Liberalism and Hierarchy: A Tension-filled Relationship as Seen from Social Anthropology
(Ladislav Holy Memorial Lecture 2024)

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Abstract: *Ladislav Holy made the distinction between representations, ideals, and behaviour central to his theoretical and methodological reflections. That distinction underlies many of the political and ecological problems that humankind faces today, including the problems currently faced by liberalism. Using an understanding of hierarchy derived from Louis Dumont, and ethnographic case studies of attempts to impart the ideals of liberalism around the world (including in eastern Europe), I argue for a liberalism that acknowledges the embeddedness of hierarchy in many contexts and that practises the anthropological virtues of empathy, scepticism, and tolerance of alternative views.*

Keywords: Ladislav Holy; liberalism; Louis Dumont; hierarchy; egalitarianism; ethnography; cultural liberalism

Introduction

Ladislav Holy was deeply committed to his chosen subject social anthropology, both to doing it and to thinking through its preconditions and underlying assumptions.[1] Therefore I need make no apology for speaking from that

[1] For helpful and, in some cases, very detailed comments, most of which I have not been able to do justice to, I thank the members of CASA who attended the Holy lecture on 27/1/2024, members of the anthropology departments of Aberdeen and St Andrew's, who listened patiently to my ideas on Dumont at two seminars in February 2019, as well as Lola Martinez, Ralph Schroeder, Mark Lee, Chris Hann, Dace Dzenovska, Gwen Burnyeat, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Charles Stewart, Jo Cook, Wang Mingming, Insa

standpoint, as a social anthropologist, and for couching my lecture – as I think other Ladislav Holy Memorial lecturers have – in the following terms: What can social anthropology, a discipline whose methods were honed in the study of small-scale societies, contribute to the study of complex modern societies, and indeed to our increasingly interconnected world where developments in one country inevitably and ineluctably impact others and where everyone faces common problems that are no respecters of nation-state borders? Can anthropology help us to get a better handle on the severe challenges that liberalism seems to face everywhere today?

I take up one of the key problems that Holy, along with Stuchlik, was concerned with, namely the relationship between, on the one hand, what people believe and say that they do, and, on the other hand, what they actually do (Holy and Stuchlik, 1983). Holy and Stuchlik were also deeply concerned with the methodological implications of the different kinds of evidence that social anthropologists collect. Some ethnographic evidence supports claims about the representations and notions that people have about their society, but not what they do; other evidence supports claims about behaviour; yet other evidence tells us what people actually do. Putting these kinds of evidence together and analysing how a given society works is the task of the anthropologist.

Holy and Stuchlik argued, persuasively, that what anthropologists had thought of as structures were in fact processes. They were among those who tried to think through systematically what the famous shift from 'structure to meaning', as the slogan went, meant for anthropological method. Many others – mainly sociologists – were making the same case at around the same time; Holy and Stuchlik were perhaps the most experienced and sophisticated in doing so within anthropology. Underlying their argument was the key distinction between model and practice. Many controversies in the social sciences have consisted of much sound and fury but have ultimately thrown little light on the issue at stake, because the warring parties have failed to distinguish adequately between the ideas, categories, and representations that people hold and which guide their practice (their models) and what they actually do, which rarely coincides fully with the model(s).

In my own research I have found this a particularly productive distinction in analysing the asserted religious preferences of different groups within the

Koch, and two anonymous readers (both of whom, in careful appraisals which I very much appreciate, pointed out interesting inconsistencies and gaps in the argument that I would only be able to fix properly by writing another article or a book). The usual disclaimers apply, even more than usual.

Nepalese diaspora in the UK, where I have called it 'category' – i.e. the religion they claim to adhere to – and practice (which is frequently a lot more eclectic than any single categorial classification of belonging might suggest). Of course, 'category' is itself a distinct kind of practice, namely, the practice of classifying for various (often political) purposes.[2]

One important caveat needs to be made to Holy and Stuchlik's approach. They were still working with the assumption that there are identifiable and distinct societies and that the anthropologist's task is to understand other societies or at least sub-sections of other societies. At the time they were writing it was not quite so obvious as it is today (1) that globalization, including mass migration, has produced global social formations, (2) that events in one society (a war, a pandemic) can almost immediately impact others around the world, and (3) that all societies are currently undergoing similar processes. The ethnographies that I draw on below illustrate the deep interconnections between different parts of the world. Put differently, anthropologists can no longer pursue problems in geographic or any other kind of isolation, even if we are sometimes obliged to narrow our perspective down for heuristic and research purposes.[3]

In the introduction to a book that attempted to explore the implications of the fact that anthropologists today so often work in organizational settings, Eric Hirsch and I once described the key methodological stance as anthropology's *necessarily cross-eyed vision.* In their double commitment to ethnographic detail on one side and holistic contextual understanding on the other, working ethnographers need to have one eye obsessively focused on whatever domain they are investigating, while the other eye roves around the context looking for connections and comparisons (Hirsch and Gellner, 2003: 7). That activity of holistic contextualization now requires us to look way beyond national boundaries to the whole world.

Young anthropologists today, in response to this situation, quite rightly want to go beyond just accumulating yet more studies of other places. They want anthropology to have something to say about the biggest issues of the day – the climate emergency, migration, the future of democracy. My personal view is that we cannot make that contribution on our own and it is foolish of some anthropologists to turn inwards and think that we can solve those problems without interdisciplinary collaboration – but that is a topic for another day.

[2] Hausner and Gellner (2012), Gellner and Hausner (2013).

[3] For comments on methodological nationalism, see Gellner (2012).

