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Methodological Approaches in a Study of Africa in International Politics

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Abstract:

An analysis of methodological approaches in a study of Africa in international politics reveals a variety of approaches including positivism and neo-positivism; approaches in Politicology involving approaches based on academic disciplines, analytical themes and three forces levels.

Keywords: *methodological approaches, international politics, positivism, academic discipline, analytical themes and three focus levels.*

1. Introduction

Africa today, the second volume, is a comprehensive reference book on all the 54 countries that comprise the continent of Africa. It presents a detailed record of modern African history, and the political, economic and social development of each African country examined from an African view point. At the same time, it provides basic information on the activities of each country as an integral part of the continent as well as the role of Africa as part of the international community.

_Source: Know Africa: Makers of Modern Africa Profiles in History, 1981, p. 13.

There is a danger and to a great extent this is what has happened in many countries – of the study of the state and its phenomena being limited to a description of political institutions, practices, behaviour, activities, processes and actions, and a collection of facts about the subject for the sake of the facts themselves without going on to look for meaningful and systematic explanations and to evaluate the interrelationships between the facts and the form of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This was the practice when political science as a discipline was dominated by those who approached it from an historical, legalistic and descriptive angle.

2. Purpose of the Article

A few pertinent comments on the broader picture of methodological approaches are offered before we look at an analysis of approaches that have been specifically selected in a systematic study of Africa in contemporary international politics.

3. Broad Approaches

Broadly, approaches may be classified as *empirical*, *logical positivism*, and *normative*. These are described as follows:

3.1. Positivism and Neo – Positivism as Approaches

Positivism, which is oriented primarily to the natural sciences, regards the works of phenomena whether physical or social phenomena, as forming a unity, since the same methods of study are applied to all phenomena. These methods of study have led to the achievement of unparalleled successes and results in the natural sciences and the laudable argument is that same methods should be employed in the study of social phenomena and that the social sciences aim at the ideal of exactness and objectivity of the natural sciences.

The basic contention that all empirical observed phenomena in the universe, whether physical matter or human relations, constitute material for science if studied by the scientific method, is basically of a positivistic nature. What this implies is that all particulars and facts which are immediately observable together with their relationships and uniforms which are accessible to reason without violation of the limits of observation are regarded as positive. Here faith in the sensory perception of empirical phenomena, that is, empiricism, plays a dominant part. Methodologically, positivism is, therefore, in polemic opposition to the metaphysical obstructions of traditional philosophy. In this regard whatever claims to go beyond the sphere of the empirical to seek out the hidden essence of phenomena or

the ultimate and final caused behind things is metaphysical. The nature and purpose of metaphysics is contemplative and speculative. But the purpose of knowledge, according to the positivist premise, is not the gaining of knowledge for its own sake, but in order that it may serve as a guide to conduct in the interest of the common good. There is therefore a close historical tie between the development of positivism and the progress made in the natural sciences. The earliest traces of positivism are to be found in the 17th century empirical philosophy of *Sir Francis Bacon* [1561 – 1626]. He based the principles of scientific of procedure on the observation of facts and put forward inductive generalisations. *Immanuel Kant*, *Sir Isaac Newton* [1642 – 1727] and *Edmond Hassel* [1869 – 1934] also emphasised and contributed a great deal to the development of positivism.

The positivist trend became explicit and was consciously formulated as a definitive system by *Auguste Comte* [1798 – 1857] and was given the name of positivism. For *Comte* positivism was the stage in thought at which facts are grasped in their empirical certainty and phenomenal relation [the positive stage, positive knowledge]. *E. M Burns* [Ideas in conflict, p. 75], comments as follows on *Auguste Comte's* positivism:

“It was based upon his cardinal doctrine that the only knowledge of any value is positivism knowledge, or knowledge gained by objective research. He rejected metaphysical as utterly futile, no man discovers the hidden essence of things – why events happen as they do. Or what is the ultimate meaning and goal of existence. All we know is how things happen, the laws which control their occurrences and the relations existing between them”.

