

The Crisis of Social Science as The Crisis of Positivism

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explain the view that there is a crisis for social sciences. This crisis is taken by the philosophy of science that is also called interpretations. The effect of natural science application to social science is to be measured. This paper argues that real causes may be observed and known in natural phenomenon that is also called philosophy of science or positivism.

Positivism is the observance and study of natural sciences in natural phenomenon that is proved valid if studied on longitudinal bases. It is influenced by pure and real data in natural existence. A critique with subjective perspective on positivism is called interpretivism. Social science research is different from natural science as it includes culture, circumstances and context in which reality exists.

In this paper it will be discussed and presented that social science is based on realistic interpretations of natural sciences. It also defends positivism provides opportunity to researcher to observe and explain reality in objective and natural manner while interpretivism gives space to observe and study realities on subjective basis. As a result, interpretivism provides opportunity to study realities in in-depth on associated factors of social science and draw conclusions that are more acceptable to society. This shows that social is not empirical or mental job, it is concerned and associated with society.

Key words: Positivism, Interpretivism, Social Science, Natural Science, Society

Positivism resulted from foundationalism and empiricism; positivists value objectivity and proving or disproving hypotheses. Interpretivism is in direct opposition to positivism; it originated from principles developed by Kant and values subjectivity. Critical theory originated in the Frankfurt School and

considers the wider oppressive nature of politics or societal influences, and often includes feminist research.

INTRODUCTION

There is a general advantage in having distinguished between a positivist and a realist philosophy of science. For the first time, it has become possible for us to see two important but different interpretations of natural science. Each one of them gives its version of how science is or should be conducted. For my own purposes, however, the differentiation between these two interpretations has a specific advantage, which goes beyond a mere distinction between two conceptions. In my view, the distinction has laid the ground for a philosophical position from which it is possible for me now to argue for an important case which could not be treated philosophically otherwise. By having made this distinction, I am now in a position to argue that, to the extent that I am right in my previous argument about the positivist philosophy of science, the crisis of social theory has its causal roots in the positivist approach.

In actual natural science, this crisis is not felt for the quite simple reason that scientists do not follow the positivist path in conducting their scientific activities. However, in the context of the social sciences, this crisis has, I think, resulted in a wrong account of the social world, including a misunderstanding of human actions and behavior.

To begin with, it is helpful for us here to assess, in general terms, some of the consequences of the positivist position in social science. To adopt a positivist view in social science leads inevitably to a confrontation with a social world constituted only of events and phenomena; and the content of our knowledge about this world is (would be) simply these events since they are all that which is. Along with this, the explanation of human actions, as one of the focal areas of social inquiry, is ultimately reduced to this ontology of events. Human action, it seems, occurs as an event within this realm of empirical events. Therefore, it is explained in conjunction with some other empirical events, namely by being subsumed under some general laws.

Man's real nature is a biological organism whose highly complex physical structures and mechanisms make him the kind of being he is, by virtue of this, he acts the way he does. However, from this point of view, this nature is forgotten in the first place. In short, man is ignored the fact of his natural being, i.e. as an active entity who causes his own actions, Why? Because from this point of view psychology, the science of psychic life, is merely reduced to a thus appears a form of behaviorism, i.e. as the study of the empirically overt behavior which is then explained by being brought under some other events in connection with general laws. Hence, man's mind, so it seems cannot be dealt with for it is not observed.

These are a few prejudices, among others, involved in the positivist position. As such, they are, I think, the causal antecedents of the crisis of social science as conceived by positivism. This crisis appears in social theory as the failure of positivism. Positivism fails to account for social reality and man because it is built on wrong principles.

If I assume that the crisis of social theory is intrinsic to the positivist philosophy of science, it is because social theory has been conceptualized within the positivist framework. Consequently, a mistake has been committed. It lies in the fact that the methods and concepts of positivism have been taken for granted as the true and indisputable grounds of scientific research. In lieu of having been dispensed with as

erroneous and misleading myths, they have been adopted as normative rules for scientific thinking and practice.

It is within the attempt to found a science of society in the model of natural science that positivism came to influence the conception of social theory. It was thought that once we master the techniques and concepts of natural science, we could apply them to the study of society and thereby establish a science capable of dealing with and explaining social phenomena. Wrongly interpreting natural science, however, positivist social science is no less wrong for social scientists.

In the pages that follow, I will consider some fundamental aspects of the sociology of Emile Durkheim. Such consideration will show and disclose the way in which the positivist principles have been introduced and suggested as the foundations of a science of society. These principles will be seen at work, so to speak. Hence, the meaning of the crisis of social theory, as I construed it, will be clear and articulated.

