ÉMILE DURKHEIM AND THE BIRTH OF THE GODS

Clans, Incest, Totems, Phratries, Hordes, Mana, Taboos, Corroborees, Sodalities, Menstrual Blood, Apes, Churingas, Cairns, and Other Mysterious Things

Alexandra Maryanski

ÉMILE DURKHEIM AND THE BIRTH OF THE GODS

The *Birth of the Gods* is dedicated to Durkheim's effort to understand the basis of social integration. Unlike most social scientists, then and now, Durkheim concluded that humans are naturally more individualistic than collectivistic, that the primal social unit for humans is the macro-level unit ('the horde'), rather than the family, and that social cohesion is easily disrupted by human self-interest. Hence, for Durkheim, one of the "gravest" problems facing sociology is how to mold these human proclivities to serve the collective good. The analysis of elementary religions, Durkheim believed, would allow social scientists to see the fundamental basis of solidarity in human societies, built around collective representations, totems marking sacred forces, and emotion-arousing rituals directed at these totems.

The first half of the book traces the key influences and events that led Durkheim to embrace such novel generalizations. The second part makes a significant contribution to sociological theory with an analysis that essentially "tests" Durkheim's core assumptions using cladistic analysis, social network tools and theory, and data on humans closest living relatives—the great apes. Maryanski marshals hard data from primatology, paleontology, archaeology, genetics, and neuroscience that enlightens and, surprisingly, confirms many of Durkheim's speculations. These data show that integration among both humans and great apes is not so much group or kin oriented, per se, but orientation to a community standing outside each individual that includes a sense of self, but also encompassing a cognitive awareness of a "sense of community" or a connectedness that transcends sensory reality and concrete social relations. This "community complex," as Maryanski terms it, is what Durkheim was beginning to see, although he did not have the data to buttress his arguments as Maryanski is able to do.

Alexandra Maryanski is Professor of the Graduate Division at the University of California, Riverside, Emerita Professor of Sociology at UCR, and a founding member of the Institute for Theoretical Social Science. She holds advanced degrees in anthropology, network analysis, and interdisciplinary social science. She has co-authored six books, *Functionalism*, *The Social Cage*, *Incest: Origin of the Taboo*, *On the Evolution of Societies by Means of Natural Selection*, *Handbook on Evolution and Society*, and *The Emergence and Evolution of Religion*. She has written dozens of articles demonstrating the utility of network analysis, cladistics, and evolutionary theory in sociological analysis and has been at the forefront of two intellectual movements in sociology: evolutionary sociology and neurosociology.

Maryanski has undertaken to critically review accumulated data from various sources, including evolutionary biology, primatology, and comparative history . . . as she methodically retraces Durkheim shedding light on the origin of the mysterious force that transforms human individualism into a collective community . . . Readers of *Émile Durkheim and the Birth of the Gods* will find it an essential new, must sociological reading.

Edward A. Tiryakian, Professor Emeritus of Sociology,
Duke University

This is an important book. Maryanski shows that the evolutionary record of human ancestors and relatives needed a mechanism that would turn very loosely organized, in many respects individualistic and a-social apes, into the strong-yet-flexible ties that have made up the history of human societies. It could not have happened by building on ape family structures, since these lacked strong ties across and within the generations. Humans took a different route by developing emotional rituals that generate symbols of membership, thus providing a flexible tool for building societies of many different kinds. Maryanski uses evidence of biology and animal researchers in a new and impressive way to show how humans interact emotionally and cognitively to create socially shared institutions. This is an important theoretical broadening of human evolution, beyond the slow mechanism of genetic selection, and the usual focus on individual psychology: how humans acting together developed a mechanism to create and change social structure.

Randall Collins, Emeritus Professor of Sociology,
University of Pennsylvania

This is a brilliant, original, and challenging contribution to the sociology of religion and to our understanding of social life. It is essential reading for scholars and graduate students in sociology, anthropology, and religion. Using convincing data Maryanski sheds fresh light on Durkheim's quest to provide a scientific explanation of the roots of religion and the central part it plays in the roots of human sociality.

Kenneth Thompson, Emeritus Professor,
The Open University

A scintillating effort to put Durkheim into conversation with contemporary knowledge from paleoanthropology, primatology, evolutionary biology, and sociobiology. Maryanski proves there is still gold to be mined in the oeuvre of this venerable founding father.

Alexander Riley, Professor of Sociology,
Bucknell University

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FOR PROFESSOR JONATHAN H. TURNER
MY PERSON OF VALOR

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Foreword

Durkheim returned to Paris in 1902 in an era of renewed multi-modernity that has been characterized as "La Belle Époque". Following the "Long Depression" that marked the economic life of industrial countries, progress resumed in many forms. In France, slowly recovering from the humiliating 1870 defeat by Germany and an ensuing period of political instability, which climaxed from 1894–1899 with an undeclared civil war pitting various elements of the left against various elements of the right, a return to normalcy occurred in centripetal centers of attraction. Political life became institutionalized with the presidency of republican Émile Loubet (1899–1906), who resolved the Dreyfus crisis, made possible the start of a long-lasting Anglo–French *entente,* and inaugurated the greatest international exhibition in history, the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900, which made Paris in the age of electricity, "The City of Lights".

Marcel Fournier, the faithful chronicler of Durkheim, makes little of the latter's involvement at the Exposition, even though "solidarity" (his doctoral thesis) was feted by Léon Bourgeois as the social philosophy of the great Exposition. Durkheim was in the midst of arduously preparing for successive volumes of the *Année Sociologique.* Nevertheless, he found it timely to attend one of the many distinguished intellectual conferences (or "congresses") held that summer: the International Congress of Social Education, limiting his participation to reading a paper "devoted to the use of the education system to promote solidarist ideas" (Marcel Fournier, *Émile Durkheim*, p. 341).

Tying together some strands of thought, Durkheim argued in his presentation that sociology should have a major role to play in all the universities, that beliefs and moral rules are social formations, and that solidarity is society's very condition of existence and the essential law of humanity (Fournier, p. 342). Complementing the panache of outer luxury available on **the right bank** of Paris, and the electricity that transformed the entire city through technology, Durkheim had become a prized "scholastic" of what Albert Thibaudet later aptly called **the left bank's** "Republic of the Professors" (Thibaudet, *La République des Professeurs,*

1927, p. 155). This is echoed in the present study by Maryanski noting that Durkheim "was also a living icon in French intellectual life" (17–13).

Committed to the presupposition of the merit of a democratic republican form of government, Durkheim turned to his abiding concern over social cohesion and its moral foundation. He had an epiphanic moment when his nephew Marcel Mauss introduced him to the work of Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites.* Durkheim used his keen insight to search in totemism the basic "stuff" of religion, sensing that religion has the elements of the social force for social integration. To find the facticity of this primal force, generated in emotional gatherings of "collective effervescence", led Durkheim to a close reading and interpretation of the recently published ethnographic accounts of "primitive" tribes of Central Australia.

A major tenet of Durkheim's ensuing *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*—the sacred/profane dichotomy—quickly found its way in the discourse of the Anglo–Franco public. However, two generations ago the empirical materials on totemism tended to be glossed over or even ridiculed by anthropologists (and by traditional religionists) refusing to see totemic religion as a matrix of primitives' social life and key access to modern religious systems.

