Emile Durkheim’s work from Romanian social pedagogical perspective

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Abstract

We propose a global analysis of Durkheim’s work, the founder of the sociological orientation, who influenced decisively the sociological theory and practice at the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

In the sociology history, we insistently talk about a stage until Durkheim and another stage post Durkheim, which indirectly constitutes an acknowledgment of Emile Durkheim’s sociological work. From the methodological perspective, this historical change is important if Emile Durkheim promotes a new paradigm – the sociocentrism.

Keywords: social fact, sociocentric paradigm in education, sociological method rule, social pedagogy, pedagogical fact, socialisation, policy of education, social will, sociologic school.

1. Introduction

Emile Durkheim has the merit of noticing the importance of normativity and even of laws governing within social life. This idea is identified towards the 18th century, when Montesquieu foresees the fact that the social regnum has own laws. The new science appears in the 19th century, with Auguste Comte, who highlights the fact that the social reality is above all the individuals’ existences, the social life constituting the material of a new science, different from psychology [1] p. 82-83.

The essential contribution of Durkheim remains that of constituting the epistemological object of sociology [2] p. 41-49. The abovementioned author proposes us a global analysis of Durkheim’s work, the founder of the...
sociologist orientation, who will decisively influence the sociological theory and practice at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century.

There are highlighted the following fundamental ideas and principles of Durkheim’s thinking, also important within the pedagogical area:

1. The outreach of the speculative, descriptivist, subjective, psychologist manner of treating the social life. The proposed pattern is that of the natural sciences, so that the society may be assessed objectively with results verified in the social practice. We consider that this idea is an invitation addressed also to pedagogy in order to outreach its tendencies of subjectively approaching the educational reality.

2. In the society’s analysis, the social fact is “the primordial element, a crystallisation of the objective existence, before the individual and imposed to him by the force of the evidence”; the social fact becomes a fundamental sociologic concept by which the overall society and its main subsystems can be analysed, including the educational one. Durkheim explains any psychological phenomenon related to the collective conscience, which imposes norms, values, models etc. with explicit and implicit social value.

3. The society has a complex structure which can be analysed from two perspectives: a) according to the complexity degree; b) according to the specific functions proved within the society.

According to the degree of complexity, there are two types of structures:

• structures characterised by mechanical solidarity: tribe, clan, family on a natural basis; they provide to education the community basis of valued evolution also in the plan of professional education;

• structures based on organic solidarity, work of the modern society, characterised by a social division of the work more and more complex.

According to the specific functions, we record the presence of more types of structures: economic, moral, religious, legal, linguistic, pedagogical, political, and supported by proper institutions insuring the control of those specific social facts. These structures correspond to several social functions reflected also at the education level.

On this basis, Durkheim has an epistemological contribution, in the sense of noticing the perspective of the apparition of branch sociologies, starting from the general sociology which is a synthetic science. In this branch sociology category shall be placed also the pedagogical sociology or the education sociology, together with the family sociology, the religion sociology, the moral sociology. Researches of these areas are presented in Durkheim’s work. Analogically, the process of constituting the norms of pedagogy can also be interpreted.

2. Theoretical foundation and related literature

The classic contribution of Traian Herseni relating to Durkheim’s role has to be reported to the idea of sociology origins. In Herseni’s vision, Durkheim has the merit of acknowledging the fact that this new science, born “yesterday” is only going to be created. From the historic point of view, Durkheim is also acknowledged with the closer or farther continuity. The closer continuity is associated with August Comte’s contribution, who considers that sociology is the society’s science, constituted in the 19th century. The farther contribution goes back to antiquity (Plato’s “Republic”; Aristotle’s “Politics”). But also considers the social projects of Campanella, Hobbes and Rousseau. However, they cannot be considered sociology’s representatives, because they do not describe, analyse or explain the overall society, but protect the social models.

Durkheim’s contribution to the social and human sciences’ progress is unanimously recognised and consigned in the general sociology treaties, but also in dictionaries and researches in ethics, politics or economics, and of course, in pedagogy area.

