

REVIEWS

THE OTHER DURKHEIM?

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Némedi, Dénes: *Durkheim. Tudás és társadalom* (Durkheim. Knowledge and Society).
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I.

A written piece simultaneously speaks about its chosen subject and its author. When a work in question attempts to come up with something new in both respects, the reader gains an extraordinary experience. This book is such a work in which Dénes Némedi, whom I regard one of the most learned members of the current generation of Hungarian sociologists, attempts to revise our image of Durkheim, consolidated by the traditions of sociology, and meanwhile he calls attention to new qualities of his own research work as well.

In his time Robert K. Merton convincingly argued in his famous book (*Social Theory and Social Structure*) that knowledge about the history of sociology was an integral part of the professional grounding of sociologists. As contrasted to the “neglect by assimilation” approach of the natural sciences (new discoveries and explanations invalidate earlier ones, hence they are moved to the “museum of natural sciences” as dead matter), social sciences are unable completely to put their earlier achievements to death, as the problems raised still have no final answer. At the same time it is also known that the relationship of the profession to its own past is fairly ambivalent, and the prestige of the knowledge of significant earlier achievements has decreased, particularly in the second part of the twentieth century. Any such attempt, aiming at the exploration and interpretation of theoretical heritage, is only to be welcomed, particularly if the goal is to make the new results part of the professional training of the young generation of sociologists.

Dénes Némedi is one of the not too large number of Hungarian sociologists who is well trained in almost all the areas of his profession. While his primary interest is

theory, he also participates in empirical research, is an authority on the general problems of sociology and also is also committed to studying a special branch of sociology (the sociology of knowledge). In the first part of his career he mainly showed interest in historical topics. Of his work in that period his research into the history of the intelligentsia and into the rural ethnography of the inter-war period are prominent. In those publications the two key features of Némédi's research accomplishments could already be identified, namely the detail orientation which characterises historians and philologists on the one hand and theoretical sophistication on the other. I regard both these as decisively important. As he himself has said, he was interested in rural ethnography because it lead him to more general problems, such as a social movements of intellectuals or as a chapter in the history of Hungarian sociology.¹ Meanwhile theoretical problems have been increasingly coming to the foreground of his research activities, and it was this tendency (his interest in the history of international sociology and ideas, and in the sociology of knowledge) which has led him to the writing of the book analysing Durkheim's work.

The monograph on Durkheim clearly represents the peak of Némédi's career so far. At this point he demonstrates a further skill in addition to his attention to historical detail and his theoretical knowledge, the ability to be creative. Némédi boldly parts with the traditional image of Durkheim, and his provocative hypothesis (namely, Durkheim was a sociologist of knowledge and a theorist of innovation) sheds new light on this classic of sociology. Needless to say, the hypothesis is based on careful analysis, yet it induces discussion. *Is there another Durkheim then?* Némédi answers this question based on his careful textual analysis.

In the Hungarian sociology of the past decades new understandings of Durkheim's image was introduced whenever his works were published. We always knew that Durkheim played a decisive role in the creation of sociology as an autonomous discipline, but it was always a different aspect of his work that was stressed on each occasion. In his preface to *Suicide* (1967), László Cseh-Szombathy mostly assessed Durkheim's achievements in the discipline and in methodology. In her preface written *To the Explanation of Social Facts* (1978), Zsuzsa Ferge primarily stressed Durkheim's fairness as a scholar and his moral honesty, and defended him in the face of those who wanted to "canonise him from the right", or "attacked him from the left". In his introductory paper written to *The Division of Labour in Society* (1986) László Csontos analysed the logical structure of Durkheim's thinking. Némédi did not wait for the publication of yet another volume by Durkheim to get the opportunity to set forth his message, although he argues that it is a great loss that the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) has not yet been published in Hungarian. In his view it would most likely be this work which would best prove that there is yet a lesser-known Durkheim beside the Durkheim of the "canonised" texts.

