The “Third Gender”

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This paper describes the theoretical advances since the work of Margaret Mead (1930) in conceptualizing the categories of gender. It shows how, beginning in the 1970s, feminism targeted these categories for academic research and social action, leading, mainly in the English-speaking world, to the field of Gender Studies. I have drawn on my ethnographic research since 1960 among the Canadian Inuit, which has led me to reject a binary approach to the study of sex and gender. A ternary approach is needed to integrate the (all-too-numerous) exceptions that are very often ignored in conventional ethnographies. To this end, I propose a three-level cosmological model: 1) the infra-human level of the fetus, which, according to the Inuit, can change sex; 2) the human level, with the transgendering of children whose sex differs from that of the ancestors they reincarnate (or when the family’s sex ratio is unbalanced); and 3) the supra-human level, with the transgendering of shamans whose helping spirits belong to the opposite sex. The third gender thus manifests the crossing of gender

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boundaries at each level. I suggest we admit the existence of a third gender (which is recognized in many traditional societies) in order to rethink gender categories in contemporary societies by referring to the “family atom” concept and to social practices rather than religious, legal, or economic norms. Finally, I am baffled by social anthropology and sociology’s apparent silence in response to the way in which the California-based Queer Movement has changed the meaning of gender – by emptying it of its social content and turning it into an expression of personal desire and sexual orientation, a change that, according to Butler (2006), was inspired by French philosophers.

The social sciences have long considered sexual categories to be a natural given. There are two sexes, men and women, who carry out human reproduction. It was also assumed that the sexual division of labor was based on their biological specificities: men took on productive activities and difficult tasks requiring physical strength, mobility, or intellectual power (hunting, war, etc.), while women dealt with the reproduction of life and simple service tasks (food gathering, domestic work, childcare, etc.). Physiological constraints such as menstruation, pregnancy, or breastfeeding were also used to justify women being confined to the home. As a result, male-female power relationships (which were usually justified through this naturalist logic) were not thought to be socially constructed. Aside from attempts by some precursors (for example, Fourier, Engels, and Freud) to free these relationships from biological determinism, anthropologist Margaret Mead was the first to challenge this determinism in the 1930s. Through fieldwork in Oceania, she demonstrated that the sexual division of labor differed from one society to the next and depended more on culture than on nature (Mead 1963). However, her dualist approach prevented her from accounting for individuals who deviated from the traditional division of labor. Although this sociocultural definition was extensively developed by Simone de Beauvoir, the same dualist perspective appeared in her essay *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir 1971/1949) and prevented her from conceptualizing her own status as a non-traditional woman, aside from projecting into a utopian future her dreams of co-education and the removal of social boundaries between the sexes. Forty years later, Élisabeth Badinter would return to this hypothesis from an evolutionary perspective, a point I will discuss further.
The feminist revival of the 1970s spurred major developments in theoretical rethinking of social relationships between men and women, mainly among English-speaking anthropologists (Reiter 1975). These academics pondered the origin and universality of male domination. In an attempt to resolve this question, anthropologists turned to hunter-gatherers of historic times, whom they considered to be living in a quasi-prehistoric manner. Ethnographic data generally suggested that men dominated these societies by controlling hunting and war, while women more or less had to gather food and take care of the home. These facts were interpreted in divergent ways (Mathieu 1991a, 1991b). Those who supported sexual equality and were loyal to the views of Engels on pre-capitalist societies followed Eleanor Leacock (1978), who saw male domination as both a Western influence and an expression of male ethnologist bias. Others supported the idea that male domination in public life existed alongside female domination in private life. Still others acknowledged the power of women and the complementarity of men and women in a number of activities, concluding that male domination was expressed through the control of technology and ideology. As each approach remained set in its views, the 1980s saw declining interest in the origin of sexual inequality and even in the power relationships between men and women. At the same time, there was growing interest in the social categories of gender (hence, Gender Studies), which would constitute a prerequisite for all research on social relationships between men and women.

These categories remained defined in dualist terms despite new ethnographic data that suggested a need to abandon this approach and despite some attempts to broaden its scope — by Ortner and Whitehead (1981), McBroom 1986, and myself (Saladin d’Anglure 1986). By 1992, it may be said that the concept of gender, i.e., sex as a social category, was commonly used in the social sciences, though often confined to feminist academic literature. Research on gender, however, remained marginal and far from a major concern of the social sciences in general and anthropology in particular, this being especially true for French anthropology. The causes for this state of affairs include confusion between gender and sexuality (already noted in older ethnographies), which persists in the minds of a number of researchers. A glaring example is
the abuse of the term “berdache,” which refers to cross-dressing and transgendering in Amerindian societies but has been laden with strong homosexual connotations, although many berdaches are not homosexual and many Amerindian homosexuals are not berdaches.

