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Emile Durkheim’s sociological thinking evolution from a pedagogical perspective

Ionut Bulgaru*

University of Pitesti, Doaga Street, no. 11, Pitesti, Arges, Romania

Abstract

In the work’s economy, an important specific perspective is the historic one. Thus, we shall concentrate on Durkheim’s work historic analysis, made by several Romanian and foreign authors, which will help us correctly placing Durkheim’s sociology within the great sociological and psychological thinking systems. At the same time, it will help us identify the importance of the paradigm he proposes within the sociological thinking system – the classical functionalism paradigm – which will influence the education sociology apparition and development.

Durkheim’s most important and substantial merit consists in supporting and demonstrating the fact that sociology must be conceived as a general science of the social. This approach becomes exemplary for understanding pedagogy as a general science of education.

This thesis, which today is unanimously accepted, has been hardly to assert within the historic conditions where Durkheim created his sociological work during the 19th-20th centuries.

1. Introduction

In the sociology as science beginning’s history, there was traced a way that Durkheim contests vehemently. The main thesis that Durkheim proposes is that of the social fact which, on one hand, has an objective character, being extrinsic to individuals, and on the other hand, has an imperative character, even compelling and coercive

* Corresponding author Ionut Bulgaru. Tel.: 0040747117789; fax: 0040348453351.
E-mail address: ionutbulgaru@yahoo.com
for any individual who want and must integrate within the society. This main thesis is proposed, analysed and developed by Durkheim in his famous work, "The Rules of Sociological Method".

In epistemological and methodological plan, “The Rules of Sociological Method” is an epochal work for the sociopedagogical thinking, having at least three great essential contributions:

1. the identification of the specific research object, which must always refer to objective character facts (thus, sociology, but also pedagogy distinguish themselves by other sciences, such as psychology and history);
2. the application of an adequate methodology to the object studied (sociology involves observation and experimentation methods, statistical methods etc.), valuable both externally and in pedagogical area;
3. the apparition of the interdisciplinarity idea that Durkheim intuits and even experiences when comparing the social facts with the psychological facts.

In conclusion, for Durkheim, sociology represents “or is going to be the integrative and systematic theory of the social facts”. Thus, these social facts cannot be known very deeply if they will be studied by particular disciplines, other than sociology. Analogically, pedagogy must provide an integrative theory of the education facts.

2. Theoretical foundation and related literature

The first historic analysis we propose is inspired by the Istoria Sociologiei (History of Sociology)[1], written by the famous Romanian sociologist, Ilie Bădescu, history which may be interpreted also as a model for understanding the educational resources of the sociological approach.

Ilie Bădescu proposes a monumental history of sociology, based on the “sociological theories’ dynamics”, which is divided into two parts:
• the former provides a history of ideas, finalised by systems, theories and current schools.
• the latter involves the social ideas functions within the classic cycle theories.

Thus, by merging the two perspectives, Durkheim’s work analysis is made from the perspective of much more ideas with sociopedagogical receptiveness and signification [1], p. 188-351:
• corporate idea, object of the contractual relationships analysis in education;
• social conscience and common conscience idea, object of moral, intellectual, esthetical etc. education;
• mechanical and organic solidarity idea, necessary at the level of the education objective functions;
• social division, religion and anomie idea, suggestive for arguing the education importance;
• social change idea, significant for the education reforms issue.

Durkheim is interested in explaining the anomie, which means the absence of laws and which measures the social disintegration degree. The last generation analysis made at Oxford, published in the dictionary of sociology, edited by Gordon Marchal (1994; 1998), reconsiders Durkheim’s conception beyond the classic clichés of sociology and sociological functionalism founder. Durkheim’s ideas are placed just “in the sociolinguistics structuralism area (conversations and postmodernism analysis)” [2], [3], which provides receptiveness to the ample issue of the educational communication.

The post-modern ideas are placed in the area of the contributions brought by Durkheim when creating “L’Anneé Sociologique” magazine, which became the exponent of Durkheim’s thinking school, the symbol and propagator of Durkheim’s conception. The dictionary insists on Durkheim’s methodological merits. Thus “sociology as a science can be characterised by observation (more than by abstract theory) while the study of the social facts (not psychological) provides both causal and functional explanations”.

The methodology formulated is consistently applied in the book “Suicide”, which demonstrates a troubling truth, “the rate of suicides is a social fact”. The same methodology is applied also when there are analysed “The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life” (1912). In this book, “an epitaph of his work”, Durkheim demonstrates the fact that by religious facts (rituals, practices etc.), “the collective individuals venerate the society”. The methodology proposed by Durkheim is applied also in the approach of several subjects concerning directly or indirectly pedagogy’s issue: the subject of the moral and morality, of the relationship between education and society, between pedagogy and sociology.
Durkheim’s most important and substantial merit consists of supporting and demonstrating the fact that sociology has to be conceived as a social’s general science. This approach becomes exemplary for understanding pedagogy as an education general science.

