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HIERARCHICAL OPPOSITION AND SOME OTHER TYPES OF RELATION

UNDERSTANDING a society must involve understanding the system of ideas and values on which it is based, and this underlying system must consist in elements and the relations between them. In pursuing this line of thought, structuralism has laid much emphasis on the relations, and Dumont himself introduces his notion of hierarchical opposition by contrasting it with another 'type of relation', namely distinctive (complementary, symmetrical or equistatutory) opposition. The level of abstraction is clear from the start, and the notion is in addition presented as immensely important. Both types of relation may well be 'universal components' of culture (1978: 101), and the comparison with Hegel's dialectic is in effect a claim to a position within the mainstream tradition of continental philosophical thought (thus reminding one of the use of 'category' in *Année Sociologique* writing). Genesis is cited by Dumont to provide an example, but at the same time it contributes mythological resonances scarcely inappropriate in the context of such fundamental ideas. Moreover, hierarchical opposition is closely related to hierarchy, and to the criticism that he uses that word polysemically Dumont replies that any idea to which a fundamental place is attributed *ipso facto* receives a multitude of partial and secondary senses (1979: xxxv — xxxvi).

An analytical notion (or theory or heuristic tool) of such abstraction, theoretical ambition and richness is not likely to be easy to pin down and evaluate. Three possibilities suggest themselves. One is to trace its growth and application in the work of its originator. In brief, in the 1950s the notion of complementary opposition seemed adequate, though the seed sown by Apthorpe was germinating. *Homo Hierarchicus* in 1966 represented a transitional phase, and it was the reaction of critics (especially Heesterman?) that led to the explicit formulations, first in 1971, then in the second edition in 1979. The

notion was applied to the Hertzian dualist work in 1978 and to the ideology of the moderns in 1980. These summary facts leave much room for the intellectual biographer.

A second approach would be to ignore the genesis of the notion and try it out by applying it. The proposal is that whenever the ethnographic materials appear to offer a structuralist opposition of the form X/Y the analyst should ask himself whether there is some sense or context in which element X is or represents the superordinate totality (whole, set) to which in other senses or contexts both elements alike belong. As a rider, he should also ask whether the relationship can be reversed, whether there are special circumstances under which Y represents the whole and X is subordinate. For example, these questions might be asked concerning the totality formed by the traditional ritual and religious life of the Thulung Rai of East Nepal (Allen 1976). Simplifying only slightly, this domain has a binary structure, the priest dealing with tribal welfare and continuity, with ancestors and the good dead, while the medium deals with unpredictable individual affliction, with evil spirits and the bad dead. The priest is *par excellence* guardian of tribal tradition, and it can probably be argued that he is closer than the medium to representing the tribal ideology as a whole. As to other levels, I am not sure whether within the domain of the medium there is some sense in which the priest is present but subordinate, but a reversal can perhaps be recognised in an even more inclusive context. Tribal life is nowadays encompassed by the Hindu milieu and to the outside world it is the medium who represents the local tribal tradition, and seems fated to do so increasingly.¹

Ultimately, the value of Dumont's notion to an empirical discipline must depend on its application, either to the problems he has set himself, or to other bodies of material. However, I attempt here a third approach, essentially theoretical, with a view to facilitating application by bringing the notion into clearer focus. Without any pretence of completeness I suggest a number of different ways of envisaging or discussing hierarchical opposition, one borrowed from a neighbouring discipline, one based on a different choice of metaphor, one setting this type of relation in the context of others and of the possible transformations between them.

1. *Unmarked : Marked*

Dumont describes the hierarchical relationship as 'queer at first sight', even as a 'logical scandal' (1971: 69; 1979: 400). However, he also notes (*ibid.*: 398) that it

1. A thorough treatment would have to relate the Thulung opposition to Dumont's priesthood/possession and Durkheim's religion/magic. The latter is often judged to be ethnocentric, and presumably the Thulung are unusual in structuring so dichotomously what is elsewhere often a continuum. Their two officiants in fact conform moderately well to the polar types of Goode 1976.

is a common feature of vocabulary, and this being so it would be odd indeed if it had escaped the attention of linguists. In fact it is regularly discussed by them, under the heading of marking or markedness. The notion was developed particularly by the Prague school from the 1930s onwards (Trubetzkoy, Jakobson, Vachek), and has become common currency.² To give a few examples, Martinet (1970: 186, reprinting pieces from 1956–7) has a chapter entitled 'La hiérarchie des oppositions distinctives', which opens: 'La notion de marque est de celles qui sont indispensables pour bien comprendre la structuration du langage'. In Britain, Lyons (1970: 16), introducing a well-known collection of essays, gives markedness a prominent place next to syntagmatic/paradigmatic in a section on structuralism, and the concept is described as 'extremely important' in his *Semantics* (1977, I: 305). In American circles one of the most prominent users of the concept has been the anthropological linguist Greenberg (especially 1966), who among other things emphasises its importance in studies of language acquisition and language change.³ The following remarks cover ground extremely familiar to linguists.

