I believe that all workers in the field of sociology sense the unpleasantness of the state of indecision that rules in our young discipline. There are as many methods as there are authors. And, what is sadder still, there are just as many regularities. While in the natural sciences there exists a whole set of facts, inductions, generalizations and regularities that the researcher can take for granted as solid bases to rely on for further work, we hardly have a single contingency that we could refer to without disagreement. What can be the cause of this sad state of disarray? Beside the extreme complexity of the phenomena themselves, it must be that the majority of authors approach the phenomena from an angle which, being subjective, disallows control. As long as we operate purely or chiefly with the facts of individual consciousness, we are for ever risking that another ‘introspective observer’ will reject our theorizing, claiming, for example, ‘In my consciousness altruism is a fundamental factor, therefore your theory which deduces the phenomena of social life from selfishness is false.’ It is vain to refer further to the facts of the consciousness of other people which can in their turn only be objected to through introspection. When one reads a work of natural science it is unimaginable not to be impressed by the precision, objectivity and openness to control, which they exhibit. They talk not about subjective facts but about things – things, which may be measured, grasped, compared and never denied by anyone. Thus one inevitably heaves a sigh - Is sociology alone doomed to squabble over the hair-splitting differences of introspection?

Thoughts of the above nature have been exercising me for a long time, therefore I shall attempt to treat the works and strivings of present-day French sociology from this angle. There are two persons whom I have found particularly noteworthy from this aspect of things.

One is Le Dantec, a French worker in biology with an interesting and impulsive mind, who also has a fine sense for philosophical and sociological problems. And because since the time of Comte we have been accustomed to see in biology the ABC of our discipline, I was most curious to find out how this pioneering representative of modern biology thought of the position of sociology.

The other is Durkheim who has been the grand master of French sociology since the death of Tarde and who unifies a whole army of young sociologists under the flag of L’année sociologique, in the spirit of the positivistic, objective method.

Since face-to-face conversation often puts such things into a surprisingly sharp light, which would easily bypass our attention when read in print, I requested both of

* This article was published in Huszadik Század in 1905.
these scholars to allow me to put a few questions on the above problem. They proved more than willing to grant me the opportunity and I found their views so interesting that I cannot fail to present them to the readers of *Huszadik Század*. I have to disclose Le Dantec’s ideas in the same form of discourse in which I heard them, as he has not written on these ideas to this date. I shall be in an easier position in describing Durkheim’s views, as his book *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* has just been published in its third edition. In this work he gives very proper treatment to the problem here under discussion, so that I only need to refer to his interview in order to supplement what is already there in his book.

Le Dantec is unlikely to be over forty and one would hardly believe that his volumes already amount to a minor library. It is hard to imagine more enjoyable academic reading than his books, which are eminent examples of clear and elegant writing. His speech is no different - lively, clear and impulsive.

I must start by saying that the most impressive and intriguing parts of his writing were, to me, those in which he provides a critique of Weismannism. The denial of the inheritance of acquired characteristics had almost managed to confuse me and the whole theory of the origin of the species had become obscure in my eyes. I believe that his critique can be seen as the ultimate refutation of Weismann’s aggressive scientific metaphysics.

I would not even call it metaphysics. It is nothing more than drawing flawed and arbitrary conclusions from flawed and arbitrary premises. A completely extinct doctrine. We can safely say that anyone who can believe in it is incapable of scientific thinking.

At the same time, even if we do call on the Lamarckian factor, the gradual development of the species remains a logical absurdity to me - unless we ceaselessly emphasize one fundamental condition. This is that the environment may be considered as a constant through tremendous periods of time.

As long as it is said that the transformation of the species is perpetual adaptation to the changing environment, it remains impossible to understand how the sequence of the species has emerged from the protists to man. For if we consider the environment as changing, it is obvious that the adaptation of one generation is hindered by the contrary adaptation of the next generation to the changing environment. Thus if the environment was perpetually changing, this would only produce monsters and the development of species and societies would be equally incomprehensible. I therefore believe that all biological and sociological research must be founded on the assumption that the environment may be considered as a constant through tremendous periods of time. This is a point, which I do not see to be sufficiently highlighted in biology.

