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Durkheim's Contribution to the Sociological Analysis of History

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*Emile Durkheim has long been viewed as one of the founders of the so-called variables-oriented approach to sociological investigation. This view ignores his considerable achievements using the methodology of "case-based" historical analysis, most prominent among them, his lectures on the history of French education (*The Evolution of Educational Thought*). In this paper I first outline the intimate relationship that Durkheim envisioned between historical and sociological investigation. I then turn to his work on French education for substantive illustrations of his approach. Finally, I explore certain points of intersection between Durkheim's approach to history and present-day concerns, especially in regard to the role of culture in history and the opposition between prospective and retrospective ("teleological") strategies of historical analysis.*

KEY WORDS: Durkheim; historical sociology; education; culture.

INTRODUCTION

Emile Durkheim has long been viewed as one of the founders of the "variables-oriented" approach to sociological investigation (Ragin and Zaret, 1983; Ragin, 1987; see also Bendix, 1971). As a putative forefather of the so-called variables revolution that swept across American sociology in the 1940s and 1950s (see Abbott, 1992), his "statistical" methodology, as illustrated, for example, in his study of *Suicide* (1897/1951), is often contrasted with the "case-oriented" qualitatitive-historical methodology of Max Weber. "Durkheim's comparative strategy," write Charles Ragin and David

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Zaret, "directs attention away from observational units of analysis to testing propositions about general patterns of relationships among abstract variables . . . . A variables-based strategy seeks transhistorical generalizations, not concrete knowledge about specific cases" (1983:740).

This conclusion that Durkheim neglected case-based historical research is true only to a very limited extent. For one thing, it does not take into account his considerable achievements using the methodology of "case-based" comparative analysis. Prominent among these achievements are his lectures on the history of French education, *The Evolution of Educational Thought* (1904–05/1977). While lacking the formal comparative framework widely associated in recent years with the case-oriented approach (Ragin, 1987; see also Moore, 1966; Skocpol, 1979), this and other such studies still pursue sociological comparisons *over time* (see Quadagno and Knapp, 1992:286–291), and feature occasional comparisons *across* cases as well, while devoting themselves most intensively to the study of one or a few specific cases (see Skocpol, 1992:60–61). While *Suicide* provides us with the analytical logic for a variables-based approach, *The Evolution of Educational Thought* and other historical works by Durkheim powerfully exemplify the case-oriented strategy in action.

Just as significant, however, is that Durkheim stressed throughout his writings the importance of combining *in most any analysis* two different but complementary methods of investigation: those of social statistics, on the one hand (or of any other approach that might be useful in analyzing "currently operative variables" [Bellah, 1959]), and those of case-oriented historical inquiry, on the other (so as to analyze the *formation* and *significance* of those variables). In "the science of morals and rights," Durkheim points out, one encounters two interrelated types of problem: "(1) How [rules of conduct] were established in the course of time: that is, what were the causes that gave rise to them and the useful ends they serve [their formation and significance]; and (2) The way in which they operate in society; that is, how they are applied by individuals [the analysis of currently operative variables]." These two sets of issues "are distinct, but even so, they [cannot] be treated separately, for they are closely linked . . . . This is why the equipment of the method used in studying the science of morals and rights is of [these] two kinds" (1898–1900/1992:1).

My argument in this essay is that Durkheim's conclusions as to the indispensability of case-oriented analysis still bear considerable weight today. They help us grasp the shortcomings inherent in the presentist assumptions that still hinder much of sociological research. It is ironic, indeed, that one of the very methodologists who associates Durkheim with the variables-based approach—Charles Ragin—goes on to criticize that same approach in terms strikingly similar to those quoted from Durkheim

above.[3] While championing a different methodology in the end than that which Durkheim advocated, Ragin agrees at least on the inherent problems of purely statistical analysis. For both thinkers, the meaning and significance of given causal variables cannot ever be known unless those variables (and their changing interrelations and contexts) are investigated historically. "[O]nly history," writes Durkheim, can show us "of what elements [the present] is formed, on what conditions each of them depends, how they are interrelated; only history, in a word, can bring us to the long chain of causes and effects of which [the present] is the result" (Durkheim, 1906/1956a:152–153).

I shall begin my analysis by outlining the intimate relationship that Durkheim envisioned between sociological and historical investigation. I shall then turn to one of his neglected masterworks in comparative historical analysis—the aforementioned lectures on *The Evolution of Educational Thought*—for some substantive illustrations of his approach. After laying out certain lessons that this work still offers, I shall evaluate in light of it recent critiques of Durkheim's "unhistorical" approach to history, and consider the role in his work of teleological and retrospective assumptions. Finally, I shall conclude with reflections on some of the limitations of Durkheim's view of the historical process.

