

## Auguste Comte (1798-1857)

The French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857) developed a system of positive philosophy. He held that science and history culminate in a new science of humanity, to which he gave the name "sociology." Born in Montpellier, Auguste Comte abandoned the devout Catholicism and royalism of his family while in his teens. He entered the École Polytechnique in 1814 and proved himself a brilliant mathematician and scientist. Comte was expelled in 1816 for participating in a student rebellion. Remaining in Paris, he managed to do immense research in mathematics, science, economics, history, and philosophy.

At 19 Comte met Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de Saint-Simon, and as a "spiritually adopted son," he became secretary and collaborator to the older man until 1824. The relationship between Saint-Simon and Comte grew increasingly strained for both theoretical and personal reasons and finally degenerated into an acrimonious break over disputed authorship. Saint-Simon was an intuitive thinker interested in immediate, albeit utopian, social reform. Comte was a scientific thinker, in the sense of systematically reviewing all available data, with a conviction that only after science was reorganized in its totality could men hope to resolve their social problems.

In 1824 Comte began a common-law marriage with Caroline Massin when she was threatened with arrest because of prostitution, and he later referred to this disastrous 18-year union as "the only error of my life." During this period Comte supported himself as a tutor. In 1826 he proposed to offer a series of 72 lectures on his philosophy to a subscription list of distinguished intellectuals. After the third lecture Comte suffered a complete breakdown, replete with psychotic episodes. At his mother's insistence he was remarried in a religious ceremony and signed the contract "Brutus Napoleon Comte." Despite periodic hospitalization for mental illness during the

following 15 years, Comte was able to discipline himself to produce his major work, the six-volume *Course of Positive Philosophy* (1830-1842).

Positivism as a term is usually understood as a particular way of thinking. For Comte, additionally, the methodology is a product of a systematic reclassification of the sciences and a general conception of the development of man in history: the law of the three stages. Comte, like the Marquis de Condorcet whom he acknowledged as a predecessor and G. W. F. Hegel whom he met in Paris, was convinced that no data can be adequately understood except in the historical context. Phenomena are intelligible only in terms of their origin, function, and significance in the relative course of human history.

But unlike Hegel, Comte held that there is no *Geist*, or spirit, above and beyond history which objectifies itself through the vagaries of time. Comte represents a radical relativism: "Everything is relative; there is the only absolute thing." Positivism absolutizes relativity as a principle which makes all previous ideas and systems a result of historical conditions. The only unity that the system of positivism affords in its pronounced anti-metaphysical bias is the inherent order of human thought. Thus the law of the three stages, which he discovered as early as 1820, attempts to show that the history of the human mind and the development of the sciences follow a determinant pattern which parallels the growth of social and political institutions. According to Comte, the system of positivism is grounded on the natural and historical law that "by the very nature of the human mind, every branch of our knowledge is necessarily obliged to pass successively in its course through three different theoretical states: the theological or fictitious state; the metaphysical or abstract state; finally, the scientific or positive state."

These stages represent different and opposed types of human conception. The most primitive

type is theological thinking, which rests on the "empathetic fallacy" of reading subjective experience into the operations of nature. The theological perspective develops dialectically through fetishism, polytheism, and monotheism as events are understood as animated by their own will, that of several deities, or the decree of one supreme being. Politically the theological state provides stability under kings imbued with divine rights and supported by military power. As civilization progresses, the metaphysical stage begins as a criticism of these conceptions in the name of a new order. Supernatural entities are gradually transformed into abstract forces just as political rights are codified into systems of law. In the final stage of positive science the search for absolute knowledge is abandoned in favor of a modest but precise inquiry into the relative laws of nature. The absolutist and feudal social orders are replaced gradually by increasing social progress achieved through the application of scientific knowledge.

From this survey of the development of humanity Comte was able to generalize a specific positive methodology. Like René Descartes, Comte acknowledged a unity of the sciences. It was, however, not that of a univocal method of thinking but the successive development of man's ability to deal with the complexities of experience. Each science possesses a specific mode of inquiry. Mathematics and astronomy were sciences that men developed early because of their simplicity, generality, and abstractness. But observation and the framing of hypotheses had to be expanded through the method of experimentation in order to deal with the physical sciences of physics, chemistry, and biology. A comparative method is required also to study the natural sciences, man, and social institutions. Thus even the history of science and methodology supports the law of the three stages by revealing a hierarchy of sciences and methodological direction from general to particular, and simple to complex. Sociology studies particular societies in a complex way since man is both the subject and

the object of this discipline. One can consider social groups from the standpoint of "social statics," which comprises the elements of cohesion and order such as family and institutions, or from the perspective of "social dynamics," which analyzes the stage of continuous development that a given society has achieved.

### Later Years

By 1842 Comte's marriage had dissolved, and he was supported by contributions from various intellectuals, including the English philosopher J.S. Mill. In 1844 he met Clothilde de Vaux, and they fell deeply in love. Although the affair was never consummated because Madame de Vaux died in the next year, this intense love influenced Comte in his later work toward a new religion of humanity. He proposed replacing priests with a new class of scientists and industrialists and offered a catechism based on the cult of reason and humanity, and a new calendar replete with positivist saints. While this line of thought was implicit in the aim of sociology to synthesize order and progress in the service of humanity, the farcical elements of Comte's mysticism has damaged his philosophical reputation. He died in obscurity in 1857.

[from "Auguste Comte." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed. 17 Vols. Gale Research, 1998.]

