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Alain Testart (1945–2013): An Evolutionist in the Land of the Anthropologists

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Abstract

[Please provide abstract of about 50–150 words]

Keywords

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The French anthropologist Alain Testart passed away in 2013, leaving behind an *œuvre* that is as original as it is impressive, and which no one who seriously wants to understand the evolution of pre-historic societies can ignore. The last of his works appearing during his lifetime, *Avant l'histoire – l'évolution des sociétés de Lascaux à Carnac* – which Gallimard published soon before his death, in its prestigious 'Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines' series – finally made his name somewhat more well-known. This book brought together some forty years' worth of research in a vast synthesis reconstructing the evolution of human technique, ideology, art, and, above all else, social structures, from the Upper Paleolithic period to the heart of the Neolithic age. This monumental work borrows from archaeology as from ethnology, from sociology as from the philosophy of science; and there can be no doubt that it will remain a landmark text, given the questions of method that it raises and the new light that it sheds on various different subjects.

Yet it will also remain the first movement of an unfinished symphony; the second volume, which would have proceeded from the Neolithic period to class societies, will never see the light of day. Thus ended a life of research which, from the outset, was organised around one central ambition: to understand and reconstruct the evolution of society, more particularly of societies without writing, while steering clear of the pitfalls on which his predecessors had run aground.

Hunter-Gatherers, Inequality and the Neolithic Revolution

Many scientific discoveries were born of the desire seriously to examine facts that had until then been considered simple exceptions to some well-established rule. And the same goes for Alain Testart's first great work *Les chasseurs-cueilleurs ou l'origine des inégalités* (1982), which reconsidered the equation of societies' mode of food supply and their social structures. Indeed, it had long been accepted that hunter-gatherers were characterised by economic egalitarianism; it was with the 'Neolithic revolution', to use the expression coined by V. Gordon Childe – that is, the more-or-less combined emergence of agriculture and animal husbandry – that the first wealth-inequality supposedly arose.

Yet even if we do not mention those hunter-gatherers like the Indians of the Great Plains or certain Siberian peoples who were in reality first and foremost farmers, breeding horses or deer (and thus, logically, being non-egalitarian), some societies fit poorly into Childe's schema. A typical example of this is the inhabitants of the Pacific North-West coast, the strip of territory stretching from northern California to the south of Alaska between the Pacific Ocean and the Rocky Mountains. There were peoples living in permanent villages there at the moment of their contact with the West, even though they were authentic hunter-gatherers wholly ignorant of agriculture and animal husbandry. They stored the salmon they caught *en masse* during spawning season by drying them, thus allowing them to survive the off-season. And these societies developed pronounced social inequalities. Slavery was widespread and they elaborated a sometimes very extensive system of honours – for example, the Kwakiutl, a tribe of barely 10,000 members (the same one that bequeathed ethnology the term *potlatch*, the name of the festival in which each person's place was confirmed) thus featured a scale of some 658 titles, in an intricately ordered hierarchy.

Traditionally, these settled hunter-gatherers were termed 'a complex case' and *de facto* excluded from the general schema holding that the Neolithic

revolution was a watershed between egalitarian and non-egalitarian societies: no one knew precisely how to class them.

Similarly, we could note that not all cultivators developed even elementary forms of economic inequality: for instance, the cassava growers in the Amazon lowlands, or certain among the tribes of New Guinea.

Thus a compelling conclusion imposes itself: namely, that the birth of wealth inequalities was not linked to the birth of agriculture and of animal husbandry, but another variable. That is, the storage of food on a significant scale.

Such storage was unknown in egalitarian societies, whether they were 'classic' hunter-gatherers or tropical cultivators, who since they grew tubers did not need to conserve grain in accordance with the seasons. Conversely, non-egalitarian societies are those in which food provision relies essentially on resources that are stored, be these societies made up of cultivators or of settled hunter-gatherers.

And the text did not stop at that, going on to explore the chains of causality that were at work behind these phenomena.

Modes of Production in Egalitarian Societies

These initial results – already remarkable on their own account – opened the way to a further study. Indeed, Testart's monumental 1986 work *Communisme primitif – économie et idéologie* sought to distinguish among the different modes of production that operated within economically egalitarian societies. Rejecting the idea according to which such a notion is meaningless in societies that do not feature exploitation, the author argued that:

Marx said that 'What distinguishes the various economic formations of society – the distinction between, for example, a society based on slave-labour and a society based on wage-labour – is the form in which this surplus is in each case extorted from the immediate producer'. In writing these lines, Marx was only thinking of class societies, and this formula applies to them only. For other societies, we ought to say 'What distinguishes the various economic formations of society is the form in which in each case a surplus is not extorted'. To theorise societies without exploitation is to seek out the specific forms in which the immediate producers managed to appropriate all that they produced.¹

¹ Testart 1986, pp. 54–5.

