**Positivism, Logical Positivism, Constructionism and Subjectivism: A Synthesis from a Modernist Perspective**

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This brief essay is an attempt at synthesizing the sociological, organizational and research perspectives of positivism, logical positivism, constructionism, subjectivism and Modernism.

Before undertaking the synthesis a brief view of each will be presented in the tradition of Burrell and Morgan’s sociological foundations of conducting organizational analysis. Each perspective will be evaluated on the basis philosophical and societal assumptions which Burrell and Morgan call Anglo-French Positivism/German Idealism and sociology of Regulation or Radical Change.

**Positivism**

Positivism represents the Anglo-French Objectivist perspective. Positivism derives its meaning from the word positive which in turn is underpinned by the notion of ‘posited’ or given. French sociologist Auguste Comte (1798-1857) along with Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and, English sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) are considered as the main proponents of positivistic sociology which largely shaped organization theories developed later. The ‘posited’ nature of Positivism which is underpinned by determinism and empiricism justify its philosophical assumptions which are discussed below.

1. Ontology

Positivism assumes realist ontology or a world ‘out there’ which exists without the acknowledgement of a conscious mind. Objects have inherent meanings in them which are there to be discovered.

1. Epistemology

Positivistic epistemology relies on gathering of data through sense-perception (empiricism) and its interpretation is carried out within strict scientific generalized laws based on the principle of reductionism and demanding reliability and validity. Methodological rigor is the mainstay of positivistic epistemology.

1. Human Nature

Human nature is assumed to be deterministic in a stimulus-response fashion. There is no scope for voluntary free will in individuals in Positivism.

1. Methodology

The above three assumptions naturally aligns positivism with natural science methodology of research which Burrell and Morgan term as ‘nomothetic’. This process of research assumes researcher to be a value-free, neutral and non-participative individual who collects and interprets data and refuses to compromise on the methodological rigor in-built in this paradigm of research.

**Logical Positivism**

Logical positivism is a harsher form of positivism the roots of which lie in the scientific discourse of Vienna Circle of early 20th century. The Circle comprised of members like social philosopher Otto Neurath, mathematician Hans Hahn, physicist Philip Frank and Moritz Schlick and the logicians Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead. We have called it a harsher form of positivism because it modified Comtean introduction of natural science methods to social sciences further and sought to align philosophy with the exactitude of mathematics. According to logical positivist view any philosophical statement which could not be verified empirically was to be discarded (the verifiability principle). Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was another influential figure of the Circle who denied any possibility of genuine knowledge without the application of scientific principles.

Positivism and logical positivism are based on same Anglo-French objectivist philosophy and assume a structuralist view of society where sociology’s main task is to regulate and order it.

From an organizational and social research context positivism employs purely nomothetic methodology of experimental and survey research using research tools such as sampling, non-participant observation, highly structured interviews, data reduction, statistical analysis and use of measurement and scaling oriented questionnaires.

**The Philosophical Assumptions of Constructionism**

Constructionism or interpretive sociology is historically rooted in German Idealism. It is based on Immanuel Kant’s ideas (1724-1803) who laid down its ontological and epistemological foundations by postulating that social actors were directly involved in the process of sociology. After the romanticism of Goethe and Schiller the ideas of Kant were however hidden behind the rise of ‘scientism’ of objectivism and positivism.

Late 19th century however witnessed a rise in neo-Kantian movement. The period from 1890 to 1930, under the influence of Stuart Hughes, championed cultural view over the scientific view. The works of Dilthey, Max Weber and, Edmund Husserl coined the notion of *verstehen* or understanding to draw lines of distinction between natural and social sciences and maintained that the two were fundamentally different on the subject of mind and matter. Natural science’ methodology was deemed inadequate in capturing the realities of social science. The constructionists view is however not mutually exclusive with positivism. As a matter of fact major sociological texts view *verstehen* as the bridge between the two. Other main proponents of the view include Gadamer, Alfred Schtz (1899-1959), George Simmel and George Mead.