Although Durkheim is by no means the first or the last philosopher who preached and defended a positivist science of society, his systematic methodological formulations and his importance in this field make him, perhaps, more relevant for positivist social theory than his predecessor, Comte. It is in this respect that I selected him as a representative of positivism.

Research Methodology: In this article descriptive and analytical research approach is practiced, although major part of the literature review articles was quantitative in type, but findings are utilized for conclusion.

Positivism:

Positivism is based on Foundationalism, it a paradigm that is led by objectivity by observing and studying things in a natural phenomenon as it exists. (Lecturer in nursing, 2018).

Interpretivism:

Interpretivism may be considered as completely opposite of the positivism. It is based on subjectivity, and observing things by considering social and environmental factors (Lecturer in nursing, 2018).

Social Science:

Social Science may also be considered as Science of society. It refers to observe and study the coordination, communication and relationship among individuals living in a specific territory (Manicas, 1991).

Natural Science:

Natural Science refers that research paradigm towards observing, understanding and expressing things in a natural phenomenon (Hempel, February 1967).

Society:

Society consists of a group of people, who have common interest, values, believes and norms in a specific area. They have set standards for coordination and political and cultural representation.

Literature Review

Like a good positivist, Durkheim thought that a true sociology or science of society cannot be established unless the criteria of objective knowledge are met. These criteria are the positivist criteria of observation and experience. (Ryan, 2018)

Thus, for sociology to attain the certainty of natural science, it has to be purified of all religious or metaphysical ideas so that its object can be delimited and defined objectively. Pursuing this line of argument, Durkheim proposes the notion of “social facts” as the subject matter of social inquiry. Social facts, he concedes, must be considered as “things” He writes: ¹ Social phenomena are things and ought to be treated as things to be sure, in order for a social fact to have the status of a thing, it must possess certain properties which make it such. Durkheim’s contention is that social facts do have such features which, when well considered, prove empirically their being things. Durkheim ascribes three features to social facts. The first one is externality. Social fact, Durkheim argues, is and must be external to the individual and independent of his will or wish. He says, “When I fulfill 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 custom. The second feature is coercion. That is, social facts exercise some sort of power and restraint upon the individual such as the social norms and ritual practices of a society. Social facts, he notes, are “ways of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him. Failure to conform to them leads to different forms of sanctions and punishments, depending on the nature and type of damage caused in society (Hovorka, 2010)

The third feature is generality. The general character of a social fact does not mean, for Durkheim, that the fact simply exists in every segment of social life. Social fact is common because it is “collective.” It is a group tradition repeated in the individual because imposed on him, “he says. The concept of collectivity is important here for it refers, in Durkheim’s terminology, to society as a whole, not to its individuals as independent, separate parts. The parts make up the whole, but the whole includes more than the sum of its parts. It includes, besides its parts, the social structure through which the individuals are related and their behavior is expressed. This social structure has, Durkheim maintains, an independent existence of its own. He identifies social structures with the norms, legal codes and conventions in society. In this social structure, behaviors are provided for individual guidance for behavioral representation. Society may exist longer if it is based on unity, society that is based on single component of society will not last longer (Rivas, 2010).

From Durkheim’s consideration of social phenomena as things and his urge to treat them as such, he wants, I think, to ground the epistemology of his sociology on the category of observation and experience. What we find in Durkheim as a philosopher of social science is, again, the positivist fallacy of trying to conceptualize scientific knowledge in terms of what is general. Warning us, “we must approach the social realm where it offers the easiest access to scientific investigation; he aims at restricting social science to the study of social norms, legal laws, conventions, and institutions. The reason, he says, is that “they constitute a fixed object, a constant standard within the observer’s reach, exclusive of subjective impressions and purely personal observations. With this positivist standpoint in mind, Durkheim thought he could pave the way for an objective study of society. On this account, once social phenomena are taken as things, they can be observed, studied empirically, and a system of the regular relationships among them

can be established. As we proceed, the difficulties of Durkheim's positivism will be made clear (Husam Helmi Alharahsheh, 2020)

Conceiving of the social scientist's task as the search for the regular relationships between social phenomena, Durkheim aimed, positivistically, at the establishment of some kind of enduring relationships among observational data. This is plainly seen in his social studies where he worked out some general statements from which certain testable consequences may be derived. In *Suicide*, one of his major works, he studied the rate of suicide in social groups based on their degree of social "cohesion." He claims, for example, "Suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of religious society. Durkheim formulated this general statement from his analysis of Catholicism and Protestantism. "Protestants," he writes, "are found to kill themselves much more often than Catholics. They do so because the Catholic religion is much more integrated than the Protestant religion. The superiority," he says, "of Protestantism with respect to suicide results from its being a less strongly integrated church than the Catholic church. In addition, the reason for the weakness of Protestantism, he continues, is that it incites and encourages the individual's "free inquiry" more than Catholicism. In other words, while Protestantism allows more freedom of action and personal initiative to the Protestant, Catholicism establishes the Catholic's rules of conduct in a way, which limits and restricts his freedom (Grix, 2002)

