SOC116: History of Sociological Thought

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Durkheim on social facts & the normalcy of crime

Goals for Today

1. Clear understanding of the concept of social fact
2. Meaning of "crime is normal" and its connection to more general sociological ideas about boundaries and norms.

What are social facts? Durkheim offers several definitions. Try to summarize and make sense of them.

First of all, they can’t be everything that is generally present throughout society because then there’d be no special object for sociological study – we’d study the same as everyone else.

There is a specific category of phenomena, though, that can be called "social": "[w]hen I fulfill my obligations as brother, husband, or citizen, when I execute my contracts, I perform duties which are defined, externally to myself and my acts, in law and in custom" (90a2). Some of the characteristics shared by these things are that (1) even if "I feel their reality subjectively," they are "still objective, for I did not create them" (90a3); (2) we find them already here; (3) they function independently of me – not affected by whether I follow them or not; (4) "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness" (90a5). In a phrase: “it consists of ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him” (90b5).

We might note a distinction made by Zerubavel in Social Mindscapes which places "the social" midway between the phenomenological/individual/personal at one extreme and the natural or physical at the other.

My personal history
Feelings
Idiosyncracies

Social

Neurochemistry of my brain
Natural world
Laws of Physics

Some social facts get crystallized out in the form of aphorisms, moral rules, laws, etc. (cf. to “social constructions” “institutions”).

Other social facts don’t quite have this concreteness but methodological tricks can help us to separate them out. D calls these “social currents” (91a5) and lists the collective sentiments that are behind things like changes in a marriage or suicide rate. Using statistics we can ascertain that there must be something “out there” behind the numbers.

So, let's summarize:

- external to the individual
- ready-made at birth
- function independently of my own use of them (e.g., I can’t change language)
- coercive power
  - sanctions/punishment
  - ridicule
  - isolation
What is "the society" associated with "the social"?

How are social currents similar to and different from social facts?

Like social facts that are external and coercive. You CAN resist, but you can tell that you are resisting.

Socialization

Lots of things are passed on "mouth to mouth, transmitted in education, and fixed in writing. Point is that much that we "know" about the world is not based on experience or on hearing about decisions. Rather, we "receive" reality, pre-packaged, as we learn to be human.

Do social facts have to be universal?

"It follows that sociological phenomena cannot be defined by their universality. A thought which we find in every individual consciousness, a movement repeated by all individuals, is not thereby a social fact" (92a3). It is the collective aspect, not the universality, which makes things social.

The main thing is that these things are general because they are collective not vice versa: "but it is general because it is collective (that is, more or less obligatory), and certainly not collective because general" (93a2)

Give a sense of the range and variety of what Durkheim wants to gather under the title "social facts."

Durkheim's initial list included acting like a brother, husband, citizen (we'd say "playing roles" or "having identity"), fulfilling contracts (the point is that we fulfill our obligations absent coercion), using currency (the point being we believe in it even though it is literally worthless). Later, along the way, he adds religious beliefs and practices, style of dress, national and class customs, language, using the technology of the times. Still further on he broadens the concept to include "social currents," "great movements of enthusiasm, indignation, and pity in a crowd" (91a5), those feelings we sometimes refer to as "the spirit of the moment" and the amorphous version of "peer pressure." The test for "social factness" here is whether one feels resistance if one "goes the other way."

What are some other things we might include? Subcategories of language as social fact are all manner of new-isms that sweep through everyday usage (some, like "like" and "you know" don't seem to sweep out as quickly as they swept in). Taste in things like art and music are certainly in the social fact realm, along with fads and fashions in any number of other areas. Even, baby names.

Why does Durkheim want to distinguish normal and pathological?

He does not spell this out in the excerpt we read. Can we infer it from what we read here? Recall that this selection is from his book *The Rules of the Sociological Method*. He is, in a sense, trying to define what sociology is and how it should go about doing what it does.
Durkheim wants to allow sociology to focus scientifically on "actual society" rather than to be in the position of suggesting moral reforms to move the world toward an idealized form of perfected society.

In addition, he may have been processing the fact that what appears to his generation a clear advancement in social development was not always accompanied by a decrease in things taken to be social problems.

And…

**What IS "normal"? What does the word mean here?**

"Crime is present … in all societies of all types" (94b4).

"…appears closely connected with the conditions of all collective life" (94b8).

Normal is here the opposite of morbid or pathological.

"not to say merely that it is an inevitable, although regrettable phenomenon, due to the incorrigible wickedness of men; it is to affirm that it is a factor in public health, an integral part of all healthy societies" (95a5).

**What is the argument for why crime is normal?**

"…crime is normal because a society exempt from it is utterly impossible" (95a6)

"Assuming that this condition [balancing of sentiments for and against certain behaviors] could actually be realized, crime would not thereby disappear; it would only change its form" (95a9).

When collective sentiments get lax, they can be strengthened

"Imagine a society of saints, a perfect cloister of exemplary individuals….faults which appear venial to the layman will create there the same scandal that the ordinary offense does in ordinary consciousness…." (95b3).

Why doesn't this process eliminate all "conventional faults" as well as crime? Main reason: members of a society are similar, but not identical. "…there cannot be a society in which the individuals do not differ more or less from the collective type…" (96a3)

**It can be said that the idea of crime as normal is central to Durkheim's overall conception of what society and the social are. Use passages from the reading to flesh out and explain this observation.**

“If all hearts beat in unison…because an identical force propels them…Each is carried along by all” (46b9).

“A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations” (48a.3).