

THE ELEMENTARY FORMS AS POLITICAL (A)THEOLOGY

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Abstract. Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* examines a fundamental intercalation of selfhood, sociality and cosmology, but as a response to a particular political context, it may also speak to contemporary issues of sovereignty and democracy. Reading the *Elementary Forms* in this context, and in light of Durkheim's references to monarchy, absolutism and revolution, is suggestive of an approach to such issues which resists sacrifice of the social to the sovereign, whether hierarchical or popular.

Keywords: Durkheim, sovereignty, political sociology, revolution, sacred, representation

Résumé. *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* écrit par Emile Durkheim explore l'intercalation fondamentale de la subjectivité, de la sociabilité et du cosmos, mais dans la mesure où cela renvoyait à un contexte politique et historique précis, cela pourrait également insister sur les problèmes de la souveraineté moderne et de la démocratie de manière moins directe. Lire *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* dans ce contexte tout en étant conscient des références de Durkheim à la monarchie, à l'absolutisme et à la révolution suggère que son approche de ces questions résiste au sacrifice de « la vie » sur le « pouvoir », du social sur le mécanisme de la souveraineté qu'elle soit hiérarchique ou populaire.

Mots clés: Durkheim, souveraineté, sociologie politique, révolution, sacré, représentation

AMBIGUITY AND CONTINGENCY: THE DIVERSE MESSAGES OF *THE ELEMENTARY FORMS*

The publication of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (hereafter, *EFRL*) marked a controversial intervention into cultural politics (Tiryakian 2009: 172–186), but subsequently, that context and the unsettling potential of its argument were often obscured (Stedman Jones 2001) by interpretations emphasizing the functional aspects of religion: the ar-

ticulation and enactment of established values and institutions, and the energizing of collective loyalty. This potential has lately re-emerged in work situating *The Elementary Forms* in a post-structuralist lineage via the *Collège de Sociologie* (Richman 2002; Riley 2010; Strenski 2006). A neo-Durkheimian revival now extends beyond anthropology and sociology to include epistemology and ontology (Mellor 2004; Frauley and Pearce 2007), identity (Joas 2008), politics (Lacroix 1979; 1981; Datta 2008) and sovereignty (Datta 2010). The ambiguities and polarities of the sacred are being revisited, along with its associations with violence, and its production through political and discursive *acts* which constitute individuals and populations in terms of rights and exceptions, possibilities and risks, economies and emergencies.

Nonetheless it can still seem strange to ask how *The Elementary Forms* might inform discussion of sovereignty and revolution. It seems to turn from the present and away from the course of history, seeking something anterior to modernity's paradoxical juxtaposition of abstract universals with accelerating historical displacement, contingency, creativity and destruction. It points to elemental forms and forces — differentiation, representation, identification — identity which give the very possibility of sociality and of its history. But this “long look back” was less literal than literary, a device to address the *modern* condition (Durkheim 1975b, 188; Rosati 2008). It will be suggested here that *The Elementary Forms* also addressed, if obliquely, the sociopolitical circumstances of the French Third Republic (Riley 2010; Stedman Jones 2001; Jones 1999) and the legacies which haunted it: the century-long aftermath of the French Revolution, and the monarchical and ecclesiastical absolutisms it overthrew.

SPECTRES OF ABSOLUTISM: REVOLUTION AND RESTORATION

The Revolution's troubled course, its Napoleonic capture, and two different restorations of the Bourbon monarchy, sowed ongoing division between those who sought to complete the Revolution, those who wished to bury it, and those who advocated some version of Bonapartist imperialism. These divisions shaped the failed 1848 revolution, the civil strife surrounding the Paris Commune (following the 1871 collapse of the Second Empire), and the Dreyfus affair (see Brown 2010). They took new forms in contesting political philosophies (liberalism, socialism, syndicalism, anarchism), and anxious discussions about the “degenerative” effects of modern life on national vitality (Nye 1984). They sparked conflict, even amongst defenders of Revolutionary and repub-

lican ideals, over the relative weighting of individual rights and social justice in response to industrial and social modernization. A century after the Revolution, both right and left in the Third Republic still defined political issues in its terms; liberals championing its association with individual rights; socialists celebrating revolutionary solidarity, justice, and equality. On the right, heirs of de Bonald and de Maistre transformed the historical actualities of the monarchy and the Catholic ascendancy into a narrative about the Enlightenment betrayal of legitimate order to its Revolutionary executioners. Restorationist and conservative Catholic circles imagined the mystical resurrection of a France dedicated to the Sacred Heart (Jonas 2000). Saint-Simonians and Comteans strove to re-situate legitimacy, not in a Rousseauian “people,” but in scientific principles of social solidarity, marrying conservative order to Revolutionary progress in a manner that inspired social republicanism and *solidarisme*.

