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## **The Individual and Society in Durkheim: Unpicking the Contradictions**

Finn Bowring

### **Abstract**

In the revisiting of Durkheim's humanism in recent years, attention has been drawn to his theory of moral individualism and the usefulness of his argument that a reformed democratic capitalism can reconcile individual freedom with collective constraint. Here I investigate Durkheim's understanding of the relationship between individual and society in greater detail, showing in the process that his thinking was ambiguous and inconsistent. Although he flirted with the notion that capitalist modernity may actively foster and legitimise destructive forms of individualism, his default position was to attribute anti-social drives to a human nature set loose by weak or inadequate social norms, and then to idealise liberal humanism as the ethical remedy for this normative deficiency. I argue that the inconsistencies in his thinking are significant, however, because they testify to the underlying contradiction between the logic of capitalism and the ideals of moral individualism, and to the difficulty of locating the moral individual in a morally irrational world.

### **Key words**

Durkheim, moral individualism, capitalism, anomie, egoism

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### **Durkheim's humanism**

In the revival of Durkheim scholarship in recent years, two prominent themes stand out. One is the reconstruction of Durkheim as an action theorist, for whom social reality is an emergent property of collective practices (Rawls 1996, 2001, 2003, 2012). The other is the reclaiming of Durkheim's theory of 'moral individualism' as an antidote to Foucauldian cynicism and a restatement of the unfinished project of liberal-communitarian humanism (Joas 2008, 2013; Cladis 1992a, 1992b; Callegaro 2012; Lukes and Prabhat 2012; Hodgkiss 2013). While the former arouses some interesting epistemological questions, the latter carries a more obvious ethical attraction, claiming as it does to have found a reassuring harmony between the belief in human dignity and the highly differentiated yet interdependent character of global modernity.

Although both interpretations of Durkheim can be accused of glossing over contradictions in his thinking, it is the inconsistencies in Durkheim's understanding of the individual which interest me here. In what follows I will detail the tensions in Durkheim's theory of the individual in order to challenge the idea that there is a straightforward moral or cultural remedy for the pathological forms of individualism that afflict Western societies. There are, as we shall see, fundamental discrepancies in Durkheim's theory of the relationship between individual and society, but in my view these discrepancies are testimony to the way the structural contradictions of capitalist societies produce forms of identity and legitimising concepts of the self that both conflict with, and impair, the ideal of moral individualism.

### **Social facts and the collective good**

In *The Rules of Sociological Method* [1895] Durkheim made the novel claim that social phenomena should be studied scientifically, 'as external things', existing as stable realities 'detached from the conscious beings who form their own mental representations of them'. Social facts have a 'property of resistance', he famously wrote, exerting a 'coercive' and 'constraining' power superior to the individual's consciousness and will, and constituting a force of 'necessity' that 'is often ineluctable'. (Durkheim 1982: 52, 70) In the standard positivist reading of this work, Durkheim was advancing a dualistic analysis, in which the strength of the individual and that of society are inversely related. The function of social facts is thus to hold the anti-social tendencies of the individual in check so as to maintain social order. This has been called Durkheim's 'container' model of society. 'Such is any container distinguished from the things it contains.' (Stone and Farberman 1967: 150)

As a kind of inverted complement to this dualism, Durkheim also distinguished those social facts made visible by the hard-won Cartesian rigour of the social scientist, from the 'schematic, summary representations which constitute the prenotions that we employ in our normal way of life'. The latter are the spontaneous but unsatisfactory product of an 'ideological analysis' whose dependence on the illusions of common sense is 'the natural inclination of our mind'. In order to study the social forces that denature the individual, in other words, sociologists must reverse a process that is itself a 'natural inclination' – they must throw off the yoke of beliefs 'invested with a kind of ascendancy and authority' and whose 'resistance [we feel] when we seek to free ourselves from them' (1982: 60-3).

This familiar summary of Durkheim's early positivism does need qualifying, however. Perhaps surprisingly, Durkheim made a point of distancing himself from the pessimistic positions of Hobbes and Rousseau. For them, he says, there is an erroneous 'break in

continuity between the individual and society', with the anti-social nature of the individual making some form of external control an artificial but necessary requirement of social order (1982: 142). Against this view that the individual is 'obdurate to the common life and can only resign himself to it if forced to do so' (1982: 142), Durkheim was already stressing the moral and intellectual superiority of society, and its articulation with *internalised* motives, desires and aspirations – such that external 'constraint in time ceases to be felt...because it gradually gives rise to...inner tendencies which render it superfluous' (1982: 54). The individual's 'subordination' to society is accepted, moreover, not out of a fear of a Leviathan or through the calculated pursuit of self-interest, but because it rests on 'feelings of attachment and respect which habit has implanted within him' (1982: 144). In the 1901 preface to the second edition of *The Rules*, Durkheim reiterated this point, emphasising how social obligations are sustained by a positive 'attachment' that presupposes 'something more internal and intimate than duty', namely, a sense of the 'good' (1982: 47 n4). Hence his later clarification that it is not 'physical constraint', but rather 'moral authority', which is the 'essence of social life' (2001: 156 n4).

