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Principles of General Sociology: Volume I: Fundamental Social Relations and Forms of Dependency ed.Valérie Lécrivain et Marc Joly, CNRS Éditions, 2021

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- **Alain Testart *Principes de sociologie générale. Volume I: Rapports sociaux fondamentaux et formes de dépendance* ed. Valérie Lécivain and Marc Joly, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2021), 400 pages, €28.**
[\[1\]](#)
- **[Principles of General Sociology: Volume I: Fundamental Social Relations and Forms of Dependency]**
- [Bernard Lahire](#)
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- [Full-text](#)
- [Author](#)

[1](#) At the time of his death in 2013, the social anthropologist Alain Testart left behind a magisterial and abundant body of work on primitive communism, the origins of economic inequalities and the state, religion, gift-giving, money, the kinship system among Australian Aboriginal people, the sexual division of labor, initiation rites, slavery, the accompanying dead, and cave painting. His works have become touchstones of the discipline, and have also facilitated dialogue between anthropologists, prehistorians, and archeologists. Far from being a dabbler, his prolixity and the variety of the subjects he explored stemmed from a systematic quest for links between phenomena that had been studied separately by specialized researchers. This search for coherent systems can only be made sense of in the context of Alain Testart's ultimate goal of classifying all societies known to prehistory, ethnology, history, and sociology, in order to comprehend the evolution from one type of society into another. [\[2\]\[2\]Alain Testart. Éléments de classification des sociétés \(Paris:...](#) He felt he was emulating what botanists or zoologists had ultimately achieved for the animal and plant kingdoms.

[2](#) The author often swam bravely against the current. Convinced that a true social science, capable of formulating laws, was possible, in an academic world predominantly won over by epistemological relativism, and the defender of a (revised) evolutionism at a time when the idea of social evolution had been abandoned by most of his colleagues, he wanted to return to the work of the founders of anthropology (James G. Frazer, Edward Tyler, and most of all Lewis H. Morgan) and of sociology (Marx, Weber, and Durkheim in particular). For this task, he armed himself with a steadfast faith in science, a staggering level of erudition, and a rigor of thought that his early scientific training (as an engineer at the École nationale supérieure des mines de Paris [Paris School of Mines]) and his great admiration for legal scholarship had helped to forge. [\[3\]\[3\]A worthy subject of enquiry would be how the "literary"...](#)

[3](#) The synthesis of all these qualities can be seen in the first volume of this new work entitled, with a nod to Herbert Spencer, *Principes de sociologie générale*. This volume sets out the ambitious project of creating a general sociology in search of "fundamental social relations," in the form of "social relations of dependency" characterizing different kinds of societies. Within it, he rigorously sets out his methodology (in particular a sociological comparatist approach, seeking the greatest contrasts between societies, rather than small variations) and his core concepts, while also demonstrating their relevance to a series of societies chosen for their particularly coherent and homogeneous natures. Alain Testart therefore indeed offers a general sociology that takes full advantage of comparison by asking the same questions, using the same conceptual tools, of societies that are maximally different from one another: from hunter-gatherers without wealth to ancient, feudal, lineage-based, and capitalist societies.

[4](#) The author guides us into the main body of the work through a rereading of three major authors: Tocqueville, Marx, and Durkheim. In their writings, he identifies a common search for a "principle of intelligibility" that is central to the social world, through which the nature of the connections that form in other areas of the same society can be "deduced" (Tocqueville), "isomorphisms" or "geneses" understood (Durkheim), or "determinations" (Marx) between domains (politics, economics, legal, religious, etc.) identified. These "kernels of intelligibility" are the social democratic state in America for Tocqueville; the personal dependencies of feudal societies or the logic of surplus work and surplus value in capitalist societies for Marx; and the elementary forms of religious life among Australian Aboriginal people for Durkheim. This introduction could have been extended with rereadings of the evolutionary anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan, [\[4\]\[4\]Alain Testart wrote an introduction to Morgan's classic work...](#) Fustel de Coulanges's history of institutions, or the historical sociology of Marc Bloch in *Feudal Society*, all of which also guided Testart's project.

