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Global turmoil and conflicting hierarchies: An introduction

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Editorial

In the present issue of Intersections, devoted to the theme of shifting hierarchies of our times, our aim is to highlight how the absence, contestation, or unacknowledged presence of hierarchical relations fuel conflicts that contribute to the global turmoil we currently experience in politics and governance, as well as in economic and social life. For social scientists, it is evident that hierarchy is in operation wherever we look, and as recent research and reflection on the topic spell out, hierarchy is about much more than inequality and oppression. While in the liberal political tradition society is modelled as the association of individual, autonomous, equal political subjects, and hierarchical human relations seem to be the antithesis of just that; in many cultural contexts around the world, hierarchical relations are valued as components of a just social order and a moral good (Haynes & Hickel, 2018, p. 2).

Hierarchy, recalling the Greek origins of the word, once denoted the idea of a sacred order – an arrangement in which the laws of the universe and those governing human life stemmed from the same immutable sources. Such worldviews were characteristic of all traditional societies and are still cultivated by our religious traditions. However, the scientific revolution put an end to the security provided by the authority of religion and self-reflection and 'thinking for oneself' have become hallmarks of maturity. Beginning in early modernity, individuals were increasingly tasked with the freedom and responsibility to find their place in life and shape both themselves and society to the best of their knowledge and intentions. This task has proved to be both daunting and liberating. The loss of belief in the legitimacy of traditional hierarchies has erased long-standing privileges and servitude, but with it went the security of following inherited patterns and roles, and even more than that.

If one would like to understand what has been lost and why hierarchical human relations could still have an appeal, a very good place to start is the work of the French anthropologist, Louis Dumont. Dumont dedicated much of his life to studying and comparing the value systems of diverse cultures. He analysed the nature of hierarchy both as a social formation and as an ideational structure and summarised his findings in a monograph, Homo Hierarchicus: the Caste System and its Implications (1970).

Dumont's central thesis in his lengthy monograph was that traditional Indian social hierarchy was the manifest structure of a holistic ideational order.

He stressed that a holistic representation of the world would be necessarily hierarchical, since, in such an outlook, the purpose of the parts 'organically' follows from the purpose of the whole; and then, as long as the various units differ from one another the way persons do, their connection and contribution to the whole will also differ, which inherently gives rise to hierarchy. In a subchapter of Homo Hierarchicus entitled The necessity of hierarchy Dumont employs Parson's arguments about concerted action to substantiate his claim. Parson defines action as activity oriented towards the attainment of goals, and thus involves selective processes relative to those goals. The implication is that, seen in their relation to the attainable goals, all the elements of the processes involved will be evaluated. The elements of the processes could be the necessary materials, the elementary units of action, but also the persons carrying out the actions. All these elements will be evaluated and, as a result, ranked. A further implication of Talcott's thought is that social stability will necessitate integrating the evaluations of the component units into a shared value system (Talcott, 1953, A revised analytical approach to the theory of social stratification). And when an entire society has its values integrated with the help of a grand narrative that organises all the members' purposeful activities into an integrated whole, then the result is a hierarchically organised structure (Dumont, 1970, pp. 19–20).

Dumont's analysis of the traditional holistic outlook has one more feature that differentiates it drastically from the present mindset, and this is the degree to which a society is self-reflexive about its own evaluating mechanisms. In cases where tradition provides an outlook where everything already possesses a place and rank in the cosmos, the value of a thing is embedded in its idea, or conceptual representation, and this Dumont calls a 'value-idea'. To demonstrate how this works, Dumont describes how the hierarchical organisation of parts into a whole is conventionally represented by the image of a living organism, in which the representation of any particular organ is bound up with a particular value. He then asks us to think of our left and right hands and shows how the evaluation of the right being 'better' comes so 'naturally' that we are barely conscious of actively creating the ranking (Dumont, 1980, p. 301).

The second step in Dumont's project was to contrast the ideology of the traditional hierarchical orders with that of modern Western society, founded upon the principle of equal liberty. Dumont observes that although our modern state gains legitimacy by providing an order where each citizen's autonomy is equally protected, it is nevertheless, almost subconsciously, bound up with a holistic image captured in the Fable of the Bees by Mandeville, which teaches us that by pursuing their own interests individuals will, through the 'magical hand' of the market, contribute to the greater good of the entire community (Dumont, 1977, pp. 61–62).

