

# COMTEAN POSITIVISM AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING IN NIGERIA

C. L. OCHULOR

(Received 27 April, 2005; Revision Accepted 12 July, 2005)

## ABSTRACT

In this article on 'Comtean Positivism And Social Engineering In Nigeria', we analysed Comte's Law of the Three Stages of thought development, which is the pivot of his positivism. Here Comte talks of movement from the theological to the metaphysical and finally to the scientific way of accounting for the behaviour of things-physical and human. For him, just as the stars do not change as we move from the theological to the metaphysical and finally to the scientific or positive way of accounting for their behaviour, neither should the structures of society change as far as the basic elements are concerned. These basic elements-the family, private property, language and religion – are never to be revolutionalized no matter how obsolete. Progress for him has to do, not with any basic alteration of the elements but simply with the continual refinement of our understanding of how we should utilize these stable structures in an optimum way. We discovered here that this clear 'no' to revolutionary change makes Comte a defender of the status quo. We discovered that the conceptual interest of positive sociology is apologetic and justificatory. We found embedded in it, categories which both disguise and justify certain aspects of the existing order. We detected a link between positivist epistemology and conservative social theory. And so, we rejected positivist epistemology per se, and positivist conception of social engineering exemplified in Comtean Positivism.

KEYWORDS: Positivism, Social Engineering, Nigeria, Refinement and Revolutionize

## INTRODUCTION

Can there be social engineering properly so called, considering the fact that as Alan Ryan did observe, the social sciences have very few or no generalizations of their own which can compare with anything in the natural sciences? The absence of such generalizations, according to him, means that there can be no social engineering properly so called. In Ryan's (1981) opinion:

The absence of a technology for social engineering is a factual matter quite independent of the desirability of a technological attitude to social and political decision-making (11-14).

Comte has, contrary to Alan Ryan's position, a notion of social engineering.

## THE LAW OF THE THREE STAGES

In the opinion of Auguste Comte, a careful examination of the history of ideas shows that there has been clear movement of thought through three stages, each stage representing a different way of discovering truth. These stages are the theological, the metaphysical and the positivistic or scientific. The first stage of thought development is the theological stage. In the theological stage, phenomena are explained as being caused by divine powers. This theological explanation of the physical world either in Greek mythology or in orthodox Christianity, with frequent instances of the intervention of the gods or of God, as was the case in Medieval Period, had its counterpart in political theory, namely the theory of the divine right of kings. Comte maintained that slavery and the military state go along with the theological stage (Stumpf 1977: 340ff). But this theological approach, says Comte, is superseded by the second stage of thought development, namely the metaphysical stage. In the metaphysical stage, anthropocentric concepts of divinity are replaced by impersonal and abstract forces. This metaphysical stage speaks of a necessary being or ground of being as the explanation for the existence of finite beings such as men and things. Its counterparts in political thought, says Comte, are the attempt to formulate abstract principles such as the rights of man and the sovereignty of the people. Comte placed the

doctrine of the sovereignty of the people in the metaphysical stage and rejected the metaphysical stage. By so doing he rejected the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people. Comte's third stage of thought development is the positivistic or scientific stage. In this stage only the constant relations between phenomena are considered and all attempts to explain things by reference to beings beyond our experience are given up. He maintains here that it is a clear scientific fact that men are unequal and have different capacities and must, therefore, have different functions in society. Comte's view on the issue of the inequality of men conflicts with what Rousseau regarded as a necessary condition for order. Proceeding with his scheme for social engineering, Comte said that love, then, is our principle; order our basis and progress, our end. So order or social order was important to him as a basis for social engineering.

Comte called the evolution from one stage or state of thought to another, the law of the three stages. This he did because he thought he could find this threefold development at work, not only in thought in general but in each particular science. Moreover, this law could be said to be at work in the political, too, for since the structure of a society reflects the philosophical orientation of an epoch, any major change in philosophic thought will bring about a change in the political order. In volume one of Comte's *The positive philosophy of Comte* which was published in six volumes between 1830 and 1842, Comte's position as articulated by Andreski (1974) holds that:

It cannot be necessary to prove to anybody who reads this work that ideas govern the world, or throw it into chaos; in other words, that all social mechanisms rest upon opinions. The great political and moral crisis that societies are now undergoing is shown by a rigid analysis to arise out of intellectual anarchy (37).

