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"Father of sociology": Emile Durkheim

The authors present a well-known sociologist Emile Durkheim, famous for his views on the structure of society. The authors write that his work focused on how traditional and modern societies evolved and function. Durkheim's theories were founded on the concept of **social facts**, defined as the norms, values, and structures of a society.

Key words: Sociology, Durkheim's sociology of knowledge, concept of social facts, moral individualism.

David Émile Durkheim (French: [emil dyʁkɛm] or [dyʁkajm] April 15, 1858, Épinal in Lorraine, France – November 15, 1917, Paris) was a French sociologist, social psychologist and philosopher. He formally established the academic discipline and, with Karl Marx and Max Weber, is commonly cited as the principal architect of modern social science and father of sociology [10].

He came from a long line of devout French Jews; his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had all been rabbis. Durkheim became interested in a scientific approach to society very early on in his career, which meant the first of many conflicts with the French academic system, which had no social science curriculum at the time. Durkheim found humanistic studies uninteresting, turning his attention from psychology and philosophy to ethics and eventually, sociology [8; 1].

Durkheim was a brilliant student at the College d'Épinal and was awarded a variety of honors and prizes. His ambitions thus aroused, he transferred to one of the great French high schools, the Lycee Louis-le-Grand in Paris. Here he prepared himself for the arduous admission examinations that would open the doors to the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure, the traditional training ground for the intellectual elite of France [2].

Emile Durkheim was the first French academic sociologist. His life was dominated throughout by his academic career, even though he was intensely and passionately involved in the affairs of French society at large. In his well-established status he differed from the men dealt with so far, and his life may seem uneventful when compared with theirs. Undoubtedly their personal idiosyncrasies had a share in determining their erratic course. But in addition, they were all devoted to a calling that had not yet found recognition in the university. In their attempts to defend the claim to legitimacy of the new science of sociology, they faced enormous obstacles, which contributed in large measure to their personal difficulties [2; 11, 103–138].

It is Durkheim who clearly established the logic of the functional approach to the study of social phenomena, although functional explanations, it will be recalled, play a major part in Spencer's approach, and the lineaments of functional reasoning were already discernible in the work of Comte. In particular, Durkheim set down a clear distinction between historical and functional types of inquiry and between functional consequences and individual motivations.

The concept of function played a key part in all of Durkheim's work from *The Division of Labor*, in which he sees his prime objective in the determination of "the functions of division of labor, that is to say, what social needs it satisfies," to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, which is devoted to a demonstration of the various functions performed in society through religious cults, rites, and beliefs. An additional illustration of Durkheim's functional approach is his discussion of criminality [6; 14].

The main thrust of Durkheim's overall doctrine is his insistence that the study of society must eschew reductionism and consider social phenomena *sui generis*. Rejecting biologicistic or psychologicistic interpretations, Durkheim focused attention on the social-structural determinants of mankind's social problems [12].

Durkheim presented a definitive critique of reductionist explanations of social behavior. Social phenomena are "social facts" and these are the subject matter of sociology. They have, according to Durkheim, distinctive social characteristics and determinants, which are not amenable to explanations on the biological or psychological level. They are external to any particular individual considered as a biological entity. They endure over time while particular individuals die and are replaced by others. A social fact can hence be defined as "every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint."

Social phenomena arise, Durkheim argued, when interacting individuals constitute a reality that can no longer be accounted for in terms of the properties of individual actors. A political party, for example, though composed of individual members, cannot be explained in terms of its constitutive elements; rather, a party is a structural whole that must be accounted for by the social and historical forces that bring it into being and allow it to operate. Any social formation, though not necessarily superior to its individual parts, is different from them and demands an explanation on the level peculiar to it [3].

Durkheim was concerned with the characteristics of groups and structures rather than with individual attributes. He focused on such problems as the cohesion or lack of cohesion of specific religious groups, not on the individual traits of religious believers. He showed that such group properties are independent of individual traits and must therefore be studied in their own right. He examined different rates of behavior in specified populations and characteristics of particular groups or changes of such characteristics. For example, a significant increase of suicide rates [7; 13] in a particular group indicates that the social cohesion in that group has been weakened and its members are no longer sufficiently protected against existential crises. For Durkheim, one of the major elements of integration is the extent to which various members interact with one another.

"Suicidal tendency is great in educated circles, this is due, to the weakening of traditional beliefs and to the state of moral individualism."

"Man seeks to learn and man kills himself because of the loss of cohesion in his religious society; he does not kill himself because of his learning. It is certainly not the learning he acquires that disorganizes religion; but the desire for knowledge awakens because religion becomes disorganized. Knowledge is not sought as a means to destroy accepted opinions but because their destruction has commenced. To be sure, once knowledge exists, it may battle in its own name and in its own cause, and set up as an antagonist to traditional sentiments [9]".

The difference between value consensus and structural integration can now be more formally approximated in terms of Durkheim's own terminology. He distinguished between mechanical and organic solidarity. The first prevails to the extent that "ideas and tendencies common to all members of the society are greater in number and intensity than those which pertain personally to each member. This solidarity can grow only in inverse ratio to personality." In other words, mechanical solidarity prevails where individual differences are minimized and the members of society are much alike in their devotion to the common weal. Each element in a differentiated society is less strongly tied to common collective routines, even though it may be bound with equal rigor to the differentiated and specialized tasks and roles that characterize systems of organic solidarity. While the individual elements of such a system have less in common, they are nevertheless much more interdependent than under mechanical solidarity [3].

To Durkheim, men were creatures whose desires were unlimited. Unlike other animals, they are not satiated when their biological needs are fulfilled. When social regulations break down, the controlling influence of society on individual propensities is no longer effective and individuals are left to their own devices. Such a state of affairs Durkheim calls anomie, a term that refers to a condition of relative normlessness in a whole society or in some of its component groups. Anomie does not refer to a state of mind, but to a property of the social structure. It characterizes a condition in which individual desires are no longer regulated by common norms and where, as a consequence, individuals are left without moral guidance in the pursuit of their goals [14].

Durkheim's program of study, the overriding problems in all his work, concerns the sources of social order and disorder, the forces that make for regulation or de-regulation in the body social. His work on suicide, of which the discussion and analysis of anomie forms a part, must be read in this light. Once he discovered that certain types of suicide could be accounted for by anomie, he could then use anomic suicide as an index for the otherwise unmeasurable degree of social integration. Suicides may be considered a "normal," that is, a regular, occurrence. However, sudden spurts in the suicide rates of certain groups or total societies are "abnormal" and point to some perturbations not previously present. "Abnormally" high rates in specific groups or social categories, or in total societies, can be taken as an index of disintegrating forces at work in a social structure [5].

Though Durkheim stressed that in modern societies a measure of integration was achieved through the intermeshing and mutual dependence of differentiated roles, he came to see that these societies nevertheless could not do without some common integration by a system of common beliefs. In earlier social formations built on mechanical solidarity, such common beliefs are not clearly distinct from the norms through which they are implemented in communal action; in the case of organic solidarity, the detailed norms have become relatively independent from overall beliefs, responding as they do to the exigencies of differentiated role requirements, but a general system of overall beliefs must still exist [5].

Durkheim's sociology of knowledge is intimately tied to his sociology of religion. In the latter, he attempts to show that man's religious commitments ultimately can be traced to his social commitments (the City of God is but a projection of the City of Man). His sociology of knowledge postulates that the categories of man's thought--his ways of conceiving space and time, for example--can be traced to his mode of social life [4].

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