

# The Institution and the Symbol. Rethinking Social Practices Through Durkheim's Sociology

Mélanie Plouviez \*  
melanie.plouviez@univ-cotedazur.fr

## ABSTRACT

This article studies the Émile Durkheim's definition of the institution as a way of thinking and acting that the individual finds pre-established. The criterion of pre-establishment is questioned here and distanced from the interpretation that Georges Gurvitch proposed, which identifies it with repetition. Articulated with his theory of social symbolism, the Durkheimian sociology of institutions allows us to go beyond the opposition between the necessity of the institution and the aleatory character of the instituting. It enables one to think a necessity of that which institutes without reducing it to what is instituted.

## 1. Introduction

In his preface to the second edition of *Rules of Sociological Method* (1901), Émile Durkheim gives a definition of “the institution” that has gone down in history. This definition places the institution at the heart of sociology's concerns, thereby identifying it with social facts.

In fact, without doing violence to the meaning of the word, one may term *institution* all the beliefs and modes of behaviour instituted by the collectivity; sociology can then be defined as the science of institutions, their genesis, and their functioning. (Durkheim, 1895/1982, p. 45)

This definition is usually identified as the moment when the original, political meaning of “institution” gives way to a broader, social meaning. Before, “institution” represented a type of legal reality essential to political structures. Durkheim expands this view to include stabilised social relations such as the family, marriage, property, criminal penalties, language, totemic beliefs or religious rituals, social mores or workplace habits, etc. As Durkheim mentions in the passage immediately preceding this definition, these heterogeneous phenomena can

\* Côte d'Azur University, France.

all be united under the umbrella of “institutions” because they all precede the individual. For each of us, institutions are already there, they pre-exist us. “The individual encounters them when they are already completely fashioned and he cannot cause them to cease to exist or be different from what they are” (Durkheim, 1895/1982, p. 45). This Durkheimian sociological definition of institution is in firm opposition to its previous political definition: According to Durkheim, man does not establish institutions, he does not create them, whether through a social contract or an unspoken agreement. Rather, he finds them there ready made, facing and preceding him, regardless of whether he is a simple subject or a legislator. Durkheim and the Durkheimians sum this up succinctly: institutions *come before* individuals, they are “*pre-established*”. Thus, Marcel Mauss and Paul Fauconnet, in their article “Sociologie” written in 1901 for the *Grande Encyclopédie*, say just that when they define social phenomena (understood as institutions in the broad sense) as “all the ways of acting and thinking that the individual finds pre-established” (Fauconnet & Mauss, 1969/1901, p. 150, *our translation*).

Yet an institution does not face or precede the individual in the same way as objects in the physical world. Or rather, the exteriority of the institution is composite: It is an internal exteriority. Durkheim’s definition is, after all, surprising, coming from the same thinker who maintained “to consider social facts as things” (Durkheim, 1895/1982, p. 60), that is, “from a viewpoint where they present themselves in isolation from their individual manifestations” (Durkheim, 1895/1982, pp. 82-83). Institutions are “*beliefs and modes of behaviour* instituted by the collectivity” (Durkheim, 1895/1982, p. 45, *our underlining*); they are “ways of acting, thinking and feeling”, in other words, they are intangible but very real, lodged within our individual minds. In Durkheim’s 1901 definition, institutions are not foremost reified organisations that can be located in time and place<sup>1</sup>. On the contrary: institutions inhabit individual minds, yet without deriving from it. Institutions are thus mental realities that are in me while not originating from me. They are not foremost a social materiality external to individual minds. Instead, they are, above all, in the individual’s head.

This is what is so original about Durkheim’s definition of the institution: with this definition, he reveals a new ontological layer. This new ontologi-

<sup>1</sup> To explain this understanding of the institution as material, one can take the example of a school, which has both a material space (its buildings) and a temporal dimension (its history).

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cal layer is the social one, in which internal and external are intimately interwoven, in the form of ways of thinking and acting that individuals find pre-formed within themselves. This is also the profound sense that Durkheim and the Durkheimians give to the specific feature of institutions: the *pre-established*. An institution is always already there, but not like a physical necessity that confronts the individual as an exteriority, rather as a ‘within’ that nonetheless does not originate in him. The already-there-ness of what is instituted is not outside of me, but is inside of me - yet I am not its origin.

