

'An Apotheosis of Well-Being': Durkheim on austerity and double-dip recessions

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Matt Dawson

University of Glasgow, UK

Abstract

This article is an attempt to contribute a view on the economic crisis from classical sociology, a voice often missing from the sociological response to the crisis. The work of Émile Durkheim provides a unique perspective here centred on morality and inequality produced in a historical context akin to our neoliberal times. It is argued there are four key points to take from Durkheim's work. First, that the initial credit crunch can be more fully understood with reference to the economic anomie which Durkheim sees as 'chronic' in a time of marketisation. Second, that this creates an antagonistic relationship between a supposedly self-dependent rich and lazy poor. Third, this conception of self-dependency and individual initiative makes any attempt to regulate the economy akin to sacrilege. Finally, the state is unwilling to intervene due to the emergence of 'pseudo-democracies'. Therefore, Durkheim's theory accounts for the initial crisis, austerity and double-dip recessions in a sociological framework. The article concludes by returning to the centrality of morality to the crisis for Durkheim and highlighting the omission of this in contemporary debates.

Keywords

Austerity, economic crisis, economic sociology, Émile Durkheim, recession

In April 2012, *The Guardian* columnist Aditya Chakraborty published an article bemoaning the lack of sociological responses to the economic crisis. He claimed that it appears there is little 'encouragement to engage' with finance, markets and crisis for sociologists and that, given their track record, it was 'hard to believe they really want to' (Chakraborty, 2012b). The response from the sociology community was, inevitably, vociferous. Letters were published in *The Guardian* on the behalf of the British Sociological Association

Corresponding author:

Matt Dawson, University of Glasgow, Adam Smith Building, 40 Bute Gardens, Glasgow G12 8RT, UK.

Email: matt.dawson@glasgow.ac.uk

(BSA) (*The Guardian*, 2012) and Chakraborty's inbox filled up with messages from those looking to defend the discipline. Chakraborty responded 3 weeks later, claiming he was not convinced and that, privately at least, many academics agreed with him (Chakraborty, 2012a). For him, the response of the BSA was too specialised meaning that 'the trade body for British sociologists proudly displayed its engagement by enumerating articles in the *Journal of Niche Studies*' (Chakraborty, 2012a). More responses followed, including a further *Guardian* article by then BSA President John Brewer (2012) and the publication of an 11-page formal response by the BSA outlining relevant sociological research on finance, markets and the crisis (BSA, n.d.).

Within this debate, something was very pronounced – the search for 'newness'. Chakraborty (2012b) himself was asking for 'fresh voices' and sociology responded in kind. I would argue this overlooked the fact that classical sociology was just as useful in attempting to understand the nature of the crisis and to challenge the dominant economic and political voices. Indeed, the work of Émile Durkheim is just such a resource, and this article is an attempt to inject a particularly Durkheimian voice into debates on the economic crisis.

To do so, I will be taking a broad view of the economic crisis. This is not just the initial 'credit crunch' and ensuing recession, but also includes the 'age of austerity' and the continued presence of crisis in the form of double-dip, and near-triple-dip, recession. In what follows, I will discuss these elements separately before drawing them together. In doing so, this article builds upon studies which seek to utilise Durkheim for times of economic crisis (Filloux, 1993; Lukes, 2009; Mestrovic, 1991; Stedman Jones, 2001: 103). Yet, when it comes to the political response of austerity and double-dip recessions, I hope to suggest a new appreciation of Durkheim's (1959) economic and political sociology that can be used to more fully understand 'our collective malaise' (p. 7). Therefore, Durkheim's work provides a sociological perspective on multiple aspects of the crisis, not solely its initial causes or its results but both.

My argument in what follows is twofold. The first is that Durkheim provides useful tools for understanding not only the nature of the economic crisis but also the connection between its various elements. Looking at events with the use of concepts such as economic anomie provides a sociological explanation for how the events of the credit crunch and the age of austerity emerge from a common cause: neoliberal marketisation. The second claim is to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Durkheim's economic and political sociology to an era of neoliberalism. Recently, attention has turned to Durkheim's role in the 'birth' of economic sociology (Steiner, 2011), and this article is meant as a contribution to such a reassessment. In what follows, I will be drawing from across the breadth of Durkheim's economic and political writings although I will make extensive use of his argument concerning economic anomie in *Suicide* (Durkheim, 1952).

Durkheim and the credit crunch

When advising sociologists who wish to understand the nature of political economy, including their pathological or normal form, Durkheim (1982) advocates they 'investigate what in the past gave rise' to such conditions and 'whether these conditions still pertain in the present or, on the contrary, have changed' (p. 95). I will follow this advice

throughout the article to argue that the credit crunch and resulting age of austerity can be more fully understood with reference to a pathological social fact: economic anomie.