This thesis, which today is unanimously accepted, has been hardly to assert within the historic conditions where Durkheim created his sociological work during the 19th-20th centuries.

Moreover, we shall underline the fact that from the end of the 19th century, “the dominant conception about the social fact was that all that is general used to be firstly individual” [4] p. 119.

In sociology as science beginning’s history, there was traced a way that Durkheim contests vehemently. This will generate a different paradigm which was proven to be useful for creating sociology, as a distinct science, but also for removing any interference with psychology, which used to be in a more advanced stage of epistemological ageing over the social sciences, over sociology. This situation constitutes an epistemological challenge also for pedagogy’s construction.

The main thesis that Durkheim proposes is that of the social fact which, on one hand, has an objective character, being extrinsic to individuals, and on the other hand, has an imperative character, even compelling and coercive for any individual who wants and must integrate within the society. This main thesis is proposed, analysed and developed by Durkheim in 1895 in his famous work, “The Rules of Sociological Method”.

Thus, Emile Durkheim defends himself as follows: “we do not say that the social facts are material things, but that they are similar to material things, but in a different way” [5] p.12.

The historic analysis proposed correlates two aspects: Durkheim’s scientific life and career and his scientific work. It is unanimously known that Emile Durkheim remained in the social sciences history of France (and not only) as “the sociological school head, because he succeed in presenting sociology as a theory integrating and systematising the social facts, as other disciplines never did.” [4] p.120-126.

Durkheim’s work can be synthesised quantitatively with the following terms:
- more than 80 articles and more than 300 reviews published in the specialty press, mainly in “L’année Sociologique”;
- four books “considered canonical for sociology”: 1. The division of Labour in Society (1893), a book which is based on his PhD thesis presented at Sorbonne; 2. The Rules of Sociological Method (1893); 3. Suicide (1897);
- 4. The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (1912). There should also be mentioned his posthumous works; all these books can be interpreted also from their major formative resources perspective, which are important for understanding the relationship between sociology and education.

In “The Rules of Sociological Method”, a book published at Paris in 1895, Durkheim practically enhances the sociology status by removing its specific study object, different from that of psychology. Durkheim proves the fact that the psychological facts have also in their essence and expression a sociological signification: “When I fulfil my charge of brother, husband or citizen, when I achieve my commitments, I fulfil charges that are defined out of me and my actions, by law and in manners; even if I agree with my own feelings and I feel them intrinsically, this reality does not mean that they are not objective, because it is not me that made them, but I received them as such through education” [6] p. 3-4), which acts a true social fact.

Sociology’s object of study is the social fact, different from the psychological fact, which individualises itself by at least two characteristics: 1. its exteriority and its objectivity; 2. its coercive action which imposes to the individual norms, rules, constraints without which the social integrity cannot take place. It is what is also understood in the case of education; by analogy, pedagogy studies the sociopedagogical facts, involved externally and objectively in the individual formation and “socialisation”.

In epistemological and methodological plan, “The Rules of Sociological Method” is an epochal work for the sociopedagogical thinking, having at least three great essential contributions:
- the identification of the specific research object, which must always refer to objective character facts (by this, sociology, but also pedagogy distinguish themselves from other sciences, such as psychology and history);
2. the application of an adequate methodology for the object studied (sociology involves observation and experimentation methods, statistical methods etc.), valuable both extrinsically and pedagogically;

3. the apparition of the interdisciplinarity idea that Durkheim intuits and even exercises when comparing the social facts with the psychological facts, the psychological approach with the sociological approach; it is a way that Durkheim will also use in the analysis of the relationship between psychology and pedagogy in a work become classic, published posthumously [7].

A post-modern analysis perspective of the sociology’s history is presented by Micelle Lallement [8] p. 9-11. According to the author, the historic evolution of Durkheim’s thinking is closely related to his sociological project developed in three stages, which confirm a very interesting and surprising post-modern perspective:

1. moral stage;
2. epistemological stage;
3. methodological stage.

1. **The moral stage** is related to the ethical preoccupations that Durkheim has during his youth, together with the reformist spirit of the post-revolutionary period and with the Dreyfus Affair, which caused large emotions and social debates. Then the social moral issues are inherent to the profession that he embraces, vital for the republic’s future. Durkheim is a supporter of the free, obligatory and laic elementary education, legally recognised in 1880, by Ferry Law. Moreover, his interest in political issues (civil rights, freedom of expression) confers to his pedagogy and sociology a militant character. The education itself, considered as socialisation, “seems to be to him one of the most important means of social integration”.

