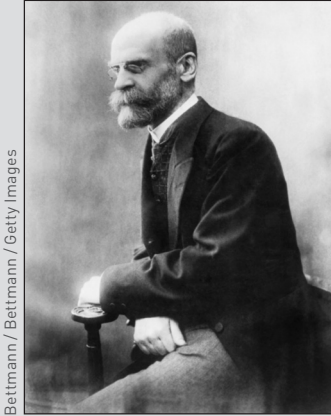


## EMILE DURKHEIM

### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



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Emile Durkheim was born on April 15, 1858, in Epinal, France. He was descended from a long line of rabbis and studied to be a rabbi, but by the time he was in his teens, he had largely disavowed his heritage (Strenski, 1997:4). From that time on, his lifelong interest in religion was more academic than theological (Mestrovic, 1988). He was dissatisfied not only with his religious training but also with his general education and its emphasis on literary and aesthetic matters. He longed for schooling in scientific methods and in the moral principles needed to guide social life. He rejected a traditional academic career in philosophy and sought instead to acquire the scientific training needed to contribute to the moral guidance of society. Although he was interested in scientific sociology, there was no field of sociology at

that time, so, between 1882 and 1887, he taught philosophy in a number of provincial schools in the Paris area.

His appetite for science was whetted further by a trip to Germany, where he was exposed to the scientific psychology being pioneered by Wilhelm Wundt (Durkheim, [1887] 1993). In the years immediately after his visit to Germany, Durkheim published a good deal, basing his work, in part, on his experiences there (R. Jones, 1994). These publications helped him gain a position in the department of philosophy at the University of Bordeaux in 1887.

In his role at Bordeaux, he offered public lectures on the social sciences and covered topics such as social solidarity, the family, suicide, crime, and religion. These were the first courses in social science offered in a French university. His main responsibility, however, was teaching courses in education to schoolteachers where he focused on moral education. Durkheim saw himself not merely as an educator and “scholar but also as a citizen” (Fournier, [2007] 2013:117). As a result, his lectures had a “practical character” that would address the problems encountered in everyday work. Durkheim was admired for his teaching, which was described as original, systematic, and “strikingly powerful.” He was listened to with a “sort of fervor” that exercised a “considerable influence” on his students and at times concerned university administration (Watz, cited in Fournier, [2007] 2013:348).

The years that followed were characterized by a series of personal successes for Durkheim. In 1893, he publicly defended his Latin thesis on Montesquieu and his French doctoral thesis, which was soon published as *The Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim, [1892] 1997; Fournier, [2007] 2013). There was some resistance to the work. It was described as moralistic and deterministic, and some of the examiners were wary of Durkheim’s focus on sociology because it was “too closely related to socialism” (Perreux, cited in Fournier, [2007] 2013:153). Nevertheless, the defense was regarded as a great success: “[O]ne of the most remarkable of oral examinations, and one of the most completely satisfying.” (Fournier, [2007] 2013:155). His major methodological statement, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, appeared in 1895, followed (in 1897) by his empirical application of those methods in the study *Suicide*. Each of these works increased Durkheim’s reputation as one of the major figures in the developing field of sociology, but, again, were challenged by his competitors who criticized Durkheim’s

(Continued)