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Schools and Scholars
Durkheim's Ghosts

CHARLES LEMERT

Why Ghosts?

To speak of Emile Durkheim as haunting us today – by means of not one but several ghostly presences – is to risk appearing all too hip. Inasmuch as Durkheim himself was anything but hip, it may seem a gratuitous insult – if not to the man himself, to the field of sociology which still pays him homage for his work in founding our discipline more than a century ago.

Yet, in fact Durkheim's writings and spirit continue to haunt modern social science in ways that go beyond, even, his role in their history. Scientific sociology, for one, embraces the spirit of the Durkheim of *Suicide* (1897) as both a *locus classicus* and, after a fashion, a proof text for the legitimacy of the analytic statistical method in social research. Cultural studies, including those in anthropology and sociology, for another, honor the specter of the Durkheim of *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) as a hovering power over their claim that culture, including knowledges of all kinds, are necessarily plural because they are fixed by the social order, and not by the immutable laws of human nature. Though there are ghostly presences (including notably that through Ferdinand de Saussure on modern linguistics), these two are the most salient, especially for sociology and its affines among the social sciences.

The essay here following is a reflection on some twenty five years work in the second of the two main ghostly traditions. I first discovered the distinctive qualities of French social thought during a research visit to Paris the summer of 1971. I was there, by the financial graces of my then university home, to advance rather traditional empirical work I had done in urban ethnography for my doctoral thesis. I meant to collect (as we say) data (so to speak) for a comparative study in the cultural of the modern suburb (then a hot topic). But, in between interviews with city officials in the suburbs to the south of Paris (interpreted, in the days before I had worked up my French, by my then-wife), I came upon works of such wonderment.

Like many of my generation, especially those of us trained at Harvard (for better or worse), what we knew of what was then called sociological theory (as opposed to social theory) was passed down

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directly or indirectly from Talcott Parsons or Robert K. Merton. Those were the days when (in astonished retrospect) revolutionary social thinking in sociology called to mind various doctrines of the American and Canadian plains – sociologies owing debts to symbolic interactionisms, pragmatisms, and the even-then *sui generis* Erving Goffman (a Canadian trained – if Goffman could be said to have been trained – at Chicago by another Canadian, Everett Hughes). In 1971 Alvin Gouldner was just beginning to emerge from his Weberian closet as a new kind of third-way Marxist. And, though there were wild experiments in social theory in the late 1960s, what little the normal (if not quite average) sociologist may have known about European social theory was filtered through the mildly reactionary lenses of Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology* – mostly Hegel and Husserl refracted further through Schutz in ways that provided safe passage from the vulgarities of a more radical Marx.

I was thus naively equipped for that visit to France whereupon, being an urbanist of sorts, I came up Henri Lefebvre's early writings on the production of urban spaces. I do not remember which language I read him in. If it was French (as probably it was) my mastery was so poor that whatever dawned did so dimly through the shadows. Still, there was light enough.

Those of generations fresher than mine might not realize just how pervasive and long-lasting were the anti-Communist terrors in America. I graduated high school in 1955, which meant that all the years of my absurd adolescent strivings were acted out under the shadow of this terror. While I spent my time plotting my next access to the thrilling touch a girl's naked breast, people were suffering terribly because they had once been known to have associated with someone with an accent, who might have been a communist. In those days in provincial southern Ohio "accent" meant "dangerous" which could also mean "European." The effect on intellectual practices was severe.[1] I was a perfectly silly white boy of the suburbs in those days, but still the ghost of this American foolishness was upon me, however much it did its work in the backrooms of consciousness. Those who grew up in such a time, without the benefit of urban experience on either of the American coasts, knew what they knew of Marx between the lines of family table talk. If they suffered the fate of going to Harvard, they met few challenges until the 1960s unraveled. This is why Goffman and the others of the provincial plains looked so radical. They were in their ways, but not in ways that were anything like what I found in Paris when I arrived in 1971 tardy for the real revolutionary years but just on time for new wave of post-Marxist social theories.

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I subject the reader to this tangent of a memoir in order to lend some definition to the reasons I refer to Durkheim's ghosts as I do.[2] We grow up with ghosts. In my case, it was the ghost of Red Scare. For a latter generation it was the ghosts of the over-wrought 1960s. The influences from our personal experiences played out in our thinking always dimly, at first at least. But when we come to the vocations of adult life, our training is touched more directly, if still imperceptibly, by the presence of such shadowy figures. This is why I approach – or, I should say, why after all these years I have finally come to approach – Durkheim as I do. In graduate school, the Durkheim of *Suicide* was very well understood through the teachings and writings of Parsons and Merton. We read *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, but usually when narrowly focused on religion (which as it turns out is not the subject of Durkheim's book at all) or when trying to figure out how any one who wrote *Suicide* could possibly write no less brilliant but clearly different a book as *Elementary Forms*.

