

Dénes Némedi  
www.nemedi.hu

## Durkheim and the history of sociology

I guess that a sociologist who has a good average familiarity with the history of sociology would not mention Durkheim among those who have a strong historical interest and a prime role in the elaboration of the history of sociology. The stereotyped image of Durkheim shows a positivist-functionalist sociologist not very well versed in history. However, this image is false. Durkheim has written some historical works, among which the most important was unquestionably his lecture series on the development of the French educational system. (Durkheim 1938). It is less known that Durkheim held seminars on the history of philosophy for students preparing to the *agrégation*. He worked on the history of socialist thought and he was certainly among the first scholars who lectured on the development of sociology – in 1901–2 in Bordeaux. (Lukes 1973: 277, 617-9, Mauss 1925: 482-3) According to Mauss, Durkheim prepared a full elaborated version of these lectures – unfortunately, most of these manuscripts disappeared. Even so, there remained a considerable amount of works relevant to the history of sociology: the Latin thesis on Montesquieu (Durkheim 1966), several lectures on Rousseau (Durkheim 1918, 1919), an interesting series of lectures on the development of socialism, especially on Saint-Simon (Durkheim 1928), some essays on the development of sociology. (Durkheim 1888, 1900, 1909, 1915, Durkheim-Fauconnet 1903)

The research on Durkheim clarified the most important aspects of the Durkheimian perspective on the history of sociology. (See in the first place Lukes 1973: 67 ff., 125 ff., 245 ff., 277 ff., Heilbron 1993, Borlandi 1993, Jones 1993, 1994, Challenger, 1994) I do not wish to discover – what was found out long ago – that Durkheim had a clear and elaborated conception on the history of sociology. However, it will not be without interest to give a general overview of his methodological ideas concerning the history of sociology. His treatment of the French forerunners of sociology will be interesting from several points of view. Finally, questions of a general nature could be raised concerning the Durkheimian theory of science.

\* \* \*

After he has occupied the chair at Bordeaux, Durkheim held an introductory lecture. There, he outlined the rise and development of the idea of a social science. At the end of the historical overview, he wrote on sociology: “Elle ne semble plus être un beau jour sortie du néant comme par miracle; mais elle a désormais ses antécédents historiques, elle se rattache au passé et il est possible de montrer comment, ainsi que les autres sciences, elle en est peu à peu sortie par un développement régulier.” (Durkheim 1888: 100)<sup>1</sup> He stressed very much the

---

<sup>1</sup> In 1900, he summed up the rise of sociology in similar words: “La science n’apparaît que quand l’esprit, faisant abstraction de toute préoccupation pratique, aborde les choses à seule fin de se le représenter. ... Mais cette dissociation de la théorie et de la pratique suppose toujours une mentalité relativement avancée.” (The idea of the natural law was necessary to this dissociation) “Elle [la notion de loi naturelle] ne s’est introduite que récemment dans les spéculations relatives à la vie; elle n’est encore qu’imparfaitement acclimatée en psychologie. On conçoit donc qu’elle n’ait pu pénétrer qu’avec la plus grande peine dans le monde des faits sociaux; et c’est ce qui fait que la sociologie ne pouvait apparaître qu’à un moment tardif de l’évolution scientifique.” (Durkheim 1900: 113)

continuity of the development. According to him, the story began with Montesquieu and each actor at each subsequent stage added something to the progress of social science. The emergence of social science was a cumulative process. The most important steps were the theories of Montesquieu and Condorcet, the formation of economic science, Comte's sociology, the contributions of Spencer, Espinas, and Schaeffle, and as the last steps the German socialism of the chair and historical science of law. (Durkheim 1888: 80 ff..) This sketch of the emergence of sociology was a short summary of the learning process Durkheim went through: at the ENS he was introduced to the works of Comte; later on it was the then very popular Spencer whom he had to be familiar with; he wrote an extensive review of Schaeffle's main work; during his visit to Germany he learned the German historical economy, the historical philosophy of law (and the 'science of ethics' which he did not mention in this introductory lecture); last not least, Espinas was the only French author among the numerous proponents of a positivist organicist social philosophy whom he had taken seriously (and Espinas as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts had helped Durkheim very much to obtain the job at Bordeaux). In this lecture, Durkheim criticized Comte on several important aspects and presented Spencer as the author whose theories overcame the Comtean conception of social science. Therefore, one has the first impression that Durkheim was at that stage of his development much more a critical Spencerian than a Comtean positivist. This would be very surprising, indeed.

The first impression is false, of course. Durkheim's conception of social science was developed under the influence of Comte. The Comtean inspiration persisted in spite of the well-founded criticism of certain Comtean ideas. It was the 47. lecture of the *Cours de philosophie positive (Appréciation sommaire des principales tentatives philosophiques entreprises jusqu'ici pour constituer la science sociale.* (Comte 1969: 179 ff.)) which served as a model for Durkheim in his introduction to the history of sociology.<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of the lecture mentioned above, Comte stated that earlier it was impossible to establish a veritable social science. But even those futile attempts were necessary preconditions of a positive social science which by now became possible. In other words: the social science itself was the product of a development that had its own laws.

