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Auguste Comte

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THE
POSITIVE PHILOSOPHY
OF
AUGUSTE COMTE.

BOOK VI.
SOCIAL PHYSICS.

CHAPTER I.

NECESSITY AND OPPORTUNENESS OF THIS NEW SCIENCE.

IN the five foregoing parts of this work, our investigation proceeded on an ascertained and undisputed scientific basis; and our business was to exhibit the progress made in each science; to free it from entanglement with the ancient philosophy; and to show what further improvements might be anticipated. Our task is a different, and a much harder one, in the case of the sixth and last science that I am about to treat of. The theories of Social science are still, even in the minds of the best thinkers, completely implicated with the theologico-metaphysical philosophy; and are even supposed to be, by a fatal separation from all other science, condemned to remain so involved for ever. The philosophical procedure which I have undertaken to carry through becomes more difficult and bold, from this point onwards, without at all changing its nature or object; and it must so far present a new character as it must henceforth be employed in creating a wholly new order of scientific conceptions, instead of judging, arranging, and improving such as already existed.

VOL. II.

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It is not to be expected that this new science can be at once raised to a level with even the most imperfect of those which we have been reviewing. All that can be rationally proposed in our day is to recognize the character of positivity in social as in all other science, and to ascertain the chief bases on which it is founded; but this is enough, as I hope to show, to satisfy our most urgent intellectual necessities, and even the most imperative needs of immediate social practice. In its scientific connection with the rest of this work, all that I can hope to do is to exhibit the general considerations of the case, so as to resolve the intellectual anarchy which is the main source of our moral anarchy first, and then of the political, which I shall treat of only through its originating causes. The extreme novelty of such a doctrine and method renders it necessary, before entering upon the immediate subject, to set forth the importance of such a procedure, and the futility of the chief attempts which have been indirectly made to investigate social science. However unquestionable may be the need of such science, and the obligation to discover it, the best minds have not yet attained a point of view from which they can estimate its depth and breadth and true position. In its nascent state every science is implicated with its corresponding art; and remains implicated with it, as we have seen, the longer in proportion to the complexity of the phenomena concerned. If biological science, which is more advanced than social, is still too closely connected with the medical art, as we have seen that it is, we cannot be surprised that men are insensible to the value of all social speculations which are not immediately connected with practical affairs. We cannot be surprised at any obstinacy in repelling them, as long as it is supposed that by rejecting them, society is preserved from chimerical and mischievous schemes: though experience has abundantly shown that the precaution has never availed, and that it does not now prevent our being daily invaded by the most illusory proposals on social matters. It is in deference to as much as is reasonable in this apprehension that I propose to state, first, how the institution of a science of Social Physics bears upon the principal needs and grievances of society, in its present deplorable state of anarchy. Such a representation may perhaps convince men worthy of the name of statesmen that there is a real and eminent utility in labours of this kind,

Proposal of
the subject.

worthy of the anxious attention of men who profess to devote themselves to the task of resolving the alarming revolutionary constitution of modern societies.

From the point of view to which we have been raised by our study of the preceding sciences, we are able to survey the social situation of our own time in its fullest extent and broadest light; and what we see is that there is a deep and widely-spread anarchy of the whole intellectual system, which has been in this state of disturbance during the long interregnum, resulting from the decline of the theologico-metaphysical philosophy. At the present time, the old philosophy is in a state of imbecility; while the development of the positive philosophy, though always proceeding, has not yet been bold, broad, and general enough to comprehend the mental government of the human race. We must go back through that interregnum to understand truly the present floating and contradictory state of all great social ideas, and to perceive how society is to be delivered from the peril of dissolution, and brought under a new organization, more consistent and more progressive than that which once rested on the theological philosophy. When we have duly observed the powerlessness of conflicting political schools, we shall see the necessity of introducing an entirely new spirit into the organization of society, by which these useless and passionate struggles may be put an end to, and society led out of the revolutionary state in which it has been tossed about for three centuries past.

