

Truth and Social Science Theories: Starting from the End and there is no Panacea

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Abstract- Sociologists have again started meta-theoretical debates about their disciplines in terms of crisis, fundamental goals and purposes, cores and identities. The achievement of “objective knowledge” through this discipline was never beyond question. Hence, the articulation of “truth” through the scientific approaches applied in social science is also obscure to many extents. Of late, often both in academic and in public discussions we hear that truth is contingent on time, space and culture. This contingency of truth also has been developed in many recent academic discourses. However, the basic aim of this paper is to enter into the wider debate of social sciences theories in understanding the “truth/objectivity.” Through this paper, I argue that the forms of truth characteristic of our present are wider than social scientists recognized, their relations to objectivity more various, and their historicity more complex. The truth regime of advanced modernity is characterized by multiple, irreducible truth formulae that coexist and sometimes vie for dominance. Finally, this paper concludes that a new theory emerges from the end of another one and there is no panacea in achieving the truth/objectivity. Since, judging all alternatives rather than one is better as well as tenable to gain knowledge on truth/objectivity. Because trying many alternatives improve our self-evidence and self-evidence is comparatively better in judging the truth/objectivity.

Index Terms- Truth, Objective Knowledge, Social Science Theories, Positivism, Falsificationism, Realism, Anti-Realism, Hermeneutics, Feminist Standpoint Theory

I. INTRODUCTION: THE ROAD TO TRUTH

The transcendental ego is the agent of truth (Sokolowski, 2000:156). It exercises this agency in many contexts: in speech, picturing, reminiscence, practical conduct, political rhetoric, clever deception, and strategic maneuvering. A special way of exercising the power to be truthful occurs in science, whether the science is empirical or rhetoric, and whether it is focused on one region of being or another (ibid, p.156). But are these scientific approaches/roads are able/enough in searching the truth/objective knowledge? In fact, theoretical truth is not a fixed entity discovered according to a metatheoretical blueprint of linearity or hierarchy, but is invented within an ongoing self-reflective community in “theorist,” “social scientist,” “agent,” and “critic” become relatively interchangeable (Brown, 1990:189). As a result various ‘rhetorical turn’ has become an important intellectual movement in the human sciences, where reality and truth are formed through practices of presentation and interpretation by rhetors and their publics (ibid, p. 188).

Of late, often in academic or in public discussions we hear that truth is contingent on time, space and culture. This contingency of truth also has been developed in many academic discourses (e.g. neopragmatism of Richard McKay Rorty). Some philosophical discourse developed on ‘truth’ says truth is time bounded or ‘truth regime’. For example, Foucault (2000b: 131) considered truth as “truth regime” as a “general politics of truth.” Foucault for the first time proposed that “each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth-that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true.” Thus social science theories are now called into questions for its epistemological construction/reconstruction of truth/objective knowledge.

This ongoing debate has been spurred because of the fragmentation in the social science theories, which has given birth to many fugitive questions especially on the essentialization of truth/objective knowledge. However, on the one hand, the sheer split among the philosophers and philosophies in the dynasty of social science adventure posed the conspicuous ambiguity to its learners and readers to make a clear-cut sense on the truth/objective knowledge, on the other hand, some advocacy for these dividedness is going to be entertained by some of the philosophers and its stakeholders specially in the web of modern/postmodern philosophical endeavors (e.g. queer theory). One major aspect of these theories of science of social sciences is to cogitate truth and gain the objective knowledge. Though the theory of science as a “theoretical understanding of the goals, aims, fallibilities, controversies, failures, and achievements of science” is seeking to investigate the nature of science, it also poses many questions at the same time i.e. “what is science?” “What is objective knowledge?” and “What is truth and how can we obtain it?”

To my mind, the fall of grand-narratives escalated the fragmentation of social science philosophies that are engaged in searching the truth/objective knowledge. As Brante states that sociologists have again started meta-theoretical debates about their discipline in terms of crisis, fundamental goals and purposes, cores and identities (2001:1).” However, with the flow of time and the development of attempts to “learn” the truth, not invent or intuit it” (Wallerstein 1995, 13) the new types of questions started to emerge, such as “whose objectivity?” which introduce a serious doubt that is it actually possible to achieve objective knowledge (Wallerstein, 1995: 91) or that truth virtually exists. While Sayer states “no philosophy of science can promise ‘a royal road to truth’ (2000: 17).” And Tilly (2001) believes that social reality is too particularistic to be explained. Thus enquires of social science theories regarding the development of truth or objective knowledge are under immense of scrutinizing.

