

Towards *fin de siècle*: A time to re-vision Durkheim's sociology of education?

Paul Armstrong
Birkbeck College, University of London

Abstract: This paper builds on earlier work on values and ethics that argued the need to re-vision the ideas of Émile Durkheim, by suggesting that the argument is supported by the notion of *fin de siècle*, which implies that the challenges of post-modernity are by no means new, and that there is evidence of a pattern or even a cycle that would seem to re-appear at the end of each century. Approaching the 21st century and the millennium, the notion of *fin de siècle* has additional significance. But is it merely a matter of history repeating itself? And is this important to the educator of adults?

Retrogression

You may recall a popular song from the 1950s entitled 'There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza'? The song encapsulates the helix of non-sequential, circularity in moving towards the achievement of goals. In order to achieve A, I need to undertake B; in order to achieve B, I need to undertake C; in order to achieve C, I need to undertake A. At the 1996 AERC conference, my paper on values and ethics in research, was presented as part of a larger project which was seeking to find out whether and why we need to research values and ethics in research before we can research values and ethics. My hypothesis was that the answer to both the 'whether' and the 'why' had something to do with these 'new times'; or our postmodern condition. Towards the end of the paper, I realized my task was only just beginning. The penultimate paragraph asked where should we *begin*? My journey forward had taken me back to nineteenth century social theory; namely, Weber, Simmel, and Durkheim. Freed by post-modernism from my previous fear of pluralism and especially eclecticism, I concluded the paper with a further 'whether and why' question: whether we should go back to re-vision the work of Durkheim, and if so, why?

So, here we are back to the grand narrative. In this paper, I wish to argue for the re-visioning of Durkheim's sociology of education, and lest I forget my long-term challenge, the broader landscape, I want to conclude by briefly considering the importance of the issues raised for the teacher or researcher in adult education.

It is no longer a surprise to me to find that the path I wish to tread someone else has been there before; indeed, in this case, it is well-trodden. Responding to the challenge to return to the writings of Durkheim, to critically re-appraise his writings, not in the context of the nineteenth century, but in terms of their contemporary relevance, I found that - inevitably - the task had already been completed. For example, in 1989, Frank Pearce had creatively re-examined Durkheim's major works, questioning the taken-for-granted, inherent positivism and conservatism. Pearce sought to explore and re-theorise the concepts that informed Durkheim's

work, and from here to develop new theoretical analysis. In a sense, Pearce was de-constructing Durkheim, which was title of a subsequent publication by Jennifer Lehmann. However, just to add to the confusion, the author tell us that her analysis is not deconstruction, 'because it assumes that the radical break with metaphysical humanism occurs with modernism, and some form of 'structuralism' - not with 'post-modernism' or post-structuralism'. Nor can it be a deconstruction because it is a reading of Durkheim from a particular and alternative point of view - critical structuralism (as opposed to Durkheimianism, not deconstructionism). The very fact that Durkheimianism can be opposed by an alternative other than deconstructionism in itself goes against the 'philosophy of deconstructionism'. In other words, the analysis points to alternative 'epistemes' in Durkheim's theories. By contrast, deconstruction is a 'sceptical, undermining, decentering, anti-foundational, processual critique of absolutely everything ... Deconstruction is posed as the most radical escape from conventional philosophy, and somehow outside it, as not just another ontology and epistemology, but as, putatively, the absence or end of ontology and epistemology'.

Whatever the arguments, my intuition that Durkheim was in need of re-visioning turned out to be justifiable. But there was a further twist in the analysis to come, when I came across a third re-reading of Durkheim which was published between Pearce and Lehmann. In 1991, Stejpan Meštrovic published *The Coming Fin de Siècle*. The significance of this re-reading of Durkheim was more than re-considering the contemporary relevance of his ideas, but to re-situate them in the nineteenth century, not just as a historical moment, but as a historico-cultural experience. The notion of *fin de siècle* does not relate merely to the end of the nineteenth century, but has a close affinity with the spirit of post-modernism.

