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EMILE DURKHEIM AND THE RIDDLE OF THE MODERN WORLD

Symbols of works quoted from:

Durkheim, Division of Labour in Society DL
Emile Durkheim, Robert Nisbet, with Essays E
Giddens, Marx, Weber, Durkheim G
Steven Lukes, Emile Durkheim - L
Nisbet, Sociology of Emile Durkheim - N
Parkin, Durkheim - P
Durkheim, Professional Ethics and Civic Morals - PE

Introduction

Basically the following account will be a rather negative assessment. I believe that Durkheim is much over-rated, a thinker who is well below the level of the other great thinkers (Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Tocqueville, Marx, Weber) with whom I have dealt. He is indisputably important for academic politics in proselytising for a new discipline, sociology. But I find him intellectually far from impressive. Among my central criticisms will be the following.

He seems to have failed even to see the Riddle that lies behind the development of the modern world, that is to say how accidental and extraordinary it is. He failed to do so for a number of reasons. He had little historical interest or expertise and hence did not see how unlikely it was that one part of the world emerged from a predatory agricultural order. Here he fails to share the understanding of Montesquieu, Smith, Weber or Gellner. He had no real interest in other great civilizations, for example I can't find any sustained discussion of India, China, Japan, Islamic civilization. Hence again, unlike other great thinkers like Maine, Weber and others, he does not see the strangeness of his own civilization. He is not even really interested in other parts of the West. There is little interest in Germany, Italy, Spain, let alone Britain or America.

The deeper problem, however, is that he is an evolutionist. He believes in a one-way, non-problematic, inevitable set of steps or stages from traditional to modern civilization, probably caused by technological and demographic forces. This means that he sees no problem, puzzle or riddle about what has happened. It was bound to happen. Every civilization will inevitably go through the same stages. It is a familiar later nineteenth century view, a sort of Whig sociology, though without the component of moral progress. But it cripples his thought.

I also find that his diagnosis of the ills and difficulties of his time is very conventional and in no way marks an advance on the work of Tonnies and others. In other words the breakdown of family, the expansion of economy, greed, the weakness of democracy and so on. This not nearly as profound an analysis as that of Tocqueville or Weber, for example. Yet this is the central part of his problem, namely how to restore order in an atomized and egotistical world.

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His failure, I believe, largely comes out of his methodology. I have already noticed his lack of historical or comparative material. I have already mentioned his latent, unexamined and naive and uni-directional evolutionism. But there is also his naive and unrealistic view that sociology can only deal with single-cause phenomenon, his woeful positivistic stance on 'facts' being out there, his tautological functionalism, his naive rejection of philosophy.

I find that the solutions to the problem he set himself, that is the way in which social solidarity can be increased, are very unsatisfactory. Basically, there are two attempted solutions and then a long evasion or side-track. The first attempt is the central theme of the 'Division of Labour', namely that the division of labour in itself will bring solidarity. This is patently nonsense and it is not surprising that Durkheim dropped the idea and all talk of organic solidarity pretty quickly and never returned to it. The second solution is his theory of corporations or professional groups. There is something in this, but it is far too vague, unhistorical and State-centred to be of any practical value. Which leaves the one worthwhile piece of his work, his recognition of the power of religion. Although the ethnography and specific theories have been torn to shreds, there is a core of a certain truth which has had an important liberating effect within anthropology. Although it does not really address his life's problem, except in a very tangential way, it does provide an interesting set of links which were later developed much more elegantly by Mauss, Evans-Pritchard and others. So let us examine this in a little more detail.

The Life of Emile Durkheim

Emile Durkheim was born on 15 April 1858 in Lorraine. His father had been a Chief Rabbi and we are told that he 'grew up within the confines of a close-knit, orthodox and traditional Jewish family, part of the long-established Jewish community of Alsace-Lorraine... he was destined for the rabbinate and his early education was directed to that end: he studied for a time at a rabbinical school.'(L.39) [This interests me since there is a very high rate of myopia among orthodox Jews. That he was myopic is suggested by the various portraits of him. These show him wearing glasses all the time - not just for reading. I believe that this myopia fits very well with what is known as the 'myopic personality' which he exhibited so well. Over-studious, bookish, obsessive, unaware of wide and far issues. It helps to explain his very myopic concern with limited problems, limited data, limited periods and places.]

The fact that he also started in a very religious setting and upbringing, but it was later decided that he would not follow the family tradition and he dropped his orthodox Jewish identity help to explain his central obsession with what held groups together and particularly religion in a secular society. He both escaped from, and longed for that early warmth. He later wrote of the typical Jewish community as 'a small society, compact and cohesive, with a very keen self-consciousness and sense of unity' and of Judaism as consisting 'like all early religions... of a body of practices minutely governing all the details of life and leaving little freedom for individual judgment'.(quoted in L.40) This shows both his attraction and ambivalence. His life's quest seems to have been how to create a cosy, moral community which would not have the draw-back of stifling the individual.

Several features of his personality and personal background stand out. Like many important intellectuals he was a marginal figure, standing on the edge of various traditions, at an angle to both secular-rationalist and Christian-conservative traditions. (E.28) He was basically a prophet, concerned to set up a new secular morality which would replace that of his ancestors which could no longer survive in an industrial age. Thus, he is in the tradition of the great, vehement, moralistic secular rabbis such as Marx. That he was basically a moralist (L.320), can be seen not only in the content of his ideas, but in his intense preaching style in public and even his appearance. A contemporary described him as follows:

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'... he appeared, thin and pale, in his grey jacket, with an immense head and sombre eyes, on the platform of the amphitheatre... He took up his lecture at the point where he had stopped...His grave manner never brightened; nonetheless, his speech, always somewhat subdued at the most significant moments, was not without charm; and one felt it turning into a sort of incantation.' (quoted in L.369) Another tried to explain his influence in terms of 'ardent intellectual passion, imperious eloquence, a dialectic that was so rapid and so decisive that it compelled conviction and paralysed objections' and, behind this, the existence of 'a doctrine and a faith. He was a philosophical innovator and there was in him something of the apostle'.(quoted in L.369)

Those who heard him had 'the impression that this was the prophet of a new religion'.(L.370) Bergson described him thus: 'One immediately saw him as a sort of automaton of super-human creation, destined endlessly to preach a new Reform... His eloquence, truly comparable to that of a running tap, was inexhaustible and ice-cold... to be acquainted with Durkheim's appearance and his speech was virtually equivalent to grasping his system. For any given question, it contained the answer, classified, set down in its proper place, ranged in an immutable order which evoked not the shelves of a grocer's shop, but niches for epitaphs distributed under the galleries that surround crematoria. Family, country, institutions ... were preserved by his efforts and confined within his system, but preserved and confined like mummies in a necropolis.' (quoted in L.370-1)

In all of this he reminds me, as I said above, very much of Karl Marx, another Old Testament, Jewish Rabbi prophet. But there are differences. One fundamental one was their attitude towards how one brought in the new golden age. For Marx it was the path of revolution, but Durkheim was a reformist and revisionist who opposed all revolutionary transformations. (L.323) Another difference was that Marx was basically an optimist, believing in the inevitable triumph of communism. Durkheim, more like Tocqueville and Weber was a pessimist. He saw the weaknesses of democracy, of modern capitalism and industrialism and so on, but saw no real way out into a better system. There was no going back and no easy Utopia lying in the future. He was in many ways an alienated and frustrated thinker, full of anxiety and pessimism. (see eg. E.98, 101, N.267).

