

HIERARCHY REVISITED

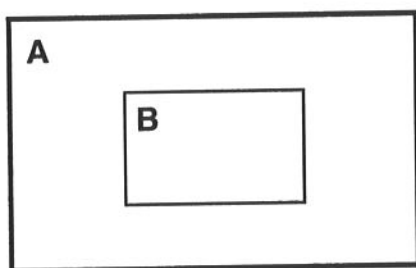
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Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierachicus* is much more than a theory of hierarchy for South Asian systems of caste. It is a whole philosophy that tells us about our world, a comparative theory of social relations and history. It has a narrower application to India, but it also has a universal horizon, which may be valid, as some general theories are, in a comparative sense and in relation to particular times and places. It goes beyond empirical reality in that it orders reality and reveals a logical relation between encompassing and encompassed elements. We heard Dumont sketch out an abstract set of relationships at a lecture given at Brown University in the early 1970's, situating hierarchy amid other possible relations. Although we have not seen any subsequent reference to this lecture by Dumont we still find it useful in thinking about hierarchy. The diagrams below (figs. 1-6) are not meant to be definitive since we recall them after a quarter century, and while they are compelling it is not meant to be exactly as Dumont sketched them. A relationship is posited between elements A and B, where A+B exhaust the universe of discourse.

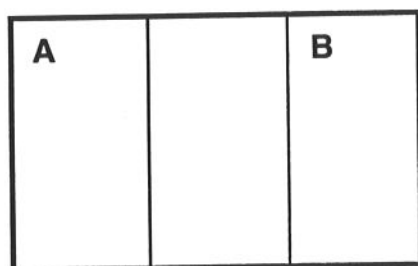
The theory is an ideal type in Weber's sense – a model with which to approach reality, but one that is built up after reality. It is useful in assessing the nature, extent, and transformation of hierarchical social and cultural systems locally, regionally, and even historically. How do hierarchical systems change through time, especially since colonial and then independent political and economic regimes challenge the basic principles of hierarchy?

Dumont's theory occasioned numerous debates, but in addition to producing critical knowledge it has elicited exasperated dismissal, avoidance and neglect in recent years. Yet Dumont rightly insisted all along that his is a theory of value contrasting modern and non-modern civilizations. In hierarchy he identifies a fundamentally different mode of thought and points to a peculiarly modern aversion to it. He saw correctly the inability of social science to break out of its embeddedness in the West and social theorists' inability to overcome the stumbling blocks to a comparative understanding posed by individualism and holism, the position of the individual in two kinds of societies, an egalitarian ideology obscuring and reducing hierarchy to inequality and stratification.

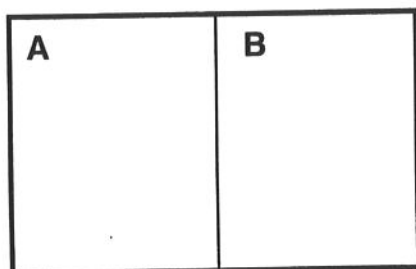
The still relevant question is to what extent a theory of hierarchy can illuminate the anthropology of India in comparison with the West, and what place it has, if any, in a relational analysis of India today.



