

THE CASTE SYSTEM *IN STATU NASCENDI*

Within the realm of structures of society, the caste system, a unique example among all the aspects of human adventure, represents at the level of social morphology, that is in the manner of grouping characteristic of a society, India's most original contribution to human history within all great civilizations, to the point that India's civilization is generally identified by the principal feature of its morphology.

However, the caste system, which defines the structure of traditional Hindu society, constitutes a sort of contrast for Western sensitivities trained in the idea of individual freedom, of formal equality between men and open competition that at least ideally make social mobility possible. The caste system, on the other hand, makes inequality the constitutive principle in its scale of beings; in Hindu society each person is completely defined by the place he occupies in the social whole, by his position in a scale of separate and interdependent rankings. For Western thinking, the virtual invariability of conditions and the supposedly abso-

lute rigidity of the caste barriers resulting from the division of Hindu society into four functional hierarchical classes (*varna*) and into closed and endogamous communities forming individualized elementary and relatively specialized groups (*jāti*) render individual social mobility ultimately impossible. The caste system in this way of thinking is thus based on institutionalized arbitrariness, and it must unceasingly be denounced as “scandalous” and the supposed “tyranny” condemned. Such a denunciation mixes together in a single act of rejection both its most constant general features—such as the ranking of groups, their hereditary specialization and their interdependence, the separation or even repugnance that govern contaminating contacts, measured, in a number of studies, by scales of minimal distances that translate “social distance” spatially—as well as some of its most marginal and deviant manifestations.¹ It can be discerned in this brief description why the caste system incarnates the very type of social relations that, until the penetrating work of L. Dumont, sociologist or anthropologists studied only in order better to reject, through latent sociocentrism or ethnocentrism, the collective representation underlying them.

Why in fact did Indian civilization develop this unique form of social organization called the caste system? Does the caste represent a phenomenon deriving from the social structure or is it an aspect of Hindu culture? And what does it signify for a Hindu to belong by birth to a given group in a permanent and definitive manner?

¹ It is stated, for example, that in 1931 a group of Untouchables in the district of Tirunelveli (Tamil Nadu), the Purada Vannan, was the object of public scorn and condemned to lead a nocturnal existence by the single fact that since they were launderers (*dhobi*) of the clothing of other Untouchables—the very height of abjection—the very sight of them was sufficient to defile any other Hindu. Moreover, the caste system is so firmly entrenched that Untouchables recognize untouchability even among themselves. Certain Untouchables, if introjection is incorporation in an unconscious manner, introjected the system to the point of having to purify their dwelling after the visit of a Brahman, judged by them to be defiling! For the first example see J.H. Hutton, *Caste in India. Its Nature. Function and Origins*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1946, p. 71. It is still stated, for example, that bands of robbers or highway bandits (*dacoits*) roaming in certain areas are also organized into *jāti*.

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Attempts by the social sciences to respond to these crucial questions by analyzing the social reality of castes have long been brought up short by the multitude of specific castes (numbering 2718 at the time of the last official census in 1931, without mentioning sub-castes!), the mosaic of which forms an infinitely complex puzzle in a sub-continent already splintered by astonishing ethnolinguistic multiplicity and where 80% of the population still lives in 575,000 villages of less than 5000 inhabitants. Although it is true that the only good ethnography is local, that is, rooted in field research and nourished by detailed descriptions coming from participatory observation, with the risk otherwise of “building on sand”, research on castes remained prisoner in the 1950’s and 1960’s to descriptive pointillism and sociographical dispersion, since it was thought sufficient to juxtapose differences revealed by local monographs to produce a partial or global image of the caste system by adding up particularities observed.² A change of approach was evidently required.

It was then that L. Dumont, breaking with the “atomizing empiricism” of previous works, introduced, with a series of successive enlargements of his first south-Indian ethnographic work, a completely “holistic” perspective that was to revolutionize the manner of approaching the caste system. Thanks to a structural reading of the caste system, the desperate atomization of research was now overcome by revealing the formal mechanism of its creation. The infinite diversity of concrete castes and behaviors now emerged to replace a range of developments, and this range, even if it preserved free variation in the details of one or another village, of one or another region, now could and indeed had to be refuted.

As remarkable as it was, this advance still left open the question of the origins, the genesis and historical development of the caste system. For a long time this question remained controver-

² Quite indicative is the title of the work directed by L. Dumont’s virulent opponent, E.R. Leach, *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*, Cambridge, 1960. The overview by D. Mandelbaum, *Society in India*, 2 vols., Berkeley, The University of California Press, 1970, summarizes these empirical, or rather “empiristic”, approaches, to use L. Dumont’s subtle distinction.

sial and even desperate since Indian tradition is almost totally ahistorical and recognizes no significance in the kinds of changes and breaks that the Western mind tends, in comparison, to overestimate. Conjectures about the origins of the caste system were confusing, and many theories born in the twentieth century diverge from the causal imputations of this complex phenomenon. For example, that of J.H. Hutton calls upon a dense stream of factors, enumerating no less than fifteen.³ Although it certainly leaves the enigma intact, the disconcerting diversity of interpretations that it postulates at least offers the advantage of allowing us to measure the importance of the questions raised by the caste system and, in particular, of the complexity inherent in the problem of its origins. What then were the conditions for the appearance of such a segmentary social morphology in India?

I. THE COHESION INHERENT IN THE STRUCTURAL APPROACH

That “the sociology of India should bring together descriptive sociology and classical Indology”⁴ is the postulate that from the beginning governs the research L. Dumont was to conduct in order to write his major book *Homo hierarchicus*.⁵ Far from the idea that the principle of totality guiding it is *a priori*, this research has as its point of departure the evidence of India’s profound unity, a unity that is not simply cultural but that derives instead from an ideological complex of ideas and values. This profound unity of a social nature justifies the “holist” or unifying point of view holding that Indian society forms a whole.⁶ But this profound unity underlying the diversity of empirical groups consists more in a set of relations between characteristics than in a mass of isolated elements. Recourse to the kind of approach

³ J.H. Hutton, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-65.

⁴ Inaugural lecture at E.P.H.E., reprinted in *La Civilisation indienne et nous*, Cahier des Annales No. 23, 1964, p. 89.

