

Tip: Jones et al 'Introducing Social Theory 2nd ed.
(2011, Polity Press: Cambridge)

Emile Durkheim: born Lorraine, France, 1858, died Paris, 1917

Major works

The Division of Labour in Society (1893)

Rules of Sociological Method (1895)

Suicide (1897)

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912)

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century Marx and Durkheim were seen, particularly by theorists influenced by structural **functionalism**, to represent opposing approaches to theorizing modern society. According to such accounts, Marx is concerned with economic power and class conflict and has nothing much to say about culture; whereas Durkheim offers no account of power relationships but sees cultural analysis as a vital area of sociological study. More generally, while Marx intends his theories to support a worker's revolution, Durkheim would regard such a commitment as a betrayal of proper scientific neutrality.

Such readings of both thinkers can be seen as results of two main factors: significant parts of their work were only discovered or translated into English after they died, and when they were published it was within a political and intellectual climate that lent itself to such

specifically, Durkheim argued that such a sociology of moral beliefs would be able to discover the most appropriate moral framework for the complex, socially differentiated and primarily secular societies of Europe, and specifically of France. As we saw in the previous chapter, Marx sought to fuse social analysis and criticism as a contribution to the radical transformation of capitalist society. Durkheim explicitly committed himself to values of scientific neutrality, but he did also get involved in some of the political and intellectual controversies of his day (see Lukes 1973). He is like Marx and their **Enlightenment** forbears in seeking to employ the critical faculties of reason to understand the laws of collective social life and – again like Marx – to analyse how the ideals of the French Revolution might be made a reality.

A science of society

At the beginning of Durkheim's intellectual career, sociology was not yet taught in French universities and it was really only in the late 1890s that an established body of published sociological research began to be available. His ambition to establish sociology as a respected scientific discipline meant that it was necessary to develop specifically sociological theories – as distinct from historical or psychological ones, for example – and a clear set of methodological principles that would allow the theories to be tested via research.

Durkheim's ambitions to establish sociology as a science grew within the context of his concerns about the disunity and disillusionment of French society experienced intermittently since the 1789 revolution and heightened by France's defeat by Prussia in 1871. Without wanting to explain Durkheim's sociological project as simply a response to the issues which dominated French society during his lifetime, if we are to understand the nature of his ideas it is important that we briefly look at the context of their development. The question of how to rebuild France after the defeat by Prussia dominated political and intellectual life. Broadly speaking, Catholic and conservative opinion argued for a return to traditional values and the reigning in of republicans, socialists and other groups in favour of expanding democracy and workers' rights. Revolutionary socialists in contrast, sought to extend the campaign for **secularization**, equality, and support for unions and welfare programmes. Communists and revolutionaries sought to abolish private property altogether (see Thompson 2002; Lukes 1973; Giddens 1971b; Morrison 1995).

Durkheim, despite often being portrayed as a conservative, was

stark oppositions, particularly in America. However, more recent commentators have brought together the historical and political themes in Durkheim's work as a whole, in the light of which we can see that, although there are significant differences between Marx's and Durkheim's work, the latter's contribution to social theory is more than simply that of founding functionalist sociology. In fact, Durkheim is, like Marx, an historical thinker who attempts to analyse the moral, political and psychological impact of the modern **division of labour**.

Like Marx's, Durkheim's is a theory designed to promote the good society. Like Marxism, it is a *response* to modernity, and, like Marxism, it is a *part* of modernity – it is part of the modern belief that societies can be transformed for the better, that progress can be achieved in social organization through the application of human knowledge. Like Marx, Durkheim believes that social progress depends on finding ways to develop the potential for individual fulfilment and freedom to change within the structure of society as a whole. Durkheim and Marx also share the belief that the division of labour, the social relationships within which we coordinate how we produce what we need to survive, is part of the shared moral and political environment and should be treated as such. However, according to Marx, the opportunity to be free in modern society will only be possible when the class-based productive system characteristic of **capitalism** is abolished. In contrast, Durkheim sees the problems faced by modern societies to be moral rather than economic. He argues that 'a state of order or peace among men cannot follow of itself from any entirely material cause, from any blind mechanism however scientific it may be. It is a moral task' (Durkheim 1957: 12).

