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978-0-521-17542-5 - Durkheim's Philosophy Lectures: Notes from the Lycee de Sens Course, 1883-1884

Edited by Neil Gross and Robert Alun Jones

Excerpt

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## Introduction

*Neil Gross*

In the fall of 1882, at the age of 24, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was sent by the French Ministry of Public Instruction to live in the provincial town of Sens, a community of 13,000 on the Yonne River, seventy miles southeast of Paris.<sup>1</sup> Having studied for three years at the elite *École Normale Supérieure*, the traditional breeding ground for French intellectuals, Durkheim had just passed – with low marks – the *agrégation* examination in philosophy that was the stepping stone to a job as a philosophy teacher in one of the nation's *lycées*, or secondary schools. Ambitious young scholars who put in their time at a *lycée* and also completed two dissertations – one in French, the other in Latin – were then eligible to compete for positions at the university level. Such were Durkheim's ambitions, and those who knew him had no doubt that his prodigious intellectual gifts would prove more than adequate for their achievement. His instructors and fellow students at the *École Normale* were therefore surprised when he placed second to last on the exam, perhaps due to illness.<sup>2</sup> Still, this was enough to secure him a *lycée* post. Like the vast majority of young *agrégés*,<sup>3</sup> Durkheim was sent, not to a prestigious Parisian *lycée*, but to a provincial one. After a month

1. Population figure published in *L'Union de l'Yonne*, February 8, 1882, 1. Library of Sens archive.
2. Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 64.
3. John Brooks, "The Definition of Sociology and the Sociology of Definition: Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method* and High School Philosophy in France," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 32 (1996), 379–407; John Brooks, *The Eclectic Legacy: Academic Philosophy and the Human Sciences in Nineteenth-Century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998).

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at the Lycée de Puy, he was reassigned to Sens in November 1882. The local Catholic paper, ever eager to ring up anti-Semitic and anti-German points in its polemic against the evils of laicized education, announced with a convenient typographical error in its November 4 edition that a “M. Durckheim [sic], professeur de philosophie, agrégé” was on his way to town.<sup>4</sup> At the *lycée*, Durkheim taught a required academic year-long course that sought to introduce students in their final year of secondary instruction to the field of philosophy – to the questions it posed, the thinkers who comprised its canon, and the range of arguments and ideas in serious consideration by members of the French philosophical establishment.<sup>5</sup> This eighty-lecture course, given for the first time in the 1882–3 school year, was partially repeated in 1883–4 but was cut short by Durkheim’s reassignment to the Lycée de Saint-Quentin in February 1884.

Scholars have known for years that the very first lectures given by Durkheim, unquestionably a seminal figure in the social sciences, were these lectures on philosophy given at Sens. Although the content of the lecture course remained unknown until recently, other evidence suggested that Durkheim put on an impressive show for his young charges. Steven Lukes, for his definitive 1972 biography, unearthed reports by Ministry of Public Instruction officials that praised Durkheim’s work in the *lycée* classroom as serious and first-rate.<sup>6</sup> The philosopher André Lalande (1867–1963), who was in Durkheim’s class during the 1883–4 school year and who took the notes of which the present volume is a translation, observed in an essay published to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Durkheim’s birth that “his students, even the mediocre ones, had the greatest consideration for him.”<sup>7</sup> And thanks to the diligent archival work of Edward Tiryakian, historians of Durkheim have also had access to the text of a short and quite inspirational address Durkheim made to the *lycéens* at Sens in 1883 on the subject of great men that leaves no doubt as to the cogency of the orator.<sup>8</sup> But the actual

4. *L'Union de l'Yonne*, November 4, 1882, 2. Library of Sens archive.

5. “The idea” of the *lycée* philosophy course, Gary Gutting writes, “was to cover the whole of philosophy, both its problems and its history, in a year-long, grand synthesis” (*French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 4).

6. Lukes, *Emile Durkheim*, 64–5.

7. André Lalande, “Commémoration du centenaire de la naissance d’Emile Durkheim,” *Annales de l’Université de Paris* 30 (1960), 22–5.

