



Positivism and Ibn Khaldun's thought: bridging objectivity and social dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines two foundational approaches in social science: positivism and Ibn Khaldun's theoretical framework. Through comprehensive library research analyzing primary and secondary sources, we explore the ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions of both paradigms. Positivism, approaches social phenomena through rigid scientific methodologies, emphasizing empirical observation and quantitative measurement while pursuing objective, universal social laws. This perspective, while influential in modern social science development, often reduces complex social realities to measurable variables, neglecting subjective dimensions like values, culture, and historical contexts. In contrast, Ibn Khaldun's 14th-century framework, particularly his concept of *asabiyyah* (group solidarity), offers a more dynamic understanding of social phenomena by integrating empirical observation with philosophical reflection and historical context. This research demonstrates how Ibn Khaldun's approach acknowledges the multidimensional nature of social reality, including moral, spiritual, and cultural factors that remain influential in social development cycles. The comparative analysis reveals that while positivism provides methodological rigor, Ibn Khaldun's holistic perspective better captures the complexity and fluidity of social dynamics, making it particularly relevant for contemporary social analysis seeking to transcend mechanistic explanations. This study contributes to ongoing discourse about developing more integrative approaches in social science that balance empirical observation with contextual understanding.

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INTRODUCTION

Ontologically, social science is a discipline based on complex social realities that are highly dynamic and continuously evolving over time (Noor et al., 2025). From various perspectives, social science attempts to understand complex social phenomena, from studies of geography, history, economics, anthropology to politics (Abdullah, 2024). One approach that has greatly influenced the development of social science is positivism. Positivism emerged as a school of thought that laid the foundation for the development of modern science, including social science. Introduced by French philosopher Auguste Comte in the 19th century, positivism starts from the belief that the only valid knowledge is knowledge based on scientific method, through observation, experimentation, and empirical verification (Santos, 2010).

In the context of social science, positivism offers an approach that prioritizes the use of quantitative methods and objective analysis in studying social phenomena (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Positivists believe that human behavior and social structures can be scientifically analyzed (Shengyao et al., 2024), using tools such as statistics, surveys, and experiments. This approach seeks to find predictable patterns in social life phenomena (Alwassil et al., 2024), similar to how natural sciences discover universal laws through observation of natural phenomena (MR, 2019).

However, although positivism makes a major contribution to the development of social science, this approach also faces significant criticism. Many social thinkers consider positivism to oversimplify the complexity of social life by reducing rich and diverse social phenomena into numbers or data that can be empirically measured. One of the main criticisms of positivism is that it ignores the subjective dimensions of social life, such as values, norms, meanings, and culture, which are difficult to measure with a quantitative approach. Positivism is considered too focused on aspects that can be measured objectively, while the in-depth qualitative aspects of social life are often neglected, including positivism being assessed as too ignoring the complexity of social phenomena and simplifying them into empirical objects of study only. Meanwhile, what appears in reality may store many mysteries that can only be approached with a qualitative approach (Al-Eisawi, 2022). So it is not surprising that recently the term postpositivism approach has begun to emerge in social science, which can be said to be a new paradigm in social science (Ilham, 2018), with a fundamental difference being the recognition of metaphysical matters, while positivism tends to ignore metaphysical matters (MR, 2017; MR & Widiastuti, 2024).

In addition, positivism is also considered less sensitive to historical and structural contexts that influence social phenomena (Mahdi, 2015). The positivist approach often views social phenomena as static entities separate from broader historical dynamics. In fact, social life cannot be separated from the historical, political, and cultural contexts that influence it. In other words, positivism tends to ignore how power, ideology, and social conflict play a role in shaping social dynamics. Of course, this will contradict social science itself, which also contains many aspects as mentioned earlier (Baum, 2019). Therefore, many social thinkers argue that the positivist approach is too narrow to understand the entire complexity of social life.

