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## THE CRITIQUE OF POSITIVIST SOCIAL SCIENCE IN LEO STRAUSS AND JÜRGEN HABERMAS\*

Regis A. Factor and Stephen P. Turner

Leo Strauss and Jürgen Habermas may seem to be strange bedfellows. Habermas, as principal legatee of the tradition of 'critical theory' established by Horkheimer and Adorno, sees himself as a successor of Marx. Strauss and his followers are more often understood as conservatives, both in practice and in theory. The Straussians are fundamentally opposed to the whole modern project in political thought, of which Marxism is a late, and in their eyes grim, development. Yet there are remarkable similarities in their political conception and their conception of philosophy. Indeed, the similarities are so great that the prominence of Habermas in German thought may be taken as a vindication of Strauss' life work of the restoration of the classical conception of political philosophy. The key to the similarities is a shared conception of the philosophic intent. Both see the restoration of the connection between theory and practice as the central task of philosophy today. Both believe that the central practical questions are political. Both believe that the central political question is the common good. Both agree that modern political thought has failed with respect to these issues. Both reject historicism, positivism, modern liberalism, and the doctrine that survival is man's essential good. Both agree that ethics and politics must be united. Both think ethics and political philosophy must evaluate on the basis of transcendental standards established through reason. Both emphasize self-reflection.

In what follows, we shall be concerned with the limited matter of the similarities and divergences between their critiques of positivist social science. Our purpose will be explicative — to exhibit the structure of the two arguments. We shall summarize each critique, describing Habermas' critique as a variation of Strauss'. Then we shall examine some of the difficulties in each critique. Both critiques command the attention of the social scientist of any persuasion, for the critiques attempt to answer the question of the validity of the whole modern concept of a 'science of society'. In the technicized social order in which the social scientist and his subjects alike exist, this question has never been so urgent. For in such a social order, the limits to the possibilities of man's knowledge of human things fix the limits of

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the possibilities for mankind itself. And it is these limits to the possibility of knowledge of human things which the critiques challenge.

#### THE STRAUSSIAN CRITIQUE OF THE NEW POLITICAL SCIENCE

Strauss' critique of the contemporary social sciences is focused on contemporary 'behavioralist' Political Science, but it sees 'behavioralism' as a natural development from the political writings that inaugurate the 'modern project' in political philosophy, the writings of Hobbes and especially of Machiavelli. Machiavelli separated his teaching of politics from the question of political good, as though there is no genuine political good in the classical sense. Hobbes taught that knowledge is knowledge of 'motions'. These basic ideas are brought together in the work of Max Weber, and through Weber inform (and dominate) contemporary social science. Weber distinguished questions of fact, which he arrogated to science, from matters of value, which he rejected as subject to irreconcilable conflicts. He conceived of science as the study of causal relations, and held that human action is to be explained causally. Strauss' critique of Weber is the source of the central Straussian arguments against recent social science. Passages in the important Straussian statements, 'What is Political Philosophy?' and 'Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Our Time' are taken almost word for word from the chapter on Weber.<sup>1</sup>

Strauss begins his treatment of Weber by a consideration of historicism, the view which Weber's conception of the social sciences attempted to correct. Strauss points out that:

Historicism asserts that all human thoughts or beliefs are historical, and hence deservedly destined to perish; but historicism itself is a human thought; hence historicism can only be of temporary validity, or it cannot be simply true.<sup>2</sup>

The historicist does not say that historicism is only of temporary validity – it 'thrives on the fact that it inconsistently exempts itself from its own verdict about all human thought'.<sup>3</sup>

Weber attempts to avoid this inconsistency by the fact – value distinction: he argues that value ideas are historically relative, but that the validity of the propositions of social science is objective and universal, or transhistorical. Thus the historicist relativizing consequences of the thesis are restricted to a limited aspect of social science, the value aspect. The 'validity of the propositions' is accounted for positivistically, and therefore non-relativistically. Weber is, then, as Strauss

describes him elsewhere, a 'representative of social science positivism'.<sup>4</sup>

