Perspectives in Sociology

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Dr. Gyanendra Singh

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Preface

The writing of this book mainly grew out of the significant changes that have happened in the field of sociology around the world in the last few decades. What distinguishes it from other books is that it provides arguments and comments, wherever necessary, reflecting new developments in the subject.

Sociologists analyze social phenomena at different levels and from different perspectives. From concrete interpretations to sweeping generalizations of society and social behavior, sociologists study everything from specific events (the micro level of analysis of small social patterns) to the "big picture" (the macro level of analysis of large social patterns). The pioneering European sociologists, however, also offered a broad conceptualization of the fundamentals of society and its workings.

Comte's positivism was posited on the assertion of a so-called law of the three phases (or stages) of intellectual development. There is a parallel, as Comte saw it, between the evolution of thought patterns in the entire history of humankind, on the one hand, and in the history of an individual's development from infancy to adulthood, on the other. In the first, or so-called theological, stage, natural phenomena are explained as the results of supernatural or divine powers. It matters not whether the religion is polytheistic or monotheistic; in either case, miraculous powers or wills are believed to produce the observed events.

Functionalism, also called structural-functional theory, sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of the individuals in that society. Functionalism grew out of the writings of English philosopher and biologist, Hebert Spence (1820–1903), who saw similarities

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between society and the human body; he argued that just as the various organs of the body work together to keep the body functioning, the various parts of society work together to keep society functioning.

Émile Durkheim, another early sociologist, applied Spence's theory to explain how societies change and survive over time. Durkheim believed that society is a complex system of interrelated and interdependent parts that work together to maintain stability, and that society is held together by shared values, languages, and symbols. He believed that to study society, a sociologist must look beyond individuals to social facts such as laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashion, and rituals, which all serve to govern social life.

German sociologist Max Weber agreed with Marx but also believed that, in addition to economic inequalities, inequalities of political power and social structure cause conflict. Weber noted that different groups were affected differently based on education, race, and gender, and that people's reactions to inequality were moderated by class differences and rates of social mobility, as well as by perceptions about the legitimacy of those in power.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is considered a founder of symbolic interactionism though he never published his work on it. Mead's student, Herbert Blumer, coined the term "symbolic interactionism" and outlined these basic premises: humans interact with things based on meanings ascribed to those things; the ascribed meaning of things comes from our interactions with others and society; the meanings of things are interpreted by a person when dealing with things in specific circumstances.

This book deals with all the development in the field of sociology in a historical context. This book is useful for sociologists researchers and social reformers.

—*Dr. Gyanendra Singh*

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1

Positivism with Particular Reference to Auguste Comte

Auguste Comte was born in Montpellier, Hérault on 19 January 1798. After attending the Lycée Joffre and then the University of Montpellier, Comte was admitted to the École Polytechnique in Paris. The École Polytechnique was notable for its adherence to the French ideals of republicanism and progress. The École closed in 1816 for reorganization, however, and Comte continued his studies at the medical school at Montpellier. When the École Polytechnique reopened, he did not request readmission.

Following his return to Montpellier, Comte soon came to see unbridgeable differences with his Catholic and monarchist family and set off again for Paris, earning money by small jobs. In August 1817 he found an apartment at 36 rue Bonaparte in Paris' 6ème (where he lived until 1822) and later that year he became a student and secretary to Henri de Saint-Simon, who brought Comte into contact with intellectual society and greatly influenced his thought therefrom. During that time Comte published his first essays in the various publications headed by Saint-Simon, *L'Industrie*, *Le Politique*, and *L'Organisateur* (Charles Dunoyer and Charles Comte's *Le Censeur Européen*), although he would not publish under his own name until 1819's "La séparation générale entre les opinions et les désirs" ("The general separation of opinions and desires"). In 1824, Comte left Saint-Simon, again because of unbridgeable differences. Comte published a *Plan de travaux scientifiques nécessaires pour réorganiser la société* (1822) (*Plan of scientific studies necessary*

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for the reorganization of society). But he failed to get an academic post. His day-to-day life depended on sponsors and financial help from friends. Debates rage as to how much Comte appropriated the work of Saint-Simon.

