



The Three Stages Law of Auguste Comte and Its Contribution to the Study of Sociology

Rahmatullah^{1*}, Shermina Oruh¹, Andi Agustang²

¹ Sociology Doctoral Program, Makassar State University, Makassar, South Sulawesi

² Universitas Pejuang Republik Indonesia, Makassar, South Sulawesi

Article Info

Article history:

Received

Revised

Accepted

Keywords:

The Three Stages Law;

Contribution;

Study of Sociology

ABSTRACT

This article aims to explain Auguste Comte's three-stage law of epistemology in the theory of social change, namely the theological, metaphysical, and positive stages, and to explore its relevance to the study of sociology. The article employs qualitative research with a literature review approach. This method is utilized to gather information and data through various materials available in the library, such as documents, books, magazines, and so on. Comte attempts to elucidate that social change occurs in three stages: the Theological Stage (fictional), the Metaphysical Stage (abstract), and the Positive Stage (scientific). These three stages are considered universal laws that generalize the evolution of society throughout its history. Comte proposes that the positive stage represents the pinnacle of human thought evolution, and sociology, as a science, should adopt a positivistic approach focused on empirical analysis and objective observation to understand the structure and function of society. The positive stage is viewed as the culmination and highest point in the development of human intelligence, where humans seek to understand all relationships within the order of nature through scientific approaches and empirical data. This pursuit aims to shape human intelligence for more advanced and progressive living.

Corresponding Author:

Rahmatullah

Sociology Doctoral Program, Makassar State University, Makassar, South Sulawesi

Email: ullahrahmatullah19@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Every creature in this world will undergo changes, including humans who were created by God with a certain perfection. Change is considered a natural will of God that involves every aspect of life, including material possessions, ways of sustaining life, thinking patterns, behavior, and even the pursuit of worldly pleasures. Changes can occur at both the individual and societal (community) levels and may lead to improvement or, conversely, deterioration. Changes are not limited to material things but also involve the cultural and civilizational aspects of human beings as a whole. Debates about change, especially in the context of social change, continue, and it seems difficult to prevent their direction and pace. The concept of social change encompasses social phenomena at various levels of human life, ranging from the individual level to the global level. Social thinker Auguste Comte sought to provide a scientific and methodological foundation for understanding the science of human society. He introduced the concept of social physics and established the Positivism movement in the history of scientific development. Comte's approach enables the study of social change at certain levels or beyond using various study areas and units of analysis.

The positivism movement reflects the human thought patterns of the 19th century, characterized by advancements primarily in the field of science. During this period, scientific thoughts and knowledge emerged, which were modern in nature [1]. Positivism, as a legal philosophy, adheres to a positive law theory

where the law does not evaluate the goodness or badness of positive law itself but rather focuses on the effectiveness of the law for society [2]. Auguste Comte is known as "the father of positivism," and his perspective on science emphasizes that science is born and grows on the foundation of a strong philosophical basis, serving as a paradigm for the development of modern science.

Auguste Comte was born in Montpellier, France (1798-1857), full name Isidore Auguste Marie Francois Xavier Comte, was a prominent philosopher [3]. He is often referred to as the founder of Sociology, introducing the term 'Sociology' itself. Comte was the son of a nobleman from a Catholic family. However, throughout his life, Comte did not show loyalty to his nobility or his Catholic upbringing, influenced by the social, intellectual, and political upheavals of his time. Alongside his senior, Henry de Saint Simon, Auguste Comte was involved in a significant project in the field of positive philosophy (positivism). Although the term positivism was first used by Saint Simon, Auguste Comte popularized it, making it one of the key terms in the history of the philosophy of science. Moreover, Comte introduced the term sociology, which he understood as the scientific study of society. For Comte, society should be seen as a separate entity from the researcher, operating under the laws of determinism. The positivist approach held by Comte places high importance on facts, and he only accepts factual knowledge. Positive facts refer to facts independent of individual consciousness. Therefore, Comte referred to sociology as social physics, considering it a study of humans and society equivalent to nature, with definite and mechanistic laws.

