Reproduction and Inheritance: Goody Revisited

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Key Words
property, devolution, kinship, law, Eurasia

Abstract
According to Jack Goody, in a body of work that dates back to the 1950s, differences in the mode of inheritance between Eurasia and sub-Saharan Africa have multiple connections to domestic groups, kin terminology, politics and stratification, and above all, productive systems. Goody’s theory is built on evolutionist assumptions and draws in part on statistical analysis of the Ethnographic Atlas. Theoretically and methodologically unfashionable among sociocultural anthropologists, his work has been largely ignored in recent decades. This article considers the standard criticisms and reviews pertinent recent work on kinship and property in rural Europe and in legal anthropology. Inheritance was supposed to lose its fundamental social significance in socialist societies, and it also came to play a smaller role in the social reproduction of advanced capitalist societies. However, this eclipse may prove to be temporary, and a reengagement with the topic on the part of anthropologists is overdue.
INTRODUCTION

The notion of reproducing economic relations, or relations of political domination, or the reproduction of society itself, has been frequently deployed in the social sciences from Marx and Engels to Bourdieu and Meillassoux. The topic is potentially broad enough to include virtually everything that sociocultural anthropologists study, but this article focuses on property transmission. Inheritance is best conceptualized broadly as the intergenerational devolution of valuables, including many forms of inter vivos transfer. It links the sphere of production to that of kinship and marriage and has far-reaching implications for the development of social institutions in general. The key figure in the elaboration of these links is Jack Goody, who in an oeuvre stretching over more than five decades has placed “diverging devolution” (a term he prefers to bilateral inheritance) at the center of a longue durée account of Eurasian history since the urban revolution of the late Bronze Age. In the first part of this review, I outline Goody’s vision, which was set out most concisely and comprehensively in Production and Reproduction (1976). Both in terms of theory, where he addressed an agenda shaped by Maine, McLennan, and Morgan in the nineteenth century, and in terms of methods, where he relied heavily on the data coded in Murdock’s Ethnographic Atlas, Goody’s work went against the dominant grain of the twentieth-century discipline. The fields he sought to draw together are nowadays fragmented; I discuss some recent work in just two of these fields. Large-scale comparisons over millennia remain unfashionable in sociocultural anthropology. Yet between the detail of localized ethnographies and the universalist aims of new cognitive approaches, Goody’s diverging devolution hypothesis remains an outstanding example of middle range theory, notable for both its non-Marxist materialism and its engagement with the work of archaeologists and historians.

THE GOODY ARGUMENT

Goody’s abiding interest in mechanisms of property transmission originated in his fieldwork in Northern Ghana in the early 1950s and drew on traditions of comparative legal scholarship, which had strong influence on the descent theorists of the British school (Goody 1962). Although he is often associated with these earlier theorists, Goody frequently criticizes the circularity, holism, and synchronicism of structural-functionalism, which led some scholars to project African descent models onto Eurasia without paying attention to fundamental differences in productive systems, the devolution of property, and ensuing differences in domestic roles and succession strategies. Instead of male property passing to men (sons inherit from their fathers or from their mother’s brother in matrilineal societies) and female property to women, the dominant pattern in Eurasia is for both male and female offspring to inherit from a conjugal estate. Drawing on Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) data, Goody links this observation to the predominance of monogamy over polygyny and of “vertical” dowry transfers (an important form of premortem inheritance) over “horizontal” payments of bridewealth. The contrast is further developed in terms of roles and quasi-kinship relationships: Monogamy is associated with concubinage, and emotional tensions, which in Africa are focused on cowives, are directed in Eurasia toward the stepmother. Adoption is also shown to be primarily a Eurasian institution to provide an heir; it is largely superfluous in Africa, where polygyny and fostering provide flexible alternatives (Goody 1982). Late marriage and high rates of celibacy are further consequences in some parts of Eurasia. Outside the domestic domain, diverging devolution is linked to increased social stratification and complex polities. Finally, it is linked to individualizing (i.e., descriptive rather than classificatory) kin terminologies.
But diverging devolution is not the ultimate cause of the fundamental contrast between Eurasia and sub-Saharan Africa. Generalizations about causality are hazardous, but the strong links between the domestic, sociological, and productive domains are incontrovertible (Figure 1). Diverging devolution is associated with advanced agriculture (defined by use of the plough and/or irrigation), which requires new gendered divisions of labor, enables higher yields, and converts land into a new kind of property object. In its general thrust, Goody's argument is consistent with the evolutionism of Morgan (1877) and also with Marxist historical materialism (Engels 1972), though he largely avoided the language of class struggle and exploitation.