The credit crunch – here I refer specifically to the dwindling availability of credit for exchange between banks following a number of defaults on ‘sub-prime’ mortgages – occurred after a long period of economic growth. In the 10 years leading up to 2008, the British economy had grown at an average rate of 3.2 per cent (World Bank, 2014). Long-time Chancellor Gordon Brown had said goodbye to ‘boom and bust’; the boom would remain, but the bust was part of the past. This continual growth helped give birth to a period of consumerism. As Bauman (2007b) put it, we entered the stage of a ‘society of consumers’ which sees individuals ‘*primarily in their capacity of consumers ... the kind of society that promotes, encourages or enforces the choice of a consumerist lifestyle and life strategy and dislikes all alternative cultural options*’ (pp. 52–53). This conception of the ideal consumer pervaded political discourse. European governments followed Margaret Thatcher in the advocacy of (consumer) choice above all else (Bauman, 2007a).

Therefore, the period leading up to the credit crunch was categorised by two factors: continual growth and the expansion of consumerism. These form the basis for Durkheim’s (1952) description of economic anomie (pp. 201–219). To recap this argument, Durkheim (1952) claims humans are defined by insatiable appetites which are ‘unlimited [in] so far as they depend on the individual alone’ (p. 208). Unlike animals, there are no organic or psychological limits to our desires, our wants are an ‘an insatiable and bottomless abyss’ (Durkheim, 1952: 208). This is why forms of regulation, inevitably moral in nature, have emerged in order to limit and control such desires. The appropriate limits emerge from corresponding ideas of the value of occupations: ‘the respective value of different social services’ and ‘the relative reward due to each’ (Durkheim, 1952: 210), thereby regulating and limiting desire according to the appropriate social value of our differing occupational activity. Importantly, such forms of regulation must be considered just ‘by the peoples subject to it’ (Durkheim, 1952: 212). Consequently, moral regulation emerges from ‘public opinion’ or ‘public feeling’ which would be ‘scandalised’ if the rich spent too frivolously or the lowest end of the scale were driven into a state of poverty (Durkheim, 1952: 210). While greater equality, by further equalising the resources given to all, would lessen the need for such restraints, it will not remove them because this is always a ‘matter of degree’ (Durkheim, 1952: 212). Therefore, for Durkheim, a normal economy is categorised by moral limits on desire considered just for that society. Thus, there is an equilibrium between resources received and conceptions of justice, based upon the social value of different occupations.

Such equilibrium is upset in a period of economic boom. The new opportunities offered by the promise of exciting and well-paid new jobs¹ and the presence of enticing, suddenly more affordable, consumer products upset this by challenging the established link between social position and social reward. The swiftness of such changes in a time of economic boom means that

As the conditions of life are changed, the standard according to which needs were regulated can no longer remain the same; for it varies with social resources, since it largely determines the share for each class of producers. The scale is upset; but a new scale cannot be immediately improvised.

(Durkheim, 1952: 213)

There emerges what Fromm (1942) termed a ‘lag’ between economic conditions and new ideas of a just distribution (pp. 244–245). As a result, the previously regulated desires are removed from moral regulation and ‘limits are unknown between the possible and the impossible, what is just and what is unjust, legitimate claims and hopes and those which are immoderate’ (Durkheim, 1952: 213). This freeing of consumer demands also occurs within an unequal distribution of wealth, meaning that while the poor feel an even more acute disconnect between what they receive and conceptions of a just distribution, the rich begin to seek out even more riches as ‘the more one has, the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs’ (Durkheim, 1952: 209). This inevitably for Durkheim creates a state of mutual suspicion and jealousy between the economically strong and the economically weak. The former can realise their consumerist dreams, while the latter become ‘faulty consumers’ defined by their inability to participate in the consumer market (Bauman, 2007b). Consequently, inequality of rewards expands. Here, we have the condition of economic anomie – the rewards of the economy and the ideas of justice which regulate it have dissolved in the cauldron of continuous growth and a thirst for the ‘novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations’ which make up the consumer market (Durkheim, 1952: 217).

This is Durkheim’s initial contribution to understanding the credit crunch: the period of economic boom preceding it was also a period of economic anomie. It would be too simplistic, not to mention profoundly un-Durkheimian, to say economic anomie ‘caused’ the recession, since, as we shall see, this is traced by Durkheim to the increase in marketisation. Nevertheless, as we shall see, applying the concept of economic anomie allows us to more fully elucidate and understand the nature of the credit crunch and the events which made it up. For example, not only do we see the expansion of consumer desires, but we see this occurring in an unjust system, one marked by economic inequality. Indeed, inequality in the United Kingdom during this boom period was ‘unparalleled both historically and compared with the changes taking place at the same time in most other developed countries’ (Brewer et al., 2009: 2). Only tax credits and stealth taxes were present to act as the ‘peace treaties’ used to maintain some harmony between the rich and poor (Durkheim, 1992: 11). This unequal expansion of credit and consumer goods was made worse by the nature of capitalist production in a globalised economy since

As the organised type of society develops, the fusion of the various segments entails the fusion of the markets into one single market, which embraces almost all of society. It even extends beyond and tends to become universal ... The result is that each industry produces for consumers who are dispersed over the length and breadth of the country, or even the whole world ... The producer can no longer keep the whole market within his purview, not even mentally. He [sic] can no longer figure out to himself its limits, since it is, so to speak, unlimited. Consequently production lacks any check or regulation. It can only proceed at random, and in the course of so doing it is inevitable that the yardstick is wrong, either in one way or the other. Hence the crises that periodically disturb economic functions.

