Durkheim

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A Critical Introduction

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1

Durkheim Declassified

Emile Durkheim is regarded as one of the founding fathers of sociology. His writings form part of the canon of classical sociology and each year tens of thousands of undergraduate students are provided with short, textbook-style summaries of his four major books on *The Division of Labour in Society*, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, *Suicide* and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Throughout his career, Durkheim strove to improve the standard of sociological output. Assessing the work of his most important predecessors, he complained that much of their analysis remained at the level of empty speculation. In place of the empirical research that Durkheim advocated, thinkers like Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer merely imposed abstract philosophical categories onto reality.[1] This impoverished their analysis and invalidated their prescriptions.

The idea of detailed empirical investigation became a central theme in Durkheim's work. Whether he was investigating the division of labour or suicide rates, Durkheim sought to apply the scientific method in a way that moved his understanding beyond that of the common individual. Where others had built abstract conceptual systems, moreover, Durkheim would 'allow the facts to speak for themselves'.[2] This helped to build the reputation of his sociology for a generation of French intellectuals, who, like Durkheim, aspired to make sociology more scientific.

In 1887, Durkheim was given the title of Professor of Social Science at the University of Bordeaux. This was the first such chair in the whole of France, signalling Durkheim's growing standing amongst his contemporaries. Fifteen years later, Durkheim took the Chair of Education at the Sorbonne, the pre-eminent university in France at the time. He became a full professor there in 1906, taking the Chair of Education and Sociology in 1913. Durkheim's academic career propelled him to the head of a distinct school of sociology, replete with its own journal – the *L'Année Sociologique*. The *L'Année*, first published in 1898, further cemented Durkheim's influence by drawing together the most important sociological literature emerging at the time.[3] Inspired by Durkheim's sociological practice, the journal married detailed empirical work with the development of a corpus of sociological categories that were used to investigate social reality. Over time, the *L'Année* also became the home of a gifted group of young researchers, united in their devotion to empirically grounded and methodical research. Together with Durkheim, thinkers like Marcel Mauss worked tirelessly to establish sociology as an academic discipline with the standing of physics and chemistry.

In order to cultivate this academic legitimacy, Durkheim stood deliberately above the fray of contemporary controversies. Indeed, with the exception of the Dreyfus affair of 1894, he painstakingly cultivated the image of a serious scholar, detached from the cut and thrust of daily politics. This conscious projection of neutrality was to prove extremely successful. Both in his own day and in our own, it has led to a conception of Durkheim as the detached scientific observer *par excellence*. Craig Calhoun recently spoke for many within the profession when he argued that Durkheim is, above everyone, the founder of sociology as a serious academic discipline.[4] This mantle has traditionally been shared with Karl Marx and Max Weber, but unlike the former's defence of workers' rights or the latter's overt German nationalism, Durkheim is generally seen as the defender of 'empirical research' over 'political polemics'.

His work has thereby become synonymous with objectivity and serious scholarship in a way that, we believe, completely misrepresents it. In stark contrast to many orthodox interpretations, this book aims to root Durkheim's sociological practice firmly within the political institutions of the French Third Republic. Durkheim's meteoric rise is one indication of his alignment with the values of French Republicanism, but his link to the French ruling classes went much deeper than mere academic patronage. Durkheim's republicanism was, rather, heartfelt and enduring. Throughout his life, he believed passionately in the republican precepts of reason, liberty and individual rights. Against the clericalism of the monarchist right and the utopianism of the revolutionary left, Durkheim posited these ideals as the rightful inheritors of the French Revolution. Modern defenders of the *ancien régime* were, therefore, completely anachronistic. A return to the clericalism of the eighteenth century would stifle the individual liberty and undermine the collective solidarity of the French Republic. From the other side of the political spectrum, revolutionary socialists sought to replace scientific reason with, what Durkheim considered to be, a dangerous utopia. Rather than uniting citizens in social partnership, socialism preached class hatred, endless struggle and social disorder. The solution to these twin evils was to revive the benign form of civic patriotism that Durkheim associated with the Third Republic. Every society has a morality that is shaped by and appropriate to those who produce it, but this needs to be properly brought out through scientific investigation. Instead of looking into the ancient past or striving for a utopian future, Durkheim promised to root his sociology in the nature of reality itself.[5]

This meant investigating the nature of the contemporary moral order and then diffusing it through a republican education programme. If morality was the means by which people came into proper alignment with each other, then Durkheim's role was to make this clearer to the general population. This quest for a scientifically informed moral regeneration was evident in the questions that Durkheim posed, the concepts he created and the political positions that he – implicitly – advocated.

