

DURKHEIM

AND WOMEN

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DESCRIPTIONS OF WOMEN

▪ Durkheim's oeuvre is clearly characterized by its silence on the subject of women—by the conspicuous absence of women in its many pages. Of course the repression of women by a text, their expulsion/expurgation, exclusion/exile from the printed page, constitutes a theoretical *treatment* of women in and of itself. To some extent Durkheim's theory of women is the very invisibility of women in his theory.¹ Durkheim does formulate a "positive" theory of women, however, in the very specific sense that women do assume a certain presence in his work; they materialize and take form in his writing, ghettoized though they may be within it.

Durkheim theorizes women in the following places: passages in *The Division of Labor in Society* and *Suicide*; an article on divorce; and review essays in *L'Année Sociologique* under the heading "Domestic Organization," includ-

ing the subheadings "The Family," "Marriage," and "Sexual Morality" (the index in the English compilation of Durkheim's contributions to *L'Année* reads: "Women. See also Family; Marriage"); as well as passim under the heading "Criminal Sociology." It is surprising and particularly revealing that in most of his review essays, and in the surviving lectures of his course on the family, even Durkheim's family sociology systematically omits any mention of women.²

Durkheim pays negligible attention to women within his sociological theory. The observations he does make about the sexual difference appear scattered and incidental. Nevertheless, his work does in fact contain a coherent, consistent, systematic sociological theory of women. This theory is more latent than manifest, more immanent than articulate. It must be reconstructed. As the structure of Durkheim's sexual sociology emerges, the importance of sexual theory to his social thought, as well as the importance of Durkheim's thought to sexual theory, becomes evident.

The importance of sexual theory to Durkheim's social thought has several aspects. Foremost is that, despite the scarcity and dispersion of its manifestations, he does evince a specific, structured, and multifaceted theory of women. They are not completely absent from his sociological thought or from his theoretical portrait of society. Like an unresolved problem underlying a neurotic symptom, women are un/important in that they are never Durkheim's exclusive focus, but their image recurs throughout the expanse of his work.

In piecemeal fashion, then, Durkheim theorizes women. He theorizes their presence or being, as women's/woman's "nature," giving this the same reified, determinant necessity that all his morphological anatomies and ontological models assume. And he theorizes their position or situation in society as women's/woman's "place," deriving this from the dual causal imperatives: woman's nature and society's needs.

The natures of women and men are different and specific. This sexual differentiation bears both the eternal finality of nature and the inexorable inevitability of evolution. Society requires and utilizes both the difference itself and the specific skills of each sex. The sexual division of labor is thus doubly determined: by nature, through the natural natures of women and men and the progressive differentiation thereof, and by society, through the social functions these natures and these differences serve.

These pronouncements are presented by Durkheim as disinterested science, as objectively excavated fact, as methodologically unearthed reality. They are presented as the indisputable discoveries of an undisturbed and undisturbable "new world," which is merely that dimension of the old world unseen by untrained eyes. In themselves these "scientific observations" have a conservative

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import. Although he denies being a "reactionary" because he questions every institution, Durkheim admits to being a "conservative" because he sagely recognizes the immutability of the social/natural facts he uncovers.

Traditional sexual roles and relationships are thus naturalized and written in stone, through Durkheim's descriptive dissection of male and female natures and through his descriptive demonstration of the general social good effected by the corresponding sexual division of labor. There is a natural substructure, the sexual difference in nature. This is a decisive reality. And there is a social superstructure, the sexual division of labor. This is a contingent reality.

As a scientist, the authorial/authoritative position, the auteurial/artistic point of view, that Durkheim constructs for himself is outside this complex structure, faithfully sketching its outline, passively representing its configuration, honestly rendering its reality. This structure, and this stance, is parallel to the multilevel structure comprising the relationship between the division of labor in society and organic solidarity, as Durkheim elaborates it in *The Division of Labor in Society*.

The morphological substructure of modern society is the differentiation of individuals. This necessitates a moral and institutional superstructure of the organic rather than the mechanical type. "Necessitates" is a crucial word, designating a critical relationship. A moral order of individual difference and interdependence, a solidarity based on the occupational similarity of individuals and the occupational difference of groups, is *required* by the naturally emergent specialization and individualization of society. It is expressive of society's nature, and it is essential to society's functioning. This means that it is automatic. It also means that it is arbitrary. Because it is compatible with—reflective/expressive of—the division of labor, organic solidarity *will* exist, and for the same reasons it *should* exist. Durkheim, the neutral scientist, simultaneously describes and advocates its existence.

In exactly the same manner, Durkheim, standing apart from the sexual division of labor, can simultaneously endorse it scientifically by positing its inevitability and endorse it scientifically by positing its desirability. Its inevitability and its desirability rest on the same base: the sexual division of human nature, or at least Durkheim's scientific depiction of it. Whether naturally determined or socially chosen, the sexual division of labor is *necessary*. It does not matter whether it occurs spontaneously or is adopted deliberately. You mustn't fight Mother Nature: you *can't* fight Mother Nature, and you *shouldn't* fight Mother Nature. This is Durkheim's scientific/political message. He implicitly delineates the futility of tampering with sex roles, of "messing with"

nature's creation. His science asserts simultaneously that this intervention is impossible and that it is undesirable.

