

BOOK REVIEWS

The Interpretation of Caste by Declan Quigley, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, viii+184 pp.

This book is a rather ambitious attempt to provide both specialists and nonspecialists of South Asia alike with a general theory of caste. The author takes up and evaluates, by his own terms, several important works regarding the nature of caste organization. He claims to present an alternative explanation based on his interpretation of Hocart's theory of caste.

It is clearly stated at the beginning of the book that no attempt is made to review all the previous works on caste. Instead Quigley focuses his attention on a selective basis—taking up works of such scholars as Hocart, Dumont, Marriott, Heesterman, Parry, Raheja, Fuller, and Inden—in order to present the reader with a clear line of argument. He deals at length with the work of Dumont in particular, to point out the shortcomings, as he sees them, of previous works on caste. He argues that Hocart's theory presents a better alternative. Throughout the book, Quigley stresses the need for a comparative approach to the study of caste which, he says, is more often than not mistakenly regarded as a culturally specific phenomenon, a unique feature of Hindu social organization. He turns to Ernest Gellner's accounts of different types of social structures which he uses for his comparative framework.

Quigley seeks to provide a theory of caste which does not reduce the institution to either indigenous ideology or to material factors. He finds fault with previous materialist theories of caste which note that high castes are usually wealthier and have more political power than low castes. They claim that such inequalities in the politico-economic sphere are legitimated by caste ideology, according to which members of high castes are of high status by virtue of their religious purity. This view runs into immediate problems because politico-economic power and high caste ranking do not always come hand in hand. In cases where there is a definite disconnection between power and rank, material theorists may then turn the argument around to defend themselves by asserting that the ideology of caste ranking masks the "true" politico-economic situation. This clearly is no adequate explanation.

The idealist explanation of caste, the author points out, is also problematic. According to this view, caste is an ideology or a system of ideas, the underlying principle of which transcends material conditions. Dumont's theory of caste is singled out as being a representative of such a view and a major part of this book is devoted to description and evaluation of Dumont's theory. Quigley is critical of idealist versions mainly because they lead to asserting cultural relativism which, he says, goes against the spirit of the comparative approach he aspires for.

Both idealist and materialist explanations of caste are inadequate, Quigley argues, because they begin with the same assumption that "Brahmans are the highest caste." The supremacy of Brahmans in caste ranking is assumed by most scholars working on Hindu society because they confuse the two concepts of *varna* and *jati* and take for granted that Brahmans are associated with what is ideal in the Hindu world. In this connection, Quigley argues that a distinction should be drawn between the terms

“Brahman” and “brahman.” “Brahman,” he says, refers to the caste group or *jati* and “brahman” to the profession or function, that is to say, *varna*. These two categories should not be confused because it is not always the case that a particular caste group (*jati*) maps onto a particular function (*varna*). Moreover, as in the case with brahmins, there is no agreement on what their ideal function should be. Some—like Dumont—say it is that of a priest, while others—like Heesterman—say it is that of a renouncer.

Apart from the problem of no agreement on what exactly constitutes the ideal brahmin, Quigley points out that Brahmins are fragmented into large numbers of different groups—some which are not involved in priestly occupations—and frequently contest each other’s status. Moreover, Quigley points out that since a Brahmin’s role as a *purohit* to his *jajman* is to remove inauspiciousness, evil, and sin of the latter, it seems rather odd to say that Brahmins are higher than their patrons.

Having pointed out the problems of conflating the notions of *varna* and *jati*, in view of the confusion it creates between the function of brahmin and actual caste groups, Quigley goes on to dispose of the commonly held assumption regarding the supremacy of Brahmins. He does this by taking up Hocart’s interpretation of caste, which places the king at the center of caste organization. Basing his analysis on Hocart’s theory, Quigley tries to give an account of how the caste system works, spelling out conditions under which caste systems exist. For example, he points out that caste organization depends on the existence of agricultural surplus and that caste cannot be found in Western industrialized society.