His work thus counterposed two fundamental types of nomadic hunter-gatherers: their Australian forms, on the one hand, and all the rest (Inuits, bushmen, and so on) on the other. In Australia, the hunter's prey was not his own property: rather, because of obligations linked to matrimonial customs, the right to it belonged to his parents-in-law. Everywhere else, however, the hunter could keep what he had caught. Even if this were then widely distributed, it would be a gift made at the whim of its owner, who had much greater freedom of action than in the Australian case and would earn prestige from making such a donation. This contrast in the structures of production and distribution also had its echoes in other dimensions of social life: thus the Australian tribes were frozen into relations of dependency that constrained their members throughout the entire length of their lives. Each people was subdivided into a certain number of strictly exogamic groups (halves, sections...) and each individual was a tributary of a complementary group such that they could find a spouse. On the ideological plane, other tribal sub-groups were charged with rituals designed to reproduce the animal or vegetable species whose consumption was specifically forbidden to them. Thus on every plane – economic and matrimonial, real and ideological – and contrary to egalitarian societies, the Australian mode was organised in terms of mutual dependency among the different tribal subdivisions.

Testart used this contrast among the different modes of production in order to explain the economic dynamism of the corresponding societies. In the 'individual' mode of production proper to the Inuits, Bushmen, and so on, the hunter had a stake in what his activity produced, and, consequently, in technical progress. In the Australian mode of production in which the hunter was by definition dispossessed of the game he caught, he had no incentive to increase his productivity.

Testart thus explained that the reasons for what he saw as the Australian continent's rejection of technical progress resided in its social structures. Even when the Aborigines in the Torres Strait were in contact with Papuan populations knowledgeable about the bow and agriculture, they did not adopt these innovations, instead choosing to continue hunting with spears. Though some peoples did remain hunter-gatherers also in other parts of the world, this was due to environmental obstacles. Everywhere that agriculture was possible, it sank roots; hunter-gathering only survived in the least hospitable environments, and even there it did make use of the bow. In Australia, conversely, agriculture and *a fortiori* the use of the bow were technically possible: but the obstacle to them was the result of social factors.

He revisited and deepened this thesis in *Avant l'histoire*: the cave paintings of the Upper Paleolithic period (including, among others, those of the Chauvet

and Lascaux caves) as well as the stagnation in its techniques across many tens of thousands of years, were here interpreted as so many elements indicating that Magdalenian societies were structured according to the Australian model.

Toward a General Classification of Societies

As we have said, Alain Testart occupies a special place on the chessboard of social anthropology.

He did not cease to proclaim himself an anthropologist,² which alone proved enough to marginalise him. In France at least, this discipline is still dominated by structuralism; references to Marxism have almost completely disappeared, and for decades it has been caught up in a fierce, almost unanimous hatred for anyone who dares to speak of social evolution.

Yet Alain Testart was equally opposed to the two principal traditions of evolutionism, that is, both that of its nineteenth-century founders and the mainly American 'neo-evolutionism' born in the 1950s.

He reproached both of these traditions for reasoning on the basis of concepts that are too vague to be of any practical use. For historical reasons, evolutionist social thought developed in a way wholly at odds with its genesis in the biological domain. When it came to the living world, the theory of evolution had to battle to defeat the evidence in favour of fixism; and the theory could only be elaborated once a rigorous classification of organisms had been established. Evolutionism in the social sciences proceeded the other way around, taking evolution to be a self-evident fact that it attempted to contemplate without even having a solid classification of the different social structures. This problem runs so deep that even a century-and-a-half later, and despite the immense mass of documentation that has been gathered, there has still been not one serious attempt to organise this ethnographic material and to draw a rigorous, exhaustive typology of social forms from it.

