

divided into two discrete blocks could be described as dualism. An example is the unfortunately common practice of using two very different ways of explaining social action: we treat our own actions as rational while supposing those of others to be irrational. This is ‘explanatory dualism’.

**DURKHEIM, EMILE (1858–1917)** Despite dying from a stroke at the young age of 59, Durkheim produced a number of major studies that rightly establish him, with Karl Marx and Max Weber, as one of the three founders of modern sociology. Like the others, he produced pioneering studies of substantive sociological topics (mostly concerned with the novel characteristics of modern industrial societies) and contributed to debates about the appropriate methods for sociological study.

In his doctoral thesis, published as *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), Durkheim presented his contrast between the bases of social cohesion in pre-modern and modern societies. Rather confusingly (because it suggests the machines characteristic of the industrial society), he used the term ‘mechanical’ solidarity to describe the basis of social solidarity in primitive societies where individuals and institutions were little differentiated and people hung together by their common adherence to a shared body of values and symbols. Put simply, the society stayed together because its component people were very similar in having been socialised into a single culture. Modern industrial societies are too large and complex to cohere by similarity; increased specialisation of work and the differentiation of institutions encourage diversity and individualism. These would in turn threaten social cohesion were it not that at the same time they create greater inter-dependency. The modern society is sustained by ‘organic’ solidarity. Like the human body, the whole only survives because of the workings of the separate organs but equally each organ can only

survive if the whole lives. However, a potential problem remained since the decline of a collective conscience raised the threat of **anomie**. His idea that people required some sort of externally-imposed cultural straitjacket in order to find satisfaction (because without it greater wealth would simply stimulate an expansion of the desires) explains why, for a long time, Durkheim was dismissed as a right-wing ideologue. Always interested in public policy, Durkheim’s proposed solution to the anomie inherent in modern societies was the promotion of the idea of occupational guilds and other intermediate institutions that would stimulate value cohesion.

Durkheim’s second book, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), attempted to establish a clear method for the new discipline. He argued that it: had to be based on observation (rather than the generation of abstract philosophical schemes); had to provide both causal and functional explanations; and had to study social rather than psychological facts. By this he meant that proper sociological data were observations about features of societies, not about the individuals who peopled them. He was firmly opposed to **methodological individualism**.

He tried to demonstrate his method in his third major work, *Suicide* (1897). Unlike previous scholars who had treated **suicide** as an individual act, Durkheim studied the relationship between suicide rates and other aspects of a society. Whatever the reasoning of an individual suicide, regular patterns could be discerned in suicide rates and changes in these could be explained without recourse to individual motives. The fallibility of his data and his inconsistent shifting between individual and social levels of analysis explain why few scholars now find his treatment of suicide convincing, but the approach was profoundly influential, particularly on the **structural-functionalism** associated with Talcott Parsons.

Durkheim’s fourth seminal work (summarised by Maurice Halbwachs (1930) as *The*

*Origins of Religious Sentiments*) was *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912). This study of aboriginal religion was influential in describing and explaining religious ideas and practices in terms of the latent or hidden functions they performed for the society. At the heart of much primitive religion was the creation of social cohesion; by worshipping totems, primitive peoples were worshipping their own societies.

Durkheim also wrote on education, socialism and morality and founded the journal *L'Année Sociologique*.

**DYSFUNCTION** The use of 'function' (as in 'the primary function of the family is to

produce and socialise the next generation') gives a certain grandeur missing from 'consequence', 'effect' or 'purpose' and implies a biological metaphor. Just as we understand the kidney by the part it plays in keeping the rest of the body working, so the significance of any social institution is the part it plays in maintaining the whole society.

Activities that are injurious to a society are unlikely to become institutionalised. Almost by definition, function is positive because we look for the contribution to the maintenance of the social body. For that reason the prefix 'eu' (meaning good) died from neglect; but its opposite 'dys' is used to describe some patterned activity that has harmful or unpleasant consequences.