On the other hand, classical thought in social science offers an alternative approach that is more comprehensive and holistic in analyzing society. One of the great thinkers who made an important contribution to the classical social science tradition was Ibn Khaldun, a Muslim historian and philosopher who lived in the 14th century. Through his famous work, *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun provided an in-depth analysis of the social, economic, and political dynamics that influence the development of human civilization (Alatas, 2006). Although Ibn Khaldun's thought emerged long before positivism, his ideas remain relevant in the context of modern social science (Ar-Rifa'i, 1999), especially in criticizing approaches that are too positivistic.

Ibn Khaldun's approach to analyzing society is not only limited to empirical observation but also involves philosophical reflection and a deeper understanding of how historical, cultural, and geographical factors influence social interaction (Dajani, 2015). One of the main concepts in Ibn Khaldun's thought is *asabiyyah*, or group solidarity, which according to him is the driving force behind the formation and decline of civilization. In Ibn Khaldun's view, human civilization develops through cycles of growth, glory, and decline, which are influenced by complex interactions between social solidarity, political power, and economic conditions (MR et al., 2024; Widodo et al., 2024).

Ibn Khaldun's approach shows that understanding society cannot rely only on empirical data that can be measured, but must also consider qualitative aspects that affect social life, such as togetherness, collective identity, and power dynamics. Therefore, Ibn Khaldun's thought offers an implicit critique of the positivist approach that tends to ignore these qualitative dimensions. Ibn Khaldun's approach also emphasizes the importance of considering structural and historical factors in social analysis, which are often ignored by positivism. Thus, it is not strange that Ibn Khaldun is more deserving of the title "Father of Sociology", not Auguste Comte whose lifespan was very distant from Ibn Khaldun (Efendi, 2024).

In addition to its relevance in the context of criticism of positivism, Ibn Khaldun's thought also makes an important contribution to the discussion of a more holistic approach in modern social science (Erliana & Normawati, 2024). In recent decades, many social scientists have begun to abandon the rigid positivist approach and begun to adopt a more inclusive approach, which involves qualitative and contextual dimensions in social analysis. This approach is often known as the post-positivist approach (Assalihee et al., 2024), which recognizes the limitations of positivism and attempts to integrate various perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of society. Thus, there is a need to analyze Ibn Khaldun's thought in the context of classical and modern social science, and explore how his ideas can provide criticism of the dominant positivist approach in social science. Additionally, this paper will also look at the relevance of Ibn Khaldun's thought in contemporary social science discourse, especially in the context of developing a more inclusive and holistic approach to understanding society.

The paper's contribution to future science lies in its demonstration that the path forward in social research may involve recovering and reintegrating insights from classical traditions rather than simply developing entirely new methodologies. Ibn Khaldun's work suggests that the apparent tension between scientific objectivity and contextual understanding may be resolvable through approaches that embrace complexity rather than seeking to reduce it. This has profound implications for how we conceptualize social science education and research training. Rather than viewing classical Islamic scholarship as merely historical curiosity, your work suggests it offers substantive methodological resources for addressing contemporary challenges in social research. The post-positivist turn thus becomes not just a critique of earlier approaches, but an opportunity to rediscover and revitalize intellectual traditions that were marginalized during positivism's dominance.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses the library research method, which aims to collect, review, and analyze various literature relevant to the research topic. Library research was chosen because this topic requires in-depth exploration of various theoretical thoughts that have been developed in the literature. According to Creswell (2012), library research allows researchers to access knowledge that has accumulated in previous works without the need to collect field data. In this study, researchers focus on literature related to positivism in social science, Ibn Khaldun's thought, and the development of classical and modern social science. The data collection process begins by searching for key works, such as Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, as well as literature discussing positivism theory, one of which was developed by Auguste Comte.

