

Classical Sociological Theory
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Lecture 12
Auguste Comte (1798 - 1857)

Welcome to this session and in this class, we will have a slightly detailed discussion about Auguste Comte, who is widely considered as the father of sociology. In the previous class, we discussed the contributions of Montesquieu and Saint Simon as the social philosophers who laid the foundation or who contributed significantly for the emergence of sociology as a distinct social science.

By the time we come to Auguste Comte, we see that he has coined the term sociology and then sociology emerged as a distinct discipline. It is being widely recognized as a new social science which with a very exclusive focal point and with an exclusive subject matter with a specific scientific methodology as a way of knowing about the society. In that sense, Auguste Comte is a very important scholar for the students of sociology, much more than the thinkers whom we discussed so far.

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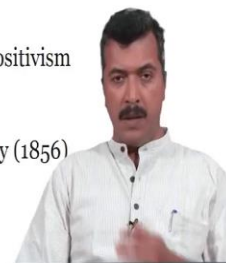


•The Course on Positive Philosophy (1830-1842)

•Discourse on the Positive Spirit (1844)

•A General View of Positivism (1848)

•Religion of Humanity (1856)

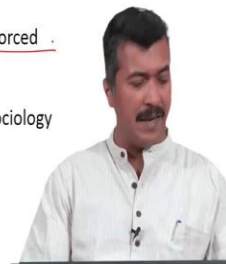


This is his picture and these are some of his very important works. He was an extensive writer, published extensively. His major works includes ‘The course on positive philosophy’, which

appeared in different volumes and 'Discourse on the positive spirit' published in 1844, 'A general view of positivism' published in 1848 and 'Religion of humanity' in 1856.

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- Born on 19th January 1798 and passed away on 5th September 1857
- Widely considered as the father of sociology, founder of positivism and one of the early philosophers of science.
- A close companion of Saint Simon, but later parted ways
- Suffered mental illness in the latter part of his life, got divorced from his wife
- Considered to be a marginal influence in contemporary sociology



He was born on 19th January 1798 and passed away on 5th September 1857. He is widely considered as the father of sociology, founder of Positivism and one of the early philosophers of science. This term 'father of sociology' is a very problematic and it is a very oversimplified term.

By now, I hope you would have understood that a person simply does not found the discipline or you cannot really pinpoint a person as the one who gave birth to a discipline. No disciplines simply take birth that way. You cannot really give the credit for the birth of a discipline to one single individual.

Even for the birth of a theory, it is very difficult to pinpoint a particular person because none of these people work or live in vacuum. They synthesize and engage in critical dialogue with their predecessors. They borrow a lot of ideas from the previous scholars. They revise them. They would have a very creative engagement with these things. Therefore, to say that, Auguste Comte is the father of sociology is a very oversimplified statement.

He is the one who coined this term sociology by combining this concepts such as socius and logos. Even before Comte, there were social thinkers, like Ibn Khaldun who is widely considered by many people as the father of sociology and who provided very fascinating sociological analysis and experience as early as say 14th century in Arabia.

However, Comte was also the founder of positivism. This is a very important aspect of his thoughts. He is the one who is considered to be the father of positivism, a very powerful epistemological position and methodological argument that sociology has to follow the path of the science because it can study society by using scientific methods in an objective and unbiased manner.

The rise of positivism and the rise of anti-positivism lead to very fascinating methodological debates and discussions within the trajectory of sociology. Comte was also one of the early philosophers of science who categorized science into different things and theorized about the relationship between methodology and theory. In that sense, Auguste Comte is a very, profound thinker.

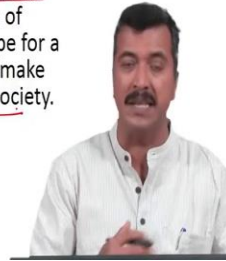
He was a very close companion of Saint Simon. He worked as his secretary and at least for six to seven years, they collaborated very closely. Their ideas shaped each other's thoughts very closely. Later they fell apart and they fought very bitterly. Their relationship ended in a very, sour note. Auguste Comte's personal life also was not very pleasant and peaceful as he suffered from mental illness and lived alone for most parts of his life.

In the later part of his life, he got divorced from his first wife and didn't had a very pleasant personal life. Today, he is kind of considered to be a marginal influence in contemporary sociology because of the irrelevance of his arguments that society has to be seen as a positive one. Many of his arguments are not really taken very seriously at present.

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- Comte's sociology emerged from the economic, political, and social conditions of post-revolutionary France.
- Comte's career had two phases: (1) the early scientific stage where he argued persuasively for a science of society and was very famous in 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.



