



## Marxism in the horizon: an essay on Maurice Godelier

Godelier, Maurice (1974 [1969]) *Rationalité et irrationalité en économie*, T.1, T.2 Paris : François Maspero [RIE]

Godelier, Maurice (1977 [1973]) *Horizon, trajets marxistes en anthropologie*, T.1 Paris : François Maspero. [HTMA] « Anthropologie et économie. Une anthropologie économique est-elle possible ? » pp. 51–136

Godelier, Maurice (1984) *L'idéal et le matériel. Pensée, économies, sociétés* Paris : Fayard. Part 2. « La part idéelle du réel » pp. 165–228 [IM]

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Published online: 1 December 2023

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With his systematic review and methodical discussion of other scholars' works, Godelier constructed a theory of Marxism that “made sense” in the empirical worlds of anthropology, while preserving the main tenets of historical materialism and dialectical materialism. From his writings in the 1970s, his workshops on “transition,” and his seminars at the CNRS in the early 1980s, we learned to think theoretically about our ethnographic material, and to do it within a framework that referred to Marx. For us, on the one hand, Godelier provided a Marxist theory that respected the value of concrete ethnography, and on the other hand, explored the issue of transitions from one system to another, while thinking about the future, a passage to a better system, probably socialist.

### Introduction

Maurice Godelier's early work is foremost a theoretical endeavor which confronts several “*problématiques*,” challenges that he thought needed to be resolved urgently in order to understand historical transformation. The three oeuvres I have chosen

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**Note of the author:** In my work I have used the French original version. However, I have used the English published translation for most quotations in the text, and given their location in the English version. I have included in endnotes the original French, for reference.

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are 15 years apart but they express a unique train of thought. When reading them together, one feels the urge of the author to get his message through, and his will to make a theoretical contribution to the study of the economy by disrupting various frameworks that were in place at the time.

Godelier's work reached Spanish universities with the process of transition to a parliamentary democratic system in full swing (1975–1982), with labor conflicts and nationalist claims filling the streets. The 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal seemed a hopeful sign for a socialist future, which expressed what transition parties, unions, and movements on the left labored for. In Spain, at the time, political mobilization was focused on achieving *that* transition, and Marxist debate provided some of the tools we needed. Godelier's political perspective—especially his interest in explaining what produced “transition”—made sense in relation to our everyday experience. Moreover, as anthropologists mostly doing research in rural “peasant” regions at home, we were in search of theoretical frameworks that could explain the political economic and socio-cultural positions we observed, which responded to pressures to “modernize” and increase productivity, while embedded in “traditional” conceptual elements. Hence, Godelier's work also made sense in relation to our research preoccupations. Indeed, in 1978, when I was a student of anthropology at the University of Barcelona, Godelier's texts were part of the syllabus in the introductory course on “economic anthropology.” Marxism was becoming influential among some anthropologists in Spain, and Godelier proposed a theoretical framework that we found enticing.

## The context of contemporary debates

When *Rationalité...* and *Horizon...* were published, critiques to French Structural Marxism such as that of Thompson (1978) had not appeared. Yet, Marxism was very present in the intellectual debate. Academic conversations turned into political positioning: how should we interpret Marx's writings and how should they be used to analyze historical and contemporary societies? In France, Althusser (in 1974 [1965] *Pour Marx*) (1968 Althusser, Balibar in *Lire le Capital* 1 and 2) had proposed a theoretical framework that emphasized structural systemic logic and stressed the centrality of theory. Against “empiricism” allegedly centered on concrete realities, which described the relevance of historical events and the ubiquitous presence of political and ideological forces in the reproduction of society, Marxist structuralists insisted on the underlying (invisible) structure, an economic logic exerting its power on social reproduction processes.

When asked to write this piece on Maurice Godelier, I decided to re-read Althusser and to read again the virulent attack that Thompson wrote against him in 1978. I thought this was necessary for context. As I went back to my books and saw how they were pencil marked in so many places, for all appeared to me so crucial then, I was stunned at the violence of Thompson's attack. Although I am closer to Thompson's position (Narotzky, 2021)—the centrality of practice and experience, of the “dialogue between social being and social conscience”—I find that Thompson over-reacted to Althusser's work, and maybe even misrepresented his intent.