Two things dominate Comte's sociological theory, namely what he calls the static and the dynamic components of social existence. Comte distinguishes between the static and dynamic treatment of phenomena. This is a fundamental distinction which he derived from other sciences, especially biology. Social statics has as its objective the study of the constituent parts of the different forms of social order and their

mutual relationship, abstracting as far as possible from their movement and development. The laws proper to social statics are the laws of co-existence, which are limited in their application to certain epochs and to certain types of social formations. This appears to be what Comte meant by his claim that knowledge in the positive stage is relative rather than absolute. Such knowledge states the existence of laws of co-existence peculiar or relative to each social type. It must be observed here, however, that for a law to qualify as a general law, it must of necessity assert a universal relation between phenomena. The application of such a law is not limited by space or time. That goes to say that any law so limited cannot justifiably be described as a general law. Social dynamics has as its objective the discovery of general laws governing the overall development of human societies and ultimately of the human species itself. The law of the three stages—the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positivistic is a leading law of social dynamics. The laws proper to social dynamics are laws of successions as against the laws of coexistence which are proper to social statics.

### COMTEAN POSITIVISM VIS-À-VIS SOCIAL ENGINEERING

Unlike revolutionary thinkers who called for radical reconstruction of society, or idealists who fancied utopian communities, Comte moved along lines that rejected the above approaches. Thomas Kuhn (1962) advocated what he described as paradigm shift; a move which Comte's positive philosophy does not accept. One of the two things which dominate Comte's sociological theory is what Comte calls the static component of social existence. This static component consists of certain stable elements of society such as the family, private property, language and religion. Comte's philosophical position is that as far as these stable elements of society are concerned, there can be no paradigm-shift from an old or original to a new paradigm, to borrow Kuhn's terminology. For Comte, the stable elements of society are virtually permanent and so he does not advocate any revolutionary change in them. Here Comtean positivism rejects the above Kuhnian analogical analysis. It is this clear 'no' to revolutionary change that makes Comte a defender of the status quo. For Kuhn and modern science in general, progress has to do with rejecting obsolete principles and replacing them with new and better ones. Comte says no to this. For him, however obsolete the stable elements of society may be, stable elements like the family, private property, language and religion, there should be no revolutionary changes in them. Progress for him has to do, not with any basic alteration of the social elements but simply with the continual refinement of our understanding of how we should utilize those stable elements or structures in an optimum way. For him, just as the stars and the number of fixed stars grouped within an imaginary outline do not change as we move from the theological to the metaphysical and finally to the scientific way of accounting for their behaviour, neither should the structures of society change as far as the basic elements are concerned.

Comte's thesis was that slavery and the military state go along with the first stage of thought development, namely the theological stage and that the assumptions of liberal democracy and the doctrine of the equality of men are outgrowths of the metaphysical stage. Comte rejected the theological stage of thought development along with the doctrine of the military state. Comte also rejected the metaphysical stage alongside the assumptions of liberal democracy and the doctrine of the equality of men. We accept and appreciate Comte's rejection of military state. Every military state is a violation of the social order. The military should limit themselves to their natural and constitutional role of protecting the state. The role of ruling the state is that of the

group described by Plato as the guardians/ elite or the philosopher-kings. We accept and uphold Comte's rejection of the military state.

On the other hand, we disapprove of Comte's rejection of liberal democracy and the doctrine of the equality of all men. While recommending Nigeria's guardians/elite or philosopher-kings for the role of ruling Nigeria, we insist that Nigeria must eliminate the problem of succession and also make politics less glamorous and less commercially rewarding. We acknowledge the natural inequalities that exist among men, and recommend a positive use of same. But we insist on as much economic and political equality as possible. The Nigerian constitution confers upon every citizen of Nigeria, who has attained the age of eighteen years, the right of voting in all elections: legislative elections both state and federal, gubernatorial elections and presidential elections. This right is subject only to a residence qualification. The wordings of the provisions may be a little defective and the tendency towards capitalist democracy is obviously defective, but Comte's rejection of all forms of democracy and the equality of all men can only work against social engineering attempts in Nigeria. The importance of order in this task was such that Rousseau—a critic of the Enlightenment—harped upon the need to regulate the accumulation of wealth in the interest of equality. Rousseau made it clear that he was insisting on economic equality, not because it was an end in itself, but because its absence threatens the more important end of social order. His idea of economic equality is that inequalities should never be so great as to permit of the citizen's selling himself or being bought by another. Rousseau was a predecessor of some importance for the formulation of the social thoughts of Comte. It is surprising that Comte did not appreciate the important role economic equality plays in bringing about social order, which Comte accepts as important for societal progress. The Nigerian nation must deeply appreciate the great need for economic equality, at least, to a reasonable extent if the nation is to progress. Montesquieu was another philosopher that greatly influenced the formulation of the social thoughts of Comte. Again it is surprising that Comte did not pick the idea of economic equality from Montesquieu but rather concentrated on natural inequalities in men, which in the long run promotes self interest. Montesquieu on his part emphasized virtue which he describes as the love of one's country and the preference of the interest of one's country, to one's self-interest. It involves the love of what one's country stands for: equality and frugality in the democratic state. Love, equality and frugality in a democracy, says Montesquieu, prevent members of the government from exercising their power in their own private interest. It causes them instead to seek to promote the general well-being of all in the state. Comte's inability to appreciate these facts, makes his social engineering scheme unacceptable to this author. The emphasis on economic equality by Rousseau and Montesquieu as necessary condition for the social order that eventually leads to progress is strongly recommended for Nigeria by this author. Long before Montesquieu formulated his philosophy and expounded his political theory of the separation of power, Aristotle had taken time to examine the things that make for stability of governments. Before discussing the stability of constitutions, Aristotle pointed out that politics is knit to ethics. For him political science is the second half of a subject of which ethics is the first half. Aristotle describes man in biological terms as by nature a political animal; he develops capabilities only in societies rightly organized for his welfare. The aim of politics is to discover, first in what mode of life man's happiness consists; then discover by what form of government and what social institutions through which that mode of life can be secured. The former question requires the study of man's character

