

The Quest for Wealth

A formal criterion for the classification of human societies

Abstract :

In the perspective of forging a general classification of human societies, and contrary to the classical approach that favours political criteria, the French anthropologist Alain Testart focused on the emergence of wealth. This, according to him, was characterised by the presence of matrimonial (bride price) and judicial (wergeld) payments. Such a solution, however, appears too restrictive and leads to certain insoluble contradictions. By taking up the path opened by this scholar, while correcting his few errors, this article proposes an alternative definition of wealth, which offers an irreplaceable tool for a classification of societies. Wealth refers to a specific subset of property rights, which relate to objects other than human beings. Two forms of wealth must then be distinguished, depending on whether these rights are convertible into rights of the same type, or into other elements of the social system.

Keywords

Social evolution, Wealth, Economic anthropology, Property rights, Social classes, Alain Testart.

Introduction

Social anthropology has long faced a paradox: even though it conceives of itself as the science of societies – of all societies, in the broadest comparative perspective – it has never been able to elaborate a general classification of its object. More precisely, it has developed several, none of which has achieved consensus. The first attempts, which generally distinguished three major groups, were based on a criterion combining the mode of subsistence with the social structures: this was the case for the tripartition savagery – barbarism – civilisation (Ferguson [1767] 2000; Morgan 1877), which Gordon Childe revisited in the twentieth century with his concepts of the “Neolithic” and “urban” revolutions (Childe 1936). Even today, prehistorians and anthropologists continue to speak, often for ease of use and for lack of a more appropriate vocabulary, of “hunter-gatherer societies”, although it has been noted many times that this term can encompass the most diverse and least specific social forms (Testart 1981; 1982; Arcand 1988).

While avoiding the criterion of mode of subsistence, the classification put forward by the neo-evolutionist school of thought is not exempt from criticism either. The principles that lead to the identification of “bands”, “tribes”, “chiefdoms” and “states” are rarely spelled out in detail, and mix considerations of political structure with a simple size approach, as if the two necessarily went together (Service 1962; Johnson and Earle 2000). It is not unreasonable to think that the success of this classification is due not to its precision, but on the contrary to its vagueness, as prehistorians find it an appealing way of categorising material evidence that is often not very eloquent. Moreover, there have been numerous attempts to modify it, either to add categories by distinguishing, for example, between “simple” and “complex” chiefdoms (Earle 1978; Anderson 1994; Carneiro 1981) or, on the contrary, to remove some, by merging tribes and chiefdoms into so-called “trans-egalitarian” (Hayden 1995; 2001) or “middle-range” societies (Rousseau 2001; Spielmann 2008; Duffy 2015). In any case, in the absence of precise criteria related to social structure, this approach often gives the feeling of being able to carve out an arbitrary number of categories, in the same way as one can see any number of colours in the rainbow.

However, another entry point is possible: that of the economy – assuming that by this is meant not material culture or the mode of subsistence, but the social relationships that are built around the production, consumption and transfer of goods. However, it has rarely been the focus of attention. Just as Marshall Sahlins’ try (Sahlins 1965), from which he himself drew few clear conclusions, it can be said that the economic dimensions have often been addressed by anthropology, but rarely considered as essential. A partial exception is the New Guinean case: several works have emphasised the importance of the demarcation between societies in which social relations were woven in a direct manner, the demands being made in the form of services or work, and those marked by the large-scale manipulation of material goods that became the obliged intermediaries and the centre of the social game (Godelier [1978] 2006; 1990; Lemonnier 1990). More than anyone else, it was Alain Testart who attached central importance to this

observation and made it the main criterion of his general classification of societies (Testart 2005) – an attempt which, unfortunately, did not receive the echo it deserved. Convinced of its fruitfulness, the following article returns to the hypotheses put forward by Alain Testart, pointing out their shortcomings and blind spots. By following this approach, and provided that the necessary corrections are made, we will show that it is possible to put forward a set of definitions that allow us to satisfactorily grasp the most fundamental demarcation that is to be found in the social world: that related to the action of wealth.

1. Alain Testart's three "worlds"

1.1 The definition of wealth...

The classification developed by A. Testart divides societies into three sets – three "worlds" – designated, for want of a suitable vocabulary, by the numbers I, II and III. If the break between World I and World II is linked to the emergence of wealth, that between World II and World III corresponds to the formation of social classes. These are supposed to result from the emergence of a particular type of land ownership, the so-called "funduary" property, where the owner's rights over the land are retained, whether the land is worked or not, and which thus paves the way for land rent. Such a definition of social classes certainly raises several difficulties; we will leave them aside here, to concentrate on the other delimitation, which therefore concerns wealth. By the way, A. Testart himself suggested that it was this transition between World I and World II that represented the most important bifurcation in the course of the evolution of human societies; the three social "worlds" could legitimately be grouped into two wider sets: the first, corresponding to World I, was that of societies "without wealth" (or "achrematic") societies; as for the second, it encompassed Worlds II and III, with class societies logically perceived as a subdivision of wealth societies.

