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Q2(a)

What is positivism? Critically analyze the major arguments against it

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 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

- **Define positivism in sociology:** Comte, **Durkheim**, science of social facts
- **State major arguments against it:** meaning, values, reflexivity, power, feminist and interpretive critiques
- Give a critical, not purely dismissive, analysis
- Keep Indian or research-method illustrations light but real

Revision summary

Positivism treats sociology as a science of observable regularities, after Comte and **Durkheim**.

Its strength is accountability to data, comparison and replication.

Weberian understanding, phenomenology and ethnomethodology deny that meanings are mere residuals.

Critical theory and feminist standpoint theories deny the neutrality of the observer.

Giddens's **double hermeneutic** states that people already interpret the world sociologists study.

Indian field studies show why census categories cannot replace meaning, even when counts remain essential.

Introduction

Positivism in sociology is the claim that society can be known by the methods and spirit of the natural sciences: observation, comparison, measurement, and the search for laws or stable regularities. Auguste Comte placed sociology at the summit of the sciences. **Emile Durkheim** told students to treat social facts as things and to explain them by other social facts, as in the statistical study of suicide. The project professionalised the discipline. It also attracted a century of argument about meaning, values and power.

Body

What positivism asserted

In its strong form, positivism holds that only observable, preferably quantifiable, statements count as knowledge; that the observer can stand outside the object; and that explanation is causal and general. **John Stuart Mill**'s canons of experiment, later survey statistics, and operational definitions of attitudes all belong to this family. In research practice it became

questionnaire items, scales, significance tests and the hope of replication. Karl Popper's falsification is sometimes folded into a looser "scientific" culture, though Popper himself attacked naive verification. The merit was real: sociology stopped being sermon and started being accountable to data.

Major arguments against it

Max Weber's Verstehen was the first great internal dissent. Social action is meaningful; a rate without a motive is incomplete. Values shape what we choose to study, even if we then proceed with disciplined honesty. Alfred Schutz and phenomenological sociology argued that the "things" **Durkheim** counted are already interpreted by actors. Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology showed that survey categories rest on everyday methods that positivism does not inspect. The Frankfurt School, especially Adorno and later Habermas, charged that positivism is not neutral: it can become an instrument of administration, counting in order to manage. Thomas Kuhn's paradigms weakened the picture of a single accumulating science. Feminist standpoint theorists such as Dorothy Smith and Sandra Harding argued that a view from nowhere usually hides a view from male, white, professional power. Anthony Giddens's **double hermeneutic** states the decisive logical point: sociologists interpret a world that is already interpreting itself, unlike atoms.

In India, M. N. Srinivas's field view of caste and village could not have been produced by census columns alone, even though the census is indispensable. Positivist tools remain necessary for poverty counts and election studies. The critique is that they are not sufficient, and that they can reify official categories such as "household head" or "labour force" which already encode gender and class.

Flow diagram

Positivism -> Comte Durkheim measurement
Positivism -> Critiques
Critiques -> Weber Verstehen
Critiques -> Phenomenology ethnomethodology
Critiques -> Feminist standpoint
Critiques -> Giddens double hermeneutic

Conclusion

Positivism gave sociology evidence, comparison and a check on speculation. The major arguments against it are that meaning, values, standpoint and power cannot be expelled from the study of society. A critical analysis keeps the tools and drops the pretence of a view from nowhere.

Facts & figures

Durkheim's rule

Explain social facts by other social facts, using comparison and rates, as in Suicide.

Double hermeneutic

Giddens's phrase for sociology's two-way interpretation of an already interpreted social world.

Standpoint critique

Feminist argument that supposedly value-free observation often encodes dominant social positions.

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