

Cyril Isnart

## Recent papers about Robert Hertz and St. Besse

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Nicolas Mariot, “Les archives de saint Besse: conditions et réception de l’enquête directe dans le milieu durkheimien”, 2006.

OVER THE LAST TEN YEARS WE HAVE WITNESSED GROWING INTEREST and work on a singular French scholar from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the key works of Robert Hertz (1881-1915) on death, left hand and saint cult were published in French between 1906 and 1917, the proximity of his death’s anniversary may account for the renewed interest in this young Durkheimian who met his untimely death on the battlefield. Another fact is that the sociologist’s papers and archives are now available to any researcher in digital format, thanks to the library of the Laboratoire d’Anthropologie Sociale (Paris), which has digitalized the entire collection of Hertz notes and manuscripts and holds his books and photographs.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hertz’s works – which are now classical readings in general anthropology – have been translated and studied mainly by English-speaking anthropologists, making his most important texts available to an English-speaking audience.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars have enriched and deepened

1 See Parkin (1996) for an exhaustive and international bibliography up to 1996.

the exploration of this work, moving away from the topics and objects of Hertz to focus on his “life-work”. The life and work of Hertz are now widely known thanks to the great book published by Robert Parkin in 1996, *The Dark Side of Humanity: The Work of Robert Hertz and Its Legacy*. He was the first to read the archival collection in its entirety and to give a panoramic portrayal of this intellectual in his *milieu*. He has shown especially that Hertz was considered a pessimistic person – he worked on death, left hand and sin – but was also an earnest socialist activist and nationalist soldier – he was actively engaged in Jean Jaures’ socialist party and in World War I. His death is also evidence of his unique life. In 1915, he wrote to his wife Alice that he was tired of waiting behind for the Germans and had decided to go to the front, where he eventually was killed. The scientific topics he chose, his engagement in political life and his death make Hertz, according to Parkin and many others, a unique figure of the origin of sociology. The publication of Parkin’s book revived many questions and interpretations of this individual (especially Riley 2001-2002; also Riley 1999; Pajon 2003).

These studies focus on the scientific and political engagement of this former student of one of the most prestigious French educational establishments. At the École Normale Supérieure, he met Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss and Lucien Herr, the last of whom was the library curator and a famous socialist in the French university world. According to Durkheimian rules, social science must have real effects on the lives of people. Political engagement and popular teaching are in this way the major public actions of the Durkheimian school. Hertz contributed to this movement but Riley and Parkin, blending political faith and intellectual texts, show that Hertz’s socialist engagement, despite being a requirement for working with Durkheim, makes his personality ambivalent. Even though he created the political group named Groupe d’études socialistes in 1908, and gave many conferences and papers at political meetings, hesitation and concern about the form and sense of his engagement (political, patriotic, scientific or mystical) allow us to blur this image of a blind Durkheimian scholar. This question becomes crucial when considering the last period of his life, when he engaged in the fire of World War I and was fatally wounded on the battlefield.

The renewed interest in Hertz’s works and life was not merely a pretext to speak about psychology. It has been also an opportunity to go deeper into the history of the social sciences, using the fieldwork notes kept in his archives concerning one of the more recently rediscovered texts: *Saint Besse: étude d’un culte alpestre* (first published in 1913 in the French *Revue de l’histoire des religions* and translated into English in 1988). During vacation in an Alpine valley, Hertz participated in a small pilgrimage to honor a local saint, Besse, in a high pasture. Four rural parishes of the Soana valley – in the diocese of Ivrea – and one of the Aostan valley worship the saint who takes three different identities,

as a soldier, a bishop or a shepherd. Hertz uses oral and written sources, popular, local and ecclesiastical traditions; he constructs different scales of analysis and also observes the local cult in the field. As a student of Durkheim, who sees religious activity as a major contributor to social identity, Hertz concludes that each group – mountain peasants and village clergymen – constructs its own identity of the saint according to their social and cultural characteristics. As an ethnographer of Europe, following the trail of folklore, he shows that the devotion to the local saint is a surviving form of the prehistoric worshipping of stones. Blending those two themes, Hertz opens new perspectives on popular culture and religion, identity and the uses of history. But Mauss and other scholars have contested this work, considering it merely a pleasant and picturesque text which had nothing to do with the scientific work of Hertz on sin.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, the *Saint Besse* text is a classic, equaling the essays on the dead, the left hand and sin. In some recent publications, both French and English, *Saint Besse* is quoted and analyzed in two different ways: as a cornerstone of diachronic ethnography or as a rich case study for the history of anthropology and fieldwork method.

