

Positivism: “Love, Order, Progress” – Auguste Comte (1795 – 1857) and Emile Durkheim (1858 – 1917)

The impulse to think critically and seriously about how the social world is made and continues in being is strongest in times of social crisis. Thomas Hobbes claimed to have founded the science of political analysis. His was a great and original contribution but we should not forget that he was one of hundreds of thinkers at that time who all cogitated on similar fundamental problems: If the king is dead who or what is the source of authority in society? If I put myself first, how is society possible?

Hobbes was writing during the English Civil War and after, and that profound political and economic transformation stimulated the production of thousands of pamphlets and books discussing the versions of this problem, which has been called in sociology the problem of order. Hobbes proposed that there should be in society some unquestionable source of authority and power – the Leviathan – that guaranteed the basics of security and law. Without it men would simply follow their appetites and aversions, their wants and fears, and they would be in consequence the “war of all against all” and “which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short.”

Hobbes himself had experienced social change and revolution in very direct ways. He was faced with the failure of the old order. On leaving Oxford University, Hobbes became a tutor in the Earl of Devonshire’s household. C. B. Macpherson describes in his Introduction to the Pelican edition of the Leviathan how “Part of his duties was to cadge money for his young man, to the extent of catching cold standing about in the wet soliciting loans ... To the ordinary insecurity of the parvenu was added there was thus added a view of the insecurity of the old ruling class. Hobbes learned early that the hierarchical order was, by the beginning of the seventeenth century something of a veneer.” In his life he saw the founding of a short-lived republic and sought exile. His doctrine bought him no particular respect from either side: he certainly did not defend the divine right of kings to rule and nor did he defend the rights of democracy.

The impulse to sociological rather than political analysis has similar roots in social crisis. These crises have been variously described: crises of urbanisation, democratisation, industrialisation, etc. Intellectually and culturally in the nineteenth century there were fundamental developments in science, the decline in religious certainty, and shifts in the way that human beings were perceived. Marx, Darwin, and the geologist Lyell, are representative and important figures of the intellectual trend which broke with the idea that human beings were at the centre of creation.

There is no doubt that the nineteenth century in Europe was and was experienced as a particularly turbulent time, as turbulent and dramatic as the seventeenth century which had so unsettled and stimulated Thomas Hobbes. Very simply we can see two sorts of responses to these crises. One was to bemoan them and hark back to the alleged certainties of the past: the aristocratic reaction. The other was to seek new certainties in

the future as an antidote to the crises of the present using the resources of science. The people I am going to discuss belong to the second group.

Auguste Comte (1795- 1857)

Although, if you have not done sociology before, you may not have heard of this person, he has probably affected your thinking. His version of what science is has been profoundly influential. Indeed, I would argue that the evidence is overwhelming that if most people are asked for their commonsense view of science they would offer up a description that Comte would recognise as his own.

Comte had a mission to construct and disseminate a science of society. This necessity existed because what he called “the anarchy of opinions” was leading to social breakdown and revolution. Although it took place before he was born, the French Revolution of 1789 overshadowed the whole of the nineteenth century. However, the final defeat of Napoleon Buonaparte in 1815 seemed to indicate deep problems with the legacy of the French Revolution but also the possibility of progressive social change.

Positivism – the scientific spirit in Comte’s view – had to seek converts in order to stabilise society and reconcile the lower orders to their lot in life. The positivist creed was to discover and teach the necessary laws of social life. Comte believed that “True liberty is nothing else than the rational submission to the laws of nature.” (In truth, Comte had his doubts about the rational capabilities of the so-called lower orders.) Nevertheless, he claimed that, “The positive philosophy offers the only solid basis for that social reorganisation which must succeed the critical condition in which the civilized nations are now living.”

Positivism is both a sociology and a philosophy of science. The sociology emphasises the evolution of societies, that is their dynamics, but Comte also dealt with ‘statics’, i.e. the sources of social stability. The philosophy of science is what I shall here concentrate upon. The Comte de Saint-Simon for whom Comte had worked as his secretary coined the term, Positivism. It was Comte, however, who invented the word sociology, (and other words too such as altruism – the idea of doing something for no immediate reward). For Comte, sociology was the queen of the sciences. But although it was the queen (or king, if you will) because it was the most complex and difficult, it shared with all the other sciences the same scientific method. This method is the distinguishing characteristic of science and one science is therefore only distinguished from another because of the different aspects of reality that are studied. It may be that the social sciences have problems, but these are problems of development and not problems in principle because of what sociologists study.

