

## On a Classic Thinker, Classically

Marcel Fournier, *Émile Durkheim. A Biography*,  
Cambridge 2013 : Polity Press, 866 pp.  
ISBN: 9780745646459

Six years after the publication of the French edition, an English translation has appeared of a biography of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) by Marcel Fournier, a professor at the University of Montreal. The book is an event for historians of sociology—a new synthesis of the research that has been done in the thirty-five years since Steven Lukes’ groundbreaking work. Reading Fournier’s book is not only important for historians of the discipline, however, but for all sociologists, as Durkheim’s work forms part of the fund of knowledge shared by all researchers. Classic sociological writings form part of the outlook of every representative of the social sciences; they integrate and stabilize the academic community, while simultaneously still giving impetus to its undertakings.

The biography by Fournier is long. With the footnotes, which make an essential supplement to the text, it has 866 pages. It presents Durkheim polymorphically as a scholar, teacher, lecturer, active participant in academic discussions, observer of social change, sometimes politically engaged intellectual, editor of *L’Année sociologique*, leader of a social sciences school, authority and mentor for his young colleagues, regent of the Sorbonne, Jew, neurasthenic, son, brother, husband, and father. This biography makes Durkheim’s sociology, which we study in the first years of our university education, an organic element in the tale of a genuine human being: a tale that is very traditional in its aims, forms, and manner of narration.

The book keeps Durkheim in a central position. It is not an attempt to speak about the history of something else through a biographic prism. If, on the occasion, Fournier writes fascinatingly about French Judaism, about the schools and universities of the Third Republic, intellectual climate, academic ethos, political and scientific disputes, mentalities and habits, of the occupation of Alsace, the Dreyfus Affair, or the First World War, it is because Durkheim’s life was entwined with all of these. They constitute, however, a background: reconstruction of the historical, cultural, political, and intellectual context allows the individual, socially located therein, to be understood without eliminating his subjective autonomy.

Fournier's book adopts the most obvious form for a biography: Durkheim's life is presented in chronological order. The impression is that the author is guided solely by the sources available—most readily, wherever possible, allowing the protagonist to speak for himself. The biography is very heavily supplied with quotes and these have been linked to form a fine narrative. Fournier speculates unwillingly; he constantly bases himself, in every detail, on the source material, confronting one with the other and leaving questions unresolved where no further evidentiary proceedings are possible. The collection of sources and limiting of authorial commentary and interpretation are intended to ensure the biography's scientific validity. Obviously, Fournier, as a student of Pierre Bourdieu, will not have succumbed to the 'biographical illusion'. He is aware that all biographical writing endows the described life with meaning. Fournier consciously makes use of past biographical achievements, the sociology of science, and the history of ideas. The strength of the book is its realization of theoretical postulates without burdening the text with a theoretical apparatus. We are provided with an unusually thick description, to which, at least to a certain degree, we can give our own theoretical sense. The work is open in a dual sense: it can be supplemented by successive discoveries of fact, but above all, both Durkheim's life and his work can be grasped within the theoretical structure.

Fournier's work does not provide a new, breakthrough interpretation of Durkheim's thought; the biography reconstructs the context of discovery and not its justification. The book does not constitute a summary of contemporary discussions about the work of the classic French sociologist, nor is it an exhaustive bibliographical source of such works and analyses. In this sense, it is decidedly more the work of an historian than of a theoretician of sociology. Although both disciplines frequently use identical material, the principles organizing their texts are different: a historian seeks the origins of ideas, while a theoretician makes a rational reconstruction of a work.

In the course of narration, Fournier systematically, intricately, presents the main theses, origins, and further fates of Durkheim's succeeding texts, including those that are less well known—if at all—and accessible to the average sociologist. Durkheim's books are incorporated into the account of his incessant reading and his disputes, meetings, lectures, public debates, critiques, and polemics. We are disabused of the impression that Durkheim was a productive scholar for only a few years of his life. On the contrary, we see him continually at work, with breaks only when he felt impelled or on a doctor's orders.

