

Introduction

Three things at the birth of the New Age bear weighty testimony to an increased and increasing interest in human deeds: the Novel, the Trust, and the Expansion of Europe; the study of individual life and motive, the machine-like organizing of human economic effort, and the extension of all organization to the ends of the earth. Is there a fairer field than this for the Scientist? Did not the Master Comte do well to crown his scheme of knowledge with Knowledge of Men?

W. E. B. Du Bois

In the second half of the nineteenth century, criticisms of religion proliferated, threatening the foundation of Western thought and society. Historians of ideas usually highlight the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859 as the watershed moment in the erosion of the Bible's authority. However, five years before this important date, another major nineteenth-century thinker, Auguste Comte, had completed his four-volume *Système de politique positive*, which not only more aggressively attacked traditional religions as irrational and obsolete but offered a creative secular alternative, the Religion of Humanity. As James Livingston remarks, "While other philosophers of the period – the Hegelians, Neo-Kantians, and British idealists – attempted philosophical reconceptions, or various forms of 'demythologisation' of the Jewish and Christian historical revelation, Comte sought a more thoroughgoing religious revolution by rejecting any appeal to either historical revelation or metaphysical theism."¹ Comte was convinced that his religion, based on the intellectual rigor of the modern scientific age and the long lost emotional intensity of the primitive era, would provide society with cohesion and individuals with personal meaning. The radical, paradoxical nature of his humanistic religion and the political reconstruction that it entailed constitute the main focus of this third volume of Comte's intellectual biography.

The first volume of this biography covered Comte's life from 1798 to 1842. This period is considered to be his "first career," when he established the scientific basis of his positive philosophy. This first volume explored his upbringing in Montpellier by his royalist,

¹ James Livingston, "Sceptical Challenges to Faith," in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1870–1945*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 322.

Catholic parents, Louis Comte and Rosalie Boyer. After his mother died in 1837, his sickly, unmarried sister, Alix Comte took care of their father. Comte's relations with Louis and Alix Comte were always strained. He deeply felt the absence of a warm family life, often blaming his years as a boarder at the lycée in Montpellier and at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris for having deprived him of a loving home experience. From the start, he recognized human beings' deep need for affection. He knew that the role of the emotions in their lives was as important as that of the intellect. He himself was often driven by his passions, which led him to rebel against society as a young man. After his expulsion from the Ecole Polytechnique for insubordination in 1816, Comte worked for the reformer Henri de Saint-Simon and grew close to him, personally and intellectually. Comte learned from Saint-Simon the importance of constructing a new unified system of knowledge for the modern industrial era. This philosophical system had to be based on "positive," that is, scientific, ideas. It also had to be devoted to the common good, the importance of which was also espoused by Comte's beloved teacher Daniel Encontre at his lycée and by his professors at the Ecole Polytechnique who upheld the republican, reformist ideals of the French Revolution. In 1824, Comte broke with Saint-Simon because he worried that his mentor was stealing his ideas. The following year, shortly after Saint-Simon's death, he began writing articles for *Le Producteur*, a journal launched by the Saint-Simonians, but he tried to keep his distance from his mentor's disciples. He was more concerned about preparing a course on positive philosophy. In 1826, he started giving his lectures but after the third session experienced a severe attack of mental illness, which sent him to an asylum for eight months. Helped by his wife, Caroline Massin, he gradually recovered. Nevertheless, for the rest of his life, he struggled with what seems to have been bipolar disorder. A manic depressive, he often became delusional about his mission to regenerate society. In 1838, paranoia pushed him to adopt a regime of "cerebral hygiene," where he refused to read contemporaries' books, newspapers, or journals, chiefly to preserve his "originality" and to spare himself the pain of reading bad reviews of his works. His difficult personality drove away those close to him. His wife finally left him with great sadness in 1842, after he continually accused her of having affairs and not appreciating him. For the rest of his life, he gave her an allowance to help her survive. By this point, he had landed a job as an admissions officer and *répétiteur* (tutor) at the Ecole Polytechnique, where he applied repeatedly and without success for a prestigious chair in analysis.