Yes, American neo-evolutionism did have the merit of bringing the evolutionist problematic to the forefront in a period when it had almost been banished from view. Nonetheless, in Alain Testart's eyes it repeated the majority of its predecessors' methodological failings. Its classification of societies into four types (in the most common version, bands, tribes, chiefdoms and states) is too crude to clarify anything, and worse still, it cannot be refined, because it totally ignores the institutions and customs that structure these societies, namely the object of ethnology: the role of goods in social relations, types of

² See Testart 1992 in particular.

kinship, matrimonial offerings, political structure, and so on. We could add to Testart's arguments by saying that the neo-evolutionists have themselves sometimes deplored the insufficiencies of their social categories, and tried (in vain) to remedy this, for example, by proposing to subdivide chiefdoms into 'simple' and 'complex' ones.³

Alain Testart also thus considered it of indispensable importance to gather together the factual and conceptual elements necessary for the elaboration of an alternative to neo-evolutionist categories: in his *Éléments de classification des sociétés* he presented what he termed merely a 'wholly initial outline'⁴ of these, though even this was a highly accomplished effort compared to what had existed beforehand.

The density of this short volume was only matched by its ambition, in that it drew up a typology of the ensemble of human social forms, summarised in a table at the end of the book. The author forcefully underlined one of his dearest convictions: that far from being simple and uniform, the structures of classless societies were much more diverse than those of class societies, just as in the animal kingdom invertebrates are far more numerous in type than are vertebrates.

Testart then went on to deepen the reflection he had begun in other works: we are here particularly thinking of his desire to identify and characterise the different modes of goods transfer, which culminated in his 2007 work *Critique du don*.⁵ The sharp line of argument in this work brought a decisive blow to traditions stretching back to the likes of Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, in which the primitive world was perceived uniformly as the reign (in their respective accounts) of gifts or of exchange.

Here we ought to open up a parenthesis, and advance the suggestion that amidst Testart's many justified criticisms of neo-evolutionist categories, his *Éléments de classification des sociétés* did also address some rather more questionable attacks against them, for example when it reproached them for a classification system tantamount to a biologist ranking the species as 'big, medium or little'.⁶ We think it would be more appropriate to compare them to someone classifying animals according to those with complex brains, simple brains or none at all. Indeed, neo-evolutionist categories are directly

3 See, for example, Timothy Earle in Johnson and Earle 2000.

4 Testart 2005, p. 5.

5 See the English translation of its first chapter, carried out by Susan Emanuel and Lorraine Perlman, and now posted on the site of *Hau* journal: <<http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/94/314>>.

6 Testart 2005, p. 14.

inspired by a very real tendency in social evolution, namely for it to produce ever larger, more hierarchically-ordered and more differentiated organisations, just as the evolution of the living world has produced organisms with ever more developed nervous systems. Neo-evolutionism's error of method was to believe that the identification of a (quantitative) tendency was sufficient for the construction of pertinent categories for its classifications, and that this would thus save it from having to reflect on (qualitative) structures. Societies cannot be classed and understood on the basis of their 'level of integration' alone (this concept being so central to neo-evolutionism, and yet remaining so poorly defined), just as organisms cannot be classed and understood on the basis of the level of development of their nervous system only, independent of the other characteristics of their anatomy.

To get back to the classification that Alain Testart elaborated, it divided societies into three main groups. 'World I' was that of societies without wealth, which were thus egalitarian on the economic terrain. Their essential characteristic was that it was not possible to free oneself from a social obligation by payment in goods. Whether one wanted to get married or compensate for a murder, the only payment was to make a payment in kind: a period of work that was either temporary or an annuity ('service for the fiancée') or the spilling of the murderer's own blood. The turn to 'World II', societies that had wealth but not classes, came about through the emergence of payments that met social ends: the price of the fiancée and *wergild* (the 'blood price'). 'World III' is the world of societies that do have classes, where the means of production (in the first place, land) can be appropriated in a fully private manner.

Each of these worlds was, in turn, subdivided into narrower categories. World II, in particular, which comprises the greater part of the societies studied by ethnology, was broken down into three sub-groups according to the nature of these societies' political structures (the implications of which affected the whole of social life). Thus Testart distinguished 'ostentatious plutocracies' – societies without formal political organisation, where it was wholly normal for the wealthy to see themselves as invested in collective responsibilities; 'semi-states', democratic societies (essentially in North America) or societies based on lineage (in Africa) with non-state political institutions; and finally, Africa's 'royal societies', structured as states but nonetheless lacking in classes because access to the land was still a right for each member of the community.

Moreover, each of these principal social types was, in turn, subdivided into numerous variants, which it is impossible here to summarise in just a few lines.

