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# A Letter to Émile Durkheim

Michaela Petz

Western University, mpetz@uwo.ca

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# A Letter to Émile Durkheim;

A social theorist's response to the struggles of a modern day entrepreneur

Michaela Petz

King's University College

## **Abstract**

Émile Durkheim, a classical social theorist, is considered to be one of the founders of modern social science, and a father of sociology. Despite his historically controversial views of society, he is now recognised as a scientist of the social order. This paper examines a number of Durkheim's theories and applies them to the struggles of a modern day entrepreneur. This paper is non-traditional essay formatted into two separate letters. The first letter is written through the eyes of a struggling young entrepreneur. She is writing to Émile Durkheim to seek advice on her business endeavours. More specifically, she feels restless and anxious about her future and is under constant pressure to succeed. The second letter is written as Émile Durkheim offering his advice and expertise to this struggling entrepreneur. As a sociologist, he provides a unique diagnosis that is non-psychological or therapeutic, but rather structural in nature. Émile assures her that what she is experiencing is a structural problem of modern society. Finally he outlines the social changes that must occur in order to greatly reduce the struggles experienced by entrepreneurs.

June 12 2017

Dear Emile Durkheim,

I'm sorry to bother you with my struggles, but I really need your perspective on my current situation and I understand that you are the person to talk to. I am a graduate of The French Culinary Institute and have recently opened up my own pastry shop in the heart of downtown Toronto. It has been an uphill battle trying to get my finances in check and make my dream become a reality.

Upon graduating from pastry school I felt compelled to open my business because I was informed that it would provide me with the greatest job satisfaction. Several of my peers were interested in being entrepreneurs because of the flexibility it offers, as a result they convinced me it would be the best option to pursue.

As a young entrepreneur I feel that I am under constant pressure to succeed. I have been optimistic about my business since it opened, however I am constantly restless and anxious about my future. I spend my time overthinking about ways I can improve, and further develop my business. I have so much potential to achieve my aspirations, but at the same time I am left with so many possibilities and it is impossible to know which direction will guide me down the path

towards success and economic prosperity. I feel alone in my decisions and I can only hope that I am making the right choices.

Although today's society is encouraging of individual freedom and success, I often feel that I am in need of moral support and reassurance when it comes to my business ideas. I can talk with my friends or employees but ultimately it is on me to make the final call. I find this to be very nerve-racking because if I fail there is no one to blame but myself.

Overall I feel great anxiety and restlessness when it comes to my business and its success. I also feel that the pressure lies solely on me, and as a result I am overwhelmed with all the options and possibilities.

I would greatly appreciate the input of your expertise and advice on my current struggles.

Sincerely,

Struggling Entrepreneur

June 12, 2017

Dear Struggling Entrepreneur,

I am sorry to hear about your predicament, but you have come to the right person. Firstly it is imperative to note that what you are experiencing is a direct result of numerous social problems. You may wonder what qualifications permit me to accurately diagnose your situation, and how something that appears to be so personal in nature is actually a result of a wide-scale phenomenon. Well, in short, the assessment of the social order and its relation to the individual requires a copious amount of time and effort to fully comprehend, but I will provide you with the best explanation possible. As for my qualifications, I will briefly touch on a few of my major contributions to society.

As a sociologist, I am highly skilled in viewing problems from a sociological perspective. I have

devoted my life's work to establishing sociology as a distinct science. I have analyzed the writings of several of my predecessors including Karl Marx, The Utopian French Socialists, Auguste Comte, and Herbert Spencer. I took it upon myself to study the notions and guiding principles of each of their contributions and critique or support them according to my research findings. At length, I have studied the transition from pre-modern society to modern society and noted distinctive characteristics of each. I later developed my own theories on how society has progressed and what guiding factors influenced its change. I introduced concepts such as mechanical and organic solidarity, the cult of the individual, division of labour, social facts and the collective consciousness. Each of these provides greater insight into how society is impacted by the ever-growing world of capitalism. Famously I am known for my theory of suicide which assessed the increasing rates of suicide in France at a time of economic prosperity. My work has been vastly criticized, but conversely it has been applauded and respected.

My sincerest apologies, I seem to be getting carried away...let me transition my thoughts back to you. As a sociologist and major critic of capitalism, modern society and the social order, I am confident in my ability to assess your situation, and offer you a better understanding on how the social and moral organization of capitalism greatly impacts young entrepreneurs, like yourself, as well as different groups of individuals in similar societies.

