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052143405X - Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography, Volume I

Mary Pickering

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As the founder of sociology, positivism, and the history of science, Auguste Comte was arguably the most important nineteenth-century French philosopher. Yet he has been curiously neglected. Based upon ten years of research, including three years of archival work in Paris, Mary Pickering's projected two-volume study constitutes the first comprehensive intellectual biography of this thinker. This first volume covers the period from his birth to the completion of the seminal *Cours de philosophie positive* and places Comte's evolution within the context of postrevolutionary France. It shows that Comte, reacting to the cataclysmic upheavals of his time, developed sociology as a way to unify society. He conceived the new doctrine of positivism to serve as its basis and to eliminate the questionable abstractions of conventional philosophy.

The book examines the interplay between Comte's controversial intellectual development and the vicissitudes of his personal and professional life. It highlights his struggles with poverty and mental illness, his failed marriage to a so-called prostitute, and his violent confrontations with the government and the scientific community. At the same time, it investigates his volatile relationships with his family, friends, and disciples, as well as with such famous contemporaries as Saint-Simon, the Saint-Simonians, Guizot, and John Stuart Mill.

Pickering challenges the traditional view of Comte as an arid, simplistic thinker. According to her, he always emphasized the importance of the emotions and distrusted the scientific approach that now is paradoxically associated with positivism. She thus demonstrates that his later religious direction did not constitute a break with his early beliefs but represented their logical outcome.

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To My Father

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Abbreviations

AN	Archives Nationales
BA	Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal
BN	Bibliothèque Nationale
CG	<i>Auguste Comte: Correspondance générale et confessions</i> , edited by Paulo E. de Berrêdo Carneiro, Pierre Arnaud, Paul Arbousse-Bastide, and Angèle Kremer-Marietti, 8 vols. (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1973–90)
EP	Archives of the Ecole Polytechnique
MAC	Archives of the Maison d'Auguste Comte, Paris
RO	<i>La Revue occidentale</i>