

Louis Dumont's Political Thought

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Louis Dumont is very well known for his anthropological work on India, but rather less for his political thought. Vincent Descombes emphasizes the substantial originality of that thought, which defined the political on the basis of comparative studies and in that way dispelled some of the equivocations of modern and contemporary philosophy.

From the mid 1960s onwards, Louis Dumont (1911-1998) moved away from Indian studies, in which he had become a leading authority with the publication of his monograph on the Kallar caste (*Une sous-caste de l'Inde du Sud*,¹ 1957) and his survey of the principle of the caste system (*Homo hierarchicus*,² 1967). He decided to devote himself fully to what he sometimes called an “anthropological” perspective on Western man, i.e. to studying from an anthropological point of view ourselves. As he put it, this meant taking an “anthropological perspective” on Western man, basing it on forms of human life alien to our traditions. Using one of Tocqueville’s images, he wrote: “The time has perhaps come when the mirror anthropologists direct at other societies should be turned back by them on ourselves, when we should try and formulate our own institutions in comparative language.... About the difficulty of the task there is no doubt. But it might well be the royal road for the advancement of sociological understanding.”³ These last words clearly show how Dumont saw his own

¹ Louis Dumont, *A South Indian Subcaste: Social Organization and Religion of the Pramalai Kallar*, translated from French by M. Moffatt and L. and A. Morton, revised by L. Dumont and A. Stern, edited with an introduction by Michael Moffatt; New York and Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1986.

² Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, translated from French by Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont and Basia Gulati; Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

³ *Homo Hierarchicus* [1967], University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 313.

approach: as a comprehensive sociology, in Max Weber's sense, which means that the sociologist sets out to study man not only in his observable behaviour but also as he acts in accordance with ideas and values—with the result that the investigation of a society must focus on the “collective representations” of its members, in other words on the meaning that these members themselves give to their ways of behaving.

Holism and Individualism

Dumont broadened his audience by his works on Western individualism: first, his study (in *Homo aequalis*, 1977) of the origins of the category of economics, based on that of politics; then his *Essais sur l'individualisme*⁴ (1983), a collection of articles tracing the path leading from the “individual-out-of-the-world” in stoicism and Christianity to the “individual-in-the-world” affirmed starting with the Reformation; and finally *L'idéologie allemande*⁵ (1991), a profound reflection on the contrast between the individualism of equality (reigning in France) and the individualism of singularity (expressed in the German tradition of *Bildung*).

In the sociology and political science literature, Dumont's analyses are generally discussed with reference to his great distinction between two types of society, holistic and individualistic. But the meaning of this distinction is not always well understood, as can be seen for example when readers think they detect an anti-modern prejudice in his thinking. Some critics have even suggested that merely emphasizing this contrast revealed a vague nostalgia for old hierarchical forms of social life. They have not seen that with this contrast between two types of social ideology, Dumont was just giving a fresh take on the great division in the discipline of sociology: status and contract (Henry Maine), community and society (Tönnies), mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim), and so on. The originality of Dumont's version is in placing the accent on the revolution of values that tips the traditional type into the modern type. In fact, the readers who protest against the very idea of a holistic sociology are at odds with Dumont on this basic principle of his theoretical undertaking: to be comprehensive, sociology must grasp social life on the basis of the *ideas* that the actors deploy; but to be sociology, it must have the capacity to grasp these ideas as *social* ideas—a capacity which necessarily eludes the actors if they are, like us, citizens of a

⁴ Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective*, translated from French by Joseph Erhardy, Paul Hockings, and Louis Dumont; Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

⁵ Louis Dumont, *German Ideology: From France to Germany and Back*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

society with an individualistic ideology. Social ideas are ideas that must be understood in the overall picture of a particular society. But how can sociologists, simply by critically reviewing themselves, thus understand *comprehensively* ideas that have to be related to their own culture, the culture of the particular society in which their minds have been formed? They would have to stop taking for granted their social environment, and understand what makes it particular. However, it is highly likely that a purely reflexive critical approach would end only by confirming the investigators' natural sociocentrism. That is why comprehensive sociology must be comparative, and must relate our ideas to those of other people with civilizations different from ours. All readings of Dumont should start with what he himself (in the *Essais sur l'individualisme*) called "the comparative principle."