⁵ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, Gallimard, 1967, expanded re-edition, coll. “Tel”, 1979, followed by *Homo Aequalis I*, Gallimard, 1977, second part of the diptych, and his *Essais sur l’individualisme*, Le Seuil 1983.

⁶ Inaugural lecture, *ibid.*, p. 95.

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offered by the principle of totality made it possible once again to go beyond the too narrow definition of data assembled in works of “empiristic” inspiration as well as the separation, of positivist inspiration, between “facts” and “values”, whereas such a distinction is often illusory or impossible in India. In this epistemological perspective, the structure as organized and systematized ensemble of relations appears as the explicative link between forms and values. It manifests the generative formula and the law common to solidary social phenomena, the latter themselves being what they are only in their relation to others, and it remains unvarying while elements are subject to variations.

The structural reading of Hindu civilization (L. Dumont, M. Biardeau), which immediately posits it as a significant totality, aims at organizing and ranking data according to a system of values within the atemporal view that the Hindu has of his universe. It requires that the meaning of a certain number of fundamental representations be restored, the first of which being that of a sociocosmic order (*Dharma*) enveloping and eternal because it is co-extensive with the universe itself perceived as a sacral totality. For “order” here does not at all seem relative to human intentions, but it is a reality, and even the great Reality that establishes symbolic order out of which this traditional society draws its cohesion and its metastable balance. A similar structural reading thereby confirmed the effectiveness of symbolic forms in every civilization. Its primary virtue is that of dominating the kaleidoscopic richness of a thriving and apparently anarchical element even while underlining its profound unity and its logical wealth. Even the irrationalities, contradictions and apparent ambiguities of caste institutions proved to be part of a coherent system. L. Dumont refutes in this manner any explanation of the caste system, of the Hindu type, that is based on social stratification, in the contemporary sociological sense.

If there is one conclusion of L. Dumont that meets general agreement today it is that “the caste system is indeed the expression of a totality through its parts, while preserving for each one the capacity to be both the element through which relations with other elements refer to the whole and a totality in direct relation with the encompassing order. The principle of unity is not found in the element but outside it and in a different order that, as such,

ranks these elements necessarily in relation to one another". In other words, "this particular social system—and perhaps every social system—is based on a principle that remains external to it, is ordered by something beyond it and finds its meaning in a higher order".⁷

Thus it is evident that the caste society, considered as a coherent totality, is defined by submission to a hierarchy of religious nature: the principle of its order, as brought out by structural analysis at the level of synchrony, is hier-archical, not in the sense of a hierarchy of authority but in the sense of a gradation of levels of status along a scale of greater or lesser purity.

Structured by the very ancient contrast between pure and impure, the caste system appears above all as a system of social classification capable of organizing an indeterminate number of elements (castes) using formal properties of a pure symbolic system, expressed in particular by the dietary code. The responses provided in terms of various criteria—for example the study of *Veda*, its teaching, prohibition of remarriage of widows, vegetarianism—to the following questions, "Does X accept water from Y?"; "Is X purer than Y?", allow determining indices of purity that, by signifying an infinity of differential degrees (purity and impurity being always relative), make it possible to derive an hierarchical ensemble of ranks in contexts that are as varied as they are open. It became possible to bring to light the structural complexity of systems of interdependence and interaction at work in the caste society. A particular example is provided by the *jajmānī* system of division of labor. For a long time overlooked by research although it is an integral part of the caste system, it is characterized by, on the one hand, its orientation toward the whole, that is hierarchical collectivity, and, on the other, certain "religious" aspects. However, these two features are inclusive in relation to its other aspects that are specifically

⁷ We can measure the fertility of this conclusion by L. Dumont in the variety and scope of research that it has inspired and that in turn prove its validity. See T.N. Madan (ed.), *Way of Life, King, Householder, Renouncer. Essays in Honour of Louis Dumont*, Delhi, Vikas 1982, and *Différences, valeurs, hiérarchie*, essays in honor of L. Dumont collected by J.Cl. Galey, E.H.E.S.S., p. XX, XXI and XXIII.

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“economical” or “technical”. This is why, in recent decades, there have been many social anthropology monographs in which it is possible to discern the true nature of *varṇa* and *jāti* in terms of relationship and ritual activity and to describe the coherent functioning of the caste society within the microcosmic or village framework, which is in fact multi-caste.⁸

No matter how rigid and fertile it may be at the level of understanding that is its own, structural analysis nevertheless postulates, for better or for worse, the subordination of the historical point of view to the systematic point of view. This is not to say that it does not recognize historical values. But it is clear that intelligibility lies in synchrony, as if the structure absorbed the genesis. Except that, as M. Biardeau himself once suspected, “how can one be sure that the reduction of a fact to the norm does not hide the intrusion of an historic contingency whose data escape us? Can one hope for a neat systematization of the entire Hindu cultural ensemble? This would mean falling into the trap of centuries of rationalization that Brahmans have accumulated in good faith, misleading themselves before misleading us”.⁹

II. THE APPEARANCE OF HISTORICAL CONTINGENCY

Jean Baechler attempts to describe the abrupt appearance of historical contingency in *La solution indienne. Essai sur les origines*

⁸ Among the abundant and highly technical literature, special mention should be made of the remarkable work of J.L. Chambard on the village of Piparsod (Madhya Pradesh), *Atlas d'un village Indien*, Mouton, 1980. It should be recalled that the population of a typical caste is generally between 5000 and 15,000 persons in a given area and that each village on the average in Northern India includes 10 *jāti* (9 Hindus and 1 Muslim, except in rural Bengal where the situation is more fluid) and in Southern India from 15 to 20 (Kerala). Likewise, since the work of M.N. Srinivas a dominant caste or castes can be distinguished in each village that control(s) rights over the land and replace(s) the royal role at the village level, and servant castes (craftsmen and specialists, day-laborers, domestic help).

