SECTION I
The Mystery of Some ‘Last Things’ of Émile Durkheim: Notes for a Research Project

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For most of Durkheim’s admirers it all ended when he died on 15 November 1917. Or at least one is apt to get that impression in reading the classic study of Durkheim’s life by Steven Lukes (1973). He concludes his book, as indeed he intended to, with the death of the great pioneer of sociology in France. Lukes knew, as we all know, that Durkheim’s death did not mean the end of the appearance of items written by him. Attempts were made by a decimated Année sociologique group under the far less affirmative leadership of Durkheim’s nephew, Marcel Mauss, to continue along the path set by the great master. Former manuscripts and letters of Durkheim’s were published as members of the group continued to write about him and propagate his ideas. But in one very certain way, his empire had come to an end. Beyond 1917, the general interest in France, that had been so strong in the first two decades of the twentieth century, waned. All that followed had to be seen as something that was purely historical, albeit a small number of disciples endeavoured to extend their master’s ideas.

The writings of Durkheim published after his death were, to a large extent, retrieved by his nephew from a depository of Durkheim’s papers held by his daughter, Marie, who was given their custody. It is this depository that is the subject of what follows. They are the ‘last things’ of Émile Durkheim, but, like so many ‘last things’, they are not without their mystery.

Émile Durkheim married Louise Dreyfus in 1887. As is well known, they had two children, André, who was killed in the First World War in 1915, and Marie, born in 1888, four years before André. She died in 1953. It may be deduced that after Durkheim’s death all his academic papers came into the possession of his widow, but of this we are not sure. She died in 1926 and the sole inheritor then became Marie.

In 1912 Marie Durkheim married Jacques Halphen, a wealthy Jewish metal merchant of Paris, who was later connected with the oil industry. He served in the First World War and was wounded three times before being dis-
charged. Born in 1880, he died in 1964, at about 84 years of age. Marie and Jacques Halphen had three children, all of them boys. The eldest was Claude, born in 1914, who figured in a number of photographs with the grandfather and Marie. Claude died in 1988. The second son, Étienne, was born after the First World War, in 1919, and died in 2008. Maurice was the youngest, born in 1923, but whether he is still alive is not known. All such straightforward facts about the Durkheim family are common knowledge. Our interest in the ‘last things’ turns on one person of the family, Étienne Halphen.

The author first met Étienne Halphen in 1992 in the office of Philippe Besnard (1942–2003), the then central figure of Durkheimian studies in Paris. From what Étienne said, it appeared that he was the only grandson of Émile Durkheim who had interested himself in the life of his grandfather. Claude Halphen had been in the Resistance, and the youngest grandson, Maurice, had gone to live in Strasbourg. Neither of them showed much interest in the achievements of their illustrious forebear. For most of his life Étienne worked as an administrator in an international electrical firm, often undertaking work as a proof-reader. One is given to understand that the royalties from Durkheim’s books, paid by the Presses Universitaires de France, passed over to the three brothers in 1964, with the death of Jacques Halphen. Étienne was the only grandson who lived in Paris, but it was not until he retired that a surge of interest in the life of his grandfather grew within him. He had, however, and even later continued to have, little knowledge of the contents of the books written by his grandfather. What interested him far more were the circumstances, domestic and otherwise, surrounding the great man’s life.

On one occasion, after the first meeting with Étienne, the author confronted him with the fact that, even in the 1980s, there were no plaques or official acknowledgements of Durkheim to be found on the streets of Paris or Bordeaux. When Étienne became conscious of the omission he proceeded to redress it with considerable vigour. As a result, the local authorities erected a plaque at 260 rue Saint-Jacques in Paris in 1994, where Durkheim and his family first lived in the city. Another memorial followed in 1995 at 218 boulevard de Talence in Bordeaux, thought to be his residence when he first went to the university as a chargé de cours. One street alongside the new Bibliothèque Nationale was named after Durkheim in 1996, as was a square in the Université des Sciences et Technologies in Lille in 1997. On each occasion Étienne Halphen gave a short speech. At the ceremony in 1994, Professor R.K. Merton, the well-known American professor of sociology at Columbia University, who happened to be in Paris at the time, spoke for a few minutes. Étienne established a Société des Amis d’Émile Durkheim and in 1998 the Société published a booklet, Hommages à Émile Durkheim.
By the mid-1920s a cleavage became apparent within the Durkheim family group. On the one hand there were those who were based around the immediate descendants of the family – Marie after the death of her mother in 1926 and the Halphen family, who lived in the bourgeois 16e arrondissement of Paris at 9, avenue Jules Janin, which is still a private road. With her were deposited, as has been noted, all of Durkheim’s papers, yet in which there appeared to be little family interest. Marie told her children that their grandfather was famous, but that seems to have been all. According to Claudette Kennedy (1910–1999), the greatniece of Durkheim, the family as a whole was very united around the time of the First World War, and one imagines were proud of the achievements of the great professor (Kennedy 2010). Signs of a division began to appear in the family with the marriage of Marie to Jacques Halphen. It turned on issues of wealth and social aspiration brought by Jacques, which were cemented as the married couple took up residence in Avenue Jules Janin.

