

What Durkheimian thought shares with pragmatism: How the two can work together for the greater relevance of sociological practice

Journal of Classical Sociology

12(3-4) 384–397

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DOI 10.1177/1468795X12453272

jcs.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Durkheimian thought and pragmatism are often considered inconsistent with each other. Nevertheless, beyond their most obvious differences, they share some fundamental postulates – like immanentism, pluralism, and relative indeterminacy. Realizing these common points seems particularly crucial in the current situation of the social sciences. Firstly, it allows us to overcome the structural-functionalist and structuralist versions of Durkheim's work that prevent the understanding that at its core is his theory of practice. Secondly, it forces us to distance ourselves from the aspects of pragmatism that are most hostile to sociological thought (that is, that are the most oriented towards individualism). Finally, and above all, it provides social scientists with the means to escape their difficulties in assessing their own practices, and it aids in defining their political role in society. Indeed, taking into account what pragmatism shares with the Durkheimian tradition leads to a better understanding that what the social sciences are founded on, both historically and in terms of scientific practice, is a political undertaking of emancipation. Such an undertaking aims to implement an approach involving the ideas of truth and historical progress in human thinking that is neither objectivist nor relativist. In order to describe this undertaking and its limits, this article explores the famous text published by Durkheim and Mauss in 1903 under the title 'On Some Primitive Forms of Classification'.

Keywords

Durkheim, Mauss, political role of social sciences, pragmatism, sociocentrism, theory of progress in human thinking, theory of truth

When actors act, they are not usually following rules; instead they settle for enacting what Pierre Bourdieu (1977 [1972]) called 'practical sense.' However – and Bourdieu

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may not have given this point its rightful weight – the same actors are sometimes led to inquire collectively into the fact that one or another of their actions did not sufficiently comply with rules that should have been followed. Inquiries of this sort may lead actors to discuss the rules and in some cases call their relevance into question. From this we can conclude that situations in which actors act in exclusively ‘empirical’ fashion, to use Leibniz’s term, and those in which they collectively produce a high degree of reflexivity are fundamentally continuous. A major feature of the approach I use in my sociological studies, an approach I call ‘grammatical analysis of action,’¹ is to take that continuity seriously. The method of inquiry consists in apprehending all actions in terms of their relations to sets of rules (or *grammars*), even if that relation is not actualized by the actors in the given situation.² Here I will examine how this practice requires us to bring together two traditions generally deemed incompatible: Durkheimian thought and pragmatism.

What is at issue in bringing together Durkheimian thought and pragmatism?

First, is it legitimate to bring these two bodies of understanding together? We know why it would not be (Joas, 1984). To begin with, there is Durkheim’s own declared disagreement with the pragmatist perspective, particularly with William James’s view of religious phenomena (Baciocchi and Fabiani, 2012; Durkheim, 1955 [1913]). What nonetheless justifies the *rapprochement* is that above and beyond their differences, Durkheimian thinking and pragmatism share at least three fundamental postulates. The first could be called immanentism and derives from the fact that both traditions broke with idealism. This is immediately clear for pragmatism, which in several respects may be thought of as a version of radical empiricism (Lapoujade, 2007). But when Durkheim’s thinking is correctly interpreted, it proves just as hostile as pragmatism to the idea of analyzing the lived experience of transcendence in any terms other than human sociality. Though Durkheim was at pains to account for transcendence and attest to its irreducible nature, he always thought of it as an experience of ‘transcendence within immanence,’ to borrow an expression Bruno Karsenti (2004) used in his discussion of a similar question.³

The second postulate shared by the two traditions is pluralism. Once again the point seems obvious for pragmatism: pluralism is often identified as its primary trademark, as Jean Wahl (2011 [1920]) pointed out in his work on ‘pluralist philosophies of England and America.’ But pluralism is also an integral part of Durkheimian thinking, as eloquently attested by the opposition Durkheim developed between sacred and profane in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1985 [1912]) and by Beuchat and Mauss’s article (1950 [1905]) on seasonal variations in Eskimo societies. Clearly action in those texts is understood as heterogeneous: one and the same single individual is called upon to act in compliance with sets of rules that differ according to the social situation of the moment.⁴

