

## CHAPTER 3

# The Sociology of Auguste Comte

**A**s we outlined in Chapter 1, it is perhaps embarrassing to sociology that its founder was, by the end of his life, a rather pathetic man, calling himself the High Priest of Humanity and preaching to a ragtag group of disciples. In essence, Comte's career had two phases: (1) the early scientific stage where he argued persuasively for a science of society and was the toast of continental Europe for a brief time and (2) a later phase when he tried to make science a new religion for the reconstruction of society. The first phase culminated in his famous, *Course of Positive Philosophy*,<sup>1</sup> a monumental five-volume work that was published serially between 1830 and 1842. The second phase was marked by Comte's personal frustrations and tragedy that found expression in *System of Positive Polity*,<sup>2</sup> published between 1851 and 1854. Even as Comte went over the deep end, he retained a firm belief that discovery of the laws governing the operation of human societies should be used to reconstruct society. For Comte, science did not oppose efforts to

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<sup>1</sup>We will use and reference Harriet Martineau's condensation of the original manuscript. This condensation received Comte's approval and is the most readily available translation. Martineau changed the title and added useful margin notes. Our references will be to the 1896 edition of Martineau's original 1854 edition: Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, Vols. 1, 2, and 3, trans. and cond. H. Martineau (London: George Bell & Sons, 1896).

<sup>2</sup>Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity*, Vols. 1, 2, 3, and 4 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1875; originally published 1851–1854).

make a better world, but it was first necessary to develop the science half of this equation. For, without deep scientific understanding of how society operates, it is difficult to know how to go about constructing a better society. This theme in Comte's work was simply an extension of the French philosophes' Enlightenment view that human society was progressing to ever-better states of organization.

In our review of Comte's work, we will focus on the early phase where Comte developed a vision for sociology. Indeed, he argued that sociology was to be the "queen science" that would stand at the top of a hierarchy of all sciences—an outrageous prediction but one that gathered a considerable amount of attention in his early writings. Comte's abrasive personality was, eventually, to be his undoing; by the time the last installment of *Course of Positive Philosophy* was published, he was a forgotten intellect. Indeed, not one single review of this last installment appeared in French intellectual circles, but Comte's stamp on the discipline had already been achieved early in his career. Moreover, scholars in England were reading Comte, and subsequent generations of French thinkers all had to come to grips with Comte's advocacy.

Comte's first essays signaled the beginning of sociology; his great *Course of Positive Philosophy* made a convincing case for the discipline. And his later descent can be ignored for what it was—the mental pathology of a once-great mind. Let us begin with the early essays and then move to the argument in *Course of Positive Philosophy*.

## Comte's Early Essays

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It is sometimes difficult to separate Comte's early essays from those of Saint-Simon, because the aging master often put his name on works written by the young Comte. Yet the 1822 essay, "Plan of the Scientific Operations Necessary for Reorganizing Society,"<sup>3</sup> is clearly Comte's and represents the culmination of his thinking while working under Saint-Simon. This essay also anticipates, and presents an outline of, the entire Comtean scheme as it was to unfold over the succeeding decades.

In this essay, Comte argued that it was necessary to create a "positive science" based on the model of other sciences. This science

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<sup>3</sup>Auguste Comte, "Plan of the Scientific Operations Necessary for Reorganizing Society," reprinted in Gertrud Lenzer, ed., *Auguste Comte and Positivism: The Essential Writings* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975), 9–69.

would ultimately rest on empirical observations, but, like all science, it would formulate the laws governing the organization and movement of society, an idea implicit in Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*. Comte initially called this new science *social physics*. Once the laws of human organization have been discovered and formulated, Comte believed that these laws could be used to direct society. Scientists of society are thus to be social prophets, indicating the course and direction of human organization.

Comte felt that one of the most basic laws of human organization was the "law of the three stages," a notion clearly borrowed from Turgot, Condorcet, and Saint-Simon. He termed these stages the *theological–military*, *metaphysical–judicial*, and *scientific–industrial* or "positivistic." Each stage is typified by a particular "spirit"—a notion that first appeared with Montesquieu and was expanded by Condorcet—and by temporal or structural conditions. Thus, the theological–military stage is dominated by ideas that refer to the supernatural while being structured around slavery and the military. The metaphysical–judicial stage, which follows from the theological and represents a transition to the scientific, is typified by ideas that refer to the fundamental essences of phenomena and by elaborate political and legal forms. The scientific–industrial stage is dominated by the "positive philosophy of science" and industrial patterns of social organization.

