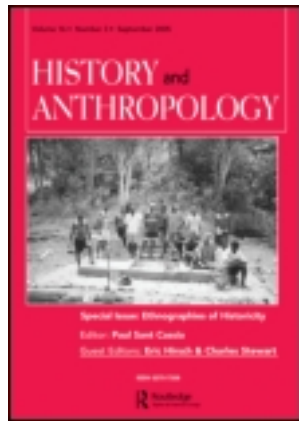


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“Savages Who Speak French”: Folklore, Primitivism and Morals in Robert Hertz

Cyril Isnart

Hertz's analysis of the Alpine cult of Saint Besse apparently marks a break from his studies of death, sin and the left to folkloric studies. This analysis helps one to understand the personality of Robert Hertz. His sociological curiosity about folklore reveals his ambiguous position in social sciences at the beginning of the twentieth century. His text appears to be a variation from the Durkheimian norm, but another reading could suggest that Hertz continued and went beyond Durkheimian thought to something between sociology of the modern world and engaged socialism. Through this study, Hertz linked his political ideals, his work in ethnology and his desire for social involvement. The cult of Saint Besse perpetuated as much religious tradition as local identity. The Alpine people were presented in the text as wilful perpetrators of an ideal social order, whose loss for his contemporary city dwellers Hertz feared. The alpine Other, marked by a material and moral backwardness, represented for activist and socialist Hertz one of the paths of balanced social organization that stabilized the identity of a group across time if it fit rather well into the folkloric stereotypes of the beginning of the twentieth century. Finally, by linking events in Herz's life (e.g., the accidental Alpine death of his father), this article suggests that the legend of Saint Besse embodied several recurring motifs in Hertz' career: the accidental deaths of saint and father by falls, the military role of the saint and of Hertz himself.

Keywords: Robert Hertz; French Sociology; Folkloric Studies; Social Order; Saint Besse

Introduction

In the landscape of nascent sociology, Robert Hertz (1881–1915) was a unique figure. Sociologist and precursor of structuralism; inheritor of Durkheimian thought and

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resuscitator of historical folklore; man of literature and man of action; militant socialist moved by the modesty of the working classes and patriot ultimately resigned to the First World War; rebel against the academic completion of his work and bulimic theoretician, it is not easy to fit Hertz into any historical category of anthropology. Drawn by this intellectual personage who left at his death on the fields of honour in 1915 a rich and promising body of work, certain contemporary anthropologists have recently rediscovered the life and intellectual history of Hertz. Their work falls into two main categories. Within the perspective of an intellectual biography, Robert Parkin (1996) has ploughed through the whole of Hertz' personal archives to produce the portrait of a thinker about "the dark and sinister sides of the human mind", as Mauss (1969a [1922]: 511) noted in his obituary. Applying a more sociological reading of the work and using certain parts of the same archives, Alexander T. Riley (1999, 2001–2002, 2002; Besnard & Riley, 2002) has tried to describe Hertz' uniqueness in the constellation of Emile Durkheim's collaborators. These analyses give prominence to the political involvement of this twentieth century scholar who frequented Lucien Herr, librarian of the Ecole Normale de Paris and propagator of university socialism.

According to Durkheim's precepts, the participation of social sciences in public debate must be constructive and positive, enlightened by reflections issuing from sociological thinking (Besnard & Riley, 2002: 8). Based on a sociological reading of Australian religion, defining ritual as the very motor of social ties, Durkheim considered that the beneficial functioning of human societies necessarily involves collective mechanisms arising from a religious logic. His work on pedagogy convinced him of this and, in the framework of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, he proposed that his students apply this political vision of the world in their teaching. Socialist involvement, sessions of teaching to the populace and the propagation of sociological ideas were their main public activities (Clark, 1973; Richman, 2002: 56–65). Hertz did not escape this collective movement and occupied a complex position in the Durkheimian sphere. Parkin and Riley interweave Hertz' political development and his intellectual work and show notably that socialist involvement, even if it was one of the conditions for collaborating with Durkheim, profoundly structured Hertz' life and his moral convictions. They insist as well on the hesitation and concern that Hertz showed in regard to the form of his involvement: political, patriotic, socialist, scientific or mystical.

Even though Riley does not emphasize it particularly, the last text Hertz published in his lifetime, *Saint Besse, Etude d'un culte alpestre* (R. Hertz, 1928: 131–194),¹ seemed to support significantly the conclusions afforded by this new reading. On the one hand, this text constituted the founding moment of his passage from exotic sociology to European ethnography. On the other hand, it was the point of departure for a broad thematic investigation on the theme of stories about falls, which Hertz seemed to favour from that time onward, dropping his academic doctoral work. Furthermore, his work on Saint Besse represented one of the first texts in modern ethnology in Europe, departing somewhat from the principles of folklore in the nineteenth century, but opening the way to a more global understanding of a localized religious phenomenon. Using Hertz' archives, Nicole Belmont showed the innovative process of intellectual

maturity that *Saint Besse* represented, both in the history of French ethnography and in the work of its author (Belmont, 2003).

If we are indeed in the presence of a monograph “that startles by the modernity of its approach” (Charuty, 1995: 5), the point of view adopted by Parkin and Riley encourages us to go beyond this first level of methodological and epistemological reading. During his vacation in the Italian Alps in 1912, Hertz participated in a pilgrimage that brought together five parishes, whose destination was a rock in the middle of an alpine meadow, from the top of which Saint Besse was hurled. Hertz showed that this rock, sanctified by martyrdom, was the reason for the pilgrimage and that it embodied the sacred force that, according to Durkheimian theory, is the very basis for social ties. Through an ethnography of rituals and an archival search, Hertz analyzed the genesis and mounting of this cult that was the essential engine of social cohesion among the different groups of “devotees of Saint Besse”.

