

Arnold van Gennep: The Hermit of Bourg-la-Reine

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Arnold van Gennep was a leader in the field of French folklore and ethnology. His life was one of prolific publication, constant intellectual growth, and incisive criticism of the French social sciences. Yet he remained an outcast from the French academic life. From a survey of his writings and those of members of L'Année Sociologique, the lines of tension which resulted in van Gennep's exclusion from academe are traced. [Arnold van Gennep, Emile Durkheim, history of anthropology and folklore, French folklore, French sociology]

INTRODUCTION

GEORGES-HENRI RIVIÈRE SAID OF HIS FRIEND and colleague Arnold van Gennep:

We called him – with a feeling mixed with admiration, familiarity, affection, and admittedly some shame at seeing him reduced, in spite of his brilliant talents, to the modest situation with which he had to be satisfied – the hermit of Bourg-la-Reine.¹ [K. van Gennep 1964:2]

Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) has puzzled intellectual historians for years. His work was one of prolific publication, beginning in 1894, and ending posthumously in 1975. Yet he is remembered primarily for one book, *Les rites de passage* (1909), which was translated into English in 1960. He was founder and director of four journals, and officer of many organizations, yet he never taught at a French university. His only academic appointment was at the University of Neuchatel, Switzerland. And though he delivered lectures at numerous universities, none of these were in France.

This contrast between his active life in publication and organizations and the absence of academic recognition in France casts a shadow of mystery on van Gennep's life. As Rodney Needham remarked,

he kept – or, more likely, “was kept” – away from the academic world of Paris, where Durkheim and his followers were establishing a tradition to which he might well have been invited (or so it seems to an outsider, and at this distance in time) to make a distinctive contribution. This is one of the most obscure aspects of Van Gennep's life, and a puzzle which it would be important to the history of ideas to see elucidated.² (van Gennep 1967:xi)

¹ This is my translation from the French. Throughout this article, I will translate most quotes into English. For a more complete discussion of van Gennep, see “The Enigma of Arnold van Gennep (1875-1957): Master of French Folklore and Hermit of Bourg-la-Reine” (Zumwalt 1978).

² Needham in the first line of this quote (“was kept”), was quoting E. E. Evans-Pritchard. In his introduction to Robert Hertz's *Death and the Right Hand*, Evans-Pritchard referred to van Gennep as a “contemporary writer” who “kept, or was

Some of the pieces to this puzzle can be found in van Gennep's own writings. Here there are indications of clashes with Emile Durkheim and other members of *L'Année Sociologique*. An examination of the critics of van Gennep will add further understanding for the reasons behind his academic ostracism. But first a brief discussion of his life will place van Gennep in his time and will give a foundation for the later discussion of his position outside the French academic community.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Even in the details of his life, there is a point which has caused confusion about van Gennep. Many scholars assume because of his name and his place of birth that van Gennep was Dutch. Indeed, he was born of Dutch parents in what is now Holland, but his identity was as a Frenchman. To clarify this point, let us examine his early years and his educational background. Charles-Arnold Kurr van Gennep was born in Ludwigsburg, in the kingdom of Württemberg, on April 23, 1873. His father was a lieutenant at the court, and a descendant of French émigrés. His mother was of Dutch descent, with many French relatives. When van Gennep was six years old, his mother and his father separated. His mother moved to Lyons, where she later married a surgeon named Paul Raugé.³

kept, well away from” Durkheim's group. He mentioned van Gennep along with a reference to Lévy-Bruhl. The latter, however, was characterized as “an independent thinker close to the Durkheimians but whom they never persuaded to join their, it must be admitted, somewhat doctrinaire group” (Hertz 1960:17).

³ It is not clear from Ketty van Gennep's account whether or not van Gennep's stepfather adopted him. The *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (Sills 1968) stated that Paul Raugé did adopt him. At any rate, van Gennep always referred to him as his father. And though he never took his surname, occasionally in his earlier publications he did sign his name as Arnold Raugé van Gennep (K. van Gennep 1964:15-16).

The young van Gennep was enrolled in a school in Lyons where he soon gained a reputation as a “garçon terrible” (K. van Gennep 1964:4). At the age of ten, he was transferred to Sainte-Barbe-des Champs in Paris (1884-85) (Lecotte 1958: 178). When his parents moved to the south of France, he went to a boarding school in Nice (1886-91). There, by his own account, he received poor marks for conduct and prizes for scholarship (van Gennep 1914:122).

In 1892, at the age of 19, van Gennep received his degree *philo aux sciences restreintes* from a lycée in Grenoble. Van Gennep’s degree was in restricted sciences because he could not master mathematics. In all else, he was a brilliant student (K. van Gennep 1964:4).

At this point, van Gennep and his stepfather reached an impasse over the direction of his career. His stepfather wanted him to study surgery at Lyons; van Gennep wanted to study surgery in Paris. Neither would cede to the other. So van Gennep decided on a different career, the diplomatic service for which he could utilize his language skills. (van Gennep could “work in eighteen languages and a fair amount of dialects” [Van Gennep 1951:ix-x]). He went to Paris and enrolled in École des hautes études (K. van Gennep 1964:5).