The ancients used to suppose Order and Progress to be irreconcilable: but both are indispensable conditions in a state of modern civilization; and their combination is at once the grand difficulty and the main resource of every genuine political system. No real order can be established, and still less can it last, if it is not fully compatible with progress: and no great progress can be accomplished if it does not tend to the consolidation of order. Any conception which is so devoted to one of these needs as to prejudice the other, is sure of rejection, sooner or later, as mistaking the nature of the political problem. Therefore, in positive social science, the chief feature must be the union of these two conditions, which will be two aspects, constant and inseparable, of the same principle. Throughout the whole range of science, thus far, we have seen that the conditions

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of combination and of progress are originally identical : and I trust we shall see, after looking into social science in the same way, that ideas of Order and Progress are, in Social Physics, as rigorously inseparable as the ideas of Organization and Life in Biology ; from whence indeed they are, in a scientific view, evidently derived.

The misfortune of our actual state is that the two ideas are set up in radical opposition to each other,—the retrograde spirit having directed all efforts in favour of Order, and anarchical doctrine having arrogated to itself the charge of Social Progress ; and, in this state of things, the reproaches exchanged between the respective parties are only too well merited by both. In this vicious circle is society now confined ; and the only issue from it is by the undisputed preponderance of a doctrine equally progressive and hierarchical. The observations which I have to make on this subject are applicable to all European societies, which have, in fact, all undergone a common disorganization, though in different degrees, and with various modifications, and which cannot be separately reorganized, however they may be for a time restrained ; but I shall keep the French nation chiefly in view, not only because the revolutionary state has been most conspicuous in them, but because they are, in all important respects, better prepared, in spite of appearances, than any other, for a true reorganization.

Among the infinite variety of political ideas which appear to be striving in society, there are in fact only two orders, the mingling of which in various proportions occasions the apparent multiplicity : and of these two, the one is really only the negation of the other. If we wish to understand our own condition, we must look at it as the result and last term of the general conflict undertaken, for three centuries past, for the gradual demolition of the old political system. So regarding it, we see that whereas, for above half a century, the irremediable decay of the old system has proved the necessity of founding a new one, we have not been sufficiently aware of the need to have formed an original and direct conception, adequate to the purpose ; so that our theoretical ideas have remained inferior to our practical necessities, which, in a healthy state of the social organism, they habitually anticipate, to prepare for their regular and peaceable satisfaction. Though the political movement could not but have changed

its nature, from that time forward, becoming organic instead of critical, yet, for want of a basis in science, it has proceeded on the same old ideas that had actuated the past struggle ; and we have witnessed the spectacle of defenders and assailants alike endeavouring to convert their old weapons of war into instruments of reorganization, without suspecting the inevitable failure which must ensue to both parties. Such is the state that we find ourselves in now. All ideas of order in the political world are derived from the old doctrine of the theological and military system, regarded especially in its catholic and feudal constitution : a doctrine which from our point of view in this work, represents the theological state of social science : and, in the same way, all ideas of progress are still derived from the purely negative philosophy which, issuing from protestantism, assumed its final form and development in the last century, and which, applied to social affairs, constitutes the metaphysical state of politics. The different classes of society range themselves on the one side or the other, according to their inclination for conservatism or amelioration. With every new uprising of a social difficulty, we see the retrograde school proposing, as the only certain and universal remedy, the restoration of the corresponding part of the old political system ; and the critical school referring the evil exclusively to the destruction of the old system not being complete. We do not often see the two doctrines presented without modification. They so exist only in purely speculative minds. But when we see them in monstrous alliance, as we do in all degrees of existing political opinion, we cannot but know that such an alliance cannot yield any virtue which its elements do not contain, and that it can only exhibit their mutual neutralization. We must here, it is clear, regard the theological and the metaphysical polities separately, in the first place, that we may afterwards understand their present antagonism, and form an estimate of the futile combinations into which men have endeavoured to force them.

Pernicious as the theological polity may be in our day, no true philosopher will ever forget that it afforded the beneficent guardianship under which the formation and earliest development of modern societies took place. But it is equally incontestable that, for three centuries past, its influence among the most advanced nations has been essentially retrograde, notwithstanding some

