

Durkheim modernity theory



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Durkheim saw Modernity as a new form of thinking that would change the way individuals functioned in society. It took away the overarching order in which humanity, nature and God were interlinked and functioned as the higher power and order of life in traditional societies. The Enlightenment brought about values of questioning, it began to examine the relationship and function that traditional institutions, customs and morals had on the individual and society. Science and rationality began to take the place of stability and order.

“ The modernity of these modes of thought lay in the innovative way in which the philosophes sought to demolish and replace established forms of knowledge dependent of religious authority, such as the biblical account of the creation of the world, with those new forms of knowledge which depended upon experience, experiment and reason - quintessentially science.” (Hamilton 1992, p. 29).

This founding of individualism and new thought is what most worried Durkheim. He felt that strong bonds had to be maintained to keep solidarity which was what he felt society needed to function best. He questioned the place the individual now had in this modern society.

To Durkheim, social solidarity is the key to society, “ Without these ‘ social links,’ he stated, individuals would be separate and unrelated” (Morrison P. 128). It brings integration, social bonds and interchanges that he feels are key to a functioning society which cooperates together to achieve goals. After all, we are all fundamentally social where our life at home, work or worship is what defines us and gives us meaning and purpose. Without

solidarity Durkheim felt, there would be poor cohesion which linked individuals to social groups. Durkheim's *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) puts forth the two diverse types of solidarity - mechanical and organic.

Mechanical solidarity saw society as a whole, with collective opinions and thoughts. The higher power of mechanical societies was held within religion. The stability and order of the Church gave continual reinforcement of the way to live your life and the population were brought together as a whole under this chain of being. This meant all individuals were directly linked and a part of society which carried with it strong social rules and moral values with little individual autonomy. At this time there was a strong collective conscience. "The conscience collective exists over and above individuals and becomes implanted in them. It is a society in which the division of labour remains at a very basic level" (Craib. I. 1997 p. 65).

Due to Industrialism, society took a major turn and organic solidarity came into place. Industrialism brought about specialisation in the division of labour. As labour developed individuals became reliant on each other to perform separate functions and individual bonds grew rather than loyalties to society. Durkheim's concern of organic solidarity was that he felt it took away the social rules which became paramount in mechanical,

"Durkheim asserted that the tendency exhibited by utilitarian's to reduce society to individuals led them to ignore the larger system of social rules which acted as restraints on individual action". (Morrison P. 125).

Individuals now had become a product of society. Urbanisation developed so people moved from rural areas into the cities for better work and job opportunities. This created a growing social mass and intensified social interaction. Durkheim was worried that in this form of modernity created selfish individuals which would exist and focus on their own economic gain even at the expense of others. Here, the conscience collective has decreased in importance and now concentrates on the individual. The enlightenment brought about the significance of science. This new knowledge embraced reason and logic which were very important to Durkheim as he was a positivist. People now questioned what was happening instead of leaving it to fate or divine will like in traditional societies. Challenging ideas created differences in opinion which eventually lead to the secularisation of society and threatened values, all contributing to individualism.

Industrialisation created a new way of work and lifestyle where labour became highly organised by the market and state and replaced the legitimisation of traditional authority. People began to become specialised in a particular form of labour which was then sold on or traded. Now, people were dependent on each other not reliant on society,

“ The force of social bonds integrates individuals in their economic occupational functions, and the ties to society become indirect and operate through the division of labour” (Morrison, P. 130).

Durkheim felt there always had to be a higher power for society to function. Society can't be reduced to just individuals, it was bigger than that and needed a higher power. In mechanical, God took the place whereas in

organic solidarity it was traded with the formulation of the individual's aim of reaching aspirations set by ourselves.

The low conscience collective in organic solidarity concerned Durkheim in the way that without the clear boundaries and reinforcement that the traditional societies set, common ideas would be lost and societies would become unsystematic and disorganised and the level of behaviour expected would break down. Durkheim described this state in his book *Suicide* (1897) to be 'anomie'. The anomic state was a type of suicide which reasoned that aloneness or estrangement occurred when a relationship between the individual and society is shattered. Durkheim felt that, "Suicide is a result of society's strength or weakness of control over the individual" (Shneidman p. 24). They emerge from the collective but result in the individual belief. He saw this type of suicide as a social fact which ran through various societies not connected to each other.

We see the reason for anomic suicide to be that society has in some way failed that individual. In some ways the individuals committing suicide haven't been able to create social cohesion and solidarity with their surrounding community. The isolation from this malfunction is the reason for their act of suicide.

To conclude, Durkheim felt that if we live our lives this way we will move away and deviate from a functioning society where working for the common good and living by shared norms was principal to the life that we should live. In some cases this may be true, with profit proving everything and exploitation of recourses and skills. Individuals are now placed and classified

into society by their occupation and wealth. Durkheim hoped that in the future the importance of status from birth and inheritance would disappear. If everyone started from the same background and standing then societies would be equal and function best, " Consensus is possible" (Hawthorn p. 123). I feel that the disintegration of the conscience collective has affected the modern society we now live in. However, to say that the norms and values of traditional societies have disappeared is an exaggerated opinion of Durkheim's. However, we do see that in today's society the impacts of industrialism and individualism has created strong inequalities which Durkheim was afraid of happening and simply hopes that we can cooperate in such divisions of labour together.