Émile Durkheim (1858–1917)
Bruno Karsenti

TRANSLATED BY AMY JACOBS COLAS

Émile Durkheim’s own remarks on Judaism tell us little about his relation to the subject. He was disinclined to examine his own biography or engage in anything resembling self-applied socioanalysis, and his sociological writings show no persistent preoccupation with the matter—not even with the “Jewish question” in the broad sense the term had acquired in the nineteenth century. This impression is not at all belied by what we have of his correspondence. Generally speaking, we have so little “evidence” to go on that further probing, stimulated by the fact that a founder of sociology descended from a long line of rabbis,1 usually leads to naught but fragile hypotheses or unsubstantiated allegations. Of course there is always the implicit or unsaid, and much can be made of a few incidental touches here and there, such as expertly wielded biblical references or irreproachable family solidarity. We can try to reconstruct a consistent identity based on such things, but the exercise is perilous and in any case superficial; it fails to engage with Durkheim’s work, telling us next to nothing about it that we did not already know without taking into account his being Jewish. The art of interpretation requires at least the tact of asking whether what was not said should be and whether silence is really a symptom. In Durkheim’s case, it seems highly advisable to tread lightly.

But it is quite another thing to consider the problem from without and in more contextual terms. It is fully relevant to resituate Durkheimian thinking—a school of thought that engaged a proportionately high number of French Jews—in a conjoined history of secular Judaism and the development of the social sciences in Europe, particularly in France. From this perspective Durkheim actually becomes a paradigmatic case, and two intersecting hypotheses may be formulated.2 The exercise should be instructive for both sides of the question, enabling us to discover in Durkheim the very model of a certain attitude toward science at a time when it was organized in Europe as a vocation, a term to which its primary practitioners readily laid claim. The notion of “professional calling” is most familiar to us in Weber’s
1917 German version, but the French version was already discernible in Durkheim’s *Rules of Sociological Method* of 1895, if only in the first rule, “to consider social facts as things”; that is, to radically desubjectify the very type of facts—human and social ones—that might reasonably be assumed acutely subjective. For Weber, an accentuated sense of *Beruf*, of abolishing the subject in the “task” incumbent upon him, was necessarily rooted in Protestantism. In Durkheim’s case the theological soil is much more friable, and the religious reference is hard to invoke without forcing it. The fact that the first *Rule* triggered a hostile reaction fanned by considerable antisemitism is obviously not in itself an argument. Nor is Durkheim’s intervention in response to the Dreyfus affair. “L’individualisme et les intellectuels,” written in reply to Brunetière following the Zola trial, does not contain the slightest apology for Judaism, even the secular variety. In it Durkheim defends freedom of thought from a sociological perspective, explicitly identifying it as a Christian achievement, one further fueled by the French Revolution but requiring a social foundation that could only be provided by sociology. No “Jewish motif”—regardless of the meaning attributed to the adjective “Jewish”—can be discerned in Durkheim’s reading here of present or past.

Moreover, the most striking feature of his brief reply to an 1899 survey on antisemitism is his concern not to dramatize the issue. French antisemitism was “superficial” and “passing,” in contrast to the German and Russian varieties, qualified as “chronic.” What had to be combated was the social discontent brewing in reaction to economic crises, because in uncertain or difficult economic conditions people had a tendency to look for “expiatory victims” and “pariahs” (Durkheim actually preceeded Weber in linking this category to Jews). Here again, he placed sociology at the forefront of the battle. But one passage of his reply stands out:

> The Jew’s defects are compensated for by indisputable qualities, and though there are better races, there are also worse ones. Moreover, Jews lose their ethnic features extremely quickly—in two generations the thing is done.  

If ever there was a passing remark to latch onto (in a minor text written in the heat of the moment), surely it is this one. Jews’ extreme aptitude to lose their “ethnic features” (Durkheim’s adjective undoubtedly encompasses both biology and culture) thus makes them *extremely* modern subjects—at least potentially, as long as antisemitism does not get in the way. But how do they assimilate in the sense Durkheim uses here? And in what way is that aptitude *extreme*?

Durkheim and the Jewish Durkheimians assimilated through adherence to a scientific project focused not on a particular culture but rather on acquiring knowledge about social phenomena posited in the greatest possible generality. Jews who supported either French or German versions of the “science of Judaism” (*science du judaïsme*; *Wissenschaft des Judentums*) were already rationalists, but the Jewish sociologists of Durkheim’s new school were rationalists in a different way: their thinking was not characterized by any special attention to the people they came from. If, then, we wish to relate the identities of scientific thinker and Jew, we shall have to formulate the question differently, scrutinizing the elective affinity between a type of Judaism typical of the late nineteenth century and a disposition to objectivism in the study of social facts. Among Durkheimians, that disposition took the form of a collective undertaking, which explains the forming of an *école,*
a distinctively French entity at the time, not to be found in German sociology. It turned out to imply a **mission**—a word used repeatedly in Durkheimian writings and an attitude noted by direct observers of the new discipline’s development. It is striking to see sociology, defined in a way that owed more to positivism than to the vicissitudes of *Wissenschaft*, taking new shape and gathering strength at the intersection of three types of motivation: religious, political, and scientific. In doing so, the process did not just substantiate a kind of renewed Christianity, emptied of its theological dimension and transplanted in secular soil (as was the case for Saint-Simon and Comte), but rather occurred in open support of rationalism—to which many Jewish scholars continued to devote themselves with an intensity akin to self-sacrifice without feeling any need to link that devotion to their Jewish identity, let alone to any “essence” of Judaism.