This leads directly to the third shared postulate, which may be called relative indeterminacy, clearly a centerpiece of pragmatism, namely through the key notion of ‘vagueness’ (Gavin, 1992). Durkheimian thinking, by contrast, has often been understood to grant very little weight to indeterminacy, the argument being that since Durkheimian

sociology seeks to discover and identify the social constraints affecting action and belief, it is ultimately mechanistic (Gurvitch, 1963). In reality the Durkheimian approach is no more deterministic or 'necessitarian' than any other sociological theory; if it were, it would be hard pressed to account—as it does so well—for the universally attested phenomenon of rule transgression and the specific movement of historical change.⁵

Immanentism, pluralism, and relative indeterminacy – what can we gain in the current social science context from realizing that pragmatism and Durkheimian thinking share these three postulates and can therefore not be considered alien or hostile to each other? Clearly, the realization is an incentive to reread Durkheim in a way that will transform our use of his work in *practicing* sociological inquiry. Anne Rawls (1996, 2004) has opened the way here by inviting us to reread Durkheim's works at the source, leaving aside Parsons' structural-functionalist version, so influential in the United States, and the structuralist version that has been so influential in France. Through their use of such terms as 'system of norms' or 'structure,' those readings radicalized and hypostasized the notion of transcendence which Durkheim, who undoubtedly recognized it as a major human experience, nevertheless interpreted in strictly immanentist terms – that is, as *an effect of collective action*. Parsonian and structuralist interpreters of Durkheim's work actually reversed the immanentist principle, presenting praxis as the *result* of the normative system or social structure rather than the other way around. This turned transcendence into what it never was for Durkheim: an autonomous principle operating as such. It is here that pragmatism, by requiring us to rehabilitate immanence, pluralism, and relative indeterminacy, can help us understand Durkheim's undertaking in its own original terms: that is, as a particular theory of practice.

This brings to light the second point at issue in this *rapprochement*, a point symmetrical to the first. It has to do with distancing ourselves from versions of pragmatism that radicalize the pluralist argument and the immanence and indeterminacy postulates to the point of losing the idea of objective truth, making the validity of our relationship to the world an effect of our sensory experiences (as William James had it) or even of our 'conversational conventions' (Richard Rorty's claim). Returning to Durkheim while distancing ourselves from that version of pragmatism is a means of rediscovering the value of more rationalist, less individualist pragmatic approaches – the pragmatism of Peirce, Mead, and Dewey. Their thinking is more rationalist in that it accepts what Peirce called the 'fundamental hypothesis' of the scientific method: '... there are real things whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them' (cited in Tiercelin, 1993: 92). As Habermas noted (1987 [1981]), the fundamental hypothesis of the scientific method echoes Durkheim's idea that social facts are independent of individual consciences: for example, whether we like it or not, accept it or not, feel it or not, persons belonging to certain social categories are more likely to commit suicide than others. The pragmatist approaches I am advocating here are also less individualistic in that they view the discovery of truth not as a personal experience but as a collective process. This can be related to Durkheim's idea that our categories have a social origin. From the perspective of rationalist, non-individualist pragmatism, then, the pluralism argument, though fully acknowledged as valid, cannot be taken as a defense of relativism. Likewise the undeniable existence of private experiences of truth can no longer mean that truth amounts to a subjective decision.

We begin to see the third and surely most important point at issue in bringing together Durkheimian thought and pragmatism. It concerns the fact that in the current situation the social sciences seem to find it excruciatingly difficult to take their own power of social emancipation seriously. Some social science researchers criticize the social world and claim that certain social changes are desirable while declaring that for them the supreme truth is socio-historical relativism, a belief that makes it impossible for them to justify the changes they (like many of us) desire and would support. Other researchers – though in some cases they are the same ones – claim that alternatives to our current form of socioeconomic organization are not impossible while rejecting the relative indeterminacy postulate as anti-scientific. Some of these practical contradictions stem from an excessively individualistic interpretation of positions derived from pragmatism; others from an excessively mechanistic interpretation of ideas derived from Durkheimian theory. Those interpretations create misunderstandings in researchers' own minds about how, practically, they come to know the social world. The result is that several of them actually end up turning their back on the immanentist argument and setting out on a quest for a supposedly absolute normative foundation that would justify their own moral and political positions. Taking into account what pragmatism and Durkheimian thinking have in common might just enable us to escape this kind of incoherence! In any case, doing so can help us to a better understanding of the fact that what the social sciences are founded on both historically and in terms of practice is a political undertaking of emancipation. And doing so can enable us to align the real practice of social science more closely with just that undertaking.