It has sometimes been asked how Dumont's work on Western individualism counts as anthropology and not just as history of ideas. After all, as he himself pointed out, he dealt directly only with changes in ideas, limiting himself to hints when it came to institutions and social forms. Dumont explained this several times. As can be seen in his first publication, *La Tarasque* (1951), Dumont—a student of Marcel Mauss—was hardly ignorant of the form and contents of field studies. As he said himself, his investigation of individualism made no claim to be complete. Nevertheless, it counts as anthropology because it requires in us a change of perspective that involves a reform of our conceptual apparatus.

Here it would be helpful to remember that for a social anthropologist, fieldwork is not limited to noting different behavioural characteristics. All descriptions of another people's ways of doing things, customs, beliefs and institutions presupposes the work of *translating* their categories of thought into ours (on this, Dumont generally refers to E.E. Evans-Pritchard as well as to Mauss). Moreover, it is this notion of translation that gives us the sense of holism as Dumont sees it. In the scholarly literature, it is sometimes said that a theory is holistic if it purports to explain human actions by means of "macro-mechanisms" or "devices" in which individuals are nothing but cogs. But the part-whole relationship important to Dumont is not like that of one piece of a mechanical system to the whole system, it is a relation involving meaning. For him it is not a matter of replacing acting men with forces of which they are the instruments. Holism consists rather of understanding things as part of a bigger picture, as is necessary in translating, where you have to switch from one language to another. Translating a speech is not just replacing one word by another. To translate means especially to match up

the syntactical rules required by our own language to the syntax of the sentence in the other language. It is a matter of meaning and of comprehension, not of causality.

Comparison is thus a contrast between conceptual schemes. Of course, the field worker translates not a text or an archive, but a life form. The conceptual schemes are therefore “configurations of ideas and values”—in short, of “ideologies” as defined by Georges Dumézil rather than by Karl Marx.

Two things stand in the way of equating Dumont’s “comparative principle” with a vague “comparativism” like that pursued in departments of “comparative literature” and “comparative religion.” First, Dumont’s comparison claims to be radical, i.e. it is made between “them” (the object of study) and “us” (the investigator’s own culture). This means that the categories of thought in which we ordinarily reason and through which we communicate with each other will not emerge from the process unscathed. They will be relativized. How? This brings us to the second point: the model used by the investigator will be taken not from us, but from the traditional type. Max Weber asked: how is it that the Chinese did not invent capitalism, even though they had all the materials (intellectual, administrative, legal, etc.)? In other words, why do they give the impression of having stopped at the point where we Westerners continued the historical development? The comparative principle demands that we reverse the perspective, because from the anthropological point of view it is we who are exceptional. As Karl Polanyi showed in *The Great Transformation* (1944), only in the west and since the nineteenth century have economic activities been represented as forming an autonomous system, “disembedded” from the ensemble of social activities. Actually the question is, why did we not remain, like the rest of humanity, in the traditional type of social organization?

How Should Politics Be Defined?

What are the implications of this intellectual project for political thought? This is the subject of one of Dumont’s reflections at the beginning of *Homo aequalis* (p. 30). He asks: how is politics defined today? This is surely the first question that any political philosophy should raise. And here, although a philosopher might be tempted to set off in search of an *essence*, or at least of a concept that is universally applicable, the “comparative principle” leads us to see things quite differently. In fact, according to Dumont there are three main kinds of response to the question “what is politics?:”

(I) Some responses—those of most contemporary political philosophers—amount to defining the part by itself. As examples of this, Dumont gives the responses of Max Weber (power is political if it has a monopoly of legitimate violence within the territory) and Carl Schmitt (power is defined as political when it designates its enemies). All responses of this kind try to define politics exclusively by the way in which it presents itself to our shared consciousness; therefore we remain trapped in our particular shared meaning: politics is power, which we then have to define by a legal characteristic (such as the monopoly of violence, or the responsibilities taken on in situations of exceptional circumstances).

These responses therefore deploy a kind of “eidetic phenomenology,” in which we suppose that what is to be defined—the “thing itself,” which here is the political—presents itself to us completely in the shared understanding that we have of it, and that we have only to purify this awareness of the political in order to release from it the universal *eidōs*. Always and everywhere there would be the essence of the political, as there would be the essence of the religious, of the moral, and so on. For the anthropologist the result is that every human society would contain institutions corresponding to what we ourselves call “the political.” If they are not explicit, that is because they exist in a disguised form. According to Dumont, this reasoning is typically sociocentric.

