

# Chapter 1: Relocating Scientific Rationality in Humanities

## Science in Retrospection

Once upon a time the term science was associated with prestige, status, kudos, power, superiority, and truth. However today it is very difficult to associate all these wonderful aspects with scientific enterprise due to intellectual turns which have brought havoc upon the pantheon of science.

In particular, the truth–claim of science is not shared by all members of scientific community today. In other words, issues of truth and feasibility in both ontological and epistemological fashions have separated their paths and each has become the sources of many controversies and conflicts as well as ideological battles and *methodenstreit*.

This is not to argue that the scientific enterprise is *passé* but nobody can deny the crisis of *western scientific enterprise* in 21st century. Of course, by western we don't refer to an ethnic group, ideological camp or geographical location but to a mode of doing science and conceptualizing reality in all its multifaceted dimensions which is built upon the *Cartesian* philosophy.

Another way of talking about the crisis of modern science is to talk about the end of hegemony of logical empiricism which resulted in the births of various post–positivistic philosophies in science and social sciences as well as diversified discourses of postmodernisms along with hermeneutic approaches as well as phenomenological philosophies.

Looking retrospectively one could easily discern that there was a great time when science was considered as the cream of human intellectual achievement and science was equivalent to natural science and among them the physics was the towering model in rationalistic approach to reality. In other words, to approach the gamut of reality in any dimension, one was inescapably dependent upon the natural scientific models which provided the best mathematical pattern in conceptualizing as well as quantifying the complexities of realities in any field.

To put it differently, the authenticity of an intellectual activity was appraised in reference to its propinquity to available models and patterns in the discipline of physics. When the social sciences entered the stage in late 19th and early 20th centuries their relevance in terms of scientificity was measured by their compliance to the established norms in the disciplines of natural sciences such as physics, biology, chemistry, and so on and so forth.

The reign of quantification and the inherent disability of humanities and social sciences to succumb to total demand of quantification put them under incessant suspicion by naturalistic-oriented authors who ruled out the possibility of *scientification* of humanities unless they turn humanities into natural scientific fashions.

Of course there were thinkers who opposed these conformist pressures but the mainstream social scientists took up the challenge of turning humanities into *science of man*, *science of society*, and *behavioral approaches* in psychology and discourses on mental and spiritual dimensions of human leben. In other words, reductionism was justified both on philosophical grounds and institutional demands in all academic discourses by all parties in West and East.

However what is of significance for us in this context is how in Iran science was received by thinkers who happened to be outside the modern academic institutions such as Tehran University or centers for sociological researches. In other words, how a social thinker such as Allama Jafari looked at science, the scientific enterprise and more importantly conceptualized the sociological enterprise while not being a sociologist in the disciplinary meaning of the term.

## Schools of Sociology

Within the discipline of sociology we have various paradigms and schools. For instance, we can speak of Marxist sociology versus academic sociology or positivistic sociology versus post-positivistic sociology and interpretative sociology versus legislative sociology. However these distinctions are not exhaustive and still we can categorize sociological orientations in a different fashion by classifying theories based on their respective traditions such as 'Conservatism', 'Liberalism', 'Socialism', 'Libertarianism', 'Anarchism', 'Communitarianism', 'Islamism', and so on and so forth. Again this manner of categorization could not be taken as the sole form of classifying sociological orientations.

For instance, we can talk about theories based on their ontological characters such as positivism versus transcendentalism or on metatheoretical basis such as collectivism versus individualism or primordialism. In other words, there are various ways of looking at the sociological enterprise and each is debatable and open to negotiation.

For example, we can look at sociology based on existing perspectives such as functionalism, structuralism, structurationism, conflict theory, and so on and so forth. All these different fashions in categorizing sociological imagination lead us to the problem of paradigm within sociological field.

The word paradigm has been employed in science to describe distinct concepts. In despite of the historical usage of the term,

“paradigm” has come to refer very often now to a thought pattern in any scientific discipline or other epistemological context. Thomas Kuhn gave *paradigm* its contemporary meaning when he adopted the term to refer to the set of practices that define a scientific discipline at any particular period of time. Nevertheless in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Kuhn defines a scientific paradigm as: “universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of researchers.” (1996. p 12)

Kuhn himself did not consider the concept of paradigm as appropriate for the social sciences. He explained in his preface to *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that he concocted the concept of paradigm precisely in order to distinguish the social from the natural sciences (1996. p x). While writing his book Kuhn observed that social scientists were never in agreement on theories, methodologies, background assumptions or concepts.