What is **the** scientific method? According to the positivist view it is based on a number of principles that I shall first put to you rather formally and then summarise more informally:

1. The basis of true knowledge is to be found in sense experience prior to concept and theory formation.
2. Scientific knowledge accumulates through the accretion of more and more independent facts.
3. There is a method of inference, induction, by which scientific laws are logically entailed by particular sets of facts.
4. The credibility of a scientific law is in direct proportion to the number of confirming instances.

In Comte's view, science proceeds by the collection of facts and then generalises from the facts to generate a scientific law. An example would be, "all metals expand when heated". Briefly, we collect factual data, generalise, and the more facts we have, the better the law. "Just look at the facts" is a command that stems from this tradition. So is the accusation of bias, if you have not "just looked at the facts." The positivist picture is very simple, very persuasive and, unfortunately, very wrong. (We shall understand this more fully why later, I hope, when I talk about Emile Durkheim.) The initial collection of factual data should be followed by the sorting of this data by two principles which Comte called the 'invariant relations' of succession and resemblance. That is, we put the facts into some kind of temporal order and we also group the data according to its external characteristics. Comte seems to suggest that this is not that difficult but, in the case of this methodological prescription about resemblances, it is quite difficult. For instances, we can make many, many factual statements about human beings. Which do we select out in order to group them? This is actually a non-factual decision. However, Comte's view is that we can do this an objective way which does not involve any pre-conceptions. The next move is to link earlier facts or events to later facts or events and make some general statement connecting the two. By induction, that is by moving from facts to theory we have arrived at a factually based law. The more facts we have at our disposal to support this law, the more credibility it has. Finally, we can then use our established laws to predict events and therefore control them.

Comte has an elegant theory to account for the successive evolution and maturation of the different sciences. This consists of two interacting principles:

1. The degree of generality of the science.
2. The relation of the science to human interest and passions.

The most general sciences are those of mathematics and astronomy and the most culturally contentious are those of physiology, psychology and sociology. Mathematics evolves scientifically first and sociology last so the rational ordering and historical ordering are the same. This identity of historical and rational development is typical of Comte's schema of history.

Similarly, society evolves. Firstly, human society is ruled by religious leaders and is therefore theocratic, then it becomes dominated by military or feudal institutions, and finally industrial life is the dominant form. These correspond to different forms of evolving culture. Firstly, all explanations are terms of deities or spiritual forces. Secondly,

there is the metaphysical or abstract phase in which hidden forces are believed to cause all observed phenomena. There is a search for a kind of ultimate reality. “Finally, in the positive state,” Comte tells us, “the human mind recognising the impossibility of absolute concepts gives up the search for the origin and destiny of the universe, and the inner cause of phenomena, and confines itself to the discovery, through reason and observation combined, of the actual laws that govern the succession and similarity of phenomena.”

Comte thought that society evolved according to relatively simple laws. He also thought that society was greater than the sum of individuals or any individual. Moreover, he claimed that social organisation and culture, ways of thinking, are directly linked to one another. The result was that individuals conformed to social developments. If we could understand the general laws of society we would be able to predict the results of our actions and therefore have some, moderate, positive influence on the way that society developed. Science would provide unchallengeable and certain knowledge, a truth universally acknowledged. Unfortunately, this did not stop Comte becoming quite batty as he got older and he tried to establish positivism as a creed like catholic Christianity with himself as a kind of Positivist Pope. Despite, this his influence was widespread and lasting in sociology.

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

For Durkheim, the central concept is that of social solidarity, and the major historical process is the development of the division of labour in society. The influence of Comte is clearly there in the sense that society exists over and above individuals and in the view that sociology is a science. However, Durkheim never described himself as a positivist.

Durkheim wrote a number of major works during his life-time. His final book, *Moral Education*, was produced by his admirers and students from his lecture notes. The books he wrote are *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), *Suicide* (1897), and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912). In these lectures, I am only going to look at the three early books.

For all sorts of reasons, I am not very sympathetic to Durkheim's work, although there are those who consider him to be the sociologist par excellence and his concept of social solidarity to be the defining concept of sociology (Lockwood, 1993). Even Abrams and McCulloch in *Communes, Sociology and Society* (1976), despite their reservations about his work, found it very difficult to discuss the solidarity of communes without reference to the arguments of Durkheim. Thus, it has to be acknowledged that his work still has very considerable influence, particularly through the American functionalist tradition, and that his work pops up in the most surprising places. For instance, consider the work of Christine Delphy, the French radical feminist. She approvingly cites Durkheim in her collection of essays, entitled *Close to Home: A materialist analysis of women's oppression* (1984). The usual argument is that our biological sexual characteristics are the bases on which gender, the psychological, cultural and social differences between the sexes, are constructed. Wrong, counters Delphy. Using Durkheim as her authority, she argues that

gender is a social phenomenon which requires a social explanation. Her view is that because of gender as a social construction and the values and beliefs it imposes on us we can only understand our biological sex in certain limited ways. Thus, it is not sex which leads to gender it is gender which frames our view of our biological sex. And, indeed, this perspective that the social is a realm of its own, to be explained only in its own terms, but which, nevertheless, affects the way in which we understand ourselves even at the most intimate level is very typical kind of Durkheimian argument.