1 A népi szociográfia 1930–1938. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1985: 8. (Popular Sociography between 1930 and 1938.)

II.

The monograph on Durkheim is one of the outstanding achievements of Hungarian sociology. It is made outstanding by the extensive research Némédi has done in France, by the enormous professional base he can rely on, and by the respectable intellectual product put forth by the author. In this respect I consider it remarkable that the analytical-systematising Némédi reveals his new face (one may speak about “another” Némédi), that of a researcher who actively constructs and boldly redraws the image of Durkheim, which has become quite rigid. And yet he can retain the “traditional” merits of a researcher. He supports his statements by arguments based on profound textual analysis,² and his scholarly fairness is proven by the fact that all along there are critical analyses as well: Némédi himself points out the contradictions that can be found in the texts.

The theory of science differentiates between those who create systems and those who raise issues, inevitable amortisation is associated with the former ones, whereas the idea of continuous relevance is associated with the latter ones. Némédi modifies the image evolved about Durkheim as a researcher mostly interested in understanding larger social systems, by pointing out cases when Durkheim creatively raised issues (primarily about the nature of the relationship between knowledge and society, as well as about the linkages between renewal and innovation). In this light Durkheim is not a historical phenomenon in sociology, but, in many respects, he is a contemporary of the modern theory of action and of the sociology of knowledge.

Although Némédi repeatedly stresses that his goals are limited, and that he “only” wishes to reconstruct Durkheim’s oeuvre from the angle of the problematique of the sociology of knowledge, in reality we are given a full survey of Durkheim’s activities. Of the ten chapters of the volume the first five present the Durkheim of “canonised texts”. Némédi stresses that the original problem of the French sociologist was the relationship between the individual and society, more exactly, the study of the issue of social integration. An interest in social history also contributed to the fact that he set out to deal with these questions with the intention of recreating national solidarity. His first known work (*The Division of Labour in Society* [1893]) is considered to be a “productive” theoretical failure by Némédi, because Durkheim was unable to answer the question of functional integration on a systemic level, yet this work, among others, opened the way to Durkheim’s most important research into specific issues (suicide, education, family, etc.).

According to Némédi, the period following the writing of the “canonised” work of 1894 (*The Rules of Sociological Method*) was a preparatory one for Durkheim’s sociology of knowledge. Though in his view writings produced during that period did not as yet formulate a kind of uniform theory of the sociology of knowledge, but the signs of change could be clearly identified (an increasingly frequent replacement of the concept of *collective conscience* by that of *collective representation*, an emphasis on the *communicative* nature of social organisations). After the turn of the century Némédi diagnoses a shift in several layers of Durkheim’s work, which he dates partly

2 Némédi’s technique of adding notes could be the subject of a separate analysis. For him the notes are not only the instruments for providing the sources, but rather a way to help make the main text understandable. They add more nuance to the message and discuss the relevant literature.

to 1903 (the publication of the paper by Durkheim and Mauss entitled *Primitive Classification*), and partly to 1907 (organisation of the *Année Sociologique*), and also to 1912 (publication of the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*). Chapters 6-10 draw the picture of that “other” Durkheim, based on careful textual analysis.

III.

Does the work of Durkheim itself represent an innovation in the sociology of knowledge, or, does it merely have some relevance for a sociology of knowledge? It is only natural that established images change slowly. Reading the arguments of Némédi, we are repeatedly faced with the question of whether Durkheim’s work could be considered a latent, or a direct manifestation of the sociology of knowledge. While cautioning about the limits of his argument, Némédi does adopt *Fournier’s hypothesis* (p. 137). Yet, the reader is at times under the impression that Némédi, by interpreting the boundaries of the sociology of knowledge as extended ones, “reads into” Durkheim the sociology of knowledge. In this extended interpretation he includes practically the full range of the content of consciousness besides knowledge: the beliefs and values of actors, meaning the norms and expectations regulating action (p. 138). At this point, however, it is not clear where the boundary is (if there is any) between the sociology of knowledge and the theory of action among others.

