

## Lecture Notes on Emile Durkheim

### Historical context of Durkheim's sociology

- Political instability of the French republic in the late 19th century: rising working-class militancy; threat of right-wing coup to reassert the power of the military, church, and aristocracy. Struggle for control over education between church and secular forces. Search for political stability preoccupies middle-class intellectuals like Durkheim.
- Durkheim was instrumental in establishing sociology as a discipline; became the first chair of sociology and established the first sociology journal. Much of his writing was preoccupied with emphasizing the value of the new discipline of sociology as compared with more established disciplines like economics, psychology, or philosophy.

### General features of Durkheim's sociology

- **Positivism:** treats the natural sciences as the model for the social sciences; goal of sociology is objective study of "social facts." Positivism distinguishes sociology from philosophy.
- **Organicism:** uses the biological organism as a metaphor for society; emphasizes the functional interdependence of different parts of society (like the organs of a body); emphasizes the primacy of the whole (society) over the part (individual). Organicism distinguishes sociology from psychology.
- **Moralism:** argues that social integration is a moral phenomenon; collective ideals and sentiments (especially those of a moral or ethical kind) are the key to understanding social behavior and diagnosing social ills. This emphasis on the moral basis of social order distinguishes sociology from economics.

### *The Division of Labor in Society (1893)*

- **Context:** concern with individualism as a modern phenomenon; attempt to present an ethical defense of individualism; how to reconcile individualism with ethical concern for other members of society? Durkheim rejects both the utilitarian defense of individualism found in classical liberalism and the collectivist rejection of individualism advanced by the church, the military, and the authoritarian right wing.
- **Goal:** Durkheim seeks to demonstrate the possibility of a "science of morality" in which morality is understood as a social phenomenon and not just abstract principles.
- Durkheim argues that individualism is a **modern** social phenomenon; it is not as pronounced in earlier societies; it is the result of social differentiation associated with the development of the social division of labor.
- **What causes the division of labor?** Durkheim argues that it is not explained by the utilitarian pursuit of happiness; individual egoism is a product of social differentiation, not its cause. Suicide statistics suggest that the division of labor does not automatically lead to an increase in human happiness. Durkheim argues that with population growth and increasing

physical and moral density, humans specialize and become more differentiated in order to avoid direct struggle for survival. This is the cause of the increasing division of labor.

- **Does individualism lead to social disintegration?** Durkheim rejects the classical liberal argument that the market is sufficient to guarantee that the free reign of individual egoism will lead to the greater good for society as a whole. He also rejects the conservative claim that the repression of individual choice is needed to prevent social disintegration. What is needed, Durkheim argues, is a new and higher form of social solidarity that will reconcile individualism with a sense of respect for and obligation toward others. Durkheim refers to this as "organic solidarity," which he distinguishes from the more traditional form of "mechanical solidarity."
- **Mechanical solidarity:** characteristic of earlier, simpler societies in which there is little division of labor and everyone's life experience is similar to everyone else's. Individuals feel moral obligation to others because others are like themselves. In such societies thought and morality are dominated by the "collective conscience," i.e., by beliefs and sentiments that everyone shares.
- **Organic solidarity:** characteristic of modern societies with a high division of labor. Individuals feel moral obligation to others who are not like themselves, based on a sense of reciprocity, interdependence, and respect for the unique contributions of diverse individuals. In such societies the collective conscience becomes less dominant, allowing for the development of a multitude of individual expressions of belief and ethical sentiments.
- **Legal sanctions** provide Durkheim with an empirical index of changing forms of solidarity. Repressive sanctions correspond to mechanical solidarity. Durkheim argues that the purpose of repressive (criminal) sanctions is not deterrence but the reaffirmation of the collective conscience. A crime is whatever offends the collective conscience. Restitutive sanctions (in which individuals who have been treated wrongly by others can receive compensation) corresponds to organic solidarity. Durkheim argues that the shift from repressive to restitutive law is evidence of the changing nature of social solidarity.
- **Anomie:** This is Durkheim's term for a lack of sufficient moral regulation in which individuals are left to their own egotistical pursuits without a sufficient sense of moral obligation to others. Anomie is viewed as a source of both individual unhappiness and social disorganization. He argues that anomie is widespread because the development of organic solidarity lags behind the growth of the division of labor. Old forms of moral regulation have lost their authority, but new forms are not yet fully developed. The solution is to create new institutions to promote organic solidarity.
- **Transitional problems associated with the division of labor:** (1) "anomic division of labor" in which individuals lack sufficient moral regulation; (2) "forced division of labor" in which excessively rigid institutions force individuals into occupational positions that are not suited to their talents and aptitudes. Durkheim argues that neither of these demonstrate that social conflict and individual discontent are endemic to the division of labor. These problems can be solved with reforms such as: (1) the development of new institutions of moral regulation (schools and professional associations); (2) a system of more meritocratic occupational placement to be achieved with equal educational opportunity and the elimination of privileges based on inheritance.

