

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JEFFREY ALEXANDER and PHILIP SMITH (Eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 418 p. + index.

The Cambridge Companions to Philosophy series are edited collections of advanced original scholarly articles intended for those already thoroughly familiar with the thinker in question. The editors of this collection, Philip Smith and Jeffrey Alexander, both at the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University, are in favour of “a more hermeneutic and cultural Durkheim” (15) which they argue arose during the 1990s, and which Alexander was certainly central in promoting.

The first of the three sections in which the collection is divided is entitled “Life, Context, Ideas.” Long-established Durkheim scholars Marcel Fournier, Philippe Besnard and Robert Alun Jones discuss respectively Durkheim’s life, his typologies of suicide and the abnormal division of labour, and the intellectual context in which Durkheim developed his ideas on totemism. The latter contribution by Jones follows his well-known historicist methodology of explaining Durkheim’s ideas in the context provided by his immediate contemporaries and predecessors. Since Durkheim can rather easily be shown to be very profoundly wrong about totemism – even by Durkheim’s time the argument could clearly be made that there was no such unitary or self-identical phenomenon as totemism at all (95) – the question becomes what could be of value, or what could be truthful, about such a fundamentally misconceived work? Jones suggests, following Richard Rorty, that the practice of a science does not require a shared philosophical belief in a correspondence theory of truth. Perhaps, but surely some conception of truth is required, and this needs to be addressed. Instead, Jones suggests that we should abandon all such philosophical presuppositions about science, and that we should go about trying to improve the world, a suggestion that begs as many questions as it sets aside.

The remainder of part one contains Randall Collins’ sociology of knowledge of the initial success and later decline of the Durkheim school, Jeffrey Alexander’s re-printed argument that Durkheim shifted from an early instrumentalist-materialist sociology to a later spiritualist-cultural sociology, and Karen Fields’ comparison of her 1995 translation of *Elementary Forms* with earlier translations. The best rejoinder to Alexander’s 25 year old argument is contained in a footnote in Collins’ (132-133) contribution, pointing out that Alexander’s understanding of

materialism is idiosyncratic, and that in addition he misconstrues both the early and later Durkheim. Fields' piece is a most interesting and detailed discussion of the difficulties, costs and benefits associated with different translations of selected passages and terms in Durkheim, and it could serve as a salutary reminder of the importance of national languages in the development of "theory."

The second part of the book is entitled "Symbols, Rituals and Bodies." The contribution by Robert Bellah speculatively and interestingly links Durkheim's account of rituals with recent studies, themselves speculative, about the origins of language, music and culture in the transition from hominids to homo sapiens. Chris Shilling provides a useful overview of how Durkheim's later work can be shown to anticipate most of the developments in the sociology of the body. Roger Friedland and Alexander Riley provide perhaps the two most closely connected essays in the collection. In different ways, they each focus on a "radical" or "transgressive" Durkheim, derived from his account of the power, contagion and heterogeneity of the sacred in *Elementary Forms*. Reading Freud on totemism alongside Durkheim, Friedlander produces a "post-structuralist" reading, which suggests, amongst several intriguing insights, that totemic rituals, described in *Elementary Forms*, are a form of homosocial passion between men which builds the social bond, and even that the sacred-profane distinction, together with the exclusion of women from many of these rites, is a way of containing and channelling this homosocial desire (250).

Riley's contribution traces the connections between the Durkheim school and the thought of Georges Bataille and his contemporaries, and then continues the discussion up to Baudrillard and Derrida. The efforts of Riley and Friedlander suggest the real possibility of a strong "post-structuralist" reading of Durkheim. However, the highly professionalized and rather anaemic quality of North American sociology will be a considerable barrier to any such reading, which I suggest, should focus on reading Durkheim alongside Freud and Bataille to begin with, thinkers linked to Durkheim by a shared intellectual context and by direct filiation, respectively. Riley, Friedlander (and Shilling) make the mistake of having Durkheim anticipate everyone from Lacan to Bourdieu to Derrida, which stretches credulity and makes the genuinely useful parts of their arguments easier to dismiss.

Part three is entitled "Solidarity, Difference and Morality," and begins with a fundamentally unconvincing comparison, by Edward Tiryakian, of the U.S.A.'s response to the attacks of 9/11 and the French response to the Dreyfus affair and the assassination of Jean Jaurès. David Grusky and Gabriela Galescu make an interesting case that Durkheim's focus on occupations in the division of labour could provide a more realistic basis for class analysis than the "relations of production" approach of Marxism. As a counterpoint to all this progressive Durkheim, Zygmunt Bauman reminds us that Durkheim was a stern moralist and self-declared scientist, hardly the stuff of "post-modern" textuality and "free play." The final piece

by Mark Cladis suggests that Durkheim's concept of solidarity can be extended to encompass the idea of the relation to otherness.

All in all, this is a diverse and refreshing collection, which deliberately leaves open many paths to and from Durkheim. Picking up on one of these paths, that suggested most strongly by Friedlander, Riley and perhaps Cladis, and hinted at elsewhere, if Durkheim is to be brought into a kind of resonance with "post-structuralism," or what might now better be characterized as contemporary continental philosophy, more rigorous and sustained attention will have to be paid certainly to Freud and Bataille and the latter's contemporaries, but also to our contemporaries, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida, who can help us to re-think the social as the relation to the other. In addition to a rigorous reading of such thinkers, ways will have to be found to allow North American sociology to weaken its own defences and to allow itself, at least at its margins, to be profoundly infected with the concerns and idioms of such very different, strange, and other thinkers.

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