

Matthieu Béra

”Émile Durkheim: A Biography” by Marcel  
Fournier

(doi: 10.2383/75778)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2013

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

# “Émile Durkheim: A Biography” by Marcel Fournier

by Matthieu Béra

doi: 10.2383/75778

Marcel Fournier is a scholar, a historian of sociology who masters the mixed chronology of works and life to the very day – which the knowledge of the protagonists’ correspondance authorizes. He has read the whole of Durkheim’s works: his five books (including the Latin thesis), his dozens of articles, his hundreds of reviews, ranging from 1885 (review of a book by Schaeffel in the *Revue philosophique*, vol. XIX) to 1917 (obituary of his son André, in the alumni directory of the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure). Fournier has obviously also read the posthumous editions of the many lectures, which he placed in their original contexts. Durkheim’s whole work is then returned to the reader: thirty years of uninterrupted publications and works. That’s what this biography<sup>1</sup> is, before anything else, the complete works of Durkheim in a compact version, when neither a complete works edition nor a critical edition are available on the market. An exhaustive index, both by themes and by names, helps readers in finding their way through this amount of knowledge.

## 1. A Taste for Archives and the Discovery of Unpublished Documents

In addition to this complete restitution of the works of the founder of French academic sociology, we also find a “taste for archives” (as the title of a famous book

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the new title, different from that of the French edition: *Emile Durkheim. 1858-1917* [Fournier 2007].

by the historian Arlette Farge reads). Since Durkheim's private archives disappeared during World War Two, Fournier has worked on another basis: public national archives, on a departmental or city level, which give access to numerous data. Among them, the file of the civil servant Durkheim at the National Archives, that of the young citizen at the departmental archives of the Vosges (before he left his family in 1876), and the professor's file at the Paris university archives, at the departmental archives of the Gironde, and at local education office archives. Besides that, in the 1980s Fournier worked on Mauss's private archives (1872-1950) which, luckily, were not destroyed. He was thus able to read dozens of fascinating letters exchanged between Durkheim and his nephew, between 1893, when Mauss was a student preparing for the *agrégation* in Paris, and 1917, when he was on the front (the letters were published by Fournier and Besnard in 1998). This is undoubtedly a considerable material, which was skillfully exploited by the author in his two crossed biographies: the first one, on Mauss, was published in 1994 under Pierre Bourdieu's patronage, who gave him access to the *Collège de France* archives (Mauss was a lecturer there between 1930 and 1940); and the second one, "the uncle's," as Mauss used to call Durkheim in his letters to his friend Hubert. It is the biographer's art to let us hear the men's personal voices, with all the privacy and intimacy, as they appear in their correspondence, mixed with impersonal texts written for publication and science. Fournier's biography of Durkheim successfully renders the human dimension of the founder of sociology, although he considered himself primarily a man of science.

Fournier was not the first one to investigate Durkheim's life, with more or less recent discoveries, such as that which led to Durkheim's class of philosophy at the lycée of Sens one year after his *agrégation* (1883), found in 1995 by the American sociologist, Neil Gross. A whole chapter is dedicated to this discovery,<sup>2</sup> an essential one to understand the "young Durkheim." Another important discovery is that of the book loan registers in Sens (departmental archives of the Aisne) and above all, of the ENS, where Durkheim was a student (1879-1882).<sup>3</sup> This gives an idea of the amount of the young Durkheim's readings while he was preparing for his *agrégation* in philosophy in Paris, and of the considerable culture of this scholar who mastered Greek, Latin, German, English, Hebrew, and maybe other languages. Fournier also uses the correspondences found in the 1970s and the 1980s, both with his colleagues of *L'Année Sociologique*, such as Hubert, Bouglé, Parodi, and Simiand, and to his

<sup>2</sup> Available online since 1996 on the Chicago university website, published by Robert Alun Jones and translated into English in 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See Paoletti's appendices [2012], initially published in the *Durkheimian Studies* in 1992.

friends (Octave Hamelin, Xavier Léon). All these letters draw an accurate picture of Durkheim.

## 2. Insisting on the Man

This taste for enquiry and archives leads the biographer to give importance to the scholar's private life from his very childhood, his "prime education," to quote the title of Luc Boltanski's first book [1969]. Fournier goes back, and very rightly so, to Durkheim's father's own rabbinical education,<sup>4</sup> whether moral, religious, or intellectual.<sup>5</sup> One just has to follow the storyteller from Durkheim's youth in Epinal to the epilogue, when Durkheim chose not to survive the death of his adored son in February 1916, whom he had raised to be like himself. This displaying of both the man and his work is not in accordance with the French academic tradition, which is reluctant to show scholars in dressing gowns, ill (neurasthenic), feeling discouraged and doubtful, or despaired to the point of dying. Fournier will be criticized for this, in fact he has already been. The historian-biographer will be accused of not being enough of a sociologist, of not paying enough attention to the works, and too much to insignificant daily facts, which critics regard as meaningless – Durkheim learnt to ride a bike with Henri when he was forty, he had a large desk facing East, he used to write the outline of his lectures on the blackboard, he would eat bread during the Jewish Easter, and so on. Shouldn't all this energy be spent picturing the man have been dedicated to his *ideas*, the only material which matters when we write about scholars?

