



## The Thoughts of Emile Durkheim in Modern Sociology; Conceptual Analysis and Application in Social Research in Indonesia

Muhammad Haji Noh<sup>1\*</sup>, Amrul Djana<sup>2</sup>, Rahmat Abd Fatah<sup>3</sup>  
Universitas Muhammadiyah Maluku Utara

**Corresponding Author:** Muhammad Haji Noh [mohhnoh8@gmail.com](mailto:mohhnoh8@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine Emile Durkheim's contributions to the development of modern sociology by highlighting the relevance of his theories in understanding contemporary social challenges and their application in social research in Indonesia. The analysis focuses on five main aspects, namely the theory of social solidarity, the role of law as a representation of collective morality, religion as a structure of shared values, the tension between individualism and social integration, and Durkheim's global influence on sociological paradigms. This study uses a qualitative approach with a review of the latest scientific literature available openly through Dimensions.ai. The results show that Durkheim's framework of thought is not only historical but also applicable in understanding the dynamics of modern Indonesian society, which is characterized by pluralism, value disintegration, and a crisis of social meaning

## **INTRODUCTION**

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) is one of the central figures in the establishment of sociology as an independent scientific discipline (Shah, 2025). He sought to separate sociology from speculative philosophy by establishing a strict methodological foundation for the scientific study of society. One of the main pillars of his thought is the concept of "social facts" (*faits sociaux*), which are patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that are external to the individual and have a coercive power. Social facts, according to Durkheim, are the true objects of sociology, as they can be empirically observed and objectively analyzed, regardless of the individual's subjective perception. With this foundation, Durkheim strengthened the position of sociology as an autonomous science equivalent to the natural sciences and law (Bulgaru, 2013), (Prus, 2019), (Lelis, 2024).

One of Durkheim's most important conceptual contributions is his theory of social solidarity. In *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), he distinguished between mechanical solidarity—found in traditional, homogeneous societies bound by shared values and beliefs—and organic solidarity that develops in modern societies, where the division of labor and social differentiation create functional interdependence among individuals (Jauch, 2023), (Matsuda & Park, 2025), (Zeng et al., 2025), (Hornung & Comolli, 2025). This distinction serves as the foundation for explaining how social order can be maintained in complex and heterogeneous societies. This concept is crucial for analyzing social changes due to globalization, urbanization, and the increasingly dominant pluralism of values. Falah (2023) shows that Durkheim's theory of solidarity can be applied in the context of interfaith relations, as an effort to build social cohesion in a pluralistic society through an understanding of interdependence (Falah, 2023).

Durkheim also provided an epistemological foundation for the sociological understanding of religion. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), he emphasized that religion is not merely a transcendental relationship between humans and God, but rather a collective manifestation that reflects social structure (Bloch et al., 2025), (Kizilgeçit et al., 2025), (Sommer, 2024), (Xin et al., 2025), (Srivastava et al., 2025). In this framework, religion is understood as a symbolic system that creates and sustains collective consciousness. Durkheim argued that religious rituals strengthen the sense of togetherness and renew the community's moral commitment to shared norms. (Baunvig, 2014) in his study of Durkheim's speech on the future of religion, highlighted that Durkheim did not predict the death of religion, but rather the transformation of the forms and functions of religion in accordance with societal changes. In the modern context, religion can transform into "civil religion" or new forms of moral expression that serve a similar integrative function.

In his approach to law, Durkheim demonstrates a close connection between the legal system and the type of social solidarity. The law is not only seen as a normative device but also as a reflection of the moral structure of society. In societies dominated by mechanical solidarity, law tends to be repressive, emphasizing punishment for violations of collective norms. In contrast, in complex modern societies, law is restitutive, aiming to restore disrupted social

relations through mediation or restoration. This perspective paves the way for the development of legal sociology as an important subdiscipline in understanding how social norms are institutionalized through the legal system. Kustura emphasizes that Durkheim was a pioneer in linking law with the dynamics of social structure, making law both an indicator and a mechanism for regulating social cohesion (Kustura, 2016).

