

Extracts from "The Poverty of Historicism" by Karl Raimund Popper (Originally published in book form 1957)

"In memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny"

From http://lachlan.bluehaze.com.au/books/popper_poverty_of_historicism.html

Starting Dedication: page iii

Extract from *"The Poverty of Historicism"* by Karl Raimund Popper (Originally published in book form 1957) (Edition extracts taken from version published by [Routledge and Kegan Paul](#), 1974 reprint, ISBN 0 7100 4616 2)

*"In memory of the countless men and women
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Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny"*

Historical Note

Extract from the starting Historical Note: page iv

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"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. . . ."

Oedipus Effect

Extract from Chapter 5: Inexactitude of Prediction: Page 13

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"The idea that a prediction may have influence upon the predicted event is a very old one. Oedipus, in the legend, killed his father whom he had never seen before; and this was the direct result of the prophecy which had caused his father to abandon him. This is why I suggest the name '*Oedipus effect*' for the influence of the prediction upon the predicted event (or, more generally, for the influence of an item of information upon the situation to which the information refers), whether this influence tends to bring about the predicted event, or whether it tends to prevent it."

The Historicist Position

Extract from Chapter 17: Interpreting vs Planning Social Change: Page 50

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"We now find that the historicist method implies a strangely similar sociological theory - the theory that society will necessarily change but along a predetermined path that cannot change, through stages predetermined by inexorable necessity.

'When a society discovered the natural law that determines its own movement, even then it can neither overleap the natural phases of its evolution, nor shuffle them out of the world by a stroke of the pen. But this much it can do: it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs.' This formulation, due to Marx, excellently represents the historicist position. Although it teaches neither inactivity nor real fatalism, historicism teaches the futility of any attempt to alter impending changes; a peculiar variety of fatalism, a fatalism in regard to the

trends of history, as it were. Admittedly, the 'activist' exhortation 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways: the point, however is to *change it*', may find much sympathy with historicists (seeing the 'world' means here the developing human society) because of its emphasis on change. But it is in conflict with the most significant doctrines of historicism. For as we now see, we may say: 'The historicist can only *interpret* social development and aid it in various ways; his point, however, is that *nobody can change it*'"

Holistic Utopian Engineering: It is very hard to learn from big mistakes

Extract from Chapter 24: The Holistic Theory of Social Experiments: Page 88 to 89

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"We can turn to point (b), the criticism of the view that we can learn from holistic experiments, or more precisely, from measures carried out on a scale that approaches the holistic dream (for holistic experiments in the radical sense that they re-model 'the whole of society' are logically impossible, as I showed in the foregoing section). Our main point is very simple: it is difficult enough to be critical of our own mistakes, but it must be nearly impossible for us to persist in a critical attitude towards those of our actions which involve the lives of many men. To put it differently, it is very hard to learn from very big mistakes.

The reasons for this are twofold; they are technical as well as moral. Since so much is done at a time, it is impossible to say which particular measure is responsible for any of the results; or rather, if we do attribute a certain result to a certain measure, then we can do so only on the basis of some theoretical knowledge gained previously, and not from the holistic experiment in question. This experiment does not help us to attribute particular results to particular measures; all we can do is to attribute the 'whole result' to it; and whatever this may mean, it is certainly difficult to assess. Even the greatest efforts to secure a well-informed, independent, and critical statement of these results are unlikely to prove successful. But the chances that such efforts will be made are negligible; on the contrary, there is every likelihood that free discussion about the holistic plan and its consequences will not be tolerated. The reason is that every attempt at planning on a very large scale is an undertaking which must cause considerable inconvenience to many people, to put it mildly, and over a considerable span of time.

Accordingly there will always be a tendency to oppose the plan, and to complain about it. To many of these complaints the Utopian engineer will have to turn a deaf ear if he wishes to get anywhere at all; in fact, it will be part of his business to suppress unreasonable objections. But with them he must invariably suppress reasonable criticism too. And the mere fact that expressions of dissatisfaction will have to be curbed reduces even the most enthusiastic expression of satisfaction to insignificance. Thus it will be difficult to ascertain the facts, i.e the repercussions of the plan on the individual citizen; and without these facts scientific criticism is impossible."

