

AUGUSTE COMTE

(1798-1857)

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Auguste Comte (1798-1857) was a tormented, dogmatic genius: and, as his 'image' emerges from his copious writings, a somewhat rebarbative one as well. Showing, from an early age, both literary and mathematical prowess he won a place at sixteen at the *École Polytechnique* in Paris. Before long he was involved in a student protest; the *École* was closed by the authorities and Comte was expelled. After a short sojourn in his native Montpellier he returned to Paris and resumed his studies -- this time on a wider scale and with an eye to political action.

Paris, then as now, was the centre of many currents -- messianic, technocratic and socialist: and Comte was quickly drawn into the circle of Henri de Saint-Simon -- becoming for a while his secretary. During this period Comte produced his 'Plan of Scientific Operations Necessary for Reorganizing Society' -- an early work that combined his constant themes -- a profound intellectualism (a belief that the human mind passed through certain stages and that these stages determined the course of history) and an equally profound activism -- as shown in his desire to reorganize society to suit the latest scientific, or 'positive' stage. Comte was well set to be one of the 'Prophets of Paris' -- elaborating his theories, quarrelling with his contemporaries, recovering from mental breakdown, and enjoying some quite disastrous love affairs.

Students of the history of sociology readily accept a few cant facts about him. We all know that it was he who, quite literally, gave 'sociology' its name: that he was a 'positivist' and placed sociology at the apex of a hierarchy of the sciences: that he propounded the Law of the Three Stages. We know too that he was a 'morality-intoxicated' man -- who gave to the familiar eighteenth and nineteenth-century ideas of progress some new and puzzling twists: that he was out to eliminate 'moral anarchy' and spent his zeal in the service of 'social regeneration'. We see him betrayed into ludicrous authoritarian notions, establishing, with himself as Pontiff, a novel Religion of Humanity.

It is tempting, I confess, to dismiss so bizarre a figure -- one who speaks to us, at enormous length, from a distant age. Even where his contribution is a real one, there is a risk that we may exaggerate its novelty. He may well have given sociology its name -- but in no real sense can he be said to have discovered the subject. Many of the ideas which, quite properly, he set out as sociological concepts had been in the air in eighteenth-century France and Scotland. Nor did he 'discover' positivism; as we shall see, this key term in his work is none too rigorously defined by Comte and it certainly cannot be equated with scientific empiricism.

Indeed, for all his scientific claims, he was in the main a social prophet -- insisting from the very beginning but with growing frenzy, that his own 'synthesis' of human knowledge could be used to create a new social order. His claim was a bold one. Such a synthesis had awaited the tremendous growth of 'positive' scientific knowledge: and in the chaos of post-Napoleonic Europe the time was ripe for its application to the study of man. It was a unique conjuncture of science, the *zeitgeist* -- and Auguste Comte.

'Positive' methods are so central to Comte's theme that it is surprising that he gave so little time to making clear what 'positivism' meant. In his famous *Cours de philosophie positive* (based on lectures that he gave in the 1820s) he observes that 'the fundamental character of all positive philosophy is to regard all phenomena as subject to invariable natural *laws*, whose precise discovery and reduction to the smallest number possible is the aim of all our effort'. But this assertion does not tell us how we are to distinguish phenomena from each other or how we are to know which natural (or social) events can be classified as identical, similar or comparable phenomena. the process of sifting and classification is a constructive 'mental' process -- and with the philosophical difficulties presented thereby Comte was blithely unconcerned. Indeed he helped to codify a rather *naïf* gambit -- the position that 'facts' are directly given to the investigator and that the relationship between them can be directly apprehended.

Comte then proceeded to advance some special advice for the pursuit of 'social physics' -- or, as he came to call it, sociology. In studying social phenomena we should use the established scientific methods of observation, experiment and comparison: but to them he added a fourth method of especial relevance to sociology -- the historical method. In principle this was a signal for a healthy advance from the arid and often ahistorical deductions that had previously been dominant in social thinking. But, as was often the case with Comte, he gave the good advice a special and limiting nuance. What *he* meant by the historical method was not what practising historians would understand by historiography. Indeed for practising historians (mere chroniclers) he had a grave contempt. Historical method for Comte meant the search, often in disregard of historical data, for abstract 'developmental social series' -- collections of events and trends which fit into an often conjectural scheme of historical change. Just as his notion of positivism begged many tough philosophical questions, so did his idea of 'history in the abstract' evade the challenges of concrete, if limited, historiography.