Much of Goody's later work is devoted to detailed historical elaboration of the hypotheses outlined in Production and Reproduction. Two volumes address developments in Europe (Goody 1983, 2000), but his principal purpose, exemplified in Goody (1990), a magnum opus devoted mainly to Asian materials, has been to criticize a basic Western bias in the most influential accounts of the emergence of the modern world. The impressive economic performances of East Asian countries have not been inhibited by "primitive" domestic institutions or by Confucian or other maladaptive mentalities. Anticipating arguments that have recently been advanced in other quarters (Frank 1998), Goody shows that Western teleological accounts have "stolen" Eurasian history by misrepresenting East Asian contributions (Goody 1996, 2006b). He recently (2006a) reiterated his debt in this line of thinking to archaeologist Gordon Childe, who traced the ultimate unity of the landmass back to the urban revolution of the late Bronze Age.

Although most of his work is devoted to the preindustrial era, Goody has also provided suggestive insights into the property and inheritance dilemmas of both modern capitalist
societies (1998b) and of socialist societies (2003). I briefly consider both variants below. What I do not attempt here is to provide an assessment either of the vast literature on property or of Goody’s entire oeuvre; property transmission is a central theme in his work, but it by no means exhausts it.

GENERAL ASSESSMENTS

Goody’s work has occasionally been dismissed as reductionist and vulgar materialist. Some enduring criticisms were formulated by Yanagisako (1979). She was respectful of some parts of his thesis, particularly concerning the contrast between bridewealth and dowry, but questioned both “the empirical generality and analytic utility of his typology” (p. 172). As we have seen, Goody aims at more than just a typology, but Yanagisako was scornful in her predictions:

His causal model in which technological factors of production are the primary movers in the evolution of domestic organization probably will not stand so well against the test of time. . . . The problem, of course, is inherent in any evolutionary scheme that rests on a crude succession of types. For however sophisticated the quantitative hardware, one cannot derive historical process from ahistorical, cross-sectional data. (p. 172)

Despite Goody’s pursuit of the contrasts in domestic role sets between Eurasia and Africa, for Yanagisako he is as guilty as Malinowski in generalizing from a genealogical grid and taking the nuclear family as society’s basic and natural unit.

1 Goody (1976) noted Althusser’s formulation that the mode of production dominates “in the last instance,” but he took no part in the neo-Marxist debates of the 1970s concerning the forces and relations of the productive “base.” This did not prevent his being classified by Hindess & Hirst (1975) as a vulgar materialist, to which he replied that theirs was a highly vulgar form of idealism (see Goody 1980, p. 17). His aversion to truly reductionist approaches is made clear in his criticisms of Diamond (Goody 1998b).

These criticisms would probably still be endorsed by most sociocultural anthropologists. Goody’s hopes that new computing technologies would enable the thorny issues of causality to be addressed in more sophisticated ways have not yet been realized. Instead those questions have largely been avoided. Some scholars continue to use the HRAF to pursue cross-cultural comparison, but the agendas seem to have narrowed. Thus the authors of a recent study of polygyny conclude that its best predictors are high rates of male mortality in warfare (as suggested in the nineteenth century by Herbert Spencer) and high exposure to pathogens (Ember et al. 2007). They acknowledge the arguments of Goody (following Ester Boserup) concerning the negative association with plough agriculture and land scarcity, but point out that all these models remain frustratingly crude because we still lack any means of measuring land scarcity.

