

THE POWER AND HERMENEUTIC LIMITS OF SOCIAL FACT ANALYSIS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE RESEARCH ON TURKEY*

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Abstract: The character of prominent political science explanation on central questions of political modernity in Turkey reflects the philosophical underpinnings of social fact analysis as articulated by Emile Durkheim. Social fact analysis is particularly interesting in relation to ongoing philosophical discussions in the philosophy of social inquiry that reveal both its analytical power and limits in contrast to hermeneutical approaches to social explanation. Here I seek to illuminate both of these elements – the power of social fact analysis and its limits – as a way of suggesting Durkheim’s significant and ongoing impact on political science inquiry on Turkey.

Keyword: Durkheim, social fact analysis, Turkey, political modernity

Türkiye Hakkındaki Siyaset Bilimi Araştırmalarında Sosyal Olgu Çözümlemesinin Gücü ve Yorumbilgisel Kısıtları

Özet: Türkiye’de siyasi modernitenin merkezi sorusu üzerine başat siyaset bilimi açıklamasının karakteri Emile Durkheim tarafından ortaya konan sosyal olgu çözümlemesinin felsefi desteklerini yansıtır. Sosyal açıklamaya yorumbilgisel yaklaşımların zıddına sosyal araştırma felsefesinde devam eden felsefi tartışmaların analitik gücünü ve kısıtını açığa vuran sosyal olgu çözümlemesi özel olarak ilginçtir. Burada ben Türkiye üzerine siyaset bilimi araştırmalarındaki Durkheim’in önemli ve devam eden etkisini ileri sürmenin bir yolu olarak bu unsurların her ikisini de –sosyal olgu çözümlemesinin gücü ve kısıtları– göstermenin peşindeyim.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Durkheim, sosyal olgu çözümlemesi, araştırması, Türkiye, siyasi modernite

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Huvat köyden havadis vermeye başladı. İlk gittiği avları, yediği davetleri saydı döktü. Arkasından Ermenilerin Gigi'yi bırakıp gitdiklerini söyledi. Atiye, Huvat Gigi lafını açınca Çerçi Boos'u hatırladı. "Gävurluğu kendi başına ya, bir iyi insandı ki!" dedi.¹

Yahudi olmasına rağmen Türkiye'yi çok seviyordu.
Çok iyi arkadaşlık.²

We must ... consider social phenomena in themselves as distinct from the consciously formed representations of them in the mind; we must study them objectively as external things, for it is this character that they present to us.³

A crucial finding of the widely discussed political science study, *Religion, Society and Politics in a Changing Turkey*, sponsored by The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) and conducted by Professors Ali Çarkoğlu and Binnaz Toprak, reflects a deep pessimism concerning attitudes towards democracy, tolerance, and minority rights – essential components of political modernity – in studies of “social values and norms” in Turkey.⁴ “Sensitivity to any kind of minority rights is severely lacking,”⁵ the authors assert, and they suggest that the “sectarian and parochial approach to basic rights” may be understood in terms of three related characteristics of the society: “an underlying conception of ‘us’ versus ‘the other’,” “an inward-

¹ Latife Tekin, *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm [Dear Shameless Death]* (Istanbul: Metis Edibiyat, 1990), 172. “Huvat then launched into his news of life in the village. First he spoke about all the hunting and dining parties he had been asked to attend. Then he informed them that the Armenians had left Gigi village. At the mention of Gigi, Atiye remembered Boos the peddler. ‘It’s true he was a heathen, but he was such a good man!’ she mused.” Translation by Saliha Paker, from Latife Tekin, *Dear Shameless Death*, translated by Saliha Paker (New York: Marion Books, 1983), 221.

² Sakıp Sabancı on the murder of Üzeyir Garip, quoted in, “İş ve Siyaset Dünyası Şokta,” *Radikal*, 26 August, 2001, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=12249&tarih=26/08/2001> (read at the time and accessed via the Internet, May 31, 2009). “Though he was a Jew, he loved Turkey very much. We were very good friends.”

³ Emile Durkheim, “Social Facts,” in Michael Martin and Lee C. McIntyre, *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994), 438.

⁴ Ali Çarkoğlu and Binnaz Toprak, *Religion, Society and Politics in Changing Turkey* (Istanbul: The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, 2006); cf., Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics: Bridge Across Troubled Lands* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 185. For elaboration on the concept of “political modernity,” see, e.g., my “Laiklik and Turkey’s ‘Cultural’ Modernity: Releasing Turkey into Conceptual Space Occupied by Europe,” in *Remaking Turkey: Globalization, Alternative Modernities, and Democracy*, E. Fuat Keyman, ed. (Latham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 35.