Yet no matter how demanding this classification stage may be, it can nonetheless only be the prelude to an attempt to attain a scientific vision of social evolution. It is still necessary to establish the chronology of succession

of the different types here identified, and this task can only produce results if we have a clear understanding of the material relics that these various different societies left behind. This is the other great reproach to which nineteenth-century evolutionism exposed itself: in neglecting archaeology, and instead contenting itself with a temporal ordering of the present societies that it imprudently termed 'survivals' – almost uniquely on the basis of mere logical deduction – this evolutionism was, in Alain Testart's view, speculative and 'imaginary'.⁷ And while neo-evolutionism did try to avoid this trap, it, too, failed, because of the weakness of its social typology. In this sense, its relative success among archaeologists, who happily adopt its categories, was but an illusory victory.

It is no chance thing that in recent years Alain Testart's works have awakened most interest among archaeologists. Firstly, because his analyses have often given them the feeling that they finally have at hand a sharp interpretative framework capable of posing their discoveries in an unexpected light. And furthermore because Alain Testart himself repeatedly showed the way on this front.

Archaeological Studies

Two of the texts that Testart devoted to directly archaeological questions seem worthy of particular attention.⁸

The first, *La servitude volontaire* (2004) looks like a detective novel: having found many ethnological accounts mentioning the strange practice whereby after the death of an important person, other people were put to death and buried in their company, the book undertakes a round-the-world tour of tombs in order to identify the occurrences of this practice. Naturally, the purpose of meandering the planet compiling this inventory was simply to mark out the crime scene. Who are these powerful people whose demise must lead to the death of others? Who are these people who are put to death? What social bonds link them together, and in what societies do we find this practice? This question allows us to cast aside the lazy (and fallacious) interpretation of these executions in terms of 'sacrifice', and to unlock the true nature of this phenomenon.

⁷ Testart 2012, p. 48.

⁸ Here, for want of space, we will not mention the numerous articles, conferences and collections on which Alain Testart worked in collaboration with renowned archaeologists (almost all of them in French, by force of circumstance).

Here, then, we see the emergence of a type of society marked by profound inequalities: after all, any society that kills people merely on account of the fact that a powerful person has just died is anything but egalitarian. But these are also societies without states (or if there is a state, it is archaic in form); after all, the state, once it was consolidated, everywhere engaged in a fight against these practices, as many historical proofs demonstrate.⁹

We will now leave behind archaeological, ethnological and historical analysis and get down to sociological reasoning, addressing the central thesis of this work. Indeed, the victims buried in the company of important people were subordinates close to them: spouses or particular servants. But they were also and above all slaves or dependents who relied upon these figures' protection: Alain Testart thus saw the constitution of these 'military entourages' based on personal relationships as being both a major factor in the decomposition of the tribal order and the germ of the state, at least in its despotic form.

Here, Testart was continuing reflection in which he had already engaged in several of his texts, notably those gathered in the 2001 collection *L'esclave, la dette et le pouvoir*, which brought into relief the central role of two institutions. Firstly, the price of the fiancée, as we already mentioned: this custom, which was so commonplace in primitive societies, compelled the future husband to pay sometimes considerable sums to his prospective parents-in-law in order to acquire rights over his bride. Yet the payment itself was far from being everywhere uniform. And that is not to mention the societies of World I (without wealth), which, by definition, knew nothing of this practice. Others practised it only in a moderate manner, limiting its impact. Elsewhere, conversely, the sum to be paid out was considerable and could even indebt men across many generations.

The second institution – which had no *a priori* connection to the first – was debt slavery, practiced by only a fraction of World II societies. However, a detailed data-gathering exercise concerning over four hundred peoples around the world allowed Testart to establish that the set of societies where debt slavery existed was entirely internal to the group with the toughest demands concerning the price of the fiancée. Testart saw this as a fundamental line of demarcation between societies that accepted – or even provoked – the subjection of certain of their members for economic reasons, and those of a more 'democratic' character where the community was protected from such a fault line.

