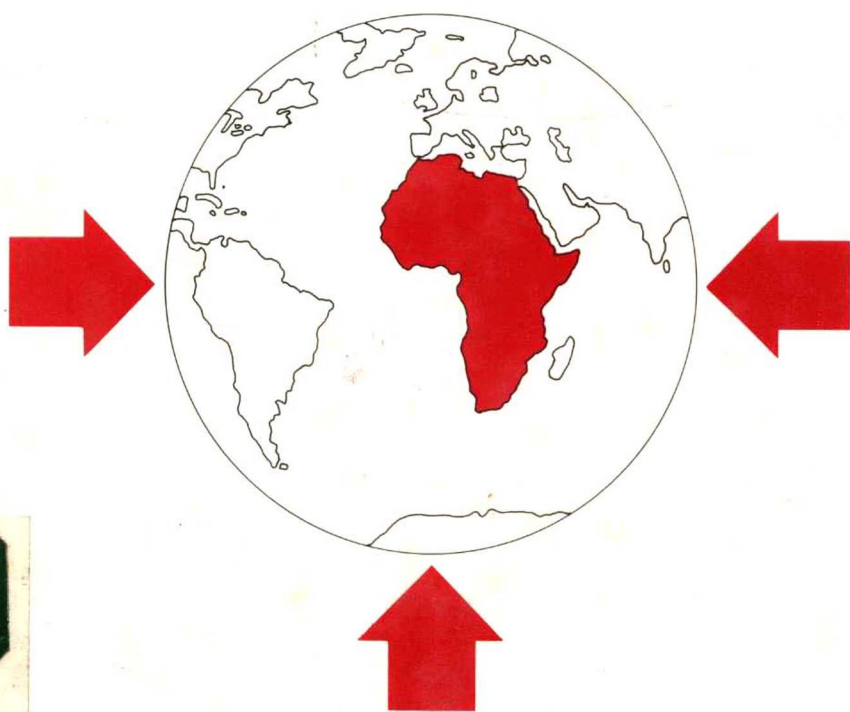


Norma R.A. Romm

# The Methodologies of Positivism and Marxism

A Sociological Debate



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**MACMILLAN**

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# Preface

Questions concerning the way in which the study of social reality is to be approached are often regarded as 'philosophical' issues which fall outside the domain of sociology. Sociology – it is argued – cannot concern itself with philosophical topics such as 'What is knowledge?'; 'What is involved in attempts to arrive at knowledge of social reality?'; 'What is the distinction between knowledge and ideology?'; 'What is the relation between sociology and society?' However it is my belief that such questions have to be confronted by sociologists going about the task of studying social reality. Instead of regarding these matters as being solely philosophical issues which – as such – fall outside the domain of sociology, I prefer to regard them as methodological questions within the field of sociology. These methodological questions cannot be 'put aside' by sociologists engaging in attempts to investigate the functioning of social reality. Indeed, whether or not these questions are explicitly confronted by sociologists, their work is always informed by some kind of (albeit often unrecognised) 'response' to them.

This book is aimed at offering a clarification of the methodological principles which underlie various sociologists' search for knowledge of social reality. It is aimed at demonstrating how different ways of approaching the study of social reality are rooted in different methodological/philosophical traditions. Specifically, I have concentrated on elucidating three types of methodological approaches: positivism, Marxist realism and Marxist nonrealism. I have tried to clarify at what points these positions differ from one another and in what sense they are incompatible.

The existence of opposing methodological positions in sociology is, however, not a cause for concern. On the contrary, the existence of difference is precisely what 'keeps alive' the debate in sociology over the manner in which sociologists are to approach their subject matter. And through this ongoing debate, new methodological arguments/suggestions become developed. The existence of difference thus acts as a stimulus for the development of further methodological arguments.

Furthermore the very existence of opposing positions is what allows sociologists to retain an awareness of the fact that their choice of methodological position is indeed itself one choice among competing

alternatives. It is not the only possible or viable approach which could have been adopted.

