

### Emile Durkheim, Society and Individuals

Durkheim believed that group properties were independent of individual traits and therefore should be studied in their own right. To him, sociology is the science of social facts, and its task is to study the determinants of social problems establishing the relationship between individual and social acts. He states that “*a social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint*” or “*which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations*” (286). Durkheim says that social phenomena arise when a certain reality emerges from the behavior of interacting individuals, but when this same reality cannot be explained in terms of the characteristics of individual agents. “*The determining cause of a social fact must be sought among antecedent social facts and not among the states of the individual consciousness*” (293). For instance, social formations like gangs, political parties and associations are composed by individual members, but the macro outcome resulting from such organizations operates in a different level and produces results that individually would not occur. Thus, social facts are external to particular individuals; they endure over time, and are capable of exercising a ‘coercive power’ upon persons. Durkheim believed that the coercive power of society was necessary to lead individuals to acceptable levels of satisfaction. His idea was that happiness and wants are tied to each other, but how human beings are creatures whose desires are unlimited, happiness would never be achieved unless an external and regulative control, namely society, imposes limits on human desires. In his words: “*To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness... To achieve any other result, the passions first must be limited. But since the individual has no way of limiting them, this must be done by some force exterior to him*” (42). He argues that “*society alone can play this moderating role; for it is the only moral power superior to the individual*” (42). Therefore, It is important to understand where the ‘power’ of society comes from. What makes the group stronger than individuals? Why do people need collectivities?

Durkheim starts to answer these questions analyzing the division of labor in society. He suggests that the division of labor is a necessary condition not only to increase the reproductive capacity and skills of the workers, but also to foster the intellectual and material development in societies. In addition, the division of labor is responsible for creating a feeling of solidarity between people. He distinguished between ‘mechanical’ and ‘organic solidarity’. The first prevails when there are “*beliefs and sentiments common to all the members of the group*” that “*exceed in number and intensity those that appertain personally to each one of those members*” (258). In other words, mechanical solidarity exists where individual differences are minimized and the members of society are alike in their devotion to the common weal. The individual consciousness depends on the collective consciousness. In contrast, organic solidarity develops out of differences between individuals. It is a result of the division of labor and a necessary consequence of the growth of volume and density of society. The more marked the individualization of the parts – the more labor is divided up – more likely is the existence of an organic solidarity. “*The structure of societies where organic solidarity is preponderant is... [constituted] by a system of different organs, each one of which has a special role and which themselves are formed from differentiated parts*” (67). Under organic solidarity, individual elements have not much in common, but at the same time are more interdependent than under

mechanical solidarity. Consequently, the progressive division of labor increases mutual dependence and makes society less dependent on common beliefs to tie its members. Therefore, the presence of both solidarities, not necessarily at the same time, would represent an input in the regulative force of society necessary to sustain individual and collective equilibriums.

But what happens when social regulations break down as a consequence of economic disasters or abrupt transitions? What happens when the social structure no longer regulates individual desires by common norms? In this case individuals are left to their own devices, without moral guidance to pursue their goals. This state of affairs Durkheim called *anomie*. He argued that economic affluence, by stimulating human desires, carries with it dangers of anomic conditions because it does not impose “*restraint upon aspirations*”, while “*poverty protects against suicide because it is a restraint in itself...*” (43). “*Anomy, therefore, is a regular and specific factor in suicide in our modern societies*” (44). Once he discovered that certain types of suicide could be accounted for by anomie, he could then use anomic suicide as a point of reference for other types of suicide characterized by different degrees of social integration. Durkheim argues that committing suicide is a *sui generis* fact whose nature is eminently social and proportional to the level of social cohesion in that group. He believed that suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration, and for this same reason suicide rates would be higher in Protestant regions than in Catholic ones. “... [T]he superiority of Protestantism with respect to suicide results from its being a less strongly integrated church than the Catholic church” (36). When people are integrated into a group (i.e. political, domestic or religious societies) where collective sentiments are strong, they are protected against frustrations and tragedies that afflict mankind; hence, they are less likely to engage in extreme behaviors like suicide. When the level of cohesion is high and a degree of consensus exists, there is less space for deviant behaviors than in collectivities in which consensus is weak. In religious society, for example, “*the more extensive the credo the more unified and strong is the society*” (36). Nevertheless, Durkheim was also careful to point that when the level of integration is too high, or when the group shares beliefs on individualism and free inquiry, then deviant behaviors as suicide could emerge as a response to the group-enjoined autonomy of its members. In other words, he found that suicide could have more than one cause, so there also should be more than one type of suicide. In his words: “*we shall be able to determine the social types of suicide by classifying them not directly by their preliminary described characteristics, but by the causes which produce them*” (35).

