Roland Lardinois, *L’invention de l’Inde: Entre ésotérisme et science*

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[1] *L’invention de l’Inde* (‘The Invention of India’) provides a history of India studies in France in the 19th and 20th centuries, from the creation of modern scientific institutions in the decades following the French Revolution to the controversies raised by Louis Dumont’s magnum opus, *Homo hierarchicus*, first published in 1966. The author emphasises the life histories of the scholars who contributed to the field and their interactions with both academia and wider intellectual, literary and social circles.

[2] A prologue on René Daumal’s novel *La Grande Beuverie*, published in 19381, aptly introduces this perspective to the reader. Daumal was a gifted writer and poet as well as a self-taught Sanskrit scholar. The ‘counter-celestial Jerusalem’ that his novel describes is interpreted by Roland Lardinois as an allegory of the French intelligentsia in the 1930s. Notwithstanding, *L’invention de l’Inde* focuses on scholarly authors: although some writers such as Romain Rolland are mentioned, a history of representations of India in French literature over the same period would easily have filled a second volume.

[3] The book is chronologically divided into three parts. The first part narrates the gradual emergence, throughout the 19th century, of India studies as an autonomous scientific field. The second part analyses how that field was structured in the 1920s and 1930s, delving into the academic and publishing careers of established scholars and relating them with more esoteric writers who were also contributing at the time to French interest for India. The third part is devoted to the life and work of Louis Dumont.

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1 A current edition of *La Grande Beuverie* is available, as is an English translation.
From philology to sociology: The specific methodology of the French approach to India

[4] Two key themes pertaining to the sociology of knowledge structure the argument. The first theme is the specific methodology of India studies in France. After France ‘lost’ India to Britain in 1763, the need for colonial knowledge on contemporary India was reduced, and India scholars needed to find alternative career paths for themselves. Ancient oriental manuscripts were accumulating in Parisian libraries, attracting visitors from all over Europe: philology constituted the core of French India studies throughout the 19th century. The mastery of Sanskrit and other ancient languages became a condition for pursuing academic careers in which India was approached through the major religious texts of Hinduism and Buddhism. Indeed, Brahminical Hinduism was envisaged as hegemonic, leading to a neglect of ‘subaltern’ cultures, such as those of the ‘tribal’ populations, and of Indian Islam, which has been studied extensively in France only after the Second World War.

[5] In the first decades of the 20th century, however, the rise of sociology, due largely to Émile Durkheim’s efforts, led to a renewed interest for contemporary India among French scholars. The leading philologist of the time, Sylvain Lévi, conducted extensive fieldwork in different regions of the subcontinent (especially Nepal), and introduced sociologist Marcel Mauss to the study of India. This integration of philology and sociology was quite specific to France. In Britain and colonial India, the focus was on the collection of contemporary empirical material on the caste system, largely for administrative purposes, which in turn had an impact on Indian reality by reifying caste categories and ranking2.

[6] Homo hierarchicus completed the integration of philology, sociology and anthropology by interpreting the results of fieldwork conducted in India in the late 1940s and in the 1950s in the light of an ‘ideology’ of Hinduism derived from the study of ancient texts. Although Louis Dumont’s thought became so hegemonic among French India scholars as to make its methodological originality ‘invisible’ to them, it has long been controversial. First, some of the French philologists were reluctant to see sociological fieldwork introduced into the study of Hinduism. Second, one of the criticisms raised by English-language scholars (be they Indian, British or American) is that Dumont tended to consider the functioning of the caste system he had observed in mid-20th

2 Indeed Nicholas Dirks’ book Castes of Mind (2001) on British attitudes towards caste, traces a completely different history from the one in the book reviewed here.
century India as ahistorical and explainable by ancient texts. In contrast, recent research has emphasized the historicity of the caste system, making the bridge between philology and sociology rather fragile.

[7] Roland Lardinois emphasises a third issue: the status ascribed by Dumont to Brahminical texts. Dumont’s key tenet is that Indian thought is radically different from Western thought and cannot be expressed through the usual concepts of sociology. Researchers need to use the concepts of Hindu texts not only to understand the Hindu worldview they express but also actual religious or caste-related practices3. Western ‘scholarly theory’ needed to be confronted to ‘indigenous theory’ for a proper scientific understanding of India to emerge. But Lardinois contends that, influenced by the philological tradition, and contrary to some of his early 20th-century predecessors, Dumont did not acknowledge the fact that Hindu texts belonged to an ‘indigenous scholarly theory’. As such, they offered a representation of Hindu society that was as specific as the one proposed by Western scholars and similarly needed to be investigated in a sociology-of-knowledge perspective, and confronted with other Indian representations of Hindu society, in particular those of ‘subaltern’ populations.

