

FROM THE ARCHIVES

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**‘FROM SCIENCE TO ACTION’:  
DURKHEIMIAN ENGAGEMENT WITH ACTIVISTS IN  
THE GROUPE D’ÉTUDES SOCIALISTES**

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I

In a recent article (Parkin 1997), I described the genesis and activities of the Groupe d’Études Socialistes (GES) in the years immediately before the First World War, which brought its existence to an end. This Parisian debating society gathered together a number of Durkheimians with political activists of socialist persuasion to discuss policy in the area of social and political reform. Key activities were monthly talks given by one of the members, leading in many cases to publication in the GES’s own series, the *Cahiers du Socialiste*. As we shall see towards the end, there was a clear difference of perspective between the scholars drawn from the circle around Émile Durkheim (the master himself was never involved in their activities) and the political activists, who had a more hands-on approach to policy questions. Nevertheless there was never any rift, and after a number of ups and downs the GES actually seems to have been gaining in strength when the First World War intervened to put an end to it. That war not only took the lives of many of its members, it also radically altered the political circumstances they were addressing. An attempt by Mauss to revive it in 1936 came to nothing (Fournier 1994: 680).

In this article, I would like to concentrate on the content of the talks given and the discussions that inevitably followed. As in the earlier article, data come from the reports of meetings drawn up mostly by Robert Hertz, copies of which are held

with his papers (the Fonds Robert Hertz, hereafter FRH) in the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale, Collège de France.<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to give full details of the talks presented to the GES, copies of which are not known to have survived, but a pretty clear idea of their nature and quality can be discerned from Hertz's reports. These characteristically consist of a summary of the talk, often written by Hertz rather than the speaker himself,<sup>2</sup> followed by a summary of the ensuing discussion where this was sufficiently interesting. Sometimes there is no account at all, just a bare mention that the talk had been given.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, all the quotes are from these reports and are of the summary (i.e. they are usually not the speaker's or discussant's actual words; translations from the original French are mine). A list of the talks given appears in Appendix 1.<sup>4</sup> Committee members for each year of the GES's activities for which we have information are listed in Appendix 2.

## II

No particular subject stands out, but there was much discussion of co-operatives in this period, four talks being devoted to it. Ernest Poisson's talk on the history of the French co-operative movement (25 Feb. 1913) has the most extensive recorded discussion, with interventions from Marcel Mauss, Louis Héliès, André Bruckère, Henri Gans, and Alfred Bonnet. All of them concentrated on its future rather than its past, as Poisson had done. As for Mauss, 'he sees a serious danger that, under the pretext of autonomy and neutrality, co-operation will shut itself up in isolation and lose its proletarian ideal.' Bruckère argued against this: 'Co-operation is a purely economic movement, not at all philanthropic. It has nothing specifically working class about it. It is not a class institution but a social function, [namely] the control of trade and production by consumers in association with

1. As before, I am grateful to Mme Françoise Heritier for permission to view the FRH archive and draw on it in published work.

2. For example, the account of Hubert Bourgin's talk on 27 Jan. 1914 was apparently written by himself (a draft not in Hertz's handwriting is in the GES file in the FRH), while those of Ernest Poisson (25 Feb. 1913) and G. Fauquet (29 Apr. 1913) were composed by Hertz (existing drafts are in the latter's hand).

3. For example, of André Bruckère, 31 Oct. 1911, and Maurice Halbwachs, 30 June 1913 (though the report tells us that the latter's talk arose out of Halbwachs' research on the social determinants of standards of living; see Lukes 1973: 401).

4. I hope at a future date to examine the versions of talks that were published in the Cahiers series, a list of which was given at the end of the earlier article (Parkin 1997: 56–7). For Hertz's pamphlet on depopulation, see Parkin 1995: 51–6.

one another.' Héliès too felt that the co-operative movement was autonomous from all other social, political, or economic movements, whose claims on it could only do it damage; it had its own rationale and interests. Poisson also opposed Mauss in arguing that the movement had value in its own right and not only in any potential it might be thought to have in aiding the rest of the working-class movement. But in opposition to Bruckère he agreed with Mauss that it was, in France at least, very definitely a working-class movement.