How, then, can we formulate the criterion of demarcation between World I and Worlds II-III? According to A. Testart, one of the major difficulties is that incipient wealth does not have the same overall uses as it has in a society where it is omnipresent. In particular, in a capitalism marked both by a strong division of labour and by the commodification of products and labour power, wealth serves above all to acquire the means to live. But wealth emerges in societies where the division of labour is weak and where individuals have rightful access to the means of production. Consequently, it does not serve, or only marginally, to acquire goods to ensure one's daily life. Contrary to a long anthropological tradition according to which, in such societies, wealth – in particular, in the form of "prestige goods" – served no purpose other than to display a certain social pre-eminence, A. Testart argued that its role was to be employed in "payments of social obligations imposed by law or custom, and quite mandatory and binding" (Testart 2005, 30). These payments fell into three main categories:

1. Matrimonial payments, starting with the transfer known as the "bride price".
2. The possibility of extinguishing a revenge through material compensation - the "blood price" (wergeld) of Germanic law.

3. Fines or compensation for offences, whether private or public.

Somewhat curiously, only the first two points were retained in the final definition: “We shall call (...) ‘World II’ the one who practises bride price (and wergeld) without experiencing the fundiary type of property” (Testart 2005, 31).

1.2 ...and its problems

While this definition represents a considerable achievement, it raises several problems.

The first concerns the status of the exchange of goods that every human society, no matter how rudimentary its technical level, engages in to one degree or another with outside groups. In the absence of matrimonial and judicial payments, a society that only experiences these exchanges is classified in World I. But it is quite problematic to speak of a society without wealth when it possesses what is today the most banal and visible function of wealth! A. Testart tried to solve this difficulty by conceding that World I was not indeed devoid of any form of wealth, but that this wealth was not “socially useful” (Testart 2005, 31). However, this solution is unsatisfactory, and not only because of the confusion it introduces in terminology. Specifying that World I is not exactly “without wealth” but “without socially useful wealth” would certainly be a first step, but it would only postpone the real solution of the problem: why does the exchange mechanism that has become, in contemporary societies, the primary means of action of wealth not exert any significant influence on social relations in World I?

This paradox is mirrored by the opposite one, which reveals another flaw in the approach proposed by Alain Testart. One can indeed expect a definition of wealth to apply to World III societies, structured in classes – these societies being precisely those where wealth has produced its full impact, by dividing them into groups with antagonistic economic interests. Yet the criterion of judicial and matrimonial payments concerns them, at best, only marginally: matrimonial payments tend to be extinguished in many modern societies, and the wergeld has long been eliminated by the State monopoly on justice. In other words, it is particularly problematic that capitalism, the human society characterised by an “immense accumulation of commodities” (Marx [1867] 1982, 1:43), where social relations are, more than in any other, determined by the action of property ownership, largely escapes the proposed definition of a wealth society.

The same is true of another social relationship, commonplace in pre-state societies and intimately linked to economic exploitation and its rise: slavery. There is no doubt, for A. Testart, that slavery constitutes a manifestation of wealth, both because slaves can be bought and sold and because, deprived of legal personality, they are “goods”, part of their owners’ patrimony, in the same way as domestic animals or material objects. Slavery, writes A. Testart, “does not exist in World I, [which is] a predictable and almost trivial result: the slave, [] could not exist in societies without wealth”. (Testart 2005, 43, emphasis added). However, since slavery does not enter into the definition of World II proposed by the author – nor into his definition of World III – the fact that slavery is indeed absent from World I is by no means self-evident: there is, at most, a correlation that the reasoning should account for. In fact, in a few rare but well-documented cases, this correlation is in fact disregarded: for example, among the

Yukaghir of the north, known as the “Kolyma” (Jochelson 1920), or among the Yuqui of Amazonia (Jabin 2016).

Finally, and this is perhaps the point that sheds the brightest light on the difficulties to which the criterion proposed by A. Testart leads, some societies, in one way or another, challenge his classification. Apart from various Siberian cases, whose interpretation and scope have recently fuelled an abundant debate (Stépanoff 2018; 2020; Guy 2020; Hadad 2020; Darmangeat 2018a; 2020b), the most striking example is probably that of the Tareumiut, the Inuit of northern Alaska. Among this people, rich individuals, the *umialit*, were dominant in social life. Owners of whaling boats, masters of commercial circuits, and holders of food stocks, they recruited the hunting crews, ensuring that their relatives and those who joined them would have enough to get through the lean season. They were also the ones who presided over ostentatious celebrations, some of which resembled the potlatches of the North West Coast. Should the fact that the Tareumiut ignored any form of matrimonial or judicial payment link them to the world of “societies without wealth”, disregarding their social reality? We will argue here for the other way, which consists in reformulating the definitions in order to achieve a more satisfactory classification.

