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Continuity and Change in Durkheim's Theory of Social Solidarity*

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This paper examines the controversial question of whether the theory of social solidarity contained in *The Division of Labor in Society* remained crucial to Durkheim's thinking after the book's publication in 1893. It is argued that this theory is rooted in a number of assumptions concerning primitive social life, the boundaries between nature and culture, and human nature. An analysis of material written after 1902 shows that Durkheim revised his approach to these topics to such an extent that he appears to be in the process of constructing a new theoretical framework for the investigation of social solidarity. In both the early and the later theories, however, the models of primitive social behavior, though different, perform similar intellectual functions.

Although most sociologists have agreed that a central theme of Durkheim's work is a concern with the nature of social solidarity, a consensus has been less readily forthcoming on the question of whether the theoretical treatment of this subject in *The Division of Labor* remained crucial to his thinking after the book's publication in 1893. Two different positions on this issue can be identified in the secondary literature. One view is that Durkheim abandoned his original typology of solidarity as he came to realize that many features of mechanical solidarity, far from being confined to primitive and traditional societies, are in fact the foundations of unity in *all* types of social systems (Nisbet, 1975:139; Parsons, 1968:I,321; La Capra, 1972:90; Marks, 1974:354). This interpretation has been subjected to a great deal of criticism by a number of scholars who, while agreeing that some modifications in Durkheim's thinking are apparent, insist that the theoretical framework established in *The Division of Labor* continued to play a fundamental role in his subsequent sociological inquiries (Giddens, 1971, 1976; Sheleff, 1975; Neyer, 1964; Bellah, 1973; McCloskey, 1976).

My intention is not to discuss these interpretations or to examine the textual evidence upon which they rest. The purpose of this paper is to show that Durkheim's original approach to the problem of social solidarity belongs to a definite theoretical perspective, a crucial dimension of which is a number of assumptions concerning the nature of primitive societies. In his later work, the moral and organizational characteristics of these societies are re-defined, and it is with respect to this particular change, one that has been accorded insufficient attention in the literature cited above, that modifications in other areas of his thought must be evaluated. This argument will be sustained by means of a comparison between *The Division of Labor* and a selection of texts written after 1902.

The Division of Labor has been exposed to sufficient critical commentary to

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preclude the need for a lengthy rehearsal of its contents here. In order to show the nature of Durkheim's later theoretical re-orientation however, it is necessary to draw attention to a number of familiar but important themes in this book.

I. *The scope of the "conscience collective" in primitive societies.* For Durkheim, the principal source of cohesion in societies characterized by mechanical solidarity is the *conscience collective*, shared ways of thinking and feeling which bind the members of society together to form a tightly knit community. This is solidarity based upon likeness and in primitive societies where it is most fully developed, uniformity is so strictly maintained that there is an almost total absence of individual autonomy and identity. The *conscience collective* not only provides a detailed regulation of moral, political and economic activities but also controls the private affairs of each individual (Durkheim, 1964: 106, 135, 138, 159–60, 289). But there is one area of behavior which escapes the jurisdiction of the *conscience collective*, which Durkheim designates the "circle of physical necessities." Unfortunately, he fails to specify the precise nature of these necessities or their relationship to private spheres of behavior. This omission gives the impression that there is a realm of distinctively personal activity which avoids collective regulation, and, indeed, there are occasions when Durkheim appears to ascribe such autonomy to primitives. For example, he claims that the satisfaction of physical needs introduces an element of irregularity and capriciousness into the life of the savage (Durkheim, 1964:394) and gives rise to weak and intermittent social relationships (Durkheim, 1964:58–61, 207–10). These statements, however, must be appreciated within the context of Durkheim's overall position with regard to primitive social life and his theory of human nature. Beyond certain vague and indeterminate predispositions common to all men, psychic life is a product of social interaction and is, consequently, irreducible to some pre-social biological or psychological human constitution (Hawkins, 1977: 230–36). In primitive societies the conditions necessary for the development of personal consciousness are absent and "the only psychic life which may be truly developed is that which is common to all the members of the group, which is found identical in each" (Durkheim, 1964:347). Individuation and differentiation are the consequences of social forces that can be generated only when societies first have been constituted on the basis of homogeneity (Durkheim, 1964: 277, 350). Far from being an incorrigible individualist, the savage lacks any self-conscious identity and he is completely absorbed by his group (Durkheim, 1964:129–30, 194, 404).

