Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel and Ferdinand Tönnies: Social Differentiation and Functionalist Sociology

Emile Durkheim

- General presuppositions and/or theoretical affiliations and influences: functionalism, history as a process of social differentiation; Auguste Comte, Wilhelm Wundt, Georg Simmel, American Pragmatism.
- Model/paradigm(s): primitive and modern society.
- Concepts: mechanical solidarity (under the conditions of a minimal division of labour, no developed forms of individuality, enforced collective rules and repressive forms in primitive society); organic solidarity (under the conditions of a highly developed division of labour, developed forms of subjectivity, with voluntary associations and the internalisation of norms in a modern society); anomie.
- Empirical environment(s): France, modern Continental Europe.

Despite the fact that analysis of American society did not play a major role in the writings of Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel and Ferdinand Tönnies, their classic contributions to the formation of sociological concepts are crucial to our purposes of studying the historical semantics of social stratification in the case of America – and therefore must be given due attention. We shall first look at Emile Durkheim’s contribution and then focus on the relevant sociological essays of Georg Simmel and the work of Ferdinand Tönnies. This
will be followed by a brief discussion on the usefulness of the contributions of the three sociologist vis-à-vis the analysis of America’s system of social stratification.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was, after Auguste Comte, the secondary ‘founder’ of sociology in France. After having taught in the provinces for some time and after a longer stay in Germany, Durkheim finally became a professor of sociology and education at the University of Bordeaux. Only late in life (1912) did Durkheim receive a professorship from the Sorbonne in Paris. The pioneering and renowned journal L’Année Sociologique which Durkheim edited with Marcel Mauss was partly responsible for making his fame, but it was the publication of four major studies, which all became classic readings in the discipline and which truly established Durkheim’s reputation as a sociologist. These four studies were: The Division of Labour in Society, The Rules of Sociological Method, Suicide, and Elementary Forms of Religious Life.

The fact that Durkheim’s work appears to be much more coherent than Marx’s and Weber’s, is due to the fact that he was not a critic of political economy torn between serious analysis and value judgements as were Marx and Engels, nor a political economist like Weber, who broadened his approach in an attempt to give the newly emerging field of sociology a proper foundation. Durkheim was a pure sociologist from the very beginning of his career; additionally, he used a functionalist approach to analyse society— which again serves to minimise the risk of being self-contradictive. Functionalism can be defined as ‘an investigation of society as if it were a system of parts, which are interconnected to form various structures, each of which fulfils some function for the system’ (Grabb, 1984: 71) In the functionalist approach, society is seen as resembling the living organism. To keep a living organism alive, different parts of this organism must fulfil certain tasks; they must contribute to, and function in accordance with the needs of the organism. As with the functions of a living organism parts of, or better still, sub-systems of a society respond to the needs of the living body called ‘society’. The functionalist approach permits the sociologist to pose such questions as ‘How is society possible’, ‘What does society consist of?’, and ‘What is holding or binding society together?’ In The Rules of Sociological Method Durkheim made it clear that sociology differs from political economy and the critique of