A century later, Alexandra Maryanski has undertaken to critically review accumulated data from various sources, including evolutionary biology, primatology, and comparative history (e.g., in her presentation of Ralph Linton's discussion of the totemic aspects of the 42nd Infantry Rainbow Division) to investigate the claims of Durkheim for totemism, past and present.

Just as Paris became bathed in light in the Universal Exposition, so can we follow Maryanski as she methodically retraces Durkheim shedding light on the origins of the mysterious force that transforms human individualism into a collective community. In the first page of the oft-neglected Introduction to what became his magnum opus, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* Durkheim narrates Sociology as a positive science which arrives at knowledge through systematic observation. Stumbling in the caverns of Ethnography, Durkheim found a lodestone of data which he enriched with his insights on the primacy of rituals that he recognized in the proto-religious system of totemism, rituals which on certain occasions activate the group's *collective effervescence* and the successive remembrance (often symbolic) of this extraordinary condition.

Maryanski does not only take us through various stages of Durkheim's research on The Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen rich ethnographic data of *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* and their companion piece,

The Northern Tribes of Central Australia,, she also in her ultimate chapter discusses the harsh criticism levelled at totemism, and at Durkheim's advocacy of totemism as expressing the fundamentals of religion.

Readers of *Émile Durkheim and the Birth of the Gods* will find it an essential new, must sociological reading of a "classic", as Karen Fields set the stage with her 1995 translation of *The Elementary Forms,* and as Robert Bellah and Hans Joas found it in preparing their magistral volume on evolutionary culture in *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (2012). The fundamental problem of individualism and social integration faced by higher apes, which occupy so much of Alexandra Maryanski's attention, as well as by us humans, is one that still remains at the heart of sociological inquiry.

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A special acknowledgment is due to Vartan Messier and Patricia Turner who helped me with the translations of Durkheim's materials as well as works by his colleagues and the scholars that influenced him. This book greatly benefited from their contributions. As Vartan Messier is a native French speaker with a specialization in literature and Patricia Turner is a French historian and an expert on nineteenth-century France, both lent a deep-reaching expertise by translating materials in the light of what they implied in the context of a nineteenth-century Western worldview.

Portions of this manuscript were written during my stay in Australia, France, and Denmark. A special appreciation to Aarhus University in Denmark in the Department for The Study of Religion where I had the leisure to read and write in such a stimulating atmosphere. My warmest thanks for the helpful suggestions and thoughtful critiques of the Aarhus

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Introduction

Why Write Another Book on Durkheim?

A Note to the Reader

After visiting the old Alice Springs telegraph station in Central Australia, and the sacred grounds where Baldwin Spencer (a professor of biology) and Francis Gillen (the station master) sat watching aboriginal totemic rites, I decided to revisit an old theory in sociology. In 1912 Durkheim published *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: The Australian System of Totemism*, which drew upon Spencer's and Gillen's observations and conclusions. While praised as brilliant, creative, and original, it was otherwise picked apart for its flawed reasoning, sloppy concepts, excessive emphasis on the social, and reliance on one ethnography to reach dead wrong conclusions.[1] As Wilhelm Schmidt ([1931]1972: 115) expressed it, "of all recent works dealing with ethnology and the history of religion, there is none which has reaped such a harvest of praise for its details, combined with such general rejection of its main thesis." Yet, despite this bumpy reception, Durkheim's book still has the unflagging capacity to engage generation after generation of readers. Why does this work stand the test of time while others sit collecting dust on library shelves?

One reason is surely the books rich pile of propositions or what Alexander Goldenweiser (1915: 719–720) dubbed a theory of everything, "a theory of religion, a theory of totemism, a theory of social control, a theory of ritual and a theory of thought." Another is that, despite predictions to the contrary, religion has not faded away in a world of secularism, nor do we have answers to the questions Durkheim addressed. Or, perhaps, despite the spate of articles, monographs, and books linked

1 See for example, Imogen Seger's excellent monograph, *Durkheim and his Critics on the Sociology of Religion* 1957. Also see Malinowski 1913; Goldenweiser 1917; Lewis 1917; and Weatherly 1917.

to *Elementary Forms* over the last hundred years, so little has been done with Durkheim's core thesis on religion that it simply remains adrift as a captivating work that generates its own effervescence. Whatever the answer, what Harry Alpert called, the "Durkhemian mystique" is still very much alive in academic circles.

I decided to pursue the logic behind Durkheim's writing of *Elementary Forms* after my visit to the old Alice Springs Repeater Station built in 1871 on the ceremonial grounds of the local Arrernte people (formerly Arunta).[2] But, in truth, I had already become incurably curious over why the core premises underlying Durkheim's theory of religion and society now tally with recent findings in neurosociology, the fossil and archaeological data, and my own research on great ape societies. In particular, I wanted to revisit Durkheim's origin thesis and his totemic principle, which is laced with historical significance but generally dismissed as a pretty wild tale on the genesis of religion. For Durkheim, a religion was not a bag of imaginary beliefs, illusions, or lies but a practical and ongoing reality with roots in the nature of things. And while the faithful justify their religious beliefs on various grounds, the true reasons underlying religion, he said, never change and never cease to exist—thus making it "the duty of science to discover them." Durkheim was also adamant that religion—indeed human society itself—was born in totemism. Indeed, he became so captivated by totems that they became *the* pivotal force not only for his theory of religion, but also for his ideas on the origin of society, kinship, and the family. But, above all, Durkheim sought an understanding of religion itself, remarking "I have made a very archaic religion the subject of my research because it seems better suited than any other to help us comprehend the religious nature of man, that is, to reveal a fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity" (Durkheim [1912]1995: 1).

In this pursuit, Durkheim believed it essential to go back as far as possible to a proto-religious time when humans lived in "promiscious hordes." While nobody had ever seen a real-life horde, Durkheim had hoped that this primal state of humanity would materialize, perhaps in the

2 The Alice Springs repeater station opened up communication channels in Central Australia as the Overland telegraph line ran from Adelaide to Darwin. It sits in such arid and rugged terrain that only camel trains delivered mail to Alice Springs until 1926. The site was chosen because it had a permanent waterhole with the repeater station positioned alongside a sacred Arrernte riverbank with major totemic significance (called in native tongue Thereyurre). It is not surprising then that Durkheim thought of Central Australia as *the* place "to study the simplest and most primitive religion that is known at present . . ." (Durkheim [1912]1995: 1; Brooks 1991).

remotest reaches of the aboriginal world. But as time passed and with no hordes in sight, Durkheim had little choice but to underpin his totemic theory with Spencer's and Gillen's ethnography, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* ([1899]1969), despite his conviction that "The Arunta are . . . a long way from . . . the 'perfect type' of primitive civilization" (Durkheim [1902]1985: 107, original emphasis[3]). Moreover, by erecting his thesis on the footings of Central Australian totemism, Durkheim faced the daunting task of dismantling what he considered Spencer's and Gillen's and Sir James Frazer's misguided interpretation of Arunta (Arrernte) totemism and convincing readers of *Elementary Forms* that *his* theory of totemism was right, and theirs was wrong. But outside of Australian totemism, nothing but fragments of broken down totemic systems remained, even among American Indians where the name "totemism" originated. By comparison, the Arrernte system was still relatively intact; and they were, Durkheim felt, at least in the lowest *observed* stage of the totemic cycle.