In the tradition of Yanagisako (and behind her David Schneider), ethnographers have continued creatively to extend the study of kinship (Carsten 2000, Schweitzer 2000, Strathern 1992). Goody did much work at that level himself, and his own interest in institutions such as concubinage and adoption presaged some of the recent work on cultures of relatedness. But he also believes that ethnographic studies should be complemented by more general, bird’s eye perspectives, including long-term historical trends as best we can infer or conjecture them. Perhaps the most significant effort of this kind in recent decades has been a theory of house-based societies as a transitional form between simple and complex structures of kinship. But Lévi-Strauss’s (1983) definition of the house is vague: “a corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods and its titles down a real or imaginary line” (p. 174). Goody’s

2 For Goody, exercises of this sort have little value because they distort the broader picture of social reproduction: “[T]o start by trying to explain polygyny is to start from the wrong end” (1976, p. 51).
work is not addressed in the ensuing literature (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995).

Indeed the Goody approach is nowadays largely ignored in anthropological research and curricula, and the terms devolution and social reproduction may be slipping into oblivion. New forms of property—biogenetic, cultural, intellectual etc.—attract plenty of attention, reflecting intensified commoditization and globalization (Hart 2008, Verdery & Humphrey 2004). Some anthropologists have emphasized radical cross-cultural differences in subject-object relations (Strathern 1999), but others insist that it is still useful to apply analytic definitions of property and inheritance for comparative analysis (von Benda-Beckmann et al. 2006). Whereas the latter volume emphasizes legal anthropology, the collection edited by Gilman & Hunt (1998) addresses a broad range of economic anthropology. But the role of property in long-term change and the precise mechanisms of its devolution receive little attention in either of these volumes.

Why the neglect? Goody’s approach has an undeniable affinity to the unpopular paradigm of modernization theory, which posited monogamy and the nuclear family as the domestic institutions to which other forms would eventually have to give way. Goody is emphatic in rejecting the transfer of Western models to postcolonial Ghana, but in taking this position he explicitly relates the African models to a less developed economy and implies that, at some later stage, the Western (or rather Eurasian) patterns are likely to emerge. In short, he represents an evolutionist perspective, which has long been as unfashionable in the mainstream of the discipline as has the use of the HRAF data sets.

Even among those anthropologists who continue to view their discipline as historical comparative sociology, few feel comfortable at the level of continents. Most sociocultural anthropologists have preferred to focus more narrowly on single societies or ethnographic cases. It is simply not possible to appreciate or to refute Goody’s theories at this level. Goody was well aware from his own work in Ghana that not all African polities were so undifferentiated and that land was not equally abundant everywhere.\(^1\) Within Eurasia, the regional and local variety are bewildering, but it is pointless to seize on details to question the Goody model, e.g., by pointing to the widespread occurrence of horizontal transfers at marriage, because nowhere does Goody claim that bridewealth and dowry are fully exclusive. One of the few to tackle the big picture (though both his time span and his spatial frame of reference remain restricted compared with those of Goody) is Macfarlane, who in his early work celebrated the uniqueness of English ego-centered kinship and traced individualist attitudes toward property, exemplified in testamentary freedom, back to the origins of the Common Law. Later, an engagement with the Japanese case obliged Macfarlane (1997) to recognize that quite different domestic institutions were equally compatible with rapid accumulation. Macfarlane places more emphasis than Goody on demographic trends. The ultimate causes of the success of England and Japan in escaping from the Malthusian traps are traced to similarly favorable geographical and political circumstances (“islandhood”). Impartible inheritance was also crucial, but the associated mechanisms differed radically. Whereas the Japanese solved the problem of farm succession primarily through the adoption of nonkin, in England (as Goody acknowledges but does not explain) adoption was not legally codified until the twentieth century and farm labor needs were met through the extensive use of servants and hired hands. Through these mechanisms, according to Macfarlane, England and Japan became the first agrarian societies to drive a wedge between production and reproduction, thereby paving the way for industrial modernity.

