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The Viennese Socrates

Karl Popper and the Reconstruction of Progressive Politics

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Introduction

Karl Popper, the Viennese Socrates

In much of the United States and Western Europe what passes for political philosophy is but an anemic and filleted product of the history of political thought, a cadaver to be dissected delicately by armchair academicians but wholly incapable of independent animation, let alone possessed of the power to motivate the masses. The notion that ideas matter, matter politically here and now, and not just to the legacy and reputation of a long-dead thinker, is regarded as passé, a naive conflating of political philosophy with ideology. For more than fifty years Western academics, whether of the Left or the Right, have been in full retreat from the intimate and self-conscious union of political philosophy and contemporary efforts to change the world. Thus Leo Strauss could warmly praise Eric Voegelin's critique of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer could hide their severance of theory from practice beneath skirts of the bleakest Hegelian hue, the later Wittgenstein and Thomas Kuhn could displace the dialectical quest for enlightenment and emancipation by a range of hermetically-sealed and incommensurable frameworks, and postmodernists could brag of their exposé of principles and worldviews as more or less reducible to interests, that is, as motivated and not motivating.

The relationship of Karl Popper (1902-1994) to all of this has long required clarification. On the one hand, he did not fit in with late twentieth century intellectual fashion. He was the last philosopher of the Enlightenment, an admirer of the early Marx, and a believer that contemporary progressive political activism would be served by a critique of the determinist, positivist, and essentialist strands that strangled the ethical and practical-critical core of Marx's theory. On the other hand, he was read by many admirers and by many opponents alike, as a critic of a philosophically inspired politics, an advocate of a behavioralist administrative science, and of the end of ideology. A large number of those

in the latter camp misunderstood the nature of Popper's engagement with classical and Marxist theory and failed to recognize the depth of his progressive commitment to political justice. The present work will attempt to clarify Popper's relationship with the tradition of political philosophy. It will offer a sympathetic critique but by no means an endorsement of Popper's contribution to the theory of progressive politics.

Popper, Socrates, and Antipositivism

In his later years, to the bemusement of some, Popper noted similarities in his situation and that of Socrates: mischaracterized by his leading detractors, the victim of adverse pretrial publicity, a philosopher who evoked a strong emotional reaction among audiences taught to write him off before they had given him an opportunity to make his case. Nonetheless, in replying to some of the contributors to his *festschrift*, Popper observed that the misrepresentation of his own ideas had occurred in circumstances that were markedly different from those in which the Socratic legend arose: not only had he enjoyed the opportunity to publish responses to his critics, he was also able to refer to earlier books and papers he had authored "which needed only to be read to disprove the legend. Nevertheless, the legend grew, and it has continued to grow."[1]

The Popper legend centered on the claim that Popper was a positivist: that he dismissed metaphysics as meaningless, rejected ontological realism as the basis of science and ethics, and sought to extend the domain of natural science methodology into the spheres of social science and political decision-making.[2] This claim is far from the truth. As should be made clear in subsequent chapters, Popper was a philosophical realist who recognized fully the importance of metaphysics in all scholarly activities, criticizing only those metaphysical doctrines he felt erroneous and harmful.

While the analogy drawn by Popper between his fate and that of Socrates was a tad vainglorious, there was a more significant connection between the ideas and methodologies of the Athenian and the Viennese philosophers. By Popper's own account, the process by which he developed contributions both to epistemology and to ethico-political theory was closely associated with his adoption of a 'Socratic' philosophy derived, almost exclusively, from the writings of Plato. Like Socrates, Popper's preferred method was to examine not merely the logical coherency but the unforeseen consequences of a proposed theory or course of action. For Popper, science had no authority; "it

is all guesswork, *doxa* rather than *episteme*."[3] Socratic fallibilism was "the true scientific spirit."[4] In Popper's post-positivist and neo-Socratic philosophy, human knowledge-claims were once more seen as opinions or conjectures; *epagoge* was displaced by a restored *elenchus*; science was to be understood as a process of conjecture and refutation.[5]

For Popper, science was not a compendium of error-free theories regarding the world; it was guesswork, refined by criticism, practice, and observation. Further, Popper was an opponent of the imperialism of natural science: his philosophical writings defended the autonomy of ethics, politics, and history. In large measure this was due to his conception of natural science as an enterprise necessarily committed to the unattainable ideal of a single, unified explanation of the universe, while he viewed ethics, politics, and history as fields of study in which a single, unified explanation was neither attainable nor ideal.[6]

Popper recognized there was no scientific basis to ethics but rather that there was an ethical basis to science. He argued not for value-neutrality or absence of prejudice among individual scientists, but a re-conception of science as a pluralist and critical process. In both ethics and politics the analogy with science went no further than a search for empirical evidence, which might aid critical debate by suggesting that a theory, a policy, or an ethical system did not yield the results anticipated. While the testing of empirical theories in a particular field of natural science might lead to a (temporary and tentative) scholarly consensus in which all theories but one were rejected, Popper believed that the rejection of some ethical systems due to their undesirable consequences might leave several competing ethical systems with no consensus as to which was the better one.[7] Democracy was not viewed as a process by which good or even 'better' statesmen were selected, but a means by which bad or incompetent rulers might be removed. Utopianism was rejected because a single right or perfect way to organize society was neither attainable nor desirable given the diversity and self-transformability of humanity; rather, Popper's ideal, the 'open society,' embraced the necessity of individual development and continuous social change.

