

# THE POVERTY OF HISTORICISM.

BY  
KARL R. POPPER

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## HISTORICAL NOTE

THE fundamental thesis of this book—that the belief in historical destiny is sheer superstition, and that there can be no prediction of the course of human history by scientific or any other rational methods—goes back to the winter of 1919–20. The main outline was completed by 1935; it was first read, in January or February 1936, as a paper entitled ‘The Poverty of Historicism’, at a private session in the house of my friend Alfred Braunthal in Brussels. At this meeting, a former student of mine made some important contributions to the discussion. It was Dr. Karl Hilferding, soon to fall a victim of the Gestapo and of the historicist superstitions of the Third Reich. There were also some other philosophers present. Shortly afterwards, I read a similar paper in Professor F. A. von Hayek’s Seminar, at the London School of Economics. Publication was delayed by some years because my manuscript was rejected by the philosophical periodical to which it was submitted. It was first published, in three parts, in *Economica*, N.S., vol. XI, no. 42 and 43, 1944, and vol. XII, no. 46, 1945. Since then, an Italian translation (Milano, 1954) and a French translation (Paris, 1956) have appeared in book form. The text of the present edition has been revised, and some additions have been made.

## PREFACE

I TRIED to show, in *The Poverty of Historicism*, that historicism is a poor method—a method which does not bear any fruit. But I did not actually refute historicism.

Since then, I have succeeded in giving a refutation of historicism: *I have shown that, for strictly logical reasons, it is impossible for us to predict the future course of history.*

The argument is contained in a paper, 'Indeterminism in Classical Physics and in Quantum Physics', which I published in 1950. But I am no longer satisfied with this paper. A more satisfactory treatment will be found in a chapter on Indeterminism which is part of the *Postscript: After Twenty Years* to my *Logic of Scientific Discovery*.

In order to inform the reader of these more recent results, I propose to give here, in a few words, an outline of this *refutation of historicism*. The argument may be summed up in five statements, as follows:

- (1) The course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge. (The truth of this premise must be admitted even by those who see in our ideas, including our scientific ideas, merely the by-products of *material* developments of some kind or other.)
- (2) We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific

## Preface

knowledge. (This assertion can be logically proved, by considerations which are sketched below.)

- (3) We cannot, therefore, predict the future course of human history.
- (4) This means that we must reject the possibility of a *theoretical history*; that is to say, of a historical social science that would correspond to *theoretical physics*. There can be no scientific theory of historical development serving as a basis for historical prediction.
- (5) The fundamental aim of historicist methods (see sections 11 to 16 of this book) is therefore misconceived; and historicism collapses.

The argument does not, of course, refute the possibility of every kind of social prediction; on the contrary, it is perfectly compatible with the possibility of testing social theories—for example, economic theories—by way of predicting that certain developments will take place under certain conditions. It only refutes the possibility of predicting historical developments to the extent to which they may be influenced by the growth of our knowledge.

The decisive step in this argument is statement (2). I think that it is convincing in itself: *if there is such a thing as growing human knowledge, then we cannot anticipate today what we shall know only tomorrow*. This, I think, is sound reasoning, but it does not amount to a *logical proof* of the statement. The proof of (2), which I have given in the publications mentioned, is complicated; and I should not be surprised if simpler proofs could be found. My proof consists in showing that *no scientific predictor*—whether a human scientist or a calculating machine—*can possibly predict, by scientific methods, its own future results*. Attempts to do so can attain their result only after the event, when it is too late for a predic-

tion; they can attain their result only after the prediction has turned into a retrodiction.

This argument, being purely logical, applies to scientific predictors of any complexity, including 'societies' of interacting predictors. But this means that no society can predict, scientifically, its own future states of knowledge.

My argument is somewhat formal, and it may therefore be suspected to be without any real significance, even if its logical validity is granted.

I have, however, tried to show the significance of the problem in two studies. In the later of these studies, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, I have selected some events from the history of historicist thought, in order to illustrate its persistent and pernicious influence upon the philosophy of society and of politics, from Heraclitus and Plato to Hegel and Marx. In the earlier of these two studies, *The Poverty of Historicism*, now published for the first time in English in book form, I have tried to show the significance of historicism as a fascinating intellectual structure. I have tried to analyse its logic—often so subtle, so compelling and so deceptive—and I have tried to argue that it suffers from an inherent and irreparable weakness.