\(^1\)In a striking contrast on the island of Madagascar, Bloch (1975) showed how the endogamous practices of the Merina distinguished them from the neighboring Zafamaniry, always potentially keen to expand their local groups. Bloch’s neo-Marxist explanation emphasized Merina investment in rice terraces as the key to the “end of affinity.” This conforms to the predictions of Goody’s model under conditions of intensified agriculture; the point is that such investments in land were rare in Africa.
INHERITANCE AND SUCCESSION IN RURAL EUROPE

Macfarlane’s is a work of grand synthesis rare in contemporary anthropology, but it is also worth looking more closely at more narrowly focused studies in Europe, where the abundance of records has allowed anthropologists to continue close cooperation with historians and other scholars (Kertzer & Barbagli 2001–2003). Scholars have oscillated between macro- and microregional classifications (Viazzo 2007). Although some spatial patterns are robust over centuries, Viazzo warns against excessively broad models such as the “Mediterranean family”. Noting that behavior toward close kin can change with astonishing speed, he questions “cultural fault lines” and also the use of quantitative evidence in interpreting kinship: Frequency of contact and levels of financial support may not be adequate indicators of the quality of relationships.

These warnings are pertinent to the theme of inheritance. Older notions of a common north-west European pattern of impartible inheritance (little stressed by Goody) have had to be modified as more and more microregions are detected. In Spain, for example, most regions are characterized by partible inheritance, the principle commonly favored in the legislation of modern nation states. In Catalonia, however, “unipersonal succession” is assured through the prevalence of “stem family” formations (Barrera-González 1998). Following Skinner on Japan (1993), Barrera-González questions whether the egalitarian fragmentation of property can be considered a form of succession at all. Catalan primogeniture is associated with strong traditions of literacy and the written law, along with larger households, late marriage, active matchmaking, high rates of celibacy, and a strong ideological emphasis on the ancestral house. However, this particular succession system is Oriental rather than European inasmuch as the patriarch does not retire but retains effective authority even after the marriage of the eldest son and heir, who is obliged to await his father’s death before he fully succeeds to the role. Barrera-Gonzállez concludes (following Habakkuk 1955) by speculatively associating Catalonia with England and virtuous causal chains: In both cases, impartible inheritance tended to promote social mobility, more efficient agriculture, and the first shoots of industrial development.

A significant earlier contribution was Bourdieu’s investigation of high rates of celibacy in Béarn (1962). Bourdieu and Goody share an underlying concern with “property transfers as tactics for maintaining status and power and reproducing symbolic capital” (de Haan 1994, p. 161). Bourdieu’s later elaboration (1976) of how ideals of honor provided scope for individual agency in the manipulation of marriage and inheritance rules is viewed by de Haan as undermining Goody’s arguments, but it can equally be seen as filling in an ideological dimension neglected by the latter. In any case, changing marriage patterns too can be related to material factors, as in early modern Württemberg, where the shift toward more endogamous marriages resulted from rising populations and the increased value of land in a region of partible inheritance (Sabean 1990). de Haan (1994) makes the important point that the functional vagueness of Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” may be hard to sustain in the conditions of an increasingly commoditized agriculture, when the “rules of the game” become more explicit and rigid (p. 166).

One way to formalize succession rules is that of state law. Yet regional diversity has persisted, even within a small country such as the Netherlands. The farmers of the eastern district of Twente maintained viable farms through a system of impartible inheritance long after state law had decreed equal rights for all siblings. de Haan draws on Lévi-Strauss’s (1983) notion of the société à maison to explain how ideas about the land as an estate and obligations to kin continue to play a role in the present day, defying the application of any narrow economic calculus to farmers’ decisions concerning the transmission of their property. Kinship loyalties based on the continuity of the
house are similarly central in Catalonia and in Bourdieu’s Béarn case. By contrast, the farmers of Brittany have continuously divided and recombined their farms (Segalen 1991). Echoing a very old distinction in the anthropological literature, Augustins (1990) argues that in the Breton case kinship rather than residence is the basic principle of social organization.

The ideological dimension is well treated in Cole & Wolf’s comparative study in South Tyrol (1974). Whereas the German-speaking residents of St. Felix have an ideology of impartible inheritance, the Romance speakers of Tret insist on partibility. The difference has considerable implications for interpersonal relations, but it transpires that average farm size is the same in the two communities. Although the authors were initially inclined to emphasize cultural factors as prior to and independent of ecology and economics, in the final analysis they had to recognize complex interaction. (Similar conclusions emerge from many other studies.) Two decades after the original research Cole was astonished by the changes he found in St. Felix (2003). A plethora of wage employment opportunities had helped transform peasants into farmers and converted the inheritance norm from male primogeniture to female ultimogeniture. Farming was no longer the basis of the economy, land ownership had lost its crucial function, and typically it was now the youngest daughter who stayed on to provide care for the aging parents; also striking was the fact that villagers told the ethnographer that this had always been their custom.

