



## disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory

Volume 29 *Populism*

Article 6

7-2020

### Social Solidarity and the Ontological Foundations of Exclusionary Nationalism: Durkheim and Levinas on the Historical Manifestations of Authoritarian Populism

C. J. Eland

*Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil*

Nicole L. M. T. de Pontes

*Federal Rural University of Pernambuco, Brazil*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.29.05>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



#### Recommended Citation

Eland, C. J. and de Pontes, Nicole L. M. T. (2020) "Social Solidarity and the Ontological Foundations of Exclusionary Nationalism: Durkheim and Levinas on the Historical Manifestations of Authoritarian Populism," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 29 , Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.29.05>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol29/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to [disclosurejournal@gmail.com](mailto:disclosurejournal@gmail.com)

## Social Solidarity and the Ontological Foundations of Exclusionary Nationalism: Durkheim and Levinas on the Historical Manifestations of Authoritarian Populism

C.J. Eland, *Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil*

Nicole L.M.T de Pontes, *Federal Rural University of Pernambuco, Brazil*

*This paper seeks to explore the dynamics of contemporary authoritarian populism from a historical perspective, relying on the approaches of Durkheim's experimental sociology and Levinas's ethical phenomenology. By reading the works of these two thinkers in concert, a pathology is exposed within this particular form of politics in that the State must necessarily close itself off to the critique of exteriority. Our reading of Durkheim explores the social pathology of nationalism while our reading of Levinas demonstrates the philosophical dimension of this pathology as the inevitable outcome of any philosophical thinking which privileges ontology above all else. The way these thinkers address these themes can serve as a guide as we attempt to overcome the same pathology today in various forms of authoritarian populism that adopt the same mentalities and methods utilized by past forms of this corrupted idealism. Keywords: nationalism, ontology, populism, Durkheim, Levinas.*

### *Introduction*

One of the great social theorists of our time passed away in July of 2019. Ágnes Heller dedicated her life to shedding philosophical illumination on complex political and social phenomena and in her last years she deployed her considerable talents in direct opposition to the politics of Viktor Orbán, the current prime minister of Hungary. Heller's legacy is that of a political critic precisely because she refused to be drawn into philosophical dilemmas in which opposing capitalism necessarily meant dogmatically supporting Marxism. As a survivor of both the Nazi Holocaust and the Stalinist purges in occupied Hungary, Heller's primary political commitment was an opposition to totalitarianism in all its forms. Her first-hand experiences with the barbarism of both left and right totalitarian governments lead Heller to build a career as an outspoken critic of all forms of political totality.

One of the deep motivations of her work is the view that while philosophy has long engaged with conceptions of evil as it has been formulated by religious thought, in the contemporary world (beginning with Auschwitz) "demonic" evil manifests exclusively as political evil. Against Hannah Arendt's conception of the banality of evil, Heller argues that evils committed or enabled by "demonic" agents become radical only when married to practical political power. She notes that Nero, for example, "was a murderer on a grand scale because as

Emperor of Rome he had the power to murder” (Heller 2011, 24). As the technology of cruelty evolved from Nero’s flames to the furnaces of Auschwitz, the scale of atrocity within reach of demonic figures expanded exponentially. This leads to the current situation in which “modern demons are in full bloom only in the situation of power” (Heller 2011, 27). Heller’s approach shows that philosophy is uniquely suited to exposing the machinations of evil, and further, that in our time the evil most urgently vital to oppose is found in the political sphere of human life. This is why, even in her final philosophical pursuits, Heller remained firmly fixed on opposing and challenging the politics of Orbán.

Heller’s analysis of Orbán, which she offered in an interview on August of 2018, less than a year before her death, can help us orient our discussion of authoritarian populism here. When asked if she considered Orbán to be a “populist” she pronounced her diagnosis of his particular pathology as follows:

I do not like the term populist as it is used in the context of Viktor Orbán, because it does not say anything. Populists rely typically on poor people. Orbán uses nationalistic vocabulary and rhetoric, he mobilizes hatred against the stranger and the alien, but it has nothing to do with populism. It has to do with the right-wing, but this is also questionable, because Orbán is a man who is interested only in power... From the time he became the prime minister of Hungary, Orbán was always interested in concentrating all the power in his hands. I would describe him as a tyrant. He is a tyrant because nothing can happen in Hungary that he does not want, and everything that he wants is carried through in Hungary. This is a very tyrannical rule... Everyone who is under Orbán must serve him and must agree with him. No counter opinion is tolerated because this is a mass society, not a class society (Heller 2018).

This mentality of total concentration of power that Heller diagnoses in Orbán is certainly not limited to Hungarian politics nor is it only found within western countries. Rather, this same pathology can be seen as a worldwide movement that has encompassed China, Russia, Egypt, Turkey, Brazil, England and the United States. Heller remained committed throughout her life to the task of deploying the full force of philosophical rigor against this pathology and the kind of tyranny she denounced in figures such as Orbán.

