BETA
Bureau
d'économie
théorique
et appliquée

Documents de travail

« Durkheim's forgotten rules of sociological method for studying social facts »

Auteur

Jean Daniel Boyer

Document de Travail n° 2024 – 13

Mars 2024

Bureau d'Économie Théorique et Appliquée BETA

www.beta-economics.fr

@beta_economics

Contact :
jaoulgrammare@beta-cnrs.unistra.fr

Université de Strasbourg · cnrs · UNIVERSITÉ DE LORRAINE · INRAE · AgroParisTech

Durkheim's forgotten rules of sociological method for studying social facts.

Jean Daniel BOYER
LinCS, BETA, Université de Strasbourg
boyer@unistra.fr

Abstract:

In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Emile Durkheim proposes a specific object for sociology, namely the social fact, which he defines as a social force. While, logically, it seems he would have had to transpose the methods of the physical sciences in order to study such an object, Durkheim in fact prefers those of the biological sciences. His initial project is therefore quickly transformed. We propose to take a step back, and to consider the perspectives on sociology that Durkheim opens up in the *Rules*, in particular the possibility of conceiving sociology as a "social physics". By using quantitative methods, sociology could unveil the nature as well as the intensity of the social forces which determine human behaviours. Social facts would thus appear as forces, but also as probabilities that certain human behaviours would occur. Thus, sociology would be tasked to reconstruct the causes of the advent of both social facts and of social phenomena by using quantitative series. In this context, sociology could also be a predictive science.

Keywords: Durkheim, force, method, social fact, social physics.

JEL codes: A12, A14, B40.

Durkheim's forgotten rules of sociological method for studying social facts

In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, first published in 1894 in fragments across two issues of the *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, Durkheim proposes a specific method for the new discipline he is seeking to found. In order for researchers of this new discipline to overcome their preconceptions, he considers it necessary for sociology to take the natural sciences as a model. Thanks to their adoption of a particular method, the natural sciences had indeed succeeded in transcending biases, in freeing themselves from the grasp of ideology or religion, and in advancing scientific knowledge (Durkheim 1895, II, ii: 72). The natural sciences had thus paved the way for the social sciences, and in particular for sociology.

It is logical, therefore, to consider that the application of the methods of natural science would be a necessary condition for sociology to become a scientific discipline. This stance, by no means unique to Durkheim, constitutes one of the guiding principles structuring sociology and the social sciences (Péquignot & Tripier 2000, Levine 1995). Attempts to transpose the methods or the discoveries of physics, biology or medicine to sociology, moral philosophy, political economics or the political sciences have shaped the development of these latter fields. Nevertheless, the methods of natural sciences do vary: the methods of physics are not the same as those of chemistry, biology, optics or medicine. The choice of *which* science's methods to transpose to the social sciences therefore profoundly contributes to shaping their contours and, by extension, their discoveries.

According to Durkheim, the sociologist should be a vivisectionist (1895 II, ii: 73). He should also adopt the point of view of physicists, chemists, physiologists (1895 *Preface to the second edition*: 37) and biologists (1895 III, i: 90, III, ii: 95, III, iii: 97). Whereas these comparisons could be perceived merely metaphorical (Levine 1995; McKinnon 2014), it seems to us that they could indeed be contradictory (see also Sousa Fernandes 2008: 453). They testify to Durkheim's hesitation concerning which methodological model to transpose. In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim seems to move from a physicalist approach, consistent with the definition of the object he attributes to sociology, to an approach aligned instead with the biologist or chemist, more in line with his ontological and political preconceptions concerning the nature of society. This gradual shift favours one way of studying social facts, but also leads to the neglect of another one.

In considering the consequences of such a shift, we begin by recalling the manner in which Durkheim defines the object of sociology as he conceives it: this object is the "social fact" (I). We show that the logical outcome of such conceptualization ought to have been the transposition of the methods of physics based on the use of statistical data (II). Nevertheless, overlooking the characteristics of his object, Durkheim gradually shows a preference for the methods of organic sciences such as biology, organic chemistry and medicine (III). After having tried to explain the reason for such a shift, we conclude regarding the new perspectives that the *Rules* could inspire.

I. The definition of the social fact and its associated research programme

In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim proposes a specific object for the new discipline he wants to found, seeking to differentiate it from ideology or morality, and to distinguish it from the other social sciences – particularly from philosophy, psychology and economics.

1. Durkheim's definition of the social fact as a social force

Durkheim names the object of his sociology the "social fact". In his view, the social fact exerts an external social force on individuals and determines their behaviours. Indeed,

> *A social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint*;
> or:
> *which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations*. (Durkheim 1895 I: 59; Durkheim's italics)

The social fact is therefore presented as an exterior moral obligation of a social nature. It is a social norm, whether formal and fixed (i.e., the law) or informal and not fixed (i.e., the mores). The social fact is thus a "social obligation" (on this question see in particular Lacroix 1976: 232 ff.). From this perspective, individual freedom is conceived as being limited by external and social rules, i.e., by social norms. According to Durkheim, nature has not provided the individual with an inherent normative capacity (Cuin 2011: 72); it is society which provides this. Rejecting all forms of apriorism, Durkheim thereby intended to go beyond Kant's categorical imperative. The moral imperative becomes "that of the collective consciousness, that of the collectivity", that of society. "It [therefore] is not an immutable moral, applicable to all eras and all cultures" (Coenen-Huther 2010: 107).