Thompson was probably moved by a political and personal dislike of the philosopher and his convoluted and abstract—often abstruse—writing (difficult to read in French, probably even more difficult in translation). Moreover, Thompson was angry at the influence that Althusser had outside of France, the influence “passed upon the English-speaking Left by the British francophiles who have, for some fifteen years, been promoting a purported ‘revival of Marxism’ in this country” (1978:209). So there was also this conflict among Marxist historians *in Britain*, that might be seen as a struggle for a local theoretical and methodological hegemony in the field.

I found Thompson unfair with Althusser because, as I saw it, their objective was not as distant as *The Poverty of Theory* purports it to be. Besides, the discussion seemed, in the end, to be a byzantine confrontation between two methodological practices (that of philosophy, more speculative, and that of history, more evidence based) and two intellectual traditions (French, English speaking) that was grounded in the concrete positioning of both scholars in two national political environments that were not the same and in which personal positions evolved.<sup>1</sup>

The way I understood Althusser, he was attempting to find a theoretical way out of the simplistic determinism that plagued many Marxist explanations of society. These asserted that an “economic” infrastructure (means of production and relations of production) was the causal explanation for all other social manifestations (political, religious, cultural, ideological superstructures). It was therefore the motor of any significant societal transformation (the transition to another “mode of production” was the basis of other forms of social change). Arguably, his attempt at overcoming this theory of systemic transformation, was (1) a casuistic play with pre-given abstract categories (“instances”), and (2) stressed the abstract reality that created the “conditions of existence” of individual agency. Yet, through the concept of “overdetermination” Althusser was trying to explain what happened in actual social formations (*in Pour Marx* 1974:111–116) by proposing

“the *accumulation of effective determinations* (deriving from the superstructures and from special national and international circumstances) *on the determination in the last instance by the economic*. ... (1974:112) This *overdetermination* is inevitable and thinkable as soon as the real existence of the forms of the superstructure and of the national and international conjuncture has been recognized – an existence largely specific and autonomous, and therefore irre-

<sup>1</sup> Etienne Balibar has an extremely clarifying interview where he explains Althusser’s position in relation to the USSR party line, and describes him as having an anti-Khrushchev position in the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (like Thorez and Mao), and basing his argument in the Theory of Dialectic materialism (Philosophy) rather than in Historical materialism (History, Politics). This becomes very apparent especially in his *Lire le Capital*, with his dramatic critique of Gramsci’s historicism. Balibar also has an interesting view on the shift from an initial Gramscian position in “Contradiction et surdétermination” (1962) to the use of Mao’s “On contradiction” (1937) essay in his 1963 reply “Sur la dialectique matérialiste (de l’inégalité des origines)” to the critiques that his 1962 essay had provoked among many PCF intellectuals. Nevertheless Balibar thinks that “the texts in *Pour Marx*, especially ‘Contradiction and overdetermination’, but also ‘On the materialist dialectics’ are texts that attempt to reduce the difference between the problem of structure and that of conjuncture” [« les textes de *Pour Marx*, surtout « Contradiction et surdétermination », mais aussi « Sur la dialectique matérialiste », sont des textes qui cherchent à réduire la différence entre le problème de la structure et celui de la conjoncture »] 7-07-2014 <http://revueperiode.net/althusser-et-gramsci-entretien-avec-etienne-balibar/>

ducible to a pure *phenomenon* [to a phenomenal aspect of the mode of production, of the economic infrastructure]. (1974:113)”<sup>2</sup>

And he adds that this overdetermined dialectical process involving change is not an exception: it *always* involves contradictions that are not purely economic, but that emerge in the relative autonomous fields of the superstructures:

“the economic dialectic is never active *in the pure state*; in History, these instances, the superstructures, etc. – are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as her pure phenomena, to scatter before her majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.” (1974:113)<sup>3</sup>

Thompson sneers at this attempt to overcome the straight jacket of economic determinism in Marxist analysis, as he presses for a theory of historical materialism based on *experience* where process and structure—social being and social consciousness—in *history*, are dialectically co-determined in social formations. It seems to me, however, that their objective is similar, even as they address it from different perspectives. Thompson may be right in saying that Althusser de-socializes and de-historicizes categories, making them “categories of stasis” whose “movement is enclosed within the overall limits and determinations of the pre-given structure” (1978:83); indeed, Thompson’s analysis bases its theory of movement on empirical evidence. However, it remains unclear what kind of structure he has in mind when he opposes his “structured process” to Althusser’s “structured whole” (1978:98), for we could argue that the theoretical proposal of overdetermination and relative autonomy gives ample leeway for undertaking historical materialist analyses of social formations past and present.

