

# Theory & Science (2002)

ISSN: 1527-5558

## German Idealist Foundations of Durkheim's Sociology and Teleology of Knowledge

Deniz Tekiner

[d.tekiner@worldnet.att.net](mailto:d.tekiner@worldnet.att.net)

### Abstract

This article explores Durkheim's sociology of knowledge with a focus on his teleological theory that human thought undergoes a process of "universalization" which reaches toward an apprehension of an objective cosmopolitan "truth," and compares Durkheim's epistemological concepts to those of Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel.

### Introduction

To appropriate Emile Durkheim's ideas to positivist and synchronic analyses of social integration, sociologists tend to minimize or ignore the idealistic and metaphysical underpinnings of his work (Knapp, 1985: 1-2). Durkheim's relationship to German idealist traditions consequently receives little attention. Durkheim's sociology of knowledge, however, is grounded in Kantian concepts and problems. In *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim presents his concept of the collective representation as a solution to a basic problem of Kantian epistemology – the problem of the origin of the categories of understanding. In the conclusion of *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim also presents a concept of universalization which, like the historical outlook of Kant's *Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, envisions a progressive integration of relations among societies. For Durkheim, as for Kant, this process is conditional to the efflorescence of human reason; for Durkheim, an objective cosmopolitan "truth" is unveiled through the process of universalization (1965: 493). Kant's ethics are as pertinent to Durkheim's epistemology as Kant's historical teleology; Durkheim conceives of collective representations as bases for rules of conduct which are felt by people, in effect, as categorical imperatives, compelling people to act in accord with the collective moral exigencies of society. For Durkheim, the moral authority of collective representations is essential to social consensus and a stable social order. Durkheim's concepts of the collective representation and the process of universalization, then, correspond to Kantian concepts, and Durkheim acknowledges the relevance of Kantian philosophy to his epistemological and moral considerations (1965: 494).

Kant's influence on Durkheim is traced to the French neo-Kantians, Emile Boutroux and Octave Hamelin, but principally to Charles Renouvier, who rejected Kant's *a priori* transcendental deduction of the categories. Renouvier argued that the categories are derived from experience and that will and moral choice are implicated in their construction. Renouvier also rejected Kant's distinction between phenomena and *numina*; the phenomenal and the real are, for Renouvier, virtually identical. Further, he rejected Kant's distinction between speculative and practical reason, or between knowledge and moral belief. As Renouvier wrote, "*La séparation kantienne de la raison spéculative et de la raison pratique est une illusion*" (1906: 164). For Renouvier, all knowledge depends upon a "will to believe." By elaborating upon these various arguments, Durkheim concluded that the categories are socially determined and that they are objective "presentations" (Lukes, 1973: 54-58). Consistent with Renouvier's conflation of speculative and practical reason, Durkheim also concluded that collective representations are bases for ethics as well as cognition.

G. W. F. Hegel's monumental system, in which material nature is conceptualized as an objectification of infinite reason, manifests a teleological vision of history (1956, 1977). Consistent with many Western metaphysical cosmologies dating back to ancient Greece, it tells a story of the descent of spirit from and return back to its intrinsic perfection. In Hegel's view, the development of human thought in history manifests a progressive self-realization of the essential unity of absolute spirit or *Geist*. In the self-realization of *Geist* in human consciousness, phenomenal contradictions or tensions are progressively reconciled in higher syntheses of thought. The notion that human history moves toward a reconciliation of tensions appeared earlier in Kant's concept of the "cosmopolitan condition" and reappears in Durkheim's concept of universalization. Although Durkheim ostensibly repudiated theories which reconstruct the world as it should be, in accord with Renouvier's rejection of deterministic doctrines of progress (Gunn, 1922: 185-204; Logue, 1993: 100-116), teleological imperatives of human history are incorporated into Durkheim's epistemology beneath a social scientific guise.

