

Correspondence

Interpreting Indian Society: A Monistic Alternative to Dumont's Dualism

Our "innocent" essay on "Caste Systems" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*¹ has been taken by reviewers Barnett, Fruzzetti, and Ostor in the last number as threatening to dismiss the contributions of Louis Dumont.² Our essay makes no critical reference to Dumont's work; it was commissioned as a descriptive, nontechnical article for the intelligent general reader; its accuracy is not much disputed by the reviewers.

However, the reviewers seem to regard with dismay certain novel, possibly monistic theoretical and epistemological implications of the essay. They repeat with distaste some of the essay's terms, "genus," "substance" and "code," "rank," "exchange," "thought," etc., preferring Dumont's words "purity and pollution," "hierarchy," "ideology," "religion," etc. For the reviewers, such differences raise unresolvable doubts and confusions to the extent that they attribute to us a reductionist "transactional theory of caste,"³ which we in no way advocate.

We think the reviewers' alarm may be premature, as they have yet to attempt an historical analysis or an intelligible exposition of "Caste Systems," either alone or together with its three explanatory papers,⁴ or with Inden's closely documented and closely related book.⁵ We do not know whether the reviewers have acquainted themselves with the hundred-odd sources not cited by Dumont that are used in our papers. We think the reviewers would be well advised to consider at least the six other recent research monographs⁶ and major papers⁷ on which our present formulations especially rely.

¹ McKim Marriott and Ronald B. Inden, "Caste Systems," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed. (Chicago, 1974), *Macropaedia* III, pp. 982-91.

² Steve Barnett, Lina Fruzzetti, and Akos Ostor, "Hierarchy Purified: Notes on Dumont and His Critics," *JAS*, XXXV, 4 (1976), pp. 627-46.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 631-36.

⁴ Marriott and Inden, "Toward an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems," *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia*, ed. Kenneth A. David, World Anthropology Series (The Hague: Mouton, 1976, in press); Marriott, "An Ethnosociological View," *Ibid.*; Marriott, "Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism," *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior*, ed. Bruce Kapferer, ASA Essays in Social Anthropology, I. (Philadelphia: ISHI Publications, 1976), pp. 109-42.

⁵ Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976)

⁶ Lawrence A. Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India* (New York:

Columbia Univ. Press, 1975); Brenda E. F. Beck, *Peasant Society in Kohku: a Study of Right and Left Subcastes in South India* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1973); Paul G. Hiebert, *Konduru: Structure and Integration in a South Indian Village* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1971); Ronald B. Inden and Ralph W. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977, in press); Ravindra S. Khare, *Hindu Hearth and Home* (Delhi: Vikas, 1976); Susan S. Wadley, *Sbakti: Power in the Conceptual System of Karimpur Religion* (Chicago: Dept. of Anthropology, Univ. of Chicago, 1975).

⁷ Veena Das, "On the Categorization of Space in Hindu Ritual," *Text and Context: The Social Anthropology of Tradition*, ed. Ravindra K. Jain, ASA Essays in Social Anthropology, II (Philadelphia: ISHI Publications, 1976); Kenneth A. David, "And Never the Twain Shall Meet? Mediating the Structural Approaches to Caste Ranking," *Structural Approaches to South India Studies*, ed. Harry M. Buck and Glenn E. Yocum (Chambersburg, Pa: Wilson

We suppose that for comprehension of what we are about, the reviewers may also need to relax their insistence on "dialectics," "mediations," "representations," and other such concepts of the Western social sciences, which are particularly "heirs to a dualistic religion and philosophy," as Dumont says of our entire culture.⁸ Dualistic conceptions of method may become obstacles to understanding the old ideas of India, which is one of those "societies which believed themselves to be natural, . . . designing their very conventions after the principles of life and the world."⁹ We appreciate that it is not easy to venture outside one's established scientific paradigm and its methodology, but we hope the reviewers will make some effort.

The Common Enterprise

Meantime, we can assure readers that we are pursuing further much the same sort of enterprise as Dumont undertook in the 1950s, and are doing so similarly by bringing together contrastively some findings of anthropology and social science (Marriott) with some findings of indology and social history (Inden). Like him we are weighing alternative formulations, and not yet speaking of exhaustive proofs.

