The Division of Labor and Social Disorder: 
A Cross-National Test of a Durkheimian Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

Durkheim's interpretation of the impact of division of labor on social order was tested in a manner which took account of his emphasis on the interactive effect of division of labor and population growth. Data for 65 nations, circa 1965, showed that rates of social disorder, measured by Hibbs' internal war index, (1) were highest in countries with low levels of division of labor and high rates of population growth, (2) declined in nations high on population growth but also high on division of labor, (3) dropped even further in countries with complex divisions of labor and slow population growth, but (4) were lowest of all for societies in which both population growth and division of labor were rated as low. These data were seen as supporting our interpretation of Durkheim's views.

LARGELY IGNORED in a massive research literature concerning the determinants of social disorganisation has been a concept that occupies a central place in social theory and has often been linked theoretically to the problem of disorder: the division of labor. One reason the division of labor has not received greater attention in this body of literature is the uncertainty that prevails about its linkage with social order and disorder—an uncertainty that reflects the overriding ambiguity found in many theoretical treatments of the subject. In the present study, we reformulate one of the most influential interpretations of the social impact of division of labor and then pose a cross-national test of this reformulation.
The Linkage Between Division of Labor and Social Disorder

Ambiguity concerning the personal and social effects of division of labor began early. Adam Smith (1937) virtually apotheosized division of labor for its contribution to increased productivity, but later attacked it as destructive of vital human values (1937:734-735). Auguste Comte (1975:272-274) cited division of employment as a source of order in his positivistic society, but then—on the very next page—withdrew his approbation and listed several ways in which specialization might lead to disorder. Marx and Spencer were free of such indecisiveness, the former condemning division of labor (1947) and calling for its abolition and the latter seeing it as one form of an increasing differentiation likely to bring about greater societal integration and adaptation. (1896:579-588).

Durkheim (1933) is the one most responsible for transmitting an ambiguous view of the effects of division of labor into the mainstream of contemporary sociology. He first asserted that societies based on likeness (mechanical solidarity) were giving way to those whose solidarity inhered in complex interdependence. In an effort to distinguish himself from the utilitarians and in his discussion of ‘anomic division of labor,’ Durkheim apparently reversed himself and reinstated mechanical solidarity as a major source of order even in complex societies (pp. 233-255, 366-368, 387, 406). Talcott Parsons (1937:319-324) noted these confusions and argued that Durkheim, in his later work, emphasized the importance of common cultural elements rather than interdependence in dealing with problems of social order. Justifiably or not, Parsons’ influential work seems to have established in the minds of later sociologists the idea that division of labor was viewed by Durkheim as a part of the problem of order rather than a solution to it (see also Lukes, 1975:147-167; Pope and Johnson, 1983).

In any case, subsequent attempts at an empirical assessment of the relationship between division of labor and indicators of disorder such as crime and suicide have begun with the ‘Durkheimian’ proposition that occupational specialization is purely malintegrative in nature. For example, Webb (1972) anticipated a direct relationship between the extent of division of labor and deviance in communities of 25,000 or more in the United States, but uncovered only modest correlations with rates of crime against property and persons. However, irrespective of the strength of these findings, Webb’s use of communities within a single highly industrialized nation as testing sites for propositions based on Durkheim’s work is at best questionable. While it is difficult to determine precisely what units of analysis Durkheim may have had in mind, his remarks most often seem to have been directed towards the evolution of entire societies, tribes, peoples, empires and nation-states (pp. 76-77, 91-93, 144-146). Accordingly, it is more appropriate to test Durkheimian propositions with data from larger social units than Webb employed, such as nations. The same criticism can be made of Willis’ (1979) recent attempt to test a Durkheimian model of crime rates within counties in the United States.