

SOCI 301/321

Foundations of Social Thought

Session 2 –The Founders of Sociology:
Auguste Comte (1798-1857)

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Session Overview

OVERVIEW

In this session, students will be studying the first major founder of sociology: Auguste Comte

Goals and Objectives

- Provide brief biographical background knowledge on Comte
- Identify and explain his core ideas, concepts and theories
- Determine his contribution to sociology

Session Outline

Comte's work is divided under the following topics:

- Topic One : The biography of Auguste Comte
- Topic Two: Comte's ideas, methods and influences

Reading List

- ALLAN K. (2005) *EXPLORATIONS IN CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: SEEING THE SOCIAL WORLD*, LONDON: PIN FORGE PRESS
- ASHLEY D. AND D. M. ORENSTEIN (2001) *SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: THE CLASSICAL STATEMENTS*, BOSTON: ALYN AND BACON.
- DZORGBO, D-B. S. (2013) *SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: CLASSICAL IDEAS AND THEIR APPLICATION IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT*, ACCRA: WOELI PUBLISHING SERVICES
- DZORGBO D-B. S. (2009) *SOCIOLOGY: FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL THOUGHT*: LEGON-ACCRA: CENTER FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF GHANA.
- RITZER G. (2008) *SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY*, BOSTON: MCGRAW HILL
- RITZER G. & DOUGLAS J. GOODMAN, (2004) *CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY*, BOSTON: MCGRAW HILL

Topic One: Auguste Comte (1798-1857) Biography

- Isidore Auguste Marie Francois-Xavier Comte, known today simply as Auguste Comte was born in Montpellier, France on 19th January, 1798.
- His parents were middle class. He went to the prestigious college: Ecole Polytechnique in France
- He never received a college-level degree because he and his class were dismissed for their rebelliousness and political ideas.
- In his intellectual work Comte was heavily influenced by the scientific methods of the natural sciences (physics, chemistry and biology) that had developed
- In 1817, Comte became secretary to the social philosopher: Henri de Saint Simon who was forty years older than him and they developed intellectual ideas together

Auguste Comte: Biography

- However in 1824, Comte left Saint Simon claiming that the latter was not acknowledging him well enough for his intellectual contribution.
- In 1832, Comte gained a teaching assistant position in Ecole Polytechnique and was also admissions examiner.
- Comte worked on the six-volume work for which he is best known, *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, which was finally published in its entirety in 1842 (the first volume was published in 1830). In this work Comte views sociology as the ultimate science.
- The *Systeme de Politique Positive* also had the practical ambition of re-organizing society.
- But as far back as 1838 Comte felt that he was not receiving much intellectual attention, people were not taking him seriously, so he decided not to read the works of others—he practiced cerebral hygiene—so that he did not benefit from the intellectual discourse at the time.
- He was sought to use sociology to reform society and that sociology would develop to become a new religion of humanity and sociologists would lead this religion by becoming sociology-priests.

Auguste Comte's Ideas and Concepts

- He coined the term sociology after considering it as social philosophy
- Socius from Latin – meaning companion, or associate, or dealing with others
- Logos from Greek – meaning study of
- Sociology means the study of society
- Sociology and the hierarchy of the sciences
- Advocate of Positivism
- Experimentation
- Historical comparative method
- Social Statics and social dynamism
- The Law of Three stages: the theological (fictive), metaphysical (positivistic) stages
- Sociology would unlock the secrets of society and guide social engineering



Auguste Comte: Social Statics and Social Dynamism

- Comte urged that sociologists should study two main aspects of society: **social statics** and **social dynamics**
- **Social statics** is concerned with stability and social order; the structures and institutions that hold together and make for social stability
- **Social dynamics** refers to those forces that make society to change or make society to be dynamic

Auguste Comte and Positivism

- Comte advocated the scientific study of society
- **Positivism:** the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of the social world
- Sociology would discover social laws or social principles for understanding society, its direction and for undertaking social reforms.

Positivism

The ONLY valid knowledge is knowledge gained through the scientific method.



