

Durkheim, Germany, War, Europe

Bruno Karsenti

1918. Ways Out of the War
Volume 22, Number 2, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1058556ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058556ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)
2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Karsenti, B. (2018). Durkheim, Germany, War, Europe. *Simmel Studies*, 22 (2), 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058556ar>

Article abstract

Among the classical authors of sociology, Émile Durkheim passed away the first on 15 November 1917. His conception of the war as well as his ideas of a possible way out of it, therefore, are far from the horizon of experience that characterized the last year of the conflict. His major war writing is a critical analysis of the intellectual sources of German militarism: L'Allemagne au-dessus de tout. Karsenti focuses on Durkheim's examination of the "Über-Ideology", which moulded German nationalism since unification in 1871, especially in the work of Heinrich von Treitschke. Durkheim's book is a censorship of the enemy's warfare. Yet, what is interesting to discover, according to Karsenti, is the particular perspective of Durkheim's investigation. The writing is a critique of all tendencies to reduce international politics to an "Über". Accordingly, for Durkheim, there is a possible way out of the war, yet it has to be read between the lines of his distinction between a "good and a bad tradition" of the moral sciences in Germany.

BRUNO KARSENTI

Durkheim, Germany, War, Europe

Abstract. *Among the classical authors of sociology, Émile Durkheim passed away the first on 15 November 1917. His conception of the war as well as his ideas of a possible way out of it, therefore, are far from the horizon of experience that characterized the last year of the conflict. His major war writing is a critical analysis of the intellectual sources of German militarism: L'Allemagne au-dessus de tout. Karsenti focuses on Durkheim's examination of the "Über-Ideology", which moulded German nationalism since unification in 1871, especially in the work of Heinrich von Treitschke. Durkheim's book is a censorship of the enemy's warfare. Yet, what is interesting to discover, according to Karsenti, is the particular perspective of Durkheim's investigation. The writing is a critique of all tendencies to reduce international politics to an "Über". Accordingly, for Durkheim, there is a possible way out of the war, yet it has to be read between the lines of his distinction between a "good and a bad tradition" of the moral sciences in Germany.*

What sense is there today in reading *Germany above All; German Mentality and War*, the combative Durkheim (1915) text, not integrated into the complete works, considered an unfortunate concession by the scientist to the anti-German galvanisation of the time, a contribution to the *ideological* war effort from which he could have abstained? * Very little meaning, it seems to be to read

* The following text is the English translation of: Karsenti, Bruno (2017). "Durkheim et l'Allemagne. Commentaire à vive voix", in Durkheim, Émile (2017). *L'Allemagne au-dessus de tout. Commentaire à vive voix*. Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, ISBN 978-2-7132-2713-4, pp 13-53. We would like to thank the author as well as the publishing house for providing *Simmel Studies* with the permission to publish this translation. The article was translated by Chiara Santini-Parducci.

the text superficially. A superficial reading supported by the collection in which the brochure appears. In 1915, Durkheim, together with Henri Bergson, Charles Andler and Charles Seignobos, among others, set up a collection entitled *Studies and Documents on the War*, in the service of France in its fight against German imperialism. The following year, the work was relayed by the “Letters to all French people”, three million copies of which were distributed in schools, and aimed at instilling confidence in the inevitable victory of the Allies against a power judged guilty and condemned, whatever happens, by what is considered to be the meaning of history. Germany will lose, it can only lose. There are, as Bergson said at the same time, forces that wear out and others that do not - and Germany wears out, because its strength draws from a false source, from chronic irritation, from an ephemeral, historically condemned runaway.

In this brief reading, I would like to show what could constitute the sociological basis of this judgment on the history of Europe at war: a programmed defeat of Germany, for socio-historical reasons. And I would like to better discriminate in this judgment what is related to the ideology of combat and the scientific construction of Europe’s sociological problem. If the exercise is justified in my view, it is because I believe that the Great War was a conceptual laboratory for redefining the European problem, not after the fact, but in situ. However difficult it may be for us to admit it, it is true, in different meanings, for different thinkers - never the Bergson of the *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, in what this book contains of inflection of the theory of the vital in the creative Evolution, would have been possible without the Great War, as reflected in the present of the engagement of Agent Bergson, sent by the French government to the United States to secretly negotiate Wilson’s engagement against Germany; never would the Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* have been possible without the considerations on war and death, motivated by the ordeal of war neuroses observed since 1915. Durkheim, for his part, did not develop what is revealed to him in his commitment

