
Philip SMITH, *Durkheim and After: The Durkheimian Tradition, 1893-2020*
(Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020, 242 p.)

Kant once said that the founder of a science and even his posthumous followers often fumble around with an idea that is not clear to them, so they cannot determine either its content, articulation, or boundaries. Philip Smith's *Durkheim and After* consists of an effort to grasp the idea around the Durkheimian project, providing a concise but learned picture of the long Durkheimian tradition over more than a century. Focusing on its most important uses "for creative *social explanation and theory building*" [viii], the book examines how Émile Durkheim's legacy has been inherited and enlivened over the period since his death and leading up to the present-day scholarship.

Smith received his MA in social anthropology from the University of Edinburgh, and his PhD in sociology from the University of California, Los Angeles. Currently, he is a professor of sociology at Yale University. Along with Jeffrey Alexander and other colleagues, he has helped shape the so-called strong program in cultural sociology, having published several works on the cultural logic of war, punishment, and climate change. Besides editing *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* with Alexander, however, Smith has published only minor pieces of research on Durkheim and his tradition to date.¹ *Durkheim and After* is the first book-length work to be published since Alexander's creation of the strong program that substantiates its interpretation of a "cultural Durkheim" while narrating the story that led the tradition he created toward its important role in contemporary American cultural sociology.

Smith's career path, from anthropology to sociology, and from the United Kingdom to the United States, sheds considerable light on the story arc offered throughout the five chapters of *Durkheim and After*.

¹ Cf. Philip SMITH and Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, 1996. "Review essay: Durkheim's religious revival", *American Journal of Sociology*, 102 (2): 585-592; Philip SMITH and Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, 2005. "Introduction: the new Durkheim" in Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER and Philip SMITH, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1-37); Philip SMITH, 2007. "Ritual" in G. Ritzer, ed., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Malden, Blackwell: 3944-3946); Philip SMITH, 2014. "The cost of collaboration: Reflections upon Randall Collins' theory of collective intellectual production via Émile Durkheim: A Biography", *Anthropological Quarterly*, 87 (1): 245-254.

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Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the works of Durkheim and the members of the *Année sociologique* team, such as Henri Hubert, Marcel Mauss, and Robert Hertz, from 1892 to 1917. Chapter 3 debates the concomitant development of Durkheimian tradition between 1917 and 1950 in three lineages of thought: in France, the works of Maurice Halbwachs, Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille, and Roger Caillois; in Britain, of Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and Edward Evans-Pritchard; and in the United States, of Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. Though Germany is briefly mentioned, Chapter 4 only follows those three national lineages from 1950 to 1985, focusing respectively on Claude Lévi-Strauss' structuralism, Mary Douglas' anthropology, and Parsons' systems theory and its critics. Finally, Chapter 5 examines the rise of cultural sociology in the United States from 1985 to 2020, concentrating on the works of Alexander's strong program and Randall Collins' interaction ritual chains theory.

Overall, other reviews² have already pointed out that *Durkheim and After* is a well-written, easy-to-read, and highly informative book that narrates a story of more than 100 years in 220 pages—an accomplishment in itself, which reflects the book's coherence and consistency. In addition, they have also highlighted Smith's bias in reconstructing the entire Durkheimian tradition from the viewpoint of the contemporary cultural sociology that is mainly practiced in the United States, a choice which leaves aside a variety of other areas and countries where Durkheim's influence has arguably continued to thrive up to the present. Whereas the tendency is to take *Durkheim and After* as a simple extension of the strong program view, this review essay, in its turn, shall demonstrate how the book offers a more critical and nuanced perspective on Durkheim and his tradition than that found in what Smith and his fellows have written so far.

Durkheim's intellectual development reconsidered

Durkheim and After is dedicated to the long Durkheimian tradition, but it is easy to overlook the fact that two of its five chapters, or 42% of the

² Paul CARLS, 2021. "The unrecognized genius of Durkheim", *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 22 (1): 123-130; Matt DAWSON, 2022. "Book review: *Durkheim and After: The Durkheimian Tradition, 1893-2020*",

Thesis Eleven, 169 (1): 117-121; Christopher THORPE, 2022. "Book review: *Durkheim and After: The Durkheimian Tradition, 1893-2020*", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 25 (3): 496-500.