1. Ontology

Interpretive or constructionist view does not deny the existence of objects but it seriously challenges the assumption of reality existing ‘out there’. The ontological perspective of interpretivism views reality and objects as inextricably intertwined with human consciousness. There is no one set of inherent meaning in the objects waiting to be discovered but meanings according to this view are furnished by the subject. The ontological claim of reality as ‘truth’ is therefore challenged and reality is thought of as multiple constructions undertaken by subjects according to their own world views.

1. Epistemology

Constructionism’ epistemology does not rely on gathering data through sense-perception. Its epistemology is anti-positivist and focuses on understanding the subjective world views of human beings. This is in stark contrast to natural science based empirical epistemology of positivism.

1. Human Nature

Human beings are considered essentially as possessing a free will on the basis of which they have the ability to respond to same stimuli differently. That is also a major point of departure from the deterministic assumptions about human nature as discussed earlier under positivism.

1. Methodology

The methodology of this perspective is ideographic as opposed to nomothetic nature of positivism. There is much less emphasis on the ‘methodological rigor’ while richness and multiplicity of information is favored.

The research methodologies of constructionism include ethnography, ethno methodology, phenomenological research, grounded theory and heuristic theory and research tools of participant observation, unstructured interviews, in-depth interviews, focus groups, case study, narratives, theme identification, document analysis, content analysis, cognitive mapping and conversation analysis are used for gathering and analyzing data and information.

**Subjectivism**

There is little difference in the sense of philosophical assumptions between this perspective and constructionism. Main difference perhaps lies in the ontological orientation which under this paradigm presents a complete denial of any objective reality. Reality is thought to be a product of a jungle of cognitive and conscious individual world views. Another difference is the critical nature of a purely subjective (post-structualist or postmodern) stance. Whereas constructionism (through symbolic-interactionism, phenomenology and hermeneutics) is purely descriptive understanding of inter-subjectivity, subjectivism goes many steps beyond description and presents a scathing critique on social and organizational assumptions of order and rationality. Its main theoretical perspectives are critical inquiry, feminism and postmodernism. Research tools of deconstruction of language and binary opposites commonly underpin subjectivist methodologies of discourse analysis undertaken from a critical or feminist standpoint.

Figure 1 depicts the two opposing set of philosophical assumptions underlying pure objectivism (positivism and logical positivism) and subjectivism. Constructionism would occupy a middle position between the two extremes.

**Anglo-French Objectivism German Idealism**

Ontology Realist Nominalist

Epistemology Positivistic Anti-Positivistic

Human Nature Deterministic Voluntary

Methodology Nomothetic Ideographic

*Figure 1*: Adapted from Burrell & Morgan (1979): *Sociological paradigms of organizational paradigms*.

**Modernism**

The 19th century has been described as the post-Enlightenment or Modern or as Age of Progress. Historically speaking Modernism is traced back to 17th century Europe where the advent of science and technology based secular world view was its main product. In the words of Habermas Modernism presents a “revolt against the normalizing functions of traditions”.

In terms of sociology Modernism refers to the social-political and scientific-philosophical reality of western societies from roughly the mid 18th century onwards. The scientific discoveries of the earlier two centuries led to numerous technological advances in Europe and America resulting in the hallmark of Modernism, Industrial Revolution.

It was the time when the discoveries in natural sciences in the preceding era convinced the Western mind that nature could not only be discovered but also conquered through application of science. This belief had major repercussions in the field of sociology. The methodology of natural science which is based on realist ontology, positivistic epistemology, determinism and nomothetic methodology of research were applied in the study of societies and human beings.

The Modernist Positivistic paradigm in organization theory directly reflects this stance of sociology. Organizations were considered as efficient machines consisting of interrelated parts. Understanding of parts became a prerequisite to understand the machine. Apart from this ‘mechanistic’ analogy the ‘organismic’ analogy which considered organizations as open systems interacting with a posited environment for their survival also gained much support from the Modernist organization theorists. In nutshell Modernism represents order and rationality in the natural as well as social worlds. It attempts to explain the two worlds under the same principles of generalizability, metanarratives, empiricism, and seeks to promote order and control.