In this lecture, I pursue the distinction between models and practice through an anthropology of liberalism in the perhaps naïve hope that anthropology may help us come to terms with the weak points of liberalism, or rather the weak points in the ways that liberalism is defended, and may even enable us to defend it better. At the very least, perhaps we can get a better understanding of why liberalism is struggling so hard against the forces of populism. So, while the topic that I address – the populist challenge to liberal democracy – may be all too familiar, I hope that my anthropological and South Asianist way of approaching the problem may have some interesting novelty and may be somewhat more than a statement of obvious truisms, even if my ignorance of the relevant literature on Eastern Europe and Latin America is provocative and irritating in equal measure.

By liberalism, I am referring to the political system, inspired by the ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity, that allows for genuine competition between parties, equality in terms of rights and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, gender, etc., rule of law, and so on. I am not denying that liberalism has a highly problematic history (see, i.e., Mamdani, 2022) or that rights have had to be fought for, long and hard, within self-declared liberal regimes. Nor am I defending *neo*liberalism, a specific economic and political interpretation of late capitalism that seeks to offload state responsibilities as far as possible onto private individuals and groups. Many people were wrongly convinced, especially in Eastern Europe following 1990, that a commitment to political liberalism necessarily required a neoliberal approach to the economy. [4]

The world today faces a series of interlocking problems that it is barely necessary to list. It all seems reminiscent of the crisis years after the First World War, when everything seemed to be going wrong: increasingly strident nationalism, ethnic cleansing, economic decline with a growing gap between rich and poor, the rise of fascism. If the First World War had demonstrated that national attachment was far stronger than any internationalist solidarity of the working class, the years after WWI – as today – seemed to show that liberal democracy had little to offer in stemming the tide of populism and anti-democratic sentiment. This was also, interestingly, the very time when modern

[4] For essays wrestling with the question of economy, and against neoliberalism, in eastern Europe, see Hann (2019). For the introduction and afterword to a set of essays that attempts to do the anthropology of actually existing liberalism, see Fedirko et al. (2021) and Dzenovska (2021). On the liberal UK state's increasingly illiberal attitude to its most marginalized citizens, see Koch (2018).

social anthropology took off (Sarró, 2022). At the end of *Argonauts* Malinowski heralded anthropology as contributing to the solution:

> Nor has civilised humanity ever needed such tolerance more than now, when prejudice, ill will and vindictiveness are dividing each European nation from another, when all the ideals, cherished and proclaimed as the highest achievements of civilisation, science and religion, have been thrown to the winds. The Science of Man, in its most refined and deepest version should lead us to such knowledge and to tolerance and generosity, based on the understanding of other men's point of view.[5]

Studying liberalism is of course normally the domain of philosophy and politics. But perhaps anthropology, the most awkward and unconventional of social science disciplines, can contribute a slightly different perspective on common problems.

Dumont and the study of hierarchy

Most would agree that the foremost theorist of hierarchy is Louis Dumont. It is hard to exaggerate just how unpopular and unfashionable Dumont is among anthropologists of South Asia these days.[6] Younger scholars hardly read him and consider him irrelevant to their concerns; he is seen as just part of the history of the subject. At the same time, however, some younger *non*-South Asianist scholars have rediscovered him and started to use his ideas as a way of talking about values and conflicts within ideals.[7] In his Radcliffe-Brown lecture 'On Value' delivered in 1980, Dumont remarked ruefully that "I have been trying in recent years to sell the profession the idea of hierarchy, with little success, I may add" (Dumont, 1980b: 208). He chose the topic of 'value' as a final attempt to 'sell' the idea of hierarchy in front of an Anglo-Saxon audience.

[5] Malinowski (1922: 407). For his mature and detailed analysis, see Malinowski (1944).

[6] Following my teachers, Nick (N.J.) Allen and Richard Gombrich, I have always argued for a judicious sifting of the Dumontian heritage (Gellner, 2001, 2020). See also Menon (2020).

[7] A rare anthropologist who falls into both camps – both a young South Asianist scholar and an advocate of hierarchy as an explanatory concept – is Piliavsky (2021), whose contribution is discussed below.

It may have taken over 30 years, but there are signs that Dumont's notion of hierarchy is, at last, beginning to catch on, at least in some quarters.

Dumont's key point, picked up and emphasized much later by Joel Robbins (2013, 2015), was that humans are evaluating animals, that evaluation is built in, as it were, to the very act of classifying and making discriminations about the world. In its simplest form, Dumont's insight was that Lévi-Strauss was right to emphasize the binary nature of human thought, but missed that one pole of every opposition is always evaluated as superior, hierarchically superior, to the other. The superior pole has a closer relationship to the whole made up of both poles taken together than the inferior pole. This idea is laid out most succinctly in the 'Postface on Hierarchy' that Dumont added to the authorized and revised translation of *Homo Hierarchicus* published by the University of Chicago Press in 1980. There he used two diagrams to explain the binary opposition and its ultimate hierarchical form: at one level A and B are equal and opposite to each other. At a higher level, A encompasses (*englobe* in French) B, i.e. it includes B as a part of itself.

Dumont's main example in this Postface is taken from the Book of Genesis. Adam is opposed to Eve as man is to woman: equal and opposite, complementary opposites in the structuralist sense. At the same time, Eve is created from Adam's rib. She is 'encompassed' by Adam, as woman is by man, with the word 'man' serving both to refer to the lower level of equal and opposite poles and to the higher level where 'Man' refers to the whole species, men and women taken together. Dumont chose to explicate the hierarchical relationship using the example of gender, but the whole book, *Homo Hierarchicus*, is about a social system in which the pure encompasses the impure and can stand for the whole made up of both pure and impure taken together.[8]

I have used this model to explicate the otherwise rather puzzling relationship between England and the other sub-units of the UK, especially as regards sports teams (Gellner, 2010). At one level England is equal and opposite to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. At another and higher level, it encompasses and includes them (as in the Bank of England, and the England cricket team) – which is why foreigners frequently refer to the whole as 'England'. Equally, I imagine that one could use this notion of hierarchy to analyse the former, and now superseded, relationship between the Czech lands (now Czechia) and Slovakia. In all these examples the egalitarian response is to

[8] Elsewhere (1979, 1980b) Dumont expounds his principle of the "encompassing of the contrary" using the example of right and left.

reject the hierarchical reading and insist that the equal and opposite relationship is the only valid one, the only way to overcome the colonial/patriarchal/sexist values of the past. From the hierarchical perspective, the relation between the two contraries can only be understood in relation to the whole that together they make up.

