

## Chapter 2

# The Making of Society

Because society is not at all a simple agglomeration of living beings whose actions, independent of any final goal, have no other cause than the arbitrary of individual wills and no other result than ephemeral and unimportant accidents. On the contrary, society is a whole, a veritable organized machine, all of whose components parts contribute in a different way to the working of the whole. The gathering of men constitutes a true being, whose existence is more or less vigorous or unsteady depending on whether its organs perform more or less regularly the functions entrusted to them.

Henri Saint-Simon, 1813

The modern concept of society as objective entity or phenomenon first took shape in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Naturally, some of its components could have been suggested previously (as the Saint-Simon quote shows<sup>1</sup>), but it was not until that time that this concept appeared as definitely and unequivocally shaped. It was then that the assumption that the realm of relations between human beings constitutes a specific entity, one that is independent of the will of the subjects involved and regulated by an internal mechanism of operation and change that is not susceptible of being consciously controlled was first fully put forward. An assumption that also implies that such an entity exerts a causal influence on human subjectivity and behaviour and that, therefore, humans are not natural and timeless individuals, but changing and historically situated subjects. In other words,

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<sup>1</sup>[“Car la société n’est point une simple agglomération d’êtres vivants, dont les actions indépendantes de tout but final, n’ont d’autre cause que l’arbitraire des volontés individuelles, ni d’autre résultat que des accidents éphémères ou sans importance; la société au contraire est un tout, une véritable machine organisée dont toutes les parties contribuent d’une manière différente à la marche de l’ensemble. La réunion des hommes constitue un véritable être, dont l’existence est plus ou moins vigoureuse ou chancelante, suivant que ses organes s’acquittent plus ou moins régulièrement des fonctions qui leur sont confiées.”] Henri Saint-Simon, “De la Physiologie sociale appliqué à l’amélioration des institutions sociales,” *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles*, Paris, 1825, pp. 228–229. This is one of the first statements in which some components of the modern concept of society are already recognizable. Mainly, the distinction the author makes between the constitutive parts (human beings) and the (social) whole as two entities different in nature, which is one of the theoretical cornerstones of such a concept.

that humans are not pre-constituted and sovereign subjects who act intentionally and arrange and re-arrange their collective intercourse and institutions at will, but, on the contrary, historical agents who embody and are the expression of a certain social state, one that sets the conditions of possibility for human action. The formulation of this assumption and the new concept of society did not only entail a profound discontinuity with the previous view of human beings, as well as of their relationships and behaviour, grounded on the concept of the individual. Moreover, the new assumption and concept were explicitly formulated in direct opposition to the theoretical individualist paradigm. Indeed, the concept of society was purposely put forward with the aim of criticizing, fighting, and replacing the previous concept of the individual (and the category of human nature that serves as its basis).

The aim of this chapter is to unravel and reconstruct the process through which the conclusion that such a thing as society existed was reached and the corresponding theory of human action came to be formulated. It will be seen that, as already pointed out, this conclusion was not the result of a close and methodical observation of human reality. Rather, it was the outcome of an operation through which such a reality was re-conceptualized starting from the theoretical horizon established by the individualist paradigm itself. The concept of society emerged as a consequence of the contradiction arising between the assumptions of this paradigm and the actual working of the liberal political regime, at the practical level. The origin of the process resulting in the emergence of the new concept is to be found in the disillusionment and dissatisfaction some people felt with the political regime born from the French Revolution. To be exact, it lies in the *frustration of expectations* with the results produced by the implementation of such a political regime. It was this frustration that unleashed, fuelled, and guided the process of theoretical rethinking that led to the formulation of the concept of society. It was the conviction that the implementation of the liberal principles was not yielding the predicted and desired results which led these people to search for the causes of this failure. In the course of their searching, they reached the conclusion that the root causes lay in the erroneous nature of the theoretical premises of liberalism. From their point of view, failure was not simply due to the fact that the implementation of the liberal principles had been wrong or incomplete, as the disillusioned liberal themselves maintained. Rather, it was due to the fact that liberalism was based on a set of theoretical premises on the human world that were false and groundless, thus preventing them from being an appropriate means for achieving the goal pursued by the liberal revolution. And if the failure had theoretical causes, then the liberal theoretical paradigm should be subjected to close criticism in order to elaborate a new paradigm, one that would allow the successful completion of the process of re-shaping the political institutions and relations begun by the liberal revolution. This new paradigm resulting from the critical reaction against individualist classical liberalism was the societalist paradigm.

It is well known that the advocates and supporters of the liberal regime started from the assumption that once liberal principles were put into practice, the result would be a stable and harmonic political and social order: an order devoid of

conflicts and gradually more egalitarian. This belief stemmed from the assumption that the liberal regime was consistent with human nature and that it therefore allowed people to limitlessly achieve and satisfy their inherent propensities, hopes, and needs. This fit between human nature and political regime implied that once the latter was implemented, all political and ideological disagreements would disappear and a basic consensus among human beings would prevail. Given that they simultaneously drew on the assumption that human history constituted a course of progress towards a superior and perfect social order, in the eyes of the liberals, the liberal regime appeared as the culminating stage of this course and the embodiment of that order. As time passed, however, some people started to think that these expectations were not being fulfilled, since political instability and ideological conflicts persisted and the promised consensus had yet to arrive. It was this fact that gave rise to the frustration of expectations that eventually undermined the theoretical underpinnings of classical liberalism and its concepts of individual and human nature in particular.

This theoretical rethinking was not simply the result of observing the actual workings of the liberal regime, but of a certain diagnosis of them. That the political and social situation appeared to fail was not because it did so, but because it was compared with and assessed according to the political and social expectations encouraged by the liberal revolution. Only if viewed in the light of these expectations has the liberal revolution failed in its attempt to achieve the promised ideal political order and to fulfil the modern project of human emancipation. Without the mediation of the assumption that such a political order was feasible and achievable, as well as the goal of human history, the political situation would have been diagnosed differently, not as a failure. For example, it could have been diagnosed as the product of a groundless and unjustified political adventure, as indeed it was by counter-revolutionaries. It is just because the origin of the modern concept of society is found in this diagnosis, and not in the mere observation of reality, that the new concept is genealogically rooted in and indebted to the previous concept of the individual. The theoretical rethinking carried out by these critics of classical liberalism did not simply consist in relinquishing the concept of the individual, thus excluding it from the theory of human action for the first time. It also consisted in a sort of theoretical inversion of this concept. According to their diagnosis, the failure of the liberal revolution not only proved that the individualist theory was false, it also gave cause for thinking that events occurred in a different way to that envisaged by the individualist theory. If the observed facts seemed to show that, contrary to forecasts, the new political and social organization did not match individual hopes and will, this meant that such an organization was governed by its own laws and mechanisms, ones that were independent of individual will. Once any providentialist explanation had been ruled out, this was the only possible explanation. No other explanation could be conceivable within the prevailing theoretical framework, the one established by the modern categories of human nature, individual, and historical progress.

Those who came to experience a frustration of expectations with regard to the liberal revolution were people who shared the modern-enlightened assumption that

creating a perfect social order was a feasible goal and who took for granted that human history actually tended towards creating such an order. There is no need to describe that imagined social order in full detail here. Suffice it to say that it is an order in which political and moral consensus, equality, harmony, and material well-being would prevail. It is the prospective type of social organization delineated by authors such as Condorcet.<sup>2</sup> For people who shared these assumptions, the regime resulting from the liberal revolution aimed to create that ideal (“definitive,” as Auguste Comte called it) social order. In Comte’s words, the task that “the general course of civilization has assigned to the present age” is to lead it “towards the definitive social state of human race, the one that best suits its nature, that in which all its means of prosperity are to receive their fullest development and their most direct application.”<sup>3</sup> His own work, as Comte himself confesses below, is indeed aimed at contributing to achieve the goal of bringing into play that “new [social] system.”<sup>4</sup>

The frustration of expectations regarding the liberal regime created, from the early nineteenth century, a favourable atmosphere for the emergence of diverse projects of social and political organization aimed at amending or rectifying the practical failure of that regime. There were two types of projects. The first sprang from the diagnosis according to which failure was due either to a conceptual deficiency of the liberal theory and, specifically, to its defective understanding of human nature, or to the fact that liberal principles had not been correctly or entirely implemented. Given this diagnosis, the proposed solution was to correct and enhance the regime originated in the liberal revolution by adopting a more appropriate notion of human nature. To this first type belonged the projects devised and promoted by the various utopian individualisms that, beyond their differences, shared the assumption that a human nature existed and that, therefore, the perfect social order had to be grounded in and consistent with that nature.

Among those disappointed with the liberal regime there was also, however, a small group of people who made a somewhat different diagnosis of the reasons for failure. I will not explain the genesis of this group, which lies beyond the scope of my inquiry and is irrelevant for the purpose of explaining the shaping of the concept of society. Suffice it to say that for this second critical trend the cause of the liberal failure does not lie in a conceptual deficiency alone, but in the fact that the liberal theoretical premises themselves are false. As stated by Comte, the liberal project failed because of the “profound ignorance of the fundamental conditions which any social system must fulfil in order to have true solidity.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in order for the

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<sup>2</sup>Condorcet (2002 [1795]).

<sup>3</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society” [1822], in Auguste Comte, *Early Political Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 49/“Plan des travaux scientifiques nécessaires pour reorganizer la société,” *Écrits de jeunesse, 1816–1828*, Paris-The Hague: École Pratique des Hautes Études and Mouton, 1970, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 50/242.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 54/245.

goal of the perfect social order to be achieved, these premises must be subjected to general criticism and replaced by more correct ones. This is precisely what some members of the Saint-Simonian movement and, later, the historical materialist thinkers came to propose. Since the cornerstone of liberal theory was the concept of the individual, the theoretical revision undertaken by these critics necessarily meant questioning the premise that a universal and ahistorical human nature existed and was the origin and foundation of social and political arrangements and subjects' action.

The members of this critical group held the conviction that the liberal regime had not achieved a sufficient degree of stability and did not enjoy the promised general consensus. On the contrary, political instability prevailed, as political and ideological quarrels and conflicts kept it alive, and it seemed they were never going to lessen. For an observer such as Comte, European society is in a state of "very violent crisis" and "moral anarchy," by which he means a lack of basic consensus on the political and social order.<sup>6</sup> In these circumstances, to achieve a state of stability and consensus, it was necessary to proceed to a thorough reorganization of the political system, or, to be more exact and couched in Comte's terms, a *reorganization of society*. It was not simply a question of reforming the existing political system, but of grounding it upon new theoretical premises. As Comte sees it, such reorganization would consist in re-establishing "a genuine and lasting harmony in the profoundly troubled system of our diverse social ideas."<sup>7</sup> Without such reorganization, not only was the current state of crisis likely to remain but it ran the risk that society itself would perish. According to Comte, no society can survive for long without a basic consensus and a set of fixed and generally accepted opinions.<sup>8</sup> Hence the urgency of "freeing society from this fatal tendency towards an imminent dissolution and of bringing it towards a new form of organization, one at the same time more progressive and more solid."<sup>9</sup> That is to say, of re-establishing "harmony" by adopting the appropriate ideological principles ("doctrine"), ones that would have to be generally accepted.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, it is always important to bear in mind that the entire theoretical reformulation undertaken by the theorists of the social had a very practical goal, namely to reorganize human society on more solid grounds than those provided by individualist classical liberalism. As Comte states, "the practical goal" [le but pratique] of the new social science is to meet the "needs of society" and contribute to "the

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<sup>6</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Tome I, Paris/La Haye, Mouton, 1973, Lettre à Valat, 25 décembre 1824, p. 147. Or, as he writes some years later, the present "social situation" is characterized by "a profound and more and more extended anarchy" (*Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, Paris, 1839, p. 8.).

<sup>7</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Valat, 25 décembre 1824, p. 147.

<sup>9</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Tome I, Paris/La Haye, Mouton, 1973, Lettre à Valat, 25 décembre 1824, p. 147.

great reorganization demanded so imperiously by the current state of the social body.”<sup>11</sup>

As already said, according to the diagnosis of this critical trend, the ultimate cause of the current state of crisis is a theoretical one because the liberal political regime is grounded on a false conception of the human world. According to the Comtean diagnosis, “society is today disorganized, both from a spiritual point of view and from a temporal point of view,” but the cause of the current “social malaise” is, above all, “spiritual [theoretical] anarchy.” That is, the lack of a suitable theoretical foundation. Therefore, in order for the current state of crisis or disorganization to be overcome (enabling the process opened up by the French Revolution to be closed), it was necessary to elaborate and adopt a more correct theory of the human world. In Comte’s words, to “close the revolutionary era” it was necessary to reorganize “the spiritual power”; that is, the theoretical bases of social organization (and not simply to reorganize the temporal power).<sup>12</sup> For him, it was impossible to attain a solid and stable form of social organization if the corresponding theoretical foundations were not previously set up; that is, if such an organization was not put in accordance with the “present state of knowledge.” “Nothing essential and durable can be done for the practical part, until the theoretical part is established or, at least, very advanced. To proceed otherwise would be to build without foundations, to give the form priority over the substance.”<sup>13</sup> Any plan for social reorganization—such as that undertaken by the French Revolution—must be, says Comte, “inevitably composed of two parts,” one “theoretical” another “practical.”<sup>14</sup> And what is more, not only can the two parts not be undertaken separately, but the first must be prior to and constitute the foundation of the second. Establishing the new political system was not a purely practical task, as it should be driven by scientific criteria, a condition not fulfilled by classical liberalism.<sup>15</sup> The “reorganization of society” should not be a “purely operational matter which can be entrusted to merely practical men,” but it “must be directed by preliminary theoretical knowledge.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 97/281.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 72/260.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69/257.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 65–66/254–255.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69/257. “The formation of any sort of plan of social organization is necessarily composed of two series of operations, totally distinct in their object, as well as in the kind of capacity they demand. One, theoretical or spiritual, has as its goal the development of the seminal idea of the plan, that is of the new principle according to which social relations must be co-ordinated, and the formation of the system of general ideas intended to serve as a guide for society. The other, practical or temporal, determines the mode of distribution of power and the system of administrative institutions which are in closest conformity with the spirit of the system as settled by the theoretical operations. The second series being founded on the first, of which is only the consequence and the realization, it is with the first that the general work must begin. The first series is the soul, the most important and the most difficult part, even though only preliminary.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 65–66/255).

