



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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ALLISON L. HURST

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY
CORVALLIS, OR



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I. Division of Labor, Book 3

“Just as ancient people need a common faith to unite them, so we need justice.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage comes from Durkheim's dissertation, completed in 1893, and first published in 1902 as *De la Division du Travail Sociale*. The first English translation was done by George Simpson in 1933, but this version was found to have several shortcomings. A more approved translation was made in 1984 by W. D. Halls, edited by Lewis A. Coser. This translation was republished with some improvement by Steven Lukes in 1997. This is the recommended version if you would like to read more of the text than what is included here.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

The *Division of Labor in Society* was divided into three books. The third book looks at what happens when the division of labor is not functioning properly. As you read, think about how often the division of labor is unhealthy or “abnormal” and how often the division of labor is actually in its normal, solidarity-producing state. You might also want to compare what you read here with Marx's critique of capitalism.

Chapter I. The Anomic Division of Labor

Until now we have studied the division of labor as a normal phenomenon, but, like all social facts (and biological facts as well), there are pathological forms we must analyze. If, normally, the division of labor produces social solidarity, sometimes it does the opposite. We must find out what makes it deviate from its natural direction. Otherwise, we are in danger of assuming the division of labor is the cause of these un-solidaristic conflicts. In addition, studying these deviating forms will allow us to determine the conditions of existence of the normal state a little better. When we understand the circumstances in which the division of labor ceases to produce solidarity, we may better know what is necessary for it do so. Here, as always, understanding pathology is a valuable aid of study.

We will explore three types of the exceptional pathological state, not because there are no others, but because these three are the most prevalent and the most serious.

Section 1. Examples of solidarity breaking down

[The first case happens during industrial or commercial crises, which we can see as breaks in organic solidarity. Certain social functions are not adjusted to one another. The second case has as its example the conflict between capital and labor. As organizations grow, it is more difficult for all the parts to be effectively encompassed. We will see in the next chapter that there are also other reasons for the breakdown of solidarity between capital and

labor but certainly a lack of regulation and connections is a primary cause. We know this because small-scale industry still tends to more harmonious. We can see yet another example in academia. Where scholars used to be part of a whole enterprise, they are so specialized now that they are sometimes in conflict with each other.]

Section 2. Seriousness of the problem

What makes these facts serious is that they have at times been considered natural effects of increasing specialization. It is said that the individual becomes so isolated in her activity that she cannot appreciate the work of her fellows. As a result, increasing the division of labor will only lead to a breakdown of society.

If this were true, the division of labor would, by its very nature, work to dissolve rather than bind society.

Section 3. Examples of Lack of Regulation leading to Conflict; Explaining Anomie

We know that wherever organic solidarity is observed, we encounter at the same time an adequately developed regulatory system which determines the mutual relations of functions. For organic solidarity to exist, it is not sufficient that there is a system of organs dependent upon each other, but also that the way in which they come together be predetermined in some manner. Otherwise, new calibrations would constantly be necessary to create an equilibrium, as one part treats another part as adversary rather than supplementary assistance. One could hardly expect solidarity if mutual obligations had to be freshly fought over in each particular instance of specialization.

If the division of labor does not produce solidarity in such cases [examples omitted], it is because the relations of the organs are not regulated. Rather, they are in a state of *anomie*.

But where does this state of *anomie* come from?

We can begin by saying that the state of *anomie* is impossible wherever organs are sufficiently in contact or sufficiently prolonged such that a body of rules spontaneously emerges to establish relations between social functions.

A function can be shared between two or more parts of an organism only if these parts are more or less contiguous. Once labor is divided, thereby creating more interdependent functions, the distance separating organs lessens.

But a set of exceptional circumstances, as in the case we have been discussing, can work differently. Take the case of trade. As the organized type develops, markets merge, eventually embracing the whole of society. Borders break down. The result is that each industry produces for consumers *over the whole surface of the planet*. In this circumstance, mere contact is no longer sufficient to generate regulation. Production appears limitless, and it becomes wild and unregulated. From this come recurrent economic crises.

As the market extends beyond the vision of any one producer (or consumer), great industries appear and, with them, new relations between employers and employees. Machines replace people; manufacturing replaces craftsmanship. The worker is regimented, separated from her family during the day. Unlike the worker of the middle ages, which often roomed with or near their employer, workers now live very far from their

employers. These are all relatively new conditions of industrial life and demand a new organization. The problem is, as these changes have occurred so rapidly, the potential conflicts of interest have yet to be equilibrated.

