

THE DIVISION OF LABOR IN SOCIETY, BY ÉMILE DURKHEIM

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Abstract

Through this study I will try to present the crisis of the modern world starting from Émile Durkheim's famous work „The Division of Labour in Society”. Here, one discovers that the subject is, in fact, the departure of man from morality. Thus, the paper starts with the concept of anomy, which is the real manifestation of the crisis that the modernity goes through. The second part refers to the solution that Émile Durkheim proposes in order to successfully exit the crisis: the corporation as a factor of moral cohesion. I will also try to highlight the link between the two central concepts, anomy and corporation, with the help of other concepts such as dynamic density, solidarity and specialization, division of labour.

Keywords: anomy, specialization, morality, corporation, solidarity.

Anomy – a modern world crisis

The development of technology implies for humans new challenges that show their departure from morality. Out of the sphere of influence of family, the individual was no longer able to find the resources of solidarity to cope with this crisis. Concerned about the crisis of the modern world, Émile Durkheim named this phenomenon as “anomy”. For Durkheim anomy represents an evil that affects the whole society, which becomes unable to live without cohesion and regularity. In other words, anomy is the:

“Inability of the governmental organ to regulate the details of economic life; of the philosophy of sciences to assure the unity of science. If, in these cases, functions do not concur, it is because their relations are not regulated; the division of labour is anomic. Necessity of regulation. How, normally, it comes from the division of labour (...). This anomy arises from the solidarity organs not being in sufficient contact or sufficiently prolonged”¹.

The economical sector trains people to compete against each other in order to survive individually, a fact that would have been impossible if the individual had remained under the umbrella of morality:

“It is this anomic state that is the cause, as we shall show, of the incessantly recurrent conflicts, and the multifarious disorders of which the economic world exhibits so sad a spectacle”².

¹ Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor In Society*, Translated by George Simpson, The free press of Glencoe, Illinois, The Macmillan Company Fourth Printing, September, 1960, p. 353, available at: <http://fs2.american.edu/dfagel/www/Class%20Readings/Durkheim/Division%20Of%20Labor%20Final%20Version.pdf>.

² *Ibidem*, p. 2.

The division of labour in society, according to Durkheim, has the distinctive role of producing the necessary solidarity which brings people together, in other words the only manner to deal with the crisis. If, however, the division of labour does not lead to solidarity, one can initiate the talk about the emergence of anomic societies:

“If the division of labour does not produce solidarity in all these cases, it is because the relations of the organs are not regulated, because they are in a state of anomy”³.

Thus, in other words, anomy consists in the impossibility of the society to control the ambitions of individuals. And when the emergence of anomic situations is inevitable, the trajectory is clear: the society becomes unable to maintain social order.

“The weakening of social control over the individual is expressed by the weakening of the power of social norms”⁴.

The social rule becomes the only reality that confers a permanent character to social life.

The essence of the division of labour in society is the specialization of individuals that brings people together due to the fact that each individual needs the implication of the others in order to live or thrive. Society resembles with an organism in which each individual has a specific function. When the correct fulfilment of that particular function leads to the proper functioning of the organism, respectively of the society, the level of solidarity between individuals increases. Taking into consideration the growing number of people in society, these functions are more and more divided and the differences are less and less marked:

“(…) constituted, not by a repetition of similar, homogeneous segments, but by a system of different organs each of which has a special role, and which are themselves formed of differentiated parts. Not only are social elements not of the same nature, but they are not arranged in the same manner. They are not juxtaposed linearly as the rings of an earthworm, nor entwined one with another, but coordinated and subordinated one to another around the same central organ which exercises a moderating action over the rest of the organism”⁵.

So, one can safely say that the main role of the division of labour in society is the increase of solidarity:

“In effect, individuals are here grouped, no longer according to their relations of lineage, but according to the particular nature of the social activity to which they consecrate themselves. Their natural milieu is no longer the natal milieu, but the occupational milieu. It is no longer real or fictitious consanguinity which marks the place of each one, but the function which he fills”⁶.

For Durkheim, social solidarity is a:

“(…) completely moral phenomenon which, taken by itself, does not lend itself to exact observation nor indeed to measurement. To proceed to this classification and this comparison,

³ *Ibidem*, p. 368.

⁴ „Slăbirea controlului social asupra individului se exprimă prin slăbirea puterii normelor sociale.” (Radu Baltasiu, *Introducere în sociologie [Introduction to sociology]*, București, Editura Beladi, 2007, p. 56).

⁵ Émile Durkheim, *op.cit.*, p. 181.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 182.

we must substitute for this internal fact which escapes us an external index which symbolizes it and study the former in the light of the latter. This visible symbol is law”⁷.