8. Emile Durkheim, “Du rôle des grands hommes dans la société,” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 43 (1973), 25–32.

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substance of Durkheim's thought in this early stage of his career remained a mystery.

*The Importance of Understanding the Early Durkheim*

Not only for those with an historical interest in Durkheim was this a serious lacuna in our knowledge of him. Indeed, there are two reasons why scholars who have sought to use Durkheim's ideas for more presentist purposes have also wished for greater understanding of his early views. First, while it is well known that the entirety of Durkheim's sociological project was closely bound up with philosophical concerns, the nature of the connection remains somewhat murky. Sociology was not a distinct academic field in France until Durkheim helped make it so. As *The Division of Labor* (1893) and *Suicide* (1896) make clear, his effort to carve out its unique domain involved differentiating sociology from economics and empirical psychology. Even more important, however, given the intellectual and institutional realities of the day, was the work Durkheim did to highlight sociology's distinctness from – and importance to – academic philosophy, which at the time encompassed, in addition to more familiar concerns, psychology cum philosophical anthropology, political theory, and methodology. As John Brooks points out,<sup>9</sup> it was philosophers who served on Durkheim's dissertation committee and philosophers who, wielding tremendous power within the French educational system, held the key to the institutionalization of a new discipline. Philosophers were thus a primary target audience for Durkheim's now classic statements about the nature of sociology, his injunctions about the method it should follow, and his substantive efforts to demonstrate the explanatory leverage one could get over a wide range of phenomena by taking account of what he termed the "sui generis" reality of the social. Philosophical interests also lay back of his more general project of mobilizing sociological investigation for the purpose of developing an ethics. Toward the end of his career, Durkheim's attempts to persuade philosophers of the significance of sociology became especially pronounced, as he developed a sociology of religion and a sociology of knowledge in part to shed new light on longstanding metaphysical and epistemological debates. But key questions about Durkheim's engagement with philosophy remain unanswered, not least for those who aim to fold Durkheimian insights into contemporary sociological theory. How

9. Brooks, "The Definition of Sociology and the Sociology of Definition," 385.

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exactly should we understand the relationship between Durkheim's sociology and his ethics?<sup>10</sup> To what extent does acknowledgment of the external and constraining nature of social facts imply a deterministic vision of the social universe?<sup>11</sup> And how can a sociological account of the origins of the categories of understanding – that is, “time, space, number, cause, substance, personality”<sup>12</sup> – such as that developed by Durkheim in *Primitive Classification* (1903, written with Marcel Mauss) and in *The Elementary Forms* (1912) be articulated from a rationalist<sup>13</sup> standpoint and also square with sophisticated renderings of the apriorist position, which would explain the categories as originating in the very nature of the mind?<sup>14</sup> It would be helpful in answering these and other questions to have a fuller statement of Durkheim's philosophical views. Ideally, such a statement would have issued from the pen of the mature Durkheim as he sought to clear up confusions and misconceptions left by the wayside in the course of his pathbreaking work. Less desirable, certainly, but still of considerable value would be an accounting of his philosophical outlook from an earlier point in his career. For reasons described below, his *lycée* lectures would have been precisely such an accounting.

Second, to know more about what Durkheim's ideas were in the years right after he left the *École Normale* would be to have considerable information about when and in what sociointellectual context the idea for a genuinely empirical science of sociology was born in France. An important question for contemporary sociological theory, especially various strains of critical theory, is, under what conditions do intellectuals (and those they influence) begin to doubt the atomistic social metaphysics that often passes as common sense and replace it with an empirically informed understanding that the history of human affairs

10. For interesting recent discussions of this, see Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Paul Keast (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 49–65; W. Watts Miller, *Durkheim, Morals, and Modernity* (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 1996).
11. See Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, vol. 2. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
12. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 8.
13. On the question of Durkheim's rationalism, see Robert Alun Jones, “Ambivalent Cartesians: Durkheim, Montesquieu, and Method,” *American Journal of Sociology* 100 (1994), 1–39.
14. See Terry Godlove, “Epistemology in Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24 (1986), 385–41.

