

Ideas of marx, weber or durkheim

Society



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Are the ideas of Marx, Weber or Durkheim useful for understanding social change today? Illustrate your answer using the ideas of ONE of these theorists.

Abstract

This essay will focus on the ways in which one can use Durkheim's theories of the bond between the individual and society to explain why movements dedicated to social change occur. Where necessary, examples of contemporary social change are used to highlight these concepts, although the essay itself is primarily a reading and a response to two of Durkheim's work in particular;

The Division of Labour in Society and The Rules of Sociological Method

0. Introduction

One of the main concerns of Emile Durkheim's body of work was the changing relationship between the individual and the society that they live in. This concern has led some to question his relevance to theories of social change, as it isn't explicitly discussed in any of his major works. However, in this essay, I will try to show how this central premise of his work; the individual and society, can be used to demonstrate the reasons why social change, particularly socio-political change, occurs.

1. Notions of Society

1. 1 Mechanical vs Organic Society

Durkheim proposes that there are two distinct forms of society; the mechanical society and the organic society. A mechanical society is characterized by “ very little social complexity and differentiation,” (Harms, 1981, p397) and composed of members holding similar beliefs and attitudes. Here, society is a regulatory body. Organic society, on the other hand, is the opposite. Its members are more socially complex and diverse, and have become characterized by their individuality, such as their particular labour specialty, rather than their likeness to others. Durkheim proposes that, as labour divides, “ each one [person] depends as much more strictly as society.” (Durkheim, 1933, p70) Rather than society being merely a regulatory body, the individual now feels himself more integrated into it, and is more aware of his particular circumstance within it;

“ As all other beliefs and all other practices take on a character less and less religious, the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion. We erect a cult in behalf of personal dignity which, as every strong cult, already has its superstitions.” (Durkheim, 1933, p 172)

Social dissatisfaction, which more often than not is the starting point of social change, can be seen to arise out of a friction between the individuals perceived needs and expectations, and society’s ability to provide these for him. As the above quote demonstrates, this is particularly prevalent in a modern, secular society, which places more of an emphasis on personal responsibility and achievement. The individual seeks to enact change that will address this imbalance, and attempt to alter their social

circumstance so it becomes something that he is once again able to depend on, and able to function within.

1. 2 Social Facts

Underlying these expectations of society are what Durkheim called “ social facts.” These are “ ways of acting, thinking and feeling, external to the individual and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him.” (Durkheim, 1938, p3) It is claimed that social facts guide our behaviour, particularly those considered obligatory or “ non material,” such as speaking a certain language or adopting a certain currency, because we fear the consequences of rebelling against them. Social facts are usually learnt from external forces, such as law and custom oreducation, and our awareness of them as something not only external but also prior to our existence gives them a certain coercive power over our actions.

In keeping with Durkheim’s proposition of differing societies, social facts could perhaps be seen as a lingering form of mechanical society in an organic society, as by being universally acknowledged, they go some way to providing the regulation it used to. Organic society, however, can challenge one’s acceptance of social facts, particularly because regular access to a more complex variety of people equals more diversity in opinions, as well as a greater variety of social experience. Through this, traditional, perhaps untrue, social facts can be corroded, as the individual is better capable to view his society as a whole.

For example, if the prevailing social fact states that “ the police are there to protect civilians,” yet innocent civilians are reportedly victims of abuse by <https://assignbuster.com/ideas-of-marx-weber-or-durkheim/>

them, then the social fact will eventually become impossible to believe, and so a new one must be created in its place. This is highlighted by the emergence of social media, and the freedom of expression the online community is privileged to have. These channels have allowed societies to become even more organic by adding global, private channels of communication, provide a space to “do what could not otherwise be done in reality.” (De Long-Bas, 2011, online) These new, emergent social facts can now be disseminated to a wide extent at incredible speeds, and with very little restraint from the external sources that used to influence traditional social facts.

