

The Fascination for India

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Since the 18th century, India has been portrayed in contradictory ways. While scholarly knowledge is based on the philological study of texts, literary Orientalism expresses its fascination for a society well-known to preserve the values of order and hierarchy. For Roland Lardinois the anthropology of Louis Dumont illustrates the ambiguity of these discourses.

Source: Roland Lardinois, *Scholars and Prophets. Sociology of India from France in the 19th and 20th centuries*, New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2013, 564 p. (translated from the French by Renuka George, *L'invention de l'Inde. Entre ésotérisme et science*, Paris, CNRS Edition, 2007).

Scholars and Prophets is a book that deals with the sociology of producers of discourses on India but does not restrict itself to academic works on India. Indeed, the strength of this work lies in that it simultaneously presents a sociological study of scholarship on India and a critical analysis of the representations of India. As such, it is likely to appeal to both specialists in the sociology of scholarly production, as the book will provide food for thought, as well as to India lovers who will get an opportunity to reflect on ideologies more readily available on the market for intellectual representations of India.

Birth of Orientalism

In the first part of his work, Roland Lardinois traces the genesis of the scholarly milieu of 19th century Indologists with a particular emphasis on three essential dynamics: the creation of new institutions of production for Orientalist knowledge, the emergence of a group of specialists endowed with rare language skills, and the social and intellectual acknowledgment of these specialists by instances of legitimation and diffusion of their knowledge (the Asiatic Society of Paris, the *Journal Asiatique*, etc...). From its inception, the field is marked by an opposition between a literary-socialite pole on the one hand (involving both poets, essayists as well as industrialists, traders or diplomats and missionaries), wishing to reach a wide, mixed audience and, on the other hand, a scholarly pole, anxious to condition Orientalist learned practices to the knowledge of Oriental languages. The latter will work to impose the knowledge of an Indian language, a form of linguistic capital, as a genuine right of entry onto the market of Orientalist cultural goods. This process reached a sort of climax with the development of a new discipline, comparative grammar, which Eugène Burnouf initiated.

The imposition of linguistic competences as a criterion for academic legitimacy by the more scholarly fraction of the field does not, however, suffice to impede the expansion of a literary-socialite pole. The latter indeed bases itself on a strong demand by different fractions of the public he addresses who want to consider India as the archetype of a social world swept up in European countries by the Enlightenment. In response to this demand, a literary, Orientalist, polymorphous and implicitly reactionary culture very quickly spread in the entire field. The work of Roland Lardinois helps us to see in this development a kind of original sin of scholarship on India, which, till today haunts the production of discourses on India.

It is on the basis of this tension between the socialite milieu and the scholarly one that the institutionalization and empowerment of Indian studies continue. The creation of the Oriental Society of France in 1841, of the 4th and 5th sections of the *École pratique des hautes études* (EPHE) in 1887 and of the French school for the Far-East in 1898 are symptomatic examples of this heteronomy. These institutions are more or less direct products of colonial expansion of France, a consequence of the need to consolidate colonial power by knowledge. These institutions were aimed at producing an Orientalist scholarship delineated on the model of classic erudition and conceived as an expansion of Greco-Latin Humanism.

In the second part of his work, Roland Lardinois analyses the inter-wars years and highlights the permanent split between scholars and socialites, which divides the field of scholarship on India in its entirety as well as its two main poles that structure it. For this, he applies the method of geometric data analysis¹ to three different sets of objects: firstly, to a prosopographic database gathering all the agents involved in this field between 1920 and 1940; secondly to the articles published on India in the academic journals (*Journal asiatique*, *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, *Revue des arts asiatiques*) during the same period of time; and finally to the work of Sylvain Lévi, the scholar who dominated the entire field of scholarship on India during the first half of the 20th century. The robustness of these statistical analyses, relating to a meticulous and rigorous work, firmly upholds the author's argument and constitutes the focal point of this work. As such, *Scholars and Prophets* remains perfectly accessible to the reader who has no statistical skill because the more technical aspects of these analyses appear in the appendix while the body of the work is largely reader friendly. It is especially the fluidity of the style and the perfect mastering of works that he studies that grabs the reader's attention: rather than a pure quantitative analysis, what is given to read is much more; to take a few examples, it is an analysis of the scholarly *habitus* of Sylvain Lévi, or the strategies devised by René Guénon or Romain Rolland to impose their discourses on India despite their lack of legitimate institutionalized skills. The analysis of 'prophetic logic' is particularly stimulating as it succeeds in elegantly taking into account the strategies deployed by authors less gifted in scholarly capital to legitimize their discourse. Particularly interesting is the developments on René Guénon, an author stigmatized by scholars but who, nevertheless, attracted great success in opposing, with an obvious essentialism, on the one hand, Oriental civilizations remaining, according to him, loyal to "l'esprit traditionnel" and, on the other hand, the modern, Western civilization considered perverted. Guénon's work particularly influenced authors like Raymond Queneau, Antonin

