

EMILE DURKHEIM

(1858-1917)

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Why should there be a special science called sociology? Why not simply a science of human behaviour in general? Is the behaviour of social groups not ultimately reducible to the behaviour of the groups' individual members? Questions such as these are bound to occur to anyone approaching sociological literature for the first time. but much of that literature fails to answer these questions. It is concerned with a ragbag of problems, which might equally well be dealt with by a biologist, a psychologist, an economist, or a statistician. It looks for no special class of determinants, it asks no special questions, it brings no special insights to the facts under review.

The student who feels this way cannot do better than to turn to the work of one of the great masters of sociology, Emile Durkheim. Durkheim was an Alsatian Jew who was born in 1858 and grew up in a turbulent period of French history, marked by the defeat of the Franco-Prussian war, the setting up of the Third Republic and the weakening of traditional educational institutions dominated by the church. Himself an agnostic, Durkheim devoted himself to the search for a new secular and scientific social ethics which would serve to bind the new French society together. For a period of nearly thirty years he addressed himself to the teachers of France, first as Professor of Social Science in Bordeaux and then as Professor of the Philosophy of Education and of Sociology in the Sorbonne. And the theme of his teaching was always that attention should be devoted not simply to the characteristics of individuals but to the specifically social bonds which united men in society.

In his *Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim sets out to distinguish the specifically social element which it is the task of the sociologist to study. He shows how, along with the purely individual, biological and psychological determinants of human behaviour, there are others, which do not arise from the constitution of the individual. As he says:

When I fulfil my obligations as brother husband or citizen, when I execute my contracts, I perform duties which are defined externally to myself and my acts in law and custom. Even if they conform to my own sentiments and I feel their reality subjectively, such reality is still objective, for I did not create them.

Obligations, contracts, duties, laws and customs are thus isolated as a specific subject matter, and their distinguishing features are that they are 'exterior' to any individual and that they exercise constraint over him. If we confine ourselves to facts of this kind we shall be studying 'society'.

Sometimes, however, individuals are constrained by external facts which are rather more vague and difficult to study. If one wishes to study the legal determinants of human behaviour one has data ready to hand in written le-

gal codes. But if one seeks to study the effect of a crowd on its members, or vague social trends such as fashion, it is not quite so clear what kind of evidence one should seek. Durkheim believed that it was important that such social trends should be studied. Indeed he probably felt that they constituted the major part of the subject matter of sociology. He therefore argues that if the social fact has no independent observable existence of its own, it is the sociologist's job to give it one. He should do this by discovering statistical rates which should be taken not merely as a counting of separate individual phenomena but as indices of social currents.

The empirical application of these ideas is to be found in two of Durkheim's greatest works: *The Division of Labour in Society* and *Suicide*. In the first, his doctoral thesis, Durkheim argues that social order cannot be explained, as the English utilitarians sought to explain it, in terms of the enlightened self-interest of individuals. There must, as it were, be something there, apart from purely individual tendencies binding individuals together into social wholes. This 'something' is a form of social solidarity. In simple societies this form of social solidarity rests upon collectively held sentiments and ideas. In advanced societies it rests upon the division of labour which is not just an expedient device for increasing human happiness, but a moral and social fact whose purpose is to bind society together. Both forms of social solidarity, however, have this in common. They are expressed in legal codes and it is to the comparative study of these codes that Durkheim directs our attention.

In *Suicide*, which still stands as a model of the specifically sociological use of statistics, Durkheim begins by showing that the available statistics do not seem to support any hypothesis which attributes suicide to individual causes. What matters is the rate of suicide and this (which varies only slowly) is indicative of a kind of society whose very structure compels a minority of people towards self-destruction. In a society having the first kind of social solidarity discussed in *The Division of Labour* the trend is toward 'altruistic suicide'. In a society of the second kind suicide tends to be 'egoistic'. What Durkheim has done for suicide, could be done in relation, say, to patterns of marriage and divorce, delinquency or industrial unrest. By contrasting the statistical rates of these phenomena in different social groups we should be able to discover the strictly social concomitants of variations in the rate.

Because Durkheim inherited the tradition of nineteenth-century positivism, he did not confine himself to the empirical study of sociological data for its own sake. He was concerned to extract from empirical material a positive guide to action. And he believed that in showing what were the essentials of social order he was also showing what were the conditions of human happiness.

