

Durkheim's Critique of Colonialism and Empire

George Steinmetz

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ABSTRACT

How does Durkheim's thought relate to colonialism, imperialism, and postcolonial theory? To answer these questions, I first examine his explicit discussions of empire and colonialism, which are more extensive than previously thought. I then explore the implications of his general perspective – particularly his theories of anomie and morality—for discussions of colonialism and empire. I find that Durkheim was very critical of violent forms of colonialism and imperialism and that he firmly rejected the civilizational and racist discourses that underpinned modern European, and French, colonial conquest. He rejected forms of empire that exist “without internal acquiescence from their subjects,” empires that engage in “conquest via annexation” and military imperialism. As an alternative he advocated an “international system of states” based on a universal but socially and historically grounded morality. The article examines the ways Durkheim's thinking pushed beyond existing French understandings and criticisms of colonialism. I then examine the afterlives of his ideas in later research on colonialism by French sociologists. The conclusion considers postcolonial critiques of Durkheim and adumbrates a Durkheimian theory of colonialism and empire.

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Durkheim's Critique of Colonialism and Empire

In colonies violence almost inevitably breaks out. Hence that kind of bloody foolhardiness that seizes the explorer in connection with races he deems inferior. The superiority that he arrogates tends, as though independently, to assert itself brutally, without object or reason, for the mere pleasure of asserting itself. It produces a veritable intoxication, an excessive exaltation of self, a sort of megalomania, which goes to the worst extremes nothing restrains him; he overflows in violence, quite like the tyrant.

- Émile Durkheim, *Moral Education*

Texts that are inertly of their time stay there: those which brush up unstintingly against historical constraints are the ones we keep with us, generation after generation.

- Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European*

Those who nowadays set themselves up as judges and distribute praise and blame among the sociologists and ethnologists of the colonial past would be better occupied in trying to understand what it was that prevented the most lucid and best intentioned of those they condemn from understanding things which are now self-evident for even the least lucid and sometimes the least well intentioned observers.

- Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*

Introduction

Émile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is a foundational text in the sociology of knowledge.¹ Determining Durkheim's views of colonialism and empire is therefore as important for intellectual historians as it is for sociologists. If Durkheim's work "bore the mark of empire," as Raewyn Connell

¹ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York, 1915 [1912]).

claims, we need to then ask: what exactly are these “marks”?² Do such “marks” undermine any argument that we should keep Durkheim’s texts with us, generation after generation? Conversely, are Durkheim’s ideas about colonialism more ambiguous and even more useful for ongoing work on colonial and imperial history? Do marks of empire coexist in his writing with ideas that that discomfit political verities, unsettle social scientific doxa, and gesture toward new understandings of colonialism and empire?

In fact, Durkheim was critical of the forms of colonialism and continental empire that existed during his lifetime. He rejected the hierarchical, civilizational, and racist discourses that accompanied modern European colonial conquest and rule. Durkheim’s critique of colonialism and empire is related to his general theory of social morality and moral deregulation. He was adamantly opposed to despotic empires that exist “without internal acquiescence from their subjects.” Again militarism and empire, he advocated an “international system of states that is also based on Morals.”³

This article proceeds as follows. The first section presents some of the leading interpretations of Durkheim. The second section examines Durkheim’s explicit discussions of colonial and imperial phenomena, before discussing several additional relevant themes: his sociology of morality, his views of race, racism, and civilizational hierarchy, and his theory of pathological and anomic social conditions.

The third section compares Durkheim’s views of colonialism to leading figures in 19th century French sociology and neighboring disciplines, concluding that his views located him on the critical edge of French anticolonialism before

² R. W. Connell, “Why is Classical Theory Classical?,” *American Journal of Sociology* 102/6 (1997), 1511-1557, at 1545.

³ Durkheim, “*Germany above All*”; *German Mentality and War* (Paris, 1915), 32, 45.

WWI. The fourth section examines Durkheim's influence on French sociological writing on colonialism and empire between his death in 1917 and the early 1960s, when the French empire wound down.⁴ This discussion finds that Durkheim's legacy occupied a central position in French sociological writing that explicitly thematized and theorized colonialism during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The conclusion turns to the current "postcolonial" criticism of Durkheim and asks how his ideas might contribute to further research on colonialism and empire.

Part 1: Some leading interpretations of Durkheim

There are at least five interpretations of Durkheim's thought that are worth considering here, because they shed specific light on the question of his views of colonialism and social organization more generally.⁵

Some of the oldest readings of Durkheim describe him as a conservative theorist of social order, social reproduction, and consensus.⁶ A few even argued

⁴ The *Empire français*, as it was known in Durkheim's lifetime, was renamed the *Union française* in 1946 and the *Communauté française* in 1958. Several colonies became Overseas Departments of France in the constitution of October 27, 1946; Algeria remained officially part of metropolitan France until its independence in 1962. French sociological research on colonialism largely disappeared after the winding down of French colonialism, notwithstanding a flourishing of school of mainly economic writing on underdevelopment that lasted through the 1970s. George Steinmetz, *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: French Sociology and the Overseas Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023); Jean Copans, *Sociologie du développement* (Paris, 2016).

⁵ On Durkheim, see especially Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim* (London, 1973); Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, v. 2, *The Antinomies of Classical Thought: Marx and Durkheim* (London, 2014 [1982]), and Marcel Fournier, *Émile Durkheim: A Biography* (Cambridge, 2013). Durkheim's personal papers were destroyed during WWII, making careful scrutiny of his publications even more crucial to any interpretations. Selected letters from Durkheim are preserved in the papers of some contemporaries; see Durkheim, *Textes*, vol. 2, ed. Victor Karady (Paris, 1975), 389-487; Durkheim, *Lettres à Marcel Mauss* (Paris, 1998).

⁶ D. Pels, "A Fellow-Traveller's Dilemma: Sociology and Socialism in the Writings of Durkheim," *Acta Politica* 19/3 (1984), 309-329, at 323; also M. Plouviez, "Sociology as Subversion: Discussing the Reproductive Interpretations of Durkheim," *Journal of Classical*

that Durkheimian sociology was proto-fascist.⁷ I will contribute to the literature that puts these older theories to rest by marshaling evidence about Durkheim's anticolonialism, which situated him closer to the socialists and the political left at the time.

A second reading calls attention to Durkheim's interest in politics and power and his writings on the state, democracy and despotism, socialism, and political theory.⁸ Several writers emphasize that Durkheim "never lost his fascination for the 'social question'," and supported "a more equitable distributive justice," "welfare as a social responsibility," "some level of planning," and the abolition of inherited wealth.⁹ During his lifetime Durkheim was closest politically to French liberals and socialists, particularly to his lifelong friend, the socialist Jean Jaurès (see below). Durkheim rejected violent revolution, empires, militarism, bellicose foreign policy, and colonialism, favoring republicanism, democracy, the rule of law, expansive political and individual liberties, and an international order based on human rights.¹⁰

Sociology 12/3-4), 428-448; a nuanced example of the "conservatism" argument is Lewis Coser, "Durkheim's Conservatism and its Implications for his Sociological Theory," in Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *Emile Durkheim, Essays on Sociology and Philosophy* (London: 1964), 211-232.

⁷ Mathieu Hikaru Desan and Johan Heilbron, "Young Durkheimians and the Temptation of Fascism: The case of Marcel Déat," *History of the Human Sciences* 28/3 (2015), 22-50. Desan and Heilbron discuss and reject the "fascist" interpretation.

⁸ Émile Durkheim, *Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education* (New York, [1925] 1961); *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (London, 1957); "Germany above All"; *German Mentality and War* (Paris, 1915); see also Durkheim, *Textes*, ed. Victor Karady, vol.3 (Paris, 1975), ch. 2, for miscellaneous texts by Durkheim on the state.

⁹ Pels, "A Fellow-Traveller's Dilemma," 324; Durkheim, "Contribution to "Enquête sur la guerre et le militarisme," *L'humanité nouvelle* May (1899), 50-52, at 52; Frank Pearce, *The Radical Durkheim* (London, 1989), 57.

¹⁰ Pearce, *The Radical Durkheim*, 57; Melvin Richter, "Durkheim's Politics and Political Theory," in Durkheim, *Essays on Sociology and Philosophy*, 170-210, at 172; Yves Sintomer, "Émile Durkheim, entre républicanisme et démocratie délibérative," *Sociologie* 2 (2011), 405-416; Grégoire Mallard and Jean Terrier, "Decolonising Durkheimian Conceptions of the

A third interpretation sees Durkheim's as being driven by a profound sense of societal destabilization and multifaceted crisis.¹¹ This is expressed most forcefully in his concept of *anomie*, which he first presented in the third section of *The Division of Labor*.¹² Here, Durkheim discusses "abnormal" or "pathological" forms of the division of labor, including commercial crisis and labor strife, which reflect, in his words, a "state of anomie."¹³ Durkheim's second book, *Suicide* (1897), "hinges on the chapter on anomic suicide."¹⁴ Here, anomie is defined as a "condition of rulelessness in which individuals lose their moorings."¹⁵ For Durkheim, anomie became chronic and institutionalized in contemporary societies.¹⁶ Besnard argues that Durkheim's anomie concept therefore amounts to "a vigorous and almost vehement condemnation of the ideology of industrial society."¹⁷ As we will see, Durkheim characterizes both colonialism and noncolonial empires as anomic.