to France through these few combat texts. He died, afflicted by pain following the loss of many of his loved ones, before the end of the war, in 1917. However, I believe that, as in the two previous examples, something happens in his thinking, something exclusively triggered by war as he interprets it and as he sees it - as he interprets it and sees it while acting within it, taking sides inside it. In such manners that the ideological and the scientific enter here into a correlation that should not be obliterated: they do not oppose each other head-on, but, on the contrary, relaunch each other. As if it could only be through an ideological moment that scientific reflection could reach a higher degree of lucidity. Still it must master this passage, not stop along the way. With regard to Durkheim, who did not develop a theory after the war in which his intuitions of sociologically rebased international politics are reflected, I believe that this is nevertheless the case. If at least we try to read closely *Germany above All*.

The main part of the Durkheimian diagnosis is said in a word, or rather in a preposition, brandished in the German patriotic anthem: *über*. Over or above, overhead or even beyond. The *State* that is Germany claims a position that is not only superior, but also detached from the other states. Above all, and even more significantly, Germany as a State stands above any other source of authority that would come from its own body: the state is above its members, that is, German citizens, as it is above morality, as it is above civil society. In other words, if Germany thinks of itself as State, it is by going astray in a hypostasis. Its international policy is imperialist, because its *national* policy is a policy of hypostasis, because it has stalled politically, morally and economically.

The *über*, in a word, even in a prefix, indicates a distorted articulation in the modern syntagm of the nation state. It is here, I believe, that sociological reflection begins, and discovers, on the unique occasion of the War, a dimension of the political problem of the State that it did not perceive before.

As we know, Durkheim's analysis is limited to the Berlin historian Heinrich von Treitschke¹. Treitschke is the best symptom of what is happening in Germany, he is worthy of interest because he *cogitates* Germany, its mentality instilled since the victory of 1870, and more precisely since 1876, when the historian began to teach at the University of Berlin, giving lessons in politics to the glory of Bismarck and imperialism.

However, it must be seen that Durkheim, when he examines the content of this teaching, does not denounce anything. What he retains is not his racial particularism, his unbridled praise of "Germanity", his declared hatred, but a certain political logic. There is in Treitschke, if we try to clear up the surface rhetoric and purge it of its slag (for example, Durkheim does not for a moment allude to the fact that he is dealing with one of the greatest anti-Semites of the time), a real thought of the State, whose coherence should certainly not be prejudiced, but to which it would be wrong to refuse any coherence a priori.

This thought is braced on the concept of sovereignty: which means that it consists in attributing to the State a will that is not bound by anything other than itself. But what is the link between a will *to itself*, of what specific obligation is it the household? What Durkheim reads in Treitschke is in short the following answer: *of none*. No other than to assert itself precisely as a will. At the level of public law, where the legal-political reflection that dominates the German mentality takes place, sovereignty is an enhancement of the will at the level of the state entity, which makes it a loosened entity. Referred to itself and itself only, the State constitutes itself sovereignly, that is, it acquires the status of a *sovereign* force that projects it above any other authority, and therefore above any link that could be considered as a limit to its will.

¹ On the meaning to be given to this current which subordinates the defense of freedoms to that of national unity, and the role played by Treitschke, see Megay (1958). For a biography of Treitschke cf. Dorpalen (1957).

The decisive point is that, from this execution of the *über* in the form of a loosening, *war* immediately follows as a distinctive and constitutive practice of the State. Let us be clear: war does not therefore stem from a bellicose spirit, poorly controlled impulses, or ulterior motives. It follows logically from a form of true political thought, *since the state is poorly conceived and poorly constructed in the modern situation*. The question is not that the State can wage war, but that it must necessarily wage it as a manifestation of its essence. Taken as a definitional act of the State, war comes down to this: it is the consequence, not the ultimate, but the first consequence of the fact that the will is *sovereign*, that is, essentially untied. For this will, the idea of obligation forged in civil law has no validity.