The intention of this book has not been to resolve the methodological debate in favour of the adoption of a particular model for the practice of sociology. Although I (finally) suggest a preference for the 'nonrealist' Marxist argument, I have primarily stressed the need to recognise that the adoption of any particular position requires a 'consciousness' of the rationale of competing/opposing claims.

The book should prove useful to students of sociology who are being schooled in the variety of (sociological) theories about social reality – for it provides the tools for an understanding of the methodological underpinnings of different viewpoints. Furthermore post-graduate students engaging in research projects need to consider carefully the methodological principles in terms of which they wish to operate, and should benefit from the detailed account of principles as here provided.

While a number of books do already exist which outline the methodological stances of positivism and/or Marxist realism and/or some kind of 'critical' Marxism (Marxist nonrealism), I see the contribution of this book as follows. Firstly, it provides an in-depth account of the tenets of all three of the above-mentioned approaches. Secondly, it explores each of these approaches by considering its 'answer' to the same four methodological issues which I have isolated for attention throughout the book. The discussion of each position in terms of these four issues makes for easy comparison between the different positions. And it also helps to lend clarity to the discussion of each of the respective positions. The methodological issues which I have located are:

- (i) the definition of sociological knowledge;
- (ii) the logic of sociological investigation;
- (iii) methods to be used during sociological investigation;
- (iv) the practical utility of sociological knowledge.

Although the book deals specifically with the relevance of these issues within sociology, other social sciences – which are directed at the study of some selected aspect of society, such as political science or economics – are also confronted with similar methodological issues. The book may help to cast light on the methodological controversies within these disciplines.

And finally, because of its discussion of both positivism and Marxism (including Marxist realism and nonrealism) as 'philosophies of science' which constitute methodological options in various scientific disciplines, the book is relevant to philosophers of science concerned with these issues.

NORMA R. A. ROMM

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# 1 General Introduction

Sociology, as a discipline directed towards providing an understanding of social reality, is characterised by a variety of standpoints. This variety is manifested both in the types of theories which are offered to come to grips with social reality and in the very mode of producing or generating these theories. Hence sociology is characterised not only by different theories concerning the operation of social reality, but also by different conceptions of what is involved in the very doing of sociology. Questions concerning what indeed is involved in the practice of sociology may be termed methodological questions.

This book focuses on clarifying the differences between two specific approaches to the study of social reality, which can broadly be labelled as 'positivistic' and 'Marxist' methodological approaches. The aim is to indicate exactly where and how positivism as a methodological approach differs from Marxism as a methodological approach. The suggestion is that, once the differences in these approaches are understood, we will be better equipped to understand the differences between positivistically produced and Marxist-type sociological theories. Furthermore sociologists themselves who are going about the task of studying social reality will be better equipped to understand the implications of their adoption of a particular methodological stance. They will become more 'conscious' of how their adoption of a particular methodological position commits them to a course of inquiry which necessarily differs from other possible courses.

The book does not offer an account of the methodological position which has been broadly labelled within the sociological literature as the 'interpretive' or 'humanistic' approach. This does not imply that such a position constitutes a less clearly defined option for the practice of sociology. The 'humanist' option may indeed be considered as a viable alternative to the methodological stances which are presented in the course of this book. However the choice to adopt this alternative requires us to have clarity on the positions (positivism and Marxism) against which the alternative justifies and defends itself. Hence 'humanistically-oriented' sociologists too may benefit from considering the account of the positivist and Marxist positions as presented here.

## THE LABELS 'POSITIVISM' AND 'MARXISM'

### **Positivism**

The use of the term 'positivism' to characterise a specific sociological position, was originally suggested by Auguste Comte, who was intent on affording sociology a 'positive' scientific status. Comte's 'positive philosophy' incorporates a number of principles for rendering sociology a scientific discipline on a par with the natural sciences. These principles can be summarised as follows. Sociology was to break its ties with 'metaphysical' and 'theological' modes of thinking. It was to become an empirical discipline which grounded all its knowledge-claims in empirically observable facts. Furthermore it was to be able to offer predictions based on its knowledge of the laws which connect specific outcomes with specific (initial) circumstances.

