

Programme: Master in Sociology
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Introduction

Positivism is characterised in terms of prediction and explanation of the behaviour of phenomena and pursuit of knowledge is understood through objectivity, scientificity, and rationalism or logical thinking. It refers that truth can be discovered through reason and rational thought. The world is said to be deterministic, determined by cause and effect. Positivist argues that knowledge comes from foundational concepts known intuitively through reason. The fundamental difference between empiricism and positivism lies in his realm of theory. Data within positivism is theory driven and designed to test the accuracy of the theory. Empiricism on the other hand, is a method of research which has not referred explicitly to the theory guiding its data collection procedure. Thus for empiricism it's the fact speak for themselves. In this section we are going to discuss positivism, a method of enquiry that sought to give immense cognitive prestige to the discipline, and wanted to convince its adherents that sociology too could be a science and follow the scientific methodological principles of empirical observation, deductive, reasoning, and formulation of laws or universal generalisations. As a matter of fact, this self-perception of sociology as a science sought to serve three purposes - (a) it separated sociology as an empirical science from humanities and philosophy; (b) it gave a professional identity to the sociologist who ought to overcome the limiting identities emanating from caste, class and gender, and think in a more objective/rational universal fashion; (c) the knowledge it would acquire would help us to reconstruct our society, and create a better world.

Salient Features of Positivism

The salient features of positivism can be characterised as follows:

- It believes in the unity of method. Sociology is not different from the natural sciences as far as the method of enquiry is concerned.
- It celebrates objectivity and value neutrality. It, therefore, separates the knower from the known, subjectivity from objectivity, and fact from value.
- Sociology is not common sense. It rests on explanatory principles, which give a universal character to the discipline.
- Sociology is a formal and organised body of knowledge, characterised by specialised skills and techno-scientific vocabulary.
- Sociology can strive for abstraction and generalisation. Human experiences can be explained through law-like generalisations.
- The scientific knowledge of society can be used for social engineering.

Origin of Positivism

As we recall, the period between 1300 and 1600 was a time of great change in Europe. While the religious movement or the Reformation was taking place, another revolution took place in

Europe that changed permanently how human beings viewed the world. Before 1500, scholars generally decided what was true or false according to the Bible and Church. However, few Europeans challenged this idea of the Church. This was the period of Scientific Revolution that was based upon careful understanding and a willingness to question the accepted beliefs. Moreover, the basis for scientific revolution was the scientific method that used observation and experimentation to explain theories on the working of the universe. This method of research is the beginning of natural science. Science is often described as a subject oriented towards the empirical study of the search for 'truth' and establishment of abstract laws, through a definite procedure that is based on testing and validation effectively regarded as scientific method and the knowledge produced with these methods is the scientific knowledge which is acknowledged as the superior form of knowledge. The famous scientists like Copernicus, Galileo or Newton used different methods that brought discoveries and inventions in medicine, physics and biology. However, scientific method did not develop overnight. The work of two important thinkers of the 1600s, Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes helped to advance the method. Francis Bacon who was an English Statesman and a writer was passionate about science and believed in better understanding of the world. Instead of reasoning from abstract theories, he urged scientists to experiment and draw conclusions. This approach is called Empiricism or Experimental method. In France, Rene Descartes took interest in science and developed analytical geometry. This provided an important new tool for scientific research. However, unlike Bacon, Descartes used mathematics and logic rather than experimentation.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) taught us first the important notion of objectivity. He was of the opinion that the truth exists out there but is sullied and distorted by the prejudices and biasness which human beings possess. Hence he expounded a system of philosophical thinking that would help us to seek and grasp the truth with all its authenticity. Bacon proposes four species of idols that hinders the process in the attainment of value neutral truth. Value neutrality means dispelling of any values that inhibits the search of knowledge for the perfection of mankind. He stated four classes of idols and these are the idols of the mind which are basic to all human beings as it is a way of trying to perceive the world as everyone wants. This leads to the shielding of the truth and everyone forming his own idea about reality. The idols of the den depend on individual's inclination to look at the world. Experiences definite to particular social settings, prejudices and different ways of socialization condition one's outlook whether it is pessimistic, optimistic, revolutionary or conservative. The idols of the market are the idols that emerge from interactions of people in various places that encourage gatherings. Interaction with linguistic aid creates confusion as the categories and the meanings used in the daily interactions are never value free and creates tension and one sided generation of knowledge. The idols of the theatre shroud the minds of people with specific dogmas and systems of philosophy.

