

# Questions of Interpretation: Sociology contra Durkheim

Durkheim, who died in Paris in 1917, was a republican philosopher, a self-proclaimed rationalist and socialist; yet he is taken as the apostle of conservative thought as well as the most unphilosophical scientism, empiricism and positivism in the social sciences. Of the triumvirate of thinkers who are regarded as the founding fathers of sociology, neither Marx nor Weber has received more opprobrium than Durkheim. He has, it would appear, committed every sociological sin: he is concerned with consensus, and has no theory of conflict or of power; he has a static view of society, with no theory of social change; he has no theory of agency and no conception of the problems of meaning and interpretation; he has little or no conception of the individual and individual consciousness; and, as the architect of sociological positivism, he is the principal author of what has been characterized as a crisis of irrationalism in the human sciences. The name 'Durkheim' now evokes all that must be avoided in sociology, and has become like a billboard which is so pelted with missiles that the original message is obscured. The attempt to uncover this is my task in this book.

Sociology has its own oral tradition, and it is in this that Durkheim's name has been particularly blackened. The process is fed by pre-university courses and by introductory texts. An example of this is Bilton et al. (1981), where Durkheim is presented as an 'organicist positivist' whose view of science, which is 'crudely positivistic', comes from Comte (Bilton et al. 1981: 691, 702). Organicism, based on an analogy with a living organism, is held to be tied to functionalist explanation, where the elements are explained by the role they play in the functioning of the whole (ibid. 704). Functionalist explanations always require equilibrium mechanisms; in this way Durkheim, like other functionalists, avoids historical explanations and stresses order and integration (ibid. 713–15). So organicism leads directly to social order, for conflict cannot be allowed between component parts, and a high degree of integration and co-

ordination is regarded as 'normal'. The primacy of value consensus 'cannot be overemphasized' for, like other organicists, Durkheim considers society as primarily a 'moral order', that is constituted by institutionalized norms and values (ibid. 701).

In another textbook, the external and constraining nature of social facts for Durkheim is held to confirm his organicism and holism; his concept of constraint is said to be central to his functionalism, and is opposed to conflict theory. His view of structure is viewed as opposed to action, meaning and, for Giddens, agency (1989: 720–3). This continues a long-standing criticism that Durkheim's objectivism – seen in the externality of social facts – rejects the subjectivity of the individual (Tosti 1898).

It is not only textbooks which express such views; we find them also in recent commentaries. Lehmann's *Deconstructing Durkheim* sees him as a conservative patriarch whose conservatism is tied to his positivism and whose 'uncompromising' organicism (1993: 8) is central to his social ontology and entails his determinism (ibid. 45). His view of constraint is evidence of holistic determinism (ibid. 55), as are his concepts of externality, force and thing. In maintaining that for Durkheim the individual is 'impotent' in face of society as a 'natural entity', Lehmann continues the critiques that have stemmed from Gehlke (1915) and continued through ethnomethodology that he ignored the role of the individual as an active cause of social phenomena. His most distinguished commentator claims that Durkheim has 'an absolutist conception of knowledge' which misses the 'essentially meaningful character of social interaction' (Lukes and Scull 1984: 23). Further, in books focusing on other topics, asides are thrown at Durkheim which are equally condemnatory: 'Durkheim modelled his sociology on the natural sciences, thus violating hermeneutics' (Meadwell 1995: 189).

These criticisms circulate widely, and form the basis of a thinking about Durkheim that can be called 'vulgar Durkheimianism', which is the distillation or worst-case analysis of what has been said about him in the history of sociology. It combines the concepts of system, order, morality, holism, functionalism and science. With this conglomeration of unreconstructed concepts, the main accusations against Durkheim have been made: he is a thinker who adapted the methods of the natural sciences to the study of society; he is a conservative in his concern for social order and moral integration in society; and his functionalism confirms his scientism and conservatism, just as his view of society is taken to deny the individual.

Is there anything wrong with these views? Are they not a fair distillation of his failures, and an accurate final judgement on the founder of the subject? Whilst I will show in the next two chapters how various views that have been ascribed to Durkheim are contradicted by his own state-

ments, and in the subsequent chapters offer new light on Durkheim's theoretical positions, here I will just indicate some of the problems with these views. Accusations centring on his organicism ignore his rejection of biological explanations in sociology: to call society an 'organism' is 'an aphorism' which alone does not establish a science (Durkheim 1885a: 1.373). And why should an unreconstructed organicist argue that, with society, the organism 'spiritualises' itself (1893b: 338/284)? If society is really a 'natural entity' which renders us impotent, why is it 'irreducible' and how can Durkheim argue that through social forces 'we rise above things' to deprive them of their 'fortuitous, absurd and amoral character' (ibid. 381/321)? If his holism is really incompatible with freedom, agency and the individual, why does he reject those views which overemphasize cohesion to the exclusion of liberty (1892a: 14), argue that the individual is the only active element of society (1898b: 43n./29), and hold that 'freedom of thought is the first of freedoms' (1898c: 269/49)?

If his view of externality really is incompatible with the subjective nature of social reality, why does he hold that externality 'is only apparent', and argue for internality (*le dedans*) (1895a: 28/70)? If social facts really are 'hard data' which exist without reference to meaning, why does he hold that social life is made 'entirely of representations' and that this indicates the role of mind (ibid. xi/34)? If constraint is central to a functionalism which denies conflict, why does he characterize the constraining division of labour by the 'war of the classes'?<sup>1</sup> And if his functionalism ignores the historical and change, why does he deal with 'historical development' (ibid. 94/123) and talk of the 'free currents' of social life (ibid. 14/58)? And if he really ignores all questions of hermeneutics, why does he argue that interpretation is possible and associate it with type and 'species' (*espèces*) (ibid. 89/119)?

Interpretations are complex, they consist not only of what has been said, but also of what has not been said. Lukes in his magisterial intellectual biography has done much to set the record straight. And other commentators (Giddens, La Capra, Tiryakian and Pickering, amongst others) have demonstrated the rich complexity of his thought, and have insisted on the centrality of the conscience collective and of collective representation to his thought. But however much the sociological reading of Durkheim has improved, there are certain theoretical lacunae in these accounts which leave certain fundamental critiques unchallenged, and this remains the case despite new and interesting readings of Durkheim (by Gane, Pearce, Schmaus and Meštrović).

