

# Marx's alienation versus durkheim's anomie theory



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## Introduction

The Industrial Revolution was a time of industrialized development that transformed rural societies into urban ones. This revolution took place in the latter half of the eighteenth century, but continued to catch the eye of those in the centuries that followed. Two of those interested in the effects of the Industrial Revolution were Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim. The two sociologists focused on the division of labor and theorized concepts pertaining to it. Marx addressed this with a term he coined alienation, while Durkheim discussed using his own term, anomie. While the two concepts aren't identical, the broader idea of the division of labor allows them to be compared side-by-side.

### Alienation

Marx's concept of alienation states that alienation occurs when something that is, or should be, familiar begins to feel foreign (Lowe, 2019). Alienation doesn't only relate to feeling disconnected from others, but it is a state of feeling disconnected from one's own nature. Along with a feeling of disconnect, there is a sense of loss of control. Being in a state of alienation inhibits one's ability to properly engage in society and with other societal members, affecting more than one aspect of life. Marx believed that alienation emerged in capitalist societies where production was the main focus. Capitalism emphasizes the lack of ownership of the worker by forcing the workers to sell their labor as a commodity to the capitalist, who will make a profit off of it.

### Anomie

Durkheim's concept of anomie is what he used to describe a lack of sufficient moral regulation in which individuals are left to their own egotistical pursuits without a sufficient sense of moral obligation to others (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, & Virk, 2012). Essentially, anomie is the state of normlessness. Because there are no norms, there are no actions deemed as acceptable or not acceptable, so people don't know what they are supposed to do or how they are supposed to act.

### Application of Concepts to Division of Labor

In regards to capitalism, Marx and Durkheim have both applied their differing concepts to explain the impact of the division of labor. For Marx, alienated labor is a task that is so poorly compensated that the worker is estranged from the product with no input on the process. This means that they work for someone else and go home without any of the product they made. Marx lists four aspects of alienated labor- the relation of the worker to the product of labor, the relation of the worker to the act of production, man's species being, and separation of man from man. Workers are alienated from the products of their labor because their work only strengthens the monopoly of the capitalists and the workers don't directly receive any of the profit from their labor. By being more efficient and increasing the rate of production, the laborers enrich the capitalist who owns the products they have produced (Armando, 2017). Even though the worker has made the product, it ultimately doesn't belong to them, nor was it produced for them. Workers are alienated from the act of labor because they aren't the ones who get to decide what products are made, how they are made, or in what conditions they are made (Lowe, 2019). Marx's concept of species being is the idea that

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humans interact with the world around them and can consciously transform it. Being in a divided workplace alienates those within from their own species being because they are unable to change things freely since they are not in a position of control. Finally, workers are alienated from other human beings because they are forced to compete with one another for jobs.

While Marx recognized that having a division of labor was good because it allowed for greater productivity, he collectively thought the division was a bad thing. Marx was against the division of labor because as labor became more and more divided, the tasks performed by each individual worker grew simpler and more repetitive, which led to demanding less competence from the worker. While there is a division of labor, Marx points out that each person is able to do all of the tasks required for survival- so the idea of a division of labor isn't necessary for society to function properly since each person had the capabilities to be self-sufficient.

On the other hand, Durkheim was in favor of the division of labor. The division of labor allowed for cooperation among individuals and assured them that there are sufficient resources for all within the society. He saw no reason for those within a society to compete in the sense of struggling just to survive (Conservative Approaches, 2002). Furthermore, he believed the division of labor benefits society because it increases the reproductive capacity of a process and the skill set of the workmen. This created a feeling of solidarity, or unity, among people who shared those jobs. For this reason, he also believed the division of labor went beyond economic interests due to the fact that it also established a social and moral order within a society (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, & Virk, 2012). He believed this division

happened because of population growth. He stated that division of labor is in direct proportion to the moral density of a society. Density can happen in three ways- through an increase of the spatial concentration of people, through the growth of towns, and through an increase in the number and efficacy of the means of communication. When one or more of these things happen, labor becomes divided and jobs become more specialized. Growth causes people to be in competition with each other, therefore, it is necessary for specialization. If each person tried to do everything, then one would be in competition with everyone for every single thing. Therefore, diversifying talents means competition with fewer people.

Overall, the function of the division of labor in Durkheim's eyes was that it must determine the degree to which the solidarity that is produced by the division of labor contributes to the integration of society. This will prove whether or not the division of labor is an essential factor in social cohesion. Durkheim also pointed out that the division of labor could lead to anomie under particular circumstances. The pressure of a job can become so great that the person in the role experiences anomie. Workers become more and more isolated by their specialized tasks, resulting in them losing any sense of being a necessary component to some larger whole (Jones, 1986).

## References

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