⁹ M. Biardeau, *L'Hindouisme, anthropologie d'une civilisation*, Flammarion, coll. “Champs”, 1981, p.10.

du régime des castes,¹⁰ a most remarkable work, outstanding for its synoptic ambition, its effort at theorization and its deliberately comparative historical method. Benefitting from the theoretical achievements of his preceding research, and in particular from the conceptual distinctions relative to the types of social morphology and political regimes examined in his major survey *Démocraties*, an excellent example of the genre “*histoire raisonnée*”,¹¹ J. Baechler attacked the question with the resources of a conceptualization that was as adequate as it was fertile, based in part on a comparative and exhaustive analysis of social structures according to their size and their level of either integration or superposition, from the village to the empire as well as on social stratifications and then typical forms of power. It is obvious that the theory he proposes merits interest for more than one reason.

First of all its principal value is certainly that of grasping the specificity of the caste system in its history and of showing the stages in the process of its formation. A second original element lies in affirming that the installation of the caste system should be interpreted as a solution that arose to signal the success of a series of concordant responses given to problems of a specifically political order so that the conditions for its emergence should be sought in reference to particular facts in India's political history. Finally, this theory, “logically coherent”, is believed “to

¹⁰ J. Baechler, *La solution indienne. Essai sur les origines du régime des castes*, P.U.F., coll. “Sociologies”, 1988. This work is here designated by the abbreviation *S.I.*.

¹¹ From his *Origines du capitalisme* (Gallimard, coll. “Idées”, 1971), in which he already showed the essential role played by the political order in industrial development, to *Démocraties* (Calmann-Lévy, coll. “Liberté de l'esprit”, 1985), not to mention *Le Pouvoir pur* (Calmann-Lévy, coll. “Archives des sciences sociales”, 1979) and his two articles “La Nourriture des hommes. Essai sur le Néolithique”, *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, t. XXIII, 1982, pp. 241-293 and “Aux origines de la modernité. Castes et féodalités: Europe, Inde, Japon”, *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, t. XXVII, pp. 31-57, a “plausible ‘histoire raisonnée’” (“La Nourriture des Hommes”, p. 242; cf. *La solution indienne*, p. 8) has always been a key objective in the work of J. Baechler.

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account for all known facts and is not refuted by any available information".¹²

According to J. Baechler, it is necessary to examine the history of a people in order to identify the struggles through which its personality has been created. It is thus important to have recourse to a diachronic reading in order to account for the creation of the caste system. For this system, contrary to Hindu religious ideology that entrenches its legitimacy in the ideal synchrony of a sociocosmic Order (*Dharma*), inclusive and eternal, can only be fully understood as the work of history, if not its product. For Hindu consciousness there is no doubt that the question, "Does the land of *Dharma* have a history?" would be absurd. In Hindu eyes the caste system seems to be the high water mark of a superiorly-ordered great civilization, with its extremely stable configuration apparently being, according to J. Baechler, a solution that appeared to mark the success of a series of concordant responses to past situations. Discarding the objection that the attempt to restore the history of India is but a projection onto a civilization whose values are profoundly ahistorical of the "historist" (rather than "historicist") prejudice inherent in Western sensitivity, it is necessary to dissipate the ahistorical illusion¹³ in order to restore its historical dimension to the caste system and to explain the diachronic process of creation of such a segmentary morphology. Breaking with fragmentary historical analyses, the approach adopted aims consequently at reconstructing this process by bringing together and articulating systematically, that is in an integral whole, all the interdependent

¹² *S.I.*, p. 189.

¹³ That so-called traditional societies are not static and mental in origin, according to the structuralist hypothesis, but that to the contrary they are historical and political has been made clear by G. Balandier, for example, in the case of African societies. On the question of the mode of historicity proper to traditional societies, see G. Balandier, *Anthropologiques*, 1974, new ed. 1985, chap. IV, "Tradition, conformité, historicité". On the question of determining the proper place for a history of India, see the two articles by J. Pouchepadass, "India" in the *Dictionnaire des sciences historiques* under the direction of A. Burguière, P.U.F., 1986, and "Enseigner la civilisation de l'Inde", *Historiens et Géographes*, no. 297 (Dec. 1983), pp. 421-437.

elements that contributed to make the appearance of such a system necessary, even though in itself it was contingent.

J. Baechler, in his double capacity as historian and sociologist, to this end applies two complementary approaches, that of functional analysis (while remaining careful, however, to avoid the excesses of functionalism, especially its implicit finalism),¹⁴ and that of genetic analysis or analysis of causes. For him it is a matter of rediscovering the reality of contingency in the facts he establishes. For the contingency is real; the historian-sociologist finds proof of either in the unexpected interference of causes or in the liberty of people, and particularly in their inventiveness, which brings about events or social structures impossible to foresee. The historian-sociologist, then, can only reject *en masse* the numerous myths of the origin of castes in which “the origins of the caste always appear at a time in which the overall society already existed”.¹⁵ The operation seeking to retrace the historical genesis of the caste system by using an analysis of real social stratification then requires setting aside the tri-functional Indo-European ideology brought out clearly in the research of G. Dumézil and, at the same time, the Brahman religious mentality it shapes. The latter, which feeds on cosmogonic speculations, crystallizes around a sacrificial order to which corresponds a division of ritual labor. It finds its founding myth, as we know, in the famous Vedic hymn, itself rather late, that celebrates the sacrifice by the gods of primordial “cosmic Man”, and in whose place appears a society divided into functional classes (*varṇa*) while constitutive privileges and obligations are consecrated within the society thereby created. We could speak of a veritable “mythical charter” if this expression did not instead connote a contractualist fiction.¹⁶ The advantage of the historical method in sociology is in the present case to break the self-referential structure of religious ideology, source of collective narcissism and an

¹⁴ *S.I.*, pp. 64, 142, 194.

¹⁵ O. Herrenschildt, “L’Inde et le sous-continent indien”, *Ethnologie Régionale II*, Encyclopédie de la Pléiade 1978, p. 163.

¹⁶ For the *Purusasukta. Rig Veda* X.90 see P. Mus, “Où finit Purusa?”, *Mélanges d’indianisme à la mémoire de L. Renou*, 1968, pp. 539-563.

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unparalleled ethnocentric fatuity.¹⁷ The comparative historical method disengages the effect of circular self-legitimation by which “differences are petrified, i.e. of course *naturalized*, to constitute a ranked society in which roles, ideally at least, are distinguished and linked to determined human groups”.¹⁸

The starting point for research lies in an enigma created by the following *unique* fact, which invites reflection: why does India, whose chronology is almost exactly parallel to that of other areas in terms of stages of political development (from Neolithisation to the appearance of kingdoms around the 6th century B.C. and the spread of an empire), after the 2nd century A.D. embark on a completely original evolutionary path, the major feature of which was in fact to be the development of the caste system? The fact is that until the process of imperialization undertaken by the Mauryas, there is nothing in India’s political and economic history that can account for the caste system.

