Four systems of stratification

There is an old Chinese saying that it is unlikely to be a fish that discovered water or a bird that discovered air. Most of us live in a world where we take our culture as ‘natural’, and seldom more so than in relation to the ideology and actual distribution of rank and power. Occasionally, however, a dramatic change or set of contrasts leads one or more thinkers to question these basic and largely unquestioned assumptions. One famous occasion was in the eighteenth century Enlightenment when, for example in the work of John Millar, Adam Ferguson and Jean Jacques Rousseau and others a systematic analysis of equality and inequality was undertaken.

Another formidable attempt to understand equality and inequality was made by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1858). There were a number of conditions which seem to have played an important part in directing Tocqueville's attention to the question of equality and which gave his analysis an unusual depth. First there was his family background. An aristocratic pedigree contrasted with an upbringing within a post-Revolutionary France formally dedicated to equality and the abolition of privileged ranks. Then there were his travels from a land so recently hierarchical to the most dramatically free and equal civilization in the world, America, as well as to England. Finally there were the revolutionary changes in France itself, as an inegalitarian system tried to adapt to the new ideology of equality. All this made equality his obsession and his life's work was concerned with trying to reconcile liberty and equality. He was a man divided between two worlds, caught in an endless struggle between his head and his heart. As he put it in a discarded note, there were standing against each other 'Mon Instinct, Mes Opinions'. 'I have an intellectual taste for democratic institutions, but I am an aristocrat by instinct...' (Drescher 1964: 15). Out of this clash emerged his great works on *Democracy in America* and the *Ancien Regime*.

It is attractive to see Andre Beteille as someone in a similar position, reflecting deeply on the essence of equality and inequality partly because of his personal circumstances, partly through the changing and contrasting world he experienced. With his French father and Indian mother, Beteille is an heir to diverse philosophies and traditions. As an academic who never permanently left India, yet frequently spent periods in Europe and America, he is deeply aware of the contrasts of 'East' and 'West'. As someone who participated in the rapid changes in India over the period since Independence, he could see the battle of ideologies based on inequality and equality on his own doorstep. It is thus no surprise to find that his lifelong obsession has been with equality and inequality. His Ph.D. thesis was published under the title of *Caste, Class and Power; Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore village* (1965) and was soon followed by his influential edited set of readings on *Social Inequality*

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1 I am very grateful to Ramachandra Guha and Johnny Parry for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article which have helped me to re-formulate the argument.

2 For the first instalment of Beteille's autobiography, which will clarify issues in his background, see Beteille 1997.
There is not merely a resemblance between these two thinkers. There is clearly a very great amount of continuity. In some ways Beteille can be seen as one of the heirs of Tocqueville, as someone who has applied Tocqueville's earlier insights and broadened and updated his analysis. His debt and the way in which his work complements Tocqueville's can be seen if we consider first some of his explicit comments on Tocqueville's writings and the way in which they provide a framework for his own comparative analysis.

The first distinction; hierarchical and egalitarian systems.

As a first step, Beteille follows Tocqueville in proposing a simple binary model in space and time which suggests that until the eighteenth century all the world was based on the premise of natural inequality, but after that western Europe and America moved rapidly to the premise of natural equality, leaving India and much of Asia to 'catch up' later. It can also be shown in certain parts of Beteille's earlier work. Let us briefly examine this use of Tocqueville's ideas and the way Beteille proposes an initial binary opposition between two systems of equality.

Beteille wrote that 'For Tocqueville there were two kinds of societies, aristocratic society with its fixed and stable hierarchy of estates or castes, and democratic society which allowed or even encouraged the free movement of individuals across its classes. Aristocratic societies prevailed in Europe prior to the nineteenth century; and America in the first half of that century was the best example of democratic society.' (1983: 39) Beteille re-iterates the contrast many times. The first feature that strikes us is that the major civilisations of the past were all hierarchical by design, although the logic of the hierarchy was not everywhere the same. The design was most elaborately and consistently worked out in the case of traditional India, although it was very much in evidence in medieval Europe and also in China from the time of Confucius onwards.' (1977: 25) Thus until the eighteenth century, all the world was 'hierarchical'. 'It is not as if the principle of hierarchy enjoyed legitimacy only in traditional Indian society; in this matter India was not unique among the civilisations of the past. In pre-industrial Europe also society was not only divided into unequal ranks, orders or estates, but these divisions were broadly accepted in principle. There also the social hierarchy was invested with a measure of unity and coherence so that what existed was considered to be by and large right, proper and desirable.' (1977: 150)