This whole science of sex roles is itself the foundation of another superstructure: Durkheim's politics of sex roles. The science is covertly and implicitly—scientifically—political. The politics is overtly and explicitly—expressly—political, and implicitly but impressively scientific. Durkheim's science constitutes a set of admonitions and injunctions against concerted social action and social change. His politics constitutes a set of admonitions and injunctions about the form concerted social action and social change should take. Based on his scientific formulations about the natural differences between men and women and the socially functional division of labor arising out of that difference, Durkheim formulates both a response to feminism and a vision of the natural and ideal future of sex relations.

Durkheim's assertions about women can be disentangled into two categories: statements about reality, or description, and statements about ideality, or prescription. This chapter focuses on description. Here I reconstruct Durkheim's ontology of sexuality, deferring his prescriptions, as well as his contradictions, to subsequent chapters. Within the world of reality as he conceives it, Durkheim produces theories about the nature of women, or their putative *structure*, and about the role of women, or their putatively proper *function*.

The Structures and Functions of Sexuality

Structures of Sexuality:

The Differential Natures of Women and Men

The nature of women, according to Durkheim, is that they are natural, in a pejorative sense. For Durkheim, society is the progenitor of all that is mental and moral. Women are fundamentally, inherently, intrinsically asocial; they are asocial by nature and are therefore part of nature rather than part of society.³ For Durkheim women are the weaker sex; they are weaker mentally and morally because they are the extrasocial sex. They are by nature excommunicated from the collectivity that collectively generates and individually receives both ideas and ideals. They are therefore left behind men in a state of nature, which for Durkheim is a lowly, pathetic, and inferior state.

Society, the source of the intellectual and ethical—in other words, of the human psyche itself—represents the ultimate good in Durkheim's eyes. Therefore the value of a particular society or group can be measured in terms of its degree of socialization, or civilization. In fact the very humanity, or humanness,

of a society or group is relative and is specifically related to its level of sociality, or socialness. Thus women's distance from society is the very mark of their distance from humanity: to Durkheim women are uncivilized primitives at best, and nonhuman animals at worst.⁴

■ 36 This theme is introduced in *The Division of Labor*, specifically in the section on suicide. The suicide rate is seen to be a function of the "degree of civilization" of social groups. Accordingly, women's low suicide rates reflect their low degree of civilization. "It is the same with the sexes. Woman has had less part than man in the movement of civilization. She participates less and derives less profit. She recalls, moreover, certain characteristics of primitive natures" (1933, 247). The difference between men and women is comparable to that between "lower societies" and modern society (250).

The same theme is developed in *Suicide*. There it is seen that women "have no great intellectual needs." The sensibility of "woman" is "rudimentary": "As she lives outside of community existence more than man she is less penetrated by it; society is less necessary to her because she is less impregnated with sociability. She has few needs in this direction and satisfies them easily. With a few devotional practices and some animals to care for, the old unmarried woman's life is full. . . . very simple social forms satisfy all her needs" (1951, 215–16). Women are comparable to "lower," "primitive" societies, with their "simple" social inclinations, which "need little for satisfaction."

Since men are viewed as social animals and women are viewed as natural animals, Durkheim believes that there is a sexual difference in sexuality itself. The very sexuality of men becomes social while the sexuality of women, naturally, remains natural. Women's sexual needs have "less of a mental character" than men's because "generally speaking her mental life is less developed": "These needs are more closely related to the needs of the organism, following rather than leading them and consequently finding in them an efficient restraint. Being a more instinctive creature than man, woman has only to follow her instincts to find calmness and peace. . . . her desires are naturally limited" (1951, 272). Women are naturally protected—that is to say protected by their very nature, which is natural—from the "disease of the infinite," from infinite sexual desire. Because this sexual disease is social and mental in origin, it afflicts males exclusively. Similarly, women are naturally protected, as natural creatures, from suicide. "If women kill themselves much less often than men, it is because they are much less involved than men in collective existence; thus they feel its influence—good or evil—less strongly. So it is with old persons and children" (299).

In general, women are relatively immune to social forces. Their position out-

side society provides shelter from all influences of collective, cultural origin, including harmful ones. According to Durkheim, they escape social impulses not only to anomie and suicide, but also to crime. Women do not share in men's life of crime, nor do they experience a socially induced increase in crime with the advance of civilization. "This is because the causes are social, and women . . . by not participating as directly as men in the collective life, submit less to its influence and experience less of its various consequences" (1980, 409).

If shelter from social problems is the consolation women enjoy because of their Otherness, there are drawbacks. First, although women are immune to the negative effects of divorce (notably suicide), they are also immune to the positive effects of marriage. The existence of divorce does not exacerbate female suicide rates precisely because of the "general law" which holds that "the state of marriage has only a weak effect on the moral constitution of women." The "woman" to which Durkheim frequently refers "stands somewhat beyond the moral effects of marriage," just as she stands beyond the reach of society in general (1978a, 247).

The second disadvantage is that since women are not truly socialized and do not really internalize social impulses, their natural, asocial impulses lie very close to the surface. Thus, for example, criminal behavior emerges in widows, whose crime rate is "intensified." The family is the sole social bond and constraint that women experience. Furthermore, it is a superficial social force—with respect to women, truly an external constraint. Therefore when women, persistently and essentially unsocialized, are detached from the family through widowhood, they readily succumb to their natural inclination to crime: "She is less resistant to the shock of events as soon as she is subjected by force of circumstances to more direct involvement in the action" (1980, 414).

