

Book Review

Kieran Allen and Brian O'Boyle, *Durkheim: A Critical Introduction*. London: Pluto Press, 2017, 192 pp.

Review by Mike Gane

This crisply written introduction does not simply present Durkheim's sociology and assess it empirically and theoretically; it is, the authors say, designed to counter the idea that this sociology is value-free and above the class struggle. Constructed in the period from the mid 1880s to World War I, it was a defence of the bourgeois order against both the threat from the Parti Ouvrier inspired by Jules Guesde's new brand of Marxism and a revolution from below. This 'critical introduction' aims to bring Durkheim down to earth: 'Each year, hundreds of thousands of students hear about the partisan ideas of Karl Marx, while Durkheim is presented as a value-free observer', yet in effect 'Durkheim's desire to shore up the institutions of the Third Republic dictated the selection of his sociological questions, the construction of his key concepts and the way he marshalled the available evidence' (vi). This introduction is to a Durkheim devoted to misrepresentations if it suited his defence of a political regime threatened by immanent proletarian revolution. Like the campaign for Real Ale, this book seems part of a campaign for Real Marx (with its small niche market).

Such a critique seems reminiscent of writings in the 1960s when Durkheim was presented as the naïve conservative dedicated to a functionalism that justified all kinds of inequalities against a radical egalitarian alternative. But this new introduction has an extensive bibliography which suggests the authors have read the detailed refutation of Durkheim as naïve functionalist. The authors have the advantage over Talcott Parsons's classic 1930s account of having many more Durkheim texts on which to base their judgement, as well as having many more detailed historical accounts of the Third Republic. Today Durkheim has, they claim, become simply 'anaemic' (9). The book first locates Durkheim in the context of the Republic, and then considers the following topics: the division of labour ('outlandish'; 35), method ('a failure'; 79), suicide ('limited'; 87), religion ('ultimately a failure'; 131), education ('authoritarian'; 146) and socialism ('obtuse'; 149).



It finishes with a final chapter on 'The Limits to Durkheim's Republican Sociology'. Each substantive chapter has first an exposition of Durkheim's work followed by a critical assessment aiming to reveal the specific distortions, biases, omissions and manipulations in the sociology resulting from its deployment on behalf of an insecure bourgeoisie. And, as promised, each chapter finds incriminating evidence. Durkheim's legacy pronounced at the end of the book is that:

Insofar as modern society still requires state regulation, Durkheim's work has something to offer. Insofar as the system still requires partisan social theory draped in impartiality, Durkheim's work remains indispensable. By carefully delimiting his analysis to what went on *within the structures of his own society*, Durkheim made sure that his sociology was as politically successful as it was scientifically compromised. This is the enduring legacy of Durkheim's work in social theory. (174; emphasis in original)

The fundamental idea is that most of Durkheim's misconceptions and errors were not accidental but stem from one cause – his intention to 'shore up' the bourgeois Republic. Today it is 'the system' that needs shoring up.

Over the past 30 or 40 years there has been a considerable debate on Durkheim's involvement in the various antagonisms of the Third Republic; few if any regard this involvement as neutral. Durkheim's own application of the notion of social pathology made sure it was not neutral. The authors attack this notion as pseudo-scientific and dismiss it as a cover for partisan alignment. But, secondly, and more significantly, the question of just how successful Durkheim was politically has also been examined. It is thus difficult to believe that sociologists can today present Durkheim as having attained the political authority and success in his day claimed in this book. For the period, the thesis can only be sustained by providing a parody of the Third Republic on the one hand, and misrepresenting Durkheim's political impact on the other. The compliment the authors pay Durkheim is quite undeserved.

Certainly, there were crises in the Third Republic, but not principally from the left. The authors present a picture of class conflict by producing evidence of the growth of membership of the Parti Ouvrier, and of the number of strikes and of their repression. But it comes as a surprise to learn that Durkheim was in favour of such repression or that the Republic faced revolution from that quarter. The threat of revolution came from elsewhere – the threat from the higher sections of the bourgeoisie against popular moves to subject it to graduated income tax, or from reaction to move to make the army account for blatant racism (Dreyfus). There was no single simple 'bourgeois' political interest as such (the fragmentation is crucial to the story), and the parliamentary regime survived through internal compromises which led to the neutralisation of the left (also deeply

fragmented politically): the haute bourgeoisie survived the threat of taxation, and the army survived the Dreyfus Affair. Durkheim's positions were in favour of taxation, especially taxation on inheritance, in favour of separation of church and state, the secularisation of education, and directly involved against racism. This raises the question as to whether Durkheim identified himself as pro-bourgeois (he repeatedly positioned himself against class war), or whether he was anti-proletarian – not at all the same thing. His position on the Republic was that it required fundamental structural reform. Building social science as an independent force, based in universities that were not political parties, was his principal objective. A careful analysis of his very occasional political interventions and his alignments with the various party programmes would be valuable, but this is not to be found in this introductory text.

