



Bellah's Durkheim: A fruitful reinvention?

Jean-Louis Fabiani¹ 

Accepted: 13 June 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

The contribution is based on Robert Bellah's introduction to Emile Durkheim on *Morality and Society* (1973) and second on other references to the French sociologist in Bellah's work as well as in Bortolini's insightful remarks on the "homology" between Durkheim and Bellah. The publication of the book took place in a time of Durkheimian effervescence: Steven Lukes' *Emile Durkheim. His Life and Work* was published on the same year and a new Durkheimology appeared in the English-speaking world: attention shifted from methodology, as expressed in *Suicide* or in the *Rules of Sociological Method*, to morality with a focus on the moral basis on a non-pathological society. Bellah's statement is quite strong: Durkheim can "be seen as a theologian of French civil religion". The paper will examine's this point of view with respect to the state of French society at the turn of the century and Durkheim's social project. One side question concerns the choice of texts: the editor did not give enough weight to texts that might have strengthen Bellah's point of view, particularly *l'Education morale*. Bortolini mentions Bob's long and silent work on Durkheim and his critique of mainstream analysis of *The Elementary forms of Religious Life*, reducing religion to a mere projection of society (:142). The biographer insists on the ambivalent, if not contradictory, vision of Durkheim in Bellah's work, in which he finds a key to the interpretation of the oeuvre. The article focuses on how to account for its complexity, which is never as clear as in the interpretation of Durkheim's sociology in a post-rationalist direction. Bortolini's concept of role model/hero incarnated by the founding fathers (here Weber and Durkheim) is analyzed in connection with Parsons' reconstitution of a pantheon. The question of civil religion is reexamined in the light of the transatlantic transfers carrying different meanings of civil religion.

Keywords Civil religion · Effervescence · Crisis · Secularism · Hero · Reinvention · Subjectivity

✉ Jean-Louis Fabiani
fabianij@ceu.edu

¹ Central European University, Vienna, Austria

On the eve of the First World War, Durkheimian sociology got a first institutional recognition. Durkheim's course on *Pragmatism and sociology* inaugurated the first chair, in French universities, officially designated as a chair in sociology. The sociologist had taught at the Sorbonne as a Professor of Science of Education for more than ten years (BacIOCchi & Fabiani, 2012). The change in the denomination of the appointment did not mean that sociology was then an autonomous discipline apart from philosophy, still considered in the French educational system of the Third Republic, as the "crowning discipline", able to subsume the growing diversity of the social sciences (Fabiani, 1988). However, it meant a lot for the founding father of French sociology, who had tried in vain to become Professor at the Collège de France and have his discipline recognized by a dedicated chair. The consecration was limited though, as no specific curriculum in sociology existed. One had to wait until 1958 to see a B.A. in sociology created in France. The First World War decimated the Durkheimians and the conservative institutional mood of the post-war times did not give any official space to the social sciences, despite her exuberant emergence at the turn of the century. This is well known, as well as the discreet and fecund survival of a sociological spirit in other disciplines (anthropology, economics, ancient history, sinology, etc.). In the early 1950s, when French sociology got its first real institutionalization, Durkheim was considered as dead wood as well as the remain of the prehistory of the discipline, an ideologist and a philosopher more than a scientist. This is the reason why Durkheimian scholarship moved to the West, mainly to the United States, where Talcott Parsons revisited his work in a creative way, but far from the original. Susan Stedman Jones aptly analyzed the loss in translation that led to the American Durkheim, devoted to normative integration and reconfigured in a brand new functionalist system: "I could see that Durkheim's theoretical interest or language was not adequately expressed by Parsonianism...I was now becoming aware of the peculiar fate Durkheim had suffered: he was treated as a kind of badge of foreign authority for theories which only encapsulate a part of his thinking, but with which identified and through which he was interpreted" (Stedman Jones, 2001: IX). In an insightful criticism of functionalism, Dennis Wrong had shown long before the renewal of Durkheimian scholarship the distorted view that was at the basis of Parsons' reading: Parsons' theory overestimated the integration of/in society (Wrong, 1961). The basis of his theory is the "internalization of social norms". Human beings are motivated primarily by the desire to be recognized by others by developing a positive self-image. Human conduct is entirely the product of common norms or institutional patterns. Parsons read Durkheim through "Freudian" glasses (or so he thought). This is the meaning of the famous tenth chapter "Emile Durkheim on the Theory of Social Control" (particularly the paragraphs devoted to "the changing meaning of constraint" in the *Structure of Social Action* (Parsons, 1937). Constraint is no longer an external obstacle that one can experience but an internal norm conceived on the model of the Freudian superego. Through this move, the value of the notion is reversed: the Parsonian superego is a "happy" superego that guarantees internal harmony, whereas the Freudian superego was that of anxiety and guilt. Functionalist sociology is the superego without the id, it is the Hobbesian order without reference to the war of all against all, which is not only the state of nature, but the threat which weighs permanently on the execution of the social contract. Parsons' reading soon became the

dominant one, excluding the central issues of the “conscience collective”, “collective representations” and solidarity, and including the concept of system and its corollaries (homeostasis, internalization, social control). The concept of social constraint seems to have been misunderstood by Parsons too: Durkheim’s identification with the “Hobbesian problem of order” is illusory. Authority is entirely made of respect according to the French sociologist. Whatever the limitations of the notion when compared to the Weberian treatment of *Herrschaft* (domination), it has nothing to do with Hobbes’ vision of an individual consistently hostile to social life when she is not forced to obey. Although Bellah’s knowledge of Durkheim came mostly from his seminal years with Parsons, he quickly distanced himself from his mentor and developed a very original, albeit not apposite, view of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Is this fresh thinking more accurate than the functionalist frame that shaped Durkheim’s reception for so long? Is there an effective “homology” between him and the author of *The Broken Covenant*, as Matteo Bortolini suggests? Or his Bellah’s Durkheim as American as Parsons, but with a West Coast flavor? This question is worth an investigation. The first part of the article is devoted to the to the French founding father’s annexation to what seems to be an all-American tradition, civil religion. In a strong statement, Bellah claims that he “can be seen as a theologian of French civil religion”. Bortolini’s book makes room for much more complexity, as the author of *The Elementary Forms* is constantly reinscribed into a post-rationalist framework. Is the contradiction inherent to Bellah’s complex reconstruction or is it already encapsulated in Durkheim’s reorientation toward religion as the universal matrix of society? This point is developed in the second part. The inquiry will allow us, in the third part, to ask what recent scholarship allows us to say about Durkheim’s conception of religion in modern (and post-modern) societies.

