



## Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology



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# I. Biography of Durkheim

## EMILE DURKHEIM (1858-1917)

“Si vous voulez mûrir votre pensée, attachez-vous à l'étude scrupuleuse d'un grand maître; démontez un système dans ses rouages les plus secrets”<sup>1</sup> – Emile Durkheim

“Patience, Effort, Confidence” – Durkheim's motto<sup>2</sup>

NOTE ON SOURCES: The most comprehensive biography of Durkheim, by Marcel Fournier, was published as recently as 2012. Until this publication, there were many books on Durkheim's contributions to sociology, but comparatively little was known about his personal and family life. In addition to Fournier, the following recommended sources were used for compiling this biography, listed in order from oldest to most recent: Gehlke, *Emile Durkheim's Contributions to Sociological Theory* (1915), Alpert, *Emile Durkheim and His Sociology* (1939); Nisbet, *Emile Durkheim* (1965); Bierstedt, *Emile Durkheim* (1966); Lukes, *Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work* (1972); Giddens, *Durkheim* (1978), Parkin, *Durkheim* (1992); Jones, *The Development of Durkheim's Social Realism* (1999); Stedman Jones, *Durkheim Reconsidered* (2001); Allen, *Durkheim: A Critical Introduction* (2017).

### Overview

David Emile Durkheim was born in Epinal, France on April 15, 1858. Unlike Marx, whose youth was spent during the tumultuous first half of the nineteenth century, by the time Durkheim was a young man France was experiencing one of its longest governments, the Third Republic (1870-1940). He would spend his entire life living and working in France. Intelligent and productive, Durkheim would do much to create and institutionalize the new discipline of sociology in France.

1. “If you would like to educate your mind, attach yourself to the scrupulous study of a great master; take a system apart and uncover its secret mechanisms.” According to Alpert, Durkheim said this to a friend, explaining that this was how he himself had learned to be a good thinker (Alpert 1939: 26).
2. This motto was developed for a series of pamphlets for the French during World War I, but we could also see it as a motto that guided his own work and life.

## Social Background/Family

Durkheim's mother, Melanie, was the daughter of a horse merchant.<sup>3</sup> His father Moise, was a regional Chief Rabbi. Moise's father and grandfather before him had been rabbis as well. As a young boy, it was assumed that Emile would also one day be a rabbi, but it was not to be. After going to college, Durkheim broke with religion altogether. Nevertheless, he always remained part of the Jewish community. In 1887, he married a young embroiderer named Louise Julie Dreyfus, the daughter of a director of a foundry, and together they had two children, Marie Bella (born 1888) and Andre-Armand (born 1892). It is said that Louise was well-educated and helped Emile with his work. Where Emile was austere, Louise was light-hearted. By all accounts, they had a happy marriage. Andre would die in 1915, from an injury sustained in battle in Bulgaria. When waiting to hear news of his son, on the battlefield, he wrote to a close friend, "The image of this exhausted child, alone at the side of a road in the midst of night and fog ... that seizes me by the throat."<sup>4</sup> It is said that the death of his son precipitated Emile Durkheim's decline and early death, following a stroke (at age 59).

## Ten Things We Know about Durkheim as a Person

1. He was an outstanding student.
2. He was very close to his family and community. He worried about his family's finances when his father became ill while he was in college.
3. He was a good debater.
4. He was very well-known by all kinds of intelligent people, especially in circles of philosophy and psychology.
5. He strongly supported the republican cause (against resumption of the monarchy) and admired the reforms of the Third Republic.
6. He was a very good administrator and organizer and provided assistance to friends and supporters.
7. He was a mesmerizing lecturer and was even accused of having too much control over the minds of his young students.
8. He often worked too hard, sometimes even into illness.
9. He stood up for the underdog.
10. He was devoted to the science of sociology.

3. Interestingly, Melanie's great-grandmother was a woman named Francoise Marx, born in 1758 in Lixheim, Lorraine, France less than 100 miles from Trier, where Karl Marx was born a half-century later. It may be that the two families (Durkheim and Marx) share a common ancestor.

4. Letter to Davy, reprinted in Lukes 1972: 555.

## Durkheim's Career

Durkheim earned degrees from his local college in 1874 and 1875 (when he was only 17). At that age, he wanted to be a college professor, and the only way to do this was to attend the *École Normale Supérieure*, in Paris. By all accounts, life in Paris was very difficult for him, as he did not have a lot of money and he did not feel at home. It took him two years before he passed entrance exams necessary to attend the prestigious institution. Once there, he considered much of what he was forced to study “sheer poppycock.”<sup>5</sup> Although never perhaps shaking the feeling of being an impostor, he was admitted to the highest intellectual circles. He participated in debates. He became friends with philosophers, historians, and psychologists (a new and exciting field at the time). After graduating in 1883 he took a teaching post in Bourdeaux, where he lived, with his growing family, until 1902. In 1892 he briefly returned to Paris where he earned his PhD (for *The Division of Labor*). In 1902, he moved to Paris permanently to teach at the Sorbonne, where he continued until his death in 1917. He did much to create the field of sociology in France, largely by overseeing the sociology journal, *L'Année Sociologique*, and by helping advance the career of young sociologists. He was also an advisory editor on the first US sociology journal, *The American Journal of Sociology*.

