

Introduction

Wherever students of society are introduced to sociological traditions of thought, it is likely that the work of Emile Durkheim features strongly in the initiation. Durkheim's name is so firmly planted in the heartland of sociology's classical tradition that the reiteration of his importance has become something of a ritual performance. In a certain orthodoxy he is credited with conferring distinctiveness on the discipline, founding its method, and with defining a set of facts eminently social, and, as such, distinguishable from the 'facts' drawn from a psychological, biological, economic or utilitarian understanding of man and society. By the quality and volume of his own work, he has earned his place of importance, and through the inspiration of others he has brought forth a sociological literature of merit and substance. At the same time his work has been subjected to many criticisms, some justified, and to a number of misleading interpretations which have led to his work being neglected by some and turned aside by others. In early American sociology his writings were seen as granting an undue realism to social phenomena, and were thus believed to be antagonistic to America's individualistic and voluntaristic tradition.¹ In France his school of thought suffered an eclipse after the 1914–18 War, and through the 1930s; only recently has there been, especially in the pages of the *Revue Française de Sociologie*,² what amounts to a quite remarkable revival of interest in his method. In Britain the identification of Durkheim with a conservative image of society, and the linking of his concern for 'solidarity and the conservation of societies' to the general functionalist model, led to his work acquiring the unpopularity reserved for all functionalist thought, as Marxist and quasi-Marxist models were revived in the late 1950s and 1960s.³

The last decade has seen a clear revival of interest in his work, signalled by several English, French and American works,⁴ and by the publication of special 'Durkheim' issues of the French *Revue*. But it should not be taken as a symptom of a renascent conservatism in sociological thinking. On the contrary, the revival has been marked by a distinct move away from past

interpretations of Durkheim as the cornerstone of sociological conservatism, and, whilst the new work has not shed all scepticism about Durkheim's weaknesses as a sociologist, it does see these weaknesses in a new light. Recent interpretations have provided a more finely balanced estimation of Durkheim's sociology, and a sharper view of how Durkheimian thinking may be evaluated. We are now required to take more seriously the claim that Durkheim ought to be regarded, in some senses, as a radical critic of the developing industrial society he observed, and, instead of dismissing him as reactionary, set out to assess the nature and quality of this 'radicalism'.

The renewal of interest in and reinterpretation of his work deserves our attention, especially since the new commentaries have not been written by scholars wholly antagonistic to his mode of thinking, nor by scholars unreservedly sympathetic. John Horton pointed the way when he spoke of alienation and anomie, central concepts in Marx and Durkheim, as 'metaphors for a radical attack on the dominant institutions and values of industrial society'.⁵ Joseph Neyer and Melvin Richter, in a 1960 collection of essays, did much to undermine the established orthodoxies about his theories.⁶ But it was not until later works, and especially that of Lukes and Giddens,⁷ began to make their impact that a new view of Durkheim's sociology began to penetrate widely into sociology. It is this new current of thought which has, in large part, provided the occasion for the present book.

This book attempts to draw together and crystallize a singular interpretation of Durkheim's work and hold it up to critical examination. In doing so we have had to remind ourselves of the power of fashion in sociological thinking and guard against allowing the pendulum to swing too far in a different direction; we have had to temper enthusiasm with caution. But we have tried to do more than this, because this volume attempts to do more than reinterpret Durkheim's writings. As well as presenting to the new or returning student the major elements of Durkheimian sociology, as well as trying to evaluate the view of him as a 'radical' ('a socialist of sorts' as Lukes has described him) – we have also tried to free consideration of his writing from narrowly scholarly treatment. This is not because such exegesis is not valuable – without it the task could not even begin – and in any case most of the now available exegesis is of a very high quality. But we have tried to expand our consideration of his work away from pure exegesis simply because the next task – the consideration of his value as a sociological guide to concrete substantive areas of analysis – demands to be undertaken anew in the light of the enriched understanding of his general ideas. So, in this book, we have also concentrated on demonstrating the actual impact of Durkheim's thinking on important substantive areas of sociological inquiry – the state, the division of labour and class conflict,

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religion and ideology, race and society, education, and the problems of law and deviance. We hope that because of this, sociologists will be able to broaden their appreciation of his work, and new students will have an entrée into his theories which goes beyond methodological debates and formal treatment of him as a 'founding father'.

