
Emile Durkheim

THE
EVOLUTION OF
EDUCATIONAL
THOUGHT

*Lectures on the
Formation and
Development
of Secondary
Education
in France*

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Lectures on the formation and
development of secondary education
in France

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Peter Collins

Introduction by Maurice Halbwachs to the French edition of 1938

The work here offered to our readers is the text of a course on the *History of Education in France* which was first given by Durkheim in 1904-5 and which he repeated in subsequent years until the war. It had been decided, at the time of the 1902 reform, to organise a professional course in educational theory for all '*agrégation*' candidates. The University of Paris had entrusted the running of this course to Durkheim.

It is a fact which needs to be remembered without being exaggerated that sociology was not admitted wholesale to the Sorbonne but rather insinuated itself through the narrow gate of educational theory. In 1902 Durkheim was appointed as the deputy of Ferdinand Buisson, whom he succeeded in 1906, and given responsibility for teaching the science of education. Moreover, his teaching at Bordeaux had prepared him for this since a large part of it had always been devoted to this discipline. It will be seen that this course only partially comprised new work. It came after long years in the course of which he did not cease to be concerned with the problems of education and teaching. Moral education, child psychology, the history of educational doctrines: Durkheim had successfully adopted these three perspectives which constitute classical educational theory. There is scarcely a province in this area which he did not explore. And not only in order to carry out a task which was required of him. It was a part, and also one of the essential practical applications, of the science of man which he believed fully deserved the effort he devoted to it.

The 'course of education in France' had absorbed and was imbued by all this. But we have here something else besides. Durkheim has furnished us with a model example of what can be made of a study of educational institutions carried out within an historical framework by a great sociologist. Just as there is a sociology of religion, a sociology of politics, etc., there is in fact a

sociology of education which is by no means the least important. For education is the most powerful instrument a society possesses for fashioning its members in its own image. Certainly, the family takes the child in its entirety first of all, envelops him wholly and forms him in its own way. But if we think of the revolutions which take place in him when he goes to school for the first time, we realise that his way of being and even almost his very nature change. From this moment onwards he contains within himself a veritable duality. When he goes home, his parents feel that he belongs less and less to them. Fathers and children: the generation gap is established at this point. Subject to the regimen of the school environment, the child, the young man progressively discovers a whole social world which is exterior to his family and in which he can only take a place if he adapts to it and incorporates it. The family itself is gradually modified by this.

Like all major functions of society, education has its own spirit which is expressed in programmes of study, of subjects taught, teaching methods and a physical body, a material structure which partially expresses this spirit but which also influences it, sometimes leaves its imprint upon it and temporarily serves to confine it. From the Cathedral schools to the mediaeval universities, from these latter to the Jesuit colleges, and then from there to our own *lycées* there have certainly been many transformations. This is because the organs of education are in every age closely related to the other institutions of the body social, to customs and beliefs, to the major intellectual movements.

But they also have a life of their own, an evolution which is relatively autonomous in the course of which they conserve many of the features of their former structure. Sometimes they defend themselves against influences acting upon them from the outside by relying on their past. For example it would be impossible to understand the division of universities into faculties, the systems of examinations and degrees, the boarding system, the use of sanctions in the academic world, unless we go right back to the time when the institution was being constructed whose outward forms, once they have come into being, tend to endure through time whether by some kind of force of inertia or because they successfully adapt to new circumstances. Seen from this point of view the organisation of education appears to be more hostile to change, more conservative and traditional even perhaps than the Church itself because its function is to transmit to the new generation a culture whose roots reach back into the distant past. But as against this the organisation of education has always been subject at certain periods to more radical changes brought about by genuine revolutions which have sometimes proved excessive. As

Durkheim noticed the men of the Renaissance in their hostility towards scholasticism failed to preserve that aspect of mediaeval education which deserved to be retained, namely its concern for a vigorous training in logic, and thus they paved the way for a purely literary, Greco-Latin curriculum designed primarily to fashion sophisticated writers, masters of eloquence, and accomplished conversationalists.

