

Michela Nacci

Marcel Mauss, "La Nation". Éd. et prés. de M. Fournier J. Terrier. Paris: Puf, 2013, XV+404 pp.
(doi: 10.2383/77059)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2014

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book Review

Marcel Mauss, *La nation*. Éd. et prés. de M. Fournier & J. Terrier. Paris: Puf, 2013, XV+404 pp.

doi: 10.2383/77059

Marcel Mauss is famous for his *Essai sur le don* [1925]. The set of writings by the French author (having reached nine in total) published by Puf under the “*Série Mauss*” imprint and directed by Florence Weber have a few surprises in store, however. While being the author of *Essai*, Mauss deals with politics, society and its problems; he reflects on different types of socialism concurrent to the time and tackles the theme of nation. He does all this while continuing to be the Mauss whom we know: he applies to society, the history of socialism and politics the categories of the great mentor Durkheim; he unfurls infinite knowledge into history, economics and technology. From these interests comes *La nation*, which now, edited by Michel Fournier and Jean Terrier, appears under the «*Série Mauss*» imprint and offers the entirety of Mauss’ work on the nation, with the sole exception of one (illegible) part dedicated to the Société des nations: the text is twice the length of the sample, which was published by Henri Lévy-Bruhl in 1956. Plans for the draft date back to 1920: Mauss has just returned from the war. He went to Épinal, a village in the Vosges department where his mother lived, and jotted down a vast and ambitious project: a work dedicated to the nation. Mauss took up and abandoned the work several times between 1920 and 1930, and it was never finished: Mauss did not publish it, just like several others of his works.

The editors highlight the pacifist preoccupations underlying all of Mauss’ reflections. He saw in the increasingly vast exchange (which he understood both as trade and as individual and group movement), which typifies the contemporary era, the reason for the ever greater unity of the world: from clans to tribes, to the nation and individuals. For Mauss, exchange is the bringer of civilization and the creator of sociality. This forms the basis of his vision of the future: a world unified by increasingly easier exchanges, whereby discussion manages to replace war. Mauss fully subscribed to that post-war world in which the issue of reaching stable peace was reasoned by countless intellectuals.

The work edited by Fournier and Terrier is valuable not only because it completes our knowledge of Mauss the scientist, but because it casts light through his reflections about important debates, all of which were characteristic of the time. There are at least three significant ones. First of all, as mentioned, the search for lasting peace. Secondly, trade unionism in the cooperative version as a way to escape the social disparity created by capitalism and social anomie: self-government and the industrial democracy in the British world seemed to Mauss to be an example worth following. It should not be forgotten that Mauss was, in addition to being a scientist, a man involved in politics among socialists. Indeed, he sought to find his way in the variegated family of socialism, which ranges from Marxist orthodoxy to all possible and imaginable variations and, as part of these, upon the debut of neo-socialism in France (among other things, actually the work of a friend, Marcel Déat), from statist socialism to the example of the Bolshevik Revolution (to which he devoted an essay in 1924). Lastly, the nation. Mauss’ reflection lay between the national plan (which he deemed fundamental both since it was a complete

form of sociability and since it was a must of the political situation at that time) and the international plan (understood both as a plan used to seek peace and as a tendency to develop nations).

Due to the fragmentary nature of the discipline, those who study the cooperative movement do not usually study Mauss, pacifists do not read *La nation* and readers of *Essai sur le don* ignore Guild socialism. Here, on the other hand, the overlap among different sectors and themes are indispensable: otherwise this text proves incomprehensible. It examines the renewal of democracy, intermediate bodies, the creation of an economic parliament, a legislation of interests, which takes the place of parliamentarianism: all themes that interested an array of intellectuals and movements at that time, from English trade unionists to Italian fascists. Mauss, on his part, nevertheless emphasises that parliamentarianism cannot be suppressed: because if it is true that is anything other than perfect, then it is equally true that at present it is the best way to express differences in interests, opinions and instincts of a nation in a pacifist way.

The nation is an omnipresent theme in the nineteenth century, especially in French social and political thought. Madame de Staël and Guizot, Michelet and Quinet, Thierry, Taine and Renan concerned themselves with the concept of a non-stop nation: they relate the history and research the origins of the French national in language, religion, costumes and institutions. They compare their nation with others, in search of superiority that they strive to document with proof taken from history. Versions of the national and nationalist discourse in nineteenth-century France lack homogeneity: for some (such as Taine), the nation is a fact, a datum automatically produced by history, by race (an ambiguous term and distinctly characteristic of this discourse), by the circumstances in which a certain country finds itself to be. For others (like Renan), the nation is indeed the product of all this, albeit invigorated and made topical by the voluntary choice that citizens make on a daily basis. For Thierry, it is the result of the tension between the two races that has always formed the nation, while, for Michelet, it consists of various climatic and geographic factors that are amalgamated with the passing of time.

