

E. H. GOMBRICH IN 1968: METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF CONSERVATISM

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Abstract: The commonalities Gombrich affirmed between his own positions on science, politics, and art and those of his friend Karl Popper are key to understanding both his work on the history of style and the conservative fulminations on method he published from the early 1950s onwards. United with Popper by their shared experience of exile from fascism, Gombrich failed to register the amateurish character of Popper's political theory and that his aversion to notions of social determination disabled the historian. Popper's skepticism regarding the ontological status of social collectivities and rejection of the concept of totality reinforced Gombrich's suspicions of holistic analysis and led him to fall back on naturalistic descriptions of individuals acting in a social world glued together by such commonsensical categories as "traditions" and "institutions". In this regard he is representative of the common aversion to sociology of the British intellectual establishment in the early Cold War.

Keywords: methodological individualism; conservatism; philosophy of science; art history.

It is symptomatic of the political tenor of the time that a cluster of Gombrich's statements attacking the influence of Hegelianism and Marxism in art history should have been written or published over 1965-73—I am thinking especially of "The Logic of Vanity Fair" (1965), "In Search of Cultural History" (1967), "Art History and the Social Sciences" (1973), and "Style" (1968) (Gombrich 1979, 60-92, 24-59, 131-66; Gombrich 1968). Given his reputation as the pre-eminent figure in British art history, these overtly conservative pronouncements carried considerable cultural authority. No wonder then that he was singled out to represent the current state of British "Aesthetics" by *New Left Review's* editor Perry Anderson in a brilliant article "Components of the National Culture", which appeared in the journal's issue for July/August 1968 (Elliott 1998, 20-32, 46-56).

Under the headline "Combat Bourgeois Ideas", Anderson's essay savaged the parochialism of Britain's intellectual life, its mediocrity and inertia, particularly singling out its failure to produce a single important Marxist thinker and the symptomatic absence of a "*classical sociology*"—bourgeois society's counter-discourse to Marxism. Stifled by a "geographical isolation and historical petrification" that left it unable to generate major thinkers of its own in many disciplines, British intellectual life had become dependent on what he called "The White Emigration"—that is to say on conservative refugees from war, revolution and fascism in Eastern and Central Europe such as Berlin, Eysenck, Malinowski, Namier, and Wittgenstein (Anderson 1992, 52-56, 60-65). Gombrich and his friend Karl Popper were typically honoured

representatives of the genus. Popper already had a knighthood, and, Anderson surmised correctly, Gombrich would soon get one (Anderson 1992, 64).

Art history and aesthetics, Anderson noted, was “an enclave in British culture much more completely colonized than any other by expatriates”. Given the stature of some of its other exemplars such as Fritz Saxl and Edgar Wind, what accounted for Gombrich’s preeminence? The answer Anderson offered was an ideological match in that Gombrich’s theory of art was “a variant of the psychologism which is a recurring component of the culture as a system.” While Anderson fully conceded the intelligence and erudition with which Gombrich brought developments in experimental psychology to bear on problems of pictorial representation in *Art and Illusion*, the work as a whole was “vitiating by the closed parameters of its discussion,” which reduced the causes of historical transformations in artistic style to the effects of technical progress in representational codes (Anderson 1992, 70-84). For Anderson Gombrich’s mode of argument “radically dehistoricize[d] art” because it effectively omitted the “principle of explanation”. Indeed, Gombrich was forced to acknowledge the inadequacy of technical changes alone to explain the specificities of stylistic developments by his “recourse to *ad hoc* sociological explanations” that were embarrassingly jejune (Anderson 1992, 85).

