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ABORIGINAL SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND RECIPROCITY

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This paper seeks to show that while the idea of reciprocity is fundamental in Australian Aboriginal societies, inequalities are also inherent in the kinship system itself. An attempt is then made to articulate these two aspects and to specify the form of social inequality which is characteristic of Australia.

Cet article prétend montrer, d'une part, que l'idée de réciprocité est fondamentale dans les sociétés australiennes, d'autre part, que les inégalités le sont tout autant dans la mesure où elles sont inscrites et fondées dans la parenté elle-même. Il cherche aussi à montrer comment réciprocité et inégalité s'articulent entre elles. Enfin, il tente de spécifier la forme d'inégalité sociale caractéristique de l'Australie.

The impression that comes from reading about Aboriginal Australia is astonishingly contradictory. Aboriginal societies seem to be either profoundly egalitarian or else thoroughly inegalitarian. The debate, it seems to me, must be situated at the point where at least three academic traditions intersect.

First of all, the great tradition, inaugurated by Morgan, of the study of kinship and social organization came very early to Australia, with Fison and Howitt (1880), and strongly influenced the work of Howitt, Roth, Spencer and Gillen. It also determined the intellectual preoccupations of Australian Anthropology, which, with Radcliffe-Brown and *Oceania* in the 1930s, reinterpreted the problems of kinship in functionalist terms. After World War II this tradition continued, though no longer in a monolithic form. Because of its long reign over Aboriginal Studies, it has decisively affected how we think of these societies. But what is noteworthy for the present purpose is its constant preference for subjects involving the idea of **reciprocity**: the division into moieties, which are, by definition, **complementary** and lack meaning apart from their **reciprocal** relationships;¹ more complex organizations such as sections and clans; kinship relations since each such term always has a **reciprocal** term and since relatives' rights and duties are also **reciprocal**; exogamy, a key question in classical anthropology; and marriage **exchanges** (or Lévi-

Strauss's 'alliance theory'). We could add on to this list the ritual distinction between 'boss' and 'worker' not so much because these two terms are obviously reciprocal but rather because the persons who play these roles in one context **reciprocally** play the opposite role in another. This tradition left little room for social inequality, which, at best, could be considered to be a secondary phenomenon that, coming from the outside, upset the ideal harmony of an overall structure based on reciprocal exchanges.

To avoid ambiguity, I would like to point out that there is no necessary logical relationship between reciprocity and equality. The example of potlatch societies suffices to prove this. Further evidence comes from the fact that the most unequal social relations (e.g., under feudalism during the European Middle Ages or patronage in Ancient Rome) have been thought out in terms of reciprocity (e.g., the serf provides his lord with food, and the latter reciprocates by providing armed protection). I do not mean, and certainly do not want to suggest, that the scholars who have taken up the forementioned academic tradition have postulated such a logical relationship. Nonetheless, this tradition, given its preferred line of inquiry, clearly leads to the impression that reciprocity is the very opposite of what is meant by inequality or domination. Unfortunately, impressions sometimes leave deeper and longer marks than the reasoning used in argumentation.

Since this first tradition, which alone accounts for so much of the history of anthropology, there has arisen a narrower tradition of inquiry into societies of hunter-gatherers. Therein, these societies, or at least those taken to be representative of this type of society, have always been considered to be egalitarian. In fact, 'egalitarian' or 'band societies' have become synonymous with 'societies of hunter-gatherers'. This tradition, by comparison with the first, has a fundamentally different theoretical orientation; it is more materialistic, if not Marxist (in the case of Lee and Leacock), and more interested in the economy or the relationship with the natural environment. However these two traditions do somewhat overlap in the case of Service, who, along with Steward, can be considered to be the forefather of this second tradition even though it does seem to have developed in opposition to his theses. In effect, Service (1966: 14ff) shares with the first tradition a theoretical concern with reciprocity, not in the social organization but in the economy.

The third tradition, unlike the preceding two, emphasizes the domination of seniors over juniors, and of men over women. It is much more recent; and its scope, still limited. Congruous observations from diverse sources over a long period prefigure this interest in the forementioned inequalities.² In 1880, Fison and Howitt noticed the monopoly over women 'exercised by the elder men to the exclusion of the younger men' (p.355). Comments of this sort finally took shape in the writings of Rose (1960, 1965a, 1968 and 1976) so as to open up a new overall interpretation of Aboriginal societies. By proposing the concept of 'gerontocracy', Rose is thinking less of the enormous age-difference between spouses than of the thus implied social relations, notably: the forced bachelorhood of young men; the quasi-monopoly of women by mature men; and the considerable authority of older men, which is partly backed up by belief in their powers, if not also by violence. It is nearly paradoxical that this inegalitarian vision of Aboriginal societies was proposed by a scholar from East Germany, an official Marxist from Eastern Europe whose reflections were set down in writing at a time when the thesis of the five stages should have, normally, led him to see such societies as examples of 'primitive communism'. This paradox highlights the originality of Rose's thought.³ I am poorly placed to evaluate his influence on Australian research, but it seems to have been very limited, at least until recently (see Hiatt 1985). I detect even less on the anthropology of hunter-gatherers.

