

INTRODUCTION TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MODERNITY AND SOCIOLOGY IN SPECIFIC TO EMILE DURKHEIM AND MAX WEBER'S STUDIES

Ruhi Can Alkin, MSc
University of Southampton, the UK

Abstract

This paper proposes to examine the strong relationship among the emergence of modernity and foundation of sociology by investigating Emile Durkheim and Max Weber's studies. Some of the arguments developed by these thinkers towards the process of social change will be analyzed.

By focusing on Durkheim and Weber's studies when dealing with the aforementioned relationship, it is proposed to illustrate two main methodological and theoretical considerations in sociology tradition. It will be claimed that Weber's position towards social change represents the interpretative tradition in sociology whilst Durkheim was a defender of positivist methodology.

Besides describing thinker's scientific studies and their connection with modernity, Weber and Durkheim's optimistic and pessimistic attitude towards social change will be questioned in conclusion part. This attempt may seem to be dealing with emotional reflections, which is generally explored by psychology. However, it will be seen that Durkheim and Weber's long-term theoretical studies and methodological considerations in sociology characterize their attitude in the face of social change in 19th century. This assertion will be justified and detailed in the relevant section.

Keywords: Modernity, Sociology, Durkheim, Weber

Introduction

Foundation of sociology as an independent academic discipline and the emergence of modernity illustrate one of the well-known historical connections (Ashley & Orenstein, 2005). This connection could be observed by focusing on the major changing on modern time, especially in 19th century. To remember, Enlightenment, French Revolutions, Industrial Revolution, Secularism, etc. are some of the breaking points for individual

and social life in modern Europe (Swingewood, 2000). For Hall, these steps “shaped modernity across a long-term historical time-span” (2006: 9). At this point, sociology starts to make itself visible in Western Europe. It is not a coincidence that the first/classical sociologists investigate the issues related to the reasons and consequences of modernity (Harriss, 2000). When looking at the concepts and arguments such as anomie, division of labour, individualism, alienation, bureaucracy, suicide, etc., it will be noticed that these are produced and discussed by classical sociologists in a social scientific way. In the light of this background, it could be claimed that sociology is a scientific response to large-scaled changing in Europe.

At the present, this current paper proposes to illustrate the close relationship between modernity and sociology by discovering the studies of two classical theorists, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Two main sections are expected to clarify the subject summarised above. Firstly, Durkheim’s contribution to sociology will be presented as a scientific reflex formed by a thinker, who experienced the wide-ranging social change in modern Europe. For that purpose, the aim of sociology from Durkheim’s viewpoint will be investigated. After that, some of his main arguments and theories that he generated by considering positivist methodology will be explained. Here, the place of solidarity types, anomie, and suicide on Durkheimian theory will be incorporated in study.

As soon as completing the discussion on Durkheim, Weber’s contribution to sociology as a new philosophical and methodological step will be explored. The relationship among Protestantism and Capitalism as an example of ideal type and its effect on modern society will be illustrated as one of the much-discussed arguments belongs to Weber. In addition to ideal type, the notion of rationalism, which is one of the basic reference points for individual and social relationships in modern time, will be investigated. Throughout the second section that centres on Weber, his interpretative methodology and his attitude that supports subjectivity on different social groups and events will be detailed.

In addition to classifying terms and notions that the thinkers investigated when responding to modern change, Weber and Durkheim’s anticipation for the future of modern societies will be compared in conclusion part. It will be shown that the legacy of their social scientific considerations and methodological perspectives determine their positive or negative stance towards the future of modern societies.

Durkheim: A Scientist’s Response to Modernity

Emile Durkheim is the first official lecturer of sociology and one of the classical representatives of this scientific endeavour (Fenton, 1984).

Some of the contemporary theories discussed in today's World are still attributed to Durkheim's studies.