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[The following text constitutes the Introduction to Auguste Comte, *Early Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Jones, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998]

By a happy coincidence, the publication of this edition of Comte's early social and political writings coincides with his bicentenary. But, two centuries after his birth, Comte is rarely encountered at first hand by today's readers. He still enjoys an important place in the history of ideas—as Saint-Simon's ablest disciple, as a

formative influence on John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic*, and as the author of the doctrine of positivism which, a generation after his death, shaped the work of the founding fathers of the Third Republic in France. Above all, he coined the word 'sociology', and is still commemorated as one of the makers of that discipline. He inaugurated an important sociological tradition—best represented by Durkheim—which took consensus, rather than class conflict, as the discipline's central focus. But few read Comte today, and those that do tend to encounter him in such a ludicrous form—the founder of a secular religion of humanity, with himself at its head—as the self-appointed high priest—w—that the experience brings them no closer to an understanding of the potent influence his ideas exerted in the nineteenth century.

Comte had a host of disciples in his own century, especially after his death; not only or even mainly in France, but dispersed as far apart as Newcastle and Rio de Janeiro. His followers were to be instrumental in the establishment of republics not only in France but also in Brazil, Portugal and Czechoslovakia. The first objective for a modern edition of his writings must be to impress upon readers some sense of the qualities that enabled Comte to speak so powerfully to his own age. The absurdity of many of the liturgical and doctrinal prescriptions of his later works is so blatant as to obscure the force of his more fundamental ideas. But one obstacle that prevents the modern mind 'accessing' Comte is the sheer scale of his major works: the six volumes of the *Positive Philosophy* and the four volumes of the *Positive Politics* seem destined to gather dust in any modern library. Yet it was precisely the encyclopaedic character of his mind that spoke most eloquently to the nineteenth century—an age that thirsted for new certainties and systematic doctrine.

This is the main reason for turning to Comte's youthful writings, and for constructing a presentation of his work around the 'funda-

mental essay' he wrote, initially under Saint-Simon's direction, in 1822-4. The *Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society* has a number of advantages for the modern editor, but the main one is that it combines brevity with encyclopaedic ambition. It does not, to be sure, aim to present the whole of Comte's doctrine: it was conceived as the first part of a much longer work which he did not complete. But it was Comte's first attempt to expound a systematic doctrine. And he continued to regard it as a fundamental work, an essay which set the agenda for his whole intellectual career. It was the work that established him as a major intellectual force, for though a young man's essay, it circulated widely among the intellectual elite of the time. It was distributed to prominent liberals of the stature of Constant and Guizot, Sismondi, Dunoyer and Say; and while Constant was critical of Comte's illiberalism, Guizot and others were deeply impressed. Furthermore, Comte's first disciple, Gustave d'Eichthal, took it upon himself to distribute the essay internationally, and brought it to the attention of both Hegel and Mill. Both read the essay and found much to commend in it. The essay was written at a time when Comte's concerns were at the heart of European political theory. This was not always the case. Later in life, towards the end of the composition of the *Positive Philosophy*, Comte subjected himself to a regime of 'cerebral hygiene': he vowed to preserve the purity of his intellectual vision by insulating himself from the ideas of contemporary thinkers. This regime necessarily had the effect of cutting him off from the European mainstream. But in the 1820s he was addressing questions that were central to European political theory, which was preoccupied, above all, with this question: how can any kind of political community, be forged in a society peopled by individuals shorn of traditional social bonds? In France, more specifically, the most urgent question of all was how to 'close the revolution'—how to construct; a new form of legitimacy that would transcend the conflicts that had plagued France since 1789—and Comte constructed one of the

most arresting and distinctive answers to that question.

This is the pre-eminent reason why the time is right for a new appreciation of Comte's place in the intellectual history of early nineteenth-century France. For the tradition of enquiry concerned with closing the revolution has been brilliantly excavated in recent years by Francois Furet and his collaborators, who have set out to build a decisively new alternative to the 'Marxist' paradigm of French revolutionary studies upon a recovery of France's lost liberal tradition. Precisely because Furet's ideological commitment was to the rediscovery of such liberal writers as Constant, Stael, Guizot and Tocqueville, he has given only fleeting attention to Comte. But if historians need a comprehensive 'mapping' of the exceptionally rich debates in France in the 1820s, we must give due space to the terrain occupied by Saint-Simon and Comte. For their approach rested on an original synthesis of the conservatives' sense of the systemic nature of the social order with the liberals' understanding of the revolution as the product of long-term and hence irreversible social change. Their sense of fundamental historical change, which they shared with the liberals, precluded an acceptance of the counter-revolutionary project. But because, like the conservatives, they saw that society was an organic whole, they were suspicious of the liberals' fondness for constitutional fixes: Comte in particular maintained that the practical and political work of reconstruction must build upon a prior theoretical work of reconstruction, which would depend crucially upon the formation of new kinds of intellectual and spiritual authority. That, in short, is why the positivist intellectual system should be seen as the realization of what was, from the outset, a political project.

This edition presents the *Plan* as part of a collection of Comte's early writings, spanning the period 1819-28. This corpus of texts is pre-selected, in the sense that these were the texts that Comte himself chose to reprint as an

appendix to the final volume of his *Positive Politics in 1854*, and which at one time he had hoped to append to his earlier *Positive Philosophy*. This collection therefore possesses a sort of retrospective authorial approbation. At the same time it is worth commenting on why Comte chose to reprint these texts. His aim was to rebut the allegation that the *Positive Politics*, with its fondness for the elevation of positivism into a secular religion, constituted a betrayal of the 'scientific' character of Comte's first system, as he expounded it in the *Positive Philosophy*. The appendix was intended, Comte informed his readers, 'to demonstrate the perfect harmony of the efforts that characterized my youth with the works accomplished by my maturity' (*Ecrits de jeunesse*, p. 197). What Comte meant by this remark—here anticipating subsequent lines of criticism developed most notably by Emile Littré and J. S. Mill—was that these early essays, considered together, displayed 'the necessary relation between the philosophical base and the religious construction' in his thought (*Ecrits de jeunesse*, p. 197). The latter was not a late accretion, but held a central place in Comte's thought from the outset, as was demonstrated above all by the essays dealing with the 'spiritual power' and its necessity in modern society.