From this example, it appears that Durkheim's positivist method is highly questionable. He based his explanation of social cohesion on the concept of integration, the absence of which he thought leads people to commit suicide. However, the concept of integration of religious society is, I think, a little bit overlooked by him. A religion, such as the Catholic religion, does not necessarily imply or prove that the society practicing it is more integrated than the society adhering to a much more tolerant religion, such as the Protestant religion. The integration of a society may not be inferred from or brought about by the limitations and controls imposed upon its members. The Catholic religion may determine the beliefs of its members more than the Protestant religion does. Nevertheless, this does not mean that one society is more integrated than the other is. The fact that Protestants enjoy more freedom than Catholics, does not tell us why their society is less integrated than the Catholic society; nor does it tell us why they kill themselves more than Catholics do. From a purely religious point of view, both religions, as we know, strongly forbid the killing of the self (Tuli, 2010)

The reason that Durkheim's argument does not work as a scientific explanation can, I think, be understood from the fact that he leaves out altogether the individual as the active agent who commits the act of suicide. Suicide is an act taken by a human being toward himself; and this act is ultimately related to the individual, his life situation, and the way he perceives it. Thus, in order to explain it, we cannot simply dismiss the actor's ability to know and to make judgments about the world surrounding him, on the one hand, and to reflect about himself as a causal agent who can act according to his knowledge in achieving his goals, on the other hand. This is not to say, however, that the environment does not play any role in suicide. Most often, indeed, suicide is committed because of environmental factors. One could, for example, put an end to his life simply because he could not keep up with the objective demands of family life (Wilk, 2018)

Thus, while Durkheim has found the cause of the rate of suicide, he has not succeeded in accounting for the causal mechanism of the interplay between the environment and the individual in the act of suicide. For he wants to explain suicide by conjoining it with general facts such as social norms and conventions Durkheim lacks a real concept of causality; therefore, he is unable to explain suicide correctly.

“Disregarding the individual as such, his motives, and his ideas,” he writes we shall seek directly the various social environments (religious confessions, family, political society.) In-terms of which the variations of suicide occur. However, if we do not take into account the individual, his beliefs, ideas, and desires, our explanation will leave out the material upon which the social environment acts unaccounted for. Things behave the way they do according to their structures, and part of the individual’s structure is his rationality. This rationality cannot then be left out in explaining the individual’s behavior because it generates the form of his behavior in response to the causes, which are working on him. Furthermore, if the individual, his ideas, and beliefs about the world are left out altogether, it will become difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish suicide from murder or natural death. Consequently, Durkheim’s positivist way of thinking brings us back once again to the positivist assumption that scientific knowledge is knowledge of the empirical regularities encountered in society, but not of the way by which they come about (Hunt, 1991)

And in the absence of a real concept of causality, scientific explanation is here once more conceived of and construed as a sub Sumption of some categorical empirical events under some higher, more general ones. For Durkheim, scientific explanation, so it seems, is the derivation of some facts from others. Hence, his choice of religious confessions, in our preceding example, as supposedly determinant “causes” of suicide is not an accident. It is the simple application of the positivist claim that scientific explanation is a deduction of some empirical facts from general laws. To be sure, explanation, in this sense, may still allow one to formulate general laws; but it misses the real function of scientific explanation i.e. of allowing one to see the generative mechanisms responsible for the production of events (Fuchs, 2017)

In addition, note that Durkheim does not really have any causal explanation for the phenomenon of suicide based on religious confessions. In other words, if religion has, in fact, some causal relationship to suicide as his thesis seems to hold, then some kind of religious beliefs can and must be construed as causes of the suicidal act; and, as a result, the phenomenon of suicide must be explained and understood in terms of such religious beliefs. Durkheim would certainly deny this. Then the real causes of suicide must be other than religious ones. Furthermore, it seems that, for him, religious beliefs exist only in religious ceremonies, norms, and documents, but are not part of the life of the individuals who are involved in these norms, rituals, and document. Individuals, it appears, are simply passive and receptive to society and its rules. Therefore, in this view, men have no active and creative roles in their society. Society itself, an ambiguous category in Durkheim is thinking, seems to exist above and outside its members as an entity endowed with a powerful mind, imposing various types of rules and norms of life to which men have to conform. Therefore, we can conclude that, had Durkheim discovered the mechanism by which the lack of social cohesion is related to the suicide rate, he would not have viewed suicide as if it were a passive reaction on the part of the individual to the environment (Hjørland, 2005).

