

# SCIENCE CAN BE USED TO BUILD A BETTER WORLD

AUGUSTE COMTE (1798–1857)



## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

**Positivism and the study of society**

### KEY DATES

**1813** French theorist Henri de Saint-Simon suggests the idea of a science of society.

**1840s** Karl Marx argues that economic issues are at the root of historical change.

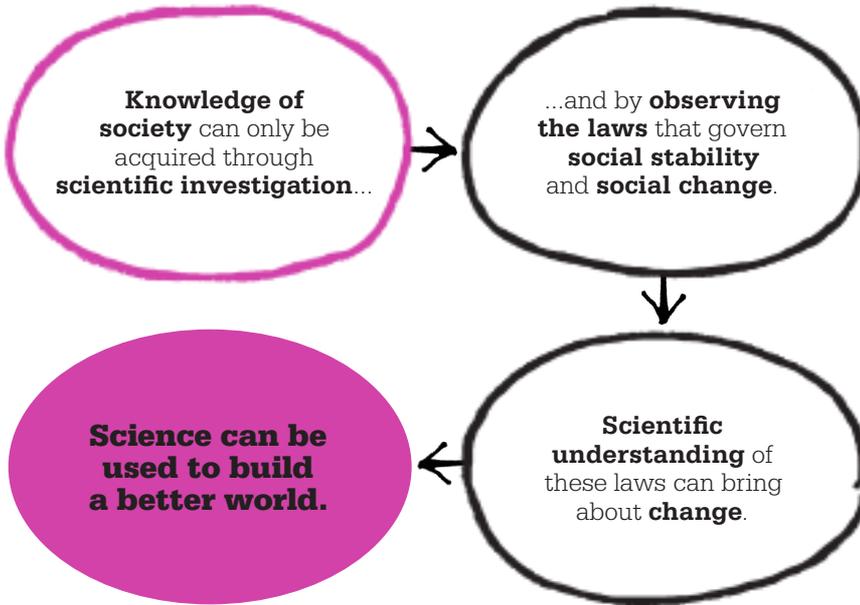
**1853** Harriet Martineau's abridged translation *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* introduces Comte's ideas to a wider public.

**1865** British philosopher John Stuart Mill refers to Comte's early sociological and later political ideas as "good Comte" and "bad Comte."

**1895** In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Émile Durkheim seeks to establish a systematic sociology.

**B**y the end of the 18th century, increased industrialization had brought about radical changes to traditional society in Europe. At the same time, France was struggling to establish a new social order in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Some thinkers, such as Adam Smith, had sought to explain the rapidly changing face of society in economic terms; others, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, did so in terms of political philosophy. Adam Ferguson had described the social effects of modernization, but no one had yet offered an explanation of social progress to match the political and economic theories.

**See also:** Harriet Martineau 26–27 ■ Karl Marx 28–31; 254–59 ■ Ferdinand Tönnies 32–33 ■ Émile Durkheim 34–37 ■ Max Weber 38–45; 220–23



Against the background of social uncertainty in France, however, the socialist philosopher Henri de Saint-Simon attempted to analyze the causes of social change, and how social order can be achieved. He suggested that there is a pattern to social progress, and that society goes through a number of different stages. But it was his protégé Auguste Comte who developed this idea into a comprehensive approach to the study of society on scientific principles, which he initially called “social physics” but later described as “sociology.”

**Understand and transform**

Comte was a child of the Enlightenment, and his thinking was rooted in the ideals of the Age of Reason, with its rational, objective focus. The emergence of scientific method during the Enlightenment influenced Comte’s

approach to philosophy. He made a detailed analysis of the natural sciences and their methodology, then proposed that all branches of knowledge should adopt scientific principles and base theory on observation. The central argument of Comte’s “positivism” philosophy is that valid knowledge of anything can only be derived from positive, scientific inquiry. He had seen the power of science to transform: scientific discoveries had provided the technological advances that brought about the Industrial Revolution and created the modern world he lived in.

The time had come, he said, for a social science that would not only give us an understanding of the mechanisms of social order and social change, but also provide us with the means of transforming society, in the same way that the physical sciences had helped to modify our physical environment. »



**Auguste Comte**

Auguste Comte was born in Montpellier, France. His parents were Catholics and monarchists, but Auguste rejected religion and adopted republicanism. In 1817 he became an assistant to Henri de Saint-Simon, who greatly influenced his ideas of a scientific study of society. After disagreements, Comte left Saint-Simon in 1824, and began his *Course in Positive Philosophy*, supported by John Stuart Mill, among others.

Comte suffered during this time from mental disorders, and his marriage to Caroline Massin ended in divorce. He then fell madly in love with Clotilde de Vaux (who was separated from her husband), but their relationship was unconsummated; she died in 1846. Comte then devoted himself to writing and establishing a positivist “Religion of Humanity.” He died in Paris in 1857.

**Key works**

- 1830–42 *Course in Positive Philosophy* (six volumes)
- 1848 *A General View of Positivism*
- 1851–54 *System of Positive Polity* (four volumes)

He considered the study of human society, or sociology, to be the most challenging and complex, therefore it was the “Queen of sciences.”