Summarizing the contributions to their rich volume, which include several explorations of the longue durée by historians as well as case studies of contemporary change from both Eastern and Western Europe, Heady & Grandits (2003) suggest cautiously that

[over the very long-term there is evidence of a movement away from systems that stressed communal inheritance and defined kinship identity in patrilineal terms, towards systems of partible or impartible inheritance and a conception of identity that emphasizes property over kinship, conceptualizing kinship in bilateral terms. However, the shifts involved are neither uniform nor complete. (p. 6)]

**LAW, LAWYERS, LEGAL PLURALISM**

The European studies discussed above reveal ubiquitous tensions between state law and local norms. The distinction between partible and impartible inheritance may be clear in theory, but it is often muddy in practice. Customary law diverges from state codes, the norms articulated by villagers may be different again, and what people actually do with their resources must be analyzed at a different level altogether. Notarial documents may create the impression that status is giving way to contract, that state law is penetrating the intimacy of the family; yet villagers may manipulate the law to serve their traditional, nonindividualist purposes, e.g., when making wills or registering “fictional” transfers inter vivos to gain tax benefits or cement informal pension arrangements within the kin group (Abrahams 1991).

These discrepancies point to broader analytic issues in legal anthropology. Goody has been criticized for failing to maintain a consistent distinction between inheritance transfers and other forms of alienation (von Benda-Beckmann 1979, 1994). If a property owner has testamentary freedom to bequeath wealth at his death to whomever he wishes, then it is clearly insufficient to consider only dowry and transfers to legal heirs as forms of inter vivos inheritance: Account should also be taken of other transfers made before death, including the gifts that Goody treats as “counter-inheritance” strategies. von Benda-Beckmann calls for a more rigorous approach to inheritance in terms of “nonreciprocal diachronic transfers.” He distinguishes four types of transfer pertaining to “actions of last will,” including “property transfers—donations—which are retroactively drawn into the diachronic dimension and subjected to different criteria of validity than obtained during the property holder’s lifetime” (1994, p. 118). This analytic clarity is
a prerequisite for grasping how inheritance is shaped in practice, often by different systems of law simultaneously. In his Ambon case study, von Benda-Beckmann documents the complex mixing of local (adat) law, religious (sharia) law, and state (Dutch) law in colonial Indonesia. As in Sabean's European study (1990), the diachronic flows are continuous, not concentrated at the moment of death. The long-term story here too is that devolution is increasingly concentrated on direct descendants, and individuals come to enjoy greater freedom both to give away their property during their lifetimes and to bequeath it.

Islamic inheritance law in Indonesia differed considerably from the adat systems, notably in establishing heirs bilaterally, but Islamic jurisprudence is itself far from static and homogenous. Contrary to some Orientalist “superimposition” theories, women in at least some regions of the Middle East received their share long before the writings of the Prophet, which in key respects resembled the provisions of Christianity and Judaism (Mundy 1988). Local diversity persisted long after the introduction of written codes of inheritance law, and Mundy has illustrated this in two major empirical studies, first in Yemen (1995) and later in a historical study of what is now a region of northern Jordan (Mundy & Saumarez Smith 2007). The latter develops a powerful tripartite model to analyze the “three moments of property”: The first is the law, the second its administration in the wider context of governance, and the third consists in concrete realities of ecology and production; it is usually the last that holds the key to understanding why women should be endowed with land in some places but not in others. Mundy’s intensive focus on property devolution challenges prevalent idealist models of “tribal” societies in the Middle East, with their one-sided focus on agnatic descent. Goody would surely approve of the way in which her work modifies his model (see Goody 1990) because the incidence of diverging devolution is shown to depend more on agrarian sociology than on legal texts or that least satisfactory of variables, “culture.”

