

Reassembling the ambiguity of the sacred: A neglected inconsistency in readings of Durkheim

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Abstract

The ambiguity of the sacred combines two opposite modes, the pure and the impure, as its fundamental feature. Present in the work of Durkheim and most scholars of the sacred, as well as in actual social practice, the impure sacred is not the profane, the sphere that opposes the sacred. However, in most interpretations of Durkheim, and even in aspects of his own argument, the ambiguity of the sacred is neglected and, in several important cases, treated as if it were profane: this has negative consequences for cultural sociology and the study of culture in contemporary society. In certain cases, the impure sacred and the profane can be hard to tell apart. Yet, if the boundaries between the sacred (pure and impure) and the profane are not clearly distinguished, the overall approach to culture in terms of distinctions and boundaries loses its logical and theoretical coherence. This article elucidates the ambiguity of the sacred and reintegrates that ambiguity into cultural sociology. The model proposed here treats the impure as a transient result of violation of the sacred/profane border with no independent status of its own.

Keywords

Ambiguity of the sacred, anthropology, cultural sociology, Durkheim, impure sacred, religion, sacred and profane

Introduction

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the notion of the sacred fascinated and inspired the most important scholars in several disciplines, including anthropology and studies of religion. Trying to unravel its mysteries, they sought rational explanations for the sacred phenomena they observed. Emile Durkheim ([1912] 1995) in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* raised the stakes by connecting the phenomenon of the sacred

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with the foundations of social life and conceptual thought. He suggested a set of social mechanisms that would reveal the connection between social interaction and symbols, ideas, and representations. In particular, he demonstrated how exciting ideas, powerful symbols, firm convictions, and strong beliefs emerge from social interaction, gain credibility, and go on to shape the perception of social life. His approach promised to solve the problem of how social order is produced and what its purpose is. However, for most of the twentieth century, the potential of Durkheim's theory of the sacred for grounding sociological theory and research was not effectively realized. For decades, it was read as interpreted by Talcott Parsons and Lévi-Strauss. Particular aspects of the theory, such as the "cult of the individual" and the sacralization of the person in modernity, became more popular than the overall argument. The important role of the ambiguity of the sacred in the overall argument was almost entirely obscured.

This article considers just one aspect of a complicated story involving the notion of the "ambiguity of the sacred" and its sociological implications. The discovery of the ambiguity of the sacred by social thinkers at the end of the nineteenth century opened a new period in which Western science became informed by what they considered at the time the "primitive" world. The corpus of ethnographic data about such societies had shown that the sacred, considered as a sphere of objects, events, and processes of special importance, combines two opposite features. On the one hand, sacred objects are sources of "grace" and produce great admiration, reverence, and respect. On the other hand, they inspire fear, horror, and even disgust. Even more puzzling, those opposite qualities often refer to the same object, which reveals at one point a beneficial, and then at another a disastrous side. This paradoxical feature was called the "ambiguity of the sacred."

Currently, the "strong program" in cultural sociology (Alexander and Smith, 2003, 2010) is one of the few sociological approaches that recognizes the fundamental sociological importance of Durkheim's theory of the sacred. Putting Durkheim's theory of the sacred at the core of the conception, Jeffrey Alexander, Philip Smith, and their colleagues built productive sociological explanations for a wide variety of social spheres, from politics to art, from history to everyday life, and from economics to intellectual movements. Revealing sacred and profane codes that underlie these spheres, cultural sociology finds persistent emotional attractors that shape perception and thus play an important role in contemporary social life. However, their analysis has tended to focus on stable structures of the sacred/profane opposition, neglecting the processes of change and replacement that involve the impure sacred. How those oppositions collapse and are destroyed and replaced by new emotional attractors, powerful symbols, and attractive ideas that emerge in their place remains unclear. Yet, this is especially important since those are the processes that increasingly rise to the forefront in contemporary social life.

In this article, I argue that a blind spot in dealing with the possibility of change follows from a general disregard of the ambiguity of the sacred, treating instead the impure as if it were profane. The impure sacred is not the profane – it is still the sacred. Overcoming this difficulty could substantially benefit cultural sociology and the understanding of Durkheim in general.

I argue that the unrealized potential of Durkheim's theory of the sacred and the tangential treatment of the ambiguity of the sacred have origins not only in misunderstandings of Durkheim's argument, but also in a fundamental incompleteness in Durkheim's

own treatment of the phenomenon. To overcome this problem, it is necessary to explicate implicit inconsistencies in Durkheim, and develop a more consistent account. This effort will build on several important later theories of the sacred (including those of Rene Girard, Roger Caillois, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner). This reveals not only the more expected aspects of the sacred – its “light side” – but also the “dark side” of the ambivalent sacred, those transgressions that are frequently and mistakenly treated as profane.

The section “Durkheim’s legacy actualized and problematized: Cultural sociology” deals with the “strong program” in cultural sociology which actualizes Durkheim’s legacy in studies of contemporary culture. The reasons why this research program is so important for sociology are considered along with its disregard of the ambiguity of the sacred. The section “The ambiguity of the sacred as an inconsistent fact in Durkheim’s theory” considers two reasons for this disregard: the hypothesis that the ambiguity of the sacred is an inconsistent aspect of Durkheim’s own theory, and the influence of several of Durkheim’s most important followers. The section “Alternative account of the ambiguity of the sacred” offers an alternative account of the ambiguity of the sacred. The section “The ambiguity of the sacred in modernity: An illustration” considers the special role of the ambiguity of the sacred in modernity and offers an illustration of the fruitfulness of the proposed model involving desecrations considered within the sacred.

