A Re-evaluation of the Holism-Individualism Dispute

Rarita Mihaila *  
Lecturer, PhD, “Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati, 111 Domneasca Street, Galati, Romania

Abstract

The present article aims at evincing the positive valences of the holism-individualism dispute in the epistemology of social sciences. Like other dichotomous pairs, holism and individualism have become the predominant spaces of academic analysis in social sciences, being vested with a great power of theoretical discrimination. Instead of treating methodological individualism and holism as complete, a-temporal, antagonistic paradigms, it is our presumption that they are but historical evolutions in social thinking, which are under no circumstances definitive, but improvable and possibly complementary. In this context, the present study claims that there is less and less justification for a dispute between a “holist” Durkheim and an “individualism”-championing Weber, all the more so as in the past few decades consensus and synthesis have been sought by the very proponents of these doctrinal oppositions.

Introduction

The opposition holism/individualism is part of an ensemble of antithetic pairs that are relevant not only for social sciences in general, but also for sociology in particular. All subjects are concerned with the tension between objectivity and subjectivity, deduction and induction, the analytical and the synthetic (Valade, 2001, p. 357). Terms such as diachrony or macroanalysis, and their antonyms synchrony and microanalysis, which have always had an area of privileged applicability in linguistic and economy, have been extended to various other subjects. In anthropology, be it either philosophical or psychoanalytic, and in sociology, be it either general or applied, the subject and the structure, the individual and the society are the symbol of determining references, open to various interpretations.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40 745805991.  
E-mail address: rarita.mihail@ugal.ro
The antinomy that the pair holism/individualism seems to intrinsically manifest is not dissociated from the source of other acknowledged contradictions. That these are mostly false debates, quickly qualified as sterile, is proved by the dispute between Tarde and Durkheim (Valade, 2001, p. 387). But, besides the hidden stakes and ideologies, it has to be remarked that scientific controversies are very frequent (all the more so as generally speaking science also has a polemic function). In point of the opposition holism-individualism, the sociological debate is first and foremost methodological and epistemological, therefore technical, and that is why it has to be taken with a grain of salt.

Taking these considerations into account, it is our objective to show that even if holism and individualism have become the main spaces of analysis for humanistic thinkers, vested with a great capacity of theoretical discrimination, they should not be treated as definitive and antagonistic paradigms, but rather as historical evolutions in understanding the social phenomena, apt to be reassessed in the light of the relationship between society and the individual. In this respect, it is our wish to also show that Durkheim should not be strictly ranked among the holists, nor Weber considered a “champion” of individualism. Going beyond this confining classification is all the more justified as Raymond Boudon, one of the theorists who used to propound these doctrinarian oppositions, ended up finding individualist explanations in Durkheim. Similarly, it is our view that Weber’s explanations on the model of the rational actor may be extended beyond individualistic perspectives.

1. Irrefutable differences between holism and individualism

The issue of the epistemology of social sciences concerning the conceptual models of society comprehension brings forth the dispute between holism and individualism. Raymond Boudon, one of the modern theoreticians of methodological individualism, proposes to approach the history of sociology through the two currents in permanent dispute. The former is older and was the dominant one for a long time, i.e. holism, and the latter appeared later with Max Weber, i.e. methodological individualism. Although the latter tends, towards the late 20th century to change the balance in its favour, the heuristic value of some of the holistic explanations on social life has never been contested.

Although complementary, the two paradigms of social sciences are mainly differentiated by the model of scientific knowledge they favour (Hollis, 2001). The various forms of holism attempt to connect social science to natural sciences, while individualism attempts the connection to history and economy. Holism has a nomologic point of departure, trying to discover relations or properties similar to laws. On the other hand, individualism is prone to casuistics, being interested in unrepeatable events and the particular and unique aspects of any phenomenon. Holistic conceptions consider that in order to explain social phenomena one should depart from the social structures and move towards the individuals and their actions, while individualistic conceptions support the priority of individuals and their interactions in the attempt to explain social life.