¹ The geometric analysis of data is a statistical method of data analysis elaborated by Jean-Paul Benzecri, and popularized by Pierre Bourdieu in his work *Distinction*, that enables synthesizing and structuring information contained in multidimensional data.

Artaud, André Breton or René Daumal and, till date, it continues to mark all the authors who belong to different esoteric or occultist groups.

The Ambivalence of the Work of Louis Dumont

Roland Lardinois then analyses the rupture that institutionally and intellectually marks scholarship on India in the second part of the 20th century: the development of Louis Dumont's anthropological project, including his later work on the genesis of individualism. This choice enables the author to show more precisely that Dumont's studies on India were already carriers of a certain ambivalence between, on the one hand, an empirical social science and, on the other hand, a normative moral philosophy.

Lardinois thus shows how Louis Dumont had to build his legitimacy against philological tradition, which, according to his contemporaries, placed an often simplistic textual study at the centre of its approach. Louis Dumont thus seeks to liberate himself from a scholarly tradition relying exclusively on texts and for which the fieldwork was mobilized only for argument's sake. Simultaneously basing itself on philological tradition and on the Durkheimian sociology as practiced by Marcel Mauss, and adding to these two inspirations, the practice of field investigation, Dumont broke 'with an illusory character of Indian diversity' and to affirm that "India is one" and that "this unit [...] especially consists of ideas and values" (Louis Dumont, *La Civilisation indienne et nous*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1964). It is however in this attempt to overcome the fragmentation of disciplinary perspectives that Louis Dumont comes to favour only one single source: the Brahmanical point of view. Where philologists only trusted the text, Dumont relies only on the cognitive framework of the Brahmanical culture. Roland Lardinois work enlightens this Brahmano-centrism viewpoint before questioning an issue that, according to him, was not raised by Dumont's critics: "How could a Brahmanical viewpoint be substituted for a scholarly viewpoint in the understanding of the caste system, while Dumont claims, quite rightly, to have drawn upon Durkheimian sociology that specifically made the distinction between the indigenous point of view and a sociological understanding?" (p. 360).

Lardinois finds the answer to this question in the influence that René Guénon had on Louis Dumont. Dumont's work would thus be a 'retranslation into the universe of social sciences post World War II of ideological themes previously elaborated in other forms' (p. 360). Dumont has indeed refurbished the nostalgia for the old social order, which relied on numerous discourses stemming from the worldly milieu of scholarship on India, amongst which the kind of prophetic work of René Guénon doubtlessly gained the most public legitimacy. Lardinois particularly emphasizes the reference to Tocqueville as a mediation that enables Dumont to retranslate in legitimate academic terms Guénon's comparative project between traditional societies and the modern world. The filiation between René Guénon and Louis Dumont must not however be considered simply as a denunciation on the accursed share of the work of Dumont that will resurface through the Tocquevillian avatar. We must replace this filiation in the economy of the book and consider the entire set of arguments developed by Roland Lardinois: stressing Dumont's implicit reference to Guénon enables showing the tension between the two dimensions of Dumont's work, which can be understood as the extension of contradictions that crossed the field of scholarship on India since its inception. The opposition, presented in the second part of the work, between the typical figure of the scholar as embodied by Sylvain Lévi, and that of the figure of the prophet, as embodied by Romain Rolland or René Guénon, serves as a guiding

principle for the analysis of the dumontian anthropology. There lies a strong homology between tensions structuring the field of scholarship on India and internal contradictions in Dumont's work.

