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Michel Bourdeau, Mary Pickering, Warren Schmaus, eds. *Love, Order, and Progress: The Science, Philosophy, and Politics of Auguste Comte*. Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018. xiv + 402 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (hc.). ISBN 9780822945222.

Review by Jean Terrier, University of Basel/UniDistance, Switzerland.

Love, Order, and Progress is an edited volume dedicated to the thinking of the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857), the founder of positivism. Positivism was a secular philosophy that gave a central role to scientific knowledge. It entailed a philosophy of history, which aimed at offering a general explanation of human progress since the earliest times. At the social and political level, positivism took a stance in the debates of its time concerning the sweeping processes of industrialization, secularization, and nationalization, which were tearing European societies apart, resulting in a growing social “anarchy” (pp. 131, 237). To restore unity and order, positivism advocated a new unitary faith based on science and an objective political steering of society by scientists and economic experts.

In terms of systematic ambition, breadth of scope, and immediate impact on the ideas of the time, Comte’s philosophical system can easily be compared with those of better known 19th-century European thinkers, such as John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville or Karl Marx. Among the various differences between these authors and Comte, one stands out in particular: the latter’s intellectual influence, which was initially great, clearly receded after his death. It is no surprise, correspondingly, that the various contributions to this volume take great care, first, to document the initial success of Comte’s philosophical system, and second to explain the reasons of Comte’s later intellectual demise.

Edited by three of the most renowned scholars within the field of Comtean studies, *Love, Order, and Progress* is composed of two roughly equal parts, “Comte’s Philosophy of Science” and “Comte’s Social and Political Thought.” An introductory section on the significance of Auguste Comte and a conclusion on his legacy round up the volume. Far from being an eclectic collection of unrelated essays, *Love, Order, and Progress* is a coherent volume, with the ambition to offer a reference work on Comte.

In the fashion of intellectual history, the contributors to *Love, Order, and Progress* carefully document the place of Comte’s thinking in the philosophical context of the time. This volume shows who were the scientists and philosophers who most inspired or influenced Comte’s work. Among scientists, Comte drew on the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (pp. 105–106) and on Franz-Joseph Gall, the German founder of phrenology, of whom Comte was a “devoted,

though lucid, advocate” (p. 120). With regard to Comte’s social thinking, Saint-Simon, the French reformer and theoretician of industrial society, played an important role (pp. 12, 244–245), as did the philosopher of progress Condorcet (pp. 140–141, 237). Conservative political theorists such as Joseph de Maistre inspired Comte’s organicist vision of political order (pp. 165, 237). More originally, this volume discusses other influences on Comte, such as the one exerted by the Scottish Enlightenment, especially Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson (pp. 144–145). Comte appreciated their complex theory of human nature and their vision of historical progress, in which the division of labour was central. Comte’s knowledge of Kant is also discussed (p. 89).

Likewise, the influence of Comte on other thinkers is presented, in a few cases in much detail. In Britain, John Stuart Mill was an initial admirer (p. 5), but later took his distance (pp. 187–188). In France, the distinguished linguist Emile Littré campaigned ardently for positivism (p. 253). In the final chapter of the volume, Mary Pickering presents the global reception of Comte’s work. It is a historical *tour de force* that gives a clear picture of positivism as a global philosophy, comparable in this to Marxism, even though positivism had much less political impact and its success ended more quickly.

For the reader not acquainted with Comte’s thinking, it may be advisable to first read the introduction, followed by the general presentation of Comte’s philosophy of science offered by Warren Schmaus, and then Wernick’s discussion of Comte’s social and political thought. From these three contributions, the reader may gain a general sense of Comte’s philosophy, which consisted in connecting a systematic history of scientific progress with a theory of social change and a vision of political order.

Comte’s “law of the three states” is well known and can be considered as one of the most influential theories of human progress ever produced. According to positivism, human history unfolds in three stages, the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. The human mind had originally a tendency to explain natural events anthropomorphically, i.e. as the result of conscious intentions. At the beginning of human history, everything in nature (clouds, stars, flowers, animals and so on) was taken to possess agency. Later, the human mind moved beyond such “fetishistic” beliefs: it stopped seeing minds in every natural thing and started attributing natural phenomena to the action of supernatural persons, gods and goddesses (polytheism). Monotheism, with its idea of a single omniscient, ubiquitous and omnipotent god, corresponds to the later phase of the theological stage (p. 36).

With time, human beings eventually abandon their reliance on the notions of intention, purpose, essence and cause and begin to “seek explanations that appeal only to general laws governing the phenomena” (p. 34). This corresponds to the third and last stage of historical development, the “positive stage.” The belief in supernatural beings progressively fades away. As shown by Anastasios Brenner in his fine chapter on this topic, astronomy in particular could contribute to dispelling wrong beliefs in the supernatural. To help scientific knowledge replace theology, Comte himself gave lectures on astronomical science and published an introductory book on the subject (pp. 73–74).

