



George Soros Contradicts Mentor Karl Popper

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Introduction: George Soros, in his own words, has regarded Karl Popper as his mentor, the philosopher and instructor at the London School of Economics under whom he studied. Of interest to me, as I was compiling research on Soros in 2007-08 in preparation of writing *Gold Baron*, was the fact that, for someone who supposedly so revered his mentor, Soros plainly disregarded and even contradicted Popper's teachings. Not to say that he didn't learn the lessons in class. In actuality, Soros applied them well in what he calls reflexivity. In order to streamline where Soros deviated from the wisdom of Popper, in this brief of working notes, the entry from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is utilized for the clarity and concision of Popper's work in social and political philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/popper/>, revised since this paper's writing. The following quoted excerpts are from the Stanford document. My emphasis on Soros' obvious contradiction of his mentor's teachings are highlighted, and my comments are italicized: *Falsifiability &* Popper, then, repudiates induction, and rejects the view that it is the characteristic method of scientific investigation and inference, and substitutes *falsifiability* in its place. It is easy, he 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. For Popper, a theory is scientific only if it is refutable by a conceivable event. Every genuine test of a scientific theory, then, is logically an attempt to refute or to falsify it, and one genuine counter-instance falsifies the whole theory. *[Thus, global warming which Soros uses freely as a rationale for his philanthropy, by Popper's definition, is unscientific]* In a critical sense, Popper's theory of demarcation is based upon his perception of the logical asymmetry which holds between verification and falsification: it is logically impossible to conclusively verify a universal proposition by reference to experience (as Hume saw clearly), but a single counter-instance conclusively falsifies the corresponding universal law. In a word, an exception, far from proving a rule, conclusively refutes it. Popper emphasises both the importance of questioning the background knowledge when the need arises, and the significance of the fact that observation-statements are theory-laden, and hence fallible. For while falsifiability is simple as a logical principle, in practice it is exceedingly complicated no single observation can ever be taken to falsify a theory, for there is always the possibility (a) that the observation itself is mistaken, or (b) that the assumed background knowledge is faulty or defective. *Historicism &* Against this Popper strongly advances the view that any human social grouping is no more (or less) than the sum of its individual members, that what happens in history is the (largely unplanned and unforeseeable) result of the actions of such individuals, and that large scale social planning to an antecedently conceived blueprint is inherently misconceived and inevitably disastrous precisely because human actions have consequences which cannot be foreseen. Popper, then, is an historical *indeterminist*, insofar as he holds that history does not evolve in accordance with intrinsic laws or principles, that in the absence of such laws and principles unconditional prediction in the social sciences is an impossibility, and that there is no such thing as historical necessity. *[However, does this not combat the assumption that global warming can be avoided by attempting to predict human effect on the atmosphere by predicting (through false science) the energy expenditure of humanity? And is not Soros promoting exactly this?]* *Open Society &* More specifically, the open society can be brought about only if it is possible for the individual citizen to evaluate critically the consequences of the implementation of government policies, which can then be abandoned or modified in the light of such critical scrutiny in such a society, the rights of the individual to criticise administrative policies will be formally safeguarded and upheld, undesirable policies will be eliminated in a manner analogous to the elimination of falsified scientific theories, and differences between people on social policy will be resolved by critical discussion and argument rather than by force. The open society as thus conceived of by Popper may be defined as an association of free individuals respecting each other's rights within the framework of mutual protection supplied by the state, and achieving, through the making of responsible, rational