He explains that he wrote this book precisely to demonstrate that there are no, nor can there be any, paradigms in the social sciences. Ritzer, on the contrary, applies the Kuhnian idea of scientific paradigms to sociology and demonstrates that sociology is a science consisting of multiple paradigms. (Ritzer, 1974)

In other words, we have, on one hand, many philosophers of science who argue stridently against the possibility of social science as a scientific paradigm, while, on the other hand, we can easily witness many social scientists who applaud the existing theoretical/methodological/conceptual diversities as indications of multi-paradigmaticity within the context of social sciences, in general, and sociology, in particular.

To put it otherwise, the question of classification is not separated from the problematique of classics and the latter is very much intertwined with the problem of classicality and all are related to the project of canonization in sociological context. What do, in concrete terms, all these entail? When a scholar attempts to classify an issue the act of classification is carried out in reference to a framework.

This framework is not a sole product of an instant imagination without any precedent or antecedent as everybody works within parameters of existing situations. In other words, within the context of disciplinary sociology there are certain *paragonic scholars* who have been appropriated as models for doing sociology in a disciplinary fashion. Analogous to the process of canonization within the context of Catholic Church there is a disciplinary form of canonization which influences the fabric of sociological enterprise in a meaningful fashion, i.e. shared symbolically by all those who are initiated in the pantheon of sociological temple.

Said differently, the classicality is not a sole product of imaginative reworking of existing conceptual frameworks but constructed in a dialogical manner in relation to complex historical trajectories where a

scholar happens to be situated in the multifaceted cross-roads of all these diverse factors. Put it differently, the act of classification within scientific context may look as a pure intellectual enterprise but the rational tool of mental reorganization is shaped in a pre-intellectual space which is conditioned by various para-discursive elements.

Having said this, I would like to turn to the problem of classification in Allama Jafari's work now. He comes from an Iranian context where the disciplinary sociology was approached from a non-disciplinary perspective. The alternative outlook has colored the contours of his classificatory schemes and sometimes one may feel irritated as it seems Allama Jafari is talking about two different things without distinguishing them conceptually in a feasible fashion. However this irritation is constructive as alerts us to realize what

could "alternativity" mean in practical terms. In other words, Allama Jafari classifies the disciplinary sociology in an undisciplinary fashion and this paradox is of crucial importance for all who are interested in working within alternative paradigms as this *paradoxicality* is the *raison d'être* of many contemporary incommensurability between competing discourses in Iran and outside Iran in relation to human sciences.

In brief, Allama Jafari divides sociology into two broad orientations: 1) Positivistic Sociology and 2) Theoretical Sociology. This distinction may seem to be rooted in the context of Iranian metaphysical tradition where philosophy is divided into theoretical and practical orientations. However this is not the whole story of Allama Jafari's metatheoretical narrative as one could discern elements of discursive positivistic tendencies within the parameters of his classificatory paradigm. [1](#)

## Positivistic Sociology

This school of sociology is a branch of science where the logic behind the assumptions is based upon sound reasons, explicit laws and inferred directly. In other words, the methodology in the context of this school is designed in a manner that any well-versed researcher in this branch of science and conscious about causality relation between a cause and its social effect (phenomenal effect in a social context) could be able to deduce the assumption in regard to the object under sociological analysis.

For instance, when a sociologist approaches the problem of *multiple personality* in a society s/he would probably need to inquire about the societal impact of contrasting ideas which could create the effective factors for generation of *multiple personality*. (Jafari, 1976. Ch. 3)

When individuals are exposed to different ideas and ideologies their personalities could be-come glassy, fragile and brittle.

This brittle state could become even more aggravated when a person is exposed to towering personalities or fascinating ideas and ideologies. (1976. Ch. 3) In other words, in the shadow of totalitarian ideologies one may lose and give up her/his autonomy and be under the tutelage of others.

