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Emile Durkheim and the Polish Question

Abstract: In 1899 and 1907, Polish patriotic circles contacted well-known European and American intellectuals and politicians, asking them to express themselves on the subject of independence for Poland, which was then divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria. Emile Durkheim responded to both requests. The present article comments on these mostly unknown texts by Durkheim. The replies sent by Ferdinand Tönnies, Vilfredo Pareto and other scholars in the social sciences are also briefly discussed.

Keywords: Emile Durkheim, the Polish question, early opinion surveys

Emile Durkheim was not only a great scholar, but also an outstanding citizen. He was involved in the field of sociology, but he was also engaged in public activities—he defended secular education in French schools, and spoke out on the Dreyfus affair and other events in France and Europe (Lukes 1973: ch. 17). In his day, one manner of acquiring information on social questions and of understanding and forming public opinion was for individuals, editors or institutions to appeal to distinguished members of society for statements or sometimes even for answers to a set of questions (Zeisel [1933] 2002). In England and America such initiatives were called surveys or questionnaires, and in France, *enquêtes*. Just as ‘public opinion’ did not then mean the opinion of the masses, so ‘a survey’ did not then signify today’s sample survey. Durkheim himself willingly answered such *enquêtes*: on war and militarism, on anti-Semitism, on ‘the religious question’, on elites and democracy, and on other issues (Mergy 2009). He also expressed himself, twice, on the ‘Polish question’.

Poland, as a state, was liquidated toward the end of the 18th century and divided between the neighbouring powers—Russia, Prussia and Austria. Excluding the brief episode of the Duchy of Warsaw (1807–1812) created by Napoleon, this situation lasted until the First World War, in spite of insurrections in the Russian partition in 1830 and 1863 and the diplomatic steps taken by Poles in the international arena. Toward the end of the 19th century, Polish strivings toward independence were still being severely repressed in the Russian partition and the Germanisation campaign was intensifying in the Prussian partition. Only the Austrian partition, in the 1860s, acquired far-reaching self-government and cultural autonomy within the framework of the multi-ethnic Habsburg realm (Wandycz 1975, Davies 1982). Poland’s partition and the question of its independence occupied the minds of many in Europe from the second half of the 19th century until the country’s rebirth in 1918.

Krytyka's Questionnaire

In 1899, the editors of the monthly journal *Krytyka* (Criticism), which had been founded in Cracow, in Galicia (it was a name of the Austrian partition), decided to 'remind Western opinion of the Polish question, and determine to what degree it is, in the persons of its most discriminating representatives, acquainted with the situation of the Polish nation and society, and to ascertain what it thinks about this situation and what horoscope it casts for the future.' Then a questionnaire with the following text was sent to nearly five hundred 'outstanding individuals in the fields of journalism, literature, history and sociology, and thus to those who can have the most influence on opinion in their countries':

Cracow (Galicia), 26 Sławkowska St.
Gentlemen,

The peace congress in The Hague, which has been called together at the initiative of the Russian government, has attracted universal attention. But all those matters, which, in the opinion of the gathered powers, have not yet matured to the point of peaceful settlement, were carefully kept from the congress. These included, for instance, the questions of Armenia, Macedonia, Eastern Asia and, finally, the Polish question. This question, which a mere thirty years ago was still on the diplomatic table, today appears to be an entirely dead issue.

The 19th century, whose end brought political unification and freedom to the most minor peoples, deprived the Polish nation not only of independence but also of the principles of freedom necessary for the development of natural forces. It is sufficient to remember that in four-fifths of Poland the Russian and German governments are suppressing the national language: Polish speech has been banished from administrative offices, courts and even from public schools. The press is subject to chicanery and persecution of all types. Nevertheless, Poland's participation in the intellectual and social progress of Europe has not declined but has continually increased. Polish art and literature is ever more widely known and appreciated abroad; within the country, the democratic movement is embracing an ever broader layer of society and is becoming a power that is reflected in all areas of political and intellectual life.

The silence with which the West surrounds the Polish question can not thus be ascribed to the Polish nation's lack of vigour and patriotism.