Such an obligation; indeed, has two possible sources: the law on the one hand, the contract on the other – the contract being what has the force of law for each of the parties. As for the transposition of this civil obligation at the public level, it takes the privileged form of the interstate pact, and is supposed to be reflected in international law. As soon as we conceive sovereignty as what is bound only by its own affirmation – practically, what is not subject to any other constraint than that of manifesting its existence as *will* - then we can say that there is no real international law, or at least that it has no other reality than the affirmation of powers. War, in these conditions, is not an accident, but the *reality* of international relations, as a regime of relations not subject to the obligations that apply within States, primarily those produced by contractual law. Pacts, alliances, treaties, do not therefore bind the State: they are nothing but pauses, local and temporary stopping points in the execution of a will still in the process of being unbound. *Power*, if you will, is the name of the legal existence of the only *duty* – a duty that is no longer an obligation in the strict sense of the term - that the State recognise upon itself, in order to be equal to what it is.

It means the duty to be great, to which all other duties relentlessly give way. A purely *political* duty, whose purity and

strength are measured by the removal of any moral obligation. Thus the politics of power is not so much beyond the law as it is the proper law of the State as such, when it is caught up in the slenderness of the *über*.

Did Durkheim really believe that this was the essence of German political thought? In other words, did he capture Germany under this term of *mentality* (which he does not use as a technical concept in his sociology, and which suddenly emerges here at the head of a real attack against Germany, a Germany concentrated and reduced to the mediocrity of Treitschke's teaching)? It is said that it is impossible that a reader of Kant and Hegel (in whom international law and the theory of sovereignty have a completely different form) could have believed in such a reduction. And yet, it is not the scrutiniser of the spirit of a population who is speaking here, but the sociologist. And the sociologist does not make the opposite mistake of flattening the history of politics on the history of political philosophy. What he is looking for are active ideas, motives for action. For the sociologist, the ideological level is a relevant empirical level, provided that it is restored in its own complexity, i.e. in the system of positions and oppositions where each intervention makes sense. However, we must recognise that Durkheim was particularly well placed to grasp the main lines of this ideological reality – both in France and Germany (and just as well in England, if we look at how he reads Spencer in the *The Division of Labor in Society*). In short, it is Europe's ideal or ideological system that is the global sociological object against which Treitschke's analysis makes sense.

There is more. In this system, the sociologist does not exempt himself from a form of self-analysis, he registers himself in it. He does it quietly, but he does it nonetheless. Let's be clear: he does so by sketching the genesis of sociological thought, of which Treitschke's position is intended to be the exact negation. And this genesis is not French, but German. In other words, by isolating Treitschke, the Treitschke-logic that I have pictured in broad strokes, Durkheim intended to mark an internal German

bifurcation in political thought, or more precisely in the State, where two lines separate: a sociological line and an ideological line, the German mentality resulting from the erasure of the former to the benefit of the latter.

I was saying that Durkheim was particularly well placed to make this discrimination. His first publications, the result of his trip to Germany in 1885-1886, are mainly reading of Schaeffle, Wundt, Schmoller, Wagner, Tönnies and even Jhering and Savigny. Not for a moment was Treitschke mentioned back then. To the French public, it mainly reported the renewal of social thought in Germany, evident in several fields, in particular economics and law, and which had resulted in a certain form of socialism, the “Socialism of the Chair”. In *Germany above All*, in the midst of the conflict, he reminds us again: in Germany, in the second half of the 19th century, a trend emerged without which sociology would never have been able to take a truly scientific turn, because it would not have been able to assemble again social forces in their positive and impersonal aspects. This perspective was favoured by the specific problems of unification that German nation was facing, making it vulnerable to criticism from the French revolutionary *legicentrisme*. Thus, sociology was more likely to be born in Germany than in France, because it did not encounter the major obstacle of constitutionalist abstraction. But that’s when we wonder: why is it that none of this remains in the doctrine of the *Machtstaat*? Or rather, why is it that only the reason for the *domination* of these impersonal forces remains, translated into an instantiation and a deliberation that the *über* summarises?