Finally, with disciplines, fields of knowledge, and themes becoming compartmentalized, gender categories have become very difficult to study because they transcend these academic boundaries. The same phenomenon may be called “androgyny” in religious studies, “inversion” in structural anthropology, and “marginality” in sociology, an inconsistency that does not contribute to understanding. Given this theoretical stagnation, I believe it more useful to look at hunter-gatherers as a means to ask questions about our own societies and better conceptualize the social system of gender. This change of perspective must necessarily involve an epistemological critique of the dualist conception of gender that has trapped us through classical logic, our Judeo-Christian ideological heritage, and scientific rationalism.

**The Inuit Example**

It may seem paradoxical to renew our theoretical approach to gender categories and social relationships in the West by looking at Inuit data, as this “exotic” indigenous people has always been absent from anthropological debates. This absence is partly due to the difficulties of Westerners over four centuries in trying to adapt to Arctic conditions and, thus, their tendency to overestimate the technical skills that such adaptation requires. When the Inuit were discovered, their ability to survive in such a hostile environment seemed baffling, and it was assumed that survival was their only concern and absorbed all of their energy. For a long time, their name was also imaginary. They were first labeled “Hyperborean Pygmies,” then identified as Tatars before being called “Esquimaux” (an Algonquian term), and then “Eskimo” (the English version of the same term). They are now called by their own name, “Inuit” (or “humans”).

These preconceptions would influence generations of ethnologists and prevent them from observing Inuit social, economic,
political, or religious organization in depth. This restricted definition of Inuit society is well summarized in a terse observation by Lévi-Strauss: “The Esquimau, though great technicians, are poor sociologists.” In saying this, he contrasted them with the Australian Aborigines, whom he considered to be the reverse.

The only real theoretical interest in the Inuit came from Marcel Mauss (1906), who, ironically, never visited them. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mauss published an essay on seasonal variations in Inuit social life, which according to him swung between two poles: summer individualism, based on the nuclear family, the couple’s private and nonreligious life, and individual production; and winter communism, which is economic, sexual, and religious and is expressed in widespread sharing and exchanging of goods, children, and spouses, and in large collective rituals. At the time, this was termed “primitive communism.” While Mauss’s essay is interesting and unique because of its overall perspective, it contains no exhaustive data on the sexual division of labor or gender categories. Furthermore, it remains trapped in a reductionist, dualist, and seasonal explanation of Inuit social life. Things might have been different had he known for instance that, in the language of Inuit shamans, the term for “summer” is constructed from the root arnaq (woman, female), while the term for “winter” is constructed from the root anguti (man, male). Consequently, the social distinction between men and women is the basis for all general distinctions in the universe, which Balandier (1974) terms the “sexualization of the world.” Had Mauss known about these facts and about the data I present below, his essay would have achieved all of its theoretical and heuristic potential (Saladin d’Anglure 2006a).

In another attempt to theorize from the example of the Inuit, Spier (1925) revisited the idea expressed fifty years earlier by Morgan (1871) whereby the kinship terms of the Inuit form a system with a similar structure to that of the kinship terminologies of Western Europe and the Yankees of New England. Spier extended his analysis and typology to rules of filiation, place of residence at marriage, and so on – in short, to what in anthropology is referred to as a “kinship system.” Thus he identified an “Eskimo” kinship system common to Inuit, Andaman Islanders, and Western peoples. This typology was revisited by Murdock
(1972) and extended to the entire system of social organization. Thus it was claimed that the same kinship system and type of social organization could be found at both the Inuit and Western ends of the scale of human technical and economic development. However, recent ethnographic studies of Inuit kinship have challenged the general significance of the data used to define the Eskimo system. These studies show the existence of multiple systems, and they reveal so much variation in kinship customs that several researchers have concluded that the social organization of the Inuit is characterized by great flexibility, a notion I will criticize further on.

