

Development of capitalist society and the demise of individualism



Theorists began to recognize capitalism as pre-industrial society developed economically and major social changes began to occur. Modernization resulted in industrialization, urbanization and bureaucratization as the workplace shifted from the home to the factory, people moved from farms into cities where jobs were more readily available and large-scale formal organizations emerged. Classical theorists' observations addressed numerous facets of social organization and interaction that came about as a result of modernization; however this essay will focus on their ideas regarding capitalism and the capitalistic society.

Over time, classical theories have been analyzed, debated and modified but sociologists continue to reference them as they have merit in understanding contemporary issues. Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Georg Simmel are the dominant classical voices when studying or analyzing the rise of civilization from a more cooperative, collective feudal social order to a modern capitalistic society. All four of these sociological philosophers contributed to the contemporary understanding of the nature of society and social change.

Each of them eventually surmised that economic conditions directly influenced the relationship between individuals and their fellows, and individuals and their world. Although they had differences in their viewpoints, they were acutely concerned with the evolving market society and its effect on human interaction. Marx developed his concept of "alienation", Durkheim expressed thoughts on social solidarity, Weber and Simmel emphasized how the emergence of capitalism affected the way people think, making the

rational calculation of means and ends more ubiquitous and placing significant importance on rationalism and disenchantment.

The outcome for the modern citizen was not naturally grounded in humanitarianism or connectedness with his fellows; rather it was grounded in the division of labor and relationship to modern capitalism and the means of production. However, each saw capitalism as a system with some serious downfalls and consequences to human relationships between individuals, and societies. Karl Marx (1818-1883) lived his life when most of Europe was still agricultural and artisanal; most European states were still dominated by monarchical power; and most Europeans still went to church.

Marx's theoretic endeavors are clearly influenced by the history of his time. Marx argued that modernization is an ascendancy of industrial capitalism. Marx felt that capitalism through industrialization had increased the productive capability of the world's economy far beyond that ever witnessed before. He also felt that capitalism created two competing classes of people, the bourgeoisie who owned and controlled the means of production and hired wage laborers and the proletariat, comprised of common workers who owned nothing but the right to sell their own labor.

Capitalism's very nature would ensure that eventually, these classes would struggle against one another. In identifying the issues of class based in economics and the exploitation of workers, Marx sought to explain and change the social scheme of society. Marx argued that social change was created through a series of changes or "stages of development" whereby capitalism evolved as the dominant social structure. This development

between man and his relationship to the means of production was critical for his survival, and maintaining his social being.

Marx in no way assumed that this economic state was normal however it had to be accepted as natural/normal in order to be effective. Because this system of owner and worker was constantly being reproduced it would “become” normal, and accepted in the consciousness of the individual. In order to successfully reproduce and become internalized at a “consciousness level”, this economic system had to be adopted in other structures of society including religion, education, and entertainment and so on.

The message adopted by these social structures had to be congruent with the ideology of capitalism. This dependence on the means of production was a state achieved quite likely against his or her will. The initial strength in his theory is in identifying and addressing his belief that the individual’s very consciousness is determined by his or her social being rather than the contrary. Marx formed the theoretical framework that saw the division of labor as one of conflict where capitalism functioned as a system of oppression and exploitation of one class over another.

Marx analyzes and examines the ideas of alienation, a natural development of capitalism wherein the individual becomes alienated from his or her work product, then his or her peers and finally the self. It is the owner then, not the worker that would own and profit from the end product. Marx, in the Communist Manifesto, states that the worker actually becomes the product.

He or she is relegated to a wage laborer and according to Marx, a seller of themselves.

It is then inherent in capitalism that the individual only sees himself or herself in terms of the relationship to the means of production and the corresponding social class. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) also examined the move into modern, capitalist industrial society, the division of labor and the relation to the means of production. He surmised this new economic state and the division of labor was the natural outgrowth of individuals with different interests and skills.

Durkheim's fundamental premise was that society was based on solidarity and harmony and that the turmoil evident in industrialization was abnormal. Where Marx saw the modern industrial world as a necessary step to freedom, Durkheim saw it as a development with specific social phenomenon which he refers to as "social facts" that needed to be studied scientifically as explained in *The Division of Labor in Society*. These social facts were outside the individual and were capable of exercising power over the individual and influencing behaviour. A social fact is identifiable through the power of external coercion which it exerts or is capable of exerting upon individuals" (Durkheim, [1859] 1982, p. 56) Durkheim believed that by examining and understanding the effect of these social facts on human behaviour within the context of industrial society, adequate solutions could be devised to deal with the problems inherent in the new capitalist society. According to Durkheim, two different types of social facts exist: material and immaterial.

Durkheim was most interested in studying the latter, particularly morality, collective conscience, collective representation, and social currents. He suggested that society could achieve a state of harmony or equilibrium – the state at which it was designed to remain. Unlike Marx, who believed the industrialized society would bring alienation and revolution, Durkheim believed it would bring cohesion and interdependence. Greater specialization would create greater interdependence. Marx and Durkheim both saw the change in society over time from the old group identity to a more individuated existence.