What would society be like without an internalised understanding of the common good? In *The Division of Labour in Society* [1893] Durkheim called the form of social organisation imagined to be adequate by the utilitarians – a society based on competitive self-interest – 'negative solidarity'. Negative solidarity is a social order based on contractual non-interference rather than wilful commitment to a common goal, consisting 'not in serving, but in not harming'. 'It does not lead wills to move toward common ends, but merely makes things gravitate around wills in orderly fashion.' (1964: 116) When negative solidarity breaks down, as when there are civil or economic disputes, the reparations that resolve the conflict do not require the agreement of the opposing parties, but simply the

restoration of the status quo ante. 'Far from uniting, their task is rather to separate what has been united through the force of things, to re-establish the limits which have been transgressed and replace each in its proper sphere...But the troubled order is the same; it results, not in concurrence, but in pure abstention.' (1964: 119) Negative solidarity is a 'troubled order' because it 'is not a true solidarity'; it 'does not produce any integration by itself', but rather presupposes it. 'Negative solidarity is possible only where there exists some other of a positive nature, of which it is at once the resultant and the condition.' (1964: 119-120, 129)

### **Positive solidarity**

Durkheim's allusion to a 'positive' solidarity returns us to the role of shared conceptions of the good. In pre-industrial societies positive solidarity originated from the strength of the 'collective conscience' – common sentiments and values which dominated the individual to the extent that novel or divergent acts were a rarity. The collective conscience is certainly internalised, but the effect of this internalisation is to suppress the individual more thoroughly than any purely 'external' force could do. 'In societies where this type of solidarity is prominent, the individual does not appear'; 'our individuality is nil' (1964: 130). 'This solidarity', Durkheim asserts, 'can grow only in inverse ratio to personality' (1964: 129).

As societies develop, however, and processes of differentiation break down the bonds of likeness, the collective conscience becomes 'feebler and vaguer', 'more abstract and more indecisive' (1964: 171), and its socially integrating power declines. What seems to take its place is the diversification of roles and functions whose interconnectedness engenders a positive sense of cohesion. It is, then, 'the division of labour which, more and

more, fills the role that was formerly filled by the common conscience. It is the principal bond of social aggregates of higher types' (1964: 173).

In devoting several chapters to 'pathological forms' of the division of labour, Durkheim acknowledged there were 'exceptional and abnormal circumstances' in which this solidarity was deficient. A division of labour that changes or accelerates too rapidly, which is too discontinuous to allow the stabilisation of activities and exchanges, or which separates the worker too dramatically from the owner, and the owner too greatly from the consumer, leads to unrealistic ('anomic') expectations, social conflict and economic crises. A division of labour which is 'forced' rather than 'spontaneous', which reproduces hierarchies of social privilege and inherited wealth instead of being constituted, meritocratically, 'in such a way that social inequalities exactly express natural inequalities', also causes conflict and disunity by violating the modern moral principle of fair exchange. These deviant forms are then contrasted with the solidarity that arises from the division of labour in its 'natural' state:

For, normally, the role of each special function does not require that the individual close himself in, but that he keep himself in constant relations with neighbouring functions, take conscience of their needs, of the changes which they undergo, etc. The division of labour presumes that the worker, far from being hemmed in by his task, does not lose sight of his collaborators, that he acts upon them, and reacts to them. He is, then, not a machine who repeats his movements without knowing their meaning, but he knows that they tend, in some way, towards an end that he conceives more or less distinctly. He feels that he is serving something. (1964: 372)

There is an obvious ambiguity in Durkheim's account here, for although he wants to distinguish organic solidarity from the 'negative' solidarity of utilitarian theory, he also wants to distinguish it from the 'mechanical' solidarity that rests on a strong collective conscience. There are, he says, 'two kind of positive solidarity':

In the first, what we call society is a more or less organised totality of beliefs and sentiments common to all the members of the group: this is the collective type. On the other hand, the society in which we are solidary in the second instance is a system of different, special functions which definite relations unite. (1964: 129)

Organic solidarity, Durkheim seems to argue, rests neither on reciprocal self-interest, as the utilitarians claim, nor on normative consensus, as does mechanical solidarity. Instead, thanks to the division of labour, workers 'collaborate' to meet a practical goal, with the repetition of actions breeding a consciousness of their mutual interdependency and an awareness of the collective end they 'serve'. Yet this vision of an individual whose 'proper duty' is 'to be an organ of society' and 'to play his role as an organ' (1964: 403) is a puzzling one, for it skirts dangerously close to that 'mystic solution' to the pathologies of individualism which Durkheim associated with Hegel's pernicious influence and with socialists who wanted to 'revive the cult of the City State' (1992: 54).

The first clue that Durkheim did not take this proposition seriously in *The Division of Labour*, is that the passage cited above, which distinguishes 'two kinds of positive solidarity', is immediately followed with a statement of clarification: 'These two societies really make up only one. They are two aspects of one and the same reality' (1964: 129). Here we see the Durkheimian basis to the theory that modern societies are reproduced through two

different but parallel mechanisms of integration – the one ‘functional’, and other the ‘social’ (Lockwood 1964) – as well as the claim that the historical process of rationalisation is one that entails the progressive differentiation of ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’ (Habermas 1987).