Emile in the Bay Area

When he arrived in Berkeley, Bellah felt compelled to reshuffle his syllabus for his course on the sociology of religion. What he had got from Parsons then looked disembodied and abstract, deprived of the vivid dimension of the object. In the Durkheimian tradition, it is necessary to consider social facts as objective “things” that can be studied by a rigorous knowledge inspired by natural sciences. This implies that the sociologist does not share the effervescence manifested by the performers of a ritual. It is impossible to imagine the French sociologist warmed up, or worked up, by his object. The most deviant acts of the Totemic religion are accounted for with coldness and equanimity in *The Elementary Forms*, even when it comes to sex. Bellah was perfectly conscious of Durkheim’s imperturbable austerity. Significantly, he started his introduction to *Emile Durkheim on Education and Morality* with an anecdote showing that one had no interest to deviate from what I called “surtravail” (surplus-labor) in a previous description of collective commitment in the Durkheimian group (Fabiani, 2005): “There is an anecdote from Georges Davy about an occasion when Davy and Marcel Mauss, Durkheim’s nephew and disciple, had, on a warm summer day, left off work for a few minutes to have a beer on a sidewalk café. Catching a glimpse of his uncle coming out of the Sorbonne courtyard, Mauss

said to Davy: “Quick hide me! Here comes my uncle” and escaped behind one of the orange-trees decorating the café. After working on this book off and on for five years and exposing myself for long stretches at a time to Durkheim unrelieved tone of moral seriousness, I have had moments of sharing the feelings of Marcel Mauss on that occasion” (: VII). In his correspondence with his nephew, Durkheim blamed him for his womanizer’s inclination. Here we can find a clear account of the cultural gap between the two sociologists. Both can be characterized by seriousness, but for the French it is never a joyful one. We all know that Durkheim was deadly serious, that he was what today would be described as a workaholic, and that he was not the most playful individual. He used to say “Il faut ce qu’il faut” (what is needed is needed); “Mettons nous au travail.” Let us work as much as we can: this is not a slogan particularly suited for recreation. Such a rigid stance on Durkheim’s part had to do with the historical conditions pertaining to France of the early Third Republic. The newly restructured Sorbonne was still in its fragile infancy and was the subject of harsh attacks from conservative literati. As a symbolic figure of the New Sorbonne, Durkheim felt compelled to constantly underscore the demarcation line between art and science, literature and sociology. However, we must go deeper: Durkheim has grievances against excessive playfulness: “All aesthetic activity is healthy only if it is moderate. A too strong artistic sensitivity is an unhealthy phenomenon which cannot be generalized with harm being done to society” (Durkheim, 1893). As was the case with many other university professors at the turn of the century, Durkheim fought against what he called “anarchic dilettantism,” an ever-present risk for all those committed to understanding the social world. One can clearly see the difference with Bellah: his reading of Norman O. Brown’s *Love’s Body*, which is remarkably analyzed by Bortolini, would have been unthinkable for the austere Durkheim. The biographer notes that the book was “a collection of aphorisms, disjointed phrases, and powerful images” (Bortolini: 117), according to its motto: “there is only poetry”. The endeavor was characteristic of the late 1960s’. Even when it was released, it received a lot of criticisms for its lack of scholarship and intellectual confusion. On the contrary, Bellah was overwhelmed: “It is easy to be haunted, dominated by the reading-to be fucked by it”, he wrote in his diary in July 1968 (Bortolini: 118). He developed a theory of writing and reading as active and passive sexual intercourse (“The pen is my penis”). One should not limit the gap between the two sociologists of religion to opposing *Zeitgeist*: Durkheim was aware of Rimbaud’s famous definition: “The poet makes himself a visionary through a long, prodigious and rational disordering of all the senses” (Lettre à Paul Demeny, 1871). He just thought that sociology had nothing to do with poetry. Bortolini insists on the intensity of Bellah’s experience at that time, a mind-blowing one, which takes place at the very moment when he starts to work on his edition of Durkheim’s work. His course on religion had to be rethought in the light of *Love’s Body*. “I realized that when I started teaching, I was a disembodied ghost presenting abstract concepts” (Bortolini: 140). His new pedagogical attitude was based on a lived experience. Teaching religion was considered as a “kind of religious discipline” in itself (ibid.). Durkheim was wholly opposed to the blurring of borders between the explanatory endeavor and the object: distancing oneself from any type of subjectivity was the first methodological rule. Mixing his Harvard teaching inherited from Parsons with a kind of 1968 ter disordering of all the senses was

the best way of putting the classics dutifully arranged together by Parsons in an anti-rationalist bathwater, very far from Durkheim or Weber's fundamental insights. One of the great merits of Bortolini's book is to make the reader aware of this huge distortion, that a mere scholastic reading tends to obfuscate. Bellah was not really interested in Durkheimian scholarship, which was not existent at the time. Steven Lukes' innovative intellectual biography that triggered a new dynamic in research came out the same year as Bellah's collection of texts (Lukes, 1973). The new light shed on the French sociologist's work did not give all the answers on a very complex and sometimes contradictory endeavor but taught us to avoid its free use for any type of purpose. By acknowledging that any interpretation of reality was just an interpretation, Bellah radically separated himself from Durkheim's main ambition: being analytical and not interpretative and holding the basic assumption that social facts should be always treated as things.