Though critical of the Comtean lineage, Durkheim sought to specify the conditions governing the configurations and potentialities of modernity, correlating historical developments with trans-historical laws, but rejecting idealized origins or utopias. Politically a non-partisan republican with both socialist and liberal sympathies, he promoted a secular vision of national and moral reinvigoration informed by disciplined attention to the unfolding logic of social actuality as something both apparent and *real*, delimiting and galvanic, immanent and sovereign. As a comparison of *The Elementary Forms* with Durkheim’s *The Evolution of Educational Thought in France* demonstrates, his response to the contemporary context was twofold, identifying fundamental elements of social life obscured by historical contingency, but also examining the specific historical formation of key features of the modern outlook (1977: 7-14) in events such as the French Revolution. Durkheim was not alone in seeing modernity as a consequence of contingency and law. But the centrality of the Revolutionary legacy to the political context in which he established sociology as a scientific discipline and republican policy resource, ironically *constrained* his freedom to explore it empirically as an historical event. Particularly because it was constantly resurrected by his interlocutors as a *resource* to make sense of contemporary issues, the Revolution required interpretation *as exemplifying social and symbolic processes*, with an eye both to its actual impact on the social development of modern France, and the manner in which it became, *after the event*, a system of *collective representations*, tools with which to think and make society (Durkheim 1973a).

Durkheim addressed these tasks in doctoral theses on Montesquieu and the division of labour; in lectures on socialism, education, professions and the state, and discussions of individualism and human rights

(1973b). But in *The Elementary Forms*, attention to the Revolution is muted aside from a few striking passages, and mention of the monarchy it overthrew is virtually absent. Despite the book's non-European ethnographic focus, this is puzzling: the Bourbon monarchy and the Revolution both invite analysis in terms of its argument (Tiryakian 1988). The absolutism of Louis XIV, at least in its hagiographical trappings, verged on a combination of juridical and sacral sovereignty. The Revolution, too, was a sacralizing machine (Hunt 1988), allegorizing the People in "Marianne", a totemic figure supplanting the Virgin Mary, and transforming the sacred-tree imagery of kingship into revolutionary "liberty trees" (Harden 1998: 171–174). The Revolutionary cult of reason transposed magico-religious sovereignty, reimagining churches as Temples of Reason (Gombrich 1979). Even the execution of Louis XVI was a religiously-inflected trauma, beheading orders of belief and practice which still inhabited regions of a collective imagination pitched vertiginously into an uncertain future. A certain fascination with regicide and decapitation in twentieth-century French intellectual culture (Pearce 2003; 2006), exemplified by Bataille's review *Acéphale*, and Dumézil's studies of kingship and destiny (1988; 1999), might indicate that Durkheim's intellectual progeny took this trauma more seriously than Durkheim himself.

The most sustained, if still somewhat indirect evidence of Durkheim's attitude toward the *ancien régime*, or monarchy generally, appears in his thesis on Montesquieu (1997), which represents Montesquieu's three politico-juridical "forms of state" (republic, monarchy and despotism) as *actual* rather than ideal orders; distinct modes of organization and pursuits of "well-being." Montesquieu, Durkheim says, was concerned with the "whole fabric" of laws (1997: 22e–28e). Montesquieu's seeming entrancement by forms of state reflected an as-yet undeveloped conceptual scaffolding for a fully *sociological* theory of the essential elements and particular forms of societal organisation (29e, 31e), encouraging a residual tendency to treat sovereignty "at first sight" as the "most important" property. "Since the ruler stands, it might be said, at the "summit" of society and is often, quite understandably, called the "head" of the political system, everything is thought dependent on him" (41e). But Montesquieu actually demonstrated that monarchy *derives* its character from *social* factors: differentiation, particularity of interest and competition for honour. The king's power is limited by other orders and bound by law (1997: 36e): monarchical social orders allow for diversity, a "source of cohesion." Durkheim does not elaborate on the social mechanisms of this order — patronage, clientelism, protection, service — but the hint at organic solidarity is clear.

Despotism however, is different; it amounts to “a monarchy in which social orders have all been abolished and there is no division of labour, or a democracy in which everyone, except the ruler, is equal, but in servitude. It is *like a monster in which only the head is alive, having absorbed all the energies of the body*” (39e–40e, my emphasis). Durkheim seconds Montesquieu’s qualification that despots *are* still constrained, not by “the institution of different social orders, but the extraordinary, absolute authority enjoyed by religion amongst the people, and with the ruler too” (43e). This begs questions about something more proximate than Montesquieu’s “oriental” examples; parallels to the *ancien régime* would occur to any reader familiar with it. But for Durkheim, neither monarchy nor despotism constitute social *types*: “the nature of sovereign power can change while the nature of society remains stable, or it can be one and the same in societies which are totally different” (41e). This resembles Durkheim’s later characterizations of absolutism: while not terminologically identical, both despotism and absolutism are treated as epiphenomena manifest in varying social contexts. Absolutism is not identified exclusively with monarchy: despite occasional veiled (1986) or pointed (1992: 83–89) allusions to their conjunction, Durkheim implies that it may take different political forms. Rather than a structural/functional type or evolutionary category, it is represented as contingent, overdetermined by other factors, lacking significance in its own right.

The sacral dimension of monarchy merits even less attention from Durkheim than the juridical: *e.g.*, a quick summary of religious aspects of kingship in a review of Frazer (1907c), dismissive mention of the “ease” with which divine attributes can be attached to “men” (1975a: 80–81), and a terse reference to the idea of majesty as religious in *The Elementary Forms* (1995: 58–59). This is surprising: if prerevolutionary France was not a despotic “democracy of servitude,” it nonetheless tolerated for a century the pretensions of an absolutist *caput tyrannicus* ruling in a close but tense relation to the parallel “monarchical” order of the Roman Catholic Church. Louis XIV surrounded himself with rituals and symbols which aped and competed with ecclesiastical ones, though the Church exerted political and theological constraints on his sovereignty. Such complexities beg further Durkheimian analysis.

