

## **INTERROGATING ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY: REVISITING ACADEMIC IMPORTANCE OF DURKHEIMIAN IDEAS**

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Emile Durkheim and his theories could sustain classical position in sociology for around a century by now. But, the social situation of his life time is changed tremendously which is why the basic epistemology of sociology itself has been shifted from the definitional anthropocentric explanations of society to accommodative of environment. Even though Durkheimian sociology which focused on division of labour and solidarity of bounded society could not explain post-world war situation. Nevertheless, the theories proposed by him were not taken away from the academic discourse. As time went on, the theories now - after the global citizenship and global interdependence - slowly caught up the academic discursive flow. Such a retreat of the theoretical formulations is due to necessary cooperation in environmental protection and sensible usage of environment. In a context where environment has occupied a visible definitional and epistemological position, this paper suggests a re-work in Durkheimian theories in tune with environment as they were formulated from a Human Exceptionalist perspective.

### **INTRODUCTION**

What's common between Durkheim and environmental studies? Remembering the mass industrialization and essential mechanization of the world, the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the period of greedy utilization of ecological resources. The intensity of profit oriented capitalist economy prompted the celebrated father of sociology Emile Durkheim (d. 1917) (Turner, 1992, Corner 1982) to theorise the social reality as a matter of complex division of labour and to criticize the reductionist Malthusian fear of scarcity of food. Notwithstanding the negativity of maximization of production and intensification of environmental exploitation, as any other social scientific branches, Durkheim proposed the unavoidable organic kind of solidarity that arises from the complex division of labor among the people in the contemporary time. Industrialisation which promotes the co-operation and cohesion of the people and their labor force was formulated as the fortune of the humanity to liberate them in the modern industrial world from the clutches of theological formulations of medieval time. The doubtful scientificity of sociology, as a result, and its inherent capacity to analyse the chaotic inconsistency of the society was satisfactorily sorted out due to such a brilliant scholarship and due to the prediction about the co-existence of peace emerged out of solidarity and fearful geometric growth of population.

Considering society which is devoid of natural and ecological elements as super-organismic reality Durkheimian sociology tried to assure the subordination

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of every other to the humanity. The human biased temporal importance of that stand and similar takes of all other social sciences failed to formulate a strong critical opposition. Though many a time questioned the compatibility, the Durkheimian theorization about the society and social interactions continued unshaken even after a series of historical events of First World War (1914-18) and turbulent anti-colonial movements all over the world, and Second World War. None of the social scientific inquiry, which was theorizing the particular situation of turbulent world orders, was found seriously arguing the absolute failure of the theory of division of labor to explain the cause of widening gap and smearing hatred among the human beings. Rather “the subsequent generations of sociologists have embraced the paradigm of Durkheim” (Corning, 1982). Besides, the human exceptionalist conception which was inherent in the intellectual formulations of Durkheim was also not critically approached. Rather, society was still looked as exceptional so that it can exploit the ecology maximum for its greedy satisfaction and competitive lucrative show offs.

However, the realization of presumable and, sometimes, actual negative effects of Industrialisation in USA brought the discussion on inevitability of sensible treatment of ecology and environment to the mainstream political, social and academic spheres (Gross, 1999). Gross says, as the discussion progressed into the third stage in recent years (after 1970s) the theories became *en vogue* (ibid, p: 3). Such a discussion was a severe blow to the sociological definition of society which was confined to the human centered equations. The realization of the inextricable relation of environment with human existence and its defining capacity of the human behavior caused to change the definition from the hitherto tendencies of academic world, ie, human exceptionalist one to giving an equal importance to the environment.

Taking the new ecological paradigm proposed by Catton and Dunlap in 1970s to the inevitability of human existence and ultimately of society, the erstwhile understanding of the society was to be revisited continuously. Durkheimian theorization of solidarity of modern society through multiplicity which grabbed classical face in sociological discussion, in this venture, and which was facing the possible or inevitable criticism after the world wars and social movements all over the world, was also to be interrogated, especially, in the context of celebration of Durkheim even after one century or so in the academic world. This paper would be suggesting the possibility of new theoretical annexure to the old theorization of Durkheim to call a neo-Durkheimianism.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL THEORIZATION: RISE AND FALL**

Continuing the pre-industrial passive approach, the invisibility of environment as a matter of serious discussion was normal in the modern social scientific disciplines till the second decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century. With an exception of Malthusian “positive

or natural check” and Darwinian “natural selection” and Spencerian “survival of the fittest”, almost all theorizations failed in giving proper importance to the environmental inevitability in the social life. Without considering the fact that the existence of the human society is connected with ecological normality and abnormality, environment itself was defined something alien to the human being.