There are two types of solidarity: mechanical and organic. This classification is made by Durkheim in relation to the type of law which corresponds to a certain type of society. The mechanical solidarity is specific for traditional societies, where people are together because of their resemblances:

“There are in us two consciences: one contains states which are personal to each of us and which characterize us, while the states which comprehend the other are common to all society. The first represent only our individual personality and constitute it; the second represent the collective type and, consequently, society, without which it would not exist. When it is one of the elements of this latter which determines our conduct, it is not in view of our personal interest that we act, but we pursue collective ends. Although distinct, these two consciences are linked one to the other, since, in sum, they are only one, having one and the same organic substratum. They are thus solidary. From this results a solidarity *sui generis* which, born of resemblances, directly links the individual with society”⁸.

What is specific to this type of solidarity is the fact that people’s movements are harmonious and the collective actions always produce the same effect. In short, people will move in the same sense, so the focus is on collectivity, not on individuality:

“If our ideal is to present a singular and personal appearance, we do not want to resemble everybody else. Moreover, at the moment when this solidarity exercises its force, our personality vanishes, as our definition permits us to say, for we are no longer ourselves, but the collective life. The social molecules which can be coherent in this way can act together only in the measure that they have no actions of their own, as the molecules of inorganic bodies. That is why we propose to call this type of solidarity *mechanic*”⁹.

Its main function is to maintain a strong link between people who think and act as others do:

“Its true function is to maintain social cohesion intact, while maintaining all its vitality in the common conscience. Denied categorically, it would necessarily lose its energy if an emotional reaction of the community did not come to compensate its loss, and it would result in a breakdown of social solidarity”¹⁰.

There is a correspondence between the mechanical solidarity and the repressive law, which consists in a physical and aggressive punishment of those who break the law. Repression is a way through which society defends itself, because it wants to annihilate the criminal tendencies of individuals by using the fear of punishment:

“If it is society alone that employs the repression, that is because it is attacked when individuals are, and the attack directed against it is repressed by punishment”¹¹.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 105–106.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 90–91.

The collective conscience is the most important of them all in the eyes of the community because it represents the main condition for social cohesion. Durkheim offers two definitions to this concept. The first brings into discussion the beliefs that are the same for all people that form a society, while the second one revolves around the idea that people prefer the company of the ones they know (as opposed to strangers). People in a society are accustomed with a particular lifestyle and a belief system, and a stranger disturbs this way of life embraced by all.

“The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system which has its own life; one may call it the collective or common conscience”¹².

“It is the psychical type of society, a type which has its properties, its conditions of existence, its mode of development, just as individual types, although in a different way”¹³.

The second type of solidarity that Durkheim refers to is known as the organic one, which is generated by the division of labour. It is thus specific to the modern societies and it is based on the differences between individuals (that summed up create another type of organism, one in which every social particle has a very well defined function):

“Here, then, the individuality of all grows at the same time as that of its parts. Society becomes more capable of collective movement, at the same time that each of its elements has more freedom of movement. This solidarity resembles that which we observe among the higher animals. Each organ, in effect, has its special physiognomy, its autonomy. And, moreover, the unity of the organism is as great as the individuation of the parts is more marked. Because of this analogy, we propose to call the solidarity which is due to the division of labour, organic”¹⁴.

To this type of solidarity it corresponds a restitutive law, which does not rely on punishment, but on the reintegration into society of the individual who broke the law. In other words, the action is meant to re-establish the initial social order:

“What distinguishes this sanction is that it is not expiatory, but consists of a simple return in state. Sufferance proportionate to the misdeed is not inflicted on the one who has violated the law or who disregards it; he is simply sentenced to comply with it. If certain things were done, the judge reinstates them as they would have been”¹⁵.

In short, the individual must restrain something to society for his mistake.

The question of morality is so important for Durkheim that he introduced a new concept, the dynamic density, in order to better argue his thesis. Dynamic density refers, on the one hand, to the frequency of interactions between individuals and, secondly, to the quality of these interactions. For the author, dynamic density is directly proportional to the progress of the division of labour:

“The division of labour develops, therefore, as there are more individuals sufficiently in contact to be able to act and react upon one another. If we agree to call this relation and the

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 79.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

active commerce resulting from it dynamic or moral density, we can say that the progress of the division of labour is in direct ratio to the moral or dynamic density of society¹⁶.