In order to demonstrate that what you are experiencing as a young entrepreneur is that of a social problem, I must first distinguish sociology as a unique science. You may believe that your frustrations are relative to your psychological nature. I am here to inform you that this is not the case. As mentioned earlier your problem is of a social nature. Unlike psychology which strictly focuses on the internal phenomenon of an individual, sociology looks at the external phenomenon. It narrows in on the collective mind and how it affects groups of individuals and

the societal structure. Your situation may also be viewed from a philosophical standpoint due to its substantive parallels with sociology; however philosophy is not based on external facts. Sociology is based on empirical evidence and is capable of providing answers or solutions to oppressive issues, whereas philosophy merely bases itself on conceptual analysis. In other words its conclusions about pressing situations rely on assumptions and speculation instead of observation and experimentation. Finally, we cannot make sense of your situation through the notion of common sense. Our everyday notions about politics, morality, economics, education and the entire societal make-up “are as a veil interposed between the things and ourselves” (Royce 62). If we view the world from this perspective, we confuse our impressions, and gut feelings as realities. This, in turn hinders our ability to truthfully assess individual problems as well as world-wide phenomenon. Take, for example, yourself as an entrepreneur; common sense would say that you are overworking, overthinking, and may have been persuaded by your peers to start up your own business. In contrast, sociology would say that it is the structure of today’s society that has had an impact on your business and the way you view your successes. Overall, sociology is a distinct science through its object, social facts (I will explain in more detail shortly) and its method, empirical observations of the social world.

In order to justify that this is a social problem, I must introduce you to my notion of social facts. To put it more simply, allow me to define each of these terms separately. “Social” can be defined as collectively organized ways of feeling, thinking and living. It is the result of human interactions over time. More specifically it is the development of languages, moral standards and worldly perspectives. Most importantly, it is something that is external to the individual and originates from groups. “Fact” on the other hand can be studied and it possesses a nature of its

own. A fact can be either material or immaterial and, like “social”, it exists outside of the individual.

As mentioned earlier, the social construct of capitalism has a major impact on your perspective of your business, and the business itself. Allow me then, to further demonstrate how the concept of social facts relates to your problems by analyzing capitalism as a social fact. This analysis in return will provide you with more clarity on my argument about capitalism and its relation your business struggles.

In order for something to be a recognized as a social fact three criteria must be present, 1) externality, 2) constraint, and 3) generality. Capitalism possesses all of these qualities. Generally speaking, the term externality means to exist outside of something. It is described as something that exists prior to or outside of an individual. In order for something to be a social fact it has to be part of our heritage or be inherited after we are born. The most obvious example of this is language, something we learn and develop over time that existed prior to our birth. Capitalism also fits the requirement of externality. As humans we are socialized into the notion of capitalism. We are told from youth that is the norm to get an education and work for a living. In today’s society there is much emphasis on the success of the individual, in relation to capitalism this means the rise of private institutions and entrepreneurship. We are accustomed to the concept of working to make a profit to expand our business to make more money. The structural system of capitalism is essentially an ongoing circle of work, profit making, expansion, and earning money. This emphasis on having the “ideal” capitalist society is a primary cause of your frustrations. If you weren’t raised with the guiding principles of capitalism, you wouldn’t feel the need to expand your business and further your successes. Thus you wouldn’t be overthinking about ways to improve your pastry shop, and you wouldn’t feel any anxiety or restlessness. The

fact that you were born into capitalist ideologies allowed you to become habituated with its ways. Because you believe that profit making and expansion is a typical, maybe even applauded characteristic of work, you will continue to focus on these aspects and in return you will feel the stresses of meeting the societal standards.

Let us move forward to the second requirement, constraint. To put it simply, constraint means that in order for something to be a social fact it has to put forth a compelling force or coercive power over individuals. These forces inflict themselves on the individual externally “like moulds into which we are forced to cast our actions” (Royce 58). In some cases, these forces are obvious such as laws, however more often than not we are unable to recognize them. Humans, generally speaking, conform to the social norm in order to fit in with the population. Often times, we don’t even realize we are compelled to do so until we receive some sort of “punishment” for acting differently. For example, if we break a law we receive a fine or jail time, if someone comes out as gay in a religious community they may be shunned, etc. Capitalism undeniably meets the requirement of constraint. As mentioned earlier, capitalism is an institutionalized system deeply embedded in society. As humans we want to fit in with society and as a result we often conform to the overall population. Generally, people focus on the achievements of the individual, and associate a person’s job and earnings with their social status. This exerts a coercive power over individuals to succeed and be viewed as prosperous. Capitalism greatly supports those who put forth their greatest effort to achieve the greatest outcome for themselves. This notion to provide for oneself and gain a higher ranking in society is greatly evident in entrepreneurship. Your peers were persuaded into opening their own businesses because it is a societal norm. It is highly respected, and as you mentioned it offers flexibility in terms of ever-growing wealth and advancement. If capitalism was not evident in in today’s society, you may

