



EMILE DURKHEIM: A PROMINENT SOCIOLOGIST OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

*Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), an effective writer from France, is considered one of the pioneers of Sociology. Besides being an erudite scholar and deep thinker, he was a professor of Philosophy and political liberalist. Herbert Spencer acknowledged August Comte as his master but Durkheim didn't. It is important to state here Durkheim was deeply influenced by Comte's theory of positivism. He was an educationist of higher esteem during his time. The most important area of his research/interest was moral education. Durkheim remained agnostic throughout his life. But he was from the core of his heart a staunch moralist. He was sad and unhappy during his last days of his life for he could not tolerate the moral degeneration of the French society. It was Durkheim who made Sociology as an empirical science. He was the founder of a journal called *Anne Sociologique*, which is still regarded as one of the leading journals of Sociological thought. In 1893, he published his French doctoral thesis *The Division of Labour in Society*. *The Rules of Sociological Method* was published in 1895. His most influential book *suicide* came in 1897. But it was with the publication of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) Durkheim became famous throughout world. He labeled Marxism as 'disputable and out of date hypothesis.' Unlike Marx, he didn't see the proletariat as the salvation of society. He was greatly opposed to violence/agitation which Marx preached to the 'Have not's.'*

INTRODUCTION

Durkheim's theory of "Division of Labour" is often regarded as his major contribution to the field of sociological thought. This theme is presented by him in his doctoral thesis *The Division of Labour in Society*. The main crux of this book is the relationship between

individuals and society or the collectivity. Durkheim studied division of labour as a social institution, and not an economic institution. The concept of division of labour has been used in three ways: (a) in the sense of the technical division of labour, it describes the production process; (b) as the sexual division of labour, it describes social division between men and women; (c) as the social division of labour, it refers to differentiation in society as a whole (it is in this sense Durkheim uses this term). While Karl Marx, a champion of communism, was pessimistic about the division of labour in society, Durkheim was cautiously optimistic. Marx saw the specialized division of labour trapping the worker in his occupational role and dividing society into antagonistic social classes. Durkheim saw a number of problems arising from specialization in industrial society but believed that the promise of division of labour outweighed the problems.

Durkheim made comparisons between the primitive and the civilized societies in terms of his concept of solidarity. According to him, the primitive society is characterized by “mechanical solidarity” based on the “conscience collective” and the advanced society is characterized by “organic solidarity” based on the “division of labour.” The difference between the two societies can be comprehended from the following characteristics.

Mechanical Solidarity:

In this society individuals don't differ from one another very much. They are the members of the same collectivity and resemble one another because they feel the same emotions, cherish the same values and hold the same thing sacred. The society is coherent because the individuals are not yet differentiated. Here we find the strong states of the collective conscience. The Collective conscience refers to the sum total of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of the society. This prevails mostly in primitive societies. In the primitive society, there is a strong solidarity of resemblance, loyalty to tradition and kinship and simple division of labour.

Organic Solidarity:

As defined by Durkheim, Organic solidarity refers to “a type of social solidarity typical of modern society, in which unity is based on the interdependence of a very large number of highly specialized roles...complex division of labour that requires cooperation of almost all the groups and individuals of society.” Organic solidarity is almost opposite of mechanical solidarity. It is a heterogeneous society where the sameness and the resemblance are missing; the coherent unity of the collectivity is expressed by differentiation. The solidarity that exists is organic which is based on division of labour, fusion of market and growth of cities.

Durkheim's views about social facts are extensively dealt with in his second major treatise called *The Rules of Sociological Method*. He in fact, defined sociology as "a science of social facts." His aim was to demonstrate that there is a science called Sociology which is an objective science conforming to the model of other sciences and whose subject is the social fact. A social fact is a phase of behavior (thinking, feeling or acting) which is subjective to the observer and which has a coercive nature. According to Durkheim social facts must be treated as "things," as empirical facts from the outside, we must discover them as we discover as facts. Durkheim insists that we must regard social facts as things because things, he says, are all that is given, all that is offered to or rather forced upon our observation. Ideas can be perceived introspectively (philosophically) but things cannot be conceived by purely mental activity—they require data from outside mind. Therefore, the social facts are external to the individuals and exercise a constraint on them. Durkheim has emphatically stated that society is a reality "sui-generis" Durkheim differentiated between two kinds of social facts—material and non-material. Material facts are real, material entities; society, structural components of society (Church and State); morphological components of society (population distribution) etc. Non material social facts are what Sociologists call norms and values or more generally culture (morality, collective conscience).

Durkheim's theory of suicide is cited as a monumental landmark in which conceptual theory and empirical research are brought together. Suicide is an indication of disorganization of both individual and society. Increasing number of suicides clearly indicates something wrong somewhere in the social system. Durkheim has studied this problem at some length. According to Durkheim, "suicide refers to every case of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative death performed by the victim himself and which strives to produce to this result." Durkheim has classified suicides into three types:

- a. **Egoistic suicide:** Egoistic suicide is a product of relatively "weak group integration." It takes place as a result of extreme loneliness and also of excessive individualism. These types of suicide are committed by those who have the tendency to shut themselves. Such individuals feel affronted, hurt and ignored. Egoistic persons are aloof and cut off from the mainstream of society and don't take full interest in social matters. Such persons get alienated and find it difficult to cope with social alienation and feel impelled to commit suicide.
- b. **Altruistic suicide:** These type of suicides take place in the form of a sacrifice in which an individual ends his life by heroic means so as to promote a cause or an ideal which is very dear o him.

- c. **Anomic suicide:** The breakdown of social norms and sudden changes that are characteristic of modern times, encourage anomic suicide. When the collective conscience weakens men fall victim to anomic suicide.

The book *The Elementary Forms of Religious life* is the last of Durkheim's major works. In this book he discusses his views on religion. Durkheim maintains that scientific thought had its origin in religious thought. Both religion and science reflect on nature, human beings and society, Durkheim observed. According to Durkheim all religions are comprise of two basic components, namely, beliefs and rites. The central characteristic of all religions is sacred and profane. He writes: "religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden." In Durkheim's theory of religion, the sacred represented the interests of the group, especially unity, which were embodied in sacred group symbols, or totems. The profane, on the other hand, involved mundane individual concerns. Durkheim explicitly stated that the sacred–profane dichotomy was not equivalent to good/evil. The sacred could be good or evil, and the profane could be either as well.

In the conclusion, I would like to state that Durkheim's contribution to sociology is everlasting. He borrowed from Comte the positivistic stress on empiricism. But he went far ahead of Comte to establish sociology as an empirical science. As a believer in scientific method he sought to deal chiefly with empirical data and to avoid value-judgments. He was a man of character. Throughout his life he was passionately engaged in the moral issues of his time. He is certainly one of the greatest social thinkers of the nineteenth century. His theories are relevant even today and will be for future times.

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