Aside from an interesting study by Naomi Giffen (published in 1930) on the sexual division of labor among the Inuit, it may be argued that gender relations have been of little concern to researchers in Inuit ethnology. If one cites only fieldwork studies, these researchers have looked at technology and myths, cultural ecology, the psychology of emotions, and village ethnographies, with emphasis on kinship and social change. In the 1960s, many anthropologists still saw the Eskimo kinship system as the key to Inuit social organization and consequently to Western societies. Gender categories were only incidental. Thus the commonalities (established rather too quickly perhaps) between Inuit society and our own helped increase the confusion over Inuit social organization caused by early stereotypes.

An Alternative Avenue of Research

Finally, there is the field of symbolic anthropology, which includes my own work (Saladin d’Anglure 2006b, 2007). My first ethnographic studies among the Inuit began in the early 1960s on kinship in general, and in particular on fictive (or pseudo-) kinship, which is highly developed among them. I studied the relationships created by adoption (30 percent of all children were adopted) and the quasi-parental bonds between the newborn child and the midwife, who, being considered a cultural mother, assisted and accompanied the child into adulthood. In return, the child offered her gifts at each new milestone of achievement and increasing maturity.
I also examined the effect of personal names on individual identity and the use of kinship terms. I found that kinship status operated in an opposite direction to that of generation order. After children received the name and identity of their dead grandparents, they would symbolically dominate their own parents until they became parents themselves, at which point they would in turn be symbolically dominated by their own children. These practices are consistent with the Inuit conception of time, which is circular and cyclical. As names are gender-free, they can be passed on from male to female and vice versa. When a child’s ancestral namesake belongs to the opposite sex, the child will be transgendered in the sense of wearing clothing and learning tasks associated with the opposite sex (or “reverse socialization”). These studies soon made me realize the central role of human procreation in the Inuit conceptualization of the world, in which the fetus is the nexus for the various components of the universe. The male component is represented by the man’s sperm, which blocks the cervix and thus begins the reproductive process by mixing with the mother’s blood to give the embryo its form and structure, and then its cohesion. The female component is represented by the mother’s blood, which coagulates, becomes part of the embryo, and then forms the blood of the fetus. The animal component is represented by the animal meat consumed by the pregnant woman, which is thus absorbed by the fetus and becomes part of its flesh. Finally, there is the supernatural component, represented by the soul-names of the dead ancestors who will be reincarnated in the unborn child and are waiting to be acknowledged by the living. In addition to these components, on the day of birth there is the air that will be breathed by the newborn, this air being the portion of the atmosphere that will bind the child to the spirit of the universe naarjuk (“large belly”) and to all breathing, living things.

Thus in the little igloo of the womb, itself a microcosm of the universe, the emergence of human life on earth plays out. Cosmogenesis and ontogenesis are viewed in the same way as the cycles of life, the cycle of the seasons, and the cycle of day and night. The first human beings lived on earth in an almost womb-like darkness before having access to the light of day. Similarly, as later human beings faced increasingly complex rules of life and a multiplicity of spirits, they too lived in a dangerous obscurantism before having access to the light of shamanism. The active
ingredient of all shamanic power is clairvoyance, which in Inuit is called qaumaniq, or “light.”

Genesis myths also depict sexual differentiation as the first main differentiation in the creation of the world, i.e., cosmogenesis. This differentiation is also considered an essential moment in the reproduction of human life. Several accounts illustrate these beliefs. The Inuit believe that a fetus can change its sex at birth, and such individuals are said to be sipiniit (from the verb root sipi, meaning “to split”). In two out of three cases, a boy becomes a girl. Among the symptoms associated with this transsexualism are long, difficult labor, genital swelling compounded by genital ambiguity in the newborn (their sex being difficult to identify), and genitals obstructed by mucus (which leads to inability to urinate) in the moments following birth. Several Inuit midwives state that they have witnessed the newborn’s penis and scrotum being reabsorbed and becoming a vulvar opening in the perineal tissue. According to Inuit beliefs, it is therefore important to stabilize these organs by looking at them or touching them to prevent their transformation if the newborn child is to maintain its sex. Otherwise, the process must be left to run its course.

