

# *Durkheim (and Mauss) before Durkheim*

Review by Nicolas Sembel

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Marcel Fournier and Charles Kraemer (eds), *Durkheim avant Durkheim: Une jeunesse vosgienne*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014, 259 pp.

Here is a long-awaited work with an enticing title, which aims to sum up what is known about 'Durkheim (the young man) before Durkheim (the celebrity)' – long-awaited, because the original idea dates from 2008 and a conference on the 150th anniversary of Durkheim's birth. It was an opportunity, as Marcel Fournier and Charles Kraemer point out in their introduction, for a 'pilgrimage', or, in a 'Durkheimian perspective, a ritual' (p. 8), with a visit to Durkheim's historical roots (home, synagogue, school). During the six years between the conference and the work itself, the title changed as well as some of the contributors. The two editors are complementary: Fournier, the author of Durkheim's recent biography, now translated into English and awarded a prize by the American Sociological Association,<sup>1</sup> and Kraemer, the president of the Société d'émulation des Vosges. The work offers readers thumbing through it an abundant iconography (we counted eighty-three reproductions and twenty-eight illustrations in 259 pages). The title draws on an attractive logic, as long as the idea it spontaneously suggests is taken in the spirit rather than the letter, for there is no such thing as a young or old Durkheim any more than – as Fournier himself argues elsewhere – there is a young or old Mauss (Fournier 2014). Although not part of the collection, a paper on this topic was given at the conference by W. Watts Miller. Usefully, it aimed to prepare the ground and sort out what is at stake in searches for the origins of Durkheimian thought. As François Dubet commented in reviewing Fournier's biography, an impression on discovering this thought in Durkheim's early writings is that it is ready-made and comes from nowhere, which is obviously impossible: it is in fact the product of a work, a process, which only a 'genetic' method would be able to reconstitute fully (Dubet 2008).

The book's wager is to postulate that each of its themes gives access to Durkheim and that he in turn has a relatively direct connection with all of them. What are they? The book has ten chapters arranged in three sections – family, community, society – and ends with a 'short bibliography' of only



twenty-two titles. The section on the family begins with Durkheim's 'roots', involving his grandparents and a religious family document, 'parts of which date from before the sixteenth century and contain what are essentially Talmudic commentaries'. Pascal Faustini, the author of this chapter, establishes that Durkheim was 'undoubtedly' descended from Joselmann of Roheim (p.14), a famous rabbi and spokesman for the Jews of Alsace and then of the German Empire, who defended them against Charles V. Nearer our time, Durkheim's mother's cousin, Lazarus Isidor, was chief rabbi of France from 1867 to 1886. Durkheim was more than a rabbi's son; he was a kinsman of famous rabbis. The chapter's other contribution, not new, but helping us to understand Durkheim, is to describe the successive historical migrations, notably caused by wars, of a Jewish family that owes its name to the birthplace of Émile's grandfather, Israël David, a school-master born in 1766 at Durkheim (now Bad Durkheim) in the Palatinate. The ancestral religion was always important and the frequent migrations were rarely from choice: as Faustini concludes, 'Émile Durkheim bears in his person the whole history of Judaism in the Rhineland since the Middle Ages' (p. 20).

Next in line in the family came Durkheim's father, Moses, who was fifty-three when Émile was born and died aged ninety-one in 1896. Here, a point worth noting is that although Moses had spent seven years at the chief rabbi Trier's school in Frankfurt, 'where only the most gifted were admitted' (p. 29), for a long time he chased after fees and certificates – in a word, recognition – to such an extent that Simon Schwarzfuchs, author of this second chapter, asks if 'Durkheim's decision to renounce a rabbinical career was connected with the administrative and financial difficulties that overwhelmed his father' (p. 43). Another significant point is that Moses was not a university graduate and left no memoirs or writings. As in the case of religion, his relationship with the world of the school was very different from that developed by his son, Émile.