Il faut que le besoin instinctif de constituer enfin la science sociale sur des bases vraiment positives soit profondément réel, et même bien senti, quoique mal apprécié, pour que cette opération, malgré son peu de maturité rationnelle jusqu'à nos jours, ait été tentée avec tant d'opiniâtreté, et par des voies si variées. En mêmes temps, l'analyse générale des principaux efforts nous a expliqué leur avortement nécessaire, et nous a fait comprendre qu'une telle entreprise, désormais suffisamment préparée, reste néanmoins tout entière à concevoir de façon à comporter une réalisation définitive. (Comte 1966: 227)

Durkheim adopted this principle. At that time he was a convinced Comtean even if he rejected certain specific ideas of the *maître*. The Comtean developmental model of social science implied a theory of science which was accepted by Durkheim. He was as much convinced of the necessary character of the development leading to the constitution of the social science as Comte was. According to this philosophy of science, the establishment of a separate sociology at the university was the necessary concluding step of a long scientific evolution. The basic idea of the Comtean scheme was that there is a difference in complexity between the

---

<sup>2</sup> Comte, too, had a well developed historical consciousness, His theory of scientific and social progress implied that he had to reconstruct the whole process of social thought as leading to the formulation of positive philosophy: "... la reconstitution de la généalogie de la sociologie ne cessa jamais de le préoccuper, soucieux qu'il était de reconnaître toutes ses dettes." (Arnaud 1969: 46)

phenomena and therefore the particular sciences studying them cannot reach the positive stadium at the same time. The principle leads to the conclusion that there is a necessary developmental sequence in the establishment of sciences that cannot be reduced to each other. (Heilbron 1993, 1995: 229 ff.) Of course, this is the principle which was behind the famous Durkheimian idea of the *sui generis* character of social facts. The historical aspect of the principle is the supposition that there was a cumulative evolution leading to the appearance of the social sciences and the same applies to the inner development of sociology, too.

Durkheim said once that sociology was in a sense a French science. (Durkheim 1900: 111) This, too was a Comtean idea. Therefore, the existence of a developmental path leading to academic sociology had to be demonstrated in the French case. This task was accomplished in a cursory manner by Comte. Durkheim had more difficulties.

In Durkheim's introductory lecture in 1888, Montesquieu and Condorcet, the main heroes of Comte's 47. lecture were mentioned only cursorily. Comte observed that the *Esprit des Lois*, this 'remarkable' work succeeded "à concevoir désormais les phénomènes politiques comme aussi nécessairement assujettis à d'invariables lois naturelles que tous les autres phénomènes quelconques". (Comte 1966: 193) In this sense, it was the first intuition of positive social science. However, he said, Montesquieu could not complete this formidable invention because the scientific and political preconditions were absent, there was no positive biological knowledge which would have been necessary for a successful elaboration of this basic idea. (Comte 1966: 195-6, 200)

Durkheim's small treatise on Montesquieu – his so-called Latin thesis published in 1892 – gave a much more detailed and analytical picture. (This monograph is the more interesting because it is here that Durkheim first developed his methodological ideas – in this sense it was the immediate antecedent of the *Règles*.) According to Durkheim Montesquieu was the first who undertook the investigation of the nature of 'social things', who looked for sociological laws. (Durkheim 1892: 43-4, 76)<sup>3</sup> The general assessment accorded with that of Comte who saw the forerunner of positive science in Montesquieu. Durkheim remained in the line of Comte's evaluation when he acknowledged Montesquieu's contribution to the elaboration of the comparative method. He criticized him for not being able to follow consistently these sound principles and adopting instead deductive reasoning. (Durkheim 1892: 95 ff.)

Durkheim departed from Comte's treatment of Montesquieu when he devoted several pages to the latter's typology of government. Comte had little interest in that and he reproached Montesquieu with his positive bias against the English system. (Comte 1966: 196) Durkheim highly appreciated Montesquieu's typology.<sup>4</sup> He identified Montesquieu's republic as an example of mechanical solidarity whereas the description of the monarchic system was for him an early intuition of the organic solidarity resulting from the division of labor. (Durkheim 1892: 58 ff.) This can be hardly accepted as a correct interpretation.<sup>5</sup> It supported,

---

<sup>3</sup> Durkheim quoted the first sentence of Book I. Chapter I. of the *Esprit des lois* (Montesquieu 1979: I. 123) and some sentences from the second part of the *Défense de l'Esprit des Lois* (Montesquieu 1979:II, 435-6)

<sup>4</sup> "Bien mieux, si l'on néglige les termes dont il se sert, on ne trouvera sans doute dans tout l'ouvrage rien de plus vrai ni de plus pénétrant que cette classification, dont les principes peuvent être conservés, même aujourd'hui." (Durkheim 1892: 70)

<sup>5</sup> A characteristic example: Durkheim described the social links (*lien social, sociale vinculum*) in Montesquieu's monarchy as follows: "Mais la cohésion des éléments naît de leur diversité même. Cette ambition qui met en mouvement les ordres et les individus, les stimule en effet, en même temps, à s'acquitter chacun le mieux possible de sa fonction." (Durkheim 1966: 65) He completed his interpretation by quoting a sentence from Book III. Chapter VII. of the *Esprit des Lois* – split into two. The full sentence reads like that: "L'honneur fait mouvoir

however, the general evaluation that the cumulative evolution of positive social science began with Montesquieu.

Comte objected to Montesquieu that the latter has exaggerated the influence of climate on the development of societies. Montesquieu did not see, he said, that this influence was the strongest at the beginning of the evolution and declined thereafter. (Comte 1966: 198-9) Durkheim did not attribute much importance to that problem. He underlined, on the other hand, that Montesquieu saw the causal significance of the volume of societies. (Durkheim 1892: 76 ff.) In this way, Montesquieu became the forerunner of the Durkheimian theory of the division of labor. The same cannot be said of Montesquieu's conception of the 'nature' and 'principle' of government: Durkheim maintained that these concepts were problematical and unacceptable. (Durkheim 1892: 88-89) He could not accept the curious mixture of functional and teleological principles involved in Montesquieu's argument.