2. **The epistemological stage** is related to the entire effort oriented by Emile Durkheim in the direction of recognising sociology as a science together with the identification of its specific study object (moral facts with objective character). The great French sociologist and pedagogue tries to separate from the psychologist tendencies which used to be in that period, tendencies which also use to reverberate on ethics and moral.

Influenced by Kant’s philosophy and by the principles undertaken from the natural sciences, Durkheim already issues, in his PhD thesis (which also became his first book) the following thesis with epistemological value: “we do not want to separate the science’s moral, but to make the moral’s science”. It is a beginning in his way of asserting a sociology specific epistemology that he considers a kind of physics of manners and of law. This specific epistemology is useful in the process of clarifying the status of pedagogy as an autonomous science.

Before getting the concept of social facts – a key concept for founding sociology, Durkheim talks about two large categories of moral facts:

**Manners** – refer to the human charge towards family, professional corporation, State;

**Law** – relates to a general ethics, based on the human economic and community life.

These ideas, already launched during youth, are found in a book published posthumously, entitled - „*Leçons de sociologie. Physique des moeurs et du droit*“. On this way, Durkheim gets the key notion for sociology, the social fact notion. It is valued in pedagogy, at a general and particular level (see the education notion as a social fact, morally, politically, legally, religiously etc. expressed).

In the category of the social facts there are also the social, moral, pedagogical, legal rules, more or less visible, which have an objective character, exercising an external constraint on human being. Only these social facts, noticeable and explainable only by the causality principle and by scientific methods, constitute the object of a new science designed as sociology. His approach becomes an epistemological pattern also for other social sciences, including for pedagogy.

3. **The methodological stage** can be divided in two sub stages: a) a stage of constituting the general principles to follow in the sociological research [5]; b) application of these principles and rules in the analysis and explanation of several exceptional social facts, such as the religious faith and the suicide.

“The Rules of Sociological Method” helps Durkheim to treat in a certain manner the study object – the social facts. They are, first of all, things with objective character. Thus, the sociologist appeals to the social facts observation, as the physicist notices and experiences the physical facts. Then, the social facts have to be judged
within a well defined social context in order to distinguish between what is normal and what is pathological. It is introduced the regularity idea of the social facts, which has its causes in the previous social facts and not in the biological or psychological individual facts.

The application of these rules at the suicide level confirms the fact that suicide is a social fact and not a psychological one. The three types of suicide correspond to three types of social situations and causes:

- the altruist suicide appears in closed groups, such as the army;
- the egoist suicide is generated by the absence of equilibrium related to the society’s external force;
- the anomic suicide is the consequence of the anomic phenomenon apparition, of order absence (which may be acute, regressive or progressive).

The application of the same rules for the religion phenomenon leads to the conclusion that religion is first of all a collective phenomenon. “A religion is a unitary system of faiths and practices related to sacred things, that is separated, forbidden, faiths and practices that are merged in the same moral community named Church by all those who adhere to it […]. Showing that the religion idea is inseparable by that of Church, it also results the fact that religion may be an eminently collective thing” [5] p.63.

Laically speaking, Durkheim notices that “society is for its members what God is for His religious.” In other words, religion is society’s transfiguration, a subtle and sublime creation of the collective conscience.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, for Durkheim, sociology represents “or is going to be the integrative and systematic theory of social facts” [6] p.64. Thus, these social facts cannot be known in their deepness if they will be studied by particular disciplines, other than sociology. Analogically, pedagogy must provide an integrative theory of the education’s facts.

Two conclusions are relevant in the analysis proposes:

1. The former has a common point with the researches of the Britannic Oxford researchers; Durkheim is a structuralism and post-modernism precursor by his positive, but also ethical force of his sociological approach, which provides new analysis sources of the socioeducational phenomena.

2. The latter is of evidence; Durkheim is the founder of the French Sociology School, which will generate a thinking school with his name (“Durkheimian School”); this school has the force of a multidisciplinary project as the functionalism issue is related to more social and human sciences: to moral and religion, to linguistics and aesthetics, but also to history and ethnography of religions, to politics and law, to geography; pedagogy itself considers the analogical meanings, but especially the epistemological meanings of this “school”.

It is awkward that on this “map” of relationships and specialists within the durkheimian school, there is no organic relationship expressed explicitly by Durkheim between pedagogy and sociology [8] p. 109.

References