



# From society to tribal communities

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## Abstract

Between the 18th and the 20th centuries, modernity was built on rationalism, individualism (the individual seen as a unit) and on the social contract of the Republic, united and indivisible. The modernist project was to dominate nature and to be universal. The postmodernity which has succeeded it has seen the powerful return of the impulse to community and of the need of collective emotion – I call this neo-tribalism (1988). The plural person, identifying with a number of tribes and elective affinities based on common tastes, is rediscovering the importance of territory (roots) and ‘*compagnonnage*’ – the passing on of a trade and a craftsman’s identity, an initiation rather than an education. It is this nascent postmodernity which I attempt to describe.

**Keywords:** tribalism, the plural person, the end of individualism, localism, collective emotion

\*Translated from the French by Rob Atkins

In the same way that postmodernism in architecture is at once plural and yet coherent, it is the fragmentation of the human subject that sets the heartbeat of the postmodern social bond. Fragmentation is the main characteristic of this new constellation in society which we call ‘tribalism’.

In my 1979 work *Conquête du Présent*, I was inspired by Rimbaud and his prophetic utterance, ‘*je est un autre* – I is another’ to show how it is only possible to understand this ‘Conquest of the Present’ and its increasingly obvious results by drawing attention to the masks, roles and theatricalities which the fragmented person uses in daily life. Such a person is not only a double person but a double-dealing one and his or her duplicity is what makes resistance to the powers that be possible in the long term.

The existence of a plural person and of emotional tribes: it is difficult to refuse or retreat from this observation. Faced with this truth, it is common in politics or journalism to hold fast to an established point of view which derives from the philosophical or social systems of the 18th and 19th centuries and which assumes that individualism always wins out in the end. It is a simplistic, received wisdom that we must base everything on the individual as defined in the line from Corneille’s drama ‘*Cinna*’ where Augustus declares, ‘I am my

own master and the lord of the universe'. This is the cornerstone of Rousseau's famous 'Social Contract' which people on all sides are constantly trying to repair without realizing that it is structurally unsound.

However, at this time of change any attempt to patch things up is in vain – how could we possibly be satisfied with half-hearted solutions or conjuring tricks? A more radical approach requires a more penetrating gaze capable of discerning what is really happening at the very heart of things – and what is therefore inevitable. When a new phenomenon emerges we must get alongside it if we can or at the very least allow it to develop.

Whatever comes into existence takes the form dictated by its own life force and this means that even if we talk about a crisis, it is a crisis with a life of its own. What I have been calling duplicity and double-dealing are indications of an obvious will to live and are even, to use more high-flown language, its vital signs. We are actually experiencing a new mode of being whose main characteristics are passion and desire.

The heir of the culture of reason, of a history we can control and of a consensual social bond is a culture of instinct where people want to face up to destiny. The former has a predictable plan and talks of a career, whether it be in economic or educational terms, while the latter is all about chance, risks and adventure. The individual as a rational and consenting figure in stable institutions and functioning as a predictable counter in political science – for instance, the political science of the increasingly meaningless opinion poll – is being replaced by a much more shadowy person whose instinctive will to live will not be denied.

The changeable nature of public opinion and a decline in political involvement may well be the most tangible signs of this slippage – a slippage which we might explain in terms of *desubjectivization*. The spirit of the age is no longer one of subjectivism seen as governed by Apollo, the god of the rational, but is marked instead by an expenditure of one's self – a loss of self in the other. There is a *transfiguration of the political* where the individual is no longer involved – instead, the very person tears away from previous loyalties and fragments to gain access to a larger Self, the Self of the tribe, the Self of nature or the Self of religion.

In this fragmentation of the self into the larger Self, everything is relative – which amounts to the same thing as saying that everything is to do with relationships. The current addiction to role-playing games, to chatrooms and to a variety of social media sites is the perfect example of this fragmentation – that is unless it is preferable to describe this phenomenon not as a fragmentation but as an enlargement.<sup>1</sup> In fact, with the help of technology, we see a return of the so-called *daemon* of Socrates, which we can also observe in Romanticism. This concept emphasizes the strength of organic growth as the instinctive foundation of the functioning of any living being.