In mapping this 'abstract history' a key place was held by his Law of the Three Stages. He distinguished between three stages (not necessarily in all contexts consecutive) in the development of the human mind -- the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. Simplifying his analysis rather drastically, we may say that he meant something like this. In interpreting natural phenomena mankind has come to rely less and less upon explanations in terms of supernatural causes: nor do we now find it useful to talk of nature,

as for example medieval philosophers had done, in terms of abstract Essences or Ideas or Forces. We now seek to account for natural events by reference to 'laws of coexistence and succession' -- hence the advances made in the late eighteenth century in physics and chemistry. These sciences had reached the 'positive' stage. Would not the study of human actions, if based on the same methods (plus some additions), now take an equally impressive turn?

Comte's answer was an enthusiastic 'yes'. In his enthusiasm to unite all knowledge under the banner of sociology and abstract history, Comte once more was indifferent to major issues of method. Indeed, both in his early *Cours* and in his later *System of Positive Polity*, these issues were brushed briskly aside. He ignored, as many critics have complained, the way in which human beings have a kind of inside knowledge of themselves which they do not have with regard to external objects or events. Furthermore, in his quest to establish sociology in its own right, Comte had no time for the achievement or the promise of psychology. These are among the traditional 'loose ends' of social analysis -- and I do not claim that subsequent writers have tied them all up. But -- admittedly with hindsight -- both Durkheim and Weber grappled energetically with such issues. For Comte to have done so would have revealed that his system was scientifically insecure.

Comte's stress on the Law of the Three Stages symbolizes his concern with 'social dynamics' -- with the processes of change. What he has to say on social statics is relatively brief and bald. He was not concerned primarily with the empirical study of social structures -- his job was to expound the 'laws' by which such structures are transformed. These laws are those of the development of the human mind (its growing rationality). And knowledge of these laws must be applied to human affairs if our happiness is to grow in step with our technological skills. It followed for Comte that those who like himself possess such insights should form a spiritual elite: this elite would evolve a 'subjective synthesis' of all useful knowledge geared to the interests and wants of mankind.

We may smile at this view: and smile again when we recall firstly that this spiritual elite (led by Comte) would be, in the ideal society, the sole counter-vailing power to the temporal rulers, and secondly, that the temporal rulers, in each state, would consist of the three most important bankers. Freedom of speech would, of course, be allowed: but Comte did not expect that the teachings of persons outside the spiritual elite would enjoy much prestige or influence. In the minute details of the new social order, and of the supporting Religion of Humanity, Comte became pathologically absurd: and upon the absurdities, and their sources in his stormy private life, it is best to draw a veil. But the enterprise of which Comte wrote is worth some attention.

His confidence arose from his basic view that there are invariable laws that govern human relationships. This positivist view is, at best, a heuristic assumption. With astonishing self-confidence, Comte used it as an

assumption *and* as a conclusion of his arguments. For the Law of the Three Stages is not a law about a given, 'unconstructed' reality. It is rather an interpretation which arises from thinking about some relevant evidence on human history. But obviously it is an interpretation that owes much to the perspective of the interpreter, the time at which he lived, and the motives that moved him. This does not mean that the interpretation is 'false' -- only that other verdicts, prior, contemporary or subsequent, may be just as 'true'.

I do not want to be misunderstood. Such interpretations have their uses -- and their place in sociology. Comte's case was of interpretation gone astray: but his wildness does not mean that interpretation (even of a utopian kind) is itself absurd. Comte's hubris lay in his belief that he knew what the 'laws of social development' looked like and how to apply them. Like so many enthusiasts for the happiness of mankind he became indifferent to the happiness -- and freedom -- of individual human beings. Even his elite were to think with freedom only within hallowed Comtean lines. This is more than an intellectual error: it is a moral enormity. No elite, whatever its scientific pretensions, can either know or coordinate the wants and interests of all mankind -- or even of the citizens of one nation-state. Happiness, after all, is a many-sided objective. The state can certainly create the prerequisites of human happiness: but it cannot create it uniformly according to a blueprint. This kind of 'scientific' planning is an enemy of 'real' planning -- planning, with faith and vision, for what is possible in a non-plastic world.

Positivism involves more than an assertion that there are 'invariable laws'. It stresses the links between knowledge, prediction and action. Indeed Comte's maxim -- *savoir pour prévoir* -- might serve as a copy-book rule for social science. Today -- though not in Comte's own day -- many short-run, actuarial-type predictions are, of course, quite possible -- in criminology, for example, or in applied economics. And in the computer age the raw data needed for such predictions can be analysed with a speed and rigour unimaginable in Comte's day. Yet, as is notorious, this kind of statistical projection was viewed by Comte with undisguised distaste. There is irony here -- for Comte, in so far as he earned his own living, did so as a skillful mathematician.

