

## **The Architecture of Consensus in Durkheim's Early Political Sociology**

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### **Abstract**

*The object of analysis of this article is how the role of political institutions is tackled in the construction of social consensus in the theoretical interventions made by Durkheim between 1883 and 1889 which are disregarded by criticism. As a result of all the inquiry held, it is worth mentioning that after Durkheim's first productive period (1883-1885) ruled by questions about the capacity of the state's mechanisms to lay the foundations of social consensus, he gets to the conclusion (between 1886 and 1889) that said consensus is spontaneous and self-generated, where political institutions only have a secondary and derivative role in its reproduction. He starts getting a new perspective that he would finally adopt with the passing of time.*

**Keywords:** Classic sociological theory Émile Durkheim period 1883-1889 political institutions social consensus

### **Introduction**

Among the numerous exams and interpretations that have been arisen from Émile Durkheim's production, it is really a minority those who have paid attention to his political sociology. Actually, apart from some valuable works, for example the outstanding ones of Giddens (1997) and Lacroix (1984), it is hard to find systematic treatments having as an object the contribution of this classical sociological thinker to the analysis of political phenomena. This lack of attention to Durkheim's political sociology can be explained, according to Giddens (1997:91), by the fact that the most influencing interpretations received from his work, especially Talcott Parsons' one, were made before his direct analysis of political problems was published. As a matter of fact, *The Structure of Social Action*, that was the work that internationally launched to fame Durkheim and Weber's theories, was published in 1937 while *Lessons on Sociology*, where Durkheim defines his perspective about the State and Democracy, was ultimately printed in 1950. Over the following decades, once this obstacle had been overcome, Durkheim's political dimension does not still appear among the preferences (Steiner, 2003: 123) even though his sociology is again in an important position for French and American academicians and at the same time more sophisticated analysis and reevaluations are made on other disregarded aspects of said sociology. Durkheim's early interventions between 1883 and 1890 were neither published in Spanish nor the focus of specialized literature.

Except for, (Giddens, 1997; Lacroix, 1984; Lukes, 1984; Steiner, 2003), the literature about Émile Durkheim's life and work does not mention all his writings and speeches previous to 1893 and a lot less those he made before 1885, which were undoubtedly the most precocious ones. Besides, when they are considered, it is as an anecdote or part of his biography, without aiming at systematizing or reconstructing the system of questions that supports it (here Lacroix analysis constitutes again a welcome anomaly). It is not meaningless information as the corpus made of essays, reviews, speeches and courses during the period between 1883-1890 shows a big concern about political issues and, above all, about the problem of the capacity of cohesion of the National State.

Aiming at contributing to sort out this pointed deficiency, this paper is interested in Durkheim's early political sociology setting as a purpose the identification of the problem (key questions, ideas, assumptions, access via) that is shown to deal with the role of political institutions in the architecture of social consensus.

### ***The problem of the national unity (18831885)***

In Durkheim's early reflections, you can find an important concern about the roles of the state institutions and political leaders in the architecture and conservation of the National Unity together with the first draft of his known project to build a science of social phenomena to account for the moral guidelines for political action (Lukes, 1984: 76). In his dissertation about the role that great men play throughout history, Durkheim invites his contemporaries to reconcile two apparent contradictory feelings: trusting in the greatness of great men to guide the destiny of a nation and asserting the freedom and intelligence of ordinary men that make up the crowd. In other words, the union of a nation needs both superior political leaders that can go beyond their individual glory and citizens that accept being guided without losing their independence and self-respect (Durkheim, 1883)<sup>1</sup>. The organization of a nation, made up by the gathering of all its citizens, implies that a special body (the government) should care about common interests. For the government not turning dangerous, it is important that the powers be separated into three groups of people: those who legislate, others who rule and finally those who judge (Durkheim, 18831884). Consequently, it can be claimed that he adheres from a very young age to the well-known doctrine of separation of powers as a way to organize the state body in order to avoid the concentration of power. The government has a dual function: protecting the citizens from their mutual disagreements and leading society to accomplish its "own aim".