Nevertheless, Durkheim's thinking is not without criticism. One of the main criticisms is his view, which is considered to overly emphasize collectivism to the point of neglecting individual agency. Durkheim is often labeled as an anti-individualist thinker due to his focus on collective consciousness and social structures that dominate the individual. However, this view has been corrected by several contemporary studies, such as Vares, who states that Durkheim actually acknowledged the importance of individualism, but in a "moral" form – namely, an autonomous individual who is still bound by collective ethical norms. Thus, Durkheim did not reject individualism, but rather its egoistic and anomic forms. He advocated for individualism rooted in social responsibility and moral education to ensure the continuity of social cohesion (Vares, 2012).

With his various profound and comprehensive contributions, Durkheim has emphasized the importance of viewing society as a structured and dynamic totality. In facing contemporary challenges such as value fragmentation, extremism, community disintegration, and identity crises in the digital era, Durkheim's thought continues to provide a solid conceptual guide. In Indonesia, Durkheim's thought can be applied in studies on inter-religious harmony, changes in customary law norms, and studies on social cohesion in post-conflict societies. Therefore, revisiting his intellectual legacy is not only historically valuable but also offers an applicative and critical analytical framework for the development of an inclusive and civilized modern society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In discussing Emile Durkheim's thoughts in modern sociology and their application in the Indonesian context, several studies show diverse interpretations of Durkheim's key concepts, yet remain conceptually interconnected. These differences are evident in the way each study articulates Durkheim's relevance to social change, collective structure, and social research methodology. Wijaya and Sudaryanto use Durkheim's structural functionalism approach to analyze carbon economy policies in Indonesia. In their view, the success of the implementation of the policy highly depends on social solidarity and the structure of collective values, which reflects Durkheim's basic assumption that society functions as a single systemic unit that is orderly and mutually supportive (Wijaya & Sudaryanto, 2024).

However, a more dynamic approach to social structure is demonstrated in Susilo's study, which observes the shift in the religious patterns of the community in Kampung Inggris Pare. Instead of viewing society as a stable system, Susilo emphasizes the transformation of values and religious practices due to changes in the social structure. In this context, the mechanical solidarity that once bound

traditional societies has weakened, shifting towards a form of organic solidarity that is more individual and flexible, as explained by Durkheim in his work on the division of labor (Susilo, 2023). This approach is enriched by the study of Sirnopati et al. on the Wetu Telu community in Lombok, which actually shows the presence of syncretic and collective forms of religiosity that persist within the traditional social structure. This challenges the assumption that modern society is entirely characterized by individualism and the weakening of social cohesion (Sirnopati et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, Abdullah brought the discourse to a more epistemological level by critiquing the dominance of the Western paradigm in the teaching of social sciences in Asia. He called for the importance of building alternative discourses based on local contexts, including in the reading of classical theories such as Durkheim. Although not rejecting Durkheim's relevance, Abdullah emphasizes the need for reorientation so that these theories are not applied dogmatically, but rather reinterpreted within a more contextual and critical Asian sociological framework (Abdullah, 2023). This view can be contrasted with a more positivistic approach as advocated by Wijaya, yet it still acknowledges Durkheim's role as a foundation in building systematic social analysis.

In the realm of methodology, differences also emerge between reflective approaches and structured teaching approaches. Giordano emphasizes the importance of understanding research methods as epistemological tools that influence the outcomes of social knowledge. He compares the sociological autobiography method with the anthropological portrait to show how the choice of method can shape the understanding of social facts that Durkheim focused on (Giordano, 2018). On the other hand, Haryono et al. strive to strengthen the mastery of qualitative methodology among students through a structured and systematic approach, reflecting Durkheim's spirit in developing sociology as a measurable and organized empirical science (Haryono et al., 2023). These two approaches may seem technically contradictory, but they complement each other in the effort to make social facts a legitimate and meaningful object of study.