This is consistent with Durkheim's position that women are no less criminal or immoral than men; they merely lack criminal opportunities owing to their distance from social life. "Woman kills herself less, and she kills others less, . . . because she does not participate in collective life in the same way. . . . she merely lacks as frequent opportunities, being less deeply involved in the struggle of life. . . . Moreover, she is far from having the same antipathy to these two forms of immorality. . . . Whenever homicide is within her range she commits it as often or more often than man" (1951, 341–42).

The higher crime rate among widows thus "proves" that "woman's moral sense is less deeply rooted than man's." It substantiates the "truth" that "woman's nature is less strongly socialized than man's" (1980, 414). Women are, in effect, social castrates. They are devoid of negative social pressures, such as those conducive to crime and suicide. Conversely, they are devoid of positive

social pressures, such as those that deter crime and suicide. When women are good, they are good for all the wrong reasons. When women are bad, they are bad owing to natural causes.

The antagonism between the sexes is the third deleterious effect of the asocial nature of women. Since men are social and women are not, men and women constitute two diverse and opposed interest groups within society. In fact the sexual differentiation is the only deep internecine division Durkheim admits to in the family of man; the sexual opposition is the only fundamental conflict of interest he admits in the society formed by a unity of individuals. The antagonism of the sexes, he says, originates in the fact that "the two sexes do not share equally in social life. Man is actively involved in it while woman does little more than look on from a distance. Consequently man is much more highly socialized than woman. His tastes, aspirations and humor have in large part a collective origin, while his companion's are more directly influenced by her organism" (1951, 385).

Given this sexual difference of interest, each social phenomenon must have two contrasting effects: one on men and one on women. "It cannot simultaneously be agreeable to two persons, one of whom is almost entirely the product of society, while the other has remained to a far greater extent the product of nature" (1951, 385). Marriage, for example, is beneficial with respect to social beings—to men and their society. Therefore it is necessary. But though it is functional, and therefore inevitable, it is at the same time detrimental with respect to "the other half"—to natural beings, women.

There is, according to Durkheim, a "flagrant . . . psychological inequality" that radically separates women from men (1951, 386). Having declared the *human* to be equivalent to the *social*, he defines women as less social, as asocial, relative to men. The logical deduction is that women are not human, or are subhuman, relative to men. Ultimately, the social/asocial distinction is the difference in "structure" or "morphology" that differentiates women and men. Like any radical morphological difference, it suggests a difference in classification, a categorical difference. Women and men have different and unequal natures; they are different and unequal species.

The difference between men and women is a fact of nature. It is also a product of evolution. Durkheim believes that the structural differentiation of men and women progressively increases throughout human history. The primitive condition is one of structural similarity between the sexes. The opposition between social men and natural women "was originally less marked than now" (1951, 385). Sexual homogeneity is characteristic of both childhood and "the beginning of human evolution" (1933, 57).

The specific process by which sexual differentiation emerges and advances is the gradual development of men, combined with the stagnation or regression of women. Men and women begin history equivalently, as simple, primitive, instinctual natural creatures. Men diverge from women to become something different; to become social, mental, and moral human beings. Men become social and society becomes male in the same movement, a movement in which women do not and cannot participate. Men evolve into men, become civilized and humanized, leaving women behind in species limbo as primitives.

As opposed to eternally simple women, men step over the threshold into modern, superior, specifically human complexity. "As his thought and activity develop, they increasingly overflow these antiquated forms. But then he needs others. . . . he is a more complex social being" (1951, 215–16). The thought and activity of women remain undeveloped; women remain in the realm of antiquated forms, which for them never become antiquated. Women are forever simple and asocial beings. They are forever young, representing humanity in its infancy, its natural state. Women represent the animal in man and the physical dimension of mankind. Men represent the humanity in man and the psychic dimension of the human animal. Women are trapped in the biological as men are enmeshed in the social. The structure of women, or "the female form," constitutes "the aboriginal image of what was the one and only type from which the masculine variety slowly detached itself" (1933, 57).⁵

The growing difference between men and women reflects the general direction of human evolution. Just as primitive individuals resemble each other, so primordial males and females resemble each other. Advanced, modern society is characterized precisely by progressive, infinite individual and sexual differentiation. It has taken "the work of centuries" to produce the "flagrant" "psychological inequality" that distinguishes men from women. But this evolutionary work is not finished. "The female sex will not again become more similar to the male; on the contrary, we may foresee that it will become more different" (1951, 385). "And evolution does seem to be taking place in this direction. Woman differs from man much more in cities than in the country; and yet her intellectual and moral constitution is most impregnated with social life in cities" (386).

Functions of Sexuality:

The Occupational Specialization of Women and Men

The difference in structure that divides women and men from each other also destines them to a sexual division of labor. As male and female structures are differentiated, so male and female functions should be specialized. The contrasting natures of men and women should find expression in sex-segregated

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occupations. "By constitution, woman is predisposed to lead a life different from man" (1933, 264). Furthermore, Durkheim asserts that "we have no reason to suppose that woman may ever be able to fulfill the same functions in society as man" (1951, 385).

40 Functional specialization is the fate of the sexes as well as of individuals. But it is with respect to sexual specialization that Durkheim moves beyond generalities. The nature of women suggests the nature of work that corresponds to their inherent abilities, as the nature of men suggests the nature of work suitable to them. The specific structures of men and women specifically determine their proper respective functions. Abstractly speaking, the sphere of activity to which women are "predisposed" by "constitution" is "affective" activity. Conversely, men are constitutionally predisposed to other, nonaffective functions—notably to intellectual functions. "One might say that the two great functions of the psychic life are thus dissociated, that one of the sexes takes care of the affective functions and the other of the intellectual functions" (1933, 59).