A fourth reading frames Durkheim, or the mature Durkheim of the *Elementary Forms*, as a theorist of "dogmata" that is, of collective ideation, discourse, culture.¹⁸ This approach draws particularly on *Elementary Forms*, where

International Colonialism and Internationalism in the Durkheimian School during and after the Colonial Era," *Durkheimian Studies* 25 (2021), 3–30.

¹¹ Lacroix, *Durkheim et le politique*, 179, 275.

¹² Philippe Besnard, *L'anomie: ses usages et ses fonctions dans la discipline sociologique depuis Durkheim* (Paris, 1987); Durkheim, *Division of Labor in Society* (New York, 1984 [1895]).

¹³ Durkheim, *Division of Labor*, 304.

¹⁴ Philippe Besnard, "Anomie and Fatalism in Durkheim's Theory of Regulation," in Stephen Turner, ed., *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Moralist* (New York, 1993), 163-183, at 167.

¹⁵ Steven Lukes, "Emile Durkheim," *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam, 2001), 3897-3904, at 3900.

¹⁶ Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, translated by J. A. Spaulding and G. Simpson (New York, 1973), 254; Philippe Besnard, "Anomie," *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam, 2001), 510-513, at 511.

¹⁷ Besnard, "Anomie and Fatalism," 173.

¹⁸ On the focus on "dogmata" rather than "pragmata" in certain theoretical approaches to the human sciences, see Reinhart Koselleck, "Begriffsgeschichte and Social History," in Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 73-91, at 73.

Durkheim traces the origins of modern scientific categories of understanding, including time, space, cause, force, and number, to religion, and indeed, to the religions of the structurally simplest human societies. In the process of tracing modern classification schemes to “primitive” religions, Durkheim elaborates a theory of collective conscience as the source of social solidarity, of the reawakening of solidarity through collective ritual, and of religion as an originary moral and epistemological framework. Working from this “culturalist” turn, interwar Durkheimian sociology examined collective representations and classification schemes, social epistemologies, and practices such as sacrifice and ritual within contemporary “western” societies.¹⁹ Durkheim’s text had a decisive influence on 20th century British social anthropology, from Radcliffe-Brown, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas,²⁰ to Claude Lévi-Strauss and French structuralism. Durkheimian sociology still resonates, directly or indirectly, within cultural sociology.²¹

A final set of interpretations frames Durkheim as a sociologist of morality.²² As Isambert notes, the “importance of morality for Durkheim can perhaps be

¹⁹ Key texts here, in addition to *Elementary Forms*, are Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, “De quelques formes primitives de classification,” *Année sociologique* 6 (1903), 1-72; and H. Hubert and M. Mauss, “Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice,” *Année sociologique* 2 (1899), 29-138. On Durkheimian sociology’s later articulation with French surrealism, see Stephan Moebius, *Die Zauberlehrlinge: Soziologiegeschichte des Collège de Sociologie (1937-1939)* (Konstanz: 2006).

²⁰ Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms* has been used as the core reading in the Winter term of the year-long “Soc 2” (“Self, Culture, and Society”) undergraduate sequence at the University of Chicago since the 1980s. Michael Schudson, “A Ruminating Restrospect on the Liberal Arts, the Social Sciences, and Soc 2,” in John J. MacAloon, ed., *General Education in the Social Sciences: Centennial Reflections on the College of the University of Chicago* (Chicago, 1991), 126-147, at 137, 141.

²¹ Philip Smith, *Durkheim and After: The Durkheimian Tradition, 1893-2020* (Cambridge, 2020). Smith (p. 211) mentions classification, collective memory, iconicity, cultural trauma, and narrative as central concerns of contemporary Durkheimian sociology.

²² Ernest Wallwork, *Durkheim: Morality and Milieu* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972); Hans Joas, “Durkheim’s Intellectual Development. The Problem of the Emergence of New Morality and

measured by the extent of his writing on the subject”: the “first article he published concerns moral science in Germany and that the last of [his] texts” sought to create a new moral theory.²³ The original *Introduction* to Durkheim’s *Division of Labor* framed the book as a sociology of morality.²⁴ Pickering observes that while *Elementary Forms* “stands as [Durkheim’s] masterpiece, his ambition was to crown it with something greater, something closer to his heart, a sociological study of moral behaviour.”²⁵ Durkheim comes to analyze “moral facts” as compulsory rules of behavior that create social order and solidarity. In more differentiated societies, morality is also promoted by the state, the legal and educational systems, and professional and occupational groups.²⁶ Each society develops--or should develop—a system of morality specific to its social structure, which is itself historical and historically changing. As we will see below, Durkheim rejected the categorization of non-European mores as uncivilized, countering that European empires and colonies were themselves amoral.

Each of these interpretations is useful for making sense of the thematic cluster *Durkheim/colonialism/empire*. I focus in the pages that follow on Durkheim’s comments on colonialism, empire, the state, and politics; his theory of crisis and anomie; his rejection of *race* as a category for social explanation and his

New Institutions as a Leitmotif in Durkheim’s Oeuvre,” in Stephen Turner, ed., *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Moralist* (New York, 1993). 223-238; Joas and Andreas Pettenkofer, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Emile Durkheim* (Oxford, 2020) and Nicola Marcucci, ed., *Durkheim and Critique* (London, 2021).

²³ François-André Isambert, “Durkheim’s Sociology of Moral Facts,” in Stephen Turner, ed., *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Moralist* (New York, 1993), 187-204, 187.

²⁴ Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, v. 2, *The Antinomies of Classical Thought: Marx and Durkheim* (London, 2014 [1982]), 125.

²⁵ W. S. F. Pickering, “Introduction,” in Pickering, ed., *Durkheim: Essays on Morals and Education* (London, 1979), 3-28, at 4. Durkheim only completed the first paragraphs of the introduction to this study on his deathbed. See comments by Mauss in Durkheim, “Introduction a la morale,” 79.

²⁶ Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy* (New York, 1974); Idem., “Introduction a la morale,” *Revue Philosophique* 89 (1920), 79–97.

increasing refusal to distinguish between societies in terms of their putative civilizational levels; and his sociology of morality—particularly his *relativism* about ethics, law, religion, and all of the other social practices that were referred to by European powers in justifying their conquests and their arrogations to themselves of sovereignty from African and Asian societies.

Part 2: Colonialism and empire in Durkheim’s writings

Durkheim was not entirely silent about colonialism, contrary to most commentators, and when he did discuss it he was unerringly critical.²⁷ In *The Division of Labor* Durkheim suggests that “colonization” was one response to the disorganizing, anomic pressures of the modern division of labor, along with emigration and suicide.²⁸ It is revealing that Durkheim distinguishes between colonization and emigration; his translators have sometimes failed to do so.²⁹

One of Durkheim’s most sustained discussions of colonialism appears in *Moral Education*. This text is based on “the most important of the lecture courses” that Durkheim “delivered fairly regularly between 1889 and 1912, both at Bordeaux and Paris.”³⁰ Durkheim was interested in developing educational practices that could inculcate morality and autonomous capacities for moral judgment among youths in societies like his own that seemed to lack universal

²⁷ Gurminder K. Bhambra and John Holmwood argue that Durkheim ignored colonialism, but they do this by dismissing the passages in *Division of Labor*, *Moral Education*, and “*Germany above All*” as irrelevant and by ignoring Durkheim’s reviews in *Année sociologique* (discussed below). Bhambra and Holmwood, *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, 2021), 143, 164, 175,

²⁸ Durkheim, *Division of Labor*, 228. *Colonialism* involves the arrogation of sovereignty by a conquering power and the implementation of a system of legal and social practices in which the colonized are constructed as inferior to the colonizers in racial, ethnic, or civilizational terms; *colonization* involves permanent emigration from a metropole to a global periphery. See Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton, 2005).

²⁹ The 1984 translation by W. D. Halls substitutes the word “integration” for “emigration,” but Simpson’s earlier translation got it right; compare Durkheim, *Division of Labor in Society* (Glencoe, 1933), 286. All other quotations in this article are from Halls’s translation.

³⁰ Lukes, *Emile Durkheim*, 110.

moral codes. The passage in question appears in a chapter on corporal punishment, an educational practice that, according to Durkheim, culminated in an “orgy of violence ... in the schools of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries.”³¹ There was, however, “a force that is ... in a position to check this kind of thinking: the prevailing climate of moral opinion.”³² Durkheim then turns to the behavior of a hypothetical European in the colonies who encounters “moral forces” that are “depreciated in his eyes” because they are associated with “races he deems inferior.” This European does not recognize any moral force or “authority requiring his deference”; at the same time, he is unrestrained by the moral rules of his home society.³³ Nothing restrains the colonizer, Durkheim writes: “he overflows in violence, quite like the tyrant.”³⁴

This passage is fascinating in several respects. The first is that Durkheim introduces colonialism in a discussion of corporal punishment in schools. His text has already associated corporal punishment with earlier, despotic political systems.³⁵ Through a chain of associations, Durkheim links colonialism to continental empires, which are elsewhere described as despotic (see below), and as asynchronous or outdated. Secondly, by including a discussion of the relations between colonizer and colonized in lectures on the development of morality in children, Durkheim calls attention to the ways in which colonial rulers often impute childlike inferiority to the colonized. Third, Durkheim describes the colonial situation as completely lacking in moral regulation. Although he does not use the word *anomie* here, he had already introduced that term, defined as an absence of moral regulation, in *The Division of Labor*, which ended with a warning

³¹ Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 192.

³² Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 195.

³³ Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 193.

³⁴ Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 193.

³⁵ Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 196.

that morality was currently “in the throes of an appalling crisis” and that a form of justice corresponding to the new form of life had not yet appeared.³⁶ Situations were proliferating, Durkheim wrote, in which “the law of the strongest ... decides any dispute, and a state of out and out warfare exists” between social groups.³⁷ As Frank Pearce notes, if we “follow Durkheim’s reasoning, a likely feature of a colonial ... society ... will be an ever-present anomie.”³⁸

In the colonial setting, anomie escalates into something even more extreme than the scenarios in *Division of Labor* and *Suicide*. It is important to pay attention to the rhetorical excess of Durkheim’s texts, which often exceed the strictures and limits of his scientific categories.³⁹ Consider this passage in *Moral Education* which argues that the European’s sense of superiority tends

as though independently, to assert itself brutally, *without object or reason, for the mere pleasure of asserting itself*. It produces a veritable *intoxication*, an excessive *exaltation of self*, a sort of *megalomania*, which goes to the worst extremes. This violence is a game with him, *a spectacle* in which he indulges himself, a way of *demonstrating the superiority* he sees in himself.⁴⁰

This description of a form of pleasure existing *without object or reason* recalls at first glance Durkheim’s description of *anomic suicide* as a form of unlimited,

³⁶ Durkheim, *Division of Labor*, 339. Elsewhere, “Durkheim uses synonyms such as “deregulation, agitation, effervescence, [and] inorganization” and “state of deregulation” and “maniacal agitation.” Besnard, *L’anomie*, 26.

³⁷ Durkheim, *Division of Labor*, xxxvi.

³⁸ Pearce, *Radical Durkheim*, 73.

³⁹ This is an example of *textuality* in the poststructuralist sense, which is also emphasized by foundational postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, who emphasize the undecidability, hybridity, and multiple meanings of much colonial discourse rather than its transparency. See Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994).

⁴⁰ Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 193. Italics mine.

insatiable desire that is “over-excited” and unregulated by the “check-rein” of a moral code.⁴¹ Yet the description of the colonizer’s acute pleasure in engaging in a *spectacle* without an object exceeds even the discussion of anomic suicide.

Durkheim describes the colonizer as being gripped by a kind of *Tropenkoller* or colonial madness, an individual effervescence. For readers of the *Elementary Forms*, this recasts the European as the primitive, reversing the imperial gaze. Such reversals had been commonplace in European anticolonial discourse, from Montaigne through to the Enlightenment, in the writings of Diderot, Voltaire, Le Vaillant, Chamisso, and others, but it had faded by Durkheim’s era. Durkheim reintroduced this reversal of the colonial optic, which became a mainstay of the neo-Durkheimian surrealist discourse produced by the interwar *Collège de sociologie*. In this respect, Durkheim’s vision is the very opposite of an “imperial gaze,” *pace* Connell.⁴²

Durkheim’s second extended critique of colonialism appears in his 1915 pamphlet “*Germany above All*”.⁴³ As Bernard Lacroix notes, this text allowed Durkheim to return to his earlier preoccupation, during his Bordeaux years (1887-1902), with “the exegesis of great political texts,” including Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Saint-Simon.⁴⁴ “*Germany above All*” was written primarily for propagandistic purposes, but it hews to the general theoretical lines Durkheim had been working out since the 1890s. It can be read as an essay in political sociology and a critique of the ideas of Heinrich von Treitschke, who had been at the peak of

⁴¹ Durkheim, *Suicide*, 247–248, 258, 287.

⁴² Connell, “Why is Classical Theory Classical?,” 1523. Julian Go does not examine Durkheim’s texts but simply repeats and affirms Connell’s judgment; see *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (Oxford, 2016), 4.

⁴³ Durkheim, “*Germany above All*”; *German Mentality and War* (Paris, 1915). On this text see Lukes, *Durkheim*, 549-552; Fournier, *Durkheim*, 680-683.

⁴⁴ Lacroix, *Durkheim et le politique*, 183; Durkheim, *Montesquieu and Rousseau* (Ann Arbor, 1953).

his influence and popularity when Durkheim was in Berlin in 1886. I will return to Durkheim's specific analysis of political form of empire below. The key point here is that Durkheim also discusses colonialism *per se* in this text. By including discussions of colonial phenomena in "*Germany above All*" -- a text ostensibly focused on *continental imperialism* -- Durkheim connected the two forms of morally deregulated geopolitics which Europeans usually considered separately.

Durkheim's working hypothesis is that Treitschke's ideas epitomize a dominant German ideology in which domestic despotism is combined with aggressive continental imperialism and overseas colonialism.⁴⁵ According to Durkheim, Treitschke insisted that the state's duty was to obtain "as large a *place in the sun* as possible, trampling its rivals under foot in the process."⁴⁶ This phrase refers directly to the German colonial empire, which was identified at the time as a colonial latecomer seeking its own *Platz an der Sonne* (place in the sun)—in the tropics. Durkheim then criticizes Treitschke, and by extension, Germany, for practicing a particularly brutal form of colonialism.⁴⁷ According to Durkheim, Treitschke believes that

in dealing with people who are still in an inferior stage of civilisation, it is evident that policy must adapt the means to their mentality. It would be folly for an historian to judge European policy in Africa or the East by the principles

⁴⁵ Durkheim borrowed Treitschke's works from the Sorbonne library in 1915 in order to write "*Germany above All*." Matthieu Béra, "Les emprunts de Durkheim dans les bibliothèques de l'École normale supérieure et de la Sorbonne," *Durkheimian Studies* 22 (2016), 3–46, at 23.

⁴⁶ Durkheim, "*Germany above All*", 23.

⁴⁷ This is not to say that French or British colonialism was any less brutal than German colonialism. However, the claim about German colonialism's extremism was widespread among the British and French after WWI, when the spoils of the German colonial empire were being redistributed among the war's victors.

applied in Europe. In those countries, *he who knows not how to terrorise is lost*.⁴⁸

Durkheim clearly implies here that European policy in Africa or the East should be judged by the principles applied in Europe, or, as he writes elsewhere, by international norms (see below).

Durkheim then quotes Treitschke's remark about the English colonizers who "over half a century ago, bound the rebel Sepoys to the mouths of the guns and blew their bodies into fragments that were scattered to the heavens." Durkheim remarks that "[t]hese terrible measures of repression" were "tolerated" by "the manners of the time" but are condemned by the manners "of today," and "would certainly be condemned by contemporary England." Yet these same measures, he continues, "are pronounced natural by Treitschke."⁴⁹ These comments make sense in terms of Durkheim's moral sociology, according to which "the normal type is the average type within a given stage of the development of the organism under consideration."⁵⁰ Durkheim is arguing these forms of colonialist savagery are out of alignment with contemporary manners and international morals. Once again, German morals are described as being objectively pathological in a comparative sociological sense.⁵¹

Durkheim argued further that Germany's lust for "universal hegemony" was based on categories such as "race" and "legend," and that these ideas were "sometimes bordering on delirium."⁵² He adds that "German practice could not be understood at all without linking it to the myth (Pan-Germanism) that it expresses

⁴⁸ Durkheim, "*Germany above All*", 25 (italics in original).

⁴⁹ Durkheim, "*Germany above All*", 25 (my emphasis).

⁵⁰ Isambert, "Durkheim's Sociology of Moral Facts," 192.

⁵¹ Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy*.

⁵² Durkheim, "*Germany above All*", 42.

and on which it depends.” These connections to *delirium* and *myth* recall Durkheim’s discussion of the anomic colonizer in *Moral Education*. It is significant that Durkheim here adds race thinking as a further marker of political pathology. As we will see below, Durkheim had taken a clear stand at this point against militarism, race and racism, and the idea of a hierarchy of stages of civilisation. If the reader accepts Treitschke as the voice of a dominant strand of German ideology, German morality can be diagnosed as lagging with respect to its own internal societal structures.⁵³

Finally, Durkheim reversed the “imperial gaze” once again here by describing the German military as applying colonialist practices to European warfare. Specifically, he describes Germany as entering Belgium in WWI as if it were annexing a “*res nullius*.” This phrase refers to the doctrine of *terra nullius* (“territory without a master”) that was used by colonial conquerors to justify the occupation of non-European lands. Durkheim is therefore suggesting that Germany is behaving like an aggressive colonial power *inside* Europe. He is describing the abandonment of any distinction between the inside and outside of the *Ius publicum Europaeum*.⁵⁴ Durkheim is suggesting that colonialism and continental empire are kindred formations – a century before this became a *topos* among historians.⁵⁵

⁵³ Of course this argument corresponds in its basic structure to the German *Sonderweg* thesis, according to which German culture and politics lagged behind its modern capitalist economy, leading to fateful tensions that eventually nurtured Nazism. This analytic approach has been dismantled by historians since the 1980s; see George Steinmetz, “German Exceptionalism and the Origins of Nazism: The Career of a Concept,” in Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, eds., *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge, 1997), 251-284. What is more interesting in the present case is that, for Durkheim, colonialism and continental empire figure among the pathological results of the German disjuncture between social structure and morality.

