

「法國研究學者來台訪問暨學術演講系列」

# **“Sex distinction, gender and kinship: implications of a relational perspective”**

**Dr. Cécile Barraud**

**Senior Research Fellow,  
French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS)**

*June 22, 2006, 2:30 pm*

*Institute of Ethnology/Sociology - Academia Sinica*

*Lecture organized by*

*The French Center for Research on Contemporary China - Taipei Office (CEFC),  
and the Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies (CAPAS), Research Center for  
Humanities and Social Sciences (RCHSS), Academia Sinica,  
with the support of the Institut Français de Taipei (IFT)*

-- Not to be cited or reproduced without the author's permission --

**“Sex distinction, gender and kinship: implications of a relational perspective.  
Insights from the study of Austronesian societies”**

**Dr. Cécile Barraud**

In 1988, the British social anthropologist author of the book entitled *Feminism and Anthropology*, facing the different theoretical positions within feminist anthropology, thus summarized the dominating debate : “...is sexual asymmetry universal or not? In other words, are women always subordinate to men?”

Almost twenty years later, these two questions are still a good start for my discussion of gender and sex distinction. In the above quotation, Henrietta L. Moore connects these two questions by the expression “in other words”, which means that for her these two questions are equivalent. However, from my comparative anthropological perspective this is problematic. In the present lecture, I will dissociate the two questions, and while answering the first one, propose an alternative formulation of the second one.

In my discussion, I will draw on Louis Dumont's work, a French sociologist and a social anthropologist, who died in 1998. His anthropological approach establishes a comparative perspective based on the study of hierarchy and caste in India, on the one hand, and on the rise of the notion of the individual in Western societies, on the other. In

his work, a society's ideology is understood as a set of ideas, values and representations, all considered as social facts. He thus contrasts two types of ideologies in which relations between ideas and values are different: one which characterises most Western societies where the individual as a value is dominant and one which characterises most other societies, where the values of the society as a whole encompasses the parts and the individuals as such. He summarised this contrast in the opposition between individualist and holistic societies.

Stemming from this perspective, I would like briefly to identify a few problematic points in the gender approach.

Firstly, gender studies' point of departure is the social agent, the so-called individual or morally independent subject, endowed with a substantial identity. This entails that the category "women" is considered a universal sociological category.

Secondly, the objective of most gender studies is to understand and to denounce processes of inequality and subordination and asymmetrical power relations. This imposes a universalising Western view on the different societies. However, simultaneously, these studies agree that gender is a "social construct", which can take as many different forms as there are cultures and societies. To denounce a universal fact of inequality thus imposes a unilateral view, a presupposition, upon the different cultural forms of societies. In my view, as "social construct", gender is to be considered in specific social contexts whose analysis may question the universal Western statement.

This has been underlined by many authors and led to a shift in the objects to be studied. Thereafter, the comparison bore no longer on the self-evident cultural differences, but on the notion of difference itself, with the idea that cultural difference is one among other possible forms of differences. The orientation was aimed at understanding complex modalities where differences such as gender, race, class etc. are intertwined like so many various forms of the difference.

A contradiction thus arose, insofar as feminism, a cultural and political critic aimed at political action, is identified with women as a sociological category, implying identity and similarity, a category which is questioned by the notion of difference. There cannot be difference and similarity at the same time. We are thus faced with the paradox to have to consider cultural differences on the one hand, and to consider women as a universal category on the other.

My point is that cultural differences reflect something like cultures or societies which, as systems, are sociologically meaningful, and that to deal with different systems is not equivalent to dealing with a general notion of difference, incorporating a multiplicity of differences, extracted from their particular social contexts. In that respect, the notion of difference has replaced that of gender.

The study of gender can be considered along two complementary perspectives: gender can be considered as a symbolic and social construct, that is as a concept, or as a social relationship.

However, I prefer to dissociate them and propose, through the study of kinship, to consider gender as a social relationship and to contrast the notions of difference and that of distinction.

