

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

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Sociology of Louis Dumont: Homo Hierarchicus II

Welcome back to the class. We are discussing a structuralist understanding of Indian society. We started discussing this very important sociologist Louis Dumont and his monumental work Homo Hierarchicus in the last class. We discussed structuralism as a very influential theoretical framework that emerged in Linguistics, which later found salience in other social science disciplines, especially in social anthropology. Dumont represents the tradition of French structuralism when he came to study Indian society. So in the previous class, we had a discussion about this, the basic premises of Homo Hierarchicus and why he believed that this book is a kind of argument to take the perspectives of the local people more seriously.

Dumont is talking about views from within and from without. He also argued that quite a lot of existing theoretical perspectives are eurocentric and ethnocentric and that does not provide adequate weightage to the perceptions of the local people. He wanted to correct all these kinds of deficiencies or issues that he identified in the way in which Indian society had been studied. We also discussed that many of the things that are taken for granted in European societies, like egalitarianism or individualism and individual rights and other things, need not be accurate in many other parts. Dumont in his first chapter, the introductory chapter, is appealing to the French people to be receptive to ideologically and intellectually understand other values so that they will better begin to understand their values.

We were discussing this particular slide in the previous class. The ideas the people express are related to each other by more fundamental ideas, even though they are unexpressed. Fundamental ideas go without saying and do not need to be distinct, that is tradition. Only their

corollaries are explicit. The caste system, for example, appears as a perfectly coherent theory once one adds the necessary but implicit links to the principles that the people themselves give.

In the last slide that we discussed in the previous class, Dumont argues that the task of the anthropologist and a sociologist is to understand the most fundamental principle. So he understood and argued as a structuralist that the structural principles, which are beyond human perceptions, human empirical capacities, and capabilities, need to be studied differently. Dumont following Bougle, one of the French masters in Sociology, chooses the Hindu notion of the fundamental opposition between pure and impure as his starting point for an understanding of the caste system. Bougle, another French anthropologist or sociologist, had already provided a fascinating and insightful understanding of the caste system, and Bourdieu very closely followed Bougle. Bougle argued that one of the fundamental notions within Hinduism is opposition between the pure and the impure. Please keep these two terms in mind. In the previous class, we mentioned how these binaries are essential in the structuralist scheme of things, The binary way of presenting things and understanding things is something very central to the structuralist argument. So he followed Bougle, who argued that the most fundamental structural base of Hindu social life is the opposition between the pure and the impure. Bougle defined the caste system as comprising hierarchically arranged hereditary groups separated from each other in certain respects, that as caste, endogamy, restriction on eating together and on physical contact but interdependent on others traditional division of labour. Now this is a very coherent definition of the caste system.

Bougle defined the caste system as comprised of hierarchically arranged hereditary groups. So these groups are arranged hierarchically, and hierarchy means the classification of social groups into superior and inferior. It is not a horizontal arrangement of things on the way to specific other attributes, but it is a hierarchical arrangement of groups with notions of superiority and inferiority, and they are all hereditary groups. You are born into a particular group, and your offspring are born into that particular group, so there is a clear hereditary line that passes through the generations of people. It is a hereditary group separated from each other in certain respects.

There is something that separates this one particular group from the other, and one important thing or the most fundamental thing that maintains the separation is a rule on caste endogamy. Caste endogamy is the rule that one has to get married within one's group. This group can vary, it can be caste endogamy, sub-caste endogamy, religious endogamy, or ethnic endogamy. Endogamy only tells you that one has to get married within the group, and this group can be defined in different ways. There are certain ways in which these groups are kept separate, and one of the fundamental rules is the rule of endogamy and then the restrictions on eating together or physical contact that these two groups are not allowed to have physical or social or civic social interactions, but they are interdependent on other things.

But each of these castes is dependent on others for their basic survival, and that is how a structural functionalist explanation or a functionalist explanation of the caste system would function. So it is an arrangement of castes in different groups with a hierarchical arrangement. Certain castes perform certain functions for example the Brahmins function as priests or teachers, the agriculturalists are the people who cultivate the land and there are weavers, porters, oilmen, washermen, barbers and there are people at the lowest rank who remove the dead bodies of animals or who clean the villages the ones who do the most menial jobs. Each of these jobs is hereditarily assigned, determined so that there is a kind of complementarity with each other. The washerman washes the clothes of the upper caste people who in turn provide them with the food grains and other things. So that is seen as a very coherent functional system. This is how caste was often explained and even justified by functionalist groups. Bogue kind of defined it in that sense.

