

## Classification as Collective Representation: A Conceptual Review of Durkheim and Mauss's Primitive Classification

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### Abstract

*This article examines Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss's Primitive Classification as a foundational text in the sociology of knowledge that argues classificatory thinking is not merely an individual cognitive given, but a socially formed institution. Using library research and critical-conceptual analysis, the paper reconstructs the book's central thesis that social divisions (moieties, clans, and totemic groupings) provide the prototype and scheme by which natural phenomena are organized into hierarchical systems of categories. The analysis highlights their comparative cases, including Australian totemic systems, Zuni and Sioux classifications, and Chinese correlative cosmology, to show how cosmological order and social order are made mutually intelligible through classificatory logics. The article then discusses Rodney Needham's editorial introduction, which questions the explanatory "resort to sentiment" and the conflation of collective representations with universal cognitive faculties. The study concludes that the enduring value of Primitive Classification lies in its programmatic claim: sociological analysis can illuminate the genesis and functioning of logical operations, while later critique urges caution against overstating causal claims and psychological reduction.*

**Keywords :** Classification, Collective representations, Totemism, Social organization, Sociology of knowledge

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## 1. Introduction

Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, in their 1903 work *Primitive Classification*, proposed an intellectual project that challenged the dominant assumption of their time that classification was a ready-made, universal mental faculty fully explicable by individual psychology (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). For nineteenth-century philosophy and psychology, classification was considered a simple procedure arising from the association of ideas, habits of perception, or the innate human capacity to recognize similarities and differences (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). Durkheim and Mauss rejected this reductionist view and proposed that classification especially a stable, hierarchically organized system of categories is a historically formed social institution whose origins can be traced through sociological analysis (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963).

In Durkheim's intellectual tradition, the concept of "social institutions" refers to collective forms that organize social life, both material (such as law and economics) and ideational (such as religion and cognitive systems) (Durkheim, 1982). By positing classification as a social institution, Durkheim and Mauss expanded the scope of sociology into the realm of epistemology and the philosophy of knowledge, paving the way for what later became known as the "sociology of knowledge" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mannheim, 1936). They argued that the way humans divide the world into categories such as those of space, time, genus, and species is inseparable from the way society divides itself into social groups (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963).

The central thesis of *Primitive Classification* can be summarized in one sentence: "they classify things because they are divided into clans" (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 82). In other words, social divisions such as moieties, clans, and totemic groups provide prototypes and conceptual schemes by which natural phenomena are organized into hierarchical systems of categories (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). Durkheim and Mauss argued not only that classification is influenced by society, but that social structure itself is the model, template, and logical source for classification (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). The relationships between clans within a tribe, for example, are seen as prototypes for the relationships between categories in a cosmic classification system (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963).

The *Primitive Classification* project was comparative and ethnographically based. Durkheim and Mauss analyzed a variety of cases from non-Western societies, including the totemic system of Australia, the cosmological classification of the Zuñi and Sioux peoples of North America, and the correspondence system of China (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). They used this ethnographic material to demonstrate that "primitive" classification was not an inferior or pre-logical form of thinking, but rather a hierarchical, unified, and speculatively oriented system of ideas that served to unify knowledge in other words, an early form of "natural philosophy" (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 81).

However, since its publication, *Primitive Classification* has been the object of intense intellectual debate. Rodney Needham, who translated and edited the English edition in 1963, wrote a critical introduction questioning some of Durkheim's key claims. and Mauss (Needham, 1963). Needham criticized the use of "sentiments" as a causal explanation, arguing that this explanation is inadequate and risks being tautological (Needham, 1963). He also highlighted the conceptual ambiguity in the distinction between the study of "collective representations" and claims about "universal cognitive faculties," and pointed out that Durkheim and Mauss often jumped from one to the other without adequate justification (Needham, 1963).

This article aims to reconstruct the main argument of *Primitive Classification*, analyze the ethnographic cases used by Durkheim and Mauss, and evaluate Needham's critique to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their proposed sociology of knowledge project. The main questions to be answered are: How do Durkheim and Mauss construct the argument that classification is a collective representation? To what extent is their argument supported by ethnographic evidence? And what are the implications of Needham's critique for the validity of the Durkheimian sociology of knowledge project?.