It would appear that the term *fin de siècle* originated in a play by two obscure Parisian writers in 1888, and was used to refer to the general cultural malaise characterising late nineteenth century Europe, 'it signified a belief on the part of the literate and voluble bourgeoisie that the end of the century would bring with it decay, decline and ultimate disaster'. This spirit of decadence did not accidentally sweep across Europe and across the globe as some kind of free-floating *Zeitgeist* or 'spirit of the times'. Rather, 'social and political factors obviously governed such a sustained 'feeling', and the growth of mass communications facilitated the spread of these ideas. Late nineteenth century Europe was unquestionably invaded by *fin de siècle* culture - by art and literature which self-consciously promoted the themes of decadence and death. It also impacted on social theory. Paradoxically, the very internationalism of this '*fin de siècle*' ideology stimulated a greater sense of self-awareness and even affectation in the citizens of Europe and America.'

It would appear that this internationalism was considered the most unusual feature of this nineteenth century *fin de siècle*, for other characteristics of the phenomenon had appeared at the end of previous centuries, as expressed in art, literature and other cultural artefacts.

If this is the case, then it will be of no surprise that as we approach the end of another century, that the period may be characterised *by fin de siècle* - perhaps more so, because it is not only the end of a century, but a millennium. Does not postmodernity reflect that very same spirit? Meštrovic believes so: 'The previous *fin de siècle* spirit and the current wave of postmodern culture share a common rhetoric of rebellion against Enlightenment narrative. In this sense, the

coming *fin de siècle* and the previous *fin de siècle* also seem to share cultural values and traits, a sense of anxiety, uneasiness, and excitement; a deliberate breaking away from the seriousness and tradition in favour of play, impulse and fun; and a seeming liberal concern with what might still be termed socialist, democratic, humanistic ideals of justice and equality'.

Meštrovic argues in his book that whilst there is overlap between the idea of *fin de siècle*, and postmodernity, they are not synonymous. Postmodernism is an extension of modernity - the same Enlightenment modernity that the previous *fin de siècle* spirit rebelled against. Whilst the previous *fin de siècle* may be considered a genuine reaction against Enlightenment narratives, and a genuine search for the *irrational* bases of social order, the coming *fin de siècle* will be seen as an imperfect, ambiguous, confused and contradictory attempt to replicate the original and authentic spirit of rebellion of the nineteenth century. His argument is that one of the differences lies in the intellectual spirit that is at the heart of the *irrational* which itself comes from the heart. His analysis leads him to Schopenhauer who argued that the heart was more important than the mind, and his influence was strongly felt by Durkheim.

Digression

If the arguments so far presented are reviewed, we find that a justification for re-visioning Durkheim's work is not that his grand narrative is sufficiently abstract, historically and culturally free that his ideas can be applied with little distortion to our contemporary times, but that the historical and cultural context in which he conceived his ideas and the nature of his task is essentially similar in spirit to our own. How can we illustrate this? If we were able to establish that the key concerns of education during the period characterised by the previous *fin de siècle*, which are presumably reflected in the Durkheim's writings are essentially similar, in spirit, to those we face today, then we could take a step forward in our analysis, to argue the need to re-vision the ideas of Durkheim. Given West's insistence on the significance of the international dimension of the previous *fin de siècle*, we would also need to establish that this evidence was not just European. In undertaking a search of the historical evidence in both Europe and North America for the period characterized as *fin de siècle* in the nineteenth century, there would appear to be two problems of historiography. The first is to do with the selection of historical evidence, and the second is to do with history itself, from a postmodern perspective. These concerns might be considered a digression, but are - of course - at the heart of the rational/*irrational* debate that I am seeking to tread lightly through.