While the Arrernte ethnography served well enough for his general theory of religion, Durkheim was forced to rely upon assorted aboriginal customs and outright conjecture to connect the genesis of religion with primitive hordes. To cast this event, he began by describing the hunting and gathering lifestyle of the Central Australians, slowly taking the reader back to the lesser known, and, then, to the unknown in an unfolding narrative of a mystical time in prehistory when nomadic hordes roamed about gathering wild fruits and vegetables. Long convinced that religion was not a product of individual consciousness but a collective phenomena with energy drawn from social activity, Durkheim reasoned that the awakening of proto-religious sentiments must reside in the "fission and fusion" cycles of wandering food collectors who when meeting up occasionally experienced an emotional "effervescence" that appeared to come from an external force, or *mana*. In time this invisible and diffused force came to be embodied in totems and totemic emblems, which symbolized in a concrete way these collective representations. Yet, to sustain solidarity, community members had to periodically assemble, which is why Durkheim saw the germinal source of religion residing in the actions of social life itself.

3 For Durkheim, Arrernte society had already undergone "grave and profound rearrangements . . ." And contrary to what many social scientists believe, Durkheim believed it was wrong "to see in the Arunta the late representatives of humanity at its origin; and it would be no less a mistake to misjudge everything that subsists among them as the most primitive social forms that we know" ([1902]1985: 107,117).

Could Durkheim's origin thesis have a basis in reality? After all, religion originated at some point in time. Could the genesis of religion be a by-product of collective emotions generated by effervescent gatherings and represented by sacred totems? Is this the wellspring of the religious sentiment, the god figure or what Durkheim called the *totemic principle*? Who then indeed is god?

After publishing *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim became a lightening rod for criticism, especially by anthropologists who attacked him for confusing a primal religion with a simple religion, for confounding the cause of religion with its function, and for partitioning the sacred and profane into artificial categories with little utility. Disapproval of Durkheim's totemic theory was relentless with critics charging that totems are not universal, that totem complexes are not fixed entities and may even be an illusion, and that totems could not be the earliest religion because a totem need not be religious at all. Some scholars were more favorably impressed but, overall, *Elementary Forms* received but faint praise, leaving it to dangle precariously on a crumbling evolutionary framework of the early twentieth century.

The English-speaking world at large became acquainted with Durkheim when Joseph Swain, a young graduate student working on his own dissertation translated *Elementary Forms* in 1915. W. Lloyd Warner wrote as late as 1935 that "It is unfortunate that all the works of this great French social theorist are not available in English, and that he seems fated to continue being misunderstood by English and American anthropologists" (p. 355).

Yet, once scholars outside of France became familiar with *The Division of Labor* (1893), *Suicide* (1897), and *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), Durkheim's stature underwent a transformation. Then, over the next decades, Durkheim became a victim of legend with his writings subject to a variety of interpretations and misunderstandings because of some poor English translations, selective perceptions of "would-be admirers" on what they thought he said or did not say, clashing ideologies, and unbalanced translations of articles, monographs, and books. As Steve Lukes (1973: 3) put it, Durkheim "has been variously called a materialist and an idealist, a positivist and a metraphysican, a rationalist and an irrationalist, a dogmatic atheist and a mystic . . . a 'scholarly forerunner of Fascism,' an agent of 'bourgeois conservation,' a late-nineteenth-century liberal, a conservative and a socialist." Indeed, remarked Byron Turner (1992: xiv), "Durkheim's sociology has been surrounded by a forest of contradictory and often misleading interpretation." A case in point is George Catlin's introduction to the first English translation of *Rules of Sociological Method* ([1938:

1964: xxviii) where he wrote that Durkheim "By his ill-considered and scientifically pretentious psycho-mysticism . . . has contributed to give the color of justification to the new religion of the altar of *divus Augustus* and to the neopagan philosophy of Caesar-worship." (For more on this issue also see Giddens 1979; Pickering and Martins 1994; and Gephart 1998).

Fortunately, what Terry Clark (1979) characterized as "an enormous revival of interest in Durkheim and the Durkheim school" also resulted in new translations of his classic works, translations of his little known writings, excellent biographies (e.g. Lukes 1972; Pickering 1984; Fournier 2013), and scores of timely articles, books, and monographs devoted to interpreting and building on his work with regard to the division of labor, morality, social solidarity, rituals, emotions, family life, religion, suicide, education, and the like. But with few exceptions, almost nothing has been done with his core thesis in *Elementary Forms*. Typically, it is conveniently set aside and ignored while his association between god and society following Dominick LaCapra is treated by some scholars "as an erratic or mad peccadillo which may be chalked up to purely personal or historical idiosyncrasies" (quoted in Clark 1979: 130). And so, one can ask: Did Durkheim waste over fifteen years of his academic career seeking the origin of religion in the primitive horde? I asked this question and then decided to find an answer.

My original plan was to confine my research to Durkheim's totemic principle and his origin thesis, but I soon realized that I needed to cast a much wider net if I was to penetrate his underlying logic and the bold assumptions behind his ideas—if only to see if they were worthy of further examination. A deeper understanding would also lessen the chances of misinterpreting his reasoning or missing something important. So I read most of Durkheim's writings, visited the home of his childhood, the schools he attended, the universities where he taught and, of course, to the Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris where he is buried. I also systematically traced his ideas on religion over time, being careful to stick with the facts. To dig a little deeper, I read the key works of individuals known to have influenced him. Focusing on writings that captured Durkheim's thinking at a given point in time proved to be a fruitful approach because he often expressed his ideas initially in a word-for-word lecture format or in articles before they appeared in book form.

As ideas are born and colored in the intellectual atmosphere of a period, this book begins by placing Durkheim in his own social and intellectual world. For added insights I felt it was also important to illuminate his personality, his known strengths and weaknesses, and other distinctive traits. But there is much more. Everyone likes a good detective story, and

with most of Durkheim's personal papers lost, the unwritten storyline behind *Elementary Forms* is riddled with unsolved mysteries—from the origin of his ideas and the scholars that influenced him, the curious obsession he had with hordes, clans, and totemic cults to the cryptic journal note he wrote in 1907 telling of a *révélation* he had in 1895, a watershed moment, he said, because it forced him to rethink all his past research to tally with his new understanding of religion. Equally intriguing is the paper trail he left behind with baffling clues into his thought processes that come as close as you can get to a sociological "who-done-it." For Durkheim, though, he was solving the mystery of mysteries—the genesis of religion. What was this serious French scholar thinking when he proposed such a daring undertaking, and, why did he defend totemism as his *raison d'être* for the origin of religion (and society) in the face of fierce and mounting criticism? Durkheim was not known for wild-eyed commentary, nor did he make hasty generalizations; and so, it is essential to understand why he defended so vigorously what many consider a radically unsound thesis.

Durkheim was an impressive intellect in his own time, but I believe he was also ahead of his time. For in tackling the genesis of the religious institution he provided glimpses into humans' ultimate history, a time before institutions existed. Too often, scholars have accused Durkheim of naive and simplistic thinking with regard to his views on totems, clans, kinship, and family life, but my ten years of research revealed just the opposite. For despite some major faulty premises, Durkheim was a well-schooled kinship theorist with a deep understanding of the issues he confronted. What led him astray was his nineteenth-century worldview with its misguided notion of social evolution and erroneous conclusions about aboriginal lifeways. But if we replace Durkheim's developmental model with modern evolutionary theory and update his methodology with social network tools and cladistic analysis, his hypothesis can be turned loose to lead us where it may. And, so in the pages that follow we will visit some very strange and exotic places especially for sociologists and scholars more generally.