DURKHEIM ON SOCIOLOGY AND HISTORY

Durkheim was by no means disinterested in historical inquiry. Indeed, it is hardly coincidental that his thinking shaped and influenced the historical research of generations of French and other European sociologists. Various members of the so-called Durkheim School, for example—virtually all of them assembled around the journal, *L'Annee Sociologique*—undertook pioneering investigations into a wide range of historical topics (see Lemert, 1981; Besnard, 1983). Among these were the changing social construction of the spiritual topography of the Holy Land (Halbwachs, 1992: Part II), diverse morphological influences upon Parisian social life during the 19th century (Halbwachs, 1960), the historical evolution of religious representations (Hubert and Mauss, 1909), the religious origins of money as a symbolic system (Simiand, 1934), the

[3]For Ragin, variables-oriented research wrongly assumes "that a certain effect exists independent of context," independent "of the values of the other causal variables in each case"; that it hides "the different effects of a variable in different settings or in different types of cases"; and that it "contradicts notions of multiple conjunctural causation," notions, that is, of the "multiple intersections of causal conditions" (1987:62–64). These are not the only shortcomings of multivariate statistical analysis that Ragin discusses (see also 1987:61–62).

development of Chinese religious life (Granet, 1930, 1975), the historical sociology of the caste system in India (Bougle, 1971), the rise and dissemination of egalitarian ideas (Bougle, 1926), and changing patterns of social organization "among the primitives and in the Ancient East" (Moret and Davy, 1970). Even when the vitality and influence of this remarkable group of scholars waned after World War I, the mantle of Durkheimian sociology was picked up in altered form by the two great founders of the "Annales School" of social history, Marc Bloch (1973) and Lucien Febvre (1982 [see Rhodes, 1978]). In Germany, Norbert Elias also pursued historical inquiries into "collective mentalities" or "representations," as Durkheim termed them, in his now-classic work, *The Civilizing Process* (1994), while in more recent years historians of "mentalites," such as Georges Duby (1980), Philippe Aries (1962), and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1979), further elaborated an historical sociology deeply inspired by Durkheimian ideas. The historical research of Michel Foucault (1970, 1972, 1979) also falls within this broad category (see Hutton, 1981; Hunt, 1986). And not least, the historical and sociological investigations of Pierre Bourdieu in France today (1967, 1988) perhaps represent the single most important revitalization of this approach since the very days of the Durkheim School itself (see Wacquant, 1992:12–14).

Not only Durkheim's impact upon later social historians and sociologists, however, but also his own life and work make it remarkably odd that he should still be so little identified with historical investigation, at least in the English-speaking world. For one thing, Durkheim's own personal involvement in the cultural struggles of his day was extensive, and stood in an intimate relationship with his analytical insights into cultural and institutional change. As is well known, Durkheim immersed himself deeply in ongoing efforts to reform the French university and public educational systems (Clark, 1973; Auspitz, 1982; Ringer, 1992). He was also an outspoken and prominent participant in the celebrated Dreyfus affair of 1898, and a committed socialist, too, albeit of a reformist and evolutionary variety (Lukes, 1985:320–332;342–349). His practical involvements were profoundly influenced by his theoretical ideas, as expressed, for example, in his lectures on education (*Education and Sociology*, 1903, 1906,1911/1956b; *Moral Education*, 1902–03/1973a; see also Durkheim, 1979a); his reflections upon the complex relationship between social science and political activity (1883, 1890, 1898, 1904, 1973b: Part II); and his important but all-too-often neglected lecture series on socialism (1895–96/1958). Durkheim's participation in worldly and practical affairs in turn reinforced his abstract and theoreti-

cal ideas, for throughout his written work he never ceased to affirm the role of human agency in history (more on this below). Far from regarding historical developments as a mechanical and automatic unfolding of structural processes, he emphasized repeatedly the dynamic involvement of social actors in the shaping and remaking of the social world that shapes them.

Relatedly, Durkheim spoke out forcefully and often in his own writings for the recognition, albeit at a more specifically methodological level, of the utter inseparability of sociological from historical investigation. On this point, Robert Bellah's classic essay on "Durkheim and History" (1959) remains definitive and convincing. Bellah argues that "Durkheim, from his earliest to his latest work, urge[d] the closest *rapprochement* between sociology and history" (1959:447).

> In one of his earliest published papers [1888], [Durkheim stressed] the importance of history for sociology and of sociology for history. In the prefaces of volumes I and II of *L'Annee Sociologique* (1898, 1899/1980: 47–55], he [laid] down the policy of including a large proportion of historical works among the books reviewed . . .. In 1905 he call[ed] to . . .students' attention the importance of history for the understanding of the sociology of education [1956a], and in 1912 he [spoke] of the crucial importance of history for the sociology of religion [1965]. And in his last paper, the "Introduction to Ethics" of 1917 [1917/1979b], Durkheim once again note[d] the fundamental significance of history for the understanding of man. (Bellah, 1959:447–448)

In a paper published in 1903, Durkheim noted additionally that history itself was becoming increasingly sociological in its orientation (Durkheim and Fauconnet, 1982). And most emphatically, in 1908 he declared that "[i]n reality, there is nothing in my knowledge of sociology which merits the name, which doesn't have a historical character . . . . There are not two methods or two opposed conceptions. That which will be true of history will be true of sociology" as well (1982a:211; quoted in Bellah, 1959:448).

