

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-39647-9 - Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies  
Edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## Introduction: Durkheimian sociology and cultural studies today

*Jeffrey C. Alexander*

This book is designed to bring the analysis of symbolic phenomena more directly into the discourse of sociology. The human studies are in the midst of an explosion of cultural interest. In diverse disciplinary orientations throughout Europe and in literary studies in the United States, semiotics and structuralism – and the poststructuralist movements which have followed in their wake – have fundamentally affected contemporary understandings of social experience and ideas. In American social science there has emerged over the last twenty years a complementary movement within anthropology. This symbolic anthropology has begun to have powerful ramifications on related disciplines, especially on American and European social history.

In the discipline of sociology, however – particularly but not only in its American guise – researchers and theorists are still fighting the last war. In the 1960s there was a general mobilization against the hegemony of structural–functional theory in the “idealist” form associated with Parsons. This challenge has triumphed, but theorizing of an equally one-sided sort has taken its place. The discipline is now dominated by micro and macro orientations which are either anti-systemic, anti-cultural or both. The anti-cultural macro approach, which emphasizes conflict and social “structures,” made positive, innovative contributions in the early phase of the fight against functionalism. It helped stimulate, for example, the reaction against the reigning consensus perspective in history. But the new social history, as it has been called for two decades, is by now old hat; it is in the process of being overtaken by a different kind of social history, one which has a pronounced cultural bent. Sociology, meanwhile, remains mired in presymbolic thought. It is as if in this small corner of the intellectual world the Reformation and Renaissance have been reversed. Sociologists are still trying to reform the Parsonian church. For them the cultural renaissance has yet to come. In sociology there is, as yet, scarcely any cultural analysis at all.

The irony is that important intellectual roots of this cultural revival can

*Durkheimian sociology: cultural studies*

actually be traced to one of sociology's own founders, Emile Durkheim. Sociologists know Durkheim primarily through the works he published in the middle 1890s, *The Division of Labor in Society*, *The Rules of Sociological Method* and *Suicide*. On the basis of these works, as Collins suggests later in this volume, sociologists have identified "Durkheimianism" – and to some extent sociology as such – with an emphasis on external constraints and "coercive social facts" on the one hand, and with positivistic, often quantitative methods on the other.

But it was only after the completion of these works that Durkheim's distinctively cultural program for sociology emerged.<sup>1</sup> It is true, of course, that even in his earlier works there is an unmistakable concern with subjectivity and solidarity. But only in the studies which began in the later 1890s did Durkheim have an explicit theory of symbolic process firmly in hand. It was at this time that he became deeply interested in religion. "A great number of problems change their aspects completely," Durkheim (1960 [1899]:351) wrote, "as soon as their connections with the sociology of religion are recognized." Durkheim came to believe, indeed, that theories of secular social process have to be modelled upon the workings of the sacred world. This turn to religion, he emphasized, was not because of an interest in churchly things. It was because he wanted to give cultural processes more theoretical autonomy. In religion he had discovered a model of how symbolic processes work in their own terms.

In scattered essays in the late 1890s, and in the monographs and lectures which followed until his death in 1914, Durkheim developed a theory of secular society that emphasized the independent causal importance of symbolic classification, the pivotal role of the symbolic division between sacred and profane, the social significance of ritual behavior, and the close interrelation between symbolic classifications, ritual processes and the formation of social solidarities. It was an unfortunate if largely fortuitous fact that the published work in which Durkheim announced and systematically developed this new theory – which he called his "religious sociology" – was devoted to archaic religion and to what would today be seen as anthropological concerns. Only in his unpublished lectures did Durkheim elaborate this new perspective in regard to the secular phenomena of modern life.

If Durkheim had lived beyond the First World War, the perspective of these lectures would be much more widely known today, for he would no doubt have converted them into published scholarly works. We would then have available to us systematic explorations of the "religious" structures and processes that continue to inform contemporary life. The posthumous publication of the lectures (Durkheim 1956, 1958a [1928],

### *Introduction*

1958b [1950], 1961 [1925], 1977 [1938] has certainly made his ambition and preliminary thinking in this regard perfectly clear. In a series of profound and probing discussions of education, politics, professional organization, morality and the law, Durkheim demonstrated that these modern spheres must be studied in terms of symbolic classifications. They are structured by tensions between the fields of the sacred and profane; their central social processes are ritualistic; their most significant structural dynamics concern the construction and destruction of social solidarities. These lectures demonstrate the truth of Durkheim's remonstrance in the opening pages of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the late masterpiece in which he outlined his "religious sociology." He has not devoted himself to "a very archaic religion," Durkheim declares, "simply for the pleasures of telling its peculiarities." If he has taken Aboriginal religion as his subject, he argues (Durkheim 1912:1), this is only "because it has seemed to us better adapted than any other to lead to an understanding of the religious nature of man, that is, to show us an essential and permanent aspect of humanity." His point, he insists, is that it is not only archaic man who has a religious nature, but also the "man of today."

