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SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

The Poverty of Historicism

By Prof. Karl R. Popper. Pp. xiv+166. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1957.) 16s. net.

THIS book is an enlarged, revised version of some articles published in *Economica* thirteen years ago. Their reappearance in book form is very welcome, for in these writings Prof. K. R. Popper adds to the considerable debt already owed to him by all students of the natural and social sciences.

Popper's intentions are both polemical and constructive. He wishes to expose the fallacies which underly a certain theory, or group of theories, about both the subject-matter and the methodology of the social sciences. This doctrine, 'historicism', is roughly that the task of the social sciences is both to discover the 'laws' or 'trends' exemplified by the development of societies in time, and to predict the future course of history. In criticizing this, Popper makes a large number of illuminating and subtle observations, particularly in connexion with the crucial difference between a trend, such as may be established by statistics, and a universal law, of the kind desiderated by physics. This logical analysis of laws and theories in physics is not only of considerable importance in its own right, but it also conclusively shows that there can never be a holist or historicist 'science of society'. As against this, Popper defends a piecemeal approach to both social investigation and reform; this he calls "social engineering"—a phrase with unfortunately mechanistic overtones, which, however, Popper is at pains to disavow.

There are three topics whose treatment by Popper is, I think, open to question.

(1) The notion of historicism is qualified in so many ways that in the end the term has a very wide meaning indeed, perhaps too wide to be very useful. Historicism, we are told, is both the theory that large-scale social changes can be predicted, and that they can be controlled. As Popper shows, predictability and controllability are not the same, and so we have two distinct varieties of historicism. Further, a distinction is drawn between what are called pro-naturalistic historicists, who regard the methods and objectives of the social sciences ('social dynamics') as essentially the same as those of the natural sciences, and anti-naturalistic historicists who reject this on the grounds that the complexity of society vitiates the experimental method, and that historical development precludes generalization. This gives us a fourfold classification of types of historicism, and there are doubtless others, for Marx, Plato, Comte, Spengler, Toynbee, Mill and Mannheim are all said to be, in their various fashions, historicists. However, the reason why Popper gives to 'historicism' such a wide meaning is that he very properly wishes to state these theories in their most plausible form before setting out to demolish them.

(2) According to Popper, the essential difference between the natural and social sciences is that the latter permit the adoption of a method of logical construction in which a model of behaviour is set up on the assumption of complete rationality on the part of the individuals concerned, so that we can estimate the deviation of actual behaviour from model behaviour by using the latter as a zero co-ordinate. This technique, which in this application is derived from Weber's *verstehende Soziologie*, is of great importance in the social sciences; but the employment of this type of idealized model is also important in the natural sciences, although admittedly here no reference is made to rationality. There seems no difference in principle between, for example, an economist's use of the concept of perfect competition and a physicist's employment of the notion of 'free motion' in a Newtonian system.

(3) In discussing the conditions of scientific and technological progress, Popper rightly insists that the scientific community is a social institution whose standards of objectivity make possible the growth of science. He associates this with a different doctrine which, although widely accepted, is in my view both mistaken and dangerous—it is that "science is based upon free competition of thought; that is, freedom" (p. 159). In fact, the only social requisite for the development of science is free interchange of ideas on scientific issues; this might co-exist with complete absence of freedom in respect of other matters. Although liberal humanism made the sciences possible, we cannot assume that it is essential for their preservation. This supposition is one of the reasons why it is still difficult for many to recognize the achievements of Soviet science. We can all think of individuals who combine scientific sophistication with political superstition, though to what extent a whole society can succeed in maintaining the departmentalization is a question that cannot as yet be answered. But its answer must not be begged.

It would be misleading, however, to conclude on a critical note. This is an important and original book which makes valuable contributions towards the solution of a number of difficult and fundamental questions.

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ARCHÆOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

What Mean These Stones?

The Significance of Archaeology for Biblical Studies. By Prof. Millar Burrows. (Meridian Books.) Pp. xvi+306. (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1957.) 12s. 6d.

THE Bible is a library of books, not all of the same literary or historical importance. In some cases (especially in the Old Testament) the books themselves are composite and contain ancient frag-