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Variations on Two Themes in Durkheim's *Division du travail*: Power, Solidarity, and Meaning in Division of Labor

Dietrich Rueschemeyer¹

This paper explores two themes that had a significant place in Durkheim's Division of Labor: the idea that people's needs and wants vary across epochs and cultures, and the conception of societies as systems. The first leads to a rejection of efficiency as the primary driving force behind advances in the division of labor. Considering power in addition to efficiency, but also the complex conditions of trust and meaning, leads into questions of interdependence and systems analysis.

KEY WORDS: division of labor; efficiency; power; trust; meaning; systems analysis.

INTRODUCTION

With the book whose 100th anniversary we celebrate, Durkheim made a contribution to one of the great "theory conversations" in history. The discussion of the division of labor as one—perhaps even *the*—major determinant of social structure reaches back to the philosophers of Greek antiquity. It assumed critical importance in the central project of social theory since the late 18th century—the understanding of the emerging modern world. With Mandeville and the Scottish enlightenment began a continuous dialogue that involved all the classics of social analysis, and it continues in our time.

Durkheim's discussion of division of labor takes off from the question of how it is that with the emergence of modern societies "the individual, while becoming more autonomous, depends more upon society" and thus "can be at once more individual and more solidary" (Durkheim,

¹Department of Sociology, Brown University, Box 1916, Providence, Rhode Island 02912.

1893/1964:37). Modern social life, then, has in Durkheim's view the potential of combining dense social integration with highly developed individuality. This, at first sight paradoxical, potential he attributes to the advances in division of labor that define modernity. That is—as Durkheim himself saw it—the central claim of *De la division du travail social: étude sur l'organisation des sociétés supérieures* (On the Social Division of Labor: An Essay on the Organization of Advanced Societies)—thus the full title.

THE TWO THEMES

I want to focus here on two closely related themes Durkheim developed in *Division du travail*. The first is the idea—central to Durkheim's attack on Spencer and utilitarian social theory—that human needs and wants, that the very criteria for happiness and fulfillment are not the same across societies and historical epochs; rather, they are shaped by the social relations people find themselves in and—beyond these—by the forces that transform social structures.

The second theme is the system conception of society. Clearly suggested by Durkheim's view of the interrelations between social structure, needs and wants, as well as norms, values and beliefs, a system analysis of social life was dramatically showcased in *Division du travail*. If this conception was not programmatically argued and even remained largely implicit, it certainly exerted a most powerful influence, coming to full fruition in the functionalist theories of the 20th century.

On both counts, then, reflecting on problems of the division of labor still leads us into problems central to all macrosocial analysis—as it did 100 years ago.

CONSIDERATIONS OF POWER

Durkheim was fundamentally opposed to 19th-century utilitarian social theory—his time's version of today's claims that analyses of the rational pursuit of individual self-interest offer the best foundation for a general understanding of social life. Rather than viewing social institutions and structures as “aggregate results of the desires of individuals who are severally seeking satisfaction” (to cite a formulation of Herbert Spencer), Durkheim was committed—both morally and intellectually—to getting a grasp of that social reality that neither is a result of the play of individual self-interests nor the creation of coercive state action.² Human fulfillment for him is possible only through the sharing, enabling, and constraining in-

dividuals experience in social life (Lukes, 1967). Correspondingly, a social analysis that simply builds on individual desires cannot be adequate.

Durkheim tackled these broader issues when he examined the advances in the division of labor that define modernity. It was in this context that he developed the first theme I want to examine. Secular advances in the division of labor cannot be explained, he argued, by the economic efficiency they bring. They cannot be understood as driven by the goal of increasing productivity and the desires for greater happiness. Durkheim puts the reason as follows:

If [our ancestors] were so tormented by the desire to increase the productive power of work, it was not to achieve goods without value to them. To appreciate these goods, they would have had to contract tastes and habits they did not have, which is to say, to change their nature. That is indeed what they have done, as the history of the transformations through which humanity has passed shows. For the need of greater happiness to account for development of the division of labor, it would then be necessary for it also to be the cause of the changes progressively wrought in human nature, and for people to have changed in order to become happier. (Durkheim, 1893/1964:240)

Individual needs and wants change across the epochs of human history.³ Needs and wants—as well as social practices, norms, and values—are

²The quote is from Spencer's *The Man versus the State*, as quoted by Peel (1971:213). On the complex relation of Durkheim's work to that of Spencer, see Rueschemeyer (1985).