Furthermore, in the process of reading literature, an in-depth study of key concepts from the collected literature is carried out. Fuad et al., (2022) explains that literature review is a crucial stage in qualitative research, where relevant literature is critically analyzed to find similarities, differences, or relationships between ideas. Researchers in this case try to understand how positivism and Ibn Khaldun's thought shape the social science framework and identify relationships or potential conflicts between them. After the literature is analyzed, the next stage is data compilation. Bazeley & Jackson, (2013) emphasizes that in library research, it is important for researchers to systematically compile and classify the data obtained so that the analysis can be more directed.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Positivism and the Concept of Objectivity in Social Science

Positivism views that science is the only valid knowledge, and historical facts that may be objects of knowledge. Positivism is rooted in empiricism, which strongly emphasizes the senses in determining something or an object of study. In other words, positivism rejects the existence of all forces or subjects behind facts, rejects all use of methods outside those used to examine facts. In the context of social science, it strongly emphasizes the importance of empirical methods in understanding social phenomena (Brauer et al., 2023). For positivists, society can be studied in the same way that natural science studies physical phenomena, namely through systematic observation, quantitative measurement, and experiments aimed at producing universal and objective social laws (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this view, social phenomena are no different from natural phenomena, because both are subject to causal laws that can be discovered and measured and can be sensed (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

Auguste Comte, as the main figure of positivism, saw that the progress of social science must go through the application of rigorous scientific methods, where social theories must be tested through direct observation and repeatable empirical evidence, because they are considered to have natural science mechanisms (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In other words, this school claims that everything that is metaphysical or abstract is not considered to have epistemological value, so it must be ignored in research (Fricker, 2007). Adherents of positivism believe that there is little difference (if any) between social science and natural science, because society and social life run according to existing rules (S. Kurniawan et al., 2019). In positivism, social facts are objective and can be separated from individual values or the subjective views of researchers. This view was born from the ambition to make social science equivalent to natural sciences, such as physics or biology, which are based on experiments and observation (Cajete, 2000). Comte's thoughts on positivism were later developed by subsequent thinkers such as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Popper. They brought the positivism approach to the realm of sociology and other social sciences, thus providing a foundation for the development of social research methods that focus on quantitative data, hypothesis testing, and empirical modeling (Arif, 2020).

This positivism has several main principles that underlie its application in social science, including: 1) emphasizing the importance of objectivity in social research. Researchers are expected to distance themselves from personal bias, value preferences, and subjective interpretations in order to produce valid and reliable knowledge (Geertz, 2008); 2) positivism believes that the only way to obtain valid knowledge is through direct observation of facts that can be measured and verified with human senses (E. Kurniawan, 2022); 3) positivism seeks to explain social phenomena by looking for the underlying cause-effect relationships. In other words, positivism aims to identify variables that influence a social phenomenon and formulate universal laws that can explain interactions between these variables (Ro'fah et al., 2021); 4) the importance of making generalizations and predictions, which indeed is one of the characteristics of science today. In this case, researchers must look for patterns or laws that are general and apply to various different social contexts. In addition, positivism also expects that existing research results can be used to predict behavior or social phenomena in the future; and 5) the main method in practice of data collection using quantitative research methods such as surveys, experiments, and statistics becomes the main method used to collect and analyze data. This is because quantitative methods allow more accurate and objective measurement of social variables.

However, the principles mentioned above also turn out to be the turning point of criticisms that begin to question the use of the positivism approach in social science, some of which are: 1) the neglect of social facts. Positivism is considered to ignore the subjective experiences and interpretations of individuals, whereas every person's behavior in the private or social sphere still requires an understanding of motives, values, and perceptions that cannot be measured objectively (Aspiranti et al., 2021); 2) positivism seems to forget that between natural science and social phenomena are often influenced by cultural, historical, and locality contexts that are very specific. This makes it difficult to formulate universal social laws as expected by positivism. Many social researchers argue that the positivist approach that tries to generalize research results oversimplifies the complexity of social life; 3) confusion in the use of measurement using a quantitative approach. Because in social

problems, most are difficult to measure with an approach, such as emotions, norms, or values, difficult to measure quantitatively. Critics argue that this approach ignores social dimensions that cannot be measured or seen empirically. In addition, generally the quantitative approach tends to be based on assumptions. If assumptions do not match reality or deviate greatly, then their ability cannot be guaranteed and even misleading (Astuti et al., 2020); and 5) the limitations of positivism in understanding social change which is indeed dynamic (Rohner & Khaleque, 2012). Whereas positivism with the principle of equating with natural science using static formulas will become less relevant. In addition, social phenomena also sometimes present unexpected things, or spontaneously appear, then positivism will fail to capture that phenomenon.