Before we proceed to a detailed examination of the early essays and their significance, we need to begin with a brief survey of Comte's system, as it developed in his two great multi-volume treatises. In these works, Comte addressed the political crisis of the age of revolution, and he analysed that crisis as, at root, an intellectual and spiritual one. He explained the political disorder of the age in terms of the spiritual void that had afflicted Europe ever since the fragmentation of western Christendom at the Reformation. This was, no doubt, an egregious instance of over-determination—cause and effect were separated by two centuries; and in practice Comte plugged the holes in his argument by invoking the corrosive influence of Enlightenment philosophy, which completed the work of the Reformation. If

political unity were to be recaptured, it had to be preceded by the establishment of a new spiritual unity; and Comte's central contention was that the only possible foundation for that spiritual unity was the authority of the positive method.

It has frequently been asserted, most famously by John Stuart Mill, that a wide gulf separated the Comte of the *Positive Philosophy* from the later Comte of the *Positive Politics*. The later Comte—so the argument goes—betrayed the rationalist objectives of his earlier work, and elevated imagination, emotion and the 'social sentiment' above reason. Positivism ceased to be a philosophy and was transformed into a secular religion, in which the worship of humanity supplanted that of the Christian God. Comte even prescribed in notorious detail the trappings of his religion of humanity: a hierarchy of priests, with Comte at the head; a calendar of positivist saints; social sacraments; and quasi-religious festivals celebrating social relations.

There is no doubt that Comte's emphasis did shift in his later work. The priority he now attached to sentiment rather than to reason was quite new, and overturned explicit assertions in his earlier work. But Mill's interpretation as a whole is difficult to sustain. Comte always insisted on the necessary interdependence of *Positive Philosophy* and *Positive Politics*; and by his lights it is easy to see why. The former alone could not serve as a principle of unity, for as we shall see Comte denied the objective unity of knowledge. It was only in the subjective synthesis of positive knowledge in its application for the good of humanity—that is, in the polity, and in the formation of the new spiritual power—that positivism acquired a unifying power. And it is Comte's early essays that demonstrate that his objectives were from the outset spiritual and political rather than narrowly philosophical. From the start, the exposition of the positivist philosophical system and the formation of positive sociology were conceived as means to the development of a positive spiritual power which would serve as the centrepiece of a positive polity.

The biographical significance of these early texts lies above all in the fact that they coincided with Comte's break with his mentor, Saint-Simon; indeed, it was the 'fundamental essay' and its publication that played a critical role in the rupture of the relationship of master and disciple, since Comte felt, with some cause, that Saint-Simon was unwilling to give him sufficient credit for the authorship of the text.

It was in 1817 that Comte met Saint-Simon, one of the intellectual geniuses of the age of revolution and reconstruction. The moment was opportune for both men. Saint-Simon had just lost the services of his valued secretary and collaborator, Augustin Thierry, who was soon to make a name for himself as one of the luminaries in France's emergent school of liberal historiography. Saint-Simon was notoriously difficult as an employer, and it was his authoritarianism that finally overcame Thierry's patience. The loss was a grievous one, for Saint-Simon, possessed as he was of one of the most brilliant and fertile intellectual imaginations of the age, was almost wholly lacking in any sort of talent for organization or system. He needed able collaborators who understood the train of his thought and could weld his sparkling insights into some kind of order. This was Thierry's gift; still more so was it Comte's. The young Comte, meanwhile, had been searching for a direction to his career ever since his dismissal from the Ecole Polytechnique, along with the entire student body, in April 1816. The opportunity to work for Saint-Simon put an end to sixteen months of uncertainty in his life.

The intellectual legacy Saint-Simon was to bequeath to Comte was a composite one, 'a bricolage of the organic social theory of the theocrats with the scientism of the Enlightenment, in the guise of a systematic general doctrine that would finally bring the moral and political crisis of the revolutionary period to a close' (Baker, 'Closing the French Revolution', p. 329). Saint-Simon had been deeply impressed by his encounter with the

Ideologues, those liberal heirs of the Enlightenment who were the dominant intellectual voice in France between the fall of the Jacobins and the advent of Napoleon. They taught that the key to rational social reorganization lay in science, and specifically in knowledge of the physiological generation of ideas, which would become the foundation of a science of morality and politics. Under their influence, Saint-Simon conceived the project of deploying the physical sciences as a basis for the reconstruction of society. Meanwhile, a celebrated encounter with Mme de Stael, herself close to the Ideologues, both reinforced the notion that the route to certainty in politics lay in the application of 'the philosophy of the positive sciences' to the moral and political sciences, and introduced a number of new and fertile ideas into Saint-Simon's thinking. These included a concern with the essential role for an intellectual elite in the scientific reconstruction of society: for Stael, men of letters must constitute a sort of 'lay ministry' to guide the people and to defend them against tyranny. She also awakened in Saint-Simon an awareness of the religious basis of social order. This made him receptive to the influence of the conservative social theorists Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald. Maistre's emphasis on the need for systematic doctrine as the foundation for a stable social order, together with Bonald's notion of society as an organic whole, together constituted the second great formative influence on the development of Saint-Simon's thinking.

These lines of thought were developed by Saint-Simon in a series of brilliant works which were, however, wildly disorganized and largely unread before the advent of Thierry, who served as his secretary from 1814 to 1817. Under his influence, Saint-Simon wrote much more lucidly and with greater literary success, for instance in his *De la reorganisation de la société européenne*, published in October 1814. He also moved much closer to the liberals, whom he had formerly looked upon with a measure of contempt. His works were

favourably reviewed in the liberal press, and under the influence of the liberals he became increasingly interested in political economy. It was through the influence of Jean-Baptiste Say, the pre-eminent French economist of the time, that the word *industriel* entered Saint-Simon's vocabulary. The new direction to Saint-Simon's thought was marked by his foundation of the periodical *L'Industrie* in 1816. Its subscribers included eminent scientists, businessmen, bankers, peers and deputies, as well as Say himself. The nineteenth century, Saint-Simon declared, was destined to be 'the industrial century'.