We must consider the lateral possibilities that J. Baechler was able to discern and to develop, longitudinally in a sense, the various possible lines of historical evolution, the realization of which butted up against decisive constraints and was brought up short. In short the procedure followed consisted in reconstructing various possible evolutionary lines and discerning, by elimination of those that proved to be dead-ends, the very one through which would appear at a certain stage, when alternative solutions had failed, what might be called “factual connection”. The explanation thought to provide the sought-after understanding of M. Weber,¹⁹ determined and evaluated by a comparison of possible lines of development inferred by imagination with the actual development revealed in history.²⁰

However, it is not in the sudden appearance of some generative disrupting event that the originality of India’s evolutionary

¹⁷ *S.I.*, p. 182.

¹⁸ O. Herrenschmidt, *ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁹ Max Weber, *Essais sur la théorie de la science*, French tr. by J. Freund, Paris, Plon, 1965, p. 319.

²⁰ *S.I.*, for example p. 147: “the disqualification of the morphology (kingdom or empire) that normally should have prevailed...”.

line can be found but rather in a failure and a lack. The definitive failure of the imperializing movement launched by the Mauryas from Magadha is indeed the event upon which Indian history pivoted around the 2nd century B.C., in the vital period of unpredictable events in which societies play out their destiny. There appeared at that time a conjunction of factors whose coincidence explains why the political history of India is unique. “Is it by chance that the regime of the *jāti* is itself also unique?”, J. Baechler correctly inquires.²¹ The heart of his analysis deals precisely with the complex interaction between factors of various types that were, through a movement of causality that is not all linear but circular and multifactorial, to imprint their own dynamics on the history of India. We can summarize these factors with J. Baechler.

In the case of India, the uncontrollable vastness of the territory, continental in size, and the difficulty of communications,²² as well as the resurgence of centrifugal forces, most often in the south, have always (and this despite the many attempts in century after century) obstructed the creation of a durable pan-Indian empire not destined to collapse and perish, victim of its excessive extension, or imperial overstretch as today’s geopolitical scientist might say. Moreover, the disappearance of aristocracies (between the 7th and the 4th centuries B.C.) condemned political regimes to assume the aristocratic hierocratic form.²³ Driven by the idea of a universal monarch (*cakravartin*), the most enervating ideal of all since it incited them to universalize their very sovereignty by extending their *imperium* throughout all the lands, kings and would-be kings were as a consequence exhausted by constant wars among themselves, intended to assuage their unlimited thirst for conquest. The situation that resulted was a

²¹ *S.I.*, p. 95.

²² J. Baechler carefully notes the insurmountable obstacles—geographic, climatic and political—that have continuously arisen, century after century, on the path to imperialization. *S.I.*, pp. 89-93.

²³ It is not by chance that in Greece democracy, as “realm of the word”, appeared and flourished in City States whose narrow territory was only a few square kilometers in area.

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unique one, especially in that the multiple kingdoms were overlapping and thereby marked by instability.

This is the source of the chronic fluidity and inconsistency of the kingdoms making up a particularly unstable multi-polar system that was never able to organize itself into oligopolar harmony, balanced and stable. This was the situation India found itself in, if by “situation” we understand in fact the environment defined as an ensemble of stable and coherent constraints in which the system of action is set.

In this respect there is a striking contrast between India and China,²⁴ where imperial unification was accomplished in 221 B.C. by Quin Shihuangdi. Quin not only eliminated the feudal system but also multiplied the measures of unification, of centralization and of government standardization (system of weights and measures, characters for writing, width of roads, etc.), while at the same time reinforcing control of the State in every domain, especially economics. Formed quite early, the Chinese State, omnipresent and omniscient, through its administrative apparatus controlled the development of the empire at the same time as it controlled and structured the mental categories of the people through the civil servants of its “heavenly bureaucracy”.

However, the inconsistency and evanescence of Indian Kingdoms created a morphological problem following upon the “disqualification of the political”²⁵ resulting from the fragility of dynasties, although it is true that “in order to live in polity men should be united by a principle of coherence and cohesion”²⁶ guaranteeing the social survival of their community. In sum the situation that resulted from this chain of processes caused a problem for Indian society as well as Indian civilization, whose cultural unity, continuity and expansion have always been threatened with dissolution consecutively by the recurring assaults of successive invaders. Indian society and civilization were consequently forced to invent a solution in order to survive, manifesting their vitality and mobilizing their resources for an active adaptation

²⁴ *S.I.*, pp. 78, 85-86, 107, 134.

²⁵ *S.I.*, p. 53.

²⁶ *S.I.*, p. 133.

to their new political environment. This confrontation does not fail to recall the famous scheme of challenge/response that Arnold Toynbee applied, sometimes with uneven results, to the destiny of civilizations in *A Study of History*. Except that the economic conditions of a problem always determine or create the manner in which it finds a solution within the framework of the real relationships of a society. It thus seems as if the “solution” of the caste system was the one that Hindu society created precisely because of the different relationships that characterized it at that time. Is it not in fact correct to say, in the famous words of *Contribution to the Criticism of Economics*, that “humanity proposes to itself only tasks that it can fulfill”?

At the conclusion of a rigorous, rigid and even obstinate demonstration, J. Baechler thus established, with the help of the analytical instruments previously mentioned, the thesis that “the regime of the *jāti* is an original morphological solution to the problem, political in nature, raised by the failure of the Mauryas (around 185 B.C.) to imperialize the Indian sub-continent and by the subsequent political inconsistency that is a direct consequence of a certain political regime that itself resulted from a particular social structure”.²⁷

This is how, in the transition from Brahmanism and from Hinduism, Indian civilization, in its confusion, invented an original morphological solution by drawing inspiration from two models, one furnished by corporations and the other by the hereditary and endogamous group of Brahmans. It was an original solution in that it is half-way between dispersal in bands and the unification of political space under a single power, the caste system “can function without any reference to a political power”. Even when political power is fraught with instability and the political structure tends to be distributed *juxta modum* in four levels (chiefdom, region, province and, possibly, empire), the solution of castes is “capable of functioning independently from the political structure”.²⁸ Because it produces the disjunction of morphology and political power, it thereby “excludes the terms of

²⁷ *S.I.*, p. 9.