This article explores Hertz’ life, scientific work and archival documents in the light of his last text. We revisit the analysis of the Saint Besse cult in an attempt to determine individual and scientific motivations that allowed Hertz to move from his founding themes of death, sin and the left into folkloric studies—or, more exactly, to evaluate in what way *Saint Besse* allows us to understand the personality of Robert Hertz. His sociological curiosity about folklore indeed reveals to us his ambiguous position in social sciences at the beginning of the twentieth century. His text appears to be a variation from the Durkheimian norm and a direct continuation of the political aspirations of young Ecole Normale socialists. It is thus via a return to rural “primitives” of Europe—in other words, to the object of folkloric science—that Hertz continued and went beyond Durkheimian thought to something between sociology of the modern world and engaged socialism. Halfway between sociological determinism and nostalgic primitivism of ancient Europe, Hertz thus linked his political ideals, his work in ethnology of the close-at-hand and his desire for social involvement. The image of the sociologist as a young socialist is reflected intimately in the image of the socialist as young sociologist, a completely astounding dialectic that the text on *Saint Besse* makes visible.

This article will describe the network of moral convictions, political practices and intellectual demonstrations within and around the text on the cult of Saint Besse. It will not stumble into the always-possible pitfall of essentializing a pre-existing destiny—and to then read this text as a determining symptom—but, on the contrary, separate out the sociological, historical and psychological forces that led an individual to construct a unique work.

From One Other Comes Another

Towards New Others

Born in 1881 into a rich Parisian family and a non-practicing Jewish milieu, Robert Hertz was destined for philosophical studies. After his baccalauréat in 1898, he did a portion of his military service, which was interrupted by his father’s death during the summer of 1899, in Austria. Hertz entered the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1900 and

there met Durkheim. He received his aggregation in philosophy in 1904, married Alice Bauer and rapidly collaborated with the sociological research group Durkheim was directing at the time. He became a collaborator on the journal *L'année sociologique* (created in 1902) and, starting with issue 8 in 1903, published two papers (Parkin, 1996: 202).

The young Hertz was encouraged by Durkheim, as well as by Marcel Mauss, who pushed him to work and to choose a particular field of research (Parkin, 1996: 2). Despite his great capacity for work, he experienced difficulties defining the subject of his main thesis and decided finally on sin and atonement (Parkin, 1996: 4). Durkheim supervised him and sent him in 1905 to the Library of the British Museum to collect data for his thesis. He also commissioned from him a study on death, which was published in *L'Année sociologique* in 1907 (Hertz, 1907). Hertz then spent two years in Douai, where he taught philosophy in a high school. He began this period of his life with great enthusiasm, convinced he had finally found his place in French society: Jewish, bourgeois, intellectual and socialist without financial problems, he gave himself to secondary education by ethical conviction as a citizen. However, the experience displeased him. He tried to distract himself from it by working on the Dayaks of Borneo. He thus built a relationship of empathy at a distance with this people, as Alice Hertz his widow remembered:

[T]his young scholar, barely out of adolescence, absorbed in his work to the point that, until he learned their language, he lived for months with the Dayaks of Borneo, who had become for him not just a topic on a notecard, but also flesh and blood reality. His interpretation of double funerals arose, so to speak, from his direct contact with the 'primitives' from Borneo. (A. Hertz, 1928: x)

He wrote to his friend Pierre Roussel about the precious advantage he was gaining from this sociological work and from his attachment to the Dayaks, but also about his weariness with his job as a secondary teacher: "During the long month of July, the kids having (more or less) passed their bloody baccalaureat, I had more leisure. I took advantage of it to go find the other savages, these dear Dayaks of Borneo."² Or further: "When summer vacation came I had the feeling I would never be ready [to publish the study on death] if I began a new year of teaching—and so I left. Since I could not imagine myself teaching for fifteen years or more abstractions that are good for at best a small number of students."³ He finally left the province for Paris and his sociological work, with the intention of continuing his doctoral research. He enrolled in 1906–1907 in the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes where he took courses from Mauss, whose chair he took the following year until 1912. This post allowed him to finalize the Maori data related to his doctoral work, but he did not seem convinced by his research and put off writing it up and completely invested himself in work (Parkin, 1996: 10).

Hertz' preoccupations moved from his first object of interest centred on "primitive" ethnography towards the European field. In the spring of 1912, when the signs of his *ennui* became increasingly pregnant, he made plans to holiday in an alpine region whose touristic, climatic, geographic and ethnologic aspects enchanted him. He wrote to his British socialist friend Dodd:

I have a delightful place to propose to you... it is Cogne, at about 1450m in the Italian Graian Alps—not very far from Aosta—It is a most lovely place, in a large open valley, with view on the Mt Blanc and quite near the Gran Paradiso—Plenty of walks, excursions, ascensions of all descriptions, woods—and running waters which give a perpetual coolness—Add to that a great charm to the scenery, a population with quaint dresses and quaint customs unadulterated.⁴

The summer after this letter he participated in the pilgrimage to Saint Besse, a military saint described as a Roman legionnaire, whose history is almost unknown, but who was the subject of a large regional cult. The letter he sent to his family to tell them about this discovery was marked by a sincere enthusiasm with this alpine religiousness, but also showed a slight irony in the face of his family's urbanity:

I brought back a package of notes about the legend and the cult of Saint Besse: a bizarre and ridiculous saint, who exists only to justify the cult devoted to a sacred rock situated at an altitude of 2100m and venerated long before Christ's name penetrated these mountains. I will doubtless do a small article about it that will amuse you perhaps, at least Charles. You see one does not waste one's time when one comes to the Graian Alps and when one is fond of prehistoric things.⁵

He spent the next two years involved in the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes where he was teaching, the Bibliothèque Nationale where he was compiling hagiographies and the writings of Italian historians, an intense correspondence with local erudite persons, and field investigations in Cogne and the Soana Valley, where he gathered native accounts concerning Saint Besse. He found a new interest in an object he discovered when working: the mythological accounts of falls from rocks. Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss inserted this theme in an uncompleted larger comparative work that took into account the divination of natural elements (Durkheim, 1975 [1916]: 441–442; Mauss 1969b [1922]: 495). Alice Hertz gave the title “Legends and Cults about Rocks, Mountains and Springs” to this body of research (A. Hertz, 1928: xiii).

