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## **Flogging a Straw Man: Popper's Critique of Marx's "Historicism"**

Perhaps the most influential critique of Marx's theory of history has been that by Karl Popper, considered by some to be the foremost philosopher of science. It is Popper's contention that while Marx's stress on economic and technological factors in the evolution of societies has been salutary, Marx's theory of history is fatally flawed by being based on the idea of historical determinism. In opposition, Popper wishes to assert the vital role of human creativity and rational agency in history. But is his critique well founded? It is my contention that while Popper may be correct in denouncing historical determinism as fundamentally erroneous, his belief that Marx's theory of history embodies this concept is itself erroneous.

Popper maintains that the course of human history cannot be the subject of scientific investigation, at least insofar as such investigation involves prediction. He thus sets about to refute what he calls the doctrine of historicism, by which he means "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."<sup>1</sup> Historicism, as he conceives it, teaches that the course of history is, at least in broad outlines, predetermined.

Popper argues that the course of history is strongly influenced by the growth of knowledge, and that it is impossible to predict our future states of knowledge (for we cannot know today what we shall only discover tomorrow). This is not Popper's sole argument against historicism, but is the one he considers a decisive refutation; and it seems unassailable if it is meant to demonstrate the impossibility of knowing in advance the exact states of social systems. In this respect it can be agreed with him that "we must reject the possibility of a *theoretical history*; that is to say, of a historical social science that would corre-

spond to *theoretical physics*.”<sup>2</sup> Still, it is not clear that there might not be discoverable rhythms or patterns to historical change, broad norms of social-system development analogous to the stages displayed in the life cycles of individual organisms. Even if there cannot be a theoretical history in Popper’s strict sense, historicism might survive in this looser sense. But whatever the historical connections may be between historicism and various Marxisms, I believe it is wrong to interpret Marx’s theory of history as implying historicism even in a loose sense.

For Popper, Marx’s historical materialism is a prime instance of the historicist fallacy. Supposedly it aims to predict the course of economic and political developments, especially revolutions. Though totally rejecting such an aim, Popper gives qualified approval to Marx’s “economism” (or “materialism”). That is, he approves of economism so long as it is not interpreted as rigid economic determinism. It is a perfectly sound claim “that the economic organization of society, the organization of our exchange of matter with nature, is fundamental for all social institutions and especially for their historical development.”<sup>3</sup> However, by this statement Popper means only that the study of social institutions can generally benefit from being undertaken with an “eye” to economic conditions. “What I wish to show,” he writes, “is that Marx’s ‘materialist interpretation of history’, valuable as it may be, must not be taken too seriously; that we must regard it as nothing more than a most valuable suggestion to us to consider things in their relation to their economic background.”<sup>4</sup>

As Popper sees it, both Marx’s “historicism” and his “rigid economic determinism” derive from an eighteenth-century materialist belief that science requires strict determinism. Even though he recognizes that Marx did not consider mind a mere epiphenomenon of matter, it is his claim that “Marx’s ‘inexorable laws’ of nature and of historical development show clearly the influence of the Laplacean atmosphere and that of the French Materialists.”<sup>5</sup> (Laplace, it may be recalled, was an astronomer-mathematician who reasoned that a superhuman intelligence, gifted with knowledge of the entire state of the universe at any one moment, would be able to predict or retrodict with absolute precision the state of the universe at any other moment in its history.)

But as we shall see, Popper certainly misrepresents the scope of Marx’s inexorable laws. Like many other commentators, he makes no clear distinction between Marx’s attempt to construct a model of pure capitalism, a model in which human beings are viewed simply as impersonal “supports” or bearers of economic categories, and Marx’s

theory of history, generalized over all types of social formations and assigning an important role to human agency in the form of class struggle.

Capitalism, in Marx's view, possesses structural tendencies that exert strong pressure on the way the system evolves in real historical time, an expansionist dynamic absent from other types of society. In particular, it is only under the regime of capitalist competition that technological innovation becomes a structural imperative. To what degree Marx believed this structural logic was bound to impose itself on actual history is unclear; his theoretical pronouncements on capitalism did underestimate the countervailing potential of contingent factors. But capitalism, for him, is only one phase of history, and not one whose laws are present in other phases. Indeed, he often accused economists of illegitimately reading capitalist forms and laws into earlier societies. Marx's theory of history, true or false, cannot be described as a form of historicism on the basis of his description of capitalism.

Now it is clear that for Popper what is historicist is Marx's general theory of history, and not merely his analysis of capitalism. True, Marx did believe that the dynamic of capitalism, once it had firmly taken root in a society, would surely create conditions that would allow and encourage the working class to replace capitalism with socialism. But this in no way commits him to a deterministic theory of history in general. Marx claimed that if Russia succeeded in transforming itself into a capitalist country along the Western European model, "then, once plunged into the vortex of a capitalist economy, it will have to endure the inexorable laws of that system, exactly like other profane nations." But then he went on immediately to warn against turning "my historical sketch of the development of capitalism in Western Europe into a historical-philosophical theory of universal development predetermined by fate for all nations, whatever [the] historic circumstances in which they find themselves may be...."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, this is just what Popper has done.

