Émile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* ([1912] 1991) is considered by many the conclusive statement on religion of the Durkheimian school. In fact, this is rather a simplification of a more complicated intellectual history. A more careful evaluation of the examinations of religious phenomena by the members of the Durkheimian team demonstrates some intriguing theoretical distinctions that give rise to broader differences in intellectual position-taking and help explain serious differences in the trajectory of influence of the Durkheimian school on subsequent generations of intellectuals. These differences stem largely from the description of the nature of the sacred in the Durkheimian tradition.

The sacred is of course the key to the Durkheimian definition of religion. In *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim proceeds in typical fashion toward a working definition of this difficult category by eliminating competing definitions, only offering his own after all others examined have been effectively annihilated. Religion, he argues, can only adequately and inclusively be characterized as ideas and rites oriented toward the setting aside and protection of sacred things. But in what manner can we as social scientists classify sacred things and distinguish them from things non-sacred? One might suggest that sacred things can be defined merely as those things set aside and protected in any given society. But this is clearly a circular definition. In any society, Durkheim asserts, there are things sacred and things profane. The profane he is content to leave with a negative definition: that which is not sacred. But it will not do to take the same route with respect to the definition of the sacred (i.e., the non-profane), as this is the substantive category upon which his entire theory of religion is based. The sacred inspires respect, but why?
What is it about sacred things that so inspire us and that allow us to distinguish them from profane things? And is this awe-inspiring capacity monolithic and identical in all sacred things?

It is in struggling toward a definition of sacredness that things become very interesting indeed in the Durkheimian tradition. For we discover that, while the sacred/profane polarity is one of the central conceptual tools of the Durkheimian sociology of religion, it is not the only set of key oppositions Durkheim makes use of in sociologically classifying religious experience, rite and representation. The sacred is in fact not only the holy or consecrated, but it can also be the accursed, “something devoted to a divinity for destruction, and hence criminal, impious, wicked, infamous” (Pickering 1984: 124). Durkheim argues that the sacred, in addition to being opposed in a binary relationship to the profane, is itself comprised of two opposing binary poles: on the one hand, the pure, beneficent powers and forces that maintain physical and moral order, life and health, and, on the other, those that are impure, evil and produce disorder, sacrilege, disease and death (Durkheim 1991: 681--2). These two types would become developed in the early Durkheimian school as pure, beneficent, or right sacred and impure, trangressive, or left sacred. As W.S.F. Pickering has noted, the sociological richness of the concept can be seen by tracing the term to its Latin derivation sacer, which contains both of the seemingly contradictory meanings. The French sacré likewise can mean both, and is frequently used in both senses (la musique sacrée, holy or sacred music, and un sacré menteur, a damned or accursed liar), whereas the English “sacred” has in practice lost the second meaning, a fact which by itself perhaps explains a good amount of English-language misreading of the Durkheimian treatment of this issue.

Like the sacred/profane distinction, that between the two varieties of sacredness, the right or pure sacred and the left or impure sacred, is also derived from Robertson Smith, but
Durkheim and his colleagues developed it as a theoretical tool to a considerably greater extent. The nature of the relationship between pure and impure sacred is complex, for the two are in many ways not clearly distinguishable. Durkheim points out that in fact a pure sacred object or power frequently becomes impure while remaining sacred (i.e., without simply becoming profane) and vice versa through a modification of “exterior circumstances.” For example, in certain societies, a corpse moves as a result of a specific ritual process from the status of an impure sacred object inspiring dread and the possibility of evil contagion to that of a venerated sacred object that is even ingested by surviving family or clan members as a boon and a protection against evil (Durkheim 1991: 684). But are pure and impure sacred two distinct states or manifestations of a single kind of power, never present in any empirical site at the same moment, or rather two seemingly contradictory yet actually complementary and mutually dependent facets of any empirical sacred object or force? Durkheim is not clear on this point. He seems to want at once to separate them empirically, while acknowledging a potential of the one to become the other, and to recognize the acute difficulty of actually making a neat distinction between the reverence associated with the pure sacred and the fear and horror linked to the impure. Are not, he asks, truly intense experiences of the pure sacred characterized by some degree of what can be called fear or dread, and does not a certain reverence attach itself to the horror we feel in the face of the most intensely impure sacred objects? (Durkheim 1991: 683–4)¹

Given this ambiguity in the nature of the sacred, some intriguing dilemmas present themselves in drawing conclusions about the role of the sacred in social life. Durkheim had argued that ritual practices could be divided into negative or ascetic rites, which are designed to prevent the mingling of profane and sacred worlds and consist entirely of abstentions and
interdictions, and positive rites, which are the actual practices that bring the worshipper into contact with the sacred and are ultimately at the heart of religious ritual since only they contain their reason for existence in themselves (Durkheim 1991: 509--11, 551). It is the positive rites, the most important historical example of which is the institution of sacrifice, that provide the setting for the most essential element of religious phenomena, according to Durkheim. This is the sentiment of collective effervescence that is generated in those moments of ritual worship of the sacred. But which form of the sacred, pure or impure, is enacted by positive rites? The answer would seem to be straightforward: it must be the pure sacred, as this is the life-celebrating and beneficent force. Durkheim certainly suggests that this must be the case:

Thus far from being ignorant of actual society and making a false abstraction of it, religion is the image of society; it reflects society in all its aspects, even the most vulgar and repulsive. Everything is found here and if, most often, it is the case that good is superior to evil, life superior to death, the forces of light superior to the forces of darkness, it is because reality is not otherwise. For if the relationship between these contradictory forces were reversed, life would be impossible. (Durkheim 1991: 700)

However, there is a clear distinction in the manner in which the notion is theorized by Durkheim, on the one hand, and by his three closest colleagues who also worked on religious topics, on the other. This distinction has to do with rather different emphases with respect to Robertson Smith’s distinction between the pure and the impure sacred. In Durkheim, the emphasis is on the pure sacred, the sacred as positive rite and negative interdiction, i.e., the sacred as the moral. Though he acknowledges the impure sacred and the ambiguity of its
relationship to the pure sacred, his concentration, both in his *chef-d’oeuvre* on religion and in his practical discussions of the role of the sacred in contemporary secular France, is clearly on the latter. In fact, a very difficult question concerning the origin of the impure sacred emerges from Durkheim’s argument. The sacred is ultimately generated by the social itself, he argues, as a means for its constant reinvigoration. But why should society create a force, the impure sacred, that bodes ill for it, even threatens it with destruction? No clear answer suggests itself from Durkheim’s analysis (Pickering 1984: 129; Arppe 1995: 214).

