

Under the Carpet: Shedding Light on Durkheim's Sociology and Social Sciences

Buddha Dev Biswas

Sociology (CSSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 110067, India

ABSTRACT

Emile Durkheim's work, *"Sociology and Social Sciences,"* first published in 1903, offers a profound perspective on sociology as a positivistic science. This paper delves into Durkheim's unique and comprehensive understanding of sociology and its role within the realm of social sciences. Durkheim's concepts, including the dilemma of sociology's uniqueness, the differentiation between the "general" and the "specific," and the notion of sociology as a system of social sciences, shed light on sociology's capacity to serve as a common ground for comprehending complex social phenomena. By exploring these ideas, this paper presents an alternative viewpoint on sociology as an interdisciplinary endeavor capable of providing a comprehensive understanding of society. Durkheim's insights continue to be relevant in contemporary discussions surrounding the interdisciplinary nature of sociology and its significance in the broader field of social sciences.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of Durkheim's ideas through a succession of major publications is essential to understanding his sociology. His seminal 1893 book, *"The Division of Labour in Society,"* begins the journey, which was followed by *"The Rules of Sociological Method"* in 1895. However, Durkheim's *"Sociology and Social Sciences"* (1903) paper represents a noteworthy culmination of his early work. Durkheim's intellectual path was marked by this paper, which not only defined sociology and its relationship to other social sciences but also laid the groundwork for his later influential theories on social facts, anomie, and the importance of collective consciousness. By studying Durkheim's 1903 essential work, scholars may better comprehend his ideas on social realities, collective awareness, and institutions, and trace how these ideas shaped his subsequent sociological outlook. His idea of sociology as an interdisciplinary field has created a framework for comprehending society's complexities, advocating for the integration of diverse perspectives as a means to achieve a comprehensive understanding of society. Consequently, these writings have not only shaped sociology and the social sciences but also influenced modern sociological thought and continue to be crucial to Durkheim's enduring intellectual legacy.

KEY WORDS: Interdisciplinary, Positivistic Science, General-Specific, Social System

THE DILEMMA

The 1903 paper starts with a dilemma that Durkheim tried to solve in the article to prove his unique understanding of sociology. The dilemma is about that: 'If sociology studies social facts that are also studied by different specific disciplines, then what is unique about sociology?' (Durkheim, 1903). For example, economics focuses on analysing economic activities, while political science is concerned with studying political activities. However, sociology also examines economic and political facts. The question that emerges from this fact is whether sociology is merely a broad term encompassing all social sciences or if it possesses distinct characteristics that differentiate it as a separate scientific discipline. Durkheim has presented two proposals to address and resolve this particular dilemma. He claims, *"Sociology is and can only be the system, the corpus, of the social sciences"* (Durkheim, 1903, p. 175). The second point emphasises that it is not simply a word game to examine all the social facts—economic, political, legal, and so on—that are studied by different disciplines; doing so gives an alternative method of investigation.

BREAKING THE TRADITIONAL NOTION

As per Durkheim (1903), it was essential to break the previous traditional theological and philosophical notions of human beings to claim sociology as a science. Durkheim believed that "*sociology needed to rely upon a philosophy*" (1903, p. 180) in its initial stages to establish itself as a science, for which he appreciated Comte's positive philosophy. However, "as rationalistic in sociology as Descartes was in physics and physiology" (Laguna, 1920, p. 213), Durkheim suggested that it was also important to go beyond philosophical speculations, which Comte and Spencer failed to do. Furthermore, Comte "was in no position to meet any of the conditions that he demanded for any positivistic science" (Durkheim, 1903, p. 180). Also, putting more emphasis on social dynamics than social statics and explaining "*The Laws of Three Stages*," Comte had already finished sociology before it was even founded.

According to Durkheim, "science cannot live and develop when it is reduced to one single problem" (1930, p. 181); hence, he disagrees with the early thinkers' emphasis on a single problem—the evaluation of society as a whole. Science is a platform that encompasses a wide range of specific questions and relies on collaboration where subsequent generations play a crucial role in advancing scientific knowledge. At the same time, however, Durkheim praises Comte for considering sociology as "*the complete science of social facts*" (1903, p. 182). Although Comte rejected political economy as a positivistic science, he did not exclude economic facts from the sociological investigation because no category of phenomena can be excluded from sociology. Sociologists who came after Comte, such as J.S. Mills, Giddings, and Simmel, as Durkheim highlighted, distinguished sociology as a general social science separate from other social sciences.

MEANING OF GENERAL

Durkheim identified two meanings for the term general, which was used for sociology by Mills, Giddings, and Simmel. The first meaning he traced from Mill is that sociology is general because it takes into consideration the complexity of social reality, which the particular disciplines have split and analysed independently, isolating it. Mill's sociology—general social science—focuses on "*states of society*," which include education, culture, laws, traditions, governance, etc. "Anything beyond this is a matter for the specific social sciences," Mill wrote (1903, p. 183). A sociologist's job is to identify correlations in the same state's society, understand how different states are linked, and determine the laws that govern these linkages. Specific social sciences begin where sociology ends. But Durkheim objected, countered Mill, that "it is impossible for one and the same science to master such great diversity" (1903, p. 184) since society is made up of numerous diverse phenomena, and each component is comprehensive enough to constitute a science; hence they must be examined separately.

