

HIERARCHY AND POWER: REFLECTIONS OF A BLIND MATERIALIST

Beidelman on the jajmani system:

The jajmani system is a feudalistic system of prescribed hereditary obligations of payment and of occupational and ceremonial duties between two or more specific families of different castes in the same locality... Position in the system rests upon a person's relation to the land.... By his land-based power a jajman may coerce other castes as tenants or labourers; he may coerce them by his control of farm implements and oxen, carts, seed, food, pasture, forage, and sometimes even house sites and wells... Land is the major integrative factor about which the caste and village system operate... such coercive integration is supported and re-affirmed by ritual and ceremonies which jajmans hold both to emphasise the jajman-kamin relationship and to enhance or affirm their status.¹

Dumont on Beidelman:

(according to B.) the system is based on an unequal distribution of power, therefore it represents a form of "exploitation" and "coercion". The "ritual" aspect is secondary, the economico-political aspect, dominated by relation to the land, essential. In short, hierarchy means "exploitation". A doctrinaire and blind materialism...²

The problem posed is that of the specific mode of articulation of status (ritual, hierarchy) and power in the caste system. What we are dealing with is two structures of relationships, what Dumont in his own terms refers to as the 'gradation of statuses', on the one hand, and the 'distribution of power' on the other.³

1. Beidelman tells us that 'socio-economic and ritual factors are closely interrelated, but they are certainly not the same' (p. 15). That is to say, he distinguishes between two structures and postulates a 'close interrelationship' between them. What, according to Beidelman, is this (problematic) interrelationship? 'There is a high correlation between socio-economic rank and jajmans, and a lower correlation between ritual rank and jajmans.' For example, 'the role of a Brahman jajman derives from his control of land' (p. 16). Power (based on control of the means of production) is the determining structure in the jajmani system, according to Beidelman. But the partial non-coincidence of these structures (ritual/power) and the primacy of one (power) over the other (ritual) should not conceal what is in fact necessarily implied in that relationship, viz, their partial coincidence. Beidelman refers to this partial coincidence as a 'parallelism of roles'.

The primacy of the economic over the ritual structure is expressed in the following terms:

the web of ritual services, Beidelman says, connecting a ritually higher caste to a ritually lower one is an ideological expression of the dependence which the higher caste's economic and political subordinates have toward it (p. 18).

Despite this, however, 'ritual ideology... is not fully dependent on socio-economic factors (p. 19).

To be even more precise in formulating Beidelman's position, we may say that, while the ritual-ideological structure 'expresses' (p. 18), 'supports' and reaffirms' (p. 75) the structure of political and economic relationships (power), it still possesses a relative autonomy of its own. This view of ritual (status) as the ideological expression and validation of the political and economic relationships in a caste society is repeated by Gould,⁴ who tells us that religious attitudes 'underlie and perpetuate' the existing division of

labour, that Hinduism elaborately rationalises and congeals the fundamental distinction between those who possess land and those who do not.

2. Dumont, on the other hand, asks, 'Do we have to believe that "ritual" theory rationalises the "exploitation of the Charmars?"'⁵ How then does Dumont conceptualise the relationship? He insists emphatically that the specificity of caste societies resides precisely in the absolute disjunction, 'in principle', between the ritual-ideological and economic-political structures.

The priest, the Brahman, is highest in status even when he is poor and materially dependent. In the oldest texts referring to the varna order, priesthood is set above, that is, it encompasses rulership; and at the same time, these "twin forces" together encompass all the rest (1967, 34).

In the essay on 'Caste, Racism and Stratification'⁶ he elaborates this point:

It is necessary to distinguish between two very different things: the scale of statuses (called "religious") which I call hierarchy and which is absolutely distinct from the fact of power on the one hand, and on the other the distribution of power, economic and political, which is very important in practice, but is distinct from, and subordinate to, the hierarchy. It will be asked then how power and hierarchy are articulated. Precisely, Indian society answers this question in a very explicit manner... while the Brahman is spiritually or absolutely supreme, he is materially dependent; while the king is materially the master, he is spiritually subordinate.