9 See also 'Pourquoi la condition de l'esclave s'améliore-t-elle en statut despotique?' in Testart 2001a.

Testart conjugated these elements in order to bring out an unprecedented hypothesis with regard to the emergence of the state in the first of these two groups of society:

Fidelities, friendships, links between individuals, servile dependence: all this was present in the first states – non-bureaucratic states – but also in countless pre-state societies. That a loyal follower or a slave was ready to die for his master or his patron incontestably provided a firm assurance and a certain power to this latter, the extent of which depended only on the number of people who followed and served him so well . . . After all, what is simpler than to imagine that a man who had loyal followers ready to do anything to please and serve him, and loyal to his person alone, would disarm everyone else and arrogate for himself and for those to whom he delegated his interests the exclusive right to judge internal conflicts and to wage armed expeditions against the outside world – that is, putting an end to the state of latent warfare that reigns in any non-state society, establishing civil peace and at the same time setting himself up as absolute master? How could these personal fidelities not have engendered personal power? How could they not have led to the birth of the state, at least in its despotic form?¹⁰

The combination of archaeological and ethnological data is also at the heart of another of Testart's works, his 2010 book *La déesse et le grain* (2010), which concerns Neolithic Europe and in particular the emblematic site at Çatalhöyük.

Alain Testart brings into relief the imprecise analyses that underlie traditional interpretations representing this site in terms of the worship of a 'mother-goddess' and an 'ox-god'. In a masterclass of comparative ethnology, he compares the ox skulls decorating the Çatalhöyük habitations to the remains that decorated the wealthy abodes of certain South-East Asian societies. Though there was a religious dimension to this, it here takes second place to the social dimension: these architectural elements (a large part of which came from real animals) were first and foremost of ostentatious value, in order to commemorate the generosity and munificence of those individuals who would, on certain occasions, publicly distribute part of their fortune in order to feed the community.

The egalitarianism that is generally attributed to the Çatalhöyük society thus emerges from this analysis rather tarnished. But the book also questions this society's supposed pacifism. The most widespread hypothesis with regard

¹⁰ Testart 2004b, p. 81.

to the remodelled skulls conserved by the inhabitants of this village maintains that they bear witness to a worship of ancestors. And the famous fresco depicting vultures tearing apart headless corpses is generally seen as the sign of a rather singular religious cult. Rejecting such interpretations, which are founded on too-hasty comparative analogies, Alain Testart argues that this was in fact a warlike society that, rather more banally, kept the heads of its enemies as trophies and abandoned their decapitated bodies to scavenging animals.

The image of Neolithic societies that emerges from this discussion is far from the currently widely-accepted vision; but it also unlocks a rigorous methodology for the analysis of archaeological material and for comparative studies of ethnological data. Testart would revisit this methodology, giving it greater definition, in one of the most innovative and persuasive chapters of his *Avant l'histoire*.

Alain Testart and Marxism

Having called himself a Marxist at the beginning of his career, Testart openly abandoned this reference in the late 1980s. Nonetheless, we might allow ourselves to think this renunciation as being more formal than it was real. That is not to say that Testart remained a Marxist without knowing it (which would be a rather ludicrous hypothesis); rather, in many senses the Althusserian version of Marxism that he upheld in his first works already contained the germ of his later development away from historical materialism.

In *Le communisme primitif*, the only one of Testart's works in which he made a detailed assessment of the record of Marxist anthropology, he accused it – from Engels onward – of having neglected to study primitive societies' production relations. Only a very small number of works – Terray's and Rey's treatment of certain African societies – provided any exception to this; but the most emblematic figures, like Godelier and, even more so, Meillassoux, here faced sharp criticism: 'the principal limit of [their] thought... resides in their common incapacity to conceive what a production relation is'.¹¹ Indeed, he reproached Meillassoux not only for his cavalier treatment of ethnographic data, but also for reducing production relations to a simple technical consideration: 'there is no mention of the social relations that men form in their productive activity, and the economic is reduced to the productive forces alone'.¹² Godelier, for his part, contenting himself with overly vague

11 Testart 1985, p. 41.

12 Testart 1985, p. 34.

generalities on the fluidity of bands or the inevitable dispersion of hunter-gatherer populations, was accused of emptying out the content of Marxist concepts and failing to pin down the specificities of how primitive societies were organised: ‘With Godelier . . . the term “mode of production” is a marker of style – of Marxist style – denuded of any operative value.’¹³

As we have said, *Le communisme primitif* was wholly devoted to demonstrating the existence of two opposed types of production relation among economically egalitarian societies, and to theorising this. Independently of the soundness of its results, this scientific project seems to be a fully justified one, and Testart certainly cannot be criticised for having tried to do the spadework on a terrain that had hitherto hardly been explored at all.