'Marking involves a relation among categories in which the unmarked is hierarchically superior to the marked' (Greenberg 1975: 80). Unfortunately, the nature of the superiority is not at first sight identical in all applications, and it is necessary to consider examples from different planes of linguistic organisation. It is easiest to begin with 'formal marking' in morphology, since this explains the analytical terminology. If one takes the singular and plural forms of a representative English noun, say *tree|trees*, or the non-past and past forms of a weak verb, say *jump|jumped*, then the second form in each case is marked by a suffix while the first is unmarked. The suffix specialises the marked form, and it is the unmarked that is the better representative of the superordinate abstraction of which the two contrasting forms are expressions; the tree-sparrow inhabits more than one tree, but the singular seems natural. It is its hierarchical superiority, not merely its brevity, that makes it seem natural to list the unmarked form in a dictionary.

Let us turn to a stock example from phonology where the analytical notion was first elaborated. Many languages have just two dental stop phonemes, /t/ and /d/, voiceless and voiced respectively, whose distinct phonemic status is demonstrable by collecting minimal pairs. Thus German has *Teich* 'pond' ≠ *Deich* 'dyke', *Seite* 'side' ≠ *Seide* 'silk'. At first sight this is a simple and symmetrical complementary opposition between two phonemes which exhausts the superordinate domain of dental stops. But although both letters may be written at the ends of words, in this position they produce no minimal pairs; the opposition is neutralised and only the voiceless stop is pronounced. Thus the singular of *Bunde* 'bundles' is *Bund*, but it is indistinguishable in pronunciation

2. As I noted briefly in 1978: 193, it is not clear why the notion was not incorporated in Lévi-Straussian structuralism during the early phase of maximum influence from linguistics. One can find odd references (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1962: 87, 136), but the notion is not used systematically.

3. For an example from this tradition see Brown 1984, a recent installment in a body of work that seems to me of considerable theoretical interest (cf. Allen 1984).

from *bunt* 'multicoloured'. The voiceless phoneme represents the whole category, occurs in the wider range of contexts, and is the less specialised. Here one can talk of 'distributional' as distinct from 'formal' marking. However, the two are closely related: the voicing of the hierarchically inferior parallels the suffix in the previous example, and the suffixed example was also the less widely distributed. But it is probably clearer here that /t/ encompasses its opposite /d/, as *man* encompasses *woman*.

No doubt it is semantics that provides the applications of markedness closest to the interests of the anthropologist. In particular, gradable opposites are typically asymmetrical in meaning, with one member being used to represent the whole dimension. *Long* and *short* are antonyms, but one normally asks about the *length* of an object rather than about its *shortness*. This means that *long*, the positive pole of the opposition, is unmarked in the distributional sense. It is the less specialised, the one used when the opposition is neutralised; and this is merely another way of saying that it 'includes its opposite'. Often, as in *healthy/unhealthy* or *auspicious/inauspicious*, the positive pole is also unmarked morphologically. In general, and this also applies to ungradable, 'either-or' opposites such as *man/woman*, normal order puts the unmarked first. This point, discussed by Malkiel (1969: 341 ff.) in connection with the broader phenomenon of irreversible binomials, explains why one tends to make X hierarchically superior to Y, rather than vice versa.

The theory of markedness is quite complex and there are certain paradoxes. It is particularly unfortunate that the label 'marked' is itself unmarked relative to its antonym, and similarly it is perhaps confusing that in the examples from morphology and phonology the unmarked member of the pair was characterised by an absence (of suffix or distinctive feature respectively), while under semantics the unmarked member was treated as positive. The appearance of the unmarked form in a wider range of contexts can lead on (especially in Greenberg) to the identification of the unmarked with the statistically more common. But although different criteria of markedness often coincide, they can conflict; from a semantic point of view *boys* can perhaps be regarded as hierarchically superior to *boy* (Lyons 1970: 17). Moreover the degree of markedness shown by different pairs can vary, so that *bitch* is more marked relative to *dog* than *woman* relative to *man* (Lyons 1977, I: 309).

