

**Auguste Comte** (full name: **Isidore Marie Auguste François Xavier Comte**; 17 January 1798 – 5 September 1857) was a French thinker who is generally credited for having coined the term "sociologie" (French, meaning "[sociology](#)") (from the Latin: *socius*, "companion"; and the suffix *-ology*, "the study of", from Greek λόγος, *lógos*, "knowledge"<sup>[1]</sup>). It has recently been discovered that the term had already been introduced in 1780, albeit with a different meaning, by the French essayist [Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès](#) (1748-1836).<sup>[2]</sup>

Comte now knew what he wanted to do - work out the philosophy of [positivism](#). This plan he published as *Plan de travaux scientifiques nécessaires pour réorganiser la société* (1822) (*Plan of scientific studies necessary for the reorganization of society*). But he failed to get an academic position. His day-to-day life depended on sponsors and financial help from friends.

One universal [law](#) that Comte saw at work in all sciences he called the 'law of three phases'. It is by his statement of this law that he is best known in the English-speaking world; namely, that society has gone through three phases: Theological, Metaphysical, and Scientific.<sup>[3]</sup> To the last of these he also gave the name "[Positive](#)," because of the [polysemous connotations](#) of that word.

The [Theological](#) phase was seen from the perspective of 19th century France as preceding the [Enlightenment](#), in which man's place in society and society's restrictions upon man were referenced to God. Man blindly believed in whatever he was taught by his ancestors. He believed in a supernatural power. [Fetishism](#) played a significant role during this time. By the "Metaphysical" phase, he referred not to the [Metaphysics](#) of [Aristotle](#) or other ancient Greek philosophers. Rather, the idea was rooted in the problems of French society subsequent to the [revolution](#) of 1789. This Metaphysical phase involved the justification of *universal rights* as being on a vauntedly higher plane than the authority of any human ruler to countermand, although said rights were not referenced to the sacred beyond mere metaphor. This stage is known as the stage of investigation, because people started reasoning and questioning although no solid evidence was laid. In the Scientific phase, which came into being after the failure of the revolution and of [Napoleon](#), people could find solutions to social problems and bring them into force despite the proclamations of *human rights* or prophecy of *the will of God*. Science started to answer questions in full stretch. In this regard he was similar to [Karl Marx](#) and [Jeremy Bentham](#). For its time, this idea of a Scientific phase was considered up-to-date, although from a later standpoint it is too derivative of [classical physics](#) and [academic history](#). Comte's [law of three stages](#) was one of the first theories of [social evolutionism](#).

The other universal law he called the 'encyclopedic law'. By combining these laws, Comte developed a systematic and hierarchical classification of all sciences, including inorganic physics ([astronomy](#), [earth science](#) and [chemistry](#)) and organic physics ([biology](#) and, for the first time, *physique sociale*, later renamed *sociologie*). Independently from [Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès](#)'s introduction of the term in 1780, Comte re-invented 'sociologie', and introduced the term as a neologism, in 1838. Comte had earlier used the term 'social physics', but that term had been appropriated by others, notably [Adolphe Quetelet](#).

This idea of a special science—not the humanities, not [metaphysics](#)—for the social was prominent in the 19th century and not unique to Comte. The ambitious—many would say grandiose—way that Comte conceived of it, however, was unique. Comte saw this new science,

[sociology](#), as the last and greatest of all sciences, one which would include all other sciences and integrate and relate their findings into a cohesive whole. It has to be pointed out, however, that there was a seventh science, one even greater than sociology. Namely, Comte considered "[Anthropology](#), or true science of Man [to be] the last gradation in the Grand Hierarchy of Abstract Science".<sup>[4]</sup>

Comte's explanation of the Positive philosophy introduced the important relationship between theory, practice and human understanding of the world. On page 27 of the 1855 printing of [Harriet Martineau](#)'s translation of *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, we see his observation that, "If it is true that every theory must be based upon observed facts, it is equally true that facts can not be observed without the guidance of some theories. Without such guidance, our facts would be desultory and fruitless; we could not retain them: for the most part we could not even perceive them."<sup>[5]</sup>

He used the word "[altruism](#)" to refer to what he believed to be a moral obligation of individuals to serve others and place their interests above one's own. He opposed the idea of individual rights, maintaining that they were not consistent with this supposed ethical obligation (*Catechisme Positiviste*).

In Comte's lifetime, his work was sometimes viewed skeptically, with perceptions that he had elevated [Positivism](#) to a [religion](#) and had named himself the Pope of Positivism. Comte is generally regarded as the first Western sociologist ([Ibn Khaldun](#) having preceded him in the East by nearly four centuries). Comte's emphasis on the interconnectedness of social elements was a forerunner of modern [functionalism](#). Nevertheless, as with many others of Comte's time, certain elements of his work are now viewed as eccentric and unscientific, and his grand vision of sociology as the centerpiece of all the sciences has not come to fruition.

His emphasis on a quantitative, mathematical basis for decision-making remains with us today. It is a foundation of the modern notion of Positivism, modern quantitative statistical analysis, and business decision-making. His description of the continuing cyclical relationship between theory and practice is seen in modern business systems of Total Quality Management and Continuous Quality Improvement where advocates describe a continuous cycle of theory and practice through the four-part cycle of plan, do, check, and act. Despite his advocacy of quantitative analysis, Comte saw a limit in its ability to help explain social phenomena.

## **Three Stages**

*Main article: [Law of three stages](#)*

"The law is this: -that each of our leading conceptions, -each branch of our knowledge, -passes successively through three different theoretical conditions: the Theological, or fictitious; the Metaphysical, or abstract; and the Scientific, or positive." -Comte<sup>[6]</sup>

1. Theological Stage
  1. Fetishism
  2. Polytheism
  3. Monotheism
2. Metaphysical or Abstract Stage
3. Positive Stage