

# Durkheim v marx: society v individual essay



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As a cause and as a symptom of social hierarchies, division of labor is an integral part of the structuring of society.

Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim both give very different interpretations to the effects causing, evolving, and caused by this division of labor. On one hand, Marx typically vilifies the process, finding it in large part responsible for the oppression of one group by another. On the other hand, Durkheim treats it as a unifying social force, one necessarily maintained for the betterment of all. With such contrasting viewpoints, it is difficult to decide whether this process is necessarily good or bad. In effect, the argument is how far must individual needs be sacrificed for the benefit of society, or how much society must be diminished for optimal individual equity.

However, as with many things in life, Marx and Durkheim are actually just looking at opposite ends of the same spectrum and as such, they are neither right, nor wrong, and their interpretations are not nearly so irreconcilable as they would appear. Marx believes that division of labor is a natural process, one that arises near spontaneously. Marx believes that as a nation develops its labor inevitably also becomes more divided. How far the productive forces of a nation are developed is shown most manifestly by the degree to which division of labor has been carried. Each new productive force...causes a further development of the division of labor" (Tucker, 150).

This division is what he finds to be problematic because it separates man from doing what he truly desires to do. In a highly specialized society, every individual must contribute to a facet of the society's collective production; however, this input may be very minimal (depending on the degree of

specialization). To wit, “ As soon as the distribution of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity” (160). Every man has his place and he is forced into it by the demands of society. However, Marx is not saying that every man’s niche is inviolate and his alone. Rather, he also acknowledges that as the work becomes more specialized less skill is required for many positions, making each work more interchangeable and therefore replaceable. Therein lie the two major problems with division of labor in Marx’s view. Marx believes that the product of the workers’ labor is a physical manifestation of the workers’ actual labor.

“ The product of labor is labor which has been congealed in an object” (71). As such, the worker has a vested interest in the final product as it is of himself. However, in a highly specialized system the worker does not, for example, build a complete car, but only fixes the door to the frame. The car is finally completely far down the assembly line without the worker’s knowledge or input into the rest of the process.

As such, at such a distance from the product of his labor, the worker, according to Marx, must feel a distinct sense of alienation from his labor. He can gain little satisfaction from the contributing such a small part to the overall completed product and this lack is mirrored in every other individual along the assembly line. The other problem is that not only is the worker separated from his labor, he cannot freely choose where to invest his labor. He describes this division of labor as being “ forced upon [us] and from which [we] cannot escape” (160). This lack of choice further separates the worker from his labor (which is of the worker’s own ‘ self’) thus alienating the worker from himself. Combined, these two effects result in a society that

oppresses the laborer, forces him into occupation beyond his own choosing and forced to labor with little compensation and with even less personal gratification because he no longer owns the product of his labors. Durkheim on the other hand, disagrees completely. He feels that the worker and society cooperate for each other's mutual benefit; that together, the two create a symbiotic bond that can only survive by the codependence of the worker on society.

As he describes it, " society learns to regard its members no longer as things over which it has rights, but co-operators whom it cannot neglect and towards whom it owes duties" (Durkheim, 112). As such, the individual learns that his work benefits society, which will in turn benefit him.

Furthermore, as society becomes more specialized, more opportunities are open to the individual because he no longer has to rely purely on the product of his labor for sustenance. Durkheim describes this development as the entire sphere of consciousness expanding. As such, the domains for individualism within society have correspondingly expanded as well, " individualism has expanded in absolute value by penetrating into regions which were originally closed to it" (85). Durkheim makes this claim in spite of what Marx describes as the individual being enslaved to a field. He claims that although there are many more conscriptions on the individual, the overall sphere in which the individual can act is so much larger that overall there is actually an increased level of freedom.

To illustrate his point, Durkheim uses the example of a scientist who, in an environment before labor division, was forced to cursorily delve into science as a general practice can now " from chemistry to biology, from physiology

to psychology, from psychology to sociology” (115). This freedom was heretofore impossible because of the smaller scale of the facets of society. With societies expansion, there is much more lateral freedom in every field for the individual to explore, allowing the worker much more free reign to pursue his particular passions in a given area.

Durkheim argues that the societies that depend most on this intense division of labor spawn more unified society. He argues that because of the intense specialization, each member of society cannot survive without the contributions of others, “ they cannot separate without perishing,” (79).

Durkheim likens this relationship to that of an organism where the individuals are organs without which the body (society) would perish but together create something greater than the sum of their parts. As long as man is contributing to society he can find personal satisfaction in that he is rallying and promoting something greater than himself rather than feeling alienated from the product of his labor.

Interestingly enough, Marx and Durkheim describe division of labor very similarly; their disagreement comes from their differing interpretation of its effects. They both describe the division as a process through which specialization in labor occurs and fosters interdependence among its members. However, Marx believes that this interdependence weakens the individual and the specialization alienates the worker from his labor and himself. Durkheim, on the other hand, believes that the specialization allows individuals to more freely pursue their interests and passions and the interdependence forges stronger community bonds. The two philosophers are able to reach these very different conclusions from the same body of

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evidence by looking at different extremes of the same issue. Marx focuses on the individual who is failing to achieve the freedom increased specialized labor offers. He mainly centers on the individuals who chafe on the edges of specialized society.

Contrastingly, Durkheim places particular emphasis on those who take full advantage of labor freedom. He addresses the ambitious and the passionate, those who would benefit most from being able to dive into highly specialized fields knowing that if they're successful then society will take care of their other needs. For instance, Marx would sympathize with the garbage man. The garbage man has a job that nobody envies him. Due to various sociological factors (income, education, etc. ) he is forced into this occupation to provide his, or his family's, base human needs. He cannot quit this job because society would punish him, nor can he derive true satisfaction because he cannot possibly perceive the product of his labor.

Every week there is trash in the same place it was the week before, every time he drops the dumpsters load of trash at the landfill, it looks no more full than the time before. The only way he would actively view the product of his labor would be if he and his brethren all quit and witness the spill of trash that would eventually clog the streets, but this is something that society would never allow. However, Durkheim would argue the case of the researcher with a natural aptitude for pathology and gifted intellect. With division of labor he would be able to pursue a highly specialized field, and potentially discover a cure or medicine that would benefit thousands of members of society at large. If labor were not divided he would be forced to split his time into a far more broad experience. In Marx's view, such a boon

to society would be a necessary sacrifice for all men to find self-satisfaction in avoiding self-alienation and estrangement, whereas in Durkheim's view, it is the sacrifice of a few individuals doing what others would not that allow for these types of gifts to society. In effect, the argument between the two is whether the good of society as a cohesive unit is more important than the fulfillment of every individual constituent. Marx believes that the individual's needs supersede those of society and that individual satisfaction is of the utmost importance.

Durkheim believes that in all individuals contributing to society, overall society will be improved to the level that individual lives will be improved, though not necessarily equally though all must contribute equally. However, in Durkheim's view, the freedoms of the individual are far extended allowing each individual the opportunity to pursue near any endeavor in aiding society. This freedom is also sacrificed in Marx's quest for equity, though the individual is not "enslaved" to any occupation, the individual must attain a functional level in a number of fields to support himself, sacrificing true expertise.

Succinctly, the real question is, as Durkheim asks it, "Would there be more dignity in being complete and mediocre, rather than in living a more specialized and more intense life, particularly if it is thus possible for us to find what we have lost in this specialization, through association with other beings who have what we lack and who complete us?" (140). Works Cited Bainbridge, William, and Rodney Stark. "Three Compatible Models." *Sociological Analysis* 40 (1979): 283-295. JSTOR.

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