This idea of a new and scientific era in human thought was very generally held by scientists in the latter half of the 19th century. *John Stuart Mill*, *Herbert Spencer*, *J Huxley*, *Darwin*, and other all applied this approach in their fields of study. In the social sciences positivists is persevered with the idea of a cast – iron distinction between science and fields of study such as metaphysics, theology and ethics, which are based on speculation or divine revelation or inspiration, *Arnold Brecht* [1967: 171 – 173], writes about *Comte's* view. “For *Comte* evolution was an ultimate law governing historic phenomena, and science. On the contrary, scientific method seems to exclude moral problems from the field of science. Human progress is not merely scientific and technological; it is also moral and aesthetical. In the former case, scientific method is able to achieve some degree of measurement but not so in the latter case in relation to which value judgements are required. Ultimate value judgements cannot be supplied by scientific method”.

Under the leadership of *Emile Durkheim* [1858 – 1917], *Comte's* French disciples were far more set on the application of scientific method that *Auguste Comte* had been. The *Durkheim* emphasized the externality of social facts, empirical observation of these facts, and also that sociology should be entirely independent of philosophy. But their clarification and explanation of these facts revealed what *Arnold Brecht* [1967:173], called a ‘relativistic emphasis’. They were then concerned with the differences between ethical systems and in consequences some of them ended by accepting what is known as ‘scientific value relativism’.

3.1.1. Neo – Positivism as an Approach:

In 20th century political science a new school of thought, neo – positivism (new positivism), gradually developed out of positivism. Neo – positivism is a trend in the inquiry into the bases of the exact sciences and builds on the old empiricism and positivism of *Auguste Comte*. Its methodological implications for social research were especially the following:

a) Behaviourism

As a result of positivism’s emphasis on the sensory perception of empirical phenomena, the social sciences also concentrated on the study of the external perceptible behaviours of individuals. The idea of motives affecting the determination of behaviours was rejected and stress was laid on the observable or directly deductible activities of man, with reference to the stimulus – response association in man’s overt behaviour. Specialists in this field argued from this premise arrived at the conclusion that all statements about the nature of the universe or a part of its are merely verbal formulation of someone’s response to whatever it was that evoked reaction, that is, the stimulus.

They held that all statements about the primary nature, essence or being of things or objects are merely hypotheses which cannot be verified and are consequently outside the province of science.

- b) The *neo – positivists* further emphasize that the investigator must be absolutely objective in his observation of social phenomena.
- c) *Neo – positivists* strongly emphasize the role and value of quantitative techniques in political science, in the belief that the development of such techniques will increase objectivity in the study of social phenomena.
- d) *Neo – positivists* criticise the idea of causation. Human actions are not simply responses to stimuli, and the mere observation of their responses to stimuli is not enough in the study of social actions. Human action is always related to a purpose which is being pursued, and it is this purposiveness in social action which is of the greatest importance to political analysis, and which makes his actions meaningful to man, individually and collectively.

The difference between the *natural sciences* and the *social sciences* amounts to this:

In the natural sciences empirical phenomena are observed by means of sense – perception, with the primary purpose of determining and explaining their uniformities and regularities.

However, in the study of social and political phenomena such empirical observed uniformities and regularities are not enough. The social scientist penetrates to the subjective purpose behind these uniformities and regularities and thus to the sense and meaning actions have for man. Consequently, there is a need not only for external perception, counting and calculation, but also for an understanding of why people do what they do.

Man acts in relation to others in a situation and his action is largely determined by his internalised values which embrace cultural definition of situations and action in situations. By means of the process of internationalisation of values the actor is motivated to behave in a particular way by the dominant values in the society. In this way the goals which he regards as desirable and which he

pursues, as well as the means which he uses to achieve these goals, are largely determined by the system of values of the particular society to which he belongs. It is therefore essential for us to be acquainted with the dominant values of a particular society if we wish to understand the behaviour of members of that society.