In tribute to Comte, a sociology which is practised to incorporate these principles (in some form) may be called 'positivist' in orientation. The label refers to Comte's contribution in generating the 'positivist' argument. However, in order to understand positivism as a methodological option in sociology, it is necessary to understand further 'sophistications' of the argument. The suggestion in this book is that the work of Karl Popper provides such a sophistication, and that together his and Comte's work furnish the tools for understanding the contemporary 'positivist' outlook. The label of 'positivism' in Chapter 2 is thus defined with reference to the work of both Comte and Popper.

Although Popper is used to constitute the 'positivist' category in this book, he himself has suggested that he does not wish to be considered as a positivist (cf. Popper, 1976b:290). Specifically he does not wish to be classified under the same category as the so-called 'Vienna Circle' of positivists. He feels that they have fundamentally misunderstood what it means to ground scientific theories in the realm of 'empirical observation'. According to him, they have an incorrect understanding of the 'empirical character' of scientific inquiry. He thus wishes to distance himself from their argument.

But despite Popper's suggested preference not to be labelled as a 'positivist', he does admit that there are certain points at which he decisively agrees with certain 'positivist' authors (Popper, 1978:89). (These points of agreement are discussed in Chapter 2.) Furthermore he admits (1976b:298) that 'words do not matter' and that it therefore does not really matter whether or not he is labelled as a positivist as long as his argument is understood. Given that a concerted effort is

made to indeed come to grips with the tenets of the Popperian position, it is felt that his argument is not being done an injustice by referring to it under the rubric of 'positivism'.

Once the category of positivism has been defined with reference to the work of both Comte and Popper in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 indicates how their arguments provide a route to understanding the substance of much contemporary sociology. Chapter 3 helps us to understand (theoretical) attempts to outline the nature of sociology as a scientific discipline; and it also helps to account for the (concrete) research practice of sociologists seeking to discover (regular) 'relationships' between phenomena in social reality. In terms of the argument in this book, such thinking-and-practice in sociology is in turn labelled as 'positivistic' in orientation. Its placement under the banner of 'positivism' serves to highlight its 'resemblance' to the category as defined in the second chapter, and it also serves to provide further 'instances' (or examples) of the category.

## **Marxism**

The label 'Marxism' in this book is used broadly to classify the arguments of authors who acknowledge their indebtedness to the work of Karl Marx and who use this as a basis to develop a particular methodological approach. No attempt is made in this book to judge the 'adequacy' of any author's reading of Marx's position. The book is not concerned with Marx's work as such: the concern is with examining the way in which contemporary Marxist authors draw on his work in order to express a methodological stance.

## **MARXISM DIVIDED**

Having broadly identified the category of 'Marxism', the book proceeds to divide the category into two components. The division is based on the fact that Marxist authors may interpret the methodological injunctions of Marx in different ways. Two different types of interpretation which can be identified are, respectively, a 'realist' and a 'nonrealist' interpretation.

The 'realist' position derives its name from the fact that the authors espousing this position see Marxism as geared towards uncovering the structures of external reality. They claim that Marxist science studies society in order to gain knowledge of the structures of society as these exist in reality.

The Marxist 'nonrealist' position derives its name from the fact that authors espousing this position do *not* see Marxism as the study of 'external' reality. The aim of Marxism – it is argued – is not to uncover the structures of some supposedly existing external reality. Marxism is rather a moral enterprise aimed at offering morally informed statements about suppressed moral potentialities in society. Marxism thus expressly studies social reality from a moral point of view and admits that its theoretical statements refer to 'reality' only from this viewpoint.

In order to offer an indication of these two types of Marxist positions, the following procedure is adopted. A detailed analysis of a specific (realist) author's position is first presented in order to gain clarity on the principles of the argument. The author who has been chosen to represent the realist argument is Russell Keat (who himself labels his espoused position with the term 'realism'). Chapter 4 outlines his position. Chapter 5 indicates how similar (realist) arguments have been incorporated in the discipline of sociology in general. This chapter serves to provide further instances of the realist argument.

