



## 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 2

“Animals and plants thrive when they differ. People are the same.”

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 second book examines the causes and conditions of the division of labor in society. As you read, think about the implications of Durkheim's explanation for the shift from societies held together by a collective conscience and societies held together by the division of labor. What is the future likely to hold? Should we worry about a decline in shared values and beliefs? What would Durkheim think about the value of and commitment to diversity?

## Chapter 2. The Causes

What causes the progress of the division of labor? [It is not a quest for happiness (see Chapter 1, not included here)]

### Part 1. Moral/Dynamic Density

It is in certain variation of the social context that we must search for that which explains the progress of the division of labor. The results of Book 1 allows us to immediately see what those variations are.

We have already seen how the organized structure and the division of labor developed as the segmented structure faded away. So, it is either that this fading away is the cause of the development of the division of labor, or that the development of the division of labor is the cause of the fading away. We know that the latter option won't work because segmentation is an obstacle to the division of labor, and it must have weakened at least partially in order for the division of labor to arise. Once the division of labor appears, it can contribute to the fading away of the segmental structure, but we only see it once the fading away has already begun.

But the fading of the segmented structure can have this consequence for only one reason. Its waning allows individuals who were previously separated to come into more contact with others. Social life, instead of being concentrated in like pods, becomes generalized. Social relations multiply. The division of labor develops

when there are more individual people sufficiently in contact with each other to act and react upon one another. We can call this relation and the active exchange resulting from it dynamic or *moral density*. Thus, the progress of the division of labor is in direct ratio to the moral or dynamic density of society.

This relationship can only produce this effect if the real distance between individuals is itself diminished in some way. Moral density cannot grow unless material density grows at the same time. We can use material density as a measure of moral density.

The progressive condensation of societies in the course of historical development is produced in three ways:

1. Where early groups of people were spread out over large areas relative to their small population, population is concentrated among advanced peoples. Dispersion over a large area was necessary for the work of nomads, hunters, and shepherds. In contrast, agriculture requires a settled life, and presupposes a certain restriction of society in spatial terms, although there remain stretches of land between families. As cities developed, condensation was even greater. From their origins, European societies have seen a continuous growth in their density.
2. Thus, the formation and development of cities is key. Cities always result from the need of individuals to be in close contact with others. It is here that the social mass can contract more strongly than anywhere else. New recruits arrive by immigration. As long as social organization is segmented, cities cannot truly exist. There are no cities in early-stage societies.<sup>1</sup>
3. Finally, communication and transportation are made easier and faster. By decreasing the gaps separating segments of society, new forms of communication and transportation increase the density of society.

If condensation of society produces more division of labor, it is because it multiplies intra-social relations. These relations will be even more frequent if the number of population rises. In other words, if there are both more individuals who are at the same time more intimately in contact with each other, the effect is stronger. Both social volume (the number of people) and social density (the concentration of people) increase the division of labor.

We offer the following proposition: *The division of labor varies in direct ratio with the volume and density of societies; if the division of labor progresses in a continuous way in the course of social development, it is because societies generally get denser and more populous.*

### *Part 3. Intensification of the struggle for existence*

If labor becomes every more divided as societies become denser and more populous, it is not because there are more varied external circumstances, but because the struggle for existence is more ardent.

1. This is but one example of the outdated anthropology of the day. We now know that there were in fact extensive cities far earlier than was known by Durkheim. Whether the existence of these cities undercuts his theory is another question.

Darwin rightly observed that the struggle between two creatures is as active as they are similar. Having the same needs and the same objects, they are rivals. So long as there are enough resources for both, they can live side by side, but when resources become insufficient for them both, war breaks out. It is very different if the two creatures are of different species or variations. Since they do not eat the same things or live the same kind of life, they do not disturb each other. The chances of conflict diminish. Animals and plants thrive when they differ.

People are the same. In the same town, different jobs can co-exist. They each pursue different objects: the soldier seeks glory, the priest moral authority, the politician power, the person of business wealth, the scholar academic fame. Each can attain her end without preventing the others from attaining theirs. The optometrist does not struggle with the psychiatrist, nor the shoemaker with the hatter, nor the bricklayer with the cabinetmaker, nor the physicist with the chemist. Since they each perform different services, they can all perform then in parallel.

The closer the functions, however, the more contact and the more exposed to conflict. Just as with animals that seek the same food, they inevitably seek to limit each other's development. The judge may never be in competition with the person of business, but the brewer and the vintner, the poet and the musician, do try to supplant each other. And for those with exactly the same function? They can succeed only to the detriment of others.

That said, it is easy now to understand how all concentration of the social mass, especially when accompanied by an increase in population, necessarily advances the division of labor.