From these arguments it is clear that for Durkheim, the circle of physical necessities lies beyond the domain of consciously directed action and consists of non-reflective modes of behavior which are governed by instincts. Physical needs, therefore, are satisfied automatically and unconsciously, as with animals, and do not stem from a pre-social cognitive apparatus. In the course of social evolution, instincts decline in importance and are replaced by culture as a means of organizing behavior (Durkheim, 1964:347–49). In primitive societies, where culture is coterminous with the *conscience collective*, the mind of the individual is a mirror of the beliefs and feelings of the collectivity, and the solidarity produced in this manner is called mechanical precisely because individuals are capable of no thought and action independent of the group.

II. *The morphological basis of mechanical solidarity.* Durkheim describes the morphology of primitive societies as "segmental," that is, consisting of relatively undifferentiated parts linked together in a non-hierarchical manner. This structure "allows society to enclose the individual more tightly, holding him strongly attached to his domestic environment and, consequently, to traditions," thereby reinforcing the determinacy of group beliefs and practices (Durkheim, 1964:302). These are ideal conditions for the collective surveillance of individual behavior, for "when the attention of all is constantly fixed on what each does, the least misstep is perceived and immediately condemned" (Durkheim, 1964: 298). Increases in the volume and density of a society reduce the effectiveness of the "collective gaze" upon which the maintenance of moral homogeneity depends and allows the individual more autonomy. In short, both the scope and the intensity of the *conscience collective* are closely connected with the segmental type of social organization, and the effacement of the latter leads to the erosion of the former.

III. *The role of the "conscience collective" in advanced societies.* When societies reach a certain level of internal differentiation, collective sentiments begin to decline until they "consist of very general and very indeterminate ways of thinking and feeling, which leave an open place for a growing multitude of individual differences" (Durkheim. 1964:172). In matters involving the moral status and dignity of the individual, though, the *conscience collective* actually becomes stronger, providing a common frame of reference and an important source of shared values for the members of a society. Nevertheless, this "cult of the individual" is not a surrogate *conscience collective;* respect for the individual has been increasing steadily throughout Western history and its contemporary manifestation merely accentuates existing values and hence does not compensate collective beliefs for their decline in other areas (Durkheim, 1964:167, 400). Furthermore, although this cult is a product of society, it does not have the group for its *object*, and thus, for Durkheim, this cult performs functions qualitatively different from those realized by the collective value systems of the past (Durkheim, 1964:172).

IV. *Moral relationships in organic solidarity.* Durkheim maintains that an advanced social system is "organized," that is, it is an intricate network of functionally specialized but interdependent parts whose continuity cannot be assured by the re-imposition of the moral conformity typical of the past (Durkheim, 1964:361, 409). Shared values and repressive penal sanctions do not disappear completely, but they play a relatively minor role in the maintenance of solidarity in advanced societies, where the division of labor itself becomes a source of cohesion. As work becomes increasingly specialized, so do individuals become progressively more dependent upon one another for the satisfaction of their needs. Under normal circumstances these relations of reciprocal dependence generate moral bonds which are primarily concerned with the coordination of social functions rather than with the control of individual behavior. This normative order is upheld by a system of cooperative laws with restitutive sanctions which act to ensure continuity and equilibrium (Durkheim, 1964:128).

V. *The direction of social evolution.* The distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity enables Durkheim to describe social change in terms of an evolutionary development in which one type of social and moral organization is replaced by another as societies increase in volume and density. This transformation engenders diversification and specialization, which in turn lead to the gradual emancipation of the individual from the "double yoke" imposed by the natural environment and the *conscience collective* (Durkheim, 1964:404). Societies which experience these changes require moral bonds that rest upon principles considerably removed from those governing social relationships in less advanced communities.