The editorial board of *Krytyka*, an organ of progress and independent Polish thought, thus considers that it is bound to address the following questions to outstanding representatives of literature, science, art and politics:

1. Is Polish civilisation relevant or not to the progress of Western Europe?
2. Is the proper development of the Polish nation possible in contemporary conditions and how should the policies of Germanisation and Russification be viewed?
3. Would Poland's independence not have an advantageous influence on the development of Western Europe?
4. Could Poland achieve its independence and in what manner?

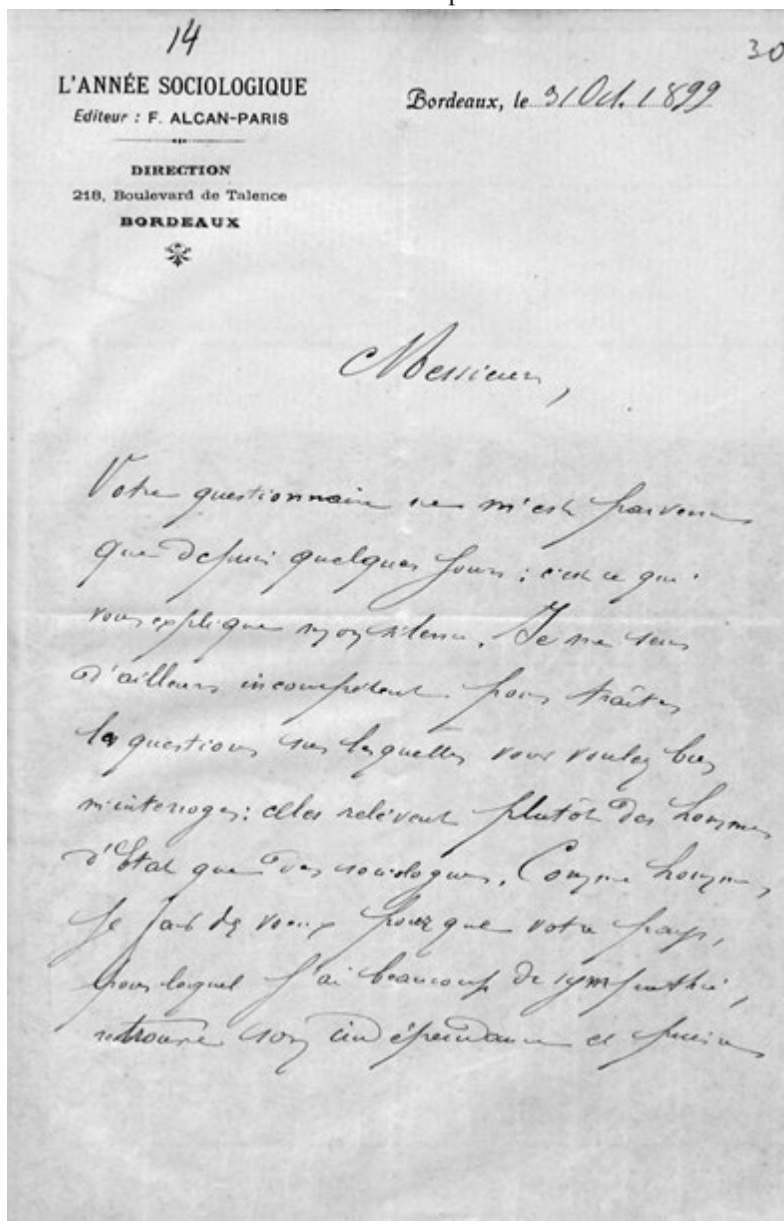
The answers we expect to receive will allow us to evaluate how Poland's social and political significance is viewed in Western Europe; the answers will be published in a special *Krytyka* pamphlet on 1 January 1900. Please be so kind as to accept our questionnaire and send your response before 15 October 1899.