“You are right. In my latest book I emphasize that the environment must be considered as unchanging through very long periods of time or that its changes are so slow as to be practically imperceptible.”

Next I told him that I have a keen interest in his research into amphimixis because, as far as I can see - it offers a positive answer to one of the most fascinating problems of sociology: that of evolution versus revolution. To wit, sociologists have two camps. According to one camp, all we need to do is establish the right institutions in order to achieve completely novel effects on society. According to the other camp, any
progress requires the slow, methodical remodeling, the educational and moral transformation of the populace.

"This is usually claimed by the priests. " Le Dantec interrupted impatiently.

No, not only the priests. It is also claimed by no lesser men than Spencer, Fustel de Coulanges and numerous representatives of the liberal doctrine. I am already willing to believe that in possession of the latest biological results on amphimixis the question can be given an exact answer. I can better illustrate this thought through a specific example. It is barely possible to find two races in Hungary, which are so far removed from each other culturally as the Jews and the Olah (a line of Gypsies). The Olah are the most backward and ill educated. The Jews are the most intellectual and most cunning. What would happen if one night we secretly replaced all Jewish babies with Olah babies from the remotest little villages of Transylvania? Would this swap have grand, noticeable consequences?

No. To all intents and purposes all things would remain the same. The Olah would grow up Jewish, the Jewish would grow up Olah under the influence of the circumstances, the institutions, the opportunities. Except, perhaps, these new Jews would be slightly more greedy or hungry or cruel or fertile, or they might be keener on a particular fashion or color than the previous ones.... but in general, all things would remain the same.

Is this answer correct?

"Beyond a doubt. Within any human racial type the differences are mainly due to differences in environment and education and therefore we can consider biologically sound the socialist view, which hopes to attain a fundamental transformation of the situation through a new system of education.¹ Nor does this require the ‘slow work of long generations ’ - the mere re-training of a single generation might suffice.

However interesting and instructive the guidance of biology may be, I persist in believing that the study of society as such (not that of man who makes it up) still lacks a proper natural scientific base. We are still working with symptoms and theories."

"So much so," continued Le Dantec, "that there is no such thing as a discipline of sociology. It is true that the self-certainty of method, which is present in the natural sciences is lacking in sociology. This is a lack we are all feeling but I don’t know myself how we should grasp the matter. Historical materialism is definitely an advance in the direction which I have called ‘channeling the accidental.’ Even Goethe was debating in one of his famous poems that the movements and struggles of people are defined by the need for nourishment. Obviously this is not true – human passions particularly are a mightier factor in activity than economic considerations and we often see people who under the influence of powerful excitement act in complete contradiction to their own interests. It would thus be a foolhardy thing to wish to explain everything from the need to eat – all we can state is that every individual who wishes to stay alive and who may be of interest to the historian of his family must by necessity involve himself in all sorts of activities the result of which will be that he stays alive. The necessity of these activities is enough to limit his freedom of action and to channel the accidental.² Thus,

¹ This interesting example was once brought up by my friend Diner-Dénes, when we were discussing this question. For the sake of complete truth I must admit that even then he was seeking to answer the question in this direction, while I was only led this way by the later biological researches.

² This is a summary of the work of a colleague of mine, who has been working on the problem of the relationship between economic and social factors in the development of human societies.
this is some progress but it is far from meaning a scientific solution to the problem. I repeat: I can merely see the shortcoming in sociology but at present I cannot recommend any certain method."

In reply to this I said that Le Dantec had a frequently recurring thought which sometimes appears to me as one that deserves further elaboration. Speaking against man’s free will he often uses the following argument. “Biologists have been led by the most precise experience to the point of accepting the absolute determinism of all the phenomena of elemental life. Now, since man is made up of nothing other than cells, all that he does is no more than an outcome of these elemental activities – it is their synthesis. As these elemental activities are determined, man is not free.”

