

# A succinct comparison of emile durkheim and web dubois essay examples

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Social sciences may be defined as the study of human character and the manner in which people relate in society. To understand any social phenomenon, several abstract frameworks of empirical evidence have been used by sociologists in the field of social theory. Each of these contributors played a separate role in building sociology. Debates, such as positivism and anti-positivism, coupled with discussions into the various aspects of society have been the major methodology used by these theorists. However, debate on the origins of sociology is as divisive as the founding fathers of the discipline.

It therefore remains on the intellectuals in the field of sociology to appreciate the works of these early enlightened individuals and understand the issues they tried to put across. This paper evaluates the works and ideas of two social theorists. The first part of the paper evaluates the works of Emile Durkheim and the circumstances under which he wrote his social views and opinions. The second part of the paper analyzes the works of W. E. B. Dubois and also the circumstances under which he writes his theories. The third part compares and contrasts the works and views of these two theorists.

## **David Émile Durkheim**

Durkheim is among the scholars termed as fathers of modern sociology together with Karl Max and Max Weber. He was born in France in 1858, an era in which a group of educated personalities were emerging during the enlightenment period (Pickering, 11). Contemporaries of Durkheim were the first to question religion and the manner in which religion seemed oppressive and repugnant the society. One of the main concerns that Durkheim had was the acceptance of social sciences as a mainstream science (Lewis, 11). He

refined several aspects of positivism using several theories of sociology.

In his works, Durkheim was concerned with attaining three basic goals. The first goal was to make sure that social science was a full discipline on its own. Secondly, Durkheim was also interested in analyzing and understanding how societies could continue to coexist and retain integrity and coherence at a time when core values of the society were drastically shifting. Finally, Durkheim looked into the practical implications of scientific knowledge and how such knowledge would be used to improve lifestyles (Pickering, 14).

In seeking to attain these goals, Durkheim wrote several works in trying to put forward his views on these matters. With regard to how the society would remain coherent and with integrity, he wrote the Division of Labor in Society theory (Pickering, 18). In this thesis, Durkheim defines division of labor as ‘ an important aspect in society as it plays diverse key roles in the society’ (Pickering, 18). He asserts that division of labor achieves several objectives. First, division of labor increases the productive capacity and skills level of the workforce. The second objective is that division of labor provides a means by which the society develops both intellectually and materially.

A more important aspect of division of labor according to Durkheim is the fact that it plays a more important moral role. Durkheim argues that “ when society finds responsibility such as labor and sharing, it creates a feeling of solidarity between the people involved” (20). Durkheim encourages society to find a means of arriving at solutions to problems in a united way. Bigger societies can rely on division of labor in order to stand as a united front.

In order to ascertain better solidarity, Durkheim argues that law is required to entrench a stable form of social life in the society (Pickering, 38). In this

sense, he argues that social solidarity can only be exhibited by having laws that define the nature of human relation in a society. Durkheim here describes two kinds of law. The first kind of law is the restitutive law. This kind of law does not prescribe suffering of perpetrators under punishment for breaking the law; rather these laws prefer restoring previous social relations. In other words, “restitutive laws seeks to reform law breakers so as they can be reintegrated back into the society. It calls for integration of corrective measures on character into the society and a society should accept wrong doers” (Lewis, 8). The second kind of law described by Durkheim is repressive in which an authority provides a structured means that defines the relation in the society. In this case the ruling elite simply dictate to the subjects the kind of social relations. Durkheim argues that social relations from repressive laws are quite mechanical will only last for a given period of time.

Durkheim further emphasizes that there exist social facts that will always guide human character and motivation. One such fact is the existence of religion and that man would always find reason to believe in the existence of a higher being. To put forward his argument, Durkheim writes the ‘Elementary Forms of Religious Life’ theory in which he provides insights to the importance of religion in keeping a society together. He delves into definition of religion that is somewhat contradictory to allow the intelligentsia to have an open mind in the discussion of religion. He affirms that belief in a supernatural being is an erroneous belief and illustrates that “for something to be supernatural, it must occur outside the scope of possibilities as defined by human beings” (Lewis, 10). However, the spheres of natural possibilities

are defined through construction of positive sciences and thus Durkheim argues that religion is based on definitions derived from sciences (Pickering, 38).

He describes the composition of religion to be based on both beliefs and rules. In his discussion, Durkheim states that religion is mostly based on sacred beliefs and that men have always considered themselves to be inferior to anything sacred. Durkheim also perceives a situation in which a society could disintegrate. This occurrence would be caused by social pathologies and crime. Several pathologies could lead to the breakdown of a society; however, Durkheim considers anomie and forced labor to be the key factors that could lead to the disintegration of the society. Other causes that could lead to breakdown of society may include lack of coordination and suicide.

According to Durkheim, the anomie in his assertion is “ rapid population growth and advent into modernity which would lead to a point where communities fail to socially interact. Each community would find new location to live and new customs and norms” (Pickering, 25). This then implies that it would not be possible to have a shared culture and norms that define social relation. In such a case, one community would value different characters compared to another community. A conflict in this sense would imply that no accepted society would exist as one community opposes the social interaction structure of the other.

With regard to forced labor, Durkheim asserts that a society will socially disintegrate if the ruling elites exert oppressive measures in forced labor due to their greed for wealth or profits. Such a state in which people are working

without their due intention would lead to a disgruntled population who would strive to change the status quo. Such need for change in leadership would ultimately destabilize the society.