Thus, the differences in approach and focus in those studies actually demonstrate the flexibility and reach of Durkheim's theory in understanding contemporary Indonesian society. Each study contributes to the reinterpretation of Durkheim's thoughts – both in structural aspects, changes in social values, and epistemological and methodological reflections – which overall enriches the discourse of modern sociology in Indonesia.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research uses a literature study method with a qualitative-descriptive approach. Data were obtained from seven scientific articles available as open access on the Dimensions.ai platform. The criteria for selecting articles included direct relevance to the themes of social solidarity, law, religion, and individualism in Durkheim's thought. The analysis was conducted using thematic categorization techniques and an interpretative approach to explore the conceptual meanings of each article, as well as reflecting them in the context of contemporary sociology and applications in social research in Indonesia.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### **Durkheim and the Theory of Social Solidarity**

Durkheim distinguished between mechanical solidarity – which is dominant in traditional homogeneous societies and characterized by shared values and collective consciousness – and organic solidarity – which develops in modern societies with complex division of labor (White, 2025), (Mohamed, 2025). In Falah's study, this concept is adapted to understand interfaith relations in Indonesia. Organic solidarity, in this case, is viewed as an important foundation for building harmony among religious communities in a multicultural society (Falah, 2023). Falah emphasizes that new solidarity should be based on interdependence and appreciation of differences, not identity homogeneity.

In the context of Indonesia, which is rich in ethnic and religious diversity, the implementation of organic solidarity faces serious challenges when social institutions fail to form mechanisms of cross-identity attachment. Social tensions due to religious intolerance or political polarization often indicate that collective consciousness has not fully shifted from a mechanical form to an organic form. This reflects the strong expectation of uniformity in social practices, compared to the formation of inclusive and dialogic shared values (Smock, 2016).

The study emphasizes that the development of organic solidarity in Indonesia requires the strengthening of multicultural civic education and the revitalization of intergroup dialogue spaces. Churches, mosques, indigenous communities, and digital civil spaces must be developed into "arenas of solidarity" that emphasize social interdependence and shared moral responsibility. In this regard, Durkheim offers a highly contextual approach to addressing the dynamics of social cohesion in a global and plural era.

### **Contribution to the Sociology of Law**

Durkheim saw law as a reflection of the dominant type of solidarity in society. Repressive law (Deflem, 2025), for example, emerges in societies with mechanical solidarity that punish violations of collective norms, whereas restitutive law develops in societies with organic solidarity, aiming to restore social relationships. Kustura emphasizes that this framework is important for understanding the dynamics of law in modern society, which is often more complex, multi-interpretative, and compromise-based (Kustura, 2016). Thus, law is not merely a tool of control, but rather a mirror of the moral structure of society.

In Indonesia, the existence of legal pluralism (state law, customary law, and religious law) reflects an incomplete transition from mechanical to organic solidarity within the legal system. The tension between customary norms and positive law, or between religious law and human rights, indicates that the legal system has not yet fully become a reflection of a shared moral consensus. The book *Personal Autonomy in Plural Societies* (2017) underscores this challenge, particularly in the context of personal autonomy clashing with collective norms in pluralistic societies (Foblets et al., 2017).

The study shows the importance of a sociological approach in legal reform in Indonesia. The law needs to be developed not only based on formal-legalistic principles but also as a result of cross-cultural and cross-belief social dialogue.

Durkheim's view that law is an expression of collective morality provides a strong foundation for building a legal system that is truly representative of a dynamic pluralistic society.

### **Religion as a Mirror of Collectivity**

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim shows that religion is not merely a divine phenomenon, but rather a collective representation of societal values. He introduced the concept of "totemism" as an early form of a collective symbol system that binds society morally and emotionally. Bauving emphasizes the importance of Durkheim's speech on the future of religion as an expression of "collective morality" (Baunvig, 2014). Meanwhile, Layantara links the concept to the revitalization of religious institutions, particularly churches, as centers for the formation of solidarity and collective meaning in the postmodern era (Layantara, 2020).