5 There then follow chapters devoted to different societies: Aboriginal Australian society, feudal society, then modern society (in the sense of merchant and industrial societies), ancient cities (Greece and Rome), ancient China, African lineage-based societies, North American Indigenous societies (of the Great Plains and the Northwest Coast), and those of New Guinea and California. In each of these chapters centered on a given type of society, Testart takes great care to show the contrasts with the societies previously described, and thus to highlight what is specific to each case. Not only are the case studies never presented in any kind of monographic isolation, being instead used as points of mutual comparison, but they are also used as an opportunity to clarify the nature of the concepts deployed.

6 The work finishes with a general theory (a “systematics”) of social relations and forms of dependency. Testart’s contribution is so rich that it is very difficult to sum it up in a single review, but I will set out a number of nodal points in his thought. It is clear how much importance the author gives to the difference between “de facto” and “de jure” (and in particular between “de jure dependencies,” such as the dependency of the serf or vassal in European feudal societies, and “de facto dependencies,” such as those that operate between classes in societies that officially proclaim and legally enshrine freedom and equality for all). He also reflects—in a similar way to Marx—on the dynamic structural contradictions and tensions, found in each society, that generate social transformations: “Contradictions *suffice*, then, to explain the major evolutionary trends of society” (555).

7 Testart also makes a distinction between “homogeneous societies” and “heterogeneous societies.” He considers some historically determined societies to represent “purer” models than others. Just as was the case in (North) America for Tocqueville, Testart goes on to explain:

8

Why did he make this choice? Because history, in America, is less complicated. Everything there is *purer, closer to the ideal, closer to the type. These words are important. “Pure,” it would appear, is the best and most telling: it evokes the notion of a chemically pure substance. Chemists do not work with unrefined ores, still less with the gangues that run through them. The same goes for sociologists. How do we know that Restoration France society was not as pure as that of America at the same time? Because, of course, the Restoration had brought back fragments of the ancien régime, such as the ranks of nobility, certain prerogatives of the king, etc.—all things that did not exist in America* (42).

9 *It is necessary to start by studying “homogeneous societies” and the “purest” archetypes, because, Testart argues, we must follow the “classic Cartesian method of starting with the simple” (557), as “societies that combine several principles are necessarily more complex, and do not make good examples for studying social archetectonics” (ibid.).*

10 Testart makes a very illuminating distinction concerning the differences between “fundamental social relations,” “access relations,” and “formed relations.” A “social relation” must be defined separately to the question of access to positions in that relation (for example, in some societies, being a man or a woman, black or white, and so on, are conditions of access for certain positions in specific social relations). Moreover, the fundamental social relation must be defined independently of “formed relations” (for example, the actions completed to enter into a given relationship of personal dependency, as in the case of the oath sworn by the future vassal to his future lord).

11 Of course, the advances that Testart’s work enables are only possible by reducing sociology to social physics. Although the author always distanced himself from structuralism, he nonetheless shared its elimination of actors or agents and their subjectivity, and painted portraits of societies only in terms of social relations, structures, positions, institutions, and functions: “People will always be of secondary importance. Undoubtedly, there is no social relation that is not enacted. I do not envisage any social relation without people as actors within it. But this is their only role. They occupy positions that are predefined by the social structure, by the social relations that are possible in the society concerned” (32). In this work, Testart does not discuss habits, nor embodied dispositions, nor processes of socialization or internalization of structures, and especially not subjectivity or lived experience. Furthermore, he very clearly explains from the outset the distance that separates his sociology from that associated with the Chicago School. Testart would undoubtedly say, if we follow his “epistemological foreword,” that the subjective relationship to practice, as well as mental and behavioral structures, constitute subjects for developmental psychology or psychoanalysis but not for sociology. However, the sociology of socialization constitutes a significant counterexample to this rather brutal disciplinary division.

[12](#) This surprising passage comes from Testart's discussion of the Oedipus complex:

[13](#)

The fact that little boys feel love for their mother is a matter of psychology. But the fact that these same children *must* love their father a matter of sociology. The incestuous desire for the mother is a matter of psychoanalysis, which is an analysis of the *psyche*. The analysis of kinship relations, of respect toward the father, instead relates to social anthropology, which is a field that studies the *social*. However, the two phenomena concern the same collection of individuals, and it is not the size of this group nor its more or less collective nature that allows psychology and sociology to be distinguished from one another (28).