For Goody, one of the distinctive features of the Middle East is high divorce rates. In a more recent contribution (1998b), he draws attention to a recent sharp rise in the divorce rate in Western societies, which, together with the increased incidence of single mothers, is generating new social tensions and excessive demands on taxpayers. His solution is to revive practices of endowment and to make inventories of all the property that the partners bring to a marriage to facilitate that property’s redistribution in the event of divorce. Although dowry has long had a bad press, notably in India (see Basu 2005), Goody argues that it should not automatically be opposed by feminists. Far from reducing women to the status of property, it is more likely to strengthen their position. More generally, the earmarking of valuables should facilitate the earlier devolution of property by the elder generation and minimize recourse to artful lawyers, whose involvement generally benefits men rather than women but above all, the lawyers themselves.

Whereas Goody argues that “keeping matters out of the hands of courts and lawyers must remain a major personal and social objective, if only because of the expense involved to individuals or to the community” (1998b, p. 211), for dynastic families in the United States, state law has long insinuated itself into the heart of the kin group (Marcus 1992). Descendants of these elites perceive their wealth and their relations to each other not in terms of an idealized kin group but through the legal instruments provided by trusts and foundations. Fiduciary professionals, many of them lawyers, assume the managerial responsibilities for the fortune and, in a sense, become the true heirs. The symbolic or mystical significance of the dynasty comes to exceed the economic: Family idioms serve to give inherited wealth a cloak of moral legitimacy and provide an object onto which wider sections of the population can project their desires. However, Marcus is also sensitive to changing political economy and sociological relations. In an afterword to his chapter on the fiduciary, he points out that the British structural functionalist anthropologists drew heavily on
a nineteenth-century legal scholarship in their constructions of African descent groups (pp. 81–82). Whereas Goody was critical of Maine’s assumptions for Eurasia (1976, pp. 77–81), Marcus (echoing Bourdieu 1976) was skeptical of the value of such legalistic models anywhere in the preindustrial world. However, he argued persuasively that legal categories must be given due recognition in any cultural analysis of contemporary Western societies, where they feature so prominently.

**CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM**

For most of the population in Western societies, in recent generations the inheritance of family property has been less significant in determining the life course than has the individual acquisition of skills and qualifications. Change has been a gradual, uneven process. Long after land had ceased to be the dominant factor of production, the “new men” of Britain’s industrial revolution still strove to convert their wealth into status and political power through the acquisition of a landed estate, which they could pass on in the family line.4 The estate, ranch, and even the modest summer house have retained much of their cultural significance as transgenerational familial property (Balfe 1999).

The continuing economic and stratificational significance of property has been neglected in recent years and Marcus’s work is exceptional among contemporary anthropologists. It has been left to sociologists to document the continued importance of intergenerational transfers in family life (Kohli 2004) and in the macrostructuration of capitalist societies (Miller & McNamee 1998). The topic of inheritance also lends itself well to the development of sociological theory. Beckert has shown that normative “discourses of evaluation” have developed in significantly different ways in the United States, France, and Germany since the eighteenth century (2007, 2008).5 These cultural discourses can be related to political and economic developments in these three countries (the absence of a revolutionary moment in the eighteenth century is one key to the German case) and also to their institutions and legal codes. Beckert argues that the key ideas have created a “cognitive lock-in” over the past two centuries, shaping the perceptions and thereby the rational actions of individual actors. His theories have a multidimensional ambition comparable to those of Goody. The major contrast is that the longue durée of this sociologist covers two centuries, whereas that of the anthropologist extends over some five millennia. Perhaps it is his longer time frame that leads Goody to privilege material causation, whereas the economic sociologist Beckert gives priority to ideas.

If the revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century placed a new ideological emphasis on equality and the Code Napoléon proclaimed the egalitarian treatment of siblings, in practice, even after the introduction of inheritance taxation to offset the expanding services provided by the state, equality (of opportunity as well as of outcome) has remained a chimera. The transmission of cultural capital has helped to ensure that the deep inequalities characteristic of preindustrial Eurasia have persisted in new forms. At this point it is instructive to consider the more radical attempt to resolve the Eurasian property problem: Whereas in Africa, mild forms of social differentiation could evoke accusations of sorcery, the structural inequalities of Eurasia produced socialism (Goody 2003).

