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Introduction: the new Durkheim

What does Durkheim mean for social science and social theory today?

This is a deceptively simple question. One way to attempt an answer is to put a deconstructive twist on the standard sociological literature about the production of culture and knowledge. It is commonplace within that field to suggest that authors produce texts to send messages to others. As participants in intellectual markets, writers strive to meet collegial expectations and hope to gain recognition in exchange (Collins this volume; Hagstrom 1965; Lamont 1987). Yet when an author's work has staying power beyond its immediate context, this being the very quality that distinguishes a truly great contribution, something much more intriguing happens. Readings proliferate that are unintended and unpredictable, with determinations that go far beyond those that could have been consciously anticipated by the maker of the original text. Time reverses the direction of influence. New contexts of interpretation come to rewrite texts as authors and theories are re-narrated for present relevance. Next, these critical interventions are themselves reworked and rethought. Eventually a layered field of immense dialogic activity is formed as words, ideas, their underlying structures of feeling and analytic choices accumulate and attach to the classical bedrock. It is precisely this sequential accretion of complexity and controversy that marks out the proper and full domain for inquiry into a great scholar. Because foundational texts and subsequent commentaries alike should be understood as social facts as well as a hermeneutic practice, we must give due attention to both scholarly intents and intellectual contexts. In thinking through questions about Durkheim and his legacy, we come to engage with others. These relate less to the cultural and intellectual preoccupations of other ages and more to those of our own.

So it is that this collected volume stands testament not only to Durkheim's posthumously evolving, and increasingly better understood, intellectual portfolio, but to current, pressing social and intellectual concerns. A marking stone that appears midway between the centennials of Durkheim's

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first (1893) and last (1912) major books, the *Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* captures not only the great French thinker's current incarnation, but also the challenges engaging contemporary social theory and the society in which it is circumscribed.

The many Durkheims and their fates

In the contribution that forms the next chapter of this volume, Marcel Fournier remarks on the enduring mystery of Durkheim as man and mind. Although he gave us clues and traces, we are left with a biography that is curiously elusive. The real “who” of Durkheim slips through our fingers. Socialist, positivist, establishment figure, Jew and, of course, sociologist – Durkheim was all of these but cannot be reduced to their sum, their boundaries, or even their dialogue. Durkheim's biography is a terrain that produces its own surplus. Much the same can be said for his thought, which exhibits a tension between promises of consistency and evidence of fragmentation. So it is that Philippe Besnard (this volume) demonstrates that Durkheim slips through the formalist intellectual grids that many have tried to impose on his conceptual universe. His concepts and typologies exhibit tantalizing geometries, but these never quite run in parallel, so we end up trying to hammer round pegs into square holes. Even at the level of the individual word or phrase it seems impossible to fix Durkheim's intent. As Karen Fields documents (this volume), Durkheim's carefully chosen vocabulary and expression is often intrinsically multivalent. This has thrown down a formidable challenge to translators for the past century, forcing them to make the toughest of interpretative choices. They have wrestled with Durkheim's thinking in the full knowledge that they do violence to its subtleties even as they attempt to be faithful unto it. If we can find this ambivalence in lived biography, in conceptual schemas and in the printed words of original text, it should come as no surprise that we can trace non-Euclidian contradictions in the vectors of Durkheim interpretations as these have arced through the last century and headed off towards new and uncharted vanishing points. Let's review this geometry and history.

Gathering up the scholarly missives left behind by earlier generations of Durkheim's admirers, one notes with irony that the great advocate of the social fact as an objective, external, ontologically unavoidable thing was unable to fix in hard stone his own interpretation. Durkheim the social scientist intended his texts to be closed, definitive and “writerly” in Barthes' (1975) terms. Yet, the tangled webs of Durkheim exegesis have demonstrated time and time again that his writings are open, suggestive and “readerly.” As Karen Fields (this volume) illustrates, Durkheim's style, particularly in

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The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912) is one of surprising complexity and literary creativity. Although highlighted in the problematic of translation, interpretative choices also confront native readers. Such textual qualities assisted a more sociological process in which Durkheim metamorphosed into a totem, a symbol whose diverse interpretations lay not only in his texts or volitions but also in less personal, more collective institutional and cultural determinations. It is precisely because he was blown hither and thither like a feather in the social, cultural, and theoretical winds of other epochs and agendas, precisely because he was readerly and not writerly, that Durkheim has passed down to us such a diverse, rewarding and ultimately surprising intellectual inheritance.