The term "positive" often appears in Comte's writings and aligns with his philosophy of positivism. Positive facts refer to "real" or "actual" facts. A positive fact is something that can be tested or verified by anyone willing to prove it. Through this project, Comte stood at the forefront of establishing sociology by employing empirical methods that are observable and measurable (reliable-measurable), drawing examples from natural science methods such as empirical observation, experiments, and comparison (comparison) [4]. Adian [5] states that positivist philosophy or the Positivism movement is an advanced evolution of English empiricism. Empiricist philosophy inspired positivism, especially in the principle of the objectivity of scientific knowledge. Empiricists believe that everything in the universe can be accessible through sensory data; in other words, human knowledge must begin with empirical-sensory observations.

Positivism develops empirical claims about knowledge, stating that the pinnacle of human knowledge lies in sciences based on hard facts (measurable and observable), known as positive sciences. In the view of the Positivism philosophical movement, philosophy has no other function than serving as the methodology of science. Its task is to discover common principles applicable to all sciences and use these principles as a guide for human behavior and the foundation for the social regulation of society. Positivism believes that society will progress by adopting a total scientific and technological approach. In other words, this movement highly values the position of science and is very optimistic about its social role in promoting human well-being. The slogan that emerged for Positivism is "savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour pouvoir," which translates to "knowing to foresee, foreseeing to be able to act" [5].

2. RESEARCH METHODS

To assist in data search, this paper was created using the method of library research or literature review. The literature review method is a study used to gather information and data with the help of various materials available in the library, such as documents, books, magazines, and so on [6]. This method is chosen because it is not feasible to conduct field research and inquire directly from thinkers, in this case, August Comte. Simply put, a literature review involves a critical analysis of written sources (literature) on a specific topic, and the preparation of this article follows the principles of scientific writing in several ways, such as dissecting, comparing, summarizing, and collecting literary sources [7].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Auguste Comte's Three Stage Law

Auguste Comte came from a family with expertise in mathematics, although his academic background primarily focused on physics. Therefore, he endeavored to apply the natural science method of thinking to understand humans as social beings. Comte is known as a proponent of positivism, believing that society is an integral part of nature. According to Comte, each society has similar patterns (laws) in its processes of change. The task of sociology, in Comte's view, is to study and discover these similar social laws. The discovery of these laws is expected to facilitate predicting the development of a society [8]. Therefore, empirical research methods become effective tools for discovering social laws in society.

In the study of social science, Comte divided it into two fields: social statics and social dynamics. Social statics refers to the theory of the regularities that emerge without a plan in human society (theory of spontaneous order in human society) [9] or existing social structures [3]. These structures tend to remain

stable over a long period. This concept is rooted in the assumption that society is an organism unified through consensus, creating harmonious relationships within it (Martono, 2016: 60). However, social statics is essentially the most basic part of sociology, although not the primary part of sociological studies, because fundamentally, social statics emerges as a result of a growth process [10].

Social dynamics, on the other hand, is the theory of the natural progress of human society, or the theory of the development and progress of society, or the study of the sequence of human development [9,8]. This study refers to the discussion of the processes of social change in human society. According to Auguste Comte, social dynamics is the most important part of sociological studies because, through positive science, it can overcome the speculative nature brought by philosophy in maintaining the order of existing social structures [11].

The division of sociology into these two parts does not imply a complete separation between them. Analogous to a house, social statics is the structure of the house, relatively unchanged or static in form over a long period, while social dynamics is the content of the house and the human activities within it. If social statics is the study of social order among interconnected societies (social structure) and provides the most elementary approach to sociology, the study of social relationships that occur between those parts cannot be learned without understanding them as a result of development. Therefore, Comte argued that a proper understanding of a social issue cannot be attained without employing social dynamics or theories of human development [10].

Auguste Comte's thoughts on social theory were influenced by the social and political upheavals occurring in France. The upheaval, known as the French Revolution, resulted in destruction and anarchy experienced by the French society. The community was threatened by intellectual and socio-political chaos in the pursuit of a more organized life. Consequently, French intellectuals were inclined to cling to the belief in returning to the Middle Ages. This stance was criticized and protested by Auguste Comte, who argued that it was impossible to revert to the Middle Ages, where advancements in science and industry during the Enlightenment made such a regression impractical and absurd [3].

