

AUGUSTE COMTE REVISITED: POSITIVISM, SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL INTERVENTION

AUGUSTO COMTE REVISITADO: POSITIVISMO, TEORIA SOCIOLÓGICA E INTERVENÇÃO SOCIAL

AUGUSTE COMTE RECORDADO: POSITIVISMO, TEORÍA SOCIOLÓGICA E INTERVENCIÓN SOCIAL

Renato CANCIAN¹

ABSTRACT: In the social sciences, a classic work is a reference for future generations of specialists who make use of its theoretical, analytical and methodological contributions in the development of new research and permanent improvement of knowledge. Among the classics of sociology, in particular the theorists of the emergence phase of this social science, the sociological thought of Auguste Comte is considered of less relevance compared to Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim e Max Weber. However, when analyzing the intellectual trajectory of Auguste Comte, this article argues that his theories and analyses were fundamental for the constitution and further development of sociology.

KEYWORDS: Science. Positivism. Sociology. Capitalism. Social conflict.

RESUMO: *Nas ciências sociais uma obra clássica é uma referência para as gerações futuras de especialistas que usufruem de suas contribuições teóricas, conceituais, analíticas e metodológicas no desenvolvimento de novas pesquisas e permanente aperfeiçoamento do conhecimento. Entre os clássicos da sociologia, em particular os teóricos da fase de surgimento desta ciência social, o pensamento sociológico de Augusto Comte é considerado de menor relevância comparado a Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim e Max Weber. Todavia, ao analisar a trajetória intelectual de Augusto Comte este artigo sustenta que suas teorias e análises foram fundamentais para a constituição e o desenvolvimento ulterior da sociologia.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Ciência. Positivismo. Sociologia. Capitalismo. Conflito social.*

RESUMEN: *Em las ciencias sociales una obra clásica es una referencia para las futuras generaciones de especialistas que se benefician de sus aportes teóricas, conceptuales, analíticas y metodológicas en el desarrollo de nuevas investigaciones y mejora del conocimiento. Entre los clásicos de la sociología, em particular los teóricos de la fase de surgimiento de esta ciencia social, el pensamiento sociológico de Auguste Comte tiene menos relevancia em comparación com Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim y Max Weber. Sin embargo, al analizar la trayectoria intelectual de Auguste Comte este artículo sostiene que sus teorías y análisis fueron fundamentales para la constitución y posterior desarrollo de la sociologia.*

¹ Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCAR), São Carlos – SP – Brazil. Doctorate in Social Sciences. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1481-5449>. E-mail: rcancian@hotmail.com

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Ciencia. Positivismo. Sociología. Capitalismo. Conflicto social.*

Introduction

Sociology can be conceived as a scientific project of modernity oriented towards the systematic study of social life. The story of its genesis lies in the work of thinkers who created concepts, methods and theories providing the conditions for sociology to become a genuinely autonomous science vis-a-vis other areas of scientific knowledge. The purpose of this article is to analyze the intellectual trajectory of the philosopher and social theorist Augusto Comte, who coined the term “sociology” and developed the first consistent sociological theories based on the definition of the research object and on methodological procedures that allowed the scientific analysis of the contemporary society of its era. In general, the reference to classical sociological thought relegates Augusto Comte to a subordinate condition in relation to Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, but it is important to highlight that Comte was a pioneer in the construction of a theoretical-conceptual framework and in conducting research that favored the recognition, acceptance and prestige of sociology, while his vast work, composed of philosophical and sociological studies, became a stimulus for the advancement of social thought, in addition to providing invaluable contributions to the development of new social theories.

