Book Review/Compte rendu

W.S.F. Pickering and **Massimo Rosati**, eds., *Suffering and Evil, The Durkheimian Legacy*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books in association with the Durkheim Press, 2008, 204 pp. $US 60.00 hardcover (978-1-84545-519-4)

Written in commemoration of the 90th anniversary of Durkheim's death, W.S.F. Pickering and Massimo Rosati's collection is offered up as a catalyst in "search for a sociology of suffering" (p. 163). Under the auspices of what the editors identify to be a "dearth" of sociological writings on the topic, its nine chapters make the compelling collective case that Emile Durkheim's writings are *especially* pertinent to, and constructive for, theorizing the complexities of human suffering, and its related form, evil (*mal*).

Following a brief introduction by the editors, Pickering's preliminary chapter explores the ambiguous cause of Durkheim's death. These reflections position Durkheim's life (and death) historically, while sensitizing the reader to the intimate relationship between collective conditions and individual lives. To bring some theoretic order to the diverse analyses of suffering that constitute the bulk of the text, two general categories are identified by the editors under the rubric of "calamitous" (i.e. cataclysmic) suffering and "normal" (domestic or institutional) suffering. The former include instances of "bloodshed, extreme pain, or sudden death" (p. 164) involving large numbers of people (from tsunamis, wars, and acts of terrorism to genocide, AIDS, and famine), whereas the latter correspond with more ordinary and enduring aspects of social existence.

The volume is divided into two parts. Part I (chs. 1-4) emphasizes the meanings the concepts of suffering and evil have in Durkheim's writings (particularly *Suicide* and *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*), and the more general role they play in his sociological approach. In her critical reading of *Suicide,* for instance, Sophie Jankélévitch interrogates Durkheim's "diagnosis" of anomie as the "typical evil of modern societies" (p. 34), emphasizing the significance of the social tie and the "painful" implications of the duality of human nature. While anomie (and egoism) may be intensified under conditions of modernity, she suggests, their roots run deep in humanity's "tragic" constitution. The notion of evil that is implicit in Durkheim's writings is considered most explicitly by Massimo Rosati and Giovanni Paoletti. Rosati argues that insofar as self-

transcendence is painful (in its asceticism), profane life can be viewed as an ordinary evil that threatens society's fragile existence. The problem of evil, he thus argues, can be grasped as foundational to Durkheim's thought, as it is a constitutive dimension *of* social life. In the volume's most conceptually oriented chapter, Paoletti formulates three distinctive moments in Durkheim's shifting discourse on evil. Like most of the authors here, Paoletti emphasizes the significance and power of collective rituals, holding up the *Elementary Forms* as a "masterpiece" that offers remarkable insight into the techniques by which collective ties are upheld and revitalized.

Durkheim's generally positive conception of social life is a theme encountered at several points in this collection. Reflecting this, Mark Cladis's chapter draws upon the example of his infant daughter to illuminate particular dimensions of the painful process (and moral task) of "becoming" human. Eloquently turning the modernist image of the individual as a *prisoner of society* on its head, Cladis's readings of Durkheim (and Rousseau) emphasize the "sacrifice" entailed by relinquishing public goals on behalf of private interests. Drawing attention to Durkheim's abiding concern with "unjust institutions and deleterious social forces" (p. 97) that contribute to egoistic and anomic suffering, Part I ends with Cladis' reference to Durkheim's "hopeful prospects" for a society in which members will increasingly shed "parochial prejudice and narrow self-interests" in the adoption of "more humane perspectives and publicly inclusive … goals." (p. 94)

In Part Two (chs. 5-9), the focus shifts towards writers influenced by Durkheim's conceptions of suffering and evil. Highlighting Durkheim's intellectual legacy, Robert Parkin brings Robert Hertz to life as a student and (later) colleague of Durkheim whose writings on death, sin, and religious polarities expanded upon Durkheim's formulation of ritual. Some interesting commentary on the political (and primarily socialist) commitments that influenced many members of the Durkheim group is included, along with some discussion of Hertz's "sacrificial" death in the First World War. William Ramp's chapter similarly unsettles the dominant reading of Durkheim as the "sober theorist of order and function" (p. 118) by bringing to light his influence on the avant-garde group *Le Collège de Sociologie*. Ramp traces the fascinating "affinities and divergences" between Durkheim and Bataille's treatments of evil, while providing an illuminating assessment of the latter's intellectual debts to Durkheimian sociology. In so doing, he refreshingly challenges the one-sided Parsonian interpretation of Durkheim's intellectual legacy that still pervades so many introductory sociology texts.

To make the case for a Durkheimian informed "sociology of suffering," this collection would benefit from more explicit applications to contemporary instances of "calamitous" suffering. Chapters by Massimo Rosati and John B. Allcock move in this direction. Rosati draws upon Durkheim, his students Hertz and Fauconnet, and recent work by Wilkinson to formulate responsibility in collective terms. Making reference to contemporary global challenges (e.g., the environment, biotechnology, and global injustice), Rosati makes a powerful case for restoring a conception of mutual responsibility to our contemporary political vocabulary. Along similar analytic lines, Allcock uses Durkheimian concepts to cut through the limits of individualist (and legalistic) accounts of suffering, drawing upon the example of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Interpreting collective responses to the legal forum through Durkheim's analyses of piacular rites and the negative cult, Allcock opens the door for further consideration of the political value of a conception of a "suffering community." He also speculates that by dramatizing its suffering, a community's sacralization may, unintentionally, *deepen* differences between groups in ways that are detrimental to reconciliation.

The concluding chapter by Pickering recaps the overarching aims of the collection, while making the case for a secular theodicy. We are recalled to the important distinction between "normal" suffering that is part of the human condition and "calamitous" suffering that is, in Weber's formulation, "senseless" and unnecessary. Pickering calls for a re-assessment of the experience of our times over and against its ideals, ending with the assertion that the sociologist has an obligation not only to analyze, but also to contribute to the diminution of unnecessary human suffering. While such a call is certainly commendable, I have some reservations concerning the claim made initially by the editors, and re-emphasized in Pickering's conclusion, that sociology has been particularly "sluggish" towards the problem of human suffering. Surely, the massive literature on inequality within sociology (and Marxist theory) bears *some* resemblance to this (a point emphasized only by Parkin). While the editors' claims need not detract from the insightful (and often outstanding) contents contained in the collection, this overstated assertion signals the need for clearer delineation of how a sociology of suffering and evil — as it is envisioned *here* — would be distinctive from existing sociological traditions that are wide awake to the painful dimensions of social life.

On the whole, *Suffering and Evil* is an impressive collection that makes a strong contribution to sociological theory and Durkheimian scholarship. Its particular strength is how it makes available the robust-

ness and enduring importance of Durkheim's rich conceptual lexicon, while advancing the case for a sociology of suffering and evil. Selected chapters also offer substantial and theoretically complex contributions to more specialized areas of inquiry, including religion and culture, socialization, modernity, intellectual history, political sociology, and international conflict. Theoretically sophisticated, yet relatively accessible, this volume is particularly appropriate for inclusion in advanced undergraduate theory courses or graduate level seminars. It will also be an asset for those whose writings touch upon the painful and "dark" sides of collective life.

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