Durkheim’s suggestions and the difficulties they carry with them can be seen in two additional respects. First, in his method of defining scientific terms, he frequently proposes the use of some sort of operational definitions in clarifying the meanings of scientific concepts. Durkheim’s notion of definition is, however, positivistic ally conceived, for, as far as this conception goes, the aim of a definition is to lay down the grounds of an empirical science of social reality. “The sole function of a definition,” he says, “is to establish contact with things; and since the latter can be grasped by the mind only from its exteriors the definition expresses them in terms of their external qualities. We have already seen this Durkheimian move in his attempt to formulate a concept of social phenomena by using observational vocabulary. His definition of social phenomena as “thing like” and his ascription of a thing’s characteristics to social facts

rest upon the positivist idea that the meaningfulness and truthfulness of scientific concepts must be determined empirically. The difficulties generated by this positivist view have been discussed earlier. (Riley, 2007)

On this issue will throw some further light on his positivist view of social science. In the Division of Labor, Durkheim argues that the division of labor in society produces social solidarity. This social solidarity, we are told, can be determined scientifically. By this, Durkheim means that the determination of the phenomenon of solidarity should be accomplished through an empirical study. Durkheim was, however, confronted with the fact that this phenomenon is not observable. "But social solidarity is a completely moral phenomenon which, taken by itself, does not lend itself to exact observation nor indeed to measurement, he says. His solution to this problem is that "we must substitute for this internal fact which escapes us an external index which symbolizes it and study the former in the light of the latter. The empirical external index he finds is Law. Law, Durkheim argues, represents social relations, including moral codes, which have been objectified in legal institutions and rules study of the various institutions and rules will, according to him, reveal the social solidarity they embody. Durkheim's study of social solidarity turned out to be a study of legal regulations and codes. (Eugene Matusov, Ana Marjanovic-Shane, Tina Kullenberg, Kelly Curtis, 2019)

However, since my purpose is merely the consideration of his positivist methodology, I will leave the content of this study aside.

However, there is one thing, which should not be left aside. The difficulty lies behind the positivist methodology. As we have seen, Durkheim clearly assumes a positivist position in dealing with theoretical entities. Hence, the positivist method he proposes is initially inadequate as solution to this problem. There are at least two major reasons for believing that this is the case with Durkheim's particular solution. First, it is wrong, I think, to assume, as Durkheim appears to suggest, that the set of social rules and legal regulations reflect the entire truth about the reality of a society so that we can infer with complete exactness its social solidarity from a simple empirical study of these sets of rules and regulations.

The sets of rules and regulations do not always represent the actual hopes, desires, and expectations of all the social formations of that society, nor do they always represent the social actions and relationships in which men are engaged in their everyday social life. That is to say, the reality of a society may well be in contradiction with its legal regulations and rules. (Majeed, 2019)

Accordingly, to take as true these rules and codes for an index of its solidarity is (or can) be quite misunderstanding. Inherent as it is in the positivist philosophy of science, the crisis of social theory then appears problematic in nature. The problem lurking behind it can be expressed. With its epistemological reductionism, positivism aims at a knowledge about social reality, which it claims to be scientific. However, we have concluded that the kind of knowledge positivism advocates cannot qualify as such. Scientific knowledge is and cannot be built only on empirical grounds. If it is, as positivist certainly think it to be, then it produces only a wrong account of society and man. As we have seen, Durkheim conceives of man as a being who appears to be almost like a puppet of society; in fact, he seems to be so controlled by it that one gets the impression he does not exist in his own right as an active agent who can affect society, just as he is affected by it. Meanwhile, society is presented as a system of rules, traditions, and institutions, which exists outside and operates from above him. As such, man's relation to society can only be a one-sided relation, i.e. that of conformity and correspondence. Furthermore, this latter (society)

looks as if it were an abstract self-regulating and self-generating system, which, supposedly active in various ways, always seeks a state of equilibrium and stability of its own (Pather, 2005).