Dumont stresses the importance of recognising these three features or principles as mutually entailed resting on one fundamental conception. The atomisation into simple elements is the student's need and not a characteristic of the system in itself. What we need to understand the distinctions we make is a singular true principle. Such a principle Dumont maintains is the opposition of the pure and impure. So it was Dumont who made Bogue's arguments about all these features into a more structuralist argument saying that a principle which fundamentally determines the nature of Hindu caste society is the opposition of the pure and the impure. They

are binary, but also they are placed in a highly opposed manner. Dumont stresses on the importance of recognising these three features or principles as mutually entailed resting on one fundamental conception. This one fundamental conception he argues is this opposition of the pure and impure and he argues that all other features including endogamy rules and rules ensuring the separation of these groups and the division of labour which necessitates interdependency can be explained as what he calls it as the opposition of the pure and impure.

Dumont argues that Bouglé had identified three important sets of features that everything can be reduced and brought down to this whole idea of opposition of the pure and the impure. The opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure. It underlies separation and the division of labour because the pure and the impure must be kept separate. The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites. In a nutshell, this is the Dumontian theory of caste. He would argue that in a caste system typical hierarchy (as we mentioned) all the castes are hierarchically arranged and according to Dumont, it is the opposition between the pure and impure and in this binary society everybody prefers the pure. So the pure is always kept here and here it is the impure that is kept at the bottom. So opposition underlies hierarchy: the superiority of the pure to the impure. One cannot keep a caste that practices impure tasks on the top because in a hierarchical arrangement, pure always precedes that of impure. Pure is always privileged, sought after, important than impure. Hierarchically it is always on the top and underlies the separation because pure and impure must be kept separate.

They must be hierarchically arranged, but an adequate distance must be ensured. They must be kept aside, kept apart because the pure and impure cannot be allowed to mingle, and as when pure and impure come together, it is the pure which becomes impure and kept separate and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupation must likewise be kept separate. So there is a division of labour but this division of labour also must be separated so that the impure occupations remain separate from that of the pure occupations. Occupations can be divided into pure and impure. For example, being a priest, a teacher or a warrior are all

considered superior and pure occupations especially being a priest. A priest is somebody who directly deals with the god, at least with an idol which is supposedly at the carcasses of dead animals are considered to be defiling and impure hence they must be kept aside and separate. The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites. So, this is his fundamental argument. The whole caste system is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence.

This hierarchy is necessary because you cannot keep the pure and impure together. You cannot keep the pure occupations and impure occupations together. So they have to be kept separate at the same time, they must coexist. He argues the whole caste system is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites. Hierarchy, defined as the superiority of the pure over the impure then, is the keystone in Dumont's model of the caste system.

It is of the greatest importance to realise that as employed by him, the notion is quite independent of natural inequalities or power distribution. It is the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole. So he argues that the superiority of the pure over the impure is of the greatest importance to realise at once that, as employed by him, the notion is quite independent of natural inequalities or the distribution of power. So he says that how inequalities are seen in the world or power (whether it is economic or political power) is distributed, these ways in which power is understood and articulated or natural inequalities are all very independent of how the pure is understood and identified and distinguished from that of the impure. It is a principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole.

A particular caste group's position is decided based on the overall logic of this whole system. For example, if it is a caste group of a washerman, and this washerman is assigned a particular position in the ritual hierarchy not based on power or not based on economic power or political power but based on how this overall logic of the separation and coexistence between purity and pollution is decided. That is the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole. The position of a particular caste depends on the overall logic of this whole system, which is a fundamental argument of Dumont.

