**The hidden battle that shaped the history of sociology: Arnold van Gennep contra Emile Durkheim**

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

man by the renewal of Comtian sociology effected by Durkheim. He took control of the teaching of the universities, his opponents having for fiefs the Collège de France and l’Institut. In the tight group the Durkheimists mounted the assault from these positions and in approximately twenty years made themselves masters. Whoever was not part of the group was ‘marked’

(from Arnold van Gennep’s unpublished notes)

**Introduction**

Recent years have seen a revisiting of Emile Durkheim’s legacy in the context of the return to the work of his opponent, Gabriel Tarde (Candea 2010; Latour 2010; Latour and Lepinay 2009; Toews 2013; Wydra 2012). Revisiting Tarde’s work has provided a most welcome injection of theoretical and methodological reflexivity, and has served to throw light on the foundations of the social sciences as we (thought we) knew them.

This article is about a different but related intellectual battle: that between Durkheim and Arnold van Gennep. The story starts when the battle between Durkheim and Tarde ended in 1904 upon Tarde’s death.This coincided with Van Gennep’s first book publication,a work on totemism that marked the beginning of Van Gennep’s ambitious endeavour to establish new grounds for the social sciences, developing an approach which on all significant accounts differed from that of Durkheim (Van Gennep 1904).

It goes against received wisdom to rank Van Gennep as an important figure in the history of classical sociology. He is almost nowhere to be found in our canon. Van Gennep became known to Anglo-Saxon readers after his 1909 book *Rites de Passage* was translated and published by Chicago University Press in 1960. Course syllabi on the sociology of religion often contain an excerpt from *Rites of Passage*. In today’s standard approach, van Gennep’s theory is discussed as a supplement to Durkheim’s theory of ritual and religion: van Gennep offered a useful terminology for the study of ritual passages, whereas Durkheim (and others) provided a theoretical framework. In Routledge’s *Key Thinkers* (Karady 1987: 255), van Gennep’s approach is characterised, typically, as ‘essentially empirical with limited theoretical underpinning’. Arnold van Gennep is not considered important beyond his classificatory achievement, and most sociologists simply do not read him.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Whereas anthropological figures such as Leach (1968), Needham (1967) and Evans-Pritchard (1960) have expressed sincere wonder as to why Van Gennep has not been held in higher regard within French anthropology (‘an academic disgrace’, according to Needham 1967: xi), no such questions have been raised by sociologists.[[2]](#endnote-2) Van Gennep would have been *thoroughly* displeased by his classification of rites being presented as a supplement – or, worse, a parenthesis – to Durkheim’s sociology of religion. His life’s work was an effort to overcome what he saw as the most serious defects in Durkheimian sociology. By continuing to neglect this work, we as sociologists are in fact perpetuating that ‘death by silence’ from which van Gennep suffered during his lifetime.

In Marcel Fournier’s biography of Marcel Mauss, mention is made of Van Gennep’s critique of Durkheim (Fournier 2006: 162). However, Fournier does not engage with the substance of van Gennep’s critique and how it actually touches the core of the entire argument proposed by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (henceforth EFRL). One might of course argue that Van Gennep’s critique of Durkheim should not take centre stage in a book on Mauss. And yet, it was Mauss who gathered most of the data and literature for Durkheim’s work, writing or co-authoring the ethnographic parts of the argument. Furthermore, it seems more than plausible that Van Gennep’s critiques of Durkheim actually had an effect upon Mauss, and therefore influenced – in ways that are difficult to discern but that we shall return to in the conclusion – his own mature sociology. In what follows, I will necessarily include a discussion of the role played by Mauss in the ‘encounter’ between van Gennep and Durkheim.

The relevance of this article’s argument is twofold. First, Van Gennep’s critique of Durkheim is a significant chapter in our intellectual history and, quite simply, close to nothing is known about it (cf. Thomassen 2012a). This is partly due to the fact that the critiques written by Van Gennep were never translated into English, though even sociologists working in France have conspicuously neglected them. Second, van Gennep’s position is not merely of historical interest. It is not only past but also present sociological theory that needs reconsideration. Concerning van Gennep’s relevance for contemporary sociology, I will indicate how Van Gennep’s work *could have* provided the study of religion and ritual with a processual platform, and made liminality a key concept for social thought from the early 20th century onward. As with the rediscovery of Tarde (and his master concept, imitation), van Gennep’s theoretical interventions are as relevant today as they were in his own era.

The methodological difficulty of unearthing the van Gennep/Durkheim debate is that Durkheim never discussed his work openly with van Gennep. The difference between theirs and the relationship with Tarde is evident. Durkheim and Tarde famously confronted each other in public debate in 1903 (Vargas et al. 2008), providing direct insight into their consciously opposed positions. Moreover, although he was thoroughly dismissive in his assessment of Tarde, Durkheim did discuss his work in written form. This critique was not hidden away in some obscure publication: it appears in one of sociology’s best-read books, *Suicide*, where it culminates, in Chapter 4, in Durkheim categorically dismissing the relevance of Tarde’s concept of imitation.

We are in no such luck when it comes to Arnold van Gennep. The situation is worsened by the fact that Van Gennep’s fiercest critiques of Durkheim were launched during the years 1906–1913, when Mauss and Durkheim lived next to each other in Paris; the letters of correspondence between Durkheim and Mauss (Durkheim 1998), which throw light on so many other periods of activity among Durkheim and his entourage, mostly came to a halt. With very few exceptions (these will be discussed below), we have no possibility of reconstructing what Durkheim may have said or thought about van Gennep by reading into his correspondence with Mauss, the one person on Earth with whom he might have discussed the matter. Therefore, in what follows, I will reconstruct Arnold van Gennep’s ‘battle’ with Durkheim based on existing evidence, on Van Gennep’s own writings, and on a contextual reading of their disagreements.

The argument will proceed as follows. To accommodate the general reader, a short introduction to Van Gennep’s life and work will frame the argument. I will then consider van Gennep’s critique of Durkheim, followed by a discussion of the role played by Mauss in the encounter with Durkheim, with special emphasis on Mauss’ critical review of Van Gennep’s *Rites de Passage*. I will end by indicating why a revisitation of van Gennep’s critique of Durkheim might matter for contemporary sociology.

**A life at the thresholds: Arnold van Gennep’s career as a social scientist**

Arnold van Gennep was born as Charles-Arnold Kurr van Gennep on 23 April 1873 in Ludwigsburg, Würtemberg.[[3]](#endnote-3) When he was six years old his parents separated and Van Gennep moved with his mother to Lyons, France. In 1892, van Gennep moved to Paris and enrolled at L’Ecole des Langues Orientales to study Arabic, and at L’Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes to study general linguistics and Egyptology. He also enrolled for lectures at *Sciences Religieuses* where he studied primitive religion and Islamic culture. Here he came into contact with Antoine Meillet, linguist and member of the Durkheim circle, and Marcel Mauss, who was just one year older that van Gennep. Van Gennep graduated in 1896 from L’Ecole des Langues Orientales, and initiated a career as translator. One of his first translations, in 1898, was Frazer’s immensely influential book on totemism.[[4]](#endnote-4) Translation would remain van Gennep’s main source of income for much of his life.