What is the nation for Mauss? It is created by “intersocial exchanges,” which are “the fundamental fact of the life of the societies” [p.16]. He writes:

“By nation, we mean an integrated society from a material and moral point of view, with a stable, permanent central power, with fixed frontiers, with relative moral, mental and cultural unity of the populace who knowingly subscribe to the State and its laws” [p.84].

In the nation the citizens have a sense of society in its whole and feel solidarity towards one another. It is the densification of society, the growing mobility of people and the multiplication of exchanges among individuals and groups, which create the nation. At the same time, it is subjective (the knowing subscription of each to the political collective nature) and objective (the nation is formed by a race, a language, morals and a national character). The editors claim that the subjective and objective versions do not coexist, yet are in conflict among themselves. With the former, Mauss seeks to detach himself from nineteenth-century objectivist theoreticians of the nation (as mentioned above); he attempts to denaturalize it. With the latter, Mauss returns to the traditional, old definitions of nation. The latter are the national “fetishism,” as Mauss defines it: a

hardening of the nation, which, instead of considering this as the product of history, views the national specificities which that history has produced as an expression of a national identity given once for ever more. In this way, nationality, instead of being viewed as a process, is viewed as something that does not change. It is believed that race creates the nation, while the contrary is true: it is the nation that creates the race.

“It is because the nation creates the race that it is believed that the race creates the nation” [p.102].

This is the nationalism that sees a particular essence in every nation, distinguishing it from others. “Sickness of national consciences” is how Mauss defines it, which he proposes, claim the editors, to save the nation from nationalism, to crack the shell that locks every nation into itself, putting it into conflict with others. Mauss’ intention brings it closer to reflections made by foremost socialists such as Otto Bauer, who, far from wishing to destroy the nation, intend to integrate nation and socialism. The theory of nationalism as an invention of tradition is often attributed to Hobsbawm, but Mauss undoubtedly anticipated him when he wrote,

“While it is the nation that makes tradition, one strives to rebuild the nation around tradition” [p.110].

Thus, one is particular surprised when the two editors, akin to other interpreters of this part of Mauss’ work (few in France and around the world, in clear minority compared with scholars of all the rest of Mauss’ work and, above all, of the donation), declare that the objective concept of nation that Mauss proposes is “strange”. Anything but strange, “hard to understand,” “curious” or even “perturbing” [p.30] it happens to have been the concept of nation most popular in France and in Europe in the nineteenth century. The contrary would be strange: namely, that Mauss was perhaps extraneous to this definition that crosses an entire century until it attains his own time.

When the editors define the idea of a “world civilisation” in which Mauss believes as an “almost utopic element” [p.39], it must be observed that perhaps the idea was utopian, but that it was nevertheless extremely widespread among intellectuals from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. They looked toward an increasingly reciprocal assimilation of national civilisations thanks to the rapidly growing circulation of goods, information, people and ideas. This global proto-world would not have seen the end of nations, but its internal would have been more similar. In this way, it was believed that the war would have been away forever by the very development of society. That the world would have globalized without the passing of war is another matter. However, we cannot say that the idea of a World State (as it was for the English, from Herbert G. Wells to Graham Wallas – whom Mauss quotes – as well as Bertrand Russell) or a world civilisation belongs to the realm of open-eyed dreams; instead it belongs to the reflection dictated by the ever-narrower interconnection, which they observed, between various parts of the world, leading to the reciprocal assimilation of nations and groups. Were those authors eternal optimists? Probably. But when interpreting them it would perhaps be more productive to look into them by contextualizing them in their own era as opposed to extracting them from it in order to compare them with what happened at a later date. In their time, the idea of the United States of Europe played a part (which we

have reached, for better or for worse) as well as the idea of a world federation of peoples (which, on the other hand, we do not have).

For one reason or another, however, for Mauss, only two completed nations (knowingly) exist in the world: France and the United States. Germany is not a nation (but a State), neither is Great Britain (divided into at least three parts) nor Italy, Poland or Greece, all of which are States that would like to be a nation, but which have not yet accomplished their goal. This idea, like the objective concept of nation, is very French, beginning with Tocqueville: the most characteristic legacy that Mauss' work on the nation carries with it.

Michela Nacci
Università de L'Aquila