Bonnet, on the other hand, supported Mauss in arguing that a view of the co-operative movement as something purely economic would inevitably lead to their development into department stores, like the capitalist ones that were already in existence: 'Even though the essential function of co-operation may be a purely economic one, an extra-economic ideal is required to keep the working-class consumers who constitute the force behind co-operation united.' In an earlier talk (31 Jan. 1911), C. Mutschler discussed the problems that had arisen between the co-operatives and their own employees. He had advocated 'the victory of the co-operative principle over syndicalist preoccupations' as a solution, his argument apparently being that the unions should adopt the support of co-operatives into their own programme. A talk by Alfred Nast (26 Mar. 1912), which pointed out that co-operatives have no legal standing in France, led to disagreement in discussion between Bruckère and Mauss on whether this was necessary. Bruckère argued that it was not, while Mauss countered that lack of legal recognition was precisely what was restricting their further development. Mauss's reluctance to see the co-operative movement as something purely economic can, of course, be traced back to the usual Durkheimian resistance to reducing the social to the economic.

Disagreement was also prompted by Sidney and Beatrice Webb's brochure on syndicalism, which Hertz read out (at the meeting of 8 Oct. 1912) in a translation into French made by himself. Among other things, it deplored the intrusion of French practices into British trade unionism, which was always wary of the continental syndicalist movement. According to some of the discussants, such as André Morizet and Bruckère, the Webbs were attacking a fantasy syndicalism and were making serious errors of fact on the subject of the doctrine and tactics of the French trade unionism they were criticizing. According to others, like Laskine, this was a fine bourgeois and liberal brochure, dissolving any revolutionary hope, socialist or syndicalist. According to others, finally, such as Bourgin, Félicien Challaye, and Mauss, it was a critique of syndicalism, quite English in certain respects, but on the whole sound, penetrating, and perfectly socialist.

Of special interest is Challaye's talk on colonialism (at the meeting of 30 Jan. 1912), a question that socialists found quite problematic, since they did not like the institution in principle but were loath to abandon it entirely. The attitude to subject peoples here shows little trace of that feeling of solidarity in opposition to capitalist exploitation that characterized their Marxist rivals and that they themselves were to adopt later. The account of this meeting is given here in full (emphases in the original):

Although most socialists may be opposed to 'colonial adventures', that is, to the acquisition of new colonies, they are not seriously proposing the abandonment of the old colonies. Such abandonment would certainly damage the metropolitan power and will not profit the natives [*indigènes*], who, being incapable of defending their independence, will fall into another form of domination, which will probably prove harsher. Besides, although our doctrine obliges us to respect the rights of the natives, it also demands the development of all the world's natural powers. It is therefore impossible for us to avoid the colonial problem: in this matter, as in all others, socialists are obliged to formulate a positive and concrete policy.

This policy is opposed on the one hand to the *policy of exploitation* which characterizes colonial capitalism, which consists in refusing any humanity to the natives and regards them solely as freely available labour, not hesitating to get rid of them through extermination in the case of bad returns. But nor will socialists construct a *policy of assimilation* inspiring an abstract humanitarianism and desiring to treat the natives as if they resembled the civilized, an ideal condemned to remain platonic and whose realization will be disastrous to the natives themselves. Socialist policy, simultaneously taking principles and realities into account, is to be a *policy of tutelage*, regarding the natives as minors and it will endeavour to protect them from the evils which the unavoidable and legitimate introduction of a civilized economy into their domain will bring with it. At the same time, it will patiently and modestly introduce civilization to them, in the respects where this is accessible to them. In particular, it will organize adequate health services, intended above all to prevent the fatal epidemics that contact with Europeans tends to give rise to; it will develop education, which, in order to be effective, must be neither theological nor metaphysical but above all technical; it will protect their collective property, the basis of their economic existence, from both the temptations of the capitalists and the lack of foresight of the natives themselves; it will provide the natives with freedom to buy and sell where they wish; finally, as far as possible it will respect the natives' customs and self-government.

The comrades who intervened in the discussion in support of Challaye as regards matters of principle insisted on the difficulties in formulating a distinctive colonial policy, given the very different levels of civilization of native peoples. There is also the fact that the policy of assimilation, rightly rejected by Challaye as regards the Negroes of the Congo, might be applied perfectly, if one wished to do so, to the peoples of the Mediterranean. Finally, freedom of trade, suggested by Challaye, will doubtless not protect the weak in the colonies any more than it does in the metropolitan power: there too, it will be necessary to organize controls, promulgate tariffs, etc.