*[Specialization occurs as a cure of side-by-side conflicts]*

The division of labor is a result of the struggle for existence, but it is a relaxed end to it. Because of the division of labor, would-be opponents are not forced to fight to death, but can instead exist beside each other. In addition, as it develops it provides the means of maintenance and survival to a greater number of people who, in more homogeneous societies, would be condemned to extinction. *[So, it is that in modern societies those that may be weak physically can still find a good position using their brain. Everyone has talents unique to them that can be put to use. No one need to be condemned as wholly useless]*

Economists regard the division of labor differently than what we have discussed here. For them, it is essentially about increasing production. But we have seen that greater productivity is only a necessary consequence of the underlying phenomenon. If we specialize it is not in order to produce more but to allow us to live under new conditions of existence *[denser and more populous societies]*.

## Chapter 5. Consequences

### *Part 1. Suppleness of the Division of Labor*

Our previous discussion now permits us to better understand the way in which the division of labor functions in society.

The division of social labor is different from the division of physiological labor in one key way. In the organism, each cell has its defined role, and it cannot change it. In societies, however, even where the forms of organization are most rigid, individuals can move about with a certain freedom. As work is divided more, this suppleness and freedom become greater. A person can raise himself from the humblest beginning to the most important occupations. Even more frequently, a worker leaves his job for another one close by. Today a scholar can pass from one discipline to another, from chemistry to biology, or from psychology to sociology. [*Things move even faster in business, where new tastes displace old ones, and workers must constantly be ready to serve different employments.*]

Now contrast the biological organism. If the function of each cell is fixed, it is because it is imposed by birth. Each cell is imprisoned, if you will, in a system of hereditary customs which cannot be overcome. The structure predetermines the cell's life. It is not the same in society. Origins do not determine the outcomes of individuals; her innate characteristics do not predestine her to one role only, making her incapable of any other. From heredity she receives only a general disposition, one quite supple and able to take on many different forms.

### *Part 2. The Development of Civilization*

In determining the principal cause of the progress of the division of labor, we have at the same stroke determined the essential factor of what we call civilization.

Civilization is itself the necessary consequences of the changes which are produced in the volume and density of societies. If science, art, and economic activity develop, it is out of necessity, because there is no other way to live in the new conditions people find themselves in. From the time that the number of individuals begins to increase, people can maintain themselves only by greater specialization, working harder, and increasing the intensity of their abilities. From all this general stimulation there naturally results a much higher degree of culture. From this point of view, civilization is not an end to which people strive, not something foreseen and desired in advance, but merely the effect of a cause, the result of a given state of population concentration. It is not the pole to which historic development is moving us in order to seek happiness or improvement. We move towards it because we must move towards it, and what determines the speed of our march is the amount of pressure we exercise upon each other, according to our number.

This does not mean that civilization is useless, but only that it is not its uses that make it progress. It develops because it cannot help but develop. We see even more clearly now how wrong it is to make civilization the function of the division of labor when in fact it is only the consequence of it. Civilization cannot explain the existence or the progress of the division of labor since it has no intrinsic value in itself, but only has a reason for existing insofar as the division of labor is itself found necessary.

Still, while being a mere effect of necessary causes, civilization can become an end, an object of desire, even an ideal. A mechanistic conception of society [*as advanced here*] does not preclude ideals. ... There is and there will always be, between the extreme points at which we find ourselves and the end towards which we are tending, a free field open to our efforts.

### *Part 3. The Development of Individual Personality*

At the same time that societies are transformed, individuals are transformed by changes in population concentration.

Above all, they are more free of the control of the physiological organism. Where a non-human animal is almost completely under the influence of its physical environment, people are dependent on social causes.

## Questions

1. What does Durkheim use as a measure of moral density?
2. You should have learned by now that “correlation is not causation.” Does Durkheim make this error in Part 1 of Chapter 2?
3. Can you think of a situation where there might be *more people* but *fewer contacts* so that the segmented structure does not, in fact, break down and give way to the division of labor? What about a situation of *fewer people* but *greater contacts*?
4. Why does the division of labor generally advance in societies?
5. Do animals, plants, and people thrive through difference? Consider the implications here. How would Durkheim likely weigh in on current immigration debates?
6. How does increasing specialization bring more freedom? Is individual freedom something useful for modern society? Do you find it odd to discuss freedom in terms of usefulness?
7. What is the cause of civilization? How is this similar to the argument about freedom? [*it may help to first define what exactly Durkheim means by the term civilization*]
8. Although you may be interested in reading the entire “part 3” of the fifth chapter, see if you can fill in Durkheim’s argument without doing so! Why is it that personality develops as moral and dynamic density increases? What consequences follow from human animals’ greater influence of social, rather than physiological, forces?

## Concepts

Moral/Dynamic Density