²⁸ *S.I.*, pp. 136 and 194.

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the problem”. Endowed with extraordinary plasticity, the fragmentary morphology of the *jāti* was to “spread like wild fire”²⁹ at the same time that it developed its parallel frame of reference, the theory of the *varṇa*. The capillary diffusion of the “Indian solution” was to have as principal vector the process of infiltration of religious values and cultural norms taught by the Brahman order, themselves broken down into multiple dispersed segments. Slowly but surely these values and norms spread from top to bottom throughout the multiple ethnic groups that make up the mass of the population. Like cultural cement that no secular authority could have ever provided, these values and norms integrated their variety of beliefs into a coherent ensemble and they achieved a broad consensus on the basis of which the philosophical and spiritual validation of the caste system could be developed. If the cultural unity of the Indian sub-continent thereby appears so rich, is it not precisely because it is the unity of diversity—the diversity of populations, of languages, of customs?

Because it creates a myriad of “autonomous niches” for the benefit of social agents, the morphology of castes constitutes the closed society of rival autonomies in an order that is flexible and conflictual at the same time. Making up an ensemble of segments anterior to the formally constituted State, the social structure is then presented as a mosaic and a hierarchy of implicit powers. At that point, even while avoiding headlessness, Hindu society manifests a relatively stable state of equilibrium between a large number of centers or networks of power, both fragmentary and hierarchical, at times complementary and at times independent of one another. In the absence of a unitary State in the modern sense that would be the seat of social identification, the cohesion of society rests on this equilibrium between a multiplicity of partial systems, sometimes subordinated, often juxtaposed, each one of which constituting a structurally coherent whole. This morphology reveals its originality in the scale of time that is proper to it; unlike so-called “Promethean” historical societies in which the multiplicity of social times in competition, corresponding to the various “levels of depth” of social structures (Gurvitch), is

²⁹ *S.I.*, p. 131.

not separated from the dynamic unification effected by global society in progress, this morphology offers the advantage of escaping broadly from history, even if it does not allow being animated by slow movements that can be perceived only in terms of generations. The caste system succeeds if not in totally disconnecting at least in dissociating to a maximum degree the great length of time in which operate a myriad of microsocial and group-related elements weakly penetrated by historicity, from the short time of political history, which is irremediably punctuated by these vain periods of turbulence, often dramatic, that are the dynastic vicissitudes of autocratic sovereigns and their precarious conquests. In sum, because they adopted a morphology that is “indifferent to politics”,³⁰ “happy peoples have no history...”.

This rapid survey is sufficient to indicate the value of this functional analysis establishing that the caste system has made it possible to resolve a problem that was posed to Indian peoples under acceptable conditions. It thereby underlines the decisive importance of functional analysis and its role in completing historical analysis in the case where historical data are overwhelmingly lacking.

But what is the value of this thesis? Does the caste system represent a simple and optimal solution invented from elements available on Indian soil in response to a problem of a political nature that was posed to Indian society at a certain period in its history? Does this explanatory scheme, whose primary interest is no doubt that it breaks with fragmentary historical analysis in order to follow the creation of the system envisaged as an integral whole, although it manages to account marvelously for the broad outlines of the evolution of Indian society as this can be reconstituted on the basis of data that are inevitably lacunary or missing and thus insufficiently conclusive, nevertheless, grasp the originality of Indian civilization, understood in its specificity and according to its own categories? Does the intelligibility that it incontestably projects over the creation of the caste system truly coincide with the vision that Hindus have of the caste system and of themselves as members of a *jāti*? Does this explanatory scheme

³⁰ *S.I.*, p. 60.

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not rest in fact on the primacy implicitly accorded to politics and to its goals in the interpretation of the human adventure? Does it not then do violence to the whole of layered meanings that make up Hindu culture? Is the adventure of humanity truly of a political order?

III . THE COMPLEX ASSESSMENT OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

Given that men, in their social activities, are thought to be guided chiefly by their interests, what should be credited or debited to the creation of the caste system? This is the question raised by the role played by evaluation of the caste system in J. Baechler's demonstration.

Although the Western observer is inclined to retain only the negative features of this morphology (among which is in the first place the so-called "tyranny of castes": C. Bouglé), its adoption also offered advantages, both on the objective level of collective organization and social structures as well as on the subjective level of social agents (respectively "coherence" and "cohesion" in J. Baechler's terminology).

The objective advantages of this multicellular and alveolar morphology at the macrosociological level are too evident for it to be necessary to insist on them: near economic autarchy of each village resulting from the specialization of each segment of *jāti* within a network of services and counter-services, economic autarchy of each caste within the basic unity grouping several dozen villages, the large autonomy of each caste forming a community that governs and administers itself thanks to its *Pañcayat* protected from any intervention or external interference of a political nature, the extreme flexibility of a system that allows the formation (by fission) of new *jāti* in accordance with historical, social or religious mutations, the possibility finally of vertical social mobility of *jāti* in the scale of rankings, in the long term at least.³¹ This is the source of the exceptional resilience of the system

³¹ *S.I.*, pp. 59-65.

and its capacity of absorption in light of political, social or economic shocks, whether these be external or internal. However, it is probable that J. Baechler overestimated here the benefits resulting from specialization since one third of the population traditionally specialized by its caste into a given non-agricultural profession in fact derives the largest part of its subsistence from agriculture.

