Module 7  Key Thinkers

Lecture 36
Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer

The thoughts of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who coined the term sociology, while dated and riddled with weaknesses, continue in many ways to be important to contemporary sociology. First and foremost, Comte's positivism — the search for invariant laws governing the social and natural worlds — has influenced profoundly the ways in which sociologists have conducted sociological inquiry. Comte argued that sociologists (and other scholars), through theory, speculation, and empirical research, could create a realist science that would accurately "copy" or represent the way things actually are in the world. Furthermore, Comte argued that sociology could become a "social physics" — i.e., a social science on a par with the most positivistic of sciences, physics. Comte believed that sociology would eventually occupy the very pinnacle of a hierarchy of sciences. Comte also identified four methods of sociology. To this day, in their inquiries sociologists continue to use the methods of observation, experimentation, comparison, and historical research. While Comte did write about methods of research, he most often engaged in speculation or theorizing in order to attempt to discover invariant laws of the social world.

Comte's famed "law of the three stages" is an example of his search for invariant laws governing the social world. Comte argued that the human mind, individual human beings, all knowledge, and world history develop through three successive stages. The theological stage is dominated by a search for the essential nature of things, and people come to believe that all phenomena are created and influenced by gods and supernatural forces. Monotheism is the ultimate belief of the theological stage. The metaphysical stage is a transitional stage in which mysterious, abstract forces (e.g., nature) replace supernatural forces as the powers that explain the workings of the world. The positivist stage is the last and highest stage in Comte's work. In this stage, people search for invariant laws that govern all of the phenomena of the world.

Comte also used the term positivism in a second sense; that is, as a force that could counter the negativism of his times. In Comte's view, most of Western Europe was mired in political and moral disorder that was a consequence of the French Revolution of 1789. Positivism, in Comte's philosophy, would bring order and progress to the European crisis of ideas. Comte's philosophical idealism thus separates his views from those of his contemporary Karl Marx (1818-1883), who was a materialist.

Comte's Sociology

Comte separated social statics from social dynamics. Social statics are concerned with the ways in which the parts of a social system (social structures) interact with one another, as well as the functional relationships between the parts and to the social system as a whole. Comte therefore focused his social statics on the individual, as well as such collective phenomena as the family, religion, language, and the division of labour.
Comte placed greater emphasis on the study of social dynamics, or social change. His theory of social dynamics is founded on the law of the three stages; i.e., the evolution of society is based on the evolution of mind through the theological, metaphysical, and positivist stages. He saw social dynamics as a process of progressive evolution in which people become cumulatively more intelligent and in which altruism eventually triumphs over egoism. This process is one that people can modify or accelerate, but in the end the laws of progressive development dictate the development of society. Comte's research on social evolution focused on Western Europe, which he viewed as the most highly developed part of the world during his times.

**Theory and Practice and Comte's Vision of the Future**

Comte believed that positivism could both advance science (theory) and change the ways people live their lives (practice). He argued that the upper classes of his time were far too conservative to advocate positivistic change. Women and the members of the working class, however, were well situated to advocate positivism and help to implement its programs of change. Comte viewed the working class as agents of positivistic change because of their ties of affection to their families, respect for authority, exposure to misery, and propensity for self-sacrifice. Comte thought of his positivism as a counter-force against communism, although the latter could provide a foundation for the former.

Comte thought that women would support his positivist program for change largely because women, in his view, were more affectionate, altruistic, and feeling than men. He tended to view men as superior in intellectual and practical matters, and thus better suited to planning and supervising change, while women are better suited to moral matters. Comte did not believe in the equality of the sexes. He saw himself and his protégés as the "priests of humanity" who would oversee the religion of positivism.

Some of Comte's most amusing ideas are found in his plans for the future. Comte envisioned a positivist calendar, public holidays, and temples. He elaborated a plan for his positivist society that included important roles for bankers and industrialists, positivist priests, merchants, manufacturers, and farmers. Comte also envisioned a positivist library of 100 books — titles that he personally selected. He argued that reading other works would contaminate the minds of the people. He also planned to restructure the family to include a father, mother, three children, and paternal grandparents.

**Comte's Positive Contributions and Weaknesses**

Ritzer and Goodman identify eight positive contributions that Comte made to sociology:

- Comte coined the term "sociology" and may be viewed as its founder.
- Comte thought of sociology as a positivistic science.
- He elaborated four methods of sociology.
- He distinguished social statics from social dynamics.
- He was a macrosociologist.
- He viewed social structures as taming individual egoism.
• He offered a dialectical view of structural change.
• He attempted to integrate theory and practice.

Ritzer and Goodman also identify ten basic weaknesses of Comte's work:

• Comte's thought was distorted by his own experiences in life.
• He was out of touch with the real world.
• He was out of touch with other thinkers of his times.
• His empirical work is laughable, and his theoretical work far too generalized.
• His work is only marginally sociological.
• He made no original contributions to sociology.
• His sociology was primitive in its organicism — i.e., he crudely viewed society in terms of the workings of the human body.
• Comte heavy-handedly imposed his theoretical frameworks on the data he was analyzing.
• His self-conceit led him to make many ridiculous pronouncements and blunders.
• His positivist religion is strangely similar to Catholicism, which casts doubt on his scientific intentions.
• His plans for the future appear totalitarian and bizarre.