After a four-year stay in Russian Poland from 1897 to 1901, Van Gennep returned to Paris. From 1901 to 1908, he was employed full-time as Head of Translations at the French Ministry of Agriculture. His linguistic skills were, by then, second to none. In an article from 1927, discussing the use of the subconscious in the study of living languages, he purports to master 18 languages plus a number of their dialects (Belmont 1979: 7).[[5]](#endnote-5) Van Gennep’s formal career was now unfolding outside academia. In addition to his ministerial position, he kept on translating and editing. For over 30 years, from 1906 to 1939, he edited the section “Ethnographie-Folklore-Religions-Prehistoire” in Mercure de France.

Van Gennep studied *sciences religieuses* with Léon Marillier at L’Ecole Pratique, becoming part of that handful of young people who were later to become Durkheim’s collaborators, among them Mauss, Henri Hubert and Paul Fauconnet. Upon Marillier’s sudden death in 1901, Mauss became van Gennep’s teacher and mentor. In 1903, Mauss proofread and thoroughly annotated van Gennep’s thesis on taboo and totemism in Madagascar. Van Gennep’s interests during the first decade of the century developed alongside those of the Durkheimians, and included the classical topics of totemism, taboo, the origins and nature of religion, magic, classification systems and the relationship between myth and ritual.

In 1904 van Gennep published his thesis, *Tabou et Totémisme à Madagascar: Etude Descriptive et Théorique*. The book is dedicated to the memory of Léon Marillier, and in its preface van Gennep reserves his final thanks for ‘mon ami Marcel Mauss’ (van Gennep 1904: 2). In the book, van Gennep analysed totemism as a social system of classification, taking its role far beyond the narrow field of religion. In 1906 he published his second book, *Mythes et Légendes d’Australie*, wherein he openly exposed the problems in Durkheim’s work. In 1909 he published *Rites de Passage*, the work that was to become his post-mortem claim to fame. Herein, Van Gennep proposed a conceptual classification of all existing rites. He distinguished between rites that mark the passage of an individual or social group from one status to another from those which mark transitions in the passage of time (e.g. harvest, new year), whereupon he went on to explore ‘the basis of characteristic patterns in the order of ceremonies’ (1960: 10). Stressing the importance of transitions in any society, van Gennep singled out *rites of passage* as a special category consisting of three sub-categories, namely *rites of separation*, *transition rites*, and *rites of incorporation*. Van Gennep called the middle stage in a rite of passage a *liminal period* (1960: 11). He called transition rites *liminal rites*, and he called rites of incorporation *postliminal rites*. The ritual pattern was apparently universal: all societies use rites to demarcate transitions. Van Gennep himself considered the book his breakthrough resulting from an ‘inner illumination’ (Belmont 1979: 58). The conceptual framework guided everything he wrote thereafter.

In 1908, during his writing of *Rites de Passage*, van Gennep decided to quit his job at the Ministry and dedicate himself wholeheartedly to academia, founding the scientific journal *La Revue des Etudes Ethnographiques et Sociologiques* in which he would publish frequently while functioning as Directeur and administrator. Also in 1908, he published a book on Homeric poetry (*La Question d’Homère*) and the first volume of *Religions, Mæurs et Légendes: Essais d’Ethnographie et de Linguistique*, a collection of essays on religion, myth and ritual. In 1909 the second volume of *Religions, Mæurs et Légendes* was released, and the flow of Van Gennep’s articles, reviews and translations continued. The bibliography compiled by his daughter lists a total of 437 publications (K. van Gennep 1964).

In 1910 Van Gennep published *La Formation des Legends*, his seventh book. It was followed by two books in 1911: *Les Demi-savants*[[6]](#endnote-6)and the third volume of *Religions, Mæurs et Légendes*. Van Gennep had, by then, become deeply engaged with general epistemological and methodological issues. Before World War One he published a series of programmatic articles wherein he denounced problems in contemporary ‘scientific’ approaches, starting to formulate a methodological platform for the social sciences that he christened ‘biological sociology’. In the same period (1910–1911) he also carried out two rounds of ethnographic fieldwork in Algeria (see Siboud 2004). Although this project – to study art forms – was only partially successful, several lengthy publications resulted from it, not least of which is his 1914 book *En Algérie*.

Despite his productivity, Van Gennep never passed the threshold into French academia. Following unusccesful candidatures at the College de France in 1907, 1909 and 1911 he decided to go abroad (Belmont 1979: 11). In 1912 he was offered the first (and only) academic position he ever held, as Chair in Swiss Ethnography at the University of Neuchâtel. Upon his arrival, he started to plan a founding event for the European social sciences: the major international conference held at Neuchâtel in the summer of 1914, weeks before the outbreak of World War One. More than 600 social scientists attended this, the biggest-ever networking event for European social scientists. The debate topics concerned basic terminological and methodological issues, as well as attempts to delineate boundaries to neighbouring disciplines. The goals of the conference were explicitly programmed: what should the social sciences look like, which tasks should we set ourselves, and how are they to be carried out? Marcel Mauss was part of the French delegation, and gave a paper on taboo among the Baronga (see Zerilli 1998). Durkheim did not show up, but he likely got a detailed resumé from Mauss, who was then working on a plan for ethnographic studies in France.

In October 1915 van Gennep was expelled from Switzerland because of his criticism of the Swiss government and its pro-German attitudes. Unable to get an academic job in France, he was recalled by Poincaré to a post in the French Foreign Office. Nonetheless, he continued to advance his academic work. He wrote several pieces on the War, in a style that comes close to the war-writings of Mauss. He only managed to finish the first of a planned three-volume series on nationalism; this was published in 1922. On 24 January 1921, at the age of 47, Arnold van Gennep became *Docteur ès Lettres* at the Sorbonne. He presented two works for the title: his book from 1920 on totemism (*L’Etat Actuel du Probleme Totémique*) and *Rites de Passage*. He received a *mention tres honorable*. These two books are, arguably, two of the most substantial contributions ever presented for a *Docteur* title in France. Van Gennep’s book on totemism paved the way for Claude Lévi-Strauss’ approach to totemic classification (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 35-36), and is rightly considered a precursor to structuralism writ large (Senn 1974); *Rites de Passage*, presented as a ‘minor’ to the Sorbonne, is easily one of the most important anthropology books ever written.

In 1922, van Gennep was invited to give a lecture tour in the United States and Canada. This forced him to quit his job at the Ministry, the last salaried full-time position he would ever hold. There seem to be no accounts testifying to his impact in America. Van Gennep actually did break another record for the time, as he performed 86 lectures within a few months, practically one per day across the entire continent. Upon his return from America he fell ill. The doors into French academia were still closed to him. He decided to give up academic ambitions, and settle down with his wife as a chicken-breeder in southern France. Yet his questioning mind could not rest, and within a year he returned to Paris. Van Gennep now turned to folklore, a discipline that he single-handedly built up over the next three decades, working unsalaried and alone in his home apartment in Bourg-la-Reine until his death in 1957. Without ever holding an academic position in France, van Gennep would become known as the father of French folklore.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**Van Gennep’s critique of Durkheim**

In retrospect it is difficult to explain Van Gennep’s failure to land a job. However, a connection to his opposition to Durkheim does seem plausible (Zumwalt 1982. Before such an assessment can be sustained, it is necessary to first present the facts and rehearse where and how Van Gennep criticised Durkheim. I shall limit this discussion to two important texts, Van Gennep’s 1906 book on Australian myths and his 1913 review of EFRL.