Languages and ideologies are not so similar that the analytical tools of the linguist can be transferred without difficulty to the purposes of the anthropologist, and it would be wrong to minimise the gap. Morphologically, *pure* and *impure* are unproblematically unmarked and marked (as are many of their Indian-language equivalents), and semantically the relationship is similar, though weak. It is a large step from these facts to the argument that in Hindu society purity as an idea-value is hierarchically superior to impurity and that the opposition is the fundamental principle structuring the ideology of caste. In general, the levels, elements, contexts and wholes of interest to the anthropologist are far less easy to recognise and specify than the corresponding entities of the linguist; and the place of consciousness in the materials of the two disciplines is hardly the same. Nevertheless, in spite of these differences, it

remains true that in both cases a notion of hierarchical opposition is indispensable in the search for structure. One hopes that, as on previous occasions (Ardener 1971: xxx ff.), anthropological theory can here draw with profit on the experience of a neighbouring discipline. To repeat, the rapprochement is not intended to disparage Dumont's originality, but is made in the hope of rendering his proposal less idiosyncratic and more assimilable.

My main purpose has been to draw attention to the parallel between the two analytical notions rather than to exploit it, but at a lower level of abstraction it is interesting to note how often in practice the oppositions and series of oppositions proposed by structuralist anthropologists do show markedness. Dumont's pure/impure could be expanded to touchable/untouchable and valued/devalued, while the Thulung priest/medium is associated with health/illness, good dead/bad dead, day/night. In the implicit or overt lists of oppositions set up by numerous analysts from Hertz onwards, Beattie notes (1976: 222ff.) that one column, the one containing right rather than left, typically contains elements that are somehow superior, positive or preferred. In all these various cases, relating to different theoretical viewpoints and different cultures, if one simply looks at the morphology and semantics of the English words, most of the oppositions to which the criterion is relevant take the form unmarked/marked, rather than vice versa.⁴ I suppose that in the last analysis this is because both languages and ideologies are subject to certain logical constraints. A vocabulary in which the concept of order was lexicalised as 'anti-chaos' seems almost as implausible as an ideology which at its highest level made disorder outrank order. Is it logically possible that Evil encompass Good (Dumont 1982: 223-4)?⁵

2. Centre : Periphery

The theoretical importance of metaphors is widely recognised (e.g. Salmond 1982), and any anthropologist interested in kinship will know how much can

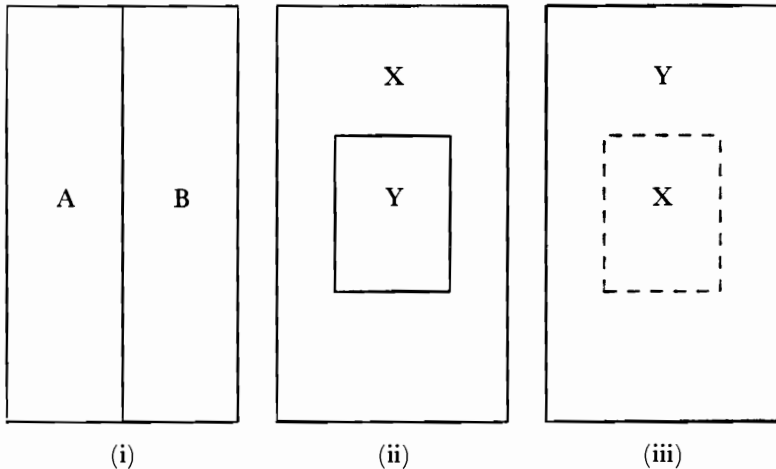
4. It is not claimed that all conceptual oppositions show markedness. For English speakers Heaven may outrank Earth ideologically, but in the absence of neutralisation a claim that it was unmarked could only rest on quite unconvincing indirect arguments such as connotation (high/low) or more natural word order. Moreover, particular markedness relations in English are not necessarily universal, nor even conditionally so (i.e. universal *if* the opposition is present). Certain North American languages are said to have the feminine unmarked (Greenberg 1966: 39, 79-80, citing Lounsbury).

