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BERYL LANGER

Emile Durkheim

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) is generally regarded as one of the key figures in the development of sociology as an academic discipline. His intellectual project was concerned with two central problems. The first was the autonomy of the social as a distinctive level of reality which could not be reduced to the psychological properties of individuals but required explanation in its own terms. The second was the crisis of modernity—the rupture of traditional social ties by industrialisation, the Enlightenment, and individualism. The two were inextricably linked for Durkheim, who believed that the problems generated by the collapse of traditional order would only be solved on the basis of scientific understanding of how societies worked. If the laws governing the natural world could be discovered through empirical observation, so too could the laws governing the social world. In Durkheim's view the crisis of the age gave the enterprise particular urgency. 'Science', he argued, 'can help us adjust ourselves, determining the ideal toward which we are heading confusedly' for '. . . in furnishing us the law of variations through which moral health has already passed, [it] permits us to anticipate those coming into being, which the new order of things demands' (Durkheim 1893: 34).

Durkheim's was a relatively uneventful life marked by academic success and a happy marriage, which does not make him a promising subject for biography. Born on 15 April 1858 in Epinal in the eastern French province of Lorraine, he grew up in an orthodox Jewish family and community, the son of a rabbi. If his decision to pursue a career in secular rather than religious scholarship signalled the preference for modernity over tradition which would characterise his thought, the conditions of his father's approval were equally prophetic—'being serious and working hard' (Lukes 1975: 41). By all accounts, Durkheim was a man of unrelenting seriousness whose punishing work schedule

left little time for pleasure and damaged his physical and mental health (pp. 99–100).

After completing his studies in Paris, in 1882, Durkheim spent several years teaching philosophy in Lycees. In 1887, he was appointed to teach courses in sociology and education in the Faculty of Letters at the University of Bordeaux. In the same year, he married Louise Dreyfus, who devoted the rest of her life to supporting his scholarly work, taking full responsibility for the household and their two children, copying manuscripts, correcting proofs, and sharing the editorial administration of the *Année Sociologique*, which he founded in 1898. During his fifteen years at Bordeaux, he published three of the works for which he is best known—*The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) and *Suicide* (1897)—in addition to his study of Montesquieu, numerous articles, and the first five volumes of the *Année Sociologique*. He also lectured on a vast range of subjects, participated in university administration, and was actively involved in working for educational reform. Little wonder that he 'worked according to a rigid timetable', talking to his family 'at mealtimes, but not afterwards' (Lukes 1975: 99).

Durkheim's scholarly reputation and the increasing legitimacy of the social sciences were confirmed by his promotion to a chair at Bordeaux in 1896, but the ultimate recognition—an invitation to teach at the Sorbonne—was withheld until 1902. Even then, his appointment was in pedagogy rather than social sciences, and he was at the Sorbonne for eleven years before the word sociology was added to his title. Thus while Durkheim's intellectual project was carried out within the academy, its legitimacy was only fully acknowledged towards the end of his career. With the outbreak of war in 1914, the focus of Durkheim's writing and public activity shifted to questions of its historical causes, and to issues of national morality (Giddens 1978: 216–33; Lukes 1975: 547–59). Health—already impaired by overwork—deteriorated rapidly after the death of his son at the front, in 1916. Durkheim died in November 1917, at the age of 59.

Throughout his work, Durkheim argued for a radically social view of human behaviour as shaped by social structure and culture. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, for example, he drew on historical evidence to demonstrate that the individualism which conservative thinkers held responsible for the breakdown of social order was itself a social product, found only in complex societies based on the division of labour. In *Suicide*, he used statistics to demonstrate that suicide rates varied with changes in social solidarity, and concluded that the apparently private act of taking one's own life was in fact a response to social forces. A social explanation of religion was advanced in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915), in which he argued that the sense of awe and reverence with which people respond to 'the sacred' is in fact an

expression of their absolute dependence on society.

Durkheim's argument on the social construction of the subject has its clearest formulation in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, in which he staked his claim for sociology as a legitimate field of inquiry whose object of study was the 'social fact', which could not be explained in terms of individual psychology. 'Social facts', he argued, are 'external to the individual' and 'endowed with coercive power':

> 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 in 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; I merely inherited them through my education ... The system of signs I use to express my thought, the system of currency I employ to pay my debts, the instruments of credit I utilise in my commercial relations, the practices followed in my profession, etc. function independently of my own use of them. And these statements can be repeated for each member of society. Here, then, are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside individual consciousness (1895: 1).

Durkheim argued that society was not 'a mere sum of individuals', and that 'the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics' (p. 103). For example, a political party or a church, while composed of individual members, has a structure, a history, a way of understanding the world and an institutional culture that cannot be explained in terms of individual psychology. 'If we begin with the individual', Durkheim maintained, 'we shall be able to understand nothing of what takes place in the group' (p. 104). He utterly rejected the idea that society had its origins in a social contract between individuals, arguing that 'in the entire course of social evolution there has not been a single time when individuals determined by careful deliberation whether or not they would enter into the collective life, or into one collective life rather than another' (p. 105). Society—the principle of association—comes first, he argued, and 'since it infinitely surpasses the individual in time as well as in space, it is in a position to impose upon him [sic] ways of acting and thinking' (p. 102).

