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The Comparison of Civilizations

Louis Dumont on India and the West

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abstract: The social anthropological/sociological *oeuvre* of Louis Dumont (1911–98) embraced continents: the contrast between the defining ideologies of traditional and modern societies was his central concern. Traditional society represented by India and modern society represented by the West were respectively considered by him to exemplify the principles of holism/hierarchy and individualism/equality. Further, what is 'manifest' in one type of society is 'latent' in the other. To study the two types of society and ideology in mutual relatedness rather than isolation, they must be compared. Comparison may begin at the local or regional level within a civilization, but it should be built up step by step to cover national variants of a civilization. The ultimate goal is to compare civilizations themselves within the framework of a common humanity. Dumont's studies of India and the West are of the greatest interest for their methodological sophistication as much (if not more) as for their substantive conclusions, which have been the subject of scholarly debate for nearly half a century.

keywords: caste ✦ economic ideology ✦ hierarchy/equality; ✦ holism/individualism ✦ property ✦ religious values

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Every civilization is carried on the network of a society, and it is impossible in practice to study a civilization and its society apart from each other. (Toynbee, 1961: 282)

Modern civilization has the unique advantage of commanding a relatively good knowledge of many other civilizations and cultures; comparison is the fulcrum. (Dumont, 1977: 11)

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Louis Dumont's objective in his monumental *oeuvre* was to treat the social anthropological (monographic) study of particular societies and cultures as not only an end in itself but ultimately, and more importantly, as a means to the sociological (generalized) understanding of the human condition. The key element of his method was comparison. The comparative method in Dumont's hands became a series of productive 'confrontations' – a dialectic – across time and space. I try in this article to briefly illustrate his method by outlining the course of Dumont's studies within and across civilizations.

Recalling the early years of his career in the late 1930s as a clerical worker in the French section of the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires in Paris, he approvingly mentions the endeavour of keeping a 'scriptureless humanity . . . alive in its diversity' (see Galey, 1982: 13). An interest in cultural difference was at that early stage established as the foundation stone of the multistoreyed intellectual edifice that he was to build over the following 50 years. There could hardly have been a better, more productive, way of developing this interest in cultural diversity – and indeed to recognize it in the first instance – than to proclaim the comparability of local, regional and national cultures and eventually of transnational civilizations. The concept of levels was central to this enterprise, each level of observation and study and of comparison being the 'stepping stone' (Dumont, 1971: 60) to another. Moreover, along with other structuralists – Dumont came to know Lévi-Strauss's work at the Musée – he came to believe that the deeper the differences between two cultures, the greater the likelihood that comparing them will yield significant understandings of both and of social life generally. Without generalization the task of comparison is incomplete.

In the original edition of *Homo Hierarchicus* (Dumont, 1967a), in which he presented a sociological model of Indian (Hindu) society – and indeed of Indian civilization generally – to the French reading public, he affirmed that, for his theoretical orientation, he was deeply indebted to the French tradition of sociology (Dumont, 1980: xlv). Within this tradition the comparative approach had been employed with impressive effect by Emile Durkheim himself in his *magnum opus*, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) and by other members of the *Année Sociologique* group. As for Dumont, he acknowledged the influence of Celestin Bouglé (1971), from whom he derived the defining principle of the caste system. It was Marcel Mauss, however, above everybody else, whom Dumont recognized as his mentor.

Dumont actually became Mauss's student in the mid-1930s. Mauss was, of course, a comparativist *par excellence* and a Sanskritist too (see, for example, Mauss, 1970). Specifically and crucially, Dumont responded positively to Mauss's teaching that 'it is through our own culture that we

can understand another, and vice versa'. Such a stance implied in the first place 'an assumption about the unity of mankind', but that by itself is rather vague and therefore further entails the 'study of differences' (Dumont, 1986: 189–90). The moot point is how a focus on difference may be prevented from producing absolute separation in effect even when the notion of the unity of humankind ensures against such a slide in principle. In short, how do we connect, by what procedure? More about this later.

Dumont's cultural and educational background in France had sensitized him to the empirical presence of the individual in society and of the normative value of individualism. His preparatory studies had already got him ready to encounter the group (caste) rather than the individual in India. This difference was to create problems for a comparison of the two cultures. For a start, there was no escape from caste, however, and it was a south Indian subcaste, namely the Pramalai Kallar of Tamil Nadu, that he chose to study. The individual here was submerged in the group, but the local group itself was not an autonomous but an embedded entity. To quote Dumont: 'All castes of a given culture area – [such as] the Tamil language area – rest on fundamental common institutions. These institutions must be discovered under individual diversity, and they constitute, along with the caste system itself, the social morphology of the civilization in question' (Dumont, 1986b: 3). The aforementioned task of discovery entailed intracivilizational comparison.