However, the revolutionary industrialism which vigorously appeared in 20<sup>th</sup> century gave a societal fear and skepticism on the future of human existence. Because, by this time, American and other societies who walked earlier to the industrialization started experiencing the risks of blind exploitative treatment of the natural resources, which led them to the dislikes the way capitalism grows without considering the centrality of relation of humans and nature. Such a realization led the people to come out with counter arguments and to the street with protests which ultimately compelled the social scientific discourses to make a mutual inclusive explanation to the society and environment (Gross, 1999). The paradigmatic human exceptional perception was, as a result, to be revisited by the academic world by serious scholarly debates and seminars and ultimately to form a new ecological paradigm.

To brief the history, as a first stage, the ecological concern was initiated in USA before world war and continued after the First World War by the sociologists of Chicago school in 1920s and 30s (Gross, 1999). Even though such discussion could bring a better social response in the society, its importance was confined to few academic circles.

The liberation movements which were strengthened after the First World War was an entry to the ecologically concerned people to observe the augmenting growth of industries and the subsequent environmental vulnerability. The concern of the international community on ecology multiplied after the Second World War which was actually the result of the ego of various capitalist countries to show their economic competency. In other words, international communities were competing each other to circulate the self-cultivated proud of massive natural exploitation without considering their generation to come. However, such environmental degradation and blind development in all countries, irrespective of their socialist or capitalist economic nature, was augmented in the years after 1960. But, since the people were more concerned about their living planet and realized the possible threat to humanity if such a situation continues unchanged, the protests were again got driving position for environmental protection (Gross, 1999, P. 18).

However, the 1960s and 70s were the second stage of environmental discussion in America particularly by the sociologists and thinkers. Exceptionalist capacity of humans in social sciences started facing severe threat and debates on the definitional inclusivity of environment in society was placed rigorously. Consequently, apart from the re-conceptualization of identity of society in intellectual world and apart from the need of serious inclusion in the political

discussions and policy matters, the environment itself has found its sound presence in all academic disciplines, particularly in sociology. Catton and Dunlap (1978, 1994), the great environmental sociologists, framed an ecological analytical framework and proposed a commendable paradigmatic intellectual shift from Human Exceptionalist paradigm to New Environmental Paradigm.

The late 1980s entered to the third phase of environmental consciousness even in academics to call “eco-sociology”. Intellectual engagement including the hitherto comparatively silent Marxian and others started to analyze and explore new theorizations. Allan Schnaiberg’s book *The Environment: From Surplus to Scarcity* (1980) was really a thorough interrogation to the relations of capitalist world and its environmental exploitation. In such a discussion he focuses on the vicious but unconscious relations of exploitative groups of “capital”, “state” and “labor” to develop a “political capitalism” which he found a greater threat to the contemporary society. Apart from that almost all meta-theorizations like structural functionalism and symbolic interactionism toiled to differentiate their stance each other which were not important as Catton rightly says that their diversity is not as important as the fundamental anthropocentrism which underlies all of them.

But, at this particular juncture, the version of classical sociologist seemed unimportant due to the differences in perspectives itself. In other words, the classical sociologists were speaking from the perspective of the exceptionality of humans in the society and the environment was meant primarily for individual enjoyment, which is why the maximization of exploitation is an appreciable move. Lidskog (1996) says, “Catton and Dunlap claimed that the classical sociology is incapable of dealing with environmental problems”, therefore, it is “ecologically blind”(p: 3). But, the society, however, has already moved from that archaic philosophy to the paradigmatic environment centered perspective which ultimately questions the classicality of classical theories of social sciences. But, interestingly, any of the academic world put the Durkheimian classical theories in the list of obsolete or non-responsive to the present society, rather they tried to find new interpretations to his inherently brilliant expositions.

However, due to the contemporary multi-complex division of labor in the global economic system where no nation is independent each other, Durkheimian ideas again became slowly dominant position in the sociological discussion, especially, after the animosity persisted among the societies of the world till the end of cold war. Apart from the labour/economic dependency of international community on each other, by now, the environmental dependency is also become a big concern. The existence itself is indebted to each other for the environmental degradation cannot be confined to the imagined national boundaries. However, the failure of Durkheimian theories to address the second aspect of environmental issues actually wanted a new Durkheimian re-work which is so important from the perspective of its classical position.