Engels’s (1972) historical materialism outlined an evolution from “primitive communism,” defined in terms of the absence of

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4 As Habakkuk (1994) explains for the nineteenth century, “land was the most visible and therefore the most effective way of exhibiting wealth. No one could tell the worth of a money fortune or assess the value of the units in which it was held. But anyone could make a shrewd guess at the value of 1000 acres” (p. 403).

5 Whereas American discourses emphasize individual testamentary freedom, in France this individualism is modified by a concern with the family, which in Germany takes even stronger form and affects the very definition of property (e.g., in the work of Hegel).

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property, to the predominance of private property under capitalism. Accordingly, twentieth-century socialist regimes set out to eliminate the inheritance of private productive property. Whereas (at least in principle) liberal property codes do not rank property forms, the Soviet Union discriminated against private ownership, which was inferior to cooperative (collective) ownership, which was in turn inferior to state ownership. Under Marxist-Leninist-Maoist socialism, land and other means of production were nationalized (collectivized) in broadly similar ways. The irony was that this socialist revolution began not in the advanced industrial regions of Western Europe, as Marx had anticipated, but in economically backward Russia.

The most ambitious attempt by an anthropologist to theorise socialism is that of Verdery (1996), who emphasizes the inefficiency of bureaucratic domination compared with the market. The notorious “economies of shortage” were dealt with in very different ways, but some degree of “informality” and “manipulable resources” was to be found even in the more rigid of the planned economies and was arguably crucial to their reproduction (Humphrey 1983). By the 1980s, Hungarian socialists had greatly diluted collectivist principles governing access to and control over resources (Hann 1990). Goody (2003) echoed many previous critics in suggesting that poor economic performance must be connected to the lack of incentive that resulted from the impossibility of passing on productive wealth to one’s offspring; however, when this restriction was removed under the “shock therapy” of the 1990s, the results were an economic disaster.

In fact, most types of nonproductive property could be inherited under socialism as under capitalism. The consequences for social re-production can be compared in Berlin, where Borneman (1992) documented the considerable differences in kinship, marriage patterns, and the life course that developed in just a few decades between East and West. The socialists in the east were ideologically committed to improving the position of women and went even further than did most other socialist states to draw women into the labor force and provide child care from a very early age. However, inheritance per se plays only a minor role in the contrasts drawn by Borneman for the era of the Cold War: Even in the capitalist West, for the great majority of citizens, material transfers were no longer decisive in determining life chances and sustaining parental power. But there are some signs in the era of “neoliberalism” that the pendulum might be swinging back again in all parts of Eurasia. Thus the role of inheritance in the constitution of English kinship seems to be increasing as many more people now have an estate to pass on, thanks mainly to a sharp rise in home ownership in recent decades (Finch & Mason 2000).

In those Eastern European countries where private property was well established before the imposition of collectivization, there was strong interest in reestablishing those rights in the 1990s (Hann 1993, Verdery 2004). In some countries, the retention of legal title to land, generally viewed as a legal irrelevance following the imposition of collectivization, suddenly turned out to be crucially significant. Citizens were angry when legislation made it difficult or impossible to regain one’s previous property or when local factors obstructed implementation (Hann et al. 2003). In Russia, by contrast, entrepreneurial farming was much slower

6The devolution of nonproductive property grew in social significance in most countries of the Soviet bloc before its collapse. The high rates of social mobility achieved in the wake of the revolution were seldom sustained. Inequalities were particularly acute in the housing market (see Szelenyi 1983).

7A recent survey in Germany indicated that almost 90% of respondents were in basic agreement with the statement that “[i]t is just that parents should transmit their property to their children, even when this means that the children of richer parents have better life chances.” In legislative changes currently under discussion in parliament it is proposed to reduce the taxation of wealth that is passed to one’s own children and grandchildren, thereby strengthening the privileged position of the nuclear family vis-à-vis wider kin groups (Bernau 2007).
to develop, inhibited by communal sentiments and envy (Heady & Miller 2003). One finds little evidence of a dominating urge to accumulate and pass on private productive property, although this did not prevent governments and their Western advisers from pressing ahead with privatization schemes.