He claims that each society has its own interests and aims, located in the crease of the national society, and leaders are expected to identify them. The means to accomplish this aim is a specific task of the science, that is incorporated in the state, and also the selection of the most appropriate means is in charge of those who perform political functions (Durkheim, 18831884). With these definitions, Durkheim wants to reject the two most relevant theories about the functions of a government: The Sociologist Theory and the Liberal or Individualistic Theory. In his opinion, the first theory seems to be immoral because it proclaims that citizens should abandon their individuality so that they delegate the conduction of a society to the government to achieve an aim that they can share or not. For him, the second theory is against the interests of a society as it constrains the function of the state to safeguard the individuals' freedom, disregarding the cohesive basis of the social life. To sum up, the state cannot reduce the individuals' freedom under any circumstances (freedom of thought and expression are essential) but at the same time it should go beyond the individual and should act to safeguard the general interest (Durkheim, 18831884). He claims that the union of a nation does not come mainly from material contact but from the existence of ideal and invisible bonds (Durkheim, 1885a). We cannot trust either in reasoning or in the spontaneous agreement of individual intentions to establish the social harmony, as instincts, habits, common beliefs are the components that make up the basis of patriotism and sacrifice. Neither can we expect from the law such an agglutinating effect as the obedience stirred up by the laws does not come from the political authority who passes, executes or judges them. Laws, in any society, are immanent to collective life and they are an expression of the popular opinion and only after being in a second instance they result formulated and passed by a body of state legislators and jurists (Durkheim, 1885a).

The political authority, understood to mean the emanation and expression of the moral authority that enables social life, is not based mainly in force or repression but in the belief, more or less rational, more or less conscious of the individuals that are parts of it. Only having faith in the authority can guarantee a longlasting and genuine obedience. If an authority can make individuals obey it by means of repression for a while, it will not take long for old beliefs to be imposed or new ones to appear. A tyrannical or despotic authority is a simply spurious one that lessens individuals' freedom and any other massive activity of the citizens is reduced as an obedient and controllable material at the hands of an absolute government (Durkheim, 1885b).

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding Durkheim's bibliographical references and aiming at granting an ordered reading according to his productive chronology, I have chosen to point out the original year of each of his interventions (courses, articles, dissertations, etc.). The year of publication (when it does not coincide) or the sources used are presented in the bibliographical references located at the end of this article.

When asked about the efficiency of political institutions to unite the French nation, Durkheim conquers in his first years of work a belief that will be strengthened with the passing of time: only a political authority in tune with an incomprehensible and immaterial strength of beliefs, opinions and ideal bonds can produce a long lasting and solid obedience.

### ***The spontaneity of the social consensus (1886/1887)***

Durkheim maintains that if common interest were the support of societies, societies would not have any future because nothing is more inconstant than the interest of the sum of individual wills (Durkheim, 1886). In open opposition to the theoretical trends that claim that the basis of the authority of the state are: general interests, the principle of common good or the search of the general welfare, Durkheim affirms that the need for sociability and the social instincts are the basis of the formation of societies, including the modern ones, and it is on them that the states are built. Social discipline synonym of social coercion and social authority in his texts exceeds and precedes greatly the authority of the political centralized power. Against statecentric schemes which consider that there is neither law nor moral until the emergence of the state, he proposes a sociocentric view according to which law and moral are expressions of a social balance condition, that is, they are present from the moment men interact (Durkheim, 1886). While he expresses the conditions of the existence of societies which are not either changeable or capricious social coercion is imposed with binding force to everybody, assuring cohesion. The insurrection or any abrupt change of the social relationships does not find any echoes in a thought that considers what exists as a product of a wise evolution (Durkheim, 1886).

However, is the social discipline strong enough to guarantee the functioning of social solidarity, or do political institutions takes a central role in this? Durkheim's explicit answer, absorbed in a discussion with liberal economists who inflate the individual and reject all state interference, is that it corresponds to the state to safeguard the community interests as they cannot be judged by individuals that only know a small portion of the social life (Durkheim, 1886). If we pay attention to the problems developed in those first years, the government bodies are the ones which have to reinforce a social cohesion that comes from another part, from the automatic practice of a social discipline made up of moral, religious and juridical rules that are registered in the nature itself of the social life. The juridical rules, the law, as well as the moral are previous to the political bodies (judicial, administrative ,etc.), whose functions are to understand, organize and apply them. Besides, Durkheim insists on the fact that the launch of the repressive apparatus is not enough either to guarantee a durable social unity, since social life cannot arise from individuals joined forcibly by an "external machine" (Durkheim, 1886). But not only can the action of the state be insufficient but also it becomes dangerous for the individual liberties. According to the young professor, the individual activity is made up of very fragile springs that the too heavy machine of the state threatens to oppress<sup>2</sup>. The action of cooperative and professional associations that appears in these pioneer years as an answer to the problem of the erosion of the social bond can only show the regenerative force of the moral if they develop apart from the sphere of the state (Durkheim, 1886a). However, is the role that we already know is secondary of the institutions of the state as regards the organization of the consensus limited to codify and apply the cosmos of rules registered in the crease of the social life or is there anything else? Durkheim's most convincing answer is the supreme importance attributed by him to moral education. In 1887, he is appointed professor of Pedagogy and Social Sciences of the University of Bordeaux, the first course of Sociology created at French universities and he does not doubt about saying that education is the most important objective for the maintenance of a nation. (Alpert, 1986: 50; Aron, 1970: 120). Whether it is embodied in a man, in a class or in an institution, the moral authority is the centripetal force that gathers the individuals in a nation, the antidote to the chaos that would reign if each individual gave free rein to their impulses (Durkheim, 1887a).