A further paradox is that Rose's influence has been decisive in kinship studies, where it has opened the way to reinterpreting preferential matrilineal cross-cousin marriages, so central to structuralism, which are no longer taken as evidence of a structure of exchange but as the effect of age-differences between spouses (Rose 1965b; Hammel 1976). Out of this has come a new trend in Australian kinship studies (Denham *et al.* 1979; Martin and Reddy 1981; Keen 1982) that concentrates not on reciprocity or exchange but on age-differences at the time of marriage, population structure, polygyny, etc., topics that have since been introduced into formal models. In the late 1970s, Bern (1979) and Hiatt (1978) shifted the question of domination in Aboriginal societies toward religion, a shift seemingly made not thanks to Rose but owing to a certain brand of French Marxism (with its English-speaking ramifications) that seeks out contradictions everywhere. Regardless of the influences at work, the debate about gerontocracy has been opened, and is continuing (Myers 1980a, 1980b; Tonkinson 1986; Hiatt 1986).

To conclude this introduction, which might be considered too long by some or too short by others, I think there are two symmetrical dangers: on the one hand, to insist on reciprocity and to ignore inequalities, considering them to be secondary or adventitious; or, on the other hand, to insist on inequalities and take reciprocity to be but an ideological illusion, or mask, that hides domination and the contradictions rending society. Each of these positions privileges some aspects of reality at the expense of others. But might these two views not be intrinsically related? In other words, might not phenomena of exchange and reciprocity, which are so obviously fundamental to Aboriginal institutions such as marriage and ritual, suppose, in order to be realized, unequal social relations?

The starting point of my analysis is game-sharing, since it is a theme running through barely variant versions of a formula worked out by both Soviet Marxism and American anthropology: either sharing, hence community, and therefore primitive communism; or else sharing, hence reciprocity, and therefore solidarity and equality.⁴ Elsewhere (Testart 1985:53-96; 1987), I have shown that Aboriginal game-sharing, though rather different from region to region, reflects a single principle, namely: certain persons other than the hunter have a prior right to the game he has caught. Under the clearest form of this principle, the person who presides over the distribution of the game or, under a milder form, the person who is served first, is not the hunter himself, nor, for that matter, one of his brothers, close kin or hunting partners. Typically, this person is a man from the other moiety (of affines in contrast with consanguineals) and/or from the other generation or, rather, from the classificatory category of father-in-law. It would not be very realistic to assume that this principle was rigidly applied in every case and in all circumstances; its application apparently depended on the kind of animal, the hunter himself, etc., and whether his parents-in-law were present in the camp. The limited sources of information about this phenomenon, and their slight interest in economics, keep us from knowing for sure the precise rules of game-sharing in traditional Aboriginal societies before contacts with Europeans. However the evidence gleaned from Dawson, Howitt, Mountford, Tindale, Gould and Hamilton does point toward such a general principle,⁵ even though their accounts provide no indication as to its application. This principle was not, of course, an economic law of the sort that governs the wage-earning relationship in our societies. It was probably something like a tendency or a preferential norm, in the sense of preferential

as opposed to prescriptive marriage rules. In effect, there is no reason to assume that game-sharing rules were less differentiated and less complicated than marriage rules.

It is clear that the principle that regulated game-sharing in Australia does not prevail among other hunter-gatherers. Consequently, we have to talk about different forms of reciprocity in game-sharing, of which there was one specific to this continent. Among non-Australian hunters, A gives to B, and B will, in return, give to A. This is a reciprocity that can be called simple or immediate. Furthermore, it is partial: A gives to B only a part of his catch and keeps another part for himself, as B does too. An Aboriginal hunter, who turns his game over to a senior, an affine or a father-in-law, does not 'give' anything to anyone any more than he 'shares'; and he will not necessarily receive part of the game back. In other words, he does not partake in the distribution of the game and might not even partake of the meat. Of course, he will be a beneficiary in the sharing of the game caught by his affines, sons-in-law or members of the younger generation. This form of reciprocity is global and radical; it operates across fundamental cleavages (generations or moieties) in the society. Each hunter's 'non-appropriation' of the game is resolved, through the reciprocity between moieties or generations, into an appropriation by the whole group; or rather: the appropriation by the whole, as a group structured by oppositions, is realised by virtue of the individual's non-appropriation. I have proposed calling this form of reciprocity 'primitive communism'.

This phrase calls for more comment than can be set down here. In the Marxist tradition, and long before (at least since the 17th century political philosophers), primitive communism has been used as a synonym for common property. But this is not the meaning I have in mind.⁶ What I am designating is a form not of property but of reciprocity — not the ownership of the means of production (or of other activities) but the way the products (or results of these activities) are distributed. I am trying to give a new meaning to an old phrase so as to refer to the principle of a society wherein what is yours or what comes from you is not for you; a society, in other words, wherein the game caught by the hunter cannot be consumed by him, just as a woman cannot be 'consumed' in marriage by a man of her clan. This is the exogamy principle according to which the whole can be constructed only through the interdependence of its parts.

This form of reciprocity seems pertinent for at least two reasons. First of all, it is found in marriage exchanges: a man can no more marry a woman of his group than he can use (distribute/consume) his game. It is also found in ritual prescriptions; for instance, clanspersons cannot eat animals of the totemic species, whose reproduction is ensured by their performances of *intichiuma* or *talu* ceremonies; nor can men marry the women of their clan, whose fertility is ensured by these same ceremonies. This form of reciprocity is not limited to a single social field. It is economic, matrimonial and ritual; it organizes all of social life. Secondly, this form of reciprocity is a means for conceiving fundamental social relations in Aboriginal societies, particularly of the inequalities that these relations imply and this reciprocity supposes. The second point seems paradoxical, but is not. It does not suffice to have identified a general principle of reciprocity; it is also necessary to inquire into the way it works, especially into the conditions whereunder it is applied and into the social dynamics (and individuals' motivations) that make it possible. The Aboriginal hunter does not surrender all claims to his game merely for the principle's sake; he surrenders them for someone else's benefit — because of a relation that binds him to this other person, who, whether an affine, a father-in-law or a man from the older generation, is always a 'relative', whether someone belonging to an actual or classificatory

kinship category or to one of the sociocentric groups (generations or sections) called marriage classes. A relative is always someone with whom there is a relation of dependency, of a symbolic nature or of indebtedness (like the debt a child contracts with its parents by the very fact of having been born).