Dumont's influence on recent anthropology outside South Asia

In the last ten to fifteen years Dumont has made something of a comeback as the anthropological theorist of hierarchy par excellence. This rediscovery of Dumont, though welcome in itself, is somewhat disconcerting for the anthropologist of South Asia of a certain age, who has got used to Dumont being considered nothing more than a fossil, of interest only to those who get excited by the history of the discipline. It is symptomatic that when *HAU: The Journal of Ethnographic Theory* organized a special section on 'Comparison made Radical: Dumont's Anthropology of Value Today' (2015, Vol. 5, Number 1), there were contributions from Latin America, Africa, and Melanesia, but none from South Asia.

At the same time as Dumont is increasingly invoked, there remains embarrassment about him. Take for example the introduction to the collection *Hierarchy and Value* edited by Jason Hickel and Naomi Haynes (published by Berghahn in 2018, from a special issue of *Social Analysis* two years earlier). In their introduction Haynes and Hickel (2018: 2–3) ask defensively, "Why, for instance, should anthropologists – and especially young scholars interested in the neo-liberal moment – be concerned with hierarchy?" They go on to note that "one employs Dumont's theory only at the risk of being thought guilty by association of a neo-colonial conceit" (ibid.: 4) – they refer to the conceit that non-Western societies are "a perennial past in the present" and that all values can be reduced to a single paramount value. In short, Haynes and Hickel feel obliged to invoke Dumont, and agree with him that understanding hierarchy is crucial for anthropology today, but pretty much everything about his actual theory, they find questionable or embarrassing.

In the same volume David Graeber contributed a characteristically trenchant afterword in which he claimed, among other things, that the explosion in the use of the term 'hierarchy' in anthropology (as measured by JSTOR searches) is entirely down to Dumont's influence on the discipline. Graeber contrasted the zero occurrences of the word 'hierarchy' in Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* with the

45 mentions in Sharon Hutchinson's *Nuer Dilemmas* published 56 years later in 1996 (Graeber, 2018: 138). Graeber claims that this shows how hierarchy has been naturalized, accepted by anthropologists as legitimate. This makes for a rather extraordinary contrast between Dumont's own view of his complete failure to persuade the Western academy out of its intrinsic prejudices against the notion of hierarchy (Dumont, 1986: 235), on the one hand, with, on the other, David Graeber's assertion 30 years later that Dumont had a stunning and unfortunate success in spreading hierarchy-talk throughout anthropology. Graeber's editors, Haynes and Hickel, disagree bluntly with his analysis, saying "given that the use of the word 'inequality' in anthropological writing also increased on a dramatic trajectory during the twentieth century … one might just as easily make the argument opposite to Graeber's" (Haynes and Hickel, 2018: 16). I agree with Haynes and Hickel: (a) as already indicated, I do not believe that anthropology generally has been massively influenced by Dumont, and if it is true the word 'hierarchy' has become ubiquitous, we must look elsewhere for the reasons; (b) Nor do I agree with Graeber that using the term 'hierarchy' necessarily legitimizes what it describes. If hierarchy is indeed fundamental to social life, as Dumont claimed, then it is as well to understand how that is so. It becomes all the more important to ask: What are the limits to the application of hierarchy? I do not agree that Dumont's thought necessarily has conservative political implications, even if Dumont himself was relatively conservative in his political opinions.

While all this amounts to respectful interest, and in a few cases deep and productive influence, it does not, pace Graeber, go across the board or influence large numbers.[9] With the exception of one or two figures, such as Joel Robbins

[9] There are several other contexts in which Dumont's name crops up within anthropology: (1) Dumont's students did their best to keep his ideas alive in the French context (Galey, 1984; Itéanu and Moya, 2015). (2) In the anthropology of Melanesia and Polynesia debates continue about whether precedence and rank is the same as hierarchy, as Dumont conceived it (see Mosko, 1994, which also provides a detailed examination of the ways in which Dumont's terminology shifted over time). (3) Joel Robbins, already mentioned, is particularly interested in a theorizing the notion of value. His work and interests may have spurred HAU to devote so much space to it. Robbins uses Dumont as a way to think about the changing relationship between values at different levels (Robbins, 2007, 2009, 2013, 2015). (4) Bruce Kapferer (1988, 2010, 2013) has applied Dumont's ideas to the study of nationalism, not without controversy (Spencer, 1990a, 1990b). (5) Interest in Dumont continues among historians of anthropology (Parkin, 2003; Celtel, 2005). (6) Many of the contributors to Rio and Smedal's 2009 edited book,

and Bruce Kapferer, there is no deep engagement; the interest is no more than patchy. It certainly does not amount to the sweeping influence that Graeber ascribes to him. Graeber's work on value is, in its own right, more interesting than his critique of Dumont, who, he suggests "might almost be seen as a kind of prophet of conservative anti-capitalist movements to come" (Graeber, 2018: 147). Debating further with Graeber would take us too far afield. Instead, I propose to work through a series of ethnographic examples. Suffice it to say that, on the question of Dumont's influence, the truth clearly lies somewhere in between Dumont's own gloomy assessment that his ideas had sunk like a stone and Graeber's claim that Dumont has caused a plague of reactionary hierarchy talk to spread throughout anthropology.