⁵⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus publicum Europaeum* (Köln, 1951).

⁵⁵ See for example, Geoff Eley, “Empire by Land or Sea? Germany’s Imperial Imaginary, 1840–1945,” in Geoff Eley and Bradley Naranch, eds., *German Colonialism in a Global Age* (Durham, NC, 2014), 19-45; Julia Hell, *The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome* (Chicago Press, 2018).

Both forms, for Durkheim, are despotic, undemocratic, unregulated, amoral, militaristic, and pathological.

Durkheim and his nephew, co-author, and “alter-ego” Marcel Mauss discussed colonialism in their book reviews in *Année sociologique*.⁵⁶ Postcolonial critics of Durkheim tend to ignore his reviews, but this is where Durkheim wrote some of his “most profound and seminal articles.”⁵⁷ His review of Célestin Bouglé’s *Essais sur les castes* discusses the effects of the British administration on the Indian caste system.⁵⁸ His review of Louis Millot’s *La femme musulmane au Maghreb* in 1913 does not ignore colonial administration but emphasizes “the attempts made by the French administration to ‘improve the lot of women’.”⁵⁹ Durkheim reviewed a number of books by Joseph Kohler on colonial law and ethnography.⁶⁰ He summarizes Kohler’s studies as focusing on “the social organization of peoples subjected to German protectorate on different

⁵⁶ Durkheim, quoted in Lukes, *Emile Durkheim*, 400. Mauss wrote that a history of South Africa “cannot overlook the populations that the Europeans colonized, that is to say, conquered, dispossessed, exploited.” Mauss, review of G. Mc Call Theal, *History and Ethnography of Africa, South of the Zambesi*, *Année sociologique*, vol. 11, 1906-1909 (1910), pp. 106-108, at 106. See also Mauss’s reviews mentioning the mobilization of ethnography by French, British, and US colonial governments in *Année sociologique*, vol. 10, review of E. Lunet de Lajonquière, *Ethnographie du Tonkin septentrional* (p. 241); review of Commandant Bonifacy, *Monographie des Mans Caolan* (p. 244), and review of A.-E. Jenks, *The Bontoc Igorot* (p. 251).

⁵⁷ Yash Nandan, “Preface,” in Nandan, ed., *Émile Durkheim: Contributions to L'Année sociologique* (New York, 1980), xv-xixi, at xvii. Among the critics of Durkheim who ignore his book reviews are Connell, “Why is Classical Theory Classical?,” Julian Go, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (Oxford, 2016); and Bhabra and Holmwood, *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory*.

⁵⁸ Durkheim, review of Bouglé, *Essais sur le régime des castes*, in *Année sociologique* 11 (1910), 384-7, at 385.

⁵⁹ Durkheim, review of Louis Milliot, *La femme musulmane au Maghreb*, in *Année sociologique* 12 (1913), 432-433.

⁶⁰ On Kohler, see Bernhard Grossfeld and Margitta Wilde, “Josef Kohler und das Recht der deutschen Schutzgebiete,” *Rabels Zeitschrift für ausländisches und internationales Privatrecht* 58/1 (1994), 59–75.

continents.”⁶¹ In a review of Kohler’s “Bantu Law in [German] East Africa,” Durkheim reminds his readers that the populations discussed by Kohler were all colonial subjects and that there was a German “administrator at the head of each district,” which meant that that “the autonomy of local groups had disappeared.”⁶² According to Durkheim’s sociology of law and morality, legal codes should correspond to the social structure and *conscience collective* of the population they regulate. This means that British policy in India, French interventions in the Maghreb, and German codifications of “Bantu Law” were generating social pathology by disrupting the natural adjustment between social structures and moral and legal codes.

To better understand this aspect of Durkheim’s views of colonialism and empire we need to consider his sociology of morality more closely.

Durkheim’s Sociology of Morality, Religion, and Social Pathology

In contrast to Kant, Durkheim argued that morals could not be derived deductively. And in contrast to the utilitarians, he insisted that individuals do not arrive at moral values via individual rational calculation.⁶³ Instead, Durkheim argued that individuals receive morality from society via primary socialization, formal education, and ongoing social interaction. “Moral facts,” for Durkheim, include rules of conduct, feelings of love and sympathy, loyalty, devotion, remorse, and the pursuit of order, solidarity, and well-being.⁶⁴ Moral facts are compulsory rules of behavior that exist either at the level of entire societies, or, in more

⁶¹ Durkheim, Review of J. Kohler, *Rechte der deutschen Schutzgebiete I. Das Recht der Herrero*, in *Année sociologique* 5 (1902), 330-332, at 330.

⁶² Durkheim, Review of J. Kohler, *Rechte der deutschen Schutzgebiete. IV. Das Banturecht in Ostrafrika*, in *Année sociologique* 5 (1902), 333-334, at 330, 334.

⁶³ Durkheim, “La Science positive de la morale en Allemagne,” *Revue philosophique* 24 (1886), 33-58, 113-142, 275-284.

⁶⁴ Wallwork, *Durkheim*, 27. ,

complex societies, within smaller professional subgroupings.⁶⁵ Like social facts, moral facts “exist outside the individual consciousness and are endowed with a power of coercion by reason of which they control him.”⁶⁶ Each society or subgroup develops systems of moral rules and laws specific to their social structure. The healthy or normal form of morality in each society is therefore “the average type within a given stage of the development of the organism under consideration.”⁶⁷ Criticism of morality therefore involves comparing a society’s moral ideals with its actual social practices. This empirical approach to grounding morality, Durkheim argues, is preferable to basing moral criticism on deductive, universal, or arbitrary definitions of right and wrong, good and evil.⁶⁸

Durkheim did not, however, restrict the efficacy of morality to submission to external coercion. He also emphasized the inculcation of a “habitus of moral being” and conscious reflection through deliberate “moral education.” This would allow morality to become a *desirable* end rather than simply a matter of duty: “The good is morality insofar as it seems to us a desirable thing ... [to] which we aspire through a spontaneous impulse of the will.”⁶⁹ This meant that it was essential to develop a sociology of morality in order to guide the efforts by teachers and

⁶⁵ Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy* (New York, 1974); Idem., “Introduction a la morale,” *Revue Philosophique* 89 (1920), 79–97.

⁶⁶ Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. S. Lukes (New York, 1982 [1895]), 2; Wallwork, Durkheim, 20).

⁶⁷ François-André Isambert, “Durkheim’s Sociology of Moral Facts,” in Turner, ed., *Emile Durkheim*, 187-204, at 192.

⁶⁸ Durkheim’s moral theory anticipates the method of “immanent critique” associated with Critical Theory. This was recognized by Adorno, see Theodor W. Adorno, “Einleitung zu Emile Durkheim, ‘Soziologie und Philosophie’.” in Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I* (Frankfurt am Main, 1972), pp. 245-279. Adorno tried to defend Critical Theory’s originality in this respect by decrying Durkheim’s political conservatism, but he did not address the similarities between the two theories of morality; see Rahel Jaeggi, “Towards an Immanent Critique of Forms of Life,” *Raisons politiques* (2015), 13-29; Allen, *The End of Progress*; and Titus Stahl, *Immanent Critique* (London, 2021).

⁶⁹ Durkheim, *Evolution of Educational Thought*, 29; *Moral Education*, 94.

officials to inculcate moral values in the citizenry that are appropriate to the society in question.

This theory's relevance to the critique of colonialism stems, first, from its inherent *relativism* about morality, law, and religion. "Every social type has the morality necessary to it." The Romans "should not have had any other" morality than the one they had.⁷⁰ Moreover, even simpler societies without a complex division of labor have highly elaborate moral systems. And just as "there are no religions that are false,"⁷¹ there are no moral systems that are inferior or false. Durkheim's theory was in this respect completely at odds with European colonial practice. Claims of moral failure were used by Great Powers to bolster their right to conquer and colonize; arguments about moral "repugnancy" were used to outlaw native practices that offended European morals. Durkheim's theory rejects these legitimations of conquest and the imposition of foreign legal codes on colonized populations.

Durkheim's theory of the state, empire, and international orders

To understand Durkheim's theory of empire we need to examine his theory of the state. Durkheim discussed the state in *The Division of Labor* and in his lectures on professional ethics and civic morals.⁷² In *The Division of Labor*, he argues that the state "embodies the collectivity" and becomes society's "brain," a "symbol of ... [collective] consciousness" whose function is to protect the beliefs, traditions and collective practices.⁷³ In *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* he argues that the modern state is not defined by religion, traditions, or a dynastic cult;

⁷⁰ Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 87.

⁷¹ Durkheim, *Division of Labor*, 87; *Elementary Forms*, 3.

⁷² H. N. Kubali, "Preface," in Durkheim, *Professional Ethics*, ix-xi, at ix.