### **DIVISION OF LABOR AND HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM**

Even though the sociological theories are more explanatory and less predictive in nature, the generalizations made by French sociologist Emile Durkheim has been important in the academic discussion for various reasons. Primarily, it was a criticism to the Malthusian threat for check of the human population for scarcity of food resources. Durkheimian explanations were one of the wonderful articulation which falsified the notion about the numbering of human beings as mere single-mouth holding creatures. To Durkheim, human being in the modern time, apart from being double handed hard working creatures, they are intelligent creatures who divide their social activities which cause more efficiency and productivity which are functional in terms of their inter-dependency and ultimately of solidarity.

But, explaining the solidarity thesis, and division of labor thesis, Durkheim used human being as the hard working de-humanized machines of industrial world. In other terms, he encouraged the modern inter-dependent human community to produce more and more, because, to him, existence of “society” (which excludes environment) is primary and important. Society to him is the super-organism whose abnormality or unhealthiness would cause harm to the individual elements in it. Therefore, the human beings and their structural elements should have exceptional existential priority which may be devoid to anything else. “Durkheim (1983) concludes that an animal is almost completely dependent on the physical environment, while for human beings, particularly in developed societies, social factors become more important than biological or physical factors” (cf. Jarvikoski, 1996). Environment and its degradation or exploitation were either not considered important in the discussion of society or failed to acknowledge it or they were silent to it. This irresponsible silence may be the failure of sociologists to foresee the societal situation or is to be considered as theoretical bias towards the productive (not inhuman at that particular context) capitalism.

### **SOCIETY BEYOND ECONOMIC MATHEMATICS**

Critiquing Durkheim blatantly for human exceptionalism or negligence of ecology in his theoretical formulations for the inherent nature of destabilization cropped up society is not commonsensical. Because, it is the society that changes whereas his social scientific formulations were more appealing and transcendent as they were “direct, concise, and comprehensible” (Turner, 1992). Nevertheless, since society is beyond economic mathematics failure of Durkheimian theory in responding positively or in suggesting solutions to the societal issues in the long run of one century in nothing but a must exercise at least from the academic point of view. Because, the question of compatibility of certain sociological theories of particular sociologist and its being unresponsive to the social situations, especially, after his death is necessarily possible. It is interesting to note that his theory of solidarity was undergone severe bashing after the world war and his modernist

fortune and institutional functionality were lost its ground after the starvation. However, in a unique present context after liberalization such a criticism loses its validity again because of international interdependence among nations in protecting environment and compromising industrial production.

According to Emile Durkheim, social cohesion and solidarity is intrinsic in the humanity, even though its *modus operandi* would be changing. Therefore, he categorizes the primitive interdependence which is emerged out of least division of labor as “mechanical solidarity” and modern complex interdependence which is emerged out of maximum division of labor as “organic solidarity”.

Considering the dominant materialistic relation between human beings, societies and nations, the interaction pattern was primarily defined on the basis of massive production behavior. The mutual inter-dependence, though very large, was confined to the boundaries of newly strengthened sense of nationality. Particular world situation of development of the concept of nation as cultural identity and less diplomatic importance to migration to form a global identity to the citizens compelled the reading of solidarity which is emerging out of division of labour as a boundary based national societal concept. However, all the nations of the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century tried to show the selfishness in using environmental raw materials and amass maximum wealth so that the supremacy of the world can be articulated. Ultimately, however, the solidarity of humans in the modern time has become a cliché in the world.

Even though same situation was prevalent there even after First World War, the academic world, especially sociologists of various nations, was not ready to give up Durkheimian ideas articulating its inherent universality and scientificity. After the Second World War, which again was the result of breach of solidarity based on interdependence, much bigger issue of starvation was there all over the world. Eventhough Talcott Parsons systemic approaches and many other theorizations were developed in 1960s and 1970s the Durkheimian criticism to Malthusian theory of population check was not properly counter criticized, and rather it again remained as a symbol of French supremacy in the classical explanation of society. The failure of the theory to respond to the social activists who rigorously engaged by this time in various life-touching movements like the environmental ones was still a serious issue in the epistemology of social science. Fortunately, the need for a sociological discussion on the centrality of environment got the lead with the new ecological paradigm proposed by the environmental sociologists Catton, which, ultimately, was a life-giving experience to the epistemology of sociology. In this particular time, Durkheim was not widely discussed and many theoretical formulations of risk society and new world system theories emerged. But, the intellectual world was reluctant to totally push Durkheimian ideas out of the door of social science.