Collectivism

2. 1 Collective Consciousness

A key, recurrent aspect of Durkheim’s work, and one which I feel is of particular importance to understanding the reasons for social change, is the existence of a “collective consciousness.” This consciousness is a uniting of individuals under social facts and cohesion, and is closely linked to the previous concept of a “mechanical” society, whereby individuals are bonded together by their similarities and not their differences;

“If all hearts beat in unison, this is not the result of a spontaneous and pre-established harmony but rather because an identical force propels them in the same direction. Each is carried along by all.” (Durkheim, 1938, p 9-10)

Durkheim goes on to claim that the emergence of an organic society supposedly breaks down the effectiveness of a collective consciousness because the differences it creates between individuals decreases their ability

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to feel solidarity with others. I, however, would propose that a modern day collective consciousness can be formed by individuals within an organic society, and, whilst it perhaps doesn't immerse all members as Durkheim implies that it should, it can have sufficient numbers of members to be a force for collective action and social change. As Harms states the collective is;

“ being derived from the association of different individuals' experiences, these concepts, which taken together form the collective consciousness, provide an awareness of the external world which constrains and meaningfully directs individual action.” (Harms, 1981, p400)

Within the majority of contemporary socio-political change, action is achieved through, or is a direct result of, collective action, whether that is through passive action such as overwhelming electoral voting and petitions or more direct, aggressive action such as rioting or protests. Suddenly the collective consciousness is focused on how society should be, rather than how society is, as well as the action that needs to be taken to achieve this. The formation of a collective consciousness around an idea or an aim, which are inspired by emergent social facts, can simultaneously legitimate the cause, as well as provide it with momentum. Today, this element of Durkheim's thought can be seen particularly strongly within cyberspace. The aforementioned emergence of social media has led to new forms of collective consciousness' being formed online, and being able to organize themselves in a much more efficient way than before. The mass protests that formed the center pieces of civil disobedience in both the Euro zone and the Arab nations in 2011, for example, were invariably organized through <https://assignbuster.com/ideas-of-marx-weber-or-durkheim/>

Facebook, allowing people to see who, and how many are going. This ability to see the number of people attending not only extinguishes any fear of breaking social norms, but also reinforces one's view of being part of a collective, a popular movement, rather than simply an individual. Similarly, their ability to communicate through these channels meant that they were constantly being fed up to date information on where action was taking place, allowing the movement to grow in real time and become much more interconnected.

2. 2 Crime

The idea of social change occurring because of collective sentiments can be further seen in Durkheim's writings on crime. He does not define what constitutes crime, compared to our traditional association of crime being linked to specific acts, and states that there is no way of defining crime, instead is it simply an action that is "universally disapproved of by all members of society." (Durkheim, 1933, p 73) Crime is something that offends and damages the collective consciousness, or the collective sentiment, and something that the collective feels the need to rise up against and overcome. He uses the example of a moral scandal in a small town, which brings people together through their perhaps voyeuristic desire to discuss it. This discussion reinforces the sense of moral outrage between the members of the group, as well as legitimizes each one's opinion of it as a "scandal." This growing momentum escalates to the need to extinguish this perceived "threat."

“..... the agitation which has gradually gained ground violently pushes all those who are alike towards one another and unites them in the same place” (Durkheim, 1933, 103)

It is not unfair to imply then, that some aspect of society, specifically something that negatively affects or offends the overwhelming majority of the members within it, can be seen to be the reason for a desire for social change. In much the same way as Durkheim’s small town was outraged at a moral scandal, many trace the ignition of the 2011 “ Arab Spring” to the self-immolation of a vegetable seller in Tunisia, which provided a collective scandal for civilians to rally around, and a figurehead for the popular dissatisfaction that the majority felt.

Conclusion

Durkheim’s work centers on the relationship between the individual and society, rather than the notion of social change. By reading into the various theories he puts forth to explain the relationship though, it is possible to see how tension within it can induce the desire for change within an individual, and these theories have become particularly relevant today in today’s secular, technologydrivenculture. In this complex, organic society citizens have become more aware of themselves as individuals, and the specialization of labour has produced an interdependence between them and the society they live in. In order to fulfill this dependence society has become the main source of the individuals emotional expectations and functional needs. Tension arises if the individual feels an inequality in this interdependence, or, a “ crime” has been committed against his ability to

function within society. Often this is a result of an action that undermines or directly challenges what Durkheim calls a “ social fact.” These facts are like customs, things we are conditioned to believe are true, and which guide our behaviour and standards of living. A challenge to these facts is a challenge to our conception of the world we live in, and the feeling of criminality can be widespread, an outrage to collective sentiments. Within an organic society, the individual is able to access a much more diverse range of opinions and experiences, and this has been greatly increased by the growth in online communication. This also allows the individual easier access to like minded people, in this case people who also share their dissatisfaction at particular social facts, and to form a small scale “ collective consciousness” around their shared beliefs and ideas, such as the need to punish the crime that has brought them all together. Continued agitation within this group, such as continued discussion of the threat provokes the group to take action, to deal with the threat, so that society can once again return to something they can depend on

Reference List

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