UNIT 3: AUGUSTE COMTE

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to–

- discuss Auguste Comte's sociological thought
- discuss Comte's evolutionary concepts
- explain Comte's Scientific approach towards Sociol ogy.

3.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we have learnt about the social context of Europe which had led to the emergence of Sociology. In this unit we will discuss about August Comte and his methodological approach.

3.3 AUGUSTE COMTE: THE FOUNDER OF SOCIOLOGY

Auguste Comte was born on January 19, 1798, in the Southern city of Montpellier in France. He was a brilliant student when he was in school. In 1814 he entered a newly created Ecole Polytechnique in Paris. This school was a creation of the post Revolutionary government in France and therefore it was subjected to upheavals that accompanied the post-Revolutionary period. He and his whole class were dismissed from the Ecole Polytechnique for their rebelliousness and their political ideas. Later, this school was closed and reorganized in 1816, but Comte did not return. Comte never received a college level degree. He lived a marginal life in Paris until 1817, and then he met Saint Simon and became his secretary and collaborator. Comte acknowledged his great debt to Saint Simon. But in 1824 he left the collaboration with Saint Simon owing to a dispute over the authorship of a book of essays because Comte believed that Saint Simon wanted to omit Comte's name in one of his contributions. Comte had to struggle with the marginal existence by tutoring and attempting to arouse interest in his ideas in a series of public lectures. In 1825 he married Caroline Massin, a bookseller, but theirs was an unhappy married life. His life was marked by series of conflicts and contradictions. In 1826, he became ill and wanted to kill himself but gradually he realized that he had been saved in order that he could complete his life's work which is an elaboration of a positivist philosophy.

During the years 1830-1842, Comte wrote his masterwork, "*Cours de Philosophic Positiv*" (Course of Positive Philosophy) which was finally published in 1942. In this book Comte put his view that sociology was the ultimate science. By 1851 he had completed his four volume *System de Politique Positive*, which has a more practical intent, offering a grand plan for the reorganization of the society.

August Comte is mostly known as the creator of the science of society. Comte preferred the name "social physics over the current name of the discipline, sociology. But later on he rebaptized his new science as 'Sociology' instead of social physics. In 'Positive Philosophy", Comte elaborated in great depth his new creation sociology.



LET US KNOW

Saint Simon: Saint Simon (1760-1825) was the founder of French socialism. After witnessing the horror and chaos of the French Revolution he decided to reconstruct the society. He sought to achieve an industrial state without poverty where science replaces religion.

3.4 COMTE'S VIEW ON SOCIOLOGY

Comte was born during the period of French Revolution and witnessed the end of the older things of his society. He had also witnessed the new era of social awakening and political and social upheavals. Thus, he had been a witness to a chaotic situation of the society that posed as a threat to social order. Therefore, he tried to look forward seeking order and harmony out of the chaos created by the French Revolution. He was motivated to develop a scientific approach to the study of society.

During the days of Auguste Comte, French society was divided into two reverse thoughts. One group was happy with the social and political changes brought about by the Revolution, and the other wanted to go back to the pre-Revolutionary society with previous social and religious order. Comte did not support either of these two views as he believed that these could not bring solution to the problem. Instead, he advocated for and worked on a scientific approach towards an understanding of the society which could bring, according to him, a solution to the problem.

His approach, which he later termed Sociology, was a scientific study where the basic philosophy was borrowed from Aristotle and Saint Simon, Hume and Kant. By this approach he wanted to inquire into the nature of human knowledge and classify and analyze the methods of achieving this knowledge. He sought to determine the nature of human society and discover the laws and principles underlying its growth and development.

Comte's entire intellectual life represented an attempt to legitimatize Sociology. His efforts went so far that he constructed a hierarchy of sciences

where he showed Sociology as the “queen” of the sciences. This hierarchy allowed Comte to assert the importance of Sociology and its tactics for legitimizing Sociology. He placed Mathematics at the bottom and Sociology at the top of the hierarchy into which was integrated all other sciences.

