Along with Marx and Weber, French sociologist Emile Durkheim is considered one of the founders of sociology. One of Durkheim’s primary goals was to analyze how modern societies could maintain social integration after the traditional bonds of family and church were replaced by modern economic relations.

Durkheim believed that society exerted a powerful force on individuals. People’s norms, beliefs, and values make up a collective consciousness, or a shared way of understanding and behaving in the world. The collective consciousness binds individuals together and creates social integration. For Durkheim, the collective consciousness was crucial in explaining the existence of society: it produces society and holds it together. At the same time, the collective consciousness is produced by individuals through their actions and interactions. Society is a social product created by the actions of individuals that then exerts a coercive social force back on those individuals. Through their collective consciousness, Durkheim argued, human beings become aware of one another as social beings, not just animals.

Formation of Collective Consciousness

According to Durkheim, the collective consciousness is formed through social interactions. In particular, Durkheim thought of the close-knit interactions between families and small communities, groups of people who share a common religion, who may eat together, work together, and spend leisure time together. Yet all around him, Durkheim observed evidence of rapid social change and the withering away of these groups. He saw increasing population density and population growth as key factors in the evolution of society and the advent of modernity. As the number of people in a given area increase, he posited, so does the number of interactions, and the society becomes more complex.
growth creates competition and incentives to trade and further the division of labor. But as people engage in more
economic activity with neighbors or distant traders, they begin to loosen the traditional bonds of family, religion, and
moral solidarity that had previously ensured social integration. Durkheim worried that modernity might herald the
disintegration of society.

Durkheim and Modernity

Following a socioevolutionary approach reminiscent of Comte, Durkheim described the evolution of society from
mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity. Simpler societies, he argued, are based on mechanical solidarity, in which
self-sufficient people are connected to others by close personal ties and traditions (e.g., family and religion). Also, in
such societies, people have far fewer options in life. Modern societies, on the other hand, are based on organic
solidarity, in which people are connected by their reliance on others in the division of labor. Modernization, Durkheim
argued, is based first on population growth and increasing population density, second on increasing “moral density” (that
is, the development of more complex social interactions), and third, on the increasing specialization in work (i.e., the
division of labor). Because modern society is complex, and because the work that individuals do is so specialized,
individuals can no longer be self-sufficient and must rely on others to survive. Thus, although modern society may
undermine the traditional bonds of mechanical solidarity, it replaces them with the bonds of organic solidarity.

Organic versus Mechanical Solidarity

Further, Durkheim argued, the organic solidarity of modern societies might have advantages over traditional mechanical
solidarity. In traditional societies, people are self-sufficient, and therefore society has little need for cooperation and
interdependence. Institutions that require cooperation and agreement must often resort to force and repression to keep
society together. Traditional mechanical solidarity may tend, therefore, to be authoritarian and coercive. In modern
societies, under organic solidarity, people are necessarily much more interdependent. Specialization and the division of
labor require cooperation. Thus, solidarity and social integration are necessary for survival and do not require the same
sort of coercion as under mechanical solidarity.

In organic solidarity, the individual is considered vitally important, even sacred. In organic solidarity, the individual, rather
than the collective, becomes the focus of rights and responsibilities, the center of public and private rituals holding the
society together—a function once performed by the religion. To stress the importance of this concept, Durkheim talked
of the "cult of the individual." However, he made clear that the cult of the individual is itself a social fact, socially
produced; reverence for the individual is not an inherent human trait, but a social fact that arises in certain societies at
certain times.
Key Points

• Durkheim believed that society exerted a powerful force on individuals. According to Durkheim, people’s norms, beliefs, and values make up a collective consciousness, or a shared way of understanding and behaving in the world.

• The collective consciousness binds individuals together and creates social integration.

• Durkheim saw increasing population density as a key factor in the advent of modernity. As the number of people in a given area increase, so does the number of interactions, and the society becomes more complex.

• As people engage in more economic activity with neighbors or distant traders, they begin to loosen the traditional bonds of family, religion, and moral solidarity that had previously ensured social integration. Durkheim worried that modernity might herald the disintegration of society.

• Simpler societies are based on mechanical solidarity, in which self-sufficient people are connected to others by close personal ties and traditions. Modern societies are based on organic solidarity, in which people are connected by their reliance on others in the division of labor.

• Although modern society may undermine the traditional bonds of mechanical solidarity, it replaces them with the bonds of organic solidarity.

• In the Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Durkheim presented a theory of the function of religion in aboriginal and modern societies and described the phenomenon of collective effervescence and collective consciousness.

• Durkheim has been called a structural functionalist because his theories focus on the function certain institutions (e.g., religion) play in maintaining social solidarity or social structure.

Key Terms

• organic solidarity: It is social cohesion based upon the dependence individuals have on each other in more advanced societies.

• mechanical solidarity: It normally operates in "traditional" and small scale societies. In simpler societies (e.g., tribal), solidarity is usually based on kinship ties of familial networks.