Before coming to a new proposal, I must add that in a previous work, I had sought the solution on the side of the consequences of wealth, by writing that “A society is said to be with wealth (and therefore belongs to Worlds II or III) when its possession in quantity results in a dominant social position, *de jure* or *de facto*, and that symmetrically, when lacking it leads to a situation of dependence, *de jure* or *de facto*”. (Darmangeat 2020b). I reject this solution today, for two reasons. The first, of method, is that it is neither satisfactory nor coherent to define a phenomenon of an economic nature through its political effects. Such an option appears to be a workaround for a difficulty that could not be resolved. The second reason is that, on a more empirical level, this solution is hardly more acceptable. Any society in which there are dominations stemming from wealth is certainly a wealth society – but this assertion is obviously nothing more than a tautology. The problem is that, in the opposite direction, we can observe societies where certain social occasions give rise to payments in goods, but which have multiplied the mechanisms preventing these customs from provoking a differentiation between individuals and the emergence, on this basis, of relations of domination and power: one can think, in particular, of the Pueblo Indians and, perhaps, of those of the eastern coast of North America to which Rémi Hadad refers (Hadad 2020). Finally, I ended up with a symmetrical error to that of A. Testart: where his definition excludes from the world of wealth those societies without bride price and *wergild*, but where socio-economic inequalities prevail, mine excluded those that had bride price and *wergild*, while remaining devoid of significant socio-economic inequalities.

2. A new solution

The reasoning for a satisfactory solution starts from an obvious fact, which we recalled in the introduction: wealth relates first of all to goods and their role in the social game. In very general – and approximate – terms, wealth leaves its mark on society when there exists connections between the sphere of goods and that of social relations, which in some

way make the former convertible into the latter. The difficulty lies in giving this proposition a more precise character.

So let us go forward step by step.

2.1 Towards a general definition of wealth

To avoid possible confusion, a first distinction to be made is between resources and wealth.

Resources are all the things that are useful or necessary for a given process. This is a very broad concept, which can also be applied outside the social context, for example in the field of ecology, for an animal or plant species. In everyday language, the term “wealth” can also assume a broad meaning: one might speak of a “wealth of teaching experience”, in which case it is simply synonymous with abundance. But the wealth that anthropological theory deals with must be understood in a much stricter social and economic sense. While all wealth is a resource, not all resources are necessarily wealth: wealth is a subset of resources embedded in specific social relations – for example, one can draw a parallel with the distinction between means of production and capital: a saw is everywhere and always a means of producing planks, but it is only in a specific social context that it also becomes capital.

What are these social determinations that turn a resource into wealth?

To begin with, wealth is property, i.e. things over which one holds rights. However, it is impossible to reason correctly at this level of generality – and on this point, once again, A. Testart had perfectly identified the problem, while not really managing to solve it (see in particular note 13, Testart 2005, 148). Within the set of goods (and therefore of rights over things), it is imperative to proceed to certain distinctions, of which the main one – and this is undoubtedly the major obstacle to a correct analysis – does not cover any commonly accepted category, and therefore does not correspond to any term in the vocabulary.

This distinction relates to the nature of the goods, i.e. the object of the rights. A differentiation must be made between, on the one hand, rights that relate to objects, whether material or immaterial (saws, axes, trees, necklaces, pigs, but also songs, dances, esoteric knowledge, etc.), and, on the other hand, those that relate to human beings. At first glance, there seems to be no difficulty here. Every law student is familiar with this distinction and knows that it has been made for a long time: the first category includes the so-called “real” rights (from the Roman *res*, the “thing” that is neither a person nor an action), the second the so-called “personal” rights. In reality, this apparent simplicity conceals two fearsome pitfalls.

The first one is that in some societies, the rights over an individual can be so extensive that he loses all legal personality: in the eyes of the law, he becomes an object, just like an animal, a piece of furniture or a stone. Thus, according to the juridical logic, the rights that one holds over a slave (since it is the slave that is at issue) do not fall into the category of personal rights, but into that of real rights. But although the lawyers have excellent reasons for assimilating the slave to a thing, everyone knows that in reality he is not one

– Roman law itself had to deal with this fact. What is coherent from the practical point of view of the jurist is a major obstacle to sociological reasoning, which must absolutely preserve the distinction between genuine things and human beings legally reduced to the rank of things. This point is all the more pernicious since there is no term that designates the sole rights held over other entities than human beings: “real” rights correspond to this set of rights only in the rare societies that, like ours, prohibit slavery. This is why, in the remainder of this text, the term “human being” will be systematically preferred to “person”, the meaning of which is too susceptible to variations according to the legal situation. In other words, while the law may consider that a slave (or someone who is incapacitated) is not a “person”, there is no ambiguity about the fact that he or she remains a human being.