The continuing accusations show that there is still a deep confusion about his theoretical language, particularly over 'force', 'thing' and 'externality'. This is one of the reasons why vulgar Durkheimianism remains *theoretically*, if not sociologically, fundamentally unchallenged. This is

composed of the concepts of holism, positivism and scientism, functionalism, and determinism. The interrelation and apparent mutual implication of these is aided and abetted by the neglect of other concepts which affect their interpretation. This allows the development of a mythology wherein Durkheim has become a kind of monster who rules over a dead world of facts and things, the point of whose thought is to nail persons to social structure, to found a science on untransformable fact, and to endorse any order as morally right and authoritative. But, like Frankenstein's monster, this Durkheim is constructed out of parts which come from diverse sources.

A fundamental source of misinterpretation is a tendency to read him through different and later theories. So the over-identification with Comte leaves Durkheim sharing his anti-individualism, authoritarianism and positivism. His overwhelming concern for order and moral consensus comes from reading him through Parsons. (Bilton et al. show the consequences of reading Durkheim through both Comte and Parsons.) The overly scientific view of structure and function comes from equating Durkheim with Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski. And of course there has been an enthusiastic structuralist reading of Durkheim which may entail as many pitfalls as a Parsonian reading. So in general we can say that Durkheim is judged by the company he is said to keep; in the history of the subject he founded, the great patriarch of the social sciences has found (like many a young girl) that it is easy to acquire a reputation, and very hard to lose it.

This dismal picture is reinforced by the particular location of Durkheim within what are seen as the antitheses of sociological thought: consensus versus conflict, holism versus individualism, structure versus agency, causal versus meaning-type accounts, and those based on transformative historical interest versus static functionalist accounts. In some cases these actually falsify Durkheim's position; in others they obliterate the originality or complexity of his position. As a result of this, every retrogressive movement in sociology seems to claim Durkheim as its own, whilst every progressive movement claims him as its enemy.

However, these views can be directly contradicted by Durkheim's own statements. An examination of these is the basis of the 'critique of critiques' which forms the kernel of these first two chapters. The way in which I propose to unravel the problems of interpretation is, first, to examine Durkheim's location in types of sociological theory. This will not only call into question the established forms of classification of Durkheim's thought, together with the dangers of reading him through later theories, but will also reveal those concepts which require examination together with certain problems in translation. Secondly, in chapter 2, I will pursue this question of interpretation by examining the concepts of order and of science which seem to sum up the 'vulgar' Durkheim.

The division of types of theory within the present conscience collective of sociology and its teaching practices is inimical to a proper understanding of Durkheim: he is identified with theories with which he has significant differences, and he is contrasted with those with which he has more similarity than is apparent.

### **The theories Durkheim is compared with: the differences**

#### *Structural functionalism*

It is important to remember that Durkheim wrote before Parsons; but from the way Durkheim is viewed in sociology's oral tradition, we have to conclude that although formally it is recognized that he died in France in 1917, he suffered a veritable rebirth in America! Paradoxically for a French thinker, this has become the dominant culture in the interpretation of Durkheim. Here he becomes a born-again conservative, not only by the perceived identification of him with the concerns of a particular form of structural functionalism, but also by the characterization of him imposed by significant thinkers within this movement.

Lukes has warned us that the sociologists' Durkheim is strongly coloured by Parsons; consequently, for many sociologists the success or failure of Durkheim's thought is judged in terms of that of Parsons and American functionalism. For this to be fair, there would have to be an identity between the central concepts of the two systems that I suggest is fundamentally lacking. Just as Parsons has no theory of conscience, conscience collective or collective representation, so Durkheim lacks the Parsonian conception of the functional prerequisites of a system, a concern with latency, equilibrium and the problem of social control, and the study of actors in terms of deviance and conformity – yet Parsons associates these terms with Durkheim (Parsons 1937: 376). Is Durkheim's view of constraint and sanction the same as social control? To identify them is to presuppose the meaning of sanction, to gloss over the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate constraint, and to ignore the possibility of a dialectical tension between structure and agency in Durkheim's conception of sanction.

Durkheim might well agree with Parsons that society is 'essentially a network of interactive relationships' (Parsons 1951: 51). However, whatever his intentions were, Parsons's stress on 'the system' makes it sound like an invisible fish tank in whose transcendent interests the fish swim. In so doing, he has bypassed what for Durkheim is the crucial logical access to society – representation. The conformity with role expectations and the integration of a common value system is the dynamic of a social system

for Parsons (ibid. 42), whilst the search for justice and the need to make a morality are central to the dynamic of modern society for Durkheim (1893b: 406/340). But, according to Gouldner (1970), morality means integration and conformity for Parsons, a view he also ascribes to Durkheim.

For Parsons there is no theory of solidarity in the same sense as there is for Durkheim; his minimal reference to solidarity is subordinate to 'the collective orientation of roles' (1951: 96–101). Solidarity for Durkheim is not necessarily the same as value consensus is for Parsons, and rather than integration being his dominant problematic, he is clear that it is only possible through the full realization of solidarity – which is compromised by injustice and inequality. Reading Durkheim through Parsons (or a particular view of him) has had the effect of passing over his concern with questions of individuality, sociality and moral relatedness in historical forms of solidarity, and thereby replacing them with questions of systems, stability and integration. This is to turn what for Durkheim is achievable into the achieved, and the concern for the social and historical possibility of morality and social relations into the concern for normative integration within the present system.

Gouldner (1970) blamed Durkheim for the pall cast over sociology through the concepts of function, system, order and integration, which are central to structural functionalism. Durkheim is the source of its obsession with unitariness, for 'The parts only take on significance in relation to the whole' (ibid. 198). On the contrary, for Durkheim, 'A whole can only be defined in relation to the parts which form it' (Durkheim 1912a: 49/33). He rejects precisely the kind of holism ascribed to him by Gouldner. There is no 'objective unity' to such a 'heterogeneous whole' (1903c: 1.132). There is both 'unity and diversity' in social life (1912a: 591/417). Unlike Comte, Durkheim insisted that diversity is not pathological, but an essential part of modern society (1928a: 222/237). There is a tension in his thought between individuality and sociality, which is expressed in the relation between different forms of individualized and collectivized consciousness – *conscience particulière* and *conscience collective* – both of which are states of mind, but with different roots.