## Godelier’s way

This was only one among many discussions and confrontations that permeated the intellectual, political, and academic environment in Europe, and very particularly in France, in the first decades after the second World War, and especially after 1956. Although he does not mention it in his writings, Godelier did a two-year military

<sup>2</sup> Original French : « *l’accumulation des déterminations efficaces* (issues des superstructures et des circonstances particulières, nationales et internationales) *sur la détermination en dernière instance par l’économie*. (1974:112) ... Cette surdétermination devient inévitable, et pensable, dès qu’on reconnaît l’existence réelle, en grande partie spécifique et autonome, irréductible donc à un pur *phénomène*, des formes de la superstructure et de la conjoncture nationale et internationale. » (1974:113). Translations into English from <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1962/overdetermination.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Original text: « que jamais la dialectique économique ne joue à l’état pur, que jamais dans l’Histoire on ne voit ces instances que sont les superstructures, etc., s’écarter respectueusement quand elles ont fait leur oeuvre ou se dissiper comme son pur phénomène pour laisser s’avancer sur la route royale de la dialectique, sa majesté Economie parceque les Temps seraient venus. Ni au premier, ni au dernier instant, l’heure solitaire de la « dernière instance » ne sonne jamais » (Althusser, 1974:113). English version based on that of <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1962/overdetermination.htm>

service after his “*agrégation*” degree in 1958, he served in France during the war of Algeria and was attached to civic-military justice courts (Godelier, 2023).<sup>4</sup> He was a militant in the French Communist Party (PCF) and sought their advice on the situation. He was told to inform Collective for Peace in Algeria lawyer Gisèle Halimi of what was going on in the courts. At the time, the official position of the PCF was that those recruited had to serve and use the opportunity to infiltrate the military. The party was against conscientious objection, identifying it as an individual “bourgeois” position. Even so, a group in the communist youth, the “soldiers of refusal” [*les soldats du refus*] were publicly refusing recruitment and being charged. In 1960, one hundred twenty-one scholars and intellectuals published a “Declaration on the right to draft-evasion in the Algerian war,” many of which, such as Jean-Pierre Vernant, were PCF members (Maspero, 1961). Whereas the PCF had presented a united front against the “Indochina war” [*Guerre d’Indochine*] (1946–1954) and in support of decolonization (Bouche, 1987; Ruscio, 2003), the war in Algeria (1954–1962) came at a different historical conjuncture, one in which in France the PCF had lost power, and the struggle against American imperialism lent a “justification” in support of maintaining the union with the metropole. However, this position was contested within the party and changed according to political conjunctures (Fédération de France du FLN, 1958; Vernant 2000 [1959]). In 1959 François Maspero published FLN member Frantz Fanon’s anti-colonial essay that argued for a left anti-war mobilization in France (Fanon, 1972). Yet, this was an extremely conflictive period for left intellectuals and members of the PCF with different moral, strategic, political, and personal engagements. Godelier in the PCF, in the military service, as a Marxist intellectual was explicitly or implicitly part of these historical processes, but his writings were engaged in a theoretical struggle.

Godelier seldom mentions Althusser and has repeatedly said that he was not influenced by him (Bert, 2007; Godelier, 2014). Nevertheless, he was, at the time of his early writings on economic anthropology, a member of the PCF (French Communist Party) (like Althusser) and a participant in the general environment in which these debates were taking place.<sup>5</sup> In an article of 1963 (“Économie politique et philosophie”) published in the journal *La pensée* in the September–October issue<sup>6</sup> and re-published in *Rationalité et irrationalité en économie* (1974 [1969] T.2), he contributes to the ongoing debate on the concept of overdetermination, and much of the article’s discussion of science, theory, and philosophical materialism also resonates with Althusser’s article, published in the previous issue of the journal.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.anthropologie-societes.ant.ulaval.ca/videos/maurice-godelier-livre-2-assistant-de-claude-levi-strauss-et-deux-ans-de-service-militaire> 1 May 2023

<sup>5</sup> Godelier remained a member of the PCF until the Soviet Union’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968

