Explaining Real World Phenomena through Political Ideologies with special reference to Positivism and Interpretivism

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Abstract: *'Reality exists or it doesn't exist' has been one of the fundamental and central questions in political philosophy. The unfolding of knowledge is to understand the reality. But there are some who believe that there doesn't exist any reality. In other words, reality is constructed and this construction is itself the result of many different factors. This research paper is all about whether there exists some reality in the real world or whether reality is just a construction through the lenses of positivism and interpretivism. This article argues that positivism is more objective in its approach and the followers of this school of thought believe in the existence of a kind of objective reality. While on the other hand, interpretivism is more constructivist in its approach and challenges the notion of the existence of objective reality. Secondary sources of data have been used including books, research articles, and personal opinions have been used to reach informed conclusions.*

Key Words: Political Ideologies, Positivism, Interpretivism, Political Philosphy, Real World Phenomena

Introduction

The knowledge world is the unfolding of thesis and anti-thesis. No theory in history has been found so valid to have universal acceptance and an unlimited life span. Rather every theory has dominated the academic world for some time but has been challenged in the due course of history by a rival and competitive theoretical conception. This is exactly true about Positivism and interpretivism. Both have their own comparative strengths and weaknesses and one can say that both explain the real-world phenomena with logical and scientific arguments. However, the two stand in sharp contrast to each other with the latter challenging the very fundamental principles of the former and vice versa. They both present opposing and conflicting ideas about reality and consequently stand on contrasting epistemological and methodological structures. However, no doubt both have contributed a good deal to the academic world and human understanding of happenings and events in the social world. Importantly, both have proven to be good sources of human understanding of the world around him and things happening around him.

Positivism

Positivism is a research approach based on ontological principles that there is an objective reality that is free and independent of the viewer and waiting to be discovered (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim, & Martin, 2014). So if there is any reality, it can be known and explored through rigorous research in laboratory-like settings. The reality, being monist necessitates being studied by objective epistemology so as to ensure that the research may not be affected by the researcher's own value system and may explore reality as it stands out there. In positivism, emphasis is put on the impartiality of the researcher, measurement of any social fact or thing, and repeatability (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim, & Martin, 2014). The question is what reality is all about. Reality is after all what is available to the senses; something that is seen, observed, smelt, and touched

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(Gray, 2004). A positivist researcher asserts that there is a social world out there that confirms certain immutable laws and rules of causation and happens in a predictable manner. However, the intricacies and complexities of the social world and human behavior should be overcome by reductionism by making them more and more simple. Moreover, positivism draws a line between empirical and normative research. As it claims to be value-free, positivist research is strongly based on empirical inquiry. Its research is all about "what is" instead of "what ought to be" (Fazlıoğulları, 2012).

Auguste Comte, a French philosopher from the 19th century is credited for being the one who introduced the philosophy of Positivism as it stands today. Since then, positivism as a research approach has gone through different stages of evolution but Comte influence still remains dominant. The French Philosopher was concerned that social sciences being a science of society was still languishing in the pre-scientific metaphysical stage while Physics, Astronomy, and Biology had entered a new era of scientific research. So he seriously started thinking about how to free social sciences to be based on facts instead of assumptions. Moreover, he explored avenues as to how to collect data to test theories (Hasan, 2016). Comte put forth the idea of observation by saying that social phenomena should be considered as things or social facts. By doing so, observation remains detached from biased moral and ethical judgments. His second argument or strategy is to put social facts into experimentation. He believed that social scientists could understand the general functioning of society by observing social pathologies just like physicians can learn about normal body functioning by observing diseases. Third, he put forward the idea of comparison in social sciences as such a technique has proved helpful in revealing the knowledge about fundamental properties of the human social world. The fourth and final methodological strategy given by Comte is historical analysis to explore the variant qualities and features of different societies over time to formulate them into law for social organization (Hasan, 2016).

Positivism tries desperately to fill the gap between natural and social sciences. According to positivists, events in the social world, which lend themselves to discovery neither occur at random nor are they pre-destined by fate. Instead, happenings in the social world are the same as those of the natural world, explained in terms of causes and effects with one phenomenon leading to another (Nudzor, 2009). Importantly, positivist researchers are tasked not to create patterns in the social world rather they are supposed to discover them in the course of their research. However, positivists argue that reality is discovered only through the application of the scientific model of research (Ryan, 2015). For that reason, positivists even combine features like hypothesis testing, experimentation and then applying statistical tools for data analysis. Perhaps this has also been the reason to make social science dependent on scientific tools for the latter has no place for values and ethics in research. Moreover, the application of scientific epistemology to social sciences is to chase the successes registered by natural sciences in the research world.