Durkheim did give the Revolution more sustained attention, but again, primarily outside *The Elementary Forms*. He linked the moral and political constitution of modern secular democracies to a Revolutionary legacy (1984; 1992; also Watts Miller 2012: 29–33), associated modern individualism, educational practice and intellectual responsibilities with Revolutionary ideals (1973a; 1977: 278–305), and located modern socialism in an Enlightenment and Revolutionary matrix (1962).

Initially, he was reluctant to explore the religious and symbolic aspects of the Revolution (Watts Miller 2012: 30–31), but these do inform his treatments of individualism, personhood, human rights (1973b; 2005), and definitional issues relating to religious phenomena (1975a), complementing the analysis of symbolism, ritual and collective fervour in *The Elementary Forms*. In the latter, references to the Revolution are vehicles for the concept of *creative* effervescence: an historical rather than cyclical unleashing of social energies, transforming rather than perpetuating established social dispensations and symbolic orders, rearticulating identity and action, enacting potentialities, new ways of being and seeing. In the “general enthusiasm” of the Revolution, the lineaments of a new world emerged in an ecstatic reinscription and sacralization of things “by nature purely secular,” like Fatherland, Liberty and Reason. To such “spontaneous hopes . . . the Cult of Reason and the Supreme Being tried to give a kind of authoritative fulfillment”, alongside a popular revolutionary religion “with its own dogma, symbols, altars, and feast days” (*EFRL*: 212–215; 1905; Gombrich 1979). If its institutional and practical roots lacked depth and its collective reach faltered (as the politics of the following century attested), this transitory moment¹ exemplified a central social process: “[n]owhere has society’s ability to make itself a god or to create gods been more in evidence than during the first years of the Revolution” (*EFRL*: 215–216).

A fascinating note in *The Elementary Forms* refers to the so-called “dupes night” on which noble privileges were voted away by members of the Assembly, including nobility caught up in the general excitement (*EFRL*: 212–213). Durkheim represents this as a *sacrifice* — “setting apart and forbidding” (i.e., *sacralising*, cf. *EFRL*: 44) — the old regime’s symbols and institutions; assigning them to oblivion in the name of the new. In renouncing them, the Assembly redefined them: no longer an order of honours, but petty, unjustified privileges which had *particularized* their holders, excluding them from an emergent national-revolutionary collectivity aspiring to the *universal*. The sacrificial act by which these privileges were othered (and thereby *negatively* sacralized) amounted to a ritual means for incorporating for their former beneficiaries into the republican nation; *self-sacrifice* required for rebirth into a new identity. Only in bemused retrospect did it appear suicidal. What interested Durk-

1. Ronjon Paul Datta (personal communication) suggests that Napoleon constituted himself as a “condensed” symbol of the continuing Revolution; tying in his person the aspirations of “the people” to a mythos of imperial/national greatness. By crowning first himself, and then Josephine, as Emperor and Empress, rather than having Pope Pius VII do so, Napoleon also combined magico-religious and juridical sovereignty, transgressing the old Indo-European taboo between these two antithetical poles of sovereignty.

heim was how a “demon of oratorical inspiration” and a “phenomenal oversupply of forces,” amplified by interchange between speakers and audience, could generate unprecedented action. In moments of transvaluative delirium, “man himself becomes something other than what he was ... stirred by passions so intense that they can be satisfied only by violent and extreme acts ... the most mediocre or harmless bourgeois transformed by the general exaltation into a hero or an executioner” (*EFRL*: 213). But Durkheim did not develop this into an extended examination of how the Revolution so quickly and radically displaced an entire institutional and symbolic order, a juridical-sacral complex once of enormous weight and apparent permanence. He noted that the process involved specific *political, symbolic and sacralizing acts*, contingent, and occasionally violent, but he limited such insight to fascinating but passing references. Was this reticence about addressing royal or revolutionary political sacralization systematically merely neglect? An editorial choice? Or a political refusal? Durkheim did not represent sociology as mere politics by other means: the study of *solidarité* was not *solidarisme*. But could his secular and republican commitments have generated concerns that shaded his editorial decisions? His response to a contemporary republican political issue, the relation of church and state, might suggest an answer.

SOVEREIGNTY AND MONSTROSITY

Ultimately, though not initially, the Revolution sought the radical elimination of religion from public and educational life. In this, it failed: Napoleon’s 1801 Concordat with a weakened but useful Holy See (Pius VII), signed its death warrant and formalized a pragmatic (and hence *de facto* conservative) *rapprochement*. Later in the century, ecclesiastical activists sought to restore the institutional authority of the Church, reviving a narrative of national consecration to the Sacred Heart, redefining the Revolution as national sacrilege and invoking the Restoration as repentance (Jonas 2000: 1–2, 82–83, 135). In the early years of the Third Republic, the Catholic Right attempted to wed republican France to the Church, imagining the Nation as a mystical body, its government as guardian of Moral Order, and the suppressed Paris Commune as a repetition of Revolutionary mayhem (Jonas 2000: 183–186, 198–201).² The “National Vow” accompanying construction of the *Sacré Coeur* on

2. The Commune (named for the Revolutionary Commune of 1792) was a movement for political decentralization and a popular uprising in Paris, lethally suppressed in May, 1871 by troops of the nascent Third Republic led by a conservative provisional government (Stedman Jones 2010: 79–80; 2001, 44–64; Harvey 2006; Jonas 2000, 171–176; Jones 1999, 13–26).