Comte’s argument that the scientific study of society was the culmination of progress in our quest for knowledge was influenced by an idea proposed by Henri de Saint-Simon and is set out as the “law of three stages.” This states that our understanding of phenomena passes through three phases: a theological stage, in which a god or gods are cited as the cause of things; a metaphysical stage, in which explanation is in terms of abstract entities; and a positive stage, in which knowledge is verified by scientific methods.

Comte’s grand theory of social evolution became an analysis of social progress too—an alternative to the merely descriptive accounts of societal stages of hunter-gatherer, nomadic, agricultural, and industrial-commercial. Society in France, Comte suggested, was rooted in the theological stage until the Enlightenment, and social order was based on rules that were ultimately religious. Following the revolution in 1789, French society entered a metaphysical stage, becoming ordered according to



Sociology is, then, not an auxiliary of any other science; it is itself a distinct and autonomous science.

**Émile Durkheim**



**Comte identified three stages** of progress in human understanding of the world. The theological stage came to an end with the Enlightenment at the end of the 18th century. Focus then shifted from the divine to the human in a metaphysical stage of rational thought, from which evolved a final stage in which science provides the explanations.



**Theological stage**



**Metaphysical stage**



**Scientific stage**

**Early human society      1790    1800    1810    1820    1830    Present day**

secular principles and ideals, especially the rights to liberty and equality. Comte believed that, recognizing the shortcomings of postrevolutionary society, it now had the possibility of entering the positive stage, in which social order could be determined scientifically.

**A science of society**

Comte proposed a framework for the new science of sociology, based on the existing “hard” sciences. He organized a hierarchy of sciences, arranged logically so that each science contributes to those following it but not to those preceding it. Beginning with mathematics, the hierarchy ranged through astronomy, physics, and chemistry to biology. The apex of this ascending order of “positivity” was sociology. For this reason, Comte felt it was necessary to have a thorough grasp of the other sciences and their methods before attempting to apply these to the study of society.

Paramount was the principle of verifiability from observation: theories supported by the evidence of facts. But Comte also recognized that it is necessary to have a hypothesis to guide the direction of scientific inquiry, and to determine the scope of observation. He

divided sociology into two broad fields of study: “social statics,” the forces that determine social order and hold societies together; and “social dynamics,” the forces that determine social change. A scientific understanding of these forces provides the tools to take society into its ultimate, positive stage of social evolution.

Although Comte was not the first to attempt an analysis of human society, he was a pioneer in establishing that it is capable of being studied scientifically. In addition, his positivist philosophy offered both an explanation of secular industrial society and the means of achieving social reform. He believed that just as the



From science comes prediction; from prediction comes action.

**Auguste Comte**



sciences have solved real-world problems, sociology—as the final science and unifier of the other sciences—can be applied to social problems to create a better society.

### From theory to practice

Comte formed his ideas during the chaos that followed the French Revolution, and set them out in his six-volume *Course in Positive Philosophy*, the first volume of which appeared in the same year that France experienced a second revolution in July 1830.

After the overthrow and restoration of monarchy, opinion in France was divided between those who wanted order and those who demanded progress. Comte believed his positivism offered a third way, a rational rather than ideological course of action based on an objective study of society.

His theories gained him as many critics as admirers among his contemporaries in France. Some of his greatest supporters were in Britain, including liberal intellectual John Stuart Mill, who provided him with financial support to enable him to continue with his project, and Harriet Martineau, who translated an edited version of his work into English.

Unfortunately, the reputation Comte had built up was tarnished by his later work, in which he described how positivism could be applied in a political system. An unhappy personal life (a marriage break-up, depression, and a tragic affair) is often cited as causing a change in his thinking: from an objective scientific approach that

### The 1830 revolution in France

coincided with the publication of Comte's book on positivism and seemed to usher in an age of social progress that he had been hoping for.

examines society to a subjective and quasi-religious exposition of how it should be.

The shift in Comte's work from theory to how it could be put into practice lost him many followers. Mill and other British thinkers saw his prescriptive application of positivism as almost dictatorial, and the system of government he advocated as infringing liberty.

By this time, an alternative approach to the scientific study of society had emerged. Against the same backdrop of social turmoil, Karl Marx offered an analysis of social progress based on the science of economics, and a model for change based on political action rather than rationalism. It is not difficult to see why, in a Europe riven by revolutions, Comte's positivist sociology became eclipsed by the competing claims of socialism and capitalism. Nevertheless, it was Comte, and to a lesser extent his mentor Saint-Simon, who first proposed the idea of sociology as a discipline based on scientific principles rather than

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The philosophers have only interpreted the world... the point is to change it.

**Karl Marx**

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mere theorizing. In particular he established a methodology of observation and theory for the social sciences that was taken directly from the physical sciences. While later sociologists, notably Émile Durkheim, disagreed with the detail of his positivism and his application of it, Comte provided them with a solid foundation to work from. Although today Comte's dream of sociology as the “Queen of sciences” may seem naive, the objectivity he advocated remains a guiding principle. ■