However, there can be seen differences among positivists concerned with social sciences regarding how strictly verifiable statements should be in order to be accepted as true scientifically and how likely it is possible to frame actual laws governing human behavior in society even if scientific methods are applied. A social researcher can gather meaningful information about society and politics through scientific methods. However, any information to be meaningful must be verified empirically. Now the question is whether social values or facts are verifiable. There is much debate on these issues but Positivists suggest that science has made progress to the extent that it is now in a position to study the complex structure of the social world.

Positivism has provided analytical tools and helped to develop intervention and evaluation methods that are more effective than those previously used in social research. Positivism has contributed a good deal to social research to be more objective, scientific, and quantitative oriented to have reliable and verifiable results. Since the days of Comte, positivism has been utilized as a helpful tool by social researchers to make use of large sets of data, quantitative measurement, and statistical analysis. Around the world, positivism-based scientific research has been able to provide suggestions and recommendations to the government on important technical policy issues ranging from food security to foreign policy matters. In almost all countries statistical data are collected on all aspects of social and economic life in social research and then analyzed to give the government recommendations on various policy matters.

Moreover, the application of survey methods, questionnaires, hypotheses testing, and other statistical models speak volumes of the relevance of positivism in a social world (Hasan, 2016).

Critique of Positivism

Despite being an innovative and healthy concept in social research, positivism has been subject to harsh criticism since its birth. There is a fundamental flaw in the assumption that positivism makes about scientific inquiry in social sciences. Science produces theoretical explanations but not on the basis of observations. Science doesn't begin with observation but with theory to make observation intelligible. Thus even observations are theory-based (Gray, 2004). This approach in scientific approach negates the very basic assumption of positivists. Moreover, scientific knowledge has boundaries and there are certain areas and realms where science can't give answers to questions in social science. For example in matters of arts and aesthetics, it is almost impossible for what constitutes good and bad tastes to be reduced to laws of science. The same is the case with matters of religion and faith (Nudzor, 2009). The research will further be subject to deficiencies in social science by putting other limitations like value-free and impartiality of the researcher. Such an approach may be desirable but very hard to digest in social science. As Teo argues even within the positivist approach, hermeneutics plays a role in interpreting the results of statistical analysis. It is exemplified by the role played by speculations in scientific psychology (Oppong, 2014).

Human behavior is too complex and keeps on changing so carrying different meanings over time and thus almost impossible to study from an objective lens. They better need to be contextualized. There is also the argument that the concept of variables in today's qualitative social research is flawed as variables only have quantifiable changes instead of pointing to reasons and causes. Such a variable-based approach will result in superficial and incomplete information to have a better understanding of a social phenomenon.

Interpretivism

When positivism met criticism, interpretivism popped up its head though it had been in use for quite a while. It is a research method that argues that people's knowledge or understanding of reality is a social construction. In other words, it means that there is no objective reality or truth in the social world. Interpretivism rejects the application of scientific research tools and methods in social research because the two belong to a different realms of academic inquiry with different subjects to study. Subjects of natural sciences are less diverse than human sciences. Thus while studying human society, researchers require different methodological tools, like sympathy that help the social researcher to study and understand the thoughts of the people being studied (Goodsell, 2013). Interpretivism remains under the heavy influence of two terms; hermeneutics and phenomenology. The former is the study of meaning and interpretation in historical texts while the latter is to consider human subjective interpretation based on the researcher's perception of the world (Mack, 2010). Researchers with an interpretivist approach look for meanings and understandings beyond human actions by studying behavior and the culture one lives in. In one way, social meanings or constructions are contextualized by including so many things while studying a particular phenomenon. "*Interpretations resulting from the application of contextualization, explain action in terms of the agents' reasons for it. A reason for an action makes the action meaningful, so that, for a third person, it makes sense to act in that way in that circumstance*" (Matta, 2015). Moreover, Interpretivisim argues that the collection of value-free data is almost impossible as a researcher is guided by his pre-conception about the enquiry process (Chowdhury, 2014). Researchers in social sciences must find ways to hearts and minds to avoid any deception at every turn.

