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COURSE 203

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS- THEORIES AND PROBLEMS

UNIT - III

**Make a distinction between ‘positivism’ and ‘post
positivism. 10**

Among all theoretical traditions which International Relations have seen emerging, the one that has invariably been regarded as canonical is associated with the term “positivism”.

The term ‘positivism’ appears to have been first used in the 1820s, in French, most influentially by Auguste Comte as a label for his ‘positive philosophy’ though many of the ideas to which it referred have a longer history. Comte’s philosophy was intended to exemplify and promote the scientific mode of thought which he believed was becoming dominant, superseding the theological and metaphysical forms that had prevailed in earlier periods of European history. Comte’s ideas had great influence on social science in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, directly as well as indirectly through the work of others, such as Mill and Durkheim.

It must be understood that it is not simple to define “positivism”, not even if we go back to the decades of turmoil which are extended from mid-XVII Century to the beginnings of this century. Leaving aside its historical circumstances which, as always, are very important, “positivism” became a cornucopia for positions so diverging that it is not much to say that it corresponds to our “controversy on the universals”, the “gray cat” of contemporary philosophy.

We may consider as vaguely positivists all theories that are placed in the confluence of phenomenalism, understood as the position which abandons the search for the cause and adopts the search for the laws which explain the objective relations between the phenomena, taking them, thus, as discrete; verificationism, understood as the strategy which attribute truth to the situation in which the sense of propositions is verified starting from their conditions of observation, which implies the adoption of a theory of truth by correspondence, and presumes a neutral position in what regards observation, associated to what is commonly called objectivism ; and finally, reductivism, understood as the procedure which establishes that an element in a class of objects can, without any loss, be taken in terms of another class, particularly, that processes can be reduced to events, which make possible the adoption of the deductive-nomologic model and confers to the theoretical terms, given the phenomenalist position, an instrumentalist inflection.

In the early 20th century a new version of positivism emerged, the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, though it drew on the earlier work of the physicist Ernst Mach, the philosopher Richard Avenarius, the psychologist and statistician Karl Pearson, and the English philosopher Bertrand Russell. These later positivists shared some of Comte’s and Mill’s assumptions but rejected others, as well as differing amongst themselves in some key respects. The primary concern of the logical positivists was to develop a rigorous conception of science, in light of the

radical implications of Einstein's theory of relativity – earlier conceptions of science had tended to assume the validity of Newtonian ideas. As this implies, unlike Comte they treated physics as the most advanced science, and as a model for all others. Nevertheless, like earlier positivists, they insisted that science is demarcated from metaphysics through its rigorous reliance solely upon logical inference from empirical evidence.

The concept of post-positivism refers to the theories of international relations which epistemologically reject positivism. Positivism holds the idea that the empiricist observation of the natural sciences can be applied to the social sciences.

The post-positivist approach can be described as incredulity towards metanarratives—in IR, this would involve rejecting all-encompassing stories that claim to explain the international system. It argues that neither realism nor liberalism could be the full story. A post-positivist approach to IR does not claim to provide universal answers but seeks to ask questions instead. A key difference is that while positivist theories such as realism and liberalism highlight how power is exercised, post-positivist theories focus on how power is experienced resulting in a focus on both different subject matters and agents.

Postpositivist theories do not attempt to be scientific or a social science. Instead, they attempt in-depth analysis of cases in order to "understand" international political phenomena by asking relevant questions to determine in what ways the status-quo promote certain power relations.