In Paris, van Gennep fell in love with a young woman whose father had died, leaving her no dowry. Thinking it highly unsuitable, van Gennep’s parents opposed this match. This was the final break with his parents. Van Gennep married in 1897, and accepted a teaching post in a Polish lycée. Van Gennep and his wife lived in Czestochowa, Poland, from 1897 to 1901.

On his return to France, van Gennep obtained a post as head of translations for the Ministry of Agriculture. He maintained this position until 1908, when he undertook several forms of employment to support his family of four. He gave lectures and he translated foreign-language works into French (Belmont 1974:8). Additionally, from 1906 to 1939, van Gennep contributed articles to *Mercure de France* for the section “Ethnographie-Folklore-Religions-Préhistoire” (Lecotte 1958:178). From 1927 to 1933, van Gennep was a collaborator with

Biographical information on van Gennep is limited. The most complete discussion of his life was presented by his daughter, Ketty van Gennep, in the introduction to her *Bibliographie des oeuvres d’Arnold van Gennep* (K. van Gennep 1964:4-12). And scattered throughout his work is an occasional remembrance of his earlier years, or mention of personal aspects of his life. For additional biographical information, see Zumwalt 1978, chapter 1.

l’Institut Pelman, and contributed articles to its journal *Psychologie et la vie* (Belmont 1974:18).

While these various jobs provided his income, his serious scholarly work continued. This was focused on two areas of interest, ethnology and folklore. His early work was a blend of the two. The first part of his dissertation for École des hautes études was published in 1904 under the title *Tabou et totémisme à Madagascar*. His next book, *Mythes et légendes d’Australie*, which appeared in 1906, fulfilled the requirements for his degree.

From July to August in 1911, and April to June in 1912, van Gennep conducted fieldwork in Algeria (van Gennep 1914:7). This had an impact on his later work, and also resulted in several publications.⁴ Of his anticipations for fieldwork, van Gennep said, “I counted on doing as one does when studying the Masai or the Australians, the Eskimos or the Indians: going into the villages themselves, staying there for some time and so conducting complete inquiries step by step” (van Gennep 1914:127-128).

His hopes for thorough, detailed research were not fulfilled. To his dismay, he had to contend with the Islamic seclusion of women, and it was the women who made the pottery, wove the fabric, and conserved “with jealous care the magic formulas [and] the superstitious practices” (van Gennep 1914:127). Though impatient with this cultural and religious seclusion of women, van Gennep adjusted. He conducted a great deal of research in the Kasbah of Algiers, wandering the streets and observing the artisans.

Van Gennep viewed his early work as crucial in shaping his later work, which after 1924 was largely focused on the folklore of France. The key to this later work was, according to van Gennep, in *Les rites de passage*.

One must consider my researches in this section of folklore, as much in Dauphiné as in Savoie and in other regions, as a verification that I was bent on doing of the general theory of my *Rites de passage*. I demonstrated in 1909 that all over the world, and in all civilizations, from the most primitive to the most evolved, every change of place, of social situation ... – all innovation and very often even all modification is accompanied ... by rites ... which always follow the same order and

⁴ Besides *En Algérie* (1914), van Gennep’s fieldwork in Algeria resulted in “Études d’ethnographie algérienne,” a 112-page article in *Revue d’ethnographie et de sociologie*, Volume 2, 1911; and in *Le tissage aux cartons et son utilisation dans l’Égypte ancienne*, written in collaboration with G. Jacquier, Neuchâtel, Delachaux, and Niestlé, 1917; and in numerous articles. For a more detailed discussion of van Gennep’s fieldwork, see Zumwalt 1978, chapter 7.

constitute the schema-type of the rites of passage. [van Gennep 1932:31]

Van Gennep, then, decided to focus on the folklore and folklife of a few regions in France (mainly Savoie) in order to validate his theory formulated in *Les rites de passage*. It was a conscious choice he made to study the folklore of France, and to give up the study of comparative European folklore, along with the ethnographic and folkloristic study of non-European cultures (van Gennep 1937:123-124).

Van Gennep's intensive study of French folklore should not be equated with a rejection of ethnology. Van Gennep's idea of the scope of folklore had its roots in the European definition: ethnography was the study of non-European cultures; folklore was the study of the peasants of Europe.⁵ In the early years, as in the later years, van Gennep carried out his scholarly work with intensity and in solitude at his apartment in Bourg-la-Reine.

HIS WORK AND HIS POSITION

Needham noted van Gennep's solitary position and questioned "whether his isolation was altogether a matter of eremitic persuasion" (van Gennep 1967:xi). From a reading of van Gennep's works and from Nicole Belmont's book, *Arnold van Gennep, the Creator of French Ethnography*, we are assured that this was not his choice. Belmont tells us that van Gennep "did in fact apply for a chair of 'ethnography and the history of religions' at the Collège de France" (Belmont 1979:11). For this, van Gennep prepared a detailed bibliography of his work along with an incisive statement of his view of French ethnography and ethnology. This was published in 1911 as *Notice des titres et travaux scientifiques de M. A. van Gennep*. However, van Gennep did not receive the appointment. In 1912, he accepted a position at Université de Neuchâtel, filling the first chair in Swiss ethnography (Belmont 1979: 11).