Modernism and the preceding Western Enlightenment and Renaissance period were outcome of a sort of reaction against the religious dominance and theocracy of Catholic Church during the Dark Ages spanning over a period of nearly 1200 years. In the retrospect it makes sense to understand the willingness of scholars and populace to replace science and reason as the ‘other’ of society in place of the Church, religion and God. The period of Gregorian reform (1050-1130) initiated by Gregory’s claim that Roman church had never erred, nor will it err in all eternity, paved the way for a more strong clergy and the status of the church was elevated to the status of a super state. The common laity had no or little control over the sacraments which they had to take from the church. This complete and absolute authority of Church led to the idea of papal infallibility. By 13th century the crusade against heretics was formalized in the form of ‘inquisition’ by Gregory IX and Innocent IV. The inquisitions allowed for the use of torture to obtain confessions from accused heretics. The pope was exalted as the most powerful and important leader in Europe and monarchies refrained from acting in defiance of the Church. In short it was the fear factor of religion and the Church preceding the periods of Western Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment and culminating in Modernism.

In terms of organization theory the classical paradigm pioneered by Frederick Taylor and Henry Fayol was that of representing organizations as machines designed by top managers to achieve predetermined goals. This paradigm views managers as engineers who operate this organizational machinery. The Modernist positivist view largely retained the major elements of this paradigm but is embedded in the root organizational metaphor of organism where organizations are viewed as living systems which adapt to a hostile environment for the purpose of survival. This paradigm views managers as an interdependent part of an adaptive whole.

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the main exponents of biology and psychology during Modernity, lived in times when Europe witnessed major political, social and moral shifts. The major impact of Darwin’s work *The Origin of Species* (1959) might not have been in the field of biology but his insight that ‘survival is for fittest’ caught on very well with the sociological and organizational theorizing. In a way it justified the utility oriented Economics and utilitarian ethics on which the idea of individualism progressed.

Sigmund Freud thought that the idea of religion thrives on our innate helplessness against the apparently invincible forces of nature and equates this with our childhood defenselessness in front of the ‘powerful’ parents. He sums up religion as the son-father relationship (where) God is the exalted father, and the longing for the father is the root of the need for religion (*Future of an Illusion*, 1955). For Freud this mental infantilism induces the mass-delusion of religion, which however succeeds in saving many people from individual neurosis. Parent-child relationship is the central theme in his analysis of human ego which, with the passage of time, learns to repress and inhibit sexual impulses with the result that “the illusion” of spiritual love over and above sexual feelings is produced. These ideas further reinforced the secular world view developed during Modernism.

In the field of philosophy Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) developed analytical philosophy. This reduced philosophy to the much less speculative realm of objective logical inquiry. Russell inherited and carried forward the English positivist tradition and thought that world’s woes were largely due to mysticism and metaphysics. He therefore abandoned Christianity as much of it could not be phrased into mathematics. His search for ‘purity’ from metaphysics and mysticism was seen thriving in the ‘Vienna Circle’ formed by a group of philosophers, scientists and mathematicians during the 1920s and 30s with the sole aim of purging science and philosophy from meaningless metaphysics. Philosophers reduced the scope of their inquiries so much that Wittgenstein, the most noted philosopher of this century, postulated that the sole remaining task for philosophy was the analysis of language.

The foundations of analytical philosophy were laid earlier by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill’s (1806-1873) utilitarian and hedonist view of philosophy.