We need to situate every important philosophers in their time and in their context. As I just mentioned no philosopher thinks simply out of the blue. Nobody gets enlightenment the way we conventionally understand the term, unlike say figures like Buddha or some other saints who gets an enlightenment all of a sudden or after so much of penance. That does not really work in the case of a social scientist.

They do not work in isolation. They have a very intense negotiations and engagement and conversations with the kind of ideas and scholars who are around them. That ultimately leads to some kind of an original contribution from these scholars. Therefore, social, economic, cultural and political context of every social thinker is important.

In the coming classes, we will have to very carefully look at what were the kind of socio-economic and intellectual context for every scholar. Comte's sociology emerged from the economic, political and social conditions of post-revolutionary France. So that particular context, the immediate context of French Revolution played a very significant role in shaping the arguments of Auguste Comte.

We can broadly divide Comte's career into two phases; the early scientific stage where he argued persuasively for a science of society and was very famous in continental Europe for a brief time and the latter part of his life where he tried to make science a new religion for the reconstruction

of society. So these two phases are very evident, especially towards the latter part, where he began to think about science as a religion for humanity.

By the time second phase, he really suffered a lot of loss of credibility. Many of his followers discarded him and people felt that he is moving into mysticism and he is kind of talking things which are not very coherent. You see the kind of a downfall of a very important intellectual who was kind of celebrated at one point in time in Europe.

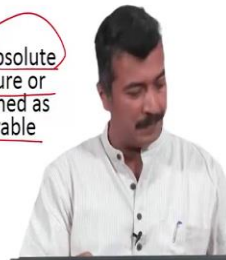
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Positivism



- Positivism as a philosophical and epistemological foundation of sociology must be understood in his larger scheme of things about evolution of society through law of three stages

- Positive, in Comte's sense, meant abandoning absolute for relative truth, and the search for the real nature or cause of things, in favor of discovering laws, defined as predictable regularities in the behavior of observable phenomena.



As I mentioned, Comte is considered to be the father of positivism, a very important, methodological and epistemological strand in sociology. Positivism is a philosophical and epistemological foundation of sociology and must be understood in his larger scheme of things about the evolution of society through law of three stages. One of the most important contributions of Comte is his formulation of law of three stages, which we will briefly discuss. He argued that every society passes through these three distinct stages, from theological to metaphysical to positive.

His argument about positivism a epistemological orientation has to be understood with his larger scheme of things in which he argued that societies necessarily pass through these three distinct stages. Positive in Comte's sense meant abandoning absolute for relative truth and the search for the real nature or cause of things in favor of discovering laws defined as predictable regularities in the behavior of observable phenomena.


This is exactly a definition about science. You are trying to discard the absolute truth. You discard any absolutist truth. You look forward for relative truth, which are established at a particular point in time, and this is the one of the major differences between religion and science. Religion has an absolute explanation for almost every question.

Religion is an absolute larger theory. Anything and everything that happens in this world can be explained on the basis of the will of the God, whether it is the whole question about what happens after death. The whole idea of starting from questions like who created the universe, and to more philosophical questions, like what is the purpose of life or who am I or what is supposed to be leading a good life?

Religion is able to provide absolute unambiguous answers to each and every of these questions, whereas science cannot do so. Comte advocated for that abandoning absolute for relative truth and the search for real nature or cause of things. He argued that it is very much possible to establish causal links.

It is very much possible to argue why certain things happen or what are the causal factors behind certain things. Comte was in favor of discovering laws defined as predictable regularities in the behavior of observable phenomena. He would argue that positivism or the path of the science is to look forward for predictable regularities in the behavior of observable phenomena. You observe things, you collect and analyze these facts, then you will be able to see the kind of observable or predictable regularities, which in turn gives rise to formulation of specific and codified laws.

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- "If it is true that every theory must be based upon observed facts, it is equally true that facts can not be observed without the guidance of some theories. Without such guidance, our facts would be desultory and fruitless; we could not retain them: for the most part we could not even perceive them"
 - In the *COURSE OF POSITIVE PHILOSOPHY*, Comte attempted to demonstrate that each science is necessarily dependent on the previous science, that is, science can only be understood historically as the process of greater perfection.
 - The final science which Comte claimed to have discovered and one which had not yet entered its positive stage, was sociology. It was sociology, he claimed, that would give ultimate meaning to all the other sciences




If it is true that every theory must be based on observed facts, it is equally true that facts cannot be observed without the guidance of some theories. Without such guidance, our facts would be desultory and fruitless. We could not retain them for the most part and we would not even perceive them. This is a very interesting point where Comte makes this connection between facts and theory, whether it is a deductive approach or inductive approach, whether can we have a set of facts without theory or can we have theories without facts.

