Who Was Durkheim?

- Born in Alsace-Lorraine from a long line of rabbis
- Expected to become a rabbi
- Became concerned with the relevance of religious teachings to the modern world
- A star student, he eventually became professor at the Sorbonne in Paris
Why is Durkheim the first author in nearly every social theory class?

**Durkheim’s Most Famous Works**

**Early Work**  Society, Sociability, and Social Science  
- *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893)  
- *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895)  
- *Suicide* (1897)

**Later Work**  Ideas, Imaginations, Religion  
- *Primitive Classification* (1903, with Marcel Mauss)  
- *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912)
A Partial Tour through the Wonders of Durkheim

When, Why, and How Do Societies Stay Together?

- Modernization and the Division of Labor
- Science Positive
- The symbolic work of community (September 6)
- Bringing it all together: symbols, trust, and modernity

The Division of Labor in Society (1893)

- General course of all societies: premodern ⇒ modern
- The principal change: division of labor
- Differentiation brings mutual dependence
- Bonds among different kinds

Disclaimer: this is not a comprehensive view of Durkheim’s sociology.
The law of the division of labour applies to organisms as well as to societies... The division of labour in society appears no more than a special form of this general development.

*Division of Labor in Society*
p. 3
Division of Labor: Apparent Benefits

Since it increases both the productive capacity and skill of the workman, it is the necessary condition for the intellectual and material development of societies; it is the source of civilisation.

_Dol_, p. 12

Division of Labor: Cultural Impact

We perceive perfection in the competent man, one who seeks not to be complete but to be productive, one who has a well-defined job to which he devotes himself, and carries out his task, ploughing his single furrow.

_Dol_, p. 4

Discuss the orange juice example
Division of Labor: Cultural Problems

Far from it assisting the progress of morality, it is in the great industrial centres that crime and suicide are most frequent.

_DoL_, p. 13

...the number of such morbid phenomena seems to increase as the arts, science and industry progress.

_DoL_, p. 12

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Division of Labor: The Real Functions

The economic services that it (DOL) can render are insignificant compared with the moral effect that it produces, and its true function is to create between two or more people a feeling of solidarity.

_DoL_, p 17

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Therefore, we need some other reason that makes it culturally “worth it” for societies to divide labor—simple efficiency isn’t enough.

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This excursion from the lecture’s line allows to underscore a key point in Durkheim, which runs through his entire career’s work:
The Types of Solidarity

Mechanical Solidarity In “primitive” societies, people feel solidarity with one another because they are similar. Societies are undifferentiated; they therefore split often. Religion holds societies together through shared beliefs.

Organic Solidarity In “modern” societies, people feel solidarity with one another because they are different. Societies are radically differentiated; they do not split because every part depends on every other part.

Psychological Example

Doubtless, sexual attraction is never felt save between individuals of the same species, and fairly generally love presumes a certain harmony of thought and feeling. It is nevertheless true that what imparts its specific character to this tendency and generates its specific force is not the similarity but the dissimilarity of the natures that it links together. It is because men and women differ from one another that they seek out one another with such passion.

*DoL*, p. 17
Suicide

What are the effects of different degrees and kinds of modernity?
Method: study suicide rates in Catholic and Protestant countries
Four types of suicide
Argument: modernity offers opportunities but also \textit{anomie} (sense of disconnection, not belonging). Anomic suicides rise in modern societies.
Above all, \textbf{Suicide is not an individual, but rather a social, phenomenon.}
The Religion of Modernity

There is indeed one area in which the common consciousness has grown stronger, becoming more clearly delineated: in its view of the individual. As all the other beliefs and practices assume less and less religious a character, the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion. We carry on the worship of the dignity of the human person. . . . it is a common faith. . . . It is indeed from society that it draws all this strength.

*DoL*, p. 122

Returning to the idea of the religion of modernity, though: . . . that as modernity progresses, we move closer and closer to pure, efficient social organization, society produces a **cult of the individual**: a religion (or at least an ideology) that makes the human individual a sacred object. Having accomplished much in his life's early work to build and defend sociology, Durkheim spent his later life exploring this set of ideas: the relationship among culture, religion, and society. With his nephew, Marcel Mauss, Durkheim first investigated the process and importance of **classification**: the process of grouping things into conceptually-oriented groups.
The Role of Language

- Saussure: *Course in General Linguistics* (1913). Language structures thought; without naming and categorizing, it is impossible to think or know.

Language (Saussure): a series of contiguous subdivisions marked off on both the indefinite plane of jumbled ideas (A) and the equally vague plane of sounds (B).