(Durkheim, 1984: 305)

Here, we have what Engels (1984) termed the ‘anarchy of production’ (p. 138) whereby capitalism has a tendency towards overproduction and, therefore, a further tendency towards crisis. In the credit crunch, this was true when it came to the production

of credit where any reference to need and suitability was removed. Whether sub-prime mortgages or lines of credit were affordable and sustainable was less relevant than the immediate monetary return, either to the company or to the individual via bonuses. This is part of the nature of economic anomie, whereby economic action is determined solely by the profit motive, rather than moral considerations.

This, we may argue, was especially notable in the banking industry, from which the initial crisis sprung. As Durkheim (1992) notes, forms of moral regulation must be 'professional ethics': moral codes which are occupation specific. As the consumer market advances, so does the division of labour, meaning that the moral regulation of the professions does not maintain pace with their specialisation. Indeed, following the credit crunch, it was often claimed the sheer complexity and opaque nature of such financial transactions made regulation problematic for anyone without a high level of financial knowledge (Bone, 2009). It was difficult to regulate that which only a few, in this case those running the system, understood. Thus, in place of these moral guidelines, the 'amoral character of economic life', the profit imperative, becomes the guiding light which

amounts to a public danger ... the unleashing of economic interests has been accompanied by a debasing of public morality. We find that the manufacturer, the merchant, the workman, the employee, in carrying out his occupation, is aware of no influence set above him to check his egotism; he is subject to no moral discipline whatever and so he scorns any discipline at all of this kind.

(Durkheim, 1992: 12)

The banker, the mortgage lender and the financier are simply the most recent example of a long-term process of debasing professional ethics in favour of the profit imperative. When combined with continual growth and the expansion of the consumer market, economic anomie is the inevitable outcome.

This section has highlighted a Durkheimian explanation for the nature and form of the credit crunch as resting in, to use Durkheim's (1952) terminology, the 'chronic' nature of economic anomie during a period of marketisation (p. 215). The crisis this induced was shaped by the results of economic anomie including the freeing of desires from moral regulation, the lessening influence of professional ethics in the financial sector, the increase in economic inequality and the 'anarchy of production'. Central to this argument is that Durkheim links this directly to increased marketisation. Economic anomie is only a plausible outcome under conditions where we see 'the almost infinite extension of the market' (Durkheim, 1952: 216). Therefore, it is essential to turn further to marketisation, and the neoliberal system which perpetuated this, to understand the impacts of economic anomie. Such marketisation was, and remains, a key characteristic of the dominant conception of neoliberal economics. Such an ideology has been especially dominant in the Anglo-American world, as well as South America, Eastern Europe and Sweden (cf. Harvey, 2005). While it is true that the material changes brought about as a result of this ideology can be exaggerated (Doogan, 2009), especially in Continental Europe (Sewell, 2009), what is significant for our discussion is how the ideological dominance of neoliberalism limits alternatives during the crisis. This is true both within the countries mentioned above and elsewhere, such as the introduction of neoliberal technocratic governance in Italy and Greece, as I will discuss below.

One Durkheimian cure for economic anomie is a retraction and retreat of the market. The failure of this to occur – neoliberalism's strange 'non-death' (Crouch, 2011) – is central to a Durkheimian understanding of the political response to the credit crunch: the age of austerity.

Durkheim on the age of austerity

Crisis is a pervasive term; however, it remains somewhat poorly defined so that it is 'de-valued in its analytical specificity' (Holton, 1987: 503). When used in relation to our current situation does crisis refer to the initial credit crunch? Or to the events which followed? For Durkheim (1952), a 'crisis' is categorised by 'disturbances of the collective order' (p. 206), and, following this definition, I would suggest that the period from the initial credit crunch up to the present day is a 'crisis'. My argument here is similar to Bauman's (2012) that we are currently living through a time of 'interregnum' where the old order (neoliberalism) is, for Bauman, dying or, perhaps more accurately, has been shown to be faulty, without yet being replaced by a new economic order. This crisis has been exacerbated by the attempt to respond to it utilising the same mechanisms which created it. To elaborate a Durkheimian perspective on this, I will discuss three key elements of the crisis. One, the aforementioned economic inequality becomes an antagonistic relationship between a supposedly self-dependent rich and welfare-dependent poor. Two, this means any attempt to regulate the economy is resisted, creating the conditions for double- and near-triple-dip recessions. And finally, the crisis challenges the connection between state and political society creating, in the extreme case, a pseudo-democracy.

