

Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Philosopher. By Dominick LaCapra. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972.

After reading LaCapra's exposition on Durkheim life and thought, one cannot help feeling that a sensitivity is present that is lacking in similar studies which derive their orientation from within sociology. Perhaps penetrating insights into the sociological tradition must be left to those, such as LaCapra, who write from the perspective of intellectual history. The basis for this judgment is not purely accidental. LaCapra's comprehensive discussion of Durkheim's work is informed by an interpretive method which allows the complexities and paradoxes of this great mind to show forth. The numerous ambiguities found in Durkheim's work, when placed in the context of a man committed to a moral imperative, are allowed to "play-out" in a manner that provides for a comprehensive unity of Durkheim's thought and at the same time provides a context for an analysis of his development.

LaCapra's main emphasis throughout his book is on a critical exposition of Durkheim's writings and intellectual development. He shows himself to have mastered the French texts, and his translations of many previously untranslated portions of reviews, etc., to support his arguments are very profitable reading. Although his discussion of Durkheim is sensitive to the socio-political context, and includes an especially perceptive treatment of the impact of the Dreyfus Affair on Durkheim's concept of community and religion (p. 11f, p. 75), LaCapra's major contribution lies in his treatment of the philosophical motivation and underpinnings of Durkheim's thought. The picture that is created is of a man grasped by la morale (which was also to be the title of Durkheim's last uncompleted work) who worked out his ideas through the categories of, what LaCapra's terms, his Cartesianized neo-Kantianism and who eventually fell victim to his social metaphysics. This intellectual portrait is executed in terms of basic axes and oppositions in Durkheim's writings.

The two fundamental axes which are seen as giving unity to Durkheim's thought are (1) the dominance of the metaphor of a "tree of social life" and (2) the conceptual distinction of normality and pathology. LaCapra notes that the tree metaphor, "...served as a logical axis for the classification of forms of human experience and entire social systems. The trunk of the tree corresponded to the invariant conditions of social and cultural life, while the branches represented different types of society" (p. 12). And secondly, normality and pathology "...intersected the classificatory axis of the tree of sociocultural life" (p. 13). These themes, wedded with Durkheim's fundamental rationalism, provide not only for an understanding of modern structural-functionalism and structuralism but also, for LaCapra, set the stage for an understanding of the inherent dialectical tensions in Durkheim's thought. The usage of the word "dialectical" might be offensive to interpreters of other persuasions, but LaCapra's argument gives ample justification for his usage. His conclusion that, "Durkheim's thought vacillated between an analytic dissociation of reality and a dialectical vision" (p. 293), seems adequately substantiated. The ability to see the two central themes working out in the context of this vacillation is one of the commendable aspects of this book.

A good example of LaCapra's suggestive treatment of his material can be found in his chapter devoted to "suicide and solidarity" (Chapter 4). The usual trichotomous treatment of Durkheim's types of suicide is replaced by two polar

yet intersecting oppositions, namely, egoism--altruism and anomie--fatalism. One does not sense here a forced structuralist schema, although indebtedness to Claude Levi-Strauss and Victor Turner is apparent throughout, because LaCapra's philosophical elucidation of the oppositions makes the rationale for Durkheim's argument apparent. Thus, despite the fact that fatalistic suicide is only briefly discussed in a footnote in Durkheim's Suicide, its functioning as an implicit polar opposite of anomie is made plausible. Anomie and egoism are seen respectively as pathological reflections of practical and theoretical reason (p. 165f). Thus, the neo-Kantian roots of Durkheim's main distinction are made clear and the possibility of collapsing these two categories seems less appropriate.