Dumont sees his task as the construction of a model of the traditional caste system of an ideal type. He is secondarily concerned with ascertaining the fit between it and the contemporary social reality. Now here we come across this term called as ideal type. So ideal type I hope you remember, is a methodological construct provided by Max Weber to construct a conceptual category which fulfils almost all necessary features attributable to that particular system. He defines it as a one-sided accentuation of all important elements. Dumont is primarily concerned with creating such an ideal type of caste system. So he says that this is the theory; this is how it works, and this is how conceptually it must work. The purity and impurity must be distinguished. Those who represent purity must be prioritised over those who represent impurity. However, their coexistence must be governed by rules and regulations that ensure their separation. Coexistence, separation, mutual dependency, and hierarchy combine within a singular theoretical frame. He was also less concerned with the fit between this theory and contemporary social reality. And this is a very interesting, fascinating point because we will discuss in detail the kind of criticisms that Dumont faced.

There were criticisms against his very theoretical model. Quite a lot of criticism that Dumont faced emerged from the fact that empirical reality does not fit in this particular way. We will discuss that later. But Dumont was not much concerned about it. Dumont was concerned, but for him, the primary thing is whether a particular observation fits in this theory or not is only a secondary matter. He was more interested in seeing whether this particular concept or theoretical construct is inherently logical and coherent.

His method is that of a theorist. He begins with a key idea and then proceeds deductively and dialectically, working out its implications step by step. This is what he does. So he had these very influential important observations of Bouglé, who identified these three important things. Dumont brings in the framework of structuralism and then arranges that in a more logical order. So, having declared his foremost concern with ideology, that is, with a system of ideas and values, he has to caution that ideology is not everything. So what is ideology for Dumont? Ideology for Dumont is this opposition between the pure and impure.

Dumont repeatedly argues that the fundamental structural element of the Hindu religion, Hindu society, is the opposition between the pure and impure and the distinction between power and status, which we will discuss in a moment. So, he says that this ideology is the fundamental one. Ideology is a system of ideas and values, but he has to caution that ideology is not everything. Ideology will not explain everything, though it encompasses the whole of social reality, nor will observation of actual behaviour reveal everything. There remains a residue, not necessarily of inferior ontological status, deduced from a confrontation of ideology with observation. He says that, as we mentioned in the beginning, he speaks about the ability to talk from within and from without. So he, like any other theorist, would argue that the ideological, the deepest structural arrangement of society must be understood. But along with that, that particular structuralist argument must be buttressed by the observable field data that you collect from the other places. There remains a residue deduced from a confrontation of ideology with observation. Now, as we just go back, he reminds us, that Caste teaches us a fundamental principle called hierarchy. He was addressing that to the French audience who is not familiar with hierarchy, but more familiar with egalitarianism or equality and aims to understand other values intellectually. So this is another very important point. He wants the French public to understand other values intellectually, and only then will they be able to appreciate their value orientations. He critiques the tendency to view the caste system as another system of social stratification (the point we already covered). The basic aim is to understand the ideology of the caste system and how its structural basis functions.

He is critical of the tendency to view human beings as atomised individuals, as monads and ask for a sociological perception. So this is again going back to his fundamental argument that societies in India and societies in Europe are very different. So, I hope another person who came to your mind and put forward this argument is Emile Durkheim. Durkheim argued that society is composed of individuals. It is a commonly known fact, but when society constitutes itself, it is much more than the total of all these individuals. what he calls social facts. Dumont almost follows that argument and is very critical of the tendency to look at society as merely composed

of individuals who are free agents, and who have their autonomy and sovereignty. Rather he argued that you need to develop a methodology to understand how society itself has its existence, which is much more and beyond that of the collective existence of these individuals. The distinction between traditional and modern societies, where collectivity and individualism are important features.

So Dumont argued that there are these two societies, the French society and the Indian society which are inherently different. They are inherently different because traditional societies are where collectivity assumes more importance, and modern societies are where individualism assumes significance. That is why he criticises Western scholars for being preoccupied with the Eurocentric or ethnocentric understanding of individuals. As a traditional society, India is marked by the ideology of hierarchy. So, that is his fundamental argument.

Now, we come to the third chapter, from system to structure, the pure and the impure. We just mentioned this point, but we are going back to that same topic. The whole should not be seen by starting from the notion of the element but by starting from the notion of a system in which certain fixed principles govern the arrangement of fluid and fluctuating elements. He is critical of the empirical ways of understanding the system, rather, the system needs to be understood based on its ideology. Similar point; just putting it in different forms.

