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[Review of "Godless intellectuals: The intellectual pursuit of the sacred reinvented" by Alexander Tristan Riley]

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BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Alexander Tristan Riley, *Godless Intellectuals: The Intellectual Pursuit of the Sacred Reinvented*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010, 298pp. \$US 95.00 hardcover (978-1-84545-670-2)

The title of this engaging work might seem paradoxical, but while the intellectuals it describes may have been godless, they were deeply concerned with some of the central issues addressed by religion. In explaining how, Riley gives us an historical sociology of a stream of Durkheim-influenced thinking that has only recently gained recognition, and indeed, is still ignored in certain quarters. His Durkheim is one whose approach, ideas and preoccupations, mediated through the French cultural avant-garde, neglected, and reappropriated in various ways, had a formative influence on French poststructuralist thought, and thence on the wider world of letters. What he terms “mystic Durkheimianism,” elements of which mark *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, and permeate the work of Robert Hertz and Marcel Mauss, contradicts the reflex association of Durkheimian thought with conservatism, functionalism, and scientism. Riley taps into an accumulating literature on the historical development of Durkheimian sociology, and a growing interest in how Durkheimian (or even Comtean) elements leaven the work of figures such as Althusser, Foucault, or Bourdieu, even if they are not always acknowledged there.

However, Riley is not interested in simply replacing Durkheim the Father of Functionalism with Durkheim the Father of Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard, or Derrida. He attempts something quite different from tracing *ur*-sources: a cultural sociology of the transmission and reconfiguration of ideas and of modes of intellectual formation, using unpublished sources, correspondence and personal papers, alongside published texts. In doing so, he seeks to navigate between two kinds of reductionism. Strictly textual interpretation has its uses, but it risks reducing authors to texts, treating texts as agents, and rendering the terrain of agency as an abstract concatenation of ideas. On the other hand, “situating” authors (and their texts) in terms of class, political or other interests can illuminate intellectual politics but can also yield caricatures, like the cartoon “Durkheim” still inhabiting some undergraduate texts. Riley seeks what these approaches can miss: how the formation and diffraction of

Durkheimian sociology, and much later, of poststructuralism, occurred in particular fields of cultural, political, and social engagement: in the micropolitics of institutions, organizations and associations, and in the personal formation of intellectual subjects striving to articulate and realize identity and purpose.

Thus, while Riley argues that poststructuralism owed much to a Durkheimian legacy, he posits a complex and contingent process of reconfiguration and transformation rather than simple continuity. In a sense, his narrative is as much about comparison as transmission; a comparison of the period in which Durkheimianism consolidated a precarious intellectual and institutional influence (roughly 1895 to 1915), and that in which French post-structuralism underwent an analogous development, between the 1950s and 1980s. In a subsequent chapter, he does trace several key linkages between these eras; for example, the important post-Durkheim role played by Mauss in the intellectual formation of Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris. He also contrasts the institutional politics of the Durkheim era to the interwar ferment of left-Durkheimian, Hegelian and Nietzschean ideas, which took place on the margins of official academic institutions, and involved a number of ephemeral groups whose significance took decades to be articulated.

Riley highlights the complex and incidental ways in which ideas were taken up, developed, rearticulated, and repurposed in specific political, institutional, cultural, and philosophical fields; a sort of discursive politics. But this process, he argues, was also *embodied* in personal relations of friendship and collaboration, and *lived subjectively and performatively* in the forging of intellectual and moral agency and identity. His examination of this ferment is framed in terms of two intersecting questions: how, both in the Durkheimian tradition, and later in post-structuralism did certain religious phenomena — especially the sacred — become such a focus of interest and attention, given that the scholars so fascinated were themselves bereft of traditional religious commitment? And how did a particular figure — the “intellectual” engaged in and committed to public discourse on cultural, pedagogical or moral issues — take form in the course of this complex and contingent history?

Riley addresses these questions by exploring the theoretical, moral and personal dimensions of two tendencies, which he names “ascetic” and “mystic” Durkheimianism, evident in the younger generation of scholars associated with the *Année Sociologique*. Durkheim himself, dedicated to an impersonal quest after scientific truth, a disciplined detachment from direct political engagement, and a strong sense of the importance of moral formation and a moral basis for social life, exemplifies the former. The latter tendency, represented by Mauss and Hertz, valor-

ized experiential and subjective aspects of religious life and political engagement, was sensitive to the ambiguity of the sacred, and rejected both an impersonal model of collective scientific work, and the *persona* of the elite, detached *maître à penser*. This “mystic” tendency bore fruit in various groups, interchanges and journals fostered by young intellectuals who were directly or indirectly influenced by Mauss in the 1930s, and who later were associated with the *milieux* out of which structuralist and post-structuralist thought emerged. “Influence” and “association” here gloss what Riley demonstrates was a complex tale of friendships, intellectual affinities, organizational memberships, and participation in the cultural politics of postwar and postcolonial France, respectively.

Within this context, Riley explores the active negotiation of terms of intellectual engagement and the construction and performance of personal and political identities. He suggests that the Durkheimian tradition mediated by Mauss was mobilized in the 1930s in response to three questions: “Who has the authority to rule?” “How and what do we know?” “What are our moral foundations?” These were addressed by re-envisioning the sacred as the central, energetic core of social life, definitive of subjective experience, embodying a duality of interdict and transgression, and shaped by a basic oscillation between order and excess. Thus understood, the sacred provided a way to respond to the cultural and political exhaustion of the Third Republic which had once provided the energized political context for Durkheim’s intellectual formation. Three decades later, in May 1968, and later again in the exhausted aftermath of Mitterrand’s socialist experiment, poststructuralists struggled with different but analogous questions in formulating a “politics of the impossible.”

This book is about more than a new way to do intellectual history. Riley suggests that we can take a measure of our own identity-making and engagement by attending to the active construction of intellectual cultures by the subjects of his narrative. The Durkheimian legacy provides resources for navigating between a simplistic version of enlightenment rationalism and its fundamentalist opposites. Making this case is difficult given that caricatures of Durkheim and of poststructuralism represent the two as poles apart. Connecting Durkheimian sociology to poststructuralism is likely to attract accusations of infidelity to one or the other tradition. Riley, however, insists on being “both faithful and unfaithful,” and this reader urges him on.

The subject matter Riley deals with is vast and complex, and some readers will likely take issue with elements of it. It could be suggested that Durkheim’s own work contains elements of tragedy, ambiguity, and transgression which made it a creative resource as well as a foil for the mystics among his legates. The intellectual trajectories of Foucault and

Derrida are complex enough that discussion of these alone could have been book-length. I would be curious to see how Riley would treat an important post-Durkheimian outlier: the Christian political anthropology of René Girard. Another question worth pursuing is how the terrain Riley explores is shaped by a particularly French interplay of politics, religion and the symbolic around issues of sovereignty, which made the decapitation of Louis XVI a symbol both of liberation and of trauma. (Jennifer Hecht's *The End of the Soul*, and Jay Caplan's *In the King's Wake*, might provide context and counterpoint on these and other questions.) But these are less criticisms than indications of fertility.

I recommend this book to any reader with an interest in Durkheimian sociology, intellectual history, poststructuralism, or social theory. *Godless Intellectuals* extends the cultural sociology associated with Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues to a unique exploration of one of the roots of that school of sociology. Thus, it would also make an interesting and accessible senior undergraduate or graduate course text in the sociology of knowledge, or in cultural theory.

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