Today's "rational action theory" may be exemplified by the assertion of the recent winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, Gary Becker: "The economic approach provides a valuable unified framework for understanding *all* human behavior, although I recognize, of course, that much behavior is not yet understood, and that noneconomic variables and the techniques and findings from other fields contribute significantly to the understanding of human behavior" (Becker, 1976, reprinted in Elster, 1986:119).

This is not the place to engage in a critical discussion of rational action theory, except for one brief comment. While attempts to combine methodological individualism and the assumptions of rational and self-interested behavior with a focus on emergent properties of collectivities and especially with a theory of social norms are among the most exciting developments in contemporary social theory, many everyday uses of "the economic approach" are stronger on ideological commitment than theoretical sophistication.

³It is worthwhile noting that Gary Becker makes the opposite assumption: "Since economists generally have had little to contribute . . . to the understanding of how preferences are formed, preferences are assumed not to change substantially over time, nor to be very different between wealthy and poor persons, or even between persons in different societies and cultures. . . . The preferences that are assumed to be stable . . . are defined over fundamental aspects of life, such as health, prestige, sensual pleasure, benevolence or envy, that do not always bear a stable relation to market goods and services" (Becker, 1976/1986:110).

This assumption of little or no change in preferences does not only maintain that the interests indicated exist everywhere and at all times; to achieve its theory-strategic purpose, it must also postulate that there is little or no change in their relative importance—patently a not very realistic premise.

themselves structured by social and cultural forces. Therefore they (as well as the happiness that they define) cannot provide a stable reference point for the explanation of long-term developments in the social division of labor and in the differentiation of social structures.

Since Durkheim insisted that “if one takes away the various forms the division of labor assumes according to conditions of time and place, there remains the fact that it advances regularly in history” (Durkheim, 1893/1964:233), he had to search for an alternative explanation. I have argued elsewhere that this alternative explanation is deeply flawed, however much it may have been inspired by sound metatheoretical considerations (Rueschemeyer, 1981, 1982).

Yet this critique is not my topic here. The theme on which I will offer a first set of comments is rather Durkheim’s observation just cited—that there are historical discontinuities in people’s “tastes and habits . . . which is to say . . . their nature.” This claim may sound simple, yet it is of profound significance.

Durkheim applied his insight only to secular transformations and to differences between societies. However, it seems to hold equally well for *divisions within society*. Slave and owner, peasant and lord, worker and capitalist entrepreneur differ fundamentally in how they assess the costs and the advantages of a given change in the division of labor. And they do so not only because they find themselves in different situations but also because their underlying preferences were shaped *à la longue* by different life experiences.

If we want to study the *actual processes* of change in the division of labor and, more broadly, in the differentiation of social structures, such differences of economic class, political power, ethnicity, and gender will actually be more important than the dramatic contrasts between historically and culturally distant modes of human existence. That means that even within the same cultural context we cannot simply recur to efficiency when explaining division of labor. For efficiency is inherently tied to the ordered preferences of different sets of people. What is a great advantage to one person may well be a heavy burden to another. We cannot avoid the question of whose desires are served and whose ox is gored.

Whose interests, then, shape the process of change? This question, I have argued a few years ago (Rueschemeyer, 1986), ineluctably introjects power considerations into any analysis of the division of labor. Here are sketches of some of the claims developed in that study:

—The question of “efficiency for whose interests?” has no stable answer for societies of any complexity. The costs incurred by one side cannot be compensated by the advantages reaped by the other

to result in overall productive increases. This problem is solved neither by consensus theory nor by assumptions about the functioning of markets. A focus on power is thus unavoidable in the examination of social change.

