Émile Durkheim on Suicide & Society: Crash Course Sociology #5

Crash Course: Sociology
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So, the fact that we have society at all is kind of amazing. Think about it: People with different interests, different amounts of money, members of different subcultures, races, and sexual orientations, somehow all manage to hold together, in this thing we call society. A thing that, at least kind of, works. But it doesn't just hold together. Society has to somehow endure periods of intense change without falling apart. Political change, technological change, population growth, economic crises – all these things can be massively disruptive. Sometimes we might even worry that the fabric of society won't be able to take the stress. And it's these questions of how society holds together, and how to understand why it goes wrong, that Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology, tried to answer.

[Theme Music]

You know who knows a thing or two about social disruptions? France. Émile Durkheim lived in France from 1858 to 1917, which means that he lived almost his entire life under France's Third Republic, founded in 1871. But, despite being the third republic, it was the first stable republic in France's history. Between 1800 and 1871, France was governed by two republics, two monarchies, and two empires. But the turmoil wasn't just political. France was also dealing with major economic, technological, and cultural changes, as industrialization took hold, and the traditional authority of the Catholic Church weakened. Given all this, it should be no surprise that Durkheim was concerned with the question of what kept societies together, so that he could make sure that his didn't fall apart again. And this was the task of sociology, as he understood it. Sociology was to be a truly scientific study of society. With it, we could understand its normal and abnormal functioning, we could diagnose how it was changing, and we could deal with the consequences. To Durkheim, sociology was to society what biology and medicine were to the human body. He actually thought of society as a kind of organism, made up of different parts, which all had to function well together in order for that organism to be healthy. This basic understanding of society in terms of structures that fit together, and which function either well or poorly, makes Durkheim the founder of the structural functionalist paradigm that we discussed in episode 2.

Now, if sociology was to be a true science, then it needed well-defined methods. And Durkheim focused a lot of his effort on this problem. He was committed to sociology as an empirical endeavor. And his ambitious book, called "Suicide" is really the first piece of sociological work to use statistical methods as its primary mode of argument. Durkheim was also the first in the field to think in terms that we now consider standard in sociology. Like, thinking about the problem of operationalizing variables, and puzzling over how intangible concepts, like social integration or solidarity, can be reflected in things that we can actually measure. And beyond this question of method lies an even bigger question: If sociology is a science, then what does it study? Durkheim thought that any science needed a well-defined object of study. And the object for Durkheim was the social fact. In his book, "Rules of Sociological Method," he defines social facts as "consist[ing] of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him."

OK, there are three things to highlight in this definition. First is the fact that it's really broad. Social facts include everything from political systems, to beliefs about right and wrong, to suicide rates, to holiday celebrations, and architectural styles. Second, notice that social facts are external to the individual. This might seem a little confusing; I mean, how can a way of thinking be external to a person? But what Durkheim means here is that social facts have a life outside of you or me. For instance, if you give gifts at Christmas, think for a second about why. That's not something that you came up with on your own. Giving gifts at Christmas wasn't your idea. It's a social fact, with an existence that's external to you. If you don't celebrate Christmas, the strength of Christmas as a social fact in the US means you've probably already experienced the third thing I want to highlight: The idea that social facts are powerful, and coercive, and they can make you do things you otherwise wouldn't. Don't believe me? Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Imagine a hypothetical family at a hypothetical Christmas. None of them want gifts, and all of them have better things to do than spend money buying gifts for anyone else. In fact, none of them are even that committed to celebrating Christmas at all. And yet, come Christmas morning there's a pile of presents under the tree. And there's a tree there in the first place! Why? Well, maybe no one was willing to say that they didn't want a gift. Or maybe they all said that, but they each bought gifts anyway, because they were afraid that the others would too. The point is, the specific explanation for the behavior in this family doesn't really matter. What's important is that we can see here the power of a social fact, even in a situation where no one directly involved believes in it! If that's not an external coercive power, I don't know what is. But this doesn't just happen with gift giving at Christmas. Social facts include all kinds of things. They help dictate how you interact with your neighbors and how you relate to society. Social facts and their coercive power represent a form of social cohesion, which points us back to our original question: how societies hold together and how they can go wrong. Thanks, Thought Bubble!

