

Classical Sociological Theory

AUGUSTE COMTE



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1.0 Objectives

This unit deals with the central ideas of Auguste Comte, the founding father of Sociology.

The objectives of this unit are:

- Outline the biographical sketch of Auguste Comte
- Describe the social background to which he belonged
- Discuss the major theories propounded by Auguste Comte
- Significance of Comte's ideas to contemporary Sociology.

1.1 Introduction

Auguste Comte, a French philosopher, is said to be the founding father of Sociology and the doctrine of positivism. He was greatly influenced by the utopian socialist Claude Henry Saint Simon. Comte was greatly disturbed by the anarchy that pervaded French society and was critical of those thinkers who had spawned both the enlightenment and the revolution. He developed the *positive philosophy* in an attempt to remedy the social maladies of the French revolution, calling for a new doctrine based on the sciences. His scientific view of positivism was developed to combat the negative and destructive philosophy of the Enlightenment. Though influenced by the French counterrevolutionary Catholics, he differed from them on two grounds. First, return to the middle ages was made impossible because of the advancement in science and technology. Second, his theoretical system was much more sophisticated than his predecessors. He influenced the work of many social thinkers like Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill and George Elliot.

Comte first coined the term *Social Physics* and later changed it to *Sociology* in 1839. From the very beginning, Comte wanted to model Sociology after the hard sciences and visualised it to become the dominant science. He tried to create a new science that would not only explain the past of mankind but also predict its future course. Like all sciences, Comte believed that this new science of society should be based on observation and reasoning. Sociology should be used to create a better society. According to him, Sociology is concerned both with Social Statics (social structures) and Social Dynamics (social change). He felt that social dynamics was more important than social statics which reflects his interest in social reform, particularly the ills created by French Revolution and the Enlightenment.

1.2 Life Sketch and Works

Isidore Auguste Marie Francois Xavier Comte, better known as Auguste Comte, was born in Montpellier, Herault, in Southern France on 19th January 1798. After attending the Lycee Joffre and then the University of Montpellier, Comte joined the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris. But two years later the institutions were closed down by the Bourbons. In August 1817, Comte met Claude Henry Saint Simon who appointed him as his secretary. He was thus initiated into politics at a very young age. He published a great number of articles which brought him to the public sphere. In 1824, he broke with Saint Simon. Comte married Caroline Massin and divorced in 1842. In 1826, he was taken to

a mental hospital, but left without being cured. He started teaching Course of Positive Philosophy in January 1829 and published six volumes of the Course (1830, 1835, 1838, 1839, 1841, 1842). Comte developed a close friendship with John Stuart Mill and developed a new “Religion of Humanity”. He published four volumes of “Systeme de politique positive” (1851-1854). His final work, the first volume of “La Synthese Subjective” (The Subjective Synthesis), was published in 1854. Comte died of stomach cancer on 5th September 1857 in Paris. His other works include ‘Elementary Treatise on Analytic Geometry’ (1843), ‘The Philosophical Treatise on Popular Astronomy’ (1844), ‘The Discourse on Positive Spirit’ (1844), and ‘The General View of Positivism’ (1848).

1.3 The Law of Three Stages

‘The Law of Three Stages’ is considered to be the corner stone of Comtian thought. This theory has got the influence of Charles Darwin’s theory of “Organic Evolution”. Auguste Comte organized and classified the social thought prevailing before his times. Comte gave birth not only to a specific methodology of studying knowledge but also analyzed the evolution of human thinking at its various stages. The Law of Three Stages states that society as a whole, and each particular science, develops through three different mentally conceived stages: theological, metaphysical and positive. The main aim of this principle is that it provides the basis of sociological thinking. These stages, he thought, characterized the development of both human knowledge and of society, which correspondingly developed from a military to a legal, and finally to an industrial stage. According to Comte, the evolution of human mind has paralleled the evolution of the individual mind. Just as an individual tends to be a staunch believer in childhood, a critical metaphysician in adolescence and a natural philosopher in manhood, so also mankind in its growth has followed three major steps.

