

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Sociology of Louis Dumont: Homo Hierarchicus III

Welcome back to the class. We are in the concluding class on Homo Hierarchicus, the magnum opus of Louis Dumont, who is considered to be the most important scholar who propounded a structuralist understanding of the caste system. In the past two classes, we have been discussing on the same book, Homo Hierarchicus. In the first introduction, we explained how Homo Hierarchicus represents the kind of a structuralist theoretical framework. In the previous class, we discussed how he theorized the opposition between purity and impurity as the fundamental ideology on which this whole caste system is fixed. Now, he is moving into another very important dimension of the whole idea of hierarchy and the theory of Varna.

Hierarchy is said to involve gradation but is asserted to be distinct from power and authority. It is a religious ranking and classifies things and beings according to their degree of dignity. It is an all-embracing comprehensive concept. Hierarchy and the scheme of Varnas align with each other as Varna and Jati.

Hierarchy encompasses both the Varna divisions and the caste system. So, what is Dumont's fundamental argument? The fundamental argument of Dumont is that the caste system has to be understood as founded on a foundational principle of the opposition between pure and impure. This kind of hierarchy is what we understand as the ritual hierarchy. It is based on ritual notions of purity and impurity because Brahmins are considered to be on top, not because Brahmins are powerful, politically powerful, economically powerful, but ritually they are considered pure.

Certain other castes are considered impure not because they have no economic power, but because they are considered ritually impure. So, this is the idea of a hierarchy that Dumont talks about. He says that the theorisation of this pure hierarchy goes very well with the Varna scheme of things. Varna scheme of things, that is the Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and Sudras and then the whole untouchables fall outside of this whole system. So, according to Dumont, this Varna system fits perfectly with his theory of pure hierarchy.

So, pure hierarchy or the basic ideology, according to Dumont, is the ritual hierarchy, which attributes the highest status to Brahmins and the lowest status to the untouchables, it has nothing to do with political power or economic power, it is purely religious or ritual status. But it is asserted to be distinct from both power and authority. It is a religious ranking and classifies things and beings according to their degree of dignity. So, this dignity is the status attached to the notions of ritual purity.

If hierarchy is isolated as a purely religious value, its connection with power must be defined. So, one of the perennial problems that Dumont or a host of other people identified is that we say that the Brahmins are on the top and the untouchables are at the bottom. This is the conventional argument or even Dumont argues that this is the nature of the Indian caste system. So, if the hierarchy is isolated purely religious, how do we account for power? As we have seen in so many accounts of ethnographic scholars, many times, it is not the Brahmins who are the really powerful people, but it is the people who are below that. Many times, Brahmins are the people who do not hold political power, but it is the caste or varnas below that particular group.

So, if hierarchy cannot give a place to power as such without contradicting its principles. Because if you look into the actual way power operates, you see Brahmins are not on the top, but Brahmins are somewhere below, maybe even in the middle, or maybe even below. There could be a whole lot of martial castes and other groups who might be occupying this whole topmost position. So, there is an absolute distinction between

priesthood and royalty. The king has lost his religious prerogative. He does not sacrifice, he has sacrifice performed. Dumont comes up with an argument that in India, at some point in history, there was an agreement between the priests or some mechanism, incident or process that happened through which there was an absolute distinction between priesthood and royalty. Priesthood and royalty were separated. Priesthood was about people who indulged in religious and spiritual matters concerning the transcendental one and they were separated from royalty who dealt with temporal and political power. There was a clear separation between that. The King does not sacrifice, but he has sacrifice performed. A political king, a political leader or a political authority cannot conduct yagas or yajnas alone. He cannot be a priest. The priestly classes are entirely separate. A king is a king in the secular sense of the term. A king can never be a priest, and a priest can never be a king. This is a very important insight or argument that Dumont brings. The king has lost his religious prerogative. So, the king cannot perform a yajna, a puja, or a sacrifice, but he has a sacrifice performed by the priests dependent on him. While they are dependent on him, their dependency is also limited. They have a certain amount of sovereignty because the king is bound to depend on them. At the same time, the king is more powerful, and secular. In theory, power is ultimately subordinated to priesthood, whereas priesthood is subordinated to power in practice. So, in theory, power is ultimately subordinated to the priesthood because Dumont argues that it is the pure hierarchy.