This diagnosis implies believing that the liberal theory is incapable of carrying out the task of social reorganization. In this view, liberal theory is merely a “critical doctrine,” in the sense that it only has the power to destroy the previous social organization. However, it is not powerful enough to reconstruct and endow the new organization with solid and stable foundations. As Comte states, the “critical theory” was enough to destroy the “feudal and theological system,” but it “is incapable of re-establishing the harmony which it destroyed.”<sup>17</sup> The liberal principles, he says, were “born to destroy, but are equally incapable of constructing.”<sup>18</sup> In *Le Producteur*’s words, the enlightened tenets were able to overthrow the feudal and theological power, but they are “incapable of founding [inhabiles à fonder].”<sup>19</sup> From this point of view, the individualist theory constitutes a destructive force (of the previous regime), but it is worthless as a constructive force. As P. J. Rouen maintains, “individualism” possesses only a “critique value” and “we owe it the destruction of the old social order,” but it is not sufficient to “rebuild the new system.”<sup>20</sup>

Yet, not only does the liberal theory lack any constructive power, according to these critics, it is also the cause of the current state of crisis. For Comte, such a theory was not only “absolutely inapplicable to the reorganization of society” but “absolutely inadequate” for “social reorganization.” Moreover, it has also placed society “in a state of constituted anarchy.”<sup>21</sup> And, therefore, it cannot constitute a suitable and effective means for overcoming that state. The liberal doctrine is unable “to prevent in the future the return of the storms which have hitherto always accompanied the great crisis characterizing the present age.”<sup>22</sup> What is more, the liberal doctrine, as Comte himself says, has become an obstacle to the reorganization of society. “Revolutionary metaphysics,” he writes, once it has played a significant role “in the general development of modern societies” by carrying out the “demolition of the theological and feudal regime,” tends at present, however, towards “hindering radically the final establishment” of the pursued “political order.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 77/244.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 56/246.

<sup>19</sup>“De quelques articles du Constitutionnel et du Journal des Débats,” *Le Producteur*, 2 (1826), p. 195.

<sup>20</sup>P. J. Rouen, “Examen d’un nouvel ouvrage de M. Dunoyer, ancien rédacteur du *Censeur Européen*,” *Le Producteur*, 2 (1826), pp. 162–163.

<sup>21</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 57/247–248.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 57/248.

<sup>23</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 43.

Consequently, as Comte concludes, the only means “capable of putting an end to the terrible crisis which torments society”<sup>24</sup> is the formulation of a more appropriate social theory. To “terminate the present crisis” it is essential to form an “organic doctrine”<sup>25</sup> and proceed to the “formation” of a “new social doctrine,”<sup>26</sup> different from that of liberalism. As Comte himself later reiterates, “the main political movement could not but have completely changed its nature, and instead of being, as it appeared to be so far, purely critical, it will more and more tend to become distinctively organic.”<sup>27</sup>

This conclusion (stemming from the diagnosis outlined above) represents the first stage of the theoretical breakdown triggered by the frustration of political expectations. The next stage of this breakdown will be the elaboration of the new theory, one grounded on assumptions different from (and opposed to) that of individualism.

Such a diagnosis also presupposes specifically that the present state of crisis and ideological anarchy is due to the fact that the current political regime lacks any scientific basis. Therefore, to overcome this state of things and to attain political consensus, it is necessary to reorganize society according to scientific principles, ones that social science must discover and establish by investigating reality. Only principles of this kind would allow for reaching a broad agreement among all people on the essential political issues or, in Comte’s words, “for reaching an agreement of all men on certain points of doctrine, even in politics.”<sup>28</sup> This scientifically based politics was labelled as *positive politics*. Thus, in order to reorganize society successfully, it was necessary, as Comte states, “to elevate politics to the rank of the sciences of observation.” Only in this way could “the great current crisis” be overcome and a political order be established, one that was capable “of regulating and preserving society from the terrible and anarchical explosions with which it is threatened, by placing it on the true path to an improved social system, which the state of its knowledge imperiously demands.”<sup>29</sup> On this point, the possibility of extending scientific knowledge to the field of the human world and, consequently, organizing the political system scientifically is taken for granted.

It should be emphasized at this point that critics of the liberal regime were not driven simply by a fear of political disorder and the purpose of keeping social peace. If this had been their only concern, their theoretical answer would have been quite different. By taking for granted that establishing a perfect political order was

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<sup>24</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 62/252.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 76/264.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 78–79/266.

<sup>27</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 13. As it is well known, the terms “critical” and “organic” come from Saint-Simon.

<sup>28</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Valat, 25 décembre 1824, p. 148.

<sup>29</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 85/271.



feasible and that human history objectively tended towards it, what indeed drove those critics was the purpose of making progress towards such an order and helping bring human history to its logical culmination. For them, the perfect social organization was not simply a desirable goal, but something historically necessary and feasible. Furthermore, the theorists of the social were convinced that the moment had arrived in which the establishment of that organization was feasible in practice, as the theory for carrying it out was already available. As argued in *Le Producteur*, “we believe that society requires a complete reorganization; that the moment of that reorganization has arrived, that the general principles of a new doctrine and a new moral and political order are formulated, and that consequently the philosophical spirits should today abandon the critical direction for the organic direction.”<sup>30</sup>

The thesis that a causal connection exists between the frustration of political expectations and the shaping of the concept of society has been profusely accounted for and broadly expounded. Furthermore, many figures in the debate were themselves conscious of that connection and described it in detail. This is the case, for example, of *Le Producteur*, for which it was the political failure of individualism that drove the reconsideration of its premises and compelled the search for new theoretical principles. Given the cause of the failure, the search was focused on the reality external to individuals and the observation of collective facts and historical phenomena, or, according to *Le Producteur*, it focused on “the study of the social body.” The aim of this search was to form a body of scientific knowledge which could serve as the foundation for social and political organization.<sup>31</sup> More recently Pierre Rosanvallon (1985) has written, for instance, that “the birth of sociology can be understood as an answer to what is seen as the failure of the classical political philosophy” (of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). And David Klinck insightfully summarizes the knowledge on the issue when he writes that “Sociology took shape in early nineteenth-century France in response to the disappointment caused by the French Revolution. Efforts to arrive at a consensus concerning what sort of institutions were to be established in the new France had produced a decade of chronic instability and violence. As a result, the ideas of equality and individual rights, which had inspired the Revolution, had been brought into question. So too had the Enlightenment’s dream of establishing the human sciences, and of applying them to the construction of a rational and humane society.”<sup>32</sup> He even goes on to explain that authors responsible for the rise of sociology, such as Saint-Simon and Comte, subscribed “to the Enlightenment’s belief that it was possible to apply the method of the natural sciences to the study of man.” However, Klinck explains, “in their work the project of the Enlightenment underwent a metamorphosis. Society acquired a character which it had not possessed for the philosophes, as existing *sui generis*, and as having a logic and laws of its own. The belief in human agency gave

<sup>30</sup>St. A. B., “De l’esprit critique,” *Le Producteur*, 3 (1826), p. 121.

<sup>31</sup>“De quelques articles du Constitutionnel et du Journal des Débats,” *Le Producteur*, 2 (1826), pp. 195–196.

<sup>32</sup>Klinck (1994), p. 705.

way to the idea that a man's consciousness and will were shaped by underlying forces. The idea of the equality of rights was replaced by that of a society in which individuals were differentiated according to their natures and social functions.”<sup>33</sup>

## 2.1 The Critique of Individualism

In the 1820s, individualism became an object of increasing debate and a frequent target of critique.<sup>34</sup> Two kinds of critical objections were raised. Some critiques are political and moral, and are aimed at the results of the practical implementation of individualist tenets. Others are theoretical and call into question the very concepts of individual and human nature. It is the latter kind of critique that is of special interest here, as it constitutes the prelude to the concept of society. However, the former should always be kept in mind, since both are inescapably intertwined. Political and moral dissatisfaction with individualism acted as a powerful stimulus for the emergence of the theoretical critique, the reason being that the practical outcomes of individualism in the political and moral realms directly contributed to give rise to the frustration of expectations. These outcomes then became the main empirical phenomena under examination when elaborating the diagnosis of the liberal failure that led to the concept of society. Thus, this dissatisfaction eventually helped undermine the theoretical credibility of individualism.

Initially, the critique of individualism was directed against what were deemed to be its destabilizing effects in the moral and political domains (hence the abandonment of individualism was at first felt as a moral and political need). For Comte, the cause of the current state of crisis lay in the “spirit of individuality,” which, broadly extended among all classes, had imposed a “rude selfishness” and reduced everything to “the more abject individuality.” The primary consequence of this reflection was that behaviour does not abide by any general moral principle, but is instead governed by personal opinion. Hence the need for a “moral reorganization” by re-establishing a “social doctrine” capable of opposing the destabilizing effects of individualism.<sup>35</sup> This moral critique of individualism was naturally shared by many people at that time, either because they felt disillusioned with classical liberalism or because they were afraid of political instability. Comte detached himself irreconcilably from all of them, however, from the moment he came to hold that, in order to overcome such a state of moral crisis, it is a necessary condition to fully reject and dispense with the concept of the individual and to base the political system on new and substantially different theoretical premises.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid. Klinck cites authors such as Baker (1989) and Wokler (1987).

<sup>34</sup>The term “individualism” began to be used after 1810 and was commonly used in the 1820s. This term generally referred to the conception of the human being that underlies liberalism and classical Political Economy and whose origin traces back to Eighteenth-Century Enlightened thought. See Cassina (1996), as well as Swart (1962), Claeys (1986), and Piguet (2008).

<sup>35</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Valat, 30 mars 1825, p. 156.

Individualism entails political regimes being based on the personal opinion of their citizens. However, according to Comte, it is impossible to reach any stability or consensus on this basis. It is therefore necessary to repudiate “the dogma of unlimited freedom of conscience,” since proclaiming “the sovereignty of each individual mind” is a hindrance to “the uniform establishment of any system of general ideas,” without which “there can be no society.”<sup>36</sup> In order for a political regime to be stable, it must be founded on general principles which, by virtue of their scientific nature, are accepted by all citizens. Political systems cannot be the product of individual reason and the spontaneous interplay of personal opinions, but must be grounded upon an established scientific knowledge similar to that of the natural sciences.

As Comte liked to claim, “there is no freedom of conscience in astronomy, in physics, in chemistry, in physiology,” in the sense that we have to take on trust the principles established in these sciences by competent men. That it is different in politics is due to the fact that there are no “established principles” (which was precisely the cause of the state of “anarchy”).<sup>37</sup> Comte argued that such a complex issue as political decision-making cannot be left in the hands of individual judgement and beliefs, as was the case. On the contrary, political decisions must be taken on the basis of a scientific “doctrine,” one that allows for treating “politics as a physical science.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, what fuels and lurks at the heart of the theoretical rejection of the concept of the individual and the subsequent search for a new social theory is the practical purpose of providing the political system with more solid foundations. This was the purpose that drove Comte, as he himself confessed. This was, he says, “the base of all my works.”<sup>39</sup> What drove him was the assumption that it was possible to develop a scientific theory of the human world, similar to that of the natural sciences, which allows for overcoming the existing state of political crisis. What that involved was denying any scientific value to the previous theory grounded on the concept of the individual.

Given the diagnosis that attributes the failure of the liberal regime to theoretical causes, any critique of political liberalism entails, on principle, a theoretical critique of the concept of the individual. That is, the critique of the assumption that human beings are natural subjects and that, as such, they constitute the foundations of social organization and the political system, and have the power to shape them at will. The critique is initially aimed at liberal political theory, but it immediately widens its target to encompass theoretical individualism more generally. This is the case, for example, of P. J. Rouen, who begins by calling the aforesaid political theory into question and immediately goes on to reject the concept of the individual

<sup>36</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 55/246.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid. This argument is repeated almost literally in *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, pp. 47 and 211–212.