Without having to engage the question of such an essence, we can say that Judaism for Durkheim was obviously itself a social phenomenon. As such it carried more weight than all individual, subjective incarnations of it—**including himself**. And on the basis of this decidedly Durkheimian remark, we can take up the question from a different angle, working to shed light not on Durkheim by way of his putative Judaism, essentialized for the needs of the cause, but rather on Judaism—a historically specific version of it—by way of Durkheim, letting that Judaism come into focus as we consider how he proceeded in his thinking. Once we have taken this detour we can use the postulates it enables us to make about his thought to shed light on the man. The approach is justified if only by the text I will be using to implement it: *Suicide*. In that work, Durkheim examined Judaism in just the way that will be most helpful to us here; there is no need to read between the lines.

It will be recalled that in *Suicide* Durkheim compares the Jewish religion in its modern form to Protestantism and Catholicism to determine what being Jewish implied for the individual’s “social integration.” The point was to measure the different religions’ “preservation coefficients,” that is, how well they protected individuals from the “suicidogenetic current” (**courant suicidogène**) leading to what he called “egotistical suicide.” That particular current, he explained, was the main factor behind the massive rise in suicide during the nineteenth century in Europe. However, it should be clarified from the outset that Durkheim’s general analysis of religious solidarity as a rampart against egotism did not lead him to suggest that such solidarity was adequate therapy. No religious—or family or political—solidarity could assuage the social and moral ill of rising egotistical suicide. The only practicable solution was to build professional solidarity in the form of “corporations.” Integration through religion, Durkheim explained, belonged irrevocably to the past, unless a new religion were to appear “permitting more freedom to the right of criticism, to individual initiative, than even the most liberal Protestant sects” (431; 1951, 375).

That eventuality could not be excluded, and in a later work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim would assert much more strongly his sense of the permanence of religiosity. But he would not revise a crucial thesis of his earlier analysis: no existing religious group could claim preeminence in modern times. And there was no point in invoking a Rousseauistic “civil religion” either. “The religion of the future,” conscious at last of its social foundation, would not
be structured by the dogma of “sanctifying” contract laws; nor could it work to bolster incomplete political solidarity. It was much more likely to have its own function, which would be to generate ideals to be acted on, or else to maintain belief in a power that dominates the subject but in which that subject also partakes, a force that “both supports him and raises him above himself.” It was this function that should persist or be given new force. Nonetheless, the forms it would take when “relaunched” would not resemble what religion had been in the past. While each religion had unconsciously contributed in its way to the function of making “the social” perceptible to individuals as both immanence and transcendence, those religions were not good resources for determining new ends or goals. The only seed of the past whose integrative potential could still be developed was the ancien régime–style professional “corporation.” It was this form that modern mankind should find a way of resuscitating or redeveloping.

Suicide is commonly thought of as a path-breaking study; some consider it the founding work in the sociology of deviance. But it needs to be clarified that suicide for Durkheim, while a form of deviance, was not exactly a transgression and certainly not a negation of the norm, but instead literally a detour (déviation) that implied overstepping limits from within moral life or in a way consistent with the flow of moral life: “Every suicide is then the exaggerated or deflected form of a virtue” (263; 1951, 240). The virtues in question could be named; they were “the spirit of renunciation, the love of progress, the taste for individuation” (420; 1951, 366). All three were socially necessary, and it was only when the spirit of renunciation became too “active,” when individuation degenerated into “languorous melancholy” or when feeling for progress was exacerbated and gave way to “irritation” or “exasperated weariness,” that the virtue was deflected and led to “self-murder.”

Suicide, then, if closely read, gives us Durkheim’s ethics. It is a sociologically substantiated treatise of the virtues. A group’s moral constitution derived from a composite set of moral “currents” that could be apprehended by examining their excessive forms, in which they became “suicidal currents.” The present was pathological in that egotistical suicide had become preeminent and anomic suicide was catching up to it. These causes of self-murder, themselves caused by a kind of inflation of the respective virtues of individuation and progress—virtues that could not be called “individualist” in themselves because they were operative in every kind of social life, though in varying proportions—had become preponderant compared to the virtue of renunciation for the sake of the group. In this case no one virtue had swelled excessively; rather, a single suicidal current was growing and outstripping the others, causing imbalance. That was indeed a sign of disease—a disease for which a sociologically rational therapy could be prescribed, a framework that would allow for reestablishing appropriate proportions of the three qualities and therefore the proper balance.