This was the original source of the second ghostly tradition of Durkheim, and the one that concerns me here as it has for many years before I understood why. It makes little sense to say that there were two distinct Durkheims. But it does make sense to suggest that Durkheim ended up as an unwitting founder of cultural studies precisely because his genius required him to work out the contradictions in his early more analytic writings. These were, put all too simply, the confusions that brought about his attempt to ground a moral vision of the culturally integrated society on social facts. The issue was not so much the logical contradictions in *Suicide*, as the more general problem of the status of facts. *If modern society is to be redeemed by sociology, a science of social facts, then one must be able to say just how one knows a social fact.* This necessity is what led Durkheim ultimately to *Elementary Forms* which, far from being a study of elementary religion, is a study of the elementary forms of social knowledge. If social facts are things in themselves, then they may only be apprehended if knowing itself is itself a social process. This is why, and how, Durkheim's last great book was also the first great and clearly reasoned work in the tradition we today call (all too inelegantly) social constructionism.[3]

The ghostly presence of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* haunts sociology even today. The present essay is an early attempt[4] to come to terms *as a sociologist* with a tradition of social thought that still today troubles many sociologists. I make no apologizes for my commitments to Sociology. I make them, however, with an occasional embarrassment at the ways official Sociology has become forbiddingly narrow in its interests and defensive of its professional

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domain.[5] I am not alone. Some of what embarrasses us goes with the territory. All professionalized disciplines are defensive about something. Part of what they do is guard the gates in order to certify those allowed to feed off their field. Yet, it is sometimes forgotten that the point of the grazing is not to protect the herd from danger, but to nourish the beings that feed on critters that draw their energy from what grows in the field. Guard the gates too severely and the critters will become slack, the grass will whither, and the beings who own the field will grow lazy.

The situation today in academic Sociology is, in one sense, similar to what it was when I began writing on the French and their social theories some thirty or so years ago. Then young men would build their careers on well-refined criticisms of the once-and-then-dominant school of thought – that associated (more or less inaccurately) with Talcott Parsons. He was one of my teachers, which was *my* reason for having, at one point, read everything I thought he had written. Others read it because they had to. I did because I wanted to. Still, it was an exhausting effort that came to an end one day when I stopped by the office for a talk and was given a daunting stack of essays and articles I'd never heard of, and since have never read. Thereafter I went through the motions for a while, and then gave it up. My excuse for letting Parsons go out of my life was far from noble. Others, including an early generation of feminists (many of them at Brandeis) had far better reasons. They were, if not exactly mad, certainly tired of the then orthodox scheme. Whether we had good or bad reasons, one thing can be said of the dismissals of my generation: We knew, and had read, what we were dismissing. It is not that these were the good old days (they were not), or that we older ones were the more virtuous scholars (we were not). Nor is it necessarily a good thing that people in that day knew the leading thinkers as well as we did. We too were sheep, well shepherded by our teachers. We knew the stuff because we obeyed instructions. Still, we knew it before we let it go. Otherwise, there was no special virtue in our rejections.

Today too is a time of dismissals of ideas that people think of as no longer, if ever, useful. Whether the practice is a necessary one for new generations to find their own way in a given pasture is hard to say, but likely. What can be said is that it is unlikely that the grass is greener on either side of the fence. But if indeed Sociology grows better hay, we'll never know it if we haven't tried both sides. Too many of those who would dismiss the long and complicated line of French social theory since World War II do so without knowing the least thing about it – without, from what I can tell, having read more than a little – some Bourdieu, perhaps Foucault's book on crime and punishment, maybe that notoriously mistrans-

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lated line of Derrida's, possibly some Lévi-Strauss here and there. Not much more. There are many exceptions to this general rule (mostly among the young), but still the rule stands.