Comte married Caroline Massin in 1825. In 1826, he was taken to a mental health hospital, but left without being cured – only stabilized by French alienist Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol – so that he could work again on his plan (he would later attempt suicide in 1827 by jumping off the Pont des Arts). In the time between this and their divorce in 1842, he published the six volumes of his *Cours.*

Comte developed a close friendship with John Stuart Mill. From 1844, he fell deeply in love with the Catholic Clotilde de Vaux, although because she was not divorced from her first husband, their love was never consummated. After her death in 1846 this love became quasi-religious, and Comte, working closely with Mill (who was refining his own such system) developed a new "Religion of Humanity". John Kells Ingram, an adherent of Comte, visited him in Paris in 1855.

He published four volumes of *Système de politique positive* (1851–1854). His final work, the first volume of *La Synthèse Subjective* ("The Subjective Synthesis"), was published in 1856.

Comte died in Paris on 5 September 1857 from stomach cancer and was buried in the famous Père Lachaise Cemetery, surrounded by cenotaphs in memory of his mother, Rosalie Boyer, and of Clotilde de Vaux. His apartment from 1841–1857 is now conserved as the Maison d'Auguste Comte and is located at 10 rue Monsieur-le-Prince, in Paris' 6th arrondissement.

Positivism, in Western philosophy, generally, any system that confines itself to the data of experience and excludes a priori or metaphysicalspeculations. More narrowly, the term designates the thought of the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857).

As a philosophical ideology and movement, positivism first assumed its distinctive features in the work of Comte, who also named and systematized the science of sociology. It then developed through several stages known by various names, such as

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empiriocriticism, logical positivism, and logical empiricism, finally merging, in the mid-20th century, into the already existing tradition known as analytic philosophy.

The basic affirmations of positivism are (1) that all knowledge regarding matters of fact is based on the "positive" data of experience and (2) that beyond the realm of fact is that of pure logic and pure mathematics. Those two disciplines were already recognized by the 18th-century Scottish empiricist and skeptic David Hume as concerned merely with the "relations of ideas," and, in a later phase of positivism, they were classified as purely formal sciences.

On the negative and critical side, the positivists became noted for their repudiation of metaphysics—i.e., of speculation regarding the nature of reality that radically goes beyond any possible evidence that could either support or refute such "transcendent" knowledge claims. In its basic ideological posture, positivism is thus worldly, secular, antitheological, and antimetaphysical. Strict adherenceto the testimony of observation and experience is the all-important imperative of positivism. That imperative was reflected also in the contributions by positivists to ethics and moral philosophy, which were generally utilitarian to the extent that something like "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people" was their ethical maxim. It is notable, in this connection, that Comte was the founder of a short-lived religion, in which the object of worship was not the deity of the monotheistic faiths but humanity.

There are distinct anticipations of positivism in ancient philosophy. Although the relationship of Protagoras—a 5th-century-BCE Sophist—for example, to later positivistic thought was only a distant one, there was a much more pronounced similarity in the classical skeptic Sextus Empiricus, who lived at the turn of the 3rd century CE, and in Pierre Bayle, his 17th-century reviver. Moreover, the medieval nominalist William of Ockham had clear affinities with modern positivism. An 18th-century forerunner who had much in common with the positivistic antimetaphysics of the following century was the German thinker Georg Lichtenberg.

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The proximate roots of positivism, however, clearly lie in the French Enlightenment, which stressed the clear light of reason, and in 18th-century British empiricism, particularly that of Hume and of Bishop George Berkeley, which stressed the role of sense experience. Comte was influenced specifically by the Enlightenment Encyclopaedists (such as Denis Diderot, Jean d'Alembert, and others) and, especially in his social thinking, was decisively influenced by the founder of French socialism, Claude-Henri, comte de Saint-Simon, whose disciple he had been in his early years and from whom the very designation *positivism* stems.

