Introduction: sociology and its history

This book has two main goals. The first is to explore the meaning and significance of the constellation of ideas in Durkheim's work that is often characterized as his "social realism" – i.e., the view, epitomized in *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* (1895), that social phenomena should be studied *comme des choses*, as real, concrete things, subject to the laws of nature and discoverable by scientific reason. The second, subsidiary goal is to exemplify a particular way of thinking and speaking about the history of sociological theory, one that might best be described as "historicist," "nominalist," and/or "pragmatist." For me, the first goal has always been the most important. But since so much of what I have to say about Durkheim presupposes some grasp of my views on sociology and its history, this introduction will begin with a brief explanation of the second.

In a famous essay published in 1984, Richard Rorty suggested that we think of the history of ideas as comprising different kinds of "conversations" that we imagine and reconstruct, sometimes between ourselves and classic writers of the past, and sometimes among the classic writers themselves. In "rational reconstructions," for example, we imagine and then converse with an "ideally reasonable and educable Durkheim" – e.g., the Durkheim who speaks *our* language, who might be brought to describe himself as having overstated the "objectivity" of social facts, the "normality" of crime, or the "pathology" of the forced division of labor. Once our concepts and language are thus imposed on Durkheim, and he has been brought to accept such a new description of what he meant or did, he becomes one of us, our contemporary, a fellow-citizen, a colleague in our disciplinary matrix (1984: 51–2). The goal of such "rational reconstructions," Rorty tells us, is *reassurance* or *self-justification* – i.e., our quite natural and reasonable desire to see the history of sociological theory as "a long conversational interchange"

in a fairly stable idiom, and thus to assure ourselves that "there has been rational progress in the course of recorded history – that we differ from our ancestors on grounds which our ancestors could be led to accept" (1984: 51). I take this to be the kind of reconstruction in which most sociologists are engaged when they write or speak about Marx, Durkheim, and/or Weber.

As an historian, of course, I sometimes find such reconstructions hopelessly anachronistic (Jones 1977: 282–9). More recently, however, I've come to agree with Rorty that this kind of *self-conscious* anachronism has a kind of justification. When theorists say (anachronistically) that Durkheim anticipated or adumbrated ideas of which he cannot have been aware, they (presumably) mean that, in an imagined conversation with present-day theorists about whether or not he should have held certain other views, Durkheim would have been driven back on a premise that he never formulated, dealing with a topic he never considered – a premise that might have to be suggested to him by a friendly rational reconstructor (Rorty 1984: 53). For all their anachronism, therefore, rational reconstructions at least serve to expand the circle of what Rorty has called "edifying conversational partners," embracing the mighty dead as well as those still living; and as long as sociologists *are aware* that Durkheim is thus being described as holding beliefs he never held, and performing actions he never performed, such imaginary conversations seem unobjectionable, and might be extremely useful.

But there is also a second, more genuinely "historical" type of reconstruction. Here we are less interested in the Durkheim who might be led to converse with us than with imagined conversations between Durkheim and his contemporaries, in *their own* language rather than ours – in short, to embrace the historicist commitment to understand the past, in so far as it is possible, "in its own terms." As Rorty has observed, the value of *these* reconstructions lies, not in reassurance or self-justification, but in *self-knowledge* or *self-awareness* – i.e., "in the fact that, instead of supplying us with our usual and carefully contrived pleasures of recognition, [the classic writers] enable us to stand back from our own beliefs and the concepts we use to express them, perhaps forcing us to reconsider, to recast or even . . . to abandon some of our current beliefs in the light of these wider perspectives" (Skinner 1984: 202, 197–8; Jones and Kibbee 1993: 156). To read these more *historical* reconstructions, to imagine these conversations that take place in an entirely different idiom, is

quite literally to encounter other vocabularies – many of them impressive enough to induce doubt and reflection about our own.