The illusion would be to believe that this happened simply by regression. That there may be a return to a political violence that the process of civilisation - in the language of the time, the transition from military to industrial societies - left behind itself is, in any case, only a secondary phenomenon, a collateral consequence of the Great War, but not an explanatory springboard, on whichever side of the front line that we are located. The *über* is an extremely modern phenomenon, an

exasperation of the modern, a fruit of the civilisational process to which *both countries* have contributed. It is Europe, as a whole, that has deviated. Treitschke's rhetoric and its amplified echoes in the Pan-Germanist slogans of the early 20th century are in this respect only a surface appearance, an epiphenomenon that masks reality. This lies in a pathology that concerns Europe itself, or at least that awaits *any European nation* as soon as it undertakes to think about what, in it, corresponds to the formation of the State, and the relations between States that result from this formation.

So you can see how it seems to me that the Durkheim text can be read in the perspective of this dialectic. The sociology of sociologists' Europe has gone through war, provided that war was an experience that made it possible to detect the deviation of the State from the sociological conception of the State. Europe at war is a Europe affected by a state pathology that only the sociology of the State is able to diagnose. And in order to make this diagnosis, it was necessary to inscribe sociology itself in the genesis of a social thought of the State that involved all European nations (say the England-France-Germany triarchy), a social thought in which Germany, against all odds, can be credited with the prominent role. Similarly, it is when it is brought back to this level of reflection that the anti-German pamphlet reveals its relevance, that propaganda or counter-propaganda gives way to sociological analysis - and that this latter one, while taking sides ideologically (against the German mentality), becomes the sociology of ideology.

To get to that point, however, we must present what is implicit in this text, namely the view of the formation of modern political societies such as *nations*, in that they are endowed with a State. It is the syntagma of the nation state that is at issue here.

From a historical sociological point of view, it is essential and normal for the State to grow, and for it to become increasingly aware of itself, and therefore to *want itself as a State*. That the State can say "me, I want" (Durkheim, 1915: 29), that its active personality is detached in its impersonality superior to the

subgroups and individuals it includes, is a modern social production that must be acknowledged, that is, of which have to be understood *what underlies it in reality*. The central argument was that the State grows and acquires that self-awareness that defines its *will* only in relation to the social differentiation that continues to be accused in parallel, an inner complexity from which individuals derive their subjective rights and conquer an increasingly consistent reality within the State.

Against the Liberals, Durkheim showed that the rights of individuals are a conquest, not of themselves, but of the differentiated society. He showed that far from implying the disappearance of the State, this movement means its growth, not as an authority that represses individuals or uses them for its own purposes, but as the place where the representations and norms required for this differentiation to continue and be resolved are forged (Durkheim, 1992: 56 f.). Finally, he showed that this authority expresses, not a service rendered to individuals taken in their empirical existence, but the social horizon targeted by the relationships they weave between themselves, the social ideal represented by the form of society in which they exist and in which their actions, however different they may be, participate (Ibid., 49-50). This is why the State only gains power by determining itself as a moral power. This is why, while acquiring its autonomy as a deliberative body, it never detaches itself from the social relations that underlie it, from the form of society of which it is the State. For this kind of State, war is by no means a type of action that touches on its essence. Its definitional criterion is of a moral and intellectual nature: it is entirely capable of producing representations and elaborating norms (which is unified by the Durkheimian meaning of the verb *deliberate*). He can certainly wage war if it perceives a threat to the work it is doing. But war is not the cornerstone of his right. If it is to be given its own right, it must be on the side of a socially formulated normative requirement, implied by the development of what Durkheim calls, in the *The Division of Labor in Society*, organic

solidarity. In legal terms, it is the awareness that every right, in the last instance, is social - to the point that social law, in its particularity, makes the general trend of law visible, whether public or private, national or international.

In the foregoing, I have summarised, in a lapidary, but rather exhaustive way, I believe, the Durkheim courses of the 1900s, those included in the *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*. In these courses, some anticipation of the disaster was present. One could already read in it the concern linked to a rise in power of a certain German vision of the State, back then referred rather vaguely to a mysticism, and attributed, without looking too closely, at the influence of Hegelian philosophy (Ibid., 54). The argument was essentially that at a time of crisis in representative democracies when the liberal individualist conception of the law exposes the State to being merely an echo of the disparate interests of civil society, one throws oneself into its absolutisation, and wrongly makes it the embodiment of a superior end not subject to scrutiny, an indication of a new despotism. The challenge – which would deserve, what Durkheim does not see, to be confronted with a more authentic Hegel, that of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*² – is then to rethink a system of mediation between society and the State that can give to modern democracies the strength they seek. And deep down, the great German thought I recalled, the one Durkheim had celebrated, was already doing so.