To come back to the question of asymmetry and of the subordination of women, as stated in the two initial questions, two propositions are put forward. The first is that it is possible to discuss the difference between the sexes without considering the issue of equality and inequality. The second is that a hierarchical perspective allows to show a specificity of the difference between the sexes that cannot be reduced to one among other differences.

Indeed, the logic of equality and inequality is a logic of exclusion, in or out, yes or no. The logic put forward by a hierarchy of values, which is a hierarchy of status, is a logic of inclusion, each term of an opposition being endowed with a status as part of a superior whole to which it is related. Thus different or opposed elements are not excluded. It is in this perspective that I wish to discuss the sex distinction.

My general research context is the study of kinship terminologies, in South-East Asia and Oceania. Why terminologies? Because a terminology is a limited corpus of terms, expressing relations between relatives, and which contains meaning, a meaning which extends beyond the kinship terminology proper.

I use "meaning" here following Louis Dumont's approach, as "the respect of the other" (not only morally but also intellectually). As Dumont puts it: "the respect of the other is the respect of the social fact as endowed with meaning". The respect of the other is

not limited to the respect of individual rights, or to the dignity of the person, because the individual has not the "monopoly of the meaning". I quote: "The respect of the other goes with the respect of the values which underlie all human societies. In other words, society is not a specific part of nature, nor a sort of residue of individual designs or aims, deprived of meaning in itself. Society is meaning, domain and condition of meaning".

Accordingly, we consider a kinship terminology as a system of meaning, resting on underlying values. In the terminologies studied, we underline the importance of the brother-sister relation (opposite sex siblings or cousins relationship), and examine its implications, both on a formal level and on the level of the structure of each particular society. After, the main opposition have been analysed, a more universal notion emerges. This more global notion has implications with respect to more general issues, particularly that of permanence and temporality, as well as the understanding of the sex differentiation or of gender.

In this connection, I introduce here the notion of "sex distinction", keeping in mind that sex is as social as gender. And I will explain this choice below.

At the outset, sex distinction was not our subject of study but has become so when it appeared methodologically necessary to define it in order to analyse kinship relationships. It then appeared that there are different ways to express sex distinction. This in turn led to make hypotheses concerning its relation to the global structure of society.

We do not consider men and women as empirical subjects, because the relationship between individuals pertains to another sociological level than the one chosen here: which

is to study a society as a meaningful whole, whose elements have meaning with regard to that whole.

We aim at studying a distinction, displayed or brought into play in a relation between persons, starting from the fact that it is a relationship, and that the definition of the term or terms expressing this distinction can be found only through the analysis of this relationship in relation to the whole. On the basis of data such as the kinship structure, the ritual systems or the exchange systems in relationship to the whole, we try to understand what contains this distinction, what it expresses, finding thus clues for the understanding of the social construction of the ideas of man and woman in relation to the whole of a given society.

Beyond the biological and visible difference between men and women, it is necessary to understand for each society the exact meaning and weight of these two words, men and women, what is their position and relevance in each system, their possible place in a hierarchy of values. We have to depart from the fact that biological difference is universal, to attribute it its exact sociological meaning and relevance in each society.

As I noticed earlier, I insist on the fact that I speak of sex distinction, a distinction drawn from the study of kinship, and not of difference: in French at least, but may be also in English, their meaning is not exactly the same: difference is more widely used in contexts relating to a norm, to express the distance with regard to the norm; the word 'distinction' is more neutral in this respect.

Distinction is thus used here in two senses: first as a criterion in a classification of relationships, a sense which analytically led to use it in the second sense, as a replacement for the word difference.

I explain the first use. Social anthropologists in the past, such as Kroeber and Murdock made a list of distinctions, or criteria, to study kinship classifications, such as generation, sex, marriage or affinity, relative age, collaterality, and so on. From the point of view of kinship anthropology, sex distinction is one distinction among others, which defines a kinship term. This descriptive level does not attribute more value to one of these distinctions over the others.