Among the most distinguished examples of such genuinely historical reconstructions are the works of Quentin Skinner, who has followed the lead of philosophers like J. L. Austin (1975) and R. G. Collingwood (1939) by encouraging us to ask what the classic writer "was doing" in saying what he said, and reconstructing the questions to which the classic text was a putative answer. Consider the effort of Descartes, both in the *Discourse* and in the *Meditations*, to vindicate the idea of certain, indubitable knowledge. Why, Skinner asks, was this an issue for him at all? Since Descartes was an epistemologist, and since certainty is one of the central problems of epistemology, more traditional historians of ideas have scarcely acknowledged the question, concentrating instead on what Descartes actually said about how we can achieve such certainty. But this, Skinner objects, is an instance of "insufficient puzzlement" – i.e., by leaving us without any sense of the specific question to which Descartes may have intended his doctrine of certainty as a solution, this traditional approach also leaves us without any understanding of what he may have been *doing* in presenting his doctrine in the precise form in which he chose to present it (1988: 282–3). In fact, it now seems clear that Descartes was responding to the Pyrrhonian skepticism of writers like Montaigne, an action that helps to explain both the character of his anti-skeptical arguments and the strategies he used to advance them. Yet until scholars like Richard Popkin (1969) and E. M. Curley (1978) became "sufficiently puzzled" about the problem to which Descartes was responding, both the arguments and the strategies remained opaque because the question itself had never been raised.

Similarly, there has been no lack of discussion of Durkheim's social realism in the secondary literature. Since Durkheim was a sociologist, and since a commitment to the "reality" of social phenomena seems almost an unquestioned article of faith among sociologists, there has been little discussion of *why* this was a commitment for Durkheim in the first place. The conversation has focused instead on the primarily methodological issue of *how* social facts might be studied *comme des choses*. Though hardly silent on Durkheim's social realism, therefore, sociologists have in this sense been "insufficiently puzzled" about the question to which social realism was presumably an answer – the problem for which it was

offered as a solution. In short, we have lacked an account of what the early Durkheim was *doing* in developing his realist social theory between the early 1880s and the publication of *Le Suicide* in 1897.

What was Durkheim doing? What was the question for which social realism was Durkheim's answer? Briefly, I will suggest that the question was not unlike that to which Plato replied in the early Socratic dialogues. There Socrates interrogates various Athenians concerning the nature of some virtue, repeatedly entrapping them in contradictions and inconsistencies. The reasonable first impression here is that Plato's intention was to contrast the rigor and precision of Socrates' arguments with the sloppiness and stupidity of those of the Athenians. But so frequently does this pattern recur (and so determinedly confused are some of Socrates' interlocutors) that the way to an alternative interpretation seems open. One such alternative argument is that Plato was pointing to a state of incoherence in the moral language of Athenian culture – i.e., that the conceptual apparatus which the Athenians had inherited from the societies represented in the Homeric epics (societies based primarily on kinship) was simply inadequate in the quite different context of the Greek *polis*. It was this linguistic incoherence and its resulting tensions, so the argument goes, which were explored artistically in the tragedies of Sophocles; and at least one purpose of the early Platonic dialogues would thus have been to purge the Greek language of these Homeric survivals, and to replace them with Plato's own, more coherent and well-ordered normative vocabulary (MacIntyre 1981: 131–45).

In the argument that follows, I will suggest that something similar was at stake in Durkheim's effort to contrive the language of social realism. It is impossible to read the lectures that posthumously became *L'Education morale* (1925) and *L'Evolution pédagogique en France* (1938), for example, without becoming aware of Durkheim's searing contempt for the vocabulary of Cartesian metaphysics. This is not to say that Durkheim considered himself anything but a rationalist; on the contrary, he regarded Cartesianism as "deeply rooted in our national thinking," and "one of the characteristic traits of the French mind" (1961: 253). But Durkheim also considered the conceptual apparatus of Cartesian rationalism – in which complexity was consistently reduced to simplicity, the concrete to the abstract, observation and experience to logic and reasoning, things to ideas – as deeply problematic, admirably suited, as he said, to the mechan-