Spinoza and the definition of tyranny

Extract from Chapter 24: The Holistic Theory of Social Experiments: Page 90

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(1) "One of the crucial points in Spinoza's political theory is the impossibility of knowing and of controlling what other people think. He defines 'tyranny' as the attempt to achieve the impossible, and to exercise power where it cannot be exercised. Spinoza, it must be remembered, was not exactly a liberal; he did not believe in institutional controls of power, but thought that a prince has a right to exercise his powers up to their actual limit. Yet what Spinoza calls 'tyranny', and declares to be in conflict with reason, is treated quite innocently by holistic planners as a 'scientific' problem, the 'problem of transforming men'."

Failure in Utopian Engineering: Centralised Power but no Centralised Knowledge

Extract from Chapter 24: The Holistic Theory of Social Experiments: Page 89 to 92

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"But the difficulty of combining holistic planning with scientific methods is still more fundamental than has so far been indicated. The holistic planner overlooks the fact that it is easy to centralize power but impossible to centralize all that knowledge which is distributed over many individual minds, and whose centralization would be necessary for the wise wielding of centralized power. But this fact has far-reaching consequences. Unable to ascertain what is in the minds of so many individuals, he must try to simplify his problems by eliminating individual differences: he must try to control and stereotype interests and beliefs by education and propaganda. But his attempt to exercise power over minds must destroy the last possibility of finding out what people really think, for it is clearly incompatible with the free expression of thought, especially of critical thought. Ultimately, it must destroy knowledge; and the greater the gain in power, the greater will be the loss of knowledge.

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All these remarks are confined to the problem of scientific method. They tacitly grant the colossal assumption that we need not question the fundamental benevolence of the planning Utopian engineer, who is vested with an authority which at least approaches dictatorial powers. Tawney concludes a discussion of Luther and his time with the words: 'Sceptical as to the existence of unicorns and salamanders, the age of Machiavelli and Henry VIII found food for its credulity in the worship of that rare monster, the God-fearing Prince.'⁽¹⁾ Replace here the words 'unicorns and salamanders' by 'the God-fearing Prince'; replace the two names by those of some of their more obvious modern counterparts, and the phrase 'the God-fearing Prince' by 'the benevolent planning authority': and you have a description of the credulity of our own time. This credulity will not be challenged here; yet it may be remarked that, assuming the unlimited and unvarying benevolence of the powerful planners, our analysis shows that it may be impossible for them ever to find out whether the results of their measures tally with their good intentions.

I do not believe that any corresponding criticism of the piecemeal method can be offered. This method can be used, more particularly, in order to search for, and fight against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society, rather than to seek, and to fight for, some ultimate good (as holists are inclined to do). But a systematic fight against definite wrongs, against concrete forms of injustice or exploitation, and avoidable suffering such as poverty or unemployment, is a very different thing from the attempt to realize a distant ideal blueprint of society. Success or failure is more easily appraised, and there is no inherent reason why this method should lead to an accumulation of power, and to the suppression of criticism. Also, such a fight against concrete wrongs and concrete dangers is more likely to find the support of a great majority than a fight for the establishment of a Utopia, idea as it may appear to the planners. This may perhaps throw some light on the fact that in democratic countries defending themselves against aggression, sufficient support may be forthcoming for the necessary far-reaching measures (which may even take on the character of holistic planning) *without suppression of public criticism*, while

in countries preparing for an attack or waging an aggressive war, public criticism as a rule must be suppressed, in order that public support may be mobilized by presenting aggression as defence.

We may now turn back to the Utopianist's claim that his method is the true experimental method applied to sociology. This claim, I think, is dispelled by our criticism. This can be further illustrated by the analogy between physical and holistic engineering. It may be admitted that physical machines can be successfully planned by way of blueprints, and with them, even a whole plant for their production, etc. But all this is possible only because many piecemeal experiments have been carried out before-hand. Every machine is the result of a great many small improvements. The same holds for the planning of the production plant. The apparent holistic plan can succeed only because we have made all kinds of small mistakes already; otherwise there is every reason to expect that it would lead to big mistakes.

R.H. Tawney, *Religion and The Rise of Capitalism*, ch. II, end of section ii."

