

Division of labour and central features of modernity sociology essay



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According to Craib the division of labour is “ the way in which different tasks are allocated to different people”. (Craib, 1997: 279) However it is not as easy to define modernity because Marx, Durkheim and Weber all had different interpretations of what modernity meant and whether the division of labour was a central feature of it, however the basic definition of modernity is simply the historical transition from feudal societies to modern ones, as a result of industrialisation. Some people argue that we still live in modernity.

Durkheim argues further that the forces of industrialisation and urbanisation led to a growing division of labour that forced the breakdown of mechanical solidarity. The specialisation of jobs and growing social differentiation in higher developed societies would lead to a new order characterized by organic solidarity (Giddens, 2001). The high level of specialisation in the division of labour is a significant outcome of modern industrial production (Giddens, 1971). This was held together by people’s economic independence and acknowledgment of other people’s contributions. As the division of labour grows people become increasingly dependent on others because each person needs goods and services that those in other professions provide (Giddens, 2001). Societies held together by organic solidarity have a well-developed division of labour. The conscience collective remains but becomes less and less important covering a smaller proportion of our lives and concentrating on the individual (Giddens, 1971). The success of organic solidarity is dependent upon the fading significance of the conscience collective (Giddens, 1971). Social integration becomes less significant, the customs and values of society begin to break down. However, people

become dependant on society because we are dependent on everybody else doing their jobs. For example in contemporary society people become dependant on others, many whom live half way across the world to grow my food and make my clothes (Craib, 1997). The division of labour arises because it is the natural result of population growth and the following decline of segmented societies. Therefore, for Durkheim the division of labour is fundamentally a central feature of modernity.

Durkheim's argument however is debatable because arguably Durkheim "vastly understated the degree of interdependence and reciprocity in pre-industrial societies" (Craib 1997: 68). For example, the idea that we are all interdependent on one another is debatable because there is class conflict present in modern society. Nevertheless, Durkheim continued to argue that the division of labour was a central feature of modernity because he found a solution to this problem. Durkheim argued that class conflict was a characteristic of the incomplete development from mechanical to organic solidarity through industrialisation. (Craib, 1997) Durkheim called it the forced division of labour. For instance, people might be given positions in the division of labour which they are not suited by their talents or skills, for example, a manager of a business who got given the job due to family connections, rather than through managerial ability and experience. Therefore real organic solidarity cannot develop if this is the case. (Craib 1997) Therefore, Durkheim successfully argues that the division of labour is a central feature of modernity.

According to Marx, although the division of labour is an important feature of modernity, it is certainly not central because the division of labour is a <https://assignbuster.com/division-of-labour-and-central-features-of-modernity-sociology-essay/>

product of capitalism (Giddens, 1973), therefore it is capitalism which drives modernity. For Marx capitalism is a system of commodity production, where maximise exchange value is the top priority (Giddens, 1973). In a capitalist system, social change is driven by changes in the productive forces and the slow change from Feudalism to Capitalism which brings about a new mode of production which was different because it brought about the rise in exchange value. Use value is the “ value of good to the person who possesses it” (Craib, 1997: 282), for example the enjoyment of drinking a bottle of wine, whereas exchange value is the “ value at which a commodity sells on the market” (Craib 1997: 279) so what the bottle of wine would exchange for. A commodity is what is created for the purpose of exchange rather than the use by the person who made it and the exchange value is what is determined by the amount of socially required labour spent on the production of a commodity. However for a worker what they sell is their labour power which is a commodity, which has use value and exchange value. The exchange value of labour power is what is needed to enable workers to live comfortably on, to enable them to buy food, clothe and educate children. However for an employer, the only reason in employing workers would be if their use value, in other words the value of stuff they produce is greater than what the employer has to pay them, so the exchange value of their labour power. The difference between the two is surplus value which is what the employer chooses. At the same time workers are working for their own wage, workers are working for their employers profit; workers are producing surplus value, and therefore they are being exploited (Craib, 1997). “ This sets the scene for permanent conflict between workers and employers”(Craib, 1997: 94).