Because of this 'unitarianism', Gouldner believes that Durkheim cannot deal with the potency and functional autonomy of the individual: he obliterates the individual (who is a 'tool' of the *conscience collective*) in his concern for social order (1970: 196). This neglects, first, Durkheim's argument that 'as societies become more vast . . . a psychic life of a new sort appears. Individual diversities become conspicuous . . . individuals become a source of spontaneous activity' (Durkheim 1893b: 339/285). Secondly, it overlooks Durkheim's logical pluralism, which is central to all wholes: wholes are not *logically* prior to persons in the way Gouldner

suggests. ‘One cannot following idealist and theological metaphysics derive the part from the whole, since the whole is nothing without the parts which form it and cannot draw its vital necessities from the void’ (1898b: 44/29). These considerations make a difference to the type of integration which is ascribed to him, for this implies a conception of unity. Alpert argues that Durkheim’s conception of social integration centres on unity – for Durkheim society is a unity, and ‘not a mere plurality of individuals’ (Alpert 1941: 2.29). But for Durkheim wholes are relational and founded on pluralism. ‘All of social life is constituted by a system of facts which derive from positive and lasting relations established between a *plurality* of individuals’ (1893b: 329/277).<sup>2</sup> How can there be a unity which is compatible with logical pluralism? A positive answer to this question means that there can be a real interdependence at the social level which is incompatible neither with the heterogeneity and ‘difference’ of phenomena nor with the autonomy of the agent: thereby integration does not require subordination for Durkheim.

So, thirdly, Gouldner overlooks Durkheim’s insistence on the plural nature of the conscience collective, and that it cannot be ‘hypostatised’ (1895a: 103/145). Durkheim argues that we have two ‘consciences’, and whilst one is collective in type, the other represents our personality (1893b: 74/61). We are not ‘tools’ of the *conscience collective* – for, as we will see, the latter is compatible with the freedom and individuation of the ‘particular conscience’ (*conscience particulière*).

This dismal picture of the consequences of Durkheim’s holism is compounded when it is combined with a particular view of functionalism: static, overly scientific and anti-epistemological, obsessed with integration at all costs, subservient to the needs of the system, anti-individual and deterministic. Structural functionalism can be defined as the view that elements of a culture or society are explained by their functional contribution to the overall coherence and stability of the social system: cultural/social systems are homeostatic functioning units. This definition implicitly introduces the teleological assumption that the point of any part is to contribute to the overall stability, continuity and functional unity of the whole.<sup>3</sup> However, Durkheim opposes teleology as explanation (1893b: 330/288), and does so through the idea of function (1895a: 95/123).

The sense of function Durkheim uses is dynamic, not static. Its original introduction in nineteenth-century thought stressed relations, activities, transformation and dynamism, as against the fixed and unchanging – static form and fixed organization (Kallen 1935: 523). ‘To remain adapted, the function itself therefore must be always ready to change, to accommodate itself to new situations. . . . nothing immobilises a function more than to be tied to a too defined structure’ (Durkheim 1893b: 323/272–3).

He rejects the static view of function of Comte and Spencer, which

assumes that 'society will have an arrested form, where each organ, each individual, will have a definite function and will no longer change' (ibid. 322/271). This must cast doubt on the accusation that Durkheim's functionalism is inherently conservative because it is committed to maintaining the *status quo* (Gouldner 1970: 335). Gouldner similarly accuses Durkheim of 'opposing a future perspective', and thereby consolidating sociology to the stasis of the 'synchronic present' (ibid. 119). This overlooks the following: 'If men have learned to hope, they have formed the habit of orientating themselves to the future' (Durkheim 1893b: 225/190).

Function for Durkheim is a relation of correspondence to the needs of the organism (ibid. 11/11). For Pierce, Radcliffe Brown (1952: 178) eradicated the dynamism of Durkheim's account by identifying 'needs' with the conditions necessary for the existence of society (Pierce 1960: 158). The real function of the division of labour for Durkheim is to create solidarity, and solidarity is a 'completely moral phenomenon' (Durkheim 1893b: 28/24). He held that present society was passing through 'an appalling crisis' of morality (ibid. 405/339). His functionalism thus must have a dynamic moral interest that has been lost through its identification with later static conceptions of function.

There are of course many definitions of 'function' (Pierce 1960: 167; Nagel 1968: 522). For Durkheim it is associated with differentiation of family tasks (1893b: 92/78), with activity (ibid. 416)<sup>4</sup> and the repetition of ways of acting (ibid. 357/302), and thus with the 'habit of certain practices' (ibid. 321/271); functions and relations mutually imply each other (ibid. 92/78). So, as for Merton later, function for Durkheim also means reciprocal relation and mutually dependent variation. None of these meanings can, without deformation, be annexed and subordinated to function as meaning the equilibrium of a homeostatic system.

Yet there are other conceptions of function which are crucial to the interpretation of Durkheim, which have either been ignored or mistranslated. First, there are 'the speculative function' (1912a: 614/432) and the 'cognitive and intellectual functions' (ibid. 613/431). The 'higher intellectual functions' are effective in action, and this is shown in the role of 'attention', which can interrupt, stop or facilitate action (1898b: 31/17).<sup>5</sup> Function here thus has a clear epistemological sense, and this is seen in its identification with the 'psychic' and with representation: 'Judicial, governmental, scientific and industrial functions, in a word all the special functions belong to the psychic order (*sont d'ordre psychique*) because they consist in representations and actions' (1893b: 46/39).<sup>6</sup> What is the psychic? Durkheimian authorities are tellingly quiet about this term – probably because it is an odd term for a man of science to use! But it significantly affects the meaning of his organicism – for 'the essential characteristic of

psychic life' is that 'it is more free, more complex and more independent of the organs which support it' (ibid. 338/284).<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, he connects function to conscience: 'Conscience, like the organism, is a system of functions' (ibid. 217/183).<sup>8</sup> We have to know more about conscience and its functions, and how it is related to the set of relations of which it is a part, before any implications about its necessary subservience to the functional needs of systems are drawn. Conscience is the crucial intermediary factor between function and system: conscience is the necessary medium for adaptation (ibid. 14/14).

