

Essay on inquiry and absolutes karl popper and the poverty of pseudo-science

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Inquiry and Absolutes: Karl Popper and the ‘Poverty’ of Pseudo-Science

Karl Popper was notable for his criticism of Marx and Freud in that he regarded neither as having developed “testable” theories, a fact which neither could be considered scientific, he argued. In Popper’s view, theories that cannot be used predictively degenerate into the realm of “pseudo-scientific dogma” (Thornton, 2009), and it is this claim that helped define Popper as a decided opponent of relativism in all branches of science. It was his contention that Marx and Freud had turned to ad hoc hypotheses that do not belong in objective science. In Popper’s view, psychoanalysis and Marxism (as a socio-economic predictor) had turned away from precision and abrogated their theoretical integrity by turning to easy solutions that suited their vision but which could not hold up under substantive scrutiny. Popper, in arguing that statements are descriptions of the observer’s interpretation “with reference to a determinate theoretical framework,” established a standard for determining scientific viability, a standard that he used to elicit a critical examination of two of the most influential theories in modern western history.

Marxism -

In his youth, Popper was an enthusiastic adherent to Marxist doctrine. However, he came to believe that Marxism, like psychoanalysis, had “more in common with primitive myths than with genuine science” (Thornton, 2009). In his seminal work *Conjecture and Refutation*, Popper contended that Marxism had been developed according to scientific precepts which were

measurable and predictive. “ In some of its earlier formulations (for example in Marx’s analysis of the character of the ‘ coming social revolution’) their predictions were testable, and in fact falsified” (Popper, 1963, 33-39). However, “ in spite of the serious efforts of some of its founders and followers, ultimately adoptedsoothsaying” (Popper, 1963, 37). However, having tested their theory, they “ re-interpreted” it in order to save it from widespread rejection. This was anathema to Popper, who reviled the fact that the people he had once been in agreement with had engineered matters so as to make evidence and theory agree.

In his 1979 book *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, Popper explained his logic by writing that “ We test for truth, by eliminating falsehood” (Popper, 1979, 30). To their credit, he felt, the Marxists had done this with every apparent intention of acceding to the evidence of empirical inquiry. And yet his colleagues had betrayed foundational precepts of scientific inquiry simply to protect doctrine. As offended by this betrayal of scientific integrity as Popper was, he refused to join in the wider-ranging criticisms of Marx that became de rigueur in the western world, particularly after World War II. For Popper, it was important that criticism maintain scientific protocols. In *Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper notes that he had been blamed for being overly harsh in his criticism of Marx, though he follows this statement with the admission that Marx has “ too often been attacked on personal and moral grounds,” an avenue that Popper notes is inappropriate, and that the important thing is to show where Marxism fails from a purely scientific standpoint (Popper, 1971, viii).

And yet Popper focuses on what he considers Marx's overreliance on "historicism," and his assertion that Marx had been proven wrong in his prediction that capitalism would result in a narrow concentration of wealth and consequent deprivation among the economically disadvantaged masses. As such, Popper "seems too close to his own era to see the full picture" (Burgess, 1996), meaning that Popper was making sweeping assessments before there was ample evidence available to indicate that wealth concentration could become a problem, which it clearly has, particularly in the United States. Some have criticized Popper's views on Marxism for being too one-dimensional, and superficial. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper argues that the historicist ethos which underscores Marxist philosophy is naturally opposed to the democratic principles of a free society. However, this assertion, some have argued, has no more to do with scientific inquiry than do those aspects of Marx that Popper criticizes for the same reasons.

Likewise, Popper's evaluation of the Marxist dialectic, which he charges has been used, often spuriously, to defend Marxism can appear remarkably similar to the Marxian argument itself. Popper wrote that "Marx's anti-dogmatic attitude exists only in the theory and not in the practice of orthodox Marxism, and dialectic is used by Marxists to defend the Marxist system against criticism" (Popper, 1963, 449). Essentially, Popper charges that Marxism has fallen back on a tendency to write off criticism as stemming from the inability of critics to understand the dialectic. Popper has labeled this phenomenon "reinforced dogmatism" (449). And yet the

dialectic, or semantic, nature of Popper's criticism of Marxism is often overlooked. Rather than emphasize testable, or quantifiable, economic data, Popper often relies on passages in *Das Kapital* in order to construct his evaluations. If, as Popper claims, historical materialism is not a true science because it is not falsifiable, then it seems that he himself would apply testable means in order to prove, scientifically, his contentions. Yet in *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper's refutation of historicism seems to boil down to little more than a charge that the course of human history is unpredictable (Burgess, 1996).

In a 1980 article published in *Philosophical Studies*, Richard Hudelson wrote that much of Popper's criticism of Marx is overly simplistic, and that Marx did not, after all, base his theories on precepts of historicism. Furthermore, Hudelson notes that Popper does not adequately prove his point when he says that there cannot be "laws" of social development, and that he fails to approach the problem from a sufficiently scientific standpoint (Hudelson, 1980). As such, it is significant that Popper charges that historicism is based on a "common misunderstanding" of scientific inquiry.

