



## Durkheim's Religious Revival

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# Review Essay: Durkheim's Religious Revival<sup>1</sup>

*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.* By Émile Durkheim. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press, 1995. Pp. lxxiii+464. \$35.00.

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Not so many years ago, there was a joke circulating amongst social scientists. It went as follows:

Q. How do you tell a sociologist from an anthropologist?

A. The sociologist thinks that *Suicide* is Durkheim's greatest book, while the anthropologist prefers *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

Not very funny really. Like so many other jokes, this one made sense only in its day. But it is still worth telling—if only as a means of underlining just how sociology's attitude toward *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* has changed over the past several years. Through exploring this sea change, we can better understand the significance of Karen E. Fields's recently published translation of *The Elementary Forms*.

Since its initial publication in 1912, Durkheim's last and arguably greatest work has enjoyed a mixed reception within sociology. For a discipline that likes to think of itself as a science, the positivistic tenor of *Suicide* ([1897] 1952), *The Rules of Sociological Method* ([1895] 1982), and *The Division of Labor in Society* ([1893] 1984) has held more appeal. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that, for many, these works have provided the Malinowskian "mythological charter" for sociology as science. By contrast, *The Elementary Forms* has remained an outlier—a liminal text within the Durkheimian corpus. Notwithstanding a residual positivism expressed in the assertion that "religion is real" and amenable to scientific inquiry, Durkheim's magnum opus holds at its core the vision of a more hermeneutic, more "cultural" understanding of society (Alexander 1989).

For the most part, this vision has been treated as a threat rather than as a promise—an attitude that has provoked various responses to Durk-

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heim's anomalous text. One response has been to misrecognize or gloss the discontinuities between *The Elementary Forms* and Durkheim's earlier texts—a strategy used by Durkheim's surviving students, such as Mauss, Bouglé, Halbwachs, and Simiand (Alexander 1982, p. 306). Other early readers, such as Goldenweiser and Van Gennep, avoided the issue by critiquing *The Elementary Forms* in terms of narrow technical and ethnographic criteria rather than its theoretical position. But the most telling reply to Durkheim's cultural challenge has been neglect. For most of its 80-something-year history, *The Elementary Forms* has attracted nothing like the amount of attention given to its elder siblings.

With Durkheim's death in 1917 and with his students all but wiped out during World War I, *The Elementary Forms* lacked a champion. From the time of Durkheim's death until the 1960s, only the French Collège de Sociologie, spearheaded by Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, really understood the spirit of Durkheim's orphaned text. In a number of important and still neglected works, they elaborated on the idea of the sacred and applied it to the analysis of contemporaneous empirical phenomena, such as fascism (e.g., Caillois 1939; see Richardson 1992). During this period, it was Durkheim's middle-period texts, especially *The Division of Labor*, that were most influential for British and American sociological theory. In British anthropology, the influential structural-functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and, to a lesser extent, Evans-Pritchard (1940) tended to focus on institutions and the kinship system rather than religion and ritual. Talcott Parsons's ([1937] 1968) perceptive reading of *The Elementary Forms* in *The Structure of Social Action* was in many ways decades ahead of its time in identifying major tensions between Durkheim's later subjectivism and his earlier positivism. However, Parsons's own functionalist models took little from *The Elementary Forms* in spirit, even if they accepted the analytic premises of normative integration and subjective motivation as central to social stability. In American anthropology, a more strongly cultural tradition emerged during this period, but it was one that drew its inspiration from local figures like Franz Boas rather than Durkheim's last great work.

In retrospect, Edward Shils's now-classic essays on the sacred, charisma, and public ritual (e.g., Shils and Young 1956) mark a crucial turning point in the fate of *The Elementary Forms*, even if it was not recognized as such in their time. In applying Durkheim's ideas to contemporary societies, Shils redeemed Durkheim's claim that a theory developed in relation to Aboriginal totemism was still relevant. But Shils also did more than this. His essays hint at a discontent with the kind of cultural theorizing that he himself helped to develop within the Parsonian camp (e.g., Parsons and Shils 1951).