Beteille shows how this was elaborated in relation to the legal structure. 'As is well known, feudal society in Europe was divided into estates. This division did not just exist as a fact of experience, it was supported by legal sanctions. The same laws did not apply to all, and there were separate courts to deal with cases relating to persons of different estates; for a person of a superior estate to be tried in an inferior court would have been a violation of honour.' (1977: 43) It was enshrined in the value system. The civilizations of Europe and Asia were in pre-modern times marked by the prominence of ranked social divisions and by the attention paid to rank in the various spheres of life. The attention to rank was carried over into legal rules and religious beliefs which are in such societies closely intertwined. Moreover, as Tocqueville points out, different standards of right conduct and different conceptions of honour, virtue and even morality are associated with the different ranks or orders into which society is divided.' (1983: 56-7)

According to Beteille, all this changed in the West somewhere between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. The timing of this revolutionary change also gives us a clue as to the causes of the dramatic shift. 'Many things contributed to the kinds of change which Tocqueville and others
witnessed and foresaw. Foremost among these were the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution which both began in the second half of the eighteenth century. They set about in a hundred different ways to destroy the material as well as the moral foundations of the traditional social order with its old hierarchies and myths. In Europe people were not only being imbued with new aspirations, but new opportunities were being created by and for them on an unprecedented scale.’(1977: 147)

It is a familiar story and one which has deeply influenced sociological thought: the birth of the 'modern' in the West, separating off a certain part of the globe from the rest in the 'revolution' of the later eighteenth century. Beteille specifically locates the argument in Tocqueville's work and links it to Tocqueville's own personal position as torn between the two worlds. The first and in some ways still the most outstanding contrast between the hierarchical social order of the past and the emerging social order with its commitment to equality was the one made by Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville's contrast between aristocracy and democracy is not confined to two modes of political organization; it extends to patterns of social distinction, forms of religious experience and consciousness, and types of aesthetic sensibility. Although born a few years after the French Revolution, he came from an aristocratic family, one which had suffered by it, and he spoke of the life and ideals of the aristocracy with the insight of personal knowledge. On the other hand, democracy still lay largely in the future, although the promise of that future infused his writing with an astonishingly vivid quality.’(1983: 74) Or again, Beteille writes 'Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to bring out the full significance of the normative order of the new society that was emerging in the United States. A European, steeped in the traditions of aristocracy, he could not but be impressed by the pervasive influence of the principle of equality in every sphere of life. The idea that people should be permanently divided into ranks invested with unequal rights and obligations was, according to Tocqueville, contrary to the spirit of American society; it was of equality and not hierarchy that law, custom and religion all spoke in one voice. Tocqueville maintained further that the spirit of equality would come to prevail over the spirit of hierarchy in Europe and the world as a whole.’(1977: 151)

The second distinction: harmonic and disharmonic systems.

Beteille is not content to stop here and is again guided by Tocqueville to search for a more complex formulation. He argues that dichotomized thinking, except in terms of 'ideal types' is dangerously misleading. Thus he writes, 'I find it false to represent the opposition between equality and inequality as a contrast between two societies in two different parts of the world. On the contrary, each society is an arena within which the two interplay, and if we fail to examine this interplay within societies, the comparisons we make between societies will be shallow and misleading.’(1983: 38) He praises Tocqueville himself for breaking out of just such dichotomized thinking. The attraction of Tocqueville's work lies in his refusal to be a prisoner of his own dichotomy. While he dwells at great length on the opposite natures of aristocratic and democratic societies, he leaves room for considering the contradictions within each type of society.’(1983: 41) Indeed some of Beteille's best insights come out of his recognitions of the contradictions within systems.

This uneasiness at the over-simple dichotomizing of Past: Present, and West: Rest is shown in certain passages where Beteille questions some of his own earlier assumptions about the 'hierarchical' nature of 'The West' before the eighteenth century. He writes that 'The more closely one examines the old order in the West the less plausible the argument appears that it knew nothing of equality as a value.’(1983: 43) This is a summary of an earlier passage where he points to one contradiction, also noted by Tocqueville. 'It is clear that equality as an ideal and a value was never wholly alien to Western civilization even when its organization was most elaborately hierarchical. No institution within that civilization was more hierarchical than the Catholic church, and indeed the concept of hierarchy is in its deepest meaning a Christian concept. Tocqueville recognized and noted this; at the same time he did not fail to point out that "Christianity, which has declared that all men are equal in the sight of God, will not refuse to acknowledge that all citizens are equal in the eye of the law". It is as if a value and an ideal
that had lain dormant under a hierarchical organization came into its own when external conditions favoured its awakening, and then invested these external conditions with a new significance.’(1983: 41-2) Thus Beteille picks up Tocqueville’s idea that all systems are mixed: that ‘pure’ hierarchy or equality only exists as an ideal type, and that in reality any society at any point in time will be the result of a dynamic and moving equilibrium between incompatible and ever-varying forces. Systems are neither static nor consistent and Beteille has often pointed this out in relation to the Indian past.