- **Some ways that Durkheim differs from Marx:** (1) The division of labor is conceived as horizontal differentiation, not vertical (class) inequality. (2) Social change is conceived as evolutionary process, not revolutionary leaps. (3) Contradictions of modern society are moral (anomie) rather than material (alienation). (4) State, law, and dominant belief system are viewed from the standpoint of their functionality for society as a whole, not as the instruments of the ruling class.

### *Suicide (1897)*

- **Context:** High suicide rates were a cause of public concern. For the authoritarian right suicide was seen as a symptom of a larger problem of unbridled individualism and social decay.
- **Goal:** Durkheim's aim is to establish the social causation of what might appear to be the most individual of phenomenon. This is intended to demonstrate the superiority of sociology over psychology.
- **Suicide is a social fact** in the sense that each society has a definite aptitude for suicide that can be measured by the suicide rate (the number of suicides as a proportion of the total population). These suicide rates tend to be relatively stable within each society, but vary between societies.
- **Arguments against psychological explanations of suicide:** Durkheim argues that individual psychology is at most a predisposing factor in suicide; whether or not individuals act on that predisposition is explained by social factors. Evidence is presented to show that the probability of committing suicide is not inherited; it's not caused by mental illness; nor is there evidence that suicide spreads through the population through a process of imitation.
- **Social types of suicide:** Durkheim classifies suicides into three categories on the basis of their social causes.
  - **Egoistic suicide** is caused by a lack integration of the individual into the social group. Durkheim notes that suicide is more prevalent among Protestants than among Catholics; more prevalent among unmarried persons than among married persons; more prevalent among childless persons than among those with children. Suicide also declines in times of national mobilization such as wartime. In all of these cases the greater the degree of integration of individuals into the collectivity and the stronger their social obligations to others, the less likely they are to commit suicide.
  - **Altruistic suicide** is caused by the complete submergence of the individual within the group so that moral obligations to others outweigh obligations to oneself. This is the polar opposite of egoistic suicide. Durkheim gives examples from "primitive" societies in which the person kills himself because it is his duty (e.g., men on the threshold of old age, women upon the deaths of their husbands, servants upon the deaths of their chiefs, etc.). Modern examples mainly pertain to suicides in the military.
  - **Anomic suicide** is caused by a lack of moral discipline. For human beings to be happy, Durkheim argues, their needs must be proportional to their means of satisfying them, and therefore individual needs and aspirations (which by themselves

are potentially unlimited) must be constrained by society. In normal times there tends to develop an equilibrium between a person's needs and their means of satisfying them. But this equilibrium can be disrupted by either an economic boom or an economic bust, both of which disrupt established patterns of moral constraint and thus lead to increased rates of suicide. Marriage (apart from its integrative function) also reduces suicide by closing off opportunities for the sexual appetites. This effect is mainly seen in men, since, according to Durkheim, women's sexual appetites are limited by nature.