[14](#) To understand the author's position—which I disagree with—we must understand that for Testart, “social” is synonymous with visible “obligations,” and that anything related to feelings, desires, or experiences falls firmly outside the domain of sociology. He thought, for example, that the *taboo* of incest is social but the *desire* for incest is not. This rigid conception of the relationship between the disciplines prevented him from grasping that the desirable is often the internalized possible or impossible, and that the processes of internalization of social structures explain the fact that we can strongly desire and experience as very “personal” something that the reality of social relations has in fact imposed on us.

[15](#) This weak point in Testart's thinking is particularly visible in his examination of the parent-child relationship. Emphasizing that it is impossible to understand African lineage-based societies, or ancient Greek and Roman societies, without taking into account the role of “parental authority,” he immediately reduces this power to that of the father (or maternal uncle): “The notion of parental authority, established in the history of law, is almost completely overlooked in social anthropology. It nonetheless applies in a large number of African societies, governed by avuncular or paternal rights. Throughout this chapter, it will be used to demonstrate the forms and intensity of dependency in this region, and in particular to evaluate the power of the uncle and the father toward their descendants. First let us approach the topic through the understanding of *patria potestas*, a standard of Roman law” (363). This reduction can be explained by the fact that Testart is essentially interested in *obligations* codified in law that uniquely determine the powers (or the rights) of the father (or of the maternal uncle) over his sons (or his nephews): the right to the use of their labor, the right to sell them into slavery, the right to punish them, and even the right to kill them, and so on. However, this disregards the “de facto dependency” that involves the mother as much as it does the father (or maternal uncle). How can we grasp the “fundamental social relations” of a society if we confine our analysis to the official, the visible, and the institutionalized?

[16](#) This brings me to my last criticism. Testart rightly insists on the importance of a general and comparative sociology that asks the same questions of all societies, but his “cross-examination” (in Marc Bloc's sense of the term) of the “fundamental social relations” that belong to each society are particularly flexible and do not anticipate the locus or the origin of these relations. Marx has been much criticized for seeing economics as (ultimately) the determining force, because it places the means of production at the heart of the functioning of societies and their history. Testart, along with authors such as Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu, abandoned the idea of pinpointing *the* locus of the most fundamental determining factors of *every* society, that which explains everything else. We can respect this choice, while still pointing out a central problem with the approach: its paradoxical lack of systematic comparison.

[17](#) Testart admits that there is “no society without law” (576), which leads him to be particularly attentive to the legal dimension of each society. But kinship and parenthood are indeed just as important, as are economics, politics, and aesthetics (in the broad sense), and yet none of these dimensions are systematically examined in his comparative study. The reader wants to agree with Testart, whose erudition is remarkable, when he claims that kinship predominates in one place (among Australian Aboriginal people), but that it is economics (in capitalist societies) or politics (in ancient cities or ancient China) that prevail elsewhere. But what justifies this shift in the “locus of social intelligibility”? Is it not possible that interpretations might proliferate based on the skills or the interests of researchers? Testart himself often emphasizes the fact that researchers have sometimes neglected the study of whole swathes of social life and poorly documented certain areas. But in leaving the field open with regard to the preeminent “loci” where fundamental social relations are forged, Testart risks biased comparisons, because the same things would never truly be being compared.

[18](#) Nonetheless, this anthropologist has left us a powerful work that is sure to become a landmark in the history of the social sciences. It will now be for prehistorians, anthropologists, historians, and sociologists to draw on it in a critical manner, perhaps finding within it a few good reasons to concentrate *collectively* on what ought to be

at the heart of their professions: the search for laws and the collective organization of a real scientific accumulation of knowledge.

Notes

- [\[1\]](#)

This review is a longer version of a report on the same work (“Alain Testart: Une grande ambition pour la science sociale”) that appeared in *Le Mondes Livres* in September 2021.

- [\[2\]](#)

Alain Testart, *Éléments de classification des sociétés* (Paris: Éditions Errance, 2005).

- [\[3\]](#)

A worthy subject of enquiry would be how the “literary” education (philosophy and arts) of many French researchers in the social sciences, molded by the elite academic route of preparatory classes for France’s *grandes écoles* followed by one of the *écoles normales supérieures*, has had problematic effects on their limited propensity to concretely defend the idea of science and to work toward their disciplines gaining the status of sciences.

- [\[4\]](#)

Alain Testart wrote an introduction to Morgan’s classic work, *Ancient Society* (*La Société archaïque*, trans. Halie Jaouiche [Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1985]).

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