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Michèle H. Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the College of Sociology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. 248 pp. ISBN 0816639744 (paper).

Reviewed by Sean P. Connolly, Cornell University

Michèle Richman's recent book, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the College of Sociology*, examines the critical impact of early French sociology on the culture, politics, and intellectual history of twentieth-century France and beyond. Departing from French sociologist Emile Durkheim's monumental study of aboriginal religious practices, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Richman assesses French sociology's effects on the avant-garde, argues for its revolutionary politics, and considers its lasting philosophical import for modern-day human sciences and political revolt. Her study is as interdisciplinary as it is broad, attending to the demands of the various disciplines it traverses—including sociology, history, literary, cultural and modernist studies—without the disciplinary privileging or distillation one might assume. This fact, however, does not compromise the book's importance for these disciplines; on the contrary, it reveals their amorphous boundaries and blind spots, encouraging them to expand their reach, address one another, and make new disciplines possible. Such is the endeavor, the merit, and, indeed, the risk that this book takes. Some of Richman's more radical claims for French sociology and its legacy, indeed, will not be met without skepticism. Nevertheless, such a risk makes *Sacred Revolutions* a book for anyone in or among the fields of European intellectual history, French studies, modernist studies, critical theory, or sociology.

Richman opens her study by addressing a curious comment by French critic and writer Jean Wahl in 1937, made in response to the intellectual prominence sociology had recently acquired:

Here is this sociology, of which I was never a very devoted follower, taking hold of young minds that are eager for rigor, who think they have found in it answers for questions they previously thought could be resolved by surrealism, by revolution, or by Freudianism. We must try to understand this phenomenon, which is itself sociological. (2)

Indeed, among these unresolved questions, questions left unanswerable (as the comment implies) by a dogmatic brand of Bretonianism, were the following: Is it possible to conceive of social existence without the hierarchy and alienation implied by statehood and individualism? Are there forms of social organization that do not betray their communal origins in a "head of state" or, in Weberian terms, a "charismatic leader"? What would such a society be, and how could it critique and redress the rise of fascism and totalitarianism, characterized as they were by such leaders? Is it possible to realize a society "without a head," so to speak? Against the backdrop of such questions, the self-proclaimed secret society "Acephale" (Grk. *acephalos*, "headless") and its public face, the College of Sociology, which included such figures as Georges Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, Roger Caillois, and Alexandre Kojève, sought to theorize and enact a social mode of being that would preserve community while avoiding the persistent corporatism, hierarchy, militarism, and utilitarianism characteristic of modern societies and fascism. Though the collegians were not sociologists *à la lettre*, their conception of community, Richman argues, derives primarily from early French sociology and the work of its founder, Emile Durkheim.

In the first chapter of *Sacred Revolutions*, Richman considers Durkheim's "sociological revolution" which, she argues, finds its most poignant expression in his 1912 *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Durkheim's brand of sociology, she contends, was revolutionary not only within the field of sociology but within the human sciences in general, which, at that time, were closely linked to historical and literary studies couched in the ideological rhetoric of great authors and individuals. In this chapter, Richman offers a comprehensive reading of Durkheim's career, highlighting the political and philosophical consequences of his axiomatic claim that social life is of a *sui generis* nature, to be considered independently of individual persons or psychic causality. Among Durkheim's many revolutionary claims in the *Elementary Forms* is that all forms of social existence and group formation have, at their foundation, practices deriving from religious origin. In this sense, "religion" and "society" are apparently synonymous for Durkheim. A tribe or clan—or any society, for that matter—recognizes its social unity through means of a tribal practice, rite, or ritual such as sacrifice, where taboos are lifted and the collective's "sacred" or "holy" power is witnessed, seizing consciousness and leaving an indelible imprint of the collective, a "*prise de conscience*," on the mind of the individual. Conscious recognition of the collective through such a rite effects a "*conscience collective*," wherein each dialectically recognizes the other as the other does oneself. The rite and its ceremonial objects, which eventually precipitate such consciousness, come to symbolically represent the transcendent unity of the group and the "holy" or "sacred" power that permeates and binds it. The social *élan* of these ceremonies and the social recognition they cause are instances of what Durkheim called "collective effervescence." Richman argues for the radical significance of this concept, which, she claims, transcends sociological case studies and has enduring importance as a theoretical lens for understanding group behavior of all kinds, including that of the Paris uprisings of May 1968. Through this lens, sociological consideration of such group behavior might highlight its revolutionary political potential. "Rather than paralyze individuals with evidence of social determinism," she argues, "the role of sociological intervention would be to accentuate the possibilities opened by social forms, especially those collective encounters associated with effervescent moments of intense social creativity and transformation" (39). For Richman, collective effervescence is not merely a theoretical construct, however; she historicizes Durkheim's sociological concept by juxtaposing it against the expansive fascist group uprisings of the 1930s and other, earlier examinations of group behavior such as Gustav Le Bon's well-known studies in crowd psychology (1895). Ultimately, collective effervescence is valorized for what the author perceives to be its revolutionary quality of sustained resistance to social normativity. For readers of Durkheim, this is indeed one of the most contentious claims of *Sacred Revolutions*.

