

BOOK REVIEWS

MAURICE GODELIER. *Au fondement des sociétés humaines. Ce que nous apprend l'anthropologie*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2007. Pp. 292. ISBN 978-2-226-17903-6.

After Claude Lévi-Strauss, Maurice Godelier is one of the most famous and discussed of French anthropologists, with the works of both scholars being embedded in profound questions about man and his social existence. Godelier, who was influenced by Lévi-Strauss, is the director of the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris, and has also worked with such renowned institutes as CNRS and *Musée de l'homme*. Taking an active part in the debates and planning of French scientific education and research, he is a shining example of an anthropologist not only conducting long-time fieldwork with a particular society, the Baruya of New Guinea, but also engaged with his own society. With his new book *Au fondement des sociétés humaines: Ce que nous apprend l'anthropologie* (2007) Godelier basically does three things: firstly, he comments on contemporary issues in anthropology and the social sciences more generally; secondly, he offers a summary of the major conclusions of his work in the past decades; and thirdly he presents his views on how an individual constitutes himself as a social subject and how one becomes an anthropologist by “breaking the mirror of Self (*Soi*) and constructing a new I (*Moi*)” (ibid. 46) (all translations of quotations by J.A.).

In the introductory chapter of his book Godelier wishes to make his stand clear that anthropology is “not in agony or about to disappear” (ibid. 62). The manifestos to deconstruct anthropology in order to do ‘New Ethnography’ or ‘cultural studies’ do not dissolve the discipline or wipe away its achievements; rather what is going on is a necessary passage for anthropology (and social sciences more generally) through which it must pass in order to attain a new level of rigour and critique. Reflexivity is important but it is just as important to remember that ethnographic texts are not just literature; the subjects have an existence outside the text and it is possible to complete or correct what has been written about them—which is not the case with the works of Shakespeare or Sophocles (ibid. 59). On the other hand, even though the Tikopia, the Nuer, and the Kachin exist today, their societies are not the same as analyzed by Firth, Evans-Pritchard and Leach. For one thing, today the majority of the 191 states of the UN do not have the sovereignty that many states had in the nineteenth or the early twentieth centuries. International organizations such as the IMF, the World Bank and thousands of NGOs intervene in societies and local communities all over the world (ibid. 25). As he considers recent theoretical trends in the social sciences and changes in the social and political structures of the world, Godelier argues that yes, the object is to deconstruct social sciences, but not in order to make them disappear; rather to reconstruct them, to make them work better. The concluding chapter of the book is titled “Appraising social sciences”, in which Godelier notes that the ever-important object of social sciences is “to bring into daylight that which is not said, to make visible the reasons to act or to not act that are laid in shadows, then to reunite and analyze all these facts in order to discover the reasons, that is, the stakes (*enjeux*) for the actors themselves in the production of their social existence” (ibid. 227).

In this book Godelier summarizes the main points and conclusions of books and articles he has published within the past decades. These have dealt with several anthropological key themes and his conclusions have often contested some “so-called eternal anthropological

truths”, as he puts it himself (ibid. 34). Godelier presents his conclusions in the form of six propositions or arguments, and a chapter is devoted to each of these. The first argument (presented in chapter one) is that in addition to things that are sold and things that are given there are things that should not be sold or given but kept in order to transmit them, and these things support identities over time. In the second chapter he argues that there are and there never have been kin-based societies. Kin relations, and even less those within the family, cannot unite groups of people to make a society. His third argument is that nowhere, in no society, are a man and a woman thought sufficient to make a child. What they fabricate is a foetus that agents more powerful than humans—the ancestors, the gods, God—transform into a child by giving it a spirit and one or several souls. Fourthly, Godelier argues that human sexuality is fundamentally asocial. In chapter five he suggests that all social relations contain imaginary cores that are their internal composites and that constitute them, and are not ideological reflections. These imaginary cores are acted out as symbolic practices. And finally in chapter six the argument is that the social relations that make an ensemble of groups and individuals into a society are not kinship relations or economic relations but what in the West are called politico-religious relations.

To support these bold statements Godelier draws from nearly thirty ethnographic examples from around the world in a fashion that brings to mind classic ‘armchair’ scholars such as Durkheim, Mauss or van Gennep, although he also presents some very detailed analysis of the Baruya of New Guinea. Now it would take another book (or even several) to go through all the arguments entirely and I suggest that the interested reader picks up Godelier’s earlier books and articles where he presents each of these ideas in detail—and Godelier too refers to these earlier works throughout the new book. What is important about this book is that the main ideas and conclusions of Godelier’s work for some four decades are laid here together in a clear, comprehensible, and even compact manner, calling to be taken seriously by anyone working with anthropology—whether it be to complete or contest them.

Perhaps the most original part of this book is Godelier’s drawing from psychoanalysis. The question of how an individual becomes a social subject interests both anthropologists and psychoanalysts but the disciplines differ in their focus, methods, and concepts. Godelier does not wish to glue the two together but wants to be open to some of the psychoanalytic ideas. This is most perceptible in his use of concepts such as “the Imaginary” and “the Symbolic” which he defines carefully since he also maintains that the difference between these two is important to avoid debates and dualisms he considers fruitless, such as that between social anthropology and cultural anthropology.

What, then, is anthropology about? According to Godelier the gist of the anthropologist’s profession lies in “knowing of the other” (*connaissance de l’autre*) (ibid. 177). But how is it possible to know or understand the “other”? It requires two steps: firstly, one needs to suspend one’s judgement and decentre the Self (*Soi*) by separating the social I (*Moi*) from the intimate I (*Moi*); the second step is to construct in the Self a cognitive I (*Moi*) distinct from the social I (*Moi*), which is done by acquiring a mastery of theoretical instruments and practices currently in use—concepts, hypotheses, doctrines, methods of enquiry and analysis (ibid. 46–49, 230). This enables the anthropologist to understand other people and other ways of thinking and acting in the world without being obliged to take part in them or put them into practice in his or her own life.

Godelier argues that all individuals begin their existence as bound to interiorizing a cultural vision of the “I” (*Moi*), a vision they do not create themselves and which from the beginning of life cannot be an object of choice (ibid. 189). This is an aspect of what Bourdieu calls habitus. And in all societies an individual becomes a subject responsible for his or her actions when he or she is separated in a meaningful way (that is, without being traumatized) from the universe of his or her first socialization, which is usually the family and relations of kinship (ibid. 182). Or to put it in the language of psychoanalysts, an individual needs to resolve his Oedipus complex without great damage. Godelier asserts that all social order is at the same time a sexual order and an order between the sexes. Yet as humans live in societies and produce society in order to live, a part of sexuality has to be repressed, though what is repressed never disappears; this, according to him, is a transhistorical and a transcultural fact that concerns the conditions of the emergence of the individual (each individual) as a social subject (ibid. 184–185).

In short, *Au fondement des sociétés humaines* works both as an introduction to Godelier’s work and a further reference to anyone already familiar with his thinking: a sort of closing of accounts by a distinguished scholar who has contributed greatly to his discipline. It is an eloquently and lucidly written book that is accessible and I recommend it to anyone interested in anthropology. Its arguments are clear and often bold, and although I would expect many of them to give rise to opposition and objection, these arguments may fuel discussion on important topics. It also deserves mention that Godelier is always particularly clear with the concepts he uses, clarifying, for example, such key concepts as culture, society, tribe, social relation, and ethnic group, which anthropologists are often regrettably reluctant to define. The elevating moral of this book seems to be that anthropology has not come to its end and instead by practicing it we can still learn a lot from today’s world and its human beings.

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