K. R. P.

Penn, Buckinghamshire,  
July 1957

Some of the most discerning reviewers of this book were puzzled by its title. It was intended as an allusion to the title of Marx's book *The Poverty of Philosophy* which, in turn, was alluding to Proudhon's *Philosophy of Poverty*.

K. R. P.

Penn, Buckinghamshire,  
July 1959.

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## INTRODUCTION

SCIENTIFIC interest in social and political questions is hardly less old than scientific interest in cosmology and physics; and there were periods in antiquity (I have Plato's political theory in mind, and Aristotle's collection of constitutions) when the science of society might have seemed to have advanced further than the science of nature. But with Galileo and Newton, physics became successful beyond expectation, far surpassing all the other sciences; and since the time of Pasteur, the Galileo of biology, the biological sciences have been almost equally successful. But the social sciences do not as yet seem to have found their Galileo.

In these circumstances, students who work in one or another of the social sciences are greatly concerned with problems of method; and much of their discussion of these problems is conducted with an eye upon the methods of the more flourishing sciences, especially physics. It was, for instance, a conscious attempt to copy the experimental method of physics which led, in the generation of Wundt, to a reform in psychology; and since J. S. Mill, repeated attempts had been made to reform on somewhat similar lines the method of the social sciences. In the field of psychology, these reforms may have had some measure of success, despite a great many disappointments. But in the theoretical

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social sciences, outside economics, little else but disappointment has come from these attempts. When these failures were discussed, the question was soon raised whether the methods of physics were really applicable to the social sciences. Was it not perhaps the obstinate belief in their applicability that was responsible for the much-deplored state of these studies?

The query suggests a simple classification of the schools of thought interested in the methods of the less successful sciences. According to their views on the applicability of the methods of physics, we may classify these schools as *pro-naturalistic* or as *anti-naturalistic*; labelling them 'pro-naturalistic' or 'positive' if they favour the application of the methods of physics to the social sciences, and 'anti-naturalistic' or 'negative' if they oppose the use of these methods.

Whether a student of method upholds anti-naturalistic or pro-naturalistic doctrines, or whether he adopts a theory combining both kinds of doctrines, will largely depend on his views about the character of the science under consideration, and about the character of its subject-matter. But the attitude he adopts will also depend on his views about the methods of physics. I believe this latter point to be the most important of all. And I think that the crucial mistakes in most methodological discussions arise from some very common misunderstandings of the methods of physics. In particular, I think they arise from a misinterpretation of the logical form of its theories, of the methods of testing them, and of the logical function of observation and experiment. My contention is that these misunderstandings have serious consequences; and I will try to justify this contention in parts III and IV of this study. There I will try to show that various and sometimes conflicting arguments and doctrines, anti-naturalistic

as well as pro-naturalistic, are indeed based upon a misunderstanding of the methods of physics. In parts I and II, however, I will confine myself to the explanation of certain anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic doctrines that form part of a characteristic approach in which both kinds of doctrines are combined.

This approach which I propose first to explain, and only later to criticize, I call 'historicism'. It is often encountered in discussions on the method of the social sciences; and it is often used without critical reflection, or even taken for granted. What I mean by 'historicism' will be explained at length in this study. It will be enough if I say here that I mean by 'historicism' an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their principal aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the 'rhythms' or the 'patterns', the 'laws' or the 'trends' that underlie the evolution of history. Since I am convinced that such historicist doctrines of method are at bottom responsible for the unsatisfactory state of the theoretical social sciences (other than economic theory), my presentation of these doctrines is certainly not unbiased. But I have tried hard to make a case in favour of historicism in order to give point to my subsequent criticism. I have tried to present historicism as a well-considered and close-knit philosophy. And I have not hesitated to construct arguments in its support which have never, to my knowledge, been brought forward by historicists themselves. I hope that, in this way I have succeeded in building up a position really worth attacking. In other words, I have tried to perfect a theory which has often been put forward, but perhaps never in a fully developed form. This is why I have deliberately chosen the somewhat unfamiliar label 'historicism'. By introducing it I hope I shall avoid merely verbal quibbles:

### *Introduction*

for nobody, I hope, will be tempted to question whether any of the arguments here discussed really or properly or essentially belong to historicism, or what the word 'historicism' really or properly or essentially means.