A return to *Primitive Classification*

In what way can focusing on what Durkheimian thinking and pragmatism have in common work to clarify our understanding of the social sciences and their practical purposes and thereby change our research practices? Rereading Durkheim's work in light of the postulates of immanentism, pluralism, and relative indeterminacy – postulates that, once again, are usually mistakenly assumed to be alien to his thought – offers a clear answer, and that is precisely the experiment I will be conducting here. First and foremost, the aim is to reread Durkheim without interference from structural-functionalist and structuralist interpretations of his thought. But as I hope will become clear, this approach to Durkheim is also intimately related to the other two points: a rationalist, non-individualist reassessment of pragmatism, and the task of aligning the social sciences with the emancipatory purpose on which they are founded.

The text I will be commenting on here is among Durkheim's most renowned, an article he wrote with Marcel Mauss and published in *L'Année sociologique* under the title 'De quelques formes primitives de classification: Contribution à l'étude des représentations collective' (Durkheim and Mauss, 1971 [1903] [published in English in 1963 under the title *Primitive Classification*]). The fact is that this text is often cited as a source for the social-constructivist theories that dominate the social science field today. I hope to show that this interpretation, though not entirely wrong, greatly underestimates Durkheim's immanentism. First, a brief summary of the article.

Durkheim and Mauss set out to retrace the various stages through which human beings developed and refined the classifying function. They present three distinct sequences: (1) the Australian clan societies described by the British ethnographers Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen, the most primitive societies for which the two sociologists had reliable information; (2) a society operating at what they term an 'intermediary' stage in the evolution of classification systems, namely the Zuñi Indians of New Mexico, who had been studied in detail by the American anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing; and (3) ancient China, an even more 'evolved' society, which they then relate on the practice of classification to Brahminical India, ancient Greece, and modern Western societies.

Australian totemism

Durkheim and Mauss's analysis of primitive Australian societies, which takes up most of the article, is the foundation for their main argument, namely that at the commencement of humanity, 'the classification of things reproduce[d] the classification of men' (Durkheim and Mauss, 1971 [1903]: 169 [1963: 11]).⁶ Men began by classifying each other, they explain. They then began putting the things around them in the categories they had devised for classifying human beings. Each thing was identified as belonging to a particular clan, 'phratry,' or marriage class, and so identified in accordance with the notion that the clan, phratry, or marriage class was itself a property of the thing in question, rather than the other way around. The result was that for the Kumite tribe, for example, there was indeed a *logical link* between a fishhawk, smoke, honeysuckle, and a tree with black wood: those beings went together and indeed attracted each other, begging to be united. Why? Because one of the five Kumite phratries had adopted the fishhawk for its totem, and smoke, honeysuckle, and a tree with black wood also belonged to it. In accordance with the same cognitive mechanism, for Kumites there was a *logical contradiction* between the fishhawk and dogs and between honeysuckle and ice, not because dogs were in the habit of hunting fishhawks or because ice melts on honeysuckle, but because those different things were part of different phratries' totems. Moreover, in addition to the mutually exclusive relations between totems, there were inclusive relations between totems and sub-totems. This is what ultimately led Durkheim and Mauss to claim that human beings' first logical categories, exclusion and inclusion, were 'social categories' (1971 [1903]: 224–225 [1963: 82]); specifically, they were categories linked to domestic and political relations within the given social group.

