

Oberlin

## Digital Commons at Oberlin

---

Honors Papers

Student Work

---

2014

### Anomie: Concept, Theory, Research Promise

Max Coleman  
*Oberlin College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

#### Repository Citation

Coleman, Max, "Anomie: Concept, Theory, Research Promise" (2014). *Honors Papers*. 281.  
<https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/281>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Digital Commons at Oberlin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Oberlin. For more information, please contact [megan.mitchell@oberlin.edu](mailto:megan.mitchell@oberlin.edu).

# **Anomie: Concept, Theory, Research Promise**

Max Coleman

Oberlin College

Sociology Department

Senior Honors Thesis

April 2014

# Table of Contents

Dedication and Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
<b>I. What Is Anomie?</b>	
Introduction	6
Anomie in <i>The Division of Labor</i>	9
Anomie in <i>Suicide</i>	13
Debate: The Causes of Desire	23
A Sidenote on Dualism and Neuroplasticity	27
Merton vs. Durkheim	29
Critiques of Anomie Theory	33
Functionalist?	34
Totalitarian?	38
Subjective?	44
Teleological?	50
Positivist?	54
Inconsistent?	59
Methodologically Unsound?	61
Sexist?	68
Overly Biological?	71
Identical to Egoism?	73
In Conclusion	78
The Decline of Anomie Theory	79
<b>II. Why Anomie Still Matters</b>	
The Anomic Nation	90
Anomie in American History	90
Anomie in Contemporary American Society	102
Mental Health	120
Anxiety	126
Conclusions	129
Soldier Suicide	131
School Shootings	135
<b>III. Looking Forward: The Solution to Anomie</b>	142
Sociology as a Guiding Force	142
Gemeinschaft Within Gesellschaft	145
The Religion of Humanity	151
Final Thoughts	155
Bibliography	158

To those who suffer in silence  
from the pain they cannot reveal.

**Acknowledgements:**

I would like to thank Professor Vojko Vujačić for his unwavering support,  
and for sharing with me his incomparable sociological imagination.  
If I succeed as a professor of sociology, it will be because of him.

I am also deeply indebted to Émile Durkheim, who first exposed the anomic crisis,  
and without whom no one would be writing a sociology thesis.

## **Abstract:**

The term *anomie* has declined in the sociology literature. Apart from brief mentions, it has not featured in the *American Sociological Review* for sixteen years. Moreover, the term has narrowed and is now used almost exclusively to discuss deviance. This project explores Durkheim's original use of the term, and whether modifications of his work—by Merton, Parsons, and others—are useful or muddling. We also present critiques of the term, evaluating them in light of Durkheim's intentions. Possible explanations for the decline of anomie theory are given, including academic explanations (e.g., classical sociology was replaced by newer theories like symbolic interactionism) and political explanations (e.g., Durkheim's functionalism became too “conservative” for the New Left). Finally, we argue that the United States is a highly anomic nation, with its focus on freedom, eternal striving, and self-advancement. We apply a Durkheimian perspective to contemporary issues like mental illness, exploring rising rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide as a consequence of these anomic conditions.

**Freedom, however, is not the last word.** Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibility. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility.

—Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

**Let us even recognize that in a general way** liberty is a delicate instrument which one must learn to handle; and let us train our children accordingly.

—Émile Durkheim, "Individualism and the Intellectuals"

# I. WHAT IS ANOMIE?

## Introduction

*Anomie*. Over a century after the term was introduced, sociologists have yet to unravel its mystery. It is a concept inextricable from the field that produced it—tied to the very origins of sociology itself. Anomie has been much maligned, much misunderstood, but the assumptions it carries lie at the heart of the discipline. To broach the term *anomie* is thus to invoke all of sociology. And to ignore the term is to wipe our intellectual ancestors into the dust.

But sociologists have grown tired of anomie theory; indeed, they are embarrassed by it. The term implicates sociology in many academic movements we wish to put behind us: functionalism, positivism, and conservatism, among others. To study anomie is to remind us of our ignoble origins, which—we continue to insist—no longer represent the field.

Consequently, anomie theory has declined in recent decades. A search of the *American Sociological Review* finds that the term has not been used in sixteen years. What happened? Perhaps by tracing the genealogy of the term, we may begin to understand its downfall.

Yet before I begin with the birth of the concept, I would like to consider its death. The following is a quote from sociologist Philippe Besnard, an expert on anomie theory.

Besnard writes:

It is better to get rid of anomie. The time to register the death of this centenarian seems to have come. We have done more: we have built it a tomb which some will judge too monumental. But could one throw the “sociological concept *par excellence*” into the pauper’s grave? This tomb appears to us to be on the scale of the illusions that have surrounded and fed the use of this slightly magical vocabulary whose sorcery we hope to have dispelled, and which we would like to write for the last time: anomie (Besnard 1987: 388, cited in Meštrović 1988a: 837).

This quotation, I am amused to report, appears at the end of a 424-page book dedicated to anomie theory. Apparently Besnard felt the term so utterly useless that it deserved a weighty

tome all its own. This bizarre quotation illustrates how contentious anomie has become—at once magical and marginal, at times the “sociological concept *par excellence*” and at times an elder on its deathbed.

Anomie is a very old term. The word entered the English language in 1591, and in the next century became associated with a “disregard for divine law” (Midgley 1971: 37). Émile Durkheim himself became familiar with the term through philosopher Jean Marie Guyau, but “after reviewing Guyau’s work, Durkheim coined his own definition of anomie in exact opposition to Guyau’s” (Orrù 1990: 232). After a period of disuse, the term resurfaced in the 1930s in the works of Elton Mayo, Talcott Parsons, and Robert Merton. The 1950s saw a heavy backlash against anomie theory, since it was associated with functionalism and therefore seen as conservative. But the term revived itself, again, in the work of criminologists and psychologists, who used anomie to explain deviance and “disaffection,” respectively (Borgatta & Montgomery 2000: 165). Today, even those passionate movements are beginning to dissipate: the word has seen fewer and fewer mentions every year since 1993.<sup>1</sup> Besnard’s death sentence may be entirely superfluous; anomie theory is dying of its own accord.

But as I will argue throughout this paper, anomie *itself* has only continued to rise. In the United States, where limitlessness is a cardinal virtue, rates of depression and anxiety have reached unprecedented heights. As the sociologist Jean Twenge observes, major depression has increased tenfold in the past century: only 1–2 percent of people born before 1915 in the U.S. had a major depressive episode; that number is 15–20 percent today (Twenge 2006: 105). In fact, the United States now has the highest depression rate in the world.<sup>2</sup> Anxiety disorders are even

---

<sup>1</sup> Google Books Ngram Viewer, English language search.

<sup>2</sup> “Mild and Bitter” (2009). *The Economist*. <http://www.economist.com/node/13899022>



more prevalent: affecting 40 million Americans (18 percent of the U.S. population), they constitute the most common mental illness in the nation.<sup>3</sup>

Anomie affects not only our mental health, but our behavior: as we shall see, rates of mass shootings, soldier suicides, and other disturbing practices are on the rise. While social constraint produces “happiness and moral health,” as Durkheim argued<sup>4</sup>, the anomic condition leads to a great deal of avoidable suffering.

It is my contention that anomie theory is declining at the *precise* moment it is most needed. Put another way, the term is losing its place in the literature just when its explanatory power is greatest. Indeed, I worry that as anomie worsens in the United States, anomie *theory*—which presupposes a critique of freedom and individualism—will become increasingly unpopular. Ideas, as Marx would have it, are tied to dominant ideologies; as the cult of the individual gains strength, it is sure to infect academia as well as popular culture.

The goal of this paper is to revive anomie theory. Barring this lofty feat, I hope to at least suggest some contemporary uses for the term, including (as I have already said) mental illness, school shootings, and soldier suicide. I will begin with Émile Durkheim’s description of anomie—focusing particularly on *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) and *Suicide* (1897). After this close reading, I will consider expansions of the term, especially Robert Merton’s famous essay, “Social Structure and Anomie” (1938). I will also consider critiques of anomie theory, evaluating them in light of Durkheim’s original analysis. Finally, I will explore why the term has declined, why it is still useful, and how it can be revived. I will end with Durkheim’s own solutions to the anomic crisis.

---

<sup>3</sup> Anxiety and Depression Association of America, Facts & Statistics: <http://www.adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Lukes 1977: 83

## **Anomie in *The Division of Labor***

Durkheim's first major work, *The Division of Labor in Society*, presents the most famous understanding of anomie. This fame is unfortunate, since Durkheim elaborated the concept in later works, and to read only this book gives a very narrow understanding of the term.<sup>5</sup> In this book—which was also his dissertation—Durkheim focuses primarily on economic anomie. Here Durkheim “treats anomie as a consequence of economic upheaval, people not knowing what rules apply across the business cycle of boom-bust-boom-bust” (Sennett 2006: xix).

Durkheim is particularly concerned with the “anomic division of labor.” As society progresses, jobs become specialized, and individuals rely on each other for specific social functions. This mutual dependence creates a sense of shared destiny around which individuals can coalesce. (This is “organic solidarity.”) Normally, the division of labor produces a sense of collective identity, but at times the opposite occurs. The healthy division of labor requires what Durkheim calls “dynamic density,” which is not only density of population (an inevitable result of urbanization), but a high frequency of interaction. Without consistent interaction, individuals become atomized, performing distinct social functions but not acquiring a sense of mutual need. Durkheim writes:

The division of labour progresses the more individuals there are who are sufficiently in contact with one another to be able mutually to act and react upon one another. If we agree to call dynamic or moral density this drawing together and the active exchanges that result from it, we can say that the progress of the division of labour is in direct proportion to the moral or dynamic density of society (Durkheim 1893/1997: 201).

---

<sup>5</sup> As Parsons (1937) and others have pointed out, Durkheim's ideas change greatly as his work progresses. His understanding of constraint, for example, passes from an “external” force that dominates individuals to an internalized “discipline” that does not feel like domination at all. This kind of evolution is hardly rare among theorists: Marx (to name just one other) admitted later in life that the base–superstructure model was not as unilateral as he thought. As Nisbet (1965) notes, authors are complex individuals, and though their work is often inconsistent (or even contradictory), we can still gain tremendous insight from them.

The anomic division of labor, Ritzer and Goodman (2004: 173) explain, “refers to the lack of regulation in a society that celebrates isolated individuality and refrains from telling people what they should do.” This must be stressed: anomie is not merely a lack of group identity (egoism), but the *insufficient sense of constraint* that results. For as Durkheim emphasizes, groups share not only a sense of purpose but a sense of mutual dependence, which restrains their desire and develops in them “a taste for altruism”, a “forgetfulness of self and sacrifice” (1893/1997: xxxiv). The anomic division of labor is one of the “pathological” forms of modernization; that is, it is not a normal result of specialization but an unfortunate malady that sometimes occurs. On the whole, the division of labor is a *desirable* process: it leads to a sense of empowered individualism, where each can pursue his passions and develop his talents (Durkheim 1898/1973).<sup>6</sup> Those who claim Durkheim was “regressive” or anti-modern must take note of this blatant praise of modernity. “In the main body of this work,” he writes,

we have been especially concerned to demonstrate that the division of labor *can bear no responsibility* for this [anomic] state of affairs, a charge that has sometimes unjustly been leveled against it. Nor does that division necessarily produce fragmentation and lack of coherence. Indeed, when its functions are sufficiently linked together they tend of their own accord to achieve an equilibrium, becoming self-regulatory (1893/1997: xxxiv, emphasis added).

While the division of labor *sometimes* produces anomie, this is not an inevitable result, but an aberration.<sup>7</sup> Yet we have not properly examined what anomie *is*. “Anomie is prevalent,” Steven Lukes writes, “because of the rapid growth of the market and big industry, for since ‘these changes have been accomplished with extreme rapidity, the interests in conflict have not yet had time to be equilibrated’; also there is the harmful existence of ‘the still very great

---

<sup>6</sup> This notion of specialization is not unlike that of Marx, who saw in the “kingdom of freedom” a highly individuated society.

<sup>7</sup> Even so, Durkheim admits that “the division of labour, by its very nature, may therefore exert a dissolving influence.” But he clarifies that specialization “is both useful and necessary” and we should not “return societies to what [Comte] calls the age of generality . . . that state of indistinctiveness and homogeneity that was their point of departure” (1893/1997: 295).

inequality in the external conditions of the struggle” (Lukes 1977: 79, citing Durkheim). Here we can see anomie’s economic character: as modernization progresses, and more and more of society is subsumed under the economic sphere, constraints on individual desire become insufficient. External circumstances—wealth, industry, technology—are advancing at a startling rate, and social forces cannot keep up. Thus “anomie is due to a lag in growth of the relevant rules and institutions” (Lukes 1977: 80). This concept is not elaborated until Durkheim’s *Suicide*, but the basic notion is that when economic change outpaces the rate of social change, desires are not properly constrained by society. An individual who gains (or loses) a tremendous amount of money is beset with new desires, but society can no longer rein in those desires. Thus the individual feels a sense of *moral confusion*, not knowing how to properly behave in society.

The suffering the individual experiences is twofold: first, one is given the means to achieve new desires, so expectations dramatically increase. Since not all of these desires can be satisfied, a sense of frustration and anxiety results. Second, the individual lacks moral direction; she is forced to pursue a “chaotic utilitarian calculus”<sup>8</sup> that seeks to maximize pleasure. It is the latter understanding that most theorists emphasize, which is why anomie is often translated as “normlessness” or “aimlessness.” The common refrain among American college students—*What am I going to do with my life?*—is indicative of this aimlessness. Such a question is not merely an existential quandary, but (as Durkheim believes) a failure of society to provide proper constraint for individuals. I say *constraint*, and not *guidance*, because anomie is above all a moral concern. It is not that society should tell us what to do<sup>9</sup>, but rather, that it should tell us what we *must not* do: it must constrain our desires. The “aimlessness” of

---

<sup>8</sup> This is a paraphrase of Merton 1938: 185.

<sup>9</sup> Historically speaking, this is an evolution: while premodern societies typically assigned functions to individuals (serf, priest, feudal lord), modernity in Durkheim’s conception *requires* that individuals pursue their own passions. If their roles are merely assigned, they will experience not anomie but its opposite: the “forced division of labor.”

the college student is problematic not only because she vacillates, but because her desires are aroused by far too many options.

That is, anomie is not merely disorienting, but painful. In times of economic depression, the reason is obvious: one must adjust to meager conditions, a difficult thing to do. But in times of prosperity, the suffering is the same! The individual must acclimate to new circumstances and forego a previous lifestyle. Indeed, “any change in human existence, whether sudden or prepared in advance, constitutes a painful crisis,” Durkheim writes,

for it does violence to acquired instincts, which offer it resistance. All the past holds us back, even when the brightest prospects tempt us to go forward. It is always a laborious operation to uproot habits that time has fixed and organised within us (1893/1997: 186).

This quotation is significant, for it reveals that even in his first book, Durkheim was not exclusively concerned with the economy. *Any* change, he wrote, is painful. This point is crucial, for many sociologists stop at Durkheim’s explanation of the economy<sup>10</sup>, and thus claim anomie is about economic dysregulation. That is false. As Durkheim stresses here and in other works, his focus on the economy is merely pragmatic, since in modern society, most activity is subsumed under the economy. Thus the anomic division of labor becomes a convenient platform through which to explore the anomic condition.

But as nuanced as his understanding of anomie may be, it is still simplistic compared with his later works. A more detailed understanding will come from his other writings, particularly *Suicide* and his second preface to *The Division of Labor*.

---

<sup>10</sup> See the work of Phyllis Puffer, for example: “The original concept [of anomie] was based on an analysis of the economy, more particularly the business cycle, and refers only to the structure of society and not to the mental state of the individual” (Puffer 2009: 200). As we shall see, this claim is incorrect.

## **Anomie in *Suicide***

In *The Division of Labor*, we observed, Durkheim “treats anomie as a consequence of economic upheaval, people not knowing what rules apply across the business cycle of boom-bust-boom-bust” (Sennett 2006: xix). But in *Suicide*, the concept becomes far more philosophical. Here, Durkheim grounds his argument in an ontological claim about human nature. We are, Durkheim argues, vessels of endless desire. Unique among beings, we are blessed with tremendous intellect, but that blessing is also our downfall.

“When the hole that life has dug out of its resources is filled,” the animal is satisfied and asks for nothing more,” Durkheim writes (1897/2006: 269). Animals, being simple creatures, have simple needs—their flourishing depends on “purely material conditions.” We do not have that luxury: “most of [man’s] needs are not (or at least not to the same degree) dependent on his body” (1897/2006: 269). Here Durkheim’s argument differs from Freudian *id*—for desire is not merely biological, but a product of intellect. “Human intelligence is more aware and can suggest better conditions which appear as desirable ends and inspire activity” (1897/2006: 270). It is not our “drives” that produce desire, but our capacity for imagination: “Beyond the pleasures that we have experienced, we imagine and yearn for others, and if one should happen to have more or less exhausted the realm of the possible, one dreams of the impossible – one thirsts for what is not” (1897/2006: 299).<sup>11</sup>

There is nothing wrong with imagination, Durkheim writes. Indeed, it is the “spirit of progress” that drives society forward (cited in Meštrović 1988b: 543). Yet even in the best of

---

<sup>11</sup> To give a concrete example: Later in the chapter, Durkheim notes that sexual desire is very complex in humans. It is not merely about satisfying bodily needs, as it is for most animals. “Though this natural urge may have been the germ of all sexual evolution, it has been progressively complicated by many varied aesthetic and moral feelings and is now only the least element in the complete and densely woven process to which it has given rise. On contact with these intellectual elements, it was itself *partly freed from the body* and, as it were, intellectualized” (1897/2006: 298, emphasis added).

circumstances, not all of our desires can be achieved. This is the curse of imagination—we are drawn toward goals that cannot possibly be fulfilled, and we suffer as a result. In a passage reminiscent of Buddhist philosophy, Durkheim writes:

No living person can be happy or even live at all unless his needs are sufficiently well adjusted to his means. In other words, if he demands more than can be provided for him, or even something other than can be provided, he will be constantly irritated and unable to function without suffering. And an action that cannot be accomplished without suffering tends not to be repeated. Aptitudes that are not satisfied atrophy and, since the aptitude for life is only the result of all the rest, it is bound to weaken if the others also slacken (1897/2006: 269).

To be sure, Durkheim reasons, most of us will accept “that appetites of this kind will sooner or later encounter a limit that they cannot pass.” But where is this limit located? “How can one assess the amount of well-being, comfort and luxury that a human being can legitimately seek? Neither in the organic make-up nor in the psychological make-up of the human being is there anything that marks the limit of such desires” (1897/2006: 270).

The individual may experience wondrous flights of imagination. But there is no mechanism that can shut imagination down. Our intellect brings us ever greater possibilities, ever higher horizons, until suddenly we wake from our illusions and begin a headlong plummet downward. “It is not human nature that can set the variable limit to these needs that they demand,” Durkheim warns. “Consequently, to the extent that they depend solely on the individual, *they are limitless*. In itself, setting aside any external power that governs it, our sensibility is a bottomless abyss that nothing can fill” (1897/2006: 270, emphasis added).

Individuals cannot self-regulate. Instead, they require the discipline of “an authority that they respect and before which they spontaneously bow.” That authority, Durkheim writes, is society. Society is “the only moral power superior to the individual whose superiority the

individual accepts. It alone has the necessary authority to state the law and to set the point beyond which the passions may not go” (1897/2006: 272).

Indeed, society exists *chiefly* as a regulatory force: it is the “arbiter appointed by nature for . . . assigning appropriate bounds” (1902/1997: xxxv). When social facts do not properly constrain desire, society has failed to perform its essential function. It was not by accident that Durkheim used “social” and “moral” interchangeably: he felt that only through shared moral constraints (the *conscience collective*) could individuals live together in a stable society. If morality is the set of constraints governing society, then society is the set of constraints governing morality; they are one and the same.<sup>12</sup>

Without normative constraints, Durkheim argued, individuals would be trapped in a utilitarian calculus, constantly trying to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. A healthy society forecloses this possibility; it provides individuals with a sense of moral direction.

So the pain of anomie is not merely that of unmet desire. It also comes from the profound confusion—Durkheim says *dérèglement* or “madness”—of living in a society without proper ethical rules (Meštrović 1987). When the rate of change in a society occurs faster than new constraints can form (“acute anomie”) or when those constraints simply do not exist (“chronic anomie”), the individual is literally *unable to be moral*. One’s moral character is no longer secure; suddenly all venues are open to pursuit, and desire and madness emerge in equal measure.

---

<sup>12</sup> “Society is the eminent end of all moral activity,” Durkheim writes (1906: 73/54, cited in Stedman Jones 2001: 195). Or as Parsons puts it: “A society, as Durkheim expressed it, is a ‘moral community’ and only in so far as it is such does it possess stability” (Parsons 1937: 389).

The two terms, though not “identical” per se, lead always to one another: “The few critics who have understood at all what Durkheim meant have generally laid the main stress on one side of the relationship—that morality is a *social* phenomenon. For present purposes, and in terms of Durkheim’s own scientific development, much the more important is the other side—that society is, at least in one of its principal aspects, a *moral* phenomenon in the strict sense that Durkheim has given the terms” (Parsons 1937: 391, emphasis in original)



Anomie is often translated as “normlessness,” and this point is somewhat misleading. While it is true that acute anomie—which emerges from a sudden change in social state—may produce a disruption in norms, this is *not* true of chronic anomie. In some nations (especially, as I will argue, the United States), norms and values *do* exist, and they have quite a grip on society. But they are not what Durkheim called “social facts”: they do not provide moral constraints on individual will. Indeed, they may do the opposite. The emphasis of Western democratic nations on liberty, choice, and opportunity is a very real cultural phenomenon. But these values do not constrain individual will; they encourage it, and in doing so, they foster anomie. It is the absence of *social facts* specifically, not norms and values generally, that produces the anomic condition. Indeed, as we shall see, this is the primary difference between anomie and egoism: both entail poor integration, but the former implies poor regulation as well.

If there is any simple definition of anomie, this is it: the suffering caused by unrestrained desire. Everything else follows from this principle. All the symptoms of anomie—*anxiety, weariness, disenchantment, unease, agitation, discontent, and groping*, as Durkheim variously wrote—are linked to “frustrations of desire.”<sup>13</sup> It is baffling to me that most sociologists fail to make this connection—instead, they describe the “lawlessness” of the anomic condition, or the breakdown of community, or the collapse of social order. But as Stjepan Meštrović reminds us, “anomie has meaning precisely in the fact that the incorrect arrangement of social representations produces distressing psychological symptoms which eventually produce physical, organismic pain” (1987: 571). It is *desire* that is painful—specifically, the overflow of desire that social facts have not properly constrained. When this desire becomes overwhelming, it leads us to take our own lives.

---

<sup>13</sup> This term is borrowed from the philosopher Peter Carruthers, who uses it in a very different context (Carruthers 2005: 167).

Anomic suicide is thus the most dramatic example of the anomic condition—it is anomie taken to its furthest personal extreme (Sennett 2006: xix). While I do not wish to discredit the role of suicide in Durkheim’s work, it must be seen as only one point *along the spectrum* of anomie, an anomie which nearly everyone experiences. By normalizing anomie in this way, I hope to emphasize that suicide is not the pathological tendency of sick individuals<sup>14</sup>, but a gradual weakening of the “aptitude for life” (Durkheim 1897/2006: 269).

Durkheim’s emphasis on suicide was, it must be remembered, a strategic choice. Ever the social realist, Durkheim devoted his life to legitimizing sociology as a discipline. If he could show that even suicide—the most personal, private act available to human beings—had a social etiology, he would prove that society existed as a concrete force: “Sociological method, as we practice it, rests wholly on the basis that social facts must be studied as things; that is, as realities external to the individual. There is no principle for which we have received more criticism; but none is more fundamental” (cited in Nisbet 1974: 45).

As we explore anomic suicide, keep in mind that Durkheim’s discussion is far broader than the act of taking one’s life. The observations in this chapter can be applied not only to economic and domestic suicide, but to a miscellany of factors that strengthen the anomic condition. Do not be fooled: suicide is merely the mask through which all anomic suffering is presented.<sup>15</sup>

Durkheim begins his chapter with an analysis of economic crises. To be sure, he says, economic downturns cause suffering and increase the suicide rate. But they do not do so for the reason we suppose. It is not that life becomes more difficult during an economic crisis, but rather

---

<sup>14</sup> It *is* pathological, but the pathology is social, not individual. My point in making this distinction is to place blame on society rather than the individual psyche.

<sup>15</sup> Another important point: though anomie is difficult to measure, suicide rates provide a clear and consistent metric for which data is available. They are *not*, of course, the only symptom of anomie.

that life changes rapidly, and new norms cannot form fast enough. The moral chaos that ensues—the erosion of barriers on desire—is what causes suffering.<sup>16</sup> Durkheim writes:

In the event of an economic disaster, there is something like a ‘declassification’ which suddenly casts certain individuals into a situation below that which they previously occupied. They consequently have to lower their demands, to restrict their needs and learn to restrain themselves more. As far as they are concerned, all the fruits of social action are lost and their moral education has to be redone. But it is not possible for society to subject them to this new life instantaneously, and teach them to exercise this additional restraint on themselves when they are not accustomed to it. The outcome is that they are not adjusted to the condition that they occupy and the very prospect of it is intolerable to them. Hence the sufferings that detach them from a diminished form of life even before they have experienced it (1897/2006: 276).

In fact, this same chaos emerges when the economy does *well*. For the human psyche cannot tell what changes are good or bad—it sees all of them as rapid and painful. Durkheim provides several historical examples to support this claim. In 1870, he observes, Victor Emmanuel’s conquest of Rome helped to revive Italy. The country saw better transportation, improved communications, greater access to goods... But “in parallel with this collective rebirth, we find an exceptional growth in the number of suicides” (1897/2006: 265).

“If industrial or financial crises increase suicides,” Durkheim concludes, it is not because they impoverish people, since critical increases in prosperity have the same result; it is because they are critical, that is to say, disturbances in the collective order. . . . Any disturbance, even when it results in greater wealth and an increase in general vitality, drives some to suicide” (1897/2006: 267).

This observation provides the framework for a theory of “acute economic anomie” (Pope 1976). From here, Durkheim immediately transitions to a discussion of *chronic* anomie:

---

<sup>16</sup> But couldn’t the suffering of, say, losing one’s livelihood *also* lead to suicide? Whitney Pope (1976) and others seem to think so, yet Durkheim does not acknowledge this point. It seems likely that a combination of effects—*anomie and* sadness, for example—may be responsible.

analyzing the relationship between income and suicide.<sup>17</sup> Making what is today one of his most famous claims, Durkheim writes: “One might even say that poverty protects” (1897/2006: 267). If anomie is caused by unchained desire, Durkheim reasons, it will be particularly prevalent among the wealthy. “Wealth . . . by the powers that it confers, gives us the illusion that we depend only on ourselves. By lessening the resistance that things put in our way, it persuades us that they can be constantly overcome. And, the less one feels limited, the more intolerable any limitation becomes” (1897/2006: 278). But the poor do not face this problem: their desires are *already* constrained by external circumstances—i.e., the inability to meet basic needs.

The analysis then becomes rather muddled—it is unclear whether Durkheim is describing chronic or acute anomie when he says: “So little is it the case that a rise in poverty leads to a rise in suicide that even fortunate crises, the effect of which is rapidly to increase a country’s prosperity, act on suicide in the same way as economic disasters” (1897/2006: 264). A rise in poverty *should* lead to suicide, by Durkheim’s own argument, since it is a sudden change in social state. Granted, that newfound poverty may “protect” once the individual becomes used to it, but the transition will cause suicide for some. It seems Durkheim is conflating chronic and acute anomie here.

Nonetheless, Durkheim’s economic observations are otherwise clear, and can be divided into two claims. First, sudden economic change produces anomie, whether that change is “fortunate” or not, because it disrupts social constraints. (This is the “acute” argument.) Second, wealth increases the risk of anomie, since (a) desires are more easily satisfied—and therefore the imagination grows and (b) the individual is accustomed to satisfaction, and cannot cope with frustrations of desire when they arise. (This is the “chronic” argument.)

---

<sup>17</sup> Chronic anomie is simply *structural* anomie—the suffering caused by a society that perennially fails to constrain desire. Acute anomie, meanwhile, is caused by a sudden change in social state, where constraints are torn asunder.

Durkheim then explores the history of constraint, linking the decline of feudalism to a change in social hierarchy. Whereas birth formerly determined one's status, "inherited wealth [and] merit" are now responsible (1897/2006: 274). It is not who you are, the old adage goes, but what you do. Yet as Tocqueville also observed, the emphasis on equality has obscured the need for constraint. Real meritocracy does not exist—"intelligence, taste, scientific, artistic, literary and industrial worth, courage and manual dexterity" are randomly distributed—but we *believe* that it does (1897/2006: 275). So it becomes difficult for individuals to accept moral authority: each of us strives to be "equal" to the most affluent, the most prestigious, the most powerful. "A spirit of anxiety and discontent is latent, and appetites which are only superficially contained break out" (1897/2006: 275). Equality is necessary, Durkheim warns, but also dangerous, and must be approached with caution.<sup>18</sup> We will explore Durkheim's approach to justice later in this work.<sup>19</sup> For now, let us turn to Durkheim's discussion of domestic, or "conjugal" suicide.

"What is marriage?" Durkheim asks, and then answers the question: "A regulation of sexual relations which extends beyond the physical instincts involved in such intercourse" (1897/2006: 298). Marriage provides "a rigorously defined object for the need to love," and shuts off the possibility of other partners (1897/2006: 299). In young adulthood, men<sup>20</sup> may benefit from an unconstrained state—to force them into an early marriage would be to "pitilessly

---

<sup>18</sup> In addition to Tocqueville, Friedrich Nietzsche also makes this point. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he writes:

People should not be surprised when the fruits of this optimism ripen, when a society that has been thoroughly leavened with this kind of culture, right down to the lowest levels, gradually starts trembling in an extravagant turmoil of desires, when the belief in earthly happiness for everyone, when faith in the possibility of such a universal knowledge culture gradually changes into the threatening demand for such an Alexandrian earthly happiness, into the invocation of a Euripidean *deus ex machina*! (1872/1999: 58).

<sup>19</sup> See my "Critiques of Anomie Theory."

<sup>20</sup> Durkheim is very clear: domestic anomie is chiefly a problem for men, not women. Durkheim believes that women have fewer sexual desires than men because they are insufficiently socialized; thus, domestic anomie is less a concern for them. We will discuss this observation in the "critiques" section.

[confine]” their future, a recipe for fatalism (1897/2006: 306). But as men develop, so do their desires, until eventually the restraint of marriage becomes imperative.

“The bachelor . . . can legitimately attach himself to whatever he wants, he aspires to everything and nothing satisfies him,” Durkheim observes. “This disease of the infinite which anomie always brings with it can just as well attack that part of our consciousness as any other” (1897/2006: 299).<sup>21</sup> Though individuals may get married for other reasons (kinship, economics, etc.), they benefit *primarily* from constraints on desire. It is these constraints that are lost in a divorce. When a couple decides to separate, “the moral calm and tranquility that made the husband strong are thus reduced, giving way, to some extent, to a state of anxiety that prevents the man from restricting himself to what he has” (1897/2006: 300).

The “endless new experiments” of the bachelor, “raising hopes that are dashed and leaving behind them a feeling of weariness and disenchantment,” cannot be endured for long. At times it is easier to take one’s life than to sustain this anomic tension (1897/2006: 299). Here we see several symptoms of anomie at once—the disappointment of unmet desire, the weariness of failed pursuits, and the moral chaos that drives the individual forward in spite of it all. “Anomie is twofold,” Durkheim observes:

Just as the subject never gives himself definitely, so he possesses nothing definitely. Uncertainly about the future, together with his own indecisiveness, thus condemns him to perpetual motion. Hence a state of unease, agitation and discontent that inevitably increases the possibility of suicide (1897/2006: 300).

In a nation with high divorce rates, argues Durkheim, even married men are susceptible. As the social fabric dissolves, it is hard to become truly invested in one’s marriage, since it too may fall apart: “One cannot be strongly attached to a bond that may, at any moment, be broken

---

<sup>21</sup> When Durkheim says “that part of our consciousness,” he means sexual desire. Here Durkheim confirms what I have argued throughout this thesis: anomie affects all aspects of our lives, not just the economic and domestic spheres, as Durkheimians sometimes argue.

on one side or the other. One cannot avoid looking outside the place where one is when one no longer feels the ground beneath one's feet solid." In such circumstances, marriage does not protect—the married man “cannot help losing some of his advantages. Consequently, the total number of suicides rises” (1897/2006: 300).

Durkheim originally theorized that widows would have higher suicide rates than divorcées, but his data proved otherwise (Pope 1976). Why—Durkheim allegedly wondered—would divorce cause greater suicide risk than the death of a spouse? Surely divorce is both more gradual than widowhood and more desirable. Durkheim came to the following conclusion: the acute anomie of widowhood, though severe, did not match the chronic pain of bachelorhood. When one loses a spouse, the mourning period often shuts down romantic desire, sometimes indefinitely. But divorce, which is enacted willingly, does not foreclose desire. Indeed, divorce is often committed because one imagines better circumstances! If this logic is correct, it is not surprising that divorce produces more anomie, and more suicide, than widowhood.<sup>22</sup>

Durkheim concludes his chapter on anomic suicide with a small footnote on fatalism. I will reproduce it here for the sake of reference, since it completes the suicide typology:

We can see by the preceding that there is a type of suicide which is opposite to anomic suicide, just as egotistical suicide and altruistic suicide are opposed. This is the one that results from an excess of regulation, the one committed by those whose future is pitilessly confined and whose passions are violently constrained by oppressive discipline. This is the suicide of married men who are too young and of married women without children. For the sake of completeness, we must therefore establish a fourth type of suicide. But it affects so few people today and, apart from the cases that we have just mentioned, it is so hard to find examples of it, that it seems unnecessary for it to detain us further. However, it could be that it has some historical interest. Is this not the kind of suicide of slaves that is said to be common in certain circumstances (see Corre, *Le crime en pays créoles*, p. 48)? In short, all those suicides which could be attributed to an excess of physical or moral despotism? To indicate the inescapable and inflexible character of the rule over which one has no power, and in contrast to the term ‘anomie’ which we have just used, we might call it ‘fatalistic suicide’ (1897/2006: 306).

---

<sup>22</sup> This paragraph is largely speculation on Pope's and my part, but it does not seem entirely implausible.

As I have argued, this chapter is perhaps the most important of all Durkheim's work on anomie. Here Durkheim defines the anomic condition, states the biological assumptions behind his claim, provides several wide-ranging examples of anomie, and hints at their solution. Here, too, Durkheim distinguishes anomie from egoism (the latter concerned with meaning, not constraint), and also from fatalism (in which constraint is excessive and cannot be internalized). Durkheim will continue with these themes throughout his work, most notably in *Moral Education* and his Second Preface to *The Division of Labor in Society*. We will discuss the latter work at the end of this thesis.

## **Debate: The Causes of Desire**

If anomie is the suffering of unbridled desire, it is crucial to understand where this desire comes from. To answer this question, we must look to Durkheim's conception of human nature. But though the nature of man is a question nearly every theorist takes up, few have been as misunderstood as Durkheim. The following will attempt to reconstruct Durkheim's argument; I will conclude that Durkheim understood *both* the social and biological underpinnings of desire, though no one—as far as I know—seems to recognize this.<sup>23</sup>

While some theorists (notably Foucault) have argued that all desire is socialized, Durkheim does not take this position.<sup>24</sup> For him, desire is the product of man's unique intellectual gifts. "Human intelligence," he writes in *Suicide*, "is more aware and can suggest

---

<sup>23</sup> For example, I have been having a lively debate with Dr. Stjepan Meštrović over this topic. Meštrović believes that desire (for Durkheim) is entirely biological, but has admitted that "you make a compelling argument for your interpretation that the sources of desire are both social and psychological—so, by all means, go with it."

