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AUGUSTE COMTE

ALFRED North Whitehead said: "A science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost" (1917/1974:115). Practitioners in an advanced science like physics *have* forgotten the field's founders, or at least they have relegated them to works on the history of the field. A student in physics does not ordinarily read about the work of Isaac Newton but rather about the contemporary state of knowledge on the issues that Newton, and other classic physicists, first addressed. The state of knowledge in contemporary physics has far outstripped that of Newton; hence there is no need for a student to learn about his ideas. Newton's still useful ideas have long since been integrated into the knowledge base of physics. According to Whitehead, physics is *not* lost; it has (largely) forgotten Isaac Newton and the other important figures in the early history of the field.

Why then are students in sociology being asked to read about the work of an early nineteenth-century thinker like Auguste Comte (1798–1857), as well as the other theorists to be discussed in this volume? The fact is that the majority of Comte's ideas ought to be forgotten. Thus, while we will discuss those of Comte's ideas that are worth remembering, we will also focus on the weaknesses and problems in his work; in other words, we will examine why much of it is best forgotten. In addition to offering us some useful ideas, the examination of Comte's work will yield a number of negative lessons on what *not* to do in sociological theory. Another reason for examining Comte's ideas is that while most of them are no longer important today, they were important in their time and influenced the work of a number of major sociological theorists. Overall, we will see that sociological theory *has* progressed far beyond many of the ideas of Comte. Sociology may not yet be in the

position of physics, able to forget all its founders as people, but it has certainly progressed far enough to forget at least some of their ideas.

Another quotation from Whitehead clearly applies to Comte: "It is characteristic of a science in its earlier stages . . . to be both ambitiously profound in its aims and trivial in its handling of detail" (1917/1974:116). We will see that the useful derivatives from Comte's work relate to his broad, often outrageous, objectives; the details of his work are not only trivial but in many cases downright ludicrous.

However, while there is comparatively little to learn from Comte, the same cannot be said about the other theorists discussed in this book. They all had many things to say that continue to be relevant to contemporary sociological theory. The positive derivatives from the work of classic thinkers like Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Mannheim, Mead, Schutz, Parsons, and, to a lesser extent, Spencer far exceed the negative lessons of their work.

COMTE'S PROFOUND AMBITIONS

Positivism: The Search for Invariant Laws

Comte is remembered to this day in sociology for his championing of *positivism* (Halfpenny, 1982; Turner, 1985a, 1990a). While this term has a multitude of meanings, it is usually used to mean the search for invariant laws of both the natural and the social world. In Comte's version of positivism these laws can be derived from doing research on the social world and/or from theorizing about that world. Research is needed to uncover these laws, but in Comte's view the facts derived from research are of secondary importance to sound speculation. Thus Comte's positivism involves empirical research, but that research is subordinated to theory.

Comte's thinking is premised on the idea that there is a real world (for example, biological, sociological) out there and that it is the task of the scientist to discover and report on it. Because of this view, Comte is what we would now call a *realist.* Here is the way Comte put the issue: "Positive philosophers . . . approach the questions with the simple aim of ascertaining the true state of things, and reproducing it with all possible accuracy in their theories"(1830–42/1855:385). Later, Comte argued that positivist philosophy (or any philosophy) "can only be valid insofar as it is an exact and complete representation of the relations naturally existing" (1851/1957:8–9). (This is sometimes called the "copy theory" of truth.)

There are two basic ways of getting at the real world that exists out there—doing research and theorizing. As we saw above, while Comte recognized the importance of research, he emphasized the need for theory and speculation. In emphasizing theory and speculation, Comte was at variance with what has now come to be thought of as positivism, especially pure empiricism through sensory observations and the belief in quantification. As Pickering puts it, "Comte would not recognize the mutilated version of positivism that exists today"(1993:697).

While there are many contemporary sociologists who think of themselves as positivists, positivism has come under severe attack in recent years. Considerable work in the philosophy of science has cast doubt on whether positivism fits the

natural sciences, and this tends to raise even greater doubts about the possibility of positivistic sociology. Some sociologists (interpretationists) never accepted a positivist approach, and others who did have either totally abandoned it or adopted a modified positivist perspective (for example, Collins, 1989a). Positivism has not disappeared from sociology, but it seems clear that sociology now finds itself in a postpositivist age (Shweder and Fiske, 1986).

Comte's interest in positivism is intimately related to his interest in sociology. By his own account, Comte (1851/1968:ix) "discovered" sociology in 1822, and his claim is generally accepted by most historians of sociology. Consistent with his commitment to positivism, he defined *sociology* as a positivistic science. In fact, in defining *sociology,* Comte related it to one of the most positivistic sciences, physics: "Sociology . . . is the term I may be allowed to invent to designate social physics" (1830–42/1855:444).

Comte (1830–42/1855) developed a hierarchy of the positivistic sciences—mathematics, astronomy, physics, biology (physiology), chemistry, and at the pinnacle (at least in his early work)—sociology.[1] (It is interesting to note that Comte leaves no place for psychology, which would seem to be reduced to a series of biological instincts.) This hierarchy descends from the sciences that are the most general, abstract, and remote from people to those that are the most complex, concrete, and interesting to people (Heilbron, 1990). Sociology builds upon the knowledge and procedures of the sciences that stand beneath it, but in Comte's view sociology is "the most difficult and important subject of all" (1851/1968:31). Given his high estimation of sociology, it is easy to see why Comte has long been esteemed by sociologists. And given the fact that as a positivist, Comte viewed theorizing as the ultimate activity, it is clear why he has had such high status among theorists.

Comte explicitly identified three basic methods for sociology—three basic ways of doing social research in order to gain empirical knowledge of the real social world. The first is *observation,* but Comte is quick to reject isolated, atheoretical observations of the social world. Without theory we would not know what to look for in the social world and we would not understand the significance of what we find. Observations should be directed by some theory, and when made, they should be connected to some law. The second of Comte's methods is the *experiment,* but this method is better suited to the other sciences than it is to sociology. It is obviously virtually impossible to interfere with, and to attempt to control, social phenomena. The one possible exception would be a natural experiment in which the consequences of something that happens in one setting (for example, a tornado) are observed and compared to the conditions in settings in which such an event did not occur. Finally, there is *comparison,* which Comte divides into three subtypes. First, we can compare humans to lower animal societies. Second, we can compare societies in different parts of the world. Third, we can compare the different stages of societies over time. Comte found this last subtype particularly important; in fact, he labeled it the "chief scientific device" of sociology (1830–42/55:481). It is so

[1] In his later work, Comte added a seventh science that ranked above sociology—morals. We will have more to say about this later.

important that we separate it from the other comparative methods and accord it independent status as Comte's fourth major methodology—*historical research.* In fact, John Stuart Mill sees this as one of Comte's most important contributions in placing the "necessity of historical studies as the foundation of sociological speculation" (1961:86). In his own work, Comte used the historical method almost exclusively, although, as we will see, there are very real questions about how well he actually used this methodology.

Although Comte wrote about research, he most often engaged in speculation or theorizing in order to get at the invariant laws of the social world. He did not derive these laws inductively from observations of the social world; rather, he deduced them from his general theory of human nature. (A critic might ask questions like: How did Comte derive his theory of human nature? Where did he get it from? How can we ascertain whether or not it is true?) In this way Comte (1891/1973:302–304) created a number of general positivistic laws, laws which he applied to the social world.

Law of the Three Stages

Comte's most famous law is the *Law of the Three Stages.* Comte identified three basic stages and proceeded to argue that the human mind, people through the maturation process, all branches of knowledge, and the history of the world (and even, as we will see later, his own mental illness) *all* pass successively through these three stages. Each stage involves the search by human beings for an explanation of the things around them.

1. The Theological Stage Comte saw the theological stage as the first stage and the necessary point of departure for the other two stages. In this stage, the human mind is searching for the essential nature of things, particularly their origin (where do they come from?) and their purpose (why do they exist?). What this comes down to is the search for absolute knowledge. It is assumed that all phenomena are created, regulated, and given their purposes by supernatural forces or beings (gods). While Comte includes *fetishism* (the worship of an object such as a tree) and *polytheism* (the worship of many gods) in the theological stage, the ultimate development in this stage is *monotheism,* or the worship of a single divinity which explains everything.

