Boekbespreking van: Popper. Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method

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Geoffrey Stokes, *Popper. Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1998. USD 23.95.

When, many, many years ago, as a young lecturer and an ardent Popperian, I was given the task to develop a course on Comparative Politics, an entirely new field for me, it soon became clear that most of the work done in this field did not fit in with my conception of what empirical science was all about. In an attempt to set matters straight, I wrote an article, which was subsequently published in *Acta Politica* (1983: 307–28), in which I set out the rules of the empirical science game, and their implications for the comparative study of national political systems. When writing the article, I faced the problem of how to convince my opponents of the utter importance, necessity even, to conduct their research in accordance with these rules. In the end, I could think of nothing else than to state that the empirical science game constituted an integral part of rationalism, which, in its turn, was based on the belief that problems ought to be solved with the help of reason. Arguments, not force, ought to decide the choice of the proper solution to a certain problem. I admit that I was not very much pleased with this answer: it was far too 'political' for my taste. When I discussed the rules of the emprical science game in later work, I therefore decided that sometimes the search for truth could very well stand on its own as a value, and, accordingly, needed no further justification, and that at other times an instrumentalist defence of these rules would suffice – playing by these rules ensures that the knowledge gained is simply the 'best' knowledge one can get. And now here is Geoffrey Stokes who in his book *Popper. Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method* explains, quite convincingly I must say, that my first solution must be regarded to be the correct one after all! In his view, epistemology is inevitably about politics, and, moreover, the 'mature' Popper would have agreed completely!

Stokes develops his thesis in the first seven chapters of the book. In the last chapter he discusses the relationship between Popper's critical rationalism and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. The chapters are written in a clear style, with the exception perhaps – but there's Habermas for you! – of the last one. In the first chapter Stokes discusses the conceptual relationship between politics, epistemology and methodology, and presents his central argument: theories of knowledge are inherently political. This implies that Popper's "commitments to certain political values such as freedom and toleration are conceptually prior to any epistemological commitments" (p. 5). According to Stokes, the character of Popper's epistemology and methodology, the key components in his thought, is determined by their place within his political philosophy. In chapter 2 he explains that the young Popper of the *Logik der Forschung* was not yet aware of the inherently political nature of epistemology. Inspired by the 'heroic' example of Einstein, Popper proposed falsifiability as the criterion on the basis of which science can be distinguished from pseudo-science. Einstein's achievements and approach also led him to develop a general model of scientific rationality, of which 'formal' logic constitutes the 'hard core'. It was Popper's ambition "to formulate

universal, epistemological criteria that were free of any subjective or psychological consideration" (p. 21). Chapter 3 contains a critical analysis of the young Popper's prescriptions for scientific rationality. On the basis of a discussion of the criteria on which to decide whether a certain basic statement should be accepted as a corroboration of a particular theory, or another one as a falsification of it, Stokes makes clear that Popper's original project to establish purely logical criteria for scientific rationality, must be regarded a failure. It appears that scientists, when making these types of decision, are not only guided by logical considerations, but also by historical, i.e., contextual, and pragmatic ones. Furthermore, Popper's proposed rules for the science game are not particularly helpful if one wishes to understand the actual growth of knowledge. Historians of science have pointed out that even in physics scientists are not perturbed by refutations if they feel they have good reasons to cling to their theories. Again, it becomes clear that "an epistemology based upon scientific rationality must incorporate non-epistemic or social values and goals" (p. 37). Stokes claims that Popper was receptive to these kinds of criticism, and accordingly set himself the task to develop and refine the social and political theory that underlay his theory of scientific rationality. The result is a political and social theory called critical rationalism.