whole book, actually address the work of Durkheim and his associates during his lifetime. In these chapters, even though Smith concedes that one can always find evidence for each of the Durkheim personae described in the literature—the positivist, the functionalist, the structuralist, and so on—he wonders to what extent one could consider Durkheim a cultural theorist. In pursuing this question, Smith reevaluates Durkheim’s intellectual development in light of the long debate over whether Durkheim’s late sociology of religion represents an epistemological break or just a shift in emphasis from his early writings. According to Alexander, who favors the epistemological break view,³ Durkheim failed to deliver a voluntaristic sociology of moral integration due to the morphological determinism in his earlier works, such as *De la Division du Travail Social* (1893). For this reason, Alexander embraced Durkheim’s revelation as the dividing line marking out a new cultural sociology as presented in *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse* (1912). Surprisingly, however, Smith diverges from Alexander and favors the *Durkheimian Studies/Études Durkheimiennes* cluster, a group of experts who supports the shift-in-emphasis view and whose scholarship “has put in the foreground several insights that should be remembered in this chapter and the next” [5]. Although Smith’s debt to *Durkheimian Studies* scholars might go unnoticed, his reconstruction of Durkheim’s intellectual development in Chapters 1 and 2 draws heavily on their works. Reflecting this, Table 1 shows the 10 authors most cited by Smith in Chapters 1 and 2.

Table 1 also highlights some general trends in Smith’s account of Durkheim: seven of the 10 most cited authors are, in fact, *Durkheimian Studies* scholars, including the top five authors—Fournier, Lukes, Gane, Watts Miller, and Jones—who altogether account for 55 out of 78 citations, while Alexander only appears in seventh position with five mentions, followed by Smith, Riley, and Besnard, with four each. Thus, far from simply agreeing with Alexander’s interpretation, Smith’s reexamination of Durkheim as a cultural theorist is not only updated but reinvented by the *Durkheimian Studies* scholarship.

Though *De la Division du Travail* is taken as the source of the early morphological determinism of which Alexander accused Durkheim,

³ Cf. Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, 1982. *Theoretical Logic in Sociology, Vol. II The Antinomies of Classical Thought: Marx and Durkheim* (Berkeley, University of California Press); Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER, 2005. “The inner development of Durkheim’s sociological

theory: From early writings to maturity,” in Jeffrey C. ALEXANDER and Philip SMITH, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 136-159).

TABLE I
Top 10 Cited Authors in Chapters 1 and 2

Author	Number of Citations	Durkheimian Studies Scholar
Marcel Fournier	16	Yes
Steven Lukes	11	Yes
Mike Gane	10	Yes
William Watts Miller	9	Yes
Robert Alun Jones	9	Yes
David Garland	6	No
Jeffrey Alexander	5	No
Philip Smith	4	No
Alexander Riley	4	Yes
Philippe Besnard	4	Yes

Smith asserts that elements of a cultural Durkheim can be found even in that book. For instance, he acknowledges that the concept of *dynamic density*, which allows society's evolutionary shift from mechanical to organic solidarity, fits well with more materialist or positivist interpretations of Durkheim in this period, such as Alexander's. However, Smith reflects that Durkheim's first book also contains concepts such as *collective consciousness*, "which has a clearer connection to cultural sociology" [17]. In spite of the fact that social structure sometimes seems to shape culture, he observes that "Durkheim sought to anchor social structure and solidarity in normative subjectivity" [21]. Ultimately, Durkheim claims that "society is integrated through sentiment", a perspective that contrasts with explanations of the social order based on brute domination and instrumental interests, and one which constitutes "an early if somewhat abstract argument for the centrality of 'culture' and solidarity in social life" [19]. As Smith contends, these cultural aspects of Durkheim's early writings remain a problem for the supporters of his epistemological break in his late works.

A further issue reevaluated by Smith is Durkheim's revelation due to his reading of William Robertson Smith, which has been assumed to have been the touchstone of his epistemological break toward a new theoretical view of religion in his late *œuvre*. Although there is a consensus that Robertson Smith had a major impact upon Durkheim, Smith argues that the road to *Les Formes Élémentaires* was not "the case of a single profound reading experience leading to the scales falling from

Durkheim's eyes" [45]. Countering the story of the alleged revelation, Smith argues that instead of Robertson Smith it was actually Durkheim's *Année sociologique* colleagues who "played a major role in Durkheim's own intellectual shift toward a religious sociology" [36]. In this regard, Hubert and Mauss were the editors of the "Sociologie religieuse" journal section, whose work on sacrifice, magic, primitive classification, time, and seasonal variations shaped much of Durkheim's late sociology of religion. Since their work was more concerned with symbolic and religious dimensions of social life, Smith places the work of the *Année* team at the center of the theoretical innovation in Durkheim's sociology. Moreover, he conceives the *Année* team as the first sign the Durkheimian project had transcended Durkheim himself and became "a paradigm with a toolkit of concepts and a replicable intellectual orientation, rather than simply the product of an individual mind *sans pareil*" [79]. As he sums up the overall relevance of the *Année* cluster:

The group was clearly significant in the evolution of a religious sociology and in bringing ethnological materials to the table as a resource. There are moments of real theoretical brilliance as well as several mid-range empirical extensions of the paradigm that have had lasting impact. The group also pioneered the production of intellectual works that were more purely analytic and with less attached baggage related to turf wars (with pragmatism, psychology, etc.) or normative agendas (fixing the Third Republic, heading off anomie). In this sense their work was more "modern" than much of Durkheim's. [91-92]

The cultural Durkheim thesis reaches its peak in Smith's discussion of *Les Formes Élémentaires*. Since ritual action enacts both rites and beliefs, it is religion that leads to action rather than science and knowledge—which are only its secondary outputs. Consequently, religion is characterized by *dynamogenesis*, i.e., the collective power capable of producing collective effervescence through rituals and thus of creating and recreating ideas and practices. As Smith puts it, the concept of *collective effervescence* gives "particular attention to morals and ideals as well as collective action and sociality" [50]. As exemplified by the sacred, "[s]ocial life is steered by the idea, by culture, by the surplus of meaning that is put onto materiality" [53]. Regarding *intichiuma*, an Australian indigenous ceremony that reproduces totemic species through mimetic actions of chanting, dancing, and playing instruments, "Durkheim speaks of these [mimetic actions] using terminology such as 'drama' and 'performance' and so captures the creative, aesthetic, and emotionally engaging nature of ritual" [52]. As Watts Miller suggests in an eloquent essay, *Les Formes Élémentaires* sketches a general theory of art defined as *total aesthetics*, which "emphasizes the

power of a whole fusion of art forms, combined together in a great collective event".⁴

Another interesting point raised by Smith concerns Durkheim's *Leçons de Sociologie* (1950), a posthumous book based on several lectures he gave from 1896 to 1915. Smith focuses attention on Durkheim's lectures on the right of property, "seemingly written up in the years 1898 to 1900", arguing that these lessons "feature vocabularies and treatments similar to those on *mana* in the *Elementary Forms*", as well as "[reprising] some themes in the *Division of Labor* about the evolution of practices from religious origins" in a way that connects both projects [65]. Moreover, Durkheim's treatment of the origin of property and contracts in these lectures anticipates some issues related to *iconicity* and *speech acts*, but, as Smith muses, it remains under-appreciated by contemporary cultural theory. Although he identifies a significant connection between the early and late Durkheim through *Leçons de Sociologie*, it is worth mentioning that all the lessons were undated and were collected after Durkheim's death. In fact, a dated lecture Durkheim gave on December 2, 1899 has been recently published, but it is concerned only with *penal sanctions*, much in the way of *De la Division du Travail*; this pours cold water on the expectations that Durkheim could have anticipated his religious turn as early as 1898.⁵ This new finding is consistent with Lukes' compilation of lectures given by Durkheim, in which Lukes notes that Durkheim lectured on the right of property for the first time only in 1910–11;⁶ this coincides with the years when he was finishing *Les Formes Élémentaires*.

Therefore, according to Smith's reexamination of Durkheim's intellectual development, "arguing for a full-fledged intellectual and epistemological break might be taking things too far" [42], since Smith's cultural interpretation reaffirms several intellectual correspondences between Durkheim's early and late writings. Indeed, as Durkheim's last essay on ethics indicates "a return to the themes and style of the *Division of Labor*" [43], Smith concludes that "[t]his finding somewhat cuts

⁴ Page 17, in William WATTS MILLER, 2013. "Total aesthetics: Art and *The Elementary Forms*," in Alexander RILEY, W.S.F. PICKERING and WILLIAM WATTS MILLER, eds., *Durkheim, the Durkheimians, and the Arts* (Oxford, Durkheim Press/Berghahn Books: 16–42).

⁵ Cf. Émile DURKHEIM, 2020. "Un manuscrit inédit de Durkheim: Physique générale du droit et des mœurs, IV^e Année du Cours. 1^{re}

Leçon, 2 Décembre 1899, Plan du Cours—Les Sanctions pénales," *Durkheimian Studies*, 24: 33–44 [<https://doi.org/10.3167/ds.2020.240103>].

⁶ Pages 618 and 620, in Steven LUKES, 1977. "Appendix A: Courses of lectures given by Durkheim at Bourdeaux and Paris," in Steven LUKES, *Émile Durkheim, His Life and Work* (Harmondsworth, Penguin: 617–620).

against [the] argument that there was a decisive break in Durkheim's thinking that led to the *Elementary Forms*" [79].