Scholars and prophets: India studies and the history of political and religious thinking

[8] The second theme that runs through the book is that although India scholars sought to create an autonomous scientific community from the early 19th century onwards, India studies were part of a broader tradition of French political and religious thinking. India scholars did need to master the knowledge produced in their field and to publish in accordance with the rules of their profession. They had to negotiate their way through established academic institutions such as Collège de France, Institut de France, École des langues orientales vivantes, École française d’Extrême-Orient or École pratique des hautes études. Yet their motivations to study Indian civilization had as much to do with what French thinkers were expecting India to be: a country whose otherness would provide answers to the debates that were agitating France. These

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expectations also help explain the influence that some India scholars could exert over both academic and wider-interest audiences.

[9] A particular India was literally invented from Sanskrit manuscripts, and among most 19th century scholars and even some of their 20th century followers, it was unclear whether contemporary India deserved a visit, given that Parisian libraries had so much material to offer. L’Invention de l’Inde thus traces a history of French intellectual circles in which the reality of India played but a minor part.

[10] 18th-century philosophers had used early accounts of India in their fight against the influence of the Catholic Church. Inversely, reactionary thinkers of the early 19th century were attracted to the idea of India as an Ancien Régime society based on divine right. Those thinkers would not envisage the inequality of Hindu society and its hierarchy based on religion as a discriminatory tradition holding back progress towards modernity, but as an ideal that could be used to restore the social order that had been destroyed by the French Revolution.

[11] In the early 20th century, India scholars had acquired institutional autonomy and no longer depended on political patronage. Sylvain Lévi, who had been involved in the defence of Alfred Dreyfus, was an agnostic, placing value on education and science as the foundations of universalism. Catholic intellectuals and priests also entered the field, however, seeking parallels between Christianity and Indian religions. And, in particular during the 1930s, a loose galaxy of antimodernist ‘prophets’ gravitated at the periphery of academic life, using Hindu thought to bolster their criticism of science, reason and progress, and of democracy, individualism and egalitarianism. Most notable among them was René Guénon, whom Lévi fiercely opposed, but whose writings on Hinduism exerted a great deal of influence, despite their lack of scientific value and the fact that Guénon had never travelled to India.

[12] Louis Dumont uneasily acknowledged Guénon’s books as one of the early sources of his interest for India, and emphasised that Marcel Mauss had played a much greater part in his intellectual evolution, which was later shaped by encounters with Claude Lévi-Strauss and with sociologists and anthropologists in Oxford and India. However, Roland Lardinois argues that a full understanding of Dumont’s work requires some familiarity with French intellectual life in the 1930s, in which anti-modernism was influential.
Two lasting concerns: the historicity of India and the nature of the caste system

[13] *L’Invention de l’Inde* shows that broad ideas about Hindu religion and the caste system that are now commonplace in academic and even popular discourse originate in the work of 19th-century scholars and were already debated in the early decades of the 20th century. Two lasting concerns were the historicity of India and the nature of the caste system.

[14] In his 1833 inaugural lecture at Collège de France, Eugène Burnouf noted the lack of an historiographic tradition in classical India but envisaged the possibility of retrieving the country’s political and social history from the philological study of its religious texts. Burnouf also asserted that religion dominated India’s civilization and ensured its continuity in time and space, and that the social order reflected in Sanskrit literature still existed in 19th-century India. In his 1889 inaugural lecture at the Sorbonne University, Sylvain Lévi asserted that India had never evolved into a nation and owed its unity as a civilization to Brahmins and to the Sanskrit language. The lack of either a central power or durable regional powers resulted in an overabundance of archaeological material (such as stone inscriptions) that did not constitute a consistent historiography. Meanwhile, Brahminical literature speculated on otherworldly salvation. Lévi concluded that ‘India has no history’, leaving historians of India no choice but to study the better-documented spread of Buddhism to other Asian countries (as an expression of Indian civilization), or to use foreign sources, whether Greek, Roman, Tibetan, Chinese, Arab, Persian or European.

