
H-France Review Vol. 11 (May 2011), No. 115

Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, 3 volumes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993/2009/2009). I:792 pp; II:652 pp; III:682 pp. \$254.35 U.S. (cl). I: ISBN-10: 0521025745. II: ISBN-10: 0521513251. III: ISBN-10: 0521119146.

Review by H. S. Jones, University of Manchester.

Biographies of philosophers are in vogue. I think of Manfred Kuehn on Kant, Terry Pinkard on Hegel, Bart Schultz on Sidgwick, Aloysius Martinich on Hobbes, and Roger Woolhouse on Locke, all published by Cambridge University Press within the last decade or so; and also of Richard Reeves's biography of Mill, Roger Pearson's of Voltaire, and Nicholas Phillipson's of Smith.[1] These are all big books, but all are single-volume studies. Auguste Comte is much less read these days than any of these philosophers, except perhaps Sidgwick; and he had a less eventful life than most. Yet here we find him receiving the accolade of a three-volume study comprising more than two thousand pages; a work that took the author thirty years (sic) to complete. The central question a reviewer must address is: how does our understanding of Comte as a thinker benefit from this meticulous treatment of his life?

On the face of things, Comte's claim to a biography of these dimensions are small, for his interest seems to lie in his thought far more than in his personality, which most have found rebarbative. His ideas have certainly been hugely influential in Europe, Latin America, and beyond, and he is commonly regarded as a prophet of many key aspects of modernity: the quasi-priestly authority of the "expert," for example, and the role of social science as a guide to public policy.[2] For Anatole France, "all cultivated minds of this time ... are penetrated with these great ideas that Auguste Comte rejuvenated or created" (III, p. 568). He has shaped the lexicon of social science and ethical life, as his neologisms—"sociology," "altruism," and even, less directly, "humanitarianism"—have entered into common usage in many languages. But the man himself was bizarrely unattractive, "as pathological an egocentric as ever strutted the stage in a Strindbergian madhouse," to quote the British economist Lionel Robbins (III, p. 580). Moreover, it is not even that a biography of Comte provides a window into the intellectual climate of his times, as, for example, Robert Skidelsky's three-volume life of Keynes could be said do to.[3] For in 1838, at the age of forty, Comte adopted a regime of "cerebral hygiene," whereby he stopped reading contemporary books, including journals and newspapers, although he made an exception for scientific reviews and for selected works such as Mill's *System of Logic*. Whereas in the first volume Pickering was able to offer some important insights into Comte's debt to and knowledge of German philosophy, as well as into his interactions with a whole range of his French contemporaries, the second and third volumes inevitably have a more limited focus on Comte's relations with his disciples.

There is one central question for Comte scholars: the question of the "two Comtes." Did the positivist system propounded by Comte in his last major work, the *Système de Politique Positive*, constitute the realization or the betrayal of his six-volume *Cours de Philosophie Positive*? What was the relationship between the science of society and the religion of humanity? Was there a fundamental shift in Comte's interests—and the implications of his work—between the 1830s, when his focus was on the logical foundations of his new science of sociology, and the 1850s, when he was obsessed with the religious foundations of the social order? Most Comte scholars, from Henri Gouhier onwards, have tended to challenge the premises of *das Auguste Comte Problem*. What does Pickering's encyclopaedic biography tell us about this problem?

The first thing to say is that her three-volume study is, in a sense, structured so as to focus our attention on this problem. The first volume focuses on the *Cours* and its precursors, while the third is centrally concerned with the *Système*. The second volume is the most interesting from a biographical point of view, because it is not dominated by a big text, and is less concerned with the exposition of ideas than with tracing the reasons for the shift in Comte's preoccupations. The period it deals with (1842-52) was the period when Comte's philosophy became an "ism." It was in the *Discours sur l'ensemble du positivisme* (1848) that Comte routinely began to refer to "positivism" (III, p. 13). It was the period—especially in and around 1848—when his political engagement was greatest. It was the period when he launched the "religion of humanity." It was also the period when he began to place woman at the centre of his programme of social and moral reconstruction. He came to see women as agents of social unity and placed the Cult of Woman at the centre of heart of the Religion of Humanity.