Several points in this law were given greater emphasis in Comte's later work. First, the social world reveals both cultural and structural dimensions, with the nature of culture or idea systems being dominant—an idea probably taken from Condorcet. Second, idea systems, and the corresponding structural arrangements that they produce, must reach their full development before the next stage of human evolution can occur. Thus, one stage of development creates the necessary conditions for the next. Third, there is always a period of crisis and conflict as systems move from one stage to the next because elements of the previous stage conflict with the emerging elements of the next stage. Fourth, movement is always a kind of oscillation, for society "does not, properly speaking, advance in a straight line."

These aspects of the law of three stages convinced Comte that cultural ideas about the world were subject to the dictates of this law. All ideas about the nature of the universe must move from a theological to a scientific, or positivistic, stage. Yet some ideas about different aspects of the universe move more rapidly through the three

stages than others do. Indeed, only when all the other sciences—first astronomy, then physics, later chemistry, and finally physiology—have successively reached the positive stage will the conditions necessary for social physics have been met. With the development of this last great science, it will become possible to reorganize society by scientific principles rather than by theological or metaphysical speculations.

Comte thus felt that the age of sociology had arrived. It was to be like Newton's physics, formulating the laws of the social universe. With the development of these laws, the stage was set for the rational and scientific reorganization of society. Much of Saint-Simon is in this advocacy, but Comte felt that Saint-Simon was too impatient in his desire to reorganize society without the proper scientific foundation. The result was Comte's *Course of Positive Philosophy*, which sought to lay the necessary intellectual foundation for the science of society.

## **Comte's *Course of Positive Philosophy***

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Comte's *Course of Positive Philosophy* is more noteworthy for its advocacy of a science of society than for its substantive contribution to understanding how patterns of social organization are created, maintained, and changed. *Positive Philosophy* more nearly represents a vision of what sociology can become than a well-focused set of theoretical principles. In reviewing this great work, then, we will devote most of our attention to how Comte defined sociology and how he thought it should be developed. Accordingly, we will divide our discussion into the following sections: (1) Comte's view of sociological theory, (2) his formulation of sociological methods, (3) his organization of sociology, and (4) his advocacy of sociology.

### **Comte's View of Sociological Theory**

As a descendant of the French Enlightenment, Comte was impressed, as were many of the philosophes, with the Newtonian revolution. Thus, he argued for a particular view of sociological theory: 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. Comte emphasized in the opening pages of *Positive Philosophy*,

The first characteristic of Positive Philosophy is that it regards all phenomena as subject to invariable natural *Laws*. Our business is—seeing how vain is any research into what are called *Causes* whether first or final—to pursue an accurate discovery of these *Laws*, with a view to reducing them to the smallest possible number. By speculating upon causes, we could solve no difficulty about origin and purpose. Our real business is to analyse accurately the circumstances of phenomena, and to connect them by the natural relations of succession and resemblance. The best illustration of this is in the case of the doctrine of Gravitation.<sup>4</sup>

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. This disavowal is ironic because Comte’s more substantive work helped found sociological functionalism, a mode of analysis that often examines the functions or final causes of phenomena. Third, clearly 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 the physics of his time. For this reason, he preferred the term *social physics* to *sociology*.<sup>5</sup>

The laws of social organization and change, Comte felt, will be discovered, refined, and verified through a constant interplay between theory and empirical observation. For, as he emphasized in the opening pages of *Positive Philosophy*, “if it is true that every

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<sup>4</sup>Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, 1:5–6 (emphasis in original).

