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Steven Lukes on Émile Durkheim

David Edmonds: *If anybody can claim to be the father of sociology, it's Émile Durkheim. By the time of his death in 1917, he'd produced an extraordinary body of work on an eclectic range of topics, and had become a major contributor to French intellectual life. Above all, his ambition was to establish sociology as a legitimate science. Steven Lukes was transfixed by Durkheim from early in his academic career, going on to become one of the world's leading Durkheim scholars.*

Nigel Warburton: Steven Lukes, welcome to *Social Science Bites*.

Steven Lukes: Thank you for inviting me.

Nigel Warburton: The topic we are going to focus on is Durkheim. Now, he is one of the great sociological thinkers of the 19th century. Could you just begin by saying a little bit about who he was?

Steven Lukes: Well, he was a French sociologist, in fact the founder of what's sometimes called the French school of sociology, and he spent many years, first of all at the University of Bordeaux, then in Paris, and his work covers a huge range, from his first book on the division of labor, to his last great work, which was on religion, and he founded a journal which was called *l'Année Sociologique* in which his young collaborators worked for about 14 years, there were 12 issues of it, a treasure trove of wonderful things, and he edited that, and was a very powerful and influential force in France, educating school teachers during his time at the Sorbonne.

Nigel Warburton: So you've mentioned some of the areas he worked in, the division of labor, he also did research on the family, on law, there's an immense range in his work.

Steven Lukes: That's absolutely true. The overarching idea, the underlying motif was the idea of exploring the limits of social determination. He was fascinated and preoccupied with the role of the social, the question of what is social, 'What is a Social Fact?' is the title of the first chapter of his book, *The Rules of Sociological Method*. The common theme across all of the work really is what can we explain, and how can we explain sociologically all of the various things that he wrote about.

Nigel Warburton: Well, let's take that idea of a social fact. What is a social fact according to Durkheim?

Steven Lukes: Well, as I say, the first chapter of *The Rules of Sociological Method* addresses that very question, and his answer is, social facts are external to individuals, meaning any individuals taken singly, they constrain us, they are independent of us, and they exist, sometimes this is called the theory of emergence, social facts emerge, and one thing you can say about Durkheim is that he was vehemently opposed to what's sometimes called methodological individualism, the idea that you can reduce explanations to facts about individuals and their interaction. He thought there was a level of social reality that sociology was basically to focus upon.

Nigel Warburton: So what does that mean for human choice? As an individual, I make choices, my friends and family make choices, together we collaborate. It feels like we are shaping reality, not some kind of social reality is shaping us.

Steven Lukes: Yes, well he was totally obsessed, you might say, with the ways in which social realities shape us. He didn't focus upon the level of social interaction, as some

sociologists have done, and he proclaimed himself to be uninterested in psychology. At one point in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, he says every time a social phenomenon is explained by a psychological one, you can be sure that the explanation is false. That is the kind of way he wrote, he was very polemical, and he thought that sociology enormous scope for explanatory success.

Nigel Warburton: Well, let's take his most famous work, as far as I'm concerned, the work on suicide, how is that related to social facts?

Steven Lukes: Well, it's strange, I sometimes say that, when I teach the subject, that the book on suicide is not really about suicide. That's to say it's not about an individual killing himself or herself, it's about the social conditions in which the suicide rate rises, or falls. It's really a book, the point of which is to explain differential suicide rates. He noticed, as an empirical sociologist, which he was, that there were strikingly different suicide rates in different places and times. During wars, for example, he noticed the suicide rate goes down. At times of economic crisis, whether booms or slumps, it goes up, this intrigued him. He also noticed that in Protestant societies or communities, as for example Swiss cantons, the rate was higher than in Catholic regions. There was also difference between whether the suicide rate between married people and unmarried people, between widows and widowers, and so on. I mean, the book is full of details like this, and this totally intrigued him. Why? What were the social factors at work that would explain why different social groups and different social communities exhibited different suicide rates?

Nigel Warburton: And was he looking for some very general laws of social nature, as it were?

Steven Lukes: He was looking for explanatory factors at the social level. The book on suicide elaborates a theory in which there are, what he calls, 'suicidogenic' currents, that's to say social causes that really amounted to the nature of social conditions in which people lived, and this, in the end, came down to two ideas really: the extent to which people were integrated into larger social unities, communities, or so on, and the extent to which they were regulated by norms. So, these key ideas of integration and regulation were at the heart of this theory. So when, for example, what he called regulation broke down, that's to say when social norms weakened, so the expectations that people had of what, for example, they were due in terms of their wages or income, when this became unclear, this represented a kind of normative breakdown. Similarly, with respect to integration, his idea was people need a certain level of attachment to their communities, so he talked about a social condition of egoism, which really meant social isolation, and the other idea about regulation, the breakdown of regulation the breakdown of normative regulation, he called anomie.