Durkheim never contemplated rehabilitating the religious solidarity of the past, even a considerably rearranged past. But he did believe that action had to be taken to reestablish a balance between the three suicidogenetic currents in a way that would simultaneously impact on each without excessively squeezing any. The professional corporation form seemed to him flexible enough to do this. It was a corps or body that did not balk at progress and in which the individual was recognized for his functional labor. It would regulate individual actions while integrating them.
into a set of shared goals, a common horizon. Similarly, and ever more insistently as *Suicide* progresses, Durkheim dares to express the idea of a religion of an entirely different type than all that had previously been tried out: a religion of society combined with a cult of the individual. That religion would have an unprecedented type of relationship to science, for free inquiry would be recognized rather than banished, but it would become effective quite differently than in Protestantism. Such hypotheses and prospecting were radically modern. But they were also modern in an unexpected way. It is just at this “nerve center” that we can see the Jewish question resurfacing in Durkheim’s thought at the end of the nineteenth century—and taking a remarkable turn.

Jews, said Durkheim, were *strangely* modern. In this respect they might well represent something of both Durkheimianism as a theory of modernity and Durkheim as an individual thinker using that theory to reflect on his own experience. What was to be made of Jews’ “preservation” against the observed rise in suicide rates? That protection had to do with the religion’s “inferiority”:

Indeed, like all inferior religions, Judaism consists essentially in a body of practices which minutely control every detail of life and leave only a little room for individual judgment. (160; 2006, 166).

This practical solidarity was combined with a factor specific to ostracized minority groups forced to submit to an external influence that actually strengthened its unity—an obvious reference to antisemitism. In the modern situation, however, and as mentioned, antisemitism could be dismissed. It was not structural but instead dependent on the economic situation, and it could reasonably be expected to recede and gradually disappear. The ritual observance factor remained. It did seem to express something essential about Judaism, and it was destined to exist for a long time, independently of the fact that Jews were persecuted and ostracized. “Judaic monotheism” (156; 2006, 163) did not grant much room to “thought and reflection”; it was not “idealistic.” On just this point it contrasted with the other two major religions, both of which aspired to “reign over the understanding and the conscience.” Catholicism spoke “the language of reason” to demand reason’s “blind submission” to faith. This can be called “dogmatic idealism.” Protestants gave voice to the protestations of reason, demanding the right of free inquiry for the individual conscience and turning critically on dogma. This can be called “critical idealism.” Judaism, meanwhile, kept a low profile and persevered in its mechanical observances, unimplicated in the clash between religions superior to it—superiority being measured by the degree of idealization or spiritualization, namely disengagement from practices that control the body.

However, Judaism’s inferiority did not make it an “elementary” religion in the sense that Durkheim used the term in his later study of Australian totemism. It did not even offer a good example of mechanical solidarity, in contrast to the strong integration of archaic societies and civilized society “corps” like the military, in which altruism played a strong role. Indeed, Durkheim hardly mentions Judaism in the section on “altruistic suicide,” that is, giving up one’s life for a cause that exceeds the individual and is rooted exclusively in the group. Though he does cite the expected reference—Flavius Josephus’s account of Masada—he does not attribute quite that meaning to those suicides, presenting them instead as an example of “suicides of the
beseiged,” an exceptional type of suicide in which the altruistic and anomic currents were combined (326; 2006, 319). Judaism was of course a residual, archaism-tinged phenomenon that persisted in modern societies, but it was also sociologically interesting and amounted to more than a mere vestige of mechanical solidarity.

It is here that the portrait of the Jew becomes more complicated, or rather that Durkheim’s definition of Jewish monotheism as nonidealistic becomes enriched with a sociological definition of modern Jews. The Jewish population was now heavily urbanized and intellectual, especially compared to Catholics. Both those features aggravated the likelihood of suicide. Yet in the case of Jews that effect seemed to have been neutralized. The effect of Jews becoming “intellectual” was particularly hard to understand. The fact should have been correlated, as it was for Protestants—who were also more intellectual and urban than Catholics—with increased self-searching and with education fueled by free inquiry. To put it roughly, it should have been possible to ascribe Jewish “intellectualization” to what I have called “critical idealism.” But the operative principle here seems different. Above all, it seems quite disconnected from the inferiority indicated by the primacy of mechanical observance in Judaism. I suggest the term “disconnected,” or rather nonaligned, for in Durkheim’s time the connection had not yet been entirely severed: Jews were in the process of assimilating and therefore not yet assimilated. The two dimensions—intellectuality and mechanical religious observance—simultaneously present in the modern Jewish individual were not aligned.

At this stage several questions arise. What is the source of Jewish intellectuality? How does this figure of a Jew living somewhere between Judaism and modernity, an individual who in one part of her- or himself practices without understanding and in the other understands without practicing, cohere as a single being? And what was the status of that figure for Durkheim? Was it pathological?

No, quite the contrary. The Jew’s unconsciously split way of being functioned as a rampart—weak, insufficient, yet operative at its own level—against egotistical suicide. As mentioned, the real contemporary pathology as Durkheim saw it was due to egotism, understood as an excessive taste for individuation—and more to egotism than to anomie as the passion for progress. In fact, the pathology could be attributed to the mutual reinforcement of these two currents. Why, then, were Jews engaged in the process of assimilation—that is, people living a kind of life that should have overexposed them to suicide—actually immunized? Durkheim offered the following portrait of this individual:

Jews seek an education not in order to replace their collective prejudices by rational ideas, but simply to be better armed for the struggle. For them, this is a means of compensating for the inferior position they are accorded by public opinion and, sometimes, by law. And since in itself knowledge is powerless against a tradition that remains in full force, the educated Jew superposes his intellectual life upon his ritual observances without the first interfering with the second. Hence the complexity of his make-up: primitive in certain respects, he is in others a refined and cultured person. He thus combines the advantages of the strong discipline that was characteristic of the small groups of earlier times with the benefits of the intense culture enjoyed by the widely based societies of
the contemporary world. He has all the intelligence of modern people without sharing their despair. (170; 2006, 175).