The problem, however, is not only that Durkheim failed to enunciate this new and quite radical view of secular society in his published work. It is also that this late Durkheimian perspective eventually ceased to be articulated at all. For some years after his death, Durkheim's closest students, and those whom they influenced, continued to carry out studies that forcefully demonstrated the power of his later cultural approach. Halbwachs' (e.g. 1913, 1950) research on working-class consumption and collective memory, Simiand's (1934) on money, Mauss' (1967 [1925]) on exchange, Bouglé's (1908) on caste – these are merely the best known illustrations of how "late Durkheimianism" was carried into practice by the Durkheim school.

The possibilities that these studies opened up, however, were never extensively mined. In the aftermath of the First World War, the influence of the Durkheim school waned. The movements that sought to carry forward its legacy, moreover, distorted key elements of its thought. The *Annales* school of history began with a Durkheimian thrust, but its "sociological" emphasis soon tilted toward demographic and socio-political structures and away from consciousness. On the other hand, under Mauss' influence, what was left of the school proper veered increasingly toward ethnography (see Vogt 1976). Because of these and other developments, the theoretical ambitions manifest in Durkheim's later program gradually faded away. By the 1930s, the French intellectual community viewed Durkheimianism either as apolitical, archaicizing ethnography or as scientific sociological determinism. It was rejected on both grounds.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39647-9 - Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies

Edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Durkheimian sociology: cultural studies*

As Durkheimian ideas made their way beyond French borders they were pushed in directions equally opposed to the symbolic interests of his later work. Radcliffe-Brown founded British social anthropology in Durkheim's name, but his mechanistic functionalism might be better identified with the theorizing against which Durkheim's later writing had been aimed. When Parsons initiated sociological functionalism in the late 1930s, he (Parsons 1937) declared Durkheim to be one of its founders. But while Parsons saw more of the cultural Durkheim than most interpreters, he explicitly criticized the later focus on autonomous symbolic processes. Rather than symbolic systems, Parsons insisted that sociology be concerned with social values and their institutionalization. He tied this value emphasis (e.g. Parsons 1967), moreover, to his search for the foundations of consensual social order.<sup>2</sup> In the post-Parsons period, sociologists who have conspicuously taken up Durkheim's mantle (e.g. Bloor 1976, Douglas and Wildavsky 1982, Traugott 1985) have tended to conceptualize culture in an even more reductive way.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, while the challenge of Durkheim's later writings has not been taken up by sociology, in other branches of the human studies it has been actively pursued. The relationship has often been indirect and the influence subterranean. Those who are pursuing a "late Durkheimian" program are often unaware that such a link exists. When the possibility is recognized, moreover, it has often been denied. Nonetheless, a compelling case can be made that, more than any other classical figure, it is to Durkheim that the contemporary cultural revival to which I earlier referred is most deeply in debt.

Consider, for example, Ferdinand Saussure, whose centrality is widely acknowledged because it was he who first conceived of modern structural linguistics and conceptualized "semiotics" as the science of signs. While Saussure never cites Durkheim directly – his major work, too, consisted of posthumously published lectures – parallels between his intellectual system and Durkheim's are striking indeed. In contrast with his linguistic contemporaries, Saussure (1916:107) insisted on the "institutional" character of language. He called language a social fact (*un fait social*, p. 21) that emerged from the *conscience collective* (p. 104) of society, the linguistic elements of which were "consecrated through use" (Godel 1957:145). Saussure depended, in other words, on a number of key concepts that were identical with the controversial and widely discussed terms of the Durkheim school. Most linguistic historians (e.g. Doroszewski 1933:89–90, Ardener 1971:xxxii–xiv), indeed, have interpreted these resemblances as evidence of Durkheim's very significant influence on Saussure. In doing so, moreover, they have conceived of Durkheim in his later, more symbolical guise.<sup>4</sup>

### *Introduction*

Whether a direct relationship can actually be demonstrated, however, is not the most important concern. The echoes in Saussurian linguistics of Durkheim's symbolic theory are deep and substantial. Just as Durkheim insisted that religious symbols could not be reduced to their interactional base, Saussure emphasized the autonomy of linguistic signs *vis-à-vis* their social and physical referents. From his own insistence on cultural autonomy Durkheim was led to an interest in the internal dynamics of symbolic and ritual systems. From Saussure's emphasis on the arbitrariness of words there followed a similar concentration on the structures of symbolic organization in and of themselves.

