DURKHEIM’S SUI GENERIS REALITY AND THE CENTRAL SUBJECT MATTER OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Eric Malczewski

ABSTRACT

Purpose — The purpose of this chapter is twofold: one, to shed light on the nature of the central subject matter of social science; and, two, to demonstrate that Émile Durkheim’s theory of collective representations identifies this subject matter.

Design/methodology/approach — Durkheim’s methodological and theoretical framework is assessed and compared with influential readings of it so as to show that Durkheim’s main theoretical contributions have been overlooked and to draw out insights of use to contemporary theory.

Findings — Defining the nature of human social reality and the central subject matter of social science forms the core of Durkheim’s project. Durkheim saw the central subject matter of social science as a single order of reality.
Research limitations/implications — *This argument draws attention to the methodological and theoretical coherence of Durkheim’s thought, thereby helping to resolve the debate over how to interpret the work of this central figure and contributing a view of use to contemporary theory.*

Originality/value — *In rendering palpable the nature of the essential reality that is the object of Durkheim’s work, the argument advanced in this chapter resolves what are interpreted as anomalies in Durkheim’s thought and draws out the implications for better understanding Durkheim and the order of reality that traditionally has been referred to as culture or society.*

**Keywords:** Durkheim; collective representations; institutions; social theory; social facts; social action

**INTRODUCTION**

The debate concerning the interpretation of the thought of Émile Durkheim has been longstanding in sociology and sociological theory (Alexander & Smith, 2005; Collins, 2005; Lukes, 1973; Schmaus, 2004, pp. 1–26). The fundamental problem may be put thus: “What to do with Durkheim?”

The answer to this question first depends on how we understand the nature of the science Durkheim sought to engender (and, therein, its epistemological thrust and implications), which then affects how we interpret and build upon the specific findings left in his great body of work. In the terms of Alexander and Smith’s overview of the history of this debate, there appear to be five versions of Durkheim: conservative, radical, structuralist, and culturalist — the latter comprising the semiotic Durkheim and the interactional/pragmatic Durkheim (Alexander & Smith, 2005, pp. 5, 20). Each of the corresponding interpretations purports to identify the “real” Durkheim. To begin with, answering the question of whether Durkheim’s political aims were informed by his conception of social science depends on the definition of what constitutes the latter; to wit, the so-called conservative or radical Durkheim further qualifies the elemental Durkheim, the really “real” Durkheim, who is widely interpreted as being either structural or cultural (Alexander, 2005, pp. 1–32). Considering that Durkheim’s conception of social science is most central, emphasizing the question — “What to do...
with Durkheim today?” – reflects more than specialists’ concerns with the thought of a prominent figure. The answer to this question bears on what is seen to constitute the object of social science and social science’s organizing principles – fundamental issues that remain contested (Alexander, 1982; Alexander & Seidman, 1990; Friedman, 2004, 2005; Greenfeld & Malczewski, 2010; Malczewski, 2013; Sewell, 2005; Tilly, 2005, pp. 3–21).

The claim advanced here is that defining the nature of human social reality (and, therein, the central subject matter of social science) is at the core of Durkheim’s project and that his theory of collective representations identifies this reality as being *sui generis*. The nature of the order of reality Durkheim spent his career attempting to define is taken as the key quality informing how to interpret and build upon Durkheim’s work. Durkheim’s merit as a scientist is what is of import here; I hence separate Durkheim *qua* scientist from whatever other commitments (political or otherwise) mutually inform his desire to constitute a new science (cf. Jones, 1977, 1978). The competing readings of Durkheim that interpret him as being either cultural or structural reduce his multifaceted view of human nature without warrant. The view espoused here transcends the structural and cultural views of Durkheim by demonstrating that Durkheim saw the central subject matter of social science as a single order of reality.

My purpose here is to be constructive, to offer a view that helps contemporary social science to see farther. In rendering palpable the nature of the essential reality that is the object of Durkheim’s work – the putative central subject matter of social science itself – my argument resolves what are interpreted as anomalies in Durkheim’s thought and, in so doing, draws out the implications for better understanding Durkheim and the order of reality that traditionally has been referred to as culture or society. This argument also draws attention to immanent problems in contemporary sociological theory whilst offering a perspective that helps correct those problems, allowing us to draw better insight from existing empirical work.

