

**Classical Sociological Theory**  
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**Durkheim an Assessment**

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## Durkheim An Assessment



Welcome back to the class, and we are towards the end of the discussion on Émile Durkheim. So, in today's class we will have a critical evaluation or an assessment of Émile Durkheim as a classical sociologist. I think we spent some close to six to seven sessions discussing various aspects of Émile Durkheim. We try to discuss why that Émile Durkheim is considered to be one of the most important classical thinkers of sociology.

We spent time trying to understand his intellectual context and his basic arguments about the exclusivity of sociology as a discipline, and the phenomenal role that he played laying out the methodological and epistemological basis for this new discipline. His preoccupation with objectivity, positivism and his magnum opus, *The division of labour*, which he brought in the peculiarity of the social as he understood in a very forceful manner.

We had two sessions indeed discussing this division of labour, then we also discussed his work on suicide considered to be an extremely important work, which very beautifully elaborated how this rules of sociological method can be put into practice. Actually, that was one of his major intentions to demonstrate how the methodological protocol that he elaborated can be put into use to analyse a particular social phenomenon.

Another very important aspect regarding this whole discussion on suicide as we discussed in the previous class is also because he was able to very successfully demonstrate that a sociological method is something so important to understand suicide as a social phenomenon.

The distinction between suicide as an individual phenomenon and suicide rate as a social phenomenon is something so striking, it is so stark and he must very successfully able to show that you cannot use a psychological perspective or a perspective in psychology or any other discipline to understand that why there are certain predispositions among populations running into thousands of, hundreds of thousands of people and why that certain number of people are destined to commit suicide and why suicide rates continue to be constant across populations or times or in comparison with other population.

We also discussed his very important work on elementary forms of religious life, which is considered to be one of the most important and classic works for anybody who is interested in sociology of religion. We also had another session, in which we looked into Durkheim's ideas, Durkheim's approach, and Durkheim's position regarding morality, education, democracy and colonialism. So, we are coming to the fag end of the discussion on Émile Durkheim, and today it is an assessment.

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- Émile Durkheim is, along with Karl Marx and Max Weber, one of the "holy trinity" of sociology's early masters.



- In *The Division of Labor* some of the key mechanisms by which complex systems sustain integration: structural interdependence, abstract and general values and beliefs, more specific beliefs and norms to regulate relations within and between differentiated groups and organizations, and networks of subgroups forming larger coalitions and confederations with common interests.

- Moreover, his analysis of the pathologies, such as anomie, that arise from the failure to achieve integration, are some of sociology's more enduring concepts.



Émile Durkheim is along with Karl Marx and Max Weber, one of the "holy trinity" of sociology's early masters. I do not think that I need to elaborate this point further, because in this course as well, we will be spending maximum time to discuss these three important

scholars, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber because they are known as the Holy Trinity.

They are known as the most influential thinkers or the classical thinkers, the stalwarts, the early masters, the founding fathers of the discipline, and especially unlike Marx who was not a sociologist per se. Durkheim is credited with establishing the discipline through his professional activities and also through his intellectual contributions of laying down the foundation, charting out a methodological protocol and very vociferously arguing that sociology is indeed a distinct discipline and it cannot be conflated with other disciplines.

This is a discipline which wants to explore certain very definitely phenomenon, exclusive phenomenon of what he calls it as the social. In that sense definitely, undoubtedly, Durkheim belongs to this one among this “Holy Trinity”.

In the division of labour, some of the key mechanisms by which complex systems sustained integration, structural interdependence, abstract and general values and beliefs, more specific beliefs and norms to regulate relations within and between differentiated groups and organizations, and networks of sub groups forming larger coalitions and confederations with common interests.

Each of these aspects have become so predominant in the latter sociological discourses and theories especially, for the theoretical tradition known as structural functionalism, which we will discuss towards the end of the course. Among some of the important themes that are discussed in his work, his division of labour assumes great significance, because he discusses some of the key mechanisms by which complex systems sustain integration.

We discussed that in the previous class, Durkheim was really preoccupied with the whole process of social integration i.e. what holds the society together, what are the mechanisms through which an individual feels connected, loyal and bound with the society in which he or she lives.

