What Aspect Of Modernity Worried Durkheim The Most

The term “Modernity” is historically associated with rapid changes in politics, science, economy and ideology. It describes a period of time in 17th & 18th century Europe (later in other developed countries) which promoted movement away from the Church as an authority figure, and be replaced by challenge and empiricism – the need for first hand, test-able or observable knowledge. In other words, Modernity resulted in leaving behind acceptance of what was previously established as fact (without the need for evidence), by bringing about new means of organizing beliefs and information within a newly-formed secular society (Fevre & Bancroft 2010:28).

Emile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) is often considered to be one of the founding figures of modern social thought, due to his fundamental theories of Social Solidarity, Functionalism and Anomie. Durkheim’s first major theory we are going to discuss, Social Solidarity, described how different societies can fall into one of two different categories – one of Mechanical Solidarity, or one of Organic Solidarity (Durkheim 1893:70-132). Societies held together by Mechanical Solidarity are usually thought of as more traditional, rural communities with small, isolated populations. These types of societies typically offer little specialization in its forms of employment, with most roles in society being dependent on family name and not the individual’s skills (kinship). Furthermore, the presence of religion of typically dominant, as well as strict social views that make up the moral rules. Social bonds are formed between individuals based on custom and obligation and are reinforced by the sense of belonging and identity within the community. Conversely, societies based on Organic Solidarity are thought of as large populations with lots of specialization within employment through a Division of Labour, little influences by religion, and a law system that recognizes the rights of an individual. In addition, social bonds are formed through a dependency and trust in others to provide services the individual can no longer obtain on their own accord in an advanced society. This is an example of Durkheim’s second major theory – Functionalism – which emphasizes that each part of society cannot function without the other parts also functioning simultaneously (we will explore Durkheim’s third theory of Anomie when we come to crime later in the essay). Modernity has consequently allowed most of Western Europe and parts of America to move from societies formed on Mechanical Solidarity to ones of Organic Solidarity, which in turn has inevitable consequences on religion and crime, both of which greatly concerned Durkheim.

Modernity can be seen as a direct cause for the decline in power and influence of religion with respect to politics, economics, education and science. During the Enlightenment Period, society moved away from sources of irrational, assumptive belief of what was fact, and moved towards empirical, positivistic knowledge and as such, the authority of religion declined with it (this is called the secularization thesis). Emile Durkheim was not religious himself, however he did acknowledge the need for rituals (religious or non-religious) to reinforce common beliefs and values within a society (the “Conscience Collective”, as he called it), particularly in societies held together by Organic Solidarity. Durkheim argued that these modern societies had fewer restraints on the individual, due to its nature of allowing differentiation amongst the population that make up the society. The rise of individualism was believed to have the potential to disrupt the Conscience Collective by allowing the individual to formulate ideas and beliefs that did not agree with the rest of society. This in turn could fracture social bonds within the society as

individuals distance themselves further and further from the moral rules that govern them. Durkheim suggested the way modern society overcomes this issue is by reinforcement of the Conscience Collective through rituals – a gathering of people with similar backgrounds or interests to produce a collective effervescence that reinforces the group identity and brings about solidarity with it. (Giddens & Sutton 2017:713-715) Although rituals can be religious or non-religious, prior to Modernity religious rituals were large-scale, very common and easily accessed means of engagement with rituals. As such, Durkheim was concerned with modern societies' movement away from religion as it could lead to too much individualism without the means of reinforcing the Conscience Collective.

One other key concern of Durkheim's was that of crime. According to Social Construct theory, laws and morals are not naturally occurring and hence predeterminate, but instead are shaped in the interest of the collective moral beliefs of the society, resulting in laws varying from one society to another. Following Modernity's influence in the evolution from traditional, feudal societies to wide-spread advanced societies, with it came a shift in the shared moral beliefs of the society - and as a result, a shift in the laws and provisions that reinforce those beliefs. In pre-Modernity societies held together by Mechanical Solidarity, laws typically involve repressive sanctions through a "penal law" system. These sanctions often punish violently and swiftly when the social norms are not withheld in order to set examples of offenders. On the other hand, post-Modernity societies operating through Organic Solidarity are generally governed by "contract law" – a set of restitutive sanctions as part of a criminal justice system. These of sanctions aim to restore life to its previous state prior to the crime taking place as a means of maintaining social cohesion. Durkheim believed that a small fraction of crime is not only inevitable, but it is also functional. He argued that no society has ever been exempt from criminal activity, therefore crime becomes a social fact of any society and hence an integral part of all societies, regardless of whether they are "healthy" or "morbid" societies. Acts of criminal intent go against the collective sentiments of the society, and because the resultant of committing criminal acts is punishment, the punishment serves to re-establish the values and sentiments the crime goes against. In a society without crime, Durkheim believed these values and sentiments would become obscured without offense and affirmation of them (Morrison 1995:157-159). Hence, crime has a role within society which is considered "healthy" and "functional". Crime also links to Durkheim's third major theory – that of "anomie". Anomie occurs when there is an absence of regulation with respect to social rules, which results in individuals not conforming or understanding those rules. Durkheim acknowledged that modern societies allow for a high degree of individualism and specialization, and therefore a central organ (such as government) is required to maintain social order by enforcing necessary laws to avoid a state of anomie (Deflem 2015). The possibility of anomie greatly increases in rapidly changing, modern societies, like the ones formed from Modernity, where there is a conflict between previously held shared values, and the newly formed ones. The state of anomie will therefore encourage social disorder, observable in increased crime and suicide rates. Hence, Modernity had direct implications for crime rates.

In conclusion, we have discussed Durkheim's theories of Organic and Mechanical Solidarity, whilst comparing and contrasting the key features and implications of both. We have seen how Modernity resulted in movement from Mechanical Solidarity to Organic Solidarity in Western Europe, and how this directly correlates to the decline in authority of religion within those societies due to new means of rational, empirical thinking. This concerned Durkheim because with the deterioration of the Church came the loss of religious belief amongst individuals. This in turn would result in a loss of a key ritual necessary for maintaining social solidarity.

Furthermore, we have considered how laws and sanctions vary between traditional societies and modern societies, and how crime is integrated into Durkheim's Functionalism theory. Durkheim suggests a small percentage of crime has a function within every society, as its punishment can be used to reinforce collective values. However, when thinking of crime in the context of Durkheim's Anomie theory, we find that the rapid changes within society promoted by Modernity allow for a clash between pre-existing and newly-formed collective values within a society. This, Durkheim feared, would lead to disruption to the social cohesion, whilst paving the way for increased criminal activity that would convert a healthy society to a pathological one.