



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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I. Education and Sociology (1922)

“Liberty is the daughter of Authority.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from Durkheim's *Education et Sociologie*, published posthumously in 1922 in Paris by Alcan Press. It was first translated as *Education and Sociology* in 1956 by Sherwood T. Fox and published by the Free Press, with a foreword by Talcott Parsons. There have been no other translations since then. The passages you have here are all taken from the first essay in the work. There are four essays in the original.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

This work, originally pulled from a series of lectures Durkheim gave in the early twentieth century, is not widely known today, although it certainly made a major impact on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, an important contemporary theorist whose work you will encounter time and again. Pay attention to the socializing role of education, and its overall role in creating and maintaining solidarity across generations.

The Nature and Role of Education

Part 1: Different Definitions of Education (a critical examination)

[Durkheim begins this work by examining various definitions of education. He criticizes all of these for assuming a perfect ideal “education” when each society has its own system of education which accords with its particular needs and understandings.]

Every society, considered at a particular moment in its development, has an educational system which it imposes upon its people with an irresistible general force. It is in vain to believe that we can raise our children exactly how we want. There are customs to which we must conform; if we deviate too much from these, they will avenge themselves on our children. Once adults, they will not be able to live in harmony with their peers. It doesn't matter whether they were raised with ideas too old-fashioned or ahead of their times; in either case, they are not part of *their times* and therefore they are outside the norm.

It is not we, as individuals, who have created the customs and ideas of the education of our times. They are the product of our common life and they express its needs. In large part, they are the work of preceding generations. All of our human past has contributed to making the ensemble of maxims which guide our education today; all our history has left traces of the history of the people which have preceded us. It is as the most evolved organisms carry within them the echo of their biological evolution. When one studies the history of the manner in which educational systems were formed, one realizes they depend upon the

development of religion, political organization, scientific progress, and the state of the industrial arts, etc. If we look at education without examining these historic causes, we do not really understand what is going on. How can one single person pretend to know and reconstruct what is not the result of individual thought? He is not faced with a blank slate but with existing realities which he cannot change or destroy by his individual will. He can act only to the extent that he understands; that he knows the nature and conditions on which systems such as education depend. He can only arrive at this knowledge by study, through observation, like a physicist who observes inanimate matter or the biologist who observes living matter.

Part 2. Defining Education

To define education, we must first consider all the educational systems that have ever existed and see what they have in common. These common characteristics will then form the definition we seek.

We have already seen two elements. For there to be an educational system, there must be a generation of adults and a generation of young people, and an action of the former on the latter. We now have to define that action.

In one sense, one could say that there are as many different educational systems as there are different social groups in society. Even today, do we not see education vary by social class or place? The education in the city is not the same as education in the country; that of the wealthy not the same as that of the worker. Is this destined to disappear, though? It is evident that the education of our children should not depend upon the chance of where they were born, or to which parents. But even if we think this is the case, and all children should have an equal education, occupational specialization would still produce different kinds of education. Each profession constitutes its own milieu and requires particular skills and special knowledge, in which certain customs and certain ways of seeing the world prevail. Because each child must be prepared for a job, at a certain age education cannot be the same for everyone. That is why we see in all advanced societies today, which tend to become more diverse, more specialization, and this specialization becomes more advanced every day. This diversity may not rest on inequality of birth as before, but it remains nevertheless. To find an absolutely homogenous and egalitarian education one must go back to prehistoric times when there was no differentiation between people.

But, whatever may be the importance of these specialized educations, they are not the entire education. One could say that all such systems everywhere rest on a common base. There is not a people anywhere that doesn't share a certain number of ideas and practical sentiments which they must impart to their children, regardless of class or place or social group.

Each society sets up a certain ideal of being human, of what its people should be, from an intellectual and physical and moral point of view. This idea is, to some degree, the same for all people. It is this ideal which is the central point of its educational system. Thus, education's function is to stir up among its children (1) a certain number of physical and mental states which the society considers should not be absent in any of its members; and, at the same time, (2) certain physical and mental states which the particular social group to which the child belongs (class, family, profession) considers necessary to find among its members. So, it is society, both as a whole and each social group within it, that determines the ideal to be realized by education. Society can exist only if there is a sufficient amount of homogeneity amongst its members: education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing in the character of the child the essential similarities which the collective life demands. But, on the other hand, full cooperation would not be possible

without a certain amount of diversity; education assures the persistence of this diversity by itself being diverse and specialized. Education is thus the means by which society prepares for its existence through its children.