## **Kant, Hegel, Durkheim, and the Teleology of Knowledge**

Kant argues that the data of sense are not intrinsically coherent but are made coherent by the faculties of mind (1949). The mind's imposition of categories of understanding upon sense impressions confers order on subjective empirical experience. People can know "phenomena," or the world the mind interprets it, but cannot know the essential realities of things or "things in themselves" which exceed the mind's epistemological scope. In Kant's view, then, analyses of the categories of understanding are fundamental to the epistemological project. Kant, however, rests on the assumption that the categories are necessary facts of human intelligence and does not explain their origin.

Kant also argues that the human mind abides in the domain of *numen*, or spirit. The activities of mind are thus free and not subject to the natural laws that govern material nature. However, he also holds that:

Whatever concept one may hold, from a metaphysical point of view, concerning the freedom of the will, certainly its appearances, which are human actions, like every other natural event are determined by universal laws....The means employed by nature to bring about the development of all the capacities of men is their antagonism in society, so far as this is, in the end, the cause of lawful order among men....After many reformative revolutions, a universal cosmopolitan condition, which nature has as her ultimate purpose, will come into being as the womb wherein all the original capacities of the human race can develop. (1963: 11, 15; 23)

Like the optimistic teleologies which characterize Christian chiliastic doctrines as well as many Western idealist cosmologies of history, Kant thus conceives of human history as ultimately governed by a purposive design.

Durkheim sought a sociological and scientific solution to the problem of the origin of the categories of understanding. He presents collective representations – internalized social prescriptions for thinking, acting, and feeling – as functionally equivalent to the categories (1964: 2; 1965: 21-33). Just as Kant asserts that the coherence or order of sensory experience depends upon the categories, so for Durkheim social order depends upon collective representations. Seeking to understand how social order could be sustained in the modern world despite secularization and the emergence of individualism, Durkheim further conceives of collective representations as the means by which categorical imperatives, conceived as the moral exigencies of a social collectivity, are operationalized in society. Durkheim's ethics differ from Kant's insofar as for Durkheim, moral imperatives are collectively formulated and variable and are not, as in Kant's scheme, invariable moral laws; for Durkheim, moral imperatives must be congruent with the functional exigencies of a given society. Notwithstanding these conceptual differences, collective representations, like categorical imperatives, demand that the actions of individuals are deferred to collective moral requirements. As constituents of a collective moral consciousness which transcends the individual, collective representations, once internalized through socialization processes, insure that individuals are constrained by the exigencies of a social collectivity. In a modern society, they thus assume the ethical functions of religious moral prescriptions and provide Durkheim with a solution to one of his principal sociological problems: How is social order possible in a secularized world? For Durkheim, therefore, categories of understanding, conceived sociologically as collective representations, function as bases for ethics as well as cognition.

Trying to work through Kant's belief that the categories of understanding entail intrinsic epistemological constraints, but also uncovering, like Kant, a teleological imperative governing human history, Durkheim conceives of a progressive liberation of human objectivity through a progressive liberation of human thought. Collective representations entail epistemological constraints but these constraints may eventually be overcome because, according to Durkheim, human thought tends to undergo a process of universalization:

It is this international life that has already resulted in universalizing religious beliefs. As it extends, the collective horizon enlarges; the society ceases to appear as the only whole to become part of a much vaster one, with indetermined frontiers, which is susceptible of advancing indefinitely. (1965: 493)

Due to a progressive integration of collective representations particular to given societies with those of other societies, objects of thought may eventually “be organized according to principles which are their own, so logical organization differentiates itself from the social organization and becomes autonomous” (1965: 493). Through processes of inter-societal interaction, then, there is an apprehension of an objective cosmopolitan truth toward which humanity is “constantly approaching, but which in all probability we shall never succeed in reaching” (1965: 493). This truth is manifest in the nature of the cosmopolitan life itself by virtue of its integration of diverse spheres of thought. If the cosmopolitan life were ever fully realized, Durkheim asserts, this objectivity would be realized. While Durkheim doubts that this objectivity will ever be fully apprehended, he asserts that it is progressively approached. In his view, all societies have attained some measure of the international life and tend to attain more of it in their processes of development:

