What we still owe to Auguste Comte*)

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Before getting to the leading areas of sociology in which we still owe an everlasting debt to Auguste Comte, permit me to recall some of the facts of his extraordinary life which seemed in its maturity to be so staid on the surface, but which seethed with neurosis and even psychotic episodes. Like any good Catholic boy at the end of the eighteenth century (he was born at Montpellier in 1798) of a Royalist family, he was given at his christening more names than he later knew what to do with and settled on two of the euphonious of them — Isidore Auguste Marie François Xavier Comte. He was educated at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris where like a true rebel he had trouble with the academic authorities. He was a top-flight mathematician (which was not the least important of the reasons why he knew the restrictions of its use) but his way in academic life was hard (as was true of other great thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — witness Marx and Simmel and the fact that Durkheim was graduated at the bottom of his class and had a tough time getting through with his dissertation). It almost appears to be a general principle that having trouble with academicians as a young man is a necessary condition for great thinking. Early drawn into the circle of St. Simon, he soon broke with him and seemingly endless disputes have gone on and still go on among scholars whether Comte stole all his ideas from St. Simon and merely expatiated on them and systematized them. But a reading of St. Simon (now made easy by a little book in English edited by Markham and containing his leading essays) shows that what were shrewd surmises and epigrammatic sayings in St. Simon became only a basis for the great works by Comte. Aquinas lifted ideas from Aristotle, Marx from Hegel, and so on, but each raised these ideas to a pinnacle far above where they were when he found them. Comte never held a formal top-flight academic position although he was for a few years, from 1836 to 1846, an examiner at the Ecole Polytechnique but he was even fired from that position, after which he lived on contributions from his religious disciples and admirers. He had founded the Positivist Society in 1846, eleven years before his death. And so he was laid to rest unheralded by French academic life and

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like all unheralded or beheaded or disgraced Frenchmen of note a street in Paris was named after him to help undo the injustice done to him.

His personal life was a mess and an intriguing subject for contemporary psychiatry. From our present knowledge of mental illness it would seem to be clear that he had a savage, barbaric, and emotionally primitive mother who must have devoured him and undermined his sense of security. The French thinkers, novelists, and musicians of the nineteenth century seem to have been plagued by such parents — witness the inhuman, fanatical rejection of Balzac and his punitive schooling away from home, the horrors visited upon Berlioz, and the hatred of Flaubert for women and the ensuing attack in his work on the hypocritical society of his day.

In Comte's case we find the now well-known prostitute-virginity syndrome; he married a prostitute who deserted him and later in life glorified as if she were the Virgin Mary Clotilde de Vaux, a woman he seems to have seen but once and never knew intimately or even socially. Twice he attempted suicide, in both cases in ways that would be detected so that he would be saved, the second time jumping into the Seine and crying out “Sauvez-moi, Sauvez-moi”, and promptly being pulled out by a gendarme whom he would never permit to come and see him to express his gratitude. Suicide is always an inverted homicide and results from a personality that can never face up to what he really hates but either surrenders to a debased image of it (a prostitute) or glorifies and romanticizes it as he did Clotilde.

But so great was Comte's ego-drive that he was able to continue to work and accomplish great things in spite of his deep psychic handicaps. Like all great humanitarians, at the level of the unconscious he hated humanity and sublimated his hatred through work and seeking a world where what happened to him in childhood and as a result of his childhood would not happen to other men. Not for frivolous psychiatric reasons did he found a Religion of Humanity and later come to believe that his Positivist philosophy and religion would appeal most strongly in the end to women and to proletarians (those who work and whose work is insufficiently recognized).

His emotional difficulties and his contradictory internal dynamics do not in the least detract from his thoughts, however; indeed they make all the more remarkable his great achievements. And intuitively they led him to see the overwhelming import of the emotions and instincts for social life, as we shall in due course see when we come to his contributions to the budding science of psychology, where his insights are so intense that he borders on the discovery of the unconscious though he could not learn how it worked. Freud himself later said, you will recall, that he, Freud, did not discover the unconscious but only discovered how it worked.

It would be impossible in short compass to spell out everything that we owe to Comte. I sometimes think that perhaps the best way to do that is to give a course to students concerning Comte's thinking through intensive explication de textes. Here I content myself with stressing several high points of our debt and I trust that some of them may surprise us by their modernity and by the fact that they have not before (to my knowledge) been adequately appreciated even by the leading French commentators or by the British for some of whom he had quite an appeal or by American sociologists.
Comte wrote an abominable French and Harriet Martineau's English condensation and translation sound like Comte's French. W. M. Simon in his recent book on Positivism in the later 19th century has well said that Comte wrote French like an abstruse German philosopher writes German. Perhaps his turgid style helps us understand some of the early opposition to him among his fellow-countrymen who pride themselves upon the clarity, precision, directness, and lucidity of their language.

1. The founding of a truly scientific sociology under the name of positivism. In no sense did Comte mean by positivism a way of thinking that assured man complete certainty, an absolute idea incapable of contradiction, but a way of connecting phenomena without recourse to supernatural or speculative causes. The chief characteristic of positive philosophy is its search for natural laws relative to the type of phenomena which it studies. In the great historical process by which a subject-matter becomes a science, obstacles have been met in every case. But in no other case have the obstacles been as great as in the forging of the new science of sociology or what Comte called Social Physics.

But until the scientific method had been developed in the physical and biological sciences it could not be applied to the social sciences since its worth had not yet been shown. Furthermore, it was necessary to have at our disposal material on a number of different societies so that through comparative observation we might discover what underlies all of them. There was no doubt in Comte's mind that such material was now available as a result of the secularization process brought about by the French Revolution, which like any important revolution was a world revolution in that it changed man's conception of himself. The French Revolution not only made sociology possible but indispensable to man's future welfare, not only indispensable to man's future welfare but also to the surging forth of technological advancement and the material progress of mankind.

