

## Durkheim and Marx: Two Models of Social Change

Both Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx have provided seminal social theories that seek to explain various social phenomena, as observable in the authors' contemporary society and additionally in the development of such societies. The mechanisms that the two authors employ to explain social change, however, are distinct. The present author contends that the mechanism employed by Marx is not in itself sufficient to characterize all social change, while that of Durkheim may prove more useful for phenomena that do not fit the more broadly applicable Marxist characterization.

According to Durkheim, religion forms the basis of all categories of thought used by a given society and is thus “a fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity,” in that all other social relations are derivative of religious nature (1). All our constructed cognitive schemas are “born in and from religion; they are a product of religious thought” (9). Religion, however, is not simply a set of beliefs about the supernatural, but rather “*a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them*” (44). Religion then is defined by the social nature that it represents, namely a moral authority that both permeates the society and is itself the object of devotion of religious practices. Durkheim defines religion in terms of the totemic principle, with the members of a single moral community venerating or worshipping the totem as the objectification of the power of the moral authority binding the society together. Durkheim explains the totem as amounting to “the tangible

form in which that intangible substance is represented in the imagination; diffused through all sorts of disparate beings, that energy alone is the real object of the cult” (191). Religious beliefs and practices are the means through which a society experiences and reproduces the real power that binds its members together. Not only is religious nature fundamental to humanity, but “the idea of society is [itself] the soul of religion” (421).

This description of religious nature as essential to humanity, that from which all other thinking is derived, and yet itself derived from and existing in service of the totemic power which binds a society together as a moral community at first seems static. One imagines that society simply replicates itself as a moral community through unchanging religious rites and perpetuates all other derivative social relations. It must be recalled, however, that “religion is first and foremost a system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it” (227). This reminder of what has already been stated by Durkheim, but stated in the less programmatic language of *imagination*, allows for the development of society through changes in collective understanding. Members of a moral community experience their social existence through their idealized and imagined conceptions of the social force binding them together, represented and venerated in religious rites and beliefs. Thus the key to the development of society is not external to society or its members, but contained within it. “The ideal society is not outside the real one but is part of it” (425). Durkheim claims, “it is in the school of collective life that the individual has learned to form ideals. It is by assimilating the ideals worked out by society that the individual is able to conceive of the ideal. It is society that, by drawing him into its sphere of action, has given him the need to raise himself above the world of

experience, while at the same time furnishing him with the means of imagining another. It is society that has built this new world while building itself, because it is society that the new world expresses” (425). One’s existence in the empirically real world of society mediated through religion provides the basis for the fundamental categories, including that of the ideal. Thus able to conceive of the ideal society, which is often reflected in religious terms given the totemic nature of religion, one can observe the manufacturing of a new society, the development from older forms to newer ones, through religious beliefs and practices that furnish the necessary concepts. Given that the “religious force is none other than the feeling that the collectivity inspires in its members, but projected outside the minds that experience them, and objectified,” it should not be surprising that a given moral community so often expresses their ideal society in terms of religious language (230). For Durkheim, religion plays an essential role in not only allowing its adherents to conceive of the ideal, but in bringing about social changes through collective imaginings of such an ideal society. Religion’s “true function is to make us act and to help us live,” in order that an ideal social order of harmony may be achieved (419).

Like Durkheim, Marx considers social relations, principally the division of labor and the eventual historical formation of and struggle between social classes, as determinative of everything else in human experience. While religion served as a mediator between social organization and the construction of frames of reference for Durkheim, the key for Marx are the modes of production; Marx’s humanity is not fundamentally religious in nature, but essentially economic. There are needs of subsistence that must be met in order for individuals to remain alive, so the “first historical act is thus the production of

the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself” (48). In order to exist at all, human beings must produce all the means necessary to satisfy their needs, which when satisfied generate other needs that must be met using other means. The continued production of the means to satisfy human needs, both basic and subsidiary, is the process that drives the course of human history according to Marx. “By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life” (42). One’s material life is not simply the things that one possesses, but more importantly the entire empirically observable milieu in which an individual exists. For Marx this includes not only those base elements of material life—subsistence and division of labor—but also the superstructural elements of consciousness and ideology.

