

Part I

The Rise of the Classical Tradition



Introduction

All groups and societies develop their own understandings of human behavior. Perhaps this reflects our reliance on planning rather than instinct to survive; or perhaps it's inherent in a species that uses language to think and communicate. In any event, we find that, throughout history, human association is accompanied by ideas about human motivation, social interaction, and social order. However, not all societies have produced "social thought" or something like a deliberate and methodical effort to provide secular explanations of social life. Similarly, not all societies have created social institutions (e.g., universities, publishing companies, journals) and social roles (e.g., professors, social critics, and commentators) whose purpose is to analyze and debate the truthfulness of social ideas.

It is impossible to locate the origins of social thought. In many of the so-called "ancient" civilizations (China, Egypt, Greco-Roman), we observe diverse traditions of social thought. For example, in ancient Greece, Plato, Aristotle, and Thucydides crafted social analyses of war, the origins of the family and the state, and the relation between religion and the government. Aristotle's *Politics* offers a rich social account of the formation of different political systems and the interconnections between the individual, family, culture, and politics. Although thinkers like Plato and Aristotle were insightful about humanity and society, most historians do not credit them as founding figures of the social sciences.

What makes the social thought of premodern times different from social science? Perhaps it's that the social sciences hold to different assumptions about the world and about social knowledge than do the traditions of premodern social thought. Ancient and Christian social thought often viewed the universe as a unchanging hierarchical order in which all beings, human and otherwise, have a more or less fixed and proper place and purpose. Premodern social thought often approached human behavior as part of a conception of the overall natural and moral structure of the universe. For example, Aristotle's social thought was less concerned with explaining social patterns such as the role of social class in shaping politics than with sketching an ideal society in the context of a comprehensive philosophy of life. Social science has abandoned the static, hierarchical world view of its Greek and Christian predecessors. Modern social

4 THE RISE OF THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

scientists have, in the main, abandoned the effort to craft a comprehensive philosophy of life. Social science occupies a different world of ideas than premodern “Western” social thought.

In the next four chapters, we take a first glance at the world of modern social thinking. Eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Europe was the principal home for the birth of social science. Beginning with the ideas of the Enlightenment, we trace the development of modern social theory in the work of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. These thinkers make up the core of what is considered the classical tradition of modern social theory.



I

The Idea of a Science of Society: The Enlightenment and Auguste Comte

Eighteenth-century Europe gave rise to some remarkable social thinkers like Voltaire, Hume, Adam Ferguson, Condorcet, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Although they wrote widely on philosophy, natural science, and literature, they produced an impressive body of social ideas. Of particular importance, Enlightenment social thinkers (Enlighteners) broke away from the Greek and Christian traditions of social thought. They pioneered a new science of society.

Although the Enlightenment took up the cause of science with the enthusiasm of crusaders, they were not its original creators. The great breakthroughs to a scientific worldview occurred from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, the result of the efforts of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton. From the perspective of that time period, the commitment to science amounted to a serious challenge to the prevailing Aristotelian-Christian world view. In early modern Europe, the universe was seen as a hierarchical order in which every being (human, animal, plant, spiritual) had a rightful place and purpose in a divinely created and ordered universe. The natural and social worlds were viewed as spiritually infused with value, meaning, and purpose. By contrast, the scientific revolution conceived of the universe as a mechanical system composed of matter in motion that obeyed natural laws. Both divine purpose and human will became peripheral, indeed unnecessary, features of the scientific world view.

If the Enlightenment were not the creators of the scientific revolution, they were its great popularizers and propagandists. Through their writing and speeches, they proved indispensable in introducing science to educated Europeans. Moreover, they were themselves innovators, less in their efforts in the natural sciences than in the study of human behavior. They dismissed much of previous social thought as based on prejudice, opinion, revelation, philosophical reasoning, and tradition; true knowledge, they asserted, can only rest on the solid ground of fact and scientific method. Departing from views of society as a divine or natural order, the Enlightenment understood society as a 'field' of individual interaction responsive to human intentions. The Enlightenment created a social world view that has become dominant in the modern West. At its core is the notion that humans create society; through our actions



we shape a world of institutions which in turn shapes us; the interplay between individuals and social institutions determines the history and future of humanity. The aim of a science of society is to reveal the common patterns of human association across different societies.

