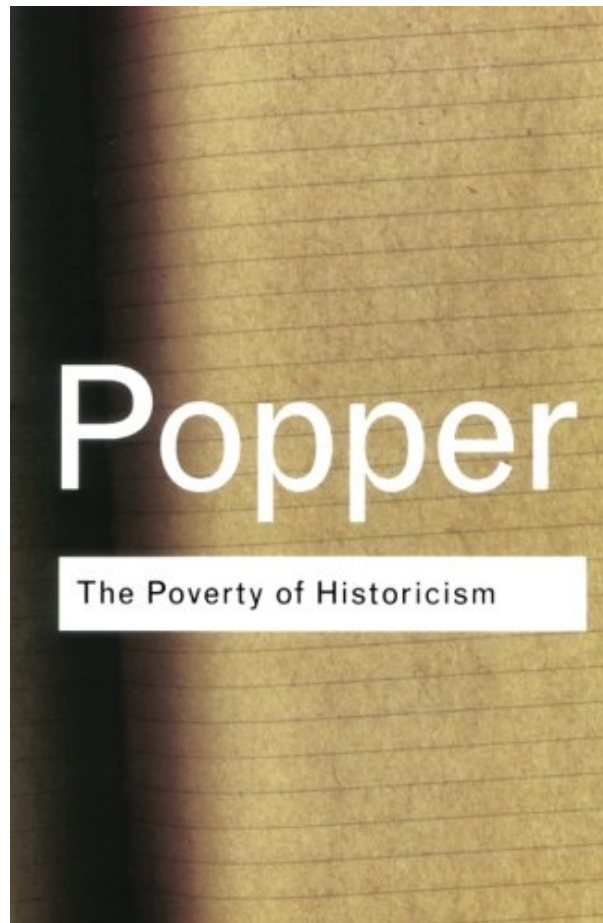
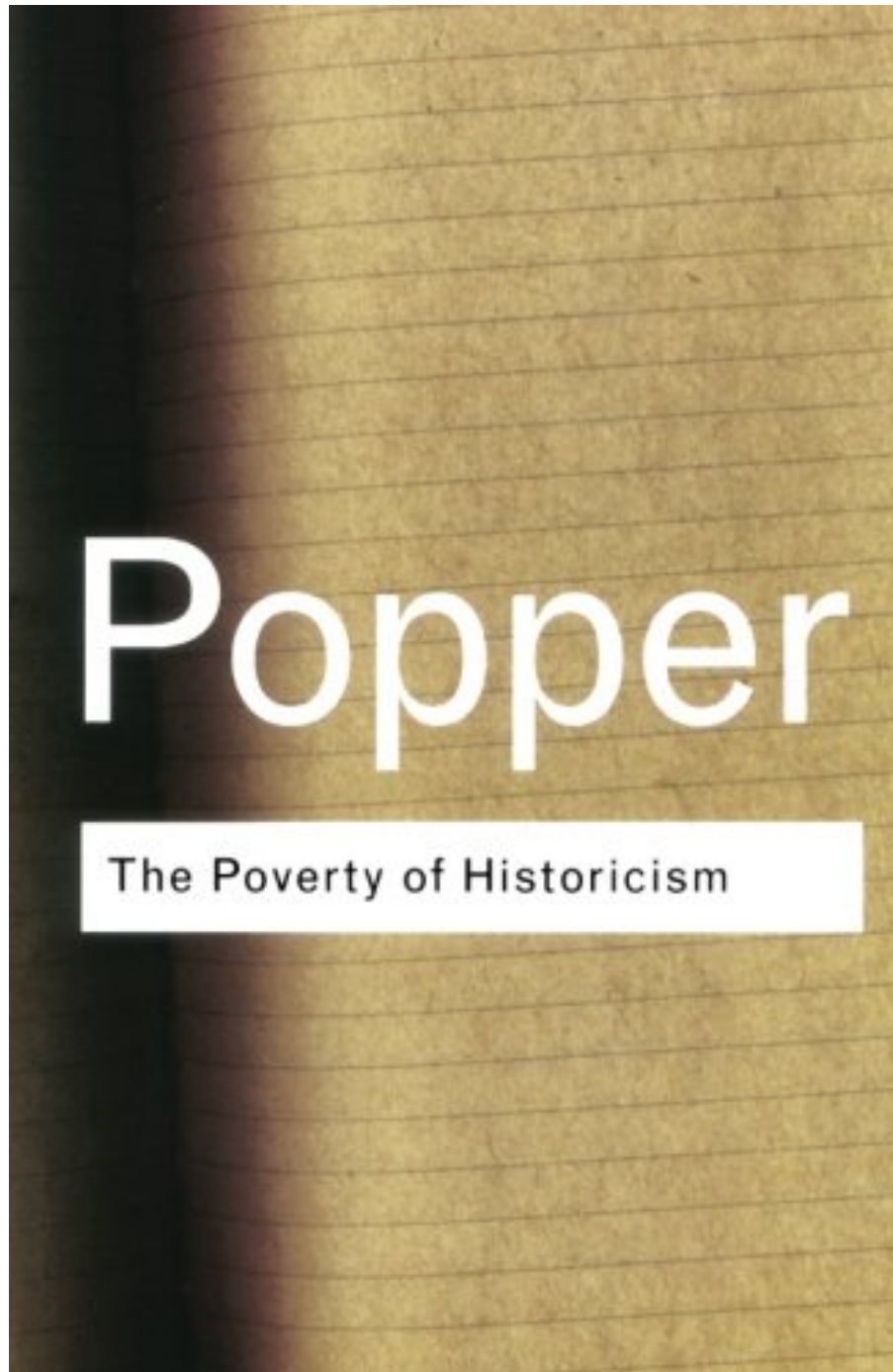