ical, mathematical certainties of the 17th century, but completely inadequate when applied to the social and ethical demands of advanced industrial societies. In particular, Durkheim regarded modern societies as enormously complex wholes which, subjected to the principles of an "oversimplified rationalism," would be reduced to their constituent elements, and thus deprived of any objective moral foundation whatsoever. In an age of individualism, egoism, and anomie, it was essential that the institutions of the Third Republic become the primary focus of a citizen's duties and obligations; and no "mental construct," no Cartesian *idée claire et simple*, could ever become the object of such unqualified allegiance. "It would be absurd," Durkheim insisted, "to sacrifice the real, concrete, and living being that we are to a purely verbal artifact. We can only dedicate ourselves to society if we see in it a moral power more elevated than ourselves" (1961: 257).

For Durkheim, this was why social phenomena should be understood *comme des choses*, as real, concrete things, subject to the laws of nature, resistant to human will, and discoverable by scientific reason through their properties of externality and constraint. Sociologists, of course, describe this as a *methodological* injunction, one that has become a standard part of most introductory sociology textbooks. The point of my argument, however, will be that Durkheim's interests and purposes were at least as much *moral* and *political* – i.e., to construct a normative vocabulary, a new way of speaking about duties, obligations, and ideals that would take the place of the Cartesian idiom. Like Plato, therefore, Durkheim was pointing to a general state of crisis in the moral language of his culture, and attempting to replace it with metaphors more adequate to the needs of his time.

If we think of Durkheim in this way – i.e., as someone cobbling together a language rather than discovering something about Nature – his social realism appears less as a coherent doctrine or theory than as an assortment of rhetorical strategies. On the one hand, it described society as not only "similar to" nature, but as itself a *real, natural thing, a part of nature*, and subject to its laws. On the other hand, this same vocabulary insisted that society is a *particular, distinctive* part of nature, a reality *sui generis*, irreducible to the laws discovered by psychologists or biologists. There was always a precarious tension, if not conflict, between these two metaphors – the former vulnerable to the criticism that it explained social

phenomena by referring to non-social (e.g., psychological and biological) causes, and the latter to the charge that sociology is not a "science" at all. Durkheim's description of society as an external, regulative force, epitomized in his treatment of anomic suicide, thus had to be balanced with his depiction of society as the source of positive, collective ideals, exemplified in his treatment of aboriginal religion. If Durkheim often spoke like an empiricist when attacking Descartes in *L'Education morale*, he could also sound like a rationalist when criticizing Mill in *Les Règles* (indeed, by 1897, he would embrace the "rationalist empiricism" of Hippolyte Taine). Finally, if this ingenious manipulation of these multiple rhetorical strategies is one measure of the extent of Durkheim's achievement, it has also contributed to the linguistic incoherence of subsequent sociological debate – including disagreement over the meaning and significance of Durkheim's works.

This essay is an effort to reconstruct Durkheim's shaping of this vocabulary. In chapter 1, for example, I describe the social, political, and religious context of the Third Republic, with special emphasis on the years 1879–85, during which the republican project of laicizing French education was effected. In one sense, this "reform that contained all other reforms" became the vehicle whereby sociology was institutionalized in French primary and secondary education; but in a larger sense, this final collapse of the Church as a source of authority created the moral vacuum that social realism was supposed to fill. In this sense, I shall argue, sociology was less an end in itself than a means to the achievement of moral and political goals. In chapter 2, I discuss Durkheim's views on the history and theory of moral education, particularly as reflected in the lectures posthumously published as *L'Evolution pédagogique en France* (1938) and *L'Education morale* (1925). These lectures represent a relatively late stage in the development of Durkheim's thought, and they are introduced early in my book for two reasons. First, they provide us with Durkheim's most self-conscious reflections on the policies of educational reform described in the chapter that immediately precedes them. Second, if – as I have suggested – Durkheim's social realism constitutes a vocabulary constructed to serve quite concrete interests and purposes, these lectures afford the clearest sense of what these interests and purposes were. In effect, they provide the context within which the development of that vocabulary – the subject of the subsequent chapters – makes the most sense. By my

describing these commitments up front, in considerable detail, the reader will be better prepared to understand the significance of arguments made in Durkheim's earlier works.