Durkheim is not only a classical sociologist who explained the process of social change from traditional forms to modern ones. He is also an intellectual who wanted to benefit from sociology and sociological knowledge in order to find solutions to the major problems of 19th century's Europe. "Durkheim's goal was to develop a sociology that would help France to overcome its continuing moral crises" (Pope, 2008: 76). That is why, his books generally deals with the current problems of his period. Especially *Division of Labour in Society* and *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, which is a "diagnosis of moral and social disintegration of France and European societies" (Nisbet, 1975: 10), pictures the main changing and depression in social life.

To exemplify Durkheim's concern in a specific way, some of his main arguments in sociology could be reviewed. For example, in *Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim focuses on a new type of solidarity emerge in modern social life. He clarifies it by a strong theory in which he compares two different periods. For Durkheim (1996), mechanical solidarity was representing the basic characteristic of the similar types of associations in pre-modern societies. It was a "social solidarity which comes from a certain number of states of conscience which are common to all members of the same society" (Durkheim, 1966: 109). Individuals, in this type, used to work in the same areas and sustain almost the same occupations. As a result, people were deeply dependent on each other in mechanic solidarity. "Collective consciousness" says Durkheim (1966: 79) "diffuses every reach of society", so it provides supremacy for the social order over the individuals. That is why; values of groups, in mechanical solidarity, are very important and any behaviour against them used to be punished violently. "Unforgiving moral codes embodied in the collective conscience" and "repressive law at its core underlie the harsh justice and severe punishments that perpetuate the similarities underlying mechanical solidarity" (Pope, 2008: 79).

On the other hand, having a look on modern/industrialized societies, the role and capacity of mechanic solidarity would not be efficient to understand social organization. This is, probably, the main reason that pushed Durkheim to picture a new sort of solidarity. In other words, a new social organization model, named organic solidarity, is a response by Durkheim to social and individual relationship is modern age. Some reasons may encourage Durkheim to find a new type of solidarity. Because of industrialization, for example, there is a specialization on jobs/occupations that lead people to work independently. As Merton (1965: 106) stated,

“[T]his type of solidarity is indexed by juridical rules and groups... This trend is found in the increased size and density of population”.

As another reason for organic solidarity, the process of specialization in work could be given. Practical interdependence in division, as Giddens (1971) points out, prepares new sort of solidarity. It might be asserted that, modernization, which brings individualization and interdependence, is subjected by Durkheim in his mechanic-organic solidarity definitions.

In order to address Durkheim’s sociological approach to modernity, we now may look at another notion, anomie, which is related to organic solidarity. Sociologists, in general, are agreed to define anomie as normlessness (Hilbert, 1986). For Durkheim, it is a notion that refers to a society, where regulations are not well-defined or absent (O’Donnell, 1986). Sociologically speaking, it is defined as the crises of society, which has difficulty in understanding or get used to major fluctuations in modern life. As Zhao and Cao (2010: 1211) summarized, “[D]uring to transnational period... the diffusion of new norms and values disrupts the equilibrium of traditional societies and breaks down traditional beliefs and ascribed status relationships” (Zhao & Cao, 2010: 1210).

In his theory, Durkheim correlates anomie and suicides committed in 19th. In *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, anomic suicides are pointed out as the new type of suicide in modern societies. In order to underline the relationship anomie and suicide rates, Durkheim apply to religious groups and their basic position towards religious dogmas. To explain briefly, according to Durkheim’s examination on Christian groups, suicide rates are higher among Protestants than Catholic believers (Hughes *et al.*, 2006). For him, it is mainly associated with the different religious perceptions in view of these sects. When Catholics seem to be adaptable to the certain rules of Christianity, Protestants tend to criticize the old-fashioned and inflexible rules of religion (Brown, 1965). This interrogator manner of Protestants becomes apparent against the chaotic atmosphere of modernity, as well. For Durkheim, struggling for understanding and questioning the anomic atmosphere pushes Protestants to commit suicide more than Catholics, who seem fatalistic towards the external problems.