We believe this bias to be false in two ways. First of all, the man and his life shed light on the work. As Durkheim himself said in 1909 in his friend Rauh's obituary: "The man is the work." The phrase is quoted by Fournier, who thinks it too strong, so much so that he reduces it himself. Nor did Durkheim hesitate to inquire about the man when presenting an author's work. He did so with regard to Hobbes, as can be discovered with the lecture found by J. F. Bert [2011], and with regard to Saint-Simon in his lectures of 1895/96 on socialism. He used to read the biographies of the authors he was working on for his *agrégation* lectures.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Louis Greenberg followed this lead for the first time in 1976. See also Béra [2011] on Durkheim's two first names.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the colloquium "Une jeunesse spinalienne," organized by Fournier at Epinal in 2008. Conference proceedings to be published, with in particular M. Schwartzfuchs's communication on Moïse Durkheim's studies, which he surveyed through a co-religionist of Durkheim's father's who had the same education and had the good idea to write about it.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the borrowings we have been able to trace back over the Bordeaux period, to be published in the *Durkheimian studies* in 2014.

Fournier does some pioneering work here: behind his extraordinary erudition is a didactician who knows better than anybody that to understand complex work it is necessary to possess the author's keys. Making the man engaging to the reader is a way of communicating his ideas in a stronger way. We entered Mauss's sociology through his biography, for Fournier knew how to underline the aspects of his personality and the historical context in which and through which he had become what he was. Fournier succeeds in doing the same with Durkheim, even though the latter had not many opportunities to leave his office: he was never involved politically, except during the Dreyfus affair, when he ran the Bordeaux branch of the new Human Rights League, or when he worked for the university propaganda during World War One. Contrary to his very sociable nephew, he did not have multiple friendships. A workaholic, he probably thought that the time he would have needed for friendship would have been lost to his work; since he was too old for war, Durkheim did not spend four years at the front like Mauss did; he did not take part in the founding of *L'Humanité*, although he was regarded as a close friend of Jaurès's. No. He had an orderly family life from September 1887 (when he married Louise Dreyfus at the great synagogue in Paris), to November 1917 (when he died at home, 4 avenue d'Orléans in Paris). He had an implacable superego which resisted everything and which he imposed on everyone around him: on his nephew, who had been entrusted to him for his education; on his son, whom he taught himself at home on a daily basis until he was old enough to go to higher education; on his wife, who had to proof-read for him, to attend his lectures, and to organize practical life so that he never had to deal with it; and on his students, on whom he would impose a precise work pattern. He was concerned with all sorts of moral codes (civic, professional, domestic), which he taught in lecture halls. Moral was the great matter of his life. He had to think it out, to apply it, to teach it. He commanded respect in his family, amongst his colleagues, his students, and he did not show any weakness and resisted every temptation. At the maximum, he was considered someone warm, with an “all feminine” sensitivity. Although he was himself excessive both with regards to work and moral rigor, he developed a theory of the happy medium and thought excesses and failings were equal evils.

### **3. The Interest for the Context**

Those who criticize Fournier for favoring the man over his work will be joined by those who believe the context does not add anything valuable (they exist, including among sociologists). Nevertheless, Fournier applies himself to reconstructing the

various contexts of Durkheim's work: urban (Epinal, Bordeaux, Paris), social and cultural (Jews from the East and from Bordeaux), intellectual (philosophers, institutions, journals), political (the Dreyfus affair, social movements, elections), institutional (the Bordeaux faculty, the Sorbonne, committees, commissions, councils, and so on). This addresses the need to set the man and his ideas in a particular context, for ideas do not come "out of nowhere," as Weber wrote in *The Protestant Ethic*. This is the price to pay for entering a work which seems amazingly far from reality (there are very few hints to his time, to technical or social progress, to cultural life; it is rather paradoxical for a professor who always advised his *agrégation* students to scatter their courses with concrete examples). How could one possibly understand Durkheim's interest in religious phenomena without knowing anything about his family background, about the Dreyfus affair, about anti-Semitism, about the Republic laws, or about the beginning of the sciences of religion at the *Ecole pratique des hautes études* around 1900?

We appreciate this work by a historian and sociologist, who reminds that Durkheim was as much a lecturer as a scholar. Fournier strives to find who his students were and the content of his lectures. We prefer this to a story of ideas which would forget the context and override the man, his education, the voices of his predecessors and contemporaries who speak and argue through him. It is not the case here: as soon as Durkheim reads or meets an author, Fournier supplies information about him. The process is a little systematic, but it has its advantages. Maybe a synthetic networking, no more available in the 2013 edition than in that of 2007, is missing: networks of friends, colleagues, opponents, etc. However, Fournier's work is encyclopedic and a reference. It sets the basis, establishes the foundations. Now that the material is gathered, others may present it differently, or use it as a basis from which to elaborate suggestive synthesis. That's at least how *we* have been using this book since 2007.

