

## **Positivism, Anti-Positivism and Neo-Gramscianism**

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## **I. Introduction**

*“Theory is always for someone and for some purpose”*, Robert W. Cox (1981) argues that all theories have their own perspectives and perspectives are derived from a position of time and space (Cox, 1981: 87). The study and research in the field of social science and political science have ranges of diversity in approaches, theories and methods across the dimension of time and space. This paper agrees with Cox argument that theory/approach has variety of purposes and there is no universal character which applicable to all contexts, rather, theory/approach is unique and has specific features depend on each school of thoughts. Therefore, the paper argues that there is no universal usage of theory and approach in the study of social and political science, nevertheless, theory and approach play the peculiar roles in each school of thought in the philosophy of social science.

This paper begins with the investigation of the Positivism, one of the dominant approaches to the study of social science, and Non-Positivist schools of thought. Then, the essay attempts to offer the attractive example approach of contemporary political economy such as Neo-Gramscianism theory as an Anti-Positivism approach to political reality. Then, the last section is the summary of the paper.

## **II. Positivism Approach to Social Reality**

Conducting research in social and political science can proceed in a number of methods depending on different approaches in the philosophy of social science. Positivism, one of the dominant approaches in social science, is the point of departure of this paper. This section will provides the basic meaning and characteristics of Positivism as an approach in social science, and then the next section is going to show other approaches which are non-Positivist tradition.

Positivism is a term with widely use in social science and philosophy. In general, it can be defined as an approach which applies scientific method of natural science to study human activity using objective enquiry and thereby presupposes the unity of the sciences (Hollis, 1994:

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41; Delanty, 2005: 10). Positivism entails the view that scientific knowledge can be positively verifiable and foundation of knowledge is built on the discovery of general laws (Delanty, 2005: 11). Moreover, Marsh and Smith (2001: 529) argue that Positivism is obviously foundationalist, which is the idea believe that there is a real world out there and it is independent from agent's knowledge of it. Therefore, the essay can offers the main features of Positivism which are including, first, empiricism; second, scientific explanation; third, scientific method and the attempt to predict the case study (see Marsh and Smith, 2001: 529; Delanty; 2005: 11-12; Marsh and Furlong, 2002: 22-23).

### *Empiricism*

The first feature of Positivism approach to the study of social science is empiricism. This feature based on observation from five senses of human being (Hollis, 1994: 42). For Positivist the object which researcher needs to observe must verifiable and be operationalised by means of experimental method (Delanty, 2005: 11). The Positivism approach requires the objectivity rather than subjectivity in its methods of inquiry. Furthermore, in order to gain data when conducting research, the Positivist believes in value-free or value-neutral which separate the researcher's bias from the object which is observed (for neutrality in social science see Hollis, 1994: 202-223; Weber, 2003: 107-120; Taylor, 1973: 139-170).

### *Scientific explanation*

Pratt(1978: 70) states that scientific explanation of Positivism must have three types of component which are, *firstly*, it must incorporate one or more general principles or laws; *secondly*, there must be some statement of a particular fact(s) and *thirdly*, there must be a statement describing whatever it is that is being explained. The crucial thing from Pratt idea is Positivist attempts to explain social or political phenomena through the covering-law thesis. This means that researcher would begin their study with some theory and formulate the hypothesis to be proved from the fact or data which are derived from scientific methods. Moreover, Positivist usually considers the unit of their analysis at the agency level, especially the behaviour of human being in a specific case. They ignore the social structure which constraint social interaction among each people (see Pratt, 1978; Hay, 2002).

### *Scientific method*

Positivism clearly that it is required the scientific inquiry to gain the fact or data in their social or political research. Experimental research design which researcher could control each

variable similar to laboratory of natural science research is preferable for the Positivist. In addition, quantitative methods, for example, survey and formal model which derive mathematical and statistical calculation are important to Positivist analysis the causal relationship of social or political object (for quantitative methods see Silburgh, 2001: 125-152; Shiveley, 2009: Ch7-10). Moreover, one of the most distinctive features of Positivism approach is prediction. The approach aims to develop formal model or construct the experiment to predict the possibility and future direction of the selected object (see Dowding, 2001; King et.al.,1994; Hay, 2002: 37-45).

In short, Positivism has crucial functions for guiding the social and political researcher for gaining fact and data in order to test the hypothesis and predict the future possibility of the controlled case study. This approach is useful for the research that tend to find out the simple relationship between each unit of analysis, usually be an individual, without counting on the influence of social structure. On the contrary, for non-Positivism approaches to social and political phenomena they have different functions and goals from the Positivism which going to show the section below.

### **III. Anti-Positivism: Considering Neo-Gramscianism Approach**

Contrasting to the Positivism approach, Non-Positivism, such as Realism and Interpretive, does not believe in the absolute scientific mode of inquiry and explanation, rather, Realism and Interpretive approaches pay their attention to the factors that Positivism tend to ignore, for instance, the social structure and value-led interpretive method.