<sup>24</sup> This is a crucial point, since Durkheim has often been accused of ignoring biological facts and explaining everything as a result of socialization.



better conditions which appear as desirable ends and inspire activity” (1897/2006: 270). But these very gifts become a source of frustration:

One may accept that appetites of this kind will sooner or later encounter a limit that they cannot pass. But how can one assess the amount of well-being, comfort and luxury that a human being can legitimately seek? Neither in the organic make-up nor in the psychological make-up of the human being is there anything that marks the limit of such desires” (1897/2006: 270).

That Durkheim distinguished between “organic” and “psychological” makeup is worth examining. Why did he make the distinction? As Stjepan Meštrović (1988a) has argued, Durkheim’s conception of desire is not the same as Freud’s. For Durkheim, desire does not simply emerge from a natural “drive” (*id*), but comes as a product of imagination. “The real seems worthless beside what is seen as possible by feverish imaginations, so they detach themselves from it, only later to detach themselves from the possible when that becomes real in its turn,” he writes (1897/2006: 281). He repeats this point later in the chapter: “Beyond the pleasures that we have experienced, we imagine and yearn for others, and if one should happen to have more or less exhausted the realm of the possible, one dreams of the impossible – one thirsts for what is not” (1897/2006: 299).

So it is imagination that separates us from the animals, not our *social* capacities, as some have argued (e.g., Besnard 1990). If that is the end of the discussion, we can safely conclude that Merton was right: Durkheim was unaware of the social etiology of desire. He saw society only as a constraining force, and could not have imagined—as Merton so artfully did—that culture itself might actually increase desire.

But was Durkheim really so ignorant? Hardly. The following passage from *The Division of Labor* tells a different story. Specialization not only satisfies desires, Durkheim argues, but *produces* them:

What confers value upon [the division of labor] is the fact that it meets certain needs. Later the proposition will be demonstrated that these needs are themselves consequences of the division of labour. It is because the division of labour is accompanied by an increase in fatigue that man is *constrained to seek after, as a compensatory increase, those goods of civilization that otherwise would present no interest to him*. Thus if the division of labour corresponds to no other needs than these, its sole function would be to mitigate the effects that it produces itself, one of binding up the wounds that it inflicts (1893/1997: 15, emphasis added).

This “increase in fatigue,” it should be noted, is precisely the notion that Marx gives to the “production of new needs.” As Marx argues in *The German Ideology* (1846/1978), society grows ever more complex as it attempts to satisfy new needs, and the increasing difficulty of satisfaction produces even *more* needs. It is a vicious cycle, as Durkheim recognized, and one that can only be justified by accompanying advantages. (These include increased solidarity and moral direction.) The fundamental point is that *being in society* produces these new desires. This is not quite the same as Merton’s understanding—desire as culturally imposed—for here desire is a historical process, the result of social complexity.

Many have called Merton “revolutionary” for his notion that culture creates anomie (Orrù 1990: 232, for example). But Durkheim preempted him by over forty years. A comprehensive analysis by Steven Lukes (1977), with citations from *Suicide, Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*, and other works, reveals:

Anomie is the peculiar disease of modern industrial man, ‘sanctified’ both by orthodox economics and by extreme socialists. Industry, ‘instead of being still regarded as a means to an end transcending itself, has become the supreme end of individuals and societies alike.’ Anomie is accepted as normal, indeed ‘a mark of moral distinction,’ and ‘it is everlastingly repeated that it is man’s nature to be eternally dissatisfied, constantly to advance, without relief or rest, toward an indefinite goal.’ Religion, governmental power over the economy and occupational groups have lost their moral force. Thus ‘appetites have become freed of any limiting authority’ and ‘from top to bottom of the ladder, greed is aroused without knowing where to find ultimate foothold. Nothing can calm it, since its goal is far beyond all it can attain.’ The lives of ‘a host of individuals are passed in the industrial and commercial sphere,’ where ‘the greater part of their existence is passed divorced from any moral influence . . . the manufacturer, the merchant, the workman, the

employee, in carrying on his occupation, is aware of no influence set above him to check his egoism' (Lukes 1977: 78).

A few things to note here. Though desire may originally stem from the individual, it is "sanctified" by society, and encouraged as "a mark of moral distinction." Industry has become a "supreme end," not only for individuals but for societies. Greed does not just exist but is "aroused" by social forces. These conditions are precisely those Merton describes in his famous article, when he discusses the anomie of American culture.

If that is not enough to wrest Merton of his "revolutionary" title, consider this: Just one year prior to Merton's article, "Social Structure and Anomie," Talcott Parsons made an important observation. In Durkheim's section on egoistic suicide, he notes that the Protestant obsession with freedom is not a break from social constraint, but a constraint in itself: "In so far as he is a Protestant in good standing he *must* assume this responsibility and exercise his freedom. It may be said that this exemplifies quite literally Rousseau's famous paradox, as a Protestant man is, in certain respects, *forced to be free*" (Parsons 1937: 332, emphasis in original). This attitude, Parsons notes, applies not only to Protestantism but to *modernity itself*:

Later in the book Durkheim generalizes this insight and puts forward the view that the leading common moral sentiment of our society is an ethical valuation of individual personality as such. This is the more general phenomenon of which the Protestant version of religious freedom and responsibility is a special case. . . . The fundamentals of the system of normative rules governing contract and exchange by virtue of which 'organic solidarity' is possible, are, in certain respects at least, an expression of the cult of individual personality. This is not a matter simply of freeing the individual from ethical restraints imposed by society, it is a matter of the imposition of a different kind of ethical restraint. Individuality is a product of a certain social state, of the *conscience collective* (Parsons 1937: 333–34).

Freedom is not merely *allowed* to exist: it is enforced. Here Durkheim reveals (*à la* Foucault) that power is a *constitutive* force, not merely a source of repression.<sup>25</sup> It is easy to see how this “cult of individual personality” applies to anomie: modernity’s emphasis on the self—self-improvement, self-advancement, self-determination—produces a whole host of desires that cannot be satisfied. This was certainly Merton’s point, and it was likely Durkheim’s as well.

In summary: I cannot agree with Merton’s accusations of biologism. It is clear that Durkheim was interested in psychological and social aspects of desire, not Freudian *id*. But nor can I agree with Philippe Besnard (1990), who reads in Durkheim only the social construction of desire. On balance, it seems that Durkheim advocated for social constraints on desire, but recognized that culture could also *produce* desires.

Indeed, this is probably why he distinguished between *integration* and *regulation*, a contrast many theorists have claimed not to understand.<sup>26</sup> The latter refers only to social facts—moral constraints on individual will—but not all norms and values are constraining. Some, as Protestantism shows us, actually *demand* the exercise of the will.

### **A Sidenote on Dualism and Neuroplasticity:**

Durkheim has sometimes been accused of dualism—not the mind/body dualism of Descartes, but the dual nature of man as both biological and socialized (see Pope 1976: 49). As Dennis Wrong and others have noted, this notion is reductionist. Biology and socialization interact in complex ways; indeed, it would be better to speak of “nature via nurture” (Ridley

---

<sup>25</sup> Though Durkheim and Foucault have basically opposite notions of the *value* of constraint, they share a nearly identical understanding of the nature of morality. Foucault’s use of the word “discipline,” as the internalization of a social fact, mirrors Durkheim completely.

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 4, “Integration and Regulation: Different or Identical?” in *Durkheim’s Suicide* (Pope 1976).

2003, cited in Solomon 2012: 21). In his famous essay, *The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology*, Wrong writes:

The drives or ‘instincts’ of psychoanalysis, far from being fixed dispositions to behave in a particular way, are utterly subject to social channeling and transformation and could not even reveal themselves in behavior without social molding any more than our vocal chords can produce articulate speech if we have not learned a language. To psychoanalysis man is indeed a social animal; his social nature is profoundly reflected in his bodily structure (Wrong 1961: 192).

This complexity is, I think, reflected in Durkheim’s own writing. Although Durkheim believed in both social and biological causes of desire, he recognized that the former could influence the latter. In Durkheim’s view, desire was a vague, unchanneled force, ripe for social refashioning.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Parsons writes, this is what distinguished him from the utilitarians, who conceived of desire as “concrete”: “It was just this tacit assumption Durkheim had to break down” (Parsons 1973: 381n2).

But Durkheim’s conception of “nature via nurture” was more advanced even than Wrong’s. If it is not stretching things too far, we may argue that Durkheim believed in neuroplasticity (though of course he did not use the term). Consider his understanding of the human brain: In *The Division of Labor*, for example, Durkheim argues that women’s and men’s brains are continuing to grow apart to fulfill specialized functions. Why is this change occurring? *Because of the division of labor*. Durkheim cites the phrenologist Gustave Le Bon, who writes: “The volume of the skull of a man or woman . . . presents considerable differences in favor of the man, and this disparity likewise increases *with the advance of civilization*” (Durkheim 1893/1997: 18, emphasis added). Here the development of the brain *follows* the development of

---

<sup>27</sup> This is comparable to Freud’s notion of the *id*, which does not attach to anything but finds itself drawn to everything. Again, the difference is that for Freud, desire is inherent in the human body, while for Durkheim, it comes from our capacity to imagine (which is why only humans experience anomie).

society (a Lamarckian point).<sup>28</sup> Whether this bit of science is accurate is beside the point. It is merely useful in illustrating that for Durkheim, social realist above all else, even the human brain could be swayed by social forces.

This sidenote on dualism and neuroplasticity serves to bring Durkheim's understanding into the twenty-first century, so that we may not consider his writing a mere historical artifact, but a useful, complex, scientifically viable understanding. It is not perfect, but it is much more sophisticated than even today's common-sense assumptions.

## **Merton vs. Durkheim**

Nearly 80 years after Robert Merton's work, "Social Structure and Anomie," was released, the article remains the most popular contribution to anomie theory. Merton is credited not only with expanding the concept, but making it less philosophical and more empirical. The article connects Durkheim's theory of unattainable desires with the American success ethic, and emphasizes the anomic character of the United States.

Although Merton *claims* to expand on Durkheim's work, his article often pours scorn on the Durkheimian perspective. Merton begins by thoroughly ridiculing the notion that desire is biological. He rejects the Freudian notion of "man's imperious biological drives," and instead blames society for increasing our desire. "It no longer appears so obvious that man is set against society in an unceasing war between biological impulse and social restraint," Merton writes (Merton 1938: 185).

---

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Riley confirms this interpretation. In an endnote to *Suicide*, he writes: "[Durkheim] had argued that one of the effects of the historically gendered division of labour was to *create differences* in brain size (and therefore in intelligence) between the sexes" (2006: 447, emphasis added).

The article is, in my view, rather uncharitable. Merton continues to set up straw men—weak arguments that vaguely resemble Durkheim’s—and then debunk them, leaving Durkheim’s original claims intact. Because Merton’s concept of anomie comes from Elton Mayo and not Durkheim, the claims Merton makes are often imprecise (Meštrović 1988a: 837).

Durkheim does not, for example, see man as an “untamed bundle of impulses” (Merton 1938: 185). That view belongs to Freud.<sup>29</sup> Rather, desire comes from the human capacity to imagine better circumstances. This capacity becomes more complex as the individual is socialized—it is aroused, expanded upon, etc. So Merton misrepresents Durkheim’s argument on two fronts: first, by claiming that desire is based on biological drives, and second, by asserting that desire has no social component.

Granted, Merton’s task is not simply to rehash Durkheim’s claims, but to challenge and refine them. Yet by failing to summarize Durkheim’s original argument, Merton’s “critiques” are not especially helpful: it is unclear which aspects of Durkheim’s argument he is rejecting. Merton seems to be quite concerned with deviance, for example; he rejects the notion that “conformity is the result of an [*sic*] utilitarian calculus or of unreasoned conditioning” (Merton 1938: 185). “Our primary aim,” he says, “is to discover how some *social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in the society to engage in non-conforming rather than conforming conduct*” (Merton 1938: 186, emphasis in original). But was deviance a chief concern of Durkheim’s? Not necessarily. Durkheim spent very little time discussing deviance—he cared more about the anguish of anomie (i.e., its psychological effects) rather than its role in

---

<sup>29</sup> Of course, this is a simplification, and I do not intend to mock the Freudian perspective. See *Civilization and Its Discontents* for Freud’s original (and far more nuanced) argument.

crime.<sup>30</sup> Yet Merton seems to accuse Durkheim of backwards Freudian thinking, embroiling both Durkheim and Freud in an academic tirade against biologism.

Nonetheless, Merton's approach does have its merits. His use of the term "goals" (instead of desires or needs) is helpful, since it emphasizes the social compulsion to achieve valued goods. Our desires, Merton recognized, are often socially imposed—the will is transformed through social expectation. Merton also highlighted the goal–means discrepancy involved in anomie: the gap between social goals and the socially approved means of attaining them. In an anomic society, the goal becomes so important that individuals are quick to abandon the means—they become innovators, deviating from social norms so as to achieve social goods.<sup>31</sup>

These goods, namely wealth and prestige, are crucial indicators of success. But success is always vague, as both Durkheim and Merton recognized. There is no clear demarcation; as such, one can never be fully successful unless one is constantly advancing. This is particularly true in the United States, where—as Werner Sombart observed—"haste, restless striving, and ruthless competition" are the norm (Sombart 1906: 13). Merton writes:

In the American Dream there is no final stopping point. The measure of 'monetary success' is *conveniently indefinite and relative*. At each income level, as H. F. Clark found, Americans want just about twenty-five percent more (but of course this 'just a bit more' continues to operate once it is obtained). In this flux of shifting standards, there is no stable resting point, or rather, it is the point which manages always to be 'just ahead.' (Merton 1938: 190, emphasis added)

In Merton's view, anomie is one of several forms of "malintegration." It is characterized by "an exceptionally strong emphasis upon specific goals without a corresponding emphasis upon institutional procedures" (Merton 1938: 188). Individuals become dominated by "considerations

---

<sup>30</sup> Durkheim *did* devote much attention to crime—and its connection to the collective conscience—but he was not interested in "deviance" per se.

<sup>31</sup> They may also become ritualists, retreatists, or rebels—or remain conformists—according to Merton's five modes of adaptation. I do not wish to explore this typology in detail; since my chief concern is how anomie works, individual adaptations to anomie are outside the scope of this thesis.



of technical expediency” (a weighing of pleasure and pain) rather than moral constraints (Merton 1938: 189). In a rare reference to Durkheim, Merton explains:

In this context, the sole significant question becomes: Which of the available procedures is most efficient in netting the culturally approved value? The technically most effective procedure, whether culturally legitimate or not, becomes typically preferred to institutionally prescribed conduct. As this process of attenuation continues, the society becomes unstable and there develops what Durkheim called ‘anomie’ (or normlessness) (Merton 1938: 189).

This summary of Durkheim is largely correct, although the translation of “normlessness” may be misleading (as I will discuss momentarily). Yet Merton is right to describe the anomic condition as a painful utilitarian calculus, and he is even wiser in connecting this calculus with the American “cult of success” (Merton 1938: 189). And although he emphasizes the deviance rather than the suffering that anomie produces, he does recognize its emotional trauma: “Guilt feelings, a sense of sin, pangs of conscience” are each the result of moral unraveling (Merton 1938: 190n7).

The best aspect of Merton’s work is his description of anomic culture—the notion that not only goals, but *goal-attainment*, are socialized. “To say that the goal of monetary success is entrenched in American culture,” Merton writes, “is only to say that Americans are bombarded on every side by precepts which affirm the right or, often, the duty of retaining the goal even in the face of repeated frustration” (Merton 1938: 190–91). Institutions like family, school, and workplace—sources of latent pattern maintenance—“provide the intense disciplining required if an individual is to retain intact a goal that remains elusively beyond reach, if he is to be motivated by the promise of a gratification which is not redeemed” (Merton 1938: 191). Indeed, this last sentence is probably the closest Merton comes to a Durkheimian analysis—here, he is clearly borrowing from Durkheim’s chapter on anomic suicide, where Durkheim warns against walking toward a goal that “is infinitely far away” (1897/2006: 270–71).

Although Merton is often blamed for misinterpreting Durkheim’s work, his contributions to anomie theory are not to be discounted. Above even Durkheim, Merton allows us to make the crucial distinction between *social forces* and *social facts*. Social forces may constrain *or* stimulate desire, confine *or* unshackle the will. But social facts—as Durkheim knew and Merton highlighted—are a particular type of force. They are the only norms that can constrain desire. Understanding this point is crucial to understanding Durkheim’s argument: it is not that we need “more norms,” but that we need more checkreins on desire.<sup>32</sup> This is why “normlessness” is an inadequate translation of *anomie*.

I do not wish to spend too much time on Merton’s finer points—we will cover them in my chapter on anomie in the United States. Suffice it to say that Merton provides many other excellent examples of anomic pressures, and explores how Americans adapt to them. His description of anomie reflects his concern for deviance—the gap between goals and means, he says, produces “cultural chaos” in the form of crime—but his understanding is admittedly more broad than that (Merton 1938: 214). Although we will not explore deviance in this thesis<sup>33</sup>, we will return to Merton’s work throughout this essay.

## Critiques of Anomie Theory

I would not have written a thesis about anomie if I were not convinced of its explanatory power. That said, the theory is not perfect. In its 121-year history<sup>34</sup>, anomie has come under all kinds of attacks—some reasonable, some absurd, and many conflicting. Whenever possible, I will examine these critiques in light of what Durkheim actually wrote. When this is not feasible,

---

<sup>32</sup> Indeed, this may involve *destroying* norms like the success ethic!

<sup>33</sup> Except in our discussion of school shootings.

<sup>34</sup> Here I am referring to Durkheim’s 1893 dissertation.

I will consider how Durkheim *would* have responded to these critiques. This approach, which we might call “imaginative reconstruction,” I carry out not because Durkheim is infallible, nor out of a special bias toward him, but in the spirit of charitable discourse.<sup>35</sup> Charity demands that an author’s writings be respected and not simplified, and that they be treated with careful nuance; this is exactly what I intend to do.<sup>36</sup>

Yet Durkheim’s writings are diverse and at times contradictory; it is easy to misinterpret what he said. Moreover, Durkheim’s thoughts are elaborated across several works—his view of anomie in *The Division of Labor* is markedly different from how it appears in *Suicide*.<sup>37</sup> While I promise to take each critique seriously, I will (gently) challenge these arguments by pointing to aspects of Durkheim’s work that contradict them. I will also raise critiques of my own, and evaluate them in the same way—examining how Durkheim might respond to them, and whether those responses are valid.

## **FUNCTIONALIST?**

First, it should be said that there is nothing *inherently* wrong with functionalism, just as there is nothing inherently wrong with conservatism or liberalism. To say that Durkheim is “functionalist” must not only be qualified, but problematized. Here, I will consider what seems, *prima facie*, to be a valid critique of Durkheim: that his functionalism serves to justify inequality.

---

<sup>35</sup> The philosopher Daniel Dennett writes: “As I tell my undergraduate students, whenever they encounter in their required reading a claim or argument that seems just plain stupid, they should probably double check to make sure they are not misreading the “preposterous” passage in question. It is possible that they have uncovered a howling error that has somehow gone unnoticed by the profession for generations, but not very likely” (Dennett 2014).

<sup>36</sup> In political philosophy, this is sometimes called the “Straussian” approach, after political theorist Leo Strauss. Strauss demanded very close readings of the text, paying special attention to authorial intent. (I am indebted to Harlan Wilson for this point.)

<sup>37</sup> It is crucial, as John Rawls notes, to consider a *whole* theory rather than its constituent parts. We must be “mindful of Rawls’ reiterated point that a theory cannot be evaluated by focusing upon a single feature or part of it; instead the whole theory must be assessed . . . and a perfect theory is not to be expected” (Nozick 1974: 230). Similarly, it would be unfair to criticize Durkheim’s theory while only reading one of his books, especially since his later works expand upon (and clarify!) earlier claims.

One of the most common criticisms of functionalism is that it tries to explain, and thus explain away, the problem of hierarchy. Durkheim is certainly guilty here. In *Suicide*, he argues: “We should still need a moral discipline to make those whom nature has least favored accept the more lowly position that they owe to the chance of their birth” (1897/2006: 275). Durkheim’s view is comparable to that of Ithiel de Sola Pool, who writes:

In the Congo, in Vietnam, in the Dominican Republic, it is clear that order depends on somehow compelling newly mobilized strata to return to a measure of passivity and defeatism from which they have recently been aroused by the process of modernization (cited in Wolin 1969: 1065).

To be fair, Durkheim’s justification of hierarchy is linked to his understanding of well-being: hierarchy serves as a structural constraint on desire. Though modernization promised many delights—equal rights, formally free labor—the lower classes had to wait many centuries to receive these benefits. Like Tocqueville, Durkheim worries that the promise of equality will inflate expectations and produce desires that are impossible to satisfy. His concern here is not just social order, but human suffering (Tocqueville 1835/2003; Bendix 1996).

It is not unreasonable, Durkheim thinks, for individuals to try to achieve equality; the problem is that equality might have a “flattening out” effect that some would find unacceptable:

Would anyone go so far as to demand that shares should be equal for all and that no advantage be accorded to the most useful and most deserving? In that case, we should need a very energetic regime to make the latter accept treatment that made them simply equal to the mediocre and incapable (1897/2006: 275).

This passage may strike the modern reader as excessively harsh. Today, we recognize that talent is largely a matter of luck—a “morally arbitrary” category (Rawls 1999). And most of us agree that our peers deserve fair treatment no matter how “mediocre” they are. But the problem of getting some to settle for less is a very real one. As Robert Nozick (1974) argues in a famous

critique of Rawls, the notion of mutual responsibility is probably not strong enough for the luckier among us to give up their advantages.

Durkheim is not arguing here that equality is undesirable—quite the opposite! But he sees equality as a practical problem, since it involves tremendous constraints on desire. Hierarchy, he thinks, may be temporarily necessary, but the ultimate goal—his grand vision as established in the religion of humanity—is a just, humane society (Lukes 1977: 80). How we move from our current reality to Durkheim’s ideal is unclear, and again a critique of functionalism may be justified (since it cannot explain social change). Yet as Susan Stedman Jones observes, Durkheim *did* see room for change: “The tension between public expectations and reality,” Durkheim felt, “is fertile ground for changes through contrary forces” (Stedman Jones 2001: 104).

“The task of modern societies is a work of justice,” Durkheim wrote. We seek “to put more equity into our social relations so as to ensure the free deployment of our socially useful forces” (cited in Stedman Jones 2001: 105). Not only is justice useful in itself, but it poses a challenge to anomie. If anomie is contingent on an unjust world—tempting us with hierarchical advancement—equality provides the solution<sup>38</sup>. “So there is an ‘only if’ in Durkheim’s thinking,” Stedman Jones writes. “Only if there is a transformation towards equality and justice, can economic differentiation finally and fully realize solidarity” (Stedman Jones 2001: 110). And with solidarity comes moral restraint.

But restraints do not form automatically. Just as equality can lead to feelings of mutuality, so too can it produce status anxiety and competition (Tocqueville 1835/2003; de Botton 2004). Although he certainly supported equality, Durkheim knew that equality itself

---

<sup>38</sup> Or seems to. As we shall see, this is not quite the case.

would not end the suffering of egoism or anomie. Even if “the overriding consideration of ideal justice had finally been realized, that men begin their lives in a state of perfect economic equality . . . the problems with which we are now grappling would not thereby have been resolved.”

Equality does not produce constraint: society will not “become regulated as if by magic as soon as it becomes useful to do so” (1902/1997: lv–lvi). So although equality is an important part of Durkheim’s vision, it is not the most important. If we may criticize Durkheim here, it is not on the grounds of injustice. Rather, Durkheim may have placed too much emphasis on desire and not enough on fairness: perhaps he felt that anomie was more painful than inequality.

Either way, Durkheim’s work reveals a deep concern for individual well-being. An entire section of *Suicide* is devoted to the personal consequences of anomie: the sense of anxiety, weariness, disenchantment, unease, and agitation it engenders.<sup>39</sup> His approach is psychological, and intentionally so: “We see no objection to sociology being described as a form of psychology, provided one is careful to add that social psychology has its own laws” (1897/1993: 346).

Though anomie is ultimately a social problem<sup>40</sup>, it is not *exclusively* social. As Stjepan Meštrović writes, anomie affects us at the level of “body, mind and society” (Meštrović 1987: 568).

In summary: yes, Durkheim employs functionalism in his account<sup>41</sup>, as most sociologists continue to do today. His functionalism may lead him to justify hierarchy, but he never abandons the struggle for justice. Stratification is a functional requisite: since “man . . . is made for life in a determinate, limited environment,” hierarchy accomplishes not only social stability, but human flourishing.

---

<sup>39</sup> These are all words Durkheim used to describe anomie.

<sup>40</sup> I.e., it has a social cause and a social solution (Pope 1976).

<sup>41</sup> In fact, Durkheim essentially invented functionalism.

## TOTALITARIAN?

Durkheim's chapter on anomic suicide includes this frightening passage:

What is necessary for the social order to prevail is that the generality of men be content with their lot. But what is necessary for them to be content is not that they have more or less, but that they be convinced that they do not have the right to have more. And for this to be, it is absolutely necessary that there be an authority whose superiority they acknowledge, and which lays down the law (cited in Aron 1967: 81).

Even a charitable reader of Durkheim might be understandably disturbed by this passage: it sounds like something out of Stalinist Russia. Durkheim's emphasis on stability, contentment, and submission to authority may strike us—and not unreasonably—as a recipe for totalitarianism. The phrasing is unfortunate, I think, because Durkheim's conception is quite humanitarian: concerned with justice and equality, as we saw above. What, then, is this nonsense about kowtowing to authority?

Durkheim's understanding of authority is quite different from our own. It is not the coercive authority of a Hobbesian sovereign, but rather the *moral* authority of society. As Durkheim argues in his chapter on anomic suicide, society is the only force that can constrain our desires. To be sure, "it is the concept of authority rather than freedom that looms largest in Durkheim's thought," Robert Nisbet writes,

but it is for him the authority alone of the kind of conscience, or consensus, that is produced within the social group, the association, or community that is required. It is *emphatically not* the kind of authority that goes with the coercive machinery of the large scale association, whether economic or political. Authority for Durkheim is something inseparable from family, local community, school, occupation, and other of the associations within which man normally lives. It is the breakdown of authority in these areas that results in, not only estrangement and isolation of individuals but the intensification of coercion and power (Nisbet 1974: 274, emphasis added).

Moral authority, as Nisbet hints, is not only uncoercive, but provides a *buffer* between the individual and the coercion of the state<sup>42</sup>. The weaker the moral authority of a society, the easier state coercion becomes. This was, in fact, the core of Erich Fromm's argument in *Escape from Freedom*. Fromm worried that the loss of communal ties in the modern age would result in a kind of "moral aloneness" (1941/1966: 34). The individual would do anything to cure his isolation—he would choose to "escape from freedom" and toward "any custom and any belief however absurd and degrading" (1941/1966: 34–35). Totalitarianism, then, was not the coercion of moral authority, but its very absence!

That is all well and good, our critics might say, but it does not free Durkheim from blame. Insofar as he encourages us to be "content with [our] lot," Durkheim hints at a kind of Marxian ideology—seeking to justify or mask inequality. Indeed, the whole notion of anomie may be said to encourage submission: *just accept what you've been given and don't complain, or else you'll suffer from your own desire!* As Raymond Aron (1967) and others have pointed out, improving one's condition *requires* us to strive for more than we have, even if that means temporary discomfort. In fact, that discomfort could be a sign that circumstances need to change!

Durkheim by no means denied this claim. As Stjepan Meštrović notes, "the 'will to life' is beneficial when restrained but destructive when unrestrained. Thus, Durkheim argued in *Suicide* that a little anomie, like a little poison, was good for society. Moderate amounts of anomie are the source of society's 'spirit of progress,' creativity, and innovation" (Meštrović

---

<sup>42</sup> This argument can be found in Durkheim's Second Preface to *The Division of Labor*. Consider this summary from Nisbet: "Durkheim was also aware of the dangers which lay in any nationalism that could expand in the allegiances of its citizens unchecked by the existence of other, social, economic, and cultural associations lying intermediate to man and the nation" (Nisbet 1974: 274).



1988b: 543). Granted, the implications of this point are never made clear—Durkheim never tells us at what point our desires become unreasonable; the boundaries are nebulous and self-determined.<sup>43</sup>

There are some who will still be unsatisfied with this explanation. Why limit desires at all? If it is our ambition to aim high, who is to stop us? “To limit man, to place obstacles in the path of his free development, is this not to prevent him from fulfilling himself?” Durkheim asks. “But . . . this limitation is a condition of our happiness and moral health. Man, in fact, is made for life in a determinate, limited environment” (cited in Lukes 1977: 83). I can already hear the screams of protest from my libertarian readers: *made* for a determinate life? *Made* to be limited? What nonsense! What an utter castration of human freedom! But the research bears him out: the more freedom we have, the more overwhelmed and less happy we tend to be (see, e.g., Schwartz 2005). Durkheim is not merely spouting off conservative propaganda: his work on anomie is a “far-reaching empirical observation that since individual wants are in principle unlimited, it is an essential condition of both social stability and individual happiness that they should be regulated in terms of norms” (Parsons 1937: 382).

But even when confronted with the research, some will have a hard time accepting Durkheim’s argument. The notion that constraint is desirable is so anathema to American culture that it is *literally incomprehensible* to some minds. Many Americans would rather give up their mental health than their freedom—in fact, they make this choice every day. But constraint does not (really) deprive us of freedom: it is a constitutive rather than coercive force. Social facts do not hold us at gunpoint: in the end, we *choose* to adhere to them. As Talcott Parsons writes in a brilliant passage:

---

<sup>43</sup> Yet what could he possibly say? It seems to me that this is always an individual decision: balancing potential gains, current limitations, and the painful gap between the two.

Individualistic modes of thinking are so deeply imbedded in our culture that such confusion is very difficult to avoid. For the usual distinction between voluntary adherence and constraint carries the connotation of the utilitarian dilemma. Yet this is just what Durkheim has transcended. He has precisely distinguished, as the utilitarians did not, between voluntariness and arbitrariness. While, on the one hand, adherence is voluntary, on the other hand, that adherence is binding on the individual. But it is binding not from physical necessity but from moral obligation (Parsons 1937: 384).

Constraint is a choice, but it is not *our* choice: it is the collective decision of society. And the purpose of constraint is not domination, but human flourishing. Only “vulgar Durkheimianism sees duty as submission to order in terms of stability of the whole,” Susan Stedman Jones writes:

Against such readings we must understand Durkheim’s conception of duty as central to practical reason. We must locate its dynamics within the logic of representation and practical force. As fundamental to the action which constitutes social worlds and to a morality of co-operation (Joas 1993), it is central to his interest in coherent, effective action within the limitations of the milieu and to his interest in the viability of significant human life within society (Stedman Jones 2001: 191).

But the issue is not quite resolved. We must now ask the Foucauldian question: to whose constraints are we really adhering? Whose version of “society” triumphs in public discourse, and whose is marginalized? For though society is a collective process, it is *not* true that each of our voices are equally represented.<sup>44</sup> Durkheim seems to ignore the potentially corruptive force of power here; in privileging the social over the individual, he forgets that society is a constellation of individual forces. Indeed, his writings would have us believe that social facts blossom out of thin air.

“Moral or legal rules essentially express social needs which society alone can identify,”

Durkheim writes. But how exactly are these rules formed?

They rest upon a climate of opinion, and all opinion is a collective matter, the result of being worked out collectively (1902/1997: xxxv).

---

<sup>44</sup> For an extended discussion of this problem, see Iris Young (2000), *Inclusion and Democracy*.

Is opinion *really* a collective matter? Certainly, we can each attempt to shape public opinion, but we delude ourselves if we think we will be equally successful. A whole host of factors—including class, gender, and occupation—may limit our influence (cf. Young 1990/2011; Young 2000). Since these forms of stratification appear in Durkheim’s own work, we cannot say that he was unaware of them. But he may not have seen them as problematic. As Michael Walzer, a Durkheimian social scientist, explains:

Aren’t social meanings . . . nothing other than ‘the ideas of the ruling class,’ ‘the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas’? I don’t think that they are ever only that or simply that, though the members of the ruling class and the intellectuals they patronize may well be in a position to exploit and distort social meanings in their own interests. . . . A people’s culture is always a joint, even if it isn’t an entirely cooperative, production; and it is always a complex production (Walzer 1983: 9n).

This quote—an excellent summary of Durkheim’s position—does little to quell our anxiety. No one, not even Marx, claims the collective conscience is *only* the product of dominant forces. To try to dispel that myth (which, again, no one believes) is to set up a straw man and knock him down. Sure, culture is joint and society is complex, but that does not solve the question of power. For our concern is not that the powerful have *complete* control, but that their control is disproportionate and monopolizing.

Durkheim attempts to solve this problem by appealing to socialist self-governance. “The republican aim of replacing duty to Church, monarchy and established hierarchy emerges in Durkheim’s thought as duty to society,” Stedman Jones writes. “If society can be self-governing, it will prescribe rules to itself and be stable in its moral relations” (Stedman Jones 2001: 192). But even if hierarchy were destroyed and power were distributed fairly, would we really be out of the woods? Equality can promise a great many things, but not homogeneity of thought. If collective opinion is a battle for recognition, what happens to the losers? We are *all* victims of the social fact, bowing beneath the yoke of society (Durkheim 1897/2006: 276). But submitting

to norms one did not create seems profoundly unjust. We may escape the rule of the despots, but if Durkheim has his way, we may find ourselves facing the tyranny of the majority.

For Durkheim, society *always* holds the best values for individuals (Nisbet 1965). If society is the sacred expression of shared understandings, how could it err? As Parsons writes: “A moral rule . . . is not truly moral unless obedience to it is held to be desirable, unless the individual’s happiness and self-fulfillment are bound up with it” (Parsons 1937: 387). I am not convinced by this argument: there are many reasons to adhere to social norms, and desirability is only one of them. Durkheim rightly refers to social facts as *choses* [things]: constraints act upon us and we can *feel* their influence. When we cede to them, it is not usually because they improve our well-being, but because we feel the weight of duty upon us. Whether that duty really benefits us is another question entirely.

Stedman Jones attempts to explain, or rather explain away, this problem: “For Durkheim,” she says, “not all constraint is ‘normal’ – that which is founded on wealth or power is not normal, and ‘can be maintained only by violence’” (Stedman Jones 2001: 140, citing Durkheim). I believe Stedman Jones and Durkheim are both wrong on this front. As Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, modern society forces us to *internalize* the demands of power, so that violence is no longer necessary. That discipline has largely replaced punishment is the triumph of the modern age. But this triumph is insidious, and not at all tied to the well-being of individuals. It is tied, instead, to the power exercised by dominant forces.

Though Durkheim addresses this problem, his answer is wholly unsatisfying. To be sure, he writes, excessive regulation might produce “physical or moral despotism.” But this situation “affects so few people today and . . . it is so hard to find examples of it, that it seems unnecessary for it to detain us any further” (1897/2006: 305n). The era of “oppressive discipline,” Durkheim

seems to think, has passed—it is now merely a question of “historical interest.” This passage is startling in its optimism, and I cannot defend it here.<sup>45</sup>

With its praise of a “society” that always holds the individual’s best interests at heart, Durkheim is giving tacit consent to powerful entities. The potential for totalitarianism in Durkheimian thought must be further explored.

