

Emile Durkheim Essay Questions

Durkheim's Modernity Compared to Marx and Weber

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Question 1: Compare Durkheim's view of modernity to that of Marx and Weber. Please pay special attention to each author's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of modern social forms.

Prior to beginning the comparison, let us broadly review Durkheim's construction of mechanical and organic solidarity as these constructs can be used to facilitate the comparison of his work to that of Marx and Weber. Mechanical solidarity classifies a society with a high degree of fellow feeling and mutuality amongst societal members. The members of this type of society are often bonded through rituals in which totems of various sorts identify that which is sacred to the group. The rituals surrounding the totem promote unity while facilitating the development of a collective consciousness. Durkheim identifies that there is a small division of labor present because the societal needs likely do not warrant more than a few classifications of work, e.g. hunter, farmer, etc. Durkheim thought that societies of this type had more repressive laws that resulted in more severe forms of punishment because any violation was likely one that affected the group's strong sense of collective conscience.

Organic solidarity refers to societies in which there is a high division of labor. The division of labor results from increased specialization in work, which is also associated with the rise of capitalism. Organic societies were classified by reduced amounts of collective experience because work specialization results in the formation of many smaller, discrete groups. As such, societies of this type have a reduction in rituals and sacred objects and a rise in individualism. Perhaps one might say that an increase in many individualized sacred objects could also result from this. The society construction of this type becomes paradoxical because individuals are dependent upon other with whom they do not have social relations, but may act or vote against those individuals that support them in an indirect fashion. Durkheim categorized laws of organic societies as

restitutive because when violations occur the focus is on compensation for the individual violation. Compensation was not punishment *per se*, but some form of payment for the violation. It is noted that Durkheim's research in this area does not hold up empirically.

When we compare this aspect of Durkheim's view of modernity to Marx we find that they both studied hunter gatherer societies but Marx did not focus his work on collective conscious, ritual, and sacredness. Marx's work in this area was focused on man's species-being and how work was a fundamental aspect of man's construction. Marx argued that work was fundamental to man's being, and that this aspect was violated in the capitalistic mode of production since work in this environment was based on task simplification rather than entire product completion. Marx furthers his argument by making a distinction between the working class subjected to this environment and the owners who define the environment. This is a strength of Marx's work because he is making class distinctions that Durkheim did not. We also don't find Durkheim assessing man's everyday needs in terms of 'immediate consumption' or how management potentially sought regular control over employees by limiting wages in such a way that their ability to build surplus was limited. However, we do find Durkheim discussing the importance of social contracts and how a lack of them can result in increased forms of deviance. This was a strength of Durkheim's analysis because he identified the existence of social objects that guided, and obscured, the behavior of individual's on varying levels. Marx focused less on micro aspects of behavior and more on the economic conditions of a class as well as how the capitalistic system would eventually self-destruct.

In regards to Weber we find Durkheim's view of modernity simpler to follow. The establishment of mechanical and organic solidarity and their resulting division of

labor is a useful start to perhaps gauge the level of a society's development but it is through Weber's analysis of bureaucracy, class, status and party, science, and rationality that many more avenues of inquiry are opened. One of the places where these two authors find common ground is in Durkheim's notion of the collective conscience. Weber did not utilize this terminology but one could say that it was similar to some of his ideal type constructions such as the Protestant's covenant of work. Both were seeking to establish a means to explain how groups or sects of people embodied an ideal in that group's collective conscience. Weber did this through his identification of three types of structure: traditional, charismatic, and rational/legal. Each could be thought of as having a unique type of collective conscience that Weber explored through each structure's people, context, and consequences. This approach was more in-depth than Durkheim's but this does not mean that Durkheim's approach was without warrant. This was particularly so in regards to his assessment of the democratic state.

In Durkheim's view, the democratic state would promote a high division of labor that would in turn result in many individuals requiring the state to house notions of individual equality and freedom while promoting patriotism and national pride on a collective level (Giddens, pg 101). But when lower levels of the state, i.e. those individuals with too many choices and an inability to focus their desires, become unbalanced there could exist the possibility of bureaucratic tyranny. From our class notes we learn that a construction of this sort becomes a slippery slope leading towards imperialism because the collective conscience is more focused on national pride than a balance of national pride and individual skill development within occupational sub-groups. Durkheim's proposal of occupational groups is an effort to build a solution to this situation but we

know that it is not an idea he actively sought to develop further. In some regards, Durkheim's use of the collective conscience is an advancement of thought from both Marx and Weber because we can use this construct to think about power relations in a group and the interaction of one group's ideals with those of another group. This is also useful in explaining how various groups in a high division of labor can come together in pursuit of a common goal.