Durkheim's response to **modernity** has two main elements:

- he wanted to ensure that modern societies were harmonious
- he wanted to create a *science* of society to generate the knowledge necessary to show how this harmony could be achieved.

On one hand he maintained that shared moral beliefs act as a social 'glue' and create a sense of harmony in a society. On the other hand, dissatisfied as he was with philosophical guesswork and generalizations about what makes for a good life and a stable society, he sought to produce a *science* of morality. Durkheim was convinced that sociology could fulfil this need for an objective, verifiable and empirically grounded science of moral beliefs. He believed that such a science was desperately needed to point the way towards 'social peace'. More

specifically, Durkheim argued that such a sociology of moral beliefs would be able to discover the most appropriate moral framework for the complex, socially differentiated and primarily secular societies of Europe, and specifically of France. As we saw in the previous chapter, Marx sought to fuse social analysis and criticism as a contribution to the radical transformation of capitalist society. Durkheim explicitly committed himself to values of scientific neutrality, but he did also get involved in some of the political and intellectual controversies of his day (see Lukes 1973). He is like Marx and their **Enlightenment** forebears in seeking to employ the critical faculties of reason to understand the laws of collective social life and – again like Marx – to analyse how the ideals of the French Revolution might be made a reality.

A science of society

At the beginning of Durkheim's intellectual career, sociology was not yet taught in French universities and it was really only in the late 1890s that an established body of published sociological research began to be available. His ambition to establish sociology as a respected scientific discipline meant that it was necessary to develop specifically sociological theories – as distinct from historical or psychological ones, for example – and a clear set of methodological principles that would allow the theories to be tested via research.

Durkheim's ambitions to establish sociology as a science grew within the context of his concerns about the disunity and disillusionment of French society experienced intermittently since the 1789 revolution and heightened by France's defeat by Prussia in 1871. Without wanting to explain Durkheim's sociological project as simply a response to the issues which dominated French society during his lifetime, if we are to understand the nature of his ideas it is important that we briefly look at the context of their development. The question of how to rebuild France after the defeat by Prussia dominated political and intellectual life. Broadly speaking, Catholic and conservative opinion argued for a return to traditional values and the reigning in of republicans, socialists and other groups in favour of expanding democracy and workers' rights. Revolutionary socialists in contrast, sought to extend the campaign for **secularization**, equality, and support for unions and welfare programmes. Communists and revolutionaries sought to abolish private property altogether (see Thompson 2002; Lukes 1973; Giddens 1971b; Morrison 1995).

Durkheim, despite often being portrayed as a conservative, was

actually concerned that the struggle between conservatives and radicals would drown out the liberal principles bequeathed by the French Revolution. He was not in favour of socialist revolution but, equally, he did not believe it was possible or desirable to go back to an earlier and largely imaginary period of harmony based on feudal forms of authority. Instead, Durkheim argued that the ideals of the French Revolution of liberty, respect for the individual, and equality had to be systematically and carefully incorporated into modern French society.

One of the reasons why Durkheim has been characterized as a conservative is that he was influenced by Comte, who first developed the project of a systematic science of society that could provide a guide for social and political reform. However, Durkheim was influenced not by Comte's conservatism but by his advocacy of **positivism** as the methodology for the new science of sociology. Durkheim criticized Comte's work for being over-reliant on philosophical speculation, whereas Durkheim wanted to develop a scientifically precise approach to the carefully controlled strengthening of the moral climate of France in a progressive direction. This was deemed necessary because France was experiencing not only the political and cultural crises mentioned above but also rapid industrialization. This latter had allowed capitalism to develop in an unregulated and unjust manner and led to class conflict, unregulated competition and routinized, degrading, meaningless work (Lukes 1973: 174). All of these issues cried out for the scientific study of society's collective moral beliefs as sources of social cohesion. Durkheim thus saw the role of sociology as similar to that of a medical physician who applies scientific techniques to distinguish between health and illness and to prescribe the appropriate remedy for the latter. The medicine required in this case was an answer to how the process of transition from traditional to modern collective values could be best achieved.