At this stage, the problem is therefore: where does this specific mental reality come from? Durkheim answers this question in his 1901 definition with a second defining element: “institutions are beliefs and modes of behaviour *instituted by the collectivity*” (Durkheim, 1895/1982, p. 45, *our underlining*). But does this not introduce a vicious circle, the institution defined as that which is instituted? To avoid this, must Durkheim not at least explain what this instituting by the collectivity consists of? What does it mean to say that the collectivity institutes beliefs and modes of behavior? In this article, I intend to elucidate precisely how “instituted by the collectivity” can be understood in Durkheim’s thought.

I will defend, with regard to this “instituted by the collectivity”, the following thesis: The Durkheimian conceptualisation of the institution contains a theory of the instituting collectivity which succeeds in raising collective normativity beyond the simple normalisation / regularisation of behavior without, however, reducing it to the aleatory character of the political or the conventional. In other words, the Durkheimian conceptualisation of the institution is compatible with a strong conception of social normativity which is irreducible both to the quasi-physiological necessities of functional normalisation and to the aleatory character of the political or conventional constituent. Or again, the Durkheimian sociology of institutions allows us to go beyond the opposition that is too caricatural, but nonetheless tenacious, between the necessity of the *instituted* and the aleatory character of the *instituting*. It enables one to think a necessity of that which institutes without reducing it to what is instituted.

### 2. Durkheim’s Two Definitions of the Institution

What could “the collectivity institutes beliefs and modes of behavior” mean? I will begin by defining what *instituted by the collectivity* is not, that is, something *consolidated by society*.

Durkheim's concept of institution is often interpreted in terms of consolidation. Georges Gurvitch, for example, criticizes, in volume 1 of *La vocation actuelle de la sociologie*, the meaning Durkheim gives to "institution". In Chapter VI, "Le concept de structure sociale", Gurvitch, while methodically attacking Talcott Parsons's structuro-functionalism, reexamines the "widespread yet so old-fashioned concept of 'institution'", popularised, in his view, by Durkheim and his disciples (Gurvitch, 1968, p. 427, *our translation*). For Gurvitch, Durkheim's concept is "at once *too broad and too narrow*" (Gurvitch, p. 427). Too broad, because the criterion of "pre-established" lacks precision and groups together quite disparate phenomena. "It is *too broad*, because beliefs, ideas, values, and collective behaviours, even if they are all pre-established, quite clearly do not all share the same nature" (Gurvitch, p. 427). Is the fact that religious rituals and fashion trends precede individuals who put them into practice sufficient to class them under the same, yet vague term of institution? Too broad, therefore, but also too narrow, since what is not pre-established is excluded from the social. A surge of collective enthusiasm, a revolutionary movement, a creative process – none of these are pre-established, yet are they not social phenomena? In other words, Gurvitch's argument is that Durkheim's assimilation of the institution to social fact under their common feature of pre-establishment makes for a functionalist reduction of institutions to instituted and consolidated phenomena – "too quiet", "well organized", "conformist", as he describes it – while neglecting the dynamics of instituting – "non-conformist, reformist, revolutionary, that which creates" (Gurvitch, p. 428).

Gurvitch's critique is problematic because it in fact unwittingly conflates two different definitions by Durkheim of the institution. A close examination of Durkheim's works (which Gurvitch appears not to do) shows that Durkheim formulates two successive, yet incompatible definitions of the institution, which must be taken separately in order to understand the *instituted by the collectivity*. In *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) and in the first edition of *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), Durkheim indeed defines the institution as a "consolidated", "crystallised", or "organised" social habit. However, in the Preface to the second edition of *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1901) and in his later texts, in particular, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), he formulates another definition of the institution, as a way of being "instituted by the collectivity." Between these two definitions there is Mauss and Fauconnet's article "Sociologie" in the *Grande Encyclopédie* (1901), in which

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these two Durkheimians argue for classing social facts under the heading of “institution”, insofar as they are all pre-established.