The preeminent sphere of affective functions is of course the private, domestic world of the family. It is "precisely . . . women's role" to be wives and mothers, "to preside over this interior life . . . family life" (1978c, 143). The family, in fact, is "unexcelled as a territory for feminine activity" (1980, 209). The family is only the best expression of femininity, however. Durkheim observes women "coming out" or emerging from interior, private life and entering exterior, public life. There too women specialize in affective functions, leaving intellectual functions to men. Outside the home women, characteristically, participate in "artistic and literary life."

The potential and partial entry of women into the public sphere, in suitably feminine roles, is only a manifestation of the historical tendency to ever greater functional differentiation between the sexes. As evolution produces increasingly disparate male and female structures, males and females occupy increasingly disparate functions. Like the sexual difference in nature, the sexual division of labor develops progressively over time, becoming particularly pronounced in advanced, modern society. Primordially, the sexes are alike in function as well as in nature. Structural similarity is accompanied by "functional resemblances": "In these same societies, female functions are not very clearly distinguished from male. Rather, the two sexes lead almost the same existence. There is even now a very great number of savage people where the woman mingles in political life . . . men's lives . . . war" (1933, 58). But civilization entails specialization at the sexual as well as at the individual level. In "modern times," "sexual labor is more and more divided. Limited first only to sexual functions, it slowly becomes extended to others. Long ago, woman retired from warfare and public

affairs, and consecrated her entire life to her family. Since then, her role has become even more specialized. Today, among cultivated people, the woman leads a completely different existence from that of the man" (1933, 60).

The Structures and Functions of the Family

The progressive evolution of the sexual division of labor is very closely associated with the historical development of the family. Durkheim describes a complex process of simultaneous institutional and sexual specialization centered on the family. The first aspect of that process is, as noted, the definition of the family as the sphere of activity proper to women: the specialization of women in the family and the specialization of men in extradomestic endeavors. There are two additional, interrelated dimensions of familial differentiation. First is the external dimension, or the family's institutional structure. Second is the internal dimension, or the family's organizational structure. Typically, Durkheim sets up a contrast between the "primitive" structure of the family and its "advanced" or evolved, modern, and superior structure.

The History of the Family:

External Differentiation and Specialization

The primitive family is part of the collective type of society and obeys the principles of mechanical solidarity. This primitive form entails familial extensivity; domestic "collectivism" or "communism"; domestic despotism and a total absence of individuality; and a coherent combination of uterine descent and matriarchy. Matrilinearity is associated with matriarchy: women in matrilineal society are relatively prestigious and privileged. Matrilinearity is also associated with the primitive, incohesive form of the conjugal family. Sexual relations are primarily nonmonogamous, and women are relatively independent from their husbands. Women's primary orientation is to their natal family rather than their conjugal family, and it is the natal, matrilineal family that is the collective, despotic mass where property is held, communally, and individual identity is absorbed and lost.⁶ This is the theory behind Durkheim's statement about the primitive nature of female privilege: "A mind with a revolutionary bent, especially if given to socialism, will be swept along by its passion for the weak and by its tendency to come to their defense, and will judge the varieties of families according to the way they treat women. But the privileged situation of women, far from being a sure index of progress, is sometimes caused by a still rudimentary domestic organization" (1978b, 213).

The entire pattern of the primitive family is disrupted by the advent of the

42

testamentary form of inheritance. The will symbolizes the emergence of an individual identity within the family, in the person of the father. At first the father is only a figurehead, an individual personification of the communal family. But eventually the communal family is displaced by the patriarchal family. Finally, the apex of the evolutionary process is what Durkheim calls "the conjugal family." It is the product of a dual trend: the continuous contraction and emergence of the family, culminating in a circumscribed and distinct unit. The conjugal family is the ultimate, completely differentiated form of the family. "The law of contraction or progressive emergence has been verified. Invariably we have seen emerging from primitive groups increasingly restricted groups which tend to absorb family life completely" (1965a, 536).

The conjugal family represents a final contraction, "a contraction of the paternal family." As such, it is characteristic of "the most civilized peoples of modern Europe."⁷ The patriarch appears within the extended communal family, at first as its representative. Then the extended communal family becomes the patriarchal family, which is also extended, but to a lesser degree. Finally the patriarchal family constricts until only the smallest possible family unit remains, containing only the conjugal couple and their children. This family, commonly referred to as the nuclear family, is detached from the rest of society and from many of its previous functions. It is at once differentiated and specialized with respect to its external, institutional milieu: differentiated from the extended family, the clan system, and so forth, and specialized in noneconomic activity. The conjugal family is confined to the few members who are directly involved in procreation and to the few functions that are not eventually appropriated by occupational institutions.

The History of the Family:

Internal Differentiation and Specialization

The externally differentiated and specialized conjugal family is also internally differentiated and specialized. "The married couple, at first lost in the crowded family, detached itself, became a group sui generis that had its own physiognomy and its special set of rules" (1980, 236). Durkheim acknowledges that there are societies in which "the occupations of the sexes are in fact the same" within the family, familial types "where all the adults play the same role and are on the same plane of equality." Nonetheless, he implies that this is unnatural: "It appears quite natural that the different members of the family should have duties, that is to say, different functions according to their degree of relationship" (1951, 264-65). Intrafamilial specialization is not inevitable, then. When it occurs it reflects the innate differences among family members that "make

possible the division of labor" and that would otherwise remain latent. Specialization is natural because it makes use of these "natural differences" and because it corresponds to them.

