



**FACULTY OF JURIDICAL SCIENCES**

**COURSE: B.A.LL.B 204**

**Semester II**

**SUBJECT: SOCIOLOGY-II**

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# Lecture- 33



## LECTURE 33:

Comte's positivism Auguste Comte Auguste Comte (1798–1857) first described the epistemological perspective of positivism in *The Course in Positive Philosophy*, a series of texts published between 1830 and 1842. These texts were followed by the 1844 work, *A General View of Positivism* (published in French 1848, English in 1865). The first three volumes of the *Course* dealt chiefly with the physical sciences already in existence (mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology), whereas the latter two emphasized the inevitable coming of social science. Observing the circular dependence of theory and observation in science, and classifying the sciences in this way, Comte may be regarded as the first philosopher of science in the modern sense of the term.[28] For him, the physical sciences had necessarily to arrive first, before humanity could adequately channel its efforts into the most challenging and complex "Queen science" of human society itself. His *View of Positivism* therefore set out to define the empirical goals of sociological method. "The most important thing to determine was the natural order in which the sciences stand—not how they can be made to stand, but how they must stand, irrespective of the wishes of any one. ... This Comte accomplished by taking as the criterion of the position of each the degree of what he called "positivity," which is simply the degree to which the phenomena can be exactly determined. This, as may be readily seen, is also a measure of their relative complexity, since the exactness of a science is in inverse proportion to its complexity. The degree of exactness or positivity is, moreover, that to which it can be subjected to mathematical demonstration, and therefore mathematics, which is not itself a concrete science, is the general gauge by which the position of every science is to be determined. Generalizing thus, Comte found that there were five great groups of phenomena of equal classificatory value but of successively decreasing positivity. To these he gave the names astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and sociology." — Lester F. Ward, *The Outlines of Sociology* (1898), [29] Comte offered an account of social evolution, proposing that society undergoes three phases in its quest for the truth according to a general "law of three stages". The idea bears some similarity to Marx's belief that human society would progress toward a communist peak (see dialectical materialism).[citation needed] This is perhaps unsurprising as both were profoundly influenced by the early Utopian socialist, Henri de Saint-Simon, who was at one time Comte's mentor. Comte intended to develop a secular-scientific ideology in the wake of European secularisation. Comte's stages were (1) the theological, (2) the metaphysical, and (3) the positive. [30] The theological phase of man was based on whole-hearted belief in all things with reference to God. God, Comte says, had reigned supreme over human existence pre-Enlightenment. Humanity's place in society was governed by its association with the divine presences and with the church. The theological phase deals with humankind's accepting the doctrines of the church (or place of worship) rather than relying on its rational powers to explore basic questions about existence. It dealt with the restrictions put in place by the religious organization at the time and the total acceptance of any "fact" adduced for society to believe.[31] Comte describes the metaphysical phase of humanity as the time since the Enlightenment, a time steeped in logical rationalism, to the time right after the French Revolution. This second phase states that the universal rights of humanity are most important. The central idea is that humanity is invested with certain rights that must be respected. In this phase, democracies and dictators rose and fell in attempts to maintain the innate rights of humanity.[32] The final stage of the trilogy of Comte's universal law is the scientific, or positive, stage. The central idea of this phase is that individual rights are more important than the rule of any one person. Comte stated that the idea of humanity's ability to govern itself makes this stage inherently different from the rest. There is no higher power governing the masses and the intrigue of any one person can achieve anything based on that individual's free will. The third principle is most important in the positive stage.[33] Comte calls these three phases the universal rule in relation to society and its development. Neither the second nor the third phase can be reached without the completion and understanding of the preceding stage. All stages must be completed in progress.[34] Comte believed that the appreciation of the past and the ability to build on it towards the future was key in transitioning from the theological and

metaphysical phases. The idea of progress was central to Comte's new science, sociology. Sociology would "lead to the historical consideration of every science" because "the history of one science, including pure political history, would make no sense unless it was attached to the study of the general progress of all of humanity".[35] As Comte would say: "from science comes prediction; from prediction comes action." [36] It is a philosophy of human intellectual development that culminated in science. The irony of this series of phases is that though Comte attempted to prove that human development has to go through these three stages, it seems that the positivist stage is far from becoming a realization. This is due to two truths: The positivist phase requires having a complete understanding of the universe and world around us and requires that society should never know if it is in this positivist phase. Anthony Giddens argues that since humanity constantly uses science to discover and research new things, humanity never progresses beyond the second metaphysical phase. [34] Positivist temple in Porto Alegre, Brazil Comte's fame today owes in part to Emile Littré, who founded *The Positivist Review* in 1867. As an approach to the philosophy of history, positivism was appropriated by historians such as Hippolyte Taine. Many of Comte's writings were translated into English by the Whig writer, Harriet Martineau, regarded by some as the first female sociologist. Debates continue to rage as to how much Comte appropriated from the work of his mentor, Saint-Simon.[37] He was nevertheless influential: Brazilian thinkers turned to Comte's ideas about training a scientific elite in order to flourish in the industrialization process. Brazil's national motto, *Ordem e Progresso* ("Order and Progress") was taken from the positivism motto, "Love as principle, order as the basis, progress as the goal", which was also influential in Poland. In later life, Comte developed a 'religion of humanity' for positivist societies in order to fulfil the cohesive function once held by traditional worship. In 1849, he proposed a calendar reform called the 'positivist calendar'. For close associate John Stuart Mill, it was possible to distinguish between a "good Comte" (the author of the *Course in Positive Philosophy*) and a "bad Comte" (the author of the secular-religious system).[28] The system was unsuccessful but met with the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* to influence the proliferation of various Secular Humanist organizations in the 19th century, especially through the work of secularists such as George Holyoake and Richard Congreve. Although Comte's English followers, including George Eliot and Harriet Martineau, for the most part rejected the full gloomy panoply of his system, they liked the idea of a religion of humanity and his injunction to "vivre pour autrui" ("live for others", from which comes the word "altruism").[38] The early sociology of Herbert Spencer came about broadly as a reaction to Comte; writing after various developments in evolutionary biology, Spencer attempted (in vain) to reformulate the discipline in what we might now describe as socially Darwinistic terms. Proletarian positivism Fabien Magnin was the first working class adherent to Comte's ideas. Comte appointed him as his successor as president of the Positive Society in the event of Comte's death. Magnin filled this role from 1857 to 1880, when he resigned.[39] Magnin was in touch with the English positivists Richard Congreve and Edward Spencer Beesly. He established the *Cercle des prolétaires positivistes* in 1863 which was affiliated to the First International. Eugène Sémérie was a psychiatrist who was also involved in the Positivist movement, setting up a positivist club in Paris after the foundation of the French Third Republic in 1870. "Positivism is not only a philosophical doctrine, it is also a political party which claims to reconcile order—the necessary basis for all social activity—with Progress, which is its goal." he wrote.