Industrial capitalism

The scientific project that gave rise to sociology was not refractory to the philosophical conceptions and political ideals of its founders, since important historical events that occurred throughout the 19th century had an impact on the studies that were being elaborated, serving as a mainstay for the formulation of research problems. In addition to influencing the intellectual debate on the role or contribution of the nascent social science to the society of the time². There is no doubt that the driving force of these events is the development of capitalism that has become the hegemonic economic and social system, definitively burying the old feudal mode of production and the social order that represented it. The transition from feudalism to capitalism was a long-term historical event that spanned

² In fact, the intellectual debate on the relevance of sociology is a constitutive part of its development, covering its foundation and consolidation phases with its insertion in the academic sphere and in the educational system as a school subject. In Brazil, where the teaching of sociology has a precarious historical trajectory due to the inconsistency of its presence in the curriculum of basic education, the debate on the importance of this discipline remains an essential task for the strengthening of institutional identity and professional career. of sociologists.

centuries, but its development was not simultaneous within the European continent, some countries were ahead. England witnessed the rise of the bourgeoisie to power after the outbreak of the 1640 Revolution that ensured the full development of capitalism in that island country; and it was also in England that another important event began in the second half of the 18th century; the industrial revolution that associated work and science, triggering a boom of inventions and technical improvements, mainly in the sectors of metallurgy and mining, steam engines and factory machinery, which resulted in a vertiginous expansion of industrial production (IGLÉSIAS, 1986).

While England was at the forefront of modernity, some countries on the continent resisted change; in general they wanted to develop the industry as long as it did not shake up the traditional social order; the most emblematic case is that of France, which represented the most powerful absolutist monarchy on the continent and a stronghold of the Ancien Régime in the West, but in frank decline at the end of the 18th century. The French Revolution that broke out in 1789 marked the defeat of the feudal nobility in that country, but the dominance of the bourgeoisie took a long time to consolidate due to the radicalization between the revolutionary political factions and the restoration movement. Even countries that did not face civil wars and revolutions were not able to prevent the advance of the capitalist system; in these cases, however, the transition took place slowly through alliances between strata of the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie and the landed classes organically linked to the old social order; this type of conciliatory transition, also called the conservative path, made it possible to accommodate the divergent interests of the ruling classes and lead these countries towards modernity (MOORE, 1967).

Whether by revolutionary or conservative means, the structural transformation of countries from predominantly agrarian economies into urban industrial societies under the aegis of the capitalist system shook the basic political-philosophical ideals of the bourgeois revolutionary project of cohesion and social harmony in the face of social antagonisms that manifested themselves in constant crises and social conflicts whose roots were rooted in the contradiction involving the capital-labor relationship. Capitalist relations of production had penetrated the countryside well before industrial urban development but gained strong momentum after the advance of the factory system, resulting in changes in the land tenure structure and gradually altering the functioning of agrarian properties. After adapting to the capitalist system and business methods, agricultural production became more rational, gained in productivity and profitability and began to require less manpower. The countryside was submitted to the interests of the city and little by little agricultural production, which was

rudimentary and based on self-consumption, adapted to the growing consumption needs of urban populations, causing a drastic decrease in subsistence crops and small farms, displacement, expropriation and; finally, the expulsion of the peasants who had the only alternative to migrate to the cities. The migratory exodus caused the disordered population growth of cities, causing hunger, poverty, delinquency and criminality, making densely populated urban regions present a permanent picture of tensions and social conflicts. The industry was unable to absorb as much labor at its disposal and those who found work in the factories were forced to face grueling and long working hours, extreme unhealthy conditions and degrading wages. Guided by the principles of *laissez-faire*³ liberalism, capitalism revealed its exclusionary logic: in this system, ties of servitude had disappeared and the serf had become a legally free worker, but his labor power was considered a commodity and the working class, the working class, experienced in the factories the phase of overexploitation of capital that generated inhumane conditions of existence.

In the year 1848 continental Europe was shaken by a wave of workers' revolt that quickly gained strength acquiring a destabilizing political potential. A renowned historian of the period called the uprising of the oppressed masses the spring of the peoples; the apex of a remarkable historical moment of political protagonism of the working class that fought against the oppression of capital (HOBSBAWM, 1982). In a few months the revolt of the working classes spread, affecting both developed and backward regions; although it was ephemeral for its duration, organized workers managed to overthrow several local governments until the revolts were quelled by state repression. The following year the popular struggles against the capitalist system were exhausted; in some countries the threat of proletarian revolution remained alive for some years; however, at the continental level, especially in more industrialized societies, organized workers' movements abandoned radicalism. Capitalism triumphed and the threat of social revolution disappeared from the political scene after 1850.