Another important figure who increased the momentum of the culmination of enlightenment was Descartes. He was of the opinion his senses through which he comes to know the world is not authentic. These understanding of the world around him is mere illusionary. But this same understanding made him realize that the mind can overcome all these illusions if one disperses all the subjective ideas. He stated that though the body can be separated, mind is the core existence of individuals. Minds devoid of sensory understanding can lead to a rational understanding of the world around us. Thus abstract empiricism and rationalism became the mainstay of enlightenment.

Karl Popper criticized the dominance of logical positivism in science that led to a reified way of looking at any problem for investigation. Like the Einstein's theory of relativity Popper asserted the relative character of science. Science is not static and absolute but can be subjected to analysis and falsification. Popper was of the opinion that the information gained from any source of knowledge is not immune to falsification and change. Hence science should be amenable to changes.

Thomas Kuhn another philosopher of science was of the opinion that science depends on paradigms. Paradigms like assumed domain or outlook through which we try to attain scientific information. This result in attainment of knowledge which is not absolute, any information which do fails to fall within a paradigm is excluded. Hence these exclusions create a lopsided science that should be open to speculation.

Early Positivism

Another result of the scientific revolution was the Enlightenment during the middle of the late 17th or 18th century that changed the way people lived as political and social scholars and began to question the working of the society. While the scientific revolution focused on the methods of physical world, the enlightenment tried to find methods which would find out the function and purposes of the institution of government and the state. The most influential Enlightenment thinkers were Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Voltaire, Baron de Montesquieu and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Before enlightenment the difference between sciences, religion, arts were negligible. The widespread acceptance and success of science have led to the development of the study of the social world, along with the incorporation of scientific method in the study of the social world. Thus, there evolved the science of society that paid attention to human society and its changes.

With the coming of French revolution, sociology emerged from the enlightenment thought with August Comte coining the term in 1838. It evolved as a science of society in response to the growing concerns about the emerging social facts and their meaning in the context of phenomenal social changes in the human societies. The birth of sociology converged with the inauguration of Industrial Revolution and the European Modernity in the course of European expansion and the rise of Eurocentric world system.

Both, Comte and St. Simon thought society should be studied using scientific methods that are used in natural science. Comte had initially used the term 'social physics' for the study of society but finally changed it into 'Sociology' as a Belgian Scientist has used the same term to describe 'simple statistics'. According to him society should be studied using the same methods as in the natural sciences and this approach is termed as 'positivism'. In the quest of making it as equal to natural science, sociology has opted for methods, logics, laws to understand, to experiment which can measure the success of theories, our hypothesis etc. Methods are important for confirmations or corroboration. Comte wanted religion to be replaced by humanity where science would be used as a method to come to moral principles that would lead to the development of society and individuals. Positivism as the new religion envisioned by Auguste Comte will be a society based on moral principles and science that would counter the irrational fears of the uncertain and the unknown. Mysticism would give way to criticisms. In fact, despite positivism, there was another humanistic tradition seeking to reconcile the claims of science and art of interpretation.

Sociology as a discipline studies the social world. Social world includes all the social phenomena, the individual actions, institutions, collective behaviors, social static (order), social dynamics and things pertaining to them. Care should be taken that the subject matter being studied in that of the natural science. In natural sciences the objects being studied are devoid of inner meaning while when we study society and human beings the responses that appear on the surface of any individual do not necessarily correspond with his or her inner purpose of motivation which is difficult to observe and understand. Hence the subjective meaning of the actor is not something which appears on the surface but is hidden from the view which has to be exhumed. Since the facts are observed by the same individual they do not speak for themselves but is dependent on what we select as a fact and go on to describe it. Benedict Ruth in his book patterns of culture was of the view that a person's immediate culture is like a lens through which he or she comes to grip the meaning of the social world. Hence much of what we become is actually the repositories of society where we inhabit.