Durkheim’s legacy actualized and problematized: Cultural sociology

Contemporary Durkheim scholarship is changing significantly. Interpretations that were accepted as canonical for decades are being refuted (Cossu, 2010; Rawls, 1996, 1997). The concept of the sacred has become one of the flagships of this rediscovery. With some significant exceptions, Durkheim’s theory of the sacred had rarely been taken seriously until the anthropological concerns of the late 1960s and 1970s which disclosed its fruitfulness.¹ The works of Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, and others demonstrated how Durkheim’s ideas about the sacred/profane opposition, rites, taboos, and symbolic processes could be productive explanatory schemes. The sociological reception of this important message, however, remained limited due to two circumstances. First, the anthropological debt to Durkheim was mostly unreferenced. As Eric Rothenbuhler (1992) notes, anthropological Durkheimians “work under Durkheim’s influence without need for either reference or discussion” (p. 66). Second, because of its key role in Durkheim’s argument, taking the sacred seriously requires not just taking into account isolated fragments of Durkheim’s conception but his theory as a whole, including his hypothesis regarding the relation of collective emotions to the sacred, and his sociological theory of knowledge.

One of the most consistent efforts to connect these issues to modern society is represented by the “strong program” in cultural sociology (Alexander, 2003b; Alexander and Smith, 2001, 2010), a research program oriented toward the “meaningful,” which rests heavily on a combination of Durkheim’s theory of the sacred and the interpretive tradition in social sciences. Consequently, the very terms “meaning” and “meaningful” combine

two different meanings: the first stemming from semiotics, and the second from Weberian and neo-Kantian roots. To see culture as an autonomous meaningful realm involves endowing meaning with causal power in social life. The sacred/profane opposition is used to reveal implicit meanings that govern different spheres of social life. The works of Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues on the Holocaust (Alexander, 2002; Giesen, 2004), the Watergate affair (Alexander, 1988), the Tragedy of September 11th (Alexander, 2004), and other issues have demonstrated the ability of the sacred/profane opposition to elucidate patterns of perception for significant social events. The research of Smith (2003) concerning the guillotine and other punishment technologies has shown that spheres, which were traditionally treated in the social sciences as increasingly rationalized, reveal a critical dependence on sacred and profane symbolic codes and ritual activities in expert discourse no less than in popular discourse. Alexander's (1992a) work on discourse about computers expands the explanatory power of the theory of the sacred to the very substance of instrumental reason, namely, computer technologies and their penetration into contemporary life.

According to Alexander (1992b), "education, politics, professional organization, morality and the law ... should be studied in terms of symbolic classifications" which are "structured by the tensions between the fields of the sacred and the profane" (p. 3). The formula is specified in a number of explanatory schemes and research techniques, most of which stem from the properties of the sacred. The constitutive property of the sacred, following Durkheim's definition, is the "absoluteness and irreducibility of the sacred/profane opposition." As a consequence, analysis of the borders between what is considered sacred and what is considered profane is one of the most common aims of cultural sociological research. Because they are accentuated in human interaction, those borders allow us to identify the symbolic structure of social life in many fields: physical borders or textual (marked by genres, languages, or the very act of spelling), borders between social groups, borders reproduced in the practices of communication, behavioral borders, and so on. The methodological potential of this type of analysis is due to another property of the sacred: specifically, the sacred/profane opposition must reveal itself in an intelligible way to be meaningful.

The ambiguity of the sacred and its disregard

The ambiguity of the sacred, however, has largely fallen out of the theory of the sacred and remains mostly ignored. Moreover, when it does become relevant, it is often misinterpreted. The ambiguity (or ambivalence) of the sacred implies a paradoxical "twofoldness" of the sacred that unites in it both its beneficial and disastrous sides. There are two modes of the sacred: *pure* and *impure*. The pure as achieved and as transgressed. These both belong to the sacred and not to the profane, a point that is often lost. The sacred, according to Durkheim (1995), manifests itself in powers and forces that are "benevolent, guardians of physical and moral order, as well as dispensers of life, health, and all the qualities that men value" (p. 412). The impure sacred consists of "evil and impure powers, bringers of disorder, causes of death and sickness, instigators of sacrilege. The only feelings men have for them is a fear that usually has a component of horror" (p. 412). The latter are often treated as profane. But in Durkheim's view, both are aspects of

the sacred. Durkheim (1995) bases his argument on careful examination of relevant ethnographic data coming to the view that “an impure thing or an evil power often becomes a holy thing or a tutelary power – and vice versa – *without changing in nature*, but simply through a change in external circumstances” (pp. 413–414, author’s emphasis).² It is the possibility of such a transformation, Durkheim (1995) maintains, that constitutes the ambiguity of the sacred (p. 415).