Thirdly, Durkheim talks of 'representative functions' (*fonctions représentatives*) (ibid. 270/228), which are more developed in 'the most cultivated societies . . .' (1897a: 45/76). I will show that these are crucial to thought, action and transformation – yet they have been largely obliterated through translation. Further, 'spirituality' is the distinctive feature of 'representative life' (1898b: 49/33).<sup>9</sup> Psychic functions are connected with 'representative faculties' (1925a: 34/39). Again, translation has falsified this concept, and this is partly the reason for the lack of commentary on their significance.<sup>10</sup> The representative faculties are connected to practical functions (*les fonctions pratiques*) (1893b: 270/228). The latter are connected with the ideal. 'We diminish society when we see it simply as a body organised in view of certain vital functions. In this body lives a soul: it is an aggregate of collective ideals' (1911b: 116/93). The ideal is central to action and to transformative potential—ideals are 'forces' (ibid. 117/93): 'The ideal is not there in the service of the real' (ibid. 111/88).<sup>11</sup> Most importantly it is volition which enacts ideals (ibid. 112/89).

So function, in addition to being relational and dynamic, is both cognitive and evaluative, and has critical and transformative aspects. But, through the neglect of these distinct meanings Durkheim's functionalism is presented in introductory texts as opposed to phenomenological or interpretive sociology, and is identified with the later functionalist movement and its lack of critical, transformational logic or theory of the ideal.

So Nisbet (1952: 170) cites the concept of function as evidence of Durkheim's conservatism, and this is reinforced by Coser, who saw Durkheim's conservatism as the desire to 'maintain the existing order of things' (1960: 212). For Gouldner, functionalism assumes that social order can be maintained 'regardless of the level and distribution of economic gratification' (1970: 343). The opposite is the case for Durkheim: 'Equality in the external conditions of conflict is not only necessary to attach each individual to his function, but also to link functions to one another' (1893b: 374/316). For Lockwood, Durkheim's interest in consensus overrides questions of inequality (Lockwood 1992: 23). This overlooks how 'a moral equality – that is an equality of rights and powers' is for Durkheim

essential to contemporary moral consciousness and therefore to questions of consensus (1910b: 2.375/67).

Durkheim is compromised neither morally nor politically by the concepts of function or the whole: neither the conceptions of function nor those of system that I have outlined imply that there is an automatic and inevitable subordination of the person to the needs of the system. This would be incompatible with Durkheim's democratic pluralism and individualism; the latter, however, are compatible with his relational holism. The reconciliation of these centres on the theory of logical pluralism, which will be examined in chapter 4. It follows that the 'irreducibility' of society need not imply an ontologism of system.

Irreducibility, I suggest, indicates, first, the impossibility of reducing social thinking conceptually, characterized by a 'meaning holism' (shown in collective representations) to individual thinking; they have different foundations (1895a: 105/131). This is made structural and institutional by being repeatedly acted upon – that is, by becoming habitual. Secondly, it indicates a type of social being – which is not ontological, but 'psychic' and relational, and thus is independent of the individual level, even though this is 'composed' of individuals.

Through these false views of the whole and of function, a picture of Durkheim's view of society is built up which he would condemn as 'ontologist' or 'realist' (ibid. xi/34), which is logically anti-individualist, and has more to do with Comte and the later Hegel than with Durkheim. There is, for Durkheim, no 'unrepresentable absolute' (1897e: 250/171). Wholes are plural and relational, and function is dynamic, relational, cognitive and active. He might stress the importance of the consolidation of social functions, but he also stresses creation and the development of solidarity, and these do not imply an automatic subservience to the needs of unity and stability in a system. As Bouglé reminds us, Durkheim insisted that 'Society is not a system of organs and functions . . . it is the foyer of moral life'; against materialism and organicism, his spiritualist tendencies must be recognized (Durkheim 1924a: 10/x1).

### *Structuralism*

The decline of interest in Durkheim's thought has been reinforced through the identification of him with structuralism. But does this mean that he thereby stands accused, through the critiques of post-structuralism, with its ahistoricism, anti-humanism and thus with the problems that structuralism has with self, individuation, agency, pluralism and difference?

Althusser's conception of structure is associated with the concept of the whole, unity and domination: 'the complex whole possesses the unity of an articulated structure in dominance' (1965: 208). In contradistinction to

the Althusserian view, for Durkheim, ‘The general has no virtues of its own. It is only an extract of the particular. It can thus contain nothing more than the particular’ (1910b 2.374/66).<sup>12</sup> The widespread structuralist interest in Durkheim must confront not only the question of the ‘vacuums’ (*vides*) which Durkheim sees as part of social reality (e.g. 1897a: 317/281), but also the compositional nature of social reality. The latter term is central to his account of the complex, compound nature of social reality. Whilst he uses ‘composition’ consistently, it is largely eradicated by translation,<sup>13</sup> and is overlooked theoretically by his major commentators.

For Durkheim, unlike Althusser, the concept of structure is identified not with the dominance of a whole but, first, with the habitual: ‘Structure is consolidated function, it is action which has become habit and which is crystallised’ (1888a: 105/66). The ‘habit of living with each other’ is central to ‘ways of being’ (consolidated ‘ways of doing’) and to the political structure of society (1895a: 13/58).<sup>14</sup> Structure is the consolidation of beliefs and practices through repetition, which in turn is central to habit (ibid. 8/54): ‘They are the product of repetition, and from the habit which results they acquire a sort of ascendancy and authority’ (ibid. 19/63). Secondly, action is central to structure: ‘Structure is not only a way of acting, it is a way of being (*être*) which necessitates a certain way of acting’ (1893b: 324/273). Such definitions of structure do not entail the thesis of over-determination and the denial *per se* of freedom of action of the Althusserian account. Much, as we will see, depends on the habitual – how it is understood and how overcome, for ‘sooner or later custom and habit re-assert themselves’ (1886a: 197).

