

UNIT-1 AUGUSTE COMTE



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1.0 Objectives

This unit deals with the central ideas of Auguste Comte, the founding father of Sociology.

The objectives of this unit are:

- Outline the biographical sketch of Auguste Comte
- Describe the social background to which he belonged
- Discuss the major theories propounded by Auguste Comte
- Significance of Comte's ideas to contemporary Sociology.

1.1 Introduction

Auguste Comte, a French philosopher, is said to be the founding father of Sociology and the doctrine of positivism. He was greatly influenced by the utopian socialist Claude Henry Saint Simon. Comte was greatly disturbed by the anarchy that pervaded French society and was critical of those thinkers who had spawned both the enlightenment and the revolution. He developed the *positive philosophy* in an attempt to remedy the social maladies of the French revolution, calling for a new doctrine based on the sciences. His scientific view of positivism was developed to combat the negative and destructive philosophy of the Enlightenment. Though influenced by the French counterrevolutionary Catholics, he differed from them on two grounds. First, return to the middle ages was made impossible because of the advancement in science and technology. Second, his theoretical system was much more sophisticated than his predecessors. He influenced the work of many social thinkers like Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill and George Elliot.

Comte first coined the term *Social Physics* and later changed it to *Sociology* in 1839. From the very beginning, Comte wanted to model Sociology after the hard sciences and visualised it to become the dominant science. He tried to create a new science that would not only explain the past of mankind but also predict its future course. Like all sciences, Comte

believed that this new science of society should be based on observation and reasoning. Sociology should be used to create a better society. According to him, Sociology is concerned both with Social Statics (social structures) and Social Dynamics (social change). He felt that social dynamics was more important than social statics which reflects his interest in social reform, particularly the ills created by French Revolution and the Enlightenment.

1.2 Life Sketch and Works

Isidore Auguste Marie Francois Xavier Comte, better known as Auguste Comte, was born in Montpellier, Herault, in Southern France on 19th January 1798. After attending the Lycee Joffre and then the University of Montpellier, Comte joined the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris. But two years later the institutions were closed down by the Bourbons. In August 1817, Comte met Claude Henry Saint Simon who appointed him as his secretary. He was thus initiated into politics at a very young age. He published a great number of articles which brought him to the public sphere. In 1824, he broke with Saint Simon. Comte married Caroline Massin and divorced in 1842. In 1826, he was taken to a mental hospital, but left without being cured. He started teaching Course of Positive Philosophy in January 1829 and published six volumes of the Course (1830, 1835, 1838, 1839, 1841, 1842). Comte developed a close friendship with John Stuart Mill and developed a new “Religion of Humanity”. He published four volumes of “Systeme de politique positive” (1851-1854). His final work, the first volume of “La Synthese Subjective” (The Subjective Synthesis), was published in 1854. Comte died of stomach cancer on 5th September 1857 in Paris. His other works include ‘Elementary Treatise on Analytic Geometry’ (1843), ‘The Philosophical Treatise on Popular Astronomy’ (1844), ‘The Discourse on Positive Spirit’ (1844), and ‘The General View of Positivism’ (1848).