There are special relations between the sacred pure and the sacred impure that are totally different from the relations between sacred and profane. *First*, the sacred pure and sacred impure belong to the same nature, whereas the sacred and the profane represent two natures which are essentially and irreducibly alien. *Second*, being mutually transformable, pure and impure sacred constitute a peculiar kind of “dialectic” that can be clarified empirically and in the context of sociological theory. By contrast, in Durkheim’s view, the sacred and profane do not stand in a mutually transformable relationship: the sacred can transform the profane into the sacred but not the reverse. Finally, at the level of ritual conduct, Durkheim (1995) distinguishes between the two kinds of oppositions: “all the religious prohibitions fall into two classes: the prohibitions between the sacred and the profane, and those between the sacred pure and the sacred impure” (p. 306).

Discovering the ambiguity of the sacred as its distinctive feature is usually attributed to William Robertson Smith’s ([1889] 2002) *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. Robertson Smith pointed out, that there are two general types of (taboo) objects which are separated from profane life: holy things belonging to gods, and unclean things, such as women after childbearing, the man who has touched a corpse, and so on. Those two types of taboo objects are not only separated from the profane life but also from each other. This idea was extremely influential. Giorgio Agamben (1998) shows that the idea spread rapidly to such influential works as Wilhelm Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie*, Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms*, and Sigmund Freud’s *Totem und Tabu*.

The “dialectic” or paradox of the sacred is resolved differently by different scholars. However, what is common to most anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists of religion, specialists in religious studies, and ethnographers since Robertson Smith is that they recognize a distinction between the sacred pure and the sacred impure in addition to recognizing the sacred/profane opposition. However, the difference between the two disappears in the analysis of a number of important cases.

This issue becomes most explicit in several influential texts in cultural sociology. For instance, Alexander (2003a) often uses the terms “polluted” (“impure”) and “profane” as technically equivalent, and explicitly rejects the twofoldness of the sacred. Anne Kane (1998) argues in her work on defining the problem of the autonomy of culture (which constitutes the very core of cultural sociology) that “Durkheim’s division of the world into the sacred and the profane” is the same as “more recent renditions ... pure/polluted” (p. 75). Philip Smith (1999) follows this trend in his groundbreaking work on the elementary forms of place. Developing a sociological typology of place, he proceeds from a vision of the profane as a negative side of the sacred: “Profane places are associated with evil and pollution and speak of the depths of depravity” (Smith, 1999: 16). These works exhibit an implicit confusion between two distinct oppositions: sacred/profane and pure/impure. Most importantly, this confusion occurs within a tradition which is critically dependent on the explanatory resources of Durkheim’s theory of the sacred.

How could this confusion have come to be so widely accepted? The problem lies partially in the theoretical logic employed. If researchers treat the distinctions sacred/profane and pure/impure as if they were equal, they do so to some extent according to the internal logic of Durkheim's own theory, which fails to integrate this difference adequately. Additionally, overlooking the ambiguity of the sacred has an origin in everyday linguistic usage. In his work, *Man and the Sacred*, which is probably still the most complete sociological work on the ambiguity of the sacred, Roger Caillois (1959) provides a terminological analysis demonstrating that the concept retains an ambivalent meaning in many languages:

The Greek word *ἀγος*, "defilement," also means "the sacrifice which cleanses the defilement." The term *ἅγιος*, "holy," also means "defiled" according to obsolete lexicographic usage. A distinction is made much later by recourse to two symmetrical words *ἀγης*, "pure," and *εναγης*, "accursed," the obvious construction of which indicates the ambiguity of the original word.

(Caillois, 1959: 35)

"Primitive" civilizations, according to Caillois (1959), "do not separate linguistically the taboo caused by awe of sanctity from that inspired by fear of defilement" (p. 36). Contemporary European languages differ on that point, as did ancient Greek and Latin. English, like German and Russian, puts the two modes of the sacred into different words, while French combines both meanings in a single word. These linguistic differences may have influenced the interpretation of the ambiguity of the sacred. As Riley (2005) points out, the loss of the second meaning in English has likely contributed to misreadings of Durkheim:

The French *sacré* likewise can mean both, and is frequently used in both senses (*la musique sacré*, *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 deal of English-language misreading of the Durkheimian treatment of this issue.

(Riley, 2005: 275)

The ambiguity of the sacred as an inconsistent fact in Durkheim's theory

The ambiguity of the sacred is an "inconsistent fact" for Durkheim, and his approach to solving the problem is at times inconsistent with his own theoretical position. Furthermore, this initial inconsistency has been reinforced and amplified by language issues and the interpretations of his followers. Durkheim did not ignore or deny the ambiguity of the sacred. Nevertheless, he devotes only several pages to the problem at the very end of *The Elementary Forms* (Durkheim, 1995: 412–417). There are only a few references to the impure sacred besides those in the last paragraph of the book. Durkheim does not focus on desecrations, but rather on how the positive sacred is made. In explaining the phenomenon of the impure sacred, he introduces a special type of rite, "piacular rites,"

which was an innovative move for the study of religion. However, he pays less attention to this type of rite than types that produce the pure sacred.

Durkheim did his analysis in the context of a traditional culture in which boundaries are not fluid. As a consequence, the pure/impure boundary was less important and less prevalent than in modern societies in which boundaries are constantly challenged and remade. To develop a valid and useful Durkheimian theory, therefore, it is necessary to problematize the integration of the ambiguity of the sacred into his theory. The first task is to clarify the substance of the sacred/profane opposition in the context of Durkheim's overall theory, which explains the explanatory power of the sacred; the second task is to analyze the account Durkheim gives of the ambiguity of the sacred and examine its connection with the whole body of Durkheim's theory; and the third task is to analyze the account of the ambiguity of the sacred given by several of Durkheim's followers and its consequences.