3.1.2. Behaviourism and Logical Positivism as Approaches

The two schools of thought were behaviourism (as opposed to cognitivism) and logical positivism.

- The behaviourists confined themselves to the stimulus response [S – R] mechanism in the construction of theories.
- The modern behaviourists, who succeeded them, saw the great weakness of the stimulus – response [S – R] psychology of Pavlov and Watson and pointed out that it simply ignores large areas of de – facto human experience.
- Logical positivism is a trend in philosophy which achieved considerable prominence.

The logical – positivism school has developed an idea of central significance to the evaluation of the behavioural approach – in fact, to all of modern thought. It is commonly referred to as the fact – value dichotomy. Philosophical theories about the state were built on certain basic assumptions, such as the existence of God, natural law, man's claim to freedom as natural right.

Logical positivism is interested in the answers to the questions of your normative knowledge concerning the ethical foundations or moral dimensions of political actions, relations and aims.

With all this background, time is now ripe for us to examine the place and role of a social research scientist in a systematic study of Africa in international politics. We emphasize the special place of rationalism in the acquisition and establishment of systems of knowledge.

3.1.3. The Role of Social Scientist in Research

A social research scientist has many tasks, but chief amongst them is: -

- To create, develop, facilitate, disseminate, and set standards of knowledge systems acquired and established by means of rational thoughts [rationalism] through rigorous, systematic and scientific investigations into some empirically observed phenomenon in order for groups, and communities as major stakeholders to address realistically, their current and future needs [empiricism].

Source: S. B. M. Marume, Epistemological, methodological and operational aspects of African social research studies, 1988.

From the above quotation, the social research scientist is both a rationalist [rationalistic] and an empiricist [empiricist, positivistic].

3.1.4. Rationalism as a Methodology

Etymologically, the ratio means the understanding or reason. Remembering that the understanding is regarded above all as the logical capacity of a human being, it is quite clear that rationalism will advance the view that knowledge is mainly a product of the labours of thought performed by the human reason. This means that knowledge must have the characteristic of necessity and general validity.

The fundamental thesis of rationalism is that the rule being is not catered for by the evidence of the senses, but by pure thought, of which logic is an example, and which, in intellectual conceptual schemes, constructions and logic manipulations. Rationalists offer the following arguments to support their approach to the fundamental thesis of rationalism:

- a) Logical and mathematical knowledge is not subject to the illusions of the human senses,
- b) Results of logical and mathematical analysis are universally and eternally valid: they are not subject to change; they are constant and invariable, for example, $4 + 7 = 11$; $3 \times 8 = 24$. The sum of the angles of a triangle equals to 180° . These results will not change. They are also universally valid. We therefore speak of the invariability, unchangeability, and consistency of logical and mathematical knowledge
- c) The only observations that are exact and valid are those that can be formulated in mathematical terms as measuring and accounting results, for example, three yards, one kilometre, six kilogrammes, one litre; the measurement is exact and valid. Again numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 81, 99 are exact counting results. They are unchangeable, universally exact and valid.
- d) However, there are two interpretations of the rationalistic view, namely, radical rationalism and critical rationalism.

In sum rationalism in its extreme [radical] form is rejected because it asserts that only pure human reason and capacity for thought can understand the rule being and the world process. It totally ignores the possibilities of knowledge being brought about by other sources. Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz were articulate and prominent rationalists.

3.1.5. Empiricism as a Methodology:

Empiricism is a theory about the grounds of knowledge of reality. The central thought is that the only source of ground of such knowledge is our experience. No knowledge therefore with existential reference is possible independently of experience. That data from which our knowledge is constructed stem, from the empirical observation.

However, there are two interpretations of the imperialistic view, namely, radical empiricism and critical empiricism [positivism]. Whilst empiricism in its extreme form is rejected, it must be granted that it is difficult to understand how we can acquire and establish knowledge of the world without empirical observation. The phenomenal progress made by the natural sciences would seem to bear out the empiricists' edge: if you want to know nature, go out and investigate it. Some of the great empiricist forerunners are *Sir Francis Bacon* [1561 – 1626]; *John Locke* [1632 – 1714]; and *Hume* [1711 – 1776], whilst the positivists stressed the importance of the theory.