Ultimately he was an ardent, obsessively hard working, over-serious, wracked intellectual. Like Weber he overworked and had a number of mental breakdowns probably brought on by over-work. (L.100) He died at that age of 59 in November 1916, probably of a combination of over-work and grief at the death of his only son in the War. (L.559) The reputation of his work has grown ever since and he is now conventionally placed as part of the great triumvirate, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, as the seminal thinkers of modern sociology. How far is this justified?

Durkheim's problematic: what is the question he sought to answer?

Durkheim's central problem is that of order: 'the recurring theme in all Durkheim's writings is the problem of order', for society is fragile and always on the edge of collapse.(P.59) Or, to put it in a different way, 'the basic problem of his sociology' is 'the nature of social solidarity'.(L. 227) Sociology as a discipline was the tool which would help one to solve this fundamental question; what is it that unites people in the modern, industrial, world? That is to say, 'what are the bonds which unite men one with another?' (Durkheim, quoted in L.139) As he wrote to a colleague, 'the object of sociology as a whole is to determine the conditions for the conservation of societies'.(quoted in L.139) If traditional societies had been held together by various institutions such as the family, religion, communities, what holds industrial societies together, which had lost all these bonds? (L.141) He thought that Rousseau's problem had been the same, but he had failed to provide a satisfactory answer. To provide an answer

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was 'the first and fundamental problem of Durkheim's sociology from the time of his first lecture-course on 'Social Solidarity'..' (L.287)

Thus basically Durkheim's work is part of the great effort by a number of thinkers from Tocqueville onwards to come to terms with two great Revolutions, the political revolution in France in 1789, and the industrial revolution in Britain starting around the same date. (N.14) These were two of the most massive shifts. The industrial revolution was part of a general economic shift that had altered everything. It led to an increasing division of labour, growing egotism and greed, the undermining of previous unifying bonds such as the family or religion. He believed that economic development was the main cause of modern disorganisation. (DL.3) In particular the division of labour threatens the coherence of society, setting individuals against each other. Alongside it, the increasing individualization of property led to the growing separateness and competitiveness of people. (P.60) As consumer society developed and the market expanded, so egotistical greed increased. (P.62) Prosperity leads to increasing dissatisfaction. He wrote that '...because prosperity has increased desires are heightened... But their very demands make it impossible to satisfy them. Overexcited ambitions always exceed the results obtained, whatever they may be...'. Or again, 'From top to bottom of the scale, greed is aroused unable to find ultimate foothold. Nothing could calm it, since its goal is infinitely beyond all it can attain... Men thirst for novelties, unknown pleasures, namely sensations, which lose all their savour once experienced.' (L.211) Here we hear the authentic tone of the moralist, in words which almost exactly echo those of Tocqueville half a century earlier.

The political effects of the French Revolution were equally dire. It had destroyed all intermediary institutions or secondary powers in France in its zealous pursuit of absolute equality. This had been a disaster. Durkheim wrote that: 'Our political malaise thus has the same origin as the social malaise we are suffering from. It too is due to the lack of secondary organs intercalated between the State and the rest of the society.. The social forms that used to serve as a framework for individuals and a skeleton for the society, either no longer exist or are in course of being effaced, and no new forms are taking their place but the fluid mass of individuals.'(PE.106) There was a terrible void caused by the collapse of corporations. (DL.29). And, as we have seen already, like Tocqueville, he had no real hope that democracy could provide a new alternative if it was merely based on the egotism of single individuals.

Another way of looking at his problematic is to see how all the traditional sources of order and integration had lost their power. One of these was the family. The loss of unity created by the family in earlier agrarian civilizations was the result of the change in mode of production to industrial, factory, urban civilization. (DL, 16-7). Mixed units which combined religion and the family, such as the Indian castes, were also all collapsing. (DL. 22) The family could no longer be relied on to tie humans together, to organize or give meaning to their lives. (E.65)

Another collapsed source of authority and integration, as Durkheim had noted in his own up-bringing, was religion. Durkheim put forward a straightforward evolutionary scheme here. He wrote that 'if there is one truth that history teaches us beyond doubt, it is that religion tends to embrace a smaller and smaller portion of social life. Originally, it pervades everything; everything social is religion... then, little by little, political, economic, scientific functions free themselves from the religious function... God, who was at first present in all human relations, progressively withdraws from them; he abandons the world to men and their disputes.'(DL, 169) Thus religion, like the family and education cannot help to overcome modern atomization. (N. 132) The total result is that contemporary civilization (and here Durkheim does not differentiate France from elsewhere) is in constant crisis, unstable and volatile and composed of loose and egotistic individuals.(E.100)

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In many ways Durkheim's ideas could be aligned with those of earlier thinkers such as Tonnies, Maine and Morgan; from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* (Community to Association), from status to contract, from sacred to profane (secularization and disenchantment), social atomization. (E.22, 35). In particular, although Durkheim fails to acknowledge this, his thinking on the cumulative effects of all of this on the central problem of egotistical individualism is almost identical to the insights of Tocqueville. (see N.121 and the passage quoted on p.122) Thus he describes the erosive effects of hyper-individualism on any form of social association or community (N.15). He charts the rise of individuals in nineteenth century mass society. Like Tocqueville, or like Benjamin Constant who believed that 'when all are isolated by egoism, there is nothing but dust, and at the advent of a storm, nothing but mire', (quoted in L.197), he thought society without anything except individuals would be a monstrosity. (DL.28)

What has basically happened is that everything is increasingly split up, separated, so that each person is alone. The growing division of labour is not just an economic phenomenon. It leads to an increasing separation of all spheres, for example science, aesthetics, politics all become separated. (DL.40).

