

PHILOSOPHICAL REVOLUTIONS IN POLITICAL ENQUIRY

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Abstract

Philosophical revolutions have fundamentally shaped the evolution of political enquiry by transforming the assumptions, concepts, and methods through which political phenomena are understood and studied. From the normative foundations of classical political philosophy to the empirical ambitions of positivism, and from interpretivist and critical approaches to post-positivist and post-structuralist perspectives, each philosophical shift represents a profound reorientation of political thought and research practice. This study offers an extensive and critical examination of these philosophical revolutions, situating them within their historical and intellectual contexts while analyzing their ontological, epistemological, and methodological implications for political enquiry. Employing a qualitative, analytical, and historical research design, the paper systematically reviews classical texts and contemporary scholarly literature to trace the evolution of political enquiry across major philosophical paradigms. The findings demonstrate that philosophical revolutions have expanded the scope of political analysis, challenged claims of value neutrality, and introduced methodological pluralism into the discipline. They have also intensified debates over objectivity, power, ideology, and the purpose of political knowledge. The paper concludes that philosophical reflection remains indispensable to political enquiry, particularly in addressing complex political realities in a globalized and unequal world, and recommends deeper engagement with philosophical foundations in advanced political research.

~~*Keywords: Philosophy; revolution; political enquiry; philosophical revolution; quantitative approach; qualitative approach*~~

Introduction

Political enquiry, as a systematic attempt to understand political phenomena, has never been philosophically neutral. From its origins in classical political philosophy to contemporary empirical and critical approaches, the study of politics has been shaped by successive philosophical revolutions that redefine what counts as valid knowledge, how political reality is constituted, and which methods are appropriate for its investigation. These revolutions reflect broader intellectual transformations in the social sciences and humanities, responding to changing historical contexts, scientific developments, and political realities.

Early political enquiry was predominantly normative, concerned with questions of justice, virtue, and the ideal organization of political life, as seen in the works of Plato and Aristotle. However,

the emergence of modern science and the Enlightenment introduced new philosophical assumptions that emphasized reason, empiricism, and objectivity. This shift laid the foundation for positivism, which sought to model political enquiry on the natural sciences. Subsequent dissatisfaction with positivist assumptions gave rise to interpretivist, critical, and post-structuralist approaches, each representing a philosophical revolution in its own right.

This paper explores these philosophical revolutions and their implications for political enquiry. It argues that understanding these shifts is essential for appreciating the diversity of contemporary political research and for engaging critically with its theoretical and methodological foundations.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design appropriate for examining philosophical revolutions in political enquiry. The nature of the topic is inherently theoretical and conceptual, focusing on shifts in ideas, assumptions, and methodological orientations rather than on measurable variables or statistical relationships. As a result, a qualitative approach is best suited to enable deep engagement with philosophical arguments, paradigmatic debates, and interpretive traditions that have shaped political enquiry over time. The study relies entirely on secondary data and does not involve primary empirical data collection such as surveys, interviews, or experiments.

The primary materials for this research consist of classical and contemporary scholarly works drawn from political philosophy, political science, and the philosophy of science. Classical texts by foundational thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Locke are examined to capture the normative and early modern roots of political enquiry. These are complemented by modern and contemporary works by scholars such as Weber, Kuhn, Habermas, and Foucault, whose contributions represent major philosophical turning points in the discipline. In addition, peer-reviewed journal articles and authoritative academic monographs are consulted to provide critical interpretations and debates surrounding these philosophical traditions. Sources are selected based on their academic credibility, relevance to the research focus, and sustained influence within political scholarship.

The study employs a historical-analytical method to trace the emergence and evolution of key philosophical paradigms in political enquiry. This approach enables the analysis of philosophical revolutions as processes shaped by specific historical, intellectual, and socio-political contexts rather than as isolated or purely abstract developments. By situating philosophical shifts within their broader contexts, the study highlights how changes in political realities, scientific thinking, and societal needs influenced the adoption or rejection of particular paradigms.

In addition, comparative analysis is used to examine differences and continuities among major philosophical traditions, particularly positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and postpositivism. These traditions are compared in terms of their ontological assumptions about political reality, epistemological claims about knowledge and truth, and methodological implications for political

research. This comparative framework allows for a clearer understanding of how each philosophical revolution redefined the scope, aims, and tools of political enquiry.