In this passage, Judaism and science are inseparably intertwined. It is an apology for science by way of a portrait of the modern Jew—which does not mean it is an apology for the modern Jew. Durkheim’s figure of the Jew is a composite, structured into two mutually impermeable dimensions. The primitive coexists with the evolved in the same person. The dualism of Durkheim’s homo duplex is sociological here: in one part of his being the Jew partakes of mechanical society, in the other of organic society—at least that striking aspect of organic society that corresponds to the development of intellectuality—without one part affecting the other. This Jew is historically defined: after starting and before completing the assimilation process, he is still practicing his religion. He performs the mechanical acts that regulate the details of his life without questioning them intellectually, settling for the integrative benefit they afford him. And “above” this consolidated foundation of mechanical practice, the Jew’s mind is free to operate and investigate, exempt from the critical activity that would have been required if he were trying to liberate himself from a shared body of thought. Clearly what the Jew did not have amounted to his fundamental advantage in modern life; that is, he was immune to the critical attitude toward dogma. At a deeper level—phylogenetically and ontogenetically—that advantage consists in his “immunity” to the kind of faith that Christianity introduced into history. Because the Jew has not experienced faith as a social determinant of conscience, dogma as a power that constrains the mind to believe in a certain way, he thinks in a different direction, as it were, and for different reasons than those that push people to emancipate themselves spiritually and thereby to expose themselves to the despair that accompanies that emancipation.

But then what moves the Jew to think, to use his reason, to partake in science? In order for Jews to think, thinking had to become a goal for them. In Durkheim’s portrait of Judaism, that goal is not a specifically Jewish one but a modern one, which emerged most clearly in modern societies that were developing consistently with their own natures. Durkheim is therefore not an heir to Mendelssohn. His understanding was not continuous with the Jewish Enlightenment: thinking had come to Jews from without. But they “received” it in a specifically Jewish way. For in the case of Jews, two activities might be disconnected that in Protestantism could not be: the activity of criticism, and intellectual activity. Critique had been decidedly favorable to the advancement of science, both in and of itself and because it had transformed scientific knowledge into a recognized social goal. But it operated this way by means of free inquiry, and thus according to a particular sense of what it means to criticize. The main vector in the struggle to get free of dogmatism, prejudice, and tradition had been Protestant. The two virtues implicated in that development—love of progress and a taste for individuality—had now been accented to the breaking point, as attested by the increase in suicides. Now Durkheim needed to see whether science itself was responsible for this—whether science bore within it as a kind of essential characteristic the depressive factor that fueled egoism. It was this question, disturbing for modernity as such, that the Jewish case enabled Durkheim to resolve. The heuristic function of the Jews in Durkheim’s
argument was in fact to **exculpate science**, to protect it from any and all unjust accusations. For Jews were living proof that critique, necessarily subjective and individualizing, had been grafted onto thinking; and while this critique fostered and facilitated thinking, it was not consubstantial with it. Jews were proof that thinking could develop outside the twofold move to attack dogmatic faith and to obtain recognition for the individual conscience as an interpretative and judicative authority. Jews were the historically attested substratum of nonsubjective thinking; that is, thinking in which the task of critique was not apprehended as asserting personal judgments that went against the norms of collective thinking. The fertility of Jewish intellectuality derived precisely from this easing of the task: the nonconnection between thought and critique.

Returning to ritualism, was integration its sole positive effect? When Durkheim spoke of the “advantages of strong discipline,” was he thinking of integration alone? Could not practice of a sort whose rules never change constitute a kind of foundation within oneself, ensuring that the group was internally present at the very moment one was freeing oneself from it? This two-story individual seemed disposed to become modern as a **socially disciplined being**—it was this that explained his resistance to suicide. Jewish discipline, then, was not strictly material or limited to bodily movements.

In Durkheim’s understanding, belief differed from ritual in the same way thinking differed from movement. And for Jews, as for the Aruntas of Australia, the main aspect of religion was to apply meticulously detailed, inviolable rules in a way that produced the same shared movements. It is difficult to discern in *Suicide* one of the functions of ritual that became essential in *The Elementary Forms*—that of putting the subject into the mental conditions required for experiencing “the impersonal.” This function came to light in connection with mimetic ritual, which Durkheim saw as central to primitive sacrificial rites. Such ritual, as he came to understand it, wove a tie among minds in a way that implied moving beyond subjective perception. It is reasonable to assume that Durkheim’s description of modern Jews undergoing assimilation in *Suicide* already pointed in that direction. Arnaldo Momigliano was therefore right to say that Durkheim “Judaicized” Australian totemic society, to the point where it came to resemble those small communities in Lorraine “no longer exercised by mysticism or Messianic fervor.”