The second chapter, "Savages in the Sorbonne," considers the French academy's troubled relation to sociology and Durkheimianism from the late years of the Third Republic until the eve of WWII. Among impediments to sociology's secure posture among the human sciences were its uncanny proximity to ethnology, its apparent lack of direct empirical field research, and its apparent romanticism directed toward archaic societies. The most significant obstacle was political, however. According to Richman, Durkheim's views on sociological method and their philosophical implications compromised long-held ideological views in France concerning the privileged, ideological status of literature within the human sciences. More specifically, it was the status of *French* literature and history that served as the basis for the "sociological" study of man *in general*. Durkheim's claim that sociological method demanded a divorce from the literary

paradigm and therefore challenged not only the normative definition of proper education, but also the nationalism and gallocentrism such education promoted. In response to this threat, a "counterrevolution" against Durkheimianism was initiated by Henri Massis and Alfred de Tarde, authors of the pamphlet "*L'esprit de la nouvelle Sorbonne*," which defended the primacy of literature for education and the cultivation of moral values. Durkheim parried these efforts, Richman explains, by seeking the disciplinary intersections of sociology and literature in, for example, the social and historical context of literary works, and by enlisting the help of literary figures who conceived literature sociologically as the "symbol of the collective life of a nation." The breach sociology effected within the human sciences and the challenge it posed to French intellectualism in general ultimately made its acceptance problematic. This fact, compounded by the rise in social psychoanalysis (Freud's *Massenpsychologie*), the controversial political significance of crowd assemblies later in the 1930s, and the methodological difficulties acknowledged since its emergence, destined the comparative sociology of Durkheim and his nephew, Marcel Mauss, to have a troubled status in French intellectual history. Nevertheless, their studies of archaic societies and their theories of socialization were paradigmatic for the College of Sociology. The College contended that a restoration of "sacred" social intimacy, one modeled on the effervescent rituals of archaic societies, would be ameliorative to the progressive instrumentality and devaluation of human life in modern societies. This "sacred sociology," Richman contends, extended French sociology's philosophical import and politically counteracted the rise of fascism, capitalism, and corporatism of all kinds.

The third chapter focuses precisely on these politics. In "Politics and the Sacred in the College of Sociology," Richman critically positions sociology's theories of group phenomena within the historical context of Leon Bourgeois' leftist/syndicalist solidarity, on the one hand, and the warnings of Le Bon and Tarde's crowd psychology on the other. Contrary to the latter, Durkheimianism argued for the strengthening and normalization of society via crowd assembly, which would seem, according to Richman's characterization, to serve the interests of revolution, socialism, and the left. This is not the case, however. Drawing upon writings by sociologist Robert Hertz and Georges Bataille, she distinguishes between the "right" and "left-sacred," that is, the qualitative differences in social unity between conservative, republican groups and that of radical groups. In his famous essay "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," Bataille explains that whereas the fascist-right defends and maintains a form of social homogeneity against the threat of radical "heterogeneous" elements, the left unites these elements without homogenizing them under a transcendent collective. By continually defining itself against homogeneity, Bataille's argument implies that the left can maintain sacred social intimacy without compromising its heterogeneity or, therefore, perpetuating social marginalization. Richman argues that the left-sacred characterizing French sociology and the College is to be distinguished from *both* the Le Bonian crowd and Bourgeoisian solidarity. The left-sacred would be a "sacred force capable of sustaining the negativity of its otherness and of resisting the recuperative strategy that directs it toward conservation, accumulation, and profit" (129). Sustaining such a "sacred force" through collective recognition would restore social bonds by "mobiliz[ing]," says Richman, "the energies liberated by such a recognition" (144). The politics of the sacred and the College, in effect, liberate man from the solipsism, utility, and profanation of the individual and the state.