The Pramalai Kallar are a subcaste. Much that is true of them is true of all Kallar subcastes and some of it is also true of other castes/subcastes of Tamil Nadu that are of the same or comparable ritual and social status. Understanding is here obtained through an inside-out movement. Castes that rank higher or lower in the social hierarchy also share many values, beliefs and practices with the Pramalai Kallar by virtue of participation in a common regional, Tamil, culture. Tamils themselves are one of the four major linguistic groups, each numbering millions, that together comprise the Dravidian culture of south India.

A widely shared social organizational feature of the Dravidian south is what used to be called 'consanguineal' or 'cross-cousin marriage' (marriage of a boy/man with his mother's brother's daughter). Intensive fieldwork combined with careful reading of the available ethnography and Lévi-Strauss's seminal work on 'the elementary structures of kinship' originally published in 1949 (see Lévi-Strauss, 1967), enabled Dumont to provide a new interpretation of the preferential form of marriage among the Dravidian peoples. The method was comparison within the region (at the caste/subcaste and local levels) and the substantive conclusion was that the so-called consanguines, or cross-cousins, are properly conceived of as predetermined affines. Under the prevailing

regime, marriages are not merely episodic events, but enduring arrangements between wife-giving and wife-receiving lineages. Affinity (the relationship established through marriage) could thus be said to be inherited or transmitted from generation to generation and in principle permanent. Dumont (1957a) proposed therefore that marriage in south India, being of distinctive character from what it is in the West, should be called 'marriage alliance'. The contrast was further stressed later when he wrote that, in the West, 'affinity . . . merges into consanguinity for the next generation . . . [and] is *undervalued in relation to it*' (Dumont, 1983: vii; emphasis in the original).

At the time of the first publication of the relevant monograph (1957), Dumont stated the conclusion that marriage alliance was 'the fundamental principle of South Indian kinship' (Dumont, 1983: 104). Absence of any reference to the character of marriage in north India was apparently due to the fact that no major studies of the subject based on fieldwork were available, although some Indological studies did exist. His own fieldwork in a north Indian village began only that year and he would not have arrived at any definite conclusions. Dumont addressed the issue of the north–south comparison only ten years later (Dumont, 1966). He then noted that although interkin marriage is not allowed, and the institution of marriage alliance is absent, other evidence is available about the relations between wife-givers and wife-takers (such as an asymmetrical flow of gifts from the former to the latter) to indicate a stress upon affinity that appears to be a pan-Indian phenomenon. This consists, he wrote, 'in the valuation, and in the consequent elaboration and ordering or patterning of affinal relationships. This valuation is, of course, consistent with the caste system insofar as . . . membership [in a caste] depends upon the [caste] status of both parents, and thus upon marriage' (Dumont, 1966: 113). In his discussion of south India, Dumont had earlier pointed out that the principle of alliance was also 'fundamental' in relation to caste, since endogamous marriage was its basis. Hence the conclusion: 'marriage is crucial on both levels of caste and kinship, . . . it constitutes in a sense their articulation' (Dumont, 1983: 104).

The conception of a comparative sociology and its method are here complete. North India is distinguished from south India through interregional or intracivilizational comparison but, in the next move, both north and south are accommodated within a pan-Indian emphasis on marriage, even at the cost of playing down the differences between them. This emphasis serves to bring out the contrast between India and the West (intercivilizational comparison). Thus, he observes that it is ironical that the egalitarian westerners 'practice subordination – the relation between consanguinity and affinity is exactly . . . a *hierarchical relation* – while South Indian people, who live in a hierarchical society, . . . make a simple,

straightforward, symmetrical distinction between them' (Dumont, 1983: vii; emphasis in the original).