From Exoticism to Folklore

This passage from library research in exotic ethnography, enriched by daily doses of reading as was his habit in London or in Paris, to a growing interest in European, rural, folkloric and mythological fields could have been a perilous methodological detour. However, one must not minimize, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the comparativist influence of works by the first anthropologists Lewis Morgan, Max Müller and James Frazer, or of the tradition of the French school of sociology, which at the time did not separate ethnology from sociology or, more precisely, treated ethnographic, historical or sociological data as sociology. It is useful to recall also the similarity of “exotic primitives” and European peasants according to evolutionist criteria. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, folklorists were indeed researching among the latter for traces of ancient Celtic civilization (Belmont, 1986a: 262). The passage from one exoticism to another occurred almost at the same moment as that of another unique researcher, Arnold Van Gennep,⁶ whose examination can illuminate Robert Hertz' path.

Nicole Belmont and Isac Chiva have already stressed the relationship between the two researchers. Hertz and Van Gennep in fact shared the intuition about a structural approach to ritual in terms of sequences, which Hertz illustrated in his study of dual burials as successive rituals of separation between the world of the living and that of the dead, and Van Gennep in the generalized use of stages in rites of passage, of the separation of the individual from a group to his assimilation into the new group (Belmont, 1986b: 12–14; Chiva, 1987: 16). It seems that the comparison of these two figures can continue beyond this heuristic encounter. In 1909, the publication of the founding work, *Les rites de passage*, can be considered the moment Arnold Van Gennep's interest changed from comparative ethnology of "primitive" societies to the ethnography of France and folklore. The same year, he launched his first investigations in the centre of France, in Velay and Auvergne. In 1910, the meeting of the exotic and the close-at-hand was more visible when he published in the *Revue d'histoire des religions* a set of contributions he entitled "Some Rites of Passage in Savoy". His project was to apply the theory of rites of passage to a French regional context (see also Schippers, 1995: 237). Up until 1920, Van Gennep continued to diversify his research in the two poles of ethnology until the moment he devoted himself entirely to the project on a foundation of folklore and the gathering of material for the *Manuel de folklore français contemporain* (Belmont, 1974: 78–85; Fabre, 1992). Van Gennep apparently followed the same evolution as Robert Hertz, from a profound knowledge of "primitive" and exotic societies to extensive research in the field of folklore and the European cultural space.⁷

The meeting point of these two intellectual careers was not just about this double convergence of structural intuition and objects of study. The apprenticeships and thinking of the two figures crossed paths several times. Van Gennep participated in the classes of Marcel Mauss at the Collège de France during 1903–1904, and Hertz in 1906–1907 (Fournier, 1994: 299). Hertz cited Van Gennep at the end of his article (Hertz, 1907: 190), and Van Gennep used *Saint Besse* in his monograph on the Hautes-Alpes (Van Gennep, 1992 [1946–1948]: 168–170). In a chronicle in *Mercure de France*, the folklorist went so far as to attribute to himself the paternity of Hertz' subject:

Saint Besse, étude d'un culte alpestre... owes its existence to me, because one day I said to Hertz that from twelve books making a thirteenth was unworthy of him and that taking the Savoy for myself, I suggested to him to "do" the Piedmont and to go live with alpine peasants before reconstituting the psychology of the Australians! (Van Gennep, 2001: 309–310)⁸

If exotic societies had a strong impact on Hertz' thinking and life such that we evoke his "passion" for the Dayaks or the heuristic importance of the Maori religion, his shifting interest towards folklore seems nevertheless to have arisen out of the same epistemological foundations as his passion for primitives. His passage from exotic cultures to the European world doubtlessly marked less of a break, a loss of focus, or a stepping back than an intellectual continuity in the evolution of his thinking. The parallels between Hertz and Van Gennep are from this point of view rather emblematic of a common shifting from general and comparative anthropology towards a regional ethnology.⁹ It seems important to identify the motivations that led to such a passage

for a student of Durkheim who manifested a very precocious independence of spirit (Jamin, 1988: x).

Religiosity of the Other

One factor seems to have weighed heavily in Hertz' move to the study of folklore and Europe. The attention he gave to religious phenomena, and to ritual in particular, must not be considered only from the point of view of his university work: his correspondence reveals several mentions of delight and fascination with the religious practices of his European contemporaries. Hertz was struck by a pure and original form of religion that he found among peasants and Breton sailors, and which he found again among the devotees of Saint Besse. He judged this form of religiosity in a totally positive manner, but he predicted a rapid degradation of the Bretons' simple faith. He was present for the pardons of Brittany in 1910 and shared his reflections with Louis Réau¹⁰:

Yesterday we were present for a very interesting Pardon. But religion here is attacked both from the outside—by the invasion of secular and “republican” culture—and from within, by Saint-Sulpicianism etc. The sailors from here are red and would vote for the socialist, if there were one. Let's hope they do not lose, in becoming ours, their faculty for faith, dreams, and sacrifice. One sees here that emancipation too often means spoiling and slackening.¹¹

His wife Alice seemed to share this point of view and expressed in a less political and spiritual style the value the couple accorded to expressions of this simple and rural faith. While Robert was in London, she mentioned meeting a friend during a pardon for which she was present the beginning of September 1910:

We arrived too late for the procession, having met Hachenbourg badmouthing and finding everything ugly and horrible. There were lots of people, lots of light and colour and gaiety—as always when the sun shines. To see this miracle—marvellous costumes conserved, an old festival that comes from so far back, a blessed fountain where the women drink then wash their sick eyes, and to find to say only the “human form disappears under the costume” and other unpleasantries!¹²

Much in the same way, a family event (the marriage of his sister Dora; see Figure 1) provided the occasion for Hertz to attend a religious ceremony he qualified as “antique”. After the marriage, Dodd received a letter in which Hertz professed his faith in a kind of religious practice that, at the time, would be qualified as traditionalist:

You will perhaps be interested to know they were married religiously in a Jewish temple and we were all... moved by the impressive greatness and solemnity of the antique service—I think more and more that if one has to be religious, it is better to take it all in—I mean no rationalism, no secularization of the divine, no mean adaptation of the grand absurdities of true religion to our petty intellectualist scruples.—If I was a Roman catholic, I would certainly be with Pio X against the modernists. Those people are ashamed of having a religion—they try to beg their pardon from the intellectual people and the free-thinkers—they take as humble as reasonable an attitude as they can—and they lose what is the essence of religion, the emotional power, without winning intelligibility.¹³

As Riley (2001–2002: 133) has shown, Hertz defended a certain kind of religious traditionalism that was the unique vector of a pure idea of religion and the social world.

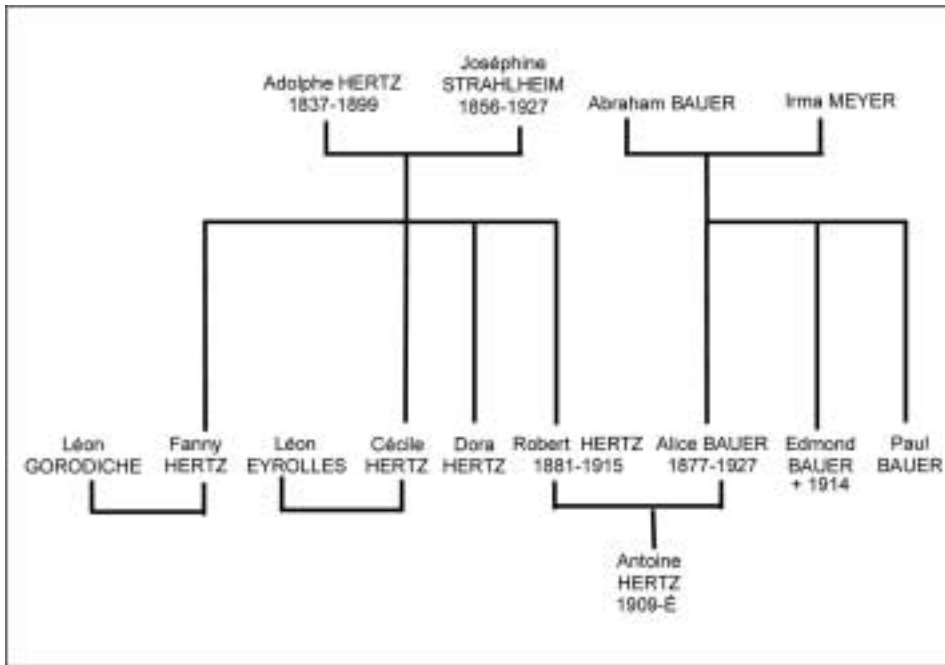


Figure 1 Family tree of Robert Hertz.

He pointed out the practices and representations of an authentic religion, unaltered, popular, spontaneous, which responded to the expectations and questions of mankind. The Saint Besse pilgrimage, which he described as a prehistoric rite to the sacred rock scarcely toned down by Christianity (R. Hertz, 1928: 191), was to his eyes an archetype of this form of idealized religiosity. He found in it conservative virtues, in terms of local identity and cultural survival, which he had already mentioned in his correspondence. The reading of the text on Saint Besse can be seen in a new light—that of Hertz’ personal representations about nature and essential function of religion.

The Creation of an Alpine Primitiveness

In *Saint Besse*, Hertz posited the Durkheimian hypothesis that the social force that had wounded, and still in 1912 wounded, the faithful of Saint Besse resided in the rock on which the martyr had died. At the same time, he described the society that honoured this saint as a group with herd instinct, showing a wilful desire for identity survival within a time-space far removed from the reality of twentieth-century citizens. For this, he used the paradigm of backwardness, current in the literature of the Alps, and he presented the devotees of Saint Besse as European “primitives”. Yet he found in the alpine context the characteristics of a popular and sincere religion he had encountered in Brittany. Far from taking the alpine people and the Bretons for ridiculous and idiotic retards, he sort of reversed the stigmatism and developed a plea in favour of this form of traditional, conservative, autonomous, living culture. As a counterpoint to

moribund and sickly Occidental society, he saw the community of Saint Besse as an example of harmony, good sense and organization, as opposed to contemporary urban existence.

The Use of Backwardness

Hertz laid out a descriptive and interpretive portrait of the mountain people through accumulation of superimposed elements. In the course of the text he noted, one by one, cultural indicators of an ancient alpine civilization, borne especially by women, hidden away in the mountains where modern influences penetrated only with difficulty. Hertz gave us an eloquent description of the material situation in which devotees of Saint Besse were embroiled: it was “Middle Ages-like”, where women dressed “like their ancestors”, with houses of wood, an economy based uniquely on herding, where agricultural technology remained rudimentary, and the work was mainly done by women. “One sees them coming home from afar to the village barns with crushing weights of hay that they carry directly on their heads” (R. Hertz, 1928: 136). Hygiene was not respected; the people slept with their livestock and often suffered from fevers.