## 2. Method

This study uses a library research method with a focus on a critical-conceptual analysis of the English translation of the Primitive Classification text, translated and edited by Rodney Needham (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). The reading strategy used is hermeneutic-critical, which aims to reconstruct the text's internal arguments while evaluating its logical and empirical strength (Gadamer, 1989; Ricoeur, 1981).

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, a reconstruction of the main arguments per chapter, focusing on identifying the premises, ethnographic evidence, and conclusions drawn by Durkheim and Mauss (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). This stage involved a careful reading of the structure of the argument to understand how Durkheim and Mauss construct the claim that classification is a social institution derived from social division (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963).

Second, the identification and analysis of key concepts such as "collective representations," "classificatory function," "totemism," and "collective sentiment" (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). This conceptual analysis is essential for understanding the Durkheimian theoretical framework underlying the book's argument, as well as for identifying ambiguities or inconsistencies in the use of these concepts (Sartori, 1970).

Third, an evaluation of Rodney Needham's critique in the introduction to the 1963 edition examines the causal explanatory power and epistemological basis of Durkheim and Mauss's arguments (Needham, 1963). Needham's critique is treated as a theoretical interlocutor who helps identify the internal weaknesses of the Durkheim-Mauss argument, particularly regarding the use of "sentiments" as explanations, the ambiguity between collective representations and cognitive faculties, and the problem of circularity in causal arguments (Needham, 1963).

In addition to Primitive Classification, the analysis also draws on related works in the Durkheimian sociological tradition, including *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim, 1995), *The Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim, 1984), and *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim, 1982), to situate the Primitive Classification argument within the broader context of Durkheim's intellectual project. Secondary literature on Durkheim and the sociology of knowledge, including the work of Steven Lukes (1972), Alexander (1982), and Rawls (2004), is also used to enrich the analysis.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Classification as a Social Institution and Collective Representation

Durkheim and Mauss began Primitive Classification with a sharp critique of the individual psychology and Kantian philosophy that dominated discussions of categories and classification in their time (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). They argued that this intellectual tradition viewed classification as a simple, almost automatic, mental operation arising from the innate human capacity to recognize similarities and differences (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 4-5). For Durkheim and Mauss, this view was inadequate because it failed to explain why classification systems differed so radically from one society to another, or why certain classifications were stable, systematic, and hierarchical (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963).

They proposed that true classification—that is, a hierarchically organized, cosmologically comprehensive system of categories—cannot be explained by individual experience or the association of ideas alone (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 7). Such a classification system requires a more "collective" source, namely, society itself (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). Durkheim and Mauss wrote that "in order to understand how men first organized their experience, we must consider how society organized itself" (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 8).

The key concept they use is "collective representations," which refers to ideas, symbols, and categories produced by collective life and that have a sui generis reality, not reducible to individual consciousness (Durkheim, 1982, p. 39). Collective representations include myths, religion, law, morals, and as argued in Primitive Classification—classification systems (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). Durkheim and Mauss asserted that classification is a

collective representation that functions to organize a society's collective knowledge and experience (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963).

They also focused on what they called the "classificatory function," the process of relating things to basic concepts considered central and then arranging the inclusion-exclusion relationships among those concepts (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 9-10). True classification, they argued, is not simply the grouping of similar things, but the arrangement of those groups into a unified hierarchical system, in which each category has its designated place within the whole (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 10).

In the concluding chapter, Durkheim and Mauss argue that "primitive" classification is not strange, inferior, or disconnected from modern science; on the contrary, it possesses the essential features of all classification systems: a hierarchical, unified, and speculatively oriented system of ideas to advance understanding and unify knowledge (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 81). They even call primitive classification an early "philosophy of nature." (philosophy of nature), which functions much like modern science in its attempt to make the cosmos understandable (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 81).

### **3.2. Australian Type: Cosmic Correspondence Follows Social Division**

The Australian case was the primary focus of Durkheim and Mauss's analysis, as they considered the Australian totemic system to be the clearest example of a direct correspondence between social divisions and classificatory systems (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 11-40). They based their analysis on ethnographic accounts of tribes such as the Wotjobaluk, Kurnai, and Arunta, collected by researchers such as Howitt, Fison, and Spencer & Gillen (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963).