It is in this important paper of 1908, in fact, now translated into English as "Debate on Explanation in History and Sociology" (1982a), as well as in one other key text, chapter VI of *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895/1982b:147–158), that Durkheim most programmatically called for the union of historical and sociological analysis. The causes that social actors themselves attribute to events, he suggested in the former essay, the conscious motives of the participants themselves, "are the most suspect of causes." As sociologists, "We must penetrate much more deeply into reality in order to understand it . . . . We must look for . . . a means of comparing historical data, and establish series of phenomena which vary on parallel lines; it is by these methodical comparisons that it [will be] possible to dis-

cover causes" (1908/1982a:212, 215, 218). Even such methods, however, were inadequate by themselves when the phenomena under investigation had a history *prior to* "the existence of the [specific] peoples under comparison" (1895/1982b:156). In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim wrote,

> The higher the social scale, the less the importance of the characteristics acquired by each people as compared with those which have been handed down . . . . [T]he new elements we have introduced into domestic law, the law of property, and morality, from the beginning of our history, are relatively few and of small importance compared to those which the distant past has bequeathed to us. The innovations which occur in this way cannot therefore be understood unless we have first studied those more fundamental phenomena which are their roots, but which cannot be studied without the help of much broader comparisons. To be in a position to explain the present state of the family, marriage and property, etc., we must know the origins of each and what are the primal elements from which these institutions are composed. (1895/1982b:157)

In this same text, and just a few sentences later, Durkheim added (in italics in the original version) that "*one cannot explain a social fact of any complexity save on condition that one follows its entire development throughout all social species*" (1895/1982b:157).

In many other writings, too, Durkheim took special pains to underscore the intimate relationship between historical and sociological investigation. These writings include, in rough chronological order, his lectures on *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (1992), which Durkheim delivered in the years between 1898 and 1900[4]; the Preface to Vol. II of *L'Annee Sociologique* (1899/1980)[5]; "The Evolution and the Role of Secondary Education in France" (reprinted in *Education and Sociology* [1956a], but first published in 1906)[6]; "The Method of Sociology"

[4]"The equipment of the method used in studying the science of morals and rights is of two kinds. On the one hand we have comparative history and ethnography, which enable us to get at the origin of the rule, and show us its component elements first dissociated and then accumulating by degrees. [And] in the second place, there are comparative statistics . . . " (Durkheim, 1898–1900/1992:1).

[5]"We have no knowledge of social reality if we have merely viewed it from without and if we are unaware of its substructure. In order to know how it is created, one must know how it has been created. In other words, one must follow the history of the progressively changing nature of its composition. In order to be able, with some chance of success, to tell what the society of tomorrow will be, it is indispensable to have studied the social patterns of the most remote past. To understand the present, one must depart from it" (Durkheim, 1980:55).

[6]"To know [the relevant aspects of education], it is not enough to consider them among ourselves; since it is in the past that they have produced their effects, it is in the past that we must see them operating . . . . The same method is indicated for all [other] problems" (Durkheim, 1956, pp. 147–148). Toward the end of this same essay, Durkheim added a crucial passage drawing an analogy between the personal unconscious of the individual and the collective history of a society and its institutions: "We can succeed in discovering [the unconscious] only by reconstructing our personal history and the history of our family. In the same way, . . . only history can penetrate under the surface of our present educational system; only history can analyze it . . . " (Durkheim, 1906/1956a:152–153).

(1908/1982c)[7]; and "The Nature and Method of Pedagogy" (also reprinted in *Education and Sociology* [1956c], but first published in 1911)[8].

Clearly, then, Durkheim called repeatedly for a union of sociological and historical analysis. In some of his writings (for example, in *Suicide*), he did selectively emphasize certain methodological possibilities over others (from within a complex but unitary logic), possibilities that today are associated with the variables-based strategy. But always these choices were dictated by pragmatic rather than principled concerns, that is to say, by the specific research concerns at hand.

Even more significant still is the additional fact that Durkheim himself undertook a number of ambitious comparative and historical investigations over the course of his lifetime. These investigations ranged from his very first major work, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893/1984a), to his last, the never-completed outline (mentioned above) of an historical sociology of morality (1917/1979b). In *The Division of Labor*, he set out to explain the emergence of modern society by reference to a confluence of what he termed "morphological" factors. He suggested that functional differentiation, specialization, and the evolution of the division of labor were destroying more traditional forms of moral integration and producing a new type of solidarity, one marked by interdependence and a greater scope for individual initiative. In another series of studies (1888/1978a, 1891–92/1978b, 1906/1978c; see Davy, 1931), he followed historically the formation of the modern family unit across a sequence of discrete stages: the diffuse clan, the differentiated family of maternal or paternal lineage, the joint family of agnates, the patriarchal family, the paternal–maternal family, and finally, the modern family itself. In yet another set of works (Durkheim, (1902/1984b, 1898–1900/1992), he inquired into the social functions of modern corporate bodies and professional groups, examining the ways in which these structures had developed over time—from the "collegia" of the Roman Empire to the medieval guilds of the 11th and 12th centuries. Today, Durkheim argued, a new system of corporate bodies was needed to remedy

[7]An institution is "a complex entity made up of various parts. These parts must first be known . . . . But in order to discover them, it is not enough to consider the institution in its perfected and most recent form . . . . It is history which plays this role." Indeed, history " . . . not only distinguishes these elements for us, but is [also] the sole means of enabling us to account for them. This is because to explain them is to demonstrate what causes them and what are the reasons for their existence. But how can they be discovered save by going back to the time when these causes and reasons operated? That time lies behind us. The sole means of getting to know how each of these elements arose is to wait upon their birth. But that birth occurred in the past, and can consequently only be known through the mediation of history" (Durkheim, 1908/1982c:245–246).