3.4.1 Positivism

Comte believed that for the reorganization of society, scientific study of social phenomena was necessary.He thought that scientific methods could be applied for the study of society and only such study could investigate into the causes of social disorganization and prepare the ground for social reorganization and development.

For the discovery of social laws and understanding of the social phenomena, Comte suggested the adoption of positive philosophy or positivism. But what is Positivism? Positivism is a philosophy, where social phenomena (like physical phenomena) can be studied objectively by making use of positivist method. Positivism is the principle that knowledge can be obtained only from sensory experience. According to him, positive means scientific and scientific approach to any phenomena and knowledge is positivism. Here, knowledge means scientific knowledge, i.e., observable facts or relationship between facts on the basis of this basic contention of the relationship between knowledge and human beings.

This philosophy states that empirical knowledge should be used to understand the social world as it can create a better society. Factual verifiability, reasoning, and validity make knowledge scientific which is nothing but positivism. Comte thus became an advocate of the application of the scientific method to study the society. This strategy is termed ‘positivism’ in social sciences.

3.4.2 The Law of Three Stages

Comte believed that the social development or the human progress is determined by the evolution of the human mind. According to him, the development of the human mind passes through three

stages in all societies. Comte's stages of development are evolutionary in nature and one stage evolves from the preceding stage. Each development stage has its unique individuality vis-a-vis society.They are–

- Theological or Fictitious stage,
- Metaphysical or Abstract stage, and
- Positive or Scientific Stage.

- **Theological Stage:** Theological stage is characterized by the world prior to 1300 A.D. At this stage, the human mind was occupied by the belief in supernatural powers and religious figures. Here the social and physical world lacked logical and orderly feeling. This period can be cited with examples of military men and priestly dominations. According to Comte, the theological stage goes through three phases, namely, fetishism (or animism), polytheism, and monotheism.
  - **Fetishism:** In the beginning, man used to believe that there was a spirit living inside each and every object. Comte calls this phase fetishism since at this phase each object is considered a fetish, that is, a thing having a spirit living inside.
  - **Polytheism:** With the gradual development in human thinking there occurred a change in the form of thinking. This developed form is known as polytheism. At this stage man had classified gods as well as natural and human forces. Each natural or human force had a presiding deity.
  - **Monotheism:** Monotheism represented a high level of cognition with a relatively low dose of imagination. It paved the way for a critical evaluation of the earlier stages.The most developed form of theological thinking is the monotheism. In monotheism it is believed that one God is supreme and he is considered to be the master of the whole universe.
- **Metaphysical Stage:** The Second stage is the metaphysical stage which occurred between the periods of 1300 A.D. to 1800 A.D. This stage is the modification of the first in which the society

as a whole is replaced by intellectuals over supernatural beings. In this stage, reason occupies the human thinking. According to Auguste Comte, this critical stage was only a transition period from the theological to the positive stage. In this stage the priestly dominance is challenged by lawyers, and the major social unit is the State. This stage, no doubt, offers progress, usually of the revolutionary kind, but instead of order often anarchy prevails in society.

- **Positive Stage:** The third stage is the scientific or positive stage. In this final stage of social development, the individual mind becomes supreme in search of the origin and destination of the universe. It gives importance to causes of the various phenomena. It establishes that reasoning and observation are true means of knowledge. In this stage, there is no place for any belief or speculation in it.

These three stages are interconnected. Each stage is a reflection of the development of the individual mind as well as the society and science.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: State whether the following statements are True and False:

a) Ecole Polytechnique was a school which was a creation of the post Revolutionary government in France. (True / False).

b) Comte's masterwork was Cours de Philosophic Positive. (True / False).

c) Comte was a revolutionary thinker who wanted to change the world with war and terror. (True / False)

d) The root of Positivism lies particularly in empiricism. (True / False)

3.5 ORDER AND PROGRESS

Comte proposed that Sociology can be studied in two parts–

- **Social statics** and
- **Social dynamics**.