To begin, let us return to economic inequality. As highlighted above, periods of economic anomie are also times of increased economic inequality. The new rewards and opportunities of periods of economic boom go increasingly to the already wealthy. This is made worse by the nature of contractual relationships. Under conditions of organic solidarity, Durkheim (1992) argues that we expect contracts to be 'just', meaning not only freely entered into but also where goods and services are exchanged at a fair, or just, value (p. 211). For this to occur, there must be some measure of equality between the contracting parties. However, in a condition of notable economic inequality, this becomes increasingly difficult. When two contracting partners encounter each other,

one contracts to obtain something to live on, and the other only to obtain something to live better on, it is clear that the force of resistance of the latter will far exceed that of the former, by the fact that he can drop the idea of contracting if he fails to get the terms he wants. The other cannot do this. He is therefore obliged to yield and to submit to what is laid down for him.

(Durkheim, 1992: 213)

When the profit motive determines economic activity at the expense of moral ends, such as in a period of economic anomie, contracts increasingly conform to this unjust model (Durkheim, 1992: 214). Needless to say, this exacerbates inequality, and since the poorer in the contracting relationship is aware of this unjust situation, the conflict and mutual antagonism between the classes expand. There is no opportunity to 'bring peace to men's minds' and thus we encounter 'ever-recurring conflicts ... between the different factions of the economic structure' (Durkheim, 1992: 11).

For Durkheim, the super-ordinate finds justification for their self-interest and unjust contracts in the dominant conception of economic action, namely, the idealisation of individualised success. This is due to the nature of wealth since this, 'by the power it bestows, deceives us into believing that we depend on ourselves only' (Durkheim, 1952: 214). This belief that wealth is solely due to individual success and effort leaves the wealthy feeling justified in their belief that being without wealth must therefore be an indication of a *lack of effort* on behalf of the poor. They should not be rewarded with just contracts or other benefits but must rather be 'reduced to a state of subjection' (Durkheim, 1992: 11). Therefore, Durkheim (1992) argues that the inequality within capitalism becomes especially marked, and justified, when moral regulation is lacking and instead the amoral character of economic life expressed via marketisation becomes dominant (p. 12). In such a situation, due to the wealthy believing their success is solely due to individual effort, rather than socially produced conditions, further justification can be found for increasing inequality. Unjust contracts and expanding inequality are not seen as problems to be solved, but rather indications of the strengths of the system in rewarding individual talent and effort.

This idealisation of the unequal division of wealth is a key justification for the welfare cuts which form a central part of the age of austerity. A discourse of 'strivers versus shirkers', with the latter being those too lazy to work and being funded through the hard labour of the strivers, draws upon this conception of wealth being due to individual, rather than social, efforts. Therefore, cutting welfare for the poorest is not only permissible but is also seen as *fair and just* (Levitas, 2012). In a significant shift, this concept of 'fairness' is now seen as fairness to the taxpayer, to the economically strong (Atkinson et al., 2012). For Durkheim, it would be unsurprising that the crisis has seen an expansion in inequality, with the richest 1 per cent of British society increasing their share of wealth to 10 per cent, while the bottom half take home 18 per cent of the wealth (Resolution Foundation, 2013). This is rather an inevitable outcome of the anomic conditions of extreme inequality.

We can also see this anomic conception of wealth manifested in one of the key elements of the 'universal' market: tax avoidance. When individual effort is seen to be all that creates wealth, those with wealth feel increasingly justified in avoiding the taxes which have been paid for much of the resources (worker education, health care, logistics, transport systems) which have allowed them to amass wealth. Many become 'virtual taxpayers' who, while avoiding tax, 'send their children to the top publically funded European universities' (Beck, 2000: 6). The lesson we can take from Durkheim is that without moral regulation this is the natural result of increased marketisation since 'the doctrine of the most ruthless and swift progress has become an article of faith' (Durkheim 1952: 218) and there is no way of 'preventing the law of the strongest from being applied too brutally' (Durkheim. 1984: xxxix).

To summarise the argument concerning the age of austerity to this point, the state of economic anomie creates a situation whereby wealth is seen to be due solely to individual effort and success, necessitating the view that poverty is due to a lack of such effort. Under such conditions, the economically strong feel justified in exacerbating the unjust nature of contemporary contracts. We can see this relationship manifested in two key features of the age of austerity: first, in welfare cuts – these are justified by appeals to 'strivers versus shirkers' and 'fairness' seen from the eyes of those paying, rather than

receiving, welfare – and, second, in tax avoidance. Both of these make rhetorical and legislative appeal to the individualised and anomic conception of wealth distribution.