Comte did not consider that he had discovered Positivism but rather that he was bringing it to its ultimate point in applying it to the realm of social phenomena. Earlier attempts in this direction had been made of which Comte thought most highly in the cases of Aristotle in his Politics en Montesquieu in the Spirit of the Laws. But Comte sought for nothing so chimerical as the discovery of some single general law that would subordinate all phenomena of all sciences unto it. The unity he seeks is the unity of Method.

The progress of history is the story of the progress of the human mind in the use of scientific method in all branches of learning, and especially now in sociology. The word itself was not a felicitous one and hidebound philologists were quick to seize upon its being a combination of two different languages, Latin socius and Greek logos, and so was born the early philological fallacy that sociology could not exist because the word was an impossible one. But it matters not what we call things as long as we know what we are talking about, and Comte did. Such a science dealt with the most particular, compound, concrete phenomena, these relative to man and his ability to live together with other men.

But though sociology is the last of the sciences to appear in the great panoply of the development of the human mind, it turns out that the last shall be the first and
that the only really universal point of view is the human or what Comte calls the social. Only sociology can achieve a generality of a world-view through which the heterogeneity of the physical and the biological sciences can be shown to be united in their method. Or in his own words: “Imperfect as sociological study may yet be, it furnishes us with a principle which justifies and guides its intervention, scientific and logical, in all the essential parts of the speculative system, which can thus alone be brought into unity”. Here, as we shall see, is the beginning of the sociology of science and of the sociology of knowledge. For sociology makes possible the “rational cultivation of natural history” by showing how society is the indispensable condition and necessary aim of all the other sciences. The study of social and historical conditions will be seen as the true way to discover how and why developments occur in the other sciences. Mathematics may be the cradle of rational positivity but sociology is its throne.

2. The Classification of the Sciences and their interdependence of development. Classifications of the sciences had been made before Comte by men of considerable calibre, but he was dissatisfied with all of them since they proceeded on the erroneous assumption that each science showed the development of a new or different human faculty whereas the true problem was their interdependence and their inextricable historical continuity of development. On the other hand, lesser minds had established erroneous classifications of the sciences through ignorance of sound knowledge of any of them.

Why was Comte so concerned with the classification of the sciences rather than merely going about his business of founding sociology and demonstrating its importance in exhibiting the logical laws of the human mind, its capacity to regenerate education, its seeking to advance all science by combining them, and offering a solid basis for social reorganization? Precisely because a positive classification of the sciences would really demonstrate how the human mind works at its rational best, would regenerate education by showing the inextricable connection of all science, proving that no single science was complete except in relation to the other sciences, and finally because no social reorganization was possible until the homogeneity of scientific method was shown to underlie all sound human knowledge and especially sociology.

Men seek to solve only such problems as those in power permit them to solve. The more concrete and the closer to man a science becomes the greater the resistance of those in power to its prosecution. For science leads to action and action leads to change and change leads to revolution. Or as he wrote: “... The most general and simple phenomena are the furthest removed from Man's ordinary sphere, and must thereby be studied in a calmer and more rational frame of mind than those in which he is more nearly implicated ...” Or, in other words, the closer a science comes to studying man the less likelihood is there of rational analysis, observation, experiment, and comparison. For a science to begin to develop the times must be ripe for it. And I would add if the times are overripe for changes in a science, particularly in contemporary sociology, it will be found that some vested interest or other, collective or personal or both, is antagonistic to such changes.
Thus the sciences have developed historically in the following order: mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, physiology, social physics or sociology. It is not to be held that the non-social sciences have always had easy sledding. They too have been subject to opposition dependent upon the social conditions prevalent and they have sometimes slid backwards, but eventually they have taken a new lease on life as times change and their interdependence with other sciences becomes clearer. But the advancement of even the non-social sciences, though historically dependent on previously developed ones, is not assured simply by their prosecution; they must fight endless battles the closer they come to casting light on the greatest science of all, sociology. Thus the opposition to Darwinian biology arose not from biologists but from theologians and spiritualist philosophers for the conception of man as a primate threatened all social institutions.

3. The Law of the Three Stages. Of all the textbook nonsense which has appeared concerning Comte none to my knowledge is so preposterous as the treatment of his famous law of human progress — the law of the three stages through which the human mind passes on its way to forging a science. It should be clearly noted that I have said “a science” and not science in general. One science may be in one stage, another in the second stage, and yet another in the third stage. Stages overlap within each branch of science and among the sciences, and remnants of an earlier stage may persist amongst certain strata of a population in some one science even though it has achieved the positive stage among its most eminent practitioners. He wrote: "During the whole of our survey of the sciences, I have endeavoured to keep in view the great fact that all the three states, theological, metaphysical, and positive, may and do exist at the same time in the same mind in regard to different sciences... In the forgetfulness of it lies the only real objection that can be brought against the grand law of the three states. It must be steadily kept in view that the same mind may be in the positive state with regard to the most simple and general sciences; in the metaphysical with regard to the more complex and special; and in the theological with regard to social science, which is so complex and special as to have hitherto taken no scientific form at all". Thus, the three stages are the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive stage. In the theological stage phenomena are observed and explained as productions of super-natural beings or divinities; in the metaphysical stage by abstract, spiritualist forces (or to use the language of Sigmund Freud, by the omnipotence of thoughts as substitutes for the psychic realities they stand for). In the final or positive stage, as Comte writes: "the mind has given over the vain search after Absolute notions, the origin and destination of the universe, and the causes of phenomena, and applies itself to the study of their laws... Reasoning and observation are the means of this knowledge".

A sophisticated man, looking back over his life history, will see that he was a theologian in his childhood, a metaphysician in his youth, and a natural philosopher in his manhood. But a man may be a scientist in a given realm and think metaphysically or theologically in other realms. Nor do the stages disappear from one realm of thought because challenged by another in another realm but attempts are
made rather to assimilate positive knowledge into the theological and metaphysical knowledge left over.