We have arrived at the following definition: *Education is the influence exercised by its adult generations on those not yet ripe for social life. It has as its object the awakening and development among each child certain number of physical, intellectual, and moral states which are demanded of her by the political society in which she finds herself and the special groups for which she is particularly destined.*

Part 3. Consequences of the preceding definition: the social character of education

Following from our definition, education consists in a methodical socialization of the young. Among each of us, one can say, there exists two beings which are inseparable but distinct. One is made up of all the mental states which apply only to ourselves and the events of our personal life; this is our individual being. The other is a system of ideas, sentiments, and habits which express not our own personality, but that of the group or groups of which we form a part; these are religious beliefs, moral beliefs and practices, national traditions, professional traditions, collective opinions of all kinds. Together they form the social being. To create this being in each of us is the goal of education.

Putting aside the vague and uncertain tendencies attributable to heredity, the infant, when she enters life, brings only her individual being. Society finds in each new generation a blank slate upon which it must build itself anew. Society creates a new social being from each individual person.

This recreating force is the special privilege of human education. Anything else is what animals receive when trained by their parents. This training may develop certain instincts, but it does not initiate an entirely new life. Among human beings, the sort of aptitudes necessary for social life cannot be transmitted through heredity. It is only through education that these aptitudes are transmitted across generations.

[*Let us take the case of science.*] People do not have an instinctive appetite for science. They only desire science to the extent that their experience has shown them its importance. We never would have discovered the ways of science if we stuck to our individual lives, because we would not have needed it. As Rousseau has said, sensation, experience and instinct alone would be necessary to satisfy the basic wants and needs of human animals. If people have come to have other needs than these very simple ones, they are not rooted in their individual lives, but their social ones, or else they would not have searched for science through arduous and laborious efforts. We have the thirst for science because society has awakened it in us, and it has done so out of a real need. We have come to need science because social life has become much too complex and complicated to operate without the cooperation of reflective thought, without, indeed "science." But, at our beginnings, when social organization was quite simple and not at all diverse, when everything was pretty much the same, simple traditions sufficed, working in a way similar to the instincts of animals. In those times, thoughts and free inquiry are not only useless but actually dangerous, for they threaten tradition. That is why they are forbidden.

We are now able to answer a question raised by the preceding discussion. As we have shown society fashioning us, individually, according to its own needs, it could seem that we are submitting to a tyrant! But in reality, we are ourselves desirous of this submission, for the new social being built up in each of us collectively through education represents the best of us. We are who we are only because we live in society.

Morality itself results from collective life. It is society that draws us out of ourselves, that makes us consider interests other than our own, that teaches us to control our passions and our instincts, to make law, to keep ourselves in check, to go without, to make sacrifices, to subordinate our personal goals to higher ends. This is how we have gained the power to control ourselves and our inclinations, which is one of the things that make us distinctly human, and which is developed more and more as we become more fully human, rather than merely animal.

Science is the product of collective life as well. It rests upon a vast cooperation of all scientists, not just at the same time, but across time as well, stretching back generations. Before the establishment of the sciences we had religion doing the same job. Both science and religion are social institutions.

Or a final example – language. When we learn a language we also learn an entire system of ideas, neatly classified, and we inherit from all previous generations this system with its classifications. Even more. Without language we could not have general ideas at all. Language has allowed us to raise ourselves above pure sensations. And it is obvious that language is a social thing.

So, we can see from these examples what we would be reduced to if society did not exist. We would be mere animals. If we are more than that it is not through our personal efforts but because we regularly cooperate with each other, and the products of this cooperation are available to us across generations. What an animal learns during his or her lifetime ends there. But for us, the results of our experiences are preserved almost entirely and in great detail, thanks to books, monuments, tools, and all the other instruments with which one generation transmits its culture to the next generation. The soil of nature is covered with a rich topsoil that continues to grow. Instead of dying with each generation, human wisdom accumulates without limit. This accumulation is possible only with and through society. For, in order for the work of one generation to be preserved and passed down to the next, there must be a moral personality which lasts beyond the passing generations and binds them together; *this moral personality is society!*

Part 4. The role of the state in the matter of education

The rights of the family are opposed to the rights of the state with respect to education. It is said that the child belongs first of all to her parents, and it is their responsibility to oversee her moral and intellectual development. In this sense, education is essentially private. If one looks at it this way, then one tends to reduce to a minimum any state intervention. The state should, in this view, serve as a supplement to, or substitute for, families. If they are unable to oversee things, the state can then and only then intervene. In this view, we can also make a case for the state stepping into help parents, by providing schools of various sorts that parents can choose to send their children to. Any action beyond this is out-of-bounds.

