

Emile durkheim and max weber



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The subject of Sociology emerged in the 18th and 19th century a period known as The Age of Enlightenment. Since then, the study of Sociology has contributed profoundly and vastly to the world of history by fostering the formation, development, and shaping of societies. The fathers of Sociology, like Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, have had a weighty contribution in studying the development of societies and the evolution of social thinking. During 1789, the changes in French Society encouraged Durkheim to give Sociology its academic credibility and influence, as he saw Sociology as a distinctive study. His study was methodological, which he made evident in his study of the suicides. Weber formed a new form of conflict theory using Marx's work as his base. His research discussed the search for adequacy at the level of both subjective understanding and structural causality. In this essay, I will be focusing on the works of Durkheim and Weber, and will be explaining how they studied the evolution of society focusing on different aspects.

In Durkheim's work, *The Division of Labour* (1997), he studied the changes in social cohesion amongst societies that evolved from traditional to modern, mainly focusing on individualism (Durkheim, 1997). He believed that the division of labour and economic dependence was the main force for binding people together in modern societies, unlike in traditional societies, where the shared belief would hold the society together (Durkheim, 1997). He explained this by mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. Nonetheless, he did agree that a shared moral basis was an essential factor in social order, because organic solidarity emphasizes more on individual distinction, rather than common identities (Durkheim, 1997). Therefore, he noticed that,

in traditional communities, religion was being replaced by individualism and philosophy.

Mechanical solidarity exists in pre-industrial, small-scale societies and individuals are alike because they share the same emotions and same sacred values, hence their properties are communally owned, making the community smaller and traditional (Durkheim, 1997). Therefore, they do not differentiate, which limits job specification in the society. Over time, societies get more complex, this led to an increase in the division of labour and cause mechanical solidarity to be less evident. As a result, organic solidarity is created, forming more modern and large-scaled societies (Durkheim, 1997). In these societies, consensus is created, which means that there is differentiation between individuals, so there was a range of activity and tasks that came across, which strengthens the interdependence amongst them (Durkheim, 1997). In spite of individuals being unlike one another, they need to get on together in order for social life to work. This dependence develops a network of solidarity. Therefore, social order does not rest on uniformity but rather on individual pursuing different, but complementary functions, which encourages individualism and individual talent (Durkheim, 1997). The moral force and consensus amongst others hold the society together and ensures that interdependence remains.

It should be considered that Durkheim's distinction of these societies was not a simplistic and rigid division, because societies don't exhibit one and not the other. As organic solidarity increasing, societies will still need to have common beliefs because all societies have to have some common set of assumption about the world (Durkheim, 1997). Thus, collective

consciousness is vital in a society, because without it, there is a collection of mutually antagonistic individuals (Durkheim, 1997). However, collective consciousness varies in extent and force from one society to another.

Mechanical solidarity on one hand embraces individual conscience, and on the other hand, organic solidarity individual scope is higher, because people have greater freedom to follow their own preferences (Durkheim, 1997).

Although the division of labour was important to Durkheim, it was not at the basis of his social theory. Unlike Marx, he did not see the economic level of social organization as providing the basis for all others, and he was much more concerned with shared beliefs and norms. He thought that class conflict was a temporary obstacle in social development believing that it acted as a mediator to ensure that modernisation occurred smoothly.

Unlike Durkheim, who focused on the society and how that forms the actions, Weber discusses how individual action causes the changes in society. Weber argued that bureaucracies were becoming the organizational model of the 19th Century (Ritzer, 2000 and Weber in Lemert, 1999), which is a ' large hierarchical organization governed by formal rules and regulations and having clearly specified work tasks' (Newman, 2008). This was seen as a leading example of rationalisation, as decisions were based on efficiency and not on tradition; it was an important social development to modernity. George Ritzer (1993) argues that McDonalds is becoming the model for organizations in the 21st Century; ' the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world' (Ritzer, 1993).