The third chapter has little to do with the work's title, in that it is a presentation of twenty-eight known photographs of Durkheim, of which at most six (from 1865 to 1886) illustrate 'Durkheim before Durkheim' and only two depict his 'youth in the Vosges'. All the others date from 1899 to Durkheim's death in 1917, and include twelve from 1913 onwards, a period that could almost be called 'Durkheim after Durkheim', in line with the same *a posteriori* reasoning of the work's title. As Matthieu Béra explains in the introduction and again in the conclusion, the chapter's only true concern is with the (non)subject himself. It is nonetheless fascinating because there is not a single photograph of this 'subject' in the biographies by Lukes (1973) and Fournier (2007), but also because so few photographs of Durkheim appear to survive. A particular comment is that although photograph number 10 is blurred and, as Béra notes, seldom reprinted, it is

in fact completely clear as it appears in the relatively well-known opening 1927 volume of the *Année sociologique*'s new series. Another detail is that there might be a twenty-ninth photograph. Published a few years ago – and probably before that – it belongs to the period when Durkheim was ‘not’ Durkheim and is reproduced twice (pp. 45 and 69) in the work commemorating the centenary of the assassination of Jean Jaurès (Lacousse, Candar, Ducoulombier and Marguin 2014: 45, 69). Dating from 1878, it is a group photograph with handwritten names. Smooth-shaven and holding his head high with a clear gaze, Durkheim (?) is next to Jaurès, and the group perhaps consists of candidates for the *École Normale Supérieure*, since it was when they were both in the same, second-year preparatory stage for this, the ‘khâgne’. But, from the ENS archives, it is more likely that the man in this photograph was M. Dieterlen.

The fourth and final chapter on the theme of the family involves the links with Épinal that joined Durkheim and Mauss together. It is by Fournier himself, who brings into clear focus a comparison, doomed to be forever made, between uncle and nephew. Épinal was where Durkheim and Mauss experienced ‘life as members of a minority’ (p. 67), yet education as an ‘armament’ made for ‘uprooting’ (p. 69), and the town then became a place they went back to for time with family, for holidays and leisure pursuits, notably cycling, but inevitably also for work. Mauss takes up as much space in this chapter as Durkheim, and by the end the reader has the impression of having discovered something about ‘Mauss before Mauss’.

The second section, which approaches the Jewish community in three ‘concentric’ steps (Alsace/the Vosges/Épinal), is by far the longest. The first chapter discusses ‘the spirit of Judaism in Alsace’ on lines that are quite general but that can sometimes be directly connected with Durkheim. For example, its author, Freddy Raphaël, remarks straightaway on ‘the persistent strategy adopted by Alsace’s Jewish community, to open themselves to modernity without abandoning their identity’ (p. 83), and how this meant the development of an ‘original response’, especially the cultivation of patriotism, which is reminiscent of Durkheim’s own journey and position. The general tone of the chapter involves a rhetoric that is sometimes a little excessive; for example, ‘forced assimilation’ is described as a ‘liquidation of the Jewish people’, as well as a ‘corrosion’, an ‘evisceration’, a ‘banalization’ and a ‘standardization’ (p. 98). The conclusion, on the Vichy regime, pushes far beyond the work’s official historical limits and might be linked with the idea of ‘Mauss after Mauss’. On the other hand, how is it possible to talk about the Jews during the period of Durkheim’s ‘youth in the Vosges’ without some reference to coming events, neighbouring Germany and incessant, ever more barbaric wars?

The next two chapters, of forty and fifty pages respectively, are not only the longest but together make up more than a third of the work, and again

go far beyond Durkheim's youth. However, let us concentrate on this here. Charles Kraemer and Alexandre Laumond, the authors of the first of these two chapters, are concerned with 'regeneration' in the intellectual and cultural spheres between 1800 and 1914. The term can nowadays have a spine-chilling effect, given the historical events just mentioned. But at the time it had a positive meaning; regeneration was an achievement of the French Revolution and of the spirit of the Enlightenment, embodying, in Raphaël's expression, a 'happy moment' (p. 99). Moreover, 'signs of regeneration' are what interest us most in order, as always, to understand Durkheim but also Mauss – who, as we have seen, is very much present in the work – and a list can be made of five such signs that concern them both. The first is the change to 'ordinary', non-Jewish forenames (p. 112); Émile was no longer David, as Béra has shown elsewhere, while Marcel would never be Israël. The second concerns the 'practice of a useful profession' (p. 113); the third is the 'culture of the school' (p. 116), but particularly 'special' admission to high school; the fourth is defence of country (p. 120); the fifth is about intellectual networks (p. 123). As in the last case, Épinal's *Harmonie Républicaine* accepted Mauss's mother and brother and also, in 1938, the town's future Jewish mayor, Léon Schwab (who was briefly to become mayor again in 1945), while another example can be found in the *Ligue d'Éducation*, of which Durkheim's brother-in-law, Myrtil Cahen, was a member.

