

BOOK REVIEWS

E. P. Thompson: Whigs and Hunters; the origin of the Black Act. Peregrine, London. 1977; £3.25; 327pp. (orig. pub. Allen Lane: 1975).

D. Hay, P. Linebaugh, J. G. Rule, E. P. Thompson & C. Winslow: Albion's Fatal Tree; crime and society in 18th century England. Peregrine, London. 1977; £3.25; 352pp. (orig. pub. Allen Lane: 1975).

The essays collected in Albion's Fatal Tree and in E. P. Thompson's Whigs and Hunters (on the origin of the Black Act), represent, in two ways, an important step forward in a particular tradition of British historiography.

Firstly, they provide a much-needed contribution to our understanding of 'what happened' to the conflicts of the 17th century, apparently resolved by the 'Glorious Revolution of 1688'. In text-book liberal history we move thus from the massive social upheavals of the Cromwellian era (conventionally only a 'Rebellion' on the way to the 'Revolution') to the 'Settlement', which, albeit based on a radical division of property, engendered the 'Good Things' of 'Industry and Empire' a hundred years later. However such analysis is made without reference to the mass of men and women whose deference to such a project had to be maintained - how was this done? It is on this point that the intervention of these essays gains significance.

Secondly, and as a direct consequence, these two books are a challenge to the method of liberal history. Indeed, as Linebaugh says in his essay on the Tyburn riots against the use of the bodies of felons for 'medical' purposes -

Few history books of eighteenth-century England fail to mention the spectacle of public hanging at Tyburn...A passing reference to the 'harshness of the criminal code', the 'brutal spectacle of public hangings' or the 'love of aggression of the London mob' and we are brought back to the civility of life in well-landscaped gardens, the Good Sense of the Hanoverian Compromise, and the quiet accumulation quantified in the account books of London and Bristol merchants. Undisturbed except by these minor shoals, eighteenth-century English history, slowly, inevitably, meanders on, a broad river spreading peace and bounty to adjoining fields, carrying forward those mighty vessels, 'Trade and Commerce' and the 'Constitution'. (AFT:68)

But if everything had been 'Settled' in 1688, why were riots widespread and often extremely violent? Indeed as Winslow shows us, in his essay on Sussex smugglers, we are not dealing with a society whose masses slumbered peacefully in the arms of paternalism but, on the contrary, with one where they were, in part, prepared openly, violently and with some success to defy their 'betters'. Moreover he says:

Eighteenth-century smuggling involved a mixture of social forms of resistance. Because most of the actual fighting was between the plebian gangs and the forces of the Government, and because the smugglers believed that they were protecting their 'rights', the conflict contained elements of class war. (AFT: 158)

However, in themselves perhaps such 'facts' and 'analysis' are accessible to liberal historians and, after all, perhaps it is only a question of concentrating a bit more on 'social' history (with all the implications that this is a topic at least 'marginal' to our understanding of 'important' events, i.e. the decisions of 'Great Men') in order to correct the balance of our analysis in these 'democratic' times, much as anthropologists seek to 'historicise' the societies they study. I am disposed to think not. Thus Thompson's analysis of the origins of the Black Act differs strikingly from the received liberal view. As he says in discussing Rogers' article on the Black Act:

We appear to be describing the same episode, but within that episode we see different actors and different social relations. What Rogers sees...is the operation of 'gangs' of 'criminals'...The Blacks were engaged in a 'calculated form of crime', their members belong to the 'criminal subculture of Georgian England', they were 'extortionists and protection racketeers', and 'bully-boys with a certain swagger and professional confidence'. (W&H:192)

As Thompson so neatly expresses it:

The confidence, and perhaps even swagger, are (one feels) less those of the Blacks than those of Professor Rogers. (ibid)

Thompson is not out to 'romanticise' crime; he clearly recognises that such men were neither particularly gentle nor necessarily the 'social bandits' of Hobsbawm. Rather, such moral questions are out of place and he argues that if we are to understand the significance of the Black Act then it must be from an understanding of the basis of 18th century social relations. Thus he writes:

In this context we can see the passage of the Black Act as a severe measure of government business, serving first of all the interests of Government's own closest supporters. It was a step upwards in the ascendancy of the hard Hanoverian Whigs, and in particular Walpole's own career. This is to see it in its contingent evolution. But such an Act would not have been possible without a prior consensus in the minds of those who drafted it - indeed a consensus in the minds of the ruling class as a whole. (W&H:206)

But a consensus as to what and over what? In short a consensus as to the fact that they alone should rule, obviously; but also a consensus as to the means that were to be employed, i.e. the ideology of law backed by the example of terror. It is here that we return to a question that the liberal historians have dodged: precisely how did what was probably no more than 3% of the population manage to get the rest of society to accept a radically inequitable division of property in the absence of massive standing armies or police forces? In order to answer this question Hay argues that we must examine the law, not just as a structure of authority embodying this division of property but also as an ideology which legitimized the way in which the

division had been made. For this to happen he rightly points out that the law at times must actually have been just, that it must at times have also upheld the 'rights' of the unpropertied: otherwise it would have legitimized nothing, masked nothing and so contributed nothing to the hegemony of the ruling class. And this is a point that many Marxists as well as liberals would do well to note.

Equally, however, the fact that a handful of aristocrats went to the gallows does not change our assessment of an exceptionally bloody penal code overwhelmingly directed to the defence of a particular way of dividing property; such superficiality has proved largely the reserve of bourgeois ideologues. But this is not to say that the rich had need of law, the poor none. Thompson reminds us here that law often functioned as a definition of agrarian practice, and that many class struggles were over alternative definitions of property rights. In mediating class relations, law not only imposed its forms on the poor, but also at times laid down what was and what was not possible for a Walpole. But as 'gentlemen' of that century revelled in the glories of their constitution and the justice of their legal institutions one must perforce conclude, faced with the evidence of the discontent of the unpropertied, that class relations were not mediated by an entirely neutral instrument!

But what has the history of 18th century England got to do with the subject matter of anthropology? What these books show us above all perhaps is a society dominated by the 'idiom of law': how many times must it have been said that the societies in which anthropology traffics are dominated by the 'idiom of kinship'? Can we expect then that the 'study' of kinship can take place solely in terms of its own logic, much as a lawyer might seek to represent the development of Law? I think not. This is not to say that such study has no place; it is merely a reminder that the 'structures' such a study might uncover will have particular and changing application according to the life conditions of the people who have to work out their social relations in terms of them. Of course, many people engaged in social anthropology would think such statements entirely uncontentious: genuflections to 'materialism' are common enough. However, the fact that the implications of such a view are frequently not worked through in practice, inclines me to think that I am not being entirely vacuous in restating it. This collection of essays offers us a timely re-statement of this order.

Neil Whitehead.

Louis Dumont: Home aequalis: Genèse et épanouissement de l'idéologie économique.
Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1977.
270 pages.

'The longest way round is the shortest way home' - is what Leopold Bloom muses amidst his wanderings, ~~what~~ anthropologists must (should) sometimes muse during theirs. This rhythm of leavetaking to homecoming appeals to some kernel in our sense of vocation, for between the Scylla of ethnocentrism and the Charybdis of accused uncommitment it is steadying to recall that we do anthropology for our own sakes: we go out into the field to return (or first to turn) to ourselves. Louis Dumont is the anthropologist who has treated the Joycean themes of moral itineracy and self-discovery most seriously and extensively. His work on India has increasingly stressed the necessity of returning to the West with the insights gleaned from caste society: '...the completion of our present task only sketches for us a new task', he concludes in Homo Hierarchicus, 'to reverse the perspective and throw light on egalitarian society by comparison with hierarchical society of the pure type, in a work which could be called Homo aequalis' (1972: 284). Now Dumont presents us with his sequel, tellingly subtitled 'The Genesis and Flowering of the Economic Ideology'.