<sup>6</sup> Althusser’s “Contradiction et surdétermination” (1962, *La Pensée*, February issue) and “Sur la dialectique matérialiste (de l’inégalité des origines)” (1963, *La Pensée*, August issue) were published in the same journal and Godelier refers in the long footnote 19 to Althusser’s 1962 article : where he agrees with his ‘overdetermination’ concept “this term has the advantage of precluding any reduction of ‘superstructures’ and of conjuncture to the infrastructures” [ce terme a l’avantage d’interdire toute réduction des ‘superstructures’ et de la conjuncture aux infrastructures] (my translation). Yet he critiques it for hiding the order of the determinations that makes their efficacy: “l’inconvenient est de dissimuler que c’est l’ordre spécifique de toutes les déterminations qui fait leur efficace » (Godelier RIE T2, 1974: 18)

Yet, although Godelier is involved in debating similar issues (e.g., the status of theory in relation to “reality,” the issue of science, the relation between base and superstructure), and although he was originally trained in philosophy, he was not interested in “doing philosophy about philosophy.”<sup>7</sup> An avid reader, he had read *Capital* in its entirety and published an analysis of its “method” by 1960 in the journal of the PCF *Économie et Politique* (reprinted in RIE T.2)<sup>8</sup> when he was 26. Godelier has asserted in an interview (Godelier, 2014) that Althusser had not yet read *Capital* at that time, something probably difficult to assess. In any case, Godelier was by 1960 working with the historian Fernand Braudel, and three years later he was working with Claude Lévi-Strauss, as an anthropologist, and establishing the field of “economic anthropology,” not without struggle.

In the early 1960s, Godelier was not the only anthropologist using a Marxist methodology to understand non-Western societies; Claude Meillassoux’s *Anthropologie économique des Gouro de Côte d’Ivoire* (Meillassoux, 1964) is considered to be the first monograph to focus on the economic transformations of an African population, using both historical and ethnographic material, explicitly resting on a historical materialist analysis (see also the essays Meillassoux, 1960, 1963, 1967). In fact, Meillassoux was generally described as the first French economic anthropologist of a Marxist persuasion, something that even Godelier recognized. But Meillassoux’s work was early on critiqued by other Marxist anthropologists (Deluz & Godelier, 1967; Terray, 1969). Deluz and Godelier (1967) in their critique are particularly harsh: they accuse Meillassoux of “a wrong theoretical interpretation of the gathered information” (1967:81). On the one hand, they critique the idea that non-subsistence prestige goods are not economic: “those goods were therefore not ‘idle accumulation’ of ‘treasures without useful destination’ and with ‘a doubtful economic efficacy’, they were ‘socially necessary’ and were as ‘economic’ as subsistence goods” (1967:85).<sup>9</sup> We can appreciate here some of Godelier’s basic theoretical tenets, namely, that the economic aspect traverses different social fields, here they present a view of a multicentric economy similar to that described by Bohannan (1959).

The main point they wish to make, however, is that there is no “self-subsistence economy,” that it cannot be characterized as “an economy,” it can only describe a sector of an economy. Meaning that it is not a “mode of production” (Meillassoux would later develop the idea of a “domestic mode of production”); hence, the “self-subsistence economy” “does not have a *general* theoretical value for a comparative typology of economic systems” (1967:85).<sup>10</sup> An assertion followed by a rather “Althusserian” statement: “As soon as this concept is used in a general manner to

<sup>7</sup> “je ne voulais pas non plus philosopher toute ma vie sur la philosophie” in Bert, 2007

<sup>8</sup> “Les structures de la méthode du ‘Capital’ de Karl Marx »

<sup>9</sup> The original wording is « Ces biens n’étaient donc pas ‘accumulation oisive’ des ‘trésors sans destination utile’ et à ‘l’efficacité économique douteuse’, ils étaient ‘socialement nécessaires’ sans être *moins* ‘économiques’ que les biens de subsistences »

<sup>10</sup> In French: « n’a donc pas une valeur théorique *générale* au niveau d’une typologie comparée des systèmes économiques »

define the specific character of the economies of societies without classes, it appears as the support, the *privileged vehicle* of non-scientific *ideological* representations of “primitive” societies” (1967:85).<sup>11</sup> The major critique being that Meillassoux is blinded by the *concrete* processes of competition between age groups in relation to access to prestige goods and women. As a result, he is unable to understand the “*non-intentional, structural necessities*, determining the specific configuration of the field of social competition...” (1967:87, my emphasis) and they add “the author’s perspective is misconceived by the absence of structural analysis ...” (1967:87). In sum, in their view, Meillassoux is an empiricist and theoretically lacking (1967:89).

