

ÉMILE DURKHEIM, PRECURSOR OF FAMILY SOCIOLOGY

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Abstract

Émile Durkheim is considered one of the founding fathers of sociology, being the one who succeeded in creating the sub-field of family sociology in a rigorous and scientific way. His research lies in a context in which individualism and social solidarity had to be reconciled, being concerned with the resolution of the divisions and problems faced by the end of the nineteenth century, when a modern society began to emerge. Émile Durkheim considers the family as a school of devotion and abnegation and classifies it as the nucleus of morality. He believes that, besides the corporation, the family is the second factor that played a significant role in the moral history of the community. One of the major aspects of modernity understood in Durkheimian terms is the relationship between the family system and other social systems. This article aims to analyze his theoretical framework regarding the family sociology and to highlight its innovation in order to try to explain the role of the family in society as a generator of morality.

Keywords: Émile Durkheim, family sociology, morality, solidarity.

The work of Émile Durkheim

The work of Émile Durkheim continues the one of August Comte, another precursor of general sociology, in the sense that it develops a rigorous scientific base for the new outlined science. For Durkheim, sociology, to become truly scientific, one must study the actions of individuals that are in relation to other external factors such as the economy or the influence of religion. This is why Émile Durkheim is rightly seen as one of the “fathers” of sociology. The French sociologist considered that the social life of individuals should be studied as objective, as scientists analyse natural phenomena. For this reason, his principle in sociology was: “Study social facts as things”¹.

Similar to other major sociologists in the field, Durkheim was particularly concerned about the changes that appear in the society in which he lived. In this regard, he believes that, in fact, common values and habits that are shared by members of that society are what sustain a society. In order to analyse this and to determine the causes of societal change, Durkheim promotes the *division of labour*,

¹ „Studiază faptele sociale ca pe niște lucruri.” (Anthony Giddens, *Sociologie [Sociology]*; trad.: Radu Săndulescu, Vivia Săndulescu, București, Editura ALL, 2001, p. 16).

a theory he defines as “*the moral rule of human conduct*”². These ideas were at the core of his book entitled *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893). Other relevant publications include *Suicide* (1897); *Rules of the Sociological Method* (1895); *The Elemental Forms of Religious Life* (1912).

Émile Durkheim and family sociology

Among the research interests of the French sociologist we find his studies of family sociology, which are related to the issue of the divisions and crisis that the society of the end of the twentieth century faces, when a modern society was just beginning, a world “in which individualism and social solidarity had to be reconciled”³.

The family – the core of morality

In *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim considers family as a school of devotion and abnegation, “the core par excellence of morality”⁴, which is possible because of its particular characters “which they have the privilege of having and which they no longer meet elsewhere”⁵. If we are talking about sociability and the causes of human rapprochement, the community of ideas, feelings and interests, they must be sought, and necessarily, in the family. For Durkheim, family is a key factor that played a considerable role in the “moral history of the community”⁶, in a similar manner as the corporation did (another relevant subject found in *The Division of Labour in Society*).

What makes the French sociologist's view more interesting is the separation between the moral proximity of individuals and their consanguinity. In his vision, this consanguinity does not have this tremendous effectiveness attributed to it at all. And the proof is, according to Durkheim, that:

“in a multitude of societies, those who are not of the same blood are found in large numbers within the same family: the so-called artificial kinship then acts with great

² „regula morală a conduitei umane” (Émile Durkheim, *Diviziunea muncii sociale [The Division of Labour in Society]*; trad.: Cristinel Pantelimon, București, Editura Antet, 2007, p. 38).

³ „în care trebuiau reconciliate individualismul și solidaritatea socială.” (Martin Segalen, *Sociologia familiei [Family Sociology]*; trad.: Mihai Dos, Alexandra-Maria Cheșcu, Giuliano Sfichi, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2011, p. 27).

⁴ „nucleul prin excelență al moralității” (Émile Durkheim, *Diviziunea muncii sociale [The Division of Labour in Society]*; trad.: Cristinel Pantelimon, București, Editura Antet, 2007, p. 26).

⁵ „pe care are privilegiul de a le avea și care nu se mai întâlnesc în altă parte” (*Ibidem*).

⁶ „istoria morală a comunității” (Ilie Bădescu, *Istoria sociologiei. Perioada marilor sisteme, [The history of sociology. The period of great theoretical systems]*, vol. I, București, Editura Economică, 2002, p. 246).

ease and has all the effects of natural kinship. Conversely, it often happens that close relatives are morally and legally strangers to each other”⁷.

Certainly Durkheim does not deny the importance of the direct relationship of consanguinity between members of a family, but it does not consider it the only factor of solidarity and, as a result, of morality. The consanguinity, says Durkheim, “has been able to facilitate this concentration [of the group of individuals who have come close to each other within the society because of a very close community of ideas, feelings and interests] because it naturally has to bring one's consciousness closer together”⁸. Actually, the basis of the approach of individuals consists in other factors such as: the neighbourhood, the solidarity of interests, the need for union in order to fight against common danger, or simply the need for unity⁹.

