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FROM IMAGINARY REALITIES TO SOCIAL REALITIES

A CONVERSATION WITH MAURICE GODELIER

· JANNE AHONEN AND TUULIKKI PIETILÄ ·

The Finnish Anthropological Society together with Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Helsinki had the honour of hosting the visit of the renowned anthropologist Maurice Godelier to Helsinki in November 2008. Professor Godelier gave a presentation at the departmental seminar and a public lecture in which he addressed a fundamental question in the social sciences: “What are the social relations that make a set of human groups and individuals a society?” Not surprisingly the lecture hall was full of interested listeners gathered around to hear the lessons of a respected teacher.

Godelier’s career in anthropology has been long and impressive. Starting from early on as an assistant to Fernand Braudel and then Claude Lévi-Strauss, Godelier has been closely connected with French academic centres. In the 1960s and 1970s Godelier became famous for practically single-handedly introducing economic anthropology to France, drawing great inspiration from the works of Karl Marx in particular. After working as a researcher for the French National Scientific Centre (CNRS) for several years, he was appointed Professor of Anthropology (*de classe exceptionnelle*) at EHESS, the leading centre for studies in the social sciences in France, a chair he has held ever since, meanwhile receiving numerous academic awards and prizes. Godelier did extensive fieldwork among the Baryua of New Guinea between 1966 and 1981, carefully documenting and analyzing how a society is structured and how it may in time transform.

It is these questions of continuity and transformation—regarding both the study of societies on the one hand and Godelier’s intellectual pathway on the other—that we had the opportunity discuss with him on his visit to Helsinki. Going back to his earlier Marxist-inspired works with notions of “the dominant mode of production” and moving towards his more recent formulations of the “role of the imaginary in human social life” Godelier opens up clarifying and interesting viewpoints to his anthropological corpus and leads us to approach a fundamental question in the social sciences: what is it that makes humans into a society? Drawing from careful analysis of dozens of cases around the world Godelier argues that it is not economic relations nor kinship relations but rather political-religious relations that are fundamental in making a society. Interviewed by Tuulikki Pietilä (University of Helsinki) and Janne Ahonen (University of Helsinki), Godelier also presents some of his views on the future of anthropology which he considers to be full of important and interesting possibilities, producing knowledge that needs to be taken into account in today’s world.

T.P.

What is your relationship to Marxism? Is it important for you today?

M.G.

What is not working in the Marxist approach is the idea—its core idea—that the transformation of the means of production will generate a total transformation of a society, such as the kinship structures, religious world views and so on. But what is still efficient is

the materialist view of man and society. This view derives from enlightenment philosophy. It is the view that all regimes of power, all cosmic and religious views of the world, are human inventions. There are no gods, and power structures are invented by men and applied to men. I call this a materialist view because the materialists in philosophy—from the Antiquity to the eighteenth century—were the first ones to say that gods are part of man. As social anthropologists or social scientists we have the task to understand in which conditions people create that kind of thinking and way of life. We have to find the origin of it within history and within the structure of the mind and the structure of society. History is an important foundation of everything that we have to explain.

But historical materialism was also founded on the hypothesis that the origin (*Entspringen* in German) of kinship structures and philosophical world views lies in the relations between people as they exploit nature and create material resources. This is not confirmed by my own experience and, I believe by the experience of many other people.

I think that economy and economic structures have changed their historical and sociological roles in the course of history. The history of economy is a history of transformation. In a society in which there are no classes, no castes, and where the human groups are mainly kinship groups, it is not kinship that makes a society as a global structure. Instead it can be the initiation structures, for instance. In Western terms we call these structures of relationships political and religious. Because these human relationships define a regime of power, a way of governing a society. And we call the relationships religious because they cannot exist without bringing together ancestors and gods and spirits of nature. For millennia, we can say, a regime of power was also a cosmic order at the same time. Not only a social order, it was a socio-cosmic order. We Westerners say that it is a political and religious structure. It is a way to see it from our perspective.

In different places archaeology shows that something happened at the end of the Neolithic era, probably during the Bronze Age. In terms of archaeological remains we find two kinds of human establishments. There are temples and there are fortresses or palaces. And there is craftsmanship because people create things to glorify the power of gods and power of people: luxurious valuables. If the priests and the warriors are specialized in their functions, they don't work anymore to produce their own material conditions of life. The other groups, the majority of the people, will work for them and produce the specific conditions of life of the people in specialized functions. Then there is a relationship between the political and religious functions and the economy. What we have to do is to understand the conditions in which certain groups of people were completely detached from productive activities while at the same time all the conditions of production were attached to them.