So, that was his perennial preoccupation throughout his academic or intellectual concern Durkheim struggled with. In this particular work, we are trying to understand the set of mechanisms by which complex system sustains integration. He speaks about a series of important issues especially of structural interdependence i.e. how and why that there are different sub structures or subsystems within a social system are interconnected, in what way for example, is economic subsystem of a society is very closely connected with the political

subsystem or how a kinship system is connected with the political subsystem. So, this kind of a structural explanation is something very important element that he had pre-occupations with.

Then the role of abstract and general values and beliefs, another very important aspect, the kind of a part of this nonmaterial culture, which includes your morals, beliefs, cultural systems and religion. We discussed that why Durkheim was so preoccupied with this whole question of religion, because it is not only that he was interested in understanding how and why religion functions, but this was also a part of his larger interest in this whole question of general values and beliefs because his general values and beliefs have very specific concrete consequences on the social structure.

When we talk about this distinction between material and non-material aspect of culture, they are not completely separate realms, they are extremely interconnected, interlinked and influences each other and the most specific beliefs and norms to regulate relations within and between differentiated groups and organizations. We discuss that how he is explaining that specific beliefs give certain sense of solidarity, certain sense of 'we' feeling and sense of integration to different society.

In his study on suicide, he very elaborately argues that Protestants have more tendency to commit suicide in comparison with the Catholics because the theology of Protestantism allows room for more individualism in comparison with that of Catholicism, which emphasize more tradition and kind of a community feeling.

A host of networks of subgroups forms larger coalitions and confederations with common interests. This structural relationship with how smaller groups come together or smaller systems contribute for the existence of a larger social system was one of the major theoretical preoccupations of Émile Durkheim. And moreover, his analysis of the pathologies such as anomie that arise from the failure to achieve integration are some of the sociology's most enduring concepts and we discussed that I think, several times that he uses this term normal and pathologically.

A term a kind of approach, which most of the sociologists do not do that, for example, Max Weber, who came immediately after Émile Durkheim is not fond of using this term pathology, because it preoccupies, presupposes an assumption that certain kind of social systems are more desirable than the others, and Weber takes a completely different position.

A host of sociologists now they do not use the term pathology, because it smacks of a kind of a comparison with human body, with a living organism and social science with the modern medicine and his analysis of the pathologies such as anomie. But this whole idea about anomie is something very important, the significance that a society needs to have a specific set of values and in the absence of these values, society will not work, and which arise from the failure to achieve integration, and some of the sociologist's most enduring concepts.

So, this whole concept of anomie, the argument that every society needs to have a stipulated set of norms and values that regulate people's aspirations and their activities. It is an extremely important topic. It is not about this complete lack of norms, because there is no society where there is complete lack of norms, but the kind of a social understanding that these norms have to be rather well defined, you need to have a set of well-defined norms is an extremely important topic and its connection with the whole question of integration, they have been some of the sociologists most enduring concepts.

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- The analysis in *Suicide*, emphasizing the individual's integration into social structures and culture, has been widely used in sociological studies of deviance, crime, and other social "pathologies."
- Perhaps more significant is Durkheim's recognition in his last major work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, that rituals directed at symbolic representations of groups constitute the basis of integration at the micro level of social organization
- His insistence on analyzing one set of social facts by another, Durkheim made a very strong case for sociology as a distinctive kind of enterprise.
- Insistence on positivism



In his analysis of suicide, as we just discussed, emphasizing individuals integration into social structures and cultures have been widely used in the sociological studies of deviance, crime and other social "pathologies" because we discussed that, we saw that how foundational was his work on suicide. Because in a very innovative argument a very provocative argument, he could demonstrate or he rather successfully demonstrated that why the large number of people tend to commit suicide, it has very specific connection with the degree of integration that these people experience and extent of control that they experience in a given society.