What is so disconcerting is that these premature withdrawals are quite contrary to the best Sociology has been. When at its best, the field has more or less intentionally guarded its gates sloppily. In the beginnings, the founding generation in American sociology never hesitated to send its young scholars to Europe to absorb whatever was new there. When American sociology became the world leader of the field – during, after, and because of World War II – we welcomed German, French, and other exiles from Europe, and embraced many of their ideas. When in the 1960s student movements began to attack the academy and its traditions there were always older sociologists willing to join their students at the barricades or sit ins, to conduct teach-ins, to design new social programs and new curricula. When in the 1970s, second wave feminist and the new race and ethnic theories, not to mention gay studies, began to come into their own, Sociology departments very often made a home for the then still young men and women who developed these fields. But, somewhere about then, sometime early in the Reagan-Bush era when the pervasive Nixonian culture of our era had settled into office, all this began to change. An astonishing bitterness set in – not everywhere, but in enough places that new graduate students had to think long and hard before selecting a graduate school. Many of them were inspired by their college teachers to examine the new ideas discussed in other fields. They hardly knew the difference, in some instances, between a course in sociology and one in cultural studies in the English departments. Nor could they see the point in worrying about it.

Still, many chose graduate study in Sociology for the apparent reason that this was the field that, on the surface, had it all, and presumably would allow it all to come to the fore. And why should they expect anything other? But I also know, as do many around the country, that what our students have found is quite other. Graduate students are told not to read Foucault or Derrida. Or, when they read them anyhow, they are told that that stuff is not Sociology.[6] I have been present more times that I care to remember when remarks were made about job candidates to the effect that "they were not sociological enough". Perhaps because I am among those who have no degrees in Sociology proper, I am more lenient on the standards. Still, it is entirely evident that, far from being the field where all things intellectual are possible, academic Sociology has lapsed into the habits of other social sciences where the standards, the norms, and the truths are exceptionally well policed.

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What is so remarkable about this story is that Sociology has no excuse for its attitudes and practices in respect to French social theory. This is because that very tradition, beginning with the structuralisms of the 1950s and including the poststructuralisms of the 1960s and 1970s was either expressly or covertly Durkheimian in its concerns, and sociological in its thinking. To be sure most of those aligned with these movements were not professional sociologists, though some were, of course. What is striking in retrospect about the intellectual climate in Paris, both in Durkheim's day and especially in and around 1968, was that disciplinary boundaries made so little difference. At least they did not make the differences one finds in American and some British academic programs. Still, American sociology has so little excuse for ignoring this line of thought, which it too often considers not really Sociology.

Perhaps the problem is that young people in many different fields who have read in and cited from the French tradition are practicing Sociology without a license. The very idea that new generations of academic writers are becoming sociologists without submitting to the orthodox demands of the Guild poses a threat far more ominous than failure to keep the gates well guarded. Not even the United States immigration authorities perform this normal police function perfectly well. Still, it is one thing for the unqualified to steal through the fences, and quite another for them to forthrightly refuse a pledge of allegiance to official Sociology. This precisely is what the washed and unwashed among the new generation of sociologists are doing when they think and act as though sociology were first and foremost a practical accomplishment. If this, then the mountain crumbles down a slippery slope to an angle of repose where sociology is the ubiquitous human competence.

Though the French have not been any more keen on practical sociology than the Americans, it is nearly impossible to read for long among the French social theorists without encountering some disturbingly persuasive instance of the primacy of the practical. Hence, also, of its entailment: If sociology is a practical competence, then Sociology (the professionalized field) must be an open pasture, free to all. More famously, one finds a version of this notion in Pierre Bourdieu and Michel deCerteau, both of whom made the practice of the practical a beginning point for social theory. But it is also in Lévi-Strauss who attempted to discover the universal mind in the mundane myths and practices of various cultures. And it appears in Foucault's famous idea of power/knowledge in that once one grants that power works through common and practical knowledge, then power itself is a practical accomplishment whereby we enslave ourselves. And of course the wider movement's interest in the subjugating danger of a too strong

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cultural ideal of the Subject – an interest common to Lacan and Derrida, as to Foucault, and the French feminists – is (apart from being poorly understood) a very serious gesture in *favor* of taking the *practices* of subjects (as distinct from *the Subject*) seriously.

Here at least is one major point of general sociological interest on which the French and the Americans enjoy common ground. In fact, the practice of subjecthood is one of the areas in which the Americans have been among the most original. Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel surely put the practical at the fore of sociological reasoning, as did C. Wrights Mills and Alvin Gouldner in somewhat different ways – and this, in part, because of America's native tradition of pragmatism. Still, even so, Goffman and Garfinkel quite openly confessed their debts to Durkheim. And while Gouldner and Mills were more openly drawn to Weber and Marx, they too knew Durkheim very well and took him with utter seriousness. Hence the mystery: Why, in spite of so deep a common ground, do Americans all too often make a joke of the French poststructuralists and others to whom they would affix various dismissive names? It is a little beside the point to say that writers like Derrida and Lacan, or Deleuze, are hard to read. Remember, I once read a lot of Parsons, and I was far from alone. When people say the material is too hard to read, it is like students telling us our subject is boring. Complaints of *too hard* or *too boring* are, as often as not, resistances. We resist the reading of that which unsettles us. It may be hard. We may be boring. But these get in the way when the ideas disturb too much. One of my purposes is to make it difficult to say that the French stuff is *too difficult*.