Durkheim's one original contribution to all of this fairly standard exposition is to apply the theory, in depth, to one obvious example, suicide. His work on 'Suicide' is thus the documentation of the dimensions and nature of the malaise. Durkheim 'saw suicide as the individual antithesis of social solidarity...', (L.206), it was a work directly on the question of what holds people together. His central, famous, thesis was that the crucial variable in differential suicide rates was the degree of integration of individuals into society. Where there was high integration, through family, religion or some other means, rates were low. (L.209) Lukes summarizes his theory as follows: 'that under adverse social conditions, when men's social context fails to provide them with the requisite sources of attachment and/or regulation, at the appropriate level of intensity, then their psychological or moral health is impaired, and a certain number of vulnerable, suicide-prone individuals respond by committing suicide.' (L.217) This was an insight which Durkheim noted in the preface to the second edition to the 'Division of Labour'. 'We were already proposing there a strong corporative organization as a means of remedying the misfortune which the increase in suicides, together with many other symptoms, evinces.' (DL.29)

So what was his solution to the problem of how one could create social solidarity in an industrial civilization? The first thing to do was to eliminate unsatisfactory alternatives, to leave the way clear for his own solution. We have seen that he had already eliminated the family, religion and education as solutions. He also rejected Rousseau's totalitarian solution of the State as representing the General Will. So what was left?

The major contender in the field was contract. It is probably no coincidence that the major developments in contract theory had occurred in England, which was not only by far in advance in its development of industrialism, but was widely recognized to have made the crucial separation of politics, religion and society very early on. John Locke was one of the earliest great exponents of the contract, but the particular target for Durkheim were the nineteenth century economists and thinkers who believed that individualism could be tamed by contract, especially Herbert Spencer.

Durkheim's criticism of Herbert Spencer was that he thought that the only link between people was dyadic contracts and this was far too individualistic. Of Spencer and others he wrote that 'They suppose original, isolated, and independent individuals who, consequently, enter into relationship only to cooperate, for they have no other reason to clear the space separating them and to associate. But this theory, so widely held, postulates a veritable **creation ex nihilo**. It consists indeed in deducing society

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from the individual.' (quoted in E.11) Durkheim's basic point was that dyadic contracts are too unstable to hold a society together.'Where interest is the only ruling force, each individual finds himself in a state of war with every other since nothing comes to mollify the egos, and any truce would not be of long duration. There is nothing less constant than interest. Today, it unites me to you; tomorrow it will make me your enemy. Such a cause can only give rise to transient relations and passing associations.' (DL. 203-4, quoted in E.43)

In fact the paradox of the fact that modern society seemed to be based more and more on contract, yet more and more unified, was because contract was not what it seemed. 'In effect, the contract is, **par excellence**, the juridical expression of co-operation'. (DL.123) There is a an underpinning which is necessary, but invisible. 'In sum, a contract is not sufficient unto itself, but is possible only thanks to a regulation of the contract which is originally social.' (quoted in N.78) Contract, in fact, 'forces us to assume obligations that we have not contracted for, in the exact sense of the word, since we have not deliberated upon them... Of course, the initial act is always contractual, but there are consequences, sometimes immediate, which run over the limits of the contract. We co-operate because we wish to, but our voluntary co-operation creates duties for us that we did not desire.'(DL.214)

It is true that contracts were very important in modern societies and fitted with the modern situation, for the advanced contract was only possible in egalitarian, confrontational, societies. (PE 213). But they were based on a deeper substratum and generated, as we have seen, more than the contractual relationship. Contractual relations 'multiply as social labour becomes divided. But what Spencer seems to have failed to see is that non-contractual relations develop- at the same time.' (DL.206) Although initially a single act, 'Rather the members are united by ties which extend deeper and far beyond the short moments during which the exchange is made. Each of the functions that they exercise is, in a fixed way, dependent upon others, and with them forms a solidary system.'(DL.227) As for their foundation in a wider morality, indeed in sacred bonds, Durkheim tried to show this through the history of contract. Contract in the full sense was a late invention, having moved through a set of evolutionary stages. The freely given, balanced, contract was a very late appearance. (PE. 175-6, 183, 203) As usual Durkheim is vague and avoids dates, but is presumably thinking of an eighteenth or nineteenth century invention.

In a broad way, Durkheim is right. Contracts are indeed only the surface and cannot easily work without a State, without a shared morality, judicial system and so on. Although his historical account is questionable in a number of respects, he does almost stumble onto Maitland's central discovery. This was that the opposition of 'from status to contract' put forward by Maine is wrong, that in reality most relations are much more mixed. Maitland's account is far better. He was a better lawyer and a better historian. But at least Durkheim is searching in the right area for an answer to the peculiar nature of modernity.

The first theory to explain what can hold society together: organic solidarity.

Having eliminated other alternatives, that is family, religion, territory, education, contract, the State, what is left? Are we doomed as a result of the growing division of labour to atomistic dust, to the dread vision of Tocqueville? Here we move to Durkheim's first solution to the problem, which is the theme of the first edition of **The Division of Labour in Society**.

The theme of the book is that of his life's work, namely what holds societies together. He explains that 'This work had its origins in the question of the relations of the individual to social solidarity. Why does the individual, while becoming more autonomous, depend more upon society? How can he be at once more individual and more solidary?' (DL.37) His answer is encapsulated in his well-known

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distinction between the two forms of solidarity, mechanical and organic, so it is worth starting with this. Traditional, pre-industrial, societies were held together by mechanical solidarity. 'If we try to construct intellectually the ideal type of a society whose cohesion was exclusively the result of resemblances, we should have to conceive it as an absolutely homogeneous mass whose parts were not distinguished from one another.' (DL.174) These are 'segmental societies with a clan-base', so-called 'in order to indicate their formation by the repetition of like aggregates in them, analogous to the rings of an earthworm...' (DL.175) In contrast to this is the form of solidarity in modern societies, organic solidarity, like the 'organs' of a body which are functionally integrated. These are constituted 'by a system of different organs each of which has a special role, and which are themselves formed of differentiated parts.' (DL. 181) These are 'not juxtaposed linearly as the rings of an earthworm, not entwined one with another, but co-ordinated and subordinated one to another around the same central organ which exercises a moderating action over the rest of the organism.' (DL.181) Here 'individuals are grouped, no longer according to their relations of lineage, but according to the particular nature of the social activity to which they consecrate themselves.' (DL. 182) Thus what binds people together is their interdependence. The 'mechanical' word was used because of 'the cohesion which unites the elements of an inanimate body, as opposed to that which makes a unity out of the elements of a living body.' (L.148) The paradox was that modern society, as it advanced, became more and more integrated: 'the unity of the organism increases as this individuation of the parts is more marked'. (L.148)