#### 4. Lukes or Fournier?

The book was first published in French in 2007. It had a monopoly over the publishing market, except for small pocket edition books of approximately one hundred pages and of uneven quality. But this English translation makes the *Biography* compete with Steven Lukes's book, which has been authoritative in English for the past 40 years (his thesis was written in 1968, published as a book in 1972).<sup>7</sup> Although they are about the same age (Lukes was born in 1941, Fournier in 1945), these two

<sup>7</sup> See Lukes [1972].

sociologists have published their intellectual biographies of Durkheim a long generation apart. An early work for Lukes, who was 27 years old in 1968, never revised or only marginally (the second edition was published in 1988), a maturity work for Fournier, who was 62 years old in 2007 and 68 at the time of the English edition. Luckily for the reader, the two biographies do not exclude each other, they are complementary. One should read both of them.

Strangely enough, Lukes’s book has not in the least become obsolete in forty years. It’s astonishing that this work should have resisted so well over the years. It certainly has not benefitted from the discoveries made over the period, but neither has it lost its topicality. This, in turn, raises the question about the objective contribution of the many “discoveries” which have been taken into account in Fournier’s book. Surprising as it may seem, Fournier’s biography supplies an important amount of informations which Lukes’s book does not lack, thanks to its thematic organization. Fournier’s *Biography* is a working tool, a sort of hyper-chronology, of hyper data bank, following a story. Lukes’s biography is more classically restricted to ideas, even though some pertinent life elements are also mentioned. The summaries and interpretation of texts are not shattered by forty years of research on Durkheim. Thus, the structure followed by Lukes in his biography for the Bordeaux period (the first part) is based on the order of the lectures. These lectures and these subjects have not changed since, and there has been no staggering discovery. Another example: on the way Durkheim’s work was first received, the corpus is now wider, finer (Fournier mentions *L’Année* and the reactions it aroused much more than Lukes does), but nothing really calls into question Lukes’s choices. With regards to the discoveries relating to Durkheim’s borrowings at the ENS, his Sens class, they enrich the knowledge of the work, but leave untouched Lukes’s book, which in spite of its silences, its failings and its holes, remains discerning. In addition, it is still necessary and Fournier’s *Biography* doesn’t equal it on some crucial points – such as the bibliography of Durkheim’s work, almost perfect in Lukes, literally unusable in Fournier.

We therefore advise the readers to read Fournier as a basis, and to add Lukes by necessity. With both books, they will have a considerable knowledge of Durkheim: the man, the work, the context. All they will then have to do will be to read Durkheim’s work and possibly, should they be willing to do so, add something to these classical biographies.

## References

Béra, M.D.

2011 “David, Émile. Les Ambivalences de l’Identité Juive de Durkheim.” *Durkheimian Studies* 17 (1): 121-150.

Bert, J.F. (ed.)

2011 *Hobbes à l’Agrégation. Un Cours d’Émile Durkheim Suivi par Marcel Mauss*. Paris: EHESS.

Boltanski, L.

1969 *Prime Éducation et Morale de Classe*. Paris: EPHE.

Fournier, M.

2007 *Émile Durkheim. 1858-1917*. Paris: Fayard.

2013 *Émile Durkheim. A Biography* [translated by D. Macey]. Oxford: Polity Press

Lukes, S.

1972 *Émile Durkheim. His Life and Work: a Historical and Critical Study*. New York: Harper and Row.

Paoletti, G.

2012 *Durkheim et la Philosophie - Représentation, Réalité et Lien Social*. Paris: Garnier.



## “Émile Durkheim: A Biography” by Marcel Fournier

---

**Abstract:** This review presents and defends Marcel Fournier’s biographical perspective applied to Durkheim, following a similar piece of work on Mauss in 1994. Fournier’s style emphasizes the man, the various contexts (political, religious, intellectual, academic), the ideas, and at the same time shows a real taste for archives, for the intensive use of private correspondence and thus sheds new light on Durkheim’s complex works, of which he gives a comprehensive and chronological account. This English translation of his Durkheim [Fayard 2007] fights with Steven Lukes’s classic intellectual biography of Durkheim, questioning the inevitably excessive monopoly it has been holding since 1972 and offering a complementary approach.

---

*Keywords:* Archives, context, biography, Lukes, lectures, networks.

---

**Mathieu Béra** is Lecturer in Sociology at the Bordeaux University. He’s author of numerous articles about Durkheim, published in *Contextes* [2012], *Raisons Politiques* [2012], *The Durkheimian Studies* [2009; 2011; 2014]. He supervised the collective book *Durkheim et la Religion. Les Formes élémentaires 100 ans après* [Garnier: Paris, to be published] and has recently published *Durkheim à Bordeaux (1887-1902)* [Contextes: Bordeaux, February 2014].