As you shall see, the connection among modernity, organic solidarity, anomie and suicides illustrates a consistent theoretical background in Durkheim’s studies. It could be attributed to Durkheim’s methodological position in sociology.

First of all, Durkheim feels the responsibility of his identity as ‘scientist’ more than his contemporaries do (Collins, 1985). In his works, arguments and inferences purely contain positivist methodology. Division of labour, anomie, suicide and other contents written by Durkheim, as it was mentioned, seems together in a positivistic chain. Durkheim’s effort on

making some determinations among them could be observed on *Rules of Sociological Method*. In this study, Durkheim suggests that “[T]he first and most basic rule is to consider social facts *as things*” (1982: 60). Assuming that the social facts are parallel to things in psychical world encourages sociology to interiorize the methodology of natural sciences. “Durkheim agreed with Comte that there are discoverable social laws comparable to those governing the rest of nature, and he approved of Comte’s view that social facts are also facts of nature” (Rhodas, 1991: 13-14). This point is crucial for Durkheim’s sociologism and its relationship with modernity. In brief, sociologism is “the theory that knowledge and the foundations of knowledge are social or conventional” (Hund, 1990: 197). Sociologism, in this respect, could be read as an epistemological inference regarding the source of knowledge. As a very modern attitude, Durkheim tries to produce a universalist consent by prioritizing society over the individual (Hughes *et al.*, 2006). In addition to the formation of knowledge, Durkheim illustrates society as a coercive power over the individuals. For him, society is able “to structure social activity by means of external coercion which has the power to override personal and private considerations” (Morrison, 2006: 197).

For a general evaluation, Durkheim’s sociology represents one of the faces of modernity, which underlines meta-narratives on individual and social lives. Addressing the methodology of natural sciences, taking society as a large-scaled structure that determines even the most individual preferences, establishing a new type of solidarity that reflects the modern socio-economic formation, etc. remind the absolutist and inclusivist manner of modernity (Melton, 1985).

Besides representing one of the perspectives of modernity, Durkheim is concerned about the problems that appear in modern Europe. His interest on these problems and changes such as anomie, suicide, organic solidarity, morality, etc. may be evaluated as a scientific reflex tends to keep society in safe and solve the current problems of it. Maybe that is why Durkheim states in *Division of Labour in Society* (1984, xxvi) that:

“Yet because what we propose to study is above all reality, it does not follow that we should give up the idea of improving it. We would esteem our research not worth the labour of a single hour if its interest were merely speculative. If we distinguish carefully between theoretical and practical problems it is not in order to neglect the latter category. On the contrary, it is in order to put ourselves in a position where we can better resolve them”

The Next Step in Sociology: Max Weber

Max Weber is one of the classical sociologists who focused on modern-capitalist world by his sociological, religious and philosophical

studies. His interdisciplinary studies are observed on today's social scientific endeavour.

Like Durkheim, Weber deals with the changings and problems emerge after modernity, too. However, Weber's methodological and theoretical considerations exhibit very different position against Durkheim. Weber's studies are maintained in the light of resemblances and changes, methodological search in social science and distinction between natural and social sciences (Wrong, 1970). In his study, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Weber (1949: 40) states that

“[E]very science of psychological and social phenomena is a science of human conduct (which includes all thought and attitudes). These sciences seek to ‘understand’ this conduct and by means of this understanding to ‘explain’ it interpretively’... All we are interested in here is one particular type namely ‘rational’ interpretation”.

As you shall see, when Durkheim uses the methodology of natural sciences and ignoring the human factor, Weber avoids from positivism by considering unique nature of social phenomena (Scott, 1999). In this respect, Weber's works could be evaluated as interpretive sociology rather than positivist social science (Clarck, 2007). Exploring Weber's studies would clarify his position.