<sup>5</sup>In Comte’s time, the term *physics* meant to study the “nature of” phenomena; it was not merely the term for a particular branch of natural science. Hence, Comte’s use of the label *social physics* had a double meaning: to study the “nature of” social phenomena and to do so along the lines of the natural sciences. He abandoned the term *social physics* when he realized that the Belgian statistician Adolphe Quételet was using the same term. Comte was outraged that his original label for sociology had been used in ways that ran decidedly counter to his vision of theory. Ironically, sociology has become more like Quételet’s vision of social physics, with its emphasis on the normal curve and statistical manipulations, than like Comte’s notion of social physics as the search for the abstract laws of human organization—an unfortunate turn of events.

theory must be based upon observed facts, it is equally true that facts cannot be observed without the guidance of some theory.”<sup>6</sup> In later pages, Comte became even more assertive and argued against what we might now term *raw empiricism*. The collection of data for its own sake runs counter to the goals of science:

The next great hindrance to the use of observation is the empiricism which is introduced into it by those who, in the name of impartiality, would interdict the use of any theory whatever. No other dogma could be more thoroughly irreconcilable with the spirit of the positive philosophy. . . . No real observation of any kind of phenomena is possible, except in as far as it is first directed, and finally interpreted, by some theory.<sup>7</sup>

And he concluded,

Hence it is clear that, scientifically speaking, all isolated, empirical observation is idle, and even radically uncertain; that science can use only those observations which are connected, at least hypothetically, with some law.<sup>8</sup>

For Comte, then, 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 explanation of empirical events thus involves seeing how they are connected in lawlike ways. For social science “endeavors to discover . . . the general relations which connect all social phenomena; and each of them is *explained*, in the scientific sense of the word, when it has been connected with the whole of the existing situation.”<sup>9</sup>

Comte held a somewhat ambiguous view of how such an abstract science should be “used” in the practical world of everyday affairs. He clearly intended that sociology must initially establish a firm theoretical foundation before making efforts to use the laws of sociology for social engineering. In *Positive Philosophy*, he stressed,

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<sup>6</sup>Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, 1:4.

<sup>7</sup>Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, 2:242.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 243.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 240 (emphasis in original).

We must distinguish between the two classes of Natural science—the abstract or general, which have for their object the discovery of the laws which regulate phenomena in all conceivable cases, and the concrete, particular, or descriptive, which are sometimes called Natural sciences in a restricted sense, whose function it is to apply these laws to the actual history of existing beings. The first are fundamental, and our business is with them alone; as the second are derived, and however important, they do not rise to the rank of our subjects of contemplation.<sup>10</sup>

Comte believed that sociology must not allow its scientific mission to be confounded by empirical descriptions or by an excessive concern with a desire to manipulate events. Once sociology is well established as a theoretical science, its laws can be used to “modify” events in the empirical world. Indeed, such was to be the historic mission of social physics. As Comte’s later works testify, he took this mission seriously, and at times to extremes. But his early work is filled with more reasoned arguments for using laws of social organization and change as tools for creating new social arrangements. He stressed that the complexity of social phenomena gives them more variation than either physical or biological phenomena have, and hence it would be possible to use the laws of social organization and change to modify empirical events in a variety of directions.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, then, Comte believed that sociology could be modeled after the natural sciences. Sociology could seek and discover the fundamental properties and relations of the social universe, and like the other sciences, it could express these in a small number of abstract principles. Observations of empirical events could be used to generate, confirm, and modify sociology’s laws. Once well-developed laws had been formulated, they could be used as tools or instruments to modify the social world.

### **Comte’s Formulation of Sociological Methods**

Comte was the first social thinker to take methodological questions seriously—that is, how are facts about the social world to be gathered and used to develop, as well as to test, theoretical principles?

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<sup>10</sup>Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, 1:23.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, the following passages in *Positive Philosophy*, 2:217, 226, 234, 235, and 238.

He advocated four methods in the new science of social physics: (1) observation, (2) experimentation, (3) comparison, and (4) historical analysis.<sup>12</sup>

### *Observation*

For Comte, positivism was based on use of the senses to observe *social facts*—a term that the next great French theorist, Émile Durkheim, made the center of his sociology. Much of Comte's discussion of observation involves arguments for the "subordination of Observation to the statical and dynamical laws of phenomena"<sup>13</sup> rather than a statement on the procedures by which unbiased observations should be conducted. He argued that observation of empirical facts, when unguided by theory, will prove useless in the development of science. He must be given credit, however, for firmly establishing sociology as a science of social facts, thereby liberating thought from the debilitating realm of morals and metaphysical speculation.

