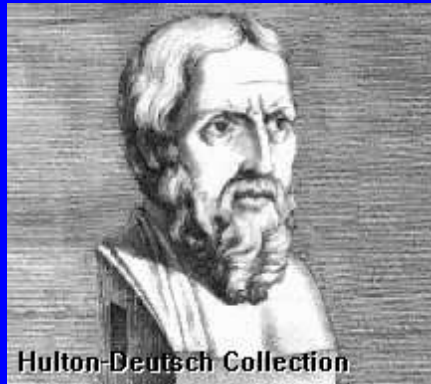

August Comte 1798 - 1857



A Science of Society

- ◆ Comte's goal was to
 - Explain the past
 - Predict the future

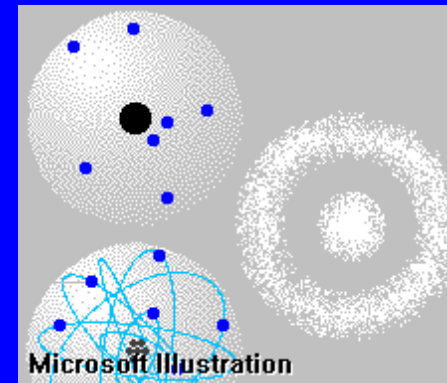


Social Physics

He first named the new science “social physics.” He later changed this to “sociology.” The word comes from the Greek “soci” which means “society” and the Latin “ology” which means “study of.”

Sociology

Like all science, Comte believed that this new science of society should be based on reasoning and observation.



Sociology

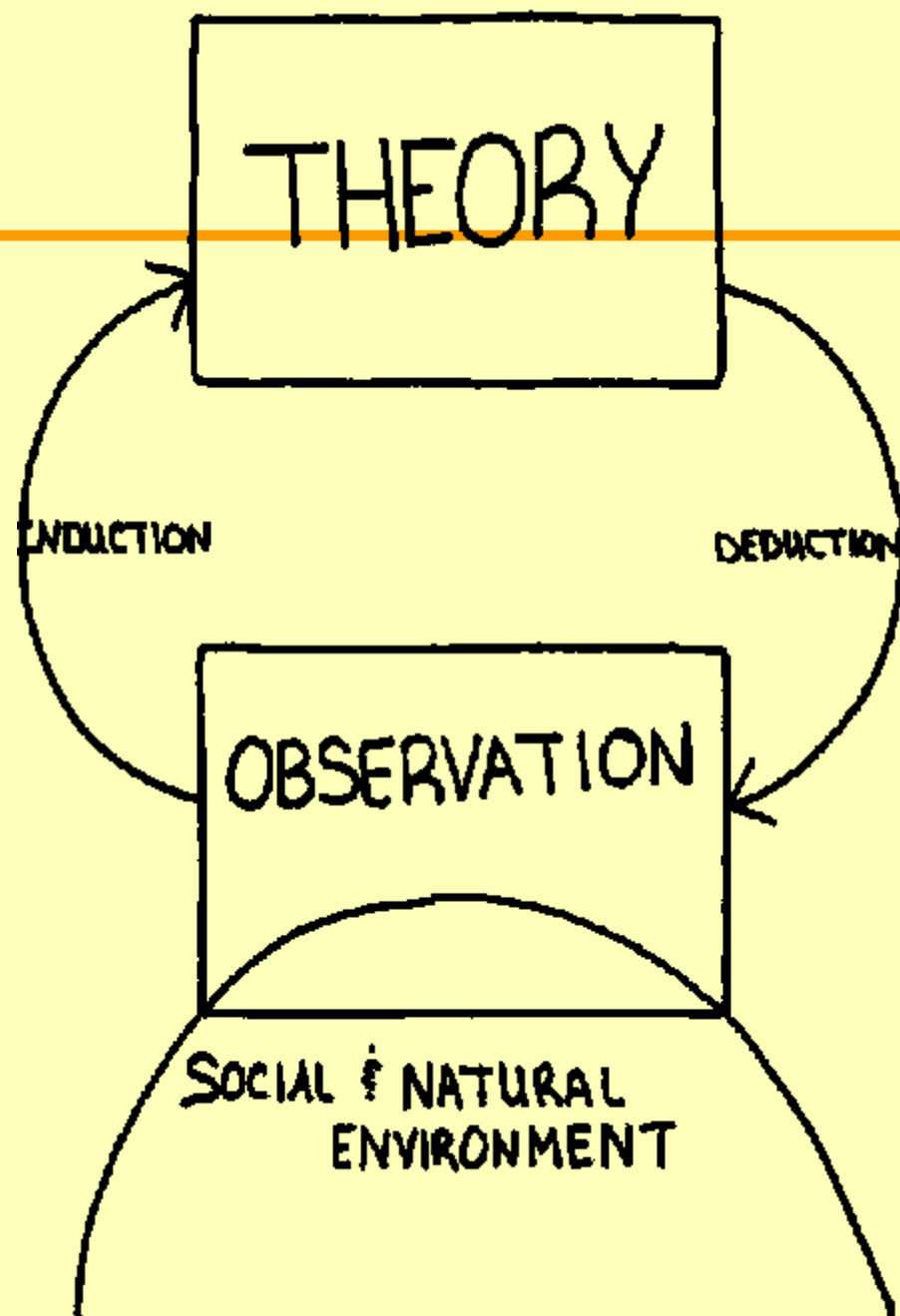
Science attempted to explain all phenomena through theories based on natural laws.