**THE METHOD AND CENTRAL SUBJECT MATTER OF SOCIAL SCIENCE**

Let us begin by approaching Durkheim with a view to understanding the specific set of empirical phenomena he sought to define and to illuminate from the very start until the end of his career.
Durkheim opens his earliest major work, *The Division of Labor in Society*, with a declaration of his approach and methodological stance: “This book is above all an attempt to treat the facts of moral life according to the methods of the positive sciences … to constitute the science of morality” (1997 [1893], p. xxv). The quotation above opens the “Preface to the First Edition”; it is given the place of privilege at the head of the work and serves as the guide to the line of thought Durkheim develops in the study that follows and in his oeuvre more generally. In this statement Durkheim provides the following: one, an indication of the relevant set of empirical phenomena; and, two, a proposed method of inquiry. Defining the relevant set of phenomena (here termed “moral,” and, later, “social” facts), those facts that are taken to bear on his guiding questions, that serve as his set of test data, and that undergird his proofs, depends first on the discovery of the characteristic qualities that justify analytical delineation. Durkheim writes:

To submit an order of facts to the scrutiny of science it is not enough carefully to observe, describe and classify them. But — and this is much more difficult — we must also, in Descartes’ phrase, discover the perspective [or aspect] from which they become scientific, that is, find in them some objective element which is capable of precise determination and, if possible, measurement. (1997 [1893], p. xxix)

Durkheim’s aim to constitute a new science demanded of him the delimitation of the definite objects that comprise the relevant data set (1958, p. 5). No one understood better than did Durkheim that well-defined concepts grounded in the observed qualities of objects of experience are fundamental to scientific activity (cf. Schmaus, 1994). These concepts underlie proposed solutions to problems and permit the scientist to craft explanatory theories (Malczewski, 2013). Durkheim’s emphasis on the careful definition of concepts has been credited to the current of late 19th century neo-Kantian thought seen running through the perspectives advanced by those such as Charles Renouvier and Durkheim’s teacher Émile Boutroux at the École Normale Supérieure and which Durkheim presumably encountered during his stay in Germany (Collins, 2005, p. 100; Lukes, 1973, pp. 55–57). This emphasis on the definition of concepts, howsoever important it was for the philosophical tradition carried on by neo-Kantians, was seen by Durkheim as central to a scientific program concerned with discovering the distinguishing phenomena of human social life — Durkheim’s major caveat being that the concepts employed in his science were neither to be improvised, nor discovered through mere introspection in the absence of putting its results to the test against empirical reality, nor borrowed from one or another of the established sciences and used in an axiomatic fashion (1974
Durkheim in this way strove to move beyond philosophical speculation or systematization of practical doctrines.

Durkheim’s emphasis on discovering the defining qualities (formulated methodologically as concepts) and organizing principles (formulated methodologically as theoretical entities or explanatory theories) of the phenomena he sought to understand and subjecting claims about them to the test of experience through rigorous comparison with empirical evidence is pithily summed up in his proposition that “social facts must be treated as things” (1982 [1895], p. 35). First, Durkheim’s proposition has methodological implications for the treatment of empirical phenomena. The empirical foundations of all scientific claims are, as it were, “things” — defined phenomena with externally observable characteristics (i.e., characteristics that are in principle capable of being examined by any interested party and accounted for in the formulation of concepts). As objects of science, such things are observed, described, classified, and made objects of experimentation (i.e., systematic comparative questioning). Scientific objects that merit the name are treated as unknown phenomena whose secrets must be uncovered through comparison and examined ever more finely. Durkheim’s use of science as his method of approach to the study of human social reality thus demanded both a certain attitude toward and the rigorous circumscription of the central phenomena seen to bear on his guiding questions. Durkheim sought to circumscribe these phenomena and to discover the organizing principles of human social order and experience in general, hence the field in which to seek scientific understanding of humanity. Throughout his work, it is clear that Durkheim’s approach to the facts of human social life entailed careful examination of evidence; consider, for example, the definition of suicide or the treatment of suicide rates in Suicide, his study of socialism, or the qualities of individual versus collective thought in The Division of Labor in Society and The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1951 [1897], 1958 [1928], 1997 [1893], 1995 [1912]). Durkheim wished to give science a new body of evidence on which to work, and, like Newton or Darwin before him, to demonstrate the significance of approaching defined bodies of evidence with a certain mental attitude (1982 [1895], p. 36).