Two talks of late 1913 and early 1914 are of interest in respect of contemporary views towards the changing role of the state in a situation of social reform. These were given by Henri Lévy-Bruhl on public law, taking a recent book by Léon Duguit, *Les transformations du droit public*, as his starting-point (28 Oct. 1913), and by Hubert Bourgin, on the socialist concept of the state (two meetings, 27 Jan. 1914, and 3 Mar. 1914). Bourgin, Bruckère, G. Fauquet, and Mauss all

spoke in the discussion following Lévy-Bruhl's talk, which was summed up as follows (with capitalization as in the original passages, here and in the following citations):

Duguit's style is still formal and dialectic. Fundamentally, although it has very well brought to light an aspect of the evolution of public law—regression towards the State becoming an end in itself, transcending the sacred, the assimilation of the State to the private person in cases where it acts as such—he completely neglects an aspect which is at least as characteristic: the growing importance of the notion of public order, which confers on the State acting as such (for example, in its relations with its functionaries) specific duties and powers, and above all the immense development of the constraining power of the State, as shown by its laws concerning conditions of work. The fundamental object of Socialists is not to protect the individual against the State but to make the public power—preserved and if necessary reinforced—serve the complicated and growing needs of collective life in the state of civilization in which we are now.

Bourgin's talk drew a critical response from Mauss at the first of the two meetings devoted to it (on 27 Jan. 1914). Bourgin had defined the State as 'a collection of specialized services of public interest' and said that 'the State has no proper or intrinsic sovereignty'. The report continued:

Mauss considers that the notion of public service to which Hubert Bourgin is forced to reduce any activity by the State is a confused notion. It embraces two quite distinct realities: on the one hand, economic enterprises (railways, postal services), functioning under a regime of direct control; on the other hand, institutions necessary for the existence of any large social body, such as the army and justice. Between these two extremes there is room for intermediaries such as state education, public health, etc.... Hubert Bourgin bases his definition of the State on services of the first type. As a result, the notion of sovereignty appears to him to be a survival destined for infinite regress. But these services have a private character, and socialists are the first to hope that State controls will fall under common economic law and lose all immunity and privilege in respect of the individual and consumers. In order to follow a positivist method, the characteristics of the State must be sought in the services devolving on the State *qua* State; and this characteristic is precisely sovereignty. Hubert Bourgin wants to reduce this notion to one of public interest; but this is an experimental construction. In fact, the general will of political society communicates to people things and decisions in which it expresses itself an imperative character, a majesty, a holiness, whose violation constitutes a crime (by opposition to the simple contravention of 'public services') and calls forth punishment. Nothing authorizes us to see survivals or primitive [*simples*] symbols in the distinctive traits of the State acting *qua* State. Simiand showed us at the last meeting that there exists a Voltairian attitude with regard to economic facts; will not some economists lapse into a sort of political Voltairianism too?

Mauss's concern here seems to be to distinguish the state as *particular* from the state as sovereign in order to ensure that its powers in the latter sense, though not the former, may be subject to privilege. Moreover, the state *as sovereign* is not a survival but a living force.

Hertz and François Simiand spoke at the second meeting (3 Mar. 1914):

Hertz recalls that, for many socialists, 'the sovereignty of the whole society' is a democratic fiction and that in reality the State exists in order to represent and defend the interests of the class that is strongest economically and socially. What does H. Bourgin think of that?

No direct reply to Hertz is recorded. Simiand supported Mauss in pointing to the neglect of the notion of sovereignty in Bourgin's account of the state:

Simiand, like Mauss, thinks that there is a difference between the economic services proper with which the State is charged and other public services, not in degree but in kind. The first are, to some extent, secularized and disengaged from the juridical element of sovereignty.... We are not tied here by any respect, any deference, any obligation [e.g. as regards the running of the railways]. On the contrary, in so far as there is something called justice...it represents something respectable and imposes itself on the conscience of the citizens. The generality of the interest to which a public service corresponds is therefore not enough to characterize the State as such: it is still necessary to consider the quality of that interest.

In his final reply, Bourgin, who had earlier said that the state has no sovereignty, now agreed with Mauss that the state represented the sovereignty of the people.

Hubert Bourgin replied that he had not intended to provide a complete theory of the State.... The State is not homogeneous: although it is in certain respects the representative of the dominant class, it is in other respects the representative of society as a whole. Socialist policy tends to neutralize the first of these tendencies and to develop the second unceasingly. He therefore agrees with Mauss in recognizing an absolute character in the sovereignty of Society represented by the State....

