The Clear Feminist Rejection of an Obscure Positivism

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to summarise the main characteristics of feminist research methods accepted in Great Britain, with special emphasis on the rejection of positivism. The rejection is based on a stereotyped view, which prohibits any fruitful reflections about this line of thought.

This text is the result of research conducted during my post-doctoral work at The London School of Economics and Political Science, from October 1996 to August 1997 (1). The theme of the investigation was gender, with a special emphasis on the relation between women and agriculture. Methodological concerns were just a part of the broader study, and to which I devoted only a portion of the time available. The decision to write a separate article about the subject arose from the fact that I participated in a course entitled "Concepts and Methods in Social Inquiry" and chose to write the final essay about the question "whether feminist researchers have managed to construct a plausible alternative to scientific objectivity as a basis for research", which was one of the themes proposed by the professor in charge. The style of the text arose from this course, and in particular, the form of the essay and the bibliography utilised, with this issue deserving special attention.

Given that this paper was written with the specific goal of participating in a debate that was taking place at the London School, the bibliography utilised is composed principally of works present in the seminars conducted both at the Methodology Institute as well as at the Gender Institute of this institution. Since the issue was of special interest to me, I broadened this list of references to include texts suggested by colleagues and which I found through broad research in libraries and bookstores in London and Edinburgh (2). However, I must emphasise that no attempt was made to represent in the works presented here all of the texts found or which exist about the theme. All that I can say is that the ideas found in the bibliography selected had significant weight among the British feminists and, as I realised upon arriving in Brazil in September 1997, they are also relevant for the debate among Brazilians (3).

The principal aspects that attracted my attention during the reading of the texts were:

1. Feminism is not considered a homogeneous system of ideas, there is opportunity for an exchange of ideas among authors with different positions. There are collections that purposefully unite different points of view (FONOW & COOK: 1991 and MAYNARD and PURVIS: 1994), as well as REINHARZ's book (1992) which, although it is not a collaborative effort, joins different approaches, without tempting to establish any synthesis between them.

2. There is a strong opposition between quantitative and qualitative methods, on one

hand, and the defence of the use of both, on the other. There is no defence of the use of quantitative methods, at most a timid acceptance of them when, through the use of statistics, such as those concerning the number of abortions, feminist causes can be defended. Qualitative methods are by far those which are preferred, principally in-depth interviews, conducted without, or with very little, previous structure (in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured or unstructured interviewing). The emphasis on qualitative methods is due principally to the importance attributed by a significant number of researchers to subjectivity in the construction of knowledge. Other specific advantages of these methods are also considered: a) they are not hampered by a lack of sufficient data, without which it is difficult to prepare the precise questions needed for a questionnaire; b) the high degree of confidence between researcher and researched that is possible in interviews diminishes the hierarchy in the relationship, allowing discussion of personal and even intimate issues; and c) facilitation of the action-research process, in the sense of raising consciousness about the need to promote changes in traditional behaviour. The proximity between researcher and researched allows reflexivity which means the feminist capacity for, and a predisposition to, discuss the research process and the attitudes and opinions of researchers in light of difficulties and dilemmas, even those of a personal nature.

I believe that the intensity of the discussions about methods in recent years can be measured by the fact that authors such as HARDING (1987) and KELLY et. al. (1994) propose that part of the energy invested in this discussion be invested in more constructive themes.

3. Action-research, although included in the earlier item, deserves additional comment. The current argument among its defenders is that if the goal of an investigation is to change traditional behaviour in relation to women, then the knowledge acquired through research must be useful. There are few authors who question: "useful for whom?" or "useful for what?". There is implicit presumption that women and feminists have similar beliefs and values. JAYARATNE & STEWARD (1991) emphatically criticise this presumption. KELLY et al. (1994) also mention the possibility that the group investigated and the investigator could have different values. The heterogeneity of values among researchers themselves leads MAYNARD (1994) to warn that there are limits to a pluralist vision of the research process. There are other common points in the two works cited here. They raise questions about the possibility of a lack of correspondence between aspirations and concrete situations, asking what type of advantages can come form a consciousness-raising process through research without there being corresponding channels available for action. KELLY et al. also doubt that the benefits of the use of interview are unquestionable. Sometimes there can be more "intrusion/imposition/irritation" in the life of people than benefits. Despite the weight of these criticisms, these authors do not advance in the evaluation of the role of subjectivity in scientific research.