We share with Dumont the aim of constructing cultural models of the whole of South Asian society and like him we use caste systems as points of entry into this world. We share with Dumont the opinion that these models should be statements of relationships rather than of entities. We agree with him that rank (which he usually calls "hierarchy") and vertical solidarity between ranks, or dependency (which he also usually calls "hierarchy"), must be major features of such models. We further concur in his dissatisfaction with simply materialist models, and in his sense that the actors' ideas about bodily states must nevertheless be considered as related to Hindu social structure. We agree with him that a conception of the autonomous "individual" does not validate Hindu ideas of society, Dumont stressing the containment of the individual in larger units, we the "dividuality" of the person in the flow of social relationships.

Our model of the most universal and enduring features of South Asian thought relevant to "caste" rather similarly perceives that older "current" of ideas which Dumont recognizes in his essay on kingship.¹⁰ In that older, monistic philosophy (which one might as well call "Vedic"), Dumont notes that categories like "gods" and "men," "Brahmans" and "Kshatriyas," "priests" and "kings" are to be understood as relative rather than absolute, and are ranked through generosity as much as through possessions. Persons may overlap such categories, their identities blurred and transformed through gifts and other transfers, notably including food. Such observations by Dumont tend in the same direction as our formulation that the intersection of categories is as regular a process as segmentation in Vedic thinking about categories.¹¹

The interchangeability of "actor-" and "action-" definitions of social order, which is also a fundamental postulate in our general model of South Asian society, is resonant with Dumont's program of relativism, and is illustrated above and again in Dumont's

Books, 1974), pp. 43–80, and "Hierarchy and Equivalence in Jaffna, North Ceylon: Normative Codes as Mediator," *The New Wind*; Marvin G. Davis, "A Philosophy of Hindu Rank from Rural West Bengal," *JAS*, XXXVI, 1 (1976), pp. 5–24; Stanley J. Tambiah, "From Varna to Caste Through Mixed Unions," *The Character of Kinship*, ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 191–229; Margaret Trawick, "Principles of Continuity in Three Indian Sciences: Psychology of Samkhya and Yoga, Biology of Āyurveda, Sociology of Dhar-

maśāstra and Their Concentric Domains," M.A. paper in Anthropology, Univ. of Chicago, 1974.

⁸ "Caste, Racism and 'Stratification': Reflections of a Social Anthropologist," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* [hereafter *CIS*], V (1961), pp. 39–40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁰ "The Conception of Kingship in Ancient India," *CIS*, VI (1962), esp. pp. 48–61.

¹¹ Cf. Tambiah, "From Varna to Caste."

summary of epic and shastric evidence on the punitive power of the king: the king's power is said to be "immanent" in his person; his royal personage emerges from his punitive action; and his personal destruction is his misuse of power.¹²

We underscore Dumont's opinion that what such texts give is "not a normative view." They show no dualistic gap, or need for dialectic between what the reviewers call "ideology and practice." Instead, they demonstrate a naturalistic view, "something like a conclusion drawn from the empirical observation of human conduct."¹³ Dumont sees this ancient attitude as typifying both orthodox texts and the "popular mentality,"¹⁴ and again we concur. In the monism of these presumptions of Vedic thought—that is, in the provision of means for anything to be transmuted into any other—we also see a potential means for conceptual integration that may be equal to Dumont's early bold assertion that in its ideas and values of kinship, caste, religion, and politics, "India is one."¹⁵

Dumont's assertion of the unity and homogeneity of Indian civilization seems to us useful in the manner of a stochastic "null hypothesis," which requires rigorous disproof even if one does not believe in the assertion. We have come by and large to believe in it, however.

Dumont's Abandonment of Vedic Monism

Having found that the presumptions evident in Vedic thought do provide a good basis for formulating Indian unity and for understanding much of South Asian history and ethnography consistently, we are reluctant to concur with Dumont's relegation of the Vedic view to a dead past in favor of what he sees as a transforming current of opposed ideas. This other current of "secular," "rational" social thought he sees appearing first in the contractual theories of kingship authored by Jains and Buddhists. He detects it in the Kauṭilya Arthaśāstra and believes that it ultimately establishes itself as the characteristic mode of all politics in the subcontinent.¹⁶ We think that Dumont overestimates this modern-looking current, since such ideas have never been shown to have popular standing among Hindus.