A few weeks before Massin left him in 1842, Comte finished his first great masterpiece, the *Cours de philosophie positive*, published in six volumes beginning in 1830. It presented his new philosophy of positivism as the key to eliminating the social, political, and moral

anarchy stemming from the French Revolution. Having learned the importance of blueprints in his engineering school, the Ecole Polytechnique, Comte argued in the *Cours de philosophie positive* that, because theory always precedes practice, the reconstruction of the post-revolutionary world could be realized only by extending the scientific, or “positive,” method to the study of politics and society, the last stronghold of theologians and metaphysical philosophers. The positive method entailed observing concrete phenomena, usually with the help of a provisional hypothesis, and then using these factual observations to construct scientific laws. Abstraction and the use of the imagination were essential in the process, for pure empiricism was to be avoided. But it was also important to reject theological dogmas and metaphysical speculations. Scientific laws, which were based on both induction and deduction, had to pertain ultimately to something concrete and observable. Comte’s famous law of three stages stated that every branch of knowledge passed through three stages: the theological, metaphysical, and positive stages. In the theological stage, people sought to explain phenomena by finding causes; in the metaphysical stage, they constructed abstract entities; in the positive stage, they created laws. Mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology had gone through these stages. Once the science of society followed their example and became positive, positivism, that is, the system of scientific knowledge, would be unified and complete because all our concepts would be scientific and homogeneous. The new science of society, which Comte called “sociology” in 1839, would unite all knowledge because it would focus people’s attention on humanity. In short, humanity would be the object of study of all the sciences. Once all knowledge was based on scientific laws, everyone would agree on the most essential intellectual principles. The new consensus would become the basis of a stable society, overcoming the divisions that had disturbed political and social life since the French Revolution of 1789.

Comte’s scientific approach to reconstruction attracted the attention of many thinkers, including John Stuart Mill, who started writing to him in 1841. Yet many scholars assert that in the late 1840s, Comte rejected the scientific thrust of his “first career,” epitomized by the *Cours*, and became a crazed religious reformer when he launched his “second career.” The cause of this alleged sudden transformation was his unfulfilled love affair with the young Clotilde de Vaux, who died in 1846, a year after they met.² Mill, who broke with Comte in 1847, helped spread this view of the discontinuity in his development. In *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1866), Mill sadly noted that Comte’s

² Irving M. Zeitlin, *Ideology and the Development of Sociological Thought*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), 84.

relationship with Clotilde de Vaux led to a marked “deterioration in his speculations,” causing him to erect “his philosophy into a religion.”³ Comte’s new Religion of Humanity seemed to be a deviation from his own principles.

The second and third volumes of this intellectual biography, covering the years from 1842 to 1857, dispute this claim that there was an abrupt break between Comte’s “first” and “second” careers. While acknowledging and underscoring Comte’s unceasing development, which was essential to his self-image as an evolving creative thinker, these two volumes highlight the continuity in his trajectory. There was no sudden switch of direction despite the fact that Comte often took on new roles, such as frustrated lover, inspired poet, strict moralist, and dedicated religious reformer. A theatrical individual, he liked to display his multiple selves, as did many of his romantic contemporaries. Moreover, just as Mill himself attributed many of his own ideas to his beloved Harriet Taylor, Comte portrayed the woman he adored as his muse. De Vaux played a significant role in his life, often in ways that have been neglected by previous scholars. But there were other reasons for the emphasis he gave to religion, such as the interest in spiritual renewal that was evident during the romantic period and the Revolution of 1848 and the fact that he wished to appeal to women, whom he associated with religion.

It is important to understand that Comte’s interest in religion was not a startling development. Although he did not believe in God and prohibited references to deities and first causes in his philosophy, he had from an early age believed in the importance of a moral system based on demonstrable principles. The roots of his secular religion can be seen in his early essays (often called “opuscles”) written for Saint-Simon and the Saint-Simonians, where he elaborated on the importance of creating a new spiritual power, and in the *Cours*, where he referred to the need to establish a Positive Church to replace the Catholic Church. An avid reader of the theocrat Joseph de Maistre, Comte believed that a solid spiritual power was crucial to political reconstruction because, throughout history, societies were ideally ruled by both a strong temporal power and an independent spiritual power. In the theological age, priests and kings (or aristocrats) represented the spiritual and temporal powers. In the metaphysical age, metaphysicians were the new spiritual power, and lawyers replaced monarchs (or aristocrats) as the temporal rulers. In the positive age, positive philosophers – generalists who had knowledge of all the sciences, especially sociology – had to be the new spiritual power to check potential abuses of the industrialists, the new temporal power.

³ John Stuart Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1961), 132.