These two concepts represent a basic division in the subject matter of sociology. **Social statics** deals with the major institutions of society, such as family, economy and polity. (Sociology is conceived of as the study of interrelations between such institutions). Social statics examines how the parts of societies are interrelated. It is basically concerned with investigating the laws of action and reaction in the different parts of the social system and their contribution towards order and stability of the system. The sociological unit of study was not the individual but the interconnections between structures.

Social dynamics or social change focuses on the whole society as the unit of analysis and how the societies developed and have changed over time. Although both involved the search for laws of social life, Comte felt that social dynamics was more important than social statics. The focus on change which is reflected from social dynamics has inspired him for social reform, particularly the reform from the ills created by the French Revolution and Enlightenment.

3.6 METHODS

Auguste Comte in his new science (sociology) provides some methods of learning which are similar to natural sciences. These methods are Observation, Experimentation, Comparison, and Historical analysis. Let us discuss them in some detail.

- **Observation:** A sociologist studies social facts. These social facts are studied through the method of observation. Any isolated, empirical observation is useless unless it is connected at least hypothetically with some laws. In a statement Comte said, “no social fact can have any scientific meaning till it is connected with some other social fact”. Connection should be made through theory for gaining rationality. And this can be possible only through observed facts.

- **Experimentation:** Comte accepted the fact that experiment method in Sociology is difficult like physical science, but not impossible. He differentiated two types of experiment– direct and indirect. Comte recognized that as in Biology, direct experiments are difficult in Sociology as it studies a complex and changeable organism of society. But the indirect experiment is possible for both biology and sociology
- **Comparison:** In sociology comparison is another type of method. The three forms of comparison in sociology are: comparison of human society, and comparison in animal society and comparison of societies at different stages of development. This is an important analysis to study the present status of the society.
- **Historical analysis:** The historical method is important in sociological analysis because no examination of facts can explain our existing state to us, if it is not ascertained by historical facts.

Comte formulated his theories through an exhaustive study of philosophy and social theory of the past. He was convinced that this course of study and different methods had led inevitably to his discovery of Sociology.



ACTIVITY 3.1

Sociology should rely on some methods to study social phenomena. What are these methods which are similar to natural sciences?

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3.7 CLASS, GENDER AND RACE

Comte had little to say on the issue of class. On the issue of race, he believed that the French in particular and the European in general were superior, although others might also in time advance to the same level of development.

Comte was, however, centrally concerned with the issue of gender. According to him, the natural subordination of women reappeared under all forms of marriages, in all ages. However he indicated family as the basic social unit. Family is the place where the fundamental principle of natural subordination of women was demonstrated. Consequently, Comte claimed, Sociology would prove that the equality of sexes is incompatible with social existence. Throughout history, at every stage in the development of society, woman's life is essentially domestic, and the public life is confined to men. However, he believed that women are superior to man in the expansion of sympathy and sociability, and inferior to men in understanding and reason. Although during Comte's era some women had begun to claim the right to citizenship and to vote, yet Comte thought women were quite clearly unfit for political power.

In sum, he wanted to say that women are unfit for mental labour because of the weakness of their reasoning ability or because women are more at home in moral and physical sensibility but quite unfit for scientific abstraction and concentration. Obviously, in his view women could not hope to be sociologist.

After Comte met Clotilde, he began to opine that women as a repository of love would become the hope for the transformation of humanity by guiding universal love and subjection of self interest to social feeling.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.2: Match the following set A with set B:

	Set A		**Set B**
i)	Theological stage	a)	Sociability
ii)	Social dynamic	b)	Laws of succession
iii)	Comparison	c)	Super natural power
iv)	Women superiority	d)	Method of Sociology

3.8 CONCLUSION

We have discussed several of Comte's positions that were of great significance to the development of classical sociology. Several of his other works deserve mention because they also play a major role in the development of sociological theory.