In order to defend this assertion, Chapter 2 highlights the extent to which Durkheim's sociology was, in fact, influenced by French Republicanism. This chapter works as the fulcrum for the entire book, as it sets the stage for the detailed textual investigations that run from Chapters 3 to 8. In Chapter 3, we take up Durkheim's assessment of the forms of solidarity underpinning French society, highlighting the extent to which his categories rely on a republican marshalling of the empirical evidence. In Chapter 4, we look at Durkheim's methodological pronouncements, critically appraising his attempt to differentiate between healthy (republican) and pathological (non-republican) social facts. In Chapter 5, we investigate Durkheim's work on suicide rates as proxies for the ways that individuals become detached from their own society. Durkheim famously claimed to investigate the social causes of individual self-destruction, but his republican politics once again biased his central categories in discernible ways.

In Chapter 6, we take up Durkheim's writings on the solidarity underpinning aboriginal communities. This study was meant to shed light on contemporary society, as the moral regeneration of the French Third Republic once again became the key driver of his work on religion. Having looked at Durkheim's canonical texts, we turn to his writings on the French education system (Chapter 7) and his critique of socialism (Chapter 8). In each case the focus remains firmly on the political influences that shaped the output of this supposedly neutral sociologist. In the final chapter, we once again take up the question of Durkheim's republicanism, this time highlighting the limitations of a sociology rooted in a class defence of French society. Our fundamental conclusion is that Durkheim's greatest theoretical achievement lay in his ability to translate the class interests of the French elites into a scientific framework that claimed universal application.

HOW DURKHEIM ENTERED THE CANON OF SOCIOLOGY

Indeed, in many ways, it was his ability to present republican values as neutral and objective that made his sociology so successful. It also made it appealing to later sociologists, who, like Durkheim, aspired to use sociology in the interests of the status quo.

This success hasn't always been the case, however. After his death in 1917, Durkheim's sociology had fallen into relative disrepute, even in his own country. Durkheim had been a vigorous supporter of the war and his reputation suffered as the disillusionment grew. Over time, the younger generations tended to reject the 'pompous rhetoric of the Durkheimians' as a relic of the pre-First World War era.[6] Moreover, many of the sociological team that surrounded Durkheim never survived the war. Durkheim was, however, to re-enter the canon of sociology that is taught in many university courses today.

Parsons was the leading sociologist in America from the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s. After his undergraduate studies, he spent a short time at the London School of Economics where he studied under the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and encountered the ideas of Emile Durkheim. Parsons soon discovered a number of themes in Durkheim that related to his own concerns. On his return to America, Parsons was hired by the first sociology department to be founded at Harvard University. All around him, however, his country was being ravaged by unemployment and mass dissent. The American dream seemed to be in tatters and many had started to look to the left and the unions for answers. A new organisation, the Commission for Industrial Organization, was recruiting lots of unskilled factory workers into its particular brand of militant unionism. In 1935, there were mass sit-down strikes where workers took over their plants and sometimes engaged in pitched battles with the police. Marxism appeared to be making considerable headway among intellectuals with 52 prominent writers endorsing the candidacy of the Communist Party leader for US president in 1932. Parsons became increasingly concerned about the stability of his own country and the growing attraction of the left. He claimed reason and scientific knowledge were being attacked by an anti-intellectualism that was coming from 'socialistic, collectivistic and organic theories of all sorts'.[7] What was needed was a grand theory that both challenged Marxism and pointed to sources of stability and order in society.