Auguste Comte's Ideas and Concepts ; Comte's

- Comte's social law: The law of three stages
- The evolution and advancement of society and social thoughts from primitive traditional stage towards positivistic, or scientific or modern stage

3 Stages

1. THEOLOGICAL
(Fictitious)

2. METAPHYSICAL
(Abstract)

3. POSITIVE
(Scientific)



Auguste Coûté ;Coÿt'd): The Law of Three Stages The Theological State



Theological

Auguste Comte: The Law of Three Stages

The theological stage (ÐòÛt'd)

- Explanations of the universe, events and social phenomena in terms of the powers of God and gods
- The theological stage is dominated religious and superstitious thoughts and beliefs as in many parts of Africa today. We have numerous churches, pastors, traditional shrines and priests, witchdoctors, soothsayers, oracles revelations,
- People come to believe that all phenomena are created and influenced by the Almighty God, other gods and supernatural forces.
- Beliefs in the works of the devil, spirits, witchcrafts, are all in Comtian Sociology, evidences that society is at the theological stage where pastors and other religious leaders are the ones who offer us explanations as to the how society works, our personal circumstances, our misfortunes, etc.

Auguste Comte: The Law of Three Stages The Metaphysical Stage

Metaphysical

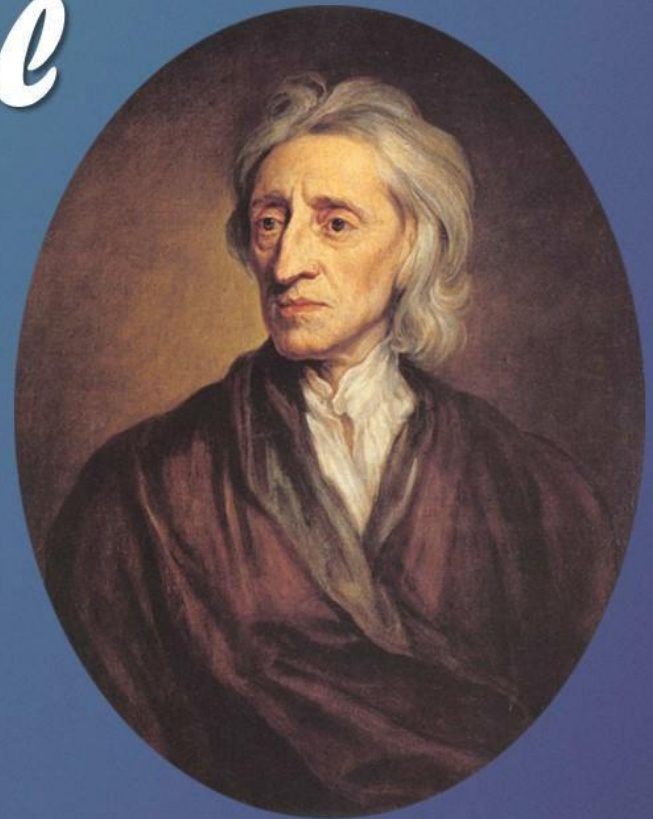


An abstract Power guides events in the world.