2. The Metaphysical Stage To Comte this stage is the least important of the three stages. It is a transitional stage between the preceding theological stage and the ensuing positivistic stage. It exists because Comte believes that an immediate jump from the theological to the positivistic stage is too abrupt for people to handle. In the metaphysical stage, abstract forces replace supernatural beings as the explanation for the original causes and purposes of things in the world. For example, mysterious forces such as "nature" are invoked to explain why things are the way they are ("it was an act of nature"). Mill gives as an example of a metaphysical perspective Aristotle's contention that the "rise of water in a pump is attributed to

nature's horror of a vacuum" (1961:11). Or to take a more social example, we could say that an event occurred because it was the "will of the people." While numerous entities can be seen as causes in the metaphysical stage, its ultimate point is reached when one great entity (for example, nature) is seen as the cause of everything.

3. The Positivist Stage This, of course, is the final and most important stage in Comte's system. At this point people give up their vain search for original causes or purposes. All we can know are phenomena and the relations among them, not their essential nature or their ultimate causes. People drop such nonscientific ideas as supernatural beings and mysterious forces. Instead, they look for the invariable natural laws that govern *all* phenomena. Examinations of single phenomena are oriented toward linking them to some general fact. The search for these laws involves both doing empirical research and theorizing. Comte differentiated between concrete and abstract laws. Concrete laws must come inductively from empirical research, while abstract laws must be derived deductively from theory. Comte was much more interested in creating abstract laws than in creating concrete ones. While positivism can be characterized by many different laws, he sees it ultimately gravitating toward a smaller and smaller number of general abstract laws.

Although Comte recognized an inevitable succession through these three stages, he also acknowledged that at any given point in time all three might be operant. What he envisioned in the future of the world was a time when the positivistic stage would be complete and we would see the elimination of theological or metaphysical thinking.

Comte applied the Law of the Three Stages in a number of different arenas. He saw people going through the three stages and viewed the child as a theologian, the adolescent as a metaphysician, and the adult as a positivist.[2] He also saw all the sciences in his hierarchy going through each of these stages. (Because it was a new science in Comte's time, sociology had not yet gone through the positivistic stage. Comte devoted much of his life to the development of positivistic sociology.) And he saw the history of the world in these terms. The early history of the world was the theological stage; the world next went through the metaphysical stage; and during Comte's lifetime the world was entering the last, or positivistic, stage. He believed that in the positivistic stage people would come to better understand the invariant laws that dominate them and would be able to adapt to these laws "with fewer difficulties and with greater speed" (Comte, 1852/1968:383). These laws would also guide people in making choices that could expedite the emergence, but not alter the course, of inevitable social developments.

Positivism: The Search for Order and Progress

While Comte used the term *positivism* in the sense of a science committed to the search for invariant laws, he also used it in another way—as the opposite of the

[2] Comte came to associate the history of the world with these life stages—infancy (theological), adolescence (metaphysical), and maturity (positivist).

AUGUSTE COMTE: A Biographical Sketch

Auguste Comte was born in Montpelier, France, on January 19, 1798 (Pickering, 1993:7). His parents were middle class and his father eventually rose to the position of official local agent for the tax collector. Although a precocious student, Comte never received a college-level degree. He and his whole class were dismissed from the Ecole Polytechnique for their rebelliousness and their political ideas. This expulsion had an adverse effect on Comte's academic career. In 1817 he became secretary (and "adopted son" [Manuel, 1962:251] to Claude Henri Saint-Simon, a philosopher forty years Comte's senior. They worked closely together for several years and Comte acknowledged his great debt to Saint-Simon: "I certainly owe a great deal intellectually to Saint-Simon . . . he contributed powerfully to launching me in the philosophic direction that I clearly created for myself today and which I will follow without hesitation all my life" (Durkheim, 1928/1962:144). But in 1824 they had a falling out because Comte believed that Saint-Simon wanted to omit Comte's name from one of his contributions. Comte later wrote of his relationship with Saint-Simon as "catastrophic" (Pickering, 1993:238) and described him as a "depraved juggler" (Durkheim, 1928/1962:144). In 1852, Comte said of Saint-Simon, "I owed nothing to this personage" (Pickering, 1993:240).

Heilbron (forthcoming) describes Comte as short (perhaps 5 feet, 2 inches), a bit cross-eyed, and very insecure in social situations, especially involving women. He was also alienated from society as a whole. These facts may help account for the fact that Comte married a penniless prostitute, Caroline Massin; the marriage lasted from 1825 to 1842. Comte's personal insecurities stood in contrast to his great security about his own intellectual capacities, and it appears as if this self-esteem was well founded:

> Comte's prodigious memory is famous. Endowed with a photographic memory he could recite backwards the words of any page he had read but once. His powers of concentration were such that he could sketch out an entire book without putting pen to paper. His lectures were all delivered without notes. When he sat down to write out his books he wrote everything from memory.
>
> (Schweber, 1991:134)

negativism that, in his view, dominated the social world of his day. More specifically, that negativity was the moral and political disorder and chaos that occurred in France, and throughout Western Europe, in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789 (Levy-Bruhl, 1903/1973). Among the symptoms of this malaise were intellectual anarchy, political corruption, and incompetence of political leaders. Comte's positive philosophy was designed to counter the negative philosophy and its symptoms that he found all around him.

But while Comte placed great blame on the French Revolution, he found the major source of the disorder to be intellectual anarchy. "The great political and moral crisis that societies are now undergoing is shown by a rigid analysis to arise out of intellectual anarchy" (Comte, 1830–42/1855:36). Comte traced that intellectual anarchy to the coexistence during his lifetime of all three "incompatible" philosophies—theological, metaphysical, and positivistic. Not

In 1826, Comte concocted a scheme by which he would present a series of seventy-two public lectures (to be held in his apartment) on his philosophy. The course drew a distinguished audience, but it was halted after three lectures when Comte suffered a nervous breakdown. He continued to suffer from mental problems, and once in 1827 he tried (unsuccessfully) to commit suicide by throwing himself into the Seine River.

Although he could not get a regular position at the Ecole Polytechnique, Comte did get a minor position as a teaching assistant there in 1832. In 1837, Comte was given the additional post of admissions examiner, and this, for the first time, gave him an adequate income (he had often been economically dependent on his family until this time). During this period, 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 had been published in 1830). In that work Comte outlined his view that sociology was the ultimate science. He also attacked the Ecole Polytechnique, and the result was that in 1844 his assistantship there was not renewed. By 1851 he had completed the four volume *Systeme de Politique Positive*, which had a more practical intent, offering a grand plan for the reorganization of society.

Heilbron argues that a major break took place in Comte's life in 1838 and it was then that he lost hope that anyone would take his work on science in general, and sociology in particular, seriously. It was also at that point that he embarked on his life of "cerebral hygiene"; that is, Comte began avoiding reading the work of other people, with the result that he became hopelessly out of touch with recent intellectual developments. It was after 1838 that he began developing his bizarre ideas about reforming society that found expression in *Systeme de Politique Positive.* Comte came to fancy himself as the high priest of a new *religion of humanity; he believed in a world* that eventually would be led by sociologist-priests. (Comte had been strongly influenced by his Catholic background.) Interestingly, in spite of such outrageous ideas, Comte eventually developed a considerable following in France, as well as in a number of other countries.

Auguste Comte died on September 5, 1857.

only did all three exist at one time, but none of them at that point was very strong. Theology and metaphysics were in decay, in a "state of imbecility," and positivism as it relates to the social world (sociology) was as yet unformed. The conflict among, and weaknesses of, these three intellectual schemes allowed a wide variety of "subversive schemes" to grow progressively more dangerous. The answer to this intellectual chaos clearly lay in the emergence of any one of them as preeminent, and given Comte's law, the one that was destined to emerge supreme was positivism. Positivism had already become preeminent within the sciences (except sociology) and had brought order to each, where previously there was chaos. All that was needed was for positivism to bring social phenomena within its domain. Furthermore, Comte saw this as the way to end the revolutionary crisis that was tormenting France and the rest of Western Europe.

