

Unit-4: Law of Three Stages

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Objectives

After studying this unit, the students will be able to:

- Knowing the rules of the three stages described by Auguste Comte,
- The religious, metaphysical and positive/scientific stages within the three stages and their extensive knowledge,
- To present a description of the development of society based on the rules of the three stages.

Introduction

The laws of development apply to the entire society. When society is in the religious stage, then the influence of kings, emperors, army and priests is maximum. Otherwise one can say that the social system parallels the development of the mind. When the mind comes into the metaphysical stage, its thinking changes, and it negates any kind of divinity. When man's development reaches the scientific stage, then he puts every object, event, evidence to the test of reason and logic. He even challenges the existence of god.

4.1 Law of Three Stages

Within the field of social thinking, the law of three stages, is an important contribution of Comtes. By 1822 itself, he had brought out this law, that by studying man's intellectual development it became clear that there are three chronological stages of development.

These stage given below are :

1. Theological/Religious stage,
2. Metaphysical Stage,
3. Scientific or Positive Stage.

Comte has written, "After studying human intellectual development in all societies and ages, we discover the fundamental rule whose solid proof we find on one hand in the reality in our organizations,

and secondarily they are present in our historical experiences. This rule is as such : all our important/main beliefs, every branch of our knowledge, one by one have to pass through three theoretical stages – religious or imaginative stage, metaphysical or abstract stage and scientific or positive stage.”

“During the religious stage, searching for the nature of the world (creation) or the premiere and end reasons of the happenings of natural reasons (production and objective) man, in trying to understand them, accepts that all events are the results of the present activities of divine, other worldly beings.”

“Metaphysical stage is a mere amendment of the first stage. Man’s mind now believes that not divine powers, but abstract, unseen mischievous which exist in every living creature are active behind every event.”

“In the last stage, the mind of man, abandons the futile search for unbiased beliefs, world and evil forces and their objectives as reasons for all worldly events”, but the rules behind the events are studied. In other words he observes and studies their repetitions, similarities and ponders them. The main basis for this knowledge is observation and reasoning applied holistically to the given data. “Definition of Facts” - whatever we understand from this saying is just the establishment of relationships between simple facts (or data). Those simple facts, with the progress of science, are decreasing day by day.”

The definition of “The rule of the three stages” is clear from Comtes above mentioned statements. Then too the important point of the development of human – knowledge or intellectual development can be elucidated and explained as follows :

1. Theological Stage – In this stage all things are considered an image of god or understood and believed as the resulting form of the activities of some divine beings. It is the belief that the active principle in all things are divine powers (the spirit of gods and goddesses), and that this force exists in all things, living or material. Flora and fauna, flow of water, living or material this force exists and is active in everything. Even in the happening of natural events, man sees only one reason and that reason is Gods – goddesses or such other divine force. Whether this thinking is right or wrong is secondary, but in this stage, this is the form that man’s thinking about his surrounding subject-matter takes. A great difference is observed between man and animals, for man can think and ponder. According to Comte, even in this stage there are 3 sub-stages:



Notes

August Comte is called father of Sociology.

- (i) Fetishism,
- (ii) Polytheism,
- (iii) Monotheism.

(i) In the first sub-stage, the life-force is experienced in every object, and accordingly there is complete trust on magic and miracles.

(ii) In the second sub-stage, the human mind is better organized and as a result, man is irritated numerous, gods and magic etc, and the feelings arises that he should see them in united form. As a result, gods and goddesses are created who represent the different aspects of life. This is the stage of polytheism, because numerous gods are worshipped and believed in as this stage.

(iii) But because of these numerous gods-goddesses, psychological confusion continues. For this reason man stops distributing his devotion and faith between many gods-goddesses, but endows one god with all the united powers, and wishes to give that god-head all his ecstatic devotion and faith. This is the stage of monotheism, when it is believed that behind every event and object, exists the action of a single god. As the human view-point expands, and his thinking powers become serious and

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deepen, so too the faith in monotheism becomes clearer and determined. Monotheism is the acme of the theological stage.

Self Assessment

Fill in the blanks -

1. After studying human _____ in all societies and all ages this fundamental rule is discovered.
2. All our main beliefs, every branch of our knowledge, have to pass through the state of these three _____, one after the other.
3. Those start study of _____ sequence and similarity.