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is in large part a history of how social structures, forms, and processes have shaped people's destinies!<sup>15</sup> Given the power of these entities, to ask the question of when their force comes to be acknowledged is to ask nothing less than what are the preconditions for social autonomy, even if it is recognized that an awareness of the social can lead as easily to heightened control as to autonomization. Among those who are interested in classical theory in part because it represents, as a whole, the premier instance where a number of profound, enduring, and empirically oriented social-theoretical projects crystalized almost at once out of the predisciplinary contributions of figures like Montesquieu, August Comte, and Herbert Spencer, there is widespread agreement as to what conditions brought it about: Classical theory is generally seen as an outgrowth of the process of European modernization that it took as its central problematic.<sup>16</sup>

But this understanding, which identifies various and sundry large-scale social and cultural transformations – industrialization, functional differentiation, urbanization, secularization, individualization, etc. – said to have somehow brought theoretical attention to the social, turns out to be quite incomplete. Not only is the causal argument implied by such an exclusively macrolevel angle of vision called into question by concurrent intellectual trends that ran in the opposite direction (for example, the growth of the entirely atomistic “bourgeois economics” on which Karl Marx heaped so much invective), but the approach ignores the possibility that it might have been in much more local contexts<sup>17</sup> – certain kinds of families, particular educational experiences, participation in social movements, etc. – that the sociological worldviews of the classical theorists actually took shape. To explore the role of such local contexts – which are, of course, themselves structured by larger forces – in the development of classical theory, detailed sociobiographical information about the classical theorists would be required. Especially important would be knowledge of exactly when and in what circumstances

15. For a useful discussion of this point, see Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

16. Anthony Giddens, in *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971), xi, thus gave expression to a widely held view when he argued that “if Renaissance Europe gave rise to a concern with history, it was industrial Europe which provided the conditions for the emergence of sociology.”

17. For a discussion of this point, see Charles Camic, *Experience and Enlightenment: Socialization for Cultural Change in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

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they began to attend to the distinctive nature of social reality. But this is a matter that Durkheim scholars, for their part, have had a hard time pinning down. Did Durkheim's dislike for the "dilettantism" and over-interest in classical letters of his fellow students at the École Normale, described in the recollections of his acquaintances, signal already a commitment to empirical social science? Should we follow Mauss in dating this commitment to 1881?<sup>18</sup> Or did Durkheim's vision of sociology, adumbrated in a number of essays published between 1885 and 1892 and then articulated more fully in his Latin thesis on Montesquieu (1892) and in *The Division of Labor* (1893), develop later in his intellectual career, perhaps after his celebrated study trip to Germany in 1885–6 or around the time he arrived at the University of Bordeaux in 1887 to take a position created just for him in social science and pedagogy? Given the lack of first-hand knowledge of Durkheim's early views, it has been impossible to say.

### *The Unfamiliarity of a New Manuscript*

In 1995, however, nearly eight decades after Durkheim's death, a new manuscript surfaced that shed considerable light on what had previously been the great unknown of the early Durkheim. Librarians at the Sorbonne, asked by one of the editors and translators of this volume (Gross) to look through their collection for material relating to a later period in Durkheim's life, came across a neatly handwritten document, more than 500 pages in length, entitled "E. Durkheim – Lectures on philosophy given at the Lycée de Sens in 1883–4 (The end, which he did not give because he was appointed to St. Quentin, was recovered from the notes of a student of 1882–3)." The manuscript was apparently penned in the hand of André Lalande, best known during his lifetime for authoring a philosophical dictionary<sup>19</sup> that went through multiple editions and whose definitions were actively debated by members of the French philosophical community. As mentioned previously, Lalande had been one of Durkheim's students at Sens. He died in 1963. His papers were later donated to the Sorbonne, and it was in this collection that the manuscript was found. Remarkably, the document is transcription-like

18. See the discussion in Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Structure and Meaning: Relinking Classical Sociology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 126.

19. André Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1928).

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in nature; rather than recording mere fragments of ideas, each of the eighty individual lectures of which it consists is a continuous narrative made up of complete and for the most part grammatical sentences. Every lecture is preceded by a detailed outline of its contents.

