



## The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society



Durkheim, Emile



**Key Concepts:** Social Solidarity, Identity, Rights and Freedoms of Individuals

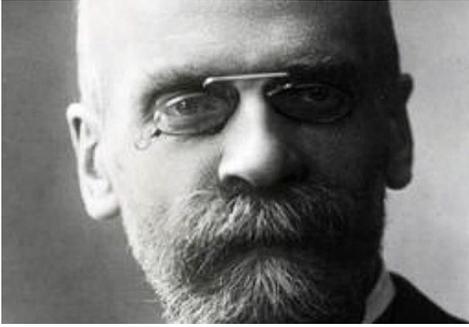
**Specific Arguments:** Sociology, Mechanical and Organic Solidarity, Functionalism, Critiquing Capitalism: Individualism, Suicide, and Religion



**Influential Works:** *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), *Suicide* (1897), *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912)

# Emile DURKHEIM

(1858 to 1917)



## Durkheim in Context

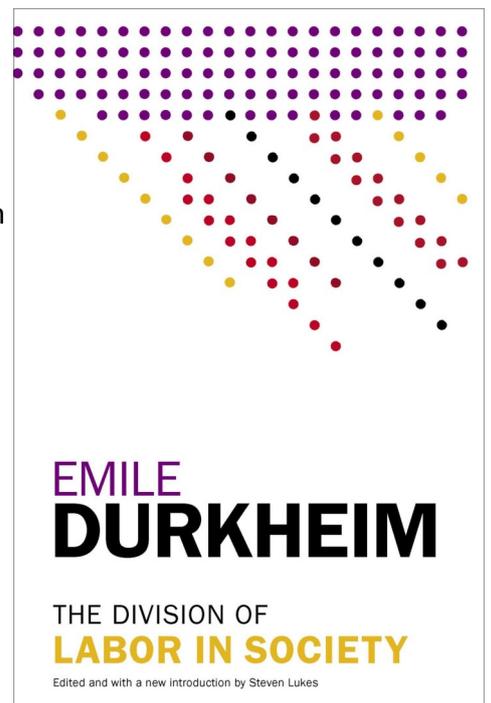
Emile Durkheim is widely regarded as the father of sociology. Educated as a philosopher, later an academic of pedagogy, he argued that neither these disciplines nor the increasingly popular field of psychology could thoroughly examine society and the issues facing it. The social sciences, he believed, were the only conduit through which the pressing issues of the day could be fully explored. He was the first ever Professor of the Science of Education and Sociology at the venerable Sorbonne. In attaining this seat, Durkheim had secured the academic gravitas that had, up until then, eluded the discipline.

When teaching Durkheim, be aware that the bulk of his academic work, his theses and inclinations, were largely influenced by the political and social climate of France at the time. There was a deep political crisis in the country; the revolution long matured, and a country in the full embrace of industry, France was suffering a crisis of national identity largely induced by the infamous Dreyfus affair of 1894. This led to pointed public debate on the issue of individualism. Were the individualist tenets of capitalism to supercede the communal, patriotic, ideology of the nation state? And if so, at what price? This wave of often impassioned discourse, alongside the society's stress on social progress and science, crashed loudly in the ears of Emile Durkheim.

## Sociology

Durkheim set out to form this new discipline of sociology as he believed it a necessity. He felt that fields of psychology and philosophy were grossly limited in their ability to study the society. The bias towards the scientific method of inquiry is important to note here. France, alongside many wealthy nations, had seen huge social change, and, of course, exorbitant wealth gains through the adaptation of industrial capitalism. With this, and with the public discourse surrounding individualism (which predated capitalism in France - owing its origins to the French Revolution), Durkheim set about justifying the discipline. He argued four specific points that supported the requirement for sociology.

First, scientific positivism, inspired by the philosopher Auguste Comte, needed to play a part. He argued the imperative of moving away from speculative and mystical views of human nature and history into a more quantifiable social science; central to this was the authority attained in observation as an academic method. Second, Durkheim stressed the need for sociology by integrating the philosophical tenet of social realism - already aflame in literary circles of contemporary France. Ultimately, it asserted that social realities exist outside of the individual's perception of them. This was an external framework of society, something empirical and objective, and required a move away from the individualism of psychology. Third, Durkheim opined the need to move social thought away from the individualism of contract theorists such as Hobbes and Rousseau. Their specific inclination toward speculating the origins of social solidarity was inherently linked to the individual's will. This, again, was disagreeable to Durkheim. Finally, Durkheim validated sociology on the basis that since the revolution, France had become ingrained in individualist social philosophy. Debates frequently erupted between leading French thinkers surrounding this new role of individualism, with



many arguing for collective obligations, and equally as many for the concept of the individual rights of the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man'. France, he felt, was the perfect breeding ground for sociology.