In trying to proceed beyond unsatisfactory dichotomies, Beteille has proposed a distinction between two kinds of social system which he calls ‘harmonic’ and ‘disharmonic’. He defines a ‘harmonic’ systems as follows: it is ‘one in which there is consistency between the normative order and the existential order: society is divided into groups which are placed high and low, and the divisions and their ordering are considered as right, proper and desirable or as a part of the natural scheme of things.’ (1983: 54) He then describes India as a good example of such a system; there is a premise and a practise of inequality, there is no fundamental contradiction (1983: 57-64).

A second form of ‘harmonic’ system can be envisaged ‘in which there is equality in both principle and practice’. Beteille does not give any worked examples of such a harmonic system, though he does consider the question generally (1977: ch.7). The most obvious examples are some of the very simplest hunter-gatherer bands (Woodburn 1982), but once mankind established settled agrarian civilizations it is difficult to see examples. We know too much to believe that communist, where all are in theory equal but some are more equal than others, has produced durable instances. ‘America’ as encountered by Tocqueville came closer than most instances, for a time, to this condition as Tocqueville himself noted. In America Tocqueville found a land which had explicitly enthroned the premise of equality, rather than of inequality. It made it a central tenet that man was born free and equal. This was still a peculiar way to look at things and Tocqueville consequently noted that ‘No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly during my stay there than the equality of conditions.’(Tocqueville 1968a: I,5) Equality, or democracy as he often called it, became the key to understanding America. ‘So the more I studied American society, the more clearly I saw equality of conditions as the creative element from which each particular fact derived, and all my observations constantly returned to this nodal point.’(Tocqueville 1968a: I,5) There had been some early attempts to take inequality over from the Old World, but they had failed. ‘Laws were made there to establish the hierarchy of ranks, but it was soon seen that the soil of America absolutely rejected a territorial aristocracy.’(Tocqueville 1968a: I,37)

Beteille does not stop here, however, for he suggests a further distinction, that is the idea of ‘disharmonic’ systems which ‘by contrast show[s] a lack of consistency between the existential and the normative orders’. One form is where ‘the norm of equality is contradicted by the persuasive existence of inequality’. This seems to characterize much of modern ‘western’ civilization, including America in its later history, where ‘Despite the idealization of equality, the class structure continues to be an important part of Western social reality, some would say its most important part.’ (1983: 76) Beteille quotes Raymond Aron to the effect that ‘Modern industrial societies are both egalitarian in aspiration and hierarchical in organization’ and adds the comment that ‘Modern societies are in this sense disharmonic: there is in them a lack of consistency between the normative and the existential order.’ (1977: 151) The clash between ideology and practice, and even within the ideology, is shown even more clearly when the ‘West’ dominated much of Asia and elsewhere. ‘Those who trace the historical conditions of the emergence of homo equalis in the West generally overlook the adventures of the same homo equalis abroad. As if the destruction of aboriginal society in Australia and America, the enslavement and brutal use of millions of Blacks, or the imposition of the most unequal conditions between European and natives throughout Asia took place in another epoch or on another planet.’ (1983: 52-3) This is written with feeling by someone brought up in the shadow of the Raj.

We may summarize the theoretical structure which Beteille has suggested in a diagram.
Beteille is in many ways most interested in the 'disharmonic' case (D), where a civilization proclaims equality but practices inequality, for this, in essence, is the modern situation. 'The great paradox of the modern world is that everywhere men attach themselves to the principle of equality and everywhere, in their own lives as well as in the lives of theirs, they encounter the presence of inequality. the more strongly they attach themselves to the principles or the ideology of equality the more oppressive the reality becomes.' (1977: 1) When did this contradiction emerge and what are its deeper features? Here Beteille can only set us on the path.

Beteille notes in several places that within the general harmonic ancien regime of western Europe before the French Revolution, there seems to be something unusual about England which hints at 'disharmony'. For instance he notes that England seems to have been different in certain respects. 'Moreover, the system varied considerably from one region to another even within Western Europe not only in its formal arrangement but also in its course of growth, maturity and decay. The contrast between France and England - the "exceptional case of England" - is a commonplace of medieval European history.' (1983: 65) Or again Beteille writes, that 'Even between France and England, neighbours who shared many things in common, there were important differences. The nobility never acquired in England the array of privileges it enjoyed in France, and English historians frequently point to the antiquity of their own traditions of equality.' He continues, however, by qualifying this remark by noting that 'for all its distinctiveness, England also developed a social hierarchy, many elements of which lasted longer there than in other West European countries.' (1983: 65) Beteille's hints of an unusually early disharmonic system in England lead us straight back to Tocqueville.

