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Q1(d)

Durkheim argued that society is more than the sum of individual acts. Discuss.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- **Durkheim** argued that society is more than the sum of individual acts. Discuss
- Keep the discussion within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Durkheim treated society as **sui generis**, not a heap of wills.

- **Social facts are external and constraining:** language, law, solidarity, **suicide** rates.

Contract already needs a non-contractual morality.

Weber and Mead qualify the claim without returning to a simple sum of acts.

Census and NFHS rates illustrate facts no single person authors.

Introduction

Emile Durkheim treated society as a reality **sui generis**. Individual acts exist, but the rules, rates, and representations that bind them are not found by adding private wills. Society is more than a heap of persons.

Body

The claim

- In The Rules of Sociological Method, **social facts** are external and constraining. Language, law, and currency are used by persons and yet not invented afresh by each speaker.
- The Division of Labour in Society described mechanical and organic solidarity as properties of the whole, not of isolated contracts.
- **Suicide** showed that even a lonely death tracks group rates of integration and regulation. The rate is a social fact.

Against reduction

- Utilitarian and Spencerian pictures treated society as a sum of exchanging individuals. **Durkheim** answered that contract already presupposes a non-contractual morality.
- Psychological explanation of crime or worship misses the collective representations that make an act obligatory.

Limits and use

- **Max Weber** kept the individual act as the starting unit, yet still needed legitimate order, which is more than one will.

- George Herbert Mead showed the self as socially formed, which supports **Durkheim's** direction without erasing the "I".
- Indian illustrations include **Census** literacy rates and NFHS fertility patterns that no one person authors, yet each person inhabits.

Flow diagram

Individual acts -> Mere sum
Social facts -> Society sui generis
Individual acts -> Social facts
Society sui generis -> Rates rules representations

Conclusion

Durkheim's point is that order, rates, and sacred rules are properties of association. They constrain and outlast the single act. The claim still stands if we also study agency; it fails only if society is turned into a mystical person.

Facts & figures

Sui generis

Durkheim's phrase for society as a reality of a new kind, not a pile of individuals.

Social facts

Ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that are external and exercise constraint.

Suicide (1897)

Showed that rates vary with integration and regulation, against a purely individual explanation.

Non-contractual basis of contract

Durkheim's argument that exchange already rests on shared rules the parties did not bargain item by item.