

M I R O W S K I R E V I E W S H A C O H E N O N P O P P E R
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-- Article 1 of 13 --

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Malachi Haim Hacohen. Karl Popper: the Formative Years, 1902-45: Politics and
 Philosophy in Interwar Vienna. (book review) Philip Mirowski.

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 \$54.95.

What could be the motives for producing a Popperian half-life such as the present volume? This work, which takes Karl Popper right up to his debut on the world stage with the assumption of his position at the London School of Economics, displays no inclination to follow up with the complementary second half of Popper's life sometime in the future. Indeed, the author admits that the omitted subsequent "public Popper" was frequently an embarrassment. Here is truncation with a purpose: this book is written to recommend the work of the early Popper to the "academic left" and to "historicize" the postmodern predicament [as] an antidote to current false consciousness" (p. 262). Since this is a work in social/political theory masquerading as biography, I shall respond in kind.

There have recently been a spate of attempts to revisit the major figures of the philosophy of science in the twentieth century, primarily for the purpose of explaining to ourselves what it was that provoked such an efflorescence of ingenuity, only to result in the subsequent letdown we now confront or enjoy: Cartwright et al. on Neurath, Fuller on Kuhn, and Kadavyan on Lakatos. Malachi Hacohen admits that this constitutes his motive as well: he is impressed with the early Popper's political leftism and anti-foundationalism, regarding the later Cold Warrior as a sad retrogression. It seems to me, however, that he has missed the major lesson of all these retrospectives: Crudely, what emerges from these exercises, as a group, is the thesis that the looming significance in general intellectual discourse of philosophers of science in the mid-twentieth century (as opposed to their current irrelevance) was due to the fact that they were doing social theory all along under the guise of describing Science. Furthermore, their question of the true nature of legitimate Science was seen as a crucial preliminary to understanding which politico-economic system would come to dominate in the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War.

From this perspective, I strongly doubt that Popper's social significance ever derived from his durable "solution" of any pressing philosophical problems: Did he really proffer a usable "demarcation criterion" for science, or rectify the problem of induction, or adequately describe probabilities as propensities, or banish "subjectivism" from physics, or even really demonstrate that Marxism was untestable? (This is not the way we now view the fall of the Wall.) No, during the Cold War it turned out that the very best apologists for Western society were leftists and anti-foundationalists; and one can observe this in the history of postwar social sciences like economics (vide the Cowles Commission) and psychology, as well as the philosophy of science. Kuhn et al. then took the next logical step in the sequence: something like "critical rationalism" was widely deemed a thoroughly implausible account of social organization in an anti-foundationalist context (certainly Popper himself never presided over an "Open Society" of scholarship, as Hacohen ruefully admits). Social order had to be reconceptualized and reimposed, be it through "normal science," "progressive research programs," or whatever.

Hence, banishing the half-life of the Cold Warrior from the biographical account is to parade a pointless Popper in a plotless Punch-and-Judy show. Hacohen rightly cautions the reader about the unreliability of Popper's autobiography Unended Quest, but he should have taken more to heart Popper's assertions therein that although he knew almost no social theory, that didn't prevent him from seeking to dictate good "scientific method" to the social sciences (p. 121); and furthermore, that his vaunted method of "situational analysis" was little more than a repackaging of neoclassical economics (itself a physics imitation) as a general methodology for the social sciences (p. 117). Thus when Hacohen proposes "situational logic" as a template for his historiography, is he sufficiently aware that he is merely participating in the general movement to extend neoclassical economics as a Theory of Everything for our contemporary globalized situation? If the purpose really was to demonstrate that Popper was situatedly rational, there would be no pressing need to write a biography; one could just as

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well fit his data to a generic maximization model. History should make us rather more self-conscious about our scholarly and political options, not less.

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Named Works: Karl Popper: *The Formative Years, 1902-45: Politics and Philosophy in Interwar Vienna* (Book) - Reviews

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