I hope that readers will enjoy this book as much as I have enjoyed researching how Durkheim came to develop his theory on the nature and origin of religion. Revisiting Durkheim's ideas on religion can also help to illuminate some of his other novel ideas, such as his view of human sociality. Why did he believe that a group must assemble and recreate itself periodically to sustain solidarity? Why did he view human beings as so emotional and ritualistic? And, why should human collectivism once energized be so fleeting? Is sociality *not* built into the human animal? In Durkheim's time, almost nothing was known about human evolution, but

today we can hold up a distant mirror to the past by using data from the fossil, molecular, and archaeological records and from humans' closest hominoid relatives—the great apes. From these vantage points, an analysis of Durkheim's theory of religion and its application leads to the asking of some new questions about religion while offering fresh insights into Durkheim's religious sociology.

Above all else, I wrote this book for Durkheim who died suddenly in 1917 after the devastating loss of his son and many of his graduate students and colleagues during World War I. To make matters worse, he had to endure years of enveloping rounds of scholars attacking totemism along with punishing and widely publicized critiques of his totemic theory. Yet, his thesis is still an open question and, thus, it deserves to be evaluated. This is what Durkheim wanted. This is what he asked us to do. Indeed, his last words in *Elementary Forms* urged us to carry on where he left off: "What must be done is to try out the hypothesis and test it against the facts as methodically as possible" ([1912]1995: 447). The purpose of this book is to start the process of doing just that by bringing new data to bear on an old theory.

Alexandra Maryanski
Santa Barbara, California

1
A Matter of Time

> *I know originality is impossible; certainly I have never claimed otherwise. I am thoroughly convinced that my ideas find their roots in those of my predecessors. Indeed, it is because they do that I have confidence in their fruitfulness.*
>
> Émile Durkheim, 1907,
> *Revue Néo-scolastique* 14: 613

Émile Durkheim's great work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), has always remained somewhat mystifying, especially to sociologists. True, Durkheim's analysis of ritual and emotional arousal is one of the foundations of present-day sociology of emotions (e.g. Goffman 1967; Collins 2004). The richness and complexity of *Elementary Forms* has also provided fertile ground for scores of Durkheimian scholars in sociology, as well as in the humanities and social sciences in general. Yet, despite its celebrated status, the work remains an enigma for many scholars. As Robert Bellah put it:

> In spite of all the excellent and persuasive reasons Durkheim gave in the introduction to *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* for choosing the Australian aborigines as the subject of his greatest book, one must still wonder at this choice. Why did this highly rational, secular, positivistic Frenchman decide sometime after 1895 to devote nearly fifteen of the most productive years of his life to the exotic cults, dancing, and blood-letting of a primitive people?
>
> (1973: xliii)

In turn, Stephen Lukes said that when he read *Elementary Forms*, he had his "mind blown" and "just became totally immersed in Durkheim" (in Clark 1979: 131). Why is this last book by one of sociology's iconic founders both baffling and beguiling?

All of Durkheim's work reflects a fierce determination to legitimate a science of society in the academic world. Yet, to put the nascent discipline

on a solid foundation, Durkheim believed he first had to solve the "gravest" problem facing sociology: what holds aggregates together? While his work on the division of labor and suicide has a strong sociological bent, unlocking the secret of social solidarity was a multiplex problem that eventually took him into the strange world of hypothetical hordes, incest taboos, and especially, the curious case of totemism—all for the glory of sociology. *Elementary Forms* thus exposes a wide range of Durkheim's scholarship and, more importantly, a breadth and depth of Durkheim's intellectual engagements in areas of inquiry not normally part of the sociological tradition.

Of course, Durkheim was also heavily influenced by two of sociology's founders, August Comte and Herbert Spencer, who both argued for a view of societies as evolving from simple to more complex forms. Moreover, like Durkheim, both argued that sociology could be a natural science devoted to developing abstract laws and principles explaining the operative dynamics of the social universe. One of Durkheim's overlooked mentors, Alfred Espinas, who arranged for Durkheim's first appointment at the University of Bordeaux and the author of the little-known *Animal Societies* (1878), also emphasized to Durkheim other ideas from Comte and Spencer beyond their evolutionary schemes.[1] Espinas argued for a much broader view of sociology (which Durkheim certainly adopted); and while Durkheim's ideas are drawn from many sources, Espinas also handed Durkheim some early conceptual blocks for the budding science. Durkheim also considered Espinas an important forerunner of sociology, claiming that he was "the first to have studied social facts in order to make a science of them and not in order to secure the symmetry of a grand philosophical system" (quoted in Brooks 1998: 204). As social facts manifest regularities, Espinas said, a science of society is possible. And, perhaps to the surprise of some, Durkheim considered *Animal Societies* "the first chapter of sociology" ([1888]1978: 59).

Perhaps less baffling are Durkheim's references in *Elementary Forms* to independent scholars, now long forgotten, and his active engagement of a wide range of more anthropological scholars' respective analyses of kinship, religion, societal types, and primordial hordes. For sociologists, however, much of this analysis of kinship and religious systems revolving around *naturism*, *animism*, and *totemism* are often viewed as too "anthropological"

1 Théodule Ribot and Alfred Espinas translated Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* into French in 1874–1875. For Espinas's detailed discussion of both Spencer and Comte see *Des Sociétes Animales* 1877–1878. And, see Geiger 1972, 309ff).

and, hence, easily glossed over. Indeed, what are the details of "primitive" religions doing in a sociological analysis of religion by a sociologist? Why was Durkheim so obsessed with lineages, phraties, moieties, incest taboos, exogamy, systems of cognitive classification and, above all, totems? Moreover, why is so much of *Elementary Forms* taken up with tortuous rebuttals of others who had criticized Durkheim's totemic theory in the late 1890s and early 1900s? And, to argue that the genesis of religion originated from primordial hordes seems especially odd, given that by 1912 evolutionary theorizing in the social sciences was fast becoming passé (because of the perceived racism and ethnocentrism in views of evolution as moving from "primitive" to "advanced" societies with, not surprisingly, the latter being white, European societies that had industrialized).

When Durkheim began to write *Elementary Forms* in the early twentieth century, his work was deeply imbued with a wide range of ideas received from early classical philosophy, early sociology and anthropology, French philosophy, and hard-science views of what the social sciences could become.[2] At the same time, his work on Australian kinship and religion was under attack and seemed to fall down on the wrong side of important intellectual debates. Yet, Durkheim was supremely confident in the validity of his arguments, despite the mounting criticism. Why was he so convinced he was right? One reason was his great faith in his predecessors and in the "proving ground" of facts, especially ones collected by nineteenth-century ethnographers and kinship theorists. In a real sense, Durkheim's aim was not originality, per se, but synthesis of known facts in order to bring truth to light. This trait was probably fostered by his mentor, Émile Boutroux ([1912]1970: 5) who wrote, "A great mind does not seek after novelty or originality; it seeks after truth . . . In reality, they make it their own by the way in which they use it." Where did Durkheim go wrong in his search for the truth? Or did he? To answer this question in a satisfactory way, we need to penetrate the underlying motives and logic behind the complex analysis in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

2 Ernest Wallwork (1972: 6) wrote, "Durkheim was a true conservative (in the best sense of the misused term), desirous of preserving the insights of the past . . . He did not hesitate . . . to go to Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Renouvier Montesquieu and Rousseau for sustenance and support . . . On the other hand, Durkheim was an intellectual radical who invariably rejected traditional formulas in favor of new, and often strkingly (sic) original, ideas." Also see Edward Tiryakian (1965) who places Durkheim in the general tradition of Plato, St. Thomas, De Bonald, and De Maistre in his approach to society as an organic unity.