In chapter 3, I return to a more conventional, chronological approach to the development of Durkheim's thought, discussing André Lalande's recently discovered lecture notes from Durkheim's philosophy course taught at the Lycée de Sens in 1883–4. These notes make it clear that, as late as 1884, Durkheim had not yet embraced anything resembling his later social realism. On the contrary, his views on morality and society seem to approximate the neo-critical individualism of Charles Renouvier's *Science de la morale* (1869). The Sens lectures also provide a context within which to discuss the influence of Durkheim's teachers at the Ecole Normale Supérieure – the historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1830–89) and the philosopher Emile Boutroux (1845–1921) – as well as Charles Renouvier (1815–1903). The same lectures set the stage for chapter 4, where I discuss Durkheim's important visit to Berlin, Marburg, and Leipzig in 1885 and 1886, which brought him into contact with German political economy, jurisprudence, and most importantly, the experimental psychology and ethics of Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920). By the time Durkheim returned, he seemed to have lost much of his interest in Renouvier's ethics (although not in Renouvier), and had begun to construct the vocabulary that would inform *L'Evolution pédagogique en France* and *L'Education morale*. These views are already evident in Durkheim's two doctoral theses – i.e., the Latin thesis on Montesquieu (1892) and *De la division du travail social* (1893), as well as *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* (1895). It was the latter work that embroiled Durkheim in the famous controversy with Jean-Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904), his most formidable critic; and it was in the context of his response to Tarde and the early stages of his involvement in *L'Affaire Dreyfus* that Durkheim revisited the works of Rousseau, offering a lecture course on *Le Contrat social* that was clearly instrumental in developing the powerful social realism of *Le Suicide* (1897) and later works. The discussion of the Latin thesis, the quarrel with Tarde, and the lectures on Rousseau thus complete chapter 5 – Durkheim's fragmentary notes on *Emile* completing the circle, recalling Durkheim's lectures on the history and theory of moral education and their role within the laicizing reforms of the Third Republic.

As this brief summary suggests, I've avoided (except where

particularly pertinent) any detailed discussion of the events of Durkheim's life, as well as thematic summaries of his most familiar works (of which many excellent examples already exist in the secondary literature). Instead, I've focused on texts that are perhaps less familiar to sociologists (e.g., the Sens lectures, book reviews, the "German" essays of 1887, the Latin thesis, the lectures on *Le Contrat social* and *Emile*, etc.) and those intellectual influences (e.g., Fustel, Boutroux, Renouvier, Wundt, Montesquieu, Tarde, Rousseau, etc.) that encourage us to see Durkheim's project as the metaphorical construction of a new moral vocabulary for the Third Republic. In short, I've tried to reconstruct an imagined conversation between Durkheim, his contemporaries, and his antecedents. In Skinner's formulation, it is the context of the things that he himself might, at least in principle, have accepted as a description of what he was doing. (It is also, I should add, what he rather clearly *did* say he was doing in *L'Evolution pédagogique en France* and *L'Education morale*.) Most importantly, because this is a self-consciously "historical" – by contrast with "rational" – reconstruction, the Durkheim who emerges from this re-description is not necessarily "one of us," not a "fellow citizen" or "participant in the same disciplinary matrix." On the contrary, he is concerned with the quite specific and contingent problems of the Third Republic, and social realism is described as an answer to *his* questions, not to *ours*. Why, then, one might ask, should we continue to read Durkheim's works? And why in particular should we re-describe them in this historicist manner? How is the promise of "self-knowledge" or "self-awareness" to be realized in more concrete terms? Recalling that to read Durkheim in this way is to encounter vocabularies other than one's own, I suggest in my conclusion that intellectual history might afford a catalyst for what Rorty has called an "ironist" perspective on our current intellectual commitments, one that would encourage some salutary doubt about our "final vocabularies." I can think of few things that would be more useful.