The Judaism of Durkheim’s self-described “serious, precocious childhood” now appeared to him as mere ritualism, and as such it shaped his conception of elementary religions. In any case, when it came to generating ideals, Judaism’s inferiority was manifest and could not be denied. But there is another side to that judgment. Durkheim’s idea of the modern Jew—and consequently of himself—led him to appreciate ritualism for its mental effects, which were a kind of external, indirect consequence of its practical structure. Modern Jews (that is, those of Durkheim’s time) were simultaneously archaic and extremely modern. And in Durkheim’s understanding, being archaic got high marks not only for its virtue of strengthening ties and consolidating the group but also because archaic ritual pulled thought in the direction of what it did not contain (in both senses of the verb: encompass and limit). As long as ritual implies neither regression (and how could it if Jews were genuinely split?) nor a process in which it acquires spiritual meaning for the subject practicing it (nothing of the sort happened in Judaism because ritual was...
inert), it creates a mental state favorable for the development of a different type of thought than thinking governed by personal judgment. Therein lies the unexpected advantage of this particular fossil.

Does this mean that modern Jews were a figure of scientific thinking as entirely positive, disinterested thinking? Absolutely not. The disjoining of critique and thinking identified above did not imply disinterestedness in the subjects in whom they had been disjoined. This is why there is no two-part apology—of science and Jews. What Durkheim’s portrait does contain is a diagnosis of antisemitism as negative stimulus. Jews had a very strong interest in investing in thought, because for them intellectual activity represented a kind of “weapon” in the social struggle they were condemned to wage given the discrimination that had pursued them throughout the history of European societies—discrimination not only in the form of negative public opinion but also legal discrimination. In that struggle, caused by unfavorable external conditions, science was of use to Jews. Conjointly, Jews were of use to science—as Jews—and this time for reasons internal to Judaism. Jews served science differently than Protestants or Catholics. The paradox is that despite their vested interest in science, they were doomed, as it were, to practice it in their own disconnected way. They could not practice it in any other way, given that critical subjective probing—precisely the kind that had caused the nonessential, context-governed convergence between thinking and a particular suicidal current—was alien to them.

Jews showed that another way was possible. This in no sense meant that they were the privileged agents of that other way. Once again, objectively practiced science as Durkheim defined it in The Rules of Sociological Method was an attainment and culmination of modern thought; in no way was it specifically Jewish. Ridding ourselves of what Durkheim called “prenotions” and combating prejudice were central purposes of fully developed science. In this sense science was of course critical. But though the critical attitude had had to endure the searing break attested to by the history of Christian thought, this did not mean it was riveted to free inquiry as shaped by individuation. The case of Jews, the ease with which they moved and advanced in the area of intellectuality, showed that science could be practiced independently of such conditions. And here we can go further than Durkheim: the case of Jews shows that critique, freed of its subjectivist component, can win recognition for the collective dimension of thought without that dimension being a matter of dogma. In this sense, Jews do indeed have a remarkable aptitude to think sociologically and to participate in science—science as sociology allowed for conceiving it. This aptitude is related to their relative immunity to the suicidal current wherein thought, having become excessively individualized, acts as cause in spite of itself.

As we know, that current is egoism—not, interestingly enough, anomie (i.e., deregulation caused by overswelling of the passion for progress). Thinking went off the rails—and came to partake of the modern pathology—by connecting up with individuation through the subjectifying act of critique. The figure of the modern Jew, with his extreme aptitude for assimilation, was an exception when it came to thinking. The Jew’s relative immunity to the primary ill—rising egotistical suicide—has thus been understood and demonstrated. But what of his relation to the secondary ill, anomic suicide? Nothing Durkheim says on the subject allows us to answer that question. Yet we have to ask it if we want to further detail the portrait he left us and
elucidate its full sociological meaning. Understanding the relation between Durkheim’s thought and the historical figure of the modern Jew requires formulating hypotheses on the subject of Jews and anomic suicide.

Once again, the rapidity with which modern Jews assimilated corresponded not only to the general direction of progress but also to their own desire for advancement. The two-story individual was a transitory figure pertaining to Jews still practicing mechanically while fully devoting themselves to an intellectual career. In 1907, in his review of Father Krose’s *Die Ursachen der Selbstmordhäufigkeit* (1906), a turn-of-the-century reanalysis of the religious determinations of suicide, Durkheim noted a significant change: “As the Jewish population becomes assimilated to the surrounding population, it is losing its traditional virtues without, perhaps, replacing them with others.” The “perhaps” is worth noting. Nonetheless, it was undeniable that Jewish suicide rates had increased. Was this due to a fall in the preserving virtues or, on the contrary, an exaggeration of what was a virtue in some other connection? It is legitimate to formulate the question this way if we take the assimilation process seriously, that is, as a more complex and ambiguous phenomenon than the mere disappearance of Jews. If assimilation was the way of the future—and if the process was not stopped by antisemitism—then it was clear that Judaic practice would decline. It was already doing so, and the benefit in terms of integration was shrinking. It was not that Jews were criticizing practical norms for the discipline those norms imposed; rather, practices that were as “mechanical” as Jewish ones, practices that could hold together groups in the process of assimilating, would ultimately fall away in and of themselves when such groups no longer had any external (negative) incentive to maintain their internal cohesion. However, even if we assume that observance was disappearing and that, with antisemitism receding, the need for regressive solidarity would do likewise, some specific feature would subsist in Jews. Their “upper story,” the singular intellectuality whose formative conditions I have just specified, would continue to distinguish them within modern society. How would that society react to this from now on?

