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On multiple codes

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Following the lead by Dumont and Pocock (1957), sociologists and social anthropologists working on India have often focussed on indigenous categories and traditional ideologies, especially those of Hinduism; this concern has often been reflected in the pages of this journal. Sociologists have also worked, however, on the ongoing arrangements in Indian society during and after the colonial period; and, especially in the context of urban centres and modern institutions (Ramaswamy 1977; Madan 1980), they seem to have difficulty in relating their analysis to enquiries which focus on indigenous categories. These ongoing arrangements commonly get their shape and consistency not from traditional ideologies but from interplay of the participants' current interests, from shortspan legitimations, and from coercive means located in institutions ultimately of European inspiration. From this standpoint, assiduous application to textual analysis, *en route* to the study of this contemporary society, may seem to be a red herring.¹

On this score even more serious doubts may assail the historians of modern India. In their confident analyses of such subcontinental phenomena as colonialism, national movement, the capitalist class, and agrarian movements, they are able commonly to proceed without reference to the texts

¹Following a seminar by Y.B. Damle, the sociologist, in September 1982 at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, Ravinder Kumar, the historian, expressed his puzzlement over the historians' difficulty in relating to the 'traditional', indigenous concepts upon which the sociologists often seem to concentrate. The earlier part of this note is addressed to that puzzle; and it goes on to outline a logic for analyzing a contemporary situation of some anxiety in India, which has not received much sociological attention yet.

of traditional ideology. Partly this is because, alongside the *a priori* assurance in the explanatory power of traditional ideologies, there is the assurance about economic forces. Consequently, the analytic focus may be on colonial extraction (Bhattacharya 1971), capital accumulation (Bagchi 1972), or on situations where economic pressures are felt with especial intensity (Siddiqi 1978). Alternatively, the prototype for the phenomenon being analysed may itself be European, not Indian.²

In these diverse positions espoused within related studies one may see reflected something of the palimpsest quality of Indian society: the earlier record has tended historically to be erased only partially, and elements from earlier designs have often been incorporated into the one currently intended (thus, concerning capital accumulation, Timberg 1978 and Bagchi 1981). Granting the reflective nature of humans as a species attribute, one which strains after consistency (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 160, 181, *et al.*), this reflectiveness in India would seem to have been canalysed by the relativising logic identified by Malamoud (1981) for *varnas*; this stance appears on the ground in the caste groups' substantial normative autonomy (Mandelbaum 1970: Chap. 13). This cellular universe appears to accept separate, more or less insulated social spaces relatively easily, often in a *both and* rather than *either/or* logic (R. Mukherjee 1970: 1160-65; M. Singer 1972: 321-25); pressure for dissolving one set of arrangements or institutions, to accommodate another set, would seem to be that much weaker. Hence the possibility of this palimpsest quality, and of exploring large parts of the early layers or of the latter-day institutional order without reference to other layers.

It so happens, however, that there are rather sharp differences between the designs, the logics—henceforward I shall use the term “codes”—of the earlier layers and the institutions implanted under colonial order and later. The sociological literature has noticed these differences, with reference to India and the West, as contrasts between civilisations (e.g. Weber 1968; Dumont 1970); but if the key institutions of the colonial order and after—bureaucracy, legal codification, legislatures, elections, Constitutions, modern forms of scholarship—have issued from social processes in Europe spread over two millennia and more, various questions remain. To the overwhelming bulk of the literature on India in the social sciences, the fortunes of implanted institutions (and of their inner codes) in the host society have not been problematical, for these have been seen as basically reasonable arrangements, likely in ordinary conditions to continue indefinitely.

The maintenance and renewal of these institutions over the long run, however, does present complex problems. For, sooner or later, institutions

²I refer here to nationalism. The issue is complex—and is considered at some length in Saberwal 1983.

everywhere—being human artefacts—face one or another sort of internal crisis; and an institution transplanted across a large cultural gap may have rather particular needs by way of sociocultural and material resources and by way of personal dispositions and strategies required of its manpower. The host society may not have, and therefore may not be able to provide, the array of resources that would meet these needs. These difficulties may be discussed with reference to particular institutions (e.g. papers by P.R.K. Rao, Donna Suri, and Neena Vyas on universities in *Seminar*, April 1982); or these may be seen in broader structural terms. Considerations of academic diplomacy on the part of Westerners (Myrdal 1968: 15), and a certain defensiveness on the Indian side (Madan 1969, Morris *et al.* 1969, Kantowsky 1982), seem to have interfered with discussion of this wider issue. The following notes seek to reopen the matter.