<sup>38</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Valat, 25 décembre 1824, p. 148.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., Lettre à Valat, 25 décembre 1824, p. 148.

itself.<sup>40</sup> According to him, “[T]he most general idea of this system [Charles Dunoyer’s] is the conception of individual man, of his needs and faculties, as the only bases of politics and the generating principles of social laws.”<sup>41</sup> Dunoyer is based here on Eighteenth-Century Philosophy and adopts its notion of “individual man.” For Rouen, the author “is based on the theory of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophy” and, therefore, “he makes his observation from the point of view of the individual man.” That is why Rouen regards it necessary to simultaneously attack both “this Eighteenth-Century philosophical and political doctrine” and the “author’s” doctrine.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, the main error of liberalism—and the cause of its failure—is, as Comte argues, that it is based on the assumption that the human being [“man”] is, “from all points of view,” “the centre of the system of nature, and, consequently, that he is endowed with an unlimited power of action over phenomena.” This assumption stems from the tendency of “man” “to form exaggerated ideas of his importance and his power.”<sup>43</sup> However, and according to Comte, as the field of natural sciences has shown, the human being is neither the centre nor the causal source of phenomena. In this field, the human being [“man”] “has been displaced from the centre of nature and placed in the rank he actually occupies in it” and, in consequence, he has “resigned himself to occupying only a subordinate and imperceptible place in the general system of the universe.” Furthermore, the development of the natural sciences has shown that human action is useless when it does not obey the ways in which nature operates: as in “medicine,” the human being has finally recognized “that his action was in vain when he did not work with that of the structure [organization], and all the more so when he worked against it.”<sup>44</sup> For Comte, something similar would happen in politics as soon as the study of this field reached its scientific stage. Also in this field, then, human beings would no longer be the centre of all things; their inability to act freely and to modify phenomena at will would be made clear, and they would be put in the place they should in fact occupy.

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<sup>40</sup>P. J. Rouen, “Examen d’un nouvel ouvrage de M. Dunoyer, ancien rédacteur du *Censeur Européen*,” *Le Producteur*, 2 (1826), p. 159. Rouen characterizes the liberal theory like this: “The main base of all political theories of modern times is taken from the science of individual man, studied by different methods. It is deduced from either the rights and duties or the needs and faculties, and therefore from the individual freedom or individual sovereignty, from which national sovereignty, elective representation, etc. are born.”

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 86/272. Comte attributes this conception of the human being to authors such as Rousseau, whom he criticizes. According to Comte, the view of the “supporters of metaphysical politics, like Rousseau,” of “the social state as the degeneration of a state of nature” was “invented by their imagination” and is no more than the “metaphysical analogue of the theological idea relating to the degradation of the human race by original sin.” (p. 89/274). That is why Comte calls Rousseau a “simple sophist” (*Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 251.).

<sup>44</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 87/273.

Thus, for Comte, if only because of its pre-scientific character, the individualist conception of human beings was false, should be dispensed with, and replaced by a more correct one.

The critique of individualism obviously involves setting aside the concept of human nature attached to it, rejecting the assumption that such a thing as a natural human subject does exist, one that is universal and independent of historical context. In Comte's words, it involves denying the existence of an "a priori human spirit." For him, the alleged existence of such a spirit is pure illusion, a chimera, and a dream, if not an absurdity.<sup>45</sup> According to Comte, there is no a priori human being that could be taken as an object of study. The only possible objects of study are human actions. Thus, the appropriate method for studying human beings cannot be psychological introspection, but observation of human actions, namely, of the development of historical facts. The patterns of human behaviour cannot be inferred from general abstract principles, but only from the a posteriori observation of facts. It is this observation, and not the supposed existence of a human nature, that allows us to explain such patterns of behaviour. According to Comte, there is no such thing as "a priori" in "human spirit" ("in its nature") that can be studied in order "to prescribe its rules of operation." This can only be done "a posteriori," on the basis of the results obtained through the observation of facts.<sup>46</sup> This critique entails relinquishing any concept of human nature, and regarding human subjectivity and behaviour as entirely historical phenomena, as we shall see below.

From this point of view, the only existing human nature is a merely biological entity and, therefore, the only role that can be attributed to human nature is that of being the first impulse behind historical development and the civilizational process. Human nature is only an initial physiological condition, but in no way does it constitute a causal factor in the shaping of social and political organization and human agency. According to Comte, the human need to exploit nature in order to obtain necessary resources undoubtedly constitutes the initial impulse of social organization. There is "a constant tendency of man to act on nature, to modify it to his advantage."<sup>47</sup> "This law" is in the origin of the civilizational progress and is "the necessary result of the instinctive tendency of the human race to improve itself."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, social organization is aimed at carrying out this necessary task collectively and more efficiently. The "final object" of "social order" is "to develop

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<sup>45</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Valat, 24 septembre 1819, p. 59. "Il résulte de là que les prétendues observations faites sur l'esprit humain considéré en lui-même et à priori sont de pures illusions; et qu'ainsi tout ce qu'on appelle *logique*, *métaphysique*, *idéologie*, est une chimère et une rêverie, quand ce n'est point une absurdité."

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Auguste Comte, "Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society," p. 83/269.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid, p. 97/282. These are, he writes later, "natural tendencies" that push "man to improve incessantly" (*Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 364.).

collectively this natural tendency, to regularize it and to channel it so that the amount of useful action can be maximized.”<sup>49</sup>

However, the historical development of social organization, which has gone through several stages over time and is aimed at reaching its “definitive state,” is an autonomous process, one governed by “fundamental laws.” And, therefore, political regime is only the outcome and expression of the existing social organization, and its role and aim is simply to facilitate the underlying process of civilizational progress in each of those stages.<sup>50</sup> According to Comte, “the social state in which the human race has always been found by observers” is “the necessary consequence of its [social] organization,”<sup>51</sup> and not the expression of a supposed ahistorical human nature or essence. In short, although “the principle of progressive civilization” is “inherent in the nature of the human race,” civilizational progress is a process causally independent from this nature.<sup>52</sup> Once started, the process escaped the intentional control of human beings, who cannot substantially alter its course.

These critiques of the concepts of individual and human nature are part of a debate that already in the mid-1820s was a completely open one, in which the two opposing stances were already sharply defined, namely, the advocates of the concepts of individual and society, respectively. That debate thoroughly pervades, for instance, the pages of *Le Producteur*. In this journal, the advocates of the concept of society not only explicitly oppose the so-called individualists, but identify the more outstanding among the latter, such as the philosopher Victor Cousin. Cousin was openly charged with being a supporter of the concept of the individual, of casting aside any notion of collective subject, and of only making use of a “psychological” method of analysis, one that was exclusively focused on studying “consciousness.” Cousin was openly charged with attempting to restore the “Cartesian” doctrines, advocating an “idealistic psychology” and making use of a “psychological reasoning” that ignored the “social domain” and dismissed any notion of collective perfectibility.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, the fact that a critical reaction against individualism was taking place led *Le Producteur* to claim that the predominance of individualism was reaching its end, and that, “after a long time,” the “reign of absolute individualism has finished.”<sup>54</sup>

While these critics were attacking individualism, they were also building an alternative theoretical conception. Indeed, their critique of individualism implied the existence and adoption of a new theoretical stance. If the individualist assumptions were denied, it was because new assumptions, though still in the

<sup>49</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 83/269.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 83/269–270.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 83/269.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 52/244.

<sup>53</sup>“Fragmens Philosophiques, par Victor Cousin,” *Le Producteur*, 3 (1826), pp. 331–332 and 335 and “Fragmens Philosophiques, par Victor Cousin,” Deuxième Article, *Le Producteur*, 4 (1826), pp. 20 y 23–25.

<sup>54</sup>“De l’inégalité,” *Le Producteur*, 3 (1826), p. 492.

making, were already available to replace them. Dissatisfaction with individualism neither exhausted itself nor resulted in a sort of theoretical paralysis, but constituted the starting point of a new way of conceiving of human beings. The very moment the concept of the individual was called into question, a new concept was taking shape and occupying its place. Critics did not confine themselves to demolishing the former, but proceeded immediately to epistemologically oppose both concepts. If the concept of the individual is claimed to be a false representation of human reality, that is because another conceptual representation of such a reality, granted a greater epistemological value, was already available. In short, from the outset, the critique of the concept of the individual was made on behalf of the concept of society, no matter how ill-defined or imprecise this concept might be at the beginning of the debate. According to the theoretical logic of the individualist paradigm, from the very moment the tenet that human beings are natural subjects was questioned, the following tenets were adopted: that society is a specific entity governed by its own laws and exerting some sort of causal pressure on its members. The concrete way of conceiving of this entity can eventually change over time, but those tenets are present from the beginning of the process of theoretical rethinking.

Thus, for example, Rouen did not limit his criticism to the individualist theory (which he describes as “incomplete” and with a “defective [vicieuse] method”), but went on to immediately postulate an alternative theoretical conception, which is the logical consequence and culmination of his criticism. If society is not an aggregate of individuals, then it must of necessity be an entity with specific properties. Therefore, not only does Rouen deny the existence of individuals and refrain from regarding them as the foundations of political regimes, but he also claims that society is a collective being and that humans are historical subjects whose actions are dependent on external causal factors. According to him, even “if society is no more than a collection of men and it contains but individual elements, it is not less true that, because of the gathering of these elements, they mutually modify each other, acquiring certain properties because of the influence exerted on them by the state of society.”<sup>55</sup>

The mere questioning of the concept of the individual inevitably leads to distinguishing between an aggregate of individuals and society, which combines individual actions in a certain fashion. As Comte writes, “any system of society, whether made for a handful of men or for several millions, has as its final objective to direct all individual powers towards a general goal. For society only exists where a general and combined action is exerted. On any other assumption, there is only an agglomeration of a certain number of individuals on the same soil. That is what distinguishes human society from that of other gregarious animals.”<sup>56</sup> For this reason political regime and social organization cannot be founded on a theory of the

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<sup>55</sup>P. J. Rouen, “Examen d’un nouvel ouvrage de M. Dunoyer, ancien rédacteur du *Censeur Européen*,” pp. 159–160.

<sup>56</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 66/255.



individual, but on a theory of society. "It is beyond all doubt", Rouen writes, "that the aspect of human societies is essentially variable and that the genre of influence [action] exerted on individuals by the whole differs to a great extent in certain times and in certain places. Thus, the study of the individual, separated from the study of the species, can only provide us with information that is excessively general and totally insufficient to serve as a basis for social organization [constitution]." <sup>57</sup>

Thus, and according to the above diagnosis, not only would the political failure of liberalism call the concept of the individual into question, it would also lead to the belief that political regimes are the effects of factors external to individuals themselves. Or what amounts to the same thing, that human phenomena constitute specific entities governed by their own rules. In this way, the crisis of the individualist theory defined the possibilities and prefigured the features of the new theoretical outlook. The fact that the liberal failure was attributed to the inherent flaws of the individualist theory set the terms of the debate and the subsequent theoretical rethinking, as well as foreshadowed the outcomes of this rethinking. For if human beings do not have the power to model the political system at will, as has been made quite clear, it follows that the political system operates independently of political actors. Once providence had been set aside, only this theoretical possibility could be imagined. Thus, the modern concept of society is already in germ in the theoretical reaction against individualism. Hence it follows that the new concept was not born from scratch, but from the theoretical horizon set up by the individualist paradigm itself. It also follows that the concept of society is not merely the result of the practical crisis of individualism, but the outcome of a genuine operation of logical inversion of the previous concept of the individual (an inversion induced by a certain diagnosis of the state of political affairs). In fact, this is the way the critics themselves conceived and made sense of the operation of theoretical reconstruction they were carrying out. For Comte, what this reconstruction entails is to stop seeing human beings as cause and to begin seeing them as effect, in other words, as the opposite to the individualist view. The "revolutions which have brought the different sciences to the positive state", he claims, "have had the general effect of *reversing* this primitive order of our ideas." <sup>58</sup>

The consequence of the theoretical crisis of individualism was the making of a new object of knowledge: society or the social. From that moment on, the term society did not simply denote the collective human phenomena, in the same sense as the traditional expression "human society." Rather, the term was now a concept that implied attributing certain properties to these phenomena, such as being governed by intrinsic laws and internal forces, and having a power of causation. To study that object, a new scientific discipline was needed, one equipped with new analytical tools and methods. The task of studying human affairs cannot be

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<sup>57</sup>P. J. Rouen, "Examen d'un nouvel ouvrage de M. Dunoyer, ancien rédacteur du *Censeur Européen*," p. 160.

<sup>58</sup>Auguste Comte, "Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society," p. 87/272. Emphasis mine.



successfully undertaken by the so-called “science of man,” established in the eighteenth century, a science whose object of knowledge was the individual and which took for granted the existence of a universal human nature. From now on, that task should be accomplished by “social science” or the “science of society”<sup>59</sup> (as it began to be called), a science whose object of knowledge was not the natural individual, but the human being as historical subject.

This epistemological move away from the science of the individual to the science of society was made evident by the reaction against the previous attempts of creating a science of human affairs on the basis of so-called Physiology. For instance, in the 1810s, Saint-Simon had already devoted to this undertaking, drawing on the work of authors such as Cabanis and Gall. From this new perspective, Physiology could provide knowledge about human beings as biological creatures, but was an inadequate tool to study humans as historically shaped subjects. It was a reaction against a naturalistic explanation of human behaviour and against attempts to explain this behaviour on the basis of the organic properties of human beings. For critics of individualism, humans were not merely organic beings, but beings that were always located in an historical context that contributed to shaping them as subjects. In fact, the historicization of human beings constituted the cornerstone of the new science of society.