An admittedly cursory glance through the history of North American adult education produced some interesting ideas. Even the way historians decide to structure and classify history is of significance. Malcolm Knowles, for example, has a chapter on 'the growth of the nation and its quest for the diffusion of knowledge, 1780-1865'. The dates are presumably governed by political conflicts, from the Revolution to the Civil War, rather than by any cultural considerations. Nevertheless, a whole series of cultural issues relating to social stratification and social mobility, the role of women, and immigration are implicit in Knowles's descriptions, and explicit in his statement that the first adult educational task of the new nation was to transform an entire people from subjects to citizens, in a society changing to democracy. His next chapter focuses on a more limited historical period, 1866 to 1920, which for some commentators on *fin de siècle*, would almost entirely encapsulate their period of concern. This focuses on the

maturation of the nation and its concomitant multiplication of adult education institution. Knowles' characterizes this period as equivalent to 'adolescence', with dramatic change (urbanization) and expansion (population, agricultural and industrial production). According to Knowles. The intellectual spirit of this era was as expansive as the political and economic: 'knowledge broke the bonds of subservience to theology and philosophy as the application of the scientific method to nearly all fields of knowledge produced a mass of new information'. The contemporary technological revolution adds a new emphasis to the phrase 'a mass of new information'. By contrast, the book by Stubblefield and Keane has less historical specificity, but points to similar trends; indeed, their Chapter 10 begins by referring to Knowles. Unfortunately, lack of space prevents a detailed critical analysis of their construction. It was intended to use a common example, that of Chautauqua, to attempt to draw out the features of late nineteenth century educational concerns. Features such as the defence of liberal adult education, adulthood as an appropriate time for intellectual development, non-formal education, the workplace as a site of learning, the importance of biographical crises as learning opportunities, education as refreshment, intellectual stimulation and acquisition of morality and spirituality (bringing together the sacred and the secular) all have their echoes in the late twentieth century, though the emphasis and detail will be different.

Less sequential in his analysis of the period 1750-1990, Joseph Kett includes an interesting discussion on culture and its decline (1870-1900). Taking a critical view of the rather narrow interpretation of the concept of culture, Kett says that by the early years of the twentieth century, 'culture itself was in decline as a goal of popular adult education. Long sniped at by a guerrilla band of critics, including Walt Whitman, culture gradually lost the allegiance of its own stalwarts and in the eyes of marauders and deserters alike came to *connote excessive refinement and even decadence*'.

Turning to Europe, the intention here was to report the re-examination of my earlier research on the development of working-class and education for socialism using historical evidence from nineteenth-century Britain. My argument rested on a marxist analysis of historical data, which demonstrated the 'failure' of adult education to contribute to the development of a socialist class consciousness and to establish a counter-hegemony, noting the continued fragmentation of the labour movement. What now makes that conclusion unsatisfactory is that I made no attempt at cultural analysis, although the sources of evidence in use (working-class publications and journals) were themselves cultural artefacts.

Indeed, a characteristic of these histories is their lack of criticality about the nature of history itself, ready to treat - paraphrasing Durkheim - historical facts as 'things'. It would be too much of a digression to get into this discussion, but it does need to be raised. The title of the article by Fukuyama, 'the end of history', should alert us to the need to de-construct historical perspectives and evidence.

Progression

So what has this got to do with either Durkheim or the education of adults? The argument is that the work of Durkheim can provide a valid frame of analysis for contemporary education. Certainly, as I suggested last year, his work on morals and education are pertinent, reminding us

of the possibilities of secular (for example, socialist) as well as religious ethics and values providing the basis of collective conscience in sustaining social solidarity in times of significant change and diversity. Moreover, among the grand narrators, Durkheim is unusual in that he does focus on education and culture (and, education *as* culture), as opposed to the narrowly political and economic. But above all, Durkheim has a sociology of knowledge which can be radicalised and deconstructed. His famous admonition is that we should treat 'social facts as things'. Whilst it is true that he did believe that social phenomena had a reality of their own ('a reality *sui generis*'), what is usually misunderstood about this injunction is that these 'things' were social actions, *informed by ideas*. He recognised that the knowable world was already received as reification. In other words, Durkheim would appear to have been a phenomenologist.