### *Experimentation*

Comte recognized that artificial experimentation with whole societies, and other social phenomena, was impractical and often impossible. But, he noted, natural experimentation frequently "takes place whenever the regular course of the phenomenon is interfered with in any determinate manner."<sup>14</sup> In particular, he thought that, much as is the case in biology, pathological events allowed "the true equivalent of pure experimentation" in that they introduced an artificial condition and allowed investigators to see normal processes reassert themselves in the face of the pathological condition. Much as the biologist can learn about normal bodily functioning from the study of disease, so also social physicists can learn about the normal processes of society from the study of pathological cases. Thus, although Comte's view of "natural experimentation" was certainly deficient in the logic of the experimental method, it nonetheless fascinated subsequent generations of scholars.

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<sup>12</sup>Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, 2:241–257.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 245.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 246.



### *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 or 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 (i.e., comparing the present with the past). But his “law of the three stages” emphasized that the laws of social dynamics could ultimately be developed only with careful observations of the historical movement of societies.

In sum, then, Comte saw these four basic methods as appropriate to sociological analysis. His formulation of the methods is quite deficient by modern standards, but we should recognize that before Comte, little attention had been paid to how social facts were to be collected. Thus, although the specifics of Comte’s methodological proposals are not always useful, their spirit and intent are important. Social physics was, in his vision, 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.

## **Comte’s Organization of Sociology**

Much as Saint-Simon had emphasized, Comte saw sociology as an extension of biology, which studies the “organs” in “organisms.” Hence, sociology was to be the study of social *organization*. This emphasis forces the recognition that society is an “organic whole” whose component “organs” stand in relation to one another. To study these parts in isolation is to violate the essence of social organization and to compartmentalize inquiry artificially. 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.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 225.

Implicit in this mode of analysis is a theoretical approach that later became known as *functionalism*. As biology's prestige grew during the nineteenth century, attempts at linking sociological analysis to the respected biological sciences increased. Eventually, scholars began asking the following questions: What is the function of a structure for the body social? That is, what does a structure "do for" the social whole? Comte implicitly asked such questions and even offered explicit analogies to encourage subsequent organismic analogizing. For example, his concern with social pathology revealing the normal operation of society is only one illustration of a biological mode of reasoning. In his later work, Comte viewed various structures as analogous to "elements, tissues, and organs" of biological organisms.<sup>16</sup> In his early works, however, this organismic analogizing is limited to dividing social physics into statical and dynamical analysis.

This division, we suspect, represents a merger of Comte's efforts to build sociology on biology and to retain his heritage from the French Enlightenment. As a scholar who was writing in the tumultuous aftermath of the French Revolution, he was concerned with order and stability. The order of biological organisms, with their interdependent parts and processes of self-maintenance, offered him a vision of how social order should be constructed. Yet the Enlightenment had emphasized "progress" and movement of social systems, holding out the vision of better things to come. For this reason, Comte was led to emphasize that the "ideas of Order and Progress are, in Social Physics, as rigorously inseparable as the ideas of Organization and Life in Biology: from whence indeed they are, in a scientific view, evidently derived."<sup>17</sup> And thus he divided sociology into (1) social statics (the study of social order) and (2) social dynamics (the study of social progress and change).

### *Social Statics*

Comte defined social statics as the study of social structure, its elements, and their relations. He first analyzed "individuals" as the elements of social structure. Generally, he viewed the individual as a series of capacities and needs, some innate and others acquired through participation in society.<sup>18</sup> He did not view the individual as a

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<sup>16</sup>See, in particular, his *System of Positive Polity*, 2:221–276, on "The Social Organism."

<sup>17</sup>Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, 2:141.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 275–281.