All manners of acting and thinking that the individual finds pre-established and whose transmission is most commonly done by the means of education are social. Having a special word to designate these special facts would be good, and it seemed that the word *institutions* would be the most appropriate. What, in fact, is an institution if not a set of fully instituted acts or ideas that individuals find before them and which more or less impose themselves on them? There is no reason for reserving this expression exclusively, as is usually done, for basic social organisation. We therefore understand by this word customs and fashions, prejudices and superstitions as well as political or essential legal organisations; for all these phenomena are of the same nature and differ only in degree. In short, institution is in the social order what function is in the biological order: and just as the science of life is the science of vital functions, so the science of society is the science of institutions thus defined. (Fauconnet & Mauss, 1969/1901, p. 150, our translation)

Durkheim explicitly refers to this particular passage of Mauss and Fauconnet’s article in the Preface to the Second Edition of *The Rules of Sociological Method*, likewise published in 1901, where he first identifies social facts with institutions:

As has been remarked [Cf. the article ‘Sociologie’ by Fauconnet and Mauss, published in the *Grande Encyclopédie*], there is one word which, provided one extends a little its normal meaning, expresses moderately well this very special kind of existence [of social facts]; it is that of *institution*. In fact, without doing violence to the meaning of the word, one may term an *institution* all the beliefs and modes of behavior instituted by the collectivity; sociology can then be defined as the science of institutions, their genesis and their functioning. (Durkheim, 1895/1982, p. 45)

So when Durkheim, following Mauss and Fauconnet, proposes a broad definition of the institution (identified with the social), he is implicitly distancing himself, in 1901, from his earlier definition. Or, to put it another way, the *instituted by the collectivity* of 1901 is not the same as the *consolidated by society* of 1893. Gurvitch misses this important point. I shall now turn to what differentiates, and even makes incompatible, these two definitions of the institution.

### 3. Durkheim's First Definition of the Institution: When "Instituted" Means "What Is Consolidated"

In the first editions of *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) and *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), Durkheim defines institutions as the most consolidated collective habits. This first definition of the institution operates within what can be called a *spontaneist* framework in which institutions emerge spontaneously from social practices.

Durkheim does not literally express this *spontaneist* framework, although it is present in his first texts, especially in the third part of *The Division of Labour in Society*, devoted to pathological forms of the division of labour. Among these forms, he studies "the anomic division of labour" in chapter one, where he attempts to determine the pathogenic reasons why functional specialisation sometimes fails to produce spontaneously the rules that are meant to regulate it.

There are certain ways of mutual reaction which, finding themselves very conformable to the nature of things, are repeated very often and become habits. Then these habits, becoming forceful, are transformed into rules of conduct. The past determines the future. In other words, there is a certain sorting of rights and duties which is established by usage and becomes obligatory. The rule does not, then, create the state of mutual dependence in which the solidary organs find themselves, but only expresses, in clear-cut fashion, the result of a given situation. In the same way, the nervous system, far from dominating the evolution of the organism, as we have said, results from it. The nerve-cords are probably only the lines of passage which the streams of movements and excitations exchanged between different organs have followed. They are the canals which life has hewed for itself while steadily flowing in the same direction, and the ganglia would only be the place of intersection of several of these lines. (Durkheim, 1893/2012, p. 366)

Durkheim's first works identify the social nature of a practice in its repetition and progressive consolidation into habits, customs and traditions, then into moral and legal rules, and lastly into institutions. "The social" is defined as that which is repeated and, through this repetition, gradually becomes consolidated and crystallised (according a chemical metaphor). In this sense, institutions are nothing more than repeated collective practices, like all other social facts. Unlike all others social facts, however, these collective practices have been repeated so frequently that they have become consolidated, crystallised, organised. More precisely, there are three properties, in this first definition, which distinguish an

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institution from other social phenomena: cohesion, definition and organisation. “Cohesion” refers to the quality of the relations between members within the institution. If the group is not very cohesive, these relations are short-lived and superficial. Inversely, the members of an institution, through frequent contact and close bonds, achieve the solidity and permanence of a “body”. The second property, that of “definition”, refers to the external contours of the group and its internal unity. An ill-defined group is a confused conglomeration without frontiers or unity. Conversely, an institution is a “defined” group, that is, a differentiated group which has distinct frontiers and manages to distinguish itself from neighbouring groups. The third property is “organisation”, which refers to the internal structure of the group and the hierarchical arrangement of its parts. An institution is a highly structured and hierarchised group. These three properties make of the institution a dense, unified and structured group, and the most solidified form of social relationships.

