

The contribution of positivism in study of social sociology essay



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Positivism is the view that finding true knowledge by researching observable traits and things rather than through speculating and reasoning (Turner, 2001). Positivism was developed in the 19th century. It can be seen as the early form of the social sciences. Views of positivists were heavily influenced by empiricism and natural science of enlightenment (Craib, 1997). They used 'scientific' methods to study problems of the society. However, their works were questioned continuously with the process of social science. This essay will first introduce that the impact of empiricism and natural science on positivism, which also can be seen as a background of positivism. Next, contributions of three famous early positivists will be pointed out and be discussed. Finally, contributions of positivists will be discussed critically.

Empiricism had a deeply influence on early positivism in the 19th century, especially ideas from empiricists such as Thomas Hobbes and David Hume (Benton, 2001). These effects included: firstly, the true knowledge is based on sense-experience, such as what we see, touch and taste; secondly, it is essential that social research should distinguish between 'facts' from 'values', which mean knowledge should be objective, because facts comes from sense-experience and values comes from subjective ideas; thirdly, study of science should use scientific language, where the scientific statement should be no more than a reflection of 'objective reality'.

In addition, natural science also had a considerable influence on positivism. Positivists believed that study of social can be the same way as study of natural (Benton, 2001). For example, natural scientist used scientific experiment to discover the laws of natural world, such as relationship between fire and water. Based on this point, early positivists such as Comte

believed that they can explore the laws of social phenomenon by collecting, observing and measuring the empirical evidence and such positivists were seen as 'naturalism'.

Overview, early positivists all agreed that scientific knowledge based on empirical evidence. Meanwhile, they had the similar views of science. That was to find regularities between social phenomena, such as Comte's invariable laws and Durkheim's correlations. However, they also had different ideas of social science. Comte believed that the head of all scientific inquiry should be sociology (Turner, 2001); Spencer believed sociology should be derived from principles of physics (Turner, 2001); and Durkheim showed that sociology was independent of other scientific disciplines. Moreover, they had different definition of social phenomena, in spite of they all believed that it were the proper object of sociological inquiry. In addition, they have different points in views that whether sociological knowledge should be used in managing and changing society by governments. Based on above points, it could find that views of early positivists have both similar and different ideas and views. Furthermore, these similarities and differences could be more detailed by comparing the aims or methods of positivists, especially Comte, Spencer and Durkheim.

Auguste Comte can be seen as the founder of sociology (Gordon, 1991). In 1839, he first developed sociology and it also was called social physics (Ritzer, 2007). Meanwhile, the aim of him was to create a unified social science, which should be at the head of all scientific inquiry (Turner, 2001).

Moreover, under the impact of Isaac Newton's discovery of the laws of gravity, Comte believed the discovering the law of social phenomena in the <https://assignbuster.com/the-contribution-of-positivism-in-study-of-social-sociology-essay/>

society is important, even theory was also necessary in social science (Gordon, 1991). Furthermore, Comte divided his laws into two categories, laws of social statics (existing social structures) and laws of social dynamics (social change) (Smith, 2003). He also mentioned that 'social dynamics' was greater than 'social statics' (Ritzer, 2007). Through this point, it reflected that Comte interested in social reform. He believed that his laws could be used by governments to build a more rationally and 'better' society (Gordon, 1991). Moreover, as a positivist, Comte insisted on using scientific methods in social science. He made a number of necessary methods to social research (Turner, 2001). They are observation, experimentation, comparison and historical analysis. By use these methods, he believed that the 'invariable laws' of social facts or phenomena could be found. Based on these points, his sociological concept has been formed. Next, Comte created the 'law of the three stages', this idea was clearly influenced by Montesquieu, Turgot and Saint-Simon (Turner, 2001). This law divided social development to three stages, fictitious stage, metaphysical stage and scientific stage. He claimed that society had now reached the final stage. It can be called scientific stage or 'positivistic'. Based on this point, he claimed that the time of sociology has arrived.

In general, Comte's insistence ideas and scientific research contributed to the progress of social sciences. However, several his views later were rejected by Herbert Spencer. Firstly, Spencer rejected that Comte's 'law of the three stages' (Turner, 2001). Spencer argued that Comte's three stages just explained the evolution in the realm of idea, but the theory in the reality (Rizer, 2008). Secondly, he disagreed that science knowledge should be used

by governments to rebuild society (Turner, 2001). He thought that the government should only focus on what people ought not to do (Ritzer, 2008). In addition, he also disagreed that causation was not important in scientific description (Turner, 2001).