Those researchers who accept the awareness of the need for change as a constituent element of feminist investigation seek methods that bring an increase of power to women (known as women empowerment methods). But according to KELLY

et al. (1994),
it is not good to always link research and an increase of power of the women studied because, in attempts to understand masculine behaviour, there is no intention to increase the power of men over women, but precisely the contrary. The central point here is the difference between "research about women" and "research about gender". There is wide agreement concerning this difference. The concept of "gender" carries a rejection of biological determinism and is based on the perception of sexual differences as products of social relations. However, despite generalised acceptance that feminist research must include men and intra-sex relations, I do not believe one can take the expression "research about women" and "research about gender" as synonyms or the second as a less unilateral version of the first, for there is in the first expression greater emphasis on the differences of power between the two sexes. ABBOTT & WALLACE (1997) capture this nuance when they warn of the danger of a deradicalisation of feminist aspirations as a consequence of the acceptance of men as the object of study.

4. Post-modernism has tremendous influence among feminists, an influence which runs from total concordance to critical acceptance or selective appropriation of its ideas. The points considered positive are:

a) Post-modernism questions the presumption that reason and science lead to objective knowledge. It goes beyond historical relativism which accepts as correct an explanation based on the scientific possibilities of a given period. There is no such thing as a correct interpretation. Any experience is understood through a social and cultural discourse, which forms the frame of reference for interpretation. In order to understand how knowledge is developed, a deconstruction of the discourse which gives it meaning is required.
b) The state is not considered the principal source of power. Power is seen as being diffused through all of society. This position leads to the study of means of control in micro-spheres such as the family, a point of special interest for feminists.
c) Post-modernism emphasises difference. For quite some time feminism has preserved a certain "mark of origin", or that is, having surged among the white urban middle class in the West, and having considered women as a group with more similarities than differences, many women feel excluded (blacks, third world women, etc.). Post modernism offers space for the differences, legitimating the reflection about them.

The most polemical issue in the acceptance of post-modernism is the possibility of a nihilist orientation concerning the possibility of a decrease in social inequality. An endless exposition of contradictions does not offer any support for action programs. This conflicts with the emphasis on action-research. It is here that the partial acceptances arise. MCLAUGHLIN (1997: 8) said that "feminism is the active contributor to, not the passive receiver of, post-modernism". Among the authors that accept post modern ideas in a selective manner, MCLAUGHLIN is one of the most critical. HARDING (1987: 10) however, goes even further. For her, if we accept that women have their own point of

view, and men another, feminist research must give up the goal of stimulating social change. KELLY et al. (1994: 31-2) have a similar position when they affirm that, if we take post-modernism to its final consequences, even the "most recognised forms of social research are pointless exercises".

5. There is strong rejection of positivism among feminists. I will consider this point at greater length.

To find a strong rejection of positivism in any line of thought that questions established science is hardly a surprise, for a large number of social scientists consider positivism to be at best a conservative and prejudiced way of constructing knowledge. This idea is so well diffused that there is little discussion of the constitutive elements of the positivist vision of science, supposing that it is not necessary to understand something in order to reject it. According to GIDDENS (1974: 2), "...the term (positivism) has become one of opprobrium, and has been used so broadly and vaguely as a weapon of critical attack, both in philosophy and in sociology, that it has lost any claim to an accepted and standard meaning". At times, even a distinction between Comte and the thinkers of the Vienna Circle (logical positivism or empiricist logic), the difference between which is considerable, is taken into consideration by critics of positivism.

Comte (1798 - 1857) is a typical nineteenth century thinker. Science for him was the paradigm of any type of valid knowledge, and, more than this, society would resolve its principal problems when it was according to scientific principles. The same cannot be said of logical positivism. (4) This school of philosophy was consolidated in the 1930s in Austria. With the ascension of Nazism, one of its most important thinkers - Rudolf Carnap - migrated to the United States, where he spread the ideas of the group. For this school, the starting point of science is the "given", or that which can be captured by the senses (or through an extension of the senses, such as laboratory equipment). The meaning of an affirmation can only be demonstrated by describing the conditions which must occur for the affirmation to be true. Its meaning can be given by definition, but the definition is composed of words that must be defined, until something that can be demonstrated is reached. For this reason positivism presupposes that the meaning of a proposition is, in the final analysis, determined only by the given. Questions for which the response demands going beyond this limit lack meaning for the scientist. It can never be known if the response is right or wrong, because demonstration is impossible. For this reason metaphysics cannot be a concern of scientists. In other words, if we ask the philosophers of the Vienna Circle how the terms and sentences through which the world is described are related with the terms and sentences that capture immediate experience, they would say that only when the former are clearly "reducible" to the latter, is scientific explanation possible. They consider themselves to be empiricists, but their philosophy differs from the radical empiricism of John Stuart Mill, unique to the nineteenth century. They accept that the propositions of logic and mathematics can be established *a priori*. It is neo-positivisim which today is commonly known as positivism and as such will be identified from now on.