Most of the central themes in Comte's philosophy can be found in Saint-Simon's work. Already in Saint-Simon we find the argument that social reconstruction depended upon intellectual reconstruction, and that the foundation of this intellectual reconstruction must be found in the application of scientific method. Further, we can find the seeds of Comte's doctrine of the spiritual power in the Saint-Simonian notion that in a rationally ordered modern society public opinion must be directed by an intellectual elite of scientists. Many commentators have inferred that Comte's significance lay not in his intellectual originality but in his skill as an expositor. This was the position taken by the Saint-Simonians after Comte had broken with them: for them, Comte's early work was only a commentary on Saint-Simon's *Lettres d'un habitant de Geneve*. But this inference would be misleading for a number of reasons.

The first is that, though Comte was not twenty years old when he entered Saint-Simon's employment, his mind was far from being *tabula rasa* at that time. Already he was dividing his reading between two fields of study, the physical sciences on the one hand and the moral and political sciences on the other. In the former he was reading such authors as Manges and Lagrange, while in the latter he was considering the works of Montesquieu and Condorcet, Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith (*Correspondance générale* 1, 19).

In other words, he was already equipping himself with the intellectual artillery with which, five years later, he would tackle his 'fundamental essay'; in Levy-Bruhl's words, Comte 'already possessed a large portion of the materials for his future system' (Levy-Bruhl, *The Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, p. 6). Indeed, though we do not know the precise circumstances that brought Comte and Saint-Simon together, there is a suggestion that it was the convergence of their ideas that was responsible for their encounter, rather than vice versa (Pickering, *Auguste Comte*, p. 10; Gouhier, *La Jeunesse d'Auguste Comte* vol. 3, 168-70). The second point is that many of the ideas for which Comte was indebted to Saint-Simon can themselves be traced back to Mme de Stael, to Condorcet or to Turgot. Thirdly, the works produced under Saint-Simon's name during the period of his collaboration with Comte were to a large extent Comte's: he was employed to synthesize his master's ideas, but his role went far beyond that. It was he who undertook the hard work of literary and intellectual craftsmanship, and it was he, too, who contributed greatly to shaping Saint-Simon's intellectual agenda. Indeed, it may be no coincidence that, just as the advent of Thierry coincided with a redirection of Saint-Simon's work, so the same was true of the arrival of Comte: the new working relationship coincided with Saint-Simon's abandonment of his growing preoccupation with the politics of production as he reverted to his earlier concern with the spiritual power.

We are dealing, then, with a case of mutual influence rather than a one-way relationship. Comte was open to Saint-Simon's influence because Saint-Simon provided what he was looking for: chiefly, he suggested the possibility of synthesizing his twin interests of the natural sciences and the moral and political sciences into a single project entailing the creation of a social science and a scientific polity. But Comte provided the methodical rigour and concern for system which Saint-Simon lacked. Comte was not by nature a

searcher after novelty but a searcher after system: he was a hedgehog and not a fox, he knew 'one big thing' and not 'many little things', and Sir Isaiah Berlin's categories might have been invented to describe the contrasting intellectual gifts of Comte and his mentor. And it was the systematic credentials of positivism that largely contributed to its sustained appeal in the nineteenth century. It is in that sense that it is indisputably true to say that without Comte there would have been no positivism.

What clearly was central to Comte's project, in his early writings and throughout his career, was the idea of subjecting moral and political phenomena to scientific investigation. But this idea in itself was by no means new. It had been a central ambition of the thinkers of the Enlightenment, especially in France and Scotland. In France, thinkers in the Physiocratic tradition, such as Turgot, deployed the idea of the rational cognition of the natural order of society as a corrective to the disorder and injustice produced by the arbitrary assertion of political will. In the era of the French Revolution, Sieyès coined the term 'science sociale'; and the idea of a rational social science that would serve as the basis for reconstruction was a familiar theme to the members of the Societe de 1789 and to readers of the *Journal d'instruction sociale*—in both of which Sieyès and Condorcet were prime movers. After Thermidor, Condorcet's disciples the Ideologues used the newly founded Class of Moral and Political Sciences at the Institut de France as a forum in which to develop their ideas for a rational reconstruction of society on the basis of a scientific study of the origins of ideas.

Saint-Simon and Comte owed much to Condorcet and his understanding of what a science of society had to look like. They agreed, above all, that it must be progressive, and founded on a history of civilization. But they also wanted to move beyond Condorcet: indeed, Comte's *opuscule fondamental* was originally conceived as an attempt to rewrite Condorcet's celebrated *Esquisse* along truly

positive lines (Baker, 'Closing the French Revolution'). If we are to appreciate how Saint-Simon and Comte moved beyond the conception of social science inherited from the Enlightenment, we have to understand that they saw themselves as *synthesizing* the ideas of Condorcet and the Ideologues on the one hand with those of the conservatives Maistre and Bonald on the other. This synthesis generated a wholly new conception of how a progressive social science could serve as the basis for a process of social reconstruction which would effectively 'close' the revolution.

Saint-Simon and Comte had come to see Enlightenment philosophy itself as radically corrosive of social order. In its negative aspects it had been invaluable in sweeping away the relics of the old order; but it possessed no positive, constructive capacity of its own, as the entire experience of the revolutionary era demonstrated. Its defects were most apparent in Condorcet's sweeping denunciations of the Middle Ages from the absolute standpoint of the inexorable progress of the human mind. Through reading the authors of the counter-revolutionary school, Saint-Simon and Comte came to see medieval Europe in a new, more positive light, and came to see that institutions that were good in one era could be bad in another, and beliefs that had once been true could become the errors of a succeeding age. This historical relativism, amounting to the doctrine that all knowledge is relative to a particular stage in the development of civilization, contrasted starkly with Condorcet's unilinear vision of history as the progressive victory of truth over error. It was this *organic* conception of the stages of history that constituted the chief novelty of the positive conception of social science.

