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The Gender of the Gift: Strathern turns gender into a capacity for action

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1988

Strathern turns gender into a capacity for action

In 1988, anthropologists of Melanesia discovered a book with a most perplexing title, content, and style. *The Gender of the Gift* was a radical departure from what had hitherto been written about this part of the world, transforming gender from a property of people into a capacity for action and for relation.

Since the mid-1970s, Papua New Guinea was the subject of many ethnographic works by women who, driven by the feminist wave, suspected the works of certain of their male counterparts of male bias. Marilyn Strathern (born 1941) was a good ten years ahead of them in devoting her research to women’s activities and their scope for action in a population of the New Guinea Highlands, the Melpa (or Hagen). She had discovered that persons were defined as men or women on the basis not so much of fixed attributes than of modes of action: namely production (of trade goods) for women and transaction for men, in a society where the main collective affair was ceremonial and competitive exchange between groups.

In the early 1980s, Strathern’s thoughts on gender in Melanesia were stimulated by criticism from other women working on Melanesia and/or feminists who accused her of falling into the trap of male bias or of deeming that anthropology and feminism sat awkwardly with each other. Her willingness to consider feminism with the distance and lack of concession that is part of any rigorous analysis was probably perceived as a lack of loyalty by female colleagues involved in debates seeking to make their mark in the public sphere.

As indicated by the subtitle, *Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, the book associates a thinking on the discipline and its analytical categories with an interpretation of the world of Melanesian ideas and practices based on two of its pillars: gender and gift. The result of this vast undertaking was to fundamentally alter the way English-speaking anthropology analyzed the forms of social life and ideas in this region of the South Pacific. French

anthropology however was not immediately impacted.

The book is based on the idea that for Melanesians, the concepts of society and culture are not entirely relevant, hence making it necessary to find an alternative, neither holistic nor individualistic, for making sense of the way these peoples think and act together. Via a critique of both “pre-feminist” and feminist approaches, *The GOG*—as the book is commonly called—seeks to bring to light a set of ideas and practices in which many collective activities consist in unmaking relations, in disassembling them, thereby revealing their hidden significations and bringing to the surface that which was invisible. These symbolic processes of representation are implemented during sequences of events, most often ritualized, analysis of which makes it possible to apprehend the Melanesian way to be related to each other (“sociality”).

People and objects are at the heart of these processes. The notion of “dividual person”, taken from McKim Marriott, emphasizes the diverse influences to which persons are subject and which constitute them. The person, Marilyn Strathern notes, is a microcosm of relations who begins life as the product of others’ actions. A child is thus said to be “complete” or “cross-sex” for they issue from the mixing of paternal and maternal substances. Due to this completeness, they are incapable of reproduction. A child subsequently becomes an “incomplete”, “same-sex”, or “single-sex” person after a symbolic detachment or extraction of a part of themselves is operated (through a rite involving blood-letting, for example). It is only then that they are capable of reproduction, and more generally of being an agent. According to Strathern’s model, a person’s life is thus conceived as alternating variable internal states bringing relational states to light. For, though never defined by Strathern, the key word is “relation”, a concept that Melanesian society erects as a value, that is, “with which it works”.

The Gender of the Gift is overflowing with ideas, giving the impression that it mirrors the Melanesian ethnographic material the author is seeking to make sense of: it is never understood once and for all, and one has to revisit it to discover hidden levels, those which were inaccessible at first reading. Alfred Gell did the readers a great service by producing diagrams and drawings in a paper humorously called “Strathernograms” (1999), depicting Strathern’s hypotheses on the “partible person”, on the relations in which a domestic pig is embedded, or on the “mediated” or “unmediated” nature of the relations between human beings depending on whether or not an object circulates between them.

It is also Gell who maliciously described the set of ideas built by Marilyn Strathern in *The GOG* as the “system M”, with M standing for Melanesia or Marilyn as one preferred. He probably so wanted to signal an ambiguity: was the “system M” the mode of thinking of each of the populations whose ethnographic descriptions are analyzed by Marilyn Strathern, or else was it a common denominator smoothing over variability, and never genuinely represented anywhere? Be

that as it may, *The Gender of the Gift* has provided plentiful food for thought for anthropologists of Melanesia and further afield, and has left a permanent mark on gender research.

Pascale Bonnemère

Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift. Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988.