Durkheim's answer to the question of social cohesion is what he called the common or collective consciousness. The common consciousness is basically the collection of all the beliefs, morals, and ideas that are the social facts in a given society. And, like with gift-giving at Christmas, these beliefs aren't necessarily held by everyone. They're just the beliefs that hold coercive power. They're the ideas that people give life to, in their interactions with one another. So, common consciousness holds a society together. But what are the problems? What is social dysfunction?

For Durkheim, if society is an organism, then dysfunction must be thought of as a disease. Now, you might think that something like crime would be a social dysfunction. But, by Durkheim's thinking, crime can't be a disease, because every society has it. So, you might not like crime, but some amount of crime is normal. In the same way, you might wish you didn't have to sleep, but that doesn't make sleeping a disease. It's just a normal part of the way the human body works. And just like sleep, Durkheim argued that crime serves a purpose. For example, he said that crime helps strengthen the common consciousness. To him, crime and punishment were a kind of public lesson in right and wrong: When someone is judged and punished, that shows us both society's morals and how strong those morals are. Crime can also point to possible changes in the common consciousness. When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus, she committed a crime. But her crime set off a city-wide bus boycott that resulted in the law being struck down. So crime in and of itself isn't necessarily a dysfunction, but, just like how sleeping 18 hours a day, every day might be a sign of disease, if the level of crime in a society becomes excessive, it would eventually stop serving these functions, and the society could no longer function normally. And that's what social dysfunction is for Durkheim: something that impedes the normal functioning of society.

Since Durkheim is a structural functionalist, social dysfunctions always have larger structural causes - they're created by some underlying problem with the social organism. Durkheim applied this idea in his famous book on suicide. Now, it might be strange to think of suicide as social at all, but Durkheim argued that there was actually a very strong link between societal structure and people taking their own lives. And he found this link in a dysfunctional

aspect of his society: namely, in a lack of social integration. When Durkheim looked at the statistics on suicide in Europe over the 19th century, he saw a massive increase, one that coincided with the shift from traditional to modern society. Durkheim argued that traditional societies – like, those of feudal Europe – were highly socially integrated. People knew their place in society, what that place meant, and how they related to other people. But modern society, over the preceding century, had suffered from a loss of social integration. The decreasing importance of religion, and of other traditional ways of thinking, resulted in a smaller, weaker common consciousness and a less intense communal life. As a result, people were less strongly bound to their society. They didn't necessarily feel they had a place in it and couldn't understand how they fit. This, Durkheim argued, resulted in a dramatically increased suicide rate.

Now, suicide is certainly a personal act, motivated by personal feelings or psychological conditions. But Durkheim showed how these personal feelings were not purely personal, and that they were influenced by the structure of society. In this case, he argued that the values holding society together were being pulled apart, and so people lost their sense of place. Feelings of isolation or meaninglessness could be traced back to large social changes. And Durkheim, in diagnosing the problem, believed he had a solution. If a high suicide rate was a disease, Durkheim's prescription was to strengthen social organizations – especially those based around the workplace, because that's where people were spending more and more of their time. He figured that these organizations – sort of like workers' guilds – could help provide people with that sense of place that they were lacking.

Now, many sociologists today see that Durkheim's work on suicide was undermined by the poor quality of statistics at the time. But still, he used those statistics in new ways, as evidence and tests for theories of society. And you can see in his research how Durkheim tried to answer big questions. Society is composed of social facts, and bound together by common consciousness. This normal functioning can evolve, but it can also be disrupted by rapid change. And that, Durkheim believed, is where sociology steps in. By studying society scientifically, and understanding social facts, sociologists can diagnose the disease and prescribe the cure.

Today you learned about Émile Durkheim, and some of his major ideas. We talked about social facts and how he framed sociology as a science. We introduced the idea of common consciousness and tried to understand how it binds society together. And we looked at suicide as an example of how Durkheim applied his concepts to a specific social problem. But there are lots of other ways to understand the purpose of sociology, and we'll see a very different understanding next week as we continue our whirlwind tour of the founding theorists with a look at Karl Marx.

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