Comte shared Maistre's and Bonald's understanding of the structural features that any stable social order had to possess: above all, there had to be an authoritative moral and intellectual order which would serve as the indispensable foundation for social order. But he disagreed with them on the substantive question of what distinctive features a modern

social order must possess. For all the complexity of their thought, Maistre and Bonald believed that only one kind of social order was possible, namely one based on church, king and landed aristocracy. The French Revolution, then, did not entail the formation of a new kind of society, but was simply the dissolution of society. It is clear from Essay 2 in this collection that Comte did not accept this interpretation of the place of the Revolution in French history. That essay constitutes a pioneering contribution to the kind of liberal historiography that was to become fashionable in the 1820s in the hands of such men as Guizot, Thierry and Sismondi. Their basic strategy, which took its point of departure from Madame de Stael's posthumous *Considerations sur la Revolution française* was to distinguish 1789 (good) from 1793 (bad) by setting the Revolution in the context of the more general movement of national and indeed European history. The central thread of that movement of history was the rise of the middle class, and specifically, for both Thierry and Comte, the 'emancipation of the communes'. This was the first 'social interpretation' of the French Revolution; and its polemical point was to demonstrate that, even though consensus about political institutions had remained elusive ever since 1789, nevertheless the basic principles of the social order inaugurated in 1789 were irreversible. They were the product, not of one generation's whim, but of a centuries-old process. If the 'Restoration' meant an attempt to restore a pre-revolutionary social order founded on privilege, it was doomed to failure.

Comte had a good deal in common with the liberals. Like them, he deployed history as a weapon against the counter-revolutionaries, who failed to see that the revolution could not be overturned because it was the product of long-term social evolution. But he departed from the liberals over their belief that the new society had essentially come into being, and that the only task remaining was to devise appropriate political institutions. Most liberals of Comte's generation followed Constant in

thinking it anachronistic to believe that an ordered society had to have a determinate common purpose. But for Comte this notion was absolutely fundamental, and it lay at the heart of his project in the next of his early essays, the so-called *opuscule fondamental*.

It should be clear from this account that this essay should be understood as an answer to the deepest quandary that confronted French political theorists of the early nineteenth century: how to 'close' the revolution. This is the significance, for example, of the important passage that Comte added at the end of the introduction in 1824 (pp. 59-62 below). Liberals such as Madame de Stael and Guizot were also centrally concerned with how to break the cycle of anarchy and despotism by making at least some of the achievements of the Revolution serve as principles of reorganization. Comte sets out the errors made by both Restoration government and popular opposition, and sees the need for a constructive doctrine to steer a middle course. This echoes the liberal project, which he regarded as less harmful than either the revolutionary or the reactionary project. But whereas liberals tended to see reconstruction as largely a work of statesmanship, Comte's originality lay in his insistence upon its theoretical dimensions, which he had identified as early as 1819, when in Essay i of this collection he first stressed the importance of separating theory from practice in politics. The fundamental features of the new social order had to be grasped before the practical work of reconstruction could begin. The claim that 'spiritual' reconstruction had to precede temporal reforms was basic to Comte's break with liberalism, and it marks out some distinctive territory for him in the history of political thought. Guizot and his fellow liberals prized moral and institutional pluralism as the mainspring of progress. Comte, by contrast, was the quintessential anti-pluralist, the archetypal exponent of the conception of society as what Michael Oakeshott, who thought it a fallacy, termed an 'enterprise association'. That is, it was an association bound together by a common purpose, like a

golf club or a trade union. This belief that 'society exists only where a general and combined action is exerted' (below, p. 66) underpinned Comte's conception of social reconstruction. The basic assumption of his *Plan* was that social reconstruction would be in vain if it was not to be grounded in the theoretical work of rethinking the goal of human activity in society. This assumption—'that government and the social union exist for the purpose of concentrating and directing all the forces of society to some one end'—alarmed John Stuart Mill right at the outset of his encounter with Comte's writings. (Mill to Gustave d'Eichthal, 8 October 1829, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* vol. XII, p. 36).

The main reason why Comte always identified the *Plan* as a fundamental work was that this was where, for the first time, he expounded his famous law of the three states, in which he asserted that all branches of knowledge pass successively from the theological state through the metaphysical to the positive. The originality of this law has been much discussed. Its authorship is sometimes attributed to Turgot, sometimes to Condorcet, and sometimes to Saint-Simon, who in his *Memoire sur la science de l'homme* (1813) reported some remarks made along similar lines by the physiologist Jean Burdin some fifteen years previously. Certainly Comte was drawing on some dichotomies that had long pedigrees in the history of ideas: that between imagination and observation, for example, and that between cause and law. The idea of the progress of the mind was certainly Condorcet's. One, obvious innovation made by Comte in his 1822 work was to introduce the second state, the metaphysical, which had not been present in Burdin or Saint-Simon; and even after reading Comte's text Saint-Simon continued to draw the simple contrast between 'the new system' and 'the old'. But this was hardly sufficient to establish Comte's fundamental originality, since he was not inclined to dwell at much length on the metaphysical state, which he always regarded as merely transitional. A much more important

point is that in Comte's work the law of the three states was inextricably linked to his differential theory of science, according to which the different sciences have distinct subject-matters and must therefore employ distinct methods (Heilbron, *The Rise of Social Theory*, pp. 225-6). This differential theory makes it quite clear that Comte's positivism did not entail a doctrine nowadays regarded as constitutive of positivism—namely, the belief that the human and social sciences must be modeled on the methods of the natural sciences. For Comte, if the scientific claims of sociology were to be demonstrated, it had to mark out both a distinctive subject-matter and a distinctive method for itself. But it is crucial to see that the logical relationship between the law of the three states and the differential theory of science was ambiguous, and that this ambiguity explains why that law itself contains an important equivocation. Comte had two different accounts of this relationship. In the first, the differential theory of science comes first, and the law of the three states is an inference from it. Comte's work in the philosophy of mathematics had taught him that the sciences differed in their subject-matter and in their methods; from which he inferred that the social sciences too must have a distinctive method based on the distinctive features of their subject-matter.