3.1.6. Varieties of Empiricism Include Positivism, Realism, Pragmatism, and Truism.

In summary critical empiricism maintains that our knowledge of the world is founded on observation, and it also accepts that there are also statements which are accepted as knowledge by virtue of their logical form. On the other hand, in critical rationalism a rational idea is regarded as an operative hypothesis which has to be tested by observation. There is therefore a mutual interdependence between critical rationalism and critical empiricism. The social research scientist is both rationalist and an empiricist.

Before tackling Africa in and international politics, it is advisable first to play attention to approaches in general, and in particular, to approaches in the study of subject concerned. The purpose to this examination is to re-emphasize and re-visit the fact that the approach selected for this study represents but only one of a member of angles from which the subject may be examined. Although the writer as a social research scientist will indicate the obvious advantages of one particular approach in this study, the social researchers and other interested scientists should never lose sight of the fact that it is only but one of a large number of approaches, and that the validity of the other approaches cannot by summarily ignored to rejected.

3.2. A Brief General Survey of Approaches

The approach to any subject which is to be studied may be briefly described as a framework of research, consisting of a set of criteria which are used to select the problems that are to be considered or studied, as well to decide which data are relevant to the research in question.

From the above definition of the term 'approach' it appears that there are a large number of possible approaches to any subject which may be studied. The number of approaches will probably depend upon the nature of the subject in question – a fact upon which we as political scientists need not elaborate must further. For our particular and immediate purposes, it is pertinently to realise that no one approach may be absolutized by a social researcher at the expense of other methodological approaches.

On the hand, it is impracticable, and even impossible, to expect any social researcher to be acquainted with all the possible approaches to a subject. However, it is possible to classify approaches according to their common characteristics, which may largely facilitate the social researcher's task. Indeed, it must be borne in mind that the criteria for classifying approaches are usually also subjectively selected, with the consequence that there may be a multiple number of possible classifications.

The ensuing scrutiny of approaches and their classification by no means purports to be a complete survey of all the possibilities. It is rather an earnest attempt to lend perspective and respectability to the specific approach which has been selected for the subject under examination.

3.2.1. Methodological Approaches in Politicology

The general remarks made in the previous sub – paragraph regarding approaches also apply to approaches in politicology and its sub – disciplines. The types of approaches which are to be examined do not necessarily apply to the entire field of politicology, but have been selected as examples in view of their applicability to the subject in question. We shall briefly indicate three types of approaches, that is, approaches based on academic disciplines, approaches based on analytical themes, and approaches based on the scope of the relevant frame of reference.

3.2.2. Approaches Based on Academic Disciplines

This type of approach is one of the most general and aims at studying objects in the field of politicology from the point of view of a certain discipline. Examples in this regard are the philosophical (ethical – logical) the juridical. The historical, the sociological, the psychological and the anthropological approaches; in view of the important place occupied by two of these approaches in the literature political development in Africa, for instance, the historical and anthropological approaches, they will; be examined in broad outline.

a. The *historical approach* in politicology centres mainly on the part, and accords primary importance to the chronological succession of events. An attempts is usually made specifically to establish cause and effect, form, significance, and pattern of development.

b. The *anthropological approach* which is closely related to the sociological approach in politicology, studies political events within the framework of the entire relevant cultural system. As will be shown later this approach plays a significant role in the literature on the political situation in Africa.

3.2.3. Approaches Based on Analytical Themes

A further important classification of approaches may be made on the basis of central themes of analysis. When using this basis of classification, the approaches examined in the previous sub – paragraph, that is, those based on academic disciplines, are grouped around such analytical themes. It, therefore, follows that there is inevitably a measure of overlapping between these two groups of approaches. Although there may also be a multiple number of possibilities in respect of a classification which is based on analytical themes, it is perhaps advisable, for the purposes of this study, to reduce the number of possibilities by grouping them under comprehensive analytical themes. Hence it would be possible to distinguish three which basis themes, namely normative analysis, institutional analysis, and processes analysis.