The idea of hierarchy – the encompassing of the contrary – lies at the very core of Dumont's most ambitious work, namely *Homo Hierarchicus* (Dumont, 1967a, 1970a, 1980). As is well known – given its status as a modern classic – the book is an analysis of the caste system. The presence of castes everywhere, he had earlier said (Dumont, 1970b: 2–18), was a token of the civilizational unity and distinctiveness of India. *Homo Hierarchicus* opens with civilizational contrasts being placed at the very centre of the enquiry. 'The caste system is so different from our own social system in its central ideology', Dumont wrote, 'that the modern reader is doubtless rarely inclined to study it fully.' Moreover, 'the very authors who have devoted books to it have more often tried to explain the system as an anomaly than understanding it as an institution. . . . More is necessary: the conviction that caste has something to teach us about ourselves' (Dumont, 1980: 1). Put differently, this meant that caste must be taken seriously as a civilizational scheme or mode and not be treated as a product of social 'degeneracy' (see Madan, 1999: 478). The question that arises here is why western observers and thinkers have been so negative about caste. Dumont's answer is that the unquestioning acceptance of equality as an ideal is responsible for this. The bearer of the values of western civilization knows equality or, its binary opposite, inequality. He or she does not think in terms of hierarchy and fails to ask 'to what extent [equality] runs contrary to the general tendencies of societies, and hence how far our society is exceptional, and how difficult it is to realize this ideal' (Dumont, 1980: 20).

Ethnocentrism is a universal failing and scholars suffer from it no less than lay persons. The tendency is to make sense of the unfamiliar by comparing it to the familiar. Needless to point out, this procedure introduces category assumptions into the interpretation and may distort it. Thus, no less an intellectual than Max Weber conceived of caste, as Dumont notes, as 'a particular kind of status group or estate (German, *Stand*), in the sense of the three estates of the *Ancien Régime* of France'. The idea that 'caste is a limiting case of social class' is widespread (Dumont, 1980: 26). What this does is to obscure the fact that, viewed from within Hindu society, religious values are crucial to an understanding of caste in a manner that renders uncritical comparisons with modern (western) society – and for that matter with the so-called primitive society – misleading. In Dumont's view, the sociocentricity of the western observer makes him or her introduce considerations of power where religious values are primary; similarly, the interests and perspectives of the individual are introduced where the group and holism prevail.

An authentic effort at understanding Indian civilization through a focus

on the fundamental and ubiquitous institution of caste, according to Dumont, must begin with the first principles chosen by Indians themselves, but should not stop there. The dialectical method requires that the first principles, or ideology, be confronted by practice, and the view from within be confronted by the view from without. The external (western or any other) perspective is not eliminated, but relocated in the structure of the argument as a particular possibility that might illumine other such particulars, rather than as a universal tendency. Instead of 'classification', which brings down social and cultural diversities to the level of the lowest common denominator, a more heuristically productive procedure is 'typification', which enlarges rather than narrows the framework of comparison, and produces understanding through contrasts (or controlled comparison) (see Dumont, 1967b).

Following a methodological first principle that he himself had earlier enunciated – 'a sociology of India lies at the point of confluence of Sociology and Indology' (Dumont, 1970b: 2) – Dumont focused on the notion of ritual purity, which he derived from both the Indological tradition and extant ethnography, as the point of departure for his analysis of the caste system. Others too – notably Bouglé (1971), who derived the hierarchical separation of castes and their interdependence from it – had identified this idea as crucial, but Dumont's handling of it (although indebted to Bouglé's formulation) was innovative. He disowned any interest in the search for causes: 'I do not claim that the opposition between pure and impure is the "foundation" of society except in the intellectual sense of the term: it is by implicit reference to this opposition that the society of castes appears consistent and rational to those who live in it' (Dumont, 1980: 44). The opposition, it must be added, is neither mere difference nor simple social gradation: it is hierarchical: that is, the impure is both opposed to as well as included in the pure. Put as a general principle, hierarchy is '*the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole*, it being understood that in the majority of societies it is religion which provides the view of the whole, and that the ranking will thus be religious in nature' (Dumont, 1980: 66; emphasis in the original).

Having grounded himself thus, Dumont proceeded to demonstrate that the various aspects of the caste system – marriage rules, dietary regimes, hereditary occupational roles, etc. – can be derived from the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of ritual purity and its opposite impurity. By his interpretation, caste is different from other forms of social stratification through the 'disjunction' of ritual status and secular (politico-economic) power within the social system. Secular power, although opposed in principle to ritual status, is encompassed by it.

