



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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DURKHEIM

I. EXTRA: Review of *Année Sociologique* (1898) article

NOTE ON SOURCE: *This is taken from a review of one of the very first articles Durkheim published in his new sociology journal, L'Année Sociologique. This anonymous review was published in English in the journal Folklore (volume 9, issues 3), in September of 1898.*

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

In the academic journal, L'Année Sociologique, Durkheim helped build the discipline of sociology by bringing together articles from different areas and disciplines that all in some way embraced a sociological perspective. This review is included here as a bonus reading because (1) it shows the early influence of Durkheim outside of France; (2) it covers a topic that was of interest to anthropologists, thereby demonstrating the disciplinary reach of Durkheim; and (3) it deals with a subject, the incest taboo, that is of interest to sociological examinations of the family, another institution that Durkheim spent much time analyzing.

REVIEW of

L'ANNÉE SOCIOLOGIQUE, published under the direction of DURKHEIM, Professor of Sociology, University of Bourdieu. 1898.

DURKHEIM, with the collaboration of a number of scientific colleagues, has commenced the publication of an annual, of which this is the pioneer, with the object not merely of presenting from year to year a picture of the condition of literature properly called sociological, but of supplying a periodical account of the researches made in the special sciences in which sociology finds its materials, such as historical jurisprudence, various branches of folklore (including the history of religions), moral statistics, criminal anthropology, economics. Each department is supervised by a specialist; and the articles comprised in the volume are of two kinds. The larger part of the volume in critical analyses of books and scientific papers publish Midsummer, 1896, to Midsummer, 1897. These are preceded by original matter, in the case of the volume before us by two articles, one by M. Durkheim himself on the prohibition of incest and its origin.

Durkheim's paper is of the greatest interest for students of folklore, especially at this moment, when the universal distribution of totemism is so strongly contested, when the origins of exogamy are under discussion, and the early forms of the family and the meaning of the clan-system are being so keenly examined. He derives the prohibition of sexual relations between near kindred from the clan-system, and finds its basis in totemism, which he assumes to be universal. Defining the clan as a group of individuals who consider themselves all akin one to another, but who recognize that kinship solely from the fact that they are the bearers of the same totem, he lays it down that we know of no clan which does not answer to this definition, and is not exogamous, and that all societies have themselves passed through this organization, or are sprung from others which have. Since incest consists in a sexual union between relatives of a prohibited degree it follows that exogamy is a prohibition of incest. But exogamy alone will not prevent the union of persons who are in fact near akin. In Australia this is effected by the combination of the class-system with the clan-system. Contrary to Morgan, M. Durkheim argues that the rise of the class-system is subsequent to the development of the clan. He assumes that each clan had its territory, and contends that the class name really indicates in word the clan of the person and the territory where he was born, that is to say, his paternity. It is difficult to explain the details without occupying more space than is at our disposal. It must suffice to say that the theory is an ingenious one, and if correct it solves a formidable difficulty. At the same time, it seems to raise others which require careful consideration. The author declares that the clan is uterine, but that there is no evidence (if we understand him aright) of any other family arrangement than that which subsists generally at present, namely, that the wife and children dwell with the husband (not he with them) and under his power. But if so, then there could be no clan-territory; and, in fact, M. Durkheim's hypothesis as to the rise of class-system is hardly conceivable, or at all events hardly probable, except as the concomitant of a change from a condition where the husband visited, or dwelt with, his wife among her to the present arrangement, whereby he takes her to dwell with him.

So far, however, we are not brought face to face with any explanation of exogamy as a rule, nor of the horror which the idea of incest inspires in all communities. But the way has been cleared. After an excellent criticism of rival theories, the author points out that exogamy is simply a particular instance of a religious institution found at the base of all primitive religions (and, indeed, in a sense, of all religions), the taboo. He points out that women are, in savage opinion, invested with a special religious character which holds the masculine population at a distance, not merely in what concerns sexual matters, but in all the details of life. This interdiction is, of course, emphasized at certain periods; and M. Durkheim connects it with the horror with which blood, and especially the blood of the totem and totem-clan, is regarded. He contends that this horror was at first confined, so far as women were concerned, to those of clan, and resulted in exogamy, and that in course of time, when, as the consequence of exogamy, women of various clans became intermixed in residence, the horror and the taboo were extended to them all; but, because this was only a secondary effect, it was not complete, and the total separation of the sexes only extended to those of the same clan.

The importance of this theory will be seen at a glance. It offers a simple explanation of the recoil which all nations have experienced from what they regard as incest, while it is not open to the objections urged, and urged successfully, against the rival theories of Spencer, Maclennan, and Westermarck. At present, however, it is merely a theory; it depends upon the universality of totemism, and moreover demands careful examination in connection with rites of marriage and other customs. M. Durkheim does not concern himself with these. He goes on to argue that exogamy, thus originated, has evolved with the family. Beginning with the uterine clan, when paternity, having long been admitted as a fact, obtained legal recognition, and legal

relationships were transferred from the mother's side exclusively to the father's, these sexual interdictions followed them. When totemism disappeared, and with it the clan-system, exogamy attached itself to the new types of the family which began to be constituted and which rested on other bases. It was accommodated to them, extending on the one hand to relations never contemplated by the unilateral clan-system, and on the other hand, becoming more circumscribed as the wider clan-relationships ceased to be recognized. Family life is dominated by the idea of duty. The domestic affections of parent and child, brother and sister, are tinged with respect incompatible with conjugal relationship. The very existence of the family rests on exogamy, understanding that term in a wide sense. Sexual relations, as we conceive them, are based upon pleasure, upon mutual attraction. They do not become permanent, the family, properly speaking, does not come into existence until the arrival of children. Sexual relations being thus founded in spontaneity, they are opposed radically to the ties of kinship. But this implies that they must first of all have been rejected from the moral atmosphere in which the family has its being. Not that there is anything in them which necessitated this broad separation: it must have been imposed upon them from without. In other words, the moral incompatibility, in the name of which we today prohibit incest, is itself a consequence of this prohibition, which therefore must be due to some other cause. This cause is the totality of beliefs and rites of which exogamy was the outcome – totemism. Once the prejudices relative to blood had led men to forbid all union between kindred, the sexual instinct obliged them to seek satisfaction outside the kindred group, and hence it speedily differentiated from the kin-sentiment. Two spheres were thus opened to human activity and sensibility. The one – the clan, the family – was and remained the theatre of duty, morality. The other, the external, was that of passion, which only took-on a moral character in the measure in which it affected domestic interests. In the meantime, and in consequence of its initial freedom from the idea of duty, it has enriched humanity with emotions and ideas that but for exogamy could never have existed. To it the imagination owes many of the developments of art and poetry, and many of the aspirations which we count among the most precious inheritances of civilization.

We have not presumed to criticize this very stimulating essay; considerations of time and space have limited us to a bare outline of its main thesis. It should be read and studied, together with the analysis and criticisms, by the same author later in the volume, of the recent works of Professor Kohler, Herr Grosse, and others. The criticisms of the former we can only accept with reserve, for we believe there is more to be said on behalf of an early prevalence of group-marriage than M. Durkheim admits. In any case, however, he has effected a masterly presentment of his view, and it deserves respectful consideration.

For anthropologists the whole volume is full of interest. We wish well to the new venture; and we gladly hail the rise of a French critical and constructive school of enquirers into savage custom.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. What do you understand of Durkheim's reception by those outside of France? How is he characterized here? What is he known for?
2. What is sociological about Durkheim's approach to understanding the incest taboo?

Concepts

Taboo

Totemism