Sacred/profane opposition and its explanatory power in Durkheim

The opposition between the sacred and profane for Durkheim has nothing to do with common binary oppositions, such as good/evil, white/black, true/false, and so on. Good and evil are both parts of the sacred and distinct from merely profane individual (nonsocial) life. Neither does the sacred/profane opposition reduce to, or follow from, moral, cognitive, or aesthetic distinctions. Quite the contrary, in accordance with Durkheim's conception, the sacred/profane distinction gives birth to those social dimensions of human life; it creates them. As a consequence, notionally, the sacred can be neutral or even negative as in the ethical, aesthetic, and cognitive realms. This is verified by numerous descriptions in comparative ethnographic and religious studies of rather frivolous and disrespectful relations with sacred objects. In some cultures, men can express anger at deities or demons and even physically beat sacred amulets. There are no indispensable behavioral attributes of the sacred, such as patterns of worship or respect. For Durkheim, the sacred does not have its origins in great symbolic laws that are pre-given to humankind (as many of his interpreters would have it), neither does it begin from any particular feeling of divinity, as Rudolf Otto (1958) supposes. Rather, according to Durkheim, the distinction between sacred and profane gives birth to all of those things.

The distinction itself, in Durkheim's view, begins the first time it is established in any human community that there are two classes of things and phenomena which are preeminently set apart: the sacred and the profane. This first boundary must be socially made. Durkheim (1995) specifies this as follows:

The traditional opposition between good and evil is nothing beside this one [the sacred and the profane]: Good and evil are two opposed species of the same genus, namely morals, just as health and illness are nothing more than two different aspects of the same order of facts, life; by contrast the sacred and the profane are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common.

(Durkheim, 1995: 36)

Durkheim makes connections between the sacred and foundational components of his overall position: the conception of society as a reality *sui generis*; the irreducibility of collective and individual representations; Durkheim's sociological theory of knowledge; and his theory of collective emotions. The fundamental status of the sacred/profane opposition creates the dual nature of human life, Durkheim's (1973) famous "homo duplex," and acquires its power by doing so. Therefore, relations between the sacred and profane both represent – and at the same time bring into being in its interdependence – a specific relationship between collective and individual life. The former (collective), Durkheim (1974) argues, is created through a synthesis of special kind resulting from the sacred/profane distinction, to which the latter (the individual) serves as a substratum.

Among Durkheim's interpreters, however, there are important cases of confusing the sacred/profane distinction with other binary oppositions. Furthermore, there seem to be certain types of opposition that are most likely to be confused with the sacred/profane opposition. These are ethically, esthetically, and logically charged ones. It is often a temptation for researchers to structure data by means of a clear and customary binary opposition, such as the dichotomy between good and evil, which are actually both sacred. The turn toward structuralism and semiotics heightened this tendency.

The critical difference between the sacred/profane distinction and other oppositions is that the former generates the dual nature of the human (social vs individual) as two autonomous realms: the collective mode of life and the individual stand in Durkheim's overall theory for the opposition between the sacred and profane. Because the profane originates from the individual sphere of experience, which is characterized by low intensity, ordinariness, and subordinated position as compared with the collective form, it reconstitutes those features in observable reality. The opposite is the case for the sacred.

This duality of the social and the individual must be objectified in observable reality by means of a discriminator that is not only strong enough to sustain the irreducible character of the sacred and profane, but which does not need other distinctions as preconditions. In other words, to establish culture, there is a need for a pre-cultural discriminator. It is Durkheim's theory of collective emotions that provided such a discriminator. Durkheim's claim is that emotions of a special kind are created by social involvement. Those emotions are, first, social by origin; second, of extraordinary intensity; and third, the former implies the latter. It is their social character that explains their intensity. The claim is analytically independent: it cannot be deduced from other elements of Durkheim's position. In turn, it is absolutely essential for Durkheim's theory of the sacred and his sociological theory of knowledge.

If the sacred/profane opposition is equated to dichotomies like good/evil, true/false, and others, it becomes disconnected from Durkheim's hypothesis about collective emotions (good and evil both involve heightened emotions). Extending such binaries beyond their emotional connection flattens his argument and reduces it to the field of semiotics. In other words, the confusion leads to contradictions and disadvantages in the explanatory power of the theory.

Durkheim's account of the ambiguity of the sacred

What could the impure sacred correspond to then, if there are only two realms of nature, the social and the individual, to be taken into account? The appearance of the impure sacred in Durkheim's explanatory scheme breaks the chain of continuity of dyadic distinctions. To solve this problem, Durkheim introduced the idea of "piacular rites" related to death and mourning. Describing those rites, Durkheim insists on the existence of a special kind of emotion which is different from those associated with the pure sacred, but which are still sacred and marked with collective intensity. By analogy with the positive mechanism of collective effervescence, those emotions stem from a special mode of collective interaction, namely, "mourning."³ According to Durkheim (1995),

While mourning differs from other forms of the positive cult, it resembles them in one respect: It too is made of collective rites that bring about a state of effervescence in those who take part. The intense feelings are different; the wild intensity is the same. Presumably, therefore, the explanation of the joyful rites is applicable to the sad rites, provided their terms are transposed.