The Enlighteners championed the scientific world view but only after they altered it to suit their own purpose. Like many educated men and women of the time, they saw in the scientific world view a triumph of reason over prejudice. However, they were troubled by this revolution in thinking to the extent that science projected the universe as a purely materialistic, mechanical place with no room for freedom and morality. It was perhaps the genius of Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and Condorcet that they were able to wed science to a liberal humanistic world view. This was achieved by conceiving human history as a product of individual actions yet patterned in a law-like way. Thus, in his great work, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu traced the variations in political systems to both natural and social factors such as geography, climate, and religion while claiming to demonstrate that this variation was limited by the constraints of human nature.¹ Similarly, in his grand vision of history as the march of human progress, Condorcet invoked human freedom to explain why some societies progress more quickly than others; at the same time, he believed that our common human nature creates important similarities between different societies and drives a movement of social progress.²

The thinkers of the Enlightenment aimed to both understand human behavior and to use science to promote freedom and progress. But, how can science be both a morally neutral instrument of knowledge and a vehicle of social progress? In a *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, Condorcet argued that the very nature of science – its reliance upon facts and observation, its openness to criticism and revision – promotes individualism, tolerance, equality, and democracy. Accordingly, he thought that the progress of science automatically translates into social progress. Today, in the aftermath of Nazism, Hiroshima, widespread revelations about scientific torture and control through medicine and psychiatry, we would surely question whether science is necessarily wedded to liberal and humanistic values. Is it not possible that the Enlighteners read their own liberal values into science? Many Enlightenment thinkers held that, by discerning the laws of history, social science would have insight into the correct social norms and social policies. But how do we guard against the possibility that the so-called “objective” laws of history might, in fact, be colored by the social values and interests of the scientist? If social knowledge is to guide social affairs, we need to be certain that our social ideas truly mirror the objective, not our subjective, world. But how can we be certain?

The social motivation of Enlightenment thinkers raises further suspicions that their scientific vision was not innocent of moral and political meanings. The figures of the Enlightenment lived in a period of social turmoil. European societies were divided between social groups that defended social hierarchy and the status quo (the church and landed aristocracy) and groups such as commercial entrepreneurs and peasants and laborers who struggled for freedom, equality, and democracy. The Enlighteners were mostly from socially privileged backgrounds (sons of nobility or parliamentarians) but were typically not members of the ruling clerical and aristocratic elite. Their livelihood

was neither guaranteed by the ruling elite nor by an independent university system of the kind that developed in the twentieth century. As educated men with few social privileges, their sympathies generally were with those who wanted to bring about social change.

The Enlighteners were participants in the social struggles of the time. Their activities as polemicists and social critics carried serious risk, from fines and economic insecurity, to exile, imprisonment, even execution. Indeed, many of them wrote under assumed names or penned essays the critical message of which was carefully camouflaged by humor or parody. Since they were typically not landowners or members of the parliament, their battle site was culture. They fought against the beliefs and social norms that upheld a society organized around social hierarchy, intolerance, and inequality. In eighteenth-century France, the struggle was primarily against the Catholic hierarchy. At one level, Enlightenment thinkers fought for freedoms relating to public expression, free speech, and tolerance of dissent. At another level, their battles were centered on the very issue of which beliefs, values, and social norms should prevail in society. In other words, the Enlighteners challenged the very basis of the landed aristocracy and church hierarchy by disputing the legitimacy of a society organized on the basis of a Christian religious culture. In this regard, they took up the cause of science as a key part of their struggle to shape the future of Europe and humanity.