⁷³ Durkheim, *Division of Labor*, 42-43, 171.

instead, it is a “Political Society” containing a large number of secondary social groups.⁷⁴ It is based in a territory that is subject to “the same one authority, which is itself not subject to any other superior authority.”⁷⁵

Durkheim’s overarching theme in *Professional Ethics* is the problem of identifying a system of moral rules that can generate solidarity within highly complex societies. As the division of labor increases, morality changes more rapidly and becomes increasingly fragmented. Yet Durkheim argues that there are substitutes for the “mechanical” solidarity that prevails in simpler societies. Moral codes develop within professional and occupational groups and are also promoted by the liberal state and its educational system--as the state’s *representations* are common to all members of society (a theme echoed by Pierre Bourdieu in his theory of the state).⁷⁶

In more differentiated societies, over time, Durkheim argues, the *individual* becomes the sacred object *par excellence*.⁷⁷ The scope of individual life expands and the human being becomes the most “exalted object of moral respect.”⁷⁸ Contrary to Libertarian and Anarchist theories, the state is not antithetical to the flourishing of individuality but promotes it. Rather than *creating* tyranny, the (liberal) state *alleviates* various forms of tyranny or despotism, keeping in check secondary groups such as the family, church, and firm, such that they do not “draw

⁷⁴ Durkheim, *Professional Ethics*, 47.

⁷⁵ Durkheim, *Professional Ethics*, 43, 45.

⁷⁶ Durkheim, *Professional Ethics*, 48, 50; Pierre Bourdieu, “Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field,” in George Steinmetz, ed., *State/Culture* (Ithaca, NY, 1999), 53–75; Idem., *On the State. Lectures at the Collège de France 1989-1992*. (London, 2015).

⁷⁷ Durkheim, “Individualism and the Intellectuals,” *Political Studies* 17 (1969 [1898]), 14-30, at 21. Durkheim developed this thesis of “the human person [as] the touchstone of morality” in this article in response to the Dreyfus affair; Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2022), 252.

⁷⁸ Durkheim, *Professional Ethics*, 56.

the individual within their exclusive domination.”⁷⁹ As a result, “people began to have a far loftier idea of the human person and the smallest attempt on his freedom [becomes] more intolerable.”⁸⁰ The stronger the democratic state, the more the individual is respected. The most general political implication of the sacredness of the individual is “universal human rights for all.”⁸¹ A form of universal morality does, therefore, emerge, but it is a product of historical changes in social complexity, the emergence of the modern state, and the state’s democratization.

As in *The Division of Labor*, however, the “normal” or “healthy” social condition is not necessarily the empirical norm. This is evident in Durkheim’s contrast between the forms of government in the French Third Republic state and the German Kaiserreich, discussed above. Durkheim discusses abnormal or pathological forms of polity in *Professional Ethics* in some detail, focusing on despotic states and “Absolute governments,” which diminish individual rights and privilege war and imperialism. Indeed, some of Durkheim’s earliest publications discussed the “bellicist” sociological writings of Ludwig Gumplowicz and Friedrich Ratzel. In 1885, Durkheim discussed Gumplowicz’s argument that the “fundamental fact about all social life” is “the eternal struggle for dominance” (“*Der ewige Kampf um Herrschaft*”).⁸² He summarized Ratzel as arguing that there was a “fundamental tendency of all societies to expand their geographical base”: the “hunger for space is, *par excellence*, the source of all political activity.”⁸³

⁷⁹ Durkheim, *Professional Ethics*, 65.

⁸⁰ Durkheim, *Professional Ethics*, 68; xxx.

⁸¹ Fournier, *Durkheim*, 297.

⁸² Durkheim, “Gumplowicz, Ludwig, *Grundriss der Sociologie*,” *Revue philosophique* 20 (1885), 627-634, at 631. In German in Durkheim’s text.

⁸³ Durkheim, Review of Friedrich Ratzel, *Der Ursprung und das Wandel der Völker*, in *Année sociologie* vol. 2 (1900), 551; Idem., Review of Ratzel, *Das Meer, Der Ursprung und die Wanderungen*, and *Die Menschheit als Lebenserscheinung der Erde*, in *Année sociologie* 4 (1901), 565-568, at 565; see also Ratzel, “Le sol, la Société et l’État,” *Année sociologique* 3 (1899), 1-15.

Durkheim rejected this theory of the state from his earliest writings. But what he learned from this Central European political sociology was to blur the ideas of state and empire.

Durkheim's early rejection of the bellicist position was sharpened by his critique of French militarism, which crystallized in his response to the Dreyfus affair (1894-1906).⁸⁴ In that context, Durkheim participated in an "investigation of war and militarism" sponsored by the journal *L'humanité nouvelle*.⁸⁵ There, he deplored the fact that France was starting to worship its army as "something intangible and sacred." This was a "truly superstitious cult," a form of "fetishism," one that removed the army from "rational criticism." Here again, with this accusation of "fetishism," we see Durkheim reversing the imperial gaze, just as Karl Marx had relocated "fetishism" to the heart of European capitalist subjectivity. In order for the army to lose its "transcendent" role, Durkheim reasoned, French youth would have to be educated in "worship of the law, respect for the law, love of freedom, concern for duties and responsibilities, whether of the individual or the community."⁸⁶

According to Mauss, Durkheim "was profoundly opposed to all wars of class or nation."⁸⁷ Durkheim's critique of bellicist theories and militarist politics was connected to his critique of states that were "solely preoccupied with expansion and self-aggrandizement to the detriment of similar entities." Empires, Durkheim argued, had existed for centuries without ever obtaining "internal

⁸⁴ Pierre Birnbaum, *L'affaire Dreyfus: La République en péril* (Paris, 1994).

⁸⁵ Michel Leymarie, "L'enquête de *L'Humanité nouvelle* sur la guerre et le militarisme (mai 1899)," in Dominique Balvet, et al., eds., *L'idée de paix en France et ses représentations au xxe siècle* (Lille, 2018), 23-36.

⁸⁶ Durkheim, Contribution to "Enquête sur la guerre et le militarisme," *L'humanité nouvelle* (May 1899), 50-52, at 51.

⁸⁷ Mauss, "Introduction to the First Edition," in Durkheim, *Socialism* (New York, [1928] 1958), 32-36.

acquiescence from their subjects.”⁸⁸ Absolutist governments isolated themselves from society. Durkheim’s ideal form of state, by contrast, was engaged in continuous, intensive communication with society, making it impossible to determine whether state or society was the original source of new practices and policies.

Durkheim and Mauss pushed their democratizing thought beyond the nation state into the realm of international law and cosmopolitan culture. In their 1913 “Note on the Concept of Civilization,” they argued that there were “social phenomena that are not strictly attached to a given” state but that “extend over areas that go beyond a national territory.”⁸⁹ A system of states based on globalized morality and international law already existed, at least tendentially, Durkheim and Mauss suggested.⁹⁰ Only a subset of modern states was driven by the will to power and expansion. In contradistinction to these states there was an international order that was “no longer grounded on hatred, conflict, and war, but on reasoned construction, peaceful debate and cross-cultural exchange.”⁹¹ Strands of this argument were already present in Durkheim’s first publication on the liberal German sociologist Albert Schäffle. Here, Durkheim had supported “cosmopolitanism” against an exclusive “patriotism” and argued that there was “no doubt that international relations are destined to grow in importance and scope in

⁸⁸ Durkheim, “*Germany above All*”, 32.

⁸⁹ Durkheim and Mauss, “Note sur la notion de civilisation,” *Année sociologique* 12 (1913), 46-50, at 47.

⁹⁰ There was a book review section in *Année sociologique* entitled “Morale et droit international” (vol. 10), “Morale internationale” (vol. 11), and “Droit international” (vol. 12). In this and other regards it is misleading to argue that Durkheim or the original *Année sociologique* ignored politics, pace Pierre Favre, “L’absence de la sociologie politique dans les classifications durkheimiennes des sciences sociales,” *Revue française de science politique* 32:1 (1982): 5-31.

⁹¹ Mallard and Jean Terrier, “Decolonising Durkheimian Conceptions,” 10.

the future.”⁹² Just as the individual should *desire* to be encompassed by the social framework of moral rules, states should *voluntarily* subject themselves to international regulation. To withdraw from such control amounted to a form of “social pathology” within geopolitics.⁹³

Durkheim’s views of “race” and “civilization”

There are two main reasons for discussing Durkheim’s views of race, racism, and civilization in a treatment of his views of colonialism and empire. One is that racism and the category of race are closely connected to the history of European colonialism.⁹⁴ The other is that “decolonization,” for better or worse, has nowadays become a synonym for antiracism (see Conclusion).

Durkheim’s entire sociological project was “directed against racialism.”⁹⁵ He stated bluntly in 1895, in *Rules of Sociological Method*, that race could not explain social facts. The “most diverse forms of organization are found in societies of the same race,” he reasoned, while there are “striking similarities between societies of different races.”⁹⁶ For Durkheim, “humanity is unitary in its thinking, not, as Lucien Levy-Bruhl believed, divided between prelogical primitives and

⁹² Durkheim, Review of A. Schäffle, *Bau und Leben des sozialen Körpers*, in *Revue philosophique* 19(1885), 84-101, at 90.

⁹³ Durkheim, “*Germany above All*”, 46.

⁹⁴ The word “race” in European languages was redefined to refer to human groups sharing physical and biologically features during the modern era of colonialism and colonial slavery. By contrast, in the ancient world, the borders between Greek and barbarian “did not constitute fixed entities forever closed to infiltration”; nor did Romans “succumb to the modern penchant for identifying ... ethnicity.” Erich S. Gruen, *Ethnicity in the Ancient World - Did it Matter?* (Berlin, 2020), 30, 112.