One could quote any number of insightful people in all disciplines who have drawn attention to the fragility of the individual. From Nietzsche with his notion that we are all engaged in creating an *identity* to Proust who makes a distinction

between an individual *self* and a more profound *being*, many writers have expressed as a tentative feeling what today has become a commonplace. Like the 'Purloined Letter' in Poe's short story, though, it is such a commonplace that we fail to notice it. Our intellectual *certainties* prevent us from doing so. And yet, there it is right in front of us, this fragmentation of the identity into a series of identifications.

Let us look now at the realm of the modern educational system. We can say that the infant whom we used to aim to lead from the status of an animal to that of a civilized human being and from barbarity to humanity used to be provided by this process with an identity of an intangible nature. First of all, came the sexual identity: male or female. Gender was fixed. Then there was the professional identity which was meant to be established and stable and which had a clearly defined shape that was unchangeable throughout a career. There was an ideological identity, too, which defined the child according to a specialization maybe expressed in a political or intellectual identity or perhaps a religious one. Everything was safe and predictable.<sup>2</sup>

It was on the basis of such an 'identification' that more or less everybody used to be put into a box in those famous social classes or the rather less well-known socio-economic groups. So, everything was under control and everybody minded their own business. Votes in political and trade union affairs, social reactions, not to mention all the different impulses and motivations that lead people to buy things could only be done according to these pre-established boxes and the *distinctions* they brought about.

This beautiful edifice is brought crashing down by publicity, fashion and role-playing games where what predominates is an ever-shifting sincerity. Incidentally, this is what rubs up the wrong way all of those pollsters and 'social engineers' who think they are sociologists but who are unable to understand why they can identify such and such an opinion one moment and another opinion a day, an hour or a second later in one and the same person. They try to track it all with algebraic symbols but, alas, in vain.

Sexual, ideological and even professional identities – all these are porous. For example, to illustrate this last point we may observe the touching confusion of company directors faced with an alarming turnover of managers. They are unable to understand that it is no longer possible to run a business according to the tried and tested methods of Taylor: a rational model addressed, to put it bluntly, to rational individuals whose identity was clearly defined and permanent.

The plural person can also be seen in indecision about sexuality – we see this in advertising. It is sometimes quite hard to tell what gender we are dealing with. Unisex fashion, the spectacular rise of the androgynous, the development of cosmetics for men, ambiguous physical postures, hairstyles suitable for both men and women, the fact that all kinds of people are getting tattoos and piercings – these are all things which in other periods were called baroque and which make a play of irregularities in the human identity. The very word 'baroque' is derived from the Portuguese *barroco*, meaning a pearl of irregular form.

We could go on thinking about the sexual ambiguity we see in bisexuality, in the rise of swinging, cruising and the recognition of alternative forms of sexuality. This is all symptomatic of a cultural change which is taking place as what I have called '*l'Ombre de Dianysos*' – 'the shadow of Dionysus' – is projected onto the postmodern megapolis. According to historians of religion, Dionysus is the god with a hundred names: he is many; he is unsettled; he is always to be found in another place than in the box where you thought he was safely *categorized*. He is a figure emblematic of the fragmentation about which I have been talking.

The discovery of the individual was the mark of the time of modernity. Cartesianism, the Enlightenment and the great social systems of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries gave it a theoretical framework and, as it were, canonized it. However, for better or worse the 'tribal person' is alive and well today. It is impossible to deny this. Look at the evidence, O gentle Reader! Just open your eyes.

The phenomenon of *tribes* is an undeniable fact. And yet, at the same time, we are unwilling to recognize it. Or rather, at best, we admit that it exists but we take it as a phase: 'youth must have its day'. Most of the time, those whose job it is to analyse the young, those so-called 'researchers' will be obliged to recognize, in a rather shame-faced way, the existence of such a tribalism. As they always do, they are likely to keep their distance and bring out the tired categories of the sixties about groupings and gangs and other nonsensical definitions of the same kind. At least that type of thing doesn't upset anybody and they can go on in their own sweet way spending public money basically on nothing!

