

CLASSICAL THEORIES I

Émile Durkheim: From Mechanical to Organic Solidarity

Karl Marx: From Capitalism to Communism

Max Weber: The Rationalization of Society

Summary

Suggested Readings

The early giants of social theory are noted for their creation of grand theories, theories that, as defined in Chapter 1, are vast, highly ambitious efforts to tell the story of great stretches of social history and/or large expanses of the social world. These theories of history generally culminate, in their authors' times, with descriptions of a society that, while it has made progress, is beset with problems. The creators of such theories usually offer ideas about how to solve those problems and thereby create a better society.

ÉMILE DURKHEIM: FROM MECHANICAL TO ORGANIC SOLIDARITY

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) built on the work of the French social theorist Auguste Comte, but he became a far more important figure than Comte in the history of theory. In fact, at least some observers consider Durkheim *the* most important theorist in the history of sociology. To this day, many forms of sociological theorizing bear the stamp of his thinking.

Two Types of Solidarity

Durkheim's grand theory involves a concern for the historical transformation of societies from more primitive mechanical forms to more modern organic ones. What differentiates these two types of societies is the source of their solidarity, or what holds them together. The key here is the division of labor.

In **mechanical solidarity**, society is held together by the fact that virtually everyone does essentially the same things (gathering fruits and vegetables, hunting animals). In other words, there is little division of labor in primitive society, and this fact holds society together. In contrast, in more modern **organic solidarity** a substantial division of labor has occurred, and people perform increasingly specialized tasks. Thus, some may make shoes, others may bake bread, and still others may raise children. Solidarity here comes from differences; that is, individuals need the contributions of an increasing number of people in order to function and even to survive.

Durkheim envisioned a historical transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity. This idea is clearly different from Comte's model of social change. Comte thought in terms of changes in ideas, in the way people seek to explain what transpires in the world; Durkheim dealt with changes in the material world, specifically in the ways in which we divide up and do our work.

Changes in Dynamic Density

What causes the change from mechanical to organic solidarity? Durkheim's answer is that the transformation results from an increase in the **dynamic density** of society. Dynamic density has two components. The first is simply the sheer number of people in society. However, an increase in the number of people is not enough on its own to induce a change in the division of labor, because individuals and small groups of people can live in relative isolation from one another and continue to be jacks-of-all-trades. That is, even in societies with large populations, each individual can continue to do most of the required tasks. Thus, a second factor is necessary for dynamic density to increase and lead to changes in the division of labor: there must be an increase in the amount of interaction that takes place among the people in society. When increasingly large numbers of people interact with greater frequency, dynamic density is likely to increase to the point that a transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity occurs.

What is it about an increase in dynamic density that leads to the need for a different division of labor? With more people, there is greater competition for scarce resources, such as land, game, and fruits and vegetables. If everyone competes for everything, there is great disorder and conflict. With an increased division of labor in which some people are responsible for one of these things and other people are responsible for other things, there is likely to be less conflict and more harmony. Perhaps more important is the fact that greater specialization

mechanical solidarity In Durkheimian theory, the idea that primitive society is held together by the fact that there is little division of labor and, as a result, virtually everyone does essentially the same things.

organic solidarity To Durkheim, the idea that because of the substantial division of labor in modern society, solidarity comes from differences; that is, individuals need the contributions of an increasing number of people in order to function and even to survive.

dynamic density The number of people in a society and their frequency of interaction. An increase in dynamic density leads to the transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity.

in performing specific tasks makes for greater efficiency and ultimately greater productivity. Thus, with an increased division of labor, more of everything can be produced for an expanding population. Greater peace and prosperity are the results, or at least that is what Durkheim contends.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917)

A Biographical Vignette

Durkheim is most often thought of today as a political conservative, and his influence within sociology certainly has been a conservative one. But in his time, he was considered a liberal. This was exemplified by the active public role he played in the defense of French army captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish man whose court-martial for treason in the late 19th century was felt by many to be based on anti-Semitic sentiments in some sectors of French society.