The existence of a pure religious hierarchy is a structural argument. But in practice, the priesthood is subordinated to power. Status and power and, consequently, spiritual power and temporal power are distinguished. So, this parallel authority, one is, status and power, status coming from religious or spiritual power authority and power coming from temporal power, are distinguished in India. So, that is why Dumont would argue that unlike Europe, where you had a Christian pop, who was both the political leader and a religious authority, a concentration of temporal and spiritual power never happened in India. That is a very important argument. Unlike in many other places where a priest, a religious head also could become a political head. In India, a religious head was always separated from the political head. The political head of the country, nation, and kingdom

was always a different person compared to the religious head. What remains problematic, however, is the connection of hierarchy with power. Hierarchy cannot give a place to power without contradicting its principle. Therefore, it must give a place to power without saying so, and this is obliged to close its eyes to this point on the pain of destroying itself. So, as you can see, Dumont struggles to account for this kind of contradiction. So, he says that in theory, the religious status must be privileged, but in practice, the political power is on the top. So, he says that it is a kind of practical arrangement. Hence, in India's absence of a supreme spiritual authority, a supremacy of spiritual authority was never expressed politically. This is precisely the same point that we mentioned. In India, the supreme spiritual authority was never expressed politically. There was a clear separation between the political authority and the religious authority. So, this disjunction of power and status is older than caste, and hierarchy can manifest itself in a pure form after that. So, this is, how Dumont puts forward. This distinction between status and power must have happened before caste. Only once this distinction happened, the pure hierarchy, that is, the pure hierarchy of privileging purity over impurity, can come into the picture. Then, everything else can fall into its place. So, in a nutshell, Dumont argues that the caste system is based on a structuralist principle of the opposition between pure and impure and the disjunction between power and status. So, two things, this pure, impure, power and status. Maybe this is a wrong interpretation; power and status are not kind of, presented hierarchically, but power and status are distinguished. There is a disjuncture between power and status.

Now, a summary of each of his chapters,

Chapter 4 shows that the traditional division of labour, the Jajmani system, is based on a religious value rather than economic logic. It does not, however, account for all economic transactions, and Dumont admits this.

Chapter 5 considers the regulation of marriage, endogamy, isogamy, and hypergamy in terms of the key concepts of hierarchy. So, the book is very interesting. It is a very unconventional way of writing. If you read the book, you will see that he makes the argument upfront. He makes his theory upfront, and in the subsequent chapters, he is belabouring to, explain and establish the theory.

The fourth chapter is about the Jajmani system. It is a traditional system that existed in India, where many times, this agricultural landlord, the people who have massive land under their control, are considered to be the Jajmen or the master. A host of service castes in this family will have a traditional affiliation. For example, porters, cobblers, washermen, barbers and certain untouchable families. A group of families will be affiliated with a particular Jajmani family. These families will render their services to this particular Jajmani family, and they are compensated mainly at the time of harvest or at the time of festivals, mainly in kind. So, it was a traditional connection between the upper caste landowning family and the service castes. Chapter 4 considers the regulations of marriage different kinds of marriage. So, in all these chapters, he is coming up with all these observations to buttress his claim. Chapter 6 carries the argument further to cover rules concerning contact and untouchability of food and vegetarianism. The opposition between the pure and the impure emerges clearly and convincingly in these three chapters. The sixth chapter is about how various rules and regulations are associated with purity and impurity, certain civic and religious restrictions are imposed on certain castes, and certain privileges accorded to certain other castes. According to Dumont, all these restrictions and privileges were aimed at keeping them separate. For example, prohibition of dining together and the untouchable and upper caste people were never allowed to have food together. That was considered the greatest sin or the most significant crime for the upper caste people. Vegetarian people consuming meat was considered a significant defiling act. All these things keep these two people away and separated.

Chapter 7 deals with power and territory, and chapter 8 deals with justice and authority. Here, the confrontation of the ideology with observed social reality is most prominent. In conformity with our method, we shall now begin to set out what is encountered in caste society while not figuring directly into ideology. So, these are the chapters in which he brings in a lot of empirical data from his research as well as research from his fellow anthropologists.

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of theory. In terms of the theory, they either surreptitiously enter the scene. Power pretends to be equal in status. So, here, many critics have observed that Dumont is at pain to explain why there is so much counter-evidence to his theory.

That is why he acknowledges that we are now brought face-to-face with the territory, power, social dominance, ownership of wealth, and mutual relationships. So, these temporal secular elements do not fit into his larger theory. These are said to be questions of fact and not of all theory. In fact, in terms of theory, they enter surreptitiously. So, he and this term is very interesting. He says that the power enters surreptitiously into the scene. Power pretends to be equal to status, but he argues status is always more important because status, according to Dumont, is the central structural feature, not power. Dominant caste, factions and economics are discussed in this very framework. The conclusion expectedly is that religion similarly encompasses politics, so politics encompasses economics within itself. The difference is that the politico-economic domain is separated and named in a subordinate position against religion, while economics remains undifferentiated within politics.