Popper and psychoanalysis -

Ultimately, Popper believed that historicism was nothing more than a means to accommodate supporting facts. This essentially describes Popper's evaluation of psychoanalysis. He considered psychoanalytic theory to be "non-testable, irrefutable" in that there was "no conceivable human behavior that could contradict (it)" (Popper, 1963, 281). Popper points to analysts' faith in the theoretical efficacy of "clinical observations," which they "

naively believe confirm their theory cannot do this anymore than the daily confirmations which astrologers find in their practice" (Popper, 1963, 37). Further, he impugns Freud for having based his theories on Greek mythology; specifically, in regard to his descriptions of the Ego, Super-ego and the Id and the roles each plays in human development and behavior. In terms of scientific credibility, no stronger support can be offered for them than "Homer's collected stories from Olympus" (Popper, 1963, 341). Freud offered what Popper considered an interesting synthesis of mythology and theory, but nothing that could be objectively tested. In his assessment, this relegated psychoanalysis to the category of pseudoscience.

Seen in this light, psychoanalysis becomes a fitting target for Popper's standard of falsifiability. "It is easy (Popper argues), to obtain evidence in favour of virtually any theory, and he consequently holds that such 'corroboration' as he terms it, should count scientifically only if it is the positive result of a genuinely 'risky' prediction, which might conceivably have been false" (Thornton, 2009). The psychoanalyst must rely heavily on the subjective interpretation of clinical data, which renders psychoanalysis unscientific in that it is not "refutable by a conceivable event" (2009). Thus, Freud's theory became a central figure in Popper's anti-inductive scientific ethos, in which observation is only one part of the process.

Scientific theory, according to Popper, was a "high-risk" proposition and, given the likelihood that it could be contradicted by some fact or tangible truth, required the rigorous discipline of testing. Without this rational "check," psychoanalysis could be nothing more than an elaborate intellectual

construct. “ Neither Freud nor Adler excludes any particular person’s acting in any particular way, whatever the outward circumstances. Whether a man sacrificed his life to rescue a drowning child (a case of sublimation) or whether he murdered the child by drowning him (a case of repression) could not possibly be predicted or excluded by Freud’s theory; the theory was compatible with everything that could happen” (Schilpp, 1974, 985). Popper was adamant, in his evaluation of psychoanalysis, that there was no place for open-ended, theoretical assertions in the field of serious and productive scientific endeavor. Thus, inductive reasoning, in and of itself, is incomplete science. Popper clarified his point by comparing compared Freud (and Marx) to the likes of Einstein, Newton and other physical theorists.

It is difficult to ascertain the extent of Popper’s influence on what many consider to be a Freudian “ fall from grace” in scientific and academic circles. The anti-Freudian trend in psychology is perhaps an extension of a strongly anti-modernist sentiment, “ a revolt against the uncertainties and ambiguities that the modernist legacy burdened us with, above all the sense that the self is unreliable, indeed largely unknowable” (Grunbaum, 1985). This would seem, at least on its surface, to be a reaction against non-deterministic science in the vein that Popper suggested. There have been many influences working against Freudian psychology in the latter half of the 20th century, and it seems reasonable to assume that many of them were influenced in some measure by Popper’s objections (1985).

One notable problem that has haunted the Freudian legacy is the absence of predictability inherent in the psychoanalytic model. Popper complained that

Freud, his colleagues and adherents have constructed an imposing yet indistinct conceptual edifice that does an admirable job of interpreting human behavior after the fact, but is not concerned with predicting behavior or behavioral patterns based on observation and analysis. From a procedural standpoint, one of the inherent problems of Freudian psychoanalytic theory lies in the fact that Freud himself relied heavily on case studies (much as analysts have traditionally depended on clinical interaction) rather than on controlled and quantifiable experimentation (Hale, 2011). Popper's argument was that a theory benefits science when it is in a position to make predictions based on experimentation, rather than claiming that everything can be explained using inductive reasoning.

It is difficult to say whether the erosion of Freud's reputation in the late-20th century has much to do with the systematic refutation of men like Karl Popper, if it has been part of a wider rejection of modernist thought in general or whether psychoanalysis gradually fell victim to innuendo and popular misunderstanding. A similar fate has eroded Marxism. Certainly, the post-war rise of Capitalism throughout the West sent Marxian doctrine into a sharp decline, if for no other reason than it failed so spectacularly in the former Soviet Union and its satellite countries. Seen in this light, one may well consider that Popper and his critique, based on the concepts of experimentation and falsifiability, to have been proven at least worthwhile, if not clearly correct.

It comes down to what exactly the word "science" means, and what its function is within modern society. Is it a medium for claims based on the

notion that inquiry should lead to experimentation and the assertion of some theory based on gathered evidence, whatever that might be? Or should it be considered an avenue for new ideas of exploration and information-gathering, where inductive reasoning has a function and can introduce new ways of approaching old questions? For Karl Popper, the lines between science and supposition were clearly delineated. And even where he saw value, such as in Marx's characterization of the effects of 19th century Capitalism, the discipline of science remained the guiding force, predominant and unassailable for a very good reason - to provide society with the opportunity to prove things in a world where uncertainty and ambiguity reign. This is what Popper sought when he declared Marxism and psychoanalysis to be "unscientific."

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