What I mean to say as a way of describing the *Why?* of the idea of *Durkheim's ghosts* is not that academic sociology has lost its way (though to some degree it has), or even to plead a case for the French. I'm much more interested in pleading, in a phrase Gouldner once used, *for sociology* – to make a gift to sociology. For better or worse, I have been among those who have sustained an interest in the French and done so *as a sociologist* – or, more accurately, in order to become a sociologist. If others think I am wrong to want to make this gift, I cannot say that I am right or that I am the only one who can make it. All I can do is offer it. Perhaps this is the better word – not so much a gift as an offering for those, like me and others I know, who want their field to recapture the spirit of adventure into new areas, and especially one that offers it so much.

Which Ghosts?[7]

To speak, then, of the ghosts of Durkheim is not so much to dwell on Durkheim himself, as on the ways the great French social

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theorist still haunts today. There are in fact two ghostly lines descending from Durkheim, only one of which remains a potent apparition. *Durkheim's ghosts* concerns itself with the still troublesome, but badly (as opposed to poorly) understood, line of thought that owes to Durkheim's writings on culture in the decade before World War I.

After *Primitive Classifications*[8] in 1903, it took Durkheim a full decade to produce his most enduring work, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* – a book not so much about religion as about what we today so innocently call "culture." From this work, along with Ferdinand de Saussure's very Durkheimian *Course in General Linguistics* (which dates from the same decade as *Elementary Forms*), came the ghostly line through Claude-Lévi Strauss and Roland Barthes and the structuralisms of the 1950s, then the post-structuralisms of the 1960s and 1970s, and the mélange thereafter that some insist on calling the postmodernisms. Today there are many who hate (that is to say "fear") anything associated with these "isms" even when a good number of the same people swoon over the Durkheim of *Suicide* (1897), in which he made his best case for Sociology as a science of social facts.

One might suppose that the plural, g*hosts*, refers equally to the two lines of descent. It does and doesn't. The nature of ghosts is that they are doubles – others, that is, always implicated in Another who has been lost to the living. Rather it refers to the line that has become, in effect, the lost Other of scientific Sociology – to the line coming from *Elementary Forms* into late modern French social theory. One of the reasons this line of thought upsets so many people is that, like all ghosts, it is an apparition that continues to redouble itself, while always (usually silently) keeping bad faith with the deadly line from which it departed. Ghosts are devils that way – the faith they keep is intentionally bad so as to call out the bad faith in the righteous pretenders to the true and the good.

It is not that Durkheim himself is responsible for all this. He was, truly, a righteous, if cautious, man. It is not his fault that so many others will not let him rest in peace. In his day, he was doing what had to be done, trying to set social facts on a sound foundation, which institutionally meant academic science. Since then, in France and more so in America, his *Suicide* had the effect of lulling academic Sociology into an unwarranted confidence in the idea that social things are what they seem. None of the other great writers of that day – most notably Freud, the heirs of Marx, and even Weber – quite believed that things could be taken at their face-value. They wanted to believe it, but everything they tried always ended up below the surface – in the unruly and irresponsible

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Unconscious, in the evil mysteries of the shop room floor where production determines everything, in the hard to understand values of the iron cage. Durkheim alone among them held fast to the positive appearances of facts, even when in the last works he could no longer quite hold fast enough.

To take seriously the doctrine that facts are positive occurrences waiting only to be captured is to deny the hermeneutic doctrine that nothing (at least nothing *social*) is ever fully present or visibly positive. There is always a death behind every purported fact. The young Emile Durkheim seemed to believe, as young men do, that deaths are real only insofar as they are transposed into facts. But, as everyone who has faced the dead knows, death is never merely a fact. For the living, the beloved dead, however and whenever they died, continue to live. One wants never to believe the fact of their absence. Their deaths are (in the famous word) always *deferred*. Or, one might say: the fact of death is always Unclosed for the living. If so, then it must follow that social facts are those facts so preoccupied with how the living sustain their relations with others that they, too, are facts ever open to revision. And this was what Durkheim unwittingly was trying to avoid saying in his social theory of knowledge in *Elementary Forms*. If, in the end, facts are known by the social categories of life with others, then, since others do in fact change their collective minds, knowledge itself is always a struggle with the dead.