As will by now be clear, Comte's interest in prediction lay in a very different direction. He believed that the coming of sociology itself was part of a determinate pattern of historical change. Once the sociologist has discovered the laws of such change it was his task to use the discovery in order to mastermind the political course of 'social regeneration'. What is more, this insight possessed by the sociologist was an insight into ethically valuable policies and purposes -- that is, those policies which will advance 'progress'. Comte slips, in other words, very gently from the indicative into the imperative mood.

Comte made things far too easy for the sociologists. In the first place, sociology -- in Comte's day and in ours -- does not have a special technique for solving ethical questions or for laying down the course of social policy. If presented with a plan that is politically ordained and clearly set out, the sociologist can assist in its execution. But his special skill lies not in legitimizing policy or in conferring upon it a seal of approval. Of course the plan, as politically ordained, may be inadequate to meet some moral or social emergency: or, quite conceivably, it may be a wicked or immoral plan. Then the sociologist, like any other citizen, has the right or duty to protest; but he cannot rest his protest upon any special status as a *sociologist*.

Secondly, Comte has a rather significant technique for setting out the context within which planning is to be conducted. It has often been noted that he is ambiguous about whether the field in which his 'laws' operate (or in which they should be applied) is Humanity taken as a whole, or Western Europe or merely his own country, France. He does refer to each of these possibilities. But he is not careful or exact on this score. Where he is consistent is in his view that he is discussing the fate of a 'total' self-contained reality. He postulates a field for prediction and planning which is, in a special sense, a 'system' -- something within which there are no significant breaks or discontinuities. This assumption is linked with the analogy between the subject matter of the biological and the social sciences -- an analogy upon which Comte, like other founders of sociology, drew very heavily.

Something of what this implies has been set out by John Plamenatz in the second volume of his *Man and Society* (Longmans, 1963). Comte, he observes, was not the first writer to insist on the social importance of knowledge as a factor in social development. '... Turgot and Condorcet, though they take it for granted that the increase of knowledge affects other sides of man's life in society, do not assume that all activities are so closely connected that they all change in a fixed order; they do not assume that there is a fixed course of *integral*, social change.' Comte, argues Plamenatz, did make such an assumption.

Like Plamenatz I do not regard this assumption as one for which there is real evidence. Unfortunately it produces a kind of picture thinking that has a deep hold over sociologists and those concerned with social reform. Comte, in my view, helped materially to legitimize as, par excellence, sociological what is, after all, but one possible view of the nature of society -- the view that society is an interlocked system of interacting activities -- but without significant breaks that might arouse theoretical concern. It is of interest too that Marx operated with rather similar intellectual machinery: we should not be misled by the neat classification of Comte as a prophet of social order and of Marx as a prophet of social conflict. So far as their effect on sociological imagery is concerned there are remarkable similarities.

Imagery, too, has its place in sociology -- but there are times when it becomes a straitjacket for the selection, manipulation and, in the last resort, the suppression of data. The image of a society which follows a 'fixed course of integral social change' is especially attractive and dangerous. It is convenient for those who wish to 'plan' without the hard labour of assessing evidence. Once one has postulated a continuous 'fabric' -- that, metaphysically, is that. One does not then need to worry about the discontinuities that may be seen in social arrangements. Whether they result from human inertia, historical legacies or unanticipated consequences, they can be dismissed at once; for they do not *really* exist.

Nor on such assumptions would we concern ourselves, any more than did Comte, with the priorities, moral or social, that have to be assigned to conflicting goals or with seeing how scarce means (human and material) can be employed in the service of competing needs. In real life we have to ask how the statistical and other projections that emerge from one study may be married with those that come out of another; or how to effect a divorce when the marriage has no further value. For a true Comtean positivist these problems have no meaning.

This review of Comte, in short, is a cautionary tale. For all his eccentricities Comte developed certain styles that his more 'normal' successors have unwittingly absorbed. For all his theoretical roots he became an anti-intellectual. His contemporary John Stuart Mill concluded: 'It is no exaggeration to say that M. Comte gradually acquired a real hatred for scientific and all purely intellectual pursuits, and was bent on retaining no more of them than was strictly indispensable'. And a more recent critic has noted Comte's practicality and his 'disdain for truth' -- citing Comte's idea that 'the intellect's proper function is as servant for the social sympathies'. Comte's passion for social regeneration warped him and unfitted him for the *intellectual* study of society and its institutions. And, as Mill acutely argued, this *theoretical* backsliding meant a distinct loss, too, at the level of *practical* results.

Is it *naïf* to believe that there is a warning here for us all -- a century or more after Comte's death? Is not the vocabulary of modern sociology shot through with motifs drawn from this nineteenth-century founder of the subject -- the language of 'integral', organic social systems? And do we pause to reflect whether this language is really relevant to the study of what happens within *actual* societies?