However, in the context of Indonesia, the interpretation of religion as a collective morality is often reduced to an exclusive symbol of political identity. When religion is used as a tool for social mobilization for electoral interests or sectarian identity, the value of solidarity derived from "collective sanctity" is actually fragmented. The study "Violence, Religion, Peacemaking" shows that religious leaders can be agents of reconciliation, but they also have the potential to become sources of conflict if they lose their universal moral function (Smock, 2016).

The study shows that religion in Indonesia still holds great potential as a binding force for social solidarity, as long as it is understood as a shared moral institution, not a tool for segmentation. Therefore, a revitalization of religious interpretation that is more dialogical, contextual, and transformative is needed. Durkheim's approach provides guidance that religion is not just about doctrine, but how communities celebrate values that strengthen social bonds.

### **The Tension Between Individualism and Socialism**

Durkheim did not reject individualism, but criticized its destructive forms. He distinguishes between "egoism" and "moral individualism" that shapes the awareness of rights and social responsibilities. In Vares' study, it is explained that Durkheim sought to unite individual freedom with social bonds through the institutionalization of values and moral education (Vares, 2012). This is relevant to contemporary challenges such as the crisis of empathy, digital anomie, and value disruption due to social media that reinforces social narcissism.

In the reality of Indonesia, individualism is accelerating through social media and a digital culture that prioritizes self-expression. The emergence of the phenomenon of "digital anomie"—the absence of moral guidance in the online space—has led to a crisis of empathy and social polarization. In this context, it is important to consider moral education that is not only normative but also based on social awareness. The Routledge International Handbook of Diversity Studies highlights the importance of building a multicultural education framework that balances individual rights and collective responsibilities (Vertovec, 2014).

The study underscores the need to rebuild "moral individualism" as defined by Durkheim, which refers to individuals who are autonomous yet bound by the values of solidarity and social responsibility. Indonesia needs an education system and public policies that instill the value of cohesion, not just

individual competence. In this regard, Durkheim's contribution remains vital as a theoretical foundation to address the challenges of contemporary social disruption.

### **Global Influence and the Sociocentric Paradigm**

Durkheim's thought marked a turning point in the transition from an individualistic approach to a sociocentric one in the social sciences. According to Bulgaru, Durkheim pioneered the analysis of how society shapes consciousness, rather than the other way around. This reinforces the paradigm that social reality is not the result of individual aggregation, but a collective construction with its own structure, values, and control mechanisms. This approach has now become the foundation for community studies, social change, and even digital sociology in Indonesia.

In the context of Indonesia, a sociocentric approach becomes important in explaining phenomena such as identity politics, community-based social mobilization, and the culture of mutual assistance. However, the challenge is how to integrate various local collective consciousnesses (customs, religion, ethnicity) into a single national construct. The book *Social Ontology, Sociocultures, and Inequality in the Global South* (2020) emphasizes that each society has a unique ontological social layer, which must be understood historically and structurally to address social inequality and fragmentation (Baumann & Bultmann, 2020).

The aforementioned study shows that Durkheim's sociocentric paradigm remains relevant in building Indonesian social theory that is not only descriptive but also transformational. For that reason, a cross-disciplinary approach is needed that can combine cultural, historical, and institutional analyses in understanding the dynamics of collectivity. Durkheim provided a theoretical framework that could bridge micro and macro studies simultaneously.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Durkheim has positioned sociology as a moral science aimed at understanding and maintaining social order. His concept of social solidarity remains the foundation for explaining the crisis of cohesion in the era of pluralism, urbanization, and digitalization. Law as a manifestation of shared values, religion as a supporter of collective morality, and his perspective that balances the individual and collectivism provide a solid theoretical foundation to address contemporary challenges.

Durkheim is not just a classical figure, but relevant as a transhistorical thinker who teaches that society is not merely a collection of individuals, but a living entity that requires a balance between structure and values. Therefore, revisiting Durkheim is to revisit the roots of our moral and social problems today, including in the context of Indonesia, which is building a just and cohesive social democracy.

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