

# **The Rules of Sociological Method**

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# Chapter I

## What is a Social Fact?

Before beginning the search for the method appropriate to the study of social facts it is important to know what are the facts termed 'social'.

The question is all the more necessary because the term is used without much precision. It is commonly used to designate almost all the phenomena that occur within society, however little social interest of some generality they present. Yet under this heading there is, so to speak, no human occurrence that cannot be called social. Every individual drinks, sleeps, eats, or employs his reason, and society has every interest in seeing that these functions are regularly exercised. If therefore these facts were social ones, sociology would possess no subject matter peculiarly its own, and its domain would be confused with that of biology and psychology.

However, in reality there is in every society a clearly determined group of phenomena separable, because of their distinct characteristics, from those that form the subject matter of other sciences of nature.

When I perform my duties as a brother, a husband or a citizen and carry out the commitments I have entered into, I fulfill obligations which are defined in law and custom and which are external to myself and my actions. Even when they conform to my own sentiments and when I feel their reality within me, that reality does not cease to be objective, for it is not I who have prescribed these duties; I have received them through education. Moreover, how often does it happen that we are ignorant of the details of the obligations that we must assume, and that, to know them, we must consult the legal code and its authorised interpreters! Similarly the believer has discovered from birth, ready fashioned, the beliefs

and practices of his religious life; if they existed before he did, it follows that they exist outside him. The system of signs that I employ to express my thoughts, the monetary system I use to pay my debts, the credit instruments I utilise in my commercial relationships, the practices I follow in my profession, etc., all function independently of the use I make of them. Considering in turn each member of society, the foregoing remarks can be repeated for each single one of them. Thus there are ways of acting, thinking and feeling which possess the remarkable property of existing outside the consciousness of the individual.

Not only are these types of behaviour and thinking external to the individual, but they are endowed with a compelling and coercive power by virtue of which, whether he wishes it or not, they impose themselves upon him. Undoubtedly when I conform to them of my own free will, this coercion is not felt or felt hardly at all, since it is unnecessary. None the less it is intrinsically a characteristic of these facts; the proof of this is that it asserts itself as soon as I try to resist. If I attempt to violate the rules of law they react against me so as to forestall my action, if there is still time. Alternatively, they annul it or make my action conform to the norm if it is already accomplished but capable of being reversed; or they cause me to pay the penalty for it if it is irreparable. If purely moral rules are at stake, the public conscience restricts any act which infringes them by the surveillance it exercises over the conduct of citizens and by the special punishments it has at its disposal. In other cases the constraint is less violent; nevertheless, it does not cease to exist. If I do not conform to ordinary conventions, if in my mode of dress I pay no heed to what is customary in my country and in my social class, the laughter I provoke, the social distance at which I am kept, produce, although in a more mitigated form, the same results as any real penalty. In other cases, although it may be indirect, constraint is no less effective. I am not forced to speak French with my compatriots, nor to use the legal currency, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise. If I tried to escape the necessity, my attempt would fail miserably. As an industrialist nothing prevents me from working with the processes and methods of the previous century, but if I do I will most certainly ruin myself. Even when in fact I can struggle free from these rules and successfully break them, it is never without being forced to fight against them. Even if in the end they are overcome, they make

their constraining power sufficiently felt in the resistance that they afford. There is no innovator, even a fortunate one, whose ventures do not encounter opposition of this kind.

Here, then, is a category of facts which present very special characteristics: they consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him. Consequently, since they consist of representations and actions, they cannot be confused with organic phenomena, nor with psychical phenomena, which have no existence save in and through the individual consciousness. Thus they constitute a new species and to them must be exclusively assigned the term *social*. It is appropriate, since it is clear that, not having the individual as their substratum, they can have none other than society, either political society in its entirety or one of the partial groups that it includes — religious denominations, political and literary schools, occupational corporations, etc. Moreover, it is for such as these alone that the term is fitting, for the word 'social' has the sole meaning of designating those phenomena which fall into none of the categories of facts already constituted and labelled. They are consequently the proper field of sociology. It is true that this word 'constraint', in terms of which we define them, is in danger of infuriating those who zealously uphold out-and-out individualism. Since they maintain that the individual is completely autonomous, it seems to them that he is diminished every time he is made aware that he is not dependent on himself alone. Yet since it is indisputable today that most of our ideas and tendencies are not developed by ourselves, but come to us from outside, they can only penetrate us by imposing themselves upon us. This is all that our definition implies. Moreover, we know that all social constraints do not necessarily exclude the individual personality.<sup>1</sup>

Yet since the examples just cited (legal and moral rules, religious dogmas, financial systems, etc.) consist wholly of beliefs and practices already well established, in view of what has been said it might be maintained that no social fact can exist except where there is a well defined social organisation. But there are other facts which do not present themselves in this already crystallised form but which also possess the same objectivity and ascendancy over the individual. These are what are called social 'currents'. Thus in a public gathering the great waves of enthu-

siasm, indignation and pity that are produced have their seat in no one individual consciousness. They come to each one of us from outside and can sweep us along in spite of ourselves. If perhaps I abandon myself to them I may not be conscious of the pressure that they are exerting upon me, but that pressure makes its presence felt immediately I attempt to struggle against them. If an individual tries to pit himself against one of these collective manifestations, the sentiments that he is rejecting will be turned against him. Now if this external coercive power asserts itself so acutely in cases of resistance, it must be because it exists in the other instances cited above without our being conscious of it. Hence we are the victims of an illusion which leads us to believe we have ourselves produced what has been imposed upon us externally. But if the willingness with which we let ourselves be carried along disguises the pressure we have undergone, it does not eradicate it. Thus air does not cease to have weight, although we no longer feel that weight. Even when we have individually and spontaneously shared in the common emotion, the impression we have experienced is utterly different from what we would have felt if we had been alone. Once the assembly has broken up and these social influences have ceased to act upon us, and we are once more on our own, the emotions we have felt seem an alien phenomenon, one in which we no longer recognise ourselves. It is then we perceive that we have undergone the emotions much more than generated them. These emotions may even perhaps fill us with horror, so much do they go against the grain. Thus individuals who are normally perfectly harmless may, when gathered together in a crowd, let themselves be drawn into acts of atrocity. And what we assert about these transitory outbreaks likewise applies to those more lasting movements of opinion which relate to those political, literary and artistic matters, etc., and which are constantly being produced around us, whether throughout society or in a more limited sphere.