decisions, a growing measure of humane and enlightened life (Levinson, R.B. *In Defense of Plato*, 17). As such, Popper holds, it is not a utopian ideal, but an empirically realised form of social organisation which, he argues, is in every respect superior to its (real or potential) totalitarian rivals. But he does not engage in a moral defence of the ideology of liberalism; *[the exact opposite of his, and the true, definition of which has come to be understood in modern Western society in that the concept promotes free enterprise (economic competition) and limited regulation by the state. Within today's society, the bastardized form of liberalism is behind increasing governmental regulation of economic enterprise]* rather his strategy is the much deeper one of showing that totalitarianism is typically based upon historicist and holist presuppositions, and of demonstrating that these presuppositions are fundamentally incoherent. *Predictability &* The latter, *(human society and human history)* of course, is *not* an isolated system (in fact it's not a system at all), it is constantly changing, and it continually undergoes rapid, non-repetitive development. In the most fundamental sense possible, every event in human history is discrete, novel, quite unique, and ontologically distinct from every other historical event. For this reason, it is impossible in principle that unconditional scientific prophecies could be made in relation to human history the idea that the successful unconditional prediction of eclipses provides us with reasonable grounds for the hope of successful unconditional prediction regarding the evolution of human history turns out to be based upon a gross misconception, and is quite false. As Popper himself concludes, "The fact that we predict eclipses does not, therefore, provide a valid reason for expecting that we can predict revolutions." (*Conjectures and Refutations*, 340). *[So how is human energy development and consumption, and its subsequent affect on the atmosphere, predictable when human society is not a closed system and thus unpredictable? Is this the purpose of Soros' idea that regulation must be instituted on the governmental level to direct capitalism? To create, or attempt to create a closed system?]* Following quote is that of George Soros and not from the Popper paper: "Global integration has brought tremendous benefits: the benefits of the international division of labor ... But global capitalism is not without its problems, and we need to understand these better if we want the system to survive. By focusing on the problems I'm not trying to belittle the benefits that globalization has brought ... The benefits of the present global capitalist system, I believe, can be sustained only by deliberate and persistent efforts to correct and contain the system's deficiencies. *George Soros. "Toward a Global Open Society". 1998. The Atlantic magazine. (http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/98jan/opensoc.htm), Historical antecedents &* For the truth is that the number of factors which predate and lead to the occurrence of any event, past, present, or future, is indefinitely large, and therefore knowledge of all of these factors is impossible, even in principle. What gives rise to the fallacy is the manner in which the historian (necessarily) selectively isolates a finite number of the antecedent conditions of some past event as being of particular importance, which are then somewhat misleadingly termed the causes of that event, when in fact what this means is that they are the specific conditions which a particular historian or group of historians take to be more *relevant* than any other of the indefinitely large number of such conditions (for this reason, most historical debates range over the question as to whether the conditions thus specified are the *right* ones). While this kind of selectivity may be justifiable in relation to the treatment of any past event, it has no basis whatsoever in relation to the future if we now select, as Marx did, the relevant antecedent conditions for some future event, the likelihood is that we will select wrongly. *[Global warming falls into this category.]* Neither conditional nor unconditional predictions can be based upon trends, because these may change or be reversed with a change in the conditions which gave rise to them in the first instance. Popper does not, of course, dispute the existence of trends, nor does he deny that the observation of trends can be of practical utility value but the essential point is that a trend is something which *itself* ultimately stands in need of scientific explanation, and it cannot therefore function as the frame of reference in terms of which anything else can be scientifically explained or predicted. Moreover, he argues, it is logically demonstrable by a consideration of the implications of the fact that no scientific predictor, human or otherwise, can possibly predict, by scientific methods, its own future results. From this it follows, he holds, that no society can predict, scientifically, its own future states of knowledge. (*The Poverty of Historicism*, vii). Popper's arguments against holism, and in particular his arguments against the propriety of large-scale planning of social structures, are interconnected with his demonstration of the logical shortcomings of the presuppositions of historicism. Such planning (which actually took place, of course, in the USSR, in China, and in Cambodia, for example, under totalitarian regimes which accepted forms of