Shamefaced or defensive hierarchy, lived 'below the line'

Let me now turn to the question of how Dumont's ideas about hierarchy might help us understand the contemporary situation, in particular the crisis of liberalism. There were high hopes after 1990 that liberalism was now the default option around the world, that maybe even 'history had ended': "In 1991, when the Soviet Union crumbled, liberalism seemed to be the light at the end of history" (Dzenovska, 2018: ix). That seems very long ago, now that democratic norms are in retreat and now that the Prime Ministers of certain EU countries declaim proudly that they stand for *il*liberal democracy.

Two exemplary ethnographies of the liberal state may help us to grasp this new reality: Dace Dzenovska's *School of Europeanness* (2018) and Gwen Burnyeat's *The Face of Peace* (2022). In both cases the liberal ideal of equal and universal human rights is in deep tension with more deeply rooted ideas about hierarchical distinctions between kinds of people and kinds of place and culture. Having considered their contributions, I will then move on to the more familiar example, familiar to me at any rate, of ideas of equality and democracy in what many take to be the home of hierarchy, i.e. Nepal and India.

I call this section 'hierarchy lived below the line' in reference to Dumont's "comparative diagram" (1980a: 233), which he calls "a useful memory-prop for comparison… [not] an abstract formula" (ibid.: 234). The diagram contrasts what he calls "homo major", i.e. the more 'normal' and pervasive case of

Hierarchy: Persistence and Transformation in Social Formations, orient themselves in relation to Dumont's theory; the volume includes several of those already mentioned.

hierarchy, with "homo minor", i.e. the more unusual case of modern egalitarian society. Dumont allowed that in hierarchical societies there was still a place for egalitarianism in certain "encompassed" contexts. Likewise, in the modern world, values are egalitarian; formally, hierarchy is suppressed and opposed—but it reappears in hidden or unofficial contexts:

> … in hypernationalism and totalitarianism the whole asserts itself against individualistic atomization, and there are residues of hierarchy more or less everywhere: in social class, annexed to the notion of 'power', and finally in racism. (Dumont, 1980a: 234)

All countries are supposed to be equal, but some are more equal than others. Empire has no legal standing, so we have unofficial empires. Even the doctrine of suzerainty, according to which one country might have a legitimate say in the foreign policy of another, is hard to sustain. Just as the equality of nation-states is supposed to, but does not in fact, govern the life of states, so equality of respect and treatment is supposed to govern individuals' interactions and relationships but in practice does not.

The Latvian case

Dace Dzenovska's *School of Europeanness* is an ethnography of EU expansion into Latvia. Dzenovska started studying Latvia, and specifically EU-sponsored attempts to teach "the liberal political virtue of tolerance", in 2005. She studied Latvian politics and society for the next ten years. She had to navigate: (1) EU expectations of human rights, minority rights, tolerance, and so on; (2) the state and NGO-led attempts to impart those values and practices, specifically by the state employees and activists whom she calls "tolerance workers"; (3) how the representatives of the state actually dealt with refugees and other migrants who turned up in Latvia. What she was investigating was how "political liberalism [is] an ideological and civilizing project located in historically specific fields of power" (2018: xi). There were multiple paradoxes and ironies in the attempt to teach people how to be more tolerant and liberal, in short to be more European, on the one hand, and to build a new Latvian nation, and throw off the unwanted leftovers of the Soviet and earlier eras, on the other. Liberalism, in attempting to impart particular attitudes and recommended forms of language, was and is teaching a particular hierarchy of values.

In the seventeenth century the Duchy of Courland, with a German Duke, German aristocracy and middle class, and a Latvian-speaking peasantry,

corresponded more or less to present-day Latvia. Duke Jacob Kettler, very mindful of what other European maritime powers were doing at the time, established his sovereignty over the Caribbean island of Tobago in 1654. He also had a trading station in the Gambia for a brief time (2018: 20). Latvians today take pride in this very short history of colonialism, which shows that they were a European nation like others. They had to be taught by Dzenovska's "tolerance workers" that actually they should feel shame at having any colonial history at all. Combatting this naïve pride in a colonial past was, Dzenovska observes, "yet another site through which the Western traveller or scholar can assert moral superiority" (2018: 41).

In 2004, as part of its accession to the EU, the Latvian government established a National Program for the Promotion of Tolerance, a programme that ran until 2013 when the funding ran out and it was merged with more generic government programmes of 'social integration'. Much of the funding for the activities that fell under it came from the EU or international foundations interested in the spread of liberalism in the former Soviet bloc. In this period, Dzenovska remarks, "the need to catch up with Europe came to structure all spheres of life…" (2018: 109). Any problem that seemed to be blocking Latvia from becoming fully European could be blamed on the hangover of a "Soviet mentality", which was a catch-all explanation for "corruption, intolerance, lack of civic activity, insufficient entrepreneurial skills, people's expectations in relation to the state, and more" (2018: 89). The only sphere where even the educated tolerance workers allowed that 'the West' might be wrong was that of ethnopolitics: "… in this particular domain it was the liberal West that was thought to lack in understanding appropriate for guiding action" (ibid.). In particular, the West did not understand the specific history of the Baltic republics, the fact that the Latvian nation had to struggle for its existence, first under German domination, later under the Soviets, and that even now, with a Russian-speaking minority of 30%, its very existence was extremely precarious.

Partly because of this history, the general Latvian public did not find it easy to accept that they were intolerant, and indeed that had to be taught it by the tolerance workers. They did not, for the most part, see anything wrong with the Latvian terms that they had traditionally used for Jews and for Blacks and did not see why they should stop using them; and indeed, some saw the request to do so as an attack on nationalist attempts to promote and retain the Latvian language. One civil servant came to object to the intolerant way, as she saw it, that tolerance was pushed on the Latvian populace (2018: 125–6). Some Russian speakers made fun of the National Program for the Promotion of Tolerance by

calling it Dom Terpimosti (*tyerpimostyi*) or 'the House of Tolerance', which implied that it was a brothel.

