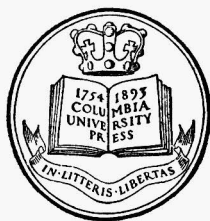


# EMILE DURKHEIM AND HIS SOCIOLOGY

BY

HARRY ALPERT, Ph. D.

SOMETIME UNIVERSITY FELLOW IN SOCIOLOGY  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



NEW YORK  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS  
LONDON: P. S. KING & SON, LTD.

1939

STUDIES IN HISTORY, ECONOMICS AND  
PUBLIC LAW

Edited by the  
FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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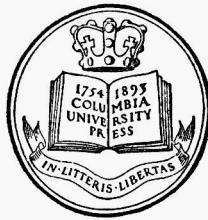


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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the Institute of International Education for a Franco-American Exchange Fellowship which made possible a sojourn in France;

To Columbia University for a University Fellowship in Sociology under which this study was completed;

To Professor Bonnafous of the University of Bordeaux, Professors MacIver, Abel, Lundberg, Lynd, Chaddock, Casey, von Schelting, Benedict and the late Professor Tenney of Columbia University for guidance and training;

To Professor R. M. MacIver, Professor G. A. Lundberg, and Mr. V. D. Sewny for having read and for having generously commented upon the manuscript;

To the Examining Committee of the Faculty of Political Science of Columbia University which accepted this study as a doctoral dissertation for valuable suggestions and penetrating criticisms;

To Professor T. Abel for having graciously assumed some of the editorial responsibilities;

To Anitra F. Alpert for more than usual forbearance as a wife while this work was being prepared.



## ABBREVIATIONS

AA	American Anthropologist.
AFLB	Annales de la Faculté des Lettres de Bordeaux.
AJS	American Journal of Sociology.
APDSJ	Archives de Philosophie du Droit et de Sociologie Juridique.
AS	Année Sociologique.
AnS	Annales Sociologiques.
ASR	American Sociological Review.
BSFP	Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie.
DS	Le Devenir Social.
ESS	Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences.
GE	Grande Encyclopédie.
JP	Journal de Psychologie.
KVS	Kölner Vierteljahrshefte für Soziologie.
MF	Mercure de France.
PSQ	Political Science Quarterly.
RB	Revue Bleue.
REP	Revue d'Economie Politique.
RIE	Revue internationale de l'Enseignement.
RIS	Revue internationale de Sociologie.
RiItS	Rivista Italiana di Sociologia.
RMM	Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale.
RNS	Revue Néo-scholastique.
RP	Revue Philosophique.
RPe	Revue Pédagogique.
RiP	Rivista Pedagogica.
RS	La Riforma Sociale.
RSH	Revue de Synthèse Historique.
RTA	Revue Turque d'Anthropologie.
RU	Revue Universitaire.
SF	Social Forces.
SP	Sociological Papers.
SR	Sociological Review.
SoR	Social Research.
SSR	Sociology and Social Research.





“ Si vous voulez mûrir votre  
pensée, attachez-vous à l'étude  
scrupuleuse d'un grand  
maître; démontez un  
système dans ses rouages  
les plus secrets.”

EMILE DURKHEIM



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## INTRODUCTION

THIS study is offered as a contribution to the history of social theory.

The major emphasis in Part I is biographical. No complete biography of Emile Durkheim has yet appeared in any language. This is an unfortunate gap in our knowledge, for to understand a doctrine, one must at least know its history; and the personality of its author, his life, experience, and influences are an essential part of that history. The brief biography here presented does not purport to fill this gap; it is too meager to be able to do that. Moreover, it is based exclusively on published materials, gathered from many sources, whereas we know that the most valuable data for a biography of Durkheim are still unpublished. Part I, therefore, is presented only as a temporary stop-gap. Its purpose is merely to summarize and interpret whatever biographical data are at present available. It is to be hoped that a more thorough and more searching biography will soon supersede it.

Part II discusses only a few of the problems raised by Durkheim's conception of the nature, scope, and method of sociology. Our main effort here is to indicate the advantages of Durkheim's broad view of sociology as a positive science of social behavior, as a rejuvenating method of social investigation, and as a solid foundation for an integral social philosophy. Sociology must don overalls and dig deeply for the fact-stuff that is its life-blood. But it must also, without trepidation, soar into the higher regions of rational thought whence alone come proper synthesis and integration.

The most controversial and vexing problem raised by the Durkheimian conception of sociology seems to be the connection between the theory of *conscience collective* and *représentations collectives* as exposed by Durkheim and the traditional dogmas of group and social minds. Our essential thesis on this point is that while Durkheim used — most unfortunately and quite unnecessarily, it is true — the language of the social real-

ists, he was not of them. He was, in fact, explicitly opposed to a "group-mind" interpretation of his position.

