

Theses on Durkheim

by Jim Spickard

1. Durkheim sought to understand the differences between traditional and modern societies scientifically.
2. He saw these differences on two levels, related to a changing division of labor:
 - a. a change from segmented to differentiated social structure;
 - b. a change from "mechanical" to "organic" solidarity—forms of moral attachment that kept society together.
3. Mechanical solidarity depended on shared beliefs and values ("collective consciousness"), whereas organic solidarity did not. The latter arose from people's practical interdependence. Each form of solidarity involved a different conception of moral order, of which Durkheim found traces in the evolution of criminal law.
4. Durkheim distinguished between two effects of this changing division of labor: the growth of individuation (as society becomes less and less segmentary); and the growth of individualism as ideology. The first is inevitable, he thought; the second, not so.
5. The structural change was fundamental for Durkheim, but also an inevitable product of increased social "density" (in terms of population, information and productive capabilities). He therefore focused his sociology on an analysis of the second change. That change flowed directly from the first and illuminated its problems. Understanding these moral changes scientifically would help society solve its problems.
6. Studying morality scientifically meant, for Durkheim, the development of a means of demonstrating its objectivity. He therefore conceived of morality as an external force, impinging upon the individual. Being external to the individual, it must be social and can be studied by sociologists.
7. This produced a problem, because a society based on organic solidarity lacked an externally enforced common moral life. Therefore, Durkheim concluded, it must lack norms. This society, in Durkheim's view, is "anomic". Individuals are cut adrift, to find meaning on their own.
8. While individualism (as an ideology) appears to be able to solve the problem of anomie—by providing a moral norm shareable throughout a differentiated society—in reality it cannot do so. Its content drives people farther away from one another, preventing the unity that a shared moral order should bring.
9. Durkheim therefore recommended the establishment of intermediary institutions to enforce local norms and guard against an excessive individualism. These groups would be connected with the occupational groups arising under an increased division of labor. They would provide the externally enforced norms that society as a whole lacked, and prevent anomie.
10. Durkheim failed to realize that norms could be internal and still objective. As Piaget pointed out, once modern society is conceived of as depending on internally enforced norms, the problem of anomie disappears.