There is no people and no state which is not a part of another society, more or less unlimited, which embraces all the peoples and all the States with which the first comes in contact, either directly or indirectly; there is no national life which is not dominated by a collective life of an international nature. In proportion as we advance in history, these international groups acquire a greater importance and extent. (1965: 474)

Durkheim, then, in accord with Hegel’s objective idealism, appears to have been attracted to the idea that human knowledge inexorably strives toward an apprehension of truth. Like Kant, Durkheim finds that the categories of human understanding, which he conceives as socially constructed collective representations, constrain our apprehension of this truth. For Durkheim, however, unlike Kant, constraints on human knowledge are due not to the intrinsic limitations of categories of mind but to the social limitations of collective representations. He may therefore reason that due to the changeability of collective representations through time, their social limitations may be lessened. In Kant’s scheme, there is no possibility for changing categories of mind which are considered to be intrinsic, fixed, universal, and subjective. But for Durkheim, collective representations may be transformed in tandem with processes of social change. In his view, the epistemological limitations of collective representations are not lessened by intra-societal processes of change. For him, the “subjective elements” of individual societies are the principal cognitive constraints upon the human apprehension of truth; these can be overcome only by processes of inter-societal interaction in which collective representations become more objective. As he writes, “[C]ollective representations... contain subjective elements, and these must be progressively rooted out, if we are to approach reality more closely” (1965: 493). The process of the universalization of thought that he hypothesizes depends upon the emergence of a cosmopolitan life in which diverse spheres of collective representations are integrated. The cognitive limitations of these spheres, in his view, are lessened in the process of their integration, reaching toward an apprehension of an objective cosmopolitan truth.

A sociological variant of Hegel’s objective idealism can be inferred from Durkheim’s universalization scheme, despite its abstraction from Hegelian processes of dialectical conflict. In keeping with Durkheim’s habitual underestimation of processes of conflict, he apparently conceives of the process of universalization as relatively seamless, whereas Hegel acknowledges that processes of the reconciliation of disparate modes of thought can entail traumatic upheavals of conflict. Consistent with Hegelian dialectical processes, however, Durkheim’s

universalization scheme implies that a cosmopolitan truth unfolds through progressive syntheses of categories of thought. Differing sharply from Hegel, who explained the development of human knowledge as a manifestation of the inexorable drive toward self-realization of *Geist* in history, Durkheim attributes the transformation of human knowledge principally to social processes.

According to Hegel, the teleological imperatives of *Geist* are gradually actualized through the historical development of human thought. *Geist* attains a self-realization of its essential unity through the development of the world spirit or *Weltgeist*—*Geist* as it is collectively manifest in human consciousness. For Hegel, the categories of the human mind's interpretation and organization of phenomenal experience are not fixed, but evolve through stages which eventually culminate in the self-realization of *Geist* in human thought. Through human thought, *Geist* is impelled to find its intrinsic unity out of diverse phenomena and to resolve the phenomenal contradictions, manifest between "theses" and "antitheses," with which it is constantly confronted. These contradictions are resolved in the forms of "syntheses" in variable ways according to the stages of history. For Hegel, then, categories of understanding are historically variable. The human mind's continual struggle with phenomenal contradictions involves perpetual processes of reflection which result in new syntheses of thought. These contradictions constitute constraints upon human knowledge which are slowly but consistently overcome. As new modes of thought are synthesized, old modes of thought are transcended. For Hegel, unlike Kant, categories of human understanding correspond with what is real, so there is no hiatus between the objective world as it appears to the human mind and the world "in itself." As *Geist* progressively apprehends its own intrinsic unity through human consciousness, it is freed from the contradictions which characterized transcended stages of thought. Freedom is in turn progressively manifest in human consciousness through the inexorable self-realization of *Geist*. *Geist's* perpetual journey toward self-realization proceeds according to stages of development to which the human mind is historically bound. Human knowledge is thus historically constituted through the unfoldment of *Geist*. In its actualization of *Geist's* teleological imperatives, the human mind is perpetually compelled to struggle against historically determined phenomenal contradictions. As human thought overcomes these contradictions, it progressively apprehends "truth" as manifest in the intrinsic unity and freedom of *Geist*.