Hope you remember the previous way we tried to make sense of this whole ideological system, within structural functionalism, which gave preference to these ideas of different subsystems or its elements. And that was how structural functionalism understood a society. They were more concerned about how a particular subsystem of society contributes to society's overall well-being. Now, the whole should not be seen by starting from the notion of the element, that is, you should not look at society, and understand society by trying to understand what this particular element stands for or the nature of this particular element. But starting from a system in which certain fixed principles govern the arrangement of fluid and fluctuating elements.

So this is the fundamental argument of structuralism that as a researcher, you must pay attention to these relations that govern the relation between this particular unit and this particular unit, this unit and this unit. Because this might go, this particular element might change its character, it might become something else, it might die, something else might come in, but these relations, according to Dumont, will remain the same. So, the terms of which certain fixed principles govern the arrangement of fluid and fluctuating elements. He is critical of the empirical ways of understanding the system; rather, the system needs to be understood based on its ideology.

This is the point that I mentioned. He is almost critical of the whole body of anthropological knowledge that Hitherto existed then. He was almost dismissive of people like Srinivas or others who only used the empirical method. To Dumont, the empirical method only provides very superficial observable things. You will be collecting or trying to make a statement about it without understanding the salience of this observable data. Now, the distinction between systems and structure, structural functionalism and structuralism same point that we mentioned. So here structural functionalism gives preference to systems trying to understand how different units are organized in a particular way and how independent parts provide for a particular arrangement.

In structuralism, the emphasis is on this particular arrangement, this relation, not on the systems. The caste system needs to be understood based on the principles whereby caste is ranked in order and underlying this order is a system of oppositional structure that we already discussed. And now, structure is a system of relations, not a system of elements. If you just go back to this, structure is a system of relations. So for him, for Dumont or any structuralist, the fundamental way a society is defined is based on how these relations are to be understood.

These individual units what you see are they are dispensable; they can change their colour, and they can be replaced, but their relations will remain almost static. So that is a very important argument. Structure is a system of relations, not a system of elements. So they are based on the principle of the opposition of the pure and the impure and underlies the principle of hierarchy.

So, the whole is founded upon the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites, which is the exact point we discussed.

Hierarchy is the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole. In a hierarchical arrangement, a particular caste position must be understood based on the overall logic of a system and why it came to be positioned here. This fundamental opposition is not the cause of caste distinction but is there for another important argument that Dumont puts forward. He argues that this particular arrangement is not the cause. It is not that somebody decided to put the pure on the top and the impure at the bottom and then arrange everybody in between. It is not. He does not say how caste came into existence, but he says that the caste system began to express itself or take the form of this hierarchical arrangement. Now, Dumont tries to fit ethnographic data into this theoretical framework. As we mentioned earlier, he only succeeds partially because a lot of historical or anthropological data does not simply fit in. The impurity of the untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of Brahmin, and untouchability will not indeed disappear under the purity until the purity of the Brahmin is itself radically devalued. Now, this is another very important argument. It is a very provocative and radical argument. He says that when you look into the extremes, Brahmins are considered the purest, and untouchables are considered the most impure because they deal with very different kinds of occupations. Untouchables deal with the most defiling occupations like scavenging or removing dead bodies of animals and human beings or working on leather and cleaning the drainage and such kind of defiling, polluting jobs. In contrast, the Brahmins are supposed to be different. So here he says that untouchability will not disappear until the purity associated with the Brahmin is conceptually radically devalued. Just imagine the practical implications of this argument.

We will talk about the eradication of untouchability and caste prejudices. There are legal initiatives and arguments to end caste discrimination against untouchables. But Dumont says that untouchability and the impurity associated with untouchables will be here to stay if the notions of purity associated with Brahmins stay because they are constitutive. One does not have its salience in the absence of others. It is a very important argument. Now this is very important

because other scholars have argued that purity and impurity are seen as quite opposite, occupying extremely opposite positions. Then both are required for the reinforcement of others. We will come back to this particular point. So let me break now, and we will continue with the discussion and conclude this session on Dumont in the next class. Thank you.