

EMILE DURKHEIM

“SOCIAL FACTS”

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Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was a French sociologist whose contributions were influential in the formation of sociology and anthropology. His work helped to establish sociology on a scientific basis and as an accepted social science. He saw sociology as a new science that could be used to elucidate traditional philosophical questions by examining them in an empirical manner. Durkheim believed that we must study social life with the same objectivity as scientists study the natural world. His famous principle of sociology was “Study of social facts as things!”. By this he meant that social life could be analysed as rigorously as objects or events in nature. Durkheim’s writings spanned a broad spectrum of topics, one of the most important of which is the study of Social Facts.

For Durkheim the main intellectual concern of sociology is the study of social facts. He gave a very detailed explanation on what should be considered and described as social fact in his book “The rules of the Sociological Method”. In general, rather than applying sociological methods to the study of individuals, sociologists should instead examine social facts – aspects of social life that shape our actions as individuals, such as the state of the economy or the influence of religion. Durkheim believed that societies have a reality of their own – that is to say that there is more to society than simply the actions and interests of its individual members. According to Durkheim, social facts are ways of acting, thinking or feeling that are external to individuals and have their own reality outside the lives and perceptions of individual people. Another attribute of social fact is that they exercise a coercive power over individuals. The constraining nature of social facts is often not recognized by people as coercive, however. This is because people generally comply with social facts freely, believing they are acting out of choice. In fact, Durkheim argues, people often simply follow patterns that are general to their society. Social fact can constrain human action in a variety of ways, ranging from outright punishment to social rejection to simple misunderstanding. The concept of social fact and how it should be studied will be examined and described in more details and precision below.

Before beginning the search for the method appropriate to the study of social facts it is important to understand what are these facts termed “social”. This term is commonly used without much accuracy to describe most phenomena that occur within society, but they present little social interest. Biological and physiological facts should not be confused with social.

In reality there is a clearly determined group of phenomena in every society, with distinct characteristics separable from those that form the subject matter of other natural sciences. Durkheim claimed that performing duties like a brother, a husband or a citizen and carrying the commitments we are obliged, we fulfill obligations that are defined by laws and customs external to ourselves. Even if they are suited to our own feelings and attitudes, it is not we who have prescribed these duties. Rather we received them through education. For example, in religion the

beliefs and practices existed before we did, and we discover them readily fashioned. The same applies to the system of signs we employ to express ourselves, the system of currency we use to pay, etc., they all function independently from us. Durkheim also described that not only are these types of behaviour and thinking external to the individual, but they oblige themselves upon the individual, whether he wishes it or not. In other words, they have a compelling and coercive power. When we adapt ourselves to them, this coercion is not felt. However, we cannot resist these. If we attempt to violate the law or moral rules, the reaction will be against us whether it is a social rejection or the outright punishment. These are the examples of extreme cases. In ordinary life's situation, the constraint is less violent, but still exists. If we break the rules and customs of the country we leave, the result will be the public laughter or isolation from the society. In other cases, although we are not forced to speak the same language as our fellow citizens, or adapt the modern ways of production, etc., it is impossible to do otherwise. The attempt to escape or break these necessities will result in failure and struggle.

Overall, according to Durkheim, this category of facts presents distinctive characteristics: they consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over us. Therefore, they cannot be confused neither with biological, nor psychological phenomena. Thus they constitute a new variety of phenomena and to them must be exclusively assigned the term social. It is appropriate, since it is not the individual, but society that is represented as their substratum. Moreover, the term applies to them exclusively, since the word "social" has the sole meaning of designating those phenomena which fall into none of the categories of facts already constituted and labeled. Consequently they are the proper field of sociology, according to Durkheim. Yet is undeniable and unquestionable today that most of our ideas and tendencies are not developed by ourselves, but come to us from outside, they can only penetrate us by imposing themselves upon us. This is all that this definition implies. Moreover, we know that all social constraints do not necessarily exclude the individual personality.

In addition, Durkheim claimed that despite the fact that example above consists of beliefs and practices already well established, it does not necessary mean that no social fact can exist except where there is a well defined social organisation. There are other social facts, called social "currents", that also possess the same objectivity and dominance over the individual. They come to each one of us from outside and can sweep us along in spite of ourselves. As an example, Durkheim used the great waves of enthusiasm, pity or indignation that are produced at the public gathering. He claimed that we are the victims of an illusion that we have ourselves produced what in reality has been imposed upon us externally. During the assembly or any public gathering, even when we have individually and spontaneously shared in the common emotion,

the impression we have experienced is entirely different from what we would have felt if we had been alone. Once the crowd is gone, in other words the social influences disappeared, the emotions we have felt seem an alien phenomenon, in which we no longer recognise ourselves.

In order to verify this definition of social fact, Durkheim argued that we only need to observe how children are brought up. It is clear that education consists of a continual effort to impose upon the child ways of seeing, acting and thinking. From the earliest years we are taught the personal hygiene, the customs and conventions, the need for work, etc. Even though, we might not feel the constraint we are obliged, it is just because we adopted the habits it imposed. Moreover, these facts conclude, that the main aim of education is the socialization of a person, in other words, creation of social being. The pressure that is imposed to the child is the same pressure of the social environment which seeks to shape him in its own way. Therefore, parents and teachers are just representatives and intermediaries.

Thus, to Durkheim, what constitute social facts are the beliefs, tendencies and practices of the group taken collectively. The origins and nature of legal and moral rules religious institutions and aphorisms and popular sayings, etc., is received through collective inherited habits. None of the modes of acting and thinking are to be found entirely in the application made of them by individuals, since they can even exist without being applied at the time.

Having studied the nature of a collective phenomena and what could be called social fact, Durkheim claimed that he then succeeded in defining for ourselves the exact field of sociology. It embraces one single, well defined group of phenomena. A social fact is to be identified through the power of external coercion which it exerts or is capable of exerting upon individuals. The second essential characteristic is that social fact exists independently of the particular forms that it may assume in the process of spreading itself within the group. Moreover, sociology cannot dissociate itself from what concerns the substratum of collective life.

According to Durkheim, there are two ways of explaining social facts. In both cases the explanation lies in society. The first method involves method involves determining the cause of social fact, seeking to explain its origin. In his view, the determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of individual consciousness. However, the explanation of social fact also involves an analysis of its function in society, of its contribution to the general needs of the social organism, of its function in the establishment of social order. Durkheim assumed that the explanation for the continuing existence of a social fact lies in its function, that is, in its usefulness for society.

Durkheim conceded that social facts are difficult to study. Because they are invisible and intangible, social facts cannot be observed directly. Instead, their properties must be revealed indirectly by analysing their effects or by considering attempts that have been made at their

expressions, such as laws, religious texts or written rules of conduct. In studying social facts, Durkheim stressed the importance of abandoning prejudices and ideology. A scientific attitude demands a mind which is open to the evidence of the senses and free of preconceived ideas that come from outside. Durkheim held that scientific concepts could only be generated by scientific practice. He challenged sociologists to study things as they really are and to construct new concepts that reflect the true nature of social things.

To sum up, Durkheim's works has had a large number of followers. He followed the lead of August Comte (1798-1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and their studies established functionalist analysis in social sciences. Having established to his own satisfaction that social facts can, at least for purpose of analysis, be treated separately from social actors, Durkheim was free to treat society as a system which obeys its own laws. Therefore, he became in position to seek explanation of social life in the nature of society itself.

Bibliography:

1. Durkheim, E. (1982), *The rules of the Sociological Method*, (Ed. By Lukes, S.; trans. By Halls, W.D.). New York: Free press.