

A SCIENCE OF POLITICS POSITIVISM: PROS AND CONS

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Abstract

Political science is the study of political institutions, constitutions and policy processes. It aims at an accurate description and explanation of these features of politics. It is an empirical (positive) science in terms that it seeks to collect data and analyses it much as a natural scientist would collect a sample and put it under the microscope. The empirical study of institutions and laws is a vital part of any study of politics. If political science asks ‘what are the key building blocks of politics?’ political theory may ask ‘why are these, the key building blocks of politics?’ If political science identifies human-rights legislation as a key feature of contemporary politics, political theory might ask ‘is this just?’ The scholars like Arthur Bentley (The Process of Government), George Catlin (The Science and Method of Politics), David Easton (The Political System), Robert Dahl (Modern Political Analysis) and others have treated political theory as a science. Positivism is generally understood as having three distinct stages, associated with the name of Auguste Comte, Ernst Mach and finally Carnap, the Vienna Circle and Logical Positivism. Positivism relies on quantitative data that positivists believe is more reliable than qualitative research. Positivists believe that since there are set laws and rules followed, there will be minimum room for error. Positivism believes that objective inferences and conclusions can be reached as long as the person doing the observation is objective and disregards her emotions. Positivists see things as they are and tend to disregard unexplained phenomena. If a theory that says A only occurs when B and C combine, then B can never be A.

Key Word’s: Science and Method of Politics, The Political System, Modern Political Analysis, Political Theory & Positivism.

Introduction

Political science is the study of political institutions, constitutions and policy processes. It aims at an accurate description and explanation of these features of politics. It is an empirical (positive) science in terms that it seeks to collect data and analyses it much as a natural scientist would collect a sample and put it under the microscope. The empirical study of institutions and laws is a vital part of any study of politics. If political science asks ‘what are the key building blocks of politics?’ political theory may ask ‘why are these, the key building blocks of politics?’ If political science identifies human-rights legislation as a key feature of contemporary politics, political theory might ask ‘is this just?’ The scholars like Arthur Bentley (The Process of Government), George Catlin (The Science and Method of Politics), David Easton (The Political System), Robert Dahl (Modern Political Analysis) and others have treated political theory as a science. However, all

science is not political theory, just as all political theory is not science. Political theory is not an exact science like natural or physical science. In political theory, unlike natural science, there are no universally recognized principles, no clear cause-effect relationships, no laboratories and no prediction can be made. It can only be termed as a science so far as it admits concepts and norms which are both observable and testable, and in so far as it responds to the requirements of reason and rationalism.

In the 1950s onwards, the American political scientists in general and behaviourists in particular sought to create a science of politics and indulged in the process of reductionism. Political theory can be termed as a science so far as it can be applied to a social gathering and the definitive rules of the exact sciences are applicable within the limitations as in any social science. So far as its methodology and its analysis is concerned it can be called a science. Colin Hay in his work *Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction* rightly points out that political theory admits objectivity in association with subjectivity, facts in relation to values, research together with theory. Political theory as science generates neutral, dispassionate and objective knowledge. Present-day scientific method is fundamentally a product of empirical and logical approaches to knowledge. The story of its genesis is, therefore, at least until the end of the nineteenth century, identical with the general history of logic and empiricism. The empirical approach has never been entirely absent from the struggle for knowledge. But it was often grossly neglected, especially in the Middle Ages, and always had to fight for recognition against tradition, superstitions, the dogmatic influences of religion and the pseudo-authority of allegedly self-evident principles. Only after a long period of co-existence did the empirical approach begin to crowd out all others from the field for which the name 'science' was claimed. In the political field, however, this development gained momentum under the influence of Locke and Hume, of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and later, of the positivist and pragmatist schools. Scientific objectivity is a standard we are all familiar with (at least in principle). The idea is that we can establish, through the application of scientific methods of data collection and analysis, the verifiable truth. Between the 1920s and 1970s, the scientific paradigm, the belief that all that counted as knowledge had to be scientific, came to be imposed upon the social sciences and humanities. The claims popular around this time were that we had left our religious and metaphysical infancy and developed science. Thus, two thousand years of philosophical and normative thought were dismissed. This quirk of intellectual history went beyond empirical study to make claims about the very nature and possibility of knowledge. These debates, called epistemological debates (from the Greek *episteme*, meaning knowledge) are keys to political theory.