## Durkheim's Politics

Durkheim lived and worked during the Third Republic, a relatively stable period in France that was, in theory, committed to parliamentary democracy (as opposed to constitutional monarchy or socialism). We could say the Third Republic was a compromise government, and that its stability could perhaps be attributed to its moderation. Durkheim was actively involved with supporting the Third Republic and saw sociology as the science that could lead to better policy-making. He was also an outspoken critic of antisemitism<sup>6</sup> and much in sympathy with socialism. Durkheim once told a close friend “with a moving simplicity how, at a certain moment of his spiritual life, he had had to admit to himself that he was a socialist.”<sup>7</sup> During World War I, he was active in supporting France and even wrote a series of short articles decrying the “German mind” for its tendency to militarism and overreach.

5. He was eager to learn useful things and did not appreciate heaving to learn Latin. He was also said to be “disgusted by the sophisticated and shallow sarcasm” of many of his fellow students; “he hated all affectations. Profoundly serious, he hated flightiness” (Albert 1939: 21-22).
6. See the Dreyfus Affair, a national scandal in which a Jewish captain in the French army was falsely accused and convicted of passing military secrets to the Germans. Many intellectuals at the time, led by the writer Zola, accused the government of antisemitism. Whether one supported the government or Dreyfus said a great deal about one's political position and beliefs during the years the controversy raged (roughly 1894 to 1906).
7. The friend was Bourgin, the quote was reprinted from Lukes 1972: 321. Durkheim's socialism was “abstract, intellectual, evolutionary, reformist, optimistic, inspired by large ideals of cooperation and organization with an overriding respect for social science” (Lukes 1972: 329).

## Durkheim's Mission

*“Our science came into being only yesterday. It must not be forgotten, especially in view of the favorable reception that sociology is given now, that, properly speaking, Europe did not have as many as ten sociologists fifteen years ago” – Durkheim (1900)*

Durkheim wanted sociology recognized as an important discipline, distinct from political economy, psychology, history, or philosophy. He devoted his career to making this happen. He saw sociology as a science that could have practical effects (e.g., better policies).<sup>8</sup> It was not armchair philosophizing. It was also a *moral science*, whose results could advance society, taking the role that religion and other dying traditions had played in the past. *“It would be no distortion to view Durkheim’s entire sociological career as an intransigent and relentless battle fought on two major fronts: against the dark, unfathomable forces of mysticism and despair, on the one hand, and against the unsubstantial ethereal forces of the dilettantic cult of superficiality on the other” (Alpert 1939: 18).*

## Reports by Friends and Colleagues

Durkheim was “deeply opposed to all war whether of classes or of nations; he desired change only for the benefit of society as a whole and not that of any one of its parts, even if that latter had numbers and force. He regarded political revolutions and parliamentary developments as superficial, costly and more theatrical than serious. He therefore always resisted the idea of submitting himself to a party” – Marcel Mauss (1928)<sup>9</sup>

*“His adversaries, his enemies, not taking sufficient account of his personal disinterestedness, considered him, and sometimes treated him, as ambitious and as an intriguer. What an error of judgement! His ends were noble and went beyond personal rewards, and I believe that all the steps he took, when they related to getting people jobs – advancing some, and thwarting and excluding others – had the single objective of the interest of science and the community” – Bourgin (1938)<sup>10</sup>*

8. “There was a hardly a social problem of the day for which Durkheim did not offer constructive suggestions.” These included the reorganization of the educational system, the training of politicians, the separation of church and state, divorce and marriage, suicide, the regulation of economic life, social equality, political reform, and pacifism. (Alpert 1939: 58)

9. In Lukes 1972: 322.

10. In Lukes 1972: 377.

## First-Hand Character Descriptions<sup>11</sup>

“Durkheim has a very serious and somewhat cold appearance. He is conscientious, hard-working, well-informed and very clever...M. Durkheim is, in short, one of the most serious of our young professors of philosophy” (1885)

“M. Durkheim, tall, thin and fair, is already bald...His voice at the start was feeble and subdued, but gradually, under the pressure of the ideas he was expressing, it rose and grew animated and warm, until it seemed capable of filling a vast vessel” (1892)

“He received me in his study, which was vast and simple, lacking any adornment or evidence of artistic preoccupations. His long, thin body was enveloped by a large dressing-gown, a cassock of flannel, which concealed his bony and muscular frame, the fragile support for this thought. The face emerged, pale and ascetic, with its high forehead bare, a short beard, a thick moustache...One felt oneself before the judgment and already under the authority of a man who was devoted, entirely devoted, to his task, to his mission, and who, by admitting you to his side, along with his colleagues, delegated to you a part of the responsibilities he had assumed” –(approx. 1903)

### Questions

1. Although admittedly partial to socialism, Durkheim's contribution to politics were very different from Marx's. Where Marx sought to educate the working class so that it might revolt, Durkheim turned to sociology for policy recommendations for the existing state. What might explain these different approaches? How might the historical context have affected the choices and strategies made by these two great thinkers?

11. Each of the following can be found in the biography by Lukes (1972). Appended to each account is the year of its observation.