The Division of Labour in Society is very characteristic of Durkheim's thought. Societies are social groups which, by definition, possess solidarity. The question is, why is there order in society and why do people hang together in social groups: what binds them together? Herbert Spencer, the English theorist and his near contemporary, advanced the view that modern societies held together because it was in each individual's interest to cooperate together. Durkheim argued that common interests might draw individuals together at one moment and divide them the next. The so-called 'harmony of interests' was simply deferred conflict (echoes of Hobbes). It follows, that a society could not be united on the basis of contract, the satisfaction of mutual interest. Durkheim's view, then, was that there must be an extra-contractual element to contract which made sense of what it was to honour a contract. We can quite easily see that this part of Durkheim's argument must be right. One way that trade unions, in organised disputes with employers, have of fighting their corner is by working precisely to contract. It is frequently a very effective weapon.

According to Steven Lukes, The Division of Labour "advanced the claim that the functions once performed by 'common ideas and sentiments' were now, in industrial societies, largely performed by new social institutions and relations, among them economic ones; that this change involved a major change in the nature of morality; and that all these changes were best observed through studying changes in the law (Lukes, 1973)." This division of labour refers to the specialisation of institutions. It is best termed the social division of labour. There is also the technical division of labour. This is when productive, economic tasks are sub-divided and each sub-divided element is repetitively performed by one individual in common with others. Only together can they make the complete product. The ultimate form of the technical division of labour is the assembly line.

Durkheim's theory in The Division of Labour changed as he wrote it. (This also happens in his book, Suicide.) In primitive societies solidarity existed because powerful common beliefs - what he called the conscience collective - united a social group in which everyone was roughly the same and individuality was suppressed. This was unity based on similarity. The change was caused by greater competition between societies because of population growth. The need for greater efficiency in the struggle for existence created internal specialisation, both individually and institutionally. Institutions like the family restricted the range of their activities to the socialisation and care of the young. Education, once the preserve of the family, became a separate social function for institutions like schools and universities. Production, sale and exchange became separated from the family

and developed as a distinct sphere of life, to the extent that it is now in many cases an offence to confuse family and business income and assets. Equally, individuals became more and more specialised in the range of activities they were called upon to perform. In primitive tribes, there were very few different roles and the division of labour was largely based on gender. In modern societies, few of us do more than work at a part of a task. Thus, the unity of modern societies is based on individual difference: each of us is complementary to the other and connected by the division of labour.

These ideas of the division of labour being part of a general evolutionary tendency of societies to evolve more and more specialised institutions and to upgrade themselves in adaptive and productive capacity have been very influential in American sociology in particular. The problem for such increasingly socially differentiated societies, looked at from this perspective, is how they can integrate these different, specialised institutions into some coherent, functioning social whole.

At first, Durkheim was of the opinion that the division of labour was sufficient to bind societies together. However, as the argument develops he comes to the view that the conscience collective cannot disappear completely, and that common values and beliefs do play a significant part in binding societies together. However, the modern conscience collective is problematic because it had as its central characteristic a belief in the sanctity of the individual. This is one of the central moral tensions in his work: everywhere he recognises the benefits of individualism, everywhere he recognises that it holds the most terrible threat to social life and individual well-being itself. This is the problem of order, again.

This fundamental change in the nature of social solidarity was described by Durkheim as a change from mechanical to organic solidarity. The change in the deep structure of society and its morality was indicated by changes in the nature of law. In mechanical societies Durkheim believed that the law and punishment was repressive: that is, the purpose of the law was to crush the individual deviant and mark without ambiguity the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable social behaviour. In organic societies the dominant kind of law is not the criminal but the civil law and the purpose of this kind of law is restitution. It is not intended to punish the individual but to repair the social fabric. If anything, however, the law in primitive societies is restitutive, not repressive. It was in the great agrarian and slave societies of the past- not so-called primitive tribal societies - that the law was at its most punitive and repressive.

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