But here we might take issue with Heller’s reluctance, in the passage cited above, to identify the populist element of what she calls Orbán’s mobilization of “hatred against the stranger and the alien,” which she argues “has nothing to do with populism”. In our view, Heller underestimates the way that contemporary authoritarian populism mobilizes and exploits contempt for those who are ethnically or culturally different from the hegemonic majority, not as an incidental route to power but as a formal definitive characteristic of the movement. As will be developed below, this exploitation is not as an incidental characteristic but rather is a necessary and defining methodology of the movement. Further, this appeal to the basest aspects within the human soul is inseparable from the particular kind of right-wing authoritarian populism that Orbán represents and goes to the heart of the entire tradition of exclusionary nationalist populism which can only comprehend social unity in terms of hegemonic cultural solidarity.

In discussing the kinds of solidarity which unite and divide the social order, we might

well begin with the work of Émile Durkheim. While Durkheim is mostly known for his formal experimental sociology, he was a politically active scholar who, like Heller, deployed the full force of his academic research against the most serious political challenge of his day. For Durkheim, that challenge was the rising force of nationalism in the early part of the twentieth century. In the first part of this paper we will explore Durkheim's very specific account of this particular pathology. In the second part we will attempt to orient how this pathology relies on an appeal to "elemental feelings" among the populace as an unmistakable component of past and present forms of exclusionary nationalist populism.

### *Durkheim Against Nationalism*

As one of the founders of classical sociology, Durkheim was primarily preoccupied with the dynamic forms of social solidarity that rise and fall with historical and cultural changes. While his work rarely addresses the particular political manifestations or exploitation of these kinds of solidarity, we can see how these elements converge in his brief 1914 (republished in English in 1915) propaganda pamphlet "Germany above All," written against rising German Nationalism at the outset of the First World War and. There, Durkheim elaborates a view of a particular kind of nationalistic politics that persists today in contemporary forms of authoritarian populism. Dominick LaCapra explains the context of the pamphlet within Durkheim's thought:

One important problem which the propagandistic World War I pamphlet *Germany above All* emphasized was the crisis generated by a conflict between legal imperatives and the demands of a humanistic ethic. Although the severity of this conflict challenged his optimistic evolutionary assumptions about the non-authoritarian and democratic course of law and government in modern society, Durkheim's answer was unequivocal. In contrast to the school of juridical positivism in Germany, which had exercised some influence on his early thought, Durkheim without hesitation placed the humanistic *conscience collective* of modern society above legal duties to the state (LaCapra 2001, 87).

This interest in the conflict between legal obligation and ethical obligation is a vital theme that gets to the heart of the mentality of contemporary nationalism. This mentality harbors a deep belief that the ethical order of human life can and must be subordinated to a conception of legal accountability, which is more easily manageable by the State's legal apparatus. What this means is that ethics presents a threat to the authoritarian State as a realm that exists beyond its complete control, unlike the legislative and judicial realms which remain within the self-contained logic of the authoritarian State. Durkheim's rejection of this absolute conception of the State rests on an account of the primacy of collective moral consciousness, which he develops in great detail in the pamphlet. Durkheim advocates for an almost Kantian position of European cosmopolitanism against which Germany had rebelled. He emphatically accuses Germany of leaving the great family of civilized people that comprises European society:

It is beyond belief, they say, that Germany, which yesterday was a member of the great family of civilized peoples, which even played amongst them a part of the first importance, has been capable of giving so completely the lie to the principles of human civilization. It is not possible that those men, with whom we used to

consort, whom we held in high regard, who belonged without any reservation to the same moral community as we ourselves, have been capable of becoming those savage creatures, aggressive and unconscionable, whom we hold up to public indignation (Durkheim 1915, 3-4).

Durkheim goes on to examine the way in which this withdrawal from collective civilized morality can be understood through a particular German mentality embodied in the work of Heinrich Treitschke. Durkheim explains Treitschke's views of an exaggerated independence released from all limitation and reservation that culminates in the absolute State. Relying on this conception of exaggerated independence of the absolute State, Durkheim notes that for Treitschke, "the State is *autarkès* (self-sufficient), in the sense which the Greek philosophers gave to that word; it must be completely self-sufficient; it has, and ought to have, need only of itself, to exist and to maintain itself; it is an absolutism (8, translation modified). This definition of the State as absolute self-sufficiency, of the utter closing off to the critique of exteriority, is the foundation of Treitschke's political theory and serves as the forerunner to contemporary populist movements of radical exaggerated nationalist sovereignty.

Durkheim focuses on Treitschke's rejection of international law, or more specifically, his view that international law or treaties cannot be binding since a State cannot admit an authority superior to itself. Unlike contracts between individuals, who can and must yield to the superior authority of the State, contracts between States can have no such external force of law. Durkheim summarizes this point in Treitschke's view of the State:

Whilst in contracts between private persons there is at the base a moral power which controls the wills of the contracting parties, international contracts cannot be subject to this superior power, for there is nothing above the will of a State. This follows not only when the contract has been imposed by force, as the sequel of a war, but not less when it has been accepted by a free choice (Durkheim 1915, 10).