Second, Durkheim’s proposition entails the elementary logical requirement that scientific explanations of phenomena be drawn from appropriate sets of reality. This requirement applies equally to the treatment of social facts and other sets (whether physical, organic, chemical, etc.). In contrast to the emphatically biological orientation of psychology of his day — and, arguably, our day — Durkheim sought the answers to questions
concerning human experience and social order in a set of phenomena characteristic of that set of problems. He writes:

The fault of the biological scientists was not that they used [analogy as a form of comparison] but that they used it wrongly. Instead of trying to control their studies of society by their knowledge of biology, they tried to infer the laws of the first from the laws of the second. Such inferences are worthless. If the laws governing natural life are found also in society, they are found in different forms and with specific characteristics which do not permit conjecture by analogy and can only be understood by direct observation. (1974 [1898])

Regarding human social reality as a mere epiphenomenon of organic life as understood by biology entails an unexplained logical leap (i.e., that the organizing principles of life provide the explanatory organizing principles of all aspects of living phenomena whatsoever) and fails to grasp that which is distinctive about human social reality (e.g., that rule-based behaviors — behaviors that are essentially constituted as meaningful or symbolically oriented — are characteristic only of human beings and have no analogue in the other realms of scientific inquiry). This view is one that Durkheim continuously emphasized yet that was overlooked by many of his contemporaries (1982 [1895]). The basic error is the failure to recognize the implications of dealing with a set of reality sui generis (1974, pp. 1–34), whatever its putative ontological status.

Durkheim defends his general view of the autonomous nature of sets of reality sui generis both on empirical and on logical grounds — the empirical grounds being established by direct reference to characteristic qualities and/or patterns evident in the data set and the logical grounds depending on the nature of the questions at hand and/or the nature of the analytical approach. Durkheim was no naïve positivist or classical inductivist: his methodological statements demonstrate his awareness of the constructed nature of scientific claims and the facts (whether as concepts, theoretical entities, or proven theories) that legitimate them. Durkheim’s view is manifest throughout his prefatory remarks on the nature of his approach in his major studies and is demonstrated in the bodies of his works. Durkheim’s elementary — and controversial — methodological claims made in the 1890s anticipate similar claims later made by Karl Popper and a version of which is currently being advanced by our contemporaries Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith, to take two well-known examples (Alexander & Smith, 2010, p. 21; Popper, 1979 [1972], pp. 153–190). Durkheim’s central methodological claim is that the characteristic organizing principle of a given set of phenomena must be located in that set and analyzed on its own terms. This, of course, applies to all objects of science equally.
Regarding the definition of the relevant set of reality, Durkheim’s science begins with the examination of what he terms social facts. “Social facts” are comprised of rules of action (règles d’action) or manners of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual that are endowed with a power of coercion by virtue of which they impose themselves on him (1930 [1893], p. xxxvii, 1982 [1895]). The concept of social facts refers to the objects that are taken as basic and upon which social science is built. Durkheim’s related concept of “institutions” refers to “all the beliefs and modes of behavior instituted by the collectivity” and composes both social facts and theoretical entities based on them — these latter are termed “collective representations” (1982 [1895], p. 45). Durkheim argues that the activity called sociology is a science concerned with understanding the genesis and functioning of institutions (1982 [1895]; cf. Malczewski, 2013). Institutions are argued to encompass the following: one, social facts — primarily as beliefs, but also as externally imposed coercion or influence, which, independent of the position in a given analysis, take the essential form of belief for the coercive agent or agents (rules of action have this same dual character — they are both rules putatively followed by individual actors and they are the rules that provide the putative explanation for coercive action on the parts of the coercive agent or agents); and, two, the phenomena to which they give rise, “collective representations,” which are theoretical entities providing the putative organizing principles of the behavior in question. Durkheim argues that institutions are the effects of men in association and consequently reflect transformations of the nature of this association.