Giddens (1974) cites three presumptions that identify a "positivist attitude" in sociology: a) sociology and the natural sciences use the same method; b) the objective of sociological analysis is to formulate knowledge about the social in the form of "laws";

and c) sociology, as do the natural sciences, has a technical character and works with an instrumental reasoning, both of which are "neutral" in relation to values. The feminists whom I read and heard in Great Britain, upon rejecting positivism, have implicit in their reasoning the idea that the acceptance of one of these principles implies the acceptance of the other two, which is not always true. Some feminists add still another fourth presumption: the use of quantitative methods. This vision of positivism as a "block of these four elements" is one of the points that I intend to question. Its implicit character often tends to obscure the origin of a certain methodological manichaeism which divides sociologists simply as positivists or non-positivists, in which the former do not deserve consideration.

To consider this first issue, I choose the methodological orientations of Max Weber (1864-1920) for various reasons, the principal one of them being the fact that while he accepts the last of the three assumptions, he denies the first and the second. Another motivation was presented to me during a seminar about feminist research conducted at the London School in 1997. Given that the always difficult question of the presence of values was in debate, both those of the researcher as well as those of the people being researched, I asked the speaker, who was from the Gender Institute, if the ideas of Weber could not contribute to this reflection. The response surprised me because although she confessed that she knew little of this author, she said that little attention was given to Weber by the Feminist Group with which she worked because Weber was a positivist. Being fond of the Weberian dilemmas and because of his refusal to succumb to the comfortable idea that it is possible to have a synthesis between different positions when it comes to values, I decided Weber was an author who had enough complexity to serve as an inspiration for questioning prejudices in sociology. I choose sociology because of my own condition as a social scientist.

The negation of the objectivity of the social sciences is not surprising in these times. Perhaps its unconditional defence is more surprising. However, not always does the denial of the assumption of neutrality mean a denial of everything that was done beforehand. In the same way that there was a selective appropriation of post-modernism by feminists, there are different selective appropriations of that sociology considered classic.

Simply for didactic purposes, first I will discuss the association between positivism and quantitative methods. These methods have been "cursed" by some currents of the social sciences. Although there is in this reaction a healthy denial of the excessive simplification brought by a naive empiricism, in the opinion of some researchers, and of empiricism with bad intentions - in the opinions of others, there is no valid basis to associate quantification with positivism and qualitative research with post-modernism. If we turn to Durkheim (1858-1917), the principal example of a positivist sociologist, we see that these associations are not present, despite the affirmation that appears in *Les régles de la méthode sociologique* that statistics allows the isolation of social facts from their particular forms so that social laws can be established (DURKHEIM; 1978:7). I believe that Durkheim would not have been so important for the social sciences if he had been absolutely faithful to this rule. We do not find statistics in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse.* His fascination with tables was typical of his time. We see the same fascination in Lenin, when he wrote about the development of

capitalism in Russia. Durkheim with his deaths, and Lenin with his horses makes use of inductive reasoning, as called for by the Vienna Circle. We find the defence of inductive reasoning as the supreme scientific method as early as the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth with Francis Bacon (1561-1626). In Brazil, the dialectical thinkers are generally given nearly all of the credit for the criticism of the inductive method, which emphasises that the vector of knowledge moves from the particular to the general. They certainly can be given credit for this (5), but the limits of pure induction are so rigid that Karl Popper, the Austrian philosopher born in Vienna in 1902, and who for a while was close to neo-positivism, strongly criticised the negation of the importance of metaphysics. While Schilick maintained that for the empiricist, metaphysics is neither false nor true, but simply does not make sense (SCHILICK; 1975: 70), Popper revives the importance of metaphysics maintaining that, far from making scientific work more difficult, it is a stimulus to new hypotheses (CAPONI: 1995: 89), redirecting the vector which thus moves from the general to the particular.