During the 1960s, other sociologists took this discontent further, finding in *The Elementary Forms* a resource for moving beyond the dull and uninspiring lexicon of "values" and "norms" toward a more dynamic, powerful, and empirically anchored form of cultural theorizing. In insisting on the centrality of sacred national fictions, Robert Bellah's (1967)

work on civil religion pointed both backward to *The Elementary Forms* and forward toward contemporary research on narrative. Edward Tiryakian's work on the occult (1974) and sacrality also opened up new ways of being Durkheimian. But it was Clifford Geertz (1973) who made the most decisive break with Parsons, drawing in an indirect way upon the poetic dimensions of *The Elementary Forms* to develop a more literary and hermeneutic form of cultural inquiry than any that had been attempted before. Other anthropological theorists took a more structural and less textual lead from *The Elementary Forms*. Claude Lévi-Strauss's interest in binary codes and mythology led almost inevitably to wider discoveries about the centrality of the sacred/profane dichotomy in social life, the work of figures like Mary Douglas (1969) and Louis Dumont (1970) on the dialectic of purity and pollution being a case in point. Equally important was the work of Victor Turner (1969) whose influential concept of "communitas" reprised Durkheim's discussions of "collective effervescence."

But important as these breakthroughs were, it is important not to exaggerate their significance. While they contributed to the seminal position of *The Elementary Forms* in anthropology from the 1960s onward, the text remained marginal in sociology. The period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s was one in which an antinormative mode of theorizing was dominant, especially among critical sociologists. Figures like Tiryakian, Bellah, and Shils may have been important in the discipline, but they also remained isolated pioneers without any mass basis of support. Up until this time, the joke with which we began this piece would have worked. For it is only in the past 10 years that *The Elementary Forms* has become canonical for mainstream sociology.

Three forces have contributed to this emerging centrality. First, there has been a broad swing in the discipline as a whole toward cultural analysis. This general intellectual movement has seen hermeneutics, semiotics, structuralism, and postmodernism become more central to contemporary sociological theory. In so doing it has opened up a breathing space for the later Durkheim. Thanks in no small part to the efforts of the 1960s pioneers in demonstrating a contemporary relevance, more attention is now being directed toward *The Elementary Forms*. The second reason relates to the ways in which researchers who are inspired by Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* have been able to adapt Durkheim's visionary ideas to a changed intellectual climate. On the one hand, untenable ideas about homogeneous and unified societies have been thrown out the window along with most, if not all, traces of idealistic cultural determinism. On the other hand, theoretical developments in kindred areas like literary criticism, historiography, and narrative philosophy, postmodernism, and semiotics have been taken on board and adapted to the Durkheimian project. A plethora of research has resulted that folds the spirit of *The Elementary Forms*—a belief in the sacred, symbolism, and the autonomy of culture—into innovative new theorizing and applies the results in fields as diverse as comparative and historical sociology (e.g., Edles 1993;

Kane 1991; Smith 1991, 1996; Stallybrass and Whyte 1986; Zelizer 1985), inequality (e.g., Lamont 1992; Della Fave 1991), health (e.g., Armstrong 1993), communications and the mass media (e.g., Jacobs 1996a; Rothenbuhler 1993; Sherwood 1994; Smith 1994), civic and political culture (e.g., Somers 1995; Alexander and Smith 1993; Edles 1995; Wagner-Pacifici 1986; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991), nationalism and national identity (e.g., Kapferer 1988; Phillips 1996; Schudson 1994; Spillman 1994), science, technology, and the environment (e.g., Alexander 1993; Alexander and Smith 1996; West and Smith 1996), sexuality (e.g., Seidman 1988), emotion and motivation (e.g., Turner 1987), and race and ethnicity (e.g., Jacobs 1996b). It is this efflorescence of work that has made Durkheimian cultural sociology central to empirical as well as theoretical sociology today.

The third reason for the revival of the religious Durkheim is less obvious and relates to the way that we contemporaries have read *The Elementary Forms*. As the culturalist movement has gained strength, so have perceptions of *The Elementary Forms* changed. Whereas earlier readings emphasized objectivism and continuity with the middle-period Durkheim, later readings have detected a decisive epistemological break embodied in a call for *verstehen*-type inquiry. These rereadings have helped launch *The Elementary Forms*, along with Weber's religious sociology, to preeminence as the mythological charter for culturalist inquiry. In particular, calls for the recognition of the "autonomy of culture" (e.g., Kane 1991) have drawn upon the late-Durkheim as the totemic ancestor from whom the culturalist project derives both its legitimacy and its lineage.