However, this paper aims to understand the 'truth/objectivity'-one of the major aspects of social science theories. I do believe, looking at this issue from any single point of view (i.e. positivism or realism) will be inadequate as well as may mislead us to gain the appropriate and adequate knowledge on the issue, rather the discussion from different major philosophical trends (i.e. positivism, realism, hermeneutics, standpoint (feminism), might be imperative to realize as well as to envisage its effects on the issue. Thus this paper attempts to be engaged in a wider debate in the theory of science of social sciences in understanding the "truth/objectivity."

II. TRUTH IN POSITIVISM AND FALSIFICATIONISM: VERIFY OR FALSIFY

In this section I want to offer a set of insights about how the *truth* was configured according to positivistic approach in terms of crude objectivity. Positivism is a term with many uses in social sciences and philosophy (Hollis, 1994:41). At the broad end, it embraces any approach, which applies scientific method to human affairs conceived as belong to a natural order open to objective enquiry (ibid, p.41). Positivism, pioneered by the father of sociology Auguste Comte, has been developed as a renunciation of Aristotelian metaphysics (Wallerstein, 1995:10). The advocacy on behalf of logical positivism originated in Vienna in the 1920's, further developed and attempted to formalize classical Comte's positivism, paying close attention to the logical form of the relationship between scientific knowledge and facts (Chalmers, 2004: 3). It refined the idea of gaining the truth through verifications as "a proposition has meaning only in as far as it can be verified" (Schlic cited in Werkmeister, 1937:281). Positivists of that school acknowledge the objective reality and see science as a way to discover this reality with method that enables "us to go outside the mind" (Wallerstein, 1995:11), which is observation, "the moment of truth when hypotheses are tested against the facts of the world" (Hollis, 1994:42). Thus the creation of the multiple disciplines of social science was part of the general nineteenth-century attempt to secure and advance "objective" knowledge about "reality" on the basis of empirical findings (Wallerstein, 1995:11).

Karl Popper also saw the moment of truth in the "one where theory is tested against pure observation or brute fact" (Hollis, 1994:76), but he proposed an opposite approach '*falsification*' in comparison to positivist's verification. Thus, he was in fundamental opposition to this entire construction of knowledge and to the assumption of total verifiability (Kraft cited in O'Hear, 2004:175). Popper claimed that there is no complete verification at all of general statement about reality; only an ambiguous falsification for it is possible (Ibid, p. 176). This approach implies that none of current theories can be accepted as true, only as "superior to its predecessors" (Chalmers, 2004:69) or as "the best available...better than anything that has come before" (ibid, p. 60). Falsificationism shifted the focus in science from showing the truth (or what is perceived as truth) to continuous improvement of existing knowledge (ibid, p.85) and hence falsificationism's motto can be presented as "progress rather than truth (ibid, p. 86)."

With the passage of time positivism have undergone with a lot of critiques. The anti-positivist sought to liberate the science from stereotypes about a neutral and objective observational basis in order to enable theories that 'produced' new types of observation, in social science as well as in quantum physics (Brante, 200:169). The fundamental base of positivism is observation/empiricist views and this is considered as passive and private, is totally inadequate, and does not give an accurate account of perception in everyday life, let alone science (Chalmers, 2004:19). Thomas Kuhn did not think that truth lies either in verifiability or falsification, rather than "it is bound by paradigms" (Benner 2011). The truth for Kuhn was the guidance for normal science, which were provided by these sets of "general theoretical assumptions and laws and the techniques for their application that the members of a particular scientific community adopt" (Chalmer, 2004:108). Here he emphasized on scientific progress that is launched from "*pre-science-normal science-crisis-revolution-new normal science-new crisis*" (ibid, p.8-9). Thus, the whole process of science Kuhn presented as a puzzle-solving activity (ibid, p.109) interrupted by crises.

Imre Lakatos' views were somehow similar to those of Kuhn's as he also "saw the merit in portraying scientific activity as taking place in a framework" (Chalmers 2004:130), but instead of paradigms, he proposed that the truth was framed by "research program", constituted of fundamental principles which defined "feature of a science" and could not be "blamed for any apparent failure"(Chalmers 2004, 131). Paul Feyerabend, with his famous principle "anything goes," stepped even further and revealed the "socially embedded" nature of science (and hence the scientific truth). Feyerabend advocated for individual freedom in contrast to the institutionalization of science (Chalmers, 2004:155-156), as his anarchistic theory of science claims that there is no one superior scientific method to obtain the truth (ibid, p.150).