On the whole, Durkheim's evaluation of Montesquieu was similar to that of Comte. The same cannot be said of Rousseau.

Rousseau was not mentioned in the 1888 lecture. In Durkheim's other early writings, Rousseau was a kind of sitting duck. Comte did not waste much time on Rousseau, either. He qualified him a '*simple sophiste*' without further argument. (Comte 1966: 200) In a similar manner, Durkheim mentioned Rousseau only in negative terms in his long essay on the German moral sciences in 1887. According to Durkheim, Rousseau (and the liberal economists) conceived social relations as superficial, interest led relationships. (Durkheim 1887a: 271-2) Rousseau conceived men as originally solitary persons and he regarded higher social functions as artificial products. (Durkheim 1887a: 281, 315)<sup>6</sup> Rousseau was not quoted in the *Division* and his theories were not debated there. (Borlandi 1993: 67, 70) In the *Règles*, Rousseau was mentioned once. Durkheim compared him to Hobbes because both maintained that human nature was contrary to collective life and therefore men accepted it only under the impact of force. (Durkheim 1894: 213) In the *Leçons de sociologie* which was written before 1900 (but we do not now exactly when), Rousseau appeared as the forefather of modern democratic theory and practice which conceived the government as translating and representing the feelings and volitions of the multitude. (Durkheim 1950: 127, 132) Durkheim disagreed with that theory. To sum up: for a long time Rousseau was for him the representative of a political and philosophical individualism which had to be combated by the emergent social science. He certainly did not belong to the forerunners of sociology.

It is difficult to say when and why he changed his opinion. Rousseau was not mentioned neither in 1900 nor in 1903 when he wrote again short overviews on the

---

toutes les parties du corps politique; il les lie par son action même; et il se trouve que chacun va au bien commun, croyant aller à ses intérêts particuliers." (Montesquieu 1979: I, 149) Durkheim first quoted the second part of the sentence, beginning with 'il se trouve', which in itself was similar to the definition of organic solidarity. Then he mentioned the virtue of '*honneur*' and quoted the first part of the sentence. The meaning of '*honneur*' came near in this context to the notion of interest: "les ambitions particulières, soit des individus, soit des classes" (Durkheim 1892: 66). The sense of the whole sentence disappeared, however: according to Montesquieu the stability of the monarchy depended on the virtue of '*honneur*' and not on private interests. This stability was the unintended consequence of actions directed by the defense of honor. This kind of stability was very far from the Durkheimian organic solidarity. Durkheim read into Montesquieu the concept of the division of labor which he has taken over from Spencer (and through Spencer from Smith).

<sup>6</sup> This evaluation was consistently followed in the early writings: in the review of Schaeffle's book (Durkheim 1885: 359, 370), in the essay on the principles of 1789 (Durkheim 1890: 221-2), in his overview of the teaching of philosophy in Germany. (Durkheim 1887b: 465) It is surprising that Lukes mentions without qualification Rousseau's impact on Durkheim and Durkheim's high opinion of him. (Lukes 1973: 125, 283) See Challenger, (1994, 107-134) too.

emergence of sociology. However, he gave lectures on the *Contrat social* in Bordeaux, i.e. before the summer of 1902. These lectures were not published in his lifetime. In them, he developed a rather different evaluation of Rousseau. Durkheim did not modify his opinion that Rousseau started with the individual and he could prove the necessity of society only by excessive use of dialectical ingenuity. (Durkheim 1918: 133) But, according to Durkheim, the idea of a special social existence was accepted by Rousseau. In this way he, too, belonged among the forerunners of sociology.

Rousseau avait un sentiment très vif de la spécificité du règne social; il le concevait très nettement comme un ordre de faits hétérogènes par rapport aux faits purement individuels. C'est un monde nouveau qui se surajoute au monde purement psychique. Une telle conception est bien supérieure à celle même de théoriciens récents, comme Spencer ... (Durkheim 1918: 136-7)

This sociological tendency<sup>7</sup> could be observed, Durkheim maintained, in Rousseau's conception of the '*volonté générale*', too. According to Rousseau, the assertion of justice required the existence of a special being who determined the law and acted as an arbiter. This being was the social being whose supremacy over the individuals resulted from his moral preeminence.

Ainsi, ce qu'exprime cette théorie, c'est que l'ordre morale dépasse l'individu, qu'il n'est pas réalisé dans la nature physique ou psychique; il doit y être surajouté. Mais, pour qu'il ait un fondement, il faut un être en qui il se fonde, et, comme il n'y a pas d'être dans la nature qui remplisse pour cela les conditions nécessaires, il faut bien en créer un. C'est le corps social. (Durkheim 1918: 160-1)<sup>8</sup>

In Rousseau's case it is less important to ask whether Durkheim's interpretation was correct or not. It is obvious that he distorted Rousseau's ideas in many ways. The really important thing is that, sometimes around the turn of century, Durkheim accepted Rousseau as one of the forefathers of sociology. Now, he saw a straight line of development beginning with Hobbes<sup>9</sup> and leading through Montesquieu to Rousseau and further to modern social science. "Pour tous les trois, la société est quelque chose qui se surajoute à la nature proprement dite." (Durkheim 1918: 195) According to Hobbes, the social order was created by an act of will, Montesquieu investigated the determinant social conditions of legislative acts and Rousseau discovered the bases of social order in opinions, in the interests and in the mores. (Durkheim 1918: 196) "Donc, en même temps que ces penseurs s'entendent pour affirmer l'hétérogénéité du social et de l'individuel, on constate un effort croissant pour fonder en nature l'être social." (Durkheim 1918: 197)

Political considerations, perhaps, were among the factors leading to a modification of Rousseau's supposed role in the development of social science. In the context of the Dreyfus-affaire Durkheim stressed the integrative role of moral individualism. Rousseau could not be