Comte also put this issue in terms of two of his great concerns—order and progress. From his point of view, theology offered a system of order, but without progress; it was a stagnant system. Metaphysics offered progress without order; he associated it with the anarchy of his day, in which things were changing in a dizzying and disorderly way. Because of the coexistence of theology and metaphysics (as well as positivism), Comte's time was marked by *dis*order and a *lack* of progress. Positivism was the only system which offered both order *and* progress. On the one hand, positivism would bring order through the restraint of intellectual and social disorder. On the other hand, it would bring progress through an increase in knowledge and through perfection of the relationship among the parts of the social system so that society would move nearer, although never fully attain, its determinate end (the gradual expansion of human powers). Thus, positivism is the only stage in the history of humankind that offers us both order *and* progress.

Comte saw order and progress in dialectical terms, and in this sense he offered a perspective close to that of Marx (see Chapter 5). This means that Comte refused to see order and progress as separate entities but viewed them as mutually defining and interpenetrating. "Progress may be regarded simply as the development of Order; for the order of nature necessarily contains within itself the germ of all positive progress. . . . Progress then is in its essence identical with Order, and may be looked upon as Order made manifest" (Comte, 1851/1957:116).

It is interesting and important to underscore the fact that in Comte's view the crisis of his time was a *crisis of ideas* and that this crisis could be resolved only by the emergence of a preeminent idea (positivism). In fact, Comte often described positivism as a "spirit." In this sense, Comte is an idealist: "Ideas govern the world" (1830–42/1855:36). On this issue, rather than being in accord with Marx, he stands in stark contrast to Marx (a materialist). Marx saw the capitalist crisis as stemming from the material conflict between capitalists and the proletariat, and he believed that its solution lay in a material revolution in which the economic system of capitalism would be overthrown and replaced by a communist system. Marx scoffed at the idea that he was dealing with a crisis of ideas that could be solved in the ideational realm. Marx was distancing himself from the idealism of Hegel; Comte, in contrast, had adopted a viewpoint that resembled, at least in a few respects, Hegelian idealism.

COMTE'S SOCIOLOGY

We turn now more directly to Comte's sociology, or his thoughts about the social world. Here we begin with another of Comte's lasting contributions—his distinction between *social statics* and *social dynamics*. While we do not use those terms today, the basic distinction remains important in the differentiation between social structure and social change. (By the way, Comte believed that all sciences, not just sociology, are divided into statics and dynamics.)

Social Statics

Comte defines the sociological study of social statics as "the investigation of the laws of action and reaction of the different parts of the social system" (1830–42/55:457). Contrary to what one might think, the laws of the ways in which parts of the social system interact (social statics) are *not* derived from empirical study. Rather, they are "deduced from the laws of human nature" (Comte, 1852/1968:344–345). Here, again, we see Comte's preference for theory over empirical research.

In his social statics, Comte was anticipating many of the ideas of later structural functionalists (see Chapter 13, on Parsons). Deriving his thoughts from biology, Comte developed a perspective on the parts (or *structures*) of society, the way in which they *function*, and their (functional) relationship to the larger social system. Comte also saw the parts and the whole of the social system in a state of harmony. The idea of harmony was later transformed by structural functionalists into the concept of equilibrium. Methodologically, Comte recommended that since we know about the whole, we start with it and then proceed to the parts. (Later structural functionalists also came to grant priority to the whole [the "social system"] over the parts [the "subsystems"].) For these and many other reasons Comte is often seen as a forerunner of structural functionalism.

Comte argues that "in Social Statics we must neglect all questions of time, and conceive the organism of society in its fullness. . . . Our ideal" (1852/1968:249). In other words, to use a concept developed by Weber (see Chapter 7), *social statics* describes an "ideal-typical" society. The system of social statics conceived by Comte never really existed; it was an idealized model of the social world at a given point in time. In order to construct such a model, the sociologist must, at least for the purposes of analysis, hold time still.

At a manifest level, Comte is doing a *macro*sociology of social statics (and dynamics), since he is looking at the interrelationship among the parts and the whole of the social system. Indeed, Comte explicitly defined *sociology* as the macro-level study of "collective existence" (1891/1973:172).

The Individual in Comte's Theory However, Comte's isolated thoughts on micro-level individuals are important not only for understanding his social statics but also for comprehending many other aspects of his work. For example, the individual is a major source of energy in his social system. It is the preponderance of affect or emotion in individuals that gives energy and direction to people's intellectual activities. It is the products of those intellectual activities that lead to changes in the larger social system.

More important for understanding his social statics, as well as his overall view of the world, is the fact that Comte sees the individual as imperfect, dominated by "lower" forms of egoism rather than "higher," more social forms of altruism. In fact, Comte sees this dominance of egoism as rooted in the brain, which is viewed as having both egoistic and altruistic regions. Egoism is seen as having higher energy, thereby helping to ensure the "natural feebleness" of altruism (Comte,

1852/1968:139). Putting egoism and altruism in slightly different terms, Comte argues: "Self-love . . . when left to itself is far stronger than Social Sympathy" (1851/1957:24–25). To Comte (1852/1968:122), the chief problem of human life is the need for altruism to dominate egoism. He sees all the social sciences as being concerned with this problem and with the development of various solutions to it.

Thus, left to themselves, people will, in Comte's view, act in a selfish manner. If we are to hope to be able to create a "better" world, the selfish motives of individuals must be controlled so that the altruistic impulses will emerge. Since egoism cannot be controlled from within the individual, the controls must come from outside the individual, from society. "The higher impulses within us are brought under the influence of a powerful stimulus from without. By its means they are enabled to control our discordant impulses" (Comte, 1851/1957:25–26). Thus Comte, like Durkheim (see Chapter 6), his successor within French sociology, saw people as a problem (egoism was a central concern to both) that could be handled only through external control over people's negative impulses. In terms almost identical to those later used by Durkheim, Comte argues that "true liberty is nothing else than a rational submission to the . . . laws of nature" (1830–42/1855:435). Without such external controls,

> our intellectual faculties, after wasting themselves in wild extravagancies, would sink rapidly into incurable sloth; our nobler feelings would be unable to prevent the ascendancy of the lower instincts; and our active powers would abandon themselves to purposeless agitation. . . . Our propensities are so heterogeneous and so deficient in elevation, that there would be no fixity or consistency in our conduct . . . without them [external restrictions] all its [reason's] deliberations would be confused and purposeless.
> (Comte, 1851/1957:29–30)

Thus Comte concludes: "This need of conforming our Acts and our Thoughts to a Necessity without us, far from hampering the real development of our nature, forms the first general condition of progress towards perfection in man" (1852/1968:26).

Not only does Comte have a highly negative view of people and their innate propensity to egoism, but he also has a very limited view of the creative capacities of individuals. "We are powerless to create: all that we can do in bettering our condition is to modify an order in which we can produce no radical change" (Comte, 1851/1957:30). Thus, Comte's actors are not only egoistic but also weak and powerless. In a very real sense, people do not create the social world; rather, the social world creates people, at least those animated by the nobler altruistic motives.

Comte addresses this issue in another way, in terms of the relationship between what he calls the "subjective" and "objective" principles. The subjective principle involves "the subordination of the intellect to the heart," while the objective principle entails "the immutable Necessity of the external world. . . actually existing without us"[3] (Comte, 1851/1957:26–27). Given the preceding discussion, it should be clear why Comte argues that the subjective principle must be subordinated to the objective principle. The "heart" (especially its egoism), which dominates the

[3] It is the kind of viewpoint that leads us, once again, to think of Comte as a social realist; there is a real world out there.

intellect, must be subordinated to external societal constraints so that another aspect of the "heart," altruism, can emerge triumphant.

Comte had other, more specific things to say about the individual. For example, he distinguished among four basic categories of instincts—nutrition, sex, destruction and construction, and pride and vanity (Comte, 1854/1968:249–252). Clearly, all but the constructive instinct are in need of external control. While Comte does attribute other, more positive instincts to people (attachment to others, veneration of predecessors), it is the instincts in need of external control that define to a great degree his thoughts on the larger society. Larger social structures like the family and society are needed to restrain individual egoism and to help bring forth individual altruism.