A brief example of distinction. Some terminologies have one term for grand-parents (in French and in English, for instance): this term designates the father and mother of one's own parents. This unique term includes four positions: father's father, father's mother, mother's father, mother's mother. The distinction which operates here is that of *generation*. Other terminologies make a further distinction on this generational level between men and women, and class separately grand-fathers (father's father, mother's father) and grand-mothers (father's mother, mother's mother). Thus two terms for four positions. The distinction that has been added here is that of *sex*. Other terminologies would add a third distinction, that of laterality, contrasting father's side from mother's side, resulting in four terms for four positions: father's father, father's mother, mother's father, mother's mother. In this example, the combination of three distinctions, that of generation, sex and laterality, leads to the use of four terms instead of one, that of grand-parents, for that generation.

The conception of one's relation to "grand-parents" thus varies from one society to

another and the presence or absence of some distinctions is meaningful.

In a given society, sex distinction may or may not be determinant to characterise relations. The relation expressed in French or in English by the term grand-parents indicates only a genealogical distance of two generations, but the sex criterion is absent. It can be added, when distinguishing grand-father from grand-mother. In this respect, to distinguish following one or the other criterion underlines a specific information and ignores other information on this level, and, in reference to the system, manifests the sociological meaning and the value of this information. Any distinction reveals and hides certain characteristics of a system. For instance, when one term, and one term only, designates the mother's brother and the wife's father a particular type of marriage is revealed.

From this very basic example, it is reasonable to propose that there is neither a universal definition of the relation between two generations (grand-parents-grand-children) nor of the term 'grand-parents'. This statement leads to the hypothesis that, in the same manner, the sex distinction could provide information on the conception of the relation between the sexes and probably also, on the definition of man and woman in a given society.

The systemic analysis of a kinship terminology thus can shed light on sex distinction and has the advantage of coming as close as possible to the meaning of the terms and to avoid projecting the analyst's value judgements.

Issues related to semantics or to attitudes, roles etc. are left aside methodologically in

the first phase in order to examine the distinct features of the terms and how they denote classes of parents. As L. Dumont notes, "the terms are used to distinguish (that is to oppose) classes". Once classes of parents are identified, the meaning of each class is inferred from its situation in the whole, that is in relation to the whole. A kinship terminology helps to think and conceptualise indigenous categories and to take distance with our own categories, that is, it helps to think comparatively. To think or to reflect comparatively upon the sex distinction helps to understand it beyond the simple universal man-woman dichotomy.

### *Absolute sex, undifferentiated sex, relative sex*

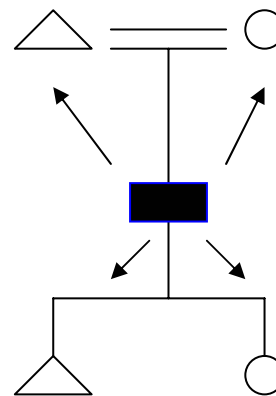
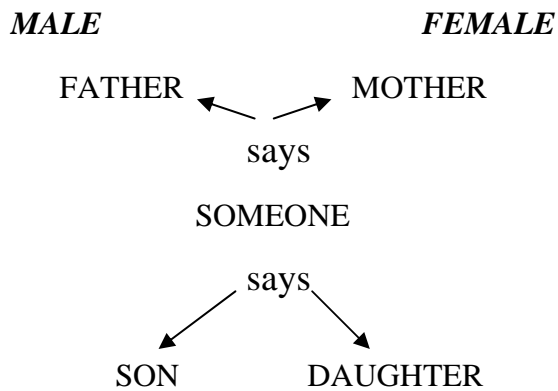
I wish now to introduce first the notion of relative sex and then its implications for the analysis of the man-woman relation.

As a criterion of classification of kinship terms, sex distinction can take different forms. It can specify the male or female sex of the parent or not specify it. It answers the following question: what information on the sex of the person concerned is given by the term?

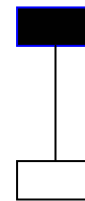
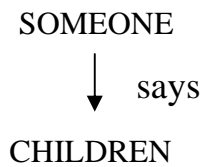
In kinship terminologies, sex distinction manifests itself along three possible modalities, according to which a kinship term can be described as absolute sex, or undifferentiated sex or relative sex.