Within the more individual society the fight for survival would be intensified by urbanization and denser populations. They both agreed that the modern division of labor would bring negative consequences to the individual; however Durkheim maintained that this new division of labor could bring about a new, more modern type of solidarity. Durkheim viewed social disorders or class conflict as a consequence of rapid social change and believed that adhering to norms and morals that would bring homeostasis through shared beliefs and values whereas Marx saw an inevitable revolution.

Durkheim contended that social facts such as legal codes and shared moral belief could cause individual behaviour and that societies were held together by a strongly held collective morality called the “ collective conscience”, but because of the complexity of modern societies, the collective conscience had become weaker, resulting in a variety of social pathologies. In his work entitled *Suicide*, Durkheim analyzed this seemingly individualistic act, to

illustrate the position of society as a powerful entity in itself. Durkheim's research in *Suicide* examined the individual's connection with society.

He identified that anomie which signifies the breakdown of normative frameworks was ever more present in advanced capitalistic societies and occurred in the economy at times of booms and busts. Durkheim called anomie "the malady of infinite aspiration". "The more one has, the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs" (1951, p. 248) He revealed that the level of integration or regulation in society has a profound effect on the acts and behaviours of its members, and influences solidarity, the level of cohesion or division within society.

Since a lessening of solidarity is acute in capitalist societies, Durkheim believed that it was necessary to create a new way to reinforce social norms and thought this could be accomplished through religion and kinship or participation in occupational groups. These relationships while economic in nature would also transcend politics. Max Weber (1864 – 1920) argued against abstract theory, and contended that understanding, or *verstehen*, was the proper way of studying social phenomena.

Weber viewed the social changes that occurred when traditional society shifted to a modern industrial society in terms of ideologies. He strongly disagreed with Marx who was analyzing the relationship to the means of production, and focused instead on the impact of economic industrial change on individual ideology. Weber developed a multidimensional theory of stratification that incorporated class, status, and party. Class is determined by one's economic or market situation (i. e. , life chances), and it is not a

community but rather a possible basis for communal action. Status is a matter of honor, prestige, and one's style of life. Parties, according to Weber, are organized structures that exist for the purposes of gaining domination in some sphere of social life. In contrast to Marx, Weber felt that religion should act as a means of stability though oppressive in nature. Unlike Durkheim who viewed religion as external to individuals, Weber analyzed it through the meaning men and women put into things and how these ideas facilitate social change and influence society.

Weber's arguments regarding rationalization are exemplified in his studies of religion and capitalism. Weber suggests that religious ideology, the spirit of capitalism, and capitalism as an economic system, are interrelated. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he offers a sociological interpretation of history to explain the rise of Western capitalism. He traces these roots to the foundation of the Protestant branches of Christianity and the unique mores that the followers of this faith lived by in earlier times.

Weber coined the term 'Protestant work ethic' to describe a dedication to simplicity and hard work that the Protestant branches of the Christian church espoused. The paradox of the Protestant work ethic was that whilst hard work led to commercial success, it was a sin (particularly in Calvinism) to spend the money on oneself or religious icons (Protestant churches are very simple, unlike Catholic ones). The way out was investment, which simply led to even more commercial success. Mass-production also supported Protestant ideas of equality and countered individualism.

Commercial success and personal simplicity was seen as a particular demonstration of piety. If you can be rich yet resist the easy temptation it brings, then surely you will get into heaven. In short, according to Weber, Calvinism as a rational, methodical system of religious beliefs and practices was an important factor in the emergence of modern capitalism in the Western world. Modern capitalism actually grew from religious seeking of wealth as a symbol of work. Weber described the spirit of capitalism as the ideas and habits that support the rational pursuit of economic gain.

Without the restraints of religion, greed and laziness lead to making the maximum amount of money for the minimum effort. The economic ethics of other religions, such as Hinduism and Confucianism, inhibited the emergence of modern capitalism in India and China. Once modern capitalism emerged in the Western world, however, it spread the effects of rationalization worldwide. Weber noted the pre-eminence of the state in Western culture. He identified a 'three-component theory of stratification' of society consisting of social class, based on economic relationship to the market, e. . employee, owner, lessee; status, based on non-economical elements, such as religion, family, qualification and party which were affiliations to political parties and groups, such as Liberal, Greenpeace, or Conservative. Both Weber and Marx believe religion, and Christianity in particular, aided the rise of capitalism. For Weber, capitalism is aided by religion because Protestant ethics offer a driving force behind working harder, investing more money and trying to get ahead.

With Marx, who famously called religion an opiate for the masses, religion assists capitalism not by pushing people to work harder, but by keeping <https://assignbuster.com/development-of-capitalist-society-and-the-demise-of-individualism/>

people pacified in the face of their capitalist employers. Marx saw capitalism as the dominant response to the flaws of feudalism, and felt that the flaws of capitalism would lead to the emergence of communism (which is a prediction that is failing to be proved). Weber's view holds some similarity to Marx in that those in power have the ability to control economic resources, to determine production and to decide the direction and extent of consumption.