The real Durkheimian engagement with the left or impure sacred took place not in the *Elementary Forms* or in any other work of Durkheim himself, but rather in the work of his protégés Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert and Robert Hertz. The more or less simple reduction in Durkheim of the sacred to the social as moral bond is more problematic in the work of his protégés. There is a concerted effort on the part of the three junior colleagues, in contrast to Durkheim, to attend to “the accursed part of the sacred,” to acknowledge in its full theoretical and practical complexity this notion that is at the same time the foundational principle of the system and a part of the system that needs explanation. [For] As a synonym for communal force, it is the condition of possibility of social symbols; thus, its meaning cannot be exhausted in its own symbolic representation. (Arppe 1995: 210)

It is this attention to “the problem of evil” in the social that ultimately separates the two treatments of the sacred and of the social more generally. What precisely is the role played by the impure sacred in the generative processes of collective effervescence and revitalization that
are so important in the Durkheimian sociology of religion? Clearly, some part of this sensitivity to the “other half” of the sacred in the trio Mauss/Hubert/Hertz comes from their great immersion as students in Indian religious history and structure, as there is a much greater treatment of these themes here than in the greater (Judeo-Christian) and lesser (i.e., primitive) religious traditions known better to Durkheim. Indeed, the groups that have emphasized aspects of the impure sacred in Brahmanic religion and its historical descendents have played a considerably larger role in the development of their religious systems than have analogous groups in Judaism and Christianity. For example, Gnosticism in Christianity and Tantricism in Hinduism and Buddhism each developed notions of the religious adept who, having reached a certain stage of spiritual development or relationship with the deity, was at least in certain cases no longer bound by particular moral strictures and could often increase his spiritual understanding by deliberately transgressing moral rules. Tantra however has played a significant role in historical Hinduism and Buddhism, while the historically emergent emphasis on the pure sacred in Christianity led to the total crushing of Gnosticism in the first centuries of the Church’s establishment.

The distinction is however something deeper than just a difference of empirical area of specialization. As Pickering has noted, Durkheim extends the sacred/profane opposition in such a way as to link to the former collective representations, the realm of the ideal in general, and the collectivity or society, while the profane encompasses individual representations, the corporal or material realm, and the individual (Pickering 1984: 120). He famously distinguishes magic and religion on this axis, although Mauss and Hubert argued precisely the contrary in their study of magic. Indeed, in this and other collective work they undertook, Mauss and Hubert endeavored to elaborate a concept that they believed broader and more inclusive than that of
the sacred to understand in sociological terms the origin and power of religious rites and beliefs. According to Mauss,

> We detected at [magic's] foundation, as at the foundation of religion, a vast common notion that we called by a name borrowed from Melaneso-Polynesian, that of mana. This idea is perhaps more general than that of the sacred. Since then, Durkheim has tried to deduct it logically from the notion of the sacred. We were never sure he was right, and I continue still to speak of the magico-religious base. (Mauss 1979: 218)

While Durkheim indicated a distinction between, on the one hand, the series church/pure sacred/collective well-being and that of magic/impure sacred/collective ill-being, he left the latter largely unexplored, while Mauss and Hubert theorized it in much greater detail. In his introduction to the French translation of Chantepie de la Saussaye’s *Manuel d'histoire des religions*, Hubert (1904) presents a qualified but vigorous criticism of Durkheim’s theory of religion and the sacred, aiming at Durkheim’s concentration on religious facts attached to a Church and to the pure sacred exclusively. He criticizes the Durkheimian emphasis on “the formation of doctrines and churches,” as this is a reduction of “the total history of the religious life,” which must include religious practice in societies without established churches or fixed systems of belief (Hubert 1904: xxii). Hubert was quite concerned that the history of religion not be reduced to the history of “church religions” (e.g., Christianity, Buddhism, Islam) to the exclusion of “religions of the people” (e.g., Roman, Greek and Assyrian religion) (1904: xxi). He also uses a telling comparison in indicating the mutual participation of magic and religion in a greater whole for which the social study of religious phenomena must account:
Magic indeed resembles religion in its modes of action and its notions; they intermingle often even to the point of indistinguishability; magical facts are in sum religious facts; but it is the case that magic forms with religion a more general class wherein they sometimes oppose one another, as for example crime and law oppose one another. (Hubert 1904: xxiv, emphasis added)

Durkheim had of course discussed the sociological necessity of crime in his *Rules of Sociological Method*, demonstrating its importance for an understanding of the phenomenon of normal societies and moral action, but stopping well short of considering it an equal participant in a “more general class” with legal, moral action. Hubert’s intent here is, as in the argument in the essay co-written with Mauss on magic, to emphasize the sociological illegitimacy of favoring religion over magic, or the pure over the impure sacred, simply because of an *a priori* moral project. Further on, Hubert (1904: xlvi--xlvii) is still more explicit that the notion of the sacred “appears under two different aspects, depending on whether we consider it in magic or in religion.” In the latter case, the sacred takes on the face of interdictions and taboos; in the former, it is “willful sacrilege.”

The later work of Mauss too was in many ways an elaboration of these early insights that distinguished the Hubert-Mauss model from that of Durkheim. This can be seen perhaps most clearly in Mauss’s work on the notion of the gift. In his endeavor to establish the social fact of reciprocal gift-giving as a “total social fact,” as a phenomenon that reveals the dense intertwining of social realms as diverse as the juridical, economic, religious and aesthetic, which even “in certain cases involve[s] the totality of society and its institutions,” (1950: 204, 274)
Mauss borrows a Maori term, *hau* (or “spirit of things”), to attempt to define the power gift objects have to compel givers and receivers to “give, receive, render” (1950: 205). As Lévi-Strauss notes disapprovingly in his preface to the volume in which Mauss’s essay was reprinted,⁴ Mauss uses the notion of *hau* here in much the same way the notion of *mana* had been used in the earlier essay on magic. Mauss quotes a Maori sage, Tamati Ranaipiri, to demonstrate the nature of the spiritual power inherent in the given object itself that provides a “moral and religious reason” (Mauss 1950: 153) for the imperative to give, receive and render the same, which he then summarizes as follows:

> It is clear that in Maori law, the legal bond, the bond by things, is a bond of souls, for the thing itself has a soul. From which it follows that to present something to someone is to present something to oneself...[F]or, to accept something from someone is to accept something of his spiritual essence, of his soul; the retention of this thing would be dangerous...Finally, this thing given is not an inert thing. Animated, often individualized, it tends to return to what Hertz called its “hearth of origin.” (Mauss 1950: 160--1)⁵

Ironically, Lévi-Strauss’s criticism of Mauss is fundamentally that the latter refused the sort of reduction of the impetus or force behind the phenomenon of gift-exchange to the social (in the form of its unconscious symbolic logic) that would have been characteristic of a more pure Durkheimian solution. Instead, Lévi-Strauss argues, Mauss has fallen victim to the familiar trap of the ethnographer who comes to accept as explanation the mystifications of the populations he is studying (Lévi-Strauss 1950: xxxviii). The *hau*, he argues,
Lévi-Strauss, in his attempt to reduce the sense of both *mana* and *hau* to the universal and timeless unconscious mental structures that are the foundation of his own theoretical model, rejects as simply anti-scientific the untidy “notions of sentiment, of fatality, of chance and the arbitrary” that Mauss invokes (Lévi-Strauss 1950: xlv). Mauss’s “error” then, here as in the case of *mana*, is to refuse to reduce either the motive power behind the obligation to give and receive gifts or the power behind magical efficacy and belief to some ultimately structuralist social necessity for order, be it logical or moral (in Lévi-Strauss’s criticism, it is primarily the former; in Durkheim’s theory of the sacred, it is the latter). In fact, in both cases, Mauss’s intention is explicitly inclusive (1950: 164--9); he refuses to consider as fundamental to the explanation of religious phenomena a concept that includes only those ideas and practices that are at bottom moral, or logically essential to the productive order of the social system, and that exclude ideas and practices that elude the moral categories and can even be destructive of social order. For Mauss, this inclusivity is necessary in the case of magic, in order to account for its deliberately anti-moral elements and, in the case of gift-giving, in order to account for agonistic gift-giving, such as that exemplified in the Kwakiutl *potlatch*, which is, far from the sort of non-agonistic gift-return cycle evident elsewhere (the kind perhaps more amenable to explanation by Lévi-Strauss), rather a form of virtual warfare (Mauss 1950: 269--70).