Each of these ideas refers to something crucial: humans experience everything filtered through a structured, interpretive process. “Reality” doesn’t come pre-packaged for humans to comprehend. Rather, in order to understand the jumble of inputs we observe, we have to impose a scheme of classification and division on that jumble. Durkheim and Mauss’s insight was that it was society’s job to provide that classification system.

Using that insight, Durkheim turned from abstract theory back to specific study.

Imagine that for some time now you have understood religion as collective beliefs and practices that shape a society’s moral identity. You have become convinced, as well, that in modern, democratic societies religion plays an increasingly minor role. You are eager, then, to discover what supplies a sense of belonging and moral scaffolding in modern societies. If religion provided moral solidarity in the past, and if religion has been in a continuous state of decline, what will take its place in the future? And what of today?

Now imagine this: a fellow citizen is unjustly accused and convicted of high treason. It is clear to you and others that he has been scapegoated by military and government officials: his rights have been betrayed. Soon, many rally to his defence. With marches in the street and flags and speeches in the air, your society is stirred and the social ideals of liberty and justice are renewed. You witness a moral community being forged: sacred rites and beliefs clearly emerge. These, however, are not centered on the totems or gods of yesterday, but on the rights and dignity of the individual. You begin to realize that the elementary forms...
What is the function of religion?

How can we understand religion scientifically?

Methodology: seek the most primitive (elementary) forms and work forward

Durkheim takes us back to "primitive" societies to ask what constitutes religion. He rejects common ideas of the time—such as the idea of a supreme being, creation myth, or soul—as being the central elements of all religion. He rejects these because we can think of practices we understand as "religious" that do not conform to these definitions. We are searching, here, for the essence of religion: the fundamental elements that make it what it is.

Using the available ethnography of his day, Durkheim went back to what were widely considered the most primitive societies: the tribes of Australia and, to a lesser extent, the Americas.

...we descend to the least evolved societies known, those which the Germans call...Naturvölker.... There is a complete lack of distinction between [the individual] and his exterior soul or his totem. He and his "fellow-animal" together compose a single personality.

_Primitive Classification_, p. 6

The essence of these tribes' religions is what Durkheim refers to as totemism:
The Totem

It is the tangible form in which that intangible substance [society] is represented in the imagination; diffused through all sorts of disparate beings, that energy alone is the real object of the cult.

*Formes* (Trans. Fields) 191

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Collective Effervescence

Feeling possessed and led on by some sort of external power that makes him think and act differently than he normally does, he naturally feels he is no longer himself. It seems to him that he has become a new being.

*Formes* (Trans. Fields) 219–220
And because his companions feel transformed in the same way at the same moment, and express this feeling by their shouts, movements, and bearing, it is as if he was in reality transported into a special world entirely different from the one in which he ordinarily lives, a special world inhabited by exceptionally intense forces that invade and transform him. . . how would experiences like these not leave him with the conviction that two heterogeneous and incommensurable worlds exist in fact? All this leads to the role and outcome of religious practices: the development of a social conscience collective (collective consciousness) that holds society together.

Religion: Functions

The main object of religion is not to give man a representation of the natural universe. . . . In this respect, it [would be] barely more than a fabric of errors. But Religion is first and foremost a system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it.

*Formes* (Trans. Fields) 227
Religion: Definition

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.

*Formes (Trans. Fields)* 44

Religion as an Eminently Social Thing

The symbol thus takes the place of the thing, and the emotions aroused are transferred to the symbol. It is the symbol that is loved, feared, and respected.

*Formes (Trans. Fields)* 221–22

Religion, Durkheim tells us, is an eminently social thing. Famously, he asks, "if the totem is the symbol of both the god and the society, is this not because the god and the society are one and the same?" (Fields trans., p. 208)

It is to the symbol that one is grateful, and it is to the symbol that one sacrifices oneself.

*Formes (Trans. Fields)* 250–251
The soldier who dies for his flag dies for his country, but the idea of the flag is actually in the foreground of his consciousness. Indeed, the flag sometimes causes action directly. Although the country will not be lost if a solitary flag remains in the hands of the enemy or won if it is regained, the soldier is killed retaking it. He forgets that the flag is only a symbol that has no value in itself but only brings to mind the reality it represents. The flag itself is treated as if it was that reality. I’ll leave you today with some images that may convey the sense of sacredness in contemporary society—think about these in preparation for Thursday’s discussions.
Émile Durkheim, 1858–1917
Social Facts and Solidarity

2008-01-18

31s
"Is not this the kind of fasting which I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the yoke of burden, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?"

-Isaiah 58:6-7-
Émile Durkheim, 1858–1917
Social Facts and Solidarity

January 22, 2008

26s
Photographie de Nick Ut, 1972.

Photographie de Nick Ut, 1972.

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