Montmartre (Harvey 2006: 311–340) was intended to reconcile Republic and Church in expiation of the Commune’s “crimes” — an unintended irony given that the legendary martyrdom of St. Denis, decapitated on Montmartre, was joined by that of Communards allegedly entombed in dynamited tunnels beneath it.

Despite its Revolutionary roots, the Third Republic’s later anticlerical policy, expressed in a December 1905 law respecting separation of church and state, advocated only the Church’s divestment from state functions, not its elimination from civil life. Details of the new law generated much debate amongst secular, Catholic and Protestant intellectuals, and Durkheim’s own intervention, at a May 1905 colloquium, sparked controversy:

M. Durkheim: ... I believe the bishops’ distrust [of proposed lay “cultural associations” to govern remaining Church property at the parish level] is quite justified. In so far as it will give the laity more autonomy, the legislation will lead the Catholic Church out of the abnormal situation in which it is now. From a sociological viewpoint, the Church is a monstrosity. (*Outburst by the participants*) (Durkheim 2006: 11)

What did he mean? His clarification was telling:

M. Paul Desjardins: One can translate that as something miraculous.

M. Durkheim: It is the same thing ... That such a vast and widespread association, which itself includes such complex moral groups — in which there are so many motives for differentiation — should be subject to such an absolute intellectual and moral homogeneity is not normal. The result of the legislation will be to unleash within this organization the motives for differentiation that have been muted for centuries. (Durkheim 2006: 11–12)

This echoes Durkheim’s treatments of despotism and absolutism:³ *monstruosité* is a morphological term designating institutional malformations with pathological consequences for given social types (Pickering 2006: 8–9). “Ultramontanist” tendencies in the Church, especially post-1870, emphasized hierarchical authority focused on a central apex or summit, inhibiting spontaneous institutional, associational and intellectual diversification. Weakening the monarchical episcopate’s ties to the state could “awaken new life” at local and intermediate levels of the Church: “[f]acing the unitary and authoritarian tendency, there will be another

3. Contra his discussion of Montesquieu, he seems here to identify “monarchical” with absolutist.

... Will not the old power and the new life conflict, and what will be the consequences? ... Either opinion holds sway or it does not” (Durkheim 2006: 14). This repeats an earlier observation, subsequently elaborated in *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*: forms of sovereignty are not to be simply identified with social orders. Social order *does not necessarily depend on, nor correspond to*, the kind of sovereign power imposed on it.

If Durkheim could characterize a church hierarchy as both monarchical and monstrous, could he not, by analogy, have understood *ancien régime* absolutism similarly? His usage does seem to echo the Revolutionary denunciation of the King as a “political monster”; a figure conjoining tyranny and criminality, found *in* society but not *of* it (Foucault 2003: 81–107, 110–111). However, the Revolutionary image of monstrosity as exterior to the social is incompatible both methodologically and substantively with Durkheim’s understanding of it as a pathological survival or accentuation of *social-structural* traits. And in actuality, neither Bourbons nor bishops were wild figures entirely detached from their respective social orders; nor did they impose themselves on unorganized masses. Both stood at the sacral apex of vast institutional edifices of patronage and dependency, placement and identity (Darnton 1984: 177–181). Targets of popular cynicism but also objects of an “if only” longing for their return to proper obligations and duties (Engels 2001), Church and Monarchy were not only discursively identified with the corporate totalities of the Realm or the Body of Christ, but also imbricated in *social* systems, even if pathological ones.

However, in the debate over Church and State, Durkheim passed over these social entanglements, emphasizing instead a *conceptual* distinction between types of social organization and more incidental forms of sovereign power. Secondly, he differentiated between two models of sovereignty and between their respective images of social totality. In one, sacralized and personified figures act on behalf of divinity to incarnate an ordered realm as its *head*, and to “give” that realm its law. In the other, persons are represented as sacralized through *membership and participation in a mutual commonalty* (“the people”; a citizenry; a “cultural church”) that could be termed democratic. Personification is an emblematic process in both, but in very different ways. Durkheim clearly identified modern polities — religious as well as secular ones in this instance — with the latter model, in an almost Protestant contrast to the liturgical orientation of *The Elementary Forms* (though social “motives for differentiation” still trump solitary initiative here). But he posited *neither* form of sovereignty as a *constitutive source* of regularized social life (though they might appear so to those invested in them): rather, they

are *effects*. Even the personified sovereign is a collective representation, a figure *made* sacred; his status characterization as the “fount of honour” enabled by an institutional scaffolding which he appears to graciously command and institute, but which he actually depends on. In this sense, sovereignty is a fiction, if a “necessary” one (Hirst 1986: 23–27). Like gods who needed sacrifices, the king, to remain king, required “feeding” with taxes and glorification — until his Revolutionary divestment, the decapitation of his State, and the rise of a *new* fictive sovereign, the Will of the People — one with its own appetites.