Shortly after the discovery of this manuscript, it was typed and posted in French to the Durkheim Web site<sup>20</sup> maintained by the other editor and translator of this volume (Jones). Four of the eighty lectures were simultaneously published in the journal *Durkheimian Studies*.<sup>21</sup> Almost immediately, Durkheim scholars began to analyze the lectures. John Brooks, a historian, used them to bolster the argument he had already been developing that despite what conventional histories of sociology tell us, the positivism of August Comte was not the main fountainhead for Durkheim's ideas, or for the French human sciences more generally. Comte argued that study of the relationship between what he called social "statics" and "dynamics" – that is, the relationship between order and progress – would ultimately yield insight into the workings of the mind and usher in a new social and political era. Against the view that the human sciences in France owe their greatest debt to this vision, Brooks marshaled various pieces of historical evidence, including the Sens lectures, to show that another crucial source lay in the "eclectic spiritualism" of philosopher Victor Cousin, whose dual ideas that truth could best be obtained by reconciling the competing philosophical systems developed over the years and that all matter is thinking substance mesmerized the French philosophical field for much of the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Warren Schmaus, agreeing with Brooks's assessment, took the Sens lectures as the starting point for a reanalysis of Durkheim's theory of the origins of the categories of understanding.<sup>23</sup> And Jones himself pointed to one of the most intriguing things about the lectures – the fact that, as is also discussed below, they contain no hint of the social realism that would so soon become synonymous with Durkheimian sociology – as support for his view that it was, above all, Durkheim's exposure to the empirical investigations of psychologist and protosociologist Wilhelm Wundt and other German scholars that allowed him to

20. [www.relst.uiuc.edu/Durkheim](http://www.relst.uiuc.edu/Durkheim)

21. See Neil Gross, "Durkheim's Lectures at Sens," *Durkheimian Studies* 2 (1996), 1–4.

22. Brooks, *Eclectic Legacy*.

23. Warren Schmaus, *Rethinking Durkheim and His Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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advance decisively beyond the intellectual perspectives on which he had been reared.<sup>24</sup>

That more researchers still have not folded a reading of Durkheim's Sens lectures into their understanding of his corpus is probably a function of two things. First, the vast majority of the lectures have never appeared in print, and none has ever appeared in English translation. Second, even those scholars who read French and who might have examined the version of the lectures published on the Web would have found them extremely challenging to get through – not because of the complexity of the language but because of their rather cumbersome style. There is no evidence that the lectures were ever intended for publication or edited in any way by Durkheim. Moreover, there are very few corrections in the handwritten manuscript, which leads one to assume that Lalande wrote it out on the basis of shorthand notes taken in the classroom. It is therefore likely that the writing style is more Lalande's than Durkheim's own. Lalande's subsequent stature as a chronicler of philosophy offers some reassurance that the notes of this very young man accurately record the substance of Durkheim's course, but no one who has ever graded a freshman college essay – and Lalande would have been about two years younger than a freshman at the time – should be surprised to find that the French notes are often repetitive and their style formal and stilted, if nevertheless charming.

But this is not the only thing about the lectures that might surprise readers. Indeed, even after they are edited for style, as they have been in the present volume, something disconcerting about them remains: namely, how utterly strange they are as compared to Durkheim's later work. Whereas the characteristic feature of Durkheimian sociology is the attempt to explain social phenomena as a function of social morphology – Durkheim's term for social organization – the Sens lectures contain no reference whatsoever to functional relationships of this kind. In fact, except for a few entirely conventional remarks about the division of labor and the family, there is almost no discussion of social structures at all, and not a single mention of sociology, in the entire text. Whereas Durkheim is known as a forerunner in the use of statistical and ethnographic data to formulate and empirically ground social-theoretical claims, the Durkheim of the Sens lectures endorses no more than what I term below a “pro forma” empiricism, insisting

24. Robert Alun Jones, *The Development of Durkheim's Social Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).



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early on in the lecture course that philosophy is a science and that all sciences should study their subject matters experimentally, but then retreating into introspection or argument by anecdote when actually advancing substantive claims in such areas as psychology and ethics. Whereas Durkheim would later offer a provocative and controversial theory of the social wellsprings of religious sentiment, thereby indirectly proclaiming his own atheism, in the Sens lectures, as Schmaus points out,<sup>25</sup> he is quite willing to throw his weight behind a philosophical proof of God's existence. Finally, the Sens lectures find Durkheim, who is widely – though not necessarily correctly – heralded as an important precursor to poststructuralism and its insistence that there is a significant social component to reason, espousing essentialism and fully supporting an apriorist view of the origin of the categories of understanding.