[8]Durkheim posed here once again the problem of determining "how education [or, for that matter, the family, or any other social institution] developed and what the causes are which have determined this development and which account for it" (Durkheim, 1911/1956c:98).

the lack of moral authority in economic life, to serve as a focal point for moral community and group attachments, and to mediate the "individualistic particularism" of economic interests within the public sphere.

In still another important work, his lectures on *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (1898–1900/1992), Durkheim ventured even more boldly into the field of political sociology, inquiring there into how the modern state and political society had gradually taken shape over time. His investigations took him as far back as the (pre-)historical period of the so-called primitive or mechanical societies, which Durkheim compared in general terms to the political societies of more modern times (see Giddens, 1972; Prager, 1981; Pearce, 1989). In that same work, Durkheim further inquired into the historical sociology of legal forms and structures, discussing at some length the evolution of the rights of property and contract (Durkheim, 1898–1900/1992: chaps. XI–XVIII). And finally, in his "Introduction to Ethics" (1917/1979b), he sketched out what was to have been an ambitious research project into the shaping of moral ideals, values, and norms. This outline contained further assertions as to the indispensability of an historical point of view for sociological inquiries into moral life.

DURKHEIM'S STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

In the discussion that follows, I shall direct my attention to yet another of Durkheim's major historical studies—his examination of the historical transformation of French secondary schooling. The reasons for this emphasis upon *The Evolution of Educational Thought* (1904–05/1977) are threefold. I believe, first of all, that it was in this educational study that Durkheim presented his single most comprehensive and sustained effort at comparative and historical investigation. Second, it is this study that best exemplifies the analytical advances that Durkheim achieved in the important "religious" phase of his theoretical development (Alexander, 1982).[9] Third, it is this text that provides for us the best point of departure for pondering the potential significance of Durkheim's key ideas and insights for present-day comparative and historical analysis.

Durkheim sought to show throughout the final "religious" phase of his intellectual development that secular processes could be understood along the same lines as religious phenomena, and particularly as religious ritual.

[9]Elsewhere, I argue that *The Evolution of Educational Thought* is most fruitfully read in conjunction with two other texts—*Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912/1965) as emblematic works from that same "religious" period. See Emirbayer (1996).

> In scattered essays in the late 1890s [observes Jeffrey Alexander], and in the monographs and lectures which followed until his death in 1917, [Durkheim] developed a theory of secular society that emphasized the independent causal importance of symbolic classification, the pivotal role of the symbolic division between sacred and profane, the social significance of ritual behavior, and the close interrelation between symbolic classifications, ritual processes, and the formation of social solidarities. (Alexander, 1988a:2)

The major studies in which Durkheim elaborated these views, including *The Evolution of Educational Thought*, provide us with important theoretical resources for any historical inquiry into modern society and culture. Durkheim in his later religious period remains useful for a cultural sociology of modernity because he "alone insisted on the centrality of meaning in secular society . . . . [O]nly in his work, [in fact,] does a systematic theory of contemporary cultural life begin to emerge" (Alexander, 1988b:189). And yet he also situates systems of meaning carefully within their social and institutional settings, and in relation to their material bearers.

What, then, does Durkheim actually accomplish in *The Evolution of Educational Thought*? To begin with, Durkheim reiterates in its opening lectures some of his by now familiar insights into the intimate relationship between historical and sociological analysis. "I believe that it is only by carefully studying the past," he avers, "that we can come to anticipate the future and to understand the present . . . . [N]o educational subject can be truly understood except by placing it in the context of the institutional development, the evolutionary process, of which it forms a part but of which it is only the contemporary and provisional culmination" (1904–05/1977:9, 11). This master principle applies, adds Durkheim, to both the organizational structure and the guiding ideals of education. Just as our "past *personae* predominate" in our present selves, and "constitute the unconscious part of ourselves," so too do the educational ideals and visions of the past continue to inform our present-day practices and understandings (1904–05/1977:11). "For the truth is that the present, to which we are invited to restrict our attention, is by itself nothing: it is no more than an extrapolation of the past, from which it cannot be severed without losing the greater part of its significance" (1904–05/1977:14).