In 1792, People and King became an impossible conjunction of antithetical sovereignties. One had to be defeated, but in a new fashion. The battle against Louis the Tyrant took shape not as an *aleatory contest* against a counter-claimant, but as the *necessary elimination* of a pathological intrusion. Perhaps the King doomed himself, donning the red cap of liberty in a moment of irony, resignation or suicidal identification (Harden 1998: 168–169); a coronation of blood. In the autumn of 1789, before the National Assembly, Dr. Guillotin had praised a deathly “principle of equality” which his invention enabled: “[t]he mechanism drops like lightning, the head flies, the blood spurts, *the man is no more!*” (Kristeva 2011: 92, my emphasis). The *Assemblée*, indignant at the tortures allowed in *Ancien Régime* law codes, filled the hall with “mad laughter.” Subsequently, as Kristeva elaborates,

... the claims of a painless technique and democratic equality immediately merged with metaphysical speculation in the minds of those in charge. In solemn, sacramental speeches, they ennobled the unconscious, depressive and erotic power of decapitation and interpreted it implicitly as a “black work”: since only what is high and celestial is attacked at the head, to bring down that head would mean to prepare another “beyond.” Following the model of alchemical experimentation, decapitation became an esoteric necessity, indispensable to the emergence of a new head, a new era. We hear this *positive value* attributed to the sinister event in the remarks justifying the execution of Louis XVI. On November 13, 1792, Saint-Just could declare: “The same men who are going to judge Louis have a republic to found. As for me, I see no middle course: this man must reign or die ... I say that the king must be judged as an enemy: *that we have less to judge him than to fight him.*” On December 3, 1792, Robespierre claimed: “*There is no trial to hold here. Louis is not a defendant, you are not judges, not in the least. You have no sentence whatever to decide for or against a man, but a public safety measure to take*” ... The body of the king ... regarded as sacred by tradition and by the monarch himself, would be transformed by the Montangards into a monstrosity: “Kings are in the moral order what monsters are in the physical order...” (Kristeva 2011: 92–93)

Louis was sentenced and executed as “Citoyen Louis Capet”, but the egalitarian name marked a citizenship of the criminal and the dead, eliminated, equally, scientifically, and efficiently, from the path of the Revolution. The man who had been king was rendered *sacer*, removed from the civic sphere and made available for murder. But he crossed that boundary, not merely as a former citizen, but in transition from *one* “outside” — sovereign sacrality — to *another*: a king captured in flight become disloyal citizen; then a bare man, his civic status rendered a *laughable legal fiction* by his one remaining political attribute: *enemy of national safety; a security risk*. And then he disappears again; a man who “is no more” as a result of an act of sanitation. While his execution could be and was represented as *sacrificial* (Kristeva 2011: 93–94), the *eliminationist* terminology by which Louis was reduced rendered him no longer a king; *not even a man*, but the target of a special and *necessary* dark work; a campaign to erase a pathogen. Like twentieth-century genocide victims, the erstwhile monarch was buried hastily under a layer of quicklime “without so much as a trumpet’s blow”, “suffocated by the very absence of rites”, as if “matter meets anti-matter and all that is left is nothing” (Harden 1998: 167–168; see Watts Miller 1986: 243–244; 2012: 175–186).

Could the absence of the figure of the sovereign from the pages of *The Elementary Forms* be, in any sense, an analogous, post-hoc *literary* decapitation? Was Durkheim’s inattention to the symbolic side of monarchy, and his anticipation that the “old power” of a monstrous ecclesiology would be swept aside by the “new life” of a “cultural” church, an echo of Saint-Just or Robespierre; *refusing attention* to monarchical absolutism to *erase* its power over the imagination? Eradicating an aesthetic fascination with sovereign symbolism would have aligned well with a desire to exorcize the political ghost of the Restoration. But eliminationism, conceptual or corporal, does not accord with Durkheim’s sociological insight: purging people or thought-crimes, however ecstatically, might unweave one moral fabric but cannot suffice to reweave another. Watts Miller cautions against reading a justification of capital punishment or Revolutionary “iconocide” into Durkheim, especially given that the execution of Louis XVI involved “conflict between different energies of the sacred” and a profane politics of expediency (1986: 241–244; 2012: 181–183). Perhaps Durkheim’s reserve about the symbolism attending what Carl Schmitt would later call political theology, reflects not an eliminationist but an acephalous impulse: better characterized as a *negative* political theology, or an *atheological* refusal to draw attention toward figures of political idolatry. Perhaps it provided a means to refuse complicity, even unintended, in what must have appeared as a Restorationist “lie” of sovereignty — that the Revolution and the 1871 Com-

muned were in essence national *sins* which desecrated Moral Order, *given to the people through the person of the sovereign*, and which martyred Legitimacy. In this narrative, a people cast adrift could replace these only with political puppetry and barbarity. Perhaps Durkheim also sought to refuse sanctuary to a more recent dream of bestowed sovereignty, embodied in the Bonapartist Second Empire's grandiloquent symbolism and military adventurism (and masking its *realpolitik* tradeoffs). Both the restorationist imaginary of sovereignty as made incarnate and inherent in the king's body by divine sanction, and the *idée napoléonienne* that the Emperor embodied the People, designated sociological impossibilities: real as *representations*, they obscured and reversed political actualities. Rather than attack such representations actively (*pace* Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire*) perhaps Durkheim chose *not to act discursively*; neither to erase nor to call attention to the concept of monarchical sovereignty: a *political non-act* (cf. Agamben 2011) in, and in response to, the *conscience collective*.