Moreover, this definition of a social fact can be verified by examining an experience that is characteristic. It is sufficient to observe how children are brought up. If one views the facts as they are and indeed as they have always been, it is patently obvious that all education consists of a continual effort to impose upon the child ways of seeing, thinking and acting which he himself would not have arrived at spontaneously. From his earliest years we oblige

him to eat, drink and sleep at regular hours, and to observe cleanliness, calm and obedience; later we force him to learn how to be mindful of others, to respect customs and conventions, and to work, etc. If this constraint in time ceases to be felt it is because it gradually gives rise to habits, to inner tendencies which render it superfluous; but they supplant the constraint only because they are derived from it. It is true that, in Spencer's view, a rational education should shun such means and allow the child complete freedom to do what he will. Yet as this educational theory has never been put into practice among any known people, it can only be the personal expression of a *desideratum* and not a fact which can be established in contradiction to the other facts given above. What renders these latter facts particularly illuminating is that education sets out precisely with the object of creating a social being. Thus there can be seen, as in an abbreviated form, how the social being has been fashioned historically. The pressure to which the child is subjected unremittingly is the same pressure of the social environment which seeks to shape him in its own image, and in which parents and teachers are only the representatives and intermediaries.

Thus it is not the fact that they are general which can serve to characterise sociological phenomena. Thoughts to be found in the consciousness of each individual and movements which are repeated by all individuals are not for this reason social facts. If some have been content with using this characteristic in order to define them it is because they have been confused, wrongly, with what might be termed their individual incarnations. What constitutes social facts are the beliefs, tendencies and practices of the group taken collectively. But the forms that these collective states may assume when they are 'refracted' through individuals are things of a different kind. What irrefutably demonstrates this duality of kind is that these two categories of facts frequently are manifested dissociated from each other. Indeed some of these ways of acting or thinking acquire, by dint of repetition, a sort of consistency which, so to speak, separates them out, isolating them from the particular events which reflect them. Thus they assume a shape, a tangible form peculiar to them and constitute a reality *sui generis* vastly distinct from the individual facts which manifest that reality. Collective custom does not exist only in a state of immanence in the successive actions which it determines, but, by a privilege which

example in the biological kingdom, expresses itself once and for all in a formula repeated by word of mouth, transmitted by education and even enshrined in the written word. Such are the origins and nature of legal and moral rules, aphorisms and popular sayings, articles of faith in which religious or political sects epitomise their beliefs, and standards of taste drawn up by literary schools, etc. None of these modes of acting and thinking are to be found wholly in the application made of them by individuals, since they can even exist without being applied at the time.

Undoubtedly this state of dissociation does not always present itself with equal distinctiveness. It is sufficient for dissociation to exist unquestionably in the numerous important instances cited, for us to prove that the social fact exists separately from its individual effects. Moreover, even when the dissociation is not immediately observable, it can often be made so with the help of certain methodological devices. Indeed it is essential to embark on such procedures if one wishes to refine out the social fact from any amalgam and so observe it in its pure state. Thus certain currents of opinion, whose intensity varies according to the time and country in which they occur, impel us, for example, towards marriage or suicide, towards higher or lower birth-rates, etc. Such currents are plainly social facts. At first sight they seem inseparable from the forms they assume in individual cases. But statistics afford us a means of isolating them. They are indeed not inaccurately represented by rates of births, marriages and suicides, that is, by the result obtained after dividing the average annual total of marriages, births, and voluntary homicides by the number of persons of an age to marry, produce children, or commit suicide.<sup>2</sup> Since each one of these statistics includes without distinction all individual cases, the individual circumstances which may have played some part in producing the phenomenon cancel each other out and consequently do not contribute to determining the nature of the phenomenon. What it expresses is a certain state of the collective mind.

That is what social phenomena are when stripped of all extraneous elements. As regards their private manifestations, these do indeed have something social about them, since in part they reproduce the collective model. But to a large extent each one depends also upon the psychological and organic constitution of the individual, and on the particular circumstances in which he is

placed. Therefore they are not phenomena which are in the strict sense sociological. They depend on both domains at the same time, and could be termed socio-psychical. They are of interest to the sociologist without constituting the immediate content of sociology. The same characteristic is to be found in the organisms of those mixed phenomena of nature studied in the combined sciences such as biochemistry.