Even Durkheim's immediate survivors in France found themselves in possession of an ambiguous legacy. Alexander outlines the great tensions in Durkheim's early and middle period writings in this volume. It should not be surprising, then, that the disciples of *Année sociologique* pursued contradictory lines of inquiry that careened between more symbolic and more structural, more radical and more conservative lines of analysis. Notwithstanding the productivity of these scholars, and the fact that they were in positions of real influence, new followers of Durkheimian sociology were hard to recruit after the First World War. As Randall Collins remarks in this volume, Durkheim was stigmatized as a member of the "old guard." He became a lightning rod for dissatisfaction with centrist Third Republican politics and normativizing neo-Kantian philosophy. Zygmunt Bauman's contribution to this book demonstrates this line of interpretation continuing to resonate today, albeit with a postmodern shift in sensibility that exhibits the anxieties of our era.

Yet, as Alexander Riley elaborates in this volume, at the very same time that Durkheim was reviled as an Establishment figure, he became, perhaps unwittingly, the founder of a politically radical and intellectually iconoclastic school of surprising originality and scope. Ideas about the "impure sacred" were taken from *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) (hereafter *Elementary Forms*) – where they make only a brief, inconsistent but provocative appearance – as well as from the work of Durkheim's student Robert Hertz. These were elaborated by members of the Parisian *Collège de sociologie* and alchemized into a transgressive sociology that added a shot of Nietzschean spirit to the already heady cocktail of Durkheimian symbolic and ritual theory. In the hands of such social thinkers as Georges Bataille and Rogers Caillois, this saw the non-rational, erotic, existential, evil and unconscious deployed in an insistent effort to push back the restrictive limits on human experience imposed by the rationalization of modern life. Despite inauspicious beginnings – the *Collège* folded after scarcely two years – this

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inter-war curiosity was subsequently tessellated with textual and semiotic understandings of culture within the broader, more rigorous and more significant mosaic of post-structural and post-Marxist thought. We return to this pattern of influence later.

Meanwhile, a very different Durkheim was taking shape within the English speaking world. Barely 300 miles from Paris, in the oak paneled halls of Oxford and Cambridge, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, and Myer-Fortes took Durkheim to be the pioneering advocate of a new scientific theory of institutions. In this scenario, Durkheim was neither Republican priest nor bohemian prophet, but a rigorous academic whose collectivistic visions order and resolute acknowledgment of the functional demands imposed by intertwined organizations provided the key for robust but rather deterministic interpretations of such exotic puzzles as kinship systems, sorcery, and sacrifice. Pivotal to this view were Durkheim's early and middle period works. While we now see the complexity and ambiguity of these writings (Alexander this volume), it was the social-structural emphasis of *The Division of Labor in Society* ([1893] 1964) (hereafter *Division of Labor*), the functionalist and positivist methodology of *The Rules of Sociological Method* ([1895] 1966) (hereafter *Rules*), the objectivism and determinism of *Suicide* ([1897] 1966) that struck Durkheim's anthropological observers in the 1930s and 1940s. Read in this way, these books provided an intellectual Erector Set with which the girders, nuts, and bolts of both field observation and armchair-anthropological erudition could be bolted together into more complex and determined articulations, each component playing its role in the stability of an edifice that was at once empirical account and theoretical armature. Only towards the end of this golden age do we see signs of change. The interpretative revisions that informed Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion* (1956) already indicated a move towards a more hermeneutic rather than functionalist understanding of belief systems.

Some three thousand miles to the west, Talcott Parsons was busily converting Durkheim into a pillar of what came eventually to be known as action theory. Less interested at this stage of his career in determining functions than in institutionalizing morality, Parsons saw Durkheim through a Weberian lens as a perceptive theorist of normatively driven human agency and an interpreter of the cultural underpinnings of social life. Parsons ([1937] 1968) drew upon *Elementary Forms* as much as upon the *Division of Labor* in this early effort to demonstrate the centrality of non-rational components in social life and social action. In so doing, his project can be subtly distinguished from the British anthropologists with their interest in gathering objective social facts and explaining social order. Yet when another American, Robert Merton (1968 [1938]), presented his Durkheimian theory

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that deviance resulted from dynamic tensions between social means and individual ends, he was indebted less to the Durkheim of Parsons, his teacher, than to a Durkheim similar to that of the British anthropologists. This was a figure who highlighted the divisions of social labor and their intersection with social structure in patterns of integration, opportunity, and anomie.