The Durkheimian tradition's journey through the Anglophone lens of the cultural turn

During the interwar period, Smith argues, the Durkheimian tradition "was to slowly decline in authority and creativity in France but attain scholarly recognition in the Anglophone world" [94]. He then recognizes British and American functionalism as the official keepers of the Durkheimian tradition. In the United Kingdom, Durkheim has inspired a highly productive paradigm centered on social organization. For instance, Smith notes that Evans-Pritchard was ahead of the curve in using and translating the works of Durkheim and the *Année* team, and Evans-Pritchard has reflected on "how concepts of time and space mirror social organization" [126]. In the United States, although Durkheim became a founding figure, Smith observes that "only Parsons has really tried hard to understand and build upon him in a creative way" [135], since he had in Durkheim the best expression of how an action is "meaningfully motivated rather than externally compelled and/or rationally maximizing" [131].

In contrast, France's interwar period "was to become a dead end for a visible empirical-theoretical tradition building on Durkheim" [114]. Smith's narrative attributes the decline of the Durkheimian tradition in France to the decrease of theoretical ambition and creativity of the *Année* team survivors. Yet his portrayal of the French intellectual scene portrays it as much more dynamic and diverse than that of Anglophone functionalism, contradicting his interpretation about the interwar period. For instance, Smith recognizes that, in Marcel Mauss' "Essai sur le don" (1925), Mauss was able to uncover the hidden logic of gift exchange beyond cultural particularities toward a universal pattern. Mauss not only "was blessed with Durkheim's capacity to move beyond details, to work with concepts, and to build arguments analytically through a comparative method" [99], but he also "had a capacity to be right on target and to spot and theorize things of universal significance that nobody had really noticed before" [101]. As Smith concludes, Mauss and Halbwachs "continued to author texts that have had a generalizable legacy for cultural theory itself and that have inspired entire fields of sociology and anthropology" [99]. Besides that, the only

omission here is Marcel Granet, a former student of Durkheim and Mauss whom Smith dismisses by saying that if his book “were about the study of China over the last century he [Granet] would have a central place in it” [98-99]. Yet, more than a sinologist, Granet is first and foremost a central figure who connects the Durkheimian tradition to French structural anthropology, spanning from Lévi-Strauss and Georges Dumézil to Philippe Descola. As David Palmer sums up: “A study of Granet’s work and its impact shows the profound, but often forgotten, mutual influences between French sociology, anthropology, and sinology in the first half of the twentieth century and beyond”.⁷

In addition to the *Année* team, Smith presents the Collège de Sociologie, a vibrant but marginalized cluster formed by Bataille, Caillois and Michel Leiris, which also creatively advanced the Durkheimian tradition in France’s interwar years. For Smith, Bataille “somehow intuited—or conjured—the most dramatic and least positivistic thoughts in the *Elementary Forms* and took them to a remarkable place on the frontiers of knowledge or the knowable” [113]. Moreover, Caillois reflected on subjects such as play, “something that has not been fully explored in the Durkheimian tradition”, and he “offers a way to start to think about this socially widespread, deeply meaningful activity that is hiding in plain sight” [109]. Indeed, Smith suggests that the Collège de Sociologie connects the Durkheimian tradition with the French poststructuralist thinkers of the late 20th century: “Scholars touted as speaking about power and as deeply opposed to functionalism are in fact carriers of a particular Durkheimian legacy looking at experiences of the extreme or at rule-breaking behaviors as constitutive of the social order” [112-113]. Thus, contrary to what Smith himself claims, he shows how the French Durkheimian tradition remained more theoretically innovative but marginalized than the prevailing Anglophone functionalism. This unforeseen outcome from Smith’s study converges with Michèle Richman’s account, which attributes the marginalization of interwar French sociology to academia’s political motivations rather than the discipline’s creative theorization through ethnology and its “willingness to apply to one’s own society the same criteria and objectifying process imposed upon others,” since the “radical implications of such a methodological reversal are not easily assimilated into current practice”.⁸

⁷ Page 162, in David A. PALMER, 2019. “Cosmology, gender, structure, and rhythm: Marcel Granet and Chinese religion in the history of social theory”, *Review of Religion and Chinese Society*, 6 (2): 160-187.

⁸ Page 196, in Michèle H. RICHMAN, 2002. *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press).