This is to state that in a context where opposing ideas or ideologies rule supreme it could lead to the breakup of *glace* of human personality. (1976. Ch. 3) One may fall in a denial pattern by refusing to admit that s/he has lost her/his autonomy and instead turn into a cracked and fragmented personality and finally lead to herd-mentality.

There is, in Allama Jafari's view, a deep correlation between fragmentation of personality and the question of truth. Individuals who refuse to conform to dominant social norms based on their autonomous views regarding fundamental issues of human existence they may be able to assert themselves above the herd- mentality.

It seems Allama Jafari is touching upon the question of socialization and taking a position on debates such as 'nature versus nurture' or 'heredity versus environment' by arguing that personality is a reality which could be realized and when the individual takes seriously the call of conscience then this may lead to forms of truth. In other words, the reality of human being is consisted of what Allama Jafari terms as 'unification of being' that underlies the very core of human personality which makes possible ... *the act of discernment, the yearning for free-will and the desire for freedom.* (Jafari, 1976. Ch. 3)

In Allama Jafari's words, the positivistic sociology is a branch of science where phenomena and facts are observed in a systematic fashion and interpreted in reference to established laws. This methodology reigns in other branches of science too. Thus, in a nutshell, it could be argued that positivistic sciences are those branches of knowledge where the laws have been verified and currently dominant in academia. (1976. Ch. 3)

## Theoretical Sociology

We have certain theoretical issues that fall within the scope of theoretical sociology. Allama Jafari believes that in the theoretical context, we are faced with problems which have not been verified scientifically. The main task of theoretical sociology is to present grand theories related to social phenomena and aspects of society. In the theoretical sociology, the sociologist is looking for quantitative and qualitative laws and principles which are beneficial for the betterment of social life.

In other words, the difference between the theoretical sociology and the former paradigm which was discussed earlier is that within the theoretical paradigm, theories are presented to the scientific community without being considered as science. To put it otherwise; problems discussed within this paradigm will be subjected to the high court of verification and if the theory is verified then it is considered as a scientific fact.

This is a danger that threatens science and additionally reduces its value/significance. For instance, the importance of *Freudian Libido* or *Malthusian Catastrophe* was discussed initially as a theoretical matter but later it was considered as a scientific fact which inhibited the realization of inquiring spirit in vital matters of humanity. (Jafari, 1976. Ch. 3) It seems Allama Jafari refers to the dominant spirit of scientism

which has disarmed many intellectuals in asking serious questions in regard to the fundamentally significant dimensions of human destiny.2

## Disciplinary Turns and Intelligible Approach

Today there are many thinkers and various discourses where all aspects of science and the scientific enterprise are critiqued in a very detailed fashion but four decades ago in a developing country such as Iran where science, technology and social sciences were held in high regard to speak critically about scientific study of society, if not considered as an audacious adventure surely it could be seen as a sign of intellectual integrity where *fads and foibles* ruled supreme.

In other words, to critique science in 60s and 70s were unthinkable for Iranian intellectuals who appraised the development of human knowledge by reference to the western achievement in science and the scientific models which were produced in Europe and America. In other words, the ceiling of knowledge was not measured by intellectual criteria but by reference to *eurocentric* vision of reality in all its dimensions.

Of course, European thinkers and philosophers were deeply involved in a critical dialog with science as a novel way of doing rational conceptualization of reality but these dialogs took the shape of a revolutionary movement when the reign of logical positivism was questioned by many celebrated philosophers and historians of science along with many distinguished scientists.

In brief, one could state that Logical Positivism, also called logical empiricism, was a philosophical doctrine formulated in Vienna in the 1920s, according to which scientific knowledge is the only kind of factual knowledge and all traditional metaphysical doctrines are to be rejected as meaningless. (Beckwith, 1957) In addition, it should be emphasized that the logical positivist school differs from earlier forms of empiricism and positivism (e.g., that of David Hume and Ernst Mach) in holding that the ultimate basis of knowledge rests upon public experimental verification rather than upon personal experience.

