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DURKHEIM'S DIVISION OF LABOR IN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The source of social life, according to Durkheim, is the similitude of consciousnesses and the division of labor. The former is best evident among primitive societies where a "mechanical solidarity," evidenced by repressive law, prevails; the latter in advanced societies where populations evidence greater "dynamic density," and juridical rules define the nature and relations of functions. In combating individualism and basing the existence of societies on a "consensus of parts," Durkheim refutes his positivistic emphasis which denies the relevance of ends to a scientific study of society. In his discussion of social ends is a latent anti-mechanistic trend. The theory of unilinear development is established on deficient ethnographic data. It assumes the absence of division of labor among primitive societies and of any "mechanical solidarity" among modern societies. Repressive and restitutive law Durkheim seeks to use as indexes of mechanical and organic solidarity, but he does not establish with any precision the perfect associations which he assumes obtain between his types of solidarity and of law.

In a pedestrian, and somewhat infelicitous, fashion, Durkheim's *De la division du travail social* has been accorded a belated English translation, forty years after its initial publication.¹ This testimony to the continued esteem with which Durkheim's work is regarded provides the impetus for a reconsideration of the first *magnum opus* of this hegemonic protagonist of the sociologistic school. The value of such an examination is twofold: it permits a re-estimation of the rôle played by Durkheim in the development of modern sociological thought, and it brings to a focus several conceptions fundamental to much of contemporary research.

An analysis of the theoretical context in which this work was written is of moment in appreciating its contributions. Deep in the current of the positivistic thought which stemmed from Comte, Durkheim's *Division* embodies many of its characteristic features. It seeks to adopt the methods and criteria of the physical sciences for the determination of those mechanically induced social laws, which, under given conditions, obtain with an ineluctable necessity. Explicit in this procedure is, of course, the assumption of the feasibility of so doing and of the susceptibility of social phenomena to such

¹ George Simpson, *Émile Durkheim on the Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1933. Subsequent citations refer to this edition.

study. The fact that the concept of causation, more markedly perhaps in the social sciences than in the physical, is an epistemologic assumption, a matter of imputation and not of observation, is ignored. Within this positivistic tradition the *Division* is further classifiable as instancing the anti-individualistic, anti-intellectualistic approach. It is an avowed revolt from the individualistic-utilitarian positivism which, finding its prototypes in the systems of Hobbes and of Locke, characterized so much of English social thought. A radical sociology seemed to Durkheim to be the one way of maintaining the autonomy of sociology as an independent discipline, and it is to this dominant preoccupation that many of his conceptions are due. Of especial significance is the fact that the *Division*, although it adumbrates many ideas which Durkheim subsequently developed in some detail,² presents an objective approach, with implicit reservations, from which he later diverged sharply, notably in his *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*.

The peregrinations of the ideas expressed in the *Division* have included this country, but a brief summary is none the less desirable to establish the basis of this discussion. The source of social life, maintains Durkheim, is twofold: the similitude of consciousnesses and the division of social labor. In one society-type, which he calls "primitive," solidarity is induced by a community of representations which gives birth to laws imposing uniform beliefs and practices upon individuals under threat of repressive measures. These repressive laws are external—that is, observable in the positivistic sense—indexes of this "mechanical solidarity." The division of social labor, on the other hand, while it enhances, nay compels, individuation, also occasions an "organic solidarity," based upon the interdependence of co-operatively functioning individuals and groups. This type of solidarity is indexed by juridical rules defining the nature and relations of functions. These rules may properly be termed restitutive law, since their violation involves merely reparative, and not expiatory, consequences. Historically, the movement has been from mechanical to organic solidarity, though the

² The starting-point of *Le Suicide* is explicit in Book II, chap. i, of the *Division*; *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* on pages 349 ff.; and the *Formes élémentaires* . . . on pages 288 ff.

former never disappears completely. The determining cause of this trend is found in the increased size and density of populations with the usual, if not invariable, concomitant, increased social interaction. This so intensifies the struggle for existence that only through progressive differentiation of functions is survival possible for many who otherwise would be doomed to extinction. This continuous trend occurs mechanically through a series of disturbed and re-established social dynamic equilibria.