Durkheim offers sociology a singular object, the "social fact", comparable to a social norm, exerting a decisive external force that is determinant of individual behaviour.

> Here, then, is a category of facts which present very special characteristics: they consist 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. Consequently, since they consist of representations and actions, they cannot be confused with organic phenomena, nor with psychical phenomena, which have no existence save in and through the individual consciousness. Thus they constitute a new species and to them must be exclusively assigned the term social. (Durkheim 1895, I: 52)

Sociology would thereby be the science of social norms and representations, of social and moral obligations, and of normative systems. It would thus be the science of social morality, which determines individual behaviours, acts, thoughts and feelings. And since the social fact is defined as an external constraint, it is also conceived as an external force. Given the similarity in the nature of their objects, sociology should, it seems, draw its inspiration from the methods of physics; and, on the contrary, since the social fact "cannot be confused with organic phenomena", the methods of organic sciences would not be appropriate for studying it.

Logically, then, sociology would be a "social physics". Sociologists should study the nature, intensity and direction of the social fact, as well as its causes and its effects on individual behaviour and on other social facts.

2. The nature of the social: a system of social facts

Being composed of all social facts, the social is logically perceived as an articulated system of forces (Takla and Pope 1985: 77–78) of varying nature and intensity.

In his 1892 Latin thesis devoted to Montesquieu, Durkheim expressed this idea explicitly.

> Montesquieu […] realized that all these things [morals and the rules] are so interconnected that they cannot be understood, each just on its own, divorced from the others. Thus he does not set law apart from morality, religion, commerce, etc., or, above all, from the form of society which spreads and extends its influence to everything in the social world. However diverse they may be, they express the life of one and the same society. (1892, V, ii: 65e–66e)

It appears that the study of Montesquieu's thought exerted a decisive influence on Durkheim. It contributed to shaping the *Rules* and led Durkheim to consider the social as a system of social facts conceived as social forces in relation to each other. Any given social fact can only be understood in terms of its specific place in this system. The intensity of its force would also be dependent on the forces of the other social facts with which it would be in relation. For these reasons, a social fact is both determinant and determined. Each social fact indeed determines individual behaviours, according to Durkheim's definition. Its impact and its force are also determined by other social facts, which it determines in return.

If laws formed a system for Montesquieu, and if, from this system, there emanated a certain spirit, namely the spirit of the laws (1748, XIX, iv: 310), the same seems to apply to Durkheim but from a broader perspective. Durkheim indeed replaces Montesquieu's spirit of the laws by the spirit of social norms. This spirit is thought as the emanation of the system of norms. Durkheim describes it as "the spirit of discipline [,] the essential condition for all common life" (1895, V, ii: 123). It would be the spirit of the social morality constituted by social constraints.

Thus, the system formed by the association of individuals "represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics" (1895, V, ii: 129). The emanation of their interrelationship is in the end, "the social", similar to a collective consciousness with a specific nature and specific laws (Karsenti 2002: 39). It derives neither from individual consciousness or reason, nor from a social contract or convention. Its force "is not derived from some conventional arrangement which the human will has contrived, adding it on to what is real; it springs from the heart of reality itself; it is the necessary product of given causes" (1895, V, iii: 143). It is natural (1895, V, iv: 143–144) and synthetic.

To sum up with Takla and Pope, "The world or reality exists as systems of forces: the ultimate constituents of the physical world are physical forces; the ultimate constituents of the social world are social forces" (1985: 77–78). According to Durkheim, every social fact appears as a specific manifestation of this collective consciousness. The social generates its own laws. It determines the social facts conceived as the causes of social phenomena (1895, V, ii: 129). The social would thus be similar to "the collective being which is, of itself, a nature *sui generis*" (1895, V, ii: 144). It would have its own harmony born of the articulations of the social fact. Having its own existence, the social is conceived as a whole that "does not equal the sum of its parts; it is something different, whose properties differ from those displayed by the parts from which it is formed" (1895, V, ii: 128). Every social fact must therefore be brought back to this primordial collective consciousness, in order to know its nature.

3. Durkheim's research program: the study of the social thought as a system of norms

Logically, therefore, the examination of systems of social norms is Durkheim's main topic of study. Given the conception of the social as a system of forces, the imagery of force is therefore a feature of Durkheim's thought, even if most commentators do not address this

aspect of his work (see Takla and Pope 1985: 75). Durkheim's ambition to transpose the methodology of physics was not only a weapon to win recognition of sociology's scientific status: it also profoundly determined his metatheory (Takla and Pope 1985). A quick glance at Durkheim's works testifies to this.

Durkheim's interest in the system of norms had been aroused even prior to *The Rules of Sociological Method*, and can already be seen taking shape in his 1893 French thesis *The Division of Labor in Society*. Durkheim seeks to study social solidarity understood as the body of moral rules (later defined as social facts) which determine individual actions. In 1893, Durkheim considers that

> social solidarity is a wholly moral phenomenon which by itself is not amenable to exact observation and especially not to measurement. To arrive at this classification, as well as this comparison, we must therefore substitute for this internal datum, which escapes us, an external one which symbolises it, and then study the former through the latter. That visible symbol is the law. (Durkheim 1893: 24)

Thus, Durkheim proposes to study the "visible symbols" of social solidarity to reveal its nature (Durkheim 1893: 24). These visible symbols give a concrete shape to the social. They can therefore be studied as a datum; as a thing.