Durkheim’s initial definition of institution is restricted to groups which, through the process of consolidation, acquire nearly bodily materiality. This definition is narrow, first because institutions are understood as tangible organised structures which fulfill certain clear-cut social functions – schools, local governments, businesses, churches and the family, for instance. The definition is narrow also because not all social facts are institutions, but only a particular type of social fact, namely the most consolidated.

This is, moreover, a sociological definition of institutions that anchors them in repeated collective practices, and thus avoids political decisionism or legicentrism. Thus, institutions are not generated by an action or a power that institutes them. Institutions are generated spontaneously, horizontally, and immanently through the regulating repetition of collective practices. Or rather – since not every collective practice spontaneously leads to its institutionalisation – only those collective practices that contribute to the smooth functioning of society and have a social function, are repeated, condensed, and institutionalised, mechanically, without any political intervention. Clearly, therefore, latent functionalism underlies this *spontaneist* framework: only those practices which contribute to satisfying social needs are institutionalised (social utilitarianism), those which maintain and perpetuate the social whole (homeostatic finalism).

As such, due to their origin in repetition and consolidation, institutions can only be experienced by individuals as preceding them in the form of the “already-there”. Their anteriority, their pre-established nature, is due to regular repetition and consolidation. I find them already complete and they fulfill higher

goals than mine, even as I am active in them. This theory leaves no room for the emergence of the instituting event, or for the advent of a counterfactual optimum that exceeds and contests the institution in its present form. On the contrary, even: institutions only express factual regularity. One can understand in this light why Durkheim's first theory of the institution was branded as conservative, since the institution is reduced to an already-instituted whose finality is to perpetuate itself.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Durkheim's Second Definition of the Institution: When "Instituted" Means "What Institutes"

However, this is not Durkheim's only definition of the institution. He even abandons it in 1901, yet it is never enunciated.

When, in 1901, in the Preface to the second edition of his *Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim defines institutions as "all the beliefs and modes of behaviour instituted by the collectivity," he is, in fact, implicitly distancing himself from his initial definition. The foremost attribute of institutions is no longer their tangible and consolidated aspect. Henceforth, institutions are mainly collective ways of feeling and thinking, lodged in individuals' minds, which standardise their behaviour. Their reality is not primarily material, but mental, which Durkheim calls "collective representations" (Durkheim, 1924/1953, pp. 1-34). They are no longer characterised as consolidated and crystallised social practices repeated to the point of forming structured organisations, but rather as collective representations which make me behave in certain ways that are not really mine, and of which I am not even aware. Thus, institutions are no longer, in this second definition, a specific type of social fact (the most consolidated); they *embody* all social facts. Whether going by the name of "institutions", "collective representations", or "social facts", they refer to one and the same reality, which is the proper subject of sociology. This reality is the ontological layer, revealed by sociology, of the collective representations that are within us, yet do not derive from us, and moreover, we are not even aware that they do not. This reality is composed of beliefs, values, ideals, goals, prohibitions, duties, among others. With this second definition, Durkheim adopts a broader approach to institutions – as sets of representations *instituted by the collectivity*. Thus he closely maps the social onto the mental.

<sup>2</sup> On the conservative interpretations of Durkheim's thought, see Plouviez (2012).