Whatever its reasons, this silence about things monarchical did not impel a political flight into the arms of a Rousseauian vision of the People (Durkheim 1960); nor was it compensated by a sociological focus on *revolutionary* sovereignty or sacrality, despite Durkheim's striking references to the latter. The near-absence of the *ancien régime* in *The Elementary Forms* parallels only slightly less cursory treatments there (and elsewhere) of the specific symbolic politics of the Revolution. Nobility voting away their privileges; sober bourgeois become heroes or murderers; ecstatic street congregations; the instauration of a Revolutionary faith: these were *events in a specific history*, and Durkheim himself had endorsed Montesquieu's treatment of sovereignties and their successions as historical actualities. Why, then, so little sustained analysis of the Revolution's specific course; the actual development and fate of its sacralizing impulses? Or for that matter, the Commune, or the National Vow which sought to bury it? If these events had wounded the national soul, why not examine the specific formation of that soul and the occurrence of its wounds? An obvious rejoinder is the *Elementary Forms* was not history; even if it responded to *fin de siècle* cultural politics (Tiryakian 2009: 92–97, 104–106), it addressed the modern through deliberately distancing antipodean examples. Overburdening it with historical detail would also have courted an empiricism Durkheim rejected (though he briefly considered undertaking an historical sociology of religion, and he did cite Mathièz's complementary history of the Revolution: see Tiryakian 2009: 94–104). There may also have been institutional and conceptual difficulties with political science as an intellectual project (Favre 1983; Lacroix 1979).

POLITICAL (A)THEOLOGY, REVOLUTION, AND THE WORK OF PEACE

However, a more apposite reason for a lack of sustained attention to the events of the Revolution might have been an unease with the energies it released: frenzy, delirium, violence, as well as self-transformation, heroism or sacrifice. The later *sociologie sacrée* of Caillois and Bataille would examine their complex effects, but Durkheim himself had sensed that such energetic release in periods of transition, could take monstrous forms. His emphasis on constraint, obligation and duty as social facts impressed on the psychic lives of individuals and constitutive elements of human subjectivity and personhood (Gane 2010), has often been represented as *antirevolutionary*, privileging imposed order, but it could as plausibly reflect commitment to a notion of benefit deriving from a fragile and contingent *social achievement of peace* (Strenski 2010; Jones 1999: 13, 20). This is not peace as a space from which “threats” are eliminated by security forces, but rather the social production of a commons; a mutual work — agonistic, aleatory, aesthetic — ethically limited by commitment to others’ well-being and moral status, and by *commitment to care of the social fabric* in which life together is constituted and re-constituted. Such care could also encompass vigilance against distorted and distortive iterations of sovereignty (Stedman Jones 2010: 78–81). In this light, Durkheim’s allusions to absolutism as “monstrous” could appear as cautions that not only revolutions are double-sided. Sovereign orders, even nominally democratic ones, may be disintegrative as well as preservative, and may impose a “peace” which is war by other means. It was Robespierre’s Committee on *Public Safety*, given sovereign power and legitimated by “emergency”, which so enthusiastically pursued a reign of terror.

In *Moral Education*, Durkheim gives an arresting example of violence ensuing from arbitrary appropriation of sovereign superiority:

Hence that kind of bloody foolhardiness that seizes the explorer in connection with races he deems inferior. The superiority he arrogates tends, as though independently, to assert itself brutally, without object or reason, for the mere pleasure of asserting itself. It produces a veritable intoxication, an excessive exaltation of self, a sort of megalomania, which goes to the worst extremes, and the source of which is not difficult to fathom. We have seen, in fact, that the individual controls himself only if he feels himself controlled ... As soon as the only moral forces with which he has anything to do are depreciated in his eyes ... they cannot perform this moderating function. Consequently, nothing restrains him; he overflows in violence, quite like the tyrant whom nothing can resist. This violence is a game with him, a spectacle in which he indulges himself, a way of demonstrating the superiority he sees in himself (Durkheim 1973c: 193; also Gane 2010: 49).

Durkheim presciently associated such violence with situations — pedagogical as well as colonial — marked by a “moral gap” between subordinates with limited ability to self-organize and authorities who subject them to moral discounting. The superiority of the latter “has no very solid foundation”; it is “a special type of game, *characterized by a certain need for violence and harassment*” (1973c: 193–194, my emphasis). Likely imagining middle-class boarding schools, Durkheim thought such violence temporary, “not in itself very serious.” But using his own logic, when the authority of superiors is threatened not merely by the graduation of their targets, but *by a deeper de-legitimation consequent on an anomic assumption of a sovereign freedom to harass*, violence can become serious indeed; its “games” a feature of detention and interrogation in times of “emergency” and extralegal social spaces, both of which accentuate the *contingent* character of the power exercised. Arguably, absolutist regimes and institutions are subject to similar uncertainty and prone to similar excess; their repressiveness less a mechanical effect of sovereignty imposed on undifferentiated masses than of a combination of moral discounting and unacknowledged fear of de-legitimation. Tyrannical indulgence in spectacular violence (and spectacular consumption) is haunted by potential for a counter-discounting which, in the fluidity and effervescence of transitional situations, could permit “formidable reprisals.”