The hunter does not surrender all claims to his game merely for the community's superior interests. This primitive communism, as I have called it, lacks, it should be added, a consciousness of itself. We are the ones who can affirm — but only at the end of our analysis — that the hunter's appropriation amounts to the community's appropriation through a form of reciprocity. The motive, reason or cause of this act does not lie in a relationship that binds the individual to the whole community but rather comes out of the interpersonal relations of dependency that encompass the individual.

What I have said about hunting can be said about marriage. Men surrender claims to the women of their clan, section or moiety because of a relation of interdependence that binds them to another clan, section or moiety. Beyond the abhorrence of incest, beyond the imperative of exogamy, women are due to others; and this idea of debt conveys dependence. Whether game or women are surrendered to others, this act implies recognizing a whole set of bonds with these others.

At this point, a general law can be formulated. Any relation of reciprocity (whether generalized, balanced or negative) — any relation (whether sharing, appropriating or exchanging) having to do with goods (whether material or immaterial goods or women) — takes place between individuals who are already socially defined and maintain with each other certain social relations prior to any exchange, gift or other act of reciprocity. These prior social relations make possible such acts and condition the establishment of a certain form of reciprocity between the two persons. In Aboriginal Australia, these social relations, which I propose calling 'fundamental', have to do with kinship in the broadest sense.

Inherent in kinship is a hierarchy. Notwithstanding this commonplace, not all its theoretical implications have been drawn. Aboriginal societies are inequalitarian precisely because they are organized predominantly on the basis of kinship. There is no need to seek the ultimate origins of inequality anywhere else.

Kinship is dominant in Aboriginal societies. What does this mean?⁷ It is dominant in that kinship relations condition all others, in that the terms of various social exchanges or relations are defined through kinship, and finally in that kinship is the frame of reference and model of all other social relations, whether economic, religious or political. In our society, kinship organizes but a part of social life. At the workplace, the employer and wage-earner are not usually kin; nor, in education, the teacher and pupil. In various hunting-gathering societies, kinship, though important, is not a primary determinant as in Australia. !Kung hunters share with their kin, but only after they and the owner of the arrow have, first of all, distributed it among themselves (Testart 1985:63-64). In contrast, the most important characteristic of the ways game is shared in Australia is that kin, seniors or affines, have a prior right to what the hunter has caught, if only the right to distribute it. Moreover, the most outstanding characteristic common to the diverse forms of Aboriginal marriage is that the wife is selected as a function of kinship and always within previously defined kinship sets, which have been called marriage classes, endogamic moieties or sections. Although, as proven long ago, these sets do not suffice to determine who will be the wife, the choice fits within this predetermined grid. Whether in matters of hunting, marriage or, more generally, sexual relations, kinship provides the general framework

wherein problems are raised. It also provides the framework of religious life and activities (the knowledge of myths and performance of rites and ceremonies). These activities are always carried out by distinct clans, moieties or kin groups, even though an individual may learn myths other than his clan's thanks to his multiple kin relations, or may participate in ceremonies other than his group's because of the ritual relationships between groups.⁸ Finally, kinship also apparently provides the framework of politics, itself so closely associated with religion. Leaders or headmen are such only for the groups (clans, couples of sections, etc.) to which they belong. The choice from among the group's senior members of the one who is going to assume the title of headman follows from considerations that involve the various levels at which kinship is defined. To understand the complexity of politics, we need only re-read Pink's (1936) article, which states that an individual may claim the headmanship as a function of his clan membership (which depends more on his father's father than on his father); his conception totem or clan (i.e., as a function of the place where he was 'found' by his mother at the time of conception); or his subsection.

What differs from one society to another is not so much the magnitude of inequalities (as implied in the phrase 'reduce inequality') as their nature and form. What differentiates and characterizes societies in this respect is the organization of the various levels where the equality/inequality question arises. For example, our societies are egalitarian in the sense that all persons are thought to be 'born free and equal'. Differences of birth or, to use an older term, of condition are not recognized; all persons are equal in the eyes of the law. Yet, there are differences of fortune, and individuals are obviously unequal economically. There is equality at the legal but not at the economic level. Tension between two or more levels where the equality/inequality question is raised in different terms probably exists in each type of society. However, there is no reason to suppose that the levels are always the same. In Aboriginal societies, economic inequalities — of the sort that exist in our societies — are not conspicuous, since neither material production nor the accumulation of commercial wealth is well developed, and an opposition cannot be made between the rich and poor, nor even between those who control production in one way or another and those who do not. In this sense but in this sense alone, we may conclude that these societies are egalitarian; and this is what is meant in the anthropology of hunter-gatherers. However another sense is evident from what has been said. In contrast with our idea that everyone is born free and equal, Aboriginal societies seem to be thoroughly inegalitarian since everyone is born dependent and will experience this dependency when seeking admission to the mysteries of religion or to the status of initiated adult or when seeking a spouse or catching game. Up to this point, we have been contrasting Aboriginal societies with our own; but there is no reason, it should be repeated, why the duality of the legal and economic levels, where the equality/inequality question arises in the latter, should also characterize the former.