First of all, let me point out that Comte here has already foreseen, without spelling it out or perhaps even fully realizing it, the theory of primitive mentality later developed by Lévy-Bruhl and once again brought forcibly to the forefront of contemporary thought by psychoanalysis and its demonstration of projective thinking, rationalization, and sublimation as substitutes for positive thinking concerning the workings of the unconscious and its relation to the ego and the superego. His attack on the metaphysical mode of thought brought howls of protest and derision from philosophers, and his own later life-history shows clearly that certain theological and metaphysical concepts and modes of thinking may be essential compensations for human emotional dilemmas. And his heavy emphasis upon positivism as the basis for scientific method appears to neglect aspects of the human dilemma which continue to defy the rigorous methods it betokens. So he can be accused of arrogance, but only in the light of subsequent developments in the sciences of man which he did so much to foster. A man who is proved wrong by the prosecution of the very subject-matter he espouses prosecution of, can hardly be blamed for being restricted by his own times, for his use of his own times made our times possible.

But he well understood that the positive stage was not stagnant or stationary, and as he wrote in his discussion of the new science of Social Physics or sociology: "It would be absurd to pretend to offer this new science at once in a complete state. Others, less new, are in very unequal conditions of forwardness. But the same character of positivity which is impressed on all the others will be shown to belong to this. This once done, the philosophical condition of the modern will be in fact complete, as there will then be no phenomenon which does not naturally enter into some one of the five great categories. All our fundamental conceptions having become homogeneous, the Positive state will be fully established. It can never again change its character, though it will be forever in course of development by additions of new knowledge". But he detracts somewhat from this disarming and trenchant statement by immediately following it with this one: "Having acquired the character of universality which has hitherto been the only advantage resting with the two preceding systems (theological and metaphysical), it (the Positive system) will supersede them by its natural superiority, and leave to them only an historical existence". This last optimistic assertion shows the strong utopian strain in Comte's thinking manifested at the very same time by the utopian socialism that was beginning to make its appearance in Germany and France. But Comte may at this point be excused for his utopianism on the grounds of his solid realism and scientific encyclopedism. To judge a man by his errors is to lose perspective on what we owe him for his truths. It is always easy to find errors or contradictions in the greatest of thinkers but to search only for them or to lay undue stress upon them betokens our own desire to share in his immortality and not any godliness in us.

4. The Sociology of Science. When we consider such aspects of what is today called the sociology of science as: the general social conditions necessary to the growth of science, the social role of the scientist, the impediments to the growth of science,
and the problems which science in general and special sciences in particular set for themselves as reflections of the state of society and culture, we cannot fail to see that Comte was the first systematic thinker to understand the significance of these aspects of science.

The revolution in science and in scientific method employed in formerly sacred subject-matters is for Comte a fruit of the seventeenth century — of Bacon, of Descartes, and of Galileo. The theological class which was set apart in the Middle Ages itself set the stage for the revolution in science which occurred in the seventeenth century. He writes: “Whatever might have been the confusion of intellectual labor, and the inanity of the leading investigations of the sacerdotal orders, it is not the less true that the human mind owes to them the first effectual separation between theory and practice, which could take place in no other manner”. He follows this statement by the following: “Any spiritual expansion supposes the existence of a privileged class, enjoying the leisure indispensable to intellectual culture, and at the same time urged, by its social position, to develop to the utmost the kind of speculative activity compatible with the primitive state of humanity; and this description is answered by the sacerdotal institution established by the theological philosophy... We must not forget that but for their activity in the days of its prime, human society would have remained in a condition much like that of a company of superior monkeys. By forming this speculative class, then, the theological philosophy fulfilled the political conditions of a further progression of the human mind”. The theological stage, however, proves its own undoing by failing to be able to settle the problems which arise in and through it and by the metaphysical problems which arise from it which cannot be answered by the primitive theology existent. Though the metaphysical philosophy has its own dangers, intellectual and moral, it in turn raises questions which cannot be answered within the metaphysical orbit but only by beginning the systematic observation, comparison, and experimentation which lead into the stage of positivism. The theological stage when paramount is always contingent upon the supremacy of military regimes. The gods and the generals go hand in hand; the metaphysical stage is marked by religious and political upheaval whereas the positive stage is marked by the beginning of the supremacy of industry and technology, both of which become the express concern of government to foster and finance.

First of all, Comte had already seen what historians have only begun to see in very recent decades, that there is no Dark Age in western civilization when opposition to theology and metaphysics was not being carried on somewhere, somehow by the intellectual curiosity of the human mind for proof and evidence of the laws governing the universe and human life. Secondly, one could make out no small case for the fact that Comte foresaw the relation of the rise of heretical Protestantism to the growth of the positive spirit and of modern industry and commerce. He saw the ethics of heretical Protestantism making for what we like to call modern civilization and I have no doubt that a good case could be made for contending that the relation of the Protestant ethic to the rise of capitalism is not the sole possession of Max Weber, and that the reverse of Weber’s position in Karl Marx is at least intimated by Comte. In passing it should be noted that Marx and Comte had little to do with each other intellectually — Marx apparently considering Comte a bourgeois fuddy-duddy.
and Comte placing his faith in progress through the orderly permeation of the positive philosophy among common men and the underprivileged class known as women rather than through Revolution. Order and Progress are the mottoes he throws out as against the class struggle and the proletarian revolution. His entire discussion of the effect of what he called "The Industrial Movement" on human personality, domestic life and the family, the abolition of the caste system, its effect on internationalism, on industrial policy, on Catholicism, on administration, on the growth of banking and public credit, on the surge of invention (firearms, printing, maritime discovery, colonialism, slavery, and on the flowering of the arts) still deserves close reading despite the meandering, prolix style, and the uninviting character of his language, either in French or in English translation, or any other language I should imagine.

It is not possible for me here to spell out in greater detail Comte's contribution to, if not actual initiation of, the subject we now call the sociology of science. But I cannot refrain from referring to chapter 11 of Book VI of his *Cours de philosophie positive* and suggesting that hardy souls plough through it to see what astounding aperçus Comte was capable of as he performed what today is frowned upon as armchair sociology. I might suggest that perhaps we might all look around for a comfortable armchair in some obscure garrett or study and tease out the implications of his thoughts.