To say that the only thing that is transhistorical is the 'validity' of the propositions of social science is to say that everything but the validity is historically relative. The picture this suggests looks something like this: Reality is like a quiz-show contestant who can answer questions only with 'yes' or 'no'. Each of us comes to reality with historically bound conceptions. So the only knowledge we can have of reality is limited to the kinds of questions we can, within our *Weltanschauung*, ask. This means that the knowledge of social reality that we as co-participants in the *Weltanschauung* have is not really competitive or commensurable with the knowledge of the participants in other *Weltanschauungen*, since they are operating within a different set of possible questions. In effect, then, there is no one knowable reality for social science, but as many knowable realities as there are self-consistent valuative starting points for approaching reality. Reality becomes knowable for us by virtue of an essentially arbitrary decision to act in a certain way towards it. The significance which things have is not in the things themselves, but it is breathed into them, as it were, by this decision.

Notice how Weber's conception would contrast with a social science which claimed that there could be genuine knowledge of the true ends of man. The arbitrary character of the first step would be eliminated. The science would be able to proceed from a valid frame of reference as opposed to various partially valid or invalid frames of reference. And this would have obvious bearing on questions of theory and practice.

Based on genuine knowledge of true ends, social science would search for the proper means to those ends; it would lead up to objective and specific value judgments regarding policies. Social science would be a truly policy-making, not to say architectonic, science rather than a mere supplier of data for the real policy makers.<sup>5</sup>

The central thesis of Strauss' life work is that this is the sort of social science that the classical political philosophers sought, and that should still be sought. It is this possibility, Strauss says, that is the real target of the fact-value distinction. The rejection of the possibility makes sense only if one denies that there can be any genuine knowledge of the ought. This is exactly what Weber does. He denies that man can have any knowledge of the true value system on the grounds that there are various value systems whose conflict cannot be solved by human reason.

Strauss points out that this doctrine, which he describes as the real major premise of Weber's conception of social science,

necessarily leads to nihilism or to the view that every preference, however evil, base, or insane, has to be judged before the tribunal of reason to be as legitimate as any other preference.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, Weber's case for his position is peculiarly slight. His attempt to demonstrate the insolubility of value-conflicts involves only three or four examples. These Strauss disposes of quickly as badly conceived, except for one conflict, the conflict between a this-worldly orientation and an other-worldly orientation.<sup>7</sup> If we grant that social science, as a this-worldly orientation, is legitimate, this conflict raised by Weber appears to be irrelevant. But Weber refused to grant this premise.

Strauss suggests that at the root of Weber's rejection seems to be the fact that, in the long struggle between theology and philosophy or science in the full sense of the term, neither side has managed to refute the other. But philosophy must grant that revelation is at least possible. Yet to grant this means to grant that the philosophic life may not be the right life, since revelation might demand another kind of life, e.g., a life of obedient love. So the commitment to science is, at root, unfounded or based on an act of faith, which is contrary to its nature — the 'sacrifice of the intellect', which is abhorred by science or philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Thus Weber reduces his own position to an equal level with any other position, for he can make no claim that his act of faith is better than any other act of faith. In short, he reduces it to the level of ideology.

Strauss points out that the classics took a view of knowledge that was opposed to this. Socrates conceived of philosophy as an ascent from opinions to knowledge or truth which is made possible and necessary by the fact that opinions about what things are contradict one another. A recognition of these contradictions forces one to go beyond opinion towards a consistent view of the nature of the thing involved. This consistent view makes visible the relative truth of the opinions. As Strauss puts it, the 'opinions are thus seen to be fragments of the truth, soiled fragments of the pure truth'.<sup>9</sup> This conception is implicit in the practice of both Plato and Aristotle. They proceed from the various common sense or pre-scientific views on the topics they consider. Philosophy is thus concerned with a reality that common sense points to, by virtue of its own contradictions. In short, the possibility of philosophy or science is established through a consideration of the pre-scientific understanding of reality.

