

Contribution of emile durkheim study of society sociology essay



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Durkheim (1858-1917) who devoted himself to the scientific study of sociology is widely regarded as a pioneer in French sociology. It is known that Emile Durkheim inherits some of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer's ideas and developed a systematic sociology both in theory and methodology (Moñivas, 2007, p. 18). However, some of his works have been questioned and criticized. In order to examine the contribution of Emile Durkheim to the scientific study of society critically, one should consider Durkheim's groundbreaking works including: *The Division of Labour* (1893), *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), and *Suicide* (1897), all of which reflect a popular topic about individualism and a new social regulation in modern industrial society (Barnes, 1920, p. 4). This essay will first describe Durkheim's notion of social facts which run through as a principle concept in his sociology. It will discuss its characteristics as well as importance, and then introduce Durkheim's methodological approach to study social facts. The essay will move on to explore Durkheim's contribution to the social sciences through the use of examples which include his study of *The Division of Labour* and *Suicide*. In addition, limitations will be mentioned when examine his works. This essay will argue that in spite of some criticism both in theories and methods. The overall contribution of Durkheim remains one of the peaks in modern sociology.

Second, social facts are external from individuals. Durkheim rejects Comte's opinion to unify social science with other scientific disciplines and try to treat it independently. He argues that social facts are different from those assumptions in people's mind and regular acting such as drinking or sleeping in everyday life. As a result, one could distinguish a kind of conduct and

thought out of biology and psychology and classifies it into the particular category of sociology (Allan, 2005, p. 102). Casteel (2009) considered this as 'an important issue to Durkheim' that 'complete Comte's project and establish sociology as its own academic discipline'. Besides, such externality also reflects on continuum and social facts are kind of objectivities that 'prior to individuals, but individuals are born into them and enact them', thus social facts could be observed and measured by statistics (McCormack, 1996). However, Lukes (1973, p. 11) argues that Durkheim's concepts about 'externality' is ambiguous. For example, 'collective consciousnesses', which defined as a kind of similar and general perspectives and emotions such as religion that could react on people in an indirectly way that without crystallized forms. As is regarded as a social fact, it should be outside and independent from individuals. Nevertheless, Durkheim explained that collective consciousnesses are derived from most individuals in a society as a 'group mind' thus failed to support his notion about externality.

Thirdly, social facts have external coercions on individuals. It limits the choices of individuals and if individuals try to go against them, they may likely to get resistance by certain external constraint power such as public laws. Additionally, those coercive powers are not only administered by social organization but also potential moral awareness which called 'social currents' (Harrington, 2005, p. 28). However, Durkheim failed to distinguish the power of coercion and prestige. For examples, the power of public law which administered by institutions composed on individuals not only by means of the 'acceptance of legitimacy', but also fear of sanction. On the other hand, beliefs may probably constraint individuals through prestige or

moral obligation (Lukes 1973, p. 13). Moreover, it is argued that Durkheim neglects the reaction from individuals on social facts. Some critics who challenged Durkheim's theory believe that individuals could have the capability of creation on social facts (Casteel, 2009).

In his book 'The rules of Sociological Method', Durkheim highlights the importance of study social facts as well as the methods to study them. He accepts Comte's idea that every social phenomenon should be studied as a thing within the context of society. Due to its objectivity, one could use positive approaches to observe, experiment, compare and analysis social phenomenon in favour of finding the sociological laws, demonstrating the normal and pathological as well as speculating the future development of society (Craib, 1997, p. 30). In Durkheim methodology of social science, he stresses the importance of looking at society scientifically and discovering the formations (collective consciousnesses etc.) as well as functions (social cohesion, change etc.) of social facts and how they have effects on individuals within the scope of society (Brown, 2008). Emirbayer (1996) point out that Durkheim has rejected metaphysics and uses 'statistical methodology' and 'comparative strategy' (p. 264) to explore the correlations and casual relations among a number of systematic and connected variables by collecting and interpreting evidences.

Durkheim has exercised his theory and methodology in two of his major works: 'The Division of Labor' and 'Suicide'. In 'The Division of Labor', Durkheim argues that there have other approaches to integrate the society beside religion. One of them is the division of labor, which he regarded as a powerful evidence of how social bonds transit from collective consciousness
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to division of labor (Brown, 2008). Durkheim highlights the functional interdependence of different individuals or units of the society which could be explained by the term of 'solidarity' (Allan, 2005, p. 122). In the division of labor, he illustrates two kinds of solidarity: mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. He compared primitive society and modern society using the organismic approach to explore how individuals maintain solidarity. In primitive society where there is low productivity, individuals are automatically bond together by the 'collective consciousnesses', an external uniform beliefs imposed on individuals. On the other hand, organic solidarity exists in modern society. Spencer enormously influenced Durkheim's Division of Labor. Spencer believes that society was stimulated by the fundamental force of population growth, which changes the way of society to distribute production and wealth (Jones, 205, p. 345). Durkheim developed his evolutionary and organism doctrine. According to Barnes (1920, p. 240), for Durkheim, 'social evolution is characterized by a decrease in this repressive and mechanical type of social cohesion or solidarity and by a corresponding increase in the development of individual consciousness and personality'. That is, with a dense growth of population as the determinant cause of raised intensive division of labor, individuals are more interdependent on diverse contribution of others to perform a cooperatively function instead of the dominance of collective conscience (Sirianni, 1984). Brown (2008) points out that 'individualism becomes more important than the collective' to maintain social solidarity and represents the characteristic of modern society.