On his first visit to England in 1833 Tocqueville wrote as follows: 'But what distinguishes it [the aristocracy of England] from all others is the ease with which it has opened its ranks...with great riches, anybody could hope to enter into the ranks of the aristocracy. Furthermore since everybody could hope to become rich, especially in such a mercantile country as England, a peculiar position arose in that their privileges, which raised such feeling against the aristocrats of other countries, were the thing that most attached the English to theirs...The English aristocracy in feelings and prejudices resembles all the aristocracies of the world, but it is not in the least founded on birth, that inaccessible thing, but on wealth that everyone can acquire, and this one difference makes it stand, while the others succumb either to the people or to the King.' (1968b: 43) Thus England combined very great de facto differences, with few de jure privileges.

As Tocqueville left England he summarized many of his impressions. 'In England an illustrious name is a great advantage...but in general one can say that the aristocracy is founded on wealth, a thing which may be acquired, and not on birth which cannot. From this it results that one can clearly see in England where the real aristocracy begins, but it is impossible to say where it ends.' Furthermore, the real difference can be pinned down on to one word. 'The difference between England and France in this matter turns on the examination of a single word in each language. "Gentleman" and "gentilhomme" evidently have the same derivation, but "gentleman" in England is applied to every well-educated man whatever his birth, while in France gentilhomme applies only to a noble by birth. The meaning of these two words of common origin has been so transformed by the different social climates of the two countries that today they simply cannot be translated, at least without recourse to a periphrasis. This grammatical observation is more illuminating than many long arguments.' (1968b:51-2)

The situation partly arose from the commercial nature of England, whose wealth could be acquired from sources other than land and hence a parallel 'aristocracy' constantly emerged and challenged the
older families. In this way an aristocracy of wealth was soon established and, as the world became more civilised and more opportunities of gaining wealth presented themselves, it increased, whereas the old aristocracy, for the same reasons, continually lost ground. (1968b: 104) The consequences were status competition and uncertainty, a constant pre-occupation with small marks of difference and attempts to out-do others. Paradoxically this meant that in the middle of the nineteenth century England was more snobbish than France. The French wish not to have superiors. The English wish to have inferiors. The Frenchman constantly raises his eyes above him with anxiety. The Englishman lowers his beneath him with satisfaction. (1968b: 60) Ranks still existed in England, but they were confused. 'When birth alone, independent of wealth, decides a man’s class, each knows exactly where he stands on the social ladder. He neither seeks to rise nor fears to fall.' But when 'an aristocracy of wealth takes the place of one of birth, this is no longer the case.' This is because 'As a man's social worth is not ostensibly and permanently fixed by his birth, but varies infinitely with his wealth, ranks still exist, but it cannot be seen clearly at first sight by whom they are represented. The immediate result is an unspoken warfare between all the citizens. One side tries by a thousand dodges to infiltrate, in fact or in appearance, among those above them. The others are constantly trying to push back these usurpers of their rights. Or rather the same man plays both parts...' (1968a: II, 731-2)

This was one of the reasons the English were so guarded with each other: they found it difficult, especially if they met away from England, to know who they were dealing with (1968a: II, 731). It was also an explanation of why it was so difficult to envisage a revolution in England. Tocqueville believed that 'The English aristocracy can therefore never arouse those violent hatreds felt by the middle and lower classes against the nobility in France where the nobility is an exclusive caste...' In England, 'The English aristocracy has a hand in everything; it is open to everyone; and everyone who wishes to abolish it or attack it as a body, would have a hard task to define the object of his onslaught.' (1968b: 52) One of Tocqueville's greatest puzzles, taking up a theme from Montesquieu, was why England had become so different.

Tocqueville suggested that out of common European feudalism, that is the odd mixture which arose out of a decomposing Roman civilization and Germanic customs, the subsequent paths of continental Europe and England were different. Tocqueville started with the premise that there had been very little difference between the parts of western Europe in the Dark Ages. The system which emerged in about the ninth century covered the whole of western and central Europe (1968b: 2). Then came the invasion of England by Tocqueville's Norman ancestors. At this point, Normandy and much of France, as well as most of the Continent, were identical to England. Yet this identical system produced contrary results. By the seventeenth century there was a great divergence. Everywhere on the Continent at the beginning of the seventeenth century absolute monarchies stood triumphantly on the ruins of the feudal or oligarchic freedom of the Middle Ages. (1968a: I,52-3) Yet in England, 'Shutting your eyes to the old names and forms, you will find from the seventeenth century the feudal system substantially abolished, classes which overlap, nobility of birth set on one side, aristocracy thrown open, wealth as the source of power, equality before the law, office open to all, liberty of the press, publicity of debate....Seventeenth-century England was already a quite modern nation, which has merely preserved in its heart, and as it were embalmed, some relics of the Middle Ages.' (1956: 21) In these ways it diverged dramatically from what happened elsewhere in Europe. What then is the great difference according to Tocqueville? 'It was far less its Parliament, its liberty, its publicity, its jury, which in fact rendered the England of that date so unlike the rest of Europe than a feature still more exclusive and

