

Durkheim, Émile (1858–1917)

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David Émile Durkheim was a progenitor of sociology and remains (alongside Karl Marx and Max Weber) one of social science's central founding figures. In addition to authoring several major studies, Durkheim edited the influential journal *Année sociologique*. He held the first chair of sociology in France at the University of Paris. He was born on April 15, 1858 in Épinal, France. He died in Paris on November 15, 1917.

One of Durkheim's central aims was to construct the science of society—to treat the facts of social life according to the methods of the empirical sciences. Durkheim's guiding claim is that society is a reality *sui generis* that shapes and conditions the individual actor. Durkheim argues that explanations concerning types or manners of individual action locate the causal origin of action in society, and yet these types or manners are concomitantly carried and realized by individual actors. Although Durkheim never conducted a study of nationalism, it is quite clear what such a study would have entailed for him: it would be centrally concerned with defining the specific form of collective consciousness, or the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average man within the putative national unit; it would have a central subject matter, comprised essentially of social facts and of theoretical entities based on those facts; and it would be genealogical in its approach, breaking the national unit down into its component

parts, showing how those parts developed throughout history, and identifying the conditions and causes of the unit's coming into being.

Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness refers to the basis of social solidarity (i.e., the basic process by which social units cohere), which can be traced to the conformity of each individual consciousness to a collective type; and a collective type is constituted by the total social similarities or the sum of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society. For sociological explanation, an individual's personal state of consciousness is not seen as the decisive element determining his or her behavior; rather it is the collective consciousness—that is, the aspect of the individual's total consciousness that is shared with members of the group of which the individual is a part. The resemblance of individual consciousnesses to the collective type is the characteristic that marks membership in the group and provides the explanatory factor concerning this type of social cohesion.

The basic set of facts that Durkheim delineated was made up of *social facts*, which consist in manners of acting, thinking, and feeling that are external to the individual and are endowed with a power of coercion in virtue of which they impose themselves on him (Durkheim 1937: 5). The broader set of facts captured by Durkheim's concept of *institutions*—namely all the beliefs and all the modes of behavior instituted by the collectivity (1937: xxii)—composes both the social facts and the theoretical entities (e.g., collective representations) that are based on analyses of these forms. “Collective representations” refers to a category of theoretical entities that explain the basic cognitive functions

of individual actors; they both define and explain the central processes responsible for the creation of social facts. Hence Durkheim referred to *sociology* as the science of institutions, their genesis, and their functioning (1937: xxii). He argues that only through the careful study of the past can we come to understand the present and anticipate the future. The study of nationalism would therefore entail, for him, genealogical historical investigation. In order to understand the nature of nationalism in general (or of one nation in particular), one must discover the characteristic qualities that define this form of collective consciousness; and, to do this, one must study the past. All human institutions are rooted in history, so Durkheim's explanations emphasize seeking an understanding of their genesis as well as of the function they serve in their historical context.

Durkheim's interest in understanding and explaining contemporary society led him to identify certain key characteristics of French and German collective consciousness, and in this way there are empirical guiding lights that inform and complement his general theoretical and methodological view and suggest concretely what qualities a study of French or German nationalism would need to account for. Representative aspects of the French collective consciousness that Durkheim identifies in his works are the sacred and supreme value of the individual (Durkheim 2002) and an essential Cartesianism (Durkheim 1938). The aspects of the German collective consciousness that he identifies incorporate views of the state as the highest form of community, views of the state as sovereign, and the concomitant view that the state is power, encapsulated in the motto *Deutschland über alles*, "Germany above all" (Durkheim 1915). Durkheim, moreover, offers a view on certain concepts that are central to the study of nationalism—a people,

a nationality, and the state. Durkheim writes of a *people*:

A people, from the mere fact that it is a people, will have an intellectual and moral temperament, a character which will assert itself in every detail of its thoughts and acts ... this popular soul will find expression in literary monuments, epics, myths, legends, etc., which, without being referable to any particular author will have a kind of internal unity like the works of individuals. It is from the same source that we derive those bodies of juridical customs, the first forms of law. (Durkheim 1915: 28–29)

Of a *nationality* he writes:

A nationality is a group of human beings, who for ethnical or perhaps merely for historical reasons desire to live under the same laws, and to form a single State, large or small, as it may be: and it is now a recognized principle among civilized peoples that, when this common desire has been persistently affirmed, it commands respect, and is indeed the only solid basis of a State. (Durkheim 1915: 40)

He refers to the *state* as "the people awakened to a consciousness of itself, of its needs and its aspirations" (Durkheim 1915: 27).

SEE ALSO: Citizenship and Nationality; Nationalism; Solidarity

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FURTHER READING

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