Plato develops the idea of the forms and Aristotle develops the idea of essences and ends by showing they are implicit in our pre-scientific conceptions and usages. Similarly, 'natural right' as Strauss conceives it is established as an epistemological possibility by saying that, if discovered, it would constitute a perfection of the pre-scientific conceptions of political good. When Strauss calls for the restoration of the classical political philosophy, he is not simply calling for the revival of Platonic or Aristotelean political conceptions. He is calling for the restoration of the idea of proceeding *from* and perfecting the pre-scientific understanding of things.

What this strategy does *not* do is what Weber quite explicitly does do — claim that scientific understanding involves a *break* with the pre-scientific understanding of social life. Weber proceeds from a rejection of the pre-scientific understanding of reality. As he saw it, science is based on a specific view of reality, and scientific understanding consists in a specific transformation of reality. His view of reality, as we have suggested above, was that it is:

an infinite and meaningless sequence, or a chaos, of unique and infinitely divisible events which in themselves are meaningless: all meaning, all articulation, originates in the activity of the knowing or evaluating subject.<sup>10</sup>

The scientific view of social life, the 'value-free' view, is of course by its defining premise a denial of the validity of pre-scientific knowledge. The citizen, the political man, does not make the fact-value distinction. He is as sure that he can judge good and bad as he can judge 'factual' statements, and when he speaks about political things he speaks about the two things together. Weber's whole conception supports the legitimacy of such a break. If all conceptions of the world are based on ultimately irrational decisions, Weber's is no less legitimate than any other.

But Weber was unable to carry through this break consistently. Nor have current sociologists. Strauss gives a simple example to illustrate this. If a sociologist conducts a survey, he gives his interviewers all sorts of instructions. But he does not tell them: address your questions to human beings, and not to dogs, trees, and so on. Nor does he tell them how to identify human beings. This knowledge is presupposed. It is a part of the pre-scientific understanding which is not 'replaced' by science.<sup>11</sup> But social science is dependent through and through on this knowledge. The 'scientific view' rejects the pre-scientific understanding only to let it in the back door. If we change Weber's conception to take account of this relation, the conception of science changes from

forming an *alternative* to pre-scientific understanding to forming a *modification*. As a modification, it can only make sense on the basis of a coherent and comprehensive understanding of that which it attempts to modify.

Strauss points out that only on the basis of such a comprehensive understanding could the possibility of an evaluative social science be adequately examined, since it presents itself as a modification of, a perfection of, our pre-scientific understanding. The new Political Science does not do this. It adopts the positivist conception of science as a programmatic presupposition. Yet it is forced, in the course of attempting to carry out its programme, to examine this presupposition in the way that Weber refused to examine it. In the study of political institutions, the new political scientist must at some point consider the ideologies that had a part in shaping these institutions. And one kind of ideology is the teaching of the political philosophers. These teachings may have had only a minor political role – but to determine this one must know these teachings as they were meant by the teachers. In such study, the political scientist will encounter his own presuppositions, the scientific presuppositions, for these too are a part of the history of ideology. Since they are a modification of the principles of modern political philosophy, which are in turn a modification of those of classical political philosophy, which in its turn is a self-conscious modification of the pre-scientific understanding of the world, they must be examined as modifications. And in doing this, the new political scientist cannot avoid consideration of 'the possibility that the older political science was sounder and truer than that which is regarded as political science today'.<sup>12</sup> He must do so because it is impossible to see how a coherent account can be given of such developments without formulating precisely this possibility. The new political scientist is thus forcibly made to account for the possibility and character of his own enterprise in a way which is consistent with his enterprise. And in formulating this account, the new political scientist must transcend the self-limitations of social science. Thus the history of political philosophy, far from being an exotic branch of the history of ideology, is the direct route to the examination of the presuppositions on which any understanding of politics rests.