Penetrating as far as it goes, Anderson’s critique misses some of the fundamental contradictions of Gombrich’s conservatism. This may have been partly because while he acknowledged Gombrich’s personal relations with fellow Austrian emigrés Popper and von Hayek, Anderson did not address their influence on his project and underestimated Popper’s significance as a philosopher of science. It is striking that in his listing of emigrés by discipline, Anderson associated Popper primarily with “social theory”, in which he was merely “an amateur” in “even the rudimentary skills” of the discourse. While he ranked him as “competent” as a philosopher of science (Anderson 1992, 61, 71-72, 84), he seems to have been unaware of the ongoing debate in Germany sparked off by the confrontation of Popper and Adorno at the Tübingen Conference of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* in 1961, which had been publicized in a sequence of articles, reports and books before it issued in the volume *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie* in 1969 (Adorno et al. 1976). While I too think that Popper’s pretensions as a political philosopher would be laughable were their ideological influence not so extensive, both his contribution to the philosophy of science and its impact on Gombrich need to be taken more seriously than Anderson recognized in 1968.

Gombrich’s friendship with Popper dated from 1936 when he was a junior research fellow at the Warburg Institute and Popper was on his first visit to Britain (Popper 1982, 108, 100; Hacohen 2000, 310-311, 314). They came from similar backgrounds in Vienna where their families—who were secularized Jews—knew each other well. Their fathers were both lawyers and both families were deeply involved in Vienna’s musical culture (Gombrich 1991, 11-13; Popper 1982, 10-11). Popper, born in 1902, was seven years Gombrich’s senior, and very much the intellectually-dominant one of the pair. In his autobiography, he presents his thinking on scientific matters as intrinsically linked with his thinking on politics and the arts and however anachronistic and inaccurate the autobiography may be in some regards (Hacohen 2000, 8, 12-14), we should respect this aspect of his self-presentation. At any rate, Gombrich records himself as equally indebted to both Popper’s scientific and political philosophy, and shared his views on the arts. He was present at the 1936 seminar at LSE convened by Hayek and Lionel Robbins at which Popper delivered a paper that would eventually issue in the two-part article “The Poverty of Historicism” in 1944-5, and he played a crucial role in organizing the publication of *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Hacohen 2000, 313, 316, 353-354, 375, 453, 456, 458-459). In the preface to the first edition of *Art and Illusion* of 1960, Gombrich observed of his friend’s

position on “problems of scientific method and philosophy” that “I should be proud if Professor Popper’s influence were to be felt everywhere in this book”, and invoked him elsewhere in the text to support his critique of the Hegelian taint he discerned in the style theory of Riegl and Sedlmayr (Gombrich 1972, ix, 17, 231).

In his 1974 autobiography Popper observed that “in matters of *intellect* (as opposed, perhaps, to art, or to politics) nothing is less creative and more commonplace than conservatism” (Popper 1982, 125). Although a self-avowed “conservative” with regard to art and a liberal supporter of the Cold War social-democratic consensus in politics, Popper liked to see himself as a radical modernizer in the field of epistemology, albeit one who issued from a tradition of critical rationalism that stretched back to the Presocratics (Popper 1978, 120-135). In this regard, he conceived the achievement of his major work, *Logik der Forschung* of 1934, as partly to have made a radical separation between epistemology and psychology and to have finally discredited inductive theories of knowledge. He saw himself as demonstrating the implications of what he referred to as “the staggering progress of the natural sciences” for all forms of knowledge, (Adorno et al. 1976, 87) and expressed a buoyant optimism that scientific philosophy (the issue of developments in logic, mathematics and physics) could reformulate and solve traditional problems (Hacohen 2000, 231; Popper 1978, 364-376).

Correspondingly, while Popper had an antagonistic and competitive relationship with the *Wiener Kreis* and particularly with the Marxist Otto Neurath (Hacohen 2000, 89-90, 261-275, 360-362), it played a fundamental part in his philosophical development, and in his autobiography he acknowledged that because of the circle’s “attitude of enlightenment” and its “critical view of... what philosophy unfortunately is, and of what it ought to be” he felt “very much at one with [it]” (Popper 1982, 89, 109). Given this alignment with “enlightenment”, it was entirely appropriate that Popper would figure his philosophical project as a development on Hume’s critique of induction prompted by Einstein’s revolution in physics, but also as fundamentally Kantian in its presupposition that knowledge took forms that were governed by innate principles, what he would later call “latent inborn knowledge” (Popper 1982, 80, 86, 37-38, 82, 52). Significantly for my thesis here, in a tribute to Kant of 1954 Popper claimed that Kant’s conception of mind as not deriving laws from nature but rather imposing them on it, made it possible “to look upon science, whether theoretical or experimental, as a human creation, and to look upon its history as part of the history of ideas, on a level with the history of art or of literature” (Popper 1978, 181).

