

I

David Émile Durkheim, Life and Times

Intellectual work is inevitably attached to a human life, and so understanding what Durkheim thought and wrote will require understanding a good deal about where and when he grew up, where he went to school, and what kinds of important experiences he had during his formative years. In this chapter, we examine some crucial and basic elements of Durkheim's biography, including descriptions of his early family life, educational trajectory, and the political and cultural events of importance that took place during his lifetime. Though these sociobiographical elements will resurface frequently throughout the text, it is in this chapter that I will lay out the broad contours of the sociology of knowledge, at both a local or micro level (his family and close networks of colleagues and interlocutors) and a broader or macro level (the broader social and political environment of the French university and social world), which is necessary for a rich understanding of Durkheim's thought.

The France That Produced Durkheim: The Second Empire, the Early Days of the Third Republic, and the Situation of French Jews

Durkheim's youth unfolded in a period marked by great political upheaval in France. The turmoil of that time sparked cultural and political debates that resonated profoundly throughout the country for the next several generations,

and it marked Durkheim for the rest of his life and fundamentally informed his intellectual trajectory. The 19th century was, generally speaking, a tumultuous one in political and social terms in France. In the wake of Napoléon's fall in 1814, the French Republic had collapsed back into a monarchy that managed to survive, in varying forms, until barely a decade prior to Durkheim's birth. Then, in early 1848, amid riots and violence, King Louis Philippe abdicated before a movement that reinstated republican government. This fledgling Second Republic began quickly to sway back to the right. In June 1848, the republican military crushed a rebellion in Paris by some of the more radical elements, killing thousands and badly damaging working-class support of the new Republic. Toward the end of that year, the nephew of the former Emperor, Louis-Napoléon, was elected president, with powerful support from reactionary peasants and the urban underclass Marx had called the **lumpenproletariat**. Three years later, Louis-Napoléon enacted a coup and dissolved the Republic, and in late 1852, less than 6 years before Durkheim was born, Bonaparte declared himself the new Emperor of France.

The first 12 years of Durkheim's life were spent under the increasingly disastrous rule of the reactionary Second Empire of the newly christened Emperor Napoléon III. When the Emperor dragged the French into an ill-advised war with the Kingdom of Prussia in 1870, he sealed the fate of his Empire. The Prussians defeated and captured him at Sedan in September 1870, and a few days later the Third French Republic was proclaimed. Fighting continued under the provisional Government of National Defense until the following summer, when the defeated French negotiated for peace. But this was far from the conclusion of the fighting. The Prussians made bold assertions in the negotiations. They wanted a triumphal symbolic march into the French capital to display their victory. As had been the case in 1848, the feisty Parisians revolted. Rejecting what they viewed as the abject surrender of Auguste Thiers, the head of the provisional national government, the workers of Paris seized control of the city in March 1871 and for the next 2 months held it as a revolutionary government that became a symbolic beacon for the socialist movement throughout Europe. In May, the regular French Army under Thiers, with the Prussians looking on, put down the **Paris Commune** in the blood of perhaps as many as 25,000 of the rebels. The horrific spectacle of Frenchmen shooting dead their fellow countrymen by the thousands would be a revolting collective memory for many decades afterward. But revolutionaries worldwide were inspired by the brief, tragic example of the Communards. Lenin, on the seizing of power of the Bolsheviks in the 1917 Russian Revolution, anxiously measured the early days of the new regime against the lifespan of the Paris uprising. Durkheim was just entering his teens when the Commune was crushed.

In the wake of the murderous defeat of the Paris Commune by France's own soldiers, the Prussians enforced significant territorial claims. They reclaimed a huge chunk of Alsace and a smaller but still substantial part of Lorraine. Almost the entirety of the Lorraine department of Moselle became part of Prussia, and even a small portion of Vosges, the department wherein lay Épinal, the town of Durkheim's birth, was annexed, as the Prussian leader Otto von Bismarck claimed the people there spoke Germanic dialects. French territory militarily occupied by the Prussians was separated from Durkheim's boyhood home by roughly the same distance that separates lower Manhattan from Greenwich, Connecticut.

One does not have to be a Freudian to believe that events of childhood can have a profound effect on an individual's adult trajectory, and all the more so as those childhood events are themselves profound and traumatic. It was a mere 12 years after Durkheim's birth, as he was undertaking the study of Hebrew in anticipation of following his father into the rabbinate, that the Prussian Army marched into Épinal.

Early Family Life and Education

This then was the broad setting in France and in Lorraine when on April 15, 1858, a son was born to an Ashkenazi Jewish French family headed by Moïse and Mélanie Durkheim in Épinal, which is situated in the Lorraine region in the far northeast of the country, on the German border. Durkheim's father was rabbi of the Vosges and Haute-Marne departments of the region, and he represented the eighth generation of rabbis in the family. Durkheim's nephew Marcel Mauss, a great founding social scientist in his own right, would later speak of their family genealogy as a kind of hagiography, full of "saints" (Fournier, 2007, p. 26). At Émile's birth, the Jewish community in Épinal was tiny, numbering only perhaps some 200 in a total population of around 12,000, but given its heritage in the rabbinical line, the Durkheim family was among the most locally important Jewish families. Three other children had preceded David Émile, as he was named, and Moïse's salary was barely sufficient to make ends meet, so Durkheim's mother began doing embroidery at home to add income to the family. Eventually this turned into a thriving family business. All three of Émile's siblings eventually went to work in it, and the husband of the oldest of the siblings, Émile's sister Rosine, eventually became its head.