Durkheim's point is that while relations between individuals are guided or at least limited by ethical responsibility, no such mechanism exists in international relations. The Kantian cosmopolitanism of European morality, the great family which Germany has decided to leave behind, offered one way of solidifying a trans-national morality, which has subsequently been lost due to German aggression. Durkheim diagnoses the imminent threat to all of western civilization within Treitschke's doctrine of the absolute State as the inevitability and necessity of war which necessarily accompanies this mentality. Because competing interests and rivalry will undoubtedly arise between States that are equally unrestrained by the moral power which compels contracting parties, the inevitable result will be war since the States cannot yield to the arbitration of any external authority. Moreover, those nations incapable of imposing their collective will onto other nations cannot rightfully be called States, he continues:

Without war, the State is not even conceivable. Again the right of making war at its own will constitutes the essential quality of sovereignty. It is by this right that it is distinguished from all other human associations. When the State is no longer in a position to draw the sword at its will, it no longer deserves the name of State (Durkheim 1915, 12).

Thus, in Treitschke's view of the State, since there is no distinction between politics and war, the

essential quality of sovereignty is the power to make war. But Durkheim diagnoses the pathology of Treitschke's absolutism as not only the inevitability of war, but in the sanctity with which warfare becomes invested. Warfare itself becomes sacred in two ways: first as a necessary condition for the existence of the State, which is in turn necessary for the survival of its citizens, and second as the actual embodiment of moral virtues. Durkheim explains, quoting Treitschke at length:

War is not only inevitable, it is moral and sacred. It is sacred first because it represents a condition necessary to the existence of States, and without the State humanity cannot live. "Apart from the State, humanity cannot breathe". But it is sacred also, because it is the source of the highest moral virtues. It is war which compels men to master their natural egoism; it is war which raises them to the majesty of the supreme sacrifice, the sacrifice of self. By it, individual wills, instead of dissipating themselves in the pursuit of sordid ends, are concentrated on great causes, and "the petty personality of the individual is effaced and disappears before the vast perspective envisaged by the aspirations of the State". By war, "man tastes the joy of sharing with all his compatriots, learned or simple, in one and the same feeling, and whosoever has tasted that happiness never forgets all the sweetness and comfort that it yields". In a word, war connotes "a political idealism", which leads a man forward to surpass himself. Peace, on the contrary, is "the reign of materialism;" it is the triumph of personal interest over the spirit of devotion and sacrifice, of the mediocre and sordid over the noble life (Durkheim 1915, 12-3).

This inversion of morality functions in accord with the logic of Durkheim's account of the sacred in that it makes war itself sacred and selfless while peace is seen as profane and egoistic.

Durkheim could not have anticipated the degree to which war propaganda would be perfected during the twentieth century in order to ensure this moral inversion, although his work already explains the fundamental principles by which it will function. Following this "political idealism", the State itself becomes a personality, which Durkheim notes is necessarily "a personality, imperious and ambitious, impatient of all subjection, even of the appearance of subjection : it is only really itself in proportion to the measure in which it belongs completely to itself" (13). The State's inability to admit a power beyond itself, to close over into totality, forces the State to collapse all conception of power into the State itself. Weaker States are inevitably dominated as their dependence on others negates their absolute sovereignty. Durkheim continues: "A weak State naturally falls into dependence on another, and, in proportion as its sovereignty ceases to be complete, it ceases itself to be a State. Whence it follows that the element, which essentially constitutes a State, is Power. *Der Staat ist Macht* — this axiom, which constantly falls from the pen of Treitschke, dominates all his teaching" (14). This view that the State is Power is the underlying logic to all of Treitschke's politics and ultimately collapses the distinction between politics and war at a fundamental level. This necessarily implies that smaller countries who lack the physical strength to defend and maintain themselves in conflict against their stronger or more aggressive neighbors, cannot properly be understood as States. Thus, powerful States who are "true" States by virtue of that power, have no moral or legal obligation to respect the rights of weaker non-States who have no legitimate claim to their own sovereignty.

Durkheim is especially interested in the way the State subordinates and must subordinate all morality to its own immediate necessities. One of the central claims of Durkheim's pamphlet is that German nationalism in particular harbors a notable aversion to any morality which resides beyond the totality of the State. Any external or universal morality, such as Kantian cosmopolitanism, which could serve as a critique of the State, would be a threat to the absolute sovereignty which Treitschke insists is the essential characteristic of the State. Durkheim elaborates that the way that Treitschke responds to the potential challenge to the sovereignty of the State posed by morality is via a return to Machiavelli as a thinker who "did not hesitate to maintain that the State is not under the jurisdiction of the moral conscience, and should recognise no law but its own interest" (18). This view of the State as a closed totality, unbound by any external morality is rediscovered by Treitschke and other German nationalists seeking to solidify the absolute sovereignty of the State which is above all moral critique. Of course, acting in a moral way may well suit the interests of the State, to gain a reputation for trustworthiness might enhance the political power of the State, for example. But Durkheim makes clear that in this Treitschkean-Machiavellian conception of the relation of morality to the State, all morality serves the single purpose of reinforcing the State's authority, which is to say, to increase the Power of the State. Increasing the Power of the State becomes the Supreme Good, above all else within the moral schema dictated by the exaggerated independence of the absolute State. Durkheim notes:

Here we have a logical demonstration of the famous formula the German learns to repeat from his earliest childhood : *Deutschland über alles*; for the German there is nothing above the German State. The State has but one duty : to get as large a place in the sun as possible, trampling its rivals under foot in the process. The radical exclusion of all other ideals will rightly be regarded as monstrous (Durkheim 1915, 23).

Because the absolute self-sufficiency and autonomy of the State can admit no higher power, this would seem to necessarily enter into conflict with any claim of universal values, especially those of religion when not subordinated to the State. Monotheism presents an especially problematic challenge since the God of monotheistic religions does not refer to a particular God of a tribe or a city, but to the God of the entire human race, a universal lawgiver and guarantor of an absolute morality which applies to all of humanity. It is in respect to this monotheistic conception of the divine that Durkheim writes: "Now the very idea of this God is alien to the mentality which we are studying" (24). While nationalists like Treitschke often claim divine or religious moral grounding of their political ideology, Durkheim views any admission of a divinity beyond the State as merely a "formal reservation."

For Durkheim, this denotes the total inversion of the sacred dimension of human life, the interconnectedness of social solidarity, which is entirely supplanted by the political objectives of the State. But this is not a suspension of morality in a Kierkegaardian sense of obligations to the State forcing us to renounce or suspend conflicting beliefs that we know to be morally right. Rather, this "political idealism" represents a new morality taking the place of the old morality, which is then cast as weak and decadent since it contributes nothing to the one true duty of the State, which is to increase its power. This new morality does not only guide the actions of the State at the international level, but also in terms of the regulation of the internal life of society.

Thus, Treitschke represents not only the elevation of the State over morality, but more fundamentally over civil society itself. Durkheim makes clear the source of this antagonism:

To designate what we call the People as distinguished from the State, Treitschke and a number of other German theorists prefer the term Civil Society (*die bürgerliche Gesellschaft*). Civil Society includes everything in the nation which is not immediately connected with the State, the family, trade and industry, religion (when this is not a department of the State), science, art. All these forms of activity have this characteristic in common, that we embrace them voluntarily and spontaneously. They have their origin in the natural inclinations of man. Of our own free will we found a family, love our children, work to satisfy their material wants and our own, seek after truth, and enjoy aesthetic pleasures. Here we have a whole life which develops without the intervention of the State (Durkheim 1915, 27).

This voluntary spontaneity cannot be incorporated into the mechanism of the State, and thus presents a necessary antagonism. This civil society is what resists the pressure of the State's single-minded pursuit of its own totalization. This realm of civil life which is prior to the State, and thus exists outside the purview of its authority, Durkheim describes as:

... a mosaic of individuals and of separate groups pursuing divergent aims, and the whole formed by their agglomeration consequently lacks unity. The multiplicity of relations that connect individual with individual, or group with group do not constitute a naturally organised system. The resulting aggregate is not a personality; it is but an incoherent mass of dissimilar elements. [Treitschke] "Where is the common organ of Civil Society? There is none. It is obvious to everyone that Civil Society is not a precise and tangible thing like the State. A State has unity; we know it as such; it is not a mystic personality. Civil Society has no unity of will" (Durkheim 1915, 28, translation modified).

As an "incoherent mass of dissimilar elements", the diverse mosaic of civil society presents an antagonism with the absolute morality of the State, which demands unity, order and organization above all else. Because civil society lacks a kind of spontaneous harmony or the authoritarian imposed harmony enforced by the apparatus of the State, each of its competing interests will invariably enter into conflict, resulting in the chaos of disorder, which is anathema to the objectives of the State. The State, in turn, must inevitably resort to coercive action and commanding obedience to impose order, making obedience to the State the first civic duty. This does not require the coercion of belief, for Treitschke, merely the coercion of action, since the State has no interest in the private lives of citizens, only external obedience to the formal law. He quotes from Treitschke: "[The State] says: what you think is a matter of indifference to me; but you must obey. Progress has been made when the silent obedience of citizens is reinforced by internal and well considered acquiescence; but this acquiescence is not essential" (32). The silent obedience of the masses, yielding to the power of the State not out of agreement but out of coercion, supplants moral solidarity and fraternity. Since the first task of politics, in Treitschke's view, is to assert its own Power, this requires the overcoming of mere sentimentality and aversion to harshness on the part of the sovereign. Durkheim further quotes, with evident distaste, Treitschke's view that



“Politics cannot be carried on without harshness; that is why women understand nothing about them” (33).