An absolute sex term specifies the sex of the parent. The word "father" for instance in English is such a term, it describes a male parent, and "mother" describes a female parent. The sex is inherent to the meaning of the word.

**ABSOLUTE SEX**



**UNDIFFERENTIATED SEX**

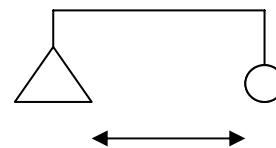


*MALE AND FEMALE*

**RELATIVE SEX**

A MAN AND A WOMAN  
call each other reciprocally  
BY THE TERM **Z**

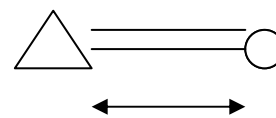
**BROTHER AND SISTER**



**Z**

A MAN AND A WOMAN  
call each other reciprocally  
BY THE TERM **S**

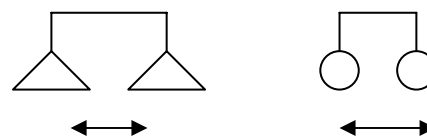
**HUSBAND AND WIFE**



**S**

TWO BROTHERS CALL EACH OTHER **X**

TWO SISTERS CALL EACH OTHER **X**



**X**

**X**

An undifferentiated sex term does not specify the sex of the parent, who can be either male or female: the word "child" is such a term. No information on the sex is available in the term itself.

The third modality, a relative sex term, is more complex. It describes with only one term a reciprocal relation between two persons, who call one another reciprocally by the same term. It can concern same sex or opposite sex kin.

In the first case, same sex, a term, X, is used by a man reciprocally and exclusively to call his brother; and the same term X is used by a woman as much exclusively and reciprocally to call her sister. For a man, it means brother, for a woman it means sister; two sisters call one another X, two brothers use the same term X to call one another.

In the second case, opposite sex, a term, Z for instance, is used by a man to call a woman and the same term Z is used by a woman to call a man. The uses are exclusive and reciprocal. The most common examples are a unique term used for brother and sister, or a unique term used for husband-wife. A man calls his sister Z, the sister calls her brother Z. A husband calls his wife S, a wife calls her husband S.

In the first case, same sex, two same sex persons, either male or female, use one and the same term X to call each other; in the second case, two persons of opposite sex use the same term Z or S to call each other. In other words, relative sex terms have the characteristic to designate both sexes, either two male or two female persons, or two persons, male and female. In both cases, same sex and opposite sex, the terms signify sex distinction (both sexes being signified by their differentiation) without specifying readily the sex of the designated person. The term X, same sex, neither characterises male sex nor

female sex, does not say "man" or "woman", it characterises a type of relation, a relation between two brothers or two sisters and signifies relationally that two persons are of the same sex, that contrasts implicitly with the other sex. In the second case, the term Z (or S), opposite sex, does not say "man" or "woman", it characterises a type of relation, a relation between a brother and a sister or a husband and a wife. It signifies relationally that two persons are of opposite sex, without specifying the sex, only the relation. Hence it is difficult to translate it.

This case is called relative sex because the sex of the designated person is known in relation or by reference to that of the other relative. Specification of the sex is not in the term itself, but in order to know if X or Z is a man or a woman, one has to know the sex of the person who uses the term.

Otherwise, the information given generally by the term X is: the two related persons are of the same sex, in the first case and the two related persons are of opposite sex, in the second case. The term does not identify persons, but a type of *relation*: in the same sex case, it can be two men or two women, in the opposite sex case, by definition, the two persons are of opposite sex. This is crucial: both sexes in relation are distinguished by means of one term only: the sexes are signified, but not attributed to one or the other person.

