

Unearthing the Repressed Grandfather: Comte's Vision for Sociology, and Why Teaching it is Important for the Future of Sociology

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This paper will be presented by way of dramatic performance, with the author appearing as the nineteenth century Auguste Comte, returning sociologists to Comte's founding vision of sociology, and providing them with a public account of their own potential as sociologists and teachers of sociology.

Abstract

There is a repression within the discipline of sociology and in the teaching of sociology of its own birth. This is unhelpful for young sociologists when they are developing their own sociological identity, and when they communicate their study to others. Like our own grandfather, Comte demands our respect and understanding, along with a constructive criticism of his misguided concepts; but only after we have properly listened to him, not to careless clichés. Concepts such as: positivism, altruism, historical method, comparative method, teaching sociology, and the relationship of religion, biology, economics, and psychology towards sociology, all have new life breathed into them by a careful reading of Comte's wide range of theories. Comte's voice helps inform us of how we got to where we are currently in sociology today, to locate ourselves, and of what we can aim for in the future when guided by a moral passion.

Keywords: Comte, Teaching Sociology, Classical Sociology, Pure Sociology, Positivism

Sociology lecturers today are complicit in a repression of sociology's "founder" Auguste Comte (1798-1857), and thereby deny themselves and their students an understanding of sociology's origins, as well as its founding spirit and purpose. Comte's legacy continues within sociology, and he produced some of the most interesting sociological ideas in the history of social theory. He is probably the easiest figure in the history of sociology to criticize though, and some of his ideas are still too embarrassing for many sociologists to teach to their students. Unfortunately, in our postmodern age of deconstruction and reconstruction, Comte remains a widely

misunderstand and neglected “other”. This paper challenges the stereotypical and disparaging reduction of Comte's vast works to mere "positivism" and “madness”, and calls for a recuperation of those theories and concepts that could speak to our contemporary condition, and to contemporary students who are wanting to “understand” what sociology initially involved, and can still involve, which most notably involved his moral vision, and his discussion of an early socio-biology. We should not just teach Comte’s clichéd, early, and redundant concepts, we should discuss the full range of his colourful concepts, since “we sociologists” all emerge from within his vision

Comte’s Early Theories

Comte has historically been referred to as having two careers, the early scientific work and the later mystical socio-political writings. Many recent scholars of Comte however dispute this dichotomy, arguing that Comte’s work was a through-line (Pickering 1993; Wernick 2001; Gane 2006). Comte himself wished others to know this too; “That career is thus seen to be homogenous throughout; the end being clearly aimed at from the first” (Comte 1973a: ix).

Comte’s best known and most commonly taught ideas belong to his early career. Many trained and working sociologists and philosophers would be familiar with his “positive philosophy”: the *hierarchy of the sciences*, the *three stages of development*, his *positivist methodology*, and his discipline of *sociology*. These originate from Comte’s major early work *Course of Positive Philosophy*, written over twelve years, translated and condensed by the first woman sociologist, Harriet Martineau: *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (1855).

The *Hierarchy of the Sciences* is only of passing interest as a sociological theory, as it has been widely contested for its usefulness. Comte primarily used it to argue how reliant each science is on the lower sciences informing them, particularly how reliant sociology is upon biology: “those who would apply the analysis of Revolutions to the Positive study of Society must pass through the logical training given by simpler phenomena of Biology” (Comte 1855: 484).

The *Three Stages of Development* referred to stages that Comte thought societies, knowledge and people progress through: “the Theological stage, in which free play is given to spontaneous fictions admitting of no proof; the Metaphysical stage, characterized by the prevalence of personified abstractions or entities; lastly, the Positive stage, based upon an exact view of the real facts of the case” (Comte 1973a: 26).

The whole of Comte’s *positive philosophy* involved an attempt to understand society scientifically. Comte said that positive philosophy involved methods of observation, experimentation, correlation, comparison, and succession (Comte 1855: 484). He dismissed the use of *cause*, calling it “theological and metaphysical” and “unmeaning and sophistical” (Comte 1973a; 290), but this was more a dismissal of *speculation*, particularly supernatural speculation, not of a dismissal of deeper understanding.