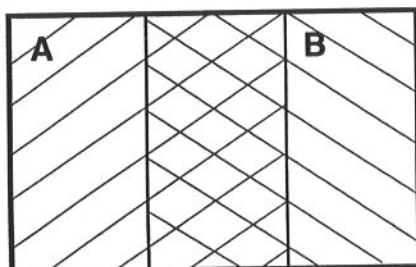
1. Encompassing/encompassed



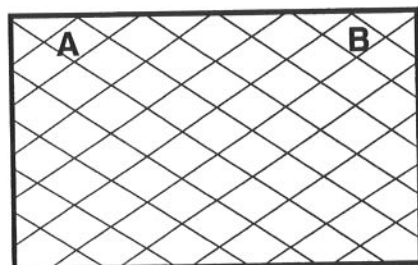
2. No engagement



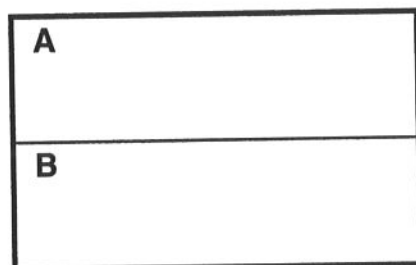
3. Complementary opposition



4. Overlap



5. Contradiction



6. Stratification

Figs. 1-6. The logic of hierarchy

RELIGION, POLITY/ECONOMY AND POWER

One of the least explored aspects of South Asian societies today is the changing hierarchy between economies/politics and religion. To assess the cataclysmic changes brought by the 20th century a comparative theory of the kind proposed above is clearly needed, yet it has to contend with numerous conceptual blinkers. The most obvious instance revolves around power and versions of the 'Big Stick' argument, which runs something like this: culture obfuscates, and Indology, holism, hierarchy (encompassing and encompassed relations) amount to a culturology which privileges the wielders of the Big Stick. Power is power; the superior and the dominated are easy to identify in any setting. The rest is orientalism and an ideological smokescreen benefiting those who can back up their ideas with force. A weaker version would point to inequality and stratification in the place of hierarchy. In either case the basic assumption of the various analyses is a universal social science with sociological categories valid for all places and times: the individual as the building block of society, caste, class, stratification, religion, economics, politics, kinship, and family.

Recent writings of Berreman (1974), Beteille (1975), Mines (1994; 1984), Mencher (1972), Dirks (1989; 1993), Appadurai (1986; 1996), Guha (1997; 1983), Gould (1987-90), Inden (1990) and others all utilize to greater or lesser extent the Big Stick argument with some version of culture as a smokescreen. Despite marked differences they agree on a more universalistic, less culturally specific a view of the world, underemphasizing India's cultural uniqueness and overemphasizing global, homogenizing or generalizing cross-cultural societal processes. Where Dumont posits difference, these theorists see similarity. Thus Beteille and Berreman proceed from general, seemingly 'culture-proof' conditions of social inequality and stratification; Gould relies on universal sociological categories as the basis for studying India; Inden imputes all difference to orientalism; Dirks assigns British colonial regimes the power of inventing caste thus denying value to indigenous culture; Guha proceeds from universal conditions of power under colonial and imperial rule; Appadurai credits global cultural 'flows' and homogeneity with significance and meaning yet to be demonstrated, and Mines insists that Indian merchants have always behaved as individualistic entrepreneurs.

We do not deny that the above works do more than just oppose hierarchy. No doubt we simplify and generalize aspects of complex and ambitious studies which have contributed in other directions. Nevertheless they share an incredulous, at times rejectionist stance, ignoring the methodological and theoretical significance of hierarchy, and misconstruing the theory as a property of substantive data and a description of empirical reality. Driven to rejection, they cannot learn from the analytical and interpretative potential of hierarchy. At the very least they fail to

exploit the theory in the production of critical knowledge. Yet such a theory is needed to evaluate structural change and radical social transformation. How else can we decide what change means, what changes from what to what? In an undifferentiated social universe, change does not mean anything, and there is nothing new under the sun.

KINSHIP AND GENDER

In the last 25 years of Indian anthropology, there has been a marked departure from an Indological perspective through the analysis of caste. Anthropologists to-day better understand concepts of caste and ritual purity and pollution, hierarchy and the Hindu construction of gender.

The emergence of gender studies in anthropology led to symbolic and cultural analyses of Hindu gender and contemporary social structure, compelling anthropologists to expand their understanding of the caste system and hierarchy. Gender studies would subsequently complement rather than replace the earlier emphases on caste and kinship. Departing from earlier studies of women

seen as an appendage of Hindu social organization, gender became the primary locus of study. Even though to-day's studies of women in India have some of their origins in the writings of Stevenson, Gough, or Yalman, none of these anthropologists (or their contemporaries) had a primary interest in the study of women. (Fruzzetti: 1989: 269.)

Stevenson (1954) examined status in the caste system, stressing the concepts of purity and pollution, which were later addressed by Gough through the analysis of female initiation rites (Gough 1952; 1955; 1959). Yalman's pivotal work on women's purity was linked to caste and kinship (Yalman 1963). Deciphering Indian womanhood necessitates separating the indigenous meaning of gender from caste, kinship and marriage. Later studies of gender drew from these sources and successfully moved on to new concerns. It became clear that a study of Indian women would necessitate multiple meanings of hierarchy and purity/pollution. A separate treatment of Indian women began in the early 1970's (Barnett 1976; Das 1982; David 1973; 1977; Fruzzetti: 1981; 1982; Kolenda 1982; 1992; Madan 1987; 1992; Vatuk 1975; Wadley 1975; 1980). Dumont and Schneider also left their mark on the direction taken by the study of gender. Dumont's work on caste as a total social fact addressed the role of ideology, demonstrating the connectedness of Indian culture and society (Dumont 1957; 1959; 1970). Schneider's kinship studies (1968; 1972; 1976; 1986) helped lay the ground work for feminist and gender studies in India and elsewhere. Barnett (1976), David (1973), Fruzzetti (1982), Östör, Fruzzetti and Barnett (1992) drew on Schneider's methodological approach to kinship and acknowledged the cultural construction of gender. The intricate tie between gender and kinship was clearly demonstrated.