In 1958, Dumont and Pocock had written that "there is only one hierarchy and there can, therefore, be only one kind of status . . . not *secular* status and *religious* status."¹⁷ But from 1962 to 1971, metaphysically dualistic schemes using Western terms ("religious" versus "secular," "status" versus "power," "purity" versus "pollution," etc.) proliferate in Dumont's perceptions of Hindu society, "the distinction between spiritual and temporal being carried out in an absolute fashion."¹⁸ The same Hindu books of *dharmā* whose views are "not . . . normative" in 1962 become "normative . . . religious law" in 1970.¹⁹

We applaud what we understand as Dumont's more recent inclination to delete these "absolutes," perhaps to regard such distinctions as analytic rather than ontological, and certainly to emphasize the genetic and other links between their representatives.²⁰ Such an inclination was perhaps already present in Dumont's uses of the concepts "complementarity," and later "hierarchy," as well as "encompassment"—devices necessitated by his feeling for the inaccuracy of characterizing Hindu thought simply in terms of that

¹² "Conception of Kingship," pp. 64–65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁵ "For a Sociology of India," *CIS*, I (1957), pp. 9–10.

¹⁶ "Conception of Kingship," pp. 61–64, 67–68, 75–76.

¹⁷ "A. M. Hocart on Caste—Religion and Power," *CIS*, II (1958), pp. 53–54.

¹⁸ "Conception of Kingship," p. 52.

¹⁹ Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 49.

²⁰ Dumont, "On Putative Hierarchy and Some Allergies to It," *CIS*, n.s. V (1971), pp. 70–71.

favorite structural formula, binary opposition. Yet even after these qualifications, a matrix of alien conceptual splits still seems built into the core of Dumont's post-1962 definitions and depictions of the Hindu caste system. We hope to see Dumont's newer emphasis on the idea of birth ("the Adam and Eve situation"²¹), rather than encompassed dualism, carried out systematically, and in indigenous terms, perhaps by the reviewers.

While awaiting such revision, we can agree with Dumont on the cumulative, inclusive ordering of Hindu concepts for the "ends" of life (*dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*). But like J. D. M. Derrett²² and others, we must record that we are not convinced by the indological reasons for Dumont's allocation of two of the three "ends"—*dharma* and *artha*—to different personnel: priest or Brahman *varṇa*, and king or Kshatriya *varṇa*, respectively. If such allocations were justifiable, we might agree with Dumont's translations of *dharma* in general as the sphere of "religion," and *artha* in general as the sphere of "political power"—concepts that are irreducibly separate in modern Western thought and are generally separate in personnel and institutions.

But in countless Hindu texts, as in everyday life, we find to the contrary that strivings toward the four "ends" of life are not differentially allocated among specialized persons. All are treated as inherent in all categories of beings. Thus, typical priests of Hindu literature may be venal or lustful; kings are often moralizers bent on salvation. Universally distributed as these general properties are, *dharma* may be better understood as "morality" (or within the actor as "code of conduct") and *artha* as "advantage." The Hindu taxonomies of "power," as we find them discussed in numberless texts as *brahman* or *śakti*, also go far beyond the royal or military varieties; once more, as with *dharma*, each *varṇa* and every being is said to have some particular kind of power.²³ To say in accord with these findings that the particular code of every person is thought to comprise and engender his particular power seems a more consequential as well as a more accurate (and "hierarchical"!) statement than to leave those features assigned to dichotomized persons, offices, *varṇas*, or levels.