Sociology, Comte believed, should have the same goal: to discover the natural laws that determine social stability and change.

Further, like the natural sciences, sociology should be used to create a better society.

Theory

For Comte, the simple collection of facts was not enough. “Facts cannot be observed without the guidance of some theory.”



Comte On Theory

- ◆ "No social fact can have any scientific meaning till it is connected with some other social facts" (II, p. 245).
- ◆ "If it is true that every theory must be based upon observed facts, it is equally true that facts cannot be observed without the guidance of some theory" (Comte, 1830, p. 4).
- ◆ "No real observation of any phenomena is possible, except in so far as it is first directed, and finally interpreted, by some theory" (Comte, 1830, p. 243).

Positivism

"The first characteristic of Positive Philosophy is that it regards all phenomena as subject to invariable natural Laws. . . . Our real business is to analyze accurately the circumstances of phenomena, and to connect them by the natural relations of succession and resemblance" (Comte, 1830, 5-6).

Positivism

"For it is only by knowing the laws of phenomena, and thus being able to foresee them, that we can . . . set them to modify one another for our advantage. . . . Whenever we effect anything great it is through a knowledge of natural laws. . . . From Science come Prevision; from Prevision comes Action" (The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte I, 20-21)

Positivism

The new science was to be of real benefit to mankind. It would provide the knowledge that would help us reform society. It would establish the natural laws that governed human affairs, establish institutions that would maintain order and guide us in social change.

Positivism

"We shall find that there is no chance of order and agreement but in subjecting social phenomena, like all others, to invariable natural laws, which shall, as a whole, prescribe for each period, with entire certainty, the limits and character of social action" (I, p. 216).

Positivism

"The office of science is not to govern, but to modify phenomena; and to do this it is necessary to understand their laws" (II, p. 240).