It is a complex and eventful story which is also vast in its scale since it embraces the whole period stretching from the Carolingian era to the end of the nineteenth century. Of course Durkheim was not an historian by profession. But he was thoroughly familiar with modern historical methods, having been a pupil, and a highly valued pupil, of Fustel de Coulanges at the Ecole Normale. He studied primary sources; for example, he read Alcuin in the original. No less eminent a historian than Christian Pfister, who was familiar with the two lectures on the Carolingian renaissance, found them unexceptionable. His documentation was as substantial as possible: the majority of his lectures included bibliographies which bore witness to massive reading and which we have not reproduced here because of course they are now out of date.

However it is of crucial importance to understand what Durkheim intended. When he had agreed to run this course he had clearly specified that he would not treat educational problems in doctrinal fashion as a psychologist or a moralist. He would demonstrate rather how they arose in the course of events under the pressure of circumstances and the social environment, what solutions triumphed, what their consequences were and what we should learn from them. He sought in the past the lessons from which the present was to take advantage. This way history for him furnished the subject-matter for reflection on a certain number of great educational experiments whose structure and outline it presents. He needed to evoke them, to imagine them, to relive them in thought and, above all, to understand them and to interpret them in their relationships and their development. As Auguste Comte said of positivism, sociology could do ample justice to the views which have preceded it and which it believes itself destined to replace. Durkheim recognised the gaps, the excesses, the congenital vices of the earlier systems of educational thought. But he was also sensitive to an understanding of those qualities in them which were novel and fruitful and which had constituted the legitimate reasons for their more or less sustained success.

All this can be found in the large bold fresco which covers ten centuries of history, in this kind of sustained discourse on the progress of the human mind in France which only Durkheim was

capable of constructing.

It is our belief that by making known this aspect of his thought, of his intellectual activity, we are rendering good service to his memory. His opponents have sometimes represented him as having a scholastic mind, narrow, nourished by abstractions, incapable of insight into anything beyond the confines of his own system. It has also been urged against him by people who have concentrated on one part of his work despite the extensiveness and diversity of the whole that he attended too exclusively to savage and archaic societies. To those who read this book, he will appear as he really was, that is as a mind free from all preconceived ideas, subject first and foremost to the authority of facts and moreover quite at ease working on a large canvas. It will also be seen how for him the history of education in France is constantly illuminated by the history of French and European thought over more than ten centuries. Could anything be more concrete and more relevant, closer to our own contemporary concerns?

Besides there is an additional factor apart from the above mentioned which has decided us at this particular time not to let the work slumber and disappear into obsolescence as is the fate of so many forgotten manuscripts. This is the fact that the book provides direct answers to questions which we ourselves pose today with greater urgency than ever so that it is only fitting to reintroduce it into the main stream of contemporary life, into the world of argument and debate which is its only habitat.

This course was undertaken immediately after the great parliamentary enquiry into education where qualified representatives from all parts of society, from all walks of life, from all political parties and from every kind of school, came to give evidence which culminated in the 1902 reform. It took place at a time when another reform of secondary education or, as we say now, of the 'secondary level', was being prepared. Durkheim described in one of his final lectures the variations in the curricula of the nineteenth century. He would not have been surprised that in the first third of the twentieth century, these endless toings and froings, despite being somewhat chaotic and contradictory, between one system and another, one conception and another, one extreme and another, have continued. But on the other hand he thought that this simply constituted a state of uncertainty which could not last indefinitely, that a state of crisis would soon be reached and that instead of timorous and partial reforms which failed to penetrate to the heart of things, it would be necessary to undertake a total reorganisation of our educational system. At that moment, it would be necessary to review the problem of educational thought in its entirety and it was precisely to the task of specifying

fully the terms of the problem and to indicate the ways in which solutions were to be sought that Durkheim wished to contribute when at the conclusion of this long historical study he wrote two long prescriptive chapters. In them he distinguished the two great objects of education, namely persons and things, and examined successfully what benefit should be derived in this respect from the study of the sciences, of history and of languages. These pages contain a comprehensive educational theory which is simultaneously positive and systematic and well fitted to the needs of the moment. We present it with complete confidence to those responsible for the structural reforms which the ancient edifice of our school and university system requires as well as to academics and teachers at all levels. These latter in particular will be all the better able to contribute to making these reforms a reality, if they have a clearer conception of that portion of the evolutionary curve which has been hitherto traversed. In this way they will at least know how the academic organism of which they are a part has been gradually constituted, where it comes from, even if not where it is going and what principles emerge from a well-conducted examination of an already long period in the history of educational thought in France.