Moïse was already in his 50s when little Émile was born. The other three children were born in a cluster, the youngest a full 7 years before Émile, so elementary family sociology reveals him as an outlier, the baby of the family

by a good margin, the “simple fact of the order of birth” providing a strong initial clue into the “prematurely adult qualities” the “ever-somber and humorless Émile” would show throughout much of his life (Greenberg, 1976, p. 625).

Rabbi Moïse Durkheim was an Orthodox Jew, and the stringent ritual cult of Orthodox Jewish life was a central part of the early experience of David Émile Durkheim. The Judaism of the Durkheim family home was centered in an ascetic, antimystical logic in which little room was made for the expressive arts. Durkheim would later speak of having learned as a child to be incapable of experiencing pleasure without a twinge of remorse (Fournier, 2007, p. 29). Durkheim’s colleague Georges Davy, speaking on the centenary of the former’s birth, described him as having imbibed some important basic traits from his family environment: contempt for the merely alluring and charming; disdain of success that was unaccompanied by effort; and horror of everything not seriously anchored as the individual is by the group, facts are by their logical connections, and conduct is by moral regulation (Davy, 1960, p. 17). And yet we must not overstate things. A photograph of Moïse Durkheim reveals him without a beard and dressed in modern garb. The evidence visible in the photograph, and the fact that he permitted it to be taken in the first place, contribute to an interpretation of the familial life of the young Émile as perhaps less severely conservative than it has sometimes been portrayed (Greenberg, 1976, p. 625). The family did not speak Yiddish at home, and the father was proud of his heavily accented French. The evidence is that the family happily embraced its French identity (Fournier, 2007, p. 28).

Throughout Durkheim’s adult life, a barely submerged undercurrent driving his social and political thought was the importance of the acceptance of France’s Jewish community into the ranks of full-fledged French citizenry. He was almost never overt about expressing this, and he certainly did not make “the Jewish question” in French society a centerpiece of his public life, but it can be detected in myriad ways in his intellectual focus on questions of moral solidarity in contemporary French and European society. The history of Jews in France was complicated, filled with mixed episodes of optimistic acceptance and crushing, sometimes violent repression and exclusion. France had emancipated its Jewish population earlier than had any other European country, during the days of the Revolution in 1791, and French Jews therefore came frequently to replace their religious cult with a “cult of the revolution,” which was especially prominent and pronounced during the Third Republic (Weber, 2004, p. 1).

This peculiar relationship of Jewish and French identities, a kind of secularized French Jewish patriotism that nonetheless had religious roots, deeply affected the thinking of many French Jews, including Durkheim. At the

emancipation, there were some 40,000 French Jews, some three quarters of these Ashkenazi living in the region of Alsace-Lorraine that was Durkheim's birthplace. The remaining 10,000 or so French Jews were Sephardim living in the southern part of the country, largely in Bordeaux, Bayonne, and Provence (Weber, 2004, p. 3). By the time of the Dreyfus Affair (discussed in greater detail below) at the turn of the 20th century, the Jewish population had grown to 75,000, with more than half of these living in Paris, and they began to exercise an increasing social and cultural influence. At the same time, however, anti-Semitism, evident in only its most outward and obvious face in the case of the unfortunate Captain Alfred Dreyfus, was growing virulently. In the right-wing popular press, and in some purportedly more respectable political circles as well, French Jews were blamed for the defeat of 1870, and there was a widespread set of discourses on the cultural and political right that rejected the very idea of French citizens of Jewish ethnicity (Fournier, 2007, p. 32).

It was initially his father's wish for Émile to follow his own career path. There was an older son, Joseph-Félix, but it was recognized early on that he was something of a wastrel and clearly lacking the necessary seriousness for such a charge, while the young Émile was precocious and focused (Fournier, 2007, p. 25). His early education was thus directed toward preparing him to follow in his father's footsteps. He was enrolled in rabbinical school for a year at the age of 13, learned Biblical Hebrew in order to study the Pentateuch and the Talmud, and appeared contented with the planned trajectory of his life. At some point in his teens, however, there was a turning. He received a *baccalauréat* degree (the rough French equivalent to a high school diploma) in both Letters and Sciences at the *lycée* (high school) in Épinal, and then the decision was made in 1875 to send him off to Paris to prepare for the grueling entrance examination to the prestigious **École Normale Supérieure** (ENS), or Normal "Sup" as it is known in Paris argot. An ENS degree was a requirement for anyone seeking to join the professoriate, and this had apparently become Durkheim's new career path; it was clear by this point that the plan to succeed his father was no more.