⁵ We should note that the traditional American concept of folklore differed from the European concept in two ways. First, the study of folklore was not limited to the rural populations of Europe, but included American Indians, Blacks, and other immigrant populations in the United States (see Newell 1888 and Dundes 1966). Second, the emphasis in American folklore studies has been on narrative folklore or, as William Bascom phrased it, verbal art. However, recent trends in American folklore studies have brought in folklore and folklife studies. (Richard Dorson's book is *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); and at the University of Pennsylvania, there is the Department of Folklore and Folklife.)

Van Gennep taught there until he was expelled from Switzerland in 1915 as a result of his criticism of the Swiss government and what he considered its pro-German status. He had written several letters to the *Dépêche de Toulouse* protesting the actions of German sympathizers, which he thought violated Swiss neutrality; and he published *Le génie de l'organisation* (1915), a patriotic work, praising the French for their individualistic nature and condemning the Germans for their militarism. Both in his protest and his publication, van Gennep was expressing his belief in the freedom of thought and his belief in the importance of the individual: "Qu'importe la mode d'activité, ce qui compte c'est l'homme" (van Gennep 1915:28). ("The type of activity does not matter; that which counts is man.") In being true to his beliefs, van Gennep also suffered for them. He lost the only academic position he would ever have.

Apparently, van Gennep hoped for another appointment. In a letter to Jean Baucomont dated November 19, 1930, van Gennep wrote:

My dear friend.

... No, my chair of ethnography does not yet exist: I fear that I will never have it: and since it is absolutely necessary that I succeed, I have made publicity for myself.... It is useless to recriminate, or to grieve, right? I have only to follow the right channels. I will pay for it, so much the worse for me. But I do not stop my scientific work for it, on the contrary, I work with fury. [van Gennep 1961:451].

Van Gennep did not obtain the chair of ethnography. In 1933, he wrote to Baucomont: "Since I will be sixty years old in April, a state position will not be mine ... too bad! for that which remains of my life. I will manage one way or another" (van Gennep 1961:452).

In another letter to Jean Baucomont, dated December 14, 1931, van Gennep took heart in the task yet to be accomplished and the possibility of future recognition: "Well, let's try to finish; at least all that is collected will be saved from oblivion and they will be grateful to us in one hundred years ... or in one thousand years. It is at least a consolation ..." (van Gennep 1961:451).

In his notes intended for the last volume of *Manuel de folklore français contemporain*, van Gennep revealed the struggle for control of both science and academic positions, a heretofore unwritten portion of intellectual history:

There arose then [after 1890] a fairly violent antagonism among the previously organized sciences of

man by the renewal of Comtian sociology effected by Durkheim. He took control of the teaching of the universities, his opponents having for fiefs the College de France and l'Institut. In the tight group the Durkheimists mounted the assault from these positions and in approximately twenty years made themselves masters. Whoever was not part of the group was "marked." [van Gennep 1975:31]

The progression of the conflict between Durkheimians and van Gennep can be traced in the reviews of books and journals. At the time of the publication of his first book, van Gennep must have been on good terms with Marcel Mauss, one of the central figures in the Durkheimian school. In the preface to *Tabou et totémisme à Madagascar* (1904), van Gennep said, "Finally, I thank my friend Marcel Mauss for having given me many useful references and for having taken the time to read my proofs" (van Gennep 1904:2). This was signed and dated April 1903.

But shortly after the appearance of *Tabou et totémisme à Madagascar* (1904) and *Mythes et légendes d'Australie* (1906a), the points of contention emerged. There was disagreement over the subject of totemism, taboo, and the classification of narratives; always present was the question of definition. And one surmises from the reviews that there was a shared position by the Durkheimians, and then there was van Gennep's position. Indeed, van Gennep parenthetically noted that his own work, though similar to Mauss's, had been criticized in *L'Année Sociologique*. while Mauss's was obviously accepted: "Mauss posed some rules of method which are like those which I presented here (one nearly reproached me for them) ... which I applied in *Tabou et Totémisme à Madagascar*, formulated with more precision in my *Notes sur le Totémisme...*" (van Gennep 1905:382). In Mauss's review of van Gennep's *Mythes et légendes d'Australie*, published in the 1904-5 issue of *L'Année Sociologique*. Mauss devoted two and a half pages of the three-page review to a criticism of the points where van Gennep departed from the "principles" set forth in *L'Année Sociologique*. The division between the accepted view and van Gennep's position was especially apparent in the discussion about Australian totemism. Mauss wrote:

As for us, we have exactly the contrary impression, that of M. Durkheim, that the Arunta notion is the end of a long decomposition, fruit of the conflict of notions concerning the hereditary totem. And the principal reason of disagreement between the authors is fundamentally only that, according to us, MM. Howitt and Durkheim accord to this last phenomena its true

importance, the others, M. van Gennep in particular, having insufficiently reflected on it. [Mauss 1907:228]

Yet discord was not always present in these earlier years. In his review of the 1904-5 volume of *L'Année Sociologique*, van Gennep acceded to Mauss's criticism of *Tabou et Totémisme à Madagascar*.