Nearly the entirety of Hertz’s published work deals extensively with the pure/impure sacred distinction, but nothing does so more clearly than his essay on social rituals surrounding
death. Here, Hertz examined the ways in which primitive societies symbolically deal with the liminal experience of death. Funeral rites in the Indonesian societies he examined consist of two separate burials, one occurring soon after death and the second only some significant time later. The corpse itself moves through two classificatory stages during this process, beginning as an impure sacred object and becoming pure sacred with the final burial rites. Hertz has been read here and in his other work as using the sacred/profane dichotomy as a simple equivalent of the pure/impure sacred one (see Evans-Pritchard 1960; Parkin 1996), and indeed he does explicitly note “a natural affinity and almost an equivalence between the profane and the impure” in his article on religious symbolism and the preference for the right hand (Hertz 1960: 95). Yet the language he uses in both these essays and particularly in the essay on death indicates clearly that he is discussing the distinction between impure and pure sacred statuses. The newly deceased is an object of “horror and dread,” his relatives “impure and accursed” during the time they are denied normal membership in the society prior to the final burial ceremony (Hertz 1960: 37, 50). More, it is clear he is talking about the impure sacred and not the profane if we follow Durkheim’s formula for equating the latter with the non-social, as all of the aspects of the deceased and his relatives discussed are thoroughly social in their effects and remedies. In the final analysis, Hertz’s work uncovers the myriad ways in which the impure sacred emerges within the social bond, creating liminal spaces through which social actors move and exerting a power that is ultimately generative at the core of the social bond.

The theoretical importance of the left/impure sacred for understanding the Durkheimian project and its legacy is significant. Indeed, the notion of the impure sacred raises the question of how to account for the concept of evil within the discourse of sociological theory. Durkheim reconciles himself to the existence of the impure sacred by placing it in a clearly inferior position.
vis-à-vis the pure sacred, but this move is not justified by any argument. Mauss, Hubert and Hertz endeavor to provide a solution to this problem, and in doing so they do more than make a contribution to a narrow specialist’s question in the sociology of religion. They opened up a path toward a kind of renegade Durkheimian mode of political and cultural intervention that would have an important and very interesting influence in subsequent intellectual generations. For although the personal political directions taken by the three younger Durkheimians were not grossly dissimilar to that of Durkheim, who was the very embodiment of the reformist and secularist socialist of the Nouvelle Sorbonne so despised by the French religious right of the era (see Bompaire-Evesque 1988), their engagement with the impure/left sacred arguably provided an intellectual discourse that others did use to take up very different positions in the fields of culture and politics. In some sense, we can even derive two different basic intellectual political positions from the emphases on the two different kinds of sacred. In brief, the concentration on the pure sacred yields an intellectual politics that is, like that of Durkheim himself, classically progressive and rationalist, in which the realms of science and politics are kept separate and the existential concerns of the thinker him/herself are bracketed from his/her political project, while an emphasis on the impure sacred tends to lead to an intellectual politics that is more based in emotional force (collective effervescence in pure form) and transgression, wherein the line separating scientific knowledge and politics is significantly less clear and the existential situation of the theorist takes on a great deal more importance.

Allan Stoekl (1992) has suggested (by way of Roland Barthes) that the modern French intellectual can be best understood as caught between two oppositional categories, the “writer” and the “author;” the first is concerned with representation and communication via argumentation of a rational tenor, while the second is engaged in “the not necessarily rational
force of writing or language itself” (Stoekl 1992: 7). In these two forms, the French intellectual has taken up the seemingly contradictory political tasks of acting both as representative and theoretician of the state and as critical dissident, and the stylistic and political conflict in these two models of intellectual identity is at the heart of the French situation. Durkheim, according to Stoekl’s argument, occupies a foundational place in this narrative, as he was the first modern French intellectual to clearly pose the opposition in its essential form, which is in fact concerned with the intellectual’s relation to the sacred. In Durkheim’s treatment of the totem as at once “(re)instituting act and . . . representation” (Stoekl 1992: 8), that is, as both rational and pre-rational expression of the social bond, he is laying down the terms of the task of the twentieth-century French intellectuals who followed him: namely, the struggle to reconcile the two within oneself, and within the terms of the category of the sacred. In the French context, both writers and authors envision a key political role for the intellectual (quite more important than, for example, the political role of the intellectual in the US), but the tenor of that role changes significantly hinging on this question that is for Stoekl ultimately stylistic. Stoekl is correct in noting the distinction, but incorrect in believing it merely stylistic. It actually hinges on the substantive question of which half of the sacred is taken up as the focus of an intellectual project.

The intellectual and political salience of the impure/left sacred arguably was augmented by specific changes in the French intellectual world in the interwar years. The decline in influence of institutional Durkheimian thought was serious in the wake of the Great War, owing not least to the death of many members of the Durkheimian school in the war (see Besnard 1983: 34--5; Mauss 1969: 473--99; Clark 1973: 209), but the Durkheimian interest in the impure sacred was picked up in certain intellectual circles that were in reaction against the perceived radical
secularism of the Third Republic and its concomitant failures on several crucial domestic and international issues. In fact, the war itself, and the several near-disasters it brought the French prior to the victory at the Marne in September 1914, not to mention its consequences in the loss of nearly an entire generation of young men, were seen by many as a direct effect of the failure of the Republican secular ethic to properly maintain France’s power position vis-à-vis the other central continental power, Germany. The wave of flight from secular Republican liberalism during this period was led in many respects by Catholics, and this was a period of intense conversion and return to the Catholic faith on the part of a significant number of intellectuals (see Gugelot 1998). But even those who remained unfriendly to the Church and to other traditional religious paths often reacted violently against the Republic, its secular liberal ethics and morality and its representative intellectuals. For many of these interwar intellectuals, the alternatives to that lifeless and suffocating Republic, with its purported excesses of democracy, science and reason, consisted of various efforts to tie together the spirit animating three emergent forces in French society: the modernist avant-garde (which, in its fascination with African and other primitive art and culture, became engaged in criticisms both of Western progressivist aesthetics and the French colonial political project); the anti-democratic movements of communism and/or fascism (which saw in the rising powers of Fascist Italy and Soviet Russia the virile successors to the tired old democratic republic); and a renewed mystical religious sense separated from and in fact often hostile to the Church.