It is a weakness in Durkheim's view of modernity that not much emphasis is placed on the economic relations of groups or individuals. The focus of his work on group cohesion and how modern societies develop mutual dependence on differentiated roles is clearly valuable in explaining relations amongst groups but what about the economic side of group relations? What if there is a set of occupational groups that mitigate the state government but this organization is not able to be voiced properly because it doesn't have enough funding from its group's members to cover the cost? It is a strength of both Marxist and Weberian work that economic considerations were covered but it is a weakness in Durkheim's work because modern capitalistic societies are based on monetary mechanisms. In Weber's view this is why some relationships amongst people in capitalistic societies are built solely upon their economic relations to one another. These monetary relations can exert power and influence that is greater than some of the social norms that Durkheim discussed. In this point Marx would certainly find agreement. Thus we must question if Durkheim's group cohesion and social influence premise is adequate to explain the nature of relations in capitalistic societies.

Another manner in which to view the works of these three theorists is in terms of class. Marx was clearly focused on class and class interest. Marx assessed that men and

women are born into different strata in which property relations have already been determined indicating that people's behavior would be class based. Weber expanded Marx's analysis of class by positing that men and women could be further classified into groups based on their consumption patterns rather than where they stood in the process of production. Weber brought forward how societies had different levels of groupings and strata with different life-styles attached. Within the different life-styles occurs positioning for power and prestige. Durkheim's analysis doesn't have a focus towards individuals or classes. Again, we find a focus on group characteristics and a clear focus on identifying causes of social facts as objects but little work on group economic relations. It is a strength that both Marx and Weber sought to analyze the position of the individual actor in society. It is not a disadvantage that Durkheim didn't focus on the individual. In fact, he was optimistic that increased divisions of labor would allow avenues for individuals to develop their full potential but in a social structure in which the one's mode of actions are constrained the system's moral duties (Giddens, pg 88).

Question 2: How do each of these writers explain the relationship between ideas and experiences?

Marx's analysis of ideas and experiences illustrates that the owners of production are also the owners of ideas because they have the means and capital to distribute ideas to the masses. Associated with goods production, the owners of production can produce ideas that working class experience as reality. The owning class possesses the wherewithal to hire the clergy, and other information delivery systems, to establish levels of false consciousness in the working class from the distributed ideas. Marx goes on to posit that it is in the bourgeoisie' best interest to manufacture ideas because there would otherwise be a greater possibility of revolt by the workers. Weber differs from this point of view in that he feels there are lots of ideas within society and individuals select one or

many of them that correlation with the individual's prerogatives. There may be some agreement in regards to idea formation between Marx and Weber in that Weber discusses how the formation of idea concentrates in a society's learned group. The ideas of this group are logically constructed and this group seeks to distribute their ideas to the masses but in this process ideas are transformed to suit the culture of the individuals communicated to, as witnessed in the Protestant's creation of wealth as a sign of God's grace. Thus we have Marxist construction that ideas are used to control masses and a Weberian construction that ideas are experienced in a way that facilitates a group's interest. Durkheim's view of ideas is that there are too many of them present in modern society and this becomes overwhelming for individual's when social structures weaken their influence upon the individual. The decrease of the controlling influence of social objects on individuals can create states of indecision, frustration, and stress that can result in increased levels of suicide.

Durkheim's work around suicide is differentiating from that Marx and Weber because he formulated a manner in which to assess the effects of a lack of social structure on individuals. Neither Marx nor Weber were particularly focused on this issue. Anomie, or normlessness, was the term Durkheim used to describe an individual's experience of a state in a social structure in which there were no social controls to limit one's ambitions or actions. Part of his empirical work focused on social structures that had increased or decreased levels of suicide depending upon how much control the structure had over the individual. He compared the difference of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews finding that Jews had the lowest levels of suicide because first off it was preached as not permitted and secondly he found that increased levels of education, which was a core component of

being raised Jewish, had a negative correlation with suicide (Suicide). Durkheim also illustrated how levels of suicide decreased in times of national crisis, e.g. a war, because the collective conscience would help direct more people towards a common goal rather than a feeling of anomie.