It is this logic of Germany Above All, the logic of the State above morality, that allows for unrivaled levels of brutality, as Durkheim describes German conduct up to that point during the First World War. Durkheim notes:

... the individual atrocities committed by the soldiery are but the methodical application of these principles and rules. Thus the whole system is homogeneous and logical; a pre-determined concept of the State is expressed in rules of conduct laid down by the military authority, and these rules are, in their turn, translated into action by the individual (Durkheim 1915, 39).

At the level of individual action, atrocities are carried out not out of any particular malice or hatred, but out of a systematic and methodological application of the self-sufficient mentality of the State. Durkheim points to a connection between the State placing itself above both morality and civil society in such a way as the actions of its agents (specifically soldiers in this case) cannot be judged by any logic external to the State. Put another way, if the only good is the good of the State, moral agency must be oriented around the single goal the State can have, which is to increase its power. Thus, overthrowing weaker States, who are not “real” States in the sense they are incapable of exerting their own Power, is the inevitable outcome of this radical autonomy. By orienting all citizenship around the goal of increasing the power of the State, Treitschke opposes the very concept of nationality in terms of the collective of social groups living under a set of established laws. Powerful States, in pursuit of greater power, desire to impose order on these non-States, via coercion rather than their consent. This, for Durkheim, explains German aggression: “Hence the passion of Germany for conquest and annexation. She cares so little what men may feel or desire. All she asks is that they should submit to the law of the conqueror, and she herself will see to it that it is obeyed” (40).

Durkheim concludes the essay by making clear that the fundamental pathology of this mentality is not simply collective insanity or brutal sadism, but rather lies in defining the State via “a morbid hypertrophy of the will, a kind of will-mania” (44). For Durkheim, this idealism of exaggerated sovereignty leads to the inability of Germany to accept the legitimacy of international law, of the right of “lesser” States to exist, or even accept the existence of “equal” States which might serve as rivals. This produces a “frenzied race to power” (43) which will inevitably oblige Germany to attempt to outgrow any possible challenge which might come from any external forces. This is the task set forth by the political idealism that Durkheim describes, but remains impossible to realize for the individual. Rather, it is only achievable through the State, in Treitschke’s formulation, due to its unique ability to harness these disparate individual wills in order to direct them to the “supreme end” (45). Durkheim then pronounces the philosophical underpinnings of the German mentality:

The State is the sole concrete and historic form possible to the Superman of whom Nietzsche was the prophet and harbinger, and the German State must put forth all its strength to become this Superman. The German State must be “über Allés” (above all). Superior to all private wills, individual or collective, superior to the moral laws themselves, without any law save that imposed by itself, it will be able

to triumph over all resistance and rule by constraint, when it cannot secure voluntary acceptance (Durkheim 1915, 45).

This absolute superiority of the State, above all other individual or collective wills, admits no possibility of the critique which emanates from exteriority. By subordinating all wills, even morality itself, to the one task of increasing its power, the State not only becomes a personality characterized by its desire for unity, order and organization, but it becomes the only possible concrete personality.

The association of the German mentality of aggressive nationalism to the philosophy of Nietzsche is, at best, a highly selective reading of Nietzsche's concept of will to power, and must necessarily ignore Nietzsche's critique of mass culture and the herd mentality that would subordinate individual wills to any kind of collective will, including the State. Clearly Durkheim is not offering a particularly nuanced reading of Nietzsche as a social theorist, but this does reveal an important dimension of Durkheim's reading of Treitschke as the culmination not only of a particular political ideology but more fundamentally as the conclusion of a particular line of philosophical thinking. This mentality, which Durkheim associates with both Nietzsche and Machiavelli, rests on the subordination of all individual wills to a general will for the sake of increasing the power of the State.

Ultimately, Durkheim concludes his essay optimistically, noting: "When all the nations whose existence it threatens or disturbs — and they are legion — combine against it, it will be unable to resist them, and the world will be set free" (47) That optimistic view, in 1915, could not have anticipated the events of the next three years of the First World War, let alone the horrors that played out over the rest of the first half of the twentieth century and still persist in similar forms of "political idealism" well into the twenty-first century.

*"Elementary Feelings" and the Degenerate Germanic Ideal of Man*

Durkheim's analysis of Treitschke's nationalism takes on renewed relevance when we observe that contemporary forms of authoritarian populism have merely substituted Donald Trump's "America First" for Oswald Mosley's "Britain First" or Jair Bolsonaro's "Brazil Above All, God Above Everyone" for the "Germany Above All" embodied by Treitschke. But in order to understand the deep pathology at play within the xenophobic and jingoistic rhetoric deployed by these authoritarian figures, which has historically been deployed with extraordinary success by nationalistic populist movements, we can turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas, like Heller, lost much of his family in the Holocaust and his work bares the mark of his own internment in a Nazi prison camp. Levinas's work is especially important for this task because he addresses politics at the level of underlying philosophical commitments, specifically focusing on the way philosophy has come to be singularly consumed with questions of ontology, which has left it vulnerable to this particular pathology. Levinas's work also emphasizes, as did Durkheim's analysis of Treitschke, that political manifestations of this ideology cannot be addressed purely at the level of political rationality but must rather engage it as a matter of social metaphysics.