Durkheim's sociology of knowledge is, then, in a complex relationship, but not necessarily at odds, with critical theories of ideology. As I have tried to indicate through the notion of *fin de siècle*, ideas no longer have to be seen purely in terms of their historical root; they provide a far wider and more inclusive range, forming the background to every social process, and they are pre-eminent because it is through ideas that we construct social reality.

As teachers, we may be concerned that our purpose is to construct reality, or the 'truth' for our students; for us, as researchers, the purveyors of objective facts, Durkheim reminds us of the constraining effect of the 'rules of social life'.

1. Paul Armstrong, 1996, 'The professional ethic and the spirit of post-modernism: researching values in teaching and research in the education of adults', *Proceedings of the 36th Adult Education Research Conference*, University of South Florida, Tampa.
2. Frank Pierce, 1989, *The Radical Durkheim*. London: Unwin Hyman.
3. Jennifer M. Lehmann, 1993, *Deconstructing Durkheim: a post-post-structuralist critique*. London: Routledge.
4. *ibid.* p. 4
5. Stjepan G. Meštrovic, 1991, *The coming fin de siècle: an application of Durkheim's sociology to modernity and postmodernism*. London: Routledge.
6. Shearer West, 1993, *Fin de siècle: art and society in an age of uncertainty*. London: Bloomsbury.
7. Jeffrey C. Alexander, 1995, *Fin de siècle social theory: relativism, reduction and the problem of reason*. London: Verso
8. *ibid.*, p. 1
9. Meštrovic, 1991, *op. cit.* p. ix
10. As represented in, for example, Arthur Schopenhauer, *The world as will and representation*, which was originally published in 1818 but not widely read until the 1880s, a long time after his death. It is interesting that Schopenhauer is considered a leading philosopher of the *fin de siècle* - see Henri Ellenberger, 1970, *The discovery of the unconscious*. New York: Basic Books.
11. Malcolm Knowles, 1977, *A history of the adult education movement in the United States*. Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger
12. *ibid.*, pp. 35-36
13. Harold Stubblefield and Patrick Keane, 1994, *Adult education in the American experience: from the colonial period to the present*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
14. Knowles, 1977, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-38; Stubblefield and Keane, 1994, *op. cit.* pp. 136-138; see also, C. Hartley Grattan (ed.), 1959, *American ideas about adult education, 1710-1951*. Classics in Education No. 2, New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, Ch. 8; Joseph F. Kett, *The pursuit of knowledge under difficulties: from self-improvement to adult education in America, 1750-1990*. Stanford: Stanford University Press .Chs. 5-7
15. Kett, 1994, *op. cit.* p. 143 (emphasis added).

29. Paul Armstrong, 1988, 'The long search for the working class: socialism and the education of adults, 1850-
30. 1930', in Tom Lovett (ed.), *Radical approaches to adult education: a reader*. London: Routledge
31. And many more than mentioned here. A recent publication, (Roger Fieldhouse and associates, 1996, A
32. history of modern British adult education', Leicester: NIACE), whilst aware of the function of history to
33. illuminate the present and the future by looking at the past, fails to take on board postmodern perspectives
34. on history.
35. F. Fukuyama, 1989, 'The end of history?', *The National Interest*, no. 16
36. See, inter alia, Henry A. Giroux, 1993, *Border crossings: cultural workers and the politics of education*.
New
37. York: Routledge, pp. 121-123; David Lowenthal, 1985, *The past is a foreign country*. London: Routledge,
38. Introduction; Michel Foucault, 1972, *The archaeology of knowledge*. New York: Pantheon.
39. This argument has previously been put forward by Stuart Hall, 1978, 'The hinterland of science: ideology
40. and the 'sociology of knowledge' in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *On ideology*. London:
41. Hutchinson, pp. 21-22.