

# Louis Dumont on Caste

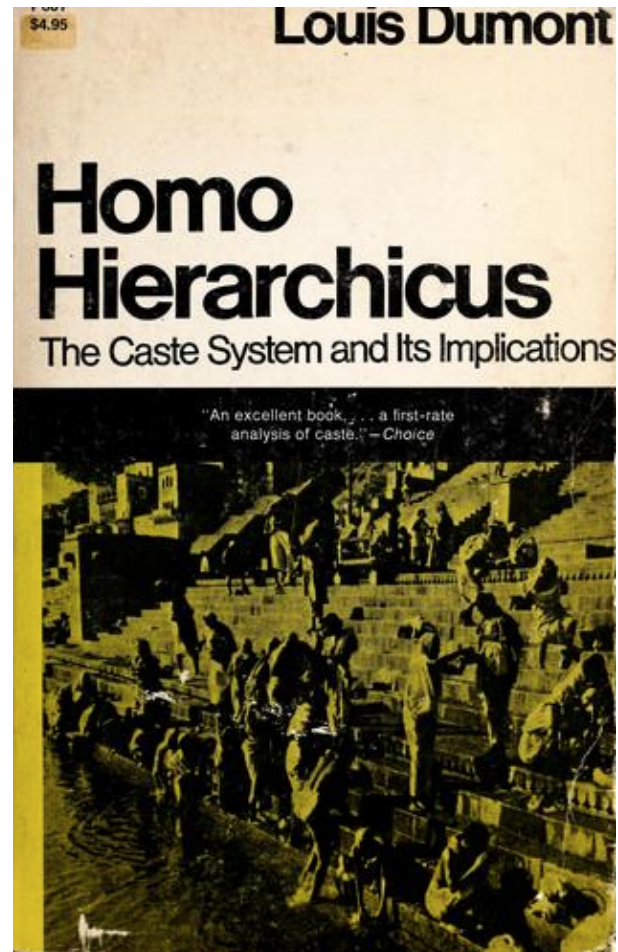
Introduction to Sociology

# Caste as Social Stratification?

- Social Stratification – Conflict Thesis (Karl Marx)
- Social inequality places a vital role in the smooth operation of a society? (Davis-Moore Hypothesis)
- Weber not convinced of proletariat revolution – class, status and parties.
- Can there be universal nature of Social Stratification?



# Homo Hierarchicus



## Caste through Comparative Focus

- Hierarchy, Equality, Liberty, Democracy
- Need to understand caste as Institution
- Need to forget that it is opposed to our (Western) ethics
- Dumont has a conviction that caste has something to teach us about ourselves (modern/ western).
- Our obsession with equality may lead to sameness – kill difference.



# Methodological and Philosophical Questions

- India a complex society that sustained a great civilisation [despite ‘hierarchy’ ?]
- Caste helps us grasp our modern values *intellectually*
- Need to move beyond social stratification → Importance of ‘Ideology’
- Society is present in the mind of each man [Durkheim]; Republic linked to collective being in Plato’s republic
- Importance of “apperception” → not innate but learned, therefore central in comparative sociology
- Individual as a sociological problem – “Equality as a modern value → hierarchy as counterpart”

# Individualism and Holism

- Individual as free vs. individual as apperception
- Difficulty of making individual an universal unit of analysis
- Problematised individual as 'modern value' → liberty and equality central
- Is the individual of modern society opposed to hierarchy?
- Rousseau (individual → natural being → social being → individual) vs. Plato (collective end)
- Collective end against liberty and equality
- Tocqueville → Individualism spreads with democratic conditions, could confine individuals within solitude.
- Talcot Parsons → Universal notion of hierarchy
- Modern denial of hierarchy affects our understanding of caste system

# Caste: History of Ideas

- Phases of study – explanation, description to intensive studies by anthropologists
- Whatever the shortcomings of caste – it sure is a masterpiece of legislation (Dubois).
- Caste organisation is attributed to divine will– priest at summit to save division of labour (James Mill).
- Earlier writings faced a challenge of reconciling the technical and economic aspects of caste with Religious