### ***Relative sex distinction has specific properties***

Relative sex terms X and Z are neither masculine nor feminine (unlike the English "brother" and "sister"), they are not gendered. In contrast with terms such as man or

woman, or father or mother (absolute sex), they designate at once both men and women, at once expressing a relation and the sex of each term of the relation. A relative sex term thus has a very specific position in a system of relations on the one hand because it informs on the sex distinction itself (either same sex, or opposite sex, by means of a unique term), and on the other, because it informs about the sex of the designated person when the sex of the referent person is known (it means that the information is inferred by the relation itself).

From an analytical point of view, a relative sex term contrasts with an undifferentiated sex term in that, it informs both about the sex of the designated person *and* that of the speaker without specifying which sex is concerned : they are of same sex, or of opposite sex. Thus, a relative sex term expresses immediately sex distinction in its very definition.

This shows that a relative sex term is first and above all relational. It is a remarkable sociological fact: it does not express the sexes independently from one another, but at once their reciprocal relationship, same sex or opposite sex, by means of a unique term, and thus expresses in one word all the possible realisations of the opposition between male and female. A relative sex term expresses first the relation, and secondarily the sexes of the concerned persons, two social agents. It expresses an opposition by means of one term.

Let us note that the grammatical gender of the term and the specific sex of the person are not at stake, but rather the very nature of the relation itself: same sex or opposite sex. Expressing sex distinction is not equivalent to expressing a grammatical gender. The latter concerns an isolated term, while sex distinction expresses itself *as a relation*. To distinguish sex amounts here not to oppose but to link up (uniting) the two sexes.

Consequently, relative sex distinction compels to conceive of something which is seldom expressed in French or English, namely, the definition of a person by his/her relation to another person and by sex distinction, with no further distinction of position or of role. Western languages usually do the reverse. Terms of relative sex thus move us away from both biological (man-woman) and analytical (kinship/gender) dichotomies, without positing a particular subject. They deal with a social relation under its reciprocal form.

On a formal level, this distinction, or better, this reciprocal relation between the sexes, expressed by one term only and not by two, as is usual when dealing with oppositions, leads to propose that a unique term can express first a relation and at the same time both relatives: a distinction can be expressed by means of a unique term while keeping its capacity to distinguish. One can hardly imagine of a unique term expressing the relationship between day and night or right and left. However, in kinship studies, the phenomenon of a unique term is well known and signals a 'self-reciprocal relationship'. I will return to that notion later. In all cases, relation comes first and determines the concerned person's status both in the kinship system and in society.

On the level of relation between sexes, beyond the fact that relative sex term incorporates sex distinction without expressing it in words, it demonstrates clearly that sex distinction has to be thought of primarily as a relation that takes precedence over one and the other sex terms. Terms of this type that organise kinship terminologies are significant of the way a society constructs sex distinction. Moreover, empirical subjects are determined primarily by their sex as spouse, brother, sister and so on, and not readily as

man or woman, (an identity). Their relation to the system is in each case different. To be a man or a woman therefore only has meaning in relation to a specific system and not in general, as if a collection of men and women did constitute a society.

On a more general level, and even apart from the condensed relation expressed by relative sex, sex distinction as it is induced by the analysis of kinship relations, expresses first a social relation, all the more difficult to conceptualise that, (as the oppositions between day and night and life and death), if detached from its social and relational context, it includes a universal dimension. We know it but have difficulties in conceptualising the fact. When parents speak about their "baby", the child's sex is not relevant at that particular moment. The significance of "baby" is different from that of "my boy" or "my girl". A human being is not then specified by one or the other sex, or his or her sex is not taken into account, from one specific point of view, that of the relations of the parents to the child. The grammatical gender of the word 'child' or 'baby' (masculine gender in French) relates the child not to male sex but to human kind and to a phase of human life cycle. This is what we want to insist upon: a terminology expresses a relational point of view not concerned with identity. An approach of sex distinction as an expression of kinship relations sheds light on its definition as a relation.

To summarise the definition of the three modalities: absolute sex term specifies the sex of the designated person, (and usually does not inform about the sex of the speaker), undifferentiated sex term gives no specification of the sex of the designated person, (nor usually about the sex of the referent), relative sex does not specify the sex of the

designated person, but specifies at once a reciprocal relation between two persons and the fact that they are either of same sex or of opposite sex.