---

<sup>7</sup> Durkheim gave lectures on the *Émile*, too, but of these remained only notes that cannot be dated. These notes show, too, the positive evaluation of Rousseau from a sociological point of view. Durkheim stressed that Rousseau's pedagogy was not totally individualistic, that he acknowledged the existence of supra-individual moral forces and the moral necessity of social discipline. (Durkheim 1919: 379, 386)

<sup>8</sup> Durkheim criticized Rousseau in certain respects. He attributed to Rousseau the idea he rejected that the '*volonté générale*' was the arithmetic average of individual volitions. (Durkheim 1918: 165) He believed that Rousseau did not see the importance of the division of labour and therefore he conceived the sovereign power as an undivided whole and in a vitalistic manner. (Durkheim 1918: 169-70)

<sup>9</sup> Durkheim read Hobbes in Bordeaux in seminars for students preparing for the *agrégation*. (Mauss 1925: 482) He had notes for these seminars which existed in 1925 and disappeared later.

rejected totally in these circumstances. Voltaire and Rousseau were regarded as their forefathers by the Republican intellectuals.<sup>10</sup> Durkheim in his defense of individualism mentioned Rousseau in a positive sense. (Durkheim 1898: 263) However, Durkheim did not modify his basic idea of the development of social science by incorporating Rousseau in it. He simply inserted Rousseau in a preexistent Comtean model. It is no wonder that serious interpretative distortions occurred.

Even this simple insertion of Rousseau among the forerunners of sociology led to some difficulties. Durkheim maintained that the development leading to modern sociology was a cumulative one. It was rather difficult to imagine a straight cumulative development leading from Montesquieu through Rousseau *and* Condorcet to Comte. To avoid awkward questions, Durkheim simply omitted Rousseau when he was asked to talk of the whole process of the emergence of sociology – as in 1900, 1909 or 1915. The model was not modified – only the evaluation of one particular author.

The really awkward problems emerged in conjunction with the role of Comte in the creation of social science. The starting point was simple: Comte was the *maître* for Durkheim.<sup>11</sup> However, already the relative importance he attributed to Comte and Spencer is not easily perceptible.

In 1988, the Comtean inspiration of Durkheim's criticism of Spencer was obvious.

Il [Spencer] ne s'intéresse pas aux faits sociaux pour eux-mêmes; il ne les étudie pas dans le seul but de les connaître, mais pour vérifier à leur occasion la grande hypothèse qu'il a conçue et qui doit expliquer toute chose. Tous les documents qu'il accumule, toutes les vérités spéciales qu'il rencontre chemin faisant sont destinés à démontrer que, comme le reste du monde, les sociétés se développent conformément à la loi de l'évolution universelle. (Durkheim 1988: 94)

The criticism was based on a well-known central principle of the Comtean philosophy of science, on the difference of the particular sciences. The consequent application of this principle excluded the research of some "loi d'évolution universelle". It was in the spirit of the Comtean 'differential theory of science' that Durkheim rejected Spencer's general methodology.

However, Durkheim in his attempt to summarize the achievements of sociology produced the impression that he was trying to find a middle position between Spencer's and Comte's opposing conceptions of social science. He reproached Comte for supposing that there is "entre chaque espèce d'êtres comme entre chaque espèce de sciences une solution de continuité." (Durkheim 1888: 90) As Spencer denied this 'solution de continuité', one would say that in this respect Durkheim was more sympathetic to Spencer than to Comte. However, when he came to mention Liliensfeld it became clear that he explicitly rejected the methodological principles of organicism developed by Spencer.

Si la sociologie existe, elle a sa méthode et ses lois à elle. Les faits sociaux ne peuvent être vraiment expliqués que par d'autres faits sociaux et on n'en a pas rendu compte parce qu'on a signalé leur ressemblance avec des faits biologiques dont la science est dès à présent faite. (Durkheim 1988: 92)

Durkheim acknowledged the heuristic virtue of the biological analogy. However, if we compare the remarks on the failures in the elaboration of the Comtean program with the

---

<sup>10</sup> See to that Goulemot-Walter 1984.

<sup>11</sup> On Durkheim's relation to Comte see Heilbron 1993.

essential criticism of Spencer's conception, the result will be that Comte fared much better than the popular British polyhistor.<sup>12</sup> According to Durkheim Comte made excessive use of a right principle whereas Spencer applied with some success a false one. (Of course, Durkheim has amply utilized the heuristic value of the biological analogy.) But, if he agreed with Comte as far as the nature and evolution of social science was concerned, why did Durkheim produce the impression that Spencer's ideas constituted a real progress to those of Comte?

Borlandi (1993: 104) reminds us of the simple fact that Spencer, and not Comte, was *the* sociologist at the time when Durkheim started his academic career. His works were highly popular and they served as examples for anyone who wished to enter the field. Durkheim was caught in the pitfall of his Comtean philosophy of science. He supposed with Comte that social science entered his positive phase of development and that evolution is necessary and continuous. If that was the case, Spencer himself must have contributed to the general progress. That was all the more important because in the eighties he argued forcefully that the German social sciences constituted a real progress, too. If he would have accepted the German contributions as real but those of Spencer not, he should have abandoned the cumulative evolutionary model of science. He was thus forced to insert Spencer in the model inherited from Comte. However, Spencer's philosophy of science was in an important aspect inconsistent with his own. He remained faithful to the Comtean principle of the *sui generis* character of social facts which was implicitly rejected by Spencer's organicism. Thus, he had to accept as a positive step forward a contribution that was inconsistent with his general conception of science. Perhaps this explains the ambiguous evaluation of Spencer in the *Division*.