Now, as previously suggested, Durkheim seeks to combat individualistic positivism which ignores the relevance of social ends as partial determinants of social action. He is hence faced with a perturbing dilemma: as a positivist, to admit the irrelevance of ends to a scientific study of society; as an anti-individualist, to indicate the effectiveness of social aims in conditioning social action, and thus in effect to abandon radical positivism. For, if, as positivism would have us believe, logic and science can deal only with empirical facts, with *sensa*, then a science of social phenomena, on that score alone, becomes impossible, since this attitude relegates to limbo all ends, i.e., subjective anticipations of *future* occurrences, without a consideration of which human behavior becomes inexplicable.³ Ends, goals, aims, are by definition not logico-experimental data but rather value judgments; and yet an understanding of social phenomena requires a study of their rôle.⁴ This does not involve a determinism-teleology embarrassment, but simply notes the fact that subjectively conceived ends—irrespective of their

³ Strangely enough, this position is admitted by the positivist, V. Pareto. See his *Traité de sociologie générale*, II, 1349 ff. Paris, 1917. Cf. Talcott Parsons, "Some Reflections on 'The Nature and Significance of Economics.'" *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, XLVIII (1934), 511-45. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Parsons for much of the viewpoint here expressed.

⁴ Compare Heinrich Rickert, *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft*, pp. 99 ff. Tübingen: Mohr, 1921. Léon Duguit, whose conceptions of solidarity by similitude and through division of labor closely resemble those of Durkheim, presents a brilliant exposition of the significance of ends for interpretation. This, in spite of his ultra-positivism. See his *L'État, le droit objectif et la loi positive*, pp. 33 ff. Fontemoing, 1901. In this country, the most exact statement of this position is to be found in W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (University of Chicago Press, 1918-20), particularly in the discussion of social attitudes and "definition of the situation."

recognition of all the pertinent data in a given situation—as well as “external conditions,” influence behavior. To ban ends as “improper” for scientific study is not to exempt sociology from metaphysics, but to vitiate its findings by a crude and uncriticized metaphysics.⁵

At the time of writing the *Division*, Durkheim was too much the positivist to acknowledge explicitly the full force of this position, but his conscious methodologic doctrines notwithstanding, he surreptitiously slips between the horns of the dilemma and salves his anti-individualistic conscience by dealing with *social* ends. Thus, he indicates quite clearly that if society were simply a resultant of juxtaposed individuals brought into temporary contractual relationships for the satisfaction of their respective immediate interests, that if the typical social relation were the economic, then we should no longer have a society but Hobbes's “state of nature.”

For where interest is the only ruling force each individual finds himself in a state of war with every other since nothing comes to modify the egos, and any truce in this eternal antagonism would not be of long duration.⁶

This corresponds to Durkheim's description of *anomie*. But the fact is, he continues, that even in such highly contractual and “individualized” societies as our own, this brutish state of nature does not obtain. What, then, obviates this condition which, were the individualistic approach valid, one would expect to find characterizing a contractual society? It is the “consensus of parts,” the integration of individual ends, the social value-complex.⁷ This is clearly seen in the legal regulation of contracts between individuals, for although it is true that these contracts are initially a voluntary matter, once begun, they are subject to society as the omnipresent and controlling “third party.” Through a system of law, an organ of social control, the accord of individual wills is constrained for the consonance of diffuse social functions. Moreover, in this process, society plays an *active* rôle, for it determines which obligations are “just,” i.e., accord with the dominant social values, and

⁵ Compare C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (ed.), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Pierce*, I, 52 ff. Harvard University Press, 1931.

⁶ *Division* . . . , pp. 203-4; cf. p. 365.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 360. Cf. Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 517.

which need not be enforced. With this incisive analysis, Durkheim refutes one of the basic doctrines of an atomistic sociology, for he finds in the very relation which had been regarded as individualistic, *par excellence*, the significant interpenetration of social factors.⁸

His conception is similar to Sumner's "strain toward consistency" and autonomy of the mores and to Goldenweiser's notion of the limit to the discrepancies between the various aspects of a culture. This view of society is linked to an acknowledgment of the previously mentioned rôle of social ends and to an acceptance of the doctrine of emergence. That social behavior cannot be explained through reference to the behavior of individuals in mere juxtaposition is maintained by both Durkheim and Pareto,⁹ and it is precisely this view which is held to justify sociology as a distinct discipline.

In Durkheim's discussion of social ends is a latent anti-mechanistic trend. For when instruments are fashioned for the attempted attainment of ends, by this very fact conditions are evolved which act not only in the direction of the goals, but react upon and frequently change the value-estimations. These new valuations may relieve man from the necessity of accepting the "conditions of existence"—Durkheim's *milieu*—and acting in the previously determined manner. His "definition of the situation" having changed, his behavior has a new orientation, and mechanistic determinism, based on a knowledge of the *objective* factors, no longer adequately accounts for this behavior. But as is frequently characteristic of mechanistic theorists, Durkheim does not properly distinguish his abstract conceptions, in this instance the external conditions of existence, from the concrete situation, which includes the usually suppressed elements of man's selection of objectives. The ineluc-

⁸ The distinction between Durkheim's analysis and the social contract theories should thus be quite clear. As Durkheim himself remarked: "Il n'y a qu'un critique singulièrement superficielle qui pourrait reprocher à notre conception de la contrainte sociale de rééditer les théories de Hobbes et de Machiavel." *Règles* . . . , p. 151.

