

Bruno Latour as a Reader of Emile Durkheim

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Introduction

One aspect of Latour's modus operandi that is sometimes neglected is the fact that he is a *reader* of other texts. And indeed over the years he has produced a number of book reviews.

So how, then, does Latour review books? It will come as no surprise to note that the reviewing technique of a thinker like Latour operates in the back-and-forth grip of a creative tension. On the one hand, as we'd expect, his reviews are disciplined and trenchant, full of citation and faithful to the argumentational structure of the subject-text in hand—in many ways, his book reviews model responsible exegesis (of the sort he politely requests, but does not always receive, for his own writing). And yet, on the other hand, filtered as they are through the matrix of his own forms of intuition, all his reviews represent quasi-Latourian manifestos in their own right, wrenching the subject-text into an actuality of his choosing, examining it according to the epistemological and ontological schemata that lies at the heart of his own *Weltanschauung*. If, like me, you're interested in that, then Latour's book reviews will be a resource worth mining.

Naturally these reviews often fly under the radar. Often they're only in French. And so it'd be good to start the discussion going on one or two of them where we can, particularly for an English-speaking audience. Latour's recent review of Emile Durkheim's 1912 text in social theory, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, is one place to start. You can find it [here](#) in French (the review has not yet been translated into English).

It's no surprise that Latour would have wanted to address Durkheim, and in particular the Durkheimian sociological approach to religion, at some point. After all, the two inhabit a contiguous lexical space (that is to say, they often use theological vocabulary that sounds similar at first glance). Have we not encountered Durkheimian terms such as the following in relation to religion as a mode of existence: 'empirical grounding', 'immanent construction', '*les forces extérieures de religion*', and so on?

Latour's close reading of Durkheim, however, is primarily critical. In fact, we might even go so far as to say that the Durkheimian approach would represent something like an antonym to the entire structure of Latour's political theology. The basic point is easy enough to anticipate: as far as Latour is concerned, Durkheim's desire to uncover the 'elementary form' of religion in the world springs the very trap that his dynamic, immanent, processual ontology has taught us to avoid, namely, the premature unification of the proliferating agencies that actually comprise any regime of truth (in this case, the proliferating agencies of the beings of religion that comprise the regime of truth that we can call 'religion as a mode of existence'). In this sense, Latour will be castigating the Durkheimian sociological approach to religion for misconfiguring the very agencies it seeks to catalogue (through empirical data on aboriginal religion, etc) as being constitutive of religion. For Latour, Durkheim's foundational methodology is stunted and reductive, and therefore it cannot lead him to the phenomenon of religion itself.

And yet, towards the end of the review, Latour begins to creatively re-appropriate the book. This is where things get intriguing. Latour's basic argument will be something like the following: *in spite of his own intentions* Durkheim offers some footholds for a modal approach to empirical phenomena, and therefore he can even be thought of as prefiguring modes of existence such as 'politics' [POL], 'metamorphosis' [MET] and 'reproduction' [REP], as well as 'religion' [REL] of course. In fact, in regard to the latter, Latour will even suggest that contrary to his claim to have defined 'elementary' forms of religion by means of his sociological method, Durkheim actually ended

up defining ‘advanced’ forms of religion—not at all the sort of thing he set out to find (or thought he had find), but nevertheless forms of religion that turn out to be very similar to the one defined by Latour himself in his own work:

Je voudrais montrer que si ce livre utilise une forme élémentaire de sociologie, il développe en fait des formes avancées de théologie et qu'on doit lire sous la forme d'une théodicée, ce que Charles Péguy, adversaire décidé de toute théologie sociale, avait parfaitement reconnu. (p.3)

My translation: ‘I would like to show that if it is true that this book employs an elementary form of sociology, it actually develops advanced forms of theology, demanding to be read even as a form of theodicy—something that Charles Péguy, that resolute adversary of all such social-theology, knew perfectly well.’ (all translations my own)

Of course, the reference to Péguy here is resonant—for Péguy is the thinker of ‘religion as a mode of existence’ *par excellence*.

What this book review provides, then, is a fascinating exploration of some of the ‘blurred edges’ of the intellectual genealogy that Latour claims for his own work. A thinker like Durkheim would routinely be considered outside the world of the *Inquiry* (for goodness sake, Durkheim was actually engaged in polemics against William James and Gabriel Tarde, both of them *bona fide* heroes, and Latour himself has even staged a [historical reconstruction](#) of a debate *contra* Durkheim). And yet, it can still be said that Durkheim offers resources to his work. If he is read, somehow, through himself, perhaps in a Deleuzian register of some sort.

In conclusion, what this shows, I think, is that we must think of the historical genealogy of the modes of existence less as a zero-sum game defined by ruptures (this thinker was with us, that thinker was against us—let us mark out our friends from our enemies), and more as a series of flashings and obscurances, sometimes illuminating and sometimes concealing, and often combined in single thinkers or boundaried schools of thought.

