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The Paradox of Paradise: Durkheim on Dubai

Arpitha Peteru, 2010

In today’s age of expanding urbanization, it seems that no corner of the world is spared from sprouting metropolises - all aspiring to emulate the modern American city. In this aspiration, these cities direct all available resources to creating a solid infrastructure, advancing and developing technologically, building ample job opportunities, fostering as much capital as possible and so forth, all with the singular goal of cultivating a flourishing economy. The capitalist model has well extended from its status as an economic model to become the ideal model for modern society as a whole. This means that today, society is primarily striving to achieve a state of ever-increasing economic growth, as per capitalism. Regardless of its feasibility, such a goal entails a society that is principally centered on personal gain. But with this immense focus on the individual and individual wealth, are we compromising something even bigger than the individual? Using Dubai as a case study, this essay argues that indeed, modernization is diminishing social solidarity and thereby, alienating the citizen from the larger society. Emile Durkheim’s theories are explored and applied to assert that the hyper-individualism that is prevalent in current society has overwhelmed the individual’s sense of identity and belonging. The main question here is: is the trade off worth it? How can one resolve this apparent paradox that the aspects that appear to provide the most happiness for us, i.e., monetary gain, personal success, are the same aspects that seem to beget depressed feelings of loneliness and isolation? In many ways, this inquiry is a direct result of modernity, and is arguably the question of our time.

Although the breadth of Emile Durkheim’s theories in sociology is immense, his assortment of works can be explained in terms of one of his central concepts, social solidarity. Social solidarity refers to the social cohesion and interconnectedness of a given society. This concept essentially constitutes the entire basis of Durkheim’s theories about societies and the ways in which they function. Not only does the concept of social solidarity provide a means for understanding the workings of a particular society, but it also serves as a guideline for distinguishing the mechanisms between different societies. Durkheim identifies two basic forms of social solidarity, mechanical and organic. This distinction is made based upon the given society’s division of labor, which Durkheim greatly emphasizes as a highly determinative factor for the society’s organization and functioning. Applying his theories to current world events, many connections can be drawn while examining the struggle that is evident in many regions of the world due to the transitioning from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity.
The article, *Young and Arab in Land of Mosques and Bars*, clearly illustrates the experiences of people who move from a mechanical society to an organic one. In particular, it focuses on the development of Dubai into a highly advanced, technologically-forward and modern society. The article relates the experiences of several different people living in Dubai, but largely centers on one main character, Rami Galal. As a young, working man in the “glittering, manic Dubai”, Galal faces many of the same issues and challenges that effect a large number of people who have migrated to Dubai. Galal himself is a fairly recent migrant, having moved from his home in Egypt about a year ago for a job offer in construction. The article begins by detailing the “wonderful” qualities of Dubai, particularly in comparison to Egypt. It describes Dubai’s cultural diversity and openness, especially in terms of religion. The atmosphere is such that both orthodoxy and lack of religiosity are equally welcome, and neither is more or less valued. Thus, “religion is not something young men turn to because it fills a void or because they are bowing to a collective demand”, as is in most of the Arab world (Slackman 2008). The young especially appreciate such a society, which then judges a “person based on productivity more than what [s]he looks like.”

More broadly, Galal states, “Here, no one keeps you in check.” It appears that the lack of religious mandates is accompanied by more freedom in general for a person to make his own choices. These instinctively seem to go hand-in-hand with each other; the religious atmosphere of a society is highly correlated with its overall rigidity. Although Dubai is still an “unmistakably Muslim state [...] religion has become more a personal choice and Islam less of a common bond,” which lend to Dubai’s larger “socially freewheeling” nature. These descriptions of the city look to be quite similar to Durkheim’s descriptions of a society based on organic solidarity. In fact, Dubai emerges as a perfect example of all the various aspects of an organic society. To be precise, Durkheim explains organic solidarity to occur with the specialization and division of labor. As individuals take on different roles in society, they are grouped “according to the particular nature of the social activity to which they devote themselves” (Giddens 1972: 143). Thus, solidarity in this type of society results from individuals’ interdependence on each other, which can be likened to the mutual interdependence of organs within an organism’s body.

Because the specialization of the individual gains greater importance, the concerns of the collective whole do not have as much of an impact in organic societies as they would in more traditional, mechanical societies. In fact, the conscious collective, which is Durkheim’s concept of “a determinate system of ideas, attitudes and beliefs which create social likenesses among individuals in society,” is minimized in organic solidarity (Morrison 2006: 328). This conscious collective is the “body of collective beliefs and social practices” that serves as the basis for collective action in mechanical societies, in which there is minimal division of labor. In organic societies, however, the individual
takes the place of the collective, and accordingly, individual beliefs guide one’s behavior and activity. Again, Dubai serves as a prime example to illustrate this aspect. Galal explains that since the traditional religious values, such as family honor, does not dictate his life in Dubai as it did in Egypt, “everything is up to him… what he eats, whether he goes to the mosque or a bar, who his friends are” (Slackman 2008). All these things, once prescribed to him based on the norms “approved” by the society as a whole, are now fully matters of personal choice.