- Such a focus has the added advantage of bringing identifiable—individual and collective—actors into the picture, aiding successful process analyses.
- Interests in the maintenance and expansion of power may well stand *against* advances in the division of labor. One major example is resistance against a division of authority. This had far-reaching consequences for the understanding of the development of public and private organizations.
- The interests of the powerful do not simply steer the process of change. Rather than assuming one-sided determination, any analysis must take into account conflicts over change and the power resources of the different parties.
- In the analysis of power resources, market position and market functioning must be taken into account, as well as chances for collective organization, the operation of law and legitimate coercion, cultural hegemony, the power implications of available technology, and other factors.
- Interests of the powerful and conflicts between dominant and subordinate interests shape the division of labor even in domains of social life that most participants see as exempted from the impact of power constellations. Thus, professional work, the specialized pursuit of research, and even the very development of knowledge itself cannot be understood without taking divergent interests and inequalities of power into account.
- The broader processes of structural differentiation, and also of de-differentiation, are equally shaped by power struggles. An especially clear example is the democratic universalization of citizenship, an instance of de-differentiation at the role level that was not won without persistent pressure and struggle.

Power, this was my overall conclusion, plays a central role in the causation of changes in the division of labor and more broadly in processes of the differentiation and de-differentiation of social structures. As the major proximate cause, power acts as a filter for most other causal factors; and it is indispensable for exploring the role of historical agents in these processes.

QUESTIONS OF SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

The other main impact of Durkheim's *Division du travail*—reinforcing rather than counteracting the influence of Spencer—was to advance systems analysis in sociological investigations. In spite of the fact that much of scholarly opinion has turned against functionalist reasoning,⁴ the issues tackled by systems analysis are real enough. What is problematic is not the focus on complex interdependencies that systems analysis suggests. What is problematic is rather the frequent failure to distinguish a *functional problems analysis* from causal explanation and the tendency to accept analogies as causal arguments. (That the metaphor of the computer has displaced organic analogies is hardly a real improvement.)

Just acknowledging interdependencies as a central *problem* for social theory, however, raises the question of whether an analysis of division of labor in terms of power and conflict is enough. In a conversation while we explored the Stockholm archipelago. Shmuel Eisenstadt gently offered a negative answer when he suggested that it should be possible to write an argument parallel and complementary to *Power and the Division of Labour* on solidarity and on culture. Power, trust, and meaning—these three complexes and their interrelations, he argued, are critical for understanding division of labor.

“The exercise of power—even the most concentrated power—is manifestly not identical with social causation.” For one reason, too many diverse conditions shape the alignments of power. Furthermore, even when the analysis is focused on proximate causation, where power is indeed of the utmost importance, the interaction of different organized interests will often have results that are at odds with the intentions of any group (Rueschemeyer, 1986:186, 192).

Problems of solidarity and meaning are quite clearly relevant to the study of division of labor. Disturbances and tensions in these areas complicate processes of change, and certain patterns of trust and solidarity as well as certain cultural orientations may well favor or militate against different levels and directions of division of labor. Yet while these issues must be taken into account in any comprehensive analysis of division of labor, one may still hesitate to give them an independent place in an overall theoretical framework, to conceive of them—in the language of system the-

⁴Durkheim's mode of systems analysis is not open to some of the more important critiques of functionalism. Durkheim was aware of, and sought to guard against, the fallacy of mistaking a statement of “functional” consequences for a causal explanation, one of the most objectionable features of naive versions of functional analysis (see Stinchcombe, 1968; Elster, 1983).

ory—as “subsystems” with relatively autonomous status, distinctive boundaries, and independent effects of their own.

Such a move—to focus further explorations distinctively on issues of trust and solidarity and on problems of meaning—finds support not only in Parsonsian system analysis but also in classic considerations and arguments of, for instance, Marx as well as Durkheim. The young Marx argued that as a consequence of increasing division of labor, the life situations of people in subordinate positions diverged increasingly from true human nature and that this “alienation,” in which issues of material exploitation fuse with problems of ultimate meaning, constitutes the engine that propels history forward.