Durkheimian orthodoxy is therefore often discernible, and on occasion it gave rise to some rather strange comments. Thus Simiand and Marcel Granet thought that alcoholism could be combated only by encouraging an ersatz passion of some sort—a Durkheimian 'effervescence', perhaps, for sports, cinema, trade unions, etc. (meeting of 30 May 1911). And on the occasion of Simiand's own talk on strikes in the public service (meeting of 28 Mar. 1911), 'Mutschler and Hertz confirm[ed] the right of the collectivity, whose interest appears to them to be morally superior to that of the producers.' As we have seen, Simiand, like Mauss, frequently intervened in debates, often at considerable length. He was prominent at the meeting

of 23 December 1913, at which Edmond Laskine spoke on customs policy, and made ten different points in the discussion. He also spoke at length to Roger Picard's talk on the possibility of introducing minimum wages (27 May 1913), arguing that this might impede wage rises in times of economic growth. As the economist of the Durkheimian circle and a particularly outspoken defender of Durkheimianism (see Besnard 1983: 248), he must have felt in his element in many of these talks.

Simiand and Mauss both tended to oppose the singling out of particular classes to take all the blame for the country's ills, always preferring sociological analysis to the less nuanced tirades of some of their non-academic colleagues. Bruckère, for example, in his talk of 8 April 1913 on small property owners, spoke of the 'parasitism' of the petty bourgeoisie, whose ideals have nevertheless come to invade all classes; it is against them that socialists should be fighting. This was too sweeping for Simiand, and also for Mauss, though the latter suggested diplomatically that 'Bruckère's criticisms are in large part well founded: but they bear less on the characteristic of an economic class than on our national temperament'. Mauss spoke in a similar vein to Lévy-Bruhl's talk on the law and the right to strike (25 Apr. 1911), saying that in such cases magistrates are actuated not by fear of the powerful or by class interest so much as by their own 'fanaticism to preserve themselves and the caste prejudices which lead them to regard every strike as a quasi-criminal rebellion'. These prejudices were born of their position in society and could not be reduced to mere economics. Society had its own moral force, which was not simply the epiphenomenon of economic activity, as it was in the Marxist view that influenced many of the activist, non-scholarly wing of the GES directly or indirectly.

### III

There is thus evidence of some differences, if not actually tensions, between the academics and the activists in the GES. Years later, between the wars, one of the GES's founders, Hubert Bourgin, freely recognized this and expanded on it. Bourgin, originally a Durkheimian, spent the war under Albert Thomas in the Ministry of Munitions, a disillusioning experience which turned him first into a pacifist and then, in the 1930s, into a supporter of the far right and an antisemite who, in Clark's words, 'spent the rest of his life as a proto-fascist penning diatribes against his former colleagues' (1968: 90; also Lukes 1973: 321 n. 4). But whatever his motives in writing then as he did, whatever the exaggeration, what he has to say on the tensions within the GES has a ring of truth that is missing from Hertz's often rather bland memoranda.

Bourgin's chief regret seems to have been that the intellectualism of the GES did not act more as a brake on the demagoguery and anarchism which, in his view,

had increasingly threatened to take over the pre-war Parti Socialiste (1970: 482–3). But it had always been difficult to persuade the activist wing of the need for reflection and study:

...although I conceded the Cahiers du Socialiste an element of useful co-operation, like my friends, my peers, I remained incapable of improving what we could never be, of sanitising our work and our political combinations, of encouraging the faint-hearted, of moralizing to backsliding consciences, of purifying plans poisoned by trickery and fraud. These men, who despite everything were our party comrades, knew the world in which they acted better than we: they did not feel the need to perfect themselves intellectually or morally that we felt they should....

From science to action: we tried to develop science for action; but were we capable of giving the activists the taste for science, the desire to 'purge' themselves of errors and passion? (1925: 86–7)

As with all rhetorical questions, Bourgin must have intended this to contain its own answer.

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APPENDIX 1: TALKS GIVEN TO THE GES, 1910–1914  
(Some of these talks were published in the Cahiers du Socialiste Series  
as indicated below)

*Undated (presumably 1910)*

- C. Mutschler, on co-operation.  
G. Fauquet, on industrial hygiene.  
Georges Gelly, 'Le socialisme et l'agriculture'.

*1911*

- 31 Jan.: C. Mutschler, on the relationship between consumer co-operatives and their employees.  
28 Feb.: Jacques Ferninand-Dreyfus, 'Étude critique de la mutualité (après un livre de Weber)'.  
28 Mar.: François Simiand, 'La grève dans les services publics'.  
25 Apr.: Henri Lévy-Bruhl, 'Le Code Pénal et la grève' (Cahiers du Socialiste, no. 12).  
30 May: Marcel Granet, 'Le problème de l'alcool' (Cahiers du Socialiste, no. 11).  
27 June: Robert Sexé, 'Retraites ouvrières et assurances sociales en Angleterre: quelles leçons en tirer pour la France?'  
25 July: Unknown (report for meeting missing, but see under 26 Dec. 1911 below).  
31 Oct.: André Bruckère, 'Le travail à domicile'.  
28 Nov.: Sidney Webb, 'La base nécessaire de l'organisation sociale' (read in a translation from the English by Robert Hertz, made by himself).  
26 Dec.: Hubert Bourgin, 'Un programme de lutte préventive contre la misère, en Angleterre: le rapport des Webb à la Commission de la loi des pauvres' (postponed from previous meeting [25 July?] on account of Bourgin's health).

