

# 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 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 prediction; 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.

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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*.

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