(Durkheim, 1995: 402–403)

The sharp opposition between the pure and impure sacred which needs to be explained, thus, seems to be reduced to the difference between people's emotional responses to different social "stimuli" (such as joy, hurt, loss, etc.). "When society is going through things that sadden, distress, or anger it, it pushes its members to give witness to their sadness, distress, or anger through expressive action" (Durkheim, 1995: 415). This focus on individual emotions appears to place Durkheim's argument close to the psychological reductionism, which is strictly opposed to his general presuppositions and irrelevant to his theorizing. In addition, it leads to a paradox. If there are special modes of the sacred which stem from pleasure and sadness, why aren't there also any other modes concerned with other kinds of emotions which could be claimed to be basic, such as surprise, revolt, and wonder?

It is important to take note that this account of the ambiguity of the sacred is indefensible empirically because the emotional lineaments which mark off pleasure from mourning do not coincide with the borders between the pure and the impure sacred. There are many ethnographically described ritual practices that deal with impure objects, and they include positive (joyful) ecstatic experience rather than mourning. In fact, those emotions are the same as those Durkheim says are produced by positive rites. There are Sabbaths, saturnalias, and carnivals which often appear to be highly indicative in this respect. Pollution and desecration, which are typical issues for that kind of ritual, evoke delight, gratitude, and even respect.

The ambiguity of the sacred in works of Durkheim's followers and critics: consensus versus conflict

Since Durkheim left questions regarding the ambiguity of the sacred, the solution was largely left to the interpretation of others. First, theorists of the *College de Sociologie*

should be mentioned in this connection, then Robert Hertz (2009) whose important work on the opposition of right and left influenced the former (Hollier and Bataille, 1988). However, those early interpretations were less influential than those that came later (including Lévi-Strauss). It was Talcott Parsons who would determine the interpretation of Durkheim that became most prominent in sociology.⁴ As a result of Parsons' treatment, the issue of the ambiguity of the sacred was almost excluded from theoretical consideration. Instead, a focus on social conflict versus consensus became a powerful explanatory.

Parsons' consensus-oriented reading of Durkheim was reinforced by his thesis regarding the homeostatic character of Durkheim's sociological theory. It was Parsons who first put Durkheim's model of collective life into parallel with the reigning mid-twentieth-century conception of the social system as homeostatic. He argued that there was an affinity between Durkheim's notions of "moral community" and the social environment (*milieu social*), and the notion of "internal environment" (*milieu intérieur*) in the work of the French physiologist Claude Bernard ([1865] 1957: 76) and the American biologist Walter Cannon (1932), (Parsons, 1973: 163–164, Parsons, 1975: 107). In this homeostatic vision of social order and culture, the only possibility for social change is through increasing differentiation and segmentation of the system: there is no room for arbitrariness or radical change.

It is becoming clear that Durkheim's theory of meaningful contemporary social life was much more sophisticated than his interpreters have credited (Durkheim, [1893] 1933; Rawls, 2004, 2012; Special Issue *JCS*, 2012). Nevertheless, most interpretations of Durkheim, until recently, have taken the consensus view. The works of the "neo-Durkheimians" of the 1950s to the 1970s, who worked under the influence of Parsons, dominated this development. They interpreted Durkheim as directly applying an explanatory apparatus drawn from an analysis of primitive societies to contemporary societies. The most important works of that school are "The Meaning of the Coronation," the breakthrough work of Edward Shils and Michael Young (1956); Shils' (1965, 1988) later work on center and charisma; the conception of "civil religion" by Robert Bellah (1967); Edward Tiryakian's (1974) research on the occult and esoteric phenomena; and the works of Clifford Geertz (1973, 1977). As Smith and Alexander (1996) noted, the work of Shils and Young provided "new ways of being Durkheimian" (p. 583).

The benefits of this approach go hand in hand with its weaknesses. Neo-Durkheimians studied contemporary society in terms of Durkheim's "religious sociology." But to do so, they had to treat contemporary society as a kind of huge clan, which goes entirely against Durkheim's own argument about how societies change when they diversify. The fragmentary character of contemporary social life, and conflicts and discrepancies in collective behavior were relegated to the periphery of sociological analysis. According to Lukes (1975), "what holds society together the so-called 'problem of order' is an exceedingly complicated problem to which these writers propose an excessively simple answer" (p. 297).

The issue of the ambiguity of the sacred remained mostly neglected due to this focus: processes of pollution and desecration are not likely to play first violin in the sociological worldview of consensus and equilibrium. While contemporary cultural sociology has addressed many of these problems, it shares with Parsons and the neo-Durkheimians, the primal birth trauma caused by the failure to adequately integrate the ambiguity of the sacred into the overall theory.

Alternative account of the ambiguity of the sacred

The impure is a result of transgression between the sacred (pure) and the profane. That means that the impure is neither a state in itself or an epiphenomenon of any anthropological entities or modes of emotion. To overcome the problems introduced by Parsons and the neo-Durkheimians, our model of ambiguity should be integrated with Durkheim's hypothesis concerning collective emotions, and the account should embrace not only equilibrium-oriented and consensus-based ritual-like activities, but also those practices that are concerned with destruction and changes in social order. Such a model includes four steps: taking the "dark side" of the sacred seriously, overcoming the homeostatic model championed by Parsons, stressing the importance of temporality, and clarifying the logical status of the two oppositions.