The Social Positivism Of Comte And Mill

Comte's positivism was posited on the assertion of a so-called law of the three phases (or stages) of intellectual development. There is a parallel, as Comte saw it, between the evolution of thought patterns in the entire history of humankind, on the one hand, and in the history of an individual's development from infancy to adulthood, on the other. In the first, or so-called theological, stage, natural phenomena are explained as the results of supernatural or divine powers. It matters not whether the religion is polytheistic or monotheistic; in either case, miraculous powers or wills are believed to produce the observed events. This stage was criticized by Comte as anthropomorphic—i.e., as resting on all-too-human analogies. Generally, animistic explanations—made in terms of the volitions of soul-like beings operating behind the appearances—are rejected as primitive projections of unverifiable entities.

The second phase, called metaphysical, is in some cases merely a depersonalized theology: the observable processes of nature are assumed to arise from impersonal powers, occult qualities, vital forces, or entelechies (internal perfecting principles). In other instances, the realm of observable facts is considered as an imperfect copy or imitation of eternal ideas, as in Plato's metaphysics of pure forms. Again, Comte charged that no genuine explanations result; questions concerning ultimate reality, first causes, or absolute beginnings are thus declared to be absolutely unanswerable. The metaphysical quest can lead only to the conclusion expressed by

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the German biologist and physiologist Emil du Bois-Reymond: "Ignoramus et ignorabimus" (Latin: "We are and shall be ignorant"). It is a deception through verbal devices and the fruitless rendering of concepts as real things.

The sort of fruitfulness that it lacks can be achieved only in the third phase, the scientific, or "positive," phase—hence the title of Comte's magnum opus: *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–42)—because it claims to be concerned only with positive facts. The task of the sciences, and of knowledge in general, is to study the facts and regularities of nature and society and to formulate the regularities as (descriptive) laws; explanations of phenomena can consist in no more than the subsuming of special cases under general laws. Humankind reached full maturity of thought only after abandoning the pseudoexplanations of the theological and metaphysical phases and substituting an unrestricted adherence to scientific method.

In his three stages Comte combined what he considered to be an account of the historical order of development with a logical analysis of the leveled structure of the sciences. By arranging the six basic and pure sciences one upon the other in a pyramid, Comte prepared the way for logical positivism to "reduce" each level to the one below it. He placed at the fundamental level the science that does not presuppose any other sciences—viz., mathematics—and then ordered the levels above it in such a way that each science depends upon, and makes use of, the sciences below it on the scale: thus, arithmetic and the theory of numbers are declared to be presuppositions for geometry and mechanics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology (including physiology), and sociology. Each higher-level science, in turn, adds to the knowledge content of the science or sciences on the levels below, thus enriching this content by successive specialization. Psychology, which was not founded as a formal discipline until the late 19th century, was not included in Comte's system of the sciences. Anticipating some ideas of 20th-century behaviourismand physicalism, Comte assumed that psychology, such as it was in his day, should become a branch of biology (especially of brainneurophysiology), on the one hand, and of sociology, on the

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other. As the "father" of sociology, Comte maintained that the social sciences should proceed from observations to general laws, very much as (in his view) physics and chemistry do. He was skeptical of introspection in psychology, being convinced that in attending to one's own mental states, these states would be irretrievably altered and distorted. In thus insisting on the necessity of objective observation, he was close to the basic principle of the methodology of 20th-century behaviourism.

Among Comte's disciples or sympathizers were Cesare Lombroso, an Italian psychiatrist and criminologist, and Paul-Emile Littré, J.-E. Renan, and Louis Weber.

Despite some basic disagreements with Comte, the 19th-century English philosopher John Stuart Mill, also a logician and economist, must be regarded as one of the outstanding positivists of his century. In his *System of Logic* (1843), he developed a thoroughly empiricist theory of knowledge and of scientific reasoning, going even so far as to regard logic and mathematics as empirical (though very general) sciences. The broadly synthetic philosopher Herbert Spencer, author of a doctrine of the "unknowable" and of a general evolutionary philosophy, was, next to Mill, an outstanding exponent of a positivistic orientation.