In Australian society, Durkheim and Mauss demonstrated the existence of a complex system of social divisions based on moieties (dualistic divisions) and totemic clans (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 12-15). Each individual belonged to a moiety and a clan, and this affiliation determined not only their social relationships (such as marriage rules) but also their relationship to the universe (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). Each clan had a totem, an animal or plant species considered ancestral and symbolic of the clan (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 16).

What was most interesting to Durkheim and Mauss was that the classification did not stop at the totem. Each clan not only identified with a single totem species, but also claimed various objects, phenomena, and natural locations as part of their clan's "territory" (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 17-20). For example, in the Wotjobaluk tribe, the Pelican clan identified not only with pelicans, but also with cypress trees, ebony trees, several species of fish, and various other natural phenomena (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 18). Durkheim and Mauss interpreted this as evidence that the entire cosmos was classified according to a clan scheme: every object in the universe "belonged" to one clan or another (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 20).

Furthermore, Durkheim and Mauss point out that in some cases, this correspondence system is very strict and is considered "obligatory" by social actors (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 24-28). They give the example of the messaging system in a particular tribe: if someone from clan A wants to send a message to someone from clan B, then the sender must be from clan A, the messenger must be from the appropriate clan, the wood for the message must be from a tree that "belongs" to clan A, and even the colors used must match the colors associated with clan A (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 25-26). Compliance with this correspondence is not optional, but is considered necessary and "demanded" by the principle of classification itself (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 26).

From this pattern of correspondence, Durkheim and Mauss drew a radical theoretical conclusion: classification works like a logical theorem, in which different elements are "demanded" to be in harmony by the underlying principle of classification (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 28). And the principle of classification itself stems from social division (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). They wrote that "the classification of things reproduces the classification of people" (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 34).

Durkheim and Mauss also formulated what they called "two directions of totemism":

first, humans are grouped according to natural objects (totems), and second, natural objects are grouped according to social groups (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 35-36). This produces a thesis that is the opposite of the view of James Frazer and other evolutionary anthropologists, who argued that clans formed because people first classified natural objects and then identified themselves with those objects (Frazer, 1910). Durkheim and Mauss proposed the opposite: objects were classified because society was already divided into clans (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 36-37).

### **3.3. Zuñi and Sioux: Schema Expansion and Differentiation**

After discussing the Australian case, Durkheim and Mauss turned to examples from indigenous North American societies, particularly the Zuñi and Sioux, to show that the same principles apply in more complex contexts (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 41-60). They argued that cosmological classifications could be more elaborate and differentiated, but still demonstrate a close relationship between social mapping and natural mapping (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963).

In the case of the Zuñi, Durkheim and Mauss presented a highly elaborate classification system based on seven directions (north, south, east, west, up, down, and center), where each direction was associated with a particular clan, color, natural element, season, and various other attributes (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 42-48). This system encompassed not only physical space but also the organization of time, ritual functions, and even social temperament (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 48-50). For example, clans associated with the north were considered to have a "violent" or "warlike" temperament, while clans associated with the south were considered to have a "peaceful" or "agricultural" temperament (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 50-51).

Durkheim and Mauss interpreted this example as evidence that natural and social categories are mutually enriching (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 52). Classification does not simply map objects into abstract categories, but assigns meaning, value, and emotional affinity to those categories through their association with social groups (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 53).

In the case of the Sioux, they exhibit a similar system but with significant local variations (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 54-58). The Sioux classification system is also based on clan divisions and cosmological associations, but with a different emphasis on sacred numbers (especially four and seven) and ritual symbolism (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 55-57).

### **3.4. China: Correspondence Classification and the Challenge of Causal Explanation**

The section on China is the most problematic part of *Primitive Classification*, both for Durkheim and Mauss themselves and for their critics (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 61-75; Needham, 1963, pp. xli-xliiii). Durkheim and Mauss discuss the Chinese correspondence classification system, which is highly elaborate and includes five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, water), five directions, five seasons, five colors, five tastes, five body organs, and so on (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 62-68).

They argue that this Chinese classification system is the most developed and most philosophical form of correspondence classification, suggesting that this kind of classification is not limited to "primitive" societies but is also found in great civilizations (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 68-70). However, they struggled to relate the Chinese classification system directly to social organization, as they did with the Australian, Zuñi, and Sioux (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 70-72).