Van Gennep’s discussion of Durkheim in his 1906 book *Mythes et Légendes* goes straight to the heart of Durkheim’s position. Van Gennep was never circumspect in his critique. Before 1906, Durkheim and Mauss had written several essays on religion referring to the Australian material; so had Van Gennep. *Mythes et Légendes*’ Introduction starts by singling out the most important works published on the Australian material, and on page XXIV it tackles Durkheim’s work. The critique begins with a seemingly trivial issue, albeit at the time an object of endless debate: whether or not it is possible to establish which descent system was the ‘original one’. Among the Arunta, males run most of the institutions, but the culture displayed clear signs of matrilineal descent systems. Durkheim had taken this as an indication and indirect proof that matrilineal descent was the original mode of social organization, and that over time it had been replaced by patrilineal descent. Van Gennep argues that in many Australian Aboriginal societies parallel systems can and do co-exist, and that it is rather risky to speculate about origins in the absence of empirical evidence.

At the general level, Van Gennep exposes the underlying evolutionist stance that lurks beneath Durkheim’s explanatory apparatus. Van Gennep questions the adopted analytical procedure by which Durkheim positioned the Arunta at a certain level or stage of ‘development’, creating an analytical short-cut to the question of ‘origins’. Whenever Durkheim recognized a *change*, over time, or between groups (in kinship affiliations, for example), he systematically prevented any real account of such a transformation, relegating it simply to the ‘general needs of society’ (1906: XXV). Durkheim left unexplained what those ‘needs’ really amount to and how they emerge. There was no grounding epistemology to tell us what such a ‘society’ *is* to be able to ‘have’ such needs. Durkheim operated a peculiar kind of ‘métaphysique sociologique’ (1906: XXIV): he posited a metaphysical abstraction at the core of his argument, and then he artificially ‘animated’ it (1906: XXV), granting ‘society’ explanatory powers without ever accounting for the very nature of ‘society’. As van Gennep rather provocatively says, this is to resolve a problem *without having even managed to pose it as a problem* (XXV).

In short, van Gennep pinpoints Durkheim’s reductionist stance, which simplified everything as a need and function of the primordial social entity called ‘society’. But here he raises the stakes, evidencing the connections to the not-so-unrelated political ideologies that so easily follow from any strongly argued collectivist theory: what is lurking behind this sociologism is something even more problematic, and permeates far beyond Australian kinship classification. Van Gennep sums up his critique on page XXXV:

We have seen how M. Durkheim explains social modifications by the “needs of society” without indicating neither the why nor the where of those needs, and without justifying how exactly a “society”, however small, may have “needs” in the first place. It is by an identical process of *animation* that they speak to us of “the call of the fatherland”, or “the voice of the race”. M. Durkheim anthropomorphizes, even if this is what he pretends to defend himself from. (emphasis original, my translation)

According to Van Gennep, Durkheim’s sociology was not just flawed at the theoretical level; the entire epistemology upon which it built bore resemblances to and could serve to justify other and much more serious *political* essentialisms. This was a recognition that Mauss would himself take up very explicitly in his analysis of the Bolsheviks (Mauss 1992; see also Thomassen 2012b). Here it must be stressed very explicitly that Van Gennep was of course not implying that Durkheim was racist or nationalist according to any direct or simplistic meaning of those terms. Durkheim had strongly condemned racism and anti-Semitism, and certainly not only because of his own Jewish background.[[8]](#endnote-8) Something else was at stake, and it concerned the appreciation of concrete living human beings, acting within the limits of their social and physical environments. Van Gennep argued that Durkheim’s categorical collectivism lost sight of real human beings. The late Gabriel Tarde had called this Durkheim’s tendency to dangerously construct society as a ‘divine Being’, sacrificing the individual at its altar. Durkheim now found himself with a new opponent, who was re-launching Tarde’s critique from another angle. And this was not just any opponent: this was someone who knew the ethnographic material onto which Durkheim had projected his universalist theories of religion better than Durkheim did himself. But the new opponent was also much younger than Durkheim and held no academic position. Durkheim answered Van Gennep with silence.

**The 1913 review of *Elementary Forms of Religious Life***

Van Gennep did not only spend his time discussing Durkheim. His many book reviews would always try to distil whatever was positive that could be said about somebody else’s work. But when Durkheim published EFRL, van Gennep could not keep quiet.

EFRL is in fact the one book that should, more than any other and for several reasons, have discussed van Gennep’s masterpiece *Rites de Passage*. Durkheim’s most important anthropological work was written during the period when Van Gennep’s work had been made public. Mauss, who did much of the work for EFRL, had closely followed van Gennep’s work during the year-long preparation of the material for EFRL. Just like Van Gennep, Durkheim famously singled out ritual as central to the constitution not only of religion but also of society itself. However, Durkheim made no use of the terms or distinctions suggested in *Rites de Passage*. Van Gennep is dismissively mentioned (as a ‘drawback’) in a footnote to Book II, Chapter 2, with a reference to an article he published in 1908 on totemism and the comparative method in *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* (Durkheim 1995: 136). Van Gennep’s book *Tabou et Totemisme* is mentioned once (but not discussed), in a footnote to Book III, Chapter 1 (1995: 324), as one of several works that document the contagiousness of the sacred. Durkheim does not consider how Van Gennep further developed this quite crucial point about contagion in his larger classification of rites undertaken in *Rites de Passage*. When in Book II Durkheim goes into some detail with the myths and legends that underpin Australian totemic beliefs, he does not once refer to *Mythes et Légendes d’Australie* by Van Gennep – a whole book dedicated to the ethnographic case study that grounds the entire argument of EFRL. In this founding work of sociology, Durkheim does not find it worthwhile at all to discuss Van Gennep, possibly the person in France who knew most about the subject matter of EFRL.

Van Gennep published his review of EFRL in *Mercure de France* on 16 January 1913 (Van Gennep 2001: 92-95). EFRL is still today considered *the* classic work in the sociology of religion. Reading van Gennep’s grounded critique of EFRL, the question one has seriously to ask is whether the book should not actually be considered a genuinely false start in the field. When making contemporary reference to Durkheim’s work on religion (and using it as standard text in university courses) we might at least consider including van Gennep’s review, for it neatly sums up everything problematic with Durkheim’s exposé.

 EFRL is composed of two parts; one is general-theoretical, and the other is monographic. The latter, begins Van Gennep, is the weaker part. Van Gennep feels more than entitled to engage with this ethnographic part, for he knows every single one of Durkheim’s sources. Van Gennep states quite bluntly that Durkheim demonstrates a complete lack of critical stance towards the sources, which were collected by traders, police agents and priests, and that he naively accepts their veracity. Durkheim over-states the theoretical potential of single facts and interprets freely from dubious data. Durkheim falsely attributes this ‘fictional’ procedure as the ‘German’ method.[[9]](#endnote-9) Against every line of the book, says Van Gennep, one feels tempted to dot down the simplest of questions: ‘Is he right about what he is saying?’, ‘Which are his sources?’, or ‘How can we actually know what he argues corresponds to reality?’. Van Gennep was himself an extremely meticulous note-taker and bibliographer, and he would confront any other academic work on the same grounds as his criticism of EFRL: the moment it failed to be transparent about sources in terms of their reliability and veracity, he would warn the reader that the conclusions reached could not be verified and therefore may not stand up to scrutiny. Durkheim’s book did not pass the test on this first, fundamental account of accuracy and reliability. Van Gennep quite fundamentally challenges Durkheim on his empirical data, technical knowledge and scientific transparency. He states categorically:

Within ten years, his entire systematisation of the Australian material will be completely rejected, and with them the generalisations that he has constructed on the basis of the most fragile ethnographic data I have ever seen. The view he has proposed concerning ‘primitive man’ and ‘simple’ societies is entirely erroneous. (2001: 92, my translation)

This was of course no minor issue; it touched Durkheim’s project and his very academic identity. Van Gennep, better than anyone else, was in a position to spot Durkheim’s lack of expertise in ethnography, and Durkheim’s tendency to press ethnography into service of a prefabricated theoretical scheme. Durkheim’s professed insistence upon using ‘facts’ and ‘observable social phenomena’ for theory building was simply not followed up in his own work; Van Gennep pointed this out more clearly than anyone else, and he did so without the privilege of hindsight. For that reason alone, sociologists should start to take him seriously.