Durkheim's concept of universalization bears parallels to Hegel's teleological scheme. The universalization of thought, in Durkheim's scheme, results from an integration of diverse spheres of thought and corresponds with Hegel's concept of the self-realization of *Geist* in its resolution of historical contradictions. The process of the universalization of thought is constrained by the diversity of spheres of thought which must eventually be reconciled with one another in order to achieve the goal of a functionally integrated international life. The process of universalization thus depends upon progressive syntheses of variegated spheres of human thought. As the cosmopolitan life develops, these syntheses manifest in new constellations of collective representations in which diverse spheres of thought are integrated. Collective representations are thus transformed and an objective cosmopolitan truth, as an epistemological goal of this process, is approached.

Conceptual parallels between Durkheim and Hegel can be attributed to direct influence only by conjecture. Durkheim may well have studied Hegel, but he makes few references to Hegel and

makes no references to the conceptual parallels in his writings. As Peter Knapp observes, any explicit associations with Hegel would not only have undermined Durkheim's efforts to establish sociology as a scientific discipline but also would have exposed Durkheim to French nationalistic intellectual attacks (1985: 9-10). It is clear, however, that many of the authors who exerted important influences on Durkheim, including the French neo-Kantians and the German historicists, were greatly indebted to Hegelian thought (Knapp, 1985: 3-4). Renouvier, for example, taking Hegelian dialectics as a point of departure, attempted a dialectical deduction of the categories on the basis of the fundamental category of relation, conceiving of the categories as syntheses of theses and antitheses. These various authors were influenced by Hegelian concepts which in turn appear to have affected Durkheim's own theoretical synthesis. Knapp observes that among the most significant of such concepts is *Geist*, which Hegel conceives of as prior to and constitutive of human consciousness and which bears correspondence to Durkheim's concept of the collective representation (1985: 4-6). Rejecting Hegel's concept of the metaphysical constitution of human consciousness by *Geist*, Durkheim conceives of the categories of understanding, understood as collective representations, as socially constituted. Also rejecting Hegel's concept of the metaphysical basis of historical processes, Durkheim uses his concept of universalization to support a sociological telos of human history. The teleological imperatives of *Geist* are sociologically transposed in the concept of universalization. In universalization, a hypothesized progressive human apprehension of objective truth is conceptualized in terms of social rather than metaphysical processes.

In *Primitive Classification* (1963) as well as *Elementary Forms*, in debunking Kant's concept of a priori categories of understanding, Durkheim demonstrates the social determination and variability of the categories. This variability, in his view, applies even to apparent universal categories such as time, space, number, cause, and substance (1965: 22, 28). His concept of the social constitution of human knowledge may thus appear to obviate a notion of objective truth. For Durkheim, concepts of truth manifest the "absolute ideas" of a society which transcend particular experiences of individuals (1965: 485). Even scientific findings, if not in accord with collective representations, "will be denied; minds will be closed to them; consequently it will be as though they did not exist" (1965: 486). Although "logical" thought appears in all societies because it is essential to the intelligibility of cognitions, the forms it takes are socially variable (1965: 487). In response to this apparent relativism as well as Durkheim's late interest in American pragmatic philosophy, it has been argued that Durkheim was moving toward a relativistic social pragmatism similar to that of George Herbert Mead (Stone and Farberman, 1970). Durkheim, however, asserts that our apprehension of truth is socially variable, but not that there is no objective truth (1965: 484-486). His more or less tacit epistemological objectivism is evinced in his concept of the universalization of thought.