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<sup>2</sup>It is worth mentioning that this point of view about the political power as an obstacle of the social moral will be modified years later. In *Lessons on Sociology* (1890-1900), although he does not abandon his position according to which the state is the product of a cohesive social life, a body whose existence depends on the social life that gives it origin, he admits that it has a certain autonomy in the organization of the consensus. In fact, though he continues thinking that the collective representations and the social trends exceed and surpass constantly the state, now he admits that it makes up a dynamic center that has its own capacity, to elaborate obligatory representations for the society as a whole with a high grade of consciousness and reflection (Durkheim, 1890-1900: 113). In this *Lessons*, he also considers that the professional associations cannot be placed outside the state but, on the contrary, they must be articulated by the state as they represent an interest that goes beyond the selfish corporate field of each profession.

Consensual authority that does not have to be identified with passive obedience, with an inert mass unable to act, but, on the contrary, with an active political life which is nourished from the citizens' initiative and the activity of the masses (Durkheim, 1887a). And the constitution of that moral authority actively includes civic work, that can only be in the hands of the state. This is essential since it corresponds to said moral authority the systematization of citizens' education about the principles that would lead them to defend their country, to fight against individualism and to respect laws (Durkheim, 1887a). Although young Durkheim claims that certain government bodies (particularly, the legislative, administrative, judicial and educational bodies) play a role in the reproduction of the consensus, he affirms that they work over a preexisting dynamics and material. In the opening lecture of the Course in Social Science (1888), where it is explained what the object and the field of study of sociology are, one can find an excellent summary of the successive conclusions drawn by young Durkheim. The object of sociology he says "they are social facts" and their research must contain, at least, four branches or fields of research. 1. The study of the "ideas" and "common feelings" that are transmitted from generation to generation and they assure "at the same time, the unity and the continuation of collective life" (popular legends, political beliefs, language, etc.). 2. The observation of principles and moral beliefs as "natural phenomena" subject to laws; to the "judgments that admit the universality of citizens" which are obligatory and they have an "influence over their own wills". 3. The exam of "(...) the principles which have an obligatory force in such a way that the society prevents it from being withdrawn. It does rely on the public opinion to guarantee its respect, but it gives this job to specially authorized representatives. The moral judgments become "legal forms" when they get this particularly overwhelming nature (Durkheim, 1888: 1920). 4. The study of the economic phenomena, "as political economy has to be taken out from its isolation to convert it into a branch of sociology". This inventory, says Durkheim, "is far from being complete", for example, "we have not spoken about the army or diplomacy", though they are social phenomena, but this "science does not exist yet, not even in embryonic stage". With these words, he reveals his own limitation to solve the crucial problem of the use of the state power.

He is dazzled by the power of the moral rules and social obligations, which, in their various modalities from the vaguest to the most coercive ones, found social solidarity. In this context, legal rules, far from being arbitrary and unfair, they are the reflection of cohesive moral rules, guaranteed by the state by virtue of such a legitimate origin. The state does not have a sovereign authority, but it is built as representative of social powers that go beyond it and from which emanate its force. The place assigned by Durkheim in the "sociological building" reproduces this subordination of the state to the society, understood to mean the scene of production of moral rules assented by the "universality" of its members. The sociology of the state is necessarily subject to the study of the social coercion. The thesis about the nature mainly spontaneous and internal of the social solidarity formulated in these first years will be reinforced with the passing of time. In fact, he later on insists that not only the communities of the past are based on a spontaneous and internal solidarity, but also all social forms, even the most modern ones, require it instead of an external state incentive, for their existence (Durkheim, 1889). Then, in his greatest work of 1893, he will defend a more sophisticated and complex version of this thesis according to which the modern societies, characterized by a weak collective consciousness, have their own internal source of social solidarity: the social division of labor<sup>3</sup>.