When locating the ideological position behind such a process, we find an uncanny overlap between Durkheim's time and our own; for Durkheim, it was *laissez-faire* economics; in our time, it is this ideology's descendant: neoliberalism. By assessing this, we also begin to encounter Durkheim's suggestion for how times of crisis are self-sustaining; in contemporary terms, why do we encounter double-tip, and near-triple-dip, recession?

As highlighted above, for Durkheim the expansion of the market aids the sidelining of moral considerations in favour of the profit imperative. However, the corrosive nature of markets does not stop there since it also inhibits the potential for, and contests the validity of, reasserting morality into the economy. This is part of a historical shift Durkheim (1952) notes where 'for a whole century, economic progress has mainly consisted in freeing industrial relations from all regulation' (p. 215). As a result, more and more areas of social life have been subjected to economic demands to the point that

The scientific functions alone are in a position to dispute its ground, and even science has hardly any prestige in the eyes of the present day, except in so far as it may serve what is materially useful, that is to say, serve for the most part the business professions.

(Durkheim, 1992: 11)²

This expansion of the market is united with the idea of individualised success, meaning that

Government, instead of regulating economic life, has become its tool and servant. The most opposite schools, orthodox economists and extreme socialists, unite to reduce government to the role of a more or less passive intermediary among the various social functions. The former wish to make it simply the guardian of individual contracts; the latter leave it the task of doing the collective bookkeeping ... But both refuse it any power to subordinate social organs to itself and to make them converge towards one dominant aim. On both sides nations are declared to have the single or chief purpose of achieving industrial prosperity; such is the implication of the dogma of economic materialism, the basis of both apparently opposed systems. And as these theories merely express the state of opinion, industry, instead of being still regarded as a means to an end transcending itself, has become the supreme end of individuals and societies alike. Thereupon the appetites thus excited have become freed of any limiting authority. By sanctifying them, so to speak, this apotheosis of well-being has placed them above all human law. Their restraint seems like a sort of sacrilege.

(Durkheim, 1952: 216)

This apotheosis of well-being therefore sees *any* restraint as sacrilege or 'hateful in itself' (Durkheim, 1952: 217). Such restraint is seen as akin to punishing the successful and hard-working. This ensures that the lack of moral regulation of the economy is maintained by a view which sees regulation to limit, rather than expand, the market as itself immoral. This is a central part of neoliberal ideology with its claim that 'human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private rights, free markets,

and free trade' (Harvey, 2005: 2). To pursue individual needs and desires economically is seen as a wider moral good since, as David Cameron (2012) put it, 'free enterprise promotes morality'. This is then reflected in the response of governments to the initial crisis whereby, despite the demonstrable failings of the neoliberal system, regulation has not been forthcoming. This is because any regulation to limit the market is seen as evil, due to its being a curb on the individual economic freedom which makes up the apotheosis of well-being. Therefore, for Durkheim, marketisation is self-justifying and perpetuating.

As the above comment from Cameron indicates, it could be claimed that Durkheim's link of markets and 'amorality' is a bit too simplistic since the neoliberal conceptualisation of markets encapsulates a very particular idea of what it is for individuals to be moral. This includes the following: the individuals freely selling their labour for the highest value as active agents in a fair and just market (Braedley and Luxton, 2010); that individuals can only do so when markets operate without regard to external 'restrictions' (Connell, 2010); and finally that this becomes part of 'common sense and everyday behaviour' (Hall, 2011: 728). I would suggest this is a flaw of language on Durkheim's part rather than conceptualisation. As the above has indicated, Durkheim does imagine markets to contain a certain *individualised* morality: the apotheosis of well-being. Given Durkheim's wider sociological concern, this is 'amoral' in the sense that while it directs individual actions, such direction happens without reference to others. Therefore, it is possible to assert that the amoral character of economic life is amoral for Durkheim not in the sense that it contains no conception of individualised morality but rather in the sense that it is not linked to a collective form of morality, determined by justice. This then impacts government action; 'the dogma of economic materialism' allows only for regulation to *further* the market, but not to create the moral limits Durkheim sees as essential. Therefore, adopting a Polanyian perspective, neoliberalism can be regulated into being by governments without also being *morally* regulated.

Therefore, with new moral regulation lacking, the factors which created the initial crisis (the amoral action of the markets, the extension of credit beyond ability to pay, the construction of new exotic financial mechanisms) once more expand. But the conditions are now even worse since the insatiable appetites and individual desires have already been emancipated by the initial crisis, the result being that

There is no tendency to resignation in the feverish impatience of men's lives. When there is no other aim but to outstrip constantly the point arrived at, how painful to be thrown back! Now this very lack of organisation characterising our economic condition throws the door wide to every sort of adventure. Since imagination is hungry for novelty, and ungoverned, it gropes at random. Setbacks necessarily increase with risks and thus crises multiple, just when they are becoming more destructive.