In this conception the distribution of power (that structure which Beidelman sees as determinant) is distinct from, and subordinate to, hierarchy. What is still problematic is the status of this relationship of 'subordination' - at what level, and in what way, is power subordinate to hierarchy (ritual; status)? 'In every society one aspect of social life receives a primary value stress and simultaneously is made to encompass all others and express them as far as it can.'⁷ As the basic value of caste societies status or hierarchy both 'encompasses' and 'expresses' all other aspects, including the structure of social and political relationships. Dumont corroborates this in his own words:

There is in Swat no fundamental distinction between status and power: the "Priests" are inferior to the dominant group (Pakhtun), and the religious quality of the "Saints" expresses itself in terms of dominance instead of dominance (of the Kshatriya etc.) being obliged to express itself in terms of religion (ibid, 35 - my emphasis). Hierarchy, then is the mode of expression of power. The structure of political relationships and economic power expresses itself in the religious idiom of hierarchy. Religion is the language of power relationships (and ultimately of the relations of production) in a caste society.

This, in fact, is what Dumont says in so many words: 'the "religious" is here the universal mode of expression, and this is perfectly coherent given that the global orientation is religious, that the religious language is that of hierarchy.'⁸ And finally, 'Hierarchy marks the conceptual integration of a whole, it is, so to speak, its intellectual cement.'⁹

The structure of political and economic relationships ('power') is 'subordinate to' hierarchy in the sense that these relationships are expressed in religious terms, in the language of hierarchy, which constitutes the global principle of caste societies. I have quoted at length from Dumont's work because I wish to make the point that (i) nothing Dumont says refutes Beidelman, and (ii) there is no necessary opposition between their respective conceptualisations of the relationship between power and ritual in the Indian village.

This may seem strange since Beidelman subordinates ritual (status) to power (relations of production), and Dumont, conversely, power to ritual. Yet this apparent contradiction evaporates once it is realised that 'hierarchy', in Dumont's view, 'marks the conceptual integration of the whole,' that power is

subordinate to hierarchy at the conceptual level, that is, within the domain of the ideology itself.

The 'essential' function of hierarchy is that it constitutes the conceptual or symbolic, not material (Dumont stresses the antithesis), unity of caste societies. 'Hierarchy integrates the society by reference to its values.' In other words, what we are dealing with is a conscious model, a mode of conceptualisation of the social and cosmological universe. An ideology is precisely such a conceptualisation - it defines 'lived experience' that is, the way in which men live their conditions of existence.¹⁰ But the crucial point is this: an ideology is not visible to the agents themselves. Because it is their very mode of conscious existence men do not normally establish that psychic distance from it which is the essential precondition of science. That is to say, and this is the paradoxical point which Dumont fails to grasp, the conscious model is profoundly unconscious of itself.

This means that an ideology of course - as hierarchy - is not simply a mode of conceptualisation of the universe, a way in which men consciously experience their social relationships, it is also itself a structure of which the agents are quite unconscious. As such it is defined by its own specific 'functions' (like Dumont I use the word reluctantly - cf. HH 318), of which the agents have no immediate knowledge.

To reformulate the original problem of the mode of articulation of ritual (status) and power - how is the ideological structure implicit in men's conceptual image of their universe related to the actual structure of the relations of production into which they enter? Dumont asked, 'Must we believe that "ritual" theory rationalises the "exploitation" of the Chamars?' The answer, of course, is 'no'. 'Rationalise' implies that the conceptualisation embodied in the dominant motifs and themes of the hierarchical ideology (purity/impurity etc.) is a consciously planned and deliberate exercise. Yet Beidelman's view was that ritual (meaning by this that gradation of statuses which is the concrete form of hierarchy) 'supports and reaffirms' the coercive integration of caste society. Beidelman then, was not referring to some conscious process of mystification, but to an objective function of the hierarchical principle. That is to say, the conscious model (hierarchy) is unconscious of its own objective functions. Beidelman's weakness is that he nowhere specifies in a clear and explicit fashion what these 'functions' are or indeed even how the ideology embodied in ritual functions in such a way as to 'support and reaffirm' the existing social relationships.