The work of classic thinkers can be read in two coequal manners. Some regard such works as the best of their kind, providing the bases for paradigms and abstractly exemplifying existing ideas. The aim of such reading is to ready a framework of views, to juxtapose the key intuitions contained in the text, and to reconstruct arguments that can be considered *sub specie aeternitatis*. The author of a work read in this manner becomes an intellectual construct, alienated from the specific historical context of the figure to whom we refer in our academic work. The competing, nominalist, reading does not have the aim of making adjustments or detecting contradictions. Reading a classic work consists in working out its ideas and theses as they were formulated and had validity in certain historical circumstances. A change of context leads to a re-

constitution of meanings. Deciphering historical meanings requires adopting the perspective of the author. The first theoreticians—realists—might be disappointed with Fournier's work: there aren't any questions here about the relevance of Durkheim's ideas, any daring interpretations, startling textual reconstructions or explications, or even quarrels with the old ones. Nominalists will find invaluable material in the biography for their research. We have the opportunity to see Durkheim not only as the author of a certain paradigm, but also as the founder of an intellectual school.

Durkheim's biography should encourage Poles to study their own Durkheimist tradition as well. In reading Fournier, however, there are few Polish motifs to be found. Durkheim was supposedly helped in formulating his initial questions concerning the sources of national unity by studying Ludwig Gumplowicz (1838–1909) and his antagonistic vision of social life. Then there is mention of a professor at the University of Warsaw (Russian at that time), Feodor Sigel (1845–1921), who was known for the lectures he gave in 1900 on the subject of Slavonic law (published in 1902 as *Lectures on Slavonic Law: Being the Ilchester Lectures for the Year 1900*) and who did several reviews for the third volume of *L'Année sociologique*. Finally, there is a word about Stefan Czarnowski (1879–1937), the only Polish Durkheimist, a student of Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert at the *École pratique des hautes études*. In 1912 Czarnowski allegedly met Durkheim and made a very good impression on him. We learn that a book by the Polish sociologist on the cult of St. Patrick was ready then and was even printed in *L'Année sociologique* series, which annoyed Durkheim as he had not had time to read the book through. In the end, the work was published in 1919, with an introduction by Henri Hubert, and was entitled *Le culte des héros et ses conditions sociales. Saint Patrick, l'héros national de l'Irlande*.

This thick biography, published by Polity Press, has a wrapper with a characteristic photo of Durkheim. Fournier's work is a narrative; it is less suitable for those who might wish to use it as an encyclopedia. The text is divided, it is true, into small portions—parts, chapters, and subchapters—but the book lacks a precise table of contents to help the reader navigate. Other facilitations would also have been useful: if only, for instance, a table showing the succeeding issues of *L'Année sociologique* or maps on which places connected with Durkheim could quickly and easily be located. It is also a pity that no room was found for photographs: of Durkheim, his family and friends, the bust that was made of him for his jubilee, or the buildings in which he lived. There aren't any reproductions of letters or documents. These omissions are compensated for by the narrative, which in places is almost novelistic, and the impressive translation by David Macey, author of books on Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault and translator into English of, among other writers, Alain Touraine and Jean-Claude Kaufmann.

The history of the natural sciences is practiced independently of them. It is otherwise in sociology—theoreticians and empiricists actively study the works of their discipline's founders. Durkheim's works are among those classics of the social sciences for which we regularly reach in search of legitimation for our own ideas and to show the worthy genesis of the issues we are investigating. Above all, however, in returning to these hundred-year-old works we treat them as equal with contemporary sources

for forming new research projects or for pointing out weakness in the premises of paradigms we are criticizing. While in the natural sciences, the roots of scientific ideas are basically worn away with time, their effects being either added to the body of certainties or forgotten, social science continually returns to read the works of its founders. Thus Fournier's work should be placed not at the margins of sociology, but at its centre.

Jakub Bazyli Motrenko  
Institute of Sociology  
University of Warsaw  
motrenkoja@is.uw.edu.pl