

EMILE DURKHEIM'S THEORY OF INTEGRATION IN DIFFERENTIATED SOCIAL SYSTEMS

JONATHAN H. TURNER
University of California, Riverside

An examination of Emile Durkheim as a theorist is undertaken, with an emphasis on his formulation of abstract theoretical principles. Operating from the assumption that Durkheim formulated some of sociology's basic laws of human organization, his abstract principles are summarized with respect to system differentiation, system integration, and system disintegration. Most of these principles are seen to come from Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society* and *Suicide*. Other works, while intellectually important, are not viewed as theoretically significant as these.

Theory in the "natural sciences" typically consists of a series of abstract principles that state the relations among generic properties of the physical or biological universe. For example, current evolutionary theory accounts for speciation of animals and plants in terms of principles that specify relationships among ecological change, mutations, gene flow, genetic drift, and natural selection. Or, to take another example, the formula $F = ma$ states that basic properties of the universe are related in certain fundamental ways. In contrast, if we look at the social sciences, particularly sociology and anthropology, a much different picture of "theory" emerges. There is enormous controversy over whether "theory in the natural science sense" is even possible. And among those who believe that social theory is possible, discussion revolves around such issues as the work of the "great masters" of the last century (e.g., Coser, 1977; Giddens, 1971), the "best" metatheoretical view of the world (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Parsons, 1937, 1951), the various "schools of thought" (e.g., Turner, 1978; Ritzer, 1975; Harris, 1968), or the biography and history of ideas (e.g., Lukes, 1973; Nisbet, 1974). Indeed, a review of theory textbooks in

anthropology and sociology reveals a de-emphasis on isolating and articulating abstract principles of social organization. Much more prominent are discussions of early masters, schools of thought, controversies, and metatheoretical positions. And if we look at introductory texts, we can see an almost complete omission of even these incipient theoretical concerns in favor of discussions of empirical topics, whether these be on complex organizations, kinship, or small groups.

Why should there be such a difference between the "natural" and "social" sciences in the extent to which theoretical issues guide intellectual activity? There are, no doubt, many reasons for the difference, but one of the most fundamental is the failure to view sociology's and anthropology's early masters as theorists. Such a statement may seem surprising, if not absurd, in light of the fact that theory and introductory texts are filled with discussions of the great masters, such as Spencer, Tylor, Morgan, Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Mead, and the like. Yet, it can be argued that these discussions are rarely theoretical in the natural science sense of history. Rather, they typically consist of summaries of discursive texts, presentations of isolated concepts, or delineation of schools of thought that were inspired by an early master.

The lack of concern with extracting the abstract theoretical principles of these masters is particularly surprising, since they appear to have provided keen insights into basic properties of the universe. Indeed, these masters are read and reread today because we sense that they unlocked some of the mysteries of the social universe. And yet, we have not extracted the theoretical essence of their arguments and have left discussions of their metaphysics, metatheory, schools of thought, historical context, and the like to the historians of ideas. In this essay, a modest beginning is made to correct for this deficiency. The work of Emile Durkheim is examined with a strictly theoretical purpose: to extract his most abstract theoretical principles of social system differentiation, integration, and disintegration. For whatever else Durkheim is—an idealist (Harris, 1968: 464), a functionalist (Turner, 1978: 25-28), a founder of multivariate analysis, an advocate of causal modeling (Giddens, 1971, 1972)—he represents a social theorist

who articulated some basic laws of the social universe. This is why we continually read him. But we have not, it is argued here, fully appreciated Durkheim and other early masters as theorists. This lack of full appreciation has led otherwise astute commentators such as Merton (1968: 47) to argue that sociology as well as anthropology will have to wait for its Einstein because "it has not found its Kepler—to say nothing of its Newton, Laplace, Gibbs, Maxwell, or Plank." In contrast to Merton, we will argue that we have been reading and rereading our "Newton, Laplace, Gibbs, Maxwell, or Plank." Our problem has been the failure to recognize Durkheim and others for what they are.

DURKHEIM'S THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES

Almost all of Durkheim's major insights (1893, 1895, 1897, 1912) are expressed within an evolutionary, causal, and functional mode of reasoning. It is often the mode of reasoning more than the substantive theory that has dominated commentaries on Durkheim (e.g., Turner, 1978; Turner and Maryanski, 1979; Harris, 1968; Giddens, 1971, 1972). My goal here is to ignore Durkheim's mode of reasoning and translate his substantive argument into theoretical principles. Yet, Durkheim's (1895) methodology presents a number of problems. First, because Durkheim's theoretical statements are often couched in functional terms (x structure functions to meet y need), it is often difficult to translate his ideas into a theoretical principle of the form x varies with y . Second, this problem is compounded by Durkheim's implicit and explicit mingling of moral statements about what should be and what is. Durkheim frequently defined actual events and structures as "abnormal" and "pathological" in terms of his own moral yardstick. As a result, it is sometimes difficult to determine those relationships that Durkheim felt to be basic to the nature of the social world and, therefore, worthy of statement as an abstract principle.