The three stages are discussed in detail below:

1.3.1 Theological or fictitious stage

According to Comte, in this stage, “all theoretical conceptions, whether general or special, bear a supernatural impress”. People are unaware about the real causes of the natural and social phenomena and they attribute the happenings to imaginary or divine forces beyond their mental reach. This stage is further sub-divided into three sub stages.

a. **Fetishism-** Here man accepts the existence of spirit or soul. The supernatural powers resided in the fetishes or mystical qualities attributed to inanimate objects. Hence, ‘fetishism’ emerged as a form of religion and it admitted no priesthood, because its gods are individuals, each residing in fixed objects.

Polytheism- Where the mind of primitive man became better organized, fetishism became cumbersome. Too many fetishes created confusion. Here man begins to believe in magic and allied activities. He then assigns specific objects to possess certain supernatural power and starts worshipping them as god. Man started believing in several gods and created the class of priests to get the goodwill and blessings of all such gods.

b. **Monotheism**- During this sub stage, man believes that there is only one centre of power which guides and controls all the activities of the world. Thus man believed in the superhuman power of only one god.

1.3.2 Metaphysical or Abstract Stage

This stage is an improvement or extension of the earlier stage. Rationalism started growing instead of imagination. It was believed that the abstract power or force guides and determines the events in the world. Metaphysical thinking discards belief in concrete god. Reasoning helped man to find out some order in the natural world. The continuity, regularity and infallibility found in the natural order were attributed to some principles or power. Thus, principles and theories gained ascendancy over feelings and speculations.

1.3.3 Positive or Scientific Stage

The positive stage represents the scientific way of thinking. As Comte stated, "In the final, the positive stage, the mind has given over the vain search after absolute notions, the origin and destination of the universe, and the cause of phenomena, and applies itself to the study of their laws-that is, their invariable relations of succession and resemblance. "Observation and classification of facts marks the beginning of this stage. There is no place for magic or superstition. Everything is viewed rationally. This stage suits the needs of industrial society.

1.3.4 Stages in Social Organisation and Progress

Comte not only identified three stages in the development of human thinking but also observed three stages in the development of society or social organisation. All these modes of thinking-theological, metaphysical and positive-determine and correspond to a particular type of social organisation. This explanation of Comte can be viewed as another important contribution of his sociological thought.

Comte declared that theological thinking leads to a military and monarchical social organisation. Here the God would be the head of the hierarchy and is represented as a mighty warrior. The individuals would be arranged in a military organisation. Divine sanctions are the rules which can hardly be questioned or challenged. Dogmatism would prevail here and its challengers would be punished or threatened with severe punishment.

Metaphysical thinking produces a political system in which the power of the king becomes restricted. The constitutional system of government gets priority. The constitutional changes are gradual and there is a movement towards decentralisation of power. It corresponds to a legalistic social organisation. The medieval social organisation clearly represented this kind of society. Here the natural rights are substituted for divine rights. Priesthood is furthered. Society becomes legalistic, structured and formal. In Europe, nation-states emerged during this stage.

Positive thinking produced a society dominated by industrialists. It leads to an industrial society in which men inquire into the nature and utilisation of the natural resources and forces. Here the main stress is on the transformation of the material resources of the Earth for human benefit, and production of material inventions. In this positive or scientific stage, the great thought blends with the great power.

Comte's law of three stages is represented in the table shown below:

System	Theological	Metaphysical	Positive
1. Cultural (moral) system			
a. Nature of ideas	Ideas are focused on non-empirical forces, spirits, and beings in supernatural realm	Ideas are based on the essences of phenomena and rejection of appeals to supernatural	Ideas are developed from observation and constrained by the scientific method; speculation not based on observation of empirical facts is rejected
b. Spiritual leaders	Priests	Philosophers	Scientists
2. Structural system			
a. Most prominent units	Kinship	State	Industry
b. Basis of integration	Attachments to small groups and religious spirit; use of coercive force to sustain commitment to religion	Control by state, military and law	Mutual dependence; coordination of functions by state and general spirit

However, Comte's law of three stages has been criticised by various theorists. The Law of Three Stages belongs to those grand philosophies of history elaborated in the 19th century, which now seem quite alien to us. The idea of progress of humanity appears to us as the expression of an optimism that the events of the 20th century have done much to reduce. More generally, the notion of a law of history is more problematic. Comte has made it absolutely clear that the intellectual evolution is the most important aspect in human progress. Still, he was aware of the importance of factors such as increase in population, division of labour etc. in determining the rate of social progress. As Lewis A. Coser writes, "It can hardly be questioned that Comte's Law of Three Stages" has a strongly materialistic or idealistic bias.

