

Social Change: Marx and Durkheim

by Nina Costanza

For Marx, all social intercourse is reduced to economic or material origins. In addition to ascribing most human activities to economic pursuits, he proposes a solution for societal ills (class divisions) through a perfect model, communism, the only social system that can revolutionize the intolerable political organization of society. Marx is reductivist, political (though he decries political power as the official expression of antagonism in civil society, p. 219), and advocates revolution as the only means for real change. Durkheim is ecumenical, a sociologist, and purports the natural evolution of society. Marx is critical of the current scheme of human life and imposes his own schemata as ultimate solution, a dogma which ironically suggests both orthodoxy (religiosity) and idealism. Durkheim, on the other hand, is neither critical nor has an agenda. He observes, questions, and analyzes implying that society is a natural process of many layers which persists on its course unimpeded by individual agendas. Marx and Durkheim are almost antitheses of each other: "... just as in those that are subject to despotic government, the individual has no sphere of action that is peculiarly his own, as is proved by the general institution of communism" (Durkheim, p. 142) and "The external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own... It belongs to another; it is the loss of self" (Marx, p.74).

One major difference is their interpretations of the source of the division of labor and its effectiveness for a productive society, from which further distinctions in their views on nature, individualism and consciousness, and the stages of social change are derived. In Marx's view, the history of society is the history of class struggles (Marx, p. 473). Refuting the primordial condition as a means to explain society, Marx, instead, proceeds from "actual" economic fact. Economic relations are the foundation of these class struggles. The first historical fact is the production of the means to satisfy basic needs for survival (p. 156). The family is the next historical fact and is the first social relationship. Satisfaction of first needs leads to new needs. With the increase of needs and population, new social relationships are forged through the cooperation of individuals. Individuals engage in these productive forces to achieve self activity and to safeguard their existence. Material life is the end, and labor, which produces this material life, the means (p. 191). The moment men work together and for others, labor assumes a social form. Expanding productive forces, then, determine the nature of society, and "hence the history of humanity must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange" (p. 157).