The full details of this significant change in Durkheim's life trajectory are unfortunately not completely known. The typical narrative in this kind of case involves the trope of "losing the faith," and Durkheim certainly did cease to adhere to the religious ideas and many of the ritual practices of Judaism, but there is significant complexity here. His father had attempted in his mid-20s to undertake the study of science and philosophy in Paris himself, but he had not gotten far along this path, and it may have been the case that the young Émile was not so much rejecting his father's path in heading off to the capital as he was endeavoring to follow the career direction his father had also desired as a young man (Greenberg, 1976, p. 626). It might well also be

said that Durkheim rejected not so much the values of his father but the paltry rabbi's salary, which he had seen in his father's example as insufficient to adequately provide for the family (Greenberg, 1976, p. 630).

In Paris, Durkheim enrolled in ENS preparatory classes at the *lycée* Louis-le-Grand, the vaunted institution in the heart of the Latin Quarter where many of France's leading intellectuals had studied since its founding in the mid-16th century. He was a somber youth, serious and shy, who made friends with difficulty but who was tremendously loyal to those friends he did have. Like many provincials arriving in the bustling capital, Durkheim underwent some considerable emotional stress and yearning for the cozy familial hearth he had left back in Lorraine. There is some evidence he may have begun suffering during this period from bouts of what we now call depression. Adding to the emotional pressure were failures in the ENS entrance examination the first two times he sat for it. His provincial schooling had handicapped him considerably on these national tests; in the oral interview of one of the failed efforts, he was described as "too cold and dull" (Greenberg, 1976, p. 633). However, his ascetic upbringing in the strict household of Rabbi Moïse prevented him from completely despairing at these failures, and he managed eventually to prevail through tenacious application and willpower.

Normal Sup'

The ENS occupied a status position in Third Republic France that elevated it above the normal university system, as its graduates would become the secondary and university teachers who would educate the entire country, and this pedagogical role was seen as crucially important by French republicans for the evolution of the entire society. *Normaliens*, as ENS students are called, quickly developed an identity that connected them to the institution and to one another, and the absorbing, suffocating atmosphere of the place almost inevitably shaped its graduates in certain important and long-lasting ways.

At the *École Normale*, Durkheim rubbed shoulders with a generation of talented scholars who would go on to occupy prestigious posts in the French academic and political worlds. Among his cohorts were the philosopher Maurice Blondel, the psychologist Pierre Janet, the linguist Ferdinand Brunot, and the historian Henri Berr. In the class one year ahead of him were two other giants of French intellectual and political life of this period, both of whom Durkheim knew well personally. The first was the philosopher Henri Bergson, who would go on to enjoy a vogue of celebrity that extended

to the international intellectual community at the turn of the century and who served as something of a philosophical adversary for Durkheim in his post-ENS years. The second was a young man Durkheim first met before he had passed the ENS entrance exam, while he was enrolled at Louis-le-Grand in preparatory courses. Jean Jaurès was a year younger than Durkheim, but the polished youth achieved entry into the ENS a year earlier and graduated in the cohort just ahead of Durkheim's. The two men roomed in the same boarding house while studying for the ENS exam (Fournier, 2007, p. 36). There is some conjecture that the influence of Jaurès, who was already an atheist and a socialist by the time Durkheim met him, may have been of significant importance in further distancing Durkheim from the religious worldview of his youth. Jaurès would go on to become perhaps the most important socialist theorist and political figure in France at the turn of the century, and his assassination in July 1914 ensured France's entry into World War I. Although Durkheim never officially declared his affiliation with any political parties during his lifetime, the evidence is overwhelming that he was a reformist, non-Marxist socialist in the same vein as Jaurès.

Closely documenting Durkheim's intellectual influences while at the ENS allows us to demonstrate the inaccuracy of some common claims about the trajectory of his thought. It is widely believed that the **positivism** of Auguste Comte was the central philosophical source on which Durkheim drew, but, as we will see in later chapters, although there are undoubtedly points of commonality in the thought of the two men, Comte frequently comes under severe criticism in Durkheim's writings, and it is evident that there were other thinkers who influenced Durkheim more significantly.

He was profoundly marked in his time at the ENS by his reading of another of the dominant philosophical figures in 19th-century France, the idealist neo-Kantian Charles-Bernard Renouvier. Although he never taught in an institution of higher education, Renouvier exercised a great influence on a whole generation of French thinkers from the time of the founding of the Third Republic into the early 20th century. He agreed with Kant that our knowledge of the world cannot be a realist knowledge of things in themselves but must necessarily involve the work of our own understanding through our sensory apparatus, which inevitably distances us to a certain degree from reality. In his late work on knowledge and religion, Durkheim would take up this Kantian framework for understanding in devising his category of **collective representations**. Renouvier distinguished himself from positivism in his refusal of the necessity of a narrowly causal understanding of science. Whereas Comte posited a science of society that would, given its determinist foundation, be capable of prediction, Renouvier maintained a more interpretivist perspective, arguing that while the natural world should

be seen as operating according to determinist principles, a critical scientific approach was better suited to the actual relationship of the knower to knowledge, due to the moral freedom of the human knower. Contingency and will played an important role in Renouvier's conception of the work of the scientific thinker, and this also influenced his social theory, which was based on republicanism and the moral autonomy of the individual (Jones, 2001, pp. 64–65; Lukes, 1985, p. 55). These concerns with determinism and republican individualism are present throughout Durkheim's work. Late in his career, Durkheim opined that the best way to mature one's own way of thinking was to "devote yourself to the study of a great master . . . [to] take a system apart, laying bare its innermost secrets." He went on: "This is what I did and my educator was Renouvier" (Lukes, 1985, p. 54).