The positivist clergy would also give moral direction to scientists. From the start, Comte distrusted scientists because he found them self-absorbed and greedy for power and money. Once the sciences reached the positive stage, they could not be cultivated for their own sakes; they needed a moral and political agenda, one that would help society. Comte was not so naive as to think that the sciences were “value-free.” As part of society, they were affected by the moral, political, and economic forces that shaped it. Comte anticipated the problem posed by a new age dominated by science, democracy, and big money: where would the legitimate basis of spiritual authority be located?⁴ A careful student of history, he maintained that the spiritual power would not disappear in the future. Indeed, one of his most interesting insights was that in the future, people would become more, not less, religious. Picking up on the importance afforded to spiritual matters in the 1840s, Comte renamed his secular, positivist belief-system a “religion” and made his positive philosophers the new spiritual power. They would be a legitimate directing force because their principles would be based on scientific laws whose truth could be demonstrated, unlike religious principles in the past.

The second volume of this intellectual biography covered Comte’s life from 1842 to approximately 1852. This was the period when he started creating his religious and political movement to rejuvenate the social world, an aim he had embraced since his youth. He was much affected by the social unrest of the 1840s, which led him to address the concerns of workers and women. He was convinced that the dignity of work had to be recognized and that women should no longer be seen as the root of all evil. These two groups were vital to his plans to renovate society.

Since 1831, he had given a free public course in astronomy that attracted many workers who became his disciples. They gave him insights into their poor working and living conditions. Comte responded to their yearning for knowledge by composing works devoted to popular education. In 1843, he published the *Traité élémentaire de géométrie analytique*, a mathematics textbook. In 1844, he wrote the *Discours sur l’esprit positif*, which consisted of the philosophical introduction to his astronomy course and summed up positivist principles. With these books, he hoped to obtain a wide following among workers.

He obtained further insights into the condition of women because of his relationship to the young Clotilde de Vaux. Abandoned by her husband, she tried to launch a career as a writer but died of tuberculosis as she was reaching her goal. Her travails in earning a living and

⁴ Walter L. Adamson, *Embattled Avant-Gardes: Modernism’s Resistance to Commodity Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 5.

gaining independence from her family deeply affected Comte, but his relationship with her was not the only factor influencing his development, although some scholars adopt this reductionist approach.⁵ He also became attuned to women's issues thanks to his friendships with Mill and Sarah Austin, an English bluestocking.

Convinced of the importance of the emotions and eager to appeal to workers and women, he launched in 1847, his Religion of Humanity and soon added another science to his scientific hierarchy, morality. These innovations constituted his response to the religious fervor of the day, so evident in the Revolution of 1848, when socialists and other revolutionaries made frequent references to Jesus Christ and Christian values. Like these reformers, he worried about the rampant individualism of his age that was threatening social harmony. Supporting the Revolution of 1848 and partaking in the optimism of the times, he made his positivist system into a religion by insisting that all our ideas, feelings, and activities be directed toward society, the subject of sociology. Social harmony came not only from intellectual consensus but from emotional solidarity. He wished to revive the emotional intensity that he thought existed during the primitive fetishist age. Assuming that humans were distinguished by their minds and hearts, Comte wanted to inspire their intellectual development by means of education, especially in the sciences, and encourage their emotional evolution by having them cultivate love for their families, members of their "intendancies" (small positivist republics), and humanity as a whole. People's activities to improve their social conditions and their natural environment also encouraged their emotional and intellectual development, making them more cooperative, altruistic beings. Humans' moral improvement helped stabilize and advance society. Order and progress were Comte's watchwords.

Devoted to constructing the Religion of Humanity, he sought a myriad of ways to foster sociability. He often used the tools of the new visual culture of the nineteenth century to reinforce his message. Both Napoleon I and Napoleon III were adept at devising iconographic codes to popularize their regimes. As soon as Napoleon III took over, he had his bust installed in every city hall in France. Displays of prominent individuals and festivals reinforcing them became more salient as the century advanced.⁶ As Walter Adamson has noted, in the "new, culturally more democratic world" of the late nineteenth century, "the pace of life quickened amid compressions of time and

⁵ Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, trans. Richard Howard and Helen Weaver, 2 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1965; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1968) 1:124.