## HABERMAS AND THE SELF-CRITIQUE OF SOCIOLOGY

Jürgen Habermas begins his inquiry in *Theory and Practice* with the central Straussian observations. The classical political tradition is dead. It has given way to 'the establishment of political science on the model of the modern experimental sciences'.<sup>13</sup> It seems alien to us because it was a doctrine of *praxis* as opposed to *techne*, that is to say, concerned with prudent understanding as opposed to instrumental or technical mastery, 'prediction and control'. Machiavelli is the first to deal with political questions as a matter of technique, divorced from the ethical considerations of classical political science. But Machiavelli does not give an account of his writings as 'science'. Hobbes was the first to do this, and it is Hobbes who first becomes entangled in the ambiguities of the idea of causal, mechanistic science of man.

Habermas goes beyond Strauss in his account of these ambiguities. He notes that Hobbes assumes that 'as soon as insight into the mechanics of the societal state has been gained, the technically required arrangements can be fashioned to produce the correct social and political order'.<sup>14</sup> Theory was to inform practice as technical knowledge informs instrumental action. But this relation creates a paradox:

The same human beings whose behavior was initially conceived as an object of nature, in the necessary causal interconnections of institutional compulsions and modes of reaction given with human nature, must at the same time assume the role of subjects who, with the knowledge of these interrelationships, are to fashion the better arrangements. They are as much objects of the conditions to be investigated as subjects of the conditions to be changed.<sup>15</sup>

The claim of theory to inform practice becomes problematic. The ideal order or even the better order cannot be conceived in theory structured in this way without 'changing the structure of the theory itself'.<sup>16</sup> The goal — the ideal or better order — is shown to be false or spurious by the existence of mechanical laws of society: contrasting to the social order that actually exists, the ideal shows itself to be inconsistent with the laws of nature, since the laws of nature causally produced the existing order.

The difficulty thus took on two aspects. First, the relation between the theory and political practice had to be accounted for in such a way that politics could still be 'guided' by knowledge of the laws governing the 'natural order' of society. Hobbes papered this problem over. The physiocrats tried to solve it by turning politics into a kind of epistemological tribunal: the physiocrats wished to install the monarch as 'the

guardian of the "Natural Order" of society which they have analysed theoretically; the monarch, however, does not gain insight into the laws of the *ordre naturel* directly – he must allow this insight to be mediated for him by the *public éclairé*'.<sup>17</sup> In a later period, John Stuart Mill ridiculed the idea that one *ought* to 'obey' the laws of nature. In the physiocrat's conception, public opinion has the task of determining what the laws of nature are, in order to obey them. The second aspect was the critique of ideology. Any conception of the political good which is inconsistent with the political order produced by the causal laws of nature must therefore be fantastic and illegitimate, as would an invention which presupposed the suspension of gravitational forces. If it is said that something about the actual order is evil, the speaker needs only to be shown that this thing arose through causal, law-governed forces. This kind of critique of ideology, which Habermas calls the bourgeois critique of ideology, is one which American social science should find familiar, since it is the core of the sociology of William Graham Sumner, the most influential American sociologist of the late 19th century.<sup>18</sup> Habermas points out that the bourgeois critique of ideology can only be negative. Once the notion of the natural order and law became positivistically understood, it can only be used for 'dissolving the empty formulas of Natural Law'.<sup>19</sup> Moral questions, and questions of practice, are deprived of any rational basis or foundations.<sup>20</sup>

Marx, no less than Hobbes, the Physiocrats, Locke, and the French Revolution, is entangled in these ambiguities. Resolving them, Habermas points out, is the axis upon which subsequent controversy within Marxism was forced to turn. Marxism comes to occupy an ambiguous position, 'between philosophy and science'. The work of Marx is conceived of as a critique of ideology, especially a 'Critique of Political Economy', as the subtitle of *Das Kapital* reads. Engels understood the critique positivistically, such that:

the correct ideology was distinguished from the false solely according to the criteria of a realistic theory of knowledge. The socialist *Weltanschauung* was the only correct one, because it correctly 'depicts' [*abbildet*] the cosmic law in nature and in history.<sup>21</sup>