Marx argues that to begin to understand a human society, one must examine the process of its formation, namely the relation of the forces of production, the intercourses they produce, and the classes developed from such. As opposed to Durkheim, who began not by looking at individuals, but at society as a transparent aggregate of persons, Marx insists that one must “set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process... [to] demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process” (47). It is only in examining the material conditions of a given person, or rather a class of persons, that one can understand the relation of people to an economic system that seeks to meet human needs. This analysis, which Marx provides for Western Europe, includes not only the material productions but also the modes of production. “What [men] are, therefore, coincides with their production, both *what* they produce and with *how* they produce” (42). The particular mode of production and how such production is divided up between sexes or classes is determinative of the essence of that

person. Thus for Marx, historical analysis begins with an analysis of the needs and means used to satisfy such needs. The means used inevitably imply a division of labor, first manifested in the family, which is mirrored in the wider civil society. Intercourses between individuals brought about by this division of labor in society provide the basis for the overall goal of Marxist historical materialism, based upon the

ability to expound the real process of production, starting out from the material production of life itself, and to comprehend the form of intercourse connected with this and created by the mode of production, as the basis of history; and to show it in its action – as State, to explain all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc., etc. and trace their origins and growth from that basis; by which means, of course, the whole thing can be depicted in its totality. (58)

While Durkheim claimed that “far from being able to explain religion, the ideal society presupposes it,” Marx contends that religious ideology is repressive and would hardly accord it any role in the evolution of social intercourse (Durkheim 423). Marx sees the development of the modes of production as the crucial promoter of social development. Social development occurs with the “further development and extension through increased productivity, the increase of needs, and, what is fundamental to both of these, the increase in population. With these there develops the division of labour” (51). In Marx’s view, the social development from one form of society to another (e.g., feudal agriculture to town-centered commerce) is due to a new division of labor that occurs as a response to the change in the mode of production. What drives the change in the mode of production is a change, or as Marx sees it, an increase, in the needs and the scale of productivity. These are in turn driven by an increase in the population, whether through expansion and conquest, or through sexual reproduction. Marx understands “the whole evolution of history [as] a coherent series of forms of intercourse, the coherence of which consists in this: in the place of an earlier form of intercourse, which has become a fetter, a

new one is put, corresponding to the more developed productive forces and, hence, to the advanced mode of the self-activity of individuals—a form which in its turn becomes a fetter and is then replaced by another” (87). As one mode of production is superseded by another, the division of labor is altered, and the understanding of what constitutes fulfilling self-activity is redefined, and new classes emerge—one dominant through its control of the means of production and the other subordinated to the ruling class. In turn the ideology that is both derivative of and legitimizing for the ruling class comes to replace that of the previous ruling class. This change is not a gradual or concessive one, as the struggle between the continuing ideology of the outmoded ruling class conflicts with the productive forces represented by the rising ruling classes, giving rise to punctuated conflicts. According to Marx, “all collisions in history have their origin...in the contradiction between the productive forces and the form of intercourse” (89). At root, these conflicts and the ensuing development of social organization is the result of increased population, resulting in increased needs and demanding increased productivity.

Both Durkheim and Marx conceive of history and ideas as socially constructed. It is through the social organization or division of labor that one is able to arrive at primary categories or ideology. Durkheim holds society as a given, an empirically observable phenomenon whose origin does not influence the fundamental and permanent aspect of the religious nature of humanity. Marx views society as a historically constructed process, whose origin deeply implicates the economic aspect of humanity as primary. Both, however, account for change in society. Durkheim views change as internal to the society, arising from the imagination of an ideal society, as communicated through

religious beliefs and rites, which are products of the social organization. Marx, on the other hand, views societal change as partially external to the society; increasing population creates increased needs and drives an increase in productivity, generates a change in the mode of production and a new division of labor, which is at odds with the existing form of intercourse, and ultimately drives social change. In a strict interpretation, one would expect to find a change in population whenever a social change, especially of the revolutionary nature described by Marx, has taken place. This, however, is not always the case, as is evidenced in the cycles of aggregation and separation observed in the archaeological records of the lowland Maya, Egyptian, and Levantine regions. In these and other cases, there is certainly not a correlation between population change and social development. The link between change in mode of production and social development is likewise not necessarily present in all of these cases. It must be noted, however, that none of these cases are the modern western European historical record from and for which Marx developed his model of social change. Additionally, Marxist theory certainly does not preclude other material factors than population growth from influencing changes in the mode of production and thus accounting for the social change. Furthermore, whether or not Durkheim's model of social change as taking place through the indigenous imagination of an ideal society as realized through religious beliefs and rites, corresponds to evidence from the above mentioned cases and others remains to be seen. It is probable, however, that upon further examination that Durkheim's model may prove to be useful in explaining issues of social change where the explanations of Marxist historical materialism do not seem to be fully adequate.

### Works Cited

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