“true social unit”; indeed, he relegated the study of the individual to biology—an unfortunate oversight because it denied the legitimacy of psychology as a distinct social science. The most basic social unit, he argued, is “the family.” It is the most elementary unit, from which all other social units ultimately evolved:

As every system must be composed of elements of the same nature with itself, the scientific spirit forbids us to regard society as composed of individuals. The true social unit is certainly the family—reduced, if necessary, to the elementary couple which forms its basis. This consideration implies more than the physiological truth that families become tribes, and tribes become nations: so that the whole human race might be conceived of as the gradual development of a single family. . . . There is a political point of view from which also we must consider this elementary idea, inasmuch as the family presents the true germ of the various characteristics of the social organism.<sup>19</sup>

Comte believed that social structures could not be reduced to the properties of individuals. Rather, social structures are composed of other structures and can be understood only as the properties of, and relations among, these other structures. Comte’s analysis of the family then moves to descriptions of its structure—first the sexual division of labor and then the parental relation. The specifics of his analysis are not important because they are flawed and inaccurate. Far more important is the view of structure that he implied: social structures are composed of substructures and develop from the elaboration of simpler structures.

After establishing this basic point, Comte moved to the analysis of societal structures. His opening remarks reveal his debt to biological analysis and the functional orientation it inspired:

The main cause of the superiority of the social to the individual organism is according to an established law; the more marked is the specialization of the various functions fulfilled by organs more and more distinct, but interconnected; so that unity of aim is more and more combined with diversity of means.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 280–281.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 289.

Thus, as social systems develop, they become increasingly differentiated, and yet like all organisms, they maintain their integration. This view of social structure led Comte to the problem that Adam Smith had originally suggested with such force: How is integration among parts maintained despite increasing differentiation of functions? This question occupied French sociology in the nineteenth century, culminating in Durkheim's theoretical formulations. Comte emphasized,

If the separation of social functions develops a useful spirit of detail, on the one hand, it tends on the other, to extinguish or to restrict what we may call the aggregate or general spirit. In the same way, in moral relations, while each is in close dependence on the mass, he is drawn away from it by the expansion of his special activity, constantly recalling him to his private interest, which he but very dimly perceives to be related to the public.<sup>21</sup>

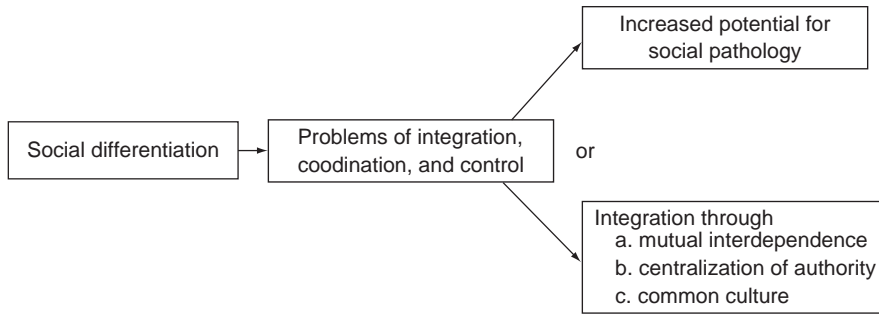
Comte's proposed solution to this problem reveals much about how he viewed the maintenance of social structure. First, the centralization of power in government counters the potentially disintegrating impact of social differentiation, which will then maintain fluid coordination among system parts. Second, the actions of government must be more than "material"; they must also be "intellectual and moral."<sup>22</sup> Hence, human social organization is maintained by (1) mutual dependence of system parts on one another, (2) centralization of authority to coordinate exchanges among parts, and (3) development of a common morality or spirit among members of a population. To the extent that differentiating systems cannot meet these conditions, pathological states are likely to occur. Figure 3.1 shows Comte's implicit model of social statics.

In presenting this analysis, Comte felt that he had uncovered several laws of social statics because he believed that differentiation, centralization of power, and development of a common morality were fundamentally related to the maintenance of the social order. Although he did not carry his analysis far, he presented both Herbert Spencer and Durkheim with one of the basic theoretical questions in sociology and the broad contours of the answer.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 293.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 294.



**Figure 3.1** Comte’s Implicit Model of Social Statics

*Social Dynamics*

Comte appeared far more interested in social dynamics than in statics, for

the dynamical view is not only the more interesting . . . , but the more marked in its philosophical character, from its being more distinguished from biology by the master-thought of continuous progress, or rather of the gradual development of humanity.<sup>23</sup>

Social dynamics studies the “laws of succession,” or the patterns of change in social systems over time. In this context, Comte formulated the details of his law of the three stages, in which idea systems, and their corresponding social structural arrangements, pass through three phases: (1) the theological, (2) the metaphysical, and (3) the positivistic. The basic cultural and structural features of these stages are summarized in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 ignores many details that have little relevance to theory,<sup>24</sup> but the table communicates, in a rough fashion, Comte’s view of the laws of succession. Several points should be noted: First, each stage sets the conditions for the next. For example, without efforts to explain references to the supernatural, subsequent efforts at more refined explanations would not have been possible; or without kinship systems, subsequent political, legal, and military development would not have occurred, and the modern division of labor would not have been possible. Second, the course of

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 227.