The great enemy, as he saw it, of an adequate positive ethic was the tradition of English utilitarianism culminating in the sociology of Herbert

Spencer. The utilitarians believed that human happiness could be increased by a continuous increase in the size and number of individual lots of pleasures. It seemed to Durkheim, that, far from this being the case, human happiness could only be assured if the pleasures of the individual were limited by socially approved norms. In circumstances in which these norms collapsed, the individual found himself in the state of personal disorganization which Durkheim called 'anomie'.

The notion of anomie crops up both in *The Division of Labour* and in *Suicide*. In *The Division of Labour*, Durkheim recognizes that the division of labour does not in fact always produce social order. In many cases differentiation of function is actually accompanied not by reintegration but by conflict. This state Durkheim calls 'the anomic division of labour'.

He goes on to argue from this that what is needed to overcome anomie and reintegrate our social order is the organization of men into occupational groups, whose professional ethics will not merely integrate each group within itself, but also relate it to the other groups in the larger society.

The ambiguities of Durkheim's position here together with his evasion of such problems as the economic basis of class conflict have made it possible for him to be hailed as the prophet, both of guild socialism and Fascist corporativism. But he does have the merit of having formulated what must be the central question of modern social organization, namely, 'When the old social order based upon kinship and the tribe breaks down, what will be the elements from which the new social order will be built up?' In suggesting that the occupational group might be such an element, moreover, he offered an alternative to the individualistic and family-centred ideal which has played such a large part in English sociology.

In *Suicide* we again encounter the possibility of anomie. For along with the forms of suicide which are, as it were, inherent in forms of social order, there is another kind of suicide, 'anomic suicide' which follows from the collapse of social norms. And here Durkheim recognized that the collapse of social order is accompanied by actual personality disorganization. The individual who commits anomic suicide is sick and he is sick because his society has collapsed.

The recognition of this fact in *Suicide* forced Durkheim to explore new ground. For, despite his insistence to the last on the distinctiveness of social facts, he found it less and less possible to argue that such facts are solely and simply 'external' to the individual. That which is external is also a constitutive element of the social personality. It was to the problem of the intimacy of the relation between the social and the personality system that Durkheim addressed himself in his lectures on education and in his greatest work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

This last is, like most of Durkheim's work, of complicated origin. As a Jew, brought up in a Catholic educational tradition and ending up as an agnostic, Durkheim had undoubtedly pondered long on the question of the validity of religious belief and he wished to defend publicly the shocking thesis of the equation God = Society. But having devoted himself so long to the problem of the nature of social facts he was equally interested in discovering why social norms should have the morally constraining quality which they do. And finally, he was, as we have said, concerned with the relationship between the social system and the social personality of the individual.

What Durkheim purports to show under the first head is that on important social occasions among primitive people when the whole clan or tribe has gathered, an atmosphere is generated which is attributed to supernatural origins, but which, in fact, is simply due to the collective excitement of the crowd. This atmosphere carries over into the ordinary 'profane' life of the people, so that all the symbols of society's presence take on a sort of supernatural quality.

Now there is much in this, and anyone who has participated in great national rituals will recognize the similarity between our feelings about purely social and religious symbols. But it has often been asked whether this really proves Durkheim's point. Why do social symbols have the quality they do? Crowd excitement by itself seems a weak explanation. Would it not be equally true to say that the social has a divine origin as to say that the divine has a social origin?

What is much more important, however, is the effect of this argument on Durkheim's conception of the relation between society and the individual. The conception of social order as a mere expedient will not do. But nor will that of society as a purely external fact. As he says, society awakens in us not only 'the idea of a physical force to which we must give way of necessity' but 'that of a moral power such as religions adore'. Or again, 'When we obey somebody because of the moral authority which we recognize in him . . .' we do so 'because a certain sort of physical energy is immanent in the idea we form of this person, which conquers our will and inclines it in the indicated direction'.

For anyone who accepts these formulations, the nature of sociology is transformed. It ceases to be simply a matter of head counting. What we have to do, if we accept them, is to study man always as a member of a moral community. The first question which we have to ask of any society which we are studying is 'What are the moral communities which compose it?' -- a question which leads on the one hand to the understanding of the dynamics of the society and on the other hand to an understanding of the kind of man which the society produces.