### **Moral individualism**

The second indication that Durkheim, already in *The Division of Labour*, doubted that functional interdependencies could alone deliver a stable form of solidarity, is his scattered comments on the role of the collective conscience in modern society. On the one hand, Durkheim logically argued that the growth of the autonomous individual presupposes the weakening of collective norms; what is a loss for the collective is a gain for the individual. ‘It is necessary, then, that the collective conscience leave open a part of the individual conscience in order that special functions may be established there, functions which it cannot regulate.’ (1964: 131) For the individual consciousness to have grown, the collective conscience must have declined: ‘It must have been emancipated from the yoke of the latter, and, consequently, the latter must have fallen from its throne and lost the determinate power that it originally used to exercise.’ (1964: 166) On the other hand, Durkheim made the contradictory argument that the increasing autonomy of the individual demonstrates how in one respect the penetration of the collective conscience has become *stronger*: ‘the only collective sentiments that have become more intense are those which have for their object, not social affairs, but the individual’ (1964: 166).

Durkheim made some attempt to resolve this anomolie by attributing the opposing tendencies to chronological stages of development. The individual first emerges from the decline in ‘collective surveillance’ that results from the growing density and diversity of social interactions. Following this initial liberation, ‘the sphere of free action of each

individual is extended in fact, and, little by little, the fact becomes a right'. At some point the demands of the individual personality 'end by receiving the consecration of custom' (1964: 299). What was originally experienced as a negative 'freedom from' the constraints of the collective conscience, crystallises into a positive moral obligation and a 'freedom to'; it is transformed into 'a very lively sense of respect for human dignity, to which we are supposed to conform as much in our relations with ourselves as in our relations with others' (1964: 400). Hence 'no one today contests the obligatory character of the rule which orders us to be more and more of a person' (1964: 405). The ethos of this rule comprises what, in 'Individualism and the Intellectuals' [1898], Durkheim called the 'religion of the individual', a moral 'system of beliefs' which does not lead, as utilitarian individualism does, to the disintegration of society, but to its harmony and preservation. Instead of 'the utilitarian egoism of Spencer and the economists', instead of that 'crass commercialism which reduces society to nothing more than a vast apparatus of production and exchange' (1973a: 44), Durkheim defended an ethical individualism formalised in human rights and founded on a collective belief in the sacredness of the human person. 'Thus the individualist who defends the rights of the individual defends at the same time the vital interests of society, for he prevents the criminal impoverishment of that last reserve of collective ideas and feelings which is the very soul of the nation.' (1973a: 53-4) Hence Cladis's contention that Durkheim shows how 'there is no fundamental antinomy between democratic societies and the individual' (Cladis 1992b: 83). Or in Callegaro's words: 'society as a whole is not a constraining force, but the precondition for understanding the very humanity of individuals' (Callegaro 2012: 467).

Even on this subject, however, Durkheim was ambivalent. In his account of the progress of organic solidarity, for example, he qualified his approval of the growing 'respect

of society for the individual' by warning that 'this simple growth of strength cannot compensate for the multiple, serious losses that we have observed' (1964: 167). And though *The Division of Labour* closes with the assertion that moral individualism binds the individual to the collective – 'The duties of the individual towards himself are, in reality, duties towards society. They correspond to certain collective sentiments which he cannot offend' (1964: 399) – earlier in the same text Durkheim had made exactly the opposite assessment, reinvoking an atomistic individualism at war with the collective good.

We erect a cult in behalf of personal dignity which, as every strong cult, already has its superstitions. It is thus, if one wishes, a common cult, but it is possible only by the ruin of all others, and, consequently, cannot produce the same effects as this multitude of extinguished beliefs. There is no compensation for that. Moreover, if it is common in so far as the community partakes of it, it is individual in its object. If it turns all wills towards the same end, this end is not social...It is still from society that it takes all its force, but *it is not to society that it attaches us*; it is to ourselves. Hence, *it does not constitute a true social link*. That is why we have been justly able to reproach the theorists who have made this sentiment exclusively basic in their moral doctrine, with the ensuing dissolution of society. (1964: 172, my emphasis)

### **Negative and positive freedom**

The same tension between a negative and a positive conception of individual freedom is evident in the lectures developed by Durkheim at Bordeaux between 1890 and 1900, which were subsequently published and translated as *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (1992). Here Durkheim emphasised the important role the state has played in liberating the

individual from the grip of common norms and institutions, delivering the same negative freedom that the British liberal philosophers associated, in contrast, with the minimal state. 'It is the State that has rescued the child from patriarchal domination and from family tyranny; it is the State that has freed the citizen from feudal groups and later from communal groups; it is the State that has liberated the craftsman and his master from guild tyranny.' (1992: 64) The state is liberating 'because, in holding its constituent societies in check, it prevents them from exerting the repressive influences over the individual that they would otherwise exert' (1992: 62-3). The zero-sum relationship of individual and society seems inescapable in Durkheim's reasoning here: 'it is the State that *redeems the individual from society*' (1992: 69, my emphasis). Hence also Durkheim's argument that increasing respect for the individual, and the corollary desire to avoid or minimise his or her suffering, reflects a *weakening* of the collective conscience whose transgression no longer generates passionate outrage and violence against persons.