In contrast with the monist tendencies of structuralism (the unity of the dominating structure of Althusser), Durkheim stresses the real diversity of social life (1920a: 2.320/84). The ‘interdependence’ of social facts (1903c: 1.157/205) is not incompatible with the difference that experience shows. The task of science, after the acknowledgement of differences, is to integrate them in an explanatory framework: ‘beside the resemblances, the differences remain to be integrated’ within representation (1893b: 355/300).

For Durkheim the forces, syntheses and combinations which make up social reality are developed through association. The latter operates on ‘psychic forces’, and thereby releases their energy together with a new ‘psychic life’ (1950a: 96/60); association is the determining condition of social phenomena. The ‘properly human milieu’ which is ‘internal’ and is the active factor in social life (1895a: 111/135) consists analytically of consciences in association. Collective representations which form the web of society are ‘the product of the actions and reactions exchanged between the elementary consciences of which society is made’ (1898b: 39/25).<sup>15</sup>

Association invokes a principle of combination – logical pluralism –

which differentiates Durkheim from the later movement: ‘Combination presupposes plurality’ (ibid. 28/14). Whilst the thesis of over-determination of the whole characterizes the later movement, Durkheim stresses an indetermination which is a factor of society that comes with complexity (1895a: 88/117).<sup>16</sup> And how are we attached to these plural totalities? – Is it through a thesis of unified conceptual domination of whole to part? On the contrary, for Durkheim, ‘The links (*liens*) which attach us to society, derive from the community of beliefs and feelings’ (1893b: 119/101).

Foucault’s critique of continuity is central to post-structuralist thinking, and can be seen to oppose holism diachronically. Although Durkheim stresses the importance of social continuity, it does not follow that he embraces a philosophical continuum. Indeed, he criticizes Comte’s philosophy of history for fallaciously unifying historical events, for it ‘introduces a unity and continuity which they lack’ (1903c: 1.128). For Durkheim the rejection of continuity has a practical importance: it shows where human agency can insert itself in the historical process (1895a: 91/120).

Amongst the critiques levelled by post-structuralism is the accusation that structuralism is the enemy of a dynamic, changeful world. This cannot apply to Durkheim: ‘Structure . . . forms and decomposes itself (*se décompose*) ceaselessly, it is life come to a certain degree of consolidation’ (1900c: 1.22/362). He insists that a static vision contradicts science (1898b: 16/4). Derrida’s critique of structuralism focuses on the ‘metaphysics of presence’ in form-thinking which is static and Apollonian. Against this, he embraces force-thinking, which recognizes difference and becoming; in this he could be drawing on Durkheim, who sees society as a system of ‘acting forces’ (*forces agissantes*) (1912a: 638/448).<sup>17</sup> Force is central to the meaning of causality for ‘humanity has always seen causality in dynamic terms’ (ibid. 519/367). And just as Durkheim recognizes ‘difference’, he also recognizes becoming: ‘Structure is found in becoming (*devenir*) and it can only be made evident on condition of taking account of the process of becoming’ (1900c: 1.22/362).

It is a constant complaint against both structuralism and post-structuralism that their theoretical terms allow no active subjects at all. For Althusser, there is no subjectivity of action in history: ‘the true subjects’ are ‘the definers and distributors: the relations of production’ (Althusser and Balibar 1970: 180). Durkheim specifically repudiates the accusation that he denies that ‘Historical persons are factors of history’ (Durkheim 1913a(4): 674). Durkheim’s interest in the structural and the general does not require the denial of agency or of the activity of the subject in society. That the reality of society exists in the whole (*le tout*) and not in the parts is not incompatible with the claim that ‘Individuals are the only active element of it’ (1895a: xvi/46). The way in which the whole is defined is central to the possibility of this.

Whilst Althusser's social formations are deterministic, Durkheim's conception of determinate law and structural causality is compatible with agency and freedom of will (1893b: xxxvii/xxv). Individuals do not fit automatically and unreflectively into structures. 'An agent endowed with conscience does not conduct himself as a being whose activities can be reduced to a system of reflexes: s/he hesitates, makes attempts, deliberates and it is by these distinctive characteristics that it is recognised . . . this relative indetermination does not exist where there is no conscience and it grows with conscience' (1898b: 15/3).<sup>18</sup>

Even when he is concentrating on social physiology, he identifies collective will and intelligence as involved in the deepest level of structure (1900c: 1.30/369).<sup>19</sup> Unlike the later movement, Durkheim – both early and later in his thought – recognizes action, autonomy and individuality. 'To be a person is to be a source of autonomous action. Man acquires this quality only in so far as there is something in him which is his alone and which individualises him' (1893b: 399/335). He identifies the 'personal ideal' with autonomy of action (1912a: 605/425). We individualize structural relations (1895a: xxiii/47): there is no social uniformity which denies 'individual gradations' (1900c: 1.29/367). And whilst the later movement is characterized by an impersonality, Durkheim stresses both the personal and the impersonal (1914a: 318/152). 'The very materials of conscience must have a personal character' (1893b: 399/335). 'The more complex a state of conscience is, the more personal it is' (ibid. 298/251). Indeed, is not the idea of 'a personal being' (*être personnel*) (1925a: 40/46)<sup>20</sup> an awkward element for a structuralist reading of Durkheim – as is his science of morality for a science of structures?

One of the main arguments against structuralism is that it lacks an account of agency: the lacuna of Althusserian structuralism is not only the absence of a concept of will, and therefore of the possibility of agency, from the theoretical terms of structuralist science, but the elevation of this lacuna into a theoretical advantage. Althusser's conception of the 'authorless theatre' and the radical negation of the subject are important features of his rejection of humanism and the establishment of a science of social formations. Hirst (1975) gives an Althusserian reading of Durkheim, and praises Durkheim for his theoretical anti-humanism and for not conceiving the world as a cosy conspiracy of human subjects.