In Bryan S. Turner's view, Enlightenment social thought is characterized by a particular utopianism, reflecting a belief in the promises of modernity to bring about freedom. Unlike preceding social thought, Enlightenment social thought demonstrates a profound belief in the power of human agency to shape the future. It seems that the influence of utopian thinking and concerns about the orderliness of social structures during the French Revolution also played a role in shaping Comte's beliefs in rationality [11].

The utopian thinking emerged from society's demands for the necessity of freedom, equality, and unity, as well as the requirements for intellectual morality and philosophical independence, which would later become pivotal in the historical birth of 18th-century thinkers. The Enlightenment philosophers believed in the human capacity for transforming society according to unlimited scientific principles. However, Auguste Comte was indeed influenced by this Enlightenment belief in science, but he harbored skepticism towards conservative groups regarding Enlightenment individualism and the pressure from conservative groups emphasizing the importance of maintaining social order against the threat of social anarchy [12].

Therefore, Comte held a rational and futuristic view of society. The occurrences of social changes in French society that he experienced provided the scholarly foundation for Comte's theories of human progress and social evolution. This included the moment when hereditary aristocracy could be replaced by equality, superstition and fear could be replaced by reason and self-confidence, coerced labor could be replaced by voluntary cooperation, and religious domination could be replaced by the dominance of knowledge [12]. In the end, the theory proposed that there are three intellectual stages (law of three stages) that humanity goes through throughout its history.

According to Comte, not only the world undergoes a dynamic process of evolution (natural progress), but also groups, societies, sciences, individuals, and even human thoughts go through three stages. The law of three stages is a formulation of the evolutionary development of societies and individuals. The force of historical change in human society begins with the human spirit's drive to develop and progress through their intellect. With this spirit, humans comprehend reality, make assumptions, and create methods applied in efforts to explain, predict, and control societal life. The quality and quantity of knowledge possessed by society continue to evolve. The degree of knowledge held by society influences or determines all other aspects of communal life, such as the economy, politics, and military [8].

Social change always progresses from something simple towards complexity, continuously evolving from ordinary life towards advancement. The development of social change in a society will follow a linear pattern found in the law of three stages. This law is a generalization of each stage of human intellect that progresses through three stages: the theological stage, the metaphysical stage, and the positive or scientific stage [13, 14, 15, 9].

The following is an explanation regarding Auguste Comte's three-stage law:

- A. First, the Theological and Military Stage (Theological). This stage is the longest period in human history and is referred to as the era of intellectual infancy for humanity. During this stage, humans believe in the existence of supernatural powers that arise from the forces of natural substances, talismans, or powers

originating from outside oneself, or emerging from the influential figures of religion that are emulated by humans. In social life, the society in this stage lives based on conquest, where social relations are military in nature, constantly subduing and conquering other societies. Therefore, in this stage, it is also divided into three sub-stages: fetishism, polytheism, and monotheism.

- a. Fetishism is a dominant thought form in primitive societies, encompassing the belief that all objects possess their own inherent life forces (spirits). During this stage, humans begin to believe in the power of talismans or objects. This phase can also be described as the early stage of the theological and military system.
 - b. Polytheism is an assumption that arises due to the belief in powers governing life or natural phenomena (gods or supernatural beings). In this stage, urban life has emerged, land ownership becomes a social institution, the caste system exists, and war is considered the only way to create or achieve lasting political life. This phase can also be described as the development phase of the theological and military system.
 - c. Monotheism is the belief in a single deity that begins to replace the multiple gods or only God who reigns supreme and has the power to control the natural world. This phase can be considered as a modification phase of the theological and military system. The modification of the military system (militarism) referred to here is a social relationship in which society is military-oriented, constantly aiming to subdue and conquer other societies.
- B. Second, the Metaphysical Stage (Revolutionary Crisis). This stage is a transitional phase between the theological and positivistic stages, hence referred to as the adolescence of human intellect. This phase is characterized by human belief in abstract natural laws, illustrated by thinking that is philosophical, abstract, and universal. Thus, the belief is no longer in specific gods' powers, but human thought is constrained by philosophical and metaphysical concepts instilled by philosophers and religious figures in an abstract and universal sense (supernatural agents are replaced by abstract forces), such as the "Reason" of the Enlightenment Age. In social life, society is no longer military-oriented but not yet industrial. During this period, the main goal of society is not only conquest but is strengthened by increased production. While individual slavery systems have shifted and disappeared, the slavery owned by producers still retains various rights in relation to the military. Therefore, there are two main objectives: conquest and production. Producers are protected as a military resource, and war is systematically considered essential to develop production levels. This means that this stage serves as a bridge or transitional phase from a military (primitive) society to an industrial one.
- C. Third, the Positive Stage and Science (scientific stage). This stage is the final phase in Auguste Comte's social evolutionist thought and is considered the adulthood of human intellect. In this stage, the human mind no longer seeks original, absolute ideas that determine the universe and cause phenomena. Instead, the human mind begins to search for laws that determine phenomena or discovers a series of unchanging and common relationships (thinking scientifically). In this stage, humans begin to believe in empirical data as the ultimate but temporary source of knowledge, not absolute. However, through such social analysis, humans can formulate consistent laws, enabling progress and advancement in the field of science.