It may be objected that a phenomenon can only be collective if it is common to all the members of society, or at the very least to a majority, and consequently, if it is general. This is doubtless the case, but if it is general it is because it is collective (that is, more or less obligatory); but it is very far from being collective because it is general. It is a condition of the group repeated in individuals because it imposes itself upon them. It is in each part because it is in the whole, but far from being in the whole because it is in the parts. This is supremely evident in those beliefs and practices which are handed down to us ready fashioned by previous generations. We accept and adopt them because, since they are the work of the collectivity and one that is centuries old, they are invested with a special authority that our education has taught us to recognise and respect. It is worthy of note that the vast majority of social phenomena come to us in this way. But even when the social fact is partly due to our direct co-operation, it is no different in nature. An outburst of collective emotion in a gathering does not merely express the sum total of what individual feelings share in common, but is something of a very different order, as we have demonstrated. It is a product of shared existence, of actions and reactions called into play between the consciousnesses of individuals. If it is echoed in each one of them it is precisely by virtue of the special energy derived from its collective origins. If all hearts beat in unison, this is not as a consequence of a spontaneous, pre-established harmony; it is because one and the same force is propelling them in the same direction. Each one is borne along by the rest.

We have therefore succeeded in delineating for ourselves the exact field of sociology. It embraces one single, well defined group of phenomena. A social fact is identifiable through the power of external coercion which it exerts or is capable of exerting upon individuals. The presence of this power is in turn recognisable because of the existence of some pre-determined sanction, or

through the resistance that the fact opposes to any individual action that may threaten it. However, it can also be defined by ascertaining how widespread it is within the group, provided that, as noted above, one is careful to add a second essential characteristic; this is, that it exists independently of the particular forms that it may assume in the process of spreading itself within the group. In certain cases this latter criterion can even be more easily applied than the former one. The presence of constraint is easily ascertainable when it is manifested externally through some direct reaction of society, as in the case of law, morality, beliefs, customs and even fashions. But when constraint is merely indirect, as with that exerted by an economic organisation, it is not always so clearly discernible. Generally combined with objectivity may then be easier to establish. Moreover, this second definition is simply another formulation of the first one: if a mode of behaviour existing outside the consciousnesses of individuals becomes general, it can only do so by exerting pressure upon them.<sup>3</sup>

However, one may well ask whether this definition is complete. Indeed the facts which have provided us with its basis are all ways of functioning: they are 'physiological' in nature. But there are also collective ways of being, namely, social facts of an 'anatomical' or morphological nature. Sociology cannot dissociate itself from what concerns the substratum of collective life. Yet the number and nature of the elementary parts which constitute society, the way in which they are articulated, the degree of coalescence they have attained, the distribution of population over the earth's surface, the extent and nature of the network of communications, the design of dwellings, etc., do not at first sight seem relatable to ways of acting, feeling or thinking.

Yet, first and foremost, these various phenomena present the same characteristic which has served us in defining the others. These ways of being impose themselves upon the individual just as do the ways of acting we have dealt with. In fact, when we wish to learn how a society is divided up politically, in what its divisions consist and the degree of solidarity that exists between them, it is not through physical inspection and geographical observation that we may come to find this out: such divisions are social, although they may have some physical basis. It is only through public law that we can study such political organisation, because this law is that determines its nature, just as it determines our domestic and

civic relationships. The organisation is no less a form of compulsion. If the population clusters together in our cities instead of being scattered over the rural areas, it is because there exists a trend of opinion, a collective drive which imposes this concentration upon individuals. We can no more choose the design of our houses than the cut of our clothes – at least, the one is as much obligatory as the other. The communication network forcibly prescribes the direction of internal migrations or commercial exchanges, etc., and even their intensity. Consequently, at the most there are grounds for adding one further category to the list of phenomena already enumerated as bearing the distinctive stamp of a social fact. But as that enumeration was in no wise strictly exhaustive, this addition would not be indispensable.

Moreover, it does not even serve a purpose, for these ways of being are only ways of acting that have been consolidated. A society's political structure is only the way in which its various component segments have become accustomed to living with each other. If relationships between them are traditionally close, the segments tend to merge together; if the contrary, they tend to remain distinct. The type of dwelling imposed upon us is merely the way in which everyone around us and, in part, previous generations, have customarily built their houses. The communication network is only the channel which has been cut by the regular current of commerce and migrations, etc., flowing in the same direction. Doubtless if phenomena of a morphological kind were the only ones that displayed this rigidity, it might be thought that they constituted a separate species. But a legal rule is no less permanent an arrangement than an architectural style, and yet it is a 'physiological' fact. A simple moral maxim is certainly not malleable, yet it is cast in forms much more rigid than a mere professional custom or fashion. Thus there exists a whole range of gradations which, without any break in continuity, join the most clearly delineated structural facts to those free currents of social life which are not yet caught in any definite mould. This therefore signifies that the differences between them concern only degree to which they have become consolidated. Both are forms of life at varying stages of crystallisation. It would undoubtedly be advantageous to reserve the term 'morphological' for those social facts which relate to the social substratum, but only on condition that one is aware that they are of the same nature as the other.

Our definition will therefore subsume all that has to be defined if it states:

*A social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint;*  
or:

*which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations.*<sup>4</sup>

#### Notes

1. Moreover, this is not to say that all constraint is normal. We shall return to this point later.
  2. Suicides do not occur at any age, nor do they occur at all ages of life with the same frequency.
  3. It can be seen how far removed this definition of the social fact is from that which serves as the basis for the ingenious system of Tarde. We must first state that our research has nowhere led us to corroborate the genesis of collective facts. Moreover, from this definition, which is not a theory but a mere résumé of the immediate data observed, it seems clearly to follow that imitation does not always express, it is never expresses, what is essential and characteristic in the social fact. Doubtless every social fact is imitated and has, as we have just shown, a tendency to become generalised, but this is because it is social, i.e. obligatory. Its capacity for expansion is not the cause but the consequence of its sociological character. If social facts were unique in bringing about this effect, imitation might serve, if not to explain them, at least to define them. But an individual state which impacts on others none the less remains individual. Moreover, one may speculate whether the term 'imitation' is indeed appropriate to designate a proliferation which occurs through some coercive influence. In such a single term very different phenomena, which need to be distinguished, are confused.
- This close affinity of life and structure, organ and function, can be readily established in sociology because there exists between these two extremes a whole series of intermediate stages, immediately observable, which reveal the link between them. Biology lacks this methodological resource. But one may believe legitimately that that, in organisms as in societies, are applicable to biology and social facts only differences in degree exist.