But there we have it, postmodern tribes are specific. And they deserve to be thought of as such. Admittedly, used as we are to the purring choir of unanimity, it is not an easy thing to think. Oh the joys of *correctness*! We keep calm by reading conventional analysis in the parish newsletter. Our age is a great consumer of antipsychotics and we are unwilling to listen to anything that might upset us. That's fine, but we need to realize that life is not a bed of roses. We've worked so hard to protect ourselves that we are exhausted. Everything has to be safe and sterile – this is *official* nowadays. But the *unofficial* in society keeps on wanting to be heard and and what it wants to talk about is a kind of return to the wild. Tribalism is no different.

We must not be afraid of going against the crowd and asking hard questions of conformity. I am therefore going to set out three great characteristics of the tribal phenomenon. They are: the importance of the territory in which the tribe finds itself; the sharing of common tastes; and the return of the eternal child. All three are paradigmatic of the feeling of belonging which is both the cause and effect of tribalism.

Let's look at the first of these characteristics, namely, place, territory, locality. Briefly, if the social phenomenon is linked to time, sociality is linked to space. From an ethnological point of view, the tribe in the strict sense of the term was a way of struggling together against the many forms of adversity so generously provided by the jungle. The area which a tribe had managed to tame

was therefore an assurance both of survival and solidarity. Surely something similar is going on in those *concrete jungles* of the postmodern megapolis! The neighbourhood, the estate, the vicinity are just the territory one shares with the tribe and which one is prepared even to fight to defend – we are talking about a womb where coexistence finds its natural expression. Sometimes the tribe will venture forth from its territory and drift into some other ‘hotspot’ that seems attractive if unfamiliar. However, its moorings and the source of its communal rhythm will still be the place where it has its *habitus*, its traditions and customs.

It is, of course, possible to feel regret about this and even to make some grand pronouncements about the indivisibility of the national territory but it is better to recognize the development of this tribal localism, if only to be able to avoid its most harmful effects. It is true that to think in terms of localism is to swim against the current of the grand theories of emancipation which were such a feature of the 19th century and according to which it was necessary above all to uproot people’s lifestyles, their idiosyncracies and their ways of thinking.

It so happens, though, that a kind of rootedness is coming back onto the agenda. However, whereas, as Strohl (2008) puts it, *l’État social ne fonctionne plus* – ‘the social state has broken down’ – it is exactly from these roots that new forms of solidarity are emerging, new ways of expressing generosity, day-to-day acts of common kindness, and even the taking into account of suffering, illness and other forms of human distress. Rootedness becomes dynamic and defines the sphere of a social bond whose nature is changing profoundly.

Sharing territory should be seen in parallel with sharing tastes if only because very often tastes are dependent on the place where they can be shared.

Let us think of postmodern tribes as ways of sharing specific tastes. So, our citadels may be seen just as a series of places, sometimes even hotspots where tribes meet – musical, sporting, cultural, sexual, religious tribes. We should do more than think in this way, we should celebrate in these places the tastes which act as a social cement for each of these tribes. It is important to underline this because if we do, we will then think about the social bond and organize it with emotions, passions and specific feelings as the starting point. It is not possible to make others share one’s tastes. So, it not really very easy to keep on thinking of the world in terms of uniformity as we are in the habit of doing.

Tastes are a whole world in miniature. As the novelist and literary critic David Lodge so rightly put it, it is a ‘Small World’. When we speak about some cocktail party – fashionable or not – or about some trade union demonstration, or some political rally let alone about different cultural events, we often hear it said ‘the world and his wife were there – literally everybody’! This is a metonymy if ever there was one where the part, sometimes a tiny part, stands for the whole. Yet this ‘everybody’ is the familiar, everyday, known world. In other words, it is a tribal world. One where sharing tastes in common gives legitimization to people and gives a meaning to pleasure or desire not to mention to the need to co-exist and live in harmony.

Shared spaces and shared tastes lead us to this other characteristic proper to postmodern tribes, namely the accentuation of what we have agreed to call the phenomenon of *the eternal child*. As a matter of fact, to literally 'play' in these places, these urban 'hotspots', to give free rein to one's tastes and passions, is it not to act in an astonishingly infantile manner (this is not meant to be pejorative, by the way)? The myth of the *puer aeternus* – the boy who never grew up – is a recurrent theme in human history. There is no lack of stories and legends, and a variety of mythologies and true stories to remind us that the figure of the child has played an essential part in the social imagination in a number of places.