The main figures included Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970), considered the leading figure of logical positivism, Herbert Feigl (1902–88), Philipp Frank (1884–1966), Kurt Grelling (1886–1942), Hans Hahn (1879–

1934), Carl Gustav Hempel (1905–97), Victor Kraft (1880–1975), Otto Neurath (1882–1945), Hans Reichenbach (1891–1953), Moritz Schlick (1882–1936), and Friedrich Waismann (1896–1959). They were primarily concerned with the logical analysis of scientific knowledge, which affirmed that statements about metaphysics, religion, and ethics are void of cognitive meaning and thus nothing but expression of feelings or desires; only statements about mathematics, logic and natural sciences have a definite meaning.

According to logical positivism, all meaningful statements can be divided in two classes, one containing

the statements that are true or false in virtue of their logical forms or in virtue of their meaning (these statements are called analytic a priori), the other containing the statements whose truth or falsity can be ascertained only by means of the experience (called synthetic a posteriori).

Logic and mathematics belong to the class of analytic a priori statements, since they are true in virtue of the meaning ascribed to the logical constants (the words 'and', 'or', 'not', 'if') and to the mathematical terms. The class of synthetic a posteriori statements includes all genuine scientific statements, like those of physics, biology, and psychology.

A statement is meaningful if and only if it can be proved true or false, at least in principle, by means of the experience or in virtue of its meaning. Moreover, the meaning of a statement is its method of verification; that is, we know the meaning of a statement only if we know the conditions under which the statement is true or false (i.e. the verifiability principle).

Thus statements about metaphysics, religion and ethics are meaningless and must be rejected as nonsensical. Also traditional philosophy is often regarded as meaningless. (Nagel, 1961) Many alleged philosophical problems, like the controversy between realists and instrumentalists, are indeed pseudo-problems, the outcome of a misuse of language. (Carnap, 1974)

They do not concern matters of fact, but the choice between different linguistic frameworks. Thus the logical analysis of language was regarded by logical positivism as a major instrument in resolving philosophical problems. (Friedman, 1999) Characteristic of this aspect was the intense analysis of scientific language performed by Carnap and Hempel.

Practical aspects of scientific research were not considered by logical positivism, which was not interested in the real process of discovering, but was concerned with the rational reconstruction of scientific knowledge, that is the study of the logical (formal) relationships between statements, hypothesis, and empirical evidence.

When others such as Karl Popper (refusal of verifiability as scientific criterion and replacement of falsifiability as criterion of scientific norm), A. J. Ayer (distinction between strong and weak verification), Hilary Putnam (meaninglessness of distinguishing between theoretical and observational), W. V. O. Quine (critique of the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements and the reduction of meaningful statements to immediate experience), and Thomas Kuhn (impossibility to provide truth conditions for science independent of its historical paradigm) paved the way for the fall of Logical Positivism, this generated a benign climate for social sciences which suffered for years from inferiority complex vis-à-vis ruling natural sciences which happened to be framed within the parameters of positivism and its various naturalistic schools.

For instance, sociologists start to talk about paradigms in social sciences and the multi-paradigmatic character of sociology which has been lacking in natural sciences.

In other words, a *sociologization* or *culturalization* of scientific enterprise set in and the self-image of social sciences came to be interpreted in novel fashions rather than aspiring to look similar to natural sciences of any kind. George Ritzer, for instance, argued that sociology is a multiple paradigm science and this multi-paradigmaticity has a deep impact upon sociological enterprise.

By applying Kuhn's idea of scientific paradigms to sociology and demonstrating that sociology is a science consisting of multiple paradigms Ritzer attempted to prove the falsity of historical claim against social sciences and humanities. He further discussed that the fall of logical positivism and the rise of multi-paradigmaticity had deep-rooted implications for the field of sociology and the very notion of science as we have understood it in the past two centuries. (Ritzer, 1974)

On the other hand, the disintegration of scientific rationality led to a deeper crisis of metatheoretical nature, i.e. the collapse of notion of 'law' in the frame of scientific worldview.

In the memorable word of distinguished Polish-British sociologist Zygmund Bauman, we are now in a state of *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2000. p 8) where the whole human value of the scientific worldview (i.e. the legislative character of scientific inquiry) is being questioned once again- and instead we have entered into a time where science is better off to take on the mantle of understanding (i.e. the interpretative character of academic investigation) where phenomenological approaches should be embedded in a particular 'life-world' or 'communal tradition'. In other words, Bauman makes a pitch for interpretive reason rather than legislative reasoning.