First of all, history has major status on Weber's studies. When he sets his arguments and combinations about modernity, he always applies to historical analysis. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is an outcome of a comparable historical, philosophical and religious study, which includes “ethic of a religious belief and spirit of an economic system” (Luethy, 1970: 124). Instead of drawing a positivist-absolute picture for the origins of capitalism, Weber specifies the subject and deals with basic historical background of capitalism by suggesting that “[P]rotestant ethic’ is an ideal type, a generalizing construct which attempts to explain what would happen under certain hypothetical conditions” (Hansen, 1963: 464). This theory includes an objection against Marxist approach that claims inevitability and determinacy on the foundation of capitalism. Weber declines attributing capitalism to an evolutionary process or law (Mommsen, 1989). He, as an interpretivist social scientist, highlights dominant status of ethic and ideal aspects and his sociological analyses centre on value-based varieties made by human (Scott, 1999), instead.

In addition to his comments on the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism, the concept of rationalism in Weber is another crucial argument. As Rundell (2003, 15) states, “Modernity became identified with the development of objective knowledge, that is, with the development of modern rationalist, scientific thinking”. As a thinker of the modern era, Weber is influenced from this concept. “Weber sums up the

particular problematic character of contemporary reality under the title ‘rationality’” (Loewith, 1970: 108).

In contrast to picturing the positivist design of social world, Weber refers to reasonable and practical actions, institutions and organizational model of modern-capitalist societies when dealing with rationality (Ritzer, 1974). For Weber, the process of modernism is also a process of rational actions, rules, economic activities, and science rather than addressing traditional rules, religious orders in social and economic life.

Weber’s authority classification is another point that refers to rationalism. He addresses the modern societies as the social associations governed by legal/rational authority (Weber, 1958). When traditional rules were dominant on the authority type of pre-modern period, rational institutions and rules such as parliament, laws, principles and bureaucratic processes are the necessities of modern-capitalist governing style (Beetham, 1996).

Interestingly, Weber’s position towards rationality presents a negative perspective, as well. Rational orientation, which is spread over entire social life via economical life, scientific studies, and economical organizations, becomes the absolute reference point for individuals. At this point, the criticism of rationalism by Weber comes together with a prediction and this sheds light on criticism of modernity. Weber notices a characteristic irrationality that derives from rationalization itself (Loewith, 1970). Meaning and aspect of rationalism, as you shall see, alters. Modern-capitalist societies require organized individuals who obey rational structure of economic life, and then determined rational rules create an ideal individual type. “This reversal”, continues Loewith (1970: 114) “marks all of modern culture: its establishments, its institutions, and enterprises are rationalized in such a way that it is these structures, originally set up by man which now, in their turn, encompass and determine him like an ‘iron cage’”.

We might read the notion of ‘iron cage’ as a serious criticism against modern society and its rational-legal authority. The process and results of iron cage is not only an issue belongs to early sociological studies, but it is also a matter of current sociological debates and one of the main criticisms on capitalist formation.

For a general evaluation, Weber’s basic sociological arguments differentiate from Durkheim’s sociology, which implements the rules of natural sciences into the social sciences. After Weber’s contribution, sociology reaches to the position that considers different possibilities, values, individual choices and subjective meanings. This also means a new sort of methodology, which differs from natural sciences strict positivist methodology, for sociology. Thus, it would not be wrong to claim that Weberian model enriches the interpretation of modernity. Dealing with

rationalism for both illustrating the social change and criticizing it is another point that illustrates the relationship between modernity and sociology.

General Evaluation and Conclusion

From today's perspective, it could be easily said that sociology as an intellectual manner was an inevitable output of modernity. For a sense, theorists or thinkers who contributed to the foundation and development of sociology were commentators of modern-capitalist society, as well. In this respect, it could be said that sociology is not only a guidebook of transmitting process from tradition to modern societies, but it is also a morality for a new World.