This volume sets out to provide 1) a basic introduction to Durkheim's thought; 2) a consistent view or interpretation of his sociology and political philosophy and 3) a practical introduction to his thought as applied to areas which are commonly part of current sociological inquiry. This last intention, carried through in the bulk of chapters 2 and following, naturally includes the discussion of more recent writers who have been directly or indirectly influenced by Durkheim's work.

An outline of the present book

In the first chapter we present a guide to his written work and his life and public career. Considerable space is given to an account of French society and politics of the period 1870–1920, especially as they formed the setting for his sociological thinking, and indeed as they formed the stage on which he acted out his practical reforming concerns. Choices of emphasis have to be made, and we have set out to evaluate the continuing relevance of Durkheimian thought; therefore correspondingly less space is given to the intellectual antecedents of Durkheim. Readers are directed to good reading on this subject. Chapter 1 also contains the broad interpretive thesis of the book, conveyed by way of a critique of Nisbet's view that Durkheim's work is motivated by profoundly conservative impulses and constitutes the very foundation of sociological conservatism.⁸ Without denying the importance of his concern with 'solidarity' and the conservation of societies, we have found good cause to support the view that there is an important strand of radical criticism in his work, backed by a secular reforming spirit. This theme – or at least the tension between conservatism and radicalism in his thought – is pursued in the substantive interests of the later chapters.

Chapter 1 does aim to stand as a general introduction to his major works, but it should be noted that rather less space is given to those topics which are naturally taken up in greater detail in the following chapters. For example, we mention his work on education in the first chapter, but more detailed attention is given in chapter 5; *Suicide* is discussed in rather more detail in the opening chapter because it does not have a single 'home' in the later chapters. The reader should also make a mental note of similar dispositions in regard to the treatment of major writers who have been influenced by Durkheim. Merton's elaboration of the concept of anomie has obviously been very important.⁹ In this book, the concept of anomie is

discussed at length in the chapter on the division of labour – the context in which Durkheim himself developed the idea to a great extent – whereas Merton's work is discussed most fully in the chapter on deviance and the law, again the area in which it most naturally falls. Similarly the work of Lévi-Strauss has a clear *general* importance in the development of Durkheimian themes, but detailed discussion of Lévi-Strauss is here reserved for the chapter on religion (7) and on race (4).

It is the chapters on the division of labour and class conflict (2), the political state (3), education (5), the law and deviance (6) and, to a lesser degree, race and primitive mentality (4) which provide the best opportunities for extending the interpretive arguments of chapter 1. In the fields of economic organization and education particularly, there is abundant evidence of Durkheim's practical reforming ideas and these can be readily judged in the light of subsequent developments. It is less immediately apparent in his work on religion, but the sociology of religion played such an important part in the corpus of his writings, that a book on Durkheim would be seriously incomplete without a discussion of it. The reader will note that five chapters and the introductory and concluding remarks have been written by one author who has tried to achieve consistency of theme and argument. Since we are not only concerned with Durkheim's writings, but also with fields of contemporary interest, especially where influenced by Durkheimian ideas, the chapters on religion and law and deviance have been contributed by different authors who not only have an understanding of Durkheim, but also have great depth of knowledge in these specialist fields. They were asked to contribute these chapters because of their specialist knowledge of these substantive fields and they were not expected to guarantee that everything they wrote adhered to the main author's 'party line'. Most readers will probably not discover striking contradictions, but differences and difficulties will remain and readers are warmly invited to explore them. Indeed we hope that all the chapters will occasion renewed discussion and debate. For example, in the field of education the revival of serious interest in Durkheim's work is at a very early stage, compared with, say, his influence on the sociology of religion.

We have written this book persuaded that the central themes or argument advanced by Durkheim concerning solidarity, the division of labour and the state are central to the general appreciation of his sociology. Therefore these ideas are introduced in chapter 1, and advanced in detail in chapter 2. To some degree they can be taken as understood in later chapters, but their very centrality has meant that it has been impossible to avoid some reiteration. Whilst we expect that the book can best be read in the order in which it is set out, readers with a special subject area interest may find their needs met by reading chapter 1 followed by that substantive area chapter.