which occupies the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the latter question is the subject of the constitution of the state, which is treated in *Politics* by Aristotle. *Politics* is the sequel of *Ethics*, the second half of a single Treatise. This subject is covered by Plato is a single dialogue-*The Republic*. Then he goes on to say, regarding equality, that the equality which men of democratic spirit seek for in the case of the multitude is not only just but also expedient (*Politics* V. V111 (1-2)). Sectional prosperity, says Aristotle, must be guarded against. And every form of constitution should be so framed both by its laws and by its other institutions that it is impossible for the magistracies or rulers to make a profit. If Comte had taken the above views of Aristotle, Montesquieu and Rousseau to heart and made the need for economic equality an important step to social order, that would have added weight to his social engineering strategy. Comte also rejected the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people because he saw it as another outgrowth of the metaphysical stage. This Comtean rejection works against any attempt at social engineering in Nigeria. There is need for Nigerian citizens to be politically conscious and always be in a position to assess government actions fairly. Here we are referring to a government that got its authority from the people, through the people's supreme constitution. This is what it means to control the business of government. All social critics should aim at a balanced appraisal and be bold in condemning misgovernment in all its ramifications. Honest intention is necessary in this regard and no one should be indifferent to the activities of government. The point being emphasized here is the need for objective criticism in the people's performance of their duty of constituting ultimate checks on the governing personnel in a democratic form of government. Democratic people claim the ultimate right to approve or condemn policies made for their governance by the governing personnel, and to select other rulers if they are dissatisfied with the achievements of their existing government. Every citizen of Nigeria is a member of the sovereign. Our constitution makes it clear that sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria, from whom government through the constitution derives all its powers and authority. So we oppose Comte's rejection of the principle of the sovereignty of the people.

Comte's third stage of thought development is the positivistic or the scientific stage. One characteristic of knowledge in the positivistic or scientific stage is that it is constituted of statements which state the necessary and invariant relations between classes of phenomena. Comtean positivism insists that the detailed scientific knowledge produced by the sociologist can be applied in efforts at social reform on an analogy with the application of physical knowledge in the improvement of techniques of production and transportation. He opines that control over nature may be extended to control over man and society by means of social engineering. According to Comtean positivism, the social world like the physical world operates according to strict laws. Comte and his followers maintained that in the same manner as natural scientists describe and classify phenomena by noting such observables as shape, size, position, motion and so on; so should social scientists define their phenomena of interest. A phenomena or class of phenomena, according to Comte, is scientifically explained when the law governing its occurrence has been discovered. This led Comte to insist on a close logical connection between explanation and prediction. Comte goes so far as to make rational prediction the criterion of scientific knowledge, saying that without such a prediction, there is no science properly so called (Andreski:100). This connection of prediction with explanation provides for Comte the basis for a link between 'science' and 'art' that is, between 'practice' and 'technique'. There are two distinct types of such links for Comte. First we may modify our actions in the light of foreknowledge of some future unalterable event. For example,

on Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1994 in Oron Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, an extraordinarily heavy and long lasting down pour destroyed goods and property worth more than three million naira. If such an event had been predicted, on the basis of astronomical knowledge, the inhabitants of the affected areas would have, at least moved out some, if not all their belongings. The second class or type of such link, says Comte, is where we may deliberately intervene to alter conditions and circumstances and so bring about desired effects. Comte made it clear that human intervention is powerless to modify astronomical systems. Could anyone have stopped the Oron rain from falling in the Oron case cited above? It must be noted, here, that science and technology aim at such controls of weather today. Social systems are, on the other hand, eminently modifiable. Whereas prediction is the criterion of success in astronomy, successful modification of outcome is the main criterion in sociology. That is to say, having predicted, efforts must be made to successfully modify.

