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Durkheim's Ghost

The Century after His Death, 1917-2017

Emile Durkheim died 15 November 1917 just when Europe's Great War turned uglier than already it had been. He died of despair over the death of his son, André, on a front of that war.

1917 was also the year of the beginning of the revolutions that ended Czarist Russia and in which the Americans entered the fight against Germany. Not quite two years later, on 28 June 1919, the disastrously punitive Treaty of Versailles assured that the Great War ending Europe's liberal nineteenth century would, in historical fact, turn out to have been a latter-day Thirty Years War. It threatened the very interstate system the Treaty of Westphalia inaugurated in 1648 to end the original Thirty Years' War. As time would tell, Hitler, in particular among the German people, was so obsessed by the disgracing wounds inflicted by Versailles that when France capitulated on 22 June 1940 he humbled the French by demanding that the Armistice be signed at *Compiègne* in the very train car in which Germany had been forced to capitulate on 11 November 1918. Then, too when the Americans entered that grand but not-so-great war, it would not turn out to be—as the American President Woodard Wilson had naively hoped—the war to end all wars. Anything but! On the contrary, the short twentieth century from the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand 28 June 1914 to the end of the Cold War with Mikhail Gorbachev's resignation on 25 December 1991 would be riddled by wars that grew more violent as they became ever more local.

Now, a full century since the war that killed Durkheim and so countless many others, the killing and violence continues at, if anything, a faster pace. He would not be happy. But, also, Durkheim might not be surprised that his noble ideas did so little social good. A differential diagnosis of Durkheim's cause of death would have to include not just the stroke and the anomic despair at the loss of his son, but also the deeply sad failure of his life's work to save France from the modern world.

What, specifically, would Durkheim have thought of the century following 1917? He had had but 59 years, of which the last few, after 1914, he devoted to France. Had it not been for André's death, it might have been just as likely that he would have worked himself to death

in national defense efforts and a strenuous schedule of teaching and lecturing. Through those terrible years he somehow remained cautiously optimistic¹. But why, while still among the living, might Durkheim have been optimistic? Little in his personal or social time encouraged the notion that the very social disorder he meant to heal could be or would be healed. Then too he would surely have been deeply discouraged, to say the least, by the disaster that arose not more than a decade after his death.

It is well known that Durkheim was born in rural Épinal to a long line of rabbis. What he could not have known is that the Jewish village of his birth was not far from the border with what would become Nazi Germany. Had Durkheim remained in Épinal to become a rabbi in the tradition of his father's fathers he very possibly would not have survived. He was, if nothing else, more than ready to go against the grain. Still, having left for the modern, secular world, had he lived to learn of *Kristallnacht* (9-10 November, 1938 when he would have had 71 years), Durkheim would have understood a good bit about the Nazi pseudo-religious cult that led to Hitler's "Jewish Problem". In truth, any prescient sociological study during the early years of the Nazi cult would have had to have been Durkheimian. (A Weberian study of the kind would likely not have been able to manage Hitler's attempt to fuse Weber's many spheres into a singular Aryan nation-state.)

Still, it is far from clear (to me at least) how much, if at all, Durkheim suffered from his ethnic identity. He of course joined Émile Zola in defending Captain Alfred Dreyfus (and was married to Louise Dreyfus who must have been related at a remove to Alfred). France today, as then, still experiences a virulent strain of anti-semitic violence, as do many other so-called modern societies. Anti-semitism and its rabid affines have not gone away in 2017, even if they are hidden under the cloak of post- (or, better, ill-) liberal politics. Whatever may have been Durkheim's personal struggles, there can be little doubt as to what he would have thought of the Nazi regime that was ever more severe an assault on a nation's social bond than the secularization that so troubled him in modernizing France.

