Émile Durkheim, 1858–1917
Religion, Social Facts, and Social Life

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Sociology 250
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Remembering last time....
Born in 1858 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)
When, Why, and How Do Societies Stay Together?

- Modernization and the Division of Labor
- *Science Positive*
- Social Facts
- The symbolic work of community
- 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
Logic and Methods: *The Division of Labor*... 

- Search for universal or widespread tendencies
- Similarities in form between society and biology
- Understand the functions of social phenomena
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.
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
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
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
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*
For Durkheim, the economy was always part of society, and depended on social bonds to develop. Therefore:

*economic efficiency cannot explain social behavior or social change*
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.
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
Early Durkheim: Main Points

- Society as a fundamental unit of study
- Sociability as *preceding* economic rationality
- Society—like organisms—progresses toward complexity and interdependence, and therefore toward secularization
- The opportunities and problems of modernity
- Methodological insights:
  - Social facts (*faits sociaux*)
  - Elementary forms (*formes elementaire*)
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
...to classify is not only to form groups; it means arranging these groups according to particular relations.... There are some which are dominant, others which are dominated, still others which are independent of each other. *Every classification implies a hierarchical order for which neither the tangible world nor our mind gives us the model....* we must... ask ourselves what could have led them to arrange their ideas in this way, and where they could have found the plan of this remarkable disposition.
The Role of Language

- Saussure: *Course in General Linguistics* (1913). Language structures thought; without naming and categorizing, it is impossible to think or know.
Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse
The Elementary Forms of Religious Life
What is the function of religion?

How can we understand religion scientifically?

Methodology: seek the most primitive (elementary) forms and work forward
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 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
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
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
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*
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
The “God/Society Equation”

“Is it not that the god and the society are one and the same?”