While the *ancien régime* was neither completely nor terroristically unrestrained, it did indulge sumptuary and punitive excess, elevating the King’s mortal body to an unsustainable ontological position, and the monarchy too far above its institutional context. Increasingly dependent on royal favour, the nobility no longer checked royal ambition, and the moral distance between king and all three estates furthered a crisis of representation which undermined the sacral force of the monarchy long before 1790 (Engels 2001). It involved a revaluation of the king’s image with symbolic but also moral, political and economic consequences (the terms governing and defining royal legitimacy; the relation of the king’s effigy to the value of coinage bearing it). Formerly imagined as a quasi-eucharistic “real presence” of the sovereign in his representations, royal images came to be reconceived as “signs” of something outside themselves; no longer incarnating the King but pointing to, and *beyond*, him. Legitimacy came to be judged not in terms of “blood” but of “law” and “performance”; the king’s adequacy to his throne (Caplan 1999: 156–159). This was a solvent on absolutism: in the quickly-collapsing world of incarnational theatrics, the King might now be accused of imposture — false embodiment — on performative grounds. The lifestyles of Louis and Marie Antoinette now *became spectacular* in the context of

a “moral gap” and a moral discounting from below: their Versailles exile and seeming lack of purpose undermined faith in the monarchy’s moral restoration or social re-engagement. In a strange twist on Frazer’s notion of divine kingship, they now appeared “set apart” less by their ceremonial role in preserving the ordered realm than by a withdrawal *from* that realm into self-absorption. The weakening of countervailing orders eventually undermined the very institution it freed up, fuelling a re-configuration of monarchical performance which condemned its absentee players. The Revolution would later deliver a fatal blow to the notion that *any* person or corporate political body could incarnate the nation. In that new dispensation, political figures and estates no longer *embodied* the People but *represented* them, speaking and acting (*to* them) “on their behalf” (Friedland 2002). The King’s pathetic donning of a liberty cap was the gesture of a failed actor representing nothing and no-one. Before his decapitation, he was first disincarnated and then rendered voiceless in a crisis-induced replacement of a dead “cult” of presence by a new one of representation (Durkheim 1907d: 637–638; Pickering 1984: 337).

But the Revolution had its own institutional and moral weaknesses. Representational political regimes reduced the People (then ... and since) to an *audience of political theatre* (Friedland 2002). Innovations fired by revolutionary effervescence outran the consolidation of an institutional, social and practical fabric and a collective moral conscience which could embed them and restrain retaliatory or ecstatic destruction. Instead, they were delivered to the machinations of politicians. Not that the Revolution lacked all moral constraint: physical destruction of aesthetic symbols of the old order was checked by a concern for “national heritage” which helped birth the modern museum (Watts Miller 1996: 240). But it bequeathed to the following century recurrent moral, institutional, symbolic and policy crises, culminating in the founding trauma of the Third Republic: the civil strife of 1871, which, like the Revolution, involved idealism and murder. Like Revolutionary governments of the 1790s, the Commune was institutionally unstable and isolated. Like the Restoration, the new Republic lacked a fully democratic institutional basis or political constituency to measure its response to perceived threats. From a Durkheimian perspective, the Monarchy, the Revolution and the Commune would all have appeared contingent and institutionally ephemeral, the latter two tragically so, their legacies unrealized in a febrile and wounded Republic. If political memory haunted Republican attempts at a secular moral/political order, perhaps Durkheim’s fleeting acknowledgements of revolutionary violence indicate both a refusal to be mesmerized by it, and a determination instead to identify what moral fabric could bind sovereignty *durably and appropriately* to social life.

CONCLUSION: DILEMMAS AND POSSIBILITIES OF SOVEREIGNTY

However, a resolve to address issues of modern sovereignty sociologically is challenged by a modernist *theoretical crisis of representation* evident in *The Elementary Forms* itself. If social-scientific discourse deconstructs and reverses the process of religious representation, by extension, it likewise cannot accept political-theological representations of sovereignty on their own terms. They must be explained (and their truth-value thereby exploded) as historically-conjunctural or typologically-functional phenomena. However, in a reprise of the dilemma that haunted Saint-Simon's attempts to conjoin science and politics, *The Elementary Forms* also asserts that social formations must necessarily, insofar as they involve collective processes, *be represented*; they not only exist as facts but must appear to participants as *necessities*. Cosmologies, classifications, emblems derive from *and* articulate social life, making its reproduction possible. A social formation must have moral force transcending the egoistic and particular. This transcendence is nonetheless manifest concretely in particular things, symbolic but material: such manifestation in turn *transfigures the concrete*. "Society never stops creating sacred things," and its Janus-faced emblems, in themselves particular, indicate and participate in a constituted and constitutive totality:

If society should become infatuated with a man, believing it has found in him its deepest aspirations as well as the means of fulfilling them, then that man will be put in a class by himself and virtually deified. ... This is what happened to many sovereigns in whom their epochs had faith ... A clear indication that this apotheosis is the work of society alone is that society has often consecrated men whose personal worth did not warrant it (*EFRL*: 215).