For our purposes it is sufficient to focus on two of these functions. The first was understood by Dumont. An ideology 'cements' a society on the conceptual plane. It is a mode of conceptual integration. As Dumont says in a beautifully lucid phrase: 'Hierarchy integrates the society by reference to its values.' But while putting emphasis on this aspect Dumont scarcely mentions the second. Because no ideology ever reflects the existing social universe in a clear and precise fashion (or what would be the function of science?) it inevitably distorts, to some degree, the social perception of reality. This is precisely the deeper meaning of the hierarchical principle. For what, after all, is hierarchy? Dumont stresses that it is a matter purely of religious values.¹¹ 'If we are to generalise, it can be supposed that hierarchy, in the sense that we are using the word here, and in accord with its etymology, never attaches itself to power as such, but always to religious functions'.¹² In other words, the ideology encoded in the structure of ritual relationships is an ideology which focuses predominantly on religious functions. I would maintain that this focus by its very nature ignores that sector of reality which consists in specifically economic functions, that is, the field of the relations of production, the structure of 'power' as opposed to 'status'. In short, caste ideology excludes the dominant structure of social life from the field of social perception. In this way it necessarily distorts that perception.

I have found in Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus only one passage where he more or less explicitly recognises this function of the principle of hierarchy:

Hierarchy or the gradation of statuses... is not everything. What it leaves out of account ("laisse en dehors d'elle") is the

distribution of power, but then you might ask, if that is the case, should it not at least reflect that distribution in some way, since in practice it never attaches itself to power? Generally speaking, an ideology orientates or orders reality rather than reproducing it, and the act of awareness ("prise de conscience") is always in fact a choice of one dimension in preference to others: it is impossible to focus on certain relationships without completely ignoring ("se rendant aveugle à") others...¹³

In this remarkable passage Dumont grasps the essential point that an ideology is not simply a conceptual 'integration', and 'intellectual cement', but also an unconscious distortion of the social universe; that the hierarchical ideology necessarily distorts reality by concealing the structure of 'power'. This function is as 'essential' as the other.¹⁴

To conclude - we might say that while power is 'subordinate to' ritual (status) at the conceptual-ideological level, the relationship is reversed at the level of the total mode of articulation of these structures (status, power), and that this reversal is precisely a consequence of the hierarchical principle. As a 'blind and doctrinaire' materialist I am certainly not committed to the nonsensical view Dumont attributes to 'blind and doctrinaire' materialists, viz. that 'hierarchy means "exploitation"'.

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References

1. Thomas O. Beidelman, A Comparative Analysis of the Jajmani System (1959), 6; 74; 75.
2. Louis Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus (1966), 136.
3. _____, in Caste and Race (ed. de Reuck and Knight, 1967), p. 34.
4. Gould, S. W. J., 14 (1958). Cf. Gough JRAI 89 (1959) "Like all the higher Hindu castes of India, (The Nayars) based their belief in the moral rightness of the caste system in part upon a racist ideology..."
5. Louis Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus, 137.
6. Contributions to Indian Sociology 5 (1961); Homo Hierarchicus 317; Social Inequalities, ed. Beteille, p. 353.
7. Dumont in Caste and Race (1967), p. 33.
8. _____, Homo Hierarchicus, p. 141.
9. Ibid, p. 318.
10. See N. Poulantzas Pouvoir Politique et Classes Sociales (1968), 223 f.
11. Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus, 93.
12. Ibid, 318.
13. Ibid, p. 106.
14. The relationship between hierarchy and power is to some extent homologous to the (much more problematic) relationship between the visible symmetry (dualism) and concealed asymmetry (class structure) of social formations in Central and Eastern Brazil - Lévi-Strauss American Anthropologist 46 (1944) and "Do Dual Organisations Exist?"