From this point, Durkheim distinguishes four types of suicide according to the relation of the actor to society. *Egoistic*, or individualistic, suicide results from “*man’s no longer finding a basis for existence in life*” (44). When individuals are on their own devices and are no longer tied to their fellows, they are prone to commit this type of suicide. When the normative regulations surrounding individual conduct are relaxed and fail to curb and guide human propensities, men are susceptible to succumbing to *anomic* suicide. It results from “*man’s activity lacking regulation and his consequent sufferings*” (44). In other words, when the restraints of the structural integration (i.e. organic solidarity) fail to operate, men become prone to egoistic suicide; when the collective conscience is attenuated (i.e. mechanical solidarity), men fall victim of anomic suicide. The other two types of suicide are the *altruistic* and the *fatalistic*. The first refers to cases in which there is a strong regulation of individuals, as in the army for example. In this case the demand of society is so great that the rate of suicide varies directly with the degree of integration. Durkheim states that altruistic suicide occurs because “*the basis for existence appears to man situated beyond life itself*” (44). The second, fatalistic suicide, opposed to its anomic form, “*is the suicide deriving from excessive regulation, that of persons with future*

*pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline*" (44). All types of suicide are, therefore, characterized by a certain degree of integration or social regulation. But still, it is worth asking where does this regulation come from? What binds individual acts to the collective consciousness and why does that happen? What prevents individuals from behaving according to their own desires? Where does the societal restraint come from?

Mechanical solidarity, the social division of labor and the organic solidarity that arises from it are the reasons why individual actors interact and depend on each other. But besides these forces, Durkheim suggests that individuals' actions are also driven by society because their moral values are closely associated with social ones. Explaining his argument, he says that individuals have two consciousnesses: one is shared with other members of the group, "*which is consequently not ourselves*", while the other is an individual one, which "*represents us alone in what is personal and distinctive about us, what makes us an individual*" (258-59). According to him, these two consciousnesses are interdependent and hardly work separately, but the consciousness imposed by the group is usually stronger than the individually defined. "*The individual consciousness... is simply a dependency of the collective type, and follows all its motions, just as an object possessed follows those which its owner imposes upon it. In societies where this solidarity is highly developed the individual... does not belong to himself; he is literally a thing at the disposal of society*" (259). Or else: "*...morality [is] a system of rules, external to the individual, which impose themselves on him from outside; not certainly, by any physical force, but by virtue of the ascendancy that they enjoy*" (268). Thus, moral rules are external to the will and "*fixed in its essentials from the moment of our birth*". With this argument he strengthens his point that the group is stronger than its component parts. Yet Durkheim also suggests that the presence of two consciousnesses represents a permanent source of conflict within individual heads, and for this same reason they could occasionally revolt against the current patterns of morality and impose their own: "*We are not obliged to bend our heads under the force of moral opinion. We can even in certain cases feel ourselves justified in rebelling against it. It may, in fact, happen that, for one of the reasons just indicated, we shall feel it our duty to combat moral ideas that we know to be out of date and nothing more than survivals. The best way of doing this may appear to be the denial of these ideas, not only theoretically but also in action*" (271). Obviously, social rules can be broken only when individuals understand what surrounds them and acquire the capacity to analyze the facts and rules governing the environment in which they are embedded. How do they do that? Durkheim's answer is: through education.

"...to understand the world and to order our conduct as it should be in relationship to it, we only have to take careful thought, to be fully aware of that which is in ourselves. This constitutes a first degree of autonomy. Moreover, because we then understand the laws of everything, we also understand the reasons for everything. (...) We liberate ourselves through understanding; there is no other means of liberation. (...) We can investigate the nature of these moral rules... through education..." (270-71)