Dumont did not begin with psychoanalytic assumptions but from anthropological inquiry into the value systems of particular cultures; yet he ultimately addressed the non-conscious dimensions of culture. He maintained that although cultural value systems vary, they all fall within 'the human predicament'— the range of possibilities available to Homo sapiens living in groups. This was how he put it:

The unity of mankind, postulated and also verified (slowly and painfully) by anthropology, sets limits to the variation (of value configurations). Each particular configuration of ideas and values is contained with all others in a universal figure of which it is a partial expression. Yet this universal figure is so complex that it cannot be de-

scribed, but only vaguely imagined as a kind of sum integral of all concrete configurations (Dumont, 1980, p. 311).

Dumont's broadly naturalistic anthropological outlook underlies his distinctive comparative method for discerning the 'universal matrix'— the universal constellation of values that encompasses all variations. This requires mapping not only the explicit values of a community but also its unconscious features (Dumont, 1980, p. 311).

Thus, if a culture's ideo-normative setting extols autonomy and self-sufficiency, the significance of interdependence remains unconscious; if it emphasises conformity, rank, and discipline, the desire to do things one's own way lingers beneath the surface. In the end nature will set limits, even if those limits are not known, and hierarchically organized societies somewhere in their configurations will contain a principle of equality, e.g. in the Indian caste system although the dominant mindset was communitarian, everyone had the option to turn their back to the order of the world and live as a 'renouncer', an individual outside the ranks of society (in the analyses of Dumont the Buddha was such), whereas western formally egalitarian systems are fraught with hierarchical structures (class, power, racism) (Dumont, 1970, p. 233).

Another way to put what would also follow from Dumont's conclusions is that no culture can extinguish the manifold human potential. This is what the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Zizek, argues in his latest book, Against Progress (2024). Zizek seems to pick up the thread where Dumont left it. His book unapologetically attacks the fantasy of progress as a linear process that yields constant gains and entails no significant loss. Rejecting linear conceptions of progress, Zizek insists that progress makes sense only as 'the inner development of a system, the gradual actualisation of its potential' (Žižek, 2024, p. 17). Everything, therefore, depends on which system serves as the point of reference. His analysis in his essay on Authority pushes us to consider how the desire to belong to a community leads people to treat their own community as the desired site of progress (Žižek, 2024, pp. 13–14). Such an exclusivist notion of development will be coupled with the fantasy of the perfect community. This community can only fail due to the intruding other, leading to a situation where:

what appears as hindrance to societies full identity with itself is actually its positive condition: by transposing onto X (the Jew) the role of the foreign body which introduces disintegration and antagonism into the social organism, the fantasy-image of society as consistent, harmonious whole is rendered possible (Žižek, 2024, p. 73).

Condemning such fantasies, Zizek affirms passionately that 'in order to survive we need a radical rearrangement of our entire way of life towards some form of global solidarity and cooperation' (Žižek, 2024, p. 19). At the same time, it may come as a surprise that he simultaneously insists on the local and multiple nature of 'progresses', leaving the reader to ponder how these diverse local systems are to submit to the global imperative of survival. What Zizek does emphasise, though, is that the idea of progress in Western thought has traditionally been tied to the ideal of freedom. And if this venture has produced grievances, such as the loss of ontological security, of acknowledged interdependence, of the idea of hierarchy as holism, or the loss of responsibility for doing one's own share in the task of enabling planetary survival, then the notion of progress has to be redefined to tackle all these losses.

Zizek is hardly alone in the critical rethinking of progress. As noted at the outset of this introduction, the anthropologists contributing to the volume, Hierarchy and Value, also argue for the need to redefine our conceptions of freedom and progress.

Invoking Charles Taylor's Sources of the Self, anthropological research affirms the insight that agency — the capacity to make meaningful choices — depends on a worldview. Agency and freedom can only be developed through participation in a community's conception of a meaningful life, even if nowadays this takes the form of being exposed to several competing conceptions. From the perspective of freedom, meaningful hierarchy could be an enabling factor for making the most of one's potential, as well as a hindrance (Haynes & Hickel, 2018, pp. 5–7).

As opposed to Dumont, Haynes and Hickel depart from the definition of hierarchy as holism and as 'encompassment' — the phenomenon when lower, contrasting categories are subsumed within a higher, comprehensive one. Instead, they assert that hierarchy as a structure of ideo-normative values and as a kind of social form need not go together. They believe that a great number of social relations based on asymmetry of power and difference in rank, such as clientelism or seniority, could be satisfactorily analysed without positing an all-encompassing ideological structure.