Although less critical than the previous one, the second problem posed by the distinction between real and personal rights must also be noted. The personal rights referred to in the textbooks are primarily those of the creditor over the debtor and, more precisely, the rights that in our societies derive from the transfer of ownership over objects. However, past societies knew many other rights over humans than the right of claim – starting with slavery, but this is far from being the only one – which played a major role in social life: one only has to think of the general importance of those exercised by men over their daughters and wives and their correlate, the centrality of matrimonial strategies. By proscribing almost all of these rights (the only ones that remain among us are the rights of parents over children, which are not alienable), our own law places us at a very narrow window of observation. On the one hand, this leads us to assimilate personal rights essentially to those of the creditor, and on the other hand to see claims as deriving exclusively from transfers of material goods. In many societies, however, at least some rights in persons could be transferred, giving rise to obligations similar to those arising from transfers of objects. In some parts of Australia, for example, the circumciser owed a wife to the youth he has initiated, and this debt was just as binding as the one we owe for the purchase of a car. Although they are now almost the only remaining personal rights, the rights arising from claims on transfers of goods are in fact the least deserving of this description, since unlike the power of the master over the slave, or of the husband over the wife, they exist only as a consequence of transfers of rights over (non-human) things and are extinguished with them. For our analysis, therefore, we will have to neutralise, as it were, the rights of claim, considering that they exist only as secondary extensions of the transfers of what might be called primary rights – rights over non-human objects, or rights over humans – and that they disappear once these transfers are completed.

This distinction, within goods (i.e. rights over things), according to the nature of the object to which the right relates, which therefore does not overlap with the traditional distinction between real and personal rights, is crucial for social reasoning on wealth. However, it must be supplemented by a secondary distinction, that relates to the scope of the rights concerned. Without ignoring the problematic nature of this term, it will be assumed that it is possible to identify, on the one hand, a more or less complete ownership of the good, which allows it to be alienated or destroyed, and, on the other hand, more restricted rights, in particular the right of use.

As mentioned above, a major problem, which greatly contributes to hampering reflection, is the absence of any term that would designate unambiguously the sub-sets defined by the preceding analysis. In particular, rights in objects other than a human being cannot be referred to in any way other than a long periphrasis. In the absence of a more elegant solution, we therefore propose to use the mathematical symbol for negation (\neg), noting H the rights over humans other than those corresponding to a claim on goods, and O the specific rights of ownership.

The different categories can be summarised in the following table:

Table 1 : classification of goods

	Rights over things (goods)	
	Over objects other than humans	Over human beings
Ownership	O \neg H	H
Other rights (use...)	\neg O \neg H	

With these foundations in place, a first definition can be put forward:

Definition: Wealth is made up of rights that can be converted into (exchanged for) O \neg H.

It follows that wealth has a dual nature. First, it consists of a direct right of ownership over things, material or not: at the heart of wealth is the possession of houses, domestic pigs, axes, precious metals or magic formulas, provided that these things can be given up in order to acquire others. This condition is essential: a field that one works, a fruit tree that one exploits, a tool that one holds, even if exclusively, are resources; but they only become wealth if they can be transferred onerously, in other words if the rights one holds over them can be converted into rights over other objects.

However, there are also goods that constitute, so to speak, wealth by extension. These are primarily rights over humans that can be converted into property over non-human objects. For example, a father has rights over his daughter. In a society where marriage occurs only in the context of an exchange of sisters or a bride service, these rights can be exchanged against similar rights or against labour, respectively, but they are not connected to the sphere of rights over non-human objects and, therefore, do not constitute wealth. If, on the other hand, the society practices the bride price, the transfer of these rights constitutes a means of acquiring property in non-human objects, and these rights then belong to the sphere of wealth.

2.3 Elementary and developed form

The above also provides the elements for solving the aporia of wealth existing within a World I yet said to be “without wealth”. The solution is based on two definitions:

Definition: the convertibility of O→H into other O→H constitutes the minimal (or elementary) form of wealth. The convertibility of O→H into other elements of a social nature, i.e. the need to transfer O→H in order to modify or, on the contrary, to perpetuate a social situation, constitutes the developed (or extended) form of wealth.

This distinction between minimal and developed forms of wealth provides the basis for the distinction between World I and Worlds II-III:

Definition: a society belongs to World I if and only if wealth exists only in its elementary form. It belongs to Worlds II or III if one or more forms of developed wealth exist.

What is World I? It is a social universe where property rights over non-human objects are at most convertible into similar rights over other objects. There is therefore, as A. Testart noted, a basic form of wealth – and the term “world without wealth” is probably not the most suitable one: it would be more appropriate to speak of a “world with minimal wealth” (on the model of “minimal political organisations” proposed by the same scholar). However – and this is the crucial point – the social agency of this wealth is narrowly limited. The things to which O→H rights relate are useful for life, but they do not act as intermediaries, or as vehicles, of social relations. In other words, the sphere of property rights over objects is self-enclosed.

This compartmentalisation of O→H goods corresponds to the compartmentalisation of H goods. These goods arise and disappear, can be transferred, and a substantial proportion (if not the essential part) of the social game is built around these movements. But, as we have just said, they do not imply those of O→H. If they do involve something, it can only be the reverse transfer of another right H, usually of the same nature (for example, in the exchange of sisters) or the provision of a service or work (as in the bride service).

Conversely, societies with developed wealth (Worlds II and III) are those of an equivalence, or interoperability, between spheres that were previously compartmentalised: a convertibility is now established between property rights over non-human objects and social relations, and it is this convertibility that gives them a power of social action. Wealth becomes “socially useful”, in the words of A. Testart – socially useful, one might add, because socially efficient. Even the minimal form of wealth acquires then a new importance. It behaves in a way like a chemical agent which, in its pure form, would be more or less inert, but which, placed in a context where other reactions are possible, would act as a catalyst.