How does the human world differ from the plant and animal kingdom? The answer, for Comte, was that human beings possess the ability to learn from the experience of previous generations, so that each generation is not doomed to repeat the experience of its predecessors. This was the chief reason why 'society' was not a constant in the same way as nature. The subject-matter of social science was distinctive in being progressive, and methodologically it should be based upon a historical law.

On this account, the law of the three states is this historical law: it is, in other words, the principal substantive finding of sociology. But Comte's other account depicted this law not as

a substantive law of sociology but as the law that shows the necessity of sociology. Here, it is the law of the three states that comes first, and the differential theory of science is a further specification of the law. The law of the three states showed that all branches of knowledge passed from the theological through the metaphysical to the positive state. But the point of the differential theory was that it showed that the fact that the study of society had not yet reached the positive state did not prove that it was incapable of doing so. On the contrary, the differential theory explained why the study of society had to be the last science to become positive, since its subject-matter was the least abstract and the most complex. So the significance of the law of the three states for Comte was that it on the one hand demonstrated that a positive social science was possible and necessary, and on the other hand demonstrated that it already existed. It was on the one hand a law proving sociology to be necessary; on the other hand, it was the essential law of sociology.

Comte's *Plan* has long been acknowledged to be an important work. Less well known are his essays dealing with the question of the spiritual power—Essays 4 and 5 in this collection—and yet they are in their way just as revealing of the cast of his mind. For it was here that he engaged most closely with the works of the political economists and with those of the 'counter-revolutionaries' Maistre and Lamennais. Here he was much more appreciative than he had been previously of the value of the Catholic/feudal system. Comte's main theme was the need for the institution in modern Europe of the separation of the temporal and spiritual powers, a principle that had first been developed in medieval Christendom, but which had been lost since the dissolution of that system set in with the Reformation. This principle had both authoritarian and liberal aspects. On the one hand, it was in formulating his understanding of the place of the spiritual power in modern society that Comte first expounded in detail his conception of a positivist priesthood—to be

composed, not of scientific specialists, but of moral and social philosophers who would be grounded in the sciences without being specialist practitioners of any one science. Benjamin Constant noted that this conception left little room for freedom of conscience. Comte commended faith as a 'fundamental virtue', defined as 'the disposition to believe spontaneously, without prior proof, in the dogmas proclaimed by competent authority; which is indeed the indispensable general condition allowing the establishment and the maintenance of true intellectual and moral communion'.

Constant denounced Comte, and other contributors to the Saint-Simonian journal *Le Producteur*, for advocating a new kind of theocracy. And it is quite true that Comte had no sympathy for *intellectual* liberalism: the principle of freedom of conscience, which was so dear to Constant, was a heresy to Comte. But it would be wrong to infer that the political implications of the essay were illiberal. The most obvious implication of the principle of the separation of powers was to contest the absorption of the spiritual power by the temporal. Comte wanted to assert the importance in the modern world of a distinct and autonomous spiritual power which could serve as a force for intellectual and moral governance. He maintained that the separation of spiritual and temporal powers conferred two significant benefits. On the one hand, it permitted the reconciliation of two desirable goals which would otherwise have been incompatible: the increase in the scale of human society and the maintenance of strong government. At the same time, the reconstitution of a moral and intellectual authority independent of the temporal power facilitated the maintenance of order without recourse to the kind of centralization of political power that would stifle progress. What Comte was saying here was that there were two sources of social cohesion, namely moral force and material force; and in the absence of the former the latter must expand to fill the gap. 'In a population where the indispensable

co-operation of individuals in public order can no longer be achieved by the voluntary and moral assent accorded by each to a common social doctrine, there remains no other expedient for maintaining any kind of harmony than the sad choice between force and corruption' (below, p. 200). In modern society, then, the reconstitution of spiritual power was a means of averting administrative despotism.

These two essays also have a crucial biographical significance for the student of the development of Comte's intellectual projects following his break with Saint-Simon. The *Plan* of 1824 was described as the first part of the first volume of a projected *Système de politique positive*. The first volume, when complete, would deal comprehensively with the *scientific* work necessary for social reconstruction; that is, principally with 'social physics' or what Comte would later call sociology. Its fundamental idea was 'the application of the positive method to social science' (*Correspondance générale* i, 84). The second and third volumes would, presumably, deal with the other two 'series of works', namely the educational and the political, while the second part of the first volume would present a first outline of a social science by 'presenting a first scientific overview of the laws which have guided the general course of civilization, and in turn a first glimpse of the social system which the natural development of the human race must bring to dominance today' (below, pp. 47-8). The last two volumes seem to have been a longer-term project, but in May 1824 Comte saw the completion of the first volume as an immediate priority, which would take him two months at the most (*Correspondance générale* 1, 83). This ambition, needless to say, was one that Comte never fulfilled, but the reasons are not wholly clear. In 1824-5 Comte repeatedly told friends that the ideas for the second part were clear in his mind and that he just needed a good stretch of time to put pen to paper. But the curious thing about his correspondence at this time is that, though he frequently raised the subject of his planned

second part, he never discussed in any detail the ideas it would expound. There is inevitably a suspicion that the work was not as fully developed in Comte's mind as he suggested. But he also suffered from financial difficulties, as he repeatedly complained, and these led him to divert into income-earning projects (whether teaching or writing) energies that might have been channeled towards the completion of his major project. The works that appear here as Essays 4 and 5 originated as two series of articles Comte wrote for the Saint-Simonian journal *Le Producteur*; and at the time he made no secret of the fact that he regarded them as a diversion from his main task. They did not develop new ideas, but just served to propagate principles he had expounded in his *Plan (Correspondance generale I, 172-3)*.