In addition to being natural, the domestic division of labor shares the other merits of the general division of labor, the division of labor in society. It is, first, an efficient method of organization. But more important for Durkheim is the fact that it is a method of organization. Society becomes a complex, structured organism, instead of an amorphous, impotent mass, through the interrelationship of differentiated individuals. Similarly, Durkheim believes, the family can, through internal differentiation, emerge from its primitive, mechanical state into the advanced, desirable state of organic solidarity. And this is the final merit of specialization. It provides a superior method of organization, and the specific type of organization it engenders is characterized not by lesser but by greater unity.

The object of *The Division of Labor* was to demonstrate that specialized individuals are actually more highly integrated than identical individuals—that organic solidarity is more solidary, and therefore more social, than mechanical solidarity. The division of labor, whether it exists in society or the family, is a superior, natural, efficient, unifying, and particularly social form of organization. Like the general society, and indeed like all of nature, the familial society inevitably repeats the universal evolutionary process.

In relation to its social milieu, the family contracts in both structure and function until the supreme form, the microcosmic and institutionally specialized "conjugal family," emerges. The conjugal family or "conjugal society" undergoes internal differentiation parallel to the differentiation of both institutions and individuals in society at large. Durkheim does not elaborate the details of the internal specialization of the family, with two exceptions. First, as noted, he finds that the inherent nature of women predisposes them to confine their activities to the domestic milieu, while the inherent nature of men predisposes them to move outside it. However, he also believes that men have a crucial familial function to fulfill. Although men remain largely external to the family, once inside it they specialize in the exercise of power. Durkheim explicitly defends patriarchy and suggests that, with modifications, it is appropriate to the modern family. In modified form, patriarchy is an important dimension of familial organization and the domestic division of labor.

While providing what he believes to be scientific support of patriarchy, Durkheim acknowledges the feminist repudiation of it. Yet he acknowledges the feminist position only to refute and dismiss it. In reviewing a work by Marianne Weber, he says: "Her entire theory rests on the principle that the

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patriarchal family has brought about a complete enslavement of women. In its absolute form, the proposition is most disputable" (1978c, 143). Instead of the "unfair" tendency to "downgrade unjustly" the Roman system of patriarchy, for example, Durkheim proposes that "it is as vain to attack it as it is to defend it. It is enough to understand it and to see what justifies it in the social context where it is to be found" (1980, 178).

Presumably Durkheim's description of the Anglo-Saxon system of patriarchy demonstrates a fruitful, scientific, and objective "understanding" as opposed to the futile alternatives: an unjust attack or a superfluous defense. "It was, then, a relationship implying supremacy and protection on one side and submission and self-sacrifice on the other—without, however, anything degrading being attached to this subordination" (1980, 254).

Durkheim gives varying accounts of the social reasons for, and historical causes of, patriarchy. Originally patriarchy emerged as "family communism" was dismantled, individualized, and organized through the introduction of the last will and testament. The evolution of patriarchy was tied to the evolution of testamentary inheritance and adoption: "This is also the evolution from which came the authority of the family's father, for the right to make a will is one of the principal points involving the *patria potestas*" (1980, 177).

The authorization to make a will . . . was to run up against the principle of family communism—a principle it negated. . . . the family was induced to incorporate within the person of the *paterfamilias*, to relinquish into his hands, the powers it held at the start. Accordingly, the father came to be invested with almost limitless power. It was not by virtue of the respect that individual personality would have inspired from then on; the fact is that he was, literally, the family personified. He was their agent. His authority stemmed from that of the family group and was entrusted to him, as it were, by delegation. (1980, 228–29)

The limitless power of patriarchy, then, originated as a domestic form of representative democracy. The family *incorporated* itself in the person of the father; it *relinquished* its power to him; it *invested* him with power; it *personified* itself in him; it took him as its *agent*; it *entrusted* absolute authority to him by *delegation*.

Durkheim is more vague in his explanation of the investiture of communal family power specifically in the male individual. To some extent he apparently takes it for granted. But occasionally he overtly acknowledges the masculinity of patriarchy. "But this movement has profited only the masculine segment of humanity. The chiefs of individual families have always been men. . . . this hegemony has been necessitated by the very conditions of life. Notably, the

importance of military functions explains the social primacy attributed to the stronger sex" (1978c, 142). This explanation is uncharacteristically perfunctory for Durkheim. In addition, it contrasts with another, equally perfunctory, explanation given elsewhere: "Because of age, because of the blood relations he has with his children, the father is the one who exercises the authority in the family, an authority constituting paternal power" (1933, 264).⁸

Typically, Durkheim is more concerned with social and historical functions than with social and historical causes. The structure of patriarchy, in his view, has many functions. Historically, it facilitated the dissolution of the primitive family type, matriarchal communism. Patriarchy created an individual, the patriarch, who assumed an identity distinguishable from the family collective. Initially the individual patriarch was only a symbol of that collectivity, but ultimately he paved the way for its individuation/dissolution. "The constitution of the patriarchal family corresponds to a first movement in the direction of individuation" (1978c, 141). Equally or more important, is the fact that patriarchy provides a means of organizing and unifying the individuals so differentiated—a higher, more complex, and stronger unity than that of familial collectivism. The family was "transformed" from the disorganization of communism to the structure of patriarchy. "Instead of remaining overextended, it became organized" (1980, 228). In order "to organize itself," family communism abdicated its "monarchical" power and submitted itself to "the entire organization authorized by the father" (1980, 236).