⁶ Rémi Dalisson, *Les Trois Couleurs, Marianne et l'Empereur. Fêtes libérales et politiques symboliques en France 1815–1870* (Paris: La Boutique de l'Histoire, 2004), 260–61.

space, . . . audiences fragmented as they expanded, . . . and a common cultural vocabulary could no longer be assumed.” The result was that the “visual image” would “become the favored means of cultural and political communication.”⁷ This prediction of the importance of visual culture was one forecast Comte got right. He spent much time getting his portraits done, designing flags for his movement, and especially determining the right image for Humanity, who was to be depicted as a mother with a child. This image of Humanity that replaced the male God of traditional religions emphasized family ties, the origin of each individual’s feelings of sociability. Comte drew up elaborate plans for temples dedicated to Humanity and for a series of sacraments to replace those of Catholicism. He created a Positivist Calendar, a chart of the functions of the mind that highlighted altruism, and a Positivist Library of 150 great books. All of these measures were to reinforce the cult of Humanity. One of the aims of this cult was to ensure “subjective” or immaterial immortality, where people who had made contributions to society would survive in the hearts and minds of others. Collective memory would play an important integrating role in the positivist era. The cult of Humanity would also include a cult of Woman. Insisting that everyone worship important women in their lives, Comte claimed to have three “guardian angels”: his mother, Rosalie Boyer; his beloved muse, Clotilde de Vaux; and his dedicated maid, Sophie Bliaux. Women would have a crucial role in the positive era because, as agents of morality and specialists in love, they could help unite society.

Thanks to enthusiasm generated by the Revolution of 1848 and the ensuing growth of civil society, Comte also created the Positivist Society, which represented the kernel of his political movement and the prototype of his spiritual power. Before establishing this political club, Comte had attracted many followers, including the writers George Henry Lewes and Emile Littré and the scientists Alexander Williamson and Charles Robin. Now, confronted with the proliferation of political clubs in Paris, Comte attempted a more organized approach to his movement. The Positivist Society met weekly and obtained eventually approximately fifty members. It issued policy papers on the crises confronting the Second Republic. To propagate positivist religious and political principles, especially among workers and women, Comte wrote *Discours sur l’ensemble du positivisme* (1848), which later constituted the first volume of the *Système de politique positive*. It condemned political extremism, especially on the right; called for the incorporation of proletarians into society by improving their job opportunities and education; outlined his idea of a ruling positivist triumvirate pulled initially from the working class; and

⁷ Adamson, *Embattled Avant-Gardes*, 2.

introduced his new cult of Humanity. But Comte's optimism about imminent change was soon tempered. Having dismissed Napoleon as a reactionary tyrant, he did not approve of the election of his nephew, Louis, as president of the Second Republic. Comte found this new regime to be unproductive. He became annoyed when the regime shut down for a few months his popular new course on the history of Humanity. Unfortunately, partly because of all the time he spent on preparing his lectures, writing his works, and spreading positivism, he was derelict in fulfilling his duties at the Ecole Polytechnique. He lost his job as admissions examiner in 1844 and his teaching assistantship in 1851. To provide Comte with financial support, Emile Littré created the Positivist Subsidy, funded by people who were enthusiastic about his ideas. Free from his teaching duties and supported financially by his disciples, Comte was eager to continue writing and shaping his religious and political movement.

This third volume explores the last years of Comte's life from late 1851 to 1857. It focuses on his religious and moral system, especially as outlined in his famous *Système de politique positive*, and his erratic political views. To adapt to the new empire of Napoleon III, which he supported with reservations, Comte experienced a "conservative turn." It was reminiscent of his strange appeal to Comte Joseph de Villèle (the right-wing minister of finance) and the ultras in 1824, when he was anxious to find support among members of this politically dominant party after his rupture with Saint-Simon.⁸ Now in the 1850s, once again the right was in control, and Comte moved to toady to it, while keeping his options open on the left. His desperate attempt to appeal to both sides of the political spectrum alienated many leftists and conservatives. The latter remained put off by his criticisms of traditional religion and his references to his own planned revolutionary government. Nevertheless, he continued to be an influential thinker with a notable following.

Based on thirty years of archival work, especially at the Maison d'Auguste Comte and the Bibliothèque Nationale, which hold most of his correspondence, this volume, like the previous one, explores for the first time Comte's close connections with his disciples. These include Joseph Lonchampt, Georges Audiffrent, Auguste Hadery, Charles de Capellen, and Jean-François-Eugène Robinet. Comte's disciples came not only from France but from Belgium, Holland, Great Britain, Italy, Spain, Germany, Russia, Mexico, Brazil, and the United States. Giving these men and women personal, professional, and spiritual advice, Comte reveled in the role of mentor and spiritual father.

⁸ Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 252–54.