The fourth chapter, "Sacrifice in Art and Eroticism," is at once a history and defense of the College's attempt to resacralize modern society through "sacrificial" conceptions of art and eroticism. Drawing upon Mauss' account of sacrifice as a "*fait social total*"—a social phenomenon that at once comprehensively binds the people of a society and their varied economic, political, and moral activities—College members sought to manifest sacrifice itself in various artistic and erotic forms in order to foster a sacred society. Indeed, this is what distinguished the College's practice of a "sacred sociology" from the scientific goals of Durkheim and the sociology of religion. Michel Leiris, along with French artist André Masson, for example, wedded literature, eroticism, and the theatre of bullfighting in his *L'age d'homme* and *Miroir de la tauromachie*. Alternatively, George Bataille's radical conception of the sacred and sacrifice as kinds of radical expenditure (*dépense*) enabled him to associate these to ecstatic forms of all kinds, including laughter, tears, excreta, and sexual acts. Bataille was committed unwaveringly to this ecstatic notion of the sacred, which could only be realized by means of a violent, prodigal expenditure for which sacrifice was the model. Michel Surya's voluminous biography notes, for example, that Bataille offered to sacrifice his own life at a meeting of the Acephale group. (See Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: la mort à l'oeuvre* or the recent English translation by Krzystof Kijalkowski and Michael Richardson, *Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*.) In contrast to sacrifice, art, Bataille argued, betrays such useless expenditure, being partly a form of work. As Richman explains, for Bataille, "sacrifice is no longer understood as the endpoint of the sacred so much as its condition of possibility" (173). His radical views occasioned factionalism within the College, challenging its endeavor not only to theorize but to enact a "sacred society." Richman underscores his disagreements with Roger Caillois, for example, which were evident in his review of Caillois' important book *L'homme et le sacré*. Whatever the difference among the College's members, however, the author maintains that the lasting importance of the College resides in its analysis of the sacred/profane polarity of social existence, its response to the progressive evanescence of the sacred in modern societies, and its insistence that the loss of the sacred diminishes in its turn the transformative, revolutionary potential of collective effervescence.

The postscript, "Effervescence from May '68 to the Present," considers the lasting intellectual and political relevance of the sacred and collective effervescence for the modern day. In response to Jurgen Habermas' dismissal of Bataille and his epigones as antipragmatic, "manichean," and "antimodern," Richman argues somewhat tendentiously that these supposed faults are actually its merits; sacred sociology endeavored precisely to rescue humanity from the militant utilitarianism and profanation of modern life. As *Sacred Revolutions* explains throughout, this was the political and cultural function of sociology in general: to serve as a critical and ameliorative socio-political discourse, a corrective lens as it were, fostered dialectically through the study of foreign autochthonous cultures. This lens is no less useful today, maintains Richman. The sacred, for example, "stands as a social phenomenon neither to be revered for its venerable antecedents in antiquity nor reviled for its association with primitives—both gestures robbing it of relevance in the present" (211). To maintain the sacred intimacy of social life, one must defend and maintain what Richman calls the "socio-logic of effervescence," according to which revolutionary social uprisings such as that of Paris '68—a modern version of effervescent assembly—might serve to restore the lost, sacred sense of community.

The fulcrum of the book, from start to finish, is its claim for the socio-political importance of collective effervescence. Richman's personal claim for it is, again, that it causes a potentially revolutionary social metamorphosis, one which serves moreover as the *conditio sin qua non* of social movements in general: "This transformation constitutes the precondition for social and political movements" (5). This metaphysical claim is among the most intriguing and radical in *Sacred Revolutions*. Indeed, she acknowledges that this claim departs considerably from that of standard readings of effervescence and Durkheim's *magnum opus*. "Such readings," she argues," "devalue *Elementary Form's* radical potential" (15). It would be interesting, therefore, to investigate how far she departs from such readings and to what degree she transforms collective effervescence into a more idiosyncratic metaphysical concept of political revolution.

To begin, Richman convincingly argues that collective effervescence manifests a new paradigm of human social existence wherein the individual is no longer opposed to the group. Rather, they find synergy in Durkheim's composite idea of man as homo-duplex: an integral being at once social and individual, at once the whole society and one of its constituent parts. The value of *homo-duplex,* as Richman rightly observes, is that it eschews the naive antagonism between nature and nurture, the alienated individual and oppressive social forces, favoring a more interdependent, dialectical relationship. As Durkheim says in *Sociology and Philosophy*, for example, "the individual submits to society, and this submission is the condition of his liberation" (106; translation mine).

This is not to say that liberation entails passive acceptance of society, however; on the contrary, liberation can only have meaning vis-à-vis the social link that binds all men as homo-duplex. The upshot of this dialectic is that social change never entirely departs from ongoing, ameliorative social normalization. "Society" is both the means and the ends of any detraction from society. Indeed, it is possible to make the paradoxical claim that, for Durkheim, anomie is always already *nomos*. If, then, normativity is the ultimate end of society, anomie and social unrest would seem, on the contrary, to be its side-effect or necessary evil. It is easy therefore to understand the conservatism and republicanism associated with Durkheim's thought and what critics have called his tendentious "social metaphysic." Normativity, for Durkheim, is at once the principle and *fons et origo* of society itself. Collective effervescence would seem to be, therefore, the means through which this social normativity is achieved and reinforced, despite the fact that it occurs usually during transient moments of taboo ritual and non-normative social behavior.