If we seek to reconstruct the Durkheimian studies of the "visible symbols" of social solidarity, the first which we come to is, as mentioned, the law. Durkheim presents the law as the crystallization of morality, the concrete expression of social facts and of "the non-material nature" of social solidarity (Durkheim 1893, I, iii: 24). In his French thesis, Durkheim limits his object to formal norms, rigorously justifying his choice because "Law is nothing more than this very organisation in its most stable and precise form". According to him,

> Life in general within a society cannot enlarge in scope without legal activity simultaneously increasing in proportion. Thus we may be sure to find reflected in the law all the essential varieties of social solidarity. (Durkheim 1893 I, iii: 25)

Tracking the progress made by societies which become more complex under the influence of the extension of the division of labour, the law too has become more specialized, more sophisticated and more complex. The transition from a mechanical solidarity to an organic solidarity corresponds also to the transition from a "repressive law" to a "restitutory law". Studying law is therefore a means to study the social and its evolution.

The second visible symbol of "social solidarity" is religion, which constitutes the theme of *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, published in 1912. As Cuin observes, for Durkheim the religious individual was "the functional transfiguration of the social individual by the actors themselves […]; through religion, men adore their own society without which they are nothing and in which they therefore recognize an authority which they sanctify" (Cuin 2011: 17). Conceived as systems of norms and constraints – in short, as systems of moral obligations – religions therefore make the social forces partly visible. They are indeed presented as the receptacle of social forces whose characteristics vary according to socio-historical conditions (Durkheim 1912).

The third visible symbol of "social solidarity" and of the social forces appears through the education system. Durkheim is indeed logically compelled to study the process through which norms are internalized, and his interest in the institutionalized dimension of socialization is shown in particular in *Pedagogical Evolution in France* and in *Moral Education*. He pays particular attention to the role of education systems and to their contribution to the methodical socialization which, in his opinion, remains "a society's most effective means of shaping its members in its own image" (Durkheim 1904–1905: 5). Like

law or religion, education systems and their rules emerge as "visible symbols" of social forces.

Thus, Durkheimian sociology seeks to study social forces, which are made visible and perceptible through the formal, concrete institutions which contribute to maintaining and reproducing societies. An initial research program would therefore concentrate on the systems of laws, thought of as systems of perceptible social forces. From this perspective, and even if Durkheim does not go so far, sociology could also have a legitimate interest in the genealogy of laws and the construction of normative systems, in as much as they themselves are the product of social forces and their interactions.

Nevertheless, social forces do not always have a formal and visible dimension. As Durkheim states in his Latin thesis on Montesquieu, and as the definition given in the *Rules* confirms, social facts are not only at stake in laws (1892, Introduction: 7e). Mores or informal norms are also social facts. Lacking any concrete existence, they can be perceived only by their indirect manifestations. For this reason, Durkheim's sociology has a second dimension, one which aims to examine the consequences of social facts. Being mainly conceived as immaterial and invisible forces, social facts are thus apprehended through their effects on social phenomena.

This method is developed in *Suicide*, in which Durkheim focuses on this particular "social phenomenon". Indeed, suicide is not a social fact. Defined as "all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result" (Durkheim 1897: xlii), suicide is neither a force, a social constraint nor a moral obligation. It possesses no power of coercion, no exteriority, and no formal law prescribes it. Like crime, described as a "phenomenon of normal sociology" (Durkheim 1895, footnote p. 106) or even as a "fact of normal sociology" (Durkheim 1895:107 footnote), suicide is conceived as the effect or the manifestation of social facts. Religion, the family, and other social, economic and national structures produce social norms which determine the propensity to commit suicide. Social facts could then be studied indirectly through their concrete manifestations. Although many social facts are generally imperceptible, their effects are concrete, which makes it possible to detect them (see our II. 1). Indeed, collective representations such as religion, ideology or mores exert forces on individuals and could determine their manners of acting, thinking and feeling. They can therefore be studied indirectly, by their effects.

Among the social facts that are hardly perceptible, there is one that scientists must find particularly problematic: preconceptions. Preconceptions can determine manners of thinking and thus hinder scientific discoveries. Since they exert an external constraint over the individual, preconceptions are themselves social facts. In the *Rules*, Durkheim insists that the scientist must remove preconceptions and in so doing shed all social forces which could bias a study: "One must systematically discard all preconceptions" (Durkheim 1895 II, ii: 72). The rules of the sociological method are established precisely for this purpose, for sifting through preconceptions and overcoming them. Nevertheless, as preconceptions are social facts, they should not only be simply discarded: in order to be overcome, it follows that they should (and must) have previously been the object of study. Their nature, strengths and the biases they can generate must be identified. Sociology, as the science of morality and social facts, would in this instance become also the science of the preconceptions that can distort every science. Thus, sociology would become a critical science of knowledge.

Durkheim therefore assigns to sociology a singular object, the "social fact", comparable to a social norm that exerts an exterior constraint on individual manners of acting, thinking and feeling. Sociology would thereby be the science of social norms, of social and moral obligations, and of the normative systems determining individual behaviours. It would

be both a science of social morality and a science of human actions. Having defined its object, then, it remains to establish which methods sociology should use to study it.

II. Sociology as social physics: the method of analysing the social fact conceived as a force

Conceived as a force, each social fact would have 1. a specific nature, 2. a specific intensity, and 3. a specific direction and sense, i.e. a specific finality (*telos*). The aim of Durkheimian sociology would therefore be to specify these three dimensions in a way that resembles a social physics.

