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The success recorded in natural science in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was so enormous on the social and intellectual life of the then people of Europe that they started trusting the words of scientists and even sought their opinion on matters unrelated to science such as law and forensic evidence. This positive response to science happened as a result of a change in the socio-cultural milieu of the time and this explain why belief in science and application of science to any issue is called positivism from then on.

The socio-cultural milieu in which positivism grew is called the renaissance and the enlightenment period. It is called a renaissance period because it marked a period when people started a revolution of return to their Greek heritage of using reason in matter of public concern and not the dictate of religion as it was in the age prior to this time. However, the intellectual community at the time saw this as a big threat to human happiness and survival. Romanticism gave rise to humanism and naturalism, and works of art and literature produced at this this time were also regarded as classic. Bertrand Russell puts this more succinctly when he said that, “the period of history which is commonly called “modern” has a mental outlook which differs from that of the medieval period in many ways. Of these, two are the most important: the diminishing authority of the Church, and the increasing authority of science. Discipline, intellectual, moral, and political, was associated in the minds of the men of the Renaissance with the scholastic philosophy and ecclesiastical government.”

The effect of that manoeuvring was overwhelming. Scientific approach to things grew out of philosophical approach to issues, but science was restricted to study of natural phenomena because it was only the material that was believed to behave in a regular and predictable way. Not until a French social philosopher called August Comte thought otherwise. He was of the opinion that society behaves in a regular pattern much like material things and this behaviour can be studied and somewhat accurate predictions made. This is the beginning of social sciences, especially sociology and Comte is being regarded till date as father of sociology and social sciences in general.

Positivism rejects theoretical speculations that are not based on facts of experience as a means of obtaining knowledge. There are a a lot of problems with this conception of ideal knowledge seeking enterprise. First of these problems is observation upon which the basic justification of positivism came is laden with error. These include the facts that:

1. Observation are concept-laden;
2. Observation are hypothesis-laden;
3. Observation are theory-laden;
4. Observation are value-laden;
5. Observation are interest-laden;
6. Observation are laden with culture-specific ontologies.

What is social science?

Social science is an area of study dedicated to the explanation of human behaviour, interaction and manifestations, either as an individual in a society or collectively as a group; including the institutions, norms and mores such interactions created. Discipline in social science include: sociology, psychology, economics, political science, archaeology and anthropology.

Social science seek to employ the method of science in the investigation of social phenomena taking the human person as object of study. The objectives of such endeavour include:

1. Understanding humans in both historical and cultural development context and factors responsible for such development or change.
2. Discovering and manipulating if possible, the laws governing most of human behaviour; and
3. Advancing beyond armchair philosophy, the knowledge about the characteristic temperament and associated behaviour of a person or group.

The Problem of Reasons and Causes

1. Have an invariable or constant relations in the sense that whenever the alleged cause occurs, the effect must also occur;
2. Be temporally related such that the cause precedes the effect in time just as the effect must follow continuously from the cause;

The principle of cause and effect states that for every event in the universe, there is a set of conditions such that if the conditions are all fulfilled, then the principle states that for every event ‘B’ in the universe, there is always a cause “A”, such that “B” can always be explained by reference to the activities of event “A”. This is the principle that underlies the method of explanation in science.

One way to solve this problem is to accept reasons are not causes but motive or intent.

The Problem of Human Person as Object of Study in Social Sciences

Another problem with the project of social science is that, according to Max Weber, methodology of science becomes inapplicable due to the fact that the object of study in social science is man, a rational being with freewill, desires, emotions, and other sentient features that come into play in his action. It is on this basic assumption of rational behaviour that the law of demand and supply was formulated: The higher the demand, higher the price but the higher the supply the lower the price. This is also referred to as market forces. However, it has been observed even by economists themselves that these laws do not hold all the time since man does not behave rationally all the time. In fact, in recent years capitalists have been able to manipulate consumer behaviour to the point it is doubtful if these laws hold any longer. Now, if a supposed scientific law is neither absolute nor hold quite often, should we continue to call it scientific of economics?