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[More information](#)

partial services. We need not go into any discussion of its doctrine, in order to ascertain its powerlessness for future service: for it is plain that a polity that could not hold its ground before the natural progress of intelligence and of society can never again serve as a basis of social order. The historical analysis which I shall have to offer of the causes that have dissolved the Catholic and feudal system will show, better than any argument, how radical and irretrievable is the decay. The theological school explains the fact, as far as it can, by fortuitous and, we might almost say, personal causes: and, when they will no longer suffice, resorts to its common supposition, of a mysterious caprice of Providence which has allotted to social order a season of probation, of which no account can be given, either as to its date or its duration, or even its character. A contemplation of historical facts however shows that all the great successive modifications of the theological and military system have, from the beginning and increasingly, tended to the complete elimination of a *régime* which, by the fundamental law of social evolution, could never be more than provisional, however indispensable. And if any efforts to restore the system could achieve a temporary success, they would not bring back society to a normal state, but would merely restore the very situation which compelled the revolutionary crisis, by obliging it to set about the work of destruction again, with more violence, because the *régime* has altogether ceased to be compatible with progress in the most essential respects. While avoiding all controversy on so plain a case, I must briefly present a new view which appears to me to point out the simplest and surest criterion of the value of any social doctrine, and which emphatically condemns the theological polity.

Criterion of
social doctrine. Regarded from the logical point of view, the problem of our social reorganization seems to me reducible to this one condition: to construct rationally a political doctrine which, in the whole of its active development, shall be always fully consequent on its own principles. No existing doctrines approach to a fulfilment of this condition: all contain, as indispensable elements, numerous and direct contradictions on the greater number of important points. It may be laid down as a principle that the doctrine which furnishes accordant solutions on the various leading questions of polity, without failing in this one respect in the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE THEOLOGICAL POLITY.

7

course of application, must, by this indirect test alone, be recognized as sufficiently adapted to reorganize society; since this intellectual reorganization must mainly consist in re-establishing harmony in the troubled system of our social ideas. When such a regeneration shall have been accomplished in an individual mind (and in that way it must begin), its generalization, sooner or later, is secure; for the number of minds cannot increase the difficulty of the intellectual convergence, but only defer the success. We shall hereafter find how great is the superiority of the positive philosophy in this view; because, once extended to social phenomena, it must connect the different orders of human ideas more completely than could be done in any other way.

The accomplishment of this great logical condition might be expected from the theological polity above all others, because its doctrine is limited to co-ordinating a system so clearly defined by its long application, and so fully developed in all its essential parts, that it may well be supposed secure from all serious inconsistency. The retrograde school accordingly extols habitually, as its characteristic attribute, the perfect coherence of its ideas, in contrast with the contradictions of the revolutionary school. Yet, though the theological polity is less inconsistent than the metaphysical, it shows a daily increasing tendency to concessions of the most radical importance, directly contrary to all its essential principles. This is evidence enough of the futility of a doctrine which does not even possess the one quality most spontaneously correspondent to its nature. The old political system is seen to be destroyed as soon as its most devoted adherents have lost the true general sentiment of it: and this may now be observed, not only in active practice, but among purely speculative minds of a high order, which are unconsciously modified by the irresistible influences of their age. If examples are desired, we need only bring the retrograde doctrine into comparison with the elements of modern civilization. There can be no doubt that the development of the sciences, of industry, and even of the fine arts, was historically the principal, though latent cause, in the first instance, of the irretrievable decline of the theological and military system. At present, it is the ascendancy of the scientific spirit which preserves us from any real restoration of the theological spirit; as, again, the industrial spirit, in its perpetual extension, con-

stitutes our best safeguard against any serious recurrence of the military or feudal spirit. Whatever may be the names given to our political struggles, this is the real character of our social antagonism. Now, amidst this state of things, do we hear of such a thing as any government, or even any school, seriously proposing a systematic repression of science, industry and art? Do not all powers (with an eccentric exception here and there) claim the honour of encouraging their progress? Here we have the first inconsistency of the retrograde polity, annulling its own project of a restoration of the past: and though the inconsistency is less apparent than some others, it must be regarded as the most decisive of all, because it is more universal and more instinctive than any other. Napoleon Bonaparte himself, the hero of retrogression in our time, set himself up, in all sincerity, as the protector of industry, art, and science. Purely speculative minds, though more easily separating themselves from any prevalent tendency, have escaped no better from the influence of their times. How many have been the attempts, for instance, for two centuries past, on the part of some of the most eminent minds, to subordinate reason to faith, according to the theological formula; reason itself being made the supreme judge of such a submission, and thus evidencing the contradictory character of the proposition! The most eminent thinker of the Catholic school, the illustrious De Maistre, bore involuntary testimony to the necessity of his time when he endeavoured, in his principal work, to re-establish the papal supremacy on historical and political reasonings, instead of ordaining it by divine right, which is the only ground appropriate to such a doctrine, and the only ground he would have proposed in any age but one in which the general state of intelligence precluded such a plea. Instances like these may spare us further illustration.