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Chapter 4 on race and primitive mentality requires some special comment. In all other areas treated it is not difficult to uncover Durkheim's own interests, nor to trace the hand of his influence in current sociology. In the case of race and society this is transparently not so. But there are at least three good reasons for including this chapter. The first is that we believe that a reading of it will demonstrate that there is much more to be said on 'Durkheim and race' than many would have suspected. The second is that it shows that Durkheim did place very great importance on his arguments *dismissing* the significance of race in sociological understanding; he thus formed an early part of a sociological orthodoxy which conceptualized race in biological terms and ejected it from sociological thinking. Since this orthodoxy *and* continuing vital interest in race and society both persist, this raises intriguing questions about the adequacy of sociological attitudes to race. The third reason is that direct Durkheimian influence was not the only criterion for our selection of substantive areas; we were also influenced by the current importance attached to areas of inquiry in subsequent sociological writing.

One final comment should be made here, and this concerns the evaluation of Durkheimian sociology and its importance in contemporary work. The present volume is neither a hymn of praise nor a catalogue of condemnations. If we overlooked what we see to be the weaknesses, small and large, in Durkheim's approach, we would be misleading the reader. If, conversely, we had found little or nothing of value in his writings, it is most unlikely that we would have embarked on this project. In the matter of specific areas of inquiry, there are clearly many where his insights have been influential and continue to provide a profound stimulus – one can turn for example to the sociology of law, of religion and of suicide. There are others – and I suspect the sociology of education is one – where much of worth remains to be tapped. In the matter of the broader sociological philosophy – the Durkheimian meta-sociology if you like – his work, correctly seen as the writings of a man of conservative temperament with a broad vision of necessary social reconstruction, deserves to be evaluated in just that light. There is nothing new or startling in the observation that all sociology of any substance or breadth contains within it implicit or explicit political and social values, and embodies assumptions and presuppositions about the nature of man and society, particularly with regard to change and changeability. Some social philosophies maintain that societies are natural orders in which men intervene at their peril; others that societies are torn by internal contradictions which are transcended in the birth of a new order.

We have suggested in chapter 1 that present day sociology contains within it an opposition between reformist and revolutionary thinking, between thinking predicated on the assumption that social pathologies are 'treatable' broadly within the existing structure of property relations and

the disposition of democratic power, and thinking predicated on the assumption that most social pathologies are finally traceable to the central contradictions of contemporary society and can only be overcome in the transcendence of that society. That is not the only, nor necessarily the most central, opposition in contemporary sociology, but it is evident and important. Durkheim clearly believed that modern society was troubled by profound pathologies; that people could, should and would impose themselves on the natural process of social change towards greater complexity and individualism, in an effort of social reconstruction. He also quite explicitly rejected social revolution as a means of approaching the social ideal. One of his most explicit statements of this position occurs early in *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*:¹⁰

Let us suppose that by a miracle the whole system of property is entirely transformed overnight and that on the collectivist formula the means of production are taken out of the hands of the individual and made over absolutely to collective ownership. All the problems around us that we are debating today will still persist in their entirety.

The possibility of the transformation of property did not escape his attention, nor did the proposals for revolutionary change. Rather he gave reasons for rejecting these ideas. He contended that change through class conflict incurred more social harm than good; that the regulation of economic activities was a moral question as much as a question of power and interest; and he was also guided by his belief that radical socialist proposals for change entailed the danger of an over-powerful state organ. Settlement of these arguments has not been achieved; they cannot be set aside.

Since differences between Durkheim and other sociologists on this kind of issue are as much matters of presupposition as matters of sociology, it follows that any discussion of his work is bound to remain substantially within his own terms. Those terms need not and may not be accepted. But the challenge is to remain within his terms long enough to push his sociology to its limits and then reach our judgement of where the strengths and weaknesses lie. This is, on the whole what we have tried to do. But there are significant exceptions and this is so because there are areas – particularly with regard to the state and class relations – where Marxist analysis looms so large that it would be unwise to neglect it.