**Perinatal Transsexualism**

The incidence of perinatal transsexualism is difficult to quantify. Based on an oral survey of the 900 residents of the village where I conducted my study, it appears to be almost 2 percent of all births. This high incidence may be explained by several hypotheses that will require further investigation. First, there may be cases of genetic intersex and specifically of congenital adrenal hyperplasia, a pathology of the adrenal glands that causes female pseudo-hermaphroditism and that has been reported in some regions of Inuit territory, such as southern Alaska, at an incidence ten times that of Caucasian people (Hirschfeld and Fleschmann 1969; Pang, Murphy et al. 1982). While this genetic peculiarity (which to my knowledge has not yet been studied in the Canadian Central Arctic) may be a contributing factor, it cannot account for all of the cases reported, as this pseudo-hermaphroditism is usually accompanied by infertility. Yet most sipiniit are fertile, at least among those who have been studied.
A second hypothesis concerns the technical conditions of labor and the position of the fetus at the moment of delivery. In fact, breech birth usually causes genital swelling in the newborn. My own studies, as well as the work of the first ethnographers of the Canadian Inuit (Boas 1888), confirm that abnormal presentations at birth have led to cross-dressing of such children or some gender reversal, be it the direction of the pelt on their clothing or their movements in certain rituals.

The womb memories of Iqallijuq (Saladin d’Anglure 2006b), an Inuit woman from Igloolik, who recounted how she had changed sex at birth, shed some light on the sipiniit. Her memories date back to before her own conception. At the beginning of her account, her maternal grandfather and namesake Savviuqtalik had just passed away. His invisible spirit rose from the grave and approached his daughter (Iqallijuq’s mother), who was relieving herself nearby. He touched the woman’s unbuckled belt and entered her womb, which looked like a small igloo. There, after eating a white substance that a dog came regularly to regurgitate, the spirit turned into a male fetus. He grew rapidly and, when the igloo became too small, decided to get out. He took his male tools but, remembering the difficulties in his previous life as a hunter, especially the cold and the dangers, he changed his mind and decided to return to life in a woman’s body. He put down the male tools, took up the female ones, and came out in a violent effort. Immediately his penis retracted, his perineum split, and he was born a girl.

This type of reminiscence constitutes a kind of narrative genre among the Inuit. It can be found in most Inuit groups, and its credibility is supported by a well-known myth about a woman who has been beaten by her husband, turns herself into a dog and then into different species of game animals before becoming a fetus in the womb of her brother’s wife and being reborn as a boy.

Symbolic Transgendering

Another myth about perinatal transsexualism describes Inuit cosmogenesis and illustrates the very first sex change. It tells how the first two humans emerged from two small earth mounds as adult males. Soon, they wanted to reproduce, and one impregnated
the other. When the pregnancy came to term, they realized that the pregnant man could not give birth. With a magic chant, his partner caused the re-absorption of the other man’s penis and an opening in his perineum, thus turning him into the first woman. Soon after, she gave birth to a son. From them, it is said, came all of the Inuit. Thus, at the infra-human level of life (the passage from womb to human life), sexual identity is unstable, and its borders can be easily crossed in both directions, from boy to girl and from girl to boy. This instability existed at the beginning of human life and is still present at each birth. I mentioned above how the identity of newborns was determined by the name they were given. The choice was made by their dead ancestors so that they could live again among those who had been dear to them. The ancestors chose the name of relatives or friends whose absence affected them the most. When a newborn had trouble surviving the first few days after birth, this was a sign that a dead person wanted to live again in him or her, and this wish had to be fulfilled to ensure the baby’s survival. Dreams were another way to receive clues about the dead person’s wishes. When a dead person appeared in a dream to someone, for a visit or an invitation to drink, this was a sign that the person wished to be reborn into that person’s family.

The random and unforeseeable nature of death (i.e., the sexual identity of the next person to die) combined with the uncertainty surrounding an unborn child’s time of birth and sex led to a relatively high number of newborns (15-20 percent) whose sexual identity differed from that of their ancestral namesakes. These cases involved a symbolic investiture that could take different forms, referred to as “transgendering” (be it use of kinship terms, hair length or style, clothes or accessories, tools or techniques, and gestures or posture normally reserved for the opposite sex). As children often received more than one name and thus had several male or female namesakes, they lived with multiple identities that coexisted or alternated in time. These identities coexisted when the person displayed both male and female attributes at the same time, and they alternated when the person displayed either male or female attributes depending on the circumstances.

The degree and duration of the transgendering depended on several factors, including the presence near the child of those who had chosen the opposite-sex namesakes, the strength of the affective...
bonds between them and the namesakes, and the proportion of ancestral namesakes belonging to the opposite sex. When all of the namesakes came from the opposite sex, the transgendering was greater and could continue beyond adolescence.