5. If I do not pursue the matter further it is partly because of the limitations inherent in all dualistic approaches; the problem presents itself differently in the context of four-element structures. One might also search within language for parallels to Dumont's notion of the reversal of a hierarchical opposition with change of level. Semantics seems to offer examples. *Short* is hierarchically subordinate to *long*; but within the subordinate domain the marked form *shortish*, which implies greater length than *short*, is subordinate to it.

turn on the precise form given to diagrams. So when Dumont pictures hierarchical opposition by drawing an outer rectangle representing simultaneously the whole and the superordinate element, and a concentric inner rectangle representing the subordinate element, it is natural to consider possible alternatives. In particular, why not reverse the allocation of values so as to make the central element dominant, the peripheral subordinate?

Dumont's diagram conforms to his verbal imagery whereby the superordinate entity is described as 'encompassing' (French *englober*). Similarly the notion of purity is compared to an immense umbrella or to the cloak of Our Lady of Mercy, protecting or embracing all manner of beings (1979: 84, 107, 268). Since a cover makes no sense without something covered, this simile puts the emphasis on the subordinate level or phase of duality, while the Marx-derived comparison of the encompassing with ether (1977: 192, 28) emphasises the level of unity; one imagines the ether pervading the whole field *before* the appearance of the central square. In either case one works conceptually from outside inwards.

With the alternative diagram one would work the other way round. Again there are two possibilities. Emphasising phase two, one can start with a central square and represent the subordinate element by a rim added on outside but conceived as an extension of the centre. A more satisfactory image, conforming better to Genesis, starts with the square representing the totality and adds the subordinate rim *inside*. One can also separate rim and central component by a dotted line, so as to give weight to the priority of the whole (see Figure 1).



- (i) Dumont's representation of contradiction and complementary opposition.
 (ii) Dumont's representation of hierarchical opposition.
 (iii) Alternative representation of hierarchical opposition (X continues to represent *both* the whole universe of discourse *and* that which is opposed to Y).

Figure 1

To represent the subordinate element in a hierarchical opposition as peripheral rather than central has the advantage of conforming to much English usage, both everyday and analytical, as well as to conceptions common to most cultures. I suppose that in general an insider anywhere is more highly valued than an outsider, and the textbooks regularly mention tribal self-appellations translatable as 'Man'. No doubt most peoples have confidently located themselves at the centre of the cosmos, relegating the rest of humanity to the margins. The ambiguity as to whether these 'others' are inside or outside the boundaries of the cosmos mirrors precisely the two ways of drawing the second diagram, and corresponds to the wider problem of whether or not Order embraces Chaos, or Good Evil.⁶

Dumont's representation has its advantages. It emphasises the significance of the extremities of the caste and *varṇa* hierarchies as against the middle ranges. Moreover, it avoids the risk of confusion arising from the political connotations of 'the Centre', and it allows for the fact that ultimate values may lie in the background as 'taken-for-granted', rather than constituting the focus of attention. In thinking about global configurations of idea-values there is room both for the encompassment and centrality representations (not to mention the regular structuralist imagery of levels and depth).

3. *Transcendent : Differentiated*

Hierarchical opposition may appear at first sight as a binary relation, like contradiction, that is, a relation between X and Y in Dumont's notation. But there is a third relevant entity, namely the whole, the universe of discourse, X before it is differentiated, Adam before he loses his rib. Calling this third entity A, one can say that X and Y are differentiated while A transcends such classification. Hierarchical opposition exists if X is identified with A as well as with not-Y. By fusing the inter-level relation with the intra-level, the notion compresses into binary form what from another point of view is ternary. Leaving transcendence on one side for the moment, we may ask first whether structuralism needs to put as much emphasis as it has done on binary formulations.

Non-dualistic structures are not entirely neglected by linguists. Martinet (1970: 83-9) attacks the *apriorisme binariste* of certain phonologists, and Lyons (1977, I: 287-90) discusses many-member lexical sets such as days of the week, military ranks and numerals. Thus the semantic structure of the seasons (the pattern that might underlie in common the English lexical set and that of some

6. *Homo Hierarchicus* (n. 96c, in connection with world-renunciation) alludes to the need for a study of Hindu concepts of space. Such a study could well include the phenomenon whereby a territory is represented as a unity by virtue of the relationship of shrines within it to the parts of the body of a being that once walked the earth (Allen 1981).

other language) consists of four elements linked by a relation of cyclical successivity. A dualistic formulation would miss the essence.