It means we have to understand why the people in specialized social functions (priests, warriors, et cetera) were allowed a complete detachment from the productive activities. At the same time, for the majority of the population, access to land was controlled by these 'detached' people. In some societies, even the person of the commoner was controlled: the bodies and work and life of the commoners. This is the traditional problem of the origin of castes and classes. It is with these transformations that economy starts to play an important role because the direct producers have to produce for themselves and for others. This is a historical transformation which has occurred in different places at different times.

What is relatively clear is that in Asia and Europe the process started at the Bronze Age. With bronze they were producing religious objects like vessels, and arms—bronze weapons.

But after *l'âge du fer*, the Iron Age, it was easier to multiply the production of weapons and tools so there was a transformation from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. That is the hypothesis. And therein lies also the problem of the relationship between violence and consent.

In the nineteenth century there was discussion about the role of violence in history. The state is created by violence and the anarchists wanted to use violence to destroy the state. That was a big polemic between Marx and others, the anarchists in Germany and Russia, and so on. The anarchists could not accept the idea that the dominated consented—partly—to be dominated and subjugated. One cannot understand the relationship between consent and violence without getting into the vision of the people, the vision that priests are working for the good of everyone because they can work and be in dialogue with the gods, with the spirits and the ancestors. They bring something positive to everyone. That is the core of consent. The people who dominate are at the same time thought to bring potential prosperity. This is what you see in all the rituals in fact. That was discussed earlier under the term of ideology: ideology as masking the reality, the true reality. The use of the concept of ideology was difficult, because it meant interpreting the relationship between the different groups as a relationship of exploitation and domination. We interpret other people's vision of themselves and of the cosmos as an ideology masking the true reality. That is wrong. There was no true reality that was masked, there was an existential reality lived and produced by the people. In terms of history, what is important is that ideology does not come after relationships. It does not come afterwards to mask something that is existing. It was a way to think in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What we have to understand—and this is the strength of anthropology—is the global process of creating a new kind of existence.

T.P.

So that is what you would call 'the imaginary'?

M.G.

Yes, and so what I have done recently is to look at Lévi-Strauss, going back to the introduction to Mauss, where he says that if there is primacy between the symbolic and the imaginary, it is the symbolic which will be first. But he did not try to provide a clear definition of what the imaginary is and what the symbolic practices or symbolic realities are. I'll explain. Imaginary realities and symbolic realities never exist separately, they always exist jointly, and we can confuse them. The idea that Jesus Christ is a god living and dying for us, the sinners, is an imaginary view of something and someone. If that was not transformed into rituals and institutions like churches, it would be an idea in the minds of some people, without any social or historical effect. In order for imaginary realities to become social realities they have to be coupled with symbolic practice, symbolic gestures. Symbolic realities are institutions and practices. And these institutions and practices make imaginary realities transform into social realities. If you take this sort of view of a relation between imaginary cores and symbolic and social institutions I think you'll get a view of a process of creating existential realities and evidences for people.

T.P.

Is the imaginary always larger than the symbolic and social realities? Could it be called a realm of the potential?

M.G.

Creativity. It is creativity of a sort. It cannot become a social reality with a social effect if it is not transformed into rituals. Rituals make thoughts—imaginary realities—into social evidence and social truths at the same time. They bring reality and truth. This is why it is difficult to criticize religion because for the people it is reality and truth, it is a real fact. But that fact is a pure creation in terms of symbolic gestures of an imaginary reality. This is why my materialism is more efficient now than what I was thinking when I was younger, as a Marxist. Now I don't think that there is a direct link between a mode of production and the view of Jesus as a god. That was the core hypothesis of Marx, that if you understand the mode of production you will get the key for kinship and religion. So from knowledge of the mode of production of the Jews, seven centuries before Christ, you will understand the imagination of the prophets and the Bible. It is not possible. That sort of materialism is refuted by my experience and I think by the experience of many other people. In academic circles thirty years ago, in the great glory of Marxism and structuralism, that hypothesis was taken for granted. That was the way to be a materialist, to start with the mode of production and after that go to kinship and religion and hope to understand everything on the basis of that. This is finished for me. But my view is a materialist view because I say that religion is a creation of man, nothing exists outside the mind except symbolic practice and institutions. So these things do exist—but not because gods exist but because men transform imaginary realities into social realities.

J.A.

You began to address the problem of modes of production and what the Marxists usually call superstructure in “The Mental and the Material”, *L'Idéal et le matériel*. There you also say that there is no direct link between a mode of production and kinship. But do you still think it is useful to find so-called dominant social relations that are directly linked to production and reproduction?

M.G.

No. I have broken with this hypothesis because compared with Meillassoux and others I think I was not a normal Marxist, if you remember. First, because I knew what a structure was better than Meillassoux and also because I was not pleased with the idea that kinship is generated from modes of production. I thought it was not fitting with what I was reading from Meyer Fortes and all the others. They were not Marxists but they were good ethnographers. So I proposed the hypothesis that when kinship relationships act as relations of production...