Translator's introduction

Preamble

I shall make no attempt, in introducing the present text to the English-speaking reader, either to set these lectures within the context of Durkheim's achievement as a whole or to provide a synoptic guide to their principal places of interest. I am not sufficient of a Durkheim scholar, a sociologist or an historian to attempt the former and there is a more urgent prefatory task than the latter which needs to be undertaken.¹ For this book consists of a series of twenty-seven lectures originally delivered in 1904 as part of the compulsory curriculum for that élite cadre of French graduates destined to compete in the *agrégation* where success would lead, in the majority of cases, to academic careers to be begun by filling the year's vacant positions in the *lycées*. *Prima facie*, therefore, there would seem to be good grounds for doubting whether the book can be of much interest to present-day, English-speaking students of education. It may, indeed, be that such doubts on the part of publishers and even students of Durkheim have brought about the situation which Steven Lukes characterises by saying: 'It [the book] has been almost completely ignored by writers on Durkheim and on the history and sociology of education, though it is unquestionably a major work that deserves to be translated.'² Nevertheless, I wish to claim not only that Lukes's evaluation is more than amply justified — the book will show that — but also and more surprisingly that Durkheim's treatment of large-scale but always concrete educational issues has as much to teach us about the problems which confront us today as almost anything we are likely to encounter in the writings of modern educational theorists. Far from being irrelevant, parochial, out-of-date, narrowly historical and only of interest to Durkheim scholars, this book is imbued with that insight and

wisdom which transcend spatio-temporal limitations and which are characteristic of the genuine classic.

In his opening lecture Durkheim speaks of 'meeting an urgent contemporary need' by carrying out the investigation he is about to embark on. I shall argue that the turbulent state of educational theory and practice in the Western World in the last quarter of the twentieth century generates a need no less urgent than that to which Durkheim felt himself to be responding. Moreover, I shall claim that that response in the very earliest years of the century still goes a very long way towards meeting the same need. In particular, I shall try to show how much we have to learn from Durkheim with respect to four major areas of current educational controversy: the preparation of teachers and the content of the curriculum, then, though more briefly, styles of discipline and the distribution of education.

The preparation of teachers

The very existence of a compulsory course in educational theory for aspirant teachers continues to generate controversy in all quarters. Conservatives are suspicious lest it provide an opportunity for educational ideologues to indoctrinate the future teachers of their children with dangerously 'progressive' views. Radicals see it as yet another device whereby the priestly guild of teachers seek to enhance their monopoly power and prestige by insisting upon yet another vacuously mysterious initiation rite. And ordinary practitioners and interested spectators of the everyday business of educating the young enquire irritably or wistfully how long, O Lord, how long before some real expert will appear and actually and accurately tell us how to deal with discipline problems, how to ensure that our charges grow up to be moral and well-adjusted citizens, what to teach to whom — when, how and why. It is possible that sensitivity to all these issues accounted for Durkheim's reported reluctance to take responsibility for the course in the first place. Nevertheless, once having accepted it, he made no attempt to evade the issues.

In trying to elucidate what Durkheim thought the justification of educational theory to be, it is necessary to begin by saying something about what he took the nature of that activity to consist in. The French word which I have usually translated by the phrase 'educational theory' is 'pédagogie'. In one important respect, the translation is seriously defective in that Durkheim himself, as Lukes points out, proposed a threefold distinction between '(1) the scientific study of education; (2) the art of education, consisting of "ways of acting, practices, systematized skill" — the "savoir-faire