Similar parallels exist between later Durkheimian theory and Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology. Lévi-Strauss insists that societies must be studied in terms of symbolic classifications, that these symbolic systems are patterned as binary oppositions, and that social action (at least in premodern societies) is expressive and cultural rather than instrumental and contingent. Here is another influential cultural program, in other words, that bears a striking similarity to the late Durkheimian program I have outlined above. Once again, moreover, while direct linkage is impossible to establish, a compelling case for significant influence can be made. In linguistics, Lévi-Strauss acknowledges the influence not only of Jakobson but also of Saussure. In anthropology, he recognizes primarily his debt to Marcel Mauss, whose earlier work on symbols he (Lévi-Strauss 1968) praises for emphasizing the autonomy of classification and the antipathies and homologies of which it is composed. That Lévi-Strauss often takes sharp issue with Durkheim cannot, therefore, be taken at full face value. In the first place, such denials (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1945) associate Durkheim with an anti-symbolic "sociologism" that is at odds with the emphasis of his later work. In the second place, not only was Mauss himself Durkheim's closest student, but the work of Mauss that Lévi-Strauss (e.g. 1968: xxxi) most applauds, the essay translated as *Primitive Classification*, was co-authored with Durkheim and represents only one of many exemplifications of the later Durkheimian program.

From Saussure and Lévi-Strauss some of the most important contemporary cultural movements have been derived. It was structural thinking more than any other current that stimulated Roland Barthes to elaborate his enormously influential studies in social and literary semiotics. Over the last thirty years Barthes and other semioticians have explicated the codes – the systems of symbolic classification – that regulate a wide array of secular institutions and social processes, from fashions (1983) and food production (Sahlins 1976) to civil conflict (Buckley 1984). Poststructuralists like Foucault have carried this emphasis on the structuring power of symbolic patterns, or discourses, even further into the social domain.

*Durkheimian sociology: cultural studies*

On occasion these thinkers have made their relation to Durkheim explicit. These acknowledgements, however, often serve to emphasize rather than to reduce the distance between Durkheim's later program and sociology as it has come to be conventionally understood. Barthes (1983:10) insists in his methodological introduction to *The Fashion System*, for example, that while "the sociology of Fashion is entirely directed toward real clothing[,] the semiology of Fashion is directed toward a set of collective representations." He follows with the extraordinarily revealing statement that his own, semiotic emphasis leads "not to sociology but rather to the *sociologics* postulated by Durkheim and Mauss" (original italics), footnoting the same essay on primitive classification cited by Lévi-Strauss.

In most cases, however, these Durkheimian roots are simply not recognized at all. In *A History of Sexuality*, Foucault devotes a major section of his argument to demonstrating the religious roots of the modern "rational" insistence on exposing the sexual basis of various activities. This contemporary discourse, he insists (1980:68), has "kept as its nucleus the singular ritual of obligatory and exhaustive confession, which in the Christian West was the first technique for producing the truth of sex." Secularization, then, consists in "this rite [having] gradually detached itself from the sacrament of penance." A more clear-cut exemplification of Durkheim's later program for sociology would be hard to find. It was Durkheim (1960 [1899]:350) who insisted that religious phenomena "are the germ from which all others . . . derived" and the treatment in his late lectures of such secular phenomena as contract and exchange find their echoes in Foucault. That Foucault himself never entertained the possibility of a Durkheimian link is in a certain sense beside the point. His work rests on an intellectual base to which late Durkheimian thought made an indelible contribution.

Both as theory and empirical investigation, poststructuralism and semiotic investigations more generally can be seen as elaborating one of the pathways that Durkheim's later sociology opens up. Indeed, they have demonstrated the importance of his later theory more forcefully than any discipline in the social sciences more narrowly conceived. As such, they constitute primarily theoretical resources from which the effort to create a cultural sociology will have to draw.

In emphasizing this extra-sociological Durkheimianism, however, I do not want to suggest that within the social science disciplines there has been no work related to late Durkheimian theory at all. There have, in fact, been some interesting developments, and even if they have not been of comparable scope or influence they point in similar ways. Without, for the most part, explicitly acknowledging Durkheim's work, these efforts

### *Introduction*

have joined his emphases to other theoretical frameworks in order to develop a more symbolic kind of discourse about secular life.