Hence science came into prominence as a result to quench the thirst of the unknown where science can equip an individual with awareness, perception and tools to search and understand the conundrum that is the functioning of the society.

Consolidation of Positivism

Auguste Comte provided the intellectual foundation of positivist sociology. And possibly it was this French tradition that gave birth to one of the most distinguished classical sociologists, Emile Durkheim (1858- 1917). Durkheim consolidated and elaborated positivist sociology. In a way, the Rules of Sociological Method that he published in 1895 gave a new momentum to the discipline. The subject matter of sociology, he repeatedly emphasised, is the domain of social facts that cannot be comprehended by any other discipline. It is, therefore, important to know how he defined social facts.

You can understand it better through an example from your everyday life. Imagine one fine morning you choose to walk barefoot. Nobody has compelled you to do so; it is your free choice, your own decision. But then, imagine one evening you decide to visit a temple, and offer your prayers. Before entering the temple you remove your shoes, wash your hands, and walk barefoot.

Do you see a qualitative difference in these two experiences? Yes, there is a significant difference. In the second case you are not really free. Well, you may argue that it is you who have chosen to walk barefoot inside the temple complex. But that is because you have internalised the prevalent practice so well that it looks almost natural and spontaneous. Imagine what would have happened had you tried to enter the temple without removing your shoes. You would have experienced severe constraint and resistance. From the temple authorities to the other devotee: all would object to your act and regard it as an insult to the sacred space. In other words, walking barefoot inside the temple is a fact that exists out there as a thing. It has an independent force that transcends your own will. If you disobey the practice, you would be forced, coerced, isolated or ridiculed. Such facts, according to Durkheim, are called social facts.

Everybody eats, drinks and sleeps. But not all such facts can be called social. Then, there would be no difference between biological physiological facts and social facts. In fact, there are some distinctive features of social facts. First, social facts exist outside you. Imagine a tree that you

are seeing from your window. It has a reality of its own. Even if you close your eyes and refuse to see it, the tree exists as it is. Likewise, Durkheim (1964: 1) explained that

When I fulfil my obligations as brother, husband, or citizen, when I execute my contracts, I perform duties which are defined, externally to myself, and my acts, in law and in custom. Even if they conform to my sentiments and I feel their reality subjectively, such reality is still objective, for I did not create them; I merely inherited through my education.

These facts are indeed different. The currency you use in your economic exchange, the language you speak in the process of communication, the rituals you celebrate as a member of a religious community, all these are social facts. Their existence does not depend on your or my will. As Durkheim (1964: 2) put it, 'here are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness'.

Second, social facts are endowed with coercive power. True, in our everyday life we do not experience this constraint. The reason is that, because of habit, socialisation and internalisation, we tend to experience social facts as natural and spontaneous. But then, as Durkheim (1964: 2-3) reminded, 'if I do not submit to the conventions of my society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attenuated form, the same effects as a punishment in the strict sense of the word'.

Third, social facts as things need to be distinguished from their individual manifestations. In fact, Durkheim held that social facts 'acquire a body, a tangible form, and constitute a reality in their own right, quite distinct from the individual facts which produce it'. For example, codified legal and moral rules, or articles of faith wherein religious groups condense their beliefs; none of these can be found entirely reproduced in the applications made of them by individuals. Yet, sociologically it is important to categorise their tangible, crystallised aspects as social facts, not their individual manifestations.

The meaning of 'social' in social facts is, therefore, clear. As Durkheim (1964: 3) stated, 'their source is not in the individual, their substratum can be no other than society, either the political society as a whole or someone of the partial groups it includes, such as religious denominations, political, literary, and occupational associations'. To sum up, you can borrow Durkheim's (1964: 13) own words, and conclude:

A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations.