This shocking unfamiliarity raises two important questions. First, how confident can one be in the authenticity of the notes? Perhaps the Sens lecturer appears so un-Durkheimian because he was someone other than Durkheim. Second, even if the question of authenticity is answered in the affirmative, how certain can one be that the views expressed in the lectures were actually Durkheim's own and that he was not simply teaching according to some preestablished formula?

### *The Matter of Authenticity*

With respect to authenticity, there is no way to be absolutely certain. In his address on the centennial of Durkheim's birth, however, Lalande did – without mentioning the notes – say a few things about the lecture course at Sens that are consistent with the manuscript discovered at the Sorbonne. First, he recalled that Durkheim's teaching was characterized by “a systematic order in investigations and a strong organization of ideas.”<sup>26</sup> Of course, this describes the pedagogical style of every good teacher. But it is not irrelevant to observe that this recollection is at least consistent with the style of the present volume. Although, as noted earlier, the lectures can be repetitive, on the whole the text does a remarkable job of proceeding systematically and thoroughly through the topics it takes up, typically considering and rejecting numerous alternative

25. Warren Schmaus, *Review of Durkheim's Sens Lectures*, <http://www.relst.uiuc.edu/durkheim/Reviews/Sens.Schmaus.html>

26. Lalande, “Commémoration du centenaire de la naissance d'Emile Durkheim,” 24.

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theories before going on to propose one of its own – a style of argumentation for which Durkheim's published works are also well known. Second, in the same address, Lalande noted that Durkheim had a habit of going to the blackboard at the end of each lesson, "and there he reconstructed [its] . . . outline, consisting of titles or short hierarchical formulas which concretized for his listeners the structure of what he had just explained freely and in a continuous fashion."<sup>27</sup> This recollection, too, is consistent with the document found at the Sorbonne. To save space, these outlines have not been included in the present volume, but they are there in the original manuscript and neatly synopsise the author's main points. Interested readers are encouraged to examine the version of the lectures posted on-line.<sup>28</sup> Third, Lalande said not only that Durkheim's students had been fond of him but also that, after Durkheim left Sens in 1884 for the Lycée de Saint-Quentin, "most of those [students] who remained borrowed the class notes compiled by comrades from the preceding year, and copied the lessons they lacked."<sup>29</sup> This is precisely what the title page of the manuscript also states. Finally, Lalande remembered that "in one of his early lessons [Durkheim] . . . cited on several occasions the name of Schopenhauer, completely unknown to almost all his young listeners."<sup>30</sup> Sure enough, lecture 7 of the manuscript contains a discussion – a quite critical discussion – of Schopenhauer's pessimism. None of this definitively establishes that Durkheim and the Sens lecturer were one, but it does create a very strong presumption in favor of this conclusion, especially given that we are not aware of anyone else who is even a plausible candidate for authorship.

At the same time, there are features of the lectures that *do* appear to be foreshadowings of Durkheim's later views. For example, the philosophy of science Durkheim endorsed in 1883–4 anticipates in certain respects the social realist perspective that would be articulated most fully in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895). In that book, Durkheim urged would-be sociologists to treat social facts as real "things," subject to their own laws, and argued that a field of inquiry (like sociology) deserves to be called an independent science if the object and laws it studies are

27. Ibid.

28. The outlines, still in French, are at <http://www.relst.uiuc.edu/Durkheim/Texts/1884a/00.html>

29. Lalande, "Commémoration du centenaire de la naissance d'Emile Durkheim," 25.

30. Ibid.