H. A. L. Fisher and Prediction of Historical Trends

Extract from Chapter 27: Is there a law of Evolution? Laws and Trends: Page 109

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"Nor can the observation of one unique process help us to foresee its future development. The most careful observation of *one* developing caterpillar will not help us to predict its transformation into a butterfly. As applied to the history of human society - and it is with this that we are mainly concerned here - our argument has been formulated by H. A. L. Fisher in these words: 'Men . . . have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern . . . I can see only one emergency followed upon another . . ., *only one great fact with respect to which, since it is unique, there can be no generalizations . . .*'(1)"

(1) See H. A. L. Fisher *History of Europe*, vol I, p. vii (italics mine). See also F. A. von Hayek, *op. cit.*, *Economica*, vol. X, p. 58, who criticizes the attempt 'to find laws where in

nature of the case they cannot be found, in the succession of the unique and singular historical phenomena'.

"The Poverty of Historicism, we might say, is a poverty of imagination"

Extract from Chapter 28: The Method of Reduction. Causal Explanation. Prediction and Prophecy: Page 129

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"There are, indeed, countless possible conditions in our search for the true conditions of a trend, we have all the time to try and imagine conditions under which the trend in question would disappear. But this is just what the historicist cannot do. He firmly believes in his favourite trend, and conditions under which it would disappear are to him unthinkable. The Poverty of Historicism, we might say, is a poverty of imagination. The Historicist continuously upbraids those who cannot imagine a change in their little worlds; yet it seems that he cannot imagine a change in the conditions of change."

Hypotheses and the scientific method

Extract from Chapter 29: The Unity of Method: Page 131

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"Because of their tentative or provisional character, hypotheses were considered, by most students of method, as *provisional in the sense that they have ultimately to be replaced by proved theories* (or at least by theories which can be proved to be 'highly probable', in the sense of some calculus of probabilities). I believe that this view is mistaken and that it leads to a host of entirely unnecessary difficulties. But this problem is of comparatively little moment here. What is important is to realize that in science we are always concerned with explanations, predictions, and tests, and that the method of testing

hypotheses is always the same (see the foregoing section).

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The result of tests is the *selection* of hypotheses which have stood up to tests, or the *elimination* of those hypotheses which have not stood up to them, and which are therefore rejected. It is important to realize the consequences of this view. They are these: all tests can be interpreted as attempts to weed out false theories - to find the weak points of a theory in order to reject it if it is falsified by the test. This view is sometimes considered paradoxical; our aim, it is said, is to establish theories, not to eliminate false ones. But just because it is our aim to establish theories as well as we can, we must test them as severely as we can; that is, we must try to find fault with them, we must try to falsify them. Only if we cannot falsify them in spite of our best efforts can we say that they have stood up to severe tests. This is the reason why the discovery of instances which confirm a theory mean very little if we have not tried, and failed, to discover refutations. For if we are uncritical we shall always find what we want: we shall look for, and find, confirmations, and we shall look away from, and not see, whatever might be dangerous to our pet theories. In this way it is only too easy to obtain what appears to be overwhelming evidence in favour of a theory which, if approached critically, would have been refuted. In order to make the method of selection by elimination work, and to ensure that only the fittest theories survive, their struggle for life must be made severe by them."

"How did you first find your theory" vs "How did you test your theory".

Extract from Chapter 29: The Unity of Method: Page 135

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"For we can say (b) that is it irrelevant from the point of view of science whether we have obtained our theories by jumping to unwarranted conclusions or merely by stumbling over them (that is, by 'intuition'), or else by some inductive procedure. The question 'How did you first *find* your theory?' relates, as it were, to an entirely private matter, as opposed to the question, 'How did you *test* your theory?' which alone is scientifically relevant. And the method of testing described here is fertile; it leads to new observations, and to a mutual give and take between theory and observation."

Tolstoy and Historicism

Extract from Chapter 31: Situational Logic in History. Historical Interpretation: Page 147

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"But is this all? Is there nothing whatever in the historicist demand for the reform of history - for a sociology which plays a role of a theoretical history, or a theory of historical development? (See sections 12 and 16.) Is there nothing whatever in the historicist idea of 'periods'; of the 'spirit' or 'style' of an age; of irresistible historical tendencies; of movements which captivate the minds of individuals and which surge on like a flood, driving, rather than being driven by individual men? Nobody who had read, for example the speculations of Tolstoy in *War and Peace* - historicist, no doubt, but stating his motives with candour - on the movement of the men of the West towards the East and the counter movement of the Russians towards the West, can deny that historicism answers a real need. We have to satisfy this need by offering something better before we can seriously hope to get rid of historicism.