My point here is that the two dimensions comprising the portrait of the Jew “in the process” of becoming assimilated have not undergone the same fate. In the full assimilation scenario that we need to imagine, some singularizing feature persists. But it is not a residue of rootedness. What’s more, it is not uniformly Jewish in that it cannot be derived from some presumed nature of Judaism now reduced to religious or cultural foundation. That enduring feature results from the contingent encounter between a certain religious configuration—being alien to idealism and therefore to a critique of faith—and the modern process, that is, the construction of organic societies and the importance those societies grant to intellectual activity. Moreover—and this is surely the most important point—that feature could not function as a center around which a new membership group could form. It could be found in a certain number of individuals but did not serve to unite them into a substantive, self-conscious group. In sum, and without denying the fact of assimilation and its dissolution of particularized collective identities, it is clear that one Jewish feature—or rather a feature that fell to Jews and that each would exhibit individually—would persist after assimilation. It pertains to a way of thinking present in dispersed individuals. And it amounts to a change in rationalism, a curious historical “secretion” that modernity carried on its side and that manifested itself
belatedly, once a set of factors had come together in which Judaism as such played a very limited role.

This feature has nonetheless doomed the Jews to progress. According to the topics of *Suicide*, this can mean two different things. The passion for progress, a fundamental virtue of modern societies, implies regulation of activity, and that regulation can be either too strong or too weak. If it is too weak, there is nothing to rein in infinite desire or provide it with purpose; if it is excessive, the future seems “pitilessly blocked” (311; 1951, 239) and the passion for progress shatters against impossibility. Anomic and fatalistic suicides are symmetrically opposed on the count of regulation, just as altruistic and egotistical suicides are opposed on the count of integration. Durkheim dismissed fatalism as a quantitatively insignificant phenomenon: historically, it referred to suicide by slaves and, in his time, “very young husbands” and “the married woman who is childless” (ibid.; 1951, 276). But might fatalistic suicide be relevant for some modern Jews? The question is a fair one once we take into account the possibility of antisemitic opinion growing stronger or becoming instituted as antisemitic law, of its rising once again in Europe and precluding de facto any margin of progress among individuals already engaged in an assimilation process. Being particularly well adapted to intellectual practice precisely because one has chosen it as a “weapon” in the struggle (170; 2006, 177) becomes a factor for despair when that struggle is lost even before it can begin, that is, when acquired aptitudes cannot be converted into social benefits. Negative consolidation—such as the bolstering of internal ties in communities that are discriminated against or persecuted—only works if the assimilation process has not gone beyond a certain point. Once it has, Jews no longer have any other tie to turn to than the one they hope to make with the receiving society. This means that the very people who shared in the intelligence of modern men without sharing their despair can come to that despair by a path other than egotism.

Jews do not feature in Durkheim’s discussion of anomie either. There may be a general explanation for this: both anomie and fatalism are problems involving the passions rather than the intellect. The intrinsically unlimited nature of desire—which explained why economic, industrial, and business activities were directly affected by anomie (288; 2006, 284)—had made regulation necessary. Nonetheless, the move to embrace progress through intellectuality does involve passion, particularly when the motivation is to obtain better odds in the social struggle. What does it mean for Jews to progress? Once again, the point is clarified through a comparison of Jews and Protestants. In the Christian world, where Protestants remained, progress implied a critique of dogma. Progressing was an act of emancipation—self-extrication from a collective foundation that remained relevant for the emancipated even after they had extricated themselves. Jews, on the other hand, wage that combat with their eyes trained on the future only. The combat is coextensive with progress itself—progress understood as time that is constantly redeployed as one advances, as one “ progresses”—without any reference to a tradition that one has left behind and that might serve to measure the distance covered. We see that the danger of anomie here comes not from antisemitism but rather from the same singularizing feature of the modern Jew that has just been identified. For devoting oneself to progress by practicing criticism—the individual consciousness turning back to or on itself as a reasoning consciousness—is not the same thing as willing
progress. Progress here is understood as pure accomplishment of the modern project in an impersonal mode, where the only wager is on history itself, as it were: the indefinite temporal openness of history.

As we saw at the outset, it was because Jews changed so quickly that they appeared to Durkheim extremely modern. We now have a clearer idea why. Disburdened of the cumbersome aspect of critique by which thought is related to the thinking subject (in either psychological or transcendental mode, it matters little here), Jews move fast. They have no difficulty considering facts as “things” or analyzing them from the perspective of impersonal reason. But at another level this makes them vulnerable. Entirely projected toward the future, they are the first to fall when history trips up—when “progress” is not progress at all, and science and civilization betray themselves by submitting to the expansionist warring of nations. There can be no doubt that Durkheim invented the concept of anomie and distinguished it from egotism before the first signs of World War I, and that he thought of it as something more than social discontent. Anomie is the sociological version of “civilization’s discontents.” It is just as certain that Jews’ extreme aptitude for assimilation—that is, for intrinsically historical progress—condemned them to suffer from anomie specifically. In this connection, Heine’s old line, “Judaism’s not a religion, it’s a misfortune,” seems to acquire new resonance and a rightful place in Durkheim’s discourse.