He reproached me for having followed too much the classic practice in extending taboo to all interdictions. He is perfectly right, and if I had to rewrite my book one year after its publication, I would have chosen a totally different plan of classification. [van Gennep 1906b:463]

And Mauss, in his 1913 review of "Etudes d'ethnographie algérienne," praised van Gennep for "the zeal" with which he collected the data, "the value" of his classification, and "the clarity" with which he discussed his material (Mauss 1913:858).

The disagreement between van Gennep and the Durkheimians pivoted on the differing interpretations of the totem and of the individual's position in society, specifically in "primitive" society. As the years passed and the books and reviews were published, the split became irrevocable. Van Gennep revealed his tenacity in never missing an opportunity to criticize Durkheim and the French sociological school. In 1917, van Gennep began publishing a series of articles in *Revue de l'histoire des religions* which were presented in 1920 as *L'État actuel du problème totémique*. These articles were a culmination of his long dispute with the Durkheimians over totemism. Thus, the year of Durkheim's death, 1917, was also the date of van Gennep's most carefully reasoned critique of Durkheim.

In *L'État actuel du problème totémique*, van Gennep presented his idea about the development of social institutions. Instead of humans evolving intellectually or culturally, he maintained that their social institutions were evolving. And at times, these institutions reached an impasse. One such institution, he thought, was totemism (van Gennep 1920:43). Van Gennep criticized Durkheim for founding "a general theory of religion and of society on such a phenomenon" (totemism), and he was convinced that Durkheim's orientation "lead to an erroneous view of reality and a forced interpretation of the documents" (ibid.). Van Gennep called this "les simplifications de Durkheim" (van Gennep 1920:55).

Van Gennep's own view of totemism came from his ideas about the nature of man and his social institutions. Every human and animal group had to be assured of two things for its survival: (1) the internal cohesion of the group in each place, and (2) the continuity of the group through successive generations (van Gennep 1920:344). Thus, for van Gennep, totemism provided social cohesion and continuity through time, and countered the tendency for autonomy from the secondary groups of clan, family, and caste. Furthermore, it provided a means for establishing territory and relationships between groups (van Gennep 1920:352).

In short, totemism provided a system of classification. Van Gennep had presented this view earlier, in *Mythes et légendes d'Australie* (1906), where he criticized both Andrew Lang and Durkheim for their theory about the origin of the totem, and said that totemism was "a simple system of classification" and thus was expressed according to its own terminology in each culture (van Gennep 1906a:xxiv).

In *L'État actuel du problème totémique*, van Gennep continued his explanation: "I do not admit the point of view of Durkheim, *Formes Élémentaires*," who reasoned that the classification of the universe was a consequence of totemism. Rather, van Gennep emphasized, totemism was just one form of classification. It was the need for ordering the universe which expressed itself in totemism or in other systems of organizations: "because the people who do not have totemism have their own system of classification, which is also a system of general social organization ..." (van Gennep 1920:345). (At another point, van Gennep said, rather facetiously, that certain very primitive *unités sociales* managed to survive without totems in spite of the fundamental thesis of Durkheim (van Gennep 1920:170). Further, nothing in the study of totemism permitted one to establish it as anterior to other modes of classification.⁶

Another point of dispute between van Gennep and Durkheim centered on the role of the individual in society. Van Gennep repeatedly

took issue with Durkheim's view of the collective force. According to van Gennep, the individual could not be subordinated to the will of society, precisely because societies were composed of individuals.

Indeed, one can very well admit in chemistry and in crystallography inherent tendencies of the bodies, tendencies of movement and tendencies of grouping. But a human society has for primordial components individual forces each of which can at any moment react.... I have too often insisted on this power of the individual, even in primitive societies, to modify the collective situation to need to return to it here. [van Gennep 1920:342]

Further, van Gennep said, those who insisted on the importance of the collective (and here the reader knows that he meant Durkheim) always obtained results that were contrary to observed facts (ibid.).

Fourteen years earlier, in his *Mythes et légendes d'Australie* (1906), van Gennep had discussed his ideas about the importance of the individual as the initiator of change: "In reality, just as with us, in the Australian tribes it is the individual who invents and proposes modifications.... Some are discussed, some tried ..." (van Gennep 1906a:xxxv). Durkheim, van Gennep said, explained these modifications of society as "bes besoins de la société," the needs of society (van Gennep 1906a:xxv). "It is by an identical process of animation that one speaks to us of 'the call of the Fatherland' or 'the voice of the race.' M. Durkheim anthropomorphizes as well as defends society" (ibid.; his emphasis).

In 1920, van Gennep still complained of Durkheim's canonization of society. In *L'État actuel du problème totémique*, van Gennep remarked that if one followed Durkheim's argument, one would conclude that totemism formed the basis of all religious evolution, that from this came demons, gods, and finally God "which is Society" (van Gennep 1920:43).