It is ironic, perhaps, that the most important developments of this type emerged from the dissolution of the Parsonian camp. As disaffection with structural-functionalism increased, three of Parsons' most important students and co-workers tried to push his framework toward a distinctively Durkheimian emphasis on symbolism, sacredness and ritual. Shils (1975) argued that secular, differentiated societies have symbolic "centers" which inspire awe and mystery and that it is the proximity to these sources of sacredness which allocates such "structural" qualities as social status. In a series of critical essays in the 1960s, Geertz (1973a, 1973b) argued that whether cultural systems are "religious" has nothing to do with their supernatural quality, and everything to do with the degree to which they are sacralized, inspire ritual devotion, and mobilize group solidarity. Since that time, Geertz has interpreted secular phenomena from Balinese cockfighting (Geertz 1973c) to American political campaigns (Geertz 1983) in more or less similar symbolic and culturalist terms.

Shils and Geertz never acknowledged their debt to Durkheim. It is true, of course, that they drew widely from cultural theory, and in this sense their failure to make the reference explicit merely reflects the permeation of later Durkheimian thinking into the general intellectual milieu. It also, however, reflects the resistance toward, and misunderstanding of, late Durkheimian ideas within social science itself. The result is that, while Geertz's work especially has been enormously influential outside the field of sociology, this turn toward cultural theorizing from within the social sciences has had only a limited impact on traditional sociological work (for exceptions, see Stivers 1982, Zelizer 1985 and Prager 1986).<sup>5</sup> It is only the third disaffected Parsonian, Robert Bellah, who openly acknowledged the link to Durkheim; indeed, he has made this connection the lynchpin of his newly cultural work.

Bellah (1970, 1980a) has argued that secular nations have "civil religions." These are symbolic systems that relate national political structures and events to a transcendent, supra-political framework that defines some "ultimate" social meaning. Bellah calls this framework religious not because it must refer to God, but rather in order to emphasize the sacredness of its symbols and the ritual power it commands. In these terms, even atheistic, communist nations possess civil religions. Not ontological properties but historically determined social conditions determine the effect of a civil religion on society.

More than any other social scientific formulation, the civil religion concept promised to open sociology to the power of Durkheim's later

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39647-9 - Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies

Edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Durkheimian sociology: cultural studies*

work. In the years since Bellah's original formulation, the concept has, indeed, been used to explain a wide variety of political and cultural situations (e.g. Coleman 1970, Moodie 1974, Wolfe 1975, Bellah 1980b, c, Hammond 1980a, b, Rothenbuhler 1985). Yet civil religion has not, in fact, entered the language of social science in a central and powerful way. Rather, it has been taken up primarily in "religious studies" by sociologists who specialize in religion (e.g. Hammond 1983a, b) and by theologians (e.g. Lynn 1973, Marty 1974, Wilson 1979) with a special interest in society. The reasons, I think, have to do not only with the resistance of social science to embracing cultural work but also with central ambiguities in the original concept itself.

Bellah first conceived the civil religion idea in a discussion which argued for the close relation between American politics and Protestant religiosity. He suggested that, while the connection was not necessary in principle, in practice the American civil religion did in fact center on traditional Christian symbols. Indeed, he argued that growing agnosticism could undermine the status of American civil religion *vis-à-vis* secular power. Moreover, the most significant expositor of Bellah's concept, the sociologist of religion Phillip Hammond (1983a, b), has sought to limit civil religion explicitly to the kind of formation that exists in the American case. A nation has a civil religion, in his view, only if it has institutionalized a cultural system that ties politics to churchly symbols but is independent of an established Church. But such an argument, while certainly illuminating particular empirical issues (cf. Thomas and Flippen 1972 and Wimberly et al. 1976), narrows the more far-reaching and general implications of the concept, for it effectively cuts the concept off from its late Durkheimian base (*contra* Hammond 1974). Ironically, it was against precisely this kind of narrowing that Durkheim launched his later arguments, which in turn formed the basis for Bellah's original conception of the term.

Shils and Bellah, of course, are sociologists, and while Geertz is not – he is an anthropologist – he was trained by Parsons, a theorist who was. Taken together, their work certainly constitutes another major resource from which cultural analysis must draw. The other source of significant ideas that has emerged from within the social sciences comes from anthropology. The Durkheimian sociologists pushed theories about modern society to incorporate concepts previously applied only to premodern ones. Late-Durkheimian anthropologists have used Durkheim's theories of premodern society to move to a study of modern life. While beginning from opposite directions, in other words, they have ended up in much the same place.