Except that that discourse does not exist. Once again, there is no data in Suicide to confirm the hypotheses I have been formulating about Jewish suicide in connection with the singularizing feature of modern Jews that Durkheim did identify. Have I been applying the very method I criticized at the outset, trying to detect what Durkheim left unsaid on the Jewish question in a body of work that hardly lends itself to such interpretation? In the empirical framework initially defined, the demonstration had no right to go so far. My own questions about modern Jews are what have dug the aforementioned “hole” in Durkheim’s discourse, and it makes little sense to ask why Durkheim did not fill it, let alone reproach him for that.

On the other hand, it is important to note that the history of Durkheimian thought went some way toward filling that hole. In 1930, in a work that returned to the root of Durkheim’s suicide problem and related it to new knowledge acquired through the intervening empirical and methodological advancement of social science, Maurice Halbwachs pointed out that the trend in Jewish suicide noted by Durkheim had been entirely reversed. If there was one point on which Durkheim’s analysis should be corrected it was that one, Halbwachs insisted. Moreover, Durkheim himself had begun to acknowledge this in his 1907 review of Father Krose’s book. The time had come to be clear and direct: suicide among Jews in Prussia had risen to nearly six times what it was, overtaking the rate for Protestants.19 Durkheim’s theory of Jewish “preservation” was an illusion.

Halbwachs thoroughly reorganized Durkheim’s suicide question, rejecting the very idea that the religious factor—or the family one—could be isolated or observed in isolation and calling instead for a comprehensive, integrated term such as “lifestyle” or “milieu,” in which customs, institutions, practices, and representations would be understood to interact. That shift is not of primary interest here, but it is important to note Halbwachs’s remark that Durkheim had formulated the suicide problem even less relevantly for Jews than for Protestants and Catholics (re-
garding the latter groups, Halbwachs nonetheless consented to criticize Durkheim’s method). According to Halbwachs, Jews—and if this applied to a large proportion of them in 1930 it already applied to a significant proportion in 1897—could not be ascribed a specific religious identity:

The extremely rapid multiplication of mixed marriages between Israelites and Christians does not primarily result from the weakening of religious beliefs among them. Rather, such marriages would not be possible at all if Jewish families were forced back upon themselves as much as formerly and did not allow their members more freedom. There is nothing here that cannot be expressed in purely secular terms except for customs of long standing that have some ties to religion. For the purpose of examining the influence of the religious group as such on suicide, then, it would be better to discard the example of the Jews.20

And indeed, the rest of Halbwachs’s discussion says nothing of Jews. His is an entirely different interpretation of the two-story individual. The “customs of long standing that have some ties to religion” did not amount in and of themselves to a “religious factor.” Jews were assimilating very quickly, as attested by the high rate of intermarriage. They were free individuals—evermore free. Custom-based ties were doomed to disappear, and when they persisted they were insignificant, meaning they did not have enough impact to enable us to assess the specific affect of the religion on suicide. Durkheim, suggests Halbwachs, misled us on this point, even more than in his comparison of Protestants and Catholics. For Jews, a strictly secular reading was required.

We can wager that this reading was urgently required at the time Halbwachs was writing. At the end of the preceding century, Durkheim could write that antisemitism in Western Europe was “superficial” or “passing.” In 1930 no such assumption could be made. For anyone who, like Halbwachs, saw and understood the implications of the rise of Nazism at a time when antisemitism had been steadily flourishing in French public opinion as well, judgments had to be unambiguous, free of any emphasis whose effects might prove incontrollable. Jews were modern—the proof was that they were assimilating at high speed. Durkheim had of course already said this many years before, but it had had a different meaning when he said it. For Halbwachs, to speak of assimilation was to take literally the indiscernible future of “Jews” and not to take into account their singular integration trajectory, in which they could still be discerned as Jews. In speaking of assimilation, it was important to ensure that no specifically Jewish feature subsisted and also to be careful not to point up any specifically Jewish contribution to the destiny of modern democratic societies.

Legal antisemitism, not just that of public opinion, would soon hit so-called civilized Europe, acquiring unprecedented scope and giving rise to unheard-of violence. Halbwachs, the Christian husband of an assimilated Jew, a representative of just those mixed marriages whose multiplication he had pointed out, was arrested by the Gestapo and died in Buchenwald in 1945. There can be no doubt that he had perceived before Hitler came to power the urgency of precluding any judging of Jews that would distinguish them from other groups, especially when such judgments were being revised “outside,” while Jews were in the process of assimilating. For antisemitism too was progressing, and not just quantitatively. It was learning
to discriminate ever more finely—just when all evidence suggested there was nothing left to be discriminated. With an admirable mixture of intellectual probity and political acuity, Halbwachs settled the matter: “it is preferable to leave aside the example of the Jews.” And “the Jews” were already in the sights of Western European societies.