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3 Montesquieu's arguments, and an expanded version of this account of Tocqueville's theories, will be given in my book provisionally titled The Riddle of the World.
more powerful. England was the only country in which the system of caste had been not changed but effectively destroyed. The nobles and the middle classes in England followed together the same courses of business, entered the same professions, and, what is much more significant, inter-married.'(1956: 89)

The fact that inequalities on the basis of birth had been abolished, or never properly arisen, in England, did not mean that there was little inequality. Ironically, the aristocracy was flourishing in eighteenth century England while it was decaying all over Europe. This gradual impoverishment of the nobles was seen more or less not only in France but in all parts of the continent where the feudal system, as in France, disappeared without being replaced by a new form of aristocracy. Among the German peoples, who bordered the Rhine, this decay was everywhere visible and much noticed. The contrary was only met with in England. In England the old noble families which still existed had not only preserved, but also had largely increased their wealth...'(1956: 86) Thus one found in England, apparent equality, real privileges of wealth, greater perhaps than in any country in the world.'(1968b: 79) Of course they proclaimed the universal rights and equality of men. But what did these consist of?

'The English have left the poor but two rights: that of obeying the same laws as the rich, and that of standing on an equality with them if they can obtain equal wealth.'(1968b: 78)

This clash between a de jure situation where everyone in theory was equal, but some definitely ended up as richer and more powerful, was made more difficult to bear by the loss of religious faith. In most societies, the poor could reconcile themselves to their position by realizing that there was no alternative: they were born into a fixed social position. Or again, in many religions their position was determined by their activities in previous lives. It was not their fault, a result of their heedlessness or inability. Even Christianity had provided the solace that even if this life was one of poverty, there would be recompense in eternity. The rich would find it virtually impossible to get through the eye of the needle into heaven. The poor and meek would inherit the earth, and heaven too. Yet as faith evaporated, men and women were faced not only with physical misery, but no consolation prize in the after life. Thus inequalities were particularly hard to bear 'in an epoch when our view into another world has become dimmer, and the miseries of this world become more visible and seem more intolerable.'(1948: 84) The English case is relatively familiar to many of us since, to a certain extent, it is part of the air we breathe now, through its extension to America and Europe over the last three hundred years. Through Tocqueville's analysis, this third case, the origins and spread of the major disharmonic form which now dominates the world, becomes less mysterious.

A disharmonic system in the 'East'.

Beteille also considers briefly the last logical possibility (A, that is a 'disharmonic' system in which people practise equality while professing its opposite'. Yet he excludes this category from consideration 'as being remote from historical experience' (1983: 54). In fact, in small scale instances, it is probably fairly common. One variant is to be found, for instance, in the area where I do anthropological fieldwork in the central Himalayas. The Gurungs were at one stage transhumant shepherds and hunter-gatherers and, on the whole, their ideology and practice was towards the egalitarian end of the continuum. During the last three hundred or more years they have gradually been absorbed into a hierarchical model based on the Hindu caste system. There is a marked tension however, for while the ideology is often explicitly hierarchical, with 'Untouchable' groups, ritual impurity and so on, in practise the interpersonal relations and distribution of wealth have manifested a considerable amount of de facto equality (Macfarlane 1976, 1993). No doubt many similar examples could found on the interface between tribal and caste societies.

Here, however, I would like to conclude by considering a civilization which has for at least a thousand years manifested a notable tension or contradiction between an ideology of inequality and a practise of much de facto equality. This is the puzzling case of Japan. Although the following account is necessarily schematized and over-simplified, it is worth exploring briefly the one large-scale case which
seems to fit the last of Beteille's four major ideal types.

At the ideological or cultural level of inter-personal relations, Japan has long been and remains today one of the most hierarchical or inegalitarian societies ever known. We are often told that equal relationships are impossible in Japan. Japan is and always has been a 'vertical' society, where every relationship is of an inferior to a superior. This is built into the language, etiquette and all of life. Chie Nakane's work epitomizes this view. 'The relationship between two individuals of upper and lower status is the basis of the structural principle of Japanese society'. 'In fact, in Japan it is very difficult to form and maintain the sort of voluntary association found so often in western societies, in that it does not have the basis of frame or existing vertical personal relations'. 'The golden rule is that the junior man should invariably carry out any order from his immediate superior, for this immediate link between the two men is the source of the existence of the junior man in the organization'. 'The core of the Japanese family, ancient and modern, is the parent-child relationship, not that between husband and wife. So the family today also reflects the predominance of vertical relationships'. (Nakane 1973: 44,62,55,133)