Between the theological and the positive era there was, according to Comte, a transitional period, which he called “the metaphysical stage.” In it, not personal gods were idolized, but abstract principles such as the State, the Individual, or the Rights of Man (p. 135). It was an era of criticism, which strongly emphasized will—not the will of God, however, but the will of

individuals. This emphasis is clearly visible in the dominant political philosophies of the metaphysical era, most of all in the various theories of the social contract.

To each of the three historical stages of scientific progress, there corresponds a specific configuration of social institutions: “In the theological stage, military leaders and priests ruled. In the metaphysical stage, lawyers and metaphysicians dominated. In the positive stage, industrialists and positive philosophers would be in control” (p. 13). In any stable society, according to Comte, there is an equilibrium between two distinct forms of power: the physical power over bodies, on the one hand, and the spiritual power of minds, on the other (p. 174). This equilibrium can take different forms. In the West, Christianity introduced a clear separation of physical and spiritual power and a division of labour between the two. During the metaphysical stage, however, many philosophers and political thinkers denied that there was any need for a spiritual power (p. 173). They advocated a privatization of religion and a reinforcement of popular education with a view to foster freethinking and individual autonomy.

Comte was strongly opposed to such views. The positive stage of humankind was beginning, and Comte saw it as his duty to hasten progress so that it more quickly leads to order. In conservative fashion (pp. 173, 245) he did not believe that individuals could discover truth autonomously. The metaphysical emphasis on rights, liberty, and autonomous thinking may in the long run undermine the classical bases of social order, which Comte located in the family and religion. For this reason, he pleaded for a defence of the family as the “true social unit” (p. 148), argued in favour of a restoration of spiritual authority (Comte’s “lasting goal,” in the formulation of Michel Burdeau on p. 173), emphasized individual duties as opposed to rights, and advocated a surveillance and steering of public opinion by scientific experts. He was in favour of a cohesive non-democratic republic in which industrialists and bankers would be in charge of the state, with indirect but regular input from workers. Comte believed that in the industrial era the political and military functions would diminish in importance (p. 173), and the role of the economy grow—Comte, as a supporter of the industrial transformation, welcomed this development. He thought that social order would increasingly come to rest on the unity of opinions in society, as opposed to physical constraint. Scientists and scholars would be responsible for disseminating the correct doctrine, by education and persuasion alone and without using force (p. 175). In order to achieve this goal, a hierarchical organization of scientists was to be established. In the second part of his career, controversially, Comte decided to call this organization the “Positive Church” and its members “Priests.” He went as far as to explicitly plead for the establishment of a new religion, modeled after the Catholic Church (pp. 236–237), complete with dogma, rituals, celebrations, a clerical hierarchy and a pope—Comte himself. Not a personal God, but humanity as a whole, would be the idol of the new religion (pp. 225–231).

This volume does a fine job at characterizing Comte’s philosophy of history. Differently from Marxism, positivism is an intellectualistic theory that envisages historical progress as a step-by-step improvement of human knowledge (pp. 133, 152–153). Contrary to the cliché according to which philosophies of progress are not much more than a chauvinistic celebration of modern Western societies, Comte did not have the tendency to pass negative judgements on the past or on the non-Western world. He admired the medieval equilibrium (p. 237) and even tried to preserve some elements of fetishism in his political system, in particular the self-idolization of the community (p. 239). He also opposed colonization, advocating instead a peaceful global society, even though its leadership was to remain firmly located in Europe (pp. 183–184).

As Laurent Clauzade and Andrew Wernick make clear, Comte's thinking rested on a theory of human nature. Comte, classically, recognized the importance of intelligence as a central human faculty. However, he also strongly emphasized the role played by natural instincts, which he called the "affective functions" (p. 143). In opposition to the dominant spiritualist philosophy of his time, whose main representative was Victor Cousin (pp. 6, 29), Comte placed humanity firmly in nature and emphasized the strength of two selfish animal instincts (p. 97): the self-preservation instinct and the sexual instinct. Comte's conviction was that these instincts were the cause of egoistic behaviour and may destabilize society. In his early writings, Comte argued that intelligence could counteract the effects of the affective dimension (p. 143). In his later philosophy, he emphasized more and more the importance of another instinct, for which he coined the term "altruism." The roots of altruism can be found in the instinct to protect one's offspring, and then gradually expands into a tendency to defend one's mate, dependents, in-group members, and then allies. In the positive era, the division of labour expands and gives birth to a situation of general interdependence. In this context, altruism can take the upper hand over the natural tendency to act selfishly (pp. 105, 123, 153), and thus becomes the central ordering principle of social life. Correspondingly, "Vivre pour autrui" is one of the core mottoes of the positive Church (p. 224).

