

Source : « Dumont, Fernand (1927-1997) » dans John R. Shook (editor), *The Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers*, Tome II, Bristol, Thoemmes, 2005 : 677-680.

DUMONT, Fernand (1927-97)

Fernand Dumont was a philosopher deeply inspired by sociology, a discipline he taught all his life at Université de Laval in Québec, Canada, and above all, he was a great intellectual in the French tradition and a recognized master for generations of students. He was French Canada's foremost intellectual for over forty years.

Fernand Dumont was born on 24 June 1927 in Montmorency, a small working-class town near Québec City, and he died on 1 May 1997 in Québec City. He received his education at Petit Séminaire de Québec (receiving a BA), and at Université de Laval where he studied social sciences. He later went to Paris and registered at La Sorbonne to study sociology, psychology, epistemology, and philosophy with Georges Gurwitsch, Lucien Goldman (his doctoral thesis supervisor), and Gaston Bachelard. He received the *certificat d'études supérieures en psychologie générale et psychologie sociale*, and a PhD in sociology from the University of Paris in 1967. In 1955 Dumont was appointed professor of sociology at Université de Laval, and he held this position until his death. He became the Director of the department of sociology and anthropology in 1963, and Director of the Institut supérieur des sciences humaines in 1967.

Over the years Dumont achieved international recognition for his works on culture, religion, and epistemology of science. He occasionally taught at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris and served as President of the International Association of French-speaking Sociologists. Dumont received many prestigious awards: the Molson and the Governor General awards in Canada, the Leon Gérin and the Prix David awards in Québec, to mention a few.

Dumont authored sixteen books; it is difficult to classify his works in precise terms or areas. He contributed to epistemology of

science; more precisely of economics (1970), sociology (1973), and theology (1988). He proposed an original theory of culture (1968, 1981, 1987) written in philosophical rather than in strict sociological terms, and he wrote strong works in sociology as well as inspired by philosophy (1974, *L'Avenir de la mémoire*, 1995). He also edited (alone or with colleagues) seventeen other books on ideologies, youth, religion, culture, including a handbook on medical anthropology and another on social problems. All these books are related to his personal perspective which consists of interpreting the contemporary world; many of them are case studies that illustrate the fruitfulness of his thoughts. He founded a research institute on culture (Institut Québécois de Recherche sur la Culture), and a multidisciplinary scholarly review *Recherches Sociographiques* (with Y. Martin and J.-C. Falardeau) on Québec studies.

The son of a textile worker, he experienced in his life the distance between social classes, and between high and popular cultures, as revealed by the title of his autobiography (1997). He wrote that he has been unable to leave school. "The real function of the school, from the primary level to University, is to put apart, to transplant the child in another world, far from pretending to initiate someone in life. Such a distance generates self consciousness." (p. 186) Distance is a key word that helps us to understand Dumont's conception of culture as *horizon* and *milieu*, developed in his master book *Le Lieu de l'homme* (1968).

Dumont distinguishes between primary culture and secondary culture (*culture première* and *culture seconde*), not to be confused with popular and high cultures. The primary culture is a milieu, a set of models that orient daily life. Men and women are closely embedded in complex social networks, they make things, they build villages and cities, and they raise a family. But they are not confined to their milieu, because they are able to take some distance, to interpret the world,

to build a secondary culture. Individuals develop a historical consciousness, they adhere to ideologies, they create knowledge, they develop cultural works that incarnate a significant world, they communicate with others, and build shared values. Ideologies, artists' productions, and learned works are different modes of production of culture. Dumont proposed the concept of *dédoublement*, a French word which characterizes the construction process by creating a distance.

Dumont (1981) distinguishes three modes of thought: that of operation, of action, and of interpretation. Dumont's writings belong to the interpretation mode of thought where the subject recognizing his own singularity brings to the world a meaning inscribed in rituals and production. For Dumont, society is not like an inert material because we have an experience of it. "La société n'est pas analogue de la matière inerte. Nous ne la percevons pas, nous en avons l'expérience." Society is not a system, but a set of practices of interpretation (often in conflicts) that are working toward its own integration. This perspective leads Dumont (1974) to the study of ideologies. Ideologies are different definitions of a situation and are oriented toward social action. In that sense, ideologies are symbolic productions different from myths; myths mix up two different temporalities (past and present) but ideologies, on the contrary, separate them. This separation characterizes also history as discipline, where each new generation feels the obligation to rewrite national history. For Dumont, social conditions are open to diverse readings, but ideologies bring out different meaning because of the different situations or viewpoints of their producers. This is a major aspect to Dumont's contribution to the analysis of the ideological phenomena. He speaks of a plurality of definitions but also of a plurality of *définisseurs* (which may be translated as defining subject) often in conflict. In this perspective, one cannot speak of *the end of ideology* and he takes issue with the notion

of ideology as deformed image of reality or as *fausse conscience*. The purpose of an ideology is not to develop knowledge about the world but to provide meaning to collective action.

In his works, Dumont distinguishes truth and relevance, a distinction that allows him to separate science from ideology. Truth refers to scientific knowledge, thoughts, operationalization, objectivity. Relevance refers to what makes sense for individuals, and Dumont also believes that knowledge should have some sense for individuals. In this respect, one can speak of the relevance of science and knowledge, an aspect important for him in social sciences and philosophy.

