



Sociological Theory II: Emile Durkheim

Sociology 1001: Introduction

General Issues

- Emile Durkheim is often regarded as the 'father' of modern Sociology
 - His interests were largely unambiguous
 - He wanted to understand and theorize the impact of the large scale structures of society and society itself on the thoughts and actions of individuals
 - He used the term 'social facts' to describe the social structures and cultural norms that are external to and coercive of actors

Biography and History

- Born in France in 1858 and witnessed massive social change in economy, polity, and civil society
- He came from a long line of rabbis, yet rejected this vocation for academia
 - Taught 'moral education' to school teachers
- Was a committed social activist (particularly with respect to the 'Dreyfus Affair') and deeply interested in progress and social change

Social Facts

- ‘Sociology’ (coined by Comte) did not really exist in Durkheim’s day
- To make it distinct, Durkheim emphasized ‘social facts’
 - Treated as ‘things’ and studied empirically (cf. philosophy)
 - Seen as external and coercive of actors (cf. psychology)
- Differentiated *material* from *non-material social facts*
 - Leads to problems of externality

- Material social facts include:
 - Society
 - Structural components of society
 - Church, State
 - Morphological components of society
 - Population distributions, channels of communication
- Nonmaterial social facts include:
 - Morality
 - Norms and values
 - Collective conscience
 - Collective representations
 - Social currents

Division of Labor in Society

- One of Durkheim’s seminal works focused on the transformation of work in modern society
 - Differentiated two ideal types of society
 - *Mechanical solidarity* was more primitive and had a relatively undifferentiated social structure with no real division of labor
 - *Organic solidarity* was more modern and had a greater and more refined division of labor
 - Saw these two types of social organization as producing very different collectives
 - Social change driven by *dynamic density*, increases in population and interaction

Anomie

- In the context of this social change, Durkheim saw a decline of common morality
 - He used the term 'anomie' to describe this
 - Individuals are confronted with anomie when they are not faced with sufficient moral constraint, when they do not have a clear concept of what is and what is not proper or acceptable behavior
 - Saw this as derivative, but aberrantly derivative (cf. Marx) of the division of labor under organic solidarity
 - Viewed the condition as pathological and treatable

Collective Conscience

- Came to see common morality under organic solidarity as the 'collective conscience'

'The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system which has its own life; one may call it the *collective* or *common conscience*...It is thus an entirely different thing from particular consciences, although it can be realized only through them.'
- Can think of collective conscience as varying by *volume, intensity, rigidity, and content*

Collective Representations

- Ultimately abandoned the notion of collective conscience in favor of 'collective representations'
 - Saw these as specific to collectivities such as family, occupation, state, and educational institutions
 - Allowed Durkheim to conceptualize non-material social facts in a narrower way
 - Saw them as sui generis, unique and defined within different social contexts
 - Leads to interesting questions about hierarchy and priority, as well as order and change

Social Currents

- Another type of non-material social fact is the 'social current'
 - These have 'the same objectivity and the same ascendancy over the individual...but without such crystallized form'
 - Gave as examples 'great movements of enthusiasm, indignation, and pity in the crowd'
 - Some see these as emergent and perhaps ephemeral features of social life
 - Still are external and coercive but have a much more dynamic quality to them

The Cult of the Individual

- Although Durkheim saw social pathologies as rooted in the division of labor, social change was most promising in the context of collective morality
 - Felt that a modern, weakened version of mechanical solidarity was emerging through the 'cult of the individual'
 - Here, individualism was becoming the moral system of modern society
 - Not necessarily problematic; his opposition was to egoism
 - Solutions lay in reinforcing the strength of collective morality

Whither the Actor?

- Our emphasis on social facts leads to interesting questions about the role of the actor in Durheimian thinking
 - Durkheim had an awareness of the significance of mental processes and integrated them into his work

'In general, we hold that sociology has not completely achieved its task so long as it has not penetrated into the mind...of the individual in order to relate the institutions it seeks to explain to their psychological conditions. Man (sic) is for us less a point of departure than a point of arrival.'

- Assumptions about Human Nature
 - Accepted the existence of biological drives, but also acknowledged the importance of social feelings
 - Accepted cognition as a fundamental human attribute
 - Saw people as endowed with ‘egoistic’ drives that pose a threat to social order

- Socialization and Moral Education
 - Given these, the ‘internalization’ of social morals through education and socialization is paramount
 - Provided *discipline* to restrain passions, a sense of *autonomy* to enable action, and a sense of *obligation* or devotion to society
 - Fundamental basis of social order

Summary

- The key problem for Durkheim was one of integration
 - In light of large scale social change in the organization of labor, how does a society maintain order and stability

 - Emphasized social processes that regulate asocial behavior and bind individuals to the collective

 - While criticized heavily over the years, Durkheim illuminates a fascinating question of how the endless diversity in action, affect, and is continually bound and rebound into the routine structures of society