In Hertz’ correspondence, one can also find several descriptions of the alpine environment, certainly picturesque, but always with a certain foreignness, a bizarreness and strangeness that one must link to his concept of backwardness. Hertz described to his family the inhabitants and cultural context of Cogne, with particular attention paid to details of everyday life. By pointing out the material conditions of common existence in Cogne, he seemed, on the one hand, to confirm the distance from his own familial and social surroundings, and he used, on the other hand, a tender and amused vocabulary to describe this ultimately easy-going ambiance. The letter he wrote to his mother during the summer of 1912 is one of the best examples:

It is delicious to find savages who speak French, it is the great superiority of natives here over the Bigoudens whom they are like in many ways. For example, our search for popular traditions and antiquities, if it cost us more trouble than money, got us plenty of fleas and other similar vermin... I do not know if you would have had as much fun as me with these cynegetic emotions [looking for fleas]; I imagine that Léon Eyrolles¹⁴ in particular would have found them too much popular, the “people” he pretends to have come from. But, what do you expect? This is part of the “charm of Cogne”—just like the alcoholic delirium crises of our delicious landlord, Albin Gerard, “signor Albinos” as we call him.

There is also in a neighbouring valley the “charm of Pont”, which consists notably in that dinner lasts from two to three hours every evening (counting the intermissions), and when one grows tired and wants to eat, Ambrosine, the daughter of the house, brings you... a box of matches, or some toothpicks, or some letter paper. No hysterical laughter: it is frowned upon in this household! ... But Cogne is much more civilized, I hasten to add, so you won’t tease us all year long. We even have, in our palace, two small lackeys dressed in green uniform with two rows of enormous gold buttons and the whole thing topped off by a prestigious hat: these are the two little kids of the landlord he has dressed like this, one day when he was thinking big; they answer to the two names Charles and Zéphirin. They also have six brothers and sisters who do not yet wear uniforms and play in the creek. I believe there is a ninth one on the way. Must one get excited or rather say like a young Frenchman who was here at the beginning of the season: “Well, that’s drunks for you!”¹⁵

The signs of modernity connected to tourism, such as over-crowded land, were evoked like disquieting anecdotes, reflecting a mode of life foreign to Hertz' habits. The following year Robert and Alice were in Abriès, in the Queyras (Hautes Alpes) and were present for a pilgrimage to Sainte Anne, which the ethnologist described again as a typical and endearing ceremony. From the opening lines, he stressed the characteristic traits of an alpine religiosity that survived despite modernity and that appeared from then on as a characteristic of backwardness:

From my point of view as a searcher for old cults and old legends, this country is a bit too civilized: people are educated, enriched by emigration to America and very detached from old beliefs. However there are still things to find; I am following several trails at the end of which I hope very well to find some game. We have already, Alice and I, I am not saying, seen, but also lived and made a very interesting pilgrimage. The destination is a marvellous lake situated at about 2,500 metres—a lake of snow of an extraordinary blue-green overlooked by a formidable rock wall. After having spent a good night in a barn on some straw, we left with the procession.—All during the ascension, which lasted more than three hours, the men and women—two separate choruses, never stopped singing their litanies: *Misere nobis* etc. “For the love of God one must put up with the priest”—a fat doll with a reddish face—was mounted on a mule and brought up the rear—a real Rabelais! He made jokes, made me admire the countryside, or showed me “two fleas duelling on top of that rock over there”.—For him this ascension was a sinister burden, imposed on him by his parishioners: why not say a mass to Sainte Anne at the bottom in the valley instead of climbing all the way up? But the mountain dwellers did not see it that way. I heard an old peasant who had come from far away—all anguished because the priest had said that if the weather was bad, they would not go “to the lake”.—“But, Father, will my trip count just the same?” She had an important request to ask Sainte Anne, and she wanted direct contact with her—... [O]nce we got to the top we saw another procession hurtling down the sharp cliff above the lake: they were people from a parish situated on the other side of the mountain who were also going to Sainte Anne.—Our procession got in formation again to go meet the newcomers.—The two beasts, I mean these two communities of the faithful that resembled two snakes, singing all the while, bonded with each other, section by section: the girls with the girls, the women with the women, the boys with the boys, the men with the men, the cantors and priests in a line—as a single group we entered the chapel [illegible words] in broad daylight said mass. Then festively in the lovely meadow, flowing wine moistened throats, a general gaiety and despite the efforts of the priests who feared brawls between the two parishes, games, three-jump races, intensely disputed, risked degenerating into a fight—... The women of Ceillac still wore their old costumes: beautiful shawls of bright colours and especially the gaudy bonnets: green, violet, blue, pink: what a splash midst the monotone Alps! ... [W]e were almost the *only tourists*—so we had been adopted—obliged to drink with them. As for city dwellers, there were only the emigrants, people from the country who had made a fortune in Marseille, in Paris, or in America, and who had come back to show off their rapidly-made fortunes. There was in particular a young guy from Ceillac, back from Buenos Aires who had turned into a flashy foreigner, who did not tire of being admired for his gold rings, his gold chains, his boots almost in gold or at least they shined like it, and his terrifying adventures among the Indians of the pampas.¹⁶

Here again the description of an alpine ritual, connecting traditional forms of dress, games, a pilgrimage and the image of the emigrant back from abroad, stigmatized a very clear isolation that situated the place, the inhabitants and their culture in a different space-time than that of modern city life. These “savages who speak French”, Hertz

describes them in texts alongside other radicals. The erudite thinkers of the nineteenth century used the same terms for disgusted descriptions of life in the mountains, as opposed to the modernity of the meadows or the towns. A group of recent studies have questioned these prejudices about the mountains as a “back-looking backwoods” (see, e.g., Albera 1997).¹⁷ Granet-Abisset (2001: 62–65) showed that this stereotype of “retardation and isolation” made use of themes of cohabitation between man and animal, of self-sufficiency, of attachment to routines whose psychological consequences are significant: superstition, fatalism, renouncing of progress, cretinism. Hertz thus participated in creating and maintaining the stereotype of backwardness, but avoided an evolutionist or condescending reading by connecting his description of alpine culture to the sociological thought of Durkheim. He indeed mixed backwardness with two identity characteristics of the devotees of Saint Besse (the reliance on self and on primitive religion), which allowed him to interpret the Saint Besse ritual as an archetypal form of the Durkheimian theory of the sacred.