Two points emerge from this sketch of Durkheim's arguments in *The Division of Labor*. The first is that the intellectual scaffolding of this book is furnished by a set of oppositions—mechanical/organic, repressive/restitutive, segmental/organized—all of which resonate a broader dichotomy between primitive and advanced societies. Secondly, the model of primitive societies fulfills a crucial function by acting as a contrastive device by means of which the salient features of modernity can be illuminated by comparing them with radically different types of social structure. The result is a distinctive theoretical perspective within which specific concepts are defined by their place within the wider system of dualisms. The question that has to be considered now is this: To what extent did Durkheim retain this perspective after 1893?

A complete answer to this question would require an analysis of all of Durkheim's work produced after the publication of *The Division of Labor*, a task obviously beyond the scope of this paper (see Gurvitch, 1950). It is necessary, therefore, to confine the analysis to those texts which contain discussions of solidarity in both primitive and modern societies. This condition is fulfilled by the lectures on moral education delivered at the Sorbonne in 1902–3, and the writings on religion produced in the last few years of Durkheim's life.

In the lectures on moral education Durkheim proclaims his intention of discovering the universal properties of morality (Durkheim, 1973a:21). One such property is the attachment felt by the individual for his group, and in particular, for the society of which he is a member. Such sentiments of group loyalty mean that all societies exhibit a certain degree of moral uniformity, and Durkheim maintains that this homogeneity is an essential prerequisite for social harmony: "Society, in fact, cannot exist except on the condition that all of its members are sufficiently alike—that is to say, only on the condition that they all reflect, in differing degree, the characteristics essential for a given ideal, which is the collective ideal" (Durkheim, 1973a:87–88).

If moral resemblance constitutes a fundamental basis of social order then Durkheim apparently has revised his original theory, which restricted such conformity to pre-modern societies. Indeed, there are suggestions in these lectures that the model of organic solidarity is inadequate: "A society in which there is pacific commerce between its members, in which there is no conflict of any sort, but which has nothing more than that, would have a rather mediocre quality. Society must, in addition, have before it an ideal towards which it reaches" (Durkheim, 1973a:13). If society lacks an effective coordination of its various functions *and* "lacks the unity based upon the commitment of men's wills to a common objective, then it is no more than a pile of sand that the least jolt or the

slightest puff will suffice to scatter" (Durkheim, 1973a:102). In a later essay Durkheim claims: "To see society only as an organized body of vital functions is to diminish it, for this body has a soul which is the composition of collective ideals" (Durkheim, 1974:93).

Durkheim no longer attributes a specifically moral function to the division of labor, which he now considers to be responsible for an atomization which could threaten the continuity of the social order. Diversification is essential for an advanced society whose members should receive an education which equips them for the performance of specialized roles; but in addition they must also be imbued with common sentiments and values in order to prevent this structural differentiation from attaining pathological proportions (Durkheim, 1956:117–23). Durkheim retains his allegiance to the values associated with the cult of the individual (Durkheim, 1974:60; 1915a:22–24; 1915b:427), but they are now elevated to the status of a *conscience collective*, as the only ones capable of providing a common focus (Durkheim, 1904:261). This cult is far from being vague and indeterminate, as was claimed in the earlier theory, though it differs from the collective value systems of less advanced societies in that a person's submission to it is rational, based upon a knowledge of its source and functions (Durkheim, 1973a:52). Personal autonomy, then, becomes defined, not in terms of freedom *from* the *conscience collective*, but as a rational assent to the obligations imposed by it, in contrast to the blind and unreflective obedience characteristic of the past.

