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Philip Smith

Durkheim and After: The Durkheimian Tradition, 1893-2020
(Polity Press, 2020)

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What makes someone a 'Durkheimian'? Appropriately, given its subject, an act of classification, this book from Philip Smith on the Durkheimian tradition implicitly suggests two answers. One answer is that to be a 'Durkheimian' is to be a Durkheim scholar, someone steeped in a close reading of the original writings and active in debates of interpretation. Such an understanding then inspires the empirical research that scholar does; Durkheimian concepts are brought to bear on their chosen topic. The second answer is slightly different, someone can be a Durkheimian without engaging in such a detailed reading of the original sources, but instead by asking Durkheimian questions. Research which, for example, focuses on ritual, the social forms of morality, suicide or social integration can be included within the Durkheimian tradition even without specific reference to Durkheim's work. It could be said here we have an example of Merton's (1968:35) 'obliteration by incorporation'; Durkheim is there in the background, shaping how we do sociology, even if we do not directly acknowledge him. In this text, Smith draws upon both understandings of what makes a 'Durkheimian' and in doing so provides us with an immensely valuable account of Durkheim and his uses, albeit one with an underlying bias in the story it tells.

Smith's goal here is not, as he puts it in his Preface and Acknowledgements, to write 'yet another' book on Durkheim (p. ix), instead it is an attempt to trace how Durkheim's work has been used before and after his death. Smith begins the text with a chapter detailing Durkheim's 'major four books', interspersed with biography. While the discussion of each text is excellent, the real virtue of this chapter comes early on, where Smith highlights the complexities of interpreting Durkheim. To summarise, if you read enough, you will find at least some evidence for all the 'Durkheims' claimed in the literature: the conservative structuralist, the radical critical theorist, the cultural sociologist and so on. Not only this, but the way Durkheim writes can encourage different interpretations, at one point the systematic, quantitative, positivist thinker, at others, for want of a better term, a fluffy, humanistic and moralistic theorist. Added to this is the controversial 'epistemological break' element, where Durkheim's whole perspective is seen to have changed with the publication of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Therefore, as Smith puts it, the interpretation of Durkheim 'varies according to which book is taken to capture his essence' (p. 2). Smith claims in this text he is not interested in the question of what Durkheim 'really meant' and therefore eschews the literature on this question. He does however helpfully summarise some of the key lessons this detailed Durkheimian scholarship has given us, notably that Durkheim worked as part of a team who pushed each other to new discoveries, that he was intimately engaged in the debates of his day, that he was immensely serious and, towards the end of his life, overburdened with administrative duties.

This team is a significant focus of Chapter 2. Before this, Smith provides a somewhat dizzying albeit very comprehensive whistle-stop tour of Durkheim's writings beyond the major four books. Of particular note here is the space Smith gives to Durkheim's work on sex/gender and the family. He, rightly in my view, suggests this work with its problematic assumptions – most notably in the notion of women being closer to nature than is the case for men – has a "third rail" quality that sees them left well alone even by ardent devotees' (p. 67). Indeed, were one to construct a case of Durkheim as a conservative it is this topic, rather than his views on society, solidarity or conflict, that provide the best evidence.

Following this, Smith turns his attention to the group of scholars who joined Durkheim in producing *L'Année Sociologique*. It is probably fair to say that he is not the greatest admirer of this group's intellectual acumen. Marcel Mauss, Maurice Halbwachs and, to a lesser extent, Francois Simiand are given recognition for their important work on, respectively, anthropology of the gift, collective memory, and economic sociology. Robert Hertz, author of the classic *Death and the Right Hand* (Hertz 1960), is also seen as the great hope for the group before his tragic death in World War I. Beyond this however, the group are depicted as largely unoriginal writers who did not contribute much of value themselves beyond their important role in pushing Durkheim into new areas of enquiry.