However, the significant contribution of the 1915 text, this shift in perspective that I mentioned when I began by saying that only the experience of war allows us to experience it, is precisely that it does not take up this argument.

As summary as it may seem, he is finer in his diagnosis, and does not attribute this neo-despotism to Germany. Not only does he not refer Treitschke to the “mystical solution”, but he expressly

² On this subject, see the combined mobilisation of the two authors by Honneth (2014).

distinguishes it from it, seeing the mysticism of the State emerging in Germany only as a degeneration of the historian's views. The mythology that feeds Pan-Germanism in its final version, the borrowing from romantic thoughts, all the invocations of Germany's providential hegemony founded in the essence of the German people, do not go to the heart of the problem.

Treitschke's language, Durkheim explains, "is free of any mysticism" (Durkheim, 1915: 43): it is even what makes it *really* meaningful. Its deep spring is quite different. It comes from a *reaction to liberalism of a different type than the romantic reaction and the mystique of the people*.

We must go further: let's admit that this reaction, which can be read in Treitschke, has something *right*. For it consists in denying that society reduces itself to civil society, that fundamental social trends are reflected in the material interests of individuals and subgroups seeking their articulation at the level of civil society. With this reaction, Treitschke, despite all that has been said, nevertheless gathered some echoes of the *great German social thought*; let us say that he had sought to translate into the doctrine of the State an *idealistic* opposition to the reduction of the social existence of a nation to the satisfaction of the material needs of its members, to the maintenance of its own life as a pure system of private interests and particular needs.

Where does the deviation come from then? At what tangential point does it register? Paradoxically, it doesn't come from a thought of war, but rather from a way of living peace. Germany's problem is peace, the situation of peace or the state of peace. In Treitschke's logic, peace can mean nothing other than a relapse into material life and a retreat into individualistic values reduced to competing interests. Peace dissolves social unity, which can only be reactivated by a *coup de force*: the affirmation of an ideality tested in the disposition contrary to self-sacrifice, which only war, or the disposition to war, is able to achieve.

We leave this analysis with the following judgment: Germany has not succeeded in thinking of itself as a *society*, that is, not as a combination of interests, but as an entity producing through its internal relations a certain structure of ideality in a peaceful situation. It has not been able to think or live *peace* as an inner life in which ideals are forged, capable of guiding behaviour beyond the current satisfaction of needs. And the absolutisation of the State has resulted from this deficiency. The transition to a theory of public law based on the law of war, or war as a touchstone of State sovereignty and its own law, are precisely the effects of this fundamental deficiency.

There are two possible ways to account for this drift. The first, which Durkheim does not borrow, would be to understand the social history behind Treitschke's break with those German thinkers who approached the state of peace differently, and who were moving towards a conception of social ideals and the morality of the State that is its corollary, in opposition to any liberal reduction in terms of law and economy. This would be tantamount to asking how Germany's self-constitution as a modern nation in the Durkheimian sense has been hindered, characterised by centripetal forces, oriented towards internal (Durkheim, 1992: 70 f.) social life, capable of working social relations towards an ideal of autonomy that is not so much the consecration of subjective rights as the ferment of a social right that is constantly improving.

But there is a second possible way to approach German pathology, more direct. This is the one Durkheim uses in the last vertiginous pages of the 1915 text. It amounts to taking this German idealistic reaction to its roots, once again so legitimate and so fair could it have been in its intention, and to see what was the operator in Treitschke. What is then in debate is this: *a pathology of idealism that translates into a hypertrophy of will*. This is the complete formula for the Durkheim diagnosis of Germany. Through this formula, we reach the most active nucleus of the German mentality, whose mystical motives, the glorification of war, the

claims to hegemony and expansion, are only second-rate secretions. To philosophically discuss the 1915 text is to understand exactly this formula.