The differences between the two approaches of social life also depend on the model of interpretation they favour. In holism the key concept or the basic interpretation principle is the social system, without involving individual reflection, while individualism favours individual actions and significations granted by individuals to social phenomena. Holism has privileged the statistical method, which neglects individual differences and massifies social facts. Individualism prefers the method of the ideal type, but the downside is that it has a similarly simplifying effect on the actors’ subjectivity. Also, these paradigms differ in point of the scale on which they are applied: holism is macrosociological, and hence it risks falling into the philosophy of history, while individualism is microsociological, but the network of the individual and his conscious and close relations gradually decrease, the individual being eventually completely tied to the others. They also differ through the knowledge objective. Holism favours causal explanations, which transcend the subjects’ intent or will, while individualism favours comprehension. But holism risks claiming that it explains what it does not understand, or utterly misunderstands, as is the case, for instance, in Marxism and religion. If holism tends to see a false
conscience everywhere, individualism endows the individual with an exaggerated optimistic rationality. Holism tends to reduce the individual to the status of a puppet manipulated by collective forces to increase determinism, or decrease or deny freedom. On the other hand, individualism idealises the individual’s freedom, identifying neither insurmountable choices, nor fundamental conflicts.

These two different ways of understanding social reality found their supreme expression in the works of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, starting from the premise that the two founders of sociology used completely opposing methods. Weber found a theoretical basis associated to comprehensive sociology, and Durkheim to the so-called statistic sociology. The former tries to understand society starting from the behaviour of the individuals, and the latter attempts to grasp social acts by studying their regularity. The former sees individuals as irreducible elements of society: there is nothing higher than the individuals determining their behaviour by compensation. Thus, the latter takes a different view on society, seeing it, by analogy with organisms, as a whole whose lower parts serve the inherent interests of the upper parts. The two views on society are alike in considering that social phenomena exist and can be understood, but they differ in that the former tries to understand these phenomena by means of their parts (and individual behaviours), and the latter through the whole (considering individual behaviours as functions of the activity of the social whole).

Therefore, the opposition between Weber and Durkheim is only methodological in nature. It refers simultaneously to two social ontologies. Situating the active element of the social phenomenon in the individuals or in society, they bear judgement on their ways of existence. Durkheim’s holism opines that society exists as an entity ruled by autonomous laws, while Weber’s individualism is founded on the idea that there is nothing above the individuals. Although Weber is right when he acknowledges the importance of the individuals’ point of view in the order of explaining social phenomena, his drawback is that he denies any autonomy to the collectivities they constitute. The main difficulty regarding Durkheim’s conception is that he defines social acts as external to the individuals. The externality relation may be understood in two different manners (Gilbert, 1992, p. 246): he either denies the fact that the real components of society are the human beings, bearers of particular states of mind, case in which we should talk about radical holism, or rather he means that social acts originate in individual consciences, but the singularity of these consciences never intervenes as a decisive element. Gilbert agrees to the latter interpretation, although he never definitely states that it is what Durkheim really meant. Despite these incompatibilities, it is still possible to envisage a reconciliation between individualism and holism (Gilbert, 1992, p. 430) if the former agrees to consider, on one hand, that there is no collective individual circulating independent representations of individuals, and the latter accepts, on the other hand, that the scheme of the singular agent does not fit individuals as group members.

2. Interference of holistic and individualistic interpretations of social acts

Rejecting general characterisations and global qualifications - "holism” or “individualism” – as well as acknowledging the conjoint presence of holistic and individualistic features in any society do not exclude the systematic research of the macrosociological variables to the purpose of understanding all the social phenomena, no matter the context of their observation. Unfortunately, this is precisely the tendency that individualism has been trying to combat, which proves that the dispute over this issue is far from being settled.

Interpreting holism as a procedure specific to social field approaches which separate everything stimulates oversimplification and amalgamates judgements when approaching social epistemology issues. Despite a few common presuppositions on determinism or the desire to find the laws of evolution, the difference is far greater between Marx’s and Durkheim’s sociology than these insignificant similarities. Boudon himself indirectly admits to it since he manages to find valid individualistic explanations in Durkheim (1998, pp. 91-136), which he uses in order to include the sociologist in this family. Thus the complexity of Durkheim’s thinking could be understood in a completely different light (Tarot, 2001); obviously, it should not reduced to the positivism in The Rules of the Sociological Method, of which it grows more and more apart as it takes up the
extremely arduous task of integrating religious acts into his sociology. In regard to Mauss, he explicitly mentioned the exigency of comprehension, both from the actor’s point of view in an ethnographic perspective, and as a preamble necessary for any explanation (Tarot, 2003, pp. 33-36).