Nevertheless, three main difficulties remain as regards this enterprise:

1. While some of the social facts are easily perceptible because they are expressed in law and legislation, others, more informal, are much more imperceptible. Sometimes we are not conscious that we are submitted to a social constraint, even though we are. We feel free, whereas in fact we are not totally free.
2. The intensity of the social constraints and of the moral/social obligations is difficult to estimate. Certain moral obligations are more binding and more imperative. The moral obligation not to kill, for example, is stronger and has more effect than a rule of politeness.
3. The finality of a social fact and the way it determines us is sometimes hidden and difficult to establish.

To cope with these difficulties, Durkheim proposes a specific methodology.

1. The rules to reveal the force of the social fact: the rules of sociological proof

In the last chapter of the *Rules of Sociological Method*, entitled "rules for the demonstration of sociological proof" (1895: VI), Durkheim expresses the necessity for sociology to use serial quantitative analysis and statistics. There are two principal reasons for this. First, according to him, statistics could make it possible to detect unsuspected causalities and social laws that would otherwise remain invisible to observation. Statistics, therefore, could reveal the social fact. Second, statistics can help to quantify possible causalities. Thus, the use of statistics can serve both to reveal social facts which were at first imperceptible, and to establish the intensity of their forces (Durkheim 1895: ch. VI). To assess the force of a social fact, Durkheim proposes to study their effects, and thus to use the indirect method of what in the *Rules* he calls the concomitant variations.

> We have only one way of demonstrating that one phenomenon is the cause of another. This is to compare the cases where they are both simultaneously present or absent, so as to discover whether the variations they display in these different combinations of circumstances provide evidence that one depends upon the other. (1895, VI: 147)

In *Suicide* (1897), Durkheim puts this method into practice. Certain invisible social forces determine a man or woman to commit suicide. They are revealed by varying the social characteristics of individuals and by studying the suicide rates specific to each social category. By using this method, Durkheim establishes that the tendency to suicide varies particularly according to religion, marital status, place of residence, nationality, and the state of development of the economy. Social facts can therefore be studied indirectly, through their

concrete manifestations. This makes it possible to detect the social forces and establish their intensity, despite their having initially been imperceptible. For this reason, suicide may be conceived as an "explicit research program [that] can be summarized as an investigation into the identification, measurement, and comparison of social forces – 'currents of egoism, altruism or anomy' […] – that cause or inhibit suicide" (Takla and Pope 1985: 86).

Given that it is a feature of society, the phenomena of study cannot be artificially produced at will by the observer, and hence the method chosen is that of indirect experimentation: "we can only bring them together as they have been spontaneously produced" (1895, VI: 147). For this reason, sociology is a science of experimentation, but it is a kind of experimentation that is not by itself sufficient to unveil and establish social laws.

Durkheim is indeed conscious that a statistical correlation is only a clue to potential causality.

> Nothing is proved when, as happens so often, one is content to demonstrate by a greater or lesser number of examples that in isolated cases the facts have varied according to the hypothesis. From these sporadic and fragmentary correlations no general conclusion can be drawn. To illustrate an idea is not to prove it. (1895, VI, ii: 155)

After having detected correlations via the analysis of series of variations, the sociologist must therefore establish causalities by using deduction in a continuous back and forth with observation.

> First we shall discover, with the help of deduction, how one of the two terms was capable of producing the other; then we shall attempt to verify the result of this induction with the aid of experiments, i.e. by making fresh comparisons. If the deduction proves possible and the verification is successful, we can therefore regard the proof as having been demonstrated. (1895, VI, ii: 152)

The demonstration of sociological proof is therefore established by using quantitative methods and deduction. The explanation of social phenomenon is also grounded on experimental analysis through the possibility of testing potential correlations by replicating the experiences thanks to the use of quantitative data.

Finally, after having isolated the social fact, its intensity – i.e. the degree of imperativeness of this social obligation – could be estimated using statistics. The higher the correlation, the stronger the force. "As manifestations of the same underlying reality, cause and effect vary proportionately: the more powerful the cause, the more powerful the effect; the more powerful the effect, the more powerful the cause" (Durkheim 1895 IV: 148). Furthermore, "cause and effect stand in a one-to-one relationship" (Takla and Pope 1985: 78). Durkheim also proposes two kinds of uses of serial quantitative analysis, articulated around a static and a dynamic perspective (1895, VI, ii–iii). The use of quantitative series could therefore allow the detection of historical tendencies and the study of the causes, i.e. the social facts, determining a social fact.

2. Society as a system of forces: the necessity for a social physics

By conceiving social facts as social forces determining human behaviours, Durkheim proposes a physicalist conception of society. This conception is particularly explicit in *Suicide* (1897).

