

Emile Durkheim

Durkheim's analysis of the process of social change involved in industrialization is presented in his first major work, *De la division du travail social*,

He describes how societies begin in simple forms of interaction and are held together by solidarity and likenesses. In such societies the members have similar aims and roles. These generally homogeneous societies he called 'mechanical'.

The growth of societies, together with technical and economic advance, makes the interrelationships more complicated and diverse. When this happens the functions and positions of individuals in societies will vary and each person's work becomes more specialised. Members of society also become more independent. Durkheim called these 'organic societies'

The role of the law

In both types of society law plays an important role. In mechanical societies, its main function is to enforce the uniformity and the status quo. In organic societies, its main function is to integrate the diverse parts of the society and ensure that they co-exist without problems

Crime

Durkheim saw crime as a normal occurrence, and said it is impossible to have a society totally devoid of crime. All societies generate some rules and provide sanctions in case they are broken. Therefore crime is a necessary feature of every society and, provided it does not exceed certain levels, the society is healthy. Durkheim argues that crime originates in society and is a fundamental condition of social organization

He claimed that the best examples of healthy levels of criminality were to be found in simple, mechanical societies.

An unhealthy level of criminality is more likely to arise in an organic society, and to be the result of the law being inadequate to regulate the interactions of the various parts of that society. The incomplete integration gives rise to anomie, one of the results of which is excessive or unhealthy levels of criminality

Punishment in a mechanical society

The punishment of criminals play an important role in the maintenance of the social solidarity. When the dictates of the collective conscience are violated, society responds with repressive sanctions not so much for retribution or deterrence, but because without them those who are making the “perpetual and costly sacrifices” would become severely demoralized.

The punishment of criminals also acts as a visible, societal expression of the inferiority and blameworthiness of the criminal group. This reinforces the sense of superiority and righteousness found in the mass of the people, and thus strengthens the solidarity of the society

The pathological state of society would be one in which there was no crime. A society that had no crime would be one in which the constraints of the collective conscience were so rigid that no one could oppose them. In this type of situation crime would be eliminated, but so would the possibility of progressive social change.

To make progress, individual originality must be able to express itself. In order that the originality of the idealist whose dreams transcend his century may find expression, it is necessary that the originality of the criminal, who is below the level of his time, shall also be possible. One does not occur without the other

Anomie

In the organic society the function of the law is to regulate the interactions of the various parts of the whole. If this regulation is inadequate, there can result a variety of social maladies, including crime. Durkheim called the state of inadequate regulation anomie

The only mechanism that can limit human appetites is human society

As a matter of fact, at every moment of history there is a dim perception, in the moral consciousness of societies, of the respective value of different social services, the relative reward due each, and the consequent degree of comfort appropriate on the average to workers in each occupation....Under this pressure, each in his sphere vaguely realizes the extreme limit set to his ambitions and aspires to nothing beyond....Thus, an end and goal are set to the passions

Durkheim focused on situations of rapid social change, including those in which the society goes into an economic recession or repression

In the case of economic disasters, indeed, something like a declassification occur which suddenly casts certain individuals into a lower state than their previous one. Then they must reduce their requirements, restrain their needs, learn greater self control... So they are not adjusted to the condition forced on them, and its very prospect is intolerable.....

Durkheim used his experience to explain high rates of suicide during times of economic downturns. He argued that something similar happened in times of rapid economic expansion

It is the same if the source of the crisis is an abrupt growth of power and wealth. Then truly, as the conditions of life are changed, the standard according to which needs were regulated can no longer remain the same ... The scale is upset; but a new scale cannot be immediately improvised. Time is required for the public conscience to reclassify men and things. So long as the social forces thus freed have not regained equilibrium, their respective values are unknown and so all regulation is lacking for a time

He then made the surprising argument that anomie (or the deregulation of appetites) would be worse in time of prosperity than in times of depression, since prosperity stimulates the appetites just at the time when the restraints on those appetites have broken down

With increased prosperity desires increase. At the very moment when traditional rules have lost their authority, the richer prize offered these appetites stimulates them and makes them more exigent and impatient of control. The state of de-regulation or anomy is thus further heightened by passions being less disciplined, precisely when they need more disciplining