# I

## THE ANTI-NATURALISTIC DOCTRINES OF HISTORICISM

**I**N strong opposition to methodological naturalism in the field of sociology, historicism claims that some of the characteristic methods of physics cannot be applied to the social sciences, owing to the profound differences between sociology and physics. Physical laws, or the 'laws of nature', it tells us, are valid anywhere and always; for the physical world is ruled by a system of physical uniformities invariable throughout space and time. Sociological laws, however, or the laws of social life, differ in different places and periods. Although historicism admits that there are plenty of typical social conditions whose regular recurrence can be observed, it denies that the regularities detectable in social life have the character of the immutable regularities of the physical world. For they depend upon history, and upon differences in culture. They depend on a particular *historical situation*. Thus one should not, for example, speak without further qualification of the laws of economics, but only of the economic laws of the feudal period, or of the early

industrial period, and so on; always mentioning the historical period in which the laws in question are assumed to have prevailed.

Historicism asserts that the historical relativity of social laws makes most of the methods of physics inapplicable to sociology. Typical historicist arguments on which this view is based concern generalization, experiment, the complexity of social phenomena, the difficulties of exact prediction, and the significance of methodological essentialism. I will treat these arguments in turn.

## I GENERALIZATION

The possibility of generalization and its success in the physical sciences rests, according to historicism, on the general uniformity of nature: upon the observation—perhaps better described as an assumption—that in similar circumstances similar things will happen. This principle, which is taken to be valid throughout space and time, is said to underlie the method of physics.

Historicism insists that this principle is necessarily useless in sociology. Similar circumstances only arise within a single historical period. They never persist from one period to another. Hence there is no long-run uniformity in society on which long-term generalizations could be based—that is, if we disregard *trivial regularities*, such as those described by the truism that human beings always live in groups, or that the supply of certain things is limited and the supply of others, like air, unlimited, and that only the former can have any market or exchange value.

A method which ignores this limitation and attempts a generalization of social uniformities will, according to historicism, implicitly assume that the regularities in question are everlasting; so that a methodologically

naïve view—the view that the method of generalization can be taken over from physics by the social sciences—will produce a false and dangerously misleading sociological theory. It will be a theory denying that society develops; or that it ever changes significantly; or that social developments, if there are any, can affect the basic regularities of social life.

Historicists often emphasize that behind such mistaken theories there is usually an apologetic purpose; and indeed, the assumption of unchanging sociological laws can easily be misused for such ends. It may appear, first, as the argument that unpleasant or undesirable things must be accepted since they are determined by invariable laws of nature. For example, the 'inexorable laws' of economics have been invoked to demonstrate the futility of statutory interference with the wage bargain. A second apologetic misuse of the assumption of persistence is the fostering of a general feeling of inevitability, and thus of a readiness to endure the inevitable calmly and without protest. What is now will be for ever, and attempts to influence the march of events, or even to evaluate it, are ridiculous: one does not argue against the laws of nature, and attempts to overthrow them can only lead to disaster.

These, says the historicist, are the conservative, apologetic, and even fatalistic arguments which are the necessary corollaries of the demand that a naturalist method should be adopted in sociology.

The historicist opposes them by maintaining that social uniformities differ widely from those of the natural sciences. They change from one historical period to another, and *human* activity is the force that changes them. For social uniformities are not laws of nature, but man-made; and although they may be said to depend on human nature, they do so because



human nature has the power to alter and, perhaps, to control them. Therefore things can be bettered or worsened: active reform need not be futile.

These tendencies of historicism appeal to those who feel a call to be active; to interfere, especially with human affairs, refusing to accept the existing state of things as inevitable. The tendency towards activity and against complacency of any kind may be called 'activism'. I will say more about the relations of historicism to activism in sections 17 and 18; but I may here quote the well-known exhortation of a famous historicist, Marx, which strikingly expresses the 'activist' attitude: 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point however is to *change it*.'<sup>1</sup>

## 2 EXPERIMENT

Physics uses the method of experiment; that is, it introduces artificial controls, artificial isolation, and thereby ensures the reproduction of similar conditions, and the consequent production of certain effects. This method is obviously based on the idea that where circumstances are similar, similar things will happen. The historicist claims that this method is not applicable in sociology. Nor would it be useful, he argues, even if it were applicable. For, as similar conditions occur only within the limits of a single period, the outcome of any experiment would be of very limited significance. Moreover, artificial isolation would eliminate precisely those factors in sociology which are most important. Robinson Crusoe and his isolated individual economy can never be a valuable model of an economy whose problems arise precisely from the economic interaction of individuals and groups.

<sup>1</sup> See the eleventh of his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845); see also section 17, below.