Thus the challenge posed by Richman's account. Instead of a practice serving normative ends, collective effervescence in *Sacred Revolutions* is a kind of valorized metaphysics of social revolution. Given Richman's frequent juxtaposition of Bataille and Durkheim, this new conception of collective effervescence might be a kind of forced compromise or hybrid between their respective systems of thought. At times, the author characterizes Durkheim's concept as a Bataillian or quasi-Nietzschean form of vitalism or *amor fati*:

Rather than paralyze individuals with evidence of social determinism, the role of sociological intervention would be to accentuate the possibilities opened by social forms, especially those collective encounters associated with effervescent moments of intense social creativity and transformation. (39)

This re-characterization permits Richman to bridge a potential gap between Durkheim's sociology and that of Bataille and the College. It also permits her to argue for its enduring political importance for modern-day revolutionary political movements, such as that of Paris 1968. For reasons given above, however, it would seem that moments of collective effervescence, for Durkheim at least, are more closely wed to social patterning and normalization than to "possibility" or "social creativity and transformation."

Perhaps the discrepancy between these differing conceptions is the result of two fundamentally different interpretive orientations applied to the same social phenomenon: whereas Durkheim concerned himself with the diachronic effects of effervescent assembly through history, Richman is more interested in its synchronic qualities, such as its impact on consciousness and temporary suspension of social norms and taboos. Or, whereas Durkheim's stated purpose is hermeneutical, that is, to interpret and elaborate the origins of society, Richman's is more poetical, endeavoring to explain the necessary preconditions for socio-political consciousness and change. Such were Bataille's own tendencies in his account of "affective effervescence" in "The Psychological Structure of Fascism." Still, if such a discrepancy is merely a difference in methodological tendencies, one must wonder about the degree to which such a reorientation on Richman's part compromises the proposed genealogical link between Durkheim and the College of Sociology. Indeed, it would initially seem that they are at cross-purposes: whereas Durkheim argued for enduring *nomos* and disfavored social change, the College (and especially Bataille), by arguing for a continual and ongoing social change—vis-à-vis an absolute negativity and potential—endorsed contrarily a continual state of revolution. If this impression is accurate, and, indeed if Richman's conception of collective effervescence seems more akin to the latter, one might ask about the degree to which Richman reads Durkheim through a partisan avant-garde/Bataillian lens. And, by extension, one might also ask to what degree Durkheim and the College—or by implication French sociology and the avant-garde—would be comparable if such a lens were removed.

By tenaciously adhering to the politics of effervescence in particular, *Sacred Revolutions* partially eclipses the theoretical significance of many other sociological phenomena of either equal or greater importance. In the postscript, for example, one might have expected Richman to take a broader view of French sociology and its perdurable value. Instead of engaging, however, in a more comprehensive kind of evaluation, her *idée fixée*remains the radical politics of effervescence. One might have considered exactly how, for example, the sacred/profane vacillation of society takes place today, post 1968. The College presaged the dissolution of the sacred in the 1940s; what, then, is its current status? It is indeed questionable whether the sacred/profane binary is applicable at all, given the hegemonic tendency of global capitalism to banalize and homogenize by reducing everything to commodity and exchange-value. Is this binary now obsolete, or, if not, have the terms "sacred" and "profane" themselves dramatically transformed? If so, how is collective effervescence to be understood, and where and when does it occur? Must we nostalgically recall and reenact the social movements of the sixties, or must new paradigms of social unity be considered? If sociology's legacy is to endure for the present, it would seem that these questions should be its concern. Mauss, Durkheim, and the College alike present ardent critiques of the logic of neoliberalism and its dire social effects. This would be the likely place where Durkheimianism and the College converge, and this would be the most convincing presentation of French sociology's critical value today.

Whatever controversy it provokes, *Sacred Revolutions* is a well-researched, dense, and extremely rich study of French sociology and its historical, cultural aftermath. Though other studies have considered the history of sociology, the College of Sociology, and its prominent figures, Richman's book is among the first to examine in depth the complicated genealogy of French sociology from Durkheim to the avant-garde. And, though occasionally burdened by turbulent prose, *Sacred Revolutions* clearly opens a new area in comparative studies, provoking many curious, unexplored questions about modernism, postmodernism, critical theory, and intellectual history. What, for example, are the politics of Durkheim's thought? In what important ways did the French avant-garde employ and transform French "comparative" sociology? More broadly, what is the current relevance of such sociology for the humanities and intellectual history? What place does it occupy, given extant disciplinary boundaries? What lasting philosophical, cultural, or political relevance does the College's "sacred sociology" have for modern or postmodern societies? What is the relation between the sacred and the profane in the current context of advanced secularism, globalization, global capitalism, and terrorism? Questions such as these, prompted by *Sacred Revolutions*, would be the fertile soil of future study and theorizing.

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