As argued in *Le Producteur*, Physiology provided knowledge on the “individual state,” which is similar everywhere, but not on collective phenomena, which are diverse and changing. Physiology “as science of man is able to provide a positive basis for individual moral” and, therefore, “it will be useful forever.”<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Physiology facilitated an understanding of natural human needs and propensities, and of those individual states that are similar at any time and place.<sup>61</sup> However, this knowledge of individual states provided none on collective phenomena, since the latter, unlike the former, are historically changeable. “Social phenomena,” it is argued, “are not the same in different parts of the world and in different periods of history. While the individual always has the same instincts, the same passions, the same needs, social organization differs widely and suffers many and marked mutations.”<sup>62</sup>

This then proves that society is not the expression or outcome of individual state, but constitutes a different phenomenon, and that the development of humanity is governed by its own laws. Such a fact “demonstrates” that “society is not merely the expression of the individual tendencies and that the species is subjected to particular laws other than those of physiology.”<sup>63</sup> In the particular case of political

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<sup>59</sup>That new science of society or of the social was at first coined by Comte as “social physics” (Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à d’Eichthal, 5 août 1824, p. 109). Later, he replaced this label with that of “sociology.”

<sup>60</sup>B. Z., “De la Physiologie,” *Le Producteur*, 3 (1826), p. 122.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 132–133.

action, in no way can this be regarded as an expression of a natural human being. Were this to be the case, it is argued, such an action would take on similar forms in every time and place. However, what one can observe is a great variety of forms. In the author's words, if politics were the "combined result of passions, instincts, and individual reason," then political regimes would have a fixed and not a variable form.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, he adds, the variation of political regimes has regularities and obeys a "constant order," which makes them a different object requiring a particular science.<sup>65</sup> The diversity of political systems thus compels us to distinguish between human beings and the historical development of the human species, to refrain from taking the latter as an effect of the former, and to regard such a development as a specific phenomenon. That is why, the author concludes, physiology is a useful tool for knowing the human being, but is useless for knowing social phenomena. As already remarked, the study of the latter requires a new scientific discipline.

Some human phenomena, the author insists, are organic in nature, while others presuppose and need a "state of society," such as, for example, "the set of moral affections and feelings belonging to the species." The physiologists' mistake lies in their confusing these two kinds of phenomenon, resulting in their inability to realize that both phenomena are different in nature and that the latter cannot be deduced from the former.<sup>66</sup> Given "individual Physiology's" "epistemological limitations," the author advocates the creation of a "social Physiology" to explain social phenomena. The former can provide us with a general knowledge on the "origin of civilization," but human history has undergone a series of changes and mutations of which "the mere knowledge of man cannot give us the key." Therefore, it is necessary to create a specialized science that deals with "an order of particular facts" and that studies them "with the methods used in the other sciences."<sup>67</sup>

Comte makes the same distinction between two kinds of human phenomena and their respective scientific disciplines. According to him, in "living beings" there are two "orders of phenomena essentially different, those relating to the individual and those concerning the species, above all when this is a sociable one" (as is the case of humans). Especially "with regard to man," he follows, this "distinction is fundamental." The second type of phenomena are "more complicated and more particular than the first," hence the need for two different disciplines to study each one: "the physiology itself and the social physics."<sup>68</sup> "Social phenomena," Comte explains, are influenced by the "individual's physiological laws." At the same time, however, relations between individuals constitute a specific realm and are a consequence of "the action of each generation over the next one." This means that "for accurately studying the social phenomena" one must start from "a profound knowledge of the

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>B. Z., "Physiologie. Des termes de passage de la physiologie individuelle à la physiologie sociale," *Le Producteur*, 4 (1826), pp. 80–82.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>68</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Premier, 1830, pp. 93–94.

laws of individual life.” But, at the same time, contrary to what “some physiologists” believed, “social physics” is not a “simple appendix of physiology.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, distinguishing between “the two sciences” is a question of “really fundamental importance.” As “it would be impossible to treat the collective study of the species as pure deduction from the study of the individual, since social conditions, which modify the action of physiological laws,” are “the most essential” factor. Thus, even though it has a “necessary close relation with physiology itself,” “social physics must be founded upon its own specific body of direct observations.”<sup>70</sup>

Many of the basic ingredients of the modern concept of society are recognizable in this move against a purely physiological conception of human beings. Firstly, critics establish a theoretical distinction between individual and social phenomena, and the latter is causally dissociated from the former. In so doing, they deny the existence of a universal human nature and strip it of all value when explaining meaningful human behaviour. Secondly, they attribute to social phenomena the condition of unintentional and self-regulated entities and, therefore, the condition of objects of knowledge of a new scientific discipline, the science of the social.

The constitution of the social as object of knowledge is also the result of another critical questioning of classical liberalism. One of the main charges against liberal theory is that it is founded upon and operates with concepts that are essentialist, absolute, and abstract in character (in the sense that they are ahistorical concepts that do not match any real phenomena and have been elaborated regardless of any empirical observation of human beings and their actions). This is the case of the concepts of the individual and human nature. According to critics’ terminology, the main flaw of liberal theory is its *metaphysical* character. In this feature lies the principal cause of the failure of the liberal regime and the present state of crisis.<sup>71</sup> More precisely, this failure and this crisis have made it clear that liberal concepts are purely metaphysical in character, in the sense that they lack any epistemological connection with reality. That is why the critique of metaphysics was a central piece of the movement against individualism and, therefore, one of the main architects of the formation of the concept of society.

Indeed, the critics consider that the basic concepts of liberal theory refer to entities that have no real existence and that are understood as pre-constituted and non-historical essences. In other words, they are a priori concepts that lack any empirical foundation. In fact, according to Comte, liberal metaphysics is no more than a modified version of the previous theological doctrine, a version in which “the supernatural agencies are replaced by personalized abstractions...regarded as capable of causing all observed phenomena by themselves.” Hence, “the explanation”

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>71</sup>*Le Producteur* brands the liberal political theory and individualism as “metaphysical,” at the same time as it denies them any capacity of “social reorganization.” (*Le Producteur*, 4 (1826), p. 347).

of such phenomena still continues to consist in “assigning to each phenomenon its corresponding abstract entity.”<sup>72</sup> From Comte’s perspective, a relevant example of a metaphysical concept is that of social contract (which in turn derives from the concept of human nature). For him, the liberal doctrine [“doctrine of the peoples”] expresses “the metaphysical state of politics,” as “it is founded in its entirety on the abstract and metaphysical assumption of an original social contract, prior to all development of the human faculties by civilization.”<sup>73</sup>

The denial of the existence of any (human) absolute essence is thus the cornerstone of the theoretical reaction against individualism. Such a reaction started as a sort of conversion to historical relativism and as an attempt to escape, in the domain of “political ideas,” “the vice of the absolute,” as Comte himself says when describing his own intellectual trajectory.<sup>74</sup> In contrast to classical liberalism’s absolute or metaphysical conception of human beings, Comte denies the existence of any absolute. “In a word,” he writes, “all general ideas, but above all social ideas, are all polluted with a radically false idea, that of the absolute. There is nothing absolute in the world, everything is relative.”<sup>75</sup> In opposition to that metaphysical conception, the critics maintain the thesis that humans are not natural beings, but historical subjects, in the dual sense that they are ever-changing and are shaped by their living circumstances. The historicization of human subjects is thus the main theoretical effect of the frustration of political expectations and represents the first step in the move away from individualist theory that led to the concept of society. By opposing the historical and the metaphysical, by denying the existence of universal essences, and by claiming that any human phenomenon is historical in character, the way was paved for the subsequent theoretical assumption that every human phenomenon is historically shaped. Also at this point, an operation of logical inversion of the prior paradigm took place, as the fact that human beings

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<sup>72</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, Tome Premier, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 83/269. For Comte, any notion of a priori is “gloomy metaphysics” and a “profound obstacle” for elaborating a “positive philosophy,” that is, a scientific theory of human phenomena. In this point, he is criticizing the Kantian conception of this matter. (Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à d’Eichthal, 5 août 1824, pp. 106–107).

<sup>74</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Valat, 15 juin 1818, p. 42. He writes below that “our absurd education system instill in us all too much absolute ideas.” The expression “relativist conversion” is also used by Gouhier (1933, p. 227) to describe this episode of Comte’s intellectual biography.

<sup>75</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Valat, 15 mai 1818, p. 37. Some years later he will state: “Everything is relative; that is the only absolute principle.” (*Système de politique positive*, T. IV, *Appendice Général, Préface Spéciale*, Paris, 1854, p. 2). As early as 1817, he had also written: “It is no longer a question of expounding interminably in order to know what is the best government; speaking in an absolute sense, there is nothing good, there is nothing bad; the only absolute is that everything is relative; everything is relative especially when social institutions are concerned.” (“Premier aperçu d’un travail sur le gouvernement parlementaire, considéré comme régime transitoire” (*Écrits de jeunesse, 1816–1828*, Paris-The Hague, École Pratique des Hautes Études and Mouton, 1970, p. 71. Translation taken from Pickering (1993, p. 113).

were not natural and universal entities implied, for the critics, that they must necessarily be historically constituted subjects.

That liberal theory is metaphysical in character not only implied that human subjects were deprived of their historicity, but that such a theory lacked any scientific foundation because it took non-existing entities (individual, human nature, and social contract) as its object of knowledge. Knowledge of non-existing phenomena is impossible to produce. Thus, the critique of liberal metaphysics has both a theoretical and an epistemological dimension: it entails the need to develop a new science of the human world whose objects of knowledge are no longer purely abstract entities, but historically concrete human subjects. That is why the critics insistently advocate the need for a kind of empirical shift, in order to make the observation of human actions and historical development—rather than the aforementioned metaphysical entities—the starting point of the process of knowledge creation. This is indeed the epistemological shift the critics presume to have successfully carried out when devising their alternative social theory. Whether this actually happened and whether they were able to escape from “metaphysics” and the tyranny of a priori concepts are questions to be dealt with and assessed later. As Comte argues on this matter, liberal theory lacks scientific basis because it is grounded upon purely abstract notions and not upon the observation of reality, as is the case of so-called positive politics. For this reason positive politics “discovers,” whereas metaphysical (like theological) politics simply “invents.”<sup>76</sup>

The weight of metaphysics is especially heavy in the case of classical political economy, since this is also based, as argued in *Le Producteur*, on the “abstract individual,” instead of “looking for evidences through the rigorous study of the succession and chain of social phenomena.”<sup>77</sup> In order to know the human world, the argument goes on, it is not enough to study the abstract individual, the “development of the human species” must also be studied. If the “science of social organisation” is based upon “momentary events” or “more or less ingenious conjectures on the constitution of the *individual*,” it does not allow us to know human reality and to “fully see the subject one wishes to encompass.” Such a reality can only be known through “the study of history (...) regarded as the series of developments of the *human species*.”<sup>78</sup> As the author reiterates, “the abstract notion of being” must not be confused “with its objective reality,” and, consequently, it is impossible to “deduce the one from the other.”<sup>79</sup> Quite the contrary. Only social phenomena can be objects of observation and knowledge, as only they really exist. Therefore, we should stop pursuing “the abstract being” and deal only with “the

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<sup>76</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 106/289.

<sup>77</sup>P. E., “Considérations sur les progrès de l’économie politique, dans ses rapports, avec l’organisation sociale” (premier article), *Le Producteur*, 4 (1826), p. 373.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 379–380.

<sup>79</sup>“Fragmens Philosophiques, par Victor Cousin,” p. 20.

phenomenal existence of the human species, with “the whole and the details of social life.”<sup>80</sup>

## 2.2 Society as Civilization

The theoretical and epistemological critique of individualism resulted in the formulation of the modern concept of society. This concept entails the assumption that the historical development of humankind is governed by its own inherent laws and therefore constitutes a process that is independent of the human intentional actions. Human civilization has unfolded through several stages, by virtue of an internal mechanism of change that is beyond the human capacity of conscious manipulation. The existence of that autonomous and self-regulated domain entails in turn that human institutions (in particular, the political regime) are the effect or expression of the state of the civilization process at all times. The modern concept of society was first formulated in this form, along with the initial meaning of that concept, and the initial way of conceiving of *social causality*. In this early formulation of the new concept, the property of being an entity governed by intrinsic laws and of possessing the power for causally determining human institutions and behaviours was attributed to the process of civilizational development of humankind. What is meant here by civilization is the state of scientific knowledge, cultural creation, and economic activity (usually termed as industry). These are the three basic components of human civilization. According to the well-known Comtean definition, “[C]ivilization consists, properly speaking, in the development of the human mind [esprit], on the one hand, and, on the other hand, in the development of man’s action on nature which is its consequence. In other words, the elements of which the idea of civilization is composed are: the sciences, the arts and industry; this last expression being taken in the widest sense, the one we have always given it”<sup>81</sup> (that is, that the term industry designates productive or economic activity in general).