Two of his professors at the ENS also proved influential on his way of thinking. The philosopher Émile Boutroux was also a neo-Kantian, and Durkheim acknowledged that it was from Boutroux that he formulated the notion that sociology, in order to develop as an independent discipline, must establish its own realm of facts and radically distinguish itself from biology and psychology (Lukes, 1985, p. 57). But arguably even more important to Durkheim's mature intellectual perspective was the historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges. He had been a professor at the ENS since 1870 and became its director in 1880, the year before Durkheim arrived there as a student. He was perhaps France's most renowned historian, his fame largely dependent on his book *The Ancient City*, a penetrating and careful study of the deep roots of law and social institutions in the Roman Empire in religious ritual and belief, which deeply influenced Durkheim's own way of understanding the foundational power of religion. Fustel de Coulanges argued that ancient Indo-European religious beliefs concerning the worship of the souls of the dead, which formed the common historical heritage of Greece and Rome, had profound effects on nearly every facet of daily civil life. The organization of the family, the form of morality, and the structure of legal institutions including the most basic ones revolving around the notion of private property derived their shape from these religious roots. In his own book on religion, Durkheim would make a similar argument about the primary role of religious practices and ideas in shaping the civil life and legal and political institutions that superficially seemed distant from religion. The argumentative styles of the two books are similar, as both rely on a search for original, elementary forms of religion that are argued to give rise to all subsequent forms (Héran, 1989, pp. 369–376).

In addition to the specifics of his approach to the study of religion, Fustel de Coulanges was a source of influence to Durkheim in broader ways. His approach to scholarly life was marked by a tremendous ascetic devotion, and

this quasireligious view of the intellectual life was well known to students at the École Normale, who noted his “austere radiance that imparted intellectual asceticism” (Lukes, 1985, p. 59). He also represented to his students a position on the scholar’s political role that clearly demarcated political and intellectual roles and tasks. His work on the history of France necessarily involved him in intellectual and popular polemic about the contemporary political status of the country, national identity, and other such conflict-laden topics. Fustel de Coulanges clearly had positions on these and other political issues, but, as a scholar, he preferred to speak to them publicly only through the authority of his scholarly work. He recognized the inevitably political significance of intellectual work engaged with questions of morality and religion but understood the scholarly calling as forbidding overt interventions into the political arena, save in certain drastic situations. As we will see in later chapters, Durkheim adopted a similar model of the ascetic moral religion of scholarship and the importance of a line of distinction between that realm and the equally important sphere of politics.

In 1892, 3 years after Fustel de Coulanges’s death, Durkheim dedicated his Latin thesis on Montesquieu to “the memory of Fustel de Coulanges.” In his preface to the first volume of the sociological journal he created, *l’Année sociologique*, Durkheim invoked Fustel de Coulanges in his argument that the journal was designed not merely as a source for sociologists but also as a means to “bring sociology closer to certain special sciences [“it is above all history we are thinking of in speaking thus”] that keep themselves too distanced from it, to their own detriment and to our own” (Durkheim, 1898, p. ii).

Durkheim’s reputation among peers and teachers was formidable at the ENS. A fellow student described him as “visibly older than the majority of the rest of the students, with a precocious maturity” (Davy, 1995/1919, p. 89). Fustel de Coulanges wrote of him early in his ENS years as an “[e]xcellent student, a very forceful mind both sound and original, with a remarkable maturity” (Tiryakian, 2009, p. 20). His personality could be caricatured by his enemies, one of whom described him as a “sort of automaton” whose “ice-cold” demeanor “would not have profaned the inside of a mortuary” (Lukes, 1985, p. 371). But Durkheim was, like his father, not nearly so cold as he perhaps appeared to some. This stern exterior was arguably only “a cultivated disposition” underneath which lay “an almost feminine sensitivity . . . a goodness and tenderness that blossomed only in the confines of the family and later in the presence of his intimate friends, his ‘spiritual family’ of *L’Année sociologique*” (Greenberg, 1976, p. 627).

He quickly became known for his penetrating intellectual skills and his love for political discussion (Fournier, 2007, p. 41). Nicknamed “the

Metaphysician” for his intimidating philosophical seriousness, Durkheim was characterized by one of his close ENS friends, Frédéric Rauh, as an “apostle, filled with his thought and the desire to disseminate it and to penetrate other minds[,] . . . who was at the same time a contemplative” (Fournier, 2007, p. 40). He was instinctively drawn to politics but rejected what he saw as the vulgarization of French political life, which made of this noble sphere something “small and mediocre,” whereas he had always considered it the most serious of affairs (Davy, 1995/1919, p. 92).

