**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 18: Durkheim: Religion and Ritual II**

* Now that we have looked at Durkheim’s ideas on religion, we consider his related work on social knowledge and ritual.
* Generally, Durkheim moved in the direction of relating religion to the origins of conceptual and explanatory thought.
* According to Durkheim, traditional philosophy had developed two general models for how humans could develop *concepts* from *sense impressions*:

1. *Empiricism*: our concepts are generalizations from sense impressions (yet we need key concepts such as space and time categorize them in the first place); and
2. *Apriorism*: we must be born with some initial concepts enabling us to so understand sense impressions (Kant’s ‘apriori categories of apprehension’). But how is this so?

* Durkheim felt that philosophers could not sufficiently answer such questions, and positing/assuming some innate or transcendental source shades into religious speculation (and we already know what he thinks is the source of that).
* Durkheim contends that human knowledge is not the product of experience alone, nor are we born with innate perceptual categories that are then applied to experience.
* Instead, our perceptual categories are *social* creations, the result of living in pre-existing social groups, providing collective representations passed down to us in socialization.
* Since the first categories for explaining the universe are religious in origin, then intellectual categories must be products of social activity.

**Categories of Understanding:**

*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* thus argues for the *social origin* of six fundamental categories that philosophers had identified as essential to human understanding:

1. *Time* emerges from the rhythms of social life. Rituals marking harvests, religious feasts, seasons, etc provide a socially structured schedule/sense of continuity;
2. *Space* develops from the divisionof areas occupied by members of society/tribal territory. Socially organized space enables comprehension of geographic/ physical space;
3. *Classification* is tied to the human group (e.g. emblems in totemism);
4. *Force* is derived from experiences with social influences and determining actions;
5. *Causality* is rooted in explanatory myths such as the origins of the universe or why the crops fail; and
6. *Totality* is rooted in the encompassing nature of society itself.

* In effect, Durkheim argues that the fundamental categories enabling us to transform raw sense impressions into abstract concepts are derived from social experiences – especially the experience of religious *rituals*.
* In rituals, the bodily movement of participants in the structured sounds and movements creates feelings that give rise to the categories of understanding.
* Yet, this does not means that our thoughts are totally determined by society: social facts variously associate and develop in interaction with one another.
* Thus, though concepts originate in a religious source, they can develop into non-religious systems like science.
* As well, despite this autonomous development, some categories are fundamentally necessary to facilitate contact between individual minds and social interaction. Otherwise, society would be impossible. There thus needs to be a minimal logical consensus.

**Religious Rites and Social Functions:**

* Durkheim now turns to look at the effect which religious rites have on the individual and society. Rituals/rites, basically do two things:
  1. They outline categories of actions to be taken toward objects; and
  2. They lay down limitations or restrictions on what is permissible in relation to the sacred.
* More generally, religion (comprised of beliefs + rites):
  1. Maintains separation between sacred and profane;
  2. Lays down a system of beliefs for the faithful; and
  3. Sets up a system of rules forbidding certain behaviors.
* Two broad categories of religious rules are important:

1. Those which proscribe things or objects which are incompatible; and
2. Those which require separation between the sacred and the profane.

**Durkheim’s Classification of Rites:**

* Durkheim classified religious rites into four broad categories:

1. *Sacrificial rites* related to initiation and sacrifice:
   * specify and regulate the obligations individuals have towards the objects of the group which either serve the clan as a totem or are designated as fundamental to life

(e.g. essential foods and the productive powers related to regeneration)

- initiate and renew the bonds of the group/its worldview

with heightened emotion

* + sanctify the individuals who take part
  + re-enact/revivify the collective practices/social sentiments of the group

1. *Imitative Rites* and the principle of causality:
   * serve to consolidate rituals, often by ‘imitating’ the various movements and habits of animals whose reproductive powers are desired
   * the idea is that similar actions have similar effects, with qualities passed by contagion among the group
   * In the reverse process, it is felt that the valuable animal will be reproduced
   * Thus, ritual beliefs about reproduction extend into a theory of imitative causality (e.g. how one thing is extended to another, how regenerated, etc.)
2. *Representative Rites:*
   * Such rites involve how society represents itself to the group.
   * They involve the re-enactment of the mythical history of the tribe and bring its reality into the present
   * These sustain the vitality of the group’s identity and keep them from being forgotten
3. *Piacular Rites*:
   * Such rites deal with misfortune, loss, and death, reaffirming their religious significance and seriousness for the group (e.g. deal with funerals, threats to the group)
   * Often involve fasting, weeping, or obligations to show outward penance for a period of time
   * Sometimes these may be enacted by many to head off disaster or beseech the gods to intervene (e.g. to end drought)

* Ultimately, Durkheim concluded:
  + Socially transmitted religious rites and myths served as the basis for our categories of knowledge, even though these have evolved into apparently scientific secular forms today
  + Social rituals and practices put into action the mythical history of a group. It is in these that the group acts in collective unity, common purpose, and re-enacts their core beliefs.