The prime theoretical premise held by the critics of the individualist paradigm is, as has already been said, that the development of human civilization is a process governed by intrinsic laws. In Comte’s words, “the progress of civilization develops according to a necessary law.” The experience of the past proves “that the progressive development of civilization is subject to a natural and irrevocable course, derived from the laws of human organization, which in turn becomes the supreme law of all political phenomena.”<sup>82</sup> In that respect, as he later asserts, “there can be no doubt that the course of civilization, considered in its elements, is subject to a

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>81</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 90/276.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 93/278.

natural and constant law which dominates all particular human differences.”<sup>83</sup> That is why Comte explicitly establishes an analogy between the laws governing the course of civilization and those governing the natural world, such as the “law of gravitation.”<sup>84</sup> The fact that “civilization is subject to” a “determined,” “invariable,” and “natural” course in turn implies that such a course is not only independent of human will, but also imposes upon it, or, in his own words, that it is “independent of and dominating all [human] combinations.”<sup>85</sup> The law governing the progressive course of civilization prescribes and determines specifically the stages through which it passes. As Comte emphasizes, “[t]he fundamental law that governs the natural course of civilization rigorously prescribes all the successive states through which the human race is bound to pass in its general development.” The course of civilization deriving from that law is “essentially unalterable as far as the substance is concerned” and “none of the intermediate steps can be overstepped, and no true retrograde steps can be taken.”<sup>86</sup>

The evidence that civilization is governed by its own laws can be found, according to Comte, in the fact that when history is observed it becomes clear that civilization has followed an “uninterrupted and ever-growing progress,” from “the most distant times in history up to our own day.” There can be no doubt, he continues, “of this great fact” with regard to the last centuries, since “the introduction of the sciences of observation into Europe by the Arabs and the enfranchisement of the communes.” But it is no less incontestable for the preceding eras. That progress is clear, in particular, in the fields of “industry” and social organization, as is proven by the establishment of Christianity and the formation of the feudal regime, far superior to Greek and Roman organizations.<sup>87</sup> It can certainly be concluded “that civilization has been continually on an onward course in all its aspects.”<sup>88</sup> The aforesaid theoretical premise is also backed by the fact that the development of civilization is a universal process, following along the same lines for different peoples, with no contact between them. This identity of all the civilizational development of all peoples “could only have been produced by the influence of a natural course of civilization, uniform for all peoples, because it derives from the fundamental laws of human organization, which are common to all.”<sup>89</sup> The issue of the relationship between the concepts of society and progress will be dealt with below.

If humanity is regarded as an organized body governed by its own laws, that theoretical premise is an outright rejection of the concept of the individual. From this viewpoint, “humankind” constitutes “a *collective* being” which “develops”

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 97/281.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 108/291.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., pp. 95–96/279–280.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 97/281–282.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., pp. 93–94/278.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 94/278.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 95/279.

through time obeying an internal “law,” the law of “a progressive development.”<sup>90</sup> But the fact that humankind constitutes “an organized body growing progressively according to invariable laws” implies that the individual, understood as “an *abstract and rational* [*de raison*] being” does not exist as such. Only the historically located individual exists: one who takes different forms in different places and at different times, depending on the stage of historical development of humankind. Therefore, it is not “*the individual man*,” but “the life of the human species” that must be taken as the object of observation and study.<sup>91</sup>

This theory of history thus entails no longer considering human beings as the causal foundation of social and political organizations but to begin considering them as simple executors and instruments of the historical development. From this theoretical outlook, so to speak, history is seen as a process without a human subject. This conception is purposely formulated in outright opposition to the individualist theory of history and historical change that serves as the basis of the liberal regime. The importance of this lies in the fact that this new theory of human history constitutes the means by which the modern concept of society and the notion of social causality could emerge. Indeed, from the assumption that civilization takes a pre-determined course, it follows that social organization is not the causal origin of the state of civilization, but that, on the contrary, the latter is the “product” or “consequence” of the former. “Social organization,” states Comte, “does not at all regulate the advance of civilization; it is, on the contrary, its product.”<sup>92</sup> Comte concludes that the consequence of the progress of civilization being a natural process is that “the state of the social regime is a necessary derivation from that of civilization.”<sup>93</sup>

Thus, the central premise of the new theoretical paradigm, which aimed to rectify and replace the individualist paradigm, is that, since the historical development of humankind is governed by its own laws, it determines the form of social and political organization at each stage. This premise was formulated categorically and unequivocally by Comte: “When we consider civilization from this precise and elementary point of view, it is easy to see that the state of social organization is essentially dependent upon that of civilization, and that the former must be regarded as a consequence of the latter, where the politics of imagination [i.e., liberalism] views them as isolated and even wholly independent.”<sup>94</sup> Comte himself then explains the meaning, significance, and theoretical scope of that premise: “The state of civilization necessarily determines that of social organization, whether in the spiritual or the temporal dimension, from the two most important points of view.

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<sup>90</sup>*Doctrine de Saint-Simon: exposition. Première année, 1828–1829* (Troisième édition revue et augmentée), Paris, 1831, p. 107.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>92</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 94/278–279.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 95/279.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 90–91/276.



First, it determines its nature, for it fixes the goal of activity for society; furthermore, it prescribes its essential form, for it creates and develops the temporal and spiritual social forces which are destined to direct this general activity. It is indeed clear that the collective activity of the social body, being only the sum of the individual activities of all its members, directed toward a common goal, could not be different in nature from its elements, which are obviously determined by the more or less advanced state of the sciences, the arts, and industry. It is still more palpable that it would be impossible to conceive the prolonged existence of a political system which does not confer supreme power on the preponderant social forces, whose nature is invariably prescribed by the state of civilization. What reasoning indicates, experience confirms.”<sup>95</sup>

It is true, Comte argues, that “social organization in turn reacts inevitably on civilization, with more or less energy. But this influence is only secondary, and its very great importance must not lead us to invert the natural order of dependence.” That is, it must not lead us to lose sight of what is the primary and determinant causal factor. The evidence of that causal dependence is, as experience shows, that “if social organization is constituted in opposition to the movement of civilization, the latter always in the end prevails over the former.”<sup>96</sup> Therefore, he concludes, “social organization must not be looked upon, either in the present or in the past, in isolation from the state of civilization, but that it must be looked upon as a necessary derivation from that state. If, for ease of study, we sometimes deem it useful to examine them separately, we must always think of this abstraction as simply provisional; we must never lose sight of the subordination established by the nature of things.”<sup>97</sup> From all this it follows, according to Comte, that chance and causality have little effect on the development of human civilization. Chance, he claims, “has only the tiniest of parts in scientific and industrial discoveries.” It “plays an essential role only in discoveries of no importance.” And the same can be said of the role of the genius. That role is equally insignificant, as genius is nothing more than the instrument of a civilizational process that is impersonal and autonomous.<sup>98</sup>

That is why, among other reasons, such a process is the result of a generational chain that never breaks. Each new generation starts not from scratch, but from the inheritance bequeathed from previous generations, and each new civilizational progress (in sciences, arts, and industry) is a consequence of previous progress. According to Comte, the history of human knowledge proves “that in the sciences and the arts all works are interlinked, whether in the same generation or from one generation to another, in such a way that the discoveries of one generation prepare the way for those of the following generation, as their way had been prepared by those of the preceding generation.” That is why “the power of isolated genius is much less than we had supposed it to be.” As “the man who is most illustrious for

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 91/276.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 92/277.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 93/277–278.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., p. 96/280.

his great discoveries almost always owes the greater part of his success to his predecessors in the career on which he is proceeding.” In short, that “in the development of the sciences and the arts the human mind follows a determined course, surpassing the greatest intellectual powers, which come to be understood, so to speak, as mere instruments destined to produce the successive discoveries at the appointed time.”<sup>99</sup> These successive stages “are constantly chained in a determined order,” since each one is “the necessary result of the precedent and the indispensable motor of the following.”<sup>100</sup> Thus, the fact that each civilizational stage is the result of the precedent stage is what allows us to claim that historical development is a non-intentional process.

Hence, this theoretical approach (that could well be called “historical determinism”)<sup>101</sup> conceives the historical development of humankind as an objective process, in the dual sense that it is not intentional and that it determines the form of social organization. This approach entails relinquishing any notion of the individual as creator and replacing it with that of an historical subject, whose ideas are no longer seen as causes, but as effects. From this standpoint, human beings embody such a process, although they neither produce nor control it. On the contrary, they are causally determined by it.

The existence of a relation of causal determination between state of civilization, and social and political organization has been made clear, according to Comte, throughout history. Thus, for example, the form of social organization he calls “military system” was a “necessary consequence of the imperfect state of civilization at that time. Industry being in its infancy, society naturally had to take war as the goal of its activity.” The form of social organization he called “theological system” was, however, a consequence of the fact that “the third element of civilization, the arts, was the predominant.”<sup>102</sup> Likewise, historical change, the passage from one type of organization to another is, from this perspective, an unconscious and not an intentional process. Comte illustrates this theoretical postulate with the example of the transition from feudalism to liberal society. According to him, “the decline” of “the feudal and theological system” was the result of “a succession of modifications” which have been “independent of any human will” and to which human beings have contributed unconsciously. That transition was, in short, “the necessary consequence of the course of civilization.”<sup>103</sup> A case in point are the communes during that transition period. As they were emancipated from military and theological power, communes were devoted to developing scientific and industrial capacities, which in turn provoked the decline of the old system and

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 96/280–281.

<sup>100</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 366.

<sup>101</sup>That is, for example, the term used by Reardon (Reardon 1971, p. 528) when characterizing the approach of authors such as Philippe Buchez and Comte.

<sup>102</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 91/276.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., p. 51/243.

paved the way for the “new social system.” But the communes did not act consciously and there was no preconceived plan.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, according to Comte, it was the development of science and industry that provoked changes in social and political organization in recent centuries. For him, these changes would have been no more than the effect “of the ever-growing expansion of the scientific element and the industrial element.” Historical phenomena such as the “passage of polytheism to theism,” the “protestant reformation,” the “passage from the Roman state to the feudal state,” and the decline of the latter were “chiefly produced” by scientific progress and by the “increasing importance of the industrial element.” All these phenomena, Comte concludes, “testify to the close dependence of social organization on civilization.”<sup>105</sup>

Given that these critics of liberalism are driven by the practical purpose of reorganizing the political regime on a more sound and stable basis, their efforts concentrate mainly on developing a new theory of political system. On this matter, as we have just seen, their central theoretical premise is that political regimes are causally determined by the state of civilization. That is, by the scientific, cultural, and economic conditions prevailing at a given historical moment. According to this assumption, political regimes do not establish and transform as the result of individual will and premeditated and conscious design, as individualists maintain. On the contrary, every political regime is entrenched in a certain state of civilization and, therefore, its shaping and transformation are dependent on the general laws of historical development. Political regimes are not historically arbitrary human creations, but historically necessary products. And political subjects are not individuals endowed with a contingent creative capacity, but are embodiments of a given civilization state, one that shapes them as such and induces them to act and to organize politically in a certain way. It is in this sense, according to Comte, that political regimes can be described as “spontaneously produced and modified” and although they can be variable and relative, they are not arbitrary, since they are determined.<sup>106</sup> It follows from this that political changes are a consequence of transformations in social states and that “any government must change as a consequence of [par suite du] the progress of civilization.”<sup>107</sup>

On this matter, according to the critics, so far human beings have been attributed with a capacity to shape and modify the political system that they actually do not possess, and political action has been mistakenly conceived to be a sovereign means of intervening in the world. “[U]p to the present,” as Comte says, “man has believed

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<sup>104</sup>Auguste Comte, “Summary Appraisal of the General Character of Modern History,” Auguste Comte, *Early Political Writings*, p. 25–26/“Sommaire appréciation de l’ensemble du passé moderne” [1820], *Écrits de jeunesse, 1816–1828*, pp. 222–223. The expression “new social system” is on p. 32/228.

<sup>105</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 92/277.

<sup>106</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 341.

<sup>107</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Valat, 8 septembre 1824, p. 128.

in the unlimited power of his political combination for the improvement of the social order.”<sup>108</sup> This is still a mistaken belief, since it is the social state, and not human action, which determines shape of political regimes. “[I]t is absurd”, Comte claims, “to conceive the political system in isolation, to derive all the forces of society from it, whereas on the contrary it receives all its force from society and without it is null and void.” In other words, that “the political order is only and can only be the expression of the civil order, which means, in other words, that the preponderant social forces necessarily end up in control.” And he concludes: “It is just one step from there to recognizing the subordination of the political system to the state of civilization. For, if it is clear that the political order is the expression of the civil order, it is at least as obvious that the civil order itself is only the expression of the state of civilization.”<sup>109</sup>

This fact implies, in particular, that the political regime is not the embodiment of certain absolute principles, but rather the product of certain historically shaped principles. As Comte himself stresses, if “the political regime must be and is necessarily relative to the state of civilization,” then “the best, for each era, is that which best conforms to that state. There is not, therefore, and there cannot be a political regime absolutely preferable to all the others; there are only states of civilization of which some are more perfected than others.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, the existence of a causal linkage between social state and political regime does not only imply that both always coincide. In Comte’s words, as a consequence of “the laws concerning social phenomena, every nation always has the government which befits its state of civilization.”<sup>111</sup>

It also implies that there are no more or less natural or perfect political regimes, whose grade of perfection can be measured on the basis of some general and abstract principle. On the contrary, all political regimes are equally natural, since they are the historically possible ones. “Every government system which has endured for some time is necessarily good during the time it has been in force,” Comte claims.<sup>112</sup>

Disagreements on this point with classical liberalism, as the critics themselves remark, are very strong. As Comte emphatically argues, with regard to the origin of the liberal regime, “it would be certainly absurd to think that the successive organization of the new system was conducted by scientists, artists and artisans in accordance with a premeditated plan, followed unwaveringly from the eleventh

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<sup>108</sup> Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 88/273–274.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p. 92/277. He writes elsewhere that “the political regime” is, “in the long run, of all necessity, radically in accordance with the corresponding state of civilization.” (*Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 336).

<sup>110</sup> Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 106/289. Here Comte uses the terms “social state” and “state of civilization” synonymously.