Conversely, the version of historical materialism within which his research is inscribed is far from above criticism; for it could not but lead him ultimately to abandon any reference to Marxism. Testart explained that when the majority of Marxist anthropologists *de facto* ignored the relations of production, this resulted from their gravely mistaken view of historical materialism that considered the productive forces as the determining factor of social evolution. This ‘primacy of the productive forces’ ought to be seen as a ‘fundamental perversion at the hands of Soviet Marxism’¹⁴ and rejected as such. It represented the ideological form of the ruling bureaucracy’s dominion in the USSR, this latter having an interest in avoiding all discussion of production relations in order to draw a simplistic equation between industrial development and building socialism. However, Testart did not limit himself to rejecting – and rightly so – the opinion that the level of the productive forces necessarily determines a particular form of production relations: he made a further step, a much less legitimate one, in characterising ‘the idea of any correspondence’ between the two as ‘inane’.¹⁵

In fact, Testart was here opposing his own, inverse caricature of historical materialism to the one that that ignored the relations of production by focusing on the productive forces only. His caricature posed the relations of production as being the prime – and, ultimately, only – determining factor. In this perspective, the productive forces merited only the attention that ought to be given to a mere effect.

But in so doing, Testart saw himself as introducing ‘an extremely radical conceptual reorganisation’¹⁶ of Marxist categories. In particular, he took his

13 Testart 1985, p. 42.

14 Testart 1985, p. 25, an idea revisited and developed in the subsequent pages.

15 Testart 1985, p. 28.

16 Testart 1985, p. 13.

cue from those passages in Marx devoted to feudalism, and which explained that the relation of exploitation required a prior relation of domination.¹⁷ For Testart, these lines signalled the failure of historical materialism: as Marx himself had confessed, in feudal society the economic relations had to be deduced from extra-economic relations, and not the other way around. As such, in order to save what could be saved of Marxism, the explanation of social structures would have to make recourse not only to the relations of production but furthermore to some other so-called ‘fundamental’ social relation that conditioned them, too.¹⁸ Even though this theoretical innovation could have still have been situated within a Marxist framework, it seems as if the countdown for Testart’s break with Marxism had already begun. The logic of things unerringly led him to conserve only this ‘fundamental social relation’ as an explanatory factor, and to loosen the last knots still attaching this latter to Marxist concepts.

In this sense, the ‘general sociology’ subsequently elaborated by Testart, which sought the key to all the spheres of social life (including the economy) in this hypothetical ‘fundamental social relation’, represented continuity far more than a break with his earlier works. This theory was the basis for his unfinished, monumental text *Les Principes de sociologie générale*, only the first two volumes of which – dealing with this ‘fundamental social relation’ and the political sphere, respectively – were ever published, in electronic form on his website.¹⁹

17 ‘It is furthermore evident that in all forms in which the direct labourer remains the “possessor” of the means of production and labour conditions necessary for the production of his own means of subsistence, the property relationship must simultaneously appear as a direct relation of lordship and servitude, so that the direct producer is not free; a lack of freedom which may be reduced from serfdom with enforced labour to a mere tributary relationship. The direct producer, according to our assumption, is to be found here in possession of his own means of production, the necessary material labour conditions required for the realisation of his labour and the production of his means of subsistence. He conducts his agricultural activity and the rural home industries connected with it independently. . . . Under such conditions the surplus labour for the nominal owner of the land can only be extorted from them by other than economic pressure, whatever the form assumed may be. . . . Thus, conditions of personal dependence are requisite, a lack of personal freedom, no matter to what extent, and being tied to the soil as its accessory, bondage in the true sense of the word’. From Marx 1998, pp. 376–7.

18 Testart 1985, pp. 12–13.

19 They have since been taken down, doubtless in view of a future paper edition. Testart also gathered the materials for two further volumes, devoted to the economy and religion respectively.

Having thus turned his back on historical materialism, and although occasionally paying homage to the profundity of Marx's perspectives, Alain Testart did not shy away from mounting polemics against Marx, in pages that were not always among his most memorable. In particular, in the *Démocraties et despotismes* volume of *Les Principes de sociologie générale*, it is hard to tell precisely which caricature of Marxism this text is trying to refute; we could also mention his *Moyen d'échange, moyen de paiement; des monnaies en général et plus particulièrement des primitives*,²⁰ which, alongside its illuminating insights with regard to primitive money, mounts a rather underwhelming attack on the labour theory of value.