Van Gennep's concern with the importance of the individual was apparent in all his work. In his later folklore publications, he emphasized that while folklore was a collective and anonymous creation of the people, this did not negate the creative force of the individual. Van Gennep was opposed to the romantic notion of the 19th century that the folk create as a communal activity, as a reflection of their *volkgeist* or group spirit (van Gennep 1943:50-51). This notion derived not only from a paucity of direct observation, but also from the assumption that the individual was not important in primitive societies. People confused

⁶ Lévi-Strauss, in his book *Totemism*, acknowledges van Gennep's contributions to this topic. Of *L'État actuel du problème totémique*, Lévi-Strauss says, "a curious mixture of erudition, partiality, and even incomprehension, allied to unusual theoretical boldness and freedom of speculation" (Lévi-Strauss 1965:4). Lévi-Strauss praised van Gennep's interpretation of exogamy in the eight-section system of Australia: "This interpretation, which is also our own (see *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*), seems to us to be still superior to that proposed by Radcliffe-Brown in even his latest writings ..." (Lévi-Strauss 1965:56).

anonymity of creation with lack of individuality (van Gennep 1943:52). For van Gennep, the study of folklore focused on the individuals within the social group, with the group concerns, but not with the group as a mass. "If I say 'collectif,' I do not mean by that 'made in common' " (van Gennep 1924:24).

Steven Lukes, one of the few historians of Durkheim's work to note the conflict with van Gennep, says: "The most devastating of Durkheim's anthropological critics was the great ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep who criticized *The Elementary Forms* on both empirical and theoretical grounds" (Lukes 1972:524). As we have noted in our discussion, van Gennep's criticisms of Durkheim began with his first book in 1904, and were not merely a reaction to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, which was published in 1912.

Nonetheless, this work was important in marking the ever widening gap between van Gennep and Durkheim, Van Gennep's review of *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, published in the 1913 edition of *Mercure de France*, was scathing. Durkheim, van Gennep said, in trying to arrive at *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* did not enable the reader to "untangle any of his formidable chains of reasoning" (van Gennep 1913:389). According to van Gennep, the ethnographic portion was the weakest, since Durkheim relied on questionable Australian data. "He treats them as if the commentators dealt with sacred texts, clarifying them with great reenforcement of erudition, but without asking himself if three-fourths of the raw material is even worthy of confidence" (van Gennep 1913:389).

Van Gennep stated that he himself had used the same Australian monographs for his work, and he knew that the sources of information were unreliable. The informants were often "police agents, obscure colonial officials, missionaries, etc." (ibid.). At points in Durkheim's book, one must ask at every line, "Is this certain? Of what value was the informant? Of what value, or what exactly does the document say?" (ibid.).

Van Gennep was certain that the ethnographic portion of Durkheim's work would be rejected:

Andrew Lang and Father Schmidt were already led astray into the Australian wasp's nest: M. Durkheim threw himself in at his turn. In ten years, all his systematization will be completely rejected, and all other generalizations which he constructed on the group of ethnographic data which is the weakest I know. [ibid.]

Van Gennep did not accept the notion that primitive people had a simple society. Though Durkheim, as van Gennep said, discussed primitive people as relatively primitive (Durkheim 1912: 11, n, 1; 1965: 13, n. 1), still, his idea of primitive people and simple societies "is entirely erroneous."⁷

To the degree that one understands the Australians better, one identifies less the level of the material civilization and that of the social organization, one ascertains that the Australian societies are very complex, very far from simple and from primitive, but very evolved following their own directions [van Gennep 1913:389]

Van Gennep said that the portion of the book which dealt with the theory of totemism and the general theory of religion "is full of solid truths" (van Gennep 1913:390). After this brief note of praise, van Gennep continued: "At every instant, he refers to these tribes to show the "genesis" of such and such tendency or institution. This is really what renders his construction so fragile, since the foundation is so shaky" (van Gennep 1913:391). In his attempt to arrive at the origin of religious belief, Durkheim had reduced Australian society to a "monocellular organism," "Not having the sense of life, that is to say the biological and ethnographic sense, he makes phenomena and living beings into scientifically dissected plants, as in an herbarium" (ibid.).

On one point, van Gennep was in accord. But even his agreement was facetiously presented: "one ditch that Durkheim leapt with liveliness" was the place of religion in society. Van Gennep agreed with Durkheim that among the demi-civilisés religion was an all-encompassing social phenomenon, and that religion had less importance among the civilisés (ibid,).

And finally, van Gennep criticized Durkheim for his broad theoretical formulations. As Ketty van Gennep remarked in her biographical sketch of her father, "He did not like hasty generalizations and he always said that one could generalize from a number of facts, exactly as in medicine ..." (K. van Gennep 1964:11). One worked with care from the facts to the generalizations. And this was the methodology which van Gennep applied to his

⁷ In his paper "The Theme of Social Evolution in the Anthropological Reviews of Emile Durkheim," Andrew P. Lyons examined the reviews written by Durkheim in *L'Année Sociologique* and drew together comments on Durkheim's theoretical orientation (Lyons 1980).

own work, especially his later work in French folklore. Van Gennep contrasted his caution in generalizing with Durkheim's formulations:

Naturally all depends on the amplitude of the observed territory: when one thinks that Durkheim and others based universal theories on tribes composed of 20 to 50 individuals, one is overcome with doubts. For my Savoie, I deal with 3 million individuals. At this count, I could invent 100 universal theories, only considering the exceptions.... [van Gennep 1934:26-27]

In contrast to van Gennep's persistent criticism of Durkheim, the latter never mentioned van Gennep nor referenced his work. This is especially noticeable in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), as the subtitle of this work indicates: *le système totémique en Australie*. As we know, van Gennep had written two books which would have been relevant to Durkheim's discussion: *Tabou et Totémisme à Madagascar* (1904) and *Mythes et légendes d'Australie* (1906a). And, of course, van Gennep had also published a number of pertinent articles.