# The problem of comparison

- Difficult to find something similar
- De Nobili and Italian Jesuit who became a sadhu for communicating christianity – criticised by jesuits.
- Is caste is a matter of religion?
- Max Webber – Caste as a particular kind of status group.
- Caste as Class (Alfred Kroeber ). Elimination of religious justification Consciousness is reduced to epiphenomenon



# Modern lenses affect our understanding

- Indo- European, Dravidian and Racial Theory
- Racial theory – mingling of Indo-European Invaders and autochthonous populations –Invaders purity.
- Risley order of caste and nasal index of member.
- Max muller – initially two races priest and nobility- the rest came about later -- **All try to grasp caste through modern civilization.**
- After 1945 [Anthropology] Tendency to treat each caste as a whole or to explain the whole through each caste

# Dumont's Proposition

## System to Structure

- Dumont is most cautious of projecting modern-western prejudices in studying caste – understand and appreciate IDEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE
- System of castes [ Bogle goes from system to elements and Hutton goes from elements to nowhere]
- Caste as a system of ideas and values – Need to understand this **intellectual system and Ideology**.
- Jajmani as part of caste system –Hierarchy penetrates the domain of kinship → Father-son relationship [pg36], therefore ideology is important.

# The place of ideology

- Need to understand the **principles** behind their views
- Possible to recover the simple principle of their thought.
- Focus on relations can be limiting → force, political, economic, power, territory, property.
- “ It is only in **relation to the totality** thus reconstructed that the ideology takes on its true sociological significance”
- $o=i+r \rightarrow$  Application of ideology to a particular situation
- Ok but what should be order of study  $O \rightarrow I$  or  $I \rightarrow O$ , for studying hierarchy  $I \rightarrow O$  makes better sense.

# Notion of Structure

- Caste is a state of mind – The whole should not be seen from the notion of element... but by starting from the notion of system (certain fixed **principles** govern the fluid and fluctuating elements)
- In studying system – there is a tendency to separate individual from system
- Speak of Structure instead – a system of relations [not a system of elements]
- In Modern society reference is to elements, in India it is to the whole [41]
- Segementation [of caste] is an aspect of structure as opposed to substance – various properties of caste are attached to different levels of the phenomenon.

# The Fundamental Opposition

- Underlying this order is found, a system of oppositions – a structure.
- PURE and IMPURE [ Principe]
- The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical co-existence of the two opposites.
- Purely structural universe : beyond scepticism of modern man.
- Questions : Caste is territorially different? There's more than purity? **Ideology** encompasses territorial factor.
- Emcompassment → Status encompasses power, Brahman is the highest status even when he is poor.

# Purity Impurity – anything Indian?

- Brahman (Man-Cow as Pure) and Untouchable (Impure) –Why and how applies this across hereditary groups?
- Temporary and permanent impurity [Multiple derivations of notion].
- Death – Danger [you bury mine I bury yours] however untouchables permanently impure – others enter the state and walk out.
- Purity extends to → Kula, artha and sarira [HISTORICAL DATA pg 49 – 55]
- Excrement, Saliva, Lowly fate reserved for left hand; Bronze vessel cleaned earthen ware replaced; Birth and Death; Bath, shaving whole head, five products of cow as purificatory.

# All Imitate the Purest Man?

25.4 *Historical data (concluded)*. Thus the literature is explicit about impurity in personal life within a caste or social category – particularly that of the Brahmans. From this point of view, purification already appears as a perpetual necessity. The literature also shows the transition from this occasional or temporary impurity to the permanent impurity of certain human groups. The laws of Manu say (V, 85), ‘When he has touched a *Caṇḍāla*, a menstruating woman, an outcaste, a woman who has just given birth, a corpse . . . he purifies himself by bathing.’ Here the three occasional impurities are identified with that of the ‘outcaste’ and the *Caṇḍāla*, who is none other than the old prototype of the Untouchable. There is another list in the same book at III, 239, ‘A *Caṇḍāla*, a domestic pig, a cock, a dog, a menstruating woman and a eunuch must not look at Brahmans while they are eating’,