The term *hierarchy* is also crucial in international relations. In *Hierarchy in International Relations*, David A. Lake proposes investigating hierarchy among states from a relational understanding of authority (Lake, 2009, p. 3). Whereas political philosophers starting from a legalistic conception of authority conceive of international relations as unfolding between formally equal states possessing indivisible sovereignty — limited only by legal institutions of their own creation and thus constituting a fundamentally anarchic system — a relational approach acknowledges and explains empirical patterns of domination and subordination. In a relational approach, the authority to rule stems from the ruler's capacity to uphold a secure order, and subordinate states accept such authority to benefit from the order it provides, in a logic analogous to the social contract in domestic politics. Subordinate states forfeit aspects of their sovereignty in exchange for peaceful order. Once sovereignty is understood as practically divisible, and the authority of dominant states as stemming from their ability to uphold a secure local order, new and important patterns of international relations emerge (Lake, 2009, pp. 1–4).

In sum, what we can learn from recent studies about value systems and social hierarchies at the local and global levels is that, rather than seeing hierarchy as inherently good or bad, we could ask many questions about its nature and effects. Can hierarchy serve the public good? Which hierarchies make sense in terms of personal well-being and public welfare, and which do not? Can a context-specific use of the concept also take local components into account, without losing sight of global structures?

The special issue "Global turmoil and conflicting hierarchies" has brought together scholarly contributions exploring the nature and causes of these phenomena, from researchers based in various countries and working across a wide range of academic disciplines. Despite the diversity of methodological approaches, regional foci, and theoretical frameworks represented, the articles in this issue share a common concern with the concept of hierarchy as it manifests across different societal domains. This shared focus allows the contributions to be grouped along three principal thematic axes, each of which reflects a distinct dimension of hierarchical organisation and its implications.

The first axis focuses on concepts and includes contributions by András Schweitzer, Andrew Richard Ryder, and Áron Tábor. These authors all address recent theoretical developments and global challenges that call for a renewed conceptual engagement with hierarchy. The second axis observes non-Western cases of contested hierarchies,

featuring studies by Márta Mónika Wollner, Karunanithi Gopalakrishnan, and Sumit Kumar, who offer ethnographic and historical perspectives that provincialise Western assumptions about stratification and value. Finally, the third axis focuses on social and policy practices of everyday hierarchies, with contributions by Judit Durst and colleagues, Imen Khemakhem, and Dwi Wahyu Handayani and colleagues, that turn to the lived and institutionalised dimensions of inequality, examining how hierarchical relations are negotiated in contemporary social and policy settings. Together, these contributions offer valuable insights about ongoing transformations in global hierarchies.

András Schweitzer's article Democracy dies in conceptual darkness. How the innocuous left-right metaphor leads to deceptive ideational hierarchies and democratic backsliding investigates how political ideas shape democratic erosion, using Hungary as an emblematic case. Once a regional pioneer in democratisation and later in autocratisation, Hungary illustrates how ideas can drive both processes. From a social constructivist perspective, Schweitzer analyses academic and political narratives of Hungary's post-1989 transformation and how they link political ideologies to democracy. He identifies two narrative groups: mainstream liberal accounts that emphasise democratic decline starting with the second Fidesz government after 2010, and critical anti-capitalist or sovereigntist narratives that claim earlier democratic deficits caused by the liberal ideological project. These narratives, he argues, construct hierarchies that either elevate liberalism or place nationalism above all other ideologies. To counter this, Schweitzer proposes a new model that flattens these hierarchies and positions liberalism, socialism, conservatism, and nationalism as equal. Grounded in the French Revolution ideals – liberty, equality, fraternity – he links them to liberalism, socialism, and nationalism, which together safeguard pluralism, justice, and cohesion, and adds conservatism's emphasis on stability. The resulting tetrahedron presents all four ideologies as equally essential democratic pillars.

Andrew Richard Ryder's A new Social Europe: A Polányian response to turmoil and authoritarianism argues that Europe's current political and economic turmoil stems from a historical reversal of social hierarchy: the inversion of the relationship between the economy and society. During the post-war period of 'embedded liberalism', society and democratic institutions held authority over markets. With the rise of neoliberalism, markets became 'disembedded', empowering financial elites and technocratic bodies like the ECB and IMF, as starkly revealed during the eurozone crisis, when austerity was imposed at the expense of social welfare. Ryder shows how authoritarian populism exploits the resulting grievances: while aligned with neoliberal economic forces, populist leaders redirect anger toward cultural out-groups and claim to embody the 'true will' of the people, creating new political and cultural hierarchies. He calls for a 'New Social Europe' in which social and democratic objectives once again take precedence over market imperatives.