J.A.

The infrastructure...

M.G.

... the economic activities and relationships will make, in terms of society, the kinship relationships dominant. So in a way I saved the Marxist hypothesis under this form. When a superstructure is acting as an infrastructure it explains the domination of this superstructure in terms of society and mind—culture. That was my hypothesis. I provided an alternative to the mechanical causality view between a mode of production and kinship. I started with kinship societies, kin-based societies; I was absolutely in the atmosphere and universe of the anthropologists. I could explain kin-based societies by the dominance of kinship, and after that I moved to India to explain the dominance of religion, because the caste system is a religious and political system, but at the same time it is a distribution system of productive activities between castes.

I was wrong. But I was not contradicting the empirical evidence of anthropology. Most of my colleagues in France were not paying attention to the richness of anthropology in terms of data. Me, I am always very, very empirical. And very often the Marxist anthropologists were more philosophers than ethnographers, a few references sufficed. But Marxism was a religion in a way, an ideological attitude to combat the bourgeoisie.

So now, what is the difference? I say kinship as such never dominates a society because it does not produce a society. Kinship does not create society as a global structure. Between kinship groups there must be something which is not kinship and which encompasses them, and this is what we in the West call a regime of power and a regime of relationships with the cosmos. This is not produced by kinship relationships. Kinship relationships simply don't produce a vision of the gods. They don't produce a vision of the universe. And they don't relate all the kinship groups into a totality in such a way that relationship between kinship groups would be the common base for making a society. That is very clear from the Baruya. The Baruya have fifteen clans, but the fifteen clans co-operate only on one occasion or one context. This context creates something permanent in the society. It is the context of age-groups. All the boys will pass through four stages and they will become men, warriors or shamans: the great men. At the same time there are great women. Great women are women who pass through their initiation, they have got six, seven, eight children. The Baruya recognize that to have seven or eight children living is a difficult task. And these women are good gardeners and strong workers, too. They have their own social role and weight, in spite of the male domination. The initiation structure creates an encompassing and interdependent relationship between everybody according to their age, lineage and village. It concerns everyone. Kinship relationships by themselves cannot produce a global, a complete, interdependent system of relationships. But at the core of that there is an imaginary thing because here people will use sperm to re-engender the young boys. Sperm will be a source of life and strength; this is a pure imaginary function of sperm, not to inseminate people. That is a symbolic practice. For them it is a real practice: sperm without any contact with women is a source of life and strength, men re-engender life without women. At the core of the practices you have ritual homosexuality, as a way to construct virility of the boys and to separate completely the female and the male worlds.

During the initiation ceremonies the sun will come to join the masters of the ceremonies to initiate the boys. So *Tsimie* is the central post, *Tsimia* is the initiation house, *Tsimie* is the image, the symbol of the ancestors of the Baruya clan, which has given its name to the Baruya tribe. During the initiation ceremonies that last four or five weeks there is a

connection between the sun, the spirits of nature, and the human beings; the Baruya lay out a lot of things to their tribal spirits and the ancestors, they are coming. So sun, spirits, ancestors and human beings come together, and at the end of the ceremony they disjoint all these things. They have a ritual to send back the sun, to send back the spirits and the ancestors and to resume life for three years, and after three years they will pull it all together again, and so on. If you don't understand this global machinery, something is wrong.

So you see now why my previous hypothesis as a Marxist was wrong? Because I was still believing in the same thing as Meyer Fortes and others: kin-based societies. I was blocked by it by believing in it. And that is the break I have made.

I think that now my analytic capacity is much stronger than before and that I am a much better anthropologist now. I think I have broken and killed the evidence of one so-called ethnographic truth, that is, the claim that there are kin-based societies and class-based or caste-based societies. No: kin-based societies don't exist. It is an illusion. It is because I have made this step in the last ten years that I can repudiate my previous ways of being a Marxist. But doing that I am a much more efficient materialist than I was because I can give an account of the imaginary cores of all the relationships and I can give an account of the role of the imagination to create realities.

Also, what I have done recently is to think about what we call relationships: the relation between groups or the relation between father and mother and so on. For a long time—and that was the view of Lévi-Strauss—it was thought that relations exist between related elements. What was missing was something very important: relations do not exist only between but within. This is the subjective part of relationships, the way people think about themselves. So in fact a relationship is a double reality. It is a reality between and within. You cannot get married without knowing what marriage is, or with whom you can marry in your society. The relationship of marriage is within you and at the same time between you.