These three modalities express different points of view useful to understand sex distinction in relation to kinship but also to the whole of society. Taking into account the specific combination of these three modalities is necessary in a system, in association with the other distinctions. The meaning of a kinship terminology is to be this objective "social construct" of kinship relationships in a given society and hence of social relations.

Relative sex distinction has some remarkable recurrent features associated with its central position in a system, the main one being that it has a grasp on temporality. Although, it relates people of the same generation (brother-sister, husband-wife) and although it is exclusive, self-reciprocal and symmetrical, it also develops a dissymmetry beyond this level.

A few such examples are when sister's children are classified differently from brother's children, when a mother's brother is classified differently from other uncles, when a woman's affines or in-law relatives are different from a man's affines or in-law relatives. This indicates that sex distinction, although pertaining to a generation, spills over other generations, ascending or descending, thus orienting the time conception of the society

The close implication of kinship terminologies on the time representation of a society is clear. In the way, they organise generations' succession since the origin, they are a projection on past and future. They express the relation to the ancestors, to the dead and the

way a group conceives of its permanence (this is self evident in kinship systems defined by descent). In the mainly Austronesian examples studied, brother-sister relation is the axis around which the structural time of society unfolds. And in relation to time, sex distinction becomes asymmetrical.

There is no time here to develop this point, but just to stress the sociological dimension of this construction. When analysing the relations that structure a society, we cannot define men and women as general categories. In the same manner, we cannot envisage temporality as something physical, a context, and external to social relations. What I remark here is on the contrary that social temporality is inscribed in the very expression of kinship relations, and of social relations in general, under the form of a sex distinction. Temporality enhances the social dimension of this distinction.

These facts about relative sex, dissymmetry and temporality, drawn from the analysis of terminologies, lead to conceptualise sex distinction firstly on a more abstract level and secondly on a more social level. At this point hierarchy has to be introduced.

### ***Asymmetry and subordinated value position***

I mentioned earlier the self-reciprocity of kinship terms. Alongside the relative sex example, brother-sister, or husband-wife, there are other cases, such as grand-parents-grand-children or brothers-in-law, just to mention two cases. In each case, a unique term is used to designate both relatives. Formally, self-reciprocity includes a sort of symmetry whose axis is the determining distinction, but different in each case. In the case of grand-

parents-grand-children, the axis of symmetry is the central generation; in the relation between two brothers in law, a symmetry exists with regard to a marriage. In contrast, the relation between two brothers expressed by a self-reciprocal term is symmetrical with regard to sex distinction, so to say by default, because the sexes are the same, and there is no distinction. A sort of sex distinction inverted, in negative. In all these cases, the formal symmetry expressed by self-reciprocal terms leads to an equivalence of status of the two positions of the relation.

The relation between a brother and a sister (opposite relative sex) has the same formal symmetrical character with regard to sex distinction, but is also, by definition, the full expression of the distinction. The self-reciprocal term makes reference to a principle that is not enunciated, which is both inherent to the relation and operating a distinction between its terms, it is the principle of differentiation between the sexes itself. One has thus to admit, following Louis Dumont, that these relations are ordered in a logical set in which the principle of distinction takes part in the definition of the terms while being outside of them because it orders them. Louis Dumont often referred to the opposition between the right and the left hand to illustrate this hierarchical opposition. The right-left pair cannot be defined in itself, but only in relation to a whole, that of the human body. The reference to the body as a whole is "constitutive of the right hand, of the left hand and of their distinction". Right hand and left hand are not in the same relation to the whole of the body, they have so to say "a right relation and a left relation and are different in themselves"; thus they do not have the same status, in relation to the body; they are not equivalent, there is a dissymmetry.

As the right-left opposition with regard to the whole of the body, in sex distinction each term does not have the same position in relation to the whole. Man-woman distinction is ordered by the principle of sex distinction. This is a hierarchical relation, in which the terms cannot be understood apart from the reference to the whole to which they pertain, the whole being represented here by the principle of distinction itself.