Durkheim's vision of a modern form of moral agency committed both to individual rights and a universalized "human *patrie*" highlights the tension this process induces. However cosmopolitan and diverse in practice, such commitment gains force when represented as *one* (Watts Miller (1986: 244–246) and materialized in figures or images. But the necessary fictions of a humanist sovereignty, as of religious representation, are not necessarily transparent. Symbols work as manifestations, not windows, and they embody forces (Durkheim's explanation of this evokes an incarnational idea of signification and communication which the Revolution displaced). They represent through *misrepresentation* (see Lacroix 1979): society disappears behind them and works transfiguration through them. Science makes this process transparent, but Durk-

heim admits that social-scientific abstractions may — at least outside of the educational sphere — make poor vehicles of collective moral energy.

It is difficult to imagine how a symbolic and social universe could be at once transfigurative *and* transparent (Watts Miller 1996: 244; 2006, 6; 2012: 151–159). Durkheim suggested that in the new Revolutionary dispensation, “we saw society and its fundamental ideas becoming the object of a genuine cult directly — *and without transfiguration of any kind* [my emphasis]” (*EFRL*: 215–216). Watts Miller suggests that the transparency of Durkheimian scientific rationalism *was itself transfigurative*: through it, religious symbolism was *seen anew, in a new light; revealed* in its reality.⁴ Yet, he concludes, Durkheim remained caught between a “sociology of developing enlightenment”, and one of “inevitable mystification” (2012: 152–155). In 1914, Durkheim made the distinctly Nietzschean observation that “our power for creating ideas has weakened ... old ideals and the divinities which incarnated them are dying because they do not meet the requirements of the new aspirations ... we find ourselves in a transitional period, a period of moral coldness ... (1975b: 186). Nonetheless,

... who does not feel that in the depths of society an intense life is developing which is seeking outlets and which will ultimately find them? ... *These latent aspirations which disturb us will some day succeed in becoming more clearly conscious of themselves*, in translating themselves into definite formulae which men can rally round and which will become a nucleus for the crystallization of the new beliefs. It is pointless to try to discern the content of these beliefs. *Will they remain general and abstract, will they be linked with personal beings who will incarnate them and represent them? These are historical contingencies that one cannot foresee* (1975b: 186–187; my emphasis).

These new “sources of warmth” are *immanent* in social life (“among the working classes in particular”): we “absolutely have to get used to” the idea that “humanity is left on this earth to its own devices and can only count on itself to direct its destiny.” The necessary resources are not “superhuman” but “readily available, so close to hand” (1975b: 187) — a hope ambiguously fulfilled in the subsequent century.

Renewed interest today in political theology and sovereignty — embodied, absent, or popular — resurrects these dilemmas. For our purposes, the issue is not whether sovereign acts *constitute* the political, but what sort of *representation* and *representative acts* sovereignty involves; whether it necessarily hides as it reveals; whether it institutes a presence that is always absent; whether it thereby continually incites

4. Watts Miller draws a striking analogy here to the Transfiguration of Christ.

postponement or diversion of the transcendence it posits; whether modern revolutionary sovereignties encouraged a sense that “in such times the ideal can be realized” (Pickering 1984: 387), *even as mechanisms which reduced “the people” to an audience of political theatre were being consolidated* (Friedland 2002: 295–300). Moving from social fact to political possibility, perhaps such considerations might indicate other forms of sovereignty which take ghostly shape in longing *but are not sought*: wounded, suffering, captive, absent, articulations of mourning and resistance, memory and hope.

Modern representations of sovereignty continued to articulate social totalities, binding them to *figures*, to heads — though in new and sinister ways. It is neither an idle nor a rhetorical question to ask what differentiates a Stalin or Hitler from the traditional monarchs they despised. But the legacy of revolutionary anti-authoritarianism directs its heirs toward different concerns: are *acephalous* representations of the social as whole possible, through, say, populist “empty” signifiers: “freedom” (Laclau 2005), or a “commons”? Or does any representation of such a whole necessarily reconstruct headship? Does any *enactment* of it constitute exceptions which give a lie to universality? The political decapitation of the *ancien régime* was followed by a scientific dismantling of the Cult of Man, and latterly, by a postmodern deconstruction of Society as moral totality or field of intentionality. But skepticism of absolutes and totalities is shadowed by emerging reconfigurations of both. Ironically, these include not only the religious fundamentalisms so obsessively catalogued, but doctrinaire economic liberalism. A new universalism attends that monument to particularity, the sovereign consumer, idealized possessor of inherent rights and performative vehicle of the “material inscription of economic knowledge” (Steiner 2011: 189–90), ironically, in new regimes of demand and debt. The moral individualism which Durkheim had sought to root in social justice and scientific reason, in the collective life of an educative democracy and in a human *patrie*, is subject to aggressive de-legitimation in terms of an ideal of self-sovereignty, nominally democratic but authoritarian in its unconditionality and its consequences. Is it still possible, in response, to represent and pursue an intellectual *culture proprement sociologique*, or a practical beneficence which dethrones consumerist absolutism, or political bonds of peace which undo the security state?

I have suggested that Durkheim’s muted response to questions of the sovereign, of revolution, and of their respective symbolisms, might have involved a principled disavowal of specific absolutist legacies, and sensitivity to the violence entangled with the history of republican France. Perhaps that reticence still merits attention. Advocates of free-

dom, democracy, wellbeing and peace still construct iconographies, condense and materialize principles in symbolic figures, and give them life as poles of emotional force. What crowns do we now seize or bestow? Is *The Elementary Forms*, in its assertions and its silences, an admonition for vigilance about those sovereignties we are drawn to produce, imagine, embrace, as well as those we resist?

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