The decline in the rate of homicide at the present day has not come about because respect for the human person acts as a brake on the motives for homicide or on the stimulants to murder, but because these motives and these stimulants grow fewer in number and have less intensity. These stimulants are the very collective sentiments that bind us to objects which are alien to humanity and the individual, that is, which bind us to groups or to things that are a symbol of these groups. (1992: 117)

There is a second conception of individual freedom offered in *Professional Ethics*, however, which is 'positive'. This conception stresses the role of the state in actively promoting the moral faculties of reason, responsibility and self-discipline whose cultivation

Durkheim (1961) argued, in his Sorbonne lectures of 1902-3, should be the primary concern of a secular education system. This conception argues that the moral content of contractual relations does not reside in 'freedom from' constraint, but rather in the contracting parties' adherence to collective definitions of value, price and just desert (1992: 208-11). To ensure this positive 'freedom to', the role of the state is 'not simply to fend off the opposing forces that tend to absorb the individual: it also serves to provide the *milieu* in which the individual moves, so that he may develop his faculties in freedom' (1992: 69). In this sense the state functions as a kind of figurehead for the principles of moral individualism, its 'fundamental duty' being 'to preserve in calling the individual to a moral way of life' (1992: 69).

### **Homo duplex**

In *Suicide* [1897], of course, the distinction between a negative liberty set free from moral constraints, and the positive freedom of moral individualism, has graver significance, for the former not only jeopardises social solidarity but also 'leads to suicide' (1951: 336). But what exactly is the difference between these two forms of individualism? Is the conflict between atomistic individualism and moral individualism a battle between two conflicting social constructions – between two 'collective representations' – of the human person, or is this a battle between the spontaneous inclinations of human nature and the moral force of society? If it is true, as Parsons (1968) originally argued, that Durkheim moved from a positivist to an idealist position as his thinking evolved, then we would expect the former interpretation to be dominant in his later work, and the latter one to prevail in his early writings.

How curious, then, that in 'The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions' [1914], written three years before his death, Durkheim reverted to what Giddens (1971)

calls the 'pre-social' individual; that is, to the utilitarian idea of the naturally egoistic self which must be tamed and controlled for the sake of social order. This control, admittedly, is theorised as something *internalised*; but the social forces that are internalised still remain at war with the biological instincts that pre-empt them. Durkheim thus conceptualises the human person as internally divided – '*homo duplex*' – between sensory appetites that 'are necessarily egoistic' and 'have our individuality and it alone as their object', and the conceptual activity of the mind which, dealing in principle with universals, attaches us to the collective (1973b: 151). 'Man is double because two worlds meet in him: that of non-intelligent and amoral matter, on the one hand, and that of ideas, the spirit, and the good, on the other.' (1973b: 157) Utilitarianism, Durkheim argues, has reduced human beings to profane 'amoral matter', ignoring the sacred moral ideals that animate their minds. But in arguing thus, he concedes considerable ground to his opponents: moral representations must induce forms of consciousness which 'come to us from society', which 'transfer society into us and connect us with something that surpasses us', because in their absence our behaviour would fall sway to the imperious appetites of the body, and social life would disintegrate. Like Freud, Durkheim understood this to mean that a price has to be paid for 'the growth of civilisation'. 'We must, in a word, do violence to certain of our strongest inclinations.' 'We cannot pursue moral ends without causing a split within ourselves, without offending the instincts and the penchants that are the most deeply rooted in our bodies.' (1973b: 161-3, 152; see also 2001: 235, 341-2)

The origin of the antagonism that we have described is evident from the very nature of the elements involved in it. The conflicts of which we have given examples are between the sensations and the sensory appetites, on the one hand, and the

intellectual and moral life, on the other; and it is evident that passions and egoistic tendencies derive from our individual constitutions, while our rational activity – whether theoretical or practical – is dependent on social causes. (1973b: 162)

This is, in a way, a more sophisticated psychological version of the ‘container model’ of society that seemed to play a central role in Durkheim’s early positivism. From the perspective of this model, moral pathologies arise when the individual is subject either to excessive or insufficient social constraint, suicide being an extreme result of this disequilibrium. In modern societies anomie and egoism are the two dominant pathologies. Both, Durkheim writes in *Suicide*, ‘spring from society’s insufficient presence in individuals’ (1951: 258, my emphasis). They are not normal products of a particular type of society, but pathological symptoms of the *breakdown* of society.

In keeping with this reasoning, Durkheim describes, in *Suicide*, how people naturally desire more than they can attain. ‘*Irrespective of any external regulatory force, our capacity for feeling is in itself an insatiable and bottomless abyss*’, and ‘if nothing external can restrain this capacity, it can only be a source of torment to itself’ (1951: 247, my emphasis). It is because society is a moral power superior to the individual that the limits it imposes – the definition of just and appropriate goals, actions and rewards – are respected and adhered to, with the resulting realism making possible a healthy contentment with life. Insufficient moral regulation of desires, on the other hand – which may occur when social norms and expectations are in a state of flux, or when moral rules cannot be recalibrated fast enough to keep pace with sudden improvements or deteriorations in people’s material conditions of existence – gives rise to that morbidly ‘feverish impatience’ and ‘malady of infinite aspiration’ that characterises ‘anomie’.<sup>1</sup>

## **Anomie**

Evidence that this theory of anomie was unsatisfactory to Durkheim, however, comes from the way Durkheim himself vacillated in his formulation of it. Comparing anomie with 'egoism' – which I will return to in a moment – Durkheim suggested a neat distinction: egoism is cerebral and introspective, anomie is passionately emotional. 'The former is lost in the infinity of dreams, the second in the infinity of desires.' (1951: 287) This distinction is already undermined, however, when Durkheim explains that what makes humans susceptible to anomie is the higher moral faculty of consciousness – 'a more awakened reflection [which] suggests better conditions, seemingly desirable ends craving fulfilment' (1951: 247). This contrasts with the non-human animal, which is a purely organic being: 'Its power of reflection is not sufficiently developed to imagine other ends than those implicit in its physical nature.' (1951: 246)