I do not think that Durkheimian theory provides a wholly sound basis for sociological theory; I do believe that it provides a consistent theory, of depth and imagination, yielding up a theoretical challenge which must be met. It also seems clear to me that in specific areas of inquiry his work contains insights of continuing value. And I am convinced that there is some fundamental truth in his understanding of the moral quality of social

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life which cannot be discarded. In the chapter on Durkheim's political sociology I have tried to show, through a discussion of authority and obligation as against coercive power and interest, how deeply this 'moral' conception of social facts penetrated into Durkheim's thinking. In his own terms this is thoroughly consistent. Stepping outside of his terms, it does appear to lead to his underestimation of power, coercion and interest. He does not offer a theory of how capitalism works, he does not incorporate into his sociology an explicit 'economic' theory of land, labour and capital. But then we return to the point that capitalism was not, for Durkheim, the focal category of analysis. Some of the difficulties this entailed can best be seen in his discussion of property; his view of changing property relations has been seen above. In several passages a discussion of the distribution of property (and possible changes in it) glides imperceptibly into a discussion of the moral attitudes and regulations surrounding property. If there is something wrong with theorizing about property relations without considering the moral elements of economic behaviour, there can equally be something wrong with conceptualizing property relations as if they were wholly or mostly moral relations. In fact some of his commentary on property, inequality and inheritance strongly implies the need for quite radical changes in the distribution of property and regulation of property relations, but this is discussed without any systematic acknowledgement of the resistance likely to be met when property rights and privileges are challenged. The loosely sketched out reasons for the expectation of a gradual 'evolutionary' change in property relations seem inadequate.

I am not, then, a Durkheimian. The strengths, and the limits of his work, in my estimation, are exactly as I have expressed them above and are developed in the body of this book. My distance from Durkheim will not always be readily apparent in the pages which follow and this is partly because, in devoting time and effort to his works, I have acquired a curious kind of sympathy – perhaps that minimum necessary for being able to appreciate his thought – but a sympathy which falls short of endorsement.

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Durkheim's life, public career and sociological thought

Social crisis and sociology

Durkheim was but twelve years old when France registered the double shock of defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, and the upheaval of the Paris Commune of 1870–1. But these events made their mark on him, as they did on most people of his generation, the first being a severe blow to national pride and self-confidence, the second dramatizing the potential for violent class conflict in a society which was becoming markedly more industrial, even if the pace of change in France was slower than in other European societies. Durkheim grew up in a France which was openly concerned with the question of national purpose and solidarity, and was faced with new and growing symptoms of social division, as the urban working class began to realize its strength. On the one hand, therefore, Durkheim had some ready awareness of a 'social question' which formed part of the social consciousness which influenced his sociology. In lectures and discussions he speaks freely of the divisive force of inequality, and the generality of class conflict in industrial societies.¹ On the other hand, the 'national question' greatly affected him too. The struggles of the Third Republic to establish its authority – against both reactionary and revolutionary forces – dominated his adult experience of political life. He had, like other nineteenth-century intellectuals, a sense of crisis, manifested variously as the loss of moral certainty, the spectre of social dissolution, of social division and class conflict, and as the problem of political authority. His sociology was very largely concerned with his understanding of this 'crisis', of its historical roots, its present manifestations and the paths to social reconstruction.

But a persistent oversimplification in interpreting Durkheim and other nineteenth-century writers has been to suggest that somehow they shared a sense of crisis, that they shared an understanding of social dissolution, and therefore founded their sociologies on the same basic intellectual impulse – the desire to find a way of preserving society. This is so vague and general a

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formula that it explains everything and nothing. Many writers of the period did have a deep sense of crisis, a sense that the whole basis of social life was being transformed at such a rate and in such ways that it not only reduced the lives of many people to misery, uncertainty or moral despair, but also threatened to bring an end to even the merest modicum of social order and political continuity. But the actual nature of the appreciation of this 'crisis', the diagnosis of its causes, and the prescription of a cure – these specific elements of different writers' ideas – varied so much that to trace them all to the same vague sense of crisis is to leave much unexplained and unexplored. This is especially true of the interpretation of Durkheim's sociology. We have been too readily persuaded by the bland argument that Durkheim lived in a society in which the 'problem of order' was paramount and thus founded his intellectual constructs on the perceived need to preserve its integrity. Some knowledge of both his life and of French society of the time is a prerequisite to the task of reshaping our appreciation of his sociology.