1. Durkheim’s Sociological Method

Latour’s critique of Durkheim converges upon Durkheim’s sociological method. In the case of the book under review, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), this primarily refers to Durkheim’s use of the ethnographic data he adduces to explain the most primitive religion that was known at the time—namely, the totemic religion of Australian aborigines. For Latour, Durkheim’s handling of this data is faulty. The give-away is that the ‘universal’ explanation of religion that Durkheim derives from this ethnographic data is the same at the beginning as it is at the end of the book. What this reveals is that his empirical data hasn’t had any effect on his conclusions, which are now shown to have been *a priori* all along.

Malgré l’érudition manifestée tout au long, le lecteur ne peut s’empêcher de remarquer que les grandes thèses qui s’appliquent à toutes les formes de

religion, élémentaires ou avancées, ne subissent pas de transformation notable entre le début et la conclusion de l'ouvrage (p.2).

My translation: 'In spite of the erudition on display throughout, the reader can't help but notice that the grand theses that are applied to every form of religion, elementary as well as advanced, are not subject to any notable transformation between the beginning and the end of the work.'

What Durkheim is doing, then, is using a token empiricism to secure a universal conclusion, which is the polar opposite of the working method of ANT. With this in mind, for the main part of his review Latour offers a critique of Durkheim as being guilty of misconfiguring the nature of the (religious) agency he is dealing with.

Durkheim's basic line, of course, is that in *Elementary Forms* he is investigating the social forces and causes that are present in any given social milieu and that lead to the emergence of religious life. The agent he is handling, then, we might call *Dieu-Société* (p.7). What Latour shows, however, is that Durkheim presents us with an actor that can have no meaningful actions! What Durkheim does is first to over-animate his actor (by attributing to it the overweening power to cause every single expression of religion that the world has ever known), and, second, by consequence, to defenestrate his actor (because by endowing it with this power, this super-agent is in fact rendered unattributable as an empirical phenomenon in the world). The claims made on behalf of the actor *Dieu-Société* are superficially persuasive (hence, the influence of Durkheim's philosophy of religion on theologians ever since). But when subjected to a basic semiotic reading, this actor is shown to be insufficient to account for diversity of phenomena it is supposed to have produced. And so the question is begged:

De quelles actions est donc capable, dans le récit, l'acteur dont le nom est 'société'? (4).

My translation: 'In this narrative, then, of what actions is the actor that is called 'Society' capable?'

The ironies revealed here are legion—not least when we consider that, having mis-figured a chimerical 'metaphysical paymaster' into being with one hand, Durkheim then proceeds with the other to con-figure a full blown historical genealogy for that very same entity. That genealogy proceeds something like the following:

1. In early human societies religion was understood as nothing but a brute, non-comprehended, universal force.
2. Over time, this force found itself being reconfigured anthropomorphically and mythologically, such that what was once a non-comprehended force increasingly began to be figured in terms of a personal force of one sort or another (such as monotheist religions, pagan typologies, sophisticated modern spiritualities).
3. In the latter times, in a more sophisticated way, by dint of scientific method, we are able to recognize these forces as deriving from the 'collective effervescence' of society, with the hope

that in the future we might enjoy something like *une forme paradoxale de religion laïque* (p.4).

An agent equipped with a simple diadic causal motor is supposed to have generated this proliferating range of effects! Really! It is as if Durkheim is sending out an F-16 jet into battle, removing its mounted weapons capability, and then telling a story of its great success in defeating the enemy.

Of course, we can immediately spot the synergy between the *Dieu-Société* of Durkheim's text and the Modern category of 'Society', as developed in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) and elsewhere. Neither the *Dieu-Société* nor 'Society' can explain anything: rather, they are that which need to be explained (by means of the careful and labour-intensive analysis of proliferating agencies in the world):

Tout s'éclaire si la société n'est pas ce qui explique, mais ce qu'il convient d'expliquer (18).

My translation: 'Everything becomes clear if we take society not as that which explains, but what has to be explained.'

The Durkheimian sociologist of religion, then, is guilty of setting himself up as an arbitrator of privileged access to a metaphysical paymaster that lies behind every expression of religion that has ever been experienced. This is elitist, non-democratic, non-diplomatic behaviour. The Durkheimian sociologist waves before our eyes an object of enquiry that:

[...] ne peut pas être vue directement sinon par le sociologue équipée, grâce à la science, d'une sorte de masque de soudeur qui protégera ses yeux (p.6).

My translation: ' [...] cannot be seen directly other than by means of a sociology equipped, through science, with a kind of welder's mask that can protect one's eyes.'