As will become evident, by 1895 Durkheim had dropped much of the argument in the *Division of Labor in Society* (1893). Gone was the distinction between *mechanical* and *organic* solidarity. Gone was the all powerful *collective conscience* of "swallowed up" minds that was gradually dwindling away in the face of organic solidarity, being largely tempered by the notion of *collective representations.* And, gone was his focus on social evolution from simple to complex, being largely replaced by an increasing concern with the origin of religion and society and with Durkheim's intriguing image of a pre-kinship, promiscuous *horde.* He also dropped *naturism* as the baseline form of religion that he had asserted in his 1893 stage model in *The Division of Labor*, very quietly replacing it with *totemism* in the second edition in 1902 (see Maryanski 2014: 358–359).

Thus, increasingly after 1895, Durkheim drew from many areas of expertise—especially kinship theory and ethnographic portrayals of pre-literate societies—that sociologists frequently do not realize were a central part of Durkheim's knowledge base. But, perhaps most important is that Durkheim was fighting for his continued intellectual relevance during the early twentieth century. His ideas about religion, his analysis of Australian marriage rules and descent, and especially his views on totemic beliefs and rites were all under attack by such illustrious scholars as James Frazer and Andrew Lang [who referred to some of Durkheim's premises as "doubly impossible" ([1905a]: 1970: 103). These critics were undermining years of Durkheim's creative work and forcing him to devote considerable energy to defending his views in essays and commentaries, often with his nephew, Marcel Mauss, and ultimately with his very complex analysis in *Elementary Forms.*

This last of Durkheim's great books, then, is so overdrawn and convoluted because he was mounting an offense in one great statement. He was sure, as noted above, that he was right, but he had to convince others of this conviction. Durkheim was thus defending and, in his mind, vindicating himself in this work. For despite Durkheim's otherwise great fame and prestige, he felt that a lot was on the line: his continued relevance in the intellectual world, as well as his intellectual legacy to later generations.

There is, then, an interesting story to tell—indeed a kind of mystery story—about why Durkheim turned to totemism as a critical force, and indeed, why so many other leading scholars were also interested in this force during Durkheim's lifetime. Why did Durkheim begin to sound like an anthropologist more than a sociologist; and why was he examining phenomena such as incest, hordes, the origins of society, exogamy, clans,

totems, rituals, innate cognitive categories, and the like. In the short chapters of this book, one of my goals is to tell this story and unravel why the second half of Durkheim's career, was in essence, devoted to making vindicating statements in *The Elementary Forms.*

Part 1 of this book chronicles the path of Durkheim's early years to uncover why he suddenly became fixated on totemism and, then, to reconstruct the reasoning behind his sweeping generalizations on the origin of religion and society. A systematic chronology is especially important because Durkheim rejected or modified some early ideas that are still in circulation today and because of the widely differing views on what Durkheim supposedly said, or did not say. A reassessment of his thesis on the origins of religion also requires that we sort out some mystifying issues in Durkheim's academic history—issues such as his self-described "revelation" igniting his obsession with religion, his quiet removal of *naturism* as primal religion after 1895 (first articulated in *The Division of Labor* see Chapter 5) and replacing it in the second edition of *The Division of Labor* with *totemism* as the origin of religion, his reasons for dropping his famous distinction between "mechanical" and "organic" solidarity and, oddly enough, his reasons in *Elementary Forms* for wanting to avoid even using the name totemism because it grossly misrepresented the social institution he was describing (Durkheim ([1912]1995: 101). If not totemism, what else did he have in mind? Did we miss something important? The answer is yes, and the objective of this book is to (a) fill in some essential gaps in the development of Durkheim's religious sociology and (b), in Part 2 of the book, present data that will cast some new light in support of his ideas on individualism, society, and totemism.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an essential historical context. For Durkheim's approach to religion, his use of classic evolutionary theory, and his sophisticated application of kinship theory reflect not just late nineteenth-century thought in France but are all contingent on a matrix of ideas adopted from earlier scholars in Europe, Australia, and the Americas. Even his decision to become a sociologist was fostered by historic events before he was born. A natural starting point is sociology's two science-minded founders—Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. Some background is also needed on three major nineteenth-century happenings: the great time revolution on the age of the earth, the founding of the English school of anthropology, and the discovery of kinship.

Early Sociology and Durkheim's Sociology

Auguste Comte and the French Collectivist Tradition

After the French Revolution (1789–1797), France was faced with chronic social and political unrest. French philosophers responded with an urgent need to understand the dynamics of social order, a problem that occupied Fourier, Joseph De Maistre, Chateaubriand, and Henri de Saint-Simon amongst others. Out of this call, a revitalization movement began to unfold in French intellectual circles urging the abandonment of libertarian individualism in favor of a collective philosophy to restore a sense of social order in post-revolutionary France. The consensus was that a bold doctrine was needed for the construction of a new social order grounded in morals, religion, and ethics (Nisbet 1966: 3ff; Gunn 1922: 32; Levy-Bruhl 1903). Durkheim is often seen as continuing this tradition because of his first ideas about "the collective conscience" and his later notion of "collective representations," but Durkheim was all too aware of what was lurking beneath the surface of the rosy portrayals of collectivism: *individualism*. Given the egoistic nature of humans, the submission of individuals to the collective must be achieved rather than assumed as "natural" to humans; and thus, *Elementary Forms* represents Durkheim's theory outlining the mechanisms by which commitments to collective representations are generated and sustained, thereby tempering potentially disintegrative effects of human individualism.

When Durkheim began his education, Comte's sociology was subject to ridicule. In fact, it was a banned topic in most French academic circles but, within a short span of years, his ideas were back in vogue. Indeed, the President of France and some of his cabinet of officials attended the dedication of a statue of Comte at the Sorbonne in 1902, thus marking Comte's "rehabilitation." But, despite the decades of obscurity, few French thinkers could avoid being exposed to Comte's ideas; and Alfred Espinas (a pioneering French sociologist) along with others assured that Durkheim would be steeped in Comte's key ideas, especially his ideas about the potential for a science of society. For whatever the merits or demerits attached to Comte's "law of the three stages" and his "hierarchy of the sciences," in which sociology is crowned "queen science," Comte sketched a framework for a truly objective social science, calling it by default *sociology*—as his preferred choice, *social physics*, had already been claimed by a Belgian statistician (Coser 2003: 3; Thompson 1975; and see Pickering, 1993 for an intellectual biography).

Worried that his nascent science would be dismissed as modified philosophy, Comte took the bold step of portraying sociology as *the* sister

discipline of biology. What distinguished the two sciences, he said, is the nature of their elements, calling one a "biological organism" and the other a "social organism." Although Comte's use of the organismic analogy led him to elaborate anatomic comparisons between his two "organic" bodies, it helped to solidify sociology's image as the new science of society. Comte's metaphoric imagery is also seen as laying the footings for what became functional theorizing in sociology and even for Durkheim's statements on causes and functions outlined in *The Rules of Sociological Method* as they had been applied in *The Division of Labor in Society*.[3] After 1895, Durkheim's thinking began to change, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, he was forced to smuggle in some neurology underlying human cognition and actions—an emphasis that is a far cry from his powerful advocacy in *The Rules* for sociologists to study only "social facts" rather than psychological or, heaven forbid, biological facts. And so, Durkheim seemed to be caught in a contradiction with his extreme sociologistic arguments in his early work. But, once we examine Durkheim's work in more detail in reviews, articles, and commentaries in the post 1895 period, it is clear that while he deliberately underplayed reference to human predilections in order to promote sociology as a distinct science in its own right, when it came to his theory on religion and society he was forced to anchor his thesis in the inherent properties of human neurobiology.