Van Gennep was not ignored by all the Durkheimian school. We have already referred to some of Marcel Mauss's review of van Gennep's work. In the volumes of *L'Année Sociologique* issued before World War I when there was a break in publication, van Gennep's books were regularly reviewed. With the renewal of the journal in 1923-24, there was one review of *Le Folklore* (1924) by Czarnowski. This brief review offered polite praise and useful criticism. In subsequent issues of *L'Année Sociologique*, van Gennep's work was no longer reviewed. Possibly this was due to a change in policy of the journal, to a redefinition of the concerns of sociology. We know that from 1924 to 1957, van Gennep published books which dealt almost exclusively with folklore. It might have been that the editors of *L'Année Sociologique* decided his books were no longer of concern to sociologists.

Additionally, we should note, in the issue of *L'Année Sociologique* published in 1958, no mention was made of van Gennep's death, though this was the first issue to appear after his death. Rather there was a photograph of Emile Durkheim and an article "In Memoriam, Emile Durkheim" in recognition of the 100th anniversary of his birth (navy 1958:xii-x). While it is entirely possible that this memorial issue had nothing to do with the death of van Gennep, still the coincidence of this eulogy to the founder of *L'Année Sociologique*, appearing as it did after

the death of his most vociferous critic, must be noted.

Steven Lukes, author of *Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work*, remarks on this conflict between van Gennep and Durkheim in a single footnote: "It is striking that van Gennep was ignored and excluded by Durkheim and his colleagues" (Lukes 1972:524, n. 35). And he tells us of a personal communication with one of the early members of *L'Année Sociologique* and the author of Durkheim's obituary and memorial: "M. Davy has confirmed that they did not take him seriously" (ibid.)

Like Steven Lukes, Terry Clark, author of *Prophets and Patrons: The French University and the Emergence of the Social Sciences*, mentions van Gennep only briefly in a footnote:

Arnold van Gennep published an essay in 1912, *Les demi-savants*, that parodied the ritualism of specialized scholarship... His early irreverence toward academic norms seems to have been a factor in preventing him... from ever holding a position in the French university system. [Clark 1973:48, n. 66]

It is unfortunate that Clark, a prominent scholar of the French academic system, did not delve further into the reasons for van Gennep's ostracism. Clearly he would have found similar tensions to those which he traced between Gabriel Tarde, who held the chair in modern philosophy at the College de France in 1900, and Emile Durkheim. In his introduction to Gabriel Tarde's *On Communication and Social Influence*, Clark discussed the intellectual debate between Tarde and Durkheim. And much of it pivoted around the importance of the individual in social sciences: Tarde emphasized the autonomy of the individual and Durkheim stressed the importance of collectivity (Tarde 1969:18).

Quite obviously the split between van Gennep and Durkheim was part of larger fissures, like grains in marble, that ran through the intellectual community in France. Henri Bergson, Tarde's successor at College de France, received his share of hostility from the Durkheimians. A student in philosophy at the Sorbonne complained that the professors in his university had reduced history, literature, and philosophy to lifeless forms:

One well understands the animosity they feel for M. Bergson. It is a pleasure to note, during lectures, during thesis defenses, unfavorable allusions to "outside

influences,” in general, and to that great thinker in particular. [Clark 1973:192, n. 88]⁸

Thus van Gennep’s position outside French academic life can best be understood against the background of Durkheim’s struggle to build and to fortify his sociology. This was a real struggle since in 1900 there was only one sociological position in France: Durkheim’s chair at Bordeaux. In 1914, Durkheim was appointed to the chair of Science de l’Éducation at the Sorbonne and Bouglé was maître de conférences in Économie Sociale. Yet there still was not a chair entitled sociology (Clark 1973: 167). For Durkheim to maximize his position as the leader of a new sociology it was crucial for him to maintain influence in the French university system. As Terry Clark notes, “Those at its center controlled (and largely control) the content of courses, examinations, degree requirements, teaching and research appointments, research grants, and to some extent journal and book publication outlets” (Tarde 1969:63). After the turn of the century, according to Clark, Durkheim had become “one of the most powerful university politicians in France,” and he carefully used his contacts on the national university councils and in the Ministry of Education (Tarde 1969:10).⁹

⁸ Clark was citing “Les tendances de la nouvelle Sorbonne, lettre d’un étudiant,” l’Action, 1910, signed Jacques Jary, student in philosophy at the Sorbonne. It appears that the students and the professors were divided into partisan camps: those who supported the Sorbonne and Durkheim; and those who supported Bergson and the Collège de France. (See Clark 1973:192, notes 88-89 for a fascinating series of quotations relating to this factionalism between Durkheim and Bergson, and the Sorbonne and the Collège de France.)