<sup>111</sup> Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Valat, 8 septembre 1824, p. 128.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

century to the present.” That is so because “at no time has the progress of civilization obeyed so systematic a course, conceived in advance by a man of genius, and adopted by the masses.” Such a thing, he says, is “completely impossible in the nature of things; for the superior law of the progress of the human mind leads and dominates everything; for it, men are only instruments. Although this force derives from us, it is not any more in our power to remove ourselves from its influence or to control its action, than it is to change at will the original impetus which makes our planet revolve around the sun.”<sup>113</sup> In fact, Comte adds, the “great error of the legislators and philosophers of antiquity consisted precisely in seeking to subject the course of civilization to their systematic views, whereas their plans ought on the contrary to have been subordinated to it.” Such a course, he concludes, “is beyond our control.”<sup>114</sup>

The disagreement with political liberal theory is also sharpened, as already remarked, by the fact that such a theory, as the critics see it, starts from the assumption that there are absolute and universal principles which can be put into practice irrespective of historical circumstances. Classical liberalism, as Comte says, is distinguished by possessing an “absolute character,” that is, by trying to “establish” a “type” of “social order” “without having in mind any particular state of civilization.”<sup>115</sup> Liberalism conceives its “system of institutions” as “a sort of universal panacea applicable, with infallible certainty,” whatever the “degree of civilization of the people” may be and regardless of the state of civilization.<sup>116</sup> The fact, the arguments goes on, that the political liberal project has been formulated “regardless of the state of civilization” is no more than the consequence that liberalism has envisaged “social organization in an abstract manner, that is to say independently of the state of civilization,” and it sees this latter “as being subject to no law.”<sup>117</sup> Here lies the main flaw of political liberal theory (and the cause of its practical failure). Since liberals have not taken into account that humankind’s historical development is an objective process, they have been unable to understand that for a political regime to be successfully established, it must concur with such a development.

The fact that political liberal theory is rooted in an abstract and universal concept, and not in concepts inferred from observing historical development, is what leads the critics to consider such a theory as unscientific, or, to be more exact, pre-scientific. Thus, since this has been the cause of the practical failure of liberalism, the main goal set by the critics is to endow the political regime with a scientific basis. Only by so doing is it possible to establish a political regime with a

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<sup>113</sup>Auguste Comte, “Summary Appraisal of the General Character of Modern History,” pp. 23–24/220–221.

<sup>114</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23, note c/221, note 1.

<sup>115</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 88/273/274.

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 88–89/274.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 89/275.

sound and stable basis, one able to guarantee harmony and consensus. In order to achieve that goal and to turn politics into a science, two requisites must be met. The first, in terms of method, requires politics, like the natural sciences, to be based on the “observation” of reality, and not on “imagination.”<sup>118</sup> For the second, in terms of theory, “we must [...] conceive social organization to be intimately tied to the state of civilization and determined by it; on the other hand we must consider the course of civilization to be subjected to an invariable law founded on the nature of things.”<sup>119</sup> These are the two essential requisites that must be met by political theory in order to gain scientific status and reach the stage of positive politics, as Comte calls it.

According to the critics, the contrast between the positive political theory and its predecessors is therefore very sharp. That contrast is evident in the way both types of theories conceive the process of establishing the definitive political regime. Whereas liberals and counter-revolutionaries mean to set up the political system they regard as the *best*, the supporters of scientific politics mean to set up the political system that is *feasible* according to historical conditions. As Comte argues, “theological and metaphysical politics imagines the system which suits the present state of civilization, in accordance with the absolute condition that it should be the best possible.” “Positive politics,” on the contrary, imagines that political system “solely on the basis that it must be the one that the course of civilization tends to produce.” For Comte, adopting one or another conception has huge practical consequences, as it will be decisive for the success or failure of the task of establishing the definitive political regime. “In accordance with this different way of proceeding, it would be equally impossible either for the politics of imagination to find the true social reorganization or for the politics of observation not to find it. The one makes the greatest effort to invent the cure, without considering the disease. The other, persuaded that the principal cause of recovery is the vital strength of the patient, limits itself to predicting, by observation, the natural outcome of the crisis, so as to facilitate it by removing the obstacles created by empiricism.”<sup>120</sup>

The political proposition which follows from that new theoretical conception is that human beings should entirely abandon the aim of managing and directing political processes intentionally. “Political phenomena,” Comte asserts, are “sub-jected” to “true natural laws” and, therefore, it would be “vain pretention” to want to govern “these genre of phenomena at our own will.”<sup>121</sup> Human beings can but try to uncover the laws that govern such phenomena in order to accommodate them and foresee the consequences. The appropriate strategy is not to impose a certain political order regardless of the state of civilization—as classical liberalism had tried to do—, but to observe and examine the social state in order to set up a political system in accordance with it. Given that history is a process governed by

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<sup>118</sup>The terms in inverted commas in *ibid.*, p. 104/ 289.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 90/275.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 106/289.

<sup>121</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 308.

necessity, human beings cannot act on its causes, but only on its effects (the same as in the physical world). As for historical development, as Comte states, only its “secondary effects ... are subject to our control.” Therefore, “all we can do is obey this law (our true providence) intelligently, understanding the course it prescribes to us, instead of being pushed about by it blindly; and it is worth saying in passing that it is precisely what constitutes the great philosophical progress reserved for our age.”<sup>122</sup>

And, since then, this proposition has indeed become an inherent part of any political theory grounded upon the concept of society as objective entity (e.g. Marxian socialism). According to that proposition, the advent of the perfect or definitive political system is a historical necessity (and not the result of human volition) and, therefore, human beings can but aspire to become conscious agents of that necessity and to act accordingly. Thus, if the critics—including the Marxists—advocate the establishment of a definitive social order, it is because they consider that a point in history has been reached at which such an establishment is objectively necessary and feasible. They believe so for two interconnected reasons. First, because they consider that the development of civilization has reached a state that indeed requires this type of social order. Second, because nowadays it is possible to know the human world scientifically and, consequently, to establish social and political organization on scientific grounds. For them, the definitive—stable and harmonic—society is not a wish, but a scientific possibility.

The theoretical premise that political regimes are determined by the social or civilization state is what led authors like Comte to criticize and heavily dismiss the so-called *legislator theory*.<sup>123</sup> That is, the theory according to which political systems are the result of individual will, initiative, and creative action, in particular of those individuals occupying a prominent position in politics. In short, a theory, as Comte says, according to which it is the legislator “who determines the best possible government.”<sup>124</sup> However, if it is the laws that govern the course of civilization which determine political organization, then the legislator can only

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<sup>122</sup>Comte continues to argue: “But in spite of that, then we see in the political order a series of events which are connected in the same way as if the men who were their agents had acted in accordance with a plan, may we not employ this assumption so as better to bring out this connectedness?” This is the case in natural sciences, “where, to present a group of phenomena more clearly, we attribute systematic intentions and designs even to unorganized matter” (“Summary Appraisal of the General Character of Modern History,” p. 24/221).

<sup>123</sup>The critique of this theory and that of natural contract in general, of which it is a part, has a long history and occupied an outstanding place, for instance, in the work of some Scottish Enlightenment authors. Yet the new critique substantially differs, in its terms and goals, from the previous one. The first critics never call the concept of the individual into question, but only maintain that human beings are sociable by nature and that social ties are therefore natural and not voluntary, instead of the work of legislators. The new critics, on the contrary, deny the existence of natural individuals as such and conceive of social ties as historically and objectively shaped phenomena.

<sup>124</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 108/290.

influence the details. The human race, Comte asserts, is “subjected to a natural law of development” that “prescribes as unequivocally as possible the political action that can be exercised in each era.” Therefore, the “arbitrariness” of the legislator theory necessarily ceases to exist. The human world is governed by its own laws and no agent (not even the people’s sovereignty) can modify it at will.<sup>125</sup> Hence Comte’s critique of those who, imbued with “vain metaphysic utopias,” still believe in “the absolute and indefinite power of legislators armed with sufficient authority to modify the social state at will,” without realizing that “the diverse political phenomena” are “always regulated ... by entirely natural laws.” The knowledge of which should be the only “rational basis” for any “wise speculation” in this field.<sup>126</sup>

Nowadays, however, Comte argues, a conception of politics prevails that sees it as an effect of human will, and not as an effect of social laws. “Statesmen” and “publicists,” belonging to both “the theological” and “the metaphysical school,” conceive “social phenomena as indefinitely and arbitrarily modifiable” and continue to see “the human species” as “devoid of any spontaneous impulse, and always ready to suffer the influence of any legislator, temporal or spiritual, as long as he is invested with sufficient power.”<sup>127</sup> In general, the argument goes on, “the vulgar theory attributes ... to the legislator the permanent faculty of breaking unexpectedly the necessary harmony ... on the only condition that he is previously armed with the sufficient authority (see footnote 127).” This conception, however, even though it may seem “founded on great examples,” is the outcome “of a pure illusion about the general sources of political power, one that mistakes the symptom for the principle.”<sup>128</sup> For it is “social influence” that actually determines the form that such a power takes.<sup>129</sup>

From this stance, as pointed out above, conscious political action can only have limited and superficial effects, and could never affect the substance of political phenomena. As Comte contends, “[t]he course of civilization is only modifiable, to a greater or lesser extent, in its speed, within certain limits, by several physical and moral causes, which are capable of being estimated. Among these causes are political combinations. This is the only sense in which it is given to man to influence the course of his own civilization.”<sup>130</sup> This does not mean that Comte denies “the power of political measures, be they temporal or spiritual,” but that he thinks that such a power must be [historically] “confined,” in order to “exclude any chimerical hopes.”<sup>131</sup> Comte sets the example of the Turkish Empire. This is a case

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<sup>125</sup>Ibid., p. 108/291.

<sup>126</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 245.

<sup>127</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 337.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid., pp. 337–338.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid.

<sup>130</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” pp. 97–98/282.

<sup>131</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Valat, 8 septembre 1824, p. 129.



in which the fact that historical development is a process governed by its own laws would be clear. "I am much persuaded," he writes, "that the Turkish government is capable of great improvements by means of appropriate measures; but I do not believe that this can go so far as it is usually meant in the ideas of absolute and omnipotence of political combinations. It seems to me that the Turks are close to the state in which we found ourselves between the sixth and eleventh centuries," and, indeed, someone who had tried to establish "a liberal constitution" at that time "would have been a great madman."<sup>132</sup>

The logical outcome of this critique of individualist political theory is the principle that it is possible to establish a scientifically grounded political regime. As Comte maintains, that civilization follows a necessary course susceptible of being known with precision by studying it through close observation of the past allows us to create "positive politics."<sup>133</sup> Once created, the political regime, and the human affairs more generally, could be managed scientifically. From then on, "the government of things replaces that of men," says Comte, echoing Saint-Simon's maxim.<sup>134</sup> That principle has since then been an inherent part of any political theory based on the concept of society.

Thus, that the theorists of the social are driven by the practical purpose of overcoming the liberal failure and the state of political crisis makes their search for a scientific knowledge of politics become so relevant. For such knowledge is, in their eyes, the essential means for achieving a stable and harmonic political order. The "positive knowledge of the course of civilization," in Comte's words, will make it possible to get over the present state of instability and to reorganize society on a more solid footing. Only the knowledge of the laws that regulate the course of civilization will allow for "the social reorganization" which will put an end to "the current crisis."<sup>135</sup> This is the "practical utility" of such knowledge.<sup>136</sup> In fact, according to Comte, revolutions have been caused by "the ignorance of the natural laws which regulate the course of civilization."<sup>137</sup> And hence his faith in the possibility of establishing a political order immune to revolutions, once these laws have been determined. Positive politics "must provide the means to avoid violent revolutions."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>132</sup>Ibid. "Je suis très-persuadé que le gouvernement turc est susceptible de grands perfectionnements par des mesures convenables; mais je ne crois pas que cela pût aller aussi loin qu'on le suppose d'ordinaire avec les idées d'absolu et de toute-puissance des combinaisons politiques. Les Turcs me paraissent être à peu près dans l'état où nous nous trouvions entre le sixième siècle et le onzième, et certes celui qui alors eût tenté d'établir chez nous ce qu'on appelle une constitution libérale aurait été un grand fou."

<sup>133</sup>Auguste Comte, "Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society," p. 97/281.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid., p. 108/290–291.

<sup>135</sup>Ibid., p. 103/286.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., p. 100/284.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid., p. 101/285.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., p. 102/285–286.

Comte and the other critics did not specify the mechanisms through which the social or civilizational state shapes and causally determines social and political organization. But there can be no doubt that they came to formulate this theoretical assumption unequivocally and fully, which resulted in the appearance of a new theoretical paradigm already containing the modern concepts of society and social causality.

Neither can there be any doubt that what happened on this point was a truly logical inversion of the individualist paradigm. In general terms, that inversion entailed no longer attributing to individuals the causal origin of social and political institutions, but regarding them as effects or projections of certain objective social processes. As has already been remarked, such an inversion was the outcome of the diagnosis on the failure of the liberal political regime. According to this diagnosis, that failure had made evident that neither the underlying theoretical assumptions nor the practical procedures used for establishing the definitive political order were the appropriate ones. Classical liberalism had intended to intentionally implement a certain political regime which it believed concurred with human nature. In ordinary terms (used by the critics themselves), the individualists believed that it was enough to draw up a constitution and to create the corresponding institutions to achieve political stability and harmony. A belief rooted in the assumption that once the natural propensities and wants of human beings have been unveiled, it will simply be a question of creating the legal and institutional order which best fits in order for them to be realized.

