

Past Conferences

Oxford

22 February 2003

In conjunction with the Maison Française in Oxford, a one-day conference was organized by the Centre on 22 February, 2003. Papers were given by Derek Robbins (London) on Durkheim through the eyes of Bourdieu, and by Roger Cotterrell (London) on Law in the Durkheimian Tradition. Each stimulated a long and lively discussion. The paper by Derek Robbins is published in this issue. The paper by Roger Cotterrell is linked with plans to edit and publish translations of some of the work of the Durkheimians mentioned in *Archives* (see above).

W. Watts Miller

Halifax, Nova Scotia

3 June 2003

On 3 June 2003, during the proceedings of the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at Dalhousie University, Halifax, a session of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association took place. The session was organised by Ronjon Paul Datta of Carleton University with the title, 'Hegemony and Sacrifice: Radical Durkheimian Perspectives'. The theme was an invitation to scholars working with Durkheimian discourses to consider the extent to which contemporary political structures can be analysed by drawing upon Durkheim's work on the sacred and the profane, along with that of Hubert and Mauss and others on sacrifice.

The first paper by Dana Dawson of York University, Toronto, was entitled, 'Identity, Identification and the Sacred'. Dawson's point of departure concerned the question of whether or not, and under what conditions, post-sacral (and non-sacrificial) ethics are possible. Drawing upon the debate over Paul de Man's alleged complicity with the Nazi's in his wartime journalistic activities, Dawson explicated the extent to which debates over ethics are indebted to radical distinctions like that obtaining between the sacred and profane. Her paper explored the ways in which demands for identification are used to separate sacred histories (of which legitimated

identities are born) from profane histories (from which the 'we' is disassociated through disassociation with the scapegoat), and the implications for questions of responsibility for histories which have been thus disposed of. This thesis was developed by drawing upon Durkheim, Laclau, Mouffe, Butler and Girard. Dawson discussed the contradiction between the positive constitution of community in the violence of sacralization in which the latter is constantly under erasure.

Elizabeth Kim of Carleton University presented 'Sacred Technologies, Profane Bodies: Eschatological themes, ideology and the discourses of biotechnology'. She discussed the ways in which Durkheimian theories of religion can be used to see problems about biomedical discourses presuppose religious sentiments in which a radical opposition is maintained between 'sacred' ideals of 'healthy bodies fit for the gods' and the 'profane' bodies of the diseased and malformed. This thesis served as the basis for an examination of how 'scientific discursive practices have become a means to ritualize the social implementation of technological interventions,' thereby reaffirming a teleology of bodily perfection in which individuals are called upon to save their bodies through faith in biotechnology. The resultant profanation of actual human bodies, was shown to be dependent upon a religion of science that legitimates fascizing practices on the self and a fascizing of the social body in the pursuit of a 'perfected' body politic.

The third paper was by Shaun Bertram, also of Carleton University, who presented 'Uncle Sam Wants You: Presentations of Sacrifice in U.S. Warfare from World War II to the Gulf War', with text and image. By examining the images, rhetoric and propaganda that have surrounded and constituted the political culture of war in the United States of America, she demonstrated the extent to which various totems of the American State and American life are deployed in calling for the 'necessity' of 'human sacrifice' in sustaining American life. The rhetoric of 'good versus evil' was shown to be isomorphic with the sacred-profane dichotomy. Particular attention was paid to the visual construction of sacrifice in war posters. Bertram also discussed the gendering of positions in which a patriarchal ideology sees 'blood sacrifice as an exclusively male undertaking'. The role of women, by contrast, was represented as being 'incubators for future generations of fighting men'. In an interesting twist, Bertram argued that the rhetoric of sacrifice in war shows the complex articulation of the 'myth of individualism' with the 'notion and reality of market individualism and consumerism' in which corporations deploy sacrificial and sacral images in marketing their own products and in constructing consumption as a sacred duty.

As discussant, Datta developed some implications of the panelists' papers for radical Durkheimian theory, noting in particular the need to clarify and rework Durkheim's various theorems of the sacred-profane; religion, society and myth; and the structure of the sacrificial triangle (sacrifier, sacrificer, and victim).

Ronjon Paul Datta