
INTRODUCTION

Commenting in the 1960s on Bouglé's *Essais sur le régime des castes* (1908), Louis Dumont (1911–1998) suggests that one of the reasons why this work had not made the mark it deserved was because it 'was written in French, while few Indians read French; English is of necessity the main language of these studies' (Dumont 1980: 43).¹ For this reason, many of Dumont's own publications on India – *Hierarchy and Marriage Alliance in South Indian Kinship* (1957), for example, as well as many of his essays in the journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology* – were originally written in English. As for his *magnum opus*, *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980), Dumont oversaw and assisted in the translation himself. It took almost thirty years for an English version of his extensive monograph, *A South Indian Subcaste* (1986), to appear due to 'Dumont's insistence on the absolute accuracy of translation' (Madan 1999: 476). Even then, he made the final revisions. As Madan (*ibid.*: 486) describes the process: 'It took long – Dumont was not easily satisfied – but the work was done.' In fact, the majority of Dumont's publications in English were either written originally in this language or translated by Dumont himself (usually with a named collaborator). Apart from the titles mentioned above, this is true of almost all the essays included in *Religion, Politics and History in India* (1970), *Essays on Individualism* (1986), and *German Ideology* (1994). English translations, moreover, are not always straight renditions of the original but are quite often revisions, modifications, or elucidations of the earlier text.

Clearly, then, Dumont's standards were exacting with regard to accuracy of translation and the presentation of his ideas in English. His ardent desire to reach an Anglophone audience is evident in the admission that, 'I generally took care to make available in English whatever I produced' (Galey 1982: 15). Nevertheless, in the preface to

one of his publications, Dumont asks the reader to bear in mind that English is not his mother tongue and to pardon any awkwardness or inexactitudes that may occur. He then goes on to thank those who had assisted him in rendering his thought reasonably well into English, in this instance David Pocock and Joseph Erhardy (Dumont 1970: vii). And, in truth, here, as elsewhere, there is little problem with the English *per se*. Unfortunately, however, this does not automatically result in Dumont being straightforward to read. It simply means that the difficulties one encounters are less a matter of translation or language proficiency than of content and style – the French is just as demanding as the English. Reading Dumont, particularly his later essays, can be a challenging affair. Like his teacher, Marcel Mauss, his style can be turgid, heavy going, and occasionally difficult to follow. Parkin (2003) makes a similar observation when he writes of ‘certain obscurities in the language Dumont chooses to use’, suggesting that Dumont’s explanations are ‘frequently compressed, leaving much to the reader’s inference’ and that his ‘writings do not always lend themselves to immediate understanding, but they can generally be made to yield to careful exegesis’. One sometimes gets the impression that Dumont demands too much of his reader. His articles are often more suggestive than exhaustive, assuming on the part of his audience familiarity with previous works. I certainly know from my own experience that it was only upon a deeper immersion into Dumont’s thought, a more intuitive grasp of his style and general argument, permitting a more ‘careful exegesis’, that I was able to comprehend (at least to my own satisfaction) the significance of much of what I read. I hope in the following attempt at providing an accessible overview of Dumont’s work to convey some of this understanding.

When one speaks of structuralism in anthropological circles, one immediately and justifiably thinks of Claude Lévi-Strauss, in comparison with whom all other ‘structuralists’, no matter how different their approach or how enlightening their analyses, pale in significance. This is no less true of Dumont than of the many others – Josselin de Jong, Mary Douglas, Edmund Leach, Rodney Needham, Marshall Sahlins – to whom the structuralist epithet has been applied. In the case of Dumont, the point is forcibly brought home to the reader when considering a number of recent publications relating to anthropological theory. Robert Layton, for instance, devotes a chapter of his *Introduction to Theory in Anthropology* (1997) to a discussion of the structuralist method. Although stressing the importance of Durkheim and Mauss to the origins of structuralism within anthropology, Layton makes no mention whatsoever of Dumont – I would argue Mauss’s most faithful student and promulgator – while devoting almost the entire chapter to an assessment of Lévi-Straussian structuralism. Sim-

ilarly, Alan Barnard's *History and Theory in Anthropology* (2000) examines Lévi-Strauss in considerable depth, while 'Louis Dumont', we are simply told, 'developed a distinct but seminal, regional-structural understanding of social hierarchy in India' (Barnard 2000: 136). This comparative lack of recognition is also reflected in the fact that there are very few full-length publications in English on Dumont. There is certainly not the proliferation of books that one finds on Lévi-Strauss. Of course, there are countless articles and reviews, attempts to apply Dumont's ideas elsewhere (e.g., Barnes *et al.* 1985), critical appraisals, and even a number of festschriften (Madan 1982; Galey 1984). One notable exception is Robert Parkin's recent book *Louis Dumont and Hierarchical Opposition* (2003). As well as presenting a rather detailed and technical analysis of the idea of hierarchical opposition in Dumont, Parkin's study traces the background to this concept in the writings of Robert Hertz and Rodney Needham and its subsequent application and modification among what might be loosely called the Dumontian school in France, consisting of, among others, Daniel de Coppet, André Iteanu, Cécile Barraud, and Serge Tcherkézoff. While Parkin is concerned with tracing a theme prior, through, and beyond Dumont, in what follows I am more interested in assessing Dumont's 'system' in its own right. That is to say, I am less concerned with provenance or reception than with the internal structure and consistency of Dumont's own thought.

Not that I ignore provenance altogether. In summing up Dumont's academic career, Allen (1998: 3) suggests that 'looking back, one can see Dumont as one branch, perhaps the most central, of the intellectual tradition that runs from Comte and Fustel de Coulanges to Durkheim and on to Mauss, but one should not overlook other influences such as Weber and Evans-Pritchard, or even Talcott Parsons'. It is this former tradition, by far the more significant, particularly his relation to Durkheim and Mauss, that I emphasise here in my attempt to intellectually situate Dumont. I suggest that a degree of consistency runs throughout much of Dumont's work centred on the 'category of the individual', this being understood as an extension of Mauss's interest in the 'person'. For this reason, I attempt throughout to situate Dumont's interest in both 'categories' and 'the individual' within Durkheimian sociology more generally and to clarify the use of the terms 'person', 'individual', and 'self' within this Durkheimian tradition.

Note

1. Bouglé's study was subsequently translated into English, with an introduction by David Pocock (1971).