Contribution of Three Stage Law to Sociological Studies

In social life, humans are molded to be able to apply and utilize their intellectual faculties to master the natural environment for the progress of a better future. Society at this stage is an industrial society, where their relationships are the basic formations of the industrial structure. This stage indicates that industry dominates the collective social relations of the community, organized, and production becomes the society's primary goal.

In the development of sociology, Auguste Comte aimed for social studies to be more oriented towards scientific aspects, so that the entire knowledge system becomes "positive" with characteristics of certainty, precision, reality, utility, and being constructive and relative. Therefore, scientific knowledge in social studies should be homogeneous and integrated, where all branches of social studies are encouraged to apply positive scientific methods and establish common study objects for the progress of social civilization. Comte believed that social studies should formulate scientific approaches, considering that the needs of humans at that time required new (positive) methods in examining social sciences. This means not relying solely on theories related to emotions and intellect, as developed by authorities in knowledge during the theological and metaphysical stages. Thus, knowledge about human society needs to be expanded by adopting scientific and industrial theories [14].

In terms of contributions, we can describe Comte's three-stage law to the study of sociology as follows:

A. The Theological Stage or Theocratic Phase (Theological Stage):

In this stage, humans explain natural and social phenomena by referring to supernatural forces or divine

entities. The causes of events are explained through myths, religion, and spiritual beliefs. Comte realized that in this stage, society tends to view everything from a theological or religious perspective. His contribution is raising awareness about the importance of understanding the history of human thought to develop scientific methods in analyzing society.

B. The Metaphysical Stage or Metaphysical Phase (Metaphysical Stage):

In this stage, explanations of natural and social phenomena evolve from being spiritual to abstract and philosophical concepts. Causes are explained through concepts such as natural laws or abstract entities. Comte observed that society began to replace theological understanding with more rational explanations. His contribution was identifying this transition as a step toward a more scientific society and laying the foundation for the positivistic approach in sociology.

C. The Positive Stage or Positivist Phase (Positive Stage):

In this stage, humans seek explanations based on facts and empirical observations. Explanations of natural and social phenomena no longer rely on metaphysical or theological speculation but on measurable and observable laws. Comte proposed that the positive stage is the pinnacle of human thought evolution, and sociology as a science should adopt a positivistic approach. His contribution was providing a methodological foundation for sociology as a positive science, focusing on empirical analysis and objective observation in understanding the structure and function of society.

Overall, the contribution of Comte's Three-Stage Law to the study of sociology lies in its emphasis on the evolution of human thought towards a scientific and positivistic approach in analyzing society. His theory helped form the foundation for the development of sociology as a science that focuses on empirical observation and objective analysis.

In the construction of social communities, Auguste Comte sought to improve human life and thought through his positivistic approach. Humans, both individually and socially, have the potential to reach a scientific (positivist) level, making them a culturally rich, humane, and organized scientific society. Comte did not intend for humans to abandon the mindset and lifestyle of the previous stages (theological and metaphysical), but his main goal was to create a society that lives by high humanistic values. However, to achieve this, society needs to avoid certain elements from the theological and metaphysical stages. For example, absolute belief in theological dogmas and blind obedience to religious leaders and ideological figures (paternalism-maternalism) should be avoided. Additionally, problem-solving approaches involving violence (militarism), as applied in theological (primitive) societies, and the conquering of humans for the sake of increased production and economy also need to be avoided. An ideal society places more emphasis on science and knowledge rather than mere beliefs and obedience. Therefore, a scientific (positivist) society is not only considered superior in intelligence but also in the social dimension. This makes such a society live in harmony, order, and human values, avoiding brutality, violence, and the desire to conquer fellow human beings.