This form of organization proved particularly vital. Durkheim repeatedly cites the "strength" of the marital and familial bonds in Rome, the "close unity" of the Roman patriarchal family (1980, 256). In Roman society "conjugal intimacy was already very great" (1980, 220). Durkheim indicates that "never was the bond of matrimony stronger than in Rome, never was the union of man and wife more fully regarded as an inviolate partnership throughout the whole of life" (1980, 292). Furthermore, "the strongest and the most intangible family bonds that have ever existed" are "those which issued from the patripotestal authority (*patria potestas*) and which placed the child under the domination of the father" (1980, 205–6).

The position of children under patriarchy is brought to the fore in this last quotation. This position represents part of the specificity of ancient patriarchy and part of the reason for its subsequent adaptive modification. The Roman form of patriarchy became outmoded for several reasons. First, as the statement above indicates, it represented an autocratic domination of the father over the children, and specifically over the sons. This domination eventually conflicted with the very individualism that patriarchy inaugurated. In fact, in the vast

majority of his work on the family, it is the nature of the father/son relationship, and its transformation over time, that preoccupies Durkheim. Second, the patriarch exercised dominion over an extended family. The patriarchal family was more constricted than the primitive communal family/clan, but still more extensive than the ultimate and ultimately reduced family type, the conjugal family. Patriarchy had to be transformed because it gave the father too much power over his sons and power over too many persons.

The "law" regulating the evolution of the family was its continual contraction, culminating in the emergence of the conjugal form. Patriarchy, the transitional moment in this evolution, itself had to evolve and eventually adapt itself to the restricted, marital family. This new form of patriarchy, corresponding to the new nuclear family, Durkheim calls alternatively "conjugal authority," "marital authority," and "family authority." All these terms refer to the transfer of family power from the father of an extended family to the husband of a contracted family and to the substitution of the spouse (wife) for the child (son) as the primary object of that power. Just as the conjugal family is "a contraction of the paternal family," so conjugal authority is a contraction of patriarchal authority. Durkheim describes this dual evolution of family structure and family power in the following passage: "Marital authority was only one aspect of paternal authority. But to the degree that the second declined, the first emerged and established itself independently and more strongly. The husband had right in his capacity as husband" (1980, 236).

Durkheim's explanation for the fact that "conjugal" authority devolves exclusively on men is as cursory as his explanation for the male "hegemony" in patriarchy. At one point he even, atypically, dismisses the need for an explanation: "For reasons easy to understand, the husband was placed in charge—all of which necessarily put the wife in a subordinate position in relation to him" (1980, 260). Elsewhere he simply states that "conjugal" authority is vested in the husband because it is. "The authority of the latter comes not from natural supremacy but from the fact that the community he forms by his association with his wife is in need of a chief and he is that designated chief" (1980, 218). Only slightly more satisfying is a suggestion that the husband's particular role within the family confers and even consists of a certain degree of power. Privileges accorded to the husband "would pertain to the special role the husband plays in the household, to the duty he has to protect and to direct the wife—in a word, to the overall rights and obligations which make up marital prerogatives" (1980, 250).

A central aspect of the power of the husband in conjugal society is the fact of joint conjugal property, which reflects the structure of the newly differentiated

nuclear family. As the conjugal family replaces the communal family, property is held in the marital unit rather than the consanguinal unit. It is shared by the spouses rather than separately owned in their respective natal clans. This common conjugal ownership both mirrors and solidifies the unity of the conjugal couple (1980, 251). But in addition, it constitutes a marital activity that needs to be administered. And for Durkheim it is unquestionably the male who will administer it.

Ostensibly, "conjugal authority" consists primarily in the husband's administration of the joint conjugal property and as such is not particularly coercive or oppressive. It is merely an administrative relationship of convenience, a bureaucratic arrangement. This system originated in medieval Europe. "In the Middle Ages, although the wife was subordinate to the husband, she was nevertheless considered to be his partner: The husband was the administrator of the common patrimony, not the master of the situation" (1980, 293). In the conjugal family "the property of both spouses forms an indivisible whole" that "the husband administers." This is part of the "special role" played by the husband, part of the foundation of his special rights and privileges.

The fact that the spouses of the conjugal family have a "common patrimony" forms the economic context of one of Durkheim's explanations of male rights cited above. With the emergence of joint conjugal property, it becomes necessary "to organize its administration and to fix the role of each" (1980, 260). The establishment of joint marital property involves "a certain economic subordination of the wife to the husband," a certain "relative dependence" (1980, 261). It is because "the economic interests of the two spouses are merged by the regime of joint ownership" that "it is necessary that the indivisible society thus formed have one head. There results from this a certain subordination of the wife" (1980, 218).

Of course, with respect to conjugal authority, Durkheim is characteristically more concerned with necessary and beneficial effects or functions than with causal explanations. And the functions of conjugal authority are very similar to the functions of the patriarchal authority it derives from. Conjugal authority constitutes a strong form of organization for the conjugal family. Its greatest function, however, is that it creates a strong unity within the conjugal society. Durkheim sees it as "inevitable" that "at least at a given moment in history" the tightening of matrimonial and familial bonds requires and produces the "subordination of the wife to her husband."