of the educator, the practical skill of the teacher"; and (3) pedagogy, seeking to "combine, as conscientiously as possible all the data science puts at its disposal, at a given time, as a guide to action". Pedagogy is thus a "practical theory" — "an intermediary between art and science" (Lukes, *op. cit.*, p.111n). I have, however, avoided the word 'pedagogy' on the grounds that its colloquial use in English is extremely vague and certainly the cognate 'pedagogue' would be quite wrong, whereas its current technical use in the sociology of education gives it a sense more akin to 'educational ideology'. Moreover, I am far from certain that I can share Lukes's enthusiasm for the usefulness of this tripartite distinction and I am certain that the commonly-made distinction between that part of education courses for teachers which is 'academic' and that which is 'professional' is disastrously superficial. In fact, for better or worse, 'educational theory' is the name given to the kind of practically-orientated course, which Durkheim designated 'pédagogie' and which is found in most institutions in the English-speaking world concerned with the preparation of teachers, and for that reason I have chosen to use it.

What then is this educational theory which Durkheim regards as an essential part of the modern student teacher's preparation? It is perhaps easiest to begin trying to answer this question by looking to the results Durkheim hoped to achieve. Durkheim's absolutely fundamental premise is that an educational system is only as good as the teachers who operate it. It is crucial, therefore, that in the course of his preparation the teacher acquire a critical self-consciousness of the activity he is engaged in and of the framework within which he is functioning. Otherwise he is doomed to a mindless and mechanical repetition of the principles and procedures which governed his own education, and education itself is condemned to a stifling and degenerate conservatism. The teacher, then, must be prepared both to see how and why the present system came to be what it is and also to challenge it in the light of contemporary social need. But though he will not be this kind of servile conservative he will be no naive radical either believing that the present system can be scrapped completely and that we can start afresh from first principles. Durkheim saw too clearly the complexity of social reality and also knew full well that revolution typically destroys as much of what is good as it does of what is bad, as was so notably the case when the men of the Renaissance rejected the mediaeval system in its entirety. The successfully prepared teacher, then, would be progressive, but (to adapt a phrase of Burke's) he would attend to the ills of the body educational as to the wounds of a beloved father; moreover he would have a powerful insight into the social distortions which

had produced those ills in the first place.

An important point related to this, and indeed it is the point which explains the need for caution in setting about the task of educational reform, is that the teacher both as an individual and a species is essentially an adaptive animal. If he were not, like other biological and social creatures, subject to the law of evolution, then in principle it might be that the preparation of teachers should consist in the transmission of eternal pedagogical verities. Indeed some such verities may indeed be timeless, such as the absolutely indispensable role of dialectic in the transmission and indeed the creation of knowledge. But, in general, educational ideals and consequently the appropriate means of attaining them will change as social conditions and hence societies' values change. The good teacher consequently will be aware of the legitimate needs of his own society and to gain this awareness he will need to study how these needs have evolved in the history of that society. This is the sense in which it is correct to describe Durkheim as an 'ethical conventionalist'. He is not arguing just that social forces do in fact determine ethical ideals, still less for the extreme ethical relativism which ultimately says 'Anything goes'. But he does believe, in an important sense, that when in Rome not only does one do as the Romans do but actually that this is what one *should* do. This position is to be distinguished again from that of the Social Darwinists which ultimately makes it analytically true that what is to be socially valued are those values which in fact survive. Rather Durkheim regards man as an essentially social creature, such that what counts as the good for the individual is determined by the norms of his society. This is why Durkheim talks so frequently about 'responding' or 'meeting' new needs created by changing social circumstances. In particular, contemporary society, he believes, celebrates the cult of the individual and, though it is not clear what the precise educational consequences of this are, it is clear that Durkheim regarded it as vital that teachers become aware, primarily by studying educational systems responding to different needs, of the popular moral demands that the educational system of their own society was required to meet, in virtue of the popular legitimate needs of that society itself.