The influence of Durkheim's thought on Levinas's phenomenological project has been thoroughly documented by Howard Caygill in his 2002 book *Levinas and the Political*, which stresses the role of Durkheim's conception of the sacred on Levinas's later phenomenology.

Caygill relies largely on the widely circulated interviews with Philippe Nemo from 1981, in which Levinas addresses not only his mature philosophical positions but the range of influences which contributed to his unique approach to philosophical questions. These interviews represent an especially important moment in Levinas's reflection on his own thought and are an indispensable resource for interpreting the political and social context of the pluralism evoked in the conclusion of *Totality and Infinity*.

One of the important characteristics of the largely informal interviews, which were subsequently collected and republished as *Ethics and Infinity*, is that Levinas makes a clear connection between his metaphysical project and the broader social context to which that project attempts to respond. This brings him to address the social dimension of his philosophical thought in much greater detail than in his more formal philosophical writings. It is in this context that in response to Nemo's question "Do you put the sociological thought of a Durkheim on the same level as the properly philosophical thought of a Bergson?," Levinas offers effusive praise for the famed sociologist:

Apparently, Durkheim was inaugurating an experimental sociology. But his work also appeared as a 'rational sociology,' as an elaboration of the fundamental categories of the social, as what one would call today an 'eidetic of society,' beginning with the leading idea that the social does not reduce to the sum of individual psychologies. Durkheim, a metaphysician! The idea that the social is the very order of the spiritual, a new plot in being above the animal and human psychism; the level of 'collective representations' defined with vigor and which opens up the dimension of spirit in the individual life itself, where the individual alone comes to be recognized and even redeemed. In Durkheim there is, in a sense, a theory of 'levels of being,' of the irreducibility of these levels to one another, an idea which acquires its full meaning within the Husserlian and Heideggerian context (Levinas 1985, 26-27).

That Levinas considers Durkheim to be a great philosophical thinker on par with the titans of the philosophical canon can help us understand how to deploy his work practically in the context of populist exclusionary nationalism that occupies us here. Levinas even seems to suggest that he remained skeptical as to whether the phenomenological approach of his mentors could function without the import of concepts more accessible via Durkheim's experimental sociology. For Levinas, Durkheim provides the foundation for a critique of phenomenology itself by insisting on the irreducibility of levels of sociality, that is, on the irreducibility of social life to the actions or consciousness of individual subjects. It is exactly this irreducibility, the radical alterity which cannot be accounted for within the frameworks of Husserlian or Heideggerian phenomenology, that Durkheim's work lays bare. This helps clarify the context in which Levinas evokes Durkheim against Heidegger in *Totality and Infinity*, when he utilizes Durkheim's social metaphysics as a way to escape from Heidegger's solipsism. Levinas notes:

... for Heidegger intersubjectivity is a coexistence, a we prior to the I and the other, a neutral intersubjectivity. The face to face both announces a society, and permits the maintaining of a separated I. Durkheim already in one respect went beyond this optical interpretation of the relation with the other in characterizing society

by religion. I relate to the Other only across Society, which is not simply a multiplicity of individuals or objects ; I relate to the Other who is not simply a part of a Whole, nor a singular instance of a concept. To reach the Other through the social is to reach him through the religious. Durkheim thus gives an indication of a transcendence other than that of the objective (Levinas 1979, 68).

Levinas will go on to oppose Durkheim's reduction of religion to observable and quantifiable practices and rituals, which is necessitated by the positivistic methodology of his experimental sociology. But Durkheim's central insight which Levinas identifies and praises in *Totality and Infinity*, and again 20 years later in the Nemo interviews, is that this social metaphysics avoids the solipsistic trappings of existential phenomenology by viewing the social as beyond the scope of ontology.

As such, it might not be surprising that when faced with Heidegger's embrace of National Socialism in 1933, Levinas evoked terminology drawn directly from Durkheim's conception of "elementary forms" in accounting for "elementary feelings" which had been awakened by populist discourse directed at the German people. As one of Heidegger's most thoroughly devoted disciples, Levinas was especially shaken by his mentor's political commitment. But while his work never addresses Heidegger's politics commitment directly, his entire philosophical project can be read as an attempt to rehabilitate thinking itself in such a way as to avoid its vulnerability to the particular pathology that engulfed the German people and even Heidegger himself. To this end, the crucial text that provides the key context to Levinas' later formal work is his 1934 "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism." This text is especially relevant for our purposes here as it draws out the crucial connection between the pathology diagnosed by Durkheim in Treitschke's nationalism and the particular manifestation of that nationalism two decades later under the banner of National Socialism, which has emerged again in our time under various terms for authoritarian populism.