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So why did Durkheim abandon his first definition of the institution? The reason is not so much that he was influenced by Mauss and Fauconnet's *Grande Encyclopédie* entry, but rather that he distanced himself the spontaneist-functionalist framework underlying his first definition. Several works herald this change: his course on *Socialism* and the critique of Saint-Simon's theory of industrial self-organisation in 1895 (Durkheim, 1928/1959); the conclusion to his *Suicide* and the first structured exposition of occupational group reform in 1897 (Durkheim, 1897/2002, pp. 328-359); and, even more clearly, the 1902 Preface to the Second Edition of *The Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim, 1893/2012, pp. 1-31). The spontaneist explanation he championed in 1893 no longer seems adequate. The repetition of practices, Durkheim now argues, even when it leads to their consolidation, cannot itself generate rules and institutions. This critical distance from his previous positions is explained in the following quotation from the Preface to the Second Edition of *The Division of Labor in Society*:

For, if it is true that social functions spontaneously seek to adapt themselves to one another, provided they are regularly in relationship, nevertheless this mode of adaptation becomes a rule of conduct only if the group consecrates it with its authority. A rule, indeed, is not only an habitual means of acting; it is, above all, an obligatory means of acting; which is to say, withdrawn from individual discretion. Now, only a constituted society enjoys the moral and material supremacy indispensable in making law for individuals, for the only moral personality above particular personalities is the one formed by collective life. It alone has continuity and the necessary perpetuity to maintain the rule beyond the ephemeral relations which daily incarnate it. Moreover, its role is not limited simply to forming into imperative principles the most general results of particular contracts; it intervenes in an active and positive manner in the formation of each rule. (Durkheim, 1893/2012, pp. 4-5)

In this passage, Durkheim totally reverses the relations he established previously between social practices, rules, and institutions. The collective practices that fulfill a social function do not, in this second definition, spontaneously generate the rules that reflect their regulation nor the institutions that consolidate it. What is lacking is "a constituted society", a "group" with "authority", a collective body to decide on the rules which will have the force of law, and to make sure they are applied. In other words, Durkheim is dissatisfied with his original spontaneist-functionalist framework because it is not fully sociological. Put another way, according to Durkheim in 1902, the rule and the institution as he had

previously defined them, because they are not sufficiently social, did not sufficiently constrain.

## 5. A Renewed Conceptualisation of the Institution: The Symbolic Institution, or the Dialectics of Instituted and Instituting

So far I have delineated what *instituted by the collectivity* is *not*, that is, the consolidated outcome of repeating whatever contributes positively to the functioning of collective life. Below, I shall address what it may mean positively.

It is in Durkheim's exploration of religious rites, particularly in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, that he expands upon the full and renewed meaning of his *instituted by the collectivity*. In his sociology of religious phenomena, Durkheim redefines the institution from within a theory of social symbolism. In this framework, the instituting activity of the collectivity is irreducible to the quasi-physiological need of the instituted social body to reproduce itself. It is also irreducible to the arbitrary establishment of conventions. More precisely, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, institutions – i.e. the beliefs and modes of behaviour *instituted by the collectivity* – are explained by two series of sociological laws: the “laws of collective ideation”, which explain the origin and development of institutions, neither of which are founded on collective agreement; and the “laws of collective idealization”, which explain that collective representations are *constituting representations* that cannot be reduced to an arbitrary agreement on meanings.

### 5.1 “The Laws of Collective Ideation”

Collective representations are governed by what Durkheim calls, in rare but important occurrences, the “laws of collective ideation”. These explain the origin of institutions.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This theory of “collective ideation” can be found in the first section of the Conclusion to the *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim, 1912/1915, pp. 416-427), but it had already appeared long before (particularly in his 1898 article “Individual and Collective Representations” (Durkheim, 1924/1953, pp. 1-34), in his 1899 article “De la définition des phénomènes religieux” (Durkheim, 1969, pp. 140-165), and in the 1901 Preface to the second edition of *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim, 1895/1982, pp. 34-47).

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According to this theory of collective ideation, our pre-established modes of thought originate in society, more precisely in the material and instituted aspects of society. Social thought thus emerges from social structure.<sup>4</sup> However, the morphological explanation of collective representations has only limited explanatory power. It may be able to explain the genesis of psychical social life, but it cannot explain its development.

Now this synthesis has the effect of disengaging a whole world of sentiments, ideas and images which, once born, obey laws all their own. They attract each other, repel each other, unite, divide themselves, and multiply, though these combinations are not commanded and necessitated by the condition of the underlying reality. (Durkheim, 1912/1915, p. 424)

The “luxuriant” development of collective representations, as Durkheim calls it, is not caused directly by the state of the social structure. It is caused by the synthesis of existing collective representations, a synthesis that creates new collective representations. In other words, the sociological laws of collective ideation attempt to grasp the special life of institutions which originate in the instituted social body, but which cannot be reduced to it.