Having said the aforementioned about the 'Disciplinary Turns' within academia in the past two decades one would achieve a better understanding of Allama Jafari's intellectual project in regard to sociology and human being. I do not intend to suggest that there has been a direct relationship between the two traditions in East and West but it is doubtless that there seems to be at some level some kind of

'Confluence of Thought' in regard to interpretive approaches in academic social sciences and the *intelligible approach* proposed by Allama Jafari. For instance, what Jurgen Habermas says about the distinction between *lebenswelt* and *systemwelt* finds an appropriate echo in Allama Jafari who seems to reject the idea of reduction of human experience into a reified episode. Based on this *intelligible refusal* Allama Jafari approaches science and sociology with a great emphasis on the indispensability of being of human individual in epistemic problematique.<sup>3</sup>

For Allama Jafari, the *leben* of human being has a qualitative importance which could not be reduced to any other kinds of lifestyles. In his sociological understanding, the life of human self is the fundament for all epistemological inquiries. As in parallel universes theories, it seems there are profound similarities between proponents of continental phenomenology and Allama Jafari on the importance of 'life' in the context of human self.

For instance, the importance of phenomenological concept of *erlebt* and intelligible idea of *being* have not been explored thoroughly yet but could have profound consequences for conceptualization of



sociological analysis as both are pre-epistemological stepping stone for interpretative analyses and configurations.

1. Allama Jafari speaks of episteme and the nature of knowledge in a fashion which seems to be similar to positivist outlook. Of course we need to see his epistemological position in an integrated fashion but this does not rule out the possibility of positivistic tendencies in Allama Jafari's sociological theory. He argues that

... original science should result in gnosis (i.e. integrated knowledge) and the scientific enterprise should lead to the establishment of scientific laws. In other words, the science should lead to generalization and also provide reasonable answers for our quests. A scientific enterprise which does not lead either to scientific laws or abstain from generalization it could not be qualified as a branch of science. For instance, if someone travels around Iranian cities and villages by reporting about communications systems, transportations systems, ethnic diversities and cultural diversities and so on and so forth this mere observation and sheer reporting could not be qualified as a scientific approach to sociological issues of Iran.

In other words, by having statistical data and observing group relations one could not be considered as a sociologist. To obtain the merit of scientificity, the sociologist should unearth reasons, discover factors, infer conclusions and establish scientific laws which could enable us to interpret phenomena in reference to the established laws. To put it otherwise, observation of phenomena is one step in the process of scientific inquiry but if it does not lead towards constitution of laws it cannot be considered as scientific inquiry. (Jafari, 1976. Ch. 3)

2. Scientism is the view that all real knowledge is scientific knowledge—that there is no rational, objective form of inquiry that is not a branch of science. There is at least a whiff of scientism in the thinking of those who dismiss ethical objections to cloning or embryonic stem cell research as inherently “anti-science.”

There is considerably more than a whiff of it in the work of New Atheist writers like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, who allege that because religion has no scientific foundation it “therefore” has no rational foundation at all. It is evident even in secular conservative writers like John Derbyshire and Heather MacDonald, whose criticisms of their religious fellow right-wingers are only slightly less condescending than those of Dawkins and co. Indeed, the culture at large seems beholden to an inchoate scientism—“faith” is often pitted against “science” (even by those friendly to the former) as if “science were synonymous with “reason.” (Feser, 2010)

3. It would be very interesting to compare Allama Jafari and Jurgen Habermas as both thinkers seem to be worried about the existential state of humanity in a world that is in transition. Of course, by “transition” I do not refer solely to the global changes in the contexts of politics and economics. On the contrary, I view the concept in a different light where the existential position of humanity as a species, within the context of modern world-system, is changing dramatically. In other words, within a system where religio perennis has been absent in its makeup we are witnessing a gradual return of all that matters in the sojourn of human self. In our upcoming work we shall look at religion based on the works of Allama Jafari and Jurgen Habermas.

---

#### Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/alternative-sociology-probing-sociological-thought-allama-m-t-jafari-seyed-javad-miri/chapter-1#comment-0>