Durkheim never denied the Comtean inspiration of his sociology. In the 1888 lecture on the history of sociology, he asserted that it was Comte who found a place for sociology in the system of sciences. On the other hand, he said, Comte perceived the peculiarity of collective life. He differed from the economists because he saw the importance of solidarity, of '*consensus universel*', of integration – these contributions were highly appreciated by Durkheim. Durkheim's main objection to Comte was – in the 1888 lecture as well as in the *Règles* – that he tried to describe the evolution of humanity as a whole. Instead of distinct societies he spoke of Society as one entity. He did not see the existence of different types of societies. (Durkheim 1888: 85-90; 1894: 112-3, 170) In this respect, Montesquieu was ahead of Comte – at least according to Durkheim. He rejected the Comtean theory of the three stages of human evolution because of this holistic tendency. (Durkheim 1894: 211, 217-8)

In the *Division*, Durkheim preserved the same positive-critical attitude toward Comte. Spencer was the most cited author and the typology of solidarity was not of Comtean origin, but in Book III. – in the part which analyzed the abnormal forms of the division of labor – Durkheim returned to Comte. He took Comte's criticism of division of labor as the starting point in the attempt to solve the paradox resulting from the acceptance of the rather Spencerian solidarity based on spontaneous division of labor.<sup>13</sup>

In the Introduction to the *Règles* Durkheim stated that "la seule étude originale et importante" concerning the methodological questions of sociology was Comte's 48. lecture in the *Cours de philosophie positive (Caractères fondamentaux de la méthode positive dans*

---

<sup>12</sup> In the *Règles* Durkheim blamed Comte, too, for the explanation of evolution by basic laws of human nature, i.e. by psychology (sic!), and this criticism was similar to that directed earlier to Spencer. (Durkheim 1894: 191-2) However, the criticism leveled against Comte was based on a Comtean principle: on the principle of the hierarchy and difference of the sciences.

<sup>13</sup> Compare Durkheim 1893: 348 ff.

*l'étude rationnelle des phénomènes sociaux*).<sup>14</sup> Durkheim found that the antecedents of his thesis that social fact should be considered '*comme des choses*' went back to Comte, too.. (Durkheim 1894: 93, 112)

In his general conception on sociology, there was an important novelty around the turn of century: he now mentioned Saint-Simon as a proto-sociologist. In this respect he inserted insights gained in the lecture series on socialism (Durkheim 1928) in his treatment of the history of sociology. By celebrating Saint-Simon as the founder of positivism he modified his opinion on Comte's historical importance (Durkheim 1900: 115-7)<sup>15</sup> – but he did not modify his positive appreciation of the positivist theory. Durkheim now believed that the true founder of positivism and sociology was Saint-Simon. The most important event in XIX. century philosophy and the most significant turning point in the development of French philosophical thought after Cartesianism was the emergence of positivist philosophy – wrote Durkheim. “Or nous venons de voir que l'idée, le mot, et même l'esquisse de la philosophie positive se trouvent tout entiers chez Saint-Simon.” (Durkheim 1928: 148) Durkheim based this evaluation on a detailed account of Saint-Simon's ideas – in Book II. of the lecture series on socialism. In Durkheim's eyes, Comte now became the disciple of Saint-Simon who developed in many respects the Master's thought. He was no more the original philosopher as he was appreciated earlier by Durkheim. Durkheim gave a detailed account of the relationship between Saint-Simon and Comte. (Durkheim 1928: 150 ff.) The most important novelty he saw was that compared to Saint-Simon Comte “a séparé plus nettement la science de la pratique, et que sans se désintéresser de cette dernière, c'est à la science surtout qu'il s'est appliqué, du moins pendant la belle partie de sa carrière.” (Durkheim 1928: 153)

There are some points in Durkheim's treatment of Saint-Simon that require commentary. We know that Durkheim, from 1896-97 on, attributed more and more importance to the study of moral ideals and to the analysis of religious phenomena. Therefore, it is understandable that he did not blame Saint-Simon excessively for his attempts to reconcile religion and science. He approved his attempts to combine theoretical and practical point of views. (Durkheim 1928: 348-50) The lecture series on socialism was held in the academic year 1895-96 (Mauss 1928: V), i.e. shortly before Durkheim's research interests shifted in new directions. Accordingly, the general conclusions of his study on Saint-Simon can be read as a confirmation of the principles guiding the earlier research on the division of labor – and at the same time as a tentative formulation of new orientations.

Le problème doit donc se poser ainsi: chercher par la science quels sont les freins moraux qui peuvent régler la vie économique, et, par cette réglementation, contenir les égotismes, et par conséquent permettre de satisfaire les besoins. (Durkheim 1928: 351)

Durkheim's enthusiasm for Saint-Simon was not long-lived. In the 1900 essay he searched for a compromise formulation. He stated that the two founding fathers had equal importance: “C'est seulement avec Auguste Comte que le grand projet, conçu par Saint-Simon, commence à devenir réalité.” (Durkheim 1900: 118) In the 1903 study by Durkheim and Fauconnet Saint-Simon was not mentioned (the study is less concerned with historical

---

<sup>14</sup> As the most widely read methodological works in the second half of the century were Mill's and Spencer's books, the remark of Durkheim carries more weight than it seems.

<sup>15</sup> He mentioned Cournot, too but he did not analyze his works. As the essay was restricted to the appreciation of the French contribution to the development of sociology, Spencer was mentioned only cursorily, Espinas was praised more extensively. (Durkheim 1900: 111-125)

questions and more centered on theoretical systematic problems), but the thesis on Saint-Simon and Comte formulated in 1900 was employed in 1909 (140) and 1915 (110) again.