Durkheim saw at least some form of moral community as a necessary condition for advances in the division of labor: “The division of labor can . . . be produced only in the midst of a pre-existing society. By that we do not mean to say simply that individuals must adhere materially, but it is still necessary that there be *more links between them*.” (Durkheim, 1893/1964:276–277, emphasis added). And, of course, the division of labor had, for him, its most important *consequence* in the transformation of the character of social integration.

I will briefly explore a few ideas about each of these two problem complexes and then return to questions of overall strategy.

Durkheim held that a preexisting moral community is a necessary condition for division of labor. This proposition presents an intriguing paradox: it is questionable as a specific theorem, even though Durkheim vouches for it with his most cherished antiutilitarian ideas, which indeed have considerable persuasive power.⁵ Here is his broader argument:

If this important truth has been disregarded by the utilitarians, it is an error rooted in the manner in which they conceive of the genesis of society. They suppose originally unrelated and independent individuals, who, consequently, enter into relationships only to cooperate, for they have no other reason to clear the space between them and to associate. But this theory, so widely held, postulates a veritable *creatio ex nihilo*. . . . Collective life is not born from individual life, but it is, on the contrary, the second which is born from the first. (Durkheim, 1893/1964:279)

In principle, this critique of utilitarian social theory is appealing indeed. And it has led to important insights, such as Durkheim’s famous argument about the noncontractual bases of contract—“wherever contract exists, it is submitted to regulation which is the work of society” (Durkheim, 1893/1964:211)—and its corollary that institutions necessary for certain de-

⁵For the following three paragraphs, see Rueschemeyer (1982:580–581, 584–558).

velopments in social life cannot be created at will by contractual agreement among individuals, unless they have some basis in the *conscience collective*.

Yet Durkheim pushes the argument too far when he claims that all exchange and division of labor require an inclusive moral community. (The inconclusive character of his own discussion of international trade and the international division of labor attest to this [Durkheim, 1893/1964:280–281.]) There is evidence to suggest that long-distance trade played a critical role in initiating market exchange, that—in other words—certain advances in division of labor relied precisely on exchange relations that cut across various moral communities. Max Weber made the same point when he claimed that “at first, free exchange does not occur but with the world outside of the neighborhood or the personal association. The market is a relationship which transcends the boundaries of neighborhood, kinship group or tribe” (Weber, 1922/1968:637).

Still, if Durkheim overextends his argument, he is certainly right in the underlying claim that long-term and sustained developments of market exchange and division of labor require trust, reliable institutional guarantees, and effective regulations. These requirements, he argued, can neither be supplied by contractual agreement among individuals nor be imposed by the state, unless they have a basis in the structure and normative culture of moral communities.

Yet institutional guaranties for wider exchange relations and society-wide relations of trust—however much they may have to be grounded in the character of an encompassing moral community—do not emerge spontaneously from diffuse shifts in the nature of solidarity. They inevitably involve the exercise of power. State and law alone may indeed be incapable of providing such guarantees, but the actual creation of this institutional infrastructure for market exchange—or conditions blocking such developments—is very much a matter of deploying coercive power.

Agrarian social structures—which form the baseline for capitalist development, early or late—were (and are) hierarchical to a degree now hard to imagine. Such arrangements of drastic inequality may, and did, for long periods inhibit advances in division of labor beyond a nuclear core, because they deny innovators at the bottom the fruits of their initiatives while separating the beneficiaries at the top from the problems of production. (See Childe, 1953; Lenski, 1966; Lenski and Lenski, 1974; Elster, 1983.)

Patterns of social integration suitable for advanced division of labor were often first confined to dominant or subdominant interests, to producers, traders, and financiers with a privileged relationship to a center of political power. The rise of the modern state—with its own organizational innovation, bureaucracy—was a critical development in the rise of capitalism. It laid the institutional groundwork for sustained market exchange and

the protection of property, and it concentrated sufficient power to keep opposition to the new—and disruptive—mode of economic activity at bay.