According to Prof. N.S. Timasheff, "Comte's law of three stages in the meaning ascribed to it by its inventor is clearly invalid". As he opines, "neither of the later approaches (metaphysical and scientific) wholly supersedes the religious approach: rather, there has been accumulation and often mixture of the three". He further writes, "Comte's law of the three stages could not stand the test of facts known today". E.S. Bogardus writes, "Comte failed to postulate a fourth mode of thinking, namely, socialized thinking, or a system of thought that would emphasize...the purpose of building the constructive, just, and

harmonious societies...”. He adds, “Comte, however, should be credited with opening the way for the rise of socialised thinking”. Even Charles Darwin considers Comte’s Law of Three Stages to be a “grand idea”.

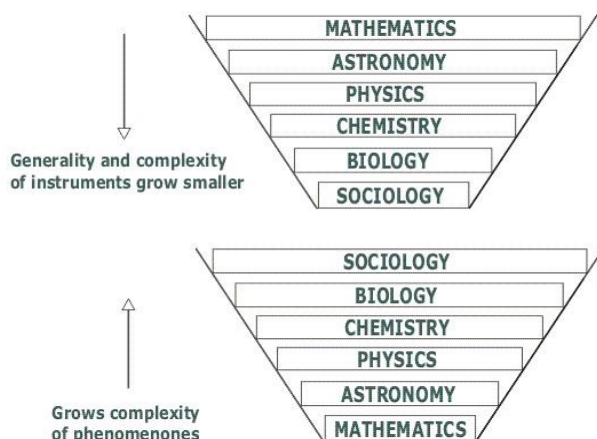
1.4 Hierarchy of Sciences

Comte’s second best known theory, which is the theory of hierarchy of sciences, is intimately connected with the Law of Three Stages. Just as mankind passes through determinant stages, scientific knowledge also passes through similar stages of development. But different sciences progress at different rate. Any kind of knowledge reaches the positive stage early in proportion to its generality, simplicity, and independence of other departments.

He put forth a hierarchical arrangement of the sciences in a way which coincided with

1. The order of their historical emergence and development
2. The order of dependence upon each other (each rests on the one which precedes it, and prepares the way for the one that follows it)
3. Their decreasing degree of generality and the increasing degree of complexity of their subject matter, and
4. The increasing degree of modifiability of the facts which they study.

The serial order of sciences on the basis of their emergence and increasing complexity were Mathematics, Chemistry, Astronomy, Physics, Biology, and Sociology.



From the above classification it becomes clear that Mathematics, according to Comte, is the simplest science while Sociology is the most complex science. In Comte’s view, Mathematics was the first science to reach positive stage, followed by Astronomy, Physics and Chemistry, and after these sciences had reached the positivistic stage, thought organic phenomena could become more positivistic. The first organic science to move from the metaphysical to the positive stage was biology, or physiology. This paved the way for Sociology which could move away from the metaphysical speculations of the 17th and 18th century towards a positivistic mode of thought. Sociology has been the last to emerge because it is the more complex and because it had to wait for the other basic sciences to reach the positive stage.

Sociology was the most complex social science because it had to study society, the most complex matter. The other sciences concentrated on comparatively simpler subjects than society. Sociology thus emerged because human beings recognized a new set of objective facts concerning their society like social disorganization, development of slums, poverty etc. which they could not explain, but which they needed to explain in order to deal effectively with them. When Comte spoke of Sociology to crown the hierarchy of sciences, he had the general unifying nature of science in his mind. He did not claim that Sociology is superior to all other sciences. He only felt that with the growth of positive knowledge all sciences can be brought into relationship with each other.

According to Comte, all science passes through the three stages, the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. But the individual sciences do not move through these three stages simultaneously. In fact, the higher a science stands in the hierarchy, the later it shifts from one stage to the other. With the growth of positive knowledge, he also advocated the use of positive methods for Sociology.