Durkheim viewed the development of sociology as a cumulative process. This perspective implied a privileged position from where the road leading to the actual present could be surveyed and which was the highest degree of sociological thinking. Durkheim's 1888 introductory lecture had to demonstrate that the newly nominated *chargé des cours* was competent and able to summarize the most recent developments of science. The task of the 1900 article was different. Durkheim acted as the observer of scientific developments but even in this case he inserted himself in the description and presented himself as the continuation of the work of Espinas. He explicitly stated that the whole process – including his own efforts – was homogeneous, unitary.

Toutes les doctrines qui précèdent sont comme des moments d'une même évolution.<sup>16</sup> Toutes, en effet, procédaient d'une même pensée, à savoir que les phénomènes sociaux sont naturels, c'est-à-dire rationnels, comme les autres phénomènes de l'univers ... En même temps, tous les savants dont nous venons de parler avaient ce sentiment que, pour arriver à découvrir ces lois, il fallait pratiquer une méthode positive, c'est-à-dire substituer aux procédés sommaires de la dialectique idéologique l'observation patiente des faits. (Durkheim 1900: 130)

The model was Comtean and worked with 'the differential theory of science' (Heilbron 1995: 225-6). It emphasized the difference of object and method of the particular sciences and stressed the specificity of sciences. This aspect of the Comtean theory was very important for Durkheim in his efforts to create an independent sociology. However, Comte (following Saint-Simon) stated that there was a necessity for a political science – later on he spoke of social physics and sociology. The task of this political science would be the solution of the scientific and social crisis. In fact, he believed that the disunity of science manifesting itself in the excessive division of scientific labor was not so much one aspect of the general crisis than its real cause. According to Comte, the re-organization of scientific work was the precondition of the re-organization of society. In this perspective, the important thing was not so much the difference, but the similarity of sciences.

En effet, la fondation de la physique sociale complétant enfin le système des sciences naturelles, il devient possible et même nécessaire de résumer les diverses connaissances acquises, parvenues alors à un état fixe et homogène, pour les coordonner en les présentant comme autant de branches d'un tronc unique, au lieu de continuer à les concevoir seulement comme autant de corps isolés. (Comte 1968: 19)

Durkheim, in his first works, stressed much more the difference of particular sciences (for example the disparity of the sociological and psychological perspective) and the necessity of separating metaphysics and science than the unity of sciences. (Durkheim 1888: 83, 86, 106) These are well known principles of the early Durkheimian conception of science. The methodological principles of the *Règles*, the thing-like character of social facts are dependent on this general idea. When Durkheim, summarizing the general theses of the *Règles*, stated that sociology "est indépendante de toute philosophie" (Durkheim 1894: 233), he was referring to these postulates. The cumulative model of scientific development was dependent on the 'differential theory of science' and supported the independence of sociology by demonstrating how a special area of research was discovered.

---

<sup>16</sup> He mentioned those (Le Play and Tarde for example) who could not be inserted in this development, but only incidentally. (Durkheim 1900: 130-33)

However, Durkheim as well as Comte before him was convinced that the special social sciences had to cooperate, too. This idea was not wholly compatible with the image of the progressive differentiation of sciences. Durkheim referred to Comte when he talked of the rapprochement of social sciences in 1888.

Pour Comte au contraire les faits sociaux sont trop étroitement solidaires pour pouvoir être étudiés séparément. Par suite de ce rapprochement chacune des sciences sociales perd de son autonomie, mais gagne en sève et en vigueur. ... Au lieu d'avoir affaire à des phénomènes rangés pour ainsi dire en séries linéaires, extérieures les unes aux autres et ne se rencontrant que par hasard, on se trouve en présence d'un énorme système d'actions et de réactions, dans cet équilibre toujours mobile qui caractérise la vie. (Durkheim 1888: 87)<sup>17</sup>

Durkheim saw that the principle of the unity of sciences was problematic. It implied that there must be an instance which should create and maintain unity. Comte attributed this role to his philosophy of science which would fulfil this task by developing the theory of the differentiation of sciences. Durkheim – in a totally new scientific and disciplinary situation – rejected the conception that the unity of the sciences should be maintained by (positivist) philosophers who study the general features of sciences.<sup>18</sup> The philosophy – said Durkheim – could not secure the coherence of sciences. The specialization of sciences destroyed any hopes to restore – under the supervision of some common methodological principles – the unity of sciences which was lost in the process of the division of labor.

Qu'on se représente la multiplicité croissant des sciences spéciales avec leurs théorèmes, leurs lois, leurs axiomes, leurs conjectures, leurs procédés et leurs méthodes, et on comprendra qu'une formule courte et simple, comme la loi d'évolution par exemple<sup>19</sup>, ne peut suffire à intégrer une aussi prodigieuse complexité de phénomènes. ... Il y a un trop grand écart entre les recherches de détail qui les alimentent et de telles synthèses. (Durkheim 1893: 355)

As even the positivist philosophy of science was unable to secure the necessary coordination, the anomie of the division of scientific labor was inevitable.<sup>20</sup> The scientific anomie was incompatible with the developmental, cumulative model of social science. The lack of organization would destroy any cumulativeness of results. The most disturbing point in scientific anomie was that it was implied by the same principles which were at work in the construction of a developmental, cumulative model of the history of sociology.