The positivistic Modernist paradigm of organization theory identifies five core elements of organizations: environment, technology, organizational social structure, organizational physical structure and organizational culture. Environment is recognized to be composed of discretely identifiable players or stakeholders. The supposed ‘fit’ between organization and its environment lies at the heart of Modernist paradigm comprising of contingency theory, resource dependence theory, population ecology view and institutional theory. Technology is viewed as the process of converting inputs (taken from environment) to products and services or outputs (transmitted back to environment) through a transformation process occurring inside the organization. An important implication of the Modernist perspective of technology is that it determines best type of organizational structure suitable for a particular type of technology.

Modernists organization theory is underpinned by the biological concept of differentiation and integration to justify social structure of organizations represented by hierarchy of authority, division of labor, coordination mechanisms, centralization and, formalization which determine whether the structure would be mechanistic, organic or bureaucratic.

**Points of departure from Classic Positivistic Modernism**

The above mentioned picture of Modernism did not remain static and much sociological and organizational theory thought development occurred during this period of time[[1]](#footnote-2). Following is a brief description of these points of departure.

Hawthorne studies undertaken in the Western Electric plant during 1920s and 30s laid the foundation of highlighting the role of physical structure, work conditions and layout of an organization. Physical structure, according to the Modernist paradigm, ‘determines’ the behavior of employees by effecting their job performance and job satisfaction levels which in turn determine the level of their motivation. Modernist paradigm views organizational culture as a tool of management and a variable effecting performance.

The developments occurring in the mid-twentieth century (mentioned above) which center around the notion of ‘people’ (post-Hawthorne period) is what some texts mention as *neo-Modernism*. The main focus of neo-Modernist theorists are how human values beliefs shapes and are in turn shaped by the organizations. The interest in ‘humanism’ or ‘human relations’ movement led to developments in theory of organizational culture, leadership and ‘democratic organizations’. Neo-Modernist perspective combines contributions from psychology, sociology and anthropology which resulted in the development of fields such as Organizational Behavior, Organization Development, Human Resource Management and Management Guruism. These developments led to parallel developments in organizational and sociological research giving birth to Constructionism and Interpretivism. Since people and non-rational aspects of organizations were not fully captured by Hawthorne Studies, the reliance on objectivism and positivism as the sole epistemology started losing some ground to the Humanists who advocated different ways of studying the natural and social worlds. .

These developments in social sciences were taking place in parallel with some crucial developments in natural sciences. Werner Heisenberg’s (1901-1976) ‘uncertainty principle’ gave a major jolt to positive sciences’ claim of certitude and objectivity. His studies on subatomic particles demonstrating the impossibility to determine exact position and momentum of these particles presented a serious challenge to the positivistic epistemological assumptions of objectivist perspective. Similarly Neil Bohr (1885-1962) challenged the realist ontology of objectivism by pointing out the difference in nature of realities between ordinary world and the world at subatomic level. These two challenges were later supplemented by Einstein’s theories of relativity which further undermined the realist, positivistic and deterministic assumptions of positivism.

In 1930s Karl Popper (1902-1994) presented a major challenge to logical positivism of Vienna Circle (of which he was once a member) by turning the verification principle on its head. He proposed that scientific inquiry carried out by empirical observations and experiments is in way engaging in a continual process of conjecture and falsification. His principle of falsification postulates that scientists do not make a discovery and then prove it right but make a guess and then ensure to find ways to make it impossible to prove the guess wrong. These claims ushered what is called *post-positivism* within the Modernist period. In the late Modernity, Thomas Kuhn’s (1922-1996) notion of scientific paradigms presented science in interpretive mould where scientific knowledge was not free of social construction and found its meanings within its immediate social context.

