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collective representation
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other: beliefs, ideology, values, mentalities, spirit (of a people, of capitalism), common sense, etc. Although no current of sociology has omitted to include cognitive process factors in its conceptualization of society, E. Durkheim is indisputably the inventor of the actual concept of "collective representations".

In the definition he provides at the end of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), he contrasts collective and individual representations from two angles. Firstly, "collective representations are more stable than individual ones: for while the individual is sensitive to even slight changes in his internal or external environment, only quite weighty events can succeed in changing the mental equilibrium of society."; then, although the representations may be common to an entire social group, this does not mean they "are a simple average of the corresponding individual representations; if they were that, they would be of poorer intellectual content (...) they correspond to the way in which the special being that is society thinks about the things of its own experience. (...) They add to what our personal experience can teach us all the wisdom and science that the collectivity has amassed over centuries."

Collective representations are one of the categories of social facts which Durkheim believes sociology is there to explain by relating them to each other. In his *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), he defines social facts as "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness. These types of conduct or thought are not only external to the individual but are, moreover, endowed with coercive power, by virtue of which they impose themselves upon him, independent of his individual will". The substratum of collective representations is not the individual but society itself, which through socialisation instils them in individuals. As Durkheim says, "it is to be found in each

COLLECTIVE GOODS

See: public goods

COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATION

A representation is a mental construct that shapes our way of defining, interpreting and evaluating various aspects of reality, and also the way we behave and communicate. A "collective" representation is one shared by the members of a particular group, who through this representation construct a consensual vision of reality. Empirically, collective representations are relatively easy to identify: they are found in discourses, carried in words and conveyed through various media; they also find concrete form in material and spatial arrangements.

The notion of a "collective representation" relates to a cluster of concepts not always easily distinguishable from each

part because it exists in the whole, rather than in the whole because it exists in the parts" (*ibid.*).

Therefore, in its original form, the notion of collective representation was restricted to shared cognitive productions that pre-exist and are imposed on individuals. Durkheim did not examine one aspect of representations studied by later sociologists, that of the social process by which new collective representations are forged. The term "social representation", often preferred today, can more easily encompass both senses of the individual-representation relationship, i.e. collective representation imposed on individuals, and individuals constructing collective representations together. The expression "social representation" leaves open the possibility that something individual can become "social", whereas this is not possible in the traditional view (Moscovici, 1993).

From the outset, the Durkheimian origins of the concept of collective representation place it in opposition to individualist or utilitarian approaches. For Durkheim, social facts are not reducible; society is not merely the product of interaction between parties, even if only because the categories of individual thought are social in origin. Economic sociology is thus faithful to Durkheim when, for instance, it tries to show that trade interactions and contracts "only" hold because the protagonists share collective representations and conventions that are imposed on them and govern their interactions.

In her book *How institutions think* (1986), in the Durkheimian tradition, anthropologist Mary Douglas explains that the meeting of individual preferences is insufficient to explain the formation of the social bond, as both the thinkable and the desirable are always pre-modeled by the institutions within which we live, or to put it another way, that in our thinking and choice-making we are tri-

butaries of the institutions which in the main do the job of thinking and choosing for us. What differentiates our society from the primitive societies that the anthropologist likes to cite as an example is the fact that our institutions are different from theirs.

Sociological analysis can use the concept of collective representation to describe micro-sociological situations, such as a study of a specific market (e.g. art auctions), which can be shown to operate smoothly only because the protagonists hold in common, for instance, the main criteria for valuation of the goods exchanged there. It can also be used to understand a general state or a trend in society as a whole. Max Weber's essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1920) belongs to this second category. For Weber, certain collective representations, in this case deriving from religion, contributed to the emergence of capitalism in that they led to a new representation that conferred a more positive image on the search for profit. This contributed to a change in behavior as it transformed both employers and wage earners' "psychological motivations", influencing them to look favorably on capitalist accumulation.

Finally, the question remains of the relationship between collective representations and social institutions, and between collective representations and social action. There is hardly any disagreement when it comes to explaining a situation of stability and permanence: representations and institutions are mutually reinforcing and the action is a reproductive action, reaffirming previous institutions and representations. In contrast, social theorists' opinions are divided over the crucial question of how social change, and change in society's institutions, comes about, because this requires identification of the principal engine for historical change (e.g. ideas, interests, systemic breakdown, etc.) and explanation of the relationship between human beings and

collective representations, which become less externally imposed as they produce new ones of their own.

See also: Beliefs; Cognition; Convention School; Cultural Embeddedness; Culture and Economy; Customs; Education and the Economy; Habits; Holism; Ideology; Norms and Values; Religion and Economic Life; Rules; Spirit of capitalism; Values

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