The chapter on socialism in this introductory text has an important place, and a new discussion of this topic is certainly welcome. But the reading here is symptomatic of the problems of this introduction more generally: anything that compromises the reductive interpretation is pushed to the side or forced into the grid. First of all, this lecture course given in Bordeaux in 1895–96 is regarded immediately as a major book, though it was not published until 1928 from the lecture notes. What the authors admire in Durkheim's lectures is his summary of Saint-Simonianism. What they do not like is his definition of socialism, and the grounds for dissenting from Saint-Simon's view (which they interpret as proto-Marxist). Secondly, instead of examining Durkheim's reading of the available texts on socialism in the 1890s, they stigmatize it as 'torturous' (was he a torturer? who was tortured?). Durkheim's definition of socialism as founded on 'those theories which demand a more or less complete connection of all economic functions or a certain number of them, though diffused, with the directing and knowing organs of society' is a definition which the authors say is 'almost open ended' – 'so contrived that it barely requires a critique' (152). Part of the lecture course that dealt with the definition of socialism was published in article form in the 1890s and, as Mauss notes in his 1928 introduction, Jules Guesde agreed with it.

Contrived or not, the thesis is clear: what is common to socialist doctrines is not a question of equality, conditions of life, feminism and the family, education, welfare or charity, but the project to overcome the segregation of anarchic private production from the governing powers of society. The authors make little or no attempt to present the economic scene facing Durkheim, that of completely unregulated capitalism or Durkheim's critique of the sociology of Herbert Spencer which tried to legitimate it. Durkheim noted that the socialists argued that after the decline of the medieval system a bourgeois capitalism interposed itself, privatising and controlling production beyond social surveillance or control. It broke free from local markets

and local constraints. This structure of the resulting alienation produced revolt, and eventually political revolution. But the source of alienation was still there, because the structure of uncontrolled private bourgeois capitalist power remained in place. Durkheim's theory is not presented in this new introductory text, and neither is the more general grand narrative that goes with it: the rejection of the law of the three states and its Marxist variant (feudalism – capitalism – communism), as Alvin Gouldner points out in his introduction to the book. That Durkheim was essentially anti-capitalist in its free market classical liberal form is implicitly accepted by the authors, but, because theirs is driven by a grid reading (that Durkheim is anti-Marxist), their thesis becomes that Durkheim defends the bourgeoisie by promoting class partnership in a new stage of capitalism through professional associations. Now if this is the thesis of the text, then it is very unclear how the authors could claim that Durkheim was politically successful (since these co-operative associations and their statute in political life were never really on the horizon as a decisive freely evolving institutional weight in France before World War I, and Durkheim failed to indicate how they were to be implanted) – unless, that is, it can be shown that the workers were hoodwinked by this mythic utopia and led away from the true path (counter-cultures did develop, influenced by the utopian Marxism of the Parti Ouvrier, and they became proletarian fortresses – now in the grip of the xenophobic far right in France).¹

The allegoric point the authors appear to invoke would have to mean that today's liberalism has the same nature as that of Durkheim's time, and today there is the same threat of working-class revolution. The problem here, as hinted at by the authors, is that today there is a different liberalism. Politicians today might propose here or there a return to complete deregulation, but neoliberalism today rests, in fact, on high levels of state intervention. The authors are perhaps right to say this would mean that our societies are socialist in a Durkheimian frame. It is to be regretted that the authors do not examine this, regarding it as absurd. It should be pointed out, however, that there are many on the extreme right who do regard modern societies, even the most neoliberal, as socialist and in which populations are enslaved (a view held, it seems, by the current President of the USA and his advisors). Durkheim's counter-argument to this view remains highly relevant, but it is not considered in this text because Durkheim's critique of liberalism is almost completely absent. Durkheim's point about the problem of capitalism's anomic culture on the one hand and forced division of labour on the other could have been followed up in relation to extreme inequalities of power, income and wealth, and tax evasion (as Gouldner points out). Durkheim's critique of racism and populism also remains highly relevant, but this too is not given significant place. Rather, the impression is given that Durkheim was a national chauvinist, which

led in the end to support of ‘imperialist jingoism’ on behalf of the French bourgeoisie. It is significant that the authors only provide a brief reading of Durkheim’s 1914–17 texts and his views on the nation, imperialism and war, simply dismissing them instantly as evidence of ‘nasty’ war-mongering once his mask of impartiality is taken off. Once the war has been defined as imperialist, it must follow that Durkheim was an imperialist. The authors do not claim, after all, to be themselves impartial judges, and conveniently omit to mention that Jules Guesde became a minister in the war government (was a mask removed or was one put on?).

Put on trial, Durkheim is found guilty by the authors of fabricating a pseudo-science to defend the bourgeoisie against the proletariat, or more cynically he deployed ‘a particular morality to advance the cause of republican France and to enforce a conformity among workers so that they turned their backs on class war’ (147). The authors give the impression that they now know what the correct political line in this revolutionary class war would have been in the Third Republic. A kind of fantasy infallibility is written into this text, an idealisation of ‘the proletariat’ and with it an inquisition, not a sociological critique.

References

Stuart, R. 1992. *Marxism at Work: Ideology, Class and French Socialism During the Third Republic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Note

1. See Stuart 1992: 497. Stuart’s analysis of the Parti Ouvrier is one of the most damning critiques of sectarian Marxism ever written. Trapped in a simple two-class vision (proletariat against bourgeoisie), this ‘hard’ class war party was unable to analyse political divisions among the bourgeois parties, unable to form alliances on the left, and spent most of its energy trying, however unsuccessfully, to impose its one correct line everywhere. But Stuart suggests, against the Marxist critiques of such vulgar Marxism, that at least it established working-class fortress communities. Allen and O’Boyle cite this text but in bizarre fashion.