Comte's project in the early/mid-1820s was the establishment of positive politics, or 'social physics'. His assumption at this stage was that the establishment of 'positive philosophy' would not be for his but for the next generation, since it could not be accomplished until all the positive sciences, including social physics, had been established. But on completion of the third part of 'Considerations on the Spiritual Power' in February 1826, he experienced some kind of nervous crisis which led him in a new direction. On his own subsequent account, he now dedicated his life to the foundation of the new spiritual power; and he came to see the need to combine the abstract and the concrete points of view, which were developed respectively in Essays 4 and 5. Finally, he came to see that, whereas from the theoretical point of view it was indeed true that social physics must precede positive philosophy, from the practical and educational points of view positive philosophy had to be developed now since it was central to the education of the new spiritual power. The result was that Comte now attributed a more fundamental importance to the course on positive philosophy which he had originally planned simply as a means of earning his living and thus being able to complete the

*Positive Politics*. That course was to be Comte's chief work of the 1830s and early 1840s (Pickering, *Auguste Comte*, esp. p. 368).

This account cuts at the roots of the thesis of the 'two Comtes'. That thesis rests upon a perception that there was a fundamental shift in Comte's interests between the 1830s, when he was concerned with the classification of the sciences and the logical foundations of sociology, and the 1850s, when his attention shifted to the religious foundations of the social order. Mill, Littré and others could enthuse about the former while deploring the latter. But the error here lies in a confusion between Comte's *subject* and his *purpose*. In the *Positive Philosophy* Comte was not writing about the classification of the sciences out of a purely theoretical interest in epistemology. Rather, it was vital to him to be able to establish positive philosophy because it was a prerequisite for the formation of a new spiritual power, which he had now come to see not as an ultimate goal but as an urgent necessity. If he was not, at this stage, writing *about* the spiritual power, he was most certainly writing *for* it. From the abstract or theoretical point of view, the urgent need was to create 'social physics'. This would in turn make positive philosophy possible. From the concrete or practical point of view, however, the urgent need was to create and educate a new spiritual power, and that demanded the prior establishment of a positive philosophy. Comte's 'theoretical' turn originated, paradoxically enough, in his growing disenchantment with the quietism of the first approach. He now sought to synthesize the two points of view.

Comte identified three 'series of works' necessary for the reorganization of society: the theoretical, the educational and the political. But in the *Plan* he dealt only with the first series, which is why in 1824 he described the essay as simply the first part of the first volume of a projected *Système de politique positive*, and why its principal title identified it as a plan of the *scientific* work necessary for social reorganization. In 1826, at the end of his

'Considerations on the Spiritual Power', he envisaged proceeding to a discussion of the more specifically political aspects of reconstruction. But in the event he did not proceed in this way. Soon afterwards he experienced what he described as 'a veritable nervous crisis', which led him, as he explained to Blainville, to undertake 'a total and, to my mind, truly systematic recasting of my work on positive politics, of which you have the first part' (*Correspondance generale* 1, 186). This recasting was what Comte went on to undertake in his *Cours de philosophie positive*. The story of how he set about it lies beyond the scope of this introduction.

There remains one essay, the final one, which has not yet been discussed and which might seem rather out of place in this collection. Comte recognized that the essay marked something of a turning-point in his career—the passage from my social debut to my intellectual career' (*Écrits de jeunesse*, p. 200). We know that he hesitated before including his essay on Broussais in the appendix to the *Positive Politics*. Nevertheless, he did decide to include it, and we should take his reasons for doing so seriously. If read in conjunction with the section at the end of the *Plan* where Comte discusses Cabanis and the attempt to found social physics directly on physiology, this text helps us situate Comte in relation to the idea of the 'science of man' which, from the Enlightenment to the Restoration, had furnished so fruitful an idiom in the quest for a rational foundation for politics. This is a complex and technical subject which can be treated only briefly here; but it is nevertheless important for an understanding of both Comte's intellectual development and his originality.

There were many different strands within the discourse of the science of man. Some of its exponents—notably the Montpellier school—tended towards vitalism, and emphasized on the one hand the unity of the phenomena of life and on the other the radical gulf that separated the life sciences from those

sciences which dealt with 'dead' matter. Others, such as the Ideologues, leaned further in the direction of sensationalism, but were still more vehement advocates of a unitary science of man that joined the moral and the physical. By the time Comte was writing, however, a philosophical reaction had set in against the sensationalism of the Ideologues, whose ideas were now thought to be tainted with materialism. Cabanis's friend Maine de Biran now repudiated the reduction of the moral to the physical. Others emphasized the active role of the mind, which did not just passively receive sensations. The most influential philosopher of this anti-materialist reaction was Victor Cousin, who denounced the sensationalist principle that all knowledge is derived from the senses and therefore dependent upon the body's sensory apparatuses. Cousin's psychology stressed the innate sense of unity and continuity constituting the self. Sense experience was meaningless without consciousness. For Cousin, one part of psychology—that concerned with the sensory operations of the body—properly belonged to medicine and physiology; the other—the study of consciousness—belonged to philosophy, and must deploy a sort of rational intuition as its distinctive method.