1.5 Theory of Positivism

Positivism is a philosophy developed by Auguste Comte in the middle of the 19th century that stated that the only authentic knowledge is scientific knowledge, and that such knowledge can only come from positive affirmation of theories through strict scientific method. This view is sometimes referred to as a scientist ideology, and is often shared by technocrats who believe in the necessary progress through scientific progress. As an approach to the philosophy of science deriving from Enlightenment thinkers like Pierre-Simon Laplace (and many others), positivism was first systematically theorized by Comte, who saw the scientific method as replacing metaphysics in the history of thought, and who observed the circular dependence of theory and observation in science. Comte was thus one of the leading thinkers of social evolutionism thought. Comte first described the epistemological perspective of positivism in “The Course in Positive Philosophy”, a series of texts published between 1830 and 1842. These texts were followed by his work, “A General View of Positivism” in 1948.

Positivism is also depicted as the view that all true knowledge is scientific and that all things are ultimately measurable. Because of its close association with reductionism, positivism and reductionism involve the view that entities of one kind are reducible to entities of another, such as societies to numbers, or mental events to chemical events. It also involves the contention that processes are reducible to physiological, physical or chemical events and even those social processes are reducible to relationships between actions of individuals or that biological organisms are reducible to physical systems.

1.5.1 Comte’s view of sociological theory

As a descendant of French Enlightenment, Comte was impressed with the Newtonian revolution. He argued, all phenomena are subject to invariable natural laws, and sociologists must use their observations to uncover the laws governing the social universe, in much the same way as Newton had formulated the law of gravity. Several points are important in this view of sociological theory. First, sociological theory is not to be concerned with causes per se but, rather, with the laws that describe the

basic and fundamental relations of properties in the social world. Second, sociological theory must reject arguments by “final causes”- that is, analysis of the results of a particular phenomenon for the social whole. Thirdly, the goal of sociological activity is to reduce the number of theoretical principles by seeking only the most abstract and only those that pertain to understanding fundamental properties of the social world. Comte thus held a vision of sociological theory as based on the model of the natural sciences, particularly physics. It is for this reason, he preferred the term *social physics* to *sociology*.

The laws of social organization and change will be discovered, refined, and verified through a combination of theory and empirical observation. According to Comte, all theories must be based upon observed facts and it is equally true that facts cannot be observed without the guidance of some theory. Scientifically speaking, all isolated, empirical observation is idle, and even radically uncertain; that science can use only those observations which are connected with some law.

For Comte, sociology’s goal was to seek to develop abstract theoretical principles. Observations of the empirical world must be guided by such principles, and abstract principles must be tested against the empirical facts. Empirical observations that are conducted without this goal in mind are not useful in science. Theoretical explanations of empirical events thus involve seeing how they are connected in law like ways. Comte clearly intended that sociology must initially establish a firm theoretical foundation before making efforts to use the laws of sociology for social engineering.

Natural sciences are classified into two classes, the abstract or general and the concrete or particular. Abstract science deals with discovery of laws that regulates a particular phenomenon. The function of concrete natural sciences is the application of these laws to the actual history of existing beings. Therefore, our business concentrates around the abstract sciences which are fundamental in raising the scientific status of a subject.

Comte believed that Sociology should be modelled after the natural sciences. Sociology could seek and discover the fundamental properties and relations of the social universe and could explain them in abstract principles. Observation of empirical events could be used to generate, confirm and modify sociology’s law. These laws could be used as tools or instruments to modify the social world.

1.5.2 Use of Sociological methods

Comte formulated four methods for Sociology: (1) Observation, (2) Experimentation, (3) Comparison, and (4) Historical Analysis.

Observation

For Comte, positivism was based on the use of senses to observe social facts. Comte maintained that the new science of society must rely on reasoning and observation rather than on the authority of tradition. Observation must be unbiased and always guided by a theory.

This is necessary for the development of a science. He is credited for firmly establishing sociology as a science of social facts liberating social thought from the realm of morals and metaphysical speculations.