## **SUBJECTIVE?**

The notion of the “neutral” social scientist is a modern phenomenon. For much of European history, most theorists were simply educated citizens who cared greatly about the direction their society was headed. Deeply situated in the communities they described, these citizens carried no pretense of neutrality; the demand that they be “objective” would be nonsensical to them (cf. Strauss 1959). Yet in the past few centuries, the “public intellectual” has largely disappeared, replaced by the accredited professor. Émile Durkheim, poised at the fulcrum of this social shift, belonged to both groups. Though he strove for empirical rigor in his work, he never abandoned his moral beliefs, and his perspective is (unabashedly) colored by his own values.

Nevertheless, academia has grown more and more hostile to Durkheim’s approach. While I do not disagree that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence<sup>46</sup>, the trend toward empirical “objectivity” (whatever that might mean) is disturbing. Weber’s famous dictum that science be “value-free” has been utterly contorted by modern sociologists (Dahrendorf 1968). Before we begin dissecting Durkheim’s own work, I would remind the reader of Dante’s

---

<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to point out that this passage describes fatalistic *suicide*, not fatalism itself. Perhaps Durkheim recognized the danger of fatalism, but felt that fatalistic suicide was uncommon. Yet he provides very little support for this claim.

<sup>46</sup> This popular phrase is attributed to Carl Sagan, though I discovered it in the work of philosopher Sam Harris.

warning: “The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality.”

Anomie has sometimes been called an “ideological” concept: rather than describing a real social problem, it simply illuminates Durkheim’s obsession with order and stability. As Boudon and Bourricaud write in the *Critical Dictionary of Sociology*:

Durkheim wanted to see . . . a society in which individuals would be guided by a system of values and norms – in other words a morality – which would encourage and invite them to be satisfied with their position in the system of the division of labour: the idea of anomie evokes, at its base, Durkheim’s attachment to the arguable and simplistic model which assimilates society with organization, and even society with organism” (Boudon & Bourricaud 1989: 35–36)

Durkheim’s vision, the authors worry, implies that society possesses “some supposed ends” that we know in advance (Boudon & Bourricaud 1989: 37). These ends include—according to Durkheim’s critics—social stability, hierarchy, complacency, and submission. Even stability, which seems the least objectionable, may be harmful at second glance. Why place such a premium on order? Why must we be perennially quelled and satisfied, like infants? As Raymond Aron puts it: “Is not frustration part, not only of the human condition, but also specifically of the condition *proper to the society in which we live?*” He goes on:

Perhaps, as social reforms increase, men do remain just as unsatisfied as they were before; but perhaps they do not. Even if they do, it is conceivable that frustrations or demands are the mechanism of historical movement. One need not be a Hegelian to believe that human societies are transformed through men’s refusal to accept their situation, whatever it may be. In this sense, frustration is not necessarily pathological; it certainly is not in societies like ours, where the authority of tradition is growing weaker and the accustomed mode of life no longer seems to impose itself upon men as a norm or an ideal. If each generation aspires to live better than the preceding one, the permanent frustration described by Durkheim will be inevitable, the sieves of the Danaïdes or the labors of Sisyphus; these myths are representations of modern society (Aron 1967: 78, emphasis added).

This perspective, which draws from conflict theory, is absolutely crucial to a critique of Durkheim. Yet it is also rather hard to address. For what Aron is asking here gets down to some

of the most basic questions of the human condition: Why should we *ever* settle? Why not seek out the greatest possible happiness for ourselves and others? In the final calculus, this passage implies, the gains of self-advancement may outweigh the pain of anomie.

Regardless of where we stand on the utilitarian debate (Durkheim himself was anti-utilitarian)<sup>47</sup>, Aron makes an important point: the discomfort of anomie could be a sign that our situation needs to change. Sometimes, one *shouldn't* be satisfied with one's circumstances, and to assume otherwise is to give up on the possibility of a better life. As we mentioned earlier, Durkheim recognized this "spirit of progress," and found it justified within limits (Meštrović 1988b: 543). Yet his acknowledgement was perhaps too lukewarm. As Aron notes, Durkheim's depiction of anomie as "pathological" has a judgmental tone: is it so wrong that we should strive for more? Rather than a sickness, anomie might better be described as a natural human tendency (cf. Merton 1938; Orrù 1990).

But this is, I think, a misreading on Aron's part. While he is certainly right that anomie could be a motivating force (a fact Durkheim downplays), his view of the "pathology" of anomie is imprecise. It is not that the *individual* experiencing anomie suffers pathologically, but rather that society does. Pathology does not lie in the individual's unreasonable desires, for these are an inevitable aspect of human imagination (1897/2006: 299). Rather, society is ill in that it cannot provide sufficient moral regulation.

When Aron says that "frustration is not necessarily pathological," he is missing the point. *Of course* frustration is not pathological; it is a product of human intellect. What is pathological is society's failure to address this frustration and fulfill one of its chief functions: regulation. While both theorists agree that frustration of desire is "natural," Aron commits the *is/ought*

---

<sup>47</sup> "Social science must resolutely renounce the utilitarian comparisons to which it has too often assented" (Durkheim 1893/1997: 194).

fallacy by extending “natural” to “desirable.” If humans inevitably seek advancement, he says, that is well and good, and we should not try to change it.<sup>48</sup> But Durkheim argues that anomie is deeply harmful, and society must soothe this unfortunate aspect of the human condition. It is society’s job to impose itself on human biology, for only social facts can quell our anomic frustrations (Stedman Jones 2001: 49).

But the notion of pathology is still troubling, for it implies a kind of “normal” state of being, and how are we to know what that is? If anomie is a sign of social illness, who is to provide the definition of health? As Steven Lukes warns, concepts like anomie and alienation are more normative than analytical. They are “only identifiable if one knows what it would be *not* to be alienated or anomic,” in other words,

if one applies a standard specifying ‘natural’ states of institutions, rules and norms and individual mental states. Moreover, this standard must be external. That is, neither the individual mental states nor the social conditions studied can provide the standard, for they themselves are to be evaluated for their degree of alienation and anomie. Thus, despite recent attempts to divest these concepts of their non-empirical presuppositions, they are in their original form an *inextricable fusion of fact and value*, so that one cannot eliminate the latter while remaining faithful to the original concepts. The standard specifying the ‘natural’ condition of the individual in society involves, in each case, a theory of human nature (Lukes 1977: 82, emphasis added)

So much for value neutrality! But again, Durkheim’s project never intended to be devoid of value. (Nor did Marx call alienation an “objective” concept.) Social theory is always tied to notions of the good, and to ask that the two be separated is nonsensical. As the Frankfurt School rightly asked, what is the purpose of all our theorizing if it does not bring us toward a better society?

---

<sup>48</sup> On a related note, William Connolly argues that terms like anomie and alienation seek to blame society for the pain of human existence. Citing Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment*, Connolly writes: “Sociocritique tends to conceal the strain of resentment against the human condition” (Connolly 2002: 191). Rather than challenge anomie, Connolly argues, we must learn to accept it as an inevitable aspect of human life; only then will our suffering become tolerable.



That Durkheim relied on his own theory of human nature is no strike against him; indeed, Durkheim did better than Marx in providing a great deal of data for his claims. So while Durkheim's vision draws on his own beliefs, it is not lacking in empiricism. In fact, the notion that constraint is *necessary and desirable* is an empirical observation, and has been proven again and again to be true (Parsons 1937: 382; Schwartz 2005). Lukes is not wrong to ask, "How plausible is the theory of human nature which each [theorist] presupposes? What does the evidence from past and present societies . . . predict and advocate?" (Lukes 1977: 85). For as we shall see in a later section, contemporary research provides great support for Durkheim's theory.

But his approach *is* value-laden, and I worry that he takes his position too far. As Talcott Parsons notes, we may grant "the correctness of his general analysis of the role of moral obligation in action" and still remain skeptical. Further questions trouble our conscience:

Does it follow that the norms to which persons either in fact do subscribe from disinterested moral motives (or with ethical legitimacy may) must be social norms, must be those shared with even the majority of the other members of the community? After all, the leading modes of moral action admired by philosophers are often those involving defiance of the general code of the community. The identification of the moral and the social seems in danger of elevating social conformity into a supreme moral virtue. . . . Above all to deny the possibility, importance or even desirability of resistance to social pressure on moral grounds is surely dangerous (Parsons 1937: 390).

In assuming that all of society shares his values, Durkheim is perhaps too confident in his vision of political community. His approach takes us to a "mythic promised land" in which the collective conscience is entirely uniform and competition has ceased to exist (Orrù 1990: 240).

In an impressive summary of Durkheim's work, Lukes writes:

Durkheim's picture of a healthy society in modern Europe is of a society that is organized and meritocratic, with equality of opportunity and personal liberty, where people are attached to intermediary groups by stable loyalties rather than being atomized units caught in an endemic conflict, and where they fulfill determinate functions in an organized system of work, where they conform in their mental horizons, their desires and ambitions to what their role in society demands and where there are clear-cut rules defining limits to desire and ambition in all spheres of life. There should be "rules telling

each of the workers his rights and duties, not vaguely in general terms but in precise detail [and] each in his sphere vaguely realizes the extreme limit set to his ambitions and aspires to nothing beyond . . . he respects regulations and is docile to collective authority, that is, has a wholesome moral constitution” (Lukes 1977: 83).

While there is nothing wrong with having a clear vision of the good society (most theorists do), Durkheim hides behind a veil of objectivity. “It was Durkheim’s feat,” writes Robert Nisbet, “to translate into the hard methodology of science ideas and values that had made their first appearance in the polemics of [those] opposed to reason and rationalism, as well as to revolution and reform” (Nisbet 1965: 25). In a brilliant move, Durkheim combines positivism and conservatism, turning traditional values into a “science” by arguing for their necessity.

Some have gone so far as to argue that the entire theory of anomie is an attempt to legitimize traditional authority and glorify the premodern era. In an illustrative passage, Paul Willemsen writes, “The often heard jeremiads about the ravages of alienation or anomie merely signal regret at the passing of the pre-modern and actively seek to discredit the advance of an individuated subjectivity” (Willemsen 2007: 496). In such a view, the “atomization” of society is merely Durkheim’s critique of individuation, his fear that marginalized people are finally speaking for themselves. At the risk of boring the reader, I will repeat that Durkheim *prized* individualism: his “religion of humanity” is a highly individuated society that rejects the “conformism of former times” (1897/1973: 52).

Nonetheless, Parsons is right that Durkheim may have placed undue emphasis on conformity. Susan Stedman Jones’ claim that “anomie is a critical concept,” not a “conservative one indicating failure of adaptation to the social order,” is not fully convincing (Stedman Jones 2001: 102). For Durkheim warns that a “healthy moral constitution” requires that the individual “respects the rules and submits to the collective authority” (1897/2006: 273). Personal agency in this framework is sorely lacking.

I do not believe, as Paul Willemsen and others do, that anomie is an ideological notion. Anomie theory rests on two claims: (1) that frustrations of desire exist and are painful, and (2) that society can curb these frustrations through moral constraint. Both are empirical claims, and both (I will argue) have been confirmed through research. Yet the implications of anomie theory, and Durkheim's proposed solution, do present some concerns: Is it ever acceptable to challenge social norms, especially if one has compelling moral reasons to do so? Can social constraint exist in a pluralistic, complex society like our own? Do social facts demand too much conformity from us? Does the motivating force of anomie outweigh its pain? These are difficult questions, and to answer them would require a rigorous moral analysis that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

## **TELEOLOGICAL?**

We saw in the previous section that Durkheim's concept of anomie presupposes a certain vision of society: well-integrated, sufficiently regulated, and stable. But Durkheim's theory is not merely a snapshot analysis of a given society: it assumes a historical trajectory, from the "healthy" premodern community to a "pathological" modern society, and again to an ordered future. "Even in its most analytic versions," Boudon and Bourricaud worry, "the notion of anomie may still retain some traces of teleology" (1989: 37).

Given how vehemently Durkheim opposed the progress narrative of the Enlightenment, the charge of teleology—a forward march toward predetermined values—is rather ironic (Meštrović 1988a: 838). Durkheim devotes an entire section of *The Division of Labor* to a critique of progress. "Is it true," he asks, "that the happiness of men increases in proportion as men progress? Nothing is more doubtful" (Durkheim 1893/1997: 186). Later in the chapter, he

goes further: compared to the savage, “we are prone to much suffering that is spared them, and it is by no means sure that the balance is in our favor” (1893/1997: 186–87).

Indeed, as Robert Nisbet (1965) notes, Durkheim’s work constituted a unique turn against the Enlightenment thinking of his day. While many theorists were delighted at the direction society was taking, Durkheim (along with a few contemporaries) was startled and disturbed by what he saw. His project was largely—though never exclusively—a return to sacred tradition, couched in the objectivity of science.

But even his rejection of the Enlightenment<sup>49</sup> has a teleological element. If Nisbet is correct, Durkheim’s work demonstrates a “burning sense of society’s sudden, convulsive turn from a path it had followed for millennia” (Nisbet 1965: 20). The notion of an interrupted path, of course, implies that society had once been moving in an “appropriate” direction before it was diverted. So even in his critique of progress, Durkheim cannot escape accusations of teleology. Either there is a path and we are dutifully following it, or else we are blundering in the dark, trying to retrace our footsteps.

Both claims appear in Durkheim’s work. The notion that we are dutifully following a path is evident in Durkheim’s praise of specialization: We must not, he writes, interrupt the “unceasing progress of the division of labor,” or the “tendency for societies to become always more extended and more centralized” (1898/1973: 52). For when social functions “are sufficiently linked together they tend of their own accord to achieve an equilibrium, becoming self-regulatory” (1902/1997: xxxiv).

The connection to functionalism is obvious: if society “naturally” tends toward certain ends, it is because those ends are functional requisites, providing stability and coherence. But if

---

<sup>49</sup> Which, we should point out, was never quite complete: if “positivism in the lineal descendant of the Enlightenment” (Nisbet 1965: 23), Durkheim was certainly influenced by Enlightenment thinking. Particularly, he praised the Enlightenment emphasis on rationality and scientific rigor.

modernization were entirely benign, the theory of anomie could not exist. Anomie is, above all, a modern dilemma, resulting from the atomization of society into poorly integrated (and thus poorly regulated) parts. Durkheim's attitude toward specialization, then, is actually somewhat lukewarm: although the division of labor is necessary, it has a "dissolving influence" (Durkheim 1893/1997: 295).

So we are both straying from the path (abandoning old institutions, communal structures, etc.) and following it (becoming more individuated, moving towards justice and away from state coercion). This complex attitude toward modernization parallels Marx's concept of the dialectic: the very factors that cause suffering also set the stage for liberation. And indeed, the teleology of Marx's approach is also present in Durkheim. As Nicholas Timasheff notes, "Durkheim's work from the vantage point of today was marred by his acceptance of certain evolutionary doctrines. Evolutionism appears, for example,

in his theory of growth from mechanical to organic solidarity, in the assumption of necessary stages in social organization, in the view that contemporary primitive societies represent earlier periods in evolutionary development (Timasheff 1961: 117).

Precisely the same critiques have been made of Marx. Yet as Marxian scholar Robert Tucker points out, the notion that societies move along a similar path—from traditional to transitional to modern—has yet to be disproven (Tucker 1969: 92–94). Indeed, *most* sociologists still "attempt to conceptualize all societies in developmental terms" (Tucker 1969: 92). While this approach can surely be totalizing, it is not inherently so.

Durkheim and Marx, we must remember, were writing at a time when Charles Darwin's work was explosively popular. It is no surprise that they were greatly influenced by his evolutionary approach. In fact, if we are to criticize Durkheim and Marx for their teleology, we must also criticize Darwin, and I suspect that most academics would be loathe to do so. For what

all three intellectuals have in common is simply an understanding of what organisms (whether singular or social organisms) *tend to do* over time. Neither Darwin nor Durkheim would have said that *every* society moves in the same direction, always, in every circumstance.

In fact, Durkheim's description of anomie as "pathological" reveals his acknowledgement that not all societies develop in the same way. Some produce conditions of tremendous happiness, and others produce tremendous suffering. To be sure, the dichotomy between "healthy" and "unhealthy" societies implies that some ways of being are better than others. But *how could this not be the case?*<sup>50</sup> Far from a normative claim about the "good society," Durkheim's point here is simply that anomic nations are miserable ones: "If anomie is an evil it is above all because society suffers through it" (1902/1997: xxxv). This is an empirical rather than ideological assertion.<sup>51</sup>

Is Durkheim's analysis "marred" by evolutionary thinking? Perhaps, but "it must be stressed . . . that evolutionism did not dominate or obscure Durkheim's thought. Had Durkheim removed the evolutionary scaffold, the structure of his theory would have remained" (Timasheff 1961: 117). Granted, Durkheim's theory of development may have extrapolated more than his evidence provides.<sup>52</sup> But given the Enlightenment fervor that dominated his era, his attitude toward the future is far more ambivalent than that of his contemporaries.

---

<sup>50</sup> This is not a rhetorical question. I cannot think of *any* reason to assume that all societies provide equal paths to well-being (cf. Harris 2010b).

<sup>51</sup> I will provide evidence for this claim when I discuss anomie in the United States.

<sup>52</sup> Though we should point out that, writing in the late 1800s, Durkheim had far fewer resources at his disposal than we do today. If his analysis was largely Eurocentric, it was necessarily so, for where else was he to obtain information?

## POSITIVIST?

Although Durkheim rejected the optimism of the Enlightenment, he was deeply influenced by its positivist emphasis. Durkheim spent much of his life working to legitimize sociology, and this could only be done, he felt, by converting it into a positive social science. His effort to apply biological principles to the social realm appears throughout his work, particularly in his *Rules of the Sociological Method* (1895).

Positivism of the Comtian variety treats society as an organism that is just as predictable, just as measurable, as a single cell. Since each part of the social body is seen to perform a special purpose, positivism is tightly linked to functionalism. Just as the Golgi apparatus transmits proteins in a cell, the family transmits values throughout the social organism (cf. Parsons 1937).

The following passage, from the Second Preface to *The Division of Labor*, illustrates the positivist conception of anomie:

We therefore lack a whole system of organs necessary to the normal functioning of social life. Such a structural defect is plainly not some local affliction limited to one segment of society: it is a sickness *totius substantiae*, one that affects the entire organism. Consequently any venture whose purpose is to effect a cure cannot fail to have the most far-reaching consequences. The general health of the body social is at stake (Durkheim 1902/1997: lv).

If the notion of social health strikes us as strange, that is because we are not thinking sociologically. “Individualistic modes of thinking” have so dominated intellectual discourse that it is difficult to think in functional terms (Parsons 1937: 384). *But are we not sociologists?* Is not the purpose of sociology to think outside of the individual? Sociology, Durkheim writes,

implies that collective tendencies like collective thoughts are different from individual tendencies and thoughts, with characteristics not to be found in the latter. So, you may ask, how is this possible since there are only individuals in society? But in that case, we should have to say that there is nothing more in living nature than in inanimate matter, since the cell is made up exclusively of atoms that are not alive (1897/2006: 344).

Association, Durkheim continues, “produces special effects: it is in itself something new” (1897/2006: 344). I do not know of any sociologist who would deny this fact, and yet it is unequivocally a *positivist* claim. It assumes that society is a unit in itself—a “psychic being of a new kind”—with its own investigable properties (1897/2006: 344).

In Durkheim’s view, “‘health’ for man in society is a state where ‘a regulative force’ plays ‘the same role for moral needs which the organism plays for physical needs’” (Lukes 1977: 83). I fail to see why this perspective is troubling. Certainly, it implies that our well-being is contingent on moral authority, which some liberals will find repugnant. That does not make it false. As the psychologist Norman Doidge observes, “The brain . . . is fundamentally an organ of socialization, and so there must be a mechanism that, from time to time, undoes our tendency to become overly individualized, overly self-involved, and too self-centered” (Doidge 2007: 121). Moral understanding allows us—in the words of neuroscientist Walter Freeman—to “surmount the solipsistic gulf” and build trust (cited in Doidge 2007: 121). If society did not constrain our individualism, we not could cooperate, and our species would perish. So it is *empirically true* that social constraint saves us from extinction. The “general health of the body social,” as Durkheim says, really is at stake.

Still, we may wonder whether Durkheim could have framed things better. His description of social facts as things [*choses*]*—*suggesting that constraint is a tangible force—“has led to accusations not only of Durkheim’s fallacious objectivism and mechanism,

but also of his positivism and materialism; that he overlooked the difference between natural and social phenomena (Parsons 1937: 399); and the continuing and widespread claims that he founded his science on a science of nature. It has inspired the view that his account of reality makes conscience a dull reflection of things, rather than the constitutive force it is. It has been taken as evidence of a positivist attempt to reduce the human to the non-human (Walsh 1972: 37) (Stedman Jones 2001: 141).



This last point is rather perplexing. Though Durkheim does not explain in detail the origins of social constraint, he does not assume they simply fall upon us like manna from heaven. “Of course,” he writes in *Suicide*, “the germs of the elementary properties from which the social fact derives are contained in individual minds.” But constraints themselves can only be formed through interaction: “When consciousness, instead of remaining isolated from other consciousnesses, combines with them in a group, something in the world has changed” (1897/2006: 344). Though social facts cannot be explained by individuals, they are *absolutely* human in character. Walsh’s claim that Durkheim “reduce[d] the human to the non-human” is nonsensical. Is religion non-human? Is language non-human? Certainly not.

At best, Walsh’s statement reveals his fear at the loss of individual agency to collective forces. At worst, it is a kind of dogmatic insistence that humans really are “unencumbered selves” (to borrow Michael Sandel’s phrase<sup>53</sup>), constrained only by obligations of our choosing. Critiques of Durkheim parallel those made of contemporary neuroscientists, who argue that our “free” will is the product of brain states beyond our control. In each case, the attack is made on ideological rather than empirical grounds.

Robert Nozick, for example, argues that the Durkheimian argument<sup>54</sup> “can succeed in blocking the introduction of a person’s autonomous choices and actions (and their results) only by attributing everything noteworthy about the person completely to certain sorts of ‘external’ factors” (Nozick 1974: 214). A lack of free will, he says, presents an “unexalted” view of humanity that “denigrates a person’s autonomy” (Nozick 1974: 214).

---

<sup>53</sup> *Democracy’s Discontent* (1996).

<sup>54</sup> Let me be clear: Nozick does not mention Durkheim in his work, but he critiques those philosophers—particularly John Rawls—who try to deny human agency.

Nozick's view is all too common, and I do not wish to belittle it here. To discover that we are not the free, autonomous selves we imagined—that we are shaped by social forces—can be a terrifying thought. *Am I just a puppet of society? Do I have any say over who I am?* These are urgent, disturbing questions. But to allay these fears by claiming they are “unexalted” is false comfort. There are many aspects of our experience that are unpleasant and even undignified, but that does not make them untrue.

What Nozick and others hope to deny is precisely what positivism seeks to emphasize: the separation between “society” and the individuals within it. Durkheim spent his life trying to prove this separation existed: he hoped to show that society was not merely the product of voluntary contracts, but a force that stood against individuals as from above. Marx, who agreed with Durkheim's analysis but feared its consequences, put the problem clearly:

How does it come about that personal interests continually grow, despite the person . . . into common interests which win an independent existence over against the individual persons, in this independence take on the shape of general interests, enter as such into opposition with the real individuals, and in this opposition, according to which they are defined as general interests, can be conceived by the consciousness as ideal, even as religious, sacred interests?” (cited in Lipset 1963/1981: 6).

For Marx, “social constraints did not fulfill socially necessary functions but rather supported class rule” (Lipset 1963/1981: 6.). Nonetheless, he shared Durkheim's view that society is a form somewhat separate from the individual. To borrow a Marxist phrase, we might say that society has “relative autonomy” from individuals: it is always the product of individual forces, but cannot be explained by any of them alone. “Social life,” Durkheim writes, “having as it were crystallized itself . . . and fixed itself on material props, is by that very fact exteriorized and acts upon us from outside” (1897/2006: 348).

Social realism lies at the core of sociology. We may reject Durkheim's claim that sociology is the study of social facts (moral constraints on individual will), but one cannot deny that society is a reality *external* to individuals.<sup>55</sup> Even Erving Goffman, whose work is considered a respite from functionalist thinking, wrote of the "little worlds sustained in face-to-face encounters" (Goffman 1957: 49).

The point is that sociology *constantly* relies on positivist assumptions, while simultaneously denying its positivist influences. Today, we speak of "interpretive social science," which is supposedly more sophisticated than positivism, but it is just a different *kind* of positivism (it takes more variables into account).<sup>56</sup> Positivism need not be reductionist; in its ideal form, it is anything but. Indeed, in his *Moral Education*, Durkheim wrote that sociology students should be trained in biology, so as to understand the complexity (not the simplicity!) of social life (Durkheim 1925).<sup>57</sup> Given that sociologists employ positivist thinking every day, their critiques are not only hypocritical: they are self-defeating.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> By this statement, I mean only that constraints act upon as *forces*. Society is not merely a collection of voluntary contracts, but a moral force that exerts pressure upon us. Given the extensive research by social psychologists in the past century—the Asch conformity experiments, the Milgram experiment, etc.—it is no longer (empirically) feasible to deny this claim.

<sup>56</sup> For example, interpretive social science emphasizes cultural and historical context, but these are certainly variables that positivists could explore. The uniqueness of a culture does not make it unamenable to positivist research.

<sup>57</sup> I am grateful to Harlan Wilson for this point.

<sup>58</sup> One final note: Talcott Parsons actually argues that Durkheim's work "constitutes a radical break with positivistic social theory" (Parsons 1937: 382). Durkheim argues that humans are not merely a part of society, but contain the whole of society within themselves: "Each of us incarnates something of humanity, each individual consciousness contains something divine" (1898/1973: 52). According to Parsons, this observation throws the positivist conception into disarray. For if we carry society within us, we are not merely pieces of a functionalist whole, but something far more complex.

I do not know what to make of this claim. Certainly, it complicates Durkheim's positivism, and makes the analogy to biology more difficult. But I do not consider this a "radical break" with positivist theory. In fact, the notion that the whole is greater than its parts appears in the natural sciences, too: if it didn't, Durkheim notes, "we should have to say that there is nothing more in living nature than in inanimate matter, since the cell is made up exclusively of atoms that are not alive" (1897/2006: 344).

## INCONSISTENT?

What does anomie actually mean? The various (mis)translations of term—normlessness, rulelessness, powerlessness, derangement, madness—indicate that there is hardly a consensus. Though I have struggled throughout this thesis to make Durkheim’s work clear, I confess that the term is often nebulous and contradictory. Below, Steven Lukes considers a few prominent understandings of anomie:

Is it a lack of a specific type of industrial organization (technical or administrative?), or the absence of appropriate occupational groups, or an economy geared to the pursuit of profit, or the cultural imperatives of a ‘success ethic’, or the fact of social mobility, or the erosion of a traditionally stable framework of authority, or social change, or industrial society, or the human condition, that is the major factor leading to anomie? (Lukes 1977: 89).

Probably all of these contribute to anomie; deciding which of them is most prominent is a difficult endeavor. Philippe Besnard argues that anomie is popular precisely *because* it is vague: it can be used to confirm or deny basically any proposition we like. It can be conservative or progressive, advocating tradition or transformation, critiquing social forms or embracing them. Sociology, Besnard writes, must do away with “this slightly magical vocabulary,” which no longer serves a clear purpose (cited in Meštrović 1988a: 837).

But do we really know *nothing* about anomie? Is it so formless that we can say nothing useful about it? Emphatically not. As Richard Sennett (2006) observes, anomie is a broad organizing concept—comparable to Marx’s *alienation*—but its breadth should not imply that it is devoid of content. So what, then, is anomie?

In a phrase: anomie is the suffering caused by unrestrained desire. Specifically, it is a situation in which social facts do not adequately constrain our will: our imagination wanders off “without knowing where to find ultimate foothold” (1897/2006: 78). All other questions are secondary—the source of desire (biological or socialized?), the historical conditions that produce

anomie (capitalism? urbanization?), etc. Any project that seeks to employ the term anomie must address two points: (1) the suffering of unmet desire and (2) society's role in directing (either arousing or constraining) desire.

Even the notion of normlessness—a “sense of confusion, a loss of orientation”—is ultimately related to desire (Parsons 1937: 335). When people are confused, it is not (chiefly) their confusion that is painful. Rather, “People no longer have the sense that they are ‘getting anywhere’” (Parsons 1937: 335).

Parsons clarifies that our “sense of security, of progress toward ends depends not only on adequate command over means, but on clear definitions of *the ends themselves*” (Parsons 1937: 335, emphasis added). So the moral chaos Durkheim often describes is maddening not because our lives are without *clarity*, but because they are without *direction*. As Durkheim emphasizes in later works<sup>59</sup>, we need a sense of movement in our lives, a feeling that we are advancing toward some transcendent end. The individual seeks “a collective existence which precedes him in time, which survives him, and which encompasses him at all points” (cited in Nisbet 1965: 66).

If my analysis has been simplistic, that is intentionally so: anomie is a complex term, and it will take more than one thesis—let alone the 120 years of analysis it has received—to tease out its implications. Nonetheless, I hope to have shown that the term *does* have consistent meaning, despite its varied appearances throughout the literature.

To say that anomie is useless simply because it is complex is an act of academic indolence. Yet this is exactly the view taken by Marco Orrù in his book, *Anomie: History and Meaning* (1987). As Stjepan Meštrović writes in an excoriating review of that work:

Orrù's treatment of anomie is analogous to a world traveller who returns from his exotic journeys only to tell his friends that he can't make any generalizations about all his

---

<sup>59</sup> See especially Durkheim 1898/1973.

experiences. Such a conclusion is bound to be disappointing and difficult to accept. The point of scholarship is to find connections where none had been suspected, not to close off avenues of inquiry. If anomie has no ultimate meaning, not even a reasonable or useful meaning, what are the reasons for choosing one meaning rather than another in research? Politics? Ideology? (Meštrović 1988b: 544).

Scholars like Orrù and Besnard have, in my view, failed to grasp the thrust of Durkheim's work. To be sure, there are some complexities in Durkheim's analysis. "But the contradictions in Durkheim's thought are neither sharper nor more numerous than those of creative thought in general and, with Whitman, Durkheim might have said: 'I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself!'" (Nisbet 1965: 28). Mindful of these contradictions, we must do what we can to synthesize anomie theory across Durkheim's work. The task is difficult but not, I think, insurmountable.

## **METHODOLOGICALLY UNSOUND?**

Though Durkheim's work is often considered "classical theory," he would have emphatically rejected the label of theorist.<sup>60</sup> Durkheim's work—positivist, precise, empirical—was a sharp turn from the vague philosophizing of his day. Indeed, in his time at the *École Normale*, he expressed perennial disappointment with the "spirit of dilettantism" at the school, which "tended to reward elegant dabbling . . . rather than solid and systematic learning." More than anything, Durkheim yearned for "earnest scientific instruction" in the positivist tradition (Coser 1971: 144).

Given Durkheim's penchant for empirical rigor, an analysis of his data on anomie seems crucial. Yet here we encounter the weakest point of Durkheim's argument. Despite his best intentions, Durkheim often committed egregious empirical errors, a fact that nearly all major

---

<sup>60</sup> At least insofar as it implies a disinterest in empirical questions. I suspect Durkheim would have been happiest with the term "theoretical scientist" or something of that nature—reflecting both his philosophical and his empirical leanings.

anomie theorists (including Parsons and Merton) have pointed out. Before we examine these critiques, I would like to remind the reader that Durkheim was writing in the late 1800s. While it is easy to challenge Durkheim's work from our comfortable spot in the twenty-first century, we must remember the limitations of his research. These limitations include not only access to data, but knowledge of empirical approaches. With those caveats in mind, we proceed to the critiques.

In his *Structure of Social Action*, Talcott Parsons writes:

There are the well-established realms of nature, roughly to be termed heredity and environment, to which [Durkheim] adds the third, the social. He is continually arguing by elimination—such and such a thing cannot belong to either of the first two categories, therefore it *must* belong to the third” (Parsons 1937: 393).

These assumptions, Parsons says, are unqualified and leave Durkheim's theory somewhat incomplete. He has laid out the theory, but he has yet to supply adequate empirical (and rational) grounds for it. But Durkheim is not alone in this regard: “The fact that in this science, as in any other at a given stage of their development, certain facts about the phenomena it studies are left unexplained . . . is not a valid reason to deprecate its scientific achievements or potentialities” (Parsons 1937: 393). That may be, but if the empirical basis of Durkheim's argument is so constrained, perhaps our conclusions must be similarly limited.

Durkheim makes several assumptions throughout his work, and fails to ground them in anything more than speculation. He claims, for example, that the division of labor occurs as individuals struggle for greater happiness. The primary motivating force of specialization, he says, is the pleasure that comes from individuation itself. (And this is why modernization is both necessary and desirable.) Durkheim provides no evidence for this claim; he simply says that all other explanations are unsound (Merton 1934/1965).

Robert Nisbet goes further: above all, he says, Durkheim sought to “translate into the hard methodology of science” his own beliefs about the benefits of traditional society (Nisbet

1965: 25). That is, Durkheim's empiricism was colored by his own agenda; he hoped to borrow empirical principles to make claims whose content he knew in advance.

Such an approach is bound to encounter difficulties. For how can one remain objective when the data are merely pillars for an ideological fortress one has already built?<sup>61</sup> Such is the concern of Whitney Pope in his excellent book, *Durkheim's 'Suicide': A Classic Analyzed*. "However imaginative," Pope writes, Durkheim's chapter on anomie "has all the earmarks of an ad hoc, post-factum attempt to salvage the theory in the face of empirically embarrassing results" (Pope 1976: 139). Let us consider those results in detail.

Durkheim begins with the surprising claim that economic prosperity leads to an increase in suicide rates, just as an economic crisis would. Sudden wealth is just as destabilizing as sudden poverty, and perhaps more so, since poverty provides external constraints on desire. This claim, Pope finds, *is* in fact supported by the data. In nine out of twelve years of prosperity, the suicide rate rose—an average increase of 7.3 percent. Unfortunately, the small sample size "prevents the analysis from being anything more than suggestive" (Pope 1976: 119). And even this small victory for Durkheim begins to break down on closer analysis. If prosperity induces suicides, we should expect *dramatic* prosperity to *dramatically* increase the suicide rate. Yet this is not the case. Prosperity increases the suicide rate by about 4.6 percent, but extreme prosperity increases it only 3.4 percent. "The greater the disturbance," Pope observes, "the smaller the impact upon suicide rates!" (Pope 1976: 119).

So much for a direct correlation between prosperity and suicide. But what about Durkheim's corollary theory: that poverty protects against anomie? This claim, Pope says, is similarly weak. Durkheim mentions only two countries (Ireland and Spain) along with an Italian

---

<sup>61</sup> This is, perhaps, putting the case too strongly. But as much as I admire Durkheim's work, I do have concerns about his ability to remain objective, as we shall see.



province (Calabria) that confirm his theory. “The data are limited both in neglecting to exercise any controls and failing to show whether wealthier individuals are more likely to commit suicide than the less wealthy” (Pope 1976: 122).

Pope concludes his discussion of economic crises with the following observations: Durkheim successfully rejects some explanations of suicide, but does not adequately defend his own theory. He fails to cite his sources or explain why he picked them. His data often appear cherry-picked rather than representative, and his sample sizes are too small. His conclusions often contradict his data, and even when they do not, the findings are less impressive than he frames them. Finally, he fails to show an inverse relationship between regulation and suicide (Pope 1976: 123).