You can understand Durkheim's scientific sociology better if you look at the 'rules' he prescribed for studying social facts. One such rule which has often been talked about is that it is absolutely necessary to observe social facts as things. What does it mean? A thing is a thing because its facticity cannot be altered even if you and I want it. It is in this sense that external objects like a tree, a table and a chair exist as things. If you wish to observe a thing as it is, you should not confuse it with your own ideas and sentiments. A tree needs to be seen as a tree, even if you hate trees. In other words, almost like Francis Bacon, Durkheim would argue that our ideas and sentiments or 'idols' should not prevent us from seeing a thing as it is (see Unit 6 for the discussion of Bacon's ideas). A sociologist must follow this fundamental lesson of scientific objectivity. Take, for instance, marriage as a social fact. As an individual, you may

not like the institution of marriage. But when as a sociologist you plan to study marriage as a social fact, retain your objectivity, separate your own likes and dislikes from facts, and see it as a thing codified in marriage laws, religious traditions and social customs. In other words, it is like separating the knower from the known facts from values. It is similar to the way a physicist studies the behavior of atoms, or a geologist studies the formation of mountains. Durkheim (1964: 30) elaborated further.

Social facts ...qualify as things. Law is embodied in codes; the currents of daily life are recorded in statistical figures and historical monuments; fashions are mpreserved in costumes; and taste in works of art. By their very nature they tend towards an independent existence outside the individual consciousness, which they dominate. In order to disclose their character as things, it is unnecessary to manipulate them ingeniously.

Likewise, Durkheim recalled Rene Descartes, and reminded us of the need for overcoming all presuppositions. For Durkheim (1964: 32) it is like overcoming 'inferior' faculties like emotions, sentiments and feelings. Only then is it possible for the sociologist 'to emancipate himself from the fallacious ideas that dominate the mind of the layman'. No wonder, Durkheim (1964: 35) pleaded strongly for a scientific vocabulary in the discipline. Sociologists must avoid the indeterminacy of common sense language, and be clear about the specificity of the concept they use.

The subject matter of every sociological study should comprise a group of phenomena defined in advance by certain common external characteristics, and all phenomena so defined should be included within this group.

It is equally important to avoid all sorts of vagueness while studying/observing an object. The physicist substitutes for the vague impressions of temperature and electricity by the visual representations of the thermometer and the electrometer. Likewise, when a sociologist studies social facts, s/he should not be carried away by their individual manifestations. Instead, it is important to find their expression in tangible and crystallised forms; for example, in legal codes, moral regulations, popular proverbs, statistical figures and religious conventions. Take an example. Suppose you are studying caste as a social phenomenon. It is possible that Ambedkar and Gandhi might have experienced and responded to caste hierarchy in different ways. But if you are practicing Durkheimian positivist sociology, you need not to be carried away by these individual manifestations. Instead, your task is to see caste as a thing, a structure rooted in codified laws, religious sanctions and social customs.

An important characteristic of science is its explanatory power. As sociology is scientific, it must explain social facts. For Durkheim, sociological explanations are objective and independent and cannot be reduced into psychological terms. It was in this sense that Durkheim (1964: 102) made an interesting point that 'a whole is not identical with the sum of its parts'. It acquires an independent character that is qualitatively different from those of its component parts. Society is, therefore, not identical with the sum of individuals. It is, of course, true that without individuals there is no society. But society transcends the individual.

While explaining social facts, it is important to understand the supremacy of the collective over the individual. Durkheim (1964: 104) clarified that

The group thinks, feels, and acts quite differently from the way in which its members would were they isolated. If, then, we begin with the individual, we shall be able to understand nothing of what takes place in the group. In a word, there is between psychology and sociology the

same break in continuity as between biology and the physiochemical sciences. Consequently every time that a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we could be sure that the explanation is false.

It was in this sense that Durkheim, as his other substantial works suggest, provided sociological explanations for social facts like suicide, division of labor and moral education. In fact, as Durkheim (1964: 110) categorically stated, 'the determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of individual consciousness'. Likewise, the function of a social fact needs to be seen in its relation to some social end. Take, for instance, punishment as a social fact. For Durkheim, its cause is the intensity of the collective sentiments that the crime offends. Likewise, its function is to maintain these very sentiments at the same degree of intensity. No wonder, for him, when the teacher punishes the child its function is not to cause physical suffering to the concerned child but to restore the sanctity of moral order in the classroom. To explain a social phenomenon, as Durkheim argued, is to find its cause as well as its function. And both cause and function are essentially social, not to be reduced to the individual psyche.