It is apparently Durkheim provide a sociological platform which benefits to interpret social process. However limitations could probably exist in his theories as well as methodology such as the cause of the division of labor and the interpretation of its effects. Tarde (cited in Lukes, 1973, p. 304) suggests that Durkheim's opinion on the division of labor only concern the social internal problem without international relationship. Meanwhile, the division of labor could also result from variety of creation instead of population density. Moreover, Merton (1994, p. 22) argues that in Durkheim's presentation of social evolution, he diminished the effectiveness of civil law in primitive society and common interest in the modern society in order to give prominence to main power of cohesion : collective consciousnesses and the division of labour, in mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity respectively. As a result, a precise relationship between solidarity and law may not be obtained. Finally, in the conclusion of his work, he personally regard the society as pathological due to the lack of social regulations that do no match the level of the division of labor and excessive individualism during transition, it is likely to push the society into anomie as well as increase the suicide rate (Mutchnick et al., 2009).

In another significant book ' Suicide' Durkheim explained a popular moral phenomenon in the 19th society. Suicide can be defined as ' every case of death which results directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act, accomplished by the victim himself which he knows must produce this result' (Lukes, 1973, p. 202). Durkheim first considered suicide is a private action but also as a matter of a social fact that exists external to each individual in the society. Thus, the statistics of suicide could reflect diverse outside forces

through which one could access to the origins of the weakness of the society as well as solution to those problem. Then he theoretically categorizes different but general social causes of individual suicide and draws its effect by deduction approach. There are four forms of suicide respect to two levels of imbalanced social forces: integration and moral rule (Thompson, 1982). Firstly, it is regarded that egoistic suicide is the consequence of excessive individualism. In a deteriorated society, individual who integrate less with others and act on their own interest is likely to act egoistic suicide. By contrast, altruistic suicide is result from excessive conformity, Durkheim stats that suicide becomes one's obligation. It often happens in modern societies among civilized people who sacrifice themselves in order to save others such as military (Durkheim, 1979). The other two kinds of suicide are classified into the group of moral regulation. Durkheim again divided the situation that people tends to conduct anomic suicide into four aspects of crisis: decline in the capability of social organizations to instruct people's lives; rapid social transformation; wealth no longer satisfied people and unbalanced marriage. Finally, Durkheim view fatalistic as the product of rigid but strong moral norm which often committed by slaves (Jones, 1986).

It is suggested that if examine Durkheim's work critically, one may noticed flaws in his notion of Suicide (Gane, 1988, p. 152). First, one may question whether such phenomenon causes by external force such as society but shared awareness from individuals. However, Durkheim defends it by the term of conscience collective which is also a kind of a social fact and points out the strength of linking morality to discover social laws (Craib, 1997, p. 32). Secondly, Lukes (1973, p. 202-206) argues that his classification of

suicide form has limited the causes and types. Moreover, Durkheim concerned the causes of suicide only with social facts and rejected the relationship between suicide and personality in terms of psychology, physics as well as alcoholism. Additionally, the subject of suicide is more like to exist in disordered societies thus lead to an unbalanced research which prone to the theory of pathology. As a result, the contribution of suicide to sociology is actually restricted.

However, Thompson (1982) states that regardless the shortages, Durkheim's work of suicide is an essential contribution because they effectively combine sociological theory with empiricism to explain social phenomenon. Durkheim suggests that the study of suicide could reveal the connection between social members which closely go with the original subject of social bond in sociology. Moreover, by examining suicide could help one to discover the law of sociology and thus give a direction of the development of society (Lukes, 1973, p. 193). In the research, he related series of common characteristics of the society as social facts to suicide rate statistics and draw a general conclusion that particular social environment and current could lead to a growth of suicide rate. For example, insufficient economy growth and social mode changes generate a remarkable suicide rate in the 19th century of European. Aimed at solving this problem, Durkheim also proposed to strengthen the backbone of economy and support individuals with the sense of belonging (Lukes, 1973, p. 220).

In conclusion, this essay explored Durkheim's main works in sociology. As one of the founder of professional sociology, Durkheim identified social facts thus built the dimension as well as the skeleton of sociology. Based on <https://assignbuster.com/contribution-of-emile-durkheim-study-of-society-sociology-essay/>

previous work, he formulates a systematic methodology to discover the social laws by observing and comparing the relationships between different variables. Durkheim further applied his methodology and theory into his work of ' The Division of Labor' and ' Suicide'. He discovered the procedure by which individuals socially integrate into society, and provide different types to explain the relationship between people and society. Although there are certain indistinct interpretation in terms of concepts and correlations, Durkheim's work is considered to have significant to the scientific study of society.

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