

THE OPEN SOCIETY
AND ITS ENEMIES
THE SPELL OF PLATO

THE OPEN SOCIETY
AND ITS ENEMIES

by K. R. POPPER

Volume I

THE SPELL OF PLATO

London

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE & SONS, LTD.
BROADWAY HOUSE: 68-74 CARTER LANE, E.G.

First published
Reprinted 1947

It will be seen . . . , that the Erewhonians
are a meek and long-suffering people, easily led
by the nose, and quick to offer up common
sense . . . when a philosopher arises among
them . . . SAMUEL BUTLER.

THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN COMPLETE
CONFORMITY WITH THE AUTHORIZED
ECONOMY STANDARDS

tinted in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome
and London

PREFACE

If in this book harsh words are spoken about some of the greatest among the intellectual leaders of mankind, my motive is not, I hope, the wish to belittle them. It springs rather from my conviction that if we wish our civilization to survive we must break with the habit of deference to great men. Great men may make great mistakes ; and as the book tries to show, some of the greatest leaders of the past supported the perennial attack on freedom and reason. Their influence, too rarely challenged, continues to mislead those on whose defence civilization depends, and to divide them. The responsibility for this tragic and possibly fatal division becomes ours if we hesitate to be outspoken in our criticism of what admittedly is part of our intellectual heritage. By our reluctance to criticize a part of it, we may help to destroy it all.

The book is a critical introduction to the philosophy of politics and of history, and an examination of some of the principles of social reconstruction. Its aim and the line of approach are indicated in the Introduction. Even where it looks back into the past, its problems are the problems of our own time ; and I have tried hard to make it as simple as possible, hoping to clarify matters which concern us all.

Although the book presupposes nothing but open-mindedness

in the reader, its object is not so much to popularize the questions treated as to solve them. In order to serve this double purpose, all matters of more specialized interest have been confined to the notes collected at the end of the book.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to all my friends who have made it possible for me to write this book. Mr. C. G. F. Simkin has not only helped me with an earlier version, but has given me the opportunity of clarifying many problems in detailed discussions over a period of nearly four years. Miss Margaret Dalziel has assisted me in the preparation of various drafts and of the final manuscript. Her untiring help has been invaluable. Mr. H. Larsen's interest in the problem of historicism was a great encouragement. Mr. T. K. Ewer has read the manuscript and has made many suggestions for its improvement. Miss Helen Hervey has put a great deal of work into the compilation of the Index.

I am deeply indebted to Professor F. A. von Hayek. Without his interest and support the book would not have been published. Dr. E. Gombrich has undertaken to see the book through the press, a burden to which was added the strain of an exacting correspondence between England and New Zealand. He has been so helpful that I can hardly say how much I owe to him.

K. R. P.
CHRISTCHURCH,

April 1944.

CONTENTS

VOLUME I: THE SPELL OF PLATO

PAOB

PREFACE v

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vi

INTRODUCTION i

THE SPELL OF PLATO 5

THE MYTH OF ORIGIN AND DESTINY 5

Chapter 1. Historicism and the Myth of Destiny ... 5

Chapter 2. Heraclitus 9

Chapter 3. Plato's Theory of Ideas 15

PLATO'S DESCRIPTIVE SOCIOLOGY 29

Chapter 4. Change and Rest -29

Chapter 5. Nature and Convention 49

PLATO'S POLITICAL PROGRAMME ..>.... 74

Chapter 6. Totalitarian Justice 74

Chapter 7. The Principle of Leadership106

Chapter 8. The Philosopher King 121

Chapter 9. ^Estheticism, Radicalism, Utopianism . .
.138

PLATO ATTACKS 149

Chapter 10. The Open Society and its Enemies
149

NOTES 178

THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES
INTRODUCTION

Concerning metaphysics . . . , I admit that my formulations may here or there have been insufficiently conditional and cautious. Yet I do not wish to hide the fact that I can only look with repugnance . . . upon the puffed-up pretentiousness of all these volumes filled with wisdom, such as are fashionable nowadays. For I am fully satisfied that . . . the accepted methods must endlessly increase these follies and blunders, and that even the complete annihilation of all these fanciful achievements could not possibly be as harmful as this fictitious science with its accursed fertility.

KANT.

This book raises a number of issues which may not be apparent from the table of contents.