⁹ For a discussion of the conservatism of the French academic bureaucracy, see Clark’s *Prophets and Patrons* (1973). Durkheim himself discusses French academic organization in an intriguing and little-known work, *La vie universitaire à Paris*. In this he discusses the need for the national organization of universities which had been in effect since century. He cautions that the choice could not be left to each individual to determine the course of education: “there must be general rules formulated through the action of the state in order to prevent excessive particularism” (Durkheim 1918:24).

For a discussion of the institutionalization of sociology in France, Germany, and the United States, see Edward Shils’s “Tradition, Ecology, and Institution in the History of Sociology” (Shils 1972). Mauss further comments on the chair of sociology at the Sorbonne that was created in 1932 and held with “rigidity” by Durkheimians, P. Fauconnet, a close companion of Durkheim, M. Halbachs, and G. Davy, second generation Durkheimians. Mauss attributes the hostility among French intellectuals to Durkheim after World War II to the rigidity with which this chair of sociology was maintained by Durkheimians (Mauss 1968, Vol. I: vi). For a discussion of the extreme conservatism of the French academic bureaucracy in the

In the preface to the 1897-98 volume of *L’Année Sociologique*, Durkheim spoke of “un esprit nouveau” which infused the true work of sociology. “Under the influence of sociology, the classification of the special sciences and their mutual relations are destined to be transformed at the same time as the spirit and the method of each of them” (Durkheim 1899:iii). He criticized the lack of methodology and of a directed plan in numerous disciplines. He specifically mentioned the German *Voelkerkunde*, which “included at once the studies of morals, of religious beliefs and practices, of habitation, of the family, of certain economic facts” (ibid.). Durkheim maintained that new organization was needed: nothing, he said, was so harmful to science as a poor system of classification (Durkheim 1899:iv). It was his intention to organize the sciences, to give them a methodology, a spirit, and direction; and all this would come under his form of sociology.

In his touching obituary of his teacher, Georges Davy described Durkheim as a charismatic leader of a dedicated group of students. He was like “the prophet of some new religion” (Davy 1919: 194). And when he gathered his group, it was because of his need “to teach a doctrine, to have disciples and not merely students...” (Davy 1919:183).

He had indeed around him a few of us who formed a spiritual family united by a bond of shared method and shared admiration for their master. They comprised, to use an expression which was dear to him, a little society *sui generis*, the clan of *L’Année Sociologique*. [Davy 1919:195]

In the first volume of the new series of *L’Année Sociologique* to appear after Durkheim’s death, the committee of editors wrote: “Durkheim always considered *Année Sociologique* as a collective work...” (Mauss 1925:7)0 The editors recalled the uniqueness of this “society of young animated scholars working together from a sincere desire to cooperate” (Mauss 1925:8).

In the 1958 memorial issue of *L’Année Sociologique*, Davy said of Durkheim: “He directed always and oriented everything in *L’Année*” (Davy 1958:vii). Davy recalled the care with which Durkheim edited his journal. One time, he had received a note from Durkheim concerning an article of Davy’s which was to appear in Tome XI of *L’Année Sociologique*.

recognition of folklore studies, see van Gennep 1951:ix, and Zumwalt 1978:147-151.

Durkheim said that it was impossible that the groups Davy had designated as tribes were anything other than family groupings. If this was the mistake of an author whom Davy had cited, Durkheim said the error could easily be rectified. And Durkheim asked him to “come to talk about it on Monday” (Davy 1958:viii).

However, Davy assured the reader, Durkheim gave direction but did not wield control. He created and sustained this society, without tyranny, giving freedom to each to pursue his own ideas (Davy 1919: 195).¹⁰ Those who saw Durkheim as tyrannical and as contemptuous of the individual were wrong. Durkheim’s interest, Davy continued, was with “l’homme actuel,” contemporary man; and he studied prehistory and ethnography in order to understand 20th-century France (Davy 1919: 196-197).

And the proof is that the day when the crisis broke out ... this scholar did not search for the causes which produced totemism, but Qui a voulu la guerre? and abandoned the commentary of the law of exogamy for that of the pangermanist: L’Allemagne au-dessus de tout. It was not he who remained above the mêlée (Davy 1919:197).

In our discussion of the conflict between Durkheim and van Gennep, we have followed the lines of tension and the resulting schism. Yet, we must also note that both men shared common ground: a vision for a new social science. However, for Durkheim, sociology was the central concern; and for van Gennep, ethnography and folklore were to be the 20th-century science of people.

According to van Gennep, the primary method used to gather ethnographic and folkloric information should be that used in the biological sciences: direct observation (van Gennep 1924:32). Once the data had been carefully recorded, then the scholar could draw

¹⁰ For a contrasting view of Durkheim and intellectual freedom, see Hubert Bourgin, *Cinquante ans d’expérience démocratique 1874-1924* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1925) p. 45, cited in Clark 1973:79, note 20.

I did not yet know the sociological school, and this was perhaps my greatest luck: it had a great force of apprehension and of adhesion, and it held on solidly to those that it had seized.... But its members of least value would no doubt have astonished, wounded, worried me by their superior conduct, by their intransigence, by their rigidity.