---

<sup>17</sup> He praised Montesquieu for similar reasons: "Montesquieu, au contraire, a bien vu que tous ces éléments [droit, moralité, religion, etc.] forment un tout, de telle sorte que, pris isolément et à part des autres, on ne peut les comprendre; c'est pourquoi il ne sépare pas le droit de la moralité, de la religion, du commerce, etc., ni surtout de la forme de la société qui étend son influence à toutes les choses sociales. Si différents qu'ils soient, tous ces faits expriment la vie d'une seule et même société; ils correspondent aux divers éléments ou organes du même organisme social." (Durkheim 1892: 103) He pointed out the importance of the unity of sciences in Saint-Simon's work. (Durkheim 1928: 148-9)

<sup>18</sup> In 1903, he criticized Comte for not seeing the impossibility of this solution: "Pour qu'elle (une science) progresse, il faut qu'elle se résolve en une quantité progressivement croissante de questions spéciales, de manière à rendre possible la coopération d'esprits différents et de générations successives. C'est à cette condition seulement qu'elle aura le caractère collectif et impersonnel sans lequel il n'y a pas de recherche scientifique. Or la conception philosophique et unitaire que Comte se faisait de la sociologie s'opposait à cette division du travail." (Durkheim Fauconnet 1903: 128)

<sup>19</sup> The remark concerned as well the 'three stades' of Comte as Spencer's law of development.

<sup>20</sup> Durkheim dealt with the scientific division of labor in Book III. of the *Division*, among the abnormal forms. Anomie means here lack of organization.

The problem of the division of scientific labor was a constant concern for Durkheim.<sup>21</sup> He was led by the goal of the re-organization of social sciences when he created the *Année sociologique*. In his conception developed around the turn of century it was the sociology which should take over the task of organizing the social sciences – not as a Comtean style philosophy of science but as a special discipline studying the common characteristics of all these sciences: the social nature of their objects. The theoretical underpinning of this conception was given in the study on primitive classification written together with Mauss. Here they stated that the methods of scientific investigation are truly social institutions which could not be studied but by sociological procedures. (Durkheim-Mauss 1903: 395) The principle implied that sociology was more than just a special science. It was an inherently (meta)philosophical discipline.

The idea Durkheim developed earlier on the history of sociology was incompatible with the ‘sociological theory of knowledge’. The sociological reconstruction of the unity of social sciences would not be the result of a gradual accumulation of scientific insights but rather of a radical turn in scientific attitudes. That was felt by Durkheim. In his writings after the turn of century, where he dealt with the relationships between sociology, philosophy, and social sciences, he used again and again metaphorical expressions where the motive of rupture, turn was prevalent. As an example I quote from an article published in 1909: “Il est donc inadmissible que les problème métaphysiques, mêmes les plus audacieux, qu’ont agités les philosophes puissent jamais tomber dans l’oubli. Mais il est également certain qu’ils sont appelés à se renouveler. Or, précisément, nous croyons que la sociologie, plus que tout autre science, peut contribuer à ce renouvellement.” (Durkheim 1909b: 185-6)<sup>22</sup> The development of these guesses would have required a modification of the Comtean model of the history of sociology. Durkheim who had a clear idea of the problems of the division of scientific labor did not have the theoretical means to create a new conception of the history of sociology. After 1900, when he was asked to write short summaries, he restricted himself to the replication of the model utilized in the nineties. That was the case in the otherwise very important article written by him and Fauconnet in 1903 and in the paper in 1909 which was written for a larger public. The idea of sociology as an integrator of the social sciences was incompatible with the conception of a cumulative development and differentiation of sociology. Durkheim did not develop this point.

\* \* \*

The most important insights of Durkheim were not formulated in historical works. In this respect there is a huge difference with some outstanding theoretical sociologists of the second half of the 20. century. For Durkheim, the history of sociology remained in a sense a pre-history. He did not work in the shadow of the oppressing authority of sociological classics. He, too, was concerned with the legitimacy of sociology. However, his precursors did not have the unquestionable legitimacy he acquired after 1945. He could not secure his position by referring to them. The lack of incontestable classics, the secondary relevance of historical points of reference determined the structure of the Durkheimian mode of argumentation. Durkheim became a classic of sociology but not a classic of the historiography of sociology

---

<sup>21</sup> I deal with these problems in my article *La philosophie de Durkheim et l'organisation de l'Année sociologique* (in print)..

<sup>22</sup> Similar formulations: Durkheim 1912: 12, 21, 637.