Methodological individualism would never consider the individual as "non-social", nor adhere to an "atomist" view of society (Birnbaum & Leca, 1986, p. 15). Besides, it does not necessarily trigger the adhesion to economic liberalism or ethical individualism. Using an individualistic method does not automatically imply considering any society as governed by individualistic values and, likewise, claiming that modern society is based on an "individualistic ideology" does not prevent the development of a "holistic" methodology. The relations or situations perceived or understood (especially by their protagonists) as "community-related" may be explained as springing from individual strategies. By mentioning these distinctions, the suggestion of Birnbaum and Leca to combine the individual strategies and community rules seems justified, either in modern, industrial, rational societies, or in traditional ones.

Although Raymond Boudon (1998) honestly admits the real heuristic fecundity of holism, he does not grant it the attention it deserves. The Marxist contribution to the history of economy is not wholly appreciated, for instance. The holism of the Durkheimian sociologists, in particular, had an enormous impact on the 20th century historians, inventors of quantitative history, and the history of mentalities. Also, this paradigm has allowed the progress of structural linguistics. Besides, it facilitated the comprehension of prehistory-derived thinking systems, as apparent from the compared mythology book by G. Dumézil (1958). Therefore, it may be assumed that far from being a random occurrence, there is a certain affinity between the method and the nature of the acts to be explained. Durkheim was often reproached with approaching suicide only through the statistical method which, as it was declared, has a massification and desubjectivation effect on, as it is the case, the most subjective and intimate act ever. Undoubtedly the upgraded conditional laws only have local value, according to Boudon (1998), and not universal applicability. Nevertheless, statistics continues to find that men commit suicide more often than women, single and widowed individuals more often than married ones, Protestants more than Catholics, Catholics more than Jews, etc. These correlations show not a necessity, but a probability. However, a century later, the progress of statistical inquiry confirmed them. Durkheim explains these acts by the variations of social integration and means of socialisation. Thus, the hypothesis is confirmed by the remarkable decrease, after his period, of the elderly people suicide rate, as today these individuals are among the best integrated in society, and the recent spectacular increase of the suicide rate among teenagers. Or, indeed, Durkheim’s hypothesis on a dialectic relation between socialisation and individuality, revealing man’s intrinsic complexity, continues to challenge and pose problems: "If excessive individuality leads to suicide, insufficient individuality triggers the same effects. When man is detached from society, he kills himself easily, but he kills himself equally easily when he is too attached to it" (Durkheim, [1897] 2005, p. 128).

In fact, holism is founded on the profound reality that society precedes individuals and determines them through collective structures and institutions: classes, families, systems of production and consumption. On the other hand, from Weber to Boudon, individualism became poorer as it gave up explaining the manner in which individuals perceive situations by means of their cultural and linguistic legacy, representations and values, acting as if man had neither identity issues, nor memory issues, and he bore no feed-back between present and past, between experience and future projection, as if he approached every situation through the innocence of a newborn, and always to the full of his reason, as if reason itself were only a native faculty and not a social act. Or, this is precisely Weber’s case, since it appears as the product of rationalisation, an affective overflow, a social constraint of thinking individuality, connected to the drama of religious conscience.

Just like Boudon sometimes lures Durkheim onto the individualist side, so may Weber be turned, in point of his perspectives, towards holism, and towards what Mauss called a total social act. In fact, studying the works of the founding fathers of sociology, it may be seen that they are extremely sensitive to the complexity of the relations between the individual and the social. If they really have a dominant feature, be it holistic (Durkheim) or individualistic (Weber), they are however aware of the existence of the other side of the issue, of
an eternally possible reversal, far from seeing things in black and white. To illustrate this view, use will be made of a few means of putting this dialectical approach in practice.