Herd Instinct and Cult of Rocks

For Hertz, the cult of Saint Besse was the image of a community withdrawn into itself that annually gathered together its members dispersed in five parishes. The legendary justification of this gathering recreated the moment of the evangelization of the Soana and Cogne valleys by Saint Besse, who had drawn all the communities to Christianity. At the same time, the evangelization tied them to each other through perpetuation of the martyr cult. Hertz first compared, then assimilated, this ritual closing off into the resistant and vengeful nature that singularized the mountain folk ever since the revolts of their ancient ancestors, the Salasses, up to the beginning of the twentieth century, when the instinct to withdraw into themselves was dominant among the Soannians, particularly when they emigrated in the winter to Paris (R. Hertz, 1928: 134–137). The survival of the cult of rocks in the current pilgrimage to Saint Besse could thus be seen as a necessary condition of protection for the community of mountain folk:

[What] allowed the little tribe of Saint Besse to persist up to the present and to maintain its originality despite the harshness of nature, despite the powerful forces that tended to dissipate it: it was the faith that this obscure mountain people had in themselves and in their ideal, it was the desire to endure and to surmount passing failure or the hostility of people and things. (R. Hertz, 1928: 187)

As Durkheim posited the equivalence of social organization and religious organization, Robert Hertz associated the cult of Saint Besse with the structure of the tiny alpine society, which found its meaning, its origin and its destiny in the expression of its originality. The attachment of devotees of Saint Besse to their patron was logically paralleled by the attachment to their tiny local community, which perpetuated itself via the cult of the rock: “The real basis of the cult, even today, is the belief in the sacred nature of the rock around which all the cult gravitates” (R. Hertz, 1928: 179).

In adhering to the Durkheimian theory of the sacred, Hertz found the essential factor of cohesion of the Saint Besse community in the rituals surrounding the rock. He then built an interpretive system in which herd instinct, backwardness and primitive

religiosity became the necessary and reciprocal conditions. During the pilgrimage and in the domestic context, the rock rituals were for Hertz the sociological and psychological symptoms of the successful integration of the Saint Besse community. Hertz stressed especially the importance the devotees of Saint Besse accorded to fragments of the rock of the martyr, his field notes mentioning the power of this rock eleven times.¹⁸ At the end of his description of the rites effectuated at the sanctuary, he enumerated the different uses of the rocks of Saint Besse: behind the altar, one could by ladder reach the very place where the Saint fell, and people “stole” pieces of the rock in order to have a fragment. One could keep them in the house, but use them for special occasions, war or illnesses (R. Hertz, 1928: 144–145). In a process of sympathetic magic, according to the terms used by evolutionist ethnologists of magic,¹⁹ the power of relics of the body of the saint were transmitted to fragments of the rock on which Besse died. Hertz concluded that the meaning of the entire pilgrimage was associated with the cult of the rock, which contained what he designated, with Mauss, “*mana*” (Fournier, 1994: 286–296).

It was thus as much religious tradition as local identity that the Saint Besse ritual perpetuated. The alpine people were presented in the text as wilful perpetrators of an ideal social order, whose loss for his contemporary city dwellers Hertz feared:

City folk, do not triumph too much over the eminent disappearance of these “gross superstitions”. For centuries, Saint Besse has taught his faithful to rise up, if only for a few moments, above the limited horizon of their daily life,—and to carry on their shoulders the heavy burden of the ideal with joy,—finally, to keep, even in hours of distress, “faith and confidence” that are stronger than evil. (R. Hertz, 1928: 187)

This conclusion was an echo of Hertz’ personal convictions: seeing in the beliefs of alpine folk or Bretons the faith that allows one to overcome the problems of individual or collective existence. Terms such as “rise up”, “joy”, “burden”, “ideal”, “distress”, “faith and confidence” or “evil” emphasized both the difficulties of peasant life and formidable recourse to the primitive religion of the rock. The turns of phrases seemed in line with a sermon whose ultimate basis resided in the solution posed by an ideal cult. Coming first from religion, this solution became also an example and a paradigm of socialist ideals. The devotees of Saint Besse were thus positioned as ingenious social players, who knew how to manage a moral survival strategy via a cult that appeared, on first sight, to be an out-dated practice. Thus, Robert Hertz’ text was at the pivotal point between scientific preoccupations, moral sentiments and his socialist commitment. The alpine Other, marked by a material and moral backwardness, by localist affects that gave it all its grandeur, by a simple, ancestral and dynamic faith, if it fit rather well into the folkloric stereotypes of the beginning of the twentieth century, represented for activist and socialist Hertz one of the paths of balanced social organization that stabilized the identity of a group across time.

A Heuristic of Primitivism

This community organization was thus seen by the ethnologist Hertz as a primitive humanity that resolved problems of collective existence. Hertz’ convictions and the reading of the text about Saint Besse demand that one nuances an *a priori* pejorative

reading of the stereotype of backwardness. Reading this text today is to confirm the Durkheimian orientation of Hertz, for whom the sacred constructed the social link, but it is also to enter into the system of Hertz' convictions, which tended to justify the moral foundation and the ethical ideal that these so-very-civilized "savages" represented, and which served as much as a scientific paradigm for the sociologist as an ethical model to the activist.²⁰ If he used backwardness in the same way as sociologists of his time used primitivism, he built Otherness out of the alpine "*gens de peu*" (Sansot, 2003) with the goal of social and individual redemption.

