

Auguste COMTE, 2012, *Cours de Philosophie Positive. Leçons 46-51*, presented and annotated by M. Bourdeau, L. Clauzade and F. Dupin, Paris, Hermann, 480 p.

Mike Gane



Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ress/2484>
DOI : 10.4000/ress.2484
ISSN : 1663-4446

Éditeur

Librairie Droz

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 juin 2013
Pagination : 276-278
ISBN : 978-2-600-01749-7
ISSN : 0048-8046

Référence électronique

Mike Gane, « Auguste COMTE, 2012, *Cours de Philosophie Positive. Leçons 46-51*, presented and annotated by M. Bourdeau, L. Clauzade and F. Dupin, Paris, Hermann, 480 p. », *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* [En ligne], 51-1 | 2013, mis en ligne le 10 mai 2013, consulté le 22 septembre 2020.
URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ress/2484> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ress.2484>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 22 septembre 2020.

© Librairie Droz

Auguste COMTE, 2012, *Cours de Philosophie Positive. Leçons 46-51*, presented and annotated by M. Bourdeau, L. Clauzade and F. Dupin, Paris, Hermann, 480 p.

Mike Gane

- 1 This new edition of an important part of the famous *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, written and first published in 1839. It formed book four of six, and was originally entitled “La Partie Dogmatique de la Philosophie Sociale”. The 1839 edition of this part of the *Cours* was 730 pages long. This new edition, book four is 319 pages and with annotations and index etc., 427 pages – the print is not large. Effectively this is edition replaces the Hermann edition of 1975, nearly forty years old now, with its Marxist rants against Comte by Jean-Paul Enthoven (p 1-6). In that edition, book four occupies pages 7-234 in small print. The new edition has been checked against the manuscript and here and there corrections have been made. A very large number of notes have been added – whereas Enthoven added about 15-20 per leçon, here there are over one hundred. Many of these simply refer the reader to another page of a text by Comte, some flesh out a reference, others refer to subsequent discussions by other writers – but these are generally limited, unfortunately, to classic discussions (but none to Littré surprisingly) up to 1940, with one or two exceptions (*e. g.* to Canguilhem, Popper, and to Mary Pickering). The GF-Flammarion edition of 1995 should also be mentioned. Edited, introduced (p. 7-31) and annotated (but this edition of book four omits leçon 46, p. 37-357, has 93 notes) by Juliette Grange.
- 2 This text, book four, is celebrated as containing the first statement of sociology as such ; Comte coins the word on p. 126. One could read this as a simple historical fact or curiosity, noting that Comte apologises for the neologism and promises it won’t be systematic neologistic. How should Comte be read? Commentators have often

mentioned his laborious style. His own mode of presentation is longwinded as he admitted when recommending the abbreviated version of his work by Harriet Martineau. But this is not really the problem. The real problem is that Comte has composed what might be called, following Eco, a closed text. This is most evident in his formulation of the famous “law of the three states” – the main object of sociology. The reader is challenged to open it, for it has to be deconstructed if the text is to be more than a ritual. One way of doing this is to read this text as transitional between the earlier writings and the later writings of Comte and to analyse the transformations. In this way the formulations are provisional not dogmatically final. Thus Comte plays with the three states (theological, metaphysical and positive, p. 287) against five (note that this series – fetishism, polytheism, monotheism, metaphysical, and positive – is not introduced in this volume where the term theological is used throughout for the first three terms of five), and elsewhere against two states (military, industrial societies p. 310). Another is to look at the idea of progression and his explanations for it, for underpinning the law is the fundamental and deep lying antagonism between theology and science. Comte does not put this on the surface of this text very often, but it is reason that is driving progression, and it is theologism and metaphysics which are both driven by it but also resist its growth. Comte closes this down by resorting to the trilogy of the sociological law, which is so badly understood in sociology today. Even the construction of the law is misunderstood since Comte explicitly argues that the order of analysis is not the linear 1, 2, 3, but 1, 3, 2. – that is where the final state is used to analyse the second. It follows from this that Comte took note of the way that the natural sciences constructed fictions in order to construct scientific series and hypotheses, justified as long as they were controlled by theory. So the fictive third state, the positive state, has to be recognised as a determining device in the analysis. It is from the beginning and end states that the sociology of the present can be achieved. The method of opening up Comte’s work suggested in this edition, is to work from a detailed very close reading of the key terms in the text. (p. 12-15).

- 3 The enormous labour which gave birth to his idea of sociology thus required careful formulations as to method and to positivism as he defined it. Against persistent misunderstandings, Comte was completely opposed to empiricism, which he held to be anti-scientific. No science simply gathers facts. Sciences are based around observations guided by theory. On the other hand sciences are not driven to look for fundamental causes, thus theory aims to co-ordinate observations in a well-founded analyses : static or dynamic. Thus against the preconceptions of what constitutes positivism we find here Comte talking about his fundamental theory of social facts, social causation, as well as social and cultural conflict.
- 4 In book four of the *Cours*, Comte outlines his general ideas of positivism and in particular the conditions for the arrival of social science, and the place of sociology among the sciences. Later in his career he developed a subjective method, but here he outlines what he defines as the objective sociological method. This discussion was taken up by Durkheim sixty years later, and the notes in this edition detail the references. What is striking is the emphasis on the complexity of the social, the necessity for method, definitions, comparisons, observations. When reading the whole *Cours*, it is also striking to see that the whole vast set of 60 Leçons has an incredible unity, and as part of this sociology is born completely logically. The *Cours* is, it must be remembered, a “Cours de Philosophie”, one which as Comte himself pointed out was self-fulfilling. It predicted the arrival of the positive sciences as a whole, and it also

delivered it. Philosophy was to be the midwife of the new science. All this follows the logic of the three states – for philosophy and the sciences have to work through the stages of intellectual development from fetishicity to scientificity, a development which is replete with revolutionary breaks and ruptures. But it is always working towards a final goal, the positive polity (left undefined in the *Cours*). When Comte got around to defining the positive polity later in his career, he applied the subjective method : things were to be defined in relation to humanity itself. There seems to be a clear millenarian passion at work in Comte. Comte needed sociology in order to move onto mapping and designing his utopian future state – which again in a self-fulfilling prophecy he started to construct. If we were to try following Durkheim to remove the teleological and homogenising notion of the progression of humanity regarded as a single being, how far can we go before we begin unravelling the Comtean schema, since the teleology is built into the project from the beginning ? The excellent, but modest, *Présentation*, notes that for Comte “in order for the positive spirit to develop it is necessary for mankind to renounce its natural penchant to project itself onto *the* world and to interpret it in its own image” (p. 10). But as Littré pointed out, Comte projected his own philosophy in the guise of objective science. Or as Comte himself suggested “*le point de vue sociologique est désormais le seul vraiment philosophique*” (noted by the *Présentation*, p. 17). For Comte’s methodology, despite its novelty and brilliance, still had not rooted out a basic problem. It is not really a problem of pseudo science, rather Comte went to huge lengths to provide the form of sociology in a simulacra of scientificity. This does not mean that we should not read Comte. It means rather that we should read him as a critical social theorist. He provided a version of sociology that is characterised by the use of the ideal type (a “utopia” as Weber noted). Against his own wishes his works belong to the metaphysical stage of social thought. However, it is by no means clear that any social theory has indeed gone beyond this stage that Comte himself defined so well (the metaphysical) and provided, unintentionally, a new variation of it, one which initiated a discipline.

AUTEURS

MIKE GANE

Loughborough University – Department of Social Sciences