The two traditions of thought which Comte's attempt at a positive social theory are meant to supplement are scholastic and monarchic reaction and the persistent 'negative' political philosophy of the Enlightenment. Conservative catholic social thought rightly insisted on the necessity of social order but sought in vain for a return of an obsolescent form of social order. Many of us Nigerians are of the view that except government returns to their owners the schools taken over by it after the Nigerian civil war, sanity will not return to our educational system. No doubt justice demands that schools forcefully taken over by government be returned to their owners. But, and this is the question, can we effect a return of that form of social order which made it possible in the 1950's and 1960's for the private agencies to effectively administer the schools? At the end of the Nigerian Civil War, the government of the then East Central State-now split into five Igbo states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo-took over the control of schools and colleges and the whole educational system. This lead, was soon to be followed by other states in Nigeria. This action of government was not without its opposition from the churches. Thus Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church- the church most vociferous on this issue-issued a statement, condemning the government's action. The Anglican Church followed suite. Soon, however, a drama developed when a then Roman Catholic clergy man Rev. Fr. Dr. Bede Onuoha, wrote two articles in favour of state control of education and secularization of schools. The Roman Catholic Bishops called on him to recant his views, which they said were opposed to some fundamental teachings or doctrines of the church. Subsequently the Roman Catholic Bishops suspended him from exercising his priestly duties. The controversy, among others, led eventually to his resignation from the Catholic priesthood. His main argument for state control of education and secularization of schools, is that the various denominations have used their denominational schools as instruments of religious pedagogy, and are causing the bitterest animosity and the sharpest polarization of the family. According to Onuoha (1970) developing nations cannot afford to have their children brought up with closed minds, inhibited by senseless taboos, and discouraged from asking questions and probing into things. In modern Africa, he contended, there should be nothing so sacred that it is precluded from human investigation, manipulation and enquiry. The resources of the continent have to be dug up, not worshipped and traditional values, however sacred, have to be critically re-examined. Onuoha saw the take over of the schools by government, as the modern day version of the Renaissance (4&11). This author informs Onuoha that contrary to his above views, the current Governor of Cross River State, His Excellency, Mr. Donald Duke, has, and rightly too, returned to their owners all schools taken over by government in Cross

River State. This author calls on Onuoha to let the public know his views on the present state of the public schools and tell the public what positive impact the government take over of schools has had on the Nigerian nation. The government take over of schools has worsened Nigeria's attempt at creating a conducive social order for meaningful national development. The other tradition of thought which Comte's attempt at a positive theory was meant to supplement was the persistent 'negative' political philosophy of the Enlightenment. The philosophy of the Enlightenment on its part, rightly insisted on progress but made, according to Comte, the mistake of thinking that to bring about progress, the existing social order must of necessity, be overthrown. These views, in the opinion of Comte, resulted in threats of anarchy and revolution. And so he advocated the positive study of order in the social statics, and of progress in the social dynamics, the consequence of which will be a reconciliation of the principles of progress and order: orderly progress.

### CONCLUSION

The above analysis of Comte's views makes Comtean positivism most unattractive and makes it unacceptable as a basis for social engineering in Nigeria. There can't possibly be the kind of analogy Comte is talking about. There is no basis for such analogy. Between physical and social phenomena, there is a world of difference; not just of complexity but of kind. Again what Comte has in mind when he talks of social engineering is nothing but attempts at social reform through existing administrative agencies. But as Marx pointed out, nothing of importance may be expected to result

from any of such attempts. For Marx and rightly too, social reform or social engineering is a bourgeois deceit subverting and delaying the process of social revolution. In other words, Comte's notion of social engineering is not and cannot be social engineering. Comte's and his follower's refusal to acknowledge the fact that between the stars and the structures of society-between physical and social phenomena-there is a world of difference, makes Comtean positive philosophy most unpopular and unacceptable as a basis for social engineering in Nigeria.

### REFERENCES

- Andreski, S. 1974. *The Essential Comte trans.* Margaret Clark, London, Croom Helm,
- Aristotle, *Politics* With an English trans. By Rackham M. A. London, William Heinemann, 1932
- Kuhn, T. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* Chicago Univ. of Chicago Press
- Onuoha, B.1970. "Schools Must Be Free From Religious Dogmatism" in *The Renaissance Newspaper*, 13<sup>th</sup> & 29<sup>th</sup> May editions.
- Ryan, A.1981. "Is the study of society a science" in *Society, and The Social Sciences* London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Stumpf, S. E. 1977. *Philosophy: History and Problems* New York, McGraw-Hill,