The short text of Levinas's reflections is remarkable for a number of reasons. With the benefit of historical hindsight, it is easy to underestimate the penetrating nature of Levinas' perception of the pathology of Hitlerism early in its development. At a point in history in which western democracies were unsure what to make of the emerging politics of fascism, and a full decade before the full extent of the horrors of the Holocaust began to come to light, Hitler was widely seen to be a somewhat aggressive politician fighting against the political and economic woes of the Weimar Republic, not unlike many aspiring tyrants of our own contemporary political climate such as Orbán. In the same sense as current movements in nationalist or authoritarian populism are commonly perceived, at the time there was no general sense of urgency as the horrors that would come to light after the war were unprecedented and unimaginable. Even as the nation-States of western Europe pursued a doomed strategy of appeasement, naively hoping for the "Peace for our time" which would be prematurely declared by Neville Chamberlain in 1938, Levinas immediately perceived the threat and underlying pathology within the rise of Hitlerism.

Still drawing heavily on Heidegger's language from *Being and Time*, Levinas writes in his *Reflections on Hitlerism*: "Time, which is a condition of human existence, is above all a condition that is irreparable. The fait accompli, swept along by a fleeing present, forever evades man's

control, but weighs heavily on his destiny" (Levinas 1990, 65). Levinas emphatically opposes the subordination of individual freedom within the logic of Hitlerism, but also outlines the problematic conception of freedom within liberal politics as placing "the human spirit on a plane that is superior to reality, and so creates a gulf between man and the world" (66). This radical division of man and world is at the heart of what Levinas will go on to denounce as "the Germanic ideal of man" which is the necessary framework of Hitlerism's false promise of sincerity and authenticity (70). Levinas's denunciation of this degenerate Germanic ideal is undertaken in the name of defending civilization itself. He notes that under the spell of this degenerate Germanic ideal, "Civilization is invaded by everything that is not authentic, by a substitute that is put at the service of fashion and of various interests... Such a society loses living contact with its true ideal of freedom and accepts degenerate forms of the ideal" (70).

At the core of the short essay we find a compelling case against not only the politics and philosophy of Hitlerism, but Levinas's attempt to describe a conception of the social which opposes this degenerate Germanic ideal. Skepticism and nihilism are attributed to this same mentality and are seen as the awakening of elementary feelings and "secret nostalgia" within the German soul. Levinas would later write, in a 1990 prefatory note to the article, that his interest in writing these reflections in 1934 was to oppose the tendency of understanding the rise of Hitlerism as some sort of collective madness or anomaly within human reason, but rather to expose the "*elemental Evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself" (63). Clearly in 1934 Levinas could not have anticipated the scale this elemental Evil would reach over the next decade, but his early account of Hitlerism already anticipated the way in which the degenerate Germanic ideal necessarily undermines "the very humanity of man" (71). The fundamental core of Hitlerian racist ideology is not primarily anti-Semitism, but rather a skepticism towards "[a]ny rational assimilation or mystical communion between spirits that is not based on a community of blood..." (70). For Levinas, the core of racism lies in accepting the principle that "[u]niversality must give way to the idea of expansion..." (Levinas 1990, 70) If we are to read Levinas' work as an attempt to create an ethical response to the problem of evil, as suggested by Richard Bernstein (2004), it is important to understand that the specific kind of evil that Levinas opposes is exactly what he refers to here as the degenerate Germanic ideal. While his earlier work did not elaborate this critique in the context of opposition to Heideggerian ontology, there is a clear overlap in the way he views this Germanic ideal as the negation of social pluralism and Heidegger's ontology as the negation of metaphysical pluralism.

Levinas's article on Hitlerism, which we should remember was written only 19 years after Durkheim's pamphlet on Treitschke, offers both condemnation of the rise of fascism as well as a lamentation of liberalism's failure to resist the pathological Germany mentality. Levinas demonstrates a remarkable interest in the political reaction to the fundamental social changes which accompany the shift from pre-modern to modern society, or to use Durkheim's technical vocabulary, in the shift from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity. Levinas does not approach this question as a strictly sociological or political problem, but rather something which is pervasive in the philosophical foundations of all modern society. Liberalism and fascism are addressed as political movements derived from the modern conception of the human subject, which is to say they both seek to understand the human condition strictly in terms of separation,

or more specifically, in terms of their separateness from one another. Levinas notes:

The whole philosophical and political thought of modern times tends to place the human spirit on a plane that is superior to reality, and so creates a gulf between man and the world. It makes it impossible to apply the categories of the physical world to the spirituality of reason, and so locates the ultimate foundation of the spirit outside the brutal world and the implacable history of concrete existence (Levinas 1990, 66).

For Levinas, Hitlerism signifies a rediscovering of a primal aspect of human existence that he calls, in terms that echo Durkheim's analysis of Treitschke, "the secret nostalgia within the German soul" and represents "an awakening of elementary feelings [*sentiments élémentaires*]" which "questions the very principles of a civilization" (64). This stirring of primal drives, however, is not simply a matter of a return to a more primitive human nature as Freud would have it, but rather is itself a product of social forces. Again, it is crucial to understand Levinas's philosophical analysis of Hitlerism in light of his affirmation in the 1990 prefatory note that western ontological philosophy has left us unequipped to respond to the barbarism of this elemental evil, especially in regards to Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology.

