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0521842662 - Durkheim's Ghosts: Cultural Logics and Social Things

Charles Lemert

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Durkheim's Ghosts

Durkheim's Ghosts is a fascinating presentation of the tradition of social theory influenced by Emile Durkheim's thinking on the social foundations of knowledge. From Saussure and Lévi-Strauss to Foucault, Bourdieu, and Derrida, today's criticisms of modern politics and culture owe an important, if unacknowledged, debt to Durkheim. These engaging and innovative essays by leading sociologist Charles Lemert bring together his writings on the contributions of French social theory past and present. Rather than merely interpret the theories, Lemert uses them to explore the futures of sociology, social theory, and culture studies. *Durkheim's Ghosts* offers the reader original insights into Durkheim's legacy and the wider French traditions in the cultural and social sciences. Of special note is the book's new and exciting theory of culture and semiotics. Provocative, scholarly, imaginative, and ambitious this book will be invaluable to anyone interested in social theory, culture, and the intellectual history of modern times.

CHARLES LEMERT is Andrus Professor of Sociology at Wesleyan University, Connecticut. His many books in cultural and social theory include *Muhammad Ali: Trickster in the Culture of Irony*, *French Sociology: Rupture and Renewal since 1968*, *Michel Foucault: Social Theory and Transgression*, and *Social Things: An Introduction to the Sociological Life*. His book *Social Theory* is a best-selling text in the field.

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In memory of Philippe Besnard,
with thanksgiving for a life-time of contributions
to the scholarly study of Durkheim.

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Preface

What follows is a book both original and composed out of the past. *Durkheim's Ghosts* had started in the mind's eye as a collection of previously published writings on and about French social theory. Then, in an attempt to introduce, ultimately to frame the essays and selections, another book emerged, superimposed on the original idea – which of course had the effect of making it something other than I thought it would be.

All but one of the shorter essays set before the main chapters are new to *Durkheim's Ghosts*. So too are the first two chapters – the one is meant to present the ghost-theme as a serious idea, while also taking on several of the more foolish dismissals of French social theory; the other new chapter, the second, means to establish a stake in the controversies surrounding the social study of culture. Together, they and the other new essays serve, not just to set up the previously published writing, but to form an argument to the effect that, if culture is a semiotic (and the study of culture is a semiology), then one has little choice but to take seriously the French who, more than any other enduring tradition of social studies, have invented, criticized, revised, and reinvented the idea of culture studies (by whatever name) as a study of meaningful signs.

I use the terms *semiotics* and *semiology* interchangeably for the most part. Umberto Eco reminds that while *semiology* was the term used by Saussure and those (including Lévi-Strauss and Barthes) who followed him, *semiotics* was the term used by Charles Sanders Peirce. I treat them as roughly equivalent less to ignore the more mathematical and formal contributions of Peirce (who in fact, stands behind the discussions of Eco) than to lessen the impression of a difference. If one must be made, I think it best to reserve *semiotics* for the social facts of which culture itself is composed, and *semiology* for the study of the culture (though I admit that this distinction is not held to consistently between the new and older texts). Also as to format, whenever I give the French title to a text, the English version is offered somewhere close by. The dates of publication for books are generally of the original French text unless

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otherwise indicated. Also, I should add that, for various reasons (some of them slightly transgressive), I do not offer citations to the texts quoted or referred to in the shorter essays before each chapter. These are meant to be, in effect, somewhat more in the vein of personal conversations with readers whom I trust to know the references or be able easily to look them up. By contrast, the citations in the previously published work are a bit overdone as befits the young man I was when many of them were published in professional journals.

I owe the inspiration for the idea of sociology as a ghostly matter to Avery Gordon. The idea had been around for a very long time since Marx, but notably in Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida, before Gordon in *Ghostly Matters* gave haunting the central place it must have in social studies. Anthony Elliott has been a haunting presence behind the writing. At every turn, whenever I returned to many of the writers I discuss, I felt the constraint of his considerable body of work in the same field. Immanuel Wallerstein personally helped me with the facts of his relation with Fanon and, through his writings, with unthinking social science. I am far from confident that any of the three would be satisfied with what I say here – from which, in either case, they are excused from responsibility with thanks for their generosity.

Very special thanks go to Willard A. Nielson, Jr. and Garth Gillan who were co-authors of two of the selections, both written during earlier days in Illinois. Quite apart from the pleasure of having this latter day occasion to renew contact with both of them, the renewal brings back all the better memories of a time in life when I started on this line of work and when, even then, there was a growing interest in what the French were doing, thus a kind of underground culture wherein one could discuss such strange things. I give more personal tributes to both Willard and Garth in the front notes to the selections they wrote with (actually much more than simply *with*) me.

In the work of preparation Victoria Stahl caused the previously published texts to be transformed back into Word; she then set up the notes into a consistent form. She also wrote for the permissions from previous publishers who are acknowledged in notes at the foot of the chapter selections they originally printed. Thanks to her and to Sarah Caro for her patience and confidence in the work.