This has laid foundation to a host of sociological theories and discussions on the questions of deviance, on crime, on law and a host of other social pathologies, especially on delinquency or deviance or crime and why certain actions are defined as crime. Why that there are higher degree of crime, proclivity to commit crime among certain groups, especially in the context of race discrimination in US and Europe. These discussions have been very important. Perhaps more significant is the case Durkheim's recognition in his last major work, 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life', that rituals directed at symbolic representations of group constitutes the basis of integration at the micro level of social organization.

We discussed that, an extremely important argument, the kind of a very close connection between the symbolic system and its enactment, its performance as a kind of a ritual, and how that contributes for an enhanced sense of integration between or for an individual with that of the society. For Durkheim, religion is nothing but society worshipping itself. It is nothing but a community worshipping itself. He argues that these rituals are so important because they reinforce, they reiterate, or they cement the kind of attachment, belongingness that an individual feels towards his own community.

It is a kind of a beautiful sociological explanation that Durkheim provides to the wide forms of religiosity, including that of belief systems, including rituals, customs, festivities, congregations and a host of other things. Each of these arguments really laid foundation for normal forms of explanation for the sociologist who came after Durkheim, who are interested in understanding different forms of society. His insistence on analysing one of the social facts by another, Durkheim made a very strong case for sociology as a distinctive kind of enterprise.


Here we come across this point specifically his enormous contribution in terms of methodology and theory because that if a discipline has to take shape and if a discipline needs to establish itself, then it requires its founding fathers to very clearly delineate the kind of an exclusive methodological as well as epistemological foundation positivism, a discipline assumes its credentials only when its practitioners are able to tell explicitly that this discipline is unique in terms of its epistemology, in terms of its methodology, in what way it is different from other disciplines and what are the kind of a theoretical possibilities, what are its unique possibilities offered by it and he succeeded to a large extent in doing that.

In that sense Durkheim very forcefully argued to see sociology as a positive science and we discussed it sufficiently because he was of the opinion that sociology can be seen as a science


that looks at the social phenomenon, just like any other physical science that looks at the nature or physical phenomena of the world.

Durkheim was a positivist and he used this positivist methodology when he studied suicide or when he studied other phenomenon, because he believed that one set of social facts can be analysed by another set of social facts by using all possibilities offered by science.

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- Durkheim has been accused as a social conservative; someone preoccupied with the questions of integration by ignoring constraints and coercion behind it. Durkheim does not investigate the extent to which shared culture upheld and reinforced the values of a ruling class.
- Durkheim does not see people as skilled, reflexive persons who knowledgeably and actively create the world in which they live. For Durkheim, people are rule-following creatures; he does not see them as rule-creating creatures.
- He ignores the role of power.



Now, what are the kind of critical evaluations being discussed so far about the enormous contributions offered by Durkheim, but then what are the kinds of criticisms been levelled against Durkheim by other sociologist or how do we evaluate Durkheim as a scholar now, when we look back almost 100 years back or more than 100 years back.

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If you just keep Karl Marx in mind, this particular point of criticism becomes more evident. Durkheim was a kind of a social conservative, he entire understanding, his entire articulation of sociology as a discipline was aimed to understand this whole question of social integration.

He was not a person who celebrated social change, he was very sceptical about social change, especially the more dramatic or drastic form of social change something like a revolution. Durkheim was extremely sceptical and doubtful about the positive aspects of these

revolution, he did not even believe in the kind of an emancipatory revolution, emancipatory possibilities of revolution as in the case of Karl Marx.

He has been accused as a social conservative, who was always preoccupied with the question of identifying the conditions that will ensure the continuation of a social status quo or a social order or a social stability and someone preoccupied with the question of integration by ignoring constraints and coercion behind it. You know that the whole question of integration is a very problematic one but of course Durkheim presented it as a very positive one, but you also need to keep in mind that integration can be achieved through a whole set of coercive mechanisms.

For example, a slave society, a society in which slavery is being institutionalized, will have its own set of integration or a feudal society which will have its own quality of integration, but what extent can we celebrate that kind of integration is a very problematic question, to what extent you can say that this is a very acceptable form of integration, it is a very problematic statement.