Tolstoy's historicism is a reaction against a method of writing history which implicitly accepts the truth of the principle of leadership; a method which attributes much - too much, if Tolstoy is right, as he undoubtedly is - to the great man, the leader. Tolstoy tries to show, successfully I think, the small influence of the actions and decisions of Napoleon, Alexander Kutuzov, and the other great leaders of 1812, in the face of what may be called the logic of events. Tolstoy points out, rightly, the neglected by very great importance of decisions and actions of the countless unknown individuals who fought the battles, who burned Moscow, and who invented the partisan method of fighting. But he believes that he can see some kind of historical determination in these events - fate, historical laws, or a plan. In his version of historicism, he combines both methodological individualism and collectivism; that is to say, he represents a high typical combination - typical of his time, and, I am afraid, of our own - of democratic-individualist and collectivist-nationalistic elements.

This example may remind us that there are *some* sound elements in historicism; it is a reaction against the naive method of interpreting political history merely as the story of great tyrants and great generals. Historicists rightly reel that there may be something better than this method. It is this feeling which makes the idea of 'spirits' - of an age, of a nation, of an army - so seductive."

Selective Point of View into History

Extract from Chapter 31: Situational Logic in History. Historical Interpretation: Page 150

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"The only way out of this difficulty is, I believe, consciously to introduce a *preconceived selective point of view* into one's history; that is, to write *that history which interests us*. This does not mean that we may twist the facts until they fit into a framework of preconceived ideas, or that we may neglect the facts that do not fit. On the contrary and objectively (in the sense of 'scientific objectivity', to be discussed in the next section). But it means that we need not worry about all those facts and aspects which have no bearing upon our point of view and which therefore do not interest us.

Such selective approaches fulfil functions in the study of history which are in some ways analogous to those of theories of science. It is therefore understandable that they have often been taken for theories. And indeed, those rare ideas inherent in these approaches which can be formulated in the form of *testable hypotheses*, whether singular or universal, may well be treated as scientific hypotheses. But as a rule, these historical 'approaches' or 'points of view' *cannot be tested*. They cannot be refuted, and apparent confirmation are therefore of no value, even if they are as numerous as the stars in the sky. We shall call such a selective point of view or focus of historical interest, if it cannot be formulated as a testable hypothesis, a *historical interpretation*.

Historicism mistakes these interpretations for theories. This is one of its cardinal errors. It is possible for example, to interpret 'history' as the history of class struggle, or of the struggle of races for supremacy, or as the history of religious ideas, or as the history of the struggle between the 'open' and the 'closed' society, or as the history of scientific and industrial progress. All these are more or less interesting points of view, and *as such* perfectly unobjectionable. But historicists do not present them as such; they do not see that there is necessarily a plurality of interpretations which are fundamentally on the same level of both, suggestiveness and arbitrariness (even though some of them may be distinguished by their *fertility* - a point of some importance). Instead, they present them as doctrines or theories, asserting that 'all history is the history of class struggle', etc. And if they actually find that their point of view is fertile, and that many facts can be ordered and interpreted in its light, then they mistake this for a confirmation, or even for a proof, of their doctrine."

Scientific Progress

Extract from Chapter 32: The Institutional Theory of Progress: Page 155

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"How could we arrest scientific and industrial progress? By closing down, or by controlling laboratories for research, by suppressing

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Science, and more especially scientific progress, are the results not of isolated efforts but of the *free competition of thought*. For science needs even more competition between hypotheses and ever more rigorous tests. And the competing hypotheses need personal representation, as it were: they need advocates, they need a jury, and even a public. This personal representation must be institutionally organized if we wish to ensure that it works. And these institutions have to be paid for, and protected by law. Ultimately progress depends very largely on political factors; on political institutions that safeguard the freedom of thought: on democracy.

It is of some interest that what is usually called '*scientific objectivity*' is based, to some extent on social institutions. The naive view that scientific objectivity rests on the mental or psychological attitude of the individual scientist, on his training, care, and scientific detachment, generates as a reaction the sceptical view that scientists can never be objective.