Following the discussion of the realist approach, a detailed analysis of another (nonrealist) author's argument is presented in Chapter 6 in order to highlight the principles of this alternative interpretation of Marxism. The author who has been chosen for this task is Jürgen Habermas. Chapter 7 indicates the presence of similar arguments within the discipline of sociology in general. These arguments are then in turn labelled as 'nonrealist' in orientation.

It may be noted that the presentation of the realist and nonrealist arguments is accompanied by an effort to indicate differences in the way in which they oppose the positivist position. Although both stances oppose positivism, it is shown that they differ in the grounds on which they do so. Marxist realism and nonrealism thus can be seen as offering different types of alternatives to the positivist methodological position.

## ISSUES DISCUSSED

In order to lend clarity to the discussion of the various arguments, all the chapters of the book centre around the same four methodological issues which have been singled out for attention. These issues have been isolated as constituting separate dimensions of the methodological

debate. The entire book revolves around a discussion of these issues from the perspectives of positivism and Marxism (including Marxist realism and nonrealism). The issues which have been isolated are, as indicated in the Preface:

- (i) the definition of (sociological) knowledge;
- (ii) the logic governing sociological investigation (in order to arrive at knowledge);
- (iii) the methods which are to be used in sociological investigation;
- (iv) the practical utility of sociological knowledge.

Chapter 2 deals with these issues as seen from the viewpoints of Comte and Popper, respectively. The suggestion is that Comte's and Popper's approaches to these issues bear significant similarities, which justifies our labelling of them under the same methodological banner: the banner of positivism. It is shown how both Comte and Popper define knowledge (including sociological knowledge) as the discovery of the laws governing the connections between phenomena in the universe. Furthermore it is shown how Popper's critique of 'essentialism' (including Marxist essentialism) resembles Comte's critique of theological and metaphysical thinking. The critique is levelled against all forms of thought which fail to examine the regular relationships (connections) existing between phenomena in reality.

When discussing the logic of scientific discovery, it is indicated how both Comte and Popper call for a scientific logic which unites 'theory' with the realm of 'observation'. However, while Comte focuses on the interplay between inductive and deductive logic, Popper emphasises the sole importance of deduction as the logic of science. This accounts for his contention that the statements of science can never be conclusively 'verified'. Deductive logic cannot be used for purposes of conclusive verification. It can be used only to 'prove' when statements are definitely false. Hence Popper draws attention to the importance of deduction in eliminating false hypotheses in science, and he suggests that statements which have withstood our attempts to falsify them may be regarded as 'tentatively corroborated'.

Regarding methods of observation to be used in the scientific process, Comte isolates three such methods: direct observation, experiment and comparison. Popper also refers to various methods of observation which may be used. But he is more emphatic than Comte that it is impossible to attain 'self-evident' data. Popper emphasises that even our statements about our 'observations' are never indubitable. Furthermore Popper is wary of Comte's conception of the

method of 'historical' comparison. He believes that Comte's conception thereof involves a confusion between trends and laws: a confusion which needs to be corrected.

As regards the practical utility of sociological knowledge, both Comte and Popper insist that sociological knowledge of laws can be used for the rational reorganisation of society. Popper, however, criticises Comte for assuming that such a rational reorganisation is an inevitable historical accomplishment.

Chapter 3 sets out to indicate how the (positivist) approach to the issues as discussed in Chapter 2, becomes instantiated in the 'positivist' tradition in sociology. Various authors' work is here drawn upon in order to indicate the arguments. It is shown how these arguments are expressed in writings on the nature of sociology as a science. It is also shown how this 'philosophy of science' informs the practice of research into relationships between dependent and independent variables in social reality. The layout of Chapter 3 follows the same structure as Chapter 2, dealing in turn with various authors' views concerning: (i) the definition of sociological knowledge; (ii) the logic governing sociological investigation; (iii) the methods to be used in sociological investigation; and (iv) the practical utility of sociological knowledge.