Finally, in a devastating concluding section, Deluz and Godelier point out that Meillassoux confuses “value” and “exchange value” which drives him to say that because products are not exchanged they have no “value” and therefore labor has “no value.” Confusing “exchange value” which appears in circulation, with “value” which refers to the “socially necessary amount of labor for producing goods” is a gross error for a Marxist, and drives him to another gross error which is that of initially attributing value to labor when “labor is the source of value but has itself no value” (1967:90). An error that potentially abolished Meillassoux’s credentials as a Marxist.

This critique expresses how the field of Marxist economic anthropology was emerging amid French academic and intellectual struggles. Within this field, Godelier provided clarity and theory in an anthropological domain generally limited to empirical descriptions of “primitive societies,” theoretically dominated by Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism, and in a philosophical field that was saturated by obscure Althusserian debates about historical materialism, dialectical materialism, empiricism, historicism, and theory.

The first two volumes of his work are a collection of articles previously published, starting with his 1960s analysis of the “Structures of the method of capital.” *L’Idéal et le matériel* is also based on previously published articles but was partially re-written, although the central chapter is basically the same as the article published in *L’Homme* in 1978. In these first twenty years of his career he designed and explained the theoretical field of economic anthropology in a “structural Marxist” version arguable stronger than that of his contemporaries Terray, Meillassoux, and Pierre-Philippe Rey. Indeed, as Terray noticed in 2007, we should be aware that there was never a structural Marxist “group” of anthropologists in France, even if they often appeared as such viewed from abroad (e.g., from Spain).

## Marxism in the “horizon”

In Barcelona, the creation of the Catalan Institut of Anthropology (ICA) in 1978 was a game changer in the training of young anthropologists. While the department of anthropology at the University of Barcelona was dominated by Prof. Claudio Esteva Fabregat, a stalwart of the Culture and Personality school, the ICA

<sup>11</sup> In French: « Dès qu’il est employé de façon générale pour désigner le caractère spécifique des économies des sociétés sans classes, ce concept apparaît comme le support, le *véhicule privilégié* de représentations *idéologiques*, non scientifiques, des sociétés ‘primitives’ »



was founded by an active group of early career anthropologists,<sup>12</sup> with the help of Josep Ramon Llobera who was based in the UK. Many in this younger generation were involved in the Marxist political movements of the Spanish Transition (1975–1982), and were exploring new theoretical avenues in social anthropology. For those of us who were studying at the time, the ICA's seminars became a second university. Foreign anthropologists were invited for a week to give a five-day seminar at the ICA, readings were distributed and some twenty of us would eagerly participate. Among the visitors of the first period were Jonathan Friedman, Olivia Harris, Ángel Palerm, John Murra, Lawrence Krader, and Pierre Bonte, all of them involved in various strands of political economy, feminist, or Marxist views of anthropological analysis.

Maurice Godelier was not part of the seminars, but the seminars created the background that enabled a sustained collaboration, starting in 1984, within an international southern European (France, Portugal, Spain, and Greece) research network to study “Forms and processes of transition between socioeconomic systems” under his guidance.<sup>13</sup> This network was very active and incorporated a number of students who were doing doctoral research—this was my case—and it provided a space to present and analyze our “peasant” and rural ethnographic material, through a Marxist lens. The objective as described by Godelier (1991) was to analyze “on the one hand, the disappearance of certain precapitalist forms of production and exchange and their replacement by capitalist forms; on the other hand, the subordination and reshaping of non-capitalist forms of production and exchange under the effects of the expansion of the market and money economy as a result of the development and domination of the capitalist mode of production over a growing part of world economies and societies.” (1991:10) Marxist “transition,” that is, “formal” or “real” subsumption to capitalism, was proposed as the conceptual armature guiding the analysis of our concrete ethnographic cases. As a result, we were pushed to look at history as the transformation of structural relations—rather than as the accumulation of past events leading to the present—but without forgoing concrete analysis.<sup>14</sup> We were also driven to study our ethnographic cases in terms of their embedding in social formations.