It is worthwhile noting that in the authors' understanding, the development of a classifying function in human beings presupposed the existence of a faculty for instituting social differences. More exactly, it assumed that human beings were already following rules for status differentiation – particularly dietary prohibitions (1971 [1903]: 171 [1963: 17]). This allows the assertion that the reason there could be *theoretical* agreement on categories and logical relations between categories was that *practices* were aligned with prohibition rules pertaining to status and self-restraint. In other words, differentiation practices were what made classifying operations possible, not the other way around. This point is key to a reading of Durkheimian thought in immanentist terms: that is, it moves to us to acknowledge how important practices are in that thought rather than

to take them for mere mechanical effects of representations. The point here is to shift from a description of thought systems in the abstract toward a description of the situated actions that enable the immanent production of such systems.

The Zuñis

The Zuñi Indians of New Mexico studied by Durkheim and Mauss in their second section used a classification system that no longer appears to follow totemic principles but consists instead in a division of space into seven distinct regions: the four cardinal points plus the zenith, the nadir, and the center. Here the authors set out to show that this spatial system actually derives from a much older totemic system – a crucial demonstration given that they mean to describe the evolution of classification systems over various historical stages, since, as they see it, defining classes in terms of spatial divisions represents a major advance in logical operations. In sum, the Zuñi system took divisions that initially characterized social organization and projected them onto space. In their system, each region of the universe referred to a particular set of clans and the objects and colors associated with that set. In the north, for example, there were the crane and yellow wood clans; in the west, the bear and coyote clans; in the south, the tobacco and maize clans, and so forth. In this way, things came to be classified as being ‘of’ the north, west, south, and so on. Durkheim and Mauss describe how this type of spatial system was used in other American Indian tribes, including the Sioux, and among the Wotjobaluk of Australia, pointing out that the Wotjobaluk divided space according to what the anthropologist Alfred Howitt saw as a ‘mechanical method to preserve and explain a record of their classes and totems, and of their relation to those and to each other’ (1971 [1903] 208 [1963: 60]). This is an important observation, in that spatialization is understood as a method of fixing and memorizing instituted differences among social groups – in other words, a technique for producing and temporally preserving a material representation of the classes in question.

Ancient China

In their last sequence, the authors describe the astronomical, astrological, and ‘horoscopolical’ divinatory system of the Chinese. For them this classification system, in contrast to the previous two, appears ‘independent ... of any social organization’ (1971 [1903]: 213 [1963: 67]). It is based on an idea of nature, the ‘Tao,’ that seems independent of social divisions; a particularly complex system in which space is divided into the four cardinal points and time into twelve years; there are also eight types of powers and five types of elements (earth, water, wood, metal, fire). The different principles of division are likewise related to each other and all things can be understood in terms of them. Here Durkheim and Mauss seek to show that the distant source of this seemingly autonomous classification system was once again totemism. They then relate ancient China to Brahmin India and ancient Greece, societies in which ‘highly organized pantheons divide up all nature, just as elsewhere the clans divide the universe’ (1971 [1903]: 221 [1963: 78]), concluding: ‘Thus it seems that we approach imperceptibly the abstract and relatively rational types which crown the first philosophical classifications’ (1971 [1903]: 223 [1963: 79]).

The sociocentrism thesis and its consequences

Durkheim and Mauss conclude their article by stressing three points. First, they claim to have shown that the first logical categories available to human beings for conceiving how nature was organized were categories linked to their own social organization, adding: 'It was because men were grouped, and thought of themselves in the form of groups, that in their ideas they grouped other things [*êtres*]' and that the idea of grouping or classifying came to them (1971 [1903]: 224–225 [1963: 82]). This is what may be called the *sociocentrism* thesis.

Second, the authors claim to have shown there is no absolute break between the first classifications forged by humanity and contemporary scientific or sophisticated classifications. As they understand it, there is actually a genealogical tie between the two, and they go so far as to claim that regardless of how different primitive and scientific classification systems may be, they share the same 'essential characteristics.' First, primitive classifications were, 'like all sophisticated classifications, ... systems of hierarchized notions.' Second, primitive systems, 'like those of science,' had a 'purely speculative purpose' because they sought to 'advance understanding, to make intelligible the relations which exist between things [*êtres*]' (1971 [1903]: 223–224 [1963: 81]).