The newer anthropological studies in the 1970's and 80's (Barnett, David, Östör, Fruzzetti, Wadley) set out an approach which 'called for research on cultural notions of conception of person and the indigenous meanings of blood and semen.' (Fruzzetti 1989: 272). 'Constructions of gender involved the domains of ritual, caste hierarchy and power, purity and pollution, and the system of relationships and exchanges among groups in the formation of marriage alliances' (Östör, Fruzzetti & Barnett 1992: lxiii).

The cultural account of kinship and gender prepared the ground for more challenging later accounts without having to assign superior value to class, economy, religion, or genealogy. The study of gender has problematized the accepted interpretations. Caste study was demystified – see the work of Mencher (1972) and Moffat (1979) on untouchability. Stutchbury (1982) and Krygier (1982) consider female purity in relation to the impact of menstrual blood on caste and kinship. Newer problematized studies of gender (e.g. Marglin 1985; Wadley 1975; Dhruvarajan 1988) focus on what constitutes the ideal Hindu woman, emphasizing the impact of religion on women's daily lives in relation to the sacred. Concepts of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, purity and pollution were reconsidered in reference to women's status in Hindu society. What are the multiple meanings of purity and pollution where women are concerned? How do women understand and maintain purity? Women's rituals were found to be a reflection of larger societal concerns relating to hierarchy, caste and kinship. Fruzzetti further linked 'women's rituals to categories of action, to exegeses of rituals, to exchange among persons and groups, and ultimately to the domains in which all of these symbols, actions, and persons are enhanced with meanings' (Fruzzetti 1982: 61).

WOMEN AND HIERARCHY

Women's movements which began before independence address both historical and contemporary gender concerns, adding new perspectives, particularly on the recent rise of domestic violence, bride burning and dowry deaths. Dowry pressures and aberrant marriage practices call for government scrutiny and new laws to protect women. Nonetheless marriage rituals are still performed for the continuation of the male descent lines on the basis of caste and kinship principles. (Fruzzetti 1982; Östör Fruzzetti & Barnett 1992).

Misappropriating married women's wealth (*strīdhan*), pressuring brides' families for more dowry and the increase of violence inflicted on married women have not diminished the importance of marriage and concerns of caste and kinship. To marry off daughters is still an intense preoccupation for Hindu families. This modern pressure, like the obligation in the past, is related to the cultural concepts and understanding of purity and pollution as they affect married and unmarried

women. Feminists and women's groups comprehend the problems facing them. Although the culture is changing, there are flagrant and upsetting contradictions concerning the qualifications for auspiciousness in women. 'Women's organizations and feminists question the notion of auspiciousness that is connected to the Hindu ideal of a married women (the images of a docile, self-effacing, selfless woman) if she is not protected by her husband' (Fruzzetti 1989: 277). Feminists question the ideal, which meets with violence, rage and at times death. Nonetheless, these women are not challenging the culture and structure of marriage, rather the increasingly aberrant behavior. The purity of women is still accomplished through marriage, and caste principles enter into the discussion of appropriate marriages along with prescribed codes of conduct.

Women's outcry against domestic violence addresses increasing dowry pressures. Women are aware that, despite the 1961 abolition of dowry, families continue the practice of demanding and giving dowries. There is more cultural pressure for parents to find husbands for their daughters than wives for their sons.

This pressure is related to the cultural concepts of purity and pollution of married and unmarried women. In the past, fear of pollution resulted in a girl's marriage being negotiated as soon as she began to menstruate. Even in modern Indian households, unmarried girls are not welcome, and families are pressured to find husbands for their daughters. (Fruzzetti 1989: 277.)

Feminists' and women's group challenge the Hindu cultural construction of gender, a model that eulogizes married women while failing to protect them. Although women activists recognize the inherent problems relating to gender violence and bride burning, they do not recommend a drastic change in Hindu marriage rites, nor have they attempted to tamper with the caste system. It is correct to add that caste hierarchy and patriarchal ideology have remained. What women suggest is an end to violence and abuse. The problem contemporary Hindu women face is tied to Hinduism, the cultural construction and meaning of 'acceptable' women, an adherence to prescribed and unchanging male codes of conduct. Underlying these prescriptions is the sacredness and purity of women's actions contributing to the maintenance of the caste system: the continuation of the male descent lines and the fulfillment of *dharma* obligations.