In the “Addenda” he added to *The Open Society and its Enemies* in 1961, Popper observed that he found it “almost sacrilegious” to put the names of Kant and Hegel side by side, believing, as he did, that Hegel and Hegelian ideas were a “major factor” in bringing about two world wars and “much of what happened in Germany” (Popper 1966, vol. 2, 393). Just as Popper sought to clean up philosophy through logic, economy of explanation and unequivocal language—all modeled on the practice of the natural sciences, Gombrich sought to clean up what he perceived as the murky Hegelian obscurantisms that disfigured the contributions of the great pioneers of German language *Kulturgeschichte* and *Kunstgeschichte*, and notably those of Burckhardt, Riegl, and Wölfflin. Although it should be noted that he regarded Hegel as “the father of art history” and was respectful of his influence as something that needed to be worked through rather than summarily dismissed (Gombrich 1984, 51-52, 62).

Popper saw modern physics as demonstrating the obsolescence of the Positivist model of science’s history according to which the accumulation of knowledge via inductive method provided the raw material for theory, which subsequently derived laws on the basis of observed regularities in this evidence. In place of the inductionist concept of mind as the passive recipient

of atomistic sense data, he advanced an “empirico-deductivist” conception of it as inherently active and formative so that the processing of sense data was always already saturated in theory and explanation was always argumentative, hypothetical, and deductive (Popper 1982, 51-52, 75-79). In the line of development that led Popper to his critique of induction and the association psychology that accompanied it, his engagement with the critique of Wundt’s associationism by the Würzburg School and by the *Gestalt* psychologists played a significant role (Hacohen 2000, 133-144). Analogously, Gombrich—who like Popper had studied with the leading Würzburg School thinker Karl Bühler at the University of Vienna—sought to develop a critique of the outmoded psychology of Riegl and Loewy in the face of what he called “a radical reorientation of all traditional ideas about the human mind” that came partly from Popper’s critique of induction and partly from J.J. Gibson’s work on perception and Hayek’s radically anti-inductionist critique of psychology (Hayek 1952) among other sources. His argument that “the possibility that all recognition of images is connected with projections and visual anticipations”, with a “mental set”; and his emphasis on what he called “the beholder’s share in the reading of images”, that is their “capacity ... to collaborate with the artist and to transform a piece of coloured canvas into a likeness of the world,” matched well with Popper’s claims for the role of deduction and the priority of “dogmatic thinking” (Gombrich 1972, 191, 190, 246; Popper 1982, 48-49). So too did his insistence that the development of illusionistic representation that issued in mathematical perspective and associated devices was an objective process akin to the logic of scientific discovery. Indeed, in an essay of 1965 he would assert the same Darwinian logic that Popper discerned in the evolution of the natural sciences, claiming: “The fitting of form to function follows a process of trial and error, of mutation and the survival of the fittest. Once the standard of either clear or convincing images has been set, those not conforming will be eliminated by social pressure” (Gombrich 1982, 24; cf. Popper 1982, 52, 79, 86).