To practice idealism in a pathological way is to conclude, fundamentally, that the plan of civil society can only be transcended at the cost of a *negation*. The ideal, in these conditions, presupposes the negation of all materiality, that is to say, specifically, of all concrete social life developed within the State. And in short, war, intended as the *philosophical* concept of war, is precisely this negation: through it, it is not only a State that opposes itself to another State, it is the internal social life that transcends *itself*, and that transcends itself *by denying itself*.

From the point of view of individuals, it will be admitted that this requires a specific experience of their own will: conditions must be produced in themselves from the test of the infinity of their will. The will is proved as infinite by accomplishing the negation of any material determination, and by joining the sphere of ideality that the State embodies and whose image it projects beyond the real society.

To this version of idealism, one is necessarily led as soon as the real society is only that: a composition of private interests carried by particular individuals or groups. Or rather, pathological idealism comes from the fact that, within these inter-individual relationships, we do not see what makes them possible and configures them without them being aware of it: the weaving, through certain practices, of a society as an entity that wants to be a society. We do not see, to say it with the Durkheim of the *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the part of *idealisation inherent to the social practices and to the relationships* that form themselves within it. And it is not understood that the ideal society is actually part of the real society (Durkheim, 1995: 442). In short, from the Durkheimian perspective, ideality emerges within a *real environment* of which it is not the negation, but rather, on the contrary, *the product*, provided that this environment is made up of interactions aiming at and actualising, at a certain level of themselves, a

determined form of solidarity. It is this strictly social environment that must be known, so that a society knows not only what it *can* want, but what it *must* want.

However, the modern societies that Europe brings together are not spontaneously willing to perceive a *duty to want*: and this is precisely what justifies the foundation of social sciences - the fact that the social sciences continuously accompany and support their development. These sciences, in essence, do not seek to correct, but to translate the ideal of autonomy of the modern as the form of society desired by them, through the affirmation of their free will. In this sense, sociology is the only European thought, in the strict sense – I mean, the only one to join the focal point of European nations: to build *the duty of will that puts them in the same axis of development*. And at the same time understand the pathologies to which this construction is necessarily exposed, in the differentiated forms that they can assume according to nations, and to their own history.

That's where we come back to Germany. Within it a pathology of the will was made possible, in a form of which no other European nation possessed the possibility. Not in the form of the two major individualistic reductions that are the materialism of private interests on the one hand, the abstract idealisation of subjective rights on the other. Not England, not France. But something specific: a will of the State embodying for every member of the State *its own will*.

We touch on the tip of the diagnosis, which concerns Germany as a possible figure of a European pathology, among others (and among these others, there is also ours). Within it it's embodied, as in any modern nation, the dual process of individualisation and differentiation defining the paradoxical unification modality of societies. In any modern nation, the form of individuality is invested, explored and valued, not as what deserves to be recognised in its intrinsic rights and interests – this is the liberal illusion of modernity that sociology continues to criticise, whatever its political versions, from right to left – but as the focal point in

the elaboration of social relations of which the moderns are capable. Each cultural configuration has a way of leading this movement, which reveals both its specific *contribution* and its specific *illusions*. If we push the analysis further, we understand that this is necessarily due to the variable way in which each tradition understands the concept of the individual (or rather, to be more faithful to the Durkheimian lexicon, the concept of the person).³

Individualised through his will, the modern individual in Germany closes himself to a social conception of himself and of his engagement in different levels of interaction in a different way than in France or in England. Above all, the pathology reaches here a high threshold of severity. This is because the absolutisation of will does not simply imply blindness towards the determinations of the real, to the requirements of the social environment in which individuality is called upon to take shape, but it encounters the risk of actively *denying* it. Not simply not to see what obliges us to want as we wish in a modern context (not to see duty wanting), but to reject in principle any obligation (to make will the negation of duty). Is that what we saw in Treitschke?

I propose to call this pathology, among the possible European pathologies, and whose overcoming is the true vector of an authentic European construction, the Faustian temptation. It is state related and first and foremost state related, in a very particular form, which can only be understood if we join the philosophical meaning that the concept of will can take. Allow me, finally, to justify the name I have chosen.

