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## **ANOMIE AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

### **Abstract**

*Processes of change in the modern world are so rapid and powerful that the influence of society is lower, and the inclinations and individual actions cannot be monitored by the institutional control. The landmarks and traditional moral standards – primarily insured by religion – are turned over by the social modern development, and that inoculated to many people of modern societies the feeling that their daily life is meaningless. This state of society, generated by changes at the social level, was explained by some sociologists through the concept of anomie. Although it has the ambition to translate in a precise mode impression of social disorder, the content of the concept varies considerably from one author to another. We will address in this article not only the different meanings that various sociologists will give to anomie, but also the solutions that they propose to mitigate its effects.*

**Keywords:** social disorder, anomic suicide, social transplantations, resistance to change, corporations, moral discipline

### **Introduction**

The changes in the modern world are so fast and intense that the influence of society is diminishing considerably, and the individual actions can no longer be monitored by control instances. In such moments, society cannot exert its authority over the individuals and they no longer know what is just or unjust, which of their desires and passions are legitimate and which are beyond the human accepted frames. The traditional moral marks and the standards – established first of all by religion – are overturned by the development of the modern society, and this inoculates to individuals the feeling that their everyday life is senseless (Giddens, 2000, p. 17). This state of the society, generated by the changes happening at the social level, was explained by some sociologists by means of the *anomie* concept.

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Anomie was correlated with a multitude of social phenomena and consequences happening at the individual level. Most often, anomie was assimilated to the notion of marginality, individual disorganization, personal maladjustments, and rebel fantasies. All of these are not false as long as they are in the center of anomie, but they are not enough in order to approach the social anomie phenomenon. Certainly these attributes can be associated with the individual personality, them being implicitly the cause of the existential malady. But the concept of anomie needs to take into consideration the collective origin of the individual maladies and to allow, eventually, the identification of their positive significance, beyond the trouble, the pain, the marginal and ridiculed existence of the anomic personalities.

The theory of anomie has a fundamental importance in an era defined by rapid changes. On the one hand, change implies the deterioration of the traditional rules of conduct, and on the other hand, the existence in the transitioning phases of some systems of rules that are badly established or that are contradictory to each other. Starting from this premise, we believe that it would be important to find out in which degree change generates the demoralization anticipated by Durkheim and in which degree the latter leads to a deterioration of the institutions. The theory about anomie should be applied in analyzing the individuals' behavior and the functionality of the institutions that are currently in a changing process. It should be applied also on those deviant behaviors and onto social transplantations. Thus, the social order and the need for some common values so as to avoid anomie were and will continue to be topical issues.

#### **Anomie, between "the infinite evil" and the irregular aspect of the economic life**

The concept of anomie has the ambition to translate in a more precise manner the vague notion of social disorder, but its content varies considerably from one author to another. Not even Durkheim gives the same meaning to the notion in his two papers in which he uses it (Boudon and Bourricaud, 1990, p. 27).

In the paper called *The Division of the Social Labor*, anomie is one of the pathological forms of labor division, in other words a temporary deficiency of the social regulation that assures the cooperation between the special functions (Besnard, 1987, p. 13). Being the main condition of the *The Annals of Dunărea de Jos University of Galați, Fasc. XX, Sociology, n<sup>o</sup>. 10, 2015, 81-90.*

existence of our complex societies, labor division assures their cohesion according to "their moral character". So, while labor division becomes the exceptional source of social solidarity, it also constitutes the base for moral order. Besides, man is not a moral being just because he lives in a society. His morality varies as well according to his social conditions.

It happens sometimes that the labor division no longer produces social solidarity, and the role of the social collectivity to ensure the social cohesion is not always taken by another regulatory force, imposed not from the outside, but rather from the inside. Durkheim identifies three situations in which this solidarity is broken: industrial or commercial crisis, the conflict between work and capital, and the excessive specialization of the scientific research. For the economy of this article, we found it relevant to stop only on the second case presented by Durkheim in order to prove how the anomic state appears in modern societies.