Nigel Warburton: Another book that you've already mentioned focuses on the division of labor. Well, that sounds like something straight out of Karl Marx.

Steven Lukes: Karl Marx was, of course, a major figure in France at that time, but not really a central preoccupation of Durkheim. Max Weber was very much engaged in a debate with Marx. Durkheim, much less so, although he did write a book on socialism. Political economy and economics in general was something that was outside his focus of attention. He was interested in the division of labor, and meant by it, social differentiation, the degree in which a society consists in interdependence, interdependence of people's activities and roles and functions. And the overarching question for him was: what is social solidarity? How do societies hold together, and above all, as indicated when talking about suicide, he was interested in norms, in norms and what these days we call values. That's to say, what people expect of each other and what their conception of the 'good life' is, and so on. So, in the division of labor, the book is

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May 2015

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really about the development of modern society, the way in which modern societies exhibit, what you call organic solidarity, and by that he meant modern societies were increasingly held together by differentiated roles that are interdependent. How is it that an ever more complex society, where people are doing different things, and living ever more heterogeneous kinds of lives, how is it that they hold together, that was what was his preoccupation.

Nigel Warburton: So, when you use the word solidarity, it's more like what I would think of as social cohesion, solidarity seems to imply political solidarity, we're on your side, but this is something looser than that?

Steven Lukes: Yes, it's not that political sense. It's more the question of social bonds, and what they are. He was fascinated by just that question. Going back to the division of labor, I mean you could say that this distinction, which he thinks of in evolutionary terms, in other words modern society grows out of pre-modern society, which is characterized by a different kind of solidarity, but I think a more fruitful way of reading that book is probably to see him as making an analytic distinction between two ways in which people can be solidary, that is to say integrated into a larger society. On the one hand, the idea of being united in terms of what he says we call identity, well what people share, in terms of their beliefs and norms and values, and that would be what he called mechanical solidarity, he thought of that as pre-modern, and modern social solidarity, for him, was really what you could think of as what holds people together despite their differences. He was very much aware of the increasing heterogeneity of modernity, and was intrigued by, in view of that difference, how is it that's people live lives together in an ordered way.

Nigel Warburton: Well, that is a kind of mystery, and what was his solution, roughly?

Steven Lukes: In that book, he called this organic solidarity, and he didn't really provide a very satisfactory solution, he talked about contracts, he talked about law. He thought of law as a way of, a kind of external representation of, or an external index of morality. He then came to think that there were common values that were distinctive of modernity, so he wrote about what he called the religion of individualism, that's to say the very idea of individual rights, human rights, or freedom of thought and all these things being in some ways sacred, being a unifying set of commitments and ideas that are common in a modern society, so in this way he was rather a late 19th century optimist.

Nigel Warburton: I'm not sure I quite understood that last point about the freedom of expression, obviously it's connected with individualism, but how does that relate to the division of labor?

Steven Lukes: That first book, *The Division of Labour*, which was about the growth of the modern type of solidarity under conditions of ever greater heterogeneity, he wrote that in the early 1890s, then the Dreyfus Affair happened in France. He was a very strong supporter of Dreyfusards, he was a good friend of Jean Jaurès, the leader of the socialist party. He wrote a very famous essay called 'Individualism and the Intellectuals', and he denounced the idea, which the anti-Dreyfusards were promoting, that you should never question the judgements of the Church or the military, because of the importance of, what today we call national security. His response to that was to turn this on its head, to say that really what endangered the solidarity, or the cohesion of modern society was precisely being attached to this anachronistic set of ideas, that a modern society was held together by a commitment to certain values, that involved the right to a fair trial and all the other associated rights that go with modern citizenship; the threat to national cohesion was not taking seriously the values. He thought that it was very important that the law should punish violations of those values. He had a very interesting theory of punishment and law. For him, the point about punishment and law was not retribution or

deterrence, it was a way of reaffirming the values and the common sentiments of the righteous. In other words, punishment was a way of reinforcing social bonds. By punishing, you reinforce the rules. I mean, it's a disturbing theory, it makes punishment look like sacrifice, but there's a deep truth in it which you find has been taken up very much in contemporary criminology.

Nigel Warburton: When it comes to talking about religion, Durkheim is almost scientific about it, it seems to me.