With gratitude and expressions of deepest respect,
The Editors of *Krytyka*

The editorial board received over fifty answers, including those from two outstanding sociologists, Emile Durkheim, then professor of sociology at the University of Bordeaux and Ferdinand Tönnies (the 'scholar, historian'), from Tomáš Masaryk, then professor of philosophy in Prague and future president of Czechoslovakia, from Karl Kautsky (the 'journalist, sociologist'), Georgi Plekhanov ('socialist, author of numerous works'), Cesare Lombroso ('professor of criminal anthropology'), and a pair of other scholars, who are today less well known: Carlo Gabba ('professor of social

sciences') from Florence, and Augustin Hamon ('author of psychological and sociological works'). The editors published the questionnaire and all the responses, in their original versions and in translation, in the journal's second issue of 1900, and also in a separate pamphlet *The Polish Question in Europe's Opinion: an International Survey Undertaken by the Editors of Krytyka* (1900).

The Durkheim's answer whose facsimile is presented below was as follows:¹



¹ The original of this letter has been preserved in the Manuscript Department of Jagiellonian Library in Cracow (Rkp. BJ 6034 III, 30–31).

développer son génie propre. Comme sociologue,
 je ne puis que blâmer les efforts faits pour
 vos germaniser et vos usurper, violer, et,
 et dans l'intérêt commun de l'humanité
 civile, que chaque groupe social conserve
 son originalité. Toute politique qui a
 pour but d'enlever à un peuple sa personnalité,
 son humour, son tempérament, est mauvaise ;
 car elle est destructrice de forces vives. Aussi
 je suis assuré que, si elle se maintient une
 civilisation polonaise, elle arrivera tôt ou
 tard à reconquérir l'autonomie nationale
 et son développement normal. Et par son
 genre de vie, par quels moyens pourra
 se produire cet heureux événement, c'est
 à qui vous devez répondre. Bien des

Transformation pourront avoir lieu
 dans l'équilibre intérieur de l'Europe,
 dont votre patrie pourra profiter.

Veuillez agréer, je vous prie
 Messieurs, l'assurance de ma
 considération pour Distinguer

J. Durkheim
 Professeur de Sociologie
 à l'Université
 de Bordeaux.

In translation (from Polish):

It was only a few days ago that I received your questionnaire: this will explain to you my silence. Furthermore, I feel that I am not competent to resolve the questions you are asking me. They pertain rather to statesmen than to sociologists. As a human being, I can only wish that your country, for which I have a great deal of sympathy, should attain its independence and be able to develop in the spirit proper to it. As a sociologist, I can only deplore all impulses to Germanisation or Russification by force; it is after all in the interests of the civilised world that each social group should retain its originality. Any policy aimed at depriving any nation whatsoever of its personality, character, temperament is evil; this is because it destroys the energy. Thus I am convinced that if Polish civilisation persists, it will sooner or later acquire the autonomy necessary for its normal development. But in what form, by what means this happy event might occur—that I cannot foretell. Very many changes, by which your country could benefit, could occur to the internal balance of Europe.

Durkheim's biographers discovered this text very late and its original was published only in 1976, together with a few other minor texts by the author of *Le suicide*, in *Revue française de Sociologie*, on the basis of handwritten text in the Jagiellonian Library in Cracow (Besnard 1976). The letter in *Krytyka* was the first of Durkheim's texts to be published in the lands of partitioned Poland.

A word about what other thinkers wrote: all expressed support for Poland's aspirations. However, Tönnies saw Poland's future 'in close connection with [...] German civilisation' and linked it to the Polish nation's break with the Catholic Church, as this latter resisted the contemporary state and would not allow it to be 'raised to the level of an ethical union'. Masaryk, for his part, advised Poles that since they could not achieve independence 'by a policy of armed force', they should concentrate on 'civilisational work'... 'to create a social rather than political policy, and work on the moral elevation of the nation'. 'Is it truly the foreign usurpers alone who are guilty of Poland's downfall?' he rhetorically asked the Poles. Kautsky tied Poland's independence with the victory of democracy in Eastern Europe and because he connected this solely with 'the victory of the socialist proletariat' he wrote: 'I am afraid that Poland's independence will have to wait for that moment'. (Obviously he thought the moment distant!) Similarly, Plekhanov linked resolution of the Polish question with 'the success of the Polish workers' movement'. Lombroso wrote that after freeing itself from the yoke of Germany and Russia, and from 'superstitions and clericalism', Poland could go in the same direction as France, and could even overtake it, because 'in Poland, the races are more mixed than in any other country', and 'the confusion of races is a prime factor in civilisation.'