However, these definitions miss the partial aspect of what we call politics. For us, the political is indeed necessarily partial, since it must not be confused with the religious. Therefore, since the category of the political gives only a “partial view” of social life, it is necessary to put the part back within the whole in order to understand its meaning. For example, we cannot see as variants of the same ideal type a modern head of state and a traditional king (whose duties are primarily those of a priest looking after the place of the group in the universal order of things). Therefore, the meaning of politics cannot be the same in a society that assigns a religious dimension to the royal office as in a society in which this office has been secularized (or where this sacred dimension is preserved simply as a disguise to conceal the power relation).

(II) The second possible definition of politics falls between the preceding explanations, which remain completely encased in the shared modern meaning, and a fully comparative definition. For some of our philosophers, politics is understood as a part of life in

society, but it is the part that must provide the sense of wholeness of the entire society. Thus everything proceeds as if the vocabulary of politics that is used to name and to describe the part also has to stand for the whole, as if the words “state,” “law,” “constitution,” etc., have to be applied in two different ways: sometimes directly to their proper objects (in the partial world of political institutions), and sometimes to the overall society that supports these institutions and governs itself through them.

Dumont gave a Hegelian example of this doubleness of language.⁶ In his political philosophy, Hegel clearly has a theory of the state, but what does he mean when he calls it “spirit” (*Geist*)? He says “state,” but what does he talk about? Just the head of state, the various powers, and the bureaucracy? No, because there is also the people, who think of themselves, in contrast to others, as a sovereign state. So clearly what Hegel calls “the state” is, as in current parlance, the political institutions, and thus a part of the overall society, but it is also this overall society. Readers of Hegel have to ask themselves each time whether Hegel is discussing the *apparatus* of the state or is making a sociological observation.

Why does Hegel speak in a double language in this way? According to Dumont, this is a reflection of an ideological fact: “it is only as a state that a society as a whole is accessible to the consciousness of the individual.” (*Homo aequalis*, p. 30) “As a whole” means not just as a system of mutual dependence—such as could characterize *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (“civil society” as a system of interaction among individual decision makers)—but also as a bearer of specific values, and therefore a whole to which individuals can relate and with which they can identify themselves as citizens.

Hegel is not the only political philosopher who does this. We could cite Montesquieu and Tocqueville, in whom this doubleness in vocabulary is quite conscious and controlled. In Montesquieu, the term “law” applies primarily to legislation produced (consciously and explicitly) by the legislative authorities. But when he talks about the “spirit (*esprit*) of the laws,” he includes in this both “morals” (*mœurs*) and “manners” (*manières*). So when he is discussing the spirit of the laws in China, we would say that he’s discussing the spirit of Chinese culture. And in Tocqueville, it is well known that the word “democracy” refers not only to a political regime but also and especially to a social regime. Finally, Dumont also

⁶ In *Homo aequalis*, Gallimard, 1977, p. 148-150.

cites Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his idea of the “general will”: here again it is the “language of the modern individual,” with a clear awareness and an explicit will, that enables the thinker to provide an “indirect representation” of the overall society and its needs. Granted, indirect representation means that the thinker cannot speak about it more directly, but it also means that he can say something about it, in contrast to the authors stuck in the partial point of view.

(III) The third possible response is a sociological definition of the political as part of a whole. The “comparative principle” rules out *starting* with a definition of politics as a universal essence. On the contrary, it requires us to start with the contrast between the various ways in which different societies have (or have not) defined a category of the political (in relation to other categories of thought), with a view to *arriving*, at the end of the comparative investigation, at our modern concept of the political (separated from the religious) as a particular case. In our history in the West, we see a gradual formation of the category of the political as we understand it, in controversies surrounding the theological-political question: what are the respective roles of a temporal power (the emperor and then the king as “emperor in his kingdom”) versus a spiritual power (the Pope)? That is how we moved from a holistic ideology in which religion defined itself as the religion of the group, so that the overall society is represented as the (universal) Church, to an individualistic ideology in which religion is left to the individual and his liberty of conscience; since then, men have thought about the society to which they belong in political language. This contrast makes it possible to have a comparative definition of a *nation*: the whole of society such as it is conceived by people who see themselves as individuals (in a normative sense of the term, in which the individual is the subject of the rights of man and citizens). There was in this change a certain continuity: the Church was already seen as a voluntary assembly of individuals; but these meetings centred on religious belief (concerning the redemption of mankind), while a political association is based on purely human values.