Conceptual analysis further supports the research by clarifying key concepts such as objectivity, value neutrality, power, ideology, discourse, and reflexivity as they are employed across different philosophical paradigms. This method enhances analytical precision and helps avoid conceptual ambiguity, which often complicates philosophical debates in political science. To ensure rigor and credibility, arguments and interpretations are cross-checked across multiple scholarly sources, allowing engagement with contrasting viewpoints and ongoing debates within the literature.

Ethical considerations in this study relate primarily to academic integrity and responsible scholarship. All sources are properly cited, and philosophical arguments are presented accurately and within their original contexts to avoid misrepresentation. Overall, the materials and methods adopted provide a balanced and coherent methodological foundation

Literature Review

The literature on philosophical foundations of political enquiry is extensive and multidisciplinary, drawing from political philosophy, sociology, and the philosophy of science. Classical political enquiry is rooted in normative philosophy, with Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* emphasizing ethical reasoning and the pursuit of the good life. These works established politics as a moral and philosophical enterprise rather than an empirical science (Plato, 1998; Aristotle, 1996).

The modern era witnessed a significant philosophical shift with the rise of empiricism and rationalism. Thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke introduced a more mechanistic and individualistic understanding of politics, grounded in human nature and social contracts (Hobbes, 1651/1996; Locke, 1689/1988). This transition paved the way for positivism, which gained prominence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the works of Auguste Comte and later political scientists who sought to apply scientific methods to political analysis.

Behavioralism in the mid-twentieth century represented a major philosophical revolution in political enquiry. It emphasized observable behavior, empirical measurement, and value neutrality, challenging traditional institutional and normative approaches (Easton, 1953). However, critics argued that behavioralism neglected meaning, power, and historical context, leading to the emergence of interpretivist and critical approaches.

Interpretivist scholars such as Max Weber emphasized the importance of understanding subjective meanings and social contexts in political analysis (Weber, 1949). Critical theorists, particularly those associated with the Frankfurt School, further challenged positivism by highlighting ideology, domination, and emancipation as central concerns of political enquiry (Horkheimer, 1972; Habermas, 1984).

More recently, post-positivist and post-structuralist approaches have questioned foundational assumptions about truth and objectivity, emphasizing discourse, language, and power relations

(Foucault, 1980). The literature thus reflects a continuous process of philosophical contestation and renewal within political enquiry.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the concept of paradigmatic change, drawing on Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions. Kuhn's argument that knowledge progresses through paradigm shifts rather than linear accumulation provides a useful lens for understanding philosophical revolutions in political enquiry (Kuhn, 1962).

Within this framework, each philosophical revolution is viewed as a response to the limitations of preceding paradigms. Positivism emerged as a reaction against speculative philosophy, while interpretivism and critical theory arose in response to the perceived inadequacies of positivist explanations. Post-positivist approaches further challenge the possibility of absolute objectivity, emphasizing reflexivity and the socially constructed nature of political knowledge.

This framework allows for an integrated analysis of how ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions evolve over time, shaping the questions political scholars ask and the answers they consider valid.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that philosophical revolutions have been decisive in redefining both the scope and purpose of political enquiry. Rather than representing a linear accumulation of knowledge, the evolution of political enquiry reflects a series of profound intellectual ruptures in which dominant assumptions about political reality, knowledge, and methodology were challenged and reconstituted. These revolutions have reshaped how political phenomena are conceptualized, how evidence is interpreted, and how the role of the political scholar is understood.

One of the most significant findings is that philosophical revolutions have progressively expanded the subject matter of political enquiry. Classical political philosophy, rooted in normative reasoning, focused primarily on questions of justice, authority, virtue, and the ideal political order. Politics was conceived as an ethical enterprise aimed at achieving the good life within the polis (Plato, 1998; Aristotle, 1996). While this approach provided enduring insights into political values and ideals, it offered limited tools for explaining empirical political behavior in increasingly complex societies. The rise of modernity and the Enlightenment marked a philosophical shift toward empiricism and rationalism, redefining politics as a phenomenon that could be studied systematically through observation and reason (Hobbes, 1996; Locke, 1988).

This shift reached its most explicit form in positivism and behavioralism, which sought to establish political enquiry as a value-neutral science modeled on the natural sciences. The behavioral revolution emphasized observable behavior, measurement, and causal explanation, thereby transforming political enquiry into a more empirical and methodologically rigorous discipline (Easton, 1953). The findings indicate that this philosophical revolution significantly strengthened the scientific credibility of political science, particularly in areas such as voting behavior, public

opinion, and institutional performance. However, it also narrowed the analytical focus by marginalizing normative concerns and subjective meanings, leading to critiques that political enquiry had become detached from real-world political struggles and moral questions.

