

Science, Democracy and Sociology in the 21st Century: Response to Cruickshank's "Anti-authority"

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There would appear to be something particularly useful in the interpretation of classic thinkers when it comes to the hazy yet intellectually essential gray area between philosophy of social science, social theory, and social research. Justin Cruickshank's essay provides more evidence for this hypothesis. By reinterpreting the philosophy of science of Karl Popper, and relating this interpretation to a kind of revisionist, matters-are-clearer-in-hindsight view of the philosophy of Richard Rorty, Cruickshank does recovery work — saving these thinkers from certain stereotypes — but also, and more importantly in my view, a certain kind of conceptual carving up of “thought space.” Cruickshank uses Rorty and Popper as sculptor's tools to create a configuration of our understanding of knowledge. One senses a larger project here, a new version of pragmatism for social science, centered less directly on action and communication than were the philosophies of the original American pragmatists. The focus is, instead, on the capacities and needs of scientific knowledge, and the relationship of the pursuit of that knowledge to critical social theory and democratic practice. Here, I assume the obvious — that this project is interesting and possesses clear merit. I also assume that I need not explicate the clear contributions of this specific paper as it stands. Finally, I do not wish to directly challenge Cruickshank's interpretations of the texts of Popper and Rorty. Rather, I wish to ask some questions about the larger project that is emerging here.

Goals of the Larger Project

That project has, as I see it, two central aims. The first goal is to use the commonalities of Rorty and Popper to undermine a certain definitional and *über-ontological* realism that reaches back to Aristotle and Plato, and can be found, as well, in certain contemporary understandings of social science. The key insight of Popper, picked up by Cruickshank and aimed squarely at certain realisms in contemporary social sciences, is that methodological essentialists undermine inquiry by “formulat[ing] scientific questions in such terms as ‘what is matter?’ or ‘what is force’ or ‘what is justice?’” For Cruickshank, this is not the right way to think or to start inquiry, and one recognizes the parallel questions in social theory today (what is social structure? what is action? what is society? what is power?). In his view, there is a clear contradiction between such attempts to nail down the definition of terms once and for all, and the empirical prospects of social science. I will call the position Cruickshank attacks here *high realism* in reference to its imputed priestly character and its search for eternal forms and ever-stable referents, and to differentiate it from the many other kinds of scientific realism that pepper the epistemological scene. Cruickshank wants to remove high realism as an option for founding science, and replace it with a problem-solving approach, in which science, in interaction with the world, arrives at better, but always further improvable, theories, explanations, and concepts.

The second goal is to link this methodologically nominalist and pragmatist philosophy of science to a series of normative issues, and in particular, to certain problems that Popper and Rorty had with the “Marxist left” and the “post-Nietzschean left,” respectively. Here

we are reminded of how high the stakes are in the gray zone between philosophy of science, social theory, and social research that I referred to above. For Popper, Rorty and Cruickshank, one's account of knowledge is simultaneously a rendering of natural science, of social science, and (especially for Rorty) of the humanities. *Furthermore*, that same account of knowledge is called upon to address the relationship between knowledge production — including the norms surrounding it and the philosophy that underpins it— and democratic social life. Such is the burden of social theory, I suppose. It is a burden that Cruickshank takes up well.

His central argument, here, is that there is a link between nominalism and democracy, that this link can be found in Popper as well as in Rorty, and that this link should be carried through into a new era for understanding the purpose and possibilities of social scientific knowledge. Furthermore, Cruickshank argues that this link reveals, via contrast, an authoritarian strain in certain areas of leftist thought whose self-conception is egalitarian and democratic, but whose practice is all too Platonic. What is the link? It appears to be a certain elective affinity between the scientist's agnosticism towards his theories and the definition of terms — a willingness to attempt to falsify all conjectures via experiment and thus choose the theory that best explains the problems and puzzles he confronts, and a willingness to design and redesign concepts and definitions depending on the scientific problem at hand — and the agnosticism and irony of the liberal reformist — who, when confronted with social problems, and suffering in particular, will opt for the best solution to the problems, no matter that solution's ideological origins or valences. Both of these operations require critical rationalism, both of them embody anti-authoritarian goals, and both are, in Cruickshank's view, progressive and democratic projects. This is how I understand what Cruickshank is after in this article. Now, let us look more closely at the accounts of science on offer here, and on the proposed link between these accounts and democracy.

Popper and Rorty, the Natural and Social Sciences

I would first note that there is an odd way in which, in Popper and Rorty, an overarching pragmatism of knowledge-*qua*-human-product obscures, or at least insufficiently grapples with, the distinction between the natural and the human sciences. This distinction is, itself, a bit out of fashion. It is eschewed by those branches of the social sciences that insist on a full and total assimilation into the world of the natural sciences, an insistence that has perhaps become more shrill during the neoliberal crisis of the academy as the humanities (and also the social sciences themselves) have come under attack. And it is *also* challenged by voices from science and technology studies, who insist that most versions of the distinction between the natural and the human sciences unrealistically characterize the actual world of natural scientific practice, putting natural science on a pedestal and giving it a purity it neither desires nor deserves.

