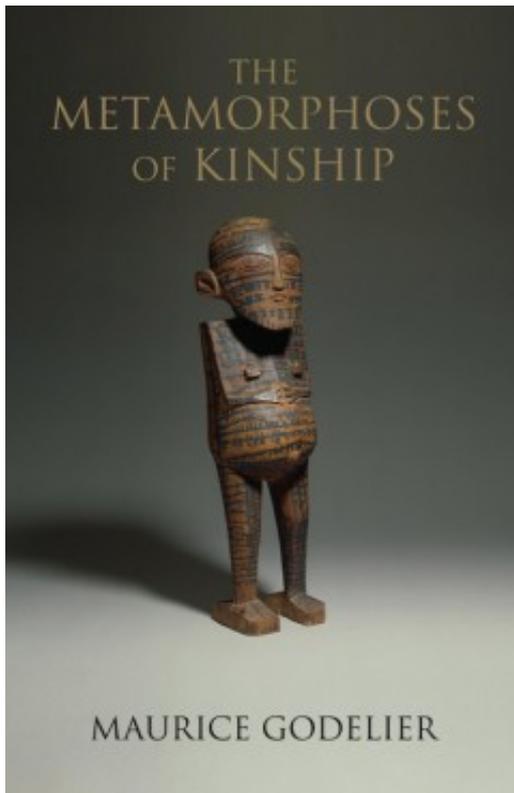


<http://somatosphere.net/2012/01/universes-of-kinship.html>

## Universes of Kinship

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By Leo Coleman



[The Metamorphoses of Kinship](#)

By [Maurice Godelier](#)

Translated by Nora Scott. London: Verso. 615pp. + index. US\$49.95 / £30.00 (hardcover)

Maurice Godelier opens his magisterial tour of the “universe of kinship” with the observation that formal anthropological kinship theory has long been left for dead. What follows is a dazzling analysis that revisits ethnographic data on marriage, descent, siblinghood, and gender from around the world, and revives the entire mode of anthropological thought and argumentation that once used such data as its prime material. As he says, the predicted death of kinship never arrived; instead, the questions that kinship theorists were trying to answer about alliance and descent, about order and conflict and reproduction, simply migrated to new

domains, following both intellectual and social realities. But Godelier almost entirely leaves aside what most American anthropologists would recognize as “new” kinship studies: work on adoption, race and ideologies of reproduction, sexuality and gender, or new reproductive technologies and new “cultures of relatedness.” Nevertheless, his classicism produces entirely novel and revitalizing insights.

This book was a success in France upon its publication there in 2004, mostly due to the first and last chapters, where Godelier contributes to debates about legal recognition of gay unions, parent’s and children’s rights, and the peculiarly French debate about *homoparentalité*. “Homoparenthood,” as it is translated here, preoccupies his conclusions, and he is clearly writing in the context of the public debate in France about the possible psychic, moral, and social dangers posed to a child by the symbolic constellation of two mothers or two fathers (cf. Fassin 2001; Butler 2002). Adoption of a child by both members of a same-sex couple remains impossible in much of continental Europe, and Godelier’s measured and ultimately conservative weighing of these questions in light of cross-cultural data on kinship spurred interest in his book. No doubt, popular interest was also piqued by his theorizing about the implications of practices ranging from brother-sister incest in ancient Egypt to “ritualized homosexuality” in male initiation in highland Papuan societies.

Such sexy topics get the expert, somewhat dry treatment here that we might expect. Indeed, Godelier pioneered the study of male initiation and “semen drinking” in his research with the Baruya, revisited here, and his ethnographic authority is unimpeachable. More surprisingly, this return to kinship theory—a literature now more often dismissed as dry and formalist, and criticized for ignoring politics, power, gender, inequality, and most of all the lived experience of relation, love, and suffering (e.g., Geertz 2001; Carsten 2004)—opens up novel insights about social reproduction and its purchase on our bodies, by putting sex and pleasure and taboo right back at the center of formal kinship analysis. In Nora Scott’s clean English translation, with some of the more winding excursions now relegated to footnotes, this book offers a compendium of carefully-sifted ethnographic insights into the rich variability and moral and philosophical importance of human practices of relation.

## II.

Godelier’s systematic delineation of the components of kinship—filiation and descent, alliance, residence patterns, notions of generation and reproduction, and the incest taboo—constitutes one long argument that kinship is a specific arena of all human social practice and thought, in

which the facts of human sexuality, procreation, obligation, and care are organized and made thinkable, and hence manipulable. At the very outset, he rejects David Schneider's (1984) well-known dismissal of the universality of kinship (as something all societies are supposed to have in more or less the same way). Godelier specifically objects to the charge that the language of kinship analysis reflects a bias towards Western ideas about reproduction and inheritance, with our cultural notions of "blood" and enforceable "codes of conduct" (in-law). He makes a strong claim for the analytic usefulness of even terms like "consanguine" and "affine," as long as it is clearly understood that the relationship indicated thus for analytic purposes may not have the same content everywhere—the formal organization of relationships on these axes, is, for him, indispensable.