⁵ Çarkoğlu and Toprak, *Religion, Society and Politics*, 14.

looking general mindset in society,” and “the introverted character of the people of Turkey.” I quote from two sections of the study (all emphases added):

In tune with this sectarian and parochial approach to basic rights, one could also talk about *an underlying conception of “us” versus “the other.”* Such a distinction between citizens of different religious beliefs or cultural and ethnic backgrounds is a reflection of *an inward-looking general mindset in society*, and provides the most important basis for resistance to developing a multi-cultural and tolerant political milieu in the country. “Us” in this context refers to Turk-Muslim-Sunni, and “other” refers to Kurd-Alevi-non-Muslim. Such a perspective creates a distorted view of the outside world, in which only citizens of Muslim countries are seen as friends, whereas many of Turkey’s long-time allies in the international arena, or neighboring countries rank lower on the ‘friendship’ scale.⁶

... we can talk about the presence of a social cleavage that revolves around the distinction of “us” and “others”. This cleavage is an indicator of *the introverted character of the people of Turkey*. People do not seem to be enthusiastic about developing shared values within a multi-cultural society. Here, “us” as a term refers to individuals who are “Turkish-Muslim-Sunni” and “others” refers to Kurdish, Alevi and non-Muslim people. A great majority of people do not have a positive opinion of “incongruous” individuals who do not comply with social values and norms.⁷

The issue I seek to explore here concerns not the content of these striking assertions as such but rather their social theoretical status as postulations of “an underlying conception,” “a general mindset,” and “the character” of “the people of Turkey.” My concern arises from a noticeable difference between the analytical language of the “us/others distinction,” “an inward-looking general mind-set,” and “the introverted character,” on the one hand, and the language of the survey conducted by the researchers, on the other. Each of the former concepts appears to be supplied by researchers to make sense of and to explain the results of an attitudinal survey that was conducted in the latter terms. The central “social tolerance” question of the survey, for example, asked the more specified question, “Would you object if any of the following people became your neighbor – A family from a different sect, a Kurdish family, a Jewish

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 103.

family, an Armenian family, a Greek family, an atheist family, and a gay couple?”⁸

Of course, that the terms of research are distinct from the theorization of the results of the research is not unusual in social scientific inquiry – indeed, it is quite the norm – but the distinction is quite salient in studies like *Religion, Society and Politics in Changing Turkey* that, as the author’s state, “decisively” seek “to cast new light on the different viewpoints of the public based on data.”⁹ The researchers, that is, aim to make *general* theoretical conclusions about societal ideas based on the empirical data. “Doubtlessly, similar to all research based on a survey, our study aims to determine *general, nationwide inclinations*.”¹⁰

But what is the rationale for the analytical move from a set of particular findings (survey responses) registered in relation to one set of concepts to a theoretical proposition stated in others? What is the underlying philosophical conception that supports this salient departure from the language of the empirical data to asseverate a theoretical position in different terms? I propose the answer to these questions in a way that applies not only to this particular study, but also by implication to similar ones that either share its general conclusion or adopt its basic explanatory form and rationale – in other words, a great deal of political science research on Turkey.

Social Fact Analysis

While the work of Emile Durkheim is not prominent in the training of most political scientists, Durkheim’s analysis of social facts within sociology helps make sense of the theorization of general conceptions or characteristics of a people or society that are stated in different terms than those supplied by the subjects of survey research.¹¹ Social fact analysis offers a theoretical framework within which social scientists may specify phenomena “external to” the

⁸ Ibid., 50. This is “a question that has been asked in many similar studies” (49).

⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Durkheim’s intellectual-analytical relevance to political science in this regard is similar to that of the work of Carl Hempel to all the empiricist-positivist social sciences. Most researchers in social science do not study Hempel’s philosophical account of the deductive-nomological or covering-law character of empiricist social science explanation, but to do so is to see its underlying aims, interests, and presuppositions. See, Hempel’s *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

consciousness of the subject group that explain why the members of that subject group act, think, or feel in the ways that they do.¹²

For Durkheim, social facts are, by definition, ways of thought, belief, conduct, and feeling in a society that “exist outside the individual consciousness” of its individual members and that shape – like obligations embedded in customs and social systems – the consciousness and actions of those individuals.¹³ They “do not originate in any one of the particular consciousnesses. They come to each one of us from without and can carry us away in spite of ourselves.”¹⁴ Social facts do this by “imposing” themselves upon individuals “with a power of coercion.”¹⁵ Durkheim likens this power to that of externally constraining molds: social facts are not therefore determined by the will, “they determine [the will] from without; they are like the molds into which our actions are inevitably shaped.”¹⁶

Of course, when I fully consent and conform to them, this constraint is felt only slightly, if at all, and is therefore unnecessary. But it is, nonetheless, an intrinsic characteristic of these facts, the proof thereof being that it asserts itself as soon as I attempt to resist it.¹⁷

For Durkheim, these facts constitute a distinct realm of scientific phenomena, “and it is to them exclusively that the term ‘social’ ought to be applied... for it is clear that, since their source is not in the individual, their substratum can be no other than society...”¹⁸

Social fact analysis thus provides a rationale for the existence of “things”¹⁹ – like underlying concepts, mindsets, or characteristics – in society that exist external to its individual members that coercively shape the conduct and thought of those members. In this light, the concepts of *Religion, Society and Politics in Changing Turkey* – “an underlying conception of ‘us’ versus ‘the other,’” “an inward-looking general mindset in society,” and “the introverted character of the people of Turkey” – appear to function as social facts. These are ways or

¹² Durkheim, “Social Facts,” 433.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 434.

¹⁵ Ibid., 438.

¹⁶ Ibid., 439.

¹⁷ Ibid., 433.

¹⁸ Ibid., 434.

¹⁹ Ibid., 439-40.

currents of thought, belief, and feeling that may be studied as external to individuals that, as social facts, coercively shape the thoughts, beliefs and feelings of “the people of Turkey,” such that their individual responses on the survey research “indicate” or “reflect” these social facts. The large number of negative responses to what the authors describe as multi-cultural neighborhood scenarios are, in Durkheim’s terms, caused or molded by these three social facts – the underlying conception, the general mindset, and the character. These facts mold a society of “cleavages” and “distinctions,” in which collectively “people do not seem to be enthusiastic about developing shared values within a multi-cultural society.” The “underlying conception of ‘us’ versus ‘the other’” is like an external constraint that “creates a distorted view of the outside world” and “provides the most important basis for resistance to developing a multi-cultural and tolerant political milieu in the country.” That is, I read the implicit philosophical rationale for these assertions in terms of the logic of social fact analysis: the “underlying conception,” “general mindset,” and “societal character” may be seen as coercive molds that cause “a distorted view” and “resistance” to multi-cultural, tolerant politics. Such resistance in turn demonstrates the causally coercive character of the social facts. The later determine the wills of the individual survey respondents like molds into which their thoughts, feelings, and actions are cast.

The striking difference between the language of theorization and the language of the research may thus be understood, I suggest, by viewing the former as having the status of Durkheimian social facts. Since the source of the social fact is society, not the individual, the language of social theorization need not replicate the terms of the survey to which those surveyed directly responded. The social scientist may speak of causal factors – the us/other conception, the inward looking mindset, an introverted character – outside the consciousness of those whose thoughts, feelings, and actions are caused by those factors. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the authors of the report are Durkheimians; I am saying that the analytical logic of these assertions may be reconstructed within the framework of Durkheimian social fact analysis.

The rationale for social facts is further undergirded by the research design that aims for general conclusions. The survey research method seeks to access and identify the general inclinations – “to determine *general, nationwide inclinations*” – within a sampled population through sophisticated sampling means. Thus the general conception, mindset, and character – the social facts –

are reflected in or indicated by the particular response. The language of the response may be both distinct and different from the language of general theorization because the general exists outside or external to the consciousness of the particular. The authors acknowledge and accept that such a design has significant limits in terms of depth and nuance,²⁰ but, similar to all such studies, the articulation of the general is their goal. This general is the “social” – the fact about the nation and its inclinations that the parts indicate or reflect.