5. The Sociology of Knowledge. In his essay summarizing the range of the sociology of knowledge in the book titled *Modern Sociological Theory*, Professor Franz Adler of the University of Arkansas finds the major roots of this field in the Durkheim school of sociology, in Marx and the Maxists, in the anti-Marxists especially Max Scheler and Honigsheim, and in Karl Mannheim. Comte is given less than scant treatment and is even treated as the parent of contemporary neo-positivism for which, in actuality, he has absolutely no responsibility at all. When Comte talks about positivism he means an attitude of mind towards science and the explanation of the universes of nature, man, and society and not some predilection for mathematical precision in sociological findings. In fact, Comte expressly makes a distinction between the search for certainty in science and the mistaken search for precision.

But both from the standpoint of particular sciences and their particular ideologies and from the standpoint of ideology in general, Comte actually was the originator of the sociology of knowledge. The three leading general ideologies are for Comte the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. The theological cannot exist without a class or caste pledged to its perpetuation and whose basis intent is to bolster the existing groups and individual relationships in a society. He realizes like Marx and Engels that "Social being determines social consciousness" but not unilaterally but interdependently, and indeed the whole aim of his positive philosophy is to aid men to develop a society in which Positivistic consciousness (in his sense of the word positive) determines social being, a society where if the scientist, and especially the social scientist is not king, at least every common man is to some degree at least a social scientist or respects the findings of social science. Even where
in a particular science enough momentum has been gained inside the science itself to
promulgate new problems and expand knowledge it nevertheless remains true that
the science itself in its existent organizational state is determined by the state of the
society.
Scheler's distinctions between social conditions or "real factors" which do not
determine knowledge but merely make it possible, and ideal factors where the
succession of thought by new thought determines knowledge is somewhat foreign
to Comte's position. Social conditions determine whether science can develop, to what
degree it can develop, and the uses to which it can be put. Though the validity of
propositions in knowledge may not be specifically determined by social conditions,
the belief in validity is itself determined by social conditions. Once under way the
progress of knowledge cannot be stopped but neither can it continue under way
without social conditions adequate to the intellectual needs of its proponents.
As for ideologies in general, men of power pursue theological thinking because they
need it for the continuance of their social life and position and for keeping other men
in subjection; they pursue metaphysical thinking because of confusion in the organi-
zation of their social relationships and only long struggles for positivistic ideology
by devoted men serve to achieve social conditions in which metaphysical propositions
give way to positivistic ones. When finally the positivistic stage is reached in any
science, and especially in sociology it will be found to have been made possible
originally and to be able to continue indefinitely through continual reorganization of
society, a continual reorganization which is made possible by the pursuit of sociology
and its application to practical problems, particularly problems in the organization of
knowledge, its propagation, and its being passed on from generation to generation.
I realize that I am here giving Comte the benefit of every doubt by omitting what I
consider to be extraneous material he introduces but nevertheless the guide-lines of
what we call the sociology of knowledge today are to be found in him. What an
essminent thinker foresaw in the mid-nineteenth century can never eventuate precisely
as he saw it then, but one pays tribute to him not by stressing the shortcoming of the
times he lived in and drew from but from the stimulation to contemporary thinking
which he offers. In this respect I would suggest that those who devote themselves to
being sociologists of knowledge might well turn back to Comte and discover for them-
selves what amazing new formulations of the problems of the sociology of knowledge
can arise from him. He is easy to take on as a whipping-boy in the sociology of know-
ledge but not so easy to take on as a well-muscled, learned, and exciting champion
who has been reduced to some sorry little deluded figure by historians of thoughts
they may have never read in context or in the majesty of their systematic treatment.
I do not wish to start a "Back to Comte" movement in sociology like the ill-fated
"Back to Kant" movement in philosophy but rather to suggest a "Forward with
Comte" movement by pushing forward the implications of his theories. He was a
greater man than we have ever allowed him to be in late years and he becomes
all the greater as we add to him the great developments in sociology, and the
sociology of knowledge in particular, which he set going. I would especially suggest
to the Durkheimians that they go back to Comte and discover where Durkheim got
his start from.
Sociology as Comparative History. Comte is often treated as if his chief contribution was to the philosophy of history and he has indeed been called the French Hegel. But though Comte was interested in propounding and discovering the laws of human development and the conditions for human progress in society, he used history primarily as the basis for discovering the laws of social structure and the social organism and the laws of social dynamics or what we call social change. History is a laboratory for the sociologist in that it enables him to compare different types of society, discover their common elements, and account for the differences in their structure and in their dynamic flow. His knowledge of history — ancient, medieval, modern — is for his time and place truly impressive, especially when one considers that he was originally a mathematician also learned in the physical and biological sciences. Why did the old systems of society break down and wither away and give rise to modern industrial society? This question is not the least of those to which Comte addresses himself. But we must not become bogged down in historical minutiae since what Comte is looking for are the laws of social existence and he writes: "... We must avoid confounding the abstract research into the laws of social existence with the concrete histories of human societies, the explanation of which can result only from a very advanced knowledge of the whole of these laws. Our employment of history in this inquiry, then, must be essentially abstract. But the laws of social existence cannot be discovered until the entire system of the preceding sciences has been formed, and the whole mass of historical information offered as material for its analysis. The function of Sociology is to derive, from this mass of unconnected material, information which, by the principles of the biological theory of man, may yield the laws of social life". The scientific comparison of immutable landmarks throughout the whole past of human experience will afford a direction and a rallying-point for sociology and show the fundamental structure of all societies, the reasons for the peculiarities of each, and the goal of social reorganization which modern sociology can posit for man. Modern institutions are not all adapted to man's new needs and their mutual readaptation through some reintegration can only be established through understanding the irrelevancies of certain theologically and metaphysically based institutions to the positive spirit of modern industrialism. And here is contained a first intimation of Durkheim's concept of anomy which originally amounted not so much to a discovery as to an expatiation on Comte's theme. For almost a century Comte became a butt of jokes by the sorry historical academicians who can never see the forest because of their histories and there is more than poetic justice, there is scientific justice in the recent discovery of the importance of sociological considerations to the understanding of historical events. Even the most minute of historical events we now attempt to enliven by showing them in the context of the social type in which they occur and their concurrence or discordance with other elements of then-existing institutions and orders of social relationships. Thus the French Revolution, which climaxed the old order and ushered in the new, was not a political phenomenon alone but the result of massive disjunctions between the various segments of the old society, and I would throw out
the suggestion that were Comte alive today he would point to the Russian and the Chinese Revolutions as proof of what happens when an old order impedes the forces of material and intellectual progress which are impinging upon it.