Apart from the founding of scientific sociology, Durkheim devoted his life to saving France from the chaos he associated with the decline of religion as the moral glue holding together the splintering parts of a secular social order. In this respect, he shared, in his way, a version of Max Weber's belief that modernization, whatever its benefits, was an iron cage of rationality because it left scant room for the charismatic moment (of which the religious prophet was Weber's exemplar). By the comparison, the key passage in Durkheim's opening salvo on egoistic suicide in *Suicide* introduces a little remark upon irony of modern religious life which must have had its origin in his childhood experiences in a Jewish family

in Épinal. The irony is in the fact that Jewish people were among the most highly literate of modern people, yet they enjoyed a strong coefficient of preservation against suicide. Durkheim's idea was that education is individuating because (in a notion quite similar to Weber's thinking on the matter) learning breaks the bond with the traditional religious society, for which he takes Catholicism as the prime example. Protestants were more highly educated than Catholics, yet they suffered from a morbidly feeble immunity to egoistic suicide.

Hence, Durkheim's implied question: If among Protestants education induces a higher social suicide rate, how could it be that, of the three major European religious groups in that day, Jews were more immune to suicide than even Catholics who were protected by the social solidarity of a then very traditional religious community? The answer was that Jewish people, notwithstanding their supposedly individuating learning, were a persecuted minority which required a strong communal solidarity for defensive purposes. "The Jew, therefore, seeks to learn, not in order to replace his collective prejudices by reflective thought, but merely to be better armed for the struggle."² Or, to rephrase in Weber's terms, Catholics then were subject to traditionalism and Protestants were the ideal type of the modern rational ethic. Thus, it is possible that Durkheim, were he to have used Weberian terminology, might have said that Jewish people were an ideal type of the after-modern person. It is only partly correct to put "after-modern" in Durkheim's mouth because he showed little direct interest in the political economy of the modern world in Europe. As a consequence, Durkheim would have been far less likely than Weber—not to mention Marx—to consider that the actual history of the Protestant modern ethic has been the story of the nightmares capitalism (whatever its benefits) has visited on those it exploits. One can only hope for an after-modern culture able to learn, as Durkheim's Jews are said to have, from a solidarity derived from a long history of persecution.

This being so, and granting that Durkheim died before he could have seen what has come to pass after 1917, we can wonder still more about what he would have made of Hitler's slaughter of so many Jews. From a moral point of view he would have been, it hardly need to be said, appalled. Still, from a scientific point of view, as a student of culture and its workings, Durkheim would have well understood how the Holocaust after *Kristallnacht* came to be. Hitler's culture of Aryan supremacy was the very antithesis of the healing moral culture Durkheim had hoped France's secular educational system might create. Hence another irony associated with Durkheim's thinking. As much or more than Weber, the son of rabbis upon rabbis became the interpreter of the role of religion in societies, traditional and modern. But also, Durkheim carefully argued in *Elementary Forms*

of the Religious Life that religion was in the very inner workings of knowledge as inherent and necessary to social life itself. In this, Durkheim turned Marx on *his* head (though not in a Hegelian or even a Kantian sort of way). Alvin W. Gouldner once said in reference to Marx's *Camera Obscura* that the figure of speech was brilliant except for the fact that Marx had no way to account for cameraman. Durkheim, by contrast (and in spite of his thin theory of the individual), argued precisely that culture is anything but obscure because culture provides the only picture of the social world in which all social individuals are the picture-takers.

In this respect, Durkheim would have taken interest, perhaps pleasure, in the writings of the German critical theorists of culture whose very purpose was, in significant degree, a response to the sad fate of Germany under the National Socialists. Durkheim would have well appreciated such works as Horkheimer's and Adorno's 1944-1945 essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", for its critique of the deep structure of mass culture. Hitler's nationalism was, in effect, a forerunner of the mass culture that came to be so influential after 1945. Curiously, Durkheim might well have agreed both with their ideas on the industrialization of mass culture *and* their famous essay's critique of Enlightenment. But, Durkheim would have certainly held a more restrained attitude toward the German Enlightenment even though his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* was a direct assault on Kant's mental categories of understanding from which issued the ideas of knowledge as based on a synthetic *a priori* and of the categorical imperative to act as though one's actions pertain to, and sustain, the moral order of social life.