In order to illustrate how the new Latvian state deals with its Russian-speaking minority, Dzenovska describes a visit to a public transportation company that she made with two women who worked as government language inspectors. They were required to visit companies and ensure that progress was being made in getting people who worked in specific professions to speak Latvian to the required level for their profession. In Dzenovska's account the two women find the work difficult and troubling, because of the micro aggressions they receive for trying to impose the state's linguistic nationalist ideals on men and women in their 50s and 60s who have been operating in Russian all their lives. One of the men being interviewed is recalcitrant, refusing to play along (only occasionally responding in Latvian), and asking rhetorically in Russian, "Do we get shot after the third penalty?" (i.e. the third penalty for not having reached the appropriate level of Latvian to operate as a bus driver). He appeals to the women inspectors to drop the mockery and to deal with them "humanely" (*po chelovecheski*), a Soviet-era term that implies that the two sides, as fellow sufferers, should come to an agreement to work around the inhumane rules of the bureaucracy. In Dzenovska's analysis, the two inspectors might have been able to empathize and cooperate "humanely" before (under Soviet rule), but now that the Latvian nation and state were aligned "they did not seem to have the resources for such a connection" (Dzenovska, 2018: 78–9).

The Colombian case

Gwen Burnyeat's book, *The Face of Peace: Government Pedagogy and Disinformation in Colombia* (2022), is about the referendum that was held in Colombia in 2016 on whether the people endorsed the Peace Accord that government had signed with the FARC guerillas in order to bring to an end 50 years of armed rebellion.[10] The referendum inevitably sparked comparisons with the Brexit campaign of the same year. In both cases the government clearly favoured one side in the vote and yet was obliged, at the same time, to appear even-handed and not to prejudge the outcome. Therefore, it was reduced to laying out a barrage of facts supporting the Yes campaign (or the Remain campaign in the UK case). In both referendums the No (or Leave) side was able to mobilize appeals to emotion and was accused of making many false claims and of playing on people's ignorance and prejudices.

[10] The text of this section follows my review of the book (Gellner 2023).

Burnyeat's book is an ethnography, not so much (or only partially) of the *voters* who rejected the Peace accords, nor of the *politicians* who made political capital out of voters' discomfort with them and of their longstanding distrust of the state, but rather of those people – the NGO workers and civil servants – who tried to persuade the voters to vote Yes. They were often placed in very difficult situations, because they had to be the face of the state or 'give face' (*dar la cara*), as they put it, in rural areas, areas which might have been under the control of FARC, or otherwise been neglected by the state, for many years and have little reason to trust it. The anguish and predicament of these often highly motivated, indeed passionate, activists and bureaucrats, who desperately wanted to see national reconciliation and an end to civil war, and especially their huge disappointment at the No vote in the referendum, are at the heart of the book.

What the activists' efforts showed – as many recent ethnographers of the state have been keen to emphasize – is that the state is a performance. It has to be taken on the road and it has to be ritualized. Even a roadshow about a peace agreement is a performance. In Chapter 4 Burnyeat describes in detail one such session, held in a rural area called Dabeiba. She provides the reader with a slide-by-slide Powerpoint exposition, as delivered by Pilar, a young, urban, educated, middle-class, and very White representative of OACP (the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace), sent out to do five presentations to peasant audiences, over the course of four days, of the 'facts' of the agreement. Burnyeat records her own shock that OACP should send such a young interlocutor who was so very different from her target audience. She also honestly records the views of the locals that in fact Pilar, the presenter, was good, that she was exactly what they expected from the state, and that at least some of them were very pleased to learn what Pilar so didactically, and following a narrow and specific script, was sent out to teach them.

Woven into this detailed and compelling ethnography is Burnyeat's wider aim: a critique of liberalism. This means that *The Face of Peace* is a difficult book – not because it is written abstrusely – far from it. As far as that goes, it is a model of clarity. The book is difficult to read because it turns the gaze onto 'our' too little examined beliefs and assumptions, in quite a harsh, though simultaneously empathetic, way, in fact in just the way that anthropology is supposed to, but rarely does, at least rarely does in a way that makes us truly and deeply uncomfortable.

I say 'our' and 'us' because I would be surprised if the author herself did not share, at least to some degree, the assumptions of the liberal consensus or liberal

imaginary. Some of the author's best friends – as the ethnography makes clear – are liberals, both politically, and in subscribing to what she calls 'cultural liberalism'. Cultural liberalism believes in the value of education: the solution to bad decision-making, or people believing in propaganda, is more education. Cultural liberalism believes in reason and truth: in the end, reasoned argument and the facts will defeat ignorance, prejudice, and lies. Cultural liberalism believes in the gulf between reason and emotion: appeals to emotion, especially negative emotions and intolerance must be combatted by appeals to reason, rights, and justice. Cultural liberalism believes in impartiality and neutrality and the possibility of fairness when rules of impartiality are applied. It believes that the liberal settlement – parliamentary democracy, the separation of powers, the rule of law – enacts those values of equality, fairness, justice, and truth. As a corollary of this, it believes that technical solutions are possible. In particular, and in relation to the Colombian referendum, it is possible to keep politics out of neutral presentations of 'the facts' about the peace agreement. Perhaps most crucially, cultural liberalism tends to give itself an epistemological free pass; in other words, it assumes that its own position is somehow natural, given, and self-evident; once ignorance and blockages are removed, it will shine forth as self-evidently true and correct.