Part III briefly discusses Durkheim's views of the nature of society as unity, regulation, and expression and presents some of the specific investigations into social integration, legal evolution, ceremony and ritual, and personality on which the Durkheimian conceptions rest.

As an army marches on its belly, so a science progresses on its mistakes. Its errors are the very pabulum on which it feeds. Constant self-criticism, persistent self-evaluation are the price of its advance. It is therefore incumbent upon it not to seek the new, the novel and the startling as much as to reexamine and rethink the old. Discovery and invention, sociologists well know, are but the reinterpretation, reevaluation, and recasting of materials already given.

This philosophy of science has guided us in our study of Emile Durkheim and his sociology. What is Durkheimian is surely not to be identified with what is right. But equally as surely there is in Durkheim's life and in his works much that may be termed, to pursue our metaphor, food for thought. "My ideas," Durkheim did not hesitate to remind his readers, "are destined to be modified and reformulated in the future." Nor can it be otherwise. For science begins neither with clear and exact ideas nor with precise instruments. "It begins rather with hazy ideas and inexact measurements but greater accuracy is introduced and indeed made possible by the ideal of a scientific system," Professor Morris R. Cohen has remarked.

However, revision and correction are predicated on fair understanding. If this study has contributed to such an understanding, if it has convinced the reader of the necessity of avoiding oversimplification and erroneous standardized clichés and stereotypes concerning Durkheimian sociology, it has succeeded in its purpose. The minds of great men are too complex and their thoughts are too subtle to be expressed adequately in summary formulae.

## PART I

### EMILE DURKHEIM: FRENCHMAN, TEACHER, SOCIOLOGIST

#### I. RABBINICAL BACKGROUND AND EARLY SCHOOLING

EMILE DURKHEIM was born at Epinal (Vosges) in the ancient province of Lorraine on the 15th of April, 1858. His birth occurred about a year after the death of Auguste Comte whose work he was to perpetuate and reanimate.

The future exponent of an ingenious sociological theory of religion was the direct descendant of a long line of rabbinical scholars, and, in keeping with the family tradition, prepared himself for the rabbinate. He studied Hebrew—not systematically we are told—and acquired a familiarity with the Old Testament and with Talmudic and Hebraic lore. Whether or not these rabbinical studies were only a passing fancy, as some have said, we cannot be sure. It is certain, however, that young Durkheim decided to renounce his religious ambitions at quite an early date. This decision was in part due to the influence exercised on the lad by a Catholic instructress. In spite of this renunciation—one is almost tempted to say because of it—these early biblical studies were not wasted. Durkheim later turned them into sociological profit, for he was skilled in utilizing and synthesizing every bit of knowledge he acquired. Thus, references to the Bible abound not only in his works on religion, but also in his analyses of primitive law and social organization. One need only note, for example, the numerous biblical references in *De la Division du travail social*.

The author of *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* never forgot his rabbinical background. He was fully conscious of his own predominantly ethical and religious preoccupations and frequently had occasion to recall to his colleagues of the *Année Sociologique* that he was, after all, the son of a Rabbi.



Durkheim received his first formal education in his native city, at the Collège d'Epinal, where he established quite a brilliant record. He "skipped" several grades, as Americans would say, and won prizes and contests without difficulty. Davy's invaluable book on Durkheim includes a picture of the young lad taken while he was at the *collège*.<sup>1</sup> The photograph is not very clear, but in it we perceive the bright youngster as he rests his left arm on the shoulder of a comrade. His high forehead is surrounded by very thick hair which is especially bushy at the sides. The facial features reveal an almost feminine delicacy and sensitivity; a keen intelligence is unmistakably manifested in the boy's visage. The delicate hand we see seems, as it droops from the wrist, to end in unusually long fingers. This sensitiveness of feature and mien remained with Durkheim throughout his life.

While at the *collège* and no doubt because of his remarkable success there, Emile resolved to train himself for the profession of teaching. He therefore went to Paris where he continued his studies at the *Lycée Louis-le-Grand*. Here he prepared himself for admission to the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, entrance into which is determined by a nation-wide competitive examination. The period of "*cagne*," as this preparation for the *Ecole Normale* examination is called, was not a particularly happy one for the young philosopher. He was not at all receptive to the type of instruction to which he was subjected and could not see the value of a good deal of the required work. Consequently, he had to wait three years before the *Ecole* finally opened its doors to him.

## 2. ECOLE NORMALE SUPÉRIEURE: THE REVOLT AGAINST DILETTANTISM

This was in 1879. Lanson, S. Reinach and Lévy-Bruhl had just been graduated. Bergson, Jaurès and Belot had entered the year before. Rauh and Maurice Blondel were to be ad-

<sup>1</sup> Davy, G., *Emile Durkheim* (Paris: Vald. Rasmussen), p. 33.