While Durkheim rejected Kant's concept of a priori categories of mind, his concept of the collective representation preserves Kant as well as Hegel's view of categories of human understanding as ideal or nonmaterial things. Durkheim conceives of collective representations as nonmaterial social facts. Although collective representations can be represented in material things, they are socially constituted and objectified in nonmaterial domains of mind. Their essential existence is in the minds of individuals and in the moral consciousness of society. Thus he recognizes that attempts to analyze collective representations by empirical means alone are problematic:

Thus renovated, the theory of knowledge...keeps all the essential principles of the apriorists; but at the same time it is inspired by that positive spirit which the empiricists have striven to satisfy....The categories are no longer considered as primary and unanalyzable facts, yet they keep a complexity which falsifies any analysis as ready as that which the empiricists content themselves....[T]o succeed in understanding and judging them...there is a whole science which must be formed, a complex science...to which the which the present work brings some fragmentary contributions in the nature of an attempt. (1965: 32-33)

Perhaps as a means of a more complete understanding the categories, then, Durkheim might have been attracted to a method resembling Max Weber's *Verstehen*.

## Conclusion

Durkheim rejected the Kantian concept of a fixed and static set of necessary and universal categories of understanding not only because it precluded a sociological theory of knowledge but also because it could not account for his observations of the variability and changeability of the categories (1965: 28). Hegel recognized the variability and transience of the categories but his assertions of metaphysical causation also obviate a sociological epistemology. Durkheim's epistemology not only explains both the transience and social causation of the categories but also invests the categories with moral and teleological significance. For Durkheim, in accord with Kant's epistemological scheme, the categories, as collective representations, organize and give coherence to human thought. They are also bases for social cohesion by virtue of the moral imperatives that they manifest. Durkheim's concept of the collective representation, then, sociologically transposes both Kant's concepts of the categories of understanding and the categorical imperative. By reasoning that collective representations are socially constructed, variable, and change in accord with the development of the cosmopolitan life, Durkheim's also overcomes the cognitive constraints of the categories of understanding. In his view, an objective cosmopolitan truth is gradually approached in a process of inter-societal interaction which leads to the progressive universalization of collective representations. By further reasoning that collective representations are objective presentations, in accord with Renouvier's repudiation of the Kantian concept of the constitution of "things in themselves" by a numinous domain which exceeds the scope of human understanding, Durkheim also overcomes Kant's view of the categories as "primary and unanalyzable facts."

Durkheim's concept of the progressive universalization of thought entails objectivistic and tacitly dialectical ideas which correspond with elements of Hegel's philosophy of knowledge. Collective representations, by their objectivity and transience, are thus rendered closer to Hegel's concepts of the categories of understanding than Kant's. For Durkheim, categories of human thought, conceived as collective representations, are bound toward freedom by their progressive liberation from the epistemological constraints of subjectivity, and toward an objective cosmopolitan truth by their progressive integration of diverse spheres of thought. Durkheim's sociology of knowledge thus preserves the traditional optimism of Western metaphysical teleologies of history dating back to ancient Greece.

Questions about the veracity of the teleological dimension of Durkheim's sociology of knowledge will have to remain unsettled. Every nomothetic sociological scheme which has hypothesized that there are laws of development which govern human history has been fraught with empirical hazards. Because of these hazards, the least empirically problematic sociological approach to the analysis of human historical processes, it appears, is an idiographic one like that of Max Weber which admits of unique constellations of circumstances with less predictable outcomes.

Throughout the twentieth century, accelerated processes of travel, immigration, international commerce and the global proliferation of mass communications media have hastened the emergence of a cosmopolitan life in many parts of the world, especially in the United States. In many ways these processes may appear to have led to a fruitful integration of many varied cultures. But in many areas where cultures and ethnic groups have mixed, persistent antagonisms have also emerged, manifesting in reactions of xenophobia, ethnocentrism, bigotry, discrimination and worse. In cases where diverse cultures and groups appear to have successfully integrated, the question of whether this integration manifests "objectivity" and an apprehension of cosmopolitan truth is intrinsically problematic because the question would have to be subject to highly variable philosophical criteria regarding the nature of truth. Perhaps for Durkheim, the integration of diverse spheres of thought that these situations manifest do reflect the objectivity that he had in mind.