The paragraphs above relate to “acute anomie,” the suffering caused by a sudden change in social state. What about more chronic forms of anomie, like the shift from agricultural to industrial society? In agricultural work, Durkheim says, “the old regulative forces still make their appearance felt most and [the] fervor of business has least penetrated” (cited in Pope 1976: 123). We should therefore expect agricultural societies to have much lower rates of suicide. But the data show that there is just *too much variation* even within industrial societies—some have high rates of suicide and others, very low rates—to make a substantive comparison. The standard deviation is so great that one cannot claim industrial society is inherently more anomic.

Chronic anomie is based on the notion that some societies are inherently more regulated than others; social facts have a greater hold on individual will. But the agricultural–industrial pairing is the *only* evidence Durkheim provides for this claim, and it turns out to be false (or muddled, at least). Given this failing, Pope claims, “Durkheim provided no empirically-based

analysis using objective indicators of regulation to support his contention that in modern society, suicide varies proportionately with chronic economic anomie” (Pope 1976: 124).

Durkheim’s work on domestic anomie is no better. His choice of statistics is “highly selective” and relies on “arbitrary decisions” throughout. It is difficult to say anything substantive about domestic anomie, since “Durkheim’s case is neither convincingly sustained nor completely falsified by the data” (Pope 1976: 125). Has Pope simply failed to draw conclusions from Durkheim’s analysis? Hardly. As he points out at the end of the chapter, one *cannot* draw conclusions, because Durkheim’s argument is a logical paradox.

Consider: domestic anomie requires either divorce or widowhood. Divorce, Durkheim says, produces *chronic* anomie: although there is a sudden change in social state, what is more important is that the husband has no constraints on his sexual desire. (This is a permanent condition until he finds a new partner.) Widowhood, however, produces acute anomie, because the *involuntary* loss of a spouse is swift and dramatic (and therefore destabilizing). But there is a problem with this reasoning:

If the widowed display higher suicide rates than divorced persons, the applicability of acute anomie is proved; if divorced persons turn out to have higher suicide rates<sup>62</sup>, then chronic and not acute anomie is operative. Whatever the comparison, whatever the outcome, the theory ‘explains’ it. Because suicide rates themselves are used to determine which portion of the theory is applicable, the theory itself cannot be falsified (Pope 1976: 136).

---

<sup>62</sup> It is indeed the case that divorced persons have higher suicide rates (according to Durkheim’s data). Pope claims that this was initially a shock to Durkheim—who expected the acute anomie of widowhood to be more dramatic—and that Durkheim had to rewrite his theory to account for the data. In other words, the notion that divorce produces “chronic anomie” (for the bachelor who is now exposed to sexual desires) was a way of saving Durkheim’s theory from inconvenient data.

That may be, but was Durkheim so wrong to have done so? Aren’t we always adjusting our theories based on data—in fact, isn’t that our job as social scientists? That Durkheim used to believe one thing, and revised his theory based on new data, seems evidence of his *strength* as a sociologist.

The observations Pope makes, both here and above, pose “considerable embarrassment” for Durkheim’s theory. Or so Pope claims.<sup>63</sup> Certainly, there are flaws in Durkheim’s methodology, but the weakness of his data does not disprove his argument. Though Pope’s analysis should be taken seriously, three caveats are worth mentioning: first, we must remember Durkheim’s lack of access to good data. It is all too easy to sit on our high horse and say what Durkheim *should* have done, what resources he *should* have used, but whether those resources were available is another question entirely. Second, Durkheim’s data rarely contradict him—for the most part, as Pope readily admits, the data are simply inadequate or inconclusive. Again, that is simply a sign that more research must be done; Durkheim’s argument remains unchallenged. Finally, Pope’s critiques are paradoxical: he cannot simultaneously say that Durkheim’s data “disprove” him, or “embarrass” him, while pouring scorn on the data itself. One can criticize the source of the data Durkheim chose, or the “arbitrariness” of the selection, or the questionable representativeness, or the poor sample size, but this means the data are *illegitimate*—one cannot draw any conclusions from them! Pope cannot have it both ways: either Durkheim’s sources are flawed, and must be discounted, or they are strong enough to challenge Durkheim’s theory. Since the former seems more likely, all we can conclude is that further empirical research is required. That is hardly an embarrassment for anomie theory.

Though instructive, Pope’s approach to *Suicide* is somewhat shortsighted. Pope forgets is that the social fabric is *tremendously* complex and difficult to quantify. Indeed, in the act of quantification, something may be lost in translation. As the philosopher Sheldon Wolin<sup>64</sup> writes, “Political life does not yield itself to terse hypotheses, but is elusive and hence meaningful statements about it often have to be allusive and intimative” (Wolin 1969: 1070). Social life, being far more nebulous, is even more difficult to categorize.

---

<sup>63</sup> Pope 1976: 119.

<sup>64</sup> Wolin himself is a scholar of Durkheim.

Wolin rejects the oft-made claim that “theoretical models should be tested primarily by the accuracy of their prediction rather than the reality of their assumptions” (Wolin 1969: 1073).<sup>65</sup> Yet this is precisely what Durkheim’s critics have done. Even if humans *are* vessels of endless desire, even if society fails to constrain that desire and it causes great suffering, critics have wielded the same battle cry: *Show me the data!* This obsession with data over substance, empiricism over creative thinking, gives rise to what Ralf Dahrendorf calls the “fallacy of empirical research” (Dahrendorf 1968: 121).

“Sociological theory,” Dennis Wrong writes, “concerns itself with questions arising out of problems that are inherent in the very existence of human societies and that cannot therefore be finally ‘solved’ in the way that particular social problems perhaps can be” (Wrong 1961: 184). Such questions as Durkheim is asking

do not lend themselves to successively more precise answers as a result of cumulative empirical research, for they remain eternally problematic. Social theory is necessarily an interminable dialogue. “True understanding,” Hannah Arendt has written, “does not tire of interminable dialogue and ‘vicious circles’ because it trusts that imagination will eventually catch a glimpse of the always frightening light of truth” (Wrong 1961: 184).

This is Durkheim’s task, and ours as well: to peer beyond the veil and see what, if anything, we can discover. We may never pin down the truth of anomie, but we may one day approximate it.

Are there problems with Durkheim’s methodology? Absolutely. Do these problems cast great doubt on Durkheim’s argument? Not necessarily. Further research must be done, but it should evaluate and expand Durkheim’s work rather than simply attempt to debunk it. Anomie is a powerful explanatory concept, and it should be tested against our greatest social problems—depression and anxiety, soldier suicide, and school shootings, to name just a few. Then and only then can we decide whether the term is “useless,” as so many sociologists claim.

---

<sup>65</sup> Here, Wolin is citing Anthony Downs in *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), p. 21.

## SEXIST?

Several scholars have noted the sexism in Durkheim's thinking. Writing in the late 1800s, Durkheim employed many of the predominant gender assumptions of his day. Though I do not think his sexism is *uniquely* egregious—similar comments have been made of Marx<sup>66</sup>—it does merit attention, especially since it has implications for his theory of anomie.

Gender essentialism can be found in much of Durkheim's work. In his dissertation, Durkheim cites the phrenologist Gustave Le Bon, whose measurement of brains “presents considerable differences in favor of the man” (cited in Durkheim 1893/1997: 18). The division of labor, Durkheim concludes, must take these differences into account. In the fifth chapter of *Suicide*, Durkheim applies these views to his theory of anomie. After a divorce, he observes, men are much more likely to commit suicide than women. Why is this? To answer this question, we must first consider what marriage is:

This is the function of marriage. It regulates all this life of the passions, and monogamous marriage more strictly than any other. By obliging the man to attach himself to only one woman, and always the same, it supplies a rigorously defined object for the need to love, and closes its horizon (1897/2006: 299).

When divorce occurs, men are subject to a painful “disease of the infinite” and commit suicide. But why do only *men* need their desires restricted? Does Durkheim believe women have no sex drive? Not quite. Rather, the argument is that women—having a lesser role in the (male-dominated) social realm—are less socialized. Deprived of opportunities for intellectual development, the woman is “a more instinctive creature than the man,” and “she has only to follow her instincts to find peace and quiet” (1897/2006: 301). Men, being oversocialized, have more complex sexual desires than women, which are thus more difficult to satisfy.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> See Heidi Hartmann's excellent work, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism” (1979).

<sup>67</sup> There is something laughable about this proposition, since today the assumption is quite the opposite: Women are seen as overly intellectual in their attitude toward sex, and *men* are the ones who seek easy gratification. To be fair

The corollary to this point is fascinating: if men typically benefit from the constraints of marriage, women suffer. Durkheim writes:

The freedom which [the husband] has given up [by marrying] could only be a source of torment for him. The woman did not have the same reasons to renounce it and, in this respect, one can say that, by submitting herself to the same regime, she is the one who makes the sacrifice (1897/2006: 305).

Since women have little need for checkreins on desire, constraint becomes a burden rather than a reprieve. Women *make a sacrifice* when they enter into marriage. Their experience is one of fatalism, and it is this feeling that leads them to divorce. This is hardly a sexist position! If we extend Durkheim's argument just a bit, we reach a proposition that is quite radical<sup>68</sup>: marriage does constrain desire, even for women, but that constraint *goes too far* because it requires many other constraints that men do not face: having to take care of children, prepare meals for the husband, and do the majority of housework. No wonder women have lower rates of suicide after divorce—they are escaping from what is often an oppressive situation!

Sadly, I do not believe Durkheim was actually implying all of the above. But if we were to employ his argument in a modern-day analysis, it might be incredibly useful. The hypothesis is easy to formulate: in countries with more equitable marriages (e.g., an equal share of housework), divorce leads to equal rates of suicide. In countries with greater inequality, divorce leads to greater *male* suicide, since wives benefit from the act of divorce.

Though Durkheim's theory of domestic suicide appears sexist, it is far less offensive when properly understood. Durkheim did not argue that women are *inherently* less anomic than men. Although he subscribed to phrenology, his argument was not a phrenological one. Rather,

---

to Durkheim, men were far better educated than women in the 1800s, whereas women are more educated today. Perhaps he is right! Maybe intelligence makes sexual satisfaction harder, since it stimulates our imagination and arouses greater desire!

<sup>68</sup> Or would have been in Durkheim's time, anyway. I would like to think it is commonplace today.

he claimed that because women “participate less in social life than men”—certainly true in his day!—their desires are less aroused:

Women are therefore characterized by less sociability, less complete socialization, less development of mental and intellectual life, and less development of the relatively more complex needs that can only be fulfilled by collective life, particularly in its most complex forms (Pope 1976: 49).

If Durkheim had claimed that women were *naturally* less intelligent than men, we might raise objections. But here, he only makes the empirical claim that women participate less in social life. Given that women were largely excluded from social participation (and still are, to an extent), his argument stands to reason. Even his subsequent claims—that less socialization means less development, and possibly less complexity of desire—are empirical questions, not patriarchal statements. They may be dubious, but saying so requires more than an accusation of sexism.

Nonetheless, Durkheimian scholars must respond to feminist critique. If *any* part of Durkheim’s work is to be taken seriously, it must address the limitations of his analysis. Rather than defend Durkheim at every moment, we must reject outdated views for the patent nonsense they are. Phrenology, in particular, deserves no place in a theory of anomie. But we must also be charitable, demonstrating (as I have tried to) that Durkheim’s approach was far more nuanced than one might suppose. Sexism is just one of many allegations leveled at Durkheim, but it is a particularly brutal one: it confirms the notion that Durkheim was an old-fashioned, chauvinist, elitist conservative who can tell us nothing about life in the twenty-first century. Only by being honest about Durkheim’s faults, as well as his merits, can we reshape this hurtful image.

## OVERLY BIOLOGICAL?

Anomie relies on the notion that humans are vessels of endless desire—comparable to (though distinct from) Freudian *id*. Our desire stems from our unique intelligence, which distinguishes us from other animals: “When the hole that life has dug out of its own resources is filled, the animal is satisfied and asks for nothing more. . . . [But] human intelligence is more aware and can suggest better conditions which appear as desirable ends and inspire activity” (Durkheim 1897/2006: 269). Or so Durkheim claims. But are humans *really* vessels of desire? Or is desire socialized, as Merton (along with Marcuse, Foucault, and others) has argued?

Merton is eager to pour scorn on “man’s imperious biological drives.” Far from a scientific fact, he writes, “the image of man as an untamed bundle of desires begins to look more like a caricature than a portrait” (Merton 1938: 185). Having no background in biology, Merton’s speaks with a conviction that he fails to justify. Not once in his famous essay, “Social Structure and Anomie,” does he provide any evidence for his critique.

As Dennis Wrong writes in a brilliant essay<sup>69</sup>, sociologists like Merton are all too quick to reject biological reality. “As soon as the body is mentioned,” Wrong writes, the specter of ‘biological determinism’ raises its head and sociologists draw back in fright” (Wrong 1961: 191). We either assume that biology does not exist, or else that socialization somehow overrides it. But as Wrong rightly points out, our rejection of biology is just as presumptive as the biologist’s rejection of sociality:

I do not see how, at the level of theory, sociologists can fail to make assumptions about human nature. If our assumptions are left implicit, we will inevitably presuppose of a view of man that is tailor-made to our special needs; when our sociological theory over-stresses the stability and integration of society we will end up imagining that man is the disembodied, conscience-driven, status-seeking phantom of current theory. We must do better if we really wish to win credit outside of our ranks for [a] special understanding of man (Wrong 1961: 192–93).

---

<sup>69</sup> “The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology” (1961). *American Sociological Review*.



This passage, essentially a critique of functionalism, may strike us as an attack on Durkheim. But it is in fact the opposite. Wrong praises Durkheim throughout his essay; it is *Merton* he criticizes. On balance, this is not surprising: Durkheim did a far better job than Merton at weighing both biological and social considerations.

But there is something ironic in Wrong's praise of—and Merton's scorn toward—Durkheim's view of biology. "Above any thinker of his age," Robert Nisbet observes, "Durkheim was responsible for burying the utilitarian distortion of man's nature and for *highlighting the social basis of consciousness*" (Nisbet 1965: 59, emphasis added). As I have argued throughout this essay, Durkheim's work was a turn *away* from the biologism of his day. Much of *Suicide*, for example, is dedicated to debunking biological explanations of mental health. Suicide has three aspects, he wrote. One of them is biology—the "nature of individuals who make up the society." But more important are the "nature of the social organization" and the disturbances of collective life" (1897/2006: 357).

If Durkheim's views on biology are remarkable, they are remarkably *balanced*. He recognizes, as his contemporaries did not, that "in the beginning, there is the body" (Wrong 1961: 191). Social forces may superimpose themselves on biological reality<sup>70</sup>, but they never destroy that reality. Contemporary science is beginning to discover what Durkheim already knew: that biology and socialization are not dichotomous realms, but two sides of the same coin. As the emerging fields of neuroplasticity and epigenetics have taught us, society affects biology just as biology influences socialization. We must heed Dennis Wrong's warning: if sociology cannot take biological explanations into account, it will lose legitimacy as well as explanatory power.

---

<sup>70</sup> This phrasing is borrowed from Whitney Pope (1976), p. 49. See also Durkheim's Second Preface to *The Division of Labor* (1902), pp. xliii–xliv.

## IDENTICAL TO EGOISM?

Durkheim's conceptions of *anomie* and *egoism* have often been confused. Sheldon Wolin, for example, writes that *anomie* is a "riot of egoism" (cited in Pope 1976: 30). Susan Stedman Jones, in a more recent work, claims that "*anomie* in its most important sense means lack of solidarity" (Stedman Jones 2001: 102). These assertions are disappointing, for any close reading of *Suicide* would clarify the misunderstanding. At the beginning of Durkheim's chapter on anomic suicide, he writes: "Society, however, is not only an object that draws toward itself the feelings and the actions of individuals, with more or less intensity. It is also a force that directs them" (Durkheim 1897/2006: 262).

If egoism cannot be conflated with *anomie*, then what does it actually mean? Durkheim uses "egoism" in a very special sense, distinct from our contemporary conception. Egoism is not the arrogance of an individual who only cares about himself, but a more pitiable condition described by a lack of social belonging. This must be qualified, for Durkheim does not mean "loneliness." Rather, the term is closest to Erich Fromm's conception of *moral aloneness*: the "lack of relatedness to values, symbols, [and] patterns" (Fromm 1941/1966: 34). To be a part of society is not only to participate in social interaction, but to experience the *essence* of society—the rituals, traditions, and customs that allow the individual to transcend her personal circumstances. Stjepan Meštrović (1988a) rightly claims that it is impossible to understand Durkheim without engaging in philosophy; here we must see "transcendence" in a very real sense. Each of us longs to be part of something greater than ourselves, Durkheim writes.<sup>71</sup> By relating to social forms, one transcends the pain of individual existence; one becomes greater than what one is. In a beautiful passage on the problems of modernity, Durkheim writes,

---

<sup>71</sup> As the French philosopher Pierre Hadot puts it, "The true self of each individual transcends each individual" (cited in Halperin 1995: 75).

The only remedy for the ill is to restore enough consistency to social groups for them to obtain a firmer grip on the individual, and for him to feel himself bound to them. He must feel himself more solidary with a collective existence which precedes him in time, which survives him, and which encompasses him at all points. If this occurs, he will no longer find the only aim of his conduct in himself and, understanding that he is the instrument of a purpose greater than himself, he will see that he is not without significance. Life will resume meaning in his eyes, because it will recover its natural aim and orientation (cited in Nisbet 1965: 66, from pp. 373–4 of *Suicide*).

Egoism, then, is not just a lack of social integration—being unable to fit into a group. It is something far more perilous. Egoism deprives the individual of social *purpose*, the kind of transcendent meaning that allows one to feel eternal even in the face of death. This may be what theorists are getting at when they (mistakenly) describe anomie as “meaninglessness” or “emptiness.” Without society as a source of meaning, the individual must turn toward himself for transcendence, but how can transcendence ever come from oneself? The task inevitably leads to failure, and failure to self-destruction. Without a socially given purpose, the individual is beset with nihilism; he might as well not be alive.

What a far cry from our modern conception of egoism—the arrogance of the individual! In Durkheim’s view, one does not choose to be obsessed with oneself; one is forced to do so. And the consequence is tremendously painful.

What about anomie? Insofar as social solidarity leads to constraint, egoism and anomie are tightly linked.<sup>72</sup> Durkheim writes in *The Division of Labor* that the greater the density of interaction—that is, the greater the population and the more frequent the contact—the faster organic solidarity can develop. As long as the division of labor proceeds in a healthy fashion, shared norms imply increased constraint on individual desire. But this does not always occur. In the *anomic division of labor*, specialization leads to the atomization of society, wherein individuals pursue their own work and do not feel a sense of mutual dependence (Stedman Jones

---

<sup>72</sup> “Both come from the fact that society is not sufficiently present for individuals” (Durkheim 1897/2006: 284).

2001: 102–104). Thus egoism and anomie emerge in equal measure: not only are there few social forms tying individuals together, but the lack of mutual *obligation* means there are no proper reins on desire.

As Whitney Pope notes, egoism and anomie have the same origin: the historical shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, and the subsequent weakening of social bonds. In each case, society has *lost its grip* on the individual. “Noting their ‘peculiar affinity,’” Pope writes,

[Durkheim] (288) observed that egoism and anomie “are usually merely two different aspects of one social state.” Again, he (382) referred to the ‘identical cause’ producing them. . . . Consistent with the theme that they are caused by the same social state, Durkheim (323) referred to “the hypercivilization which breeds the anomic tendency and the egoistic tendency.” . . . *Suicide* (288) even indicates *why* the egoist is likely to be anomic and vice versa: “It is, indeed, almost inevitable that the egoist should have some tendency to non-regulation; for, since he is detached from society, it has not sufficient hold upon him to regulate him. . . . Inversely, an unregulated temperament does not lack a spark of egoism; for if one were highly socialized one would not rebel at every social restraint” (Pope 1976: 45).

This is not to say that egoism and anomie are inextricable. It is perfectly conceivable to imagine a society in which one exists without the other. As I have argued, not all norms and values constrain desire. If the social fabric is largely held together with cultural goods—music and literature, for example—the society may be anomic but not egoistic. That is, culture may still exist to bind individuals together (albeit superficially), but constraints on desire will be absent. “We can bring to society everything in us that is social,” Durkheim writes, “and yet not know how to limit our desires; without being an egotist, one can live in a state of anomie, and conversely” (1897/2006: 284).

Conversely, indeed, a society may impose harsh demands on the individual, insisting on conformity and severely curtailing desire. But if the members of that society feel merely dominated, and do not internalize those norms, they may enter a condition we might call

“egoistic fatalism.”<sup>73</sup> Unable to achieve their desires, they will feel no anomie, but they may still feel morally alone.

To review: while egoism is caused by a lack of social solidarity, anomie is caused by a lack of social constraint. Egoism is about *poor integration* (weak bonds), while anomie is about *insufficient barriers on desire*. Those who suffer from egoism need purpose, meaning, transcendence; those who suffer from anomie need barriers, directions, harnesses.

**Egoism:** atomization of society → low density of social interaction → lack of group membership → lack of social purpose → meaninglessness → “depression, melancholy, or sheer apathy”<sup>74</sup>

**Anomie (chronic):** atomization of society → low density of social interaction → lack of norm formation → lack of social constraints → gradual increase in desires → inability to satisfy those desires → disenchantment, unease, agitation, discontent, groping, anxiety

**Anomie (acute):** sudden change in social state → disruption of social constraints/barriers on desire → sudden increase in desires → inability to satisfy those desires → disenchantment, unease, agitation, etc.

As these trajectories illustrate, anomie and egoism are clearly related. Both start from the atomization of society (a product of modernization), and both lead to feelings of tremendous discomfort. But to confuse the two terms, or claim they are identical, is sloppy scholarship.

---

<sup>73</sup> Actually, one wonders whether egoistic fatalism is possible, since the despotic character of fatalism usually engenders resistance and social solidarity. Still, we can conceive of a society in which fear of punishment precludes collective identity. But even acting alone and in secret (or wishing one could act) might be enough to prevent egoism: “The monk in his cell who believes in God and the political prisoner kept in isolation who feels one with his fellow fighters are not alone morally,” Erich Fromm writes (1941/1966: 34). Perhaps there is an inherent tension between fatalism and egoism, and the two cannot coexist. If fatalism is the product of overbearing moral constraint, it means that *morality exists*. And no matter how ugly this morality may be, it provides a social core around which individuals can coalesce. Egoism, then, may not be possible under these circumstances. If this is so, we have yet to prove that egoism can exist without anomie.

One final thought: Foucault (1975) distinguishes between premodern societies (which relied in punishment) and modern societies (which rely on discipline). The main distinction is that discipline is internalized by those it oppresses, so force is largely unnecessary. Perhaps only in the latter case can despotic morality can be considered “social,” whereas punishment, whose purpose is never internalized, provides no social glue. If this is the case, then egoistic fatalism can exist only in punishment-based societies. Modern genocides may provide an example, but even these provide solidarity to the persecuted. The issue is unresolvable! For egoistic fatalism to work, those punished *cannot* form a social identity around their punishment. But since persecution always provokes resistance, a resistance shared by those punished, one wonders whether this is possible.

<sup>74</sup> Pope 1976: 31

This is not to say that the distinction is *obvious*, only that a close reading—which any theorist deserves—reveals the difference. Still, a survey of brilliant scholars shows there is hardly consensus on this front. Whitney Pope observes:

Given the logical structure of Durkheim's theory, the relationship between integration and regulation is crucial. Yet commentators have not agreed on what, if anything, distinguishes them. Parsons (1949: 327–38) maintained that integration refers to value content; regulation, to the strength of social control. Nisbet (1966: 94; see also 1974: 233) suggested that anomie is a breakdown of moral community; egoism, of social community. Coser (1971: 134–35) defined the difference in terms of structural integration versus normative regulation. Agreeing with Coser on the meaning of regulation, Wallwork (1972: 48–53) saw integration as a matter of attachment to group morals. Giddens (1971b: 84–85) has argued that Durkheim linked egoism with moral individualism, whereas anomie referred to a lack of moral regulation. Finally, although Lukes (1967: 139n) initially denied the existence of any difference, he (1972: 206) later concluded that integration referred to the social bonds tying the individual to socially-given ideals and purposes; regulation, to those that regulate the individual's desires.<sup>75</sup>

Others, however, noting the overlap between integration and regulation, have stressed the difficulty of identifying any sociological distinction (Sainsbury 1955: 22; Gibbs and Martin 1964: 6–7; Smelser 1971: 18–19; Poggi 1972: 200). Some have implicitly acknowledged the overlap by coupling egoism and anomie or by attributing to one concept characteristics that Durkheim linked with the other (Homans 1950: 336–37). Wolin (1960: 339) characterized anomie as a 'riot of egoism,' and LaCapra (1972: 145) referred to an 'anomic absence of meaning in experience.' Many other authors have ignored the problem altogether, simply restated the distinctions Durkheim enumerated, or otherwise failed to clarify a viable difference (i.e., Alpert 1961; Hendin 1964: 8–9; Henry and Short 1964: 132–33; Aron 1967: 30–33; Douglas 1967: 3–76) (Pope 1976: 30, emphasis added).

Nonetheless, Durkheim was very precise in his terminology, as Pope makes plain:

Though both entail the absence of society in the individual, the sphere of this absence differs. 'In egoistic suicide it is deficient in truly collective activity, thus depriving the latter of object and meaning. In anomic suicide, society's influence is lacking in the basically individual passions, thus leaving them without a check-rein' (258, see also 287). The contrast between the meaninglessness resulting from lack of integration and the uncontrolled passions resulting from lack of regulation is clear (Pope 1976: 31).

---

<sup>75</sup> Lukes (1972) provides the most accurate distinction in my view.

If egoism is a crisis of meaning, anomie is a crisis of desire. Many scholars complain that the terms have similar causes and solutions, but that is exactly the point: strength of community is a human necessity, and without it we will satisfy neither purpose nor desire.

## **IN CONCLUSION:**

Of the classical sociologists, only Marx has faced more criticism than Émile Durkheim.<sup>76</sup> Durkheim's critics include Talcott Parsons (1937), Robert Merton (1934/1965; 1938), Nicholas Timasheff (1961), Robert Nisbet (1965), Raymond Aron (1967), Whitney Pope (1976), Steven Lukes (1977), Marco Orrù (1990), and Susan Stedman Jones (2001), among many others. Nearly every major sociologist has had something to say about Durkheim's work. As such, the allegations made against him are wide-ranging and sometimes conflicting. Durkheim has been accused of biological and historical determinism, functionalism and positivism, sexism and subjectivism. His theory has been called incoherent—conflating anomie and egoism, failing to give a consistent definition of anomie—as well as ideological. He has been charged with placing too much emphasis (and not enough emphasis) on biology, too much emphasis (and not enough) on socialization.

Though many of these critiques are indeed concerning, not one of them (in my view) topples the theory of anomie. Perhaps the strongest critique was made by Raymond Aron when he asked: “Is not frustration part, not only of the human condition, but also specifically of the condition proper to the society in which we live?” (Aron 1967: 78). The critique is impossible to challenge, because it broaches a fundamental moral question: Why should satisfaction be our goal? If anomie is a motivating force, then we have very little to say against it *even despite its*

---

<sup>76</sup> I have yet to read a critique of Max Weber.

*discomfort*. No one, not even the boldest sociologist, can justify “settling for less” rather than “striving for more.” For where do we draw the line? When is settling a kind of giving up—what Merton calls retreatism—and when is it a healthy, logical decision?

To accept anomie theory is, in some sense, to accept that progress has its limits. There is something tragic in admitting that we may never achieve what we most deeply desire. But the consequences of not doing so are even more disturbing. “No living person can be happy or even live at all unless his needs are sufficiently well adjusted to his means,” Durkheim reminds us.

In other words, if he demands more than can be provided for him, or even something other than can be provided, he will be constantly irritated and unable to function without suffering. And an action that cannot be accomplished without suffering tends not to be repeated. Aptitudes that are not satisfied atrophy and, since the aptitude for life is only the result of all the rest, it is bound to weaken if the others also slacken (1897/2006: 269).

The final consequence of unregulated desire is not dissatisfaction. It is death. Death is the price of human imagination, aroused and unrestrained in an anomic society. And that is precisely our situation, today, in the United States.

## **The Decline of Anomie Theory**

If, as I will attempt to show, the United States is rife with anomie, we should expect a great number of sociologists to be writing on the topic. But in the past few decades, the opposite has occurred: anomie theory has precipitously *declined* among sociologists. A search of the *American Sociological Review* finds that the term has not been used in sixteen years.<sup>77</sup>

What has happened? Though my explanation is somewhat speculative, it follows two major veins: the academic and political. Anomie theory has been hit twice—not only by academics who call the term obsolete, but by a shifting political climate that rejects structural

---

<sup>77</sup> Certainly, the word anomie appears in the occasional article, but it has not been included in a title or abstract since the year 1998. Anomie is not, therefore, the central concern of recent articles, but occurs only incidentally.



functionalism. These two threads cannot be disentangled: political views shape academic discourse, and that discourse restructures the political climate.

Anomie, James Davis writes, is one of many ideas deemed “old-fashioned and outmoded” by sociologists. But are such ideas actually wrong, he asks?

I doubt it. The only sociological ideas that ever turned out to be demonstrably wrong are ‘status consistency’ and ‘relative deprivation,’ and both pop up regularly as true ideas.<sup>78</sup> We neither refute nor confirm and expand ideas; we just become bored with them and move on to some ‘cutting edge’ novelty (Davis 2001: 101).

In this view, anomie theory declined simply because it was too old and newer theories replaced it. If Davis is correct, this is a *highly ironic* thing to have happened. Durkheim himself disliked his time at the École Normale because it “tended to reward elegant dabbling and the quest for ‘novelty’ and ‘originality’ of expression rather than solid and systematic learning” (Coser 1971: 144). Yet here we see Durkheim’s own theory relegated to the dustbin of history, only because it is no longer novel!<sup>79</sup>

Davis is likely correct *to an extent*, but as we have said, there were far more factors at play. Knowing that anomie theory was largely replaced, we must ask, *why* was it replaced? What academic climate encourages the defenestration of old theories? As Sheldon Wolin argues, it is our obsession with scientific empiricism. “The defining characteristic of a scientific revolution is to break with the past.” It is an “animus against tradition” which, seeking to eschew ideology, is ideological in itself (Wolin 1969: 1068). “This anti-traditionalist bias,” he goes on, “cultivated in the name of the elimination of bias, has

---

<sup>78</sup> Davis has since recanted his views on relative deprivation, according to a personal correspondence.

<sup>79</sup> As the theoretical physicist Max Planck (1858-1947) wrote, “A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.” (Cited in the Edge.org 2014 contest, “What Scientific Idea Is Ready for Retirement?”)

manifested itself on numerous occasions during the past decades as the effort to diminish the significance of ‘traditional political theory’” (Wolin 1969: 1070).<sup>80</sup>

Before we explore *which* theories replaced anomie (there were several of them), we must consider the so-called flaws in the concept that made it so easy to overthrow. As we saw earlier in the last section, Durkheim’s theory faced a whole host of accusations—poor methodology, sexism, and authoritarianism, among others. These concerns, combined with poor scholarship by Durkheim’s (and Merton’s) followers, wounded the reputation of anomie theory:

The popularity of strain/anomie theory declined in the late 1960’s due to the lack of empirical evidence put forth by researchers and the political climate of the decade (Agnew and Passas, 1997: 4-5). The lack of supporting data can be attributed to several flaws in the original research methods employed by the researchers (Agnew and Passas, 1997: 5). Inappropriate methodology, oversimplification of theory, and a neglect of the previous revisions resulted in a body of work that misrepresented the original purpose of anomie/strain theory (Agnew and Passas, 1997: 5-7).<sup>81</sup>

But anomie theory may have been victim of a larger movement—the fight against functionalism. “Just as it was gaining theoretical hegemony,” George Ritzer and Douglas Goodman observe, “structural functionalism came under attack, and the attacks mounted until they reached a climax in the 1960s and 1970s” (Ritzer & Goodman 2004: 59). Though Durkheim certainly employed functionalist thinking, it was the work of Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton that turned anomie into a functionalist concept. (Parsonian sociology, in particular, was conflated with the worst kind of conservatism.) Challenges to functionalism came from *both* politics and academia: “Structural functionalism was accused of such things as being politically conservative, unable to deal with social change because of its focus on static structures, and incapable of adequately analyzing social conflict” (Ritzer & Goodman 2004: 61).

---

<sup>80</sup> If one has any doubt that Durkheim is included in this statement, consider that Wolin himself was a scholar of Durkheim.

<sup>81</sup> “Robert Agnew’s General Strain Theory.” <http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/agnew.htm>

This last point is crucial, for it was the emergence of conflict theory that posed perhaps the greatest challenge to functionalism. The revival of Marxian sociology in the late 1960s (via Tom Bottomore and others) brought widespread scorn for functionalist ideas. Though Marx himself employed functionalist logic—describing the structural contradictions of capitalism, for example—his emphasis on social change became far more salient, especially as the New Left movement gained ground.

Indeed, the New Left may have been largely responsible for the rejection of anomie theory. The movement, which challenged patriarchy, imperialism, and heterosexism, sought *freedom* from all constraints and the collapse of traditional authority structures. Naturally, a theory like anomie, which preached the merits of constraint, could not remain popular.

Anomie theory, once highly esteemed, began to pose a challenge to the narrative of freedom emerging in the United States.<sup>82</sup> The rise of individualism rendered Durkheim's concept not only unpopular, but *incoherent*. The notion that constraint could be both necessary and desirable was so anathema to 1960s American culture that it could not be properly understood. As Talcott Parsons warned in 1937, "Individualistic modes of thinking are so deeply imbedded in our culture that such confusion is very difficult to avoid" (Parsons 1937: 384). Even if a theory is true, it will not be accepted unless it matches our ideological paradigms. This is not a minor point: the cognitive linguist George Lakoff observes that one *literally cannot understand* certain information unless it fits one's own framework. Individuals will reject true statements, again and again, in favor of false ones that match their understanding of the world (Lakoff 2004).

---

<sup>82</sup> Of course, freedom was already a central concept in American life, so "emerging" is perhaps a misleading term.

We mentioned earlier that Marx provided great inspiration for the New Left movement and the decline of functionalism. As Steven Lukes observes, Marx and Durkheim hold *opposite* views of human nature, such that the triumph of Marx spells the death of Durkheim:

In large measure, Durkheim sides with Hobbes and Freud where Marx sides with Rousseau and the Utopians. For the former, man is a bundle of desires, which needs to be regulated, tamed, repressed, manipulated and given direction for the sake of social order, whereas, for the latter, man is still an angel, rational and good, who requires a rational and good society in which to develop his essential nature – a ‘form of association in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone.’ For the former, coercion, external authority and restraint are *necessary and desirable* for social order and individual happiness; for the latter, they are an offense against reason and *an attack upon freedom* (Lukes 1977: 84, emphasis added).

These frameworks, one can quickly grasp, are diametrically opposed. Roughly speaking, the former represents communitarian constraint, while the latter champions individualist liberty. “For Marx,” Seymour Lipset notes, social constraints did not fulfill socially necessary functions but rather supported class rule” (Lipset 1963/1981: 6). No wonder, then, that academics steeped in Marxian ideology might be wary of employing anomie theory. To do so would be to admit that our well-being is contingent on authority, a dangerous claim indeed.

But while conflict theory was influential, it was not the only paradigm to emerge in the sixties. Exchange theory—the work of George Homans and others—also played a crucial role. While functionalists cared about social institutions, exchange theorists were far more concerned with the individual: “Homans’ basic view was that the heart of sociology lies in the study of individual behavior and interaction. He was little interested in consciousness or in the various kinds of large-scale structures and institutions that were of concern to most sociologists” (Ritzer & Goodman 2004: 62). Responding to the rise of individualism, academics created a whole host of theories that celebrated the individual: phenomenological sociology (Schütz), dramaturgical analysis (Goffman), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel), and symbolic interactionism (Mead).

