

# The Poverty of the Poverty of Historicism

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IT is not easy to see what kind of doctrine Professor Popper is trying to pillory under the title "historicism." The main beliefs of historicists are supposed to be defined with the greatest care and objectivity in the first two chapters, in preparation for their annihilation in the last two, but out of all this nothing like a single coherent doctrine emerges. Professor Popper's attempts to characterize the underlying connecting thread are extremely slap-dash and often question-begging. On page 45, however, we are brought to the "very heart of the body of argument" which is to be called historicism: "Social science is nothing but history: this is the thesis." The whole mountain of moral and philosophical error is thus to be built on a methodological mistake, on an incorrect view of the nature of scientific method and the logical relation between the proportions of science.

Before attempting to make clearer, if we can, what the historicist sin really is, we should try to maintain a sense of perspective by naming some of the more notorious figures in Professor Popper's rogues' gallery. Plato, Hegel and Marx, of course, figure prominently, as does, if we can judge from the dedication, Hitler. These are of course the incorrigibles. J. S. Mill and Comte also suffered from a mild dose of the disease, but are considered basically recuperable, and their many methodological merits will be weighed in the scale in their favour. Finally, Karl Mannheim is taken as the prime exhibit of historical error, and his "Man and Society" is taken as the basic text. "Historicism" can perhaps be defined, as a first approximation, as that doctrine which all these held in common, if indeed they held anything in common at all.

One thing that they do have in common, and this is perhaps the basis of Professor Popper's argument, is that all the incorrigibles at least, are the habitual whipping boys of a certain negative liberalism, which passionately rejects any form of humanism unless it be the abstract *laissez-faire* defence of formal freedom, as both metaphysical

(here untenable intellectually) and implicitly totalitarian (here untenable morally). This interpretation is, if anything, reinforced by the fact that Professor Hayek's work is quoted with approval throughout. In its most hysterical form this brand of liberalism fastens on any movement of ideas which does not accept human nature as it is, as a conspiracy for the total enslavement of man to brutal dictatorship. The clamour of moral indignation becomes so loud that rational discussion can no longer be carried on. This "argument from the concentration camp" has almost come to replace traditional forms of argument in certain circles in this country whenever ethics or political philosophy are on the agenda, and Professor Popper cannot resist indulging in it from time to time in the "Poverty of Historicism." Thus the difference between the piecemeal political reformer and the radical wholesale reformer is carefully defined (p. 69) in a question-begging way as that between one "who can attack his problem with an open mind as to the scope of the reform" and one who is prejudiced *a priori* against certain hypotheses and thus "violates the principles of scientific method." In particular, the Utopian (the wholesale reformer) must neglect the "uncertainty of the human factor." Thus he will be forced to use totalitarian methods to bring his intractable human material under control.

But we cannot do justice to Professor Popper until we can unravel the constellation of presuppositions which make such an extraordinary series of inferences seem plausible. The faith in piecemeal reform, or "piecemeal social technology," is justified by its supposed scientific merit. If we study certain restricted problems we shall more easily be able to submit our theories to definite standards like clarity and practical testability. In order to establish laws we must fasten on repeatable events (e.g. rising and falling prices), which can give us a sure empirical base. If we insist on trying to project reforms and hence make theories of society as a whole, we shall immediately be in a realm where the

same standards cannot be applied.

Now this sounds plausible enough until we ask ourselves what the real basis for the distinction between the "piecemeal" and "wholesale" approaches is. The obvious answer, that one deals with only part of society, the other with the whole, won't do, as Professor Popper himself sees. He does not exclude from the category of the "piecemeal," constitutional reform or a series of reforms inspired by a single general tendency (p. 68). How then can we characterize the difference? We are left really without a clear answer, for it is just here that Professor Popper takes off on the anti-totalitarian tack which was cited above, which simply makes his argument true by definition.