Yet, if these limitations are accepted and it is recognized that they force some degree of inference, a series of abstract principles that summarize Durkheim's thought can be developed. Since

Durkheim employed an evolutionary framework, his most important theoretical principles always concern the concomitants of increasing social differentiation. His basic theoretical question appears to have been: What are the basic integrative, and disintegrative, properties in differentiating social systems? This question is phrased more abstractly than Durkheim may have intended, but this is exactly what must be done if Durkheim's genius is to be fully appreciated. It is necessary to pull away from subtle nuances, pay less attention to the burning (but now less relevant) issues of his time, abandon much of his functional vocabulary, and seek a consistently high level of abstraction in order to present the full explanatory power of Durkheim's ideas.

With these considerations in mind, the discussion of Durkheim's theoretical principles will be organized into three sections: (1) principles of social system differentiation, (2) principles of system integration, and (3) principles of system disintegration. It is in these principles that Durkheim's theoretical contribution to modern sociological and anthropological theory resides, and to the degree that these principles are considered insightful will determine the extent to which Durkheim's work can still inform contemporary social theory.

(1) PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL SYSTEM DIFFERENTIATION

In *The Division of Labor* (1893), Durkheim isolated a series of variables that he felt influence differentiation and specialization in society. His basic idea is that increased "moral density"—that is, contact and interaction among people—escalates competition for resources, forcing social differentiation. Durkheim's conceptualization is often enveloped in Darwinian and Spencerian metaphors, and thus we need to eliminate Durkheim's vocabulary and direct our attention to the postulated relationship among more generic variables. When this is done, the following principle can be abstracted from Durkheim's work on *The Division of Labor*:

- (1) The level of social differentiation of a population is a positive function of the degree of competition for scarce resources among

members of that population, with competition being a positive and additive function of:

- (1a) the size of a population, with this being a positive function of:
 - a. the net in-migration
 - b. the birth rate
- (1b) the degree of ecological concentration, with this being a positive function of:
 - a. the extent of constrictive geographical boundaries
 - b. the degree of political centralization
 - c. the degree of consensus over cultural symbols.

When ideas are expressed in propositions like the one above, there are several initial reactions by critics which should be addressed before the substance of this and additional propositions is explored. One reaction is that Durkheim's argument has been removed from its historical context. Another is that the proposition is "obvious" and "simplistic." Yet another is that it ignores causality and/or functions. In response, we should emphasize several points. First, abstract scientific theory is always ahistorical; it seeks to understand the generic properties of the universe that cut across time and the details of empirical contexts. Second, good theory always simplifies the universe; it seeks to make understandable the complexity of empirical events and to isolate the key underlying dynamics. In many ways, social scientists have been "snobbish" about their universe, assuming that theory must be esoteric and complex. Just the opposite should be the case. And third, theory in the more advanced sciences ignores issues of final (functional) causes and views causality in general as a secondary issue. Theoretical principles such as the formulas $E=mc^2$ and $F=ma$ or the principle of natural selection do not specify causality. Rather, they seek to reveal the affinities among fundamental properties of the universe. They do not preclude a concern with causality, as is the case when the formula $E=mc^2$ is used as the theoretical insight for constructing a hydrogen bomb or when we are concerned with specifying the sequence of events in the evolution of a species, such as *homo sapiens sapiens*, by natural selection. But causality is a more relevant concern in examining a specific empirical case in a

particular context than it is in formulating the abstract theorems of social theory.

With these caveats as a background for this analysis, what does the above proposition say about the social universe? Durkheim's principle, which is not vastly different than Herbert Spencer's (1874), argues that social differentiation and competition over resources are fundamentally related. Those generic conditions producing high levels of competition will increase the level of social differentiation (and by implication, vice versa). Durkheim (1893: 256-282) specified two such conditions: (1) population size and (2) ecological concentration. In turn, population size is related to migration and birth rates, while ecological concentration is related to the degree to which populations can be kept from dispersion by geographical barriers, political control, or cultural unity (language, values, beliefs, religious dogma, etc.).

While such a proposition is interesting, it is, no doubt, incomplete. For example, Durkheim has little to say about the effects of technology and productivity on social differentiation. Yet, when Durkheim's argument is stated as a principle, we are in a position to highlight such defects and provide necessary supplementation. For this proposition, we would, at minimum, want to articulate propositions on technology, productivity, and natural resources. More interesting than Durkheim's principle of social differentiation, however, are his principles of social integration and disintegration, for it is in formulating these principles that Durkheim's enduring contribution to social theory resides.