The 1970s, expanding on the themes of pluralism and identity, gave rise to feminist theory, poststructuralism, and multiculturalism. Classical ideas like anomie could not compete; they “went down with the functionalist ship.”<sup>83</sup>

This is the story given to us by Ritzer and Goodman. But it is, I fear, a little too neat. It tells us about the collapse of functionalism, but does not say much about anomie in particular.<sup>84</sup> As I warned at the beginning of this chapter, the decline of anomie theory is a speculative tale; little has been written about it, so we have to engage in imaginative reconstruction. We now turn to Stjepan Meštrović, an expert on Durkheim and, in my estimation, one of the best Durkheim scholars in the United States. To understand the trajectory of anomie theory, Meštrović argues, we must begin with Durkheim himself:

First, most of Durkheim’s graduate students, colleagues, and followers were killed in World Wars I and II.<sup>85</sup> Really, only Marcel Mauss was left to carry the Durkheim cause, and Mauss was assimilated by anthropologists more than by sociologists. Second, Durkheim is still regarded today as one of the several founding fathers of anthropology. . . . But anthropologists are most interested in Durkheim’s ethnographic approach in *The Elementary Forms*, and not in anomie, which applies more to modern societies. Third, it was Parsons and Merton who really injected Durkheim into American sociology, and they did so with the wrong interpretation of ‘normlessness.’ When functionalism was pretty much jettisoned in the 1960s, anomie was thrown out with the bathwater of Parsonian functionalism.<sup>86</sup>

In fact, Meštrović writes, “Durkheim’s original understanding of anomie never really entered American discourse.” In the 1920s, the Chicago School approximated Durkheim’s intentions, but their approach “was displaced by symbolic interactionism, which has no room for pathology.” Even European sociologists neglected Durkheim, focusing their energies on Marx and Weber.

---

<sup>83</sup> Aaron Howell, personal correspondence.

<sup>84</sup> To be fair, that was not the authors’ intention—the information comes from a chapter about the history of sociology, not the history of anomie theory.

<sup>85</sup> In another essay, Meštrović observes that “all of Durkheim’s papers and lectures were destroyed in the war. Thus, no one will ever really know the extent of Durkheim’s usage of anomie” (Meštrović 1988a: 836).

<sup>86</sup> Personal correspondence.

Finally, Durkheim's work was largely inspired by Schopenhauerian philosophy, which was extremely popular in his day. But Schopenhauer is no longer discussed. "My overall take," Meštrović concludes,

is that Durkheim's theory overall and his concept of anomie were never really assimilated, in all these years. I think Durkheim was right, and is more relevant today than ever, but his theory cannot be grasped because the "collective consciousness" in academia and sociology is not open to his ideas or the philosophers he used.<sup>87</sup>

Though we now have a crucial piece of the story, several questions remain. Why has anomie declined *in the past few decades*? What happened to it after the New Left waned and the sociological paradigms of the sixties and seventies were no longer novel? Although the term never quite disappeared, it became highly specialized—relegated to the fields of criminology and psychology.

Just as Durkheim's work lost prominence, "Merton's version of anomie, too, almost died, but was miraculously resurrected, this time in the vast literature on delinquency and deviance" (Meštrović 1988a: 837). Even today, the few articles that do discuss anomie are almost exclusively concerned with deviance. A quick search of recent articles brings back titles like "Why Do People Engage in Corruption?" and "Deciding to Bribe: A Cross-Level Analysis of Firm and Home Country Influences on Bribery Activity."<sup>88</sup> As Marco Orrù (1990) points out, it is not surprising that Merton's interpretation of anomie has triumphed over Durkheim's: most prominent sociologists are American, and Merton frames anomie as a *particularly American* issue. But while Orrù sees this a sign of Merton's superiority, the French sociologist Philippe Besnard considers it a shameful ideological victory:

Sociologists must accept the idea that sociological works, like all products, are subject to the effects of fashion, and that their career depends in good part on the marketing

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Via Jstor.org, searching articles that use "anomie" in either the title or abstract.

strategies of their promoters. They must also admit that the cognitive power of a theory is not to be measured by its notoriety. Like other celebrated theories, the Mertonian theory of anomie, despite the brilliant intuitions of its author, is like an overinflated balloon which bursts when one tries to seize hold of it. If one believes in sociology and its future, it is not on foundations such as these that one should build (Besnard 1990: 383).

Nonetheless, anomie has largely survived *because* of its contemporary use in criminology. For those of us who prefer Durkheim's original definition, that observation is bittersweet. We may be grateful to Merton for keeping anomie theory alive, but also frustrated that the term has become so distorted over time. The word "anomie" is now applied to individuals rather than societies, describing the "anomic" pathology that leads one to, say, rob a bank or cheat on tests. Here anomie has little to do with frustrations of desire, and everything to do with loneliness, emptiness, and other terms that are irrelevant for Durkheim.

In an ironic twist that not even Durkheim could have predicted, anomie is now used to *stigmatize the individual* rather than diagnose social problems. It has been divested of its grounding in social realism, ascribed to the very psychological forces Durkheim wished to debunk. What a tragic fate for the "sociological concept *par excellence*"!<sup>89</sup>

In a fascinating essay called "What Ever Happened to Anomie?", David McCloskey writes: "Durkheim's famous sociological concept, so often heralded as the first massive and irrefutable demonstration of the autonomy of social facts, has become thoroughly psychologized" (McCloskey 1974: 498). Not only has the term been co-opted by criminologists, but it has been converted into a psychological diagnosis: *anomia* (Srole 1956; Lamnek 1996). Anomia is defined as "a social psychological derivation used to represent a state of disaffection or disconnectedness" (Borgatta & Montgomery 2000: 165). The term, coined by Leo Srole, has

---

<sup>89</sup> Besnard 1987: 388, cited in Meštrović 1988a: 837.

turned Durkheim's complex theory into a delightfully empirical scale, easy to employ. Surely Durkheim would have been thrilled at the scientific rigor of Srole's approach!

Except that anomia has almost nothing to do with anomie. Although the anomic condition sometimes produces "disenchantment," feeling *disconnected* is a symptom of egoism. Egoism "tend[s] to be characterized by a state of apathy, an absence of attachment to life," while anomie is "a state of irritation or disgust, irritation resulting from the many occasions of disappointment afforded by modern existence, disgust being the extreme form of perception of the disproportion between aspirations and satisfactions" (Aron 1967: 34).

As McCloskey notes, nearly all anomie theorists have failed to connect their own views with those of Durkheim. "I challenge Professors Lee and Clyde, Dean and Reeves, De Grazia, Srole (and yes, even Merton and Parsons!) to demonstrate by systematic exegesis that their various versions of anomie enjoy *any necessary and significant relation* to Durkheim's original ideas" (McCloskey 1974: 498, emphasis added). To be fair, intellectual thought does not and should not demand loyalty to any one theorist. Durkheim himself would have wanted his theory expanded upon (and even challenged) in light of empirical research. "It seems fruitless," Marco Orrù writes, "to attempt to resolve issues of conceptual legitimacy in sociology—and specifically in anomie theory—by referring to the Durkheimian texts" (Orrù 1990: 232). He goes on:

If anything, the vicissitudes of the concept of anomie in sociology show that departing from earlier definitions is not a drawback, but an asset. After all, Durkheim was acquainted with the earlier definition of anomie of the social philosopher Jean Marie Guyau, and after reviewing Guyau's work, Durkheim coined his own definition of anomie *in exact opposition* to Guyau's (Orrù 1990: 232, emphasis added).

Even so, theorists like Merton and Srole *do* commit a disservice when they claim to derive their theories from Durkheim. It is one thing to say, *I have received my inspiration from Durkheim, but will now depart from it*. It is quite another to depart from Durkheim while claiming one has



followed his path all along! Such an approach, McCloskey writes, is an indefensible attempt at “charisma-on-deposit” (1974: 498).<sup>90</sup> One cannot have it both ways, citing Durkheim for credibility while also attacking his approach (and then denying it).

Given how muddled anomie theory has become in recent decades—no one seems to agree upon a definition—it is perhaps unsurprising that the term has declined. But has the concept itself disappeared? Hardly. As Steven Lukes explains in a personal correspondence:

I would draw a distinction between ‘anomie theory’ and the concept of anomie. I think that the latter (not always accompanied by the term) has entered the bloodstream of sociological thinking and more generally social and political discourse. Thus a Durkheimian diagnosis of the ills of capitalism citing multiplying, insatiable wants and the absence of restraining normative expectations has surely become something of a commonplace.

Lukes cites the 2012 book *How Much Is Enough?* by Robert and Edward Skidelsky. Though anomie is not mentioned in the book, the theme is clearly present. A summary by the publisher reads: “Though income has increased as [Keynes] envisioned, our wants have seemingly gone unsatisfied.”<sup>91</sup> Another notable work (which I cite in this thesis) is Peter Stearns’ *Satisfaction Not Guaranteed: Dilemmas of Progress in Modern Society* (2012).

In fact, the problem of unreasonable desires has probably seen *increasing* academic interest in recent years. Much has been written of the millennial generation—our unwillingness to settle, our thirst for advancement, and our quixotic expectations. As anomie continues to worsen in the United States, we should expect a great plethora of social critiques.

So does it even matter whether academics use the *word* anomie? Isn’t it far more important that the *concept* is employed? Yes and no. Though insisting on the term itself may seem a matter of academic pride, it has several advantages. First, it frames the problem as a

---

<sup>90</sup> In philosophy, this is called the “appeal to authority” fallacy.

<sup>91</sup> *How Much Is Enough?* (2012). <http://www.amazon.com/How-Much-Enough-Money-Good/dp/1590515072>

*social* rather than individual one. Anomie is above all (*pace* Srole) a social condition, caused by the failure of society to constrain desire. When our children experience unreasonable desires, we can remind ourselves that they are victims of a social problem rather than their own greed (or our failed parenting). By focusing on society, we can disburden the individual of blame and stigma.<sup>92</sup> Second, using the word itself gives us a more nuanced understanding of the problem: by reading *The Division of Labor*, for example, we can understand that the problem is not unique to our own society, but grounded in the historical shift from feudalism to capitalism.<sup>93</sup> Finally—and this is no small victory—using the term “anomie” may help to legitimize the sociological perspective among academics. By linking well-being with social regulation, it may even change American attitudes toward constraint.

---

<sup>92</sup> This will be particularly crucial in our discussion of mental health.

<sup>93</sup> Or *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, agriculture to industry, Catholicism to Protestantism, functionalist to plebiscitary representation, etc.

## II. WHY ANOMIE STILL MATTERS

### The Anomic Nation

We have now reached the core of this thesis. Here I will argue that the United States is an *anomic nation*—that is, its collective conscience produces rather than constrains desire. This chapter will be divided into two portions: the first will explore the historical basis of anomie, and the second will examine anomie in light of contemporary research. Though not exhaustive, the combination of cultural and historical considerations should give us a very accurate picture of anomie today.

#### ANOMIE IN AMERICAN HISTORY:

Robert Merton was not the first to explore the uniquely anomic character of the United States. The French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville had suggested as much over a century prior to Merton. In his 1835 work, *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville noted with concern that Americans are enthralled with political liberty, but lack the necessary restraints that accompany it. “The less coercive and dictatorial the political institutions of a society become,” Tocqueville felt, “the more it needed a system of sacred belief to help restrict the actions of both the rulers and the ruled” (Lipset 1963/1981: 9). But this system—which some have called *traditional reciprocity*<sup>94</sup>—was absent from American culture. Having founded itself on the notion of religious freedom, and having never experienced the constraints of feudal society, America was in a perilous place. Its citizens had “neither the instinctive patriotism of a monarchy nor the reflective patriotism of a republic”; they were comforted neither by traditional restraint (*noblesse*

---

<sup>94</sup> See Reinhard Bendix (1996), *Nation-Building and Citizenship*.

*oblige*) nor the fraternity of democratic allegiance (Lipset 1963/1981: 65, citing Tocqueville).

Ironically, the emphasis on freedom and equality had deprived Americans of community. They had become isolated, competitive individuals, with nothing to hold them together but their shared pitiful condition:

As in periods of equality no man is compelled to lend his assistance to his fellow men, and none has any right to expect much support from them, everyone is at once independent and powerless. These two conditions, which must never be separately considered or confounded together, inspire the citizen of a democratic country with very contrary propensities. His independence fills him with self-reliance and pride among his equals; his debility makes him feel from time to time the want of some outward assistance, which he cannot expect from any of them, because they are all impotent and unsympathizing (cited in Bendix 1996: 59, emphasis added).

The focus on equality, Tocqueville found, produced a tremendous degree of anxiety. If individuals were truly equal, they could no longer blame social conditions for the direction their life took. Whereas in feudal times, one was largely consigned to a certain kind of destiny, democracy promised equal opportunity for all. Suddenly, one's successes were a matter of utmost importance; they became an indicator of personal merit (cf. Weber 1905/2005). The more equality individuals possessed, the more damning their failures.

To be sure, real equality has never existed in the United States or anywhere else.<sup>95</sup> But the *myth* of the meritocracy has been enough to ensure a high degree of competition. Since personal success has been conflated with self-worth, it is no wonder that individuals compete for increasingly unreasonable aims. Anomie, it seems, is the inevitable result of a battle for status and superiority.

But status alone cannot account for our obsession with advancement. For a more complete explanation, we turn to the historian Frederick Jackson Turner. In an essay published the same year as Durkheim's *Division of Labor*, Turner argued that advancement was embedded

---

<sup>95</sup> For an elaboration of this point, see John Rawls' (1999) *A Theory of Justice*.

in America's founding. The promise of manifest destiny, Turner claimed, was stamped into the minds of colonial Americans; the journey West shimmered as a symbol of freedom and possibility. The colonists of early America literally "pushed the frontier"; we do so metaphorically today, seeking constant growth and refusing to settle (Turner 1893). In fact, Americans seem to *eschew* stability in favor of an amorphous, chaotic, and ever-changing way of life. We may be moving westward, but we are walking toward a goal that is "infinitely far away" (Durkheim 1897/2006: 270).

Werner Sombart, a German sociologist, expanded on Turner's analysis. In his masterful work, *Why is there no socialism in the United States?*, Sombart writes:

If the American prays before the god of Success, he strives to lead a life acceptable to his god. . . . Neither the enjoyment of life in comfort to the full nor the final harmony of personality at peace with itself can be the American's ideal in life; instead, this ideal is constant self-advancement" (Sombart 1906/1976: 13)

Success is not only a cultural desire, Sombart notes, but a social imperative: "We therefore see in every American—beginning with the paperboy—restlessness, yearning, and compulsion to be way and beyond other people" (Sombart 1906: 12–13). This notion of "compulsion" is particularly crucial, for it mirrors Durkheim's own understanding. In his chapter on egoistic suicide, Durkheim (1897/2006) observes that Protestants are compelled to pursue their own desires. Talcott Parsons explains:

The essential point is that the Protestant's freedom from group control is not optional. It is not a freedom to take his own religious responsibility or to relinquish it to a church as he sees fit. In so far as he is a Protestant in good standing he *must* assume this responsibility and exercise his freedom. He cannot devolve it on a church. The obligation to exercise religious freedom in this sense is a fundamental feature of protestantism as a religious movement. It may be said that this exemplifies quite literally Rousseau's famous paradox, as a Protestant a man is, in certain respects, *forced* to be free" (Parsons 1937: 332, emphasis in original).

As Max Weber (1905/2005) observed, freedom and success are tightly linked. One is not truly free—that is, free from social demands; rather, “freedom” is simply the opportunity to prove oneself in competition, to assert dominance over one’s peers and demonstrate superiority. This plays out most obviously in the economic sphere. In the United States, Sombart notes, the emphasis on self-advancement has translated into an emphasis on profits. It is easy to see how one’s personal validation becomes tied up with the capitalist system: for success is, above all, a financial compulsion, prescribing the acquisition and consumption of valued goods.

Though class boundaries are actually quite rigid (more so than in Sombart’s time), advancement *is* sometimes possible. But the glimmer of hope present in American culture—the underdog entrepreneur who becomes a Steve Jobs or the industrious immigrant who earns a spot in the White House—is the exception rather than the rule. Steeped in the doctrine of upward mobility, but unable to attain it, the American finds himself forced to justify his failure; that is, to disprove it. Again, capitalism provides the solution: he retreats into the world of work, for this gives him purpose and also the buying power necessary for conspicuous consumption.

Yet as Robert Merton observes, what the American obtains is never quite enough. We are trapped in a “cult of success,” Merton writes, the measure of which is financial gain: “Money has been consecrated as a value in itself, over and above its expenditure for articles of consumption or its use for the enhancement of power. ‘Money’ is peculiarly well adapted to become a symbol of prestige” (Merton 1938: 189–90). Yet no amount of money can ever satisfy, for it is the *struggle for more*, and not the acquisition, that defines the American condition. “Americans are bombarded on all sides,” Merton writes,

by precepts which affirm the right or, often, the duty of retaining the goal even in the face of repeated frustrations. Prestigious representatives of the society reinforce the cultural emphasis. . . . The family, the school, and the workplace . . . join to provide the intense disciplining required if an individual is to retain intact a goal that remains

elusively beyond reach, if he is to be motivated by the promise of a gratification which is not redeemed (Merton 1938: 190–91).

There is tremendous “ethical work,” Foucault tells us, in learning to adhere to social pressures (Schalet 2011). But the American norms associated with success are particularly demanding. “Not failure, but low aim, is crime,” Merton notes, so “those who draw in their ambitions” are swiftly penalized (Merton 1938: 192–193). As Durkheim writes in *Suicide*:

A passion for the infinite is daily presented as a sign of moral distinction, when in fact it can only occur in disturbed minds which accord the status of a norm to the very disturbance from which they are suffering. The doctrine of progress despite all and as fast as possible has become an article of faith (1897/2006: 282).

When we are constantly exhorted “not to be a quitter” and that “there is no such word as ‘fail’” (Merton 1938: 192–93), how are we to react when we *do* fail? The emphasis on “lofty goals,” coupled with the inability to achieve them, is a recipe for disaster. This disaster is predicated, Merton says, on three cultural myths:

1. All should strive for the same lofty goals since these are open to all
2. Present seeming failure is but a way-station to ultimate success
3. Genuine failure consists only in the lessening or withdrawal of ambition [. . .]

In sociological paraphrase, these axioms represent, first, the deflection of criticism of the social structure onto one’s self among those so situated in the society that they do not have full and equal access to opportunity; second, the preservation of a structure of social power by having individuals in the lower social strata identify themselves, not with their compeers, but with those at the top (whom they will ultimately join); and third, providing pressures for conformity with the cultural dictates of unslackened ambition by the threat of less than full membership in the society for those who fail to conform (Merton 1938: 193).

Though not the first to describe America’s anomic character (that honor goes to Tocqueville), Merton made several important contributions. His emphasis on wealth is particularly enlightening: “In the American Dream there is no final stopping point. The measure of ‘monetary success’ is conveniently indefinite and relative” (Merton 1938: 190). Merton cites the work of H. F. Clark, who finds that Americans always desire 25 percent more than their

current salary.<sup>96</sup> But Americans care far more about *becoming* wealthy than they do about wealth. Upward mobility is an obsessive-compulsive pursuit, like locking and unlocking a door.

To *achieve* wealth is nothing; one must always *aspire*. Nevertheless, the demand for constant growth requires some proof that one is actually advancing. It is for this reason, Robert Bellah notes, that Americans cling to the notion of “life stages.” Along with the myth of meritocracy, which claims that anyone can advance, the myth of progress reminds us that we *do* in fact advance. Stagnancy is death<sup>97</sup>, so we are constantly exhorting ourselves to reach the next “life stage” lest we become complacent and wither away.

These life stages, Bellah explains, are often framed as crises. As the individual moves from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, she frees herself from the shackles of normative constraint. “Every life crisis, not just that of adolescence,” Bellah writes, “is a crisis of separation and individuation, but what the ever freer and more autonomous self is free *for* only grows more obscure” (Bellah et al. 1985: 81–82). Given the highly anomic character of the United States, life stages provide an illusion of direction; they “give coherence to the otherwise arbitrary life patterns [Americans] seem to be asked to create” (Bellah et al. 1985: 81). But coherence does not lead to satisfaction: life stages promote constant growth, and frame stability as a threat to freedom. Americans conflate “development” with perennial advancement, as if stability were a sign of decay rather than something desirable. Forget Marx! This Eriksonian perspective has all the trappings of teleology.

---

<sup>96</sup> Contemporary data may be different; this research is over 80 years old.

<sup>97</sup> I would not be surprised if this notion is borrowed from capitalism. Most capitalists claim that the economy must grow by several percentage points every year, or else it will flounder. Perhaps this progress imperative has been internalized by individuals; thus Americans feel that they must constantly be challenging themselves and growing, or else they will become obsolete. We are like Damien Hirst’s shark, moving ever forward, fleeing from death and toward the unknown.



On the whole, *Habits of the Heart* is a brilliant analysis of anomie. It tells the story of a nation without direction, without community, and without constraint. Throughout the work, Bellah and his colleagues turn a critical eye toward the notion of freedom; their solution—transcendence through community—is entirely Durkheimian.<sup>98</sup> Of special importance is Bellah's conception of the social fact. Though the term does not appear in *Habits of the Heart*, the concept is certainly present. Social facts, Bellah argues, are both necessary and desirable, but Americans flee from them like disease. Our allergy to constraint is ironic, Bellah says, because it is the *only thing* that can give us the freedom we so desire. In a personal correspondence shortly before his death, Bellah told me: "Freedom can only exist within a system of rules, set by authority; otherwise 'freedom' just produces the war of all against all which allows no freedom whatever." He distinguished between "negative freedom"—the right not to be coerced—and "positive freedom." The latter notion is so anathema to U.S. culture as to be almost incomprehensible: it is "freedom from sin, which means in effect, freedom to do the right thing." This freedom is, in the American view, not freedom at all—it is a moral compulsion. But as Bellah and Durkheim both claim, one cannot even begin to be free without the necessary social conditions. "Here I think Kant's ethical philosophy is very important," Bellah writes. Ethical action, to act only if your action can be justified as valid for everyone, or the injunction to treat all others (and oneself) as ends in themselves and never as means, leads Kant to imagine a society in which everyone does that and so all are free."

Yet as Bellah would readily admit, duty is not simply a religious compulsion, to be achieved for its own sake. It is pursued primarily—though not exclusively—as a path to well-

---

<sup>98</sup> In fact, Bellah cites both Durkheim and Tocqueville (both of whose influence is obvious) toward the end of his monograph. Bellah was quite inspired by Durkheim, and published an edited volume of his work called *Émile Durkheim on Morality and Society* (1973).

being. In fact, Durkheim “criticizes the Kantian ethics as one-sided on account of paying sole attention to duty,” Parsons explains:

There is, he says, also the element of the good, of desirability. A moral rule is not moral unless it is accepted as obligatory, unless the attitude toward it is quite different from that of expediency. But at the same time it is also not truly moral unless obedience to it is held to be desirable, unless the individual’s happiness and self-fulfillment are bound up with it. Only the combination of the two elements gives a complete account of the nature of morality” (Parsons 1937: 387).

But for most Americans, the idea that constraint can be *desirable* is puzzling at best. At worst, it is an oppressive claim that has served to justify tremendous inequality, a claim that has held the marginalized in its thrall down through the centuries. *Enough!*, Americans say, and we proceed to rip off the very bandages that hold us together. Everything associated with morality becomes an object of aversion; we fear even our own socialization, since it implies that we are not wholly in control of our selves. All that is passed on through latent pattern maintenance becomes a source of suspicion, so we purge ourselves of norms and values, or at least attempt to do so. (In fact, our shared appetite for freedom is itself a cultural norm.) Where, then, do we find shared meaning? Where do we find shared constraint? Without these forces, we will inevitably experience the twin tyrants of egoism and anomie.

Since the social is viewed with mistrust, the individual is forced to turn inward to discover meaning. But meaning can never come from oneself, so it has to be arbitrarily invented. “Values,” Bellah observes, “turn out to be the incomprehensible, rationally indefensible thing that the individual chooses when he or she has thrown off the last vestige of external influence and reached pure, contentless freedom” (Bellah et al. 1985: 79–80).

Contentless indeed! Our obsession with independence is both vacuous (lacking content) and unsatisfying (lacking contentment). And even when Americans *do* form social bonds, their emphasis is always on the individual. Bellah notes the popularity of Buddhist philosophy, for

example, which encourages a (rather vague) spiritual connection with all things. Even humanism, which champions our social essence, is ultimately devoid of content. The problem with these philosophies, Bellah writes, is that they talk about global unity but do not deliver *concrete suggestions* about how to live in society (Bellah et al. 1985: 81). And like most associations, they are purely voluntary: one stays with them only if they provide personal satisfaction. Social bonds are always means to an end, and any unifying doctrine is merely a mask under which hedonism hides:

We live in a society that encourages us to cut free from the past, to define our own selves, to choose the groups with which we wish to identify. No tradition and no community in the United States is above criticism, and the test of the criticism is usually the degree to which the community or tradition helps the individual to find fulfillment (Bellah et al. 1985: 154).

The perennial search for fulfillment is a consequence of both egoism and anomie. Our weak social solidarity—based on voluntary, pleasurable association—gives us no feeling of transcendence or social purpose. We seek “fulfillment” in whatever way we can, often appealing to religious ideology. (In fact, egoism may explain the unusually high value Americans place on religious faith, especially in comparison to other democratized nations.) But fulfillment is also a struggle for satisfaction, trying to quench our “unslakable thirst” for pleasure (Durkheim 1897/2006: 270). The emphasis on “finding oneself,” Bellah observes, is both an important and a fruitless task: since meaning is only possible through society, and Americans eschew social bonds, their effort will always fail.

The important tasks in life must always be done on one’s own. It is the American way. Reliance on anyone—parents, friends, institutions—is a sign of weakness. The connection to

egoism is clear, but since egoism and anomie always have the same cause<sup>99</sup> (Pope 1976: 45–46), our allergy to dependence produces *both* in equal measure.

In a fascinating work, historian Barbara Taylor and psychologist Adam Phillips propose a radical claim: only kindness can constrain our desire, yet this is precisely what is lacking in the modern age. Our failure to engage with one another on a meaningful level—that is, our egoism—prevents us from forming collective restraints:

It is our unkindness—our lack of affection and regard—that makes our desire possible; kindness is the way we stop ourselves desiring. . . . Kindness and prohibition are inextricable; kindness is our recognition of the forbidden and our refusal of it (Phillips & Taylor 2010: 85, 87).

This is egoism in both the Durkheimian and the classical sense. First, the individual is forced to turn inward: he cannot expect kindness from his fellow Americans since they are (in Tocqueville words) “impotent and unsympathizing.” Instead, he must seek kindness for himself: that is, personal pleasure. “In this stark picture,” Phillips and Taylor write, “other people exist for the individual only insofar as they are the means, the instruments, of his own gratification. They have no significance other than the possibilities for satisfaction that they provide” (Phillips & Taylor 2010: 77).

The pursuit of pleasure must be seen in this light. The notion that Americans are “greedy” or “wealth-obsessed” may be true to an extent, but it is, I think, an inevitable result of social deprivation. Just as social solidarity creates mutual dependence, a *lack* of solidarity forces the individual to seek comfort outside of society. We have become exactly what Tocqueville warned: proud vessels of independence, floating along in a vast ocean. We are united only by a shared secret: that we are sinking.

---

<sup>99</sup> And the same cure: tight social bonds which create a “collective life” that “transcends the individual” and provide a “corpus of moral rules” (Durkheim 1902/1997: xlii–xliii; Durkheim 1897/2006: 349).

“We depend on each other not just for our survival but for our very being,” Phillips writes:

The self without sympathetic attachments is either a fiction or a lunatic. Modern Western society resists this fundamental truth, valuing independence above all things. Needing others is perceived as a weakness. Only small children, the sick, and the very elderly are permitted dependence on others; for everyone else, self-sufficiency and autonomy are cardinal virtues. Dependence is scorned even in intimate relationships, as though dependence were incompatible with self-reliance rather than the only thing that makes it possible (Phillips & Taylor 2010: 95–96).

The problem, then, is twofold: not only do Americans lack social constraint—our society encourages us to “cut free” of obligations—but we also lack the modern *prerequisite* for constraint: organic solidarity. To be sure, we do have some norms and values in common: our collective conscience includes a high valuation of freedom, wealth, and advancement. But these are not enough to create what Durkheim is really after: a sense of mutual responsibility (Durkheim 1898/1973). It is only through our shared dependence that social facts—moral constraints on individual will—can emerge.

What dependence requires is not a highly conformist, *Gemeinschaft* culture. In fact, as Durkheim observed in *The Division of Labor*, individuation is a precondition of dependence. If the *Gemeinschaft* society was based on homophily, *Gesellschaft* is predicated on mutual need. As we perform increasingly specialized functions, the whole social fabric is needed to meet one person’s needs. In evaluating to what extent “dependence” is necessary, it may be helpful to consider Amy Schalet’s typology of individualism. In *Not Under My Roof*, a comparison of American and Dutch culture, Schalet distinguishes between “adversarial” and “interdependent” individualism. In adversarial individualism, “individual and society stand opposed to each other, which leaves uncertainty about the basis for social bonds between people and for self-restraint within them.” In interdependent individualism, “individual and society are conceptualized as mutually constitutive,” so constraint becomes “a matter of course” (Schalet 2011: 18).

What makes adversarial individualism particularly dangerous, Schalet notes, is that it requires some “higher authority” to constrain desire. Since cohesion and restraint are not self-regulative, as they are in an interdependent society, they must be imposed from above. This is precisely what Durkheim worried about when he described oppressive state intervention.<sup>100</sup> The weaker the influence of voluntary associations (like the ancient *corporation*), the greater the need for external regulation.<sup>101</sup> In interdependent individualism, this regulation “appears less necessary” (Schalet 2011: 19). Unsurprisingly, Schalet pairs this kind of individualism with Dutch society, and adversarial individualism with American society.

The greatest fear of the adversarial is that “society may overwhelm the individual” (Schalet 2011: 79). This notion is captured brilliantly by a popular aphorism of Rudyard Kipling:

The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. To be your own man is a hard business. If you try it, you’ll be lonely often, and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself (Kipling 1967).

Loneliness and fear are nothing compared to the prize of self-determination. This Nietzschean view has something in common with the Durkheimian: it sees society as a fundamentally “real” force external to the individual. But while Durkheim saw society as a *necessary component* of individuation, Nietzsche argued the opposite. Society became for him, as it is for most Americans, a threat that must be resisted at all costs.

Let us pause for a moment and take stock of these anomic conditions. Not only are Americans (like all human beings) vessels of endless desire, but they are encouraged—no, *exhorted*—to pursue their desire and never abandon it. On top of this, they resist the natural

---

<sup>100</sup> See especially his comments in the Second Preface to *The Division of Labor* (1902/1997).

<sup>101</sup> The decline of voluntary associations in the U.S. was the subject of the much-discussed book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). Some sociologists feel that Robert Putnam overstated his case, but nonetheless, the book is considered one of the most important studies of American culture.

constraint that comes from social ties; that it, they reject both the direct and the solidary cure to anomie. The American approach, it may be said, is like fleeing from the only doctor who can save your life.

Individualism, as Schalet's work attests, is not the problem. It is our style of individualism that needs to change. Our freedom is "useless," Durkheim writes, unless it is tempered by fraternal bonds. The individualism of the eighteenth century, whose unfettered freedom still plagues us today, will not do. But neither will the conformism of the *Gemeinschaft* society. So it is "a matter of completing, extending, and organizing individualism, not of restraining and combating it" (Durkheim 1898/1973: 56).

To what extent are we fulfilling Durkheim's maxim? If Schalet is any clue, we are failing most miserably. In the next section, we will extend the "anomic nation" thesis further, analyzing it in light of contemporary research.

#### **ANOMIE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY:**

In an excellent book on anomie and mental illness—perhaps the best companion to this thesis aside from Durkheim's own work—Liah Greenfeld writes:

Placed in control over our destiny, we are far more likely to be dissatisfied with it, than would be a person deprived of any such control: not having a choice, such a person would try to do the best with what one has and enjoy it as far as possible. A truly believing person would also feel s/he has no right to find fault with the order of things created by God, much less to try and change it to one's own liking—one's situation in life would be perceived as both unchangeable and just. Conversely, the presence of choice, the very ability to imagine oneself in a position different from one currently occupied or that of one's parents, and the idea that social orders in general are created by people and may be changed make one suspect that one's current situation is not the best one can have and to strive for a better one (Greenfeld 2013: 28).

In no other generation has the presence of choice been more pervasive, or more overwhelming.

That *Fast Company* magazine recently dubbed millennials *Generation Flux* is all too fitting. We

are living in a tremendously unstable time, and yet this instability is lauded as a tremendous thrill. Members of *Generation Flux* are no longer constrained by such prosaic tasks as “employment.” Instead, we pursue any number of short-term positions, mastering them within six weeks and then moving on. As Jean Twenge (2006) notes in the aptly named *Generation Me*, our employment expectations are wildly unrealistic, constrained only by the limits of imagination. Nearly all young Americans intend to become actors, athletes, or artists. Each of these positions, it should be noted, is associated with fame, fortune, creative exercise, and (in theory) a minimal level of grunt work. That many young Americans expect to be famous is not entirely surprising: access to fame has certainly increased with the advent of Youtube and other social networks. Highly publicized stories, like Justin Bieber’s rise to fame, give the illusion that anyone can make it if they have the talent. Nonetheless, most Americans will not end up on MTV; instead, they will fill low-wage, somewhat unsatisfying jobs. That they hope otherwise is natural, and perhaps even desirable (for one should never give up aspirations entirely<sup>102</sup>), but the fact that they *expect* otherwise is cause for concern. “If [the anomic] disturbance is profound,” Durkheim warns, “it even attacks the principles that regulate the distribution of citizens between various jobs; since the relationships between the various parts of society are inevitably modified, the ideas that express these relationships can no longer remain the same” (1897/2006: 277). Suddenly everyone feels s/he is entitled to the best and only the best, and the notion of having to “settle” for a mediocre (read: typical) job is anathema.<sup>103</sup>

Yet in 2013, 35 percent of millennials (ages 18–32) were unemployed (Pew Research Center 2013). And of those lucky enough to find jobs, “fully half (49%) say they have taken a

---

<sup>102</sup> “Of course, a man does sometimes hope against all reason and, even if it is unreasonable, hope has its joys. So it may be that this sustains him for a time, but it cannot indefinitely survive the repeated disappointments of experience” (Durkheim 1897/2006: 271).

<sup>103</sup> As an anecdote, an acquaintance of mine recently declined *four* job offers because they weren’t quite what she was looking for. She is now unemployed.



job they didn't want just to pay the bills, with 24% saying they have taken an unpaid job to gain work experience. More than one-third (35%) say that, as a result of the poor economy, they have gone back to school" (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends 2012). But miraculously, only 9 percent say they "don't think they will ever have enough to live the life they want," compared to a whopping 72 percent of people aged 35 or older (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends 2012). Clearly, there is a mismatch here between expectation and reality!

Unrealistic expectations go above and beyond employment. In 2013, 34 percent of millennials (ages 18–32) lived with their parents, and a shocking *50 percent* of non-college students (ages 18–24) did so (Pew Research Center 2013).<sup>104</sup> Yet optimism about housing does not seem to reflect this reality. Americans are inundated with imagery of luxurious, exquisite homes, at a time when housing is getting more and more expensive. Twenge notes that on shows like *Friends*, characters with low-paying jobs (waiter, etc.) somehow live in well-furnished apartments in New York City. (For a more recent example, see HBO's *Girls*, in which four Oberlin graduates miraculously live in multi-room apartments despite being underemployed.) "We're constantly exposed to people who have more than we do and rarely see those who have less," Twenge writes, "a lack of perspective that's a formula for dissatisfaction" (Twenge 2006: 132). Because we often live in class-segregated neighborhoods, the average person has almost no confrontation with poverty (unless they're poor themselves). Yet the media constantly shows us people wealthier than ourselves. When we have nowhere to look but up, our expectations will inevitably be unfeasible.