Thus the division of labour produces solidary, 'not only because it makes each individual an **exchangist**, as the economists say', but ((DL.406), at a deeper level. It is the division of labour which itself holds people together, just as an arm and a leg and a head are functionally interdependent and need each other. (see eg. L. 147)

Now there are some deep and fundamental flaws in this idea. One is that it assumes that the division of labour is spontaneous and voluntary. Durkheim admits that 'the division of labour produces solidarity only if it is spontaneous and in proportion as it is spontaneous.' (DL. 377) Of course, in practice, workers and others are forced against their will into such a division of labour. Another weakness is Durkheim's totally unconvincing answer to the question of why people who work in a sphere where there is a high division of labour, for example in a factory conveyor belt production unit in the post-Fordian world, or as a check-out worker in a supermarket, should feel a moral involvement with each other. His feeble solution is that alienation and a sense of meaningless and unconnected activity will disappear if the management explain to the workers their important role and place in the total process. As Parkin puts it, 'Durkheim's own solution to the problem was to deny that there was a problem. Extreme specialization, he contended, only produces deleterious effects in rare and exceptional cases. For the most part, the division of labour did not dehumanize workers because, however humdrum and repetitive their tasks, they were conscious of being part of a collective social enterprise, a co-operative activity which gave even the humblest operative a sense of involvement and purpose.' Parkin quotes Durkheim to the effect that the worker is 'not therefore a machine who repeats movements the sense of which he does not perceive, but he knows that they are tending in a certain direction, towards a goal that he can conceive of more or less distinctly. He feels that he is of some use' and that 'his actions have a goal beyond themselves.'(P.65) It is fairly clear that this is very idealised and it is doubtful whether Durkheim had ever spent long periods down a coal mine or working in a cotton factory.

The goal which comforts the workers, Parkin summarizes, 'is the creation of social solidarity.' (Parkin, quoting DL 308) This is related to Durkheim's implausible argument that integration, rather than economic efficiency, is the true function (i.e. goal) of the division of labour. The 'economic services' which the division of labour provides, are small when 'compared to the moral effect that it produces,

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and its true function is to create in two or more persons a feeling of solidarity'. It is clear that Durkheim is not talking about manifest and latent function, but goal, for he goes on that 'In whatever manner the result is obtained, its aim is to cause coherence among friends and to stamp them with its seal.' (DL. 56) It is not self-evident that the owner of a supermarket has social solidarity as his foremost consideration when he places twenty girls in a row at the check-out tills and twenty others filling the shelves. Adam Smith and Tocqueville, who lamented the terrible effects of the division of labour, were much closer to the actual effects.

That Durkheim's central argument failed as a solution to the question of what holds modern societies together is widely recognized by later critics. (see e.g. N.30, L.174) Its failure was clearly recognized by Durkheim himself who never referred with any seriousness to the theory of organic solidarity again in his later works. He presumably dropped it because it did not work.

Another indicator of the failure is in Durkheim's main supportive evidence for the supposed cohesive nature of modern societies. This he found in the contrast between two types of legal system. He argued that 'In lower societies, law... is almost exclusively penal; it is likewise almost exclusively very stationary.' (DL.78) Law in modern societies, on the contrary, is restitutive rather than repressive. As Parkin summarizes the contrast, 'Repressive laws are those which punish the offender by inflicting injury upon him or causing him to suffer some loss or disadvantage.' He quotes Durkheim to the effect that 'Their purpose is to harm to him through his fortune, his honour, his life, his liberty, or to deprive him of some object whose possession he enjoys.' (DL 29, quoted in P.27) 'Restitutive laws, by contrast, do not bring down suffering on the head of the offender. Instead, they aim at "restoring the previous state of affairs"' (DL 29, quoted in P.27) In fact, as almost every anthropologist since Durkheim has pointed out, this is topsy turvy nonsense. (e.g. see N.129-30; L.159) Many of the simpler societies, for example the Nuer, have a mainly restitutive system, while most modern societies use penal and repressive measures. It is an indication of Durkheim's myopia that he did not look around him at European or American or Chinese justice and see that they were heavily penal.

So Durkheim's first attempt to explain what could hold modern societies together and re-integrate life in a new way was a complete failure. He did not return to the ideas in his later life and abandoned the central themes of 'The Division of Labour in Society'. Instead he became interested in a possible new solution to the question of anomie and egotistical individualism.

Durkheim and the Professional Association: Solution Mark Two.

I shall deal with this at considerable length since in many ways I find this (again a failure) one of the most interesting parts of his work - especially when we compare it to that of Maitland. That Durkheim tried so hard, yet again conspicuously failed, yet Maitland succeeded in solving the puzzle of what can hold modern societies together - i.e. a proper civil society - is an indication of Maitland's stature. He solved a problem which neither the French (Durkheim) nor Germans (Gierke & co) could solve and which is at the heart of modern capitalist success.

Introduction

Durkheim's first attempt to solve the problem of how to achieve social solidarity in modern civilizations having failed, he moved onto a new projected work on occupational groups, which, in fact, was never written. (G.103) What he intended to do, however, can be reconstructed from various sources. In various parts of **Suicide** he laid out the need for moral and political integration through new

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forms of grouping. In the preface to the second edition of **The Division of Labour** he dealt with this particular problem in relation to a new form of grouping. And in the lectures (originally given in XXX), and published as **Professional Ethics**, he gave his most detailed outline of what needed to be done. As Nisbet points out, this is not just a wayward side issue in his work but rather 'in these proposals lies the origin and the very essence of his theoretical approach to the problem of authority and power, not merely in modern European society, but in ancient as well as medieval groups, Eastern as well as Western.'(E.69). Let us therefore consider his theory.

But first it is worth outlining the reasons why he thought some new organizational form was needed [this may be placed earlier].

It will be remembered that Durkheim's work was a response to what were considered to be the two great revolutions of modern times and their consequences - the political revolution (the French Revolution and democracy) and the industrial revolution (the division of labour, factories, mass society, the loss of community). We can see that these were the two major areas where Durkheim thought his new organizational forms would solve the problem.

Overcoming political alienation: the aftermath of the French Revolution.

There seem to be two strands to Durkheim's argument. Firstly, in almost identical terms to Montesquieu and Tocqueville, Durkheim realized that in order to prevent the State from becoming over-powerful and despotic, it needed to be balanced by what Montesquieu had called 'intermediary institutions'. His idea of pluralism and countervailing secondary groups were just like those of Tocqueville (L.271). 'It is the nature of every form of association to become despotic unless it is restrained by external forces through their competing claims upon individual allegiance.' (E.72.) 'Every society is despotic, at least if nothing from without supervenes to restrain its despotism'. (PE.61) Thus he was a good modern liberal, defending the liberty of the individual against the state. (L.341).