2. **Metaphysical Stage** : At this stage the belief in the individual power of god is diminished. God is thought of not as a personified form but as an abstract force. Whatever is happening in the world is not more abscribed to the form of a single god, but is attributed to an abstract formless force (person), is the existence of this power. But this force is not resultant from any special person or body. Whatever is happening due to this abstract, formless force it is eternal and complete in itself. The special qualities of this stage lies between the Theological and Scientific/Positive Metaphysical Stage.

3. **Scientific or Positive Stage** : Thinking itself can be complete and eternal, but cannot be based on real reason, logic and facts. When a person leaves behind metaphysical thinking, and tries to understand and define this world and its events on the basis of observation and reasoning then he enters the scientific or positive stage. Comte claims that the formative mixture of observation and reasoning is the foundation of true knowledge. When we describe an event, we try to find the relationship between the ordinary facts and that particular events. This relationship of cause and effect can only become fact through observation. Observation is the evidence, for it is real, not imaginative. According to Comte, to understand the different facts and events of this world, the true and dependable method is observation and classification. In this scientific stage, man does not make imaginary castles, nor tries to give a metaphoric interpretation to the various facts of this world. At this stage the collection of knowledge is his one and only end to his objectives.



Did You Know?

Positive Philosophy, Positive Polity, System and Positive Polity are the main texts of Comte.

Defining the above mentioned three steps of human-knowledge and thinking. Comte does not forget this truth at these three steps cannot have an existence, isolated from each other. In other words, these three stages though completely different, follow one after the other, may not be completely correct thinking. It may happen that they may exist in a society or a mind simultaneously. On religious matters, we can be in a religious stage; in relation to the ideals of life, in the metaphysical stage, and in matters of life-resources, we can be in the scientific stage. An unique mixture of these three stages is seen in Indian Society. For example, the hindu-marriage, even today is in the religious stage and Hindus respect marriage as religious sacramental institution. Gandhi's Satyagraha, ahimsa (non - violence) and allah-ishwar ek hi naam' (allah and ishwar are one) are primarily phylosophical; when the Indian five year plans convey the positive or scientific stage. Therefore the three stages of human thinking or knowledge are not isolated from each other. This concept of Comte's can be clarified with another example. Take, the example of a scientist, who holds scientific view and trusts science on all subject. But suppose he only son dies, then it is possible that he would not be able to console himself by taking

a scientific position here. At such times it would be helpful to take the help of metaphysical thoughts like "meeting and parting, happiness sorrow are emotions one has to face in this world." Or he can console himself by coming to this conclusion on a religious basis whatever god does, he does for our good. "Therefore it is clear that the above mentioned three stages of human knowledge or mind can be found simultaneously in the same mind or same society. Comte has laid maximum stress on never forgetting this truth as he states that in forgetting this truth * this great law of the three stages, it becomes objectionable and liable to criticism, otherwise never. In 1839 Comte wrote in connection with this rule, "After thinking-discussing this from all angles; and after examining it in every way; seventeen years of in depth thinking on this great subject; has given me the right to announce without any scientific hesitation, that we shall always find this historical belief to be complete and steady. Like any ordinary fact from other disciplines of natural philosophies are accepted only after proven evidence, now this belief seems to have been fully proved."



Task

Why is Comte's theory of the three states of evolution called a linear theory?

4.2 Summary

- Comte explained the system of social change in confirmed steps, from simplification to complexity and in a straight line.
- Comte interpreted social transformation according to the intellectual development of humanity.
- According to Comte, social change occurs according to the intellectual development of humans in the three given below.
- The steps of intellectual development are listed below –
 1. Religious/Theological State
 2. Metaphysical State
 3. Scientific State.

4.3 Keywords

4. **Evolution** : This activity of change/transformation/growth is known by the name of evolution, in which every changed state is necessarily related to the state that precedes it. In this, growth, expansion development, and continuity are the three events in proximate to each other.

4.4 Review Questions

1. Explain the rule of three stages of August Comte.
2. Write the names of Comte's three main texts.

Answers : Self Assessment

1. Intellectual development

Notes

2. Theoretical
3. related to thought

4.5 Further Readings



Books

1. Sociological Theory – *Abraham and Morgan*.
2. Structure of Sociological Thought – *J.H. Turner*.
3. Encyclopedia of Sociology – *Harikrisha Rawat*.