Later in the chapter on anomic suicide, attempting to explain why married women – unlike married men – do not seem to be more prone to anomic suicide in societies where divorce has become sufficiently widespread to have weakened the moral institution of marriage, Durkheim exposes again the contradiction in his thinking:

Women's sexual needs have less of a mental character because, generally speaking, her mental life is less developed. These needs are more closely related to the needs of the organism, following rather than leading them, and consequently find in them an efficient restraint. Being a more instinctive creature than man, woman has only to follow her instincts to find calmness and peace. She thus does not require so strict a social regulation as marriage, and particularly as monogamic marriage. (1951: 272)

It is the 'mental character' of desires, in other words, and not their 'instinctive' nature, which renders them susceptible to over-excitation. And since the mind is the repository of society, it is quite logical that it is *society* which is responsible for this over-excitation, this surplus of desire. Hence Durkheim does not explain women's 'less developed' mental life through biological reductionism, but by implicit reference to the way women in the nineteenth-century were denied independent access to the public sphere of politics and learning. 'Woman kills herself less...not because of physiological differences from man but because she does not participate in collective life in the same way.' (1951: 341; see also 166, 215) And because the woman 'does not require so strict a social regulation as marriage', the type of suicide most common among married women is of a different sort – that 'deriving from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline' (1951: 276 n25; see also 189).

Hence for men, in Durkheim's analysis, it is clearly not (or not just) a *deficit* in civilisation, but rather '*hypercivilisation* which breeds the anomic tendency' (1951: 323, my emphasis). 'The longing for infinity is daily represented as a mark of moral distinction', Durkheim complains of society's collective obsession with boundless novelty, innovation and excess, further demonstrating his conviction that moral and ideological forces can engender pathological as well as felicitous desires. 'The doctrine of the most ruthless and swift progress has become an article of faith.' (1951: 257)

As soon as men are inoculated with the precept that their duty is to progress, it is harder to make them accept resignation; so the number of the malcontent and

disquieted is bound to increase. The entire morality of progress and perfection is thus inseparable from a certain amount of anomy. (1951: 364)

If society 'inoculates' people with the idea – with an 'entire morality' – that it is their 'duty' to progress, then it clearly makes no sense to say, as Durkheim (1973b: 162) did, that anomic passions and desires 'derive from our individual constitutions' rather than from 'social causes'; and it makes no sense to claim, as Giddens (1966: 278) did, that anomie refers to a situation where 'social norms come to exercise only a low level of regulatory control over behaviour'. Even Douglas's proposition that, in keeping with Durkheim's theory of the dualism of body and soul, anomie should be thought of a 'social force' which acts by 'increasing the effect of the body on individual actions' (1970: 345), underplays Durkheim's understanding of anomic tendencies being fostered by collective representations – or what Marx would have called 'ideologies' – which clearly belong to the province of the soul or social mind.

### **Egoism**

Similar tensions are apparent in Durkheim's discussion of egoistic suicide. Egoism apparently arises from weak social bonds and insufficient involvement in collective life. The effect of this 'excessive individualism' is to make human mortality intolerable by fostering existential doubts which dense social ties, by 'integrating' individuals more profoundly into supra-individual sentiments and practices, can otherwise hold in abeyance. 'When, therefore, we have no other object than ourselves we cannot avoid the thought that our efforts will finally end in nothingness, since we ourselves disappear.' (1951: 210)

Protestants are more prone to egoistic suicide than Catholics, Durkheim argues, not because of the *content* of the Reformist faith – the ‘details of dogmas and rites are secondary’ – but ‘because it has fewer common beliefs and practices’ (1951: 170, 159), allowing Protestants more ‘freedom from’ church doctrine, and more latitude to question and judge the nature of religious truth. Durkheim does note the existence of ‘metaphysical and religious systems’ which, as he saw it, ‘attempt to prove to men the senselessness of life’. But his argument is that these ‘new moralities’ are ‘an affect rather than a cause; they merely symbolise in abstract language and systematic form the physiological distress of the body social.’ Their collective hue is therefore a pale substitute for genuine solidarity and a true collective conscience. The morbid egoist ‘effects communion through sadness when he no longer has anything else with which to achieve it’. (1951: 214)

But Durkheim knew full well that intellectual autonomy and self-reliance were, as Weber documented at length, ethical imperatives central to the Protestant faith. Religious freedom, Parsons (1968: 332) pointed out in his analysis of *Suicide*, ‘is a basic ethical value common to all Protestants’. Indeed, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912] Durkheim himself acknowledged the moral debt we owe to this religious tradition, noting that today ‘it would be sacrilege for a man to deny progress and flout the humanistic ideal to which modern societies are attached’, this ‘sacred’ ideal being the untouchable ‘principle of free enquiry’ (2001: 161). As Parsons insisted:

An institutionalised order in which individuals are expected to assume great responsibility and strive for high achievement, and in which they are rewarded through socially organised sanctions of such behaviour, cannot be accounted for by postulating the lessening of all aspects of institutionalised control. Instead, such an

order, with its common values, its institutionalised norms, its sanctions and media, its mechanisms of social control, represents a particular mode of institutional structuring. (1967: 30)