The particular role played by the French reception of Nietzsche is of great importance in understanding the motivations and directions of this inter- and post-war intellectual pursuit of the impure sacred. Much scholarly work has demonstrated the ways in which, beginning in the early 1900s, Nietzschean thought became a tool for French thinkers of this period looking to move
beyond both the secular rationalist and the traditional religious alternatives to morality and
meaning. Nietzsche’s proposed means for self-overcoming and the heroic embrace of tragedy
were adopted initially almost exclusively by poets, artists and generally peripheral cultural
figures, but soon the ideas began to be engaged by intellectuals in more culturally central
locations. Even at least one figure in the respectable ENS/Sorbonne group surrounding
Durkheim can be explicitly shown to have held a great interest in Nietzsche. This was Hertz,
who wrote at great length in intellectual correspondence about his debt to the German thinker
(Riley 1999: 302--30).

But Hertz was killed in the Great War in 1915, so he played no real direct personal role
in translating the interest in the impure sacred to the younger generation of thinkers who were
reading Durkheim and Nietzsche while seeking radical personal and political alternatives to the
stifling conformities of the Third Republic. Mauss, who pursued a frenetic teaching schedule at
three different institutions (the École Pratique, the Institut d’Ethnologie and the Collège de
France) during the interwar period, instead became the central intellectual influence for these
neo-Durkheimian researchers of the impure sacred. His students were not the philosophy and
history agrégés and normaliens who had been attracted to Durkheim’s work 25 or 30 years
earlier, but a much more heterogeneous and volatile mix of orientalists, ethnologists, artists and
writers. Johan Heilbron described vividly the circle of young intellectuals who would become
Mauss’s heirs and their position vis-à-vis the rest of the university world:

they were rather outsiders in the university world; Maussian ethnology was not, in their
eyes, a continuation of Durkheimian sociology, but something “new,” tied to exoticism,
to the world of art, or simply to archaeological studies, to the history of religion or to
Oriental languages. For them, Durkheim had been “a severe professor, cold, rather rigid, truly the head of a school, while Mauss was a completely different kind of man: he was warm, expansive, he radiated.” (Heilbron 1985: 230, emphasis in original)10

An important group of Mauss’s students and followers in the 1920s and 1930s were attracted by all three of the emergent cultural movements discussed above (i.e., the modernist avant-garde, anti-democratic radical politics and anti-Catholic mysticism), and they saw in Maussian thought, and more broadly in the Durkheimian interest in the impure sacred, a consistent way of integrating the three into a lived practice as intellectuals.

Georges Bataille discovered Mauss’s work in the fall of 1925 (through the influence of his friend and former schoolmate at the École des Chartes, Alfred Métraux), and a number of other similar thinkers, including Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris, were also attracted during this period (Armel 1997: 219; see also Clifford 1988; Surya 1987: 181).11 These three (Bataille, Caillois and Leiris) shared a primary engagement and interest in avant-garde literary and artistic circles of the period. All were involved to a considerable degree in André Breton’s surrealist group, though each broke with Breton eventually. Bataille emerges as the central figure, at least in organizational terms, of the several associations and groups in which the three participated collectively in the 1930s that attempted to put into practice their reading of the Durkheimian engagement with the impure sacred.

The most important of these neo-Durkheimian groups dedicated to the interrogation of the impure sacred was the group formed by Bataille in early 1937, the Collège de Sociologie. Bataille had been the founder or co-founder of a number of earlier intellectual groups that were conceived as efforts to found a new kind of intellectual project at once politically radical,
aesthetically avant-garde and existentially constitutive of the kind of effervescence spoken of by the Durkheimians. One of these groups, Acéphale, was a kind of secret society Bataille organized with Pierre Klossowski, Jean Wahl, Jules Monnerot and several others in 1936.

Acéphale (literally, “headless” or “leaderless”) published a review that appeared a total of four times between June 1936 and June 1939, and in this way was perhaps not completely unlike many other intellectual associations of the period, but its central purpose was as a transgressive, subversive group of marginal adepts who attempted to recreate and reinvoke the power of the sacred and of the mythic as effervescent, quasi-religious elements outside the official political arena. Bataille and the others involved saw the group as a collective space within which a new way of enacting an intellectual identity could be pursued, a new way consistent with the basic insights of the Durkheimian tradition, albeit mingled with the avant-garde aesthetic and revolutionary political goals that had emerged in the cultural landscape of post-WWI France.

The group attracted a wild and sometimes dark reputation for its interest in the extreme faces of such collective effervescence and experience of the sacred. There was even a rumor circulating among some of those close to the group that they intended at one point to carry out a human sacrifice, using a member of the group (Bataille himself perhaps, or his lover and fellow traveler Colette Peignot who was already ill with the tuberculosis that would end her life in November 1938), in order to reenact the foundational myth necessary to make of the sacrificed a “founder-hero” and of the group a new religion. This rumor remained only a rumor (see Felgine 1994: 139--40).

The Collège was, in some ways, an extension of Acéphale, an application of the same principles of intellectual action to an expanded and more public arena. The express goal of the Collège was the creation of a sacred sociology, which was defined as an enterprise that would
at one and the same time analyze and describe the sacred in its effervescent role in the social
and endeavor to construct direct experiences of the sacred for the participants of the group
and, by extension, for other members of the social. These two tasks were seen as inseparable
by the group. In pure theoretical terms, it was the radical separation between the sociologist as
subject and the social, or the other, as object that was put in question by the Collège. Jean
Jamin (1980: 5--30, 14) restates the key question posed by the Collège thus: “How and under
what conditions can a subject position other subjects as objects of knowledge?” In responding
in a fashion that denied the separation between sociological analysis of the sacred and the
existential quest for the same, the Collège attempted to assert an identity as a

moral community . . . militant, interventionist . . . that not only gave life to the concepts
and methods of official sociology represented by Mauss -- in transferring them from the
exotic to the everyday, from the distant to the near, nearly to the self (Bataille, Leiris) --
but also made each of its members into travelers of social experiences. They became
the voyagers and the actors of a sociological experiment. (Jamin 1980: 12)

Taking as their starting point the same recognition made by the Durkheimians of the dual
character of the sacred, the members of the Collège followed and expanded on Mauss, Hubert
and Hertz in their concentration on the left or impure sacred and in their understanding of the
proper manner in which to engage the sacred themselves. For them, the quest for a community
both intellectual and affective at the same time was a powerful motivating force. It is difficult to
generalize about the work of the individuals involved as they were such an idiosyncratic group,
but there are nonetheless powerful lines of common interest and orientation connecting them.
Bataille maintained an interest in religious subjects and the idea of the sacred from an early age, when he embraced a mystical Catholicism in his early twenties that informed his first publication, a paean to the Notre Dame cathedral at Reims that had been one of the many French cultural treasures bombed by the Germans during the Great War. Even upon losing his Catholic faith a few short years later, he continued an existential inquiry into the problems of the sacred, sexuality and death that lasted throughout his life. All of his major works are examinations of these problems from a perspective that is greatly indebted to two sources often considered by intellectual historians as utterly oppositional: Durkheimian sociology and German existentialism, and especially Nietzsche. The unifying theme in his work is itself something of a meeting point of these two influences, although terminologically it is clearly Maussian in origin. In analyzing the social and the individual’s participation in it, Bataille took as central the notion of expenditure, i.e., of the offering, free giving, or destroying of some capacity, force or good. Mauss’s discussion of the gift was essential to Bataille’s conception, and he tied his understanding of gift-giving and expenditure even more explicitly to the sacred.