Positivism

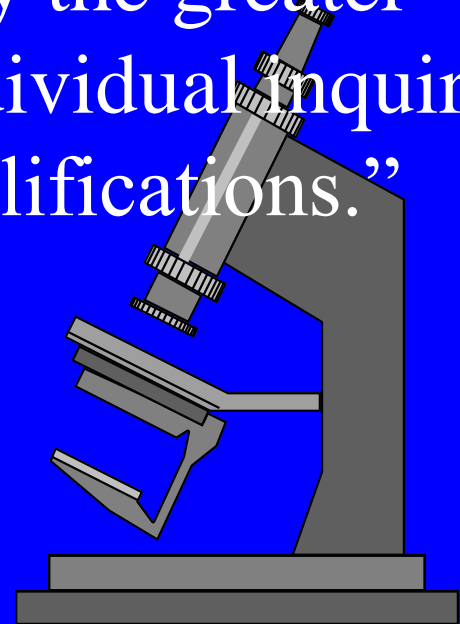
In order to transform the natural world to our purposes, human beings first had to discover natural law through science. Once sociology discovers the laws governing social evolution, we can use this knowledge to make a better world. In order to change society for the better, we must first know how the various parts of society fit together and how they change.

Positivism

Societies impose limits on human behavior. A science of society will help discover what these limits are so that we will know what is possible and what is not. Personal opinion without the discipline of study and science are as invalid in understanding society as they are in understanding the natural world.

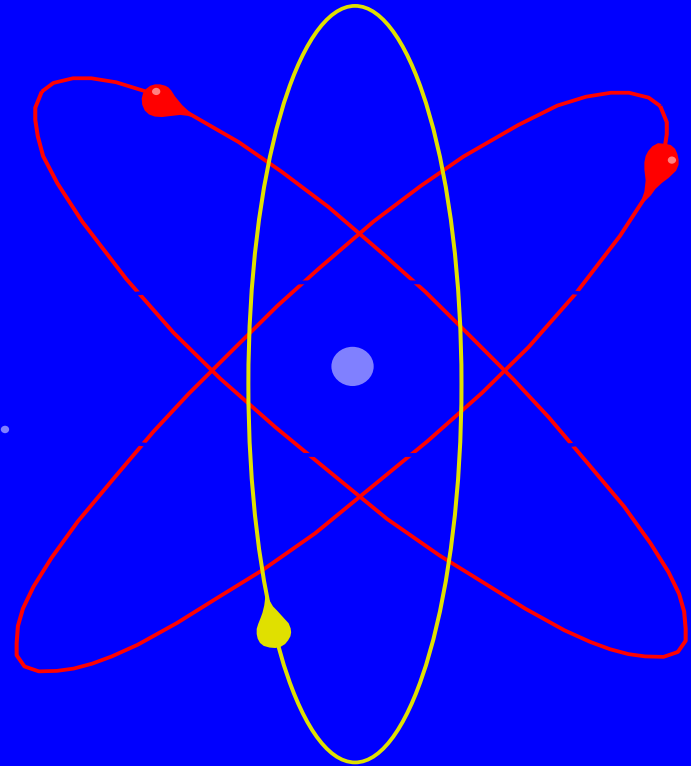
Positivism

“Ordinary men should hold no opinions about matters of scientific fact. The intellectual reorganization in the social sciences requires the renunciation by the greater number of their right of individual inquiry on subjects above their qualifications.”



Preferred Methods of Inquiry

- ◆ The methodology of sociology is the same as it is for the natural sciences:
 - Observation
 - Experimentation
 - Comparison



Observation

By observation Comte means the direct observation of human behavior, guided by a preliminary theory of what you expect to observe.

Experimentation

Formal experimentation is not really applicable in the study of many social phenomena. For example, we cannot study the effects of mother love by taking infants away from their mothers and comparing this to infants that were coddled.

Experimentation

However, Comte points out, "Experimentation takes place whenever the regular course of the phenomenon is interfered with in any determinate manner. . . . Pathological cases are the true scientific equivalent of pure experimentation" (II, p. 245).

Historical Comparison

But, the chief method for the social scientist "consists in a comparison of the different co-existing states of human society on the various parts of the earth's surface--these states being completely independent of each other. By this method, the different stages of evolution may all be observed at once" (II, p. 249).

Historical Comparison

“The historical comparison of the consecutive states of humanity is not only the chief scientific device ...it constitutes the substratum of the science...Sociology is nothing if not informed by a sense of historical evolution” (II, p. 251).