He makes this point very clear that you need to have a set of facts, but these facts must be informed by larger theoretical argument otherwise, they become fruitless. They do not reveal any meaning on its own. Therefore he talks about the kind of complementarity between theory and facts. In his book, 'The course of positive philosophy', Comte attempted to demonstrate that each science is necessarily dependent on previous science. That is, science can only be understood historically as the process of greater perfection. He has this idea of hierarchy of science, starting with physics, astronomy, biology, and then finally reaching to sociology.


As we mentioned, he is widely considered as one of the earliest philosophers of science. He has his own argument about the complexity of science and how scientific method can be approached. A scientific method can be used to understand complicated subject matters. He argued that the final science which Comte claimed to have discovered at once, which had not yet entered its positive stage, was sociology.

He claimed that sociology would give ultimate meaning to all other science. He argued that sociology is the mother of all sciences. I do not think this claim has any major validity relevance now. He argued that, mathematics, where scientific principles can be used very easily could be compared to that of sociology which deals a more complicated, unpredictable system. He argued that in that sense, sociology really represents the most important feature of science.

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- Comte proposed the word sociology for this new science rather than the current expression, *physique sociale* (or social physics).
- Sociology was divided into two distinct parts. Social statics, that is, the study of socio-political systems relative to their existing level of civilization and social dynamics which entailed the study of the three stages.
- Attempt was to find the true scientific knowledge about the society so that a balance between the order and progress can be made and all conflicts, violence and confusion can be avoided.
- The tussle between advocates of reformists and the reactionary counter reformists.



Comte proposed the word ‘sociology’ for this new science rather than the current expression social physics. We know that is one of the reasons why Comte is considered as the father of sociology. He argued that this term ‘sociology’, as the science of society is better than the term ‘social physics’ which was the term that was currently used during that particular time.

Another very important contribution of Comte, which is very valid even today, is his focus on two distinct aspects of society. He argued that sociology was divided into two distinct part, one is ‘social statics’ that is the study of socio-political systems related to their existing level of civilization and secondly, social dynamics which entailed the study of three stages. In this sense, he argued that sociology is the study of two distinct things.

One is about social statics that looks at how a society exists. What is the kind of a study of socio-political systems, socio-political systems, socio-political structure of that particular society where you are able to understand that particular society in relation to their existing level of civilization.

Through that you are able locate a particular society where it stands in the larger scheme or larger canvas of things.

Then the second part, the 'social dynamics' which tries to understand the social change. In other words the social order and social change. Social statics looks at how the social structure is formed and where do you locate the, this particular society in the larger evolutionary scheme of things. And the social dynamics, the latter part of sociology must look at how societies undergo change.

This argument about a larger canvas of society is one of the most central arguments of Comte that every society has to undertake a unilinear evolutionary model, an evolutionary model in a single direction. Every society must follow this particular path, reaching a kind of a culmination. For him the Western societies have already reached this particular culmination because they were the so-called positive societies.

Therefore, the attempt of Comte was to find the true scientific knowledge about the society so that a balance between order and progress can be made and all conflicts, violence and confusion can be avoided. As we discussed briefly, Comte was a product of his time. He saw the kind of confusion, violence and unrest and the social conflict that affected France during the period after the French revolution.

Comte was deeply committed to bringing a more peaceful solution. He believed that the scientific knowledge will bring about a kind of balance between order and progress, which are very important concepts in sociology. On the one hand, you need stability and for stability you need established institutions. You need a set of moral values. You need a set of practices which have certain kind of permanence.

You need certain social structure, you need entrenched practices and entrenched value systems. On the other hand, society also requires progress because French Revolution was seen as a very important milestone in the human progress. It also opened up the possibility that the society can march forward to endless possibilities of progress. So on the one hand, you require a certain kind of an equilibrium because a society without equilibrium and society completely or constantly in state of chaos could be quite detrimental.

You need some kind of stability and also you need the kind of a forward march towards what was generally understood as progress. How do you ensure that? So he believed that the scientific knowledge provides you the mechanism to strike a balance between the social order and progress and therefore all conflicts, violence and confusion can be avoided. The tussle between advocates of reformists and the reactionary counter reformists could be balanced.

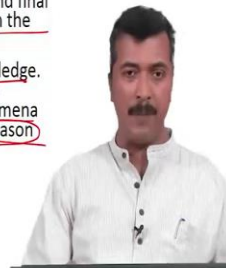
We know that, in Europe during that particular time, there was very serious very serious conflict or arguments between the people who advocated more radical changes and the more reactionary conservative sections who wanted all these reformists attempts to be stopped and society retain its balance. In that context, Comte actually represents a very interesting position that tried reconcile these two.