Social structure

For Durkheim the crucial feature of **social structures** is that they are made up of *norms* and *values* – cultural definitions of behaviour considered appropriate and worthy in different settings. Since it is through socialization that we learn these normative definitions, it is only this process which makes people into members of a society and therefore makes social life possible.

It was Durkheim who first of all stressed the view that even the possibilities of thought and experience are *inherited*, and not invented

anew by each generation. For example, people who attend a religious service may believe sincerely in their god. But the beliefs and practices of their religion were in existence before they were – they *learned* them. Like all other social activity, religious belief and practice is structured by society and by the positions of people in it. As Durkheim puts it:

When I perform my duties as a brother, a husband or a citizen and carry out the commitments I have entered into, I fulfil obligations which are defined in law and custom and which are external to myself and my actions. Even when they conform to my own sentiments and when I feel their reality within me, that reality does not cease to be objective, for it is not I who have prescribed these duties; I have received them through education... Similarly the believer has discovered from birth, ready fashioned, the beliefs and practices of his religious life: if they existed before he did, it follows that they exist outside him. (Durkheim 1982 [1895]: 50–1)

For Durkheim, then, the achievement of social life among humans, and the existence of social order in society, which he calls '**social solidarity**', is ensured by socialization – the process whereby different individuals learn collectively held standards or rules of behaviour. Durkheim's phrase for these rules was 'social facts'. Although these are only *visible* through the conformity of individuals to them, they are, nevertheless, in Durkheim's words, 'external to, and constraining upon' these individuals. Though not capable of being seen, such structures of cultural rules are as real to the individuals who are motivated by them as the world's physical structure by which they are also constrained. Society, in a famous phrase of Durkheim's, is a reality '*sui generis*' – it has its own existence which cannot be analysed by historical, psychological or any other social science but sociology.

Durkheim was convinced that these social facts required a sociological analysis to address the central problem of how to sustain social solidarity in the process of transition from traditional to modern society. Different types of society achieve solidarity in different ways. In pre-modern, traditional societies, where people live very similar kinds of lives, solidarity is achieved more or less automatically. This form of **mechanical solidarity** is the result of a simple division of labour. There are so few roles to play or different ways of living available that the need for the society's members to see the world in the same way – to share a collectively held set of rules about how to behave – is satisfied without much difficulty.

Things are much more problematic in modernity however. By definition, a modern society has a highly complex division of labour. There

are so many different roles to be played and so many different ways of living possible that social solidarity is much more difficult to achieve. For Durkheim, this is the main danger in modernity. The forces separating and dividing people are so profound that social disintegration is a real threat. Furthermore, Durkheim believed that human beings are not naturally consensual. He believed that if left to our own devices, we are *anti-social*. The natural, as opposed to structurally constrained, state for a human is to be self-centred, greedy, insatiable and overly competitive. Without norms constraining our behaviour, 'humans develop insatiable appetites, limitless desires and general feelings of irritation and dissatisfaction' (Durkheim 1974: 72). The problem of modernity is that it encourages such excessive, rampant **individualism**. So not only are our natural propensities dangerously individualistic, but the very institutions of modernity can, without strategic re-alignment and re-inforcement, encourage such anti-social individualism, a condition Durkheim termed **anomie**. This term can mean 'without law', but Durkheim uses it to refer to the lack of a sufficiently secure framework by which people are provided with a sense of moral regulation and social integration, rather than to a lack of formal legislature. According to Durkheim, unless such counter-balancing social structural forces promoting cohesion and integration can be strengthened, social solidarity and social order are seriously threatened. Durkheim argues that the extent of our mutual dependence needs to be much more clearly and explicitly brought into the public's consciousness. To use his phrase, modern societies need to achieve **organic solidarity**. But how can the moral cohesion of modern societies be strengthened and anomic tendencies reduced? Solving this problem is at the heart of Durkheim's theorizing. He wants to demonstrate the truth of his assertions that stable societies are interdependent societies and he wants to locate the potential basis for promoting organic solidarity within the existing stock of moral beliefs. On this basis Durkheim's work develops in three separate, but related, directions:

- first, he argues that only if sociology is a science can we acquire the evidence we need to understand social arrangements
- second, he shows how societies work as interdependent **social systems** by using functionalist theorizing
- third, he demonstrates the crucial role of collective belief in inhibiting anomie and guaranteeing social solidarity in human societies.

The laws of society

It is his conception of his subject matter that leads Durkheim to advocate the use of science to explain social life. The scientific method he favoured is known as positivism. The guiding principle for the positivist scientist is that if something exists in nature, it has been caused by something else in nature. That is, natural phenomena cause other natural phenomena. For example, when water reaches a certain temperature (cause) it freezes (effect). Furthermore, this always happens. There are no circumstances (depending on atmospheric pressure) when water will not become ice at a particular temperature. Such invariable cause and effect relationships are called *laws*. Science sets out to discover the laws of nature. These laws are 'given' for us. Whether we like it or not, water will freeze at a certain temperature. Whether we like it or not, the temperature is higher in the summer than in the winter. Whether we like it or not, leaves will fall from deciduous trees in the autumn. We live in a natural world that is organized in a particular way and we are stuck with this world, whatever our views about it. Science therefore only reveals *why* nature is as it is. We can describe this 'given' character of nature by saying it is an *objective* world. It exists, as a matter of fact, independently of any subjective feelings we may have or judgements we may make about it.

For Durkheim, social structures are just as objective and given as nature. For him, structural features are as much a given for the inhabitants of a society who encounter them at birth as is the natural world for the phenomena, animate and inanimate, that make *it* up. Daffodils do not choose to be yellow; frogs do not choose to croak and have bulging eyes; water does not choose to freeze. They do so, nevertheless. Humans do not choose to have two eyes, a nose and a mouth. Nor do they choose to have two arms and two legs. These are simply biological facts of life.

In the same way, for Durkheim, a society consists of a similar realm of *social* facts 'external to and constraining upon' the individual. We do not choose to believe the things we believe or to act in the way we act. We *learn* to think or do these things. Pre-existing cultural rules determine our ideas and behaviour through socialization. Thus, in the same way as the characteristics of natural phenomena are the products of laws of nature, so people's ideas and acts are the product of external social forces that make up social structures. Consequently, sociology must be scientific in its method of enquiry. In Durkheim's words 'sociology can and must be objective, since it deals with realities as definite and substantial as those of ... the biologist' (Durkheim 1970: 39).

For positivist science this method involves *empirical observation*: only if you can muster evidence of causal relationships identifiable by the senses can you claim to have demonstrated their existence. Thus, Durkheim argues for sociology to rely on empirical evidence too. Since behaviour and belief are determined by external structural forces, when we quantify the incidence of action or of thought among people, what we have is empirical evidence of the extent to which the forces that have produced this behaviour and belief exist. The attraction of such **empiricism** was that it seemed to offer the possibility of certainty – of demonstrable proof. For many of those engaged in a project dedicated to social reconstruction and societal progress – the sociology of the modern world – such a prospect was indeed enticing.

According to Durkheim, as we have seen, order flows from consensus – from the existence of shared norms and values. For him, the key cause of social and individual ill-health stems from anomie – a lack of regulating norms. He argues that a strong, ordered society and individual liberation are only guaranteed where beliefs and behaviour are properly regulated by socialization: 'The individual submits to society and this submission is the condition of his liberation. For man freedom consists in the deliverance from blind, unthinking physical forces; this he achieves by opposing against them the great and intelligent force which is society, under whose protection he shelters' (Durkheim 1974: 72).