He had dressed his princely figure in modest robes, for rather than a work of the same reach and totality as his India book, Homo aequalis is more demure in its claims. It comprises a series of monographs on some economic and social theorists--the Mercantilists, Quesnay, Locke, Mandeville, Smith, and most extensively, Marx--which attempts to trace the development of 'the economic' as a distinct category in intellectual discourse, and to sketch the individualist ideology with which Dumont claims 'the economic' to be bound up. The modesty and locality of Dumont's project bespeak it well, but at the same time cast doubt on its capacity to carry the burden of proof he seeks. As the title intimates, after all, a whole species of man is being elucidated here, the species evolved within modern, European, industrial civilization; to presume to find the likeness of that man in a few theoretical texts, without telling us how he came to be located there, begs as many questions as it lays to rest. Dumont, himself, as in Homo Hierarchicus, defines ideology totallistically, calling it

...that which is socially thought, believed, enacted, starting from the hypothesis that, hidden beneath our habitual distinction, there is a living unity to it all. Ideology is not a residue here, it is the unity of representation, a unity which does not rule out contradiction or conflict (1977:31)

but his 'great books' methodology seems to belie this structural approach. How is the primacy of the economic in our 'unity of representation' demonstrated by invoking those writers who, whatever the case, give it a quite conscious primacy? We are

unsure whether, beneath the modest garments of these explications des textes, there truly lurks the princely figure of modern man; we may find only the beggarly figure of the modern intellectual,

These are doubts about the book's first assumptions, however, and we must lay them aside if we are to enter into its argument. The argument is well worth this suspension of disbelief, for while not over-subtle, it is unembarrassedly direct and fundamental; its lack of subtlety is in fact its virtue, since what the homecoming wanderer, or the non-specialist, can sometimes point out is exactly the common sense of things too common to demand elaboration. If Dumont sometimes protests too much historical assertions that seem obvious, we can be grateful for the moral subtlety involved, the risks taken in strange fields to raise the issue of comparison at all.

His argument stands on two contrasting views of what constitutes humanity and two concomitant views of society, which Dumont names holism and individualism:

...most societies valorise in the first place order, then conformity of each element to its role in the whole--in a word, society as a totality; I call this general orientation of values 'holism'.... Other societies, our own anyway, valorise the individual human being in the first place; for us each man is an incarnation of humanity as a whole, and as such is equal to all other men, as well as free. I call this 'individualism'.... Now we find that, among the great civilisations which the world has known, the holistic type of society has predominated. Everything happens as if it had been the rule, with the sole exception of our modern civilisation (1977: 12).

Two fundamental assumptions are being made here. First, there is the division of humanity into two sub-species--a division based, we should note, not upon the titular concepts of hierarchy and equality, but on the more basic dichotomy of holism and individualism. This new dichotomy, to which hierarchy/equality relates as an implicit distinction (1977: 12), signals a theoretical advance over Homo Hierarchicus, whose emphasis on hierarchy tended to ignore traditional societies which lacked a strongly marked ranking system. At the same time, this conceptual advance heightens the risks in Dumont's enterprise. The former concentration on hierarchy had particularised his analysis; he was considering not the nature of social life in general, but the discrete version of it based on caste; and in fact, Dumont had invoked this particularity as crucial to the legitimacy of his method, criticising

...the mere consideration of similarities which allow phenomena taken from different types of society to be grouped together under a common label.... In the last analysis, it is by humbly inspecting the most minute particulars that the route to the universal is kept open (1972: 37-8).

Homo aequalis abandons this route and the legitimacy of local analysis. Its recourse to holism not only allows, but demands 'phenomena taken from different types to be grouped together under a common label', for as the end of the long passage given above makes clear, Dumont's claims concern the nature of social life itself. This is the book's second fundamental assumption: modern, Western man is not being set against one particular society's alternative to himself and his egalitarianism; rather he is set against the rule of human society. He is exceptional, aberrant.

The risk which this claim to generality entails is not at all political, or ideological in the vulgar sense. As with the political theorist Leo Strauss, Dumont's anti-modernism is the cutting edge of his insight, and not a blunt tool; his conservatism gives his approach a clarity and stature to be reckoned with; so if we disapprove of his commitments (as I do), still Homo aequalis has compelled us to think them through. The danger of the book's generalising thesis is, however, to be found elsewhere, in the sort of intellectual legitimacy which the argument must claim for itself. Disavowing particularity, Dumont must disavow as well the intuitive and protean criteria by which we judge particular interpretations (say, his structuralist interpretation of caste in Homo Hierarchicus). Embracing generality, Dumont must lay claim to an explicit and quite un-protean vocabulary by which to describe social life categorically, by which to compare. He himself understands this, and he ties his dualistic thesis about social types to the possibility of an overall comparative model for society:

We are separated from traditional societies by what I call the modern revolution, a revolution of values which seems to have been produced over the centuries in the Christian West. This fact constitutes the axis of all comparison of civilisations...The central task of comparison consists in giving an account of the modern type vis-à-vis the traditional type. For this reason the greater part of our modern vocabulary is inadequate for the ends of comparison, and the fundamental comparative model must be non-modern (1977: 16).

The possibility of comparison depends on the anthropologist's emancipation from the terms of the modern: 'Only someone who holds

himself without can attempt to understand how this particular point of view came into being' (1977: 35). Indeed his engagement in a particular alien society such as India may be understood as just the first step toward disengagement from any locale, the first step into what Dumont calls 'sociological apperception'. In claim if not in stature, then, Homo aequalis may be thought to have surpassed Homo Hierarchicus. With all traditional societies wedded in a theory of the whole, the critic can turn toward 'the central task of comparison....giving an account of the modern type vis-a-vis the traditional type'. Like the angel Michael brandishing his sword at the gate to Eden, he looks back (and down) upon the solitary renegades.

The security of Dumont's vantage-point thus depends on what he can actually show us about our own renegade selves. He locates our 'revolution in values' in 'an unprecedented innovation; the radical separation of the economic aspects of the social tissue, and their construction into an autonomous domain' (1977: 15). This secession of the economic as an intelligible category is the ideological condition for our apotheosis of the individual:

...it is under the aspect of possession or property that individualism rears its head, removing everything left behind by an obedience to...social hierarchy, and installing itself upon the throne thus emptied. I need not insist: the economic, taken as the major category, represents the summit of individualism and, as such, tends in our universe to be supreme (1977: 75).

We recognize here the complement of Dumont's analysis of Hindu ideology, whereby sacral order (dharmā) encompasses rule (artha) encompasses self-interested pleasure (kama): in the West, on the contrary, politics has encompassed religion (the rise of the city- and the Reformation nation-states), and economics has encompassed politics (the rise of modern, liberal states and of contract social theory).

Now this is where the sort of obviousness I mentioned above at once makes and mars the argument. Makes it, because this notion of the scissiparity of domains does give a good account of the atomism and fragmentary unity of our 'native sociology'; mars it, because it takes for granted exactly what it should demonstrate, the real status of these domains in social life. Dumont is surely right in asserting that our commonsensical, as well as our theoretical, idea of the economic involves a substantial Individual prior to society, for whom society is a means to self-directed ends--involves, in Dumont's terminology, the primacy of relations to things and the instrumentality of human relations. But this primacy is, par

excellence, the thing which needs to be accounted for. Does he mean that individualism gives rise to a certain object-directed realm of action which we call the economic? If so the argument---that 'the economic, taken as a major category, represents the summit of individualism'---is a mere tautology, a definitional sleight-of-hand. Or is it rather that the self-evident distinctness of economic action gives rise to an individualist psychology?

But then we still do not know what exactly constitutes the economic 'as a major category,' nor can Dumont, within the exigencies of his argument, ever tell us; for the argument is self-fulfilling. Certainly the economic has something to do with the primacy of relations between men and things; yet Dumont wants this to carry the implication of subjecting all social relations to individual ends. This last is, of course, the self-definition of bourgeois economics, but is it an exhaustive sociological description of the domain, if the domain can be said to exist at all? Marx, for one, offers a rival analysis, calling illusory the radical distinction between social relations and relations to objects, and constituting the economic as just that realm of action where each implicates the other. He develops the concepts of labour and production precisely to demonstrate this common foundation. Thus in direct contrast to Dumont's dictum that 'needs, labour, production all belong to economy, that is to say, essentially to individual man in his relation with nature' (1977:207), Marx writes of pre-capitalist societies:

The earth is the great laboratory, the arsenal which provides both the means and the materials of labour, and also the location, the basis of the community. Men's relation to it is naive; they regard themselves as its communal proprietors, and as those of the community which produces and reproduces itself by living labour. Only insofar as the individual is a member...of such a community, does he regard himself as an owner or possessor. In reality appropriation by means of the process of labour takes place under these preconditions, which are not the product of labour...(Marx 1964: 69).