Nonetheless, it would be utterly mistaken to stop at this point, imagining that Testart's renunciation of Marxism means that his research is thus by definition unable to bring anything to Marxism. Need we even remind ourselves that Marx himself could not have nourished his reflection other than by leaning on the results achieved by hundreds of non-Marxist authors? Such a rigorous and erudite analysis of the evolution of societies as Testart's, even if organised around certain erroneous concepts, has proven far more fruitful than works that although more orthodox are happy to stay on the terrain of commonplaces that often stand far from scientific truth.

Some Critical Considerations

As we have just seen, not all of the developments made in Testart's colossal *œuvre* are as appealing as others. Some seem to have made a decisive step forward for the social sciences: to name but a few, the identification of the key role of storage in the evolution of social structures; the fundamental distinction between societies within and without wealth; the typology of primitive societies (however provisional its results); or his methodological lessons on the interpretation of archaeological facts. Others, conversely, provoke more or less serious doubts.

Such is the case, for example, of his counterposition of the Australian and other types of societies without wealth; even if Australian societies did, indeed, contrast with Inuit or Bushmen's societies in many aspects, it is nonetheless rather more difficult to see these differences as being key to the dynamics of their technical progress. The idea that hunter-gatherer societies might have been structured by various different relations of production is certainly not an absurd one; it even represents a very promising research avenue, breaking

²⁰ In *Aux origines de la monnaie* (Testart 2001b).

with a long tradition according to which the common traits of these societies allow us straightforwardly to label them as having a ‘domestic-communist’ or ‘forager’ mode of production and end it there. The problem resides not in the question that Testart raised, but his answer to it.

I think that Testart, getting carried away by his instincts, rather too hastily enrolled those elements that served his thesis and neglected those that contradicted it. The social relations of aboriginal Australia were doubtless far from being so uniform as the author of *Avant l'histoire* wants to present them. And even at the level of deduction, it is hard to understand why a system that denied the hunter ownership of his prey would *ipso facto* destroy any incentive to increase his productivity; the well-performing hunter would manifestly enjoy the same prestige in Australia as anywhere else. It is even harder to understand why this system provided any less of an incentive than that in other parts of the world which cast a taboo over the hunter's prey and forbade him to consume it himself. Finally, and though it is impossible here to take forward this discussion in any detail, here, it is far less certain that Australia rejected technical progress than the author of *Communisme primitif* thought; similarly, the elements on which he bases his comparison of Australian social relations and European Magdalenian society seem rather precarious.²¹

At another order of reflection, we might perhaps be reticent in following Alain Testart in his characterisation of the ‘royal societies’ of Black Africa, such as the Yoruba or Abomey monarchies. These societies, which incontestably did have states, were, however, organised around a land-property regime typical of that continent (and, more generally, of ‘World II’), in which one could only own a piece of land on condition that one worked it (by oneself, or through the intermediary of a dependent). Thus here we do not find individuals monopolising uncleared or fallow land, or the existence of a proletarianised peasantry – these two conjoined phenomena, so commonplace in the West from the time (at least) of Solon's Athens onward. Making the land-property regime the determining criterion of the existence of social classes, Testart was able, in passing, to stick a thorn into the side of the Marxist theory of the state in concluding that these African ‘royal’ societies had a state and yet did not have classes.

I do not know whether the impossibility of such a combination ought to be set up as some absolute principle; but in any case, it seems that in practice our conclusion on this point is almost entirely dependent on our definition of social classes – a problem well-known to all those who want to define

21 On this score, I refer the reader to the various posts on my blog at <<http://cdarmangeat.blogspot.com>>.

the Soviet society of the twentieth century. Here, Testart opts for a rather narrowly juridical approach; we could retort that in a society where part of the population (the state hierarchy) occupies a privileged position from both the political and economic points of view, and whose massive recourse to slavery allows it entirely to detach itself from productive labour, then we clearly are speaking of a class society – even if it appears to be of an original type, and doubtless an archaic one, as compared to its more conventional homologues founded on private land-property such as we know it.

And Materialism?

We cannot finish without mentioning two works that touch on the question of materialism, albeit without using the word itself.

The first is a rather old text, Testart's *Essai sur la division sexuelle du travail chez les chasseurs-cueilleurs* (1986). Rejecting the narrowly naturalist explanation, he sought to demonstrate that constraints linked to pregnancy and maternity cannot account for the series of prohibitions that almost universally prevented women from using sharp weapons and hunting big game. This salutary corrective effort nonetheless ended up with a rather unsatisfying conclusion that seems to attribute these prohibitions to purely ideal causes (a 'blood ideology' that was to one degree or another universal among all peoples) and denied objective factors any determining role.²² This tendency towards idealism found its echo thirty years later in *Lamazone et la cuisinière*, a short work published posthumously in 2014 that revisited this question by insisting on its repercussions on contemporary societies.