Weber's rationalisation discussed regularities and patterns of action within civilisations, institutions, organisations, strata, classes, and groups (Ritzer, 2000). His interest lies on the 'objectified' rationality, which is the action that is in accord with some process of external systematization. Weber argues 4 types of rationality – practical, theoretical, substantive, and formal – to 'scrutinize the historical fates of rationalization as sociocultural processes' (Kalberly, 1980). Practical rationality is 'every way of life that views and judges worldly activity in relation to the individual's purely pragmatic and egoistic interests' (Kalberly, 1980). Individuals that practice this rationality, merely accept realities, and deal with difficulties in the most expedient way. This rationality opposes anything that threatens to transcend everyday routine. Individuals tend to distrust all impractical values, as well as theoretical rationality. Theoretical rationality understands reality through the abstract concepts, rather than through action (Ritzer, 2000). Unlike practical rationalists, individuals deal with difficulties as a quest to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos. Substantive rationality discusses how individuals accept the various possible values and attempt to make them consistent (Ritzer, 2000). However, this does become an issue in modern societies as it acts as an obstacle to pursue certain values. For example, being grounded to family values may be difficult for an individual to tolerate the economic pressure and dominance from bureaucratic organisations. Lastly, formal rationality characterises bureaucratic, which leads to 'universally applied rules, laws and regulations that characterize formal rationality in the West ... particularly in the economic, legal, and scientific institutions, as well as in the bureaucratic form of domination' (Ritzer, 2000), such as the contemporary legal and judicial systems.

As society was become more rationalised, Weber noticed that in modern societies, formal rationality played a greater role, thus substantive rationality lead to a decline (Ritzer, 2000). This is because; formal rationality emerged consequently during the time when capitalistic organisations were being developed. Due to the increase in formal rationality, the other forms of rationality are crowded out, limiting the possibility of creative social action (Ritzer, 2000).

Durkheim believed that individual's actions are not independently chosen by them but in fact is the choices are planned by society. Using religion as an example, we possess certain values, beliefs and practices which have been learnt over time, because of their existence before. As a result, Durkheim believes that we perform our roles in society as a duty, ' even though they conform to my own sentiments and I feel their reality subjectively...I merely inherited them through my education' (Appelrouth, S. & Laura D. E in 2008). For example, the roles we perform as being a sister, or wife, or even mother is more like a duty, and how society expects us to behave and act towards the other. Therefore, the achievement of social life among people, the existence of social order and social solidarity is established by collective standards of behaviour and values (Durkheim, 1964). However, social solidarity is crucial for the existence of society; the specific type or form social solidarity which resides within a society is not fixed and changes the changing form of society.

The members of the society adopt common values, beliefs and tradition, which is created as products of collective interaction. This means that individuals are constrained to adopt their culture in a certain way, because

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they belong to that culture (Durkheim, 1964). For example, as a member of the audience, individuals feel obliged to applaud at the 'right time' to conform the feeling of collectively. Therefore, the social group is a social phenomenon, as it constrains individual behaviour, which is known as 'social facts'. It is 'every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or gain, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations' (Durkheim, 1964: 13). For example, many people say that society is the reason for their actions, beliefs and knowledge; like society expects one to get married and have children, however not everyone fulfils these expectations, and they still do continue living in society. Nevertheless, the degree of constraint and freedom vary and there is always a degree of choice, but there is also a degree of constraint, which are social facts. Durkheim (1964) argues that social facts must be regarded as things which can be observed at the level of collectively and not at the level of individual behaviour. He also suggests that one can identify social phenomena by identifying situations of social constraint. Using suicide as an example, we all believe that it is the most individualistic action of all actions (Poilton et al, 1987). However, Durkheim uses his work on Suicide to prove that even in its most solitary and individual of acts, something external to the individual, namely 'society', has not only been a 'witness' to but also the 'director' of the tragic drama.

Weber's social action theory explains how individuals in society have the ability to exert control over their own actions, which makes them the active creator of social behaviour, hence opposing Durkheim's view about society

constructing their action. Hence, according to Weber, society is created by individuals and not the other way around (Weber, 1978 and Whimster, 2000). Individuals in society use their conscious thought to be aware of themselves and others as social beings; they possess their own motives, belief, and reasons, and they control their own actions. Weber discusses 4 types of social action according to the degree of rationality vs. meaningfulness – traditional action, affectual action, value-rational action, and instrumental action (Weber, 1978 and Whimster, 2000). Traditional action is an unthinking habitual behaviour. It has low rationality and low meaningfulness (Weber, 1978). For example, the way people eat in different cultures and families vary. Thus, eating with your hands is not considered rude in an Indian family, whereas it would be in a European family. Affectual action is governed by emotions, and thus makes it uncontrollable, similarly to traditional action; it is low on rationality and meaningfulness (Weber, 1978). For example, emotions such as laughing, burping, and anger are controllable, and as a result, the individuals have the ability to exert control. Value-rational action is the characteristic of modern societies and civilisations that have not made the transition to high modernity (Weber, 1978). These actions are high on rationality, but low on meaning, as one is unable to reflect upon the value of actions. For example, in religion, the belief in God is rational as there is blind faith, and people follow certain practices in order to go to heaven. Lastly, instrumental action represents the completion of an individual's ability to reflect upon the ways and purposes of his actions (Weber, 1978). It exists in all societies, but predominantly in advanced capitalist societies. For example, in society, in order to earn a PhD degree, one has certain rational acts to achieve that certain rational goal,