It was in this historical context characterized by profound transformations of continental scope, described in a synthetic way in the preceding paragraphs, that the axes that guided the first scientific studies of society were outlined. The first axis, undoubtedly the most important, is based on the social changes resulting from the transition, consolidation and crisis of the capitalist and industrial society that marked the history of the 19th century. A common aspect shared by social theorists of the time was the interest in globally interpreting

³ Term that means “let it be done” and refers to the political ideology of liberalism that defends the principle of free competition and non-state intervention..

that historical moment strained by the forces of progress; on the one hand, and by violence and social conflict, on the other. The second axis is based on a certain conception of scientific knowledge that guided a good part of sociological research, basically involved an effort to determine the object of study and also the investigation methods that would be used by the new science. The third axis sustains the debate around the contributions of sociology to modern society and involved the discussion about the role or function that the new science would have to play in that new world that aroused fascination and disturbance.

The intellectual trajectory of Augusto Comte

Isidore Auguste Marie François Xavier Comte, known as Auguste Comte, was born in Montpellier, France, on 19 January 1798 and died on 5 September 1857. In 1814, at the age of 16, Auguste Comte entered the Polytechnic School of Paris, former Central School of Public Works; prestigious public educational institution founded in 1794 by the revolutionary government of the time and dedicated to scientific formation of excellence aimed at the formation of technical staff to meet the growing demand of public administration and industry. Comte spent two years at the institution and in this short period he enjoyed a stimulating scientific and intellectual environment that had a decisive influence on his education and intellectual work. In contact with scientists and colleagues from the Polytechnic, he cultivated an enormous interest in the natural sciences and in the social changes that were taking place in his time and sought to study society in order to understand social phenomena and problems, especially in the context of French society, which was going through a critical moment of social disorder and anarchy after the outbreak of the great revolution.

Despite several attempts, Comte was unable to obtain a professorship through public competitions, so he led a life of “*intelligentsia sans attaches*”⁴ facing penury and material difficulties throughout his life. He worked for a brief period at the Polytechnic School as an admissions examiner and then went on to teach private classes, lectures and courses offered to the community as a means of obtaining financial income in addition to retributions for collaborating with newspapers and donations from collaborators; it was in this way that he managed to spread his ideas and elaborate his studies (TACUSSEL, 1999). His works are encyclopedic in scope, being formed by the following studies: “Scientific work plan to

⁴ The expression “*intelligentsia sans attachés*” means independent intellectual and has a pejorative meaning when indicating the intellectual who does not have material conditions..

reorganize society”⁵, “Social philosophy booklets”, “Positive philosophy course”⁶, “Discourse on the positive spirit”, “Discourse on the whole of positivism”, “Positivist Catechism”⁷, “System of Positive Politics”, “Appeal to Conservatives”, and “Subjective Synthesis”.

Positivism and social physics

The central ideas that provided the basis for Auguste Comte's sociological thought come from his contact with works by intellectuals and scientists covering the areas of politics, economics, history, medicine, astronomy, biology, physics and mathematics; aligned with the Enlightenment tradition, an intellectual movement that emerged in the 18th century that exalted and spread the principles of rationalism and the supremacy of science as the basis for the progress of humanity. The prestige of rationalism and scientific knowledge was so dominant at that time that it subordinated philosophical thought to science, pure philosophy lost supporters and importance being restricted to a few and unimpressive academic circles and the only philosophical works that became influential were those that were based on in scientific knowledge. It was in this intellectual context that Comte developed a philosophical system called positivism which, together with empiricism that originated in England at the initiative of the British philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill, formed the dominant philosophical currents in 19th century Western Europe.