Many authors have been quite critical of Comte's work; some suggested that the majority of Comtes work have been often neglected. Comte's contemporaries were equally critical after his turn to religion. But Comte should not be forgotten, because he invented the term 'Sociology'. He is the one who set out a theoretical blueprint for sociology, with his conception of society as a real phenomenon, his division of society into statics and dynamics, his recognition of interconnection of structures and his insistence on the importance of theory in relation to the observation of social facts.

Comte's Programme for sociological investigation has been an important foundation for many other sociologists, but it too has come in for criticism. Most especially, some sociologists have criticized Comte's empirical scientific approach.

Even though Comte lacked a solid academic base on which to build a school of Comtian sociological theory, he nevertheless laid a basis for the development of a significant stream of sociological theory.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.3: State whether the following statements are True or False:

a) In 1942 Comte's master work "Philosophic Positive" was published. (True / False)

b) Auguste Comte commented on various issues of class. (True / False)

c) The application of the scientific method was to create a new science is physics. (True/ False)

d) Auguste Comte was a revolutionary thinker. (True / False)



3.9 LET US SUM UP

- Auguste Comte was born on January, 1798, in the Southern city of Montpellier.
- Auguste Comte was a brilliant student at school, but due to post revolutionary upheavals in France he could not receive a college level degree.
- Comte worked in collaboration with Saint Simon and owed a great deal to him.
- During 1830-1842, Comte wrote his masterwork *Cours de Philosophic Positive.*
- Auguste Comte is known as the founder of the term 'Sociology'.
- Comte advocated applying scientific method to the study of society. The society of man, according to him, could be studied through scientific method in the same manner as the natural sciences.
- This new science, which studies society, was named by him as "social physics" following the hardcore science and then he modified the term as Sociology.
- Comte's positivism states that authentic knowledge is possible only through scientific method. The roots of positivism lie particularly in empiricism.
- According to the law of three stages, there are three intellectual stages throughout history in intellectual and social development. These three stages are theological stage, metaphysical stage, and positive stage.
- Order and progress were inseparable in Sociology .This order and progress in sociology is explained by Comte as social statics and social dynamics.
- Social statics is the study of the existing social order of the society. And social dynamics is the study of the change over the time in all the social structures of the society.

- Comte comes with his codification of a methodological enquiry into sociological phenomena. These methods are used as successfully as in natural sciences. These are observation, experimentation, comparison and historical analysis.
- On the issue of race he believed that the French and the European were superior.
- Comte was concerned with gender and believed that women were superior to men in the expansion of sympathy and sociability, and inferior to men in understanding and reasoning.



3.10 FURTHER READING

1) Adams, Bert N. and Sydie, R. A. (2002); *Sociological Theory*; New Delhi: Vistaar Publication.
2) Coser, Lewis A. (2010); *Masters of Sociological Thought*; New Delhi: Rawat Publication.
3) Hussain, Maqitul (1996); *A Prologue to Five Sociologists*; Assam: T.L.B Publishers.
4) Ritzar, George and Douglas, J. Godman (2003); *Sociological Theory*; McGraw Hill.



3.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1: a) True, b) True, c) False, d) True

Ans. to Q. No. 2: i) c, ii) b, iii) d, iv) a

Ans. to Q. No. 3: a) True, b) False, c) False, d) False



3.12 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short Questions: (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q.1: What are the basic features of positivism?

Q.2: What is the difference between social statics and social dynamics?

Q.3: What does metaphysical stage imply?

Q.4: Write a brief note on Auguste Comte's biographical sketch.

B) Long Questions: (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q.1: What are the laws of three stages? Briefly write about their ideas to view the world.

Q.2: Discuss Comte's view on Gender. Does he allow women to take part in political affair? If not, why?

Q.3: Discuss Comte's view on Sociology as a scientific study of society.

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