⁹⁵ Mallard and Terrier, “Decolonising Durkheimian Conceptions,” 11; see also C. Fenton, “Race, Class and Politics in the Work of Emile Durkheim,” in UNESCO, *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris, 1980), 143-181) and Matt Dawson, *The Political Durkheim: Critical Sociology, Socialism, Legacies* (London, 2023).

⁹⁶ Durkheim, *Rules*, 108.

logical, science-based moderns.”⁹⁷ Durkheim attacked his contemporary, the sociologist Georges Vacher de Lapouge, who defended scientific racism and who had reintroduced the ideas of Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, the French “inventor” of racist theory.⁹⁸ To deny the use of race in explanations of human behavior was to reject one of the main ideological foundations of modern colonialism. Durkheim further developed these arguments in his battle against Anti-Semitism during the Dreyfus affair. Durkheim wrote that French anti-Semitism “reveals the serious *moral disturbance* from which we suffer,” using the same language as in his descriptions of colonialism and empire.⁹⁹

In another sharp break with colonial ideology, Durkheim refused to categorize societies as “savage” or “barbaric.” Instead, he used the adjective “primitive,” which for him did not signify inferiority but referred to societies that were smaller and structurally simpler, with a less thorough division of labor.¹⁰⁰ Durkheim agreed with Franz Boas that “there are no essential differences between primitive thought and the thought of civilized man.”¹⁰¹ In 1912 the pro-colonial economist Charles Gide asked Durkheim to provide a criterion for “distinguishing between civilized and uncivilized” societies. Durkheim responded that such a criterion did not exist. He refused Gide’s invitation to attend a discussion of “the right to colonize.”¹⁰² Here again, Durkheim’s views directly contradicted a central

⁹⁷ Lukes, “Durkheim,” 3901. On Lévy-Bruhl’s differences from Durkheim see Frédéric Keck, *Contradiction et participation. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, entre philosophie et anthropologie* (Paris, 2008).

⁹⁸ Mucchielli, *La découverte du social*, 459, 278–279.

⁹⁹ Durkheim, “Anti-Semitism and Social Crisis.” *Sociological Theory* 26/4 (1899), 321–323, at 322 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁰ Durkheim had spoken of “the progress of civilization” in *The Division of Labor* but later distanced himself from this language.

¹⁰¹ Cited in Fournier, *Emile Durkheim*, 601.

¹⁰² Charles Gide, quoting Durkheim, in the first part of the dossier “Sur la colonisation,” in *Libres entretiens*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1912), p. 5. The six discussions of colonialism between November 1912 and April 1913 were sponsored by the *Union pour la Vérité* and coordinated by

tenet of French colonialism, the so-called *mission civilisatrice*.¹⁰³ In the last volume of *Année sociologique* before WWI, Durkheim and Mauss published the above-mentioned essay that defined civilizations as complex, solidary systems of social facts that are not located within a single state or “political organism” but are “nonetheless localizable in time and space” and that have a shared “moral milieu.” There were “types of civilizations,” they argued, but not hierarchies, scales, or rankings of civilizations.”¹⁰⁴ The notion of “uncivilized” societies was thus defined out of existence.¹⁰⁵

These systematic, logical rejections of the ideas of “race” and “uncivilized” societies were widely shared among Durkheim’s pre-war *pleiad*.¹⁰⁶ Célestin Bouglé, one of Durkheim’s closest collaborators, wrote in 1908 that “the guiding thesis of the philosophy of races – so much used and abused in the nineteenth century – seems to have been decisively abandoned.”¹⁰⁷ Henri Hubert, another member of Durkheim’s inner circle, rejected “anthroposociology” and argued that “sociology can only study societies, not races.”¹⁰⁸

Part 3: Durkheim’s contemporaries and colonialism

In order to understand Durkheim’s views of colonialism it is also useful to situate them within his wider and more proximate intellectual and political contexts, including the views of his predecessors and contemporaries in French

Gide. Durkheim apparently did not accept the invitation to the events, as he is not listed in the index of those in attendance and as suggested by Gide’s comments.

¹⁰³ Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, 1997).

¹⁰⁴ “Types of civilization” is a frequent heading in the review section of *Année sociologique*.

¹⁰⁵ Durkheim and Mauss, “Note sur la notion de civilisation,” 47-48.

¹⁰⁶ Christophe Charle, *Birth of the Intellectuals: 1880-1900* (Cambridge, 2015). Ch. 4; Fournier, *Durkheim*, Ch. 11.

¹⁰⁷ Célestin Bouglé, *Essays on the Caste System* (Cambridge University Press, 1971 [1908]), 95.

¹⁰⁸ Henri Hubert, “Races et sociétés,” *Année sociologique* vol. 9 (1906), 167-168, at 168.

academia.¹⁰⁹ This allows us to identify blind spots in his thinking that might have been realistically avoided, since they were already being openly discussed by others at the time. It also permits us to identify moments in which Durkheim's thinking pushed up against historical constraints and pointed in new directions.¹¹⁰

According to Steven Seidman, advocates of colonialism in the early Third Republic were extremely vocal “and often better organized” than their opponents. Seidman notes that “a loose network of scientists, geographers, explorers, public officials, and colonialists called the *parti colonial*” was one of the leading organizations advocating “imperial state policies” in the early Third Republic.¹¹¹ Indeed, most French social scientists supported colonialism before the 1930s.¹¹² French economists shifted from widespread opposition to colonialism to almost universal support by the 1870s. French psychologists and psychiatrists became deeply engaged in the overseas colonies. Anthropology was embedded in the colonial Empire as a fieldwork context and increasingly as advisors to colonial governments.¹¹³

According to Jonathan Derrick, there were three main strands of French *anti-colonialism* between 1900 and 1940: (1) moral condemnation of oppression or ill-treatment of the colonized; (2) condemnation of the role of militarism and

¹⁰⁹ On the treatment of colonialism in various French academic disciplines before 1945 see Singaravélou, *Professer l'Empire*; for the period after 1945 see Author (2023).

¹¹⁰ This sentence paraphrases Edward Said, in *Freud and the Non-European* (London, 2003), 26-27, describing the proper postcolonial response to “classics”; see also Jacqueline Rose, “Response to Edward Said,” in *Ibid.*, 63-79, at 67.

¹¹¹ Steven Seidman, “The Colonial Unconscious of Classical Sociology,” *Political Power and Social Theory* 24 (2013), 35-54, 40.

¹¹² Steinmetz, *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought*, Chs. 6-7.

¹¹³ On views of colonialism in various social scientific disciplines at the time, see Pierre Singaravélou, *Professer l'Empire: Les sciences coloniales en France sous la III^e République* (Paris, 2011).

capitalism in driving colonialism and in the effects thereof on colonies and metropolises; and (3) utilitarian critiques of colonialism emphasizing its deleterious effects on metropolitan economies.¹¹⁴ Several left-wing members of the socialist party – Jean Jaurès, Paul Louis, Jules Guesde, and Paul Lafargue – represented the main organized political opposition to colonialism within French politics. A larger group of socialists advocated “colonial socialism,” which led to the creation of socialist parties in Tunisia, Guadeloupe, Algeria, and Morocco.¹¹⁵

How did Durkheim fit into this political landscape? The sociologists with the strongest influence on Durkheim, Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, had commented extensively on colonial matters. Saint-Simon and his disciples were actively involved in the colonization of Algeria between 1830 and 1870, staffing the *Bureaux arabes* and directing the first “grandes enquêtes” of Arab society.¹¹⁶ Comte was more critical, writing that “Catholicism, in its decay, not only sanctioned but even instigated the primitive extermination of entire races” while creating a system of colonial slavery, which was “a political monstrosity.” The European nations in which investors became “personally interested” in overseas colonies saw an increase in “retrograde thought and social immobility.”¹¹⁷ Comte also argued that colonialism strengthened the “warrior spirit,” prolonging “the military and theological *régime*” and delaying “the time of the final

¹¹⁴ Jonathan Derrick, “The Dissenters: Anti-Colonialism in France, c. 1900-1940,” in Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, eds., *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France* (London, 2002), 53-68.

¹¹⁵ Liauzu, *L’histoire de l’anticolonialisme*, 103, 107-109. On French anticolonialism at the time, see also Charles Robert Ageron, *L’anticolonialisme en France, de 1871 à 1914* (Paris, 1973); J.-P. Biondi, *Les anticolonialistes (1881-1962)* (Paris, 1992).

¹¹⁶ Abdallah Zouache, “Socialism, Liberalism and Inequality: The Colonial Economics of the Saint-Simonians in 19th-Century Algeria,” *Review of Social Economy* 67/4 (2009), 431–456; Osama Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria* (Palo Alto, CA, 2011).