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such as funds and grades. Therefore, Weber argued that the actions of the individuals are not influenced by society, but in fact they have the capability to exert control over their actions, thus they are independent of their own behaviour.

In *Division of Labour* (1997), Durkheim further discusses the reinforcement of suitably modernized societies. He saw that only certain groups would be permitted to regulate economic life by generating the moral standards (Turner, 1993). According to Durkheim, these standards ' can be established neither by the scientist in his study nor by the statesman; it has to be the task of the groups concerned'. (Turner, 1993); in other words, it cannot come from outside. However, these groups were non-existent in society (Turner, 1993). Although Durkheim was vague about the groups, he does implicitly argue that the groups would have initially been formed by legislation; ' once the group is formed, nothing can hinder an appropriate moral life from evolving out of it' (Turner, 1993).

Nevertheless, Durkheim's vague idea about the groups was correct. The governmental regulation of economic life, such as the regulation on the notions of morality and equity, has enormously developed in modern industrialised societies, and the agent is known as the State, not occupational groups (Turner, 1993). As Durkheim failed to realise the ability the State possesses to regulate economic life, he also underestimated the moral power of traditional intermediate groups, which were based upon their religion and ethics (Turner, 1993). He believed that only modern groups could counterbalance the actions of the State. However, Durkheim viewed central State and intermediate groups as the key factors to individual rights

(Turner, 1993). Therefore, Durkheim perceives the State as the organ of the society, it is the social brain; the State acts as a regulator.

Weber did not see State as the regulator, but in fact, he saw the State as dominator. As we are aware that bureaucracy organisation were being more popular, societies transferred from traditional to modern over a period of time, especially in capitalist societies. Weber saw that there was a new emphasis on materialism and consequently the rise in Protestantism resulted in the formation of 'The Iron Cage' as human society was imprisoned with depersonalisation and increased rationalisation (Weber, 1958).

According to Calvinism, known as a rational religious system, people should engage in a disciplined and methodical way of life which would facilitate their path to become richer and work harder (Weber, 1958). This was because they believed that it was the right way to glorify God, as it would be a sign that they are chosen to be saved. Contrary, Catholic doctrine followed the idea that one would obtain salvation by the means of avoiding salvation and adopting an isolated and mainly spiritual life (Weber, 1958). Therefore, the attitude of material wealth to serve God, and wasting time and money being an obstacle for salvation, led to development of the Capitalist system, as it permitted Christians to live luxuriously, thus rational economy was formed in which everything was calculated and designed to maintain the system.

However, soon, the reasons for material wealth had been substituted for other reasons, and maintaining the social system was a key priority (Weber, 1958). These meant that people worked and earn more, just so they could spend more. As a results, science replaced religion in order to keep the

system working, thus the Capitalist system got out of hand, which linked to secularisation (Weber, 1958). Unconsciously, people were trapped in the system, like a cage, without ways to leave, which subsequently made them slaves of the system, transferring people into money machines (Weber, 1958). According to Weber, people's ability to control their life was diminishing as they no longer had the option of to be or not to be part of the system; their freedom is limited. Ironically, the bureaucracy aimed to ensure people's civil liberty, but unfortunately, it resulted in people enslaving them, and indirectly forcing them to support the system.

To conclude, it is evident that Weber and Durkheim both focused on different aspects when studying social evolution. Weber focused on the economical aspect, such as capitalism and bureaucracy, and Durkheim on the social, like the workings of society; Weber supported the idea that actions of individuals caused a change in society, but Durkheim disagreed and said that it was the change in society that led to a change in people's actions. However, they are similar in the way that they both believed that society needed to evolve, and break through the traditional way of life.