Spencer has been seen as another founder of sociology. Spencer and Comte had similar aim. His aim was to develop a synthetic philosophy that contained all domains of the universe and all sciences (Turner, 2001). However, they had different interesting. Spencer was more interested in social life should ' evolve free of external control' (Ritzer, 2008, pp 36-30). Moreover, he believed that physical principles should be the basis of sociology (Turner, 2001). Furthermore, Spencer's work was based on a large number of data collecting, especially his ' Principles of Sociology' (Turner, 2001). Base on data collecting and analysing, Spencer contribute several fundamental laws. These laws were about relations of fundamental forces of human organization, such as population, production and reproduction (Turner, 2001). Meanwhile, through these concepts, he explained the concept of ' survival of the fittest' (Smith, 2003) and developed the famous ' evolutionary theory' (Ritzer, 2008).

Spencer's works was welcomed at the beginning, but it was rejected in the twentieth century. There are two main reasons. Firstly, his work led to social conflict, due to the centralisation of power and the inequality between its members was caused by this complication of social relations in his theory. Secondly, the reason is Spencer's works were full of egoism posture. In his study, he ignored all the ideas was not conducive to his points, and only select the views he want (Ritzer, 2008). Therefore, his sociology was

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influenced by value. His ideological sources were biased so that his research lost its possible value (Turner, 2001). For this ideological approach, Durkheim suggested that the study of society should avoid the conflation between ideal and reality (Baert, 2005).

Emile Durkheim is an extremely important sociological thinker, whose ideas are still have an impact on today's social science. Durkheim's works and views were influenced by Comte's ideas. For example, Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society* was influenced by Comte's idea of 'social dynamics' (Turner, 2001). Moreover, Durkheim also accepted that social research should be based on empirical evidence, such as social 'things' or 'social facts' (Baert, 2005). Therefore, Durkheim collected a great deal of empirical evidence for his work. For example, in his study of suicide, he studied the 26, 000 suicide records (Morrison, 2007). Meanwhile, he first used statistical closure to study suicide (Ritzer, 2007), such as he counted suicide by age, gender and other features. Moreover, Durkheim didn't think that sociology can find the indisputable truths (Baert, 2005). Therefore, in Durkheim's work, he raised the point of 'social facts' (Craib, 1997). 'Social facts' is objective 'things' that it exists of social realities from society to society, such as social structures, traditional values and cultural norms (Ritzer, 2007). For example, every society has forms of punishment when law are broken. Therefore, a criminal will be punished by moral law. Therefore, it can be a 'social fact'. Meanwhile, definitions of 'social fact' should meet three criteria (Craib, 1997). It should have clearly common-sense perceptions; it should be general; and, it should have a certain degree of external constraint. Besides, Durkheim used 'social facts' on studying suicide (Craib,

1997). In addition, Durkheim also had a scientific approach with a combination causal and functional analysis (Baert, 2005). He believed that four rules for using a scientific method in social science. First, scientist should have the correct 'attitude'. For example, collecting data cannot be biased. Secondly, scientist should give a precise definition. Thirdly, the relations between variables should be examined and described. Fourth, the casual relations between variables should be explained. Based on these ideas and methods, Durkheim has many contributions to the study of society, including the division of labour, suicide, solidarity and religion (Morrison, 2007). Meanwhile, Durkheim made positivism become more professional.

However, even Durkheim had better concept and methods in social science, his approach had unavoidable problems. He used statistical closure to study suicide, but it cannot account for all complex relationship in real world (Smith, 2003). In other words, findings of statistical closure systems may not be able to use in the reality. Furthermore, under the Durkheim's contribution, although positivism continually making progress, it was met with opposition from others, such as interpretative approaches. Positivists believed knowledge comes from sense-experience, but Kant argued that both external and internal were equally important and they also depended on one other (Smith, 2003). External refers to sense-experience and internal refers to the structure of mind. Therefore, positivism might lack of consideration for internal factors. It could be considered that the knowledge of positivism is incomplete. Meanwhile, Rickert argued that physics can be formally homothetic, but social science can not be, because the objects of

social science could be unique and historically changing (Smith, 2003). By these points, it might be found that positivists could never be objective and it is hard to distinguish between values and facts in social science. Moreover, Weber also rejects positivism. He pointed out three key reasons for it. First, it is impossible to use the same tools to study social sciences and natural science. Next, actions of individual are unpredictable so that it is hard to study human behaviors. Thirdly, knowledge can never be neutral. Therefore, it might be impossible to find an 'invariable law' or objective 'social fact' in social science.

In conclusion, positivism was found in the 19th century. Early positivists were heavily influenced by empiricists and natural science. Therefore, they have similarities on views and thoughts. It is obviously that early positivists were all 'naturalism'. They all used scientific methods to study of society, such as observation. In order to achieve 'objective' knowledge, they tried to separate 'facts' and 'values'. However, they have different aim and views on social science. Furthermore, Durkheim had outstanding contributions to social science. However, his works and ideas still were criticized by others, especially his statistical closure and 'social facts'. Although his views had a significant contribution to positivism, it still has shortcomings. Other scientist included scientists of Interpretative approaches thought that discovering 'objective' facts of society could be impossible. They also claimed that study of structure of the human mind and study of sense-experiment are equally important.