So many scholars and researchers contributed to the interpretivist model research but it is Max Weber whose influence and contribution remains dominant. Being a founding father, Weber thought that natural and social sciences address two different questions, thus they require different methods to conduct research. In his opinion, an empirical science cannot tell anybody what he should do, rather it can only tell what one can do (Goodsell, 2013). Research into the social world has an inner meaning to be understood by the researcher while a natural scientist applies an external meaning to his data (Goldkuhl, 2013).

Interpretivism is based on constructivist ontology. It assumes that the social world is not given, rather it is constructed and reinforced through humans' actions and interactions (Goldkuhl, 2013). Resultantly research moved from explanation to understanding of social phenomena. However, the argument that interpretivism is purely qualitative as against Positivism which stands for quantitative research is subject

to much debate. Scholars are very much divided on this aspect of Interpretivisim as no research can be strictly either qualitative or quantitative although Interpretivisim is more qualitative because of the nature of inquiry it makes. This is not even advisable because it will severely limit the boundaries of the research.

Interpretivism opened new ways and vistas for research in the social world. In comparison to positivism, interpretivism research inquiry is broader and wider to include many new techniques, concepts, and strategies. It has more room to look into a particular social phenomenon from different but interrelated and relevant aspects to have a better understanding of the object under research. Interpretivism is more realistic in its approach to separating social and natural sciences from each other in conducting research. The two belong to different worlds of research inquiry whose research goals and objects are quite distinct using thus different research tools. Interpretivism must be credited for recognizing this divide. Moreover, there is agreement among a number of scholars that value-free research is not even possible in a number of natural sciences. So how can it be extended into the social world where the object and subject are so much interconnected? Emotions, sentiments, and built-in knowledge are all there to affect one's research and so must be given due attention in the course of research. So it is more naturalistic and accepts the fact that the social world is too complex and can only be studied properly by an all-inclusive and all-encompassing approach rather than an objective research methodology. For that reason, it avoids a generalizability claim in its research. To avoid the issue of validity, the technique of triangulation can be used where two or more two methods of investigation are used and those methods reinforce the same conclusion, validity is strengthened and may even be generalized (PhotongSunan, 2010).

Critique of Interpretivism

Interpretivism is criticized for some of its shortcomings and limitations. Interpretivism abandons the scientific procedure of investigation and verification and so can't be generalized to apply to other even similar situations (Mack, 2010). Interpretivists argue that they provide a much deeper and more meaningful understanding of a social phenomenon through their research approach. However critics suggest that Interpretivisim has failed to provide any representative platform for all qualitative research in social science. This is reflected in the fact that many social science researchers in feminism, postmodernism, etc have switched over to positivism in their research and apply tools and methods that fall in the domain of natural science. It has also been suggested that interpretivism doesn't give any alternative to positivism because, in the final analysis, it retains some of the key assumptions of positivism in its research. Thus critics consider interpretivism a minor theoretical perspective admissible at the earliest stage of research before the hard-nose research begins (Nudzor, 2009). Moreover, drawing sharp line between natural and social sciences is also not recommended as the two must benefit from each other reservoir of knowledge and methods of research. No doubt, natural sciences' methods of research are more reliable, but social scientist must utilize them in their own research. But interpretivists drop any such idea.

Interpretivists' findings and results lack verifiability, despite being so exhaustive and comprehensive in its approach. As it is more subjective in its approach, there is every possibility that contradictory and inconsistent explanations are, or would be, advanced to explain social phenomena (Nudzor, 2009). It has been noticed so many times that one social phenomenon researched more than one time through interpretive lenses has produced results different from those produced by the previous one. Such a weakness leads to other interlinked problems for it is considered more time and resource-consuming.

Conclusion

Positivists and interpretivists stand for conflicting ideals so long as the explanation and construction of reality are concerned. The dichotomies in the research world have led to paradigm wars between interpretivists and positivists. The entire debate between the two schools of thought revolves around the nature of reality and how it is to be discovered. If one is subjective, the other is objective in its approach to reality. They also differ on qualitative and quantities research methods in social world. However, both have its comparative strengths and weaknesses and so both have a large number of proponents and opponents.

This is the reason that both approaches have proved to be a rich source for debate and research reservoirs in the academic world.

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