Positivism aimed to stimulate the general and universal progress of humanity through intervention in all spheres of social life from a project of scientific management of society, but before that it would be necessary to create a science dedicated to the study of society. Comte found that the branches of scientific knowledge that constituted the natural sciences had reached the stage that he conceptualized as positive, however there was a gap that should be filled by a new science that would deal with the study of society, this science received two names: Sociology and Social Physics. Social physics would be in charge of the study of social phenomena, adopting the same methodological procedures of the natural sciences that study their respective research objects with objectivity through observation, experimentation and comparison to reveal the general laws that govern such phenomena.

⁵ Published at the time when Comte was working as secretary to the philosopher Claude-Henry Rouvroy, Count Saint Simon. As he disagreed with the proposal for social reform devised by Saint Simon, Comte moved away from him and re-edited the aforementioned work in 1824 with some changes and a new title: Positive Policy System.

⁶ Considered the most important work because it presents the theoretical-philosophical foundations of positivism, it was published in six volumes from 1830 onwards.

⁷ Published in 1852, it details the foundations of the project of a religion renewed under the principles of reason, as part of the positivist project of rebuilding the collective consensus for the consolidation of the social order..

Objectivity is a central element of the intellectual debate in the constitution phase of sociology because it is related to the issue of scientific neutrality. Comte feared that interference with value judgments on the part of those dedicated to the study of social phenomena would harm the scientificity of sociological research, he stressed that the analyzes carried out by the various branches of scientific knowledge that make up the natural sciences do not suffer interference from conscience and convictions scientists, because research in the field of physics, astronomy, biology, chemistry; among others, they are based on the factual observation of phenomena that exist independently of the opinions and value judgments of researchers. He also stated that the researcher who studies social phenomena should not regard them as objects of admiration or criticism and should move away from any absolute notion of good or evil. Comte considered sociology a natural science, so the thesis of analytical and methodological unity had coherence; he assimilated the prevailing scientific paradigm because the natural sciences were progressing in such a way that it would be inconceivable for an intellectual immersed in that scientific culture to propose the creation of a science that would despise the methodological scheme of the natural sciences, considered the only valid scientific method⁸ (COMTE, 1978, p. 73-103). The influence of the natural sciences on sociology was not restricted to methodology, the conceptual framework that make up Comte's philosophical and theoretical writings is based on a pattern of language and the use of words extracted from physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy; terms such as dynamics, statics, evolution, general laws, anatomy, and physiology exemplify the remarkable strength and prestige of the natural sciences.

Evolutionary paradigm and the law of the three states

In the midst of the philosophical orientations that guided the sociological thought of Auguste Comte, the contributions of the French philosopher and mathematician Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat (1743-1794), known as Marquis de Condorcet, stand out. In his famous work *“Esboço de um quadro histórico do espírito humano”* (Sketch of a historical picture of the human spirit), published posthumously in 1795, Condorcet explained a theory of human progress from an evolutionary perspective considering three fundamental premises: a) progress resulted from the improvement and accumulation of knowledge human throughout history; b) progress is a linear, inexorable and spontaneous historical phenomenon governed

⁸ The historical method was incorporated into sociology because certain social phenomena can only be properly studied by observing the historical movement of societies..

by laws of evolution; and finally, c) progress is a harbinger of a better future. Comte deepened the analysis of these premises in the so-called Law of the Three States by elaborating a typology of the cognitive capacities of the human intellect throughout history, highlighting three sequential stages: theological, metaphysical and positive (COMTE, 1830-42, p. 16-21).

The theological stage explains the phenomena of reality through the actions of mystical entities personified in beings and objects of nature and deities to understand the causes and purposes of the phenomena. The metaphysical stage explains the phenomena of reality by the action of hidden forces of nature and abstract entities to understand the intrinsic essence of the phenomena. In the positive state, rationality predominates and the analyzes of the phenomena of physical or social reality are based on observations, comparisons and experiments. The positive state recognizes that scientific knowledge is incapable of explaining the causes, purposes and essence of the phenomena studied and as an alternative to these restrictions, considered insurmountable, science limits itself to unveiling the laws underlying the phenomena to explain how they occur and how they link to each other. The positive stage is considered the highest stage in the evolution of intellect, intelligence and the human spirit.