The first trend is in fact a polemical exchange between the advocates of “continuity” and those of the “revitalization” of European rituals that takes *Saint Besse* – and the contemporary cult of this saint – as a paradigm. Jeremy Boissevain elaborated an interpretative theory of European ritual in 1992, grounded on rural exodus and the revitalization of rural identity during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He shows that the collective and rural rituals earlier discontinued were then renewed for different reasons (secularization and spectacularization of rituals, political uses of local identity, claims of authenticity, migration and mobility). MacClancy and Parkin try to assess this theory tracing the recent history of St. Besse’s cult, which is characterized more by “the degree to which it has not changed” (1997: 72) than by his transformations. The main evidence, and cause, is the return of migrants who find an identity resource in the cult of St. Besse (1997: 75). Two years later, Boissevain (1999) answers those comments by turning the signs of modernization cited by MacClancy and Parkin into evidence for his own theory. The facts considered in this polemic are significant for the study of European rituals and the anthropology of rural identity in the contemporary world, and it is impossible to give the reader the full details.<sup>3</sup> But in a way, calling up the *Saint Besse* text shows that the debate is relevant for determining Robert Hertz’s place in anthropology today. Not only a structuralist predecessor – through his work on right and left –, or the father of ritual analysis – with his study of death –, Hertz is now a precursor of

2 To further the subject and for all references, see the chapter concerning *Saint Besse* in Parkin (1996).

3 See Isnart (2005) for a deeper analysis of those texts.

European historical and cultural anthropology. This idea represents the mainstream in contemporary uses of Hertz's work by historians and anthropologists in France since the 1980s (see, for example, Charuty 1995). However, some of the recent publications based on the archives of his study of St. Besse go further, making a critical analysis of the text instead of using it just as a reference work to quote, comment or discuss.

This recent stream of work on Hertz is closely connected to the papers concerning his fieldwork enquiry in Piedmont and the Aostan valley to collect data on the local cult of St. Besse. For example, Nicole Belmont (2003), using letters, drafts and fieldnotes kept in Hertz's archives, tries to briefly tell the story of the fieldwork, which is an unorthodox method in the Durkheimian scheme (2003: 77) and gives an abstract of the final publication (2003: 80-85). At the end of the paper (2003: 87-88), she adds some of the letters by French scholars of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (M. Halbwachs, M. Meillet, M. David and some friends) received after the publication of the text in 1913. They follow the skeptical opinion of Marcel Mauss: it is quite a nice study, but not as serious as the comparative project of the Durkheimian school. Belmont's conclusion deals with the fact that Hertz would have been a precursor of an anthropology of Europe with a strong fieldwork element, but the French school of sociology could not bring itself to accept and lead this empirical thrust (2003: 88). This first publication allows us to shed light on some of the questions raised by the archives, but does not extensively analyze the Hertz text itself, its scientific context and its writing process.

Nicolas Mariot (2006) takes a more critical point of view. His text constitutes a case study on the history of science in the context of Durkheimian sociology. The sub-title is very clear ("Conditions et réception de l'enquête directe dans le milieu durkheimien") and focuses on the unusual methodology followed by Hertz, the direct observation of a European rural context in light of the archives. Firstly Mariot underlines Hertz's careful remarks and questions, which prevent him from being considered a heretical Durkheimian, as he abandons armchair anthropology for the European field and direct observation (Mariot 2006: 67, 72). Hertz maintains an orthodox Durkheimian position through his focus on the social force of the ritual, even though the geographical area, the folklorism of the methodology and the concern for the individual's thoughts are very far from the Durkheimian frame. Secondly, *Saint Besse* is the kind of ethnographical monograph usually undertaken by folklorists, missionaries or officials, although sociologists make large comparisons through exotic data. And the monograph, especially in the European context, is a bourgeois practice, living without working. That is why Mauss considered *Saint Besse* a leisure work, the holiday pastime of a Parisian intellectual (Mariot 2006: 75). Mariot analyses fieldwork as a social class confrontation between the bourgeois and the common Alpine people. He therefore shows how Hertz

tries to reduce the distance between himself and the Alpine peasants, which can be seen as a social class difference (2006: 78-79). Mariot believes that Hertz succeeds in his fieldwork better than other sociologists or field anthropologists because he talks, discusses and lives with the Alpine people and, in a way, annuls the borders between “him” and “them” (2006: 82). Hertz tries to accept the thoughts and actions of the other as a “rational” way of life, as Weber might say, and as a clear text about local social organization, as Geertz would have said about culture. Finally, for Mariot, Hertz is truly a heretical Durkheimian because the experience of the field is ultimately more important in that work than the theoretical background. Unfortunately, this first piece of fieldwork by a pupil of Durkheim remains the only one and has not been followed.