Popper presented his reconceptualisation of scientific progress, his critique of Hegelianism and Marxism, and his conservative views on the arts as all of a piece—as part of unified intellectual development (Popper 1982, 33-35, 55). The key issue with regard to the critique of Hegelianism and Marxism was the rejection of “philosophical system building” (Popper 1978, 335), and the denial of any ontological status to social collectivities and structures. The ostensible grounds for this were that such entities were not amenable to testing and falsification, and thus did not meet Popper’s demarcation criteria for scientificity. There was no distinction to be made between the methods of the natural and social sciences, and “the task of social theory” was “to construct and to analyse our sociological models carefully in descriptive or nominalist terms, that is to say, *in terms of individuals*, of their attitudes, expectations, relations, etc. a postulate that may be called ‘methodological individualism’” (Popper 1976, 136). In place of what Popper saw as the obscurantism of social forces and social groups, he fell back on the commonsensical categories of “traditions” and “institutions”; furthermore: “[i]nstitutions do not act;... only individuals act, in or through institutions” (Adorno et al. 1976, 104). The method of Popperian social science was to be the “*logic of situations*” (Popper 1976, 147-52; cf. Adorno et al. 1976, 103). Gombrich, of course, explicitly adopted this position, observing in “*n Search of Cultural History*” that the art historian’s concern should be with “the individual and particular rather than with that study of structures and patterns which is rarely free of Hegelian holism,” and calling in the essay “*The Logic of Vanity Fair*” for a Popperian art history that posed problems in terms of “*the logic of situations*” (Gombrich 1979, 57, 61). It is symptomatic that in his well-known review of Arnold Hauser’s *Social History of Art*, Gombrich expressed scepticism as to the existence of capitalism as a system (Gombrich 1963, 88). He was also

averse to what he regarded as the importation of “the barbarous jargon of sociology” into the humanistic discipline of art history (Gombrich 1979, 132).

Popper’s reconstitution of bourgeois liberalism in explicitly Kantian terms was completely interwoven with his rejection of determinism, that is to say of the positions he criticized as historicism, historism, and sociologism. Both he and Gombrich could only conceive determinism as the idea that “history follows an irrevocable and pre-determined course” (Gombrich 1984, 64). In the moment of their production, the whole object of “The Poverty of Historicism” and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* had been to argue for “the possibilities of democratic reform” and to insist that “the future depends on ourselves” (Popper 1966, vol. 1, 2, 3). Correspondingly, for him Kant’s conception of the moral autonomy of the individual was a Copernican Revolution of the same order as his revolution in epistemology (Popper 1978, 181-183). But, as Marcuse pointed out, while Popper attempted to “rescue the values of liberalism and democracy” he was unable to account for “the emergence of a society that plays havoc with these values” (Marcuse 1972, 207). Refusing holistic critique as “unscientific” and rejecting the notion of totality, Popper stopped short of criticizing society as such, that is with confronting the object with its concept. In this regard, as Adorno observed, Popper’s *kritisch* approach was very un-Kantian (Adorno et al. 1976, 26, 114). Jürgen Habermas, another of his opponents in the *Positivismusstreit*, went further, arguing that his insistence that “a so-called scientific subject is merely a conglomerate of problems and attempted solutions, demarcated in an artificial way” precisely replicated the atomistic structures of capitalist modernity and reduced issues of freedom to problems of technique, effectively technologizing knowledge (Adorno et al. 1976, 92, 131-136, 207-209).

The counterpart to Popper’s refusal of social and historical determination of the individual—his rejection of the sociology of knowledge—was an attempt to rest humanism on a “scientific basis”. In his autobiography he extended the Kantian scheme so far as to claim: “there must be inborn dispositions of great variety and complexity which co-operate in this field: the disposition to love, to sympathize, to emulate movements, to control and correct the emulated movements; the disposition to use them, and to communicate with their help; the disposition to react to language; to receive commands, requests, admonitions, warnings; the disposition to interpret descriptive statements, and to produce descriptive statements” (Popper 1982, 50-51). Gombrich would follow him in this opposition to relativism and insistence that there was “a permanent human nature behind all appearances” (Gombrich 1991, 37). It was on these grounds that both would offer a critique of modernism as an art premised on the fallacy of historicism, and claim that there were objective grounds for traditional values in the arts.