I consider Chapters 8 and 10 of the monograph as the most exciting ones, as they intend to prove the radical changes of Durkheim’s methodological approach and outlook. The traditional history of sociology continues to reconstruct Durkheim’s methodological views on the basis of *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1894). Némédi convincingly shows the essential difference between the views expounded in the work published in 1894 and in the paper entitled *Primitive Classification* (1903). Guided by his professional honesty, he presents all the possible objections (primarily on the basis of *R. Needham*) that may be raised with respect to the professional foundations of that methodological turn. Here, however, not only the strength of the available ethnographic evidence raises questions, but so does the very idea itself. Durkheim and Mauss thought that it was possible to answer the question by analysing the practice of primitive peoples, and figuring out how their skills developed, and that their example would prove the social nature of the operation of consciousness by using categories.³ No doubt in this explanation there are several innovations for epistemology (for instance, a shift towards a genetic explanation), but its explanatory force is doubtful for modern society because of its naive core, characteristic of the early evolutionists (by the study of the “primitives” we can find out about our earlier conditions). In fact this problem was diagnosed by Némédi himself (p. 322).⁴

3 “...the real issue is what made people systematise their ideas just in this form, and where did they take the basic idea for this remarkable arrangement.” (*Primitive Classification*. In: *A társadalmi tények magyarázatához*. Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1978: 261).

4 “Durkheim publicly never acknowledged the issue that he wanted to dissolve the crisis of modern philosophy by the sociological theory he proclaimed, but he found the subject of his analysis and the empirical material indispensable for his sociological theory in ancient, clearly not modern societies.”

This doubt is spelt out in relation to the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* as well, which – otherwise – Némédi considered the best piece of Durkheim’s oeuvre. In his discussion of the arguments in the book, he definitely refutes the image of the “prophet of order”, which had emerged about Durkheim, and argues that he “primarily wanted to be the theorist of innovation and creation” (p. 297). At the same time, he also acknowledges that Durkheim was simultaneously preoccupied by two (apparently contradictory) problems. On the one hand, he continued to consider the existence of some common set of beliefs and cults important, whereas on the other hand, he “expected a renewal of society, the reproduction of bonds by cultic »revolt«, some kind of radical renewal” (p. 310). This is why he put the study of social change and innovation into the focus of his attention (the analysis of the *intichiuma* rites, a distinction between the cycles of the *holy* and the *profane*, the role of *social density*, *critical mass* and *collective revolt* in change). No doubt, this was a new element in Durkheim’s work, but Némédi’s argumentation does not unambiguously prove that it also represented a radical change in Durkheim’s approach. To do that he would have to prove that – to use Némédi’s own words – “a central topic, a direction of interest, a special approach as a point of crystallisation ... can be defined in the arguments and in the practice of research” (p. 136). Not to mention that when considered from a functionalist angle, innovation may also be regarded as an instrument (or mechanism) creating integration in other contexts.⁵ Surely Némédi also understands this (p. 299–300), but he insists on his interpretation, describing Durkheim as a theorist of innovation.

Finally the reviewer, who is not a specialist in Durkheim, stresses again Dénes Némédi’s tremendous merit in revising our traditional knowledge of Durkheim. Yet, it must be pointed out that this book is not likely to be read by a broad circle of readers. Actually the book contains materials from the author’s dissertation, and this bears its marks on its form and content. This variant was written for a narrow professional audience: those who are somewhat familiar with French history, and who are somewhat acquainted with Durkheim’s works already. The author, for example, assumes that the audience is familiar with and understands the logic of *The Division of Labour in Society*. We are looking forward to seeing the production of a variant by Dénes Némédi, which can be grasped by a broader professional public, and which can be used in teaching the history of sociology. In reality that would be the only real chance to revise the widespread traditional understanding of Durkheim.

⁵ By way of analogy, I would mention L. Coser’s work, who was a sociologist of conflict, while remaining a functionalist in his approach.