Another key finding is that interpretivist and critical philosophical revolutions emerged largely as responses to the limitations of positivism. Interpretivist scholars argued that political actions cannot be understood solely through external observation, as they are embedded in social meanings, beliefs, and cultural contexts (Weber, 1949). This philosophical shift redirected political enquiry toward understanding how political actors interpret their own actions and institutions. The findings show that interpretivism enriched political enquiry by restoring attention to language, symbols, identity, and historical context, thereby offering deeper insights into political legitimacy, authority, and participation.

Critical theory represents a further philosophical revolution by explicitly challenging the assumption that political enquiry can or should be value neutral. Drawing on Marxist and Frankfurt School traditions, critical theorists argue that knowledge production is inseparable from power relations and ideological structures (Horkheimer, 1972; Habermas, 1984). The findings reveal that this approach transformed political enquiry into a tool for critique and emancipation, focusing on issues such as domination, inequality, and systemic injustice. Rather than merely explaining political reality, critical political enquiry seeks to expose hidden structures of power and contribute to social transformation. This has been particularly influential in studies of capitalism, democracy, development, and global governance.

Post-positivist and post-structuralist philosophical revolutions further complicate political enquiry by questioning the very foundations of truth, objectivity, and rationality. Scholars such as Foucault argue that political knowledge is produced through discourses that shape what can be known and said about power and governance (Foucault, 1980). The findings indicate that this perspective has shifted political enquiry toward analyzing discourse, narratives, and knowledge regimes, highlighting how political realities are socially constructed rather than merely discovered. This has had profound implications for fields such as international relations, security studies, and postcolonial politics, where dominant discourses often legitimize particular power arrangements.

At the same time, the findings reveal that philosophical revolutions have generated enduring debates and tensions within political enquiry. While methodological pluralism has enriched the discipline, it has also raised concerns about relativism and the fragmentation of political knowledge. Critics of post-positivism argue that excessive skepticism toward objectivity undermines the possibility of cumulative knowledge and policy relevance. Conversely, critics of positivism contend that rigid empirical approaches fail to capture the normative and interpretive dimensions of political life. These debates underscore that philosophical revolutions do not resolve foundational questions permanently but rather redefine them in new terms.

Importantly, the findings highlight the relevance of philosophical revolutions for contemporary political enquiry, particularly in non-Western and Global South contexts. Dominant philosophical paradigms developed in Western settings may inadequately capture local political realities, histories, and power structures. Critical and postcolonial approaches challenge Eurocentric assumptions and call for more context-sensitive political enquiry that reflects diverse experiences

and voices. This reinforces the argument that philosophical reflexivity is not merely an abstract concern but a practical necessity for inclusive and meaningful political research.

Overall, the findings and discussion demonstrate that philosophical revolutions have transformed political enquiry from a narrowly defined normative discipline into a diverse and contested field characterized by multiple paradigms and methodologies. Rather than weakening the discipline, this philosophical diversity has enhanced its analytical depth and relevance. However, it also places a greater responsibility on political scholars to be explicit and reflective about their philosophical assumptions. In PhD-level research, such reflexivity is essential for producing rigorous, credible, and socially relevant political knowledge.

Conclusion

Philosophical revolutions have been central to the development of political enquiry, continually reshaping its foundations, methods, and objectives. From classical normative philosophy to contemporary post-positivist approaches, each revolution reflects changing assumptions about political reality and knowledge. Rather than viewing these shifts as a linear progression, this paper has shown that political enquiry evolves through ongoing contestation and dialogue among competing philosophical paradigms.

Understanding these philosophical revolutions is essential for PhD-level research, as it enables scholars to situate their work within broader intellectual traditions and to make informed methodological choices. Ultimately, philosophical reflexivity strengthens political enquiry by fostering critical awareness of its assumptions and limitations.

Recommendations

It is recommended that political science and international relations scholars engage more explicitly with philosophical debates in their research design and analysis. Graduate training should emphasize philosophical foundations alongside methodological skills to promote reflective and rigorous scholarship. Additionally, greater openness to methodological and philosophical pluralism should be encouraged, particularly in research addressing complex and context-specific political issues in the Global South.

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