(Durkheim, 1952: 217)

Therefore, the economic conditions which produced the initial crisis are likely to remain and, in some ways, become more acute. We encounter a crisis defined not by one event but by their multiplication – by the double-dip and near-triple-dip recessions which emerge from the un-reconstituted economies of the initial credit crunch. We can see the predilection for 'adventure' and 'risks' suggested by Durkheim in our current economic

situation. They can be found in the ever more esoteric financial instruments, such as derivatives (Sassen, 2012: 461–464) and the manipulation of the London Inter-Bank Offered Rate (LIBOR) rate at which banks lend to one another. All of these have contributed towards the self-perpetuation of crisis. At the same time, possible solutions, such as the Tobin/‘Robin Hood’ tax or a splitting of retail and financial banking, are (in the United Kingdom at least) dismissed unless they come with the approval of those they seek to regulate. The apotheosis of well-being, and its unity with the amoral character of economic life, is unquestioned. For Durkheim, this is an inevitable result of the initial economic anomie casting all regulation as harmful in itself.

As we have seen, given the rejection of regulation in the initial marketisation responsible for the crisis, there appears to be a lack of political will for regulation as a response, as I will indicate below. Any crisis marked by marketisation is therefore self-perpetuating. However, there is a further political element to the crisis, namely, the way in which governments responded to it by implementing an age of austerity. This requires us to turn our attention towards the role of the state in a democracy.

For Durkheim, the state is divided between external and internal functions (Durkheim, [1958] 1986). The external functions – which form the initial reason for the state’s development – concern the state’s role in military operations and trade. As states become more established geographically and politically, such roles become less significant and the internal functions become dominant. These concern the nature of the state as the ‘organ of social justice’ (Durkheim, [1958] 1986: 48). The state is charged to ‘keep a rein’ on the inequalities and injustices which emerge from forms of economic organisation such as ‘castes, classes, corporations, coteries of all kinds, and all economic entities’ (Durkheim, [1958] 1986: 49).³ The prime mechanism through which the state achieves this is by the codification of ideas of justice, based within civic morals (Durkheim, [1958] 1986: 48, 1992).

The most effective means for establishing such a state is a democracy. Durkheim (1992) is very specific in his definition of democracy arguing that

The closer communication becomes between the government consciousness and the rest of society, and the more this consciousness expands and the more things it takes in, the more democratic the character of the society will be. The concept of democracy is best seen in the extension of this consciousness to its maximum and it is this process that determines the communication.

(p. 84)

Such a process means that ‘the citizens are kept in touch with what the state is doing’ and the state is told ‘what is going on in the deep layers of the society’ (Durkheim, 1992: 85). This is not to suggest that Durkheim (1992) has a rosy view of a flourishing democracy in which citizens are fully engaged in politics,⁴ rather that under normal conditions mechanisms exist via which the democratic process can be, at least partially, enacted.

But a time of crisis cannot, as we have already seen, be considered a time of normal conditions. Instead, it could be argued that the communicative connection between the state and political society has been noticeably damaged and even cut. Rather than the actions of governments being ‘checked by everyone’ as democracy requires (Durkheim,

1992), governmental action has been increasingly aimed towards, and approved by, economic bodies, be they 'experts' (financiers, global finance ministers), institutional bodies (credit ratings agencies) or ethereal notions ('the markets') (p. 82). To elaborate on this notion, there are two cases I wish to draw upon: technocratic governments and credit rating bodies.

When the economic crisis was reaching its height in Europe, two countries gained technocratic governments within 5 days, largely at the urging of transnational bodies including dominant European Union players. Greece was led by the technocratic government of Lucas Papademos from 11 November 2011 to 16 March 2012 and Italy by the government of Mario Monti from 16 November 2011 to 27 April 2013. Both men were chosen explicitly for their background as economists.⁵ Neither was elected to their initial post nor was approval sought from the citizenry, despite the fact that part of their 'mandate' was to enact major social and economic changes. These governments, beholden to the citizenry and instead owing their power to transnational groups, were not therefore linked to political society via the communicative mechanisms of democracy but rather became physical manifestations of the dominance of the amoral character of economic life. Not only had government become the 'tool and servant of economic life', it had elevated the toolmakers to leaders.

When we see such a loss of the communicative mechanisms of democracy, we enter what Durkheim (1992) termed a 'pseudo-democracy' (p. 84), one feature of which is that 'political leaders are only delegates and always provisional' (p. 88). Here, such leaders are delegates from the amoral character of economic life. Due to this disconnection between political society and state, an inevitable feature of pseudo-democracies is large-scale protest since, with the lack of a clear democratic link between people and government, 'resistance is more sharply defined' (Durkheim, 1992: 84). The well-attended protests throughout Greece would seem to, at least partly, be linked to this. Therefore, technocratic government is an institutionalisation of economic anomie and the rejection of regulation.