Power and Limits

The power of this analytical move in the study of politics and society lies precisely in the way that it accounts for elements of social life outside the immediate consciousness of individuals. It is difficult to dispute the idea that society is not coextensive with subjectivity, and that inquiry based solely on “individuals” – such as Weberian *verstehen* analysis of meanings that individuals “attach to” their actions – sidesteps the study of distinctly social kinds of phenomena.²¹ Methodological individualism appears to fall short in explaining distinctly social phenomena or practices that exist or take shape outside the subjective conceptual world of individuals. The very subjectivity of meaning is in question here: Durkheim’s view of social facts advances the intuitively compelling idea that the meanings individuals attach to their actions cannot be said to be *their own* meanings. Rather, those meanings emanate from outside the individual – for Durkheim in society itself, in its ways of conduct and thought, customs, beliefs, laws, and institutions. These cause, mold, and coerce individual members of society to act, think, and feel in the ways that they do.

From a hermeneutical perspective, however, a problem emerges in the Durkheimian approach that is revealed in the distinction between the language of the survey to which respondents have given *direct* responses and the theoretical stipulations of social facts that have no direct response within the survey. The substantive content of the social facts appears to be determined outside the data obtained from those who those assertions are about (excluding for the moment that the researchers are also members of the society in question;

²⁰ Çarkoğlu and Toprak, *Religion, Society and Politics*, 19.

²¹ For discussion, see Roger Trigg, *Understanding Social Science: A Philosophical Introduction to Social Science* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, second edition 2001), 44–64.

they are not the formal subjects of the study). An “us/others conception,” an “inward-looking general mind-set,” and an “introverted character” are not the terms of the conducted research; they are supplied by the social scientists. In this regard, the status of these terms is hermeneutically suspect, because hermeneutics suggests that the language of theorization be developed from within the dialogical context of inquiry, such that the terms of theorization give expression to the concepts constitutive of the social practices being studied – the meanings and understandings that participants in practices of, for example, neighborliness, neighborly pressure, tolerance, intolerance, etc. give to and have of those practices. Hermeneutically speaking, these meanings and understandings *constitute* those practices: they make the practices what they are in the sense of marking their identity and distinguishing them from other practices.²²

Thus while it may be true that social fact analysis appears to trump, as was partly Durkheim’s goal, modes of subjectivist interpretive inquiry like the *verstehende* method for failing to account adequately for distinctly social phenomena, it is not so clear that social fact analysis does away with the need to locate theorization within the constitutive conceptual horizons of those who those theorizations are about. In ongoing considerations in the philosophy of social science, the significance of the Wittgensteinian hermeneutical approach – elaborated on the basis of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s insights on the social character of language – may be seen precisely as addressing the important gap between the power of social fact analysis on the one hand and the limits of subjectivist interpretive analysis on the other. Wittgensteinian analysis does so by positing a mode of hermeneutical inquiry that maintains the constitutive thesis concerning the relationship between meaning and practice *and* seeks to account for the social dimension by accounting for the *intersubjective* meanings constitutive of social practices.²³

It is from this viewpoint that the theoretical propositions of *Religion, Society and Politics in a Changing Turkey* concerning an underlying conception, a

²² For a more extensive review of the primary theoretical statements of this approach as well as its scope and limits, see my *Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: A Hermeneutic Reconsideration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 13-15, 51-86, and “Hermeneutics and the Politics of Secularism” in Linell Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, editors, *Secularism and Politics in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

²³ See especially, Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

general mindset, or a general character are so striking: insofar as they do not appear grounded in the terms of the survey research, their relation to the meanings and understandings constitutive of relations between potential neighbors within the understandings of the survey respondents is not clear. Durkheim's analysis supports this lack of additional clarity for it confidently asserts that social scientists may supply terms that individual respondents may not (because the social facts are external to individual consciousness). Wittgensteinian analysis, by contrast, says that the meanings that individuals express are *not* (only) their meanings. Language comes to individuals within language speaking milieus and thus individuals express *intersubjective* meanings – meanings constitutive of their relational or common endeavors – not only (if at all) subjective ones. The terms I express (or to which I respond in survey research) are not *mine*; they are ones that I share with others within the language milieus that I inhabit.²⁴ While “the individual” is not the source of “society” (Durkheim), what any one person expresses contains a social element (Wittgenstein). The contrast with the *objective* is not the *subjective*. It is the *intersubjective*.²⁵

In the research context, this hermeneutical view enables social inquirers and theorists – who, by design, are in dialogue with participants in social practices in order to understand the outlooks constitutive of those practices – to posit social meanings from *within* the conceptual horizons of those who those terms are about. In studies of practices associated with “social tolerance” in Turkey, it is not clear whether such an approach would result in the characterizations of the social in the terms that Professors Çarkoğlu and Toprak suggest – “an underlying conception of ‘us’ versus ‘the other’,” “an inward-looking general mindset in society,” and “the introverted character of the people of Turkey.” These terms might certainly be part of the matrix of meanings constitutive of practices concerning social tolerance – of the concepts, understandings, mindsets, characteristics, and meanings that constitute relations and practices of tolerance and intolerance, *mahalle baskısı* and friendliness,²⁶ enmity and

²⁴ Between and across language milieus there are often differences in meaning, even of the same words, and thus it is above all crucial to understand – within a number of significant limits, of course – these differences.