For Bataille, the crucial moments in social life are those in which society expresses itself by ritual offering or destruction of la part maudite, the accursed share, in the moments that produce effervescence and power through a total and excessive expenditure of energy, even to the point of death. Sacrifice, war, potlatch, games, festivals, mystical fervor and possession, sexual orgies and perversions are all modes in which this kind of expenditure is carried out. This is obviously a discussion that turns traditional sociological and philosophical treatments of production and society, which take production as primary and expenditure as dependent upon it, on their heads. Bataille was among the group who attended, in the 1930s, the lectures at the École Pratique des Hautes Etudes by Alexandre Kojève on Hegel, where he learned of a
way to read Hegel as a radical and proto-existentialist critic of the systematizing Marxists and others who saw production and work as the keys to human society. From Kojève’s Hegel, who took great pains to demonstrate “the unreasonable origins of reason” (Descombes 1980: 14), Bataille took as basic the desire of man that, like animal desire, can be satiated only in destruction, in action that radically annihilates the object desired. He also followed Kojève in the conception of the philosopher’s ultimate concern as not simply the world or society but as necessarily himself and his own experience prior to everything else.

The culminating point of this position in the published work is perhaps Bataille’s La part maudite (1949), in which he demonstrates in an explicitly historical and sociological manner the centrality of this idea of excess and the necessity of its perpetual regeneration and violent expenditure in society. Here, he invokes historical references ranging from Aztec human sacrifice to primitive potlatch, Tibetan Lamaism and the modern West in order to extend the point made by Mauss in his essay on the gift and in his other treatments of the fait social total. Bataille demonstrates how the analysis of general economy in society (as opposed to limited economy, that which restricts itself to production and labor) reveals the essential role played by excess and expenditure, and how this new understanding of economy enables an understanding of the centrality of the sacred (see especially Bataille 1949: 113--14) For the sacred, in its transgressive, impure guise, is one of the central ways in which this expenditure of excess is carried out.

In other discussions of eroticism, violence and death, he echoes this point. The transgressive moment, he argues, “does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it” (Bataille 1986: 63); that is, an understanding of the sacred in purely right sacred terms overlooks the very necessity of the left sacred for the completion of the sacred experience. In
Bataille’s view, the sacred is the experience of “the greatest anguish, the anguish in the face of death . . . in order to transcend it beyond death and ruination” (Bataille 1986: 87), and this experience is possible only when taboos and restrictions representing protection from things and realms that can produce death are transgressed. Thus, sexual taboos are burst asunder and the participants experience the transcendent moment in which the fear of death and decay that is intimately entwined in the sexual act (for “in the long or short run, reproduction demands the death of the parents who produced their young only to give fuller rein to the forces of annihilation” (Bataille 1986: 61)) is overcome, however briefly. Similarly, Bataille sees as the primary element in sacrifice not the offering to the god but rather the transgression, in a violent act of collective murder, of death taboos in the interest of thereby experiencing collectively the effervescent moment in which all perceive “the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one” (Bataille 1986: 22).

In all this, Bataille takes as given the Durkheimian starting point of the sociality of the sacred and of effervescence, but he adds the compelling response of existentialism, which is that such phenomena cannot be studied from afar by the philosopher or sociologist but that they fundamentally implicate and involve him/her. He makes very clear the point that Mauss, Hubert, and Hertz suggested in their own projects, which is that the problem of the sacred is first and foremost a personal problem and that any scientific treatment of it cannot escape this fact.

Caillois was the only one of the three central Collège de Sociologie members who studied with Mauss as a student rather than following his courses as an auditeur libre. While a student at the École Normale Supérieure (from which he would graduate with an agrégation in grammar), Caillois was already attending Mauss’s post-graduate seminars at the École Pratique and he took a diploma from its section in religious sciences in the same year he
obtained his *agrégation* (1936), working closely with Mauss and Georges Dumézil on myth and later publishing a thesis on “Les Démens de midi” (Fournier 1994: 708). But his connection to a certain unorthodox Durkheimianism extended further back even than these studies; while a lycée student in Reims in the early 1920s, one of his philosophy professors was none other than Marcel Déat, the renegade *L'Année sociologique* collaborator and friend of Célestin Bouglé who turned to the radical right and French national socialism in the 1930s (Felgine 1994: 31). Caillois wrote several book-length studies on precisely the central themes explored by the Durkheimian religion group. *Le myth et l'homme* (1938) and *L’homme et le sacré* (1939) were evidently greatly indebted to Mauss and to Durkheim, and also to Marcel Granet and George Dumézil. Though Mauss made some stern criticisms of the work on myth, finding the discussion of literature as modern myth too mired in “irrationalism” and “a vague sentimentality” (Mauss letter to Callois 1938), it cannot be denied that Caillois’s position on the foundational character that mythical thought has for social knowledge generally is fundamentally Durkheimian. The book on the sacred is still more obviously Durkheimian, or more precisely Maussian, in spirit, with a great number of references to the work of the religion cluster. In many ways, it reads something like the “textbook” on the sacred that Mauss himself was the best suited to write but never did (see Felgine 1994: 205--6). It also clearly shows the progression in the emphasis given to the “sacred as transgression,” that is, the impure sacred, as opposed to the sacred as respect that we noted in Mauss, Hubert and Hertz. Caillois included as well a discussion of sexuality and the sacred that presaged Bataille’s later work on eroticism as one of the central fields in which the impure sacred manifests itself.

Leiris’s most important contribution to the Collège in substantive terms was a paper on “Le Sacré dans la vie quotidienne” that he delivered in January 1938. In this paper, he
demonstrated a concern for the sacred that was perhaps still more reflexive than even that of his comrades in the Collège. Leiris made completely explicit the connection between the ethnographer’s concern with the sacred and his/her own participation in it by engaging in an analysis of the construction of the sacred in his own childhood and the ways in which that sacred structure lived on in his adult life. We find in Leiris’s personal geography of the sacred the same distinction between left and right, impure and pure sacred, or in Caillois’s terms, sacred of transgression and sacred of respect; his father’s top hat and revolver are examples of the latter, the bathroom and a nearby race course exemplify the former (Leiris 1988: 24–31).

The brevity of this central contribution to the Collège should not deceive us, for the recent publication of Leiris’s notebooks in preparation for the subject demonstrate a deep and lasting concern for the subject of the sacred (Leiris 1994). More, as is the case with Bataille and Caillois, much of his work beyond the explicit connection to the Collège was also engaged with the sacred as an object of central existential importance in his own life. He continued the autobiographical investigation of the sacred he had begun in the Collège after its collapse with a work in 1939 dedicated to Bataille (L’Age d’homme), and then a series of books that comprise his masterwork, La Règle du jeu. In these works, the connection between the Durkheimian concern with the sacred and the ethnographic project, on the one hand, and the surrealist concern with literature as a profound form of self-examination, on the other, is explored in depth. In the detailed exploration of his own sacred landscape via examination of dreams, childhood memories and transgressive or limit experiences of debauchery, he hoped to create a true littérature engagée, in which the writer becomes l’homme total, “one for whom real and imaginary are one and the same” (Boyer 1974: 10), precisely in exploring the one individual in whom he can see the totality: himself. L’Afrique fantôme had been among the first,
tentative sketchings of this quasi-scientific literature in which the methods of the ethnographer (the keeping of a “field journal” and note cards, a certain distancing from the object under investigation) are put to use on the ethnographer himself (Boyer 1974: 40--1).