The ideas and experiences of Weber were quite focused on understanding how a goal/rational society was constructed because an individual's experience in this type of society always involves the justification of behavior towards an end. Through Weber's exploration of the Calvinist and Lutheran doctrines he determines that the Calvinism doctrine of predestination placed such an 'unprecedented inner loneliness' on its followers because the church was no longer responsible for providing one's salvation through the sacraments. It was already predetermined whether a person would be accepted into God's kingdom or not so the best that one could do was work the gifts bestowed upon them. Weber saw this as the beginning stages of the of the disenchantment of the world because it represented a decrease in people attending institutions that would contemplate ethics and morals (Giddens, pg 128). As a result of this, if a modern society becomes more rational then all of the experiences of individuals in that society are focused towards that which can be justified. Science becomes increasingly valued because processes and nature can be calculated. Bureaucracies are valued because they represent a collection of rational processes with start and end points. New types of controls are placed on individuals in rational systems because qualifications for employment, education levels, and prior work experience enables or does not enable one finding jobs that match their interests. Increased control becomes desired and that which people experience perhaps is limited because the ability to experience, and the cost

of experience, becomes controlled by those rational mechanisms that provide *access* to experience opportunities. As with Marx we find in Weber a level of system thinking applied to an individual's experience. This differs from Durkheim because his system was focused on an overall set of beliefs.

In relation to the ideas and experiences of Marx we find alienation. The concept is that men are dominated by the forces of their own creation. Man on the assembly line is creating a product in a process of production that is outside of himself. Because money is needed in order to sustain man's life the working for money and the subjectification of oneself to the production system results in man not being able to fully develop the many facets of his personality. Durkheim was perhaps exploring and developing Marx's concept of alienation in his work on suicide but again it was not focused on the individual. Durkheim wrote, "The individual submits to society and this submission is the condition of his liberation. For man freedom consists in the deliverance of from blind, unthinking physical forces; this he achieves by opposing against them the great and intelligent force which is society, under whose protection he shelters" (Giddens, pg 117). From a Marxist perspective this submission would be a form of purgatory.

Question 3: How does Durkheimian framework illuminate and or obscure what you want to know?

In the Marx paper submitted this semester the last section of the paper focused on the topic of automation and mechanization. This topic will now be further developed with simulation, robotics, and prototyping literature as these forces continue to rapidly alter the face of production environments that are both beneficial and detrimental to employees. A Durkheimian framework will be applied to this work. (note: the previous writing on this subject in the Marxist paper is attached to the end of this paper)

In Jerry Rifkin's book, "The End of Work" the history of various labor saving technologies are explored and their impact upon employees. From the cotton gin, to the assembly line, and now on towards robotics and database technologies modern capitalistic society is continuing in its efforts to increase efficiency so that corporate employee requisitions may be retired from the budget. Rifkin seeks to document the historic trend of worker displacement via automation and robotics. He cites how blacks in the 1940's accounting for 30% of Fords UAW's membership but their overall employment in this industry change to 25.7% in Chrysler and 23% in General Motors by the end of the 1950's (Rifkin, pg 75). He also documents how the impact of Ford's 'automation department' established in 1947 eventually resulted in Ford Rouge plant housing under 30,000 employees by the 1960's whereas this number was over 85,000 in 1945.

An original driving force behind automation strategies was the advancement in computing technologies. When numerically controlled computers started hitting the factory floors in the 1960's Rifkin cites how management's active commitment to labor saving technologies was firmly rooted (Rifkin 64-68). Coded tape from engineering designers now drove the lathes and cutters as the knowledge and expertise of the worker was embedded into the tape. Between 1957 and 1964 the productivity rate in manufacturing doubled. All told, the number of blue collar workers in auto manufacturing fell by 3% during this period and it has been estimated that Ford alone invested, not spent, more than 2.5 billion on automation initiatives in the 1950's and 60's (Rifkin, pg. 75).

Associated with this was a reduction in labor's power because unions were not able to compete with the automation strategy effectively. Rifkin cites that when the union contract negotiations of the 1960's focused on job retraining they were effectively securing positions for the union members in that day at the expense of a future generation. There was also a correlation of decreased union power with the rise of the global corporation in that manufacturing operations from the 1970's onward as corporation's found cheap labor and no unions overseas.