In light of the breakthroughs to a scientific world view by their predecessors, it is hardly surprising that the Enlighteners seized on science as a vehicle to challenge the Christian culture. Through the persecution of Galileo and other innovators of science for heresy, the public associated science with social rebellion. Moreover, the scientific world view was interpreted by both the church and its detractors as a grave threat to the Christian cosmology. In a universe that was viewed as governed by mechanical laws, God was rendered as little more than a peripheral, detached observer. As the role of God in natural and human affairs was reduced to that of a spectator, the social role of the church would diminish accordingly.

The world view of science challenged the public authority of the church. Science projected a universe in which all beings were reducible to matter in motion, the only differences that counted were those related to shape, force, mass, or velocity. Fundamental Christian beliefs about the existence of spiritual beings and actions (e.g., angels or divine incarnations) and about the very notion of a human soul differentiating us from animals were placed in doubt. Similarly, to the extent that science assumed that true knowledge is based on observations, facts, and scientific method, Christian knowledge founded upon revelation, tradition, and the authority of the church was discredited. Finally, we should notice the close tie between the social values associated with modern Western science and those of the Enlighteners. For example, the Newtonian universe placed all beings on an equal footing; scientific knowledge itself was not an inherited right or gift but a product of education and effort; natural laws apply to all beings in the universe. In short, the scientific revolution seemed in tune with modern liberal values and the social agenda of those groups who wanted social reform. It was not, however, the generation of Galileo or Newton that translated the scientific cosmology into a social world view; it was the Enlighteners.

Whereas the first phase of the scientific revolution (from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries) still left God and the church in charge, in the second phase, initiated by the Enlighteners, God was a matter of personal belief and the church, a human institution deserving of no special public authority. The Enlighteners directly challenged the social power of the church and the landed aristocracy by criticizing religion as the source of knowledge, social norms, and public values. If true knowledge is based on observation and fact, then religion, which is based on revelation or tradition, is mere opinion or an illusion. Indeed, many Enlighteners accused the church of inventing Christianity in order to gain social privileges by keeping the masses in a state of awe, fear, and ignorance. The existing social order, with its alliance of the church hierarchy, monarch, and landed aristocracy, was viewed as a fragile artifice resting upon rather shaky religious foundations.

By championing the cause of science, the Enlighteners were able to mount a frontal assault upon the social status quo. Yet the very style of their criticism can just as easily be turned against them. If the church forged a world view that masked their desire for social power, is not the same true for the Enlighteners? Were they not intending to replace religion with science and priests with scientists? Is the claim that only science ensures true knowledge and guarantees social progress not just another ruse on the part of a rising social elite wishing to legitimate their desire for power?

Our suspicions gain credibility when we note that, for all their rhetoric of science as based on facts, observations, and method, they ignore the point that science, just like religion, rests upon ideas that cannot be scientifically proven. For example, the claims that humans are natural beings, that nature is uniform and lawlike, that observations yield knowledge, and that history is patterned and goal directed cannot be proven by science. These beliefs are in the end matters of faith. Moreover, despite reassurances that their social explanations rested upon a bedrock of fact, their contemporaries and successive generations have raised grave doubts. For example, insisting on his scientific approach, Montesquieu declared: "I have not drawn my principles [of social organization] from my prejudices, but from the nature of things."³ But did "the nature of things" reveal that climate, as Montesquieu believed, rather than religion or social class, is the main determinant of political systems? When Montesquieu proposed that cold climates produce individuals who are courageous, generous, and insensitive to pain, when he explained the "Englishmen's love of liberty" by the impatience produced by cold weather, was he simply giving voice to "the nature of things" or to his prejudices? Perhaps even more telling of the moral patterning of Enlightenment social thought are their grand stories of the march of human progress and the triumph of reason over superstition. These narratives look suspiciously like secular versions of Christian millennialism. We are, in short, left with the impression that the Enlightenment practice of science is as weak a guarantor of truth as religion. The cultural clash between the backers of religion and the proponents of science appears to be a battle over the shape of society and the right to legislate social norms and ideals.