The most influential development in Comte’s positive philosophy was his *social physics*, which he later named *sociology*. Comte rejected the relevance and the emptiness of mathematical study of phenomena, and he would criticize today’s schools of school science and social research that produce dry social data. This is primarily why Comte adopted the term *sociology*, when *social physics* became appropriated. Comte complained of “the vain attempts of several geometricians to

carry out a positive science of society by applying to it the delusive theory of chance” (Timasheff 1952: 232).

Sociology for Comte involved comparative method: comparison and correlation between existing societies (now called *comparative sociology*); between past and present society, which he called *historical method* (Comte 1855: 483), and between biology, and human life (known now as socio-biology, but which also included phrenology, ethology, and zoological comparison: “Without the aid afforded by the observation of animals, our feeble reasoning powers would never have been able to withstand the sophistical attempts of theology and ontology to disprove the existence of innate sympathetic instincts” (Comte 1973a :565).

Working sociologists today are still as affronted by some of Comte’s correlations of Biology and the social, just as Comte’s financier, John Stuart Mill, became, when he felt forced to abandon Comte’s vision of sociology (Mill 1891). However, now that socio-biology has been growing as an established field of study: in discussions of evolution, altruism, understanding of genetic material, and the neurochemistry of the brain: we know that sociologists are increasingly forced to integrate *nature* arguments into their existing *culture* explanations. It wasn’t therefore Dawkins, Wilson, or even Darwin who was the first socio-biologist, but Comte.

Comte’s *historical sociology* involved interpretation of existing historical data, and clearly could not involve a thorough rejection of understanding causal connection. Comte in fact proposed a model for understanding, which along with his *historical sociology*, seems to have been plagiarized by Weber in his *ideal type* method (Timasheff 1952: 226): “In the statics of sociology we have to consider the ultimate type, leaving to the dynamics of the science the study of the phases through which it is attained” (Comte 1973b: 237)

Importantly, Comte used “socius” and “logos” to create the term sociology, which meant companionship and knowledge. Comte had at one stage regretted combining Latin and Greek words for the name of his discipline, due to its clumsiness. Many critics of both Comte and of sociology remark this. What is little known however, is that later in his career, Comte reflected with pride on how he brought together these two central meanings, which he perceived as historically the two most important sociological cultures: “it recalls two historical sources – the one intellectual, the other social – from which modern civilization has sprung... The word Sociology has already been adopted by all Western thinkers from my Positive Philosophy” (Comte 1973a: 326).

This then was the founding vision for sociology: knowledge for the express purpose of improving companionship. Sociology was about changing and stabilizing society where needed, not accumulating knowledge of society for its own sake. Comte was discussing what has come to be known as *pure sociology* and *applied sociology*. Sociology would replace the abstraction and time wasting of philosophy, as well as the introspective and self-absorbed field of psychology: “the worthless study of the individual mind, pursued by metaphysicians” (Comte 1973c: 38). Sociology would also replace the negative speculation of both Catholicism and atheism, and help rebuild societal chaos, which for Comte, was post-Napoleonic Europe: “So long as most of our energies, theoretical and practical, were wasted by theology and war in absurd speculations, or in miserable strife, the organic world was wanting in unity” (1973a: 500).

The *three stages* and the *hierarchy of the sciences* are of little interest to the new millennium sociology student, as they of little application to present day issues in society. But Comte’s insistence on correlating sociology and biology, such as

comparing human to animal society, should spark a sociologist's curiosity, so too should his emphasis on cross comparative and historical study of societies. Many students want to know all this, both for their own reflections upon their discipline, and to explain it well to others.