(2) PRINCIPLES OF SYSTEM INTEGRATION

For Durkheim, social system integration or, as he phrased it, "social solidarity" can be defined only by reference to what he saw as "abnormal." Anomie, egoism, lack of coordination, and the forced division of labor, all represented to Durkheim (1893: 353-410; 1897: 145-240) instances of poor integration. Thus, "normal" integration represents the converse of these conditions, leading to the following definition of integration as a condition where (a)

individual passions are regulated by shared cultural symbols (1893: 353; 1897: 241); (b) individuals are attached to the social collective through rituals and mutually reinforcing gestures (1897: 171; 1912;¹ (c) actions are regulated and coordinated by norms as well as legitimated political structures (1893: 374-395); and (d) and inequalities are considered legitimate and to correspond to the distribution of talents (1893: 374-389).²

For Durkheim, differentiating systems face a dilemma, first given forceful expression by Adam Smith and rephrased by Comte (1830, 1851): The compartmentalization of actors into specialized roles also partitions them from each other, driving them apart and decreasing their common sentiments. In *The Division of Labor*, Durkheim (1893: 287) recognized that differentiation is accompanied by the growing "abstractness," "enfeeblement," or "generalization" of the collective conscience. Or, in terms of the specific variables he used to describe the collective conscience, values and beliefs become less "voluminous," less "intense," less "determinate," and less "religious," for only through increasing generality of the collective conscience can actors in specialized and secularized roles hold common values and beliefs. If values and beliefs are too specific, too rigid, too intense, and too sacred, they cannot be relevant to the diversity of actors' secular experiences and orientations in differentiated roles, nor can they allow for the flexibility that comes with the division of labor in society. Hence, moral imperatives become more abstract and general. This basic relationship can be expressed in the following proposition:

- (2) The degree of specificity in evaluational symbols in a population is an inverse function of the degree of social differentiation among members of that population.

The key to understanding Durkheim's view of integration, then, is the inherent relationship between differentiation of roles and the increasing generality of moral evaluational systems. For as evaluational symbols such as values, beliefs, and religious dogmas become general and abstract, the major basis for

integration in comparatively undifferentiated systems is undone. It "must" be replaced by alternative bases of integration, or disintegrative processes will be initiated. Hence, the degree of integration among differentiated roles will be dependent upon the extent to which alternative bases of integration emerge. Durkheim's list of these alternatives can be expressed in the following principle:

- (3) The level of integration in a differentiated population where evaluational symbols are generalized is a positive and additive function of:
 - (3a) the degree of intra- and inter-group normative regulation and coordination
 - (3b) the degree of subgroup formation around diverse productive activities
 - (3c) the degree of coordination vested in a centralized authority
 - (3d) the degree of organized opposition to centralized authority
 - (3e) the extent to which the unequal distribution of scarce resources corresponds to the unequal distribution of talents
 - (3f) the degree to which sanctions are restitutive.

In this proposition, the varying bases of integration in differentiated social systems are delineated. Any one basis of integration, such as the centralization of authority and the use of coercion, would be insufficient. High levels of integration come when weights for all the bases—that is, (3a) through (3f)—are high. And, of course, there will be varying degrees and forms of integration depending upon the relative weights for each of these variables in a particular empirical system. For example, a system high in normative regulation and subgroup formation will reveal a form of integration much different than one where centralized authority is weighted higher than the other variables.

Most of the variables in proposition 3 come from *The Division of Labor* (1893), with clarification coming from other works (Durkheim, 1895, 1897, 1912). Variable (3a) represents a rephrasing of Durkheim's discussion of his "organic and contractual" solidarity (1893: 200-233) and "organic solidarity" (1893: 111) as

well as his discussion of "another abnormal form" (1893: 389-395). Variable (3b) represents a rephrasing of the argument in his famous "Preface to the Second Edition" (1904). Variables (3c) and (3e) are extracted from "the forced division of labor" (1893: 374-388) as well as from his reading of de Tocqueville (1835) and his Latin thesis on "Montesquieu and Rousseau (1892). And variable (3f) is taken from the latter portions of his discussion of "methods" (1893: 49-70).

By stating Durkheim's argument as a series of conditions that can reveal varying weights in empirical systems, much of the moralistic tone of Durkheim's argument is obviated. Equally important, we are able to communicate the dialectical argument built into Durkheim's theory. For in those very conditions that promote integration reside disintegrative processes.