One of the pathologic forms of labor division is represented by the class struggle, or, in Durkheim's own terms, "*the conflict between work and capital*" (Durkheim, [1893] 2001, p. 370). The solidarity between employers and employees, coming from the "corporations" of the Middle Ages tends to disappear, a fact regretted by Durkheim. The changes taking place in the industrial life contribute to the increase of the workers' needs and desires. Furthermore, the isolated workers that perform special tasks start to lose the sense of their work. Excessive specialization diminishes the role of the worker to a simple annex to the machinery work, thus becoming inevitably an inert mechanism.

Even though he does not blame capitalism, Durkheim, has not ignored the phenomenon that Karl Marx has described in terms of class struggle or alienation. The great modern societies are very little capable to calm the individual and to offer him protection against isolation. Towards the huge mass of people that represent the modern nation, the individual can only feel solitary, without any links with this anonymous and impersonal crowd. The decline of the moral values of a society represents a source for anomie, a fact translated by means of a high number of suicides. The goals and the means to act become uncertain, and culture stops playing the role of mark and guide to action. This fact is the result of the social changes which generate the birth of new values, creating thus a gap between them and the old ones.

By describing the status of the man on the verge of the XX<sup>th</sup> century as being "*le mal de l'infini*" and also the consequences generated by the **The Annals of Dunărea de Jos University of Galați, Fasc. XX, Sociology, n<sup>o</sup>. 10, 2015, 81-90.**

anomic state, Durkheim “has anticipated some of the fundamental elements of the future existentialism” (Stoica, 1969, p. 20). Only that his interpretation has a strong sociologic character which intends to explain the state of mind of the Western society. In this context, Durkheim militates for a social unity capable to integrate the individuals and to restrain them, to pull them out of their isolation and to give them a purpose in life. But by analyzing the historic process of transitioning to modernism, he sees that, on the contrary, a weaker social communication generates a deficit in socializing both at the level of the population and at individuals also. This is the perfect frame for anomie, for its pathological forms, and in a more special way, the one that generates anomic suicide (Durkheim, [1897] 2005, pp. 145- 170).

The decline of the moral values in a society is the source for anomie, claims Durkheim, because the purposes and the means to act become inert, and the culture no longer plays the role of mark and guide to action since people decide to commit suicide. By defining one of these types of suicide as being “anomic”, Durkheim believe that the aggravation of the social crisis affects the society in its core, and it produces situations in which the individuals or the social groups lack social guidance and are doomed to a mental disorder which proves sometimes to be fatal.

At the suicide level, anomie is defined as the characteristic of the situations in which society ceases to exert its regulatory function over the passions, be their desires to promote or to earn, or their sexual desires. It is a sign that in the modern society, a crisis takes places because of the social disintegration and of weakening the social links. From this perspective, the interpretation offered by Durkheim to the anomic state is radically different than the one given previously by Robert Merton, even though they both start from the same premise: Durkheim’s definition sends towards the idea of individuals’ limited desires, while the one of Merton talks about the insufficient means to reach the determined objectives.

If in a first stage of the study, anomie represents a disorder of the social balance, a positive or negative change inside the community, later, Durkheim states that only those sudden changes which affect the medium health of the society are the source of anomie. In the end, by reducing the sphere of anomie, it appears as a dissemblance between our inner forces (desires, passions, sensibility, etc.) and the exterior forces (the quantity of economic goods, respectability, appreciation, power, influence, privilege, prestige, etc.). (Bădescu, 1994, p. 289).

In normal social conditions, society imposes the same norms and desiderata both to those that are capable to satisfy their needs and passions, and to those in need. In this way, society, as “a superior moral value to that of the individual”, masters the human sensibility by means of moral rules. Only society has the needed authority to state what is right and to establish the boundaries beyond which passions should cease. But when society needs to adapt to some changes, in its moral life will appear some preoccupations, disorder and random states. While some old norms will seem obsolete in the context of the new society, the new ones are usually insufficiently promoted or even contradictory, thus causing confusion. Therefore, anomie refers both to passions, to anarchy in a society, and also to the authority’s inability to limit these passions. On the one hand, people desire more economic goods than what they can obtain, respect, the appreciation of others, power, influence, prestige, etc., and on the other, society lacks “the moral power” to impose the acceptable boundaries for these passions.

Durkheim’s view on anomie was the starting point of many authors who wanted to value the idea that the anomic states appear especially in social crisis times, during which the conflicts between the normative and value systems have affected the functionality of the norms. The consequences are bad especially at the individual level because it disorients the individuals whose actions and behaviors are no longer guided by clear marks.