> Collective tendencies have an existence of their own; they are forces as real as cosmic forces, though of another sort; they, likewise, affect the individual from without, though through other channels. The proof that the reality of collective tendencies is no less than that of cosmic forces is that this reality is demonstrated in the same way, by the uniformity of effects. […] Since, therefore, moral acts such as suicide are reproduced not merely with an equal but with a greater uniformity, we must likewise admit that they depend on forces external to individuals. Only, since these forces must be of a moral order and since, except for individual men, there is no other moral order of existence in the world but society, they must be social. But whatever they are called, the important thing is to recognize their reality and conceive of them as a totality of forces which cause us to act from without, like the physico-chemical forces to which we react. So truly are they things *sui generis* and not mere verbal entities that they may be measured, their relative sizes compared, as is done with the intensity of electric currents or luminous foci. Thus, the basic proposition that social facts are objective, a proposition we have had the opportunity to prove in another work ([footnote:] See *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ch. II.) and which we consider the fundamental principle of the sociological method, finds a new and especially conclusive proof in moral statistics and above all in the statistics of suicide. (1897: III, iii, 3: 273–274)

The social fact both determines and is determined by other social facts. "Thus, to account for social facts, we investigate the forces capable of producing them" (1895 Conclusion: 162).

For studying society conceived as a system of social facts, therefore, a general social physics is needed. Its aim would be, first, to specify the nature and the intensity of the social facts that determine the other social facts studied in a systemic analysis – "The determining cause of a social fact must be sought among antecedent social facts" (1895 V, ii: 134). This, then, is a study of the causes of the social fact. Second, the aim would be to determine the consequences of the social fact and its effect on human behaviours in an historical and dynamic perspective. Sociology could aim to reconstruct the evolution of a phenomenon by studying the evolution of the social facts that determine it. This study is ultimately devoted to the evolution of society, conceived as the evolution of a system of social facts. It would lead to a new type of historical investigations conducted in the manner of the physicist, which requires a concern for data construction and a use of statistical tools to discover regularities, trends, correlations and potential causalities. Nevertheless, this approach to history would require a mass of quantitative data which scarcely existed before the 20th century. Durkheim's ambition was therefore strongly limited by the scarcity of data. This may explain why, with the exception of his study of *Suicide*, he did not propose any research that really did seek to transpose the methods of physics. The possibilities offered by the available series were too limited, particularly in terms of the historical study of phenomena.

These reflections have two general consequences. 1. The domain of sociology conceived as social physics is limited by the data available. 2. As sociology requires data, it also needs institutions that produce and collect data (Tierney 2010: 377–379).

III. The fascination with organic sciences and the transformation of the nature of the object of sociology

Nevertheless, Durkheim seems deeply affected by a scientific bias, similar indeed to a preconception, that apparently prevents him from proposing a genuine social physics. Indeed, even in the *Rules* we see a tension between a conception of society as a system of forces and as a social organism, and this contributes to affecting Durkheim's conception of the nature of the social fact. Durkheim gradually moves towards the latter. He is progressively led to prefer the methods of organic sciences, and thus led, indirectly, to transform the way the object of sociology is apprehended.

1. The organicist conception of society

Durkheim begins his second chapter of the *Rules* with a methodological instruction: "the first and most basic rule is *to consider social facts as things*" (Durkheim 1895 II: 60. Durkheim's italics). He therefore assumes the existence of an identity between social facts and things: "Social facts are things and must be treated as such" (Durkheim 1895 Conclusion: 161). This methodological proposal poses a logical problem.

It is true that considering social facts as things in the sense that "they are the sole *datum* afforded the sociologist" does not contradict Durkheim's initial conceptualisation of his object. In this case, "a thing is in effect all that is given, all that is offered, or rather forces itself upon our observation" (Durkheim 1895 II, i: 69). In other words, Durkheim in this case uses this identity to underline both the concrete dimension of the social fact (even if this concrete dimension is difficult to perceive at first sight) and the attitude that the sociologist must adopt as a scientist. He makes further use of what could here be considered a metaphor in his insistence that the sociologist place social facts at a distance. Social facts "must be studied from the outside, as external things" (Durkheim 1895 II, i: 70).

Nevertheless, Durkheim goes further. He also uses this identity, deliberately or not, to draw the conclusion that the social fact has the same nature as any other thing. This identification is not without consequences. It legitimizes the transposition of another set of methods: those of biology or chemistry. It also leads him to consider society as an organism. Durkheim reveals this parallel perspective early on, in a note concluding the first chapter of the *Rules* dedicated to the definition of the social fact.

> One may believe legitimately that the inductions of the first science on this subject [Biology] are applicable to the other [Sociology] and that, in organisms as in societies, between these two categories of facts only differences in degree exist. (Durkheim I: 14 of the French edition; our translation)

Thus, the organicist dimension and the biologistic temptation emerge very quickly in the *Rules*. This explains why the sociologist must become a "vivisectionist", subjecting social facts to "a cold and unflinching analysis" (Durkheim 1895, II, ii: 73). Nevertheless, this transposition poses a problem, in the same way as the identification of the social fact as a thing does. In fact, it conflicts with his prior definition of the social fact as a *force*, and for that reason it introduces a contradiction.

Placing his faith in biology, Durkheim relies on an organicist conception of society, and this contributes to shaping his scientific method. The social fact is regarded as a thing or as a part of a body, whose functioning has to be explained and whose social functions are to be identified. The chosen methods, which are therefore closer to biology, chemistry or medicine, are thus aimed at studying the organic composition of the social fact. This transposition is understood from the viewpoint "of the general conceptual field, common to all forms of sociology inspired by the biology of their time" (Guillo 2006: 508). Durkheim's intellectual and epistemological context was in fact shaped by the triumph of biologism (Berthelot 1995: 23 ff). The strength of the biological analogy thus guides Durkheimian studies, and is to a certain extent a decisive factor, turning the social into "a living species" (Berthelot 1995: 58 ff).