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The First Positivism was initiated by Auguste Comte, who coined the word "positivism," and is associated with the notion of Progress, such as in Comte's description of the development of humanity from "a Theological stage, in which free play is given to spontaneous fictions admitting of no proof; the Metaphysical stage, characterised by the prevalence of personified abstractions or entities; lastly, the Positive stage, based upon an exact view of the real facts of the case." [from **A General View of Positivism** by Auguste Comte]. For Comte, society and history were governed by Laws, and once the sciences

had developed sufficiently, it would become possible to understand these laws, and social and historical development could be subject to scientific management.

Other exponents of the first Positivism were E. Littré and P. Laffitte in France, John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer in England. Each of these writers aimed at developing a Sociology as the pinnacle of science. The classical Political Economists were part of the First Positivism.

The Second Positivism emerged in the 1860s and '70s and Ernst Mach is widely recognised as its foremost exponent, though Avenarius, Poincaré and others also made significant contributions. These writers were motivated by problems which had begun to emerge in physics, ultimately leading to the Quantum/Relativity revolution in 1905 (both Mach and Poincaré are sometimes credited with anticipating Einstein's solution to these problems, and Einstein himself credited Mach with providing inspiration, but this is questionable), the failure of Sociology to achieve the anticipated rigour of the natural sciences, and the "marginal revolution" in Economics, which overthrew the objectivist standpoint of the Political Economists, replacing it with a subjectivist understanding of value and price.

It was this Second Positivism which was criticised by Lenin in his famous:

Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. There is no doubt that the second positivism and the scientists who were influenced by it, gained important insights by giving more weight to the subjective point of view, as opposed to the one-sided, or "mechanical" materialism of earlier natural science. However, with Mach, for example, epistemology had reached the point of the very denial of the existence of a knowable material world beyond sensation, and adopting the standpoint of an extreme psychologism. In this sense, the Second Positivism is reminiscent in many ways of the most extreme forms of Post-structuralism of the people like Foucault in the late twentieth century. Sociologists and historians of the Second Positivism would reject the idea of any 'meaning,' lawfulness or 'essential development' in history, restricting science to the study of appearances. Max Weber emphasised that history was always told and investigated from a specific point of view and with different aims. Thus in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* he shows how the rise of capitalism can be attributed to developments in Christian theology just as much as to economic and technical development. This kind of scepticism nevertheless contributed to the critique of overly simplistic or mechanical conceptions of history, common among many nineteenth century thinkers.

The Third Positivism, or "neo-positivism," is linked up with the activity of the Vienna Circle (O. Neurath, Carnap, Schlick, Frank and others) and of the Berlin Society for Scientific Philosophy (Reichenbach and others), which combined a number of trends: logical atomism, logical positivism and semantics.

The main place in the third positivism is taken by the philosophical problems of language, symbolic logic, the structure of scientific investigations, and others. The Third Positivism renounced psychologism of Mach & Co., but instead sought a solution to epistemological problems in formal logic and mathematics.

Generally speaking, the Third Positivism was superseded by Percy Bridgman's Operationalism and the pragmatism of William James et al, which owed a great deal to Charles Sanders Peirce and Einstein's own pragmatic explanation of his methods. Pragmatism is however quite distinct from Positivism.

The words "positivism" and "positivist" do, however, crop up from time to time across a wide range of discussions in political science and political thought. Those sympathetic to the scientific study of politics use

