


## CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WORK "THE RULES OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL METHOD", BY ÉMILE DURKHEIM

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the theoretical and methodological foundations of the work *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, by Émile Durkheim, focusing on the concept of social fact and the guidelines proposed by the author for its scientific observation. The research is based on the need to understand how Durkheim consolidated Sociology as a distinct science, by proposing that social phenomena be treated with the same rigor as the natural sciences. The main objective is to identify the contributions and limitations of Durkheimian thought to the construction of a sociological method based on objectivity and the overcoming of preconceived ideas. The methodology adopted is qualitative in nature, through a bibliographic research, with an exploratory and interpretative approach, aimed at the critical reading of the author's work. The study allowed us to observe that, by defining the social fact as an external and coercive reality, Durkheim delimited a specific field of analysis, guided by neutrality and empirical observation. It is concluded that, although its approach has limits related to conceptual rigidity and the idealization of scientific neutrality, it represents a fundamental basis for the development of Sociology as an autonomous and systematic science. It is recommended to deepen the theme in dialogue with other sociological currents.

**Keywords:** Social fact. Sociological method. Émile Durkheim. Prenotions. Social coercion.

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## INTRODUCTION

The consolidation of Sociology as a scientific discipline at the end of the nineteenth century represented an important advance in the systematic understanding of the social dynamics that shape collective life. Among the thinkers who contributed decisively to this construction, Émile Durkheim occupies a prominent place for his rigorous methodological proposal and for his effort to precisely delimit the object of study of Sociology. In his work *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (1895), the author establishes the theoretical foundations for the scientific treatment of social phenomena, moving them away from speculative philosophical or individualistic psychological approaches. The theme remains current, since the epistemological challenges of social science persist, especially in the face of multiple interpretations of contemporary social reality.

Durkheim defines as the central object of Sociology the "social fact", understood as any way of acting, thinking or feeling that is external to the individual and that exerts a coercive power over him. By stating that such facts exist independently of individual wills and are transmitted collectively, the author highlights the strength of institutions, norms, values and social practices that structure coexistence in society. The analysis of these phenomena requires, according to Durkheim, that the sociologist abandon "prenotions" – preconceived ideas based on common sense – and adopt a posture of scientific neutrality, treating social facts as "things", that is, as objective and observable realities.

The relevance of the study proposed by Durkheim lies precisely in the attempt to give Sociology the same status of scientificity as the natural sciences, by establishing rules for the observation of social phenomena. However, this proposal is not without controversy. The idea of absolute scientific neutrality, as well as the emphasis on social coercion as a fundamental characteristic of social facts, raises debates about the limits of objectivity in sociological analysis and about the place of individual action, subjectivity and conflict within social structures.

This article aims to critically analyze the main foundations of the work *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, with emphasis on the conception of social fact and the rules proposed by Durkheim for its observation. It seeks to understand the author's theoretical contributions to the constitution of Sociology as a science, while discussing the limitations and implications of his approach. The analysis will be conducted exclusively based on the author's own work, considering the conceptual and methodological elements presented by him.

The methodology used in this study is qualitative, based on bibliographic research. The analysis is based on the reading and critical interpretation of the work *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, considering the original content systematized and organized into topics that address the definition of the social fact, the rules related to its observation and the theoretical implications arising from these propositions. It is, therefore, an exploratory and interpretative study, aimed at understanding and problematizing the concepts developed by Durkheim, which allows the researcher to contemplate the qualitative data in a systemic way, with a detailed understanding or interpretation of the analyzed phenomenon (LÖSCH; RAMBO; FERREIRA, 2023).

This article is structured as follows: after this introduction, section 2 presents a summary of the work, with emphasis on the concepts of social fact (2.1) and the rules for its observation (2.2). Then, in section 2.3, a critical analysis of the Durkheimian approach is developed, pointing out its main contributions and limitations. Finally, in section 3, the final considerations are presented, resuming the objectives of the analysis and its possible implications for the field of social sciences.