*1912*

- 30 Jan.: Félicien Challaye, 'Le socialisme et la politique coloniale'.  
27 Feb.: Ernest Poisson, 'Le fonctionnement de la démocratie politique: une éléction législative en 1912 (Elbeuf, Seine-Inférieur)'.  
26 Mar.: Alfred Nast, 'Le problème juridique de la coopération'.  
30 Apr.: Max Lazard, 'L'organisation du marché du travail: le placement'.  
4 June: François Simiand, 'La théorie de la valeur économique et le socialisme' (postponed from 28 May because of public holiday).  
2 July: Continuation of the topic of the previous meeting.  
8 Oct.: Sidney and Beatrice Webb, 'Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire: sa raison d'être et sa valeur sociale' (read in a translation from the English by Robert Hertz, made by himself; Cahiers du Socialiste, nos. 14/15).  
29 Oct.: Henri Sellier, 'Paris et la banlieue: la réorganisation administrative de la Seine'.  
26 Nov.: Jacques Ferninand-Dreyfus, 'L'État assureur'.  
20 Dec.: Henri Gans, 'La distribution de la force électrique en France: vers l'organisation d'un réseau national'.

1913

- 28 Jan.: Louis Héliès, 'La concentration coopérative' (ms. of either this or following talk [probably former] in FRH).
- 25 Feb.: Ernest Poisson, 'Histoire de l'unité coopérative en France' (see previous talk).
- 8 Apr.: André Bruckère, 'La petite propriété comme danger social et danger national' (postponed from late March because of Easter).
- 29 Apr.: G. Fauquet, 'L'application de la loi des retraites ouvrières'.
- 27 May: Roger Picard, 'Le minimum légal de salaire' (*Cahiers du Socialiste*, nos. 16/17).
- 30 June: Maurice Halbwachs, 'La définition de la classe ouvrière'.
- 28 Oct.: Henri Lévy-Bruhl, 'Vers une conception socialiste du droit public (à propos d'un ouvrage récent)' (on Léon Duguit, *Les transformations du droit public*, Paris 1913).
- 25 Nov. and 23 Dec.: Edmond Laskine, 'Le socialisme et la politique douanière'.

1914

- 27 Jan.: Hubert Bourgin, 'La notion de l'État dans le socialisme' (discussion continued in next meeting).
- 3 Mar.: Bourgin (continued) plus Henri Sellier, 'Le développement des banlieues urbaines et la réorganisation administrative du département de la Seine' (postponed from late February because of Mardi Gras).
- 31 Mar.: Henri Gans, 'La situation financière et le problème fiscal' (*Cahiers du Socialiste*, no. 18).
- 28 Apr.: Étienne Weill-Raynal, 'La crise de la main-oeuvre agricole en France, d'après un livre récent' (on Auguste Souchon, *La crise de la main-oeuvre agricole en France*, Paris 1914).
- 26 May: Henri Gans, 'Le problème financier: les mesures fiscales qui s'imposent'.
- 30 June: Paul Ramadier, 'La fonction des Syndicats d'après la législation et la jurisprudence' (no report exists of this meeting, which was the last, but there is no reason to think that the talk did not take place, only that it was not written up later).

APPENDIX 2: COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- 1910: Robert Hertz, Marcel Granet, Henri Lévy-Bruhl, André Prudhomme, François Simiand.
- 1911: Robert Hertz, Henri Lévy-Bruhl, François Simiand, Marc Bloch, Alfred Bonnet.
- 1912: Robert Hertz, Henri Lévy-Bruhl, Alfred Bonnet, François Simiand, Georges Gelly. (Lévy-Bruhl in fact resigned at the meeting of 30th January and was replaced by Gelly, but he is mentioned in the end-of-year report as being a member of the committee.)
- 1913: Robert Hertz, Henri Lévy-Bruhl, François Simiand, Alfred Bonnet.
- 1914: Unclear, but certainly including Robert Hertz.