Ibn Khaldun and the Concept of Asabiyyah in Social Dynamics

Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) was a Muslim scholar whose scholarly reputation is recognized in various parts of the world to this day. This is confirmed by the fact that the theories and thoughts he initiated are still tested and widely studied by scholars both East and West, Muslim or non-Muslim scholars. He had expertise in several fields until he became known as a thinker, judge, state administrator, sociologist, and historian as well as various other fields of knowledge. Ibn Khaldun's popularity peaked through his monumental work, namely the book *al-Ibar fi Diwan al-Mubtada wa al-Khabar fi ayyam al-Arab wa al-ajam wa al-Barbar wa Man Asarahum min Dhiwai al-Sultan al-Akbar*, a work on general history, as well as the theory of history that he wrote in the introduction to that book, namely *Muqaddimah* (Arini & Umami, 2019).

Ibn Khaldun, who lived several centuries before the emergence of positivism, developed a different view on how to understand society. For example, in the book *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun introduced various complex concepts to explain social dynamics, one of which is the concept of *asabiyyah*. *Asabiyyah* can be translated as "social solidarity" or "cohesive force" that binds a group of people and becomes the main motor in the progress and decline of civilization (Mahdi, 2015). Ibn Khaldun's idea of society is illustrated by the natural nature of humans who always live in groups, and need each other, and are unable to live alone without needing help from others (*zoon politicon*). So from these natural characteristics and accompanied by the same goals from each human, then *ashabiyah* is formed among them. This social unity is formed starting from the smallest group to the largest group of humans (Wahidmurni et al., 2024). In addition, Ibn Khaldun also understands that society is dynamic, not stagnant or uniform. Society always experiences change and diversity, where each group has different historical roots, as well as unique norms, values, and rules. Each society also has a collectively embraced identity and ideology. Generally, societies that have known civilization tend to be oriented towards progress (Van Dijck et al., 2017).

Ibn Khaldun emphasized that social change and civilizational development do not occur in a vacuum or within a framework of fixed laws as assumed by positivism. Instead, social change is influenced by various factors, including the strength of social solidarity (*asabiyyah*) that exists in a group. According to Ibn Khaldun, societies that have strong *asabiyyah* tend to be more able to rise and build advanced civilizations. Conversely, when *asabiyyah* weakens, that group or civilization will experience decline (Lalahwa et al., 2024). Although it must be admitted that the existence of this *asabiyah* concept can have positive and negative meanings. It has a positive meaning because it leads to the concept of brotherhood. In the history of Islamic civilization in particular, this concept can form social solidarity of Islamic society to be able to work together, by putting aside the existence of self-interest, and fulfilling obligations to others. This spirit, in the end, can encourage the creation of social harmony and become a very powerful force in supporting the rise and progress of civilization. However, it will have a negative meaning, if it actually causes blind loyalty and fanaticism that is not based on aspects of truth (Nurtanto et al., 2021).

The implications of this *asabiyah* concept apply generally in several aspects, for example in the context of character formation, the social environment can also lead to the formation of good or bad character. That with a positive environment will support the development of good character, while a negative environment has the potential to push someone towards deviant behavior (Sagala et al., 2024). Then in the economic context, Ibn Khaldun believed that the economic progress of a country

is strongly influenced by the extent to which its society has solidarity and cooperation, for example in economic sectors based on togetherness, such as Islamic cooperatives and microfinance institutions. These institutions facilitate cooperation between individuals in a community to create shared prosperity, which in turn supports more inclusive economic development (Hussain et al., 2022).