Bourgin noted that years later when he worked with the group of Durkheimians he was able to conserve his independence “toward the master and his disciples” (Clark 1973:79, n. 20).

conclusions through the use of the comparative method (van Gennep 1924:42). The biological sciences had taught the scholarly world the use of the comparative method, “that one must compare data of the same order across time and space” (van Gennep 1911:507).

Van Gennep’s interest in the biological sciences focused both on the methodological rigor and the concern with living beings. He was emphatic that ethnography and folklore should be the study of living facts. He spoke of this as *la biologie sociologique* (van Gennep 1924:27). Van Gennep contrasted his own “biological” approach to ethnology and folklore to the methods of the sociologists and historians. The latter, he maintained, had a disregard for the living; historians dealt with *dead* facts (van Gennep 1909a:83; his emphasis). “M. Durkheim and his school,” as van Gennep phrased it, used the term *sociology* to focus on the collective social phenomenon and its mechanism (van Gennep 1909b:85).

While van Gennep insisted on this orientation toward folklore and ethnology, that of *la biologie sociologique*, still he indicated he had been ostracized because of it.

To study the facts of civilization, from the most primitive periods, under the biological approach and following the methods of embryology and the comparative natural sciences, was opposed, at once, naively, to the historical method on one hand, and to the official sociological method on the other. I have been considered an outcast for a long time. [van Gennep 1934:25]

Outcast as he was, van Gennep did not allow this to interfere with the progress of his work. As his daughter noted, “worries and annoyances never perturbed him: he set them aside and totally forgot about them” (K. van Gennep 1967:9). Of course, we know van Gennep was not always so detached: he was deeply disappointed in 1930 when he was not awarded the chair in ethnography (van Gennep 1961:451). But he continued his work “with fury,” and in the following years produced the nine volumes of *Manuel de folklore français contemporain* and many other books and articles. Undoubtedly van Gennep was able to accomplish so much precisely because he did not have an academic position. As he said, “All the times that I have been an ‘official,’ they have never given me the liberty to work on my own ideas” (ibid.).

Though he did not occupy a chair of ethnography or of folklore in France, van Gennep offered guidance and encouragement to

a group of dedicated scholars and friends. And he recruited young people to the study of folklore. It is their tribute to van Gennep on his death which reveals their emotional and intellectual attachment to the man whom they called the Master of French Folklore (van Gennep 1958:ix).

Riviere and Lecotté, in their tribute to van Gennep, said that many people were “stimulated and enlightened by this great example,” Arnold van Gennep’s diligent work on his *Manuel de folklore français* contemporain (van Gennep 1958:xi). Throughout the years of researching and writing the *Manuel*, van Gennep uncovered the neglected areas in French folklore. Riviere and Lecotté remarked, “Many times, we saw it, the Master had to instigate, if not himself effect, such an indispensable study on an unexplored subject” (ibid.).

Van Gennep’s desire to further folklore research extended beyond concern with personal prestige. Nils-Arvid Bringéus, a professor of European ethnology at the University of Lund, Sweden, wrote of his meeting with van Gennep in 1950 in his apartment outside Paris.¹¹ Since Bringéus was writing his dissertation on burial customs, he was greatly interested in talking with van Gennep.

Our conversation was, as far as I can recall it, about questions concerning death and burial rites.... Before I left van Gennep spread his arms and said: “I am an old man, you are young! Take this material back home and use it to the best of your knowledge.” Then he gave me a whole carton (the kind you get in a clothing shop) filled with off-prints and excerpts concerning burial rites. [Bringéus 1977]

Even if van Gennep had not been so violently opposed to Durkheimian sociology, he could never have been associated with the members of *L’Année Sociologique*. As his daughter said, he was a man who always worked alone (K. van Gennep 1964:10). And as van Gennep said in his author’s note to *The Semi-Scholars*, “We must have complete freedom to think, and this includes the liberty to digress” (van Gennep 1967:xxiii). Yet this freedom was gained at a high price. Nils-Arvid Bringéus recalls meeting van Gennep. His words convey both the

grandeur of the moment and the poverty of the surroundings.

But now for your question about van Gennep. I can note that it was in the summer of 1950. I was in Paris and visited him. In my almanac I see it was in July.... Bold like I was as a young student I tried to locate him and got his address at the Musée de l’Homme. I remember he lived rather far out in a suburb, though I don’t remember if it was in Bourg-la-Reine. It was in an ordinary tenement and in a rather small flat. I remember his wife sewing on her sewing machine the visit in his house is an unforgettable memory. I had met one of the great of that day in his field, in such simple and unpretentious surroundings I was almost shocked. [Bringéus 1977]

Despite his frustration and disappointment at his failure to obtain an academic appointment in France, van Gennep was pleased with his work in folklore and ethnology. “De l’eau bénite et des ‘prises de bonne note,’ j’en ai eu dans ma vie tant que j’ai voulu” (van Gennep 1961 :451). (“Of holy water and good marks, I have had as much as I wished for in my life.”)

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¹¹ Personal communication, 1977. I am grateful to Nils-Arvid Bringéus, professor of European Ethnology at the University of Lund, Sweden, for sending me recollections of his meeting with van Gennep.

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