3. Durkheim, between holism and individualism

Both in *The Division of Social Work* and *The Suicide*, Durkheim turns the development of individualism into an essential characteristic of the passage from traditional to modern societies. In these societies, the individual is considered as a fundamental reference unit for himself and for society at the same time. Not only does he freely assume his own beliefs and opinions, but his autonomy is also greater than in traditional societies. In the works mentioned above, Durkheim starts from a judgement whose objective is to explain evolution, which has both a positive side—the progress of “individual personality”, and a negative side—the progress of “selfishness” (Boudon & Bourricaud, 1990, p. 303). In relation to collective entities, such as labour division, the collective representations or institutions, Durkheim approaches the socio-historical process of individualisation proper to modern societies. But Philippe Corcuff (2003) sees ambivalence in this approach. On the one hand, Durkheim is holist on a methodological level, as he asserts the predominance of the whole over the parts, and on the other hand, he tries to defend certain individualist experiences. In accordance with this latter priority, Durkheim brings forth the tension between two individualisms specific to modern societies, as this tension itself points to a tension within the individual. It is precisely what he mainly explains in two articles: «L’individuelisme et les intellectuels» ([1898] 1987) and «Le dualisme de la nature humaine et des conditions sociales» ([1914] 1987). Out of the two types of individualism that he distinguishes, Durkheim mostly relies on the one inspired from Kant and Rousseau, a humanistic individualism of the socialised man. This moral individualism makes it possible for the social whole, the social connection to become somehow stable. The individualism he opposes corresponds to the “utilitarian selfishness” which the liberal economists of the time overestimate. This selfish individualism contributes to the disruption of the social connection, paving the way for what Durkheim calls *anomie*, a state of disruption of the moral reference points in society. This anomie occurs, in his empirical investigation into *Suicide*, as one of the factors of suicidal predisposition in modern society. Despite these dangers, Durkheim ([1893] 2001) remains optimistic considering the group (society) as the only power which may limit individual selfishness, viewing the individual as “an autonomous source of action”.

These examples and many others that one may find prove that individualist theories are not foreign to sociology, being found even in the works of sociologists who, like Durkheim, reject individualist methodology. It may be said that Durkheim has become the prototype of sociological holism as the stake of the sociological approach, in his opinion, is to restore the anteriority of society over the individual, the latter not being immediately aware of this anteriority and especially of its historical and anthropological depth ([1895] 2002). Consequently, social relations take priority over the individual subjectivities and are not reduced to them. Moreover, society is perceived as an entity *sui generis*, superior to the sum of its parts, i.e. the individuals who make it up (Trigg, 1996, p. 74). Therefore, in his opinion, sociology has to adopt a method to part with the subjectivity and partiality of the social living in the immediate moment. As a sociological object, social acts have to be methodically rebuilt and persistently objectified, to avoid the subjectivity wherefrom individualism would infer them. However, this methodological holism of Durkheim’s is under no circumstances opposed to the individual under the form of contemporary individualism being central to his thinking. To him, the ever more important role of the individual constitutes the very specificity, the corner stone of modern societies and one of the reasons they encounter difficulties. Even if secularisation reduces the influence of religion, the respect towards the individual and human rights has become the modern religion itself.

If from a synchronic point of view his vision on society is holistic, in evolution society produces the individual, modernising itself in doing so. Or Durkheim never ceases to evince the perils of this movement: anomie and suicide. As a result, Durkheim’s individualism is real, but not naive, swinging between the optimism
of a liberating moral invention and risk awareness, to be compensated for by the newly identified forms of solidarity.

4. Reassessments of Weber’s individualism

To study the civilisation of a society, of a particular social group as a totality, and to build a scheme, an ideal type, is precisely what Max Weber did in his *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1905] 2003). A minute analysis of the practical implications of moral theology and Calvinist metaphysics determined him to build a model vision of the Puritan world and conduct, eventually finding that this model overlaps with the one dictating the behaviour of the capitalist entrepreneur. Besides, the simultaneous historical development of the two models makes him infer certain relations between them, but without stating that one is the cause of the other (Weber, 2003). This book of Weber’s is in fact a case in point for his methodology based on explanatory comprehension. He does not perform a theoretical analysis of Protestant theology, but instead attempts to understand a type of ethical attitude practised by Protestants. Moreover, Weber is interested in the meaning that the Puritans give their actions, showing that this ethical and religious attitude is very close to economic behaviour. Historically speaking, the spirit of capitalism, viz. the ideal type of capitalist attitude, seems to have been born out of a particular moral type: Puritan ethics.