Indeed, in Chapter 3, which covers Durkheimianism from Émile's death in 1917 until 1950, Smith sees this group's impact in even more negative terms. With Durkheim's death, the *L'Année* group largely move into significant academic positions, get heavy administrative workloads and spend their time on exegesis of Durkheim, rather than original work. In the context of France at this time, where the University was linked closely to the needs of the nation, this had the inevitable outcome of producing a sociology that was staid, conservative and seen to emphasise too much the notion of duty to the nation. There was a response to this with the formation of the *College de Sociologie* whose members, most notably George Batallie, sought to revive Durkheimian analysis by combining it with different bodies of thought, such as surrealism and Freudianism, and use different means of expression. A prominent example was Batallie's autobiographical take on what constituted the 'sacred' in his childhood. Valuable as this work was, it meant the academic and systematic development of Durkheimian thought would need to take place in a setting where Universities were free from the national obligations facing Durkheimians in France. This explains for Smith why Britain with its tradition of Durkheimian social anthropology and the US with Parsons (who encounters Durkheim during his time at the LSE) sees the greatest development of Durkheim's work during this period.

The legacy of this period is discussed in Chapter 4, which categorises the years 1950-1985 as 'through the cultural turn'. For Smith, Durkheimians in this period either 'went around' or, more bluntly, ignored, the cultural turn or, in going 'through' it, responded to the instigation to treat culture as a key unit of analysis. In the first camp was Parsons, structural functionalism and systems theory (most notably Habermas and Luhmann) who, while discussing culture, keep it enclosed in a system which, especially in the context of the 1970s was unappealingly abstract and conservative. The second camp includes two heroes of Smith's story: Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglas. Both of these, in slightly different ways, unmoored a Durkheimian discussion of culture from its unattractive base in systems theory while also building upon the earlier successes of the British school of social anthropology. This meant that the greatest developments of Durkheimian thought, for Smith, as we enter in the 80s were in anthropology and its focus on the culture. This also begins to highlight a tendency in Durkheimian thought as we get into the latter part of the 20th Century. As he puts it:

'The river from Durkheim to Lévi-Strauss demonstrates what Jeffrey Alexander sees as a wider pattern with regard to Durkheim: under-recognition and sins of omission in works by leading figures in the cultural turn or in cultural anthropology. The causes of this may be political or personal, may reflect visions of Durkheim as a positivist, or may disclose the attractions of a robust self-image when living in the shadow of the anxiety of influence. With deep reading or close readings, with attention to vocabulary or ways of arguing, with expertise in cultural theory, it is possible to see Durkheim is everywhere, with varying levels of intensity' p. 151

In short, the further we get away from Durkheim, the more his work, while still influential, recedes into the background and becomes this common language where deliberately or accidentally. Levi-

Strauss and Douglas, the most prominent Durkheimian of this period who, unlike Parsons for instance, do not engage in extended discussion of his work, are indicative of this trend for Durkheim to retreat, but for Durkheimian themes to become even more central.

The reader will also note here that Smith, following Alexander, sees this as especially true in cultural perspectives. This is the main topic of the final chapter that brings the story up to the current day. Here Smith spends significant time outlining the 'Strong Program' of Durkheimian cultural sociology developed in the US. This school, with its focus on culture as a guiding focus and inspiration from *The Elementary Forms* shares common cause in Smith's telling with writers in the US such as Randall Collins, Michele Lamont, Viviana Zelizer and Barry Schwartz. All of whom, in different ways, approach cultural issues in a Durkheimian manner, for example grounding questions of morality, classifications, collective memory and rituals. Smith then ends with a grouping of 'Other Durkheimian Fields' in which he includes the *Durkheimian Studies/Études Durkheimiennes* group along with some smaller groupings, most notably recent attempts to return to a 'normative' Durkheim.

This is undoubtedly an impressive book in scope and ambition. As an attempt to tell a story of the Durkheimian tradition, Smith provides an immensely readable and engaging tale. He also explains the shifts in Durkheim's reception and understanding in intriguing ways. This can be seen in the above discussion of his immediate reception in France versus Britain and the ways in which Durkheim's rise in American cultural sociology depended first on the decline of Marxism. Personally, I am also immensely grateful to Smith for drawing attention to the fact that a partial recording of Durkheim's 'Value Judgements and Judgements of Reality' is available online. Hearing his voice was an amazing experience and a reminder of a point Smith makes repeatedly, that Durkheim is not a figure from a bygone age but is not that far removed from us.