Stokes argues in chapter 4 that Popper's critical rationalism includes certain assumptions about human nature, as well as a – rather speculative – philosophy of history. Popper admits that his image of the creative scientist who willingly submits his theories to the critical scrutiny of others does not correspond with the strongly felt emotional intolerance towards innovation and criticism in the great mass of people. In this sense, his project must be seen as "an attempt to supply more suitable epistemological controls upon human thought and action" (p. 50). This need for regularity and dogma is characteristic for the closed society. The breakdown of the closed society, and the gradual emergence of the open society started in Greece around 600 BC, when thinkers of the Ionian school began to question and criticize tradition and dogma. Human progress, in the form of the development of the open society, depends on the critical attitude and the growth of knowledge. As yet, the transition to the open society is not complete, and its achievements – the most important of which is the advancement of political freedom – are not secure. Popper claims that the members of the open society shall have to adopt the critical rational attitude, which involves an attitude of 'reasonableness', an 'openness to criticism', as well as the rejection of violence as a means to solve problems. Stokes points out that Popper's abhorrence of violence did not lead him to embrace pacifism. He accepted that under certain circumstances it may be necessary to use violence, for example, in order to defend a democracy against an aggressive dictatorship. His failure, however, to provide clear criteria to guide our decision as to when the use of violence is justified, demonstrates that in politics, as in science, such potentially far-reaching decisions are essentially pragmatic and dependent upon a given context. It also becomes clear that for Popper, in the end, freedom and democracy represent higher values than non-violence. This leads Stokes to discuss Popper's theory of democracy. On the one hand, Popper uses a 'passive' conception

of democracy, merely a system of checks and balances to prevent incompetent rulers from doing much harm and to get rid of them in a peaceful manner. On the other hand, he develops a quite 'activist' one, in that democratic states should engage in social and economic reforms by means of piecemeal social engineering in order to alleviate human suffering. Stokes concludes that Popper, who used to describe himself as an 'old-fashioned liberal', really was more a social democrat in the continental tradition.

In the fifth chapter, Stokes analyses Popper's philosophy and methodology of social science, which are a direct outgrowth of the latter's dominant political values: freedom and democracy. He performs his analysis against the background of Popper's claim of a unity of scientific method between the natural and social sciences. In this connection, Stokes correctly dismisses Popper's demand for methodological individualism as incompatible with this claim of the unity of method. There are no epistemological or methodological reasons why the 'behaviour' or 'actions' of social collectives, like states or social groups, *must* be reduced to the behaviour or actions of human individuals. This inconsistency can only be explained by Popper's political or moral preferences, his aim to "prevent the real, concrete individual from being sacrificed for an abstract conception such as the greater good of the community" (p. 80). A further examination of Popper's methodological precepts for social science brings Stokes to the conclusion that Popper's claim for the unity of science cannot stand: "For virtually every key methodological precept, Popper proposes some extra rule for which there is no direct equivalent required for the conduct of natural science" (p. 96). According to Stokes, these differences can be traced to Popper's understanding of social science as a more politically dangerous project than natural science. For this reason, social science has to be "a more thoroughgoing moral project." A perception that is "arguably Popper's most distinctive achievement" as far as social science is concerned (p. 97).

In the 1950s, Popper came to realize that human freedom and human free will were the real problems that stood behind his epistemological and methodological writings. He reacted by developing a metaphysics of which the idea of freedom constituted the hard core. In chapter 6, Stokes presents a critical account of this metaphysics. Crucial is realism: a conjecture that the world exists independently of us, but can be known through our senses. Popper's realism also includes the idea of the growth of knowledge, in the sense that together we can get nearer to the truth. According to Popper, realism implies the rejection of instrumentalism, but Stokes makes clear that, as far as scientific practice is concerned, it is very hard to draw a distinction between realism and (sophisticated) instrumentalism. It will come as no surprise that Stokes eventually finds that "Popper's most forceful arguments for realism are explicitly ethical and political" (p.103). Popper's cosmology also requires an argument for indeterminism. In a fully determined world, there is no place for human creativity and responsibility. This argument is intimately connected with his later arguments for World 3, the world of objective knowledge, and the reality of the self. Stokes makes clear that he is not particularly convinced by Popper's 'scientific' indeterminism, but he admits that the latter's 'metaphysical' indeterminism, in the form of his 'propensity interpretation'