The third and final point in their conclusion follows from the first two: if it can be shown that primitive classifications were governed by sociocentrism and that there seems to be no break between primitive and contemporary scientific classification systems, then we may rightfully ask whether or not the latter escape the sociocentrism of the former. The authors' answer to this question is the key point of the article. It is complex. On the one hand, they state that sophisticated classifications are independent of original social categories: that is, totemic ones. This makes it tempting to say that classifications became and become increasingly less sociocentric and more objective. However, they explain, modern science would be impossible if those who practice it did not have access to classification frames that come neither from nature nor from themselves as individuals but from the society to which they belong. In this sense, scientific classifications can never be thought of as entirely 'objective,' at least not if what is meant by 'objective' is a perspective on the world entirely free of any socially produced framework and therefore of any attachment to a particular social group and its history. Nor, for the same reason, can those classifications be absolutely free of affect or moral authority. In this way, the sociocentrism thesis regains its rightful place and power.

Bridges between Durkheimian thought and pragmatism

My brief review of the main lines of argument in this renowned text suggests two points of contact between Durkheim's thought and pragmatism that we can now explore. The first concerns truth; the second, history.

The role of experience in recognizing what is true

It might be thought at this point that for Durkheim and Mauss the truth of classification systems resides entirely in the social and emotional authority they enjoy: that is, in the

fact that individuals using them are not really at liberty to contest them. This is indeed suggested by the following sentence: ‘The pressure exerted by the social group on each of its members does not permit individuals to judge freely the notions which society itself has elaborated’ (1971 [1903]: 229 [1963: 88]). And the theory of truth suggested by this statement could, in fact, be used to defend a relativist position, for it would suggest that the validity of the social categories individuals use to apprehend and classify the natural world originate *entirely* in their collective beliefs: that is, in a mere agreement among people devoid of concern about a correspondence between those beliefs and nature itself. Durkheim was fully conscious of the problem, as attested by his move in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* to supplement the notion of collective belief with that of collective experience:

A collective representation, because it is collective, already presents guarantees of objectivity, for otherwise it could not be generalized and maintained with sufficient persistence. If it were in disagreement with the nature of things, it could not have acquired an extensive and prolonged hold on people’s minds. ... Now, a collective representation is necessarily subjected to an indefinitely repeated test: the men who adhere to it verify it by their own experience. Therefore it could not possibly be inadequate to its object.

(Durkheim, 1985 [1912]: 625 [2001: 333])

Contrary to an interpretation readily encountered today, Durkheim’s theory of truth can therefore not be reduced to the notions of collective representations and the mutual sanctions individuals use to constrain themselves and each other to think and act in compliance with those representations. That theory also points to notions of experience and the move to check representations against experience: that is, it acknowledges and embraces the idea that the materiality of the world may confirm or belie our collective representations. Collective representations that do not adequately correspond to what Durkheim calls ‘the nature of things’ would risk being repeatedly invalidated by experience and create persistent practical problems. A passage from the 1903 article on the Zuni classification system offers a good illustration of the importance that Durkheim and Mauss attached to testing ideas against experience:

In the beginning, things were divided by clans; each animal species was then assigned entirely to a certain clan. This total attribution occasioned no difficulty, for there was no contradiction in conceiving a whole species as standing in a relation of kinship to one or another human group. But when the classification by quarters [regions] was established, a downright impossibility appeared: *the facts were too clearly opposed* to a rigorously exclusive localization. It was thus absolutely necessary that the species, though remaining pre-eminently concentrated at a unique point, as in the former system, should however be diversified in order to be able to be dispersed, under secondary forms and various aspects, in all directions.

(1971 [1903]: 199–200 [1963: 50], my italics)

The eagle, for example, was associated with the clan located at the zenith, but the Zuni knew there were eagles in all regions, not only at the zenith: their experience of eagles

contradicted the idea that one region, the zenith, had a monopoly on eagles. If we follow Durkheim and Mauss here, this fact is what led the Zuni to complicate their classification system, to imagine that while the most majestic, eminent eagles came from the zenith, there were also representatives of the eagle species – ‘only smaller and less excellent’ – in all other regions of the world. Each of these other eagle types was of a specific color, the color characteristic of the given region.