However, it could be argued that technocratic governments, with their open allegiance to, and parenthood from, economic rationality simply, to repeat Durkheim's (1992) critique of classical economics, 'raise a *de facto* state of affairs which is unhealthy, to the level of a *de jure* state of affairs' (p. 10) since the same process has occurred in countries without a pseudo-democratic setup. Rather than government actions being determined via democratic communication, it could be argued that it has, even more than before the crisis, been judged according to the considerations of the amoral character of economic life. This is most notable in the United Kingdom where the success or failure of austerity measures has not been measured in unemployment or poverty rates but rather by technocratic economic measures including the maintenance, and eventual loss, of a 'triple A' credit rating, the approval of bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the approval of 'the market' (which takes on a quasi-spiritual formation; cf. Taussig, 1997). Here, political decisions have their value judged on purely economic grounds, outlined by technocratic bodies or ethereal notions, despite the appearance of democracy. This means that the expansion of economic rationality continues apace and the moral ends towards which economic action should be directed are discarded. As Durkheim (1992) put it in words which echo in the current day, 'there exists to-day a whole range of

activity outside the sphere of morals ... And it is precisely due to this fact that the crisis has arisen from which the European societies are now suffering' (pp. 10–11). The apotheosis of well-being is once more a guiding light and crisis is the result.

In the preceding section of this article, I have argued that Durkheim's relevance to our current economic crisis is not only limited to explaining its initial manifestation via economic anomie but also to the economic and political conditions which occur in an age of austerity. This has taken three forms. First, the exacerbation of inequality produced by the initial condition of economic anomie and made worse by the crisis becomes a notable divide of rich and poor where the rich increasingly feel their wealth is solely down to individual effort. In such a situation, welfare cuts are justified via a discourse of 'strivers vs shirkers' where the poor must be forced to generate their own wealth to combat their perceived laziness. Second, this belief in wealth being due to individual effort also means that new forms of regulation, notably moral regulation, are seen as harmful and to be opposed in all cases. This means that regulation to combat the original crisis is not passed and the conditions remain for the perpetuation of crisis in the form of double- and near-triple-dip recessions. Finally, rather than the state and political society being linked by the communicative mechanisms of democracy, governmental actions are decided primarily with recourse to economic rationality. This has been seen in the 'pseudo-democracies' of technocratic Greece and Italy and the importance given to transnational economic measures, such as credit ratings and the ephemeral decisions of the market.

This brings us to the final point of our discussion: having highlighted Durkheim's explanation for our crisis, is there any solution offered in his work? To quote one of Durkheim's contemporaries, 'what is to be done?'

Conclusion: Durkheim's way out of crisis

As we have seen, the current crisis for Durkheim has both economic and political elements. However, to understand any potential solution to such a crisis, we must return to the realm of morality. Durkheim ([1899] 1986), when confronting the challenges of his time, most notably the lack of economic regulation, spoke of a *malaise* as 'not rooted in any particular class; it is general over the whole of society' (p. 143). This *malaise* should for Durkheim ([1899] 1986, 1959) be seen as 'one of refashioning the moral constitution of society' (p. 143) through discovering the 'moral restraint which can regulate economic life' (p. 240). It is beyond the scope of this article to fully elaborate the various views on the nature and positioning of Durkheim's politics. While I (Dawson, 2013) have argued that Durkheim can be located within the history of libertarian socialism, others have seen him as advocating a fundamentally corporatist (Black, 1984), communitarian (Cladis, 1992), republican (Giddens, 1971) or liberal/reformist socialist project (Lukes, 1973). What is important for our discussion is that while these views differ, they all highlight the centrality of morality, as in Lukes' (1973) claim of Durkheim being a 'moralistic' social reformer (p. 546). Indeed, a recent history of political theory, undecided on whether Durkheim was a 'market socialist' or a 'communitarian', nevertheless places him as the pinnacle of a French school which sees moral unity as determining the strength of the political (Ryan, 2012: 983–984). As we have seen above, it is this lack of moral regulation of markets which Durkheim sees at the heart of the *malaise*.