Of course, the collective is the primary *explanans* for Durkheim, but this does entail eradicating the theoretical possibility of the agent/subject. Similarly, his theoretical account must acknowledge the individual, otherwise it lacks the means to explain moral individualism where 'The centre of moral life has been transported from without to within and the individual has been exalted as the sovereign judge of their own conduct' (Durkheim 1898c: 273/52). The theoretical description of

neither individualism nor humanism are undermined by science for Durkheim.

The concepts of sign and of signification are central to Durkheim's thought, and were clearly influential on the later movement: thought is expressed through signs for Durkheim (1895a: 4/51). And words represent ideas: 'the affinities of ideas communicate themselves to words which represent them' (1893b: 51/42). The dominance of the linguistic method, which characterized the later movement, does not follow for Durkheim: language is not the key to understanding religion, for example, for this implies a complex interrelation between belief, representation and action (1912a: 116/79). Language expresses representation: 'What it expresses is the way society . . . represents objects of experience to itself' (ibid. 620/436).<sup>21</sup> So Durkheim does not hold that linguistic structures underlie all cultural phenomena: it is not by the logic of the mind that the study of culture must proceed – the individuality of each culture 'depends only partly on general human faculties' (1920a: 2.320/84).

#### **The theories that Durkheim is contrasted with: the similarities**

Weber's action perspective is contrasted to Durkheim's structural approach, just as his methodological individualism and *verstehen* approach is contrasted with Durkheim's holist, positivistic approach; explanation by the ideal type is contrasted to Durkheim's functionalist, empiricist method which treats social phenomena as facts and things. But this radical contrast between Durkheim and Weber is false. For example, both hold to an objectivist, causal approach as the final criterion of the scientific – Durkheim, like Weber, holds that all questions of interpretation cannot alone be sufficient explanations, and must be supported by causal analysis (1895a: 89/119). This false opposition has begun to be questioned (Coenen-Huther and Hirschorn 1994). The following reflections add to this reconsideration of their theoretical relation.

Does not Durkheim's conception of the 'the psychic type of society' (1893b: 46/39) show an affinity to Weber's 'ideal type'?<sup>22</sup> 'Types of thought' and of 'action' are central to society (1912a: 620/436), and that much maligned concept of 'health', Durkheim says, is an 'ideal type' which is nowhere entirely realized (1893b: 330/278). Even the concept of charisma is not absent from Durkheim: the man who speaks to the crowd draws on a plethora of forces which come from the crowd and incite 'the demon of oratorical inspiration' (1912a: 300/212).

To oppose the structural to the action perspective blurs just how much Durkheim is concerned with action. He questions 'this logic by which law would exclude action' (quoted, Lukes 1973: 653), and insists that 'Every

idea, when it is warmed by feeling, tends to action' (Durkheim 1885c: 1.376). Action is central to his definition of society. 'It is through common action that it becomes conscious (*conscience*) of and establishes itself: it is above all an active co-operation' (1912a: 598/421). Indeed, as we have seen, 'structure . . . is action which has become habitual and is crystallised' (1888a: 105/66). Social facts stem 'from collective activity' (1900c: 1.32/371); ways of beings are actually ways of acting which are 'consolidated' (1895a: 13/58).

So, like Weber, Durkheim can claim that his method deals with thought and action (1895a: 74/104); however, unlike Weber, he claims that 'The passions are the motivating forces of conduct' (1925a: 80/94).<sup>23</sup> And, 'The springs of our activity are internal to us, they can only be activated by us and from inside' (ibid. 149/178). But his account of action includes that of *tendances* (1895a: 92/121). And although he rejects the psychological finalism of Comte and Spencer, he does admit that there is a 'finalism' which 'existence implies' (ibid. 96n./144). The neglect of these two concepts, together with 'passion' and the logic of internality, has fuelled misunderstandings on this point. Indeed, for Durkheim there is a profound and radical view of the relation between thought and action: 'The imperatives of thought are probably only another aspect of the imperatives of will' (1912a: 527/373). But it is above all the 'ideal . . . which energetically solicits action' (1925a: 103/123).<sup>24</sup>

Durkheim's holism is contrasted with Weber's methodological individualism, yet he argues that the method of irreducibility does not eradicate the individual at the theoretical level. 'Here as elsewhere what exists is the individual and the particular: the general is only a schematic expression' (1893b: 1st edn 16/1933 trans. 419). 'Society can only exist in and through individuals' (1912a: 356/252) – that is 'through the individual consciences which compose it' (ibid. 317/223). Indeed, 'truth is only realised through individuals' (1955a: 196). Cuvillier said that although this will surprise those convinced of Durkheim's 'sociologism', this nevertheless represents the authentic Durkheim, and he cites 1924a 'At the same time as it [society] transcends us, it is interior to us, since it can only live in us and through us' (Cuvillier in Durkheim 1955a: 196). 'If individual life is not valued, however little this might be, the rest is worthless, and evil is without remedy' (1887c: 1.330). He argues that 'In conclusion social life is nothing other than the moral milieu or better, the collection of different moral milieux which surround the individual' (1900c: 1.28/367). And 'In qualifying them as moral we wish to say that these are milieu constituted by ideas' (ibid.).<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, what has not been recognized is the way in which he refers to the individual: if all is representation, how is the individual represented? It is connected with the concepts of the personal, the autonomous and,

above all, the particular conscience (*conscience particulière/individuelle*). It is through this that individualization occurs. 'The impersonal forces which are released from the collectivity cannot constitute themselves without incarnating in individual consciences where they individualise themselves' (1912a: 382/269). As a result of overlooking this logic, in contrast to Weber, who extols the autonomy of value, Durkheim is regarded not only as incapable of accounting for the individual, but also as an apologist for the customary and as an advocate of conformism. Recognition of his view of the diversity and pluralism of the modern world, together with his view of the autonomy of the person must correct this characterization. Indeed, for Durkheim, this intellectual conformism occurs only under specific conditions: 'As long as mythological truth reigns, conformism is the rule. But intellectual individualism appears with the reign of scientific truth; and it is even that individualism which has made it necessary . . . [thus] social unanimity cannot henceforth establish itself around mythological beliefs' (1955a: 185).