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## Review

"Probably the only book published this year which will outlive the century."

-Arthur Koestler, author of "Darkness at Noon"

## About the Author

Karl Popper (1902-94). Philosopher, born in Vienna. One of the most influential and controversial thinkers of the twentieth century.

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# **THE POVERTY OF HISTORICISM (ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS)**

## **BY KARL POPPER PDF**

On its publication in 1957, *The Poverty of Historicism* was hailed by Arthur Koestler as 'probably the only book published this year which will outlive the century.'

A devastating criticism of fixed and predictable laws in history, Popper dedicated the book to all those 'who fell victim to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.' Short and beautifully written, it has inspired generations of readers, intellectuals and policy makers. One of the most important books on the social sciences since the Second World War, it is a searing insight into the ideas of this great thinker.

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### Most helpful customer reviews

16 of 17 people found the following review helpful.

Non expert summary of the book

By Sudipto Sarkar

1. Historicism is a term that was invented by Karl Popper. He did it on purpose to prevent confusion with any other existing term.
2. The book is about methodology of social science but of course most of the conclusions are about the nature of social science.
3. He seeks to refute the two core arguments that are advanced to show that social science is not like science.
4. The anti naturalist doctrine says social science is not like science because unlike in science we cannot really follow the hypothesis>experiment>conclusion> refinement of hypothesis cycle. Various reasons are offered for this such as being unable to experiment, complexity of social science (includes biology, psychology etc.), novelty (every situation is unique because of the `uncertainty principle') and the fact that social experiments is not worth doing in a piecemeal fashion because their generalisability is very less.
5. The naturalist doctrine on the other hand looks at social science as being similar to astronomy (global laws

which explain everything about the universe and cannot be disobeyed or overturned no matter what we do) and says that laws of social science can be found. These laws are not accurate in the short term but work very well in the long term across periods of history and in fact are necessary to be able to make out the transition between different periods of stages of history as the deeper content of each of these stages cannot be known with accuracy. Also these laws can be solely understood by studying the history that is records of past events. These laws are called Holism by Popper and he shows that even in the anti naturalist doctrine holism is popular because it is used as a constant between the various stages of history (which in the short term cannot be analysed and predicted).