Durkheim argued that sociologists must put aside their social prejudices and preconceptions and assume the same state of mind as physicists or chemists in relation to the natural world (p. xv). It should not be assumed from this, however, that he was either politically conservative or indifferent to social problems. He was committed to social reform, but thought that reform based on anything less than scientific understanding of social reality was misconceived. In Durkheim's view, sociology's objectivity was a precondition for its usefulness rather than an end in itself. His commitment to a sociology which is practical rather than merely speculative is clearly stated in the Preface to *The*

Division of Labor in Society, his first major work: 'Although we set out primarily to study reality, it does not follow that we have no wish to improve it; we should judge our researches to have no worth at all if they were to have only a speculative interest' (1893: 33). Almost one hundred years later, the text in question has been incorporated into the sociological canon, read not for the light it might cast on what Durkheim calls 'practical problems', but because it forms part of the intellectual tradition into which we seek entry when we define ourselves as students of sociology. It is, in other words, impossible for us to read *The Division of Labor in Society* except as a 'classic', and while Durkheim might take satisfaction from the implied fulfilment of his aspirations for the establishment of sociology as a discipline, his disappointment at its manifest failure to provide solutions to the problems he identified would likely be profound.

Durkheim's thesis in *The Division of Labor in Society* is a defence of modernity. Rejecting the view that industrialisation necessarily leads to a breakdown in social order, he argued that the declining authority of traditional moral beliefs was not an indication of social disintegration but of social change, a historical shift from a form of social order based on shared belief and tight communal control (*mechanical solidarity*) to one based on the mutual interdependence of relatively autonomous individuals (*organic solidarity*). He characterised the 'mechanical solidarity' of traditional societies as dependent on the 'likeness' of its members, whose common life circumstances made for shared beliefs and values. Under conditions of mechanical solidarity, he argued, 'individuality is nil', for the 'individual conscience . . . is . . . dependent upon the collective type and follows all of its movements' (p. 130). The 'organic solidarity' produced by the division of labour, on the other hand, depends on individual difference—the difference which develops with occupational specialisation. Specialisation, he argued, creates the conditions for the development of personal difference, opening up spheres of action which are not subject to collective control. At the same time, however, it increases dependence on society, for with occupational specialisation the exchange of services becomes a condition of survival.

The problem with Durkheim's thesis was that the increased solidarity that he associated with the division of labour was not to be found in any actually existing industrial society. In what might be seen as a glaring failure to abide by his own methodological prescriptions, he held to his preconception of the solidarity that 'should' be produced by the division of labour, and classified its actual consequences as 'abnormal'. He identified two main causes of this 'abnormality'. The first was 'anomie', the absence of a 'body of rules' appropriate to the changing circumstances of economic life', which left markets unregulated and workers without any sense of social purpose. The second was structured inequality: the

existence of social classes which reproduced privilege from one generation to the next. Durkheim's social ideal was meritocratic and he argued that the 'spontaneous' division of labour on which organic solidarity was based could only occur if society was 'constituted in such a way that social inequalities exactly express natural inequalities' (p. 377). He therefore made social justice—defined in terms of reward for merit—a precondition for organic solidarity, arguing that the division of labour could not be spontaneous 'if one class of society is obliged, in order to live, to take any price for its services, while another can abstain from such action thanks to resources at its disposal which, however, are not necessarily due to any social superiority' (p. 384).

There is, as Gouldner (Durkheim 1928: xxvi) observed, a 'surprising' convergence with Marx in Durkheim's argument that the exploitation inherent in the 'forced' division of labour generates class conflict and precludes social solidarity. Durkheim did not see Marxism as providing adequate solutions, however. In his view, the problems associated with the transition to modernity would be solved by neither revolution nor conservative reaction, but by social science. The problem with socialism, he argued, was that its conclusions and predictions were based on inadequate scientific understanding of existing social reality (1928: 6).

Equally dismissive of socialism's laissez faire opponents on the grounds that their claims were not based on 'scientifically induced' laws but on 'a prizing of individual autonomy, a love of order', and 'a fear of novelty' (1928: 7), Durkheim is best read not as a 'conservative', but as a technocratic reformer. Much of the secondary literature in English, based as it is on a conservative appropriation of his work as primarily concerned with the 'problem of order' on the one hand (Parsons 1949) or a left–romantic rejection of his preference for reform over revolution on the other (Zeitlin 1968), screens out what Pearce (1989) has recently called 'the radical Durkheim'. Durkheim's central problem was not the ahistorical question of how social order is possible, but the historically specific one of how a modern industrial society, in which the traditional ties that bound individual to society have been weakened, might provide its members with a sense of social purpose and belonging. This is not, as is often claimed, an inherently 'conservative' question, but one which must equally be addressed by socialists. While Durkheim undoubtedly underestimated the extent to which the conflicting interests of labour and capital limited the possibility of social reform under capitalism, it is equally true that Marxist theory, prior to Gramsci, ignored the extent to which the creation of a new social order was not just a question of changing the relations of production, but of changing consciousness.

While Durkheim stands beside Marx and Weber as a classic thinker whose work is known to most sociologists, his influence on Australian sociology is less apparent, and there are few obvious contenders for membership of a 'Durkheimian school'. There are a number of probable

reasons for this. One is the outmoded organicism of his thought, which precludes an adequate analysis of power by assuming that 'what gives unity to organised societies . . . as to all organisms, is the spontaneous consensus of parts' (1893: 360). Another is the fact that sociology was introduced into Australian universities in the 1960s, when prevailing intellectual fashion showed little sympathy for either his views on scientific method or the anti-utopian implications of his argument on the need for social constraint. However, while his uncritical positivism is no more acceptable now than it was in the 1960s, his arguments on anomie have undeniable contemporary resonance, and, as Pearce (1989: 159) has demonstrated, he has much to contribute to the discussion on the characteristics of a feasible democratic socialist society.

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