Political debate in France during Durkheim’s days at the ENS was between conservatives, largely Catholic, who looked back nostalgically on the monarchy and worshiped hypertraditionalist versions of the family, the Church, and the Army, and the secular supporters of the new Republic. Durkheim was clearly aligned with the secular republicans in the most general sense, but, like the religious conservatives, he recognized the damage an unrestrained individualism could do to the moral bases of French culture. One of the central topics of political debate of the time had to do with the nature of the educational system. Conservatives wanted to preserve its connection to the Church and classical pedagogical emphasis, while republicans saw the need for a revised, even revolutionized secular educational model. The educational reformer and ENS graduate Victor Duruy had spoken of the need to create a new, entirely secular French educational system led by an “aristocracy of intelligence” (Fournier, 2007, p. 43), and during the time that Durkheim was at the ENS, the statesman Jules Ferry was at work pushing such reform forward. Durkheim was one of those movingly compelled by this vision.

The German university system was seen by many of the secular republicans as a model to emulate, and Durkheim would later spend a year of government-sponsored research leave on the other side of the Rhine getting a close-up view of the German system. He came progressively to see the need for a new system of thought to adequately theorize the development of a republican society with a collapsed traditional value system that was in need of new social and cultural structures to undergird it and a secular pedagogy to bring its youth into those structures. By his second year at the ENS, he had begun to establish this new way of understanding the human world, and in short order would become the founder of a new intellectual movement, defined by the term “sociology,” which tied together the dual projects of political and pedagogical action (Filloux, 1977, p. 259).

Durkheim was awarded the *agrégation*, or state teaching qualification, in 1882, and the following year he dutifully took up his first academic position as a secondary school teacher of philosophy in Sens, about 75 miles southeast of Paris. His ambition at this point was, however, already palpable, and he was aiming well beyond this backwater position toward the nation’s

capital, where the most prestigious academics found posts in the core institutions of the French academic system.

Early Teaching and Work: Lycées, Bordeaux, Dreyfus, a Year in Germany, and the Birth of *l'Année Sociologique*

The path to Paris proved to be long and complicated. A certain amount of paying of dues is required in the French system, and Durkheim selflessly took up this responsibility by teaching high school-age students for several years. This teaching was largely structured by the centralized French curriculum, with determined items that were to be covered by all teachers of the year-long philosophy courses that were Durkheim's charge. It was not a teaching responsibility that made much room for innovation or for direct inclusion of Durkheim's emerging ideas on sociology. He was nonetheless working furiously in this period to develop the perspective he would begin presenting in publications during these years. He was humorously referred to by his students as "Schopen," apparently short for "Arthur Schopenhauer," the German philosopher of the 19th century (Fournier, 2007, p. 63). Schopenhauer's work would certainly have been one of the elements in the syllabus to be covered in Durkheim's course, but there is little evidence that Durkheim was particularly enthusiastic about the German's ideas. Schopenhauer's extreme pessimism was incompatible with Durkheim's sense that concerted and impassioned collective work was required to solve the social problems France faced. Ever the realist, he advocated "a bit of melancholy, but not too much" (Fournier, 2007, p. 65).

In 1885, Durkheim received a scholarship to spend a year studying in Germany as part of a program organized by the Ministry of Public Instruction to strengthen the country's educational institutions by exposing France's brightest young scholars to cutting-edge German methods of research and instruction. Durkheim was highly impressed by the advances in the sociological study of morality in Germany and summarized his impressions of them in one of his first substantive publications. He became acquainted there with the work of historical economists such as Adolph Wagner (the teacher of Werner Sombart, one of the founding German sociologists) and Gustave von Schmoller, who attacked liberal political economy for treating human economic transactions outside of a social context and therefore reducing economic activity to pure egoism divorced from any moral content. In the view of Sombart and von Schmoller, society had its own nature, which had to be taken into account if economic activity were to be properly understood and regulated. Durkheim's mature work would take up a similar critical

perspective on mainstream political economy. He also looked favorably on the work of the sociological jurist Rudolf von Ihering, who had just written a massive two-volume study on the purpose of the law that argued that the modern study of ethics and law would have to take place under the aegis of the social sciences. Finally, and most important, Durkheim discovered the work of Wilhelm Wundt, whom he described as a scientist of morality engaged in careful, empirical studies of *Völkerpsychologie*, or social psychology. The central unifying thread in all of this new German work on morality was its rejection of the purely deductive method and embrace of the collection of empirical facts to ground arguments about the nature of morality (Durkheim, 1975c/1887). Durkheim was tremendously excited to find others pointing in the direction he intended his own work to take, as it was only too easy in France for him to feel that he was a lone voice in the wilderness.