Of these anthropological developments, Turner's work on the ritual



### *Introduction*

process is undoubtedly the most important (see, e.g. Moore and Myerhoff 1975). Turner (1969) argues that the basic components of ritual can be abstracted from the specific situations of archaic societies and treated as fundamental aspects of social behavior as such. Because all rituals involve transitions from one patterned position or structure to another, he suggests that ritual can be seen as possessing not simply an integrative but an “anti-structural” dimension. During this anti-structural or “liminal” phase, he suggests, participants experience intense solidarity, or “communitas.” Since this condition of liminal solidarity constitutes a deviant status, it often provides an opening for social change. In his later work, Turner (e.g. 1974) tried to separate these elements from an association with actual ritual events. He demonstrated that liminality and communitas could be seen as central features of such widely divergent secular phenomena as political confrontations, athletic contests and counter-cultures.

Once again, the relationship between this new development in cultural theory and Durkheimian thought is never explicitly made. For his specific terminology, indeed, Turner drew on the work of van Gennep, the contemporary of Durkheim’s who criticized his explanation of Aboriginal religion. But the similarities between Turner’s ideas and Durkheim’s later project are too obvious to overlook (see, e.g. the discussions in Dayan and Katz and Rothenbuhler below). This is not to say, of course, that Turner did not go beyond Durkheim in valuable ways. Indeed, he has shown more clearly than Durkheim how rituals can depend on contingent behavior and can be deeply involved in social change.

Much the same can be said for the work of Mary Douglas, the other anthropologist whose work has contributed significantly to broader currents in cultural studies. She has documented the classifying and symbolic functions of what are usually taken to be merely physical and adaptive activities (e.g. Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Most particularly, she (1966) has shown that pollution is a form of social control that societies use against symbolically deviant, profane things. Even in such clear efforts to generalize from religious to secular activity, however, Douglas dissociates her efforts from Durkheimian work. Still, it is the “Durkheimianism” of Radcliffe-Brown that she is fighting, not the symbolic theory of Durkheim’s own later work. Her conception of pollution expands Durkheim’s notion of profanation by relating it directly to issues of social control.<sup>6</sup>

My argument in this Introduction has been that, even while references to Durkheim’s later theory have virtually disappeared, his “religious sociology” has significantly influenced the developments in cultural studies

*Durkheimian sociology: cultural studies*

that are invigorating the intellectual world today.<sup>7</sup> Two conclusions follow, both of which have to do with the benefits of making this framework explicit. The first relates to cultural studies more generally. By making this Durkheimian framework explicit, the inner connections between these different developments can much more easily be seen. Only if these inner connections are established can the theoretical basis for contemporary cultural analysis be accurately portrayed. The full array of theoretical resources is necessary if a general and comprehensive social scientific understanding of culture is finally to emerge (see Alexander, forthcoming).

The second conclusion is more limited. It has to do with cultural studies in a more disciplinary sense, specifically with the prospects for a cultural sociology. Disciplinary practice is defined by its classics, and for sociology Durkheim's work is arguably the most classic of all. At the present time, "Durkheim" is perceived largely in terms of the structural concerns of his middle-period work. Insofar as the Durkheimian reference of contemporary cultural studies becomes explicit, however, this narrow understanding becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. If it cannot be sustained, if the understanding of Durkheim shifts towards the later work, then there will be increasing pressure to bring cultural analysis squarely into the practice of sociology. This, I have argued, was precisely the ambition of Durkheim himself.

It is certainly not coincidental that it has been in the midst of this outpouring of Durkheim-inspired cultural work that a new and much more sophisticated phase of Durkheim scholarship has emerged. The scope of Durkheim's lectures in the later period was evident only after Lukes (1972) published the first fully annotated account of Durkheim's life and work. Lukes' research also brought to light biographical material which underscored not only the existence of Durkheim's turn to religion but the personal significance it may have had for him. Later in the 1970s there emerged a group of scholars around Phillip Bésnard and *La Revue française de sociologie*, who initiated a new wave of historical explorations of Durkheim and his school. Once again, these historical investigations revealed the importance of the religious turn, not only for Durkheim himself but for the direction of his students' work (e.g. Birnbaum 1976, Bésnard 1979, 1983). Neither Lukes nor the French group argued that there emerged a later "religious sociology" more generally conceived. The interpretations that succeeded these pioneering studies, however (e.g. Filoux 1977, Jones 1977, Lacroix 1981, Alexander 1982), not only followed up on these leads but on the basis of this new understanding read the extant Durkheim material in an altered way. Gradually, a more general perspective did begin to emerge. While some interpreters still do not