

**THE NOTION OF IDEOLOGY  
IN THE WORK OF GEORGES DUMÉZIL:  
A CONTRIBUTION TO A DUMÉZILIAN EPISTEMOLOGY**

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THE much debated notion of ideology dominates Georges Dumézil's entire work which took form around the genesis, expressions and influence of this notion, ultimately to impose itself through it. But ideology has also dictated the refinements and successive changes of direction that mark his work. It is this complex evolution that I should like to examine here by attempting to sketch the shape of an exemplary intellectual itinerary, exemplary as much through its history as through the more general questions it raises.

1. *The First Model*

(a) Mirror images and representations

By daring to juxtapose archaic Indo-Iranian social theory with the no less archaic fossil that comprised the closed group of *flamines maiores*, Georges Dumézil

This is a shortened version of a paper which is to appear in French in the *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*. An earlier version was delivered at the departmental seminar of the Oxford Institute of Social Anthropology on Friday, 10th November, 1989. All translations from the French are by Andrew Meehan. All references are to works by Dumézil unless otherwise indicated.

deferred to his keen, fertile and audacious intuition. But he also raised a general question, albeit involuntarily, which was to obsess him for at least two decades. His analysis, which he modified and re-examined time and time again, would paradoxically lead him to adopt an original solution, very different from his initial position. His work thus provides human science scholars with a perpetually evolving reflection on the very notion of ideology itself.

At the origin and in the background of his entire work, standing like a massive and impassable tower, is the social organization of the Indo-Iranians, laid out in the twin theories of *varṇa* and *piśtra*: 'the social organization of the Indo-Iranians has remained the closest to the common Indo-European type' (1941: 33). For Dumézil, it is apparent that this special form of social organization was itself a prehistoric heritage that the Vedic Indians, especially, had preserved and maintained better than any others, going so far as to harden this heritage into endogamous classes, strictly separated and organized into a hierarchy.

Dumézil sought to establish a relationship between this type of precise and rigorous social tripartition and other triads of a sacerdotal or theological nature, such as the aforementioned Roman triad, with which it seemed to possess obvious morphological affinities. Strengthened by the 'realism' of his initial axiom and by the close similarities he discovered, Dumézil came inevitably to adopt the solution of a mirror image, especially as this solution itself reflected certain epistemological conceptions of the time. The vocabulary he used reveals the choice of this option quite clearly. Its most radical expression originated in 1939 and culminated in 1949: 'it is probable, a priori, that the one (the organization of men) and the other (that of the gods) roughly corresponded to each other, the divine peoples roughly reproducing the structure of the peoples that invoked them' (1949: 213).

The Germanic example provided confirmation of this point of view, since the same distortion, or the same deficiency, can be observed here in both social theory and pantheon: 'the pantheon is less hierarchical because the society is itself less hierarchical' (1939: 11).

It is true that from the outset we are compelled to accept that a tripartite representation or conception of society will interpose itself, mediating the relation between the concrete social fact (that is to say, the exhaustive division of society into three hierarchically organized functional classes) and the corresponding theological or sacerdotal expression. For Dumézil at this time, this representation or conception is itself the calque of reality. It simply presents a more abstract and more general image of it—its ideal double. Germanic mythology 'reflects a certain tripartite conception of society and of the world...a conception which in fact expresses itself most vigorously in the social hierarchy of the Indo-Iranians and the Italo-Celts' (1939: 7).

This distinction nevertheless introduces an important nuance, since Dumézil was to give an ever greater signification to the role and autonomy of these ideas—ideas which we are tempted to call pre-ideological notions. The reason for this is obvious. We can conceive the society of the gods directly reflecting the organization of the men who conceived it, but we must surely admit, if we seek

to account for other forms of symbolic organization such as rites, narratives and legal mechanisms, that a special conceptual framework exists. This conceptual framework is that of the three functions, recognized and isolated as early as 1941:

The least philosophical of the so-called 'primitive' peoples do not conceive of their social being without simultaneously, in systems that are homologous and interdependent, conceiving of other real or conceptual organisms of their experience as well as of the universe which contains them all.... Behind the three social organs [India] has always clearly defined, both abstractly and concretely, their three *functions*. (1941: 57-8; original emphasis)

This coherent set of positions, adopted in relation to the object in question as much as to its origin, bears a certain resemblance, though in an even more radical form, to certain well-known theses of Mauss and Durkheim concerning the notions of representation and systems of classification:

Religion, far from ignoring real society and making an abstraction of it, is in fact its very image. Religion reflects all its aspects, even the most vulgar and repugnant.... But if reality can indeed be observed showing through myths and theologies, it is equally true that the reality we find is enlarged, transformed and idealized. (Durkheim 1985 [1912]: 601)

And elsewhere:

Society was not simply a model which classifying thought may have followed, but rather, its own framework served as framework for the system. The first logical categories were social categories, the first classes of things were classes of men into which those things were integrated. (Durkheim and Mauss 1968: 83)

Nevertheless, in adopting such a position, Dumézil locked himself into a dilemma which today is well recognized: either representation is placed on the side of the object and is its mirror-image, in which case it seems difficult to explain its efficiency and its constituent role; or else representation is conceived independently of any referential reality, in which case 'it is legitimate to wonder what its own principles of organization are and where they come from' (Augé 1979: 59). We shall see later why Dumézil was induced eventually to change his point of view and come down in favour of the second option, and also what new principles he would then invoke in order to get round the very legitimate question of origins.

The attention he paid to social organizations, and to the representations issuing from them, also made Dumézil more sensitive to the notions of system and equilibrium which from the outset would play a decisive role in the most general perception he had of religion: 'a religion is a system, an equilibrium' (1941: 24).

All his life, Dumézil was bitterly and untiringly opposed to 'pointillism', to the dividing and splitting up of matter, to the cutting up of documents into erudite but sterile monographs. He was convinced that each element lives only through the

intelligibility conferred upon it by the totality from which it is drawn. He therefore had no difficulty, a few years later, in replacing the less characteristic words *système* and *ensemble* with the word *structure*. He thus gained a more precise and accurate vision of the intrinsic complexity of ideological productions. It appears that at this time, around 1950, the word *structure* offered him the advantage of designating a system, but a more autonomous one, whose elements, primarily conceptual in nature, are linked to each other by rigorous laws destined to reveal their differential values and the hierarchical levels to which they belong. Substituted in place of the reductionist mirror-hypothesis will be the structural evidence, strengthened by its laws of 'com-position' and 'op-position'.

But we have not yet reached this luminous vision of the possibilities of structural method. At this same date Dumézil is still troubled by the difficulties confronting his initial mirror-image postulate.

#### (b) The Roman impasse

Whilst deliberately keeping them out of his inaugural article of 1938, Dumézil was later to annex the three legendary tribes of the Roman synoecism and recognize them as mythical equivalents of genuine functional classes. Faced with objections and difficulties over this thesis, which no historical source confirms, he first fell back on a solution which proves too ingenious to be convincing. Only an aristocracy could have been divided into 'thirds of functional value', whilst the rest of the Roman people could not have presented any exclusive and lasting specialization.

We can judge to what extent he was a prisoner of his own mirror-image conception at that time. The mention of the division of a human group into functional classes, tribes, clans or races had of necessity to reflect a real social stratification, since the latter is in any case the reference, the model, by which the most diverse objects and notions may be classified. Later, however, on discovering that he had blocked himself into this Roman 'impasse' by mechanically and radically applying his initial postulates, Dumézil came to understand that the objective of his analysis was, and should remain, the study of a dominant scheme of thought. He was obliged to give up trying to describe and situate the process of formation of this scheme, concentrating instead on studying its expression and 'harmonics'. This second and last point of view might be termed the autonomy of ideology. I will examine it closely below for it led Dumézil to an original definition of this notion of ideology, a definition which is ultimately the only one that matters to readers in 1990.