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The law of three stages



- He claimed the history of society could be divided into three different stages: theological, metaphysical, and positive based on the evolution of philosophy and of human mind.
- **The first stage, the theological stage**, relies on supernatural or religious explanations of the phenomena of human behavior because "the human mind, in its search for the primary and final causes of phenomena, explains the apparent anomalies in the universe as interventions of supernatural agents"
- In this stage, humans focus on discovering absolute knowledge. Comte disapproved this stage because it turned to simple explanation humans created in their minds that all phenomena was caused by supernatural agents, rather than human reason and experience.



Now coming to his major contribution about this law of three stages, he claimed that the history of society could be divided into three different stages the theological, metaphysical and positive based on the evolution of philosophy and of human mind. It is a very interesting argument he makes. He argues that the evolution of philosophy, society and human mind, they all follow the kind of a similar pattern of a transformation from a stage that can be described as theological to an intermediary and a very short lived face called as metaphysical to that of a current phase that can be called as positive.

Comte was very favorable about it. He was very optimistic about it. Comte had very positive opinion about this argument. He believed in the laws of society. He is as a social scientist, was trying to imitate the practices of natural science. He was trying to formulate laws of human society. As you all must be knowing, now no sociologists would dare to talk about formulating his or her laws that are applicable to every society, irrespective of time and place. Such a conception of overarching laws are impossible, they do not work.

Sociologists have realized that it is impossible or irrelevant to try and formulate such laws. But the times of Comte was very different. The intellectual orientation of Comte was very different. He believed that such laws can be formulated because he modelled sociology after natural sciences such as physics or chemistry.

He wanted to create a laws of sociology the same way you have laws in physics and chemistry. So the first stage, the theological stage relies on supernatural or religious explanations of the phenomena of human behavior. Because the human mind is in search for causes of phenomena and explains the apparent anomalies in the universe as interventions of supernatural agents, which is a very important argument.

Even if we do not agree with the argument about law of society,, it is very important because it also talks about how human society in general began to make sense of the world. Because in this theological state, as he correctly points out, human beings try to make sense of this world as a reflection of the actions and desires of a supernatural being, whether you call it as a God or you believe it as the power of spirits or certain kind of in phenomena like animatism.

You believe that the things that are going around you, or way in which the world works, the way in which human beings behave, the way in which everything happens around you must be regulated by a supernatural agent. As human society progressed, your understanding of the supernatural agent also changed from attributing divine power to a particular object.

You usually understand the evolution as starting from animism where supernatural powers were perceived to be attached to particular rock or a particular tree or particular animal, to natural forces like thunder or rain, into different ideas about spirits and notions of God into more refined and more advanced notions of a of monotheistic religions of a single God. The God which appears in the nature of human beings or a God which does not have any shape.

All these explanations were used to make sense of the world around them and to explain the apparent anomalies in the universe as inventions of supernatural agents. It could be anomaly in terms of your personal life. You being very pious and leading a very virtuous life, but end up in facing some of the most difficult tragedies in your life, you do not come to terms with that.

Starting from such kind of questions or agonies to your bewilderment about the way in which the world function about natural calamities, everything was attributed to a supernatural agent. In this stage, human focused on discovering absolute knowledge. Comte disapproves this state because it turns to be simplistic explanation of social phenomenon. In this stage, people perceive that all phenomena was caused by supernatural agents rather than human reason and experience.

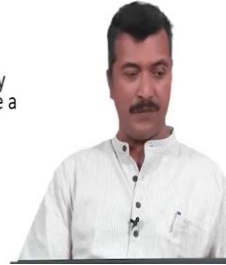
It is a very familiar argument that we have. You tend to believe what you simply thought in your mind, especially with the emergence of religion as an institutionalized system. There was mechanism to consolidate these ideas and to transmit these ideas and even to enforce that. So every story of organized religion tells you the story of its codification, its institutionalization and its transmission, its socialization and its enforcement through violent as well as through non-violent means.

Therefore every religious education, religious institutions and in combination with legal system and brute power, they worked across the ages to establish that religious knowledge is the absolute one. But Comte believed that is not true because that is a reflection of a simple and uncritical mind. And rather, you need to employ reason and experience to make sense of the word.

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- The Theological Stage is broken into three sections, Fetishism, Polytheism, and Monotheism as an evolutionary progress.
- **The metaphysical stage**, is merely a modification of the first because a supernatural cause is replaced by an "abstract entity"; it is meant to be a transitional stage, where there is the belief that abstract forces control the behavior of human beings.
- Because "Theology and physics are so profoundly incompatible", and their "conceptions are so radically opposed in character", human intelligence must have a gradual transition.