For example, in the history of sociology, we meet two approaches which insistently repeat:

1. Durkheim is considered “one of the main founders of the modern scientific sociology, interested in the social status improvement, in the social order and consensus achievement”; his great merit related to sociology is double:

   a) the confers epistemic legitimacy to sociology by recognising the specific research aim (the social facts identified by the sociological method rule); sociology studies the society at global level and intrinsically if it is
demonstrated the fact “that the social can be explained only by social” and not by external aspects to the social, as made before the sociology creation.

b) the sociology assessment as academic discipline recognised within the university environment with theoretical, but also extremely important practical contributions: removing pre-notions and empiricism in social life analysis, the distinction of normal and pathologic, of equilibrium and anomie in social life analysis, applying objective and comparative sociological methods in the analysis of different social phenomena: politics, education, religion, suicide, moral life, work division in economics etc. [3] p. 17-18.

2. In the sociology history, we insistently talk about a stage until Durkheim and another stage post Durkheim, which indirectly constitutes an acknowledgment of Emile Durkheim’s sociological work. From the methodological perspective, this historical change is important if Emile Durkheim promotes a new paradigm – the sociocentrism.

In the sociology French school, the group of Durkheim’s adepts, we’ve already referred to asserts itself. The representatives of this school due to Durkheim both the thematic chosen and the research methodology adopted.

Thus, “among the themes approached by Durkheim’s adepts, a place of honour is reserved to religious sociology, ethnology and social constitution study of the human categories”. We can talk about more examples of authors and works: Hubert and Mauss – Melagne „D’histoire des religions”, Robert Hertz – „Sociologie religieuse et folklore”, G. Richard – „L’origine de l’idée de droit”, 1892, J. Ray – „Essai sur la structure logique du code civil français”, 1926.

In the economics domain, there should be mentioned Francois Simiand’s work, which “is treating the development of a sociological theory of the situation of persons addicted economically and from the point of view of prices and revenues’ evolution” (Le salaire, l’évolution sociale et la monnaie, 1932). The sociology school created by Durkheim at the “L’année sociologique” magazine also stimulated the apparition of several important works of social analysis: Bougle – „Les idées égalitaires”, 1899, Bougle – „Essai sur le régime des castes”, 1908, M. Halbwachs – „Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire”, 1925.

Another Durkheim’s adept, much more consistent with his method is Marcel Mauss (Emile Durkheim’s nephew), considered “the founder of the French ethnology”. He is the author of a text edited in collaboration with Emile Durkheim, where he asserts that “there is a reason of the primitive thinking”. He notices the decisive role of the collective conscience at the societies’ formation and at their evolution on the basis of several categories (space - time), notions (persons, psychic or soul) and religious practices (prayer) [4] p.119.

The contemporaneous French sociological theories due, also to Durkheim, not “an acceptable science model in all its essential articulations”, but a blow and a “rationalist profession of faith” synthesised in the foreword written at the first edition of his famous book – “The rules of the sociological method”.

We summarise, according to Ioan Drăgan, author of the foreword of the anthology “Sociologia franceză contemporană”, Editura Politică, București, 1971, the following main aspects of his profession of faith, resulted by valuing the sociological method:

1. unlimited faith in the scientific rationalist method also applicable in the sociology case;
2. rigour of elaborating the principles of the social researches named by Durkheim “rules of the sociological method”;
3. asserting the social autonomy at the level of sociology related to the biological and psychical factors, which must not be neglected, but which constitute the study object of sociology.
4. global vision over the social, so necessary for asserting sociology, an autonomous science in the context of the other social sciences.
5. the specific sociological approach of relationships between the individual and the society.
6. highlighting the methodological unit between theory and practice, so necessary for analysing several different social phenomena (education, politics, work division, moral, suicide) with unitary methodological means [5], p. XIII-CI.

It should be noticed that the acknowledgement of Durkheim as school creator is obvious also for the Romanian researchers of the interwar period. We signalise here the analysis proposed by E. Sperantia who
notices the multiple influences exercised by Durkheim in ethnology, history, religion, economics, ethics, education etc., as Michelle Lallement does it presently [6].