The soundness and pertinence of the foregoing remarks must now be shown. How does kinship shed light on the forms of inequality specific to Aboriginal societies? What dialectical tension between equality and inequality characterizes of these societies? Let us begin by handling the first of this set of questions.

What forms of inequality are inherent in Aboriginal kinship? In our society, relatives and non-relatives are distinguished: kin forms a circle around ego; and outside

this circle stretches the vast world of non-kin wherein lies another circle, stretched like the first, but of affines. There is nothing of this sort in Aboriginal Australia: everyone is 'kin', and distinctions are made only about the ways of being kin. To put it in Morgan's terms, the system of consanguinity overlaps the system of affinity. *De jure*, these two systems are, despite differences, coextensive and can be translated into each other. As a consequence, the bonds of dependency characteristic of kinship relations extend throughout society and enmesh ego in a network.

There are two types of dependency: on the one hand, the mutual and symmetrical dependence of peers (for example, brothers or cross-cousins) on each other; and on the other hand, the asymmetrical dependence of one hierarchically differentiated position on another (for example, between father and son, or uncle and nephew). The second is a source of inequality; but this does not mean that such a relation is not reciprocal; a nephew (or son) owes obedience to his maternal uncle (or father) who, reciprocally, owes him support. A son-in-law gives his game to his parents-in-law; and in turn, the father-in-law class ought to provide him with a wife. Despite this reciprocity and interdependence, this type of relationship opposes two individuals, or classes of individuals, of different rank on a hierarchical scale such that those from the upper rank always have authority over and are thought to have greater responsibility for others.⁹ Inequalities in Aboriginal societies arise between persons from different generations. Overall, the hierarchy, which comprises all inequalities except those between the sexes, is one between generations.

This generation hierarchy is stable over time. People grow older; but an uncle is still an uncle, and the older generation always precedes the younger. This temporal succession defines a hierarchical order that has all the properties of a mathematical formula: it is stable, irreversible (since A is greater than B, B will never be less than A), and transitive (if A is greater than B which is greater than C, then A is greater than C). From ego's point of view, however, it is reversed depending on the persons involved (the son will become a father; the nephew, an uncle), and his position in the hierarchy changes. From his point of view, the hierarchy exists only instantaneously: if he looks in another direction, his kinship relations (unlike those between serf and lord) can be reversed. As he looks upwards, he is a son, a junior of lesser rank; but as he looks downwards, he is a father, a senior of higher rank. In effect, each kinship term implies a reciprocal term, and everyone is normally led during his life to hold, relative to various persons, each of the hierarchical positions inherent in these pairs of reciprocal terms (such as father-son). This does not happen in the serf-lord relationship.

This can be said in another way. With regard to eternity, if attention is turned at once to all past, present and future relations into which ego will enter, he is as 'superior' as he is 'inferior'. If population variables are kept constant, he has dominated and will dominate as many people as have dominated and will dominate him. In general, and from ego's point of view, hierarchical relations balance out. When the viewpoint shifts to the succession of generations and the past, present and future relations that it implies, the hierarchical order is fully defined, as simply as the passing of time. However from a given generation's viewpoint, the same argument holds as from ego's. We thus understand how this society can be seen as egalitarian or inegalitarian, but this is not the point. What interests us is to see how equality and inequality are converted into each other through the opposition between duration and the instant. The hierarchical scale is fixed, but it lets each person climb the ranks. There is an inequality of relations but an equality of individuals.

It should be emphasized that I am leaving aside the problem of the sexes, because it would require special treatment, in particular, the elucidation of the concept of the sacred, a subject too vast for an article. The man-woman relationship is rooted in kinship; but unlike the asymmetrical relation between generations, it cannot be reversed since a woman who is the wife of a man will never be the husband of another man. In other words, the inequality between the sexes, if it can be formulated as such, has to be incorporated in kinship and is necessarily of a different nature than that between generations.

Another remark is necessary to reply to a question implicit in Rose's work and explicit in Hiatt's (1978). Can we, when referring to the young/old opposition, talk about classes in the Marxist sense? Recall that the young are bachelors subject to a harsh initiation whereas seniors are polygamous and have numerous material advantages derived from the many food taboos that the young and women must respect. The answer, in my opinion, is 'no', because these inequalities do not irreparably cleave the society in two, since the opposition between generations is temporary. These inequalities determine no classification (which is central to the concept of class) of the society into two or several antagonistic sets. On the contrary, very strong, visible bonds exist between the young and old, especially bonds of kinship but also what we might call bonds of 'becoming' since juniors are seniors-to-be. Aboriginal societies can be compared to the African ones that French anthropologists have explained in terms of a lineage mode of production. This comparison, which does not imply that we should talk about classes in the latter case (see Testart 1985:245-47) highlights the difference between the two: the young become old, but an elder will always be an elder. The elder/younger relationship cannot be reversed like that between generations. At best, a younger person will become an elder if the person holding this position happens to die. Of course, a younger brother is older than the youngest brother, but this fact does not give him any authority in the household or lineage.

To come back to the Australian case, men are at each instant involved in unequal relations. This inequality comes only from their temporary positions on the hierarchical scale. Facing eternity, they re-become equal, as they were at birth, or even earlier when they were still spirit-children at totemic sites. It is tempting to adapt a formula from the French Revolution: men are born equal but not free — equal by nature, since there are no differences of 'condition' or caste. This implies that it can be said about everyone — especially about anyone who claims too much authority — that, as the Pintupi themselves say 'He's only a man like me' (Myers 1980:315).