### **Anomie as a social disorder**

In the context of the changes taking place at society level, Durkheim emphasizes the effects of the anomic states over the individual as a person and his behavior. If the individual does not assimilate the social norms, an essential condition to assure the social consensus, the social order will be disrupted. So, anomie – the individual disorder which results from the lack of ethical, religious and traditional values – may lead to the destruction of the social order. The lack of laws and rules no longer assures the social integration. And if norms no longer offer clear marks for the individuals’ actions and behavior because there are some discrepancies between the old ones and the ones that are to be implemented, the consequences of these situations will appear both at the level of the collective and of the individual.

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Robert Merton (1938) has developed this idea, but in a different frame than Durkheim. Anomie, the individual disorder, becomes a social disorder as the gap between the general admitted rules and what it is practiced in common life is becoming larger and larger. Merton intervenes at this level with his interpretation. There is no longer the case of lack of rules capable to limit the individuals' objectives, but of the inadequacy between the objectives that the society establishes for its members and the means it offers to reach them.

Naturally, any society asks its members, under the form of moral demands, to choose only the goals that are socially acceptable, which they can reach by means of institutional help. Only in the ideal case in which these are respected, we can talk of normality. In fact, compliance represents that ideal behavior which assures the stability and the normative order in a society. In this compliance between the scopes and the means cannot exist in a real way since the cultural values (which have become goals) are common to all individuals of the society, and the action norms (in other words, the legitimate means) are not available to all, but only to those that are privileged due to the power of money.

From a more micro-sociologic perspective than a macro-sociologic one as in the case of Durkheim, Merton claims that in any society one can observe values which are more or less agreed by the people who live in it. "Social success", a value that is generally accepted, is a purpose that the industrial society imposes to its people. But, at the same time, many individuals cannot reach this goal because of their social status in which they were placed since birth. The values that were assumed in variable degrees are the base for the objectives set for the individuals. In order to reach these goals, the individuals have means that are also determined by the social norms. Some of these means are licit and some illicit. In any society, all individuals have a certain autonomy which allows them to adopt different attitudes towards the objectives and the means valued by society. By means of their actions and behavior, the individuals ignore the legitimate means and they take into account only their personal advantage and the ways to avoid being sanctioned.

Therefore, society confronts itself with a major conflict between its goals and means, its ideals and the individuals' possibilities to reach them. When the two elements which guide action are divided by an inadvertency, a tension emerges which may create an anomie state, defined by Merton as the absence of norms. And this normative disorder generates an

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undermining of the process of social integration. It is at the same time the cause for the appearance of the behaviors which go against morality and, implicitly, for the development of the abnormal behavior.

Durkheim's interpretation of anomie is thus reformulated by Merton that presents a model which emphasizes the pressures exerted by the social and cultural structures on the individuals in order to force them to conform or to adopt deviant behaviors. If Durkheim considers anomie as being inherent to the modern societies in which lacks a stable and acceptable normative frame, Merton has adapted the notion to a different purpose, which underlines the disjunction between the cultural norms and the people's social abilities to live according to them.

### **Anomie and the resistance to change**

Durkheim's theory regarding the "pathological evil" that has touched the modern society has influenced the American sociology which explains the social disorder by means of anomie. But the most interesting development of the anomie theory is present in the paper of W.I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki (1958), which talks about the effects of the social transplantation. In their study over the Polish immigrants from America, the authors have shown that transplantation causes a "social disorder" among families, and in consequence a demoralization of the individuals which leads to an existence that lacks any goals and evident significance. The authors prove that the lack of the staff and of the inner social rules make the individual to manifest an errant behavior, limited to a day-by-day life, to a meaningless existence. In this context, as it results from the research mentioned, to the concept of anomie, as it was used by Durkheim, we should associate also a similar concept, that of "social demoralization".

Therefore, Durkheim's theory on anomie opens up the perspective to analyze the social transplantations, the situations in which the individual is confronting with conflictual systems of rules which generate demoralizing situations, characterized by means of lack of stable behavioral marks. In order to explain the slowness to which the individuals adapt to the changes generated by the economic development, the contemporary sociologists often use the notion of resistance to change. In Raymond Boudon's view, this notion is useless as it involves a rudimentary approach, well below Durkheim's analysis, that presupposes on the one hand

reachable social goals, and on the other, a sort of bad intention or of a mechanic resistance due to an unknown force to the individuals.