On the other hand it seems more difficult to evaluate this morphology at the level of each social agent. The very notion of evaluation supposes that the Hindu individual, like the *Homo oeconomicus* of classical economy, has as axiomatic characteristics to be sovereign, selfish and calculating, that is he pursues his own interests by a constant calculation of advantages and costs and by assessing each action using an algebraic formula.³² Although it is difficult to evaluate the economic effect on the individual level, for example, it is not only because it is naturally impossible to apply to a subsistence economy, still largely remaining at the phase of “total service”, the monetary criteria controlling, on the one hand, production, distribution and consumption, and on the other the remuneration of labor in the economy of the modern market. It is also and especially because it is necessary to take into account here the balance of the material economy and the “psychic economy”, to use the expression of R. Ruyer. Whereas J. Baechler affirms with a touch of irony that “man in general does not live by bread alone, but he does live by bread also”,³³ it can be correctly maintained with R. Ruyer that “historic materialism having become the ideological passion of explaining everything by the material economy, is completely false. Psychic nourishment is a primary need. A people happy in its austere but nourishing traditions can easily do without wealth”.³⁴ This means that in order to assess the results of the caste system for the Hindu people at the individual level, in ad-

³² This is the very presupposition at work in *Démocraties*, for example, p. 31.

³³ *S.I.*, p. 166.

³⁴ R. Ruyer, *Les Nourritures psychiques*, Calmann-Lévy, coll. “Liberté de l'esprit”, 1975, chap. XI: “Économie matérielle et économie psychique”, pp. 137, 148.

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dition to the degree of satisfaction of their material needs, it is necessary to take into consideration the configurations and the dynamics of sociability within the limited group in which they are inserted.³⁵ In this respect what are the “compensatory virtues of the *jāti*”?³⁶

Without continuing into a psychologization of the social sphere by reducing it to interpsychology, it is correct to affirm that for each social agent the *jāti* procures a sort of second skin, no longer enveloping the individual in the narrow sense, but a “social niche” which does not need to be comfortable if it is quite habitual and if life can unfold there channeled by the order and harmony of traditions and enriching myths. It is a misunderstanding for the West to condemn the “closed mentality” with which each caste limits its intellectual horizon to the sociological barrier restricting it. In fact the caste forms for each of its members a sort of “psychoniche” in which they can live in the domestic luxury of the habitual. Just as each animal species has its bioniche, its “ecological niche” in which it is well adapted and in harmony with its environment, each *jāti* has its own “psychoniche” in which the individual is well adapted. For the caste forms a tight unit not only through the relations of marriage and a community of interests but also by the communitarian feeling born of the affinity of type of life and aspirations. The *jāti* is for the individual not only the realm of a total solidarity with the other members, making his life more bearable through the protection, cooperation and aid that it provides him, for example in the construction of a house, plowing a field or distribution of grain in case of famine. It is also the realm of intense microsociability, particularly on the occasion of the numerous festive occasions that punctuate traditional social living. With its durable links and its reliable relations, it offers above all a fabric of emotions and feelings that protect, nourish and sustain the individual at least as much as

³⁵ It is not possible to envisage the extended family as psychosocial matrix of Hindu infancy. See S. Kakar, *Moksha, le monde intérieur, enfance et société en Inde*, Les Belles Lettres 1985, and L. Kapani and F. Chenet, “India and the Risk of Psychoanalysis”, *Diogenes*, No. 135, Fall 1986, pp. 63-78.

³⁶ *S.I.*, p. 140.

the network of obligations in which he is inserted constrains and limits him. A fusional environment in which emotions and feelings circulate, in “affective autarchy”,³⁷ and which dispenses to each member a nourishing affective warmth. Thus for each one of its members the caste responds to this basic desire for organic intimacy with other related beings that is inscribed at the deepest level of the human psyche. The individual is integrated into a community that gives him the feeling of security in exchange for his dependence and that provides him its support for facing the major crises of existence: birth, marriage, misery, sickness and death. Even though biologically individuated, each members thus becomes a socialized agent according to a transindividual dimension. Moreover, since it represents for each of its members the seat of his social identity, the caste is the locus of his cultural identity, always respected. Fiercely attached to his identity, the humblest craftsman, for example, is proud of his caste, of his customs and of his trade that he would not exchange for anything else in the world. Is it possible to imagine a greater feeling of security than to belong to a community whose customs and mentality one shares? The modern West seems insecure by contrast, where each one is left to seek his own identity: the tireless search for a fleeting identity that in our societies predisposes the individual to become victim of his schizoid states, or even to become totally schizophrenic. On the other hand, just as the coupling of statuses and social roles in the caste society determines the fabric of social roles and imposes a certain form of behavior on individuals, the individual is capable, in a given situation, not only of playing his role but of recognizing the role of others and thereby anticipating their reactions. The advantage of such predictability for the Hindu is important, since an excess of uncertainty about the character to play and the personality to assume is liable to cause confusion in the individual by plunging him back into his original insecurity. There is indeed no more pitiful sight today than to see an uprooted Hindu wandering aimlessly in a large Western city. Where his conduct before had been “determined by tradition” (or tradition-directed as D. Riesman termed it), now

³⁷ J. Baechler makes a very brief allusion to this. *S.I.*, p. 60 and pp. 140-141.

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he is plunged into the “lonely crowd” and buried under its fragmented mass without even having been able to acquire that “internal gyroscope” that would have allowed him to become “inner-directed”.³⁸

IV. POLITICAL PRIMACY OR RELIGIOUS PRIMACY?

As penetrating as the analyses upon which it rests, the theory proposed by J. Baechler is, however, far from being totally convincing, for it still manifests the fault of sharing in the Western prejudice that grants an eminent and even determinant place to politics in the historical movement of civilizations. For the Western way of thinking, the destiny of a people evolves in the conflictual dynamics of power, that is concretely in the activities that concern power, either for those who hold it or for those who are subject to it, contest it or seek it. It is the political level of civilizations that reflect their challenges, crises and major options. In this frame of interpretation of Western societies, on the one hand, politics is largely defined by the central role that the State occupies in the life of historic communities, so that in the social sciences political power largely dominates the typology of global societies; while on the other the function of politics (this is a central thesis of political philosophy, from Machiavelli to Eric Weil) is to make an historic community durable by helping it to become prosperous, strong and free with a collective freedom, in short by aiding it to *make* its history. For J. Baechler, the “centrality of politics” is such that “if we want to know why history took a certain direction instead of another, it is best to turn to the political observatory as the most promising one”, even though, he notes, “affirming the centrality of politics does not mean reducing everything to politics nor making of it a ‘last resort’”.³⁹ Indicative of this “prejudice”, in the strong sense of the term, is the following conclusion. “As always in human affairs, the fun-

³⁸ D. Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, Yale University Press, 1950.