2. Society as a chemical compound

Sousa Fernandes also notices a shift in Durkheim's method. According to her

> The preface to the second edition of the Rules (1901), contemporary with the lessons on the Geneva Manuscript [of Rousseau, recently discovered], announces a new orientation of sociology. The definition of social facts, formerly referred to physics and biology, becomes wholly dependent on the comparison with the chemical compound […] This *chemical turn* implies a new epistemology. (Sousa Fernandes 2008: 454)

Durkheim would be influenced in this respect by Rousseau's perspective, who considered that "Society, a moral entity […] is the product of a 'chemical' synthesis: the general will and the common self emerge from the melting of private wills and identities" (Sousa Fernandes 2008: 449). Such a preference given to chemistry has a consequence for the conception of the way society is structured. It contributes to erasing forces, conflicts and power relations. In addition, Durkheim seems to be increasingly concerned with the question of collective representations, considering that individual representations and individual consciousnesses could dissolve into a collective whole with its own specific characteristics. Durkheim thus tends to take the view that the social fact is no longer external but internal to individual consciousness. Society is no longer seen as a system of forces and counter-forces: it is henceforth conceived as a psychic entity, as a chemical compound, made up of individual consciousnesses thought of as chemical particles. A new epistemology would thus accompany Durkheim's 'spiritualist' turn (Sousa Fernandes 2008: 459), and this creates a further distance from a "social physics".

3. Durkheim's revelation in 1895

This reversal in Durkheim's conception of the social fact may be linked to the revelation he had in 1895, which engendered an awakening, leading him to consider "the crucial role played by religion in social life", "so much so that all [his] previous research had to be taken up afresh in order to be brought into harmony with these new views" (1907 in Durkheim 1975: 404). This revelation was a real epistemological breakthrough. (On this revelation see Steiner 1994: 25, Watts Miller 2022. For a more critical perspective highlighting the constancy of Durkheim's religious conception but also his successive reformulations, see Paoletti 2012. For an equally critical perspective on this conversion, coupled with a more psychoanalytical reading, see Mucchielli 2004). By turning to the study of religion, Durkheim became more sensitive to the meaning of human actions and moved towards a qualitative sociology, as evidenced by his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912).

Durkheim became also more interested in the study of social representations conceived as the representations of the social. Religions are indeed studied as system of representations. Moreover, these representations are no longer essentially conceived as external facts: they become more internal and exert a more internal force.

> For society, that unique source of all that is sacred, is not satisfied to move us from outside and to affect us transitorily; it organizes itself lastingly within us. It arouses in us a whole world of ideas and feelings that express it but at the same time are an integral and permanent part of ourselves. (1912 II, 8, iv: 266)

Thus, Durkheim became more preoccupied with subjective internal reality than with objective external reality. The social fact, as it appears in Durkheim's work, can thus be seen to have a double nature. It appears as both an external and an internal force. As a social norm it is exterior, but, as a result of socialisation, the force becomes internalised and therefore also internal. By focusing on the study of this internalised force, the social fact quickly lost its first nature as an external force, and Durkheim did not long pursue the scientific project he had set

out in his *Rules*. He abandoned the quest for a social physics, to prefer instead the analysis of social representations.

4. Durkheim's fascination with medicine

This change of perspective may not seem strange, given Durkheim's concern for the health of society thought as social organism (1895, III, i: 87–90). Durkheim sees the sociologist as the medical doctor of society, tasked with assisting the statesman in his political duties. According to Levine,

> As physicians of the body determine ranges of normal functioning beyond which various measures – temperature, pulse, blood cell counts, and the like – are excessive and so indicate a pathological condition, so the doctor of society has a mission to establish ranges of behaviour normal for each type of society, ranges beyond which phenomena are pathological. A certain amount of crime or suicide has to be considered normal for every society, but crime or suicide rates in excess of those amounts is pathological. A lurch in suicide rates that accompanies a dramatic swing in market fluctuations indicates an acute pathology. (Levine 1995: 255)

To cope with social dysfunctions, Durkheim proposes a kind of clinical sociology. Sociology must be associated with the concern for the preservation of life (Tierney 2010). Thus, Durkheim's study of suicide can be seen as a historical example of the development of a new "governmentality", close to a science of governing men. By using data and statistics, sociology would be a crucial discipline for governmental rationality. It provides knowledge that is useful for the administration of life (Tierney 2010: 376–383) and for social reforms.

Durkheim thus appears to be in favour of a new way of governing which comes close to Foucault's conception of biopolitics (2004: 1). For him,

> The duty of the statesman is no longer to propel societies violently towards an ideal which appears attractive to him. His role is rather that of the doctor: he forestalls the outbreak of sickness by maintaining good hygiene, or when it does break out, seeks to cure it. (Durkheim 1895, III, iii: 104)

This new way of governing also comes close to being a method governing social representations and, by extension, individual consciences.

To cope with the rise of egoistic and anomic suicides, which testify to the dysfunction of modern societies, Durkheim proposes that bodies be established that take on the roles of integration and regulation. Thus, he is in favour of corporations that would integrate workers both into their particular occupations and into the "moral environment" of "a collective personality", i.e. into a social body. In French, the terms *corps* [body] and *corporation* or *corps de métier* [guild] have the same etymology. Corporation is a way of organising individuals into a social body, testifying to an organic conception of society. According to Durkheim, "the corporation has everything needed to give the individual a setting, to draw him out of his state of moral isolation" (Durkheim 1897: III, iii, 3: 346). Corporation would indeed be better suited than religion, family, or the state for addressing the egoism and anomie of modern societies.