With this last point we come to Karen Fields's retranslation of *The Elementary Forms*, the first complete translation to be published since Joseph Ward Swain's original version of 1915 (Durkheim [1912] 1976). Fields's translation is an indicator in more ways than one of the nature of Durkheim's religious revival. The fact that the Free Press decided to publish a new translation of a reasonably expensive, 464-page work by Durkheim suggests that a certain level of interest exists among scholars. It testifies, in a sense, to the existence of an objectively observable social fact that will support the book in the marketplace. But above and beyond this, the translation is also suggestive of the nature of this current interest. The most striking feature of Fields's translation is not just its more contemporary, vibrant use of language but also the way that this translation reflects emerging understandings of the message of *The Elementary Forms* and its place in contemporary social science. Constraints of space prevent a detailed exploration of this issue, but we can compare how Swain and Fields render two selections. First, compare a description of an Aboriginal corroboree as presented in the original French and then in Swain and in Fields:

Tandis que les feux, allumés de tous les côtés, faisaient ressortir violemment la blancheur des gommiers sur le fond des ténèbres environnantes, les Uluru s'agenouillèrent les uns derrière les autres à côté du tumulus, puis ils

en firent le tour en se soulèvent de terre, d'un mouvement d'ensemble, les deux mains appuyées sur les cuisses, pour s'agenouiller à nouveau un peu plus loins, et ainsi de suite. En même temps, ils penchaient leurs corps tantôt à droite, tantôt à gauche, poussant tous à la fois, à chacun de ces mouvements, un cri retentissant, véritable hurlement, Yrrsh! Yrrsh! Yrrsh! (Durkheim [1912] 1979, p. 311)

While fires were lighted on all sides, making the whiteness of the gum trees stand out sharply against the surrounding darkness, the Uluuru knelt down one behind another beside the mound, then rising from the ground they went around it, with a movement in unison, their two hands resting upon their thighs, then a little further on they knelt down again, and so on. At the same time they swayed their bodies, now to the right and now to the left, while uttering at each movement a piercing cry, a veritable yell, "Yrrsh! Yrrsh! Yrrsh!" (Swain's translation; Durkheim 1976, p. 217)

With fires flickering on all sides, bringing out starkly the whiteness of the gum trees against the surrounding night, the Uluuru knelt in single file beside the mound, then moved around it, rising in unison with both hands on their thighs, kneeling again a little further along, and so on. At the same time, they moved their bodies left and then right, at each movement letting out an echoing scream—actually a howl—at the top of their voices, "Yrrsh! Yrrsh! Yrrsh!" (Fields's translation; Durkheim [1912] 1995, p. 219)

Second, here is how a theoretical passage appears in all three:

Une société, c'est le plus puissant faisceau de forces physiques et morales dont la nature nous offre le spectacle. Nulle part, on ne trouve une telle richesse de matériaux divers, portés à un tel degré de concentration. Il n'est donc pas surprenant qu'une vie plus haute s'en dégage, qui, réagissant sur les éléments dont elle résulte, les élève à une forme supérieure d'existence et les transforme. (Durkheim 1979, p. 637)

A society is the most powerful combination of physical and moral forces of which nature offers us an example. Nowhere else is an equal richness of different materials, carried to such a degree of concentration, to be found. Then it is not surprising that a higher life disengages itself which, by reacting upon the elements of which it is the product, raises them to a higher plane of existence and transforms them. (Swain's translation; Durkheim 1976, p. 446)

A society is the most powerful collection of physical and moral forces that we can observe in nature. Such riches of various materials, so highly concentrated, are to be found nowhere else. It is not surprising, then, that a higher life develops out of them, a life that acts on the elements from which it is made, thereby raising them to a higher form of life and transforming them. (Fields's translation; Durkheim 1995, p. 447)

While neither translation quite captures the urgent yet supple rhythm of Durkheim's own writing, that of Fields is the closer of the two. Moreover, its more contemporary choice of vocabulary makes the passages look less like museum pieces and more like sections from a contemporary

text. As Fields (pp. xxiii–xxiv) notes in her introduction, translations do not simply recode words from one grammatical system to another, they also recode texts from one semantic system to another. The difference here is one of text and context, where the effective translation carries over the spirit of the original as much as its letter and embeds it in a new *weltanschauung*. The appeal of Fields's text very much lies in its synergetic relationship with contemporary understandings of *The Elementary Forms*. The stilted, convoluted late-Victorian tones of Swain embody and reinforce the the image of Durkheim, the scientist and philosopher. By contrast, Fields's reworking of the text gives to *The Elementary Forms* a Geertzian tenor. Here Durkheim becomes the virtuoso interpreter of cultural life, the translator of traditions. But more than this, Durkheim reads like a daring and imaginative theorist rather than a pedantic relic of 19th-century positivism. In bringing this Durkheim back to life, Karen Fields reaffirms and documents the continuing relevance of Durkheim's work for modern sociology.

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