This change in perspective represents a profound and new epistemological reorientation, since a reductionist approach to theological and mythological systems (the mirror-image representation) will be replaced by an attempt to understand the immanent structural character of these systems. Henceforth, ideology, as a system

of thought, will exist in itself and through itself, emancipated from any social or sociologizing ancestry:

In this way a sounder conception takes form, in which social division proper is no more than one application among many others, indeed one which is often absent where others are present—one application of what I have proposed to call, using perhaps an ill-chosen term but one which has become accepted, the structure of the three 'functions': beyond the priests, the warriors and the producers, and more essential than them, appear the articulated and hierarchically organized functions of magical and legal sovereignty, of force, principally warrior force, and of peaceful and fertile abundance. (1968: 15-16)

(c) Eternal regrets

Before discussing this second period of Dumézilian thought I must make two observations.

First, this change in attitude was neither immediate nor perhaps even completely irreversible. For about a decade, probably longer, Dumézil, though abandoning his initial strict determinism, adopted an ambivalent or circular solution according to which social tripartition could be both real and ideal, as much determining as determined, the essential point being ultimately the series of homologies which comparative study could discover in religious, legal and literary sources.

I must add straight away, and this is the second observation I should like to make, that those who may have found the initial model too simplistic, and who consider the early corrections which followed it to be too timid or clumsy, should bear in mind that it was very difficult to challenge the possible and (apparent) realism of Indo-Iranian social conceptions with a mere stroke of the pen. First, these conceptions seem plausible indeed. A careful historian of Indian law wrote in 1967, echoing Dumézil's preoccupations, that they offered 'a simplified image, but probably as a whole a precise one, of the reality [their authors] had before their own eyes' (Lingat 1967: 59). Emile Benveniste, for his part, in 1969, did not even bother to ask himself the question:

The two groups of terms [the Indian and the Iranian] differ in their lexical nature, but coincide in their social reference. The tripartite division of society that they express is the most ancient form we can reach.... India's castes are the much hardened systematization of a division going back to at least the Indo-Iranian past, even perhaps as far back as Indo-European society. (Benveniste 1969: 280)

Secondly, there exist certain rites which imply the presence of a representative of each *varṇa* (*rājasūya*) or which offer different options that conform to the rank of participant (*upanayana*).

However, we have seen that the exclusive and excessive nature of the initial hypothesis undoubtedly stems from the exorbitant privilege granted to this Indian theory of the *varṇa*, a privilege which may be explained by the fascination that the very simplicity of the stated model seems to have conferred upon it. This fascination again led philologists to conclude denotation from denomination. This confusion was reinforced and in turn established by a translation in narrowly 'professional' terms (the priest, the warrior, the peasant). This translation restricted the ideological value of the model whilst strengthening its descriptive value, and thus it perhaps misses its profound vocation. For what does a close analysis reveal? The term *vaiśya* is very vague, signifying the ordinary man, the plebeian, so why have we not preserved the significant imprecision of the term? The *ksātra* (from which is derived the word *ksātriya*) designates any form of real strength and power (even if, in practice, the term is embodied in the holders of warrior power). To the *brāhmaṇa* corresponds a whole group of activities which are not limited to the ritual domain alone. The *brāhmaṇa* is also a scholar, a poet, a sage, an advisor, a jurist, a master of words; the *brāhmaṇa* is indeed a way of life and a set of values that the simple word 'priest' cannot possibly evoke.

In other words, the Indian theory of the three *varṇa* is probably less descriptive (both in its nomenclature and in its didactic or speculative finality) than is generally supposed. Perhaps the theory was itself already the fruit of a subtle analysis which did not so much refer to three strictly defined socio-professional activities but rather reflected an analysis of a world in three hierarchical zones. Under a 'spiritual power' and a 'temporal power' working in close association, lay the mass of the producers, whatever type of production that may have been. In this way, the theory was likely to suit a great variety of concrete situations, on condition that each situation saw a clerical aristocracy linked to a strong temporal power, both being interested in preserving a social situation where—culturally—the mass of the people were their definitive subordinates. Dumézil recognized the theological expression of this last aspect very early on: 'we are talking here of real social inequality, with the Aśvin representing—under a glittering and divine aristocracy—a true plebeian, skilled, hard-working and obliging, but without lustre' (1945: 45). For this division, as has often been observed, is as effective in society as it is essential to the myth. This is why this theory of *varṇa* insists to such an extent on the separation, the non-confusion of the three constituent parts: the hierarchical fact, inasmuch as it implied first and foremost the submission of the producers (see, for example, *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 12.7.3.15), is undoubtedly more essential to it than the concern for an adequate description of reality.