An important theoretical implication of Durkheim’s focus on institutions is made palpable in his argument that the central phenomena of theoretical interest to sociology are “collective representations.” Being uninterested in matters metaphysical or in accessing “the innermost depth of being,” Durkheim demonstrates that examining institutions scientifically leads to the discovery of laws concerning the source of these products of human activity (1982 [1895], p. 37). Social facts, whatever role they play as conditions or causes once made, are first and most importantly representations and effects of another process. It is the nature of this process that Durkheim’s sociology seeks to uncover — he is not interested in constructing a curiosity cabinet of social types, ethnographic portraits, and statistical tables, howsoever useful these tools might be. The understanding and explanation, not the mere description, of these phenomena motivates Durkheim’s advocacy for the analytical division between representations of “states of the collective consciousness” and those of “individual
consciousness”; he justifies this division on the grounds that each set “has its own laws” (1982 [1895], p. 40). Like the relationship between a gene and the human organism that carries it, these phenomena belong to analytically separate sets that essentially include one another in some way, but the laws peculiar to each of them are specific and definite. Claims that Durkheim reified or hypostasized society (Lukes, 1982, p. 4) overlook the significance of his approach to social facts as products of an as yet unknown force, and his consistently applied method, moreover, forbids conflation of what for us are two different methodological elements: empirically established sets of facts and falsifiable claims about those facts. (Of course, even the basic order of so-called empirically established facts themselves are conjectural and, therefore, falsifiable; Durkheim’s definitions of suicide or socialism illustrate that scientific facts — which are conceptually framed — are built like theories only at a different level of generality.) Claims concerning the existence of “society” fall under the latter species and refer to patterns evident in the first.

It has been claimed that social facts and their concomitant characteristic of constraint have an “ambiguous” quality both at the level of the underlying facts and by extension in Durkheim’s claims about them (Alexander, 2005, p. 140; Lukes, 1982, pp. 3–4). The implication here is that Durkheim is caught being ambiguous in the sense of obscure or inexact. No, this is not the case. It is, however, right to see Durkheim as being ambiguous if the emphasis is placed on the two-sided — ambi — or dual nature of social facts (and, therefore, constraint) and claims about social facts: in fact, emphasizing the two-sided nature of social facts and theoretical entities based on them gets straight to the heart of what Durkheim is demonstrating. Consider, for example, Durkheim’s claim in The Division of Labor in Society:

> From [the collective consciousness], directly or indirectly, all criminality flows. Crime is not only an injury done to interests which may be serious; it is also an offence against an authority which is in some way transcendent. Experientially speaking, there exists no moral force superior to that of the individual, save that of the collectivity. (1997 [1893], p. 43)

Social facts in all of Durkheim’s studies are argued to exhibit qualities reflecting a dual nature — one that is subjective (i.e., individual) and one that is external (i.e., social). In The Elementary Forms of Religious Life he offers the following conjecture: “society weighs in on its members with all its authority … Such appears to be the origin of the very special authority that is inherent in reason and that makes us trustingly accept its promptings” (1995 [1912], p. 16). The individual in both of these examples is
unquestionably self-constraining and subject to external constraint. Such “ambiguity” is an analytically isolated and putatively inherent characteristic of the phenomena to which Durkheim refers.

The often used distinction between the “structural Durkheim” and the “cultural Durkheim” is more misleading than helpful. Seeing the structural Durkheim in “submerged morphological forces, legal constraints, and abstract conscience collective … that narrate the Division of Labor, the mechanistic interactions and associations that animate Suicide, and the functional determinism and epistemological collectivism suggested by Rules” overlooks Durkheim’s repeated arguments that these are products of some sui generis process — the process termed “society” — whose definition is key (Alexander & Smith, 2005, p. 5). Taking into account my claims concerning the essentially multifaceted nature of these phenomena discussed above, Durkheim at his most structural would be Durkheim at his most cultural. We see, for example, as Durkheim explicitly roots institutions in history, he emphasizes seeking understanding of their genesis and functioning: Durkheim is working with a time- and context-dependent process that is both subjective and external. The characteristics peculiar to a given set of beliefs or mode of behavior are conditioned by and depend on those sets that precede it and that provide the material out of which those under observation are made. Whatever structural components one may observe in Durkheim’s work, they are, at best, structural for Durkheim in a metaphorical sense (even if the scientific approach suggests that metaphor). Methodologically speaking, Durkheim’s approach permits him to account for the elements — the several beliefs and modes of behavior — that comprise a given institution:

History alone enables us to break down an institution into its component parts, because it shows those parts to us as they are born in time, one after the other. Second, by situating each part of the institution within the totality of circumstances in which it was born, history puts into our hands the only tools we have for identifying the causes that have brought it into being. Thus, whenever we set out to explain something human at a specific moment in time — be it a religious belief, a moral rule, a legal principle, an aesthetic technique, or an economic system — we must begin by going back to its simplest and most primitive form. (1995 [1912], p. 3)

It is clear throughout Durkheim’s work that all actions are realized by individuals (hence all social facts pass through individual actors). Moreover, since social solidarity is a product of individuals’ actions — indeed, Durkheim often reminds his audience of what ought to be the most elementary empirical observation in the human sciences: that individuals are “the only active elements in society” — understanding the characteristics and
contexts of individuals’ actions always brings the question back to the nature of society and its constituent parts (1937 [1895], p. xvi).

Most importantly, the process and causal sequence (Durkheim calls this “society”) out of which institutions are produced, even though it is the process and causal sequence that Durkheim advocates most emphatically and places in the seat of privilege in his work, is a theoretical entity referring to the organizing principles of the process whereby acting individuals concomitantly associate and create institutions. Transformations of society are comprised of alterations in this association the only visible outcome of which comprises beliefs and modes of behavior as translated, effectuated, or concretized by individuals. Durkheim stresses time and again that individuals are “the only active elements in society” — this is both an empirically and logically based claim — and his equal stress on the sui generis nature of society suggests that the essential nature of the vector responsible for the concretized products of analysis (i.e., “institutions”) has two facets. Social transformation is thus simultaneously “individual” and “social” for Durkheim. This process always occurs at these two levels. Put differently, the individual and the social refer to two aspects of one and the same process; hence any science trained on this order of facts must take into account both levels in order to grasp what is essential in the phenomena. This explains why the meaning of the characteristic of “constraint” in Durkheim’s definition of social facts

shifts dramatically ... from the authority of legal rules, moral maxims and social conventions (as manifested by the sanctions brought to bear when the attempt is made to violate them) to the need to follow certain rules or procedures to carry out certain activities successfully (for instance, a Frenchman must speak French to be understood, and an industrialist must use current methods or else face ruin); he also used it for the causal influence of “morphological” factors (such as that of communication channels on patterns of migration and commerce), psychological compulsion in a crowd situation, the impact of prevailing attitudes and beliefs, and the transmission of culture through education which serves to constitute the very identity of individuals. (Lukes, 1982, p. 4)

Lukes goes on to draw the conclusion that the shifts in the meaning of constraint in Durkheim’s definition of social facts indicate a slippage in Durkheim’s thought (1973, p. 11). Lukes’ conclusion is incorrect and misleading. Social facts for Durkheim are both external to any given individual and external to all individuals in a given society or group. This highlights two aspects of a single problem for Durkheim. Both the social and individual aspects must be studied in and for themselves.

It is a mischaracterization of Durkheim’s thought to suggest, as Alfred Kroeber did in an address to the American Anthropological Association in
1950, that Durkheim believed “cultural phenomena can be adequately subsumed under purely social concepts” (Kroeber, 1952, p. 156). Kroeber’s perspective attributes empirical and logical errors to Durkheim where they are most markedly absent. Durkheim emphasizes the so-called social aspect of the phenomena in order to demonstrate that the individual personality — evident in rules of action, beliefs about the world, and modes of behavior which follow — is fashioned by a key process, that the individual personality is empirically and analytically dependent on phenomena that have a social character. Durkheim argues that this relationship of dependence operates as a law of nature. In this way, we can make sense of Durkheim’s claim that society is a “conscious being,” a “sui generis being with its own special nature, distinct from that of its members, and a personality of its own different from individual personalities” (Durkheim quoted in Lukes, 1973, p. 11). Although society is a set of reality logically distinct from others, it is not simply that — it is an order of reality of its own kind.