In the *Introduction to Family Sociology* (1888), which is actually the inaugural course of Émile Durkheim of the University of Bordeaux, we find the principles of methodology that it will develop in other social areas such as: the problem of division of labour, the religious forms and the influence of religion, the problem of suicide, themes that consecrated the work of the French sociologist. But the most important aspect of the Durkheimian innovation in the field of family sociology is the link highlighted between the family system and the other ones.

Thus, in order to research different types of family and to understand the relationships between the constitutive characteristics and the determinants, Durkheim “based on the work *The Ancient City* by Fustel de Coulanges (1864), on the work of German, English and American historians, *Histoire de la famille* of Lippert (1864), *Le droit maternel* of Bachofen (1861), *Studies in Ancient History* of McLennan (1866) and *Ancient Society* of Morgan (1887)”¹⁰. Based on these studies, Durkheim describes, arranges, classifies, establishes causal relationships between facts and group behaviours, and constantly seeks using the comparative method:

“In modern sociological language, we could say that it is about identifying the patterns and conditions of building these models”¹¹.

From the beginning of his paper, *Introduction to Family Sociology*, Émile Durkheim introduces the concept of *solidarity*, which he analyses according to the

⁷ „într-o multitudine de societăți, cei ce nu sunt de același sânge se găsesc în număr mare în sânul aceleiași familii: așa-zisa rudenie artificială acționează atunci cu o mare ușurință și are toate efectele rudeniei naturale. Invers, se întâmplă deseori ca niște consanguini foarte apropiați să fie, moral și juridic, ca și străini unii față de ceilalți.” (Émile Durkheim, *Diviziunea muncii sociale [The Division of Labour in Society]*; trad.: Cristinel Pantelimon, București, Ed. Antet, 2007, p. 26).

⁸ „a putut facilita această concentrare [a grupului de indivizi care s-au apropiat unii de alții, în sânul societății politice, datorită unei comunități foarte strânse de idei, sentimente și interese] căci ea are în mod natural ca efect apropierea conștiințelor unele de altele.” (*Ibidem*).

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ „se bazează pe lucrarea *La Cité antique* a lui Fustel de Coulanges (1864), pe lucrările istoricilor germani, englezi și americani, *Histoire de la famille* a lui Lippert (1864), *Le droit maternel* a lui Bachofen (1861), *Studies in Ancient History* a lui McLennan (1866) și *Ancient Society* a lui Morgan (1887). (Martin Segalen, *op. cit.*, p. 27).

¹¹ „în limbaj sociologic modern, am putea spune că este vorba despre identificarea modelelor și condițiilor de constituire a acestor modele.” (*Ibidem*).

type of society: traditional societies are characterized by a *mechanical solidarity*, due to the identity of the consciousness, the communion of ideas and feelings; while the modern, more organized societies are characterized by an *organic solidarity*, which derives from functional differentiation and from the division of labour¹². The analysis of the concrete forms of sociality and sociability naturally starts with “the simplest and oldest group of humanity – the family”¹³.

Durkheim lists the main dimensions to be considered when studying the family, these being: 1) the relationship between people and goods; 2) kinship structures, ties resulting from marriage and descent; 3) the relationship with the state, with the global society¹⁴. In his study, to understand the three types of structures listed above, Durkheim analyses **the customs, the morals, the law**, “distinguishing in these regular and constant practices in the normative system in general what is common and steady in all individual conduct”¹⁵. What characterizes the common sense in Durkheim's sociology is precisely its binding nature for all members of society. This is more than just a habit, rather than an ordinary mode of action, and “what distinguishes it is not its greater or lesser frequency, but it is precisely its imperative virtue. It is not just what is done most often, but what needs to be done. It is a rule that everyone is compelled to obey and is subject to sanctions”¹⁶. Besides custom and morality, Durkheim also analyses the law, which he characterizes as a clear system of norms, which has associated a concrete and stable system of material sanctions, precisely stipulated.

For Émile Durkheim, the useful sources of knowledge for family sociology are ethnography, history and demography. Of these, the French sociologist prefers the method of historical study of family forms because:

“The forms of domestic life, even the oldest and most distant from our customs, have not completely ceased to exist; some of them still remain in the contemporary family”¹⁷.

And for this reason, Durkheim sees in the contemporary family the product of the old forms, a final point of this evolution:

¹² Émile Durkheim, *Introduction in family sociology*; Extracted from *Annales Journal of Bordeaux Faculty of Letters*, 1888, p. 1, French version available in electronic form at the Internet address: www.cras31.info/IMG/pdf/durkheim_-_introduction_a_la_sociologie_de_la_famille.pdf.

¹³ „în limbaj sociologic modern, am putea spune că este vorba despre identificarea modelelor și condițiilor de constituire a acestor modele.” (Corina Bistriceanu, *Sociologia familiei [Family sociology]*, București, Editura România de Măine, 2006, p. 25).