We have understood that what defines the sociological point of view is that it reveals the fact that the willing encloses a certain duty, backed by a knowledge of the environment in which the action takes place. To understand the centripetal constitution of the modern nation, sociologically, is to return to that. And the

³ See on this point the distinction between individual and person Durkheim (1995: 272ff.).

whole of Europe is called upon to become aware of this, which means nothing more than a better understanding of its own social history.

And yet, if we leave it at that, there is something nonsensical about accusing Germany. It is that no one better than Kant has detected the inner link between duty and will. Moreover, no current of thought more than German Protestantism is able to grasp what we mean by this. Whatever the case, that makes Kant, forever, a kind of sociological hero. But he's an ambivalent hero. And this ambivalence concentrates Germany's European pitfall. Why?

To purify the will by extracting it from any empirical determination, to base duty in *pure* practical reason, is to convey a passion for the unlimited whose desperate portrait Goethe has delivered. This is what Durkheim understood in "On Suicide" and in his courses on moral Education:

pessimism always accompanies unlimited aspirations. Goethe's Faust may be regarded as representing par excellence this view of the infinity. And it is not without reason that the poet has portrayed him as laboring in continual anguish (Durkheim, 1961: 40).

Beyond experienced pleasures one senses and desires others; if one happens almost to have exhausted the range of what is possible, one dreams of the impossible; one thirsts for the non-existent (Durkheim, 2005: 234).

The will is, for sure, the enabler of individualisation of the moderns. But it is so, only to the extent that it is through it that their socialisation is accomplished. This is what the Faustian temptation ignores. The untying of things cannot and must not be the essential result for action, *as a desired action*. If will is linked to duty, it is because this duty *binds it internally to an environment that limits and constrains it* - binds it empirically, or pathologically, in the Kantian acceptance of the word pathological, anchors it to an

environment that will does not encounter outside itself as an exteriority foreign to its nature, but *which structures it as will*. This is the progressive discovery in European thought that sociology expresses. Because it is a *social* environment, the environment in which human action takes place is the structuring of will. Inside it it's determined what we *must* want – and thus the real link between will and duty is built.

Certainly, Kant is not Treitschke: he does not separate duty and will, much less make them exclusive of each other. It does not project the will in the State to release it from any obligation, internally or externally. Nevertheless, it addresses the division at another level: between reason and sensitivity, between the noumena and the phenomenal in man. And this is where the “pathological” trace (in the Durkheimian sense of de-socialisation, and no longer in the Kantian sense) of the Faustian lack of limits and the emptiness in which the modern subject is lost as an acting subject lodge itself.

Far from being an extrinsic limit to the pure affirmation of will, the social milieu is therefore the necessary place for its formation (Durkheim, 1961: 47 f.). This is the truly modern discovery: that of a will that is formed in social life, and that accesses the sociological awareness of this process. Germany had the means to understand this more than any other cultural tradition. It was becoming through this, spontaneously, while social law was invented inside it in the 19th century - and although this happened under Bismarck – the teacher of Europe. These means were provided to Germany by its idealism, and more precisely by the Kantian prowess of articulating duty and will. But the Faustian temptation inhabited it: it was the other German tendency that had to abort his social thought and lose his idealism in power politics.

And it is up to other European nations, unaffected by this pathology, and whatever they may be inhabited or menaced by others – abstract legalism, the over-valuation of contractual exchange – to correct it. Which they do through a war they can only win, because by making it, they are carried by real *European*

forces. They are real, because they spring out of the socialisation common to all nations. These forces, in fact, are the only ones through which nations really communicate – the only ones that justify talking about Europe and wanting Europe. And sociology is the only perspective that makes Europe from this angle, with this degree of unity.

Bibliography

- Dorpalen A. (1957). *Heinrich von Treitschke*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Durkheim É. (1915). *Germany above All. The German Mental Attitude and the War*. Paris: Colin.
- Durkheim É. (1961). *Moral Education. A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education*. New York: The free Press.
- Durkheim É. (1992). *Professional ethics and civic morals*. London: Routledge.
- Durkheim É. (1995). *The Elemenary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.
- Durkheim É. (2005). *Suicide. A Study in Sociology*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Honneth A. (2014). *Freedom's right: The social foundations of democratic life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Megay E.N. (1958). "The Hegelian Tradition of German Liberalism", in: *Treitschke Reconsidered: Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 2 (3), pp. 298-317.