Durkheim on Collectives

In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim’s primary question is, “Is the increasing division of labor that characterizes our society something that contributes to the health of the society?” Like Marx and Weber, he takes on an aspect of society under modern capitalism that starkly differentiates it from previous eras and that he sees as “one of the fundamental bases of the social order,” (3). In this project, Durkheim is driven by a question about the moral nature of the division of labor, a phenomenon that he sees in all sectors of society. True to his methodological approach set out in “The Rules of Sociological Method,” Durkheim warns against a study of any subjective conception of the division of labor, and says that, “We should rather treat it as an objective fact, to be observed and comparisons made,” (Division of Labor, 7). In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim sets out to understand “essential forms of religious thought and practice” and from where they spring. This is important because Durkheim is bent on finding the cohesive force that binds societies of increasing complexity through time, and perhaps more importantly, the origin of knowledge in societies, having shown how the division of labor loses its capacity to bind members of modern society. Here, too, Durkheim is concerned with observable facts as units of study, and is as careful to stick to a recognizable sociological theory-making structure to assert his claims.

In *Division of Labor*, Durkheim sets up and quickly rejects the “straw man” position that its function, by engendering increased productivity, is to enable the existence of a civilization that is inherently good. He does so because there is no empirical way to establish the positive moral function of society; there must be an underlying social fact that explains the function of the division of labor. He turns to the division of labor within marriage to formulate a hypothesis that the division
of labor “constitutes the establishment of a social and moral order sui generis,” (21). This leads him to “ask whether the division of labor might not play the same role in more extensive groupings – whether, in contemporary societies...it might not fill the function of integrating the body social and of ensuring its unity,” (23). In other words, he posits that the division of labor provides the social cohesion necessary for the continuation of society.

Durkheim then puts forth the task of his investigation: to determine if, in societies with a high division of labor, there is a high level of solidarity that contributes to social cohesion, and if the division of labor is indeed the cause of this solidarity (24). To do this, Durkheim examines the legal forms of social relationships, a task which dominates chapters 2 and 3 of the first book. By focusing on legal forms, the “perceptible” manifestations of solidarity, he is starting with empirical, measurable effects in order to get to the causal social facts (24).

Durkheim identifies two significant categories of legal forms: repressive or penal laws, those which result in punishment, and restitutory laws, those which provide restitution in equal proportion to the harm done. Penal laws refer to basic rules that exist in the “collective or common consciousness,” (39). It follows, he claims, that, “The rules sanctioned by punishment are the expression of the most essential social similarities,” (60). Durkheim refers to this type of solidarity of similarities as “mechanical solidarity,” (84) because it is absent of any inherent source of movement or change, like an inorganic body— the individual, as part of the group, follows the motions of the collective type which moves independently of the individuals.

In contrast to the solidarity of similarities, Durkheim establishes another type of solidarity derived from the division of labor. He calls this “organic solidarity,” for its resemblance to a highly evolved organism whose specialized organs function in unity (85)— specialization begets increased productivity and co-ordination, which, in turn, favors further specialization. While mechanical solidarity depends on the homogeneity of a group, organic solidarity depends on individuality, the
existence of “a sphere of action that is peculiarly our own,” (85).

Organic solidarity is not expressed in penal law; rather, it is formalized in certain forms of restitutory law. Restitutory laws which regulate the division of labor within social relationships, such as marriage or business partnerships, express positive solidarity (as opposed to negative solidarity, which refers to the avoidance of conflict) (77). Durkheim will go on to compare the relative importance of the two types of law— penal and restitutory— that he has classified as a means of determining the relative importance of the two types of solidarity, thereby determining the moral significance of the division of labor.

Durkheim is primarily interested in the two kinds of positive solidarity: that which comes from a common consciousness and that which comes from the division of labor. The former links the individual to society without an intermediary, and suggests an organized society in which members hold certain beliefs in common. The latter depends on the mediation of social bodies and refers to a society characterized by distinct, functional relationships between individuals. For Durkheim, mechanical solidarity is a useful way for thinking about social cohesion under pre-modern conditions, when individualism was minimal, social mobility was low, and society characterized by stasis. Likewise, organic solidarity describes social cohesion under modern capitalism, in which relationships are characterized by increasing specialization and the economy by instability and change. Durkheim says that the movement towards increasing division of labor in all sectors of life is universal, powerful, and autonomous of individual societies; however, his inquiry is driven by a question— is the division of labor good or bad?— that suggests the potential to stem this tide of specialization (3).