Although Nakane is the most systematic in her analysis of the vertical nature of Japanese society, others are in broad agreement. Robert Bellah wrote, 'The particular characteristic of the Japanese institutional system was its strong emphasis on the vertical axis and relatively small reliance on horizontal ties. That is, the institutional structure was held together largely through ties of loyalty between superior and inferior' (1957: 55). Ruth Benedict had written earlier that, 'Whatever one's age, one's position in the hierarchy depends on whether one is male or female. The Japanese woman walks behind her husband and has a lower status' (1967: 37) Takie Lebra explains that Japanese 'siblings are also hierarchically graded in a strikingly elaborate system based on seniority. One is a junior brother or a senior brother vis-a-vis every other brother, unless the two happen to have entered the group at the same time.' (1976: 179) Indeed language itself makes an equal relationship impossible. As Paul Bohannan noted, all Japanese verb endings must denote relative rank (1969: 43), and hence, for example as Robert Smith, quoting Miyoshi, observed 'In such interaction 'between young male equals, each speaks as though the listener were his inferior [that is, both use less polite speech]; between female equals, each as though the listener were her superior [that is, both use more polite speech]; between male and female equals, she speaks with [deference], he without it...' (1983: 75). It is difficult, in one sense, to conceive of a less egalitarian society.

Yet, in practise, the pervasive inequality is situational; a person is not intrinsically unequal by virtue of birth (unless he or she happens to be a foreigner or a member of the discriminated group, the burakamin). Hence, many see Japan as one of the few truly egalitarian societies, with little permanent ranking, orders, castes or classes, and with very considerable opportunities for social mobility. This was noted long ago by Basil Hall Chamberlain. ‘Some have used the word “caste” to denote these divisions; but the term is inappropriate, as there exists no impassable barrier between the different classes, nor yet any thing approaching to Indian caste prejudice. The feeling only resembles that to which we are accustomed in England, if indeed it is as strong’. Chamberlain comments, ‘And how this moderation makes for happiness! The rich not being blatant, the poor are not abject; in fact, though poverty exists, pauperism does not. A genuine spirit of equality pervades society’. (1971: 95,449)

The fact that Japan is at the opposite extreme from a 'caste' society has been echoed by anthropologists. For example, some years ago A.L.Kroeber wrote that 'Japan is often cited as a land of caste', but believes that 'this was true to perhaps the same degree as of medieval Europe', and believed that 'occupational elaboration and integration with religion remained vague' (Kroeber 1935)). More recently, Chie Nakane, who has worked on the fringes of a caste society, in Assam, writes that the general ideology of Japan shows itself to be 'completely the opposite of the caste ideology, in which division of labour and the interdependence of groups are the basic principles of social organization. In a caste society groups are formed of homogeneous elements, while in Japan they consist of heterogeneous elements.' (1973: 105)
The contradiction is well captured by Edwin O. Reischauer. 'Status is vastly important. But a sense of class and actual class differences are both extremely weak. In most essential ways, Japan today has a very egalitarian society - more so in fact than those of the United States and many European countries'. He believes that this is partly related to the strength of the small group. 'Otherwise, group associations, by emphasizing discrete hierarchical relationships and reducing lateral contacts with groups of similar function and status, play down class feelings as these are known in the West'. He concludes that 'there is no sharp cleavage. There is virtually no great inherited wealth and very little degrading poverty'. (1988: 150,152,174) It is perhaps this which makes the Japanese themselves uncomfortable with the label of 'vertical society'. There is a popular, conventional theory that Japan is a vertical society. Nothing could be more mistaken. Japan is a circular society. Michiro Matsumoto himself, visiting the land of equality reports that 'I learned the hard way that it is the American society that is intrinsically vertical'. (1988: 121,126)

Japan is thus famously a 'small group society'. Within the group there are vertical differences, but between the groups there is a great deal of equality. There are no fixed and permanent strata, just powerful internally stratified entities. This is described by Nakane as follows. 'There is no obvious status group formed by masters or landlords, excluding peasants: on the contrary, a functional group was formed by landlord and tenant, master and servant, and the master or superior was always one of them in the same group.' (1973: 152) This explains why, for instance, there was no distinct aristocracy or ruling class. As Lebra, citing Hasegawa, puts it, 'the aristocracy in Japan, compared with its European, Chinese, and Indian counterparts, has formed a less distinct cultural elite, less separate from the working mass.' (1976: 83). It is thus impossible to speak of the 'upper class' or the 'ruling class'.

Thus what is curious about Japan is that the whole society is based on the premise of situational inequality, yet de facto there is little ranking of groups. It teaches us that there is a strong middle position between the two extremes represented in the usual sociological models. Such situational inequality seems perfectly compatible with advanced industrialism. Thus Japan is, depending on how one looks at it, the most egalitarian, or the least egalitarian of societies. At the cultural level of language, kinship, gender and age, there is hierarchy everywhere; no-one is equal. At the level of formal stratification in terms of class, caste and wealth, there is surprisingly great equality for most. We thus have a system that combines two apparently contradictory principles - extreme inequality and extreme equality.