This self-understanding was to become the foundation of the official Marxism of the Soviet Union. The development of the positivistic self-understanding of Marxism was paralleled and in some respects surpassed by the development of the positivistic self-understanding of academic sociology. The difficulties of official Marxism and the difficulties of

academic sociology are thus of a piece, and the critique of official Marxism applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to academic sociology. It should be noted that Sociology cannot escape the problems with the positivistic self-understanding. Sociology is itself a social phenomenon, and is therefore a subject of sociological inquiry. Indeed, as Habermas remarks, 'Only when role theory is referred back to the activity of the sociologist itself do the fundamental problematics begin to emerge'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, according to Habermas, the sociology of sociology plays for positivist sociology a role analogous to the role that Strauss says the history of political thought plays for behaviouralist political science. It forces the foundational issues.

The problems of self-understanding form the point of departure of Habermas' major work, *Knowledge and Human Interests*.<sup>23</sup> The strategy Habermas adopts is to take the Marxian critique of knowledge as a point of departure for a new epistemological conception or self-understanding of social science. The Marxian critical tool was the demonstration of connections between ideas and class interests. He gives an account of the dominant self-understanding of the social sciences, positivism, with an eye towards seeing positivism as an embodiment of certain interests. Habermas goes back to the historical origins of positivism to bring out these connections. He also examines the work of Dilthey and Peirce, since both these philosophers *reflect* on reasoning. Dilthey reflects on hermeneutic reasoning, and conceives of its point as instrumental. Peirce reflects on science and comes to the same instrumentalist conclusions. Positivism in its developed form, logical positivism, denies the possibility of speaking meaningfully about the value- or interest-significance of science, and thus puts such self-reflection out to the pasture of meaninglessness.

Instrumentalism has some peculiar features as an interpretation of science which it does not share with logical positivism. If a scientific theory is an instrument, it must be an instrument with a purpose – the concept of instrument is inseparable from the concept of purpose or end. Thus an instrumentalist interpretation of scientific theory presupposes the meaningfulness of questions about ends. Scientific theory may be distinguished from other kinds of theory by reference to the distinct purposes of theories, but an instrumentalist philosophy of science does not *recommend* the characteristic ends of scientific theory over the ends of other kinds of theory, nor does it deny the possibility of other ends and other kinds of theory. The instrumentalist interpretation thus invites self-reflection on the purpose of science. Habermas points out that classical epistemology was this kind of self-reflection.

In contrast, Habermas argues that this denial of the possibility of meaningful self-reflection merely conceals the interest or purposes of scientific theory. This denial of the meaningfulness of reflection on interests is thus a form of false consciousness.<sup>24</sup> This is a difficult point. To call a philosophical position 'false consciousness' one must examine it against a standard of 'true consciousness'. The step of adopting the standard is fraught with well-known risks of relativism and circularity. Habermas develops an account of such a standard under the title of an 'ideal-speech situation' which attempts to avoid these risks. His point in *Knowledge and Human Interests* ultimately rests on this account, but its import can be seen more directly. The positivists 'suppress' a class of possible claims when they deny meaningfulness to questions about purposes. In effect, they also suppress the interest represented by the suppressed claims about ends. The only interest that is not suppressed is the one that is built into the scientific enterprise, the interest summarized in the expression 'prediction and control', which Habermas calls the interest in 'technological control'.