Here of course, one may legitimately tender a defence of Durkheim: does his theoretical attempt not deserve to be taken seriously, irrespective of superficially analysed and flawed empirical material? Van Gennep would agree: Durkheim’s general theories on totemism and on religion deserve to be considered in their own right, and are in fact full of ‘solid truths’ (2001: 93). Chapter 5, a critique of existing theories on totemism is ‘simple, rapid, exact’ (Mauss very likely composed most of this chapter). And yet, when Durkheim moves on in the next chapter (on the origins of totemic beliefs) to suggest his own theory, *no real theory is ever proposed*. What Durkheim offers, says Van Gennep, is a definition of totemism (as we know, Durkheim proposes to see totemism as representing an anonymous and impersonal ‘force’). More than explaining anything, this definition only opens up a series of questions concerning the nature of totemism. It also misrecognises what van Gennep had specified as the essentially ‘energetic’ nature of religious conceptions (Mauss would pick this up later).

Durkheim, says van Gennep, claims to have established the ‘foundations of society’ from a single religious institution (totemism), without realising that this was just onevery specific type of classification, peculiar to this not-so-simple society. The Australian Aborigines simply cannot be posited as a ‘first’ or ‘elementary’ building block upon which one can erect an entire edifice; these are fantasies of a desk-scholar. The Aborigines (here the Arunta) have complex matrimonial rules and complex totemic beliefs and practices. Even if one wants to defend an evolutionist perspective, these people simply cannot be taken to represent some kind of *ursprung*. The foundation of Durkheim’s entire argument is thus thoroughly unsound.

Van Gennep also denudes Durkheim by returning to one of the points he raised in 1906 in *Mythes et Légendes*: when Durkheim lists the various constitutive parts of a religious system (such as the variety of rites), instead of actually understanding them or their ‘function’, he uses them to construct, again and again, a speculative theory about their ‘origins’ (2001: 94). Furthermore, in his insistence to throw in all stakes on the collective level, Durkheim completely and categorically neglects the action of single, existing individuals in the formation of institutions and beliefs. In doing so, the very process and production that lies behind myth-telling and ritual acting is annulled and hidden away.[[10]](#endnote-10) Even in the most ‘primitive’ societies, van Gennep insists, individuals *do act.* It was this process formation that van Gennep had in fact tried to discuss in *Mythes et Légendes* – a book that, according to Van Gennep, Durkheim neglected *consciencieusement* (my italics, noting Van Gennep’s deep bitterness but also utter surprise).

In EFRL, Durkheim dreams of assigning society a natural reality, with its own laws of necessity, in a world devoid of concrete human beings. For the purposes of his theoretical construct, Durkheim artificially reduced Australian society to a ‘mono-cellular organism’, devoid of agency. Durkheim possesses only a metaphysic and scholastic understanding of the world; he constructs reality from pre-conceived words and concepts (Van Gennep 2001: 94). Van Gennep follows these observations with what is perhaps the most emblematic statement ever made about Durkheim’s sociology:

Not having the sense of life, that is to say the biological and ethnographic sense, he turns phenomena and living beings into scientifically dissected plants, as in an herbarium. (2001: 94)

It is not simply that the data is wrong; it is not the flawed methodology; it is not even the circular, redundant theoretical style that is at issue: the problem, says Van Gennep, is that Durkheim lacks a *sense of life*. Durkheim’s project did not even belong to the life sciences. It was lifeless and futile at best, theoretically misleading and politically dangerous at worst. The conclusion is that Durkheim, in his eagerness to explain religion, has replaced it with his own prefabricated ‘system’, his own inherently impossible sociological imperative. And it is this entire enterprise that Van Gennep declares useless and void.

Given the sharpness of van Gennep’s critique, and that it was the first of its kind to be so explicitly formulated, it is indeed a mystery why even *critics* of Durkheim have failed to consider it. Van Gennep continued his discussion of Durkheim in a series of articles, and some of these laid the framework for the book on totemism, *L’État Actuel du Problème Totémique* (1920).[[11]](#endnote-11) From 1920 onwards he gave up the fight, and turned to folklore.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Van Gennep was not alone in countering Durkheim’s findings. Radcliffe-Brown also found the main arguments of the book (including Durkheim’s central discussion of the clan-emblem) to be based on a series of errors, and wrote so in a letter to Mauss. This was a critique Durkheim that could not drown in silence. Durkheim wrote two letters to Radcliffe-Brown thanking him for sharing his views on science and added that Radcliffe-Brown’s critique had made him realise that he should have a second look at the ethnographic data and its interpretation. This ‘second look’ never took place (Lukes 1985: 528-529). Despite van Gennep’s critique being identical in part to Radcliffe-Brown’s (van Gennep suggested very directly that EFRL could gain much in value if some of the worst errors were corrected), Durkheim never bothered to respond in van Gennep’s direction. Mauss mostly shied away from the debates that followed EFRL’s publication, and would later reveal that he himself had been unconvinced about some of Durkheim’s positions (Fournier 2006: 162). Unfortunately, Mauss remained reserved about those matters as long as he lived, making assessment of his position difficult. But given the central role occupied by Mauss in the entire affair, an effort to attempt this assessment *must* be made.

**Arnold van Gennep and Marcel Mauss: so close and yet so far away**

How exactly does Marcel Mauss fit in to this whole discussion? As indicated above, van Gennep’s relationship to Durkheim and his students was tight and complex before it ended in rupture. In *Rites de Passage*, van Gennep built on writings by Mauss, Henri Hubert, and Robert Hertz. However, it was Mauss who wrote a short and highly critical review of *Rites de Passage* in *L’Année Sociologique* (Mauss 1910; see also Belmont 1979: 62-63). This review is often used as a testimony that Mauss and the Durkheimians did not consider Van Gennep’s work important, and that Van Gennep’s own academic shortcomings and lack of theoretical rigour prevented his entry into French academia. Mauss’ critique therefore needs to be reconstructed.

 In his review, Mauss accuses van Gennep on three accounts. First, Mauss says that Van Gennep sees rites of passage everywhere, and that he forces this ‘law’ of ritual passages into a principle that governs all religious representations, underpinning the very structure of thought and philosophy, ‘from the Greeks to Nietzsche’. Second (and here the preceding argument is turned on its head), Mauss says that van Gennep is of course, in a sense, right about what he is saying (that people use rites of passage to demarcate transitions) – only, unfortunately for van Gennep, this is already well known to everyone: the book is a truism, offering nothing new. Third, Mauss accuses the book of a generic defect, namely that of presenting a myriad of ethnographic and historical facts instead of bringing analysis to bear on a circumscribed and thoroughly studied case. Mauss comes close to ridiculing the book as ‘une randonnée à travers l’histoire et l’ethnographie’, i.e. a loose narrative jumping randomly around between ethnographic and historical facts.