This argument provides Le Dantec a means for accepting as secure and unshakeable the tenet whereby human life can be nothing other than the same physicochemical process as that which makes up cellular life. Now somebody might carry the argument further and say that society is a unity of people and since people are made up of cells, the regularities of society would have to be sought for in the laws of cellular biology. And indeed – somebody in our country not only pronounced this daring thought but actually applied it in its details. (Here I briefly outlined to him Méray’s basic ideas.)

“Impossible,” answered Le Dantec, “we don’t even know the connections between the cell’s nucleus and the protoplasm and we could make the most contradictory statements about them. Thus, a transference of this kind is absurd because it would mean that we try to explain something partially known (society) with the entirely unknown.”

(It occurred to me only later that by stating this, Le Dantec was partly contradicting himself. After all, contemporary psychology, against which L. D. fights on a biological ground, is most frequently relying on the main argument that explaining psychology with physicochemical regularities is the same as trying to explore the directly given and relatively well known (the life of the soul) with the more remote and the unknown. L. D. himself has written in so many words and uttered in live speech the claim that we have reached the point where life can be expressed through pure physicochemical regularities. Thus there is no hiatus between these phenomena.)

All in all, Le Dantec can see the problem but he knows of no cure. All he can say is this,

“It is doubtless that the solution can only come through the methods of the natural sciences. This method is based on mathematics and physics. I will not give 15 years and without knowledge of this nature one will not be able to comprehend a whole line of scientific texts. What has been done in sociology so far is worth hardly anything. Not even Comte’s work, even though I consider him the world’s greatest philosopher. Therefore the founder of sociology will be the man who, discarding all previous sociologists, breaks his path with his own feet and with the tools of the natural sciences.

I left the great biologist with this sad, negative result.

2 See Le Dantec 1904: 94.
3 See Le Dantec 1902: 4.
Durkheim is not a young man. For years he taught sociology at the University of Bordeaux and now he has replaced Buisson at the Sorbonne. He reminds one of German professors, both in his appearance and with the heavy, exercised distinctions he makes in his writings. He likes to operate with logical categories and Greek philosophers. But he is at the same time a completely modern person, as the reader will see even from this brief extract on his methodological principles (Durkheim 1904).

Sociology, contrary to biology or psychology, focuses not on individuals but on social facts. “A social fact is any manner of action, determined or otherwise, which is capable of exercising external pressure on the individual. In other words, all that is general in the entire expanse of a given society but which at the same time possesses an existence in its own right, independently of the individual actions.” (Durkheim 1904: 19).

The first and most important rule in research is to look on social facts as things (Durkheim 1904: 20). In other words, we have to consider social phenomena in themselves, distinguishing them from conscious subjects who formulate images of these. We have to study them from the outside as external things, as it is in this quality that they present themselves to us (Durkheim 1904: 36). Up to this date sociology worked, almost exclusively, not with things but with concepts. But in fact all that exists and can alone be observed are our individual societies in their birth, development and death (Durkheim 1904: 26). Sociology must undergo the same epoch-making reform as that which had turned psychology into its present fertile self: from introspective it must become experimental. It must pass from the subjective into the objective phase. Sociology even has an advantage over psychology, namely, that its facts are easier to grasp, while in psychology this is extremely difficult.

This chief rule leads to two others.

One runs as follows: we must systematically eradicate all pre-conceived opinions (Durkheim 1904: 40).

The other is: we must only subject to research a certain group of phenomena, which are pre-defined by a few external traits that they all share. This same research must include all the phenomena, which answer the definition. (Durkheim 1904: 45)

For example, if somebody wishes to study crime, he must not indulge in any preliminary psychological observations but must find the objective criteria of the phenomenon and he will find that in all societies we encounter actions that provoke in that society a reaction, which we call punishment. The research must be founded upon these objective, clearly definable facts and not on the concepts or emotions by which these facts are represented in our minds. If we proceed in this fashion, the facts no longer depend on the scholar, on the particular inclinations of his mind but on the nature of the things themselves. The external sign on the basis of which he classified them into this or that category is one that can be presented to anybody and may be recognized by anybody; also the observations of one scholar may be checked by the other (Durkheim 1904: 46).