Bellah was never interested in Durkheim as a methodologist (the author of the *Rules of Sociological Method*) or as a sociologist of knowledge (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is one of the first examples of it as one can find an attempt to construct a post-Kantian social genesis of categories of human understanding). He explicitly reduced Durkheim to one side of his work: "But he was not only a sociologist in the strict sense. He was a philosopher and a moralist in the great French tradition of moral thought" (Durkheim, 1973: X). Although it is true that Durkheim remained located in the philosophical field of his time (Fabiani, 2021), he viewed from the start his project as an *Aufhebung* of philosophy, the queen of disciplines being unable to deal with the social issues of the time. He called for another type and another style of investigation about society. The reintroduction of his work in a traditional form of philosophy is contrary to his lifelong commitment to supersede his initial training discipline. Bellah is not alone in "re-philosophizing" Durkheim. However, in doing that he introduces a serious analytical bias. There is more to come: "He was a high priest and theologian of civil religion of the Third Republic and a prophet calling not only modern France but Western society generally to mend its way in the face of a great social and moral crisis" (Durkheim, 1973: X). Here we clearly see that the rationalist founding father of a science conceived after the model of natural sciences is turned into a "high priest" and a "prophet" announcing a new religion. Durkheim avidly read Rousseau but never thought in the terms of a civil religion. At this point we can say that Bellah deliberately misread the French and offered a distorted view of his work. He did not hide the fact in his presentation of the collection of texts. He presented his choice as an issue of relevance: "I have chosen to concentrate on this broader aspect of Durkheim's self-conception, partly because this is what determined the nature of his life work and partly because this broader aspect is perhaps more relevant to the present crisis in our society and our discipline rather than the somewhat more specific influence Durkheim has had on American sociology" (ibid.).

There are two aspects in Bellah's appropriation. The first one is the assimilation of Durkheim project to what is a specific feature of American society, civil religion. If some phenomena in French society bear some family resemblance with Rousseau's notion, it is clear that the Third Republic banished any type of religious orientation, including, in its definition of the modern state and did not go back to the

public display of collective harmony that was at the core of the Revolutionary “fête” starting in 1790. As Phil Gorsky reminds us, “prophetic religion provides us with the original script for the American experiment—the Exodus story—and also with the primordial vision of a just society” (Gorsky, 2017: IX). There is nothing similar in the French Revolution, as the main actors wanted to dissociate the new state, as well as the new society, from any type of religion, since it was the main legitimizing tool of the monarchy, based on “divine right”. This does not mean that the idea of a republican sacredness was not in the air, but it never coalesced to produce something close to any form of civil religion. Gorsky points out that there is a difficulty inhering to Bellah’s notion of civil religion in America. As it is defined as the “religious dimension” of the “political realm”, it provides the citizens with a frame that makes sense of their history “in the light of transcendent reality” (Bellah, 1992: 3). Its existence is somewhat ambivalent: it is not opposed to organized religion, but it is more a conceptual framework than a public church. It is not compulsory but voluntary, as if the founding myth could be chosen among diverse forms of relationship to the nation. More, as Gorsky points out, the dividing line between civil religion and religious nationalism remains unclear (Gorsky, 2017: 17). Clearly, Bellah rejects “radical secularism” that, contrary to Comte’s promise of a positive religion having its own cult and priests, implies a total separation of church and state, but also of church and the nation as a whole. Religion should be taken out of politics. What Bellah could not think is the current state of religious pluralism in the Western world: many religions are just absent from the American “myth of origin”. How can it fit for the cosmopolitan era we live in? This might be a trivial question but the idea of a voluntary adhesion to civil religion makes things very difficult and tends to split the community between two categories of citizens.

The second element of Bellah’s appropriation is the common use of crisis by both sociologists. Durkheim, following partly Saint-Simon and Comte, put the notion at the center of his investigation. Modern France was depicted as being in deep crisis: the first, and central point in his theory, was the crisis of the division of labor (Durkheim, 1893) that led to a form of economic and political anomie; the second, which was partly a consequence of the first, was the weakening of the social bond, expressed in suicide as a consequence of the growth of individualism and the decline of collective structure (Durkheim, 1897); the third, less often mentioned, was the intellectual crisis, due to the inability of traditional humanities (including philosophy) to account for the present (Durkheim, 2005). One must note that the revival of religious beliefs was never seen as remedy for crisis and anomie. The sociologist proposed civic answers (such as the reconstitution of intermediate bodies—les corporations, or a profound reform of the educational system, which should be based on a pedagogy of science). For him, the ancient gods were dead forever. Of course, Bellah’s crisis was entirely different. He spoke of an “erosion” and a “corrosion” of religious and moral understandings in the present but acknowledged that the worm was early in the fruit: “I cannot exonerate the tradition of religious and morale self-understanding, which I am trying to understand and in part reappropriate, for a share of responsibility in our present trials. The Pilgrim Fathers had a conception of the covenant and of virtue which we badly need today. But almost from the moment they touched the American soil they broke that covenant and engaged into

unvirtuous actions” (Bellah, 1992: XXII). As one can see, the tone is very different from Durkheim, who sought to account in sociological terms for the crisis and offer technical answers that would bring back a form of homeostatic state. Bellah systematically associates morality with religion in *The Broken Covenant*. Durkheim equates moral with social: morality can be brought back only if a new social order is constructed. Religion is necessarily out of the game.

Durkheim in and with the Republic

Here, in a sort of imaginary conversation with Bellah, I would like to improve his vision of Durkheim by reinserting the latter in the French Republican experience which is strikingly different from the American. Durkheim was the son of a rabbi, but he decisively put it into brackets when he envisaged the conditions of possibility of a new social order.

