

In Memoriam

Philippe Besnard (1942-2003)

The British Centre for Durkheimian Studies has suffered a severe blow with the sad death of Philippe Besnard. He has continually supported the Centre from the time when it was founded in 1991, and indeed he might be called one of its 'founding fathers'.

To many members of the Centre he was probably not well known personally but his name has been revered ever since the publication of his early articles and above all, because of the book he edited, *The Sociological Domain*, published in 1983 by Cambridge University Press. More recent books have made his name even better known.

Philippe Besnard was born in 1942 into a large family in Niort (Deux-Sèvres) in mid-west France, the son of an engineer who worked for Renault. He studied in the lycée in Poitiers but had a strong wish to go to Paris, partly on academic grounds and, more particularly, because of his great interest in jazz. He was a double-bass player and belonged to amateur and professional groups. Jazz was at a high point in the 1960s in Paris and such was his attraction to it that he did not feel himself propelled to study in a university. However, at the intervention of his father he decided to apply himself to that task. He made preparations to enter the Ecole Normale Supérieure of St Cloud, which is less well known than that in Rue d'Ulm, where Durkheim studied. He did this at the Lycée Henri IV but in the end decided not to proceed. In 1961, however, he entered the Sorbonne to study philosophy and whilst there he warmed to sociology as it was taught by Raymond Aron. Three books interested him—Weber's *Protestant Ethic* on which eventually he wrote his first book, Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires* and Mauss's *Le don*. His preference was for sociology rather than ethics, which he also studied.

At the Sorbonne he gained a 'licence de philosophie' and one in sociology and gravitated, in 1964, to the Grande Ecole, Institut d'Etudes Politiques—the Sciences Po as it is commonly known—where, during the year he was there, he again studied sociology, turning in particular to questions of method, in which he was influenced by Eric de Dampierre and Jean René Treaton. He prepared a thesis on anomie, then a popular concept amongst sociologists. Eighteen years later this early thesis, along with several articles on the subject, became the basis of a doctoral thesis (doctorat ès lettres) which was published as a book. Before that, in 1970, he finished another

less important thesis (de troisième cycle), *L'Éthique protestante et l'esprit du capitalisme*, at Paris X, Nanterre.

About this time he undertook documentary work at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (MSH), the government-funded institution so famous in France. Grounded in such a discipline and with an interest in Durkheim, he started the Groupe d'études durkheimiennes, which involved French colleagues such as Mohamed Cherkaoui, Bernard Lacroix, and Victor Karady, as well as scholars world-wide. Lukes's work on Durkheim, which involved visits to Paris and which was published in 1973, without doubt helped to spur on the Groupe. In other countries Durkheimian scholarship was emerging with Bellah, Nisbet and Clark in the United States and Pickering and Hurst in Britain. Karady published his 3 volumes of Durkheim: *Textes* in 1975, and Filloux's *Durkheim et le socialisme* appeared in 1977. Thus, a new interest in Durkheim suddenly flared up and the flames were fanned by the contribution of Besnard in the regular publication of the *Bulletin d'information, Etudes Durkheimiennes*, which was financed and distributed free throughout the world by the MSH with a circulation of about 100 copies. There were 12 issues from 1977-1987. It was very much a periodical of documentation in offering information about publications and meetings, together with small pieces and letters written by Durkheim and his followers. Circulation ceased when funds were withdrawn and it was taken over shortly afterwards in 1989 by Robert A. Jones of the University of Illinois at Urbana. Then, in 1995, Jones asked the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies to be responsible for its publication. Thus, this journal, which is a somewhat expanded format of that started by Philippe Besnard, pursues his initiative.

Besnard sought to establish extensive and accurate bibliographies, something former Durkheimian scholars in France were not renowned for. Further, he extended such work to Durkheim's followers. To this end he called together a conference in 1978, which involved scholars world-wide, not least from the USA, who presented papers on various members of the famous équipe associated with the *Année sociologique*. These shortly appeared in a special edition of the *Revue française de sociologie* and, then in English translation the book, of 1983, *The Sociological Domain*. This was not the most of apposite of titles but the book remains without a rival to this day.

There was a gap in Besnard's publications concerning Durkheim until the appearance of *Emile Durkheim: Lettres à Marcel Mauss* in 1998. Besnard, along with Marcel Fournier, was responsible for the careful reproduction and editing of what turned out to be a great task for a book of just under 600 pages of revealing letters from uncle to nephew. The book, as we know, is required reading for anyone who wants to get the feel of some aspects of Durkheim's family life and that of his faithful disciple and relative.