How, therefore, can one person have authority over another? How can he claim to be superior? He cannot found this claim on the superiority of his nature (or 'quality' as used to be said of aristocrats). It can only be founded on his place or position in a hierarchical structure that has been defined without him, before his existence. Using Weber's terminology, we might say that, in Australia, there is neither a traditional nor charismatic but rather a bureaucratic type of authority. Older men are chosen for top positions as a function of their proficiency, or experience, in magic, religious, social, etc., matters. To continue in the same vein, a certain 'rationality' can be detected. No person holds a pre-eminent position apart from his place within a pre-defined hierarchical order. This order precedes him. Organized as a conceptual system of relations, it is eternal, indifferent to the passing generations. It is stable, like the Platonic realm of ideas. It is a cosmic order, like the temporal succession of generations, which, however, brings nothing into being save what has already been given from all eternity: the being moves within the circle of its concept. The characteristics used to describe the kinship order are not

fortuitous. They are the same as those ordinarily used to describe Aboriginal religious conceptions of the Dreamtime, a mythic time of which the actual time of human beings is but the endless repetition. For this reason, it does not seem necessary to seek in the religion, considered as an autonomous structure, the foundations of the generation hierarchy: everything is already given in the kinship structure. Because of this order, which is simultaneously social, cosmic and religious, each person may temporarily hold a hierarchical position different from his neighbor's.

Of course, Aboriginal societies are not the only ones that define hierarchical positions in relation to a cosmic order. This also holds for Frazer's 'divine kingships', and even for feudal society. What, then, distinguishes the Aboriginal cosmic-kinship order from these other hierarchical orders? It does not have the shape of a pyramid, like the feudal order. When a point is transposed along the feudal hierarchical axis, when a person is moved to a lower or higher status, everything changes completely: not only does he have more (in a lower status) or fewer (in a higher status) peers, but also the nature and scope of his powers are entirely different. In contrast, when such a transposition is carried out along the Aboriginal hierarchical kinship axis, the same relations hold between a similar number of persons (leaving aside demographic contingencies). We can say that this order is stable in the case of transpositions along the hierarchical axis, which in fact is the temporal axis. This order can also be said to be invariable from the viewpoint of someone who, from a given rank, looks upwards and downwards: he will have an opposite but symmetrical view, because each generation passes through all ranks, or levels. This order is a cylindrical tube of indefinite length. Since the succession of generations is infinite, it can be neither a pyramid nor a cone, for the sides have to be parallel to accommodate a relatively constant number of persons moving up through it. This amounts to recognizing both that all persons are equal by nature and in eternity, and that, despite the usual emphasis on the immobility of Aboriginal institutions and the eternal, repetitiveness implied by the Dreamtime, kinship and hierarchy form a dynamic system. This is the most striking characteristic of this cosmic order: it is evolutive, whereas the feudal order is not, no more so than a kinship order founded on the younger/elder opposition. However we look at equality/inequality in Aboriginal societies, we always see that what most characterizes them is the instant/eternity duality.

If older, initiated men are experienced, have knowledge and are indeed the most competent or qualified, in Weber's sense, to assume responsibility for the egalitarian/inegalitarian cosmic order, they have to be defined as its bureaucrats. By taking a superior hierarchical position, they guarantee the society's egalitarianism.

This brings us to a second point about the form of inequalities: what happens to it when it is related to forms of reciprocity?

Lévi-Strauss has discerned two major types of marriage exchanges. Under a system of restricted exchange, A gives to B, and B gives to A; and the typical form of marriage is with a bilateral cross-cousin. Under a system of generalized exchange (simplified so as to take into consideration but one of its two variants), A gives to B who gives to C, and so forth, until Z who gives to A; the movement is in a single direction; and the typical form of marriage is with a matrilineal cross-cousin. Restricted exchange is perfectly represented by systems with sections or exogamous moieties, and can cover more complicated subsection systems by identifying four terminological lines or semi-moieties between which exchanges alternate depending on the generation. All these sociocentric groups involve restricted exchange. It is harder to find generalized exchange in Australia.

Such a hypothesis might explain peculiarities of kinship terminology and the preference for the matrilineal cousin; but cycles of asymmetrical exchanges can be detected only by examining lineages or sublineages within clans (between which no generalized exchange formula has ever been directly observable). Aboriginal Australia thinks in terms of symmetry.

These systems, the glory of French structuralism, are formal structures. This has two implications. First of all, we can conceive of as many systems as are mathematically possible. Secondly, these systems can, in principle, be applied to any exchange, not only of women in marriage but also of ritual or material goods (for example, parts of an animal killed during a hunt). Neither of the two forementioned exchange formulae works very well on the available information, fragmentary as it is, about Aboriginal game-sharing, in which the game is passed on to men of the older generation. This forces us to imagine a third system of exchange, which I propose calling 'open': A gives to B who gives to C, and so forth, but without any loop back to A. Two remarks should be made.

First of all, the groups that enter into the now classical, restricted or generalized, exchange formulas are unilineal groups (lineages, clans, moieties, etc.). Under open exchange, we have to do with generations. Theoretically studies have definitely preferred dealing with unilineal groups and exchanges between them rather than with the generation principle. For instance, section systems have been explained in terms of two overlapping unilineal principles (patri- and matri-). In Aboriginal societies, however, differences between generations are very clearly marked in kinship, sociocentric groups and ceremonies. The evidence indicates that considering the generation principle to be fundamental and autonomous would open up a promising approach, as others have already suggested (in particular, Dumont 1975: ch 4). I do not know whether marriage exchange can be reinterpreted from this approach; but we may inquire into the social implications of asserting that one generation gives its daughters and nieces (or sons and nephews) to the succeeding generation. Game-sharing apparently involves both restricted exchange between moieties, between consanguineals and affines, and an open exchange between generations. Combining these two formulae gives an apparently paradigmatic model wherein the hunter surrenders his game to his fathers-in-law. Combining them also yields a system with four sections.