Chapter 4 introduces the Marxist realist approach to the same issues by referring in detail to the position of Keat. Keat's elucidation of realism as a methodological contender to positivism is discussed. Keat disagrees with the positivist view that knowledge consists in the discovery of 'regular relationships' in reality. He believes that knowledge involves uncovering the 'underlying mechanisms' which account for *why* certain regular relationships are discerned to hold in reality. In the realm of social scientific study, Keat suggests that Marx's scientific approach in fact incorporates a **realist**, rather than a positivist, outlook. The aim is to uncover the structures responsible for generating particular phenomenal effects in society.

Keat suggests that the realist definition of knowledge is accompanied by a specific view of the 'logic' of science. In terms of this view, neither inductive nor deductive logic is seen as the route to knowledge-discovery. Instead of attempting to connect 'theory' with 'observation' by means of inductive and/or deductive logical chains, it is recognised that theory can never be directly (logically) connected with the realm of empirical observation. This is why theory can neither be definitely confirmed nor definitely falsified with respect to this realm.

The realist definition of knowledge, furthermore, has implications for the way in which methods of observation are to be conceived. They

are conceived as tools for uncovering structures, rather than as devices for (merely) uncovering regular connections between phenomena.

As far as the practical utility of sociological knowledge is concerned, Keat indicates that knowledge of social structures is of moral relevance in the realm of political action. Nevertheless the criteria for the establishment of scientific statements must not be directed by moral considerations. The 'truth' of scientific statements depends on their success in representing (external) reality, and not on their success in generating a particular type of moral practice.

Chapter 5 shows how the viewpoint as expressed in Chapter 4 has made its inroads within the discipline of sociology. Various authors' work is utilised as an indication of the presence of this methodological position within the discipline.

Chapter 6 presents an alternative (nonrealist) Marxist argument by referring in detail to the methodological position of Jürgen Habermas. It is shown how Habermas draws on Marx's work in order to present a particular (noncorrespondence) definition of knowledge. Sociological knowledge is then defined not in terms of correspondence with external reality, but rather in terms of the ability of theory to contribute to an emancipated society. Knowledge is thus (by definition) inextricably linked with the establishment of an emancipatory morality in society. (This in turn implies that both the positivist and realist definitions of knowledge, *inter alia*, have to be criticised.)

Habermas's 'noncorrespondence' definition of knowledge is coupled with a specific conception of the logic of scientific discovery, methods of observation, and the practical utility of sociological knowledge. According to Habermas, the empirical experience which logically links 'theory' with 'experience', occurs when subjects in society reinstate their human potentialities. It is an experience in which people express their potentiality to engage in an uninhibited moral discourse in society: a discourse which is not threatened by the constraints of given 'facts' or congealed 'traditions' in society. This empirical experience is the only experience which can serve to ground the insights provided by critical sociological theory.

This means that methods of observation within this methodological approach cannot be employed to discover some supposedly existing independent reality. Rather they are employed in order to invoke the participation of people in redefining their social reality. The 'critical' researcher makes 'observations' in order to direct people's perceptions – so that they will recognise the way in which communication has been unnecessarily stifled in society. This recognition then allows people to



re-open the moral debate concerning future possibilities and goal-directions for society. Insofar as critical theory stimulates people to direct the historical process in terms of an 'uninhibited discursive will-formation', it fulfils its moral intention. And the fulfilment of this (practical) moral intention simultaneously serves to verify the theory itself. This is the link between (sociological) theory and (moral) practice.

Chapter 7 provides an indication of how the nonrealist stance (as elucidated above) too has made its inroads within the sociological tradition. The arguments of various authors are discussed to point to the presence of this position within sociology.

Chapter 8 presents a summary of the methodological controversy between the positivist, Marxist realist, and Marxist nonrealist positions. The points at which contention arises between these positions are here highlighted.