A fourth factor, namely the sex ratio within the family, came into play when the newborn’s sex conflicted with the parents’ expectations. This sort of conflict depended on the birth order and sex of the child’s siblings. In families with no boys or no girls, it was not rare for children to be transgendered and brought up in the opposite manner in order to assist the parent of that sex. This fact was observed by several researchers, in particular Briggs (1974) and Robert-Lamblin (1981), who tried to explain it as a demographic, economic, or psychological adjustment. They saw it as a circumstantial exception to the sexual division of labor and as evidence of the system’s flexibility. In their comparative essays on the sexual division of labor in hunter-gatherer societies, Tabet (1979) and Testart (1986) mention that some cases of female hunters have been observed among the Inuit, but they both interpret such cases as exceptions. To me, all of these interpretations impoverish our understanding of the Inuit reality because of their dualist framework.

The Family Atom

To better explain this reverse socialization, I proposed to relate it to an ideal model that underpins Inuit social organization and ideology and is inspired by Lévi-Strauss’s “atom of kinship” (1958). This is the model of the “family atom,” composed of a man-woman couple (the spouses) and a brother-sister pair (their children) who support them. When any family is formed, it aspires to a certain balance, to symmetry in the sexual division of labor, which manifests itself in the wish to have at least one son to help the father and one daughter to help the mother. This microcosmic model, which reflects the order of the universe and its reproduction at the family level, is sometimes thwarted by the vagaries of life and by the wide variation in the sex ratio at birth. In fact, while this ratio is almost at parity in all populations of the world, demographers observe an imbalance in families with at least two
children: half of them have a boy and a girl, while the other half have two children of the same sex. Thus the sex ratio at birth is highly variable at the family level. In such cases of imbalance, the Inuit used adoption or reverse socialization, in particular when the firstborn was a girl. Namesaking then played a crucial role, and the girl was cross-dressed and initiated into male tasks. A girl, whether first-born or not, was thus often inversely socialized until her first menstruation, which was celebrated as if she had killed a large game animal (in a normal situation, people would have pretended that she had given birth to a child). From that day onward, she had to wear female clothes. Conversely, when the children were all boys, one of the younger ones would often be cross-dressed and socialized as a girl until he killed his first game animal. He then had to cut his braids and dress as a boy. The sipiniit described above were usually the ones transgressed to the greatest extent.

If we move on from the ways and means of transgendering to the effects on those who were transgendered, the accounts are unanimous in emphasizing the difficulties and emotional suffering that the transgendered and the socially inverted went through at puberty, when they had to adopt the clothes, tools, and tasks normally assigned to their biological sex. In this, they were seldom helped by the close relatives who had decided to transgender them, who had participated in their socialization, and who continued to use the terms of address appropriate for the sex of their namesake. They now had to accept a different reality from the one they had known during childhood, the result being a genuine crisis for these adolescents, with attendant conflicts and rebellions. Slowly and gradually, they acquired the skills of their biological sex. Yet, for the rest of their lives, they would be affected by their initial socialization and their crossing of the identity boundary between male and female. This experience became a part of their personality and set them apart from others, in a category I have proposed to call the “third social sex” or “third gender.” They were usually held in high regard because of their versatility and self-reliance and also because of their specific mediating powers, particularly in religious matters.

Rasmussen (1929), an authority on shamanism among the Inuit of the Central Arctic, and researchers such as Mircea Eliade (1978),
who used his data, never considered Inuit shamans in terms of
gender or, more specifically, in terms of transgendering and andro-
gyny. Yet Rasmussen remains an inescapable reference because he
provided the best descriptions of the Inuit spiritual world, based
on accounts from the last shamans still active in the 1920s. No one
has since attempted any fieldwork on the subject. Earlier, how-
ever, in her classic study of Siberia’s peoples published in 1914,
Czaplicka had clearly shown the importance of transgendering
among Siberian shamans. And when Marett wrote the preface, he
freely spoke of a “third gender” among the shamans described by
Czaplicka. Sternberg (1925) then added significant ethnographic
details, explaining that transgendering occurred when the shaman
was chosen by a protecting spirit of the opposite sex. He also cited
Frazer (1926), who had also written about religious transgendering
and gender change by drawing on data from Classical Antiquity
and various native peoples.