Auguste Comte: The Law of Three Stages The Metaphysical Stage

Metaphysical

Universal laws
based on
ABSTRACT
principles

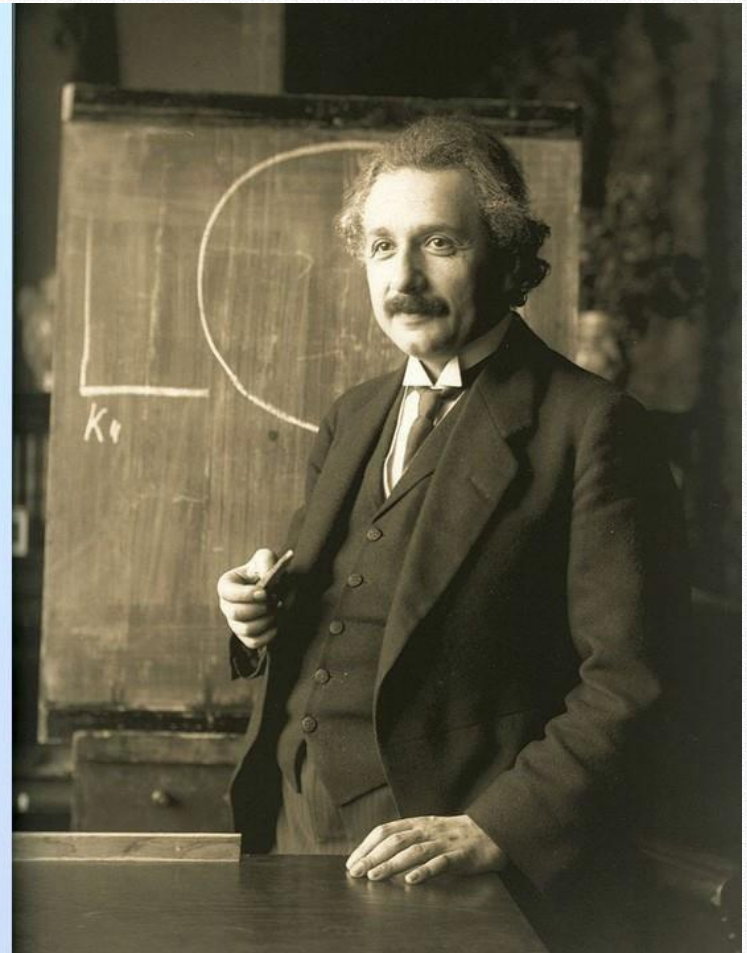


Auguste Comte: The Law of Three Stages

The Positivistic/Scientific Stage

Positive

**Observation
Experimentation**



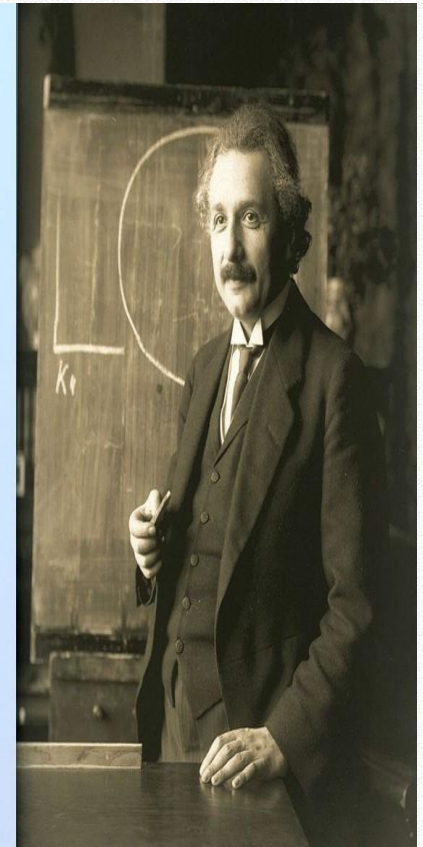
Auguste Comte: The Law of Three Stages

The Positivistic Stage ;DoYt'Ø

- Things are explained based on systematic observations and using scientific methods
- Historical comparative method

Science

Independent
of Religion



Auguste Comte: The Hierarchy of the Sciences

- Based on the law of three stages, Comte ranked the science in order of their complexities
- Comte ranked sociology at the apex, above all the sciences.
- He argued that knowledge have gone through the law of the three stages and that sociology is the last stage being positivism therefore sociology should take it seat among the sciences

Auguste Comte: The Hierarchy of the Sciences

Superiority of
Social
Sciences

Sociology

Biology

Chemistry

Physics

Astronomy

Mathematics

Comte and the Methodology of Sociology

He urged sociologists to be positivistic, to use the scientific method which include

1. Observation
2. Experimentation, and
3. Comparative historical method

Comte's Contribution to Sociology

- He was not only one of the first to formally acknowledge that a scientific study of society was feasible but also gave the study its name: sociology
- He urged sociologists to study society in two phases: social statics and social dynamics. Yes, sociologists today do study social stability (social harmony) but also social change (social conflict)
- He advocated the use of the scientific method in social inquiry. Yes many sociologists use the scientific, quantitative methods in their research
- He viewed sociology as a subject that should help humanity to ameliorate social problems: Yes sociological knowledge have helped many nations to socially organize their societies better and solve many problems of human living.
- On the whole, we can say many societies are indeed experiencing albeit in varying degrees the law of three stages