

Maurice Godelier

Kinship, Gender and Power



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My aim, when I arrived in Berlin, was to write a book on *Incest, Kinship and Power* and, in order to do so, I had to complete a series of researches and readings started in 1988 and dealing with three topics.

1. A critical review of recent data concerning diverse forms and principles of social organizations observed among the primates; family forms, bands and other territorial communities, forms of cooperation and of hierarchies between individuals according to their age, their sex, etc. A reappraisal of the evidences supposedly demonstrating the existence of "incest avoidance", "exogamy" and "exchange of males or females" among some primate species.
2. An evaluation of the theoretical explanations of the origins and foun-

dations of the incest taboo. My view was that it is not possible anymore to oppose pure biological explanations of the incest taboo to pure sociological ones (like Lévi-Strauss' theory of the incest taboo conceived as the condition of emergence of a "genuine human society", of culture as opposed to nature).

3. A research on the representations of the body and of the sexes in different societies given the kinship system and the form of social hierarchies existing in these societies.

In fact, soon after my arrival at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I realized that I had to modify considerably this program, and this in two ways: a) priority had to be given to an attempt to redefine — for myself — the basic components of kinship which combines in different ways 3 kinds of relationships called Parenthood, Siblingship, Affinity, b) the examination of kinship and family structures among the primates had to be postponed.

Parenthood, Siblingship and Affinity take different forms and have different contents as the consequences of the principle of descent (patrilineal, matrilineal, bilineal or non-lineal) structuring the various relations of filiation which constitute the first "layer" of kinship. Discussions with my co-fellows Esther Goody, André Béteille and later with Jack Goody, who visited the Kolleg for one month, were most helpful to me. I found particularly important the definition of "Parenthood" given by Esther Goody in her book *Parenthood and Social Reproduction* (C.U.P. 1982).

It became more and more clear to me that the distinction between filiation and descent made by Evans-Pritchard, Meyer Fortes and other authors like Leach or J. Goody is theoretically crucial. And it was very important to acknowledge the fact that this distinction was not taken seriously by Lévi-Strauss, Louis Dumont and some other "Alliance Theorists", i. e., anthropologists who consider that Marriage and Affinity has a structuring effect more important than any kind of descent principle.

What appeared to me most fruitful in the views of the "Descent theorists" is the idea that the existence of descent principles and of descent groups (lineage, clan, etc.) is not the effect of kinship itself but is the product of the restructuring of the universe of relations of "Filiation" by social forces and interests, i. e., by social realities existing "outside" of kinship and beyond it. These forces originate, according to Meyer Fortes, from what he called "the politico-jural domain" of social life. The hypothesis is stimulating but it seems to me there is a weakness in Fortes' views of kinship and it is precisely that he does not try to explain why some political systems restructure kinship and why other ones do not.

Step by step a sort of double process of social metamorphosis appeared to me to exist in all societies. Through the first process, non-kinship re-

alities (economic, political, religious, etc.) become aspects of a set of kinship relationships and are transmuted into attributes of kinship. This process combines its effects with another one deriving from the fact that every kinship relationship is grounded on the distinction between men and women, between genders and, so, refers to sexes and sexuality. Through this double process, non-kinship realities become aspects of kinship and ultimately of sexes. Human sexuality thus acts like a ventriloquist's dummy and speaks about social realities and social order in an idiom made of imaginary representations of the human body, representations of blood, sperm, flesh, bones, representations of the reproductive process and of the parts supposedly played by a man or a woman within that process etc.

Thus my reappraisal of the debate between the so-called "Descent theorists" and the "Alliance theorists" provided me with a better view of the relationships between kinship systems, representations of the body, and heterosexual or homosexual behaviors observed in various societies. It is also clear that no general theory of kinship yet exists. Each of the various existing theories has its strong points, the structural approach, the symbolic approach, the socio-functional approach etc. , but each neglects or eliminates important aspects of kinship. However, it seems that the time has come to combine carefully and critically the strong parts of these various approaches within an open and flexible framework.

During the year I wrote two texts. One entitled *Wird der Westen das universelle Modell der Menschheit? Die vorindustriellen Gesellschaften zwischen Veränderung and Auflösung**, for one of the *Wiener Vorlesungen 1990* given at the Rathaus of Wien in June. The other is an article for the review *Psychanalysten* entitled "Incest, Kinship and Power" which develops some of the ideas summarized here above.

* See pp. 180-200 in this volume.