²⁵ For further elaboration see Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*.

²⁶ For background on the significance of these concepts, see Ateş Altınordu, “The Debate on ‘Neighborhood Pressure’ in Turkey,” *ASA Footnotes* 37:2 (February 2009), http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/feb09/intl_persp.html (accessed May 30, 2009).

hospitality, and so forth²⁷ among people in Turkey. But how, in what ways, and whether they would be definitive of that conceptual matrix is not *yet* clear.

This is not to ignore or underestimate the significance of the findings and propositions of *Religion, Society and Politics in a Changing Turkey*. It is to highlight and deepen their importance. Professors Çarkoğlu and Toprak underscore that their study was undertaken “as part of a process to designed solve the problems of the country.”²⁸ On the basis of their findings, they assert that more education is necessary to prepare the society for liberal and multi-cultural democracy.

All research that we know of indicates that additional years spent in school not only increases the likelihood of support for liberal democratic values, but also integrates individuals to a larger commonly held view of a multi-cultural national identity. Increased resources and attention to the content of the curriculum is key to further human capital development, as well as to the deepening of the roots of a democratic system in the country.²⁹

In Durkheimian terms, they seek to produce new social facts, new kinds of externally constraining social molds that will habituate people for multi-cultural liberal democracy rather than against it.³⁰ But it is not clear whether their theoretical conclusions, upon which the new educational curricula would presumably be based, relate sufficiently to the concepts constitutive of the lives of their respondents to enable the construction of terms for school curricula that are sufficiently in conversation with the intersubjective concepts constitutive of “socially tolerant” or “intolerant” (etc.) practices of “the people of Turkey.”³¹ At stake here is whether educational curricula generated on the basis of Durkheimian social facts like “an underlying conception of ‘us’ versus ‘the other’” would speak to or past the concepts constitutive of the lived practices associated with relations of “social tolerance” (etc.) in Turkey. In *Religion*,

²⁷ All of these concepts are preliminary insofar as, from a hermeneutical point of view, all are in need of theoretical specification from within the constitutive conceptual horizons of the participants of the practices that these terms point to.

²⁸ Çarkoğlu and Toprak, *Religion, Society and Politics*, 19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰ Compare Durkheim: “all education is a continuous effort to impose on the child ways of seeing, feeling, and acting ... the aim of education is, precisely, the socialization of the human being; the process of education, therefore, gives us in a nutshell the historical fashion in which the social being is constituted” (“Social Facts,” 435).

³¹ The expressions in the first two opening quotations of this essay are meant to suggest the complicated character of this intersubjective field.

Society and Politics in a Changing Turkey, Professors Çarkoğlu and Toprak seek to deepen the roots of democratic modernity in Turkey; the study's social fact analytical bases, however, produce insufficient empirical clarity concerning the constitutive identity of *existing* practices and relations. To provide such clarity, more (hermeneutically informed) research would prove fruitful.

For now, I hope to have shown the ongoing influence of social fact analysis and its constitutive analytical orientation towards the study of crucial social phenomena – “social tolerance, values, and norms” in this case – within important political science research on political modernity in Turkey. In closing, I should explicitly state an underlying presupposition of my suggestions: Notwithstanding the absence of Durkheim (or Wittgenstein) on most political science syllabuses, the logic of social fact analysis may itself be studied hermeneutically, as a meaning constitutive of social scientific practices generally. Doing so may not, unfortunately, bring Durkheimians and Wittgensteinians into fruitful conversation. Their differing analytical outlooks on issues of operationalization, causality, and comparativity may be incommensurable. Durkheimians might, for example, see the role of social facts in the research process as a causally coercive molding; whereas, to say that the logic of social fact analysis is constitutive of most political science research on Turkey is not to point to externally existing, causally coercive molds that shape the thought and conduct of such research. Rather, it is to suggest a meaningfulness and significance with which participants in the practices of social science endow or constitute those practices.