**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 12: Emile Durkheim: Introduction**

Today we begin our look at the work of Emile Durkheim.

Biographical details:

* Born 1858 in Epinal (rural France)
* Grew up in a traditional Jewish family
* Was an outstanding student
* Studied at Ecole Normale (Paris) and University of Berlin (1885)
* Obtained a position at University of Bordeaux at 29 where he wrote *Division of Labour*, *Rules of Sociological Method*, and *Suicide*
* Moved to the Sorbonne in 1902, where he wrote *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*
* Had established himself as a major figure in sociology before his death in 1917.

Durkheim’s sociological interests were rooted in the political crisis in France between 1870-1895:

* By 1871 deep political crisis/decline in national unity
* By 1880 policies to rebuild national identity based on (1) science and social progress; and (2) anti-individualism rooted in the Dreyfus affair.

**Intellectual Influences on Durkheim`s Work:**

Three major intellectual influences on Durkheim:

1. Auguste Comte`s perspective on scientific methodology;
2. Debates related to the problem of individualism; and
3. The writings of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Auguste Comte`s work:

* Developed a philosophical perspective called positivism that sought to extend scientific investigation and the scientific method to the study of society
* This proclaimed the end of speculative philosophy and established the authority of observation in developing a theory of knowledge
* Asserted the `law of 3 stages` (theological, metaphysical, and positive stages of human intellectual development) equating science with highest historical stage of progress
* Developed a classification of the sciences, hierarchically arranging them in relation to their complexity
* Associated positivism with progress and social reform. It had been successful in the hard sciences, so the social sciences should follow suit
* Three central criteria suggested for sociology:
  1. The search for law-like regularities
  2. The assertion that all statements about society should be based on observation
  3. A Stress on the search for facts
* Essentially this meant the extension of the scientific method to the study of society
* Durkheim`s work fits in well with Comte`s 3 points, showing his influence

The problem of individualism:

* The concept of individualism was recognized as a problem by the French Revolution
* Following the `Declaration of the Rights of Man` the individual had become the center of society, notably in constitutional and legal reform (e.g. individual rights)
* This, some felt, jeopardized the collective authority of society and the state
* By 1870 French thinkers began to question excess individualism, opening debates about the individual vs. society, balancing collective obligations & individual rights
* Durkheim joined in, arguing that social life would not be possible unless there were interests superior to those of individuals
* Durkheim:
  + opposed utilitarian theory with its emphasis on individual free will, autonomy, and view that the individual was the centre of social life;
  + opposed the utilitarian view that individuals were simply motivated by rational economic gain & owed nothing to society in its own right
  + opposed the utilitarian view that all social phenomena could be reduced to the decisions, actions, and attitudes of individuals
  + asserted that utilitarians ignored the larger set of social rules or norms that restrained individual actions
  + since society was prior, asserted that utilitarians ignored how society shaped individual dispositions and beliefs
  + asserted that since society came first, individuals cannot be analytically separated from it as an organic whole
  + asserted that it is analytically preferable to focus on society rather than individual attitudes or dispositions

The individualistic writings of Hobbes and Rousseau: Durkheim sought to separate his own views from such writers who based the origins of society in individual human nature:

1. Thomas Hobbes:

* traced society to `the original state of nature` where there was no law or government
* where there are no laws or restraints on individuals, they are free to use violence to satisfy needs
* in such a state, the strong would continually subdue others
* this would represent a continual struggle for dominance and power, where none could secure peace or safety and all suffer constant fear of violent death
* society only comes into existence when people contract out of this state, placing common rules at the disposal of a leader capable of restraining them all in order to secure peace and safety
* societal formation is complete when individuals renounce

violent means in exchange for the peace and safety of

common social rules

Durkheim:

* disagreed with Hobbes` emphasis on the individual as the foundation of society (Hobbes assumes individuals are naturally resistant to society)
* felt that restraint was externally imposed on individuals independent of the self-preservation motive (i.e. constraint springs from collective life rather than the individual). This should be studied in its own right

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

* focused on the creation of common social rules in society
* like Hobbes, gave priority to human nature in the formation of society
* reasoned that when society is formed, it creates private property and self-interest, encouraging individuals to fight and compete in a world where jealousy and envy prevail
* common interest only arises when people subordinate their individual will to the `general will` of society.
* Rousseau`s idea of the `general will` is important because:

1. it represents individuals pooling their individual wills; and
2. it transforms the individual will by making it subject to the totality

* This, he argues, produces the collective will of society, something, however, that still rests analytically on the individual will

Durkheim:

* rejected these ideas on several grounds
* thought deriving society from the individual was mistaken. Individuals are not organically complete without it
* thought society`s collective structure was separate from the individual and could be studied in its own right
* thought Rousseau relied too heavily on philosophical and idealist accounts of the individual in his account of the emergence of society
* criticized Rousseau`s explanation of the individual`s

obligation to collective authority as rooted in individual

wills, making it too easy to call norms into question.

In the next class, we will begin to look at the ideas found first major theoretical work, *The Division of Labour in Society*.

Many of these ideas represent Durkheim`s response to these prior social and political influences.