> The occupational group has the three-fold advantage over all others that it is omnipresent, ubiquitous and that its control extends to the greatest part of life. Its influence on individuals is not intermittent, like that of political society, but it is always in contact with them by the constant exercise of the function of which it is the organ and in which they collaborate. It follows the workers wherever they go; which the family cannot do. Wherever they are, they

> find it enveloping them, recalling them to their duties, supporting them at need. Finally, since occupational life is almost the whole of life, corporative action makes itself felt in every detail of our occupations, which are thus given a collective orientation. (Durkheim 1897: III, iii, 3: 346)

Durkheim would therefore be in favour of the enveloping power of a new governmentality, a government of consciences, which would be diffused by corporations conceived as total institutions. In this way, Durkheim would therefore be abandoning Montesquieu's way of governing, namely through the laws, a way of governing that can be seen to stem from a conception of society as a system of forces and counterforces. He would therefore also be setting aside the model of physics in favour of a conception of society similar to a living organism. Nevertheless, the transposition of the methods of biology, chemistry or medicine poses a problem for the initial definition of the object of sociology. It conflicts, indeed, with his initial definition of the social fact as a force, and it prevents Durkheim from completing his analytical project, diverting sociology away from its calling to be a social physics.

Conclusion: Perspectives for social sciences inspired by the initial project of *The Rules of Sociological Method*

As early as the second chapter of the *Rules*, Durkheim partially forgets the definition of the social fact he has previously given. In particular, he neglects his own proposal that the social fact is an external force and must be treated as such. With regard to his first definition of its object, sociology would be a social physics and would adopt the methods of the physical sciences for studying forces, rather than turning to biology, chemistry or medicine and studying the social body from an organicist perspective.

According to his primary conception, the protocol for dealing with social facts should include:

1. The identification of the force of the social norm.
2. The definition of its nature.
3. The evaluation of its intensity.

In these three first moments, statistical studies enable both the identification and the measurement of the intensity of social forces. Quantifying and statistically evaluating the degree of compliance with a social norm is in fact theoretically conceivable from an objectivistic perspective (Courgeau 2004: 32, see also our II. 2). By the same token, quantifying the level of deviance in relation to a norm, or to put it another way the tendency not to adhere to a social rule, would provide us with indirect insight into the intensity – and the influence – of a social fact. These two kinds of studies would allow the measurement of the imperativeness of a social obligation and its centrality within the organization and functioning of a social group. It would therefore have enabled a classification of norms according to their imperativeness, and so enabled scientists to distinguish the importance of the prohibition of crime, for example, as opposed to rules regarding decency or etiquette. This would also have allowed an examination of the intensity of social determinisms in social groups and social contexts. In examining social forces, Durkheimian sociology could therefore study the variable influence of the plurality of norms and laws on individual behaviour. Evaluating the intensity of social forces could have led Durkheim to the adoption of a less holistic position. Such a perspective would ultimately enable a reconciliation of individualistic and holistic approaches by showing that the extent to which a social norm is imperative or involves submission is never total. As a result, the individual has a certain

margin of autonomy and of liberty. Sociology would thus be explanatory in a new sense: it would offer explanations of a probabilistic nature. Determinations would not be strict but probable and variable.

Beyond these first three moments, the fourth stage of the protocol is as follows:

4. To account for the effects and the sense of the direction of the social fact.

In this way, its contribution to the maintenance of the social order, or, by contrast, to social change, could be studied.

Nevertheless, as Durkheim suggests, correlations are not causalities, and effects are not causes (see also Goldthorpe 2015). Sociologists should therefore deduce the causes of the social fact in order to explain its effects. These deductions must be made in a continuous back and forth with observation.

There would then be a fifth stage:

5. To consider the place of the social fact in the social system, i.e. in the system of social forces that characterize a society.

Such a study would then have resulted in an understanding that certain norms and laws have variable and sometimes opposing effects. It would also have allowed the sociologist to identify individual or collective resistance to social forces. It would have legitimately led Durkheim towards other objects of study, such as deviance or social conflict. Society would be conceived as a system of forces of divers natures, intensities and directions. It would be the result of the relation of social facts conceived as external forces. Durkheimian sociology would thus be compatible with a sociology of social and antagonist relations (*rapports sociaux*), in Kergoat's meaning (2011). This could provide it with a more objective perspective.

There would then be a sixth stage as follows:

6. To consider the causes of the social fact studied, and to propose an historical perspective.

Through the study of the intensity of social forces, it would then be possible to propose a genuine social physics which would enable an identification of the interconnecting forces generating social dynamics, changes of state, or, by contrast, the continuation of a social state. This leads to a final, seventh stage:

7. To test scientific statements thus revealed via experiments and a statistical analysis of data.

Sociological laws or theories would therefore become falsifiable (Popper 1934).

Returning to Durkheim's initial ambitions may help to sooth Bernard Lahire's epistemological and theoretical dissatisfaction relating to the contemporary social sciences, which he views as overly segmented and marked by excessive relativism (Lahire 2023, Introduction). It could also help to test causal relationships and to evaluate their importance. This new perspective could help to build a general and synthetical epistemological frame common to the social sciences. It could help the social sciences to articulate the particular with the general, to produce scientific laws, and to give their researches a cumulative

dimension. To conclude, sociology could be considered a population science in a meaning close to that given by Goldthorpe (2015).