<sup>24</sup>Most of *Positive Philosophy*, Vol. 3, is devoted to the analysis of the three stages. For an abbreviated overview, see Vol. 2:304–333.

**Table 3.1** Comte's "Law of the Three Stages"

<b>System</b>	<b>Stages</b>		
	<b>Theological</b>	<b>Metaphysical</b>	<b>Positivistic</b>
1. Cultural (moral) system			
a. Nature of ideas	Ideas are focused on nonempirical forces, spirits, and beings in the supernatural realm	Ideas are focused 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 (temporal) system			
a. Most prominent units	Kinship	State	Industry
b. Basis of integration	Attachment 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

evolution is additive: New ideas and structural arrangements are added to, and build on, the old. For instance, kinship does not disappear, nor do references to the supernatural. They are first supplemented, and then dominated, by new social and cultural arrangements. Third, during the transition from one stage to the next, elements of the preceding stage conflict with elements of the emerging stage, creating a period of anarchy and turmoil. Fourth, the metaphysical stage is a transitional stage, operating as a bridge between theological speculation and positivistic philosophy. Fifth, the nature of cultural ideas determines the nature of social structural (temporal) arrangements and circumscribe what social arrangements are possible. And sixth, with the advent of the positivistic

stage, true understanding of how society operates is possible, allowing the manipulation of society in accordance with the laws of statics and dynamics.

Although societies must eventually pass through these three stages, they do so at different rates. Probably the most important of the variable empirical conditions influencing the rate of societal succession is population size and density, an idea taken from Montesquieu and later refined by Durkheim. Thus, Comte felt that he had discovered the basic law of social dynamics in his analysis of the three stages, and coupled with the laws of statics, a positivistic science of society—that is, social physics or sociology—would allow for the reorganization of the tumultuous, transitional, and conflictual world of the early nineteenth century.

### **Comte's Advocacy of Sociology**

Comte's *Positive Philosophy* can be viewed as a long and elaborate advocacy for a science of society. Most of the five volumes review the development of other sciences, showing how sociology represents the culmination of positivism. As the title, *Positive Philosophy*, underscores, Comte was laying a philosophical foundation and justification for all science and then using this foundation as a means for supporting sociology as a true science. His advocacy took two related forms: (1) to view sociology as the inevitable product of the law of the three stages and (2) to view sociology as the “queen science,” standing at the top of a hierarchy of sciences. These two interrelated forms of advocacy helped legitimate sociology in the intellectual world and should, therefore, be examined briefly.

Comte saw all idea systems as passing through the theological and metaphysical stages and then moving into the final, positivistic, stage. Ideas about all phenomena must pass through these phases, with each stage setting the conditions for the next and with considerable intellectual turmoil occurring during the transition from one stage to the next. Ideas about various phenomena, however, do not pass through these stages at the same rate, and, in fact, a positivistic stage in thought about one realm of the universe must often be reached before ideas about other realms can progress to the positivistic stage. The opening pages of *Positive Philosophy* emphasize,

We must bear in mind that the different kinds of our knowledge have passed through the three stages of progress at different

rates, and have not therefore arrived at the same time. The rate of advance depends upon the nature of knowledge in question, so distinctly that, as we shall see hereafter, this consideration constitutes an accessory to the fundamental law of progress. Any kind of knowledge reaches the positive stage in proportion to its generality, simplicity, and independence of other departments.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, thought about the physical universe reaches the positive stage before conceptions of the organic world do because the inorganic world is simpler and organic phenomena are built from inorganic phenomena. In Comte's view, then, astronomy was the first science to reach the positivistic stage, then came physics, next came chemistry, and after these three had reached the positivistic (scientific) stage, thought about organic phenomena could become more positivistic. The first organic science to move from the metaphysical to the positivistic stage was biology, or physiology. Once biology became a positivistic doctrine, sociology could move away from the metaphysical speculations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (and the residues of earlier theological thought) toward a positivistic mode of thought.