This, therefore, is about the line of social thought that came down from the despairing, older Durkheim and some of those in his circle, like his nephew Marcel Mauss and, mysteriously, even Ferdinand de Saussure, through various structuralisms, post-structuralisms, and the postmodernisms. Whether the last of these monikers is a good one is another question (one I have addressed elsewhere[9]). It is not that what one calls this tradition is unimportant. On the contrary. What is more important, I think, is that social theory in academic Sociology is showing signs of being all too quick to announce the death of postmodernism as a tradition of thought. Much like the repeated proclamations of the death of Freud, this one too may be premature.

I am not, as I have said, against getting rid of worn out stuff. But what bothers me – and ought to bother anyone who cares about social theory in whichever of its dispensations – is the waste of junking useful things before they've been tried on. Clean out the closets, sure. But not before you've worn things at least once to see if they fit after all. Some things (and especially those bought for cheap on sale) don't fit because we've not taken care of our weight. Whether too fat or too thin, the problem is the same. In the case of the cultured despisers of postmodern social theory in

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academic Sociology, the press, and assorted other institutional confinements, most of the problem is loss of weight. Take for one example Alan Wolfe's rant in *The New Republic* against Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*. Wolfe is interesting because he is an academic sociologist, not to mention a cult figure among the highbrow right wing. Plus, he is certifiably smart, and in my experience quite a nice person. But none of this prevents him from saying such nonsense as: "(In its initial formulation, "postmodernism" was an adjective modifying a noun such as a condition, a novel, a building, or a city; but as Hardt and Negri use the term it is transformed into an actual thing that presumably began at a particular point in time and exists in a particular place, though neither the time nor the place is specified by them.)"[10] One might note that this mind-boggling statement is put in parentheses, as if to concede that the author does not quite know what he is talking about. If there is a postmodernism that makes any sense at all, then of course there must be a postmodern. Adjectives of this kind depend on the nouns from which they came. What else could such a thing be if not, first of all, a name for times and places and the like? But the point illustrated is that Alan Wolfe's careless remark is typical of the lightweight attitude toward a tradition of thought that, whatever in the end it turns out to be worth, arose at a certain time, in a certain place, for a definite reason.

That time was just after World War II. The place was, for the most part, Paris. And the reason was, in a word, the exhaustion of the Western powers after a good half-century of political turmoil, war, depression, and loss of faith in their own promises. As John Maynard Keynes, Georg Lukács, Reinhold Niebuhr, among many others, said early in the Twenties, after World War I had devastated the political dogmas of classical, nineteenth century liberalism, we can no longer take the moral individual at face value. *He* (so to speak) is not, as history had then already proven, the motor force of human Progress. Hence, the interregnum of new deals and state-directed monetary policies that prepared the historical ground for another war – or, as Immanuel Wallerstein has recently pointed out,[11] that undergirded the one continuous war of the first half of the 20th century between the United States and Germany for control of the world order. Still, the despair of the wars, and much else, and the failure of the classic version of the liberal ethic of free markets and enlightened individuals, helped prepare for the appeal of structuralism in France and elsewhere in Europe (not to mention in American Sociology, with Parsons and Merton[12]) at the end of the long war, or of World War II. The French, in particular, among others on the European Continent (and in contrast to the British and the Americans) could resist German occupation only as coura-

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geous individuals in small clandestine groups, underground. To rid the surface of the earth of Nazi evil quite naturally was to open the intellectual skies to the idea that the truth of human things is in the visible structures, waiting to be seen, or (better) interpreted. Hence, too, the hermeneutic impulse that in France took the surprising quasi-scientific version of a structural semiotics of cultural forms.

This is the time and place where something began. Structuralism, henceforth, developed for a while, then prompted a reaction that came to be known as post-structuralism. Though at considerable odds in certain ways, the one could not have held forth without the other. Louis Althusser was among Michel Foucault's teachers, as he was a colleague of Jacques Derrida. And Derrida cut his eyeteeth, first, on the interpretation of Husserl, but soon after on the criticism of Lévi-Strauss and structuralism.[13] To the extent that structuralism was, as has been said over and over again, a reaction to the subjectivism of postwar existentialism – the philosophical thread of the Resistance experience; then, to the same extent, poststructuralism was only superficially a reaction to structuralist objectivism. Both movements were, in some very fundamental way, a coming to terms with the impossibility of liberal-modern culture, which had not very well endured the wars of the 20th century (save in a bastardized form in the United States where the ideology of liberal consensus had its very short day before the Red Scare took away its breath).