But millennials are not the only Americans with quixotic aims. When it comes to marriage, most Americans have dangerously high expectations. This was not always the case.

---

<sup>104</sup> Although the Great Recession of 2008 is partly to blame, it accounts for only a two percent increase (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends 2013b).

Marriage was once a *practical* consideration: the merging of two families for financial reasons. But as Foucault (1976/1990) notes, we have seen a shift from the “deployment of alliance” to the “deployment of sexuality.” While the deployment of alliance focused largely on familial bonds, the deployment of sexuality is a matter of personal gratification. This historical shift, it goes without saying, accompanied the rise of individualism and the declining importance of the family.<sup>105</sup> In the premodern age, marital bonds were anything but romantic; now, romance is their sole purpose. A 2013 Pew study finds that 88 percent of Americans believe love is the most important reason for marriage. Practical concerns like reproduction and financial stability are far less prominent: 49 percent and 28 percent, respectively (Pew Research Center 2014b).<sup>106</sup>

But the linking of marriage and love is precisely what makes the former so problematic. Love has become an almost utopian ideal, so marriage—which is appropriate only for the deepest, most passionate love—is even further out of reach. In an individualistic culture like the United States, this effect is particularly keen. Lacking a communitarian framework, individuals cannot count on one another for support; even friendships are ultimately plastic.<sup>107</sup> Romantic partners become *essential* for us, for they fulfill all of our unmet social longings. It is here, and not in friendship, that we find fulfillment.<sup>108</sup>

Why not friendship? As William Deresiewicz (2009) notes in a brilliant essay, friendship means almost nothing in the modern age. “Having been relegated to our screens,” he asks, “are our friendships now anything more than a form of distraction?” Up to the nineteenth century,

---

<sup>105</sup> Durkheim himself describes this shift in his Second Preface to the *Division of Labor* (1902/1997): it is the loss of familial influence, he writes, that makes professional groups so necessary. Still, family has not completely declined in importance—76 percent of Americans still say that family is the most important element of their life (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends 2010).

<sup>106</sup> Obviously, having children is not just a “practical concern.” But the idea that one marries *so as to have children* was, historically, quite practical. During the Industrial Revolution, many families would have eight or more children and then send them off to work in factories, thereby increasing the total income.

<sup>107</sup> I mean this in both senses of the word: friendships are mercurial and unstable, but also artificial.

<sup>108</sup> I am grateful to Matthew Edmonds for this point.

friendships meant deep, lasting bonds—but these ties, which he calls “classical friendships,” are all but extinguished. “Friendship has become the characteristically modern relationship,”

Deresiewicz writes:

Modernity believes in equality, and friendships, unlike traditional relationships, are egalitarian. Modernity believes in individualism. Friendships serve no public purpose and exist independent of all other bonds. Modernity believes in choice. Friendships, unlike blood ties, are elective; indeed, the rise of friendship coincided with the shift away from arranged marriage. Modernity believes in self-expression. Friends, because we choose them, give us back an image of ourselves. Modernity believes in freedom. Even modern marriage entails contractual obligations, but friendship involves no fixed commitments. The modern temper runs toward unrestricted fluidity and flexibility, the endless play of possibility, and so is perfectly suited to the informal, improvisational nature of friendship. We can be friends with whomever we want, however we want, for as long as we want (Deresiewicz 2009).

Deprived of meaningful bonds, it is no wonder that Americans turn to romance—and particularly to marriage—in search of happiness. But the painful irony is that *wanting* a perfect marriage makes such a thing impossible. As Andrew Cherlin notes in *The Marriage-Go-Round* (2010), the American attitude toward marriage presents a terrible paradox: we *value* marriage above all else, and yet we also *expect* more from it than anything else. So we enter into marriages, “try them out,” and then quickly divorce if we’re not satisfied. It is, as Cherlin suggests in his title, a vicious circle, and explains why Americans have one of the highest divorce rates in the world.

Not all Americans have a positive attitude toward marriage. Indeed, nearly 40 percent of Americans say the institution is becoming obsolete. Just over 60 percent of unmarried adults say they’d like to get married, and only 29 percent of divorcées say they’d get married again (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends 2013a). This last statistic sheds some doubt on Cherlin’s thesis: if Americans are so reluctant to remarry, how can their efforts be called a “marriage-go-

round”?<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, most Americans *do* marry at some point in their lives: among those 45 or older, about 90 percent have been married. And the value of marriage is clear: a whopping 84 percent of Americans say marriage is a very important, if not the most important, part of their lives (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends 2013a.).

Marriage rates have fallen significantly in the past few decades: only 50.5 percent of Americans ages 18 and older were married in 2012, the lowest since at least 1920. But this should not give us the illusion that *love* is becoming less important: marriage is decreasing because other avenues for expressing love—cohabitation, etc.—are becoming more common. Seventy percent of Americans were in a committed relationship in 2012, with many choosing cohabitation instead of (or on the way to) marriage (Pew Research Center 2014b).

What does all this have to do with anomie? As I have hoped to show, marriage—and romantic love more generally—is the avenue through which Americans expect to achieve their wildest desires. This would not be such a problem if Americans weren’t also resistant to the very thing that makes lasting marriage possible: commitment. This claim is somewhat ironic given that 81 percent of Americans view “making a lifelong commitment” as a primary reason for marriage (Pew Research Center 2014b). Commitment, in my estimation, entails not only a commitment to stay married—for this may well be achieved without satisfying desires. Rather, it is a commitment to meet another’s needs even when this requires tremendous sacrifice. Sacrifice, a communitarian value, is anathema to American culture: even in the best marriage it may be a difficult endeavor. In modern society, Barbara Taylor and Adam Phillips observe,

The ideal lover or spouse is a freewheeling agent for whom the giving and taking of love is a disposable lifestyle option; neediness, even in this arena of intense desires and longings, is ultimately contemptible (Phillips & Taylor 2010: 96).

---

<sup>109</sup> As marriage expert Stephanie Coontz explains in a personal correspondence, individuals may not *remarry* but still *repartner*. The act of divorce might sour one’s attitude toward marriage, but not toward relationships in general. So the anomic tendency remains.

This is our quandary: we desperately crave intimacy, but this cannot be found in the modern relationship—at least not in the modern friendship. It is not given to us by ascriptive ties, nor can we earn it through voluntary association. So we turn to romantic relationships, the one vestige of amity remaining for us. We do this to feel less alone, to share our lives with another, to feel part of something greater than ourselves. Our partners want this just as much as we do, but we are unable to provide it for them. Just as much as we dread isolation, we fear commitment, obligation, and constraints on our will. Expecting so much, but unable to attain it, we are beset with anomie.

Unrealistic expectations have also influenced our buying habits. As Tocqueville diagnosed, Americans are highly concerned with products; they are a reflection not only of status, but identity. Yet as Twenge notes, contemporary Americans take things a step further. We do not simply want things for others' sake—that is, as an expression of status. We *really do want* what others have! And this is, Twenge argues, a new development: we have moved beyond “keeping up with the Joneses” (Twenge 2007: 100). Our obsession with stuff has become internalized. “In the past,” Twenge writes, “many people wanted a big house to impress people. GenMe wants a big house so each family member can have as much personal space as possible, consistent with the needs of the individual” (Twenge 2007: 100–101). In contrast, when Werner Sombart wrote in 1906 of America's taste for “bigness,” he remarked: “Being big in quantitative terms necessarily goes hand in hand with a high estimation of its success” (Sombart 1906: 12). This is no longer (exclusively) the case: Americans really do want more space; impressing their peers is merely an added bonus.<sup>110</sup>

---

<sup>110</sup> Still, we may wonder how “new” this desire really is. I highly doubt that even in Sombart's time, the emphasis on bigness was *exclusively* tied to success. That bigness is even an indicator of success in the first place demonstrates its desirability.

Consumption, of course, extends beyond a desire for grandness. It is above all a search for the *strange*. “One thirsts for novelty,” Durkheim writes, “for unknown indulgences and sensations that are as yet unnamed, but which lose all their appeal as soon as they have been experienced” (1897/2006: 281). The search for novelty is part of what Merton calls “considerations of technical expediency” (Merton 1938: 189), which in layman’s terms we might call pleasure-seeking. The search for pleasure is immune to institutional means, Merton warns; it is a purely utilitarian calculus.

One of the most frightening consequences of this, not often discussed by sociologists, is the effect on the brain. As Norman Doidge observes in *The Brain That Changes Itself* (2007), technology has given us unbridled access to pleasure, and the changes to the brain are dramatic. Dopamine, the neurotransmitter most associated with pleasure, responds primarily to novelty; since old stimuli “lose all their appeal,” as Durkheim says, Americans constantly seek new sources of pleasure. In the twenty-first century, these include pornography, gambling, and drug use (among others). Pornography is especially pernicious, Doidge notes, since individuals can expose themselves to thousands of bodies in just a few minutes of online searching. The novelty of switching between scandalous images releases a *tremendous* amount of dopamine<sup>111</sup>, more than the human brain can handle. Our dopamine receptors become quickly overloaded; neurons begin to slow the production of new receptors so as to stem the flow of dopamine. In some cases, receptors are actually *removed* from the neuron, a process known as “downregulation.”<sup>112</sup>

The result is grim. Not only are there physical changes in the body (difficulty experiencing arousal, for example), but *all aspects of life* become less pleasurable. Since there are fewer receptors for dopamine binding, the brain is literally unable to experience as much

---

<sup>111</sup> And in fact, the scandal is part of the pleasure, as Doidge points out.

<sup>112</sup> I am grateful to Avery O’Hara, Elizabeth Cooke, and Dr. Tracie Paine for providing feedback on this analysis.

pleasure as it used to. Something as simple as a summer walk becomes utterly quotidian, utterly devoid of joy. To maintain the same intake of dopamine, there is only one way to adapt: by seeking out even *more* pleasure. As never before, anomie is impacting on our brains, hijacking our neural pathways and making true satisfaction impossible.

The increasing difficulty of pleasure is what psychologists call the “hedonic treadmill” (Schwartz 2005). As Barry Schwartz writes in *The Paradox of Choice*, the hedonic treadmill has reached new heights in contemporary America, as individuals are exposed to an overwhelming array of choices. And the more choices we have, the less we are satisfied. (Hence the paradox.) Schwartz’s solution is not to increase social constraint, but to impose arbitrary restrictions on choice. He encourages individuals to be *satisficers*, not *maximizers*: that is, to choose the first thing that satisfies some explicit criteria. When searching for a pair of jeans, for example, we might consider only the criteria “tight-fitting” and “under \$30.” In the work realm, it might be a job that is “less than 40 hours/week” and “not in a cubicle” and “includes dental care.” Though their approaches are different, Durkheim and Schwartz agree that some constraint is necessary and desirable.

Yet as Durkheim emphatically argued in *Suicide*, constraint cannot come from the individual; it must be imposed from without. To limit our options is necessary, and Schwartz’s tricks may help us feel less overwhelmed when doing so. But they do not solve the fundamental problem, which is the cultural *source* of desire. To return to Jean Twenge’s research, we are confronted with the fact that our generation “anticipates more at a time when it’s more difficult to attain even the bare minimum. . . . It’s like a cruel joke—we’ve been raised to expect riches, and can barely afford a condo and a crappy health plan” (Twenge 2007: 134). But unrealistic

expectations are part of the American way. To abandon one's wild hopes, as Merton observed, would be to resign oneself to a pathetic life.

Part of the problem, as Tocqueville noticed early on, is that our emphasis on equality is tied to the notion of advancement. "It is the strong egalitarian element in American society," Marco Orrù writes, "coupled with the emphasis on success that fosters anomic imbalance" (Orrù 1990: 234). Equality is linked to what many have called the "myth of the meritocracy." While Durkheim argued that poverty could "protect" against anomie, this is not the case in contemporary America. When one *believes* in the possibility of advancement, poverty no longer protects; indeed, it becomes irrelevant. Even the poorest may experience anomie, since they strive just as much for wealth as other Americans. Only in the United States could a president claim, as George Bush did in 2002, that "the low-income home buyer can have just as nice a house as anybody else!" (quoted in Ferguson 2010).

As Robert Merton observed in 1938, and Thomas Frank confirmed in 2004<sup>113</sup>, all social classes identify with the wealthy, and all want what they possess. As Orrù warns, "Anomie is more likely 'in a society which place a high premium on economic affluence for *all* its members'" (Orrù 1990: 234, citing Merton 1938: 681). Orrù cites Parsons' concept of "universalistic achievement," which fuses equality and upward mobility:

The combination [of universalism] with achievement values . . . places the accent on the valuation of goal-achievement and of instrumental actions leading to such goal achievement" (Parsons 1951: 183, cited in Orrù 1990: 235; see also LaCapra 1972)

To be sure, the combination of universalism and achievement is nothing new. As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *The Birth of Tragedy* (published several years before Durkheim's dissertation):

---

<sup>113</sup> Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* argues that the working class largely vote for Republicans (i.e., against their class interests) because they identify with the wealthy and aspire to be in their place one day.



People should not be surprised when the fruits of this optimism ripen, when a society that has been thoroughly leavened with this kind of culture, right down to the lowest levels, gradually starts trembling in an extravagant turmoil of desires, when the belief in earthly happiness for everyone, when faith in the possibility of such a universal knowledge culture gradually changes into the threatening demand for such an Alexandrian earthly happiness, into the invocation of a Euripidean *deus ex machina!* (1872/1999: 58)

But no society has embraced this “extravagant turmoil” as much as our own. As we mentioned above, magazines like *Fast Company* actually *praise* the notion of a generation in flux. “The next decade or two will be defined more by fluidity than by any new, settled paradigm,” Robert Safian (2012) notes. “If there is a pattern to all this, it is that there is no pattern. The most valuable insight is that we are, in a critical sense, in a time of chaos.” He proceeds to interview various members of Generation Flux, admiring their penchant for instability:

DJ Patil is a GenFluxer. He has worked in academia, in government, in big public companies, and in startups; he is a technologist and a businessman; a teacher and a diplomat. He is none of those things and all of them, and who knows what he will be or do next? Certainly not him. “That doesn’t bother me,” he says. “I’ll find something” (Safian 2012).

To expect stability from traditional society, Safian argues, “is a trap.” Instead, we must bend to the cosmic winds, learning not just to accept, but to welcome insecurity: “What defines GenFlux is a mind-set that embraces instability, that tolerates—and even enjoys—recalibrating careers, business models, and assumptions. We’re experiencing “constant pressure to learn new things and adapt to new situations, and [there’s] no guarantee that you’ll stay in a single industry,” Safian writes. “It can be daunting. It can be exhausting. It can also be exhilarating.”

Can it? Perhaps. But whether such a life is desirable in the long run is another question entirely. Safian glosses over this concern, instead expounding on the pleasures of our chaotic age. “If ambiguity is high and adaptability is required,” he says, “then you simply can’t afford to be sentimental about the past. Future-focus is a signature trait for Generation Flux.” Part of this “past,” which of course Safian fails to mention, is our relationship with family and community.

As psychologist Joshua Coleman observes in his book *When Parents Hurt* (2007), parental estrangement is at an all-time high. Coleman is stunned by the frequency of estrangements in his clinical practice, and estimates that familial estrangements in general have reached unprecedented levels, in large part due to American attitudes toward dependence.

“Nostalgia is a natural human emotion,” Safian tells us, “a survival mechanism that pushes people to avoid risk by applying what we’ve learned and relying on what’s worked before. It’s also about as useful as an appendix right now.” Instead, he says, millennials must learn to be quick on our feet, ready to abandon old ways at a moment’s notice. “The quest for solid rules is pointless, he says, “since we will be constantly rethinking them.” Importantly, Safian takes as his example the shift from agrarian to urbanized society. Although some were anxious about the changes, he notes, the anxiety was uncalled for in retrospect: “From those days of ambiguity emerged a century of tremendous progress.” Whether we have really “progressed” is debatable: as Foucault once said in an interview with Noam Chomsky, the better word is “transformation.” Nonetheless, journalists like Robert Safian extoll the merits of instability, where “anything settled is vulnerable” and anything chaotic is praiseworthy.

In contrast to that view, I submit that our real vulnerability comes from the *refusal to settle*. If that claim sounds overly conservative, I would remind the reader that stability is a fundamental human need; to be constantly uprooted from established habits is a recipe for mental illness.<sup>114</sup> In his chapter on anomic suicide, Durkheim rightly criticizes “these theories that celebrate the benefits of instability” (1897/2006: 282). Social change is necessary, to be sure, but “the doctrine of progress despite all and as fast as possible” (1897/2006: 282) is simply not practical.

---

<sup>114</sup> On this point, see Liah Greenfeld’s *Mind, Modernity, Madness* (2013).

The thirst for progress is perhaps most severe in the United States due to its tremendous wealth. To be sure, poverty rates are still quite high—15 percent as of 2012, and 22 percent for children—but that does not preclude high aspirations (Pew Research Center 2014a). For no matter our income, we have as our role models some of the wealthiest people in the world; this places our desires rather higher than those of other nations. Indeed, the wealth gap in the United States, among the worst in the world (Fisher 2011), may explain the unrealistic aspirations of most Americans. The larger the gap, we may posit, the more likely a country is to experience anomie.<sup>115</sup> (Of course, other factors, like our cultural emphasis on advancement, may play a more important role.) Yet wealth is not only pernicious for its own sake (as an enabler of desire), nor even for its symbolic role in upward mobility. It is also, as Durkheim warns, linked to the myth of independence:

Wealth . . . by the powers that it confers, gives us the illusion that we depend only on ourselves. By lessening the resistance that things put in our way, it persuades us that they can be constantly overcome. And, the less one feels limited, the more intolerable any limitation becomes” (1897/2006: 278).

“By exalting the individual,” Durkheim continues, wealth “constantly risks awakening the spirit of rebellion that is the very fount of immorality” (1897/2006: 278.). This Mertonian point—in which anomie produces deviant behavior—has been confirmed by recent research. A series of seven studies, entitled “Higher social class predicts increased unethical behavior,” finds that the affluent are more likely to “break the law while driving,” “exhibit unethical decision-making tendencies,” “take valued goods from others,” “lie in a negotiation,” “cheat to increase their

---

<sup>115</sup> Measuring anomie is notoriously difficult, and I do not attempt to do so here. This is merely an educated guess on my part; further research is needed to evaluate this point. Trautmann et al. (2013) do find that the deviant behavior associated with affluence (which we discuss below) is *higher* in countries with a greater wealth gap; this seems to provide preliminary support for my claim. But this only shows that the wealth gap makes the *wealthy* more anomic; it does not say whether the same is true for the *poor*. (I suspect that it is.)

chances of winning a prize,” and “endorse unethical behavior at work” (Piff et al. 2012). The article’s analysis reveals a clear relationship between independence and anomie:

Upper-class individuals’ *relative independence from others* and increased privacy in their professions *may provide fewer structural constraints* and decreased perceptions of risk associated with committing unethical acts. The availability of resources to deal with the downstream costs of unethical behavior may increase the likelihood of such acts among the upper class. In addition, *independent self-construals* among the upper class may shape feelings of *entitlement and inattention to the consequences of one’s actions on others*. A reduced concern for others’ evaluations and *increased goal-focus* could further instigate unethical tendencies among upper-class individuals. Together, these factors may give rise to a set of culturally shared norms among upper-class individuals that facilitates unethical behavior (Piff et al. 2012, emphasis added).

This quotation is astounding, and deserves a close reading. Wealth, the authors argue, encourages “relative independence from others,” which “may provide fewer structural constraints.” Here Piff and his colleagues establish a clear relationship between integration and regulation (that is, between egoism and anomie). Furthermore, independence creates “inattention to the consequences one’s actions on others,” so mutual responsibility is lost. Finally, these individuals experience “increased goal-focus,” with a concomitant neglect of socially approved means. This is a *classic description of anomie!*<sup>116</sup>

The authors go on to make an observation: wealthy individuals, because they are often trained in corporate finance, are more likely to see “self-interest maximization”<sup>117</sup> as their ultimate goal. This approach “may lead people to view greed as positive and beneficial”—indeed, they may “even moralize positive beliefs about greed” (Piff et al. 2012). Summarizing from this study and from the discussion above, I conclude that wealth produces anomie for several reasons:

---

<sup>116</sup> Fortunately, the authors do take note of this connection; they quote Durkheim’s *Suicide*: “From the top to the bottom of the ladder, greed is aroused” (1897/2006: 281). But unfortunately, the authors go on to misinterpret Durkheim’s work: “Although greed may indeed be a motivation all people have felt at points in their lives, we argue that greed motives are not equally prevalent across all social strata” (Piff et al. 2011). Indeed, as the quotes above demonstrate, Durkheim was well aware of this fact!

<sup>117</sup> This term is similar to Merton’s concept of “technical expediency.”

- (1) It provides increased resources to satisfy desire (expanding the realm of possibility),
- (2) It encourages independence, which creates egoism and a lack of moral constraint,
- (3) It “persuades us that [limitations] can be constantly overcome”<sup>118</sup>
- (4) It fosters a culture of greed (e.g., by training officials in economics, which emphasizes the “bottom line”).

The first is a matter of material conditions (which of course influence the imagination), the second is a matter of social solidarity, the third is a matter of habit-formation, and the fourth is a cultural consideration. This list is not, of course, exhaustive, but it gives us some idea of the anomie that wealthy individuals experience. As Trautmann et al. (2013) note, these results are particularly dramatic compared to other countries. But this should come as no surprise, since the culture of greed among the American elite is so pervasive (Ferguson 2010). It was, many have argued, the cause of the 2008 financial collapse (Piff et al. 2012; Ferguson 2010). Indeed, it would not be stretching things too far to say that anomie played a key role in the Great Recession.

Wealth is, as Merton points out, only one of the ideals for which Americans strive. Because it is easily quantifiable, and allows for conspicuous consumption, it is perhaps the most effective status symbol. Yet status is a much more complicated matter; it includes not only financial resources but all of the “primary goods” (to borrow John Rawls’ phrase) that one might desire. These include rights, opportunities, and prestigious positions. The struggle for status—which may *exceed* class a symbol of advancement—produces tremendous competition. This is not a new observation, of course: Tocqueville and Weber both observed it, but Alain de Botton’s (2004) research suggests that it is still true today. That Americans are competitive is such an obvious point as to be almost banal. But what is the origin of this competition, and what is its consequence?

---

<sup>118</sup> Durkheim 1897/2006: 278.

The answer to both of these questions is the same. Competition is the inevitable result of *status anxiety*, in which the individual's worth is measured by prestige. In a society with poor integration, individuals do not “feel solidary with a collective existence”<sup>119</sup>—their egoism forces them to turn inward to gain a sense of identity. Individuals find that they must *prove* their worth, not only to others but also to themselves.<sup>120</sup> And in the United States, there is no better measure of worth than *success*; specifically, success over others (Sombart 1906). It is fairly obvious that not everyone can triumph over others; in fact, only a small minority can do so. Nor can everyone have access to status-conferring goods, for these are quite scarce. Egoism leads to insecurity, which leads to competition as a means of securing self-worth.

But competition also *produces* egoism, since the conflict between individuals prevents fraternal bonds: “It is not good for a man to live, so to speak, on a war footing among his immediate companions. The feelings of general hostility and mutual distrust that result, as well as the tensions necessarily caused, become distressing conditions when they are endemic” (1897/2006: xliii). The distress of egoism, moreover, quickly becomes anomic distress. When cohesion is successful, individuals “come together . . . to associate with one another and not feel isolated in the midst of their adversaries.” And “in the end,” Durkheim tells us, they “lead the same moral life together” (1897/2006: xliv). Shared interests lead to shared constraints, but in a highly competitive environment like the United States, this can never happen. Instead, individuals forgo socially approved means and focus only on their own success (Merton 1938).

The above paragraphs have been highly theoretical; let's look at some recent data. In 2011, Sarah Konrath and her colleagues at the University of Michigan conducted a meta-analysis

---

<sup>119</sup>From *Suicide*, cited in Nisbet 1965: 66.

<sup>120</sup> On this point, see the concept of “salvation anxiety” in Weber 1905/2005. The Calvinists, who struggled to prove they were the “elect” rather than the “damned,” may have been the precursor to our modern status anxiety. But as Erich Fromm observes, the obsession with fame—an obvious status symbol—may have emerged as early as the Renaissance (Fromm 1941/1966: 66).

of empathy among college students. The results are startling. The analysis, which included a whopping 72 samples from American colleges, found that “college kids today are about 40 percent lower in empathy than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago,” with the *biggest drop* occurring after the year 2000. Though the authors were primarily concerned with media imagery (arguing that portrayals of violence lead to poor empathy), they also felt that “exposure to an increasingly hyper competitive social environment” might be responsible (Mozes 2011).

Though the evidence is anecdotal, students at highly competitive institutions like the University of Chicago have been known to rip out pages from library books so that other students cannot access the information. One Ivy League student who visited Oberlin College was reportedly shocked to discover that Oberlin has a student writing center. The notion that students would *willingly* help each other with papers was a threat to the competitive spirit. Generation Me, indeed.

In fact, a study published last year by Jean Twenge provides even more confirmation of her GenMe analysis. “In nationally representative samples of high school and college students,” Twenge notes,

values have shifted toward extrinsic (money, fame, and image) concerns and away from intrinsic (community, affiliation) concerns. These trends have mostly negative consequences, such as lower empathy, less concern for others, and less civic engagement (e.g., interest in social issues, government, and politics) (Twenge 2013).

Such trends continued even during the 2007 financial crisis (Park et al. 2014), though not to the extent Durkheim would have predicted. Although “wanting a job making lots of money continued to increase” during the recession, “the increase in the importance of money leveled off, and the increase in desiring to own expensive material items reversed” (Park et al. 2014). If competition is a source of anomie (as I have argued), we would expect financial difficulties to

have *strengthened* the competitive drive.<sup>121</sup> Yet that does not seem to be the case: longitudinal data from 1976 to 2010 finds that “collectivism was high and individualism was low during times of economic deprivation” (Park et al. 2014.).

Even so, it is clear over the long term that competition is increasing in the United States, especially among young Americans. Indeed, as Sarah Konrath observes, “Many people see the current group of college students . . . as one of the most self-centered, narcissistic, competitive, confident and individualistic in recent history” (cited in Mozes 2011).

We live, as I have endeavored to show, in an anomic nation. Our historic emphasis on freedom and equality, coupled with endless striving, self-advancement, individualism, wealth, competition, and the glorification of instability, have produced tremendous consequences. We have seen how this plays out in the realm of employment, friendships, romance, and education, to name just a few. Throughout this section, we have largely focused on the cultural causes of anomie and their damaging social effects. But as Stjepan Meštrović emphatically reminds us, anomie is not only harmful to society; it is “painful to the individual experiencing it *and it hurts*.” If this anomie is not properly addressed, it “eventually produce[s] physical, organismic pain” (Meštrović 1987: 571, emphasis added)<sup>122</sup>. In the next section, we will explore the manifestations of anomie in the United States, delving into some of our most pressing social problems, including anxiety, depression, school shootings, and solider suicide.

---

<sup>121</sup> This is based on Durkheim’s point that a sudden change in social state produces dysregulation.

<sup>122</sup> As evidence for this claim, consider that Durkheim included a section on the psychological effects of anomie, egoism, and altruism in *Suicide*. Throughout his works, Durkheim uses the following words to describe anomie (this list is not exhaustive): anxiety, weariness, disenchantment, unease, agitation, discontent, and groping.



## Mental Health

“No living person can be happy or even live at all unless his needs are sufficiently well adjusted to his means,” Durkheim writes:

In other words, if he demands more than can be provided for him, or even something other than can be provided, he will be constantly irritated and unable to function without suffering. And an action that cannot be accomplished without suffering tends not to be repeated. Aptitudes that are not satisfied atrophy and, since the aptitude for life is only the result of all the rest, it is bound to weaken if the others also slacken” (1897/2006: 269).

This quotation appears in a chapter on anomic suicide in Europe, but it might as well have been written in today’s *New York Times*. As Liah Greenfeld observes, “The problem of depression . . . [is] unquestionably an American problem—a problem of a particular society. My impressionistic conclusion that this was a colossal social problem affecting fearsomely large numbers of people was constantly confirmed by statistics” (Greenfeld 2013: 10).

Greenfeld is right: rates of depression and anxiety have been skyrocketing. “The World Health Organization estimates that depression will impose the second-biggest health burden globally by 2020 . . . . Depression will impose a bigger burden than heart disease, arthritis, and many forms of cancer on both individuals and society in less than a decade” (Williams & Penman 2011: 17). And anxiety is just as bad: “Depression may be exacting a staggering toll, but its cousin—chronic anxiety—is becoming disturbingly common too, with *average* levels of anxiety in children and young people now at a point that would have been judged to be ‘clinical’ in the 1950s” (Williams & Penman 2011: 17).

As Jean Twenge notes in *Generation Me*, major depression has increased *tenfold* in the past century. Only 1–2% of people born before 1915 in the U.S. had a major depressive episode; that number is 15–20% today. Indeed, “some studies put the figure closer to 50%” (Twenge 2007: 105). This is absurd, Twenge writes, given that the former cohort lived through the Great

Depression and two world wars. But should we really be worried? Perhaps, as some researchers claim, we are merely seeing a problem of overdiagnosis. In our individualistic culture, patients come to therapy demanding that their suffering be legitimized, and therapists are all too willing to comply. This is indeed a problem: Peter Stearns notes that as many as 25% of cases of “depression” are just misdiagnosed sadness (Stearns 2012: 25). But as Twenge explains: “Researchers have concluded that the change is too large and too consistent across studies to be explained solely by a reporting bias. In addition, these studies use a fairly strict definition, counting only depression severe enough to warrant medication or long-term therapy. If more mild depression were included, the vast majority of young people would raise their hands in recognition” (Twenge 2007: 105).

The problem is particularly concerning given the traditional American emphasis on happiness. Beginning as early as the 1920s, and expanding in the 1950s, Americans felt not only the *desire* but the *pressure* to be happy. Happiness became tied up with success; it was the most obvious outward display of prosperity. “Individuals who were not happy,” historian Peter Stearns writes, “had only themselves to blame” (Stearns 2012: 45). In theory, the happiness norm should have led to *underreporting* of depression, since sadness was shameful and a sign of failure. That rates of depression have continued to increase, *even as the demand for happiness has grown*, is truly startling. Stearns concludes: “Even if American memories often played false—suggesting less a really disproportionate American disease problem than a particular national self-perception issue—the fact that so many people were willing to make the claim, in a happiness culture, was in itself very revealing” (Stearns 2012: 24)

This is a crisis, and it is shocking that sociologists have not been more vocal. Psychologists have certainly had their say, but since psychology is (primarily) a study of the

human brain, how could it possibly explain the rise in depression and anxiety, except to say that American brains are suddenly prone (as never before) to a whole host of mental illnesses?

The discourse is even worse among neuroscientists, who love to discuss the “neuroatypical” qualities of a depressive brain, but cannot explain where depression comes from. While they acknowledge “environmental” factors (i.e., culture, parenting, life experiences...), many seem to think depression is merely “triggered” by these factors, while the root cause is genetics. The claim is laughable given that *neuroscientists themselves* believe in neuroplasticity—the notion that the brain changes due to life experiences. If this is so (and it is), the idea that depression is biological because “we can see it in the brain” is absurd.

I do not wish to be overly critical of psychology or neuroscience, both of which acknowledge (though sometimes downplay) the role of social factors. But it is simply astounding that the National Institutes of Health spends tens of millions each year on depression treatment, with little attention given to its cause. As Liah Greenfeld writes in her brilliant work, *Mind, Madness, Modernity*,

For those who believe that mental disease is essentially a reflection of physical, biological disorder, such declarations [about rising rates of illness]—and the consistent statistical findings on which they are based—remain questionable, because what they logically imply (an ongoing and environmentally unprovoked change of the physical human nature itself) is impossible and, therefore, cannot be true. What this means is that the persistence of the belief in the biological causation of all mental disease prevents serious (i.e., among other things, massively funded) consideration of alternative, nonbiological explanations of mental illnesses, and makes impossible both their cure and formation of policies that could arrest the rise in their rates (Greenfeld 2013: 11).

American approaches to depression and anxiety are individualistic *not because the individual approach is best*, but because we live in an individualistic culture. We must remember that funding for projects is largely contingent on one’s ability to cater to dominant values—research is only “useful” or “valuable” insofar as Americans think it so. It is no accident that in

this country, “pop psychology” books are bestsellers, while sociology books are rarely read except by sociologists. Yet when it comes to mental health, this is a tremendous obstacle. Not every problem can be reduced to the individual; some problems are social and *must* be seen in that light. So while many treatments of anxiety and depression are helpful—meditation, exercise, cognitive behavioral therapy, etc.—they are merely a palliative solution. Prescribing them is a bit like scooping water from a gushing faucet: the floor may be a bit less wet, but nothing is stopping more water from spilling out.

This is all well and good, critics will say, but if depression and anxiety are social, *how* are they social? Or more germane to this thesis, how can anomie explain them?

New research is beginning to shed light on this question. Depression, it turns out, may be related to an unwillingness to give up on one’s goals; the more tightly one clings to quixotic desire, the more depressed s/he will be. The historian Peter Stearns writes:

In the early 21st century psychologist Randolph Nesse advanced an intriguing explanation especially for the United States, reminiscent of de Tocqueville’s comments on American happiness frustrations in the mid-19th century: Americans are particularly eager to set ambitious personal goals but unusually unwilling to admit they’re not going to reach the goals—in the culturally encouraged quest for happiness, ‘persistence is part of the American way of life.’ Hence, the unusual wave of depression (Stearns 2012: 24).

A 2009 study, cited in the Economist<sup>123</sup>, confirms Nesse’s hypothesis. Some degree of depression, the study notes, serves an adaptive purpose: it encourages us to drop unrealistic goals. Mild depression “evolved . . . as a defense to cope with situations in which a person’s behavior is likely to result in wasted efforts, danger, loss, or damage to the body (Keller & Nesse, 2006; Nesse, 2000)” (Wrosch & Miller 2009: 1181). These emotions are crucial since “disengagement from unattainable goals” allows for “the conservation of resources” (Wrosch & Miller 2009: 1181).

---

<sup>123</sup> “Mild and Bitter” (2009). *The Economist*. <http://www.economist.com/node/13899022>

This is not merely a fringe theory. Indeed, the authors write, “several different theoretic frameworks converge upon the idea” that depression discourages quixotic thinking. Studies confirm that depression “is associated with more realistic perceptions of the environment,” and allows for “the withdrawal of effort” (Wrosch & Miller 2009: 1182).

The study itself investigates the long-term relationship between depression and disengagement from goals. The authors conclude: “To the extent that they experienced high levels of depressive symptoms at baseline, participants became better at disengaging from unattainable goals over the next year” (Wrosch & Miller 2009: 1185). But just as depression allows detachment from unreasonable goals, so too do unreasonable goals *worsen* depression.

American culture, with its focus on endless self-advancement, is constantly fueling our desires; we are told *never* to give up on our goals!<sup>124</sup> “Americans are bombarded on all sides,” Merton reminds us, “by precepts which affirm the right, or, often, the duty of retaining the goal even in the face of repeated frustrations” (Merton 1938: 191). If depression is supposed to protect us against unreasonable goals, we have been inoculated against its effects.<sup>125</sup> We experience the misery of depression, with all its symptoms—low energy, loss of motivation—but *without* the benefits. We find ourselves in a horrible cycle: depression weakens our *ability* to achieve goals, but not our *desire* to do so. The goals we have set for ourselves do not disappear, but loom over us from ever more daunting heights, and we fall further and further into melancholy.