⁹ It is particularly striking that Pareto, with his leanings toward empiricism, should adopt this view. *Traité* . . . , I, 26. "Notez qu'étudier les individus ne veut pas dire que l'on doit considérer plusieurs de ceux-ci mis ensemble, comme une simple somme; ils forment un composé, lequel, à l'égal des composés chimiques, peut avoir des propriétés qui ne sont pas la somme des propriétés des composants." This conception is, of course, marked in all of Durkheim's works, but an exposition of it was first given in his *Règles* . . . , p. 126.

table conclusions derived from his abstract delineation of the situation he thinks to represent actual facts, in all their empirical variety.¹⁰ To put it in another way, Durkheim neglects to treat his conceptions as advisedly ideal constructions demanding appropriate alteration before they can adequately describe concrete social phenomena.

In his presentation of societal evolution, Durkheim professes to trace genetically a transition from mechanical to organic solidarity, and it is here that his defective ethnographic data lead him astray. With Maine and Steinmetz, he affects to note the preponderance, even the exclusive existence, of *penal* law in primitive society. In point of fact, as recent field studies have demonstrated, primitive societies possess also a corpus of restitutive, civil law, involving rights and duties between individuals, and kept in force by social mechanisms.¹¹ The existence of such essentially contractual relations among primitive peoples detracts from the plausibility of Durkheim's theory of unilinear development. Moreover, in affirming the preponderance of organic solidarity in modern societies, Durkheim tends to depreciate unduly the persistent factor of community of interests. This bias warps his analysis of the elements of social cohesion. Such group-integrative factors as conceptions of honor, *Ehre*, and the subsumption of individual under collective interests during periods of war and of conflict generally, which are significant elements in the cohesion of contemporary societies,¹² are unwarrantably ignored by Durkheim in his endeavor to find in the division of labor the sole source of modern solidarity. The inviolate unity of a group becomes imperative during inter-societal conflicts, and this unity is largely achieved through appeals to common sentiments. Likewise, is the non-juridical notion of honor a powerful, if not

¹⁰ Hume had long since perceived this confusion of mechanistic science. Professor A. N. Whitehead denotes the error by the descriptive phrase, "The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness." See his *Science and the Modern World*, pp. 75 ff. New York: Macmillan, 1931. A keen psychological description of the basis of this error is to be found in Richard Avenarius' *Kritik der reinen Erfahrung*, II, 376 ff. Leipzig: Reisland, 1907-8.

¹¹ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, pp. 55 ff. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926. Contrast Durkheim's statement that "in primitive societies . . . law is wholly penal." *Division* . . . , p. 76.

¹² Cf. Georg Simmel, *Soziologie*, pp. 202, 404 ff. München and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1923.

always effective, regulatory device making for social cohesion. The fact that such forms of mechanical solidarity still subsist suggests additional grounds for rejecting Durkheim's argument of unilinear development.

Durkheim's conception of this unilinear evolution must, moreover, be reconsidered in the light of what has been appropriately termed the "principle of limits" of development.¹³ Development in a given direction may continue until it becomes self-defeating, whereupon reaction occurs in an opposite direction. Were it not that Durkheim attempts to extrapolate beyond the universe of his data, he might have found in the ever more frequently occurring states of *anomie* accompanying the increase of division of labor an index of this reaction. In the economic world, one need but note movements of reconsolidation after optima of differentiation have been passed, to realize that the process is not necessarily unidirectional.

To arrive at his conception of evolution, Durkheim does not, as has been alleged, abandon his sociologistic position. It is true that he finds the "determining cause" of increased division of labor in the growth and heightened density of populations, which is primarily a biological factor, but it is only in so far as this demographic change is associated with increased social interaction and its concomitant, enhanced competition, that the stipulated change will occur. It is thus this social factor—the "dynamic density," as he terms it—which Durkheim finds actually determinant. In a subsequent work he makes this point even more definitely by noting that population density and dynamic density are not always associated—in China, for example—and that in these instances the increase in division of labor is considerably inhibited.¹⁴ Hence the facile formula which

¹³ Cf. A. A. Goldenweiser, "History, Psychology and Culture," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, XV (1918), 593; P. A. Sorokin, "The Principle of Limits," *Publications, American Sociological Society* (1932), pp. 19–28.

