

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Rethinking the Political: The Sacred, Aesthetic Politics, and the Collège de Sociologie*. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011, 294 pp. \$39.95 softcover (978-0-7735-3901-3)

The mutual blindness of Weber and Durkheim with respect to each other has long fascinated historians of sociology. Whatever its circumstances, it signals a disconnect between two approaches to social inquiry continued, with some exceptions, by subsequent generations. A similar disjuncture may haunt Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's picture of Durkheimian and post-Durkheimian social inquiry, one many Durkheim scholars might find difficult to recognize.

Falasca-Zamponi has previously published on fascist aesthetics and politics, and extends that concern here to an examination of the work of George Bataille and Roger Caillois, central figures in the prewar *Collège de Sociologie*, and to their Durkheimian and Maussian intellectual inheritance. She argues that their insufficient theorization of politics and aesthetics, their denigration of the aesthetic sphere and their tendency to separate the social from politics, left the *Collège* unprepared to deal with the fascist aestheticization of politics, and unable to recognize and counter effectively elements of its conception of the social susceptible to proto-fascist interpretation.

Falasca-Zamponi argues that the cultural context of Durkheimian and post-Durkheimian sociology included a differentiation of "value spheres" attendant on the rationalization of modern life (p. 20), circumscribing politics and aesthetics as distinct and limited domains. She relates Durkheim's alleged neglect of the political to this context, suggesting it also circumscribed and isolated his conception of the social. She suggests that these disconnections be critically interrogated in terms of Claude Lefort's notion of the political as the "ensemble of social structures, concepts and principles that organize a society."

While Durkheim is occasionally described as a sociological imperialist, Falasca-Zamponi argues that his isolation of the social from the political shaped his eventual reduction of the social to affectively charged representations binding members to a totality, neglecting institutional and power relations to focus on ideas and emotions, in concert with a "psychological impulse at the root of [his] sociological project"

(p. 44). He also retreated from contemporary social or political life into an examination of basic religious mechanisms constitutive of meaning and solidarity in “primitive” societies, suggesting they were universal, and privileging the emotional aspects of social totality at the expense of division, contestation and power. In addition to an ambivalence about politics, Falasca-Zamponi notes his refusal to grant sociological significance to aesthetics, save in a narrowly ethnological sense, and uncritical acceptance of circumscribed, anti-political and individualist characterizations of the modern aesthetic sphere.

Falasca-Zamponi is more admiring of Marcel Mauss, especially his concept of the “total social fact” which, she claims, broke with a narrow Durkheimian sociology, and also his sensitivity to power in studying phenomena such as the potlatch. Yet Mauss, too, she argues, did not anticipate a “contagious” spread of fascist politics through “porous” social institutions (p. 210) because of a lingering identification of the political with the delimited and discredited sphere of bourgeois politics. Mauss was also ill-equipped to deal with fascism, she says, by a commitment to a “pure” social science separated from the “art” of politics (pp. 59-60), and though he had a more positive regard for aesthetics than did Durkheim, his inherited theoretical scaffolding rendered him unable to challenge its denigration or its museological reduction to ethnographic data. His intellectual heirs in the *Collège de Sociologie* also failed to challenge effectively the modern compartmentalization of value spheres. They shared a contempt for bourgeois politics and, despite brief ties to surrealism, also condemned aesthetics. In place of tired Third Republic politics, they promoted the sacred as an *alternative to politics*. This left them unable to deal with a “hemorrhaging of politics into the sacred” and a dangerous proximity between fascist aestheticizing of politics and their own concern for ritual, sacred, emotions and totality. Missing from the post-Durkheimian lineage, she concludes, was an understanding of the *political consequences* of the restriction and compartmentalization of politics and aesthetics – and the parallel compartmentalization and depoliticization of the social.

Falasca-Zamponi marshals an impressive range of historical documentation to support this argument, and to her credit, acknowledges some instances in which her subject matter does not fit her argument. Several of her comments on Bataille and Caillois are provocative and insightful, and I endorse her hope that Bataille will garner more attention from sociologists.