If the biologicistic language of kinship is an ethnographic misrepresentation, for Godelier kinship retains a strong reference to the "facts of life," and to our biological inheritance. He argues in one late, illuminating chapter, with careful reference to data from recent primate studies, that kinship both relates us to, and separates us from, our evolutionary ancestors, who were already social animals. Kinship cannot be seen as only a part of culture, totally opposed to nature, Godelier argues, rejecting Claude Lévi-Strauss's heuristic notion of a rupture between the two, marked by the appearance of language and exchange. But kinship isn't autonomous as a way of organizing actual human social relations, either. For if Godelier argues against the conceptual autonomy of kinship from natural processes, he likewise argues against the notion that there has ever been a society organized by its kinship relations alone. Every society, even the most putatively simple, he is at pains to point out, is more fundamentally structured by "political-religious" relations that organize and allocate resources and power.

What remains of kinship then, is a "dual metamorphosis" in which relations of sexuality, of filiation, of descent are appropriated by the wider forces of social reproduction, and by which the individual body becomes both the site and source of reproduction—a "ventriloquist's dummy" for reproducing meanings which may reflect the most general ideas and power-relations of a society. Property, status, and even intangibles like honor or rights, are not themselves part of kinship, but *in part* through kinship relations they are distributed, inherited, held apart, or reproduced, and most significantly made part of our very physicality, through the social exercise of control over bodily, natural processes. On this account, understanding the ways in which kinship structures circulations of value is just as important as understanding economics or politics, or any other domain of human alienation, expropriation, and integration into a pre-existing, social, whole.

### III.

Godelier begins on the ground, with his own well-known fieldwork with the Baruya (Godelier 1986), and “lets the Baruya guide us” into the universe of kinship. Let us follow his lead.

The Baruya are a highland society which practices male initiation, and their political and religious life is strongly marked by male dominance over high-status activities. Women can and do become “Great Women” and gain significant power in the political-religious relations of the society, but the substances, skills, and tools which are identified as feminine are systematically devalued. Boys are taken at a young age to live with other young initiates in a men’s house, and “become men” through participating in “semen drinking” and “semen giving” during their period of initiation. They also learn that the first women invented the sacred tools of cosmological reproduction, but misused them, so men had to save the world, and ensure its continuation, by taking power away from women.

More is going on here, though, than indoctrination. Godelier says that this period of separation with other young men introduces them to the “pleasures, desires, and frustrations of sex” [p. 450] as well as accomplishing the physical maturation of their bodies according to Baruya notions of generation. Descent is reckoned, here, through the male line and its substances, and part of the point of “semen-drinking” is to reproduce the conception and gestation of the boy-child, through men alone. These ideas physically and psychically set men against women, and connect certain groups of men to each other through vertical relations of kinship. Similar principles of social organization through descent and generation were once much discussed by “descent theorists” (though with much less attention to masculine domination and local ideas of generation).

Procedures also exist for forging and maintaining what we might term “horizontal,” if not egalitarian, relationships between groups, through marriages between local groups and through long-distance exchange relations beyond that circle (and now in relations with the national government). The ways in which such relationships are created beyond the circle of “consanguines,” however that is reckoned, is the “alliance” dimension of kinship that was stressed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969). Of course, for Godelier, neither descent nor alliance appears in its theoretical purity here or anywhere, and Baruya social cohesion, group identity, and continuance through time is as much a matter of politics and economics as of kinship—Godelier mentions large-scale exchanges between distant groups, warfare, and territorial expansion. However, relations of “alliance” are just as important as generation and descent for structuring the ideational universe of relations for the Baruya, and in particular

constitute the tie (from the men's point of view) between brothers-in-law.

#### IV.

Alliance-theory is celebrated because it functions not only as a key to kinship relations, but also works as a sociological, rather than a biological, explanation for the incest taboo—indeed, one which is widely shared by people other than anthropologists. The basic principle was summed up by an Arapesh man, who in the 1930s told Margaret Mead that “we don't sleep with our sisters” and went on to explain why, in sociological detail: “Don't you want a brother-in-law? Don't you realize that if you marry another man's sister and another man marries your sister, you will have at least two brothers-in-law, while if you marry your own sister you will have none? Who [then] will you hunt with, who will you garden with, who will you go to visit?” (Mead 1935). Such data were the kernel of Lévi-Strauss's claim that the primary incest taboo was that between brothers and sisters, compelling men to exchange their sisters and thus become brothers-in-law, creating alliances and making society possible. While giving due credit to Lévi-Strauss's analysis, Godelier's careful review of theories of incest—both indigenous and anthropological—makes a major step forward in anthropological theory, in part because of better ethnographic data, but also because he also carefully examines their purely formal and conceptual implications.