resolved, such as those relating to ascertaining whether the weakening of religious belief and the development of state power are normal phenomena or not.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, this method should in no case be substituted for the previous one. It requires a more detailed procedure. It raises questions which require later discussion and which cannot be tackled save at a stage already fairly advanced in the history of science. This is because, in short, it entails an almost comprehensive explanation of phenomena, since it presupposes that either their causes or their functions are determined. At the very beginning of our research it is important to be able to distinguish facts as normal or abnormal, except for a few exceptional cases, in order to assign physiology and pathology to each of their proper domain. Next, it is in relation to the normal that the abnormal must be found useful or necessary in order to see if it is a deviation from the normal. It could be demonstrated that sickness and health are indistinguishable, since the former necessarily derives from the organism suffering from it. It is only with the normal organism that sickness does not sustain the same relation to health. In the same way the application of a remedy, since it is useful to the sick organism, might pass for a normal phenomenon, although it is plainly abnormal, since only in abnormal circumstances does it possess this utility. This method can therefore only be used if the normal type has previously been constituted, which could only have been done by using a different procedure. Finally, and above all, if it is true that everything which is normal is useful without being necessary, it is untrue that everything which is useful is normal. We can indeed be certain that those states which have become generalized in the species are more useful than those which have continued to be exceptional. We cannot, however, be certain that they are necessary for the species to exist or can exist. We have no grounds for believing that all the possible combinations have been exhausted in the course of the process; among those which have never been realized but are conceivable, there are perhaps some which are much more advantageous than those known to us. The notion of utility goes beyond that of the normal, and is to the normal what the genus is to the species. That it is impossible to deduce the general from the lesser, the species from the genus, although we may do so over the genus from the species, since it is contained within it. This is why, once the general nature of the phenomena has been ascertained, we

may confirm the results of the first method by using the second. The second method may be formulated in the three following rules.

- (1) *A social fact is normal for a given social type, viewed at a given phase of its development, when it occurs in the average society of that species, considered at the corresponding phase of its evolution.*
- (2) *The results of the preceding method can be verified by demonstrating that the general character of the phenomenon is related to the general conditions of collective life in the social type under consideration.*
- (3) *This verification is necessary when this fact relates to a social species which has not yet gone through its complete evolution.*

III

We are so accustomed to resolving glibly these difficult questions and to deciding rapidly, after cursory observation and by dint of syllogisms, whether a social fact is normal or not, that this procedure will perhaps be adjudged uselessly complicated. It seems unnecessary to have to go to such lengths to distinguish sickness from health. Do we not make these distinctions every day? This is true, but it remains to be seen whether we make them appositely. The difficulty of these problems is concealed because we see the biologist resolve them with comparative ease. Yet we forget that it is much easier for him than for the sociologist to see how each phenomenon affects the strength of the organism and thereby to determine its normal or abnormal character with an accuracy which is adequate for all practical purposes. In sociology the complexity and the much more changing nature of the facts constrain us to take many more precautions, as is proved by the conflicting judgements on the same phenomenon emitted by the different parties concerned. To show clearly how great this circumspection must be, we shall illustrate by a few examples to what errors we are exposed when we do not constrain ourselves in this way and in how different a light the most vital phenomena appear when they are dealt with methodically.

If there is a fact whose pathological nature appears indisputable, it is crime. All criminologists agree on this score. Although they explain this pathology differently, they none the less unanimously

acknowledge it. However, the problem needs to be treated less summarily.

Let us in fact apply the rules previously laid down. Crime is not only observed in most societies of a particular species, but in all societies of all types. There is not one in which criminality does not exist, although it changes in form and the actions which are termed criminal are not everywhere the same. Yet everywhere and always there have been men who have conducted themselves in such a way as to bring down punishment upon their heads. If at least, as societies pass from lower to higher types, the crime rate (the relationship between the annual crime figures and population figures) tended to fall, we might believe that, although still remaining a normal phenomenon, crime tended to lose that character of normality. Yet there is no single ground for believing such a regression to be real. Many facts would rather seem to point to the existence of a movement in the opposite direction. From the beginning of the century statistics provide us with a means of following the progression of criminality. It has everywhere increased, and in France the increase is of the order of 300 per cent. Thus there is no phenomenon which represents more incontrovertibly all the symptoms of normality, since it appears to be closely bound up with the conditions of all collective life. To make crime a social illness would be to concede that sickness is not something accidental, but on the contrary derives in certain cases from the fundamental constitution of the living creature. This would be to erase any distinction between the physiological and the pathological. It can certainly happen that crime itself has normal forms; this is what happens, for instance, when it reaches an excessively high level. There is no doubt that this excessiveness is pathological in nature. What is normal is simply that criminality exists, provided that for each social type it does not reach or go beyond a certain level which it is perhaps not impossible to fix in conformity with the previous rules.<sup>10</sup>

We are faced with a conclusion which is apparently somewhat paradoxical. Let us make no mistake: to classify crime among the phenomena of normal sociology is not merely to declare that it is an inevitable though regrettable phenomenon arising from the incorrigible wickedness of men; it is to assert that it is a factor in public health, an integrative element in any healthy society. At first sight this result is so surprising that it disconcerted even

ourselves for a long time. However, once that first impression of surprise has been overcome it is not difficult to discover reasons to explain this normality and at the same time to confirm it.