6. The holism is central to historicism and leads to a position where in the short term we cannot do anything about social sciences in the manner of being able to rationally change and predict the consequences but in the long term we have to ensure that we are in tune with the tide of history as revealed by laws such which have roots in Plato's republic and the Marx's march of the proletariat etc. The only proactive thing we can do is to hasten the transition of various stages or change our values and beliefs to be in tune (Marx ...reduce the birthing pangs in contrast to his call to action of changing history rather than interpret it).

7. So what will work according to Popper :

a. In terms of experiments he suggests piecemeal engineering that is based on the scientific method. He says that scientific experiments may look on the surface easier to setup and control as compared to social experiments but this is because we are usually comparing a limited scope experiment to one on a large scale. If the scientific experiment was on the large scale as is expected in a social context it would be just as difficult.

b. Also large scale social experiments such as centralised planning are actually not helpful in understating cause and effect because it is very hard to learn from very large failures .Specifically with respect to planning they cannot centralise knowledge and control all kinds of relationships. To get around this they use propaganda and fear which defeats the purpose of seeing whether planning works to better the society as it stood before the start of the "experiment".

c. In a large scale social change recognise that often one can only offer interpretations based on various point of views(e.g. capitalist) and the starting conditions ( equivalent to initial conditions) as opposed try to come up with a set of unchanging laws that this large scale event seems to justify (e.g. Russian Revolution).

d. He rejects the holism argument and march of history as he says that there are no laws of social science that can be gleaned by studying many separate events. There is just a trend and a trend has to be explained by multiple laws. The mistake of historicism is to see trends as laws.

e. So even if these multiple laws were there they would not be that relevant because other than in fields such as theoretical physics ( law of gravity) the laws themselves act as background to solving a practical problem rather than being the cause of the practical problem (e.g. prediction of earthquakes in a place is not going to be found out by applying the law of gravity although any hypothesis must be consistent with gravity).

f. So to solve these practical problems we can take the piecemeal engineering approach by formulating the hypothesis as negative statements ( e.g. progress in science cannot occur in a totalitarian regime). These can then be tested using the experimental approach.

g. We should take a technological view of social science ( build a building to guard against a storm) as opposed to a theoretical view ( explain the occurrence of storms in a location over 30 years).

h. The poverty of historicist is a poverty of imagination as it says that there cannot be a scientific approach to social science but at the same time there are absolute and unchanging laws - called essentialism on the lines of Plato's Republic (that only a few people understand ) which TODAY (this generation, this period in history where the historicist is) are operating far quicker than ever before because of the "pace of progress".

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

It is impossible to know and control what people think (B. Spinoza)

By Luc REYNAERT

In this book, Karl Popper explains his vision on the course of history, on historical determinism, and on the

theories of Descartes, Poincaré and Duhem.

The course of history

For K. Popper, evolution in history is never dominated by theories, although they may exert some influence, at the same time many other less rational or even completely irrational factors are at work.

Historicism (Engels, Marx, Spencer, J.S. Mill, K. Mannheim)

Historicism is that part of social sciences which considers historical predictions as its main objective. It pretends that this goal can be achieved if we discover the 'laws' or 'trends' that underlie historical developments.

Karl Popper rejects this approach for the following reasons: the course of human history depends heavily on the increase of human knowledge. We can not rationally or scientifically predict this increase. So, we can not determine the future course of history. Developing a theoretical history which is the equivalent of theoretical physics, is impossible.

Descartes, Poincaré, Duhem, essentialism

For Descartes, the principles and premises of deductive systems must be certain ('clear and distinct'). For K. Popper, these principles are only provisory, are only hypotheses. Popper does not agree either with Poincaré and Duhem, for which some systems may not be subjected to empirical tests. A world of universals (essentialism) doesn't exist, only a world of real objects (nominalism).

Popper's proposition of piecemeal adjustments (not revolutions) in the social sphere has been heavily criticized. One critic even asked how a HIV plague can be attacked by piecemeal interventions. But, in fact, the HIV plague was attacked in a piecemeal manner; first by individual drugs, then by cocktails.