Similarly, Durkheim would have been skeptical of the very idea of mass culture insofar as the expression has come down over the years as dismissive of any culture that might be appreciated by those not among the cultural elite. Yet, he did put forth a theory of mass culture in the more generous sense of a widely, perhaps universally, shared culture necessary not just to knowledge but also to the moral order that made social life possible in the first place. If Durkheim had somehow lived into the early 1940s (when he would have had just more than 80 years), even he—the most provincial of French intellectuals—would likely have reached out to the German critical theorists in exile in the United States. Had he, he might have been a more critical sociologist, as perhaps Horkheimer and Adorno might have come to a more robust appreciation of aspects of mass culture—and especially of cinema and jazz, if not television and all the other subsequent technomedia. Still one of the early critical theory's heirs, Herbert Marcuse, was the first to describe in the plain language of *One Dimensional Man* (1964) how the newer mass cultural technomedia destroy the basic human genius for critical thinking. However mystified Durkheim surely would have been

by televisual media, Marcuse's critique would have caught his eye.

Then too, one could well wonder what Durkheim would have thought of the state of global affairs after the end of the thirty years war in 1945? The first and all-too-easy answer is that it is likely that he would have been puzzled for more reasons than his by then extreme age. The confusion would not have had to do with Europe's post-war efforts to reconstruct its infrastructures, social institutions, and democratic cultures. Even if (improbably) Durkheim would have had to have enjoyed more than another good decade of life to see the results in France, he would have relished the necessity of the reconstruction. Still, since Claude Lévi-Strauss lived to 101 years, it might not have been impossible that Durkheim could have, in principle, lived long enough to see the sensational effect of Pierre Bourdieu's 1964 *Les héritiers: les étudiants et la culture*³ on the restructuring of France's university system. Durkheim would have been delighted, one assumes, that Bourdieu's own Durkheimian disposition had the effect it had in and on French culture.

Durkheim's ghost would have certainly taken pleasure at Lévi-Strauss' *Collège de France Leçon Inaugurale*⁴ on 5 January 1960. The Chair of Social Anthropology was created in 1958. Lévi-Strauss took the occasion of his appointment to it to acknowledge the year of Durkheim's birth a century before in 1858. The most striking aspect of that 1960 lecture was the way Lévi-Strauss claimed Durkheim as the inspiration for his own studies of culture. Not only that, but Lévi-Strauss honored Durkheim's nephew, Marcel Mauss who had previously held the *Collège* chair in Sociology. This of course was part of a general affirmation of Durkheim's *équipe* including Maurice Halbwachs as well as Mauss. Halbwachs is often considered more the philosopher, yet his writings on collective memory are directly in the lineage from Durkheim's collective representations to Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology. Mauss was much more the cultural ethnographer and, with Durkheim, the author of *De quelques formes primitives de classification*⁵ which, in 1903, set down not only the basic principles of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* in 1912, while also securing a footing for Durkheimian sociology's primitive notion of what today some would call comparative social research.

As a result, had Durkheim been alive to hear Lévi-Strauss' tribute to him, he might have given thought to the limitations of his own sociologies of knowledge and culture. Whatever he carried forth from his 1903 essay with Mauss, after 1945 Durkheim might have realized that he had been too absorbed in a sociology *for* France. It is at least possible that he would have had to rethink his basic principles as, in the wake of its liberation from Nazi occupation, France had to rethink itself. I have long thought⁶ that, beyond the limitations of

his scheme, even of his more famous concept, *anomie*, Durkheim's most enduring concept is *collective representations* in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* in 1912. There, and in Ferdinand de Saussure's courses in general linguistics⁷ (offered in Geneva at about the same time, 1906-1911), are found the formal principles of the structuralism that earned Lévi-Strauss his chair in the *Collège de France*. Structural anthropology was but one line among the variety of structuralisms that, immediately after the war, rivaled Sartre's existentialism for the attentions of the Parisian intellectual elite. Structuralism won out, if one can put it this way, because France—having been the victim of the Nazi effort to steal and otherwise destroy its political and artistic cultures—had to rethink itself as a whole. France, like Germany (but unlike Britain and the United States), very much needed a stronger program for understanding its national culture.