The impossibility of liberal culture is a hard notion. One that is far from being widely accepted. One against which the resistance is scrupulous, if overwrought. But it is also a notion that has been a longtime coming. It was in fact a concern that occupied Durkheim and his generation in Europe, in particular – and concerned him to such an extent that he may have turned to culture more forthrightly precisely because of his proper and abiding worries about the liberal culture he believed so strongly could save the modern social order. In the end, sadly, it is possible that the impossibility of the liberal moral bond killed Durkheim.

Emile Durkheim died in Paris in 1917, at the height of his adult powers, just when, it happens, First World War was breaking the heart of the European Diaspora. Ghosts arise from unsettled graves – from deaths that trouble the living because they come too inexplicably soon. Those who die young may not always be good, but whatever they are, they leave behind an untold story. Ghosts are the apparitions of the Unclosed because they remind the living that they really don't know all the answers. The better part of a century after Durkheim's death amid war in Europe, many well settled in the better positions of the House Europe built are spooked by

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reveries of their 19th century ancestors who promised so much and delivered so little.

Durkheim died of a heart broken by the death of his son who was lost in the war and who, like all sons who die in such a service, are for their survivors the nightmares of what could have been. In his youth, Durkheim trusted, as could only a man raised on faith, that the Good Society would reclaim itself, even on the wounds of industrial conflict. This he believed so very well that he invented his version of scientific sociology that was to be both the true and the good of the Good Society. Yet, as could only a man of faith, nurtured in a Jewish village in the provinces of an anti-semitic nation, Durkheim's faith was always cut with vinegar. He knew that faith in the social was as much a risk as was the modern idea that a good enough science could both tell *and* establish the truth of social things. Hence, from this young Durkheim came the ghost of a scientific positivism so foolish that not even Comte, himself no minor fool, could have conjured up such a one. Thus to refer to *Durkheim's ghosts* is not, as I say, to refer to this line of thought – which, I should say, had some rather good days in and between *Suicide* in the 1890s and the golden age of American empirical sociology in the 1950s.

To the extent that ghosts are the spirits of the Unclosed, they always come in twos. We, who have actually seen ghosts, sometimes first think the apparitions are a case of double vision. We reach in the dark for our glasses only to find that the doubling remains. This is as it must be if we are being spooked by whatever came to an unnatural end. The end that fell upon the one lost is very, very real. In fact, it takes up a life of its own. In the case of Durkhiem's empirical sociology the presence was, as it must be in these matters, the presence of an absence. Durkheim, thus, had to see (so to speak) that social facts could not produce a moral order sufficient to ward off the anomie that led to self-destruction. By 1914, France and the rest of Europe, soon to be joined by its North American Diaspora, had already embarked on the path of self-destruction.

It is the way of ghostly matters that the evocation of one of them can stir the others. The ghost of Durkheim I refer to here is about the line of social thought that began – that was, even, required – when social conflict had gotten on Durkheim's last nerve. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* in addition to being the social epistemology of a science of social facts, became a point of departure for cultural studies because, in his day as in ours, culture is the issue at hand when one can no longer reliably trust the coherence of social values passed down by the tribal elders. On the surface, *Elementary Forms* can be taken as the first intimation of

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what was to become cultural studies, would appear to have been (as indeed it was) a radical move issuing from its author's guarded optimism. To say, as he did, that what and how we know is the result of the social categories we learn from the collective representations of life with others is to trust in the good of the collective will. But how could anyone sustain this ever more guarded faith when, as in the years following the book's publication in 1912, every social thing all around was a defiance of human reason? To say that the truth, such as it is, is a social thing unsettles the hope that the social order is both real and good, even if not entirely good enough to be true. Still, the thought was bracing. It did little to save Durkheim's life. But it did inspire that other ghost of social theory.

So, to answer the question directly: *Why Ghosts?* Because Sociology at least, and very likely all cultural forms, cannot avoid the haunts it would be rid of. Academic Sociology drew its first generation out of a motley crew of schoolteachers, philosophers, newspapermen, clubwomen, clergy, political troublemakers, and the like. Before there was a professional Sociology, there was not much that was more organized than Marx's writings (which, thank God, save us from the nightmare we'd have had Comte been all there was at the time). Still the generation of the 1890s, with the possible exception of Weber, and the partial exemption of Durkheim, had no other pool from which to draw the students who would become academic Sociologists. They drew what they could, especially in Chicago, from the streets and poor houses, and the schuls and churches, where reformers were at work. They are the ghosts of academic Sociology.