Following a well-worn leftist path – but supporting it with deep ethnography – Burnyeat demonstrates that all these liberal assumptions are myths. Burnyeat demonstrates that, despite the rhetoric of combatting unreasoned emotion with the facts and the truth, the advocates of peace were just as passionate about their cause as their opponents, an ethnographic fact that will resonate with anyone who lived through the Brexit referendum. Taken together, Dzenovska's and Burnyeat's ethnographies demonstrate that cultural liberalism is far from neutral or dispassionate or self-evident, that it hierarchizes some ways of life and some values over others. Burnyeat's case shows that what were supposed to be impartial presentations of the facts were in fact performances of hierarchy, shot through with the values of cultural liberalism, and that the appeal, in many cases, did not work.

South Asian cases

It is not difficult to multiply cases where the egalitarian ideals of democracy, tolerance, science, reason, and truth are imposed from above and are not experienced as empowering. For example, there is the paradoxical imposition of democracy on the Tibetan diaspora population by the Dalai Lama. Most diaspora Tibetans were happy to continue to be led by an incarnation of the

bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara who combined all political and religious authority in his own person. However, the Dalai Lama insisted that they should get used to the secularized practice of periodic voting and should have a non-religious leader elected in the modern way (McConnell, 2016).

Many people asked themselves in 2020:[11] Why was the Black Lives Matter movement in North America and other 'Western' countries so much more widespread and powerful than the Dalit Lives Matter movement in India or Nepal? And how come many South Asians supported Black Lives Matter in the West but not Dalit Lives Matter in South Asia? The simple, crude, and Dumontian answer is that the value of hierarchy is more deeply engrained in South Asia than it is in the US or similar developed countries. There is some truth in this response, for all that it is formulated at a very high level of abstraction. Of course, there are many true-believing egalitarians in South Asia, just as there remain many hardcore adherents of hierarchy in the USA, as Isabel Wilkerson (2020) reminded everyone in her searing book *Caste: The Origin of our Discontents*. However, insofar as one can measure these things, hierarchy is still a value in South Asia and to the extent that people hold it as a value, whether explicitly or implicitly, they also accept that some groups of people have a greater right to belong and have more rights than other groups. What is suggested here is that the pervasive ideology of national belonging means that this is just as true, if less openly acknowledged, right across the world.

In Nepal, traditionally, i.e. before 1951, the caste hierarchy was explicitly supported and enforced by the power of the state, including its judicial system and its police and army. A national legal code was introduced in 1854 with differential punishments for various offences depending on the caste and gender of the offender. The idea of having a single national legal code was probably inspired by the West but the *content* of the code was thoroughly traditional. Much of the code was taken up with regulating what should happen in the cases of sexual intimacy across caste boundaries. One basic principle that was consistently upheld was that upper-caste men could have lower-caste concubines without being polluted by them – as long as they didn't consume rice the women had cooked. Needless to say, the other way around, lower caste men having sex with upper-caste women, was, in stark contrast, a very serious matter for both parties, with potentially fatal consequences.

A huge change occurred when a new law code was promulgated in 1963 that no longer referred to caste and assumed that all citizens were equal before the

[11] The argument of this section has also been made in Gellner (2024).

law. Even if there was no overnight change in most people's behaviour, in the longer term there were significant consequences. Democratic ideals, symbolized by one person-one vote, began to make a real difference. Caste practices were suppressed 'below the line'. This became ever more obvious after 1990 when a series of Acts were passed that banned untouchability and introduced severe punishments for those caught practising it. This was many years after the same kind of legislation had been passed in India.

However, despite the fact that everyone is equal before the law, there is still an unofficial hierarchy of belonging, according to which certain ethnicities are privileged over others in Nepal, at least in their own minds. The Khas-Aryas, the new name for the dominant Bahun (Brahmin) and Chhetris (Kshatriyas), who between them make up about 30% of the country, see themselves as the core of the country and they do indeed dominate in most spheres of achievement (as MPs, university professors, army generals, ambassadors, leaders of political parties). However, this is now fiercely contested by those groups who define themselves as indigenous, or indigenous 'nationalities' (*Adivasi Janajati*). This claim to indigeneity has in fact received considerable (if sometimes ambivalent) support from the government.[12]

Nepal's new 2015 constitution declares that all citizens are equal before the law and also explicitly bans practices of untouchability. It repeatedly emphasizes that all citizens must have equal access to the services of the state and insists that Dalits (former Untouchables), Madheshis (Nepalis of Indian ethnicity from the southern belt), Janajatis, and other minorities must be assured of proportional representation in the organs of the state. Article 50.2, in the section entitled 'Directive Principles, Policies and Obligations of the State', states that

> The social and cultural objective of the State shall be to build a civilized and egalitarian society by eliminating all forms of discrimination, exploitation and injustice on the grounds of religion, culture, tradition, usage, custom, practice or on any other similar grounds, to develop social, cultural values founded

[12] On Nepali nationalism and the unofficial hierarchy of belonging, see Gellner et al. (2008) and Gellner (2016); on the indigeneity doctrine and its consequences, see Adhikari and Gellner (2016), which attempts to explain both the support for ideas of indigeneity in the revolutionary context following the end of the Maoist insurgency/civil war in 2006 and the subsequent backlash that saw many of the indigenous activists' hopes dashed after the election of 2013.

on national pride, democracy, pro-people, respect of labour, entrepreneurship, discipline, dignity and harmony, and to consolidate the national unity by maintaining social cohesion, solidarity and harmony, while recognizing cultural diversity.