The other chapter, by Gilles Gravel and Alexandre Laumond, traces the history of Épinal's Jewish community, and establishes the link with Durkheim immediately: 'between 1858 and 1876, Émile Durkheim lived at the heart of a flourishing Jewish community in the prefecture of the Vosges' (p. 143). During the same period, however, there existed anti-Semitic 'images of Épinal' – such as the portrait of the hook-nosed, wandering Jew – and these formed part of Durkheim's (and Mauss's) childhood and adolescence. In 1771, the census listed only a single Jewish head of family; thanks to immigration, the community went from 80 members in 1834 to 142 in 1850, then 236 in 1869. At this date, 58 per cent of the heads of family were shopkeepers. In 1875, Jews 'were still unrepresented in the liberal professions ... and among intellectuals' (p. 158); having just gained his second baccalaureate, Durkheim was on the way to becoming a pioneer. The synagogue opened in 1864; Moïse Durkheim would be its rabbi for more than thirty years and did not resign until the end of 1894, aged almost ninety and just over a year before his death. The chapter continues in this vein, marking out its chronology. The Dreyfus Affair – which could have been the subject of an entire chapter, but which does not shed any light on 'Durkheim before Durkheim' – rekindled anti-Semitic hatred, proclaiming the attachment of the people of the Vosges to the army and including violent demonstrations in January 1898. Alfred

Dreyfus, a resident of Épinal with the same name as the man at the centre of the Affair, had to take refuge in Nancy. Fournier's biography of Mauss quotes a letter sent to him at this time by his terrified mother, Rosine: 'I'm afraid to go out... There's not a bench to sit on that isn't scrawled with "Down with the Jews". For three nights running, kids launched fire ships on the Moselle, all along with the same shouts and posters in the streets'.<sup>2</sup> Some years later, the law of 1905 pushed forward the establishment of religious associations, and Myrtil Cahen went on to become president of one. Upward social mobility led to the abandonment of religious practice, work in new professions (as academics, doctors, magistrates), departures for Nancy and Paris, the disappearance of 'Jewish streets', realigned political positions, sometimes very right-wing (for instance Colonel de la Rocque's Parti social français), the election of a Jewish mayor, or to a chief rabbi (successor of Durkheim's father) who had 'built up "a widespread sympathy among the whole population"' (p. 177). The first anti-Jewish laws, in the autumn of 1940, reportedly went 'increasingly unnoticed' (p. 181) over the months that followed; the first deportations came in July 1942, of more than ninety Jews in all. By the time of the liberation of Épinal, in September 1944, there were no more Jews in the town. A long way from Durkheim but close to Mauss, this historic fact throws light on the Jewish condition; those who returned sometimes changed their name, in a regeneration that had nothing to do with the one before, but that for a number of individuals led to the replacement of a whole identity. The returnees recovered their possessions, and it is noted that 'the dossier that took the longest time to deal with' concerned Mauss's real estate (p. 158), processed by the Conseil d'État in 1950 (although the exact date is not given, a document in the Fonds Marcel Mauss records the beginning of June 1950, four months after his death). Only one of Rabbi Durkheim's grandsons, Dr Albert Cahen, went back to live in Épinal, and the community slowly but inexorably declined between 1946 and 2000; today, it consists of fewer than thirty families. A hundred and fifty years after Durkheim's 'youth in the Vosges', being Jewish in Épinal is (evidently) no longer significant; but is this progress? Raphaël, for his part, ends his chapter with the observation that in 1940 France went back on everything it stood for, 'permanently undermining the trust' placed in it by Jews (p. 99), who, like Durkheim and Mauss, sought only to be citizens without denying their identity.