Cousin's liberalism was politically suspect to the Restoration governments of the 1820s, which first dismissed him from his academic post and then imprisoned him. But his was the emergent philosophical orthodoxy of the time, and it was against Cousin's school of 'eclectics' or 'spiritualists' that Comte's essay on Broussais was directed. For F. J. V. Broussais was the best-known exponent of materialism among the medical theorists of the Restoration, at a time when that doctrine was regarded as decidedly heterodox. He made his name in 1816 with his *Examen des doctrines médicales*; but his 1828 text, *De l'irritation et de la folie*, was his most provocative work. Here he expounded a 'physiological medicine' which held that all disease results from a general state of 'irritation'. Broussais's work was read as a

rehabilitation of the sensationalism of the Ideologues; and his heroes were indeed such thinkers as Locke, Condillac, Destutt de Tracy and Cabanis. For Broussais, the true 'physical and moral science of man' was dependent upon the insights of medicine. He denounced eclecticism as unscientific; and his book was itself attacked by the Cousinian journal *Le Globe*.

For Comte to write about Broussais, and to take a stance in favour of Broussais against his critics, was thus a deeply partisan act. He admired Broussais partly because, by replacing the 'vital force' by 'irritability', Broussais had clarified the distinction between organic and inorganic phenomena. Broussais showed that physiology was not reducible to the inorganic sciences, and he thus struck a blow against the 'mechanists'. At the same time, in insisting that interior sensations were caused solely by physiological phenomena and therefore could not constitute revelations of moral truths, Broussais launched a frontal assault of the 'psychological' method of Cousin, Jouffroy and their allies.

Broussais was important to Comte because he helped him identify the distinctive place of physiology within the hierarchy of the sciences. On the one hand he had to establish that physiology *rested on* the inorganic sciences, because it was an integral feature of Comte's classification of the sciences that each science rested on the preceding one in the hierarchy—and in that sense it made sense to speak of the unity of knowledge. This was something that the vitalists overlooked. But on the other hand it was still more important to be able to show that it was a distinct science, with its own distinct method and subject-matter—which was something that the mechanists of the Paris medical school tended to overlook. Broussais, who was suspected of materialism, helped Comte establish the existence of physiology as a distinct positive science in its own right; but so too did the Catholic nobleman Henri de Blainville, who became something of an intellectual

mentor to Comte—which says a good deal about Comte's complex position on the French cultural map of the time. It was Blainville who introduced Comte to Lamarck's term 'biology' as the new designation for this science.

Comte, however, was no mere disciple of either Broussais or Blainville. He points out that Broussais devotes no attention to the demarcation to be drawn between the sphere of physiology and the sphere of social science; he does nothing to eradicate Cabanis's confusion between 'the study of the individual man and that of the human race considered in its collective development' (below, p. 235). This distinction was the crucial one for Comte, and it shows him breaking decisively with the hegemony of the discourse of the science of man; and thus breaking decisively with Saint-Simon too, for Comte's old employer himself remained in important respects wedded to that discourse. Indeed, one reason why Comte thought it so important to be able to establish the autonomy of biology in relation to chemistry—and why he was prepared to draw promiscuously on Broussais and Blainville in order to do so—was that it was a key stage in the elucidation of his classification of the sciences, the *coup de grace* of which was the legitimation of social science as a positive science in its own right. Others had asserted the autonomy of biology *vis-d-vis* the inorganic sciences in order to affirm the homogeneity of the science of man. Comte was critical of this view. He agreed that *ultimately* the history of civilization (and hence social physics) was the consequence of human organization, or of 'the natural history of man'. But 'it would be a misunderstanding to conclude. . . that we should not establish a clear division between social physics and physiology properly so called'. Direct observation of social phenomena was necessary because of the progressive character of the history of civilization: in the analysis of that history, 'it would be quite beyond the powers of the mind to connect any term in the series to the primitive point of departure, if we suppressed all the

intermediate links' (below, p. 133).

Why, we might ask, was it so important to Comte to establish social science—sociology, he was soon to name it—as a distinct positive science, rather than as an application of physiology? Why could his purposes not be served by the older discourse of the science of man, which itself aimed to supply a sort of rational foundation for politics? The ultimate answer to this question must remain a matter for speculation, but it is surely bound up with the polemical stance he was adopting in the political debates of the 1820s. He wanted to establish the positive credentials of social science because he wanted to delegitimize those other discourses about politics—he labelled them 'theological' and 'metaphysical'—which in his analysis perpetuated the intellectual and political disorder of the age. In addition, as we have seen, the distinctive subject-matter which Comte mapped out for social science—the direct observation of the history of civilizations—had the real advantage of itself furnishing proof of the historical inevitability of social science, and of the political and social order that must result once the intellectual reign of the positive method had been completed by its application to the study of society. For Comte, then, the project of creating a social science was no open-ended intellectual quest; he was interested in intellectual order rather than in a restless and endless pursuit of truth for its own sake. There would be no fourth state, for positive philosophy was to be 'the definitive state of man' (below, p. 154). Its formation was from the outset a political project with a determinate social end in view.

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#### FURTHER READINGS

- Comte's various writings have never been gathered into a critical edition. But Comte personally approved of Harriet Martineau's English redaction of the six

volumes of his main work into *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (3 vols., 1896). Secondary studies of Comte include J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (2d ed. rev. 1866; 5th ed. 1907); L. Lévy-Bruhl, *The Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (trans. 1903); and a chapter in Frank E. Manuel, *The Prophets of Paris* (1962). For Comte's relationship with Saint-Simon see Manuel's *The New World of Henri Saint-Simon* (1956); and for his relation to the history of positivism see Leszek Kolakowski, *The Alienation of Reason* (trans. 1968). Also useful are the two works of Richmond Laurin Hawkins, *Auguste Comte and the United States, 1816-1853* (1936) and *Positivism in the United States, 1853-1861* (1938), and F. S. Marvin, *Comte: The Founder of Sociology* (1936).

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