Because ethnographers encountered neither transgendered adults
nor homosexuals among the Inuit and because they had in mind
the image of the Native American berdache – this cross-dressing
adult whom travel accounts described as a perverted homosexual,
they overlooked the transgendering of children and the symbolic
androgyny of shamans. This was undoubtedly due to a failure to
distinguish between sexual orientation and gender.

In 1983, while studying an Igloolik shaman’s coat from the
beginning of the century, kept at the American Museum of Natural
History in New York, I noticed its feminine decorations. I had
the shaman’s descendants make three replicas of the coat, and I
inquired about the decorations, which were inspired by an ijiraq,
the shaman’s female protecting spirit. These spirits of either sex,
with human form and caribou nostrils, have great powers. They
can be seen only by the shamans, play an important role in Inuit
myths and representations, and are greatly feared in Igloolik. As
museums have very few Inuit shaman coats, and as the shamans
were usually stripped to the waist for major shamanic séances, it
is understandable that the significance of these details may have
escaped observation.

Although I was already aware of namesake transgendering, I
observed here a new type of transgendering, this time due to the
sex of the shaman’s protecting spirit. Soon, I realized that the two
systems were closely linked. On the one hand, it was common for shamans to have their ancestral namesakes as protecting spirits. On the other, it was common to give a newborn the name of a shaman’s protecting spirit in order to strengthen the baby’s life force. Just as an individual could have several names, a shaman could have several helping spirits, one of whom was the main protector. I formulated the hypothesis that symbolic transgendering was one of the components of shamanism, that this transgendering was associated with the acquisition of a protecting spirit of the opposite sex, by analogy with the namesaking system, and that shamans were often individuals who had been cross-dressed and inversely socialized. This hypothesis is largely supported by the life stories I collected among the Inuit.

If, as we saw above, sexual differentiation is central to Inuit cosmogony and informs other types of differentiation, a person who from an early age has been socialized into a role that crosses this boundary becomes an adult who keeps crossing boundaries, in fact someone capable of crossing them all. Is this not the definition of a shaman? He is one who must be able to cross not only the boundaries of sexual identity but also those of the animal and supernatural worlds, as noted by Hamayon (1982). Reverse socialization would therefore be a necessary – if not sufficient – condition for being a shaman.

If previously transgendered, an adolescent will become an adult through a symbolic death and a deep identity crisis that is accompanied by suffering and disarray. It is similar to, and often associated with, the process of becoming a shaman. Such individuals must isolate themselves in the cold and fast until the moon spirit (the mythical incestuous brother of the sister-sun) fills their body and spirit with light, joy, and worldly wisdom.

The “Third Gender”

At the end of this journey through the thinking and social system of the Inuit, the axis of the “third social sex” or “third gender” (see Figure 1) emerges as a veritable “total social fact.”
The third gender is rooted in nature, in the infra-human reality of the biological disorders of intersex and obstetrics. It is constructed in the culture, in the family atom, where it can compensate for symbolic and real-life sex ratio imbalances resulting from deaths or births in the family, thus ensuring a harmonious sexual division of labor. It develops through shamanic mediation, becoming a means to help manage the group’s crises, conflicts, change, and social relationships with the natural environment and the animal world. Finally, the third gender is an intermediary with the supra-human world: the dead, the celestial bodies, and the spirits. Its strengths and limitations are in another disorder of nature: the apparent erratic behavior of celestial bodies, as manifested in eclipses and the discrepancy between the solar and lunar cycles. Natural disruptions, which are represented by the biological crossing of male-female boundaries and the celestial crossing of sun-moon boundaries, are the basis of the social order and the “third gender” that maintains the social order, particularly in cases of unforeseen events, catastrophes, disorders, or social changes. This notion of crossing boundaries is arguably the key to understanding the Inuit social system. It invites further analysis along the lines of an anthropology inspired by holism, structuralism, Mauss, and Lévi-Strauss. If we apply this new perspective further to the exchange of children through adoption between households and...
generations, the exchange of game meat, the exchange of spouses between couples, the migratory exchange between camps, and the exchange of names between the living and the dead and between humans and spirits, perhaps we may discern the structure of Inuit social organization that ethnologists are so keen to find.

