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The normative origins of positive theories: Ideology and accounting thought

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Abstract

“Positive”, “descriptive” and “empirical” theories are frequently promoted as being more realistic, factual and relevant than normative approaches. This paper argues that “positive” or “empirical” theories are also normative and value-laden in that they usually mask a conservative ideological bias in their accounting policy implications. We argue that labels such as “positive” and “empirical” emanate from a Realist theory of knowledge; a wholly inadequate epistemological basis for a social science. We use an alternative philosophical position (of Historical Materialism) together with a historical review of the concept of value to illustrate first, the partisan role played by theories and theoreticians in questions concerning social control, social conflict and social order; second, the ideologically conservative underpinnings of positive accounting theories; and last, some indications of alternative (radical) approaches to accounting policy.



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