Here we can observe in passing how, as Durkheim and Mauss understand it, the contradictions that arise between classification systems and experience fuel a continuous dynamic of evolution and revision. In the Chinese classification system, for example, in order for the twelve-year subsystem to be subsumed under the five-element subsystem, one of those five elements had to be eliminated; four elements could be arithmetically related to twelve years but five could not. This led Chinese thinkers to make what Durkheim and Mauss called ‘a necessary arrangement’ (1971 [1903]: 217 [1963: 72]):

... in order to adapt the basic principles of the system to the facts, the divisions and subdivisions of regions and things were ceaselessly multiplied and complicated. ... The fact is that this classification was intended above all to regulate the conduct of men; and it was able to do so, avoiding the contradictions of experience, thanks to this very complexity.

(1971 [1903]: 216 [1963: 70–71])

The work of complexifying a classification system thus seems directly linked to the problem of experience and the danger that experience will refute and thereby invalidate the system. Likewise we can say that our own scientific classifications are never anything other than a tirelessly revised and intensively corrected version of primitive classifications. In this view, the only thing that separates our way from the primitives’ way of classifying is a very long series of revisions and corrections, a series in turn made possible by the accumulation of many centuries of experience.

The foundations for progress in human thinking

What of the theory of history operative in the article? We would not be mistaken to call it evolutionism; the classification method used by Durkheim and Mauss was very similar to the one used during the same period in comparative anatomy, the only difference being that our authors were categorizing classification systems rather than living organisms. Their way of examining the different classification systems available to them was to order them in terms of how they were organized; they then organized the categories of those systems in an evolving series ranging from the most primitive to the most ‘sophisticated’ (as they put it) stage: that is, from totemic to scientific. At this point it is reasonable to ask how we get from one set of systems to the next. What laws, or, if not laws, then mechanisms of change, brought about the shift from a primitive classification system to a system situated at the next stage of development?

The article is silent on the point. But a few years later, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim put forward a causal explanation: ‘If logical thought tends increasingly to shed the subjective and personal elements it still carried with it in the

beginning, this is not because extra-social factors intervened but because social life of a new kind was becoming increasingly developed' (Durkheim, 1985 [1912]: 634–635 [2001: 340]). He then specified the life he had in mind:

... that international life which was already universalizing religious beliefs. As it extends itself, the collective horizon is enlarged. Society no longer seems like the ultimate whole but becomes part of a much larger whole, one with vague and infinitely expandable borders.

(1985 [1912]: 635 [2001: 340])

And he concludes:

As a result, things can no longer stay within the social frames in which they were originally classified; they beg to be organized according to their own principles, and thus logical organization is differentiated from social organization and becomes autonomous.

(1985 [1912]: 635 [2001: 340–341])

Not surprisingly, then, Durkheim's explanation is morphological. The more intense the division of labor becomes at the international level – with the development of large, important cities where people from different communities live together and cooperate with each other – the more the people involved are led to realize the limits of their own original social world and the more likely they become to adopt frames of thinking that will be acceptable not only to themselves but also to people from other communities – that is, thought frames characterized by a higher degree of universality and impersonality. It is this that led Durkheim to affirm: 'Thought that is truly and properly human is not an original given but a product of history; it is an ideal limit, to which we can come ever closer but in all likelihood will never attain' (1985 [1912]: 635 [2001: 341]). What did he mean by 'thought that is truly and properly human'? He seems to have had in mind human thought as such: that is, the faculty that people increasingly came to develop in the course of historical evolution (today we would use the term 'globalization') of conceiving of themselves as *individuals* belonging to humanity conceived as a whole.