## **UMMARY OF THE WORK**

### **WHAT IS A SOCIAL FACT**

The concept of social fact, developed by Émile Durkheim, is fundamental for understanding sociology as a science. Even before defining the appropriate method to study social facts, it is necessary to understand what these facts really are. We often use the term "social" loosely, applying it to almost all human happenings. However, if we were to consider everything that individuals do, such as eating, sleeping, or thinking, as social facts, sociology would lose its specificity and become confused with other areas, such as biology or psychology.

Durkheim explains that social facts are different from individual actions. They are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside of individual consciousness. That is, they are rules, norms, and customs that were already in society before each person was born. Clear examples are laws, religious dogmas, the monetary system, the language we speak, professional practices, and patterns of social behavior. These practices do not depend on the will of a single individual: they are transmitted collectively, through education and social coexistence.

One of the most important characteristics of social facts is that they exert a coercive force on individuals. Even when we follow these rules voluntarily, it is possible to perceive

their imposition when we try to resist them. For example, by breaking a law, we face legal sanctions. By not following moral norms or social customs, we can suffer symbolic punishments, such as contempt, laughter, or exclusion. This coercion shows that social facts have the power to compel us to act in a certain way, whether we like it or not.

In addition, Durkheim points out that social facts are collective and generalized, that is, they occur in many members of a society, but they are not social simply because they are common. They become common because they impose themselves on the group, and not the other way around. An example of this is the currents of opinion or collective feelings that arise in assemblies or crowds. In these situations, emotions are not only born from within each individual, but come from outside, from the collective, and can drag everyone, even against their own will. When a person tries to resist, he feels the social force acting on him.

Durkheim also shows that social facts can be more or less crystallized, that is, some are fixed in formal rules, such as laws and moral codes, while others are more flexible, such as fashions and customs. Even so, they all have the same character: they are external to the individual and exercise some degree of coercion over him.

Another important point is that social facts are not to be confused with their individual manifestations. For example, the suicide rate in a country or the number of marriages per year are social facts that cannot be explained by personal reasons alone. Statistics, by adding up individual cases and neutralizing particular variations, reveals a collective state, a social tendency that goes beyond the decision of each person.

Durkheim also addresses the so-called morphological social facts, which refer to the structure of society, such as the shape of cities, the distribution of population, the means of communication or political organization. At first glance, these aspects seem only physical, but they are also governed by social norms and influence the behavior of individuals. For example, the fact that people are concentrated in cities instead of living in rural areas stems from currents of opinion and economic and cultural pressures.

Thus, Durkheim concludes that a social fact is any way of acting, thinking or feeling, which imposes itself on the individual in an external and coercive way, either by fixed norms (such as laws) or by collective currents (such as group emotions). It can also be recognized by its generalization in society and by its existence independent of individual manifestations. Even the most rigid social structures, such as architecture or politics, are enduring expressions of collective practices consolidated over time.

Thus, sociology has as its specific object the study of these social facts, distinct from biological or psychological phenomena, as they only exist in society and depend on collective action. To understand social facts is to understand how society shapes the individual and inserts him into a set of rules and practices that he does not choose, but to which he needs to adapt in order to live in a group.

## RULES REGARDING THE OBSERVATION OF SOCIAL FACTS

The first and most fundamental rule of the sociological method, according to Durkheim, is to consider social facts as things. He argues that when a new order of phenomena becomes the object of science, it is already impregnated with preconceived notions, shaped by everyday practice and common reflection, which precede science. These "pre-notions" are formed to guide action, but they do not faithfully represent reality. Therefore, replacing them with direct and rigorous observation of facts is essential for an objective science.

Durkheim criticizes the ideological methods that start from ideas to try to understand reality, warning that this leads to the illusion of understanding the world, when, in fact, only subjective conceptions are analyzed. Such an attitude prevents science from developing, as it confuses practice with scientific knowledge.

This criticism is especially valid in sociology, where social facts are realized through men and seem to be simple applications of ideas. Therefore, it is common to confuse social reality with the representations we have of it. Moreover, social facts often escape individual consciousness, giving a false impression of being unreal or arbitrary.

Durkheim points out that sociology, since Comte, recognizes social facts as natural and subject to laws, but still frequently resorts to philosophical or ideological notions, such as the idea of humanity's progress. He criticizes Comte and Spencer for basing their sociologies on subjective concepts, such as cooperation or progress, without empirically proving them.