Further evidence that Durkheim was unsure whether to theorise egoism as a deficit in collective norms and practices, or as the outcome of *particular kinds* of norms and practices, comes from the ambiguous descriptions of egoism in *Suicide*. Noting that this particular suicidal tendency is disproportionately high among the intelligentsia, Durkheim refers to ‘the state of moral individualism’ as the cause of this (1951: 168). And in his conclusion to the book, Durkheim makes explicit his fear that the secular ‘religion of the individual’, while not the same as egoism, is similar enough to promote it:

in societies and environments where the dignity of the person is the supreme end of conduct, where man is a God to mankind, the individual is readily inclined to consider the man in himself as a God and to regard himself as the object of his own cult. When morality consists primarily in giving one a very high idea of one’s self, certain combinations of circumstances readily suffice to make man unable to perceive anything above himself. Individualism is of course not necessarily egoism, but it comes close to it; the one cannot be stimulated without the other being enlarged. Thus, egoistic suicide arises. (1951: 363-4)

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that in Parsons’ lengthy discussion of Durkheim, egoism and moral individualism are not clearly distinguished from each other. Meanwhile egoism and altruism – normally regarded as opposing polarities on Durkheim’s scale of

social integration – are treated by Parsons as manifestations of two different *contents* of the collective conscience which together, in his view, can be contrasted with the *deficit* in moral norms that gives rise to ‘anomie’ (Parsons 1968: 405 n1).

I have suggested above, however, that even this interpretation of Durkheim grants him more coherence than is justified, for ‘anomie’ was also understood by Durkheim to be sustained by particular social forces. What this analysis demonstrates is how difficult Durkheim found it to extract his critique of the methodological individualism of the utilitarians from the grip of their own presuppositions. For the utilitarians, the wants and desires of individuals are randomly divergent and essentially lawless, and social order can be achieved only by regulating the external conditions by which self-interested individuals pursue their sovereign ends. Although Durkheim was susceptible to reproducing this idea of a ‘natural’ or ‘pre-social’ individual whose insatiable and egocentric desires explained the need for society to exert a moderating and constraining influence, the chief insight attributed to him by Parsons, as well as by Giddens (1971), was his more radical assertion that ‘the individual’ – every individual, and every form of ‘individualism’ – *is already the creation of society*.

### **Suicide and social meaning**

Further indication that egoism and anomie are socially constructed forms of selfhood comes from Douglas’s (1970) assertion that Durkheim understood suicide to be an act loaded with social meanings. That the meaning of suicide is *social* rather than individual is apparent from the conceptual methodology of Durkheim’s study, and the way he constructed a typology of suicide that is richly suggestive of the sentiments and motives of those who take their own lives. These ‘types’ – Durkheim even borrows Weber’s hermeneutic notion of the ‘ideal

type' (1951: 278) – make sense to the reader because they articulate with understandings of suicide that are already part of public culture. And this is no accident, because Durkheim himself constructed his categories out of well-established social understandings, with egoism and anomie (though the latter term was not in common usage) already part of both commonsense and more technical views of the moral malaise of the age (Douglas 1970: 17-18).

The attitude of melancholic languor and meditative self-absorption that Durkheim associates with egoistic suicide, for example, is constructed using the description of the protagonist of Lamartine's novel *Raphaël* (1849), who was brought to the brink of suicide by his experience of solitude and unrequited love (Durkheim 1951: 278-80). For anomie, on the other hand, Durkheim draws on Chateaubriand's romanticist novella *René* (1802), the eponymous protagonist of which is driven to suicidal thoughts by a surplus of passion, sensitivity and desire. 'While Raphaël is a creature of meditation who finds his ruin within himself', Durkheim explains, 'René is the insatiate type'. René is like Goethe's Werther, 'the turbulent heart as he calls himself, enamoured of infinity, killing himself from disappointed love'. (Durkheim 1951: 286) That *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) led 'Werther fever' to spread across Europe, with impressionable male readers adopting the passionate protagonist's style of dress, and some taking their own lives in what sociologists and behavioural psychologists have described as the first major instance of 'copycat' suicide, is itself further evidence of the social meaning of suicide. Just as Durkheim drew on established social meanings to construct his typology of suicide, in other words, so other social actors draw on the same circulating meanings to cultivate their longings, make sense of their frustrations, and, in extreme cases, to construct suicide as a meaningful response.<sup>2</sup> Even coroners, as Atkinson (1971) showed, participate in the transmission of these social

meanings, employing social understandings of the kinds of circumstances under which people might want to kill themselves in order to distinguish suicide from accidental death.

In Douglas's interpretation of Durkheim, therefore, it is not the lack of social meaning – 'normlessness' – which causes suicide, but rather particular social meanings which become dominant over others. Douglas thus treats egoism, anomie, altruism and fatalism as 'collective representations', symbolic narratives that comprise the 'pools of meaning' that individuals utilise to make sense of their lives. They represent, according to Douglas, 'generalised orientations toward society' – expressing, respectively, aloofness, rebelliousness, submission, and resignation – which are institutionalised and transmitted in specific areas of life (altruism in the military, for example, anomie in business and commerce, and egoism among the intelligentsia). In ideal circumstances the strength of these opposing social representations (egoism vs altruism, anomie vs fatalism) balance each other and result in a healthy integration or 'equilibrium'. 'Where they offset one another', Durkheim himself writes in *Suicide*, 'the moral agent is in a state of equilibrium which shelters him against any thought of suicide. But let one of them exceed a certain strength to the detriment of others, and as it becomes individualised, it also becomes suicidogenetic' (1951: 321).