In France, philosophical ideas (never religious) and the Republic seem indissolubly linked: it is generally believed that it is in the philosophical crucible that the first outline of a theory of the Republic was born and that it was gradually consolidated. The genealogy of a political practice is thus referred to a history of concepts. It appears thus as the shaping of an idea, in the long time of collective struggles, through a process which must be permanently reactivated not to be put in question: the Republic, even when it is weighted with a founding theory, can be at any moment the object of threats, as if the powerful apparatus of scholastic and ideological inculcation of which it had made its most tangible mark, the Public Instruction, had never succeeded in producing the durable dispositions of a habitus, in the radical sense of formative force of habits that Panofsky gave to it. Whether it was the young right-wing bourgeois who were inflamed by the new Sorbonne in the early years of the 20th century, the political elites who abdicated collectively in 1940, or the protesting forms of the extreme right that have developed since the 1980s, all the secessions point to the limits of the internalization of a model. If we consider it from the point of view of theory, what is called the Republic can be identified with the history of a series of replacements or reappropriations that associate proper names and notions (Montesquieu, Rousseau, Mably, Condorcet, reason, instruction, equality of conditions, separation of powers, etc.). One could speak of the invention of a tradition whose purpose is to create the conditions of a unified theory that can serve as a foundation for a new political order.

The republican idea, as far as we can grasp it in its permanent re-compositions since the French Revolution, is nothing other than a set of articulations between principles and events. If we consider that the beginnings of the Third Republic saw the republican idea stabilized in a form that was so widely explained that it could be believed to be perennial, we must first note that the theoretical work that guaranteed it was carried out by state intellectuals, civil servants of the nascent Republic, who rewrote the history of political ideas in a very original way. The originality of French intellectual history lies in the inseparable character of the process of theoretical legitimization of the republican order and of the device that sees the intellectual civil servant recognized in his autonomy insofar as she

adheres to the political principles of which he is herself, at all levels of the pedagogical hierarchy, the associated producer.

What are the main theoretical sources that the politicians of the Third Republic drew when they, through the fundamental laws passed between 1880 and 1884, gave a foundation to the republican Constitution? The republican idea appears as a paradoxical alloy between the posthumous reconstruction of a positive philosophy and the neo-Kantian rationalism which, under the impulse of Charles Renouvier, tends to become the common language of university philosophers. One can conceive some astonishment to see Auguste Comte appear in the pantheon of the Republic. His thought is not without affinities with counter-revolutionary theories. Charles Maurras even made him one of his masters of thought in a violently anti-republican perspective. The reference to Comte that Jules Ferry popularized inscribed him in a moderate form of republican ideology and programmed a considerable ideological re-elaboration: the Comtean political proposal was largely deactivated and reassembled in a completely different device.

Perhaps the most important element of the reference to Auguste Comte is contained in what can be called his epistemocentrism, which will be more clearly imprinted in the national collective life than positive religion. In founding French empirical sociology, Durkheim could not avoid proposing a general reappraisal of Comte's work, which had invented the term and designated for the science to come a space that was both epistemological and political. The author of *Suicide* clearly disqualified the Comtean edifice: "Today, little remains of the detail of the doctrine. The law of the three states is only of historical interest. The very terms in which Comte posed the problem made it insoluble. He believed in the existence of a unique law according to which human society in general developed, and it was this law that the sociologist had to discover" (Durkheim, 1915). Against Comte, Durkheim shows that "social reality is essentially complex, not unintelligible, but only refractory to simple forms" (*ibid.*). Presenting the state of the social sciences in France to the Italian public in 1895, he remarked that "our national spirit, filled with clarity, has a natural affinity with everything that is simple and, for this reason, comes to refuse to admit complexity, even where it exists. But Comte's work is the best propaedeutic to sociology. There is no solution of continuity between Comte and Durkheimian science: "Whatever reservations Comte's doctrine calls for, a very lively feeling for what social reality is is present everywhere. There is no better initiation to the study of sociology. Comte is installed in the space of a republican pedagogy in which education and the development of institutions of knowledge play a central role in the political project. The republican idea is inseparable from a political-intellectual configuration within which rational pedagogy is one of the instruments of the refoundation of a collective. Comte's proper name, much more than his work, which became a kind of historical curiosity from the beginning of the Third Republic, designates both the process of secularization of thought that the new pedagogical order promoted and the affirmation of the political effectiveness of the diffusion of knowledge. It is not through a founding narrative, nor through the establishment of explicit theoretical filiations that we can illuminate the relationship of the Republic to Comte, but rather from the implementation of a posture that associates a theory

of scientific production with a form of original philosophic engagement in the social world.

At the turn of the 20th century, Durkheimian sociologists and philosophers close to the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* shared, through their intensive use of the term "morality", the exigency of the social efficiency of intellectual work. Intellectual activity that does not contribute to public life is not worth an hour's effort. Durkheim agrees on this point with the metaphysicians of the *Revue*, which Stéphane Soulié defines as "the voluntarism of the idea against the dry positivism" (Soulié, 2009: 13). The heritage of Comte and that of Kant meet on this point. Such a point of view translates at the same time the strength of a civic commitment expressing the social optimism characteristic of academics who are justified in thinking that their function in the city is essential in the process of republican secularization, and the prevalence of an illusion, the one that makes them believe that it is enough for them to express themselves as philosophers or as sociologists to be that their message carries in a homogeneous social space. Durkheim's *Evolution of Pedagogical Thought* is a good illustration of this device: it is by presenting lessons on the history of the teaching system to the agrégatifs that one will obtain effects in view of their conversion to a "scientific pedagogy".