Just before Besnard died in 2003, he was asked by the publisher Droz to prepare a book of his articles, with the title *Etudes durkheimiennes*, which is reviewed in this issue by Jennifer Mergy. All too tragically the book

appeared very shortly after his death. To honour Philippe Besnard a special and enlarged issue of *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* (XLII, 129, 2004) was published recently and will be reviewed in the next issue of *Durkheimian Studies*. It had in fact been planned before he died and once again it is sad he never saw it.

Throughout his academic career Philippe was associated with research institutes which are unique to France. He never held a full-time university post. In 1982 he was a member of the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) and was promoted to directeur in 1985. He worked in the Groupe d'étude des méthodes de l'analyse sociologique (GEMS), which was directed by Raymond Boudon and François Bourricaud. In 1994 he joined the Observatoire sociologique du changement (OSC) and in 1996 became its director. Not surprisingly he was a member of a number of important academic committees.

The academic pursuit which gave him most satisfaction was his association with the *Revue française de sociologie*. He was elected to the editorial committee in 1970 and became its director in 1998. All those who submitted work to him soon realized he was a firm and exacting editor. This is seen particularly in the books he edited. He was never a party or 'clan' person and his independence of mind prevented him from pursuing personal ambitions through his influential position on the journal.

Besnard became an authority on the concept of anomie in the works of Durkheim where, in various places, as in *The Division of Labour*, he contrasted it with its use in *Suicide*. He also criticised the interpretations of anomie by Americans such as Merton, who employed it to cover apathy and alienation, as well as other various areas such as urban crime. It is probably the case that Besnard's critical attitude to Durkheim and to those who freely employed the term has helped to bring about a general avoidance of it amongst sociologists today. He wrote extensively on *Suicide* and problems raised by it and also on *The Division of Labour* and *The Rules*.

In the 1980s Besnard became a pioneer in the study of Christian or first names (*prénoms*). He argued that these were social facts given to individuals over which they had no control and which, with the passing of years, they continued to accept. Here is the very beginning of the social life of the individual. The first task which Besnard undertook, with the collaboration of Guy Desplanques, was to observe and to rank the popularity of certain names in various calendar years. Here were social facts which needed longitudinal and statistical examination going back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The next step was to determine changes that took place from year to year, and finally to try to account for the changes and relate them to other social facts to be found in the social milieu. Besnard, in adopting a Durkheimian-like method, and in raising issues about a sociology of fashion, could reach no firm overall conclusion as to the reasons why parents adopted certain first names. This was stated in a lecture he gave in Oxford in March 1991, but his work on the subject—for example, *Un prénom pour toujours* (1986)—also brought him fame on French radio,

the television and the press. It was while he was in England for the lecture that he joined a group of academics in St Antony's College and gave great support to the idea that a centre for Durkheimian studies should be created in Oxford. The Centre came into being later in the same year.

Besnard would probably be the first to acknowledge that he was no social theorist and stood removed from a scholar such as Bourdieu. He was above all concerned with texts, with a critical analysis of them and setting them within an historical milieu—something not universally common amongst sociologists. Rightly, Besnard conceived this basic work as an essential prerequisite for further analysis and the possible creation of a theory. One typical paper was entitled: 'De la datation des cours pédagogiques de Durkheim à la recherche du thème dominant de l'œuvre' (1993). It might be said that he had a 'common sense' approach to sociology based on the early Durkheim's emphasis on social facts. Despite his early encounter with *Les Formes élémentaires* he made little reference to it nor to the concept of representations. He rejected the notion that sociology had to be involved in an ideological position.

Besnard was a firm and exacting editor, who rightly demanded high standards from contributors. Although to some he was to be feared—to have one's work approved by him was always elating—he possessed a warmth of personality which was very endearing and through it he encouraged young scholars working in Durkheimian studies.

Though much in demand, Besnard was not an enthusiastic traveller. He did, however, give lectures in Chicago, St. Petersburg and Germany, and twice in England.

Four years before he died in September 2003, he was diagnosed as having cancer, which involved a very serious operation. Thereafter he put up a tremendous and determined fight to live.

Besnard was a highly respected academic, who could be intellectually severe at times, but with this came a warm and open spirit and a strong sense of loyalty.

He was very much a 'family man' and is survived by his wife, Marie-France, who valiantly supported him during his illness, and by their three children.

The best possible memorial to Philippe Besnard would be a persistence in and, indeed, a strengthening of Durkheimian studies in France and elsewhere.

W. S. F. Pickering