BLOMMAERT, JAN. "Durkheim's social fact." *Durkheim and the Internet: Sociolinguistics and the Sociological Imagination*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 7–18. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350055223.0006>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 14:00 UTC.

Copyright © Jan Blommaert 2018. Released under a CC BY licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>). You may share, re-use or adapt this work, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

CHAPTER TWO

Durkheim's social fact

Emile Durkheim devoted his life to the self-conscious construction of sociology as a science, and by the end of his life, he had achieved that goal. In his view, scientific sociology was a necessity in *fin de siècle* France. Durkheim shared the widespread sense of discomfort of his compatriots, epitomized in the military defeat against German forces in 1870, which led both to the end of the second Empire and to the revolution of the Paris Commune. Society-as-we-knew-it appeared to be falling apart. People had become weak, decadent, hedonistic and individualistic, and a generation-long process of industrialization, with the growth of a large urban proletariat in mushrooming cities, had disrupted France's national sociocultural cohesion, and hence had prejudiced its future as a strong nation. Sociology, for Durkheim, was one of the tools needed to reconstruct a sense of membership among the French, of a community that was characterized by specific and exceptional features – to be discovered by scientific sociology and to be spread by a new system of 'moral education' (the title of his celebrated course of lectures; Durkheim [1961] 2002). This sociology was, thus, *aspirational* and *prescriptive*, a sort of 'ortho-sociology'; rather than just describing what was there, Durkheim set out to convert factual description into normative prescription in view of constructing a society that, in his understanding, was not yet there.¹

2.1 Norms and concepts

This normative-prescriptive aspect is a point we need to remember, for it explains the particular focus of Durkheim's sociology, *norms*; or to be more precise: the secular moral order that should characterize the rational, industrial and science-based French society of the Third Republic. The existence of such an order – implicit and often invisible in everyday life – was what Durkheim posited as 'the social fact' that made his sociology possible; and the vigorous promotion, spread and enforcement of this order was the nation-building task of the modern French state, via its education system. Eventually, this rational civic moral order should replace religion as the belief system underlying and organizing society, becoming as 'sacred' as, previously, religious beliefs. The latter were, according to Durkheim, veiled and misconceived understandings of the real, essential moral order:

We must discover those moral forces that men, down to the present time, have conceived of only under the form of religious allegories. We must disengage them from their symbols, present them in their rational nakedness, so to speak, and find a way to make the child feel their reality without recourse to any mythological intermediary. (Durkheim [1961] 2002: 11).

Durkheim's analogy of the secular moral order with the moral order propagated in religion would, in later stages of his career, push him towards profound engagements with religion as a social fact. For in both the secular and the religious moral order he saw the same features at work: both were experienced and perceived as beyond the grasp and intention of individuals, and as compelling norms of social life. In the case of religion, they emanated from a divine force; in the case of social facts, society provided them; in both cases, individuals acquired them through extended interaction in their communities as well as through institutionalized forms of learning and education.

These features, then, formed the definition of his 'social fact'. Social facts are forms of behaviour and thought that are (1) 'exterior to the individual' and (2) experienced by individuals as coercive, constraining and imperative rules, deviation of which would come at a price (see e.g. Durkheim [1895] 2010: 100; discussion in Lukes 1973: 8–15). They are, in short, *collective rules* of which individuals are (at least intuitively) aware and to which they *must* submit. Here is one of the many formulations provided by Durkheim:

A rule is not then a simple matter of habitual behavior; it is a way of acting that we do not feel free to alter according to taste. It is in some measure – and to the same extent that it is a rule – beyond personal preference. There is in it something that resists us, is beyond us. (Durkheim [1961] 2002: 28)

The religious analogies are plain: the social order is sacred in Durkheim's eyes. The social fact, thus defined, was the object of Durkheim's new sociology; the defining characteristics of social facts should distinguish the new discipline from psychology (a science devoted to *individual* behaviour and thought). Durkheim soberly observed that people act differently when they are alone from when they are in the company of others. When alone, instincts, pre-social desires, would regulate behaviour (and would be the terrain of psychological analysis); social behaviour, by contrast, was regulated by 'collective conscience' – what we could now call an 'ideology' – and by a moral discipline pushing individuals to bring the extremes of their instincts under control so as to be acceptable in the eyes of others.² In that sense, the development of social behaviour marks a transition from 'absolute existence' (humans in their natural state) to 'relative existence' (humans in relation to others and to institutions), from an a-moral state to a moral state, and from a mode of solitary autarky to one of solidarity and labour division (cf. Lukes 1973: 125; many of these notions were already elaborated in Durkheim's dissertation, *De la Division du Travail Social*, [1893] 1967).