But if education has a collective function, if its object is to adapt the child to the social context in which she is to live, this view of the disinterested bystander state makes little sense. How could society not play a part here? It is then up to the state to remind teachers of the ideas and beliefs that must be instilled in the child to adjust her to the social context in which she must live. If the state were not always there to guarantee that education be exercised in a social way, education would break down into an incoherent babble of conflicting fragments. One could not contradict more completely the basic end of all education. Education must ensure a sufficient community of ideas and beliefs, without which any society is impossible. To do that, it is necessary that education not be abandoned to the arbitrariness of private individuals.

Since education is an essentially social function, the state cannot be disinterested in it. Everything that pertains to education must be submitted to the state's influence. That is not to say that the state should monopolize all instruction. A certain margin should be left for individual initiative, because individuals innovate more readily than the state. But from the fact that it is in the public interest for the state to allow private schools to exist alongside public schools, it does not follow that the state must remain aloof from what is going on in them. The education given in those private schools must remain under state control. Only teachers certified by the state should be able to teach, in any school. There is no school which can claim the right to give an antisocial education.

We are not all in agreement on every point. The state cannot and should not establish the community of ideas and beliefs, but rather should maintain and consecrate those that exist. In spite of all of our differences of opinion, there are presently, at the basis of our civilization, a certain number of principles we all share (or at least that no one defies openly). These are: respect for reason, science, and ideas and beliefs supporting democratic morality. The role of the state is to outline these essential principles, to have them taught in schools, to make sure that no child is ignorant of them, and that everywhere they should be spoken of with respect.

Part 5. The power of education and the means of its influence

We have determined the goal of education, and we must now determine how and to what extent it is possible to achieve this end. This question has always been controversial. The solution often depends on how much one ascribes to nature or nurture. Education does not make a person out of nothing but rather is applied to predispositions that it finds already made. These predispositions are very strong and very difficult to destroy or transform. But, fortunately one of the characteristics of human beings is that our innate predispositions are very general and very vague. To say that innate characteristics are for the most part very general is to say that they are very malleable, very flexible, and they can take on quite different forms. There is a considerable distance between the vague potentialities which constitute us at our birth and the well-defined character that we must become in order to play a useful role in society. It is this distance that education has to make us travel. A vast field is thus open to its influence.

But by what means can education exert this influence? [*the sense of duty towards the moral authority of the teacher*]

Liberty and authority have sometimes been opposed, as if these two factors contradicted and limited each other. But this is a false opposition. In reality these two terms imply each other, rather than exclude each other. Liberty is the daughter of authority. For to be free is not to do as one pleases but rather to be master of oneself, to know how to act reasonably and to do one's duty. It is exactly to endow the child with this self-mastery that the teacher's authority should be employed. The authority of the teacher is only one aspect of the authority of duty and reason. The child should be trained to recognize it in the speech of the educator and to submit to it; it is only on this condition that she will later know how to find it again in her own conscience and to defer to it herself.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. Durkheim begins this book on education and sociology by defining education. Why is this an important first step? What is Durkheim's definition of education?
2. Explain the individual and plural function of education.
3. What is the "ideal human" of *your* society? Did your education inculcate physical, intellectual and moral states which prepared you to embody this ideal?
4. What are some particular physical, intellectual and moral states that your college education is inculcating in you to prepare you for your chosen career?
5. What does Durkheim think about the opposition between the individual and society? Does society tyrannize the individual? Is it possible to live "free" outside of society?
6. When Durkheim claims that society is a "moral personality," what does he mean?
7. What would Durkheim say about the movement to provide vouchers to parents to send their children to the schools of their choice? What if the effect was to diminish public education in favor of a multitude of private schools (some teaching the theory of evolution while others teach against the theory of evolution, for example)?
8. Where does Durkheim come down on the nature/nurture debate? What role does education play here?
9. Do you agree that "liberty is the daughter of authority"? Explain and defend Durkheim's argument, and then counter it.

Concepts

Education

Society