Table 1 – Taxonomy of the Law of Three States

Stages of thought	Different shapes	Basic characteristics	Prevailing thought	Intellectual Domain	Social Structure	Basis of social integration
Theological [Fictitious- Imaginative]	Fetishism	Phenomena of reality are explained by the action of beings personified in objects of nature or religious deities.	Claims absolute knowledge [essence and cause of phenomena]	Priests	Kinship	Coercive theocratic-military power to maintain social order
	Polytheism					
	Monotheism					
Metaphysical [Abstract- Argumentative]		Phenomena of reality are explained by the action of occult forces of nature or abstract entities.		Philosophers	Society	Civil authority and legal system for social control functions.
Positive [Scientific- Observational]		Phenomena of physical and social reality are explained through empirical observation and experiments.	Claims relative knowledge [how phenomena occur, their uniform, invariable, general and particular laws]	Scientists	Industrial Society	Bureaucratic state, civil authority and laws regulate social relations.

Source: Devised by the author

The law of three states is not just about classifying knowledge and describing the attributes of modern science; it is considered the most basic law of the organization of human societies and reveals the intrinsic correspondence between each phase of human knowledge and the social arrangements that are characteristic of it; this means that each evolutionary phase of the human intellect is adjusted to a certain type of social organization. Each evolutionary stage of society creates conditions for the next stage, but for this to happen it is necessary that each stage reaches its full development; therefore, evolution depends on a cumulative process; the three successive stages explain the natural stages and evolutionary tendencies of humanity.

The theoretical assumptions of the law of the three states provided support for the positivist conception that industrial and scientific society was a natural consequence of social evolution and had reached the primacy of the positive stage. The positive stage appeared about two centuries ago in an incipient way and the sciences gradually improved, these became positive following the sequence of a natural order that depended on the complexity of the phenomena studied by each branch of scientific knowledge, starting from the simplest phenomena to the most complex phenomena (COMTE, 1978, p. 57-60); Thus, sociology was only able to establish itself as a science in the 19th century due to the emergence of a new and more complex type of social organization⁹.

Social statics and dynamics

The sociological theory developed by Auguste Comte focused on the analysis of the general laws that govern social phenomena and these phenomena were classified based on their social functions so that they could be grouped into two basic categories: social statics and social dynamics (COMTE, 1978, pp. 104-140). Statics and dynamics represented the social forces that ensure the existence of society, providing stability to the set of social relations and stimulating the evolutionary transformation of social organization. Statics mirrors the social order and is governed by the laws of coexistence, dynamics represents progress and is governed by the laws of succession. Social statics keep society intact and

⁹ The evolution of human intelligence is a cumulative process based on the permanent effort of the mind to explain the phenomena of reality. When applied to the evolution of scientific knowledge, this theoretical perspective establishes a classification between the progress achieved based on the criteria of decreasing generality and increasing complexity of the observed phenomena. Inorganic sciences such as astronomy, physics and chemistry reached the positive stage first and only then could the organic sciences become positive, first biology and then physiology, because organic phenomena are considered more complex than inorganic ones. This thesis argues that sociology emerged last because social phenomena are more complex to be analyzed..

cohesive by providing the support base for sociability and the reproduction of social relations, this occurs through the existence of institutions such as the family, laws, customs, economic activity, government. The forces of social statics are subjective and are crystallized in moral bonds, in feelings of solidarity and cooperation and in shared beliefs, forming a collective consensus. The greater internal differentiation of a social organization implies a growing increase in social institutions; therefore, the challenges regarding integration will also be greater, as the weakening of the sense of functional interdependence and of the vision of the whole can provoke a loosening of the ties and moral ties, compromising what Comte calls the aggregate or general spirit¹⁰.