DEFINITION

Positivism is a philosophy of science that assumes a specific epistemological, ontological, and methodological perspective. Auguste Comte was the first to lay out the positivist position for sociology arguing that (1) social phenomena—or social facts, as Durkheim would call them—external and observable to individuals were amenable to empirical, scientific analysis and, thus, the goal for a positivist social science would be (2) to discern the abstract, social laws that undergirded these observable facts; (3) to not focus on causes, especially ultimate causes, but rather the natural relations between phenomena; and (4) to produce a body of cumulative knowledge that could guide social engineers, analogous to physics or chemistry guiding mechanical or electrical engineers. Since Comte, positivism has evolved. Contemporary positivists, as well as their critics, assign different meanings and emphases

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to a relatively wide range of practices and philosophical positions, which has produced some confusion as to what positivism is or is not. Given the negative connotation that positivism tends to have in many contemporary sociological circles, especially outside the United States, each section of this bibliography will include one or two critical pieces linked to the section's theme. Additionally, a later section, Commentary and Critique, will provide seminal works that underscore the diversity in critiques of positivist sociology. Perhaps the most important charge leveled against positivism is that it dominates the discipline and especially the most prestigious journals, in spite of the fact that positivism has many different contemporary methodological and epistemological meanings. Nevertheless, a few core elements can be isolated that underscore all positivisms. First, sociology is and should be a science, in that only those social facts external and observable by scientific methods and instruments are to be studied. Second, and closely related, sociological inquiry should be objective, value-neutral inquiry distinguishable from religious, moral, political, or philosophical inquiry. Third, the methods and instruments should be reliable, verifiable, and precise; though there is not a distinct set of methods to which positivists adhere, many positivists (often called methodological positivists) subscribe to quantitative analyses. Fourth, theories should be abstract, generalizable statements with clearly defined concepts linked by their relationship. Though few positivists speak of "laws," most believe the goal of theory is to explain a class of phenomena. Fifth, the ultimate goal is cumulative, objective knowledge of the social world, its properties, and its dynamics.

General Overviews of Classical Positivism

No clear bifurcation between classical or contemporary positivism can be delineated. Perhaps arbitrary, positivist thought from Comte (Comte 1968) through Logical Positivism (Carnap 1934, Ayers 1959) may be termed "classical," as elements continue to inform positivism today, yet these scholars are generally not referred to or employed in contemporary defenses of or writings on positivism. Comte's philosophy was central to the sociological work of both Spencer (Spencer 1897) and Durkheim (Durkheim

1982). Both social scientists accepted the belief that there was an empirical world and that scientific methods should be employed to observe it; both wrote a text specifically on methods, with Spencer 1961 focused on the use of historical-comparative methods to generate first principles. Durkheim 1982 did not prescribe a particular method, but cogently argued that social facts were distinct phenomena apart from psychological facts and established the logic behind scientific inquiry.

During the classical phase of sociology, in Europe and the United States, most social scientists took for granted sociology as a science. For instance, Sorokin 1959 contains a general theory of stratification and mobility that tacitly assumes these phenomena have some unchanging identifiable qualities. Or, consider Sumner and Keller 1927, a herculean effort to compile data on every known society so that all sociologists would draw from the same place and cumulative knowledge could be established. Comte's vision, which explicitly or implicitly informed sociology, was eventually abandoned with the rise of Logical Positivism (Carnap 1934, Ayers 1959). In essence, Logical Positivists emphasized methodology over theory, logic over abstraction, and verification. In many ways, Logical Positivism shaped what is called methodological positivism today in that they conflated empirical generalizations with theoretical statements. Max Weber's statement on sociological methods (Weber 1946) provides a critique of positivism, while at the same time laying the foundations for modern interpretivism in sociology. On the other hand, Popper 2002 offers one of the more cogent and respected philosophy of science critiques of positivism.

Auguste Comte – High Priest of Positivism

Auguste Comte [1798 – 1857] was the father of Positivism and inventor of the term*sociology*. He played a key role in the development of the social sciences and was highly influential on thoughts about progress in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Comte believed that the progress of the human mind had followed an historical sequence which he described as the law of three stages; theological, metaphysical and positive. In the first two

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