³⁹ *Démocraties*, p. 11.

damental questions are political because everything that happens in a society has repercussions in the political sphere and everything that happens in the political sphere affects all the rest".⁴⁰ And the echo of this can be found in this statement from *La solution indienne*, "Human history is quite clearly primarily political history".⁴¹

However, this scale of intelligibility, unformulated and posited as universal by the Western way of thinking, and because of which J. Baechler attributes the establishment of the caste system to the causal action of a particular factor from the political order, is hardly pertinent in the case of Indian civilization, which finds its specificity in the unity of the religious and the social and, consequently, in the primacy of the religious. The dominant force by which the Hindu social system is *qualified* is hardly political, as in societies with "orders" or "states", but religious, so that although the political and economic spheres undoubtedly play a fundamental role, it is "as necessary, but not sufficient, variables".⁴² In Hindu consciousness, far from being a "political animal", man is an animal with the vocation to sacrifice (or to be sacrificed). Therefore it is not through an act of political motivation—a motivation that is certainly primary, not in the chronological sense but in the ontological sense, in every moment of time—that man can become himself, but through a ritual act, a sacrifice, whose "cloth" must be constantly "stretched" or "woven". True enough we should not see in this Indian quality the phenomenon of a religious consciousness indissociable from other productions of social life or thought. It is impossible then to dissociate religion and society in India in order to consider its social structure through the prism of our values and to submit it to the test of our criteria based on "political ends" judged to be ultimate and raised to the absolute. There is no doubt that J. Baechler is not sensitive to religious values, the source of which is more in the transcendent order rather than the immanent order, the basically metaphysical order rather than that of the relative

⁴⁰ "La Nourriture des Hommes", p. 283.

⁴¹ *S.I.*, p. 60.

⁴² O. Herrenschmidt, *loc. cit.*, p. 239.

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historical product.⁴³ It follows that, even while pointing to “the eminent place given to the religious sphere by this morphology” and noting the great number and variety of religious experiences,⁴⁴ he evidently emphasizes the place and role of the political order, for which he ultimately deplors “its disqualification at the expense of the place and role of the religious order, which he relegates to the rank of ideology.”⁴⁵ Who cannot see that his *Essai sur le régime des castes* implicitly rests on the presupposition of democracy and has its place in his works as a counterpoint to his preceding survey *Démocraties*, the conclusion of which provides the implicit postulate upon which the present demonstration is based, as revealed by the statement, “only a policy controlled by a democratic regime can ensure the goals of politics”?⁴⁶

But we must be careful not to impose on India from outside a primacy of politics that would be justified only in a system of thinking completely different from its own. The question, once again, is to know if it is possible to reduce all civilizations to our own criteria, or accept recognizing the difference and being called into question by it. For even if the sociologist, in his desire to reduce anything transcendent from the social, must, for reasons of methodological honesty, posit the self-immanence of a society, apart from any transcendence imposed from the outside by a metasocial element of a sacred, religious or mythical order, even more he must recognize that Hindu social fabric is fully saturated with religious values and that it distinguishes itself by its exceptional permeability to the sacred. Rarely in the history of civilization has there been a sacralization of institutions, of manners and of ideas as intense and as complete as in orthodox Indian civilization.

Assuredly “castes are coextensive with Hinduism”, so much so that “Hinduism must be posited as the reference necessary for

⁴³ Cfr. *S.I.*, pp. 53, 71, 174, 187-188. In all of these remarks there is an odor of the opium of the people and clichés about its soporific power.

⁴⁴ *S.I.*, pp. 68-69.

⁴⁵ *S.I.*, *ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴⁶ *S.I.*, p. 137.

any sociological understanding of India''.⁴⁷ This means that the caste system does not consist in an organic whole that can be defined in functional terms, but, as we have seen, as a whole that finds its ultimate reference in a transcendent order, an order that is encompassing without ever being encompassed.

But then how could the process of historical genesis—an uncertain process because in the present example it proceeds gropingly and by trial and error—succeed in creating this totality in the connection of its internal determinations while at the same time making necessary the reference to an ultimate and enveloping order where it finds its meaning? Is it truly possible to create the whole? Is it not always presupposed? Does the immanence of the whole to the parts allow considering the parts as real and pre-existent to the whole in order to create it? There is prestige for genetic explanations that hold that the simple is at the beginning, the complex at the end; but they likewise reiterate the movement of knowledge that is spread over time and that also appears in space, introducing the temporal order as a means of uniting what analysis had made distinct.

On the other hand, how was it possible that the lack of political force and its chronic incapacity to ensure the conditions of coherence and cohesion of Indian society and, *a fortiori*, the maintenance of its civilization were sufficient to control, even by default, the creation of a morphology that had its ultimate reference in a *transcendent* order? It is clear that the Brahman "religious impregnation" does not date only from the reaction of identity provoked by Muslim assault, the result of a siege mentality.⁴⁸ It is also possible in this respect that the development of the cult of images after the 6th century A.D. with its specific modalities, tended to diversify the specialization of castes and to accentuate their proliferation.

A civilization can only assume its full meaning if it is grasped

⁴⁷ O. Herrenschmidt, *loc. cit.*, p. 91. The Vedic definition of man, which we referred to earlier, is essential in this respect. On this subject see the splendid analyses by Ch. Malamoud in *Cuire le monde*, La Découverte, 1989, p. 8 and pp. 105-106.

⁴⁸ *S.I.*, p. 184.

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by a mythical vision of the world, which is more than the expression or the justification of it and which represents its actual foundation. Every cultural ensemble proposed to the description of the historian, the sociologist or the anthropologist is thus structured by representations, beliefs and prescriptions that represent for each culture a frame of reference through which it interprets its own existence and by virtue of which each one reads its own future. However, in this respect J. Baechler was too quick to reject the ideological framework of functional Indo-European tripartition.⁴⁹

That J. Baechler, in developing his functional analysis, too quickly eliminated, *a priori*, the tripartite Indo-European ideology to the benefit of the inventory of real social stratification is shown by the striking convergence existing between the results of the comparative analysis of mythologies by G. Dumézil and those of the comparative structural-functional analysis of social systems by the master of the functionalist sociological theory, Talcott Parsons himself. Analyzing the problems of the social organization of a system that links agents together, T. Parsons was able to establish that every social realm is necessarily differentiated into four different sectors or dimensions of cardinal importance. He was able to determine the necessity for four fundamental regulatory functions that link the social order to both its internal and external environment and that control its balance. However, deeper reflection reveals that the four functions Parsons identifies can in fact be reduced to three, since the first function of Dumézil corresponds to the first two in the paradigm of T. Parsons. If we arrange the paradigms of cardinal functions by Dumézil and Parsons side by side, we can easily note that the structure of the functions, discovered independently by Dumézil and by Parsons, is mutually comparable.⁵⁰ Moreover, the sociologist J. Cazeneuve, contemplating societies of insects, even goes so far as to stress “the analogy between the arrangement in castes among insects and the tripartition demonstrated by G.