3.2.4. Approaches Based on the Focal Scope

A third method of classifying approaches in politicology which is relevant to our discussion of approaches to a study of Africa, are those which are based on the nature and scope of the focus. It needs to be noted in this regard that such classifications already discussed, or any of the others to be dealt with later.

Depending on whether the social researcher uses the field of politics, or merely segments thereof as the point for this research, approaches in this regard, may be classified according to a spectral pattern, which may vary from a macro – approach on the one hand to macro – approach on the other. Between these two poles are a large number of possible intermediate positions. This macro – micro – spectrum may also be applied to sub – aspects of politics, in which case the case the focus forms may fall on the entire aspect in question, or merely on segments thereof.

The following examination of approaches in international politics will illustrate this point.

3.3. Methodological Approaches in International Politics

3.3.1. General Observations

As states previously, international politics may be classified as a sub – discipline of politicology. Hence the examination of approaches in politicology is also largely applicable to a study of international politics. It should be noted in its regard, however, that a number of approaches to a study of international politics, that is, mainly taken over from other disciplines, have recently gained prominence, but are not applicable to the wide field of politicology as such. We shall not elaborate on this point here, and will therefore, restrict our discussion to approaches in international politics which are based on the focal scope.

3.3.2. Three Focus Levels as Approaches in International Politics

The justification for a threefold classification of the specific viewpoints which are to be selected for study may be found in a review of the literature on international politics as a sub discipline of politicology. Thus it is possible to distinguish a global, a regional and a fragmented approach.

a. The *global approach* to a study of international politics centres round the dominant systems, that is, on the sum total of the ideological and political relations which apply internationally, and are usually manifested during a confrontation between the great powers or super powers.

b. The *regional approach* centres around the sum total of the ideological, and particularly the political, relations within the regional area.

c. In a *fragmented approach* to the study of international politics the focus falls on the smallest unit, namely the national state, and particularly on the interaction of the sum total of the domestic and foreign political activities of the national state concerned.

In the following discussion the regional approach will enjoy preference, whilst references will be made to works which advocate the remaining two approach levels.

3.4. Methodological Approaches in a Study of Africa

3.4.1. General Remarks

We shall now apply the foreign general survey approaches in politicology in general, and in international politics as a sub discipline of politicology, to a study of Africa. The same classification applies here.

3.4.2. Approaches Based on Academic Disciplines in a Study of Africa

The discoveries of *three disciplines* in particular are of significance for the purpose of studying Africa, for example, *history*, *anthropology* and *political science*. We now briefly indicate the approaches which are based on each of these disciplines.

a. The basic premise for a *historical approach* to a study of Africa is the necessity of a thorough knowledge of Africa's early history in order to understand the present and future role of the continent in international politics. Although there exists a measure of justification for such an approach, the lack of written historical matter in respect of Africa to a large extent makes this approach an unserviceable one.

b. Although the *anthropological approach* evidently has a much more solid foundation than the historical approach, it is too limited for the purposes of this study. The main value of this approach lies in the fact that it provides a foundation for a study of the changes in values which are coupled with Africa's contact with the predominantly 'Westerns' political system.

c. The following remarks on the *approach of political science to Africa* rest mainly on *generalisations*, and should therefore be carefully judged, since there are also significant expectations.

Africa do not take sufficient account of Africa's unique charter, and the typically Western standards used by research workers in their approach to political events on the continent have given rise to misinterpretations. Consequently, the approach of political science to Africa has often yield unsatisfactory results.

3.4.3. Approaches Based on Analytical Themes in a Study of Africa.

As in the case of politicology in general, approaches which rest on analytical themes – in particular process analysis – have gradually come to exert a significant influence on studies of Africa. The emergence of this type of approach may be ascribed largely to the unsatisfactory results of the more traditional approaches, particularly those based in academic disciplines, in studies of the continent.