The collective conscience, note, is made up of ‘collective representations’ – things we would now call ‘concepts’, relatively fixed meaning frames. And while institutions such as state-sponsored education transmit, across generations, certain collective representations typical of the nation-state, such representations are acquired alongside more specific ones characterizing and organizing life in particular social groups (caste, class, family, profession, etc.). The norms that organize social life are, in other words, layered and scaled. Socialization proceeded both at the level of becoming a citizen of a (homogeneous) country and at the level of becoming a member of (more diverse) specific social sub-groups. The function of both is the same: norms always presuppose ‘a certain disposition in the individual for a regular existence – a preference for regularity’ (Durkheim [1961] 2002: 34). Social rules are, simply put, ‘limits to our natural inclinations’ (ibid.: 96).

Now, although Durkheim would underscore the fact that ‘man always lives in the midst of many groups’, his views on which specific groups we should think about differ from publication to publication, and even when he mentions groups he does not necessarily devote much analysis to them. *Moral Education* specifies just three such groups: the family, the nation (or political group) and humanity ([1961] 2002: 73–4), for instance, and only the nation is elaborately discussed – not surprising in a book that aspired to reorganize national education in France. Elsewhere, he would profoundly examine professional groups and religious groups as well. In all, Durkheim had a strong preference for what we could call ‘thick’ groups, groups in which people shared *a lot* of norms, values and collective representations, and as we shall see later, his influence has been pervasive in that respect.

2.2 Integration and anomie

Let us recall Durkheim’s motives for the development of a sociology. He was gravely concerned about the perceived

loss of sociocultural cohesion in the France of his day. He believed he was witnessing the disintegration of an old social order, while a new one was not yet in place. Consequently, his sociology consistently addressed issues of sociocultural cohesion or integration: how did this rapidly changing society maintain a reasonable degree of cohesion? In *De la Division du Travail Social*, he pointed towards one answer: new forms of solidarity grounded in the emergence of new, smaller, professional groups were complementing older forms of solidarity grounded in 'deep' sociocultural ties. And they did so by developing alternative moral orders and collective representations – the defining features of the 'social' as we have seen earlier, and in that sense also the defining features of identifiable social groups. Members were integrated into such groups by subscribing to and adopting these defining features, by 'enregistering' (we would now say) the moral codes that shaped such groups and held them together. In other words, integration is a factor of successful socialization of individuals into the moral orders of social groups, and social cohesion is an aggregate of such forms of integration.

One of the most interesting and productive concepts developed by Durkheim is that of *anomie*. Anomie describes a situation in which individuals reject available normative orders or cannot draw on them, either by absence of such orders or because access to them is restricted. Anomie stands for 'normlessness'. Durkheim discussed the concept elaborately in his *Suicide* ([1897] 1951), and he did so from the viewpoint of social cohesion. In a rapidly changing society where an old order is on its way out while a new order is under construction, he argued, numbers of people find themselves in a moral no man's land where the rules of the social game are unknown, unclear or in need of development. Anomie, we could say, is the concrete face of social disintegration and individual marginalization. And Durkheim saw his own rapidly transforming society as prone to anomie, with individuals at risk of being poorly or incompletely socialized and at a loss finding out what it takes to do well. This moral no man's

land explained the high statistical incidence of suicide, and Durkheim provided a primarily *social* explanation for suicide.

With some qualifications, Durkheim saw anomie as something negative, a lack of a clear and widely shared moral social order; individuals caught in anomie are marginalized, deviants, outsiders. At the same time, he saw anomie as an inevitable feature of sociohistorical change and, in that sense, as a constant feature of societies at any point in time. A fully integrated society was an aspiration rather than a reality, and at any moment in their historical development, societies would be characterized by old and new normative systems coexisting in sometimes uncomfortable ways. Durkheim did not see the creative and productive potential of anomie – the ways in which anomie spawns alternative ways of social organization. His view of anomie can also be made more useful when it is understood not as a top-down phenomenon – from the ‘centre’ of society towards its margins – but as a general relational phenomenon operating at all levels of social life in the form of (negative) normative judgements of one about another. The margins of society, seen from this more broadly scoped view, are spaces where alternative social orders are quite rigorously observed and policed – as Howard Becker (1963) famously demonstrated.