Social dynamics, on the other hand, is dedicated to the analysis of the evolutionary transformation of society; that is, it is the study of the laws that govern the transition between evolutionary stages. To unveil and understand these laws, Comte used the historical method and followed the movement of societies, observing the trends of changes and social transformations operated in a certain period. As established by the law of the three states, the evolution of society was considered a spontaneous and inevitable process that would take place by itself; however, the study of social dynamics is not able to explain the initial force or impulse that would trigger changes and the evolutionary transformation of society. Comte presents a hypothesis associated with the emergence of social contradictions involving divergences of thought, ideas and basic values that would end up shaking the collective consensus and the very organic unity of society. So, the main factor of social disaggregation would be related to the divergences of thoughts that would shake the unity of society. Although this hypothesis contributed to the understanding of social changes, it was not enough to formulate a general sociological theory of the revolution; even so, the theory of social dynamics shed light on the processes of transition of the social order that would end up becoming an important object of study for sociology (TARDEL, 1990).

Sociology and social intervention

As the 19th century progresses, the European intellectuals' restlessness grows in the face of the crisis and societal conflicts that affected the countries that were modernizing and for the supporters of positivism, this situation needed to be understood sociologically, because if progress was an unequivocal harbinger of a better future the crises seemed to go against this

¹⁰ Comte supported the thesis that a social system that is incapable of carrying out the essential tasks of integration between the component parts that form the structure of society becomes susceptible to the emergence of pathological states of crises that can threaten the stability of the social order..

social security system. Within the scope of industrial society, science had acquired the ability to foster development and progress because technological advances were being applied to all areas of labor activity; this pragmatic conception of science presupposed an articulation between theory and practice; thus, it is perfectly understandable that sociology should not be a purely analytical science guided by the curiosity to understand social phenomena by limiting itself to the indefinite accumulation of theoretical knowledge; its task was to collaborate with the improvement of industrial and scientific society through social reforms capable of abbreviating the crisis and pacifying society; in Comte's words “it was necessary to know in order to act; understand to reorganize” (COMTE, 1978, p. 64, our translation).

The idea of social intervention advocated by Comte is not original to his sociological thinking because in that historical context other social thinkers had the same intention, the fundamental difference being that the positivist project of reorganization of society had scientific bases and involved a wide range of social reforms. France was placed at the center of positivists' concerns because the crisis of that society was considered pathological and of long duration as a result of the continuity of societal conflicts that hampered efforts to consolidate the new social system. Comte stated that there was a stationary situation of mismanagement (COMTE, 1844, p. 168) and made a distinction between “critical direction” and “organic direction” of society, the first being the tendency of the formation of hostile political oppositions that would confront in a directly and permanently to the new social order and the established government; the second would be the action aimed at the reorganization of society aiming at the full establishment of the positivist order (COMTE, 1978, p. 63). In the work entitled *Appeal to the Conservatives*, published in 1855, Comte observes that the organic direction of French society could be made viable if the governing party¹¹ signed a political alliance with the moderate parties of the left and right in favor of a political pact for development of the nation; however, the need to reorganize French society went far beyond this task. The crisis had broader dimensions, as it was the consequence of a process of incomplete transition with prevalence of a period of disorganization-reorganization that Comte predicted would be momentary because the old social institutions that maintained social cohesion had disappeared and new social institutions had not yet emerged to replace them; Based on this diagnosis, the social reorganization project aimed to accelerate the transition to the modern world in order to consolidate the new social organization.

¹¹ Comte considered each and every government to be conservative because all political groups that conquer state power become defenders of the status quo; In this sense, the title of this work refers to the ruling political party.

It was an ambitious task, but before realizing it, the positivists had to face the theoretical challenges imposed by the ideological currents that saw in the rupture of the bourgeois social order the solution to the general crisis of capitalist and industrial society. In that context, the core of the political-ideological conflict revolved around the activity of capitalist industry, which had substantially modified the forms of productive organization of work through the intensive use of technical-scientific knowledge, causing industrial production to generate enormous surpluses that contributed to the growth of the material wealth of European societies; however, the contradictions related to the production of this wealth and its distribution made these societies extremely conflictive (FORTE, 2008).