Homo Hierarchicus is neither a historical account of the caste system nor an explanation of it in merely behavioural (interactional) terms. It is rather

a logico-deductive 'experiment' to derive the form (or 'structure') of the 'system' from 'a single true principle' (Dumont, 1980: xiii, 43). Since castes exist 'from one end of the country to the other, and nowhere else', which fact points to an empirical 'unity of India' (Dumont, 1970b: 4), the underlying ideology – 'a system of ideas and values' (Dumont, 1980: 36) – signifies a civilizational perspective. The ideology does not explain everything, although it encompasses the social reality, nor does the observation of actual behaviour reveal everything. A 'residue' remains, which can only be explained through a 'confrontation of ideology and observation' (Dumont, 1980: 77), Thus, the exclusion of power from the notion of status leaves unexplained empirical evidence of the exercise of authority. To understand it, the principle of hierarchy is held to be applicable but also incomplete: it is 'completed by dominance'. But the first principle may not be abandoned through the elevation of economics and politics to a level on par with or above religious values. Doing so would amount to 'a misconstruction of Indian civilization' (Dumont, 1980: 183, 388). When such an equation is seen to occur, in fact, it can only be termed the pretentiousness of power.

Internal comparison is thus built into Dumont's model of the caste system. An external comparison also is indicated, in the assertion that castes are found in India and nowhere else, and is required for a complete understanding of the phenomenon. The argument is completed by providing an answer to the crucial question: 'Are there castes among non-Hindus and outside India?' (Dumont, 1980: 201–16). So far as communities adhering to other (non-Hindus) religions are concerned (notably Indian Muslims and Christians constituting respectively about 13 and 2 percent of the total population), Dumont's contention is that caste is found among them in 'more or less attenuated forms. . . . A non-Hindu group cannot be regarded as independent of the environment in which it is set, as really constituting a society by itself, however strongly its values push into this direction' (Dumont, 1980: 210). Pushing comparison outside the subcontinent to consider traditional Sri Lankan social organization, Dumont acknowledges the presence of 'all the characteristics of caste' but notes that 'the king has remained the centre both of group religion . . . and of political and economic life . . . the supremacy of the priest [standing for religious values, notably ritual purity] is an Indian fact which has remained unexportable' (Dumont, 1980: 216).

What is of deeper significance in the context of the present article is the paradigm of intercivilizational comparison that Dumont presents, hierarchical Indian society vs egalitarian western society. As he puts it, the task is to 'set the two types face to face' to show that 'explicit and valorized ideas in the one case' are 'by contrast, subordinate or unrecognized in the other'. Each type comprises the same elements, but the manner of their

arrangement is different, even irreconcilable. To wit, hierarchy (separation and interdependence) as a value *is opposed to* equality (in a framework of economics and politics); holism ('society taken as a whole', 'man [*sic*] as society'), to individualism ('man as individual'); subordination of economic and political interests to religious value, to relegation of religion to the private domain (individual life); individualism as renunciation ('individual outside-the-world'), to holism as totalitarianism. To leave the characterization in the foregoing mutually exclusive form would be 'mechanical': it is important to note that 'the pole of opposition which is not valorized is none the less present, each implies the other and is supported by it'. Thus, 'the tendency to hierarchize still exists [in modern society]', although occasionally in 'ferocious and morbid' forms (e.g. as racism) (Dumont, 1980: 232–3, 265). It follows that if the two civilizational perspectives are reversed, hierarchical society will illumine egalitarian society and vice versa.

* * *

Having started at home in Europe, Dumont set out on a voyage of discovery to India, only to return home to discover Europe in its own varieties of civilizational unity and diversity. The holism and hierarchy of traditional Indian society enabled Dumont to problematize the individualism and equality of modern western society. He queried: 'how and why has this unique development that we call "modern" occurred at all?' (Dumont, 1977: 7). It was, in his judgement, nothing less than a '*revolution of values*'. In all traditional (premodern) societies, 'the relations between men' had been 'more highly valued, than the relations between men and things. This primacy is reversed in the modern type of society, in which relations between men are subordinated to relations between men and things' (Dumont, 1977: 5). The reversal entailed in a manner of speaking the subversion of the whole of society and its replacement by the parts, namely self-oriented, choice-making, rational individuals operating in compartmentalized and specialized domains of activity.

The paradigm shift had its beginnings in the late 18th century (Dumont suggests 1776, the year of publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* as a convenient date) and was consolidated throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The political and the economic were separated through the severance of 'the link between immovable wealth and power over men', and 'movable wealth becomes autonomous'. Symbolizing the dominant role of the economy in society, 'the market and its concomitants' within the political philosophy of 'liberalism' acquired almost a 'sacrosanct role' in society. In Karl Polanyi's (1957) well-known formulation, this was indeed 'the great transformation'.