III. WAR OF THE WORLDS: TRUTH IN REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM

The fundamental basis behind realism is the acceptance that non-observable phenomena actually exist what entitle the reality/truth. This philosophical approach includes many branches and schools to the notion of truth distinguishing their own specialty. Realism is based upon three postulates (ontological, epistemological and methodological), which admit the existence of independent objective reality, of our possibility to achieve knowledge about this reality, and of the fallible, but correctible nature of such knowledge (Brante 2011b). According to Andrew Sayer "Truth might better be understood as 'practical adequacy', that is in terms of the extent to which it generates expectations about the world and about results of our actions which are realized (2000:43)".

Empirical realism emphasize to accept the truth from observable atomistic objects, events and regularities among them and does not recognize the existence of unobservable qualities (Sayer, 2000:11)-which is quite different from the classical understanding of realism that appreciates "the world that lies behind the appearances" (Chalmers, 2004:226). On the other hand, *critical realism*, truth is socially situated but not socially determined one (Baskor, 1978). Thus critical realism

discriminates between the objective world and our experience of it, and distinguishes among the real (“the structures and powers of objects”), the actual (“what happens if and when those powers are activated... what they do and what eventuates when they do”) and the empirical (“the domain of experience”) (Sayer, 2000:11-12).

On the other hand, *scientific realism* claims that the objects of scientific knowledge exist independently of the minds or acts of scientists and those scientific theories are true of that objective world. Thus scientific realism aims science at achieving true statements about the world and it behaves, at all levels, not just at the level of observation and recognizes the current theories as “truer than earlier theories” (Chalmers, 2004:238). Whereas, *Conjectural realism* focuses on the fallibility of knowledge and proposes that “the very fact that we can declare past theories to be false” is the indication of existence of “a clear idea of the ideal that those past theories have fallen short of” (Chalmers, 2004:240).

Anti-realism claims that there are no normative truths about what it is rational to believe. While realism accepts existing theories as “candidates for the truth” (Chalmers, 2004:231), the opposite school-anti-realism-considers theories only as means “to correlate and predict the results of observation and experiment” and theories are not appropriately interpreted as true or false (Chalmers, 2004:231). According to Bas van Fraassen, “the merit of theory is to be judged in terms of its generality and simplicity and the extent to which it is borne out by observation and leads to new kinds of observation” (cited in Chalmers, p. 232). However, the main clash between realists and anti-realists lies in the question if we can consider theories as “at least approximately true,” taking into account that they are “so predictively successful”(Chalmers, 2004:235). The anti-realist’s answer is that the productiveness of the theory does not indicate its truthfulness (ibid, p. 236).

The opponents of realism (mostly led by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Thomas Kuhn, Hilary Putnam) vigorously denied that that all or most of what we encounter in the world exists and is what it is independently of human thought-rather they made a strong argument on the reality that, all or most of reality depends on human conceptual schemes and beliefs. Thus they turned down to the existence of any truth/objectivize reality in the essentialization of science and the knowledge achieved through this scientific process.

IV. WHEN MEANING MATTERS: TRUTH IN HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics attempts to formulate a theory of interpretation (Warnke, 1987:1), giving priority on seeking of the meaning, rather than cause (Hollis, 1994:16-17). Although its inception was as a legal and theological methodology, later on it developed into a general theory through the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Jacques Derrida (Helmstad, 2011b). It recognizes the historicity of human understanding where ideas on truth and objectivity are presented in historical, linguistic, and cultural horizons of meaning (Gardner, 2010:9). *Schleiermacher* notes two different methodical forms of hermeneutic practice: grammatical and psychological (Warnke, 1987:13). Where as grammatical interpretation attempts to

identify the precise meaning of linguistic terms, psychological interpretation focuses on the core decision or basic motivation that has “moved to the author to communicate (ibid, p.13). Thus he suggested that to understand the meaning of a discourse is to reconstruct the original intentions of writers or speakers on the one hand, and the circumstances of their lives at the time on the other hand. In this way Schleiermacher severs hermeneutics from questions of ‘truth’ (Warnke, 1987:14) what is developed from the experience of alien and possibilities of misunderstanding as universal (Gadamer, 2004:179).

Wilhelm Dilthey characterizes the development of modern hermeneutics as a “liberation of interpretation from dogma” (Warnke, 1987:5). He discusses the genesis of human sciences out of the context of what he calls ‘life’ and ‘lived experience’ (Harrington, 2001:47). Life signifies our human experience of existing in a world that we feel as both exterior to us and of our own making and lived experience denotes our ‘inner’ experience over time (ibid, p.48). Thus, Dilthey had tried to establish the autonomy of the logic of such studies as history, textual interpretation and the investigation of social norms, practices and institutions (Warnke, 1987:2). Finally he claimed that social scientific findings were to be repeatable in the same way as natural scientific experiments and in both cases truth/objectivity was to mean an elimination of subjective intrusions (Warnke, 1987:2).

