

The Poverty of Historicism

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This book-length essay is a thinly veiled attack on Marxism, although the word Marxism hardly appears in the whole essay. The notion of 'Historicism' is due to Popper himself, ostensibly to distil a badly understood one to give it form and substance through a most lucid presentation, only to demolish it unconditionally and totally. There are dangers with such an approach of apparent generosity, namely that of constructing a man of straw, so easy to knock down.

There are after Galileo and Newton embarrassing differences between a science of the natural world and that of the social, prediction being the most obvious. While the movements of celestial bodies can be as well traced into their antiquity as well as predicted into futurity with amazing accuracy, there are no such feats concerning the sublunar bodies. In fact a simple logical argument easily dispels even the possibility of such endeavours, as any social prediction involves self-reference, and thus undercuts the very basis of the initial prediction. (A simple example is to make a prediction of the development of the stockmarket and to make that publicly known.) Similarly quantitative methods so successful, not to say essential, in the realm of natural science, simply makes no sense in a social setting, and when nevertheless been forced to do so, the result is risible, equivalent to adding meters to liters (and taking the square roots of the results). Those social scientists who nevertheless feel upon themselves to literally emulate the methods of the natural scientists, find themselves with the labels of 'scientism' affixed to their backs¹. Faced by such overwhelming odds, there is a movement of tactical withdrawal, of eschewing the methods of natural science altogether, in particular the reliance not only on quantitative reasoning but the notion of universal laws altogether. Instead stressing the continual Heraclitan change and the futility of analysis, stressing that a whole must be approached 'holistically', because a whole is more than the sum of its parts. It is this general withdrawal that Popper is out to attack, arguing that there is after all a general scientific approach, covering the natural as well as the social world, based on empiricism, or more specifically the possibility of falsification, which is Poppers well-known philosophical trade-mark. It teaches us that we do not learn about the world by passive observation and the subsequent inferring regularities, but through active penetration through question and hypothesis, testing and guessing, and learning by trial and error just as in Darwinian evolution as opposed to the Lamarckian variety. Thus in particular the defeatist approach of so called historicism is inferior in its ultimate lack of fertility.

The nature of a universal law, is according to Popper to tell us not what is possible, but what is impossible. Laws simply cuts down the potential. To the claim of the historicists that laws are not universal, that each period and culture has its own laws, and that history

¹ Popper does however make the caveat that economics is the one exception among the social sciences in this regard. Something that undercuts his main thrust and thereby the overall power of his sarcasm

proceeds by a succession of periods, each one new in its essentials, not just a rearranging of known components (as supposedly in the natural world), Popper counters that this is timidity. Once you make qualification of laws, they cease to be falsifiable and hence become uninteresting and ultimately infertile. Newton had no way of knowing whether the law of gravitation worked the same way out among the stars as here on earth; he simply so assumed and be damned the consequences. The point to be made is that no one has verified that the law of gravity works on say Sirius the same way as it does here, but that assuming so we are enabled to work out a rich tapestry of consequences, which so far have not been damned, but still corroborate each other beautifully².

As to the holistic approach, Popper has nothing but scorn. Even the most inconsequential of phenomena in the world, like the fluttering of the wings of a butterfly squirting momentarily around a flower, does generate a literal infinity of subsidiary phenomena, which all of course, no matter how abstract and obtuse, must be taken into account if ever there is a holistic ambition. From a holistic perspective there is thus simply no distinction in complexity between the natural world and the social (something which is usually adduced to the later to cover the embarrassment of its shortcomings), as both by necessity being infinitely so. And even without the holistic confusion, Popper maintains that the generally perceived disparity in complexity is misleading and arises because of skewed comparisons between artificially simplified experiments in the natural sciences and natural social situations. In real life the natural forces present a most complex picture, and only through the judicious selection of relevant aspects are we able to treat a natural phenomenon. I do, however, think that Popper is a bit disingenious here, after all in the natural sciences there is the possibility, at least in principle, of reduction to simple features, as in meteorology, while the actual computations may turn out to be unfeasible, ironically exemplified by the most minute variations of the proverbial butterfly above³. The world can never be known in all its aspects, as this would also involve the knowledge itself⁴, thus all knowledge of the world has to be selective, and the selection contingent upon the situation or the problem at hand. Any question, any problem, concerns the world in only one aspect, and that aspect becomes clear when contemplated, thus in particular there is no such thing as an unprejudiced observation, every observation is made on behalf of something. Theories makes observations, not the other way around. And an observation is when all is said and done nothing but a selection. Also history, concerned with specifics not generalities (because they are above history), can never be unspecific and comprehensive, but must always be viewed through a specific perspective, thus ignoring everything but the most relevant to that particular perspective. In this regard historicism, especially the

² The knowledgable reader knows of course that there are some inherent contradictions in the Newtonian picture, the strange precession of the orbit of Mercury being historically the most tangible. Yet for all engineering purposes Newtonian celestial mechanics is perfectly adequate, as is incidentally the dogma that the sun moves around the earth.

³ At the time Popper wrote his essay, such hyperbolic aspects had not become fashionable as they would be in the 70's, although they had already been explained by Poincaré, thus although he briefly touches upon them, he does not elaborate.

⁴ once again Popper is resorting to purely logical reasonings, reminiscent in fact of the Cantorian diagonal principle and its more popularly known manifestation - the Russell paradox.