The aspect of “transition” was always at the core of Godelier's theoretical preoccupations as he engaged in the critique of formalist economicism and defined his program for studying economic systems. The theme of economic “rationality” pointed to a problem of method that plagued studies of the economy, but it was also a theoretical proposition:

“We have distinguished between the rationality of the economic behaviour of individuals and the rationality of the functioning and evolution of the system within which they act. We have distinguished between the intentional and

<sup>12</sup> Joan Frigolé, Jesús Contreras, Ignasi Terradas, among others.

<sup>13</sup> The Spanish group was headed by Prof. Dolors Comas d'Argemir

<sup>14</sup> Already in an early piece Godelier says he “hopes to cut the Gordian knot of the old paradoxes of historical knowledge incapable of thinking together structure and event, of thinking time.” In French : « espérer trancher le noeud gordien des vieux paradoxes de la connaissance historique impuissante à penser ensemble la structure et l'événement, à penser le temps. » (RIE t 2 p.166 [1965])



unintentional aspects of the behaviour of individuals and of the local or overall functioning of the system. We have shown that these analyses bring us up against the problem of the conditions for the appearance and the disappearance of this system, its ‘historical’ rationality, and finally that this historical rationality inevitably requires that we compare the given system with those that preceded it or were contemporary with it” (Godelier 1972:102)<sup>15</sup>

His essay “Objet et méthode de l’anthropologie économique” (originally published in 1965) (RIE T2 1974 [1969])<sup>16</sup> makes the theoretical aspect clear when explaining that the “laws” of functioning of a system are different from the explicit “norms” organizing society. For Godelier, in order to understand social reality, one needs sufficient information on the actual concrete practices and on how they have changed over time, focusing on the relationship between intentional norms of organization and unintentional processes of change.<sup>17</sup> This, for him, informs the quest for scientific knowledge, which he defines as “explicit theoretical consciousness” (RIE T.2 1974:144).<sup>18</sup>

Godelier, then, is critical of empiricism and stresses the need to develop theoretical concepts and to understand the laws that explain the transformation of concrete historical social formations. Yet, he stresses the fact that these laws are not the laws of “history in general” but the laws of “the various economic social formations analyzed by the historian, the anthropologist, the sociologist or the economist,” this will enable his theoretical proposition to go beyond the Althusserian overdetermination theory (Godelier, 1974: xv). Indeed, in HTMA T.1 Godelier makes a clear vindication of Marx, and he asserts the dominance of relations of production in the general organization of society, that is, relations that control the access to the means of production, the organization of production, and the distribution of labor’s product (1977

<sup>15</sup> In French: « Nous avons distingué la rationalité du comportement des individus, de la rationalité du fonctionnement et de l’évolution du système au sein duquel ils agissent. Nous avons distingué les aspects intentionnels et intentionnels du comportement des individus et du fonctionnement local ou global du système. Nous avons montré que ces analyses renvoyaient au problème des conditions d’apparition et de disparition de ce système, à sa rationalité ‘historique’ et enfin que cette rationalité historique exigeait inévitablement de comparer ce système à ceux qui l’avaient précédé ou lui étaient contemporains. » (RIE T1 1969 p. 118)

<sup>16</sup> “The Object and Method of Economic Anthropology” in the 1972 English version

<sup>17</sup> This aspect shows a certain affinity with EP Thompson’s “dialogue between social being and social consciousness”. Indeed, Thompson salvages Godelier from the attack on Althusser, in note 143 (p.202) where he recognizes that “anthropological work of vitality and originality has emerged from within the sphere of Althusserian influence. Possibly Althusser’s ambiguous redefinition of ‘the economic’ gave back to French Marxist anthropologists a little space for movement. ... In any event, Godelier at least has fought his way stubbornly out of the orrery; and he *knows why*.” Unfortunately, Thompson does not tell us what he thinks Godelier knows!