Where, then, in this case, is the relation of the part to the whole? In a sense, the definition of politics as a particular space to be delimited within the overall society merely translates the “indirect representation” of philosophers such as Rousseau and Hegel into direct representation: the overall society is mentioned as such, which means, Dumont explains, that we are agreeing to leave behind a purely political concept (in the restricted modern sense) in order to take on a sociological concept (which, remarkably, recovers the comprehensive perspective that Plato had in *The Republic* and Aristotle in *The Politics*). In a commentary on

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Dumont demonstrated all the advantage that can be derived from this advance. The orthodox liberal theory has always been wary about the concept of the “general will” (and rightly so, from its point of view, since that concept guarantees that the holistic view of political society comes back with a vengeance). However, if it believes it is capable of doing without that concept, it is because it quickly equips itself with everything that is needed for political institutions to function in an autonomous and partial sphere: in particular, a specific society (a sovereign state, with national borders), citizens capable of conversing with each other, a consensus on the principle of majority rule as an approximation of a general will in the body politic, and so on. Rousseau actually had the merit of raising the issue of how all these prior conditions could be met. Dumont wrote: “Jean-Jacques Rousseau attempted the grandiose and impossible task of dealing in terms of consciousness and freedom not only with politics, but with society as a whole.... Rousseau was thus not only the precursor of sociology proper, but as well posed the problem of modern man, who has become a political individual without ceasing to be a social being, a problem which is still with us.”⁷ However, although Rousseau was a precursor of sociology, he was not yet a sociologist, because he also raised the problem of transforming the individual (relating only to himself) into a citizen from the point of view of a lawgiver (*Du contrat social*, II, 7). To proceed to a fully sociological point of view, we have to retain this idea of a sense of the whole set of institutions, but to stop portraying this sense as a product of the individual genius of an exceptional statesman.

In the end, what would the comparative definition of politics be? Does Dumont try to state it? In his last book, he offers this:

What in principle founds the political domain within the social? We shall posit that the political level appears when a society ordinarily seen as multiple poses as a unit confronted by others (whether empirically as in war, or ideologically). The society as a unit is ipso facto superior to the society as multiple, and takes charge of it ideologically. This is seen in Rousseau's opposition of the general will and the will of all, the citizen as participating in sovereignty and the citizen as a subject. (German Ideology, p. 206-207, translation amended)

Is this definition comparative? It is insofar as it invites us to consider how in each case a particular society imagines the situations that call for it to express a “general will” and unity, confronted by other particular societies and the outside world. Invoking the “general will” and group affirmation signals that a difference of values has arisen, which we for our part express

⁷ Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 91-92.

in a political form; in other societies collective consciousness will be expressed in a religious form. In a way this definition sketched by Dumont merely replicates the distinction that Hegel made between “civil society” (multiplicity) and “state” (unity). But the equivocation of Hegel’s political lexicon is removed: it is not the state in the sense of the state apparatus (the government and civil service) but the overall society that is elevated above the society of individuals.

Perhaps it will be objected here that these views are archaic, because democracy as we understand it means accepting disagreement and conflict, while the obsession with unity (in the Jacobin manner, for example) reflects an authoritarian concept of citizenship. That is perfectly true. However, in the democratic sense, conflict precisely does not mean civil war or the inability to decide for everyone, and it is precisely when there is disagreement among citizens that such principles as respect for majority rule and constitutional forms come into play, which amounts to elevating the individual as a citizen above the individual as a private person.

Dumont’s comparative ideas have the merit of inviting us to reconsider several assumptions of contemporary political theories, mostly theories of power. Indeed, if we agree with Dumont we have to conclude, contrary to what most of these theories suggest, that the category of the political does not emerge—when it does—in the interaction among individuals within a group (in a power struggle), but whenever historical circumstances require that a collective will be expressed in a human decision, which brings out the principle of the primacy of foreign policy over domestic policy.

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For a complete bibliography, see Jean-Claude Galey's in the journal *Droit et cultures*, no. 39, 2000, p. 211-217.

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