To be even more explicit, I would add that it was inevitable that a translation of the terms *brāhmaṇa*, *ksātriya* and *vaiśya* by 'priest', 'warrior' and 'peasant' would lead to a mirror-image conception of the ideological structure. (In fact, it would be more pertinent to consider whether such a translation is not already influenced by such a conception of ideology.) On the other hand, the translation of the same terms as (and this is merely a suggestion) 'cleric', 'lord' and 'plebeian' would immediately have revealed their profound ambivalence. Indeed,

if the first series of terms can only be descriptive or mere terms of reference, the second set, on the contrary, renders more accurately the happy compromise reached by the Sanskrit nomenclature that added to its own understanding an optimal extension and a remarkable symbolic efficiency. In a word, the second set translates better the ideological status and vocation of the Sanskrit nomenclature.

Probably because he recognized the complexity of this question (and its pitfalls)—and even if, at heart, he remained attached to his former fancies (1979: 83)—henceforth Dumézil did not allow them any heuristic role after 1957-8. He no longer tried to found any hypothesis upon them, and from that time on he devoted himself exclusively to recognizing and clarifying the structure of the expressions—be they healthy or pathological—of what had meanwhile become ‘the ideology of the three functions’. We thus come to the second period of his work, characterized by ‘the triumph of structure’.

## 2. *The Triumph of Structure*

Two brilliant discoveries seem to have led Dumézil to impose a global theoretical reorientation on his work throughout the 1950s. We have seen that it was impossible to situate the precise moment of this revolution, given the subtlety of the amendments and compromises that occurred in a thought process that had long tried to reconcile the ‘realist’ with the structuralist points of view. The first discovery was his own interpretation of the system of the *Amesha Spenta* in the Zoroastrian reform (1945); the second, Stig Wikander’s (1947) interpretation of the central group of heroes in the *Mahābhārata*. They have something in common in that both refer to a set of precise transpositions, which, in both cases, are coupled with a sort of structural filiation. They thus imply the existence of a framework of conscious thought that served as a guide to their authors.

These subtle transposition mechanisms are therefore based on double evidence: comparative evidence and structural evidence. Besides, the word ‘structure’ (or its corresponding adjective) makes a far from discreet entrance in the introduction to *Les Dieux des Indo-Européens* (1952), being mentioned fourteen times in thirty pages. This lexical switch translates the emancipation of the ideological fact. From now on, it is *structures* that Dumézil will *compare*, transpositions of structures that he will analyse. The autonomy and the omnipresence of the trifunctional scheme have been abundantly demonstrated, and it is now possible for him to abandon his initial hypothesis. The ideology of the three functions possesses its own evidence:

But all these elements (that is to say mythology, theology, sacred literature, sacerdotal organization) are themselves subordinated to something deeper, which directs them, groups them and makes them one, and which I propose to call, in spite of all the other uses of the word, ideology, meaning a conception and

appreciation of the great forces that drive the world and society, and an understanding of the relations between them. (1954: 7)

This double evidence, comparative on the one hand and structural on the other, was itself supported by three converging factors: the intrinsic complexity of the trifunctional model, its durability, and its *transgénéricité*. I shall examine each of these factors in turn.

Whilst it became clear to Dumézil that he had to give up his too innocent mirror-image reference, this was not just because of what we might term the negative reason—the contradictory Roman example, which showed that the ideology of the three functions could be alive and conscious in a society that no longer possessed, and perhaps never had possessed, three functional classes. It was also necessary to emphasize that the system of the three functions revealed quite readily a specifically structural complexity, going far beyond the overly simplistic system of tripartite social classifications (Dubuisson 1985).