It so happens that the *emblematic figure* of the modern world – according to Durkheim, at least – is the serious and rational adult who both produces and reproduces. This is a contaminating ideal when it serves as a benchmark for society to think about and organize itself. Rationalism, the pre-eminence of work, the social contract – all these things depend on such a foundation. There is a breaking point for such a way of thinking, though, and then a pendulum effect operates. Durkheim's ideal being, whom we might call an apollonian or promethean figure, has to give way to the eternal adolescent, a dionysian figure, this time. In due course, this figure, too, becomes emblematic and begins to contaminate in its turn.

Suddenly, everybody is going to be using youth language and dressing up in young people's clothes and trying to stay young: there is an infinite number of examples of this behaviour on all sides. However, it so happens that the natural personality structure of an *eternal child* is marked by fusion – or confusion. This is just another way of talking about the tribe. It is in this sense that the contemporary *cult of youth*, while it can be shown to have solid and deep roots from an anthropological point of view is perfectly coherent with the tribal constellation which is being established. Once again, rather than regretting this or criticizing it in a hurt tone of voice perhaps it would be better to see in it the expression of a vitality of genuine worth which draws our attention to a different way of co-existing.

This different way cannot be summarized as it too often is as just a clannish communitarianism. I have already spoken in this connection about what I feel is intellectual laziness and methodological stupidity (Maffesoli, 2009). It is never fair to stigmatize something which simply exists. It is better to understand it and perhaps even to get alongside it, if only to divert its energy if it seems to tend to excess. In this field, though, is it really clannishness we are seeing or the wholly preferable emergence of an *ideal of community*?

The former is isolationist and integrates as little as possible into the surrounding environment. The latter is quite the opposite and is relational. As I have shown, the plural person only exists because of the other. It is usual to note, by the way, that the term '*relationniste*' – 'relationist' – is no longer in common usage in France but that in French-speaking Canada where the language has kept many older and more pure expressions, this noun is used today to speak of someone whose task it is to take care of public relations. We could

think of 'public relations' in a metaphorical sense and speak of creating a new public space no longer conceived as an expression of a pyramidal or unified idea as was so often done in the past but instead one created from fragmentation and scattering. In the communal tribal ideal, this is of the essence.

I have already drawn attention to what social *postmodernity* owes to *post-modernism* in architecture. They are both an organic construction built from disparate elements taken from widely different contexts in space and time. It's different, but it manages to stay up!

In mathematics, Mandelbrot sets show something similar. What else are *fractal objects* but creations whose form is determined by irregularities and fragmentations? Mathematics is only here theorizing on the basis of the massive number of examples thrown up by nature – snowflakes, bronchioles and so on. It so happens that what we find in social networks is of a similarly fractal nature and that this phenomenon is only made more obvious by the interactive means of communication which only the internet offers.

The arts in their turn have not missed this. Practitioners of non-figurative art have concentrated on the fractal but also choreographers like, for instance Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham have accentuated the organic nature of the fragmented moments which make up their creations. Postmodern dance is a good illustration of the close link that exists between the oldest element of all, the body, technology which is bang up to date and the environment in which the whole thing takes place.

Looking beyond these examples from the arts, let us hold onto the idea that nature is a complex network of disparate elements. Society is the same, because here human *things* interact in many networks which all make sense, even though they are sometimes opposed to one another and are so various. As the anthropologist Gilbert Durand reminds us, the thinker's art is to try to grasp what it is that makes up these *bassins sémantiques* – these *pools of meaning*. A refusal to take into account the existence of social networking, community hubs, the plurization of the person and the importance of the different tribes we see is only an insult to intellectual honesty. Yet, we must admit that this approach is common in the conformist realm in which we live, where logic reigns.