¹⁴ *Règles . . .*, p. 140. "Nous avons eu le tort, dans notre *Division du travail*, de trop présenter la densité matérielle comme l'expression exacte de la densité dynamique." Paul Barth manifestly errs in ascribing to Durkheim an unmodified materialistic interpretation of history. Durkheim's shift to idealism becomes marked in his work on religion. Cf. Barth's *Die Philosophie der Geschichte als Soziologie*, pp. 628–42. Leipzig: Reisland, 1922.

attributes an increased differentiation of function solely to demographic changes must be revamped. To the extent that this differentiation is generalizable as a social process it may be said to be associated with competition between individuals and between groups, whatever the factors leading to such competition.

If we abandon Durkheim's unilinear theory we are left with an acute characterization of the two societies, mechanical and organic, taken as ideal-types, or as heuristic fictions. These may then be considered as limiting cases, never obtaining in empirical reality, which may be fruitfully employed as poles of reference toward which empirical data are theoretically oriented. Durkheim's work thus provides a conceptual scheme which may be used to advantage in the interpretation of processes of differentiation, integration, competition, and the like.

Another aspect of Durkheim's methodology, which characterizes not only the *Division*, but also his later works, is his use of "indices" which he considers the "external," measurable translation of the "internal," not directly observable social facts. Just as the physicist measures heat and electricity through certain objectively observable and easily measurable phenomena, such as the rise and fall of mercury in a glass tube and the oscillation of the needle of a galvanometer, so Durkheim hopes to use repressive and restitutive law as indexes of mechanical and organic solidarity, respectively.¹⁵

At this point, a fundamental difficulty arises. If the observed facts (L) are to be significant and relatively accurate indexes of the types of solidarity (S), the following relationships must hold true. Let $L(x, y \dots)$ be written for a function of measurable quantities ($x, y \dots$) (statistics of penal or restitutive law) and let it be so related to $S(x', y' \dots)$ (the social fact—social cohesion) that these postulates are satisfied. When L varies in a determinate fashion, S varies correspondingly. When there are successive increases in L , the first changing L from L_1 to L_2 and the second from L_2 to L_3 , so that the first increase is greater than the second, then the first increase in S (solidarity) is greater than the second. This postulate

¹⁵ *Division* . . . , p. 66.

must still obtain when less is written for greater.¹⁶ This affords a concomitant variation between the social facts and their indexes, the variations of the former being directly unmeasurable and relative to the directly measurable variation of the latter.

It is precisely this sort of relationship which Durkheim fails to demonstrate. He does not establish with any precision the perfect associations which he assumes obtain between his types of solidarity and of law. For example, organic solidarity may be regulated by customary usages and mores without ever becoming definitely translated into civil law. This was notably the case during a great part of the Middle Ages.¹⁷ Furthermore, as has been suggested, much of mechanical solidarity in contemporary society—that evidenced by “honor,” for example—finds no expression in repressive law. These necessarily brief indications must suffice to signify the debatable premises on which Durkheim bases his system of indexes.¹⁸

In his generally brilliant chapter on the division of labor and happiness, Durkheim evidences another fundamental weakness of his method. He eliminates certain possible explanations of a particular set of social phenomena by demonstrating that the logical consequences of the rejected theories are not in accord with observed facts. He assumes that the possible number of explicative theories is determinable, x , and that having eliminated $x-1$ explanations he is left with the necessarily valid solution. Thus, he holds that “the desire to become happier is the only individual source which can take account of [the] progress [of the division of labor]. If that is set aside, no other remains.”¹⁹ This method of projected experiment was brought into prominence by Descartes, to whom Durkheim was avowedly indebted, who maintained that in ap-

¹⁶ Compare A. L. Bowley, *The Mathematical Groundwork of Economics*, pp. 1 ff. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924.

¹⁷ Cf. Paul Vinogradoff, “Customary Law,” in *The Legacy of the Middle Ages*, G. C. Crump and E. F. Jacob (ed.), pp. 287–319. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927.

¹⁸ The same sort of criticism may be leveled against the indexes of group cohesion and disintegration employed by Durkheim in *Le Suicide*.

¹⁹ *Division . . .*, p. 251. That this is an extreme statement is clear, for Duguit, *op. cit.*, pp. 50 ff., suggests an individualistic, and non-eudemonic, explanation.

proaching reality one will find that many consequences result from initially adopted principles and that rational consideration will decide which of these consequences is realized.²⁰ But the fallacy of this method lies in the initial assumption that one has exhausted the totality of possible explanations. The elimination of alternative theories in no wise increases the probabilities of the other alternatives.

Of Durkheim's *Division*, one may say in general that it presents an incisive and suggestive analysis of a determinate social process and its structural correlates. If its conclusions are too sweeping, if its method is at times faulty, one may yet acknowledge from the vantage point afforded by four decades of subsequent research that it remains one of the peak contributions of modern sociology.

²⁰ René Descartes, "Discours de la méthode," *Œuvres*, VI, 64 ff. Paris, 1902.