The craft of scientific sociology that Durkheim constructed gave a new momentum to the discipline. Sociology, he asserted, must come out of the influence of philosophy, and establish itself as a science. The principle of causality, he believed, can be applied to social phenomena. And sociology, as a result, would be free from ideological analysis; it would be neither individualistic, nor socialistic. Instead, sociology would be an objective study of social facts. This objectivity might reduce the 'popularity' of the discipline. But then, as if speaking like a prophet, Durkheim (1964: 146) said,

We believe, on the contrary, that the time has come for sociology to spurn popular success, so to speak, and to assume the exacting character befitting every science. It will then gain in dignity and authority what it will perhaps lose in popularity ... Assuredly, the time when it will be able to play this role successfully is still far off. However, we must begin to work now, in order to put it in condition to fill this role someday.

Let us not forget that Durkheim, despite his strong plea for scientific sociology, was deeply concerned about the moral foundation of society, its stability and order. Possibly modern industrial societies, and their positivism and its critique implicit differentiation, specialisation and division of labor made him confront a new problem. Gone are the days of simple societies characterised by 'mechanical solidarity'. But then, can modern societies survive merely through egotistic individualism and selfish interests? No wonder, he evolved a strong critique of utilitarianism and its celebration of the atomised individual trying to maximise one's pleasure. Instead, Durkheim continued to retain his belief in the moral supremacy of the collective, and he saw that the increasing differentiation in a modern society, paradoxically, would lead to more and more mutual dependence and create 'organic solidarity'. It was this consistent search for the basis of moral order that led him to explore the domain of religion and of the sacred, and school and moral education. In a way, in both Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim you are witnessing an endeavour to reconcile positivist sociology with social order and stability.

Positivism, it seems, is both an assertion of science as well as a quest for order and stability.

Critique of Positivism

First, it is possible to say that what is applicable in the domain of nature is not necessarily applicable in the domain of human society. Because, unlike nature, society consists of self reflexive agents who think, argue, contest, and through their practices and actions transform the world. Hence society cannot be subject to abstract universal generalisations. Positivism, it is alleged, undermines the creativity, reflexivity and agency of social actors. As you will see in the next section, interpretative sociology was a refreshing departure from the positivist tradition.

Second, it can also be argued that the so-called 'ethical neutrality' of positivism reduces it to a mere technique, separated from moral and political issues. And, paradoxically, it is precisely the politics of positivism. The establishment to legitimise itself often uses its scientific nature. In other words, positivism can prove to be pro-establishment, status-quoist, noncritical and non-reflexive. In the twentieth century this critique of positivism came rather sharply from critical theorists, or the adherents of the Frankfurt School Marxism. What is asserted is that science has lost its emancipatory power. Instead, science itself has become an integral component of the establishment. In fact, the experience of war, large scale violence, the growth of fascism, the spread of the "culture industry", and the emergence of the 'authoritarian personality', in other words, the darkness of the twentieth century led these thinkers to speak of the 'dialectic of enlightenment'. No wonder, from Adorno to Horkheimer to Marcuse, the central thrust of their argument was that positivist science was nothing but a form of instrumental rationality leading to domination and manipulation of human and natural resources. They critiqued this instrumental rationality, and pleaded for a more critical, reflexive, qualitative and emancipatory social science.

Third, post-modernists deconstruct the very foundation of science. No wonder, for post-modernists, positivism loses its cognitive power and legitimacy. And in a way the distinction, between objective science and subjective narrative gets eroded, sociology becomes yet another narrative filled with biographies and life histories, and a non-positivist post-modern sociology does not look fundamentally different from cultural studies!

As you understand, positivism emerged at a time when sociology was trying to establish itself as a science. And positivism continues to have its appeal. But then, with the passage of time, with new experiences leading to disillusionment with the so called 'neutrality' of science, and with new sensitivity to reflexivity and creativity, we see the growing critique of positivism. Positivism has indeed lost much of its appeal.