Among the anthropologists, Dumont's strong sense of continuity with the tradition of the *Année Sociologique* makes it particularly appropriate to turn first to Mauss (1968, II: 143–8). Commenting in 1933 on Granet's treatment of right and left in China, Mauss emphasised the need to go beyond the pioneering work of Hertz. The early work (his own included) had been based on a simplistic sacred/profane dualism, and a great deal would be missed if the laterality opposition was treated without reference to the other spatial dimensions. To understand the thinking of a whole portion of humanity (he probably meant in and around the Pacific), the right/left relation needed to be taken together with the up/down and front/back relations; often too, one should take account of a centre associated with ego and sometimes identified with the cosmic navel (or the inhabited space of the camp, etc.). He envisaged the whole set of relations as 'a sort of sphere' with six poles radiating from the centre with its 'special quality' (ibid.: 145). But he was not thinking solely of conceptions of space. He had in mind a complex combining 'positions, powers [*puissances*] and purities', and in extreme cases embracing not only ego and his position but 'all the other positions, all the beings, things and events in relation to other things'. The objective should be the ensemble of things and relations. Mauss does not speak of the centre as 'transcendent', nor of the whole as constituting a 'level' distinct from that of its components (indeed the latter word was not part of his ordinary theoretical vocabulary though, like Durkheim, he would surely have accepted the idea). But it is clear that for the inventor of the 'total social fact' the route to holism was not necessarily or solely through dualism.

In the same connection one can cite Lévi-Strauss's essay on dual organisation (1958, especially pp. 168–9). The argument, on the basis of the supposed logical priority of generalized over restricted exchange, is that the really fundamental type of relation is triadic, but that this form is subject to transformation via the concentric (asymmetrical) form towards the diametric (symmetric). In a general way, all those who write in a structuralist mode about transition, liminality and mediation also call on triadic formulae. But rather than attempt a fuller survey of the types of relation proposed by anthropological structuralists I return to transcendence, to the relation between the whole and its component parts.

Two reasons suggest that the way to tackle the question without excessive abstraction is via kingship. First, for Dumont, ever since his 1962 essay on the subject (1979: 354; cf. pp. xxii–xxv), the relation in India between the purity of the priest and the power of the king is the example *par excellence* of the superordinate encompassing the subordinate, and of the reversal of the relationship within the subordinate domain. In comparison, the relation between purity and its contradiction, impurity, is scarcely to be thought of as hierarchical in the strict sense (1971: 75). Secondly, in most traditional societies, if any human can be described as transcendent, it is the king. Very commonly, of course, he is associated with a Centre in the cosmological sense mentioned above. Even in classical India, Manu (V, 96 and VII, 5) states that the king's

body is made of the particles of the substance of the eight gods who guard the cardinal and intercardinal points. In this sort of instance the centre stands for the whole in a spatial sense, but often also the king transcends the social differentiations within his realm. The Reth of the Shilluk transcends the ceremonial bifurcation of his kingdom as well as the territorial one (Evans-Pritchard 1962: 77).

Behind kingship in classical India lies the prehistoric institution guaranteed by the etymological link of Latin *rex* with *rāja*, so in relating kingship to priesthood Dumont turns to the analyses of the Indo-Europeanist Dumézil. In particular he takes from Dumézil (though also referring to Hocart) a Hegelian view of the *varṇa* schema as being not linear but rather a series of dichotomies or inclusions (*emboîtements*): the three Twice-born opposed to the Shudras, within the Twice-born the Two Forces opposed to the Vaishya, within the Two Forces the priest opposed to the warrior-kings. This mode of construing the *varṇas* is not without justification, but the explicitly Hegelian dualist approach receives no emphasis in Dumézil's work after the 1940s. Desbordes (1981: 46) refers to it as an 'idée sans lendemain', and Dumézil himself (1981: 339) attacks philosophers and structuralists in the Hegelian tradition 'who find it difficult to tolerate the intrusion of a system with three homogeneous terms into their Weltanschauung, and struggle...to reduce two of them to unity so as to be able to find once again the familiar, comfortable binary confrontation'. (The three terms in question are, of course, the three functions of Indo-European [IE] ideology, one of whose manifestations is the structure of the first three *varṇas*.) There are, in fact, contexts where the first two functions come together in opposition to the third, but kingship is not one of them (see now Dumézil 1971, pt. 3). Comparative study of the king in IE myth and epic shows him rather as a transfunctional being who represents the synthesis of all three functions. Abstractly then, the structure consists of a transcendent entity on one level and three differentiated ones on the subordinate level.