In the first place, crime is normal because it is completely impossible for any society entirely free of it to exist.

Crime, as we have shown elsewhere, consists of an action which offends certain collective feelings which are especially strong and clear-cut. In any society, for actions regarded as criminal to cease, the feelings that they offend would need to be found in each individual consciousness without exception and in the degree of strength requisite to counteract the opposing feelings. Even supposing that this condition could effectively be fulfilled, crime would not thereby disappear; it would merely change in form, for the very cause which made the well-springs of criminality to dry up would immediately open up new ones.

Indeed, for the collective feelings, which the penal law of a people at a particular moment in its history protects, to penetrate individual consciousnesses that had hitherto remained closed to them, or to assume greater authority — whereas previously they had not possessed enough — they would have to acquire an intensity greater than they had had up to then. The community as a whole must feel them more keenly, for they cannot draw from any other source the additional force which enables them to bear down upon individuals who formerly were the most refractory. For murderers to disappear, the horror of bloodshed must increase in those strata of society from which murderers are recruited; but for this to happen the abhorrence must increase throughout society. Moreover, the very absence of crime would contribute directly to bringing about that result, for a sentiment appears much more respectable when it is always and uniformly respected. But we overlook the fact that these strong states of the common consciousness cannot be reinforced in this way without the weaker states, the violation of which previously gave rise to mere breaches of convention, being reinforced at the same time, for the weaker states are no more than the extension and attenuated form of the stronger ones. Thus, for example, theft and mere misappropriation of property offend the same altruistic sentiment, the respect for other people's possessions. However, this sentiment is offended less strongly by the latter action than the former. Moreover, since the average consciousness does not have suffi-



cient intensity of feeling to feel strongly about the lesser of these two offences, the latter is the object of greater tolerance. This is why the misappropriator is merely censured, while the thief is punished. But if this sentiment grows stronger, to such a degree that it extinguishes in the consciousness the tendency to theft that men possess, they will become more sensitive to these minor offences, which up to then had had only a marginal effect upon them. They will react with greater intensity against these lesser faults, which will become the object of severer condemnation, so that, from the mere moral errors that they were, some will pass into the category of crimes. For example, dishonest contracts or those fulfilled dishonestly, which only incur public censure or civil redress, will become crimes. Imagine a community of saints in an exemplary and perfect monastery. In it crime as such will be unknown, but faults that appear venial to the ordinary person will arouse the same scandal as does normal crime in ordinary consciences. If therefore that community has the power to judge and punish, it will term such acts criminal and deal with them as such.

It is for the same reason that the completely honourable man judges his slightest moral failings with a severity that the mass of people reserves for acts that are truly criminal. In former times acts of violence against the person were more frequent than they are today because respect for individual dignity was weaker. As it has increased, such crimes have become less frequent, but many acts which offended against that sentiment have been incorporated into the penal code, which did not previously include them.

In order to exhaust all the logically possible hypotheses, it will perhaps be asked why this unanimity should not cover all collective sentiments without exception, and why even the weakest sentiments should not evoke sufficient power to forestall any dissentient voice. The moral conscience of society would be found in its entirety in every individual, endowed with sufficient force to prevent the commission of any act offending against it, whether purely conventional failings or crimes. But such universal and absolute uniformity is utterly impossible, for the immediate physical environment in which each one of us is placed, our hereditary antecedents, the social influences upon which we depend, vary from one individual to another and consequently cause a diversity of consciences. It is impossible for everyone to be alike in this matter, by virtue of the fact that we each have our own

organic constitution and occupy different areas in space. This is why, even among lower peoples where individual originality is very little developed, such originality does however exist. Thus, since there cannot be a society in which individuals do not diverge to some extent from the collective type, it is also inevitable that among these deviations some assume a criminal character. What confers upon them this character is not the intrinsic importance of the acts but the importance which the common consciousness ascribes to them. Thus if the latter is stronger and possesses sufficient authority to make these divergences very weak in absolute terms, it will also be more sensitive and exacting. By reacting against the slightest deviations with an energy which it elsewhere employs against those what are more weighty, it endues them with the same gravity and will brand them as criminal.

Thus crime is necessary. It is linked to the basic conditions of social life, but on this very account is useful, for the conditions to which it is bound are themselves indispensable to the normal evolution of morality and law.

Indeed today we can no longer dispute the fact that not only do law and morality vary from one social type to another, but they even change within the same type if the conditions of collective existence are modified. Yet for these transformations to be made possible, the collective sentiments at the basis of morality should not prove unyielding to change, and consequently should be only moderately intense. If they were too strong, they would no longer be malleable. Any arrangement is indeed an obstacle to a new arrangement; this is even more the case the more deep-seated the original arrangement. The more strongly a structure is articulated, the more it resists modification; this is as true for functional as for anatomical patterns. If there were no crimes, this condition would not be fulfilled, for such a hypothesis presumes that collective sentiments would have attained a degree of intensity unparalleled in history. Nothing is good indefinitely and without limits. The authority which the moral consciousness enjoys must not be excessive; for otherwise no one would dare to attack it and it would petrify too easily into an immutable form. For it to evolve, individual originality must be allowed to manifest itself. But so that the originality of the idealist who dreams of transcending his era may display itself, that of the criminal, which falls short of the age, must also be possible. One does not go without the other.

