

Emile Durkheim

About Durkheim (1858 - 1917)

Emile Durkheim was a French Jew at a time when anti-Semitism was deeply ingrained in French social and public life.
He is widely regarded as being the originator of sociology and he created much of the scientific methodology which is so widely used.
He believed in the rule of order and in rational and enlightened society.
He was devastated by the death of his only child, Paul, in WW1 and died soon after that himself.

Durkheim's philosophy

Emile Durkheim said that:

Society is more important than the individual.
Individuals learn the morality and values of society.
There are such things as social facts and sociologists should identify these.
Primitive society works in similar ways to a machine (mechanistic solidarity) and advanced industrial societies operate in similar ways to biological organism (organic analogy).
Society could be studied using the methods of science.
Once people understand society they will be rational and sensible. This will result in the death of irrationality and religion.

Problems with classical Durkheimian thought

Society is presented in an overly positivist way, being seen as good for people.
Durkheim is generally seen as being unable to account for rapid social change.

Development of Durkheim

In America, Durkheim's ideas about the nature of society were adopted and adapted to become a perspective known as Structural Functionalism which is associated with Talcott Parsons. This view is not popular in Britain.

In Britain, Durkheim's methodologies were used and adapted to become a tradition known as British empiricism where people went into communities and collected data about those communities.

Be Careful

Although Durkheim is probably the originator of Functional thought, he is not a functionalist.
He is very easy to mis-spell. Get it right.

Writers to name

Talcott Parsons
Robert Merton

Key skill IT

There is a huge amount on Durkheim in the Internet. Collect accounts of his work.

Key skill Communication

Look up 'Suicide' in the text books for an understanding of his Durkheim's thought.