For all their celebration of science as a medium of truth, the Enlighteners used science as a powerful instrument of social change. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of their belief in science as the path to true knowledge. They accepted the equation that science equals Truth precisely the way their predecessors professed Christianity – as

a faith. Beliefs harden into a faith when they become the commonsense understandings of large segments of society. By the mid-to-late eighteenth century, science was already a central part of a secular humanistic world view that was valued by many educated Europeans. Moreover, many Europeans perceived science as both a symbol of a new enlightened era and a force of social progress. To champion science was to be in step with the march of human progress. Christianity may have been the object of the Enlightenment's derision, but its faith that truth will bring salvation continued to animate even the enlightened mind.

The Age of Enlightenment may not have been the great turning point in human history that its greatest thinkers and many of their successors believed, but it was a period of great turmoil and change. The outlines of a new or 'modern' type society were visible in the expansion of commerce, the formation of liberal political institutions, and the emerging class organization of European societies. For many individuals, especially in the West, these changes were understood as representing major human progress. And, from this perspective, science stands as both a symbol of progress and a chief cause.

The champions of the Enlightenment had their detractors. Not everyone in the eighteenth century was an enthusiast of the Enlightenment. Critics disputed the equation that science equals Truth and that the modern era points to inevitable human progress. The Enlightenment provoked a counter-Enlightenment. As in the former movement, the latter exhibited a great deal of diversity. "Romantic" critics such as the English poets Wordsworth and Coleridge championed intuition and affect, spiritual longings and the unity of nature, humanity and God.⁴ The great "conservative" social critics Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre insisted on a social ideal that valued religion and tradition.⁵ Revolutionary critics such as the French radicals Gracchus Babeuf and Charles Fourier defended egalitarian values that were tied to a pastoral, agrarian social ideal.⁶ Common to these varied strains of the counter-Enlightenment was a deep hostility towards economic individualism, the secularization of culture, the scientization of knowledge, and the doctrine of social progress.

As the new spirit of freedom and social change swept through Europe and the United States, the ideological conflicts among Enlighteners, and between them and counter-Enlightenment critics, intensified and moved into the center of public life. The question of the meaning and social significance of science was at the heart of these cultural clashes.

Successors to the Enlightenment science of society inherited the Enlighteners' faith in science. They absorbed the great moral hopes that were attached to science. However, the heirs to the Enlightenment could hardly ignore the sobering realities of the excesses of the French Revolution or the many critics of Enlightenment secular humanism. As we move into the nineteenth century, it is the clash over ideas about science, society, and historical change that underlies the grand visions of the classics.

Auguste Comte

Comte lived in a period of extreme social upheaval in France. The high hopes attached to the French Revolution (1789) by many Europeans were dashed by its recourse to political terrorism and the failure to realize a new France. However, the ardent faith

in liberty and progress inspired by the Age of Enlightenment did not disappear in the aftermath of the revolution. Comte shared in this Enlightenment faith. Like many of his contemporaries, he was dismayed by the restoration of monarchical rule in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Comte's social thought was formed in a France that was torn between Enlighteners and revolutionaries on the one side and supporters of empire and monarchy on the other.

Comte observed that France in the first half of the nineteenth century was in a state of social crisis. The Enlightenment and the French Revolution went a long way towards undermining the old France that was dominated by the church and a wealthy, landed aristocracy. The revolution failed, however, to create a new France. The Enlightenment, especially the more radical elements that inspired the revolution (e.g., Rousseau and Robespierre) were right to expose the oppressive state of the peasants and laborers, and criticize the corruption of the church and aristocracy. Unfortunately, their utopian social hopes could not be translated into a realistic agenda of social reform. It was no accident that, once the revolutionaries assumed power, their rule rapidly degenerated into fierce power struggles and violence and brutal repression replaced reason and law. In this regard, Comte thought that the critics of the Enlightenment, mostly voices of conservative tradition and Catholic orthodoxy, were correct in criticizing the Enlightenment thinkers for failing to understand that social change has to be anchored in custom and tradition. However, these conservative critics voiced only one option: to defend the status quo against the chaos they anticipated being unleashed by the reforms of the Enlightenment. Comte did not think that this position was defensible in light of the far-reaching social changes that had occurred in the previous century. France was a nation on its way to becoming a modern industrial society; this was irreversible and a sign of social progress.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) was born in Montpellier, France. Comte's ideas were formed during the upheavals of the French Revolution and counterrevolutions. It's not surprising then that Comte was especially concerned with how societies establish social order and how they change. Comte argued that societies evolved through a series of three stages. The driving force of social evolution was the ruling ideas of the time. The final stage, which Comte termed the positive stage, was guided by scientific knowledge. Comte imagined sociology to be the ultimate fruit of the age of science. Sociology would reveal the laws of social life, making possible great social progress.