The study we discussed above has an odd corollary: if depression makes us more pragmatic—less likely to waste energy on fruitless tasks—perhaps some depression is *desirable*. Indeed, Durkheim himself held this view: “Melancholy is morbid only when it occupies too

---

<sup>124</sup> Sombart 1906: 13; Merton 1938

<sup>125</sup> This is a well-known psychological phenomenon called “attitude inoculation.”

much place in life; but it is equally morbid for it to be wholly excluded from life” (cited in Nisbet 1974: 266). Yet Americans have done just that. If happiness is a sign of success, sadness is an indicator of failure and must be exterminated.

The happiness norm reached new heights of institutional legitimacy last year when the American Psychiatric Association released the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), a gold standard for psychiatric diagnoses. Previous editions of the DSM included a “bereavement exclusion,” which meant that “clinicians were advised to refrain from diagnosing major depression in individuals within the first two months following the death of a loved one.” That exception has been removed. The DSM-5 now advises that psychologists carefully scrutinize their patients’ grief in case it appears indicative of a mental disorder.<sup>126</sup> The implication is clear: *get better quick! Return to your happy, stable self or you’ll be diagnosed with depression.*

The removal of the bereavement exclusion, far from a radical decision, has been several centuries in the making. It is the culmination of an obsession with happiness that began as early as the Protestant Reformation, and probably earlier. Peter Stearns writes: “In contrast to centuries in which people had been urged to humility before God, amid considerable valuation of a slightly melancholic personal presentation, a new chorus of advice urged not only the validity but the social importance of cheerfulness” (Stearns 2012: 41).

No doubt the APA made its decision with good intentions—hoping to “cure” individuals of their grief. But their approach may end up turning legitimate sadness into depression. Happiness, like wealth and prestige, is a socially imposed goal; to feel that one is failing to achieve it—to be told so *by a professional*—is a recipe for melancholy. In addition, the dotting concern of psychologists to what is (by all accounts) a normal emotion may teach us

---

<sup>126</sup> “Major Depressive Disorder and the ‘Bereavement Exclusion.’” (2013). American Psychiatric Publishing.

to lower our grief threshold; we may become incapable of experiencing the standard range of human experience.

Depression, as I have hoped to show, is merely a keen form of the anomie Durkheim described. It is the painful gap between desires and the ability to fulfill them. In other cultures (especially those influenced by Buddhism), depression is less of a problem—tremendous value is placed on “detachment,” accepting that what we want may never come to fruition. Even in non-Buddhist cultures, the admonition to *produce and then seek out* one’s desires is absent. Think about that for a moment: in the United States, we tell each other to *produce more desires* than we would otherwise have, and then to follow those desires wherever they lead. When our struggles inevitably fail, and we experience depression, we do not give up on our goals. Instead, we shame ourselves for not following the happiness norm—that is, we add happiness to our list of goals. Our anomic struggle for goal-attainment becomes burdened by our anomic struggle for joy, and the two reinforce one another. This is such an obvious formula for disaster that it is no wonder the United States has the highest rate of depression in the world.

#### **ANXIETY:**

Depression and anxiety are twin poisons, their histories hopelessly entangled. As we saw above, depression is the result of public failure—the inability to achieve socially valued goals. But it is *anxiety*—and status anxiety in particular—that drives us to complete those goals (de Botton 2004). Anxiety teaches us to fear the consequences of failure, and to shame ourselves when we do fail (not only for the act of failure, but for the unacceptable sadness that comes with it). So it is not surprising that, as depression continues to rise, status anxiety rises with it.

“Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom,” Kierkegaard wrote. As Americans continue to advance—achieving unprecedented levels of control over their lives—that freedom will only grow more dizzying. This is the paradox of progress: the more power we have, the higher our expectations, and the less acceptable our failure. Jean Twenge puts the problem clearly:

In many ways, there’s no better time to be alive than right now. Think of all the advantages we have that earlier generations did not: television, cell phones, better medical care, computers, more education, less physical labor, the freedom to make our own choices, the ability to move to a more desirable city. These last two, however, begin to hint at the underlying problem. Our growing tendency to put the self first leads to unparalleled freedom, but it also creates an enormous amount of pressure on us to stand alone. This is the downside of the focus on the self—when we are fiercely independent and self-sufficient, our disappointments loom large because we have nothing else to focus on. But it’s not just us: Generation Me has been taught to expect more out of life at the very time when good jobs and nice houses are increasingly difficult to obtain. All too often, the result is crippling anxiety and crushing depression (Twenge 2007: 109).

Twenge has it exactly right: we have been taught to expect *more*—that is, to increase our own desires—even as restraint becomes more and more imperative.<sup>127</sup> We are setting ourselves up for inevitable failure, but given the demands of individualism, that failure is also *our fault alone*.

What is anomie if not the suffering of unbridled ambition? These frustrations of desire, coupled with the belief that we are somehow personally to blame, produce inevitable anxiety. We are ordered to set impractical goals, saddened by our failures, and then shamed not only for the failures but also—in our happiness culture—for our own sadness! How could such an equation *not* destroy the mental health of our nation?

Granted, there is something noble in aiming high, even if the possibility of success is slim.<sup>128</sup> No matter what happens to us in the end, the act of struggling for our dreams can

---

<sup>127</sup> Remarkably, this observation parallels almost word-for-word what Durkheim wrote in *Suicide*: “The state of disorganization, or *anomie*, is thus reinforced by the fact that passions are less disciplined at the very time when they need a stronger discipline” (1897/2006: 277).

<sup>128</sup> A favorite American adage goes: “Shoot for the moon—even if you miss, you’ll land among the stars.”



provide a sense of movement and empowerment. “Can it be said that action is pleasant in itself?” Durkheim asks. Surely:

But then one must first of all be blind enough not to realize its futility. Then, for this pleasure to be felt and to moderate and partly conceal the painful anxiety that accompanies it, this endless movement must at the very least always be accomplished at one’s ease and without anything impeding it. As soon as it is disrupted, only the anxiety remains, with all the accompanying discomforts. And it would be a miracle if no insuperable obstacle were ever to arise. In such conditions, one clings to life only by a very slender thread and one that can, at any moment, be broken (1897/2006: 271).

Clearly, there is there is something very dangerous about our refusal to settle. Yet even social scientists seem reluctant to place the blame on freedom. As Twenge herself claims, “There is nothing wrong with individual freedom, of course” (2007: 115). Where is this *of course* coming from? After an entire chapter dedicated to the price of individualism—*anxiety, depression, loneliness*—Twenge ends by asserting that there is “nothing wrong” with freedom, and that this is somehow obvious. Clearly there is something wrong with freedom, as her own research shows. True, freedom can be healthy when it is balanced by social constraint. But without proper reins, it gives way to egoism and anomie.

These problems, Durkheim writes, will be not be mitigated by external forces. It is not with drugs that we will solve depression and anxiety, but with moral constraints:

A regulatory force must play the same role for non-physical needs as the organism does for physical ones; which means that this force can only be moral. It was the awakening of conscience that disrupted the state of equilibrium in which the animal slumbered, so only conscience can supply the means to re-establish it. Material constraints would be ineffective here: *it is not with physico-chemical forces that one can change the heart of man*. To the extent that appetites are not automatically contained by physiological mechanisms, they can only be halted by a boundary that they recognize as just (1897/2006: 272, emphasis added).

If there is something disturbing about this notion—that we must subject our desires to constraint—it is proof that the opposite norm holds. We are so afraid of even the slightest imposition on our will that we are quick to label such a demand totalitarian (or worse, *socialist*).

But Durkheim does not ask that we constrain all of our desires; only that desire is commensurate with the ability to satisfy it:

This *relative limitation* and the moderation that results are what make men content with their lot, while at the same time giving them moderate encouragement to improve it; and it is this average contentment that gives rise to feelings of calm, active happiness, to the pleasure at being and living which, for societies as for individuals, is a sign of health (1897/2006: 274, emphasis added).

I do not think it dramatic to say that this “sign of health” is missing in American culture.

Peter Stearns notes that rates of happiness in the United States have not improved *in fifty years*.

To be fair, this is true of most Western countries: “Within the most modern societies themselves, happiness levels have not significantly improved over the past fifty years, despite the fact that the gains of modernity, though not new, have accelerated. Denmark, for reasons no one is sure of, is the lone exception” (Stearns 2012: 16). But no other country has comparable levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicide. If anomie is not an *exclusively* American problem, it is a remarkably American one.

## CONCLUSIONS:

We have chosen to devote the most time to depression and anxiety, since these are ills that nearly every American experiences. But as Peter Stearns warns, “It’s vital to remember . . . that depression is only the most recent and obvious manifestation of modernity’s promotion of a psychological backlash” (Stearns 2012: 24). Other symptoms include schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (Greenfeld 2013), as well as older symptoms like mass hysteria (Watters 2011; Stearns 2012). Though depression and anxiety are crucial topics—and Durkheim mentioned both of them in connection to anomie—they only scratch the surface of the anomic crisis.

As Ethan Watters explains in his brilliant work *Crazy Like Us*, societies typically draw from a “symptom pool” of recognized illnesses. This radical claim deserves some elaboration: Watters writes that individual disorders are often manifestations of a larger social ill. The vague social unease we feel during, say, the modernization process (Stearns 2012: 24) expresses itself in different forms depending on particular social circumstances.<sup>129</sup>

Though the effort is subconscious, we each strive to present our social pain in socially recognized ways. That women suffered from hysterical paralysis in the 1800s may strike us as bizarre—and even suspect—but this is simply a sign that the symptom pool has changed. Doctors are quick to tell us that hysteria is not a “real” disease; hysteria has no genetic explanation. But as the sociologist W. I. Thomas famously argued, what we take to be real is real in its consequences. Hysteria was common at the time because it was a legitimate avenue for women to express discomfort with their social position.

What I am getting at is that depression and anxiety may serve the same purpose today. Certainly, the two are more complicated—there is much evidence for biological as well as environmental causes—but the *prevalence* of these phenomena indicates that they are part of the symptom pool. Indeed, there is no stronger evidence that this is the case than the fact that both are over-diagnosed. Nearly everyone who seeks out a therapist will be diagnosed with an anxiety or mood disorder, if they so desire. Diagnosis is the cultural means by which we validate one another’s pain; not to diagnose would be to deny one’s lived experience.

As I have illustrated, anomie is a social problem whose individual expression varies. The anomic condition produces symptoms as diverse as anxiety, weariness, disenchantment,

---

<sup>129</sup> Recall Dennis Wrong’s phrase: Our psychologies, “far from being fixed dispositions to behave in a particular way, are utterly subject to social channeling and transformation and *could not even reveal themselves in behavior without social molding* any more than our vocal chords can produce articulate speech if we have not learned a language. To psychoanalysis man is indeed a social animal; his social nature is profoundly reflected in his bodily structure” (Wrong 1961: 192, emphasis added).

unease, agitation, discontent, and groping. We have already shown how anomie causes depression and anxiety; I would like to go further and suggest that anomie *could* cause many other symptoms, depending on cultural factors. Indeed, anomie could probably cause *any* symptom—restless limbs, uncontrollable screaming, haunting by one’s ancestors—as long as these are part of the symptom pool.

While Durkheim explicitly tied anomie to mental health<sup>130</sup>, he surely recognized the potential for cultural variation. Depression and anxiety may be good measures of anomie in the United States, but not in other countries.<sup>131</sup> But because they are so prevalent here, and serve as legitimate expressions of social unease, they may help us to track changes in the anomic current.

## **Soldier Suicide**

The Pentagon is terrified, and understandably so: rates of suicide in the U.S. military have been skyrocketing, and no one seems to have an explanation. From 2004 to 2008, the army suicide rate increased 80 percent. Though the army suicide rate has historically been lower than that of the general population, it *surpassed* the general suicide rate in 2005 and remains significantly higher. Perhaps most troubling at all, more soldiers now die from suicide than from war casualties—i.e., suicide is the leading cause of death in American soldiers (Lineberry & O’Connor 2012: 871–72). What is going on?

The traditional explanation is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The trauma of war, psychologists argue, is troubling soldiers to such an extent that they commit suicide. But this

---

<sup>130</sup> Steven Lukes explains: “‘Health’ for man in society is a state where ‘a regulative force’ plays ‘the same role for moral needs which the organism plays for physical needs’” (Lukes 1977: 83).

<sup>131</sup> For example, Watters notes that depression (as we conceive it) did not even exist in some countries until American therapists introduced it. Indeed, Watters’ thesis is that as our notions of mental health are exported abroad, we risk sharing our symptom pool with other nations. Hence the high rates of schizophrenia, depression, PTSD, and anorexia in countries that had never experienced those problems before.

explanation makes little sense: why would PTSD rates have worsened so much in the past decade? Are our diagnoses improving? Perhaps. In fact, “Mental health rates have risen 65% in the military since 2000, with 936,000 troops diagnosed with at least one mental health issue in that time” (Zoroya 2012). As more funding goes to mental health screening, it is no surprise that that reports of mental illness have risen significantly.

But does PTSD actually cause suicide? A 2013 study rejects that claim: “Only nine of the 83 people who committed suicide—about 10%—had been diagnosed with PTSD or reported experiencing symptoms of PTSD.”<sup>132</sup> Even more startling, combat seems to have no relation to suicide risk! “None of the deployment-related factors (combat experience, cumulative days deployed, or number of deployments) were associated with increased suicide risk in any of the models” (LeardMann et al. 2013).

If Cynthia LeardMann and her colleagues are correct, suicide has essentially nothing to do with war trauma. There appears to be *no correlation* between combat experience and suicide risk. But surely many of the soldiers who committed suicide had seen war, right? In fact, that assumption is false. According to data from the Defense Department, “Nearly 85 percent of military members who took their lives had *no direct combat history*” (Childress 2012, emphasis added). The author clarifies: “They may have been deployed by not seen action.” In a June 2012 speech, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta explained, “We’re dealing with broader societal issues. Substance abuse, financial distress and relationship problems – the risk factors for suicide – also reflect problems . . . that will endure beyond war” (cited in Childress 2012).

---

<sup>132</sup> Christensen 2013, citing LeardMann et al. 2013

Panetta's response is unsatisfying: if these problems are indeed increasing, why are they particular to the U.S. military? Surely issues like "financial distress" have plagued soldiers for decades; why this distress has nearly doubled the suicide rate remains a mystery.

A PBS report from late 2012 may provide the answer. The report cites Dr. Elspeth Ritchie, former lead psychiatrist for the U.S. Army:

Ritchie studied the past 10 years of suicides in the Army, and found that bases that suffered the most suicides tended to be those where units were deploying rapidly, she said. It wasn't just because soldiers were seeing more combat, she said. Returning soldiers have less time or energy to connect with new recruits or those who haven't deployed. The elevated pace also leaves commanders with less time to form personal relationships with the soldiers in their charge (Childress 2012).

Several phrases should jump out at once: "deploying rapidly"; "less time or energy to connect"; "elevated pace"; "less time to form personal relationships." The Durkheimian analysis is obvious: soldiers are suffering from a combination of egoism and acute anomie. Poor social cohesion produces egoism, while rapid change produces anomie. Dr. Ritchie essentially admits that egoism is the problem: "The sergeants who in the past took care of the new kids are so busy preparing for the next (deployment), there just isn't the same sense of cohesion that we used to have," she explains. Journalist Sarah Childress carries the argument even further: "That loss of cohesion can leave soldiers who aren't being deployed feeling disconnected and without a sense of purpose — one of the risk factors for suicide — in positions where firearms are in easy reach" (Childress 2012).

Our claim about acute anomie may seem merely speculative, until we consider another 2012 study. "Notably," the authors write, "over one quarter of soldiers who committed suicide had a diagnosis of adjustment disorder" (Bachynski et al. 2012). Adjustment disorder is the psychological term for acute anomie: the difficulty in adapting to a sudden change in social state. Though adjustment disorder may not include a sudden increase in desire—as Durkheim's

conception does—it involves the same painful dysregulation. That *over a quarter* of suicide victims were diagnosed with adjustment disorder is shocking, and an even larger number may have gone undiagnosed.

Given these realities, one might assume that the Pentagon is doing everything it can to restructure the military system: building cohesion, lowering the frequency of deployments, etc. But the reality is (you guessed it!) far more disappointing. The Pentagon has invested \$50 million in suicide research, but that money is going entirely to mental health. “The goal,” Childress writes, is “to make sure every service member is screened for depression or suicidal thoughts.” Other tactics include decreasing access to weapons and leavening the stigma of mental illness (Childress 2012).

It is hard not to become extremely frustrated with the military’s approach. If the *lead psychiatrist* for the military admits that social cohesion is lacking, why not work to increase cohesion? If a prominent study finds that soldiers suffer from adjustment disorder, why not ease the adjustment process?<sup>133</sup> *Structural* changes are required, not psychological ones. As we have shown, PTSD is not the problem. Combat is not the problem. Mental health is not the problem—or at least, not the source of the problem. The problem is the military structure, and especially the high frequency of deployments. The consistent disruption of community, as Childress says, leads soldiers to feel “disconnected and *without a sense of purpose*,” a textbook definition of anomie. And the inability to adjust to new circumstances produces acute anomie.

“To be shot of anomie,” Durkheim remind us, “a group must thus exist or be formed within which can be drawn up the system of rules that is now lacking” (1902/1997: xxxv). Let us

---

<sup>133</sup> Some of these changes have in fact been implemented, according to Craig Bryan, head of the National Center for Veterans’ Studies at the University of Utah. (Personal correspondence.)

draw up that system! Let us provide rules, constraints, communal ties, for our soldiers. If we do not, the suicide rate will only continue to grow.<sup>134</sup>

## School Shootings

Imagine that tomorrow morning, two students from Oberlin College open fire on their classmates, killing several students and professors before shooting themselves. How will the Oberlin community respond? Perhaps more important, how will the media respond? Journalists will begin by asking two questions: (1) Were the students mentally ill? (2) How did the students access weapons? Politicians, in a similar vein, will blame two issues: inadequate mental health screenings and easy access to guns. For several weeks, national debates will include such topics as the Second Amendment, violence in video games, bipolar disorder, and campus security. Mysteriously absent from the discussion will be the *social* cause of school shootings: why more young people are taking their own lives, and the lives of others, on campuses throughout the United States.

Media reactions are all too familiar, and the predictability of their claims is almost comforting. Americans have become accustomed to the notion that all violence can be explained, and explained away, by psychological forces. As long as we keep our weapons and

---

<sup>134</sup> Intriguingly, Durkheim includes soldier suicide in his analysis, though he blames it on altruism. In his introduction to *Suicide*, Richard Sennett writes,

In peace-time these warriors experience a deep yearning for the intimacies of camp life, the thrill of co-operation in combat, even for the disciplinary rules which organize a soldier's every minute. When not making war, this yearning to give oneself to others is frustrated, and likely to drive dedicated professional soldiers to despair. At peace, in civilian life, their lives seem empty of meaning. . . . [Durkheim] now has an example of the danger of too much solidarity, of that desire for group life which can lead a man to despair of his own life (2006: xviii).

Nonetheless, I am quite confident that altruistic suicide is not the problem here. As Raymond Aron observes, "Egoistic suicide tends to be characterized by a state of apathy, an absence of attachment to life; altruistic suicide, by a state of energy and passion" (Aron 1967: 34). As all of my sources attest, American soldiers who commit suicide identify far more with the former. It is the loss of passion, not its excess, which leads them to take their own life.



our minds in check, the reasoning goes, we can prevent these tragic events from happening in our own community.

But that assumption is false. As sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer and his colleagues explain in a recent book on school shootings:

Public and political evaluations of such deeds regularly resort to familiar, ritual explanations in order to downplay losses of control. These initial assessments either define such crimes as semi-supernatural events, or else they pathologize them. What both these variants have in common is that they provide interpretations that exonerate society and create detachment in order to downplay the social causes and to return to “normality” as soon as possible: An “affliction” is a fateful thing about which nothing can be done, and pathological criminals can be isolated from an otherwise supposedly intact society (Heitmeyer et al. 2013: 27).

As an antidote to the American approach, Heitmeyer proposes a “Social Disintegration Theory,” which cites the unraveling of the social fabric—not the proliferation of guns or disorders—as the chief cause of shootings. Though the word “disintegration” evokes egoism, not anomie, it is clear that the latter is Heitmeyer’s concern. In fact, Heitmeyer and his colleagues seem to draw their entire argument from Robert Merton.

“Normality in modern society,” the authors write, “means that a person strongly identifies with the core approved values such as achievement, self-assertion, and upward mobility” (Heitmeyer et al. 2013: 33). Young people, being especially sensitive to social pressures, are heavily burdened by these expectations. And the students most at risk of homicide are those who desire most strongly to fit in—to adhere to unreasonable social demands. As Dennis Wrong observes,

The person who conforms may be even more ‘bothered,’ that is, subject to guilt and neurosis, than the person who violates what are not only society’s norms but his own as well. To Freud, it is precisely the man with the strictest superego, he who has most thoroughly internalized and conformed to the norms of his society, who is most wracked with guilt and anxiety (Wrong 1961: 187).

The irony is that those who most wish to be normal—to be healthy in the Durkheimian sense<sup>135</sup>—are most likely to experience mental illness. Normality is a socially imposed goal, and those who find themselves facing a “goal-means discrepancy” will become abnormal as a result (Heitmeyer et al. 2013: 29). Consider the logic: normality produces abnormality; the struggle for health strengthens the anomic current.

*He seemed like such a nice boy.* This is the response we hear, every time, from startled parents, friends, teachers, and even survivors after a school shooting. But given Wrong’s argument, it should hardly surprise us that school shooters “seem normal.” These are people who struggle harder than anyone to maintain a front of normalcy—to prove to themselves and others that they are successful, well-integrated human beings.

Why *school* shootings? Why haven’t we seen more shootings in the workplace, say, or in public parks? As we already mentioned, young people are particularly susceptible to status pressure. “During this phase [of their lives],” Heitmeyer and his colleagues note, people “cannot predict whether they will one day be successful in their competitive societies. As a result, adolescents sometimes engage in bitter struggles for recognition and status during their school years” (Heitmeyer et al. 2013: 42). As school-related pressures continue to mount—academic success, a flourishing social life—the competitive atmosphere adds fuel to the fire. This tendency toward competition, Werner Sombart observes, often leads to anomie. For it is not enough simply to succeed—one must be better than one’s peers: “We therefore see in every American – beginning with the paperboy – restlessness, yearning, and compulsion to be way and beyond other people” (Sombart 1906: 12–13).

---

<sup>135</sup> That is, having a “healthy moral constitution” (1897/2006: 273).

The success imperative has only strengthened in recent decades. As we saw in a previous section, today's youth face a weakened economy and grim job prospects. Despite their idealism, students know that to succeed will require an *unusual* degree of skill. Even a 4.0 GPA and stellar extracurriculars are not enough. Adolescents “are involved in fierce competition for jobs, status, and prestige, and the risk of ‘losing’ and failure is very high for the individual” (Heitmeyer et al. 2013: 43). We cannot blame culture alone, as Merton would have it, for the anomic conditions our students face. To some degree, goals *really must* increase, yet without the means to achieve those goals, more and more young people will fall victim to anomie.

Another reason schools are anomic breeding grounds is that they serve as a “transition phase” from adolescence to adulthood (Heitmeyer et al. 2013: 41). The shifting nature of identity entails a parallel shift in moral constraint, as students move from the highly controlled parental environment to the comparative freedom of young adulthood. This shift is particularly dramatic in the United States, where the coming-of-age process is fraught with familial tension (Schalet 2011). American youth gain independence only by casting off their primary ties and asserting their individuality.

Most school shootings happen at high schools and colleges, and this is no surprise. Students in these cohorts gain an unprecedented amount of freedom over their own lives—even “helicopter parents” typically recognize the need to relinquish some control to their children (Schalet 2011). But the freedom students gain is not often gradual; it occurs all at once. This sudden change in social state—from a highly constrained to a highly independent environment—is a formula for acute anomie.

These circumstances, combined with the chronic anomie of status pressure and self-advancement, are often intolerable. Many who find themselves in this position commit suicide.

Others become *innovators* (achieving social goals through unapproved means) and commit homicide instead. But most students employ milder tactics—cheating on tests, sabotaging peers, etc. Who, then, is most at risk of suicide and homicide? The answer may indeed be a matter of mental health:

Of course, says Durkheim, these suicidogenic impulses are not embodied in any one individual taken at random. If certain individuals commit suicide, it is in all probability because they were predisposed to it by their psychological makeup, by nervous weakness or neurotic disturbances. But the same social circumstances which create the suicidogenic impulses create the psychological predisposition, because individuals living in modern society have refined and consequently vulnerable sensibilities” (Aron 1967: 34).

In the final calculus, society is to blame either way. No matter how we begin our lives (biologically speaking), social forces influence our psychologies and prompt us toward violence. Blaming mental illness, as so many of us do, merely attacks the symptom and not the cause.

What about video games? It would be impossible to draw a connection between video games and school shootings without setting up a controlled experiment (an asinine prospect). But while it is possible that video games play a role, I would like to make several points. First, most video games are not played by students, but by young men in their thirties.<sup>136</sup> Why are we not seeing more mass shootings among that demographic? Second, video games may be a symptom, rather than a cause, of anomie. “It is no coincidence,” two sociologists write, “that [Columbine shooters] Dylan and Eric spent most of their time on the Internet playing a video game in which the main character has ‘practically unlimited firepower, can run and jump with inhuman stamina and skill’” (Harriford & Thompson 2008: 173–74). To be sure, such games might provide “a new form of anomie” (Harriford & Thompson 2008: 173), but it is more likely that they *reflect*

---

<sup>136</sup> The average age of video game players is thirty. *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry*. Entertainment Software Association (2013), p. 2.

the anomic condition. The “unlimited” features of these video games may satisfy an existing penchant for freedom and radical unrestraint.

Can access to weapons explain the prevalence of school shootings? Let us ask another question: do guns just leap into the hands of students and begin firing? Of course not. Here the old adage that “guns don’t kill people, people do” may have some merit. The proliferation of weapons in this country is significant, and certainly makes it easier for students to commit acts of violence. But it does not explain the *impetus* to do so. If the number of guns were really at issue, why would individual homicide rates be on the *decline* even as access to weapons increases? We now have nearly 300 million guns in this country, one for almost every American. “Is gun violence increasing in the United States?” the philosopher Sam Harris asks. “No. But it certainly seems to be when one recalls recent atrocities in Newtown and Aurora. In fact, the overall rate of violent crime has fallen by 22 percent in the past decade (and 18 percent in the past five years)” (Harris 2013). In fact, Harris notes, mass shootings represent only 0.1 percent of all murders: since 1982, a total of seventy shootings have resulted in 543 deaths (compared to 564,452 other homicides, not all gun-related).

“The correlation between guns and violence in the United States is far from straightforward,” Harris reminds us. Only 30 percent of urban households own a gun, versus 60 percent in the countryside, but most mass shootings occur in cities. Clearly, something other than guns is responsible. Harris does not quite take the next step (sociologically), but he does criticize the mental illness argument: “If we enact laws that allow us to commit young men who merely scare us to mental institutions, we will surely commit thousands upon thousands of young men who would never have harmed anyone.” Harris wonders what might have happened had Adam Lanza—the Newtown shooter—“been more intrusively engaged by society prior to the attack.”

Here Harris (unwittingly) draws a connection between school shootings and the Social Disintegration Theory proposed by Heitmeyer and his colleagues.

“Rather than new laws,” Harris concludes, “I believe we need a general shift in our attitude toward public violence—wherein everyone begins to assume some responsibility for containing it.” That attitude is more radical than even Harris supposes: it would require a dramatic reworking of the social fabric. But such an approach may be the only thing that will save us from anomic homicide.

### III. LOOKING FORWARD: THE SOLUTION TO ANOMIE

“These dispositions [toward anomie],” Durkheim writes, “are so inbred that society has grown to accept them and is accustomed to think them normal. It is everlastingly repeated that it is man’s nature to be eternally dissatisfied, constantly to advance, without relief or rest, toward an indefinite goal” (cited in Meštrović 1987: 573). Such an attitude is not only false, but tremendously dangerous. As we have seen, the anomic current has already wreaked havoc on the mental health and social stability of the United States; untreated, it will only continue to worsen.

Ever the reformer, Durkheim proposed several solutions to the anomic crisis. His most famous solution—the professional group—appears in his Second Preface to *The Division of Labor*, and it is this remedy that Durkheimians typically cite. But as Stjepan Meštrović observes, the *theme* of anomie is repeated in nearly all of Durkheim’s work, though sometimes without the accompanying term (Meštrović 1988a: 836). So the cure for anomie cannot be found only in *Suicide* or *The Division of Labor*. Rather, it is part of Durkheim’s later vision of a tight-knit, humanitarian society.

Below, we will consider three of Durkheim’s proposals: sociology as a master discipline, professional groups, and global individualism. Though this list is not exhaustive, it should give us a clear sense of Durkheim’s struggle against anomie.

#### 1. Sociology as a Guiding Force:

Durkheim recognized what his peers did not: that the solution to the modern crisis could not be found by moving backward. We must not “lead [individuals] back to the old conformism of former times,” Durkheim wrote (1898/1973: 52). As Richard Sennett notes in his introduction to *Suicide*, “Durkheim’s response was not to look backward to a supposedly simpler age; rather,

and rather amazingly, he hoped sociology would become a *master discipline* guiding the public” (Sennett 2006: xxi, emphasis added). What would this discipline look like, and how might it address the problem of anomie?

It must be remembered that at the time of Durkheim’s writing, sociology was an emerging field. While sociologists had existed in the past—Comte and Saint-Simon, among others—they did not identify as such, nor would most of their pupils have understood the term. Durkheim devoted his entire life to legitimizing the field of sociology:

He served on innumerable university committees, advised the Ministry of Education, helped to introduce sociology into school curricula, and in general did yeoman’s work to make sociology the cornerstone of civic education. In these years he came nearest to realizing his youthful ambition of building a scientific sociology that would be applied to the moral reeducation in the Third Republic and at the same time to the development of a secular civic morality (Coser 1971: 148).

Durkheim sought not only to establish sociology as a discipline, but to make it “the cornerstone of civic education.” Why was such a thing necessary? Surely if the collective consciousness held certain moral principles at heart, those were *inherently* right. After all, “If the ultimate criterion of justice becomes the general will, i.e., the will of a free society . . . [then] every institution hallowed by a folk-mind has to be regarded as sacred” (Strauss 1959: 51).

That may have been Rousseau’s view, but it was not Durkheim’s. For Durkheim, the ultimate measure of justice was social flourishing—the well-being of individuals and of the social fabric. Yet how could one know what produced flourishing, Durkheim reasoned, without scientific instruction? Durkheim “wanted to devote himself to a discipline that would contribute to the clarification of the great moral questions that agitated the age,” Coser writes.

But such moral guidance, Durkheim was convinced, could be provided only by men with *a solid scientific training*. Hence he decided that he would dedicate himself to the scientific study of society. What he considered imperative was to construct a scientific sociological system, not as an end in itself, but as a means for the moral direction of society. From this purpose Durkheim never departed (Coser 1971: 145, emphasis added).



This was a *stunning* and highly radical position for Durkheim to take, and it remains so today. As far as I know, only one scholar parallels Durkheim's approach: the philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris. In his 2010 book *The Moral Landscape*, Harris argues that values are simply facts about well-being, and must be determined through scientific inquiry:

Questions about values—about meaning, morality, and life's larger purpose—are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures. Throughout the book I make reference to a hypothetical space that I call "the moral landscape"—a space of real and potential outcomes whose peaks correspond to the heights of potential well-being and whose valleys represent the deepest possible suffering. Different ways of thinking and behaving—different cultural practices, ethical codes, modes of government, etc.—will translate into movements across this landscape and, therefore, into different degrees of human flourishing. I'm not suggesting that we will necessarily discover one right answer to every moral question, or a single best way for human beings to live. Some questions may admit of many answers, each more or less equivalent. However, the existence of multiple peaks on the moral landscape does not make them any less real or worthy of discovery. Nor would it make the difference between being on a peak and being stuck deep in a valley any less clear or consequential (Harris 2010a).

In *The Division of Labor*, Durkheim notes that "among all the elements of civilisation science is the sole one to assume, under certain conditions, a moral character" (1893/1997: 13). Although "science proper" is a highly inaccessible and therefore voluntary pursuit, everyone is required at the very least "not to remain ignorant" (1893/1997: 14). Without some degree of education, individuals cannot create a truly moral society:

The more consciousness remains unenlightened, the more averse it is to change, because it does not perceive rapidly enough either the need for change or the direction change should take. On the contrary, the enlightened consciousness has learnt how to prepare itself beforehand for the way in which it has to adapt. This is why intelligence, guided by science, requires to assume a greater role in the processes of collective life (1893/1997: 14).

When its members do not perceive the need for change, society cannot progress; it remains stagnant and without moral improvement. This is not a relativist position: Durkheim assumes that there are better and worse ways to live in society, and these are informed by science. As Harris writes, morality is a continuum: "Given that consciousness is related to the way the

universe is—it's constrained by the laws of nature in some way—there are going to be right and wrong ways to move along this continuum” (Harris 2010c). Hence Durkheim's view that moral guidance requires “solid scientific training.”

Durkheim hoped that sociology would provide that training. Sociology alone could “translate into the hard methodology of science”<sup>137</sup> principles Durkheim knew were essential for well-being: fellow feeling, mutual responsibility, and collective purpose. In the end, sociology would become for Durkheim “a substitute for socialist doctrine” (Aron 1967: 79).

Sociology, too, could pose a challenge to the anomic crisis. If anomie were a real, empirically verified problem, Durkheim felt, it could no longer be ignored. Durkheim's own work as a sociologist constituted a brave attempt to shift the collective consciousness in the right direction. This would not be an easy feat: “A sign of a social fact is that it cannot be modified by ‘a simple decree of the will,’ so ‘to produce a change,’ a ‘more or less laborious effort is required’ (Durkheim 1895a: 29/70).”<sup>138</sup> But by devoting his life to an exploration of anomie—along with the related theme of egoism—Durkheim knew his efforts would not be in vain.

## **2. Gemeinschaft Within Gesellschaft**<sup>139</sup>

As we mentioned earlier, a common critique of Durkheim is that he is overly conservative—not only does he fear change, critics say, but he wishes to regress to some idealized feudal community. This claim rests on a misunderstanding of Durkheim's work.

While Durkheim's predecessor, Ferdinand Tönnies (1887/2011), lamented the loss of

---

<sup>137</sup> Nisbet 1965: 25

<sup>138</sup> Stedman Jones 2001: 141.

<sup>139</sup> This is the most important of Durkheim's proposals (according to Durkheim himself). He notes in his Second Preface to *The Division of Labor* that he intended to write a whole book on the role of professional groups, but feared he might never have the time. That preface must therefore be seen as a sketch for a much larger book, dedicated entirely to solving the anomic crisis.

traditional society, Durkheim praised the modernization process. The shift from mechanical to organic solidarity<sup>140</sup> was, in Durkheim's view, a necessary and laudable change. To return to the "conformism of former times" would not solve the problem of anomie—indeed, it would only "place an obstacle in the way of the unceasing progress of the division of labor" (Durkheim 1898/1973: 52).

Destroying the *Gesellschaft* society was not only impossible, Durkheim knew, but undesirable. Though *Gesellschaft* sometimes produced unfortunate results—atomization, insufficiency of interaction—it also allowed for the individuation that would create a just, modern society. The solution, then, was to create communities even within the isolation of the modern world: that is, *Gemeinschaft within Gesellschaft*.