Nonetheless, working through her discussion, one has a growing sense that her subjects are being forced into a box by a rather forensic marshalling of evidence, becoming less and less recognizable in the pro-

cess. Her claims that Durkheim represents the social as operating “above and independent of other spheres”, and “cleansed of all politics”, or that he left unanswered a “whole set of questions about historical forms of the institution of the social” (p. 45) are astounding given two generations of scholarship demonstrating the opposite. Can this really be said of his historical studies of professions, the state, economic and social differentiation, property, contract, or education? I also found wanting Falasca-Zamponi’s tendency to treat Durkheim’s usage of *représentation* as referring to ideas rather than action, and to read his sociology through a social-psychological lens. The notion that Durkheim’s ethnographic turn to “the primitives” was somehow an escape from politics and modernity has been forcefully countered by Massimo Rosati’s demonstration that it was impelled by a concern precisely to understand the social and political constitution of modernity. I also cannot accept that notions of differentiation, particularization, division and conflict are absent from Durkheim’s depictions of Australian society. While Durkheim did leave politics (to a degree) and aesthetics (especially) under-theorized, I do not think he *isolated* the social from politics, conceived it restrictively as a value sphere, or univocally treated “community” (which Falasca-Zamponi seems to conflate with solidarity and totality) as a “supreme value”.

Falasca-Zamponi finds her subjects wanting in terms of an interpretive frame indebted to Lefort and exhibiting a strikingly Weberian characterization of the political: might this frame have *constructed* the “cognitive dissonance” (p. 62) she finds in their work, and led her into a systematic misrecognition of their treatment of the collective? Could the texts she reads as aporetic and ambiguous actually contain theoretical resources for challenging Lefort’s definition of the political? The “artificial line” she claims the *Collégiens* drew between social and political strikes me as more reflective of her own interpretive commitments, as does the manner in which she strains to turn analogy into evidence in picturing a dangerous and proto-fascist attraction to emotive totalities. What she sees as a retreat from rationality, beginning with Durkheim’s turn to the “primitive”, belies Durkheim’s own emphatic defence of the superiority of a scientific over a religious outlook as *not contradicted* by the social genesis of categories of modern thought, nor by “religious” elements in the institutions and commitments of modern science. Even Bataille’s philosophical-anthropological speculations, including his analysis of horror and repugnance in relation to the sacred, follow a logic informed by the French rationalist tradition (*pace* Montesquieu *and* Durkheim) of *seeking the necessary relations* between things. Bataille saw in the sacred not simply “community” or totality, but also a *memento mori* of disintegration and destruction. This was not confusion but a rigorous

pursuit of a certain cultural logic, a logic perhaps difficult to recognize from a viewpoint privileging a very different political rationalism.

Finally, Falasca-Zamponi's assembly of different types of evidence sometimes seems to exhibit problems of fit, or not to convey what it is intended to convey. Certain evidence of Durkheim's compartmentalizing the social may indicate interventions in academic politics (as historians of French sociology argue) rather than sociological logic, and Mauss's "admissions" to Ranulf (pp. 210-11) are unconvincing. I found myself questioning whether the evidence supported a careful and fair consideration of the specific logic of an argument or position, or an additive set of impressions supporting an imported interpretive frame.

Given, its breadth and detail, and the issues it raises, this book needs a more substantial response than possible here, one taking account of work by Philip Mellor, Massimo Rosati, Frank Pearce, Bernard Lacroix, and in S. R. Mukherjee's collection, *Durkheim and Violence* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). On Durkheim and art, see O'Toole, "Durkheim and the problem of art: some observations (*Durkheimian Studies*, 8, 2002). On evidentiary issues, see Strenski's demolition of Ranulf (in Mukherjee, 2010).

I endorse Falasca-Zamponi's call for sociologists to become better acquainted with Bataille. But I also think *Durkheim* needs to become better known by sociologists. Many tendentious pictures of his work ignorant of two generations of scholarship still circulate uncontested: their value-sphere compartments need airing! Historical contextualization combined with careful, informed attention to argumentative logic is needed to liberate Durkheim's, Bataille's, or Mauss's more compelling insights from the limitations of their circumstances and of posthumous interpretation.

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