Across some 350 pages of analysis, Durkheim in *The Evolution of Educational Thought* proceeds to investigate no less than 11 centuries of institutional and cultural history, covering the development of French secondary education from its origins in the early Church up through the time of the "educational crisis" of the late 19th century.[10] He focuses particularly closely

[10]The lecture series upon which this work is based was first translated into English in 1977, but regrettably fell out of print soon thereafter. Perhaps the various negative assessments of Durkheim mentioned throughout this essay might help explain why it has been neglected

upon a small set of historical cases: the intellectual and institutional innovations of the Carolingian period; the educational effervescence of the 12th century; the moral and pedagogical upheavals that took place during the Renaissance period; and the development of educational theory and practice over the course of the 18th century. The title of the work leads one to anticipate a study in the evolution of educational doctrines alone, but actually Durkheim's analyses seek to blend together the historical transformation of abstract pedagogical ideals with that of objective institutions and processes. We find in them, in fact, a Durkheim who seeks to combine the study of educational ideologies, on the one hand—the manner in which pedagogical visions emerge and spread—with the study of their (often paradoxical) implementation in actual instructional practices, on the other. We find here, moreover, a Durkheim deeply interested in elaborating a synthetic approach to causal explanation, one reminiscent of the very best that is to be found, for example, in Weberian sociology, as well as an analyst highly sensitive to the transformative possibilities of collective effervescence and to the (potential) causal significance of human agency. Durkheim provides for us through such means a telling illustration of some of the hallmarks of case-oriented research: a focus upon a relatively small number of cases, an interest in capturing "the *variety* of meaningful patterns of causes and effects," and a concern for "pinpointing the combinations of conditions, the causal complexes, that produce specific outcomes" (Ragin, 1987:52).[11]

Durkheim's key analytical insights come together perhaps most revealingly in his expansive (nearly 100 page long) case study of French educational change during the Renaissance. In subsequent paragraphs, I accordingly focus most of my attention upon this one important substantive analysis.[12] The point of departure for these chapters, easily the

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so long. Moreover, the only substantial treatment of *The Evolution of Educational Thought* in the secondary literature, apart from such standard full-length works as Alexander (1982), Lukes (1985), and Wallwork (1972), is a brief but interesting review article by Cherkaoui (1981). For two empirical case studies, on the other hand, that draw substantially upon this book, see Emirbayer (1992a, b).

[11]It is true that not all of Durkheim's actual findings in this book regarding educational change have held up as well as (many of) its theoretical and methodological strategies. And even in the latter respect, a skeptic might well argue that Durkheim tells us relatively little that we do not already know. I take up more directly the question of Durkheim's "usefulness" in Emirbayer (1996). Suffice it here to say that even those lessons from Durkheim's study that are already well-recognized in current debates are all too often honored in the breach by today's practitioners.

[12]Durkheim's investigations here actually extend well beyond the bounds of the Renaissance proper. But I continue to refer to them here, perhaps somewhat misleadingly, as a "case study of the Renaissance" because of the unity of Durkheim's own analyses, which begin with 16th century humanism but then extend to the Jesuits' efforts to subvert humanism well into the 17th century.

most substantial ones in the book, is the remarkable blossoming of educational discourse during the 16th century. Whereas in the Middle Ages the transformation of educational institutions proceeded "unconsciously," claims Durkheim, "without awareness on the part of the people involved," the Renaissance itself witnessed a sudden proliferation of ambitious ventures in the elaboration of educational doctrine (1904–05/1977:180). The most sophisticated products of this development, the pedagogical theories of the humanists, articulated visions of startling breadth and originality. They boldly proclaimed the principle that "the child and so the man is . . . a work of art to be adorned and embellished" (1904–05/1977:218). Durkheim devotes considerable effort to analyzing the inner logic of these doctrines, but he also contends that they must ultimately be regarded as a reflection of collectively held moral ideals. For Durkheim the educational ideals of the Humanists embodied the deepest social and intellectual aspirations of their age.

Durkheim situates the wellspring of humanist educational ideals in the emergent domain of "polite society." This "leisured class," he argues, owed its existence to a complex configuration of economic causes: the establishment of order and security by means of better government and more efficient administration, the growth of population and the proliferation of urban centers, the spread of communications, and the stimulation of economic activity and the expansion of markets through the discovery and exploitation of new routes of trade. Durkheim suggests that the increasing social mobility and social wealth that accompanied these changes greatly narrowed the gulf between the various levels of society and fostered among the middle strata a new desire to emulate the way of life of the aristocracy. An important transformation in the political order further enhanced these aspirations. The break up of unified Christendom into a multiplicity of national units, each with "its own special mode of thought and feeling," resulted in a "movement towards individualism and differentiation" (1904–05/1977:171).[13] This shift emboldened rising social groups to press their right to deviate from existing beliefs. Morphological developments, in sum, generated expansive new sensibilities. At the cultural level they yielded a new interest in "free inquiry" and intellectual cultivation. And ultimately they found expression in

[13]These may be questionable historical assertions, especially in light of more recent French historiography. But the broader theoretical lessons here about the causal importance of morphological developments still remain valid.

pedagogical theories oriented toward the ideals of refinement and social grace.[14]

Persuasive as it is, however, Durkheim does not rest contentedly with this one-sided morphological explanation. Economic and political changes may have provided the objective conditions for the emergence of the "leisured class" and its humanist ideology, but only developments of an ideological nature could have determined its distinctive identity and social goals. "'Man,'" notes Durkheim, "as Humanist teachers portrayed and continue to portray him, was . . . the product of a synthesis between Christian, Roman and Greek ideals; and it was these three ideals that were used to mould him, because it was these three ideals that moulded the consciousness of those who expounded them" (1904–05/1977:326–327). These abstract ideals became *empirically effective* as they found anchorage in the emergent social formation of polite society—a stratum with which, in Weberian terms, they enjoyed a powerful "elective affinity." Through these ideals the stratum of polite society constructed its own unique vision of social life. It made new sense of its own identity and interests, its relation to other social groups, and the social conditions within which it was situated. And finally, it was from this humanist perspective that the stratum of polite society pronounced the institutions and practices of the old social order both inadequate and illegitimate. As Durkheim observes in regard to educational thought: "The sixteenth century did not simply accuse Scholasticism [the dominant pedagogical outlook of the Middle Ages] of having engaged in certain debatable or regrettable academic practices, but rather [it accused it] of having constituted a school of barbarousness and coarseness" (Durkheim, 1904–05/1977:204).