It sketches some of the difficulties faced by a civilization which aims at humaneness and reasonableness, at equality and freedom ; a civilization which is still in its infancy, and which continues to grow in spite of the fact that it has been betrayed by so many of the intellectual leaders of mankind. It attempts | to show that this civilization has not yet fully recovered from the shock of its birth, the transition from the tribal or * closedl society ', with its submission to magical forces, to the * open society ' which sets free the critical powers of man. It attempts to show that the shock of this transition is one of the factors that have made possible the rise of those reactionary movements which have tried, and still try, to overthrow

civilization and to return to tribalism. And it suggests that what we call nowadays totalitarianism belongs to these movements, which are just as old or just as young as our civilization itself.

It tries thereby to contribute to our understanding of totalitarianism, and of the significance of the perennial fight against it.

It further tries to examine the application of the critical and rational methods of science to the problems of the open society.

It analyses the principles of democratic social reconstruction, the principles of what I may term 'piecemeal social engineering' in opposition to 'Utopian social engineering' (as explained in Chapter 9). And it tries to clear away some of the obstacles

i

2 INTRODUCTION

impeding a rational approach to the problems of social reconstruction. It does so by criticizing those social philosophies which are responsible for the widespread prejudice against the possibilities of democratic reform. The most powerful of these reactionary philosophies is one which I have called historicism. The story of the rise and influence of some important forms of historicism is one of the main topics of the book, which might even be described as a collection of marginal notes on the development of certain historicist philosophies. A few remarks on the

origin of the book will indicate what is meant by historicism and how it is connected with the other issues mentioned.

Although my main interests are the methods of physics (and consequently certain technical problems which are far removed from those treated in this book), I have also been interested for many years in the problem of the backwardness of the social sciences. This is, of course, nothing but the problem of their method. My interest in this problem was greatly stimulated by the rise of totalitarianism, and by the failure of the various social sciences and social philosophies to make sense of it.

In this connection, one point appeared to me particularly urgent.

Too often we hear it suggested that some form or other of totalitarianism is inevitable. Many who because of their intelligence and training should be held responsible for what they say, announce that there is no escape from it. They ask us whether we are really naive enough to believe that democracy can be permanent ; whether we do not see that it is just one of the many forms of government that come and go in the course of history. They argue that democracy, in order to fight totalitarianism, is forced to copy its methods and thus to become totalitarian itself. Or they assert that our industrial system cannot continue to function without adopting the methods of collectivist planning, and they infer from the inevitability of a collectivist economic system that the adoption of totalitarian

forms of social life is also inevitable.

Such arguments may sound plausible enough. But plausibility is not a reliable guide in such matters. In fact, one should not enter into a discussion of these specious arguments before!

having considered the following question of method : Is it within

the power of any social science to make such sweeping historical

prophecies ? Can we expect to get more than the irresponsible!

reply of the soothsayer if we ask a man what the future has in

store for mankind ?

INTRODUCTION 3

This is a question of the method of the social sciences. It is clearly more fundamental than any debate on any particular argument offered in support of any historical prophecy.

A careful examination of this question has led me to the conviction that such sweeping historical prophecies are entirely beyond the scope of scientific method. The future depends on ourselves, and we do not depend on any historical necessity.

There are, however, influential social philosophies which hold the opposite view. They claim that everybody tries to use his

brains to predict impending events ; that it is certainly legitimate

for a strategist to try to foresee the outcome of a battle ; and

that the boundaries between such a prediction and more sweeping

historical prophecies are fluid. They maintain that it is the

task of science in general to make predictions, or rather, to

improve upon our everyday predictions, and to put them upon a more secure basis ; and that it is the task of the social sciences in particular to furnish us with long-term historical prophecies.

They also believe that they have discovered laws of history which enable them to prophesy the course of historical events. The various social philosophies which raise claims of this kind, I have grouped together under the name historicism. Elsewhere, in

The Poverty of Historicism (Economic 1944/45), I have tried to argue against these claims, and to show that in spite of their plausible appearance based on gross historical facts and scientific method. While engaged in the systematic analysis and criticism of historicism I tried as well to

collect some material to illustrate its development. The notes collected for that purpose constitute the main part of this book.