In the triumphant and hopeful aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama (1992) developed a theory that societies tend to evolve toward liberal democratic forms in processes which are stimulated by inter-societal interactions. If Fukuyama is correct, and if one construes that liberal democracies manifest a kind of cosmopolitan truth, Durkheim's thesis would be strengthened. But even if some societies move in this direction, it appears that only some do, and many societies seem to remain perpetually entrenched in very undemocratic forms of life.

While optimistic teleologies of human history and knowledge tend to possess strong intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional appeals which have seduced many great minds, they tend to fail to bear up to empirical scrutiny. The most influential of such teleologies in the modern era were in the ideas of Hegel, Karl Marx, and positivist philosophy. Hegel predicted that with the progressive self-realization of the intrinsic unity and freedom of *Geist* in human consciousness, the institutions of human society will in turn progressively manifest principles of freedom. Marx predicted that the course of human history would culminate in the establishment of a communist utopia that is free of social relations of economic exploitation and domination. Positivist philosophies, which emerged with the ideas of the Marquis de Condorcet, Claude-Henri Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte in the aftermath of the French Revolution and which exercised a strong influence on the development of Durkheim's functionalist perspective on society, expected that ideal forms of society would eventually appear as a result of the progress of reason, science, technology, and industry. In retrospect of the manifold horrors of twentieth century history, the maintenance of beliefs in such hopeful historical schemes has required increasing degrees of faith. Among sociological forecasts for the development of Western societies, the one that seems to have proven to be the most consistently reliable is Max Weber's pessimistic view of the progressive rationalization and disenchantment of the social world. But if one is faithful to



Weber's own idiographic principles of analysis, one would have to admit that all the historical tendencies of societies, even those of rationalization and disenchantment, are subject to change.

## References

Durkheim, Emile and Marcel Mauss ([1903] 1963). *Primitive Classification*. University of Chicago Press.

Durkheim, Emile ([1895] 1964). *Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: Free Press.

Durkheim, Emile ([1912] 1965). *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.

Fukuyama, Francis (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

Gunn, John Alexander (1922). *Modern French Philosophy: A Study of the Development Since Comte*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich ([1837] 1956) *Philosophy of History*. New York: Dover.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich ([1807] 1977). *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford University Press.

Kant, Immanuel ([1781] 1929). *Critique of Pure Reason*. London: Macmillan.

Kant, Immanuel ([1784] 1963). *Idea For a Universal History From a Cosmopolitan Point of View*. Lewis Beck, ed. Kant on History. New York: Bobbs Merrill.

Knapp, Peter (1985). *The Question of Hegelian Influence on Durkheim's Sociology*. Sociological Inquiry 55: 1-15.

Logue, William (1993). *Charles Renouvier, Philosopher of Liberty*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Lukes, Steven (1973). *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work*. Stanford University Press.

Renouvier, Charles (1906). *Critique de la doctrine de Kant*. Paris: Felix Alcan.

Stone, Gregory and Harvey Farberman (1970). *On the Edge of Rapprochement: Was Durkheim Moving Toward the Perspective of Symbolic Interaction? Social Psychology Through Symbolic Interaction*. Waltham, Massachusetts: Xerox College Publishing.

# Copyright

*Theory & Science* is an academic publication. Its sole purpose is the dissemination of knowledge to as wide an audience as possible. Thus, *Theory & Science* is free to individuals and institutions around the globe.

Copies of this journal or articles in this journal may be distributed for research or educational purposes free of charge and without permission. However, commercial use is expressly prohibited without the written consent of the publisher.

All contents copyright © 2000-Present *Theory & Science*.  
All rights reserved.

<http://theoryandscience.icaap.org/content/vol003.001/tekiner.html>