

## OBITUARY

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### LOUIS DUMONT (1911-1998)

LOUIS DUMONT, who died on 19th November 1998, was born in Salonika in 1911, where his engineer father ran a French railway construction firm. At the age of 18, in juvenile revulsion from the bourgeois life ahead of him, he impulsively abandoned his studies at a top Parisian lycée. Thrown out by his widowed mother, who had sacrificed much to educate him, he went through a variety of jobs before being taken on for menial work in the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires. It was from the museum staff that he first gained a sense of vocation, appreciating their collective dedication to the humanistic task of preserving and recording French culture. Encouraged by the director, Georges-Henri Rivière, he returned to academic life and was particularly inspired by the lectures of Mauss.

In 1939 he was planning a history-of-art thesis on Celtic survivals in contemporary French tools when war broke out, and he soon found himself a prisoner of war. He developed his German and, after a spell as farm hand, was employed in a factory on the outskirts of Hamburg. Recalling the teaching of Mauss, he had his wife Jenny send him a Sanskrit manual and ended up receiving private weekly

This tribute draws on three interviews given by Dumont: (i) with Christian Delacampagne, 'Louis Dumont and the Indian Mirror', *RAIN* no. 3 (1981), pp. 4-7; (ii) with Jean-Claude Galey, 'A Conversation with Louis Dumont, Paris, 12 December 1979', in T. N. Madan (ed.), *Way of Life: King, Householder, Renouncer: Essays in Honour of Louis Dumont*, Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme 1982, pp. 13-22; (iii) with François Ewald, 'Louis Dumont: la culture de l'individualisme', *Magazine littéraire*, no. 292 (October 1991), pp. 114-9. I thank Robert Deliège for an advance copy of the obituary by Gérard Toffin to appear in *L'Homme*, no. 150 (1999), and Jean-Claude Galey for very helpful comments on an earlier draft.

I met Dumont some four or five times from 1969 onwards. Our last contact was when he wrote apologetically declining an invitation to give a keynote address at the conference on Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* held in Oxford in July 1995.

Dumont maintained a personal subscription to *JASO* from 1973 onwards.

Sanskrit lessons from an Indologist, Walther Schubring, a specialist on the Jains. One would love to know more about this curious wartime relationship, from both sides (it was to Schubring that Dumont dedicated his semi-popular *La civilisation indienne et nous* in 1964).

In 1945 he resumed work at the museum and toyed with undertaking an Indo-European comparative study of dragons. Dissuaded by Dumézil, he devoted his first book instead to an ethnographic and historical study of a folkloristic festival on the lower Rhône—*La Tarasque* (1951), dedicated to the memory of Mauss. Meanwhile he was preparing himself for fieldwork in South India, working ‘like one possessed’ at Tamil, Hindi, and the regional ethnographic literature. In late 1948, with the support of the great Sanskritist Renou, he set off for two years in Tamilnad.

He chose south India partly because of a culture-historical hypothesis—the shift from Indo-European Vedism to classical Hinduism was sometimes attributed to the effect of the Dravidian substratum, and similarly, the Pramalai Kallar, the martial caste with whom he spent eight months, were chosen partly for their cultural distance from sanskritized Brahmans. But although the Aryan–Dravidian dichotomy was, and still is, important for students of kinship and marriage, Dumont came rather to emphasize the oneness of India. This he located particularly in the pervasive effect of caste, which, as is well known, he interpreted in terms of its underlying ideology. Perhaps we shall one day have a full intellectual biography assessing the various elements that contributed to Dumont’s brand of structuralism. Among them were surely the *Année sociologique* background and Lévi-Strauss’s gift of manuscript chapters of the *Elementary Structures of Kinship*; but no less important was the formal ‘crystalline beauty’ that he perceived in the culture of the Tamils—those ‘born sociologists’.

After six months back at the museum, he was encouraged to move by Fűr-Haimendorf at SOAS, and he came to Oxford to the Lecturership in Indian Sociology in succession to Srinivas, the first holder. His years in Evans-Pritchard’s department (1951–5) familiarized him with a third European intellectual tradition, after the French and German, and prepared him for his introduction to the French translation of *The Nuer* (1968) and for his valuable *Introduction à deux théories d’anthropologie sociale* (1971).