have chosen a different career path all together, and you most likely would not have become an entrepreneur. Another factor of constraint is that if you vie away from the norm, you will face a punishment. Imagine that instead of going through pastry school and opening your own shop you worked with your parents in their family owned business right out of high school. People might view you as abnormal for not wanting to pursue your own aspirations and enhance your own wealth. Let's take this a step further and say that you wanted to be a "free-spirit" and travel around the world relying only on the bare necessities of life. People would perceive your lifestyle as vastly abnormal and may observe your actions as crazy, impulsive and immature. This, as a result, would tie you to negative labels that may not be true at all. Although this type of punishment is of a less severe nature, it still serves the same purpose as any effective law, and that is to get people to conform.

Finally, let's take a look at generality. Generality can merely be defined as something that is widespread. It has to be deeply rooted in our heritage and vastly influence a number of people. Often times it is present in the media and reinforced by our culture. Because social facts are widespread they tend to be observed as natural or obvious. Capitalism is definitely viewed as a prevalent phenomenon because it exists in several countries around the world. Even though some countries do not possess the "ideal" capitalist society it is perceived to be a notion that they strive for. Capitalism is vastly evident in media through a political standpoint, as well as in the entertainment industry. Several movies advocate for the hardworking autonomous individual. We rarely support the person who is comfortable living a modest life and possesses no ambition to enhance their social standing.

To summarize, capitalism is a social fact because it external to the individual, it exerts a compelling force, and its ideologies are widespread.

It is important to note that capitalism is a fairly recent phenomenon. Society did not always strive to meet their individual successes, nor did they have a biting need to become highly specialized and work for profit. In the pre-modern era something existed that I refer to as “mechanical solidarity”. During this time society was characterized by similarity. The only main divisions that existed were between lords and serfs or based on gender and age. At this time, a person’s life was pre-determined. They worked at home with their families to support one another, they were raised into a specific religion, form of work, and belief system, and their spouse was already chosen for them. This era was greatly defined by cohesive communities and homogeneity. Everyone had similar lifestyles and ideologies.

Today’s society is no longer characterized by mechanical solidarity. In the modern world, something called organic solidarity is prominent. The shift from mechanical to organic solidarity arose from the division of labour. When this principle was first implemented, manual labour became incredibly deskilled. Work differed from the pre-modern era in the sense that everything became highly specialized and as a result, several new occupations were established. Individuals varied from one another at the level of knowledge and skill they possessed. This shift in society allowed for the rise of individualism, but conversely bound people together in a network of interdependences. This structure of organic solidarity remains prevalent in today’s society. It links people “to one another who would otherwise be independent; instead of developing separately, they concert their efforts” (Royce 76). In other words, it drives individuals to work together for a common objective.

Now that I have offered you further insight on the development of capitalism, and the guiding functions of today’s society, allow me to address what I believe to be the root cause of your problems.

The first concept associated with your predicament is something I refer to as “the cult of the individual”. In our prior discussion about the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity I mentioned that today’s society highly respects the individual. It is vastly evident in laws such as the declaration of rights of man and citizen, and Canada’s charter of rights and freedoms. This notion is also present in the entertainment industry with the introduction of self-help books.

There is a sacredness that surrounds the concept of the individual. Essentially, the only thing we share as humans is our belief in the rights and responsibilities of the individual. Although innovative, this ideal unknowingly leads to detrimental effects on individuals in society.

Let’s examine the parallels between your situation and the cult of the individual. As an entrepreneur you are greatly respected in the eyes of society. This perspective comes as both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, people will look up to your independence and successes, but on the other hand people will expect you to be independent and have success. This perspective is the main reason you feel alone in your decisions. Of course your family and friends will be there to support your business strategies, but they will not be there for you to depend on. Unlike the pre-modern era, where mechanical solidarity was prevalent, you now solely have yourself to rely on. In this day and age you cannot depend on your family for financial support or business ideas without being viewed as childish, immature or weak. This issue strictly stems from the structural make-up of society; it certainly is not the result of any internal phenomenon.