### ***The law as a reinforcement of social consensus***

In opposition to the theorists of natural law who consider that the function of law is to protect individuals one from another, Durkheim claims that if the society is considered as a group of wild beasts, the work of the legislator would then consist in avoiding individuals devour each other. Like customs, the law is inherent to social life. Although it requires "the force the state has" for its application, this external coercion is not enough by itself, since it has to be accompanied by collective feelings that support and legitimize it. Everything is played on the field of the social coercion: certainly, the external coercion (from the apparatuses of the state) is the condition for the application of law, but we cannot forget that this one constitutes a form of coercion.

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<sup>3</sup>We have to consider that, as it is known, he shows certain unease when he confirms that the integration of societies with a developed division of labor does not have the same density that the one generated by the similarities in the primitive societies. As modern societies do not surround the individual so closely "(...) cannot control with the same effectiveness the divergent tendencies that come to light" (Durkheim, 1893: 80). The central idea is that the division of labor cannot give rise to the necessary social solidarity unless it produces, at the same time, a law and a moral. Only if it is accompanied by the construction of a secular morality that fills the religious void, the social division of labor can generate supportive bonds in the modern societies.

Surely derived, among others. Young Durkheim expresses this very clearly: there are different kinds of social coercion, the one that is exercised by an individual upon another individual, the one that is exercised in a vague way by the whole society under the form of customs, of common law and the public opinion and the one that is organized and concentrated in the hands of the state (Durkheim, 1887b: 24). By drawing a difference between moral and law, Durkheim finds the foundations to reject the arguments that intend to give the political institutions a leading role regarding social consensus. Both consist of compulsory prescriptions, but the moral is not only wider than the law, but it also exercises its empire permanently and in every field of society.

The organization that safeguards the moral respect is the society as a whole, while the law is enforced by the state. The force that holds the moral is not concentrated but “it is disseminated all over the nation”, it is nothing but “the authority of the public opinion”, which nobody can avoid (Durkheim, 1887b: 24). As it does not contain precise formulas, the moral is “subtle like the air and penetrates everywhere” while the state “is a very rude mechanism to regulate the extreme complex movements of the human heart” (Durkheim, 1887b: 24). In this way, the internalized coercion appears in the analysis of Durkheim as a more effective mechanism for the achievement and maintenance of the consensus than the external coercion of the State<sup>4</sup>. In short, the law is imposed by the external force of the state, but it is not a product of what happens in the State, it is not the result of the leaders’ sovereign. Historically, it derives from customs and constitutes, to a large extent, a codification of them. “(...). The legislator does not invent the laws, he only proves them and formulates them clearly. They are made day by day in our daily relations (...), they express the conditions of our human adaptation” (Durkheim, 1887b: 274). From this point of view, Durkheim rejects German academic socialists’ proposal, which tries to define the moral principles of an state intervention that brings justice in the distribution of the social products. The legislator does not have the “exorbitant role that the academic socialists sometimes assigned to him and as his importance diminishes, the society grows” (Durkheim, 1887: 275). Around 1889, Durkheim does not have any doubts: the political institutions can only break the contradictions carrying through a mechanical, artificial and temporary action. “The state has a real power only if it represents the common ideas, the common interests (...)” (Durkheim, 1889: 386). If the society is torn, if the social bonds are broken and the social body is separated, the coercion of the state can only have spurious and short term results.

### **Conclusions**

In the production period that goes from 1883 to the beginning of 1890, a reorientation in young Durkheim’s inquiry can be identified: the inquest about the nature of the Nation and the State, which is the neuralgic center of his first writings, is modified into an inquest about the grounds of social coercion and obligation. In this movement, the political authority is transformed into a new one that expresses a wider and more authentic social authority. The main problem is not related to finding out the nature of citizens’ political obedience towards the State but to explaining the reasons why the individuals respect every social prescription from the very general ones to the most organized ones. The search terms change but the motivation is still unshakable: the unification of the society, the French nation process in particular. Morality as a way of overcoming conflicts: “(...) the prime function of morality is to enable society, to make people live together without many clashes and conflicts; shortly, to safeguard the great collective interests” (Durkheim, 1887b: 276). In the middle of a disordered France by the economic transformations brought about by the consolidation of capitalism, the war against Prussia, coups d’état and the bitter political disputes among the capitalist parts trying to achieve hegemony in the State, the workers’ fights and the repression of different revolutionary attempts, our young sociologist.