## Social Solidarity

Durkheim put forward the idea that society operated because of social solidarity. He saw this operating at four levels:

- 1) the system of bonds between individuals and the society
- 2) the bonds between individuals within a society
- 3) members of a society are united by ties to that society
- 4) solidarity refers to the intensity of the cohesion of attachments which link the individual to their society



## Mechanical Solidarity

Durkheim believed that there were two true forms of social solidarity. The first of these is Mechanical Solidarity. He felt that this type of social solidarity manifested through common identity. These social links between the individual and their common identity largely discourages individualism, leading instead to a collective consciousness, rather than an individual one. Central to this mechanical solidarity was the role of religion. It set its position as the dominant social institution, seconded only by the family. In this form of solidarity, links of dependency and bonds of obligation emanate in members of the society, most notably in their shared economic and domestic tasks. Here, individuality is at its least developed. It is, instead, the units of family and religion that assume the identity. An individual's role in that society is directed by the family and the religion. It is, in essence, a largely homogenous society, often a small population which is isolated, with a division of labour centred upon social co-operation.

## Organic Solidarity

Organic solidarity occurs when individuals are grouped together by the role they play in society, roles which are distinct from those of the family. Organic solidarity occurs in larger populations, rather than the small counterparts of mechanical. Here, the economy is industrial and operates through a complex division of labour. There exists a larger institutional structure that expands beyond the family, and, as a result, communal beliefs and norms are replaced by new links and bonds according to an individual's role in the division of labour. It is seen in industrialised cities and large populations; this ultimately leads to specialised economic functions. Bonds of obligation in the mechanical solidarity world now become contracts and contractual relations. Finally, it is in a society of organic solidarity where individualism and individual autonomy are at their most developed.

*'Is it our duty to seek to become a thorough and complete human being, one quite sufficient unto himself; or, on the contrary, to be only a part of a whole, the organ of an organism? Briefly, is the division of labor, at the same time that it is a law of nature, also a moral rule of human conduct; and, if it has this latter character, why and in what degree?'*

Emile Durkheim

## Functionalism

Perhaps one of Durkheim's key contributions to understanding and quantifying societies was his theory of functionalism. In illustrating this, he used a very simple analogy: society is a human body; it has separate organs (religion, education, politics, the judiciary, etc.) which are mutually dependent. If one major organ fails, then so too does the entire system. Thus, each part of society serves an imperative function in contributing to the continuous good health of the society. Durkheim used functionalism to explain the theory of consensus - *why* societies work together. He argued that consensus was born out of constraint; should one '*organ*' of the society suddenly malfunction, then it will bring about its own imminent destruction as well as all others. Thus, institutions of the society must work in harmony for their own interest.

Functionalism responds to the needs of society. A useful point of reference here is how educational curricula respond to the need of society; creating and shaping individuals who are trained to maximally function in their respective society.

## Critiquing Capitalism: Individualism, Suicide, and Religion

Certainly one of Durkheim's most idiosyncratic and primeval theories was that of suicide in the capitalist society. Having lived through the transition from agrarian economic dominance to industrial specialisation, Durkheim took note of the explosive rates of suicide in France. He linked this, quantifiably, to contemporary capitalism and its subsequent individualism.

Durkheim noted how with the advent of organic solidarity in capitalism, individualism peaked. Whilst seemingly endless opportunity for an individual manifested through the tenet of meritocracy, so too did the possibilities for complete and abject failure. He identified an acute lack of direction and a separate identity from one's family/clan as influential factors. Without direction, and with huge scope for failure as well as success in the capitalist world, human misery exponentially expanded.

Durkheim also identified atheism as an influential factor in increasing suicide rates in the capitalist world. Although an atheist himself, he recognised the role of religion in satiating the worries of the human psyche. This served a secondary purpose of community which, Durkheim argued, proved equally effective in relieving misery.

Also a contributor to the misery of capitalist societies was the role of consumerism. Here, Durkheim outlined that consumerism affected an individual to always desire better material possessions. This '*hopefulness*' as he referred to it was intrinsically linked to capitalism, and was another contributing factor to explosive suicide rates.

Finally, Durkheim asserted that the eradication of the close bond of family, and even the identification found within the nation, contributed to the epidemic. For, as noted in organic solidarity, family and religious bonds dissipated in the face of a separate identity based on one's role in society. Similarly, the demise of nationalism that accompanied the new capitalist model was also seen by Durkheim to be of great influence in eradicating a sense of community.

In conclusion, Durkheim attributed growing rates of suicide to capitalism. He argued that this was caused by modern economics which left individuals bereft of communal solace and authoritative guidance.

## In Summary

- Durkheim is largely regarded as '*the father of sociology*'
- He believed that psychology and philosophy were not enough to study society
- He argued that objective social realities exist
- Durkheim felt that societies needed to be studied scientifically
- He was a critic of individualism
- He argued that two forms of societies exist: one characterised by mechanical solidarity and one characterised by organic solidarity
- Durkheim pioneered the theory of functionalism: societies functioned like human bodies
- He attributed misery and suicide to capitalism and organic solidarity

## Materials Consulted

Giddens, A (2009) *Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Morrison, K (2010) *Marx, Durkheim, Weber: Formations of Modern Social Thought*. London: Sage Publications