The Structure of Social Action which was published in 1937 was Parsons' response. The book was based on an intellectual survey of European social thinkers who had addressed the 'Hobbesian problem of order'. Thomas Hobbes was a seventeenth-century British thinker who challenged the idea that society has been designed by God with inherent stability guaranteed. He had asked: How was social order possible in a world of self-interest? In Parsons' era, this seemed a deeply relevant question – particularly for those who wished to maintain social stability. Hobbes and the subsequent utilitarian school had argued that order was founded on social contracts. In what became known as the 'contract theory of social order', they assumed that individuals entered into contracts with each other and agreed to forego some of their freedoms in order to achieve their most important goals.

Parsons drew on Emile Durkheim to challenge this view. He used Durkheim's work on social solidarity as the template for his own functionalist approach to US capitalism. This made for a deeply conservative sociology that mirrored Durkheim's own concern with defending the interests of the native elites. Parsons argued two points in particular. First, that shared values had to be at the centre of social cohesion. These common values were necessary before people could even begin to establish contracts with each other. Without a 'non-contractual' element based on trust and commitment to carry out one's promises, there could be no contract. There had to be a social element that stood behind individual interactions consisting of: 'a common system of rules, of moral obligation, of institutions, governing the actions of men in the community.'[8] Second, that the non-rational and non-economic elements of these values played a crucial role in maintaining order. Whereas the Enlightenment figures before the French Revolution had mocked traditional rituals as unnecessary anachronisms, Durkheim, according to Parsons, saw 'the function of ritual as a stimulant to solidarity and energy of action'.[9] Parsons was particularly impressed with Durkheim's study of religion as the prime example of a non-rational value system that made society more coherent by pointing beyond the self.

The aim of *The Structure of Social Action* was to show that there was a convergence of European thinkers on the importance of common values as a source of social stability. Parsons argued that their analysis did not go far enough and thus framed their writing as a contribution to his own 'voluntarist theory of social action', which focused more on how individuals internalised values which made their own goals and the goals of society complementary.

Nevertheless, the central point was that Durkheim had been resurrected and declared to be very much alive within the new canon that Parsons was creating. This was an extremely conscious process of framing 'required readings' that would later form the core of sociological textbooks. Not only was Parson's the major intellectual influence for generations of American sociologists, he also actively participated in the translation and selection of books for publication by the Free Press – a publishing house that had huge influence over the direction of American sociology.[10] Parsons aim was to create a professional, scientific sociology which was apparently value free and yet could function as an intellectual counterweight to Marxism.

But by sociology he meant something quite different to the general category of social thought which could trace its origins back to ancient Greece. He defined sociology as: 'a science which attempts to develop analytical theory of social action systems in so far as these systems can be understood in terms of the property of common value integration.'[11] In other words, his was a science whose focus was on the manner in which values and culture could be used to integrate people into society. This definition marked out sociology as a distinct space from economics and politics. But it also created its own bias because it bracketed out economic relations and political institutions and, by implication, assumed an uncritical stance towards them. What mattered was social stability not the conflicts that undermined cohesion.

The canon that Durkheim entered was thus a distinctly American one, shaped by the anti-Marxist ethos of McCarthyism and the Cold War. Durkheim was hailed as a founding father because his primary concern was with order and stability. The writings of Robert Nisbet, a professor of sociology and member of the right-wing American Enterprise Institute, gives a flavour of the discourse about Durkheim in the post-Second

World War period. According to Nisbet, Durkheim was hailed the 'complete sociologist' and the 'first among equals' due to his insistence on rooting sociology in scientific objectivity. Yet Nisbet wanted to have it both ways, simultaneously praising Durkheim for a sociology that drew on a conservative tradition that stretched back to Edmund Burke in its 'profound stress upon the functional interdependence of all parts of society' and the 'collective representations' that held society together.[12] Thus, Durkheim was a 'value-free scientist' who viewed science as a tool for maintaining a conservative social cohesion.[13] This image of functionalist sociology could not survive the social revolt of the 1960s. As a result, Durkheim's influence within the discipline has waxed and waned with the wider levels of social struggle against capitalist oppression and exploitation. This, yet again, speaks to the political nature of his sociology as we seek to show in the rest of this introduction.

