DURKHEIM, ÉMILE
1858–1917

Émile Durkheim, the son of a rabbi from Eastern France, has long been recognized as a founding figure in modern sociology following his attempt to establish the subject as a respected scientific discipline in the academic world. Durkheim defined the subject matter of sociology as separate not only from that of natural sciences such as biology but also from other social sciences such as psychology and economics, which also studied the activities of the individual as a member of a group. Durkheim's seminal contribution to the establishment of sociology centered upon his founding of the journal *L'Année sociologique* in 1896, which addressed a whole range of issues including the economy, crime, law, and punishment. Journal entries on these and other topics allowed Durkheim to have an important influence in sociology and other social science disciplines.

Durkheim also advanced knowledge of the ideas of society, morality, and religion. One claim open to debate is that Durkheim was a social realist. This led him to challenge the assumption made by earlier Enlightenment philosophers that society was only a subjective and artificial entity because it was not part of nature. Instead, Durkheim argued that one should see society as an objective or observable reality that could be studied scientifically using empirical methods. To become scientific, sociology must study *social facts*. In *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) Durkheim defined social facts as those emergent properties and realities of a collectivity which could not be reduced to the actions and motives of individuals, and that individuals were shaped and constrained by their external social environments. It was because social facts existed in their own right independently of individuals that Durkheim viewed society as a *su generis* reality, which was subject to processes that could be understood only with reference to other social forces. Examples of social facts include language, religion, the economy, and law. These facts were real and should be studied as things. This meant that social phenomena could be known through observation which in turn made them capable of being analyzed as rigorously as objects or events in nature. Durkheim's conceptualization of society was nevertheless criticized for being ambiguous. In *Émile Durkheim: His Life and Work* (1973) Steven Lukes noted that Durkheim used the term *society* in various senses to mean the association of individuals, cultural transmission, socially prescribed obligations, system of rules, symbolic representations, or a national entity such as "French society." In 1894 Gabriel Tarde challenged Durkheim's notion of social facts, suggesting that they could not exist in their own right independently of individuals because social phenomena were transmitted from individual to individual.

Closely linked to the idea of society was Durkheim's original theory of morality. Here the obligation to act in accordance with moral rules came from society not nature, as earlier Enlightenment philosophers had supposed. Durkheim consequently saw morality as a collective social fact. Rules of moral conduct existed outside individuals and transcended personal likes and dislikes by being directed towards others in line with society's ideals and values concerning the common good. Observable laws and sanctions were imposed by society to prevent deviations from its moral rules. The scholar J. M. A. Darlu nevertheless objected, arguing in 1906 that Durkheim's interpretation of morality prevented him from addressing the individual's capacity for reason and their scope for rebellion against an existing set of collectively agreed moral rules. Furthermore, other scholars often allege that Durkheim's theory of morality—and indeed his sociology more generally—led him to ignore the phenomenon of social conflict. Marxist critics such as Tom Bottomore build upon this point when arguing that Durkheim placed an exaggerated emphasis on social order at the expense of paying adequate attention to social change. Anthony Giddens challenged the validity of this criticism when noting Durkheim's deep concern with the turmoil affecting European societies in his own day. This concern was expressed through Durkheim's conceptualization of the interests of the individual in conflict with those of society as a whole.

Durkheim's understanding of society and morality were inextricably bound up with his sociological theory of religion, which advanced knowledge by challenging the ideas of traditional theology. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim saw religion as the source of everything social. Central to Durkheim's definition of religion was the idea of the *sacred*. Sacred objects included symbolic things as diverse as a cross, flags, oaths, or stones, all of which could be seen as extraordinary and set apart from the ordinary or *profane* things in everyday life. Beliefs and practices such as religious rituals also existed in relation to sacred things. Beliefs and practices generated the idea of moral community which in turn brought us back to the idea of sacred things. The sacred, beliefs and practices, and moral community, as the three basic elements of religion, were important because they bound individuals to the social group. Theological ideas about God and the supernatural were, however, missing from Durkheim's definition of religion. Religion was not simply an individual's communion with God. It was above all a form of collective life, and a way for the faithful, in their relationships with the sacred, to understand their connections with one another in society.

Durkheim's theory of religion has been criticized on a number of grounds. W. D. Wallis argued that religion was not essentially social and that the sociological viewpoint

INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, 2ND EDITION

465
was only one among many. Contrary to Durkheim's own view, it was necessary to include the concept of the super-
natural into a definition of religion. In the 1990s critics
such as Fernando Uriocoechea claimed that Durkheim
took the idea of the sacred for granted and did not
account for its genesis or source. Stjepan Meštrović
further suggested that there has been a failure in contempo-
ary Western societies to renew shared moral values. This
has led agreement about what is sacred to become splin-
tered into a myriad of competing meanings. This last
criticism nevertheless overstates the diminution of the sacred.
Meštrović's criticism, argued Jonathan Fish, was weakened
through its failure to engage with Durkheim's important
insights on the recurrent nature of sacralizing and resacral-
izing tendencies as an enduring feature of social life.

Durkheim's status as a founder of modern sociology
was also linked up with his original theories of the division
of labor, collective consciousness, and anomie in modern
Western society. As societies industrialized, urbanized,
and became more complex, specialized institutions con-
cerned with government, industry, business, and education
arose each with their own particular functions. A complex
division of labor based on occupational specialization,
diversification, and cooperation accompanied the
emergence of these specialized institutions where people
performed different work activities or occupational roles
in society in line with their respective talents. Durkheim
advanced sociological knowledge by rejecting the French
philosopher Auguste Comte's earlier view of the division
of labor. Instead of seeing this division as a negative force
which eroded the sense of community between people,
Durkheim viewed it in more positive terms as a potential
source of social cohesion capable of binding individuals
together through the performance of their specialized and
yet interdependent work roles.