The radical opposition of Durkheim's scientific and positivist approach to Weber's '*verstehen*' and all consideration of hermeneutics is unhelpful. First, it is clear that the concept of understanding is central to Durkheim's view both of science and of social reality: good science is a product of the understanding for him (1895a: 34/74). He insists on the activity of cognitive and practical faculties in social development: as the social milieu becomes 'more complex and more undetermined', faculties of reflection develop which are 'indispensable' to societies and to individuals' (ibid. 96/124). It is true that he insists on the method of observation, but this reveals 'an order of phenomena called representations' (1898b: 16/4). Even that concept of constraint, viewed as central to his functionalism, is operated through the mind: 'It is through mental routes that social pressure is exercised' (1912a: 298/211).

Indeed, just as with his view of science, his functionalism includes the concept of understanding. 'The understanding (*l'entendement*) is only one of our psychic functions: beside the purely representative functions there are the active faculties' (1925a: 34/39). And we need to know more of what he means by the psychological before his sociologism can be radically contrasted to it. It is not the case that psychology is 'irrelevant for sociology' as is widely held (Lukes 1973: 228). All functional phenomena 'are psychological' for they are 'modes of thought and action' (1900c: 1.23–4/363). Sociology will culminate in a psychology, but a more concrete and complex one (1909d: 1.185/237). It is a 'purely' psychological explanation which he rejects (1895a: 106/131). He uses both the psychological and the psychic – but this can be obscured by translation. He claims that the association of particular consciences (*consciences particulières*) leads

to a new kind of ‘psychic individuality’ (ibid. 103/129). The psychic (*psychique*), like the representative, is a constant of his thought. ‘The degree of simplicity of *psychic* facts gives the measure of their transmissibility’ (1893b: 297/251).<sup>26</sup> In fact, it is clear – against the positivist, functionalist interpretation of Durkheim – that meaning is central to all aspects of society – in the ‘psychique’ and in ‘representation’. Just as he insists that ‘social life is entirely made of representations’ (1895a: ix/34), so he also claims that ‘representations are conceptual’ (1912a: 618/434).

So this opposition of the scientific and the functional to the interpretive and the phenomenological is particularly inimical to the understanding of Durkheim. His ethnomethodological critics treat him as a philosophical fool who had never understood the problem of meaning or of intentionality in social action. ‘For a long time we have only recognised value in an action if it is intentional, that is if the agent represents in advance what the action consists in’ (1925a: 101/120).<sup>27</sup> I suggest that Durkheim problematized social meaning, but did not exclude it.

So we need to know what Durkheim means by psychology, and most particularly by the psychic (*psychique*) before he can be convincingly radically opposed to the tradition of hermeneutic thought. Indeed, when interpretation is defined as grasping the meaning given to consciousness then the variables involved in this – consciousness, symbolization, signification, intelligibility and choice – are found not to be missing from Durkheim’s account. The first four are aspects of mind and mental operation: all aspects of the mental are covered through conscience and its functions, and by representation in general. The fifth element, choice, is covered by freedom: he acknowledges ‘a freedom of thought which we actually use (*jouissons*)’ (1895a: 71/102).

### *Marxism/Critical Theory*

Durkheimian theory is of course contrasted with Marxism, and during the period when Marxism was more dominant in the universities than it is now, this was taken as equivalent to a rejection of socialism. Lukes outlines Durkheim’s sympathy for socialism, and corrects the view that Durkheim ‘always rejected socialism’ (Coser 1960: 216); yet he agrees with Sorel’s characterization of him as the ‘theoretician of conservative democracy’. However, Sorel’s brand of revolutionary syndicalism was opposed to Durkheim’s democratic socialism. Lukes characterizes his position as ‘strongly reformist and revisionist’ (1973: 320–1); but the question of revisionism can only be determined in the historical context of the Third Republic and contemporary views of socialism. In fact, Durkheim’s criticism of Marxism, rather than being either revisionist or a rejection of

socialism, can be seen to be a critique subsequently made by socialists themselves: Gramsci's critique of Marxism for its historicism, materialism and determinism is matched in many respects by Durkheim's.

In Bottomore's view (1984) Durkheim emphasizes solidarity rather than conflict, order rather than change, and the ideational as opposed to the structural. But is it really the case that Durkheim underestimates or ignores conflict? He characterizes the 'constraining' division of labour by class conflict. Recognition of this is hampered by the unjustifiable exclusion of the original detailed table of contents from the 1984 translation of *De la Division du travail* (where 'constraint' (*contrainte*) is translated as 'forced'). Here it is clear that 'constraint' means all forms of inequality in 'the external conditions of struggle' (1893b: 415). He opposes class domination and economic inequality as unjust: 'If a class of society is obliged, in order to live, to accept any price for its services, whilst the other due to its own resources can avoid this . . . the second has an unjust domination of the first' (ibid. 378/319).<sup>28</sup> Further, 'There cannot be rich and poor at birth without there being unjust contracts' (ibid.). Like Marx, he criticizes the brutalizing of human nature by economic factors: 'one cannot remain indifferent to such a degradation of human nature' (ibid. 363/307).

The central difference, however, is that he does not view conflict as a means of provoking change. Rather than provoking class conflict, he wanted to turn socialism from 'the feelings of anger which the less favoured class has against the other to those feelings of pity for this society which is suffering in all its classes and all its organs' (1899e: 1.169/143). Although he has a clear critique of Marxism, the interests and sympathy of the early and the late Durkheim are supportive of socialism. His study of the division of labour should help with the long-held dream 'of realising in the facts the ideal of human fraternity' (1893b: 401/336). And in 1915, 'Our salvation lies in socialism discarding its out of date slogans or in the formation of a new socialism which goes back to the French tradition. I see so clearly what this might be' (quoted in Lukes 1973: 321). In his time the socialist students in Bordeaux planned to disrupt Espinas's classes to demand that Durkheim should be their teacher (Weisz 1983: 105). Now, after nearly a century of sociology, he is seen as the conservative enemy of socialism!