¹¹⁷ Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, vol. 6 (Paris, 1842), 720.

reorganization.”¹¹⁸ Durkheim drew more heavily on Saint-Simon in his doctoral thesis on socialism, but his views of colonialism were closer to Comte’s.¹¹⁹

Among the leading contenders for leadership of French sociology in Durkheim’s era were Frédéric Le Play, René Worms, and Gabriel Tarde. Le Play and Worms were favorable toward French colonialism. Durkheim was dismissive of both sociologists and of their views of colonialism. Durkheim had more respect for Tarde, who compared the French “colonial protectorates” to cases of “collective cannibalism,” “national anthropophagy,” and “vivisection.”¹²⁰ Durkheim also was invited to a discussion at the London School of Economics in 1904 with some of the anti-imperialist British sociologists, including Hobson, author of *Imperialism* (1902) and Hobhouse.¹²¹

Durkheim and his colleagues before WWI were not directly involved in colonialism or in advising colonial ministers or rulers, even if Mauss became more involved with colonial officials after 1925 in the Institute of Ethnology, whose teachers still “remained resolutely detached from the actual work of colonizing” and did not generally seek to place their students in colonial service.¹²² Durkheim’s friend Jaurès “centered his criticisms” of imperialism “on faulty administration rather than on the idea of colonialism” until the end of the 1880s, but in the 1890s he began to argue that colonialism “was the cause of Algeria’s misery, and the answer to it was equality for the Arabs.”¹²³ Jaurès became “the great conscience of France during the conquest of Morocco” from 1907 to 1912.¹²⁴ Mauss belonged to

¹¹⁸ Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, vol. 6, 128-129.

¹¹⁹ Durkheim, *Socialism*.

¹²⁰ Gabriel de Tarde, *Les transformations du pouvoir*, third ed. (Paris, 1899), 175-176.

¹²¹ Fournier, *Durkheim*, 431.

¹²² Alice Conklin, “Civil Society, Science, and Empire in Late Republican France: The Foundation of Paris’s Museum of Man,” *Osiris* 2nd series, 17 (2002): 255–290, at 287.

¹²³ Harvey Goldberg, *The Life of Jean Jaures* (Madison, 1962), 203, 212.

¹²⁴ Goldberg, *Life of Jean Jaures*, 43.

the Socialist Party before WWI and wrote several articles in 1911 denouncing “the criminal or illegal acts of [French] diplomats and the military” in Morocco.¹²⁵

In sum, Durkheim was personally close to anti-colonialists, and his writings went beyond “moral condemnation of oppression or ill-treatment of the colonized” insofar as they called into question the justification of colonialism *tout court*.

Part 4: Durkheimian sociology and colonialism between 1918 and the 1960s

Durkheim profoundly shaped the first French social scientific studies of colonies *qua* colonies that appeared between the wars and in greater numbers after WWII. Mauss’s students who conducted fieldwork in colonial settings between the wars understood themselves as standing on Durkheim’s shoulders and pushing his ideas in new directions:

- *Charles Le Coeur* was a student of Mauss who carried out fieldwork in the Moroccan city of Azemmour and among the Tédá in northern Chad.¹²⁶ Le Coeur quoted Durkheim, rejecting “spontaneous sociology” in favor of “reflexive sociology.”¹²⁷ He published his doctoral thesis in the *Année sociologique* book series. Ethnographers associated with the *Mission scientifique* in Morocco “self-consciously presented themselves as sociologists and asserted their intellectual connections to the Durkheim school.”¹²⁸

- The North Africanist *Jacques Berque* left for his colonial administrative service in 1934 with the 11th volume of the *Année sociologique* under his arm and

¹²⁵ Mauss, “L’affaire d’Oudjda. Pillages et spéculations,” *L’Humanité. Journal socialiste quotidien* Oct. 28 (1911), 1.

¹²⁶ Georges Balandier in Charles Le Coeur, *Le rite et l’outil; Essai sur le rationalisme social et la pluralité des civilisations*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1969 [1939]; Alice Conklin, “De la sociologie objective à l’action. Charles Le Coeur et l’utopisme colonial,” in Christine Laurière and André Mary, eds., *Ethnologues en situations coloniales* (Paris, 2019), 46-79.

¹²⁷ Le Coeur, *Le rite et l’outil*, 32-34.

¹²⁸ Edmund Burke III, “The Sociology of Islam: The French Tradition,” in Malcom H. Kerr, ed., *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and its Problems* (Santa Monica: 1980), 73-88, at 86.

read Durkheim during his years in Morocco.¹²⁹ Berque went on to align himself with the social history of the *Annales* school of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, which he described as “perhaps the most authentic daughter of Durkheim.”¹³⁰

- *Joseph Chelhod*, a sociologist born in French-controlled Aleppo in 1919, “received a French formation in the schools of Mandate Syria” and completed “his education in sociology at the Sorbonne.”¹³¹ Chelhod’s primary doctoral thesis in 1955 was *Le sacrifice chez les Arabes*, picking up on the core *topos* of ritual sacrifice in Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms*. The title of Chelhod’s secondary thesis posed the Ur-Durkheimian question: “*Are Social Facts Things?*”¹³²

- *Paul Henry Chombart de Lauwe* began his career as an Africanist before 1940 and became an urban sociologist afterwards, leading the *Groupe d’ethnologie sociale*. Chombart de Lauwe traced the French study of urban geography to Durkheim’s framework of “social morphology” and to its further development by the interwar Durkheimian Maurice Halbwachs.¹³³

- *Maurice Leenhardt*, finally, was the first French sociologist to study the symbolic aspects of anticolonial struggle through first-hand ethnographic research. In his 1902 bachelor’s thesis, Leenhardt interpreted the messianic “Ethiopian” church in Southern Africa as enacting resistance through the selective

¹²⁹ Jacques Berque, “Gernet et la sociologie orientaliste,” in Georges Davy, ed., *Hommage à Louis Gernet rendu au Collège de France* (Paris, 1966), 36-37, at 36; Idem., *Mémoires des deux rives* (Paris, 1989), 45.

¹³⁰ Berque, “Medinas, villeneuves et bidonvilles,” *Cahiers de Tunisie* 21-22 (1958), 5-42, at 33.

¹³¹ François Pouillon, “Chelhod, Joseph,” in Pouillon, ed., *Dictionnaire des orientalistes de langue française*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 2012), 222-223.

¹³² Joseph Chelhod, *Les Faits sociaux sont-ils des choses?* Thèse complémentaire (Paris, 1952); Idem., *Le sacrifice chez les Arabes: recherches sur l’évolution, la nature et la fonction des rites sacrificiels en Arabie occidentale* (Paris, 1955).

¹³³ P. Chombart de Lauwe and L. Couvreur, “Urban Sociology in France,” *Current Sociology* 4/1 (1955), 15-16, at 15.

appropriation of colonial culture.¹³⁴ Leenhardt then began a long career focused on the French colony of New Caledonia. He was a member of Mauss's core circle, used Durkheimian concepts, and participated in the *Année sociologique*. After WWII, Leenhardt was also a founding member of the CNRS-sponsored *Centre d'études sociologiques*, where he carried out research on "the social structure of colonies."¹³⁵ Michel Leiris, the famous anti-colonial anthropologist, was Leenhardt's first student at the *École pratique des hautes études*. Most important in the present context was Leenhardt's criticism of colonialism. In the conclusion to the 1953 edition of his *Gens de la Grande Terre*, Leenhardt situated New Caledonian indigenous life within a critical narrative of the French "*invasion*" that entailed, in his account, expropriation, cultural decimation, and racism. Leenhardt suggested that the colony might become a kind of syncretic society, with acculturation moving in both directions in a "*jeu de transferts*" (a play of cultural transfers).¹³⁶

In other words, one development that stemmed from Durkheim was the analysis of colonialism's effects on native cultures. In 1934, Michel Leiris published *L'Afrique fantôme*, a proto-postcolonial critique of colonial social science. Leiris suggested that the Dakar-to-Djibouti ethnographic expedition led by anthropologist Marcel Griaule between 1931 and 1933 bracketed the effects of colonialism and avoided Africans whose culture had been clearly stamped by European influence. Ethnologists at the time showed a revulsion for "mixed" or "métis" cultures and a preference for "pure natives."¹³⁷ This amplified an earlier

¹³⁴ Leenhardt, *Le mouvement éthiopien au sud de l'Afrique de 1896 à 1899* (Paris: Académie des sciences d'outre-mer, [1902] 1976), 22–23.

¹³⁵ Raymond Polin, "La sociologie française pendant la guerre," *Synthèse* 5, nos. 3–4 (July–Aug. 1946): 117–29, 128.

¹³⁶ Leenhardt, *Gens de la grande terre*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1953), 213, 221–23.

¹³⁷ Benoît de l'Estoile, *Le goût des autres. De l'exposition coloniale aux arts premiers* (Paris, 2007, 148.

theme among pre-1914 Durkheimians. Bouglé argued in 1908 and 1913 against race science, insofar as “the mixing of human races, operating over immense areas, is unlimited.”¹³⁸ Leiris focused on the dynamics of cultural mixing. As Fuyuki Kurosawa writes, together with Georges Bataille and other members of the *Collège de sociologie* Leiris radicalized Durkheimian theory, finding in it “the raw materials out of which to forge sweeping dismissals of a modern West.”¹³⁹

Colonial cultural *mixité* was also a central theme for sociologist Roger Bastide. Although Bastide had initially distanced himself from Durkheim, he embraced the Durkheimian legacy after 1945. Sociologists sympathetic to Durkheimian ideas contributed to the “third series” of *Année sociologique* which recommenced publishing in 1949.¹⁴⁰ The emphasis on ethnological topics was retained from the journal’s earlier series.¹⁴¹ Colonialism was now explicitly covered in section called “*Contacts de civilisations; Colonialisme*” (Civilizational Contact and Colonialism). The contributions to *Année sociologique* no longer ignored the effects of colonialism on non-European cultures. According to the

¹³⁸ Célestin Bouglé, review of Vacher De Lapouge, *Race et milieu social. Essais d'anthropo-sociologie*, in *Année sociologique* 12 (1913), 20; a95-115. Also *Essays on the Caste System*.