The colonial institutions of European provenance emerged as part of complex long-term processes which Weber bundled together as 'rationalisation.' These may be seen as consisting of increasing stringency in:

- (a) consistency within any body of cognate ideas, including their inner structuring by levels of generality ('formal rationality', Weber 1968: 657 *et al.*);
- (b) reality testing ('instrumental rationality', Weber 1968: 24 *et al.*) and
- (c) the methodical organization of work, at both personal and aggregate levels ('practical' rationality, Weber 1946: 293,³ Schluchter 1979). The rise of impersonal bureaucratic rationality was part of this process.⁴

It will be recognised that these processes have contributed over the long term to:

1. a capacity for organising action of growing amplitudes: examples of this will occupy us shortly;
2. the differentiation of roles, institutions, and so forth; and
3. tendencies towards unification of codes governing diverse situations, relationships, and institutions.⁵

Establishment of colonial empires was one expression of this capacity for action on a growing scale; and the characteristics noted above (a to c and 1

³I thank Prakash Pimpley for calling my attention to this reference.

⁴To limit the size of this note, I must bypass questions of ethic, which loom large in Weber, and the importance of the individual, which Dumont (1982) has highlighted.

⁵The spread of Roman legal tradition through Europe in the twelfth century is an early example (Marc Bloch 1961: 117-18).

to 3) were expressed in some measure also in the institutions implanted in India under colonial auspices. Let us designate the unified principles expressed in these diverse institutions as Code E. In contrast, the principles expressed in the institutions of Indian society may be designated Code I; the various normative orders in different segments of Indian society may be designated as Codes I_1, I_2, I_3, \dots . What are the implications of this juxtaposition of codes?

We may consider the matter in steps. First, implanted in a colony, such an institution lacks normative support locally such as would have been available where it was fashioned in the first place. (Apropos only of legal codes, in Bohannan's terms, 1965: 34-36, this would be a case of reinstitutionalisation—with the usually prior normative institutionalisation missing. In our situation, however, this anomaly characterises a great deal besides legal codes alone; it sets the stage for difficulties in the running of these recent institutions over the long run.) Secondly, in most institutions during the colonial period, in fact, Codes E and I *both* operated, but their relative weights varied over time and space, being matters for situational control (e.g. Frykenberg 1965) or negotiation (Brennan 1977: 480ff, 490ff). Until late in the colonial period though, Code E was in control, more or less, at least in the last instance; with the passage of time, the situation becomes more complicated.

Thirdly, one secular long-term process, made possible by Code E, is the enormous growth of communications—in scale, in density, in speeds, and in the number of persons transported. Alongside this, recruitment into politics, education, institutional bureaucracies, and so forth reaches deeper into the social structure, away from the earlier concentration among urban, high caste groups; this process accelerated a good deal during the post-colonial period. With the spread of colleges and universities and of political leverage, the social background of actors in much of the institutional universe has tended to become more diverse (e.g. Tandon 1980). With Code E on the defensive, having weak normative support (e.g. Taub 1969), as the norms of impersonal bureaucratic rationality give way, (1) personal and group interests become more strident, (2) relatively easily threatened social identities intrude into organisational routines, and (3) a variety of codes (I_1, I_2, I_3, \dots), drawn from different parts of the cellular social order—or devised *ad hoc* to cope with exigent situations—come to co-exist in particular institutional settings.

Western capacities for organising action, for analysing experience consequent upon the action, and for using that analysis to steer subsequent action—tying all these together in an infinite dialectic—have rested upon

the kind of impersonal, unified rationality which was noted earlier. When a multiplicity of *disparate* codes is active in institutions drawn from Western prototypes, however, it raises extraordinary difficulties in organising action over the long run (thus Taub 1969: 193-94), in analysing experience flowing from that action, and in using that analysis to steer subsequent action in particular arenas. As organised action in these newer institutions of enlarged scale becomes more difficult, their capacity to resist coercive demands from different sides declines, and questions concerning the maintenance and renewal of these institutions tend to become insistent.

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