A second prominent reason for Dumont's modeling of the Hindu caste system as an encompassed dualism between religious status and secular power was his understanding, based on the local impressions of certain ethnographers in the 1950s, that castes at "the extremes" of top and bottom are ranked with precision and fixity, while castes in the middle jockey ceaselessly for secular position. An impression that local politics in India are amoral and disordered, in contrast to the postulated "religious" order, was also given by the then-approved style of social structural ethnography, for indigenous moral ideas were deliberately excluded. However, improved data from a dozen studies of the local rankings of castes, including one by Barnett,²⁴ have failed to confirm the factual existence of the supposed ranking "problem of the middle." That *dharma* (which comprises concepts of attributes [*guṇa*], power [*śakti*], and action [*karma*]) is felt by Hindu actors to be directly involved in administration, conflict, leadership, etc., is demonstrated in other recent, culturally sensitive political studies.²⁵

If reasons from indology and ethnography do not require us to adopt a ranked, dualistic model today, we may nevertheless understand how one other diffuse reason, that

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²² "Rājadharmā," *JAS*, XXXV, 4 (1976), pp. 599–611.

²³ Wadley, *Śakti*.

²⁴ "The Structural Position of a South Indian Caste," Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Chicago, 1970.

²⁵ Davis, "A Philosophy of Hindu Rank"; Stanley J. Heginbotham, *Cultures in Conflict: The Four Faces of Indian Bureaucracy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1975); and others summarized by Marriott in "Hindu Transactions," pp. 132–35.

which the reviewers call "historical placement," may have been felt as more compelling by Dumont in his time. He stresses that the reasons were not of his own making, but were part of that "common endeavor . . . which seeks to answer problems which are before all of us."²⁶ During the years when Dumont was developing his model, the West supposed that it was developing South Asia, and the Western social sciences were similarly expanding abroad. Some active debates among anthropologists everywhere then were idealism versus materialism, sociological versus psychological explanations, and structuralism versus logical-positivistic ethnography; and among South Asianists, cultural unity versus political plurality, and idiographic indology versus a generalizing social science of stratification. Dumont favored the first, or cultural position in each of these debates, but without excluding the second. His simultaneous solution to all five issues was a single form of compromise—not totally denying the validity of the formidable opposing views, but granting each of them subordination by "encompassment" (also called "hierarchy").

One effect of this encircling maneuver is to thrust into the center of Indian cultural studies the analytic categories of French, German, and British social science.

Dumont's withdrawal from indology leaves this encompassed, residual middle ground as a colony for the non-cultural sciences, but seems to exile cultural understanding from what would otherwise be some of its richest provinces—the areas of economic, political, and personal action. The often very different South Asian concepts that might be "known" (our reviewers' language) in these provinces are largely replaced by the ideas of distinguished, but foreign "knowers." Here it does not seem to be Vyāsa or the Hindu grammarians, but Marx or F. G. Bailey who teaches the separation of "ideology" from material reality; not Manu, but Max Weber who instructs in the distinction between "status" and "power"; not Patañjali, but Rousseau who sees the individual constrained; not Caraka who here defines "purity" as separation from the organic aspect of man, but Durkheim or Albert Schweitzer.

Purity and Deviations, or Life and Transformations?

In their differing historical placement today, scholars of South Asian civilization are somewhat better equipped with ideas of cultural structure, with knowledge of texts and languages, and with observations of cultural behavior. They are now confronted in this area with flourishing cultural nationalisms. They are perhaps less confident of their own sciences, and are both abler and more willing to learn about and to learn from indigenous conceptual systems.²⁷

If scholarship is now so disposed, why do we not make explicit use of what the reviewers, following Dumont, believe to be "the one principle that would make sense of the transactions described—purity and pollution"? Of course, we have occasionally used those vague English words as rough translations of some of the many more precise and distinct Indian ideas, and we do not deny that they suggest parts of some important Indian paradigms. But we urge (1) returning those approximate ideas to their place within a larger, more accurately stated context of Indian cognitions and values, (2) differentiating them through many kinds of evidence beyond that of "ritual" alone, and (3) giving more attention to the connected syntactical (operative, transformational) processes by which such ideas enter into action.

²⁶ "Putative Hierarchy," p. 67, n. 28.

²⁷ David L. Szanton, "South and Southeast Asia:

New Concerns of the Council," *Social Science Research Council Items*, XXX (1976), pp. 13–15.