The members of the Collège were attempting to find a point of connection between the insights provided by this new social science into the nature and reality of human existence and the deep and personal existential yearnings gnawing internally at many intellectuals at this crucial moment in European cultural history, i.e., the moment of the West’s full entry into a modernity characterized most centrally by the disappearance of traditional cultural responses to deep questions of personal meaning and identity and the failure to locate adequate replacements for this lost symbolic treasury. In them, and arguably also in the younger members of the Durkheimian religion group, we see the struggle between their commitment to the goals of objective social science and their desire to put this science and other intellectual currents at the service of their own existential quest, but Hertz, Hubert and Mauss managed yet to keep the combatants separated, if only with great difficulty and with more than occasional mutual intrusions. The members of the Collège are more willing for a number of reasons to allow these two realms, kept separated in any case only with considerable difficulty, to freely intermingle. This difference perhaps explains some of the clear distinctions in the projects of the Collège and those of Hertz and Mauss while attesting at the same time to the parallel dilemmas they faced and the reasons they could use the same Durkheimian body of thought as a tool in facing them. The Collège coupled a Durkheimian recognition of the place of the sacred in collective life and in the perpetual renewal of the community through collective effervescence in ritualistic ecstasy with a Nietzschean tweaking of the entire edifice so as to turn the ritualistic idea of the sacred into a celebration of the transgressive moment per se.
The Collège, forgotten by institutionally-centered intellectual history and, until very recently, all but completely unknown to the history of the social sciences in France, was nonetheless a significant presence in Parisian intellectual circles of the 1930s. Along with the three central members, participants in the group included Pierre Klossowski, Anatole Lewitsky (another ethnologist and student of Mauss), Jules Monnerot, Jean Wahl, Jean Paulhan, and Denis de Rougemont, while Kojève, Jean-Paul Sartre, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Julien Benda, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle and Walter Benjamin all attended at one time or another, though more infrequently (Bataille 1985: xxi; Fournier 1994: 707). The group was very short-lived, but its agenda with respect to the impure/left sacred was taken up by a number of important later thinkers often associated with post-structuralism and post-modernism. We can even see a certain parallel in the two groups of thinkers in the two political/cultural crises in which they emerged and participated: the Collège and the democratic crisis brought on by the failure of the Popular Front and the fascist threat in the 1930s, the post-structuralists and the tumult of May 1968.

Michel Foucault was perhaps the most important of these later thinkers in pursuit of the impure sacred. The sacred was an important conceptual theme for Foucault in much of his work. He had an abiding interest in the work of Bataille, which he described as producing a space in which “transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating” (Foucault 1977: 30). He argued that sexuality and other subjects he explored in his work (e.g., madness and death) become tied up with the Nietzschean death of God and the very possibility of the emergence of literature itself in so far as they constitute experiences that defy language to speak of them and that are nonetheless
spoken of, thereby enacting a violence on both language and the transgressive experience itself that Foucault read sympathetically:

On the day that sexuality began to speak and to be spoken, language no longer served as a veil for the infinite; and in the thickness it acquired on that day, we now experience the absence of God, our death, limits, and their transgression. But perhaps it is also a source of light for those who have liberated their thought from all forms of dialectical language, as it became for Bataille, on more than one occasion, when he experienced the loss of his language in the dead of night. (Foucault 1977: 51)

If the sacred is for Bataille desecrated and simultaneously remade in excessive festivals of orgiastic violence and sexuality, for Foucault it is in the act of writing itself that the connection to the sacred as transgression is created and maintained.

In his history of madness and the birth of the asylum in western Europe, Foucault argues that it is the confusion of madness with “unreason” (déraison) that threatens to completely eliminate the possibility of perhaps our last remaining access to the sacred through the experience of the “mad” work of art (Foucault 1973: 288). “Unreason” is seen as a realm of knowledge that offers insights not provided by other kinds of knowledge, and scientific knowledge, far from providing any possibilities for social rejuvenation, is described as actively responsible in its psychological guises for the misrecognition and subsequent destruction of this knowledge. This engagement with the left or transgressive sacred as a radical form of knowledge and experience of the social was not merely a fleeting phenomenon for Foucault. In *The Order of Things* (1970), he discusses the possibility of the death of Man as a mutation in
the fabric of knowledge that might release us from the totalizing singularity of identity. Foucault speculates upon this “explo[sion of] man’s face in laughter” (1970: 385) in light of the artistic projects of Mallarmé, Artaud, Roussel and others who worked in the region bordering transgression and the sacred “where death prowls, where thought is extinguished, where the promise of the origin interminably recedes” (1970: 383), and he finds that the “counter-sciences” of psychoanalysis, ethnology and linguistics (at least in their structuralist forms) undertake the very dissolution of Man and the turn to the dark being of Language that provided the ground for the transgressions of the poets.

Foucault was at least as scandalous as Bataille in his willingness to posit even the most disturbing manifestations of the left sacred as socially desirable. From the transgressive, “mad” artist, he turned to the transgressive power of yet another type of dangerous individual who lurks in the borderland between the moral and transgressive and “establishes the ambiguity of the lawful and the unlawful” through his/her words and deeds (Foucault et al 1975: 206). He argues that the aesthetic experience that constitutes an encounter with the left sacred might go beyond the creation of a work of art to include even acts considered by a horrified citizenry vile and criminal, like those of Pierre Rivière, the young man in provincial France who murdered several members of his own family in the 1830s and subsequently wrote in a mémoir of the otherworldly imperatives that compelled him to do so. Later still, in his work on normalization and discipline (see, for example, Foucault 1978; 1979), he examined specific contemporary western social spaces in which contact with the sacred is increasingly structurally denied. Again scientific discourses are seen as responsible for creating as categories of deviance certain realms of knowledge and practice (e.g., deviant sexualities) that for Foucault offer potential possibilities for transgressive knowledges and “pleasures” (Foucault 1978: 157). Political regimes of both
the liberal capitalist and communist models endeavor to close off experience of the transgressive sacred and Foucault condemns both with equal fervor on this ground. The sole political position-taking Foucault celebrates is that which embraces the escape of normativity in the kind of transgressive, dangerous “political spirituality” of e.g., the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Evidence of influence from Durkheimian roots that point to a particular mobilization of the left or impure sacred can also be seen in the work of Jacques Derrida. A connection to Mauss is directly observable, as Derrida has written a long essay devoted in large part to a commentary on Mauss’s essay on the gift (Derrida 1991). But beyond this, we can locate in his overall philosophical project clear connections to the later Durkheimian interest in the impure sacred. At the core of Derrida’s work is a preoccupation with the aspect of western metaphysics that requires certain foundational binary categories that are actually undone by certain crucial concepts that can invoke both poles of a contradictory binary and that demonstrate the ultimate instability of seemingly firmly constructed philosophical systems of reasoning. He has examined in great detail the role played in foundational texts and writers of the western philosophical tradition by these unstable concepts and categories in order to unveil the holes in binary thought generally that they represent, and to criticize what he sees as a systematic classification of writing as somehow more radically separated from real metaphysical presence than is speech (see especially Derrida 1976; 1982: 1--27). Examples are the word pharmakon (which can mean both “poison” and “remedy”) in Plato (Derrida 1981), supplément (which, Derrida argued, means both “addition to” and “replacement of,” with reference to writing’s relationship to speech) in Rousseau (Derrida 1976: 141--64) and gift (which, as Mauss (1969: 46) himself had pointed out, descends from a Germanic root that has
the dual meaning of “offering” and “poison,” the former preserved in modern English “gift,” the latter in modern German “gift”).