This generalised convertibility of the O→Hs, which connects them to the social game and, in so doing, tends to place them at the heart of this game, refers to different categories of elements.

1. **Convertibility with H.** Reference has already been made, in matrimonial matters, to the exchange of rights over women against rights over material goods. The same applies to all the rights over humans that can be bought and sold – and thus, eventually, redeemed by the dependents themselves. From this point of view, wealth is expressed just as much in the sale of a slave or a serf, or in the pledging of an indebted person, as in the payment of a bride price or a dowry.

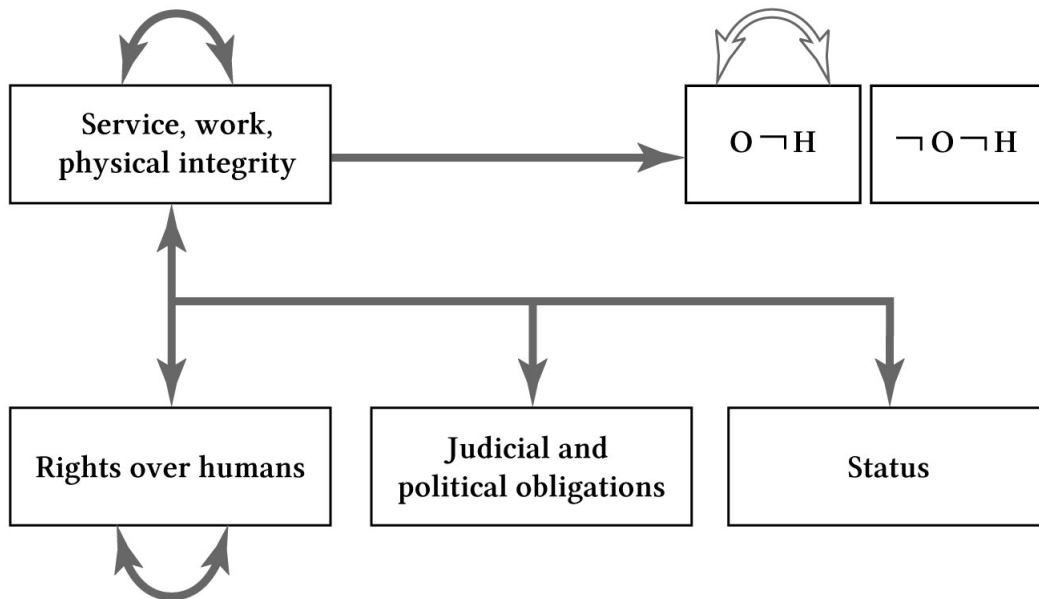
2. **Convertibility with rights of use over $\neg H$ ($\neg O \neg H$).** The granting of rights of use for a fee, where the owner of an asset can require payments in exchange for its temporary disposal, also constitutes an extended form of wealth. Depending on the situation, one may speak of rent (especially land rent) or of interest loan. While the appearance of the former is undoubtedly late and conditioned by the lack of free land, the latter is likely to have developed much earlier – one can think, for example, of the “financial” manipulations with the pigs of certain Big Men of New Guinea (Strathern 1969).
3. **Convertibility with obligations of a judicial nature.** In this case, it should be noted that conversion operates only in one direction: a transfer of property has a liberating power vis-à-vis such an obligation, but the latter arises by definition outside the transfer of the property. Following A. Testart, we have already mentioned the wergeld, fines and damages. Obligations of a political nature, i.e. taxes, occupy an ambivalent position, to which we shall return later.
4. **Convertibility with statutes.** Apart from property, i.e. rights over things (human or not), there are so-called subjective rights such as, nowadays, the right to possess a nationality. The right to bear an honorific distinction, to use a title, or to be a member of a specific social group can also be included in this category. Primitive societies provide many examples in which these rights are conditioned, in part or in whole, by payments or by expenditures of a public nature. Examples include certain Plains Indian associations that required an entrance fee (Lowie 1919), or the grades of Nias (Viaro and Ziegler 1998) or Banks (Codrington 1891) islands, which were obtained through a codified system of munificent public festivals. Conversely, World I societies are characterised by the absence of such payments; when they include organised subsets, such as that of male initiates, or award official or unofficial titles, access is governed by rules of kinship or individual achievement, and never by the transfer of a significant quantity of possessions.
5. **Convertibility with labour or services.** In a world devoid of other than minimal wealth, labour or services can only be appropriated by exchange with other labour or services, by the cession of certain rights over humans – in particular, in the context of the bride service – or as part of certain obligations arising, in particular, from kinship or marital authority. With wealth arises, for the first time, the remuneration of labour by $O \neg H$ which, in the language of Marxist economic theory, can be expressed as the formulated equivalence between dead and living labour. This remuneration should not be confused with the purchase of an immaterial good, which falls into the category of minimal wealth. This is the case, for example, of the rifle that the Jivaro shaman apprentice gives to a more competent colleague in order to learn a magic rite (Harner [1972] 2006). The remuneration of labour (or service), on the other hand, corresponds to the transaction between a man and a shaman in order to be healed by the latter. Finally, it should be noted that the remuneration of work can remain a one-off transaction, as in the case just considered, or be part of a wider circuit, where the product of the work will be reused in one way or another by the employer in the social game.