In France, the political-ideological struggles were more intense and involved three divergent political forces: left-wing radicals, right-wing conservatives and liberals. Right-wing conservatives were retrograde, representing the old regime and society organized on the hierarchical principles of pre-1789 estates and traditions; they were in frank decline, as theological thought and forms of social organization based on the feudal order and the monarchical regime had been undermined by the great revolution; however, the remaining groups resisted the nascent industrial society. Comte considered null the possibility of a return to the past as advocated by the retrogrades, since this objective contradicted the evolutionary trend of the scientific-industrial society in course; therefore, this political alternative was unfeasible; however, he recognizes that intellectuals aligned with this ideological current were right in claiming that the rapid advance of secularization destroyed important social institutions that supported social order and cohesion, making modern society more prone to political instability and social anomie. The criticism against modernity was closely related to the theory of social statics and highlighted the problem of social integration in the face of the difficulties of adaptation and adjustment of individuals to the new social order and the elements that gave basic support to collective life and some meaning to human existence in society, such as morality and religion on which hierarchy, solidarity and social consensus were based in the social organizations that preceded industrial society.

The positivists had a solution to the problem of the absence of moral unity and collective consensus, and the answer included an intellectual reform capable of modifying beliefs and mentalities. This social engineering is based on the interpretations that Comte was a progressive-conservative intellectual, admirer of scientific-industrial social progress and sympathetic to the organic social cohesion characteristic of medieval societies. However, Comte never proposed the rehabilitation of the old medieval social institutions to build a symbiotic social order articulating the modern and the archaic; because he understood that this

solution would be unfeasible in the context of modernity because the predominance of rational thought tended to destroy the metaphysical and theological forms of structuring the collective consensus; as an alternative, he proposed the establishment of a universal morality and religion, supported by science and capable of overcoming the ethical and moral particularisms where political-ideological conflicts and intellectual anarchy were rooted.

The radicals of the left were supporters of socialism, they maintained the thesis that the capitalist economy was based on the logic of obtaining profit and permanent accumulation of wealth by the owners of the means of production through the increasing exploitation of wage workers; they evaluated that the capitalist system was a generator of poverty and social inequalities, even though it was capable of producing material abundance at levels never seen in the history of humanity; they saw the conciliation of interests between workers and industrialists as improbable and the abolition of private property and class differences as the only way to build an egalitarian and socially just society. Comte categorically opposed the ideologies that these groups defended, considering them utopian and unrealizable because they contradicted the natural laws that govern social evolution. Regarding the private ownership of the means of production, Comte stressed that the accumulation of capital and its ability to generate surpluses made possible the existence and development of material civilization, benefiting the whole community so that future generations could enjoy a material base without the need of a constant restart. Nevertheless, he pointed out that wealth concentrated in the form of capitals or property could not be unrestricted, as there are socially established limits due to the fact that this wealth is the product of collective efforts; therefore, its use should have a social meaning (TARDEL, 1990).

Liberals, unlike radicals and conservatives, were situationists and aligned themselves with the defense of the status quo and the bourgeois order, defending the inviolability of private property in the means of production and the unrestricted freedom of economic agents as the modus operandi of industrial productive and commercial activities, supported the thesis that the generation of wealth essentially depended on market forces based on free competition between producers and traders and on obtaining profit as a fundamental incentive for entrepreneurial activity; principles that were unified in the doctrine of economic liberalism and in the hegemonic theses of political economy. Comte accepted some aspects of the doctrine of economic liberalism as he considered them essential to industrial activity, but he believed that the economic rationality underlying the relations of production and reproduction of capital was the result of a moral distortion of the economic system and, as a solution, he

proposed the construction of a moral humanist movement that would abolish class conflicts and selfishness.