It would be tempting to suspect Lardinois of denouncing Dumont. It is more appropriate to quote Pierre Bourdieu from *Homo Academicus* and to say that it is the reader himself who is indeed responsible for this denunciation: "It is he who, by reading between the lines, by filling, more or less consciously, the blanks of the analysis or, very simply, 'in thinking, as one says, of one's own case', transforms the meaning and value of the deliberately censured protocol of the scientific enquiry" (Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1984). However, if Roland Lardinois never falls into explicit denunciation and controversy, the reader remains nevertheless faced with an extremely important question: what use do we make of Dumont's work after reading *Scholars and Prophets*? The objectification of underlying assumptions in Dumont's work necessarily makes the scholars question the status accorded to this understanding of the caste system. This question is even more crucial since the reference to Louis Dumont is widely acknowledged outside the field of Indian studies and anthropology.

From Louis Dumont to the Subaltern Studies

Lardinois's work thus gives us the keys to think of the use of the anthropology of Dumont. This requires distinguishing three aspects often quoted of his work: firstly, the analysis of the caste system, secondly, the distinction between holism and individualism, and finally the theory of hierarchy elaborated by Dumont.

If the theory of the caste system presented by Louis Dumont is marked by an evident Brahmano-centrist viewpoint, it nevertheless creates a rupture in scholarship on caste that, until now, evoked caste *systems* and prohibited speaking of *a* caste system. Although the organization of castes is marked by strong regional disparities, Dumont has sought to isolate the most typical characteristics of these systems using Hindu India, or Hinduism, to build a theory of the caste system. If this unified approach of the caste system created a debate among Indian scholars, there is, however, no doubt that this issue is one the most fruitful and novel aspect of Dumont's work.

The comparative dimension of Dumont's work is more ambiguous. In an evident filiation with Guénon's theses, the opposition between holism and individualism is grounded on an asymmetry in the treatment of 'traditional' societies and the modern, Western society: in a toquevillian perspective, Dumont grants a certain historicity to individualism, but holism is, for its part, presented in a more dehistoricized manner. This essentialism is particularly evident when Louis Dumont writes, in *Homo Aequalis*, that the hierarchical principle represents, "the essence of man" because it is rooted "in the nature of things" (Louis Dumont, *Homo Aequalis*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977, p. 199).

Lastly, Louis Dumont's comparative theory is grounded on a formalized theory of hierarchy that presents itself as being independent of the Brahmanical theory, or even of the Indian case (see *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 239-245). Having isolated the constitutive principle of hierarchy, Louis Dumont writes that this principle lies in the fact that "hierarchy is encompassing its opposite." Such a theory of hierarchy necessarily implies the reference to an ultimate value that encompasses all the elements of the system studied, which is necessarily outside it. Roland Lardinois reminds us that such a position relies on a strong metaphysical postulate and has

decisive theoretical consequences: “By locating the origin of meaning that transcends the specific experience of the agents outside the social world, Dumontian anthropology abdicates its Durkheimian references and renounces any projects of sociological understanding of Hinduism as a legitimate cultural and social order” (p. 357).

In its final, more eclectic chapter, Roland Lardinois goes beyond the strictly French milieu to which the book mainly focused. Through a comparative approach, he analyses how American scholars have sought to overcome, after Dumont, the epistemic difficulties that sociological understanding of Indian society raises. In this chapter he reconstitutes the intellectual genealogy of McKim’s project at the University of Chicago and shows that this project is part of a more general movement aiming at a kind of “indigenization” of social sciences. Roland Lardinois then traces the emergence of postcolonial criticism in American campuses, namely that of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and that of the Subaltern Studies, and situates them in relation to the anthropology of McKim Marriott or of Dumont. Regrettably, this last chapter is not as exhaustive as the rest of the work, but doubtlessly, it does not claim to be. This chapter’s aim is to locate the analysis conducted till now in an international and more contemporary context by showing how other authors have faced epistemic issues that French authors also confronted.

These few remarks give a glimpse of the strong implications of Roland Lardinois’s work that constitutes an essential tool to frontally address major theoretical questions. To sum up, the work is extremely rich and its reading can be considered as mandatory for any reader interested in scholarship on India or in Louis Dumont’s theories. It also constitutes a substantial contribution to the history and sociology of production of scholarly knowledge.

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