Comte, rightly to my mind, saw history as a search for patterns of inter-institutional co-ordination and the unavoidable disjunctions which accompany even the most adaptable of patterns. For the old professional historian history consisted of unique events but for Comte it consisted of the laboratory for research into the general trends and tendencies of whole societies. His sociology is a societal sociology, not a series of isolated monographs on specific subjects nor even of large compartments studied separately from each other. Sociology was the search for social perfectability not a disembodied intellectual discipline far above the madding crowd and impervious to the vital and surging impact of new technology, new administrative techniques, the rise of social classes, and the struggle for power among discordant factions. He expected much of Man but not too much from men acting like scrounging ants. A new elite of men of learning, pursuing under the division of labor each his appointed task, would nevertheless under the aegis of sociology as manifestation of their mutual interdependence, also be pursuing the positive philosophy and make possible human progress never before contemplated.

It is easy to accuse Comte of grand historical generalizations and fail to realize that we all live by some such generalizations but that he had the courage to spell out the details of these generalizations and their hopes for the future. If we do not like his generalizations, we must nevertheless offer the highest praise for his demonstrating their necessity for being openly arrived at. Open generalizations openly arrived at, not secret, undisclosed generalizations secretly guiding specific little pieces of research, was the aim and goal of the new science which he himself named and which we ourselves pursue though not necessarily in the grand and glorious manner of which he was a master. Grand he was but even in his most sweeping and even overreaching speculation he was never grandiose — at least not until the end of his life when he became ensnared with the Religion of Humanity and the founding of a Positivist Church. But what we owe to him are his truths, not the errors of his later ways.

He was not like theorists of the contemporary middle range (which sometimes look more like theorists of the mediocre range), but a genius of the large overview and like all geniuses he often overstepped the boundaries of his otherwise good sense.

7. Social Organism, Social System, Social Structure, Social Dynamics

Long before late nineteenth-century sociologists had come to discuss the concept of society as an organism and decades before Darwin had propounded his theories relative to organisms, Auguste Comte had hit upon the idea of society as an organism. And unbelievable as it may sound to Talcott Parsons and his cohort of terminological enthusiasts, we even find the idea of social system in Comte. He uses the term social organism in his insistence that there must always be in society a consensus of parts, an interconnection of institutions similar to the interconnections of functions in an organism. He does not, to be sure, spell out the details of an organismic theory of society and reach the absurd lengths of certain later nineteenth century and even
early twentieth century sociologists who by argument from analogy found all the parts of living organisms existing in society to the point where Brunschwig found the church to represent the female sex and the State the male sex. Indeed, it is remarkable that Comte rarely argues by analogy; he understood that each science had its own subject-matter which inevitably leads to investigation of new phenomena and the forging of a new science, but he holds to the self-subsistent character of every science internally even though eventually externally their further development depends upon the state of society and the supremacy of the positivist spirit of philosophy. He uses the term “social system” to describe the tasks of Social Statics which he writes “consists in the investigation of the laws of social action and reaction of the different parts of the social system” and when he further writes: “The scientific principle of the relation between the political and the social condition is simply this — that there must always be a spontaneous harmony between the whole and the parts of the social system, the elements of which must inevitably be, sooner or later, combined in a mode entirely conformable to their nature”. Not that this mutual interaction is always harmonious but rather that lack of harmony in the functioning of parts will result in change or even upheaval. But this leads us to his discussion of the two main fields of sociology — Social Statics and Social Dynamics.

Social Statics is concerned with the study of Social Organization. But social organization is relative to the type of society we are studying and in a trenchant paragraph he writes: “... 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... Materials may be furnished by the observation of different departments; and such observation may be necessary for that object, but it cannot be called science. The methodical division which takes place in the simple inorganic sciences is thoroughly irrational in the recent and complex science of society and can produce no results. The day may come when some sort of subdivision may be practicable and desirable; but it is impossible for us now to anticipate what the principle of distribution may be; for the principle itself must arise from the development of the science; and that development can take place no otherwise than by the formation of the science as a whole. The complete body will indicate for itself, at the right season, the particular points which need investigation; and then will be the time for such special study as may be required... It is no easy matter to study special phenomena in the only right way — viewing each element in the light of the whole system. It is no easy matter to exercise such vigilance so that no one of the number of contemporary aspects shall be lost sight of. But it is the right and the only way; and we may perceive in it a clear suggestion that this lofty study should be reserved for the highest order of scientific minds, better prepared than others, by wise educational discipline, for sustained speculative efforts, aided by an habitual subordination of the passions to the reason”.

Sociology is for Comte a dynamic study in two senses: it will change the conditions of man in society through social reorganization and it is itself the study of how social changes necessarily take place as structures and functions break down in their interrelatedness and require rearrangement. But social dynamics cannot be adequately understood in their workings without knowledge of what he calls the spon-
taneous order of human society or Social Statics. The basis of social structures whose study goes to make up what he calls “Social Statics” are:

1. The instinctual and emotional make-up of man’s biological and psychological existence in the animal kingdom.

2. The Family as the basic unit of social organization based upon the sexual and parental relationships, and

3. The larger social organizations or what we now like to call secondary groups which are made up of the economy through the distribution of employments, and of governments.