Herbert Spencer and the British Utilitarian Tradition

While Comte's positive philosophy was shunned by most French academics during his lifetime, his ideas gained a foothold in England with such luminaries as George Elliot, Henry Lewes, John Stuart Mill, Harriet

3 Most scholars regard Comte as less the original thinker and more the brilliant synthesizer who built upon the ideas of Condorcet, Montesquieu, Saint-Simon, and other social philosophers. Saint-Simon (along with Turgot) had already sown the seeds for a science of society to restore social order and stability. Even Comte's *Law of the Three States* rests on footings laid by Saint-Simon (see Hayek 1941 and Gunn 1922). Levy Bruhl (1903: 2) noted that: "Like many of his contemporaries Auguste Comte thought himself singled out for the mission of formulating the principle of social organization." For highly readable accounts of Comte's philosophy in historical perspective see Turner et al. 2012 and Coser 2003. Comte sketched his positive philosophy as early as 1822, in such essays as, "Plan of the Scientific Operations Necessary for Reorganizing Society" (for excerpts of this work see Comte and Lenzer 1998). Harriet Martineau translated Comte's monumental work into English in 1853 under the title, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte.*

4 For a comprehensive biography of Comte's life see Pickering 1993.

Martineau, and Herbert Spencer.[4] By the 1860s when many disruptive effects of early capitalism gave sway to economic benefits, optimism came to pervade mid-Victorian England, providing a receptive milieu for a doctrine of social progress and the use of science to ensure continued progress.

When Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) took up Comte's call for a science of society, he did so in tune with the British utilitarian tradition by ignoring Comte's collective idealism and moving sociology to a more grounded materialism. He also discarded Comte's singular notion of society (i.e. the great spiritual being) by adopting a plural nomenclature to distinguish among types of *societies*. Yet, he kept the name *sociology* and endorsed Comte's premise that an understanding of society and its natural laws could only be achieved by adopting the empirical methods of science.[5]

Spencer also agreed that social phenomena must be grounded in observation (rather than theory or pure logic), illustrating this principle by anchoring his own grand evolutionary schemes in ethnographic materials gathered from various sources. And his insistence on collecting inventories of empirical facts and cataloguing these facts so that they could be compared was evident in the large and weighty books that he commissioned for publication as *Descriptive Sociology* (1873–1881). These oversized volumes, now mostly forgotten, lent a seriousness to sociology as an empirical discipline.[6] In *The Division of Labor*, Durkheim frequently criticizes Spencer's presumed "utilitarianism" but shows only faint appreciation for Spencer's evolutionary model that forms the basis of his own portrayal of societal evolution from simple to complex forms, an idea reproduced in a less complete form with Durkheim's soon-to-be abandoned distinction between "mechanical" and "organic" solidarity. Durkheim also

5 Critics questioned Spencer's decision on keeping the name sociology, calling it a barbarism because it was derived from elements of Greek and Latin. Spencer felt indebted to Comte but made it plain in his "Reasons for Dissenting from the Philosophy of M. Comte" [1864]1968, that he was not Comte's disciple. Comte's speculations had "great value," Spencer emphasized, noting that, "True or untrue, his system as a whole, has doubtless produced important and salutary revolutions of thought in many minds; and will doubtless do so in many more" (p. 24). It is noteworthy that Spencer went to France and paid a visit to Comte before the Frenchmen died.

6 The full title of this fifteen-volume work (commissioned by Spencer) is Descriptive *Sociology, or Groups of Sociological Facts, Classified and Arranged* (1873–1881). Spencer intended these materials to serve as the "raw data" for comparative sociological models on human societies. For a detailed account see Turner and Maryanski 1988; also see Duncan 1908: 156 ff. Segments of Spencer's *Principles of Sociology* were first published as separate issues to individual subscribers or published as journal articles beginning about 1874.

downplayed Spencer's emphasis that this movement from simple to complex societal formations can cause disintegration of societies when new integrative mechanisms of integration do not evolve. Instead, Durkheim sees "abnormal forms" of the division of labor, which might cause temporary episodes of disintegration, as obviated as organic forms of solidarity "naturally" and inevitably take hold. And, surprisingly, Durkheim paid little attention to Spencer's emphasis on power as an integrating force in rapidly differentiating societies. Why should this be so, especially since Durkheim had made positive comments about Spencer's work in a number of publications?

The answer resides in Durkheim's view that culture—first the collective conscience, later collective representations—are more central to societal integration than power, per se, and in many ways, Durkheim's work after 1895 seeks to demonstrate how emotional commitments to culture develop and provide the fundamental basis of integration in all sociocultural formations. And, for Durkheim, the key to understanding how commitments and solidarity evolve is in understanding how the first human societies evolved from proto-societies (often portrayed as "hordes") and how religion is the basis for this evolution of societies. Thus, Spencer's sociology reinforced for Durkheim the importance of scientific theorizing and research employing an evolutionary perspective as well as providing for Durkheim the basic model of societal development. While Spencer also made interesting arguments on the origin and evolution of religion, his psychological "ghost theory" would be rejected by Durkheim in favor of an alternative collectivist approach to religion.

Evolutionary Theory and "The Time" Revolution

A New Sense of Time

An evolutionary interpretation of history dominated the Western world during the entire nineteenth century. Evolutionary reasoning also marked the beginning of modern fieldwork on a wide variety of populations at different "stages" of evolutionary development. Beginning in Classical times, the Greek historian Herodotus and the Roman historian Tacitus, among others, had described "exotic" populations by writing elaborate descriptions of their personalities, traditions, and habits. Over time, as these stories accumulated, gradually eroding time-honored Western notions of a static universe, scholars began to write of a "ladder of evolution" whereby "higher forms had ascended though time, out of a condition represented by present lower forms" (Bock 1956: 61–63; Slotkin 1965).

As ideas of progress and change crystallized into a bold, social evolutionary paradigm, social theorists began piecing together the mountains of documents on exotic peoples gathered over the centuries. To codify these documents, a hierarchical time scale was devised to rank societies from simple to complex in terms of how advanced they were along the road to "civilization." While these stage models varied in scope and grandeur, they all applied the evolutionary logic that complex forms had evolved out of lower, simpler forms. But a looming problem remained over the biblical chronology that the earth was only 6,000 years old.

This problem was met head on by the publication of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833). Lyell's work provided the key evidence allowing all thinkers, if so disposed, to conceptualize evolution over a much longer time frame. Using evidence from deposits of sedimentary rocks, Lyell argued that the observed geological changes on the earth's surface required a vast time frame and, as is well known, Charles Darwin then used Lyell's evidence to buttress his own theory of organic evolution in *The Origin of Species* (1859), a theory that rocked the Western world because it questioned the religious interpretation of the origins of earth, humans, and society.[7]

In the post-Darwinian period, biologists debated the implications of natural selection for understanding human evolution. Social scientists also reacted by casting off the shackles of the past by going into the field to study "the primitive" or by heading to the nearest library to dust off ancient law codes, literary texts, and other archival documents in their zeal to reconstruct the *origins of* law, family, language, religion, and society itself.[8] Durkheim was soon to join these new evolutionary thinkers, released from the time scale imposed by biblical dogma. Over time, more influential on Durkheim than either Comte or Spencer in conceptualizing evolution was a more anthropological figure, Edward Tylor, who founded the British School of Social Anthropology.

