

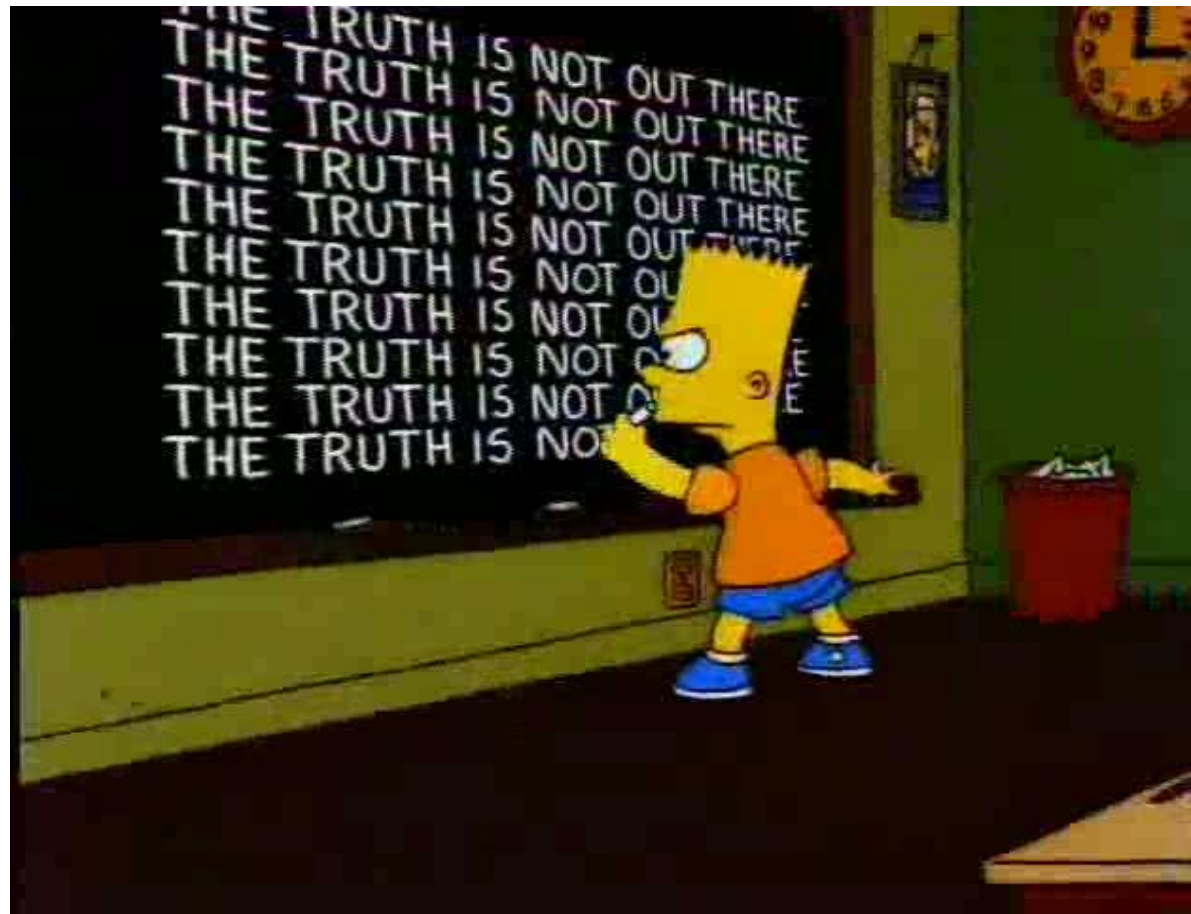
# Foundations of Social Science Research: CPT898

Lecture 2: Objectivism in social science research; The uses, abuses, myths and realities of positivism and empiricism. Or *The Truth is out there*

# THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

The “truth” is out there: Objectivity and the uses and abuses, myths and realities of positivism and empiricism

# Objectivivism



# Outline

- Objectivity
- Positivism, Science and Objectivity
- The use and abuse of positivism
- The damaged reputation of positivism
- Confused definitions and Roscoe's (1995) critique of the critics
- Empiricism and post-positivism
- Conclusion
- Further Reading

# Objectivity

Objectivity, along with generalization and explanation is a fundamental characteristic of a science. .. [It is] defined as: The basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality goodness or rightness. (Bernstein 1983:8 cited in May 2011; 8)

# Suspending belonging?

Can social researchers suspend a sense of belonging and turn it into an object of study?

“A sense of belonging may be a secondary consideration if we hold that social facts exist independently of people’s perception. It may be held that people react to their environment in much the same way as molecules which become ‘excited’ when heat is applied to a liquid. Science does not have to ask the molecules what they think. So is it necessary that social scientists ask people?” (May 2011, p 9)

# Positivism, science and objectivity

What does a positivist researcher do?

- Search for causal relationships between independent and dependent variables and produce law-like generalisations.
- Use and develop testable hypotheses
- Have a concern with facts, not opinions.
- Produce objective, value-free research.
- Belief that the scientific method is the only one that results in reliable knowledge.

# Causation

- A (IV) causes B (DV)
- Average earnings (IV) house prices (DV)
- Economic “laws” about demand and supply mediated by elasticity of demand and supply
- Low income *causes* crime, lack of integration into social groups *causes* an increase in suicide rates etc..



# Doing positivism

- Some examples in your field? – key authors key studies?
- Widespread? Dominant? or seldom used? – is positivism a dirty word?
- Can you use it? How would you use it? What if you *had to* use it?