However there is a difference between right and left and sex distinction because the latter expresses straight away the whole of sex distinction in its principle. Beyond a very formal symmetry in the use of the terms, the relation to the whole of sex distinction implies a dissymmetry due to sex. On a conceptual level, the relation between the two sexes can be formulated only in the relationship to a superior principle, the principle of distinction itself. On the superior level, there is a principle of distinction, on the subordinated level, there is a relation between the two sexes of which each has a different status in relation to the distinction that represents the whole, like the right and left hand in relation to the whole of the body.

Following Louis Dumont, if one considers that facts are not only facts but also inseparably ideas and values, one has to propose with him that the terms of an opposition do not have the same value in relation to the whole, *whatever* the value attributed to each of them. Dissymmetry does not ascribe a value a priori to one or to the other term, it implies only that their value being different, they are hierarchised. In that sense, sex distinction is hierarchical, like the right-left opposition. This self-reciprocal relation has a symmetrical formal appearance and a dissymmetrical social quality in value.

This distinction, which is at the same time an "idea-value", neither has anything to do with what is preferable or desirable, nor with equality or inequality. To say that both hands are equal is absurd. The same holds for sex distinction. Equality does not classify, nor does inequality.

To explain this statement, I will freely quote Vincent Descombes, a French philosopher who studied Dumont's theory. He shows that standard philosophy of value, which is certainly a creed of individualism, is to be questioned. To explain the concept of value, the philosopher usually refers to individual value judgements. To determine individual values, individuals are to manifest their preference, in a vote, for instance, or in consumption. In these situations, the notion of hierarchy is useless. When choosing between A and B, if B is not chosen it matters little that it is because it has no value at all or because it has less value than A. To consider values as reflecting "preferences" imposes to interpret the evaluation act in terms of "take it or leave it". A is included, while B is excluded.

Thus, in standard philosophy, what is preferred *excludes* what is not, depriving it of all value: either things are equal and of the same value, or they are not equal, and it is then impossible to attribute them a value, hence a meaning in relation to an order. This is why rejected values are excluded from meaning.

We should be aware however that it is not possible to speak of values in this way. Hierarchy is of course an order between values (and not an order between things classified in accordance to their value, as if only one method of evaluation existed, only one value).

One speaks also of scale of values, which implicitly expresses degrees. Therefore, one can speak of hierarchy of values only between superior values and inferior values: the inferior degrees must also be attributed a value. In the representation that a society has of itself, it must be possible to differentiate between the inclusion in an order of what is worth pertaining to a world of meaning, and the exclusion outside the realm of value.

Hierarchical order logic *includes* things in a relationship between the superior value and the subordinated value, which is inclusion in a world of meaning.

As Descombes says: "In other words, from the point of view of a logic of evaluation, it is not possible to include various elements in the value order without hierarchisation, and it is not possible to equal these elements without excluding completely those which cannot become equal from the order of value".

In this regard, sex distinction in its specificity can be considered as an institution of meaning

In kinship relations, some distinctions impose an order or suppose a pre-established order corresponding to a set of representations which has meaning. The criterion of the succession of generations for instance supposes that a generation (n+) follows the preceding one. The relative age criterion supposes also a successive order of birth. On the contrary, sex distinction expresses no presupposed order a priori. There is thus, by definition, an absolute difference between these various distinctions. The only order that can be recognised in the sex distinction is that of the distinction itself. With this feature, it imposes as different from all other distinctions. It thus requires a different treatment, as we

have shown, and cannot be assimilated to the other kinship distinctions and even less to other differences.

To come back to the criteria proposed by Kroeber and Murdock: if the list of criteria, which have a descriptive purpose, does not attribute more value to one of the distinctions over the others, as I said at the beginning, analysis finally shows that they do not have the same sociological meaning. The analysis of relative sex terms and of the relationship that they bring into play leads from the specific question of kinship terminologies to the more conceptual one of the relation between sexes.