In a number of places Durkheim writes about the necessity for there being co-operative and corporate groups between the state and the citizen. 'A society composed of an infinite number of unorganised individuals, that a hypertrophied State is forced to oppress and contain, constitutes a veritable sociological monstrosity... A nation can be maintained only if, between the State and the individual, there is intercalated a whole series of secondary groups near enough to the individuals to attract them strongly in their sphere of action and drag them, in this way, into the general torrent of social life.'(DL.28) One needs a multiplication of centres. 'What liberates the individual is not the elimination of a controlling centre, but rather the multiplication of such centres, provided that they are co-ordinated and subordinated one to another.'(quoted in L.325) Although the state was essential for liberating individuals in the first place, it also needed to be checked. (PE.62) Unlike Rousseau, Durkheim believed that 'it is out of this conflict of social forces that individual liberties are born.' (PE, in E.73)

His second theme was that of moral integration. The State could not provide this for it is too far removed from the citizen. Since the state 'is far from them, it can exert only a distant, discontinuous influence over them; which is why this feeling has neither the necessary constancy nor strength... Man cannot become attached to higher aims and submit to a rule if he sees nothing above him to which he belongs. ... While the state becomes inflated and hypertrophied in order to obtain a firm enough grip upon individuals, but without succeeding, the latter, without mutual relationships, tumble over one another like so many liquid molecules, encountering no central energy to retain, fix and organize them.' (Suicide, quoted in E.68-9) We shall return to these themes when we look at Durkheim's history of

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corporations.

Overcoming social disintegration: the need to overcome the alienation of mass, industrial society.

As we have seen, Durkheim's great fear was of social disintegration, of egotistical and anomic behaviour culminating in such pathological forms as suicide. He believed the new forms he would recommend would check this. These groups would create warmth and break down narrow egotism. (DL.26). An individual 'must feel himself more solidary with a collective existence which precedes him, and which encompasses him at all points. If this occurs, he will no longer find the only aim of his conduct in himself and, understanding that he is the instrument of a purpose greater than himself, he will see that he is not without significance. Life will resume meaning in his eyes, because it will recover its natural aim and orientation.' (Suicide, quoted in E.66) Thus he argued that 'What we especially see in the occupational group is a moral power capable of containing individual egos'. (DL 10) Or again, the 'only power which can serve to moderate individual egotism is the power of the group...' (DL.405) This need to contain individualism was particularly strong in France, where all the secondary groups had been crushed at the Revolution and hence egotism flourished. (L.117)

In very early societies, he believed, this integration had been provided by the family, but the new groups would take over from this. 'Up to now, it was the family which, either through collective property or descendance, assured the continuity of economic life, by the possession and exploitation of goods held intact...But if domestic society cannot play this role any longer, there must be another social organ to replace its exercise of this necessary function... a group, perpetual as the family, must possess goods and exploit them itself...' (DL.30-1) In the medieval period 'the occupational guild was the bases of social solidarity', creating genuine moral communities. (P.77-9) His new forms would provide the same function, but in a modern, industrial, society.

But what, exactly, was to be set up? If the family, religion, education and the State could not provide a model, what could? And what could one learn from previous civilizations about how such entities work?

A brief history of medieval corporations.

Durkheim provides a potted history of occupational associations and their history in France. This is a narrow account, for he does not deal with all the other important earlier corporations, in particular towns and cities, universities, religious orders and so on. This weakens and distorts the argument. He describes the rise of the medieval occupational guilds in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and their quasi-religious character. (DL.9,11; PE.33) He then notes their destruction, which he mainly dates to the eighteenth century and the French revolution. This is again a distortion, since, as Montesquieu and Tocqueville had shown, the process had started much earlier. He notes Rousseau's hatred of all intermediary institutions (N.148) and sides with him in that context. 'Since the eighteenth century **rightfully** suppressed the old corporations...' (DL.5. Durkheim's emphasis), there has been nothing to replace them. His studies showed the French Revolution levelling all the intermediary institutions. (L.265; E.68). The effects of modernity 'is to have swept away cleanly all the older forms of social organization. One after another they have disappeared either through the slow erosion of time or through great disturbances.'(quoted in N. 135) 'Only one collective form survived the tempest: the State.' (quoted in N.135). Indeed such was the force of the Revolution that it was only in 1901, after much of Durkheim's work on the subject was formulated, that the Law of Congregations allowed freedom of association for all secular purposes. (L.536)

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Durkheim clearly felt that the medieval corporations were rightly brushed away. Not only were they selfish, with their conservative mysteries and craft traditions, but they were not adapted to modern industrial conditions. (PE.35) His animus against the medieval guild was the same as his dismissal of the trade unions. They were retrograde, putting their members interests above the common good. (P.61, 77) So what was to be set up? For 'it remains to study the form the corporative bodies should have if they are to be in harmony with present-day conditions of our collective existence.... The problem is not an easy one.' (PE.31)

The new corporations: their functions and structure.

Basically the new entities, like the medieval guilds, would be based on the professions. They were to be the craft and artisan guilds restored in a new way. What Durkheim 'wished for was a type of guild that had a natural compatibility with modern industrialism.' (P.77; see also L.267) But what precisely would they do? One of the most detailed descriptions was as follows. 'To them, therefore, falls the duty of presiding over companies of insurance, benevolent aid and pensions...' They would also allocate rewards to their members. 'Whenever excited appetites tended to exceed all limits, the corporations would have to decide the share that should equitably revert to each of the cooperative parts. Standing above its own members, it would have all necessary authority to demand indispensable sacrifices and concessions and impose order upon them.' (Suicide, quoted in E.67) They would be property owning, perpetual, corporations. Thus they would act as a kind of surrogate family, village community and caste group rolled into one.

They would also bridge the gap between the individual citizen and the State by 'becoming the elementary division of the State, the fundamental political unity'. (DL.27) Thus 'Society, instead of remaining what it is today, an aggregate of juxtaposed territorial districts, would become a vast system of national corporations.' (DL.27) These associations 'will be units of society - recognized equally by the state, its members and their families.' (E.69) They would become 'the true electoral unit'. (PE.103)

This is what they would do, but how exactly? Here all is obscure. As Parkin comments, 'Durkheim is characteristically vague when it comes to the organizational structure of the guilds.' (P.78) Indeed a thousand questions crowd into one's mind. Why should the State allow these rivals to political allegiance to emerge at all? Why should all this be more successful in integrating in an altruistic way with society than the medieval guilds or trades unions? Indeed, what is the structural difference? What would the role of women be in these new guilds (Durkheim was notoriously old-fashioned in his attitude to women). What of the many people who had professions which were highly mobile (sailors, travelling salesmen), low status (rubbish collectors), semi-legal (prostitutes), scattered (lighthouse keepers), part-time (shelf fillers) and so on. Then what about other corporations, universities, clubs, sects and so on. How would they fit in?