Collective Phenomena In spite of his clear ideas on the individual, Comte's sociology overtly begins at a more macro level, with the family, which Comte labels the "fundamental institution." The family, *not* the individual, is the building block of Comte's sociology, as he explains: "As every system must be composed of elements of the same nature with itself, the scientific spirit forbids us to regard society as composed of individuals. The true social unit is certainly the family" (1830–42/1855:502). Comte clearly believes that individuals constitute a different "level" of analysis than families (and society), which are, after all, "nothing but our smallest society" (1852/1968:161). These "smaller societies" form the natural building blocks of the larger society. Methodologically, Comte argues that "a system can only be formed out of units similar to itself and differing only in magnitude" (1852/1968:153). Individuals constitute different (microscopic) units, and (macroscopic) society cannot be formed out of them. Families are similar, albeit smaller, macroscopic units, and therefore they *can* be the basis of the larger society. In fact, Comte traces a progression whereby out of families tribes emerge and from tribes come nations. The family is the "true germ of the various characteristics of the social organism" (Comte, 1830–42/1855:502). The family not only is the building block of society but also serves to integrate the individual and society, since it is through the family that people learn to be social; the family is the "school" of society. Thus, it is the family that must play a crucial role in the control of egoistic impulses and the emergence of individual altruism. Furthermore, if we are ever to improve society significantly, a change in the family will be the fundamental basis of any such alteration. Since the family is such a pivotal institution, a change in it will have profound effects on both individuals and the larger society.

While the family is the most basic and most pivotal institution, the most important institution to Comte is religion, "the universal basis of all society" (1852/1968:7). Doing a kind of structural-functional analysis, Comte identifies two major functions of religion. First, it serves to regulate individual life, once again primarily by subduing egoism and elevating altruism. Second, it has the more macroscopic function of fostering social relationships among people, thereby providing the basis for the emergence of large-scale social structures.

Another important social institution to Comte is language. Language is profoundly social; it is what allows people to interact with one another. Thus,

language helps promote unity among people. It connects people not only with their contemporaries but also with their predecessors (we can read their ideas) and their successors (they can read our ideas). Language is also crucial to religion in that it permits the formation, transmission, and application of religious ideas.

Another element of society that serves to hold people together is the division of labor[4] (a view very much like that of Durkheim; see Chapter 6). Social solidarity is enhanced in a system in which individuals are dependent upon others. Society should have a division of labor so that people can occupy the positions for which they qualify on the basis of their abilities and training. Conversely, society should not force people into positions for which they are either underqualified or overqualified (Durkheim calls this the "forced division of labor"). While Comte argues for the need for a division of labor, he is very concerned here, as he is elsewhere, about the dangers of excessive specialization in work in general and in intellectual work in particular. He worries about the tendency in society toward overspecialization and argues that the government should intervene to emphasize the good of the whole.

The government, in Comte's view, is based on force. While force can hold society together, if the use of force gets out of hand, the government will be more of a destructive than an integrative factor in society. To prevent this from occurring, the government needs to be regulated by a "broader and higher society. . . . This is the mission of true Religion" (Comte, 1852/1968:249). Comte clearly did not have a high regard for government, and he felt that religion was needed "to repress or to remedy the evils to which all governments are prone" (1852/1968:252).

Social Dynamics

While Comte does have other things to say about social statics, he devoted more attention to social dynamics. He felt that less was known about social statics than about social dynamics. Furthermore, the topic of social dynamics was, in his opinion, more interesting and of far greater importance than social statics. However, one may question these contentions. How is it that Comte knew more about the history of the world than he did about the nature of his own society? Why is the past (and future) more interesting than the present? In response to these questions, and contrary to Comte, it can be clearly argued that we always know more about the present than the past (or certainly the future) and that the here and now is far more interesting and far more important than the past (or future). Nevertheless, it is on the basis of his beliefs on these issues that Comte abbreviates his discussion of social statics and moves on to the study of social dynamics.

The goal of Comte's social dynamics is to study the laws of succession of social phenomena. Society is always changing, but the change is ordered and subject to social laws. There is an evolutionary process in which society is progressing in a steady fashion to its final harmonious destiny under the laws of positivism: "We are always becoming more intelligent, more active, and more loving" (Comte,

[4] Or what Comte calls the "division of employments."

1853/1968:60). Alternatively, Comte labels *social dynamics* the "theory of the Natural Progress of Human Society" (1830–42/1855:515). Overall, Comte sees us evolving toward our "noblest dispositions," toward the dominance of altruism over egoism. Comte also offers a somewhat more specific view of this future state toward which we are evolving:

> The individual life, ruled by personal instincts; the domestic, by sympathetic instincts; and the social, by the special development of intellectual influences, prepare for the states of human existence which are to follow: and that which ensues is, first, personal morality, which subjects the preservation of the individual to a wise discipline; next, domestic morality, which subordinates selfishness to sympathy; and lastly, social morality, which directs all individual tendencies by enlightened reason, always having the general economy in view, so as to bring into concurrence all the faculties of human nature, according to their appropriate laws.
>
> (Comte, 1830–42/1855:515)

In his view, society invariably follows this law of progressive development; only its speed from one time period, or one society, to another may vary.

Because invariant laws are controlling this process of change, there is relatively little that people can do to affect the overall direction of the process. Nevertheless, people can make a difference by acting "upon the intensity and secondary operation of phenomena, but without affecting their nature or their filiation" (Comte, 1830–42/1855:470). People can modify (for example, speed up) only what is in accord with existing tendencies; that is, people are able to bring about only things that would have happened in any event. It is the fact that people can affect the development of society, if only marginally, that led Comte to his ideas on changing society and his thoughts on the relationship between theory and practice. We will have much more to say about this issue later in this chapter. However, it should be pointed out here that the idea that people can have only a minimal impact did not prevent Comte from developing grandiose plans for the future, positivistic society.

Comte's theory of the evolution of society is based on his theory of the evolution of the mind through the three stages described above. He contends that he himself has "tested" this law by means of all the major methods—observation, experiment, comparison, historical research—and found it "as fully demonstrated as any other law admitted into any other department of natural philosophy" (Comte, 1830–42/1855:522).

Having derived this social law theoretically (from the laws of human nature), he turns to a "study" of the history of the world to see whether the "data" support his abstract theory. However, Comte's use of the words *study* and *data* is misleading, since his methods did not incorporate the criteria that we usually associate with a research study and the data derived from it. For one thing, if Comte's findings contradicted the basic laws of human nature, he would conclude that the research was wrong rather than question the theory (Mill, 1961:85). Comte did no systematic study of the history of the world (how could one systematically study such a vast body of material?), and he did not produce data about that history (he merely provided a series of broad generalizations about vast periods of history). In other

words, Comte did not do a research study in the positivistic sense of the term. In fact, Comte acknowledges this by saying that all he is offering is an abstract history; science is not yet ready for a concrete history of the world.

As he had in other areas of his work, Comte offered a dialectical sense of the history of the world. What this meant, in particular, was that he saw the roots of each succeeding stage in history in its prior stage or stages. In addition, each stage prepared the ground for the next stage or stages. In other words, each stage in history is dialectically related to past and future stages. A similar viewpoint is offered by Marx (see Chapter 5), who sees capitalism as being dialectically related to previous economic systems (for example, feudalism) as well as to the future communist society. Although on this point, and on several others, Comte's ideas resemble those of Marx, the reader should bear in mind that the differences between the two thinkers far exceed their similarities. This difference will be clearest when we discuss Comte's conservative views about the future of the world, which are diametrically opposed to Marx's radical communist society.

Never humble, Comte *began* his analysis of social dynamics by asserting, "My principle of social development . . . affords a *perfect* interpretation of the past of human society—at least in its principal phases" (1830–42/1855:541; italics added). Similarly, at the close of the historical discussion briefly outlined below, Comte concluded, "The laws originally deduced from an abstract examination of human nature have been demonstrated to be real laws, *explaining the entire course of the destinies of the human race*" (1853/1968:535; italics added).

Comte limited his study to Western Europe (and the "white race") because it had evolved the most and because it was, in his view, the "elite" of humanity. We need not go into great detail here about his historical theory because it is of little lasting significance. Furthermore, because it is more central to Comte's underlying theory, we will focus on the changing nature of ideas rather than on more material transformations (for example, Comte sees society as evolving from the warfare characteristic of the theological stage to industry, which was to dominate the positivist stage). Comte begins with the theological stage, which he traces to antiquity. He divides the theological stage into three succeeding periods—fetishistic, polytheistic, and monotheistic. In the early fetishistic stage, people personify external objects (for example, a tree), give them lives like their own, and then deify those objects. Much later, polytheism in Egypt, Greece, and Rome developed. Finally, Comte analyzes the rise of monotheism, especially Roman Catholicism, in the Middle Ages. Although all of these are part of the theological stage, Comte is careful to show that they also possess the germs of the positivism that was to emerge at a much later point in history.