When asked why Sociology is always different from other of the social sciences – always in spite of itself more unruly and uneven – the answer is because of our ghosts. They are the ghosts of the practical sociologies that come before Sociology proper – the spirits of those who came to the field from the streets and back alleys. *Durkheim's ghosts?* Surely he was not in any way a man of the sort that filled the department at the University of Chicago. He wasn't. But then he was in a way. What makes Durkheim great is not so much what he accomplished, as what he tried to do – his honesty in saying what he felt he had to say, even in his last great book where the idea that knowledge is social came perilously close to contradicting his original idea that the social is factual. This honesty is likely the reason that his spirit haunts Sociology today. No more perhaps than does the spirit of others of that day, but enough to be worth the while of this work – and especially given that the ghost lives on today in a form that terrifies so many to such an extent that they can barely stand to think about it.

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Social Studies?[14]

Though I have used capital-S Sociology to refer to the formal academic discipline, everything I wish say here owes to the idea that *sociology* is something before and other-than *Sociology*. What are we to call that before and other-than activity when it is practiced more or less systematically, in the academy, but with particular attention to the practical sociologies of those who go before?

C. Wright Mills said, in the *Sociological Imagination*, that he would have preferred to use the term "social studies." But then, being more cautious than is commonly assumed, he gave in to all the arguments against. It would sound like high school stuff. It would not be recognized in Sociology proper. And it would sound awkward. *The Social Studies Imagination?* He was surely right in this last concern. Given the times and his frail health he was wise to do the expedient while doing the outrageous against such odds. Still, whether practical sociology or Sociology, if one is going to use the expression "Sociological Imagination" in a serious, as opposed to trivial, way, it is important to ask in what might such an imagination subsist? The work (or is it play?) of imagining can never, by definition, be overly disciplined. For the literary or graphic artist and others who live by their imaginations, there is plenty of discipline to be sure. But the discipline is the beginning of it all. The imagination is how one uses the disciplined methods to invent something new and original. If sociology (now, lower case) is anything at all, it must be the practical means whereby people with their feet on the ground and their eyes on the prize of getting by go beyond the disciplines of practical living. Such disciplines of course come without certification, other than the assurance that one has gotten thus far so good. Where doing the good may be little more than feeding the kids. That is a discipline one does not want to romanticize, if only because it is too often a discipline of necessity thrust tragically on the excluded. Still, it is to be admired and respected for what it is. The professionalized discipline of trained scholars is worthwhile also. Without it, there would be no knowledge to shape the practical wisdom for purposes higher and wider than whatever goes down in the soup kitchens. The trouble with professional training is that people are made to work so hard, for so long, often to meet utterly arbitrary (sometimes useless) assignments, that once they pass the gate they are too often reluctant to leave the pasture. I say this, I might add, having just answered an e-mail from a brilliant young scholar who wants very much to join in a community service project I help out with and yet, she said (and I understand), you know don't you that I don't have tenure?

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So the work of capital-S Sociology is not, in the end, different from that of practical sociologies. Both ought, at least, to be fully engaged with the beyond of their disciplines – and that is where the imagination begins. In fact, this is the territorial border no gate can protect for one *imagines* only by using, without being confined by, what one is trained to know and do. C. Wright Mills' very parsimonious idea was that this imagination is the means whereby people begin to imagine the social structures that cause their personal troubles. But what are social structures, really? They are not, in fact, any thing real at all, except in their effects. A serious Sociologist might want to say that the structures are "in" the inequality data. An ironic sociologist might say, in retort, yes, perhaps; but can you show me the structure itself?

Whichever kinds of sociologies or Sociology one performs the art of sociology is precisely the art of imagining social structures. Without this, everything Durkheim claimed about social facts as real things in themselves would be laughable. Since, however, these structural things are not visibly, palpably, audibly *there* in any direct sense, what choice do we have but to compose them on the bases of the best factual knowledge and practical interpretations we can find? The artist paints with paint. She knows how to do it. But what she paints is not the paint as such, or even the technique by which it is applied. The act of imagination becomes real by the mysterious way she rises from the disciplined facts of her situation to reach for a beyond that is there for everyone but not normally there for everyone to see or feel or hear, much less taste.

Social studies are the paint of the sociological imagination. If Mills meant any one thing by his view of sociology it was that sociologists should never confine themselves to Sociology. If you doubt this, read the essay appendix to *The Sociological Imagination*, where he writes on the craft of the intellectual. Why is it so bad that social studies are how sociology is taught in the high schools? Aren't these preparatory levels of an education where, in principle at least, young people are trying to figure out ever more than later in life what the hell life is all about? Whether social studies are taught well or poorly in secondary schools is not the point. It is that at the least social studies is a good enough name for the work of sociological imagination in any place where people, of whatever age, aim to work between the disciplines – by which I mean something not quite usual. Yes, of course, social studies are about using whichever tradition of knowledge might be helpful. But to speak of *between* the disciplines in referring to social studies is to speak of the art of combining the discipline of practical survival with the disciplines of formal learning as they may be available. Here is a

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kind of interdisciplinary knowledge one might be able lay her hands on.

