

PREFACE

Toward a Political Anthropology of Hierarchy

This book comes at a crucial juncture in political history. In the fall of 2016, Donald Trump won the presidential election in the United States after a campaign to “Make America Great Again,” which poured disdain on liberal multiculturalism and brought explicitly racist and sexist narratives into mainstream political discourse. The previous summer, British voters opted by a slim margin to withdraw the United Kingdom from the European Union, stirred by a “Leave” campaign rooted in nationalist nostalgia and anti-immigrant sentiment. In 2014, Narendra Modi—a Hindu nationalist and member of the right-wing RSS—won the presidential elections in India. The Islamist Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the president of Turkey that same year. Xi Jinping, who ascended to the presidency of China in 2013, has become popular for his cultural counter-revolution to restore Confucianism as a guiding ideology, along with a renewed focus on ‘traditional’ Chinese values. And strongman Vladimir Putin has forged ties to the Russian Orthodox Church and is emerging as a figurehead for conservatives around the world.

Whether it be restoring the lost glory of the Ottoman Empire, recreating the India of Vedic times, or returning to the family values and racial order of 1950s America, these political forces succeed by combining a moral vision of the past with the promise of economic and political revitalization, growth, and expansion. This temporal orientation is what Charles Piot (2010) has aptly called a ‘nostalgia for the future’. And this nostalgia is often organized according to clearly structural parameters (Silverstein 2004)—a moral order imagined in terms of ‘natural’ hierarchies between children and parents, women and men, lower castes and upper castes, disciples and church leaders, minorities and majorities, the people and the state. In these movements, hierarchy is conceived as the wellspring for political and economic prosperity and the basis for restoring lost dignity. To the extent that they seek to enforce their visions of moral hierarchy through the power of the modern state, they veer increasingly toward authoritarianism.

This book does not speak directly to these political events, but it does grapple with questions that are crucial to understanding them. How do we, as

anthropologists, think about social forms that place hierarchy at the center of their moral vision? How do we analyze non-liberal or even anti-liberal conceptions of human well-being? And how do we make sense of the curious fact that even those who are rendered subordinate within hierarchical systems quite often embrace them, or even regard them as necessary to the realization of their own moral aspirations (see Mahmood 2005)? The temptation is to draw on the tools of critical theory—to see it all as a cynical veneer for political power, bolstered by supporters steeped in false consciousness and ignorant of their own interests. Such a move is not necessarily incorrect, but it does run the risk of making analytical mistakes. What we need is to find ways of understanding these movements on their own terms—ways of recognizing the moral and affective forces that shape them and drive them—although without of course losing sight of the violence that they can and often do engender. Without ethnography, without thick description, we may in the end gravely underestimate their power.

The great contribution of political anthropology is its firm insistence that politics and political economy can never be separated from the apparently unrelated domains of kinship, domesticity, religion, and ritual (McKinnon and Cannell 2013). There is no distinct realm of human behavior where ‘interests’ can be found floating about in the ether, organized according to the pure, sanitized models of Machiavelli or *homo economicus*. There is no political movement that is not culturally and historically contingent, that is not intimately informed by particular cosmologies of personhood and relatedness (Hickel 2015). It falls to ethnography to do the difficult work of identifying and rendering intelligible the pillars that frame political consciousness.

The contributions here explore a variety of ethnographic contexts from around the world where people seem to support and value illiberal—and specifically hierarchical—social formations. It examines how notions of hierarchy have come to anchor normative conceptions of justice and well-being, provide powerful moral orientations for desire and action, and shape social, political, and economic processes and events. Crucially, what emerges from this investigation is a clear sense that not all hierarchies are the same—that there is a diversity among various kinds of hierarchy and that people think about it in significantly different ways. This book provides a comparative framework for studying the value of hierarchy in diverse social formations.

The work of Louis Dumont (1977, 1980) is an important touchstone for this comparative project, but it is also critical that we move beyond some of Dumont’s limitations. In *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980), Dumont argues that the Hindu caste system is organized around the principle of purity and that this structures a hierarchical and holistic worldview that can be categorically contrasted with the egalitarianism and individualism of Western thought. Although Dumont (1977) takes a historical approach to the development of Western egalitarianism, he approaches the Hindu caste system in largely ahistorical terms. Western egalitarianism is understood as a unique historical development, but hierarchy is cast as somehow ‘natural’—a prior state or some kind of Platonic form. While these aspects of his work have long been

challenged (see Das 1997), Dumont also makes an important methodological intervention that too often we miss. He shows that from the vantage point of Western thought, hierarchy cannot be understood as anything but the exercise of power, a kind of chain of command in which powerful people subordinate those below them—a perspective that makes it impossible to conceive of hierarchy as a shared value (Iteanu 2009), and impossible to understand people’s affections for it. This book articulates an approach to hierarchy that builds on this key insight but makes room for the messy variety of culturally distinct configurations of hierarchy.