If Comte was enlisted after his death in the construction of the republican idea, and, if you like, against his will, the same cannot be said of the other great theoretical reference in the field, Charles Renouvier. The critical philosopher accompanied the attempts to establish the Republic in 1848, when he wrote a *Republican Manual of Man and the Citizen*, as well as in 1870. By opposing the ill-considered uses of the notion of the people, and by developing the notion of moral education, he contributed to the drawing of another figure of the Republic, henceforth defined as a "regime of principles". The reference to principles authorizes Renouvier to criticize from a republican point of view the most apparently radical forms of republicanism and to recover the republican spirit of the Revolution against the revolutionaries and especially against our own illusions. The Renouvierist Republic has neither a window on the radiant future nor insurrectionary rhetoric. The man of principles inaugurates, by leaning on the criticist philosophy, a regime of the true speech in politics which constitutes a powerful tradition in France, but whose range was often attenuated by the vocal power of the tribunes of the people. A discreet figure in the Republic, Renouvier nonetheless ensured a form of intellectual continuity, first by the length of his presence in the intellectual world, and then by the influence he exerted on those who, both in the administration and in the university, were working to produce a new definition of teaching and to draw the features of a new figure of the public intellectual. Durkheim had a portrait of Renouvier on his desk. Rejecting revolutionary exuberance, he was concerned with associating the moral dimension and the concern for the administration of things with political commitment.

I am quite sure that Bellah would basically agree with my account. His introduction to Durkheim draws on rather established scholarship, although he wrote it before the publication of Lukes' *Emile Durkheim. His Life and Work* (1973) and Filloux's *Durkheim et le socialisme* (1977) which shed considerable new light on the work, although he quoted Filloux's introduction to *La science morale et l'action* (Durkheim, 1970) which contains some elements of his future work. He was well

aware of the fact that in the French sociologist's work, religious references did not play an active role, but were only treated as historical forms. In his introduction to the volume of *The Heritage Series*, he acknowledged that "his references to Judaism, as to Christianity, are always respectful, but it is clear that in his opinion both were outmoded in the modern world". He appositely added that his own highest commitments were to rationality, science and humanity and to French society insofar it embodied these ideals" (Durkheim, 1973: XII).

However, in a footnote related to the conclusion of the *Elementary Forms*, Bellah writes that "this quotation also bears on the "civil religion" idea (Durkheim, 1973: 229). Here he adds something that does not exist in Durkheim 's original wording, which is the following: "This moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies, either in their object, the result which they produce, or the processes employed to attain these results. What essential difference is there between an assembly of Christians celebrating the principal dates of the life of Christ, or Jews remembering the Exodus from Egypt or the promulgation of the decalogue, and a reunion of citizens commemorating the promulgation of a new moral or legal system or some great event in the national life?" (Durkheim, 1973: XLIX). If we read this excerpt quickly, we might agree with Bellah: the French sociologist assimilates public republican gatherings to the great religious ceremonies. However, he draws a conclusion that does not seem to be contained in the analogy: if a public gathering is analogous to a religious one, it does not imply that the first is religious in character. It just means that both express the same form of collective behavior, the unity of a place, the emotional discharge and the rituals. Re-reading Durkheim, Erving Goffman has secularized the ritual and made use of it to account for interaction in everyday life (Goffman, 1967). Randall Collins went on with a general theory of interaction rites (Collins, 2004). I do think that they grasped what Durkheim had in mind when he wrote the conclusion of his last great book: we can use religious ceremonies as a template to account for collective behavior. Religions are defined as the matrix of the collective representations of social life in its earliest form. In the quote, Durkheim did not mention Totemic religion, but he could have done it without any damage. The blurring of the distinction between polytheism and monotheism, which proved Durkheim's audacity, indicates that he conceived a fully secular approach of religion as a full-fledged social object, perhaps the perfect one, the easiest to analyze as it is entirely codified and made explicit. Saying that religion is a matrix of any type of sociality does not make religious belief an imperative still to be found in modernity. Asserting that religion is an eternal phenomenon does not mean that it must take the renewed shape of monotheism. One could object at this point that Durkheim mentions the Jews and the Christians, and not the Aborigines when it comes to the reloading of collective representations through public ceremonies. But in his coup de force, making religion a universal equivalent to all types of social nexus, I see the will to construct a world that would be based on the rationality of science, which stemmed out of religion as a more advanced analytical framework of the physical and social world. Religion as the science of the past cannot be resurrected. The ancient gods are dead and buried. This applies to his rabbi father's beliefs too. Thus, the age of science makes us enter a new regime of belief, which does not mean that we must get rid of the emotional substance of

social life. Durkheim is at pains to give a clear picture of the new regime: particularly, the emphatic ending of *The Elementary Forms* led many to interpret it as a return to religion. In doing so, he left the rational analysis of religious fact open to the conflict of interpretations. What makes the “secular” reading of Durkheim seemingly stronger than the “new civil religion” hypothesis? Bellah has a quite powerful argument when he reads the French sociologist *à la lettre*. Discarding Comte’s naïve attempt to revive religion in a post-religious form (the religion of humanity), Durkheim becomes prophetic: “A day will come when our societies will know again those hours of collective effervescence, in the course of which new ideas arise and new formulae are found which serve for a while as a guide to humanity; and when these hours shall have passed through once, men will spontaneously feel the need of reliving from time to time in thought, that is to say, of keeping alive their memories by means of celebration which regularly reproduce their fruits” (Durkheim, 1973: XLVII). Sociologists should never say “one day will come” since they will be immediately branded as prophets. But one must acknowledge that there is a lack of clarity in Durkheim’s theory of creative effervescence and collective remembrance of it, as if the scientific analysis of religion, which is the main objective of the book, proved impossible to achieve. Let’s try now to see why Bellah had some reasons for having seen the French sociologist as a prophet.

