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Sociological Ideas in Pre-Revolutionary Russia

Sociology, the youngest of the social sciences, is obliged to seek its subject matter and *this quest is an integral part of the science itself.*¹

Sociologists and social philosophers undertook the quest in search of the discipline in good earnest in the last decade of the nineteenth century. A hyphen that both connects and separates nineteenth-century culture and our own modernism, the period from about 1890 to World War I was one when received truths in almost all areas of human endeavor were subject to major re-evaluation. In fields as diverse as music, the fine arts, philosophy, psychology and social science, it was a time for new departures.² In social thought, the mutually conflicting verities of social evolution discovered by Comte, Spencer and Marx were all rejected, as scholars probed the nature of society and analyzed the relationships among the disciplines which in one way or another seek to understand human interaction in organized groups. Durkheim, Weber, Simmel and Pareto all made their seminal contributions during the period of transition from Victorian certainty to modern doubt.

The examination of sociology and its subject matter raised a number of serious problems which remain unresolved to this day. What are social sciences? Does their existence imply scientism, the notion that human interaction can be reduced to immutable laws, differing in complexity but not in basic character from Newton's laws of motion? If this is true, and human actions are determined by "law," what becomes of freedom, the human soul, and God? Another series of questions relates to the subject of sociology—what is society, and how is it related to the individual human beings who compose it? This line of questioning leads to fundamental political problems. There are philosophical, epistemological questions as well—from what standpoint is it possible for human beings to understand their own myths and delusions? Finally, what is sociology, as distinct from the other social science disciplines—history, politics, economics, psychology—indeed, does it make sense to speak of a single "science of society" at all?

The first set of answers to these questions was given in the mid-nineteenth century by Auguste Comte, who "invented" sociology, fitting a science of society into the overall scientific scheme provided by his doctrine of positivism. Positivism itself

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1. Raymond Aron, *German Sociology*, trans. Mary and Thomas Bottomore (Glencoe, Ill. 1957), p. 4.

2. An interesting attempt to link the various aspects of cultural change in one specific locale is provided in Allen Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York, 1972). The work is weakened, however, by the authors' lack of attention to the parallel developments taking place in the rest of Europe.

expanded from Comte's conception to become the prevailing attitude of late nineteenth-century thought, and H. Stuart Hughes, in his influential *Consciousness and Society*, described the changed perspective of the end of the century as a "revolt against positivism." In his effort to encompass the broad stream of social thought, Hughes left positivism only loosely defined, and quite explicitly divorced it from the other quaint doctrines associated with the name of Auguste Comte, who had originally coined the term.³ In the academic discipline of "sociology," however, as distinct from "social thought" broadly construed, the *fin-de-siècle* break with tradition does indeed mean a revolt first of all against Comte and the Comtean tradition.

The break was so complete that today Comte is all but forgotten, and little direct Comtean influence can be seen in modern sociology. The relative disregard of his work is not difficult to understand. On the most superficial level, he was a difficult, obscure writer who left us no convenient distillation of his point of view. More importantly, the content of his doctrine strikes the modern reader as alternatively absurd or sinister. A sociology, or social physics, comparable to the natural sciences, with unwavering "laws" governing human behavior, the three stages of social development, and finally the Positive Religion—surely all this is the height of nineteenth-century naive arrogance, which in fact can provide us with almost no insights into the nature of the human predicament. On the other hand, Comte's view that society is absolute and the individual wholly to be absorbed by it, his scorn for individualism and for the heritage of the French Revolution, and his dream of a perfectly ordered and structured society are appalling in their totalitarian implications.⁴ But for all its weaknesses, Comtean sociology continued to show considerable vigor at the end of the century, and while the great creative minds had left him behind, Comte's legacy still dominated the journals and international societies that, before the widespread establishment of professorial chairs, formed the armature of the discipline. Furthermore, his definitions of the discipline provided the orthodoxy which the rebels attacked, and so contributed serious elements to the debate.

In the first place, the bare assertion of the need for a science of society was of major importance. Human nature is a part of nature, to be studied by the same methods as the natural universe, and like the latter it is governed by natural laws. This called for a dispassionate approach to social phenomena, a rejection of any metaphysical purpose in human evolution, and the replacement of the concept of "progress" by that of value-neutral "development." That Comte's own "laws" of social development contradicted his methodological principles was of less importance—the principles remained after the laws had been discarded by later generations of sociologists.

A second major contribution was Comte's perception of human society as a social entity, subject to its own laws, and not merely an agglomeration of the individuals composing it. Indeed, so sure was Comte of the primacy of society over the individual that psychology was not represented in his hierarchy of sciences, which

3. H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reconstruction of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (New York, 1958), pp. 36-37.

4. On these points, see Frank E. Manuel, *The Prophets of Paris* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), pp. 249-297; and Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston, 1960), pp. 323-330, 340-360.