So, his argument is very clear that all the domains of economics and politics are much separated and inferior to that of the domain of religion. The caste system is fundamentally based on religious notions, not on political or economic foundations. So, this argument is very strong. That is why he talks about pure hierarchy. He discusses how the caste system represents a basic pure ideology, pure hierarchy, and the opposition between pure and impure.

So, this religious character, he argues, is the most important attribute of Indian society and not the political or social factors. Chapter 8 passes on from the power to authority. Ethnographical data on caste government from Uttar Pradesh are examined. Such matters as the source of authority, the village panchayat, the caste assembly, caste jurisdiction and excommunication are discussed. Here also, Dumont makes a significant concession in favour of ethnographic shreds of evidence as against ideology.

The main argument of Dumont's essay ends with chapter 8. Chapter 9 deals with renunciation and sects, the opposites of the notions of collective man and caste. So, the central argument associated with his theorisation ends with chapters 8 and 9 onwards, he is looking into the ideas of renunciation and sect. Renunciation is important because it is seen as the most striking manifestation of individualism. Isn't it? A person renounces everything. He declares himself to be completely autonomous, not bound by any strings attached by society.

Dumont wanted to understand how renunciation is such a powerful institution in India that it is otherwise collective. The opposition to the notion of collective man and caste. An examination of these is a methodological necessity devised for Dumont, for he seeks an understanding of India and Western society through a dialectical process through the juxtaposition of logically opposite cultural types. So, as I mentioned, the caste on one side and renunciation on the other are the opposite. In a caste society, every aspect of your life is decided by society.

He believes that society, being a primitive, traditional society, is bound by collectivity. On the other hand, the same Indian society exhibits renouncers or people who leave everything. Aseptics, yogis and other people who are profoundly individualistic, independent, and autonomous. This is the most important conclusion. The fundamental structural elements of these two or all societies are the same. Highly significant differences between them arise out of the different patterns of relationship between the elements. Western society appears differently, and Indian society appears differently only because of how the structural elements are structured. Ultimately, the fundamental character of all societies is the same. So, Indian society appears to be more collective because the caste system, through specific structural element articulations, provides more visibility to the caste relation and notes that of the Western society.

The chapter 10 takes up the problem of comparison. There are castes among non-Hindus and outside India. Given Dumont's emphasis on ideology and hierarchy, it is not surprising to read. One is therefore led to see the caste system as an Indian institution

having its complete coherence and, validity, vitality in the Hindu environment, but continuing in existence in more or less accentuated forms in groups adhering to other religions. So, he is almost of the firm opinion that the caste system, as you see in India, is an Indian phenomenon mainly because it is derived from a specific ideology based on the opposition between pure and impure. So, he argues that it is confined to Indian society and not present elsewhere.

In chapter 11, the comparison is continued in temporal rather than spatial terms. In other words, Dumont takes up the problem of change. What does the caste system belong to? What is the caste system becoming nowadays? The tone of the whole discussion is set by his statement made at the very outset. Contemporary literature exaggerates change. One thing is sure: society as an overall framework has not changed.

There have been changes in the society and not of the society. So, this is a very interesting argument in which he says that nowadays, people are exaggerating social change, they are all peripheral changes. This is typically expected of a structuralist who believes that society does not change. So, he says that only certain kinds of peripheral, superficial changes are happening, but it is the changes in the society and not of the society.

Dumont concludes by asserting that hierarchy is a universal necessity and that if it is not formally recognised as a society, it may assert itself in pathological forms like racism. It is, therefore, of the most significant importance for Western man to endeavour to study and understand a social system in which hierarchy is recognised and accorded the status of a first principle. This is why the book is offered to the French public. This is the point which I have been telling or highlighting all through. He is addressing the French public. He says that despite celebrating and embracing individualism, there are competing ideologies. For example, hierarchy is an extremely important central feature that appears salient in Western society. So, if you do not acknowledge it and then provide it with an adequate framework, it might appear as a kind of distortion or second of a pathological form that is racism. It is, therefore, of the most significant importance for Western man to endeavour to study and understand a social system in which hierarchy is recognised.

Accorded the status of the first principle. That is why the book is offered to the French public.

This is Dumont's concluding remark to his readers. So, as I mentioned, this book is of monumental significance and considered to be a classic which completely shattered or questioned the existing scholarship on caste, which almost dismissed the kind of existing scholarship and methodological frameworks used by people and then put forward a very nuanced and loud theorisation, significantly, crucial formidable theorisation. So, in the coming class, we will look into the criticisms. Many people have criticised Dumont, and we will look into those criticisms in the coming class. So, I am winding up the class. Thank you.