These are perhaps the least convincing pages that Marcel Mauss ever put his name to; we should not automatically accept them at face value. They are problematic for reasons pertaining to each of the three points of the critique. First, Van Gennep explicitly did not propose any ‘law’. ‘Law’ is not a word that van Gennep even uses in *Rites de Passage*, whereas it was indeed typical of Durkheim and his followers.[[13]](#endnote-13) The word that Van Gennep does use is ‘schema’, which quite evidently relates to shared forms and ‘rhythms’, to *patterns* that are indeed comparable at the general level, but do not translate into law-like statements concerning ‘causes’ or ‘functions’. Mauss misreads and distorts the entire argument by forcing van Gennep’s analytical effort into his own Durkheimian framework of what ‘theorising’ may mean – and inadvertently exposes the inherent problem with Durkheimian neo-Kantianism rather than pointing out van Gennep’s shortcomings. It is in fact quite striking that Mauss blames van Gennep for extending a ‘law’ beyond the analytically meaningful: van Gennep indicates no aim whatsoever to ground a theory of thought and knowledge from the structure of rites of passage. He quotes Nietzsche *once* (for shame!), but simply with reference to Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal return, which seems to resonate well with beliefs among groups (he cites the Lushae) who see life itself as circular.[[14]](#endnote-14) Van Gennep made no claim about presenting a theory of knowledge. So where does Mauss’ critique spring from? Well, it might have come from Durkheim. In his Introduction to EFRL, Durkheim famously makes the hubristic claim to have solved the philosophical problem of knowledge. By grounding Kant’s *a priori* in social facts, in social divisions and categories, Durkheim argues that he has established not only the origin of society and religion, but also an explanation of how we can know things at all. Durkheim was refining his theory as Mauss wrote his review and it had been anticipated in his and Mauss’ 1903 essay on primitive classification. Mauss injects Van Gennep’s book with an ambition it simply does not express, a straw man who he then duly demolishes.

Addressing Mauss’ second criticism, it may well be argued that some contentions in *Rites de Passage* are truisms. However, that is exactlywhat Van Gennep himself claims: what he argues is nota deduction or an analytical extrapolation, and he is expressly notproposing any division or classification *that is not already present in the material itself*.[[15]](#endnote-15) Most genuine scientific breakthroughs have this ‘a-ha!’ moment: ‘but of course!’. We dis-cover.[[16]](#endnote-16) The related point to stress is that van Gennep’s deduction was indeed *new* in the sense that no-one had articulated it before: rites of passage have a tripartite form which is comparable across time and space, displaying the ritual sequence of rupture, liminality and re-aggregation. Van Gennep’s classificatory effort has stood the test of time. This is not something we can say about a lot of books written in the same period. What Van Gennep said was not only new, it was genuinely trailblazing, especially because it foregrounded the central, intermediate stage at which transition and transformation occurs, the liminal aspect that was wholly missing in Durkheim’s mechanical approach.

Third, it is true that van Gennep gallops across space and time in his collection of ethnographic data. However, Mauss has nothing substantial to put his critical finger on. So what is the problem? Is the data unorganised, as Mauss seems to indicate? No. The material is elegantly presented, following through with the tripartite structure, pushing the narrative across the various life-stages of an individual and, for each type of ritual passage, drawing on a rich ethnographic dataset. There were plenty of books written in the period (and since!) that left the reader drowning in data without any clear narrative or conceptual frame to hold on to. Van Gennep’s book does not belong with these; it is a beacon of light, a fresh blast of analytical clarity and ethnographic rigour into the emerging life sciences. If ever there was ‘grounded theory’, this is it.[[17]](#endnote-17)

And here a spontaneous observation presents itself: if there is onebook that resembles *Rites de Passage*, in terms of structure, procedure and mode of theorising; zooming in and out between history, ethnography and etymology; and keen perception of another universal tripartite formal structure emerging from the ethnographic record; then it is another small classic written some years later by Marcel Mauss himself: *The Gift*. Therefore: did Mauss’ review of *Rites de Passage* express Mauss’ own reading, or did he feel forced into defending a Durkheimian position? *Was* he forced into it? *L’Année Sociologique* was Durkheim’s journal. Mauss’ short and harsh review might simply have been commissioned (co-written?) by Durkheim as payback for van Gennep’s critiques of Durkheim in *Mythes et Légendes*. Instead of discussing those critiques on merit, perhaps he simply waited until van Gennep published his next book, and then destroyed it. *If* this is the strategy Durkheim followed, it can never be proven. Durkheim wrote very few letters to Mauss in that period, for the simple reason that they both now lived in Paris. From 1907 to 1911, besides his flat on Rue de Cluny Mauss occupied a room on Rue Saint-Jacques, directly above Durkheim’s apartment, which he used for work (Besnard and Fournier 1998: 349). Mauss was living and working under the pressure of Durkheim’s strong influence. It is relatively safe to assume that Mauss, reviewing a programmatic book written from within the core of the field that Durkheim so badly wanted to define (religion and the pivotal role of ritual), was not free to write what he thought about someone who had exposed Durkheim so openly. The fact that the relationship between Durkheim and Mauss was becoming extremely strenuous and conflict-ridden in those years may not be unrelated to the matter either.

Mauss’ critique of *Rites de Passage* did not lead to a final rupture between him and Van Gennep. In 1913, Mauss positively reviewed van Gennep’s Algerian ethnography (Zumwalt 1982: 4). Mauss praised Van Gennep for ethnographic effort and analytical precision. While the split between Van Gennep and the Durkheimians had become irrevocable, bridges between Van Gennep and Mauss were never totally burnt.[[18]](#endnote-18) During World War One, Van Gennep could think of only one person to contact as he again sought a way into French academia: Marcel Mauss. The exchange that followed provides another glimpse into Durkheim’s possible role in ostracising Van Gennep.

**Arnold van Gennep’s ‘encounter’ with Durkheim via Mauss in 1915**

As outlined above, in 1915 van Gennep attempted to re-enter French academia, and he did so via Mauss. While we do not have access to the letter(s) van Gennep initially directed to Mauss[[19]](#endnote-19), the main points in its content can be inferred from Durkheim’s later correspondence with Mauss. In this extremely delicate moment, van Gennep asked for Mauss’ support, and he quite evidently also asked Mauss if he thought it proper to contact Durkheim directly. Durkheim had by then established an enormously powerful position concerning employment within the social sciences; it would be hard to get anywhere without at least his consent. Mauss told van Gennep to go ahead, and that he would recommend him. Van Gennep then made contact with Durkheim during the Spring of 1915. With a permanent position, and some distance between himself and French academic power struggles, he may now have felt more comfortable in attempting to re-launch himself. Durkheim wrote two letters to Mauss about van Gennep, the first in April/May 1915 (the precise date is not legible), and the second on 1 June 1915 (Durkheim 1998: 455-457, 461-462). The wording in the first letter is indicative of his standpoint:

Received a letter from Van Gennep who presents his candidature for a *maitrise de conference* in the province. He authorises himself with an advice from you: you supposedly have said to him: “it is a shame that it is Switzerland [and not France] that is profiting from his scientific activity”. He asks me that I support him. I fail to apprehend on which basis he may nurture such hopes, for he has no degrees, if I am not wrong. Nonetheless, after what he has written about me, I cannot help to say what I think about his candidature, which struck me as being over the top [dénoter du toupet[[20]](#endnote-20)]. (Durkheim 1998: 456; my translation)

The quotation from Mauss is almost certainly what Mauss sincerely thought: how utterly meaningless that one of France’s leading social scientists was wasting his time in Switzerland, right at a moment when things were starting to take shape in France. Durkheim, however, thought otherwise. He bitterly remembered what had been said; van Gennep belonged to the ‘marked’ ones. There was going to be no forgiveness.