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What the '*sociology of knowledge*' overlooks is just the *sociology of knowledge* - the social or public character of science. It overlooks the fact that it is the public character of science and of its institutions which imposes a mental discipline upon the individual scientist, and which preserves the objectivity of science and its tradition of critically discussing new ideas."

Scientific Progress

Extract from Chapter 32: The Institutional Theory of

Progress: Page 156

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"On the other hand, and this is more important, we must realize that with the best institutional organisation in the world, scientific progress may one day stop. There may, for example, be an epidemic of mysticism. This is certainly possible, for since some *do* react to scientific progress (or to the demands of an open society) by withdrawing into mysticism, everyone *might* react in this way. Such a possibility may perhaps be counteracted by devising a further set of social institutions, such as educational institutions, to discourage uniformity of outlook and encourage diversity. Also, the idea of progress and its enthusiastic propagation may have some effect. But all this cannot make progress certain. For we cannot exclude the logical possibility, say, of a bacterium or virus that spreads the wish for Nirvana.

We thus find that even the best institutions can never be foolproof. As I have said before, 'Institutions are like fortresses. They must be well designed *and* properly manned'. But we can never make sure that the right man will be attracted by scientific research. Nor can we make sure that there will be men of imagination who have the knack of inventing new hypotheses. And ultimately, much depends on sheer luck, in these matters. For truth is *not manifest*, and it is a mistake to believe - as did Comte and Mill - that once the 'obstacles' (the allusion is to the Church) are removed, truth will be visible to all who genuinely want to see it"

Controlling the Human Factor

Extract from Chapter 32: The Institutional Theory of Progress: Page 158

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"With this, we reach a result which contrasts startlingly with the still fashionable method of Comte and Mill. Instead of reducing sociological considerations to the apparently firm basis of psychology of human nature, we might say that the human factor is *the* ultimate uncertain and wayward element in social life and in all social institutions. Indeed this is the element which ultimately *cannot* be completely controlled by institutions (as Spinoza

first saw); for every attempt at controlling it completely must lead to tyranny; which means, to the omnipotence of the human factor - the whims of a few men, or even of one.

But it is not possible to control the human factor by *science* - the opposite of whim? No doubt, biology and psychology can solve, or will soon be able to solve, the 'problem of transforming man'. Yet those who attempt to do this are bound to destroy the objectivity of science, and science itself, since these are both based upon free competition of thought; that is, upon freedom. If the growth of reason is to continue, and human rationality is to survive, then the diversity of individuals and their opinions, aims, and purposes must never be interfered with (except in extreme cases where political freedom is endangered). Even the emotionally satisfying appeal for a *common purpose*, however excellent, is an appeal to abandon all rival moral opinions and the cross-criticisms and arguments to which they give rise. It is an appeal to abandon rational thought.

The evolutionist who demands the 'scientific' control of human nature does not realize how suicidal this demand is. The mainspring of evolution and progress is the variety of the material which may become subject to selection. So far as human evolution is concerned it is the 'freedom to be odd and unlike one's neighbour' - 'to disagree with the majority, and go one's own way'. Holistic control, which must lead to the equalization not of human rights but of human minds, would mean the end of progress!"

Controlling the Human Factor

Extract from Chapter 33: Conclusion: Page 159

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"Historicism is a very old movement. Its oldest forms, such as the doctrines of the life cycles of cities and races, actually precede the primitive teleological view that there are hidden purposes behind the apparently blind decrees of fate. Although this divination of hidden purposes is far removed from the scientific way of thinking it has left unmistakable traces upon even the most modern historicist theories. Every version of historicism expresses the feeling of being swept into the future by irresistible forces.

Modern historicists, however, seem to be unaware of the antiquity of their doctrine. They believe - and what else could their deification of modernism permit? - that their own brand of historicism is the latest and boldest achievement of the human mind, an achievement so staggeringly novel that only a few people are sufficiently advanced to grasp it. They believe, indeed, that it is they who have discovered the problem of change

- one of the oldest problems of speculative metaphysics. Contrasting their 'dynamic' thinking with the 'static' thinking of all previous generations, they believe that their own advance has been made possible by the fact that we are not 'living in a revolution' which has so much accelerated the speed of our development that social change can be now directly experienced within a single lifetime. This story is, of course, sheer mythology. Important revolutions have occurred before our time, and since the days of Heraclitus change has been discovered over and over again.

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