Hocart’s theory is singled out as the only plausible explanation of caste organization which takes into consideration both indigenous ideas regarding caste and socio-historical conditions under which these ideas were produced. The caste system is characterized by Hocart as a sacrificial system in which each caste has a particular ritual function to perform. Sacrifice is central to the Hindu ideological scheme as it guarantees the well-being of the community by regenerating the cosmic order. Such sacrifices are performed by orders of the king; hence kings are the first caste by virtue of this function.

According to Quigley, however, there is a weakness in Hocart’s theory, namely that the king’s centrality in the caste system is an ideal, just as the supremacy of the brahmin is the ideal in Dumont’s caste theory. But Quigley argues that Hocart, unlike Dumont, is inconsistent in this idealist explanation, and herein lies the merit of Hocart’s explanation which looks at caste organization in terms of not only ideas but in terms of other institutions such as kinship and kingship. These two elements combined, according to Quigley, constitute the core of the Hocartian interpretation of caste.

Quigley goes on to formulate his own definition of caste by employing these two elements—kinship and kingship—and suggests that caste is “a form of political structure where kinship and kingship pull against one another and priests are the mediators of the tension” (p. 164). He says that caste organization is a result of failure on the part of kingship to assert itself against the pull of kinship ties and create stable kingdoms; in other words, according to his scheme, caste creates order through the combination of kingship and kinship.

Having presented a definition of caste along Hocartian lines, Quigley introduces Gellner’s model of complex agrarian societies in order to put forward a general model of the social structure of caste systems. He adapts Gellner’s discussion on elites in agro-literate societies to fit his schematization of caste-organized societies, arguing that communities organized along caste lines reproduce an elite structure within itself. Each community attempts to emulate the structure of the king’s court. Quigley’s

model depicts how caste organization can be seen from different perspectives of such communities, and produces different configurations of social structures seen from the viewpoints of king/dominant caste, nondominant merchant caste, and castes that supply ritual specialists, all of which aspire to emulate the king's court.

In this way, *The Interpretation of Caste* gives a clear and concise account of the general kind of problems presented by previous theories on caste. It serves as a useful introductory textbook—probably the first of its kind—and in this sense it is a valuable contribution in the field of South Asian studies and anthropology in particular. However, in his attempt to put forward a general model of caste organization, Quigley appears to lose sight of precisely that which he wishes to include in his theory, namely, the historical contexts of caste phenomena, and we are left to wonder what exactly he is trying to explain.

Quigley is no doubt correct to stress that the “central problem facing any explanation of caste is that . . . any form of reductionism is bound to fail” (p. 158), as caste can be reduced to neither material conditions nor to ideology. In a way this is common sense, and we are more interested to know about how the two aspects interact in a given socio-historical, ethnographic context, rather than be told, albeit lucidly, of the evils of reductionism. Quigley presents little ethnographic and historical information about the context in which his model of caste organization is supposed to apply, although he himself repeatedly refers to the importance of considering so-called ideological, social, cultural, economic, and political factors. In this sense, his theory ironically shows the limitations of general theories divorced from historical context, and does not provide useful insights for discussion of contemporary issues, such as the policy of reservation, Hindu fundamentalism, and other problems posed in post-colonial India.

Perhaps the book's overall lack of concern about precise historical context and its emphasis instead on general theorization stems from the author's overenthusiasm to do away with his sworn enemy—cultural relativism. Quigley expresses a great sense of distaste toward the “deconstructionist idea” that “much of our current knowledge of other societies has been distorted by the employment of Western ideological constructs” (p. 13). He says such deconstructionism is problematic as it leaves us in “a kind of intellectual limbo because it is no longer clear how one ought to proceed in order to understand other cultures and other eras” (p. 14). He equates this attitude with cultural relativism which is strictly opposed to the kind of comparative endeavor which he espouses.

Quigley is surely oversimplifying matters when he draws a rigid dichotomy between cultural relativism and the comparative approach and places scholars in each camp in an either-or fashion. We need not resort to such an extreme dichotomy. The comparative approach indeed is necessary as Quigley advocates, but we also need to be critical of the historical and cultural foundation of such an endeavor. Only then can we proceed to deal with the concrete problems we face in the contemporary world, taking into consideration historical and political circumstances as well as the cultural context in which these problems are embedded.

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