Consider what Durkheim himself says: 'social action follows ways that are too circuitous and obscure, and employs psychical mechanisms that are too complex to allow the ordinary observer to see whence it comes. As long as scientific analysis does not come to teach it to them, men know well that they are acted upon, but they do not know by whom. So they must invent by themselves the idea of these powers with which they feel themselves in connection, and from that, we are able to catch a glimpse of the way by which they were led to represent them under forms that are really foreign to their nature and to transfigure them by thought' (*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, p.209).

2. The Durkheimian Religious Individual

The next critical insight Latour offers in regard to Durkheim's sociological method, and the philosophy of religion that ensues from it, is quite straightforward. He points out that if Durkheim's thesis concerning the religious-agency of the *Dieu-Société* is to hold water, Durkheim will need to posit an

account of the human subject that is weak to the same measure as the *Dieu-Société* is strong. The weakness of the human subject must correspond to the strength of the *Dieu-Société*. Latour calls this ‘the psychology of the weak individual’. For Durkheim, the human subject—his being, his identity, almost his very soul—must be understood as donated to him by dint of his submission to the cult of Society. At best it can therefore be said that the human subject enjoys ...

[...] *l'âme déversée sur lui par la société* (9).

My translation: ‘[...] *a soul that is discharged upon him by society*’ (perhaps we could translate this in a more dramatic way: ‘*a soul that is dumped upon him by society*’, the imagery suggesting precipitation dropped from a heavy cloud).

Without *Dieu-Société* as identity-provider, the Durkheimian human subject would remain a helpless monad, unable to enter into relations with the Other, and without even the most basic means of offering communication to companions. This is the mandatory situation of the Durkheimian account of hominization, as Durkheim himself explains:

If left to themselves, individual consciousnesses are closed to each other; they can communicate only by means of signs which express their internal states. If the communication established between them is to become a real communion, that is to say, a fusion of all particular sentiments into one common sentiment, the signs expressing them must themselves be fused into one single and unique resultant. It is the appearance of this that informs individuals that they are in harmony and makes them conscious of their moral unity. It is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that they become and feel themselves to be in unison. (*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, p.230).

For Durkheim, the higher achievements of the human spirit such as science and philosophy only become possible as a result of the *Dieu-Société*.

To borrow the language of *The Inquiry*, it is as if Durkheim is here wielding one single mode as that which alone can open up the play of all the others. The consequence, of course, is the hegemony of one mode and a disharmonic in understanding the world. Against this I would contrast one of my favourite passages in *The Inquiry*, the conclusion to part II of the book entitled ‘Arranging the Modes of Existence’, and in particular the multimodal account of hominization Latour proposes in the subsection entitled ‘Another Possible Position for Anthropogenesis’.

3. Critique and Re-appropriation of Durkheim

Finally, however, the screw begins to turn. Latour observes that periodically in the text of *Les formes élémentaires*, Durkheim seems to renege on his commitment to the unilateral arbitration of the agent: *Dieu-Société*. This agent, instead, comes to figuration as something that is dependent on the animation provided to it by humans or human collectives. Durkheim slips into this alternative register, for example, when he writes about the sacred objects of religion:

Sacred beings exist only when they are represented as such in the mind. When we cease to believe in them, it is as though they did not exist. Even those which have a material form and are given by sensible experience, depend upon the thought of the worshippers who adore them; for the sacred character which makes them objects of the cult is not given by their natural constitution; it is added to them by belief. The kangaroo is only an animal like all others; yet, for the men of the Kangaroo, it contains within it a principle which puts it outside the company of others, and this principle exists only in the minds of those who believe in it [...] So here we have another point of view, from which the services of men are necessary to them. (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p.345).

Durkheim previously stood by his hypothesis that the agent: *Dieu-Société* must be understood as the animator of human collectives and their religion. But here is something different. A switch has taken place. Now, Durkheim is apparently suggesting that human collectives must be understood as animators of the sacred. One metaphysical paymaster for another. What was first of all figured as an external agency now turns out to be generated entirely from within:

[...] *les forces extérieures de coercion deviennent des forces intérieures de respect et d'approbations.* (p.15)

My translation, '[...] those external forces of coercion have become interior forces of respect and endorsement'.

This movement will be familiar to all readers of Latour's critique of Modernity. This switching-between-the-two, this exercise of first-one-and-then-the-other, is exactly what he has previously described under the rubric of 'the power of critique' (*We Have Never Been Modern*, p.30 ff). It is a tool of Modernity. And for Latour, this is precisely the tool that is wielded by Durkheim at whim throughout *Les formes élémentaires*. It is what makes Durkheim's account of religion contradictory.

The irony, of course, is that the Durkheim quotation cited above would seem to be very much in line with a model of 'religion as a mode of existence', where religion is understood as that which is instaurated through the progressive composition of agents—gods and men—where the agency is not decided in advance but justified by what they compose in the common world.