Historical Comparison

Comte reasoned that different parts of the world were at different stages of development. A comparison of these different social systems would therefore enable us to better understand social order and social change.

The Law of Three Stages

The evolution of society has paralleled the evolution of the individual mind.

Phylogeny, or the evolutionary and historical development of human societies parallels ontogeny, the course of development of the individual human organism.



The Law of Three Stages

Individuals, he maintained, passed through three stages. We are devout believers in childhood, in adolescence we become metaphysicians, enamored of such concepts as fate, essence, first causes, and other abstractions. Finally, as adults we become positivists, relying on observation and reason for explanation.

The Law of Three Stages

- ◆ Mankind, too, has evolved through these three stages. “Each of our leading conceptions—each branch of our knowledge, passes through three theoretical conditions.”
 - Theological Stage
 - Metaphysical Stage
 - Scientific (or positive) Stage

Theological Stage

- ◆ Universe explained in terms of:
 - Gods
 - Demons
 - Mythological Beings



Theological Stage

“In the theological state, the human mind, seeking the essential nature of beings, the first and final causes (the origin and purpose) of all effects...supposes all phenomena to be produced by the immediate action of supernatural beings.”

Metaphysical Stage

- ◆ Reality explained in terms of abstractions:
 - Essence
 - Existence
 - Substance
 - Accident



Metaphysical Stage

“In the metaphysical state...the mind supposes...abstract forces capable of producing all phenomena”

Positive Stage

According to Comte, the metaphysical stage was just ending, giving way to the final, or positive stage, in which explanations are based on scientific laws discovered through...

- Experimentation
- Observation
- Logic



Positive Stage

“In the final state, the positive state, the mind has given over the search for absolute notions, the origins and destination of the universe, and the causes of phenomena, and applies itself to the study of their laws—that is, their invariable relations of succession and resemblance.”

Law of Three Stages

For Comte, each successive stage grew out of the preceding one. “The constitution of the new system cannot take place before the destruction of the old.”

Societal Stages

- ◆ Societies go through these stages as well:
 - Theological
 - Metaphysical
 - Positive

Theological Stage

The Ancient World. Dominated by military men, the basic societal unit is the family.



Metaphysical Stage

The Middle Ages. Under the sway of churchmen and lawyers. The state rises to social prominence.



Hulton-Deutsch Collection

Positive Stage

Modern Age. This will be governed by industrial administrators and scientific moral guides. The whole human race becomes the main social unit.



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Scientific Stages

Scientific knowledge also passes through stages similar to societies. Each stage building on the knowledgebase of its predecessor. Different sciences evolve at different rates. First there was astronomy, then physics, chemistry, biology, and finally sociology.

Scientific Stages

- ◆ Each science in the series is based on the prior development of the one preceding it; each is more complex than the last.
- ◆ The social sciences are the most complex of all, and the highest in the hierarchy.
- ◆ “Sociology offers the completion of the positive method. All others are preparatory to it.”

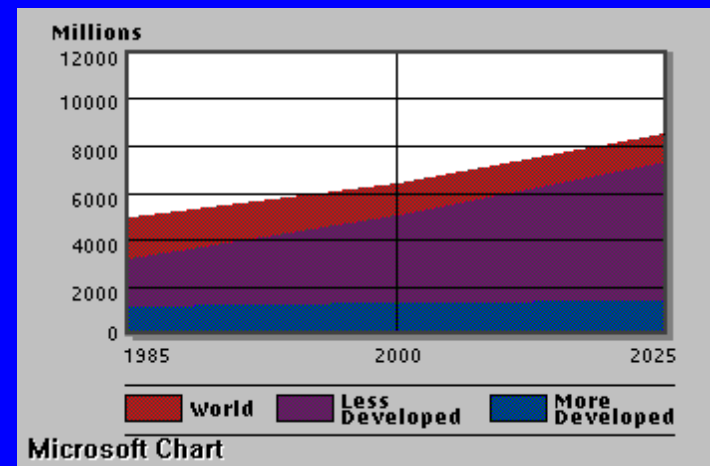
Scientific Stages

Sociology is especially dependent upon the emergence of biology. Biology is based on the study of organic wholes; biology is a holistic science concerned with physiological and environmental systems.