In this letter Durkheim expressed doubt about van Gennep’s titles. This is another myth that has circulated ever since: that the Durkheimians could not take van Gennep seriously because he had no titles; he was a strange fellow with some funny ideas, ultimately someone from outside the system. Van Gennep was not yet *Docteur*, but he did hold two university titles (Diplômes) from the Ecole des Langues Orientales and Ecole des Hautes Etudes. He had published quite extensively – possibly more than any other social scientist of his entire generation. If titles had been the issue, a great many of the persons hired to university positions in France during those years would have been disqualified. Here, of course, lies an irony in the message from Durkheim to Mauss: for van Gennep had no real problem with his titles and formal credentials – Mauss did. Mauss had still not even finished his thesis (he never finished it). Formally speaking, he had not published a proper book. Arnold van Gennep had by then 12 books on his record. He was also running his own journal, and was reviewing as extensively as Mauss.

Mauss’ letters to Durkheim were destroyed by the Nazis during World War Two, so we do not know what he responded to Durkheim concerning van Gennep. Perhaps he did not respond at all, for when Durkheim takes up the issue again – the day after van Gennep’s candidature has been evaluated – it is Durkheim who reminds Mauss and brings him up-to-date (1998: 462):

You no doubt received my letter wherein I told you that Van Gennep had, *on your advice, he claims*, presented his candidature. The question came up yesterday at the consultative committee. I argued his case. But the lack of university titles seemed decisive. It was further discussed whether he had been naturalised French. Do you know anything about this subject? His father was a Würtembergian army officer. […] I could not accept the expression ‘first rank works’, used by Jullian[[21]](#endnote-21), to assess his books. (emphasis original, my translation)

Durkheim appears surprised that van Gennep had presented himself upon Mauss’s recommendation (his italics do seem to contain a thinly veiled accusation that Mauss had even *dared* to recommend van Gennep). Durkheim also claims that he has argued van Gennep’s case, so in principle there is nothing Mauss, or anyone else, can hold against him. From Durkheim’s summary, it seems that three aspects were discussed by the committee in relation to their decision: van Gennep’s titles, his nationality (meaning, in 1915, his patriotic commitment), and the quality of his work. The direction in which Durkheim *actually* argued during the deliberation is more than evident from his letters: that van Gennep’s titles were insufficient, that his nationality had a big question mark to it[[22]](#endnote-22), and – most importantly – that Durkheim, in contrast to other members of the committee, did not consider his works of any great value. Van Gennep’s candidature was turned down.

While we may lack further direct proof of Durkheim’s role in preventing van Gennep entrance to French academia, the situation can be further elucidated by its general context. Durkheim had held a chair’s position at Sorbonne since 1902, but he had also built up a much wider power base. Some of Durkheim’s enemies would openly accuse him of ‘managing’ appointments and creating Chairs of Sociology in provincial universities simply in order to extend his influence (see Jones 1986: 12-23). But the extent of Durkheim’s direct influence on van Gennep’s blocked entrance into French academia is, in and of itself, of limited interest. The main point here is that one of France’s most talented social scientists never managed to land a teaching position, even at a provincial university. And so, with 20 languages spoken and twice that number read; a handful of the most important social science books translated from English into French; 12 books published, together with around 100 articles and reviews; directorship of a fairly successful journal of ethnography and sociology; strong administrative skills from a French ministry; technical skills in museology; fieldwork experience in Algeria and sustained ethnographic data-gathering in several French provinces; and having just recently, as the first person ever, assembled 600 of Europe’s leading social scientists to discuss the *raison d’être* and future of their disciplines – by the end of 1915 Arnold van Gennep would return to France empty-handed and unemployed, further down that road of sociological oblivion that this article has tried to redress.

**Why a reassessment of Arnold van Gennep’s work still matters**

Intellectual battles are historically important, both because they belong to a field of social struggles worthy of study, and because they tell us stories about how our sciences came to be. At the same time, there are several aspects of the material thus far presented that call for further sociological discussion in the present. Let us end by bringing up just three of them.

First, in relation to a key current theoretical debate, a reassessment of van Gennep’s work is relevant to the ‘performative turn’ in the social sciences, whose most famous exponent today is perhaps Jeffrey Alexander (Alexander 2004; Alexander, Giesen and Mast 2006). Alexander has reconceptualised power from the perspective of ‘cultural pragmatics’, linking a micro-level theory of action to a macro-level theory of social and institutional change. Alexander sees a performance-based approach as the only meaningful way to move beyond the dualistic structure/agency divide. Alexander frequently refers to the work of Victor Turner, especially as mediated by Richard Schechner, arguing that social performances can be analogised systematically to theatrical ones. Turner (1969, 1982), the one person who took up the work of van Gennep, made liminality a household term in the social sciences, and so Alexander’s enterprise would figure centrally in whatever implications that might arise from the argument that has been set out in this article.

However, Alexander ultimately grounds his performance approach in a Goffman-Durkheim tradition. This can be seen in Alexander’s key notion of cultural pragmatics, by which he means the extent to which ritual action is successful or unsuccessful (I draw here on Szakolczai 2013: 25 ff). The entire framework that Alexander sets up in order to make such a judgment is essentially Durkheimian. In societies with relatively less social complexity, there is a lower degree of cultural and social differentiation, and here the elements of social performances are ‘fused’. The more societies become complex and differentiated, the more these performance elements become ‘de-fused’. To be effective in a society of increasing complexity, social performances must engage in a project of ‘re-fusion’, bringing together the various symbolic elements into a whole and communicating meaning to an audience. It is only in this way that rituals become convincing and effective. Here Alexander sticks to Durkheim’s notion of ‘collective representations’, as it underlies his whole argument: the goal of performance, in any society, is to produce ‘psychological identification and cultural extension’. In successful performance, actor and audience come to share in meanings at the very level of ontology: they come to speak the same language, read from the same script – they fuse into one in the ritual act. ‘Success’ ultimately relies on the integrative powers of the performance, or, as Durkheim would have said, on whether the performance produces social solidarity. Alexander thus re-embeds the huge potential of Turner’s approach within Durkheimian functionalism and philosophical pragmatism. But if we take Van Gennep seriously, this results in a rather implausible and essentially contradictory intellectual genealogy.

Van Gennep was acutely aware that ritual performances could come to effectively shape history at both the individual and the collective level. Ceremony confirms, but ritual transforms, as Turner liked to say. And this transformative potential is found in the key concept that van Gennep gifted to the social sciences, namely ‘liminality’. The social-theoretical potential of that term is a matter for another discussion (see Szakolczai 2000, 2004, 2009). But since decisive events and ideas (including Alexander’s ‘scripts’) tend to take shape in figurations that are both spatially and temporally liminal, a thorough elaboration of the concept of liminality, departing from van Gennep, might indeed also serve to differently underpin the theoretical endeavour of contemporary sociological performance studies (see Thomassen 2014).