Durkheim and Halbwachs were also separated by the distance between nascent social science and solidly constituted social science, with its own publications and publishers, teaching institutions, tested methods, and attested results. From The Causes of Suicide onward, what was no longer visible, for excellent reasons—for the very best of reasons—was precisely what Durkheim had articulated about Jews at the inaugural moment, upon the founding of a new discipline forced to carve out its own territory and to determine and formulate the broad lines of its own type of scientificity. The paradox that shifted into the background in the interwar period and was not perceived later was that in Durkheim’s thought the initial explanation of the fully developed scientific spirit developed surreptitiously by way of a continued, maintained Jewish singularity, a singularity that took shape within the sociological perspective itself and could do so precisely because this perspective meant to be and was thoroughly, unambiguously secular.

Jewish singularity was produced by a complex conjoining of historical factors. It emerged at the intersection of (1) a cultural lineage characterized by a backward “life of the mind”; (2) the exercise of free inquiry and critique as inherited from modernity steeped in Christianity; and (3) long-term social conditioning in the form of persecution and ostracism, which explained Jews’ particular way of “entering” modernity. The interesting precipitate of these three factors, each of a different nature and status, was modern Jews. It is interesting for science and the history of reason, for Jews represent a paradoxical actualization of that history. And the Jewish human entity in itself is interesting as a kind of casting-against-type, “perpetrated” by history, a conjoining of heterogeneous factors that, through their improbable synthesis, ended up conferring the attributes of the avant-garde on one of the oldest and most archaic of society’s distinct groups. This type of modernity was capable of critiquing itself by rising to the level of impersonal, collective thought—a type of thought that, as long as it is not rigidified into new dogma, stands as modernity’s highest achievement.

Notes

1. A line of eight generations, the last representative being Moïse Durkheim, the rabbi of Epinal, Émile’s father. Neither Émile nor his brother Felix took on this function and profession. Were they deliberately breaking with it? To answer that question we would have to define what they were breaking from, for the family’s Judaism changed over the nineteenth century. According to Ivan Strenski in Durkheim and the Jews of France (Chicago, 1997), 60–61, the rabbi Moïse Durkheim was in significant ways a “modernizing Jew”: the household observed Judaic rules, but not in the orthodox way of the preceding generations. Émile’s “serious, precocious” childhood, as he described it, characteristic of those small Jewish communities in Lorraine “no longer exercised by mysticism or Messianic fervor,” as Arnaldo Momigliano put it in his astute analysis (Problèmes d’historiographie ancienne et moderne [Paris, 1988], 422), was actually fairly permeable to the rationalism Durkheim came to devote himself to. For a genetic, psychoanalytic reading of Durkheim’s work through the prism of his relationship with his father, see Bernard Lacroix, Durkheim et le politique (Paris, 1981).

3. Jean-Claude Milner’s study of the repercussions of Weber’s “Science as a Vocation” on certain German Jews (*Le Juif de savoir* [Paris, 2008]) could be transposed to the case of French Jewish scholars and scientists in the first half of the twentieth century. The Durkheimian movement would be important in such a study and might even constitute a main avenue of investigation. The epistemological point of departure would be *The Rules of Sociological Method*; the study would examine how this text fit into the political-ideological context of the Third Republic.

4. Momigliano recalls that while “Weber introduced the term pariah into scientific study of Judaism,” the link between Jews and the term *pariah* (social outcast) was already current in the early nineteenth century (*Contributions à l’histoire du judaïsme* [Paris, 2002], 219).


7. Translator’s note: There are two English translations of Durkheim’s work: *Suicide*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York, 1951); and *On Suicide*, trans. Robin Buss (London, 2006). For each quotation here, the translation deemed closest to the original French and Bruno Karsenti’s argument was chosen; that choice is indicated by translation date—1951 or 2006—following the English quotation and page number in the original French.

8. Commentaries written in the wake of Parsons’s *Structure of Social Action* (New York, 1937) are likely to focus on the comparison between Protestantism and Catholicism. In fact, Halbwachs had set the tone as early as 1930, explaining that the case of Judaism was misleading, a kind of trompe l’oeil: “For the purposes of examining the influence of the religious group as such on suicide, it would be better to discard the example of the Jews” (*Halbwachs, Causes du suicide*, trans. Harold Goldblatt [London, 1978], 169; Halbwachs, *Les Causes du suicide* [1930; Paris, 2002], 194). In the conclusion I consider the meaning of Halbwachs’s move to exclude Jews from study of suicide by religious membership.

9. “The kind of suicide that is currently the most widespread and which most contributes to raising the annual figure of voluntary deaths is egotistical suicide” (*Le Suicide* [1897; Paris, 1995], 406; *On Suicide*, trans. Robin Buss [London, 2006], 396). Exclusive focus on the concept of anomic suicide (which was also increasing but was not, according to Durkheim, the main cause of the general rise) may lead us to forget this important point.


15. Ibid., 511. It is useful to recall that Durkheim arrived at his thesis on sacrifice through a discussion of Robertson Smith’s *The Religion of the Semites*. In passing, he draws a parallel between Australian sacrifices and the sacrifices described in the Pentateuch (ibid., 488).


18. With the partial exception of Masada, a case of mixed anomic-altruistic suicide that Durkheim ultimately classified as “exasperated effervescence” (332; 2006, 325).


20. Ibid.