Comte sees the fourteenth century as a crucial turning point, as theology began a long period of enfeeblement and decline. More specifically, Catholicism was undermined and eventually replaced by Protestantism, which Comte sees as nothing more than a growing protest against the old social order's intellectual basis (theology). This, for Comte, represents the beginning of the negativity that he sought to counteract with his positivism, a negativity which did not begin to be systematized into a doctrine until the mid-seventeenth century. Protestantism laid

the groundwork for this negativity by encouraging unlimited free inquiry. This change in ideas, the development of a negative philosophy, led to a corresponding negativity in the social world and to the social crisis that obsessed Comte. This negative doctrine was developed by French thinkers like Voltaire (1649–1778) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), whom Comte did not see as systematic thinkers; as a result, he believed they were incapable of producing coherent speculations. Nevertheless, these incoherent theories gained a following among the masses because they appeared at a time when theology was greatly weakened and positivism was not yet ready to take its place. Most generally, this entire period was the transitional period, the metaphysical stage, between theology and positivism.

Comte himself was writing during what he believed to be the close of the metaphysical stage: "We find ourselves therefore living at a period of confusion, without any general view of the past, or sound appreciation of the future, to enlighten us for the crisis prepared by the whole progress yet achieved" (Comte, 1830–42/1855:738–739). Negativity had far outstripped positivity, and there was, as yet, no available intellectual means to reorganize society. Everywhere Comte turned there was crisis—art was "adrift," science was suffering from overspecialization, and philosophy had fallen into "nothingness." Overall, Comte describes the situation as "the philosophical anarchy of our time" (1830–42/1855:738). This philosophical anarchy prepared the way for social revolution, especially the French Revolution, which while negative in many senses, was salutary in that it paved the way for the positivistic reorganization of society. As a social event it demonstrated "the powerlessness of critical principles to do anything but destroy" (Comte, 1830–42/1855:739).

Not only was France the site of the major political revolution, but it was to take the lead in the reorganization of Western Europe. It had the most advanced negative ideas and developments, *and* it had gone farthest in positive directions. In terms of the latter, its industrial activity was most "elevated," its art was most advanced, it was "foremost" in science, and it was closer to the new, positive philosophy (and, of course, his eminence, Auguste Comte, lived there). While Comte saw signs during this period of the development of positivism, he recognized that in the short run metaphysics (and the metaphysical stage) had won out. He described the effort in France to develop a constitutional government as being based on metaphysical principles, and he felt that at a philosophical level Rousseau's "retrograde" philosophy had won out. He felt that Rousseau sought to emulate older societies, in which people were freer and more natural, rather than provide a basis for modern society. While this negative development held sway for half a century in France, Comte also saw within it positive developments in industry, art, science, and philosophy.

Comte saw this period as dominated by a focus on the individual and the metaphysical notion of individual rights. Concern for the individual only led to disorder; in its place, Comte, as we have seen, urged a focus on collective phenomena like the family and society. In addition, a focus on individual rights furthered the tendency toward disorder and chaos; Comte sought a society based on what he viewed as the positive idea of *duties* rather than on individual rights. The

idea of duties was seen as a positive notion both because it was more scientific (for example, more "precise") and because it had a "calming" influence on people's egoism as well as on the rampant negativity of the day. Instead of focusing on their individual rights, people were urged to concentrate on their duties to the larger society. This emphasis on duties would enable society to control individual egoism and to better bring out the altruism innate in people. These new duties were to help form the basis of a new spiritual authority that would help regenerate society and morality. This new spiritual authority was, of course, positivism.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

The discussion of the previous section, in broad outline, is Comte's theory of social dynamics. Yet Comte (like Marx) wanted to do more than theorize. He wanted his theoretical ideas to lead to practical social changes; he explicitly and self-consciously sought the "connection between theory and practice" (Comte, 1851/1968:46). To this end, Comte sees two objectives for positivism. The first, covered in the preceding sections, is to generalize scientific conceptions—in other words, to advance the science of humanity. The second, covered in this section, is to systematize the art and practice of life (Comte, 1851/1957:3). Thus, positivism is *both* a scientific philosophy and a political practice; the two "can never be dissevered" (Comte, 1851/1968:1).

One of the first political questions addressed by Comte is: Which social groups are likely to support the new doctrine of positivism? It was assumed by Comte that many philosophers would be ardent supporters of this new set of ideas, but philosophers are limited in terms of their ability to implement their ideas. What of the groups of people who are more actively engaged in the social world?

Comte begins by excluding the upper classes because they are in the thrall of metaphysical theories, are too self-seeking, occupy positions too overly specialized to understand the total situation, are too aristocratic, are absorbed in fighting over remnants of the old system, and are blinded by their educational experiences. Overall, he sees the wealthy as more likely than other social groups to be characterized by "avarice, ambition, or vanity" (Comte, 1851/1957:144). Comte also did not expect too much help from the middle classes because they are too busily involved in trying to move into the upper classes.

Comte did expect help from three groups: in addition to the philosophers, who would supply the intellect, the working class would bring the needed action and women would provide the required feeling. The philosophers, especially those attracted to positivistic ideas, would be involved, but the major agents of political change would be women and members of the working class: "It is among women, therefore, and among the working classes that the heartiest supporters of the new doctrine will be found" (Comte, 1851/1957:4). Both groups are generally excluded from government positions and thus will be more likely to see the need for political change. Furthermore, discrimination against them in the educational system ("the present worthless methods of instruction by words and entities" [Comte, 1851/1957:142]) is less likely to blind them to the need for such change. Comte also

sees both women and the working class as possessing "strong social instincts" and "the largest stock of good sense and good feeling" (1851/1957:142).

In Comte's view, the members of the working class are better able to think during the workday because their jobs are not as fully absorbing as those of people in the higher social classes. Presumably this means that the working class has more time and energy to reflect on the benefits of positivism than do the upper classes. The working class is not only superior intellectually, at least in the sense discussed above, but also morally. Comte offers a highly romanticized view of the morality of the working class: "The life of the workman . . . is far more favourable to the development of the nobler instincts" (1851/1957:144–145). More specifically, Comte attributes a long series of traits to members of the working class, including more affectionate ties at home; the "highest and most genuine types of friendship"; "sincere and simple respect for superiors"; experience with life's miseries, which stimulates them to nobler sympathies; and a greater likelihood of engaging in "prompt and unostentatious self-sacrifice at the call of a great public necessity" (Comte, 1851/1957:145–146).

Comte sees the spread of communism among the working classes in his day as evidence that the trend toward social revolution is focusing in on moral issues. But Comte reinterprets communism as a moral rather than an economic movement so that it fits into his scheme. He argues that communism must be separated from the "numerous extravagant schemes" (presumably Saint-Simon's socialism or Marx's call for a communist revolution) that were being discussed at the time (Comte, 1851/1957:167). To Comte, communism was "a simple assertion of the paramount importance of Social Feeling" (1851/1957:169). To show how far he is willing to water down the idea of communism, Comte argues that "the word *Republican* expresses the meaning as well, and without the same danger" (1851/1957:169). Clearly, this is a very different meaning of the term *communism* than the one used by Marx (see Chapter 5) and by most other thinkers who have employed the term.

Comte sees positivism as *the* alternative to communism: positivism is the "only doctrine which can preserve Western Europe from some serious attempt to bring Communism into practical operation" (1851/1957:170). Comte offers a number of contrasts between positivism and communism. First, positivism focuses on moral responses rather than on political responses and economic issues. (Here Comte clearly recognizes that communism, at least as it was being practiced in his time, was an economic and political, rather than a moral, system). Second, communism seeks to suppress individuality, whereas positivism seeks both individuality and cooperation among independent individuals. Third, communism seeks the elimination of the leaders of industry, whereas positivism sees them as essential. (Thus, while the leaders of industry cannot play a role in the positivist revolution, they do play, as we will see later, a central role, along with bankers, in Comte's vision of the revamped positivist society.) Fourth, communism seeks to eliminate inheritance, while positivism sees inheritance as important because it provides for historical continuity from generation to generation. In spite of his rejection of communism, Comte sees it as important as another, largely negative, force providing the groundwork for the emergence of positivism.