The relationship between the individual and the society is explained by Émile Durkheim through the degree of social cohesion. To determine the level of internal cohesion within a society, the French sociologist introduces this concept of dynamic density. Taking into account that the density and the social cohesion are directly proportional to the level of social integration that is realized according to the degree of morality in the society, the dynamic density can be defined as:

“(...) the expression of the intensity of social contacts conforming to the social norm, which is being enrolled in the collective conscience and formally expressed through law”¹⁷.

The paradox of the society is that people are more evolved as they are more different. In other words, society's paradox (Tönnies) consists in the condition that people can be together only if they are separated¹⁸. Therefore, the more developed the society gets, the more heterogeneous it becomes. Ilie Bădescu is the one that stated that society's paradox refers to:

“(...) the association of individuals [that] requires their complete separation and a completely independent existence. Independence of individuals is the frame and the field of manifestation of their association. The association separates the individuals”¹⁹.

An additional factor which amplifies the dynamic density is the social volume, which is the actual number of individuals in a society. There is a strong link between the two concepts because:

“(...) societies are generally as voluminous as they are more advanced, and consequently as labour is more divided”²⁰.

Corporation – the only way to end the anomy

The individuals exited the sphere of familial moral influence and entered the one dominated by the influence of economic competition. They now spend the majority of their time in this new manner and that is why there is a need to create a new group that has regulatory power over the actions of individuals. In other words, the corporation becomes a system of imperative rules:

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 257.

¹⁷ „Densitatea dinamică este expresia intensității contactelor sociale conforme cu norma socială fiind înscrisă în conștiința colectivă și exprimată formal în drept.” (Radu Baltasiu, *op.cit.*, p. 56).

¹⁸ Ion Ungureanu, *Paradigme de cunoaștere a societății [Paradigms of the knowledge of society]*, București, Editura Humanitas, 1990, p. 94.

¹⁹ “(...) asocierea indivizilor reclamă separarea lor completă și un mod de existență reciproc independentă. Independența indivizilor este cadrul și câmpul de manifestare a asocierii lor. Asocierea separă indivizii. (Ilie Bădescu, *Istoria Sociologiei. Perioada marilor sisteme [History of sociology. The period of the great systems]*, vol. I, București, Editura Economică, 2002, p. 221).

²⁰ Émile Durkheim, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

“The only one that could answer all these conditions is the one formed by all the agents of the same industry, united and organized into a single body. This is what is called the corporation or occupational group”²¹.

Durkheim believes that through corporations the social order can be recovered. In this way, the corporations must become public institutions with a very important attribute: they exercise a moral power over individuals:

“What we especially see in the occupational group is a moral power capable of containing individual egos, of maintaining a spirited sentiment of common solidarity in the consciousness of all the workers, of preventing the law of the strongest from being brutally applied to industrial and commercial relations”²².

Thus, a new form of social order emerges: the corporate order that relies upon the functional organization of society in accordance with individual professional skills. Thus, Émile Durkheim proposes a functional division of work whose expression is the profession. From this point of view, one can summarize: the source of morality in modern societies is assured by the professional competence.

Durkheim considers that the corporation is the end of the “law of the strongest”, so that a sort of economic equality is born. Thus, the corporation becomes the main condition for the development and the survival of a society from an economical standpoint. The corporation has a moral influence because it places the public interest above the personal one:

“For it is impossible for men to live together, associating in industry, without acquiring a sentiment of the whole formed by their union, without attaching themselves to that whole, preoccupying themselves with its interests, and taking account of it in their conduct. This attachment has in it something surpassing the individual. This subordination of particular interests to the general interest is, indeed, the source of all moral activity”²³.

Otherwise, through corporation, appears a new institution which connects the individual to the state, it being a source of occupational ethics and law. Therefore, the corporation could represent a proper way to end the anomy, because it is the only one able to moderate the individual ego, which controls domineering temptations.

Conclusions

Émile Durkheim is concerned about the crisis of the modern world that he explains through the development of technology. To exit this crisis of norms, the author proposes that the economical world should rely on a corporative type of organization, which is centred upon the professional competence of

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 5

²² *Ibidem*, p. 10

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 14

individuals. This is why Ilie Bădescu argues that the key of the new economical order is „the organization”, because it always implies moral influences:

“Professionalism, as an economic energy, is not a moral factor. As an organized profession becomes moral factor and authority. The equivalent of the organized profession is the professional body or corporation”²⁴.

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²⁴ „Profesionalitatea, ca energie economică, nu reprezintă și un factor moral. Ca profesiune organizată, ea devine factor și autoritate morală. Or echivalentul profesiei organizate este corpul profesional sau corporația.” (Ilie Bădescu, *op.cit.*, p. 241).