The other side of the Durkheim group had no such aspirations. They lived on the Left Bank, in the shadow of the Sorbonne, which was their academic shrine. Much of their social life was spent in local cafés and markets. Many were socialist. Marcel Mauss was attracted to Marxism. This did not bring praise from his uncle. The rough and tumble of the student world was very much in the veins of this other group.5

The group that was centred around Mauss also had its roots in the Durkheim family in Épinal. There was a sentiment within this group that they followed the ‘genuine’ branch of the Durkheim family and its academic tradition. Mauss died in 1950 without children, but there were other relatives in existence. They were not, however, intellectuals concerned with Durkheimian thought and its consequences. Until ten years ago there were family meetings of the Maussian group in Paris, even though they became, through the death of members, a remnant. Nevertheless, they held deep attachments to Épinal.6

Étienne Halphen, when he lived in his mother’s house and attended school in Billancourt-Boulogne, slept in the room where most, if not all, of his grandfather’s papers were kept. (If one looks at the house from outside, it is the room on the far left-hand on the second floor.) In late 1943, according to Étienne, the Germans decided to take over the house. Marie, however, had made up her mind to move before then and had gone to live in a house in a narrow street on the Left Bank near the Faculty of Medicine. As one would have predicted, she had been forced by the Germans to wear the étoile jaune. When the Germans occupied the house they threw out of the window, not only furniture, but all of Durkheim’s papers onto the street below. The latter were lost to the four winds and to other means of destruction. The house was then turned into a maison d’interrogation.
of those held to be anti-Nazis. It is alleged that the screams of those interrogated were heard by the neighbours and their children.

Marie’s husband, Jacques, was one of a thousand Jews taken into custody. He was over sixty years of age, became ill and was taken to the Hôpital Rothschild. In a very feeble state he was discharged but lived for twenty years more. After the discharge, he and Marie fled to Lyons and lived under an assumed name until the end of the war.

Marie went back to the house after the war and found it completely empty. She stayed on there but when old age overtook her, she then moved into a small flat where she died in 1953. However, Étienne and his first wife lived in the Halphen house for some time.
This is the story of the ‘last things’ that has been generally accepted, with some additional material derived from Étienne’s conversation with the author. Through German destructiveness, coupled perhaps with an ignorance of who Durkheim was, material written by and to the French master of sociology meant the disappearance of much valuable material relating to his work.

One must not rule out the failure of the family to try to hide the material. Of course some of it, especially many letters written by Durkheim, have come to light through the agency of their recipients and heirs (see, for example, Durkheim 1998a). But that constitutes only a part of what might have come into the hands of later scholars had the Halphen house not been requisitioned by the Germans. Here are the ‘last things’ lost, it seems, forever.

It is easy to let matters end precisely there and to hold that the lost has indeed been lost forever. Beyond doubt one will never retrieve the wealth of material once deposited in 9, avenue Jules Janin. Nevertheless a number of questions present themselves and do so in a persistent way that stimulates the curious mind. They are bound up with the ‘mystery’ of the end.

In an attempt to get behind the mystery one has to face the simple fact that Étienne Halphen died suddenly in 2008. He has always stood as the key figure in trying to spread light on what happened in 1943. It is much regretted that more detailed questioning of Étienne about the affair never took place. The author, who was in close contact with Étienne, always had some other project on hand. And there is always tomorrow! It is possible that Étienne’s younger brother, Claude, reported as living in Strasbourg, should he be still alive, would have some information.

There is the story that a family occupied the Halphen house after Marie had left but before the Germans occupied it. If that is so, who were they? Did they know about the papers? Was it they, and not the police or military, who threw Durkheim’s papers into garbage bins?