It is this advocacy of a *conscience collective* for modern societies that usually has been interpreted as evidence of Durkheim's re-evaluation of the nature of mechanical solidarity. As I argued above, however, the concepts employed in *The Division of Labor* belong to an integrated theoretical system which is, in turn, related to a number of assumptions about primitive social life. Consequently, in order to assess the extent to which the resuscitation of the *conscience collective* involves a revision, or merely a clarification, of Durkheim's earlier ideas, it is necessary to reconstruct the theoretical perspective within which these later arguments occur. I shall now attempt to show that Durkheim's later writings do exhibit a changed perspective, a critical feature of which is a reconceptualization of the moral and structural properties of savage society.

The clearest indication of this change is to be found in a discussion of another universal aspect of morality, the "spirit of discipline," that is, the proclivity of an individual to submit to and internalize group values and rules. As in the earlier theory, collective regulation is held to be highly deterministic in primitive cultures (Durkheim, 1973a:136–37), but the areas to which it is applicable are now claimed to be few in number due to the intermittent nature of collective existence in such societies. Durkheim concludes from this that among savages the spirit of discipline

> does of course, evidence itself whenever the tribe assembles to undertake collectively some religious ceremony, or to discuss tribal matters, or to organize for the hunt or a military sortie. *But aside from these sporadic occasions, the individual is left to his own devices, to all the promptings of his own whims* . . . Society leaves him to do as he will with his time and, consequently, does not require of him the regularity that always presupposes a more or less painful effort (Durkheim, 1973a:132, emphasis added).

There is no specification of the type of social organization to which the individual belongs during the non-collective phases of his existence, although presumably he lives in small, kinship based bands. In the absence of any direct evidence concerning the moral bonds that are involved in these relationships, it seems reasonable to make an inference from Durkheim's discussion of the modern family. Units of this size, he claims, are too small to facilitate the emergence of the spirit of discipline because, being built upon affective states, they are unable to provide the appropriate setting for the development of abstract and impersonal collective controls. In these circumstances, individuals "have too much consciousness of one another for it to be necessary, or even useful, to guarantee their cooperation through regulation" (Durkheim, 1973a:147). In the past the family was more extended and impersonal than it is at present "and all domestic relationships were subject to a genuine discipline" (Durkheim, 1973a:147). But in primitive communities the family apparently does not possess this authoritative character. In a review published in 1904 Durkheim endorses an approach which links the intensity of collective discipline to the socio-economic activities of the group. Among populations subsisting by hunting and fishing (which are seen as irregular activities that do not require a concerted group effort), there is an absence of such discipline, which only emerges with the development of settled agriculture and the growth of warfare, whereupon the child is taught to control his passions and to subordinate himself to the group (Durkheim, 1904:263). It is presumably for this reason that Durkheim argues in *Moral Education* that there is little need for education in savage communities, where an "organized or systematic discipline has no reason for being" (Durkheim, 1973a:189).

If, during the non-collective phases of life, primitives are not subjected to an authoritative social discipline as a result of the limited size of their group and the type of activities they engage in, then Durkheim has obviously modified his earlier view that small social units encourage conformity to intensely held shared values. It is only during the infrequent gatherings of the whole tribe that the necessary conditions for the emergence of collective controls are established. Consequently moral discipline is only weakly developed among primitives who, like children, are dominated by "uncontrolled dispositions" consisting of "inclinations, instincts and desires" (Durkheim, 1973a:46). This is because children and savages both share the same *pre-socialized* condition in which the moral rules and obligations that act as checks upon natural impulses have yet to be internalized. This formulation raises the question of the principles which determine primitive behavior. The comparison with children is hardly enlightening in this respect, because the latter are unable to survive without adult provision for their most elementary physical needs. It must be assumed, therefore, that the "inclinations, instincts and desires" of primitive men, existing, as they do, prior to any social conditioning, are sufficient for organizing their conduct during the greater part of their lives.

If this assumption is correct, then Durkheim has subjected his initial view of primitive existence to considerable revision. According to the new position the savage, for most of the time, is not motivated by collective beliefs but by a pre-social constitution. What was formerly referred to as the circle of physical necessities, an area of conduct outside the province of group controls, has now been expanded to embrace a wide range of activities which involve the use of a more

complex psychological apparatus than one confined to the automatic and non-reflective satisfaction of physical needs. In short, there is a sphere of psychic life that is independent of, and irreducible to, the *conscience collective*. Durkheim is far from explicit on this point, however, and there is no open rupture with the arguments of *The Division of Labor*, making it necessary to turn to his writings on religion in order to throw additional light on this problem.