This perspective is currently very much missing from political debate. Given the dominance of the amoral character of economic life, political actors currently base their appeal upon their ability to create economic growth, as we have seen for Durkheim ‘nations are seen as having the single or chief purpose of achieving industrial prosperity’. Even when questions of morality are touched upon, these are discussed in the context of economic conditions such as in Ed Miliband’s (2012) claim that a future Labour government would ‘deliver fairness even when there’s less money around’. Missing from such a debate is Durkheim’s key contribution: that economic growth can only be a means towards a morally determined end – when the debate of these moral ends is abdicated, then it is only an anomic economy which can emerge; the profit imperative becomes both means and end. As I have suggested, this is not to deny that neoliberal markets do not contain a type of morality rather than this is neoliberal individualised morality. By accepting the needs of the economy as dominant over the rest of social functions, political actors forego their responsibility to use the state to ‘work out certain representations which hold good for the collectivity’ (Durkheim, 1992: 50). Most importantly, any debate as to the wider values for which an economy stands is lost in claims that we can no longer afford these morally desirable but expensive policies. However, as Karl Mannheim (1951) later put it,

The phrase ‘we cannot afford it’ always implies reference to ‘under the given circumstances’, i.e. those of income distribution, taxation, deliberately tolerated scarcity, the production of luxury goods, plus an attitude of complacency.

(p. 262)

In this light, any question of economic regulation returns attention to the fact that this will inevitably need to be moral regulation. Since, as Steiner (2011) correctly puts it, ‘the question of justice is central in Durkheim’s sociological approach to the economy’, such moral regulation would be concerned with achieving justice throughout society, rather than simply ‘fairness’ for taxpayers (p. 29). A Durkheimian contribution to the debate on how to move past the era of crisis, whether we see this as a socialist, liberal or communitarian intervention, will remember that ‘the social question ... is not a question of money or force; it is a question of moral agents. What dominates it is not the state of our economy but, much more, the state of our morality’ (Durkheim, 1959: 204). This is not to claim that this moral question is easily answered; indeed, as we have seen, Durkheim argues times of economic anomie are especially resilient to *any* regulation, be it moral or otherwise, which may explain why previous crises have not given birth to Durkheim’s hopes. Nevertheless, some (Black, 1984; Muller, 1993) have argued that fundamental elements of Durkheim’s project were achieved in the welfare states of the post-war era. While this underplays the radicalness of Durkheim’s goals, it does demonstrate some of its applicability and links into an essential element of his optimism that such moral regulation was possible.

Such optimism can be seen in the events of 1915 where, with the minds of France turning to what their country would look like after the war and whether there should, or could, be a return to the era of *laissez-faire*, Durkheim contributed to a symposium on ‘The Politics of Tomorrow’ (cf. Fournier, 2013: 707–708). His contribution, appearing in

1917, was the last article published in his lifetime. Following his own advice of studying the history of political economy to understand the present, Durkheim (2009) argued that

Some great minds realized that economic life could not go to such an extent against the fundamental conditions of life in general, that it could not be made up of anarchic, discordant movements, from which order and harmony were born miraculously, but that economic life pre-supposes an 'organization'. Such is the principle that Saint-Simon and his disciples helped, more than anyone, to bring to light. It is this same idea that is at the basis of all socialist doctrines. However diverse the formulas through which they have tried to express themselves, all are in agreement on this fundamental truth, that economic activity is something eminently social, that it is concerned with social ends, with social interests, and that, accordingly, it needs to be 'socially organized'.

(p. 4)

Durkheim (1992) contrasted such a view with the 'strangely superficial notion' held by economists that regulation was a 'rather tyrannous militarisation', arguing instead that given the pre-existing role of governments and social ties (e.g. trust) in the economy, it is clear that 'it should be socialised' (p. 29). Indeed, it could be argued that Durkheim had a 'evolutionist' view of economic regulation (Fournier, 2013: 492). The fact that neoliberalism seems to strike at the heart of this in its turn to marketisation makes the need for raising moral questions even more profound; as Durkheim (1982) put it, sociology should have a 'constant preoccupation' with 'practical' questions such as economic organisation (p. 160). It is hard to think of a more fitting coda for the distinctively *sociological* contribution Durkheim can make to understanding our current crisis.

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Notes

1. Indicated by the perhaps counter-intuitive finding that as the rate of unemployment decreases so does the average length of each job. When the labour market expands, individuals are more willing to leave one job to seek out another (Doogan, 2009: 171).
2. The overlap between this statement of the 1890s and contemporary concerns of the 'impact agenda' and the increased privatisation of the university sector in England being especially notable.
3. As argued elsewhere (Dawson, 2013: 72–83), in Durkheim's ideal society, the practical elements of this and the actual governing are not conducted by the state but rather by the secondary groups of political society, in Durkheim's case the corporations (see also Black, 1984: 220–241).
4. Indeed, Durkheim (1992) highlights the multiple shortcomings with liberal representative democracy based on geography (pp. 98–109).
5. Monti had some background in politics having worked as a European commissioner from 1999 to 2004; Papademos had no such experience.

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Author biography

Matt Dawson is a lecturer in sociology at the University of Glasgow. He has research interests in both classical and contemporary theory, especially the work of Bauman and Durkheim. The political ends of both of these theories were combined in his *Late Modernity, Individualization and Socialism: An Associational Critique of Neoliberalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). He is currently working on a book looking at the history of normative social alternatives provided by social theory.