This profoundly moral emphasis, which is characteristic of Durkheim's whole approach to social science, leads to the final point that needs to be made concerning Durkheim's conception of the aim of educational theory. For ultimately Durkheim hoped that these lectures would result not merely in the acquisition of knowledge by future teachers but in the generation of a new educational faith — a secular faith, certainly, but nevertheless one which would issue in passionate commitment to the vocation of teaching and would engage and sustain the individual teacher at

the deepest level of his heart and mind. It was the kind of faith which Durkheim, the teacher, himself possessed in such abundance and adhered to with such rigorous devotion. It is significant in this connection to note, though Durkheim does not himself make the point explicitly, that the educational systems whose effectiveness Durkheim is most impressed by are, he thinks, ultimately to be explained as the product of profound systems of religious belief. This is true not only of mediaeval education and classical education as developed by the Jesuits but also of the regrettably short-lived 'Realist' system whose theoretical progenitors were most notably Comenius and, to some extent, Rousseau, and which had rediscovered the insight of Greek religious thought which celebrates as sacred the particulars of concrete, physical nature as opposed to the Christian emphasis on general truths about human nature.

What, however, is to be the subject-matter which the future teacher must study in order that these aims may be achieved? The now so familiar distinctions between history, psychology, sociology and philosophy of education — the four horses of the apocalypse of educational theory — Durkheim was, mercifully, spared. It was not that such distinctions were foreign to him: on the contrary he is quite emphatic that the present can only be studied in historical perspective, that though the social sciences are too 'young' to provide precise educational analysis, educational systems are nevertheless to be understood in their social context, and it is to be expected that, for example, Freud's discovery of the unconscious will have important educational implications. Moreover and more importantly, not only is Durkheim's knowledge of philosophy clearly extensive but he characteristically concludes his historical analyses with the kind of evaluative statement which we might typically regard as philosophical and indeed the book as a whole culminates in two superb chapters of educational prescription.

The fact of the matter is that intellectual life in Durkheim's France was much less troubled by border disputes concerning what theoretical territory rightly belonged to whom. Polymathy was thought to be both possible and desirable and, purely as an example of the deployment of polymathic power, this book constitutes an outstanding achievement. Thus, although Durkheim himself places the emphasis on history, it is history so interpreted and so treated that it embraces and is suffused with the perspectives of the social sciences and of philosophy. There are in the end no distinct disciplines of educational theory for the future teacher to study: there is only the investigation of how education has been in the past, why it is as it is in the present and what it could and should become in the future. The important thing is that the

future teacher's theoretical training should equip him to analyse his particular educational situation critically, knowledgeably and in depth, and to plan and prescribe with wisdom and insight.

There is a final point to be made concerning Durkheim's views on the preparation of teachers which is in some ways the most important of all. For the work is like an 'Ars Poetica' which itself exemplifies the doctrines it is proclaiming. Nowhere else that I am aware, do we get so clear an impression of what it must have been like actually to be taught by Durkheim. Thus, if the study of education is supposed to be comprehensive and embrace several intellectual perspectives, then Durkheim's own treatment of education is comprehensive and multi-faceted. If teaching, to be effective, must strike at the heart of the pupil's being, then Durkheim exerts all the resources of a rich and subtle prose style to strike up the appropriate chords and resources in the minds of his audience. Above all, if education is a process of striving to sensitise the young imagination so that it can grasp new modes of conceiving the world then this imaginative sensitising Durkheim engages in, with respect to education itself.

The content of the curriculum

Since Durkheim's concept of education is often thought to be élitist, which proposition I shall examine below, it is perhaps well to begin a consideration of his prescription regarding the content of the curriculum, by stressing that Durkheim regarded it as a healthy evolutionary phenomenon that secondary education by developing out of the original Arts faculty of the university should have required and retained an essentially general and non-vocational character. Of course, education must have as its overall aim the socialising of individuals into the role in society which they are destined to fill, and this includes preparing those individuals to play a particular part in the division of labour. But this in no wise implies that Durkheim thought education, and especially secondary education, should be narrowly vocational. However, that Durkheim should be thought to hold crudely utilitarian views on the reform of the curriculum is attributable to his sustained hostility to the hegemony of the 'classical' education; and it is worth examining his position in this respect more closely.