Edward Tylor's (1832–1917) English School of Social Anthropology

Edward Tylor was a tall, strikingly handsome English anthropologist who played the leading role in legitimizing mid-nineteenth-century social evolutionary theory. Endowed with a charismatic personality, a keen

7 In 1848, Lyell was knighted for his contribution to science (for a discussion see Gould 2002).

8 Although Comte's Law of the Three States and other social evolutionary schemes had long preceded Darwin and Wallace's organic theory of evolution, a geological time scale coupled with biological evolution lent a new legitimacy to social evolutionary thinking.

intellect, and strong leadership qualities, Tylor founded comparative ethnology and established anthropology at Oxford University. In his *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* in 1865, followed by his *Primitive Culture* in 1871, Tylor set forth to create a science-driven theory of civilization. A social theorist with an "infinite respect for facts" (Kardiner and Preble 1961: 63 and see Stocking 1968), Tylor institutionalized three empirical methods for reconstructing the stages of human societies: (1) a comparative method to sort and "pigeonhole" societies with similar traits; (2) a reliance on the archeological record to rank and place societies with similar traits in their proper time sequence; and (3) a "doctrine of survivals" to recover the non-material traits of past societies. Survivals for Tylor were quaint cultural leftovers (e.g. customs, opinions, rituals) retained from a past stage of society.[9] Yet, unlike theorists who proposed that every society must pass through each developmental phase, Tylor held that movement was simply progressive from simple to complex forms, a trend already established in archaeology where stone, bronze, and iron tools followed each other in sequence. Under Tylor's tutelage, the cross-cultural method and his "doctrine of survivals" became indispensable for evolutionary theorists because they offered concrete "proof" that contemporary societies had evolved out of more primitive ones.

Tylor also institutionalized a remarkable doctrine, "the psychic unity of mankind," or the belief that all human minds operate in much the same way. Variations in cognitive processes, he said, result *not* from biological differences but from *different environmental conditions* and *different experiences*, resulting in different grades of civilization. In Tylor's words, "when it comes to comparing barbarous hordes with civilized nations, the consideration thrusts itself upon our minds, how far item after item of the life of the lower races passes into analogous proceedings of the higher, in forms not too far changed to be recognized, and sometimes hardly changed at all" ([1871]1970: 6–7). The notion that all humans are similar in cognitive potential under similar conditions was adopted by many social theorists (including Durkheim) in part, because it lent legitimacy to a progressive theory of human cognition and to a belief that societies evolve by following

9 In Tylor's words, "When a custom, an art, or an opinion is fairly started in the world . . . it may keep its course from generation to generation, as a stream once settled in its bed will flow on for ages . . . On the strength of these survivals, it becomes possible to declare that the civilization of the people they are observed among must have been derived from an earlier state, in which the proper home and meaning of these things are to be found; and thus collections of such facts are to be worked as mines of historic knowledge" ([1871]1970: 70–71).

scientific laws. In fact, Durkheim would come to rely heavily on Tylor's doctrine that human cognition is shaped by the environment, that survivals are evidence of leftovers from an earlier stage of society (i.e. the "concept of survivals"), and that all human minds are similar (i.e. the "psychic unity of man").[10] Yet, as a sociologist emphasizing the study of social facts, Durkheim would reject Tylor's type of comparative method because it ripped traits out of context; he would also reject Tylor's approach to religion as originating in animism (i.e. a belief in spirits or souls) because such an approach sought the genesis of religion in psychological phenomena rather than in collective phenomena.

Five Kinship Theorists

As the opening quote at the beginning of this chapter underscores, Durkheim synthesized ideas from a wide variety of scholars. Edward Tylor's work was a critical resource because many of Durkheim's later ideas stem from Tylor's views on evolution. As I have emphasized, at least among sociologists who tend to rely primarily on Durkheim's great books, Durkheim was a broader-based intellectual, even as his early advocacy for sociology as a discipline was highly dogmatic and restrictive. He read widely the works of diverse scholars, and perhaps more than any other founder of sociology, was constantly engaged in debates and dialogues with them, sometimes quietly in his mind and at other times publically in full-blown arguments. His editorship and commentary in the *L'Année Sociologique* clearly reveals the breadth of his readings and scholarship. Indeed, every chapter in Part 1 of this book outlines the extent of this intellectual engagement. For example, many sociologists do not realize that Durkheim was a sophisticated kinship theorist, or that he was actively engaged with the scholarship of a variety of kinship theorists such as Lewis Henry Morgan, Johan Jacob Bachofen, Henry Maine, John Ferguson McLennan, and Fustel de Coulanges—hardly scholars enshrined in the sociological pantheon but, still, very important individuals in molding Durkheim's thinking. As David Maybury-Lewis (1990: 278) emphasized, "Durkheim is not now remembered as a 'kinship' theorist, so it is perhaps surprising to discover how much and . . . how well he wrote in this field [and] some of what he wrote has been undeservedly neglected." And as

10 As Paul Radin (1970: xii) emphasized, Tylor belongs to the "tradition of Scotch-English empiricist philosophy and psychology . . . (with) . . . little sympathy for conjectural history and metaphysical entities."

Adam Kuper (1985: 224) related, "Durkheim was preoccupied with the problems of 'primitive kinship' throughout his career." To be sure, the story of how Durkheim came to write *Elementary Forms* begins with the evolutionary ideas received from Comte, Spencer, Darwin, and Tylor, but very early on, Durkheim began to pay attention to early kinship theorists. In fact, many of the essential ideas underlying his religious sociology were extracted from the founders of kinship analysis in anthropology and the social sciences more generally.

The "Discovery" of Kinship

The "discovery" of kinship was probably the most sensational event in the Post-Darwinian period of the 1860s. Once nineteenth-century fieldworkers met the natives face-to-face, they were shocked that aboriginal family life violated the norms of European family life. Until then, the nuclear family consisting of mother, father, and dependent children was simply taken for granted as the fundamental social unit. Why did kinship need to be discovered? As Thomas Trautmann expressed it, "It may seem odd to speak of the discovery of kinship, given that the elements of that entity—family relationships, modes of descent, rules of marriage, gender roles—lie immediately to hand for every human being . . . (Yet) . . . Like the air we breathe, it is all around us and we cannot see it. Kinship had to be discovered . . ." (1987: 3). Once "discovered" and in light of striking differences between aboriginals and Europeans in domestic relations, descent rules, inheritance, and the allocation of rights and obligations, many traditional notions of family life were swept away.