Durkheim also made notable contributions to the special empirical fields which he investigated, particularly to the study of suicide and primitive relig-

ion. On the subject of suicide he discovered that the rate was higher among soldiers than civilians, higher among Protestants than Catholics and higher in times of both boom and slump than in times of economic stability. From these and other discoveries he was to draw his theoretical conclusions, but it is important to notice that the theoretical conclusions rested upon empirically tested and therefore retestable hypotheses. Thus even today when some of his conclusions may be rejected, his method is not and his hypotheses remain fruitful.

Similarly in his study of Australian religion Durkheim confronted the puzzling reported facts of the situation with a clear hypothesis. The fact that totemic species served both as the badge of the clan and as objects of religious reverence seemed to him explicable only in terms of the notion of the social power generated by the great clan festivals. Whatever doubts we may have today about this rather sweeping hypothesis, it remains one of the most insightful hypotheses in the field.

Durkheim's influence both as a general theoretician and as a contributor to specific fields of empirical study has been lasting. Before his death in 1917 he had founded a school in France and for more than a generation the writers who contributed with him to *L'Année Sociologique* continued to apply his methods and to explore his hypotheses further. Georges Davy who succeeded him in his Sorbonne chair, set out to trace the evolution of more advanced social forms from the simple totemic complex which Durkheim had studied in Australia. Mauss illuminated his studies of gift giving and of primitive religion with Durkheimian insights into the significance of particular customs for the maintenance of the social system as a whole. Halbwachs investigated further the hypotheses about the causes of suicide and was led from this to a careful analysis of the family as a social institution. Through these and other writers the Durkheimian tradition survived and remains perhaps the liveliest force in French sociology.

Outside France, Durkheim's ideas made headway very slowly. In England the administrative approach to social problems of the Fabians was no more hospitable to his emphasis on social wholes than had been Utilitarianism. It was only in the 1930s that the two great teachers of social anthropology, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, were to turn to his work for the theoretical foundations of the method which they called 'functionalism' (i.e. explaining strange social customs in terms of the contribution which they made to the maintenance of the social structure). But even they had little impact on the sociologists concerned with modern society.

In America, too, the first reaction to Durkheim's thought was a philistine one. He received little serious consideration before the mid-1930s when his ideas seem to have been taken up simultaneously in a number of doctoral theses. Since then, however, his influence has grown. At least two of America's greatest teachers, Merton and Parsons, acknowledge their debt to him,

and Parsons has made a brilliant analysis of the nature of the theoretical advance made in Durkheim's work. Moreover, the Americans, with their enormous financial resources, their scientific ideology and their capacity for spelling out theoretical ideas in terms of statistical indices, have set about the systematic investigation of the correlates of varying degrees of social integration in terms of Durkheim's categories.

In all these ways, then, it can be seen that the work of Durkheim continues to play a large part in shaping the field of sociological investigation. Yet there are points in Durkheim's thought which remain extremely arguable and which may through overstatement be extremely misleading. Two deserve special mention.

One is his emphasis on social consensus and integration. It may well be true that the utilitarian conception of a society based solely on enlightened self-interest is inadequate. But self-interest and class interest are none the less factors which must be taken into account in any interpretation of actual historical events. It is surely not sufficient to dismiss a society in which there is not a consensus but a conflict of norms as not really a society at all, but as a state of anomie. And if such a society is to be reintegrated we should say on the basis of which norms the integration is to take place.

The second point follows from the first. It is that, having said rightly that participation in a social and normative order is essential to human happiness, Durkheim seems to assume, wrongly, that any social and normative order, provided it is integrated, will guarantee this happiness. Here it is enlightening to compare Durkheim's philosophical standpoint with that of the early Marx. Marx too saw that, in his own words, 'the human essence is the ensemble of social relations'. But he also saw that while the system of social relations might liberate man and make him capable of 'self activity' it might also become a thing alien to man, confronting him and constraining him from outside. We may say that Marx failed to describe exactly the kind of pattern of social relations in which self activity would be possible. But he did at least see that there was a choice to be made, and that the mere fact of the involvement of man in an integrated system of social relations would not necessarily guarantee his self-fulfilment and happiness. It is his failure to see this which seems to make Durkheim, among the great sociologists, the arch apostle of the status quo.

Yet every sociologist's perspective is limited by the particular attitude which, for other reasons, he has towards social change. What we can say about Durkheim is that, given his standpoint, he was not afraid to pose the most important questions about the relation between the individual and society and that when he turned to empirical studies, they were never sterile and meaningless, but helped to advance our understanding of the human condition. When more sociologists approach their chosen empirical fields in this way, the subject will become far more fruitful than at present.