

Marx and durkheim essay example

[Government](#), [Capitalism](#)



Traditional society was more rigid and authoritarian than the urban, industrial society created by modern capitalism, although 19th Century sociologists like Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim found a great deal to criticize in the new order. Marx thought that capitalism was a superior form of political economy to feudalism and slavery, particularly in the progress of science, technology and economic production, but still noted the presence of a submerged and exploited class (the proletarians) whose labor power created wealth only for the capitalist elites. Eventually, though, he predicted that the workers would overthrow them in a violent revolution. Durkheim agreed with Marx that alienation, isolation and anomie had increased in urban industrial society, which was far more individualistic than the traditional rural, Catholic society that it had replaced. This had resulted in a number of unfortunate social effects, such as the increase in divorce, suicide and family background, along with a general sense of despair, hopelessness and uprooted-ness in the urban masses that might very well take an irrational direction and lead to a revival of authoritarianism in new forms, such as fascism.

1. Define and explain the questions of order and action. Give a real-life example of how order versus action can affect an individual's choices in life (page 12).

Sociology has been preoccupied with questions of order and action since the era of the ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, although for most of history order has been valued far more than change or disorder. Order means that human life and society follow regular, predictable patterns, laws, norms and routines, and that life is neither random nor chaotic, while

action refers to the motivations of groups and individuals to bring about change. Order is based on authority, law and social structures which simply exist as givens due to historical circumstances, and are not based on choice or free will, but actions means that individuals or groups can transform or overthrow these structures or patterns (Applerouth and Edles, 2011, p. 12). Emile Durkheim held that for most of human history, the individual was not highly valued in traditional, collectivist and authoritarian societies, which had rigid caste systems and limited social change or mobility. Individualism, along with specialization of labor and a more personal and subjective type of culture, was basically a product of urban, industrial civilization. Karl Marx also argued that economic transformations were the basis of changes in society, culture and government, and that industrial capitalism was in the process of overthrowing the traditional society in the Western world. He regarded individualism and subjectivism as a product of bourgeois, capitalist society, but asserted that social classes and the changing forces of production and technology brought about change, not individuals. In the end, capitalism would be overthrown in a revolution by the collective power of the organized class.

2. Discuss Marx's concept the fetishism of commodities from Capital (page 62).

Marx condemned capitalism for its exploitation of the working class and extracting the surplus value of its labor in the form of profits. He denounced capitalist and bourgeois economists for making a fetish out of commodities or turning them into some kind of mystical entity whose only real value was in the marketplace. Commodities were real objects, of course, but they were

also the social product of human labor and therefore were both “ perceptible and imperceptible by the senses” (Applerouth and Edles, p. 62). Those who produced these goods, which in the 19th Century increasingly meant wage workers in factories rather than serfs, peasants or independent artisans, did not come into social contact with each other until the commodities were sold or exchanged. Capitalists ignored the labor value that had resulted in their production in the first place, and made a fetish out of their exchange value in the marketplace, measured only by money and profits. Thus they ignored the most important factor of all, for without poor and exploited labor there would be no value at all.

Although Marx and Engels regarded capitalist collapse and socialist revolution as inevitable, they offered no real timetable for when this would occur, since capitalism was still a rising force in the world during the 19th Century. This is why they supported the North in the American Civil War of 1861-65, for example, and regarded it as the more progressive civilization that would sweep away the slaveholding aristocracy of the South. As Marx pointed out in *Das Kapital*, under American slavery and Russian serfdom, exploitation was 100% and the labor force was bound to the land, treated like property and denied any political rights. Although capitalist exploitation of the working class was harsh—and necessary for the system to extract profits in the form of surplus value—it was not as repressive as earlier forms of labor control. Both men were skeptical that any country would be able to skip over a capitalist phase of development—as Lenin and Stalin attempted in Russia and Mao in China. For Marx, such revolutions would only result in

an authoritarian type of ' barracks socialism', and he was correct in this prediction.

3. Discuss in detail, from the Manifesto of the Communist Party how the social relations of production will become a fetter or obstacle to the continued development of the means of production. Make sure to use specific quotes from the Manifesto to support your discussionm(page 70). In classical Marxist theory, changes in technology, transportation and communications led to the rise of the capitalist class or bourgeoisie, which first began to take political power in Europe and the Northern United States in the 17th and 18th Centuries. As certain regions of these countries became urbanized and industrialized, a new working class or proletariat began to emerge among the displaced and landless peasants who flocked to the cities in search of work. In the 19th Century, the hours of work in the new factories were very long and " the wages earned by laborers left families on the brink of beggary", while living conditions in cities like Manchester were hell on earth. For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, then, the three main classes of society were workers, capitalists and landowners, while the older classes of peasants and artisans were gradually disappearing and being absorbed into the proletariat. Class struggle was " the prime mover of history" and like other socioeconomic systems in the past, capitalism had unintentionally produced the class that would end up destroying it in a violent revolution. Marx and Engels regarded the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789 as liberal or bourgeois revolutions that opened the door to a capitalist phase of economic development. At the time these revolutions began, the new middle class was

in the vanguard and represented a progressive force whose task was to sweep away the old feudal order. Liberal revolutions broke out in Europe in 1830 and again in 1848, although most were defeated by the forces of conservatism as well, but capitalist industrialization continued to expand as did the urban working class or proletariat. Unlike Hegel, Marx was a historical materialist who argued that class conflict rather than ideology was that driving force of history. He confined religion and ideology to the superstructure of society, and regarded them as expressions and reflections of the ruling social class in any given historical.