My second remark is that, under restricted and generalized systems, exchanges are considered as if they were synchronous, as if they took place within the time of one generation, whereas the open system, precisely because it forms no loop, cannot synchronically involve the infinity of generations that it supposes. At any given moment, generation B gives to C only because it has already received from A; and C receives from B only because it will give to D. The open system is inconceivable in a limited time period. It is meaningful only in eternity when each generation will have received what it has given. At any given moment, the system is open in that past gifts have opened rights and duties for the future. Once again, we perceive its dynamism, the dialectic between the moment and eternity.

The value of the open system lies in the conception it provides of the hierarchy. Restricted exchange does not normally imply any hierarchy between the two symmetrical terms, A and B. The asymmetry of generalized exchange creates the conditions for a relative hierarchy between wife-givers and wife-takers: A is superior to B who is superior to C, and so forth; but there is no absolute hierarchy since the last term, Z, is inferior to all but superior to A. Since it forms a loop, generalized exchange produces a one-way

hierarchical order; but since the loop is closed, the hierarchy is cancelled out. Only the open system, because it is unbounded at infinity, can be associated with a transitive hierarchy and freed of the ambivalence of a relative hierarchy.

How can such a system be considered to be a system of reciprocity? Where is the reciprocity? Under generalized exchange, A gives to B, but B apparently gives nothing in return to A; however, by giving to C who gives to D and so forth, B renders over the whole cycle, to A what he has received. Nothing of this sort happens under the open system, which does not form a loop or, to state it like a mathematician would, forms a loop but at infinity in the same way that parallel lines meet at infinity. So once again, we come upon eternity.

The Aborigines have solved this problem of reciprocity in a much simpler way: through alternate generations (endogamous moieties). Accordingly, the generation of ego's sons is the same as that of his father; and ego's generation, the same as those of his grandsons and of his grandparents. Since the unbounded infinity of generations is thus reduced to a duality of 'even' and 'odd', the succession of generations takes the form : A-B-A-B... and symmetry is re-established. This remarkable operation provides a means of conceiving of reciprocity, by thinking of open exchange in terms of restricted exchange, which, remember, is the prevalent type of exchange in Australia, and by using a dualist model, which is a major one in Aboriginal thought. A system wherein reciprocity was a problem is thus turned into one of simple reciprocity. Furthermore, this operation re-establishes equality, and re-establishes it with regard to the only evidently hierarchical phenomenon — as though Aboriginal thought were unwilling to harbour a conception of inequality. There are hierarchical relations of dependency, but these two series of alternating generations, each made up of an infinite number of terms, are, like all men or all sociocentric groups, equal in eternity.

Since these previously described formal exchange systems can serve to regulate the circulation of different goods, another problem requires treatment: how do we understand reciprocity when Y is given in return for X? Between generations, women and game circulate in opposite directions. Therefore, we can imagine a rather simple reciprocity between the father-in-law who gives a daughter and the son-in-law who gives him game. However, things are less simple than they seem. For reciprocity to be established by means of two different goods, these must be considered to be equivalent. But how can game be compensation for a daughter? How does this presumed equivalence lead to fair reciprocity? This problem can be settled only through the system of symbolic representations. The symbolic equivalence of women and game may be based on the idea that each is a source of life, is 'flesh' or 'meat', as is said of the sister, the totem and the section. This equivalence is of the same sort as that between women and subincised penises, both of which can be 'lent' or 'put in the hand' in order to settle disputes. This is analogous to another situation, when a murderer offers to be pierced and to see his own blood shed in order to put an end to the debt of blood. The reciprocity between son- and father-in-law, despite its apparent simplicity, entails a complex symbolic order.

Furthermore, the reciprocity between son-in-law and father-in-law is but one aspect of a set made up of two systems of reciprocity each of which works autonomously with regard to a different good. This set enables us to conceive of the hierarchy between son-in-law and father-in-law, the latter being superior to the former because he gives a daughter in marriage but receives only game in return. We can push thought no farther than this; we cannot go on to conceive of equality, true reciprocity or symmetry, because the game

given will never pay back the daughter received. In general, a form of reciprocity established by means of different goods only serves to mark more clearly the hierarchy between the two parties. This holds true for all relations where what comes from the top is not the same nature as what comes from the bottom, for instance, between patron and client, employer and wage-earner, king and subject, or lord and serf. In every case, the reigning ideology, or representation, places more value on what comes from above than on what comes from below; and this asserted form of reciprocity only reinforces inequality. Egalitarian reciprocity between equals, or peers, can occur only when goods of the same type are exchanged. The way, so characteristic of Aboriginal Australia, of turning inequality into equality can be directly observed only in terms of the global circulation between all persons with regard to each kind of good, but not in terms of all exchanges of goods between two given individuals. This is another way of saying that individuals are equal whereas their relations are unequal.