### **Base and superstructure**

This critical exegesis of Durkheim's work has shown that his understanding of the relationship between individual and society was contradictory and inconsistent. Though he flirted with the idea that society creates, rather than just constrains, the individual, his conviction that capitalism needed to be reformed rather than replaced meant his analysis stopped short of a full exploration of how egoistic and anomic forms of individualism were a

normal product of the market society, while the ideological spectre of the naturally egoistic, 'pre-social' individual continued to haunt his reasoning.

I noted at the beginning how in *The Rules* Durkheim theorised 'ideology' as an obstacle rather than an object of social science – not as a social fact, but as a natural predisposition of the human mind. In *Suicide* we saw how Durkheim presented egoism and anomie inconsistently, sometimes as natural dispositions and sometimes as social constructions sustained, as Cladis (1992a) is keen to stress, by particular cultural narratives and practices. In 'The Dualism of Human Nature' Durkheim reverted to a conception of the individual as naturally egocentric, while describing society uncritically as the sacred source of morality. Finally, in *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim treated ideological illusions like the belief in a god as 'collective representations' reflecting back, in an idealised form, the common life of society's members. These idealisations, Durkheim claimed, were no longer an expression of human nature but instead 'a natural product of social life' (2001: 317).

While the practices of science have progressively taken over the cognitive function of religion, the cultivation of collective sentiments which 'promote living and acting' and 'push thought ahead of what science allows us to confirm' (2001: 326) remains, Durkheim argued, the indispensable function of religious faith. This may be faith in the dignity and value of all human beings – it may be 'moral individualism' – but nothing in Durkheim's logic precludes that it could equally be faith in the essential selfishness of the human animal, or in the god-given right to profit from the misfortunes of others.

If ideological preconceptions in Durkheim's early thinking were conceived as a natural result of the spontaneous adaptation of individuals to their environment, in his final work, as Larrain (1979: 99) notes, it is social consciousness which is hypostatized 'as a kind of second nature'. In neither case is the specific social determination – the material

conditions, interests and practices – of ideological beliefs systematically acknowledged and explored. Although, as I noted at the outset, some new readings of Durkheim's epistemology have stressed the primacy of enacted social practices to his theory of 'social facts', even here it remains unclear what kind of practices are currently responsible, in today's ubiquitously commercialised society, for producing and sustaining the moral form of individualism that, to use Larrain's vocabulary, would be a 'socially determined' consciousness but not an 'ideological' one.<sup>3</sup>

Had Durkheim witnessed the neoliberal revolutions of the late twentieth-century, he would surely have acknowledged that greed, ruthlessness, and indifference to the sufferings of others are neither instinctual expressions of human nature nor marginal deviations from the normative core of Western modernity, but are traits and values rooted in the economic organisation of capitalist societies and the ideological apparatuses that sacralise and sustain them. More pointedly, had Durkheim not been blinded by belief in the organic reform of capitalism, he would surely have detected the deep structural contradictions of *fin de siècle* France, and the cultural narratives and norms that both articulated and concealed them. He would have seen, for example, how the anti-humanist rhetoric of French chauvinism and xenophobia was not a superficial stain on the national consciousness of the Third Republic, but rather the ideological reflex of a politically and economically fractured society, sublimating and unifying the disparate grievances of alienated Catholics, a petty bourgeoisie struggling against the growing concentration of capital, and an angry lumpenproletariat impatient with the slow pace of social reform.

No contemporary of Durkheim could have anticipated how boldly the anti-Dreyfusards would return from the shadows and exact their revenge 40 years later. But a sociologist of Durkheim's calibre had scant excuse for isolating the Dreyfus case from the

decade or more of aggressive colonial expansion which preceded it. It was the grand narrative of France's 'civilising mission', and more repellent claims of racial superiority and a biological struggle for survival, which were the moral fables used to explain the emergency export of unemployed labour and surplus capital during the 1880s Depression. In the popular French fiction of the period, it was the tough and virile forerunners of Aryan supremacy who were the exemplary individuals admired by the novel-reading public – men like Jules Verne's Captain Nemo, or colonial artilleryman-turned-author Ernest Psichari, whose later autobiographical novel, *Voyage du Centurion* (1916), presented colonial combat as a neo-Roman antidote to insipid metropolitan humanism. Fellow novelist Louis Bertrand likewise depicted the colonies as a 'French Wild West' serving as 'a school of national energy', according to the historian Roger Magraw, while Robert Randau, in his 1907 novel *Les Colons*, portrayed the settlers as 'virile, ruthless, brutal, practical, a new breed of Nietzschean supermen, rejecting anaemic European sentimentality' (Magraw 1988:239).