Popper's critique of 'historicism' was a critique of claims that there was a single correct interpretation of the course of human history.[8] By 'historicism' he meant the effort to identify the laws of social development by the study of history. 'Historicists' treated history as a theoretical science

committed to identifying universal laws capable of accurately forecasting the consequences of a specific set of initial conditions: the pattern of historical change revealed the pattern of future development. Popper argued that 'historicists' (1) mistook changeable historical trends for inexorable laws of development; (2) failed to see that social development was heavily (although not exclusively) influenced by changes in human understanding, especially by the unpredictable growth of human knowledge (one could not predict what technology, social theories or cultural norms would be developed in the future); and (3) depended upon the naïve belief "that any definite set of historical records can ever be interpreted in one way only," whereas "there can be no history of 'the past as it actually did happen'; there can only be historical interpretations, and none of them final."[9] Popper did not deny that humans could decide to *give meaning* to the past, or to interpret history in various ways; rather, he denied that only one meaning was made manifest by the facts of history. While in no sense a relativist, Popper thus resisted the transfer to historical scholarship of such expectations as may have been found in the field of science that only one interpretation might ideally approximate the truth. He contended that history and science were distinct fields of scholarship, each operating under rules (norms) pertinent to the nature of its subject matter and arising from the traditional practices forged by scholars specializing in that field.

After 1961, at the latest, Popper assumed the use of situational logic as the preferred method not only in history (the field of study in which he had earlier identified the application of the method) but also in social science.[10] He contended that "the Newtonian method of explaining and predicting singular events by universal laws and initial conditions is hardly ever applicable in the theoretical social sciences…."[11] Popper viewed 'situational logic' as an alternative for historical studies analogous to the use of universal laws in natural science. Hypotheses regarding the logic of the situation were not usually susceptible to scientific testing. However, "in the social sciences, tests of a situational analysis can sometimes be provided by historical research."[12] The later Popper's apparent assimilation of social scientific methodology to historical methodology may suggest he transferred to social science from history the expectation that multiple plausible interpretations of a specific situation or sequence of developments might remain even after the elimination of those theories that were clearly erroneous.[13] Nonetheless, Popper contended, "no explanatory theory in the social sciences can be

expected to be true," while holding that social scientists should "discuss critically which of the competing theories, or models, is a better approximation to the truth."[14]

In Socrates, Popper found a model of intellectual humility and of commitment to the improvement of political life through the encouragement of self-criticism, even among politicians.[15] Defending the "positive freedom" of Socratic ideals of self-mastery and self-sufficiency Popper wrote to Isaiah Berlin, "only those who have, more or less, adopted the Socratic way of life can fully understand such ideas as the idea of negative freedom."[16] Further, Popper's Socrates was a critic but not an enemy of democracy.[17] Popper employed impressive resources of scholarship to support his analysis of Socrates. Nonetheless, the treatment of Socrates' relationship with Athenian society was not the strongest element in Popper's writings on political philosophy. Indeed, it is difficult to disagree with Ronald Levinson's observation that

> Popper's Socrates has been washed in the waters of modern liberalism until every odor of his historical Greek origin has been removed. He has been put into modern dress, and would now be mistaken…for Popper's ideal self.[18]

Popper and Marxism

In his intellectual autobiography Popper wrote that

> The encounter with Marxism was one of the main events in my intellectual development. It taught me a number of lessons which I have never forgotten. It taught me the wisdom of the Socratic saying, "I know that I do not know". It made me a fallibilist, and impressed on me the value of intellectual modesty. And it made me most conscious of the differences between dogmatic and critical thinking.[19]

The relationship between Popper's ethico-political principles and the 'non-political' components of his philosophy—most notably his epistemology—can be understood best when seen in the context of his formation and maturation as a thinker: the period of intellectual and political turbulence in inter-war Europe. In this context, Popper rejected a purely contemplative or scholarly life. He responded to Marx's demand that philosophers need do more than interpret the world. The suffering of vast numbers of people made changing the world the most urgent task. After a brief period as a Communist in 1919 Vienna, Popper spent the next 15 years in the ranks of the Marxian Social-Democratic Party of Austria.[20] The ethical and political crisis in