(3) PRINCIPLES OF SYSTEM DISINTEGRATION

Disintegration involves the converse of integration where (a) individual passions are unregulated by shared cultural symbols ("anomie"), (b) where individuals are unattached to collectivities through mutually reinforcing gestures and rituals ("egoism"), (c) where action is unregulated and coordinated by norms and political authority, and (d) where inequalities are not considered legitimate and to correspond to the distribution of talents ("forced division of labor"). While Durkheim termed disintegrative processes "abnormal" and "pathological," he also saw these processes as inevitable. For example, Durkheim (1897) recognized that certain rates of deviance stemming from anomie and egoism are inevitable in differentiated social systems. Moreover, there is always tension created by the centralization of power and the mobilization of opposition to power. Additionally, normative regulation is never without ambiguity; subgroup formation is always incomplete; the distribution of rewards never corresponds perfectly to the distribution of talents (or at least in people's perceptions, there is never perfect correspondence); and it is only

the ratio of restitution to punishment that changes (not tension producing punitive sanctions).

Thus, Durkheim's principle of disintegration is simply the converse of that for integration:

- (4) The degree of disintegration in a differentiated population where evaluational symbols are generalized is an inverse and additive function of (3a), (3b), (3c), (3d), (3e), and (3f) above.

Durkheim's most famous discussions of deviance in *Suicide* (1897) and of "abnormal forms" in *The Division of Labor* (1893: 353-410) are but specific instances of these conditions of disintegration. For example, an "anomic" situation is where differentiation and generalization of evaluational symbols have not been accompanied by normative restraints on individual desires and passions (1893: 353; 1897: 241; 1904). "Egoism" is a situation where differentiation and generalization of evaluational symbols have transpired without a corresponding degree of subgroup formation (1897: 241; 1904). The "forced division of labor" (1893: 374-388) is a result of high weights for (3c) and low weights for (3e) and (3d). Thus, all of the "pathologies," as Durkheim termed them, of differentiated social systems inhere in the basic conditions of integration. While theoretical discussions of Durkheim often highlight these disintegrative processes, it is also important to recognize that they are part of a more general theory of integration.

CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made to extract from Durkheim's works his basic principles on social organization. As is evident, almost all of these principles appeared in his first major work, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893). Subsequent works clarified key concepts, such as "anomie" and "egoism" in *Suicide* (1897) and "occupational groups" in the "Preface to the Second Edition" of *The Division of Labor* (1904). Yet, the basic arguments on the

fundamental properties of the social world remained unchanged. Even as Durkheim (1912, 1922) sought to understand social psychological processes, his sociological position on integration remained unchanged. As the four principles developed here underscore, Durkheim was primarily concerned with the shifting bases of integration in social systems during their differentiation and elaboration. And while many of Durkheim's statements represent his hopes and aspirations for the "good society," they nevertheless reveal a number of critical insights into fundamental relations among generic properties of the social universe.

In particular, Principles 2 and 3 are the most insightful, since they argue that social differentiation, value generalization, normative specification, centralization of power, subgroup formation, counter-power, resource distribution, and modes of sanctioning are all related in certain fundamental ways. Durkheim's work thus provides sociology and anthropology with some of its basic laws of human organization. Such a conclusion may seem overly optimistic and premature, since social thinkers often believe that the discovery of laws equivalent to those in the "natural sciences" is either impossible or at least a distant prospect. I hope, by phrasing Durkheim's ideas as propositions rather than as causal or functional statements, pessimistic views on the state and prospects of social theory are rendered less compelling. Sociologists and anthropologists have discovered many of the basic laws of the social universe, but we have often failed to recognize them for what they are.

NOTES

1. For a formalization of this aspect of Durkheim's theory, see Collins (1975: 153-154) where the number of actors; the length of their copresence; their mutually reinforcing gestures; their foci of interest; and their ritual activities are all viewed as variables producing solidarity and shared sentiments. These more micro dimensions of Durkheim's theory are well-stated by Collins and are not presented in this analysis, which examines the more macro dimensions of Durkheim's theory.

2. This last element of the definition is altered somewhat from Durkheim's own formulation, since we have tried to capture what he defined as integration per se. His

discussion of "the forced division of labor" was geared to modern societies, and he did not seem to consider inequalities in traditional societies that are not based upon natural talent as "abnormal." His main argument for why the forced division of labor would not persist was that people would not accept it as legitimate in the modern age. Thus, his meaning appears to be that when inequalities are not legitimated, they come to be "forced" or to appear "forced."

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Jonathan H. Turner is currently Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Riverside. In addition to his work on clarifying the theoretical arguments of other scholars, he is currently developing his own elementary theoretical principles on human organization. These will be published in both article and book form.