Cross-culturally, incest taboos comprehend more than just opposite-sex siblings, covering relations between mothers and sons, and, even more importantly, between affines (or in-laws) as well as between “blood” relatives. Until the twentieth century, most European countries banned the marriage of a man with his deceased wife's sister or a woman with her deceased husband's brother, and Henry VIII famously justified his divorce from Catherine of Aragon on the grounds that she had been briefly married to his late brother before to him, and therefore their marriage was incestuous. Such institutions posed a logical problem for kinship theory, since “alliance” could not explain “vertical” taboos, as Jack Goody pointed out in the 1950s. Nor could alliance-theory comprehend why a person would suddenly become taboo who had been, before marriage, in the same class of people as the eventual spouse—his or her sibling—nor why that taboo would be so durable (Goody points out in his review of the French edition of *The Metamorphoses* that he himself stressed the role of property and institutions to explain these phenomena; Godelier phrases his conclusions about the “appropriation” of kinship by material relations differently, but the thrust is the same).

Further, in perhaps the most intellectually-exciting section of the book,

Godelier draws on work by Françoise Héritier (2002), and observations by Margaret Mead and others, to explore what we know, and don't know, about same-sex incest, a topic on which even many taboos are silent. Godelier refutes Héritier's thesis of the conceptual primacy of mother-daughter incest, but argues that same-sex incest taboos, and correlative preference for certain same-sex partners, is at least discernible in the ethnographic record. According to some data from pre-colonial Australia and other groups in New Guinea, the brother-in-law relationship is just as much one that licenses sex between the partners to the relation as the marital one is. Both brothers-in-law and wives, more formally, are often considered to be the same "kind" of affine, equally at stake in marital exchanges (p. 453). As John Borneman pointed out some time ago, there is no reason for us to assume analytically that a heterosexual tie—with a spouse—is more fundamental or primary, sociologically or experientially, than the *homo-social* or potentially *homosexual* tie with the sibling-in-law (Borneman 1996). Each is equally promoted by the taboo on sex with one's own siblings (of whatever gender), each is conducive to exchange and expansion of solidarity, each is equally a kinship relation. This last argument, however, takes the analysis further than Godelier is willing, ethnographically and comparatively, to go.

## V.

For Godelier, the key to kinship is what it reproduces—sexually, materially, socially. Material and immaterial "goods" and their circulation are integral to this understanding, and the differing pathways through which they can flow, or—importantly—not flow. Building on his own and others' innovations in the ethnography of exchange (Weiner 1992; Godelier 1998), Godelier integrates into his analyses accounts of both *exchange*—giving things, rights, and interests in people and things in order to widen a circle of alliance—and what has come to be known by the term of art "keeping-while-giving," or "inalienable possession." Inalienable possessions are, typically, sacred objects or special valuables that form a kind of "patrimony" to be "passed down" (the classic ethnographic representatives of keeping-while-giving, the Trobriand Islanders, are matrilineal, and "patrimony" is strictly a solecism here). In any kinship system, Godelier shows, the transmission of identity, of valuables, of property and status, is as important a principle as their exchange for "new kin." In the extreme form, in Roman Egypt, brother-sister marriage was at least an ideal—and not only for elites—because, combined with more distant marriages for younger siblings, it could maximize a lineage's command of resources.

While Godelier is careful not to narrowly define the “other” interests bound up in kinship practices, or what is reproduced in kinship, the breadth of his analysis is at times a liability. In some of his more far-flung explorations, the specificity of material relations actually contracted—historically and culturally—is lost under the formal capaciousness of kinship terminologies. For example, kinship systems and the caste-based control over status and honor described in classical Indian texts are treated here as if they really were a substitute for and barrier to political centralization, a claim which both rehearses intellectualist fictions about a timeless, apolitical India and contravenes Godelier’s own general argument about the very limited autonomy of kinship, especially in highly stratified societies.

Furthermore, some of Godelier’s theses will seem immediately to be both a reduction and a revanchism to anthropologists more familiar with critical theory, feminism, and queer studies than kinship studies (or who know kinship through these fields’ critiques). There are, of course, points of agreement: Godelier holds, if in a more Durkheimian than Foucauldian fashion, that the body and its sexuality are the site and source of iterations which reproduce power; gender-relations, here, are neither primary nor natural, but a variable product of both ideologies and more specific material substantializations of power. But such insights are consistently subordinated to the problem, at once logical and historical, of social reproduction, which here involves the repression of sexuality, the alienation of labor-power, and the comprehensive deployment of sexual difference as the biological basis for social reproduction. In all of these ways, Godelier’s analysis sits uncomfortably with recent trends in the history of sexuality, at least in the American academy.