Why is this? Maybe because our natural bent is to do over and over again what we already know how to do. To redo the same analysis with fuller explanations. Let us not forget that the *reptilian brain* of modern times was laid down during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries – a time when distinctions were rubbed out, specificities were denied and lasting differences were simply set aside. Everything had to be made to fit into the classical rule of the three unities – of time, place and action. Just as God is One, the individual had to have one identity – the State is a unified entity and the Institutional takes a rational form. Auguste Comte's formula sums up this tendency: *reductio ad unum!*

The fact that our intellectual subconscious remains marked by monotheism means that it is hard for us to accept that individualism has had its day, as has the ideal of the One Indivisible Republic.

In addition to what I have written about examples from the arts – about postmodernism, non-figurative fractal art and postmodern dance – the image of the mosaic is quite interesting to illustrate what I have to say. This is because, while a mosaic respects the diversity of the elements of which it is made up, it brings them together in an organic unity greater than the sum of its parts. There is a term drawn from medieval philosophy which we sometimes use in a wrong way but which allows us to understand the specificity of the mosaic. The word is *unicity*. It is not a word about unity as a closed and rigid system but is about the flexible and open coherence of heterogeneous elements. To use examples from history, it is not the Republic seen at the time of the French Revolution in Jacobin terms, but the *res publica* of the ancient world – the public entity which allows opposing forms and forces to coincide.

The historian Ariès, whose bracing non-conformity is well known, spoke of *groupes immédiats* and *petites collectivités* – small groupings and small collectives – which arise spontaneously before a more rational level of organization takes place and which are the very foundation of any co-existence (Ariès, 1980: eg, 56, 60, 84). Perhaps we are seeing the return of groupings like these. They may well constitute the *community ideal* of postmodern socialization – a society outside or next to the State; a living social space with its own autonomy. Hakim Bey has written most entertainingly about ‘Temporary Autonomous Zones’ – TAZ – in a way that has struck a chord with the younger generations who are no longer engaged in a search for a distant and abstract utopia with some kind of rational basis but who are looking instead for a little utopia of a fragmentary nature which they can experience here there and everywhere and in the here and now.

The social mosaic according to this view would be the adjustment of these little communities brought into being by day-to-day allegiances, by the traditions and customs of the tribe and by the specific rituals which inevitably come into being in the midst of all this. Let us not forget at this point the dionysiac *zeitgeist* and the myth of the *eternal child* that both causes this spirit of the age and results from it. It so happens that this adjustment will take place with, as its starting point, all of the aesthetic and playful aspects of this form of socialization.

After all, there are cultures which are built on festive foundations like these. There are moments when – beyond a centralizing and unifying principle – co-existence in its *uniqueness* is defined by reciprocity, interaction and the sharing of passion and emotion. To cut a long story short, there is sometimes a participation in the life and in the *world of the other* as different communities interact amongst themselves.

So, I have spoken about what the pre-modern *res publica* was and what the postmodern one looks as though it may become. This raises a number of concerns because whereas there was once a domestication of social manners and a civilization of the passions which prevailed throughout the times of modernity, there is now a *return to the wild* taking its place in the world. This is not to say that there is no solid social bond being established. A bond of a



more emotional than rational nature. The bond of the pact rather than of the contract. But may we not be permitted to see here the (re)emergence of what Leibniz called a ‘substantial form’ where feelings have their place?

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## Notes

- 1 Cf. the book by the philosopher H. Azuma, *Génération Otaku* (2008).
- 2 Translator’s note: In using the term *clivage fonctionnel* in the original French, translated here as ‘a specialization’, Maffesoli may be alluding to Gérard Bayle’s concept of the *clivage fonctionnel*, a clinical usage relating to Freud’s ‘splitting of the ego in the process of defense’ (*clivage du Moi*), signalling the way a person copes with trauma by splitting in a psychoanalytic sense and, as Maffesoli indicates here, adopting instead a strong ideological allegiance. Cf. Bayle (2012). On the other hand, Bartolini (2005) gives a full account of *clivages* in a political, social and economic sense and their decline as coherent entities.
- 3 Further reading: Maffesoli, M., (1993), *The Shadow of Dionysus: A contribution to the Sociology of the Orgy*, New York: State University of New-York Press.  
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