Nor is this all. Beyond this indirect utility, crime itself may play a useful part in this evolution. Not only does it imply that the way to necessary changes remains open, but in certain cases it also directly prepares for these changes. Where crime exists, collective sentiments are not only in the state of plasticity necessary to assume a new form, but sometimes it even contributes to determining beforehand the shape they will take on. Indeed, how often is it only an anticipation of the morality to come, a progression towards what will be! According to Athenian law, Socrates was a criminal and his condemnation was entirely just. However, his crime — his independence of thought — was useful not only for humanity but for his country. It served to prepare a way for a new morality and a new faith, which the Athenians then needed because the traditions by which they had hitherto lived no longer corresponded to the conditions of their existence. Socrates's case is not an isolated one, for it recurs periodically in history. The freedom of thought that we at present enjoy could never have been asserted if the rules that forbade it had not been violated before they were solemnly abrogated. However, at the time the violation was a crime, since it was an offence against sentiments still keenly felt in the average consciousness. Yet this crime was useful since it was the prelude to changes which were daily becoming more necessary. Liberal philosophy has had as its precursors heretics of all kinds whom the secular arm rightly punished through the Middle Ages and has continued to do so almost up to the present day.

From this viewpoint the fundamental facts of criminology appear to us in an entirely new light. Contrary to current ideas, the criminal no longer appears as an utterly unsociable creature, a sort of parasitic element, a foreign, unassimilable body introduced into the bosom of society.<sup>12</sup> He plays a normal role in social life. For its part, crime must no longer be conceived of as an evil which cannot be circumscribed closely enough. Far from there being cause for congratulation when it drops too noticeably below the normal level, this apparent progress assuredly coincides with and is linked to some social disturbance. Thus the number of crimes of assault never falls so low as it does in times of scarcity.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, at the same time, and as a reaction, the theory of punishment is revised, or rather should be revised. If in fact crime is a sickness, punishment is the cure for it and cannot be conceived of otherwise.

thus all the discussion aroused revolves round knowing what punishment should be to fulfil its role as a remedy. But if crime is in no way pathological, the object of punishment cannot be to cure it and its true function must be sought elsewhere.

Thus the rules previously enunciated are far from having as their sole reason to satisfy a logical formalism which lacks any great utility. This is because, on the contrary, according to whether they are applied or not, the most essential social facts totally change their character. If the example quoted is particularly cogent — and this is why we thought we should dwell upon it — there are nevertheless many others which could usefully be cited. There are no society where it is not the rule that the punishment should fit the crime — and yet for the Italian school of thought this principle is a mere invention of legal theoreticians devoid of any solid basis.<sup>14</sup> For these criminologists the whole institution of punishment, as it has functioned up to the present among all known peoples, is a phenomenon which goes against nature. We have already seen that for Garofalo the criminality peculiar to the lower forms of society has nothing natural about it. For the socialists it is capitalist deviation from the normal state and is an organisation brought about by violence and trickery. On the other hand for Spencer it is our administrative centralisation and the extension of governmental power which are the radical vices of our societies, in spite of the fact that both have developed entirely regularly and universally over the course of history. The belief is that one is never obliged systematically to decide on the normal or abnormal character of social facts according to their degree of generality. It is always by a great display of dialectic that these questions are resolved.

However, by laying this criterion on one side, not only is one exposed to confusion and partial errors like those just discussed, but science itself becomes impossible. Indeed its immediate object, the study of the normal type, but if the most general facts can be pathological, it may well be that the normal type has never really existed. Hence what use is it to study facts? They can only confirm our prejudices and root us more deeply in our errors, since they spring from them. If punishment and responsibility, as they exist in history, are merely a product of ignorance and barbarism, what use is it to strive to know them in order to determine their normal forms? Thus the mind is led to turn away from a reality which from

then on lacks interest for us, turning in upon itself to seek the materials necessary to reconstruct that reality. For sociology to deal with facts as things, the sociologist must feel a need to learn from them. The principal purpose of any science of life, whether individual or social, is in the end to define and explain the normal state and distinguish it from the abnormal. If normality does not inhere in the things themselves, if on the contrary it is a characteristic which we impose upon them externally or, for whatever reason, refuse to do so, this salutary state of dependence on things is lost. The mind complacently faces a reality that has not much to teach it. It is no longer contained by the subject matter to which it applies itself, since in some respects it determines that subject matter. The different rules that we have established up to now are therefore closely linked. For sociology really to be a science of things, the generality of phenomena must be taken as the criterion of their normality.

Moreover, our method has the advantage of regulating action at the same time as thought. If what is deemed desirable is not the object of observation, but can and must be determined by some sort of mental calculus, no limit, in a manner of speaking, can be laid down to the free inventions of the imagination in their search for the best. For how can one assign to perfection bounds that it cannot exceed? By definition it escapes all limitations. The goal of humanity thus recedes to infinity, discouraging not a few by its very remoteness, arousing and exciting others, on the other hand, who, so as to draw a little nearer to it, hasten their steps and throw themselves into revolutionary activity. This practical dilemma is avoided if what is desirable is declared to be what is healthy, and if the state of health is something definite, inherent in things, for at the same time the extent of our effort is given and defined. There is no longer need to pursue desperately an end which recedes as we move forward; we need only to work steadily and persistently to maintain the normal state, to re-establish it if it is disturbed, and to rediscover the conditions of normality if they happen to change. The duty of the statesman is no longer to propel societies violently towards an ideal which appears attractive to him. His role is rather that of the doctor: he forestalls the outbreak of sickness by maintaining good hygiene, or when it does break out, seeks to cure it.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

