Auguste Comte (1798-1857):
A General View of Positivism

Below are excerpts from Auguste Comte’s four volume series entitled *A General View of Positivism*. The four volumes were written separately between 1830-1842 and presented in a series of lectures that Comte. The full series was first published in 1848.

Positivism consists essentially of a Philosophy and a Polity. These can never be disjoined; the former being the basis, and the latter the end of one comprehensive system, in which our intellectual faculties and our social sympathies are brought into close correlation with each other. For, in the first place, the science of Society, besides being more important than any other, supplies the only logical and scientific link by which all our varied observations of phenomena can be brought into one consistent whole. Of this science it is even more true than of any of the preceding sciences, that its real character cannot be understood without explaining its exact relation in all general features with the art corresponding to it. Now here we find a coincidence which is assuredly not fortuitous. At the very time when the theory of society is being laid down, an immense sphere is opened for the application of that theory; the direction, namely, of the social regeneration of Western Europe. For, if we take another point of view, and look at the great crisis of modern history, as its character is displayed in the natural course of events, it becomes every day more evident how hopeless is the task of reconstructing political institutions without the previous remodelling of opinion and of life. To form then a satisfactory synthesis of all human conceptions is the most urgent of our social wants: and it is needed equally for the sake of Order and of Progress. During the gradual accomplishment of this great philosophical work, a new moral power will arise spontaneously throughout the West, which, as its influence increases, will lay down a definite basis for the reorganization of society. It will offer a general system of education for the adoption of all civilized nations, and by this means will supply in every department of public and private life fixed principles of judgment and of conduct. Thus the intellectual movement and the social crisis will be brought continually into close connexion with each other. Both will combine to prepare the advanced portion of humanity for the acceptance of a true spiritual power, a power more coherent, as well as more progressive, than the noble but premature attempt of mediaeval Catholicism.

The primary object, then, of Positivism is twofold: to generalize our scientific conceptions, and to systematize the art of social life. These are but two aspect of one and the same problem. They will form the subjects of the first two chapters of this work. I shall first explain the general spirit of the new philosophy. I shall then show its necessary connection with the whole course of that vast revolution which is now about to terminate under its guidance in social reconstruction.
…The regenerating doctrine cannot do its work without adherents; in what quarter should we hope to find them? Now, with individual exceptions of great value, we cannot expect the adhesion of any of the upper classes in society. They are all more or less under the influence of baseless metaphysical theories, and of aristocratic self-seeking. They are absorbed in blind political agitation and in disputes for the possession of the useless remnants of the old theological and military system. Their action only tends to prolong the revolutionary state indefinitely, and can never result in true social renovation.

Whether we regard its intellectual character or its social objects, it is certain that Positivism must look elsewhere for support. It will find a welcome in those classes only whose good sense has been left unimpaired by our vicious system of education, and whose generous sympathies are allowed to develop themselves freely. It is among women, therefore, and among the working classes that the heartiest supporters of the new doctrine will be found. It is intended, indeed, ultimately for all classes of society. But it will never gain much real influence over the higher ranks till it is forced upon their notice by these powerful patrons. When the work of spiritual reorganization is completed, it is on them that its maintenance will principally depend; and so too, their combined aid is necessary for its commencement. Having but little influence in political government, they are the more likely to appreciate the need of a moral government, the special object of which it will be to protect them against the oppressive action of the temporal power.

But there is another and more unexpected source from which Positivism will obtain support; and not till then will its true character and the full extent of its constructive power be appreciated…It is from the feminine aspect only that human life, whether individually or collectively considered, can really be comprehended as a whole. For the only basis on which a system really embracing all the requirements of life can be formed, is the subordination of intellect to social feeling: a subordination which we find directly represented in the womanly type of character, whether regarded in its personal or social relations.

.... The great object which Positivism sets before us individually and socially, is the endeavor to become more perfect. The highest importance is attached therefore to the imaginative faculties, because in every sphere with which they deal they stimulate the sense of perfection. Limited as my explanations in this work must be, I shall be able to show that Positivism, while opening out a new and wide field for supplies in the same spontaneous way new means of expression. I shall thus have sketched with some detail the true character of the regenerating doctrine. All its principal aspects will have been considered. Beginning with its philosophical basis, I pass by natural transitions to its political purpose; thence to its action upon the people' Its influence with women, and lastly, to its esthetic power. In concluding this work, which is but the introduction to a larger treatise, I have only to speak of the conception which unites all these various aspects. As summed up in the positivist motto, Love, Order, Progress, they lead us to the conception of Humanity, which implicitly involves and gives new force to each of them. Rightly interpreting this conception, we view Positivism at last as a complete and consistent whole. The subject will
naturally lead us to speak in general terms of the future progress of social regeneration, as far as the history of the past enables us to foresee it. The movement originates in France, and is limited at first to the great family of Western nations. I shall show that it will afterwards extend, in accordance with definite laws, to the rest of the white race, and finally to the other two great races of man.