“Dubai dazzles, but it also confuses.” With the significant change in being able to exercise individual freedoms, individuals must learn to deal with the limitlessness that a society like Dubai entails. “It is a land of rules… but it also dares everyone to defy limitations.” The same reasons that attract people to Dubai are the reasons why the people are also confused. Such is the contradictory nature of an increasingly organic society. Dubai is a land of opportunity; it is a fresh, vital, highly advanced city where opportunities are based on merit, salaries are plentiful and increase accordingly, and success is within everyone’s reach. However, with the atmosphere needed to make all these freedoms possible comes the lack of regulation. There are virtually no limits imposed on individual wants, and although there are restrictions put on general behaviors, the enforcement that would follow in more traditional, tighter-knit communities is missing. Hence, Dubai’s conditions are identical to those characterizing Durkheim’s notion of an anomic. Arguable as the epitome of a free market and a capitalist society, Dubai inherently encourages people to express their wants and “pursue them to the utmost” (Garner 2004: 68). A society that has no interest in regulating material wants and gains is bound to cause “disorientation and confusion that [inevitably] arise out of the limitless wants and the inability to satisfy them.” Despite all the positive aspects of Dubai, Galal eventually admits that he is losing control of himself. With the absence of regulation in his daily life, he was “overloaded” (Slackman 2008). As much as he explained that he was enjoying himself and fully living his life like he had never done before, he expresses a dire need to “break from the drinking and the women, and reconnect with his values.”

It becomes evident then that “if Dubai offers opportunity, it also poses risks.” There seems to be an alienation from true values in the structure of an anomic that will lead to people losing control of their desires. It follows then that if an anomic is thought of as an organic society to the very extreme, then individualism, combined with severe underregulation, will run rampant and be self-destructive to the individual. Although regulation may bring the unwanted control that lies outside the individual, it also brings the moderation that is required for Durkheim’s view of a balanced, smoothly functioning society. Not only did individuals like Galal struggle with the temptations of Dubai, but many faced the isolation that accompanied it. Paradoxically, “Dubai has everything money can buy, but it does not have a unifying culture or identity.” The individual is elevated to
such a great extent in an organic society that personal ambition becomes of paramount importance. Because of this, and also because of Dubai’s attempts to foster the greatest diversity and tolerance, notions of unity and common identity completely fade away. Galal’s sentiments are overflowing with evidences of his struggle with depression; he did not feel any sort of self-belonging, culturally, personally or otherwise, in Dubai. Durkheim would further assert that Galal is a prime candidate for anomic suicide, which results when an overwhelmed individual begins to pursue his unchecked wants and desires that are beyond his capacity to obtain (Morrison 2006: 327). Galal becomes more and more emphatic when talking about the loneliness and the lack of trust he feels in Dubai, and yet, he makes a firm decision to stay. Even after returning to Egypt for a short while, and re-experiencing the togetherness of a common culture, he says that he did not feel like he fit in at home anymore; his home was now Dubai.

Why does Galal choose to go back, even though Egypt provided him all the things that he was longing for in Dubai? Why did he return despite all the loneliness and alienation he felt? Are having a common identity and feelings of belonging secondary only to living in an efficient, modern city that is full of opportunities? Are physical and material fulfillments, as with job opportunities and the like, really more important than mental and spiritual needs? The only explanation that seems plausible is that the individual and his needs have become so great that sacrificing the collective is a justified means to achieving the end. This mentality particularly resonates with those who have lived in more mechanical societies, such as many Islamic nations. For these people, whose individual choice and freedoms, i.e., societal norms, acceptable behaviors, the idea of personal success, have thus far been essentially nonexistent, Dubai’s risks are yet to be fully uncovered. The city’s glittering opportunities are still at the forefront of every hungry soul’s vision. Right now, Rami Galal, as well as all others in similar scenarios, is only focused on the aspect that he needs the ability to express free choice, which is completely valid. On the flip side, however, is the eventual realization that he cannot lead a happy life without a sense of the communal. Giddens sums up this idea best in his introduction, “The key to Durkheim’s whole life’s work is... to resolve the apparent paradox that the liberty of the individual is only achieved through his dependence upon society” (Giddens 1972: 45).

Bibliography