Chapters one through three cover Comte's change of tactics and the growth of positivism during the early Second Empire. Eager to launch the transitional period to positivism, he initially supported Louis Napoleon's takeover in the belief that he could convert the new emperor to positivism. Many disciples did not approve of Comte's authoritarian approach and left the Positivist Society. Among them were two of Comte's most important followers, Charles Robin and Emile Littré. Disciples defected because they were displeased not only with Comte's swerve to the right but his increased stress on religion and the emotions, which reflected romantic impulses of the day but seemed to betray the original scientific thrust of his thought. Faced with an increase of defectors, many of whom had helped him financially, Comte began to campaign more widely for supporters. In 1852, he wrote the *Catéchisme positiviste*, targeting women. After he became disillusioned with Napoleon III for setting up another empire and restricting various freedoms, such as liberty of the press, which was an essential condition for the spread of positivism, he wrote letters to Tsar Nicholas I and the Grand Vizir Mustafa Reshid Pasha to convert them to positivism. These letters proved an embarrassment to the positivist cause, especially after France became involved in the Crimean War.

Nevertheless, Comte held out positivism as the key to reconciling the East and West. Indeed, dismayed by the bourgeois material trends permeating Paris thanks to Baron Georges Haussmann, Comte, like his contemporaries Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, and Gérard de Nerval, became increasingly fascinated by the "Orient." Eventually, spurred by the universalist aspirations of the French under the Second Empire, he asserted that positivism would spread throughout the world. In his mind, Constantinople, not Paris, would be the capital of the positivist globe because it could most easily blend the East and West.⁹ Again, Comte seemed as eager as he had been in his youth to find the middle ground, but his efforts almost always came up against insurmountable obstacles.

After his appeal to conservatives and autocrats failed, he turned again to the left and attempted to curry favor with Pierre Proudhon, Armand Barbès, and Auguste Blanqui, all renowned revolutionaries. He seemed desperate to convert leaders from any camp, assuming that they would bring more followers in their wake. But Comte grew irritable as some disciples, such as George Henry Lewes, interpreted his intellectual trajectory in ways that made him seem obliged to the socialist tradition. Like Littré, Lewes left the movement after experiencing Comte's ire.

⁹ Roger Celestin and Eliane DalMolin, *France from 1851 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 12–13, 61.

New members, such as Célestin de Blignières and César Lefort, joined the Positivist Society. However, sometimes they added to the infighting. Disciples became jealous of each other, and their rivalry to gain Comte's attention damaged the movement while annoying him no end.

Another problem was that copies of the *Cours*, had become scarce. English readers were gratified when the well-known writer Harriet Martineau published in 1853 her two-volume free translation of the masterpiece, a translation that would soon become a masterpiece in its own right. Comte thought so highly of it that he recommended that people read her book rather than his. Although Martineau was moved to tears by the grandeur of the *Cours*, she never showed any interest in joining the Positivist Society. Nevertheless, she was in many ways the woman colleague that he had always been seeking. For Comte, their partnership represented the ideal partnership of the rational male who had learned to become sympathetic and the emotional female who had been well educated. By shortening the *Cours* and taking out its infelicitous phrases, Martineau revitalized this intellectual enterprise, putting his difficult doctrine into a form that more people could understand.

Chapters four through six examine Comte's second masterpiece, the *Système de politique positive*, which appeared in four volumes between 1851 and 1854. It introduced his political philosophy, especially his plans to reconstruct the world to make it harmonious and peaceful. Having covered in the *Cours* the importance of intellectual agreement as a factor in social unity, he now addressed the second condition of social harmony, that of sociability or "altruism," a word he coined in 1850. He began by introducing his "subjective method." It complemented the "objective method" that dominated the *Cours*. The subjective method encouraged looking at everything from a human viewpoint. This kind of focus ensured the "subjective synthesis," that is, the unity of knowledge grounded in the social point of view. Such unity could not derive from scientific laws promoted by the objective method, which centered on the world. In the first volume of the *Système*, Comte reviewed the sciences from the social perspective of sociology. In the second and third volumes, he reexamined sociology itself, tackling its two divisions of social statics and social dynamics. In terms of social statics or the study of social harmony, he explained his Religion of Humanity; introduced a new, seventh science, that of morality, which dealt with the individual; and discussed the interrelationships between work, family life, language, and the arts on the one hand and the development of the emotions and the community on the other.¹⁰ When he turned to social dynamics or the study of

¹⁰W. E. B. Du Bois criticized Comte for not realizing the importance of establishing a science dealing with "knowledge of Men." Perhaps Du Bois had not read the *Système de*