In line with this, we find rights to work, health, land, food, and housing (alongside many others, such as education, justice, and freedom of religion) all included in Nepal's 2015 Constitution. A whole Article (4) deals with the rights of Dalits. In order to bring these aspirations to realization various measures have been enacted, including affirmative action (known as reservations in South Asia) in university admissions, political elections, and recruitment to the bureaucracy and the army. The practice is still hugely unbalanced with the dominant Khas-Aryas, i.e. the Brahmins and Chhetris, massively over-represented.[13]

Is hierarchy as a value dead and buried in Nepal and generally in South Asia? Anastasia Piliavsky (2021) has argued for a return to Dumont's concern with hierarchy. She suggests, rightly, that the anti-Dumont reaction has led scholars of the region to miss the ongoing importance, and positive evaluation, of hierarchy in the region. She points out that hierarchy is necessarily involved in any kind of evaluation, as well as being implied in social relations everywhere "whether between parents and children, teachers and students, bosses and workers, or doctors and patients", and is "in fact deeply valued" (Piliavsky, 2021: 12). James Ferguson (2015) has made a similar argument in his book *Give a Man a Fish*, Ch. 5, about what he calls "declarations of dependence".[14]

We may dismiss all the legal and political statements of equality as so much aspiration and idealism; we may argue that everyday life and the organization of society and the economy are based on quite different principles. Ambedkar pointed this out at the time of India's Constituent Assembly, when he warned that "… on the 26th January 1950 we are going to enter a life of contradictions" (Jodhka and Manor, 2018: 3). However, the presence of ideals does make a

[13] See Adhikari and Gellner (2016) and Gellner and Adhikari (2024) for documentation of these imbalances.

[14] Ferguson argues that in the immediate precolonial period in southern Africa, "Relations of hierarchy and obligation here did not diminish or fetter the attainment of full personhood but rather constituted and enabled it. Hierarchical dependence here, as throughout the region, was not a problem or a debility – on the contrary, it was the principal mechanism for achieving social personhood" (2015: 146).

difference, in many cases a powerful difference, as many life stories and testimonials demonstrate. Banerjee's monograph on a West Bengal village, *Cultivating Democracy* (2022), provides evidence that the sacred values of democracy and republican citizenship have been internalized at the grassroots.[15] She writes: "Everyone, and especially members of the lower castes in the village, were keen for me to understand that being able to vote without fear was an important indication that they were indeed equal to the upper caste Syeds and that the act of voting consolidated that sense of citizenship" (Banerjee, 2022: 161).

It is the job of anthropologists and sociologists, as Holy and Stuchlik emphasized, to investigate that gap between the ideal and the daily practice, or rather, to put it more precisely, between the formal ideals outlined in laws, policy statements, and so on, on the one hand, and the rather more embodied ideals (often implicit, only sometimes articulated) of those contexts where hierarchy is still actively sought and valued, such as family life, pedagogy, and the workplace, but also in organizations and politics. One place where the ideals of hierarchy are alive and well, which would be well worth exploring in a more detailed treatment of the issue, is in the organization of political parties and their associated practices of patronage.[16]

Contemporary global cases: the hierarchy of countries

Another area where hierarchy is particularly obvious is in people's evaluations of different countries. President Trump made his negative evaluation of certain other countries quite explicit in a phrase that I won't repeat. Kathrin Fischer has documented ethnographically how Nepalis evaluate different countries around the world as 'big' or 'little', in terms of their desirability as destinations to migrate to: Portugal, the UK, Poland, Japan, the USA, Sweden, Malta, and Cyprus all count as 'big' countries. India, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia are 'small'. South Africa is somewhere in-between (Fischer, 2023). Such evaluations correspond, more or less, to hard economic realities, as we discovered during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, when rich countries bought up all the supplies of vaccine and poor countries were left without.

[15] See also Tanabe (2007) and Michelutti (2008), among others.

[16] See Hachhethu (2002) and Snellinger (2018) on Nepal; and Kothari (1970), Chandra et al. (2016: 14–15), and Banerjee (2022) on India. Hierarchy is also found in the extra-legal politics of big men or bosses, intimately linked to party politics in many places in South Asia (Michelutti et al., 2018).

The Indian journalist, Mukul Kesavan, writing in 2008, in a short piece entitled 'Against South Asia', i.e. against the concept of South Asia as a coherent way to refer to the countries of India, Pakistan, Nepal, etc.:

> From an Indian point of view, Southasia is a well-meant fiction. So long as its neighbours remain majoritarian states defined by religious identity and threatened by diversity, India's relationship with them can at best be prudential, designed to forestall conflict and encourage economic cooperation. Neither ASEAN nor the EU provides us with an appropriate model of association, but they do supply some historical lessons. (Kesavan, 2008)

Kesavan was writing at a more hopeful time in South Asia. He was advancing a view of India as instantiating a pluralist and democratic model, a civilizational beacon of light to the other, confessionally defined, countries of South Asia – a view that is not too dissimilar to the way that the EU regards new members and candidate members on its eastern frontiers. Of course, as we speak, that plural, tolerant India is being unravelled and India too is being re-defined as a Hindu-dominant nation, the mirror image of Pakistan.[17] In short, hierarchical views of liberalism as a civilizing mission are not confined to Europe.

Conclusions

I started by praising Ladislav Holy for his laser-sharp focus on the difference between what people say they do and what they actually do. In the international sphere, there is a whole industry of commentators pointing out the hypocrisies of nation-states who talk fine ideals about human rights, world peace, and climate change and then make exceptions for themselves or pick and choose where and when their principles apply.

I invoked Louis Dumont, who starts from a big and crude opposition between premodern societies based on holism, hierarchy, and the denial of individualism, and, on the other, modern societies dominated by egalitarianism and the supreme value placed on the individual. Yet, Dumont was very aware

[17] See, for example, Shah (2024) on how the institutions of the liberal state can be mobilized in a highly illiberal way against the enemies of the ruling party.

that no society practises just one value. The individual may be 'encompassed' in a hierarchical society, but a place can still be found for individualism as well as for equality. Contrariwise, hierarchy still exists in modern societies – but 'below the line', that is to say, unofficially, partially shamefacedly, and on the defensive.