Durkheim did not really pay sufficient attention to the kind of constraints and coercion behind it, he did not really look into, Durkheim does not investigate the extent to which shared culture upheld and reinforced the values of a ruling class. So, who is holding power in a society, and how is this power getting translated into both material aspect as well as non-material aspects of power relations.

How is this power relation gets translated into different modes of cultural symbols, shared cultural values, and how that a large section of population are directly or indirectly forced to believe in this particular cultural value is a very important question that Durkheim did not ask.

So, he did not pay sufficient attention to the role played by shared culture, and how it was reinforced by the values of a ruling class, values which were enforced, imposed on others by the sheer power of the ruling class. Marx comes as a complete stark contrast and very emphatically argues that the dominant values of every society are the values of the dominant class, i.e. extremely incisive argument.

The dominant values of every societies are the values of the dominant class, whereas Durkheim does not look into the whole question of who is dominant and why certain other



people are not dominant and whether is there any connection between the set of values upheld by the dominant class over others, he does not really look into that.

Durkheim does not see people as skilled reflexive persons who knowledgeably and actively create the world in which they live. This is yet another very interesting point of debate. Durkheim is extremely sceptical about the whole question of people's autonomy. He believes that people behave in a kind of a mechanical manner because they are completely constrained by social facts, a person is born into a world of social facts and he or she is socialized into that and then she acts as per the dictates of the society. You remember, the discussion we had about social fact where Durkheim very beautifully argues that social facts are coercive, the moment you try to deviate from a social fact, society will pounce upon you, society will act aggressively on you, society will teach you a lesson.

In that sense, we get a very rather pessimistic view about the possibility of an individual. Durkheim is very clear that society is like a cage and once you are into that cage, you cannot really move out of that. And this position has been criticized by a whole lot of other people, they have argued that Durkheim has a very negative image about the autonomy or freedom of individual.

Durkheim does not see people as skilled reflexive persons who knowledgeably and actively create the world in which they live. The extent to which human beings are capable of creating a life for themselves, a society for themselves is very little according to Durkheim.

This point has come up again and again as a major point of criticism. For Durkheim, people are rule following creatures, he does not see them as rule creating creatures, a very important argument. Durkheim really downplays the role of human agency. He does not give sufficient attention to the ability of human beings to actively create a society, and ignores the role of power as something that we discussed here. The question of unequal situation of a society, unequal structuring of a society, who holds power, who does not hold power and how this inequality in power is shaping society in a particular manner has not been the major focus of Durkheim.

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- Jennifer Lehmann contends that Durkheim's reflections on women in *Suicide* are indicative of a patriarchal viewpoint which characterizes Durkheim's entire social theory.



- Rational public man is implicitly contrasted with passive, emotional woman. This is a gendered division, as public, social, rational life represents males, and the private sphere of the family, which is passionate, irrational, and biological, represents females. Durkheim sees this division as beneficial, universal, and moral, when in reality it reflects the patriarchal power of men over women.



Jennifer Lehmann contends that Durkheim's reflections on women in suicide are indicative of a patriarchal viewpoint, which characterizes Durkheim's entire social theory. Of course, we know that and we discussed that. He was not really able to move beyond the kind of a patriarchal sentiments or patriarchal ideology that was raining during this particular time. He shared quite a lot of such patriarchal viewpoints, which characterize Durkheim's entire social theory.

Then, a rational public man is implicitly contrasted with passive, emotional women. There is a gender division, as public, social, rational life represents male, and private sphere of the family, which is passionate, irrational and biological represent the female. Durkheim sees this division as beneficial, universal and moral but even in reality it reflects a patriarchal power of men over women.

The kind of characterization that we are making in this point, it is typical of the kind of a binary that are presented by social theorists and also presented in the common sensical realm of every society, where you look at public man, rational public man is implicitly contrasted with passive and emotional woman.

Rationality, the ability to think scientifically, the ability to detach from emotion is seen as a unique ability of the man, whereas woman is seen as passive and is seen as emotional, is seen as vulnerable. This gender division, as a public man, as a social man and the rational life of human beings. Rational life of man is contrasted with the private sphere of woman, that of the family and which is passionate, irrational and biological represents the female, and this is an extremely important argument.