The Elementary Forms contains an explicit *homo duplex* model of human nature which roots the appetites and desires of the individual in a biological and psychological constitution that is counteracted by moral rules created by the social milieu (Hawkins, 1977). Between these two realms, the natural and the moral, there is an irreconcilable antagonism which produces anxiety and suffering for the individual (Durkheim, 1915b:206–7, 315–16; 1973b). This model plays a vital role in Durkheim's theory of morality, for he argues that the moral components of human nature have been slowly acquired during the course of social evolution as societies have become larger and increased the range and intensity of their demands upon their members. In primitive communities there is a relative absence of these moral constraints because collective controls are effective only when the tribe congregates to perform religious ceremonies. These occasions, by bringing people together, expand and intensify their relationships with one another, leading to a qualitative change in the contents of their consciousness. "On ordinary days," however, "it is utilitarian and individual avocations which take the greater part of the attention. Everyone attends to his own business; for most men, this primarily consists in satisfying the exigencies of material life, and the principal incentive to economic activity has always been private interest" (Durkheim, 1915b:348). In these private areas of behavior, collective controls are easily weakened by the "antagonistic tendencies" aroused by the "necessities of the daily struggle" (Durkheim, 1915b:348). As a result, the savage is not exposed to a demanding social discipline, and he can easily adjust to the requirements of the moral and religious order when necessary, for "when he gives himself up to the impulses inspired by it, he does not feel that he is giving way before compulsion, but that he is going where his nature calls him" (Durkheim, 1915b:224). It is only in more advanced societies that one encounters extensive obligations and individual suffering and frustration, a fact that is evidenced by the emphasis on restraint and self-denial found in civilized religions (Durkheim, 1973b:156). This view is virtually the reverse of the one expressed in 1893, when Durkheim claimed that primitive existence is dominated by religious controls on even the minutiae of private conduct and the result of the decline of such controls is that the "individual really feels himself less *acted upon;* he becomes more a source of spontaneous activity" (Durkheim, 1964:169, emphasis his).

The later texts also reveal a shift in Durkheim's conception of the demarcation between nature and culture. No longer is the *conscience collective* seen as synonymous with primitive culture, beyond which behavior is governed by instincts. Many "private," including economic, activities are organized by a pre-social psyche which, though dominated by emotions and appetites, is capable of coping with many aspects of life formerly deemed to lie within the rubric of the *conscience collective*. The latter is created by the *fusion* of pre-existing consciences during periods of creative effervescence. If the opportunities for these

fusions occur more frequently when societies become more advanced (Durkheim, 1915b:350), then it follows that the scope and the determinacy of collective constraints on this pre-social psyche will also increase with the growth of civilization (Durkheim, 1973b:163). It is precisely this development in the size, complexity and internal differentiation of societies that the original theory had claimed was refractory to the maintenance of social solidarity based upon a constraining moral uniformity.

A convenient summary of these shifts in Durkheim's position can be obtained by comparing the crucial features of his argument in *The Division of Labor* with his corresponding statements in the later writings.

I. In the later texts the scope of the primitive *conscience collective* is substantially reduced, and many activities formerly described as lying within its jurisdiction are placed beyond its domain, in a realm governed by a pre-social constitution that is adequate for dealing with the prudential requirements of existence.

II. The small and weakly differentiated groups initially seen as providing the ideal morphological conditions for the maintenance of an effective social discipline are subsequently implied to be incapable of sustaining the impersonality necessary for the creation of a deterministic system of moral controls and duties.

III. In the later texts the *conscience collective* constitutes a fundamental source of solidarity in advanced societies. While Durkheim retains the view that modernization involves the emergence of complex social systems composed of specialized and differentiated parts (Durkheim, 1974:63), he abandons the conviction that these characteristics are inimical to the existence of an intense commitment to shared values.