2.3 Durkheim’s impact and the challenge of Rational Choice

I have deliberately been selective here, focusing on elements from Durkheim’s work that offer immediate possibilities for critical re-evaluation in view of sociolinguistic evidence. Let me summarize and reformulate these elements in a series of related propositions.

- 1 There is a set of human forms of behaviour that are collective, in the sense that they cannot be reduced to individual agency or intention. They are acquired socially, through socialization and education processes,

in a variety of groups. They have a *sui generis* reality which cannot be explained by explaining individuals' enactments.

- 2 These forms of behaviour must be seen as governed by sets of sanctioned norms, or ideologies, and the character of these norms is moral. Social behaviour is moral-normative.
- 3 These sets of norms characterize social groups, notably 'thick' groups such as those of the nation, class, caste, family, profession, religion. We always live in a plurality of such groups.
- 4 These sets of norms are the key to social cohesion and integration: people who submit to them will be perceived as 'normal' members of their social groups, while people deviating from them will be confronted by anomie and risk becoming outcasts.

In a variety of formulations, these four propositions can be found throughout twentieth-century sociology (and beyond). Durkheim's sociology was, like that of for example Dewey and Bourdieu but unlike that of for example Weber (Gerth and Mills 1970: 58) first and foremost a sociology of *communities* and of *social cohesion*, and it opened several areas of exploration that became foundational for twentieth-century social sciences. These areas included the study of ethnoclassification and ethnoscience (through his work with Marcel Mauss), collective memory (through his student Maurice Halbwachs), labour organization and labour institutions (influencing, to name just a few, Everett C. Hughes, Herbert Blumer and John Kenneth Galbraith), socialization (influencing e.g. Jean Piaget), religion, cultural symbols and ritual (influencing e.g. Victor Turner and Erving Goffman) and several others.

It was Talcott Parsons who turned the priorities of Durkheim's programme into the systematic theory to which Glyn Williams took exception, in the effort significantly simplifying some of the most interesting but often unstable aspects of Durkheim's work – notably the relationship between 'society' and 'social

groups' and the place of individual agency in society.³ Parson's sociology, as we know, focused on integration at the level of 'society' (e.g. Parsons 2007). Societies would remain integrated because of the widespread acceptance of specific and relatively enduring sets of *values*, while *norms* characterized smaller social groups. Norms could differ from the dominant values, of course; they could even run counter to these values, but they were distinctly 'lighter' than values.⁴ Thus, in a text written in 1964 on US youth culture (at that time perceived as rebellious and increasingly deviant), Parsons confidently concluded that

American society in a sense appears to be running its course. We find no cogent evidence of a major change in the essential patterns of its governing values. (Parsons 1964: 181)

In other words, the long-haired, pot-smoking and anti-Vietnam young rebels of the early 1960s were still good and decent Americans, and their shocking behaviour did not shake the foundations of the American mode of integration. Four years later, such an argument would prove to be hard to sustain, and not just in the United States (Elbaum 2002).⁵

As I said above, Durkheim was very much a sociologist of communities, of the collective dimension of social life. The most radical challenge to this came from what is now known as Rational Choice (Theory) (Green and Shapiro 1994; Adamae 2003). Rational Choice is an outgrowth of Methodological Individualism, something Max Weber introduced as a doctrine in the social sciences (and was taken further by e.g. Hayek and Popper). Simply put, Methodological Individualism is the theory complex in which every human activity is *in fine* reduced to individual interests, intentions, motives, concerns and decisions, because (it is argued) individual levels of subjectivity in action (even if eminently social) are the only ones available to the analyst (Heath 2015).

