Is Durkheim’s “anomie” the same as Marx’s “alienation?” Do they have the same genesis?

Do they have the same remedy?

Anomie is the “state of de…regulation [which is]... heightened by passions being less disciplined, precisely when they need more disciplining” (p. 253). Durkheim’s anomie arises out of drastic “disturbance of equilibrium.” At macro level, it is the “disturbance […] of the collective order” that arises from events such as acute economic downturn or astounding imperial victory. It is due to the “serious readjustments… of the social order” -- and not due to whether they bring calamities or ecstasies-- anomic conditions arise. At micro level when an individual desires beyond what the collective conscience of the society permits, “unsatisfied tendencies” perturb their “impulse to live.” And that is an anomic situation characterized by the failure of collective conscience of the society to control this individual (pp. 244-246).

Durkheim’s “anomie” has roots in the (dis)obeisance to social order due to lack of social control over the individual. There exists a “moral consciousness” that prescribes rewards to people depending on the place they occupy in the hierarchical structures in society. For example, individuals belong to their particular social class-- defined as function of the upper and lower limits of standard of living. Aspiring for material wealth more than that upper limit is pathological. Since the moral consciousness is often stronger, it regulates the individual. But when it fails to do so the individual feels frustrated from their unfulfilled aspirations. Durkheim, though, believes that the definitions of moral consciousness and social order may continue to update over time but those changes are incremental (pp. 247-250).

Durkheim’s “anomie” and Marx’s “alienation” converge when institutions are cited as the sources of these phenomenon. But they take different moral positions on institutions. For
Marx, institutions cause alienation when they are working, whereas Durkheim says that institutions cause anomie when they are not working. For Marx, religion and capitalist institutions are dysfunctional, whereas for Durkheim, social institutions play functional role in the lives of people. While Marx inspires the alienated worker to capture the means of production and change social order completely, Durkheim believes that any drastic change in the social order is undesirable and pathological.

To summarize, Durkheim’s “anomie” and Marx’s “alienation” have both similarities and differences. Both argue that their genesis lies in institutions but for different reasons. Both definitely do not have the same remedy. For Marx, revolutionary change in the social order is the remedy; for Durkheim, abiding by the stable social order is the remedy. For Marx, alienation is mitigated when individuals empower themselves to bring social change; for Durkheim, anomie is mitigated when the society makes its collective conscience stronger and makes people follow its norms.

I think that alienation is the consequence of anomie. Anomie occurs in the society when the capitalist accumulates wealth beyond what the social order prescribes. As result of this mode of production, the worker feels alienated. I think both these concepts, instead of being antithetical, complement each other in the understanding of social order.

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