By 1958 he had given his inaugural lecture as Directeur d’études at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, published his two theses on Tamilnad, and founded with David Pocock (his former pupil and successor at Oxford) the journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, which is still going strong. In addition he had followed up his original fieldwork with a fifteen-month spell in north India. Though he was scarcely to write it up, this second fieldwork experience was important since it introduced him to the figure of the *samnyāsi*, thus stimulating his magnificent Frazer Lecture on world renunciation in Indian religions (1958). *Homo Hierarchicus*, his classic analysis of caste and the book for which he is best known, followed in 1966–7 and marked a turning-point in his research. Having gained comparative perspective from his work on India, he now turned back to Europe, concentrating on the rise of economics as an autonomous domain, on the

nature of Western individualism, and on the specificity of the German variant of modern ideology. The opposition of purity and impurity, basic to the Indian work, gives way to individualism versus holism (foreshadowed in the renouncer versus the man-in-the-world), and the early interest in diffusion and acculturation that had once led him to the Dravidians resurfaces in an interest in the eastward spread of enlightenment values into Germany and Russia.

But his life was not simply that of a lone researcher, such as French academic institutions at that time made possible. He founded a still active multi-disciplinary centre for Indian studies and worked with it until 1970. Later (1976–82) he initiated and inspired a small social anthropology research seminar called Erasmus, in which his ideas were often applied to fieldwork outside India (he strongly emphasized the need for reliable ethnography). Just occasionally he publicly took a position on a political issue, for instance the New Caledonia referendum in 1988. However, he came nowhere near achieving the celebrity of a figure like Lévi-Strauss, and in 1979 he himself looked back on the post-Oxford period of his life as ‘a time of many disappointments’. He recognized that his own personality might have had something to do with this, that he might be judged ‘awkward and maladroit in social life’; and it is true that he lacked the *bonhomie* of a Mauss. But there was more to it than that. His vision of science, based on the pre-First World War Durkheimian movement as well as on his museum experience, was of a collective and collaborative enterprise to which each worker humbly and conscientiously contributed what he could. Instead, he found himself in an anthropological community governed by the individualism so characteristic of modern ideology, where each researcher was expected to try and maximize his own standing in an arena dominated by personality cults and passing fashions such as Marxism. There is some truth in this: enthusiasm for the *dernier cri* all too easily leads to ignorance and neglect of less popular forms of achievement. Dumont treasured the memory of the occasion in 1986 when Dumézil came to his apartment and conferred on him the Légion d’honneur with the words: ‘You are like me, you did not pursue a career, you pursued your work’ (*vous n’avez pas fait de carrière, vous avez fait votre travail*).

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.

Among his contemporaries one sees a somewhat isolated and austere scholar, above all serious, someone little inclined to rejoice in the ludic component of our adventures among cultures and ideas. Domestically, though childless, he was happily married for forty years to Jenny until her death, then to Suzanne Tardieu-Dumont, a Director of Research at the museum where he had begun his anthropological life; but outside the home, in spite of his many successes, distinctions, and trips abroad, he was essentially an embattled figure. Reading his account of the friendship of Goethe and Schiller in *L’idéologie allemande* (1991), one senses a wish that it had been otherwise.

For the future, a number of young scholars will benefit from the trust fund that he established, and although it is difficult to anticipate future evaluations of his contribution, very likely its status will rise rather than fall. *Homo Hierarchicus*, with its grand theoretical ambition, its grasp of facts both Indological and ethnographic, and its probing judgements on a massive literature, will surely be difficult to equal or replace, and will continue for some time to stimulate and provoke, as it has done for more than thirty years. One hopes that judgements will not treat it in isolation from his lesser-known texts, which cover not only ethnography but also the history of the Raj (in UNESCO's *History of Mankind*, vol. 5, ed. C. Morazé, 1976). The precise value of his ideas on hierarchy and hierarchical opposition may need further testing and clarification, and the binary form that he often gave to his analyses is characteristic of the period in which he wrote and may appear dated. On the other hand, some of his oppositions may at least turn out to be partial apprehensions subsumable within richer and more dynamic notions of structure, to whose formulation they themselves will have contributed. As for his later work, one cannot but admire its boldness and the depth of its reflexivity. We should remember that posterity will judge not only his own oeuvre but also those who choose to ignore or dismiss it.

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