Second, a reassessment of van Gennep may help us to reconsider the development that took place in the work of Mauss. This is particularly relevant to contemporary theory, as the complete works of Mauss (edited by Loïc Wacquant) are finally about to be published in English. I have argued above that we cannot uncritically accept Mauss’ very negative 1910 review of *Rites de Passage*, or use it as proof that Mauss, just like Durkheim, held van Gennep’s work in low regard. I will venture (though it cannot be fully sustained due to the scope of this article) the hypothesis that Mauss actually incorporated van Gennep’s work in more than one (unacknowledged) way. Mauss’ post-World War One writings moved closer and closer to the original positions of van Gennep, and further and further away from Durkheim. His notion of habitus, his insistence on bodily techniques, his comparative dimension (which, in his work on personhood, re-incorporated a historical-genealogical dimension), his insistent attention to etymology, his re-engagement with psychology, his relational stance on social phenomena, even his belated understanding of the political peril embedded in Durkheim’s collectivist creed (Mauss in Gane 1992) – all of these developments in Mauss’ oeuvre reveal him as closely connected to Van Gennep.

Van Gennep’s and Mauss’ interests always overlapped in myriad ways, so it is difficult to discern how direct the influence may have been, but there is one aspect worth stressing here as it concerns Mauss’ most important legacy: gift-giving. Van Gennep paid great attention to systems of exchange, and may have inspired both Mauss and Lévi-Strauss more than either of them ever conceded (but see Lévi-Strauss 1963: 3). Chapter 3[[23]](#endnote-23) of *Rites de Passage* is almost entirely dedicated to the ritualistic exchange of words, gestures, services, goods, slaves and wives: exactly the aspects of exchange that Mauss systematically took up in *The Gift*, and which Lévi-Strauss used as platform for his exchange theory. Mauss does not cite or even mention van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* in *The Gift*. And yet, the circulation of gifts is a central aspect of ritualisation for van Gennep. Certain ‘gifts’ are obligatorily given, said van Gennep: the circulation of goods and objects serves to create continuous social bonds (1960: 31). Gift giving is the ‘confirmation of a bond’, and ‘to accept a gift is to be bound to the giver’ (1960: 29). Van Gennep discussed the potlatch as one peculiar example of gifting in the context of gift-giving practices among warrior groups as a peace-instituting act; he further notes how incorporation *rites* are often tied to military, sexual and political *rights* (1960: 35). Van Gennep had been a student of Mauss. But Mauss was also a student of van Gennep, and the only possible reason why we have failed to see it is that we have never read what van Gennep had to say.

These affinities are not surprising: the academic approaches of Mauss and van Gennep can be reconstructed as very similar in ‘temper’. Van Gennep once remarked upon this similarity himself. In a 1905 review of a journal issue of *L’Année Sociologique*, van Gennep asked with genuine surprise why it was that his work, though essentially similar to Mauss’s, was so openly criticised in *L’Année Sociologique* while Mauss’s was so obviously accepted? ‘Mauss posed some rules of method which are like those which I presented here (one nearly reproached me for them) … [and] which I applied in Tabou et Totémisme à Madagascar, formulated with more precision in my Notes sur le Totémisme’ (van Gennep [1905] in Zumwalt 1982: 4). The question is still pertinent. It is tempting to imagine what would have happened had Mauss and van Gennep taken up their collaboration from the first years of the century – it could have resulted in decisive changes in the formation of the social sciences in France and beyond. Counterfactual history remains what it is: something that never happened. But the present need not always remain constrained by that which did not happen in the past.

Third, while this article has not been able to cover van Gennep’s own approach to the social sciences in any detail, a general reassessment of his work will involve more than rewriting this or that footnote in intellectual history. In van Gennep’s reading, scientists of the 19th century had become overtly distanced from reality, and had started to adopt a language that had lost directness in relation to the physical world. Van Gennep was searching for a new science that could allow us to return to *life*. Van Gennep’s own approach was extremely methodical and down to earth, and yet, based on his intuitive skills, it was always linked to a larger picture, in full awareness of the complexity and ‘relatedness’ of the discussed material.

Van Gennep passionately believed in science, but he was sceptical about certain usages of scientific positivism. Van Gennep was highly critical of Durkheim’s comparative method, which, according to him, failed to compare like with like. In 1909, in the second volume of *Religions, Moeurs et Légendes*, van Gennep argued that ‘when we wish to study social phenomena, we must study them both locally, with the help of the historical method, and also comparatively, with the aid of the biological method, so that we can classify them into “natural” categories: family, genus, species’ (in Hafstein 1999). The ‘biology’ to which van Gennep referred was therefore not simply allusive to the authority and objectivity of natural science, but, moreover, indicative of the importance of *direct observation* and the systematic gathering of data leading, step by step, to theory building. Van Gennep wanted social scientists to deal with *living facts,* rather than ‘dead’ and abstract facts. Van Gennep refused to see sociology, folklore and ethnography as radically separate disciplines. For him they were a single discipline with a shared methodology.

Van Gennep’s social science echoes that of Tarde: why should we phantom our science on the image of the natural sciences, when we have somewhere better to start? As noted by Latour, Durkheim’s position on this issue is ambivalent: on the one hand he wants to borrow and implement scientific method from the natural sciences; on the other hand he wants sociology to cut its ties completely from biology and physics. Latour’s contrasting analysis of Tarde holds true for van Gennep also: ‘for him there exist only societies. Human societies are but a particular subset of these societies because they exist in so few copies. But since human societies are accessible through their most intimate features, social scientists have no need to let natural scientists dictate what their epistemology should be’ (Latour 2010: 3; on parallels between Tarde and van Gennep, see Thomassen 2012a). Van Gennep was truly passionate about ethnographic details, real living details, artefacts, art techniques, paintings, beliefs, rites, production techniques, legends. He published widely on highly specialised topics, from weaving techniques and pottery making to animal and property markings; but then he zoomed out, carefully so, towards the universal, detecting patterns and rhythms that tie together the different aspects or levels of reality, patterns that belong to what he called the ‘great tree of life’. While engaged in establishing the social sciences, he nonetheless refused to cut them off from any other branch of the life sciences. Unlike Durkheim, he was not clearing ground and setting up fences; he was insisting on methodical precision, thoughtful comparison and analytical openness. Much like Tarde, he refused to disentangle sociology from nature and from a larger holistic philosophy of becoming. It is within this horizon of genuine *life* science that the work of van Gennep belongs – as does the concept of liminality. In many ways, Van Gennep is our contemporary. A reappraisal of his work may therefore assist contemporary Tardean-inspired theorists to rethink social science epistemology. More to follow.