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Marx argues that this conflict between workers and employers is what Capitalism is founded upon; a class division between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, in other words the working class and the capitalist class (Giddens, 1973). Marx believed that the working class were denied the individual wealth which could be derived from the division of labour (Craib, 1997). The idea of class conflict leads to Marx's theory of alienation. "Alienation is a state in which the situation we create takes on real solidity, comes to seem unchangeable". (Craib, 1997) The system we created acts back on us which forms and control us, and alienate us from our own collective nature. Workers are alienated from their own products, for example, if a worker's job was in a factory producing cars, the worker has no control or decision making over what they produce, and it becomes impossible to differentiate the work they have done from what anybody else has produced. The worker's labour becomes an external quality, not something that comes from their inner life, the worker is alienated from their product, and it becomes a matter of satisfying another's desires. There is nothing of the worker in the work and consequently the work becomes a burden. This theory of alienation is a product of capitalism (Craib, 1997). Therefore, although Marx agrees to an extent that the division of labour is a fundamental feature of modernity, he argues that the whole system of capitalism which creates a rise of exchange value is the central feature of modernity.

For Weber, the division of labour was not a central part of modernity but due to the process of rationalisation. Weber understood this by looking at the origins of modernity by looking at the motivations of the early capitalists.

Weber discovered that in modern Europe business leaders and owners of capital were overwhelmingly protestant, (Giddens, 1973). Weber turned to the doctrines of John Calvin who created the idea of predestination, the idea that we are already chosen for eternal life or eternal damnation, and we cannot do anything about it (Craib, 1997). Their belief in predestination meant that they experienced an inner loneliness, profits were reinvested in to the business and business success bred business success (Craib, 1997). Weber argues that 'worldly success' was interpreted as a sign of salvation. This was a rational instrumental action involving a means-end form of action, in other words an activity directed towards practical ends rather than the means. For Weber this was a basis for his further discoveries. Once he looked at Christianity he began to look at other religions, it was here Weber found the key features of modernity and although the division of labour was an important part of modernity it was not the central feature.

Weber discovered that the emergence of modern society came about as a result of two practices in the world which he argued led to the rise of modern western society, bureaucracy and disenchantment which means as capitalism spreads, there is a decline in magic and religion across the world. Bureaucracy for Weber was the "rational form of organisation which dominates the modern world" (Craib, 1997: 278). "The conduct of rational capitalism in turn entails unavoidable consequences in the sphere of social organisation and inevitably fosters the spread of bureaucracy" (Giddens, 1971). This was important as a rational rather than traditional means of organising affairs. For Weber these two features were very important features of modernity, Weber believed that people were moving away from

traditional beliefs such as religion. For Weber the development of modern technology and bureaucracy was described by Weber collectively as rationalisation (Giddens, 2001). For Weber the term rationalisation meant the process by which nature, society and individual action are increasingly mastered by an orientation to planning, technical procedure and rational action. Weber thought that all the spheres of society, including the economic, political and legal spheres underwent the process of rationalisation and it was this he believed was the central feature of modernity (Morrison, 1995). According to Weber, "The bureaucratic specialisation of tasks is treated as the most integral feature of capitalism" (Giddens, 1971: 234). Therefore, for Weber the division of labour is a fundamental feature of modernity because there is a specialised division of labour within a bureaucratized structure, for example in hospitals and universities (Giddens 1971).

Weber had a very pessimistic view of society. He was fearful of modern society as a system that would crush the human spirit by attempting to regulate all spheres of social life. Weber was particularly troubled by the potentially suffocating and dehumanizing effects of bureaucracy and its implications for the fate of democracy. Weber characterizes the modern west as dominated by the secular growth of instrumental rationality (Whimster and Lash, 1987). Instrumental rationality is an activity directed towards practical ends and the easiest way to get to the precise ends (Craib, 1997). It is what allows bureaucracy to grow and become the dominant way of organising things. For example, the holocaust could only be done bureaucratically in an instrumental rational way. Substantively rational

questions are ignored. There is no emphasis on why people are doing things; the emphasis is on how people will achieve the exact end. For example, Bauman argued that during the holocaust the Nazi soldiers who killed Jews did not think about why they were doing it they just looked at the end, the wages they would receive, it was simply their job (Bauman, 1989). Therefore, this idea of instrumental rationality was a central feature of modernity for Weber.

To conclude, it is evident that the division of labour was an important feature of modernity for Durkheim, Marx and Weber. However the division of labour was only a central feature of modernity for Durkheim, whereas for Weber and Marx it was not the central feature because for Marx the central feature of modernity was capitalism and for Weber rationalisation was the central feature.