1. Through this we can distinguish the case of sickness from monstrosity. The second is an exception only in space; it is not met with in the individuals in which it is to be found. Yet it is clear that these two orders of facts differ only in degree and basically are of the same nature. The boundaries drawn between them are very imprecise, for sickness can also have a lasting character and abnormality can evolve. Thus in defining them we can hardly separate them rigidly. The distinction between them cannot be more categorical than that between the morphological and the physiological, since after all morbidity is abnormal in the physiological order just as monstrosity is in the anatomical order.
2. For example, the savage who had the reduced digestive tube and developed nervous system of the civilised healthy being would be considered sick in relationship to his environment.
3. This section of our argument is abridged, for we can only reiterate here regarding social facts in general what we have said elsewhere (Cf. *Division du travail social*, pp. 33-9.)
4. It is true that Garofalo has attempted to distinguish the sick from the abnormal (*Criminologie*, pp. 109, 110). But the sole two arguments on which he relies to make this distinction are:
  - (1) The word 'sickness' always signifies something which tends to the total or partial destruction of the organism. If there is not destruction, there is a cure, but never stability, such as exists in several abnormalities. But we have just seen that the abnormal is also, in the average case, a threat to the living creature. It is true that this is not always so, but the dangers that sickness entails likewise exist only in average circumstances. As for the absence of stability allegedly distinctive of the morbid, this leaves out of account chronic illnesses and is to divide the study of monstrosities from that of the pathological. The monstrosities are permanent.
  - (2) It is stated that the normal and abnormal vary according to different races, while the distinction between the physiological and the pathological is valid for all the human race. On the contrary, we have shown that what is morbid for the savage is not so for the civilised person. The conditions of physical health vary according to different environments.
5. It is true that one may speculate whether, when a phenomenon derives necessarily from the general conditions of life, this very fact does not make it useful. We cannot deal with this philosophical question, although we touch upon it a little later.
6. Cf. on this point a note we published in the *Revue philosophique* (November 1893) on 'La définition du socialisme'.

direction in which social events are proceeding, one may simply have compared what occurs at the decline of each species with what occurs at the beginning of the succeeding one. Using this procedure, it was believed, for example, that one could state that the weakening of religious beliefs and of all traditionalism could only ever be a transitory phenomenon in the life of peoples, because it manifested itself only during the final phase of their existence and ceases as soon as a new stage of evolution takes over. In employing such a method one risks taking for the steady and necessary march of progress what is the effect of a completely different cause. In fact, the condition in which a young society finds itself is not simply the prolongation of that at which the societies it replaces had arrived at the end of their existence. It arises partly from that very state of youthfulness which stops the products of the experiences of the previous peoples from all becoming immediately assimilable and utilisable. Likewise, the child receives from his parents faculties and predispositions which come into play only much later in life. It is therefore possible – to continue the same example – that the return to traditionalism observed at the beginning of every people's history is due to the special conditions in which every young society is placed, and not to the fact that the waning of that phenomenon can never be anything but transitory. The comparison can therefore only serve as proof if we can eliminate this disturbing factor of the age of a society. To do this, it will be sufficient to consider the societies which *one* is comparing at the same period of their development. Thus in order to ascertain the direction in which a social phenomenon is evolving, one will compare what it is doing the 'youth' of every species with what the phenomenon becomes in the 'youth' of the succeeding species. According to whether it differs from one of these stages to the next, it displays more, less or as much intensity, one will be able to state whether it is progressing, regressing or remaining static.

#### Notes

1. *Cours de philosophie positive*, IV, p. 328.
2. Cf. J. S. Mill, *System of Logic*, vol. II, book VI, ch. VII, p. 476.
3. *Division du travail social*, p. 87.
4. In the case of the method of difference, the absence of the cause excludes the presence of the effect.

## Conclusion

To summarise, the characteristics of the sociological method are as follows:

Firstly, it is independent of all philosophy. Since sociology sprang from the great philosophical doctrines, it has been in the habit of relying on some system with which it has therefore identified itself. Thus it has been successively positivist, evolutionist and spiritualist, when it should have contented itself with being just sociology. We should even hesitate to term it naturalistic, unless by this we mean only that it regards social facts as explicable naturally. In that case the epithet is somewhat useless, since it merely means that the sociologist is engaged in scientific work and is not a mystic. But we reject the word if it is assigned a doctrinal meaning relating to the essence of social things – if, for instance, it is meant that they are reducible to the other cosmic forces. Sociology has no need to take sides between the grand hypotheses which divide the metaphysicians. Nor has it to affirm free will rather than determinism. All that it asks to be granted it, is that the principle of causality should be applicable to social phenomena. Moreover, this principle is posed by it not as a rational necessity, but only as an empirical postulate, the product of a legitimate induction. Since the law of causality has been verified in the other domains of nature and has progressively extended its authority from the physical and chemical world to the biological world, and from the latter to the psychological world, one may justifiably grant that it is likewise true of the social world. Today it is possible to add that the research undertaken on the basis of this postulate tends to confirm this. But the question of knowing whether the nature of the causal link excludes all contingency is not thereby resolved.

Moreover, philosophy itself has every interest in seeing this emancipation of sociology. For, so long as the sociologist has not shed sufficiently the mantle of the philosopher, he will consider social matters only from their most general angle, that in which they most resemble the other things in the universe. Now if sociology, conceived of in this fashion, may serve to illustrate a philosophy with curious facts, it cannot enrich it with new vistas, since it would not point to anything new in the subject matter of philosophy. But in reality, if the basic facts of other fields of knowledge are to be found in the social domain, it is under special forms which cause us to understand its nature better because they are its highest expression. But, in order to perceive them in this light, we must abandon generalities and enter into the detailed examination of facts. Thus sociology, as it becomes more specialised, will provide additional original matter for philosophical reflection. Already what has been set out has been able to give some insight into how essential notions such as those of species, organ, function, health and sickness, cause and finality are displayed in an entirely novel light. Moreover, is it not sociology which is destined to highlight in all its aspects an idea which might well be at the basis not only of a psychology, but of an entire philosophy, the idea of association?