Durkheim's life changed in two fundamental ways in 1887. He was finally, after several years of teaching at *lycées*, where he was forced to teach a prescribed national curriculum with no possibility of integrating his own research in any real way into his pedagogical practice, awarded a university chair in "Science Sociale et Pédagogie" (in 1895, it would be renamed as simply "Science Sociale") at Bordeaux, on the southwest coast of the country. It was far from Paris, but it was nonetheless a step in the right direction. Here, over the next 15 years, he would write a good deal of the work for which he is most remembered. Three of the four books he published in his lifetime were produced during this period, in addition to lengthy and important articles for the *Année sociologique*, including those on incest, individual and collective representations, the definition of religious phenomena, and totemism, not to mention the voluminous collection of book reviews he contributed to the first several editions of the *Année*. These were tremendously productive years for him, despite the heavy teaching load with which he was burdened at Bordeaux. He managed to make the best of his numerous teaching responsibilities in the area of pedagogy by generating new, empirically based material for the lecture courses he gave. In the end, he turned his sociological perspective on the institutions of education and the topic of pedagogy to great effect. In addition to courses on education, he taught year-long courses on the family, on law and politics, on occupational ethics, on socialism, on the history of sociology, and on religion (Lukes, 1985, p. 277).

But if the Bordeaux appointment was the most outwardly visible sign of Durkheim's intellectual advance, his marriage in October 1887 was the more important change in terms of its positive effects on his ability to concentrate on his intellectual work. Louise Julie Durkheim *née* Dreyfus was from a well-off Parisian Jewish family; her father was an engineer by training

who was the director of a Paris foundry (Charle, 1984, p. 46). Although Durkheim by this time no longer accepted the religious tenets of Judaism, he continued to participate in familial celebrations of Jewish holidays, and everything we know about his family environment indicates it was warm and supportive. Durkheim took up the position of familial patriarch readily and effectively, and his wife's total dedication to the familial sphere freed him from all the domestic cares that might have prevented him from dedicating himself fully to his work. His friend and colleague Georges Davy described the marriage and its relation to Durkheim's intellectual work in the following terms: "His own hearth was the image of that domestic ideal. To ground it, he had the good fortune to unite himself with an admirable companion who understood him, sustained him, aided him and totally and joyfully sacrificed her own life to the austere scholarly life of her husband" (Davy, 1919, p. 65).

His work began to emerge in a steady stream after the publication of his thesis, *The Division of Labor in Society*, in 1893. Just after finishing his second book, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, he entered a period of rich discovery, career advancement, and personal transition. In 1896, both the family patriarch, his father Moïse, and the second in line for the position, his brother-in-law Gerson, who had married Durkheim's eldest sister when Durkheim was yet a boy, died, in one stroke leaving Durkheim as the male head of the family. That same year, he was finally awarded a permanent chair at Bordeaux after teaching there for nearly a decade as a lecturer. *The Rules* was the subject of widespread attack and criticism, even by some ordinarily intellectually close to him, and he worked on his study of suicide with the depressing presentiment that it too would fall on deaf ears. It was in this same period, 1895 to 1896, that he taught his first course on religion, signaling a turn toward the cultural in his subsequent work. Finally, the organizational work to create the *Année* began in earnest at this same juncture. Durkheim's period of doubt and crisis was resolved by his renewed commitment to the mission of collective labor in a calling—namely, that of the establishment of sociology as a new discipline (Besnard, 2003, p. 51).

The first issue of the *Année* appeared in 1898, and 11 more fat volumes would appear in Durkheim's lifetime. Several of his most important essays were published in its pages, including the lengthy piece on primitive classification that he coauthored with Mauss and published in the first volume. One of the central reasons why he published only four books in his lifetime had to do with the *Année*, which took up much of his time over the last two decades of his life. But he saw this labor as essential to the establishment of sociology. He was absolutely devoted to the idea of collective intellectual labor and of altruistic service to the group goal of the establishment of social

science as a new form of knowledge, and the idea of furthering his own career by publishing more books simply paled in comparison to that lofty goal. He even spoke of the collective work of the *Année* as a kind of quasi-religious project in language that will startle the reader expecting a doctrinaire secular approach to scientific work from him. In correspondence with one of his close collaborators, Mauss's friend Henri Hubert, Durkheim remarked: "You are quite right to say that our little group is a moral milieu as much as an intellectual one. No one senses this more acutely than I do. . . . *Our shared project assumes a shared faith* and a great mutual confidence" (Besnard, 1987a, pp. 518, 494, emphasis added).

Early in that same year of 1898, the writer Émile Zola penned his famous "**J'accuse**" letter, denouncing the French military and the government for its unjust prosecution of an Army captain, Alfred Dreyfus, for a treasonous act that there was no real evidence he had committed. In the open letter addressed to the French president, which was printed on the front page of a Paris newspaper, Zola accused the political establishment of anti-Jewish prejudice that struck at the heart of republican France. In short order, France's public figures and intellectuals divided up into opposing sides on the **Dreyfus Affair**, as it came to be known. On the one side were the conservatives, those who yearned for the monarchy or even the return of the Empire, who saw the Army and the Church as the most important social institutions in the nation and who saw Dreyfus as guilty despite the lack of evidence; on the other were the republicans of all stripes and the rest of the left, who carried the banner of the abstract principles of the French Republic and a deep reverence for the Republic's sacred entity, the individual.