Focusing on the ideology underlying this transformation, Dumont describes its progression through a careful consideration of the views of several social thinkers, notably Francois Quesnay (France), John Locke (England), Bernard de Mandeville (the Netherlands), Adam Smith (Scotland) and Karl Marx (Germany), all makers of the modern ideology. It was Quesnay who introduced the idea of the economic domain as 'a consistent whole', although he believed this holism to be 'the projection on the economic plane of the general conception of the universe as an ordered whole' (Dumont, 1977: 41). In other words, Quesnay's was a basically traditional position, notwithstanding the bow to the conditional autonomy of the economic domain. Locke of course preceded Quesnay, but he had already gone further in the direction of the separation of economics from politics, illustrated best by his conceptualization of the notion of 'property' within an individualistic framework. 'What is essential is that, with property, something that is exclusively of the individual is made central to a realm of consideration and facts that was governed by holistic, hierarchical considerations.' In Locke, Dumont writes 'Morality and economics provide, in the "law of nature", the basis on which political society should be constructed.' In other words, 'politics as such is reduced to being an adjunct of morality' (Dumont, 1977: 53–4).

With Mandeville a critical transition occurred: value and fact were separated. In his *Fable of the Bees*, private vices bring about public virtue in the form of activity and prosperity, not by any internal logic but by skilful political management. From a careful examination of the import of the *Fable* and of Mandeville's views on the nature of morals and society, Dumont concludes that Mandeville disjoined hedonism from morality and established 'the primacy of the relation of man to goods over the relations between men – if not in principle, then in the actual life of a large and powerful society' (Dumont, 1977: 81). Material prosperity thus became a self-certified moral end.

Mandeville is important in relation to Adam Smith's curious notion of the 'Invisible Hand', of how in the economic domain the apparently selfish pursuit of particular interests by individuals unwittingly yields the common good (Dumont, 1977: 61). Crucial to Dumont's argument is Smith's 'stress on labour as a measure of value' and his 'preference for the definition of value through exchange' (Dumont, 1977: 92). The consequence of this orientation is that human beings are presented as the creator of wealth in relation to the material world. The full potential of value thus created by humans is realized through exchange. In sum, 'we have here the elevation of the individual subject, of man as "self-loving" labouring-and-exchanging, who through his toil, his interest, and his gain works for the common good, for the wealth of nations' (Dumont, 1977: 97).

In his detailed discussion of Marx that follows, Dumont shows the

logical steps by which the 'material conditions of life', already a central idea in Smith and in the burgeoning economic ideology of the West, are given explanatory value by Marx. For him production is *the* human activity *par excellence*: 'production in the economic sense is used here as the prototype of a much wider category that tends to encompass the whole of human life. Relations between men are subsumed under a term that properly designates relations to things' (Dumont, 1977: 156). As Marx himself put it, 'Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc. are only *particular* modes of production and fall under its general law.' The 'paramountcy' of the economic domain, conceived of as the infrastructure in relation to the other domains, the superstructure, is explicitly asserted. Indeed, 'Marx can be said to have brought economic ideology to its accomplishment' (Dumont, 1977: 155, 169). Economics, it will be noted, has become economic ideology and as such is irreversible – it is, in Max Weber's famous phrase, the modern human being's 'iron cage'.

From the traditional Indian perspective, this is an inversion of values, for there the moral order (*dharma*) encompasses the unified politico-economic domain (*artha*): value and fact remain integrated in a holistic configuration. To call it non-modern, instead of traditional, would amount to the illegitimate imposition of the categories of one ideology upon another, a procedure that Dumont rejects.

By the time Dumont completed his exploration of the genesis and triumph of economic ideology, the link between individualism and equality had receded into the background. Further studies were devoted to the elaboration of the idea of individualism. The 'global' (general, 'most common') ideology of individualism, constitutive of western civilization, having been described, he finally focused on the comparison of national cultures. 'It is a fact that modern ideology takes notably different forms in the different languages or nations or, more precisely, in the different subcultures that more or less correspond to these languages and nations' (Dumont, 1986a: 15–16). To stress and illustrate the point, a Franco-German ideological – in fact cultural – contrast was formulated in stark terms (Dumont, 1986a: 130–1):

> On the French side I am a man by nature and Frenchman by accident . . . there is nothing but a void between the individual and the species. . . . On the German side . . . I am essentially a German, and I am a man through being a German: man is immediately acknowledged as a social being. . . . Therefore, while the French were content with juxtaposing nations as so many fragments of mankind, the Germans acknowledging the individuality of each nation, were preoccupied with *ordering* the nations within mankind in relation to their value – or to their might.