Some contributions to this volume are more general in nature, but most provide the reader with a detailed presentation of one specific aspect of Comte's work, such as his understanding of astronomy, biology, or social science. In a convincing chapter about gender, Jean E. Pedersen shows how Comte's theory of human nature divided humankind into two: males tend to be more egoistic and females more altruistic. This is the reason why, according to Comte, women come to play an ever-greater role as history unfolds (p. 204). Through their continuous interaction with women (wives, daughters, servants), men learn to tame their selfish instincts (p. 231). Pedersen argues, however, that in Comte's thinking "women remained subordinate to men at almost every turn even in this second system" (p. 211).

Comte's influence reached a peak towards the end of the publication process of his first multi-volume work, the *Course of Positive Philosophy* (1830–1842). However, his star began to decline with the publication of his second work, the *System of Positive Polity, or Treatise on Sociology, Instituting the Religion of Humanity* (1851–1854). In the mid-1840s, after an existential and sentimental crisis (pp. 15–17, 217), Comte started emphasizing more and more "the heart," i.e. emotions, and love in particular, as a central condition for the existence of a stable, cohesive social order (pp. 209–210). In view of this, as the editors indicate in the introduction, the classical association of positivism with a dry form of scientific rationalism is to be abandoned (p. 18). Many of the early admirers of Comte's philosophy, including Mill and Littré (pp. 165, 240), saw the new direction of positivism, with its emphasis on love and religion, as a betrayal of its supposed anti-religious and rationalistic initial ideals. Correspondingly, Comte's followers started to diminish in numbers. The contributors to this volume, however, adopt a new line of scholarship, which emphasizes the continuity of Comte's thinking (pp. 20, 213). In particular, as shown by Michel Bourdeau (p. 164), Comte formulated his project concerning the establishment of a new spiritual power as early as 1826.

When reading this book from cover to cover, one may come across a few technical passages. Some difficult terms are not defined, and a glossary has been not included in the volume. Similarly, some theories which inspired positivism or which positivism, on the opposite, took as a polemical target, are a bit too cursorily presented. The discussion of one crucial aspect of Comte's thinking,

namely his theory of human nature, appears rather late in the volume. As suggested above, it may help to read the chapters of *Love, Order, and Progress* in a different order.

In spite of these minor glitches, *Love, Order, and Progress* is an excellent reference work on Auguste Comte. Many aspects of positivism, as Wernick writes, are “hard[...] to digest, or indeed take seriously” (p. 217). It is one of the merits of this volume to look beyond this negative reputation in order to show the originality of Comte’s philosophy. The contributors show clearly Comte’s crucial role in the emergence and development of some scientific disciplines. He was among the first authors to develop a systematic history of science. He also prepared the ground for a sociological approach to scientific practices by showing the strong connection between scientific knowledge and social settings (p. 7). Several disciplines in which French scholars have played a leading role, such as the sociology of science (from Durkheim to Latour) and the history of science (Bachelard, Koyré, Canghulem, and others), can count Comte among their ancestors (pp. 8–9, 27–29).

Several contributions highlight Comte’s scientific method, which was far from being a simplistic form of empiricism: Comte believed that any scientific investigation must start with theoretical assumptions (pp. 41–45). In the social science, Comte offered interesting arguments against introspection, against methodological individualism, and for a holistic approach. This stance led him to polemicize against the nascent disciplines of psychology and economics (pp. 141–146). The contributors also emphasize Comte’s success in proposing new concepts: “altruism,” as noted above, is his coinage; it was through Comte that the term “sociology” (p. 128) became popular even though, as shown by Jacques Guilhaumou, Abbé Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès had already used it in the late 18th century.

Comte’s reflections on religion deserve a brief final comment. Comte believed (and this conviction was later taken up by Durkheim) that a society without religion could not be stable in the long run (pp. 219–220). Comte’s solution, which entailed the creation of a new religion from scratch, was unbelievably ambitious. However, such reflections acquire a new timeliness today, in view of the current debates on the post-secular (p. 248–249). A few contributions to the theory of religion, such as those by William James or Emile Durkheim, have met with a renewed interest in recent years. A rediscovery of at least some aspects of Comte’s work is not to be excluded. If this were to be the case, *Love, Order, and Progress* would be a useful and commendable guide for a new generation of readers.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Warren Schmaus, Mary Pickering, and Michel Bourdeau, “Introduction: The Significance of Auguste Comte”

Warren Schmaus, “Comte’s General Philosophy of Science”

Michel Blay, “The Analytical Construction of a Positive Science in Auguste Comte”

Anastasios Brenner, “Astronomical Science and Its Significance for Humankind”

Laurent Clauzade, “Auguste Comte’s Positive Biology”

Vincent Guillin, “Comte and Social Science”

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Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, “Art, Affective Life, and the Role of Gender in Auguste Comte’s Philosophy and Politics”

Andrew Wernick, “The Religion of Humanity and Positive Morality”

Mary Pickering, “Conclusion: The Legacy of Auguste Comte”

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