[15] Early studies of the caste system were published in the late 19th century. In his 1871 *Essai sur les castes dans l’Inde* (‘Essay on castes in India’), the Pondicherry judge A. Esquer, interpreting empirical material collected in French territories in India in the light of the *Manava-Dharma-Shâstra* (translated into French in 1840), exposed the division of Hindu society into the four *varna*, from which ‘pariahs’ and tribal populations were excluded, and spoke of a ‘hierarchy of contempt’ materialised by commensality and marriage rules. In his 1884 book, *L’Inde française. L’histoire des origines et du développement des castes de l’Inde* (‘French India. The history of the origins and development of the castes of India’), philologist Charles Schoebel introduced a distinction between the division of Vedic Indian society into *varna* estates and the *jâti* caste system of medieval India, which he argued was the historical outcome of the victory of Hinduism over Buddhism and Brahmins over kings. In fact, Schoebel applied the Protestant
critical approach to the Bible to the Sanskrit literature on caste to question the political part played by the Brahmins who authored it.

[16] Esquer and Schoebel had limited influence and the key studies of caste published in France before Louis Dumont were Émile Senart’s Les castes dans l’Inde (‘Caste in India’), first published in 1894, and Célestin Bouglé’s Essais sur le régime des castes (‘Essays on the caste system’), first published in 1908. Senart emphasised the social rather than religious nature of caste, and went further than Schoebel in questioning Sanskrit literature as a source. Senart noted that this corpus had been written over a long historical period, and was heterogeneous in terms of literary forms, style and language. Brahminical science tried to organise the reality of multiple jātī into consistent varna categories, but this was a theoretical effort and the texts thus produced could not be considered as reflecting the actual social practices of their time. In contrast to Senart, Bouglé emphasised the religious nature of caste, defined by the three principles of mutual repulsion, hereditary specialisation and hierarchy. Jātī were ranked according to their degree of purity and their proximity to Brahmins, who drew their dominance from their monopoly over sacrifice. Bouglé was a philosopher and sociologist writing on great variety of issues, who did not read Sanskrit and never visited India. He proposed a tentative framework derived from secondary sources, which he left for India specialists to substantiate: this was one the origins of Louis Dumont’s work.

An incisive reference book

[17] The book is well written and stimulating, although it is somewhat dense if read from cover to cover. A few obscure sentences and frequently recurring turns of phrase are more than compensated for by incisive comments on some of the authors discussed, which are amusing for the reader but bound to raise the eyebrows of those concerned. This is also a major reference book, complete with an extensive footnote apparatus and bibliography. Coupled with the persons’ name index, the large number of paragraphs and boxes devoted to the life and works of the main scholars make for a highly useful biographical dictionary.

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4 The second part of the book includes an analysis of biographical and publication data pertaining to the 1920-1940 period that might have been better placed in the appendix.
[18] The first two parts, on the 19th and early 20th centuries, are the most interesting, as they revive the memory of major but largely forgotten figures, in particular Sylvain Lévi, to whom Roland Lardinois has devoted much of his recent research. As explained in the postscript, the third part aroused controversy among contemporary French India scholars, who did not appreciate the link being made between Louis Dumont, one of the leading French intellectuals of the 20th century, and a shady character such as René Guénon. Lardinois asserts that Dumont and Guénon shared an identical philosophy of knowledge. He points to some similarities between Guénon’s criticism of reason and Dumont’s later work on individualism, in which Dumont used his knowledge of India to understand the ‘modern ideology’ of Western society. Dumont’s work on India has been studied by social scientists specialised on that country, whereas moral philosophers have commented upon his work on individualism. As a result, the unity of Dumont’s thought has been largely bypassed. Lardinois argues that it is to be found in his attitude towards modernity.

[19] One wishes he had devoted more space to this thought-provoking argument: the debate is not settled. Another limitation is that the last chapter explores Dumont’s posterity only in the context of North American academia, via comparisons with McKim Marriott and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a discussion that is not clearly linked to the rest of the book. The absence of a chapter on Dumont’s posterity in France is frustrating, if understandable, given that the author belongs to the milieu he would have had to analyse. These weaknesses, however, do not detract from the overall quality of the book, which is remarkable.

References