Many (especially careless American readers) thought of the structuralisms (including post-structuralism so-called) as some sort of off-beat, even absurdist, digression. The structuralist moment in France was, in fact, part of a necessary rethinking of France's place in the world. The long, sorry reign of Gaullist politics was part of that rethinking. On the other hand, the Parisian literary elite stood firm as a culture of resistance (in spite of its, to some, excessively elegant *normalien* discourse). Still, as time went by, even a few Anglophone clear-thinkers begrudgingly took to heart some of the writings of France's public *vedettes* from Lévi-Strauss to Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu—even the tragic Louis Althusser. It would be silly to suppose that Durkheim was behind all this. But he did contribute to the deep structural background of these movements by his habit of always taking a structural attitude toward culture, especially French national culture. Had it been possible that, after Versailles in 1919, for some version of Weimar culture to survive, perhaps Germany would have been able to stand up to the National Socialists. But the Versailles Treaty that Hitler so hated saw to it that what Weimar might have been would not survive to put a brake in his insanity. After 1933 many of the artists and intellectuals of Weimar culture were in exile.

Hence, also, another irony associated with Durkheim and his ghost. There is no reason to believe that his strong program for national education could have saved secular France from Hitler. But there is reason to consider that certain of Durkheim's core ideas would endure, not as ghosts, but as social scientific and cultural ideas that would contribute to the many attempts to come to terms with what we now think of as global realities. The Cold War from 1946 to 1991 would have made some sense to Durkheim, if only because it so obviously set two very different, post-national collective representations of societal cultures against each other. The West's over-determined attachment to its various and vague

ideologies of a righteous democracy was to a considerable degree a shadow of Soviet and Maoist global ideologies. Mao's cultural revolution of the 1960s was not all that different in cultural kind from the Red Scare in the 1950s in the United States. Mao's was vastly more violent, but on both sides lives were ruined, literally, for no good reason.

Just after the collapse of the Cold War in 1991, technomedia of many kinds contributed to what we now call globalization—a truly global reality of economic, political, as well as cultural change that has plunged national societies into a state of uncertainty. There are, it hardly need be said, lingering and palpable differences among American, British, German, and French national cultures—not to mention among others of the 195 entities considered independent countries. Still, as soon as one crosses into any of these, she will recognize very familiar manners and institutions, if only Starbucks or Kentucky Fried Chickens.

Where the line between sameness and difference among national cultures now lies is hard to say. Such a world as ours in 2017 would have made the urban social conflict that so worried Durkheim a century ago seem like child's play. Yet, down to the 100th anniversary of his death in 2017, Durkheim's ghost would find a haven in any attempt to think, even to understand, the whole of social things—or, more to the Durkheimian point, to gather those social facts that would permit amelioration of our anomic world order.

Endnoten

1. Steven Lukes, *Émile Durkheim: His Life and Work*, Penguin Books, 1975, pp. 547–555.
2. Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, The Free Press, 1951, p. 168.
3. *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relations to Culture*, University of Chicago Press, 1979.
4. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Scope of Anthropology*, Jonathan Cape, 1967.
5. *Primitive Classifications*, University of Chicago Press, 1967.
6. Charles Lemert, *Durkheim's Ghosts: Cultural Logics and Social Things*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
7. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Fontana/Collins, 1977) is a transcription of Saussure's lecture, published in 1916.

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