However, one thing that may have become clear is that Smith has presented *a* story of the Durkheimian tradition, one in which questions of culture, and the legacy of *The Elementary Forms*, are seen as the most valuable and significant forms of Durkheimian analysis. To Smith's credit, he acknowledges his biases in the Preface and Acknowledgements claiming that 'I am a visible member of the Strong Program' and he goes on to acknowledge that:

'I admit to being somewhat uncomfortable that American cultural sociology emerges as a kind of saviour towards the end of the book. My intention has been to provide a truthful account and not a Whig history. I am calling it the way I see it' (p. viii)

While this is an admirable admission on Smith's part the bias is, if anything, even more stark than he presents it here and can be traced to my opening discussion of the two ways one can be a 'Durkheimian' used in this text. While omissions are inevitable in a text such as this, we have seen by Smith's own acknowledgement his stretching of the term 'Durkheimian' to include many cultural writers. Meanwhile, other significant Durkheimians not writing in the tradition of cultural sociology, for whom this stretching is not required, are omitted. Among significant omissions from this group are: Anthony Giddens, who is only cited here as the editor of a book on Durkheim's writings on the State, but who developed his own major body of Durkheim scholarship (see Dawson 2016); David Garland (2013), who is cited *en passant* but whose work on developing Durkheim's criminological insight is not discussed; Philippe Steiner (2011), again cited here a few times, but only as an 'alternative view' on Durkheimian economic sociology, the content of this alternative view is not discussed; and Susan Stedman Jones, whose *Durkheim Reconsidered* (2001) provided a significant

resource for rethinking Durkheim's legacy, especially politically, and who is mentioned as just one of the large *Durkheimian Studies/Études Durkheimiennes* group.

This is not to say that the second definition of a Durkheimian, someone who asks Durkheimian questions without citing him directly, is not equally deserving of discussion in a text like this, but even here, it is notable how often the Durkheimian questions Smith highlights are ones in the tradition of cultural sociology. For example, the long tradition of sociological work on suicide, seemingly a clear trajectory for such a claim, is not discussed here (see Fincham et al. 2011), neither is work on solidarity, such as that of Lawrence Wilde (2013). These 'Durkheimians' of the second type, not clearly included in a tradition of cultural sociology, simply are not present in Smith's story. As he notes, identifying this type of Durkheimian is 'increasingly a matter of opinion as textual evidence dries up' (p. 202) and his own biases of what 'Durkheimian' analysis entails shows up most clearly here.

It speaks well of the Durkheimian tradition that one response to Smith's text is being able to list a number of significant writers and fields which he has not covered. Indeed, as Smith notes, looking at Durkheimianism in 1985 one could not avoid the opinion that Durkheim 'does not seem particularly interesting. It feels as if his ideas have been mined out' (p. 180) so to be able to write 35+ years of a proliferation of scholarship speaks well for what will come after *Durkheim and After*. It is also the case that, having criticised Smith for his biases, I should acknowledge my own. In Smith's categorisation, I would be grouped with the writers concerned with normative questions in Durkheim's work who emerged from the 1990s onward and who are concerned with different questions, and inspired by different texts from Durkheim, than the cultural sociology school. My selection of Smith's omissions is inevitably influenced by my position in the Durkheimian field.

Smith ends his text by suggesting that each dominant trend in Durkheimianism has had roughly 20-30 years in the sun and, should this pattern hold, his own school of cultural Durkheimianism would soon be leaving the stage. Whether that is true is not, what *Durkheim and After* shows is that there is a rich history to draw upon for wherever the tradition goes next. Despite, as Smith notes, the odds having been against it at many points over the last 127 years, Durkheimians of both types will continue to keep the word alive.

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