

Sociology 915

Agenda, session 1: Empiricism and Positivism

1. Laws and explanations:

- What precisely is a “law”?
- Can laws figure in social explanations, given variations historical contexts? (Fabian Pfeffer)
- Proper draws a sharp demarcation between Marx and Einstein. Does the fact that consciousness figures in Marx’s explanation contribute to Popper’s rejection of Marx? (Graham Clure)

2. Causation

- What exactly are “causes” and can we sort out the muddle that Hausman leaves us with? (Liz Holtzer)
- What is the relation between “cause” and “necessity”? How are contingent causes related to necessity? (Matt Dimick)

3. Falsifiability

- Is refutability the only criterion for science in Popper? (Gokcen Coskuner)
- *Refutation vs adjudication*: why should theories only be rejected when a better theory is available, rather than simply rejected when they are shown to be inadequate? (Eva Williams)
- Do self-fulfilling prophecies mean that refutations of social theories are unlikely? (Natalie Jahr)

4. **Paradigms & incommensurability**: what does it really mean to say paradigms are incommensurable? Is it really true that rival theories cannot be compared? (Martin Santos)

5. Why is epistemology so important?

- How important is an consensus over epistemological issues? (Dan Warshawsky)
- Perhaps the preoccupation with epistemological conditions for science should be replaced with a concern for the way social insittuiton promote or impede scientific advance? (Matt Nichter)

6. Values

- Values should be integral to science: “scientists should evaluate the consequences of their findings from the beginning of the research process” (Matt Desmond)

7. Positivism in Social Science:

- Why do B&C see Durkheim as a positivist? Is *Suicide* really an example of the kind of empiricism supposedly found in positivism? (Mark Cooper)
- What is the difference between B&Cs characterization fo “positivism” and Comte’s? (Martin Santos)

8. Creativity/imagination/genius.

- Can the production of scientific knowledge be specified as a set of rational steps of whatever sort – eg those advocated by empiricists – or does knowledge production involve something that might be called “genius” (or more poetically “magic”)? (Liberty Karp)
- In addition to psychology affecting discovery, does the psychology of scientists affect the kinds of explanations they propose? (Ricky Leung)
- Is it really correct to see the process of discovery as not following any logical process, so that it cannot really be taught? (Matias Scaglione)

9. **Social engineering**: If positivism implies social engineering, and social engineering requires strategic research in dialogue with constituencies, then it might seem that empiricism would not be an effective research model. (Brett Burrkhard)