There are innumerable problems with his ideas and it is not surprising that he never got beyond a very vague blue-print. What is more surprising is that Durkheim never paid any attention (unlike Montesquieu and Tocqueville) to the very extensive associational and corporative groups which would have provided him with working models of what he hoped to set up, and which were flourishing in America and had flourished for many centuries without being destroyed in England. Talk about re-inventing a (very wobbly) wheel. All this is another indication of a deep-seated intellectual myopia which comes out so often in his work. Again and again one feels in the presence of a very narrow, and not particularly deep, thinker.

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Yet there is an even graver problem than the fact that the solution he proposes is so unformed and filled with practical difficulties. This lies in the very nature of what he proposed, namely State-dependent corporations. This suggestion, and his general trusting attitude towards the state was to have tragic consequences, as his nephew Mauss who lived to see the rise of fascism noted.(L.339) What was the major error here?

The relations between the State and Civil Society.

We have seen that Durkheim was frightened of the power of secondary groups and had sided with their destruction in the eighteenth century. He sides with Hobbes in believing that secondary groups are a threat to the State. He tells us that in a properly constituted political state 'there must be no forming of any secondary groups that enjoy enough autonomy to allow of each becoming in a way a small society within the greater.' (quoted in E.148) This explains why he basically saw the professional groups as extensions of the State, holding delegated powers, on licence or by charter. The State must control all the sub-groups: it 'must even permeate all those secondary groups of family, trade and professional association, Church, regional areas and so on... which tend, as we have seen, to absorb the personality of their members. It must do this, in order to prevent this absorption and free these individuals, and so as to remind these partial societies that they are not alone... The State must therefore enter into their lives, it must supervise and keep a check on the way they operate and to do this it must spread its roots in all directions.' (PE.65)

Indeed the State needed to think on their behalf: 'civil society needs the state to think on its behalf because the common consciousness is not up to the job.' (P.75) Indeed, in an echo of so many totalitarian thinkers from Hobbes onwards. Parkin suggests that he believed that 'the state saves civil society from itself'. (P.75) This is because the State has a higher intelligence. Thus the growth of the State automatically expands the individual, for 'liberty is the fruit of regulation'. (L.285)

It is in this context that we can understand why he foresaw no conflict between the State and Civil Society. The State allows Civil Society to exist, and indeed, at a deeper level, there is really no civil society in the full sense. What happens is that the State sets up sub-units, corporations, which it can manipulate, close, alter at will. It thinks for them, and permeates them. It can save them from themselves. And we can also understand the extraordinary footnote in which Durkheim said it did not really matter whether corporations were set up by the State or not. 'All we say of the situation of the corporations entirely leaves aside the controversial question as to whether, originally, the State intervened in their formation. Even if they had been under State control from the very beginning (which does not appear likely) it still is true that they did not affect the political structure. That is what is important for us.' (DL. 19, fn. 24) As Maitland brilliantly showed, corporations are always set up by the State, that is their essence. They can have no other source of authority. Durkheim does not seem to have grasped this most elementary point, nor its consequences, so well spelt out by Maitland, that is to say the totalitarian tendency which he only vaguely glimpsed. (L.262)

Now a number of writers on Durkheim have pointed to his unrealistic view of the benevolence of States and state bureaucracies. (P.76) But this is really only a very small part of the problem. The whole point of civil society is that it arises spontaneously outside the State. Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Maitland had all realized this and documented it. Durkheim does not seem to have understood this basic fact or, in his terror of disorder, had ignored it. Siding with the destroyers of intermediate institutions in the eighteenth century, and showing a very impoverished idea of what medieval corporations had been,

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he was not well placed to develop a robust theory of civil society. The greater threat, he believed, were the insubordinate associations. The State should think for them, regulate them and crush them 'for the greater good' when it deemed it was necessary.

Durkheim's assumption makes his whole endeavour a waste of time. It would never have worked as a protection for the individual. Nor would it have led to the affective warmth and moral integration he hoped to produce if the professional associations were merely cells of the central Party. His weaknesses also reflects a deeper lack of perception.

Unlike Tocqueville or Maitland, Durkheim paid no attention, as we have seen, to the rich history of civil society in the West. He did not show any interest in the development of those numerous associational mechanism which had developed alongside the trade guilds. Nor did he show any interest in examining how they worked in other parts of Europe (e.g. Germany or England) or the world (e.g. America) in his day. If he had done so he might have begun to understand the very curious blend of status and contract which gave them their special character. He might have seen how they generated emotion, long-term commitment, loyalty and trust. he might have seen how they really solved exactly his problem, combining the flexibility needed in modern society, with the warmth needed in human relations. It would not have been easy for him to understand. As Maitland explains, the greatest of German thinkers, like Gierke, who had devoted their whole lives to the subject, found it almost impossible, coming from a corporative tradition based on Roman Law to understand it. But Montesquieu and Tocqueville had gone a long way. Durkheim never even made a start. Despite this being his largest question - solidarity in an industrial age - and despite feeling that groups of some kind were the answer, his intellectual myopia prevented him from even really starting on a plausible solution.

His second effort had failed. He may have sensed this also, since he lost interest in this topic as well. He turned away and turned to the study of what he considered to be the origins of religion.

The diversion: how mechanical solidarity works, the function of religion.

It is generally agreed that Durkheim's most interesting work was his late and largest book, **The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life**. This was really a sidetrack from his earlier work. He had failed in his major project of discovering how modern societies should be held together, so he seems to have decided to start again by examining the simplest case he could find in order (using the genetic method) to see what holds societies together. If he could understand the simplest case, then perhaps he could later work back to the more complicated. It was a long detour and he never got back to the complicated case. But his work, though deeply flawed once again as we shall see, has generated through its errors as much as its achievements, some notable work in anthropology.

What he did was to look at what he thought was the very simplest case, some central Australian aboriginal tribes as described recently by Spencer and Gillen, and to apply to them the ideas from other anthropologists, particularly Robertson Smith's major ideas on the nature and importance of sacrifice in ancient Semitic cultures. From this he generated a number of theories which largely boil down to the famous proposition that religion is a projection of society. This is, in fact, a circular process whereby society is 'reflected' in its religion, which then re-enforces society. Let us expand this a little by looking at some of his organizing ideas.