Marxistic variety, appears very close to the views of Popper. But Popper begs to differ, to him, Marxist theory is not a theory, it cannot be falsified, while corroboration is always easy to find for almost any phenomenon⁵; and its view of history as a struggle of class and the control of the means of production, is but an interpretation, one as valid as any other. Thus ironically Popper here presents a post-modernistic approach to history⁶. History can be studied under many different perspectives, Marxists, Feministic, medical, religious, artistic, none having the right to claim exclusiveness, each being necessary on principle but not in practice. Thus Popper shies, like a horse raised on his back-legs confronted with a sudden and unexpected danger, from accepting the Marxist interpretation of history as the one theory of history and human destiny; he concedes that it endows the confusing march of history, as one damned thing after another, with a purpose and a plot, providing casual links, but so do other view-points, each of them making useful and enlightening, or at least amusing insights, but none with the privilege of being the ultimate truth. As to examples of theories of history as opposed to mere interpretations it is not so easy to come by. Popper makes a half-hearted attempt to provide one, but concedes that history is really about documenting the particulars, not about time-less generalities. From a wider perspective one may consider natural evolution and ask what universal laws it really enjoys. An universal law being in the nature of a restriction, telling you what cannot evolve. The notion of progress, has often been proposed as such an inexorable law, but Popper is sceptical, finding corroboration in his scepticism in the writings of Darwin himself, and in particular he takes exception to the inevitable laws of human history.

Popper thus sees the scientific world as seamless, also social sciences have necessary applications, say that of designing useful institutions. Thus while there is engineering as an outcome of natural science, there are also social engineering problems, although the notion has had a very bad press. True to his conviction Popper advocates the piecemeal approach to engineering, i.e. changing one small thing at a time, as opposed to the grand overthrow that the holistic approach requires. The small modest experiment ideally puts no one in danger, while the grand social experiment, of which Soviet Socialism clearly is an example, endangers the life and well-being of millions. More important in principle though is the fact that from a failure of a small experiment one may learn something, but from the failure of a large experiment one learns nothing. And in fact, contrary to received opinion, the collapse of the Soviet Empire really does not prove very much, in particular it does not prove that Communism is politically impossible⁷ Another danger of the grand

⁵ A key aspect of the apparently perverse insistence on falsification instead of simple verification, is that falsification means going out of your way to undercut your theory (or others). This might go against the grain for most of us, and thus as Popper notes, true objectivity is to be safe-guarded by institutions, not by scientists as fallible individuals. This points to the message of his most ambitious writing on Social Theory, the necessity of diversity and hence of democracy.

⁶ An interpretation is an arrangement of 'facts' and should not be confused with the 'facts'. The sceptical reader may find the distinction problematic, and indeed it is, however, Popper in his short essay has not much space to spare such issues

⁷ At the time of writing the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union seemed far off indeed, still Popper blessed with a long life, did experience its final demise, although of course his views on it, could not be explicitly expressed in this essay, only implicitly inferred as above.

approach to social change is the forgetting of the simple fact that institutions are there to serve the needs of simple men, it is not that we need to change the nature of man in order that he fits into the institutions we have deemed fit to design. However, need institutions to be designed? Much of the technology that has served humans through the ages has developed in a pre-scientific age, although from Poppers point of view, all change is a kind of evolution, if not intentionally tested so inevitably. Institutions are not necessarily the fruits of human ingenuity, but more often than not, unplanned and evolved, their wisdom an emerged epiphenomenon. One may argue that the institutions of education are of that kind, that too much tampering with them, through poorly understood mechanisms, do more harm than good. But of such things Popper remains silent after tantalizingly hinting at them⁸.

While Popper mentions the name of Marx only intermittently a large portion of his discussion concerns Comte and above all Mill, out of whose Logic he quotes repeatedly. Mill as a social thinker was very much concerned with cause and effect, in short to base a social science on sound logical principles. What is an explanation? Schematically it consists, according to Popper, by two parts. Initial conditions that set out the particulars of the situation, and a universal law to which reference is made. Often the universal law is so trivial that it its tacitly assumed. This clearly holds for explanations in the natural world, where non-trivial universal laws exist, but also in the social world, although here the issue of law becomes stickier. But if there is no appeal to some kind of universal law there really cannot be a satisfying explanation. In this context Popper makes a distinction between mere trends and laws, accusing Mill of confusing the two. According to Mill a law can be discerned from a trend, just as in mathematics a formula may be derived from the beginnings of a sequence. However, what Mill claims mathematically is clearly nonsense. Given any finite sequence it can be the manifestation of an infinite number of different formulas. Popper does not make this objection explicit, maybe he is not really aware of it, but it once again shows the true nature of his approach. You do not infer theories from observation, you simply modify tentative theories by observation. If you know the outcome, an explanation is a *post facto* reflection, if you do not know the outcome, it becomes a prediction. If the prediction fails, it either shows that the initial conditions were not those that you had assumed (which is often the most likely 'explanation') or more interestingly, the general law you assumed is in fact not true but has to be suitably modified.

Popper casts his net wide, not only involving Mill, if peripherally, in the fold of historicism, but also Tolstoy in the role of a pioneer. He does have sympathy with Tolstoy's claim that history is not made by individual leaders, and that he in so doing pointed at a lacunae in the historical approach. But Popper does not agree with the way Tolstoy tried to fill this hole through his notion of the spirit of the times, a view sympathetic to those proposed by Marxists, Popper finds it too smacking of mysticism and essentialism, traps into which any historicistic approach is bound to fall.

Finally Popper wants to make away with one misconception he believes has stultified

⁸ He does point out that institutions are like fortresses. They need not only be well designed but also well-manned, meaning that they cannot be pre-programmed, but need the continuous supervision of *ad hoc* measures

the efforts of forming a science of sociology. It is not true that psychology needs to be its basis, in fact, according to Popper, psychology is only one branch of social science among others. And it is in fact by side-stepping the thorny issues of psychology, which threaten to mire you in self-referential games.

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