Comte's interest in the working class as a revolutionary force is not unusual, but his attraction to women as such a *group* is. Comte had some extraordinary views about women. His major position was that women brought to politics the needed subordination of intellect to social feeling. And Comte came to believe that feeling was preeminent, far more important than intellect or action: feeling is "the predominating principle, the motive power of our being, the only basis on which the various parts of our natures can be brought into unity" (1851/1957:227). Women are "the best representatives of the fundamental principle on which Positivism rests, the victory of social over selfish affections" (Comte, 1851/1957:232). Comte sometimes gushes with his admiration for women in general (as he did more specifically for his beloved "Saint" Clotilde.[5] "Morally . . . she merits always our loving veneration, as the purest and simplest impersonation of Humanity, who can never be adequately represented in any masculine form" (1851/1957:234). Or even more strongly, "Woman is the spontaneous priestess of Humanity" (Comte, 1851/1957:253). (Of course, this means that men in general, and Comte in particular, are the priests of humanity.) Nevertheless, in spite of his admiration for women, he clearly sees men as superior practically and intellectually. On the intellectual issue Comte contends, "Women's minds no doubt are less capable than ours of generalizing very widely, or of carrying on long processes of deduction . . . . less capable than men of abstract intellectual exertion" (1851/1957:250). Because of their intellectual and practical superiority, it is men who are to take command in the actual implementation of positivism.

On the one hand, Comte clearly admired the moral and affectual aspects of women, and as a result, he was willing to accord them a key revolutionary role. On the other hand, he felt that men excelled in intellect and action, and he tended to demean the intellectual and active capacities of women. In terms of implementing their role in the positivist revolution, women were supposed to alter the educational process within the family and to form "salons" to disseminate positivistic ideas. In spite of his veneration of women, Comte did not believe in equality: "Equality in the position of the two sexes is contrary to their nature" (1851/1957:275). He defended this view on the basis of the fact that positivism has *discovered* the following "axiom": "Man should provide for Woman" (Comte, 1851/1957:276). More practically, positivism would institute a new doctrine: "Worship of Woman, publicly and privately" (Comte, 1851/1957:283).

Comte's focus on women, and his emphasis on their capacity for feeling, represented a general change in perspective from his earlier positions. As we have seen, Comte emphasized order in social statics and progress in social dynamics. To order and progress he now added the importance of feeling (love), which he associated with women. As a result he came to proclaim the "positivist motto, *Love, Order, Progress*" (Comte, 1851/1957:7). Positivism was no longer important just intellectually but morally as well. Similarly, Comte added the emotional element to his previous commitment to thought and action by arguing that positive philosophy

[5] In fact, Comte thanks Clotilde for helping him come to understand the importance of affection.

represented a comprehensive perspective encompassing "Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions" (1851/1957:8).

Comte went further than simply according feeling equal status with thought and action; he gave feeling the preeminent place in his system. Feeling was to direct the intellect as well as practical activity. In particular, Comte argued that "individual happiness and public welfare are far more dependent upon the heart than upon the intellect" (1851/1957:15). It is this kind of viewpoint that led the champion of positivist intellectual life to the anti-intellectualism that is one of the problems we will discuss later in this chapter.

The emphasis on feeling and love led Comte in his later work to add the science of morality (the study of sentiment) to his list of sciences. "Morals is the most *eminent* of the Sciences" (Comte, 1853/1968:41). Morality was a science which in his system exceeded even sociology. "The field of Morals is at once more *special,* more *complex,* and more *noble* than that of Sociology" (Comte, 1853/1968:40). Not only was morality the most important science, but it was also crucial in giving direction to political changes. In Comte's terms, morality is "the ultimate object of all Philosophy, and the starting point of all Polity" (1851/1957:101). In other words, morality lies at the center of the relationship between theory and practice. Comte sees a natural morality in the world, and it is the task of the positivist to discover its laws. It is these underlying laws of morality that guide our intellectual thoughts and our political actions. Comte concludes, "It is henceforth a fundamental doctrine of Positivism, a doctrine of as great political as philosophical importance, that the Heart preponderates over the Intellect" (1851/1957:18).

Having added morality to the list of his major concerns, Comte returns to his Law of the Three Stages to look at each stage from the point of view of thoughts, feelings, and actions. He sees the theological stage as being dominated by feeling and imagination, with only slight restraint from reason. Theology operated on a purely subjective level, with the result that it was out of touch with the objectivity of practice in the real world. "Theology asserted all phenomena to be under the dominion of Wills more or less arbitrary," but in the real world people were, of course, led by "invariable laws" (Comte, 1851/1957:10). The transitional metaphysical stage continued to be dominated by feeling, was muddled in its thoughts, and was even less able to deal with the practical world. However, positivism finally offered the unity and harmony of thought, feeling, and action. The ideas of positivism are derived from the practical world and are certainly a monumental intellectual achievement. And positivism also came to comprehend the moral sphere. Only when positivism incorporates morality "can the claims of theology be finally set aside" (Comte, 1851/1957:13). Among other things, morality (feeling) is important for giving direction to thought and action. For example, without the direction of morality, positivism is prone to be too specialized and to deal with "useless or insolvable questions" (Comte, 1851/1957:21). Under the guidance of morality, positivism comes to focus on the broadest, most important, most pressing, and most solvable problems of the day.

With morality added to positivism, it is but a short step for Comte to declare positivism a religion: "Thus Positivism becomes, in the true sense of the word, a

Religion; the only religion which is real and complete; destined therefore to replace all imperfect and provisional systems resting on the primitive basis of Theology" (1851/1957:365). And this means that Comte and his principal followers become priests of humanity, with far greater influence than any other previous priesthood. In fact, Comte, with customary humility, declared himself the "founder of the Religion of Humanity" (1853/1968:x). The object of worship in the new religion of positivism is not a god or gods but humanity, or what Comte later referred to as the "Great Being," that is, "the whole constituted by the beings [including animals], past, future, and present, which co-operate willingly in perfecting the order of the world" (1854/1968:27). The Great Being lies at the base of the positivist religion: "The Positive Religion inspires all the servants of the Great Being with a sacred zeal to represent that Being as fully as possible" (Comte, 1852/1968:65).

COMTE'S PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Given Comte's exaggerated conception of positivism, as well as of his own position in it, it should come as little surprise that he ultimately conceived a grand visionary plan for the future of the world. It is here that we find most of Comte's most outrageous and ridiculous ideas. (Some would say that by this point in his life Comte was embittered and perhaps somewhat insane. It might be that one should take his earlier theories more seriously than his later vision of the future.) Standley calls Comte's vision of the future a "Memorable Fancy" (1981:158). We do not want to go into too much detail, so we will merely suggest the lengths to which Comte went in proposing ways of implementing his positivistic ideas.

For example, he suggested a new positivistic calendar which was to be composed of thirteen months, each divided into twenty-eight days. He created a large number of public holidays to reaffirm positivism, its basic principles, and its secular heroes. He even got into the question of the design of new positivistic temples. He specified the number of priests and vicars required in each temple. Forty-two of the vicars were to be chosen as the priests of humanity, and from that group the high priest ("the Pontiff") of positivism was to be chosen (as opposed to the Catholic pontiff, who resided in Italy, the positivist pontiff was normally supposed to reside in Paris). (Comte saw himself as the current pontiff and worried over the fact that there was no clear successor on the horizon.) All these religious figures were to be freed of material cares and therefore were to be supported by the bankers! Comte even specified incomes for religious figures—240 pounds for vicars, 480 pounds for priests, and 2400 pounds for the high priest. Given Comte's views on the positive influence of women, all the priests were to be married so that "they may be under the full influence of affection" (Comte, 1854/1968:224). However, in spite of his high esteem for women, they were not permitted to serve as priests, vicars, or the pontiff. These positions were reserved for men.

While he did not see them as revolutionary forces, Comte eventually accorded members of the upper class, such as bankers and industrialists, central roles in the new positivist society. It was specified that Western Europe was to have "two thousand bankers, a hundred thousand merchants, two hundred thousand manu-

facturers, and four hundred thousand agriculturists" (Comte, 1854/1968:269). Merchants, manufacturers, and industrialists were to be apportioned an adequate number of members of the proletariat. Bankers would be both the centers of the commercial world and the suppliers of required funds to the positivist priesthood. Furthermore, from those bankers who are most distinguished for "breadth of thought and generosity of feeling" would be derived the supreme triumvirate (bankers representing merchants, manufacturers, and agriculturalists), which was to handle governmental functions (Comte, 1854/1968:301). However, overseeing and directing the operation of this government would be the pontiff and his priests, armed with the religion of positivism.