Durkheim was deeply offended by the Dreyfus affair, particularly its anti-Semitism. But he did not attribute this anti-Semitism to racism among the French people. Characteristically, he saw it as a symptom of the moral sickness confronting French society as a whole. He said:

When society undergoes suffering, it feels the need to find someone whom it can hold responsible for its sickness, on whom it can avenge its misfortunes; and those against whom public opinion already discriminates are naturally designated for this role. These are the pariahs who serve as expiatory victims. What confirms me in this interpretation is the way in which the result of Dreyfus's trial was greeted in 1894. There was a surge of joy in the boulevards. People celebrated as a triumph what should have been a cause for public mourning. At least they knew whom to blame for the economic troubles and moral distress in which they lived. The trouble came from the Jews. The charge had been officially proved. By this very fact alone, things already seemed to be getting better and people felt consoled.

Thus, Durkheim's interest in the Dreyfus affair stemmed from his deep and lifelong interest in morality and the moral crisis confronting modern society.

To Durkheim, the answer to the Dreyfus affair and crises like it lay in ending the moral disorder in society. Because that could not be done quickly or easily, Durkheim suggested more specific actions, such as severe repression of those who incite hatred of others and government efforts to show the public how it is being misled. He urged people to "have the courage to proclaim aloud what they think, and to unite together in order to achieve victory in the struggle against public madness."

Collective Conscience

Another important aspect of Durkheim's argument about the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity is that it is accompanied by a dramatic change in what he called the **collective conscience**, the ideas shared by the members of a group, tribe, or society. These ideas are collective in the sense that no one individual knows or possesses all of them; only the entire collection of individuals has full knowledge and possession of them.

The collective conscience in mechanical solidarity is very different from that in organic solidarity. In mechanical solidarity and the small, undifferentiated societies associated with it, the collective conscience affects everyone and is of great significance to them. People care deeply about collective ideas. Furthermore, the ideas are very powerful, and people are likely to act in accord with them. The ideas are also quite rigid, and they tend to be associated with religion.

In contrast, in organic solidarity and the large, differentiated societies linked with it, fewer people are affected by the collective conscience. In other words, more people are able to evade the ideas partially or completely. The collective conscience is not as important, and most people do not seem to care about it deeply. It is far weaker and does not exercise nearly as much control over people. The collective conscience is far more flexible and adaptable and less associated with anything we think of as religion.

For example, in a primitive society with mechanical solidarity people might feel very deeply about being involved in group activities, including the selection of a new leader. If one member does not participate, everyone will know, and difficulties will arise for that person in the group. However, in a modern society characterized by organic solidarity, the feeling about such political participation (e.g., voting) is not nearly as strong. People are urged to vote, but there is not very much strength of conviction involved, and in any case the fact that some do not vote is likely to escape the view of their neighbors.

Law: Repressive and Restitutive

How do we know whether there has been a transition from mechanical to organic solidarity? From a strong to a weak collective conscience? Durkheim argued that we can observe these changes in a transformation in the law. Mechanical solidarity tends to be characterized by **repressive law**. This is a form of law in which offenders are likely to be severely punished for any action that is seen by the tightly integrated community as an offense against the powerful

collective conscience The ideas shared by the members of a collectivity such as a group, a tribe, or a society.

repressive law Characteristic of mechanical solidarity, a form of law in which offenders are likely to be severely punished for any action that is seen by the tightly integrated community as an offense against the powerful collective conscience.

collective conscience. The theft of a pig might lead to the thief's hands being cut off. Blaspheming against the community's god or gods might result in the removal of the blasphemer's tongue. Because people are so involved in the moral system, offenses against it are likely to be met with swift, severe punishments. These reactions are evidence that repressive law is in place, and such law is, in turn, a material reflection of the existence of a strong collective conscience and a society held together by mechanical solidarity.