<sup>18</sup> “Passer de la description des règles à l’établissement des lois à travers la connaissance des faits, c’est passer de l’intentionnel à l’inintentionnel et analyser leur rapport, c’est penser théoriquement la réalité sociale telle qu’elle se manifeste et que chacun la vie, comme une réalité à la fois voulue et non voulue, agie et subie... » (RIE T2 p.144 [1965]). In the English 1972 version: “To move from description of the rules to establishment of the laws, by way of knowledge of the facts, means passing from the intentional to the unintentional and analysing the relation between them: it means theoretically conceiving social reality as it manifests itself and as everyone experiences it, as a reality that is both willed and not-willed, performed and suffered...” (1972:260)

[1973]:89). But he does not predetermine *which* social domain will carry on the *function of relations of production*, and thus will dominate a concrete society. Althusser's idea of overdetermination pointed at the complexity of interactions between the economic infrastructure—determinant in the last instance—and the super-structure “instances” or social domains, but the “instances” remained trapped in their own dynamics. Godelier, instead, speaks of “functions” rather than “instances,” which makes it possible for him to explain the Marxist “base/super-structure” dilemma as a *hierarchy of function*, not of social domains. The question he poses is

*“Under what circumstances and for what reasons does a certain factor assume the functions of relations of production and does it control the reproduction of these relations and, as a result, social relations in their entirety?”* (1977:36, emphasis in the original)<sup>19</sup>

His critique of different perspectives in economic anthropology (formalist, substantivist, cultural ecology, functionalism, structuralism, and vulgar materialism) rests on this particular resolution of the base/super-structure dilemma that provides him with a tool that keeps Marxism in the “horizon,” but still explains the ethnographic material.

## La part idéelle du réel

In 1978, some ten years after his previous breakthrough, Godelier writes an article on “La part idéelle du réel. Essai sur l'idéologique,” (Godelier 1978)<sup>20</sup> which makes the core of his book *L'idéal et le matériel*. It might be read as the continuation of the base/super-structure debate with a slightly different turn but a similar attempt to bridge positions while retaining Marxism. Here, he argues with those who critique the Marxist view of the dominance of production relations in the social reproduction of a society, on the grounds that kinship, or religion, or political organization are dominant in many historical and ethnographic cases (1984:195). Godelier's argument is similar to the one he presented to overcome the base/super-structure dilemma: in order to become dominant social relations, kinship, religious, or political relations must also function as relations of production. But now he adds, “social relations *and the ideas that are a part of them...*” (1984:193, my emphasis). His hypothesis asserts:

*For a social activity –and with it the ideas and institutions that correspond to and organize it—to play a dominant role in a society's functioning and evolution (and hence in the thought and actions of the individuals and groups who compose this society), it is not enough for it to fulfil several functions; in addition to*

<sup>19</sup> In French : « Dans quelles conditions et pour quelles raisons telle instance assume-t-elle les fonctions de rapports de production et contrôle-t-elle la reproduction de ces rapports et par là celle des rapports sociaux dans son ensemble ? » (HTMA p.89-90, emphasis in the original)

<sup>20</sup> In the English version (1986) it is translated as “The Mental Part of Reality”

*its explicit ends and functions, it must of necessity directly fulfil the function of a relation of production.”* (Godelier, 1986:147, emphasis in the original)<sup>21</sup>

He keeps the hierarchy of functions and the “determination in the last instance” of relations of production for the reproduction of society, but now he adds “and together with these relations [that function as relations of production], dominate the representations that organize them and express them” (Godelier, 1986:148). That would explain why kinship, religion, politics, and their representations can be dominant in particular societies. In his attempt to respond to critiques of his allegedly “materialist”—as a Marxist—position, Godelier will explore further the connection between the material and the “*idéal*,” the realm of ideas. He asserts that the “*idéal*” is part of social reality [*le réel social*] and not in opposition to the material, “ideas are not an instance distinct from social relations, re-presenting them to thought after the fact.”<sup>22</sup> But he then needs to tackle the possible “ideological” aspect of ideas, as potential illusions that legitimize social domination and produce consent. While the Gramscian concept of hegemony is absent from his discussion of legitimation and consent, he does seem to converse with Bourdieu’s idea of domination as a form of exchange that entails a gift from the powerful that cannot be returned and puts the recipient in symbolic debt, together with the misrecognition [*méconnaissance*] of economic exploitation on the part of the powerless (Bourdieu, 1980:209–231). Godelier proposes the following hypothesis that refers to the social reproduction of a system of domination:

*“For relations of domination and exploitation to be formed and reproduced in a lasting fashion, they must be presented as an exchange, and as exchange of services. ... I shall also advance a further hypothesis... the fact that the services rendered by the dominant have been predominantly concerned with the invisible forces controlling the reproduction of the universe has always been crucial.”* (Godelier, 1986: 160, emphasis in the original)<sup>23</sup>

Ideology appears, then, as a material exchange of services that benefits society as a whole, but in fact contributes to the reproduction of particular relations of production that control access to the means of production, organization of social labor, and distribution of the products of labor.