Modern capitalism has a potential for egalitarian restructuring of economy and society, though this certainly is neither as automatic nor as comprehensive an outcome as one might expect from the models of classical and neoclassical economics. For long periods, however, capitalist societies tend to be still shaped—though in varying degrees—by inscriptions of their hierarchical past, which immunize them (one might even say “poison” them) against this egalitarian potential. In addition, new concentrations of economic power are inherent in capitalist development. And the short history of capitalism is dotted with instances of totalitarian political rule. All of these shape and reshape the modes of social integration and the conditions for reliable expectations and trust. In sum: considerations of power remain central to the analysis of changing patterns of social integration.

Problems of social integration, solidarity, and trust are inherently related to cultural orientations addressing questions of ultimate meaning. On this there is little disagreement. Division of opinion arises when it comes to assessing the independent impact of cultural orientations. The role of culture has been the subject of a rich and promising discussion in recent years. I make no attempt to respond to this debate here, but confine myself to a few comments suggested by *Division du travail*.

For the Durkheim of *Division du travail*, the morphology of a social structure shaped by increasing division of labor, the normative instruments of social integration, and the culture of the *conscience collective* closely correspond to each other. Cultural orientations centering on the value of individual dignity and emphasizing equality of opportunity, merit in work, and social justice can be “read off” the emerging patterns of division of labor, social association, and normative control that characterize modernity, even though the “normal” correspondence relationship had not yet been fully achieved in late nineteenth century capitalist societies.⁶

This conception of the early Durkheim suggests a strong hypothesis about social ideals and the cultural sources of meaning: the premises of actually lived routines and transactions are embraced as valuable and meaningful, provided they are not experienced as coercively imposed. Individual dignity, merit as the basic yardstick of social evaluation, equality of opportunity, and social justice are implicit in the emergent actual patterns of modern social life.

⁶The interpretation of his views is contested. See for example Alexander (1982:119–160), who emphasizes internal contradictions in Durkheim’s reasoning, and Lukes (1973/1985: 136–167), who sees it as more tentative and inconclusive rather than contradictory.

A corollary of this hypothesis is that specialization itself tends to engender—especially among highly educated and culturally sensitive strata—the belief that their specialized contribution makes sense in a broader meaningful whole: the burdens and accomplishments of specialized work are premised on this belief; they would become pointless without it. (The remarkable similarity this reasoning bears to one of the classic attempts of proving the existence of God would not have surprised Durkheim. He would have appreciated it.)

In later years, in his studies of religion, Durkheim came to see culture as more autonomous and independently important as a causal factor. This, too, suggests a hypothesis about ideals and the sources of meaning: they derive from cultural traditions that symbolize the premises and ultimate commitments of social life. These may be subject to change, but they do not respond in any close way to changes in division of labor, patterns of association, and normative regulation. In turn, they have an independent effect on social integration; through this—we may infer, turning back to Durkheim's earlier work—they influence processes of division of labor.

This proposition is different from the first, but there is not necessarily a contradiction. Both can be quite reasonably combined. They are incompatible only if we turn them into absolutes and if our primary interest is in a unified metatheoretical (or even metaphysical) image of the role of *Real-* and *Idealfaktoren* in social change.

Yet when examining this second hypothesis in relation to power, I propose to modify it based on three claims: dominant interests look for any legitimation cultural tradition can give them; cultural traditions are interpretable within rather wide limits; and thirdly, the interpretation tends to be in the hands of more or less specialized groups that often have privileged relations to dominant classes, though subordinate interests can also benefit. Taken together, these three propositions suggest a rather important role of power and conflict. The actual content and the impact of cultural traditions is shaped by—possibly contested—cultural hegemony.

That cultural traditions are interpretable within very wide limits does not mean that anything is possible, that culture has no steering effect. Broad cultural premises may well play a role in advancing or hindering division of labor or in giving it specific directions. These are definite and plausible possibilities, though our record of analysis, explanation, and prediction based on these ideas has been rather dismal. I am thinking for instance of the contradictory ideas developed in the last two generations about the impact of Confucian philosophy on the chances of socioeconomic development; these diagnoses were adapted in ad hoc fashion to simply follow the changing course of history.