Another factor that influences your situation is that modern society views the individual in 2 ways, the first being through the concept of moral individualism. This notion is highly supportive of freedom, reason, autonomy and human rights. Its actions are based on the triumphs of moral objectives. Essentially it “fixes before us an ideal” (Royce 181). The second way people view

individuals is through the notion of egoistic individualism. This concept is greatly focused on self-interest and the pursuit of happiness through consumption. Its sole focus is on the personal achievements and advancements of the individual. To put it narrowly, this type of individualism “flatters our instincts” (Royce 181). These two concepts vastly impact the way we function in society. As a result there is an enormous emphasis placed on individual reasoning and we tend to shy away from a collective spirit. Again, these perspectives are the leading factors that hinder your stability when it comes to your pastry shop. As you mentioned, society is very encouraging of individual triumphs, however this in turn, means that people lack the desire to help individuals when it comes to their business struggles. Each of us is responsible for our own individual role in the system. If that role is acted upon we have no further duties to society. This means that your family and friends have no obligations to offer you support with your business practices. It is the expectations of individuals in modern society that is causing your distress and making you feel alone in your decisions.

Another issue that is present in modern society is imbalance of integration and regulation. Essentially, integration refers to the degree to which an individual is associated with a group, while regulation depends on the amount of social control an individual is experiencing. In order for society to exist harmoniously, there must be healthy balance of both social integration and social regulation. As an entrepreneur, you are experiencing a great absence of each of these components. The lack of integration is allowing you to feel a sense of egoism or in other words, “exaggerated individuation” (Royce 82). You are vastly disengaged from social activities due to the amount of time and effort you put into your pastry shop. As a result, you feel that you are lacking social ties and a network of family, friends and peers. Due to your profession as an entrepreneur, you allow your personal interests to get in the way of social obligations. These

factors lead you to feel isolated and left to fend for yourself. Again I can't stress enough that this lack of integration is not a result of your actions as an individual, it is part of widespread phenomenon in which several members of society suffer from. The second imbalance that exists as a result of the ever-changing society is a major deficiency in regulation. As mentioned, earlier you were persuaded into becoming an entrepreneur because of society's support for individualism and the flexibility that the job offered. This flexibility allows for you to be fully in charge and expand your business as you please. These privileges often times will trigger a sense of anomie. In other words, you have an endless amount of goals and ambitions and no one to give you any restrictions or moral guidelines. This freedom in your business endeavors is what is causing you to feel restless and anxious about the future. You are overthinking all of your decisions and ideas because you have no restraints or limitations. If we are placed in this situation, we have constant need for more that can never be satisfied. As a consequence, individuals will never be "content with their lot" and will constantly strive for bigger and better things (Royce 83). This notion of anomie ties into integration in regards to the weak influence that society has over you.

Finally, we can now discuss some solutions that will help to make your life and business practices a bit more pleasant. As a society we need critical reform when it comes to the organization of capitalism. Everyone suffers under capitalism due to this problematic moral condition. We do not need something as drastic as a revolution; instead we need to improve capitalism by introducing a socialist perspective. In order to overcome the issues of too little integration and regulation we need higher economic organization and moral discipline. This implementation of ideas and policies will vastly improve the capitalist society. To specify, we need to focus more on moral individualism rather than egoistic individualism. Society needs to

introduce something called moral education. This type of education will not be based on technical learning; instead it will shape the ideas and beliefs of individuals to make them better citizens. It will 1) allow them a better sense of justice and dignity, and 2) allow them to reason autonomously. In order to improve the deprivation of integration, society needs to offer more public events. It is imperative in this day and age for people to have an emotional tie to their communities. Since the introduction of highly specialized occupations people have been exhausting themselves at work and neglecting their involvement with loved ones, and the community as a whole. To conclude, allow me to provide a resolution on a personal level. Although your problems are a result of the modern societal structure, there are a few things you can do to improve your everyday life. In order to feel like you are not alone in your choices hire someone to be directly involved with your decision making. They will be there to offer you the support you need and provide you with a sense company at your job. This person may even provide you with some restrictions in your business so you will feel less overwhelmed and anxious about the future. In your everyday life, try to attend public events and spend more time with your friends and family. By incorporating these communal activities you will have a more stable sense of integration in your life.

Hopefully I have provided you with all the answers and solutions you were looking for. I wish you nothing but the best and hope that your future business endeavors are more pleasurable.

Sincerely,

Émile Durkheim

## References

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