THE FALL AND RISE OF DURKHEIMIAN SOCIOLOGY

The war in Vietnam and the rise of the black civil rights movements tore apart the image of America as a society integrated around common values. The consensus that America was the 'land of the free' confronting a communist tyranny came under particular question in the colleges. As the profession of sociology grew throughout the 1960s, it also became more radicalised. One sign of this radicalisation was the emergence of a Sociology Liberation Movement which challenged the upper caste of the profession. It denounced the way in which figures like Talcott Parsons were tied into the US state-machine. Inspired by writers like C.W. Mills, it also challenged the combination of 'grand theory', which gave ideological support for the system and 'abstract' empiricism, which provided the ruling class with factual knowledge to help control their population.[14] In the words of Martin Nicolaus, 'the eyes of sociologists … have been turned downward … to study the activities of the lower classes', while 'the professional palm of the sociologists is stretched [upwards] toward' the dominant classes who provide research funds.[15]

The attacks on Parsons soon led to a more critical approach to Durkheim himself. He came to be seen as the founder of a functionalist approach to sociology which had dominated American sociology since the 1930s. This, its critics argued, studied society as if it were an organic unit like a plant or living organism. Pointing to his many biological metaphors, Durkheim was seen as an ideologue who saw each element of a social system working together to provide a function for the whole. He failed to recognise the reality of social conflict and tended to regard it as a pathological problem in need of cure. A new generation of conflict theorists drew on the work of Max Weber and Karl Marx to challenge Durkheim's notion that society invariably moved to a position of equilibrium around shared values. They raised the question of whose values dominated society and saw political struggle over these values as a normal part of society.[16]

Others took a more radical stance, challenging the objectivity of Durkheim's scientific pretensions. In particular, he came to be seen as a follower of the positivist, Auguste Comte, who wished to put scientific methods at the service of the ruling elite. Comte modelled his studies of society on the natural sciences and Durkheim built on this, claiming that sociologists could study social facts in the same manner that a geologist could study rocks. By seeing social facts as things which were external to both individuals and masses of people, Durkheim was effectively proclaiming that the lower orders had to accept their fate. He was accused of 'supplying scientific sanction for a patriotic posture towards the facts of social compulsion'.[17] Against the very idea of value-free sociology, these radicals called for an engagement that took the side of the oppressed and critiqued the powerful.[18]

However, while Durkheim's reputation declined somewhat, his position inside the canon of sociology was never seriously assailed. For one thing, the radical sociology movement had its own limitations. Developing at the high point of the boom in Western capitalism, it assumed that the working class were well and truly incorporated into the system and saw itself primarily as giving voice to more marginal and oppressed groups. Because its own critique lacked any revolutionary agent that could overthrow the system, it slid into promoting forms of identity politics that sought a space for such groupings within the system. The writings of C.W. Mills, moreover, tended to project the sociologist as one of the main agents for 'conscientising' the masses. This, in turn, meant that the radicals tried to recuperate the wider sociological tradition for the purpose of a softer critique of the system.

As the revolutionary tide began to ebb from the mid-1970s, the impetus from radical sociology itself declined. Symbolically, the journal of the radicals, *The Insurgent*, changed its name to *Critical Sociology* and many of its supporters took up positions within the higher echelons of American academia. Far from overthrowing the canon created by Parsons, the 1968 generation – as in so many other areas of society – recovered traditions they once opposed and gave them a more modern tinge.

One indication of the shift was the manner in which there was an attempt to rescue Durkheim from the discredited theories of Parsons. A number of publications suddenly appeared to stress the radical side of his sociology. Thus, Susan Stedman Jones claimed that: 'although he has a clear critique of Marxism, the interests and sympathy of the early and late Durkheim are supportive of socialism.'[19] Mike Gane also saw Durkheim as a genuine radical who merely criticised the concept of revolution as a form of 'witchcraft' for bringing social change.[20] Frank Pearce meanwhile produced a book with the straightforward title, *Radical Durkheim*, and claimed it was written from a post-structuralist-Marxist viewpoint.[21] The strength of this new Durkheim was, apparently, that he had a subtle understanding of the non-economic forms of representation and was thus able to create a 'more humanistic alternative to instrumental Marxism'.[22]