The enigma of the Elementary Forms of Religious Life

In the effervescence of the Summer 1968, Bellah sketched a reinterpretation of Durkheim that aimed to challenge his rationalism and the commonly accepted notion of religion as symbolic representation of society. He acknowledged the centrality of the *Forms* in a very peculiar way: Bortolini clearly shows that his re-reading of the French sociologist expressed a very strong desire to break away from functionalism and to “deparsonize” his work. The intention was excellent, but he largely missed the point by adding one layer to a long tradition of misreading, or, perhaps more accurately, of interested and almost predatory reading. Bortolini writes: “Now he wanted to save Durkheim (and himself) from the deadly embrace of functionalism and make him the major forerunner of interpretative social science—a position that, at the time, was occupied by either Weber or Schutz (Bortolini, 2021: 142). Preparatory notes make even clearer this re-oriented reading: “Various thoughts for Durkheim introduction: Durkheim as a visionary-stress collective effervescence. The difference between society alive and society dead. Durkheim’s theory of symbolism. His notion of solidarity and integration. All of this not primarily to be dealt with in Marxist terms but more modern. The form and the *unreadable* in Durkheim. The vital glowing image of society. Mother? Apparently, no father—no Führer-prinzip (sic). “Society” gives almost everything. Is his definition of God literalist? Or symbolic? Elementary Forms as central. The other selections as elucidating (sic) it”. I will argue that this interpretative reinterpretation, far from restituting the real Durkheim, has taken us further away. Paradoxically, Bellah provided us with a new image that was very close to the mainstream reading in France at the time of publication (1912). The sociologist was at last recognized as a no reductionist thinker.

The philosophical reception of *The Elementary Forms* was clearly positive, in spite of the full historicization of mental categories. The *Société française de philosophie* held a full session on the book. The harsh comments by the venerable Catholic philosopher Jules Lachelier were the sole exception. He said: “The God I am thinking of is not the one that is adored at crossroads and the religion I am talking about ignores the cults you are alluding to” (*Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, 1913: 90, my translation). Alphonse Darlu praised “the force and beauty in the book” and Henri Delacroix, who taught philosophy of religion at the Sorbonne, said to the author that his book “seemed masterly to him.” Durkheim’s appraisal was not purely circumstantial. In an earlier session of the Society devoted to the determination of the moral fact, which was less consensual, some agreement was reached. Léon Brunschvicg could address the sociologist in these terms: “It seems to me that I am able to follow most of the theses that you have presented, but you will forgive me if I succumb to the temptation to translate my approval in my own language” (*Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, 1906: 169–212, my translation). Philosophers considered Durkheim, contrary to many social scientists of the time, as a peer. His book appeared in a specific context. It was part of an ongoing debate on science and religion that crossed diverse segments of French intellectual life. Contrary to the common picture of a fully secularized French philosophy, the issue of religion remained central in the mind of philosophers (Fabiani, 2010). French rationalism had to fight what they called the “new mysticism” and the “crisis of reason” in the public. Durkheim contributed to the rational approach to religion that he shared with most of the French academic philosophers of the time, with the notable exception of Bergson. He tried to go beyond the antinomies of philosophical rationalism too. Traditional rationalism cannot properly answer this question: “Is it possible to submit to the procedures of science the very categories of thought that are the condition of possibility for science?” as Giovanni Paoletti writes (Paoletti 2012: 266, my translation). Durkheim considered that all collective representations have a double function: on the one hand, if they exist, this means that they are “socially true” as they express a social need. A member of society spontaneously acknowledges that form of truth. On the other hand, they can be analyzed as representations, mental states, or speculative forms by an external observer, either philosopher or scientist. The superiority of the sociologist over the philosopher lies in the fact that she is able to grasp both sides of the representation, the pragmatic and the speculative.

In the last twenty-five years, *The Elementary Forms* have been re-integrated in the broader frame of Durkheim’s central epistemological endeavor. Ann Rawls has been a pioneer in redirecting our attention to this: Durkheim’s epistemology, the argument for the social origins of the categories of the understanding, is his most important and most neglected argument. The argument, which is articulated mainly in the central chapters of *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le Système totémique en Australie* (1912), locates the origin of the fundamental categories of thought in the concrete empirical details of enacted practices. Unfortunately, this epistemological argument has been confused with Durkheim’s sociology of knowledge, leading to its general misinterpretation as an idealist argument that beliefs and collective representations are the origins of the basic categories of thought. As a consequence, the epistemology proper has been generally neglected » (Rawls, 1996:

430). *The Forms* can be fully understood only if we relate them to *Primitive classification* (Durkheim & Mauss, 1903) and *Pragmatism and Sociology* (Durkheim, 1983). The long and somewhat painful elaboration of Durkheim's epistemology, which appears in full clarity only at the end of his career, remains within a strong rationalist frame, while he tries to assess the weaknesses of a-priorism, empiricism and pragmatism. The first is dismissed because it cannot account for the social genesis of categories. The two others inevitably lead us toward irrationalism. The "neglected argument" occupies the center of the book and gives a key to Durkheim's whole project. It is difficult to miss it, but it is obvious that, as Rawls writes, it has been constantly missed. Bellah's blindness is not surprising, as religion tends to obfuscate epistemology.

Why is religion so important with respect to methodology and epistemology? In our research on the retrieved notes of Durkheim's lectures on pragmatism, which are central for the understanding of the oeuvre, we tried to account for this fact. Why is William James so present in the French sociologist's final work? If religion is so central for method, it is also because theory and practice are intimately linked in it. Religion provides the best example of the importance of practice in symbolic activities: every symbol must be performed to exist as a symbol. In this respect, pragmatism is very useful for Durkheim, since the relation between theory and practice is hardly deducible from his first theoretical ideas (the epistemology derived from the methodology advocated in the *Rules of Sociological method*, to put it simply). He needed pragmatism because it provided a highly suggestive way of assessing the importance of practice. However, the pure primacy of practice is in turn a defeat of reason. Durkheim's strategic use of pragmatism is very clever but has its shortcomings. The theme of 'effervescence'—the other name of practice in action—led to innumerable interpretations of Durkheim as an irrationalist. *Les Formes élémentaires* remained trapped in a contradiction, which stems from the book's ambivalent use of pragmatism. First put to work as a device to establish the importance of practice in religious life, and then in social life as a whole, it was rejected as triggering irrationalism and the collapse of social stable realities (Baciocchi & Fabiani, 2012: 31). There is no such thing as a pragmatist turn in Durkheim's later work, but a very interesting exploitation of acknowledging the primacy of practice in religious 'life', as the title of the book implies and the importance of the efficacy of rites clearly shows. The third part of the book is a key to understanding its earlier claims about adhesion to beliefs (Rawls, 2004). The many references to the non-illusory dimension of religion, perceived through the efficacy and "dynamogenic" (a Durkheimian word that indicates the importance of social and emotional energy in the social process) dimension of ritual performances, owe much to Durkheim's close reading of Anglo-American pragmatism.