Hence Durkheim employs a powerful multidimensional approach to explaining the shaping of a specific social group and its educational discourse. This approach emphasizes the interpenetration of morphological with cultural or symbolic tendencies in the formation of pedagogical doctrines (see Emirbayer, 1995). The scope of Durkheim's inquiry, however, extends far beyond this domain of educational ideals. It passes also into the realm of social institutions and of struggles for domination among different social groups. For there still remains the problem of the actual im-

[14]Nowhere is Jeffrey Alexander's insight (1990) that we always return to "the classics" for reasons that are deeply embedded in *present-day* concerns better illustrated than in Durkheim's own explanation as to why the Renaissance "returned" with renewed appreciation to the writings of classical antiquity. "For the first time", observes Durkheim, "an urgent need was felt for a kind of culture which would be more refined, more elegant, more literary. The taste was not acquired because antiquity had just been discovered; rather people demanded from the classical antiquity which they knew the means of satisfying this new taste which they had just acquired" (Durkheim, 1904–05/1977:168).

plementation of these ideals, the question as to "how they fare when, emerging from the world of the ideal, they seek to enter that of reality." Durkheim writes, "When this evolutionary process does not restrict itself to giving them an outer covering, a material and visible body, but rather transforms them as it actualizes them, then it forms part of their internal history—and on this account deserves quite special attention" (1904–05/1977:227, 228). In addressing this problem Durkheim's analysis enters a new phase. Its focus of inquiry shifts from the humanists, who articulated the educational aspirations of the Renaissance period, to the Jesuits, who in translating these ideals into practice succeeded in disfiguring them almost beyond recognition.

The Jesuits, in Durkheim's account, were the "light troops" of Catholicism, charged with combating the heresies of the Protestant Reformation. Durkheim portrays them as deeply inspired and guided by a set of religious beliefs and interests deeply inimical to cultural modernity. (Regrettably, he neglects to analyze as well their distinctive *institutional position* within the Church, and the *material* and *organizational* interests that flowed from it, thereby falling short here of the ideal he pursues elsewhere: that of a truly multidimensional analysis.) Unlike the monastic orders characteristic of the Middle Ages, Jesuits mingled freely with the world and sought to advance their purposes by ingeniously co-opting the ideas most prevalent in it. "In order the better to be able to guide [their] age," notes Durkheim, they needed to "speak its language [and to] assimilate its spirit" (1904–05/1977:233). The Jesuits' far-reaching reforms in the sphere of education were an exemplary case in point. The Jesuits saw clearly the potential usefulness of schooling in the battle against heresy. "They quickly came to realize that . . . the really important instrument in the struggle for mastery of the human soul was the education of the young. Thus they resolved to seize hold of it" (1904–05/1977:234).

The Jesuits' particular nemesis was humanist theory, whose espousal of individual self-realization they deemed a threat to their faith. They sought "to gain control of it and to direct it" by systematically reshaping its curriculum and pedagogy (1904–05/1977:234). The Jesuits transformed the materials of classical education, the distinctive feature of humanist curriculum, by purging them of everything specifically Greek or Roman. Their great innovation was "to expound the classical authors in such a way 'that they became [in one Jesuit's words] although pagan and profane, the eulogists of the faith'" (1904–05/1977:250). The Jesuits also introduced two highly original pedagogical methods: the constant and personal supervision of pupils by their teachers, and the formation among students of a spirit of rivalry and emulation so intense that academic work became, as Durkheim puts it, "a kind of perpetual hand-to-hand combat." Through this se-

vere "education of the will," they sought to transform their students into "devoted subjects of the Holy See" (1904–05/1977:260, 265).

The Jesuits were "essentially men of the past." Their subversion of the Humanist curriculum was "a step backwards, a retrograde movement," while their methods of discipline were so extreme as to inhibit all freedom of movement. The ideals toward which they sought to foster a sense of attachment were also "conservative, even reactionary": by molding their students into devoted servants of the Church, the Jesuits wanted above all to advance their own ideological struggle against the Reformation. And yet their efforts were stunningly successful. "Scarcely had they set foot on [French] soil than the population of the . . . schools went off, as if spellbound, to fill the Jesuit colleges" (Durkheim, 1904–05/1977:233–234, 237). What could account for this extraordinary success? Durkheim contends that the answer lies in the moral constitution of society. The conditions of social life in the 16th century called for a pedagogical system in tune with the ideal of subjective particularity. "[I]n proportion as people's consciousness became individualized . . . discipline had to become more personal and take greater account of individual feelings, and consequently allow for a degree of competitiveness" (Durkheim, 1904–05/1977:263–264). The Jesuits' methods of continuous personal supervision and intense competition reflected an acute awareness of such needs. Despite the extremism with which they were applied, these methods implicitly acknowledged the richness of individual personality. The Jesuits thus set themselves in opposition to the dominant ideology of the age, and yet their whole enterprise continued to be permeated by its influence. Durkheim's historical argument here is replete with irony.