Looking back at the first half of the twentieth century, then, we can see a set of distinctions emerging. These were to become consolidated in the second half as ground rules, or codes, for interpreting and identifying a “real” Durkheim. They marked out a cultural Durkheim (Parsons) from a more structural Durkheim (British anthropology, Merton) and a conservative Durkheim (Third Republic critics) from a radical Durkheim (the *Collège de sociologie*). Arguments for each of these positions have been repeatedly made on the basis of published and unpublished writings, in intellectual histories, and in the details of Durkheim’s life. Because we refer to these in the remaining discussion they need only be briefly summarized here. Structural Durkheimianism highlights the submerged morphological forces, legal constraints, and abstract *conscience collective* (collective consciousness/conscience) that narrate the *Division of Labor*, the mechanistic interactions and associations that animate *Suicide*, and the functional determinism and epistemological collectivism suggested by *Rules*. The conservative Durkheim talks about stability, legitimacy, democratic law, and social conformity, not only as empirical realities but also as ideals for the construction of a good society. Radical Durkheimianism points to creativity, effervescence, the need to explode routinization via passionate association and transcendent ritual, and to the ethical imperative to overcome the pathological division of labor with socialism and solidarity. Cultural Durkheimianism takes off from the symbolic classifications, rituals, and discussions of the soul and solidaristic passions that animate the later works, most notably the *Elementary Forms*.

In the second half of the twentieth century, “new” interpretations of Durkheim by both advocates and critics invariably took off from one or more of these positions. We can read this history very much as a case of new wine being poured into old bottles. Although each new argument had distinctive qualities of vintage and intellectual *terroir*, and might have involved a little creative blending, all were made from the same four grape varieties – the same four Durkheims. The fifties and sixties saw a more structural Parsons (1966) give centrality to Durkheim’s evolutionary model of social development, moving back to *Division of Labor* and away from *Elementary Forms*. This Durkheim-via-later-Parsons illuminates the transition to modernity in terms of differentiation, value generalization, and growing social system complexity. These shifts in Parsons’ reading meant that a structural and

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conservative Durkheim overshadowed the cultural and radical Durkheim during the mid-century period in the United States. Ironically, this move was taking place just as British social anthropology began to shift towards a more cultural approach to Durkheim. Despite possibilities for convergence, the two interpretative projects crossed like ships in the night – there was no substantial interchange.

Parsons' later understanding formed the basis for modernization theory (e.g. Levy 1952; Smelser 1959, and Eisenstadt 1963) and reached its apotheosis of structural determinism and democratic conservatism in the writings of Niklas Luhmann (1982). Alongside this structural Durkheim there developed an equally cautious cultural one. W. Lloyd Warner ([1959] 1975) treated modern American life as a cosmologically patterned and ritually integrated mass tribe organized around a cult of the dead. It was an approach without great subtlety, but it did at least get the cultural Durkheim onto the agenda as a resource for explaining life in “advanced” societies. A much more sophisticated and more critical extension of Durkheim's later work unfolded under Parsons' influence. Robert Bellah (1972) interpreted America as organized, and challenged, by a tightly integrated civil religion. Edward Shils (1975) illuminated the sacred centers of mass societies, emphasizing how once peripheral groups had become incorporated through education and majestic secular rituals and how ideas of sacrality were pivotal to the legitimacy of core social institutions.

Exciting as this movement was, it had trouble uncoupling the cultural Durkheim from his structural and conservative avatars. The belief that societal evolution led to universalism and value generalization was implicit within the cultural frames developed by Bellah and Shils. So dysfunctions and social exclusion were framed as the relics of tradition or as incomplete institutionalization rather than being imminent to modernity or the binary logic of cultural codes. A retrieval of Durkheim's sustained critique of anomie, perhaps filtered through Merton's reading of the ironies and dysfunctions of the American value system, might have allowed this line of thinking to become a more hard hitting indictment of the present. The necessary connections connecting the periphery to anomie or civil religion to exclusion were never made.

This missed opportunity created an unsurpassed intellectual vulnerability to radical critique. Produced in the afterglow of postwar high modernity, these affirmative readings of structural and cultural Durkheim and their sociological elaborations in empirical research were attacked and discredited, even as they reached their fullest elaboration during the turbulent, contentious decades of the sixties and seventies. For the rebellious intellectuals of that time, as had once been the case for their counterparts in 1920s

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and 1930s France, Durkheim had become a kind of Goliath against whom various Davids could bid for glory. Or, to switch metaphorical reference, Durkheim now seemed a lumbering anachronism whose proper home was in some Jurassic Park of intellectual dinosaurs.