France was in a transitional social state. The old France was dying. Restoring the monarchy and the power of the church and aristocracy would only incite social chaos. Change was inevitable. Yet the new France imagined by the revolutionaries – a society of universal rights, equality, mass democracy, and secular humanism – was an invitation to social disorder. Contrary to the faith of the Enlightenment, a new society could not be fashioned according to the dictates of a reason that legislates the laws and institutions of an ideal social order. Society is not a mere slab of clay that we can mold

to our desires. Comte was convinced that it was this rationalist faith of the Enlighteners that resulted in the failure of the French Revolution. Social change must be anchored in the living traditions of a nation's past and in an understanding of the principles of social order.

France was in a social crisis; it was polarized between advocates of radical change and defenders of a social order in decline. This made for a remarkably unstable social condition, as was manifest in the flip-flop in nineteenth-century France between republic, empire, and monarchy. Comte himself lived through seven different political regimes, from short-lived republican governments to restored monarchs and a Napoleonic empire. The social unrest was not just political; France was undergoing intensive industrialization which created enormous social strains in a still largely agrarian society. The clerical and aristocratic ruling elite was being challenged by a powerful stratum of industrialists and bankers who were, in turn, threatened by discontented peasants, laborers, and craftsmen.

Comte wished to find a way out of this social impasse. He proposed a program of social reform that offered a social vision of France marching to the tune of social progress. The vehicle for this social reformation was to be a new science of society which Comte called sociology.

Comte's scientific vision of sociology

Comte felt that the current era was a turning point in history. Whereas some Europeans interpreted the current social crisis as symbolizing social decline, Comte understood it as marking the birth pangs of a new era of unlimited human progress.

In essence, the current crisis was cultural. France, like all of Europe, was in the throes of a great cultural change that would eventually shape the destiny of all societies. Humanity was about to undergo a great transformation in its cultural foundations. The change involved a shift from a religious and metaphysical to a scientific world view. The cultural collision between the religious, metaphysical, and scientific world views had reached a climax in nineteenth-century France. Underlying Comte's perspective on the cultural crisis of Europe was a grand vision of the evolution of the human mind.

Comte thought that he had discovered a law governing the progress of the human mind. According to the so-called Law of the Three Stages, the human mind passes through three stages of thought: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. In the first stage, the theological, the human mind explains the origin and ultimate purpose of phenomena by reference to supernatural entities (e.g., spirits, divine beings, gods). A Christian world view would exemplify the theological stage. In the second stage, the metaphysical, human thought continues its search to uncover the first and final cause of things but appeals to essences or abstract forces (e.g., human reason or natural law). The philosophical systems of Descartes or Leibniz illustrate the metaphysical stage. The final stage, the positive, abandons the search for essences, first causes, and final purposes in favor of explaining the interconnection and succession of facts. Philosophical or religious speculation gives way to the discovery of natural and social laws. The positive stage represents the era of the modern sciences.

Comte is not simply sketching a series of changes, but a progressive historical development. The sciences represent not just a successor world view to religion and philosophy, but a breakthrough from speculation to truth. As an heir to the Enlightenment, Comte believed that the discovery of a language of truth is a turning point for humanity. Truth will liberate humankind from the web of ignorance, illusion, and error that has slowed, sometimes to a halt, the march of human progress.