From a more general perspective, by identifying laws of a probabilistic nature, sociology could also in theory anticipate and predict the possible advent of future phenomena or changes in the structuration of future social configurations. In this view, sociology would reconnect with other social sciences such as demography and with certain motifs which preceded its birth. As Courgeau (2004) reminds us, demography was born out of the desire to find laws of probability that would allow mortality to be predicted using statistical tables. This aim was quickly linked to problems relating to life insurance and to the calculus of life insurance premiums. The perspective initiated by John Graunt and William Petty in the seventeenth century gave rise to political arithmetic. Statistics would then allow for a certain level of predictability where human behaviour is concerned, which would be characterized by probabilities of occurrence which could be close to the Weberian concept of "typical chances" (Weber 1971: 47).

A new method could therefore be available for the social sciences. This would compete with the dominant contemporary approach of "mainstream" economic theory, which partly influences sociology. It would take as its point of departure the study of the social forces which determine individual economic behaviour. Individual rationality and private interests, conceived as internal and universal forces, would indeed be limited by external forces that partly determine individual choices and activities. The evaluation of their intensity could explain but also predict future social and economic configurations. Through this method, sociology could become the queen of human sciences.

Bibliography

Berthelot J.-M., 1995. *1895, L'avènement de la sociologie scientifique*. Toulouse : Presses Universitaires du Mirail.

Coenen-Huther J. 2011. *Comprendre Durkheim*, Paris: Armand Colin.

Courgeau D. 2004. "Probabilités, Démographie et sciences sociales", *Mathematics and Social Sciences,* n° 167, 2004 (3), 27-50.

Cuin C. H. 2011. *Durkheim, Modernité d'un classique*. Paris: Hermann.

Durkheim, É., [1892]. *Quid Secundatus politicae scientiae instituendae contulerit*. Watts Miller W. (ed). Oxford: Durkheim Press, 1997.

— [1893]. *The Division of labour in society*. Macmillan Press, 1994.

— 1894. "Les Règles de la méthode sociologique". *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*. 19 :1. Paris : Alcan, 1894, 465-498 and 577-607 et *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*. 19 : 2. Paris : Alcan, 1894, 14-39 and168-181.

— [1895]. *The Rules of sociological method.* New-York: Macmillan Press, 1982.

— [1897]. *Suicide, a study in sociology*. London, New-York: Routledge, 2002.

— [1904-1905]. *L'évolution pédagogique en France*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1985.

— Durkheim E., [1912]. *The elementary forms of religious life*. New-York: The Free Press, 1995

— [1907]. "Deux lettres sur l'influence allemande dans la sociologie française. Réponse à Simon Deploige". 1907, repris dans Durkheim É. *Textes*. Minuit : Paris, 1975, vol. 1.

Foucault, M. 2004. *Sécurité, territoire, population, Cours au Collège de France. 1977-1978*. Paris : Gallimard/Seuil.

Goldthorpe, J. 2015. *Sociology as a Population Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Guillo, D. 2006. "La place de la biologie dans les premiers textes de Durkheim: un paradigme oublié?". *Revue française de sociologie*, 3(47), 507-535.

Kergoat D. 2011. "Comprendre les rapports sociaux". *Raison présente*, 178(2), 11-21

Karsenti, B. 2002. "Politique de la science sociale. La lecture durkheimienne de Montesquieu". *Revue Montesquieu.* 6, 33-55.

Lacroix B. 1976. "La vocation originelle d'Émile Durkheim". *Revue française de sociologie*. 17(2), 507-535.

Lahire B. 2023. *Les structures fondamentales des sociétés humaines*. Paris : La Découverte.

Levine, D. N. 1995. "The Organism Metaphor in Sociology". *Social Research*. 62(2), 239-265.

McKinnon, A. 2014. "Elementary forms of the metaphorical life: Tropes at work in Durkheim's theory of the religious". *Journal of Classical Sociology*. 14(2), 203-221

Montesquieu, C. L. de Secondat. [1748]. *The Spirit of the Laws*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1989.

Mucchielli, L. 2004. "La 'révélation d'Émile Durkheim", in Mucchielli L., (ed.), *Mythes et histoire des sciences humaines*. Paris : La Découverte, 297-329.

Paoletti, G. 2012. "Les deux tournants, ou la religion dans l'œuvre de Durkheim avant Les formes élémentaires". *L'Année sociologique*, 62(2), 289-311

Péquignot, B. & Tripier, P. 2000. *Les fondements de la sociologie*. Paris : Nathan Université.

Popper, K. [1934]. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Takla, T. N. & Pope, W. 1985. “The Force Imagery in Durkheim: The Integration of Theory, Metatheory, and Method”. *Sociological Theory*. 3(1), 74–88.

Tierney, T. F. 2010. “The governmentality of suicide: Peuchet, Marx, Durkheim, and Foucault”. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 10(4), 357-389.

Sousa Fernandes, T. 2008. “Chemical Metaphors in Sociological Discourse: Durkheim Through the Imagery of Rousseau”. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 8(4), 447-466.

Steiner, P. 1994, *La sociologie de Durkheim,* Paris : La Découverte.

Watts Miller, W. 2022. “The ‘Revelation’ in Durkheim’s Sociology of Religion: A Moment of Creative Evolution?”. *Études Durkheimiennes*, n°26, 159-179.

Weber M., 1925. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.