Durkheim became avidly engaged in the Affair shortly after the "*J'accuse*" letter, apparently writing a letter of support to Zola, who was forced to flee the country in the face of a libel charge, and then some months later producing a powerful document that linked his sociological vision of the core principles of a just Republic to his felt need to intervene in the public realm on this issue of national debate and conscience. This was an essay, "Individualism and the Intellectuals," which we will examine in some detail in the next chapter. Generally, Durkheim's perspective on the intellectual's role in political matters centered on the need for distance and caution, although, as we will see in Chapter 3, Durkheim's intellectual project and his vision of sociology are incomprehensible without an understanding of his politics. Here, however, and in another extraordinary situation, that of France's entry into the First World War, he sidestepped this principle and became one of the most articulate and vigorous voices of intellectual activism and agitation that could be found in the country.

At Last, Paris

In July 1902, Durkheim's mother passed away after a long illness, in the same summer that he was finally accepted to a post in Paris at the Sorbonne. Again, crisis and triumph appeared in his life together, tightly entangled. The death of his mother was a trying event, with Durkheim writing a friend of the "difficult moments" while the family awaited the inevitable as their mother lay in a coma (Fournier, 2007, p. 488). A touching portrait of Durkheim's filial piety and devotion to his terminally ill mother was sketched by the rabbi of Épinal, Moïse Schuhl, who described the great scholar "matured by his studies, a leading figure of French science and letters, become once again a child at his mother's side, pushing the little wheelchair she was obliged to use to get around in her final days . . . this tableau seemed to me the illustration of the extreme, almost naïve acts of filial piety reported in the Talmud . . . which were performed by renowned rabbis for their own mothers" (Fournier, 2007, p. 487). Here, we see compelling evidence of the portrait of Durkheim as a secular, progressive republican nonetheless still deeply rooted in traditional moral community and practice.

In the spring of 1902, Ferdinand Buisson, then holder of a chair in the science of education at the Sorbonne, was elected to serve as a deputy in the French parliament. A replacement for the Sorbonne position was sought, and Durkheim was immediately seen as a frontrunner. Initially, he was lukewarm to the idea. He was worried that an even heavier load of courses in pedagogy and related matters would steal still more time from his sociological research and writing (Durkheim, 1998, p. 326; Fournier, 2007, p. 505). He was able, after some agonizing, to assure himself that the new position would not require him to alter the strongly sociological flavor of the pedagogical coursework he had been offering already at Bordeaux, and, recognizing how functionally important for the *Année* and the project of establishing sociology at the university level it would be to operate from Paris, he decided to present himself as a candidate. He was elected by a large majority to the position in July 1902. The following autumn, he began teaching at the Sorbonne as a lecturer; within 4 years, he was made a professor of the University of Paris.

His academic career was thus neatly divided into two 15-year periods, the first at Bordeaux, the second in Paris. In these Parisian years of his career and life, Durkheim took up a position as one of the most important intellectuals in the country, and his international reputation was growing as well. The crowning achievement of this Paris period was the monumental book on religion that he produced in 1912, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, but he completed many other important pieces of work during this time, including a lengthy essay, cowritten with Mauss, on the

sociology of knowledge (*Primitive Classification*) and several of the essays on morality that were brought together in a posthumous volume, *Sociology and Philosophy*.

The Great War and Death

The coming of World War I, or the Great War as it was known in Europe, was presaged by a signal occurrence, the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, the Duchess of Hohenberg, in late June 1914. But the French entry into the war was symbolized still more cogently by a local event. On July 31, 1914, Durkheim's close friend and former ENS schoolmate, Jean Jaurès, who had spoken out persuasively from the left on the need to avoid a European war that would potentially destroy all of the socialist left's efforts, was shot dead in a café on the Right Bank, where he was dining after leaving the offices of the socialist newspaper *l'Humanité*. On the day of his assassination, Jaurès was apparently considering an appeal to the American president, Woodrow Wilson, for intervention in the effort to maintain the peace. The next day, the French mobilized for war.

The emergency of the war brought the second major direct intervention into a political matter in Durkheim's lifetime. As he had risen to the challenge of the right-wing attack on French republican values during the Dreyfus Affair, he responded to the onset of war in Europe by applying his formidable intellectual and polemical skills to the French national cause. Durkheim was 56 at the war's beginning, too old to serve in a military capacity, but he threw himself into the propaganda effort with zeal. He authored two lengthy texts explicating the culpability of the Germans in instigating the war and edited another collection of essays intended to stiffen the French public's resolve in the grim business of the war.

If Durkheim himself was beyond the age of mobilization, this was not true for many of his intellectual associates, friends, and members of his family. His nephew Marcel Mauss, a second nephew, his brother-in-law, and his own son André shipped off for various theaters of the war, as did numerous younger collaborators on the *Année*. Of the latter, Maxime David, Antoine Bianconi, Jean Reynier, and one of Durkheim's most outstanding young students, Robert Hertz, were killed in combat within the war's first year. Durkheim's initial vigor in response to the war gradually began to change, as was doubtless true for many in France, to an anguished and fearful anticipation of horrors to come. When Hertz died near Verdun in April 1915, Durkheim wrote to Mauss, who had also been close to the deceased man, that Hertz's death greatly increased his worry for Mauss and André, as

Hertz was the first of their associates to perish with whom Durkheim had a close personal relationship (Durkheim, 1998, p. 454). Later that same year, 1915, André went missing at the Bulgarian front. Durkheim wrote to his colleague Georges Davy in January 1916 and expressed his fears: “[T]he image of this exhausted child, alone at the side of a road in the midst of night and fog . . . seizes me by the throat” (Lukes, 1985, p. 555). Then, in late February 1916, the crushing blow came: Durkheim learned that André had been killed in action in Bulgaria. He wrote to inform Mauss of the news in desperation: “This is going to hurt a great deal, but it’s impossible to spare you the pain. We can no longer hang on to our illusions. André was wounded and died. He is buried in the little village of Davidovo. It hurts me to write these words, and it will hurt you to read them . . . when you respond, speak as little as possible about the irreparable. These images make me suffer” (Durkheim, 1998, pp. 501–502).