Experimentation

Comte recognized that artificial experimentation is not possible with the society and the social phenomena. However, natural experimentation frequently takes place whenever the regular course of the phenomenon is interfered with in any determinate manner. Here he compares biology with sociology. As the biologist can learn about normal bodily functioning from the study of various diseases, so also the social physicists can learn the normal social processes by studying the pathological cases. Even though Comte's view of natural experimentation lacked the logic of the experimental method, it fascinated the later generation of sociologists.

Comparison

Just as comparative analysis had been useful in biology, comparison of social forms with those of lower animals, with coexisting states, and with past systems could also generate considerable insight into the operation of the social universe. By comparing elements that are present and absent, and similar and dissimilar, knowledge about the fundamental properties of the social world can be achieved.

Historical Analysis

Comte originally classified historical analysis as a variation of the comparative method, comparing present with the past. Historical method compares societies throughout the time in which they have evolved. But his formulation of "the law of three stages" emphasized that the laws of social dynamics could ultimately be developed only with careful observation of the historical movement of societies.

Comte believed these methods to be necessary for sociological analysis. Even though these methods fall much below the modern scientific standards, he was responsible to compel the later scholars to study social facts scientifically. He visualized social physics to be a theoretical science capable of formulating and testing the laws of social organization and change. His formulation of sociology's methods added increased credibility to this claim.

1.5.3 Comte's Organization of Sociology

Comte saw sociology to be the extension of biology which studied organs in organisms. Therefore, sociology has to study social organization. It stressed on the fact that society is an "organic whole" whose component organs are interrelated and interdependent with each other. These parts could not be studied in isolation. As Comte emphasized, "there can be no scientific study of society, either in its conditions or its movements, if it is separated into portions and its divisions are studied apart".

The above theoretical approach gave birth to *functionalism* in the later years. Attempts were made to link sociological analysis to the biological sciences. Along with the study of social pathologies to understand the normal operation of the society, Comte viewed various structures as analogous to "elements, tissues, and organs" of biological organisms. However, this organismic analogizing is limited to dividing the social physics into statical and dynamical analysis.

Comte wanted to build Sociology based on the biological sciences. His vision of social order was congruent with that of the biological organism, where each organ is interdependent on each other and

contributes for the maintenance of the entire body. An idea of order and progress is indispensable for Social Physics, as ideas of organization and life is inseparable from biology. Thus, he divides Sociology into (1) social statics (the study of social order) and (2) social dynamics (the study of social progress and change).

1.6 Critical View of Comte's Ideas

Comte's theories stressed on several important points:

- a. Theories must be abstract which can explain the nature of fundamental processes guiding the operation of the society.
- b. Theories must be explicitly and systematically tested using various scientific methods.
- c. Collection of data without the guidance of a theory will not contribute greatly to the accumulation of knowledge about how the society operates.
- d. Sociology should be used to rebuild social structures guided by a theory rather than by personal and ideological biases.

Comte recognises the fact that as society grows in size, parts become interdependent and independent of each other. Comte reintroduced the organismic analogy to social thinking which later developed in the functional theories of Spencer and Durkheim. However, Comte never developed any substantive theory. He did not explain how the social system operates.

He compares his law of three stages with that of the Newton's law of gravity, but his law is no more than a simplistic view of the history of ideas. Though it justifies the emergence of positivism and the queen science, Sociology, it did not advance Sociology's understanding of the dynamics of the social universe.

1.7 Lets Sum Up

In this unit you learnt about the efforts made by Auguste Comte in developing the science of society, Sociology. You read about the biographical sketch of Auguste Comte and the social environment to which he belonged. He is the founding father of Sociology and coined the word Sociology. His major theories are

1. The law of three stages- theological, metaphysical and positive
2. The hierarchy of sciences
3. The theory of positivism

You also learnt about the significance of Comte's ideas to contemporary Sociology.

1.8 Key Words

Dynamic- Metaphysical- Method- The way of collecting data or facts about social phenomena, such as the method of observation, survey, etc.

Positive- Science- Static- Theological-

1.9 Suggested Further Readings

Coser, Lewis. A. 1971. *Masters of Sociological Thought Ideas in Historical and Social Context*. Second Edition, Harcourt Brace Jovonovich, Inc.: New York.

Aron, Raymond. 1967. *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. Vol.1. England: Penguin Books.