Áron Tábor's analysis Caught in a war of identities: Domestic polarization and the loss of U.S. consensus on the Ukraine conflict examines how a bipartisan consensus in the United States over aid to Ukraine collapsed within two years of Russia's full-scale invasion. In early 2022, Democrats and Republicans alike regarded Russia as a major threat and supported unprecedented levels of military and financial assistance to Ukraine. By the time of the 2024 election campaign, however, this consensus had eroded, with public opinion and elite rhetoric revealing a widening partisan divide. Tábor argues that this breakdown was not simply about differing

cost–benefit assessments of U.S. foreign policy action, but rather the result of an overspill of domestic identity polarisation into foreign policy. Tábor connects two concepts: ontological security and affective polarisation. Ontological security suggests that both states and social groups require a stable sense of Self, and when that identity is threatened, anxieties are externalised into (foreign) policy. Affective polarisation, meanwhile, highlights how U.S. politics has become increasingly driven by partisan identities and animosity toward the out-group rather than policy preferences. When foreign-policy debates are framed in identity terms, Tábor suggests, these two dynamics interact to produce especially sharp divisions. What began as a bipartisan consensus thus shifted into the polarisation effect described by John Zaller, where higher public awareness translated into growing partisan division. The analysis underscores how the resulting lack of a foreign policy consensus severely hinders effective action and weakens the U.S.' position as the global hegemon, thereby eroding current global hierarchies from within.

Márta Mónika Wollner's article Purity/impurity in Islam: Shifting hierarchies between religious and secular attitudes in the case of female genital mutilation / cutting-khifad in Egypt is an in-depth study of how trends within Sunni Muslim religious legal interpretation reflect changing attitudes towards the hierarchical relation between science and faith, and the reconsideration of women's well-being. Examining dozens of fatwas in relation to the ongoing practices, Wollner concludes that while life-determining choices in Egyptian society are still based on religious instruction, the content of such instruction changes as religious scholars and lawmakers incorporate standard scientific evidence on women's health into the construction of religious norms, such as the principle of causing no harm. Wollner likens such a progressive interpretation of the sacred texts to the idea of the Living Constitution and shows how such an interpretation is tied to the desire for modernisation and concern for women's health. At the same time, Wollner highlights how, within fundamentalist Islam, competing narratives emerge that threaten recent legal achievements. Still, even fundamentalist sources endeavour to back up their opinions with scientific reasoning attesting to the rising status of science within the fundamentalist community, as well.

Karunanithi Gopalakrishnan's article, A caste group placed in the lowest rung of social hierarchy in India: Dalits in the past and at present, offers a comprehensive examination of the Dalit communities within the broader framework of hierarchical social organisation in India. Anchored in the concept of caste as a deeply entrenched social hierarchy, the paper explores the historical and contemporary experiences of Dalits, who have long occupied the most marginalised position within this stratified structure. The article critically engages with the caste system, with a particular attention to the concept of 'untouchability', a key mechanism through which hierarchical exclusion has been perpetuated. The paper further examines the emergence and evolution of Dalit movements, highlighting their role in fostering political awareness and collective mobilisation, as well as the constitutional and legal provisions aimed at safeguarding the rights of Dalits, with a focus on affirmative action policies intended to improve their educational attainment and employment opportunities. The article concludes with a sobering assessment: despite constitutional safeguards and various social reforms, the caste-based hierarchical order remains resilient and may continue to adapt and endure within Indian society.

Sumit Kumar's contribution, Decolonising Panchayats in India: Exploring Gand-

hian decentralisation as a mechanism for grassroots involvement, examines why India, despite its long tradition of local governance through the so-called panchayats (five-member village elder assemblies), remains a highly centralised democracy. Kumar argues that colonialism disrupted indigenous institutions like the panchayats, replacing their participatory and conciliatory practices with hierarchical, representative, and often corrupt structures. This has led to declining citizen participation, continued elite capture, and the persistence of discriminatory practices. Using postcolonial theory, Kumar explains how colonisation not only displaced local governance but also reshaped Indian politics to mimic hierarchical Western structures, meanwhile corrupting democratic ideals and embedding systemic corruption and alienation into Indian society. Kumar suggests a Gandhian vision of Gram Swaraj (village self-government) as an alternative: a decentralised, non-violent, participatory democracy; a federation of small village republics where power radiates outward from the individual in concentric circles of governance. The article concludes that decolonising panchayats requires reviving their participatory and conciliatory ethos and harmonising indigenous practices with modern democratic frameworks. This kind of change cannot come from the state. Instead, it would mean empowering individuals first, then radiating power outward to institutions – reversing the hierarchical, state-devolved model currently in place.