If Bellah misread the *Forms*, as many previous readers, one can say that he had extenuating circumstances. By putting "effervescence" at the center of everything, he certainly remained faithful to the French master, but he failed to see that, despite his rigor and methodological striving, the latter never provided us with a clear concept. I already mention the notion of surplus, which Pierre-Michel Menger carefully analyzed (Menger, 2013). Durkheim used a kind of energetic model: the *Forms* are loaded with social electricity and dynamo-genesis, but their status in a fully rational model is never

explicit. In a previous work, I tried to measure to what extent effervescence could be considered as a valid analytical tool and not as of metaphor for something that can't be understood in rational terms (Fabiani, 2013). Durkheim presents a panoply of concepts like "surplus," "excess," "supplementary," and "free play," which indicate that psychic life and imagination are not simply adjusted to their functions. It is important to note that such an excess of play is already at work in primitive religion. Many gestures in rites have simply no function at all. They seem meaningless with regard to the functions that the rites perform, but religion cannot be efficient if its rites are reduced solely to their functions. Religion would not be itself, Durkheim says, if it granted no space to play and art. A rite is not a game; it is serious. But it is more than serious: its performance has to be playful and pleasurable. Durkheim is ambiguous on this point. In some ways, excess is always excessive and surplus is potentially harmful, even in religion. It was in *The Elementary Forms* that transgression of the rules was first presented as an important element in lay-popular fêtes, but in a footnote, Durkheim notes that we find the same transgression in religious ceremonies, particularly with regard to the rule of exogamy. These transgressions have no proper ritual meaning. They do not fit into the model; they are in excess since they seem to express a "simple discharge of activities" (Durkheim, 1912:548). But local interpretations of such transgressions are somewhat different. With very little additional comment, Durkheim writes that the indigenous peoples think that if the sexual transgression is not performed, then the ceremony will fail. The whole anthropological construction is ambivalent with regard to the value and function of surplus and transgression. It seems that to reinforce the collective rules, they must be violated in some parts in certain ways as to ensure the ceremony's success. But the breaking of the rules is never a component part of the rite, as anthropologists would reconstruct it; rather, it is a mere energetic discharge, superfluous but necessary, not to the rite itself, but to its effective performance. Here a lag exists between the rite and its effectuation. A parallel can be drawn between the man in a complex society who at day's end amuses himself to no functional purpose and the primitive group that performs rites to which they add non-functional elements. Both of these entail a discharge, a quantity of energy in excess, which sometimes appear to be in infinite supply. This discharge is simultaneously necessary to social life and somewhat harmful to it. The notions of effervescence, tumult and intensity, which characterize those intellectual and psychic forces at work in primitive religion, are never absolutely clear. In some ways they have to be contained by external elements and Durkheim evokes the pressure exerted by these tangible realities on the imagination, which can merely regulate this apparently limitless flow of energy. The same would apply to modern man, who might easily succumb to the temptation of ceaseless play, if the reality principle did not return him to the performance of his social duties.

Critics have often remarked that the very notion of effervescence has been at the core of innumerable misunderstandings and confusions. Although Durkheim had harshly criticized crowd psychology and theories of imitation, it seems that he was still prone to employ such theories in his later work. One is familiar with Evans-Pritchard's criticism on that topic. He thought that the analysis of the ritual side of Australian totemism was "the more obscure part of Durkheim's thesis, and also the most unconvincing part of it" (Evans-Pritchard, 1965). Pascal Michon goes yet further by claiming that Durkheim's description of effervescent mental states

in primitive religion is based upon notions of imitation and influence, developed by Le Bon in his crowd psychology as well as by the early Tarde, both of whom were his archenemies. Michon asserts that Durkheim adopted their anthropological dualism (Michon, 2005). The primitive man “runs helter-skelter like a lunatic” (Durkheim, 1912: 208); he forgets himself just as does the ordinary man in Le Bon’s modern crowd. Effervescence is an expression of “natural violence” and Durkheim is unable to explain this excitation in any other terms; his analysis suffers from the fact that the effervescence seems to have a circular logic, i.e., it helps create rites which in their turn produce a genuine effervescence.

Nature and society are obscurely intertwined, and Durkheim’s anthropological ambition gives way to a sort of prescriptive emotional mixture. This has been often noted, and as a result *The Elementary Forms* has very often been co-opted for anti-rational uses. Gratuitous activities bear a contradictory dimension: they may be seen as a kind of residual element of natural man’s unlimited desires, but they are also necessary to further psychic development. They must be regulated by economic necessity and the social principle of reality, while simultaneously remaining at the core of psychic and collective development.

As Durkheim put it, regulated tumult is still tumult (*ibid.*: 309). His thoughts on these issues are themselves tumultuous and somewhat obscure. He failed to develop a theory of excess, simply because it would threaten his rational theoretical construct. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, itself a superb artwork and an inspirational masterpiece as Watts Miller remarks, is very difficult to use in any socio-anthropological analysis (Watts Miller, 2004), but easy to transport us to a kind of psychedelic world, very far from Durkheim primary intentions. Bellah was undoubtedly seduced by this dimension, that fitted the spirit of the times. But he was not responsible for the complexity of effervescence, and perhaps, its implicit contradiction with Durkheim’s theory of society.