This defense of indeterminism is a must for all historians and for all Popper fans.

The best introduction to Popper's philosophy is Bryan Magee's 'Philosophy and the Real World. An Introduction to Karl Popper'.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

An opportunity lost

By Rafe Champion

The Poverty of Historicism refuted the major arguments which propped up the myth of historical determinism, possibly the most damaging myth of modern times. It is a neglected classic because it was overshadowed by The Open Society and its Enemies which was published in 1945 while The Poverty did not appear in book form until 1957.

In the context of Popper's lifetime achievement it is the work where he first developed the ideas of institutional analysis and the logic of the situation which, in alliance with work by Talcott Parsons and Ludwig von Mises, could have changed the direction of economics and the other social sciences after WW2.

The Poverty of Historicism is a short book on the methods of the social sciences and social reform. It appeared as a series of three journal articles in the 1940s and in book form in 1957.

Popper's aim in this work was to transform the social sciences in the same way that he transformed the philosophy of the natural sciences in Logik der Forschung (1935). This had a moral and political purpose because he believed that defective methods in the social sciences had contributed to the rise of fascism and communism. The book is dedicated to the victims of these movements.

He wanted the social sciences to develop a body of knowledge to enable social reforms to deliver peace, freedom and prosperity in the way that the natural sciences and technology increased the productive capacity of the earth. This knowledge and the kind of piecemeal reforms that he advocated would be subject to abuse, like science and technology, but not nearly as much as grand schemes driven by dictators or "philosopher kings" who believe that "history is on our side".

### A Window of Opportunity

During the 1930s three men worked on the same problems in the social sciences and they came up with practically the same solutions. The American Talcott Parsons wrote *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). Ludwig von Mises worked for the Austrian government during the day and in the evenings he worked on "The Fundamental Problems of Political Economy". *Human Action*, his masterwork, appeared in German in 1940 and in English in 1949. Not far away in Vienna Karl Popper worked on "The Fundamental Problems of Epistemology" after teaching science and mathematics in school. *Logik der Forschung* appeared in 1935 and then he turned his attention to the social sciences. The results were *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), both completed in New Zealand during the war.

All three men offered a framework for the study of economics and the other human sciences which could have:

Maintained sociology and economics as an integrated discipline.

Sponsored partnerships between economists and students of all social institutions - law, politics, literature, religion and cultural studies at large.

Ensured that "high theory" and empirical studies informed, enriched and corrected each other.

Contributed to good public policy, especially by monitoring the results of increased regulation and intervention by Big Government and the impact of the erosion of "civic virtues". This work could have commenced when the role of government was much smaller and less entrenched.

The common elements in their schemes could have either prevented some of the unhelpful developments in economics since WW2 or at least promoted more helpful alternative research programs. The unhelpful developments include over-specialization, neglect of historical studies, excessive formalism to describe unreal systems that do not exist on earth (general systems theory and mathematical welfare economics), inappropriate aggregation of data (Keynesian demand analysis and econometrics).

There was a window of opportunity for these three leading figures in their respective fields, plus their followers, to form a united front across the disciplines of sociology, economics and philosophy to promote the ideas that they shared and to debate the views that they did not share.

This did not happen. The published works of Popper and Parsons contain no references to the other parties. No reader of von Mises would be moved to read the work of the other two. So there was no united front across the three disciplines.

After 1937 Parsons turned to general systems theory and a form of functional analysis of society that made no contact with the interests of von Mises in economics. They were also ideologically poles apart. After the war Popper returned to his main interests in logic and physics. He only made spasmodic contributions to the methods of the social sciences, including a significant paper on situational analysis and the Rationality



Principle.

The fertility of the approach is demonstrated by several programs, notably the work by Jarvie and Agassi in social science, Jack Birner, Boland and Wong in economics, some work by Burgess and others on education in Britain, North's work, the Virginia School of public choice theory, and the interdisciplinary studies in the Economics School and related research groups at the George Mason University.

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