All these statical elements are subject to the dynamic workings of society through change and progress. They make any society possible but analyses of them do not give us the clue to the true heart of sociology, the study of social dynamics or what Comte calls the theory of the natural progress of human society.

The causes for the dynamism inherent in man’s social situation involve climate, physical environment, sheer ennui, the duration of human life, the increase of population, technology and the steady advancement of science leading from the theological to the metaphysical to the positivist stage, the growth of law and government and control of the military regimes that tend to cause man to revert from positivism back to metaphysics and theology. At this point Comte is led into detailed analyses of the whole pageant of western history, arriving finally at the notion that what he calls “our present confusion” can be resolved only by a new morality based upon the new political philosophy of positivism which will give a wise systematic direction to the next great movement in human progress.

In passing here, I cannot refrain from pointing out that Comte’s discussion of the course of the social dynamics of human history and the present confusion in morality bears a suspicious resemblance to much of the moral fervour which invests Durkheim’s *Division of Labour in Society*. I have latterly become convinced that Durkheim’s early debt to Comte is greater than we have ever heretofore imagined and even that much of Durkheim’s later work is an elaboration of hints and learned asides thrown off by Comte in his wide-ranging journey through history in his humble surroundings in the Paris of the nineteenth century.

8. Psychology and Sociology. The famous American sociologist of earlier days, Lester F. Ward, who was known for his strict scientific scruples (having come to sociology by way of geology) and who rarely indulged himself in failing to understand the work of other men, nevertheless made an egregious error by charging that Comte’s sociology suffered from the lack of a psychological foundation. Nothing could be further from the truth. The difficulty here is probably because Ward did not understand that Comte did not use the term psychology to refer to what we would today call such. The term he does use in “cerebral biology” and he severely criticizes what was called psychology in his time as being incapable of being a science. He sees the importance of studying the relation of the affectual states of man to his intellectual faculties but does not consider that to be psychology although, as we shall see, his discussion throughout on this relationship is psychological to the point of being almost
in line with certain contemporary thinking. Or as his British follower, G. H. Lewes wrote in 1853: “Positive philosophy... if not in a condition, as yet, to elaborate a science of psychology... clears the way for one, by pointing out the direction which investigation must take”.

Unfortunately that direction was to take at least half a century when Freud came to put flesh on Comte’s psychological bones. For Comte propounds some very general ideas on psychology or cerebral biology as a science which have striking analogies in psychoanalysis, the psychology that has revolutionized contemporary thought concerning man.

If the Enlightenment enthroned Reason as the criterion of judgment concerning the worth of a human society, then Comte must certainly not be considered as a child of the Enlightenment. He begins his own psychological discussion by a searching criticism of Descartes for falling into the trap of the rationalistic fallacy. Comte deeply appreciated what he called the “glorious service” rendered by Descartes in mathematics and physics, but in psychological matters Descartes retreated, in Comte’s view, to theological and metaphysical stages in psychology for he represented man as a reasoning animal. For all his immense belief in man’s being capable of modification and improvement in his social relations through intellect and reason (through being guided by positivistic thinking, that is), Comte nevertheless with that strange clarity almost amounting to clairvoyance announces that it is the human instincts which are paramount originally and that they remain basic to the flowering of intellect and reason themselves. Without wishing to stretch the point I would suggest here the amazing similarity between this view and Freud’s view that the unconscious and the instincts are the foundation of all human mental energy and their most ennobling derivatives are science and abstract thought, especially in the following comment by Comte: “The affections, propensities, the passions, are the great springs of human life... Their spontaneous and independent impulse is indispensable to the first awakening and continuous development of the various intellectual faculties, by assigning to them a permanent end, without which — to say nothing of their general direction — they would remain dormant in the majority of men. It is even but too certain that the least noble and most animal propensities are habitually the most energetic, and therefore the most influential”. The separation of instinct from reason is for Comte a throwback to the metaphysical mode of thinking. Human nature is induced in various directions by distinct and independent powers, among which equilibrium is established with extreme difficulty. Here again I would draw attention to the striking similarity to Freud’s view of the interplay of id, ego, and superego. Yet Freud knew little of Comte’s systematic work and even Comte’s remarkable insight in his later work on positive polity that dreams show the preponderance of the affective faculties over the intellectual faculties is not mentioned in Freud’s first chapter in *The Interpretation of Dreams* where he reviews the history of thinking on the subject.

Comte followed up the psychological theories of Franz Joseph Gall the founder of phrenology which was in his days a respectable subject seeking to topographically chart out areas of the brain so as to establish where specific human faculties and character traits had their seat. This false trail led Comte astray but not to the point
of absurdity.
The new science of Sociology Comte wrote is rooted in biology; everybody seems willing to agree to this statement and then goes about neglecting it in practice. He thinks this neglect arises from the most conspicuous defect of biological science — that relating to intellectual and moral phenomena and with his unerring courage he goes about seeking to rectify it. When finally this imperfection is relieved, he tells us that cerebral biology or psychology will be seen to afford the starting-point of all social speculation, in accordance with the analysis of the social faculties of Man and of the organic conditions which determine their character.

But sociology is more than psychology for Comte. From psychology sociology learns to understand the agents of collective phenomena and then shows how the social environment affects the workings of the instincts and determines the course of human progress in history. Today in psycho-analysis this latter venture would be called, as Erik Erikson does, the psycho-historical actuality of the ego manifesting the externalization possibilities of the unconscious and of the repressions of the super-ego.

In the Political Positive Comte amplified his ideas on psychology, stressing once again the predominance of the motive over the merely intellectual functions. Here he divides emotional life into the personal and the social. The personal side of emotional life Comte calls Egoism, the social side Altruism. This latter term was later taken over by Spencer. Egoism and Altruism for Comte are in permanent conflict — an idea which contains the germ of the psychoanalytic concept of repression.