Dumont's last book, *The German Ideology* (1994), while sustaining the

Franco-German contrast – in fact refining it to make room for interaction within the framework of modernity – focuses on the German variant of the modern ideology. Dumont explains that the beginnings of the divergence between the two national cultures are traceable, in significant measure, to the fact that the German version of the Enlightenment was religious in contrast to the French, which was secularist. In the setting of Lutheran Pietism and Reformation, the German variant of individualism emerged as a cultural category par excellence, distanced from the French (western) variant, in which the sociopolitical domain was crucial under the influence of the Revolution. But the political category was not absent in the German ideology: the belief that the German state had a vocation to dominate the world took care of that. Both the variants were the outcome of the 'interaction' (or dialectic) of a 'world civilization' (universalism) and particular national cultures (Dumont, 1994: 36 *passim*).

The 'idiosyncratic formula' of German ideology was the combination of community holism and self-cultivating individualism. In this context, Dumont presents a detailed and insightful analysis of the ideal of 'self-cultivation' (*Bildung*) expressed through an extraordinary intellectual and artistic blossoming in Germany between 1770 and 1830, which was marked by the growth of community consciousness defined culturally. Dumont warns the readers of his book at the very outset that whatever he has to say about the German ideology is about 'yesterday and before', and disclaims any knowledge about 'the Germans of the present day' (Dumont, 1994: 3).

From the methodological point of view, a reference back to Dumont's work on India is in order at this point: he himself stresses the continuity (Dumont, 1994: viii). As in the Indian case, the principal concern is with the articulation of ideology, and with the tension between principle and actuality, but the latter is not altogether neglected. The 'preoccupation' with principles is considered typical of the French intellectual tradition. Thus, the predominant ideology is said to be that of the Left, but the ideological subordinate Right, although 'ideologically impotent, has been empirically powerful in the long run' (Dumont, 1994: 209). The relative lack of interest in the happenings of the present day, whether in India or in Germany, is an expression of this preoccupation. Not that he does not consider contemporary changes in the caste system: in fact, he provides an insightful analysis in terms of a world of 'relations' and interdependence being replaced by competitive 'substances' or blocks (Dumont, 1980: 222). But the manner he does so – interestingly as an exercise in comparison between the past and the present – results in a devaluation of the same: change is said to be confined to the ideologically subordinate politico-economic domain (Dumont, 1994: 228; see also Madan, 1994: 61–71; 1999: 479).

As for the German–French contrast, it has immense philosophical import that can only be noted here. In Dumont's own words, 'How, without contradiction, can we acknowledge the diversity of cultures and at the same time maintain the universal idea of truth-value? I think it can be done by resorting to a . . . complex model . . . where truth-value would figure as a "regulative idea", in the Kantian sense' (Dumont, 1994: 34). Such an exercise is not, however, taken up in the book. Indeed, it ends with a rhetorical question that once more and – as it turned out – for the last time underlined Dumont's fascination for the comparative study of ideologies (Dumont, 1994: 235):

> That these two countries, each bound to its idiosyncrasy, are impervious to that of its neighbour, should not cause surprise. But is it not pathetic to see each of them neutralize its own experience in order to salvage the ideological framework in terms of which the country has been wont to think of itself and the world over a great length of time?

* * *

The fact that I consider the Dumontian approach to the study of civilizations a most valuable and novel contribution does not mean that all one has to do is to mechanically borrow his categories and procedures. He invites emulation rather than uncritical imitation. In my own study of the ideologies of secularism and fundamentalism in India (Madan, 1997), I identified 'religious traditions' within the setting of Indian civilization (Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism), and examined them with a view to finding out if they harbour ideas comparable to those of 'secularism' and 'fundamentalism' as these have been formulated in the West in the context of Christianity. The dualism of the latter, expressed in the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane (or secular), is not exactly echoed by the former. Nor is the passage of cognitive categories from one civilizational matrix to another (anticipated in the hopefulness of the Enlightenment universalism or as a historical inevitability) unproblematic. To say so does not, however, mean that cultural traditions are insulated phenomena and that intercivilizational communication does not occur. Nor did Dumont think so. To hold otherwise would mean falling into the suffocating trap of cultural solipsism and denying what for an Indian is undeniable: namely that India has throughout the 20th century responded creatively, if not always thoughtfully and successfully, to the call of tradition and the invitation of modernity.

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