CHAPTER I

The reform that contained all other reforms

"When a people has achieved a state of equilibrium and maturity," Durkheim observed in his seventh lecture on moral education, "when the various social functions, at least temporarily, are articulated in an ordered fashion, when the collective sentiments in their essentials are incontestable for the great majority of people, then the preference for rule and order is naturally preponderant." It was this moral situation, for example, that had characterized Rome under Augustus, and France under Louis XIV. By contrast, "in times of flux and change, the spirit of discipline cannot preserve its moral vigor since the prevailing system of rules is shaken, at least in some of its parts. At such times, it is inevitable that we feel less keenly the authority of a discipline that is, in fact, attenuated" (1961: 100–1).

Durkheim had no illusions about the type of society or historical period in which he was living: "Now," he emphasized, "we are going through precisely one of these critical phases. Indeed, history records no crisis as serious as that in which European societies have been involved for more than a century. Collective discipline in its traditional form has lost its authority, as the divergent tendencies troubling the public conscience and the resulting general anxiety demonstrate. Consequently, the spirit of discipline itself has lost its ascendancy" (1961: 101). As we shall see, this was the problem for which Durkheim's solution was social realism. But in order to understand this solution – and why it *seemed* such a plausible solution to Durkheim – we must first have some grasp of the problem itself.

THE COALITION OF THE THIRD ESTATE

In 1872 the population of France was 36,103,000. By 1886, it had risen to 38,517,000, an annual increase of only 89,700. The birth rate had begun a steady fall, while the death rate would scarcely vary

until the end of the century. By the early 1890s there would be more deaths than births, an event so unprecedented that alarmed onlookers dubbed it the "stagnation." The traditional, fertile, Catholic family had confronted its modern, Malthusian counterpart. "Parents," Mayeur and Rebérioux have observed, "calculated and looked ahead, concerned to rise socially and to provide a good future for their children. This 'bourgeois' conception of the family spread progressively to all layers of society, reflecting the aspirations of individualism and egalitarianism" – a movement which particularly affected the lower middle class (1984: 43).

The ideological response to this stagnation was mixed. Local authorities and the French Parliament remained utterly indifferent, oblivious to the notion that the state should assist the family in a liberal social order. The disciples of Frédéric Le Play, in *La Réforme social*, combined the defense of the family with "counter-revolutionary" demands, blaming the Civil Code, compulsory sharing, and revolutionary individualism while simultaneously extolling the virtues of the male-dominated family. These Le Playists exerted considerable influence on the conservative right and "social" Catholicism, but otherwise remained an isolated intellectual current. Elisée Reclus' *Nouvelle Géographie universelle* (1877) reflected the more widespread sentiment that population decline indicated a "complete lack of confidence in the future," a social malaise or even national decadence (Lukes 1972: 195). By 1896, Jacques Bertillon had founded the Alliance pour L'Accroisement de la Population Française, and in his classic study of suicide just one year later, Durkheim insisted that both the decrease in births and the increase in suicides were the consequence of a decline in domestic feelings, an increase in migration from the country to the towns, the break-up of the traditional family, and the "cold wind of egoism" that had ensued (1888: 463; 1897: 198–202; Lukes 1972: 194–5).

In fact, from 1871 on, 100,000 people left the countryside each year for the towns, a consequence of the difficulties of agriculture, the increase in agricultural yields (which deprived some peasants of their jobs), the decline of rural industries, better transportation, military service, and higher, more regular urban wages (Mayeur and Rebérioux 1984: 44). But despite the fact that any agglomeration of more than 2,000 inhabitants was called a "town," the urban population remained relatively small, forming 31.1 percent of the population in 1872 and only 40.9 percent by 1901 – a growth rate