Mariot’s analysis constitutes an innovative exploration of *Saint Besse*, notably when he comments on Hertz’s social status and on the heretical role of the text within French sociology. I would nevertheless like to discuss one of Mariot’s ideas, which from my viewpoint is not so clear. I just want to refine the discussion using my own essay published in 2006, to show that the shadows quickly dissipated by Mariot still remain ambivalent. The central idea deals with the separation between folklorist topics and Durkheimian theory, and consequently the ethnographical relations of Hertz in the field or, in other words, the construction of otherness.

For Mariot, it is clear that Hertz distinguishes the two sides of his work (the Durkheimian side and the folklorist’s side) as a way to preserve his own position in Durkheim’s school. In a different perspective, considering Hertz’s social and political engagement, I think it is not a simple strategic precaution. It could just as well be a way of demonstrating the link he wishes to establish between the idealized pattern of traditional societies and the social renovation of Western society. Mariot argues that one cannot find in *Saint Besse* Hertz’s mystical faith in popular culture and the making of the otherness or in the primitivism of Alpine people (Mariot 2006: 82). On the contrary, it seems to me that it is Hertz’s description of the devotees of St. Besse as others (and notably religious others, who are compared by Hertz to the people of Brittany or to his own devout Jewish family members) that allows him to propose an alternative social pattern to his own decadent society and social class. Thus, the link between folklore (as European fieldwork) and sociology (as Durkheimian applied sociology) really exists in *Saint Besse* and is relevant in the case of Hertz not only because he is the first Durkheimian who goes out to the field, but because the rural European culture is taken as a model for Western society. As Durkheim analyses the religious mind in an exotic culture – the Australian rituals – and takes it as the “elementary form” of any religion, Hertz finds his own elementary form of social organization in the field of European folklore. And Mariot gives some examples of Hertz’s construction

and heuristic of otherness: the use of the term “indigène”, the identification of differences in rationality, the description of the old-fashioned way of life in the Alps, the awareness of the difference between the Alpine people and himself, and moreover, the fascination with the other (Mariot 2006: 82). Perhaps it is just a different way of interpreting text and archives that make me think that Hertz is not so distant from Durkheim in *Saint Besse* and that he needs an otherness that is “good to think with”. But the Durkheimian theory of society and Alpine fieldwork are not strictly separated and the relations between them remain ambivalent: on the one hand, the society of *Saint Besse* as a European social model is a kind of heresy in the Durkheimian background, but on the other, the cultural and social otherness of the devotees is a kind of primitivism, which is a real paradigm in Durkheimian theory. Besides, Hertz chooses a middle way between political and scientific concerns, whose ambivalence can also be found in his relations with the other.

It is difficult to consider the meeting of Hertz and St. Besse’s devotees only as a confrontation of social classes, as Mariot seems to think: the urban and intellectual tourist faces the rural and ignorant peasants, the former trying to understand the latter. This configuration occurred early in the European folklore of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it is not at all a new way of doing ethnography. But the ethnographic position of Hertz in the field reminds me of some words of Jeanne Favret-Saada (1990), an author quoted by Mariot: to understand the sorcery processes, you need to enter, as an individual, into a different rationality and not deny others any rationalism. But while this point of view certainly does not make the rural people backward, it makes them deeply others in the sense that they still have a different rationality. The otherness is based on the differences between two rationalities, which remain different culturally and not only socially. From my point of view, the stake of ethnography could ideally be the understanding of the difference between cultural rationalities. The final lesson to be learnt from Hertz, as Mariot says, lies in his successful construction of an Alpine society as a close otherness, not so far from him, because he takes them as a social model and because he constructs his ethnographical relation as a bridge between himself and them. But as in any ethnographic experience, it is impossible, and perhaps even useless, to determine or decide to what extent the ethnographer is inside or outside the society he works on. The ethnographic relation is both a space where one has to negotiate his/her position and an exchange for which one needs to build his/her own translation tools.<sup>4</sup> It is not necessarily a confrontation of social classes, it is a more or less completed meeting, which will remain ambivalent and unclear, as any human relation.

4 Silvana Borutti wrote: “le savoir anthropologique est moins une question de *typologies* que de *traduction*” (1999: 47).

Regarding this small point of discussion, the recent papers about *Saint Besse* and its archives make it clear that Robert Hertz is a singular sociologist, who has tried an alternative, innovative and very dangerous method of social science. In that sense, Chiva (1987: 16-17) is right to consider Hertz as one of the missing links in the story of European anthropology, between Durkheim and contemporary cultural anthropology, and moreover, experiencing field-work and the difficulties that come with it.

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