With no reference to an order outside its own order, sex distinction thus reflects a social order, an efficacy and a meaning, that of a hierarchisation of values that is necessarily dissymmetrical. This can be understood through the example of the relative sex relation, the eponym sex distinction relation. In this regard, relative sex distinction is bidimensionnal, like all hierarchies of values. On the superior level, it manifests the relation; on the subordinated one, it manifests the hierarchised value positions of both parents in the relationship.

To come back to Henrietta Moore's two questions referred to in the beginning, one can answer now: yes, sexual asymmetry is universal; but not the subordination of women. We speak indeed of subordination *in value*, which is different from equality or domination, and does not impose a universal model; each particular social order of values attributes a specific status to men and women with regard to these values.

## Sources

- Alès C. et C. Barraud (éds.), 2001 *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu? De la distinction de sexe dans les sociétés*, Paris, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme.
- Barraud, C. 2001 " La distinction de sexe dans les sociétés. Un point de vue relationnel", *Esprit*, mars-avril: 105-129.
- 2001 " De la distinction de sexe dans les sociétés: une présentation ", in C. Alès et C. Barraud (éds.), *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu? De la distinction de sexe dans les sociétés*, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme: 23-99.
- Barnard A. and A. Good (eds.), *Research Practices in the Study of Kinship*, London, Academic Press (ASA Research Methods in Social Anthropology 2), 1984.
- Broch-Due, V., I. Rudie and T. Bleie (eds.), *Carved Flesh/Cast Selves. Gendered Symbols and Social Practices*, Oxford/Providence, Berg, 199
- Coppet, D. de 2001 "De la dualité des sexes à leur dissymétrie", in C. Alès et C. Barraud (éds.), *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu? De la distinction de sexe dans les sociétés*, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme: 373-414
- Descombes, Vincent "Louis Dumont ou les outils de la tolérance", *Esprit*, juin 1999
- Dumont, L. *Introduction à deux théories d'anthropologie sociale*. Edition de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris-La Haye, Mouton, 1971 (Nlle édition, Coll. TEL, Paris, Gallimard, 1997).
- Dravidien et Kariéra. L'alliance de mariage dans l'Inde du Sud et en Australie*, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris-La Haye, Mouton, 1975
- *Homo aequalis. Genèse et épanouissement de l'idéologie économique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977
- *Homo hierarchicus*, Paris, Gallimard, 2è éd., coll. "Tel", 1979
- *Essais sur l'individualisme*, Paris, Le Seuil, coll. "Esprit", 1983
- Héritier, F. *L'exercice de la parenté*, Paris, Gallimard-Le Seuil, Hautes Etudes, 1981
- *Masculin/Féminin. La pensée de la différence*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1996
- Iteanu, A. 2001 "Hommes et femmes dans le temps chez les Orokaiva", in C. Alès et C. Barraud (éds.), *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu? De la distinction de sexe dans les sociétés*, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme: 325-356
- Karim W. J. (ed.), *'Male' and 'Female' in Developing Southeast Asia*, Oxford/Washington D.C., USA, Berg Publishers, 1995.
- Moore Henrietta L., *Feminism and Anthropology*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988
- "Whatever Happened to Women and men? Gender and other Crisis in Anthropology", in H. L. Moore (ed.), *Anthropological Theory Today*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999.
- Ortner S. B. and H. Whitehead (eds.), *Sexual Meanings. The cultural construction of gender and sexuality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981
- Stolcke, V. "Is sex to gender as race is to ethnicity?", in Teresa del Valle (ed.), *Gendered Anthropology*, London and New York, Routledge, E.A.S.A., 1993
- Strathern M. (ed.), *Dealing with inequality. Analysing gender relations in Melanesia and beyond*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Weiner, A. *Women of Value, Men of Renown*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1976.
- Yanagisako S. J. & J. F. Collier, "Toward a Unified Analysis of Gender and Kinship", in J. F. Collier and S. J. Yanagisako (eds.), *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1987