Returning to sociology and the opposition between the quantitative and qualitative methods, it is interesting to observe how in Brazil, although quantitative positivism has not been largely accepted, remaining restricted to easily identifiable groups, there is, in my opinion, an excess of criticism of positivism. Positivism seems to be like the windmills that challenged Dom Quixote. At times I wonder whether the questioning of quantativism is a way of escaping more rigorous criticism of qualitative research itself. While simply labelling someone a "positivist" is enough to condemn quantitative analysis, this same zeal is not found when evaluating the strong influence of linguistics among Brazilian social scientists, although linguistics has not abandoned the positivist assumptions.

I believe, however, that the sharpest phase of sectarianism between the two currents has passed. As Howard Becker maintained, the qualitative methods are not so different from the quantitative methods as sociologists commonly think (1993: 14). Not even qualitative research is, by definition, free from positivism. Ruth Cardoso maintained that this opposition between qualitative and quantitative certainly does not correspond to opposite and irreconcilable ways of seeing reality (1986: 95). But the affirmation that I like most in the work of Ruth Cardoso is that the criticism of established science winds up approaching one of the most classic formulations of positive empiricism which is that "well collected data should speak for itself" (1986: 99). Within this line are the studies about oppressed groups, where the goal is to "give them voice", which translates into a reduction of scientific work to acritical reproductions of discourses, ignoring the fact that these discourses were produced by a specific listener, the researcher (6).

This procedure was most common among feminists in past decades. The influence of post-modernism has been considered by some researchers as a good "antidote" to this "methodological optimism". I believe that many agree with me that *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* is an essential sociological work. Durkheim, in this book, does not utilise numbers but is faithful to positivist principles. He seeks ahistoric social laws, and in order to understand the role of religion in society in his time, he chose to study totemism because he considered it to be the most elementary form of religion, and thus the most easy to understand. The laws that are valid for totemism would be valid for other religions. Notice that here, the vector of knowledge does not move from a

significant number of particular cases to a generalisation, as in quantitative studies. It begins from a case studied in depth. Only the presumption of the existence of general laws which are not variable over time permits the use of this method. The belief in "invariance" is also present in the idea of the "collective unconscious", the basis of the analyses of Levy-Strauss. Structuralism, however, is well accepted in Brazil. This fact leads us to believe that the criticism of some methods does not stem from their acceptance of positivist assumptions, but on the contrary, if the method is not accepted, it is considered positivist. Even authors who are in fact far from orthodox positivism are sometimes condemned on the accusation that they fall into the posistivist category. Giddens is right when he says that the term is understood more as an offence than as a concept.

As I mentioned earlier, Max Weber is a good author to use in the consideration of complexities. Because he accepts intrascientific objectivity, the differences between Weber and Durkheim are often ignored. To reduce the Weberian dilemmas to his defence of objectivity is to weaken his contribution to the social sciences. It is convenient to contrast Weber and Durkheim because they were contemporaries. There are three points where the differences can be highlighted.

The first point is the Weberian rejection of accepting the same method for the hard sciences and the social sciences, because, for him, sociology is concerned with the meaning of social action, or that is, with its comprehensive interpretation. The natural phenomena have causes but no meaning. For this reason we speak of "comprehensive sociology". The relations of causality which stem from this are not "laws", but "regularities" found in a certain historic moment, by researchers who look at reality from one of the possible perspectives. Knowledge is unilateral, or that is, it responds to the questions which are made about reality, and historic moments are treated as singular situations (WEBER; 1949 and 1978).

The second point is the plurality and the infinity of the real, which cannot be totally understood, not in virtue of the current difficulties of knowledge, but due to the intrinsically finite quality of human reason (WEBER; 1949:72). For Weber, scientific reason is an "instrumental" reason. The final purpose of knowledge is not rational, nor irrational in the sense of an opposition. It can be considered "rational" or non-rational, for it cannot be analysed rationally. As he maintained: "An empirical science cannot tell anyone what he *should* do - but rather what he *can* do - and under certain circumstances - what he *wishes* to do" (1949:54- italics in the original). Scientific goals are social values and not rational ends. Scientific knowledge cannot take the place of ethics and of religion in the establishment of social values, as the Enlightenment scholars argued.