Durkheim concludes that "People involved in action are least well placed to see the causes which underlie their actions; and the way in which they represent to themselves the social movement of which they are a part should always be regarded as suspect, and by no means thought of as having any special claim to credibility" (1904–05/1977:167–168). Despite their chosen goals, the Jesuits not only subverted but also (in part) actualized the educational aspirations of the Humanists. They became a vehicle for the selective realization of the very principles they most detested. Through their pedagogical innovations—their efforts to instill a spirit of discipline, to inculcate the fundamental ideals of their collective life, and in ways they did not fully comprehend, to advance the movement of individualization—the Jesuits unwittingly transposed these Renaissance ideals into the realm of moral culture itself. It is for this reason that Durkheim declares (summing up one of the key lessons of *The Evolution of Educational Thought*), "The history of pedagogy and the study of social mores are intimately connected" (1904–05/1977:18).

EXPLAINING HISTORICAL PROCESSES

What analytical lessons can be drawn from this rich historical case study of pedagogical transformations in France during the Renaissance period? One of the most important lessons has to do with the relationship between the cultural and social structural determinants of action. Since the mid-1980s, historical sociologists have developed a keen interest in cultural analysis (for an excellent review, see Morawska and Spohn, 1994; see also Alexander, 1988c), in large part as a reaction against the anticulturalist bias of earlier "structuralisms" (e.g., Moore, 1966; Tilly, 1978; Skocpol, 1979). Here Durkheim's substantive works become highly relevant, for while "morphological" developments remain a key explanatory factor in these works, he also contends that they must be complemented by collective aspirations, ideals, and values. "While collective representations (which Durkheim later [calls] 'ideals' and which we might call 'values') . . . arise from and reflect the 'social substratum' (the morphological variables), they are, once in existence, 'partially autonomous realities' which independently influence subsequent social development" (Bellah, 1959:457). Having "crystallized" from patterns of social interaction in the morphological substructure of society, these cognitive and moral categories then take on a life of their own, and potentially react back upon the social structure. "Durkheim, in the concept of collective representations, [makes] the fundamental discovery of culture as an element . . . analytically independent of social system" (Bellah, 1959:457). We can see the dynamic interplay of culture and social structure precisely in the rise of Humanist educational ideals—in that combination of socioeconomic, political, and ideational developments that helped to bring about a new pedagogical vision during the French Renaissance.

Durkheim also contributes to the study of cultural and institutional change by distinguishing between the *production* and *selection* of new educational ideologies, on the one hand, and their *institutionalization*, on the other (Wuthnow, 1989). He deliberately separates the study of the emergence and spread of humanism from analysis of its partial, selective instantiation in French educational institutions, focusing specifically upon the pivotal organizational role of the Jesuits in the latter process. (As mentioned earlier, Durkheim stumbles a bit in this regard, failing to explore the Jesuits' specifically material interests—their involvement in organizational struggles within the Church—as well as their ideal interests in combatting humanist doctrine.) By breaking down his study of French educational transformations in this way, he succeeds in laying bare the various phases of what was in fact an extended moment of collective effervescence, a ritual process or "event," as it is now termed (see Abrams, 1982;

Sewell, 1991), that entailed several distinct yet interrelated causal sequences. He thereby combines the best of his later religious sociology with sound, careful causal explanation.

But if Durkheim's historical case study of the Renaissance is to be understood as an analysis of transformative ritual processes, then one final line of criticism of his work needs now to be considered. It is often said that Durkheim was a static, evolutionary theorist of social change with little or no concern for transformative possibilities in human agency. Based upon his arguments in *The Division of Labor*, this view holds that he formulated at best a crude explanation for the transition from traditional to modern industrial society, invoking such simplistic causes as the growth in volume and density of population to explain long-term processes of structural differentiation. "As an exercise in historical sociology," suggests Philip Abrams, "Durkheim's treatment of the division of labor is notably unhistorical. Not only is there nothing in the way of careful historical documentation of the processes he describes . . . , but it is clear that . . . he is in fact much more interested in the logical connection between the two types of society he has constructed than in their historical connection" (1982:27). That "history, whatever its general patterns or outcomes, is from day-to-day made by individuals" seems nowhere to be acknowledged in Durkheim's actual analyses. Moreover, critics of Durkheim point out that he portrays the transition to the modern world by means of an *evolutionary* theory of history, illegitimately shifting back and forth in his use of the concept of "organic solidarity" between empirical generalization and a normative standard of critique for modern societies. Altogether missing from his analytical perspective is any insight into the open-endedness of history, its radical indeterminacy, and its lack of a clear direction or teleological end point.