Comte's Later Proposals

Comte's second major work, the four volume *System of Positive Polity*, has largely been written out of the history and teaching of sociology. A hint for the reason of this is the original extended title of the work, which is which rarely used in reprinted editions: *System of Positive Polity: Or Treatise on Sociology, Instituting the Religion of Humanity*. This work allowed Comte to place positive philosophy and discipline of sociology in their place of service: to socio-political-religiosity. A new religion was born to save the known world: *Positivism*, also known as *the Universal Religion of Humanity*. In this religion, the speculative holy trinity was replaced by the Great Being of Humanity, anotherwords, people were to worship society:

“that instinct of each man's heart to bow down before the revered will of the Great Being, whose controlling authority is ever guiding our lives in spite of ourselves” (Comte 1973b: 382).

Prayer remained in this new religion, but contemplation was directed upon memories of noble women who had passed away, allowing people to contemplate on developing their own social side. Sociological learning was also required every day, (less so by workers and women, though still required by them): “the worship of Humanity raises Prayer for the first time above the degrading influence of self-interest” (Comte 1973a: 283). The effort and time spent in intellectual, scientific, and practical learning, was matched by time spent in the practice of prayer. Intellectual learning must be

accompanied by development of our sympathetic nature, else the correlated areas of our brain atrophied, and our sympathetic nature deteriorated: “The great problem, then, is to raise social feeling by artificial effort to the position which, in the natural condition, is held by social feeling. The solution is to be found in another biological principal, namely, that functions and organs are developed by constant exercise, and atrophied by prolonged inaction” (Comte 1973a: 73)

After a thorough education of all the sciences, selective philosophy, sociology, religious teaching, religious critique, medical understanding, counseling practice, and daily prayers, one could finally become a sociologist–priest teacher, at 42 years of age. Here then was a truly fascinating attempt at an agnostic universal religion. The *Universal Religion of Humanity* has been too strange and embarrassing for many sociologists to mention to students, but worse still, Comte placing himself as High Priest of Humanity has left few lecturers willing to risk students departing their first sociological class by mentioning the beginnings of sociology. This fear is misplaced though, as it merely needs careful teaching. First of all, no matter how strange the religion sounds, it surely would have been foolish for Comte to establish such an elaborately involved socio-religious system by himself, and then to place someone else in charge of it. The megalomaniac charge on Comte is indeed exaggerated. Comte remained celibate, prayed everyday to his departed love, continued to wear conservative dress, and continued to write on the need for ethical altruism (Pickering 1993).

Secondly, religion is omnipresent, and arguably has always has been so in human society. It is surely fascinating, not to mention very important, to understand sociology was born with religious elements. In this post 9/11 time of global religious tension, we should be heartened that the sociology of religion was the essence of the

birth of sociology, in Comte, as it was in Marx, Weber, and Durkheim; and that sociologists should reflect upon their own religiosity in their supposed neutral social research decisions. John Stuart Mill said nicely of Positivism that “a religion without a God may be, even to Christians, an instructive and profitable object of contemplation” (Mill 1891: 133). We needn’t be afraid then of the religious or ideological concern for others behind the grand-fathering of sociology, nor hide this from our students. Perhaps, in fact, it is dry empiricism that is more likely to drive students away. The moral passion of Comte shows him at times to have been a Critical Theorist, though obviously requiring much critical commentary on him as well, but also allowing us to see that social science was never meant to be a neutral endeavor, with study for its own sake.

Comte also coined the word *altruism* In *System of Positive Polity*, a term which has since entered other disciplines. Altruism was not a term that was associated with sociology by any accident: “The chief problem of human life was thus shown to be the subordination of Egoism to Altruism... The whole of Social Science consists therefore in duly working out this problem” (Comte 1973b: 122).

Comte did not mean altruism as complete sacrifice, as is often misquoted of him. He instead meant it as any beneficial social action between two people, including attachment and respect. Altruism can also involve benevolence, but benevolence always benefits the altruist as well as the receiver: “our feelings of benevolence, the only ones which admit of a simultaneous development in all” (Comte 1858: 55). The greatest danger to society is egoism. Comte’s discussion of egoism not only involved oppressive selfishness, but also the self-interest of isolated withdraw, of speculative and abstract academic pursuit, such as found in philosophy. Empiricism also must also know its place of service, including surveys: “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” (Comte 1855: 483).