According to Comte, the theological stage is broken into three sections, fetishism, polytheism and monotheism as an evolutionary progress. We just briefly mention that because even in this theological stage, human beings progress from understanding of attributing these supernatural spiritual things to set of objects, fetishism into polytheism believe in several gods, several forms of Gods, and then evolved into monotheism.

Even this is understanding is quite problematic. Because of this evolutionary character, he would argue that the most refined version of religion is that of monotheism which again a problematic assumption. In that sense, the second stage of metaphysical stage is merely a modification of the first, because a supernatural cause is replaced by an abstract entity. People begin to think in terms of metaphysics, and not proper theology.

It is meant to be a transitional stage where there is the belief that the abstract forces control the behavior of human beings. Comte does not really elaborate this much as he argues that is a very brief period. It is a very transitional period. In spite of attributing the reasons to supernatural being or the supernatural power, you attribute that to abstract forces.

Because theology and physics are so profoundly incompatible and their conceptions are so radically opposed in character, human intelligence must have a gradual transition. He implies a very instructive argument that theology and physics are so profoundly incompatible. He argued

that you cannot have a sudden shift from a theological frame of mind to a scientific frame of mind.

Because both work very differently and work on completely different premises. Both have different kind of temperaments, different kind of impact on both psychological and social and personal spheres. So you need a kind of gradual transition. And he argued metaphysical stage provided that kind of a space.

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- **the positive stage** – is when the mind realizes that laws exist to govern human behavior, and that this stage can be explained rationally with the use of reason and observation, both of which are used to study the social world. This stage relies on science, rational thought, and empirical laws.
- Comte believed that this study of sociology he created was "the science that [came] after all the others; and as the final science, it must assume the task of coordinating the development of the whole of knowledge" because it organized all of human behavior.
- His latter writings were more related to mysticism, leaving many of his supporters disappointed.



Comte argues that it is in the positive stage, when the mind realizes that laws exist to govern human behavior and that this state can be explained rationally with the use of reason and observation, both of which are used to study the social world. This stage relies on science, rational thought and empirical laws.

This is the time when human beings say goodbye to all the theological explanation, all the knowledge that is supplied to them by the clergy, by the priests, which only requires your complete obedience and an acceptance. It does not require any critical faculty. You are not supposed to have a critical dialogue with your clergy or with your priest. You are supposed to completely accept the knowledge that is supplied to you as divine knowledge.

Even criticizing the provider of this knowledge is seen as equivalent to criticizing the God. So once knowledge is considered to be divine and the knowledge giver is considered to be divine, then it becomes very difficult to criticize. So Comte argued that human civilization or human

mind in the latter stage began to criticize or began to develop this faculty of criticism. They began to develop the faculty of reason.

They began to believe that, unlike other living organisms; human beings have the ability to use the critical faculty to understand the world on their own. They are able to make use of observation. They are able to make use of their intelligence to make sense of the things that are happening around them. Through the rational thought, they are able to formulate empirical laws.

Comte believed that, this study of sociology he created was the science that came after all others. As the final science, it must assume the task of coordinating the development of the whole knowledge because it is organized all of human behavior. It is about the point that we discussed briefly, he considered sociology as a mother of all social science.

As sociology is the most recent science, it has all the features of all the sciences that were developed prior to that. It is able to synthesize all the scientific spirit that were developed previous to that. So he argued that sociology must be able to develop that kind of equality. It must emerge as the epitome of all the scientific qualities.

As I briefly mentioned, towards the latter part of his writing, he turned towards a kind of mysticism, leaving behind his preoccupation with scientific inquiry and positivism and leaving many of his supporters disappointed. He had a very difficult end. A scholar who was once celebrated, and considered to be very powerful in Europe, lived a very lonely life towards the end.

As students of sociology, we understand Comte not only as a father of sociology, not in a technical sense of the term, as he is the one who coined the term. But he is the one who very profoundly argued for the emergence of sociology as a positive science, a strand of thinking, which is even now a very powerful strand. In the era of postmodernity or late modernity there are very powerful strand of epistemological as well as methodological foundations within sociology, who argues that sociology cannot let go its scientific character.

Of course, there could be arguments and disagreements about what constitutes objectivity and other things. But there are very powerful schools of thought which argues that sociology must retain its character of science because the terms such as 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' are not

simply empty words. They need to be very seriously safeguarded. So we will wind up this class on Auguste Comte and will discuss Herbert Spencer in the coming class. Thank you.