Taking the "dark side" of the sacred seriously

To take the impure seriously, I argue, it is necessary to recognize chaos and uncertainty as possible sources of collective-inspired emotional energy similar to that produced in positive rites. Any social destruction, public disorder, challenge to social mores or revolution contains a powerful potential for creating new solidarity leading to the creation of a new legitimate order. Mary Douglas developed a model that provides an account of the impure or polluted, as an immediate result of transgression of the border between the sacred and profane. Consequently, the polluted or unclean is something that lacks and/or confronts the existing symbolic classification; it is "essentially disorder" (Douglas, 1966: 2), marginalia of the symbolic system. Douglas argued, having armed the theory with a wide range of convincing illustrations, that relations between the pure and the polluted, and stemming from their tension, are a fundamental and invariant mechanism of human perception and sensemaking.

The impure sacred is not a third pole of the sacred/profane dichotomy: The emotional energy of the impure sacred stems from the same place as the pure sacred, but by virtue of a logically alternative option. It denies the meaningful order instead of following it. The pure sacred is opposed to the impure as the meaningful is opposed to chaos. The impure as a realm of the inarticulate is a powerful idea. Focusing on the idea of social structure, Victor Turner (1969) introduces the notion of "anti-structure": the principle of the violation of prescriptions, the realm of desecration, and defilement that stands against the social and cultural order. Following Turner, desecration goes hand in hand with structure and causes its vitality as well as its ability to change.

There is a key point to be clarified here, however. Douglas treats culture as a system of distinctions, as does Turner. Her paradigmatic explanations are strongly culturally centered, and broadly deal with beliefs, taboos, and meaningful structures. But if one follows Durkheim, culture shouldn't be treated as a mere system of distinctions. Not only are the specifics of how distinctions work lost in this way – but the idea that distinctions are social creations is lost as well. Any cybernetic system, any object of physical nature can be treated as a system of distinctions, but that doesn't mean it is culture. If we are to give an account of culture, we have to explain its ability to enable meaningful action.⁵

Rene Girard makes an important contribution to an adequate account of the dark side of the sacred, inverting the Hobbesian scheme of social order as originating from a consensus or positive-oriented association of individuals, replacing it with the hypothesis that any society originates from the event of violence: "The event should be viewed as an absolute beginning, signifying the passage from nonhuman to human, as well as a relative beginning for the societies in question" (Girard, 2005: 326). He substitutes for the mechanism of effervescence, as described by Durkheim, the mechanism of "generative violence." In his view, violence does not just destroy social and cultural order, it ignites a new order, releasing strong emotional energy which, in turn, can create a new sacred in the same manner as Durkheim's effervescence. Thus, a new pure sacred appears. The most conventional examples are resocialization in total institutions, such as Nazi camps. The new order originates from the horror of the absence of the former sacred distinctions, and, hence, from absence of meaning, or uncertainty. In itself, violence doesn't yet contain an interpretation, a legitimized perspective. But interpretation is doomed to appear because of the fundamental distinguishing power of strong emotion. Girard called this "mythological elaboration." If following Girard, the impure sacred is treated as primary, then the new sacred originating from the generative event is arbitrary because of the arbitrariness of the mythological elaboration produced by generative violence. By contrast, following Durkheim's positive-oriented model of the origin of the sacred (combined with the homeostatic interpretation of this model), change can only occur in the reproduction of order; there are no such things as a new sacred or a new social order, and desecration doesn't lead to emergent innovation.

Overcoming the homeostatic model

Girard offers a way of overcoming the homeostatic model of social order by putting the arbitrary event (such as generative violence) at the core of the theory of the sacred.⁶ Arbitrary mythical elaboration makes room for the contingency of culture. As such, sacred events appear as a model of social change rather than reproducing the existing social order. Reproduction, in turn, appears to be a degenerate case of change: the consequence of inverting the logical primacy of the pure and impure sacred. Victor Turner comments on the philosophical meaning of the primacy of change and the impure sacred, or, in his own terms, the general validity of anti-structure. Why does man need to destroy? "Perhaps," Turner (1975) argues, "this is because man may still be an *evolving* species; his future is in his present, but is as yet unarticulated, for articulation is the presence of the past" (p. 298).

Temporality

Temporality is inherent to theorizing if we are to describe the impure. Why? What suggests that the profane should be treated as a mode of the impure and vice versa in many cases stems from a *synchronic* vision of a relation that should be seen *diachronically*. Thus, contact between the sacred and profane prohibited by taboo is treated as producing a profanation. Then the results of such a profanation are mistakenly treated as profane (see how language itself leads us to see it the wrong way!), while in fact, it is the impure.

Hertz (2009: 94–95) argues that it is easy to confuse the profane and the impure, if one focuses on the danger of desecrating the sacred. From this point of view, the profane, as an object of potential taboo contact, and the impure, which results from the process of actual contact, may be easily confused.