All of this, of course, is partially true. Durkheim was indeed influenced by the evolutionary perspective on history so prevalent in his day, especially in his first major work, *The Division of Labor.* But it must also be remembered that Durkheim proceeded to write a great deal more about history than *The Division of Labor* alone. As was mentioned above, he undertook a number of historical investigations, rich in analytical and substantive insights, into the key role of agency in societal processes. And in *The Evolution of Educational Thought* in particular, he portrays the key actors in his story as goal-oriented, moral beings striving to realize their cultural and institutional agendas against sometimes fierce and active resistance. Throughout this work, he depicts educational history as a sequence of "renaissance" moments in which genuinely new creative doctrines and practices were implemented. He also stresses the open-ended choices regarding such outcomes always facing French society, in the present as well as in the past. Durkheim was an interested, hardly impartial, observer of the educational

scene, concerned to stake out a position in the educational debates of his time and to use his work to make a strong case on behalf of it. It is for this reason that he so carefully pointed out that "the paths of [educational] formation [are] multiple but not infinite, that at any particular historical juncture several distinctly different futures [are] possible," and that the tale of French educational history is indeed one of "choice and consequences."

> [T]he development of educational theory, like all human development, has been far from following a steady, regular course. In the course of the struggles and conflicts which have arisen between opposing sets of ideas, it has often happened that basically sound ideas have floundered, whereas, judged from the point of view of their intrinsic worth, they ought to have survived . . . . [The whole of educational history] is littered with a multitude of lamentable and unjustified triumphs, deaths and defeats. (Durkheim, 1904–05/1977:13)

It cannot be said—and Durkheim himself never tries—that educational history is a tale of inevitable and progressive development, a story in which social actors' choices and efforts simply make no difference at all. On the contrary, Durkheim feels it necessary to learn from the frequent mistakes of the past in order to actively construct a better and sounder future. What might still remain unsatisfactory about his approach, to be sure, is its tendency to neglect those discarded doctrines and practices of the past that do not serve his reformist purposes in the present, instead of surveying the full range of educational variations that existed in each and every historical period. This "teleological" tendency notwithstanding, the acutely observant Durkheim of these pages still bears little resemblance to the mechanistic Durkheim of *The Division of Labor* and other similar writings.[15]

At a more methodological level, too, Durkheim rejects all versions of historical determinism that portray cultural and institutional development as an inevitable and mechanistic sequence of stages. In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, for example, he states unequivocally that

> it is impossible to conceive how the state which civilization has attained at any given time could be the determining cause of the state which follows. The stages through which humanity successively passes do not engender each other. It is true that normally it is accepted that evolution will proceed in the same direction as in the past, but that is a mere supposition. We have no assurance that the facts as they have hitherto manifested themselves are a sufficiently complete goal towards which they are moving in the light of the stages through which they have already

[15]If the nature of Durkheim's engagement in historical analysis changes over time, despite his evident substantive and methodological commitments all along to historical investigation, this may be due in part to the "religious" turn in his thinking. It may also derive from a shift in his underlying concerns: as a general inquiry into the moral constitution of modern society, *The Division of Labor* elicits less of an interest on Durkheim's part in the dynamism and open-endedness of historical processes than do his later studies of French schooling, given their deliberate orientation toward ongoing policy disputes.

> successively passed. There is no reason to suppose that the direction this tendency follows even traces out a straight line. (1908/1982a:139–140; see also p. 141)

Such a view sounds very different from, say, the evolutionism espoused by Talcott Parsons, or even by social thinkers from Durkheim's own day. So much for Durkheim the advocate of unilinear historical determinism, or of an automatic, mechanistic, and teleological view of history!

Today the only defensible approach to causal explanation that historical sociologists can follow is one that remains sensitive to the radical open-endedness of historical development, and that refrains from imposing any predetermined teleological framework upon social life. Historical sociologists need to recognize that an immense variety of institutional and pedagogical patterns might well have obtained during the historical period(s) they choose to study. Rather than try to explain entire sequences of events from their eventual outcomes, they need to acknowledge that in different contexts the paths of development are "multiple if not infinite, [and] that at any particular historical juncture several distinctly different futures [are indeed] possible" (Tilly, 1992:33). Most salient are the *actual choices* that actors make at different historical junctures, as well as the *consequences* of these choices. Only with such concerns will historical analysts avoid the charges of teleological reasoning that have so bedeviled the Durkheimian approach to historical and sociological investigation almost from its very inception.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have tried to rescue Durkheim as an historical sociologist from those interpreters of him who persist in linking his work to the so-called variables revolution of earlier decades. I have examined methodological pronouncements by Durkheim that emphasize the profound and necessary interrelation between sociology and history, and devoted special attention to his lectures on the history of French education, his single most impressive venture in historical explanation. And finally, after reviewing some of the analytical lessons from that work that make it relevant still to debates among historical sociologists, I have stepped back to consider the role of teleological thinking in his writings, and to underscore the open-endedness of the historical process that Durkheim himself never satisfactorily acknowledged. Perhaps with some reconstruction, Durkheim's work can go a long way toward inspiring new generations of sociologists oriented toward historical investigation, just as he inspired those in earlier decades who led the turn toward a new "variables-centered" sociology.

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