Although the sociological theory of Herbert Spencer (1820-1902) has but a small following today, his work was quite popular during his lifetime, particularly in America. Spencer's theory of society does represent an advance over Comtian theory, even though Spencer, like Comte, characterized himself as a positivist and derived his concepts of structure and function from the field of biology. Spencer used the Comtian terms of social statics and social dynamics, but not in a descriptive way as Comte did to refer to all types of societies, but rather in a normative way to describe his version of the future ideal society. Furthermore, Spencer was more interested in studying the progress of the external world or objectivity, while Comte focused more on the subjective nature of the progress of human conceptions. Finally, there are important political differences between Spencer and Comte. Spencer had little regard for centralized political control and believed that the government should allow individuals the maximum freedom to pursue their private interests. Comte, on the other hand, desired society to be led by the high priests of positivist religion.

**Spencer's Evolutionary Theory and Sociology**

Spencer defined sociology as the study of societal evolution and believed that the ultimate goal of societal evolution is complete harmony and happiness. Spencer's theory of evolutionary change is built upon three basic principles: integration, differentiation, and definiteness. Spencer argued that homogenous phenomena are inherently unstable, which makes them subject to constant fluctuations. These fluctuations force homogeneous systems to differentiate, which results in greater multiformity. In other words, homogeneous systems grow to become heterogeneous.

Spencer focused much of his energy on trying to legitimize sociology as a scientific discipline. He argued that laypeople might think they deal with the same issues as sociologists do; however, they are not trained to adequately comprehend these issues. One of
the ways that Spencer believed sociology could become more legitimate was for sociologists to study other disciplines, especially biology and psychology. Biology could be linked to sociology through the search for the basic "laws of life," understanding society as a "living body" and focusing on human beings as the starting point of sociological inquiries. Psychology is useful to sociology because it helps to show that emotions or sentiments are linked to social action. According to Spencer, individuals are the source of all social phenomena, and the motives of individuals are key to understanding society as a whole.

**Spencer's Methodology**

Spencer realized that studying social phenomena was inherently different from studying natural phenomena; therefore, sociology could not simply imitate the methods used by biologists. Spencer also argued that the psychological method of introspection was ill-suited to studying objective social facts and processes. Sociologists are also faced with the methodological problem of how to keep their own bias in check and gather and report trustworthy data. Spencer advocated a "value free" methodological approach for sociology and cautioned sociologists to be aware of emotional biases that might influence their work, including educational, patriotic, class, political, and theological biases. Spencer was committed to empirical research and employed a comparative-historical methodology in much of his work.

**The Evolution of Society**

As stated above, Spencer's general theory of social evolution involves the progress of society towards integration, heterogeneity, and definiteness. It also includes a fourth dimension, the increasing coherence of social groups. Social groups, according to Spencer, strive towards greater harmony and cooperation through the division of labour and the state. It is important to note the Spencer does not develop a linear theory of social evolution; he acknowledges that dissolution or no change at all may occur at any given moment. Spencer was a social realist in that he viewed society as an entity in and of itself — thus, the whole of society can live on even if its component parts die. As society grows, it becomes more complex and differentiated. Structures accompany this growth, which function to regulate external concerns like military activities and sustain internal issues like economic activities. Distributing systems eventually emerge that function to help link together regulative and sustaining structures.

Spencer uses his evolutionary theory to trace the movement from simple to compounded societies and from militant to industrial societies. Society evolves from the compounding and recompounding of social groups. It also evolves from military societies dominated by conflict and a coercive regulative system to industrial societies characterized by harmony and a sustaining system of decentralized rule. Spencer thought the society that he was living in was a "hybrid society," exhibiting traits of both military and industrial societies. Although he ultimately hoped society in general would progress towards a state of industry, he recognized that the regression to a militant state was possible.
Ethics and Politics

Spencer argued that individuals were the source of moral law in a given society, but that God ultimately determined good and evil. Evil itself, according to Spencer, was a result of nonadaptation to external conditions, and that in a perfectly evolved society it would disappear. Spencer's politics can be best described as libertarian—he saw a limited role for state intervention in everyday affairs, especially economic activities. Spencer also opposed state-administered charity, education, and even basic services like garbage removal. Following his doctrine of the survival of the fittest, Spencer even opposed private philanthropy. State and private charity both helped to maintain "unhealthy" or unfit members of society, and this stifled present and future society from evolving to perfect harmony.

References


Questions

1. Explain the law of three stages as given by Auguste Comte.

2. Explain the co relation between theory and practice and Comte’s vision of the future.

3. What is Spencer’s evolutionary theory? How does he view evolution of the society?