*Realism*, as Marsh and Smith (2001: 530) argue that it is different from Positivism for three important ways. *First*, Realism emphasizes the important of structure including social, economic and political structure. This approach considers the matter of social structure that might influence to human behaviours and social actions. However, Realism shares the idea with Positivism that there is the real world existing out there and observable. *Second*, Realism is based on the idea that there are deep structures which cannot be observed directly through the scientific methods as mentioned in the section above. Rather, Realism believes that we should see at the structure of social relations rather than simply judge the conclusion as there are continuing causal relations like Positivism. *Third*, Realist sees the reality world as a socially

constructed; therefore, it is impossible to detach value and bias from the researcher to the object that is observed (see Marsh and Furlong, 2002: 30-31).

*Interpretive approach* is another approach which contradicts to the Positivism. This approach reject the notion that the real world exist independently of human knowledge, in the other word, the Interpretive is an anti-foundationalist approach. According to the Interpretive approach, the clearly separation between objective and subjective is impossible. Moreover, the major consideration of the Interpretive are the discourses or traditions which establishing the interpretations and meanings attach to social and political phenomena (see Marsh and Furlong, 2002: 26).

At this stage, this paper attempts to offer one of the fascinating approaches to contemporary political economy as an anti-Positivism that is a *Neo-Gramscianism approach*. This approach is a critical international relations and international political economy approach which based on the political theories of Antonio Gramsci, Italian political theorist and journalist. Gramscian approach to the study of social and political phenomena is widely use in various fields of study, for example, political theory, sociology, anthropology and philosophy. However, Neo-Gramscianism leading by Cox is special reference to the field of International Relations and International Political Economy (see various comments on Neo-Gramscianism e.g. Bieler et.al, 2006; Ayers, 2008; Buchanan, 2000; Davidson, 2008)

Neo-Gramscianism is a critical perspective which combining between Gramsci's political theories (see Gramsci, 1971) and Robert Cox's critical theory (see Cox, 1983). This essay considers the Neo-Gramscianism approach at this stage due to they are the distinctive example of anti-Positivism in the study of contemporary social science. Neo-Gramscianism has three basic features including, *firstly*, this approach provides an ontological and epistemological foundation upon which to construct a non-deterministic grounded explanation of social change (Germain and Kenny, 1998: 5). Stephen Gill (1993) argues that a Neo-Gramscianism attempts to overcome the subject-object dualism at the centre idea of positivist social science. Gill suggests that Neo-Gramscianism is an ontological and epistemological critique of the empiricism which prevailing the study of social sciences (Germain and Kenny, 1998: 8).

*Secondly*, the Neo-Gramscianism approach against the Positivism as they attempts to consider the roles of social structure by offering the materialist conception of world order, the approach transcending the Realism approach even both are concentrates on the social structure as

the influence factor contributes to human behaviour and social action. Rather, Neo-Gramscianism sees the social structure in more details than the Realism. They employ Gramsci's concept of Hegemony, Historical Bloc and Civil Society to maintaining the dimension of power, social relations and the importance of history within the analytical framework (see Cox, 1983; Germain and Kenny; 1998).

*Thirdly*, concerning the methodology, the Neo-Gramscianism does not rely on the scientific mode of inquiries like the observation of human behaviour, nor basing on the statistical and mathematical analysis. In contrast, this critical approach to social and political phenomena tend to follow some ideas of the Interpretive approach by focusing on the "criticism" and "unravel" the complex social relations in contemporary international political economy. Hence, the level of analysis of the Neo-Gramscianism is the supra individual which could be social forces, groups, classes, international organisations etc.

In conclusion, this section provides the basic ideas about the non-Positivism such as Realism and anti-Positivism such as Interpretive and Neo-Gramscianism, in fact a kind of Realism, in order to give the contrast picture of some dominant approaches in the study of social and political science.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This paper provides the different kind of approaches that grounded the philosophical thinking in doing research in social and political science. The author agrees with Cox's argument that "*Theory is always for someone and for some purpose*". The paper argues that there a number of approaches, theories and perspectives to employ as a theoretical tools in order to conduct social and political research. This is depends on the philosophical school of thoughts underline each researcher and the purpose for each research project. As shown above, for Positivist research project, this kind of philosophical approach is suitable for the social and political research project which intend to find out the simple causal relationship of the individualistic unit of analysis. This kind of research needs scientific mode of inquiry to gain fact and data through assistance with the statistical and mathematical techniques and bias-free from the researcher.

On the contrary, Interpretive approach is useful for the normative research project which against the Positivistic mode of inquiry. This approach totally disagree with the value/bias free

notion of Positivism, rather, value judgment is always in the process of conducting research. Lastly, Realism and the selected example of contemporary political economy approach such as Neo-Gramscianism are attempt to transcending and overcoming the deterministic explanation of social phenomena of Positivism. Both approaches consider the social structure as an influence variable towards the behaviour of social actors.

However, the distinctive of Neo-Gramscianism is to go beyond the Realism via putting the dimension of power (through the concept of Hegemony), social relations (through the concept of Historical Bloc and State-Civil Society relationship), and history (through the concept of Historicism) into their criticism upon social and political change.

Therefore, in order to conduct the research in social and political science, the researcher should be aware about the case selected to do the research, the philosophical background of the researcher, the methodology to be employed and the way of analyzing the data in order to gain the quality and validity of the research project.

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