At this point, we are touching on another problem: like any social relation, inequalities are associated with social representations. What are they? The previously mentioned idea of a debt toward parents cannot be separated from symbolic representations of conception. In our societies, we say that parents have given life to their children, meaning that they have created or engendered them. This way of talking, and the underlying beliefs in the parents' active, procreative role, do not seem compatible with Aboriginal ideas about the pre-existence of spirit-children at totemic sites, since parents cannot create what already exists, nor can they give life because spirit-children are endowed with a principle that, though similar to the vital force of Western traditions, differs in that it is individualized and personalized, exists before sexual intercourse, or impregnation, and has been waiting to enter women's bodies. These ideas indicate that the pre-defined cosmic order does not depend on individuals' actions; instead, these actions fit into and take on meaning within this order. This idea, as already pointed out, seems fully inscribed in the register of kinship; or, to avoid biological interpretations, in the social relations of kinship specific to Aboriginal Australia.

This can be said differently. These spirit-children, sometimes called spirit-totems, are much less children or embryos than disincarnated persons, animated and personified principles (like souls) or, to use Aristotelian terminology, potential but not yet actual living persons. They are distributed among totemic sites, each of which is associated with a unilinear (or 'local') clan. That these potential but socially defined persons pre-exist could be stated, by reversing an existentialist formula: as essence precedes existence. The so-called pre-existence of spirit-children is less an anteriority in being than existence being preceded by an idea, a category or concept as understood independently of a thinking subject. As all this has to do with the social sphere, what is being pointed out is that social essence precedes social existence, a conception very close to what is implied by a classificatory type of kinship system. The pre-existence of spirit-children parallels the pre-existence of a type of terminology that has, beforehand, defined all possible kinship relations and also all possible marriages, hence all possible alliances and all possible children. Nothing is created that is not, beforehand, inherent in the system, because this system covers both consanguinity and affinity. Real individuals can but actualize the potentialities inherent in the system. A wife can be taken only from within a definite conceptual set of women, which, depending on the case, comprises MBD, MMBDD or others; but the set has already been defined. This system does not tell up who a given man is going to marry, how many children he will have, who his father-in-law will be, etc.; but

it has defined the pattern of a society with compartments to be filled or emptied. English has an advantage in that it distinguishes between classificatory and actual kinship (whereas, in French, the latter is called 'real'); and this reminds us of Aristotle. Keeping this connotation in mind, we can say that marriage and procreation, the two main actions in kinship matters, actualize what is there as a potential, just as conception and birth actualize what is there as a potential in spirit-children.

In consequence, it seems to be vain to seek the origin of ideas about conception and spirit-children in religion as a distinct and autonomous order. It is, I think, misleading to call them religious beliefs. Instead these representations of how material substances and spiritual principles combine to form a new being and are transmitted from one being to another are specifically associated with the social relations of kinship. They are relative to a specific domain of the social sphere, but this does not prevent them from taking a religious form, particularly in societies where religion tints everything, as in Australia. Notice, however, that religious categories crop up even in our modern ideas about conception, since parents 'give' life following a divine model, for all life comes from God. Furthermore, when we say that mother and son have the 'same blood', we echo the idea that blood is a sacred principle. To qualify as 'religious' the beliefs that a society uses to think out kinship by imagining spiritual and physiological bonds means that we miss the specificity of this field of representations. It amounts to sticking a single, useless label onto a whole series of heterogeneous things. There are, in Aboriginal religions, enough problems as yet unsettled without unduly extending the concept of the 'sacred' into other domains.

However that may be, Aboriginal parents do not 'give' life; they give care or 'look after', to use the Pintupi concept emphasized by Myers (1980a:199, 202). In relation to the pre-existing, eternal, cosmic order, they ensure the transmission of what they have not created. The mother lends her womb. The father takes responsibility for the child's upbringing, especially his spiritual and moral education. As guardian of *tjurunga*, he ensures the relations between the adult-to-be and the cosmic order as well as the totemic site. The old men ensure the uninterrupted movement of generations following the eternal order; their only authority, as custodians who enforce the law, is subject to this order. They are superior because they are equal.

To come back in conclusion to the questions raised in the introduction, one can probably say that Aboriginal societies are more egalitarian than those of other hunter-gatherers. Among the !Kung or Greenland Eskimo, where game belongs to the hunter who has caught it (if only for the time it takes to distribute it), dependence is not a determinant as in Australia; the power of seniors and affines is not postulated; and the social hierarchy does not imply a gerontocracy that deprives, before any distribution, the hunter of his game, the producer of his product. But we should perhaps recognize that the difference between these societies has less to do with the size of inequalities than with the way the inequality/equality problem is raised. If a hunter owns, to a certain extent, the game he has caught, everyone is guaranteed his independence. All are equal *de jure* or in principle; but at the same time, another type of inequality may arise because some hunters are more clever or skillful, catch more game, have more to eat and to distribute, and acquire

more prestige. The equality/inequality question is never so simple that it can be settled without looking at all the forms of reciprocity and the social relations they presuppose.

We tend to think of Aboriginal societies as being egalitarian societies into which, as a result of contacts with capitalistic society, a sense of inequality was introduced along with marketable goods. But might we not see this change as being from inequality to equality? For one thing, the quantity of goods injected into Aboriginal societies was always very limited; and if such goods were distributed in compliance with the traditional social structure, they would likely have gone to older men. Whereas traditional society was founded on the privileges and authority of seniors, capitalistic society, even though we rightly judge it to be deeply inegalitarian, was presented through the egalitarian discourses of missionaries propagating Christianity (which teaches that all men are alike in the eyes of God), of human rights, and of the wage-earning relationship (wherein each worker receives and disposes of the financial counterpart of his labour). Modern Western society appears (even though this appearance is false) to be a society wherein everyone receives the fruit of his labour, since no one systematically hands his wages over to his father-in-law or anyone else. Have contacts with our civilization not undermined the seniors' authority? As pointed out, this power and the underlying relations of dependence were the very foundations of a form of game-sharing, since the hunter handed his game over to seniors from the other generation or moiety. It is not surprising that this form of game-sharing cannot be observed in present-day communities where hunters try to assert their own rights, prior to those of elders (Testart 1987:302-04).