We can understand the situation a little better if we look very briefly at Japanese history. I shall do so here by using one source alone, that is the multi-volume Cambridge History of Japan, which has recently been published (see Macfarlane 1997). Between the twelfth and late sixteenth centuries, it would appear that Japan was an unusually 'open' society. It is difficult to speak of castes, classes or even estates. Thus Barbara Ruch writes that 'there was as yet no particular differentiation among an artisan, manufacturer, peddler, merchant, or a worker engaged in providing services, except perhaps in their economic success or failure.' (Yamamura 1990: 514) Neither in theory nor practice was there rigidity in the large urban and commercial sector. The same was true among the large numbers of those who worked on the land.

We may note, for example, the absence of slavery in the normal sense of the word, or even of unfree peasants. The situation was complicated because there were numerous different sub-groups 'based on
a complicated status system', with each group having a different name 'indicating the group's relative
degree of freedom or subordination'. The largest group, that is the normal workers on the land, what
Japanese historians term 'peasants', were relatively free. Oyama Kyohei writes that 'from observations
of the various representative shoen [landed proprietors], it is clear that the shoen peasants could act
fairly freely and that on occasion they both allied with and resisted the jito [estate manager] and shoen '.
(Yamamura 1990: 120) Thus the same author concludes that 'the medieval peasant was basically a
'freeman' (jiyumin) (1990: 121). A 'free' peasantry of this kind is very unusual, probably only to be
found in parts of western Europe and Japan at this early date. That it remained free in England and
Japan over the centuries that followed is of great importance.

As in so many features the reforms of the early Tokugawa seemed to change all this.5 ey aimed to
impose, for the first time, a rigid system of social stratification. The actual fact of stratification seems at
first sight to destroy the openness of the medieval period. The closure was meant to prevent all kinds of
mobility, not only social, but occupational and geographical. Thus, for example, Gilbert Rozman writes
that 'Peasants were barred from entering the samurai class, and in principle, from moving to the cities,
from switching to non-agricultural pursuits, and from selling or using their land as they might see fit'.
(Jansen 1989: 516) Yet the policy seems to have been fairly ineffective. Donald Shively writes that 'From the early Edo [Tokugawa] period, the government recognized the order of the four classes as
samurai (shi), farmer (no), craftsmen (ko) and merchant (sho). But 'Although Confucianists often spoke
of this class order, 'it was never given a legal basis, and its artificiality and imprecision must be kept in
kind.' (Hall 1991: 708) The outward signs of the failure to create and maintain rigidity are numerous. In
relation to geographical mobility it failed; there was massive mobility. Furthermore, there was much
movement between occupations, with many farmers having bi-occupations. This fluidity was shown in externals such as dress. As Susan Hanley observes, 'one would expect to find that dress varied by class and income in a highly stratified society' yet 'what is remarkable for Tokugawa Japan is how similar the basic cut of the clothing was for each class.' Thus we are told that the 'daily wear of men of both the
samurai and merchant classes was remarkably similar in basic style...dress in fact was gradually being
standardized and class differences minimized.' (Hall 1991: 692-3) The blending emerged as a result of a
number of factors, some of which may be briefly mentioned.

Following Shively, we learn that it was impossible to maintain the supposed distinction between the
two classes of craftsmen and merchants. 'In practice, no attempt was made to distinguish craftsmen
from merchants; both were treated as a single group...' (Hall 1991: 709) Secondly, within each supposed 'class' there were great differences in actual wealth and hence instability was introduced into the
classification system. We are told that 'Bushi [warrior class] included not only the shogun and the
daimyo [higher lords] but also the humble servants of samurai. Farmers ranged from rich landowners
and village headmen to tenants and agricultural servants.' (1991: 711) Thirdly, the distinctions between
the samurai and the rest were soon blurred. For instance, while 'Interrmarriage between samurai and
commoners was considered inappropriate', in fact 'bushi were permitted, not uncommonly, to take
commoner wives' and hence 'A kind of cultural levelling occurred...' (1991: 711) The mechanism of
adoption added to this fluidity; many rich commoner's children were adopted into the samurai ranks. The alliance between ancient blood and new wealth which was such a characteristic of late medieval
and early modern England was also common in Japan.