Steven Lukes: Yes, this is his greatest book, on religion, and it certainly what, when I was working on Durkheim, turned me on to him in a serious way, I realized that this as a masterpiece, it is, and it was written in 1912, and yes, scientific, he was a social scientist, he thought of himself as practicing, inaugurating, and actually in a major way developing, the social science, that was called Sociology. One way in which the polemic, the project of making Sociology real was to explore topics that might seem most resistant to a sociological explanation, and suicide clearly exemplifies that. As for religion, that of course was a big, very ambitious thing. The book is called *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The French word 'élémentaire' can also be translated as elemental. It's actually about the very elements of religion. He thought that by focusing on the religious practices of a very, what he called, elementary society, early society, this can be criticised today, but it was basically a look at what anthropologists have studied, namely tribal societies, clans, in Australia above all, and also in north west America. It is a study of tribal society's religion, and he made the assumption that by studying religion in its simpler forms, as he thought, you could derive an understanding of religion in general and how it works. And so *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, this book is an attempt to develop a general theory of religion, what religion is, what its elements are, by studying the tribal religions that had been investigated and written about by missionaries and travellers at that time.

Nigel Warburton: So it's almost as if these are chemical elements, put together and building up into compounds?

Steven Lukes: That's right, I mean he makes that very analogy himself, it's like a kind of experiment. He suggests that an experiment well done can tell you about, you know, real phenomena that are far more complex. What Durkheim basically argues in that book is that religion is a reflection of society, and indeed that you can see the gods, it's a sign of totemism, and it's basically saying the elements of religion can be understood by observing the way in which tribal societies worship, symbolize and elaborate rituals around a flag, or a vegetable, or an animal, or whatever it is that is the totem, and this was profoundly, of course, challenging, as you can see, immediately, to the Catholics and the religious believers at the time. On the other hand, he says very clearly in the book, no religions are false, he's not saying that religion is an illusion. He's offering you a kind of interpretive account of religion.

Nigel Warburton: So, in all of this, is he a determinist? Does he think that social facts determine all our behavior?

Steven Lukes: No, perhaps I should say yes and no. I mean, he was a passionate believer in individualism, in the sense that he believed that individuals are ever more individual in the sense of more and more differentiated from one another, and that he also believed that the individual becomes sacred under modern conditions. But he did have a very strong belief in the shaping power of social life, so social facts shape and determine us, and they affect our preferences. And indeed in his writings, for example, on moral education, he said that there were three features of morality. He talked about the spirit of discipline, that's constraint. He talked about attachment to social groups, that

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May 2015

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attachment in social life, not being disconnected from social communities, and the third was autonomy, so he thought that there was, under modern conditions human beings were increasingly autonomous, but of course when you look how to see what he meant by that, he was trying to give you a sociological account of autonomy, that was pretty ambitious.

Nigel Warburton: Was Durkheim trying to change the world, or just describe it?

Steven Lukes: He writes in *The Division of Labour* that doing sociology would have no point at all if it didn't have a practical purpose, and so he was very concerned about what he thought of as the ills of his own society. He didn't call it capitalist, but he thought that there was serious social disorganization and a great deal of suffering in both economic life, and in people's married life, because anomie, for him, was the name of what he thought of as a social pathology. So he was very concerned that society should become more, as he thought of it, morally integrated. There is a kind of theory of socio-psychological health in Durkheim. He talked about pathology, he thought of modern societies as pathological, and had a vision of something like a socio-psychological normality or equilibrium that was to be aimed at, and so, yes he was a socialist, actually, in this way. He thought of himself as a socialist.

Nigel Warburton: How has Durkheim featured in your life?

Steven Lukes: Well, he's dogged me throughout my life, you could say, I mean in the sense that I wrote a big book about him in the early 1970s, and since then have produced, at various points, editions of his major works, and he's hard to escape because there are some profound insights which are really, have entered into the very bloodstream of sociological thinking, and *The Rules of Sociological Method* is a particularly interesting book. I recently did a new edition of it in which some of the main questions that social scientists wrestle with today, are grappled with in a very forthright way. One thing about him is he's an extremely effective writer. There's never a problem in understanding what he's trying to say. He was, in a way, obsessed, Durkheim, with the question of social determination, and the ways in which our thoughts and behavior are shaped by, and reflect our social conditions and social life. It's at the very heart of the sociological enterprise, and he was the sociologist who articulated this vision in the most powerful way.

Nigel Warburton: Steven Lukes, thank you very much.

Steven Lukes: Thank you very much.