Teaching Comte

As lecturers and tutors, we should not underestimate our students’ capacity to critically grasp Comte, so long as he is respectfully taught. It is true that Comte had gone too far with some of his ideas, but there are other theories which are worthy and influence today’s sociological concepts. Students want to know what was meant by sociology, and not to have to balk when someone asks them what sociology *is*, when sociology started, and what was meant by it. They may like to know, for instance, that Comte later argued for Aristotle to be “the true founder of provisional sociology” (Comte 1973a: 234). Students can know the good and bad of the birth of the discipline of sociology, express it, and to integrate it into their other sociological studies, once they are permitted to learn about it properly, including its funny and fascinating associations. We shouldn’t pre-judge students’ ability to differentiate between what ideas of Comte’s was worthy, as compared to his ideas that were extreme and eccentric.

Students want to know why and how their discipline began, to understand what sociology, positivism, altruism, comparative sociology, historical method, all meant, not just what the meanings have distortedly come to mean. They don’t just want the safe boring theories of Comte’s that are of no application today. They want to know that sociology already had a relation to biology, and what that was, as well as sociology’s relation to economics: including that sociologists were to teach and counsel, not to govern, and that wealth was to be equalized, and that sociology involved an attempt to rebuild society. Also, they will learn that sociology was meant

to appropriate and destroy psychology, and why sociologists might react how they do today towards psychology: and in fact each of these separate disciplines were flawed in their specialization, and so needed to be included within Comte's more rounded and inclusive field of sociology. Interestingly, Comte's rounded more inclusive version of sociology is more in common with what today is referred to as "social science".

Students can also learn that Comte later placed *morals* as the "crowning science" (Comte 1973c: 41), and that biological and sociological understanding was to feed into it: "the field of morals is at once more special, more complex (Comte 1973b: 44). Today's concepts of global "modernity" and "post-modernity", of a society evolving from within a temporally located view, with progress that starts in the West, spreading globally, with applied social programs tackling social issues, transforming society, utilizing empirical study where appropriate: do these concepts and terminologies not carry a Comtean influence? (Orenstein 2007: 656). Comte's voice can give us some limited insights into the idiosyncracities of our discipline today.

Teaching "true" Comte will also help students understand, or "get a sense of" why John Stuart Mill, who funded Comte, and Herbert Spencer who met Comte, directed their careers the way they did, both within and against sociology. We can also get a sense of what the next generations of sociologists were working with, and also why the two "fathers" of sociology, Weber and Durkheim, made some of the decisions they made. For Weber, it meant writing Comte out of German sociology, and for Durkheim, it meant distorting a great deal of Comte's meanings so as to restore sociology (such as altruism and Positivism). Students will be forever aware that sociology was always meant as a package of methods, terminologies, and theories which were intimately tied to normative goals.

Along with Karl Marx then, we can see that the two big first generation sociologists were not “social scientists” as we call it today. They did not merely describe and analyze, nor even limit themselves to criticism; they produced Critical Theory, and offered *solutions*. We are able to disagree with much of what these founders say, but only after we have read them carefully. We can appreciate that *prescriptive* discussion was not merely one isolated part of sociology, but indeed was what sociology in essence was really all about. Method and theory was meant to be of aid in either stabilizing or changing society. The study of how sociality and companionship can best develop is *the* primary aim of sociology, said Comte. Students should feel comfortable attempting to offer or discuss solutions, not merely to provide problems, criticisms, descriptions, and data collection on issues.

Conclusion

A healing needs to occur within sociology which will begin with sociologists facing up to their repressed grand-father. We must not being afraid to mention how colourful the birth of sociology was, and the value that is there, as well as the mistakes. Criticism of Comte is important when mentioning how interesting he was and what he had to offer, but repression of Comte’s vision will only continue to make students feel they are in the “lost and found” when describing what sociology “is” to others, and to know what they could and should be doing within sociology. Some of us are attempting to assist in this, but I surely do not need to conduct a national social science survey, to convince you that these teachers are currently in the minority.

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