Final considerations

The constitution of sociology was influenced by the broader historical process of transition to the modern world with the development of capitalist industrial society. The first decades of the 19th century in Europe were marked by social crises, political instability and threats of revolution; phenomena that influenced the intellectual debate, stimulating the elaboration of the first social theories. Augusto Comte dedicated his life to intellectual work and materialized the ideal of being a thinker and social reformer, uniting theory and practice in a way that his sociological studies served as a general guideline for a political-ideological project for the reorganization of society. The problem of morality runs through the sociological thought of Augusto Comte in such a way that social progress depended on the execution of a project of reorganization of society that had as a basic element the construction of new moral values and a positive religion that would replace God with the notion of humanity and would serve to foster feelings of brotherhood and understanding among men. Comte found that in the context of modern society, markedly rational and secular, respect for the norms of coexistence and adherence to shared moral precepts and values would depend on institutional mechanisms of socialization capable of reorganizing beliefs and customs and transmitting new values; hence their confidence in pedagogical actions as instruments for raising awareness among individuals. He created voluntary membership associations that offered free courses for popular instruction aimed at changing mentalities; and the supporters of positivism followed the same path by founding similar associations in several western countries under the name of “positivist societies” with the aim of disseminating positivist philosophy and proposals for social reform and reorganization to the people.

Social theories in general have limitations and weaknesses, but these deficiencies become a stimulus for continuous improvement of sociological knowledge. In the phase of constitution of sociology there was no accumulated theoretical knowledge, consequently the first analyzes of society and social phenomena were more susceptible to inconsistencies. Perhaps one of the most disconcerting aspects of Auguste Comte's social theory has to do with his conception of the objectivity of sociological knowledge which, being grounded in the natural sciences, resulted in a precarious notion of ideological neutrality; above all around theoretical formulations on order and progress, central elements of positivist philosophy and

the basis of the political project for the reorganization of society. For positivists, order and progress needed to be reconciled so that modern society could achieve harmony and stability; the social order rests on the existence of a collective consensus that manifests itself in the acceptance of certain norms of a general character without which society cannot exist; progress is the perfecting of order. This assumption has been the subject of much criticism for being ambivalent and teleological and for having served as a justification for the positivist conception of the need for conformity and consensus for considering any form of social conflict a phenomenon that is deleterious to society.

REFERENCES

- ARON, R. **As etapas do pensamento sociológico**. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1997.
- COMTE, A. *In: Os Pensadores*. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1978.
- FORTE, M. A. Comte: La utopia del orden. **Revista Conflito Social**, Buenos Aires, v. 1 n. 00, p. 7-23, nov. 2008.
- HOBBSAWM, E. **A Era do Capital**. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1982.
- IGLÉSIAS, F. **A revolução industrial**. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1986.
- MOORE, B. **As origens sociais da ditadura e da democracia**: senhores e camponeses na construção do mundo moderno. Lisboa: Edições Cosmos, 1967.
- TACUSSEL, P. Augusto Comte: a obra vivida. **Revista Logos**, Rio de Janeiro, v. 6, n. 2, p. 16-21, nov. 1999.
- TARDEL, M. I. Recordando a Comte. **Revista de Sociologia**, Santiago de Chile, n. 5, p. 9-18, jan. 1990.
- TORRES, M. A. El orden social in el pensamiento de Comte. **Em Tese**, Florianópolis, v. 7, n. 2, p. 259-279, jul./dez. 2020.
- VEGA, M. L. La filosofía política de Comte y su proyecto social. **Ideas y Valores**, Bogota, v. 40, n. 85, p. 71-90, ago. 1991.

How to reference this article

CANCIAN, R. Auguste Comte revisited: positivism, sociological theory and social intervention. **Rev. Sem Aspas**, Araraquara, v. 10, n. 00, e021015, Jan./Dec. 2021. e-ISSN: 2358-4238. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29373/sas.v10i00.15744>

Submitted: 27/09/2021

Required revisions: 20/10/11

Approved: 18/11/2021

Published: 29/12/2021