

SOCI 301/321

Foundations of Social Thought

Session 4 – Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

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Session Overview

Introduction

This session deals with the works and ideas of Emile Durkheim, (French)

Goals and Objectives

By the end of the session you should be able to:

- know the background of Emile Durkheim
- know his major publications
- Identify and explain his leading ideas and views about the nature of society and human behaviour
- compare and contrast his ideas and views with the earlier founders you have studied
- apply his ideas and theories to understand society, aspects of it and human behavior

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic One : Emile Durkheim: Biography
- Topic Two : Durkheim Positivism and Major Publications
- Topic Three: Durkheim: Major Ideas

Reading List

- ALLAN K. (2005) *EXPLORATIONS IN CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: SEEING THE SOCIAL WORLD*, LONDON: PIN FORGE PRESS
- ASHLEY D. AND D. M. ORENSTEIN (2001) *SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: THE CLASSICAL STATEMENTS*, BOSTON: ALLYN AND BACON.
- DZORGBO, D-B. S. (2013) *SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: CLASSICAL IDEAS AND THEIR APPLICATION IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT*, ACCRA: WOELI PUBLISHING SERVICES
- DZORGBO D-B. S. (2009) *SOCIOLOGY: FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL THOUGHT*: LEGON-ACCRA: CENTER FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF GHANA.
- RITZER G. (2008) *SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY*, BOSTON: MCGRAW HILL
- RITZER G. & DOUGLAS J. GOODMAN, (2004) *CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY*, BOSTON: MCGRAW HILL

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

Biography

- Emile Durkheim was born in Epinal, France to a Jewish family with a long line of rabbis.
- He decided not to be a rabbi.
- At the age of 19, went to the prestigious Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris.
- He developed interest first in philosophy but by the time he graduated in 1882, he had shifted his interest to the scientific study of society.
- Five years after graduation, a sociology course was created for him at the University of Bordeaux which gave him the chance to become the first academic sociologist.
- In 1893, Durkheim defended his doctoral dissertation, the *Division of Labour in Society* at the University of Paris.
- He founded, edited and wrote an influential journal *L'Anne Sociologique* and by 1913 he attained the professorship of "Science of Education and Sociology at the Sorbonne.

Durkheim: Major Works

- **Major Works of Durkheim**
- Unlike Comte who did not have the opportunity to lecture in a University, Durkheim had this chance and developed a sound academic base
- He legitimized sociology in France he established its major subject matter.
- He wrote a number of books that continue to influence sociological thinking or discourse. The major books are *Division of Labour in Sociology (1893)*, *The Rules of Sociological Method (1895)*, *Suicide (1897)*, and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912)*.

Topic Two: Durkheim's Ideas

- Durkheim like Comte was worried about the social disorder of his day so dealt with the issue of social order.
- He defined the subject-matter of sociology as the study of “social facts”
- To him, society is held together by the shared beliefs, sentiments and values of members in a society i.e. society exists because of consensus (agreement) to follow the rules to keep society stable
- Evolution of Society: traditional to modern,
- Key ideas are social solidarity or social integration, collective conscience, happiness, division of labour and specialization, anomie and suicide
- The social significance of religion: society creates religion and religion serves society



Durkheim Ideas (cont'd)

- **Durkheim's Positivism**
- Like Comte, Durkheim believed in positivism and urged that society should be studied scientifically.
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- Sociology should study social facts: things that are external to individuals and coercive of them in society: for example, social norms, traditions and customs, societal laws, common morality, etc.
- Society evolves from traditional to modern state due mainly to population growth—moral density
- Simple societies are characterized by limited division of labour and specialization; modern societies have increased division of labour and specialization
- Simple societies experience “mechanical solidarity” and modern societies “organic solidarity”



Durkheim Ideas (cont'd)

- Like Comte, Durkheim was also disturbed by the negative influence of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and sought to reform society.
- He was concerned with how society could re-create social order and harmony. Hence the central theme running through most of his work is “social integration”, “social order”, “social cohesion” and “social solidarity”.
- Anomie/Normlessness and Suicide
- According to Durkheim, the act of suicide is influenced by social forces—level of social integration and social regulation and not simply an individual matter as it might appear
- Religion: the Profane and the Sacred
- Religion is a social fact. Its social significance is social integration and social solidarity



Durkheim Ideas (cont'd)

- Durkheim urges that **social facts** should be the subject matter of sociology.
- “a social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations (Durkheim, 1895/1982:13)
- **Social facts** are things in society that exert powerful influence on our behaviours. They are external to and coercive of the individual.
- “Social facts are those aspects of social life that cannot be explained in terms of the biological or mental characteristics of the individual. People experience social facts as external to themselves in the sense that [social] facts have independent reality and form part of people’s objective environment. As such social facts serve to constrain their behaviour, and include not only legal and moral rules in society, but also relationships and patterns of others that affect our day to day lives” (2005:12):

Durkheim Ideas (cont'd)

- Social fact is experienced as (i) an external constraint, rather than internal or individual drive and (ii) as general throughout the society and cannot be attached to any particular individual in society.
- Social fact cannot be reduced to individuals but must be studied on their own, i.e. **social facts** are ***sui generis***, a Latin word meaning *social facts* and unique. They have their own unique character and cannot be reduced to individual consciousness.
- In everyday language we can say that social facts are the social structures, institutions, cultural norms and values, laws that are external to and coercive of individuals. Durkheim himself gave examples of social facts as legal rules, moral obligations and social conventions as well as language.

Durkheim Ideas (cont'd)

- Material Social Fact
- Non-Material Social Fact
- Society as a Moral Entity
- Social Disorganization and Anomie
- Collective Conscience
- Collective Representation
- Social Currents Collective effervescences