The problem is however that this hint works against the grain of the overarching hypothesis postulated by Durkheim, namely, the forms of religious life we see all around us are products of the agency of the *Dieu-Société*. Durkheim spots the 'beings of religion' and their work in the world, but then sociologizes them out of existence. Or, to put it another way, for Latour, Durkheim is a prophet of 'religion as a mode of existence' in spite of himself!

Consider, for example, the following quote taken from the pages of Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires*, which could have been taken straight out of the pages of Latour's *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (2009):

We must be careful not to believe [...] that the cult was founded solely for the benefit of men and that the gods have nothing to do with it: they have no less need of it than their worshippers. Of course men would be unable to live without

gods, but, on the other hand, the gods would die if their cult were not rendered. This does not have the sole object of making profane subjects communicate with sacred beings, but it also keeps these latter alive and is perpetually remaking and regenerating them. (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p.346)

So Latour has diagnosed a great deal of Durkheimian confusion. But out of this mess something arises that seems more in synch with his own understanding of religion: the outline of ‘religion as a mode of existence’. It begins to appear via chiaroscuro against the backdrop of Durkheimian sociology of religion.

What is the prescription for this? First, it will be necessary to break with a historical continuum (*rompre la continuité historique*) that presupposes a universal and impersonal force (the *Dieu-Société*) animating all religious experience. For Latour, this is precisely what Durkheim is describing as ‘the elementary forms of religion’ (even though Durkheim would consider his description as a most advanced form of recognition). For Latour, Judaism and Christianity—at least when they display a pernicious commitment to monotheism—provide the most sophisticated versions of such ‘elementary’ forms of religion (p.16).

Second, the constructive move: the philosopher of religion will have to be prepared to work hard to find local factors that constitute local religious experience, acceding to a model that we might call cheiropractic, if this is understood as multi-directional (humans made by God’s hands; God made by human hands; not a *Dieu-Société* in sight):

Il faudrait substituer à l’obsession monothéiste les énigmes de l’anthropologie et accepter de comprendre que, non, décidément, l’humanité ne s’est pas posée toujours et partout ce seul et unique problème de savoir comment nous pouvons élever des autels à des dieux que nous n’aurions pourtant pas fabriqué de nos mains. (p.17)

My translation: ‘*We will have to substitute for our monotheistic obsession the mysteries of anthropology and accede to the reality that humans have not, no – not one bit, felt themselves confronted by this one, universal problem at all times and in all places: how it is that we can raise altars to gods that we would not first have fabricated with our own hands.*’

The commitment of Durkheimian sociology of religion to the agency of the *Dieu-Société* is therefore undermined by its own empirical account of religion. Or, to put it another way, Durkheim is more outrageously religious than he ever took himself to be! To use the language of *The Inquiry*, it might be the Durkheim represents some kind of amalgamation, out of which true religion, ‘religion as a mode of existence’, can be unpicked, if the anthropology is good enough! Durkheim’s book therefore has value if we can somehow recalibrate its core intuition that religion is a function of the performance of agents.

In fact, Latour takes this further, and suggests that if we can do away with this nonsense of the *Dieu-Société* then we can take Durkheim’s book as diagnosing a number of such agencies, or as he will now call them ‘divinities’, *each one functioning according to a different mode of existence*:

- [POL]: in the book, Durkheim aptly describes the phenomenon of religious oratory, where a single individual is able to harness a large crowd towards some religious end. As a mode of existence, however, we can now see that this is a tantalizing expression of the political circle as Latour describes it in the *Inquiry* (p.19).
- [REP]: in the book, Durkheim tries to make religious objects obedient to the overweening ‘naturalised’ order that is given by the *Dieu-Société*, as if such objects were granted meaning by this metaphysical paymaster. As the mode of existence of ‘reproduction’, however, we can now see that Durkheim’s descriptions of objects in the world are not universal and impersonal, but granted meaning within a complex matrix of lines of force and lineages, as described in the *Inquiry*.
- [MET]: contra his commitment to the unilateral agency of the *Dieu-Société*, what we find in Durkheim are careful descriptions of human subjects welcoming a proliferation of religious agents into their lives with a view to metamorphosis and change (p.21).

For Latour, then, Durkheim is an ur-identifier of modes of existence, and thus shows himself more sensitive to the situation of ‘*pluralisme ontologique*’ (p.22) than he is usually supposed to be. Modes of existence can be found in the most surprising places!

And so what is the conclusion of Latour’s review of Durkheim’s text? For Latour, the ‘elementary forms of religion’ proposed by Durkheim are an attempt to ignore or bypass the ‘advanced forms’ that theology should be preparing to handle and is able to handle if its regime of truth is correctly understood. It is precisely these ‘*formes avancées de la théologie*’ (p.21) that Latour himself will be handling in his configuration of ‘religion as a mode of existence’.