Comte believed that each science passes through these three stages, but at varying rates depending on their degree of difficulty. The most general and simple of the sciences precede those that are more concrete and complex. Thus, Comte proposed that mathematics and astronomy would reach the positive stage prior to physics, chemistry, biology and sociology. In other words, Comte thought that humankind would first be able to free itself from religious and metaphysical ideas in matters remote from human considerations (e.g., mathematics or astronomy or physics). Once our ideas about nature were freed from religious and metaphysical beliefs, it would be possible to apply a scientific approach to human affairs. Accordingly, sociology, as the study of humanity, is the last science to develop because it is the most complex and concrete.

Sociology is the queen of the sciences. Unlike the other sciences which analyze one narrow segment of life, sociology integrates all knowledge about humanity. Comte relied upon biology for his guiding social imagery and language. Society is visualized in organic terms, as a system whose “needs” are met by the normal operation of its functionally interdependent parts. Like any organism, society grows in a slow, continuous, and linear way, exhibiting a movement from simplicity to complexity and from potentiality to self-realization. Sociology was to be *the* science of society; its aim was to discover the universal laws that govern the organization and evolution of humanity.

Comte conceived of sociology as consisting of two parts: statics and dynamics. Social statics analyzes the structure and functioning of society; it describes the elementary parts of society, their functions and interconnections. Social dynamics investigates the evolution of humanity; it reveals the source of change and its stages and direction. Comte’s aim was nothing less than to sketch the universal laws of social statics and dynamics, a project that he began in *The Course of Positive Philosophy* (1830–42) and completed in the *System of Positive Polity* (1851–4).⁷

Comte’s sociology begins with the premise that every science has its own separate subject matter. Departing from the conventional wisdom of many Enlightenment thinkers, Comte thought that it was a mistake to conceive of society as a collection of individuals. Instead, society consists of social interaction, social rules, and institutions that are independent of the psychology of individuals. Social statistics investigate the structure and functioning of this social world. The chief problem is to explain social order, especially in modern societies. Given the emphasis upon individualism promoted by an industrializing society, how is self-interest curbed to permit social stability? Comte emphasized the role of the family, government, and religion in explaining social order. The family provides the initial and sustaining

formative moral milieu for the individual; the idea of the self-sufficient, independent individual is a myth, as we are born and formed in families. Where the moral influence of the family comes up short, religion compensates. Religion furnishes a common creed which strengthens our social bonds and loyalties to social and political institutions.

Comte introduced the idea of social dynamics to explain the laws of social evolution. He elaborated a grand vision of the progression of humanity towards perfection. Comte envisioned humanity as passing through fixed, invariable stages, each successive one representing a higher level of human development. Although all societies would pass through the same stages simultaneously if there were no interferences, accidents (e.g., natural disasters) result in social change proceeding at different rates. Thus, the differences among societies that we can observe across history are interpreted as exhibiting all of the successive stages of human evolution. From this perspective, we can locate all societies on a hierarchy of human development, from lower to higher social types.

Social change is viewed as a linear, directional progressive process. Humanity is moving towards the same goal or endpoint, even if at varying rates. Driving social development is the evolution of the human mind. Changes in social and political institutions are correlated with cultural evolution. Thus, the theological stage is dominated by priests and military institutions. In the metaphysical stage, which corresponds roughly to the early modern period (1300–1700), it is lawyers and clergy who govern society. Finally, the positive stage, an era just coming into view in European societies, will witness the growing social authority of industrialists and scientists. Comte held that all humanity evolves through these three social stages; history culminates in the positive age.

Comte believed that human evolution has reached a turning point. The crisis in France and Europe was at bottom the result of a great collision between these three social systems and world views. The Enlighteners represented the metaphysical stage, although some strains of Enlightenment thought were indicative of the positive era; their arch enemies, the conservative defenders of the status quo, exemplified the theological stage. In the breakthroughs towards science in the past few centuries, Comte detected the ascending spirit of the positive stage. Comte's sociology was intended to provide a diagnosis of the contemporary crisis and to suggest a remedy: the consolidation of the "positive" or industrial-scientific order. According to the Law of the Three Stages, social evolution points irreversibly towards the positive era. In his opinion, the destiny of France was to serve as the midwife to the birth of the new world order. And, as we will see, Comte was equally convinced that it was to be the fate of sociology to show France its appointed historical role.