The state of crisis, however, seemed to make two things evident. The first, that the absolute and ahistorical political principles from which liberalism started were groundless. The second, that political phenomena are not submitted to human will, but obey their own logic. Therefore, once the intentional nature of the political system has been called into doubt, the only possible explanation is that political systems are determined by causal powers that are external to individuals and operate independently of them. These kinds of powers can only lie in human phenomena that are supra-individual, impersonal, and anonymous in character. In this way, the individualist paradigm established the conditions of possibility of the new paradigm. Seen from the theoretical horizon the former had established, any questioning of the human capacity to intentionally shape social and political organization leads to the conclusion that it was governed by inherent laws; and, therefore, that an objective domain which determines the shape of such an organization does exist. If human subjects do not create society, they must necessarily be its effects, and if human agents are not the masters of historical development, they must be its instruments and servants. If one starts from within the individualist paradigm, there is no other logical possibility. In that case, this logical conclusion is not the result of merely observing reality, but of diagnosing and signifying the observed reality through the theoretical expectations of the individualist paradigm. Had the same reality been observed from a different theoretical watchtower, the conclusion would have no doubt been a different one. And instead of the concepts of society and social causality other concepts would have arisen from the above described process.

But this is not the whole story. In addition to the prior existence of these theoretical conditions of possibility, the new theoretical paradigm was the result of the mediation of two essential assumptions, to which I have referred above. First, that human history is a course of progress that tends toward a state of perfection. Second, that it is possible to achieve scientific knowledge of social phenomena similar to that produced by natural sciences, since such phenomena are ruled, just like the physical world, by general laws. Without the epistemological mediation of these two assumptions, it would have been impossible for the observed empirical reality to have given rise to either the aforesaid diagnosis, or the resulting concepts of society and social causality.

As already seen, the theorists of the social started from the taken-for-granted assumption that historical progress exists. That is, that the history of humankind is a process of upward development that follows a necessary and irreversible (as well as universal) path and that inherently tends toward setting up a perfect and definitive social order. In this view, each historical age has meant an improvement of social and political organization, and a step further in the advance of humankind toward its final goal or consummation. This is an assumption that the critics share with classical liberalism, for they also endorse and start from the same enlightened modern view of human history. Also for the critics, as for the liberals, the existence of historical progress is the condition of possibility of the definitive social order, which is achievable because human history objectively tends toward perfection. As Comte maintains, “order and progress ... constitute more and more, due to the nature of modern civilization, two equally pressing conditions.” This means, on the one hand, that “any real order can be established, and, above all, can survive, if it is not completely compatible with progress,” and, on the other, that “any great progress could indeed be accomplished if it in the end does not tend to clearly consolidate order.”<sup>139</sup> Social order and progress mutually imply each other, for the former is possible because the latter tends toward it, at the same time as increasing order is evidence of the existence of historical progress. As Comte stresses elsewhere, “order and progress appear” as “the two necessarily inseparable aspects of a same principle,” and, therefore, “the real notions of order and progress must be, in social physics, also rigorously indivisible.”<sup>140</sup>

One crucial demonstration of the existence of historical progress is the French Revolution, that is why, according to the critics, this had acted as a direct stimulus for the emergence of the social science. By revealing the existence of such progress, the Revolution opened up the possibility of studying the laws that govern it and, by so doing, contributed to defining and establishing the object of social science. As Comte explains, prior to the Revolution the phenomenon of progress had never been observed so clearly (hence the unlikelihood of the appearance of a social science). “Any idea of social progress was necessarily strange to the philosophers of Antiquity, as they lacked complete and wide enough political

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<sup>139</sup>Auguste Comte, “Summary Appraisal of the General Character of Modern History,” p. 10.

<sup>140</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11.

observations.”<sup>141</sup> That is why the ancients, unable as they were of noticing the existence of progress, conceived of their own age as one of decay. Until recently, the appropriate conditions for the “constitution” of a “true science of social development” had not been met.<sup>142</sup> Today, Comte concludes, “the possibility of establishing the social science on truly positive bases” first exists and, therefore, the possibility of “submitting directly the general study of social phenomena to the positive method.”<sup>143</sup> Thus, according to the critics themselves, the assumption of historical progress is a basic requisite for the emergence of the concept of society. Since it entails the existence of objective laws, such a concept is implicit in that assumption. As Comte claims, “the fundamental notion of progress” is the “first necessary basis for any true social science.”<sup>144</sup> In this way, Comte himself traces the genealogy of social science and the concept of society and explicitly locates their origin in the theory of historical progress.

The epistemological mediation of the assumption of historical progress is the reason why the critics base their claim of the existence of society and social causality on the diachronic observation of historical development, and not on the synchronic observation of human facts. Historical development, and not contemporary socioeconomic transformations, is the empirical referent to which the first theorists of the social appeal when proceeding to elaborate and account for the new social theory. The observation of such a development would have clearly shown that the state of civilization determines human institutions. In short, the existence of progress is what proves the existence of society and what makes the scientific knowledge of society possible. That is why, at the time, *social science* is understood as the science which studies the laws of the historical development of the human species. This is the way the critics understand it and it is the subject matter Comte assigns to what he calls social physics or sociology. At that time, it was basically understood as historical sociology.

Thus, the theorists of the social not only consider that historical progress is an empirical fact, but that it is precisely that fact that social science must take as its main object of observation and study. When the critics advocate the need of starting from the observation of reality, instead of from a priori “metaphysical” concepts, when elaborating scientific knowledge on the human world, the reality they refer to is historical progress. For the critics, the existence of historical progress is the empirical evidence that human societies are governed by their own laws of functioning and change and that the observation of historical development is therefore the privileged means to uncover such laws. In short, the observation of historical progress is what allows us to infer that society and social causality actually exist. Rouen explains that epistemological connection between historical progress and

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<sup>141</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 231.

<sup>142</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>143</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 238–239.

<sup>144</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 229–230.

society in a particularly clear way. According to him, “society must be conceived in all its scope; it must be studied in all its facets, in all the course of its development.” Society, he continues, “is neither a nation, nor an isolated age in itself: it is the humanity as a whole, since it exists; it is the humanity always represented in its movement by its morally or physically prevailing parts. This way, the species appears as a collective being whose diverse parts are constantly combined and modified by an uninterrupted series of action and reaction, at the same time as all these parts are carried out by a common movement and toward a common goal.” Thus, Rouen concludes, “the possibility of grasping the general law of the movement of the human species,” as well as “the law of each particular society,” is “clearly conceivable.”<sup>145</sup>

The fact that the critics relied upon the category of progress does not suffice, however, to explain why they took historical development as their empirical object of observation and theoretical elaboration. That this epistemological choice was a consequence of the practical problem the critics themselves posed and tried to resolve should also be borne in mind. For that problem was defined as such by virtue of a diagnosis of a political situation carried out by applying the category of historical progress itself. The observed political situation was diagnosed as a failure because it appeared as evidence that, for whatever reason, historical progress had been interrupted, had reached a sort of impasse, or had turned away from its natural course. Consequently, in order to find the causes of liberal failure a systematic inquiry into the field of historical development was needed. This and no other was the problem that aroused the interest and brought about the intellectual reaction of the critics, and this is the problem to which they devoted their efforts of theoretical reflection and elaboration. The theorists of the social were not driven by the goal of knowing the human world in general or understanding the socioeconomic transformations taking place around them. To understand it that way would be to attribute them with concerns and interests that they indeed did not have. And, therefore, we would be committing a mistake of historical anachronism, one that would prevent us from understanding and explaining the genesis of the modern concept of society. What actually drove the theorists of the social was the wish to unravel the causes that prevented historical progress from being fulfilled in practice. This fact explains that the theory of the social and the theory of history appear so closely interwoven. For, indeed, both the situation of political crisis and the plans to overcome it are viewed and addressed as issues bound up with the historical progress of humankind. The crisis appears as a malfunction of such progress, whereas the plans are an attempt to resume and correct the course of historical progress. The theory of the social is an instrument placed at the service of historical progress.

In effect, the practical problem that the critics have diagnosed and attempted to resolve is why historical progress does not follow its normal course once liberalism has removed the obstacles that hinder it. Thus, the problem that is taken as the

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<sup>145</sup>P. J. Rouen, “Examen d’un nouvel ouvrage de M. Dunoyer, ancien rédacteur du *Censeur Européen*,” *Le Producteur*, 2 (1826), pp. 160–161.

starting point defines and delimits the questions to be posed and guides the ensuing theoretical inquiry intended to find the answer to that question. On the one hand, there is no doubt that historical progress does exist. On the other, the failure of the liberal regime suggests that the laws of progress are no longer in operation. Given the initial assumption, this anomaly could only be caused by subjects having a defective knowledge of the laws of historical development, so that the practical implementation of these laws was equally defective. That is, it could only be caused by a theoretical flaw in the liberal conception of progress. On this matter, the liberals would have committed two flagrant mistakes. First, to suppose that historical progress consists in fulfilling a sort of timeless principle. This assumption led to them to believe that fulfilling historical progress was a question of putting such a principle into practice and creating the corresponding institutional arrangement. Given that the principle from which they started was that of human nature, this arrangement consisted in creating those institutions which concurred with the natural propensities of every human being. From this standpoint, historical progress appears as a conscious process and, therefore, in order to establish the definitive political order, it was enough that the subjects themselves were determined to pursue it. The second mistake is that the liberals have not realized that historical progress is an objective process, one governed by its own laws. In the face of this process, the appropriate stance would be to attempt to uncover these laws in order to infer the political regime that best fits the present stage of civilization. Both mistakes have led the liberal regime to fail in its attempt to achieve the promised political order.<sup>146</sup> Thus, for the aforesaid anomaly to be repaired and historical progress to resume its course, those mistakes must be rectified and the theory of historical progress reformulated.

The theorists of the social see themselves, at the same time, as the heirs and rectifiers of the enlightened theory of progress. On the one hand, they envisage themselves as continuing the project of social reorganization undertaken by enlightened intellectuals such as Montesquieu and Condorcet. On the other, they consider that such a project suffers from serious flaws and mistakes, which ought to be purged and rectified. Comte, for instance, attributes to Montesquieu the merit of being the first person who attempted to establish positive or scientific politics; yet he simultaneously considers that Montesquieu was incapable of getting rid of metaphysics.<sup>147</sup> As for Condorcet, his work would have meant a major step forward, as he was the first to conceive of civilization as a progressive course governed

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<sup>146</sup>We should remember that, for the critics, the present state of civilization is characterized by the predominance of "industry" and the political regime should therefore concur with this fact. This issue, however, lies beyond the scope of my work and I shall not deal with it here.

<sup>147</sup>Auguste Comte, "Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society," p. 112/294.

by its own laws.<sup>148</sup> Nonetheless, at the same time, Condorcet's theoretical conception lacked a sound basis, for his "classification of the periods" of civilization relied upon particular events and not upon the distinctive features of each civilization stage.<sup>149</sup> Moreover, since he based his theory on certain timeless principles, Condorcet tended to assess past social regimes as more or less close to such principles, and not as they actually were, namely the necessary stages of historical progress. As the critics argue, given that human history is a necessary course, no stage indicates backward movements or deviations from this course and it would therefore be "madness to rant and rave against the past because it had not been what it could have been."<sup>150</sup> As for the theory of progress, the critics considered more generally that the enlightened authors (such as Voltaire and Rousseau) did not base their theories on observation but acted more on "instinct" than on "true science."<sup>151</sup>

As a consequence, the theorists of the social formulated and espoused a theory of historical progress different from that of enlightened individualism. The latter regarded historical progress as a process of the gradual fulfilment of human reason, which is why individualism saw the cultivation of reason (through, for example, education) as the essential means for fostering progress and attaining the goal of the definitive social order. For the critics, on the contrary, historical progress is an autonomous process of civilizational development, which human beings are only allowed to accommodate in order to facilitate its advance. Therefore, it is not a question of educating human beings in abstract rational values, but of providing them with scientific knowledge on objective reality, in order for them to successfully act and bring the historical plan of attaining a perfect human world to its conclusion.

The theorists of the social also start from a second assumption, namely that the human world is susceptible of being known scientifically, in much the same way as the physical world can be known. This analogy between both worlds entails the assumption that social phenomena are also governed by general laws and that these laws can therefore be known through the observation and application of scientific methods. The assumption that scientific knowledge can also encompass human affairs led to the conclusion that it is possible to establish a scientifically founded

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<sup>148</sup>“He [Condorcet] was the first”, Comte writes, “to see clearly that civilization is subjected to a progressive course all of whose steps are rigorously connected to each other according to natural laws, which can be unveiled by philosophical observation of the past. For each era these laws determine in a wholly positive manner the improvements which the social state is called to experience, whether in its parts or in its overall shape.” (Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 116/297. Comte considers Condorcet to be his “immediate predecessor” (Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à d'Eichthal, 5 août 1824, p. 106). On the Comtian assessment of Condorcet, see also Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, pp. 253 y 259.

<sup>149</sup>Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 116/297.

<sup>150</sup>“De quelques articles du Constitutionnel et du Journal des Débats,” *Le Producteur*, 2 (1826), p. 197.

<sup>151</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 196.

political system. Since the liberal failure is attributed to the unscientific nature of individualism, the building of a scientific political theory relies upon a double premise. First, that such a theory should fulfil the epistemological standards of the natural sciences, so that the power to predict and intervene as in the natural sciences could be attained. Second, if scientifically knowing a phenomenon is equivalent to knowing the laws that govern it, this then also applies to human phenomena. The aim of social science is also to attempt to discover those laws operating in its particular field. Only this way could people attain the aforesaid power of intervening and predicting in the field of political action. Turning politics into science calls for basing it on the knowledge of the general laws that govern the human world.

