



# Review of L'Imaginé, l'imaginaire & le symbolique, by Maurice Godelier

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Maurice Godelier has become one of the major anthropologists of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> and of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Often too quickly categorised as a Marxist anthropologist, his research and publications have in fact with perseverance investigated the complex relationship between the material conditions of existence, the social relationships that organise access to and control of these resources, and the imaginary rationales (and symbolic bodies) that articulate and legitimise these relationships. From *La production des Grands Hommes* (1982), his major ethnographic monograph on the Baruya of Papua New-Guinea, to *L'idéal et le matériel* (1984) where his conclusions are formulated into much wider applicable theoretical suggestions, or *L'énigme du don* (1996), *Métamorphoses de la parenté* (2004), *Au fondement des sociétés humaines* (2007), and *Lévi-Strauss* (2013), to quote just a few, Godelier has gradually evolved in the ways he articulates the relationship between the fundamental triad mentioned above. To make a long story short, while in earlier works he suggested that kinship and gender relationships are fundamental in the ways in which societies organise their access to resources and define the ways in which they conceive themselves as an entity of belonging, in his latest contributions he gradually moved the perspective to an upper level considering that it is the articulation of power relationships with belief systems within the political-religious domain that are universally at the core of social reality and cultural diversity, as well as of their historical evolution. Through this trajectory, Godelier has also used, coined or redefined notions that have become part of his theoretical toolbox in the analysis of these political-religious systems.

His latest volume, *L'imaginé, l'imaginaire et le symbolique*, the one under consideration in this review, is a much awaited discussion of this general theoretical framework and of the concepts Godelier has been developing over the years. The imagined, the imaginary and the symbolic are not the only notions that are discussed in this book, however. Belief, the real, unreal and surreal (or over-real), the relationship between consciousness, language and thought, or the difficult to translate notion of the *idéal* are among the concepts Godelier investigates in this volume. Godelier defines the *idéal* (not to be confused with the 'ideal' or 'ideology') as the assembly or totality of socially shared representations about the nature and the origins of a social institution (30). Far from the usual philosophical approach, the meaning of and the relationships between these concepts are not tackled in terms of abstract or 'rational/rhetoric' discussions, but are considered in the light of ethnographic material stemming from an impressive amount of anthropological and historical sources. His ambition is indeed to consider and discuss the nature of these concepts (and the relationships these concepts produce) as they have evolved in time and space in various cultures, to suggest more generally applicable conclusions about human societies and their evolutions.

Written throughout in a clear and accessible language, the volume is divided into a foreword and an introduction, eight chapters and a conclusion. At a closer look, the reader quickly realises that the volume is in fact divided into two major parts. The first combines chapters 1 to 7 and sets the stage, explains and illustrates the approach and the notions used, as well as clarifying some of the former misinterpretations. The second part, consisting of chapter 8, in itself as long as all the other chapters combined, gets at the core of the theoretical problems addressed. This last chapter, 'From the Unreal to the Over-real' (or 'surreal') is where the author explains why and how social structure is fundamentally the product of the relationship between the political and the religious. However, not all of what humans do and imagine becomes part of this religious-political domain. The book attempts to illustrate what falls under the latter category and under which conditions it does so. In a sense, this work reopens the question of the distinction between the sacred and the profane, and wants to situate the former within mechanisms of individual thought and social belonging.

This central question is announced in the very first page of the foreword. 'All that is imagined is not imaginary', Godelier writes, confronting us with the question: how and why, in certain particular contexts, does human thought produce imagination that is imaginary (i.e. can become part of the religious domain) and in others not? 'The answer to this fundamental

question’, he continues a few pages later, ‘is that there are different kinds of imaginary that need be distinguished with respect to their relationship with the real’. The author thus interrogates the notion of the ‘real’ only to conclude that, in the religious domain, which is itself built upon imaginary resources, belief and power are not experienced by people as being imaginary, but as being an over-reality (11) and providing a sense of truth to the symbolic realm.

The first chapters deploy this general suggestion and build up the conceptual framework necessary for the second part (Chapter 8) of the book. Chapter 1 recalls how social relationships have a double-presence, one between individuals and one embodied in each individual, and that it is this double-presence that needs to be taken into account in the analysis of social reality. The embodiment of social relationships in each individual is at the core of consciousness and thought (Chapter 2). Individual consciousness of the social and the embodiment of sociality within each individual are at the core of intentionality, that which crystallises the objects of thought as being real. This intentionality of thought, as well as the social relationships that exist outside the individual must be expressed through language, which is itself a cultural coding (symbols) of mental representations (Chapter 3). This leads the author to interrogate the symbolic function (Chapter 4): the capacity to produce signs that have meaning, and are therefore signifiers, testified by the importance of metaphor and metonymy in human communication: churches, mathematical formulae, the meaning given to the Sun or the Moon in particular societies etc. Because of the embodiment of sociality and because of the intentionality of human thought, hence producing the objects of the real, the distinction between symbols that are human-made and those that are not is deciduous. After these initial and general introductory sections, Chapter 5 engages in preparation for the second part of the volume: the relationship between imagination and the imaginary (or how some imagination becomes imaginary). The imaginary, Godelier concludes, is unrealisable but nevertheless true imagination: the bodies of belief that constitute religion or mythology. He further details these definitions and distinctions through the examples of playing games (Chapter 6) and art (Chapter 7).

The second part of the book starts and ends with Chapter 8 entitled ‘From the Unreal to the Over-real, or from the Imaginary of Religions to Regimes of Power’. To overcome the problems tackled in the first part, that is, to understand how some imagination becomes imaginary, we need to analyse how humans collectively find answers to two pragmatic but

fundamental problems, Godelier advances. The first problem is how to identify and define the personality and character of those beings that are placed in the over-real: divinities, mythical beings, etc. The second problem addresses the discovery and deployment of means of communication with these beings. After a discussion of some of the assumptions of Lévi-Strauss on a similar problem, Godelier underlines that the real, the symbol and the imaginary are distinct but inseparable aspects of mythology (and of belief systems more generally), because, in contrast to other and profane aspects of social reality, the nature of symbols in the religious domain are in societies believed to have been altered by non-human beings.

In a sense, this general conclusion has become the definition of religion itself in Godelier's book: symbols of which the meaning is thought to have been provided by other entities than humans. It is the human control of these particular symbols that provides power and that intermingles the religious domain with political regimes. Here he departs from former hypotheses, which assumed that the historical processes of the emergence of Kings and States was produced by the exertion of violence. Godelier suggests that these evolutions, the fabrics of social history, are based on a shared belief in human symbols with non-human meanings, as well as on the processes that engender the legitimacy of the powerful to control these symbols. Interestingly, he also returns here to some of his much earlier conclusions, but has in this book provided a more encompassing and comprehensive body of knowledge and analysis: domination is only possible if people allow themselves to be dominated. In this work, Godelier wants to demonstrate how and why people accept domination.

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