The article by Judit Durst, Gergő Pulay, and Balázs Gosztonyi, Hierarchies of clientelism, brokerage, and indebtedness in illiberal Hungary, examines hierarchical dependency relations in contemporary rural Hungary. Situated within a broader collective ethnographic project, the study develops a conceptual framework to analyse the forms of exchange relations – particularly clientelism, brokerage, and indebtedness – that structure everyday life under conditions of economic precarity and political illiberalism. The authors argue that these hierarchical relationships are not merely functional or instrumental, but also deeply embedded in local moral economies, where personal favours are exchanged for access to impersonal public services. Working-class and marginalised individuals make economic choices that are deeply entangled with hierarchies of power and obligation. In these settings, clientelist relations, often mediated by local brokers, serve both as a mechanism of survival and as a means through which existing social hierarchies are maintained or reconfigured. The study reveals how such dependencies are not static but evolve dynamically in response to broader socio-economic transformations. Durst et al. argue that the ongoing restructuring of Hungarian capitalism – three decades after the end of state socialism – has not led to the erosion of hierarchical dependencies but rather to their diversification. The authors conclude that these reconfigured hierarchies of dependence represent a key mechanism of social reproduction in rural Hungary, sustaining inequalities while also providing a fragile form of security in a context marked by declining welfare provision and weakening institutional support.

Imen Khemakhem's *Policy monitoring and power hierarchies in Hungarian Roma integration: The Roma Civil Monitor, the Hungarian government and the European Commission* analyse how hierarchical relations shape Roma inclusion strategies in Hungary. The analysis examines the interactions between the Hungarian government, the European Commission (EC), and Roma civil society organisations (CSOs), using the Roma Civil Monitor (RCM) as a case study. Positioned within EU frameworks such as the Open Method of Coordination, the National Strategy for Roma Integration has yielded limited progress while poverty and segregation persist. The article traces two hierarchical

axes: supranational–national, where the EU pressures states but lacks deep contextual leverage; and national–civil society, where the Hungarian government restricts critical NGOs (e.g., the 2017 foreign-funded NGOs law; biased grantmaking), pushing them to seek influence in Brussels. Roma participation often becomes tokenistic, and civil society itself is hierarchical, with Roma-led groups marginalised. Applying Nancy Fraser's framework, Khemakhem argues that policies stress economic redistribution while neglecting cultural recognition and political representation, reinforcing injustices. Genuine inclusion requires stronger accountability and real Roma leadership.

Finally, the article by Dwi Wahyu Handayani, Amalinda Savirani and Maharani Hapsari, Discourse hierarchy on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) for persons with disabilities. A case study on the GESI WASH Program in healthcare facilities in Bandar Lampung city, Indonesia critically investigates the hierarchical structuring of discourses surrounding inclusive development, particularly as they relate to persons with disabilities within the WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) sector. The study foregrounds the concept of discourse hierarchy to unpack how power relations shape the categorisation, representation, and treatment of disability within development interventions. Employing Michel Foucault's framework of discourse analysis, the study interrogates the regulatory and disciplinary mechanisms through which certain truths about inclusivity are constructed, legitimised, and maintained. Central to this process is the hierarchical positioning of people with disabilities as passive recipients of inclusion rather than as autonomous agents within the development paradigm. Focusing on the city of Bandar Lampung, the study uncovers how the GESI WASH program, while ostensibly aimed at promoting inclusion, reproduces subtle forms of exclusion. The findings reveal that such discourse hierarchies are not merely rhetorical but materially consequential. By privileging technocratic narratives and development logics that frame disability as a problem to be solved, the program inadvertently marginalises those it seeks to empower. In conclusion, Dwi et al. argue that inclusive development must move beyond symbolic incorporation and critically engage with the hierarchies embedded in discourse.

The special issue concludes with a book review written by Kinga Soós, who examines Amitav Ghosh's Smoke and Ashes through the lens of hierarchy and power. In her piece titled Narcoarchy: Opium as the source of hegemony, she highlights how Ghosh traces the opium trade as a mechanism through which global hierarchies were constructed and maintained, enabling Western empires and later American elites to convert control over narcotics into economic, political, and moral dominance. Soós emphasises that opium reinforced unequal structures between empire and colony, rulers and coerced labourers, while simultaneously eroding the sovereignty and social order of Qing China. The review shows how narratives of free trade and civilizational superiority concealed these asymmetries. By framing opium as central to both historical and contemporary power relations, Soós underscores the enduring logic of 'narcoarchy' as a foundation of global hierarchy.

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