Shmuel Eisenstadt's suggestion of considering trust and solidarity as well as meaning and culture in addition to power and efficiency as separate clusters in the study of division of labor and structural differentiation certainly has a neo-Parsonian ring. This is especially true when we add the focus on the systemic interaction of factors. Are these reflections, then, returning us to Parsons' "AGIL" scheme, with efficiency, power, solidarity, and meaning corresponding to his concepts of adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (or pattern maintenance)?

In *Power and the Division of Labour*, I argued that efficiency is indeterminate as a causal mechanism. That study did embrace other factors as unquestionably relevant. However, it looked at all of them through the lens of power. Power constellations were conceived of as the filter through which other factors exert their influence.

Is it possible to differentiate the treatment of solidarity and meaning from power and at the same time to do justice to the obvious fact of interconnectedness without losing the emphasis on power? I think the answer is yes.

To take solidarity and trust, culture and meaning generously into account is possible, though there are quite a number of reasons—some just sketched in my comments on trust and meaning—which suggest that power still must be given pride of place.

It must also be possible to do justice to the obvious fact of interconnectedness, obvious even if we do not understand—or disagree about—what exactly those interconnections of complex factors are. I wish to advance, however, a number of strategic caveats and suggestions we may want to consider in any attempt to construct a more differentiated framework that at the same time responds to the insight of the interconnectedness of social institutions and processes.

A first caveat is that we must not lose sight of agency. This is closely related to the special place of power and conflict in the systemic interplay of factors. A reorientation of systems analysis along these lines is advocated also by some proponents of functionalism:

This discussion goes beyond the assumptions of classical functional and structural-functional analysis by not assuming that the boundaries, "needs," or "prerequisites" of social systems are given—either by natural facts, by the respective levels of structural differentiation in a society, or by the basic characteristics of different modes of production. Rather, this discussion indicates that the crystallization of the systemic tendencies of patterns of social interaction is itself a social process. Such boundaries, needs, and prerequisites are themselves continuously constructed through specific social processes, *activated by special social actors*, in which power, symbolic orientations, and material interests are continuously interwoven in different modes. (Eisenstadt, 1990:258, emphasis added)

This amounts to a far-reaching reorientation of functionalist systems analysis. As it emphasizes the variability of systemic interconnections and focuses on power, it reclaims a place for agency.

Yet Eisenstadt's formulation goes further in the direction of maintaining—or reviving—systems analysis than many of us find useful. My second strategic suggestion expresses part of this reservation: we must not overestimate system integration but rather expect that most systemic patterns are loose and often quite dilapidated. In fact, I would join to that a third suggestion: it seems wise to focus system analytic arguments on system *issues* and system *problems*, to use them as *heuristic tools*, and not as assertions about likely solutions.

This is complemented by a final suggestion, on which I expect S. N. Eisenstadt substantially to agree: the analysis of macrosocial change must be based on comparative historical studies. Historical depth is indispensable for macrosociology. Recent work in comparative history has demonstrated that it is quite feasible to do justice to historical particularity and at the same time to address systematically formulated theoretical problems. In contrast to both rational action theory and functionalist systems theory, however, this work is characterized by a more modest yet very sturdy theoretical ambition that assiduously cultivates a sensitivity to the complexities of historical context and sequence. History-based “analytic induction,” which examines a series of historical cases within the same conceptual-theoretical framework,⁷ has begun to successfully bridge the chasm that too often divides historical studies and macrosocial theory. Reflections such as those I have offered here may—and should—enter into the formulation of problems and the construction of conceptual theoretical frameworks; they must not preempt, however, either historical research or the specific theory building involved in explaining diverse historical developments.

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⁷For this conception see Evans *et al.* (1985) and Rueschemeyer *et al.* (1992:ch. ii and iii), who extend the earlier conception of analytic induction developed by Znaniecki (1934).

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