The subordination of the wife, which originates in the husband's administration of joint conjugal property, is "needed for good conjugal discipline and for the shared interest of the household" (1980, 218). This same subordination can

be understood as “a means of unifying the conjugal society” and as “indispensable to domestic discipline” (1980, 260). In fact, for Durkheim “*this subordination*”—the subordination of the wife under the husband, which is the converse of the conjugal authority of the husband over the wife—“*is the necessary condition of family unity*” (1980, 209; emphasis added).

The structure of the relationship between women and men parallels the structure of the relationship among individuals in society. Primitively it is a relationship of similarity and equality. At the zenith of its evolution, it is structured by the sexual division of labor and by inequality. The sexual division of labor, or the divergence of functions performed by each sex, is first and foremost a split between domestic and extradomestic activity, with women specializing in affairs of the heart and the hearth. Beyond the division that consecrates women to family functions, there is an intrafamilial division of labor in which men specialize in the exercise of familial power. This begins as patriarchy and ends with the contraction of the patriarchal family and the expansion of individual autonomy (specifically, that of the male offspring) as conjugal authority.

The Social Functions of the Sexual Division of Labor

These structures of differentiation and power, the sexual and familial divisions of labor, not only are inevitable products of evolution, they are also desirable. They are desirable because, as structures, they perform certain necessary and beneficial functions. In the first place, the difference in activity (functional difference, division of labor) between men and women expresses the difference in nature between men and women (structural difference, division of ability). The two sexes *are* systematically different from each other, and so for the good of individual women and men as well as in the social interest of efficiency, they *should* engage their talents appropriately, which is to say in different ways.

This correspondence of sex-specific ability with sex-specific occupations is important to Durkheim. Thus the first function of the sexual/familial division of labor—the social expression of natural difference and structural/functional correspondence—has inherent value and significance. But it is the second function that takes precedence and constitutes the crucial social contribution of sexual specialization. This is the function of creating sexual and familial solidarity.

Just as the division of labor in society produces a new, higher form of social solidarity, so the division of labor in marriage and the family produces there the transcendent, organic form of solidarity, an invincible solidarity based on interdependence. For Durkheim, solidarity is the highest social and moral good, the

raison d'être of society. And interdependence is the supreme basis of solidarity, the raison d'être of the division of labor. “The most remarkable effect of the division of labor is not that it increases the output of functions divided, but that it renders them solidary” (1933, 60–61).

Durkheim specifically cites conjugal society as an example of the connection between the division of labor and organic solidarity: “Precisely because man and woman are different, they seek each other passionately. . . . In short, man and woman isolated from each other are only different parts of the same concrete universal which they reform when they unite. In other words, the sexual division of labor is the source of conjugal solidarity” (1933, 56).

The sexual division of labor has advanced throughout history: from affecting “only sexual organs and some secondary activities” it has been extended “to all organic and social functions.” In this progression, it has developed “concomitant with conjugal solidarity” (1933, 57). In primitive or “savage” societies where “female functions are not very clearly distinguished from male” and where “the two sexes lead almost the same existence,” conjugal solidarity is found to be “very weak.” Marriage among these primitive, androgynous savages “is in a completely rudimentary state” (58). By contrast, “as we advance to modern times, we see marriage developing.” This is due to the fact that “sexual labor is more and more divided”: “Limited first only to sexual functions, it slowly becomes extended to others. . . . Today, among cultivated people, the woman leads a completely different existence from that of the man” (1933, 60).

In fact, Durkheim notes that the universal division of labor “has been carried to the last stage” between the sexes: there are faculties “completely lost by both” (1933, 401). Among these same cultivated, sexually differentiated people, conjugal solidarity “makes its action felt at each moment and in all the details of life.” It intimately and intricately binds together specialized male and female beings who are “incomplete” and “mutually dependent” (61).

The sexual division of labor is functional, since it engenders solidarity in sexual society. But more fundamental than this, according to Durkheim, the sexual division of labor actually creates sexual society *ex nihilo*. Marriage in essence is a society. It is potentially and ideally a bond that is “holy,” that has “sanctity,” “moral validity,” and “a social function”—a “moral communion.” In other words, it is a microcosmic replica of society itself. The fact that the conjugal association “always becomes more powerful and cohesive as history advances” means that its “moral unity” increases over time. Marriage is at heart a mental and moral, not a sexual or economic institution. Like any society, it is a mental and moral fusion of physically distinct individuals.⁹

Marriage consists primarily of “intercourse” that is “other than sexual,” and

the economic relations of marriage merely reflect the social and moral web that is its real significance. "If public conscience represents marriage as a source of morality, so to speak as a sacrament, it is because the spouses conceive in their minds the formation of a moral unity [*société morale*] of exceptional significance, and not simply a physical identity" (1980, 247). Marriage is a moral unity, a moral society, a moral identity conceived in the minds of its members. It is a mental, moral, and social union, not merely a physical union. Even sex is in some sense social and moral. "The conjugal act (and more generally, the sexual act) is not religiously neutral, but brings into play forces which are sacred and consequently formidable" (1980, 270).

It is in this sense that the sexual division of labor not only strengthens but actually constitutes the society of men and women: "Permit the sexual division of labor to recede below a certain level and conjugal society would eventually subsist in sexual relations preeminently ephemeral. If the sexes were not separated at all, an entire category of social life would be absent" (1933, 61). The sexual division of labor is a specific instance of the general division of labor in society. The function of the division of labor, in general, "consists in the establishment of a social and moral order *sui generis*" (61).