That states which call themselves socialist are capable of flexible property arrangements and high rates of economic growth is well demonstrated by China and Vietnam over the past three decades. Much productive property, along with other valuables, can now be owned and inherited. At present, land is leased for periods of up to 30 years, within which period use rights are inherited within the family. According to critics, these arrangements fail to satisfy either the criteria of equity or the criteria of efficiency (because they preclude farm expansion and provide no secure incentive for long-term improvements). Western proponents of a property rights approach approach question whether China can possibly sustain high rates of growth, given citizens’ lack of confidence in impartial legal codes. So far, however, the reform model has maintained its momentum. Diverging devolution combines with the norm of unipersonal succession consequent on the one-child policy, and individual claims to property have undermined notions of familial as well as collective property (see Oi 1999, Yan 2003). Overall, the recent Chinese experience confirms Goody’s account of East Asia as resembling Europe in the long-term “fit” between domestic institutions and rapid modernization, and as profoundly hierarchical.6 Meanwhile it would seem that the challenges of how to develop new systems of welfare and social security to support a rapidly aging population are fundamentally the same for East and for West.

CONCLUSION

No anthropologist has argued more convincingly than Goody against Eurocentric accounts of the emergence of the modern world, and few have undertaken comparative work across the levels and time frames that he has addressed. For most anthropologists of his generation and since, the ambition of Wolf (1982) (corresponding to Wallerstein’s notion of the “modern world system”) is already very longue durée. Historical sociologists have begun to develop new forms of “civilizational analysis,” and the notion of the “axial age” has been rediscovered (Arnason et al. 2005). Yet even these cover only a fraction of the period tackled by Goody.

In recent sociocultural anthropology, Goody’s panorama has been truncated temporally and fragmented thematically. His work is little used even in the subfields to which he has contributed prominently. I have discussed some of these above; space has precluded a review of many others. Europeanist work continues to improve our understanding of the links between property and kinship, legal anthropology has the potential to invigorate theoretical frames, and the study of socialist societies reveals some of the grim consequences of dispensing with the private ownership and transmission of productive property. Another subfield in which more research is needed is the interface between anthropology and demography because fertility obviously has profound consequences for inheritance (Kertzer & Fricke 1997). As noted above, Macfarlane (1997) saw England and Japan as the pioneers of what elsewhere took the form of “demographic transition.” Instead of the “natural” tendency to maximize births, these privileged islanders began to calculate the costs and benefits of additional offspring. Similar economistic assumptions have continued to dominate the literature, including studies of why fertility levels have plunged to below replacement levels in many parts of Europe (see Kertzer & Fricke 1997). Whereas Goody (1976) cautioned against the export of

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6 Much has been made of China’s success in raising hundreds of millions of citizens out of absolute poverty, but statistics suggest that income distribution has become even more unequal than that of the United States (Economist 2007, p. 50).
European models of the family to Africa on the grounds that the African economies of that era could not possibly sustain welfare states of the sort that had evolved in modern Europe, it has recently become clear that this model of welfare cannot be sustained in Europe either. It seems likely that lower fertility is one of a number of factors working to increase the significance of familial material inheritance for life chances, but more careful analysis of changing “generational contracts” is needed (Wrigley 2003).

Most of the demographic arguments are grounded primarily in individualist economic calculations. However, Heady (2007) has suggested that fertility rates may be better explained if we think of reproduction in terms of intergenerational Maussian gift exchange. He argues that only in exceptional situations of turbulence will the fundamental moral norm of meeting replacement needs not be fulfilled. Heady has recently led a large-scale comparative investigation of European kinship. Data on inheritance have not yet been analyzed, but early results confirm the persistence of macroregional variations in kin recognition and demographic strategies. With its combination of large-scale statistical analysis and ethnography, the Kinship and Social Security in Europe project is in some respects a belated realization of Goody’s methodological blueprint, even though the investigations have so far been restricted to eight European countries (Heady & Grandits 2008).

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT
The author is not aware of any biases that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

LITERATURE CITED

*Economist*. 2007. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more. *Economist*: Aug. 11:50