Making clear the logical status of the two oppositions

The two oppositions, the sacred/profane and the pure/impure, are different not just substantially, and temporally, but also logically. The sacred/profane dichotomy relates to attributes of meaningful matters, the pure/impure characterizes the status of those attributes, either it is preserved, or disturbed. The sacred and profane are two realms, whether they are objectified in things, beings, territories, phenomena, or time segments. They are relatively stable, they are not able to change in the absence of events which affect the prearranged order of things. This is the “ideal” static picture, yet, it is impossible in reality (because reality is dynamic), and this very impossibility is the fundamental reason for the ambiguity of the sacred. The impure is the violated sacred. The impure sacred is not a stable state that could be described in synchronic terms. It resolves into the pure sacred or the profane, as musical dissonance resolves into consonance.

Roger Caillois (1959) provides useful considerations of the reciprocity between the pure and the impure modes of the sacred arguing that the sacred and the profane relate as energy (or power), and substance (or thing). The thing is equal to itself, whereas energy can easily change its vector:

For the world of the sacred, among other characteristics, is opposed to the world of the profane as a world of energy is opposed to the world of substance: On one side, forces, on the other side, things. The immediate result of this is of importance for the concepts of pure and impure. They become eminently mobile, interchangeable, and equivocal.

(Caillois, 1959: 34)

The impure is the result of a prohibited touching of the sacred and profane. It results from the violation of the order, which rests upon their division. The pure is the unviolated sacred.

The ambiguity of the sacred in modernity: An illustration

As it has generally been interpreted (in homeostatic terms and requiring consensus), Durkheim’s theory of the sacred and the productivity of the concept as a means of sociological explanation meet with a formidable obstacle in contemporary societies; Contemporary social life is fluid, changeable, and fragmentary. It is not easy to point out any consensus that is shared by everyone, not to mention a consensus concerning objects of sacred worship.

As W.S.F. Pickering (2001) argues in his provocatively titled work “The Eternality of the Sacred: Durkheim’s Error?,” trying to locate the sacred in a “grand” idea of modernity, humanism, human rights, and civil religion, is problematic although some argue that

it is possible (see Callegaro, 2012; Karsenti, 2012). So, where is the elusive sacred in modernity? Taking the ambiguity of the sacred seriously provides a solution. Fluid and changeable, symbolic borders between the sacred and profane are more likely to reveal themselves, not in a positive way, but in the negative events of their transgression. It is desecration, not celebration that appears to be the basic model for a theory of the sacred applicable to modernity. From a methodological point of view, there is a parallel between observing anger, revolt, and resentment as markers of the unobservable sacred, and the famous analysis of paraphasia by Sigmund Freud (1914), revealing unobservable processes in the unconscious.

An illustration

In modern times, the influence of religion on social life in Western societies could hardly be estimated directly, as if it was something like the “collective unconscious.” There are illustrations of this embarrassment in international political life, such as the notorious discussions of the European Union constitution. Does united Europe need to mention God and the Christian legacy as a constitutive point of its identity? Is the historical idea of Europe as Christendom of any relevance at the moment? And how, in principle, could the questions be answered? A conventional way to estimate religious influence is through public surveys, in which people are asked directly whether they believe in God, or whether they practice religion. But, the borders between answers like “I believe in something supernatural,” “I believe in God,” and “I believe in fate” are unstable and unmeasurable. And, after all, doesn’t the religion-originated worldview affect even atheists?

Nevertheless, the cultural meanings and validity of religious symbols in contemporary life can be well articulated in cases of public insult or defilement that involve religious feeling. The art realm is particularly sensitive to those effects since it is immanently oriented toward excitement and emotional tension. Art, which in the time of the grand narratives of religion, drew inspiration from religious symbols in a positive way, has increasingly turned in contemporary society toward the power of desecration. For illustration, I refer to a much talked about scandal at the art performance “The Immature Atheist” in Moscow in 1998. A participant, who was at the time Director of the School of Contemporary Art in Moscow, performed a desecration of Orthodox Christian icons that included destroying them with a hatchet. The incident incurred wrath not only from believers but also from wider groups that had allegedly adopted religiously neutral positions. Public anger was so powerful, that the performance was interrupted and a criminal case initiated against the actor, which finally resulted in his emigration from Russia.

Transgression energizes the actor’s performance and informs it with the ability to impress the public (both negatively and positively), because it is a performance of an impure sacred. Intentional transgressions in relying on this super-intensive effect are analogous to symbolic mechanisms through which the power of the sacred can be obtained from ritual desecration, that are common among traditional societies.⁷ The artist released the power of the sacred, but then, as Girard argued, mythical elaborations resulted that were not controllable.

Interpretations by groups of the performer’s public advocates asserted the autonomy of the art sphere and explicitly denied the sacred status of religious matters. They stressed

that the icons desecrated were *cheap* reproductions. Thus, they tried to redefine the icons that were desecrated as merely profane, pointing to their low value both as commodities and as art objects. But the explanation was of limited productivity as the outcome of the case demonstrates. It was indefensible both conceptually and empirically. At the conceptual level, there could not be reciprocity between the sacred and the profane since they are asymmetric. More importantly, the meaning of the cheap icons was still given by reference to the sacred. If they were truly profane they would have no sacred meaning, and consequently, destroying them would not have been a meaningful desecration.