In Chapter 4, which is dedicated to the cultural turn, instead of its eminent figures such as Clifford Geertz or Victor Turner, Smith focuses on Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas. Although Smith recognizes that Saussure's linguistics was way more influential than Durkheim's sociology on Lévi-Strauss' anthropology, he demonstrates how Lévi-Strauss took the Durkheimian strand of symbolic classification and cognition and pushed it toward its limits. He concludes that due to Lévi-Strauss' interpretation of the Durkheimian tradition, "many things [were] lost along the way, making him into an inconsistent and selective heir to Durkheim" [154]. In addition, as Richman asserts: "Ironically, the domination of the structuralist approach in anthropology Lévi-Strauss developed was subsequently perceived as the strongest deterrent to research on effervescence during the postwar period".⁹ In turn, Smith's account of Mary Douglas' works on classification and pollution, consumer goods, and her grid/group model theory demonstrates her brilliance in furthering the Durkheimian tradition. He claims that Douglas' grid/group theory is "perhaps the best model we have offering a systematic rather than *ad hoc* explanation of how social structure and culture/thought/belief/worldview might be related" [168].

In Chapter 5, however, Smith's narrative somewhat loses its breadth. By the 1980s, due to the longstanding prominence of functionalism, Durkheim's reputation was that of a conservative, functionalist, and positivist theorist. The chapter focuses on American cultural sociology as a way to retrieve Durkheim's legacy from the downfall of functionalism. Smith admits to being "uncomfortable that American cultural sociology emerges as a kind of savior toward the end of the book" [viii]. While this savior portrayal might be valid for the United States context, his narrative loses track of other lineages in the very same countries he has analyzed so far, such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Likewise, it also loses track of contemporary anthropological theory, in which Durkheim remains somewhat implicated. France is undoubtedly the most symptomatic case. Throughout the book, Smith mentions several times that Bourdieu, Baudrillard, Derrida, and Foucault inherited and continued the Durkheimian tradition, and he ends Chapter 4 by recognizing that they had become "the most influential, exciting, and innovative French thinkers" [178]. However, his final chapter has no place for them or for any other contemporary French theorist, creating the delusive impression that the Durkheimian tradition ended with Lévi-Strauss and has no contemporary adherents in France. Instead, Smith

⁹ Page 197, *Ibid.*

only mentions Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault as the “[t]wo figures who would later be thought of as *in competition with Durkheimian ideas*” [184; emphasis added]. Even though he acknowledges that Bourdieu’s and Foucault’s works deal with “the sociological ways in which culture was implicated in mechanisms of control and exclusion”, he limits both by labeling them “an unwitting Trojan Horse” for American cultural sociology [184-185].

Concerning the latter, Durkheim became a node that linked the cultural turn to sociological tradition. By the late 1980s, *Les Formes Élémentaires* was described by Alexander as “having a semiotic and religious vision of a clearly autonomous and structured cultural order” [187]. As a neo-Durkheimian paradigm, the strong program aims to grasp “the deeply emotive, ritualized, semiotic, and sacral elements of modernity” [188]. The “neo” prefix is not accidental, since Smith recognizes that the strong program is also heavily based on semiotics and the cultural turn. As he concludes: “The Strong Program may not be a pure Durkheimianism, but it remains [...] a very significant outpost of the cultural turn in the Durkheimian tradition that understands modernity as never fully rational” [194]. Moreover, Smith also remarks on Collins’ interaction ritual chains theory as having a Durkheimian inspiration based on the emotional energy generated through rituals. However, he points out that this inspiration is mediated through Erving Goffman’s micro-sociological interactions, in which, contrary to one of Durkheim’s most elemental claims, “the atom of social life is the encounter or situation, not the group” [196]. In short, arguing against the functionalist view of decades ago, Smith reveals how it would in fact be *Les Formes Élémentaires* that became pivotal for contemporary cultural sociology in the United States.

Regardless of where Smith considers the Durkheimian tradition to be flourishing, *Durkheim and After* draws a much richer picture of that tradition than a Whig history of American cultural sociology would have done. While it may be true that current scholarship often seems to be disconnected from its past, the book demonstrates how this theoretical corpus has advanced, even through the efforts of scholars who have not considered their work as part of a greater research tradition. It also shows how Durkheim’s legacy has been inherited and renewed across the generations in unforeseen ways for over a century. Most notably, *Durkheim and After* provides us with valuable insights into tracing new lineages and connecting them to those of the past, allowing us “to see how the idea-sets are assembled and recombined” [220]. When Smith admits that readers in the future will be looking at a different landscape

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from his own, one could add that there are certainly readers already seeing different landscapes than his elsewhere. “The lesson from this book, however, is that time”—and, perhaps, space—“will change everything” [220].

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