Two classical sociologists, Weber and Durkheim, whose studies were examined in this paper, obviously represent the relationship between modernity and a new social science. Durkheim, who was a successor of positivism after Comte, had a chance to explain major changing in social life that prompted people to re-arrange their business and family relationships by theorizing organic solidarity. This was also an explanation regarding the expectations of modern society from individuals. Weber, on the other hand, pictured modern society by illustrating origins and development of capitalism. When Durkheim was maintaining his studies under positivistic methodology, Weber concentrated on interpretive approach and built his sociology on ideal types that project unique characteristic of socio-economic processes such as capitalism and modernity. In brief, Weber's interdisciplinary studies on economics, religion, politics, etc. mirror his major attention, which seeks and tries to explain unique organization and importance of modernity (Kronman, 1983).

The thing I would like to highlight at the end of this study is the reasons that prompt Durkheim and Weber to determine their position in the face of modernity. Durkheim, whose starting point in sociology is based on a prescription for a better society, could be defined as hopeful for the future of modernity. "He was remarkably open-minded and cautiously optimistic. His dedication to the vocation of sociologist was at the same time a dedication to analysing the structural determinants of social change" (Thompson, 2002: 127). From that point, modern society was going to perform a more liveable atmosphere for the people who live organic solidarity. If not, sociology was going to be a salvation for European (or French) society. At this point, it is understandable that Durkheim as an intellectual who wants to keep society alive had to be optimistic for the future of modernity. His attention on unifying the laws of natural science and social sciences is not a coincidence. By doing so, Durkheim was going to be able to determine positive rules for a better (modern) society and universalist consents were going to be applied onto societies.

For more interesting arguments, the content of written studies of Durkheim could be reviewed. For example, the first chapter of *The Division of Labour in Society* is entitled *The Progress of the Division and Happiness* (Neves, 2003). Now, it is possible to claim that modern organizational model of societies, which is organic solidarity, is an agent for the happiness of people. This title could itself prove Durkheim's optimism for the future of modern societies.

Max Weber, on the other hand, represents the pessimistic face of modernity. Irrational rotation of rationalism, bureaucracy, definition of iron cage and the other processes and notions mentioned above might clarify Weber's position. "His famous lament against the technocrats without a soul, the bureaucrats without spirit and, we might add, the intellectuals without bodies" (Turner, 1993: 10). This helps to explain his pessimism on modern institutions and processes. Another reason forces Weber to be hopeless could be found in his basic methodology. By examining the social change under interpretive methodology, he does not only illustrate the plural meaning of modern formations, but he also realizes fragmented structure of society and daily life. Weber's (1946: 155) following statement would justify his pessimism:

"The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the World'. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations".

To sum up, it would not be wrong to say that all of the arguments, books, theories about modernity and its results could be evaluated as a sociological attempt of the theorists mentioned above. It is obvious that whatever they deal with in their sociological studies, one way another, they kept in touch with the reality and domain of modernity.

References:

- Ashley, D. & Orenstein, D. M. (2005). *Sociological theory: Classical statements* (6th ed.), Boston: Pearson Education
- Beetham, D. (1996). *Bureaucracy*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Brown, R. M. (1965). *The Spirit of Protestantism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, R. (1985). *Three Sociological Traditions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dodd, N. (1999). *Social Theory and Modernity*, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1966). *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. by George Simpson, New York: The Free Press.

Durkheim, E. (1984). *The Division of Labor in Society*, Edited with an Introduction by Lewis Cosen, trans by: W. D. Halls, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.

Durkheim, E. (1982). *Basic Rules of Sociological Method*, Edited with an Introduction by Steven Lukes, trans by: W. D. Halls, London: The Free Press.

Fenton, S. (1984). *Durkheim and Modern Sociology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Giddens, A. (1971). *Capitalism and modern social theory: An analysis of the writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*, London: Cambridge University Press.

Hall, S. (2006). Induction. In: Hall, S., Held, D., Hubert, D., and Thompson, K (Eds.), *Modernity: an introduction to modern societies*, Oxford, Blackwell, p.1-18.