I have illustrated some of the ways in which that is so. There is a hierarchy in that tolerance has to be taught to the intolerant, as described for Latvia by Dzenovska, and this presupposes a hierarchy of more and less tolerant societies. The values of liberalism have to be taught by the Colombian state to its citizens, as described by Burnyeat. We face the paradox of being tolerant of the intolerant; of studying with an open mind, those who are not open-minded; of being true to scientific protocols even when working on those who are unscientific and disbelieve in empirical verification or falsification. Every value creates a hierarchy, even the value of equality or opposition to hierarchy. Incidentally, these insights have also been discovered or re-discovered, in the supposedly new sub-field of the anthropology of ethics and morality, with its focus on virtue ethics.[18]

I have shown how hierarchy is present in a range of South Asian contexts. Nevertheless, thanks to the introduction of formal egalitarianism – in law, in politics, in public policy – change has most definitely taken place. Despite quite fundamental change, much of society still holds by hierarchical values – hence the clashes that resurface so often. Despite those clashes, and as Mukulika Banerjee's work in West Bengal shows so well, it is clear that egalitarian values, the principle of equal respect for all, are upheld and genuinely believed in, even and perhaps especially by the poor. That is why they turn out to vote in such numbers and with such fervour in India. This is not contradicted by the fact that hierarchical patron-client relations remain very important to a great many people and in many contexts.

What does all this anthropological evidence of, as Holy would have put, society being a process, not a fixed structure, and of hierarchy continuing as the inevitable outcome of valuation even when equality is the dominant value, as Dumont would have put it, amount to?

Winston Churchill is supposed to have said that democracy is the worst system – except for all the rest. Liberalism is the same. When it is assumed to be the only game in town and to be the inevitable future of all humankind, when history has supposedly 'ended', the merits of liberalism are taken for granted

[18] For a good introduction, see Laidlaw (2014).

and its precarity is forgotten. It is very hard to get passionate about it when it is seen as natural and not in danger (even now perhaps not enough people in the USA realize that it is possible to lose the rule of law and procedural democracy). It requires recent memories of totalitarianism for the virtues of liberalism to shine forth – as they still do in contemporary Iran, China, and Ukraine.

Liberalism, as we have seen from the examples I have cited, while propagating values of equal respect, introduces its own hierarchies of the knowledgeable and scientific over the ignorant and uneducated, of the enlightened over the backward – in effect hierarchies of class – such that those at the bottom have little incentive to assent fully to the values of liberalism. When political liberalism goes along with (economic) neoliberalism, straightforward inequalities of class add hugely to the cultural tensions. In short, people in the excluded parts of the social system are well aware of the contempt in which they are held; they resent the fact that informal hierarchies of ethnicity and gender that they may value are also rejected and even ridiculed by the elite.[19]

Citizenship and belonging are not fixed attributes but precarious achievements, which under certain circumstances can be undone and removed – as those young Britons who went off to fight for ISIS discovered. Who belongs, who are the ‘real’ Nepalis or ‘real’ English or ‘real’ Czechs is a matter of contestation. There are hierarchies of belonging.[20] I will only mention, and not dilate upon, Ladislav Holy’s writing about the Czechs’ self-image as educated, cultured, resourceful, egalitarian, and cosmopolitan, by contrast to the Slovaks, who were supposedly the opposite (Holy, 1996: 203). John Stuart Mill argued that in most cases democracy had to have limits, ethnic limits, if it was to work.[21]

Liberalism was not very liberal in its origins, as we have frequently been reminded: it was restricted to white, male, property owners in the metropole

[19] See Koch (2017: 228) writing about the working class and Brexit in the UK: “This was evident in the opinions expressed online by Trisha, a mother of two mixed white and Afro-Caribbean children, who had voted Leave. The day after the referendum, she posted on social media, ‘Am I a racist? No! Am I thick? No! Am I ignorant? No! Did I do some research? Yes! Have I watched hours and hours of debates? Yes! Did I vote out? Yes! It’s my opinion and my vote!’”

[20] On contests over belonging in the Nepalese and South Asian contexts, as well as more broadly, see Pfaff-Czarnecka (2022).

[21] “Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities” (Mill 2010 [1861]: 296).

and did not apply in the colonies.[22] The more the ideals of equal respect and equal value have been extended, the more they have come into conflict with people's hierarchical instincts. Liberalism in practice is not very liberal, especially for minorities. I have discussed equality far more than liberty and fraternity. The examples do show, however, that where ideals of equality and fraternity (solidarity) are thrown to the winds of economic liberalism, liberalism frequently gets into serious trouble.

There is no obvious way to resolve the tension that I have identified between liberalism and hierarchy. It is one that we have to live with. But acknowledging the tension, understanding how it works, and remembering the crucial Ladislav Holy distinction between representations and norms on one side and actual practice on the other, is surely better than simply dismissing one's opponents as ignorant, misguided, uneducated, and brainwashed. Liberalism is a choice and a stance; it is not inevitable; it has to be actively defended as the least bad, most self-correcting, system available, markedly better than the alternatives.

I have argued elsewhere (Gellner, 2022) that the core values of social anthropology as disciplinary practice are scepticism, empathy, and holism. That scepticism includes scepticism about its own practices – to such an extent that Geertz (1988: 71) famously diagnosed anthropology as suffering from "epistemological hypochondria". Social anthropology was born with liberalism and its history is intertwined with it, for good and bad. It can, if its practitioners so wish, be part of the solution to the crisis of liberalism.

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[22] See Mamdani (2022) for an impressive restatement of the case.

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