Religion is not the only object of the emotional charge of art. The human body is probably the most prominent locus of contemporary sacrality. The body has been engaged in defilement-oriented art practice to a much larger extent than religion. These art practices disclose a wide arsenal of implicit rules and borders that concern the body by means of their violation. A task for cultural analysis would be an investigation of implicit body models, including a tacit teleology of different parts of the body, implicit sexual presuppositions and taboos, pathology thresholds, and the handling rules that constitute normality, such as body integrity, rules of immunity, consistency, proportion, and so on.⁸ The list of subjects suitable for this kind of analysis goes far beyond the spheres of religion and corporality to embrace all cultural issues.

Conclusion

The alternative account of the ambiguity of the sacred proposed here gets deeper into the implicit logic of meaningful life in contemporary society than the more conventional analysis of symbolic classification. It extends the analysis of culture beyond the rituals of worship and order maintenance to multiple processes of symbolic violence, desecration, and defilement, which are interwoven into the texture of contemporary culture. These increasingly play key roles as “energizers” of meaningful life. Acquiring an ability to recognize the variety of symbolic mechanisms that determine specific images of contemporariness is important: from rude desecrations that create spontaneous solidarity among people who otherwise seem atomized to networks of delicate ironic commentaries, which inform social life within a microstructure of emotional attractors.

The ambiguity of the sacred is an essential defining feature of the sacred. In its absence (or disregard), the sacred is reduced to general principles of difference and hierarchy, as applied to human communities. Such an approach deprives the sacred of its specificity. It becomes a formal notion, seemingly applicable to any empirical reality and easily replaceable by others. Reassembling the ambiguity of the sacred builds on several theories that comply with the spirit of Durkheimian theorizing. Most important are those of Mary Douglas, Rene Girard, Victor Turner, Georges Bataille, and Roger Caillois. The proposal is that the source of the impure sacred is the violation of the boundary between the sacred (pure) and the profane, that is, transgression. The impure, thus, is not a thing in itself, or an epiphenomenon of any anthropological, conceptual, or psychic reality, but rather a disordered condition of the sacred.

In contemporary societies, the sacred often eludes direct observation. Symbolic boundaries are not as obvious; they are changeable and fluid. The mode of the sacred we more often deal with is the impure. It is rather scandal than consensus we encounter, failures in

social order rather than respectful practices, and violations of aesthetic conventions rather than expected patterns. The good old analysis of binaries is too formal and inflexible to be adequate in modern contexts. Contemporary social life is energized by the changeable structure of emotional attractors stemming from transgressions. Taking the ambiguity of the sacred seriously, thus, promises to connect cultural sociology and Durkheimian theory with the genuine sensible nerves of contemporary social life.

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Notes

1. The most important exceptions are the “sacred sociology” of Georges Bataille and the whole sociological, philosophical, and aesthetic project of the *College de Sociologie*. Other important issues are presented by earlier works of Erving Goffman (1956) and the Chicago School, especially Everett C. Hughes (1937, 1962). However, the focus is not Durkheim’s central argument concerning the sacred, but only one of its consequences, namely, the idea of the sacralization of the person as a tendency of modernity.
2. Ethnographic and religious examples of the sacred impure turning into the sacred pure and vice versa are countless. Moreover, that turning constitutes a significant branch of powerful and widespread magical technique for gaining sacred power through desecration, whereby the most important rules of the sacred order are outraged intentionally to acquire extraordinary power.
3. Properly speaking, Durkheim does not claim that mourning is the only mode of piacular rites, but only the central one. The others are reducible to it in all important respects (Durkheim, 1995: 409).
4. The story of the interpretation of Durkheim’s works and especially the *Elementary Forms* is long and complicated. Parsons is just one interpreter who is more relevant in the context of others. For a more complex view, see, in particular, the work of Anne Rawls (1996: 462–477, 1997, 2004).
5. This is one of the three main characteristics of the “strong program,” according to Alexander and Smith (2001): “far from speaking in terms of abstract systemic logics as causal processes (à la Lévi-Strauss), we suggest that a strong program tries to anchor causality in proximate actors and agencies” (p. 138). Anne Rawls (1996) stresses the same point moving from an epistemological argument showing that

the category of classification must develop from a moral division enacted in social practice, which is experienced as a moral force in a single instance and not as a natural division perceived over a series of particulars. For Durkheim, the first moral division to be enacted becomes the first binary social division from which all other classifications follow.

(Rawls, 1996: 455)

Missing the point, continues Rawls (1996), moved Claude Lévi-Strauss to detach binary oppositions from shared enacted practices, which in turn, “led him to rest his argument on

a universe of belief structures, a position from which we are still struggling to disentangle ourselves theoretically” (Note 16).

6. Douglas’ and Turner’s models also do this to a certain extent. Douglas (1966), at least in *Purity and Danger*, is much more concerned with the “dark side” of the sacred, destruction of the order, and the generative abilities of rituals as opposed to the mere reproduction of the existing order. Turner’s central model of the ritual is the rite of passage, which is a basic model of change.
7. See examples given by Roger Caillois (1959), such as intentional incest performed by Thongan hunters to acquire the superior efficiency of the “murderer” before a dangerous hunt, or immunity to bullets, expected by residents of Lake Nyassa from incest (p. 47). “By violating the most sacred taboos, man acquires the perilous co-operation of supernatural forces, almost like signing a pact with the devil in order to become a sorcerer.”
8. Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) study of carnival culture and the model of “grotesque body” shows the possibilities of cultural analysis of body models and their defilement.

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