In his Second Preface to the *Division of Labor*, Durkheim provides the method: "To be shot of anomie a group must thus exist or be formed within which can be drawn up the system of rules that is now lacking" (1902/1997: xxxv). Since individuals have varying interests, each group must represent only a *portion* of society—it must coalesce around the *unique traits* of the cohort. "Within a political society," Durkheim writes,

as soon as a certain number of individuals find they hold common ideas, interests, sentiments and occupations *which the rest of the population does not share in*, it is inevitable that, under the influence of these similarities, they should be attracted to one another. They will seek one another out, enter into relationships and associate together. Once such a group is formed, a moral life evolves within it which naturally bears the distinguishing mark of the special conditions in which it has developed. It is impossible for men to live together and be in regular contact with one another without their acquiring some feeling for the group which they constitute through having united together, without their becoming attached to it, concerning themselves with its interests and taking it into account in their behavior. And this attachment to something that transcends the individual, this subordination of the particular to the general interest, is the very well-spring of all moral activity. Let this sentiment only crystallize and grow more

---

<sup>140</sup> These terms are confusing since, for Tönnies, the shift is from *organic* to *mechanical* solidarity. Tönnies sees Europe moving from a warm, friendly, and hence "organic" community to a cold, gear-like "mechanical" society. Durkheim sees Europe moving from conformity and homogeneity to a state of mutual dependence in which each actor fills a specific function (as in an organism).

determinate, let it be translated into well-defined formulas by being applied to the most common circumstances of life, and we see gradually being constituted *a corpus of moral rules* (1902/1997: xlii–xliii, emphasis added).

This is a classic Durkheimian approach to group membership. First, egoism is vanquished: individuals enter into relationship, discover common values, and find transcendent purpose. Next, anomie disappears as well: shared values become moral constraints, and the spirit of mutual obligation reins in desire.

Common ground—the glue of group membership—can be found in a number of ways: political ideology, philosophical views, or even geographic location. But only one, Durkheim believes, is powerful enough to tackle the egoism and anomie of modern society. It is *occupation*.

Traditional societies, Durkheim notes, were largely agricultural. Since contract labor did not yet exist, most families worked together, tending the land as serfs (or overseeing it, if they were lucky). Indeed, the family was the locus of group activity, the strongest form of communal identity. But urbanization, among other factors, led to the fracturing of the family unit. “By losing its former unity and indivisibility,” the family “lost at the same time much of its effectiveness. Since nowadays the family is dispersed with each generation, man spends a not inconsiderable part of his existence far removed from any domestic influence” (1902/1997: xlv). The weakening of domestic influence meant the weakening of regulation in the domestic sphere; in modern societies, individuals would have to look to other sectors for moral constraint. And none were more fitting—as the division of labor continued to grow—than the workforce. In modern society, as so many have observed, the question is not “Who are you?” but “What do you do?” Where communitarian identity was once handed down by the family, it is now earned in the workplace.

Of course, work is not *ipso facto* a regulatory agent. It “can only be effectively regulated,” Durkheim writes,

through a group close enough to that profession to be thoroughly cognizant of how it functions, capable of perceiving all its needs and following every fluctuation in them. The sole group that meets these conditions is that constituted by all those working in the same industry, assembled together and organized into a single body (1902/1997: xxxv).

What Durkheim proposed was the revival of the *corporation*<sup>141</sup>, or professional group. For thousands of years, corporations had thrived in traditional society—particularly during the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages. But they were eventually absorbed into the state apparatus, becoming “mere cogs in the administrative machine” (1902/1997: xxxvii). I do not wish to explore the ancient corporation in great detail (Durkheim’s own work suffices), but a few traits are worth noting. It is these, Durkheim says, that we must adapt and impart to the modern professional group.

The corporations of ancient Rome were families in themselves. Individuals worshipped together, arranged festivities, and even held “a collective *columbarium*, where, when the *collegium* lacked the means to buy a burial ground, at least it was able to assure for its members honorable funeral rites which were charged to the common fund” (1902/1997: xl). Let us revel in this quote for a moment: Not only did corporations celebrate together, not only did they share spiritual rites, but they *paid for each other’s funerals*. To imagine such a thing today—a mournful procession of dentists or plumbers—is to conjure up a Gary Larson cartoon. And yet it was the norm among the Romans.<sup>142</sup> “This family style of existence was so developed,” Durkheim observes, “that Boissier elevates it to being the main purpose of all Roman corporations.

---

<sup>141</sup> The term bears no relation to our contemporary one, except in the sense of forming a “corpus” or collective institution.

<sup>142</sup> Rome, we must remember, had indoor plumbing.

“Even in corporations of workmen,” [Boissier] states, “above all they came together for the pleasures of leading a life in common, to find outside their own home a distraction from their weariness and troubles, to create a less restricted form of intimacy than within the family, yet one less diffuse than that of the city, thus making life easier and more agreeable” (1902/1997: xli).

If Rome had found an antidote to egoism, the Middle Ages saw a cure for anomie. In the latter period, “precise rules laid down for each trade the respective duties of employers and workmen, as well as the duties of employers to one another.” Desire was constrained by a “spirit of sacrifice and abnegation,” and traditional reciprocity ensured that “the laborer was protected from the whim of his master” (1902/1997: xli, xliii). Professional integrity among artisans and merchants emphasized fairness to the buyer and excellence in one’s trade (1902/1997: xlii).

As modernity has advanced, corporations have become even more vital as integrative and regulative institutions. But they have declined, Durkheim notes, at precisely the moment they are most needed. The shift from feudalism to capitalism—and in particular, from agricultural to industrial labor—has increased the need for constraint:

So long as the economy remains exclusively agricultural, it possesses in the family and in the village (which itself is only a kind of large family) its direct organ, and it needs no other. As exchange is not at all, or only slightly developed, the peasant’s life does not draw him beyond the family circle. Since economic activity has no repercussions outside the home, the family suffices to regulate it, thus itself serving as the professional grouping. But this is no longer so when trades develop, for to live off a trade one must have customers, and go outside the home to find them (1902/1997: xlv).

It is not enough to restore the corporations of the past, Durkheim writes. Nor will modern unions suffice, since each union is “a private association, lacking legal authority and consequently any regulatory power” (1902/1997: xxxvi).<sup>143</sup> To gain legal recognition, professional groups must “become the essential organ of public life” (1902/1997: xlv). They must serve not only as national institutions, but political bodies from which parliaments can be

---

<sup>143</sup> Of course, many contemporary unions *do* have legal authority, though their power has declined significantly in the past few decades.

formed. This is a radical point: Durkheim claims geographic divisions are “provincial” and “no longer arouse deep emotions within us” (1902/1997: liv). They are destined to falter, to be replaced with occupational constituencies.<sup>144</sup>

Professional groups will also serve as a buffer between individuals and the modern state. A socialist at heart, Durkheim is wary of state coercion: constraint, he says, must come from society, not some authoritarian force. It is only through “a whole range of secondary groups” that proper socialization can happen; the state, being “too remote from individuals,” cannot accomplish this end (1902/1997: liv). But professional groups can: it is because professions “absorb the greater part of the energies of society” that they are such adept regulators (1902/1997: lv).

Professional groups, Durkheim concludes, are indispensable elements of modern society: “If, from the origins of the city to the apotheosis of the Empire, from the dawn of Christian societies down to modern times, corporations have been necessary, it is because they correspond to deep and lasting needs” (1902/1997: xxxviii). But is this really true? Many theorists have argued that what modernity really needs is justice. Marx, for example, calls for the end of economic exploitation, while Weber challenges the rule of plutocracy. Though Durkheim recognizes these concerns, he does not believe them sufficient. “The system should [be] fair, as is fitting,” he says. But he proposes the following thought experiment:

Let us suppose that the overriding consideration of ideal justice has been finally realised, that men begin their lives in a state of perfect economic equality, that is, that wealth has completely ceased to be hereditary. The problems with which we are now grappling would not thereby have been resolved. In fact, the economic mechanism will always continue to exist, as will the various actors who cooperate in its workings. . . . Merely because wealth will not be handed down according to the same principles as at the present time, the state of anarchy will not have disappeared. That state does not only

---

<sup>144</sup> This is, in fact, a shift from plebiscitary to functional representation, so perhaps Durkheim’s point is not so “radical” after all.

depend upon the fact that things are located here rather than there, or in the hands of this person rather than in another's, but will depend upon the fact that the activity for which these matters are the occasion, or the instrument, remains unregulated. Nor will it become regulated as if by magic as soon as it becomes useful to do so, unless the forces needed to institute that regulatory system have been mobilized and organized beforehand (1902/1997: lv–lvi).

Fairness is only half the battle: our well-being also requires a sense of solidarity and restraint.

And these can only come from human relationships. What good is our justice when we are lonely, isolated, anxious, and depressed? Group membership, Durkheim writes, is “a source of life *sui generis*.

From it there arises a warmth that quickens or gives fresh life to each individual, which makes him disposed to empathize, causing selfishness to melt away. Thus in the past the family has been responsible for legislating a code of law and morality whose severity has often been carried to an extreme of harshness. But it has also been the environment where, for the first time, men have learnt to appreciate the outpouring of feeling” (1902/1997: lii).

Fellow feeling, so often lost in the modern era, is revived in the professional group.

Indeed, all the benefits of *Gemeinschaft*—warmth, care, and mutual responsibility—are restored through it. Durkheim's solution to the crisis of anomie and egoism, what we might call *Gemeinschaft within Gesellschaft*, presents a happy medium between the security of traditional society and the autonomy of the modern age.

### **3. The Religion of Humanity:**

Throughout this essay, I have linked anomie with individualism. The individualist drive, I have argued, encourages Americans to think only of themselves, and to eschew mutual reciprocity in favor of self-advancement. Individualism is the scourge of modern society— isolating us in our separate spheres and precluding our social solidarity.



But the American conception of individualism is not the same as Durkheim's. When we say individualism today, we *mean* egoism. In Durkheim's usage, the two are essentially opposites. In a neglected work called "Individualism and the Intellectuals" (1898), Durkheim defends individualism against the attacks of the day. Individualism, he writes, "springs not from egoism but from sympathy for all that is human." It encompasses

a broader pity for all sufferings, for all human miseries, a more ardent need to combat them and mitigate them, a greater thirst for justice. . . . Some use it for their personal ends, as a means of disguising their egoism and of more easily escaping their duties to society. But this abusive exploitation of individualism proves nothing against it (1898/1973: 49).

The problem with Western individualism, Durkheim argues, is that it remains incomplete. For too long, we have championed the civil and political rights of the individual—those relating to personal liberty and state representation, respectively—but we have neglected to provide *social* rights (cf. Bendix 1996). Only this last group of rights forms the basis of social solidarity; the other two, left alone, only serve to divide us. Durkheim puts the problem clearly:

Our forefathers undertook exclusively the task of freeing the individual from the political shackles which impeded his development. The freedom to think, the freedom to write, the freedom to vote were therefore placed by them in the ranks of the primary benefits to be obtained, and this emancipation was certainly the necessary precondition of all subsequent progress. However, quite completely carried away by the fervor of the struggle toward the objective they pursued, they ended by no longer seeing beyond it and by erecting as a sort of final goal this proximate term of their efforts. Now political freedom is a means, not an end; it is not simply useless, it becomes dangerous. It is a battle weapon; if those who wield it do not know how to use it in fruitful struggles, *they soon end by turning it against themselves*" (1898/1973: 55, emphasis added).

Divorced from notions of fellowship and mutuality, freedom becomes a toxin. That toxin, moreover, produces egoism and anomie. Our freedom must be tempered with solidarity, or else the social fabric will dissolve. "It is exceedingly clear," Durkheim writes, "that all communal life is impossible without the existence of interests superior to those of the individual" (1898/1973: 44). But what might those interests be? Modernity has unmoored us from primary ties—to

family, church, and community—as well as to the consensus of values found in *Gemeinschaft*. Every day, “we make our way, little by little, toward a state . . . where the members of a single social group will have nothing in common among themselves except their humanity, except the constitutive attributes of the human person (*personne humaine*) in general” (1898/1973: 52).

*Humanity*, then, will be our glue. As the division of labor progresses, and “each mind finds itself oriented to a different point on the horizon,” only the human condition will remain to bind us together. “The communion of spirits,” Durkheim writes,

can no longer be based on definite rites and prejudices, since rites and prejudices are overcome by the course of events. Consequently, nothing remains which men can love and honor in common if not man himself. That is how man has become a god for man and why he can no longer create other gods without lying to himself. And since each of us incarnates something of humanity, each individual consciousness contains something divine and thus finds itself marked with a character which renders it sacred and inviolable to others. Therein lies all individualism; and that is what makes it a necessary doctrine (1898/1973: 51–52).

This is Durkheim’s grand vision; this is his kingdom of freedom, his charismatic authority. We are like shards of glass, broken off from the whole but also containing a part of it—and only through mutuality can we bring those shards together, as is proper, achieving in those rare moments a glimpse of the divine. This “religion of humanity,” as Durkheim calls it, “fixes before us an ideal which infinitely surpasses nature” (1898/1973: 48). Our dignity comes not from the egoist pursuit of difference, but “from a higher source,” one that we all share. “It is humanity which is worthy of respect and sacred,” but because each of us contains only a single shard, we must come together in relationship. “Impersonal and anonymous,” our collective aim “soars far above all individual minds (*consciences particulieres*) and can thus serve them as a rallying point (1898/1973: 48).

Our common goal, then, lies in recognizing that we do *not* have common goals; that we are complex, individuated creatures whose dreams cannot be stilted by the demand for homogeneity. To challenge individualism would be to

prevent men from differentiating themselves more and more from each other, to equalize their personalities, to lead them back to the old conformism of former times, to contain, as a result, the tendency for societies to become always more extended and more centralized, and to place an obstacle in the way of the unceasing progress of the division of labor (1898/1973: 52)

Far from egoistic, freedom and individuality have become “the only tie which binds us all to each other.” To attack individualism is not just to harm the individual, but to engender “social dissolution” (1898/1973: 54). Indeed, the spirit of individualism is the only thing keeping us from falling further into anomie! “To take it away from us when we have nothing to put in its place is, then, to precipitate us into that *moral anarchy* which is precisely what we wish to combat” (1898/1973: 54–55, emphasis added).

In our egoistic American culture, Durkheim’s claim is almost nonsensical. How can individuals, pursuing their own separate ends in their own separate fields, cohere? Isn’t this the basis of the anomic division of labor, in which atomization destroys social solidarity? Not quite. For to defend the individual is also to defend society—a society that encourages pluralism and rejects conformity; and in doing so, one “prevents the criminal impoverishment of that last reserve of collective ideas and feelings [i.e., humanism] which is the very soul of the nation” (1898/1973: 53–54).

But Durkheim’s praise of individualism may be a bit more tepid than it appears. Although he rejects the “old conformism,” he never quite lauds the loss of traditional society or the tight-knit bonds of *Gemeinschaft*. Instead, his argument is that individualism is necessary *because* we have lost those bonds; it is all that we have left. A close reading of this text reveals a rather melancholy

resignation on Durkheim's part: we have stripped away all of our historical ties, and are left only with bare human dignity. Since this is all we have left, we might as well strengthen it, for to purge ourselves of this "last reserve" of community would only worsen our anomie:

This eighteenth-century liberalism which is at bottom the whole object of the dispute is not simply a drawing-room theory, a philosophical construct; it has become a fact, it has penetrated our institutions and our mores, it has blended with our whole life, and if, truly, we had to give it up, we would have to recast our whole moral organization at the same stroke (1898/1973: 46–47).

Durkheim never gives up on the idea of *Gemeinschaft*. As we have seen, his discussion of professional groups indicates that individuals still need traditional community, even in the modern age: "To be shot of anomie a group must thus exist or be formed within which can be drawn up the system of rules that is now lacking" (1902/1997: xxxv). Can the religion of humanity provide some constraint on desire? Certainly: by emphasizing our common humanity, it can remind us of the need for mutuality and restraint. But it cannot fully temper our desire—for that, we need a stronger source of community.

## **Final Thoughts**

Modernity has won its prize. In the United States and much of Europe, citizens have achieved a freedom unimaginable just a few centuries ago. Our ancestors labored, often at great cost, for that freedom. But "quite completely carried away by the fervor of the struggle toward they objective they pursued, they ended by no longer seeing beyond it and by erecting as a sort of final goal this proximate term of their efforts. . . . We soon had to admit that we did not know what to do with this hard-won freedom" (Durkheim 1898/1973: 55).

Nonetheless, our freedoms continue to expand, and each constraint weighs on us like a shackle to be overthrown. Would it not be lovely, we reason, to cut free once and for all—to be

*radically* unburdened, even from social responsibility? Why not make that westward journey, pushing the boundaries, exploring new territory and claiming a self apart from other selves?

We could not do it even if we tried. This is our curse and our blessing—that we are tied in a vast web of mutuality, and we can never quite untangle ourselves. “So it is not true that human activity can be freed from all restraints,” Durkheim observes.

There is nothing in the world that can enjoy such a privilege, since every creature, being part of the universe, is relative to the rest of the universe. Its nature and the way in which it manifests this depend not only on itself, but on other creatures, who, consequently, contain and rule it. In this respect, there are only differences of degree and form between a mineral and a thinking subject (1897/2006: 276).

Yet Americans constantly seek to release themselves from normative constraint—society is a demon to be conquered, and liberty is the ultimate prize. What is the point? As the great sociologist Robert Bellah observed, “What the ever freer and more autonomous self is free *for* only grows more obscure” (Bellah et al. 1985: 82). Freedom is only a tool, Durkheim reminds us—“a means, not an end.” Without proper guidance, “it is not simply useless, it becomes dangerous” (Durkheim 1898/1973: 55).

That danger, I have argued, has reached a climax in the United States. Our unconstraint has produced unprecedented levels of mental illness (notably anxiety and depression), and led to high rates of mass violence. Our soldiers are more likely to commit suicide than to die in combat. Rates of happiness have not improved in fifty years, despite advances in civil rights, health care, and communication technology. These concerns each trace their origins to an anomic crisis.

But apart from a few notable exceptions<sup>145</sup>, sociology has largely abandoned anomie theory. Instead, we pursue “empirical” research that claims to be value-neutral, while in fact condoning the very social processes that sociology was invented to critique. “It has been

---

<sup>145</sup> These include Liah Greenfeld and Stjepan Meštrović.

common for [the classical] tradition to be attacked, by the advocates of a ‘scientific’ social and political theory, as being rudimentary and speculative, and lacking in scientific detachment,” Steven Lukes writes. “What is required, it is argued, is the abandonment of concepts which are internally related to theories of the good life and the good society. Evaluations of this sort should be kept strictly apart from the process of scientific inquiry.” But such an approach, Lukes warns, means accepting our world exactly as it is. It “involves advocating the abandonment of the application of models of alternative and preferred forms of life to the critical analysis of actual forms. That case has yet to be made convincing” (Lukes 1977: 94–95).

I worry, as I approach the end of this thesis, that I have been too pessimistic. Even more pessimistic, perhaps, than Durkheim himself. For though Durkheim recognized the perils of modernization, he knew that only individuation could solve the anomic crisis. It was not by going backward, but by pressing ever forward, becoming more specialized and attaining societies of greater complexity, that justice could be achieved.

It is easy to feel melancholy about the future. But even our anomic character presents some hope—for if society is ever changing, refusing to settle, then perhaps it will not settle on anomie. In a beautiful passage from *Suicide*, Durkheim writes:

There is a whole collective life that is free and untrammled; all sorts of currents come and go, circulating in every direction, crossing and intermingling in a thousand different ways; and precisely because they are in this state of perpetual motion they do not manage to settle in an objective form. Today, a wave of sadness and discouragement has swept over society; tomorrow, on the contrary, a breath of joyful confidence will raise our spirits. For a time, the whole group is pulled in the direction of individualism, then another period arrives and philanthropic social aspirations take over. Yesterday, we were all cosmopolitans, but today patriotism has the upper hand. And all these tides, these ebbs and flows take place without the slightest change to the cardinal precepts of law and morality, immobilized in their hieratic forms. Moreover, these precepts themselves are only the expression of an underlying life to which they belong; they derive from it but do not suppress it. At the basis of all these maxims, there are present and living feelings that these formulae encapsulate, while serving only as a superficial covering for them. They

would awake no response if they did not correspond to concrete emotions and impressions spread out through society. So if we attribute a reality to them, we do not imagine that they make up the whole of moral reality: this would be mistaking the sign for the thing signified. A sign is undoubtedly something, it is not some kind of supererogatory epiphenomenon, and we know nowadays what part it plays in intellectual development (1897/2006: 349–50).

“But in the end,” Durkheim concludes, “it is only a sign.”

### Bibliography

- Aron, R. (1967). Émile Durkheim. In *Main currents in sociological thought*. (Vol. 2, pp. 9–97). New York: Basic Books.
- Bachnyski, K., Canham-Chervak, M., Black, S. A., et al. (2012). Mental health risk factors for suicides in the US Army, 2007–8. *Injury Prevention*, 18(6), 405–412.
- Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Bendix, R. (1996). *Nation-building and citizenship: Studies of our changing social order*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Besnard, P. (1987). *L’anomie: Ses usages et ses fonctions dans la Discipline sociologique depuis Durkheim*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Besnard, P. (1990). Response to Marco Orrù. In J. Clark, C. Modgil, and S. Modgil (Eds.), *Robert K. Merton: Consensus and Controversy* (pp. 256–257). London: Falmer Press.
- Borgatta, E. F. & Montgomery, R. J. V. (2000). Anomie. In *The Encyclopedia of Sociology* (2nd ed.). (Vol. 1, pp. 164–167). New York: Macmillan Publishers.
- Boudon, R. & Bourricaud, F. (1989). Anomie. In *A critical dictionary of sociology* (pp. 34–37). London: Routledge.
- Carruthers, P. (2005). *Consciousness: Essays from a higher-order perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cherlin, A. (2010). *The marriage-go-round: The state of marriage and the family in America today*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Childress, S. (2012). Why soldiers keep losing to suicide. *Frontline*. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/why-soldiers-keep-losing-to-suicide/>.
- Christensen, J. (2013). Study: Mental illness, not combat, causes soldier suicides. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/06/health/soldier-suicides-cause-study/>.
- Coleman, J. (2007). *When parents hurt: Compassionate strategies when you and your grown child don't get along*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Connolly, W. (2002). *Identity\difference: Democratic negotiations of political paradox* (2nd ed.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Coser, L. (1971). Émile Durkheim. In *Masters of sociological thought: Ideas in historical and social context* (pp. 128–174). San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Dahrendorf, R. (1968). Out of utopia. In *Essays in the theory of society* (pp. 107-128). Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Davis, J. (2001). What's wrong with sociology? In S. Cole (Ed.), *What's wrong with sociology?* (pp. 99–119). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- de Botton, A. (2005). *Status anxiety*. London: Penguin Books.
- Dennett, D. C. (2014). Reflections on *Free Will*: a review by Daniel C. Dennett. *SamHarris.org*. Retrieved from <http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/reflections-on-free-will>.
- Deresiewicz, W. (2009). Faux friendship. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Faux-Friendship/49308/>.
- de Tocqueville, A. (1835/2003). *Democracy in America and two essays on America*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Doidge, N. (2007). *The brain that changes itself: Stories of personal triumph from the frontiers of brain science*. New York: Viking Press.
- Durkheim, É. (1893/1997). *The division of labor in society*. New York: Free Press.
- Durkheim, É. (1895/1982). *The rules of sociological method*. New York: Free Press.
- Durkheim, É. (1897/2006). *On suicide*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Durkheim, É. (1898/1973). Individualism and the intellectuals. In R. Bellah (Ed.), *Émile Durkheim on morality and society* (pp. 43–57). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Durkheim, É. (1902/1997). Preface to the second edition. In *The division of labor in society* (pp. xxxi–lix). New York: Free Press.
- Durkheim, É. (1925/2011). *Moral education*. Mineola, NY: Dover Books.
- Essential facts about the computer and video game industry. (2013). *Entertainment Software Association*. Retrieved from [http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/esa\\_ef\\_2013.pdf](http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/esa_ef_2013.pdf).
- Facts & Statistics. (n.d.). *Anxiety and Depression Association of America*. Retrieved from <http://www.adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>.
- Ferguson, C. (2010). *Inside job*. [Motion picture]. Los Angeles, CA: Sony Pictures Classics.
- Fisher, M. (2011). Map: U.S. Ranks near bottom on income inequality. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/09/map-us-ranks-near-bottom-on-income-inequality/245315/>.
- Foucault, M. (1975/1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1976/1990). *The history of sexuality, volume 1: An introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Frankl, V. (1946/2006). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Freud, S. (1930/2010). *Civilization and its discontents*. Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books.
- Fromm, E. (1941/1966). *Escape from freedom*. New York, NY: Avon Publications.
- Goffman, E. (1957). Alienation from interaction. *Human Relations*, 1957(10), 47–60.
- Greenfeld, L. (2013). *Mind, modernity, madness: The impact of culture on human experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Guyau, J. M. (1885). *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni Sanction*. Paris: Alcan.
- Halperin, D. M. (1995). *Saint-Foucault: Towards a gay hagiography*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harriford, D., and Thompson, B. (2008). *When the center is on fire: Passionate social theory for our times*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Harris, S. (2010a). The science of good and evil. *SamHarris.org*. Retrieved from [http://www.samharris.org/site/full\\_text/the-science-of-good-and-evil](http://www.samharris.org/site/full_text/the-science-of-good-and-evil).
- Harris, S. (2010b). *The moral landscape: How science can determine human values*. New York: Free Press.



- Harris, S. (2010c). Sam Harris: Can science determine human values? [Video.] *Berkeley Arts and Letters*. Retrieved from [http://fora.tv/2010/11/10/Sam\\_Harris\\_Can\\_Science\\_Determine\\_Human\\_Values](http://fora.tv/2010/11/10/Sam_Harris_Can_Science_Determine_Human_Values).
- Harris, S. (2012). *Free will*. New York: Free Press.
- Harris, S. (2013). The riddle of the gun. *SamHarris.org*. Retrieved from <http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/the-riddle-of-the-gun>.
- Heitmeyer, W., Böckler, N., & Seeger, T. (2013). Social disintegration, loss of control, and school shootings. In N. Böckler, T. Seeger, P. Sitzler, & W. Heitmeyer (Eds.), *School shootings: International research, case studies, and concepts for prevention*. New York: Springer.
- How much is enough? Money and the good life. (2014). *Amazon.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.amazon.com/How-Much-Enough-Money-Good/dp/1590515072>.
- Kipling, R. (1967). *The Kipling journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.kiplingjournal.com/textfiles/KJ162.txt>.
- LaCapra, D. (1972). *Émile Durkheim. Sociologist and philosopher*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don't think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Lamnek, S. (1996). *Theorien abweichenden Verhaltens*. (6th ed.). Munich: Fink Verlag.
- LeardMann, C. A., Powell, T. M., Smith, T. C., Bell, M. R., Smith, B., Boyko, E. J., et al. (2013). Risk factors associated with suicide in current and former US military personnel. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 310(5), 496–506.
- Le Bon, G. (1881). *L'Homme et les sociétés. Leurs origines et leur histoire. Deuxième partie: Les sociétés. Leurs origines et leur développement*. [Publisher unknown.]
- Lineberry, T. W. & O'Connor, S. S. (2012). Suicide in the US army. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 87(9), 871–878.
- Lipset, S. M. (1963/1981). *Political man: The social bases of politics*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lukes, S. (1977). Alienation and anomie. In *Essays in social theory* (pp. 74–95). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Major depressive disorder and the “bereavement exclusion.” (2013). *American Psychiatric Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.dsm5.org/Documents/Bereavement%20Exclusion%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>
- Marx, K. (1846/1978). The German ideology. In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx-Engels reader*. (2nd ed.) (pp. 146–200). New York, NY: Norton.
- Marx, K. (1872/1978). Manifesto of the Communist Party. In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx-Engels reader*. (2nd ed.) (pp. 469–500). New York, NY: Norton.
- McCloskey, D. D. (1974). What ever happened to anomie? A comment on Lee and Clyde's “Religion and Anomie.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 13(4), 497–502.
- Merton, R. K. (1934/1965). Durkheim's *Division of Labor in Society*. In R. Nisbet (Ed.), *Émile Durkheim*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Merton, R. K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3(5), 672–682.
- Meštrović, S. (1987). Durkheim's concept of anomie considered as a ‘total’ social fact. *British Journal of Sociology*, 38(4), 567–583.
- Meštrović, S. (1988a). The closing of the American sociological mind on anomie. *Contemporary Sociology*, 17(6), 836–838.

- Meštrović, S. (1988b). *Anomie: History and Meaning* by Marco Orrù. Review by: Stjepan G. Meštrović. *Social Forces*, 67(2), 543–544.
- Michel, J., Shen, Y. K., Aiden, A. P., Veres, A., Gray, M. K., Brockman, W., . . . Aiden, E. L. (2011). Quantitative analysis of culture using millions of digitized books. *Science*, 331(6014), 176–182.
- Midgley, J. (1971). Theoretical and empirical meanings of anomie – a critique. *South African Journal of Sociology*, 1971(3), 37–48.
- Mild and bitter (2009). *The Economist*. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/node/13899022>.
- Milosz, C. (1968). *Native realm: A search for self-definition*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Mozes, A. (2011). Today's college students more likely to lack empathy. *U.S. News & World Report*. Retrieved from <http://health.usnews.com/health-news/family-health/brain-and-behavior/articles/2010/05/28/todays-college-students-more-likely-to-lack-empathy>.
- Nietzsche, F. (1872/1999). *The birth of tragedy and other writings*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Nisbet, R. (1965). *Émile Durkheim*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Nisbet, R. (1974). *The sociology of Émile Durkheim*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, state, and utopia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Orrù, M. (1990). Merton's instrumental theory of anomie. In J. Clark, C. Modgil, & S. Modgil (Eds.), *Robert K. Merton: Consensus and Controversy* (pp. 231–242). New York: Falmer Press.
- Park, H., Twenge, J. M., & Greenfield, P. M. (2014). The Great Recession: Implications for adolescent values and behavior. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 5(3), 310–318.
- Parsons, T. (1937). *The structure of social action: A study in social theory with special reference to a group of recent European writers*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Pew Research Center. (2013). Millennials still lag in forming their own households. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/18/millennials-still-lag-in-forming-their-own-households/>.
- Pew Research Center. (2014a). Who's poor in America? 50 years into the 'War on Poverty,' a data portrait. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/13/whos-poor-in-america-50-years-into-the-war-on-poverty-a-data-portrait/>.
- Pew Research Center. (2014b). 5 facts about love and marriage. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/02/14/5-facts-about-love-and-marriage/>.
- Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends. (2010). The decline of marriage and the rise of new families. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/11/18/the-decline-of-marriage-and-rise-of-new-families/>.
- Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends. (2012). Young, underemployed, and optimistic. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/02/09/young-underemployed-and-optimistic/>.
- Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends. (2013a). Love and Marriage. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/02/13/love-and-marriage/>.
- Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends. (2013b). A rising share of young adults live in their parents' home. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/08/01/a-rising-share-of-young-adults-live-in-their-parents-home/>.

- Phillips, A. & Taylor, B. (2010). *On kindness*. London: Picador.
- Piff, P. K., Stancato, D. M., Côté, S., Mendoza-Denton, R., & Keltner, D. (2012). Higher social class predicts increased unethical behavior. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 109(11), 4086–4091.
- Pope, W. (1976). *Durkheim's Suicide: A classic analyzed*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Puffer, P. (2009). Durkheim did not say “normlessness”: The concept of anomic suicide for introductory sociology courses. *Southern Rural Sociology*, 24(1), 200–222.
- Rawls, J. (1999). *A theory of justice* (Rev. ed.). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Ridley, M. (2003). *Nature via nurture: Genes, experience, and what makes us human*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Riley, A. (2006). Notes. In É. Durkheim, *On suicide* (pp. 438–450). London: Penguin Classics.
- Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (n.d.). *Florida State University: College of Criminology & Criminal Justice*. Retrieved from <http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/agnew.htm>.
- Ritzer, G. & Goodman, D. (2004). *Classical sociological theory* (5th ed). New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Safian, R. (2012). This is Generation Flux: Meet the pioneers of the new (and chaotic) frontier of business. *Fast Company*. Retrieved from <http://www.fastcompany.com/1802732/generation-flux-meet-pioneers-new-and-chaotic-frontier-business>.
- Sandel, M. (1996). *Democracy's discontent: America in search of a public philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Schalet, A. T. (2011). *Not under my roof: Parents, teens, and the culture of sex*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schwartz, B. (2005). *The paradox of choice: Why more is less*. New York, NY: Ecco.
- Sennett, R. (2006). Introduction. In É. Durkheim, *On suicide* (pp. xxi–xxiv). London: Penguin Classics.
- Solomon, A. (2012). *Far from the tree: Parents, children, and the search for identity*. New York: Scribner.
- Sombart, W. (1906/1976). *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?* White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Srole, L. (1956). Social integration and certain corollaries: An exploratory study. *American Sociological Review*, 21(6), 709–716.
- Stearns, P. (2012). *Satisfaction not guaranteed: Dilemmas of progress in modern society*. New York: NYU Press.
- Stedman Jones, S. (2001). *Durkheim reconsidered*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Strauss, L. (1959). *What is political philosophy? And other studies*. New York: Free Press.
- Timasheff, N. S. (1961). *Sociological theory: Its nature and growth*. New York: Random House.
- Tönnies, F. (1887/2011). *Community and society*. Mineola, NY: Dover Books.
- Trautmann, S. T., van de Kuilen, G., & Zeckhauser, R.J. (2013). Social class and (un)ethical behavior: A framework, with evidence from a large population sample. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8(5), 487–497.
- Tucker, R. (1969). *The Marxian revolutionary idea*. New York: Norton.
- Turner, F. J. (1893). The significance of the frontier in American history. In *Annual report of the American Historical Association for the year 1893* (pp. 199–227). Chicago: AHA.
- Twenge, J. M. (2006). *Generation Me: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled—and more miserable than ever*. New York: Free Press.

- Twenge, J. M. (2013). The evidence for Generation Me and against Generation We. *Emerging Adulthood, 1*(1), 11–16.
- Walzer, M. (1983). *Spheres of justice: A defense of pluralism and equality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Watters, E. (2011). *Crazy like us: The globalization of the American psyche*. New York: Free Press.
- Weber, M. (1905/2005). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. New York: Routledge.
- What scientific idea is ready for retirement? (2014). *Edge.org*. Retrieved from <http://edge.org/annual-question/what-scientific-idea-is-ready-for-retirement>.
- Willemsen, P. (2007). Detouring through Korean cinema. In K. Chen & B. H. Chua (Eds.), *The inter-Asia cultural studies reader* (pp. 467–489). New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Williams, M. & Penman, D. (2011). *Mindfulness: An eight-week plan for finding peace in a frantic world*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books.
- Wolin, S. S. (1969). Political theory as a vocation. *The American Political Science Review, 63*(4), 1062–1082.
- Wrong, D. H. (1961). The oversocialized conception of man in modern sociology. *American Sociological Review, 26*(2), 183–193.
- Wrosch, C. & Miller, G.E. (2009). Depressive symptoms can be useful: self-regulatory and emotional benefits of dysphoric mood in adolescence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 96*(6), 1181–90.
- Young, I. (1990/2011). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Young, I. (2000). *Inclusion and democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zoroya, G. (2012). Study reveals top reason behind soldiers' suicides. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/military/story/2012-07-10/army-study-soldiers-suicides/56136192/1>.