As for more direct inconsistencies, more striking, though less profound, and comprehended within the present times, we see in every sect of the retrograde school a direct opposition to some fundamental part of their common doctrine. Perhaps the only point on which there is now any unanimity in that school is in the consent to break up the very basis of the catholic and feudal system, by surrendering the division between the spiritual and temporal power; or, what comes to the same thing, acquiescing in the subordination of the spiritual to the temporal authority. In this respect, the kings are

showing themselves as revolutionary as their peoples; and the priests have ratified their own degradation, in catholic countries no less than protestant. If their desire is to restore the old system, their first step must be to unite the innumerable sects which have sprung out of the decline of Christianity: but every attempt of the sort has failed through the blind and obstinate determination of the governments to retain the supreme direction of the theological power, the centralization of which they thus render impossible. Napoleon only showed an exaggerated copy, in his violent inconsistencies, of what many princes had done before him: and after his fall, when the sovereigns of Europe united to set up a power in opposition to revolutionary tendencies, they usurped the attributes of the old spiritual authority, and exhibited the spectacle of a high council composed of heretic chiefs, and governed by a schismatic prince. After this, it was manifestly impossible to introduce the papal power into the alliance, in any way whatever. Such instances of the postponement of religious principles to temporal convenience are not new; but they show how the main idea of the old political system has ceased to preponderate in the minds of the very persons who undertook to restore it. The divisions in the retrograde school have been of late apparent under all circumstances, whether of success or defeat. Any temporary success ought to rally all dissentients, in a school which boasts of the unity of its doctrine: yet, through a long course of years we have witnessed successive, and more and more serious schisms among the subdivisions of the triumphant party. The advocates of catholicism and those of feudality have quarrelled: and the latter have split into partisans of aristocracy and defenders of royalty. Under the completest restored supremacy, the schisms would only break out again, with more violence, through the incompatibility of the existing social state with the old political system. The vague assent to its general principles which is yielded in a speculative sense, must give way in their application; and every practical development must engender further divisions: and this is the scientific description of any theory which is incompatible with the facts.

When the retrograde party is reduced to the rank of an opposition, it has recourse to the principles of the revolutionary doctrine. This has been the case repeatedly during the last three centuries, when that party has been put upon the

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[More information](#)

defensive. Thus we see the Catholics in England, and yet more in Ireland, asserting the claim of liberty of conscience, while still clamouring for the repression of Protestantism in France, Austria, and elsewhere. Again, when the sovereigns of Europe invoked the aid of the peoples to put down Napoleon, they surrendered their retrograde doctrine, and testified to the power of the critical, as that which was really influencing civilized society, even though they were proposing, all the while, to effect the restoration of the ancient polity. We have seen something even more wonderful since that struggle. We have seen the retrograde party taking possession of the whole body of critical doctrine, endeavouring to systematize it for its own uses, and sanctioning all its anarchical consequences; trying to set up the catholic and feudal *régime* by the very means which have destroyed it; and believing that a mere change in the person of the sovereign would intercept the consequences of a political movement which they had done nothing to modify*. This is simply a new way of signing a political abdication, however the ability of those who do it may be extolled.—We need not look further for illustrations of the pregnant fact that a polity which is the type of unity and permanence has been full of schisms, and now contains elements directly incompatible with its fundamental principles; and that, as when we find De Maistre reproaching Bossuet with mistaking the nature of catholicism, and then himself falling into inconsistencies, the party of Order is proposing to re-establish that which is not comprehended by its most illustrious defenders.

Turning now to the Metaphysical polity, we must first observe and carefully remember that its doctrine, though exclusively critical, and therefore revolutionary, has still always had the virtue of being progressive, having, in fact, superintended the chief political progress accomplished during the last three centuries, which must be, in the first instance, essentially negative. What this doctrine had to do was to break up a system which, having directed the early growth of the human mind and society, tended to protract that infantile period: and thus, the political triumph of the metaphysical school was a necessary preparation for the advent of the positive school, for which the

* This was written during the reign of Louis Philippe, and the administration of M. Guizot.