Bortolini writes that “Bellah’s complex and contradictory image of the French founder of sociology was the crucible where is Brownesque idea of religious symbolism, his need to combine systematic analysis with personal experience, his concept of civil religion, and his view of the engaged scholar could be molded into a single, original *prise de position* (Bortolini, 2021: 143). Bellah used Durkheim as a resource for his own endeavor. He pushed some ideas of the French to their limits, reframing them into the requirements of his own personal quest. The French pushed away any attempt to mingle personal experience with the necessarily objective and detached analysis of social facts. But society, primitive or modern, proved much less rational than his own epistemology: thus, he had to account for a part of social experience, including the religious one, with notions that were largely foreign to his original views, borrowing them from his enemies in the field, Tarde and Le Bon, and paving the way for tumultuous interpretations of his work. Clearly, he would not want to be interpreted. But this is the fate of all sociological writings, even when they stand on the side of analysis vs. interpretation. Was it a fruitful reinvention? The inaugural question should be reframed: can we escape misreading in the social sciences? Or is it a condition for the successful renewal of the ways by which we deal with the social world? I will just say that from Parsons to Garfinkel and Bellah, American sociology is rich

with “creative” readings of Durkheim. The fact that another survives in altered forms is a constant of intellectual history. We may like it or not, but this is a hard social fact.

Funding Open access funding provided by Central European University Private University. This article was not funded and is the outcome of the reading of texts.

Data Availability With respect to data transparency, the data are the outcome of reading published sources duly quoted.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethical Approval The author accepts (and complies with) all rules of ethics defined by the publisher and the editor.

Consents to Participate The authors hereby consents to participate in the issue of the American Sociologist devoted to Robert Bellah.

Consents to Publish If the article is accepted, the author consents that it will be published in the American Sociologist.

Conflict of Interest There is no conflict of interest neither in the article nor in the writer’s position.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Bacocchi, S., & Fabiani, J. L. (2012). Durkheim’s Lost Argument (1895–1955). *Critical Moves on Method and Truth. Durkheimian Studies*, 18, 19–40.
- Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie. (1906). Paris, Armand Colin.
- Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie. (1913). Paris, Armand Colin.
- Bellah, R. (1992) [1975]. *The Broken Covenant. American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, Chicago. The University of Chicago Press.
- Bortolini, M. (2021). *A Joyfully Serious Man*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Collins, R. C. (2004). *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton.
- Durkheim, E. (1893). *De la division du travail social. Etude sur l’organisation des sociétés supérieures*. Alcan.
- Durkheim, E. (1912). *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. Alcan.
- Durkheim, E. (1912) [1995]. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1915). La sociologie. Extrait de *La Science française*, Larousse et Ministère de l’Instruction publique et des Beaux-Arts, vol. 1, 1915, pp. 5 à 14. Reprinted in *Émile Durkheim, Textes*. 1. *Éléments d’une théorie sociale*, pp. 109 à 118.
- Durkheim, E. (1970). *La science sociale et l’action*. Presses universitaires de France.

- Durkheim, E. (1973). *Émile Durkheim. On Morality and Society. Selected Writings*. Ed. Robert Bellah, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; 34–42.
- Durkheim, E. (1983) *Pragmatism and Sociology*. Cambridge (UK), Cambridge University Press (French 1955).
- Durkheim, E. (2005). *The Evolution of Educational Thought. Lectures on the Formation and Development of Secondary Education in France*, London, Routledge.
- Durkheim, E., & Mauss, M. (1903). De quelques formes de classification - contribution à l'étude des représentations collectives. *Année Sociologique*, 6, Paris, Alcan.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1965). *Theories of Primitive Religion*. Clarendon Press.
- Fabiani, J. L. (1988). *Les philosophes de la République*. Éditions de Minuit.
- Fabiani, J. L. (2005). Faire école en sciences sociales. *Cahiers du Centre de recherches historiques*, No, 36, 191–207.
- Fabiani, J. L. (2010). *Qu'est-ce qu'un philosophe français? La vie sociale des concepts*. Paris, Editions de l'EHESS.
- Fabiani, J.L. (2013). Durkheim and Festivals: Art, Effervescence, and Institutions, *Durkheim, the Durkheimians, and the Arts*, edited by Alexander Riley, William Pickering and Willie Watts-Miller, Oxford-New York, Bergahn Books, 2013, p. 47–66.
- Fabiani, J. L. (2021). *Durkheim and the Philosophy of his Time*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Filloux, J.C. (1977). *Durkheim et le socialisme*. Genève, Droz.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual*. Doubleday.
- Gorski, Ph. (2017). *American Covenant*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Lukes, S. (1973). *Durkheim. His Life and Works. A Historical and Critical Study*. London: Allen Lane.
- Menger, P.-M. (2013). The Power of Imagination and the Economy of Desire: Durkheim and Art", *Durkheim, the Durkheimians, and the Arts*, edited by Alexander Riley, William Pickering and Willie Watts-Miller, Oxford-New York, Bergahn Books.
- Michon, P. (2005). *Rythmes, pouvoir, mondialisation*. Presses universitaires de France.
- Paoletti, G. (2012). *Durkheim et la philosophie. Représentation, réalité et lien social*, Paris, Garnier.
- Parsons, T. (1937). *The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers*. Mc Graw Hill.
- Rawls, A.W. (1996). Durkheim's Epistemology: The Neglected Argument. *American Journal of Sociology*, 102,(2):430–482.
- Rawls, A. W. (2004). *Epistemology and Practice. Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rimbaud, A. (1952). Correspondance, OEuvres complètes, Paris, Gallimard (17 avril 1971).
- Soulié, S. (2009). *Les philosophes en République: L'aventure intellectuelle de la Revue de métaphysique et de morale et de la Société française de philosophie (1891–1914)*. Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Stedman Jones, S. (2001). *Durkheim Reconsidered*. Polity Press.
- Watts Miller, W. (2004). Total Aesthetics. Art and The Elemental Forms. *Durkheimian Studies.*, 10, 88–118.
- Wrong, D. (1961). The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology. *American Sociological Review*, 26(2), 183–193.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.