Let us start by noting his definition of religion. It is 'a system of ideas by means of which people represent to themselves the society of which they are members and the opaque but intimate relations they have with it. This is its essential function.' (quoted in P.47) Religion's importance is that it provides

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us with our categories of thought. He claimed to have shown that 'the most essential notions of the human mind, notions of time, of space, of genus and species, of force and causality, of personality, those, in a word, which the philosophers have labelled categories and which dominate the whole of logical thought, have been elaborated in the very womb of religion. It is from religion that science has taken them.' (quoted in L.445) Religion also reflects and organizes the '**conscience collective** a difficult concept to translate into English, which Durkheim defines as 'the set of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a single society [which] forms a determinate system that has its own life'. (quoted in L.4) Thus our very categories and thought are shaped by religion.

It will be noticed that he sees a direct transition from religion to science. In fact he argues strongly that modern science is identical to religion. 'The explanations of contemporary science are surer of being objective because they are more methodical and because they rest on more rigorously controlled observations, but they do not differ in nature from those which satisfy primitive thought. Today, as formerly, to explain is to show how one thing participates in one or several others.' (L.439) Thus he opposed Levy-Bruhl his contemporary, who argued that there was a pre-logical mentality.

The intriguing twist to the argument is that while religion gives us our categories of thought, religion itself is generated by society. It was not only among the Australian tribes that 'the classification of things reproduces [the] classifications of men'. (quoted in L.441) He believed that the categories themselves were 'made in the image of social phenomena'. 'Cosmic space was primitively constructed on the model of social space, that is, on the territory occupied by society and as society conceives it; time expresses the rhythm of collective life; the notion of class was at first no more than another aspect of the human group...' and so on. (quoted in L.442., and see fn.39) Thus he makes the claim, among others, that 'there are structural correspondences between symbolic classifications and social organization'.(L.449) As Lukes points out, this has been very influential. (L.449)

How, in practice, did society influence religion? In order to understand this we need to understand several of his ideas. The first is the famous distinction between the sacred and the profane. Durkheim rejected the normal distinction between natural and supernatural, and instead favoured the sacred and profane distinction which is in line with Robertson Smith's work. What did he mean by this distinction? Sacred things are 'things set apart and forbidden', while profane things are of the 'mundane workaday world' (P.44) This is an absolute division. 'The division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought; the beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of sacred things... anything - can be sacred.'(quoted in E.80) Or again he wrote of 'a bipartite division of the whole universe, known and knowable, into two classes which embrace all that exists, but which radically exclude each other. Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things, those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first. Religious beliefs are the **representations** which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things. Finally, rites are the rules of conduct which prescribe how men should behave in relation to sacred things.'(quoted in L.24)

Thus the sacred principle, which pertains to religion, is a projection of this aspect of society, it is society transfigured onto a higher plane. (L.446) A classic example of this, he argues from the Australian evidence, is in totemic beliefs, where the totem becomes the representations of the segment of the society and is set apart.

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How, in essence, does the religious feeling occur and get transferred between society and religion. His answer is through ritual and collective activities. His central hypothesis is that through 'collective effervescence' men create a higher world. He argued that it was 'out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born.', that 'after a collective effervescence men believe themselves transported into an entirely different world from the one they have before their eyes'. (quoted in L.463) Such effervescence re-creates the central core of society. 'Now this moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments...' (quoted in L.475) This is the function of ritual, to create the effervescence, generate and restore social memory, and hence increase moral density. (L.471; P.49)

While there can be no doubt as to the suggestiveness of his work in the field of simple religions, there are innumerable serious criticisms of his theories by almost everyone who has written about Durkheim. One of the most scathing is by Evans-Pritchard, who on the surface looks like one of his most devoted followers, but spends a number of pages demolishing almost every aspect of his work. (see EP in XXX) Another was by van Gennep, another distinguished worker in this field, who cast very serious doubt on his data and methods, writing for example 'Within ten years his whole Australian systematization will be completely rejected, and along with it the generalizations he has constructed on the most fragile set of ethnographic data of which I know. The idea he has derived from them of a primitive man... and of 'simple' societies is entirely erroneous...' (quoted in L.525) Some of the numerous anthropological criticisms are summarized by Lukes. (L.477ff, 521ff, 159). Even his sacred/profane distinction has been rejected by subsequent anthropologists such as Stanner. (L.28). His whole functionalist and tautological definition of religion is highly questionable. (P.48)

So why did he fail so miserably? The faulty method.

It might be argued that Durkheim's failure was due to faulty or inadequate data, and this is partly true. It might be argued that it arose from his arrogance and determination to promote sociology in opposition to other disciplines and this is also true. It might be suggested that it was due to the fact that he often failed to follow his own sounder advice on the satisfactory methods for a social science, and that is true also. But I suspect that the deeper reason for his failure is that despite the fame of his supposed advances in methodology in **The Rules of Sociological Method**, in fact his methodology is deeply flawed. Let us examine this.

Let us start with the good news. He employed (though as far as I know did not explain) the method of elimination, made famous by Sherlock Holmes, whereby unsound theories are eliminated. (L.31, 203). Even here, however, there are dangers, for he tended to assume, with Holmes, that having eliminated whatever was impossible, whatever remained was the only possible solution. Yet he often did not consider all of the options, or apply sufficient scepticism to what remained.

Again, he frequently advocated the comparative method, indeed arguing that it was the only method in social science.(REF XXX) He rightly pointed out that this was not the method used by J.G.Frazer and others which was merely 'butterfly-collecting', but what one needed was real comparison (of the kind explained by J.S.Mill and practiced by Tocqueville and Weber). Unfortunately, in practice, he hardly used the method. For instance, he never compared countries systematically, let alone civilizations or time periods. Only in **Suicide** is there much use of this method in a fruitful way.

Again, he rightly realized the need for models of what would normally happen, against which one

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could measure what he called the 'pathological'. This applied over time in what one might call the normal tendency. (L.388) This is a very fruitful method, as Adam Smith, Malthus, Tocqueville and others show in their work. Again Durkheim does not explain this in his **Rules**, but it is there.

Likewise he recognized the dual or double nature of human beings, which puts him in a long line of European thought from Pope and Smith, up through Tocqueville, rather than with the more one-sided Rousseau or Marx. (L.432,435)

Yet there is also less good news in the shape of numerous types of methodological weakness. One of these concerns his theory of causation. Basically he did not have one. He hardly pays attention to the subject and there is no sophisticated analysis, as far as I have seen, of levels, types, chains of causation.