## Bibliography

- Arnaud, Pierre 1969: *Sociologie de Comte*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France
- Borlandi, Massimo 1993: Durkheim lecteur de Spencer, in: Besnard, Philippe, Massimo Borlandi, Paul Vogt (sous la direction de): *Division du travail et lien social. La thèse de Durkheim un siècle après*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 67-109
- Challenger, Douglas F. 1994. *Durkheim through the Lens of Aristotle. Durkheimian, Postmodernist and Communitarian Responses to the Enlightenment*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield.
- Comte, Auguste 1968: *Oeuvres d'Auguste Comte. Tome I. Cours de philosophie positive. Premier volume. Les préliminaires généraux et la philosophie mathématique*, Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1968 (facsimile of the 5., 1892 edition)
- Comte, Auguste 1969: *Oeuvres d'Auguste Comte. Tome IV. Cours de philosophie positive. Quatrième volume. Partie dogmatique de la philosophie sociale*, 1969 (facsimile of the 5., 1893 edition)
- Durkheim, Emile 1885: Schäffle A., *Bau und Leben des socialen Körpers*, *Revue philosophique*, 19, 84-101, republished under the title *Organisation et vie du corps social selon Schaeffle* in: Durkheim, Emile: *Textes. 1. Éléments d'une théorie sociale*, Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1975, 355-377
- Durkheim, Emile 1887a: *La science positive de la morale en Allemagne*, *Revue philosophique*, 24, 33-58, 113-142, 275-284, republished in: Durkheim, Emile: *Textes. 1. Éléments d'une théorie sociale*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1975, 267-343
- Durkheim, Emile 1887b: *La philosophie dans les universités allemandes*, *Revue internationale de l'enseignement*, 13, 313-338, 423-440, republished in: Durkheim, Emile: *Textes. 3. Fonctions sociales et institutions*, Paris: Les Editions du Minuit, 1975, 437-486.
- Durkheim, Emile 1888: *Cours de science sociale. Leçon d'ouverture*, *Revue internationale de l'enseignement*, 15, 23-48, republished in: Durkheim, Emile: *La science sociale et l'action*, Paris: PUF, 1970, 77-110.
- Durkheim, Emile 1892: *La contribution de Montesquieu à la constitution de la science sociale*, in: Durkheim, Emile: *Montesquieu et Rousseau. Précurseurs de la sociologie*, Paris: Librairie Marcel Rivière et Cie, 1966, 25-198 (original edition under the title *Quid Secundatus politicae scientiae instituendae contulerit*, Bordeaux)
- Durkheim, Emile 1893: *De la division du travail sociale*, Paris: PUF (10e édition), 1978
- Durkheim, Emile 1894: *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, nouvelle édition, Paris: Flammarion, 1988
- Durkheim, Emile 1898: *L'individualisme et les intellectuels*, *Revue bleue*, 4. série, 10. tome, , 7-13, republished in: Durkheim, Emile: *La science sociale et l'action*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970, 261-278
- Durkheim, Emile 1900: *La sociologie en France au XIXe siècle*, *Revue bleue*, 4e série, t.XIII, 609-613, 647-652, republished in: Durkheim, Emile: *La science sociale et l'action*, Paris: PUF, 1970, 111-136.
- Durkheim, Emile 1909a: *Sociologie et sciences sociales*, in: *De la méthode dans les sciences*, 1re série, Paris Alcan, 259-285, republished in: Durkheim, Emile: *La science sociale et l'action*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970, 137-159.
- Durkheim, Emile 1909a: *Sociologie religieuse et théorie de la connaissance*, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 17, 733-758, republished in: parts I. and II. Durkheim 1912a, 1-28, part III.: Durkheim, Emile: *Textes. 1. Éléments d'une théorie sociale*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1975, 184-188.

- Durkheim, Emile 1912: *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France (7. édition), 1985
- Durkheim, Emile 1915: La sociologie, in: *La science française*, Paris: Larousse, 5-15, republished in: Durkheim, Emile: *Textes. 1. Éléments d'une théorie sociale*, Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1975, 109-118
- Durkheim, Emile 1918: Le "Contrat social" de Rousseau, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 25, 1-23, republished in: Durkheim, Emile: *Montesquieu et Rousseau. Précurseurs de la sociologie*, Paris: Librairie Marcel Rivière et Cie, 1966, 115-198
- Durkheim, Emile 1919: La "Pédagogie" de Rousseau. Plan de leçons, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 26, 153-180, republished in: Durkheim, Emile: *Textes. 3. Fonctions sociales et institutions*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975, 371-401
- Durkheim, Emile 1928: *Le socialisme. Sa définition, ses débuts. La doctrine Saint-Simonienne*, Paris: Alcan
- Durkheim, Emile 1938: *L'évolution pédagogique en France*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France
- Durkheim, Emile 1950: *Leçons de sociologie. Physique des moeurs et du droit*, (2. kiadás) Paris: PUF, 1969
- Durkheim, Emile - Marcel Mauss 1903: De quelques formes primitives de classification. Contribution à l'étude des représentations collectives, *Année sociologique*, 6, 1-72, republished in: Durkheim, Emile: *Journal sociologique*, Paris: PUF, 1969, 395-461
- Durkheim, Emile - Paul Fauconnet 1903: Sociologie et science sociales, *Revue philosophique* 55, 465-497., republished in: Durkheim, Emile: *Textes. 1. Éléments d'une théorie sociale*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975, 121-159.
- Goulemot, Jean-Marie – Éric Walter 1984: Les centenaires de Voltaire et de Rousseau, in: Pierre Nora (sous la direction de): *Les lieux de mémoire. I. La République*, Paris: Gallimard, pp. 381-420
- Heilbron, Johan 1993: Ce que Durkheim doit à Comte, in: Besnard, Philippe, Massimon Borlandi, Paul Vogt (sous la direction de): *Division du travail et lien social. La thèse de Durkheim un siècle après*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 59-66
- Heilbron, Johan 1995: *The Rise of Social Theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Jones, Robert A. 1993: La science positive de la morale en France: les sources allemandes de la Division du travail social, in: Besnard, Philippe, Massimon Borlandi, Paul Vogt (sous la direction de): *Division du travail et lien social. La thèse de Durkheim un siècle après*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 11- 41
- Jones, Robert A. 1994: Durkheim, Montesquieu, and Method, *American Journal of Sociology*, 100, 1-39
- Lukes, Steven 1973: *Emile Durkheim. His Life and Work. A Historical and Critical Study*, London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press
- Mauss, Marcel 1925: In memoriam. L'oeuvre inédite de Durkheim et de ses collaborateurs, *Année sociologique, nouvelle série*, 1, 7-29, republished in: Mauss, Marcel: *Oeuvres. 3. Cohésion sociale et divisions de la sociologie*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969, 473-499
- Mauss, Marcel 1928: Introduction, in: Durkheim, Emile: *Le socialisme. Sa définition, ses débuts. La doctrine Saint-Simonienne*, Paris: Alcan, 1928., V-XI
- Montesquieu 1979: *De l'Esprit des Lois*, 2 vol., Paris: Flammarion