4. CONCLUSION

Changes in society are inevitable as a natural part of the process of development and dynamics of human life. This focus becomes a special concern in the field of sociology, especially in line with the views of Auguste Comte, who emphasizes the importance of understanding the dynamic aspects of society, while simultaneously studying social statics as the essential basis of sociology. In his theory of social change, Comte attempts to explain these changes through three stages: Theological Stage (fictional), Metaphysical Stage (abstract), and Positive Stage (scientific). These three stages are considered universal laws that generalize the evolution of society throughout its history. It is important to note that the development of a society is inseparable from the development of intelligence, which has a significant impact on all aspects of life, including economics, politics, culture, and especially social aspects.

With the pattern present in the three-stage law, human development in the theological stage explains that humans seek the first principle or ultimate cause of all events, linking phenomena to the powers of the supernatural or the divine, whether arising from nature, objects, humans, or beyond. In the theological stage, sociology is called upon to raise awareness of the importance of understanding the history of human thought to develop scientific methods in analyzing society. Moving on to the metaphysical stage, sociology is expected to encourage society to begin replacing theological understanding with more rational explanations, as a step towards a more scientific society and laying the foundation for the positivistic approach in sociology. In the last stage, the positive stage, Comte proposes that the positive stage is the pinnacle of the evolution of human thought, and sociology as a science must adopt a positivistic approach that focuses on empirical analysis and objective observation to understand the structure and function of society. The positive stage is considered the peak and highest phase in the development of human intelligence, where humans seek to understand all relationships within the order of nature through scientific approaches and empirical data, thus shaping human intelligence for more advanced and developed living. This naturally forms societal patterns from theological (primitive) societies, metaphysical (agrarian-dogmatic) societies to positive (scientific-industrial) societies in life.

5. REFERENCES

- [1] Islami NI, Sofyan S. Konsep positivisme dalam pembelajaran bahasa Indonesia di era merdeka belajar. *GHANCARAN: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia* (2022): n. pag..
- [2] Yetti S, Fitriasia A, Ofianto. Analisis Aliran Filsafat Ilmu & Etika. *Ensiklopedia of Journal*. 2023. Vol 5, No 2..
- [3] Ritzer, George. 2014. *Teori Sosiologi: Dari Sosiologi Klasik Sampai Perkembangan Terakhir Postmodern*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- [4] Suaedi. *Pengantar filsafat ilmu*. Bogor: IPB Press; 2016.
- [5] Gahral AD. *Menyoal Objektivisme Ilmu Pengetahuan*. Jakarta Selatan: Teraju; 2002.
- [6] Mardalis. *Metode penelitian suatu pendekatan proposal*. Jakarta: Bumi Aksara; 1999.
- [7] Nuryana A, Pawito P, Utari P. Pengantar metode penelitian kepada suatu pengertian yang mendalam mengenai konsep fenomenologi. *Ensains Journal*, 2019; 2(1), 19. <https://doi.org/10.31848/ensains.v2i1.148>.
- [8] Martono N. *Sosiologi perubahan sosial*. Jakarta: Raja Grafindo; 2016.
- [9] Martineau H. *The positive philosophy of Auguste Comte (Vol. I)*. London: Batoche Books Kitchener; 2000.
- [10] Anwar Y, Adang. *Sosiologi untuk universitas*. Bandung: Refika Aditama; 2013.
- [11] Turner, Bryan S. *Teori sosial (terj)*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar; 2012.
- [12] Saebani BA. *Perspektif perubahan sosial*. Bandung: Pustaka Sedia; 2016.
- [13] Bourdeau M, Pickering M, Schmaus W. *Love, Order & progress: the science, philosophy & politics of auguste come*. (W. Bourdeau, Michel; Pickering, Mary & Schmaus, Ed.). University of Pittsburgh Press; 2018.
- [14] Gane M. *Auguste Comte*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group; 2006.
- [15] Ladyman J. *Understanding philosophy of science (1st ed.)*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group; 2002.