The book's third section is on society, with chapters that in turn focus on the town (Jacques Grasser), the school in Durkheim's time (Philippe Alexandre) and the war of 1870 (François Roth); the first and third chapters intersect, giving the second extra back-up. The defeat of 1870, the occupation of Épinal that lasted until 31 July 1873 (when Durkheim had turned fifteen), and its subsequent transformation into a fortress town, with the

frontier forty-five kilometres away, all helped to shape, at the very least, Durkheim's relation with patriotism and with Germany. Durkheim's father, born in Alsace, could have registered as German but 'chose' French nationality (Roth, p 253). His son is recalled as saying: 'We were sure of victory' (p. 239). The result was a defeat that did not finish things off (the battles of Nompattelize in October 1870 and of Belfort in January 1871), stirring up 'wild hopes' for the army of Bourbaki, followed by humiliation, but on two 'fronts'. This involved, in relation to the victors, how 'Rabbi Durkheim's family, like many Épinal families, was forced to give German officers board and lodging' (p. 246). In relation to the people of Épinal themselves, and again in recalling Durkheim's own words: 'The Jews were blamed for the defeats ... They were the pariahs who served as expiatory victims' (p. 247). Afterwards, the army became central in daily life and the public sphere, and it was necessary, in Durkheim's forever repeated expression, 'to renew the country', above all through education and faith in science.

Philippe Alexandre's well-documented chapter on the college of Épinal is also closely linked with the war of 1870. Durkheim was eleven when he entered class 5 (having skipped class 6), made steady progress throughout the year, and was twelve when he completed the session by winning the class's first prize for excellence, 'a few days after the battle of Reichshoffen'. Like the others awarded a prize, he refused it, so that, as the college principal noted, 'the money could go towards helping the wounded of the Army of the Rhine' (p. 213). His father became the college almoner in 1871 and filled this position until his death in 1896, a period of twenty-five years that covered the rest of his son's schooling and the whole of that of his grandson, Marcel (1880–1890). Durkheim achieved a certificate of merit in history at the end of class 2, and was sixteen when he got his baccalaureate in arts, two years early, in 1874 (so he presumably skipped class 1, but this is not clearly shown). Moreover, he was awarded three prizes during the same period and also, in 1874, the streamlined baccalaureate in science (in which courses in natural science and physiology replaced certain courses in mathematics, usually intended for future doctors). The prize lists for 1874 could not be found, as Alexandre points out, but in the case of the award of this second baccalaureate, a record exists in Durkheim's file in the Archives Nationales (cf. also Fournier 2007, 2012).

Among the teachers and pupils mentioned in the chapter, a name of particular interest is that of the Gleys, father and son. The father, Pierre-Gérard or Gérard Gley, taught class 3, notably Durkheim. He spent almost forty years on the school's staff, but was also a town councillor, president of the Société d'Émulation des Vosges, brother of Antoine Gley (the 'baker of the Commune') and nephew of the abbé Gley (who would end his career as canon of Les Invalides); he eventually retired from the college in 1880 (the year of Mauss's entry). The son, Eugène (Émile Marcel) Gley, was born in

1857, belonged to the same class as Durkheim from class 5 on, and won a prize in class 4 in 1871. He died in 1930 and was eulogized in Mauss's inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1931, recently rediscovered by François Bert and published in *L'Atelier de Marcel Mauss* (Bert 2012: 249–264). As Mauss remarked in the lecture, Gley 'was a childhood friend of mine and of Durkheim, our parents always having been friends'. Gley completed his medical thesis (on the physiology of philosophical work) in 1881 at Nancy, was assistant to Beaunis and his career is helpful in studying Durkheim's eventual, indirect links with the school of Nancy, a topic that could come fully within the scope of the work.

Durkheim was one of the best students in a system he would later bitterly criticize, as in Alexandre's well-chosen quotation from a piece in the *Revue bleue*, in January 1906: 'the men of my generation were still being raised according to an ideal that hardly differed from the one that inspired the colleges of the Jesuits in the time of Louis XIV. There is really no basis for thinking that the spirit of critique and examination played a substantial role in our life at school' (p. 237). Subsequent events showed that Durkheim had to build up this spirit *despite* the institution of school.

To repeat, the book is useful, not least for what it cannot tell us, due to the lack of available material, the bane of the archivist, and so to what it cannot get to grips with, namely, a good fake subject. Indeed, starting with Pierre Bouvier's short preface, with its focus on Durkheim, Mauss and the *Année sociologique*, the book strays far beyond this evasive subject. However, the return to sources that is carried out in it regularly, though without a genetic method, allows a better understanding of Durkheim.

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## Notes

1. See Fournier 2007, 2012.
2. See the discussion of the Affair in chapter 3 of Fournier [1994] 2006: 78.

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