The polar opposites, fatalism and altruism, reflect respectively resignation when confronted by excessive authority and resignation in the face of excessive community. Fatalism appears to display a more cognitive element (p. 176) and altruism is related to a more non-reflective attitude. The latent neo-Kantianism contained in this system of typology is complemented by another philosophical strain which can be best summarized by Durkheim's own words, "In the ordering of life, nothing is good without measure (mesure)" (p. 171). This feeling for mesure is fundamental for understanding the normal and pathological axis throughout Durkheim's work and its classic Greek philosophical roots are made clear by LaCapra:

...implicit in Suicide and its typology was an optimal point of intersection of Durkheim's variables which corresponded to the Greek idea of a golden mean. Nowhere else was Durkheim's indebtedness to the classical tradition of Western philosophy more telling. And nowhere else was the vision of his own France--with its insistence on mesure--as the guardian of what was valid in this tradition more apposite. In the normal society, the golden mean--incarnated in the conscience collective--would restrict hybris to the exceptional individual or the extraordinary feat whose shocking singularity ambivalently fascinated and repelled society as a whole (p. 158).

LaCapra stresses that it is this feeling for "limits" that provides Durkheim with a critical vantage point from which a "call to action", a call for structural reform, could be made, however impotent in actuality Durkheim was in carrying out these activities. This provides the core of what LaCapra calls Durkheim's "philosophical conservatism" (p. 57n).

A cursory review of some additional insights to be found in LaCapra's book might include the following. He sees Durkheim's The Rules of Sociological Method as "...a sociological version of Descartes's discourse on method" (p. 188). Hegelian dialectical undercurrents are perceived in Durkheim (p. 294). The relationship in which the later Durkheim stands to Bergson, it is argued, is not as negative as many assume. LaCapra is of the opinion that Durkheim's notion of "collective effervescence" was influenced by Bergson's élan vital. The tremendous influence of Saint-Simon on Durkheim's evaluation of socialism is also instructively delineated by the author in relation to Marxism (p. 189f).

LaCapra does not shy away from critical comments concerning Durkheim. Numerous ambiguities, defects and failures are pointed out at the appropriate places. Sociologists will no doubt find his discussion of these shortcomings in relationship to Marx and Weber particularly helpful. Much of LaCapra's critical insight is indebted to a close study of thinkers who have been greatly influenced by Durkheim. In this connection a particularly instructive interlude is provided (pp. 106-119) where the thought of Marcel Mauss, Claude Levi-Strauss and Victor Turner are discussed in relationship to Durkheim. Much of the author's subsequent criticism of Durkheim is founded on shortcomings these Durkheimian thinkers have attempted to overcome. He states, "Turner's ideas, moreover, inform much of my later discussion of developments in Durkheim's thought" (p. 119). With this in mind, the reader will perhaps be disappointed that a subsequent interlude, bringing us up to date on the development of Durkheim's thought in Turner and others, is not provided. But the general feeling that history is being projected forward in time is constantly felt in LaCapra's work, and this experience no doubt accounts for the impression that this book is more relevant than most books on Durkheim for the sociological present. An analysis, for example, of Durkheim's views on theory and practice (Chapter 5) clearly places Durkheim in the context of contemporary discussions.

There is a certain impressionistic vagueness in describing the philosophical backgrounds of Durkheim's work that might be disconcerting to those readers who lack a general understanding of the philosophic schools of Durkheim's era. But considering the scope of such a book, greater analytical detail would only have detracted from grasping its central character. One could wish however that LaCapra would have devoted more time to painting a clearer background of a central concept in Durkheim's development, namely la morale. The ambiguities of the French expression are never made explicit, and discussion of its French philosophic history would have been profitable, e.g., the relation of Durkheim's usage to Comte's usage of la morale. Likewise, a more explicit discussion of the relationship of Rousseau's volonté générale and Durkheim's conscience collective is needed. Here again the treatment is very impressionistic (cf. pp. 90, 221n, 225). Despite any reservations one might have, this book remains highly instructive and deserves serious study by those interested in the philosophic orientations that played a major role in shaping modern sociology. As such, the book contributes much to contemporary criticism of the foundations of sociology.

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