We can perhaps find a clue to the distinction on p. 64, where we are told that "piecemeal technology" is not concerned with "ends." This approach is thus neutral between all political aims. The technologist is the civil servant who simply tells us what is possible, what are the means open to us. In this his method differs from that of "Utopianism" and "Historicism," which both regard social science as important for the clarification and shaping of ends. Thus one distinctive feature of Professor Popper's approach is that it presupposes a rigid means-ends dichotomy in social science. I say "presupposes," because it is nowhere explicitly argued for, in spite of the fact that this dichotomy is under suspicion even in economics, by far the most exact of the social sciences. This suspicion is by no means dispelled when we examine some of the examples provided by Professor Popper of the finds of such a neutral technology, e.g. "You cannot have full employment without inflation"; "You cannot introduce a political reform without strengthening the opposing forces to a degree roughly in ratio to the scope of the reform."

But perhaps we could admit that Professor Popper's choice of examples is unfortunate and yet that his case stands. There are obviously "neutral" social laws, for instance in economics. The problem is:

are they the important ones that we want to know in projecting reform? They may be if we are attempting to reform the Post Office, but how about reform of the rent control laws or of the educational system? If a neutral technology is to lay bare the possible and the impossible in these fields, without touching on ends, we must find "neutral" definitions for such key concepts as "community," "insecurity," "culture," "equality," etc., something that no one has yet succeeded in doing. For the findings of "technology," to serve their purpose, would have to be couched partly in concepts of this kind, unless we really believe that the only relevant factors are to be found in the supply curve for landlord's repairs or the demand for science graduates. But to believe this is certainly not to be neutral.

The concepts which are troublesome to Professor Popper's neutral technology all fall in a certain area fairly closely related to questions which can roughly be characterized as about "human nature." The liberal faith in a neutral science of society usually and easily goes along with the belief that human nature is basically unchanging, that these troublesome concepts can therefore be fixed in some established doctrine about human needs and aims. Professor Popper seems to be no exception to this rule. On page 70 we are informed that those who state that their political reforms require a "transformation of man" admit failure from the start. For unless we accept man as he is, with his aims and aversions exactly as they are, we can have no criterion for judging whether a reform is good or bad. We must presumably therefore accept whatever the majority of our fellow citizens vote for, that is, not just accept it as part of the democratic process, but accept it as right, for we shall have no other way of judging "scientifically" what is right, but by counting heads. I am sure Professor Popper doesn't want to go to such quietistic extremes, but the question surely requires a more subtle analysis than it is given, if we are to avoid drawing this conclusion.

So far the piecemeal approach has been distinguished from its opponent by two presuppositions, that one can distinguish clearly means from ends in social science, and that human nature is relatively unchanging. There is, however, also a supposed logical or methodological distinction which is decisive. The Utopian approach and historicist approaches generally are characterized by "holism," i.e. an attempt to treat the subject, for instance social groups, as wholes, not as simple aggregates of their parts. This method is held to be inherently vicious and to be based on a logical error. Professor Popper begins (p. 70) by distinguishing two senses in which "whole" can be used, (a) "to denote the totality of all the properties or aspects of a thing . . ." and (b) "certain special properties or aspects of the thing," that is what may roughly be called its "gestalt" properties, e.g. "regularities of structure found in certain things such as organisms, electrical fields, or machines." Now he seems to accept sense (b) as quite unexceptionable, but it turns out that this is mainly a tactical retreat so as to concentrate fire on (a); for at the end of the section (pp. 82-83) he takes back all the kind words he had bestowed on the "Gestalt approach"—to the extent that one wonders if he understands what is involved. Thus he informs us that the distinction between the Gestalt and the atomistic approaches is not very

significant since the latter approach also accepts that wholes are not mere sums of their parts—it also takes into account the relations of the parts to each other. But the point of the "Gestalt approach" is not just that the whole is more "than the mere sum of its parts," it is that certain things can be said of the whole which it doesn't make sense to say of the parts. The parts of a red house may be red or not red, but the beats of a rhythm aren't in waltz time and can't be. Now in certain cases the properties in this class may be very important in the context of a given study.

And this is surely what is claimed, in, for instance Marxism, when the concept of the class is introduced. For, certain things can be said of classes, which cannot be said of the individuals in those classes. The behaviour of the class can't be explained by the sum of the behaviour of the individual members *unless* we describe the individual's behaviour in terms which express his role in the larger unit of the class. This is the real force of the claim, that the "whole is more than the sum of the parts."