Durkheim and Mauss attempted to address this issue by speculating that the Chinese classification system may have originated from an earlier clan social organization, but had undergone such transformation and philosophical elaboration that a direct connection to social organization was no longer apparent (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 72-74). However, this speculation is not supported by strong ethnographic or historical evidence (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963).

Rodney Needham, in his introduction, strongly criticized this section, arguing that the Chinese case demonstrates the weakness of Durkheim and Mauss's causal arguments (Needham, 1963, pp. xli-xliii). Needham argued that the main value of the Chinese section is that it shows that correspondence classification is a widespread phenomenon and not limited to simple societies, but that the attempt to force this case to fit the thesis of a direct correspondence between social organization and cosmic classification is unsuccessful (Needham, 1963, p. xlii).

### **3.5. A Critical Evaluation of Needham: "Sentiment," Causality, and the Ambiguity of the Concept of "Mind"**

Rodney Needham, in his introduction to the 1963 edition, offered a thorough critical evaluation of Primitive Classification (Needham, 1963, pp. vii-xlviii). His criticisms can be grouped into three main themes: first, the problem of using "sentiments" as causal explanations; second, the ambiguity between the study of collective representations and claims about universal cognitive faculties; and third, the problem of circularity in causal arguments (Needham, 1963).

First, Needham criticized Durkheim and Mauss's tendency to make "collective sentiment" or "affective value" the final explanation for why certain classifications emerge or why certain categories are organized in a certain way (Needham, 1963, pp. xxvi-xxx). For example, Durkheim and Mauss explained that differences in the conception of space between different societies occur because of the different "affective values" given to different geographical areas (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, pp. 75-76). Or they explained that the grouping of certain objects is determined by the "sentimental affinity" between those objects and certain social groups (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 77).

Needham considered this kind of explanation inadequate because it lacks empirical evidence, does not explain why certain sentiments arise, and does not explain the variation in classifications across societies (Needham, 1963, pp. xxviii-xxix). He wrote that "explanation by sentiment" risks being a tautology: classification occurs because certain sentiments exist, and certain sentiments exist because there are classifications (Needham, 1963, p. xxix). In other words, this explanation does not explain anything, but simply replaces one unknown with another unknown (Needham, 1963).

Second, Needham highlights a fundamental ambiguity in Durkheim and Mauss's project regarding what exactly they are studying: are they studying collective representations? (i.e., the content of particular social ideas) or universal human cognitive faculties (i.e., the mental capacity to classify) (Needham, 1963, pp. xxx-xxxv). Needham argued that Durkheim and Mauss often jump from one to the other without adequate justification (Needham, 1963, p. xxxi).

For example, when Durkheim and Mauss claim that "the basic categories of classification derive from social organization," it is unclear whether they mean that (a) the content of particular categories (e.g., how Australians divide up the cosmos) derives from the specific Australian social organization, or (b) that the universal human capacity to have categories at all derives from social experience (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963; Needham, 1963, p. xxxii). Claim (a) is a claim about specific, empirically testable collective representations; claim (b) is a philosophical claim about the conditions of possibility of human knowledge that is much more ambitious and difficult to prove (Needham, 1963, p. xxxiii).

Third, Needham identified the problem of circularity in Durkheim and Mauss's causal arguments (Needham, 1963, pp. xxxv-xxxviii). If categories such as space and class are supposed to derive from social organization, then one must already possess the categories of space and class in order to "see" the social model as a model from which to classify other things (Needham, 1963, p. xxxvi). In other words, to use social divisions as templates for the division of the cosmos, one must already possess the ability to divide and classify (Needham, 1963, p. xxxvii). This creates a circularity: classification explains classification (Needham, 1963, p. xxxviii).

Needham concluded that while Primitive Classification was an important and influential

work, its arguments contained significant logical and empirical weaknesses (Needham, 1963, pp. xlv-xlvi). However, he also acknowledged that the book's programmatic value namely, the idea that sociology can contribute to an understanding of the genesis and function of cognitive operations remained important and deserved to be continued, albeit with greater caution against overly strong causal claims (Needham, 1963, pp. xlvii-xlvi).