Yet differences remain. The differences between the theory of autism — inflected by the self-understanding of the parents, sufferers and movement organizers around autism — and the theory of quantum fields persist, despite philosophical attempts to dissolve them into uncertainty, networks and alliances, or anything else. Charismatic leaders know something about how charismatic authority works, and has worked at other moments in

history. And this just scratches the surface, with the most glaring examples. How, I would ask Cruickshank, does he plan to explain the differences between the social sciences and the natural sciences? Are they meaningful? How should we understand them? I think that Cruickshank and I agree that the answer that was developed in the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar was not sufficient. But it is not clear to me, yet, what Cruickshank intends to put in its place.

In Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism*, the distinction between a natural scientific experiment and the "experiments" that inform piecemeal social engineering is glossed over with ease, as Popper bashes away at the untenable Marxist philosophy of history. Popper analogize natural and social science the two with a certain élan. Lines like these are reasonably representative of the text:

Similarly, there seems no reason why we should be unable to frame sociological theories which are important for all social periods. The spectacular differences between these periods are no indication that such laws cannot be found, any more than the spectacular differences between Greenland and Crete can prove that there are no physical laws which hold for both regions. (Popper 1992, 93)

This does not go to the core of the issue; furthermore it seems all too easy. The core of the issue, for *The Poverty of Historicism*, is whether Popper's key terms — experiment, piecemeal engineering, his absolute insistence that "there is no great difference between explanation, prediction, and testing" (1992, 123) — really hold the *same* conceptual meaning across all of the areas of inquiry that he addresses. I have no idea whether the "difference" between feudal and capitalist Europe is "bigger" than the difference between the natural environments one finds in Greenland and Crete, but I find the idea that a common, clear, practical meaning to "experiment" is consistent across CERN, the medical profession in the United States, and the sociology practiced at the ISA World Congress — to pick three spaces of knowledge production — rather difficult to sustain. What, exactly, does a recovery of Popper's problem-solving approach enable us to see about sociological knowledge in particular? Can we confront, from within the Popperian problem-solving perspective, what Ian Hacking calls "dynamic nominalism" of things that are "made," what Roy Bhaskar calls "concept-dependence," and what I would call the symmetry problem of the human sciences (humans producing knowledge about other humans)? For we know from research that *what becomes a social problem to be solved* is itself a complex process determined by factors that include symbolization and public communication, and which do not all appear to fit easily under the Popperian shibboleth of "critical rationalism." As Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) wrote in their famous paper on social problems:

The fates of potential problems are governed not only by their objective natures but by a highly selective process in which they compete with one another for public attention and societal resources. A fraction of the potential problems are publicly presented by groups or individuals who define them as problems. These groups and individuals come from many sectors of society and may have very different goals ... Since there are

usually many ways of defining a given situation as a problem, claims about social problems do not only call attention to conditions; they also frame problems in particular ways (57).

Of course, there is a complex social process for the selection of worthwhile problems in the natural sciences as well, and there is contention about the very boundary between nature and society, between an “engineering problem” and a “social problem.” (The technologists have shown as much). Yet I would maintain that to simply suggest, as Popper frequently does in *The Poverty of Historicism*, that something akin to “experiments” can be the basis of piecemeal social engineering, without exploring the issue of whose suffering is symbolized as in need of redress, simplifies the problem of knowledge-politics in the human sciences. This simplification, I fear, lumps some very different issues under the rubric of “pragmatics” and “problem-solving.” It also brings me to the second issue raised by Cruickshank’s paper. For one thing that we might favor is a *democratic* method of identifying of the social problems to be solved. But what this means, and how democracy is related to expert knowledge, is left unclear in the paper.

Science and Democracy

What is the link between science and democracy? This question stands out as both the motivator for Cruickshank’s paper and a yet-to-be-answered question, which perhaps will arrive in his next book. I only wish to point out that the important commonalities that Cruickshank develops between Rorty and Popper raise further questions. In both thinkers, Cruickshank identifies what he views as an extremely valuable critique of the Platonic left: Popper and Rorty both posit a tendency towards illiberalism rooted in a presumed connection between pure knowledge and political authority and judgment. In the case of the post-Nietzscheans, of course, this is proposed primarily as a relationship of abandonment rather than the actual imposition of some sort of new social order. It is not as if the Foucauldians have actually grasped any real authority or power in society — Foucault’s theories have not become the mythical, lionized bywords and iconic reference points for entire state apparatuses attempting to radically transform societies through constant revolution. But Cruickshank maintains, with Rorty, that the Foucauldians have abandoned society as always already fallen and corrupt, giving public discussion over to the forces of, and rhetoric of, the neoliberal right. He also advances, via the comparison with Popper, and extension of this argument, proposing as a partial explanation of this abandonment the disdain for democratic processes that is ultimately traceable to Plato and to what I called, above, “high realism.”