of the world, looks promising as it "suggests the possibility of different kinds of explanations in both natural and social sciences" (p. 112). Stokes hasn't a good word to say for World 3. In his view, Popper's arguments for a separate world of objective knowledge are not persuasive. Moreover, "although designed as part of an argument for a theory of freedom, the idea of world 3 directly undermines Popper's original intention" (p. 116). Since it works as a kind of 'plastic control' over human beings, their scope for freedom is actually curtailed! This leaves 'the self and its brain'. According to Popper, the self is created by the human mind, but it is 'anchored' in human language, and, thus, in World 3. In this manner, science becomes a higher form of evolutionary adaptation. This time Stokes is more positive, even though Popper's approach puts him "on the margins of most recent philosophical debates on the self and mind" (p. 120). Popper's evolutionary history of the mind helps to make clear how human freedom and creativity are possible.

Popper's evolutionary account of the growth of knowledge creates room to develop a new, more general, epistemology. In this epistemology there is a shift away from a 'formalist rationality', inspired by the *methods* used in physics, to a 'problem-solving rationality', based on *theories* of biological evolution. In chapter 7, Stokes discusses this 'evolutionary epistemology'. Following Bradie, Stokes concludes that there are too many differences between the struggle for survival of theories and species to accept Popper's claim that his epistemology is the application of Darwin's theory of natural selection to the growth of knowledge. Nevertheless, the biological process of evolution provides a useful analogy to the growth of cultural forms of knowledge such as science. At the same time, it is clear that Popper's evolutionary epistemology, just like his 'physicist' one, does not provide clear criteria of scientific rationality. The dependence on interpretative skills remains as great as ever. As no objective criterion of truth exists, it will always remain a matter of consensus whether a certain theory or statement is true, or a certain research strategy scientifically rational. There must be a minimal prior consensus on certain values, ends and interests. Therefore, "epistemology must suggest the social and political preconditions for the successful application of its epistemic norms" (p. 139). In Popper's opinion this means that no scientist ought to seek the truth regardless of human cost. Stokes reformulates Popper's epistemological maxim accordingly as: "pursue truth and the growth of knowledge to the extent compatible with the advancement of human welfare and the avoidance of suffering" (p. 143).

In chapter 8, Stokes reviews the 'positivist dispute' between members of the Frankfurt School and Popper. It appears that Popper has been criticized for all kinds of positions that a more careful reading of his work would have shown he did not hold. Actually, there is quite a lot of correspondence between Habermasian critical theory and Popperian critical rationalism (open societies provide a favourable environment for 'ideal speech situations'). This chapter is unnecessary for Stokes's central argument. The reason why he included it must have been that he felt that one, all-important, question still had to be answered: What rational justification can be given for preferring certain values, like freedom, democracy and reason, above other values? Stokes cannot

accept Popper's reply that we *adopt* the rationalist attitude and that this adoption may be described as an irrational *faith in reason*: neither logical argument nor experience can establish the rationalist attitude. Instead, Stokes adopts Habermas's meta-ethical 'discourse ethics', which would allow for the rational selection of values. It remains unclear, however, precisely how Habermas pulls this off (Stokes admits that for non-specialists it is not easy to assess Habermas's project).