3. Social and pedagogical perspective on Durkheim’s work

Talking about Durkheim’s contribution at the creation of a sociological school with international value we have to mention another substance analysis we met in the famous sociology treaty, coordinated by Raymond Boudon.

The famous French sociologist starts from the acknowledgement of two important sociological schools existent at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century: The French and the German sociological schools, which “seem to be founded, at least in their intention declarations, on principles obviously contrasted and which do not seem easily reconcilable” [7]. The schools both provide a methodological and epistemological basis, important for the education analysis as a social and pedagogical fact or phenomenon.

Raymond Boudon considers Emile Durkheim as the most influent sociologist of the French School, which he improved together with A. Comte. On one hand, Emile Durkheim “had accepted a great part of A. Comte’s legacy, his conception about sciences’ hierarchy, as well as the idea that sociology is asked to fulfil the sciences’ system”. On the other hand, Durkheim shall exercise an overwhelming influence on French sociology, following Comte’s line, his ambitions of transforming sociology from two perspectives:

a) the perspective of convergence and integration of all the social and human particular sciences within the space of the new science – sociology, which constitutes a challenge for pedagogy;

b) the transfer at the level of sociology of the globalising functions of philosophy, sociology being understood as a science studying the society at a level of maximum generality, and by analogy the model may be also extended to the level of pedagogy.

Emile Durkheim takes both ideas, whose involvements and sociology inspirations sources in the areas of moral, religion, pedagogy and ethnology being the proof.

By the objective method proposed, he removes any metaphysical approaching tendency of the social, including at the education level. Though, by the global approach model of the social, his sociology has also a social philosophy signification. By inheriting and processing his ideas, Comte asserts what history names Durkheim’s sociologism. “It is obvious in its pretension of reserving the exclusivity of explaining all the cultural phenomena – of sciences or religion, as of magic especially – only to sociology, as imagined by him, and of removing the manners of thinking history, philosophy, economics and psychology specific” [7] p.8. This thesis is at the basis of his social and pedagogical vision, or of the sociocentric paradigm launched in the education and pedagogy area.

We can summarised Durkheim’s epistemology relating to the following main idea: “the faith in the positivist tradition by which he wants to remove from his sociology any assertion related to the social actor’s subjectivity considered as unnoticeable”. By this idea, Durkheim differentiates fundamentally from the most important representative of the German sociological school, Max Weber, who used to highlight especially the social actor importance in the social reality construction and reconstruction. In the pedagogical area, the perspectives can both be valued in an opened, creative spirit.

But in fact, as R. Boudon notices, “the contrast between the two sociologists is proven to be much less pronounced when it is considered not what Durkheim says, but what he does”. Thus, in the analysis proposed relating to the phenomena having a great subjective charge, suicide and religious value, Durkheim includes “a lot of psychological hypotheses and analyses”, acknowledging the subjective role of the social actor explainable by objective causes [7] p.9. In the education area, the methodological synthesis of the two perspectives is much important, which represents a premise of the social pedagogy and its receptivity to the education resources, not only as a social or social and pedagogical fact, but also psychosocial.
4. Conclusions

Durkheim’s contribution to the social and human sciences’ progress is unanimously recognised and consigned in the general sociology treaties, but also in dictionaries and researches in ethics, politics or economics, and of course, in pedagogy area.

Durkheim is considered “one of the main founders of the modern scientific sociology, interested in the social condition improvement, in the social order and consensus achievement”; his great merit related to sociology is double:

a) he confers epistemic legitimacy to sociology, recognising the specific research aim (the social facts identified by the sociological method rule);

b) the sociology assessment as academic discipline recognised within the university environment with theoretical, but also extremely important practical contributions: removing pre-notions and empiricism in social life analysis, distinguishing between normal and pathologic, between equilibrium and anomie in social life analysis, applying objective and comparative sociological methods in the analysis of different social phenomena: politics, education, religion, suicide, moral life, work division in economics etc.

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