Drawing on the experiences of the Indian women's movements, the contemporary as well as the pre-independence, we are struck by the outcome of ethnographic studies.

The tone of these ethnographies differs from some earlier studies because not only is the contemporary domain of women examined but their place in history is also acknowledged. What is interesting is the relationship of these and similar studies to the growth of a contemporary women's movement in India that incorporates both older women's organizations and the more recent political feminist movements. (Fruzzetti 1989: 274.)

THE INEVITABILITY OF HIERARCHY

There is a point to criticism: we ourselves have not shied away from critical engagement with Dumont. Yet we are struck by the sterility of the critics' response: mostly negative and excluding the possibility of reaping positive knowledge.

On the plus side is the discovery of anomalous incomplete or invalid instances of hierarchy. Even here a more important issue is neglected: What is the meaning of transitional or peripheral situations in India? So what does it mean to separate kinship from caste, as Dumont tends to do? What is the role of gender, which he ignores? What does it mean that Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Central Hill areas and the east do not exhibit 'classical' hierarchy? What does it mean for a theory to be applicable more to rural, village areas than to towns and cities? What of individualism and holism in India today? In asking these questions it is not helpful to refute the theory as if it applied directly to empirical materials. The central issue is whether or not hierarchy helps us understand the contemporary world and serves us as a guide for future research. We need not ask, 'Is hierarchy an empirical reality? Rather we should ask, 'Can the theory of hierarchy serve as a hypothesis?' Is it useful in a process of hypothesis and verification? Does it illuminate the present? Is Indian society becoming like the West? Is it becoming more class-like, individually oriented and dominated by economic power?

In all the cases we cited in the previous section, it is not difficult to see how hierarchy may be helpful. *Pace* Mines, Dumont never claimed that India is devoid of individuals, but that the individual as a construct differs from the concept of the person, a proposition that points to the position of the individual in Indian and Western social systems and would have a significant role in evaluating Mines's data on economic change.

Pace Guha, the elementary forms of peasant insurgency point to the central role of the bhakti religion, which a theory of hierarchy would elucidate more ably than revolutionary class conflict. We have written about the works of Raheja, Dirks, Appadurai and the others elsewhere (Fruzzetti & Östör 1991; Barnett, Fruzzetti & Östör 1976; 1977; Östör, Fruzzetti & Barnett 1992: Introduction to the 2nd edition). The fact remains that there are powerful challenges to hierarchy which are neglected or ignored by the approaches we have cited here. Political maneuvers, administrative and judicial reforms, parliamentary politics, capital-intensive commodity production, radical Dalit and women's movements and the eclipse of the bazaar by modern market economy challenge hierarchy at its roots, but the received wisdom of our theorists cannot evaluate the impact and meaning of these changes. Anything that would rearrange the relations between the individual and the whole, power and status, sacred and non-sacred necessitates a discussion of hierarchy.

A Brahman, superior in status, need not accept a gift which is polluting and inauspicious. Dirks (1989; 1993), Parry (1986; 1991) and Raheja (1988a; 1988b;

1989) reduce Dumont's work to a parody of structuralism, while they themselves argue in hierarchical terms only to reverse the direction of encompassment. They confront us

with single-minded absolutes of religion or politics, purity or power, high or low, and further reifications of Western ideology, while they leave the cornerstone of *Homo Hierarachus* undisturbed: the relational and comparative analysis of India and the West, indigenous and analytic categories, and the changes occasioned by centuries of colonial and independent regimes (Östör, Fruzzetti & Barnett 1992: xx).

Dirks would fuse status and power, making the Kshatriya hierarchically superior to the Brahman. Further, he fails to show power as a concept and a strategy for action accounts for kinship relations and marriage choices in the formation of alliance. Raheja tries to establish that the recipients of *dān* are inauspicious since *dān* is poison. 'Raheja abstracts exchanges out of the larger cultural universe and conflates *saṃskaras* with exchanges in general' (Östör, Fruzzetti & Barnett 1992: xix).