Turning to other matters, Comte urged the adoption of a positivist library of 100 titles (already specified by him). Additional reading was to be discouraged because it hampered meditation. This, too, is reflective of Comte's growing anti-intellectualism (see the next section).

Given Comte's negative views on individual passion, he urged chastity within the positivist family. He felt that positivism would "discredit and repress the most troublesome of the egoistic instincts [sex!]" (Comte, 1854/1968:251). To deal with the problem of sex, Comte espoused virgin birth. While he did not yet know how virgin birth was to be accomplished (could he have anticipated artificial insemination?), he seemed confident that others would be able to solve the problem eventually. He also favored eugenics, in which only the "higher types" of people (women) would be allowed to reproduce. Such a plan "would improve the human race" (Comte, 1854/1968:244). He said that we should devote "the same attention to the propagation of our species as to that of the more important domestic animals" (Comte, 1891/1973:222).

The positive family was to be composed of a husband, a wife, ordinarily three children, *and* the husband's parents. The latter were included to bring the wisdom of the past into the family of the present. The mother of the husband, possessing not only the wisdom of advanced age but also the feeling inherent in the female sex, would become the "goddess" of the positivist family.

These are just a few of the myriad of highly detailed proposals Comte put forth on the basis of his positivist theory. He was careful to point to a division of labor in the development of these guidelines. The positivist philosopher was to come up with the ideas, but he was not to intervene himself in the social world. Such interventions are left to the politician, guided, of course, by the positivist priesthood.

COMTE: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

From the previous discussion of a few of Comte's largely ludicrous ideas about the future, the reader might conclude that Comte ought to be dismissed out of hand. In fact, it might even be asked once again why a chapter on Comte is included in this book. Thus, we will begin this concluding section with an overview of Comte's most important contributions to sociology. Later we will turn to the far more numerous weaknesses in Comte's work—weaknesses which lead us to conclude that it is safe

for the science of sociology to forget much of Comte's work and get on with its own development, which has forged far ahead of Comte's ideas.

Positive Contributions

First, of course, Comte was the first thinker to use the term *sociology;* he can be seen as the "founder" of sociology. While it is certainly the case that thinkers throughout the course of human history have dealt with sociological issues, Comte was the first to make such a focus explicit and to give it a name.

Second, Comte defined *sociology* as a positivistic science. While this is, as we will see later, a mixed blessing, the fact is that the majority of contemporary sociologists continue to see sociology as a positivistic science. They believe that there are invariant laws of the social world and that it is their task to discover those laws. Many search for such laws empirically, while others (for example, Turner, 1985a) follow Comte's model and go about the search for such laws theoretically. Much of contemporary empirical sociology, and a significant segment of sociological theory, continues to accept Comte's positivistic model of sociology.

Third, Comte articulated three major methods for sociology—observation, experiment, and comparison (the historical comparative method is sufficiently important to be distinguished as a fourth methodology)—which continue to be widely used in sociology. While Comte's work is badly dated in most respects, it is surprisingly contemporary in terms of its methodological pronouncements. For example, there has been a substantial resurgence of interest in historical studies in contemporary sociology (see, for example, Mann, 1986; Wallerstein, 1989).

Fourth, Comte differentiated in sociology between social statics and social dynamics. This continues to be an important differentiation in sociology, but the concepts are now called *social structure* and *social change.* Sociologists continue to focus on society as it is presently constituted as well as on its changing nature.

Fifth, although again a mixed blessing, Comte defined *sociology* in macroscopic terms as the study of collective phenomena. This was to take clearer form in the work of Durkheim, who defined *sociology* as the study of social facts (see Chapter 6). More specifically, many of Comte's ideas played a key role in the development of a major contemporary sociological theory—structural functionalism (see Chapter 13).

Sixth, Comte stated clearly his basic ideas about the domination of human nature, if left on its own, by egoism. Because he is clear about such basic views, the reader gets a sound understanding of where Comte's thoughts on the larger structures of society come from. Basically, those larger structures are needed to control individual egoism and to permit the emergence of individual altruism.

Seventh, Comte offered a dialectical view of macro structures. He saw contemporary macro structures as being the product of past structures and as possessing the seeds of future structures. This view gave his work a strong sense of historical continuity. His dynamic, dialectical view of social structure is superior to positions taken by many later, even contemporary, theorists of social structure who have tended to adopt static, ahistorical perspectives.

Eighth, Comte was not content with simply developing abstract theory but was interested in integrating theory and practice. While this ambition was marred by some of his ludicrous ideas for the future society, the integration of theory and practice remains a cherished objective among contemporary sociologists. In fact, there is a growing interest in what is now called *applied sociology*, and the American Sociological Association has a section on sociological practice.

Basic Weaknesses in Comte's Theory

While Comte made some lasting contributions to sociology, the fact is that the contemporary student of sociology has relatively little to gain from reading Comte's work. All his positive contributions have been integrated into contemporary sociology and further developed and refined. Thus, the positive derivatives from Comte's work can be acquired more directly from a reading of the contemporary literature in sociology and sociological theory. Furthermore, many of the specifics of Comte's work have not withstood the test of time, and even many of his generalities have little to offer to the modern student of sociology. Most important, Comte's work is marred by a series of problems, although we can learn a good deal by examining some of Comte's most glaring mistakes.

We can begin the discussion of Comte's specific weaknesses with a quotation from one of his severest critics, Isaiah Berlin:

> His grotesque pedantry, the unreadable dullness of his writing, his vanity, his eccentricity, his solemnity, the pathos of his private life, his insane dogmatism, his authoritarianism, his philosophical fallacies . . . . [his] *obstinate craving* for unity and symmetry at the expense of experience . . . with his fanatically tidy world of human beings joyfully engaged in fulfilling their functions, each within his own rigorously defined province, in the rationally ordered, totally unalterable hierarchy of the perfect society.
>
> (Berlin, 1954:4–5, 22)

One is hard-pressed to think of a more damning critique of any social theorist, yet much of it is warranted. The issue here is: Where and how did Comte go wrong in his social theorizing?

First, I would argue that Comte's theory was overly influenced by the trials and tribulations of his own life. For one thing, very much ignored in his lifetime, Comte became increasingly grandiose in his theoretical and practical ambitions. For another, his largely unfulfilled relationships with women, especially his beloved Clotilde, led him to a series of outrageous ideas about women and their role in society. This problem was amplified by a sexism that led him to accord feelings to women, while men were given intellectual capacities and political and economic power. Then we must add the fact that Comte was deeply troubled psychologically; one often feels, especially in regard to the later works, that one is reading the rantings of a lunatic. While it is obviously difficult to keep one's psychological disturbances out of one's theorizing, it is clear from Comte's case that theorists need to be vigilant to the dangers of allowing their personal experiences to affect the way they develop theories about how the social world operates.

Second, Comte seemed to fall increasingly out of touch with the real world. After *Positive Philosophy*, his theories were characterized by a spinning out of the internal logic of his own ideas. One reason is that despite his claims, Comte actually did no real empirical research. His idea of doing empirical research was to offer gross generalities about the historical stages, and the evolution, of the world. Comte's looseness about data analysis is reflected in the following statement: "Verification of this theory may be found *more or less distinctly* in every period of history" (1851/1957:240; italics added). Had Comte been a better data analyst, and had he been more generally in touch with the historical and contemporary worlds, his theories might not have become so outrageous.

Third, Comte also grew progressively out of touch with the intellectual work of his time. Indeed, he is famous for practicing cerebral hygiene rather early in his life. He systematically avoided reading newspapers, periodicals, and books (except for a few favorite poems) and thereby sought to keep the ideas of others from interfering with his own theorizing. In effect, Comte was increasingly anti-intellectual. This ultimately became manifest in his substantive work, in which he urged such things as the abolition of the university and the withdrawal of economic support for science and scientific societies. It is also manifest in his positivist reading list of 100 books. Presumably, this limited list meant that all other books did not need to be read and could be safely burned. Comte's anti-intellectualism is also found in other aspects of his substantive work. For example, in making the case that strong affect helps lead to important scientific findings, Comte downgrades the importance of rigorous scientific work: "Doubtless, the method of pure science leads up to it also; but only by a long and toilsome process, which exhausts the power of thought, and leaves little energy for following out the new results to which this great principle gives rise" (1851/1957:243). The clear lesson of Comte's errors is that a theorist must remain in touch with *both* the empirical and the intellectual worlds.