2.4 Graphical representation

The above can be summarised in diagrams that map the essential social relationships. The convertibilities / equivalences involving $O \neg H$ and thus, one form of wealth or another, are represented by double line arrows, the others by full line ones.

World I can be represented by Figure 1:

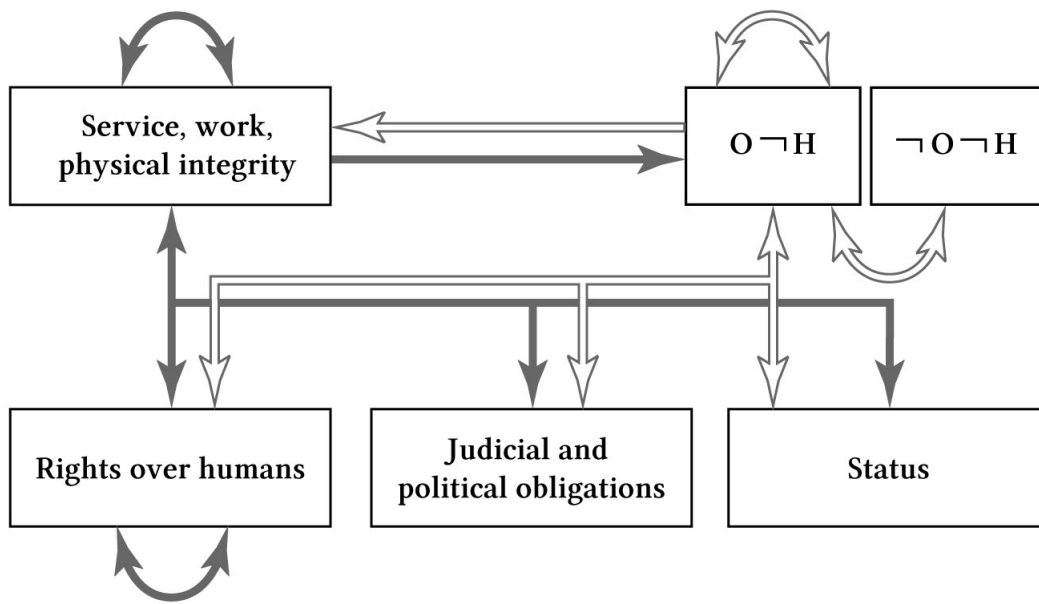
Figure 1 : World I



According to the very definition of this world I, wealth is only present in its minimal form. The consequence of this fact is particularly clear here: the $O \neg H$ constitute a sort of dead end in a social game in which they play virtually no role. The central element in the kinetics of social relations is the action of individuals: it is through one's work, efforts and merits that one obtains a wife or status, just as it is with one's physical integrity that one repairs an offence. Of course, from one society to another, the kinship system, the nature of subsistence activities, the economic organisation or religious traditions set a very different framework for this action. But what is common to all these social landscapes is that in all circumstances, in order to build a social relationship or to free oneself from an obligation, one pays with one's person and not with one's possessions.

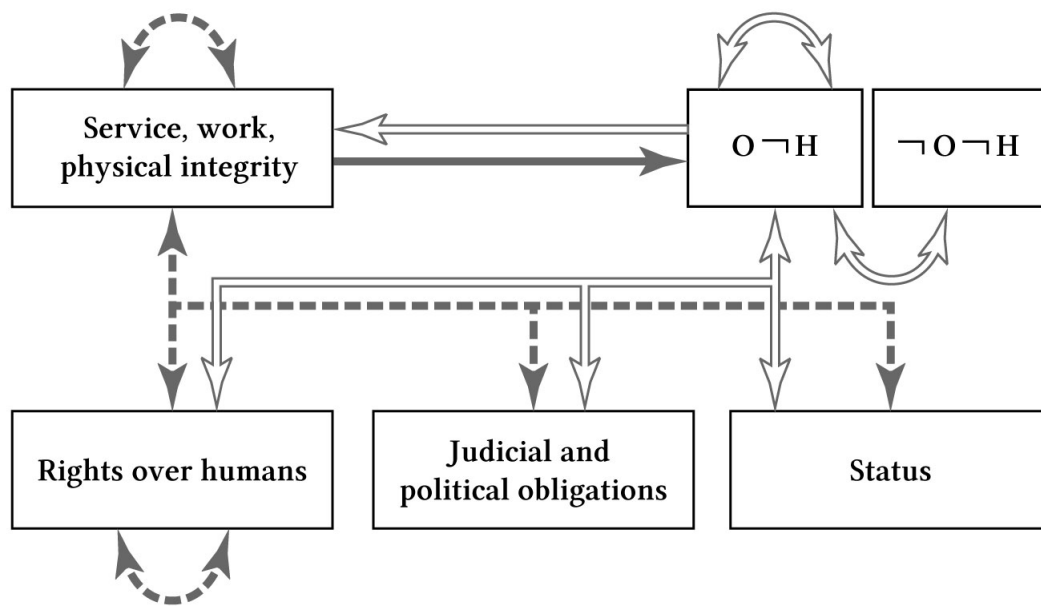
In contrast, the world of wealth is one in which $O \neg H$ s potentially interact with the entire social game, as shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2 : Worlds II-III



