

**WEEK 7:**

**Auguste Comte, “The Nature and Importance of Positive Philosophy”**

In this passage from Comte, we are treated to a progressivist theory of history, one in which the maturity of a society is measured epistemically, by virtue of the paradigm of knowledge which it displays in its works. This theory consists of three stages, two necessary and one transitional. These stages are: the theological; the metaphysical; and the positive. Each have characteristics which define them as paradigms. The theological refers to origins and ends, to “first and final causes” (152) in which all phenomena are the immediate effect of a supernatural or divine cause. The metaphysical stage, instead of postulating supernatural beings as causes, postulates instead speculative natural ones, ‘forces’ or ‘objects’ of which our familiar world is supposedly comprised. In the positive stage, no such postulation of entities is allowed. It applies itself to the discovery of constant relations (natural laws) generalizable from “reasoning and observation” (152). It therefore has no need, according to Comte, of metaphysical abstractions. Its progress consists, not in determining the real entities of the world, but in reducing the general facts of observation to the minimum number of laws consistent with those facts. In this sense, it does care about what “is” but only what can be “known” which, in this case means, what can be observed or experimented upon.

These stages do not occur in all places of society, or in all fields of knowledge at once. The development is uneven. The social sciences (as of 1830) lag behind those of physics and its derivatives, in that the general laws of society have not been obtained. In his conclusion, he stipulates that only by obtaining these laws may society be scientifically re-organized to meet its rational culmination. For Comte, it is the administration of Ideas, not of the material conditions of society, which direct its progress or decline, and the positive philosophy is the “only solid basis for Social Reorganization” (154). Finally, applying the positive philosophy to society is to Comte, the only means of ending the revolutionary turmoil of Europe (155).

**WEEK 8:**

**Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?*, “Chapter One”**

Proudhon answers the question of his work right away: ‘Property is robbery’ in the same way that ‘slavery is murder’. Such a conclusion will be the subject of elaboration. This elaboration begins with discussing common theories of property as either natural or civil right. These he takes to be incompatible though they are both applauded in contemporary politics. The slogan that property is robbery inspires fear because it recalls to some the revolution and the Reign of Terror (‘the war cry of ‘93’ (1)). If it did not arouse such fear, one could see clearly its truth and its value for the politics to come (as a ‘lightning rod’). Accordingly for PJP, this work is motivated by a search for truth,

and anyone who is interested in the same can judge his work accordingly, and come to the same conclusions.

He claims, through extensive research, that we have not understood the meaning of principles which we hold dear: justice, equality, liberty (3). The ignorance of their meaning is the cause of misery in society (3). While there may be original categories to which things apply *a priori* in our minds, the source of our bad judgement is a secondary order of *habit*, built on partial acquaintance and false extrapolation. These are so strong that even when we know something to be rationally false we still unconsciously act in accordance with the error. Such errors, which have caused us centuries of scientific neglect of the physical world (e.g. in geo-centrism), also affect us in our apprehension of morality (6), the more so since ignorance of right affects our behavior, unlike ignorance of physics which does not effect the laws of physics (6).

**What is the most ancient of all prejudices, one so far untouched by revolution?**

(6-8). It is not State religion, though this is very ancient. It is gone and our problems remain. It is not fallenness, the necessity of evil or original depravity. **It is our notion of justice.** All the past thinkers argue about justice, equality, liberty, as they do about god—namely without knowing the object of their quarrels (9-10). Justice, for Proudhon, comes before the law, thus if we know nothing about it, we know nothing about society (or our political decisions) which depend on it (10).

The fact that we are ignorant of it is shown by the fact that, although peoples' opinions differ in history, there has been progress in the ideas of justice, while remaining ignorant of it (10). He gives a brief overview of Roman, Christian, and then French Revolutionary stages of the history of justice. The French Revolution was negative, one born of hatred of suffering under kings, which shows that its understanding of justice is incomplete, because it only reacted to injustice, it did not understand the positive meaning of justice (13). What would positive justice look like? It is sovereignty not of will but of reason. Thus, in respect to justice, monarchy and democracy are two shades of the same kind, one may be preferable but each makes society subject to human will (13). What is the meaning of equality before the law? (14). By republican standards, it is little more than an oxymoron when considered in light of the inequality of fortune of the people to whom it applies (14). Such inequality was made possible by, among other things, the declaration of the supposed equality of citizens to hold office, since it left intact the structure of cronyism which characterized the aristocratic offices that it replaced. The offices were means of advancement of oneself and one's friends. These should be a duty not a privilege, and thus shouldn't be incentivised.

The three laws of the republic were according to PJP, 1) sovereignty of the will (despotism); 2) inequality of wealth and rank; 3) property. The first two have been shown by history to be unjust, the third PJP aims to show (16-7). Property, if it can be instituted rightly, must have no other ground than justice. However, it is the source of inequality (whether just or unjust). But since it is only applicable to things tangible ("appreciate by the senses" (17)) it must be amenable to accounting, and therefore to quantitative formulae of equivalence ("algebraic formula" (17)). <Not sure that I've understood this part of the argument, MCA.> Thus, because of the law of equivalence,

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property is either equal, as thus just, and of no social advantage, and thus no property at all, or a lie, and thus robbery. The remainder of “Chapter One” details the steps in the argument as stated and the sections of the book which elaborate those steps.