CHAPTER FOUR

“IN US, BUT NOT OF US”.
THE LOCATION OF SOCIETY ACCORDING TO EMILE DURKHEIM*

In the previous chapter, I have showed that there was a shift, around 1900, in the language of the social. The explanation of social events by reference to non-social, natural factors was increasingly perceived as unsatisfactory. In particular, the nineteenth-century language of the social had made the establishment of sociology and social anthropology more difficult as independent disciplines, since they suggested that the analysis of social events should in part be the task of sciences such as physical anthropology or climatology. Instead, the proponents of the new disciplines tried to give further legitimacy to their disciplines by arguing that they possessed a method of their own and an object which was to a large extent independent from other realms of reality. Another aspect is that by overemphasising the notion of a determination of human action the nineteenth-century language of the social, as we saw in Chapter 1, posed political problems: specifically, it made social change more difficult to envisage. By contrast, the supporters of the Third Republic, who sought to offer arguments in favour of social and economic reform, were in need of a theory of social transformation. Such developments in the language of the social are probably best exemplified by the work Emile Durkheim, in which the very concepts of “society” and “the social” receive their theoretically most systematic and complex treatment.

Durkheim’s Fundamental Question: The Location of Society

Durkheim famously noted in his *Division of Labour in Society* that solidarity—perhaps the most social of all phenomena—did not lend itself to being immediately observed or measured. According to him,

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* For their extremely enlightening comments on this chapter, I wish to thank Gianfranco Poggi and Susan Stedman Jones.
social solidarity is a wholly moral phenomenon which by itself is not amenable to exact observation and especially not to measurement. . . . we must therefore substitute for this internal datum, which escapes us, an external one which symbolizes it, and then study the former through the latter.1

Solidarity could only be observed indirectly by viewing the phenomena it produced, which were also its “symbols”. Arguably, the same could be said of society itself, insofar as it is an abstract entity that as such cannot be perceived by our senses:2 society is an “imagined community”3 composed of individuals who, for the most part, never meet in person. This is the reason why, as a scientific object, society seems to have an elusive and mysterious character: it can be represented, but not be directly experienced. Durkheim attempted to demonstrate that society, nonetheless, can be shown to have a logic and stability of its own and that within the framework of a new science it could be studied systematically. This new science, of which Durkheim became one of the most committed proponents, was sociology.

While Durkheim’s ideas on society undeniably changed in the course of his career, it remains difficult to identify a clear evolution in his work. Many ideas were first formulated, then abandoned, before being taken up again and re-worked. For reasons that shall appear below we should rather speak, instead of an evolution of Durkheim’s thought, of shifting emphases, new formulations, as well as conceptual and theoretical re-elaborations. Nevertheless, in his attempts to define society, Durkheim was always faithful to certain fundamental methodological principles. As early as 1888, in his “Opening Lecture” on sociology, Durkheim averred that sociology is the study of a specific domain of reality that belongs to it alone. Sociology is defined primarily by its relation to an object and by the specificity of the method it uses to study it. This principle led Durkheim to repeatedly address the question of the location of society. If, indeed, society is an object, a thing (“every object of science is a thing”),4 there must be a place it can be said to occupy. This “place”, however,

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