Hansen, N. M. (1963). "The Protestant Ethic as a General Precondition for Economic Development". *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*,. 29 (4), 462-474.

Harris, J. (2000). The Second Great Transformation? Capitalism at the End of the Twentieth Century. In Allen, T. and Thomas, A. (Eds.), *Poverty and Development into the 21st Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 325-342.

Hilbert, R. A. (1986). Anomie and the Moral Regulation of Reality: The Durkheimian Tradition in Modern Relief. *Sociological Theory*, 4 (1), 1-19.

Hund, J. (1990), Sociologism and Philosophy. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 41 (2), 197-224.

Hughes, J. A., Sharrock, W. W., & Martin, P. J. (2006). *Understanding Classical Sociology: Marx, Weber, Durkheim*, London: Sage.

Kronman, A. T. (1983). *Max Weber: Jurists: Profiles in Legal Theory*, London: Edward Arnold Publishers.

Loewith, K. (1970). Weber's Interpretation of the Bourgeois-Capitalistic World in Terms of the Guiding Principle of 'Rationalization', In Wrong, D. H. (Edt.), *Max Weber*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 101-122.

Luethy, H. (1970). Once Again: Calvinism and Capitalism In Wrong, D. H. (Edt.), *Max Weber*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 123-134.

Melton, J. (1985). Absolutism and "Modernity" in Early Modern Central Europe. *German Studies Review*, 8 (3), 282-398.

Merton, T. (1965). Durkheim's Division of Labor in Society In: Nisbet, R. A. (Edt.), *Emile Durkheim*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 105-112.

Mommsen, W. J. (1989). *The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber: Collected Essays*, Oxford: Polity Press.

Morrison, K. (2006). *Marx, Durkheim, Weber: Formations of Modern Social Thought* (2nd ed.), London: Sage.

- Neves, C. M. (2003). Optimism, Pessimism, and Hope in Durkheim. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 4 (2), 169-183.
- Nisbet, R. A. (1975), *The Sociology of Emile Durkheim*, London: Heinemann.
- O'Donnell, M. (1986), Social order, social change and socialization In McNeill, P. and Townley, C. (Eds.), *Fundamentals of Sociology*, London: Hutchinson, 89-122.
- Pope, W. (2008). Emile Durkheim In Stones, R. (Edt.), *Key Sociological Thinkers*, (2nd ed.), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 76-89.
- Rhodas, J. K. (1991). *Critical Issues in Social Theory*, Pensilvanya: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Ritzer, G. (1974) *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Rundell, J. (2003). Modernity, Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism: Creating Social Theory, In Ritzer, G. and Smart, B. (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Theory*, London: Sage, 13-29.
- Scott, John (1999). *Sociological Theory: contemporary debates*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Swingewood, A. (2000). *A Short History of Sociological Thought* (3rd ed.), London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thompson, K. (2002). *Emile Durkheim: revised edition*, New York: Routledge.
- Townley, C. and Middleton, M. (1986). Sociological Perspectives In McNeill, P. and Townley, C. (Eds.), *Fundamentals of Sociology*, London: Hutchinson, 20-57.
- Turner, B. S. (1993). *Max Weber: From History to Modernity*, London: Routledge.
- Weber, M. (1946). *Science as a Vocation, From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Edited, Translated, and With an Introduction by Gerth, H. H. & Mills, C. R., New York: Oxford University Press, 129-156.
- Weber, M. (1949). *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, translated and edited by: Shils, E. A. & Finch, H. A., Illionis: The Free Press.
- Weber, M. (1958). *The three types of legitimate rule*, trans by Gerth, H. *Berkeley Publications in Society and Institutions*, 4 (1), 1-11.
- Wrong, D. H. (1970). Introduction: Max Weber In Wrong, D. H. (Edt.), *Max Weber*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1-76.
- Zhao, and Cao, L. (2010). Social Change and Anomie: A Cross-National Study. *Social Forces*, 88 (3), 1209-1229.