From the Other to Oneself

Comparing the personalities of Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert and Robert Hertz, the classic religious typology of Max Weber shows a notable difference between the founding father and his disciples. Riley (2002: 366–367) thinks the values of the master came from asceticism, while those of his disciples appeared more to be those of mysticism. Riley (2001–1002) evoked this specific aspect of Robert Hertz, relying mainly on his familial and friendship correspondence. The figure of Hertz torn between a desire to act socially (socialism, teaching, patriotism) and an awe, faced with "blind and simple faith, ... provides even clearer evidence of the distinction between the ascetic and the mystic intellectual models" (Riley, 2002: 381). The reading we have just given the text about Saint Besse allows us to confirm and to amplify this first conclusion. Describing the web of convictions, acts and representations that surfaced in this article, we have been able to determine the values that moved the individual and the motivations of the researcher. We also are able to understand *Saint Besse* not only as an epistemological moment in European ethnology, but also as a revelation of the author's personality. *Saint Besse*, considered as the construction of an alpine Otherness, is both an example of the heuristic of Durkheimian thought about the sacred and a defence of a young idealist's committed thinking. The more psychological reasons that allowed Hertz to turn towards alpine folklore in particular are yet to be more deeply explored. If Riley had, as Parkin did in a lesser measure,²¹ identified the interconnections between the sociological, historical and moral factors that piqued Hertz' curiosity for political action, the connection—however hypothetical—could add a key to a more sensitive reading of Robert Hertz' destiny.

In 1899, Adolphe Hertz, Robert's father, stayed in Adelboden (Austria) and, as was his habit, went on alpine excursions there. At the end of July, Robert, who was preparing his entry into the Ecole Normale Supérieure, was to join his family in their village headquarters, where Dodd, his British socialist friend,²² was to join them. However, probably on 4 August, an accident happened and Adolphe Hertz died as a result of an alpine fall. Robert Hertz probably did not go to Adelboden. On 10 August, he wrote to Dodd²³ and on 14 August to his future brother-in-law Edmond Bauer,²⁴ another close friend, from a Norman residence near Le Havre, to thank them for their condolences. For approximately ten years, Hertz' correspondence revealed no further letters sent to or received from an alpine setting. Brittany was one of his favourite destinations, which seemed in fact to have been one of the villages of Robert Hertz' family-in-law.²⁵

The study of the soldier Besse thrown off a rock that then became sacred, the project about mythological accounts of “falls from rocks”,²⁶ the return to a place where natives are at once backwards, civilized and moribund make up the elements that come under the category of social facts Mauss qualified as “dark and sinister sides of the human mind” and that characterized the work of Hertz. However, the tragic event of his father’s death, occurring at the moment when the young Hertz was leaving the Lycée and entering into military service before beginning the Ecole Normale, is one of the essential keys to the reading of the personal and scientific development of the sociologist. The legend of Saint Besse indeed embodied several recurring motifs in Hertz’ career: the accidental deaths of saint and father by falls, the military role of the saint and of Hertz himself, his moral desire to revisit the social order and the alpine model he described, matched by discoveries by another person close to him. This scientific and personal configuration offers a possible vanishing point in the social portrait and moral ideal that Hertz was trying to draw in his work and doubtless in his personal life as well.

According to Durkheimian *doxa*, studies of folklore were mere pastimes that distracted from the boredom of writing a thesis. By repositioning Hertz’ research in parallel contexts, intellectual and personal, one sees that the shift towards a familiar place—which implies a distancing from exotic anthropology—led Robert Hertz to examine an object that embodied contradictory and essential data of his own existence. European primitives, the desire to take action in the world, the military context and death would all surface again in the sociologist’s life when he decided to enlist in the First World War. Once again, the text on Saint Besse resonates as a sign or a symptom of the experience lived by Hertz.

As Riley (2002: 382) shows, Hertz possessed in effect a unique empathy that in 1914 carried him towards soldiers of rural origin whose simple and sincere belief he envied (R. Hertz, 1928: 195–228). His sentiments towards the Others who had been the object of his last ethnographical work replicated in many ways his work on alpine devotees and the values he accorded them. Scientific object and moral motivations intermingled again in his interest for primitives close to him because of a particular and new form of his own civil engagement. In the framework of a recent historiographic trend that questions the “*culture de guerre*” and emphasizes points of resistance on the part of soldiers in the First World War,²⁷ Nicolas Mariot (2003: 164–165) described and placed in perspective the sentiments of Hertz at this time. The letters he sent to his wife were marked by an awareness of these soldiers’ anguish and by the wealth of rural knowledge they possessed, but Hertz also noted what separated him from others, which he envied and attempted to understand. The simple faith of the soldiers he commanded touched him to the point that he expressed the wish to be able to join their simple and sincere prayer:

This morning I went into the little village church, cold, recently white-washed, with little multicoloured saints—and I wanted to do what the soldiers were doing there, kneeling among the deserted pews praying. I wanted to be able to pray for you, my dear and good wife, for your permission to be happy and sheltered from suffering, and for my good little fellow, doing well now according to what you tell me. (Besnard & Riley, 2002: 87, letter of 28 October 1914)

In this context of uncertainty, Hertz appeared torn between three poles: the desire to “serve”, the awareness of human distress and the exaltation of the virtues of “people with little”. His worry about the objectives of the conflict was doubtless related to his moral dissatisfaction and to his desire to aspire to a useful choice. His work as a sociologist, his socialist commitment and his patriotic fervour can be read as possible resolutions of the contradictions, difficulties and needs of his biographical path: his distant yet intimate relationship to religion, his modesty and restraint in his university career, the socialist activism of a normal school student, and the doubt about the goal of his engagements, the fascination with the close-at-hand Other, his patriotic restraint. In each of his guises, he studied, explored and experimented with a kind of “primitive”, simple and archaic religiosity that seemed to him to provide ultimate recourse for the malaise of the human condition, his own condition in particular.