CONCLUSION

It is clear throughout Durkheim’s work that he sought to grasp something much more profound about the nature of human reality than a mere analytical dimension of it. Durkheim attempted to construct the science of humanity based on the empirical effects found everywhere and to demonstrate that the putative entity he termed “society” exerts a force over the individuals that comprise it that can be both described and measured. That society is a reality sui generis is a theoretical claim legitimated by the perspective or aspect by which its empirical and conceptual proofs show that it is differentiated from other phenomena. Like Newton’s approach, buttressed by observations of patterns in individual manifestations of matter, Durkheim’s view is complemented by a level of reality to which we have direct access; and, like Newton, Durkheim advances beyond mere speculation concerning the nature of things, leaving a legacy amenable to revision or verification by others.

So, what do we do with Durkheim? Based on the foregoing, I suggest that there are grounds for investigating the extent to which Durkheim’s approach reaches beyond mere analytical claims and toward a strong theoretical claim about the nature of an original order of reality, one rooted in an empirically accessible and analytically cogent order of phenomena (cf. Malczewski, 2013). Considering this issue more broadly, this approach
to Durkheim sheds light on the fissure in contemporary sociological theory between those seeking to create a sociology that is “all about culture” (and who thus seek to avoid the reduction of culture to other factors) and those focused on the mutual constitution of culture and structure: both perspectives fall victim to empirical and logical errors in failing to account for the vector responsible for bridging their imputed causes and the attributed effects, whether at the level of the individual situation, group dynamics, or social-structural elements (Alexander & Seidman, 1990; Alexander & Smith, 2010, p. 20; Olick, 2010, p. 98). To wish for a sociology that is “all about culture,” or to wish for a sociology that can claim a specific set of phenomena as its own, is to wish to identify the organizing principle that sets some phenomena radically apart from others and that legitimates the scientific aims behind the wish. The position of strict analytical autonomy (e.g., represented by the Strong Program in cultural sociology at Yale et al.), in merely making analytical claims about its body of evidence and shying away from a comprehensive orientation, acts on such wishes (often resulting in suggestive work), but it has not yet found the means of tying the fractured analytical parts together; hence such views ultimately end in reductionism. As Jeffrey K. Olick persuasively claims, it is reductionism, but reductionism of another kind: “analytical autonomy seems to imply some sort of metaphysics … a manifest belief … in a priori concepts” (Olick, 2010, p. 105).

Without an explanatory account of what I claim is an original ambiguity or duality in the phenomena — that is, that these phenomena are simultaneously external and internal at one and the same time — we are left without a theoretical path to determine causation and, therefore, explanation. General theory in the social sciences tends to be regarded with suspicion these days, but, without a theoretical beacon to guide research — that is, without a claim about the nature of the organizing principles specific to its central subject matter — social science is left in the unremarkable position of biology before Darwin. There are, of course, promising developments. Warren Schmaus’ work on Durkheim, being informed by the philosophy of science, ranks among the most sensitive interpretations of Durkheim’s thought to date. Schmaus recognizes the specific task each of Durkheim’s major studies (but not just his major studies) contributes to his theory of collective representations as well as the epistemological shift he sought to effect (1994; cf. 2003). Liah Greenfeld’s work bucks the trend of middle-range social scientific analysis and argues for the theoretical value of regarding the central subject matter of the social sciences as an order of phenomena sui generis meriting an explanatory framework that appreciates

Durkheim, that precocious and model student of human experience, left us a tremendous body of work whose insights and what they suggest remain largely unrecognized. Durkheim makes the strongest claim for the primacy of defining social science’s central subject matter: this orientation remains constant throughout Durkheim’s career and is unaffected by other, arguable developments attributed to the course of his thought (Alexander, 2005, pp. 136–159). Durkheim pointed to the defining characteristics of the order of reality that sets humanity apart and justifies a science of its own. Let us set about interpreting this order of reality with a certain mental attitude inspired by Durkheim, so as to account for it better.

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**REFERENCES**