Other Important Factors

Though he insists that his “intellectual evolution is the preponderant principle” of social evolution. He also commented on two other important factors that profoundly affect the evolution of society:

- Population
- Division of Labor



Other Important Factors

Population increases, or the “progressive compounding of our species brings about division of employment...as could not take place among smaller numbers.

Social Bonds

- ◆ Language
- ◆ Religion
- ◆ Division of Labor



Social Bond: Language

But while biological organisms were encased in skin and held together by bone, muscle, and other physical materials, there were no such physical ties holding a society together. Rather, Comte said, we are held together by more spiritual ties. Among the most important of these ties is a common language.

Social Bond: Language

Language ties us to past generations, ties us into a community of our fellows with similar concepts, values, and outlooks. Without common language we cannot attain solidarity and consensus, without common language no social order is possible.

Social Bond: Religion

While language is one of the primary bonds that hold a society together another important bond, according to Comte, is a common religious belief. Religion is a bond that encourages individuals to subordinate their own self-interests to the interests of their fellows. It holds a society together in a system of common beliefs.

Social Bond: Religion

Religion also serves to legitimate a society's institutions, giving them spiritual support and approval, strengthening the status quo, making it seem right and ordained by God.

Social Bond: Division of Labor

Finally, men and women are “bound together by the very distribution of their occupations; and it is this distribution which causes the extent and growing complexity of the social organism” (II, p. 292).

Social Bond: Division of Labor

Comte argued that the division of labor encouraged individuals to develop their talents; that it contributed to the social bond by making each individual dependent on others—the baker, the butcher, the candlestick maker—none could survive without the other.

Social Bond: Division of Labor

"The social organization tends more and more to rest on an exact estimate of individual diversities, by so distributing employments as to appoint each one to the destination he is most fit for, from his own nature. . . , from his education and his position, and, in short, from all his qualifications; so that all individual organizations, even the most vicious and imperfect . . . , may finally be made use of for the general good" (II, p. 292).

Social Bond: Division of Labor

But Comte was also concerned with some negative aspects of the division of labor as well. “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 of general spirit” (II, p. 293).

Social Bond: Division of Labor

“In the same way, in moral relations, while each individual 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. . . . The inconveniences of the division of functions increase with its characteristic advantages” (II, p. 293).

Social Bond: Division of Labor

In other words, over specialization (or what we will come to call the “detailed division of labor”) leads to “extinguishing or restricting the general spirit.”



Social Bond: Division of Labor

It is when the division of labor nears this dangerous pole of over-specialization that Comte suggests government intervention . But what if government is controlled by specialists (or special interest groups)? Is action on the part of the whole possible?

Social Bond: Division of Labor

Temporal and spiritual power should unite, Comte argued, “to keep up the idea of the whole, and the feeling of the common interconnection” (II, p. 294).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WHOLE

“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.”



Functionalism

Comte maintained that sociology must proceed by “viewing each element in the light of the whole system. To take a biological analogy, the heart must be studied by viewing the entire system within which it operates.”

SOCIETY AS AN ORGANISM

Comte was one of the first to insist that society must be viewed like an organism, drawing several parallels between biological organisms and the social body.

Functionalism

Comte must also be regarded as one of the first functionalists (though Malthus and others preceded him). He stressed the consequences that social phenomena have on the entire social system as well as the interconnectedness of the various parts of the system.

Functionalism

"There must always be a spontaneous harmony between the parts and the whole of the social system. . . . It is evident that not only must political institutions and social manners, on the one hand, and manner and ideas on the other, be always mutually connected; but further that this consolidated whole must always be connected, by its nature, with the corresponding state of the integral development of humanity" (II, p. 222).

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