¹⁴ Émile Durkheim, *Introduction in family sociology*; Extracted from *Annales Journal of Bordeaux Faculty of Letters*, 1888, p. 2, French version available in electronic form at the Internet address: www.cras31.info/IMG/pdf/durkheim_-_introduction_a_la_sociologie_de_la_famille.pdf.

¹⁵ „distingând în aceste practici regulate și constante, în sistemul normativ în general ceea ce este comun și statornic în toate conduitele individuale.” (Corina Bistriceanu, *op. cit.*, p. 25).

¹⁶ „ceea ce îl deosebește nu este frecvența sa mai mare sau mai mică, ci este tocmai virtutea sa imperativă. Nu reprezintă doar ceea ce se face cel mai des, ci ceea ce trebuie făcut. Este o regulă la care toată lumea este obligată să se supună și care stă sub autoritatea unor sancțiuni.” (Émile Durkheim, *Introduction in family sociology*; Extracted from *Annales Journal of Bordeaux Faculty of Letters*, 1888, p. 8, French version available in electronic form at the Internet address: www.cras31.info/IMG/pdf/durkheim_-_introduction_a_la_sociologie_de_la_famille.pdf).

¹⁷ „Formele vieții domestice, chiar și cele mai vechi și mai îndepărtate de obiceiurile noastre, nu au încetat complet de a exista; ceva din ele se mai păstrează în familia contemporană” (*Ibidem*, p. 5).

“The modern family contains itself, as a summary, the entire historical evolution of the family”¹⁸.

Another concept that Durkheim introduces is called *the law of progressive concentration* by which he demonstrates that the form of the modern family is dependent on the fundamental conditions of historical evolution. Under this law, with the modernization of society, urbanization and the increasing importance of the means of communication, individuals are freed from physical dependence on one another and from other constraints. In this way, the family community loses ground. The causes of this evolution can be found in the general adoption of a system of values that promotes individual autonomy.

Concerning the legal framework that defines the modern family, Émile Durkheim notes a rather paradoxical evolution of the norms that regulate and protect the space of family intimacy, the boundary between it and the public space, but also those that allow or condition the family of careful supervision and the possibility of state intervention in family matters:

„The modern family, increasingly private but, still, more and more public, is being tracked by the laws that, since the twentieth century, seek to limit the manifestation of traditional and family authority forms and their substitution by forms of public control (children's courts, women's organizations, governmental or nongovernmental services for helping older people, extra-familial social institutions, etc.). In general, the interest for the child, which has become a slogan of the social imperialism of the state since the French Revolution, and the new feminist emancipation movements, are the ones that justify the state's family interventions. Individuals take note of their capacity for autonomy, emancipation by traditional structures, and reacting to the nuclear family by refusing marriage and by criticizing the division of labour between genders”¹⁹.

All this *democratization*, concludes Durkheim, has consequences in the family's *instability* (due to the perpetuation of status disputes and the alternation of authority exercises, the decrease of solidarity and family cohesion), *inefficiency* (the cause being the inaccuracy of role definitions and the inability to determine tasks and specific responsibilities), *vulnerability* (in the absence of a proper system of norms and values, the family becomes exposed to external influences) and, ultimately, the *dissolution* of the family group²⁰.

¹⁸ „Familia modernă conține în sine, ca un rezumat, întreaga evoluție istorică a familiei.” (*Ibidem*, p. 15).

¹⁹ „Familia modernă, tot mai privată, și, totodată, tot mai publică, este pusă sub urmărire de legile care, din secolul al XX-lea, urmăresc limitarea manifestării formelor de autoritate familială tradițională și substituirea lor cu forme de control public (tribunale ale copiilor, organizații ale femeilor, serviciile guvernamentale sau neguvernamentale de asistare a persoanelor vârstnice, instituțiile de socializare extrafamilială etc.). În general, interesul pentru copil, devenit slogan al imperialismului social al statului încă din timpul Revoluției Franceze, și noile mișcări de emancipare feministă, sunt cele care servesc de justificare intervențiilor statului în familie. Indivizii iau act de capacitatea lor de autonomizare, de emancipare de structurile tradiționale și reacționează față de familia nucleară prin refuzul căsătoriei și prin critica adusă diviziunii muncii între sexe.” (*Ibidem*, pp. 8–9).

²⁰ According to Corina Bistriceanu, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

Conclusions

Émile Durkheim remains one of the founding fathers of sociology today, to whom we owe the success of setting rigorous scientific bases in the field of family sociology, his studies being in a context in which individualism and social solidarity have to be reconciled. Émile Durkheim considers the family as the environment where devotion and the sense of morality are created. One of the innovations that Durkheim introduces into the study of family life and which makes the French sociologist's view more interesting is the separation that he makes between the moral approximation of individuals and their consanguinity, introducing the concept of solidarity into the discussion. Another Durkheim's addition is *the law of progressive concentration* by which he demonstrates that the form of the modern family is dependent on the fundamental conditions of its historical evolution. This is why, in his view, family democratization and excessive state intervention in family matters create instability, inefficiency, vulnerability and, ultimately, dissolution of the family group.

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