Looking at things this way permits us to rebut one of the great charges made against the division of labor. It has been said that the division of labor degrades the worker by making him a mere machine. Every day he repeats the same movements with monotonous regularity, without taking any personal interest in them, and without understanding them. He is no longer a living cell of a living organism but merely an inert piece of machinery, a mere set of hands put to work in the same direction and in the same way.

As a remedy for this state of things it has sometimes been proposed that workers be given a general education, above and beyond any technical training for work. But let us suppose that we can relieve some of these bad effects attributed to the division of labor in this way, that is not a means of *preventing* those bad effects. The division is not going to change simply because workers are better educated. Without a doubt it is good for the worker to be interested in art, literature, etc. but none of this is going to change the fact that she is being treated like a machine at work all day long! Such a remedy would merely make specialization intolerable and therefore impossible.

[*What then is the solution?*] In order for the division of labor to develop without having disastrous consequences on us, it is sufficient for it to be wholly itself, for nothing external to temper it. Normally, the role of each special function does *not* hem us in our individual siloes, but rather keeps us in constant relations with all the neighboring functions, keeping us aware to other needs and changes. The division of labor presumes that we do not lose sight of our collaborators, and that we act upon them and react upon them. We are not mere machines that repeat movements without knowing their meaning, but rather are we conscious that our movements tend, in some way, towards some ultimate goal, which we may or may not have a clear picture of in our minds. We feel that we are serving something. As special and uniform (or monotonous or tedious) as our activity may be, it is that of an intelligent being, for it has a direction and we know that.

Chapter 2. The Forced¹ Division of Labor

Section 1. Class War follows from pathological state

However, it is not enough that there be rules, for sometimes the rules themselves cause trouble. This is what happens in the struggle between classes. While the institution of classes and castes are themselves strictly regulated organizations within the division of labor, this strict regulation itself is a source of disharmony. The

1. Durkheim uses the word “*contrainte*” here, which might be more productively translated as “constrained” rather than “forced.” However, generations of English-speaking students know this as the ‘forced division of labor’ so we are retaining that usage here. If you get confused about what is meant by forced, however, think about substituting the word constrained, which is more about being socially compelled or restricted by custom than physical enforcement.

lower classes are no longer satisfied with the role given to them by custom or law and they wish for positions that are closed to them. Further, they seek to throw over or dispossess those exercising those functions! In such a way do internal civil wars arise as a result of the way in which labor is distributed.

We see nothing like this in the biological organism. No cell or organ seeks to take on a role different from the one it is filling. The reasons for this is that each anatomic element mechanically does its job. Its constitution and its place in the organism determines what that job is; its function results from its essential nature. It is very different in societies. There is a great distance between the hereditary dispositions of the individual members and the jobs they fill. One's birth does not imply one's vocation. But on the other hand, this also means that there are many reasons individuals can end up in jobs to which they do not actually fit. Although we are not predestined to some particular position from birth, we do have tastes and abilities which limit our choice. For the division of labor to produce solidarity is not enough that each has her particular task but also that the task be appropriate to her tastes and abilities.

In this second pathological form, this condition is not met. If a system of class or caste sometimes produces sharp pains instead of solidarity it is because the distribution of jobs on which it rests does not accord with the distribution of natural talents. Constraint alone, more or less violent and more or less direct, links people to their functions. When this happens, only an imperfect and troubled solidarity is possible.

Class war is not a necessary consequence of the division of labor. Conflict between classes happens only under particular circumstances, when it is an effect of a social constraint upon the choice's individuals make in their selection of jobs. It is very different when class systems arise spontaneously out of the freely chosen initiative of individuals. When this happens there is harmony between individual natures and social functions. Ideally, the only factor determining the manner in which work is divided is the diversity of capacities. Selection is made entirely through aptitude, since there is no other viable reason for selection.

The forced division of labor is thus our second pathological form. Force or social constraint in this case does not mean every kind of regulation, as we have already seen that the division of labor must be regulated in order for it to produce solidarity. Constraint only begins when regulation no longer corresponds to the true nature of things, when it is validated through force.