Strongly associated with the development of labor displacing technologies has been the development of robotics in manufacturing, agriculture, medicine, banking, and the retail industry, i.e. scanners. Robotics in all forms have facilitated productivity rates and contributed to the displacement of workers. Specific to manufacturing, the number of robots per 10,000 manufacturing employees skyrocketed in the years between 1980 and 1996. It went from 8.3 to 265 in Japan, from 2 to 79 in Germany, from 3 to 38 in the US and from zero to 98 in Singapore. The world's robotic population grew in general from about 35,000 in 1982 to 677,000 in 1996. It expected to increase to 950,000 by the year 2001. The robotic population of North America rose 78% between the years 1992 to 1997 from 46,000 to 82,000 robots indicating this form of technological displacement is rapidly expanding (IIE Solutions, pg. 12). Rifkin has also remarked on how robotics are becoming an increasing attractive means of cost-cutting human labor (Rifkin, pg 131).

Along with the rise in robotics has been the development of simulation technologies that have greatly facilitated automation endeavors. The computing power of simulation systems is providing a meaningful and effect way to study the behavior of a system by the studying the behavior of corresponding model whose cause and effect

relationships are the same as, or similar to, those of the original (Gottfried). What is making simulation realistic and practical is its ability to incorporate both stochastic and dynamic variability through the use of statistical distributions. These systems can harness business driver information to provide a means of efficiency that Frederick Taylor would envy. As such, this technology is being utilized by groups of specialized knowledge era workers that Rifkin dubbed 'symbolic analysts' to build scenarios that facilitate process improvement exercises. Not only are these analysts designing entire systems prior to the creation of them they are also simulating these environments in their totality prior laying the foundation. Where does all of these lead us in regards to Durkheim?

In specific relation to these symbolic analysts we have a situation in which a group of highly skilled workers whose level of *normality* is such that they demand complete and full access to all operation level specific information. With this information they design, build, or enhance existing modes of production and this is exercised without the existing level of knowledge and expertise of workers in those environments. This situation has also been described as the Babbage principal (Rifkin). If we apply Durkheim's concept of organic solidarity to organizations we realize that in fact a paradoxical situation comes into existence. Symbolic analysts are being empowered in their highly specialized job to redesign jobs of other employees with whom they may have no formal relations. The social objects of this group are such that they are only concerned with improving efficiency, lowering cost, and reducing full-time equivalent numbers because this is the focus of their management. Management's concern of the department under review is likely focused on maintaining the status quo and cost

effectiveness. Essentially, it is useful to utilize Durkheim's notion of social facts as a means to better understand the behavior of a department's employees.

Where Durkheim's analysis would tend towards is understanding the collective conscience of an entire organization and its relations to other organizations and what collective values potentially bind these individuals across organizations. However, it becomes very difficult to exclude the works of Marx and Weber and their perspectives on management controls and influence. Is a high division of labor demanded by society or by the management of society? Does society want specialized analyst jobs bent of efficiency or does management? Durkheim's view of organic solidarity obscures these issues while also blurring the implications of both Marx and Weber's writings. Let us not forget that it is Weber who identified the structure of a goal-oriented society and its principals of rationalization.

In regards to Durkheim's social objects specifically to organizations we can gain insight into how a new model of organizational development is being put forward by MIT's Media Lab's Michael Schrage in his work "Serious Play." In this work Schrage argues how the more effective organizations of the future will be the ones that are able to prototype or model new products and processes prior to the construction of them. What is making this possible is the increase in computing power and the decreasing cost of microprocessors. Schrage cites how prototyping efforts can ultimately increase both quantitative and qualitative changes because prototypes allow for more product and process iterations (Schrage, pg 86). More importantly the behavior of those involved can be studied and incorporated into the process. The importance of this is that prototyping is seeking to model the interaction of social objects. If such objects are distinct from people,

as Durkheim proposed, that can we not in our age of computing apply genetic algorithms and other forms of behavior to such objects and model them? I would propose we can and on a social scientist level the works of G. Nigel Gilbert and Klaus G. Troitzsch in, “Simulation for the Social Scientist” would agree.

The challenge for a social scientist in this regards would be to utilize social theory to understand not only how to construct models of this sort but also how the model’s could be utilized to bring new levels of insight into the behaviors of groups and individuals within society.