Marx and Engels were premature in 1848 when they wrote in The Communist Manifesto that Communism was a specter haunting Europe, although socialist and working class parties were appearing in all the Western nations by this time, and the second phase of the 1848 revolution in France led to the brief creation of a Red Republic that was harshly repressed by the military. They realized that this particular event was indeed a harbinger of socialist revolutions in the future, although in the end none of these occurred in the Western capitalist core as they expected. When these revolutions took power, the workers would end up in control of the state as well as industry, trade, banking and distribution, and even though they might use repressive methods temporarily to eliminate their remaining class enemies, the final form of government would be a democratic republic. In the distant future, Marx and Engels expected the state apparatus to fade away and a truly classless society to emerge, which they called communism. They also assumed that by this point technology would have advanced to the degree that many economic activities would be automated, freeing human

beings from much of the sheer drudgery called work.

4. Outline the two forms of solidarity discussed by Durkheim. What is the relationship between the forms of solidarity and the division of labor? On what is each type of solidarity based? (page 102).

Durkheim did not find individualism in traditional, agrarian societies, which lacked specialization of labor as it existed in urban, industrial economies. For this reason, traditional society was collectivist and followed the principles of mechanical solidarity, in which most people performed the same generalized tasks such as planting and harvesting, and shared a collective consciousness that was reinforced by religion and custom (Applerouth and Edles, p. 102).

Modern, industrial society was characterized by organic solidarity, as well as anomie and isolation, given that more people were engaged in complex and specialized work “ in which each person is interdependent with others, forming a complex web of cooperative associations” (Applerouth and Edles, p. 104). Durkheim based his criticism of capitalism and urban, industrial society on empirical observations, and was concerned about the stability of the Third Republic in France and the possibilities of social and moral breakdown in the modern world. This type of historical transition may not have been universally valid in all times and places, but too many capable observers like Durkheim were aware that something very significant was taking place during industrialization and that the new culture was radically different from the old. Novelists and poets noted this change and upheaval at the time as well as academics and politicians, especially the decline of traditional Christianity and the power of the churches. Even some capitalists bragged openly that they really were only motivated by purely egotistical

and self-interested concerns and that profit was their only concern in life. Durkheim feared not only the moral consequences of such new values, but also backlashes against them that might take an authoritarian direction.

5. Discuss the various forms of suicide defined by Durkheim. Explain why Durkheim's work *Suicide* is significant for the discipline of sociology as a whole (page 110).

Durkheim was the first sociologist to study suicide rates in different societies and historical periods, and found that it was relative rare in traditional societies but increased in urban, industrial ones. Since capitalism and produced higher levels of egoism, alienation and anomie, he found that suicide rates were highest in areas where " individuals lack social and moral regulation and/or integration" (Applerouth and Edles, p. 111). Altruistic suicide was the most common form in traditional societies, where giving one's life for the group such as in human sacrifice was acceptable, and even in more recent times the actions of Japanese kamikazes and Islamic suicide bombers fit this pattern of dying for " the moral and spiritual benefit of the group" (Applerouth and Edles, p. 122). In modern societies on the other hand, suicide was more likely to have individualistic causes, such as feelings of loneliness, anomie, financial failure or personal inadequacy. Single, widowed and divorced persons, who felt more isolated, also had higher levels of depression and feelings of despair and futility, which caused them to commit suicide more frequently. This turned out to be a fundamental sociological and psychological insight which still holds true today, such as the fact that elderly people living alone and in poor health are more likely to be depressed and suicidal. In traditional societies, though, people almost

never lived alone and privacy was mostly unknown. Durkheim also noted that suicide was more common among Protestants than Catholics and Jews, who remained collectivist and traditional in their basic worldviews, and more likely to be deterred by the fear that suicide was a sin that led to eternal damnation. Yet again, contemporary sociological analysis has often confirmed that conservative and traditionalist religious views often act as a deterrent to self-destruction. In traditional societies, identity is simply a given, and does not have to be struggled for or sought after, while in the modern world “ the authority of the family, the church and the community may be challenged or questioned” (Applerouth and Edles, p. 112). In the modern world, suicide had an economic motive as well, and Durkheim noticed that it had increased during the depression of the 1870s at the same time that the number of bankruptcies had risen. He called this phenomenon “ economic anomie” and noted that in France, the suicide rate was highest not in the poorer or more backward regions but in areas where there were more people “ who have independent means” (Applerouth and Edles, p. 116).

REFERENCES

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