"Its role in all these cases is not simply to embellish or ameliorate existing societies, but to render societies possible that without it would not exist. Through it, individuals are linked to one another. Without it they would be independent. Instead of developing separately, they pool their efforts. They are solidary (1933, 61)."

Chapter 3

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR WOMEN

■ The Rejection of Feminism

Durkheim rejects feminism as "an unconscious movement." Feminism, he says, "deceives itself when it formulates the details of its demands." This is because feminism and its demands are premised on a belief in sexual equality, which Durkheim does not share. For example, he dismisses as "personal ideas" and "generalities" an author's contention that women are equal to men. "He has not examined or discussed in detail the reasons why certain thinkers—among them some women . . .—have argued against the feminist movement" (1980, 253). The reason Durkheim argues against the feminist movement is that he deems sexual equality to be primitive, unnatural, and dysfunctional.

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Sexual Equality Rejected as Primitive

■ 52 Durkheim discredits and denounces sexual equality by describing it as "primitive." If men and women resemble each other and perform similar functions, if they exist side by side and in egalitarian power relations, then sexual relations are prehistoric. Such an arrangement is elementary, undeveloped by the natural evolution that differentiates men and women into specialized structures and functions, organizes and stratifies their relations. If men and women are identical, integrated, and equal, they exhibit only the crude, primordial social relations of mechanical solidarity. Durkheim specifically rejects each form of sexual equality—structural resemblance, functional similarity, proximity, and parity—as a primitive phenomenon.

Sexual similarity, or "homogeneity," is essentially a manifestation of individual or social immaturity. In terms of individual development, it is characteristic of childhood. Historically, it belongs to "the beginning of human evolution" (1933, 57). In the beginning there are no men and women; there is a unitary, unisex "one and only type," the "aboriginal type." In "primitive" societies men and women are structurally indistinct. In addition they are functionally indistinct: "anatomical resemblances are accompanied by functional resemblances": "In the same societies, female functions are not very clearly distinguished from male. Rather, the two sexes lead almost the same existence. There is even now a very great number of savage people where the woman mingles in political life . . . men's lives . . . war" (1933, 58). Sexual homogeneity, Durkheim concludes, is inherently "savage" or "primitive." He expresses and condenses this theory in the term "primitive homogeneity."

According to this same scheme, sexual proximity, or integration, is characteristic of simple, unsophisticated sexual roles and relations. Primevally, the two sexes "constantly blended their existence in the most intimate acts of life." Conversely, sexual segregation is a modern phenomenon, an "advanced" feature of society "today." From the late Middle Ages to the present, the two sexes form "two distinctly separate worlds."¹

Finally, Durkheim delegitimizes sexual parity, or equality in power relations, by associating it with the "primitive" family structure. According to Durkheim, women have relative power, prestige, privilege, and autonomy in matrilineal society. He views matrilinearity, in turn, as both obsolete and crude. Matrilinearity is part of a configuration of inferior family characteristics that includes weak conjugal relations and a weak conjugal family. Generally, women enjoy relative self-determination owing to the system of female descent and to

the laxity of marital bonds, even promiscuity, that system entails. Specifically, women have independence from their mates owing to a persistent and primary orientation toward the natal clan. Women do not belong to their husbands because they continue to belong to their birth families. This theory of history is encapsulated in the following statement: "The privileged situation of women, far from being a sure index of progress, is sometimes caused by a still rudimentary domestic organization" (1978b, 213). Female privilege, like sexual homogeneity and sexual integration, is definitionally "primitive."

Under primitive conditions, neither society nor the family is organized according to a division of labor. The coexistence of women and men is characterized by identity: resemblance, similarity, proximity, and parity. Of course this mechanical social and sexual solidarity is backward: it is simple, inefficient, and very weakly integrated. According to his evolutionary scheme, Durkheim believes that, like individuals, the two sexes *will* eventually be differentiated, specialized, segregated, and stratified and that they *should* be.

Sexual Equality Rejected as Unnatural

Durkheim opposes sexual equality because he believes it is a primitive phenomenon. His evolutionary organicism, in turn, reflexively equates the primitive with the inferior. Beyond its alleged primitivism, however, Durkheim finds sexual equality objectionable because it is unnatural. This position can be discerned in the following dense passage from *The Division of Labor*: "By constitution, woman is *predisposed* to lead a life different from man. . . . It appears quite *natural* that the different members of the family should have duties, that is to say, *different functions*" (1933, 264–65; emphasis added). Sexual difference and inequality are endorsed by nature: by the difference and inequality inherent in the "constitution" of each sex. Sexual difference and inequality are "natural" and therefore inevitable and ideal. Sexual equality is essentially unnatural and therefore essentially unlikely and undesirable.

Durkheim states his case more clearly in this polemical passage from *Suicide*: "As for the champions today of equal rights for woman with those of man, they forget that the work of centuries cannot be instantly abolished; that *juridical equality cannot be legitimate so long as psychological inequality is so flagrant*" (1951, 386; emphasis added). The psychological inequality of the sexes is a natural fact. It is the product of centuries of natural evolution, at the end of which it is extreme, flagrant. This natural sexual inequality should be expressed in social institutions. It "cannot" be eliminated, and therefore it should not be contradicted. To do so would be illegitimate, a violation of natural law.