This interest in "elemental forms", both in the prefatory note and the original article, indicate profound connection to Durkheim at the core of Levinas's understanding of the political sphere. Levinas repeatedly evokes Durkheim's phraseology in referring to the elementary force [*force élémentaire*] of the simplistic [*primaire*] philosophy of Hitler, and the way it awakened these elementary feelings [*sentiments élémentaires*] within the German people. The way in which these repeated references derive their terminology from Durkheim's examination of "elementary forms" has been extensively explored by Caygill, emphasizing Levinas's insistence on the paganistic religiosity at the core of social life within Germany. Levinas notes: "For these elementary feelings harbor a philosophy. They express a soul's principal attitude towards the whole of reality and its own destiny. They predetermine or prefigure the meaning of the adventure that the soul will face in the world" (64). By returning to the language of Durkheim's social metaphysics which he had encountered prior to studying under Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas attempts to pronounce a fundamental conflict of modern society of which Hitlerism is merely one instantiation. The philosophy of Hitlerism, he is clear to point out, cannot be reduced to the philosophy of Hitlerians alone, but necessarily draws on the entire western philosophical tradition leading up to that point. While Levinas required another 30 years to develop his critique of ontology in *Totality and Infinity*, it is clear that he was already engaging at a fundamental level with the themes that would go on to motivate his work throughout the rest of his life.

### *Conclusion*

One of the defining features of contemporary forms of populism is a distinct attempt to appeal to nationalist sentiment. Nationalism, as the antithesis of globalism or universalism, rests on a conception of the state as inherently self-contained and isolated from its neighbors in a radical way. The most recent rise of authoritarian populism is fundamentally inseparable from the constant appeals to national heritage or cultural identity that are declared to be under siege by nefarious forces of globalist hegemony. It is unsurprising that this global hegemony is often presented in anti-Semitic tones, often focusing specifically on the role of George Soros in global

politics. This paper has argued that we can understand the dynamics at play in this emergence of nationalist identity politics by examining the way this pathology has been diagnosed and addressed in the sociological tradition by Durkheim and in the philosophical tradition by Levinas.

Heller's observation on the difficulty in identifying Orbán as a populist, with which we began this investigation, rests on a conception of populism which distances its philosophical meaning from its historical manifestations. In illustrating that while Orbán uses nationalistic vocabulary and rhetoric, to mobilize hatred against foreigners, Heller remains clearly aware that these are traditional methods that authoritarian populists have long used to gain and maintain power. But, continuing her analysis, Heller notes that it is difficult even to describe Orbán as "right-wing" because his naked pursuit of power is not beholden to any political ideology beyond his own ambition and lust for increased power. But this is crucial to understanding the populist mechanism at play in the work of an aristocrat like Treitschke, who deploys anti-Semitic nationalist rhetoric instrumentally to achieve a particular end, which is increasing the power of the State. Levinas' work helps us understand not only how this rhetoric is deployed in a specific attempt to manifest resentment by drawing on the "elementary feelings" of tribalistic nationalism, but also how this degenerate mentality is deeply rooted within western philosophy itself.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Durkheim's analysis of Treitschke, at least for the context of contemporary questions of populism, is the necessary union of social solidarity and consequent political forms of exclusionary nationalism. To be clear, Durkheim's interest in Treitschke is not limited to a strictly political conception of the State, but rather addresses the interplay between social hegemony and the concrete political incarnation of this phenomenon as the unrestrained sovereignty of nationalism. While it might be tempting to exclude this social order and draw a direct connection between the State's lust for power and the fascist movements of the twentieth century, that would necessarily risk ignoring work of nationalists like Treitschke whose work predates fascism by decades. This is precisely why Durkheim's sociological analysis of pre-fascist nationalism is so vital to the current historical moment as contemporary populist movements demand their disparate nation-states abandon international accords and reject all forms of solidarity other than "blood and soil."

## Bibliography

- Bernstein, Richard. 2004. "Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, edited by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, 252-267. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Caygill, Howard. 2002. *Levinas and the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1915. *Germany above all: German mentality and war*. Translated by J.S. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Heller, Ágnes. 2011. "On Evils, Evil, Radical Evil and the Demonic" *Critical Horizons* 12:1: 15- 27.
- . 2018. "Ágnes Heller: Orbán is a tyrant" interview conducted by Jan Smolenski. 08/13/18. In *Political Critique*. <http://politicalcritique.org/cee/hungary/2018/agnes-heller-orban-is-a-tyrant/> (Accessed, 10/15/2019)
- LaCapra, Dominick. 2001. *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Philosopher*. Aurora: The Davies Group.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1979. *Totality and Infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- . 1985. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- . 1990. "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism". Translated by Seán Hand. *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 17 No. 1: 62-71.