In traditional society, every man rose in the hierarchy and became a respected, polygynous senior; and he might eventually, if he wanted to and had the ability, become a powerful, influential headman. Of course, those who never reached adulthood but died young, or those, even more numerous, who died during infancy did not have this chance. Death was the major source of inequality in a system where equality resulted because every man could climb up through the ranks. Every man did not do so, of course. The system took death into account but not its arbitrary, absurd way of striking people down. It did not take into account the contingencies that caused some to die young while sparing others for old age; this is what I understand to be the principal lesson in Martin and Reddy's article (1987). Nor were other contingencies taken into account, such as having more or fewer children, more or fewer daughters to marry off, more or fewer kin and thus more or less power, or belonging to a clan associated with more or less important symbols. All men are equal before eternity, except for contingencies; but perhaps people are more concerned about these than about eternity.

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NOTES

1. Howitt (1904:89): 'The division of the people of the tribe into two classes is the foundation from which the whole social organisation of the native tribes of Australia has been developed'.
2. Elkin, in particular, repeatedly came back to these inequalities. Even more, he pointed to a path of inquiry that, to my knowledge, has been seldom explored (except for Moizo 1983): funeral customs are clear evidence of the implicit Aboriginal hierarchy, since they are generally a function of rank and, for example, no inquest is made for young children. Elkin (1954:314-17) wrote about the 'principle of status in burial'. The inequality question has also been raised about headmen and tribal government. Howitt

(1904:295-354) a long time ago and Strehlow more recently (1970) have shown that influential tribesmen were not just ceremonial leaders. Their authority extended to the 'secular world', and their power was considerable (to the point of deciding to execute those who transgressed the Law). These leaders were always old men; the young had no voice. These remarks, though limited to politics, are incompatible with the idea of an undifferentiated, egalitarian society governed by folkways alone.

3. Rose's originality, despite his opinion about his own thought, should be emphasized. His work on Aboriginal gerontocracy seemed to him to be fully consistent with the ideas of group marriage and of a first stage of primitive communism, since we took this gerontocracy to be a stage replacing the first. Fison and Howitt (1880:354ff) reasoned in like manner about the old men's monopoly over women in order to explain why group marriages no longer existed. This is but one of the many strange turnabouts in a line of thought that obviously ran counter to the facts. Unable to find what was expected, emphasis was laid on the opposite, while what was expected was projected into a distant past. Rose's work is valuable not because it mends the Marxist and Morganian traditions but because it gives us something new to think about, something that neither of these traditions had thought out.
4. I do not think it necessary to criticize at length this so obviously false formula. Sharing does not necessarily mean equality since the sharing itself may be inequalitarian as, for instance, in Amerindian societies of the Northwest during potlatch or game-sharing.
5. Evidence from the principal sources is cited in Testart 1985:53-96 and 1987, but I would like to add Hamilton (1980:10), who has written: 'The hunter never cooks and distributes what he has caught'; and Falkenberg (1981:45-6), who clearly shows that the obligation of giving food to parents-in-law is permanent and systematic, and that the latter have rights prior to all other persons. The initiatory context should also be examined: the older man from the other moiety under whose authority the novice is placed has a prior right to the game caught by him (Rose 1968:207).
6. The opposition between private and common property does not seem relevant to Aboriginal Australia. Other differences should be emphasized, for example, the land-owning group can be said to 'own' its land (or what Stanner calls 'estate') and the clan can be said to 'hold' its own totems. However this type of 'property' brings no material advantage to the groups in question: the land can be used by other individuals who form the land-using group; and clansmen but not other persons are normally forbidden to eat the animal representing its totem. Instead of reaping advantages, the land-owning group has duties as the guardian of its land (it has to take care of it by periodically burning it over and performing ceremonies); and the clan has to perform ceremonies for the multiplication of the animals serving as its totem. In these two cases property, or ownership, implies responsibility toward things or toward others; it is more like a duty than a right (Testart 1978:148-50; 1985:85ff, 286ff). Myers' detailed analysis (1980a: 199ff) of *kanyinipa*, a Pintupi term that simultaneously means 'having', 'holding' and 'looking after', tends in the same direction as the interpretation I have tried to make on the basis of scattered information.
7. I am using Godelier's terms. Before his 1973 article, he (1970:138) clearly discussed this subject. I differ with him about both the reason kinship is dominant and the way it is linked to the economy.
8. Without necessarily accepting Durkheim's thesis that religion is, by essence, social, it should be pointed out that the force of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is to have shown that Aboriginal religion was entirely shaped by social categories and lodged within the social framework of kinship. However, this does not mean that religion reduces to kinship.
9. I do not follow Myers (1980a:205) when he tries to minimize inequalities between generations because each generation assumes responsibility for the succeeding one. To say that seniors feel, and are socially recognized to be, responsible is too broad: the lord was responsible for his serfs, and the boss of a modern company is responsible for his workers. Responsibility is the surest sign of inequality, except in the case of slaves who are not legal persons and, therefore, to whom one cannot be responsible.

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