The radical stance of subjectivism is embedded in historical developments taking place in the Modernist era. Enlightenment and Modernism’ project of development and human march towards progress were turned upside down by the projections of ‘holocaust’ thought to have occurred in the Nazi concentration camps and Stalinist gulags. It was argued that Modernist bureaucracy was responsible for providing Nazis with an efficient tool to undertake genocide as precisely as they did. How can bureaucracy be ‘good’ then?[[2]](#footnote-3) With a question mark over bureaucracy the whole project of Modernity was challenged and denial of metanarratives, overarching theories, science and religion was a knee-jerk reaction to events of the ‘holocaust’. It is beyond the scope of this essay to go in further details but the political leverage which a certain sect within Jews gained after the ‘holocaust’ is an open secret. This probably explains the consistent tendency of subjectivist theorists to criticize and deconstruct previous theories rather than crafting any new theories. In fact theories are considered impossible and the metaphor of ‘collage’ aptly depicts the state of organization theory as a mix of subjective, fragmented and, discursive field where every manager is simultaneously a theorists as well as an artist. Organizations are no more than *Tamara* where no one understands and grasps anything in totality and art is reduced to the mundane Duchamp’s fountain just to break away from traditions.

It can be gleaned from the above discussion that the four paradigms presented in Figure 2 (during the Modernist era) are not as mutually exclusive as claimed by Burrell and Morgan. They are interrelated albeit in a subtle way by historical, scientific and people-centered research developments. That is why this essay uses the ‘hook’ of Modernism to synthesize positivism, logical positivism and subjectivism.[[3]](#footnote-4)

**Sociology of Radical Change**

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| --- | --- |
| **Radical Subjectivism**   * French Existentialism * Critical Theory * Solipsism   **Subjective** | **Radical Structuralism**   * Marxism * Conflict Theory   **Objective** |
| **Constructionism**   * Symbolic Interactionism * Phenomenology * Hermeneutics | **Positivism / Logic Positivism**   * Objectivism * Social System Theory |

**Sociology of Regulation**

*Figure 2*[[4]](#footnote-5): Synthesis of Positivism, Logical Positivism, Constructionism and Subjectivity through the lens of Modernism

**Critique on the multiple Perspectives**

*Positivism, Logical Positivism and Classical Modernism*

The most heavily critiqued aspect of Modernism is that it applies the philosophical assumptions of natural sciences to study social phenomena. It considers society and organizations as concrete realities operating like a system. After the development of Einstein’s physics and atomic structural studies of Neil Bohr it became evident that even in the natural sciences that ontological realism and epistemological positivism was not as hardcore as once envisaged. This critique gave rise to blurring of sharp divide between object and subject and gave birth to constructionism and subjectivism epistemologies.

The treatment of society and organizations as systems and goal directed entities assumes a unitary nature (like machines and organisms). This assumption is problematic because it assumes that all individuals, groups and departments have same goals as that of organizations. The issues of interests, conflict and power are masked behind this assumption. Managerialism is a natural outcome of this unitary view because managers are considered as engineers or architects of the organizational machinery.

Another problem embedded within the Modernist epistemology is the clash between the abstract and the concrete. On the one hand organizations are treated as systems but only the parts are studied because they can be studied through empirical means. Non empirical studies which can explore the non rational and non concrete aspects of organizations are considered valid and scientific enough and are therefore ignored. This tendency promoted the development of middle range inductive theories or abstract empiricism. As a result organization as a ‘whole’ entity was not understood because the focus remained on the parts.

The Modernists affinity for ‘order’ and ‘control’ is easily convertible to an organizational world where managers emerge as elites and the non-managerial class the oppressed and the alienated. The elites of organizations acquire control because they speak a particular language (learnt in business schools) and are supposed to have more organizational and strategic knowledge as compared to other employees.

*Constructionism*

Constructionism is a descriptive epistemology. Its theoretical perspectives and research methodologies and methods describe what an individual researcher obtains from another individual or group of individuals in terms of data and information. The focus of analysis is usually centered on theme extraction. The issues of conflict of interest and power and dominance are not sidelined as in the case of positivism but the underlying assumptions are not reflected critically. Because of this tendency organizational problems are highlighted but since their root causes are not (as pointed out by Peter Senge in *The fifth Discipline*), most of the organizational change initiatives serve to alleviate symptoms in a symptomatic manner. Long term and reoccurring organizational problems are therefore difficult to solve through this approach because it is not ‘curative’ by its very nature.