I would point out, however, that this view of Foucault as “cryptonormative” (Cruickshank 2007), and its associated attack on the concerns of those who study “discourse” is itself a move in a particular discursive space of Anglophone social science. Cruickshank is proposing to correct for the lurch towards multiculturalism, identity, and symbolic inclusion/exclusion as foci of study, contrasting these concerns with a more “material” focus. Fair enough, I suppose, though one might point out that the complex interconnections between symbolic dislocations and material deprivations in the contemporary world render this return to the economic slightly suspect as itself a symbolic maneuver in the field of academia. Surely the left can do both, though I suppose

the general confusion and disorganization of social movements on the left supports Cruickshank's view more than it does mine.

But even if Cruickshank is right about the neo-Foucauldians, we still have the following problem: What is this link between critical discussion, rationality, science, and democracy? Can we really say that something called critical rationalism is simultaneously the basis of good science and good democratic practice? Steve Fuller (2004) has argued something similar, in attempting to salvage Popper's reputation at the expense of Thomas Kuhn's. However, particularly when developed in connection with Rorty's own liberal politics, I find that this view again papers over some key distinctions. At its core, the argument seems to be that there is a kind of shared *ethos* (or *habitus*?) that bridges the ways of acting and being that are required of a group of people if they are to successfully pursue scientific and/or scholarly inquiry and the ways of acting and being that are required of a group of people if they are to constitute a functioning democratic polity. We could characterize this common ethos in a variety of ways (indeed doing so appears to be a central occupation of social theory for the last fifty years): the inclusion of many voices, respect for good arguments, agonism without antagonism, etc. This argument takes its most universalizing form in the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas, who attempts to link democratic politics to the very possibility of meaningful communication between humans (1984). Rorty is the other end of the spectrum of the same argument, pursuing a more historically and culturally located redefinition of "irony" as this ethos-link between critical scholarship and a democratic society.

The problem I see with this is that it has almost no account of the existence of different institutional spaces in society, and of how these spaces are overlaid by different discursive logics of argumentation and justification. Scientists are specialized, as Max Weber so famously reported in his lectures during the German revolution. They do not generally get into the business of politics. So how is it that their norms of criticism are also those of decision-makers? What would ever make parliamentary debate like a seminar? I invite Cruickshank to set me straight on this matter; to clarify how Popper's conception of problem-solving inquiry opens up not only a critique of certain strands of thinking on the intellectual left, but also informs an account of democratic practice in a complex, institutionally differentiated society.

For, from my viewpoint, there is a contradiction here, not yet worked out, between (1) the *epistemic privilege* which science ultimately tries to achieve over and against common-sense explanations, previous scientific theories and hypotheses (and which is, of course, to be understood as hooked into certain pragmatic tests of theories), and (2) the norms of critical rationality that serve as the *means* to the end of epistemic privilege. These two come together in a very specific way in the sphere of science, and there are important differences between the natural and the human sciences in how epistemic privilege is achieved (and reflexively considered and criticized). Popper, Rorty, and Cruickshank want those norms of criticism to structure everyday social life, and perhaps political processes as well. But this aspiration, while well-oiled in its critique of the Marxian, and then the Foucauldian left, has yet to account for this transfer of democracy from scholarship to society in a compelling sociological way.

In my view, sociological explanation, in many of its forms, *often does* claim, in ways rigorously supported by evidence, that there are social processes, configurations of causes, and yes, even discursive formations whose effects on social life are not immediately apparent in the interactions of everyday life. It does claim to know what people are doing, when those people do not always know. Somehow this must be squared with its democratic ambitions. Perhaps we need a sociology of scientific expertise, and of “expertise” generally, that situates various forms of scientific and scholarly practice vis-à-vis other aspects of social life. This, then, could be related to the classic concerns of the sociology of social movements: how, when, and where grievances and suffering can be made into public issues, and the basis of demands on the state. Only then, in my view, can we really return to the question of the relationship between science and democracy, and to a conceptualization of the “open society.”

In Sum

All of which brings me to a last, nagging doubt. Cruickshank identifies a terrible shift in social thought and its relationship to society, tremendously consequential, whereby public discourse was captured by the neoliberal turn. Yet, in seeking a counterattack, he turns to the *anti-utopian* philosopher *par excellence*, the one whose encounter with Marxism led him away from utopian thought altogether, and towards an all-encompassing philosophy of experimentation and problem-solving. But is it not possible that the left has ceded utopian thinking to the right, leaving the stark utopia of the market the last utopia standing? This is, I fear, a problem not only of the political economy of the world but also of the symbolics of public discussion. It is, in other words, a problem with a *discursive* dimension. Are we really inclined to give up on utopian thinking so easily, just because the dystopias pictured in *Discipline and Punish* led some academics to claim that power and domination were inescapable, and society already lost? I find that Cruickshank and I see the dilemmas facing the social sciences in the 21st century in a remarkably similar way. But I do not see the answers in clearly defined Popperian terms. Perhaps he can convince me otherwise.

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