Durkheim's life, politics and the social context of France

Durkheim was born in 1858 in Alsace-Lorraine into a Jewish family which came to expect young Emile to become a Rabbi. He died in Paris in 1917, broken in spirit by the death of his son in the war, and worn out by academic work and by the public duties occasioned by the war effort. When Durkheim was a teenage boy the shaky structure of the Third Republic, which was to endure throughout his life, was beginning to emerge from the ruins of the upheaval of 1870. Because, despite its precariousness, the Republic did endure, and because, in broad terms, this period of forty odd years was 'peaceful' and relatively prosperous, it may appear to have been a period of some calm, interposed between its stormy beginnings and its tragic close. Indeed the latter two decades have sometimes been referred to as *la belle époque*, when, following their ultimate victory in the Dreyfus affair, the Republican forces had better secured their ground, and a kind of prosperity, particularly of the middling classes, had settled on France. Henri Peyre has described the Third Republic as 'the most stable of all French regimes' and has painted a picture of a nation – in the 1890s – 'enjoying unprecedented prosperity' at the heart of which Paris was 'the glamorous metropolis' frequented by pleasure-loving men and women who 'flocked to light comedies and Offenbach's frothy music'.² Such a picture may well be taken to sit uneasily with those brief quasi-historiographies which have described Durkheim's work as being written against a backdrop of grave crisis, and as preoccupied with order. To get closer to the truth we must abandon this simplistic equation which purports to explain his thinking, and relinquish characterizations of the period evoking a monotone of either

crisis or calm prosperity. Peyre himself, though more inclined than others to speak of a stable prosperous regime, is fully aware of another side to his story; his frothy Paris is a description which betrays some of the fragility and superficiality, and he adds that this life was 'for the happy few and the foreign visitors'.³ To Durkheim's stern eye they did not, in all probability, even appear to be happy. In any case the life of Paris was not the life of France. Its cosmopolitan enclaves were not very distant from a different Paris which fostered a serious radical and communist citizenry. Those like Durkheim who came from the provinces were never likely to mistake Paris, notwithstanding its dominance, for the nation.

Social pathologies were never far from the surface, and were to be found, in periodic crises, right on the surface. In the first place, the stable regime, the Third Republic, was, for the first twenty years of its life at least, far from stable and far from securely founded. The Constitution of 1875 which consecrated the Republic, is described by Coser as having been 'framed by Monarchists who expected the Republic soon to give way to a return of the Bourbons'.⁴ The word 'Republic' was inserted in the Constitutional laws 'almost by chance', and these laws were only barely passed by the two assemblies. Coser describes the first crisis of the fledgling Republic:

After the Constitution was adopted, the Republic was plunged into a new crisis. The President of the Republic, Marshal Marie de MacMahon, tried to establish a strong presidential system of government largely independent of parliament and with a weak cabinet, that could be recalled at will. In the course of the ensuing struggles, the President dissolved the Chamber of Deputies for the only time in the history of the Third Republic. His actions pitted the Church, the landowners, the upper bourgeoisie, and the forces of law and order against the Republican left, which was mainly composed of the lower middle classes, the anti-clericals among the educated and a working class weakened by the blood-letting of the Commune. In 1879 the Republicans decisively defeated MacMahon after he had dissolved the Chamber, and thus put an end to his dictatorial ambitions.⁵

Durkheim was, by this time, twenty-one years of age. He had left his native Épinal, in the eastern province of Lorraine, and had come to Paris. He had been outstandingly successful (and, as in the rest of his life, serious, studious and hardworking) at the Collège D'Épinal and, heartily recommended, had entered the Lycée Louis le Grand in Paris, a stepping stone to the École Normale Supérieure, the 'training ground for the intellectual elite of France'.⁶ He was not altogether happy at this school and showed his distaste for the emphasis on literary and aesthetic pursuits, which he saw as being at the expense of moral concern and scientific inquiry. Noted for his seriousness, nicknamed 'the metaphysician', and out of tune with his professors, he was placed near the bottom of the list of successful aggregation candidates in 1882.⁷ But his graduation was a necessary and