It was through the performance of these intercon-
nected work roles that human beings could express their
individuality. Individuality here referred to a person's sin-
gular capacity for thinking and acting. Individuality was
part of modern society's collective consciousness. Collective
consciousness referred to a body of ideas, attitudes, beliefs,
and practices shared by all members of a society and
which determined the relations of individuals to one
another and society. A cult of the individual, which pro-
moted the dignity and sacredness of the human person,
emerged in support of this common belief in individual-
ity. The problem in Durkheim's own day was that the divi-
sion of labor and shared belief in individuality were
unable to establish strong social bonds between people
because they were centered upon maximizing self-interest.
The pursuit of selfish interests and desires also did much
to produce the problem of anomie. In The Division of
Labor (1893) and Suicide (1897), Durkheim referred to
anomie as a situation of normlessness in which the norms
or rules that regulated people's lives did not function
properly. When the norms and rules which kept people's
goals, expectations, and desires within achievable limits
broke down, people began to pursue unattainable levels of
pleasure and excitement which led them to feel uncertain
about goals and values. The feelings of persistent unhap-
piness and disillusionment caused by such uncertainty
also led to a rise in the suicide rate.

Durkheim's conception of the social origins of moral-
ity also provided a useful backdrop for introducing moral
individualism as a solution to the problem of anomie.
Durkheim's writings on this subject were of sociological
importance because they challenged the nineteenth-cen-
tury ideas of Jean-Marie Guyau who positively supported
the idea of anomie, and a future society where fixed moral
frameworks, norms, and rules would not exist. The con-
cept of moral individualism, which was fully developed in
Durkheim's work Individualism and the Intellectuals
(1898), remained the direct opposite of egoistic individu-
alism. Whereas egoistic individualism was concerned with
purely private, selfish interests, moral individualism, by
contrast, stressed the importance of individual rights as a
basis for creating genuinely new social bonds and com-
mon or shared identities across Western industrial soci-
eties. This transcendence of selfish interests would allow
the moral ideal of individualism to attach individuals to
society as never before by inspiring strong feelings of col-
lective devotion. These feelings would in turn allow the
common belief in individuality to generate strong social
bonds which relieved individual uncertainties about val-
ues thereby solving the problem of anomie.

Durkheim's proposed solution to anomie in the form
of moral individualism also challenged the rise of ortho-
dox or economistic forms of socialism, which attempted
to solve this and other social problems in nineteenth-cen-
tury Western societies by advocating a redistribution of
wealth through centralized state control of the economy.
Durkheim believed that these forms of socialism did not
provide an adequate program for social reconstruction as
the problem of anomie was neither class based nor did it
have economic roots and therefore could not be solved by
economic measures. The social problems facing modern
society, which arose because industrialization, commer-
cialization, and urbanization occurred too rapidly, were
perceived by Durkheim as moral issues which required
forms of moral authority capable of unifying individuals
irrespective of their class position. Durkheim's belief that
socialism was primarily concerned with economic regu-
lation has been challenged by Giddens when suggesting that
this view merely forced socialist theories into a conceptual
niche which he had prepared for them.

Problems in democracy were also highlighted in
Durkheim's writings. One major problem identified by

466 INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, 2ND EDITION
Dutch Disease

Durkheim concerned isolated individuals who made electoral choices on purely selfish grounds rather than through informed and considered opinions about current political issues. In the 1902 preface to The Division of Labor, Durkheim argued that this problem could be overcome through the reemergence of occupational groups or associations comprised of people who performed the same specialized work roles. These small and yet diverse functional groups would be bound together through modern society's wider collective belief in individuality. Occupational groups would stand between the individual and the democratic state through their internal election of delegates to an elected chamber. Local representatives of the occupational group would then democratically elect other delegates to national government. This procedure removed the problem of unreflective and selfish patterns of voting by only requiring average citizens to vote on internal matters within their occupational experience. Durkheim believed that this two-tier electoral system would facilitate the Western democratic state's reflection and effective promotion of informed opinion on the need for moral individualism in the future. Yet, as editor Robert Bellah pointed out in Émile Durkheim on Morality and Society (1973), this subordination of particular interests to the general interest has not occurred. Western society has not seen the revival of associational life that Durkheim originally hoped for.

Durkheim also addressed problems in education throughout his work. In Moral Education (1898–1899), Durkheim labeled as outdated traditional theological teachings of key elements in moral education such as the need for discipline and group attachment, following Catholicism's failure to adjust to the growth of individuality through occupational specialization in modern society. Durkheim's solution to this problem was to support a purely secular education for school children based upon the principles of science and reason. Secular education was needed if the historical link between moral education and mythical, transcendent forces was to be broken and the social reality behind moral rules brought to the fore. Durkheim hoped that the secular teaching of discipline and group attachment would over time enable moral individualism, and its pursuit of a genuine type of collective self-understanding, to replace traditional religion at the center of collective consciousness in modern Western society. Durkheim's belief in the ascendency of secular education over traditional theological teachings has not, however, been realized in Western societies at the end of the twentieth-century. Ernest Wallwork noted that theologians have not only responded in a creative way to the intellectual challenges posed by sociology, they have found new ways of using traditional language to speak meaningfully of the human condition in this world. Although Durkheim's prediction has not yet been realized it may be premature, argued Fish, to rule out the possibility that his secular vision might come to fruition sometime in the future.

SEE ALSO Morality: Suicide

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY WORKS


SECONDARY WORKS


Jonathan S. Fish

DUTCH DISEASE

The term Dutch disease refers to the adverse effects on manufacturing industries that took place in the Netherlands with the natural gas discoveries of the 1970s.