I hope to return to this topic in the context of an argument for both the existence of a fourth function in IE ideology and its significance in the structuralist analysis of Hinduism. For the moment it makes little difference either whether there was a fourth function or whether, if so, the king transcended it. The question is rather how Dumézil's analysis relates to the paradigmatic example of hierarchical opposition and to the type of relation itself. Since Dumézil is using the materials from the Hindu epic and elsewhere to demonstrate a prehistoric ideology, while Dumont is envisaging classical Hindu culture, we must consider the steps needed to move from the earlier configuration to the later.

The essential step is the loss of the concrete embodiment of the totality, i.e. the disappearance of the king from the level of synthesis. Together with his title and aspects of his claim to totality (notably his claim to spatial centrality), he moves into the level of differentiation, into the Kshatriya or second *varṇa*, but at the same time he loses at least the priestly component of his former wholeness. All that is now 'left behind' on the superordinate level is the abstract notion of transcendence or ultimate social value. This is now taken over by the priesthood,

which thereby gains its access to both levels and its hierarchical superiority. So far, this account of the transformation corresponds roughly to Dumont's argument (1979: 356–7; cf. p. xii) that the Indian configuration arises from the secularization of kingship, with strict elimination of its usual sacerdotal component and the exaltation of the priests and their purity. As for the latter, 'an idea that grows in importance and status acquires the property of encompassing its contrary' (Dumont 1982: 225). But there is a loose end. In order to speak of the encompassed principle of the second *varṇa* as the *contrary* of the encompassing principle of the first, it is necessary to put on dualist spectacles and merge the third lower-level element in the Dumézilian model with the second, or omit it altogether. Is this justified?

Talk about kings moving levels is somewhat remote from real history and perhaps reminiscent of Saussurean chess-playing, but the point can be approached in other ways. For the sake of argument, imagine a society divided sharply into a small number of segments, each segment performing a different function, and each such function relating to a cluster of ideas (= 'element') within the ideology. If the totality of the ideology is segmented in this way we could speak of an 'elementary structure of ideology' (not that Dumézil claims that the three functions exhaust the IE ideology). We can suppose also that the ideological elements are felt to be mutually irreducible and that the members of the corresponding groups are felt similarly to be radically heterogeneous. The structure is as holistic as one could wish, but there is no logical necessity to incorporate hierarchy: each segment could be supreme in its turn or in its context. How could such a configuration be transformed into a more familiar type?

What is needed is a process of homogenization, a blurring of those sharp boundaries which so greatly facilitate the approach of the structuralist. One way to bridge the heterogeneities (apart from dividing and subdividing the elements until they blur) is to set up an entity that transcends them, and then relate each element to it, but in differing measure. The original qualitative difference is thereby supplemented by quantitative difference along a single scale (of purity, perhaps). To model the continuation of the process one can go on to eliminate the qualitative differences, narrow the differentials along the scale, and de-emphasise the transcendent, now that it has performed its catalytic function.

This scenario takes account of Mauss's views on the evolution within each category from the heterogeneous to the homogeneous (Allen in press), and also of some ideas on the ultimately elementary forms of social organisation (a preliminary formulation can be found in Allen 1982).⁷ This is not the place to give empirical substance to its suggestions or to deal with the questions it begs. My point is that as well as being tried out on empirical material (as by

7. As Dumont says (but in the context of the modern subject-object dualism [1982: 229–30]), there is a need to bring together theories of social morphology and theories of exchange. Actually, as noted above, Lévi-Strauss's triadism relates to his concept of generalized exchange, while my own interest in four-element structures relates to (among other things) a view of the field of kinship in which the standard structuralist emphasis on the 'horizontal' exchange of siblings is supplemented by a concept of the 'vertical' exchange of children.

Tcherkézoff 1983), the notion of hierarchical opposition needs to be assessed against other conceivable types of whole-part relation and their mutual transformations. I suppose it will be a long time before the discipline develops a technical language adequate to its problems, and it would be premature to think of holism or transcendence solely in terms of hierarchical opposition.⁸

8. For an attempt to use markedness theory to criticise one aspect of Dumontian theory, see Scheffler 1984.

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