Dumont contributes in his works to the study of social change in French Canada, and especially the emergence of Québec as a global society inside Canada. He proposed important conceptual tools for the study of all global societies, a classic concept of the French school of sociology. All societies must develop political institutions: modes of political and economic regulation that define a political community. But societies are also structured as people grouping by common reference (not to be confused with a reference group). This approach is illustrated in his theory of the nation. Instead of defining the nation by referring to properties or objective traits (in the tradition of beginning twentieth century, as illustrated by André Siegfried), he suggested to characterize it as a *constructed reference*, based on social mechanisms like ideologies, historiography, literature. "A nation is above all the social construction of its members." (*Raisons communes*, 1995, p 94-5) For Dumont, social classes, defined as a community of situations in society, are also an important grouping by common reference. Frontiers, more than internal characteristics are structuring social classes. But these frontiers are not mainly given by objective criteria like occupation or income. These criteria must be transformed into signs – must be interpreted – and social classes are in this perspective cultural form. "Language, ritual

all kinds of discourses contribute to integrate us in a nation, a cultural group, a political community, a class, a generation. They offer tools to develop our behaviour and thoughts, but also to develop a reference that locates us in history that gives a shared identity." (p. 100)

Dumont wrote a scholarly masterpiece on the transformation of the French Canadian nation and the development of the Québec society, a book not only on the emergence of a new and original society in North America, but also a study which will help to understand and interpret national identity in the contemporary world (1993). Dumont states that, from time to time, all societies have to rebuild their own foundations in order to recognize the emergence of new realities. The process is clearly at work in contemporary Europe, for example. French Canada offers an exemplar case of this process of *refoundation*. The result is emergence of different new national entities in New England's former *petits Canadas*, fragmented French Canadian communities and contemporary *nation québécoise*. Many of his writings help to distinguish often confused concepts: nationalism, national sentiment, patriotism, civic culture.

In the last years of his life, Dumont wrote a fascinating and very personal book, both a sociological analysis of religion in contemporary societies and an essay on faith (*Une foi partagée*, 1996). He also prepared the final edition of all the poems he wrote during his life (*La Part de l'ombre. Poèmes 1952-1995*, 1996) and he had time to complete the writing of his memoirs (1997). Philosopher and sociologist, Dumont was an unclassifiable great writer.

As few publications of Dumont are available in English, Weinstein's *Culture Critique: Fernand Dumont and New Quebec Sociology* (1985) will help to introduce readers to his thought.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

L'Analyse des structures sociales régionales,

- with Yves Martin (Québec, 1963).
Pour la conversion de la pensée chrétienne (Montréal, 1964).
Le Lieu de l'homme. La culture comme distance et mémoire (Montréal, 1968).
La Dialectique de l'objet économique (Paris, 1970).
La Vigile du Québec (Montréal, 1971).
 Trans., *The Vigil of Quebec* (Toronto, 1974).
Chantiers. Essais sur la pratique des sciences de l'homme (Montréal, 1973).
Les Idéologies (Paris, 1974).
L'Anthropologie en l'absence de l'homme (Paris, 1981).
Le Sort de la culture (Montréal, 1987).
L'Institution de la théologie (Paris, 1988).
Genèse de la société québécoise (Montréal, 1993).
Raisons communes (Montréal, 1995).
L'Avenir de la mémoire (Québec, 1995).
Une foi partagée (Montréal, 1996).
La Part de l'ombre. Poèmes 1952-1995 (Montréal, 1996).
Récit d'une émigration (Montréal, 1997).
Un Témoin de l'homme. Entretiens colligés et présentés par Serge Cantin (Montréal, 2000).

Further Reading

- Dumais, Alfred. "Fernand Dumont, sociologue," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 55 (1999): 3-18.
 "Fernand Dumont," *Voix et images* 27 (Autumn 2001). Issue devoted to Dumont.
 Gagnon, Nicole. "Fernand Dumont et la conscience historique," *Possibles* 18 (1994): 126-36.
 Langlois, Simon, and Yves Martin, eds. *L'Horizon de la culture. Hommage à Fernand Dumont* (Québec, 1995). Contains a bibliography of Dumont's writings.
 Lucier, Pierre. *La Foi comme héritage et projet dans l'œuvre de Fernand Dumont* (Québec, 1999).

DUMONT

- “Mémoire de Fernand Dumont,”
Recherches sociographiques 42, 2 (2001).
Issue devoted to Dumont.
- “Présence de Fernand Dumont,” *Carrefour*
21, 1 (1999). Issue devoted to Dumont.
- “Présence et pertinence de Fernand
Dumont,” *Bulletin d'histoire politique* 9
(Autumn 2000). Special issue devoted to
Dumont.
- Warren, Jean-Philippe. *Un Supplément
d'âme. Les intentions primordiales de
Fernand Dumont (1947-1970)* (Québec,
1998).
- Weinstein, Michael A. *Culture Critique:
Fernand Dumont and New Québec
Sociology* (New York, 1985).

Simon Langlois