

A critique of Sayers' statement in the context of social research

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'Social science must be critical of its object. In order to be able to explain and understand social phenomena, we have to examine them critically.' (Sayer, 1992:6)

To be critical in the context of social science means asking how society could be improved based on verifiable facts and knowledge. Knowledge is a dynamic process not a static entity. Knowledge is not a bucket into which grains of information are dropped in the hope that they somehow coalesce into some kind of explanation of the world. For critical methodologist, knowledge is a process of moving towards an understanding of the world and of the knowledge which structures our perceptions of the world. (Harvey 1990: 3-4).

However, some researchers point out that this critical approach to social science goes further than they want to go. By being radically critical of society, a researcher takes a leap into being normative and judgmental. Some authors such as Webster (1986) for instance, have introduced some alternative meanings of the term *critical* in the phrase 'critical' social science. A weaker meaning would be when a researcher is merely critical of the terms of a debate – not of existing social arrangements per se.

Wherever people have engaged in corporate activities, there has been one among them who has attempted to "explain" what and why about the effort. Wherever one dreams, one has explained; wherever one acts, one has given reasons why.

Thus, when entering the world of thought, of reflective self-awareness and explanation, we enter not a new realm but one primordial. The need to act has always been conjoined with the need to know and explain the action. From the earliest of human thinking about human activity, of theorizing about social life, the human community has sought to understand not merely the "what" of human endeavours but the "why" of these endeavours. What happens as we interact with each other and why does it happen. Such is our primordial concerns. From the earliest records of the Assyrians and Egyptians, the Chinese and the Greeks, man has sought to understand and explain social phenomena by subjecting them to severe critique.

In order to fully understand how society and man has sought to understand his environment vis-a-vis social phenomena, the following perspective of knowledge must be understood: Rationalism, empiricism, relativism, constructionism, positivism, realism and discourse analysis. These theories and others together have moved man and society in his quest to improve his understanding of social issues. They have helped man to make a conscious effort to develop the most appropriate tools to enhance research.

RATIONALISM

Major intellectual forces were operative during the nineteenth century, not always in discord but with specific emphasis competing for space from governments and people. The first was Rationalism, a firm belief that life is explainable, that through the use of the human mind, society could address itself insightfully to its own problems and with concerted effort could bring a logical and reasonable way of life for all people. Rationalism held firmly to the belief that man is a reasonable animal able to think himself out of difficulty and into serenity. Rationalism was a friend of science and was skeptical of sentimentality and superstitious religion. Rationalism held on to the belief that explanations about the nature and meaning of life were scientifically identifiable and therefore the fundamental challenge to the human community was the exercise of reason in its corporate life.

The Rationalist Perspective on Epistemology could be summed up as:

- Knowledge is possible.
- Only through reason can knowledge be obtained.

- Beliefs based on reason represent reality.

EMPIRICISM

Aligned with Rationalism and in support of its general attitudes about the nature and meaning of reality was Empiricism. Empiricism was the belief that through the use of science, reality could be understood and human life could be made better. Empiricism places its confidence in the ability of the human mind to understand and explain the complexities of reality, the intricate workings of the world and the ability of the human mind to apply itself to a discovery of the logical processes of material entities and their workings. Empiricism is in many respects the superstructure for all science. In summary, it could be said that the three anchor points of Empiricism are: That the only source of genuine knowledge is sense experience; That reason is an unreliable and inadequate route to knowledge unless it is grounded in sense experience. That there is no evidence of innate ideas within the mind that are known apart from experience. Empiricism states that in order for a claim to be scientific, it must be grounded in solid, clear data based on observation of the world as it is, working from its basic constituent units such as people and keeping values out of the data-collection process.

RELATIVISM

In relativism, there are no fixed truths and therefore ethically no fixed of right or wrong. Knowledge and ethical principles or judgments are relative to the individual or culture. Behaviour is therefore a function of personal tastes and preferences.

CONSTRUCTIONISM

Experience and perception are socially and culturally mediated mostly through language. It states that theories of human action are literally grounded or discovered from data rather than predicted beforehand. "Neither God nor individual consciousness but society itself is the formation of structures of meaning, conventions, morals, and discursive practices that principally constitute both our relationships and ourselves. This implies that language, both as the dominant carrier of categories and meanings and as the medium which provides the raw material for our activity, is central" (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999).

POSITIVISM

Positivism assumes that social phenomena can be measured objectively and analysed following the principles of the scientific method in the same way as natural scientists.

Three brands of positivism can be outlined when discussing the evolution of Positivism. The first brand was established in the nineteenth century, this was followed by the Logical Positivism of the early 1920's. The second brand was the Standard form of Positivism developed after the Second World War. The early origins of Positivism can be traced to August Comte. He believed that social investigation should not seek explanation of social phenomena in theological or metaphysical theories, but rather in society itself and in the social structure relations. In Comte's view, science was the way forward to addressing human needs. Logical positivism developed in the 1920's when a group of philosophers, scientists and mathematicians working together restricted all social phenomena to issues that were answerable. The principal objective of these Logical Positivists was to eliminate all forms of speculative thinking.

The third form of positivism was referred to as the Standard Positivism. Its fundamental tenet is that all science, including the social sciences are concerned with developing explanations in the form of universal laws. It emphasized the importance of value freedom, hard facts and prediction. Such was the society so critical of its object to the extent that Galileo (1564 – 1642) was confronted by the Catholic Church. Galileo had said that:

"The world was created by God";

Earth is centre of universe;

The sun is the centre and the Earth goes round the sun". This was sacrilegious at the time and therefore was put on trial by Holy Inquisition with a charge of heresy and punishment of death. Because he could not clearly explain these social phenomena, he recanted and renounced his own work to avoid this death penalty. Interestingly, Descartes endorsed Galileo's publication many years later.

Like other philosophies, positivism suffered a demise after the Second World War with all kinds of criticisms. Critics argue that human behaviour cannot be measured quantitatively, and that reality is socially constructed through the interaction of individuals and their interpretation of events; thus the investigator must understand individuals' interpretations and experiences.

Another criticism of positivism is that it works on the principles of natural sciences and research objects are seen as scientific objects; but people are not objects. Again, it ignores subjective meanings and interpretations.

REALISM

Positivism was one of the first major attempts to formulate the scientific method as well as generate authoritative knowledge about the social world. This paradigm later provided the spring board for the emergence of other competing paradigms. In response to the shortcomings of Positivism other schools of thought including Realism emerged. The origins of realism are associated with Karl Max and Sigmund Freud.

Realism seeks to uncover the structures of social relations in order to understand why we pursue various strategies, policies and practices. Realism seeks to explain social issues and the underlying features which determine an individual or group action. The Realist approaches to the social sciences are therefore not fixed but rather depend on the subject matter being studied. In the Realists quest to guarantee scientific status in the field of knowledge, emphasis is placed on hypothesis testing, explanations, cause and effect linkages and the conventional benchmarks of rigor, including internal and external validity and reliability of the research process.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis is not just a method but a whole perspective on social life and research into it. Usually, discourse analysts study human interaction by looking at conversations, whether interview data or naturalistic observation in order to study the participants' interpretative practices.

In conclusion, it can be said that to be able to explain and understand social phenomena, social science must be critical of its object. There is a direct correlation between the progress of the human mind and the evolution of human society. As one develops, so does the other.

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