Durkheim made a characteristically radical distinction between studying the form of reality and the study of reality itself. The former in one guise or another had dominated the secondary school curriculum since its inception. Thus the trivium of the early mediaeval period had been seriously flawed by its exclusive concentration on grammar. This was in fact at yet a farther

remove from the study of reality than the study of its form, for to study grammar is to study the language in which the form of reality finds expression. To that extent Durkheim regarded it as extremely arid and certainly quite unsuited to the general education by means of which the student was to prepare himself for the more practically orientated studies of the quadrivium. It was only redeemed by the fact that close attention to grammatical form issued inevitably in insight into, and appreciation of logical form. Thus the study of grammar paved the way for the next and, in Durkheim's view, great period of the Middle Ages when the curriculum came to be dominated by dialectical logic. Then, in a highly original and persuasive historical analysis of the Renaissance, Durkheim argues that revolt against the excesses of an education based almost entirely on dialectic resulted in over-reaction and excessive destruction. Everything about the mediaeval curriculum was rejected and this included the good as well as the bad. In its place there appeared, exemplified in the work of Rabelais, what might be called 'the cult of useless information'. It is true that this constituted an improvement in that reality could, as it were, peep through the study of what the authors of antiquity had said about the world of nature but it was still far removed from Durkheim's own ideal because of its indiscriminateness and because in the end, it allowed a study of reality only indirectly through the medium of what classical authors had said about it. Worse still was the other major strand in Renaissance educational thought whose most important exponent Durkheim identified as Erasmus and which might be termed 'the cult of the empty elegance'. Here all the emphasis was on developing the arts of self-expression so that one might become well thought of in polite society. Both strands, however, were equally guilty in the banishment of dialectical debate from the curriculum. This, Durkheim felt, was the right and necessary method for generating and assaying opinions which did not fall within the province of scientific knowledge. As such, it would always need to be studied, though, of course, not in its exclusive and excessive mediaeval form.

In the emergence of classical education, largely under the influence of the Jesuits, French education congealed into a new formalism from which it continued to suffer in Durkheim's own day. This formalism might be described as 'the cult of human generality'. It was distinguished by its concern to convey, through a study of classical history and literature, especially the Roman, an understanding of the eternally enduring features of human nature. Now, the hegemony of such a curriculum Durkheim deplored on at least two crucial grounds. First, it excluded study of the world of nature through the natural sciences — and Durkheim points to the truly staggering fact that it took some two and a half

centuries before the vast and revolutionary advances in natural science of the Renaissance gained even a foothold in the school curriculum. Second, it rested on a radically misguided notion of how it is appropriate to study the world of persons, for in its artificial emphasis on what is the same, it ignored the crucial fact about human nature, namely the almost limitless diversity of its manifestation. To gloss over the differences between the ancient Roman and the modern Frenchman was not only to mislead the pupil about human nature as it was exemplified in Roman culture, it also prevented him from understanding human nature in the peculiar particularity of his own situation. Moreover, there was the further corollary that other, allegedly more 'primitive' ancient cultures could safely be ignored since they would only be of interest, in as far as they exemplified in embryonic form that human nature which found fully-fledged expression only with the Greeks and the Romans.

Now, it was by exposing these two radical flaws in classical education — the exclusion of natural science and the serious misconception of human nature — that Durkheim hoped to show the traditional arts-science dichotomy to be a false one, with the consequence that competition between them for scarce curricular resources could be eliminated.

The reconciliation of conflict between the arts and the sciences can be brought about if we see that the pedagogical justification for neither of them is what it is too often taken to be and for both of them it is the same. The essential function of education is to develop neither aesthetic nor utilitarian skills, its goal rather must be the essentially moral one of cultivating the seeds of humanity which repose within each of us. Now, to achieve this not only must the world of persons be studied through a historical perspective on the extant literature of other cultures and other ages, but the world of nature will also form an essential object of study if our goal is an understanding of human consciousness. This for at least four reasons. First, activity occurs and the conceptions we have concerning the world about us affect the whole basis upon which we govern our lives. Second, it is in the world of nature that we have our origins and our roots and consequently to attempt to study man apart from the immense universe which surrounds him is to commit the anthropocentric fallacy. Third, the works of scientists no less than that of artists constitute human achievements and to that extent need to be understood if humanity itself is to be understood. Finally, the natural sciences have developed a logic of their own in the course of their development and the pupil can only acquire the art of inductive reasoning by direct experience through reliving for himself that course of development. With the emergence of the social sciences this logic will be in-