## Pejorative, perilous and a pariah: the damaged reputation of positivism

It should be noted ... that positivism refers to varied traditions of social and philosophical thought and given that the term is often used in a pejorative sense in social science without due regard to its history, it runs the risk of being devoid of any specific meaning (C. Bryant 1985, cited in May 2011: 9-10).

# Three problems (1)

The webpage of the *Nordic Positivism Research Group* at the Centre for Nordic Studies, University of Helsinki identifies **three deep-seated problems** in the use and abuse of positivism

- Positivism is often used in a somewhat anachronistic manner. Few, if any, of the scholars that later have been labelled positivists used the term as a description of their own academic dispositions.

<http://www.helsinki.fi/hum/nordic/english/research/positivism.html> (2004)

## Three problems (2)

- Second, positivism has acquired a pejorative meaning. By calling someone a positivist one is often trying to label him (sic) as dogmatic and narrow-minded researcher. ...

## Three problems (3)

- Third, ... the term is ambiguous. Some may say that positivism is defined through certain theses about the nature of science - e.g. the principle of verification or the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements ... [for others] it has become associated with the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, which is quite different from the 19th century positivism of Comte or Spencer.

# Increasingly confused definitions and the use of inaccurate shorthand

Philosophy or a philosophical context?

Should we (do we?) read Comte, Durkheim, Wittgenstein, Reichenbach and Carnap, for example?

- Logical positivism.
- (Sociological) positivism.
- Neo positivism.
- Post positivism.
- Legal positivism.
- Correspondence theory of truth.

# Positivism is poorly defined and inappropriately used

The technical term which has come to mean its opposite is positivism. This word is currently used as a pejorative to mean the view that accepts a correspondence theory of truth, that there is a single reality independent of human beings, and that the methods of the natural sciences should be adopted in research on social questions.

However, until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century positivism meant the “rejection of the correspondence theory of truth [...] and an agnosticism about the existence of a single reality independent of human beings, and acceptance of the unity of scientific method” (McKenzie 2011, p 534).

# Roscoe's (1995) critique of the critics

“Over the last two decades, a widespread conviction seems to have emerged that positivism is an intellectual conceit [we] can no longer afford.

The target of relentlessly withering commentary, ... its perceived failings have provided a rallying point around which the identities of interpretive, deconstructive, and postmodern movements have formed. .... (however) the image of positivism is almost entirely a construction of its critics.

With remarkable success, these commentators have transformed a term once synonymous with progressive liberalism into one of pejorative conservatism. Positivism is now cast as:-



a faith, a fool's gold, or a vice, its adherents by implication dogmatists, dupes, or degenerates.

Thus, Rabinow and Sullivan (1987:9-10,11) characterize "positivist orthodoxy" as a "fascination" with reductionistic models and quantification, promulgated by "dictum" rather than debate.

Murphy (1971: 106) talks of "simple positivistic faith," Shalvey (1979: 97) of a "doctrine," Harkin (1988:100) of "a naïve positivism," Geertz (1973:119) of "vulgar positivism," and Holy (1987:15) of the "hard-core positivistic approach." (Roscoe 1995, p 492).

# “Straw-man”: us and them

Roscoe (1995, p 493) continues ..

“In short, it seems, everybody is a positivist save critics of positivism-and they turn out to be “cryptopositivists””.

“In the rhetoric of its critics, positivist philosophy is often represented as though it were some sprawling malignancy that has infiltrated its tendrils deeply into Western thought”.

# Why?

- Why has positivism been subject to such vitriolic attacks?

(This is not a rhetorical question)

# Empiricism and post positivism

- Empiricism has a shared belief with positivism that there are ‘facts’ which we can gather on the social world, independently of how people interpret them but differs in it’s orientation to theory. Positivism is theory driven but the facts “speak for themselves” in empiricism.
- Post-positivism and critical realism ... to be discussed next week

# Conclusion

- Can't discuss positivism without addressing issues of truth and objectivity in understanding reality and without an appreciation of causal relationships, and value-free research methods.
- A message for sceptics: "Oranges are not the only fruit", and "know your enemy"!

# Further Reading: Essential

May, T. (2011) *Social research: Issues, methods and research* (4e). Oxford. OUP.

Roscoe, P. (1995) The perils of positivism in cultural anthropology. *American Anthropologist* 97 (3) pp 492-504.

Williams, M and May, T. (1996) *Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Research*. London. UCL.

# Further Reading: Recommended

Davis, S. (2005) . *Handbook of Research Methods in Experimental Psychology*. Oxford. Blackwell.

Friedrich, P. (1992) Interpretation and Vision: A Critique of Cryptopositivism. *Cultural Anthropology* 7(2):211-231

Hempel, C. (2000). On the Logical Positivists' Theory of Truth. In: R. Jeffrey (ed.) *Selected Philosophical Essays*. pp. 9-20. [Online]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available from: Cambridge Books Online <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815157.005>> [Accessed 5th October 2016].

Marian, D. (2015) 'The Correspondence Theory of Truth', The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/truth-correspondence/>>. [Accessed 5th October 2016].

Mckenzie, J. (2011) Positivism and Constructivism, Truth and 'Truth'. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43 (5): 534-546.

Schauer, F. (1999) 'Positivism as pariah'. In George, P. (ed). *Autonomy of the law: essays on legal positivism*. London. Clarendon Press pp 31-56.