Kinship institutions were also found to organize most social relations in preliterate societies whereas, in contrast, the typical European society confined kinship to a small number of individuals outside other major social institutions. Making sense of these connections mandated the creation of elaborate kinship diagrams and the adoption of a kinship nomenclature with terms such as *gens, lineage, sib, moiety, clan, phratry,* and *tribe* put into service with such newly minted terms as *social father*, *section system,* and the marriage rules of *endogamy* and *exogamy.*[11] Kinship studies also became fused with legalistic terms such as *corporate group*,

11 The basic building block for most human kinship systems is the nuclear family of mother, father and unmarried offspring. Kinship systems vary in the way societies use the marital bond to configure a kinship institution. In a general sense a kinship system is a classification scheme or a network of linkages dictating statuses, roles, affiliations, and types of groupings. Affiliations are built from (a) blood/consanguinity/birth; (b) marriage (or affines);

status, and *contract* because early kinship scholars were often lawyers who sought to uncover ancient laws by tracing survivals in modern law. Discovering kinship also sparked new questions: Why do kinship systems vary so dramatically? What is the relationship between kinship nomenclature and the rules of descent and marriage? Is the nuclear family actually the primal social unit? If not, how were early humans organized?

As noted, many of Durkheim's assumptions on the family, society, and religion were drawn from the writings of five pioneer kinship theorists—Lewis Henry Morgan, Johann Bachofen, Henry Maine, John McLennan, and Fustel de Coulanges (Durkheim's mentor). Given the importance of their ideas in Durkheim's religious sociology, an overview of these eye-opening insights (at least for Durkheim) is essential here at the very beginning to the story that will unfold.

Lewis Henry Morgan

Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881) was a highly respected American attorney and politician (who served twice in the New York Legislature), while also the founding father of kinship analysis. More than anyone, it was Morgan's interest in Native American institutions that made kinship a legitimate field of study.[12] Before his time, little was known about

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or (c) fictive kin by adoption or pseudo-kinship relations (e.g. blood brothers or a totemic "community of the blood."). A *descent rule*, which often regulates recruitment refers to generational lines. In *bilateral or cognatic descent* (e.g. European system), blood lines are traced equally through males and females. In *unilineal descent (*e.g. tribal system), blood lines are traced through one sex only—matrilineal (females) or patrilineal (males). A *lineage* is a direct descent line that traces to a known common ancestor; a *clan* is an indirect line to an ancestor that may be mythical or so remote all descent traces are lost. The terms *sib and gens* are units similar to clans. Clans have a second meaning (used by Durkheim) to refer to a kin-based or non-kin based aggregate or grouping of individuals. A *moiety* is a half of something (e.g. a tribe is split in half with two moieties (each with a number of clans). A *phratry* is a grouping of clans and used when a tribe is divided up into three or more parts (a historial or alliance connection). *Endogamy* is a rule to marry internally or within a social group; *exogamy* is a rule to marry outside a certain social group (often a clan or lineage). A rule of thumb is that in a unilineal kinship system nuclear families make up lineages, lineages make up clans, clans make up moieties, and two moieties make up a tribe (For an engaging and fun to read book on kinship see Fox 1967).

12 Morgan began his fieldwork among the Iroquois Indians of upstate New York, publishing his findings in [1851](1954) under the title, *League of the Ho-De-No SauNee or Iroquois.* This early work contains Morgan's formative ideas on kinship; and while his sweeping generalizations on kinship nomenclature have been reinterpreted, his ethnography remains an excellent description of Iroquois culture.

aboriginal nomenclature (or how native peoples addressed and classified their relatives), except for the familiar Western terms of mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, husband, and wife (Tooker 1997: vii). Morgan discovered a more complex system of terminology, but what riveted his attention was that terms reserved exclusively for the Western nuclear family (e.g. father, mother, etc.) were applied to a wider circle of kindred—*outside* the actual nuclear family. Curious to learn if this nomenclature existed elsewhere, Morgan (under the sponsorship of the Smithsonian Institution) put together a questionnaire and mailed it around the world to government agents, missionaries, military personnel, and anyone else who had contact with native populations, asking them to supply whatever information they could on aboriginal patterns of consanguinity and affinity. When completed, "The Tables" (as they were famously called) included information on 139 kinship systems from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. In 1871, he published these data in *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*. Morgan was not alone in finding that native terminologies were dramatically different from Western terminologies, but he was first to give these differences serious consideration.

In his classic work, *Ancient Society* (1877), Morgan used his elaborate kinship tables as evidence for a stage model of the family and society. All humans have similar cognitive abilities, he reasoned; what varied was the *rate* of social advancement with aboriginals still in stages of "savagery and barbarism." Each stage, he maintained, planted the seeds for the next stage, with plenty of time allotted for the unfolding of each distinct sequence.[13] Of great significance (especially for Durkheim) was Morgan's rejection of the nuclear family as a primal and natural social formation, arguing instead that the mother, father, and offspring trinity came much later and, hence, the nuclear family was a purely *invented* creation (Morgan [1877]1985: 384).

In an effort to account for its origins, Morgan proposed that the European family was the end product of a five-stage evolutionary sequence (using his tables of kinship nomenclature as data for his reconstruction). In the first stage, humans lived in a *horde* or undivided aggregate with mostly transient sexual relationships (Morgan [1877]1985: 500). A promiscuous horde was a fanciful conjecture on Morgan's part, but it was the

13 It is not surprising that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels endorsed Morgan's dialectical approach to the origin of the family, kinship, and private property. It lent support to their own evolutionary schemes (See Engels ([1884]1972).

only way he could conceptualize a social formation without marriage ties. In the next stage, family life took root around a group marriage of brothers and sisters (less real siblings but collateral ones who were designated by the terms "brother" or "sister"),[14] followed in the third stage by marriage with relatively stable pairs but where spouses came and went at will. In the fourth stage, patriarchal authority was joined with polygyny or the marriage of one man to several women, a stage Morgan labeled "a special family" type because it was not universal. The fifth stage ushered in an "exclusive cohabitation" with monogamous pairings as described by a Western system of nomenclature. Morgan's stage model thus begins with promiscuous hordes and ends with nuclear families.

For Morgan, the way relatives are classified reflects institutions and social norms, so when relatives are classified together, they are considered identical in some *social* way. He also held that until paternity was certain, blood ties or descent was traced exclusively through *mother's* relatives.[15] Morgan's ideas are far more sophisticated than this overview can convey, and they were so captivating to the educated public that they attracted worldwide attention.[16] In fact, during his lifetime, Morgan was America's leading anthropologist, receiving many honors including membership in the National Academy of Sciences, and was, for a period, president of

14 Morgan knew that sibling group marriage was not found anywhere, but he reasoned that the kinship nomenclature of some indigenous peoples were survivals from a time when this type of marriage existed. The nomenclature is correct but Morgan's interpretation is wrong. For example, in the Hawaiian system of terminology, which is concentrated in areas where the Malalyo-Polynesian language is spoken, there are only a handful of kin terms and they merge lineal and collateral relatives. These terms serve to separate a generation of parents from a generation of children—instead of quaint leftovers from Morgan's hypothesized brother-sister marriage. They operate to force Ego to find a marriage partner outside his primary kinship network (see Fox 1967: 256).

15 Western kinship is a subtype of the Eskimo kinship system. It is a bilateral/cognatic descent system and is characterized by small domestic groups, a kindred instead of a single-sided lineage, with "ego" related equally to relatives on both sides of the family. It differs from a unilineal system where "ego" traces his descent typically through one side of the family (see footnote 11).

16 Morgan was mistaken that merging collateral and lineal relatives in aboriginal kinship systems corresponds in *meaning* to the European system. Nevertheless, the idea that kinship terminology is linked with social factors remains factual—only the interpretations have changed. Let me add that when Morgan visited Europe in 1870–1871, he was warmly welcomed by such intellectual giants as Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley and John Lubbock as well as the kinship theorists, John McLennan and Sir Henry Maine (Morgan 1937).