Who lives his lifetime as a crisis period, gets convinced about the inefficiency of the power of the State to solve conflicts. Consequently, his ambition to try to fund theoretically France’s “moral unification”, expressed from his interventions in 1883 onwards, takes another road. He insists on trying to turn objective the study of social facts, he claims that every scientific adventure should have a “practical usefulness” and he fights against individual and selfish beliefs. He assures that the individual cannot exist isolated from the society as the ideologists of 1789 revolution claim and he protests against the side effects that this abstract individualism has in the process of restoration of the national cohesion (Durkheim, 1890).

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<sup>4</sup>Although it is true that the problem of the internalization of the coercion gains a growing importance in Durkheim’s argument, it is clear that we can already identify him in his first works.

Durkheim's theoretical position towards 1889 can be summarized in favoring the analysis of the society regarding the inculcation of cohesive moral values and consequently, in ignoring the problem of the conflict, in spite of the fact that the French reality was full of political fights and revolutionary movements. To sum up, Durkheim's object of investigation is moved from the study of the nature of the State and its integrative function an obsession in his first writings(1883-1885) to the grounds underlying coercion or social obligation. The center is occupied by the problem of the social consensus understood to mean the self generation of social solidarity which is made up of ideas, rules and feelings that are shared in the society and transmitted from generation to generation. In this scheme, the perspective of the State as an oppressive machine working for one social class, as Marxists claim, the paradigms that give to the State, in one way or another, an independent and superior power, and the theories that put forward that the State is grounded on a type of contract between free and autonomous individuals, are discarded in favor of a new conception of the State as a derived expression from this self generated solidarity. As the "morphology" (or "substratum") of the society takes the center of the analysis, the political phenomena lose their specificity and political weight. His work in 1893 on the moral function of the division of social labor will be the culmination of his early movement started in 1886, as he puts forward that the State is a product of the collective consciousness with the vital function of helping to strengthen this same common consciousness and clarifying the social feelings that are dim or obscure<sup>5</sup> in themselves. According to the writings made during the period that is being studied and against Tönnies suggestion and the general perspective of German sociologists, Durkheim claims that the creation of social bonds does not depend on the state organ that is unable to assume a relevant role in modern societies. It is the society itself, as an indivisible entity with its own life and genuine solidarity that has the capacity of auto generates its tissues.

In other words, according to this french sociologist, the state cannot impose the conditions for social cohesion as other thinkers from his time thought. For example, Comte claims that the capitalist industrial and scientific positions at the vanguard emphasize private interests while they undermine social solidarity and this turns the state's intervention vital to provide the union of economic functions and social integration. In opposition to this, Durkheim advocates the existence of a solidarity secreted simply by societies' operations. Such ideas make him deny any action from the state even though some years later, especially from *Lessons on Sociology* (1890-1900) onwards, he rephrases the concept of state and he starts to recognize a specific field for the state, Durkheim always maintains his early conceived expressive thesis, that is, the idea that the organ of the state is determined in its form and functions by the morphology of the society. In effect, in the decade that starts in 1890, Durkheim thinks that the modern state constitutes a relevant institution with different functions and with a broad and forceful intervention on many different fields of social life and it is equipped with mechanisms to combat or soften the alienating and disintegrating forces of society. Durkheim adds that the state can take concrete economic measures, decide to make war on other nation, create crimes, regulate family life, etc.; but he claims that in the long term, it cannot stop the processes conceived in the social structure, it cannot invent solidarity. Consequently, Durkheim understands that the state has a certain autonomy and he defines it as an instance where specific representations can be created but he insists on the fact that its capacity is limited. If lengthy periods with great revolutions are analyzed (such as moving from traditional to modern societies), the society evolves according to a movement that has its own rules, in spite of the actors, in spite of the governors. To conclude, it is worth saying that the writings of the period that is being analyzed, is formed of the reviews of works of thinkers from his time that constitute a sort of "critical readings aloud" with preannounced and sketched theoretical and methodological.

Positions that are very strong nowadays. Those include: the methodological holism, the idea of the society as a superior and indivisible moral entity, the transcendence of social solidarity, the criticism against revolutionary socialism and the liberal economists and the importance of a moral teaching for the national integration.

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<sup>5</sup>Even though the problem of Modern State is the object of a secondary treatment, of a "hidden" characterization (you must look for its symptoms thoroughly) in *The Division of Social Labor*, it receives a conceptual formulation that can be summarized with the expression "the circle collective conscience-state" because the state is at the same time product and guarantor common consciousness (Inda, 2009).

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