These rules by necessity lead to a fourth one. If the sociologist sets out on the examination of any class of social facts, he must strive to grasp them from an angle in which they appear isolated from their individual appearances (Durkheim 1904: 57).
Thus, for example, various types of the family must be classified not after the descriptions of travelers and historians but primarily on the basis of the formations of family law and particularly inheritance law.

Next Durkheim proceeds to set up rules for the discrimination of normal and pathological phenomena.

1. Any social fact is normal with regard to a particular social type in a determined phase of its development if it appears in the average of societies of that type if observed in the appropriate phase of their development.

2. The results of the above method can be justified by demonstrating that the extent to which the phenomenon is general depends on the overall conditions of collective life within the given type of society.

3. This kind of demonstration is indispensable if we are talking about a type of society, which has not yet reached its integrated development (Durkheim 1904: 80).

These rules necessitate a classification of social types.

The chief rule of this classification is the following: we classify societies on the basis of their degree of complexity, starting from a perfectly simple society, which consists of a single segment. Within these classes we shall discriminate different variations according to whether there are complete mergers between various segments or not (Durkheim 1904: 106).

This would be a grand task and Durkheim himself acknowledges that the classification of more complex societies is still an open question.

We still need to talk about the methods for classifying social facts.

In this respect Durkheim believes the following:

Every time one wants to explain a social fact, he has to look separately for the cause that has led to it and for the function that it fulfils (Durkheim 1904: 117). The cause can only be sought in the preceding social facts and the function in connection with some social goal.

Durkheim rigidly rejects any explanation taken from the psychology of the individual: there is a breach in continuity between sociology and psychology in the same fashion as there is between biology and the physicochemical sciences. Thus every time a social fact is explained directly by psychological law, we can be quite sure that the explanation is false (Durkheim 1904: 128).

(What will become of this argument if we can believe Le Dantec who claims that biology, at least in its basic phenomena, can now be expressed in physicochemical laws?)

Finally, with regard to the administration of evidence he emphasizes two methodological principles:

1. The same effect must always correspond to the same cause.

2. Any even slightly complicated social fact must be explained in no other fashion than by following its integrated development through all the types of society (Durkheim 1904: 169).

Perhaps even this terribly meagre sketch can convince the reader of the strong tendency toward objectivity, which penetrates Durkheim’s entire school. For they do keep to these rules in truth and Durkheim’s books (De la division du travail social, Le
Suicide) are usually viewed as paragons of objective research. They are indeed very precise and careful works in terms of the handling of facts and data, as well as in terms of the way in which they grasp their problems. And yet, on the whole, I find them unpleasant reading, as their explanations of the psychology of masses appear forced and metaphysical in character. Besides, the manner in which he evaluates and conceives things exudes an air of the petit bourgeoisie, which, I believe, will repel many modern readers. For someone, for example, to explain the course which legal life takes entirely from collective emotions and not to say a word about class warfare - is to me simply terrible. Generally, Durkheim has an aversion to all rationalist explanations and operates always with complex processes of collective psychology.

"I do not make any psychological fact or assumption my starting point," he replied when I criticized him for this method. "I know nothing about human nature because we do not know it. On this ground you can only get to speculations and concepts but not to the natural order of things. You see, for example, Spencer created a sociology of religion on the basis of 'the facts of the psychology of the individual' which is today pur enfantillage in the eyes of all the relevant scholars. I look at the contingencies of the facts and they force me into certain explanations of collective psychology, the truth of which cannot be affected by the fact that they offend the facts of the individual consciousness. After all, Bachofen was also laughed at when he came out with the facts about matriarchy, because they were in contradiction with certain facts of consciousness. It is these facts of consciousness which led, in physics, to the theory of horror vacui and to other anthropomorphic explanations."

No matter how I resent some of Durkheim’s achievements, I am in no doubt that the basic idea of his method is correct and all young warriors who set out to conquer the castle of sociology must only have one war cry on their lips:

We need facts! And again: facts! And once more: facts!

REFERENCES