The shifting fortunes of Durkheim thus reflect the broader changes within the discipline of sociology itself. The original canon as developed by Parsons was explicit in defining Durkheim as an upholder of order and stability. During the post-war era in America, sociologists were more or less shamelessly plugged into the branches of state power. They assisted the Pentagon; drew up surveys of mass communication; examined the morale of soldiers; and attempted to provide practical solutions for social problems. In the new post-1968 Durkheim, the plus and minus signs have been reversed. Conservatism is now a negative and progressive has become a positive. Durkheim appears now as a mild anaemic social democrat who has a concern for greater regulation and social justice. This shift, however, merely reflects the current perception of those working within the discipline.

ROOTING DURKHEIM IN FRENCH REPUBLICANISM

Many of those who enrol for sociology in universities around the world do so from a motivation to improve their society. They often have a sense of the injustice and inequality that pervades modern society and want to learn how to do something about it. Implicitly, at least, they may also have rejected the neoliberal message once trumpeted so shrilly by Margaret Thatcher – that there is no such thing as society. Yet having spent some time in modern academia, many emerge with a cynicism about the very possibilities for radical social change. Sociology helps to create this sense of helplessness. Indeed, the new establishment within sociology encourages students to focus on the 'complexity' of social structures; to be suspicious of the 'simplistic' reductionism' of Marx; and to examine how many items within society are due to a 'social construction' as opposed to exploitation and oppression. Change, it is suggested, can only come piecemeal from gradual shifts in culture or, if the lecturers use some leftist rhetoric, a shift in 'hegemony'. Moreover, despite the older rhetoric of 'engagement' and the more recent one about 'emancipatory research', there appears to be very little connection between these broader cultural changes and day-to-day struggles. Hegemony is only changed, it appears, through the media or the lecterns in universities.

This message is, of course, not automatically received as it is pronounced. As in every area of life, the contradictions between proclaimed aims and present-day hypocrisies are always evident. The more discerning student often takes some of the more critical points raised by current sociologists and turns them against the very system that so comfortably envelopes their mentors. But in so doing, they will come up against the limits set up by the ideological boundaries of sociology itself. Foremost among those limits is a notion that theorising is developed in the abstract without any relation to the social relations of a particular society. To challenge this view we must consistently look at the structures of our own society in order to assess whether they can be adequately explained through the central concepts in Durkheim's sociology. This inevitably means subjecting Durkheim's entire corpus – including his views on capitalism, education, religion and social cohesion – to a critical examination. It also means challenging the manner in which Durkheim fashioned his own image as a neutral scientist standing above social conflicts to offer cures for social ills. The mere fact someone claims that they have no political stance does not mean they are neutral in the conflicts that pervade their society. Once we examine Durkheim in the context of these struggles, we will find that the labels 'conservative' or 'radical' are abstract, timeless categories that do not capture his viewpoint. A far more precise description of where he stood in relation to his own society is needed and this means situating Durkheim's sociology within the context of his republican politics.

Indeed, as we shall see, Durkheim's great talent was to take problems of the moment and generalise them into a framework that corresponded to the outlook of a section of the ruling classes in his own time and for decades afterwards. More specifically, he was writing at a time when the claims of classical economics had run aground. These had assumed that a harmony of interests would emerge between the different classes as a result of the hidden hand of the market. It had also assumed that the state could operate as a 'nightwatchman' – or in modern parlance – a security guard who patrolled the perimeter of the economy but was not involved. As France approached the twentieth century, these assumptions made little sense. The era when an individual capitalist who lived by the market alone and believed that he had a common interest with his workers was over. Conventional bourgeois thought therefore fragmented between those who wanted to uphold the 'science' of a self-regulating economy (bracketing out all social relations) and those who wanted to open new avenues to discuss the residual questions that economics could not deal with. Durkheim fell squarely into the second category. His explicit project was to forge a professional, academic discipline known as sociology. His implicit agenda was to forge a theory of social relations which promoted social partnership as a means of integrating workers into the capitalist economy and into its state. It is from these two vantage points that we shall examine the key components of his various theories.