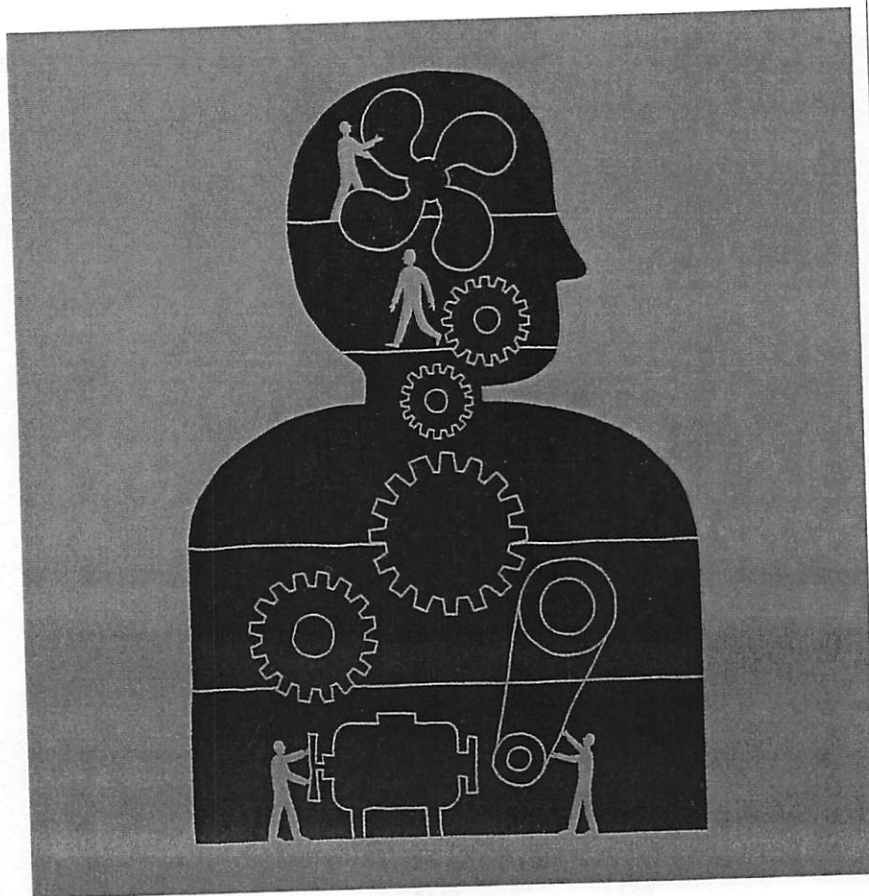


SOCIETY, LIKE THE HUMAN BODY, HAS INTERRELATED PARTS, NEEDS, AND FUNCTIONS

ÉMILE DURKHEIM (1858–1917)



IN CONTEXT

FOCUS Functionalism

KEY DATES

1830–42 Auguste Comte advocates a scientific approach to the study of society in his *Course in Positive Philosophy*.

1874–77 Herbert Spencer says society is an evolving “social organism” in the first volume of *The Principles of Sociology*.

1937 In *The Structure of Social Action*, Talcott Parsons revives the functionalist approach in his action theory.

1949 Robert K. Merton develops Durkheim’s idea of anomie to examine social dysfunction in *Social Theory and Social Structure*.

1976 Anthony Giddens offers an alternative to structural functionalism in *New Rules of Sociological Method*.

Sociology was only gradually accepted as a distinct discipline, a social science separate from philosophy, in the latter half of the 19th century. The intellectual atmosphere of the time meant that for sociology to be recognized as a field of study, it had to establish scientific credentials.

Among those who had studied philosophy but been drawn to the new branch of knowledge was Émile Durkheim, who believed that sociology should be less of a grand theory and more of a method that could be applied in diverse ways to understanding the development of modern society. Now regarded as one of the principal founders of

See also: Auguste Comte 22–25 ■ Karl Marx 28–31 ■ Max Weber 38–45 ■ Jeffrey Alexander 204–09 ■ Robert K. Merton 262–63 ■ Herbert Spencer 334

Humankind has evolved from gathering in small, **homogeneous communities** to forming large, **complex societies**.



In traditional society, religion and culture created a **collective consciousness** that provided **solidarity**.



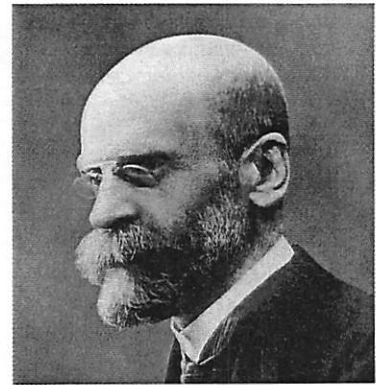
In modern society, the **division of labor** has brought about increased **specialization** and the focus is more on the **individual** than the **collective**...



...and **solidarity** now comes from the **interdependence** of individuals with **specialized functions**.



Society, like the human body, has interrelated parts, needs, and functions.



Émile Durkheim

Born in Épinal in eastern France, Émile Durkheim broke with family tradition and left rabbinical school to follow a secular career. He studied at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, graduating in philosophy in 1882, but was already interested in social science after reading Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer.

Durkheim moved to Germany to study sociology. In 1887 he returned to France, teaching the country's first sociology courses at the University of Bordeaux, and later founded the first social science journal in France. He was appointed to the Sorbonne in 1902 and stayed there for the rest of his life, becoming a full professor in 1906. He felt increasingly marginalized by the rise of right-wing nationalist politics during World War I, and after his son André was killed in 1916, his health deteriorated and he died of a stroke in 1917.

Key works

1893 *The Division of Labor in Society*

1895 *The Rules of Sociological Method*

1897 *Suicide*

sociology, with Karl Marx and Max Weber, Durkheim was not the first scholar to attempt to establish the subject as a science; the earlier work of other thinkers inevitably influenced his own ideas.

Forging a scientific model

Auguste Comte had laid the foundations with his theory that the study of human society is the pinnacle of a hierarchy of natural sciences. And, because society is a collection of human animals, the idea grew that of all the natural sciences, biology was the closest model for the social sciences. Not everyone agreed: Marx, for example, based his sociological

ideas on the new science of economics rather than biology. But the appearance of Charles Darwin's theory of the origin of species provoked a radical rethink of many conventionally held ideas. This was especially true in Britain, where Darwin's work provided a model of organic evolution that could be applied to many other disciplines.

Among those inspired by Darwin was Herbert Spencer, a philosopher and biologist who likened the development of modern society to an evolving organism, with different parts serving different functions. His writing established the idea of an "organic" model for the social sciences. »