For Aaron, 'Durkheim was a sociologist and not a socialist' (1960: 6.76). Lukes held his socialism to be 'idealistic and non-political' (1973: 321). It is now clear that for Durkheim, in 1899 at least, what prevented his political engagement was the class-based character of socialism (Durkheim 1998a: 226). This is not an anti-socialist position, but is central to a distinct view of democratic socialism which became central to Jaurèsian socialist politics.

Saint-Simon was the father of French socialism, and Durkheim

expresses the Saint-Simonian view that socialism began with the French Revolution (1905e: 289). Rather than socialism implying the mutual destruction of two opposing classes, it requires the development and extension of solidarity – and what renders this impossible is a ‘moral egoism’ (1898c: 267/48). Gouldner, when he says Durkheim opposed his moralism to Marxism, overlooks that at the time, ‘Socialism is the philosophy and morality of solidarity’ (Mouy 1927: 129).

### The concept of a critical science and the question of power

In Habermas’s distinction among three types of enquiry in the humanities – empirical/analytic, historical/hermeneutic and critical sciences – Durkheim is clearly held to be an arch-representative of the first. But for him, ‘The critical method alone suits science’ (Durkheim 1890a: 217/35). Durkheim ‘would not dream of denying that reflection is modificatory . . . Conscience and scientific thinking, which is nothing other than the highest form of conscience, does not apply itself to phenomena without efficacy, but it puts us in the position to change through its illumination’ (1907a(3): 572). The whole point of a social science is some practical transformation: the very act of knowing is itself to initiate change – because ‘conscience is not epiphenomenal, without efficacy: it affects the reality that it illuminates. . . . In acting on societies we transform them’ (ibid. 579).

For Habermas, in an empirical/analytic science there is no identity between the aim/structure of the science and its subject matter. This is not the case for Durkheim: the central element of societies consists in the particular consciences (*consciences particulières*), which are the necessary part of their composition. And ‘Science is nothing but conscience (*la conscience*) carried to its highest point of clarity’ (1893b: 14/14). The point of a science is the enlightenment of conscience: ‘The more a conscience is obscure, the more it is unwilling to change . . . That is why it is necessary that intelligence guided by science should take a larger part in collective life’ (ibid. 15/14).

What view does Durkheim have of practical transformation? He insists that ‘critique and reflection are the supreme agents of all transformation’ (1925a: 45/52). But against the characteristic categorical repudiation of institutions by revolutionary socialists, he advocates great caution in overturning them: moral and social phenomena are complex historical phenomena, and not our ‘personal work’ – they cannot be philosophically repudiated from a position which has no knowledge of their causes, interrelations and the needs to which they respond (1897d: 243/136).

He denies that positive sociology has a fetishism with fact and an

indifference to the ideal: 'sociology is directly situated in the ideal; . . . it starts there. The ideal is its real domain' (1911b: 120/96). This points to a model of how the future is to be grasped, how action and practical reason are to be implemented, which is distinct from the Hegelian/Marxist model. The ideal and its relation to action encompasses the normative orientation which, for Habermas (1992), is crucial to critical science and the relationship between theory and practice: the function of ideals of value 'is to transfigure the reality to which they relate' (1950a: 120/96).

The aim of a critical science is to establish a freedom from illusion. In addressing 'the blind force of habit', Durkheim can be seen to be addressing one of the goals of a critical science, which is to establish a 'rationally satisfying existence' (Geuss 1981: 55). Habit must not be 'the sovereign mistress', says Durkheim. 'Only reflection allows the discovery of new practices' (Durkheim 1950a: 123/90). The problem is that 'sooner or later custom and habit re-assert themselves' (1886a: 197). Indeed, it was force of habit that led to the re-introduction of authoritarian regimes in nineteenth-century France 'more than we wished for' (ibid. 95/60).

Value-freedom is central to an empirical/analytic science for Habermas. But for Durkheim, 'There is not one way of thinking and judging to deal with existence and another for estimating value. All judgement sets ideals to work. There (is) . . . only one faculty of judgement' (1911b: 119/95). For Habermas this separation of value from fact leads to the 'complete elimination of questions of life from the horizons of the sciences' (Habermas 1976: 145). Science is not silent, Durkheim says, on the ultimate question of whether we should wish to live (Durkheim 1893b: xl/xxvii). Science can offer 'a new objective to the will' (ibid.) and helps with the orientation of action through clarification of the ideal (ibid. xxxix/xxvi). And this has a reflexive foundation: 'Every strong state of conscience is a source of life' (ibid. 64/53).

For the Frankfurt School, a critical free thinking requires freedom of mind and the ideal of autonomy of action. This is not missing in Durkheim's thought – he objects to certain forms of philosophical critique precisely because they do not give free thought sufficient room (1907a(3): 572). Indeed, he calls freedom of mind 'the first of freedoms' (1898c: 269/49), and claims that the modern moral consciousness requires a 'true and effective autonomy' (1925a: 96/114). 'It is science which is the source of our autonomy' (ibid. 98/116).

The orthodox view of Durkheim is that he shows no concern with the role of political power (Giddens 1995b: 107). It must not be concluded, however, that he has no account of power – he talks of 'the eminently personal power which is the human will' (1912a: 521/368). Adorno says, more strongly, 'The powerlessness of the individual in the face of society . . . for Durkheim was precisely the criterion for *faits sociaux*' (Adorno

1976: 120). It is surprising then that Durkheim identifies the person with autonomy (Durkheim 1893b: 399/335) – even in his reputedly early ‘positivist’ stage – and argues that ‘... individual consciences constantly affirm their autonomy’ (1897a: 158/159)! He was aware of how society could both crush and emancipate: he acknowledges both ‘the power of action and creation of social thought’ (1910a(2): 1.193) and that ‘every society is despotic if nothing comes from the exterior to contain its despotism’ (1950a: 96/61). However, he claims that in history we see the individual becoming ‘An autonomous foyer of activity, an imposing system of personal forces’ (ibid. 93/57).

Power, for Durkheim, is involved in both the concepts of force and causality. ‘Productive power’, ‘active force’, is the first thing implied in the causal relation (1912a: 519/367). Force expresses power (ibid. 522/369), and initially comes from our ‘internal experience’ (ibid. 521/369).