Some anthropologists have challenged binary thinking and dualism in the study of social facts, notably Dumont (1983), with his ternary hierarchical approach to India’s castes, Tcherkezoff (1983), who used the same model to revise dualist classifications, and Berthoud (1990), who relied on ternary métisse (hybrid) thinking to connect with African thought, not to mention the first critiques of dualism by Lévi-Strauss (1973). All of these challenges seem to converge on what the hard sciences call the logic of fuzzy sets. In other disciplines within the social sciences, Michel Serres (1991) is not too far from the concept of a third gender when he defends the “educated third” who cross boundaries, being himself a thwarted left-hander, slightly androgynous, a traveler, a migrant, and a polyglot. Sandra Bem (1986) explores the psychosocial components of the third gender with her notion of “psychological androgyny,” a category in which she includes the 30 percent of Americans who demonstrate both female and male traits on her tests. A comparable concept is that of the “marginal man” – an immigrant intermediary and cultural hybrid – developed in Chicago by Park (1928) and Stonequist (1938). This concept is close to the more recent one of “cultural mediator” used by French historians to describe the role of certain migrants. Badinter (1986), who believes we are seeing the historical advent of androgyny, considers history and society from the point of view of the third gender without realizing that this social category can only exist in a structural relationship of coexistence with the other two. Society is not becoming androgynous; rather, the third gender is becoming more visible with the weakening of Judeo-Christian values.

**Conclusion**

Will the third gender give the Inuit their rightful place in theoretical debates about the social bond, about gendered social relationships, and about relationships with the world? Could it be that our societies, exposed as they are to the vagaries of family sex
ratios, have likewise engaged in reverse socialization? Have they not likewise passed identities down from one generation to the next and from one sex to the other via first names whose gender can easily be altered? Studies on atypical career paths of French women (Chaudron 1984; Daune-Richard 1988) could certainly benefit from the Inuit model as a means to analyze how the family has shaped the destiny of some individuals. The Inuit custom of marrying a third-gender (masculinized) woman to a third-gender (feminized) man may be of help in revisiting the issue of the “female heir” in families of the Pyrenees (a woman masculinized by her duties is married to a feminized younger man who must go and live with her and take her house name). Or perhaps this is an exception, as Lefebvre (1970) and Bourdieu (1962) argue. Moreover, the “female heir” model can also be said to apply to the nobility when the inheritance goes to a woman, or to some royal families when a woman who ascends the throne marries a prince consort.

We need to take a second look at how history has shaped the destiny of the great mediators, be they founders of religious orders, strategists, or heads of State, be they charismatic and ambiguous masculinized daughters or feminized sons, be they artists, writers, researchers, or therapists – the new shamans of the twenty-first century. Could the transgendering of Sartre, Condorcet, and many others until adolescence (and of the younger members of royal families) be in any way related to their destiny and to a ternary approach to gender? The question remains unanswered, as does the question of Frazer’s (1926) view that transgendering is one of the keys to religious mediation. For this second look, study of the gender system should be brought back to the field of social relations, even if this means encroaching on an area that has been the monopoly of many, including psychoanalysts, the philosophers who inspired the Queer Movement (Butler 2006),

2. Inspired by Michel Foucault and other French philosophers, Butler attempts to deconstruct the prevalent form of gender in the West by redefining it from the point of view of minority sexual practices and by privileging desire. In doing so, she forgets that, being at the margins of our margins, native people have much to teach us about their systems of gender and sexuality. Paradoxically, the American movement of the “Radical Faeries,” which is descended from the Queer movement, aims to promote sexual freedom, the use of hallucinogenic substances, and ritual celebrations inspired (or so they claim) by native peoples.
anthropologists who followed after them (Herdt 1994) and who wanted to recenter anthropology on personal desire, the political leaders who are too easily convinced that sexual orientation underlies gender identity, and finally the religious leaders who condemn Gender Studies in the name of religion. We clearly need a new anthropological view on the social construction of gender in the world’s different cultures to avoid confusion in the social sciences when we generalize from practices and problems that are specific to our societies.

Bibliography


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3. At the end of 2008, Rama Yade, then Secretary of State for Human Rights, defended before the United Nations a motion condemning all discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender. She cited the Yogyakarta Principles, which had already associated these two concepts in UN terms (March 2007) and which followed the Declaration of Montreal, which stemmed from the first international conference on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, and intersex people (LGBTI).

4. On December 22, 2008, in his address to the Roman Curia, Pope Benedict XVI officially condemned the concept of “gender” (*sic*) and “gender studies” as contrary to the Holy Spirit and the Creation. He was arguably caught up in the confusion between gender and sexual orientation, and in particular homosexuality as gender.