Durkheim struggled to avoid being completely shattered by this horrific event, and the work on the edited volume of war letters aided him in this regard. He wrote to Mauss that “life triumphs over death” and described how, initially fearing he would not be able to work again after André’s death, he had indeed managed to return to his writing desk and told his wife: “I work, I’m saved” (Durkheim, 1998, pp. 507, 508). Yet he acknowledges in the same letter that from this point on, it is inevitable that in whatever future remains for him, “melancholy will be the mode of my life” (Durkheim, 1998, p. 508). A few months later, and only about a month before his death, he told his colleague and collaborator Georges Davy that he observed people and things in the world as one who had already departed the realm of the living (Davy, 1995/1919, p. 87). It has been suggested that Durkheim gives evidence during the war, and perhaps even before, of symptoms of what today we would call depression (Pickering & Rosati, 2008, p. 19). He was undoubtedly overworked and plagued by anguished worry during the war. Any interpreter who would make of Durkheim a bloodless positivist robot will have a great deal of work to do dealing with the voluminous evidence that the end of his life was brought on by the deep emotional wound caused by the horrific death of his beloved only son.

In early 1916, while still bitterly mourning the death of his son under the French banner, Durkheim was attacked in the press and then, stunningly, also on the floor of the French Senate as a German spy in the pay of the enemy’s Ministry of War in viciously, boldly xenophobic terms. Paul Painlevé, who would briefly become prime minister in the fall of 1917 just before Durkheim’s death, publicly denounced the senator who had slandered Durkheim, reminding his listeners of his efforts in propaganda for the French cause and of the recent loss of his son, and poignantly expressing his

“regret that to the wound caused by a German hand to M. Durkheim’s heart there has today been added an even graver injury from a French hand” (Lukes, 1985, p. 557).

Despite all the emotional distress he was enduring, Durkheim attempted to get back to his desk. According to Mauss, in March of 1917, he had started working on an introduction to the book on morality he had been contemplating for some years. His condition made it extremely difficult to concentrate, but he managed to more or less complete the introduction during the summer of 1917. In his last letter to Mauss, dated November 10, 1917, Durkheim tells him that his health has “not gotten worse” and his insomnia and nervous spasms have “disappeared.” He also mentions receiving a copy of Robert Hertz’s last publication, a volume of popular myths and stories told to him by other French soldiers at the front that Hertz had collected prior to his death (Durkheim, 1998, p. 585). Less than a week later, on November 15, Durkheim’s daughter Marie telegraphed Mauss: “Papa passed away without suffering this morning” (Durkheim, 1998, p. 586). Mauss cryptically suggests that for approximately a year, Durkheim had known that he had a terminal illness (“a long illness the end of which he understood from its beginning, in December 1916”), but his exact cause of death is unknown (Mauss, 1925).

Conclusion

One might reasonably share Davy’s view that Durkheim was a victim of the war (Davy, 1995/1919, p. 87). As was true for many in Europe in that generation, some of his deepest hopes—that is, to see a renewed French republicanism solve the problems it faced in peaceful solidarity and to watch the adult lives of his children unfold in his old age—were mercilessly annihilated in the bloodshed and turmoil. A whole generation of Frenchmen was destroyed in this grisly combat, and intellectuals took their share of the loss just as the other sectors of French life. Yet the intellectual legacy left by Durkheim was great, and we still profit significantly from a reading of his work today.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore a wide range of his thought. My effort in those chapters is to follow his writings closely, as though we were reading through them collectively. In the background of that reading, though, is the wealth of contextual information about Durkheim’s life, the surface of which we have brushed in this introductory chapter. It is arguably the case that the central intellectual concern of Durkheim’s adult life—the study of morality from the perspective of a new social science that would

produce knowledge that could be of use in the moral regeneration of his country and modern societies more broadly—can be traced back to the details of his childhood and early adulthood.

A few questions

- In what ways might Durkheim's thought have turned out differently if he had been born a Catholic Frenchman? A French*woman*? A German Jew? A German Protestant?
- How did Durkheim think about the role of the intellectual in political matters? What factors in his own life might have contributed to the way he thought about this?
- What were the social, cultural, and political factors that made the era of Durkheim's life a unique time in European history?
- How did the social, cultural, and political contexts of Durkheim's life shape his intellectual interests?
- Does reading Durkheim's intellectual work with an eye toward his own social and historical location change our understanding of that work, and if so, in what specific ways?