For Durkheim, then, if human beings' logical capacities have progressed over history, this is due entirely to a morphological change in the organization of human societies. A morphological process was what originally improved and what continues to improve individuals' aptitude for conceiving the social and natural world around them in an ever-increasingly impersonal way. Durkheimian thought thus includes a theory of perfecting humanity's intellectual faculties that identifies the explanatory engine not as biological or genetic changes in the species but objective changes in its social organization. The abilities of our brains and our ancestors' brains are exactly the same; however, our social organization offers us more opportunities than they had to understand ourselves as belonging to humanity conceived of as a whole, and this fact in turn offers us a greater chance of having the most impersonal, universal beliefs, be they beliefs about relations between natural beings or about social and political relations.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this reading of Durkheim and Mauss's article has brought to light the family resemblances between Durkheimian thought and pragmatism, of which there are many more than is ordinarily believed. Regarding the issue of truth, it suggests that Durkheim, like the pragmatists, granted a key role to using experience to test representations. Contrary to what is often claimed, he understood truth not as based entirely on obedience to rules shared by a given social group but as being just as fully based on the fact that when individuals act and judge they make use of their bodies and material objects present in the world. Truth, then, in Durkheim's view, is produced by two types of testing or monitoring that together create a complex dynamic: individuals' beliefs and expectations are monitored and sanctioned by other members of the group, and collective representations are tested against individual and collective experience. This led Durkheim to see that what pushes the human mind forward is intensification of the division of labor in society, as that is what moves individuals to consider critically the categories they received as a heritage and to try to institute others which, because they are more impersonal and universal, will necessarily be better adjusted to the way social relations have come to be organized. In this way – and very similarly to pragmatist thinking – the changes that occur in individual beliefs and habits of thought are understood in Durkheimian thought to originate not in those individuals themselves but rather in the way they react to changes in their material and socio-organizational environment and changes in their partners' behavior. In this way – and again very similarly to pragmatist thinking – no category of thought can be declared absolutely objective, for sociocentrism is still fully operative: our most impersonal categories continue to depend on the way our society is organized.

In the end it becomes clear how these connections between Durkheimian and pragmatist thought shed light on the third issue specified above: that is, the place and political role of the social sciences. Striking in this connection is Durkheim and Mauss's suggestion that sociology should by all rights fulfill an eminent function in the hierarchy of sciences (even if that function has not been granted to it), for sociology, more than any other scientific discipline, is capable of helping Moderns understand the sociocentric nature of their thought categories. Modern scientific practice has, of course, already enabled us to realize the sociocentrism at work in the categories we received from tradition; indeed, modern science was built and refined through its opposition to and refutation of the authority that we granted on the basis of emotion to traditional categories, and by the strict procedures it established, in place of such authority, for verifying knowledge by experience. In many ways, however, sociology goes further, for it recognizes – and is the only scientific discipline able to do so – that sociocentrism is also at work in the highly objective and impersonal categories produced by modern science. That recognition enables it to engage a struggle against the tendency toward objectivism in modern scientific thought. Obviously it is not sociology's purpose to claim that scientific objectivity is a chimeric or an impossibility, but rather it is to remind us continually that scientific objectivity and impersonality, which are quite real, would be impossible without a certain level of division of social labor.⁷

Sociology, then, may be thought of as the science that systematically denaturalizes our frames of thinking, including the most objective among them. It is a science that shows the social and historical nature of our aptitude for thought, including our most impersonal thinking. Contrary to a mistaken reading of Durkheimian thought, this does not mean that sociology's role is to reveal our frames of thought to be relative or arbitrary, only that sociology inclines us to be ever more reflexively aware that our ways of conceiving the world – including objectivism – may still not be objective or independent enough of the categories we have inherited, particularly in comparison with the categories with which a still more intensive, internationalized division of labor will furnish us tomorrow. It is therefore appropriate that the social sciences should occasionally be presented as disciplines that enable us to begin to free ourselves from our own mental frameworks – namely by systematically comparing them with those of societies that came before us. But that presentation of them should always include the following clarification: the social sciences are also the sciences that enable us to understand that the emancipation they make possible is not and can never amount to mere rejection or scrapping of the mental frameworks we inherited, nor “to any “absolutely” objective perspective” on the social and natural world.

Notes

This article was translated by Amy Jacobs.