This is obviously the view that Popper is combating, and yet his misunderstanding of the Gestalt approach vitiates his whole argument, for his attack on the other sense of "whole," supposedly the crucial one for "holism," is completely irrelevant. He points out, truly, that we can never characterize the whole, if we mean to describe it in all its aspects at once, for the logical reason that description need never reach an end, we can always find a new way of describing a given event or object. But anti-atomistic social scientists do not generally make absurd claims of this kind, which are to be found perhaps only in extreme mystical corruptions of Hegelianism. The attack is thus delivered against a straw man, who is, however, particularly convenient since he justifies another excursus into the Totalitarian Menace. The desire to see society as a whole in this sense is linked of course to a desire to embrace the whole in one totalitarian grip, so that once more logical errors and reprehensible ambitions are shown to go neatly hand in hand.

## War in the abstract

The atomistic prejudices of Popper can be seen throughout, e.g. in his defence of "methodological individualism," a high and liberal-sounding name for the same thing (pp. 135-136). Our "models" whereby we try to understand social interaction are purely theoretical abstractions. What is real, are individuals. Even "the war" or "the army" are abstract concepts, strange as this may sound to some. What is concrete is the many who are killed; or the men and women in uniform, etc. (p. 135). The use of terms like "theoretical constructions," "abstract object" is strange here. In a sense all concepts are "theoretical" and "abstract," but plainly this is not the sense meant. We can understand how one would call the concepts of mathematics "abstract" as against empirical concepts and those of atomic physics "theoretical," but to class "army" and "state" in this category one must accept a far-reaching metaphysical atomism as well as a thorough-going nominalism. Popper admits to the latter, without however justifying it; he never states explicitly his adherence to the former, which surely needs justification. Why is the soldier more ontologically "real" than the army?

Another logical attack is mounted against the historicist attempt to discover the laws of historical development. Popper distinguishes between a law which simply asserts a universal correlation between classes of events (sections 27 and 28), and an exploration of a particular series of events, which must invoke several laws, and also some particular existential statements, i.e. statements outlining the initial conditions. Now the course of history is a particular series of events, and thus cannot be explained entirely by laws. We must also fill in some details about the initial conditions which together with the laws will allow us to derive the actual trend of events. Historicism is accused of a belief in "absolute trends," i.e. trends which can be explained purely in terms of laws, without specifying the initial conditions. But this is just another logical bogey-man. It is perfectly permissible to use "law" in a loose sense without committing oneself to a belief in these strange "absolute trends." If someone asked me about the Second Law of Thermodynamics I should probably talk in a vague unscientific way about the expanding universe, the sun's cooling and so on. It would be more correct logical form to talk entirely in general terms, be they rude or refined, and to avoid mentioning particular events. These can only be derived from the law if we fill in certain initial conditions. It is therefore misleading to answer a question about the *law* in these terms. But this is hysterical purism. We can often learn to understand a law in its application easier than we can in its pure form, and we can grasp it in its application without perhaps being able to specify exactly what initial conditions are involved, but this doesn't mean that we believe in some mythical "absolute trends," which permit us to make "unconditional prophesies." We are not necessarily committing the error involved in the ontological proof and deducing existence from essence, or postulating a necessary being. There are difficulties involved in say, Hegel and Marx's conceptions of necessity in history, but they do not lie at this primitive logical level.

"Historicism" thus emerges from Professor Popper's book as a vaguely mischaracterized straw-man, a compendium of simple logical errors and complex impermissible desires. This is not to say that the issues in the book are unreal. On the contrary. Popper is giving a statement of a widely held political view, or rather of the methodology which presupposes this view. It is the view of liberal non-interventionism, the apology for an utterly negative view of freedom. It is important that this view can appear to so many as being objective, neutral, as though a plea for neutrality on the issues that seem vital to others, puts one somehow above the struggle. But the idea is deep-rooted as a moral and political attitude, as a metaphysical, as an interpretation of traditional political philosophy, particularly those brands loosely called "historicism." In this sense even the misunderstandings are significant. This complex of opinions and attitudes is so widely held today that it begins to seem highly plausible just at the most dubious points. Professor Popper has given a persuasive and, in parts, cogent statement of what appears to many as common sense, and therefore right. This book, no less than "the Open Society," should be read by all who are interested in political philosophy and the justification of political action.