these terms approvingly, as synonymous with clear and rational thinking, and in opposition to mystical, speculative, romantic, and obscurantist thinking. Those who regard scientific approaches as abstract, sterile, and unsuited to the study of human beings and their societies, if not outright pernicious, use “positivism” and “positivist” in derogatory senses (see, e.g., Storing 1962; Johnson 2005). It is difficult to pin down a precise meaning of positivism in political science. Although mainstream empirical political science unmistakably exhibits features typical of positivism, few of its practitioners would call themselves positivists. Some even take pains to avoid the label. In recent years, dismissive criticism of “positivism” has even come from scholars whose work strongly exhibits characteristics associated with positivism (Clarke & Primo 2007). In the 1950s and 1960s, many political scientists were more or less comfortable with the label “behavioralist,” which often appeared to be synonymous with “positivist.” However, the term came to be used loosely enough to include approaches that could not be meaningfully called positivist, and it eventually fell out of use. Except in a loose sense, there is no clear, unambiguous set of “positivist” doctrines underlying political science methodologies. Scientifically minded political scientists confronted with criticisms of positivism often deny that they hold the views criticized. Yet denying the label is far from escaping positivist influence. As John Stuart Mill wrote, characterizing the situation in the nineteenth century: “It is not very widely known what they [positivism and positive philosophy] represent, but it is understood that they represent something. They are symbols of a recognised mode of thought (1907:1). Mills characterization still holds today. The common denominator underlying this “recognised mode of thought” is the powerfully inspiring image of the natural sciences, in the Galilean–Newtonian tradition. Newtonian physics, in particular, appears as the paragon of a successful science. The background image underlying the social sciences is, as Floyd Matson writes, the cosmology of classical mechanics ... nothing less than the image of the Great Machine. All that happened on earth and in the heavens had its natural and knowable efficient cause. The great machine had a determinate course. Knowledge of its present and therefore its future for all time was, in principle, man’s to obtain. ... The great machine was not only causal and determinate; it was objective in the sense that no human act or intervention qualified its behaviour. (Matson 1966:3) Galilean–Newtonian science presents as an image or metaphor, convincing not as argument convinces, but as fable does. Fables appear as common sense not requiring justification. They present deep truths with which it is difficult to argue. Even exceptions to the lessons fables teach do not shake them. Claims to know that are identified with the Galilean–Newtonian image of science enjoy authority by association. It is easy to be impressed by Newtonian physics, and thus be convinced by analogy that other fields of inquiry would flourish by following its example. Though realization of such an ideal may appear unattainable, the seemingly inexorable progress of science continues to fuel hopes for similar progress in disciplines outside the natural sciences. However, there is ample room for disagreement about what lessons are to be drawn from science in the Galilean–Newtonian tradition. The extent to which this model is valid for all domains of knowledge remains an open question.

A paradox of positivist philosophy is that it has always been an antiphilosophy by its own standards. Positivism represents a program aiming to replace philosophy with science. Knowledge is seen to consist exclusively of observations and logical relationships among them, and thus supposedly free of philosophical assumptions. Scientists, thus, do not need assistance from philosophy, and philosophy is no authority for them. A positivist

philosophy would therefore appear illegitimate by its own standards. At most, positivism should be a description of empirical facts and the logic relationships among them. Not many political scientists would be comfortable with Comtian positivist or logical positivist norms. This is easy to understand, since those who do empirical research typically assume their methods to be free of philosophical commitments. This assumption rests on the Galilean–Newtonian image of science; thus, whether these political scientists are aware of it or not, they are subscribing to positivist ontology and epistemology. The question of whether or not all of human knowledge can be either captured adequately in positivist terms or dismissed as meaning-less is an extra- scientific question that remains open.

Advantage of Positivism

(1) Quantitative Approach

Positivism relies on quantitative data that positivists believe is more reliable than qualitative research. Quantitative research is more “scientific” in its methods than qualitative research and thus more trustworthy. In research, quantitative data provides objective information that researchers can use to make scientific assumptions.

(2) Structure

Positivism follows a well-defined structure during studies and discussions. Positivists believe that since there are set laws and rules followed, there will be minimum room for error. This structure also gives little room for variance and drastic variable changes, thus making the study more accurate when it comes to experiments and applications as it tries to follow specific rules using objective mathematical and scientific tools.

Disadvantage of Positivism

(1) Human Behaviour

Positivism believes that objective inferences and conclusions can be reached as long as the person doing the observation is objective and disregards her emotions. However, human behavior naturally comes with emotional responses. Although positivism encourages researchers to disregard human emotion and behavior, there is no guarantee that this will occur at all times during studies.

(2) Inflexibility

Some scholars believe that since positivists believe everything can be measured and calculated, they tend to be inflexible. Positivists see things as they are and tend to disregard unexplained phenomena. If a theory that

says A only occurs when B and C combine, then B can never be A. This belief can eliminate lateral thinking, which is the process of finding answers by creatively and indirectly finding out ways to solve a problem.

Conclusion

Political science continues to be haunted by unreflective positivism. Overt attention to positivism and antipositivism may wax and wane, but the disputed issues do not go away. To be sure, the struggle for the soul of the discipline that raged in the 1950s and 1960s among pro-science behavioralists and antiscience traditionalists eventually petered out. This was due not to victory or defeat of any of the protagonists, or to the resolution of disputed issues, but mainly to fatigue with unfruitful debate. Political scientists retreated into their separate camps, deprecating or ignoring approaches differing from their own, only rarely engaging in genuine debate with each other. Although positivist approaches have grown increasingly influential in the discipline, foundational issues bound up with positivism and science more generally are little discussed; and although political science remains a pluralistic discipline, positivist approaches have made considerable inroads in most subfields. They now represent the dominant orthodoxy in political science, despite the fact that strong hostility toward them also remains entrenched in the discipline.

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