Of course, this concept of *asabiyyah* is very different from the positivism approach that views society mechanistically and seeks to find fixed laws that govern social behavior. Ibn Khaldun classified society as urban society that settles and Bedouin society that moves around. Geographical conditions as well as dwellings between settled people (urban society) and those who are always wandering (Bedouin society) do indeed ultimately lead to differences in law, education, and others (Alatas, 2006). According to Ibn Khaldun, urban dwellers are often involved in a life full of luxury and become easily influenced by passion. This makes them tend to have bad morals. The way to improve morals becomes increasingly difficult, because moral badness closes their hearts from goodness. They are accustomed to violating values and norms, so they lose the fear of doing actions that are contrary to moral values that prevail in society. Meanwhile, Bedouin society only deals with the world to the extent of fulfilling basic needs and far from luxurious life. Although they may commit violations, the number is far fewer compared to urban society. Therefore, Bedouin society is easier to 'control' compared to urban society, which is more difficult to accept advice because their souls have been controlled by passion (Jaya et al., 2023).

Positivism and Ibn Khaldun's Thought (Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology)

In general, both positivism and Ibn Khaldun's thought have the same goal, namely trying to explain social reality, but both are very different in viewing the world, then how knowledge is obtained, and how that knowledge should be used. Here is a comparison between positivism and Ibn Khaldun's thought in understanding social reality viewed from the perspective of ontology, epistemology, and axiology.

Ontology

Ontology relates to questions about what exists, namely the nature of reality and existence (Maryanti et al., 2021). In positivism, reality is viewed as something objective, independent of human perception or consciousness. Positivism emphasizes that this world consists of facts that can be observed empirically and measured. These facts are considered fixed, stable, and can be governed by universal natural laws (Cajete, 2000). Therefore, for positivism, reality is something that is entirely physical and can be tested through scientific methods. Metaphysical or spiritual elements are set aside because they are considered not scientifically verifiable. In contrast, ontology in Ibn Khaldun's thought is far more complex. He recognizes that reality does not only include empirical things but also includes social, political, cultural, and even moral elements (Ahebwa et al., 2016). Ibn Khaldun sees social reality as something formed by social forces working in human history. He put forward the concept of *asabiyyah* (group solidarity) which plays an important role in social dynamics and the advancement of civilization (Strogatz, 2018). In this case, Ibn Khaldun does not only focus on physical and objective elements but also on non-material factors such as social relations, solidarity, religion, and morality. For him, these factors are part of social reality that cannot be ignored if we want to understand human civilization.

Epistemology

Epistemology relates to how humans acquire knowledge and how we know what we know (Butterworth, 2001). Positivism strongly emphasizes the scientific method as the only legitimate way to acquire knowledge. According to positivism, knowledge is obtained through empirical observation, experimentation, and verifiable measurements. This method prioritizes data that can be measured and tested through repetition to get objective results. Knowledge is considered valid if it can be proven empirically and free from subjective interpretation. Therefore, positivism tends to ignore philosophical speculation, intuition, or traditions that cannot be tested through scientific methods (Dajani, 2015). Ibn Khaldun, on the other hand, has a richer view of how knowledge is acquired. He recognizes the importance of empirical observation but emphasizes that to understand

social reality and human history, we must also consider historical, cultural, and spiritual factors. For him, empirical observation alone is not enough to understand the complexity of social dynamics. Therefore, Ibn Khaldun combines empirical methods with philosophical and historical approaches. He emphasizes the importance of understanding historical context in interpreting social phenomena and recognizes that humans are part of a broader history, where non-empirical factors such as morality and religion influence human behavior (Efendi, 2024). This epistemological difference shows that positivism emphasizes empirical verification and scientific objectivity, while Ibn Khaldun approaches knowledge with philosophical reflection that takes into account social and moral contexts. Ibn Khaldun acknowledges that empirical observation is important, but he also believes that knowledge about human society requires a deeper interpretation of historical and social dynamics.

