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A semantic confusion of "Historicism"

Shirō KOYAMA

Prof. K. R. Popper coined a new word "historicism" quite independently of the German "Historismus" under which he meant a method of social science which makes historical prediction possible on the basis of a certain law. But the German counterpart "Historismus" already had a particular meaning of itself in the history of modern European thought, that is, a special kind of historical knowledge which is both intuitional and unscientific rather than conceptual and scientific. Evidently "historicism", in Popper's use, has a meaning contrary to that of Meinecke and Dilthey. It is a matter of more than a mere exercise in semantics to make a word with a traditional meaning carry forcibly another which is diametrically opposed to the former. After creating the new meaning of historicism in this way, Prof. Popper discarded it maintaining that there could be found no scientific reliability and he went so far as to deny the possibility of such a science. He says, "we must reject the possibility of a theoretical history, historicism collapses" (The Poverty of Historicism). In denying the new concept of "historicism", Prof. Popper inadvertently came to the same conclusion as German historicists did. However the grounds for which he abandoned the scientific concept of historicism entirely differ from those of the German scholars. To Popper the Marxism, for instance, is not scientific at all, while to Meinecke among others it *is* scientific. What, then, is "historicism" which is not science to one but is science to another? We shall be saved from this terminological confusion, if we apply the traditional name "philosophy of history" or "metaphysics of history" to "historicism". As regards "historicism" first christened by Prof. Popper, I am of another opinion. In the field of social science, we are now in a position to find out a law which is analogous, though in approximation, in structure to the laws of natural science, physical or biological. I approve, therefore, the scientific historicism to a certain degree, though I do not intend to have recourse to such an ambiguous concept as "historicism".