¹³⁹ Fuyuki Kurosawa, “The Durkheimian School and Colonialism: Exploring the Constitutive Paradox,” in George Steinmetz, ed., *Sociology and Empire* (Durham, NC, 2013), 188–209, at 192; see also Denis Hollier, ed., *The College of Sociology 1937-1939* (Minneapolis, 1988); Moebius, *Die Zauberlehrlinge*.

¹⁴⁰ Patricia Vannier, “La relance de *L'Année sociologique* (1949–1960): un pari réussi,” *Année Sociologique*, 3rd series, 69 (2019), 181–207. The French language sociology journals *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* (founded in 1946) and *Archives européennes de sociologie* (founded 1960) were edited by Georges Gurvitch and Raymond Aron, respectively. Both were anti-Durkheimian initially, but both editors were intensely interested in colonial questions and both were strongly anticolonial. Pierre Birnbaum, “L’‘allergie’ à Durkheim: Raymond Aron et l’épisode de son élection au Collège de France,” *L'Année sociologique* 72 (2022), 311-331. The *Revue française de sociologie*, founded in 1960 by Jean Stoezel, was less hostile to the Durkheimian legacy but ignored colonialism.

¹⁴¹ J. Faublée, “Description et analyse des sociétés appartenant au domaine ethnographique,” *Année sociologique*, 3rd series 11 (1960), 285-306; Wendy James, “The Treatment of African Ethnography in ‘*L'Année sociologique*’ (I–XII),” *Année Sociologique*, 3rd series 48/1 (1998), 193–207.

editors of the section on *Contacts de civilisations*; *Colonialisme*, the word “sociology” now signaled an emphasis on historicity, crisis, and cultural “interpenetration.”¹⁴²

The Durkheimian legacy also resurfaced within French sociological research in some of the postcolonies. Durkheimian sociologist *Jean Duvignaud* argued in 1963 that the former French colonies were caught in a “movement of destructuration and structuration.”¹⁴³ Duvignaud conducted an ethnography of the Tunisian oasis village of Chebika, arguing that during the first years of his investigation the villagers were living in a “state of abandonment” that was so grave that it affected “not only their everyday practices and religious rites but also their *conscience*.” Colonialism, he wrote, had destroyed the forces of *collective conscience* and *social solidarity*.¹⁴⁴

Conclusion: For an alternative approach to “decolonizing sociology” and revising its “canon”

As calls increase for a “decolonization” of the social sciences and for a revision of theoretical canons, it becomes ever more urgent to clarify the stakes in

¹⁴² J. Faublée, M. Rodinson, M. Sorre, and G. Streser-Péan, “Contacts de civilisations. Colonialisme,” *Année sociologique*, 3rd series 1 (1948-1949), 265-283, at 265. The editor Maxime Rodinson and Jacques Berque were described by Edward Said as having been “trained in the traditional Orientalist disciplines” but as being “perfectly capable of freeing themselves from the old ideological straitjacket.” Rodinson’s review of Maunier’s *Sociologie coloniale* criticized its author for ignoring anticolonialism, decolonization, and “the ‘revenge’ of the colonized.” Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), 326; Rodinson, review of Maunier, *Sociologie coloniale*, vol. 2, in *Année Sociologique*, 3rd series, 1 (1948–1949): 271–275, at 275. Rodinson is best known as the author of “Israël, fait colonial?,” *Les Temps Modernes* 253 bis (1967), 17-88, translated as *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* (1988).

¹⁴³ Jean Duvignaud, “La pratique de la sociologie dans les pays décolonisés,” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 34 (1963), 165–174, at 170.

¹⁴⁴ Jean Duvignaud, *Change at Shebika. Report from a North African Village* (New York, 1970), 259-260.

this discussion and to carefully examine the works of “canonical” theorists. At one extreme in this debate is the position Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò calls *decolonisation*₂, defined as forswearing “any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past.”¹⁴⁵ At the opposite pole, perhaps surprisingly, is postcolonial theory, or at least certain foundational contributors to postcolonial theory, including Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. Said argued in *Freud and the Non-European* that “[t]exts that are inertly of their time stay there: those which brush up unstintingly against historical constraints are the ones we keep with us, generation after generation.”¹⁴⁶ Spivak characterized her earlier interpretation of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* as having been based on a too “simple invocation of race and gender, with no bridle of auto-critique” and recent argued that it is “useless” to “simply label[] great thinkers” like Immanuel Kant “racists and learn[]nothing from them.”¹⁴⁷

Also located at the opposite pole from precipitous calls to decolonize the canon is Pierre Bourdieu, who was in many ways the most important inheritor of Durkheim’s sociology.¹⁴⁸ Bourdieu was also the first sociologist to call explicitly for a “decolonization of sociology,” in a 1975 in a lecture entitled “For a Sociology of Sociologists: Colonial Sociology and the Decolonization of Sociology.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, *Against Decolonization. Taking African Agency Seriously* (London, 2022), 3. Táíwò contrasts *Decolonisation*₁, or “flag independence,” or “making a colony into a self-governing entity,” with metaphorical *Decolonisation*₂.

¹⁴⁶ Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London, 2003), 26-27.

¹⁴⁷ Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 121, note 16; Idem., “Kant braucht unsere Hilfe,” interview mit Friedrich Weißbach at <https://www.philomag.de/artikel/gayatri-c-spivak-kant-braucht-unsere-hilfe>.

¹⁴⁸ Loïc Wacquant, “Durkheim and Bourdieu: The Common Plinth and its Cracks,” *The Sociological Review* 49:1 suppl (2001), 105-119.

¹⁴⁹ Bourdieu, “Les conditions sociales de la production sociologique: sociologie coloniale et décolonisation de la sociologie,” in Henri Moniot, ed., *Le mal de voir. Ethnologie et orientalisme* (Paris: Union Gén. Éd., 1976), 416-427.

Bourdieu's focus in this essay is the social scientists of the *École d'Alger*, the colonial-era specialists in Arab, Kabyle, and Islamic culture at the University of Algiers. Bourdieu argued for a careful reconstruction of "the specific properties" of the "relatively autonomous scientific field" in which "'colonial' 'science' was carried out" and of the relations between this knowledge field and "the colonial power" – the academic and scientific institutions within the colony—and the relations with "the central intellectual power, that's to say, the metropolitan science of the day." The researcher would need to reconstruct the pertinent social properties of the field's participants and the polarizations and forms of habitus characterizing the scientific space.¹⁵⁰ Bourdieu also suggests, like Said, that a key question would be intellectual agency within structural constraints, and he pointed to several ways in which Europeans could partially transcend the limits of the colonial context.¹⁵¹

Durkheim is a canonical sociological thinker who is often lambasted for being conservative, Eurocentric, and ignorant of – or even favorable to -- colonialism. I have argued that he was nothing of the sort. And I have suggested that Durkheim's thought may be useful for ongoing research on colonialism and empire.¹⁵² His theory points toward the possibility of a grounded critique of colonialism, while his theory of anomie allows us to thematize the morally unregulated character of modern colonies and their intrinsic instability. It guides us in criticizing colonialism for denying the conquered society's political autonomy

¹⁵⁰ Bourdieu, "Les conditions sociales," 286.

¹⁵¹ For an early statement by Bourdieu on social science in colonial settings see his introduction to his "Étude sociologique," in Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Darbel, Jean-Paul Rivet, and Claude Seibel, *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (Paris, 1963), 253-562, especially 258-268.

¹⁵² For an overview of theoretical approaches to colonialism, empire, and postcolonialism, see George Steinmetz, "The Sociology of Empires, Colonialism, and Postcolonialism," *Annual Review of Sociology* 40 (2014): 77–103..

and for treating its inhabitants as inherently inferior beings.¹⁵³ Durkheim's theory of anomic depravity intersects with discussions of colonies as sites of extreme violence and states of exception. Durkheim alerts us to seeing colonies as inherently unstable and crisis-ridden.

Durkheim's moral theory suggests a method for grounding the critique of colonialism that avoids deductive, utilitarian, essentialist, or foundationalist conceptions of normativity (see above).¹⁵⁴

The French sociologists who engaged with colonialism after Durkheim, from Balandier and Berque to Bourdieu and beyond, engaged with the "Other of Europe" in ways that recognized difference without inscribing the other into a civilizational hierarchy. They analyzed the multiple ways in which colonialism was remixing cultures. They continued Durkheim's gesture of turning the imperial gaze against Europe itself. Although French sociology largely abandoned the project of theorizing empire and colonialism after the 1960s, the present-day sociology of colonies and empires might benefit from a renewed curiosity about Durkheimian ideas.

¹⁵³ On the colonial "rule of difference" see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993); for the definition of colonialism as denying the sovereignty of the conquered and treating them as ontologically inferior, see Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, 2007).

¹⁵⁴ Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York, 2016), 230.