Whereas, Dilthey emphasized on process of objective understanding, *Heidegger* declined the importance of objectivity as it was influenced by the model of the natural sciences (Gadamer, 1995:6), rather he claimed that our understanding cannot transcend its historical situation, that the knowledge to which it attains is always partial and revisable and, most importantly this circumstances is not seen as a limitation of its objectivity (Warnke, 1987:40-41). Further he claimed that the notion of “objective’ understanding is rather an illegitimate importation form the natural sciences via Diltheyian hermeneutics (ibid).

Gadamer’s account of hermeneutics reflection on truth and objectivity emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing between two forms of understanding: the understanding of truth-content and understanding of intentions (Warnke, 1987:7). Whereas, the first form of understanding refers to the kind of substantive knowledge, the second senses of understanding, in contrast, involve knowledge of conditions and this kind of understanding thus involves an understanding of the psychological, biographical, or historical conditions behind a claim or actions as opposed to a substantive understanding of the claim or actions itself. What is understood is not the truth-content of a claim or the point of an action but the motives behind a certain person’s making a certain claim or performing a given action (Warnke, 1987:7-8). And ultimately we cannot achieve the truth as under Gadamer’s instruction; we are urged to recognize that we enter the hermeneutics circle borne by our prejudices (Gardner, 2010:53-56). Thus our ideas as to what constitutes an objective judgment (positivism) and rational decision (realism) are themselves ideas of particular tradition (Warnke, 1987:80).

To conclude this section, it is suffice to say that according to hermeneutics views “we are always involved in interpretation and that we can have no access to anything like “the truth” about justice, the self, reality or the “moral law”. Our notions of these

“truths” are rather conditioned by the cultures to which we belong and historical circumstances in which we find ourselves (Warnke, 1987:1)-and its changeable essence as “this century’s knowledge is the next century’s superstition” (Warnke, 1987:161).

V. FROM FEMINIST LENS: TRUTH IN FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY

The foundation of feminist theories of social science is marked as the critique of existing social science theory and often questioning its ‘objectivity’ in general and “ability of these social sciences to account for their reality” (Wallerstein, 1995:51), in particular. Feminist lens often goes with underpinning the question, “*how is it possible to get the “truth/objective knowledge’ from a theory (including feminist theory, as cited by Haraway, 1988: 575) that stands without a clear standpoint? As a result, a new web in the development of feminist philosophy- ‘the feminist standpoint theory’ has been emerged during 1970s-1980s primarily led by Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, Nancy Hartsock, Susanne Hekman, Dorothy Smith (Mulinari, 2011).*

Hekman (1997:341-342) in her article “*Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited*” has featured the feminist standpoint theory through the following stages: 1) Nancy Hartsock (1983) in “Money, Sex, and Power” criticized positivism and tried to “define the nature of the truth claims that feminists advance and to provide a methodological grounding that will validate those claims”; 2) Dorothy Smith unfolded the sociological method from the “standpoint of women”; 3) Sandra Harding formalized the scientific grounds for standpoint theory; 4) black feminist standpoint was articulated by Patricia Hill Collins; 5) in late 1980s and early 1990s the criticisms of standpoint theory mounted; 6) in the late 1990s feminist standpoint theory occupies a much less prominent position for several declining developments (i.e. discredit of Marxism, opposed postmodernism and post-structuralism).

The feminist standpoint “expresses female experience at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of social relations” (Hartsock, 1983b: 303). Hartsock distinguished between the truth of women and men, but tried to avoid the idea of multiplicity and hence relativity of truth (Hekman, 1997:343). She pointed out that material life structures our understanding and stressed that the dominant society group decides what is ‘real’. Since, from a common ground it is impossible to understand the women situation. As Mulinari (2011) states that the special position of women gives them a special epistemological standpoint, which makes possible a view of the world that is more reliable and less distorted.

On the other hand, Harding argues not for epistemological but sociological relativism: some accounts of the world are better than others. But there are different accounts of the world rooted in distinct and objective position. In a response Haraway argues that objectivity from a feminist approach should instead be perceived as “situated knowledge. “Situated knowledge means someone, with a specific perspective, in a specific historical and social context does all that research. Hence, objectivity from this approach is not about its neutrality but how to handle the context

and the perspective from which the research is derived from (Haraway 1988: 581, 583).