But why are order, harmony and consensus the right state of affairs? To answer this question, Durkheim turned to functionalism.

Functionalism

Durkheim was the first major sociological theorist to use functionalist ideas, which he developed under the influence of the work of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). Spencer argued that we can best understand the existence and character of social structures by comparing them to the origins and workings of biological organisms. Just as natural bodies rely on the integrated functioning of their individual organs to survive, so societies also require for their survival the harmonious integration of the individuals and institutions that are their constituent parts.

The organic analogy

The use of a biological analogy in social science then, begins with the fairly uncontroversial premise that an organism is a living entity whose

existence and health depend on all the organs that make it up working properly together. In the human body, for instance, all the organs are interdependent. The workings of the brain depend on the workings of the lungs, which depend on the workings of the heart, and so on. Furthermore, all (or nearly all, in the case of the human body) of these organs are indispensable. Each exists because it satisfies a particular need of the human body which no other organ can. For example, the heart exists because of the need for an organ to pump blood round the body, the liver exists because of the need for the blood to be purified, the kidneys exist because of the need to dispose of waste matter and so on. In other words, the reason why each of the constituent parts of the body exists is because each performs a particular *function* for the overall bodily system. Furthermore, all these necessary parts have to function together in an integrated way for the system as a whole to work properly. According to this approach then, the difference between referring to integrated wholes as 'systems' rather than 'structures' can be understood as simply the difference between a static picture of the whole – its structure – and what this looks like when it is actually working, as a system. In functionalist sociology the terms are often used in association with each other for just this reason. A society both has a structure and works as a system.

Durkheim and later functionalists argue that a social system works like an organic system. Societies are made up of structures of cultural rules – established beliefs and practices – to which their members are expected to conform. Sociologists describe any established way of thinking or acting in a society into which its members are socialized as being institutionalized in that society. For functionalists, the institutions of a society – for example the kind of family form it has, its political arrangements, its educational arrangements, its religious arrangements, and so on – are analogous to the parts of an organism. Societies consist of parts that are integrated and interdependent. As with organs, the reason why an institutionalized way of thinking or acting exists in a society is that it plays an indispensable part – or, to use the functionalist phrase, *performs a necessary function* – in maintaining the society in a stable and satisfactory state. In the case of the human body, if any organ fails to perform properly, ill-health, or even loss of life, is the result. For functionalists, such a functional failure by an institution – if it malfunctions – also leads to a comparable state for the whole social system. Functionalists have various phrases to describe this: a 'loss of social solidarity', a 'lack of integration', or a 'loss of equilibrium' are three favourite ones.

Crucially, therefore, this account of the origins and workings of

societies means that the existence of a social institution, of a part of the social structure, is not the result of the members of a society deciding to act or think this way. After all, people do not *decide* to have bowels or a liver or a pair of kidneys. These organs exist because the body needs them to perform necessary functions. In the same way, in functionalist theory, the institutional arrangements of a society exist not because of any choice on the part of its members. They are there because they are performing a necessary function for the social structure as a whole. Durkheim and other functionalists therefore argue that we should always explain the existence of social arrangements by looking for the *function* being performed by them – for the needs of the social system as a whole that they are satisfying.

Therefore, the job of sociology should be to use science to reveal the laws governing social organization. These laws help us to assess how effectively an institution is serving the needs of the social system and contributing to a healthy society. ‘Institutions performing functions’, or ‘institutions serving the needs of the social system’, is functionalist jargon for people living their lives in the right ways – from which society benefits. The corollary of this is that if a society is *unhealthy* – and you can tell because it will be disordered, riven with conflict, division and disagreement – it is because socialization is deficient. In these circumstances political action is necessary in the light of the social scientific evidence to ensure that the correct cultural prescriptions are re-established. The end result is a harmonious society – integrated, stable, cohesive and healthy – and happy, normatively guided individuals. We will look at Durkheim’s account of the role of religion in pre-modern human societies as a good example of this functionalist analysis.