Face to face with practical doctrines, our method allows and commands the same independence. Sociology thus understood will be neither individualist, communist or socialist, in the sense commonly attributed to those words. On principle, it will ignore these theories, which it could not acknowledge to have any scientific value, since they tend not directly to express social facts but to reform them. At least, if sociology is interested in them, it is in so far as it sees in them social facts which may help it to understand social reality by clarifying the needs which operate in society. Nevertheless, this is not to say that sociology should profess no interest in practical questions. On the contrary, it has been seen that our constant preoccupation has been to guide it towards some practical outcome. It encounters these problems necessarily at the end of its investigations. But from the very fact that the problems do not manifest themselves until that moment and that, consequently, they arise out of facts and not from passions, it may be predicted that they will present themselves to the sociologist in completely different terms than to the masses.

Moreover, the solutions, although incomplete, that sociology can provide to them will not chime exactly with those which attract the various interest groups. But the role of sociology, from this viewpoint, must consist precisely in liberating us from all parties. This will be done not so much by opposing one doctrine to other doctrines, but by causing those minds confronted with these questions to develop a special attitude, one that science alone can give through direct contact with things. Indeed, it alone can teach us to treat, with respect but without idolatry, historical institutions of whatever kind, by causing us to be aware, at one and the same time, of what is necessary and provisional about them, their strength of resistance and their infinite variability.

In the second place, our method is objective. It is wholly dominated by the idea that social facts are things and must be treated as such. Doubtless this principle is also found, in slightly different form, at the basis of the doctrines of Comte and Spencer. But these great thinkers formulated it theoretically rather than put it into practice. But for it not to remain a dead letter, it was not sufficient merely to publish it abroad; it had to be made the basis of an entire discipline, an idea that would take hold of the scholar at the very moment when he is entering upon the object of his research and which would accompany him step by step in all his operations. It was to establish that discipline that we have devoted our work. We have shown how the sociologist had to lay aside the preconceived notions that he held about the facts in order to confront the facts themselves; how he had to penetrate to them through their most objective characteristics; how he had to address himself to them in order to find a means of classifying them as healthy or pathological; how, finally, he had to be inspired by the same principle in seeking out explanations as in proving these explanations. For once we become aware that we are in the presence of things, we no longer dream of explaining them by calculations of utility or by reasoning of any kind. We understand so well the gulf that lies between such causes and such effects. A thing is a force which can only be engendered by another force. Thus, to account for social facts, we investigate the forces capable of producing them. Not only are the explanations different, but they are proved differently, or rather, it is only then that the need to prove them is felt. If sociological phenomena were mere objectivised systems of ideas, to explain them would consist of

thinking them through again in their logical order and this explanation would be a proof in itself. At the most, there might be a need to confirm it by a few examples. On the contrary, only methodical experimentation can force things to yield up their secrets.

But if we consider social facts as things, it is as *social things*. The third feature which is characteristic of our method is that it is exclusively sociological. It has often seemed that these phenomena, because of their extreme complexity, were either intractable to science or could only become part of it if reduced to their elementary conditions, either psychical or organic, that is to say, divested of their proper nature. On the contrary, we have undertaken to establish that it is possible to deal with them scientifically without taking away any of their specific characteristics. We have even refused to relate the immateriality *sui generis* which characterises them to the immateriality of psychological phenomena, which is moreover already very complex. We are thus all the more prohibited from assimilating them, as does the Italian school, into the general properties of organised matter.<sup>1</sup> We have demonstrated that a social fact cannot be explained except by another social fact and at the same time have shown how this sort of explanation is possible by indicating what within the inner social environment is the principal motivating force of collective evolution. Thus sociology is not the appendage of any other science; it is itself a distinct and autonomous science. The sense of the specific nature of social reality is even so essential to the sociologist that only a purely sociological culture can prepare him for the understanding of social facts.

We regard this progress of sociological culture as the most important of all the steps that remain to be taken in sociology. Undoubtedly when a science is in the process of being created one is indeed forced, in order to construct it, to refer to the sole models which exist, namely those of sciences already constructed. There is in them, a treasure-house of ready-made experiences which would be foolish not to exploit. However, a science cannot be considered definitively constituted until it has succeeded in establishing its own independent status. For it lacks any justification for existing unless its subject matter is an order of facts which other sciences do not study, since it is impossible for the same notions to fit identically things of a different nature.

Such appear to us to be the rules of sociological method.

This set of rules will perhaps appear needlessly complicated if compared to the procedures currently in use. All this apparatus of precautions can seem very laborious for a science which up to now has demanded hardly more than a general and philosophical culture of its devotees. It is indeed certain that the application of such a method cannot have the effect of stimulating further common curiosity about sociological matters. When, as a preliminary condition for initiation into sociology, people are asked to discard concepts which they are in the habit of applying to a particular order of things, to rethink these things with renewed effort, we cannot expect to enlist a numerous clientèle. But this is not the goal towards which we strive. We believe, on the contrary, that the time has come for sociology to renounce worldly successes, so to speak, and take on the esoteric character which befits all science. Thus it will gain in dignity and authority what it will perhaps lose in popularity. For, so long as it remains embroiled in partisan struggles and is content to elaborate, with indeed more logic than commonly employed, common ideas, and in consequence presumes no special competence, it has no right to speak authoritatively enough to quell passions and dispel prejudices. Assuredly the time is still remote when it will be able effectively to play this role. Yet, from this very moment onwards, we must work to place it in a position to fulfil this part.

note

It is therefore improper to characterise our method as materialist.