Thus there was a growing mingling and mixing of groups as wealth increased. The tendency of money
to undermine the supposedly separate ranks is summarized by a number of authors and Rozman cites

5 The Tokugawa shogunate, also known as the Edo period
(after the capital city of Edo or Tokyo as it is now known,
was from 1603-1868.)
Kozo Yamamura to the effect that under the pressure of economic necessity, class distinctions became 'virtually nonexistent' (Jansen 1989: 531). Everything became purchasable on the market - including rank. For instance, as early as 1783, 'the han [lordly domains] provided the convenience of a price list for status, from 50 ryo for wearing a sword to 620 ryo for full warrior standing' (Jansen 1989: 79). This was merely regularizing what was already in place; the possibility of exchanging wealth for status, the hallmark of the stratification system of modern societies. All this helps to explain why at the Meiji restoration the remains of the system of separate estates evaporated so very quickly. A summary also captures the gap between the formal rules and the practice. 'If we look only at how Japanese society was supposed to operate, we will find a rigid class society in place throughout the Tokugawa period.' On the other hand, as Hanley writes, in practice, 'Japan lost its class distinctions far more quickly and far more thoroughly than England did'. It seems very likely that 'much of the reason has to be the blurring of class lines before the Meiji Restoration.' (Hall 1991: 703-4)

Synthesis.

I have suggested that Tocqueville was Beteille's unacknowledged mentor, helping to set his intellectual agenda and providing guidance on a number of the deepest issues. His openly acknowledged major inspiration was, however, Max Weber, who not only re-enforced the need for comparison and contrast in all social scientific research, but also encouraged Beteille to develop 'ideal type' analysis. Beteille's ideal types of harmonic and disharmonic are valuable because they show that while remaining 'pure' in principle, an ideal type can contain within itself a structural contradiction or opposition. 'Disharmonic' systems are essentially unstable; they contain a clash of ideology and practice. Of course there are even more complicated contradictions than those discussed here, for the ideology itself, as Beteille frequently acknowledges in relation to both 'India' and the 'West', is itself usually founded on contradictions. But for the present we can limit ourselves to a simple model. The conclusions emerging from combining Tocqueville, Beteille and a brief discussion of the Japanese case can be summarized in a further diagram as follows.

Figure 2: Instances of the four systems of stratification.

Of course, none of these cases is fixed and like the famous instance documented by Edmund Leach in Highland Burma, they swing back and forth along both poles over time (Leach 1964). What is intriguing, however, is to see in the two cases analysed more fully here, England and Japan, how there are both fluctuations and continuities. Likewise, if there is any truth in this analysis, it helps to explain why both Japanese and western observers feel a mixed sense of familiarity and difference when they contemplate or experience each other's civilizations. They recognize an affinity, another disharmonic or contradictory system, a good deal of equality in practise. Yet they also sense a deep difference. There is indeed a gulf and in certain ways the two civilizations are inversions or mirror images of each other. The two different disharmonic systems are both alike and unalike at the same time.

At a wider level, it is worth being reminded that the 'Us' and 'Them' dichotomy, which Louis Dumont among others exemplifies, is unsatisfactory. ⁶ We all experience it and nearly all of us can see the 'Other' as a complete reversal of ourselves. Hence to see 'India' as part of the 'Orient', as the reverse of ourselves is tempting, as discussion of 'Orientalism' has shown. The simple bifurcation of 'Homo Hierarchicus' and 'Homo Equalis', made not only into a geographical contrast, but also an historical one, the past being 'hierarchical' until the sudden emergence of 'modernity', is very tempting. Most of us stand here and now, and we see 'them', whether in other civilizations or past ages as very different and there is always enough substance in the view to give it an initial plausibility.

What is rarer is to proceed to the second step, that is to see that in both 'Us' and 'Them', whether this is conceived of geographically or temporally, there are contradictions. It needs a special sort of person, living in special conditions, to do so. Here we may be able to guess at something which unites Tocqueville and Beteille. Their experience means that they lived in two worlds, with an allegiance to both. For somewhat different, but overlapping, reasons Tocqueville and Beteille sense the attractions of both hierarchy and equality, and even more importantly sense that a pure state of one or the other is rare. They know from their own experience that there is disharmony, a telling word in Beteille's formulation, or contradiction, in which ideology and practise clash. They are thus able to move beyond the first step of recognizing contrast to the deeper recognition of similarity with difference; that is to the recognition of dialectical tensions and the clash of contradictory forces which gives their work a much more realistic approximation to the movement of societies in history.

Because of his personal and structural position Beteille has been one of the few recent writers to have significantly advanced our understanding of equality and inequality. In this respect, as in others, we are grateful to him for his clear, insightful and beautifully coherent writing which reveals so much about our predicament. Like Tocqueville facing 'America', Beteille shows us in an indirect way the struggles of an upright and sensitive man, deeply imbued with his mother's love of truth and Gandhian ideals of equality, trying to come to terms with the excitement, but also the hypocrisies, dangers and scarcely hidden injuries of the proclaimed 'equalizing' mission of the West. Like other major thinkers he stands between worlds and helps to illuminate our options.
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