Yet if it is not the social structure, what makes the collective ideation synthesise collective representations? And why this synthesis and not another? In his article “Individual and Collective Representations”, Durkheim states that the synthesis between collective representations is governed by their “natural affinities”.

But once a first source of representations is thus constituted, they become [...] partially autonomous realities that live a life of their own. They have the power to attract and repel each other, and to form syntheses of all kinds that are determined by their natural affinities and not by the state of the environment in the midst of which they evolve. (Durkheim, 1924/1953, p. 31)

In other words, we do not decide by agreement on the rules which determine the collective meaning attributed, for example, to the piece of material we call a flag.

<sup>4</sup> The substratum of collective representations is the morphological organisation of society: the number of social elements, the way in which they are grouped and distributed, as mentioned in the article “Individual and Collective Representations” (Durkheim, 1924/1953). “It is true that we take it as evident that social life depends upon its material foundation and bears its mark, just as the mental life of an individual depends upon his nervous system and in fact his whole organism. But collective consciousness is something more than a mere epiphenomenon of its morphological basis, just as individual consciousness is something more than a simple efflorescence of the nervous system” (Durkheim, 1912/1915, pp. 423-424).

Its meaning is determined neither by human conventions nor by individual psychology, but by laws which sociology has the specific task of revealing. And these are, indeed, *laws*: that which is lodged in my mind, pre-existing my own thought, is ruled by social necessity, but this necessity is not strictly material. The determinism is psychical, but not individual, and it is the specific subject-matter of sociology. In this light, sociology is genuinely *a socio-logic* for Durkheim. It sets out the laws by which our pre-established ways of thinking, feeling, and being are associated, or synthesised, according to their “natural affinities”. What in our minds preexists our thought, Durkheim argues, does not derive from arbitrary agreements on meanings, but from sociological laws. These are the laws of collective ideation.

## 5.2 “The Laws of Collective Idealization”

But that’s not all. For Durkheim, collective representations are not descriptive or mimetic. They are normative representations that make people act. There is here a characteristic specific to institutions which explains why Durkheim systematically correlates within them “beliefs” and “modes of conduct”, collective ways of “thinking” and collective ways of “being” and “acting”. More precisely, in his Conclusion to *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim recasts the notion of institution as collective ideals that introduce a very particular way of grasping an object, which he calls “transfiguration”, or, on two occasions, “collective idealization” (Durkheim, 1912/1915, p. 421). To transfigure, to idealize is “[to substitute] for the real world another different one, to which they transport themselves by thought.” This involves “adding something to the real” (Durkheim, 1912/1915, p. 421). Looking closer at this Conclusion, it is possible to identify two levels on which such transfiguration-idealization operates.

Durkheim expands upon the first level in his analysis of ritual practices. The Arunta, an Australian totemic population, when they ritually handle the *churinga* (which is a piece of wood on which is drawn the totemic emblem), thus transform, transfigure the reality of the piece of wood in the light of what counts, of what has value collectively for them. The Arunta collectively invest the *chirunga* with more than what is in the piece of wood. They inject an ideal and value into it. This projection of valorisation is a specifically collective act. To take another Durkheimian example already mentioned, we do the same with the national flag. We collectively put more in the national flag than there is in the piece of cloth. We project a collective ideal into it; we transfigure the piece of cloth;

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we substitute for its material reality an ideal reality which is collective. This operation is specific to social thought, which differs radically from individual thought. Collective *ideas*, as collective *ideals*, actually “make reality”, change and transfigure it. That is precisely what an institution is: a material reality transfigured by a social ideal, by a collective symbolic system that invests it with new meaning, that confers on it properties it does not have on its own. This is the sense in which the *churinga* is an institution for the Aruntas, or the flag, an institution for us Moderns. We can now give a more accurate definition of Durkheim’s understanding of the institution: an institution exists when individuals add to the reality of things a symbolic reality they have not themselves created, which they find pre-established, *instituted by the collectivity*.