Instead we get just one really preposterous contention, namely that sociology cannot deal with 'accidents', with one-off events. The 'accidental must be removed', for 'there can be no science of accidents... and the task of a social science is to concentrate on those uniformities and regularities in human behaviour which are plainly not dominated by accident.' (N.49) Furthermore, sociology can only deal with very simple causal links where there is a single cause leading to a single outcome. He explicitly wrote that if there was more than one cause for an event, it would make it too difficult to be sure of an invariable relations between cause and effect, and hence anything more than single-cause phenomena should be avoided. (find quote XXX)

Since in most of social life most outcomes are the result of multiple causes and long chains of cause, this rules out almost all social phenomena and certainly all of history. Durkheim's critics seem to have missed this enormous limitation. It is part of his attempt to turn sociology into a science, using the forward-moving causal method of Descartes. But Descartes method is not suitable for the social and biological sciences. It is sterile and largely useless. Not that Durkheim is terribly interested in causes of a wider kind. In history, for example, in so far as he speculates on the reasons for change, he is a demographic and technological determinist. (L.169)

Part of his disinterest in history and change lies in his functional method. Although it is also a source of his best insights and very much in the spirit of the age, Durkheim's belief that a thing is explained only if one sees the part it plays, its function in relation to its social ends, is again very limiting. That this was his view cannot be doubted. The function of a social fact 'must always be sought in the relation of the fact to some social end - an **existing** end, not some defunct belief or norm.' (E.31) When describing or explaining 'religious, juridical, moral and economic facts', 'one must relate them to a particular social milieu, to a definite type of society; and it is in the constitutive characteristics of this type that one must search for the determining causes of the phenomenon under consideration.' (quoted in L.400) As Lukes well characterizes his method, it is one of 'asking functional questions within a broadly evolutionary framework'. (L.277)

Of course function is important, but, as many have observed, such an approach easily becomes conservative, tautological and rules out unintended consequences, other reasons for things happening. It is true he modified it by being interested in origins to a certain extent. (L.180) But basically he saw 'society' as a machine or biological mechanism with parts; he reified it and saw it as a 'thing' and this brings all sorts of problems, including the fact, pointed out by his critics, that he failed to have any theories to deal with conflict or with change - a serious defect.

Possibly he felt he had no need for a theory of change because he accepted (unthinkingly) the basic theory of evolutionary development which had dominated earlier social and biological thought. It is true

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that he stripped it of the more extreme version of moral progress - social Darwinism - which had attached itself in the work of people like Lord Avebury.(E.18) Thus he returned it to about the level of Darwin, who believed in random variation and selective retention without any teleology or notion of moral or other 'progress'. But that Durkheim thought in conventional, unilinear, evolutionary, terms is not in doubt. This has been noted by later commentators. (e.g. P.31; N.167; E.90-1;95) We can see this not only in relation to his theories on religion - as noted above - but also in relation to the family. (L.182, 93) and in relation to the history of property. (PE.171) His classic evolutionary scheme of social forms is as follows. 'If we compare tribes devoid of all central authority with centralized tribes, and the latter to the city, the city to feudal societies, feudal societies to present societies, we follow, step by step, the principal stages of development whose general march we have just traced.' All systems inevitably converge on one system, it is a development which 'progresses in a perfectly continuous way, as societies tend to approach this type.'(DL.222)

As noted in the introduction, this unquestioning, unthinking, evolutionary frame saved him the bother of discussing the really difficult questions. He had lost the sense of amazement of Montesquieu, Smith and Tocqueville, who were close enough to earlier systems to know how unlikely the emergence of modernity had been. He did not have the width of knowledge to know, like Weber, the miracle of what has happened. So he does not even sense the riddle of the modern world. He has, like Spencer and the evolutionists, already lost the question.

Instead, he tried to create a new discipline to study a newly constituted order of things called 'social facts'. These were as concrete and real as the physical or biological entities which the other sciences, which he hoped to emulate, had discovered. Sociology, he argued, used the scientific (Baconian, Cartesian) method, working inductively from real 'facts' up to theories. And here is the last weakness I shall touch on. What are these 'social facts' and how are they to be isolated and recognized like atoms or molecules? Do they really exist, or are they as insubstantial as the entities which another Empire builder, Richard Dawkins, has tried to conjure up, i.e. 'memes'?

Durkheim's definition of a 'social fact' and how one should recognize it is extremely vague. He argued that the whole of his sociology was based on 'our fundamental principle, the objective reality of social facts'. In order for the new discipline to be autonomous 'it must above all have an object all its own', a 'reality which is not in the domain of the other sciences'. (quoted in L.9) He put forward the rule that 'social facts must be studied as things'. Lukes glosses this as follows. 'By "social facts" he should be understood to mean social phenomena or factors or forces, and by the rule that they should be studied as things he meant that they are to be seen as 'realities external to the individual' and independent of the observer's conceptual apparatus.' (L.9) But what distinguishes a social fact from other things? Durkheim defined a social fact as 'every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising over the individual an external constraint' and 'which is general throughout a given society, while existing in its own right, independent of its individual manifestations'. (quoted in L.10-11) This is extremely abstract and one is left with many queries. Is fox hunting a 'social fact' (it is confined to one part of society), is coughing a 'social fact' - it seems to fit and so on and so on.

To add to the problem, is the observation that these 'facts', although apparently the things which shape a theory, using a sort of naive inductivist and positivist logic, are not as stable as that. When they interfere with a theory, which in Durkheim's case was pretty often, he would take the view that 'the facts are wrong'. (L.33) In one sense this is encouraging, for it implies a realization of the ridiculousness of reifying facts. But given his agenda of positivistic science, it is a considerable embarrassment.

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Conclusion

Durkheim studiously ignored Max Weber (and most German sociology, Marx, Simmel, Sombart, Gierke and co) and this was a loss to him. He would have learnt a great deal; how to be historical, how to be truly comparative, how to deal with complex causation, to employ ideal types. He ignored most of British sociology and particularly that of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume, Smith, Ferguson and co. He was a narrowly French thinker. But even here he missed much of what was best in the tradition. The subtlety and power of Montesquieu (about whom he write his thesis, but whose work he often wrote about in an unsympathetic way). He forgot many of the deep insights of Tocqueville, or repeated them either without acknowledgement or not knowing that he was saying the same thing. He is a reputedly great thinker whose admirers (except Giddens, who is largely uncritical) spend much of their time attacking.

So why do we remember him? He was politically useful as a prophet and zealous promoter of sociology. He was able to make certain connections between religion and society. He wrote interestingly on suicide. He was driven on by a real question - how is modern society after the French and industrial revolutions held together - even if he failed to produce satisfactory answers. He founded the **Anne Sociologique** and hence helped to shape a tradition which included some very great thinkers, Mauss, Marc Bloch, Granet and so on. So he was, in many ways, a great teacher and inspiration, even if his own writings are so frustratingly flawed.
(11500)