As a consequence of these affirmations, Weber believes that social analysis is possible only if it is conducted from a point of view, from a perspective that selects the object of study. The choice of the object implies a value, because given the plurality of reality one cannot have prior knowledge of what is or is not relevant. (WEBER, 1949: 22 e 71). In this sense, there is similarity between Weber and the feminist researchers who defend the idea that to have a feminist perspective is to seek to understand the life of women with a commitment to producing a knowledge different to that produced up to now by a predominantly masculine science. But there is also a fundamental difference: while, for feminists, their starting point is scientifically superior to other perspectives, for

Weber, there is never a perspective more correct than others because "all the analysis of infinite reality which the finite human mind can conduct rests on the tacit assumption that only a finite portion of this reality constitutes the object of scientific investigation, and that it is only *important* in the sense of being *worthy of being known"*. (WEBER, 1949: 72, italics by the author). The objectivity that Weber attributes to science is an objectivity limited to a portion of reality. Within this space, it must be neutral, as the philosophers of the Vienna Circle sought to stablish. It is because of the defence of neutrality that he is considered positivist, despite the sharp methodological differences between the positive sociologists and the comprehensive sociologists.

To the degree that Weberian pluralism destroyed the opposition between right and wrong when comparing lines of thinking, although this dichotomy continues to be valid for specific questions, it leads to the impression that the feminists that defend the presence of subjectivity in the elaboration of scientific knowledge are giving to this subjectivity the same universal character that the positivists give to objectivity. Is there a "collective feminine unconscious"? By admitting that there is, would we not have an invariant equivalent to the social laws of positivism? Would it not be expecting too much of subjectivity to expect that it would be able to overcome the profound differences in values between very different cultures? An example offered by WINTER (1994) shows the complexity of the questions that involve values. The author makes references to a debate that took place in France at the beginning of the 1990s concerning the existence in that country of genital mutilation of women in communities of immigrants from former French colonies in Africa. One one hand, there are feminists requesting the criminalisation of this practice. On the other, are defenders of cultural relativism who maintain that criminalisation would be an authoritarian imposition by dominant peoples over the dominated. It is at these moments that the Weberian conception of science as a rational knowledge that has means and ends, but that is insufficient as a tool for establishing values, can serve as warning to the limits of comparison and of hierarchisation among value aspirations. What is important? To prohibit the mutilation of women or to respect an age-old cultural tradition? Whatever the response, it is not easy because we are not dealing with right and wrong, but with the need to choose where scientific knowledge can help, but not offer the last word. It is for this reason that Weber gives tremendous importance to religion and politics as spheres of formation of values and decision making. However, concerning science, he only admits the presence of values in the choice of the object of study, and this is the source of much of the criticism of his methodological position, a criticism which I share, but do not consider sufficient to neutralise his contribution to the understanding of the difficult problem of the relationship between science and values, where ethical questions are included.

In conclusion, I would say that there are some dangers in the complete denial of positivism, even for its mos adamant critics. Firstly, only a stereotyped vision can find homogeneity among thinkers considered to be positivist. Secondly, important contributions of these thinkers are seen with disdain. In the case of positivism, I cite, as an example, the concern for the rigour of inferences and demonstrations. Thirdly, researchers can follow, in practice, principles that theoretically would be denied. Although science without ethics can lead us to results such as the atomic bomb, to hope that science, by being incorporated to subjectivity, can allow us to make decisions about

values, is to give it a power that many positivists do not dare, although they have fed on the cult of reason of the Enlightenment, and this was one of the great dreams of the Enlightenment scholars.

Feminist thinking was able to break with these tremendous epistemological barriers and reveal how much prejudice existed about pretences to objectivity. It would not be respectful of its achievements to begin from pre-conceived ideas about any line of thinking, principally when these ideas function as a false passport for critical positions.

NOTAS:

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1. I would like to thank CAPES for the study grant that was given me for this period.

2. The authors that I read are, in alphabetical order: ABBOTT & WALLACE (1997); FONOW & COOK (1991); JAYARATNE & STEWARD (1991); HARDING (1987); KELLY, BURTON & REAGAN (1994), MAYNARD (1994); MAYNARD & PURVIS (1994), MCLAUGHLIN (1997); MIES (1991); PAPART (1993); REINHARZ (1992); WHATMORE, MARSDEN & LOWE (1994); SCOTT (1988 & 1996) & SMITH (1987).
Some of this literature was recommended to me during the courses: "*Concepts and methods in social inquiry"* and "G*ender, development and social planning"*, coordinated by George Gaskell PhD. and Nazneen Kanji PhD., respectively. The rest I selected through the suggestions of colleagues and reviews of libraries and bookstores.

3. See, among others, COSTA & BRUSCHINI (org.): 1992 & SILVA (1997).

4. I am basing these ideas about neo-positivism on the ideas of the founder of the Vienna School, Moritz Schilick.

5. See among others, MINAYO (1993) and DEMO (1991).

6. An example is the work of KÜPPERS (ed.). 1994, in the Introduction of which it is written that "*women speak for themselves about their political activism".*

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