In many circumstances, however, this generalised convertibility of $O \neg H$ does not merely complement that of labour or physical integrity, but tends to supplant it. The bride price replaces the bride service, the fine or the damage is now stipulated in goods – and later, the land rent, the necessity to buy part of the necessities of life or to pay taxes only reinforce this tendency. The logic of its evolution thus pushes the system towards a situation in which property rights become an increasingly obligatory intermediary in social relations and, consequently, their centre of gravity, as depict the dotted arrows of Figure 3:

Figure 3 : Worlds II-III (alternative)



3. Three additional points

3.1 Economically significant transfers

One element might seem to invalidate the above definition of minimal and extended wealth, as well as the resulting definition of the demarcation between World I and Worlds II-III. This concerns the multiple transfers of goods of symbolic economic value, which are expected to be made on various social occasions and which are generally referred to in the literature as “tokens”.

Such transfers are extremely common in the societies studied by ethnology. They may be required at a wedding, for the conclusion of a peace agreement, in exchange for a service or for the use of a resource. In terms of sociological analysis, they must be distinguished from extended forms of wealth. These transfers do not take place in the context of an equivalence, established by society, between the work they represent and the counterpart for which they are paid. The few small objects that the future son-in-law offers to his in-laws in addition to his service, or the bag of rice that the farmer sets aside to gratify the village chief who has granted him the land, are not payments that are supposed to balance the loss of the wife or the provision of the field. They are acts of purely political social significance: they represent a sign of goodwill, and this is why the economic value of the goods transferred on these occasions – or, if one prefers, the investment in labour that they contain – remains negligible.

Therefore, for the sake of clarity, we can define Worlds II-III by adding the following precision:

Definition: Worlds II-III are those in which the establishment, perpetuation or dissolution of certain social relations, or the modification of a social situation, require the transfer of an economically significant set of O-H.

It goes without saying that the boundary between a token and an economically significant transfer cannot be formally determined. This boundary constitutes, at least potentially, a grey area of indeterminacy. It is not difficult to imagine that, at least in some cases – for example, as regards interest-bearing loans or land rents, and provided that the conditions are met – it was easy to move from the first form to the second by making the required transfer more cumbersome (see for instance Girard 1967, 277).

3.2 The tax issue

In the list of developed forms of wealth, taxes raise a specific problem. The tax due in labour (the *corvée*) clearly stands outside the perimeter of wealth. But, among the taxes due in goods, and probably somewhat counter-intuitively, only a part obeys the proposed definition and must therefore be considered as an extended form of wealth.

The definition adopted in this article actually restricts it to transfers that constitute a condition for modifying, or perpetuating, a social situation. In many cases, however, taxes do not fall into this category: they are paid because one lives under the authority of a state, and not in order to be placed under that authority or to continue to live under it. Those who do not pay their taxes may be sentenced to various sanctions, but they will remain subject to the authority that demands them. There are, however, cases of taxes that condition a social relationship or status, and which, therefore, belong to extended forms of wealth. For example, among the Kanuri of Nigeria, any individual who wished to become a landowner had to pay a specific tax, the *haraji*, in the village concerned.

Incidentally, the same reasoning applies to the obligations known among certain hunter-gatherer societies as “demand sharing” (Peterson 1993). The obligatory nature of these transfers of goods contains an element of indeterminacy, and this custom is undoubtedly situated on the borderline between the gift and the “transfer of the third type”, or “t3t” – that is, a transfer by reason of a unilateral obligation (for a rigorous typology of transfers see Testart 2007; 2013). In any case, the possibility for an individual to demand all or part of the possessions of others, either because of common membership in a local group or because of a specific kinship connection, does not fall within the scope of wealth. The transfer of goods is not in this case the condition of the social relationship, but its consequence. In other words, the fact that the transfer does not take place may open up the possibility of retaliation, but does not put an end to the social relationship between the two individuals concerned.

3.3 Formal and informal convertibility

Most situations of O-H convertibility take place in a formal framework: that of exigible transfers, either as an exchange or as a “t3t”. However, some social relations are based on transfers of non-required O-H, i.e. gifts. In this case, we speak of informal convertibility between O-H and social status. Two examples can serve as an illustration.

The first is that of the famous potlatches of the Northwest Coast of the American continent – we will not enter the debate here on the extent to which the munificence of these ostentatious feasts was a specific tendency of these societies, or a late effect of contact with Western goods; no society has ever known a “pure” evolutionary trajectory, and all social formation is the fruit of interactions and borrowings. In any case, some of them had developed a system of names, the prestige of which was linked to the organization of sumptuous festivals with ostentatious distributions of goods (Barnett 1938; Drucker and Heizer 1967). Unlike in some Southeast Asian societies, there was no formal pricing system specifying the quality and quantity of goods to be transferred on these occasions.