The approaches in this group which have gained particular prominence are those based on systems, culture, functions, structures and action. However, various forms of combinations are also frequently to be found. In addition, considerable attention is being paid to the analysing of quantifiable data. The champions of these approaches often claim that their approaches enable them to compile sophisticated inventories, detailed and serviceable models of Africa.

However, these claims have not yet been proved beyond doubt. Many of approaches, particularly those representing process analysis, are so closely concerned with methodological aspects that the attempts in these categories amount to a mere conformation of expected, and often obvious, situations.

Although the influence of these approaches on the study of Africa cannot be summarily dismissed, and should of necessity be considered, they are not suitable for the purpose for this study.

In our research for suitable group of approaches we shall now study those based on the focal scope.

3.4.4. Approaches Based on the Focal Scope in a Study of Africa

When consulting the previous disputations of this type of approach in politicology in general, and in international politics in particular, it appears that Africa's role and position in international politics may be studied on different three levels. The focus may fall namely,

- a) on Africa as part of the *global system*, or
- b) the continent may be subdivided into *various regional areas*, each representing a *focal point*, or
- c) the *focus* may fall on the *individual states* within the continent.

For reasons to be more fully explained at a later stage, the approach which focuses on the regional areas in Africa will be used in our subsequent examination. It should, however, always be borne in mind that the selection of either of the other two focal approaches may lead to a study of different problems, and may thus produce different conclusions. By focusing on the regional areas, we are by no means excluding other possible methods of studying the role and position of the role and position for the African continent in international politics.

3.5. Regionalism as an Approach in a Study of Africa in International Politics

3.5.1. Question

Regionalism as an approach in a systematic study of Africa in international politics is a distinctly special scientific science. Why then is regionalism as a methodological approach in a study of Africa called a distinctly special applied social science?

3.5.2. Possible Answers, Succinct Explanations and Examples

- First, *regionalism* as a novel political methodological approach now enjoys full universal recognition. Its characteristic attribute as a science is *not exactitude* which is related to the nature of the subject – matter, but an *orderly* and *logical methodology*, *reputable semasiology*, *dependable terminology*, and *respectable epistemology*. And as can be recalled, *science is basically a technique or a method for obtaining reliable and valid knowledge of any observable phenomenon in the universe, this knowledge is then applied for the purpose of control and prediction*.
- Second, regionalism as a political methodology may be seen as the sum total of the ideological, and particularly the political, relations with the regional area.
- Third, regionalism now has an *internal system* which comprises a *core sector* and a *peripheral sector*, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an *external system*.
- Fourth, regionalism as an approach in international politics, has gained a universal recognition and applicability.
- Fifth, as already stated, the word '*regionalism*' as such, and the concept '*regional approach*', are used here in a slightly different sense to that normally occurring in the technical literature. It is a fairly common practice to regard *regionalism* as the studying of integratory tendencies within a particular area²⁰ with particular emphasis on the organisational aspects.²¹

The terms '*regionalism*' and '*regional approach*' in our subsequent discussion refer neither to attempts at further integration within the regional area, nor to the related organisational aspects. They merely indicate a study of the role of the regional area in international politics, with the focus on internal interaction, rather than on its role in the global struggle for power.

The following quotation aptly provides the justification for the deliberate selection of this approach for this particular study:

- Neither the means of transport nor the means of destruction have suppressed the human significance of distance, the mutual reinforcements of historical relationships and spatial proximity. Humanity is perhaps one, but the peoples have not a clear awareness of their unity. Regional communities remain stronger than the one.

When applying a *regional approach*, therefore, as elaborated above, to a study of Africa, the continent needs to be sub – divided into a number of regional areas, with emphasis on the internal interaction within the particular regional area.

4. Conclusion

Broad approaches have been examined, however, regionalism as a special approach to studying Africa in international politics has been isolated as the most viable and appropriate approach.

- The rest of our examination will thus be based on this approach: '*regional approach*'.

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