However, we get a wholly different impression from his magisterial 2006 work *Des dons et des dieux*, which brought into relief the parallelism between the social structures and religious thought of each of the three sets of primitive societies. North America was characterised by the importance of gifts; South-East Asia by debts; and Australia by its relations of dependency linked to its kinship system. Testart could thus emphasise that the form that religion took

22 I had the space to develop this critique and outline an alternative explanation in a few pages of my 2012 book *Le communisme primitif n'est plus ce qu'il était*. All the same, we cannot hide away from the fact that the origins of the sexual division of labour – a distinctive trait of the human species – remain largely obscure. For example, pre-historians have proven unable to date with any certainty its apparition in the evolutionary line leading to *homo sapiens*.

could be explained only by the real social relations, even if it was no mere copy of these latter:

[Religion] selects the most significant among all those transfer relations that men make among themselves, within the real situation... It organises its worship in function of the chosen transfer and its model: here, you give and receive; there, you pay off your debts and duties through sacrifice; and in the third case you neither give nor receive, nor pay anything off... It conceives its imaginary beings in function of the chosen transfer: since gifts do not allow anything but a simple hierarchy of honours, the spirits are superior but no one is dependent on them; in another case, since the insolubility of debts demands an inescapable dependency, the spirits are not only superior, but beings on which humans depend; and in the third case, since a symmetrical reciprocity cancels out any particular dependencies at the global level, there are not even any supernatural entities superior to and independent of men.²³

Reading this extraordinary exposition, we cannot help but regret the lack of any systematic study of religion capable of embracing the ensemble of its forms and generalising these conclusions.²⁴

Conclusions

Alain Testart's writings have a quality rarely found in the social sciences: they are lucid, get straight to the point, and never drown his argument in vague or esoteric vocabulary; his point is always clearly made. Whether or not we agree with them, whether they awaken enthusiasm, doubt or resistance, they always give us something on which to reflect. Doubtless, a certain number of his arguments require serious amendments, or should even be rejected pure and simple. But his writings pose new questions by the dozen, and it is by journeying down unexplored paths that we can answer these. To what extent, for example, should the new social classification for which his writings militate be modified or refined? How can or must we rethink this classification in terms of modes of production? What precise articulation can we establish between storage, the passage from 'service for the fiancée' to 'price of the fiancée',

²³ Testart 2006, p. 149.

²⁴ Testart was going to devote a volume of his *Principes de sociologie générale* to this question. Perhaps a posthumous publication would at least in part fill this lacuna.

and the turn from World I to World II? How and why did the transition from World II to World III take place – that is to say, how and for what reasons was the land-property typical of class societies, and its corollary, rent, instituted? In what sense do advances in our knowledge of the emergence of the state provide for new perspectives with regard to how it relates to the formation of classes? These, among many dozens of others, are the questions that Alain Testart's *œuvre* poses to social anthropology and thus to Marxism.

At a time just after the birth of social anthropology, Marx and Engels avidly scrutinised its first results in order to integrate these into their own conception of the world, such that 'due regard [could] be paid to the present state of science'.²⁵ Let's hope that today's Marxists prove able to do the same, taking hold of this work, cutting off any dead branches and rectifying its errors, in order to draw on it and advance their understanding of the social evolution of the past – all the better to prepare the future.

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²⁵ Marx 1990, p. 203.

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Texts Available in English

Unfortunately, rather little of Alain Testart's work has been published in English. Nonetheless, several articles are available, principally relating to the classification of hunter-gatherers and the importance of storage to social evolution:

- 1982, 'The Significance of Food Storage among Hunter-gatherers: Residence Patterns, Population Densities, and Social Inequalities', *Current Anthropology*, 23: 523–37 [with comments].
- 1987, 'Game Sharing Systems and Kinship Systems among Hunter-gatherers', *Man*, 22: 287–304.
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- 1988, 'Some Major Problems in the Social Anthropology of Hunter-gatherers', *Current Anthropology*, 29: 1–31 [with comments].
- 2013, 'Reconstructing Social and Cultural Evolution: The Case of Dowry in the Indo-European Area', *Current Anthropology*, 54, 1: 23–50.
- 2013, 'What Is a Gift?' [chapter translated from *Critique du don*], *Hau*, 3, 1.