Sociology has been the last to emerge, Comte argued, because it is the most complex and because it has had to wait for the other basic sciences to reach the positivistic stage. For the time, this argument represented a brilliant advocacy for a separate science of society, while it justified the lack of scientific rigor in social thought when compared with the other sciences. Moreover, though dependent on, and derivative of, evolutionary advances in the other sciences, sociology will study phenomena that distinguish it from the lower inorganic phenomena as well as from the higher organic science of biology. Although it is an organic science, sociology will be independent and study phenomena that "exhibit, in even a higher degree, the complexity, specialization, and personality which distinguish the higher phenomena of the individual life."<sup>26</sup>

This notion of hierarchy<sup>27</sup> represented yet another way to legitimate sociological inquiry: It explained why sociology was not as developed

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<sup>25</sup>Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, 1:6–7.

<sup>26</sup>Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, 2:258.

<sup>27</sup>The hierarchy, in descending order, is sociology, biology, chemistry, physics, and astronomy. Comte added mathematics at the bottom because all sciences are ultimately built from mathematical reasoning.



as the other highly respected sciences, and it placed sociology in a highly favorable spot (at the top of a hierarchy) in relation to the other “positive sciences.” If sociology could be viewed as the culmination of a long evolutionary process and as the culmination of the positive sciences, its legitimacy could not be questioned. Such was Comte’s goal, and although he was only marginally successful in his efforts, he was the first to see clearly that sociology could be like the other sciences and that it would be only a matter of time until the old theological and metaphysical residues of earlier social thought were cast aside in favor of a true science of society. This advocacy, which takes up the majority of pages in *Positive Philosophy*, rightly ensures Comte’s claim to being the founder of sociological theory.

## Critical Conclusions

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Comte gave sociology its name, however reluctantly, because he preferred the label *social physics*, but he did much more: He gave the discipline a vision of what it could be. Few have argued so forcefully about the kind of science sociology should be, and he provided an interesting if somewhat quirky explanation for why this discipline should emerge and become increasingly important in the realm of science. Not all who followed Comte during the past two centuries would accept his positivism—that of a theoretically driven social science that could be used in the reconstruction of society—but he made several important points. First, theories must be abstract, seeking to isolate and explain the nature of the fundamental forces guiding the operation of society. Second, theories must be explicitly and systematically tested against the empirical world, using a variety of methods. Third, collecting data without the guidance of theory will not contribute greatly to the accumulation of knowledge about how the social universe operates. Finally, sociology should be used to rebuild social structures, but these applications of sociology must be guided by theory rather than by ideologies and personal biases.

Comte also anticipated the substantive thrust of much early sociology, especially that of Herbert Spencer and Émile Durkheim. Comte recognized that as societies grow, they become more differentiated, and the differentiation requires new bases of integration revolving around the concentration of power and around mutual interdependence. He did not develop these ideas very far, but he set an agenda. Comte also reintroduced the organismic analogy to social thinking,

although many would not see this as a blessing. At the very least, however, he alerted subsequent sociologists that society is a system whose parts are interconnected in ways having consequences for the maintenance of the social whole. This basic analogy to organisms evolved into the functionalism of Spencer and Durkheim.

Still, there is much to criticize in Comte. He never really developed any substantive theory, apart from the relationship between social differentiation and new modes of integration. Most of Comtean sociology is a justification for sociology, and a very good one at that, but he did not explain how the social universe operates. He thought that his “law of the three stages” was the equivalent of Newton’s law of gravity, but Comte’s law is not so much a law as a rather simplistic view of the history of ideas. It made for an interesting way to justify the emergence of positivism and its queen science, sociology, but it did not advance sociology’s understanding of the dynamics of the social universe.

Add Comte’s personal pathologies, which made him a truly bizarre and pathetic figure by the time of his death, and we are perhaps justified in ignoring Comte as a theorist who contributed to our understanding of the social universe. We should remember him for his forceful advocacy for scientific sociology. No one has done better since Comte first began to publish his positive philosophy.