As we have seen, over time mechanical solidarity gives way to organic solidarity and a progressive weakening of the collective conscience. The indicator of a weak collective conscience, of the existence of organic solidarity, is **restitutive law**. Instead of being severely punished for even seemingly minor offenses against the collective morality, individuals in this more modern type of society are likely simply to be asked to comply with the law or to repay (make restitution to) those who have been harmed by their actions. Thus, one who steals a pig might be required to work for a certain number of hours on the farm from which the pig was stolen, pay a fine, or repay society by spending a brief period in jail. This is obviously a far milder reaction than having one's hands cut off for such an offense. The reason is that the collectivity is not deeply and emotionally invested in the common morality ("Thou shalt not steal") that stands behind such a law. Rather, officials (the police, court officers) are delegated the legal responsibility to be sure the law and, ultimately, the morality are enforced. The collectivity can distance itself from the whole thing with the knowledge that it is being handled by paid and/or elected officials.

More extremely, something like blaspheming against God is likely to go unnoticed and unpunished in modern societies. Having a far weaker collective conscience, believing little in religion, people in general are likely to react weakly or not at all to a blasphemer. And officials, busy with far greater problems, such as drug abuse, rape, and murder, are unlikely to pay any attention at all to blasphemy, even if there are laws against it.

Anomie

At one level Durkheim seems to be describing and explaining a historical change from one type of solidarity to another. The two types of solidarity merely seem to be different, and one does not seem to be any better or worse than the other. Although mechanical solidarity is not problem-free, the problems associated with organic solidarity and how they might be solved concerned Durkheim. Several problems come into existence with organic solidarity, but the one that worried Durkheim most is what he termed *anomie*. Durkheim viewed anomie (and

restitutive law Characteristic of organic solidarity and its weakened collective conscience, a form of law in which offenders are likely simply to be asked to comply with the law or to repay (make restitution to) those who have been harmed by their actions.

KEY CONCEPT

Social Facts

Crucial to understanding Durkheim's thinking and the development of modern sociology is his concept of **social facts**. Durkheim developed this idea because he was struggling to separate the then-new discipline of sociology from the existing fields of psychology and philosophy. While philosophers think about abstractions, Durkheim argued, sociologists should treat social facts as things. As such, social facts are to be studied empirically; this practice distinguishes sociologists from philosophers, who merely speculate about abstract issues without venturing into the real world and collecting data on concrete social phenomena.

Durkheim also argued that social facts are external to, and coercive over, individuals. This distinguishes them from the things that psychologists study. Psychologists are concerned with psychological facts that are internal (not external) to individuals and are not necessarily coercive over them.

Durkheim distinguished between two types of social facts: material and nonmaterial. **Material social facts** are social facts that are materialized in the external social world. An example is the structure of the classroom in which you are taking the course for which you are reading this book. It is a material reality (you can touch and feel the walls, desks, blackboard), and it is external to you and coercive over you. In terms of the latter, the structure of the room may encourage listening to, and taking notes on, lectures. It also serves to prevent you from, say, playing baseball in the room while a lecture is in process.

Nonmaterial social facts are social facts that are also external and coercive, but that do not take a material form. The major examples of nonmaterial social facts in sociology are norms and values. Thus, we are also prevented from playing baseball while a lecture is in progress because of unwritten and widely shared rules about how one is supposed to behave in class. Furthermore, we have learned to put a high value on education, with the result that we are very reluctant to do anything that would adversely affect it.

We can see how a nonmaterial social fact is coercive over us, but in what sense is it also external to us? The answer is that things like the norms and values of society are the shared possessions of the collectivity. Some, perhaps most, of them are internalized in the individual during the socialization process, but

social facts To Durkheim, the subject matter of sociology. Social facts are to be treated as things that are external to, and coercive over, individuals, and they are to be studied empirically.

material social facts Social facts that take a material form in the external social world (e.g., architecture).

nonmaterial social facts Social facts that are external and coercive, but that do not take a material form (e.g., norms and values).