The systematic analysis of historicism aims at something like scientific status. This book does not. Many of the opinions expressed are personal. What it owes to scientific method is largely the awareness of its limitations : it does not offer proofs where nothing can be proved, nor does it pretend to be scientific where it cannot give more than a personal point of view. It does not try to replace the old systems of philosophy by a new system. It does not try to add to all these volumes filled with wisdom, to the metaphysics of history and destiny, such as are fashionable nowadays. It rather tries to show that this prophetic wisdom

is harmful, that the reformers impede the application of the "piece in the machine"

It further shows to show how we may become the masters of our fate when we have ceased to pose as prophets.

4 INTRODUCTION

In tracing the development of historicism, I found that the dangerous habit of historical prophecy, so widespread among our intellectual leaders, has various functions. It is always flattering to belong to the inner circle of the initiated, and to possess the unusual power of predicting the course of history. Besides, there is a tradition that intellectual leaders are gifted with such powers, and not to possess them may lead to loss of respect. The danger, on the other hand of their being unmasked as charlatans is very small, since they can always point out that it is certainly permissible to make less sweeping predictions ; and the boundaries between these and augury are fluid.

But there are sometimes further motives for holding historicist beliefs. The prophets who announce that certain events are bound to happen make propaganda for them, and help to bring them about. Their statement that democracy is not to last for ever is as true, and as little to the point, as the assertion that human reason is not to last for ever, since only democracy provides an institutional framework that permits reform without violence,

and so the use of reason in political matters. But their story tends to discourage those who fight totalitarianism ; its motive is to support the revolt against civilization. A further motive, it seems, can be found if we consider that historicist metaphysics are apt to relieve men from the strain of their responsibilities. If you know that things are bound to happen whatever you do, then you may feel free to give up the fight against them. The tendency of historicism to support the revolt against civilization may be due to the fact that it is itself largely a reaction against the strain of our civilization, and its demand for personal responsibility.

These last allusions are somewhat vague, but they must suffice for an introduction. They will later be substantiated by historical material, especially in the chapter ' The Open Society and Its Enemies '. I was tempted to place this chapter at the beginning of the book ; with its topical interest, it would certainly have made a more inviting introduction. But I found that the full weight of this historical interpretation cannot be felt unless it is preceded by the material discussed earlier in the book. It seems that one has first to be disturbed by the identity of the Platonic theory of justice with the theory, and the justice of modern totalitarianism how urgent it is to interpret these matters.

THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES

VOL. I
THE SPELL OF PLATO

For the Open Society (about 430 B.C.) :

Although only a few may originate a policy,
we are all able to judge it.

PERICLES OF ATHENS.

Against the Open Society (about 80 years later) :

The greatest principle of all is that nobody,
whether male or female, should be without
a leader. Nor should the mind of anybody
be habituated to letting him do anything at
all on his own initiative ; neither out of zeal,
nor even playfully. But in war as well as in
the midst of peace to his leader he shall
direct his eye and follow him faithfully. And
even in the smallest matter he should stand
under leadership. For example, he should
get up, or move, or wash, or take his meals
. . only if he has been told to do so . . In
a word, he should teach his soul, by long
habit, never to dream of acting independently,
and in fact, to become utterly incapable of it.
PLATO OF ATHENS.

THE MYTH OF DESTINY

CHAPTER 1 : HISTORICISM AND THE MYTH OF
DESTINY

It is widely believed that a truly scientific and
philosophical
attitude towards politics, and a deeper understanding
of social
life in general, must be based upon a contemplation and
intei
pretation of human history. While the ordinary man

takes the setting of his life and the importance of his personal experiences and struggles for granted, it is said that the social scientist or philosopher has to survey things from a higher plane. He sees the individual as a pawn, as a rather insignificant instrument in

THE MYTH OF DESTINY

the general development of mankind. And the really important! actors on the Stage of History he may find, perhaps, in the Great Nations and their Great Leaders, or perhaps in the Great Classes, or in the Great Ideas. However this may be, he will try to understand the meaning of the play which is performed on that Stage ; he will try to understand the laws of historical development. If he succeeds in this, he will, of course, be able to predict future developments. He might then put politics upon a solid basis, and give us practical advice by telling us which political actions are likely to succeed or likely to fail.

This is a brief description of an attitude which I call historicism. It is an old idea, or rather, a connected set of ideas which unfortunately have become so much a part of our spiritual atmosphere that they are usually taken for granted, and hardly ever questioned. I have tried elsewhere to show that the historicist approach to the social sciences gives poor results. I have also tried to outline a method which, I believe, would yield

better results.