Power represents domination. Weber's system is far more complex and diverse than Marx' and would allow more variation and opportunity. Georg Simmel (1858-1918) combines ideas from all of the three major classical writers and was influenced by Hegel and Kant. Simmel discusses social structures, the city, money, and modern society, and his analysis of modern society reflects the views on the money economy, division of labor, and ideas of capitalist competition previously discussed by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber.

His ideas are closely related to Marx's in his analysis of the money economy, while he moves away from Marx's concept of class conflict (alienation). In terms of social class, Simmel seems to have the same understanding as Durkheim, (problem of individual and society) who views the division of labor as a progressive, widening movement which doesn't need to endure an uprising of the working class in order for society to work. This leads to an idea of freedom which Marx and Durkheim would seem to disagree on, two ideas which Simmel discusses in *The Metropolis*.

This concept of freedom, as well as uniqueness, is reflected in Weber's emphasis on the influence of ideas (effects of rationalization) on society.

However, Weber and Simmel share thoughts on actions that are not necessarily caused by economic situations. One of the main focuses of Simmel's historical and philosophical sociology is the cultural level of social reality, which he called objective culture. In Simmel's view, people produce culture, but because of their ability to reify social reality, the cultural world and the social world come to have lives of their own and dominate the actors who created them.

Simmel identified a number of components of objective culture, including tools, transportation, technology, the arts, language, the intellectual sphere, conventional wisdom, religious dogma, philosophical systems, legal systems, moral codes, and ideals. The absolute size of objective culture increases with modernization. The number of different components of the cultural realm also grows. What worried Simmel most was the threat to individual culture posed by the growth of objective culture.

Simmel's major work *The Philosophy of Money* dealt with the social meaning of money. This book was similar to Durkheim's *The Division of Labour*, although not as extensive as Marx's *Capital* or Weber's *Economy and Society*. In this book, Simmel is concerned with money as a symbol, and what some of the effects of this are for people and society. In modern society, money becomes an impersonal or objectified measure of value. This implies impersonal, rational ties among people that are institutionalized in the money form.

Simmel is essentially suggesting that in order for people to experience the freedom and equality that they wished for in an unjust society, society had

to endure the process of removing distinctions using an equalizing system. This was the system of money. This quantitative approach to life became a central aspect of those in the metropolis, and it led to a devaluation of personal interests. However, while claiming that the money economy is so closely attached to the intellectualism of the people of the metropolis, he does not necessarily admonish the use of money.

It is an inevitable system of making all exchanged products recognizable by all, and putting all objects on an equal scale without distinctions. Simmel suggests that the spread of the money form gives individuals a freedom of sorts by permitting them to exercise the kind of individualized control over “impression management” that was not possible in traditional societies. At the same time, personal identity becomes problematic, so that development of the money form has both positive and negative consequences. That is, individual freedom is potentially increased greatly, but there are problems of alienation, fragmentation, and identity construction. While none of the classical theorists presented a comprehensive explanation to the changing industrial world, they did present comprehensive information and dynamic theories of the changing world. Marx, Durkheim and Weber agree that the division of labor and economics are important determiners in social action and organization. All three are strongly influenced by the historical transformation of the time.

However their specific views on the consequence of capitalism as well as the economy's influence on social interaction differ. Also, the importance of religion, and the idea of materialism is distinct. For Marx everything social comes down to the division of labor - the means of production, the

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oppressive nature of the owner and the exploitation of the worker determines social relationships. Although it isn't fully clear yet as to how accurate these theorists' claims are, it is clear through the examples of violence and conflict within class relationships that Marx was right.

Where Marx viewed the relationship of the economy and society as negative, Durkheim and Weber viewed it as positive. For Durkheim, the division of labor and the economy allowed for a new type of solidarity – organic solidarity. Durkheim sought solutions through the examination of social facts for the ills prevalent in industrial society. Both Durkheim and Weber maintained a religious connection with capitalism – Durkheim, as to society's similarity to religion, its worship of self; Weber as to its impulse toward capitalism and the ethic of work. Marx totally disagreed with both as to the nature of religion and capitalism.

For Marx, religion was a tool of those in the dominant class to make oppressed citizens feel better about their position in life. For Marx, religion was dependent on the material and economic structures rather than the opposite. The fear that the industrial revolution and capitalism would wipe out the creativity of the individual and concern for individuality's future was what Simmel, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber all had in common. Simmel approached this analysis with neutrality, saying that at best we can understand the way people interact in society, while Marx believed there was no way individuality could survive in modern conditions.

With increasing specialization, Durkheim believed individuality could come forth instead of diminishing, while Weber believed that at least in our current

society, the bureaucratic influences were not as strong as they would be in a socialist society. The modern condition is a struggle that they have understood as our adaptation to, and our dependence on, the dehumanizing money system, the division of labor, and beliefs in individuality.