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1. Even the edited volume by Allen, Pickering and Miller (1998), which otherwise reconstructs the reception history of EFRL in great detail, omits discussion of van Gennep. The only exception is the chapter by Giovanni Pauletti (2012 [1998]), which refers to van Gennep’s 1920 book on totemism, but not to the earlier works in which van Gennep actually developed his critiques of Durkheim (these include his review of EFRL). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In his book on Durkheim, Steven Lukes does in fact say this much: “The most devastating of Durkheim’s anthropological critics was the great ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep, who criticized *The Elementary Forms* on both empirical and theoretical grounds” (Lukes 1985: 524). However, having stated the core of the critique, Lukes shies away from a real discussion of it by returning to the assumption (1985: 524, n35) that Durkheim and his followers simply “did not take Arnold van Gennep seriously”. The view is repeated in the argument by Belier (1994) on the grounds that van Gennep allegedly disregarded that ‘collective level’ so dear to the Durkheimians. Belier’s argument does not stand up to scrutiny. Van Gennep was not simply an individualist with no concern for social patterns; he argued rather strongly that it was *Durkheim’s* approach which left the very notion of ‘society’ unaccounted for. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This and following sections closely draw on Thomassen 2014, especially Chapters 1-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Durkheim had himself hoped to be in charge of that important translation. In the Spring of 1898, while Mauss was in London to study the British school of anthropology, Durkheim asked him to approach Frazer with this translation in mind – but it was too late, for the young van Gennep had already been offered the job (with A. Dirr). On 10 May 1898, Durkheim writes, seemingly rather annoyed, to Mauss: “My project to have *Totemism* translated has gone down the drain. […] You can tell Frazer that my intention was to have it translated” (Durkheim 1998: 136-137, my translation). There is some likelihood that this is the first time that Durkheim ever stumbled upon the name of Arnold van Gennep (in the letter to Mauss he refers to the ‘two translators’ of Frazer without mentioning their names). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. As discussed by Belmont (1979: 7-9), in this same article van Gennep presents a remarkable homemade theory of language learning. The first rule is to focus on the sounds and rhythms of a language, training the ear, and then exercising one’s muscles in trying to imitate sounds and intonations, before moving on to the grammar, here starting out with the absolutely invariable elements and then progressing to the variable ones. *Words*, then, must be learned, *not* from their meaning, but from their root; in this way, any word summoned brings with it the whole linguistic cluster to which it belongs, whereas any direct reference to the meaning in the appropriation of a word will close the learner off from the larger semantic matrix from whence that meaning emerges. One discerns, behind these rules, much of van Gennep’s social scientific method. In fact, for him it was probably more or less the same thing. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This book was introduced and translated into English by Needham and published by Kegan and Paul in 1967 as *The Semi-Gods*. The book is a bitingly sarcastic description of the social sciences losing themselves in blindfolded specialisation. After *Rites of Passage* in 1960 and *The Semi-Gods* in 1967, no further work of van Gennep has been translated into English. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Arnold van Gennep’s name did not disappear entirely from the radar. In the 1920s, Mauss and his collaborators finally got the Institut d’Ethnologieestablished. For its first batch of students the Institute offered, in addition to the regular courses (more than half of which were taught by Mauss on ‘Instructions in Descriptive Ethnography’), a series of four ‘open lectures’. Two of those open lectures were taught by Arnold van Gennep, on the ‘geographical method of folklore’ (Fournier 2006: 238). It is the only testimony we have of van Gennep teaching a class in France, narrowly confined with the field of ‘folklore’. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The question of nationalism is more complex. As we know, Durkheim became an ardent and patriotic defender of the French Republic during the Great War. As Dingley (2008: 42) argued, in Durkheim’s works “the individual was a social reality, the product of a society that was itself a reality, and for Durkheim the implicit reality of society was the nation, particularly the French nation”. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Durkheim had had a crucial stay in Germany in 1885-1886, and liked to see himself as the transmitter of German empiricism and neo-Kantianism to the French universities. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. In fact, the telling of myths is probably one of those activities that actually *require* individual originality and impetus. Myths, like songs, poems and most art-forms, simply cannot be produced by collectivities. They are *re*produced by collectivities – but that is a different matter. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Here van Gennep reiterates why and how totemism, as a product of human ingenuity, is a both complex and extremely varied phenomenon. Therefore, he says (and with evident reference to Durkheim), “to explain it with verbal formulas such as *collective thought*, *totemic mode of thought*, *socialization of affective values*, is to retrogress to the days of phlogiston, it not to those of *virtus dormitiva* (as in Belmont 1979: 30). It is a critique echoed by Levi-Strauss: Durkheim’s theory of totemism “starts with an urge, and ends with a recourse to sentiment”(1963: 70-71). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Van Gennep did occasionally return to the shortcomings of Durkheim, and one of the more humorous ones is found in a 1934 article on the methodology of folklore: “When one thinks that Durkheim and others based universal theories on tribes comprising no more than twenty to a hundred individuals, one is assailed by qualms. In Savoy I have been dealing with three million people. At that rate I could have invented a hundred universal theories just by concentrating on the exceptions” (as translated and quoted in Belmont 1979: 56-57). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. One year later, in one of his follow-up books, *La Formation des Légendes*, van Gennep actually replaced the term ‘schema’ with ‘law’, albeit openly expressing his own regret of ‘having to use’ this highly problematic term, uncritically borrowed from the natural sciences. Van Gennep justified his choice, not without irony, by referring to the fact that “some other ethnographers and folklorists have not felt the same scruple” (in Belmont 1979: 45). He may have had Mauss in mind. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Van Gennep rarely if ever made analytical leaps to purely philosophical debates, always arguing from the grounds of available data. The only philosopher van Gennep mentions in *Rites of Passage* is in fact Nietzsche, in the second last paragraph of the book. This is where van Gennep compares rectilinear to cyclical patterns, and notes how the circular order from life to death and death to life (the sequential order of the book itself) acquired a ‘psychological significance’ in Nietzsche’s theory of the eternal return (1960: 194). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. It is striking how Mauss, even on this point, would later start to emulate van Gennep. In his crucial 1927 publication, in which he proposed a new division of sociology and its subject fields, Mauss justified the proposed division as follows: ‘The division is clear and distinct. It does not divide anything which is not perfectly divided in reality’ (Mauss 2005: 60). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In his 1910 review in *American Journal of Sociology*, Frederick Starr immediately praised van Gennep’s book as both ‘important’ and ‘original’ (Starr 1910: 707). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Mauss here exercises the sheer repetition of a critique that the Durkheimians ritually launched against members of the British school, including Frazer. Van Gennep was, in many ways, closer to the British school of anthropology, not least concerning its empirical foundations, but Mauss fails to appreciate that van Gennep did notsimply emulate the comparative methodology of the British school. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. As late as the 1930s, when Mauss had become Chair at the Collège, van Gennep was still fighting to secure some kind of stable income for his old age. Van Gennep would seek Mauss’ support for the creation of a Chair in French and comparative folklore at the Collège or, alternatively, solicit his help towards a position as director of study in religion or folklore (Fournier 2006: 300). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. There is a possibility that this was something they talked about in person during the 1914 conference in Neuchatel. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The expression ‘dénoter du toupet’ is not easily translatable into English. In context, it probably would be more correct to interpret in the vein of: ‘he has got some courage!’, or ‘how dare he even try to apply!’. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. The person in question must be Durkheim’s contemporary, Camille Jullian (1859-1933). Jullian was a friend of Bergson, and Professor at the Collège de France from 1905. Durkheim had had his struggles with Jullian before. In 1904, when Gabriel Tarde died and Bergson obtained a Chair in Social Philosophy, Durkheim and his collaborators tried hard to transform Bergson’s former Chair in Greek and Latin philosophy into a Chair in sociology – for which Mauss could then run as a candidate. However, they were voted down, and it was Jullian who was then awarded the Chair in ‘History and National Treasures’. Jullian would support Mauss’ candidature in 1907 before that of van Gennep, but by 1915 van Gennep’s merits were so substantial that it had become difficult indeed to vote against him. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The irony of the irony is this: had van Gennep nurtured German sympathies, it would have done him little harm in Switzerland – perhaps quite the contrary. Instead, he publicly denounced the Swiss government for their pro-German attitude via, among other methods, several public letters to the French daily *Dépeche de Toulouse.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. This is the conceptual discussion entitled Individuals and Groups, which is followed by six chapters, each dealing with a cross-cultural examination of ritual passages as they pertain to the life cycle, from conception to death. In other words, Van Gennep posits gift-giving as a *foundational* principle at play in ritual phenomena, tying together individuals and groups. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)