

What aspects of modernity most worried durkheim? essay sample

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Modernity can be defined as a pivotal point in the development of contemporary society, arguably a concept still relevant and effectual to this day. Modernity is, however, an entirely conceptual entity. Within our context as social scientists, perhaps it has a more specific meaning, though modernity had a diverse effect upon very many of the components of the world we live in. Admittedly the world we live in is the subject of our study to a certain degree, though I feel it is important to emphasize that modernity was not only an important principle of thought for those of the socially concerned mindset – which began to appear throughout its fruition – but also the artist, or the philosopher, the worker, the owner, the ruled and the ruled. Another discipline which was both fundamentally effected, and fundamentally catalytic, was Natural Science. A number of different approaches towards science began to emerge. With understandings evolving regarding the universe in physical terms, questions regarding the universe from many different angles became more frequent, less constrained by collective consensus, and were directed towards the formation of a new perspective.

Towards a desire for single, absolute truth, developing quickly to something like avarice in many persons. This notion of singularity is important, because modernity did indeed penetrate the minds of the masses, according to general consensus, and it created the Individual. Obviously it is nonsensical to say that the individual world suddenly burst into existence somewhere in the 1600's, though it fundamentally affected the way the individual persons within society operated, and amongst the people to notice the importance of this was Emile Durkheim. Durkheim lived from 1858 – 1917, and was a key

actor both in the foundation of sociology, social science and, as is contextually synonymous, in the development of thought surrounding the ‘great transformation’ (Polanyi, 1944), which had occurred in society as a precursor to phenomena that was possibly now moving with even more acceleration than that which was noted by Hegel (1807) in the social factors that we know to have been present, and must have been present, as catalysts towards his concept of ‘Aufhebung’.

Aufhebung is a concept regarding the importance of thesis and antithesis in both the preservation, transformation and improvement of both the composing concepts of the indicated reaction, and the subsequent synthetic conceptualization. Whilst, to my knowledge, this concept is not directly mentioned in any of Durkheim’s works, it clearly had at least the effect of a basic perspective. My reasoning for this is that he notes in his works a particular system of regulation, which is a necessity and an inevitability in any social circumstance when considered in relevance to his other exhibitions of perspective regarding social adhesion, the process itself verified by Weberian stratification theory. As Durkheim (1893/1933 pp. 405) professes:

“The only power which can serve to moderate individual egotism is the power of the group; the only power which can serve to moderate the egotism of the groups is that of some other group that embraces them.”

In saying this Durkheim reveals a number of things, even if viewed independently of its source. He reveals that Individual Egotism is something that is, and therefore is required to be, moderated by society. He reveals

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that he believes that the group, the subsequent synthetic entity of social interreaction, is to the benefit of the individual. In envisaging a system of larger and larger groups, he acknowledges that groups components are smaller, denser groups. Therefore – when viewed as an entire model – the individual creates society, though society is also a separable entity, and moderates the individual. Needless to say, society cannot exist without social beings. Though if we are predisposed as social beings, the inevitable response – society – cannot be said with certainty to be a creation of the human, or the individual. One would not assume clouds to be a creation, as such, of any of the factors leading towards their existence, but as a part of the process in which all of their composite factors are involved.

This dualistic entity resembles Hegel's *Aufhebung* quite closely, especially in viewing considerations of Hegel's other works (Kaspersen, 2003, pp27-30.) and contemplating the idea of a 'struggle of recognition', of a mutual endeavour, but also of an individual battle. This discourse could be considered as far as modernity in great depth, though in relation to the aspects of modernity which most worried Durkheim, it is the concept of individuality that was fast sweeping all disciplines of thought that presented the largest obstacle to the 'collective reflection' he thought fundamental to the plight of society. Its struggle for recognition, it could be said, was set with individualism as its antithesis in Durkheim's perspective. Robert Alun Jones (1986) confronted the idea of this dual antagonism yet again through analysis of 'The Division Of Labour In Society'. Through comparison with previous thinkers, Jones observed that through the implied evolution towards

a society in which the division of labour is particularly specialized, Durkheim is categorising this as a natural advancement.

Through this categorisation of a natural advancement, and the application of an organic analogy to society, Durkheim implied that the division of labour – the specialisation of individual components functions in order for the whole to work – was a generality, a ‘natural law’. In Jones’ own interpretation, this placement of the division of labour as a natural law seems to be paramount, for its basis in the placement of a moral rule, and its addition of a certain absolutism to ideologies regarding society. Whilst this interpretation is at least structurally valid, it is in the concept of natural advancement that I see a relation to Durkheim’s even more macroscopic designs, and the deficits to be found strewn through them. If the movement towards what Durkheim considers a more advanced society is natural, it is imperative. In the same manner that St. Thomas Aquinas (1265-1274) defined the obligations of humanity through its natural functions, Durkheim seems to have defined the purpose of society and the individual through the natural functions of the pair.

If the natural route of society is to advance, then this is its purpose. If societies purpose is to advance, then the ‘health’ of the society can be defined by its propensity towards further advancement from its current position. Here lies the worrying aspect of modernity. The collective must allow for the individual, as for the different ‘organs’ to play separate roles, they must be separable. However, for these organs to compose a healthy organism, there must be solidarity, there must be a group endeavour in

which the individuals are bonded, so the collective must not allow the individual to be separable from the whole. Conversely, The individual should, rationally, allow for the collective, as to reap the benefits of society without damaging it, they must be involved in and contribute towards it.

Also, through the individuals contribution, society may prosper further. However, for this individual to benefit society, they must maintain a certain uniqueness, a lack of involvement with some areas, in order to allow for fuller involvement with other areas, and so the individual should, rationally, not allow themselves to be consumable by the collective. For contextual purpose, consider the individual as the constituent, and society as the constituency, both in their ideal form. The constituent is the one part of 'a', the constituency is another part of 'a'. 'a' holds the numerical value of 0.5. Individuality is 'b', collectivity is 'c'. $(b \cdot c) = 0$. $(b + c) = a$.

If individuality and collectivity do not balance each other, society shall fall. The struggle for recognition made by the individual towards the whole, and by the whole towards the individual is clearly definable, though this is not the thing that I see as having worried Durkheim, not the struggle itself. The struggle is a basic, structural, prerequisite of society existing, an endless meander attempting a straight line. When the phenomena of modernity is applied to society, it will have an affectation upon the body that sits over the structure, the exhibition and result of the struggle itself, the severity of deviation from the long, straight line. Modernity means many things, progression, change, demoralisation, disenchantment, the rise, the fall. No matter the interpretation, modernity, as a state of being, and the

enlightenment, as a point in time, meant that a huge shift in paradigm had occurred, or was occurring, or would occur.

The chronology is irrelevant, as when viewing the bigger picture – the overall scene that Durkheim would appear to be privy to – this veritable explosion of individuality, this storm of personality, this new age of both absolute certainty of the self, and absolute doubt in everything else, places obstacles, in its complexity, to the simplicity of the equilibrium required for constituent and constituency to flourish, and prosper. The aspects that most worried Durkheim regarding modernity are those that he saw as diverting the course of society, of leaving it the opportunity to be lead astray from the way in which it could continue to exist. In a world with no god, man may find that it is of its own creation. In a world with no men, god may find that its creation is without purpose.

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