The first function is not simply the priest or the king or the pair they form together: it is a subtle set of conceptual oppositions, which he masterfully analyses and dissects in *Les Dieux souverains des Indo-Européens* (1977). The second function, in which we can observe at leisure the number and amplitude of its articulations, is no less rich, in a theological sense, even if it is organized in a different way. Although the system of oppositions is less extensive in this case, other systems—of alliance, of co-operation—serve to enrich the overall picture of this warrior function (Dubuisson 1986).

Clearly, however, the third function presents no such conceptual richness. Split up into several provinces (production, fertility, richness, beauty, abundance), it seems to have neither an exclusive centre nor an organizational unity. Are we to view this situation as simply the consequence of a disdainful and contemptible negligence on the part of the philosopher's first function, or was it rather a more Machiavellian concern to leave unenlightened a domain which in such conditions was condemned to remain unthinkable?

Each function can thus be considered as an autonomous domain with its own theology and mythology. But the clearly drawn physiognomy of each function never ends up as a simple juxtaposition of the three terms. The whole, by which I mean the relations of the functions between themselves, is no less clearly evident, no less thought out, than its parts. Thus the radical division that separates the two higher functions from the third is constant, recognized throughout the Indo-European domain. Now this opposition, of course, never led to a dismantling of the system. This is proof that the system was indeed a system, and that its elements were always thought out, whatever particular interest may have been shown towards any one of them.

Dumézil recognized the evidence of a system of three functions that existed in Iceland and in the Ganges valley at least 3,500 years ago and was still evident up to the nineteenth century. The evidence also came through philosophers and prophets (Plato and Zoroaster), as well as through the folklore of illiterate peasants. All this led him to admit that the durability of such a system of thought implied



its ability to engender and perpetuate a textual tradition. This tradition, developing through narratives and through magic or legal formulas, made it possible for the system to be maintained in the memories of men: 'once again, comparative study thus allows us to go back not to a theological or mythological scheme, but to an Indo-European literary subject-matter' (1971: 361).

So, in order that we can truly speak of ideology, there must exist at the same time a sufficiently abstract scheme that can reveal itself in widely differing genres (law, theology, ritual, literature), yet is at the same time linked to a content or contents in such a way that the form and innate homology of its different means of expression remain in the conscious mind and may be transmitted. It must also be sufficiently flexible to be adapted to different changing or less sophisticated situations.

### 3. *Conclusion*

Whatever the difficulties raised by this conception of ideology, which perhaps are bound to the very nature of the ideological fact, let us conclude by briefly summing up the remarkable itinerary followed by Dumézil.

The mirror-image starting-point, like any other of the same nature, overcame enormous theoretical and practical difficulties, since *ipso facto* it resolved the two most pressing and sacred questions: that of origin and that of function. (I need not recall that a mirror-image representation is tautological, since it is nothing more than itself, which is itself nothing more than the object represented.)

In giving up this type of explanation, these two questions necessarily reappeared. He never paid particular attention to, nor did he profoundly treat, the problem posed by the function of ideology. Dumézil always remained on its 'innocent slopes' (Augé 1979: 17), where its function is conceived as a general and dominant *Weltanschauung*, equitably shared by all members of a community: 'I call "ideology" the inventory of guiding ideas that govern the thought and conduct of a society, and which, of course, do not imply any particular organization of the mind, whatever that may be' (1985: 312).

On the other hand, the question of origins was tackled by way of an original route which allowed him to get round the problem, and thus minimize the almost ontological need for it. From the moment he had understood that the ideology of the three functions in fact expressed a complex and original conceptual structure, present within unities that were heterogeneous, yet comparable even at very great distances or after very long periods, this ideology acquired its own specific evidence, and relegated to a position of secondary importance the otherwise still essential question of its origin. Regardless of whether this evidence is enough in itself and proves convincing, or whether we will soon have to reopen the question of the double problem of origin and function, the monumental and untiringly

reworked dossier that Georges Dumézil has left us will remain at the centre of the debate and of our future research.

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