Quite possibly as a continuation of his quest to elaborate a societal force or organizing concept that does not drop away through time and space, as societies complexify, Durkheim sets out to understand “essential forms of religious thought and practice“ and from where they spring.
Durkheim pieces together his theoretical argument in recognizable fashion, setting up “straw men” explanations to the theory of religion as universal font of societal knowledge, and systematically knocking them down. He shows how both pure forms of empiricism and a priorism are alone insufficient to explain societal knowledge. The first has relied on the individual mind as point of origin and assembly of knowledge, the other asserting that categories which compose knowledge are “logically prior to it and condition it” (15). Both are seen by Durkheim as problematic because one assumes the individual as unaffected by external societal influence, and the other hinges on the individual mind possessing a “certain power of transcending experience” (16). Durkheim wants to treat religion as a “social fact,” that has been created by individual powers of reason (a priori), but which is composed of observable (empirical) elements.

He states: “religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities... But if these categories of religious thought have religious origins, they must participate in what is common to all religious phenomena: they must be social things, the product of collective thought” (11). Religious representations, Durkheim believes, serve as symbols in culture, and can lead the way to societal knowledge, through empirical study of them, replacing philosophy as the more often heard commentator on knowledge in society. Man, Durkheim believes, is a complex being whose essence is both biological and social—and this latter portion is where “A very special intellectuality, infinitely richer and more complex than the individual, is concentrated in them” (18). This is of the utmost importance to Durkheim because part of his aim is to demonstrate how collective representations in society are significantly more important in fomenting human reason than individual reason or free will. Durkheim is also proposing that they provide something of a roadmap common to people of all cultures, but that religious representations can most easily be observed and studied in what he terms their “less complex” manifestations, lacking their “secondary characteristics” (10).
Thus, Durkheim undertakes a study of “primitive religion,” in order to obtain elementary facts about the structure and symbols of religion in their barest form. Underlying this methodological approach is an evolutionist belief that societies become more complex through time, and to study primitive religion is to study the origin of all religions. He states that when primitive religion is closely examined, its primary elements are revealed to be ones recognized by civilizations the world over: “space, genus, number, cause, substance, personality, and so on” (11). Durkheim appears to hold the belief that time, embodied by evolution, is a distorting factor, and the further the researcher removes himself from some point of origin, the less likely he is to grasp the individual/collective representation forms in their purest state.

In Division of Labor, Durkheim establishes the notion of collective consciousness through his discussion of mechanical solidarity (39). Collective consciousness, autonomous from the individual yet expressed through the individual, is an example of the “social fact,” whose origin seems to be both moral and material necessity. Collective consciousness gives rise to mechanical solidarity, which is the primary form of social solidarity under pre-modern conditions. Collective consciousness loses salience in modern society, where the division of labor’s increasing complexity has exalted the individual above the collective. In Elementary Forms, Durkheim coins the term collective representations, which seem above all to be symbolic categories common to all societies. Far from falling away as societies complexify, collective representations remain, though they change as time and place does. The categories of collective representations, serve as “artful instruments of thought that human groups have laboured to forge over the centuries, and in which they have invested their best social capital” (21). In both works, he continues his defense of sociology as distinctive from psychology and philosophy, asserting the social fact and its methodical, inductive study above individual sentiments or more insular attempts to uncover societal forms.
Durkheim’s presumably evolutionist orientation was naturally a snag in our group, since it presupposes a common point of origin for all of humanity, and rules out real historical, geographical, and material conditions that influence different societies’ characteristics. It may similarly be fallacious to suppose that “primitive” societies are inherently simpler to study and understand. This notion also assumes that there exist—or have existed—societies that are “pure” and untouched by the influence of neighboring or sojourning societies.

Finally, our group was prompted by all this talk of religion to consider how what Durkheim asserts about the role of religion as an organizing force in society differs from what Weber put forth in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Does Durkheim also think that religion, once it frames or prompts the development of societal forms, loses its religious importance, or do remnants of its collective representations forever remain, even in a most secular form? Durkeim directly addresses the social causes of factors in religious phenomena, showing how religious phenomena are “social things,” (11) and subject to formation by social categories even as they shape these categories, a relationship that Weber does not explicitly address.