There are three sets of instincts for Comte: personal, intermediate, and social. The personal are the instincts of self-preservation, the sexual instinct, the maternal instinct, the aggressive instinct, and the industrial instinct. The last sounds peculiarly like Veblen's instinct of workmanship elaborated seventy-five years later. The intermediate instincts are pride (love of power) and vanity (love of approbation). The social instincts are attachment to other human beings, veneration or voluntary submission, and benevolence.

As for the types of individual character which emerge in social life they are principally determined by the constitution of the emotional area of human life although the latter's development depends upon the influences exerted by the intellectual and moral faculties which are themselves reflections of the social statics and dynamics prevalent in collective life. But human will, no matter how socialized, is the acting out of desire after mental deliberation has decided on the propriety of some predominant impulse — a strange premonition of the psychoanalytic doctrine of rationalization. But though intellectual functions inspire special desires, they are deficient in the energy necessary to induce action which depends solely on the emotional impulse.

Am I being presumptuous at this point by suggesting the profitability of going back to Comte's Positive Polity from which so much seems to have been lifted by later thinkers? It is a book which is almost never read these days because despite the sometimes greater maturity of his psychology and sociology there, it contains the germs of the Positivist Religion and served as the Bible for that weird collection of characters who became worshippers of Comte's bizarre religiosity which sounds so Robespierrean in its attempt to replace all existing beliefs, customs, and conventions by new names embodying old ideas.
The little French boy who had broken away from Catholicism and denounced the theological method of thought wound up by founding a Church of his own led by Littré in France and Frederic Harrison in England.

9. The Religion of Humanity. But his Church founded on the Religion of Humanity was a strange concoction because its priests were to be sociologists. They were to be the scientific directors of society, they were to interpret the Positivist doctrines of love, order and progress. But the Positivist priests were not to exercise political power but to influence opinion through education and preaching. The common man, imbued with the Positivist philosophy, would form a most enlightened public opinion, and this common man would be a proletarian for to the intelligent working-man belonged the future, not through losing his chains but through improving his brains.

I need not go into great detail on this witches' brew which Comte concocted in what I consider his mental decline and I would hold with John Stuart Mill that a great mind had lost its base. But why Comte was led in this direction is today very important for those of us who consider Humanism as a possible recompense for the tragedies of human life, its dilemmas, its incoherences, its mortality, and as a way of serving to alleviate the vagaries of a bureaucratized, impersonalized, and overtechnologized society such as the one we live in.

Comte was attempting in a wild way to compensate men for the God and the Church that Positivism and sociology must necessarily take from them. He feared the triumph of the military, distrusted professional politicians, and had the greatest faith in human beings. If he did not expect to make all men always altruistic, he at least hoped that a form of secular worship would aid them to be less egoistic. His soft-heartedness towards mankind here makes him soft-headed. Unfortunately he also developed a messianic complex and saw himself as the Moses leading his Positivist children out of the wilderness of theology and metaphysics to a land flowing with milk, honey, and sociology. It all sounds like premature senility unless one tears away the elaborate trappings and sees underneath it his love of mankind, his hatred of cruelty, and his worship of women.

There is a school of thought in France which holds that there is no inherent contradiction between the scientific Comte who founded sociology, classified the sciences, and propounded the law of the three stages, and the later Comte who founded the Religion of Humanity since in both cases his ruling passion was the betterment of man. I am willing to accept such apologetics for Comte's terminus but not for the way in which he worked it out. Far more to the point would be some such humanism as arises from Darwin and Huxley, and from Freud. But Comte was not willing to accept the possibility that the sense of selfhood could be sufficiently established in the individual man without collective institutions such as his new religion and without a new group such as his Positivist church. So the Positivist religion became jeeringly called "Catholicism without Christianity". If Comte came to look upon himself as Jesus reincarnated, we can at least apologize for him on the grounds that he was not the first so to see himself, nor, I suppose, will he be the last. But even such a wild aberration as Comte suffered from in the end should not lead us
to forget what he had done in the beginning and in the middle. If he finally suffered from religious delusions, he more than paid us for forgiving them by the great contributions which he made for his own time and for ours when we see him as containing a good deal of what is called modern sociology.

Two main types of method are available to Social Physics or Sociology according to Comte: direct methods which are peculiar to the subject itself and indirect methods where it draws its materials from other sciences and incorporates them into its own direct methods.
The direct methods are:

1. Observation,
2. Experiment, and
3. Comparison.

In the use of observation our first problem is to come upon ways and means of assuring ourselves that different sociologists will be able to see, hear, and experience through the senses the same phenomena. But observation of a uniform kind cannot be assured unless it takes place on the basis of agreed-upon sociological laws, no matter how elementary they are at the beginning. Without laws and the testing of hypotheses based upon them we would amass a scattering of random observations.

"...Social science", Comte writes, "requires, more than any other, the subordination of Observation to the statical and dynamical laws of phenomena. No social fact can have any scientific meaning till it is connected with some other social fact; without which connection it remains a mere anecdote, involving no rational utility". (Notice the way in which Durkheim has lifted this last idea from Comte in his Rules of Sociological Method almost fifty years later). Comte continues that at first good observers will be rare because they cannot systematize their observations through laws and hypotheses but this situation will improve as the science develops. This shortcoming is not all to the bad since it will keep petty minds from meddling with this most difficult subject. A mind suitably trained in scientific method becomes able to convert almost all impressions from the events to life into sociological indications when it has had experience combined with innate talent to tie them together. When he comes to the discussion of the place of Experiment in sociological research, Comte with unerring prevision sees the use of both 'natural experiments' as Mill called happenings in history over which the sociologist has no control but which he uses as given data and 'artificial experiments' or what we today like to call controlled experiments. At this point a quotation from Comte on indirect methods of controlled experimentation through observations of diseased states of the social organism seems justified because it shows his keen appreciation of the use of the so-called abnormal for the discovery of laws of the normal — a project for which Durkheim has long been given credit in sociology and which Freud used to such magnificent advantage in arriving at an approximation of a normal ego. It contains the kernel of the concept of anomy and supports in its own way Freud's
belief that a singular case could be found to be typical of a whole range of cases and make unnecessary continuous replication. The quotation follows:

"It might be supposed beforehand that the second method of investigation, Experiment, must be wholly inapplicable in Social Science; but we shall find that the science is not entirely deprived of this resource, though it must be one of inferior value. We must remember (what was before explained) that there are two kinds of experimentation, — the direct and the indirect: and that it is not necessary to the philosophical character of this method that the circumstances of the phenomenon in question should be, as is vulgarly supposed in the learned world, artificially instituted. Whether the case be natural or factitious, experimentation takes place whenever the regular course of the phenomenon is interfered with in any determinate manner. The spontaneous nature of the alteration has no effect on the scientific value of the case, if the elements are known. It is in this sense that experimentation is possible in Sociology. If direct experimentation had become too difficult amidst the complexities of biology, it may well be considered impossible in social science. Any artificial disturbance of any social element must affect all the rest, according to the laws both of coexistence and succession; and the experiment would therefore, if it could be instituted at all, be deprived of all scientific value, through the impossibility of isolating either the conditions or the results of the phenomenon. But we saw, in our survey of biology, that pathological cases are the true scientific equivalent of pure experimentation, and why. The same reasons apply, with even more force, to sociological researches. In them, pathological analysis consists in the examination of cases, unhappily too common, in which the natural laws, either of harmony or of succession, are disturbed by any causes, special or general, accidental or transient; as in revolutionary times especially; and above all, in our own.

These disturbances are, in the social body, exactly analogous to diseases in the individual organism: and I have no doubt whatever that the analogy will be more evident (allowance being made for the unequal complexity of the organisms) the deeper the investigation goes. In both cases it is, as I said once before, a noble use to make of our reason, to disclose the real laws of our nature, individual or social, by the analysis of its sufferings. But if the method is imperfectly instituted in regard to biological questions, much more faulty must it be in regard to the phenomena of social science, for want even of the rational conceptions to which they are to be referred.

Without forgetting how much is ascribable to the influence of human passions, we must remember that the deficiency of an authoritative rational analysis is one of the main causes of the barrenness imputed to social experiments, the course of which would become much more instructive if it were better observed. The great natural laws exist and act in all conditions of the organism; for, as we saw in the case of biology, it is an error to suppose that they are violated or suspended in the case of disease: and we are therefore justified in drawing our conclusions, with due caution, from the scientific analysis of disturbance to the positive theory of normal existence.

This is the nature and character of the indirect experimentation which discloses
the real economy of the social body in a more marked manner than simple observation could do. It is applicable to all orders of sociological research, whether relating to existence or to movement, and regarded under any respect whatever, physical, intellectual, moral, or political; and to all degrees of the social evolution, from which, unhappily, disturbances have never been absent. As for its present extension, no one can venture to offer any statement of it, because it has never been duly applied in any investigation in political philosophy; and it can become customary only by the institution of the new science which I am endeavouring to establish. But I could not omit this notice of it, as one of the means of investigation proper to social science”.

In his discussion of the use of Comparison as part of scientific method in sociology Comte begins by pointing out the great value of comparing whatever social life we find among the lower animals with that found among humans — a method which we have since taken over and which for a time was much in vogue, as in the studies made of the social life of ants, bees, and the lower primates.

The first germs of social relations he thinks we may discover among the lower animals, and this method has since proven of great advantage in such studies as the sociology of the family, the division of labour, the socialization processes, and other fields. In a revolutionary statement he points out that the discovery of man’s relations with the lower animals will do much to undermine what he calls the ‘insolent pride’ of ruling classes who consider themselves a special species above mankind. And with most modest intellectual demeanor he concludes that since he can only as yet offer the first conception of a science of sociology he can himself make little use of this kind of comparison but this inability on his part makes it all the more necessary to point it out lest its omission should occasion scientific inconveniences by foreshortening his program for the subject which he was founding. I cannot forbear here pointing out that Comte is using the concept of lower animals long before Darwin discovered the laws of biological evolution.

But the chief use he sees of the method of Comparison is the discovery through the study of coexisting states of society in different parts of the world of social structures, social classes, social functions and arriving at those patterns of social behavior which are universal. “...The human mind”, he writes, “is uniform in the midst of all diversities of climate, and even of race, such diversities having no effect upon anything more than the rate of progress”.

But the comparison of coexistences will still not give us the chief scientific device of Positive Sociology: the Comparison of consecutive stages through which society passes. And here the historical method of comparison is paramount. Our existing state cannot be understood simply through static study of it but only by seeing it as part of the series of social states from which it has emerged and which have left their imprint upon our minds, often to our detriment by keeping us within the bounds of the theological and metaphysical modes of thought. But every law of social succession disclosed by the historical method must be unquestionably connected directly or indirectly with the positive theory of human nature which I have already discussed under the heading of Comte’s theory of human nature and psychology. Thus the main strength of sociological demonstrations must ever lie in the ac-
cordance between the conclusions of historical analysis and the preparatory con-
ceptions of the psycho-biological theory. And thus we find, he tells us, look where
we will, a confirmation of that chief intellectual character of the new science — the
philosophical preponderance of the spirit of the whole over the spirit of detail. This
part of the method of Comparison Comte sees as developing into a fourth method,
the Historical Method, which will finally enable us to analyze the most complex
phenomena by seeing them in their development.
A few last words of Comte on method since they relate conspicuously to our present
pensant for mathematical exactitude. I offer it without comment since it speaks
for itself relative to the present stage of so-called empirical sociology. It goes as
follows: "The most perfect methods may, however, be rendered deceptive by
misuse and this we must bear in mind. We have seen that mathematical analysis
itself may betray us into substituting signs for ideas, and that it conceals inanity of
conception under an imposing verbiage".