

The Stockholm Seminars

- focusing on the dynamics and stewardship of social-ecological systems

“In today’s world,
anthropology is more important than ever”

Professor Maurice Godelier

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris. France

Friday, September 4, 2009, 11.00–12.00

Linné Hall, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences,
Lilla Frescativägen 4, Stockholm

What shared foundations, what interplay of which social relationships between individuals and groups – whether these are kin groups or other social groups – cause people to recognize each other as members of the same society? Drawing on several societies, some divided into kin groups – these were once called “primitive societies” – and others divided into castes, orders or classes, Maurice Godelier, shows that neither kinship nor, even less, family is capable of bringing individuals and groups together to make a society.

His demonstration challenges one of the basic anthropological axioms, one that is widely shared by other social sciences. He shows too that economic relationships cannot be the shared basis for making a society, even though, in the case of caste- or class-based societies, all of the groups are linked by material and social ties. His second demonstration throws into question Marx’s postulate on the role of modes of production (capitalists or others) as the basis of society. The question then is : what are the social relationships that make a society?”



Professor Maurice Godelier is an internationally renowned anthropologist, specialist of the societies of Oceania. Between 1967 and 1988 his fieldwork focused on the Baruya, a New Guinea Highlands tribe discovered in 1951. He observed and analyzed the transformations in this society based on hunting and horticulture, a society that very quickly entered the market economy, was integrated into a state imposed by the West and exposed to the missionary zeal of Christian churches. Godelier has also explored a number of essential domains: the role of mental constructs in social

relations, the distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic, and more recently the distinction between things one gives, things one sells and things that can be neither given nor sold. In addition, he has also devoted an important part of his life to scientific policy making. In 2001 Godelier received the Gold Medal of the French National Center for Scientific Research.