1. A method I developed in my ethnographic studies of change in journalists' work and the practical difficulties they have complying with their own professional ethics (Lemieux, 2000), and also applied in analyzing the practical reasoning of journalists and their information sources, one effect of which is that certain phenomena and events get intensive media coverage while others get none (Lemieux, 2008).
2. For more on the theoretical foundations of this practical approach, see Lemieux (2009). Grammatical analysis of action should be situated within a broader sociological current that developed in France in the mid-1980s under the name 'pragmatic sociology.' The term encompasses Michel Callon's and Bruno Latour's anthropological studies of science (1986 and 1988 [1984], respectively) as well as studies informed by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's pragmatic sociology of the critique (2006 [1991]). Whereas Bruno Latour's position is anti-Durkheimian (2005), my grammatical analysis of action seeks to relate Durkheim's thought to pragmatic sociology.
3. In my studies I have translated the notion of immanentism common to the two traditions by the idea of grammars of action. Grammars of action are of course transcendental phenomena in that they are the condition of possibility for acting and describing action, but they are still totally immanent to human activity in that they emerge from praxis itself and cannot be described outside of praxis (Lemieux, 2009: 19–39).
4. In my studies I have tried to comply with the pluralism postulate by means of the idea that in any and all human groups there are action sequences that follow different and potentially incompatible grammars (sets of rules). This idea requires another: the fact that there are several grammars is necessarily reflected in the *practical contradictions* that actors encounter and the concern they express about the right way to act (Lemieux, 2009: 156–176).
5. For my part I have translated the relative indeterminacy postulate by means of the idea that in every human group there is a certain tolerance for rule-breaking, meaning that the critical processes it might elicit need not occur or lead to predictable sanctions (Lemieux, 2009: 177–201).

6. When French and English editions are cited, as here, all quotations are taken from the English edition.
7. Harold Garfinkel wrote: 'In doing sociology, lay and professional, every reference to the "real world," even where the reference is to physical or biological events, is a reference to the organized activities of everyday life' (1984 [1967]: vii). Contrary to a superficial reading, this founding claim of ethnomethodology does not aim to accredit the idea that the objectivity attributed to modern scientific knowledge is illusory or fallacious, and it would run directly counter to Garfinkel's assertion to see it as expressing a socio-constructivist position. In fact, Garfinkel's sentence reaffirms Durkheim's sociocentrism thesis. This comes through more clearly in the following sentence (despite its being a direct disavowal of Durkheim's influence):

Thereby, in contrast to certain versions of Durkheim that teach that the objective reality of social facts is sociology's fundamental principle, the lesson is taken instead, and used as a study policy, that the objective reality of social facts as an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life, with the ordinary, artful ways of that accomplishment being by members known, used and taken for granted, is, for members doing sociology, a fundamental phenomenon.

In fact, rather than turning away from Durkheim's thinking here, Garfinkel offers a particularly well-developed expression of it. Social facts are indeed objective, he says; that objectivity is real. However, objectivity disconnected from its conditions of production cannot be sociology's focus of study. If it were, sociology would itself have given in to the objectivism it is supposed to combat. It would lose sight of the sociocentrism thesis, which holds that what allows the description of the natural and social world with a particularly high degree of objectivity and impersonality is concerted practices situated within a certain type of organization and division of labor.

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Author biography

Cyril Lemieux is Professor of Sociology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris) and a member of the Marcel Mauss Institute. His work focuses on journalistic practices and their contemporary evolutions. He has published notably *Mauvaise presse: Une sociologie compréhensive du travail journalistique et de ses critiques* (*Bad News: A Sociology of Journalistic Work and Its Criticisms*) (Métailié, 2000) and *La subjectivité journalistique* (*Journalistic Subjectivity*) (Éditions de l'EHESS, 2010). In those empirical inquiries, Lemieux develops an approach, which he calls a 'grammatical analysis of action', combining the Durkheimian tradition with some aspects of pragmatism. The theoretical basis and methodological requirements of such an approach are discussed in his book *Le devoir et la grâce: Pour une analyse grammaticale de l'action* (*Duty and Grace: Towards a Grammatical Analysis of Action*) (Economica, 2009).