If we are to seek a biographical explanation for the evolution of Comte's thought, the obvious place to start is with his relations with women, and how they influenced his shift from misogyny towards what Pickering regards as a "difference feminism," although one of an idiosyncratic kind.^[4] This is by no means new. In particular, Clotilde de Vaux, the woman with whom he became infatuated in 1844, has a prominent part in most accounts of the development of Comte's thought. Comte himself attributed the development of what he acknowledged to be his "second career" to his love for Clotilde's "eminent intelligence" and "angelic purity" (II, p. 372). Pickering does not dismiss her importance and indeed develops what she calls a feminist reading of Clotilde (II, p. 11, p. 585) as a serious and rounded figure in her own right. This reading is well-grounded and persuasive. But Pickering is careful to maintain a critical distance from Comte's own narratives of his development (II, p. 133). She rightly sees differences over the social position of women as central to his rift with Mill, which finally occurred the year before he met Clotilde. Comte regarded gender differences as essential and biologically constructed, whereas Mill took the view that they should be presumed (in the absence of contrary evidence) to be socially constructed and hence malleable.

Comte continued to regard gender difference as fundamental, but he abandoned the opinion, which he expressed to Mill in October 1843, that woman was in a "state of extreme infancy" and hence inferior to the "grand human type," man (II, p. 370). But that does not mean that the encounter with Clotilde was the sole factor that reoriented Comte's thinking in a different direction. A particularly original contribution made by Pickering is her account of the important influence exercised by Sarah Austin, who settled in Paris with her husband (the jurist, John Austin) in 1843, and who met Comte for the first time late in 1843, on Mill's introduction. Comte and Sarah Austin met and wrote to each other frequently in the course of 1844 and beyond, and Pickering provides persuasive evidence that his friendship with her was important in obliging Comte to reconsider the importance of the emotions and so to formulate the "sentimental" side of positivism.

This is a helpful amplification of the story Comte, and many after him, told, but it is a refinement rather than a fundamental revision. Comte did significantly rethink his understanding of gender relations in the course of the 1840s, and did so chiefly as a result of his relationships with women. Clotilde was by far the most important, but Sarah Austin was chronologically the first. But the question is how fundamental was this to the reorientation of Comtean positivism. I remain unclear exactly how Pickering answers this question. Time and again, she insists that the foundations of Comte's later system of thought were laid in the *Cours*; but if that is so, then the case for a blockbuster biography is weakened. And the cumulative impression created by this minute account of his life is that the decade covered by the second volume was indeed fundamental. It is a problem with a work of this scale that the reader can easily lose the thread of particular arguments, which sometimes have to be followed not merely for several chapters, but over more than one volume.

The other great puzzle that remains at the end of this book relates to Comte's personality. Although Pickering is properly sympathetic, it is difficult to imagine that any reader will really warm to Comte as a person. The prophet of altruism was perhaps the most egotistical of all the great philosophers and social theorists. So are we to believe that positivist ideas exerted their influence by their intrinsic appeal, and in spite of their founder's dogmatism, his authoritarianism, and his self-

centredness? What makes that account ultimately unsatisfactory is that positivism was not just a body of ideas but an organized movement, and a movement organized by Comte and, after his death, by a group of disciples many of whom testified to the force of Comte's own personality. Pickering devotes ample space, in both the second and third volumes to Comte's relations with his disciples, and we follow a string of French and foreign admirers on their pilgrimages to Comte's apartment in rue Monsieur-le-Prince, in the Latin Quarter of Paris. Most came away with their belief in positivism reinforced rather than undermined. There was something charismatic about Comte, but that quality is not really brought to life here.

One thing that can be said with certainty is that Mary Pickering's book will not be superseded. No future scholar is likely to undertake such a close and meticulous study of Comte's life, and these three volumes will remain a fundamental point of reference for anyone working on Comte or positivism. The research is exhaustive and Pickering's judgements are unfailingly balanced and fair-minded. She has performed an enormous service to Comte scholarship. There is nothing polemical here and it is difficult to pinpoint a central argument with which future historians will associate this book, but in terms of comprehensive and meticulous research it is a remarkable achievement.

NOTES

[1] Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Bart Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick, Eye of the Universe: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Aloysius Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Roger Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007); Roger Pearson, *Voltaire Almighty* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005); Nicholas Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010).

[2] Jose Harris, "Their Way," *London Review of Books* 31/5(12 March 2009): 29.

[3] Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes: A Biography*, 3 volumes (London: Macmillan, 1983, 1992 and 2000).

[4] Mary Pickering, "Angels and Demons in the Moral Vision of Auguste Comte," *Journal of Women's History* 8(1996): 30.

H. S. Jones

University

of

Manchester

stuart.jones@manchester.ac.uk

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172