Derrida’s therapeutic project was to offer a new, radical kind of thought and writing that undoes this rigidity precisely by refusing the binary categories, exposing their limitations and reveling in transgression of the hierarchical rules of traditional thought. His own method of deconstruction aims to do precisely this, and in several works he has noted the efforts of others he sees as exemplary in this regard. In a reading similar to that of Foucault, Derrida (1978: 266) sees in Bataille’s work a radical effort at “a sovereign form of writing” that embraces “the poetic or the ecstatic,” which is defined by Bataille as “that in every discourse which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense, to the (non-) base of the sacred, of nonmeaning” (Derrida 1978: 261, emphasis in original). Derrida interpreted the “theater of cruelty” of Artaud, which excluded from its ranks “all non-sacred theater,” as analogous to his own efforts (Derrida 1978: 243). Jean-Michel Heimonet (1987) has carefully demonstrated the direct links between the treatment of the sacred in modern poetry by members of the Collège de Sociologie (Bataille, Caillois and Jules Monnerot) and Derrida’s theory of différance. Leiris, Caillois and Bataille were determined in their efforts to attach the Durkheimian theory they had encountered in Mauss’s work to what they and others (especially the various members of the Surrealist movement) saw as a contemporary crisis in literature that was in their view linked, like the political and broader cultural crises of inter-war France, to the disappearance of myth and the sacred (see, for example, Rieusset 1983: 67-123).

Like Foucault and Derrida, Jean Baudrillard utilized the category of the impure sacred, specifically in analyzing forms of knowledge and exchange that have often been discounted by other observers as examples of false consciousness or cultural domination. Although his early
work bears the imprint of a neo-Marxism influenced by Henri Lefebvre, by the mid-1970s, Baudrillard had formulated a powerful critique of the foundational assumptions of critical social theory that was informed by the political events of May 1968 and owed a heavy theoretical debt to Maussian ethnology and the Durkheimian engagement with the impure sacred. He began a vigorous attack on the idea of a social order fundamentally based on the existence of a “mass” with a rational will and a teleological place in history. It is the historical notion of the “the masses” or the “social” as a foundational tenet of the discipline of sociology that he argued has denied the validity of the experience of surplus, sacrifice and the sacred (Baudrillard 1983: 79). Sociology, in Baudrillard’s reading, has always understood society as a utilitarian network of relations with use value as the driving force behind it. This understanding has led to the classification of the “masses” as alienated or mystified in so far as they forsake rational communication and commerce. But he argued it is precisely in spectacle and in revelry in apparent meaninglessness that the sacred is experienced by the silent majorities. The “masses” explode the Enlightenment vision of the social completely in refusing “progressive” political mobilization for the modern festival of a soccer match (Baudrillard 1983: 12). These festivals are in some sense the contemporary equivalent of Mauss’s agonistic potlatch and Bataille’s Aztec sacrifices.

Through lengthy analyses of the historical failures of social scientific and political movements predicated upon the outmoded productivist paradigm and a genealogical examination of death as a form of social relation in western societies that recalls Hertz in its essentials, Baudrillard offered a radical thesis regarding the dilemmas faced by contemporary western capitalist societies and the possible means of responding to them. As a result of our entry into a modern period characterized by the total victory of productivism, we have removed
much of the world from our cycle of exchange, i.e., we have expelled some actors (most importantly, the dead) from our circle of social relations, and we thus now experience a frustrated and anxiety-ridden state of existence as a result of the destruction of the more complete system of exchange characteristic of many primitive societies wherein all excess, symbolic and material, is consumed in festival or ritual sacrifice rather than being accumulated.

In short, Baudrillard pointed to the potlatch and to the experience of the left sacred examined by Mauss, Hertz, Bataille and Caillois to demonstrate the failures of our own modern paradigm of exchange and social relation. He explored a number of what he considered radical responses to the crushing strictures of the modern productivist paradigm of exchange: our cultural fascination with violent death, especially in auto accidents, which partakes of some of the same symbolic significance as is experienced in ritual sacrifice; the obscure work on anagrammatic poetry by Ferdinand de Saussure, which is, per Baudrillard, an attempt to work through a poetics in which, as in potlatch, all excess is destroyed rather than accumulated for further deciphering or signification;\(^\text{15}\) and political terrorism, which, in so far as it consists of a “radical denial of negotiation” (Baudrillard 1993: 37) constitutes a turning of the principle of domination, which is normally the State’s unique power to refuse the counter-gift and thereby to deny the recipient’s opportunity for symbolic return, back against the State itself, a move that holds out the possibility for the collapse of the State.

Baudrillard gave more nuance to his contemporary theory of the left sacred with his concept of seduction. Paralleling the move to “liberate” sex with the move to “liberate” labor, he opposed the productivist paradigm again by positing a radical form of exchange (seduction) that “takes the form of an uninterrupted ritual exchange where seducer and seduced constantly raise the stakes in a game that never ends” (Baudrillard 1990: 22). Seduction is dangerous and
violent. It refuses the banality of bodies and the orgasm for the play of secrets and challenges.

Baudrillard reappropriated Huizinga’s (1950) notion of play as a fundamental mode of
interaction and combined it with his interpretation of the sacred as foundational mode of
experience of the social. What emerges is at bottom agonistic and outside (and transgressive) of
reason and law. The points of comparison with Mauss’s notion of gift-giving and potlatch are
obvious. Baudrillard (1990: 33) argues for a mode of social relations predicated not upon any
foundational rational, wealth-maximizing agents but rather upon ludic wearers of “symbolic
veils,” which is more fundamental than any form of exchange based upon the centrality of
production. The choice of specific terminology and examples here (e.g., his analyses of
courtship play and pornography, the latter of which is in his view not seductive) is often
provocatively weighted toward the language of gender and sex, but it is clear that he intended
his analysis to apply to social relations generally and not merely to relations of sexual pursuit or
attraction. It is thus, notwithstanding Baudrillard’s extended polemic against the “social,” a
general social theory with strong ties to a neo-Durkheimian form of engagement with the impure
sacred that is advanced here and that is at the heart of his work.

This interest in the impure sacred and the transgressive cultural and political perspective
it enabled has thus survived the demise of the Durkheimian school that gave it birth and
relocated itself in a number of subsequent theoretical projects including those of several of the
most significant post-structuralist thinkers. A number of interesting points suggest themselves in
the way of a conclusion. First, the significant turn in many theoretical circles to the body in
recent years has arguably been enabled by this concentration on the impure sacred. The
institutionalized Durkheimian tradition (and indeed much of mainstream social theory outside the
Durkheimian tradition as well) has largely taken from Durkheim’s own focus on the pure sacred
the latent idealism that accompanies it; mind/body, or ideal/material, is another of those binary
oppositions that can be included along with the others suggested or explicitly formulated in
Durkheim’s theory of religion. It is largely in the circles that have inherited the Maussian/
Hubertian/ Hertzian attention to the impure sacred that the body has been more explicitly
integrated into the theoretical project. Themes of sexuality and erotic transgression have been of
central concern in the analysis of the impure sacred from the work of Mauss et al. through
Bataille to Foucault and Baudrillard.