Recent debates in the philosophy of science and social theory increasingly highlight how classification systems shape what counts as knowledge and how reality itself is organized. Contemporary scholars argue that classification is not merely a neutral reflection of natural categories but a social practice that participates in constructing the objects it seeks to describe. Historical studies of disease classification demonstrate that medical entities emerge through institutional practices such as clinical observation, diagnostic systems, and international classification standards rather than purely biological facts (Koretskaya, 2025). Similarly, theoretical analyses of scientific classification show that systems designed to capture the "essence" of phenomena inevitably depend on collective agreements among scientific communities, making classification both epistemic and social at the same time (Thellefsen, 2025). In the field of library and information science, classification and bibliographic organization are considered foundational to social epistemology because they determine which forms of knowledge become visible, accessible, and legitimate within institutional knowledge systems (Zandonade et al., 2025). These contemporary insights resonate strongly with Durkheim and Mauss's proposition that classification is embedded in collective life rather than derived solely from individual cognition.

The notion that knowledge is socially constructed has also become central to modern epistemological discussions. Contemporary constructivist and sociological approaches argue that knowledge is shaped by cultural context, institutional authority, and relations of power rather than emerging solely from objective observation (Marchelia, 2025). Within science and technology studies as well as the sociology of medicine, even scientific facts are increasingly understood as outcomes of complex social processes that link scientific practice, institutional authority, and political structures (Shaffer, 2021). At the same time, contemporary social constructionism has evolved into what some scholars describe as a "resistant knowledge project," highlighting how marginalized perspectives produce alternative forms of knowledge that can challenge dominant epistemic hierarchies (Allen, 2025). In a rapidly transforming digital information environment, the boundaries between scientific, journalistic, and online knowledge production have become blurred, producing what scholars describe as a "bifurcation of social reality," where different communities construct competing knowledge worlds through symmetrical social processes (Rughiniş & Flaherty, 2022; Neuberger et al., 2023). Viewed in this light, the Durkheim–Mauss thesis that classificatory systems emerge from social organization remains highly relevant, offering a foundational framework for understanding how societies continue to construct and negotiate systems of knowledge in contemporary contexts.

#### 4. Conclusions and Suggestions

**Primitive Classification** The work of Durkheim and Mauss offered a bold and influential programmatic thesis: classification is not a simple individual mental operation, but a hierarchical system of ideas that serves to unify knowledge, and social divisions provide the prototype and conceptual apparatus for the division of the cosmos (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963). Their central claim "they classify things because they are divided into clans" represents sociology's radical attempt to explain logical operations through the analysis of social structure (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 82).

Through a comparative analysis of the Australian totemic system, the Zuñi and Sioux cosmological classifications, and the Chinese correspondence system, Durkheim and Mauss demonstrated that "primitive" classification is not an inferior form of thinking, but rather an early "natural philosophy" that possesses the essential features of all classificatory systems: hierarchy, integration, and a speculative orientation (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963, p. 81). They

successfully demonstrated that classification is a social institution that can and should be studied by sociology (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963).

However, critic Rodney Needham cautioned that Durkheim and Mauss's project contained significant weaknesses (Needham, 1963). First, causal explanations relying on "sentiments" risk being tautological and inadequate to explain classificatory variation across societies (Needham, 1963, pp. xxviii-xxix). Second, the ambiguity between the study of collective representations and claims about universal cognitive faculties must be maintained to prevent arguments from jumping from one to the other without justification (Needham, 1963, pp. xxx-xxxv). Third, the problem of circularity in causal arguments—that people must already possess categories in order to use social models as templates for classification—suggests that the relationship between social organization and classification may be more complex than Durkheim and Mauss assumed (Needham, 1963, pp. xxxv-xxxviii).

Thus, Primitive Classification remains of great value as a foundation for the sociology of knowledge and as a challenge to psychological reductionism and epistemological individualism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mannheim, 1936). However, modern readers need to consider it a powerful theoretical project that requires a rigorous approach to explanatory logic, caution in causal claims, and sensitivity to the complexity of the relationship between society and cognition (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963; Needham, 1963). The intellectual legacy of Primitive Classification lies not in the final truth of its claims, but in the space it opened for questioning the social origins of categories we take for granted as universal and natural (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963).

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