Comte's heavenly vision of sociology

There is a paradox at the heart of Comte's sociology. His scientific vision of sociology was animated by a moral passion that eventually came to dominate his work. Comte frankly admitted the moral motivations of his science. He wished to provide

humankind with an understanding of the laws of humanity which would serve as moral guidelines for social reform. If sociology could reveal the underlying principles of social order and change, true knowledge could guide social reform.

Like many Enlightenment social thinkers, Comte thought that the role of science in producing social truths could be separated from its moral role. However, Comte himself failed to maintain the separation of science and morality.

Comte imagined sociology as resting on a firm bedrock of observation and facts, even though he held that facts are made coherent by a broad intellectual perspective. Comte never clarified, though, the origins of these interpretive perspectives or their relation to "facts." If the theories that guide observation originate in a particular cultural world view, how can we be sure that they are not biased by the values and social interests of their social origin? If theories guide the selection and interconnection of facts, how can we avoid the suspicion that theorists select and interpret facts in ways that confirm the theory? Consider Comte's own social ideas. The guiding ideas of his sociology, for example, assumptions about the uniformity of human nature, the continuous, linear, directional process of history, and the progress of humanity, are little more than leaps of faith akin to a religious and philosophical cast of mind. What facts could possibly confirm or disconfirm a theory as grand as the Law of the Three Stages? How can we avoid the conclusion that Comte's evolutionary theory betrays the prejudices of a modern Western, largely secular man inspired by a faith in progress? The entire non-Western world is reduced by Comte to little more than a bit player in human history. Is this not the conceit of the modern West? Comte's vision of humanity is deeply millennial exhibiting standard Judeo-Christian themes, most impressively the anticipation of a period of world peace and human perfection.

In the end, Comte's moral vision bursts through his rhetoric of science. A central aim of Comte's sociology was to not only lay bare the principles of social order and change but provide a blueprint of the good society. Whereas his first major work, *The Course of Positive Philosophy*, intended to uncover the universal laws of social statics and dynamics, his later work, a *System of Positive Polity*, addressed the moral role of sociology. In the fully realized positive society, industrialists would share power with scientists. Whereas the former would have priority in the mundane sphere of institutional functioning, the latter would govern spiritual matters. The sciences would furnish the core beliefs of the new society. The creators of science such as Galileo, Newton, and Comte himself would be deified; cults would form around these sacred figures. In particular, to the extent that sociology provided a unifying social vision, sociologists would become the high priests of the positive society! Sociologists would furnish the moral guidelines of the positive society, specify the duties, obligations, and social roles that have to be fulfilled in order for social harmony to prevail.

Twentieth-century sociologists inspired by the scientific vision have been embarrassed by Comte's wish to make science into a religion. They have tried to dismiss this prophetic, religious impulse as either a reflection of his gradual mental deterioration or at least as separable from his scientific achievements. But, Comte was, at heart, a visionary sociologist. His moral vision was built into the very core of his sociology.

References

- 1 Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (New York: Hafner Press, 1975).
- 2 Marquis de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (New York: Noonday Press, 1955).
- 3 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, p. lxvii.
- 4 Regarding the romantic critique of the Enlightenment, the reader should consult M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1971); Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Alvin Gouldner, "Romanticism and Classicism: Deep Structures in Social Science," in *For Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
- 5 For an overview of conservative social thought in this period, see Karl Mannheim, "Conservative Thought," in *From Karl Mannheim*, ed. Wolff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) and Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1966).
- 6 Regarding the revolutionary critics of the Enlightenment, see G. H. Cole, *Socialist Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962); J. L. Talmon, *The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952); and George Lichtheim, *The Origins of Socialism* (New York: Praeger, 1969).
- 7 Auguste Comte, *The Course of Positive Philosophy*, 3 vols. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1876 [1830–42]); *System of Polity*, 4 vols. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1875 [1851–4]).

Suggested Readings

- Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977)
Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1966)
Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)
Ken Tucker, *Classical Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2001)