Marx's argument here--as well as in the class analysis of capitalism--subsumes the very antinomies upon which Dumont stakes his description of the economic; this is indeed why Dumont's monograph on Marx, which occupies the last half of Homo aequalis, is at once its most provocative and most disappointing section. In the face of Marx' triadic (or as one says, dialectical) schema, the book's prolific dualisms commit some fundamental distortions. Marx, asserts Dumont, is essentially an individualist, the rebellious young son of Adam Smith who, despite abhorring his own society, cannot (nostalgically) embrace holistic communities such as feudal Europe

because he 'has been to the school of the bourgeoisie' (1977:211). There is a germ of rightness in his polemic, but as the above quotation might suggest, it is so little right as to be obstructively wrong.

Dumont goes wrong on Marx just where his whole project goes wrong, in the Procrustean reductions of its typological dualisms; human relations vs. relations to things, sociology vs. economics, holism vs. individualism, the West vs. everyone else. We have seen how 'the economic' and 'individualism' have a circular, mutually supporting relation to each other; this is what I meant in calling Dumont's argument self-fulfilling. The only way out of this circle is to define the economic through the radical opposition between traditional and modern ideology; but this opposition is what the emergence of the category was supposed to explain; the consequence is only to push the circularity one step back in the argument. This is what I meant in calling attention to the 'legitimation crisis' involved in Dumont's twofold classification of social types.

There is, to be sure, a venerable tradition of such dualistic models in social theory, starting from Tönnies and Maine, passing down to Weber and Mauss, and finding its way even into such an universalist as Lévi-Strauss. Were we to trace the tradition backwards, we would find it in Rousseau, in Bacon, in the 17th century 'Battle of the Books,' even in Paradise Lost. We cannot deny that we share its intuitions ourselves, share with Dumont and Rousseau and especially Milton the sense of a fall into modernity and a radically new, broken way of life. Indeed the cleft between the modern and the traditional is implicit in the activity of anthropology, and even more so in the homeward movement of the anthropologist which furnishes the occasion for Homo aequalis.

But that is precisely why, especially for Homo aequalis, we should suspect it so. To return home under the triumphal banner of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, already persuaded of the pathological status of one's own society, is to beg every question which it is the province of the anthropologist to examine. In particular, it evades the most securely pathological fact of his society, which is the presence of the anthropologist himself. For all our talk about function and meaning, science and structure, leavetaking and homecoming, this is a fact we have not even begun to make sense of. As Dumont exemplifies, we have a firm sense that anthropology frees us from our modernity, that it gives us access to the comparative basis of society itself. Unlike Dumont, though, we might also acknowledge what a thoroughly modern and Western calling it is, acknowledge that we have no idea what a 'non-modern comparative model' could look like. Anthropologists are at once implicated and disengaged; the society to which they return must be at once privileged and dismissed. Just when we thought to be most sure of our

vision, carrying our field-glasses home, we no longer know where to stand. Inside seems outside; irony retreats into membership.

I must say that I have no insights into this paradox. But reading Homo aequalis suggests to me ways not to go about coming home--beginning with not fixing on the privileged character of the West. I am not claiming that our society is unspecial, and even destructively so; it is no less justified to say that than to say that Marx 'has been to the school of the bourgeoisie,' But merely to recognise this is sterile, and it does not help. It strikes me that the task of the returning critic is not to show us what we are--which he can do mainly at the cost of being obvious--but to show us what we are not, to show us particular alternatives to ourselves. If Dumont had lain aside his all-too-Western typologies, and had included more of India, then Homo aequalis, as provocative as it is, would have been a better book; as with any quest, the key is not what you arrive at, but what you collect along the way. Or, to end with another novelist of the comic journey (this time John Barth), 'The key to the treasure is the treasure'.

David Scobey.

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N.B. Homo aequalis has been concurrently published in English under the title From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology. 1977. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. I was unable to find an English edition; all translations are my own. U.S.

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