In reality, this theory more or less implicit about the resistance to change, which we have encountered in numerous pseudo-sociologic reflections over the social change, should be replaced with the anomie theory. Change or the desire to change, or even the more or less confusing perception that a change is wanted, generates in a mandatory way, the same as in the case of transplantation, the building up of some conflictual systems of rules, and in extreme cases – when a new system of rules does not manage to get applied – social disorder and demoralization.

François Chazel (1967) underlines the fact that there is a contradiction between the values of the 50's (they were used to a strong growth, to urbanization, to a rural exodus, to demographic growth, to changing the values – hedonism and consumption replace the austerity and the saving) and those of the 60's. The sociologist ascertained that French people used to think and act like the young ones, but they were continuing to feel old. Their daily behaviors were guided by the believes of the 60's (advantageousness, the desire to be socially promoted, etc.), but their soul preferences were those of the 50's: the villages, small scale trade, etc.

### **The return to morality – the Durkheim's solution for the “infinite evil”**

In history, wrote Durkheim (1902- 1903) in his book *Moral Education*, there was no crisis more severe than the one that is present in the European societies for more than a century. Nevertheless, in his opinion, the Western society is not for ever doomed, even if it is assimilated to a transition era which passes through major changes which might affect its own existence (Valade, 1998, p. 359).

Durkheim is aware of the fact that *the moral health of society* can be reinstated only by strengthening the social unity at the level of the human groups that are small enough so as people maintain real connections with others and so as the group they make up has *a real morality* applicable for everyone of them. These small societies will make up the links that tie the individual to the big society.

We can see thus that Durkheim is the follower of Tocqueville on what concerns the solution he has foreseen: the regeneration of the intermediate groups, the same as what it is stated by the author in *L'Ancien Régime*. But the idea promoted by Durkheim has generated controversies  
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because, by trying to apply it to the industrial and economic structures, he named these intermediate communities, *corporations*. Even though the term gives birth to numerous objectors, it would be a complete nonsense not to appreciate the exclusive social significance that he has given it. Durkheim's desire to reconstruct the corporations, not as they are portrayed in *L'Ancien Régime*, but adapted to the conditions of the society of his times, is explained by the importance he gives to the community's values: every group plays the role of a moral environment capable to control the individual egotistic actions.

Professional groups that possess moral authority had the ability to give birth to a set of rules that were applying to all with the same strength, so as to not allow the conflicts to be solved by using the law of the most powerful one of them. By proposing the rehabilitation of corporations, Durkheim predicts the fact that the integration of the group and the individual's attachment to the group can be sources capable to reduce the anomic state.

### Conclusions

Anomie is a concept which allows the description of both the society and of its individuals. The consequences of anomie are felt at the individual's level by the lack of some authoritative moral criteria which should limit the human sensibility. Lacking the marks according to which to orient his behavior, man withdraws in himself and becomes a loner. This state predisposes the individual to fear and dissatisfaction. He will be looking for support in his outside world, only to find that society is not able to provide it for him.

The essential problem is thus the one of change: all societies are changing, including ours, faster and faster. This change cannot take place instantly, without generating any dissemblance between the individuals and the institutions, between different institutions, between scientific technology and the traditional values.

Therefore, we should apply the Durkheim's theory of anomie onto the analysis of the social changes. Maybe we should be aware that in the transition periods described by the fact that the rules are not yet well defined, the "morality" of the people applying it, is particularly affected and they might show a bad behavior.

If the wishes of each individual tend to become unlimited, and the individual's autonomy risks to affect the good way of society, it means that these aspects involve to ignore the social morality, thus implicitly contributing to increase the anomie phenomenon. The return to morality is the solution foreseen by Durkheim. The rational role of morality is to teach people to become united, to limit their own desires and to avoid the "infinite evil". The elaboration of a moral discipline, capable of subduing the individuals' desires to a social regulation, is the solution named by Durkheim so as to avoid or even to remove this demoralizing evil which is so omnipresent in the modern societies.

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