What is required is the discovery of new sources of information. One line to be explored is to search among official documents, for instance, those located at the local Mairie, that relate to the ownership of the house over the years. Details might be recorded on these documents, such as the dates and use made of the house by the Nazis. One wonders if other records have been preserved or whether they were destroyed.

A key issue is why such a valuable collection of academic papers was allowed to come into the hands of the Germans who may not have realized their value for scholars. This issue has been the cause of a considerable amount of embarrassment and conjecture within the Halphen family. One account came from Marie, who told Étienne that in the face of the treatment of Jews and the possible Nazi occupation of the house, coupled with the panic, fear and haste it engendered, Marie simply ‘forgot’ to remove
the papers. It is difficult to know if this was in fact the case. It is said that when she returned to the house after the war, she hit her head and said, ‘I completely forgot about my father’s papers’. As has been stated already, she certainly never gave the impression that she was much interested in her father’s work. The papers of her father appear to have been far from her mind when she fled from the house. Further, the act of departure was one that involved her alone, as it seems there was no one else living with her in the house at the time. Étienne was elsewhere, and it should not be forgotten that the safe removal of the papers was a somewhat arduous task. There would have been the problem of packing them, carrying them down flights of stairs, of organizing transport and finding a safe refuge for them, and all this to be achieved under the eyes of the Gestapo. In such an operation would not Marcel Mauss have been of assistance? Like his uncle, he was a Jew and in all probability was hesitant to rescue the papers. In this connection, and in conversations with Étienne Halphen, the name Mauss was seldom mentioned.

So the matter rests for the present. With the death of the key witnesses of the tragedy, it seems that answers to questions raised here will never be answered. Yet there remain possibilities of exploration as we have just noted. What has been written has been done so in the hope that someone in a much better position than the present writer will explore the leads just outlined and discover others. May ‘the last things’ thus be less shrouded in mystery.

Notes

1. For the several books and many articles of Durkheim’s that have been published since his death, see Lukes 1992: 587–91. (See also Durkheim 2004a). Many letters have also been brought to light; most notable is the large collection written to his nephew, Marcel Mauss (Durkheim 1998a).
2. Stjepan Meštrović, the American sociologist, met Étienne Halphen in the mid-1980s, some years before the author. Étienne later lost touch with him. Some of Meštrović’s conclusions, arising from the many interesting observations he made about the life of Durkheim derived from what he observed, might well be questioned (See Meštrović 1988, Chapter 2, especially pp. 20 and 23).
3. So far as is known, only one of the three boys attended a university, but he never finished the course. Claude went to Exeter College, Oxford, but the purpose of his presence was said to improve his English and to study law. The ‘Maussian’ side of the family saw the Halphen boys as being not very bright. Admittedly, Étienne spoke good English, had been brought up by an English nanny and for some years taught English in a private school. All the boys took up employment in business or commerce, not unlike their father.
4. On Durkheim’s residences in Bordeaux, see the research of Matthieu Béra (2009).
5. Étienne recounted the story that, when he was in a lycée in Paris with the son of Henri Durkheim, the class was visited by Dominique Parodi. Looking down the list of pupils he saw the name of Durkheim and said to the assembled students, ‘I see one of you is a descendant of the great Émile Durkheim’. Étienne jumped ahead of Henri Durkheim’s son and said, ‘Yes, sir, I am’. This somewhat startled Parodi. For Henri Durkheim’s position in the family tree, see Kennedy (2010: 55).

6. This group had had little contact with the Halphens for a considerable time. The change came when Étienne began to show interest in the life of his grandfather and he alone began to make overtures to reunite the two sides. Interestingly enough, he had never visited Épinal until some time later in the company of the author. Halphen began to contact Philippe Besnard in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Étienne met the author in Paris, who in 1991 helped found the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies in Oxford. At the suggestion of the latter, Halphen proceeded to set about having plaques erected to his grandfather in various places that have just been mentioned. In the latter 1980s, he was contacted by Stjepan Meštrović, who was studying the life and work of Durkheim. It awakened Étienne’s interest in his grandfather (Meštrović 1988). Étienne had either just retired or was about to retire. Not only did he initiate the erection of plaques to commemorate the life and work of his grandfather, he found Durkheim’s grave in Montparnasse much neglected and set about making improvements to it.

It was in Oxford in 1995 that a symbolic healing occurred at the time of an international conference organized by the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies. Against such a setting, there was a meeting of Étienne Halphen and Claudette Kennedy in the presence of Pierre Mauss, Marcel Mauss’s nephew. The old divisions had fallen into the background, for many reasons.

**References**