In making sense of Marx, it is necessary to distinguish between on the one hand levels of generalization among types of social systems, and on the other hand levels of structural abstraction (the degree to which contingency is able to modify the logic of structure). While all social systems possess certain structural features in common, each type (feudalism, capitalism, etc.) has its unique way of functioning. In the case of capitalism we can speak of laws of development—bearing in mind that these laws are truly "inexorable" only at the level of pure

economic categories, where the structural tendencies asserted for the model are unaffected by agency and accident.

By contrast, Marx's theory of how societies *in general* are structured and why one type is replaced by another can be predictive only in the more restricted sense of claiming that societies integrate themselves on the basis of their modes of production: in other words, that legal and political institutions, together with dominant modes of social thought, tend to reinforce society's economic structure, which in turn must be compatible with the existing level of technological development. Marx does assume that no society willingly abandons its achieved level of technology, and this implies that humanity's productive powers tend to increase over time. But even in this regard societal evolution is merely possible, rather than necessary—except in the hothouse of capitalism. The general theory of history, then, is not some sort of crystal ball, but rather a tool for historical research and understanding.

A failure to distinguish between the general structure of societies and the peculiar structure of capitalism, and thus to distinguish between the respective types of historical explanation that are offered, vitiates Popper's attack on Marx's "historicism". However inexorable the laws of capital may be, the general theory does not aim to predict the long-run course of history, which is to say that it is not historicist in Popper's sense. Marx's theory can best be understood as embodying a functional law or principle according to which a society's mode of production "determines" its superstructure, together with the principle that the establishment and dissolution of modes of production is intimately entwined with the struggles of social classes.<sup>7</sup>

But rather than attempting to convict Marx of historicism on the basis of his historical materialism, is it perhaps enough to point to his claim that capitalism will lead to socialism? This substantial retreat from Popper's original position would still need to explain why an economic model of capital, together with optimistic assumptions about the willingness of workers to engage in revolutionary political activity, should be interpreted as pretending to be "a historical social science that would correspond to *theoretical physics*." After all, Popper himself, in distinguishing historicism from proper scientific theorizing, agrees that economic models may legitimately be predictive. Why then should Marx's model of the capitalist economy not describe inherent tendencies toward eventual system collapse?

Popper is willing to grant the validity of prediction in social science, so long as this involves only one selected aspect of society—for to grasp a whole society in its infinite complexity is inherently impossible.

His conclusion is: "There is no history of mankind, there is only an indefinite number of histories of all kinds of aspects of human life."<sup>8</sup> It was Oswald Spengler's position that there is no universal history of humanity, only the many histories of different cultures, each with its own life cycle. But for Popper it is not a matter of there being numerous unique social organisms; it is rather that the very notion of society as a comprehensible organic whole is fallacious, and that history, as a singular sequence of events, does not lend itself to the generalizations required by science. Though there are numerous (mostly trivial) laws of aspects of history, there can be no laws of history as a whole, since there is nothing that objectively unifies the processes of history.

For Marx the processes of history are objectively unified by humanity's metabolic interaction with nature—that is, the inescapable necessity for every society continuously to carry on an interchange with its material environment in order to sustain its existence. While Popper recognizes that the interchange with nature is an important factor in historical development, his view that societies cannot be grasped holistically prevents him from recognizing in this metabolism (whether conceived according to Marx's articulation of a mode of production or in some other fashion) a potential ground for historical understanding.

All scientific understanding involves abstraction, involves discovering structural regularities rather than attempting to catalogue every unique individual aspect of the object under study. And societies, it can be argued, no less than other objects of inquiry, possess certain structural regularities. Popper has not succeeded in showing that there is something about societal wholes that places them beyond scientific ken. Even if the long-run course of societal development cannot be predicted, it may be that it can be understood retrospectively on the basis of the constraints imposed on interrelated individuals by their need to interact with their material environment. This is in fact Marx's claim. The parallel here is with biological evolution (not, it should be noted, with the life-cycles of individual organisms). It is not surprising that Marx, though no Social Darwinist, greatly admired Darwin, and it is no coincidence that for a long time Popper doubted the scientific status of Darwinian theory.

For Popper what can be salvaged from the wreckage of historical determinism is at most a "valuable suggestion" to keep economic conditions in mind. The irony of his position is that, in his haste to defend social theory against the onslaught of determinism and assert

the role of human agency, he has wound up denying the possibility of even a non-deterministic scientific theory of history.

## NOTES

1. Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 3.
2. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, vi.
3. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1966), 106.
4. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 110.
5. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 85.
6. Saul K. Padover (ed.), *The Letters of Karl Marx* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 321.
7. The thorny issue of how a society's mode of production can determine its superstructure can best be approached by employing the notion of functional explanation, such that the vital role of the superstructure in maintaining the mode of production is recognized. See G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1978). Cohen's brand of technological determinism, however, gives insufficient weight to the role of class struggle in the establishment and dissolution of modes of production.
8. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 270.