Indeed, this focus on reproduction gives Godelier’s comments on contemporary developments in kinship something of a exotic ring in the face of real developments. Procreation and filiation are now more and more separated by both law and technology: the incest taboo is reinterpreted to allow daughter-to-mother or sibling-to-sibling gamete donation; we recognize forms of parentage and relationship which reshape social identities and result in what Marilyn Strathern (following Sarah Franklin) has neatly called “recombinant families” (Strathern 2005: 22). That choice is central, both legally and ideologically, to these developments in kinship concerns Godelier, for they install individual desire over the “natural” imperatives of reproduction. He calls gay parenthood “a radical change in human kinship relations, in so far as it makes adoption a founding principle of descent fully equal with biological reproduction and completely excludes sexual relations from the criteria for founding a family . . . [such that] heterosexual relations, which engender children ‘naturally’, will now be placed at the service of homosexuals’ desire to have children” (p. 177). Godelier points out that the physical

reproduction of a child for two same-sex parents now includes, minimally, three bodies (or parts of three bodies) rather than the “norm” of two.

Yet by Godelier’s own analysis to ask about the “natural” basis of some kinship relationship is to pose a false question, and even sexual reproduction has always involved the participation and interest of more than the genitors. “Parents are also, and sometimes primarily,” he writes, “the adults who feed [the children], bring them up, and ensure their future” (p. 533). “We know, too—and for an anthropologist this is obvious—that . . . the paternal functions are not necessarily attached to a person of the male sex nor the maternal functions to a person of the female sex” (p. 551). The questions raised for kinship studies, then, by gay parenthood and technologically-assisted reproduction (themselves encompassing widely diverse practices) ought to be more about appropriation and *social* reproduction than about sex and gametes. How has *homoparentalité*, and its recruitment of various genetic and social components, become part of the already alienated structure of human social reproduction; and how are such arrangements actually being, as kinship relations, ordered as part of the social, legal, and affective cosmology of capitalist, liberal societies?

That Godelier does not himself complete this sort of analysis of gay parenthood is not a weakness of this book, nor of his approach in general. Elsewhere here, he points out evidence of a global transformation of kinship, with traditional institutions such as dowry or brideprice moving away from patterns of “keeping-while-giving” and toward the direct transfer of cash-equivalents, thus increasing the “negotiability” of the relationships involved. Such cross-cultural developments potentially provide a framework for analyzing gay parenthood alongside other transformations of kinship by law and technology (see Inhorn 2012). The European social debate, meanwhile, on same-sex parenthood is by no means over—the European Court of Human Rights is, as of January 2012, deliberating over two cases of same-sex second parent adoption (among them [Gas & Dubois v. France](#)).

Whatever is decided in those cases, on the evidence of Godelier’s book the questions raised by *homoparentalité*, or by any other technical or legal changes in kinship, reproduction, and alliance, and descent, do admit of systematic anthropological investigation and comparison. Through his highly formal mode of analysis, Godelier underscores, better than any account of individual choices or singular arrangements could, both the astounding range of kinship possibilities that have, over time, been imagined, and the limits placed by the demands of social and psychic survival. This dual emphasis on variation-within-limits is most clear in his devastating “global assessment” of Françoise Héritier’s thesis of a primal mother-daughter incest. After extensive review of comparative data,

Godelier concludes that it accords neither with ethnographic fact nor logical necessity, but rests instead on a fantasy of feminine autopoiesis (pp. 349-363), just as Freud's arguments for a primal murder of the father and subsequent cannibalistic meal, in *Totem and Taboo*, likewise said more about social fantasy than any particular practice.

Such fantasies, and the taboos they motivate, tell us a great deal about what we think we're doing, when we do kinship. Yet, while kinship is increasingly a domain of creative self-expression and consumption in the West (Faubion and Hamilton 2007), everything does not "go" either—both internal and external constraints structure the universe of the thinkable and doable, even in apparent periods of *laissez-faire* such as our own present. Thus, examining the recent metamorphoses of kinship for how they are implicated in more general processes of social reproduction is helpful, and indeed on the basis of this analysis we may arrive at a novel way to think about topics like gay marriage or single-parent adoption. Godelier is rightly careful to distinguish same-sex alliances in the ethnographic record from modern gay identities. But gay parenthood does constitute, as he somewhat anxiously observes, an avenue of both biological and cultural reproduction. This framing of kinship and parenthood as social reproduction cuts in interesting ways across the now-classic question of the reproduction of the homosexual as a "personage" in modernity (Foucault 1978: 42-43). Through explorations of homosexual reproduction in *both* these senses, how it is accomplished through diverse exchanges of (and prohibitions on) food, sex, bodies, desires, and interests, and how certain cultural forms and resources are transmitted, the anthropological study of kinship and the history of sexuality may be reunited.

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