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Q7(b)

Phenomenological perspectives in sociology reject many of the assumptions of positivism. Comment.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2020 · Sociology GS 1 · 15 marks · Sociology as Science

Sociology as Science: Science, scientific method and critique; Major theoretical strands of research methodology; Positivism and its critique; Fact value and objectivity; Non-positivist methodologies.

Core demand of the question

- Phenomenological perspectives in sociology reject many of the assumptions of positivism. Comment
- Keep the comment within a 15-mark length

Revision summary

Phenomenology studies the lifeworld given to actors (**Schutz**).

It rejects positivism's nowhere observer, thing-like facts, and covering-law monopoly.

- **Garfinkel**: members produce the fact.

Weber is a neighbour on meaning.

- **Comment**: reject objectivist assumptions; keep evidence and typicality.

Do not throw away rates; ask how they were made.

Introduction

Phenomenological sociology, after Alfred **Schutz** and later **Berger and Luckmann**, studies the lifeworld as it is given to actors. Positivism, in the Comte-**Durkheim** textbook sense, seeks external laws and thing-like facts. The first does reject many of the second's assumptions. It does not reject all discipline.

Body

Positivist assumptions under fire

- **Society as a thing observed from nowhere.** **Schutz**: the observer is already a member with a stock of knowledge.
- Law-like covering statements as the only science. Phenomenology wants typical structures of meaning.
- Separation of fact and everyday language. Harold **Garfinkel**'s ethnomethodology radicalised this: members' methods produce the fact.

What is rejected

- Naive behaviourism and a questionnaire that skips the definition of the situation, which Herbert Blumer also attacked.
- **Emile Durkheim**'s "treat as things" if it erases intended meaning. **Max Weber** is a neighbour, not an enemy.

What is not a total war

- Phenomenology still wants typicality and evidence. It is not a diary cult.
- Large rates can still be used if one asks how they were produced in offices.

Comment

- The rejection is real on objectivism, covering-law pride, and the innocent fact.
- A useful sociology keeps **Schutz** for meaning and **Durkheim** for constraint, rather than a sectarian purge.

Flow diagram

Positivism -> Facts as things laws
Phenomenology -> Lifeworld meaning
Phenomenology -> Reject nowhere observer
Lifeworld meaning -> Typical structures

Conclusion

Phenomenological perspectives reject positivism's view-from-nowhere, thing-like facts, and covering-law monopoly. **Schutz**, **Berger and Luckmann**, and **Garfinkel** lead that rejection. Comment: they do not reject public evidence. Pair lifeworld with structure so the comment does not become anti-science.

Facts & figures

Schutz

Phenomenology of the social world: stocks of knowledge at hand.

Berger and Luckmann

Social construction of reality: institutionalised meanings.

Garfinkel

Ethnomethodology: how members make scenes accountable.

Comte / textbook positivism

Search for social laws on a natural-science model.