<sup>21</sup> In French: « Pour qu’une activité sociale –et avec elle les idées et institutions qui lui correspondent et l’organisent—joue un rôle dominant dans le fonctionnement et l’évolution d’une société (donc dans la pensée et l’action des individus et des groupes qui composent cette société), il ne suffit pas qu’elle assume plusieurs fonctions, il faut nécessairement qu’elle assume directement, en plus de sa finalité et de ses fonctions explicites, la fonction de rapport de production. » (IM, 1984 :193-4, emphasis in the original)

<sup>22</sup> In French: “Les idées ne sont pas une instance séparée des rapports sociaux, les re-présentant comme après coup à la pensée » IM 1984 :199. Here, the English translation in the text is my own. The English version in the 1986 translation is: “Ideas are not an instance separated from social relations, offering them afresh, after the event, as it were, to thought.” (1986:151)

<sup>23</sup> In French: « Pour se former ou pour se reproduire de façon durable, des rapports de domination et d’exploitation doivent se présenter comme un échange et un échange de services. ...Nous faisons également l’hypothèse selon laquelle... le fait que les services des dominants aient concerné avant tout les forces invisibles qui contrôlent la reproduction de l’univers a toujours été essentiel. » (IM 1984:210, emphasis in the original)

The dialectics between the *idéel* and the material attempts to overcome the duality in a unity where “thought is always in a relation of co-emergence [of reciprocal knowledge] with social reality”<sup>24</sup> (1984:218)

## Conclusion

Godelier’s work started getting attention beyond France in the 1970s, but his ideas must have resounded differently according to the concrete political conjunctures and to the local academic and theoretical environments that received them. In Spanish university, during the transition, left politics and social sciences, in particular history and philosophy from where anthropology emerged as a discipline, were increasingly influenced by Gramsci, by French intellectual debates (French being the second language in school), and by Latin American dependency theorists. The situation must have been different in the UK, where Marxist historians and politics had a strong local tradition.

In the USA, anthropology was a discipline with a long history of theoretical debates. These included disputes in economic anthropology between formalists and substantivists, discussions between human and cultural ecology proponents of causal links addressing the human-nature relation, and incipient Marxist approaches. Godelier was well aware of the American controversies as he mostly based his theoretical ideas on these ethnographies and theoretical investigations. Indeed, it is noteworthy that whereas the only French anthropologist he directly considers is Lévi-Strauss, his ethnographic use and theoretical critique of North American anthropologists is very long and detailed. In a way, Godelier uses the work and theories of North American anthropologist scholars to go beyond two aspects of theory that appear to hinder the development of economic anthropology within a Marxist horizon: (1) Althusser’s attempt at resolving the base-superstructure dilemma and (2) Lévi-Strauss’ a-historical and abstract structuralism.

With his systematic review and methodical discussion of other scholars’ works, he constructed a theory of Marxism that “made sense” in the empirical worlds of anthropology, while preserving the main tenets of historical materialism and dialectical materialism. From his writings in the 1970s, his workshops on “transition,” and his seminars at the CNRS in the early 1980s, we learned to think theoretically about our ethnographic material, and to do it within a framework that referred to Marx. For us, on the one hand, Godelier provided a Marxist theory that respected the value of concrete ethnography, and on the other hand, explored the issue of transitions from one system to another, while thinking about the future, a passage to a better system, probably socialist. Whether Godelier’s early work is helpful to address present-day challenges can only be assessed if we are aware of its potential. To us, at the time, in our political conjuncture, he was a determinant windfall.

<sup>24</sup> In French : “*la pensée est toujours dans un rapport de co-naissance avec le réel social* » In French ‘co-naissance’ refers to co-emergence / co-production, but also refers to connaissance, i.e. knowledge. The meaning expressed seems to be co-emergence –literally “born together”— and simultaneously producing knowledge, recognition. Translation in the text is my own. The published English version translates it as : “*thought is always born contemporaneously with social reality*” (1986:167)

**Funding** Open Access funding provided thanks to the CRUE-CSIC agreement with Springer Nature.

## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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