This is exactly the kind of social analysis that we need in the era of Trump and Brexit, Hindutva and Islamism, Confucianism and Orthodox Christian revivalism. Liberal pundits have a penchant for lumping these movements together under the banner of the same reactionary religious or cultural tendencies with little regard for the differences between them. Such differences are irrelevant when one starts from the assumption that hierarchy is intrinsically and exclusively bad and violent (Khan 2018). By contrast, on the Left one finds a tendency toward economic reductionism, whereby these forces can all be explained as an effect of neo-liberalism. In the wake of Trump and Brexit, bitter spats ensued between liberals and leftists over what drove these shocking political events—whether it was a deep-seated culture of racism and sexism, on the one hand, or class anxieties and neo-liberalism, on the other. Not surprisingly, the world is more complicated than this debate allows. Neither of these perspectives adequately accounts for the particular moral concerns and aspirations that drive these movements. The ethnographic chapters of this book attest to the fact that there is something more afoot.

It is tempting to regard all of these political forces as proceeding from the same general logic. It may be politically useful to draw equivalences between Trump and Brexit, Modi and Putin—but, again, analytical risks abound. We need to be careful about letting categories like ‘right-wing populism’ overdetermine our analysis, or else we cannot think clearly about the important differences between, say, neo-Nazis in Charlottesville and Confucians in Chengdu. The task of ethnography is to do the difficult work of understanding what is particular about these various political movements, how they make sense within their own cultural and political milieu, and how they have created popular support by drawing on the value of hierarchy. This requires a more robust concept of culture than is conceived in dominant strands of liberal or left discourse. To paraphrase Daniel Rosenblatt (2004: 467), without some idea of culture, we can only understand the political lives of others in terms of our own projects. In an era of rising authoritarianism, the specter of capitalist crises, and the all-pervasive threat of climate change, we no longer have the luxury of avoiding the difficult conversation about the value of hierarchy in social life.

This approach comes with its own risks, of course. It can be politically inconvenient. “Radical politics,” Marilyn Strathern (1988: 27) points out, “has to be conceptually conservative. That is, its job is to operationalize already understood concepts or categories.” By the same token, “academic radicalism

often appears to result in otherwise conservative action or nonaction.” Strathern is surely correct about this. But perhaps we can recoup the possibility of radical politics here. Perhaps we might hope that a truly radical politics—one capable of moving us beyond the impasse that blights contemporary capitalism and democracy—can emerge from truly radical analysis. What such politics might look like is yet to be seen.

Jason Hickel and Arsalan Khan

References

- Das, Veena. 1997. *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Dumont, Louis. 1977. *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dumont, Louis. 1980. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. Rev. ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hickel, Jason. 2015. *Democracy as Death: The Moral Order of Anti-Liberal Politics in South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Iteanu, André. 2009. “Hierarchy and Power: A Comparative Attempt under Asymmetrical Lines.” In *Hierarchy: Persistence and Transformation in Social Formations*, ed. Knut M. Rio and Olaf H. Smedal, 331–348. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Khan, Arsalan. 2018. “Pious Masculinity, Ethical Reflexivity, and Moral Order in an Islamic Piety Movement in Pakistan.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 91 (1): 53–78.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- McKinnon, Susan, and Fannella Cannell, eds. 2013. *Vital Relations: Modernity and the Persistent Life of Kinship*. Santa Fe: SAR Press.
- Piot, Charles. 2010. *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rosenblatt, Daniel. 2004. “An Anthropology Made Safe for Culture: Patterns of Practice and the Politics of Difference in Ruth Benedict.” *American Anthropologist* 106 (3): 459–472.
- Silverstein, Paul A. 2004. “Of Rooting and Uprooting: Kabyle Habitus, Domesticity, and Structural Nostalgia.” *Ethnography* 5 (4): 553–578.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1988. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.