A second telling point here has to do with the expansion in the application of the
concept of the sacred inherent in a focus on the impure sacred. In Durkheim’s analysis, it seems
taken for granted that a certain secularization of the sacred is inevitable, even if some core
function provided by the sacred must be preserved for the social body. He speaks, in other
words, as a representative of the modern secular intellectual class, convinced that the “primitive”
varieties of the sacred are on their way out but still troubled (in a way, we should be sure to
recognize, that many of Durkheim’s more anti-clerical colleagues certainly were not) by his
realization that the social fabric depends on the sacred glue for its coherence. As such, the
political program that emerges from his emphasis on the pure sacred rather overemphasizes the
abstract, disembodied aspects of the sacred. Insofar as his project is motivated by his own
personal need for a solution to the problem of the sacred, the solution proffered is geared to a
society of essentially secularized intellectuals like himself. The focus on the impure sacred also
betrays a personal, existential interest in the sacred, which inevitably has political consequences,
but hardly the same ones as the focus on the pure sacred. Here, the formulation of a definition of
the sacred expressly rejects a model of the social as consisting of rational, secularized proto-
intellectuals. Precisely because the model of the intellectual represented by Durkheim and his
secular *Sorbonnard* colleagues had been subjected to rigorous criticism in the generation following them, the new engagement with the sacred explicitly built this criticism into its formulation of an invigorated notion of the sacred for modern society. Thus one finds in the effort to concentrate on the impure sacred a rejection of the split between intellectuals and masses (a split Durkheim attempts to reconcile by incorporating the latter category into the former) that is implicitly present in Durkheim’s analysis. Instead, one finds here an effort to formulate a more holistic theory of the sacred not limited by the hyper-rationalized perspective of the optimistic positivist intellectual of the pre-WWI period, a theory informed by the failures of many twentieth century political projects that over-rationalization and the denial of the “dark side” of social life that accompanies it must be corrected by a broader recognition of the very deep, and sometimes troubling, roots of the sacred.

<A> References


Interestingly, Durkheim provides pork as an example of an ambiguous sacred phenomenon for “certain Semitic peoples,” which is forbidden but in which case it is not clear why it is so, that is, if it is pure or impure sacred. We know that Durkheim, as he acknowledged himself, suffered terribly on the first occasions on which he ate pork after formally renouncing the dietary habits enforced by orthodox Judaism (see also his remarks on this topic in his review of Guyau’s *L’Irreligion de l’avenir* (1975: 161), where he writes “The Christian who, for the first time, takes his meals normally on Good Friday, the Jew who, for the first time, eats pork, both experience a remorse that is impossible to distinguish from moral remorse”).

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More, he argues here, there are no religious phenomena that are not ultimately “composite,” that is, there are no purely religious or purely magical phenomena.

See also François Isambert (in Besnard 1983:160): “At the frontier of folklore and sociology: Hubert, Hertz and Czarnowski, founders of a sociology of folk religion.”

It had first appeared in the second series of the *Année sociologique* in 1924--1925.

Mauss cites Hertz as the latter had collected a large amount of information concerning the *hau* for his unfinished thesis on sin and expiation and Mauss had come into possession of his notes and papers at the death of Durkheim in 1917; his uncle had received them from Hertz’s wife in 1915 on Hertz’s death (see Mauss 1950: 159 footnote 1). Numerous commentators (including Raymond Firth and Marshall Sahlins) have taken Mauss to task for quoting Ranaipiri out of context and thereby perhaps subtly changing the meaning of the quotation (see Godelier 1999: 16).

Lévi-Strauss’s (1950) introduction to the collected volume of Mauss’s essays is of course more than a simple introduction, as has long been recognized; it is a very skilled effort to mold Mauss into a precursor to the very structuralist theorizing of which Lévi-Strauss had been an important innovator in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Sufficiently inclusive to note the relation of the seemingly fundamentally political economic institution of gift-giving and religious obligation in the form of sacrifice, Mary Douglas’s foreword to the English translation notwithstanding.

There are distinctions, especially between Durkheim and Hertz, which I have argued elsewhere (Riley 2000) are clearly quite significant and even prescient of the still greater
differences between e.g., Durkheim and the *Collège de Sociologie*, but taking up that case at length here would take us away from the topic at hand.

9 Arthur Mitzman (1973: 111--12) characterizes Durkheim’s politics as akin to those of the “conservative socialists of the chair” in German academia during the same period (e.g., Gustav Schmoller, Adolf Wagner) in order to distinguish his position from the more alienated and Nietzschean positions of figures like Tönnies and Michels.

10 The quotation marks within the excerpt mark where Heilbron is quoting from remarks he gathered in interviews with Mauss’s students.

11 Bataille, unlike Leiris and Caillois, may not have actually attended Mauss’s courses, though he distinguishes the supposed increased attention to the importance of transgression in Mauss’s “oral teaching” as opposed to in his written work (Bataille 1986: 65).

12 Some of these lectures, given between 1933 and 1939, were transcribed and published by the surrealist Raymond Queneau in 1947 as *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*. The Kojève seminar was, like the course of Mauss, a fascinating site in which intellectuals from radically different milieux and with radically different concerns came together to engage what was seen as one of the most exciting minds of the period. Among the other seminar participants were Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, André Breton, Raymond Aron, Jacques Lacan, and Bataille’s comrade in *Acéphale* and the *Collège de Sociologie*, Pierre Klossowski (Boschetti 1988: 66; Surya 1987: 196).

13 In addition to an essay on Bataille (published in the review Bataille had founded in 1946) for a special issue on his death (Foucault [1963] 1977), Foucault assisted in the publication of Bataille’s *Oeuvres complètes* (1973) and wrote the introduction. David Macey
(1993: 16) indicates an interesting familial connection between Foucault’s family and Bataille’s:

Foucault’s father, who was a physician, operated on Jean Piel, who was related by marriage to both André Masson (who was also affiliated with numerous Bataille projects) and Bataille (Piel, Masson and Bataille married three sisters), and Masson had given Foucault’s father one of his drawings.

14 Baudrillard borrowed this term from Situationism, but he significantly modified its original Marxist implications. While the Surrealist Guy Debord defined the spectacle as “the existing order’s uninterrupted discourse about itself . . . the self portrait of power in the epoch of its totalitarian management of the conditions of existence (Debord 1983: paragraph 24) and thereby construed the spectacle as a powerful contributor to the mystification and alienation of the masses, Baudrillard saw in this revelry in the excess and irrationality of modern capitalism the best approximation of a contemporary experience of the sacred.

15 Baudrillard saw goods and words as functional equals here. The anagrammatic poem is the symbolic extermination of language itself and of the very notion of value, just as the destruction of goods in potlatch exterminates value for the primitive. It is comparable to the symbolic calling forth of the gods by the primitive, solely “in order to put them to death” (Baudrillard 1993: 209).