⁴⁹ *S.I.*, p. 113.

⁵⁰ See the article by T. Parsons' disciple E. Tiryakan, “Le mythologue et le sociologue”, G. Dumézil, *Cahier pour un temps*, 1981, pp. 83-100.

Dumézil”, with the sole reservation that “in the hive, the ant hill or termite nest, sacredness corresponds to the group’s reason for being, namely the reproduction of life”.⁵¹

In any case it is clear that having too hastily repudiated “ideological etiology”⁵² led him to underestimate the importance and the force of the symbolic in a society such as that in India, if by symbolism is understood that “other” thing, that “other” power, foundation and seat of meanings that are expressed through religions, mythologies and the imaginary perception of the cosmos. Whatever the difference between the tripartite diagram and social reality—and this delicate issue that raises problems in very many respects⁵³—we are in the presence of an ideology in the sense intended by Dumézil, namely “a conception and an appreciation of the great forces that animate the world and society, and of their relationships”, or also “an explanation of the world that sustains social structure, furnishes legends about origins and, consequently, models on which collective and even individual life can be regulated”.⁵⁴

In this manner it can be seen that the caste system, in its essence, corresponds to a table of values that encompasses the political and economic spheres more than it is determined by them. Thus the function of the religious order cannot be reduced to a simple instance of legitimation of political power or of mediation sacred to the political order, given that in the Indian tradition, politics and economics are encompassed by the religious. Political power has no absolute value and is not the principal category because it is at the service of values that surpass it. In India there are values higher than those of social and political life, as manifested by the royal function, and their hierarchical complementariness correlative to the devaluation of power be-

⁵¹ J. Cazeneuve, *La Raison d'être*, 1981, chap. I, “La leçon des insectes sociaux”, p. 30.

⁵² *S.I.*, p. 65.

⁵³ See D. Dubuisson, “Structure sociale et structure idéologique: l'apport de G. Dumézil”, G. Dumézil, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-158.

⁵⁴ G. Dumézil, *Rituels indo-européens*, 1954, p. 7 (n. 19), p. 23.

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fore status. If it is in the natural order of things that the dominant, that is the sovereign, element assumes or usurps power and rules by force, it is nevertheless recognition by the Brahman that will confer on this element the status of *kṣatriya*, possessor of the legitimate use of force, provided that it conforms to the model attributed to it and that it thereby guarantees to each man the possibility of accomplishing his caste obligation.

It is not possible ultimately to avoid considering religion and the category of the sacred if we hope to understand the caste system. The sacred is perhaps the original comprehension of the world by man under the aspect of a totality that man grasps at once as qualitatively unique. In fact in Hindu society the sacred can be found everywhere and nowhere, an expansion so vague that it directly or indirectly forms the horizon for every man in the world. Its enveloping presence has not only the cultural function of adding to the social phenomena of symbolic meanings and orientations. Far from simply ensuring a sort of symbolic regulation of social behavior, the sacred in India guarantees by its omnipresence the coherence of the world and of beings, even as the entire human order finds itself conditioned by an enveloping order and, thereby, subordinated to a more profound, transcendent and invisible dimension that orients it and produces its unity. Source of justification but unjustifiable in itself, the sacred designates above all a center of radiation, a virtual point in which all the lines of the universe are focused. Thus the sacred as function of transcendental orientation participates in India in the "interface" of the visible and invisible, in the creation of a specialization and stratification of social roles. Except that, because it transcends all determinations, the sacred cannot be determined by a finite number of functions, which would become the terms of its definition. The functional analysis of Hindu society here finds its unsurpassable limit.

CONCLUSION

“Human institutions, no matter which ones they are, have meaning. The task of anthropology is to construct the integral form of these meanings”, L. Dumont stated strongly.⁵⁵

Because it constitutes both a structure for society and a mode of sociability and to a certain extent a living organism, the caste system appears ultimately to be a pluridimensional social phenomenon that is based on a differential system and a counterpoint between its diverse dimensions. Thus it reveals itself to be susceptible to a plurality of approaches, for only a pluralism of approaches is indeed capable of integrating its various dimensions. If structural analysis has clearly brought out the internal coherence of this morphology according to an acausal principle, other modes of approach are also possible that attempt to determine the process of formation and to define its reason for being.

Except that awareness of the validity of a method is never separable from awareness of its limits. Despite their undeniable heuristic value, the explicative paradigms that we have envisaged—structural, functionalist and culturalist—are not out of the range of criticism. Thus no matter how rich may be the functional understanding that it makes possible, as soon as the paradigm of functional analysis employs the principle that “all human activity possesses the general configuration of the problem and of the solution”,⁵⁶ it normally runs the risk of exaggerating the congruence between the situation and the functional solution, in this case the congruence between the chronic lack of politics and fragmentary morphology. Culturalism no doubt does not take sufficiently into account the influence of situations, namely of concrete and historical conditions on social systems, in this case the failure of the imperialist movement, and the evanescence of Indian politics on Hindu society. Although it does not always avoid the first risk, the theory proposed by J. Baechler nevertheless succeeds in escaping the second one to the extent that it is

⁵⁵ L. Dumont in *Entretiens avec Le Monde, Vol. 4: Civilisations*, p. 207.

⁵⁶ *S.I.*, p. 194.

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deployed along the continuum formed by history and sociology and thereby achieves a salutary share of complementarity and mutual implication between sociological explanation and historical explanation.

François Chenet
(*University of Paris-Sorbonne*)

Translated by R. Scott Walker