Axiology

Axiology relates to values, especially how knowledge is used and what the purpose of that knowledge is (Taylor, 2005). In positivism, knowledge is considered neutral in value. Positivism emphasizes that knowledge must be free from moral, political, or ethical influences (Tronto, 1993). The task of scientists is to describe reality as it is, without providing moral or ethical judgments. Therefore, knowledge in the positivist framework is descriptive. It seeks to discover universal natural laws that apply without the intervention of subjective values or particular moral views. Scientific research results in positivism are often used as a basis to develop technology or public policy, but there is no requirement that knowledge must promote a particular moral value. However, in Ibn Khaldun's thought, knowledge and the study of society cannot be separated from moral and ethical values (Erliana & Normawati, 2024). He argues that the purpose of knowledge is not only to understand society but also to promote justice, welfare, and social stability. Ibn Khaldun emphasizes that moral values, such as justice, are an important foundation in maintaining the stability of civilization. According to him, the collapse of a society or civilization is often caused by moral deviation, injustice, and corruption. Therefore, social science must function not only as a tool to understand social dynamics but also as a guide to improve and maintain a just social order.

Table 1. Comparison of Positivism and Ibn Khaldun's Thought in Social Science

Aspect	Positivism	Ibn Khaldun's Thought
<i>Ontology</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reality is viewed as objective and independent of the observer. - Only what can be empirically observed is considered reality. - Ignores metaphysical and spiritual aspects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reality includes empirical and non-empirical (spiritual, moral, social) aspects. - Society is seen as the result of interaction between physical and non-physical factors. - Considers the influence of social values, morality, and history in social reality.
<i>Epistemology</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowledge is obtained through scientific methods based on observation, experimentation, and empirical verification. - Emphasizes objectivity and repeatable measurement. - Ignores knowledge that cannot be empirically tested (such as morality or religion). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowledge is obtained through a combination of empirical methods and philosophical reflection. - The importance of understanding socio-historical context in social phenomena. - Recognizes non-material values, such as spirituality and morality, in the process of seeking knowledge.
<i>Axiology</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowledge is considered neutral to moral or political values. - Focuses on description of reality as it is without ethical considerations. - Knowledge only functions to explain, not to provide moral direction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowledge is closely related to moral and ethical values. - Knowledge aims to promote justice and maintain social stability. - Knowledge is used normatively to improve society and avoid moral collapse.

Based on the comparative analysis presented in Table 1, this research contributes a novel perspective by systematically juxtaposing two fundamentally different philosophical approaches to

social science through the comprehensive lens of ontology, epistemology, and axiology. While previous studies have examined positivism and Ibn Khaldun's thought separately, this work uniquely demonstrates how Ibn Khaldun's 14th-century framework anticipates and addresses many contemporary critiques of positivist reductionism by integrating empirical observation with moral, spiritual, and socio-historical dimensions. The novelty lies in revealing how Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabiyyah* offers a dynamic, multidimensional understanding of social reality that transcends the binary limitations of purely objective versus subjective approaches, proposing instead a holistic methodology that maintains scientific rigor while acknowledging the irreducible complexity of human societies. This comparative framework provides contemporary social scientists with a theoretical foundation for developing more inclusive research paradigms that can bridge the gap between empirical precision and contextual understanding, offering a pathway beyond the traditional positivist-interpretivist divide that has long characterized social science methodology debates.

CONCLUSION

Positivism emphasizes the importance of objective scientific methods, empirical observation, and quantitative measurement in understanding social phenomena. This approach views society like physical phenomena that can be studied through measurable data, with the aim of discovering universal social laws. However, this approach is often criticized for oversimplifying the complexity of social life, ignoring subjective dimensions such as values, culture, norms, as well as historical and moral factors that cannot be measured quantitatively. Ibn Khaldun offers a more comprehensive and holistic alternative in understanding society. He not only pays attention to empirical data but also recognizes the importance of historical, cultural, moral, and power factors. The concept of *asabiyyah* (group solidarity) put forward by Ibn Khaldun shows that the strength of social solidarity plays an important role in the progress and decline of civilization. Ibn Khaldun emphasizes that society is dynamic, not stagnant, and cannot be understood only with a rigid scientific approach. From this comparison, the positivism approach is considered too narrow to capture the entire complex social dynamics. In contrast, Ibn Khaldun's thought offers a richer and deeper way of analyzing society, especially because he takes into account moral, historical, and social solidarity aspects that are important factors in social change. This approach is more relevant in the context of social life that continues to develop and change.

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