IV. Related to the third point is a concomitant revision of Durkheim's faith in the capacity of modern societies to generate a system of effective moral ties through nothing more than the reciprocal interaction of complementary social functions. In part, this shift is related to his adoption of the *homo duplex* model of human nature, which locates one source of social instability in the insatiable egoistic appetites of the pre-social individual. This conception of man is absent from *The Division of Labor*, where pathologies are explained in social-structural terms, and leads to an emphasis on the need for shared values in order to discipline and moderate individual wants (Hawkins, 1977).

V. In Durkheim's early theory, solidarity changes in accordance with changes in social structure, and evolution consists in the replacement of one type of solidarity by another. The later theory portrays change as the gradual extension of the *same* type of solidarity achieved through conformity to a common system of ideals and sentiments. The content of this system will vary according to the nature of the society in question, particularly with respect to the dignity and autonomy ascribed to the individual, but its function in promotng unity remains constant.

My contention is that these changes add up to a theoretical re-orientation in Durkheim's approach to social solidarity. It is true that there is no overt repudia-

tion of the original theory and, in fact, *The Elementary Forms* contains a number of references to *The Division of Labor*, although these are to points on which his thought does remain fairly consistent (Durkheim, 1915b:96, 208, 224, 272, 408). Moreover, there is no doubt that throughout his life Durkheim was engaged in the same project, namely, the specification of an appropriate moral order for societies characterized by specialization and individualism (Durkheim, 1974:63). But what is striking about the material written after 1902 is the limited use that is made of the conceptual apparatus of *The Division of Labor*. On the rare occasions when the system of dichotomies which gave this book its distinctive intellectual content are employed in the later writings, it is as marginal elements of Durkheim's thought (Durkheim, 1910:283; 1913:62); they can hardly be regarded as the conceptual nucleus of his work in this period. Yet at an earlier stage in his career Durkheim had built an entire critical and theoretical perspective around these dualisms, as is apparent not only from *The Division of Labor* but also from his essay on Montesquieu, his analysis of socialism, and his early lectures on the family (Durkheim, 1960; 1893; 1888; 1892). After 1902 this perspective is replaced by another group of oppositions, of which the most important is the sacred/profane dualism. The other dichotomies of this period—between the collective and non-collective phases of social life, between mind and body, reason and sensation—are all manifestations of this broader opposition. Their implications for Durkheim's treatment of solidarity is considerable when it is appreciated that the elements in these pairs are not tied to two different modes of social and cultural organization situated at opposite ends of the evolutionary spectrum, but refer to permanent features of human association. The division between the sacred-collective and the profane-individual dimensions of social experience does not replicate the earlier distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity with a different evaluative focus, but is an attempt to define the conditions under which solidarity *per se* is created and maintained.

In both the early and the later theory, however, the model of primitive society performs a similar function, even though the *content* of the model changes. This function is one of clarifying certain features of *modern* societies which Durkheim wished to emphasize. In *The Division of Labor*, savages, immersed in their group, are contrasted with moderns who enjoy a large degree of autonomy and possess a well developed sense of personal identity. In the later writings, where Durkheim is concerned to demonstrate the need for an authoritative moral discipline in modern societies, primitives appear as egoists motivated by insatiable and potentially anti-social desires except when they are occasionally inspired by collective ideals and sentiments. In both instances, primitives offer moderns a portrait of the condition from which the moderns have emerged, and time is the dimension of a transformation which also is progress.

Whether Durkheim was aware of the changes outlined above is a question that cannot be considered here, though it is perhaps significant that at the end of his life he was preparing a book on morality, of which only the introduction was completed (Durkheim, 1920), and the book was intended to *replace* his existing contributions to this field of inquiry (Lukes, 1975:411). If the analysis conducted in this paper is valid, however, the actual texts exhibit a significant reorientation, both in the manner in which the problem of socal solidarity is conceived, and in the conceptual apparatus employed in its investigation.

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