In this context, the kind of scientific knowledge sought by positivism becomes quite problematic. For example, when man's social behavior is reduced and elevated to a product of an alien entity called society, we are led to wonder about the active processes inherent in man—which make him a causal agent that Durkheim forgets. (Buddharaksa, 2010)

These remarks about Durkheim's positivism must not be understood in the sense that I am defending an individual first conception of the social, which Durkheim opposes, for to do this by insisting solely on the individual will be a mistake because it is through the structure of society that the individual's behavior is channel led. Neither am I opposing his being naturalist about social science. However, there should be no reason for confusion here, for my objection to Durkheim is only that the positivist method does not go far enough. In other words, it simply bases our knowledge about society and human behavior on what we can experience and observe in it. (Aliyu, 2014)

Because of their empirical doctrine, the positivists saw, I think, the problem of scientific knowledge mainly as question of how to develop a clearly articulated framework within which one can discover regularities among observational phenomena for the purpose of predicting future events. The positivists have been clear about this point; and their philosophy of science revolves, for the most Part, around the kind of means and rules to achieve this task. However, they have forgotten the important fact that by doing this, they were just ignoring the non-observable structures, properties, and mechanisms by which phenomena are produced. (Rose, 2020)

Scientific knowledge must be clear and distinct, but only if it depicts the real nature of things and the way they behave. This means scientific activity focuses primarily on the underlying structures and mechanisms through which observable phenomena take place. Hence, insofar as positivism does not account for this basic feature of science, it proves only one fundamental thing: the limited and narrow. Currently, the crisis of social science has been explaining is receiving increasing attention. Richard J. Bernstein has noted recently "the initial impression one has in reading through the literature in and about the social disciplines during the past decade or so is that of sheer chaos. Everything appears to be up for grabs; Bernstein traces the roots of this "chaos" to positivist social scientists. He observes, for example, that these social scientists have failed to produce the kind of objective scientific theory positivism has always been insisting on and that they have also failed in providing a theoretical basis to account for human values as well as a basis for critical studies of society which have been own position it holds avoided under the pretext of "methodological rules" (Ryan G. , 2018).

Other writers have gone further to suggest that the crisis of social science is a real dilemma characteristic of our contemporary human situation. Both Dallmayr and McCarthy, for instance, point out that contemporary man suffers from a "crisis of human understanding, "in view of which our "sense of purpose or direction seems to have atrophied. Both of them argue that today's man feels he has acquired a considerable amount of knowledge about the world, but he is more ignorant or at a loss as to what he and his accumulated knowledge are all about. They, too, like Bernstein, see the context of this crisis in positivism which, they write, "constitutes the immediate background for the intellectual "crisis" of our age and the intense ferment in the public of letters accompanying this crisis. (Wyly, 2007)

These various writers are, in my opinion, quite correct in pointing out the significant, though misleading, influence of positivism on the way scientific knowledge came to be understood and the state of confusion it, consequently, created for modern thought. Yet in their discussions of this crisis, they seem to assume that positivism is the only interpretive scheme of natural science. In contrast to this, our earlier discussion of the concept of scientific knowledge has borne out the emergence of realism as a strong counterpart to positivism. In light of this, it seems to me this tradition in the philosophy of science can plausibly be appropriated as an alternative to positivism in the social sciences. Consequently, I believe that from a realist point of view, the crisis of social science will dissolve finally. However, let me suggest here that a realist alternative will simply be an avoidance of the errors of positivism. At the same time, it will imply a rejection of any account of science that is (or may be) non-positivist, but not realist. Such as Poincarre's conventionalist account (Henry, 2015)

CONCLUSION

As we can see, by misunderstanding the error of positivism, the interpretationist initially misunderstands the crisis of social science. He does so because he assumes that the problems of this science are caused by the positivist attempt to conceive an objective science of the social; and, as a result, we must develop a non-objective science if we are to do away with these problems. For the realist philosophy of science, this misunderstanding obscures this crisis for, by introducing the problem of objectivity as the central issue, the interpretationist's criticism of positivism is misplaced and, consequently, his conception of science does not really solve the positivist problems. In fact, it simply tries to replace the positivist science by a science based on an ontology of concepts, which would reduce scientific knowledge to a realm of ideas and beliefs. Thus, instead of solving the positivist difficulties, it can only transform them into problems of interpretation.

Furthermore, from the realist standpoint, scientific knowledge cannot be built on the category of concepts and beliefs. For the realist, social reality is neither exhausted by our beliefs and concepts nor is it dependent on them. Hence, our knowledge about it must not be limited to an analysis of beliefs and ideas, which we happen to have about it, if it is, it can only be an analysis of human psychology rather than a study of social reality. In addition, beliefs, ideas, and concepts can always be subject to and sources of ideological distortion and misguidance. Therefore, a science founded on them is not only unable to explain social reality, which may be quite different from them, but also it is also unable to correct itself.

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