What Weber is trying to describe is in fact the transformation of a religious belief or energy into a type of economic behaviour. In the relation between the two components of this process, Weber does not credit religion with a causal character, nor does he see it as a last resort in explaining social and economic phenomena or, in other words, in explaining the development of capitalism. It would have meant, as Pierre Manent (1998, p. 84) considers, that he himself had fallen in the metaphysical dogmatism and unilateral perspective he reproached Marx with. Actually Weber does not reject Marx since his thesis refers to a determination of the Calvinist ethics by the capitalist accumulation spirit. But even more important than this disproportion between what Max Weber wanted and what he achieved is the fact that the social science he elaborated and applied is of a different type (Manent, 1998, p. 88) than the “causal science” or the “science of social things” founded by Durkheim.

Weber emphasises the subjective side of human experience, being a promoter of the notion of value as the organising concept of contemporary human sciences, thus replacing the notion of law proposed by Durkheim. Although opposed to this idea at first, P. Manent proves that the subjectivity of values and the objectivity of laws take place according to the same type of thinking. There is no denial that between Durkheim’s “things” and the values invoked by Weber there is no considerable difference. It is obvious that while the former evinces human passivity, people’s submission to the things governing them, the latter insists on the humans’ active, value-creating role. However, the two theses share the rejection of the classic idea of an objective hierarchy of human aims or goods, remaining neutral and egalitarian in judgement. Weber, just like Durkheim, is in fact opposed to the model of the perfectly rational and self-determined actor proposed by certain economists. Just like Durkheim, he believes that the essential issue consists of the beliefs, representations, collective psychology. All this proves that it is less and less justifiable to speak of an irreconcilable opposition between the two paradigms, just like the definite and irrevocable inclusion of Durkheim among the holists and Weber among the individualists.

The methodological individualism promoted by Weber offers no guarantees to the ability of the modern individual to think and change his present status, which seems to be a problem for the postulated human freedom. First, since the individual is caught in a gods’ war pertaining to modern polytheism, the pluralism of values, which no one shows him how to get away from, should he wish to. On the other hand, the individualism of the individuals’ action and decision brings forth a somehow tragic paradox, forgotten by unconfined human freedom. The fact that the austere virtues of the Puritans have contributed through their asceticism to the birth of the initial capitalism, unfortunately turned hedonistic, is a typical case of the paradox of the consequences which Boudon may consider as a perverse effect. Also, the individualism of the liberal society unveils the “iron cage” of capitalist rationalisation, where the world is going to be closed and nobody will find the way out anymore,
according to Weber. Although apparently it is explained by individual calculations and their results, the question is if individual calculations may be imposed an external norm, pertaining to society. As a result, it is hard to accept only an individualist explanation to understand the "disenchantment of the world", which shows that methodological individualism is but a moment and a precaution in the intelligence of the social, and not the last word of the sociologists promoting it, as their explanations extend far beyond the individualist perspectives.

Conclusions

The opposition holism-individualism is mostly outdated and considered as sterile, especially if it is taken into account that the explanation of social phenomena implies a methodological pluralism derived from the various manners of interpretation. Finding either individual explanations for collective structures, or explanations of individual actions through collective structures presupposes the dialectical and perspectivist approach of the relations between the individual and the social, implying a plurality of levels of analysis and actions. Although Durkheim and Weber are both interested in the complexity of these relations between the individual and the social, their approach is not unilateral, but constantly seeks to see things from a dialectical perspective. Also, the fact that the variables taken into account are different in nature — cultural (or rather religious) with Weber, social with Durkheim — proves the complementarity of these approaches, as well as the impossibility to include them in a strictly delineated orientation.

References