If we did not take these steps, but continued to postulate "purity" in the Judeo-Christian manner as the transcendent religious "criterion" of value orienting Hindu social life, we would be required, as we know from Dumont's experiments, to make a "shame-faced," encompassed exception out of that 50 percent of Hindus who are self-satisfied carnivores or power-wielding Kshatriyas, and to make apologies for innumerable other categories and "practices" that appear anomalous because they are "pure" but low. A dualistic methodology that makes a contrast between "ideology and practice" central to its purposes, as the reviewers advocate, may be comfortable with such procedures, and may even find virtue in the prolix casuistry they entail. Considerations of parsimony alone, however, are sufficient to urge that one seek to construct a model that can account without large exceptions and anomalies for more of the patterns observed.

As studies by several Indian anthropologists maintain,²⁸ the main explicit axis of Hindu striving is to receive and cultivate the divine gift of life, as opposed to death. Far from exalting separation from "the organic aspect of man" (Dumont's definition of "purity"²⁹), the moral code books, like villagers, seem to define the good things of their society to a large extent in what the West would call organic, or "life-science" terms. The values of the main life-axis are expressed in terms framing the whole purposes of ritual—*maṅgala*, *kalyāṇa*, etc., translated by us as promoting "bodily existence and well-being," or "auspiciousness," or "a higher quality of life"³⁰—and extending onward to salvation.³¹ Consideration of *maṅgala* was abruptly dropped by Dumont and Pocock in 1959, in favor of studying the impurity of death.³²

Further consideration of the life-optimizing value of Hinduism requires research on indigenous ideas of anatomy, genetics, nutrition, physiology, etc., and takes one much beyond the sociological and ritual studies previously thought adequate. Responsibility to this widened universe of ideas necessarily leads to more generalized summary statements regarding "substance-codes," their transactions and transformations.

Medical, moral, and ritual usages and texts are all happily found to provide regular structures for the variation and diversification of life—for ascetic and violent strategies, for widely different patterns of diet, kinship, and worship, suited to the actors' fluctuating natures. Here a biosocial outlook helps one to define lateral structures in areas that have generally been treated either as unstructured or as deviant.³³ As in modern natural scientific systems theory, the dualistic concept of "deviation" from an ideological norm or law is no longer required.

As Indian, like Western natural scientific ideas of life-processes are no respecters of boundaries, they lead us to understand the cognized South Asian person as permeable, composite, partly divisible, and partly transmissible. Processes internal to the person are described as continuous with processes of exchange between and among persons.³⁴

In attempting to specify "the cultural construction of the person," the reviewers appear to be formulating a similarly composite and microcosmic paradigm;³⁵ when they come to formulating the correlative syntactical processes, their position may be found even closer to ours.

²⁸ M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952), esp. Chs. III-IV; Das, "Categorization of Space"; Khare, *Hindu Hearth and Home*.

²⁹ *Homo Hierarchicus*, pp. 43, 50.

³⁰ Inden, *Marriage and Rank*, pp. 19, 83; "Caste Systems," p. 984; "Ethnology"; "Hindu

Transactions," pp. 123, 137.

³¹ Wadley, *Shakti*, Ch. V.

³² "Pure and Impure," *GIS*, III (1959), p. 11.

³³ "Hindu Transactions."

³⁴ Inden, *Marriage and Rank*, pp. 44-45; "Ethnology"; "Hindu Transactions."

³⁵ "Hierarchy Purified," p. 632.

Conclusion

In sum, we have been challenged by Dumont's earlier, tentatively monistic cultural approach to Indian civilization, and cautioned by his later, larger compromises with the dualistic Western social sciences. We are working toward his earlier goals by similar means, but with his experience behind us, with additional syntactical structural concepts, and with much new evidence.

In the course of our work, we have developed an increasing respect for the indigenous social sciences and other conceptual systems of South Asia, which are predominantly monistic. Most of the Western natural sciences have passed successfully from dualism to monism, and we expect that Western social scientists will also be able to do so. One way for them to try is to stretch their minds around those conceptual systems of South Asia that already have some of the features that the Western social sciences require. We do not pretend that such a *mokṣa*-like objective is easily attained, but we think it would not be a bad objective for them to make themselves—the knowers—somewhat like those South Asian objects that they would make known.

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