Sienkiewicz's Survey

Durkheim's second statement on the Polish question was his response to 'the Sienkiewicz survey'. In November 1907, with the aim of accelerating German colonisation, the Prussian government presented to the Reichstag draft legislation on the expropriation of land from Polish owners. In reaction, the Polish National Council in Lvov decided to organise, with the help of its Press Information Bureau in Paris, an international survey (*enquête*) in circles opposed to Prussian policies. Henryk

Sienkiewicz, the Nobel prize-winner for literature in 1905, added his authority and fame to the undertaking. He also wrote the appeal for statements on the question of the Prussian legislation: ‘We are asking [for statements of opinion] not because we could, even for a moment, doubt that your opinion will be anything other than a voice of indignation and condemnation, but because its public expression will stigmatise the greatest injury and greatest blemish on the history of the 20th century; it will comfort the Polish nation and simultaneously could even help all those honest Germans who, not wanting to be disgraced before the whole world, are fighting hard against the Prussian government’s unconstitutional and shameful design’ (Plygawko 1964).

Supported by the liberal press, this appeal evoked a large response. The request for statements was sent to nearly a thousand intellectuals and politicians from throughout Europe and America. Answers were sent by 268 persons, including the sociologists Vilfredo Pareto from Lausanne, Emile Durkheim from the Sorbonne, Jean Izoulet, his neighbour from the Collège de France, and Achille Loria from the University of Turin. Nearly all the answers appeared in the book *Prusse et Pologne* (1909), which was published in Paris. The survey had political not cognitive aims; it was supposed to mobilise public opinion rather than canvass it, and thus the book did not contain the critical response of Maxim Gorky, the Russian revolutionary writer, and perhaps other similar responses.² The answers were printed in European newspapers, including in the Austrian and Russian partitions of Poland; they expressed and influenced public opinion.

Durkheim’s response, one of the first received, read as follows:

Je ne connais pas dans ses détails la loi qui est actuellement soumise à la Diète prussienne. Mais le principe sur lequel elle repose ne peut que soulever un mouvement universel de réprobation auquel je me fais un devoir de m’associer.

I am giving it in the original, on the basis of the book *Prusse et Pologne*, because it is not known to Durkheim’s biographers and is not noted in the most precise bibliography of his published texts (<http://durkheim.uchicago.edu/Bibliography/Bib01.html>).

This response, although extremely economical, was received as moral support for the Polish national spirit and appeared in the Cracow daily *Czas* on 8 January 1908. In English translation:

I do not know the details of the law which is presently submitted to the Prussian parliament. But the principle on which it rests can only rouse a universal motion of condemnation with which I consider it my duty to associate myself.

Emile Durkheim

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² Gorky wrote to Sienkiewicz that he had a high opinion of his talent, but believed that the artist “should know who the enemies of our people are;” he protested against Sienkiewicz appealing to German Emperor Wilhelm II with such arguments as the “peaceful” behaviour of the Poles, who were “not kindling in the fire of revolution,” were punctually paying their taxes and providing soldiers for the Prussian army. “These words give me reason to doubt the strength of your love for the Polish people”—Gorky concluded. It is curious that Lenin, to whom in a letter Gorky reported the content of his reply to Sienkiewicz, wrote back that “Sienkiewicz will no doubt publish it since it is an opinion poll” (Lenin 1974: 379–382).

This summary of Emile Durkheim's statements on the Polish question does not perceptibly increase our knowledge of the author of *Rules of the Sociological Method*. It shows, however, that already at the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries, Durkheim was not only known to Polish scholars (Sułek 2009) but was treated as an authority in the area of 'politics and morality'.

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