Durkheim's ghosts? French social theory? Social studies? – What in the world might they have in common? Clearly to speak of *Durkheim's ghosts* is to speak at a discernible angle to Sociology's orthodoxy. But that angle is not so far a field as the orthodox might think. It requires no more than to take practical sociology seriously. To do this can lead places the cautious will not want to go. But, at the first, such a move begins, curiously, as a reconsideration of the history of intellectual life at a time when the academy and the streets were joined, more even than they were at the time in the United States. The authors of the various poststructuralist dispensations were, to varying degrees, but without exception, involved in the cultural, artistic, and political life of the late 1960s. Between Sartre's debate with Lévi-Strauss on the question of history, and Foucault's quiet rebellion against Sartre's grand intellectual, the French social theories of that era were fashioned by men and women who took their intellectual work seriously as entailing responsibility for local, practical action. Whatever one might think of Pierre Bourdieu's ideas, his death was announced on the front page of *Le Monde* not because he was a Sociologist but because, for nearly thirty years, he had been a force in French political and cultural life, much as Durkheim had been in his day. So too, it was with Foucault, Sartre, Raymond Aron, Simone de Beauvoir, and many others. This is far from a uniquely French tradition (though it is a more robust tradition in Europe generally than in the US). What is (or was) special about the when and where of French social thought was that it was one of those rare convergences when and where the ideas were fashioned in more or less close proximity to the changing times and the need for relief sought by the working and immigrant poor, students, prisoners, colonial subjects, women and queers. France did not deal with these demands for change any better than any other of the Western nations. But French social theorists did take in the political concerns, thus to fashion what, if you don't want to call it a Sociology, you can call a Social Studies.

Notes

[1] This is why, one supposes, Alvin Gouldner, a Marxist by temperament if ever there was one, hid under the mantle of a left-Weberian sociology until well after the coast was clear. Gouldner's first great book, *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* (1954) was done under the guise of a strict Weberian doctrine, while his break out book of 1970, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, was preoccupied with the prospects and faults of Marxism as a resource to sociology.

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[2] Reasons I must add that have been made clear to me by the influence of Avery Gordon's sociology of ghosts: *Ghostly Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[3] And, it should be said, if not argued here, that *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is a social constructionism that lends structural perspective to the narrow Hegelian version of the idea from the late 1960s in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967).

[4] A book, *Durkheim's Ghosts*, is soon to follow this essay in the form of a collection of my essays over the years on French social theory, each appropriately revised and reset for the current situation.

[5] Instead of "official Sociology" I might better say Capital-S Sociology, referring not so much to this or that academic administrator, organization, or department as to a prevailing attitude that seeks to stipulate the orthodox. Nor is this attitude one that prevails exclusively among persons of my generation. Regrettably, it is to be found among the aspiring newer recruits. For one particularly discouraging example see Charles Lemert, "Against Capital-S Sociology," *Sociological Theory* (Fall, 2002), which is a discussion of the tragic limits of an otherwise brilliant book by Stephan Fuchs, *Against Essentialism.*

[6] The most striking case of this kind of reaction was the astonishment with which the ortho- and heterodox greeted a survey conducted by the editors of *Contemporary Sociology*, an official journal of American Sociology. The 1996 survey asked respondents to rank a list of the most influential books of the previous twenty-five years. To everyone's amazement, the short list included authors who were not formally associated with official Sociologists. When the orthodox set about to prove the survey wrong they discovered them to be right. See Dan Clawson, ed. *Required Reading* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), which concludes with my own version, "Who's In? Who's Out?"

[7] It is impossible to use the word "ghosts" as a sociologist without acknowledging Avery Gordon's work on the subject. She, Derrida, and my dead son have been the principal sources of inspiration for what I have to say.

[8] Was written with Marcel Mauss.

[9] Lemert, *Postmodernism Is Not What You Think* (Basil Blackwell, 1997).

[10] Alan Wolfe, "The Snake," *The New Republic On Line* (October 01, 2001), p.4.

[11] Wallerstein, "The Eagle Has Crash Landed," *Foreign Policy* (2002).

[12] Lemert, *Social Things* (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 87–93.

[13] Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena* (1967; reprined and translated, Northwestern University Press, 1973).

[14] Again, the debt is to Avery Gordon, who reminded me of C. Wright Mills' preference for "social studies."

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