But if historicism is a faulty method that produces worthless results, then it may be useful to see how it originated, and how it succeeded in entrenching itself so successfully. A historical sketch undertaken with this aim can, at the same time, serve to analyse the variety of ideas which have gradually accumulated around the central historicist doctrine that history is controlled by developmental laws whose discovery would enable us to prophesy the destiny of man.

Historicism, which I have so far characterized only in a rather abstract way, can be well illustrated by one of the simplest and oldest of its forms, the doctrine of the chosen people. This doctrine is one of the attempts to make history understandable by a theistic interpretation, i.e. by recognizing God as the author of the play performed on the Historical Stage. The theory of the chosen people, more specifically, assumes that God has selected one people to function as the instrument of His will, and that this people will inherit the earth.

In this doctrine, the law of historical development is laid down by the Will of God. This is the specific difference which distinguishes the theistic form from other forms of historicism. A naturalistic historicism, for instance, might treat the development as a law of nature ; a spiritual historicism would treat it as a law of spiritual development ; an economic historicism as a law of economic development.

CHAPTER I : HISTORICISM 7

shares with these other forms the doctrine that there is a developmental law which can be discovered, and upon which predictions regarding the future of mankind can be based.

There is no doubt that the doctrine of the chosen people grew out of the tribal form of social life. Tribalism, i.e. the emphasis on the supreme importance of the tribe without which the individual is nothing at all, is an element which we shall find in many forms of historicist theories. Other forms which are not tribalist may still retain the element of collectivism¹ : they may still emphasize the significance of some collective or group without which the individual is nothing at all. Another aspect of the doctrine of the chosen people is the remoteness of what it proffers as the end of history. For although it may describe this end with some degree of definiteness, we have to go a long way before we reach it. And the way is not only long, but winding, leading up and down, right and left. Accordingly, it will be possible to bring every conceivable historical event well within the scheme of the interpretation. Nothing can contradict it.² But to those who believe in it, it gives certainty regarding the ultimate outcome of human history.

A criticism of the theistic interpretation of history will be attempted in the last chapter of this book, where it will also be shown that some of the greatest Christian thinkers have

repudiated
it as idolatry. An attack upon this form of historicism
should
therefore not be interpreted as an attack upon
religion. In the
present chapter, the doctrine of the chosen people
serves only as
an illustration. Its value as such can be seen from the
fact
that its chief characteristics are shared by the two
most important
modern versions of historicism whose analysis will form
the major
part of this book the historical philosophy of
racialism or
fascism on the one (the right) hand and the Marxian
historical
philosophy on the other (the left). For the chosen
people
racialism substitutes the chosen race (of Gobineau's
choice), selected as the instrument of destiny, ultimately to
inherit the earth.
Marx's historical philosophy substitutes for it the
chosen class,
the instrument for the creation of the classless
society, and at the
same time, the class destined to inherit the earth.
Both theories
base their historical forecasts on an interpretation of
history
which leads to the discovery of a law of its
development. In
the case of racialism, this is thought of as a kind of
natural law.
The biological superiority of the blood of the chosen
race explains
the course of history, past, present, and future ; it
is nothing

8 THE MYTH OF DESTINY

but the struggle of races for mastery. In the case of
Marx's
philosophy of history, the law is economic ; all
history has to be
interpreted as a struggle of classes for economic

supremacy.

The historicist character of these two movements makes our investigation topical. We shall return to them in later parts of this book. Each of them goes back directly to the philosophy of Hegel. We must, therefore, deal with that philosophy as well.

And since Hegel in the main follows certain ancient philosophers, it will be necessary to discuss the theories of Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle, before returning to the more modern forms of historicism.

CHAPTER 2 : HERACLITUS

It is not until Heraclitus, that we find in Greece theories which could be compared in their historicist character with the doctrine of the chosen people. In Homer's theistic interpretation, history is the product of divine will. But the Homeric

lay down no general laws for its development. What Homer tries to stress and to explain is not the unity of history, but rather its lack of unity. The author of the play on the Stage of History is not one God ; a whole variety of gods dabble in it. What the Homeric interpretation shares with the Jewish is a certain vague feeling of destiny, and the idea of powers behind the scene. But the ultimate destiny, according to Homer, is not disclosed to men. Unlike the Jewish, it remains mysterious.

The first Greek to introduce a more markedly

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

