

**Miller, William Watts. *A Durkheimian Quest: Solidarity and the Sacred*. New York: Berghahn, 2012. xviii + 257 pages. Hardcover, \$90.00.**

It is impossible for sociologists to escape the importance of Emile Durkheim. References to his work shows up in basic texts for a variety of courses, including Introduction to Sociology, Social Problems, Criminology, Deviance, Social Theory, Social Research Methods, and Sociology of Religion. Fellow sociologist William Watts Miller agrees, and argues in *A Durkheimian Quest* that Durkheim is among the “totems of the tribe” (p. x). Miller draws upon his association with the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies at Oxford to create a remarkable account of Durkheim and his work. His text is in large measure an exploration into how Durkheim envisioned sociology’s contribution to our understanding of society. Miller focuses on “solidarity in *The Division of Labor* and a quest for the sacred in *The Elemental Forms*” and “how he got from one to the other” (p. xiii).

Miller’s work is ambitious and complex. In his examination of Durkheim’s work he digs deep into the archives and draws upon both significant published works and obscure materials written by Durkheim and his contemporaries. Miller also incorporates material written about Durkheim and uses material from Durkheim’s lectures. He highlights the important concepts Durkheim incorporates into his works, which, in addition to solidarity and the sacred, include such terms as “collective consciousness” (p. 4), “mechanical solidarity (and) organic solidarity” (p. 13), “effervescence” (p. 75), and “mana” (p. 99). He also meticulously compares various drafts of Durkheim’s work, especially *The Division of Labor* and *The Elemental Forms*, and links together texts to understand the progression of Durkheim’s thought. We learn, for example, how Durkheim’s early work, especially his thesis on Montesquieu, became the basis for *The Rules of Sociological Method* and later served as a supporting document for *The Division of Labor*. Miller also revisits Durkheim’s launch of the journal *Année sociologique*, his partnership with fellow French sociologist Marcel Mauss, and the ways in which both informed the writing of *The Elemental Forms*.

In his study, Miller contextualizes Durkheim’s work in time and place. The young Durkheim was influenced by France’s Third Republic, a continuing unfolding of the French Revolution and the subject of “(his) last publication...” before *The Division of Labor* (p. 30). It is his support of the Third Republic and its democratic ideals that we see in Durkheim’s “...republican project (which attempts) to combine solidarity with autonomy” (p. 43). This “republican project” finds expression in Durkheim’s discussion of the role to be played “...by new intermediate groups between the individual and the state” (p. 69). Just as significant was the 1899 publication of *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* by W. Baldwin Spencer and Francis James Gillen, which informed the development of *The Elemental Forms*. It is the work of these two anthropologists, and to a lesser extent, their colleague Carl Strehlow’s critique of their work as “...in all sorts of ways as inaccurate...” (p. 106), that shaped the formation of Durkheim’s last significant text. Miller closes his study with three essays that demonstrate the relevance of Durkheim’s thought to important issues of our day, focusing on the struggle for power, the nature and role of hope, and the place of art in society.

*A Durkheimian Quest* is a brilliant piece of scholarship. It is exhaustive and extensively documented. Included are a series of tables that help us connect Durkheim’s antecedent lectures to the completed text of *The Elemental Forms*, compare his various definitions of religion, and trace the temporal progression of his work. Of particular interest to me was the side by side comparison of excerpts from the work of Spencer and Gillen with those portions of Durkheim’s

text that referenced their work. This was especially helpful in understanding the degree to which Durkheim held to, or took liberties with, the empirical evidence provide by their ethnography.

This book would be valuable addition to the library of all Durkheimian scholars. It would be a welcome addition to the libraries of teachers of social theory at the undergraduate and graduate levels. It is a particularly important book for scholars and teachers of religion, especially those for whom the work of Durkheim plays an important role. I think this book would be an appropriate text in a graduate level social theory class and is a must read for any graduate level seminar focused on the work of Emile Durkheim.

Mike Hirsch  
Professor of Sociology  
Director of the Adult Degree Program  
Chair of the Department of Social and Behavioral Studies  
Huston-Tillotson University