We could say, conversely, that the division of labor produces solidarity only if it is spontaneous. By that we mean the absence of everything that can even indirectly hinder the free development of the individual's innate abilities. There can be no obstacle, of any kind, preventing a person from occupying a place in the social framework which is compatible with their abilities. *In a word, labor is divided spontaneously only when society is constituted in such a way that social inequalities exactly express natural inequalities.* For that to happen, natural inequalities must be neither enhanced nor lowered by some external influence. Perfect spontaneity is a consequence of absolute equality in the external conditions of the conflict. It consists not in a state of anarchy which would allow people to satisfy all their good or bad tendencies, but in an organization in which each social value would be judged by its true worth. Some might object that, even under these conditions, there are winners and losers, and that the latter will not accept defeat except when forced to do so. But this is not really the same thing at all. *[Lack of constraint does not mean perfect equality of outcome]; constraint occurs when conflict itself is made impossible by refusing to admit the right of combat between the parties.]*

It is also true that this perfect spontaneity exists in no society anywhere. Even in places where there remains little vestige of past castes and legal restrictions against mobility, hereditary transmission of wealth is enough to make the external conditions very unequal, for such gives advantages to some beyond their personal worth. Even today there are jobs and positions that are closed or very hard to enter for those who are without money.

[Nevertheless, we are tending towards a society in which birth plays less of a role in outcome.] Society is compelled to reduce these disparities as much as possible by assisting in various ways those who find themselves at an unnatural disadvantage, aiding them in overcoming those disadvantages. We feel obligated to leave free space for all merits and we regard as unjust any inferiority of position which is not personally merited. It is a widely held belief today that equality among citizens is increasing and that it is just that this is so.

Section 2. Reasons why progress towards equality is necessary

Equality is necessary not only to bring each person together with his or her function but also to link functions to one another.

Conclusion

Section 3. The necessity of justice

It is false to believe that all regulation is the product of constraint, because liberty itself is the product of regulation. Liberty is not antagonistic to social action but is itself a result of social action. It is not an inherent property of the state of nature. To the contrary, it is conquest of society over nature! Naturally, humans are unequal in physical force; naturally they are placed under external conditions that advantage some and disadvantage others. But liberty, liberty is the subordination of external forces to social forces, for it's only in these conditions that social forces can freely develop. This is the reverse of the natural order. We can escape nature only by creating another world where we dominate nature. That world is society.

The task of the most advanced societies is a work of justice. Just as the ideal of less advanced societies was to create or maintain an intense common life, one in which the individual was completely absorbed, so our ideal is to make social relations always more equitable, so that we assure the free development of all our socially useful forces. Because the segmental type is disappearing as the organized type of society develops, because organic solidarity is slowly substituted for that which arises through mere likeness, it is absolutely necessary that external conditions become equal. The harmony of functions and of our very existence as a society is at stake. Just as ancient people need a common faith to unite them, so we need justice.

Chapter 3. Another Abnormal Form

[In this last section, Durkheim proposes a third abnormal form, but he fails to give it a name. He argues that for the division of labor to produce solidarity each task must be meaningful to the overall enterprise. Jobs that appear pointless, petty, or disconnected from the rest of life will not provide satisfaction to those doing them. We can read this abnormal form as a critique of both bureaucracy and deskilling, as jobs that are “beneath” one’s abilities do not produce solidarity. Interestingly, Durkheim quotes Marx here.]

Questions

1. Why is it valuable to study pathological forms of the division of labor? How does Durkheim’s approach differ from what Marx had to say about the division of labor?
2. Is education the answer for the anomic division of labor? Explain Durkheim’s argument here.
3. Think of a job you have had in the past. What didn’t you like about it? Would thinking about the overall goal/end of the larger enterprise provide more satisfaction to you? Consider military service here.
4. What does Durkheim mean when he argues that people should be in the jobs to which they are naturally fit? Can you think of any examples? What natural talents are unevenly distributed in the population? To what extent are even “natural” talents affected by social forces or social evaluation?
5. What are some ways that we currently attempt to ensure a spontaneous division of labor, one in which “social inequalities express natural inequalities”? Think of laws, policies, customs. What would be needed to ensure this were entirely true? Would it be possible to achieve this state?
6. Imagine Marx and Durkheim discussing the causes and solutions of class conflict. What would they say to each other? Where would they agree? Where would they disagree? Whose side would you take?
7. What does Durkheim mean when he says modern societies need justice in order to survive? Of what does this justice consist?

Concepts

Anomic Division of Labor

Forced Division of Labor