Blind to the possibility of a radical Durkheim, self-proclaimed conflict theorists read Durkheim through Parsons and then indicted them both. Durkheim became synonymous with theoretical functionalism, with amoral conservatism, with Kantian abstraction and with methodological dead ends. And so it was that, in Charles Tilly's (1981) infamous condemnation, the French founder was declared "useless" for a historical sociology that needed to explore conflict and change. Critical theorists pointed to the manner in which the empirical claims of Durkheimian sociologists often outstripped their theoretical mandate, particularly when themes of social consensus were at play. Railing against "normative functionalism" (in effect an analytic fusion of the cultural, structural and conservative Durkheims), David Lockwood (1964) pointed out that societies seemed to cohere without overarching values, not because of them, and that Durkheim had hopelessly confounded social integration (cultural consensus) and system integration (social order), a criticism that Michael Mann (1970) and Jürgen Habermas (1986) later picked up. Early efforts towards a cultural Durkheimianism were shown to be severely flawed by virtue of their functionalist strain. Steven Lukes (1975) attacked Durkheimian understandings of ritual, suggesting that integrative effects were poorly measured and unevenly distributed and had more to do with cognitive-ideological than affective-moral force. A new and often avowedly anti-Durkheimian approach to ritual as conflict emerged, theorizing a sphere of contestation in which sponsors struggled to engage audiences and establish hegemonic meanings (e.g. Bourdieu 1990: 200–70; Lincoln 1989).

During the same period, and in a remarkably parallel process, the rising tide of "microsociology" condemned a structural Durkheim. Their exclusive focus on everyday life, face-to-face interaction and conversation demanded, in effect, a "collectivist" and "determinist" ancestor to oppose. This Durkheim could be understood for all practical purposes as denying human creativity and agency and as holding positivist certainties about the transparency of social facts that were, at best, sociologically naïve. Even constructively intended efforts, such as Goffman's micro theories of interaction rituals (1967), had the effect of pushing contemporary sociology off its Durkheimian tracks. In Goffman's case, it is yet another story of missed opportunities, at least so far as the cultural Durkheim was concerned. Despite a creative reading of Durkheim as a theorist of embodied face-to-face encounters, and despite insisting from time to time on the sacred nature

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of the individual, Goffman's work seemed to demonstrate that moral sentiments and social emotions were merely emergent properties of individual level behaviors. "Agency" was restored but at the expense of the moral humanism and cultural complexity that had characterized Durkheim's ritual work. In its place, Goffman and his later Durkheimian followers, such as Collins (1975), posited a mechanistic and often cynical model of human interaction and emotion, one that failed to theorize a cultural realm that could regulate, and not only fall prey to or emerge from, moral calculus, bodily display and emotional need. Nevertheless, this line of work did make fruitful connections between ritual theory and pragmatism, echoes of which can be seen in this volume in the discussions by Collins, Jones, and Bellah on the relationship between behavior, emotion, cognition, and belief.

Microsociology, then, failed to mount a sustained engagement with the cultural Durkheim's theory of ritual action. In the case of critical theory, it was the radical Durkheim who tragically fell by the wayside. The dominance in Anglo-American circles of an anti-cultural Marxism rather than a pro-cultural, Nietzschean critical theory had led to a fatal blind spot in the Left's interpretation of Durkheim's legacy. To understand how these alternative Durkheim traditions have come to be rediscovered, we need to turn back towards France and trace another of Durkheim's posthumous intellectual journeys.

Durkheim's latent force

In the desert there are certain plants whose seeds might lie dormant for decades, awaiting a propitious moment to release their latent energy and make the sands bloom. Even as the conservative and structural Durkheims withered under scorching criticism, the re-growth of cultural and radical Durkheims was underway. Furtive and hardly recognized at first, this intellectual quickening was to represent the full flowering of themes discretely seeded by Durkheim in the *Elementary Forms*. Indeed, the full extent of their connection to that masterwork has only recently become visible. To truly understand Durkheim's legacy for contemporary cultural theory and cultural sociology, it is necessary to step away from our review of Durkheimian sociology as it has been commonly understood and review this largely silent alternative history.