Was the French diplomat and aging colonial entrepreneur Ferdinand de Lesseps formed in the same buccaneering mould? In *The Way We Live Now* (1875) Anthony Trollope had penned a biting satire on the moral progression of Victorian capitalism, with the irresistible financial imposter Augustus Melmotte blazing a mesmerising trail through the frayed and frightened ranks of the English gentry. Across the Channel, de Lesseps had been feted for the success of the Suez Canal, but when his Panama project encountered difficulties he didn't hesitate to deceive and embezzle to keep his dreams alive. Employing German-Jewish financiers as middlemen, and in doing so stoking the anti-semitic paranoia that would soon claim Dreyfus, he bribed bankers, journalists, and hundreds of members of parliament to suppress the truth and support a government-backed lottery loan that was still not enough to save the doomed venture. More than 800,000 small French investors

were ruined when the Panama Canal Company was declared bankrupt in 1889. Over 20,000 labourers on the project had already lost their lives to accidents and disease. According to Arendt (1973: 95-6), the full exposure of the scandal revealed, at best, 'that the members of Parliament and civil servants had become businessmen', and worse, that politics was degenerating into 'gangsterism'. Back in England, Trollope was reflecting on the spread of this new moral creed of extravagant and ruthless individualism. Melmotte's character, he explained in his autobiography, was intended to show how 'a certain class of dishonesty, dishonesty magnificent in its proportions, and climbing into high places, has become at the same time so rampant and so splendid that there seems to be reason for fearing that men and women will be taught to feel that dishonesty, if it can become splendid, will cease to be abominable.' (Cited in Smalley 1969: 394)

Out of social and economic realities, values and ideas are born; out of their practical conditions of existence, people's fears, appetites and expectations are shaped, selves are fashioned and the parameters of the possible, the normal and the necessary are defined. In Joas's view, the problem with modern liberalism resides not in the theory, but in the deficient implementation of its ideals; hence those beliefs and practices that clash today with Durkheim's moral individualism 'can only be interpreted as running counter to the sacralisation of the person, not as a sign of its internal contradictions' (Joas 2012: 61). What today runs counter, however, also runs deep, for over the last half-century it is the liberal capitalist nations, not their fanatical critics, that have led the most sustained assault on the frontiers of the person, desacralizing the human body through rampant commercial sexualisation, quarrying embryonic human life for medical research and treatment, and degrading human thought, increasingly bewitched by the fantasy of intelligent machines, into a machine itself – into a transmittable formula or technique which, in Octavio Paz's

words, 'puts the future of our species into question' because it 'damages the very essence of the idea of the human person conceived of as a unique and unrepeatable being' (1995: 246-7).

Moral individualism may therefore be a noble and worthy goal, but the ideas most likely to promote or retard its advance will be those that offer a purchase on the obstacles and conflicts of a more troublesome reality. In this society, even more than in Durkheim's, one cannot be a rational moral agent without complicity in an irrational and immoral world. If Durkheim is still relevant to this world, as I believe he is, it is not because of the perfection of his ideas, but because their imperfections express the real contradictions with which we live.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Merton's famous application of the theory of anomie to deviant behaviour, which touched briefly on the 'contradiction between the cultural emphasis on pecuniary ambition and the social bars to full opportunity' (1996: 143), led to the idea that anomie is partly a matter of resource distribution, expressing the 'strain' suffered by the less fortunate when they are denied the material means to achieve what is most socially valued. But for Merton the actual strain was normative, with excessive moral endorsement of success goals promoted at the expense of the moral sanctification of legitimate means. 'With such differential emphases upon goals and institutional procedures, the latter may be so vitiated by the stress on goals as to have the behaviour of many individuals limited only by considerations of technical expediency.' (1996: 135) Durkheim's own position seemed to be that there was an irreconcilable conflict between the insatiability of human desire and inescapable material constraints (constraints which Freud (2002: 15) listed as natural scarcity, human mortality, and the clashing wills of other human beings), and that a person depleted of moral restraint and defaulting to 'considerations of technical expediency', would still encounter the potentially suicidogenic experience of frustrated aspirations.

<sup>2</sup> Durkheim might also have thought of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, who is driven to suicide by an adulterous passion that causes such social ostracism that in the end her lover is her only corroborator, yet one incapable of satisfying the extravagance of her desire. The possible role played by the romantic novel in cultivating unrealistic, potentially 'anomic' but deeply meaningful ideals of conjugal bliss amongst a predominantly female bourgeois readership, is another aspect of the social construction of desire that Durkheim overlooks. Giddens (1966: 278), who insists that anomie is related to vague or inadequate social norms, whereas

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egoism is rooted in the decline of structured social bonds combined with 'social values promoting individualism, personal initiative and responsibility', predictably associates 'values which place stress upon romantic love' with egoism, since they 'place the onus on each individual to search out and win a partner through his own efforts'. Compare this to Horkheimer's argument that the romantic construction of the woman as naturally passionate, while undoubtedly ideological, also allowed her to *defy* the egocentric logic of economic rationality: it 'enabled her to avoid reduction to object-status and thus to represent, amid an evil society, another possibility. In the passage from the old serfdom to the new she could be regarded as a representation of nature, which eluded utilitarian calculation.' (Horkheimer 1974: 16)

<sup>3</sup> Rawls (2003: 302) argues, against the theory that associates moral individualism with the collective conscience, that Durkheim understood collective beliefs to be dysfunctional to the modern division of labour, with 'anomie' arising 'from a failure to give up sufficient shared beliefs to allow for the regulation of practice by justice rather than belief'. Though Rawls makes much of the kinship between Durkheim and Marx, she misses Marx's insight that capitalism can dispense with an ideological belief system descending from above (i.e. can dispense with the 'collective conscience' of religious beliefs), precisely because it generates, *sui generis*, its own form concealment – 'the fantastic form of a relation between things' – through the circulation of commodities. It is participation in *practices of exchange*, in other words, that makes capitalism appear free, equal and just. (Marx 1976: 164-5, 279-80)

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## **Biography**

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