Another critique levied on constructionism (its phenomenological and symbolic-interactionist theoretical perspective) is towards its level of application in organizations. High discretion roles like police officers, doctors, receptionists and lawyers are more suitable for it because they encounter complex nature of multiple realities in their daily roles. Constructionists research is well suited for researching such roles. But the applicability and viability of this type of research in low discretion roles like janitors and assembly line workers remains problematic. This issue is interrelated with the one mentioned above because by sidelining low discretion roles, constructionism fails to explore the marginalized and alienated members of organizations.

We have already discussed that ontologically and epistemologically constructionism treats social objects according to subject’s worldview and that this leads to creation of multiple realities. These realities are subjective but once recognized there is a tendency for these subjective realities to be ‘objectified’ or ‘reified’ as if they are actually present.

*Subjectivism[[5]](#footnote-6)*

Pure subjectivity in organizations is an anti-dote to theorizing because metanarratives, generalized laws and any attempt to theorize is seriously challenged by the philosophical assumptions on which extreme case subjectivism (skeptical postmodernism as Rosenau calls it) is based. Anarchistic individualism, French Existentialism and Solipsism present a tough challenge to theorists to craft any meaningful theories on their basis. This is because these views consider organizations as a ‘wedge’ between individual consciousness and totality of the social world and hence reduce the status of organizations to no more than middle-range reified social creation. In this way organizations contribute and cause human alienation from his/her true being.

**Concluding Remark**

1. Positivism, Logical Positivism, Constructionism and Subjectivism are not isolated epistemologies but are connected through history. They are not mutually exclusive to each other.
2. Each perspective has its own strength and weaknesses. There is no one ‘ideal’ epistemology with the ability to capture organizational and societal multiplicity.
3. All organizational researches cannot be purely inductive or deductive. They can incline to one side depending on the context of research.
4. Mixed method research is perhaps most suitable way to glimpse organizational multiplicity.
5. The rigor of methodology should not thwart a researcher from crafting bold and original theories because focus on ‘parts’ alone would miss the ‘whole’.
6. Like all other social phenomena research paradigms are also continually evolving and adherence to one paradigm would tantamount to denying the process of social and organizational thought.

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1. Many texts define Modernism in terms of time period spanning from British Industrial Revolution to a couple of decades beyond Second World. This essay therefore treats Modernism as the time period in Western history starting from 19thcentury till 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Sartre’s phenomenological approach (French Existentialism) seriously challenges bureaucracy and professional roles adopted by organizational members. According to him the professional employment forces individuals to adapt to their external reality and a point comes when they lose their subjective self in the external reality of their professional demands. Sartre terms the distance between individual’s subjectivity and external reality as ‘nothingness’ or space of freedom where freedom causes one to innovate and imagine things which do not even exist. A free individual, according to this view, keeps a large distance between his/herself and externality because he/she lives in ‘nothingness’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Postmodernist organizations with their advanced use of technology and network structure keep a continuous watch over all organizational activities and employees are hooked with organization on around the clock bases. The idea might seem fairly recent but is not very different from the ‘panoptican gaze’ of Jeremy Bentham developed some two centuries earlier. It only came to be actualized when Fordism and neo-Fordism of positivistic Modernism failed to keep the balance between mass produced products’ supply and demand. Post-Fordism is a direct extension of Modernist Fordism and in the same vain all the paradigms shown in Figure 2 are not mutually exclusive but extensions of previous paradigms. The case of Karl Marx who made an ‘epistemological break’ from Radical Idealism to Radical Structuralism in his later years also points that the different paradigms of Figure 2 have permeable walls and are linked through historicity.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The circular arrows in the middle of Figure 2 depict the inter-connectivity of the four paradigms. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Subjectivism and its critique are not described in detail because it would logically fall under Postmodernism which is not part of the elements considered in this Synthesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)