## **William Edward Burghardt Du Bois**

Du Bois just like Durkheim took time to understand humans as social beings and interactions within the society. Unlike Durkheim, Du Bois was born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts United States to black parents. His birth place was a predominantly white community of about 5, 000 whites and just 50 African-Americans (Lewis, 4). Despite this, young Du Bois was able to pursue education doing very well in his studies and earned himself scholarship to Fisk University in Nashville. During his studies, Du Bois suffered endemic racism and this made him to strive to ensure that African-Americans enjoyed equal social rights just as their white counterparts. To this day, scholars appreciate the works Du Bois did in the field of social studies and the important arguments he puts forth.

Du Bois's works were centered on history, race and religion and these works have generated great interest among scholars. To arrive at his conclusions on social arguments, Du Bois employs sociological research methods and firmly believed in undertaking proper research. He reprimands common methodology employed by some sociologists who arrive at conclusions without engaging in hands-on research to evaluate various aspects affecting a society (Lewis, 8).

Du Bois employs empirical research methods especially in his study of religion. To clearly understand religion, Du Bois practiced this religion by

living among the believers and gaining both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the subject. Today, his conclusions on religion are unparalleled by other works. These conclusions are depicted in essays found in his collection 'The Souls of Black Folk' of 1903 (Lewis, 12). In his study of religion, Du Bois concentrates on African American religious life and is intrigued by the manner in which this community seems to blend well into Christianity as professed by whites. He provides a rich history in the manner in which African American religion has transformed from a slavery state to a socially significant aspect of the community. He illustrates how enslaved Africans were able to integrate into new kinds of beliefs and blended into new denominations.

Du Bois provides this socio-historical transformation in his essay 'The Negro Church' and describes African churches in post slavery era. He particularly identifies how black communities were able to find their social definition from religion and stratified themselves into such social classes through congregations. Du Bois praises the role of these churches and the role religion played in proving the black community with identity. He finds that churches would one day guide the black community to a political awakening and begin to agitate for better rights against white communities.

On racism, Du Bois was articulate in his views against accommodative stance taken by black leaders such as Booker T Washington. This position was properly put forward by Du Bois after the two events of 1906. In the first case, 167 black soldiers were dishonorably discharged by President Teddy Roosevelt on unfounded allegations (Pickering, 28). The second incident was the discrimination against blacks in Atlanta on the perceived notion that

black men attacked white women. In expressing his views, Du Bois writes an essay ' A Litany at Atlanta' in which he expresses the need to have legal justice for blacks in the community (Lewis, 24).

His actions against racism were more profound after he took an editor's job at a New York magazine. As the editor, Du Bois named the magazine ' The Crisis' in which he expresses dangers of racial prejudice. He also played an important role in ending the lynching tradition in which black people were lynched in Pennsylvania. Throughout his works, Du Bois was keen to express the need for a society to find its own footing based on important social pillars. According to Du Bois the church and religion provide social and communal pillars that would create interpretation and cohesion within a community. While he avoided the argument on the truth or non truth of religion, his concern was on the role it played in the society.

## **Comparing Du Bois and Durkheim**

After looking and understanding the nature and works of these two theorists, there is sufficient ground to discuss the comparison of their ideologies and works. It is important to understand that these two scholars were contemporaries. However, the social environment that they experienced and influenced their ideals was quite different. While Durkheim lived much of his life in Europe without any social prejudice or discrimination, Du Bois lived among white communities at a time when racism was at its peak. In spite of these, the two theorists seemed to have shared similar conclusion.

One of the similar conclusions both Du Bois and Durkheim arrived at was the importance of a cohesive and integrated society. According to Durkheim, a



society that works together seeks to improve humanity and lifestyle.

Similarly, Du Bois argues that a collective push to a better society can only work when unity is present. He expresses this through the importance of church congregations and social structures that emerged from these congregations.

However, a more important agreement that these two theorists put forward is the importance of religion to a society. Durkheim explains that religion provides men with a guideline on how to achieve norms and avoid anomie in the society. He argues that even though the logic behind religion may be misplaced, it plays a much larger role in providing a social center for cohesion. Similarly, Du Bois presents the importance that religion and churches played in providing social centers for the black community.

However, there exist fundamental differences in the manner in which these two scholars arrive at conclusions. Du Bois is credited for using empirical driven methodology in find social facts from which he draws conclusion. For instance, he attends black churches to understand the role of religion in African American societies. This extensive hands-on research provides Du Bois with insights and constituted much of the methodology in writing ' The Negro Church. '

On the other hand, Durkheim bases his research on secondary sources in order to understand social facts. According to Durkheim, religion may not be necessarily based on existence of a superior being. He illustrates this by using Buddhism as an example, in that salvation in Buddhism is based on the worshiper and the need to attain individual sanctity just as Buddha did. In this respect, Durkheim explains that Buddhism does not require a superior

being; rather it stresses self holiness. Of importance to note here is that Durkheim does not practice Buddhism nor does he interview Buddhists. Instead he relies on written information and pre-historical knowledge to arrive at this conclusion.

## **Conclusion**

Social theorists have always relied on studies and research to arrive at conclusions regarding various social aspects of the society. Different theorists have employed different methodologies in arriving at such conclusions and expressing opinions through their works. David Émile Durkheim and William Edward Burghardt (W. E. B) Du Bois were contemporaries and studied social sciences. These two theorist made valuable contribution to sociology and helped shape the discipline to what we know today. They shared similar views regarding the need for a cohesive society and the means to ensure continuity of a socially just community.

## **Works Cited**

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