### **NEW WORLD ORDER AND RE-APPEARANCE OF DURKHEIMIAN SOCIOLOGY**

Reading Durkheim from the contemporary world order would definitely give more impetus for the important re-appearance of inherent classicality of his theories. The world after the development of global economic cooperation and liberal capitalist economic flow formed an internationally interdependent global community which presumably necessitates the rebirth of Durkheimian solidarity rather than the boundary delimited societal interdependence. Besides, the outsourcing of the jobs to the international community, even though for various economic or human and otherwise resources, upgraded the complex division of labour to an extra-complex one. The international community, now, therefore, realized two important aspects of life, viz, the global cooperation for environmental sustainability and flow of money from developed countries to underdeveloped ones, which obviously make the situation of interdependence and, therefore, solidarity of the humanity more vigorous.

At this point, an analysis of Durkheimian theoretical formulations would explain at least three teleological characteristics; suggestive, progressive and predictive. His theory of division of labour was a suggestive formulation for what kind of world we need in the modern world and what sort of relations between human beings are to be motivated by various social institutions. Durkheim (1895) says, "the division of labour....is necessary in order that man may maintain himself in the new conditions of existence as he advances in history". Its progressive phase from individuality to societality was reflected from his analysis of suicide which indirectly suggests a social responsibility of individual activity. Still more, his bold theoretical articulation of society as super organism would reflect on moving from the societal demeanor of following conventional divine religion, which develops from primitive to modern, to depicting society itself as 'religion'. In the contemporary world, even if it is western society or eastern society, that sort of super-organismic elements/human-religions/social values defines human interactions in terms of, say for example, exploitation of environmental elements or economic morality or else. That is the reason why even the environmental sociologists like Catton and Dunlap (1979) criticized the classical sociological formulation that the reality is largely socially constructed (cf. Jarvikoski, 1996, P: 73).

Therefore, the importance, compatibility and scientificity of Durkheimian classical sociological theories are forced to take a U-turn to the academic analysis of contemporary social realities, though with additional interpretations and with some conceptual re-locations. In other terms, a new Durkheim is to be born to engage with corrent extra-complex division of labor which brings out the virtual and actual solidarity where both ends of two nations, societies, groups or individuals are equally important, which ultimately more fragile and comparatively delicate.

Such fragility or delicacy can be observed in the case of environmental cooperation vis a vis the economic and industrial interests of international communities.

### **CONCLUSION: PROPOSAL OF NEW DURKHEIMIANISM IN ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS**

The interesting observation of sociologist, today, could be that the theories of Durkheim are re-buffing to the sociological discussion with more vigor and analytical capacity of the contemporary world of more liberalized interactions among global nation societies. Even after the capitalist tradition of environmental exploitation based on which the economic status and international competency had been being recognized, and which led to both world wars and many social movements that led to the change in the definitional understanding of society itself by including environment as part of society, the interdependence and necessity induced multi-complex division of labor and solidarity of more wider global society have earned ample academic discursive space. In such a context, the concept of solidarity and division of labor has to be re-read with much wider functional operational space. In other words, the solidarity among a society which has been confined by boundaries of nation or any other homogenous delimitation should be transferred to solidarity among the society which transcends the national territorial boundaries and differently heterogeneous global societies.

However, in the contemporary time, the world economic order is acknowledged as proportionate to the environmental situations which is why the systematic treatment and approach towards environment would result the human existence itself. The interdependence among the global community is escalated phenomenally due to the global concern over environmental degradation, melting glacier and climate change etc. Since Durkheimian theories were proposing intellectual solution to the Malthusian anti-human conceptions like geometric growth of human mouth before one century, the same theoretical ideas seem to be capable for better explanation of the society social chaos today. Because, global social interdependence is understood as catalyst not only for economic purposes but also for utilizing the environmental resources. Society has to take the re-distributive mechanism of the resources of developed group to the under-developed regions seriously, which again would require another sphere of international social inter-dependence that is beyond the division of labour, but division of food and services. Therefore, however, a member in the contemporary society cannot confine himself to the boundary based national identity or citizenship, rather he has to act with global identity and citizenship. This tendency can be better explained by the Durkheimian ideas of interdependence and solidarity.

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