The other example is a society that has already been alluded to, insofar as it failed to meet the criteria proposed by A. Testart: the Tareumiut of northern Alaska, marked by a differentiation (recognised even in the vocabulary) between ordinary men and rich whaleboat owners, the umialit (singular: umialiq). The former were free to join the boats, choosing the umialiq with whom they wanted to work for a hunting season. The umialit, on the other hand, received a larger share than the ordinary men, which placed them at the head of the stock from which the group got through the off-season. However, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to identify the exact nature of the rules governing the division of the catch. Some ethnographies suggest that the shares to which the men were entitled were strictly defined by custom; the transfer of the O–H they received in exchange for their work would therefore have been exigible, and the relationship between them and the umialit would therefore have been akin to a wage-earning relationship where remuneration was paid in kind (Worl 1980). According to other testimonies, however, one suspects that the sharing was not governed by any rules, and that it could be considered as a gift (Spencer 1957). We will not attempt to settle this debate here – it is not impossible, moreover, either that the reality itself was marked by ambiguity, or that the various practices were overlapping, in a society that was changing quite rapidly under the influence of contact. The important thing here is that, from a theoretical point of view, it cannot be ruled out that the action of wealth, i.e. the transfer of O–H in social relations, may in some cases have been informal, but not any less efficient.

Conclusion

The proposed definitions resolve the contradictions to which the formulation put forward by Alain Testart led. Its essential defect is to be restricted to certain admittedly frequent, but not universal, manifestations of wealth, namely the couple “bride price – wergild”. While remaining consistent with the general spirit of his reasoning, we believe that the solution provided here represents a generalisation which allows the phenomenon to be understood in its globality.

If we are not mistaken and the above reasoning is a solid basis, it allows us to go further by addressing several sets of issues around the shift towards wealth.

The first relates to the causes of this shift. From a materialist standpoint, one cannot be satisfied with a tautological answer in terms of social “choice”. Recourse to a “change of mentality” would hardly be more convincing: one could rightly ask to which factors it

should itself be attributed, and this explanation would therefore only postpone the question without resolving it. It is therefore on the side of techno-economic developments that the key to the enigma must be sought. Traditionally, agriculture and livestock farming have been identified as the triggers of socio-economic inequalities. However, the fragility of such an answer is well known. Not only is it contradicted by numerous counter-examples – the most famous being that of the hunter-gatherers of the North-West Coast –, but it also invokes a highly questionable “surplus” mechanism which, in addition of being highly debatable (see, among a very large body of literature Pearson 1957; Dalton 1960; 1963; Testart 1986; Darmangeat 2018c) cannot be related in an obvious way to any of the social phenomena studied in this article. Alain Testart, for his part, had suggested that a more empirically satisfactory answer lay in food stocks (Testart 1982), while admitting his difficulty in linking this variable to the social phenomena relevant to his reasoning – in the first place, matrimonial payments (Testart 2005, 38). In previous work, I suggested that, rather than food stocks per se, it was the significant production of movable and labour-intensive goods (which I called W-goods, for “work” and “wealth”) that could explain the shift from service to bride price (Darmangeat 2018b; 2020a). This line of inquiry should therefore be re-evaluated in the light of the more general perspective outlined here, but my guess is that this move towards W-goods or, more trivially, the increase in material production, may well represent a common explanation for the various manifestations of extended wealth. Of course, this is only an intuition that would deserve to be methodically explored.

Secondly, one may suspect – or at least hope – that the inventory of extended forms of wealth provides the elements of an internal classification of Worlds II and III. Wouldn't the pre-eminence or absence of such and such form of extended wealth constitute, in fact, a way of identifying a given type of society? The verification of this hypothesis could only be done through the meticulous constitution of a vast and precise database, in the way A. Testart had proceeded for marriage payments (Testart, Govoroff, and Lécivain 2002). However, let us repeat that, contrary to the opinion of this author, the identification of class societies with the sole so-called fundiary property, which, among the forms of extended wealth, comes down to the specific existence of the land rent, seems far too reductive. In any case, one can be sceptical about the possibility of defining the presence of social classes by one of the forms (or a set of forms) identified in this article.

A third task would be to identify the factors that unleash or, on the contrary, hinder the differentiating action of wealth, as well as the various ways in which this action is likely to be exercised. How can we explain, for example, that among the societies of World II, some can be described as “ostentatious plutocracies”, with the rich exercising *de facto* political power and multiplying sumptuary spending, while in others, wealth inequalities seem barely perceptible? In other words, how can we, on the basis of a survey of the forms of extended wealth – and, probably, of other variables yet to be identified – think about the various dynamics of social formations marked by wealth? It goes without saying that the answer to this question, while not limited to it, depends closely on the previous one and therefore on a satisfactory classification of these social formations, which, for the time being, remains to be elaborated.

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