Fourth, he failed as a positivist, both in his empirical and in his theoretical work. As to his empirical work, we have seen that he did woefully little of it and that the work he did was really little more than a series of gross generalizations about the course of world history. There was certainly little or no induction from data derived from the real world. Regarding his theoretical work, it is hard to even think of many of his bizarre generalizations about the social world as sociological laws. Even if we take Comte's word that these were, in fact, laws, it remains the case that few, if any, social thinkers have confirmed the existence of these invariant laws. While Comte argued that his laws should be reflections of what actually transpired in the social world, the fact is that he most often seemed to impose his vision on the world.

Fifth, while Comte is credited with creating sociology, there is very little actual sociology in his work. His sketchy overviews of vast sweeps of history hardly qualify as historical sociology. His admittedly weak statements on a few elements of social statics contributed little or nothing to our understanding of social structure. Thus, little, if any, of Comte's substantive sociology survives to this day. John Stuart Mill was quite right when he argued, "Comte has not, in our opinion, created sociology . . . he has, for the first time, made the creation possible" (1961:123–124).

Comte's lasting legacy is that he created some domains—sociology, positivist sociology, social statics, social dynamics—which his successors have filled in with some genuine substantive sociology.

Sixth, it can be argued that Comte really made no original contributions.[6] Mill clearly minimizes Comte's contribution in this domain: "The philosophy called Positive is not a recent invention of M. Comte, but a simple adherence to the traditions of all the great scientific minds whose discoveries have made the human race what it is" (1961:8–9; see also Heilbron, 1990). Mill also argues that Comte was well aware of his lack of originality: "M. Comte claims no originality for his conception of human knowledge" (1961:6). Comte readily acknowledged his debt to such renowned positivists as Bacon, Descartes, and Galileo. A similar point could be made about Comte's contribution to sociology. Comte clearly recognized important forerunners in sociology, such as Charles de Montesquieu (1689–1755) and Giovanni Vico (1668–1774). While he may have invented the term *sociology*, he certainly did not create the practice of sociology.

Seventh, whatever sociology Comte did have to offer was distorted by a primitive organicism, in which he saw strong similarities between the workings of the human and the social body. For example, Comte argues that composite groups like social classes and cities are "the counterpart of animal tissues and organs in the organisation of the Great Being" (1852/1968:153). Later, he contends that the family is the social counterpart of cells in an organism. Furthermore, Comte sees an analogy between social disorder and disease in organisms. Just as medicine deals with physical diseases, it "is left for Positivism to put an end to this long disease [social anarchy]" (Comte, 1852/1968:375). This kind of organicism has long been eliminated from sociology.

Eighth, Comte tended to develop theoretical ways of thinking and theoretical tools that he then imposed on whatever issue he happened to be analyzing. For example, Comte seemed to be fond of things that came in threes, and many of his theoretical ideas had three components. In terms of theoretical tools, he was not content to apply his Law of the Three Stages to social history; he also applied it to the history of sciences, the history of the mind, and the development of individuals from infancy through adulthood. A particularly bizarre example of this tendency to apply the Law of the Three Stages to anything and everything is Comte's application of it to his own mental illness:

> I will confine myself to recording here the valuable phenomena I was able to observe in the case of my own cerebral malady in 1826. . . . The complete course . . . enabled me to verify twice over my then recently discovered Law of the Three Stages; for while I passed through those stages, first *inversely*, then *directly*, the order of their succession never varied.
>
> During the three months in which the medical treatment aggravated my malady, I descended gradually from positivism to fetishism, halting first at monotheism, and then longer at polytheism. In the following five months . . . I reascended slowly from fetishism

[6] Heilbron (1990:155) disagrees, arguing that Comte's original contribution lies in his *"historical and differential theory of science."* (This theory is discussed early in this chapter.)

> to polytheism, and from that to monotheism, whence I speedily returned to my previous positivism . . . thus furnishing me with a decisive confirmation of my fundamental Law of the Three Stages.
>
> (Comte, 1853/1968:62–63)

Ninth, Comte's "outrageous," "colossal" self-conceit (Mill, 1961) led him to make a series of ridiculous blunders. On the one hand, his never powerful theoretical system grew progressively weak as he increasingly subordinated the intellect to feeling. One manifestation of this is his unrealistic and highly romanticized view of the working class and women as agents of the positivist revolution. This decline in intellect is also manifest in his practice of cerebral hygiene as well as in his limiting of the number of positive books. On the other hand, and more important, his oversized ego led him to suggest a series of social changes, many of which, as we have seen, are ludicrous.

Tenth, Comte seemed to sacrifice much of what he stood for in his later turn toward positivist religion. In the framing of this religion, Comte seemed to be most influenced by the structure of Catholicism. In fact, T. H. Huxley called Comte's system "Catholicism minus Christianity" (cited in Standley, 1981:103). Comte acknowledged his debt to Catholicism when he argued that positivism is "more coherent, as well as more progressive, than the noble but premature attempt of medieval Catholicism" (1851/1957:3). His positivist religion mirrored Catholicism with its priests, vicars, and even its pontiff. Clearly, positivist religion has had no lasting impact, and it certainly served to subvert Comte's scientific pretensions.

Finally, there is the issue of the totalitarian implications of Comte's plans for the future. For one thing, these were highly detailed plans in which Comte personally sought to dictate what the various agents in his system would do. For another, his plans even extended to specific institutions such as the family. Particularly notable here are his ideas on the application of the principles of animal husbandry to humans. Ultimately, of course, his plans encompassed religion, with his notion of a supreme pontiff who would rule over the positivist empire.

SUMMARY

This is not an unbiased presentation of Comte's ideas. It is clear that contemporary sociology has moved far beyond Comtian theory, and this chapter underscores that point. While there are a number of useful derivatives from Comte's theory, the main point is that there are innumerable weaknesses in that theory which make it largely irrelevant to a contemporary student of sociology. Focusing on the needs of such a student, this chapter is concerned with the limited number of positive derivatives from Comte's theories and, more important, the negative lessons that can be of utility to the modern sociologist.

On the positive side, Comte offers us a positivist perspective, and many contemporary sociologists continue to accept the idea of the search for invariant social laws. Comte has also given us the term *sociology*, and his focus within that field on social statics and social dynamics remains a viable distinction. His basic

methods of social research—observation, experimentation, comparison, and historical research—remain major methods of social research. Within his work on social statics, he made a number of contributions (a focus on structures, functions, equilibrium) that were important in the development of the contemporary theory of structural functionalism. Also within social statics, it is to Comte's credit that he laid out a detailed view of human nature on which he then erected his macrosociological theory. At the macro level, Comte offers a dialectical sense of structural relations, and his social realism anticipates that of Durkheim and many other later theorists. His work on social dynamics was relevant to later evolutionary theorists. Finally, Comte was not content simply to speculate, but was interested in linking theory and practice.

While these are important accomplishments, there are far more things to be critical of in Comte's work. He allowed his theoretical work to be distorted by his personal experiences. He lost touch with both the social and intellectual worlds. His empirical and theoretical work was lacking, given his own positivistic standard. There is really little substantive sociology in his work, and that which he offers is distorted by a primitive organicism. There is little in his work that was new at the time. Comte tended to impose his theoretical schemes on anything and everything, no matter how good the fit. His oversized ego led him to a number of outrageous theoretical blunders as well as many ludicrous suggestions for reforming the social world. His reform proposals were further undermined by his increasing preoccupation with positivism as a religion and his role as the pontiff of this new religion. Finally, his blueprint for the future positivist society had many totalitarian implications.

All things considered, Comte belongs to the early history of sociological theory. Some of his ideas (especially in *Positive Philosophy*) continue to be relevant, but the modern student of sociology is safe in not rereading most of his work, especially his later statements on his plans for the future. This will not be true for most of the theorists covered in this book, but we turn now to the ideas of Herbert Spencer in an effort to see whether much of his work, like Comte's, can be safely ignored by contemporary sociologists. We will see that there are many more theoretical ideas of contemporary relevance in Spencerian theory than in Comtian theory.