In *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim had surprised even the most long-standing students of his sociology by proclaiming: "There is one region of nature where the formula of idealism applies almost to the letter: This is the social kingdom" (1912: 326 our translation). In society, Durkheim had come to believe, "the idea is the reality." It is only in order to "express our

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own ideas to ourselves” that we need to “fix them on material things which symbolize them.” But here the “part of matter is reduced to a minimum” (1912: 326). Responding to criticism that his earlier sociology had conceptualized an external “physical constraint [as] the most important thing for social life,” Durkheim remonstrated, perhaps a little disingenuously, that he had “. . . never considered it more than the material and apparent expression of a profound and interior fact that is entirely ideal: this is moral authority” (1912: 298, note 2). Durkheim’s vision in the *Elementary Forms* was of a shared cultural system that is internalized within each individual. It trumps the material base by superimposing upon it a universe of arbitrary but deeply meaningful signs, myths and determinations of action. He wrote:

The whole social environment appears to us as if inhabited with forces that, in reality, exist only in our consciousness. One knows that the flag, in itself, is nothing but a scrap of cloth for the soldier. Human blood is simply an organic liquid, yet even today we cannot see it flowing without experiencing a violent emotion that its physico-chemical properties cannot explain. From a physical point of view man is nothing more than a system of cells . . . A cancelled postage stamp can be worth a fortune; it is obvious that this value is in no way tied to its natural properties . . . Collective representations very often attribute to the things to which they are attached properties which do not exist in any form or degree. Out of the commonest object they can make a very powerful and very sacred being. Yet, although purely ideal, the powers which have been conferred in this way work as if they were real. They determine the conduct of men with the same inevitability as physical forces. (Durkheim 1912: 325–6)

Durkheim began to develop these new, profoundly cultural ideas during the middle and late 1890s, even as he was completing *Suicide* (1897), the last book of the trilogy that has long formed a central building block for social-structural sociology. He elaborated this new perspective in the courses of public lectures he offered in Paris during the first decade of the twentieth century. There is good evidence to suggest that the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure followed these Paris lectures, and that in some significant part he built on them to develop his structural linguistics (Alexander 1988b, Collins this volume, Jakobson 1990: 88). In his new science of semiotics, Saussure (1959) suggested that social communication is organized by a system of symbolic signs whose complex internal structure could be likened to a spoken language. Social objects should be seen as signifieds which cannot be separated from cultural signifiers. The symbolic meaning of objects is not objective – not set by their structural location in society or their material facticity or their utility; it is established, rather, by the relation of signifieds to one another inside the broader symbolic system. Reconfiguring in this

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linguistic manner Durkheim's later sociological ideas, semiotics became one of the dominant intellectual forces of the twentieth century. In the hands of the linguist Roman Jakobson (1990) and the ethnographer Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966), semiotics formed the basis for the "structural" approach in anthropology, whose theories of interwoven and binary cultural codes provided an alternative to the British functionalist legacy. Under structuralism's influence, the literary critic Roland Barthes ([1957] 1973; [1964] 1984; 1975) developed semiotics into a flow-blown theory of social discourse and myth in everyday life, which he called "socio-logic" to distinguish it from the reductionism of a purely institutionally oriented sociology.

It was at this point, from the 1950s to the 1970s, that new forms of cultural social analysis uncovered for the first time the cultural coding of social life. In the French case, this current merged with that of the radical Durkheim. As this had been inflected by Bataille and the *Collège de sociologie*, the path of inheritance was only slightly less disguised than in the case of cultural Durkheim (Riley this volume). The emphasis in this French convergence was on the tensions between system and anti-system in cultural life. Baudrillard, Lyotard, Kristeva, and others elaborated theses whose lineage extended back to a "left sacred" – ideas about dread, productive excess, transgression, death, eroticism, and embodied experience. They pointed in various ways to confrontations between reason and its limits, not only those imposed by the individual, unconscious, and irrational, but by the polluting discourses about evil that shadow every ethical system and by the contradictions and gaps inherent in the act of classification itself. Michel Foucault (e.g. [1961] 1967), of course, was to make this dark counterpoint central to his life's work. He brought discourse back into the heart of social science with his historical investigations into the simultaneously liberating and repressive structures of symbolic thought, and he explained how organizational powers routinized and controlled the expressions of the sacred even as these threatened to escape discourse. Jacques Derrida (1978) developed a systematic method of reading culture that contextualized structures of discourse and opened them up to creative reconfiguration. Even while affirming the binding influence of already existing representational forms, Derrida insisted on their instability and inevitable productive excess at the margins of meaning. For Derrida, transgression was the shadow of the code, just as for Foucault the *cogito* must produce and depend upon the "unthought."

The blooming of this line of French philosophy-cum-social theory paralleled, but also stimulated, the rebirth of the near dormant Anglo-American cultural Durkheim. As notions of discourse, code, and myth were revived in Western intellectual life, it was only a matter of time before the cultural Durkheim's core vocabulary of ritual, symbol, and the sacred was