It is precisely here where Durkheim places the *instituting* and *constituting* activity of the collectivity, which he expands upon in his much-commented theory of collective effervescence and of the essential symbolism of social life.<sup>5</sup> Via the totemic emblem traced on the *churinga*, the Arunta achieve a representation of themselves as a group that they could not attain through the interiority of each individual consciousness.

That an emblem is useful as a rallying-centre for any sort of a group it is superfluous to point out. By expressing the social unity in a material form, it makes this more obvious to all, and for that very reason the use of emblematic symbols must have spread quickly when once thought of. But more than that, this idea should spontaneously arise out of the conditions of common life; for the emblem is not merely a convenient process for clarifying the sentiment society has of itself: it also serves to create this sentiment; it is one of its *constituent* elements. (Durkheim, 1912/1915, p. 230, *our underlining*)

However, this is not to say that the totemic symbol traced upon the *churinga* is a projection onto the material object of the preconstituted idea the clan has of itself already. On the contrary – and this is where Durkheim differentiates symbolic and imitative representation – the clan achieves this self-representation only through totemic symbolisation. In other words, the symbolic institution not only enables the collectivity to have a better sense of its unity; it actually constitutes this unity. The institution is necessary for the constitution of the collectivity as such. The group is constituted in and through the symbolisation of its unity in a material object. Or again, the symbolic institution by which individuals

<sup>5</sup> Durkheim expands upon his analysis of social symbolism in chapter VII of the second Book of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, intitled “Origin of the Idea of the Totemic Principle or Mana” (Durkheim, 1912/1915, pp. 205-239).

transfigure certain material realities is a *constituting representation*, that is to say, a representation which constitutes the group as such. The transfiguration thus also operates at a second level: the totemic symbol not only transfigures the piece of wood (the symbol changes the material reality of this wood), but also and above all it makes, constitutes and institutes the unitary idea of the group. This is the many-layered meaning of Durkheim's 1901 *instituted by the collectivity*.

## 6. Conclusion

So in Durkheim's theory of social symbolism it is possible to detect a renewed sociological definition of the institution. Understood as the ways of thinking, being and acting *instituted by the collectivity*, the notion of the institution is further refined by a double symbolic transfiguration. An institution exists when individuals add to a material reality a symbolic reality which they have not themselves created (first transfiguration) and which through this addition, makes, institutes and constitutes the group (second transfiguration). In this sense, every institution is symbolic, and is thus instituting. More precisely, symbolic institutions are caught in a pendulum movement between *instituted* and *instituting*. Symbolic institutions produced by the collectivity, also produce this collectivity. It is through this process of symbolic institutionalisation that ("can" is needed) that the collectivity can "create itself [and] recreate itself", "it is the act by which it is periodically made "it is the act by which it is periodically made and remade" (Durkheim, 1912/1915, p. 470). This is what *instituted by the collectivity* means for Durkheim, in the strong sense.

There is also, in this sociological theory of the symbolic institution, a renewed conception of normativity. By this constituting character of the symbol, norms are irreducible to a simple functional normalization. Durkheim's sociological theory of symbolic institutions also reveals that he conceives normativity in a strong sense. The symbol as *constituting* does not bring about a merely functional standardisation. Here we see how much, from 1901, and contrary to Gurvitch's interpretation, the pre-established cannot be reduced to the repeated, and how much it is, on the contrary, creative and constituting. But the symbolic institution, as *instituted by the collectivity* and instituting for it, cannot be reduced to the aleatory character of a convention either. Of course, the symbol, insofar as it is not a figurative representation, has a certain arbitrariness. Why

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does *churinga* have one figure drawn on it and not another? Why does a particular national flag have a certain set of colours and not others? Of course, the very material object on which the symbol is deposited also has a certain arbitrariness. Why is the totemic emblem drawn on a certain piece of wood? Why is the national emblem stamped onto a certain piece of cloth? Yet it is necessary – socially necessary – for the group to constitute and renew itself through ritual symbolic practices. It is impossible for members of the group to change by agreement the rules of the game. It's also impossible for members of the group to not play the game at all. Indeed, symbolic institutions are not, for Durkheim, a convention or a game, but a social, yet non-political, yet unconventional necessity of the instituting.

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