“Music has been a dominant theme in my life”, Popper wrote (Popper 1982, 53). He came, he stressed, from a musical family and for a time in the early 1920s thought of becoming a musician. Having joined the *Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen* in 1919, he got to know some of Schoenberg’s works intimately, and also attended rehearsals of some by Webern and Berg (Hacohen 2000, 91-103). Popper claimed that his growing dislike of the *Neue Musik* was a critical part of his intellectual development and greatly influenced his reinterpretation of Kant. A substantial section of *Unended Quest* is devoted to justifying his contention that there are objective values in music that arise from a tradition of problem-solving, and that both the criteria of novelty and individual self-expression are irrelevant to the production of music of value—an argument for which he acknowledged a debt to Gombrich (Popper 1982, 60-68, 208 n.78). For Popper, polyphony was “possibly the most unprecedented, original, indeed miraculous achievement of our Western civilization, not excluding science”, and the route through which it was achieved was directly analogous with that of “scientific creation” (Popper

1982, 56, 58). The normative standard of music is set by Bach and the decline of the classical tradition began with Beethoven because he offered a model of music as self-expression; but the real degeneration sets in with Wagner because of the absurd ambition “to write a work... ahead of its time” (Popper 1982, 71).

Gombrich came from an equally musical home. His mother was a concert pianist who knew Schoenberg quite well; his violinist sister knew Webern and Berg. But the family was also very close to the violinist and composer Adolf Busch, and Gombrich speculated that he might have acquired his conservative musical tastes from this quarter (Gombrich 1991, 12). In his argument for a Popperian art history, “The Logic of Vanity Fair”, Gombrich pointedly aligned himself with Popper’s position on music, emphasizing both their agreement and frequent conversations on the matter (Gombrich 1979, 89-91). For Gombrich, too, “much contemporary aesthetics tends to neglect... the technological aspect of the great achievements in the history of art,” and the very conditions of achievement had been threatened by “the cult of progress.” In actuality, the problems and values of art emerge from the problems and values of craft (Gombrich 1991, 69, 72; Gombrich 1979, 125).

In aligning himself with Popper Gombrich brought art history a strange bedfellow. Popper’s aversion to totality meant that he treated knowledge of society in an atomised fashion as a series of discreet problems and refused any model of the whole. In the thought of Popper and Gombrich alike “tradition” and received values became the glue that held the overall philosophical project together (Gombrich 1991, 73)—hence their profound aversion to modernism in the arts. It is no accident that Popper’s great opponent Adorno should be not only the most sophisticated totalizing thinker of the postwar years, but also the foremost aesthete of modernism and correspondingly an exponent of the “new” as a signature of aesthetic value. At one level, the problem with Gombrich and Popper’s thinking on the arts is that they saw no need for a philosophical aesthetics, about which Gombrich was dismissive (Gombrich 1979, 123, 126). Indeed, his refusal to draw on either philosophy or sociology in understanding the question of judgement gives his reflections the tone of an after-dinner conversation among Central European bourgeois humanists of the Belle Époque, a tone that matched with a social ideal formed in his youth and that he explicitly espoused (Gombrich 1979, 17-19, 113-114). But the result is amateurish, and issues in the banal formulation: “In technology progress can be specified once aims are stated; in science the aim is implicit in the search for truth. If there is something corresponding in art, it should be the creation of something we can ‘like’” (Gombrich 1979, 83). Art was a repository of civilized values and a source of refined pleasures, but it was not a mode of cognition—a strikingly paradoxical position from one who put such emphasis on the role of cognitive processes in the development of naturalism. But then divorced from the category of totality, how could it be? Despite his own relentless impetus towards a “universal history of art”—an ambition whose Hegelian ancestry he acknowledged (Gombrich 1984, 51)—Gombrich had effectively foreclosed on the most interesting problems and was left to lament the effects of the specialization of knowledge and the increasingly technocratic character of university education (Gombrich 1984, 8-9; Gombrich 1991, 25-35), without being able to acknowledge that they were the outcome of the desocialized model of science and the bourgeois technocratic society for which he and his idol Popper had become uneasy apologists.

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