The second definition of '*general*' comes from Giddings and is virtually the reverse of the first. In this sense, general means anything comprehensive enough to be relevant and comprehended in all unique circumstances or scenarios. It suggests a wide and thorough knowledge that may include many unique events or occurrences. To define the task of sociologists, Giddings asked a few questions: 'is society functions as a whole? Is social interaction ongoing? Are there basic truths, causes, and rules in society that apply to all communities and at all times, providing the framework for understanding and illuminating more particular social structures?' (1903, p. 186). If 'yes' then sociologists must develop universal truths and discover the general rules underlying common events. However, Durkheim argues that if sociologists' work is as articulated by Giddings, they must wait until the social sciences advance. It would be beneficial to compare findings from each area to determine their most general connections. As a result, "far from constituting an autonomous science, on the contrary, it would most directly depend on these various disciplines" (1903, pp. 186–187).

Simmel attempted another distinction between sociology and the specialised social sciences. The approach was related to Giddings' definition of 'general' but it was interpreted somewhat differently. Simmel spoke about "*content*" and "*container*." Society as a whole and groups and associations, in particular, may be understood as containers, while the various occurrences that occur inside these groupings can be considered content. Simmel believed that sociology was required to research 'groups' since specific disciplines explore group

content. He believed that *"sociology is the science of association"* (1903, p. 190). Sociologists identify the rules that govern a certain way of grouping. On the other hand, Durkheim felt that "it is the matter that produces the form" (1903, p. 191), making it impossible to distinguish content from the container. Thus, the container and content are inextricably linked. Finally, because Simmel's idea of "abstraction" to discover social behaviour was not methodological, Durkheim criticized it for being subjective. From these debates, Durkheim concluded that it is impossible to separate sociology from other social sciences or distinguish between "general" and "specific." This is because no rule or objective calculation can determine the level of generality required for a phenomenon to be considered sociological. Thus, *"to separate sociology from the social sciences is to separate it from reality"* (1903, p. 193).

SYSTEM OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Durkheim highlighted that "there is no reason to isolate one aspect or another of it to make it especially the subject of a new science" (1903, p. 194). He gives the example of biology, a branch of science that deals with the whole living organism rather than focusing on one or the other aspect; similarly, as per Durkheim, sociology should also take a holistic approach to studying society. As sociology recognises the interconnected nature of all social facts studied by specific disciplines and provides a comprehensive framework to understand and analyse them, *"sociology is and can only be the system of sociological sciences"* (1903, p. 195). Integrating sociology with other social sciences may have posed challenges initially, but specialists' attitudes have undergone positive changes over the past 50 years, facilitating its integration. For example, history now studies society's underlying structures and institutions rather than just particular events. They found trends by comparing institutions across cultures. The same goes for other social sciences whether it is political economy, anthropology, etc. They started looking for patterns and laws, which is a characteristic of positivistic science. For this reason, Durkheim claimed that "sociological ideas are no longer entirely and exclusively the monopoly of sociologists alone" (1903, p. 202), as it is clear that various disciplines are also leading towards the same conception. They all rest on the principle that social phenomena obey certain laws, and these laws can be determined.

Durkheim (1903) thinks that sociology should advance by building on and extending current fields in the direction they are already heading. Specialists must work together, exchange ideas, and strive towards a common vision to improve sociology as a discipline. Specialists must realise that their fields are just a small fraction of the entire and interrelated to other social facts. Interdisciplinary cooperation is necessary to overcome discipline-specific limitations. Durkheim contends that specialists will better comprehend their fields within sociology by recognising society as the primary driver of social phenomena and engaging in multidisciplinary cooperation- something sociology should encourage- to better understand society.

DISCUSSION

For Durkheim, a pioneer in the field, it was important to prove that sociology was a legitimate scientific discipline with its own unique subject matter (Pope, 1975), and from the above discussion, it is clear that Durkheim has solved the dilemma by claiming sociology as a system, a common ground for all social sciences that provides an interdisciplinary framework to analyse the interrelated social facts by providing an alternative methodology, which is positivism. Sociology finds its identity in its unification of all social sciences by providing a common framework and methodology, wherein these sciences are positivistic and aware of the fact that all social facts are interlinked.

Durkheim's notion of sociology as a system can be analysed from his conception of the 'division of labour' which is a central idea of his work and emphasises the interconnectedness and specialisation that exist within societies, particularly the concept of "organic solidarity" (Durkheim, 1893), which refers to the interdependence and interconnectedness of individuals in modern societies. The division of labour leads to the development of specialisation, which in turn helps to nurture interdependence and provides a basis for social solidarity. Similarly, different branches of social science are separated according to the particular social facts they investigate as subject matter. Despite the division among social sciences, interdependence, and

interconnectedness create a linkage, and all of these social disciplines are brought together under the common heading of sociology. The notion of C. W. Mill's (1970) "*sociological imagination*" helps people link personal experiences with wider societal challenges, seeing how social structures and historical settings impact individual lives. Since social activities mean participating in the economy, polity, religion, and so on, all these spheres of social life can be similarly explained or unpacked using the sociological imagination. This supports the idea that other social sciences should incorporate sociology for a comprehensive understanding. Following Durkheim, sociology can make further progress and enhance our understanding of the intricate nature of human social life by adopting an interdisciplinary approach and fostering collaboration between its component social sciences.

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