While, Collins advocacy for standpoint theory indicates the problematic power relations where she claims, “Standpoint theory argues that groups who share common placement in hierarchical power relations also share common experiences in such power relations. Such shared angles of vision lead those in similar social locations to be predisposed to interpret these experiences in a comparable fashion (1997:377).” Since, feminist standpoint theory is very imperative in locating as well in understanding women position more actively and accurately. However, some fugitive questions also raised in placing the feminist standpoint theory as Haraway asked the question “how can we bring differential positioning into community with each other without causing epistemic violence (2008:2.8)?” While Smith confused with the embodiment of standpoint theory as she argues “a major problem is the reification of “feminist standpoint theory (1997:392).”

However, to conclude this section, we can say that standpoint theory considered knowledge as situated, but yet possible to be “true” and proposed the idea of existence of “multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced” (Hekman 1997, 342) with the problematized consequence of existing of “multiple truths and multiple realities” (ibid, p. 351), also described as “modernist paranoia” (Harding 1997, 387).

VI. TRUTHURAMA: CONCLUSION

In relation to the notion of the truth, every theory has its own focus of concern or area. In this regard Sayers (2003:2) states that each discipline likes to flatter itself that it is more fundamental than all the others. In positivism-truth exists in observable world and can be obtained by verification. In falsificationism-truth does not exist on our current stage of development, but we can obtain it through the continuous process of falsification. In paradigm shift-truth exists in the frames of paradigms and we can obtain it until we face an anomaly relevant enough for starting a crisis.

According to Lakatos-truth exists and is framed by ‘research program’ and we can obtain it since it is safeguarded by ‘protective belt’. In epistemological anarchism-truth exists and we can obtain it if we abandon dominant methodologies that restrict scientific progress. In hermeneutics-actual truth does not exist, the truth that we have is formed by our history and tradition, and hence we cannot obtain real truth, but are only supposed to investigate the meaning of the word and producing its interpretations. In standpoint theory-situated truth does not exist in a world with dominance, but can be obtained if we change our reality. In realism-truth exists in observable and unobservable world, but cannot be obtained as every theory is partially true. In anti-realism, truth does not exist and cannot be obtained as we are stuck in never-ending searches for truth.

Being a graduate of social sciences, I have not only gained an orientation in the different philosophical branches of social sciences but also have been confused with the idea of truth/objectivity. Since, I often ask questions myself, is there any truth? Is it possible to gain the objective knowledge? And is there any royal way to learn the truth? My articulation goes with assumption that, for the same phenomena/fact (i.e. religion or

origin of species) the perception among the people is quite different. Then which one is really true?

In fact, a shared, naturalistic belief in the unity of science to gain the truth/objective knowledge is a matter of long controversy/disputes (Hollis, 1994:15). The outbursts of these disagreements are very conspicuous in different theories of social sciences in terms of ontological, methodological, and epistemological essentialization. For example, in the case of ontological knowledge about structure and actions, with Marx contending that action is determined by structure. On the contrary, While Mill argues that all phenomena of society arise from the actions and passions of human beings (ibid, p.115). In case of methodology, the debate is distinguished by the idea of generality, for instance to laws of nature, or to the particular, for instance to specific mechanisms.

And the third is epistemological, with Mill upholding an empiricist view that knowledge is a matter of experience and Marx needing a theory, which allows knowledge of an underlying reality (Hollis, 1994:15). These disagreements exist not only among the major philosophical endeavors (i.e. classical and contemporary, positivistic and interpretative, micro and macro, realism and anti-realism, idealism and materialism, hermeneutics and rationalism, grand-meta and standpoint etc.) but also in between any single trend. For example, in case of Positivism, it seemed to me that one philosophical enquiries has been developed from the ending-line (weakness, opposite view) of another philosophical enquires (i.e. verification (Comte)-falsification (Popper)-neither verification nor falsification rather paradigm (Kuhn)-not paradigm but research program (Laktos) and Feyerabend turned down any scientific superiority.

However, despite these disagreements, I do believe that the attempt of different social science theories should be object-oriented, because without making sense towards objectivity it would be more obscure in gaining the knowledge on truth/objective knowledge, for what we claim for, through this theoretical approaches. To conclude, it is suffice to say that, as there is no panacea, since judging all the alternatives is better as well as tenable to gain knowledge on truth/objectivity than to judge only one option. Because trying many alternatives improve our self-evidence and self-evidence is comparatively better in judging the truth/objectivity. As Hollis argues, "anything self-evident is thereby true (1994:24)."

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