This appeal to the natural science model and practical success undoubtedly constitutes a rhetorical resource through which the critics intend to confer authority and credibility to their theoretical stance. Yet there is no doubt that such an appellation stems from their sincere conviction that it is possible to extend scientific knowledge to the field of human affairs. That conviction is deeply entrenched in the modern-enlightened tradition to which the critics belong and sprang from the assumption that human and natural worlds alike operate according to objective laws. The only novelty is that the crisis of individualism led to these laws being located not in human nature, but in the realms of historical development and collective human phenomena.

In effect, the critics' central epistemological premise is that human phenomena are governed by inherent laws (rather than being intentional creations) and that this circumstance allows us to know them scientifically. Likewise, once these laws have been disentangled, they ought to constitute the foundation of social and political organization. As Comte contends, "the social phenomena, just as all the other [phenomena]," are submitted to "invariable natural laws."<sup>152</sup> It is this circumstance that allows for locating, "in the general study of social phenomena ... that same positive spirit" already successfully reached in other fields of human thought.<sup>153</sup> The fact that "social phenomena" are governed by natural laws means that, as with physical phenomena, they are "susceptible to scientific prevision" and that, beyond the accidental events caused by human action, it is possible to predict the course of history in a scientific manner.<sup>154</sup>

On this point, the theorists of the social are driven by the aim of endowing political science with a scientific foundation. As Comte claims about his own work, its purpose is "to give politics the character of physical science and, in consequence,

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<sup>152</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 243. He later refers to "the necessary subordination of social events to invariable natural laws" (pp. 259–260). That is why Comte considers that the main merit of authors such as Montesquieu was to first formulate "the general idea of *law*" with regard to human phenomena (p. 243).

<sup>153</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>154</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 312 and 313.



to submit the study of social phenomena to the method so happily used today in the study of all the other kinds of phenomena.”<sup>155</sup>

The only way of turning politics into a scientific activity is, from his point of view, by applying the method of natural sciences. As he argues, “it is the method used by astronomers, physicists, chemists, and physiologists that must be applied to politics” if the prevailing “verbosity and extravagancies” are to be overcome.<sup>156</sup> Indeed, it has proven to be a successful method for knowing and predicting real phenomena. Only by adopting and applying a method of this sort would it be possible to overcome the present state of crisis and to successfully reorganize society and the political system. As Comte himself had earlier maintained, “this way” (that of studying social phenomena in a scientific manner) is the only one that could put an end to the spiritual struggle which “torments” our old Europe and prevents its civilization from “freely gaining the momentum” that the natural course of the human species so “strongly” imposes today.<sup>157</sup> In other words, this is the only way to reorganize society and to attain a stable and harmonic political order.

For the critics, adopting a scientific method to study social and political phenomena entails empirical observation being the basis and starting point of any theoretical elaboration. Told in Comtean terms, in order for “social theory” to overcome the theological and metaphysical states and become a scientific discipline, the study of human affairs (or “morality”) should be “founded” upon the “observation of the facts.”<sup>158</sup> This is the postulate that the critics continue to reiterate and that constitutes a central piece of their theoretical proposal. This sort of *empirical turn* is the logical consequence of the critical reaction against individualism and of the oft-repeated diagnosis of the causes of its political failure. At this point what the critics also advocate, and intend to do, is an operation of theoretical inversion. By conferring that epistemological primacy on observation the theorists of the social are challenging the individualist paradigm and deliberately opposing it. And they do so for the role attached to observation in this paradigm and the kind of phenomena that ought to be the object of observation.

According to the critics, the individualist theory is unscientific mainly because it is founded on principles and concepts that lack any empirical basis, as they have not been inferred from observation. Hence such principles and concepts are ahistorical and absolute (i.e. “metaphysical”). In consequence, the critics not only oppose empirical observation to those kinds of principles and concepts, but regard observation as an epistemological antidote to “metaphysics.” As Comte states,

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<sup>155</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Jefferson, 16 juillet 1824, p. 99.

<sup>156</sup>Ibid., Lettre à Valat, 8 septembre 1824, p. 127.

<sup>157</sup>Ibid., Lettre à Jefferson, 16 juillet 1824, p. 99.

<sup>158</sup>Auguste Comte, “Summary Appraisal of the General Character of Modern History,” p. 34, note h/230, note 1. Comte makes use of the expression “social theories” in Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Premier, p. 111.

everything, “both in politics as in the other sciences, must be founded on observed facts, which will lead to the elimination of all the vague and hypothetical ideas.”<sup>159</sup> Given that the failure of theoretical individualism is attributed to its metaphysical nature, the critics concluded that, in order to erect a scientific theory on the human world, it was necessary to start by observing the (historical) facts that make up that world (instead of starting from abstract principles such as human nature and paying attention only to subjects’ intentional actions). Only empirical observation allows us to uncover the laws governing human facts or, as stated in *Le Producteur*, only from “the well observed facts” can “the laws of social physics” be deduced.<sup>160</sup>

But in order to build a scientific social theory, it is not enough to start with observation. That observation must also be focused on collective facts and not on particular or individual human facts. Building a social science requires that the object of empirical observation not be the isolated and abstract individual, but rather social phenomena (an epistemological premise that entails the assumption that objective social phenomena, which transcend individual subjects, do exist). As advocated in *Le Producteur*, observing the real developments of human beings is what will allow us to build a true social science. Individuals should not be observed, but the “facts of sociability,” for “it is only the rigorous observation of these latter facts that will make social science *positive*.”<sup>161</sup> Thus, according to the author, “the moment has arrived to deal with the human species as a whole and to leave behind those individual speculations that, founded on vague principles and relied on facts which are not susceptible to demonstration, are necessarily sterile.” It is necessary, in short, to replace “the psychology of the ancients” with “the new physiology.”<sup>162</sup> As the means to know the human world is not the psychological study of subjects, but the study of the laws that govern social phenomena and determine subjects’ thought and behaviour.

However, this does not mean that empirical observation was actually the starting point of the critics’ theoretical undertaking. As we have already seen, the observation made by the theorists of the social is mediatized by certain prior and taken-for-granted assumptions which actually contribute to shape the outcome of the observation itself. Moreover, such assumptions induced theorists to take for granted the existence of certain empirical phenomena, so that the theorists themselves contributed to the creation of their own objects of observation. This is what happens, for instance, when the category of progress induces them to take as an objective fact that human history is a course of progress teleologically directed toward a state of perfection. In this case, the object to be observed does not stem

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<sup>159</sup>Auguste Comte, *Correspondance Générale et Confessions*, Lettre à Valat, 15 mai 1818, p. 37. At this point, Comte makes a distinction between two kinds of works: those which are not founded on observation (like Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*) and those which are (such as Hume’s *History of England* and Robertson’s *History of Charles V*).

<sup>160</sup>P. A. D., “Deuxième lettre au rédacteur sur les adversaires que doit rencontrer la doctrine du Producteur,” *Le Producteur*, 3 (1826), p. 31.

<sup>161</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>162</sup>*Ibid.*

from the operation of observation, but rather from the meaningful mediation of the category of progress itself. Without that mediation, the same facts of human history would have acquired other meanings and given rise to a different object of observation. And, naturally, without that mediation, these facts would not have been conceived of and conceptualized as objective social phenomena governed by inherent laws. As discussed later in this book, although the theorists of the social believed they had escaped “metaphysics,” they remained prey to it.

### 2.3 A New Theory of Human Action

The modern concept of society already in its first formulation entails a new theory of human action. The assumption that there are social (civilizational) phenomena governed by their own laws implies that human beings are not autonomous intentional subjects, but that their subjectivity and behaviour are causally influenced by living circumstances. These external circumstances do not simply constrain and impose material limits on human actions, but also impose meaningful limits, in the sense that they are what make the emergence of certain forms of consciousness possible. Such circumstances constitute a causal factor that contributes to shaping, guiding, and conferring meaning on actions. The modern concept of society, in short, entails the notion of social causality.

The theorists of the social considered that an excessive causal power in shaping historical events had thus far been attributed to individuals. As Comte argued in the course of the aforesaid discussion, the liberal-metaphysical theory attributes to legislators an “unlimited and creative power on civilization.”<sup>163</sup> For him, theories such as this only see behind the great events “men, and never the things that impel them with an irresistible force.” Thus, “instead of recognizing the preponderant influence of civilization,” they “regard the efforts of these foresighted men as the true causes of the improvements which have taken place, and which would have taken place in any case, a little later, without their intervention.” By conceiving of things this way, he continues, “[w]e do not allow ourselves to be troubled by the enormous disproportion between the alleged cause and the effect, a disproportion which makes the explanation much more unintelligible than the fact itself. We stick to what meets the eye, and we neglect the reality, which lies beneath the surface. In short, to use Mme de Staël’s ingenious expression, ‘we mistake the actors for the play.’” And he concludes: “This error is of exactly the same kind as that of the Indians who attributed to Christopher Columbus the eclipse which he predicted.”<sup>164</sup>

The existence of objective social phenomena means, however, that human action is socially limited and that a causal relationship exists between such phenomena and

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<sup>163</sup> Auguste Comte, “Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society,” p. 99/282.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99/283.

subjects' behaviour, which is constant and not circumstantial. As Comte maintains, the existence of "[social] natural laws" implies, as in any order of phenomena, that "human action" is "always necessarily very limited."<sup>165</sup> In particular, he adds, the existence of such laws implies "the inevitable constant limitation of political action."<sup>166</sup> In his own expression, "the political action" of human beings is not, contrary to what liberals think, "indefinite and arbitrary."<sup>167</sup> On this matter, "whatever the misleading inspiration of the human pride may be, any statesman, after sufficient exercise of political power, must ordinarily be usually convinced, through his own personal experience, of the reality of these necessary limits imposed on political action by the whole of social influences."<sup>168</sup> That is precisely why political intervention is only able to bring about superficial modifications, since this intervention is always "subordinated" to the "fundamental laws ... which regulate the constant harmony of the diverse social elements and the continuous connection of their successive variations." No human power is able to alter the course of social development, of "the true natural laws of humanity's development."<sup>169</sup> Human action is capable of modifying the form and speed of change, but it is not capable of altering either the tendency or the direction. It is unable to affect "the fundamental order of development."<sup>170</sup>

As for the theory of human action then, the critics also proceed to reverse the theoretical logic of the individualist paradigm and turn its causal model upside down. In this paradigm what was cause (the individual) now becomes effect. Human beings are not now viewed as individuals endowed with agency acting according to their motivations, intentions, and natural inclinations. Human actions are now viewed as determined by external social forces which causally impose on the subjects and are beyond their conscious control. Comte puts forward the new theory of human action with the utmost clarity: "In general, when man appears to exert a great influence, it is not by his own strength alone, which is very small. It is always external forces that act for him, in accordance with laws on which he can have no impact." What happens, he says, is that "once the action has occurred, ignorance of natural laws leads the spectator, and sometimes the actor himself, to attribute to man's power what is due only to his foresight."<sup>171</sup>

This new conception of human action conveys, as has already been said, the practical implication that human beings should not attempt to manage or control social phenomena, but should only observe and adapt their actions as much as possible to them. As Comte asserts, the only thing that human beings can do is to

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<sup>165</sup>Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, Tome Quatrième, p. 391.

<sup>166</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>167</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>168</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>169</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 394.

<sup>170</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 396.

<sup>171</sup>Auguste Comte, "Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for the Reorganization of Society," p. 99/283.

make the most of their “intelligence” in order to discover the laws of social development by observation. This in order “to foresee their effects, and consequently to make them work to the goal he sets himself, provided that he employs these forces in a way that is in conformity with their nature.”<sup>172</sup> This should be, for example, the stance to adopt in the field of political action. “Positive politics,” Comte argues, “must no more pretend to govern its phenomena than other sciences govern their respective phenomena. They have renounced this ambitious chimera which characterized their infancy and have restricted themselves to observing and connecting phenomena. Politics must do the same. It must concern itself solely with co-ordinating all particular facts relative to the course of civil-ization, reducing them to the smallest possible number of general facts; it must connect these general facts in such a way as to bring out the natural law of this course, and it must then assess the influence of the various causes which can modify its pace.”<sup>173</sup> Therefore, he continues, “sound politics cannot have as its object to propel the human race, since this moves by its own momentum, in accordance with a law which is as necessary as that of gravity, though more modifiable. But it has as its goal to facilitate this movement by illuminating it.”<sup>174</sup>

From this standpoint, what determines the efficacy of human action is the extent to which it fits the objective course of social forces. As Comte states, “there is a very great difference between obeying the course of civilization without realizing it, and obeying it purposefully ... The strains of all kinds that result for the social body can be avoided, in large part, by means based on exact knowledge of the changes which are tending to occur.”<sup>175</sup> The efficacy of human action does not depend on subjects’ dispositions and capabilities, but on the degree to which it concurs with social objectivity, in a similar fashion as what happens with regard to the natural world. “These general observations apply to philosophical action, in the same way and for the same reasons as to physical, chemical or physiological action. Any political action is followed by a real and lasting effect, when it exerts itself in the same direction as the force of civilization, when it seeks to effect the changes which that force currently commands. In any other circumstance action is to no effect or is at most ephemeral.”<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>172</sup>Ibid.

<sup>173</sup>Ibid., p. 100/284.

<sup>174</sup>Ibid.

<sup>175</sup>Ibid.

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