This placing in perspective of *Saint Besse*, which we have situated both in Hertz’ intellectual development and in his particular way of relating to the world, shines a complementary light on the psychological motivations, political convictions, scientific work and moral aspirations of Robert Hertz. It has given us access to the complexity of a scientific personality from the beginning of the twentieth century, to the semantic and psychological frameworks that initiated an anthropological work and, moreover, to the sincerity and depth of feeling of this unique sociologist’s processes.

Translated by Penny Allen

Notes

- [1] First published in *Revue d’histoire des religions*, Vol. 67, 1913. For a critical reading of this text, see Parkin (1996: 153–173); Belmont (2003). This text was long considered to be a secondary work by Durkheim and Mauss until its rediscovery by historical anthropology in the 1970s (e.g., Durkheim, 1975 [1916]: 441).
- [2] FRH06.C.03.006, Douai, 20 September 1906. The archives of Robert Hertz (Fonds Robert Hertz = FRH) are available in Paris at the Laboratoire d’Anthropologie Sociale.
- [3] FRH.06.C.03.007, Paris, 27 April 1907.
- [4] FRH.06.C.01.048, Paris, 19 May 1912.
- [5] FRH.02.C.05.0046, Cogne, 29 August 1912.
- [6] Regarding Arnold van Gennep and the Alps, see Privat (2003).
- [7] Lamberto Loria, founder of Italian folklore and ethnography, went from exotic ethnography (Caucasus, Papuasias and New Guinea) to the European field and in particular to Italian folklore around 1905 (Ciambelli & Jalla, 2003: 172). Louis Dumont offers the counter example (certainly a later one) of the passage from French folklore to the Indianist field with a constant back and forth movement between the two poles of his sociological interest (see Rousseleau, 2003). For uniquely Europeanist careers, see, e.g., the cases of Alessandro Rocca Villa studied by Albera and Ottaviano (1989) or Paul Sébillot by Voisenat (2001–2002).
- [8] In parallel, Hertz’ opening to folklore was not highly valued by Mauss because *Saint Besse* was always considered a work of distraction (Parkin, 1996: 153–154) when compared to Hertz’ serious work of compiling exoticism: “To distract himself from the serious work (his thesis), Hertz amused himself with folklore and mythology. By this we mean living folklore, where he could use his faculties, not only sociological, but also as an observer. His delicious ‘Saint Besse’, his ‘Notes on folklore’, observations made about ‘his people’ that he sent back to his wife, and that the *Revue des traditions populaires* published in 1915, were for him a way of

- passing the time” (Mauss, 1969b [1922]: 494–495). Durkheim had the same judgment: “On his way, a completely fortuitous incident occurred that distracted his thinking, for a moment, towards a new object [the cult of Saint Besse]” (Durkheim, 1975 [1916]: 441). Abry and Joisten (2003: 273–274) recently nuanced this Durkheimian interpretation of the European work of Hertz.
- [9] The case of Stephan Czarnowski, a student of the same school, is relatively parallel to that of Hertz. His study of the cult of Saint Patrick in Ireland was strongly criticized by Henri Hubert in the introduction to the work of his student (see Czarnowski (1919) for the original text and Maître (1966: 64–65) for the analysis).
- [10] A historian of art, known mainly for his monumental *Iconographie de l'art chrétien* (1957–1959). He dedicated his book about early German painters to Robert Hertz in 1910.
- [11] FRH.06.C.05.010, Loctudy, La petite forêt, 1 August 1910.
- [12] FRH.20.C.04.004, Loctudy, 11 September 1910.
- [13] FRH.06.C.01.040, Paris, 2 July 1911, cited in Riley (2001–2002: 133).
- [14] Brother-in-law of Robert Hertz, married to Cécile Hertz (see Besnard & Riley, 2002: 41).
- [15] FRH.02.C.05.0046, Cogne, 29 August 1912. Letter partially cited in Belmont (2003: 79).
- [16] FRH.02.C.05.0049, Abriès, 28 July 1913.
- [17] For a view of the whole of these new kinds of dynamism on the part of inhabitants of mountain zones, see, in the field of migrations, Albera and Corti (2000); Granet-Abisset (1994). For an exploration of the questioning of these stereotypes, see Pelen (2001).
- [18] FRH.11.D.04, *Témoignages d'informateurs et notes sur la fouillasse*, 359, 360, 362, 363, 366, 368, 370, 381, 382, 391, 393/850.
- [19] For a synthesis of these theories, see Van Gennep (1909: 17).
- [20] In the scientific context of the beginning of the twentieth century, primitive Otherness appeared as a heuristic and moral concept: “What in the end guided ethnologists was research, the quest for another time, the quest for societies of another time, for the time the most distant from the one that seemed like ours, for a time close to the origin, for a disappeared time somehow miraculously conserved by certain groups miraculously preserved both from evolution and from civilization. Beyond space, the Other but the most Other, it is at the end of time that we seek this, and it is via the one farthest away that one looks for this” (Paul-Lévy, 1986: 280).
- [21] When he evoked Hertz’ pessimism (Parkin, 1996: 2).
- [22] FRH.06.C.01.008, Paris, 26 July 1899.
- [23] FRH.06.C.01.009, Les Petites Dalles, 10 August 1899.
- [24] FRH.02.C.01.045, Les Petites Dalles, 14 August 1899.
- [25] FRH.19.C.01 to 22.C.06, from c. 1904 to c. 1920.
- [26] Hertz (1928: xii) and the archives files FRH.10.N.01.001 to 006.
- [27] On the one hand, the advocates of sharing the general engagement in the 1914 conflict developed the notion of “*culture de guerre*” (Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, 2000; Audoin-Rouzeau et al., 2002), although, following mainly Frédérique Rousseau (1999, 2003; Cazals & Rousseau, 2001), this notion was seen in a larger perspective.

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