To marry is a social relationship within yourself; it is a physical relationship if you make love with your wife, but it is immediately loaded with all the representations of what sex is, what sex makes, ideas of purity and danger, and so on. All these things are part of the relationship of getting married in a Moslem society, among the Baruya, and elsewhere. The objective part in the subject is the representation of sex, the representation of purity and danger, the representation of the social ranks of the others, and so on. This is what I am now working on: what is a social relationship?

T.P.

Do you think it is possible to do relevant anthropology in an urban setting with all its diversity? Isn't it very difficult to trace the imaginary in an urban context?

M.G.

Sure it is possible. First, there are many sorts of urban settings or cities. You have cities where you have communities within cities; the city is not made of individuals coming from the countryside and being isolated, you have people coming and reconstructing a community in the city. So the urban society is not only individuals moving but also communities existing. On the other hand, we also have towns with a fantastic diversity of people without a community to back them and that is the anthropology of our society. In

such a city you have to understand the individual track of each person. People start their individual tracks from the family, more or less. In the next generation people start to live a different destiny, different tracks of life; one family group starting to disperse and regroup. They move from one residence to another and get jobs. So you always have the individual tracks and the social categories; the job is classified in our society and so on. In a diversified city we cannot do otherwise but to write biographies, a lot of biographies. But if you do only biographies, if you just take one's affective life or forget that he became or did not become an engineer, something is missing. To do research of such diversity is difficult; in a city with ethnic and other communities it is easier. In a big metropolis like Cairo, Hong Kong, Mexico City, the structure is still more one of communities. Now some European cities become like that because of the migrants coming, Islamic people from Algeria and so on. Mr. Sarkozy, the president of France, is a Hungarian chap in two generations...

So I think urban anthropology is the main task now, because in Africa, four out of five people live in cities. Africa today is very urban basically, but urban with communities of tribes, ethnic groups and so on. I have discussed and given advice for doing urban anthropology but I have never done it myself. It seems to me that urban anthropology needs well-trained anthropologists, not young people to start with. It seems to me also that one of the possible trainings of the anthropologist in the future would be to have a double training, a double base: a base outside and within your own society. To go out to a different society, to have a maximum distance and then come back to your own society. With a double base and training you get a very good foundation, I think. But in the future there will be more and more urban anthropology.

T.P.

Anthropologists are often not trained to analyze their own societies. And we tend to talk about Western societies as if they were one block.

M.G.

We have many Wests. That it is not one block is very clear if we look at history: the West was first criticized in the West. There were the socialist critiques of the nineteenth century, Marxist critiques of the capitalist system, fights of the workers, trade unions and so on. This was a society producing its own critique. We didn't wait for outsiders to criticize capitalist society; it was criticized within the capitalist societies by the people living there because of the inequalities.

Nowadays independence theories or the critiques of the colonial system don't pay attention to the complexities of history. It is not to deny the exploitation of India, but when some of the Hindu intellectuals criticize the West, you ask which West? It is true that the French workers benefited from the French colonial system and so on. But you know it is the same in other societies. India was a set of kingdoms with a caste system, the untouchables. The subaltern and the post-colonial studies deny that. They think that before the British came, India was a harmonious society. These critics were all Marxists, using Gramsci and so on, but they deny that inequality existed in the caste system. This is very strange. In criticizing the Western gods and domination they idealize their own past. In the beginning the subaltern studies were very Marxist, then they shifted; they went to the U.S. and became gurus. So

they are in fact being paid by the West [laughs]. They have become ‘the voices of the people’. These gurus live in New York but are the voices of the caste people.

What I have aimed to show is that kinship will not dominate if the society does not exist as a global structure, which is not produced by kinship. It is the same with the caste system. The caste system is not a kinship relationship. The caste system includes the role of kinship because you have to marry within your caste. So kinship is a condition for the reproduction of the total system of the castes. Class, on the other hand, is caste without a kinship ‘locker’. The class system includes the mobility of individuals; that is the quality and characteristic of class. Classes are open groups, all the time, open to selection. You can go down from your class or move up to another class, which is not possible in the caste system.

You are born a Brahmin, you will die a Brahmin, but you cannot through exams or through political manoeuvres become a Brahmin. It is not possible. That is why India is still there with its structure from thousands of years. It changes all the time but you cannot change the basic structure. It is why they have affirmative policies of giving to lower classes or outcastes ten percent in the universities. The system does not permit that by itself. So they have created a parallel system with ten percent, and so on. Otherwise the Brahmin and Kshatrya people would be going to Oxford and get all the jobs. That was the decision of Nehru and the politicians. They knew they could not break the system of the castes. They knew the history and the strength of the system, so they decided to separate the state from the Brahmins, the religious sphere. To make such policy was relatively easy, because in India the Kshatrya is a politician in a way. So such separation was historically and mentally possible. The state is not a religious state and they have created positive discrimination which is working more or less.