### ***Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912)***

- **Context of the book:**

- Problem of moral deregulation: religion provided moral regulation in earlier societies, but authority of religion is declining with the rise of science and increasing individualism.
- Political struggle between those who want to reaffirm traditional religion and those who reject it in favor of science.
- Durkheim seeks a middle position of demonstrating the "truth" of religion through scientific analysis (although not the truth proclaimed by religion itself).

- **What is the essence of religion?**

- Not belief in the supernatural. This is not always emphasized. Much of what religion explains is ordinary and natural, not mysterious and unknowable. In any case, this explanation presupposes a distinction between natural and supernatural, which is itself a later development in human history.
- Not belief in spiritual beings or personalized gods. Not all major world religions emphasize spiritual beings or human-like gods (e.g., Buddhism, Jainism, Brahminism).
- Division of the world into "sacred" and "profane." Durkheim argues that religion in its most elementary sense is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to "sacred" things as distinguished from "profane" things of the mundane world.

- **What is the source of the experience of the sacred?**

- Not animism, which argues that the dream self leads to ideas of a soul and spirits which become the objects of cults and worship. Durkheim rejects this explanation because it suggests that religion is based on illusion.
- Not naturism, which argues that human action provides the metaphors for understanding the process of nature, leading primitive man to create myths that explain nature in an anthropomorphic way. Durkheim rejects this explanation because it doesn't explain the sacred significance of routine aspects of nature, and also because this explanation suggests that religion is based on false reasoning.
- Society is the source of our sense of the sacred. This is the argument that Durkheim develops in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

- **Evidence from Australian Aboriginal totemism:**

- Durkheim argues that totemism is the earliest, simplest, and purist example of human religion. It allows us to see the essence of religion before other layers of belief have been added.
- In totemism there are no personalized spirits or gods. Religious rituals center on the sacred "totem," which is represented simultaneously by a symbolic emblem, an animal or other natural object, and individual members of the clan.
- Totem objects are demarcated from the mundane by ritual prohibitions (taboos) and ritual ceremonies that periodically bring members of the clan together and reaffirm their solidarity with transcendent experiences.
- What is the origin of the sacred energy that infuses and binds together the various representations of the totem object? Not the overpowering sensations of the totem animal, which is often small and insignificant. Moreover, the emblem is more important than the animal itself, hence the power is clearly symbolic rather than natural. Totemism is thus based on the recognition or experience of a diffuse impersonal force of some kind.
- According to Durkheim, the totem emblem symbolizes the sacred and members of the society. Hence, Durkheim argues, the sacred and society are one. The power of the totem represents the superiority of society over the individual and the demands and obligations that society imposes on the individual. Society is thus at the root of religion.

- **Implications for the relationship between science and religion.**

- Rather than debunking religion, science reveals that religion has always been simply a transfigured respect in the moral authority of the social order. Thus science holds out the possibility of developing substitutes for religions sources of moral solidarity.
- Durkheim thus rejects both the atheists' claim that religion is based on pure falsehood and superstition, as well as the religious fundamentalists' claim that religion is literally true.
- Moreover, Durkheim also argues that scientific reason, no less that religion, is rooted in social experience. Religious myth provided the earliest system of natural classification. The most fundamental notions of modern science have primitive religious origins.

- **Social origins of the categories of human understanding.**

- Apart from the specific question of religion, the *Elementary Forms* also addresses the question of the nature and origins of categories of human understanding (time, space, class, number, cause, substance, etc.)
- Classical philosophy understands human knowledge as a joint result of specific sense perception and universal categories of understanding that correspond to the most general properties of all things. But where do these general categories of understanding come from?

- Durkheim rejects the two dominant views: empiricism (they are distilled from experience) and *a priorism* (they are inherent in human reason).
- Instead, Durkheim argues that categories of human understanding are a product of society. Categories of understanding are collective representations, while specific perceptions are individual representations.
- These categories of understanding are modeled on (and thus similar to) the structures of society. The scientific classification of things is based on the social classification of people and groups. Logical hierarchy is based on social hierarchy. Physical space is conceptualized in the categories that define social space. Scientific causality is based on the experience of the power of society over the individual.