The prenotion that cooperation is the essence of society, for example, cannot be taken as truth without first a deep analysis of all social phenomena. Otherwise, it is only a matter of replacing reality with a personal vision. Thus, Spencer's sociology also falls back on a system of ideas, not on rigorous observation of facts.

Durkheim extends this criticism to other social sciences, such as morals, political economy and ethics, where abstract ideas (such as duty, justice, freedom, value) are

started, treating them as if they were well-defined realities. He shows that these fields often discuss what "should be," not what "is," confusing science with art or practical philosophy.

Economics, for example, often takes notions such as value, production, and market as initial data, without observing their concrete reality, building theories based on logical, rather than empirical, analyses. An example of this is the law of supply and demand, which has never been scientifically verified, but only accepted as a rule of thumb.

Durkheim argues that in order to achieve a rigorous scientific observation of social facts, it is essential to eliminate all prenotions (preconceived ideas). As in other sciences, Sociology must start from an attitude of methodical doubt, similar to that of Descartes, using only scientifically elaborated concepts.

One of the main challenges faced by Sociology is the emotional and subjective interference of the observer, especially when dealing with topics such as morals, religion, and politics. These feelings, although strong, should not be a criterion of scientific truth, since they are formed by disorganized historical experiences and not by rational analysis. Thus, science must study feelings as objects, but not be guided by them.

Durkheim reinforces that social phenomena must be defined objectively, based on observable external characteristics, and not by vulgar ideals or notions. This allows the observations to be verifiable by any researcher. For example, a crime is defined as any punished act, and not by its moral gravity.

He criticizes the use of ambiguous and common concepts in sociological research, such as "family" or "monogamy", which often mix different realities under the same name, generating confusion. It also disapproves of the tendency to select only certain phenomena as "pure" or "essential", ignoring historical and cultural variations.

In addition, Durkheim argues that the normal and pathological forms of a phenomenon should be studied together, as both help to understand its nature. Thus, even acts seen as deviations or errors at a certain time must be analyzed as part of the same social phenomenon.

## CONTRIBUTION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE DURKHEIMIAN APPROACH

Durkheim's proposal in *The Rules of the Sociological Method* represents a pioneering and fundamental effort to establish Sociology as an empirical and systematic science. His definition of social fact, the criticism of prenotions and the defense of a method based on objective observation were essential for the construction of a scientific field with its own identity.

By proposing that the social be analyzed as something real, external and endowed with normative force, Durkheim contributes to the overcoming of methodological individualism and to the valorization of collectivity in the explanation of human phenomena. His work marks an advance in the understanding of society as a system with its own logics, not reducible to the mere sum of individuals.

However, it is possible to identify limits in its approach. The emphasis on coercion and the exteriority of social facts can lead to a rigid and excessively normativist view of social life, in which the individual almost always appears as passive in the face of structures. In addition, full confidence in objectivity and scientific neutrality can be seen as idealized, especially in the face of the complexity and plurality of social phenomena.

Still, *The Rules of the Sociological Method* remains an obligatory reference for sociological studies. Its reading instigates deep reflections on the relationship between the individual and society, on the role of norms in social organization and on the methodological challenges of scientific research in the field of human sciences.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of the work *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, by Émile Durkheim, allowed us to understand the theoretical and methodological foundations that guided the constitution of Sociology as an autonomous science. The definition of the social fact as an external and coercive reality, as well as the proposal to observe it with the same rigor as the natural sciences, demonstrate the author's effort to delimit a specific field of study and to move Sociology away from speculative and ideological approaches. By treating social phenomena as "things", Durkheim highlights the importance of eliminating preconceptions and adopting objective criteria in the analysis of social reality.

Throughout the study, it was found that the work offers a solid basis for the development of scientific sociology, although it has limitations related to the emphasis on social coercion and the idealization of the researcher's neutrality. Even so, the concepts developed by Durkheim remain relevant to the understanding of the relationship between the individual and society, serving as a fundamental reference for contemporary sociological investigations. It is recommended, therefore, to continue the study of this framework, articulating it with other authors and approaches, in order to broaden and enrich the debate on the methods and objects of Sociology.



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