If you are familiar with the theories of feminism, these contrasts are brought into the fore and they are critiqued very systematically, the conventional way in which men are associated with the public sphere and the women are associated with the private sphere. Men are associated with the public society, whereas women are associated the private domestic sphere. And the men are rational, scientific, courageous, not emotional, whereas women are more passionate, they are emotional, they are illogical, they are irrational.

This particular depiction of men and women as binaries, this was something very predominant during Durkheim's time and Durkheim did not question that rather, he went by that, and he even argued that this was something beneficent, it was something beneficial because the domestic sphere is taken care by more appropriate women, because they are more emotional, and the private and the public sphere is taken care by men who are scientifically oriented, who are rationally oriented.

He argued that it is universal, and not only that it is moral, it is something desirable, it is how society must work. It is a very problematic position, now no sociologist would agree with that, we all know that how gender roles are defined and reinforced in that there is nothing natural that a woman takes care of the household and man goes out work. We have a number of examples, a whole lot of societies where these, gender roles or gender division of labour is completely dismantled, but Durkheim believed that, and where in reality it reflects the patriarchal power of men over women.

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- Durkheim believed that racial problems, like class issues, would be solved by the increased rational division of labor, where people naturally reached their ability level. He does not analyze the power of racism and issues of privilege associated with that.
- He often argued that the need for social integration brought about the cultural and structural arrangements that would meet this need for integration. Problem of teleology.



Durkheim also believed that racial problems like class issues would be solved by the increased rational division of labour, where people naturally reach their ability level and he does not analyse the power of racism, and issues of privilege associated with that.

This is again is a point we came across when we discussed his argument about or his viewpoints on education and on morality. Durkheim is rather naive in believing that the people will be able to overcome all these issues of racism and other things, they are able to think rationally. But we know that those things do not happen, especially the people who occupy positions of privilege, it would be very hard for them to let that go, it never happens automatically.

We have been seeing over this so many decades that the people who always have these privileges, they try to safeguard that, they try to lay a monopolistic claim over that, and hence this distinction within society, the discrimination within the society continues. But Durkheim believed that when people becoming more and more rational, these privileges will come down, the kind of ascribed status, your higher status, your wealth and your higher ritual position, all these things will come down, but that did not happen.

So, he does not analyse the power of racism and issues of privilege associated with that. Race was not a major concern for Durkheim, he did not look at race as a socially constructed one, and a construct that has enormous significance, enormous implication, and consequence on everyday lives of people.

On the one hand, when it privileges a certain group of people, because of that very privilege, it has enormous negative consequences on the vast majority of the rest of the people, he did not really bother to look into that. He often argued that the need for social integration brought about the cultural and structural arrangement that the world meet this need for integration, a problem of teleology.

So, he often argued that the need for social integration brought about the cultural and structural arrangement that would meet this need for integration. Another major point of criticism about Durkheim is that his theories especially on structural functionalism is nothing but a kind of a teleological argument. Teleology is the belief that certain things are in place because of its intended functions. So, you make a kind of a confusion between the causality and its functionality and Durkheim was not free from that.

He argued that the need for social integration brought about the cultural and structural arrangement that would meet this need for integration. This integration was seen as an ultimate requirement and for achieving that requirement he believed that societies went into different forms of differentiation and different forms of structural arrangement which led to an inescapable situation of teleology. This has been widely pointed out by host of people who were extremely critical of Durkheim's position on structural functionalism.

We need to end here now and let me reiterate the point that Durkheim definitely is one of the most important scholars of sociology who provided a kind of very distinctive character, who played one of the most important role in establishing sociology as a distinctive discipline, as a distinct modern discipline with a unique, exclusive, epistemological, methodological orientation, which studies a unique phenomenon in the society, the social in the society.

You will see that how these arguments are criticized by later scholars. When Max Weber comes into picture he criticizes his positivistic orientation, he provides a very beautiful counter argument against the kind of a positivistic orientation of Durkheim's argument. So, these discussions continue. So, let us end here and we will meet in the next class for our discussion on Max Weber. Thank you.