There are ways to reach beyond the impasse created by Dumont's critics. Murray Milner's recent (1995), magisterial work demonstrates how the theory of hierarchy can be used in a new, creative departure. Milner's procedure is to identify the key features of Indian society which are to be explained in terms of sociology history, Indology and interpretive anthropology. No partisan theorist, Milner is genuinely interested in the puzzle Indian culture poses to an objectivist, comparative social science: ethnographic particulars are brought under general features of status and power within the framework of local cultural categories. Thus caste is taken alongside ritual forms of gift-giving, sacredness/purity/auspiciousness and marriage alliance in relation to status and material resources. Difficulties abound with the selection of features and cultural identification, yet at each step of the argument Milner disarmingly pauses to define and explain: types of power, social formations, and legitimization as well as worship, salvation, and eschatology, with Indian categories attached (e.g. the articulation of status and material resources is treated as political and economic legitimacy, which is in turn linked to the sacred). The cultural code becomes a medium for the expression of a more general social reality. A prior, universalistic sociology is thus given an Indian cultural shape with an effort to be complete and persuasive in view of the difficulty presented to that theory. The method is clear: a social science language is developed and applied to India, with cultural difference admitted fully and accommodated either as an instance of something more general or as a variant (complementary or contradictory to, or encapsulated in, something else).

Let us take an example: 'Status relations and marriage alliance'. Here Milner relates regional categories and practices to the general theory of status. Among other things, he treats the present writers' studies of Bengali/cast/marriage as an instance

of 'ideological encapsulation' in a regional variant. Milner's intriguing account poses a paradox: the cultural, interpretive approach provides an understanding beyond the capabilities of the general theory. We also make comparisons but not in the sociological terms advocated by Milner. From his point of view our work is incomplete since it cannot yield the kind of generalizations he offers. For us, on the other hand, Milner accomplishes at best a translation of Bengali cultural logic into a posited, universalistic language of social science. Nevertheless, Milner goes to great lengths to get the Bengali particulars right and comments generously on the procedure even though he disagrees with it. We could not hope for a more generous discussant. Milner does not expect the causal to replace an interpretive style of analysis. His remarks concluding the chapter (p. 161) that neither general theory, nor ethnography, nor cultural analysis alone will give an 'adequate sociological analysis' can only be applauded.

A FUTURE FOR HIERARCHY

What is the relevance of the model to current and future understandings of South Asia? Changes and transformations require prior consideration, since a single-minded rejection of hierarchy does not take care of the most vexing problem: India has changed, but what does that mean? Issues of development, conflict as well as continuity and tradition, swirl around the subcontinent, with religious and social differences, communalism, economic inequality, political strife, class/caste conflict dominating the news. Recent studies suggest a continuing and productive role for Dumont's theory (see Fitzgerald 1996; Hesse 1996; Parkin 1990; 1996). New questions are brought up forcefully by changing South Asian societies and will be answered by future research. It is to the demands of empirical and theoretical (both analytic and interpretive) current and future work that a theory of hierarchy can make its most signal contribution.

What is the relation between power, status and ritual? Does hierarchy still (and to what extent) articulate sacred and non-sacred power in society? Does it still govern action, or is power to be understood in entirely secular terms? Is power relational, and if so what are its components? Do different valuations coexist? Are these in a hierarchical, complementary or contradictory relation to each other? Do juridical, political and parliamentary systems form a separate component in society with their own precedence and power? Are stratification, inequality and competition entirely detached from hierarchy? Is ritual being relegated to a subordinate position? If so, what happens to sacred valuations? Is religion being transformed? If so, in what relation to economy and policy?

Do Hindutva, Dalit and Muslim politics bring up the religion/economics/politics conundrum as Dumont formulated these in his seminal essays on communal-

ism, nationalism, and individualism? Do radical Dalit movements reject Hindu religion in order to abolish hierarchy but replicate or re-introduce it in other ways? Do Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam act in some encompassing ways in ongoing social transformations, thus reproducing hierarchy in new directions with different elements? Are bhakti and other movements individuating religion and creating substantive entities detached and separable from other social groupings?

Are marriage circles still defined by wife-givers and wife-takers? Are they still arranged hierarchically in the gift-giving relation, in the direction of marriage or just in the rituals themselves? Do considerations of status, purity, equality, and descent line persist in marriage negotiations? Are *dān* relations becoming stratified and class-like, or are they still encompassing in terms of sacred values? Are marriages becoming individuated? Does alliance still characterize marriage arrangements? If so, what is its provenance: villages, towns, cities, regions? Are marriage systems comparable across the subcontinent?

Do local, regional and central markets still act in hierarchical ways? How do they compare with commodity markets in terms of Dumont's three social values? To what extent does the valuation still fall on the whole rather than the individual? Do relations among people precede the relation to objects? Is immovable wealth (attached to power over people) still superior to movable wealth? Is there a continuing relation between market and ritual, or is the sacred detached from economic relations? Is society becoming domainized, with the economy emerging as the superior domain?

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