historicism and holism), Popper points out, is necessarily structured in the light of the predictions which have been made about future history on the basis of the so-called laws which historicists such as Marx and Mao claimed to have discovered in relation to human history. Accordingly, recognition that there are no such laws, and that unconditional predictions about future history are based, at best, upon nothing more substantial than the observation of contingent trends, shows that, from a purely theoretical as well as a practical point of view, large-scale social planning is indeed a recipe for disaster. *[Is this not the very supposition that is intruding into increased governmental regulation? The concept that planning and directing via legislation and rules, one can direct the outcome and subvert the natural direction of history and/or nature itself?]* In summary, unconditional large-scale planning for the future is theoretically as well as practically misguided, because, again, part of what we are planning for is our future knowledge, and our future knowledge is not something which we can in principle now possess we cannot adequately plan for unexpected advances in our future knowledge, or for the effects which such advances will have upon society as a whole. The acceptance of historical indeterminism, then, as the only philosophy of history which is commensurate with a proper understanding of the nature of scientific knowledge, fatally undermines both historicism and holism. *[Why then is Soros promoting the opposite of what Popper contends?]* Here we go & this answers all my previous questions & Popper's critique of both historicism and holism is balanced, on the positive side, by his strong defence of the open society, the view, again, that a society is equivalent to the sum of its members, that the actions of the members of society serve to fashion and to shape it, not conversely, and that the social consequences of intentional actions are very often, and very largely, unintentional. This is why Popper himself advocates what he (rather unfortunately) terms piecemeal social engineering as the central mechanism for social planning for in utilising this mechanism intentional actions are directed to the achievement of one specific goal at a time, which makes it possible to monitor the situation to determine whether adverse unintended effects of intentional actions occur, in order to correct and readjust when this proves necessary. This, of course, parallels precisely the critical testing of theories in scientific investigation. This approach to social planning (which is explicitly based upon the premise that we do not, because we cannot, know what the future will be like) encourages attempts to put right what is problematic in society generally-acknowledged social ills rather than attempts to impose some preconceived idea of the good upon society as a whole. For this reason, in a genuinely open society piecemeal social engineering goes hand-in-hand for Popper with negative utilitarianism (the attempt to minimise the amount of misery, rather than, as with positive utilitarianism, the attempt to maximise the amount of happiness). The state, he holds, should concern itself with the task of progressively formulating and implementing policies designed to deal with the social problems which actually confront it, with the goal of eliminating human misery and suffering to the highest possible degree. The positive task of increasing social and personal happiness, by contrast, can and should be left to individual citizens (who may, of course, act collectively to this end), who, unlike the state, have at least a chance of achieving this goal, but who in a free society are rarely in a position to systematically subvert the rights of others in the pursuit of idealised objectives. Thus in the final analysis for Popper the activity of problem-solving is as definitive of our humanity at the level of social and political organisation as it is at the level of science, and it is this key insight which unifies and integrates the broad spectrum of his thought. *Popper response to criticism &* Popper's final position is that he acknowledges that it is impossible to discriminate science from non-science on the basis of the falsifiability of the scientific statements *alone*; he recognizes that scientific theories are predictive, and consequently prohibitive, *only* when taken in conjunction with auxiliary hypotheses, and he also recognizes that readjustment or modification of the latter is an integral part of scientific practice. Hence his final concern is to outline conditions which indicate when such modification is genuinely scientific, and when it is merely *ad hoc*. This is itself clearly a major alteration in his position, and arguably represents a substantial retraction on his part: Marxism can no longer be dismissed as unscientific simply because its advocates preserved the theory from falsification by modifying it (for in general terms, such a procedure, it now transpires, is perfectly respectable scientific practice). It is now condemned as unscientific by Popper because the only *rationale* for the modifications which were made to the original theory was to ensure that it evaded falsification, and so such modifications were *ad hoc*, rather than scientific. This contention though not at all implausible has, to hostile eyes, a somewhat contrived air about it, and is unlikely to worry the convinced Marxist. On the other hand, the shift in Popper's own basic position is taken by some critics as



an indicator that falsificationism, for all its apparent merits, fares no better in the final analysis than verificationism. Introduction amended: March 26, 2011A. Dru KristenevAuthor, The Baron Series of novels: Land Barons (2007 soon to be published by New Patriot Publishing), Gold Baron (2008), Energy Barons (2009)