Rational Choice is a radicalization of the 'individualism' in Methodological Individualism. Human action, in Rational Choice, is driven by one motive, the maximization of individual

'profit' (material as well as symbolic), and it proceeds by means of calculated, intentional and rational decisions by individuals ('choice'). Since Durkheim's moral order crucially depended on the suppression (or 'moderation') of individual interests and preferences – egoism is typically seen as immoral – the theoretical dichotomy could not be sharper.⁶

Rational choice, in that sense, is a fundamental denial of Durkheim's 'social fact'. Even more: it is a lock-stock-and-barrel denial of the entire Durkheimian sociological imagination, for 'there is no such thing as society' (to quote Margaret Thatcher's slogan). In Kenneth Arrow's (1951) famous view, any form of collective (rational) choice is just impossible. Arrow, 'proved' this in his so-called 'Impossibility Theorem', quite incredibly by means of intricate mathematical argument – and mathematics reshaped (and replaced) field-observation-based sociology as the privileged source of knowledge on humans and their social practices (Adamae 2003: 102–16; cf. Blommaert 2016a). To the disbelief of empirical sociologists such as Everett C. Hughes, if certain social practices were ruled mathematically impossible, it was assumed that their occurrence in the real world was exceptional or accidental (cf. Hughes [1971] 2009: xix, 348–54).

Rational Choice never made a real inroad into sociolinguistics; but it largely dominates several social-scientific and humanities disciplines, most notably economics (cf. Thaler 2015).⁷ Revisiting and revising Durkheim's social fact from the perspective of contemporary sociolinguistics – the exercise I shall embark on in the next chapter – therefore implies a rejection of Rational Choice. A good reason for this is that in the more radical varieties of Rational Choice, people never seem to communicate, or they communicate only in dyadic logical argument when they are allowed to.

Notes

- 1 Observe that Durkheim, although generally seen as a conservative thinker, was not a reactionary. The society he

wished to help construct was a *new* one, not a (mythical) older society that needed to be preserved or recovered. Durkheim saw the present as unstable and unreliable, an old world that had vanished while a new one had not yet taken solid form and was moving in negative and destructive directions. His rejection – a moral rejection – of the present is quite radical, and contrasts remarkably with that of his contemporary Simmel, who viewed similar tendencies with a neutral, nonjudgemental gaze, as a challenge rather than as a problem.

- 2 This insistence on temperance and moderation, often presented as evidence of his politically conservative and bourgeois views, can also be seen as another feature of his analogy between secular and (Christian and Jewish) religious moral systems. Foucault (2015: 240) concludes his course on *The Punitive Society* with this caustic remark: '[Power] is hidden as power and passes for society. Society, Durkheim said, is the system of the disciplines, but what he did not say is that this system must be analyzed within strategies specific to a system of power.' Foucault saw the normative-disciplinary complex emerging in the nineteenth century as a core feature of the developing capitalist mode of production, and Durkheim's work on the division of labour as a codification of this process, in which he 'normalized' a system of power specific to and instrumental for this new mode of production.
- 3 See Parsons (1937). Parsons was not alone in seeking completion of the Durkheimian project. To name one already mentioned, it is hard not to see Foucault's sustained effort to describe and delineate the emergence of the modern 'normal' individual through forms of discipline as an idiosyncratic engagement with some of Durkheim's unfinished business. See, for example, Foucault (2003, 2015). Likewise, one can profitably read, for example, Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) as an elaborate engagement with Durkheim's notions of social cohesion and anomie.
- 4 Much of the pioneering literature on 'late' or 'Post'-Modernity implicitly takes this Durkheimian-Parsonian integrated society as its benchmark. Thus, for example, Zygmunt Bauman's 'liquid modernity' evidently takes a 'solid modernity' as its point of departure (Bauman 2007). Whether such a solid modernity was ever a reality rather than a projection of a

specific sociological imagination remains an untestable research question, although works such as E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968) strongly suggest that the degree of integration of our societies in an earlier stage of their development may have been grossly overrated.

- 5 Needless to say, Parsons' view of US society as integrated was fundamentally challenged, and some will say shattered, by Gunnar Myrdal's monumental *American Dilemma* (1944).
- 6 Judging from Durkheim's ([1897] 1951) discussion of 'egoistic suicide', egoism is, in effect, a killer rather than a cornerstone of social conduct.
- 7 The few attempts to use Rational Choice in sociolinguistic work were rather epic failures in social analysis. Carol Myers-Scotton's *Social Motivations for Codeswitching* (1993) used an awkward conception of Rights-and-Obligations sets attached to 'codes', from which speakers would rationally choose the most advantageous one; the actual social settings in which code-switching occurs were dismissed as accidental, not fundamental (see Meeuwis and Blommaert 1994 for an elaborate critique); in David Laitin's *Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa* (1992), an equally awkward variety of Game Theory is used to arrive at an ideal, rational '3 + 1 language outcome' for language policy in Africa. The argument is entirely detached from anything that ties languages to real social environments.