Popper. Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method covers a lot of ground. In most of the chapters, it is Stokes's working method to present first a summary of Popper's position on a certain topic, subsequently to touch upon some of the points of criticisms that have been raised against it, and then, in conclusion, to give his arguments why it is that Popper is right and the others are wrong, or vice versa. Although Stokes demonstrates an admirable grasp of Popper's work, due to the fact that he has reviewed an enormous number of subjects in scarcely more than 140 pages (chapter 8 deals with a completely separate topic), there is always the threat of superficiality. Two examples will suffice in this context, but more can easily be found. The first concerns Stokes's agreeing with Weatherford, and disagreeing with Popper, that one can accept physical determinism, without having to accept social determinism (p. 108). However, if Stokes accepts that the social world is indeterministic, and he also accepts, which he does, Popper's claim that the social world can interact with the physical world, then he must reject physical determinism. In consequence, it becomes incomprehensible why he agreed with Weatherford in the first place. The second example involves Stokes's treatment of Bradie's critique of Popper's evolutionary epistemology. According to Stokes, Bradie rightly accuses Popper of applying "inappropriate cultural metaphors on biological processes", since in "evolution there are no goals and there is only one problem, that of survival" (p. 130). But is this not a bit silly? Granted that 'evolution' itself, just like 'knowledge', has no goals, it has turned out to be very fruitful to explain the process of evolution as if its subjects are goal-oriented. Indeed, survival is not their problem but their goal! Moreover, while trying to survive, these subjects are confronted with any number of problems (how to get food, where to find a mate, how to avoid predators, etcetera).

There is certainly quite a bit more in the book with which I would like to take issue, notably Stokes's mishandling of World 3, but this will not keep me from applauding Stokes's achievement. The arguments he employs to establish the inescapable ethico-political foundations of epistemology and methodology are clear *and* consistent. Karl Popper stands revealed as a most political philosopher of science. *Popper. Philosophy, Politics and Scientic Method* is a fascinating book, as well as an important one. It deserves to be read (even chapter 8!).

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Peter Neijens and Philip van Praag jr. (eds.), *De Slag om IJburg. Campagne, Media & Publiek* (*The Battle of IJburg. The Campaign, the Media, and the Public*). Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis. DFL 37.50.

Referendum campaigns are a relatively new phenomenon in the Netherlands. Referendums still do not exist at the national level – in fact, the country almost lost its government coalition over the issue in the spring of 1999. But, at the local level, several referendums have been held in the wake of the 1990 municipal elections, whose record low turnout had sent shock waves through the nation's town halls. While turnout in these local elections was still a respectable 62 per cent, the 10-point drop in comparison with the previous elections sparked major concerns about the apparently growing distance between citizens and their local political representatives. Many municipalities embarked on projects aimed at increasing citizen participation in public affairs. Several towns and villages, with the city of Amsterdam as the most prominent example, started experimenting with the referendum instrument. Amsterdam held much publicized referendums on whether to reduce car traffic in the downtown area (result: *yes*), whether Amsterdam and its neighbouring municipalities should join forces in a single 'city province' (*no*), and on whether the city should be allowed to build houses on a tiny strip of grassland in the western part of the city (*yes*).

The *IJburg* referendum, held on March 19 1997, marked an important step in the transition toward mature referendum campaigns. The referendum was about whether to reject the city council's decision to develop a new city area in the IJ-lake, east of the current city. More than ever before in any type of election, the competing parties (which I will refer to as the *for* and *against* campaigns) relied heavily on paid media, giving the various referendum activities some of the looks of a professional election campaign. The referendum campaign also saw the arrival of independent expenditures, operating freely without any legal restrictions, which left a particularly deep imprint on the *against* campaign.

At the same time, the referendum campaign also had a distinct amateurish feel. For example, fundraising activities were completely unregulated. Fundraising for the *against* campaign was basically non-existent until a large environmental NGO provided the necessary funds and more or less seized control of the campaign. The *for* campaign, on the other hand, did not have to worry at all about fundraising since it was financed by, believe it or not, the taxpayer. Neither party used their paid media to react to their opponents' messages. Instead, the same old set of commercials was recycled over and over again. Rapid response was conspicuously absent, even when the mayor accused the *against* campaign of "buying the election" – an ironic accusation, given the nature of the *for* campaign's funding base, that perhaps even more ironically constituted the major turning point in the campaign, allowing the city government to take the offensive and the moral high road. The sense of amateurism extended well into the media. The local television station, for example, was so inexperienced that it naively broadcasted the city government's infomercials about IJburg as neutral television programmes.