This hidden relation between positivism and interest has profound social implications when political matters are transformed into scientific or 'technical' questions as they are in the modern welfare state. The implications arise in this way. The 'object domain of the cultural sciences', Habermas points out, is not constituted only by considerations of method, but is 'confronted as something already constituted'.<sup>25</sup> In Straussian terms, there is a relevant pre-scientific understanding of the things studied by the cultural sciences. The scientific understanding that the technocrat uses is different than this pre-scientific understanding. But this difference is concealed or obscured by the refusal of positivism to reflect on the difference. So the technical control of society exercised by the state is based on an unexamined transformation *from* practical needs understood pre-scientifically *to* goals that can be formulated in terms open to technical control. Suppose that there is a desire to wipe out poverty. 'Poverty' must be defined in a way such that 'the poor' can be identified and acted upon. This transformation becomes a *distortion* of the meaning of the term 'poverty' unless there is some informed consensus on the part of the public to the effect that it is an acceptable substitution. In a technocratic society, power becomes the power to make these transformations of meaning without this informed consent. The power to distort communication in this way becomes the basis for domination. The only check on this power would be the loss of the loyalty of the masses to the state. But this problem can be made technically manageable. The

loyalty of the masses can be assured by assuring their affluence. The public realm can be 'confined to spectacles and acclamation'<sup>26</sup> as long as the distortions of communication can be kept from examination. Thus the positivism which prevents reflection (and the value-fact separation which Strauss takes as central) become key obscuring ideologies, and practice cannot be brought under rational valuative scrutiny.

Habermas extends this analysis to Weber. Like Strauss, Habermas argues that Weber's positivistic account of method contradicts his hermeneutic intention of understanding the cultural significance of the present. He argues that this positivistic account limits 'the social sciences' to a cognitive interest, valid for the production of knowledge which can be utilized technically,<sup>27</sup> and that Weber was 'positivistic enough not to allow himself to reflect upon the connection between his methodological perspectives and rules, and the results of his social analysis'.<sup>28</sup> The other side of the coin of this positivistic account of scientific knowledge as technical knowledge is a particular ethical conception, the conception refined subsequently under the name 'decisionism' by Carl Schmitt, whom Habermas calls a 'natural son' of Weber. 'Decisionism' is not a concept of the good, but a theory about the nature of moral concepts – an ethical theory rather than an ethic. Strauss would call this doctrine nihilism. But this epithet obscures the character of the doctrine as an ethical theory and more precisely as an analysis of 'moral' utterances. The 'Decisionistic' analysis of moral talk distinguishes evaluative and prescriptive assertions from scientific claims by the suggestion that the basis for these assertions can be nothing other than a 'decision' which cannot be further justified. The doctrine is the 'obverse' of positivism in this sense – if all knowledge worthy of the name is technical or instrumental, the ends or purposes of the techniques or instruments in action must be fixed in a way which ultimately is arbitrary or irrational, by, in short, an unfounded 'decision'. So for Habermas, in contrast to Strauss, the positivistic self-understanding of science implies a particular ethical theory, decisionism. This pair of doctrines is the basis of the fact-value distinction and therefore of the problem of theory and practice, and Weber is the principal architect of this pair of doctrines in the recent social sciences.

One of Habermas' important contributions is the development of the concept of 'the ideal speech situation', through which the notion of 'communicative distortion' is specified. This account is based on a particular view of discourse. According to Habermas, a language game 'rests' on a background consensus about the truth of certain beliefs

and the correctness of certain norms'.<sup>29</sup> The ideal speech situation is a hypothetical state of discourse in which there are no constraints on raising questions about elements of the background consensus and coming to a revised consensus. Deviant or distorted communication occurs where there are such constraints. One of the paradigm kinds of distortion is the case of domination, the case where one of the parties to interaction cannot be made to justify his statements. The essence of domination, in this view, is that the dominator can avoid accounting for his acts or statements. Distortion also may arise from neurotic incapacities of the speech participants which prevent them from participating in discourse about particular elements of the background consensus. A consensus which arises through distorted communication is a false consensus.

In a society in which the ideal speech situation does not obtain, philosophy must take sides. It must take sides against distortion, and for nondistorted communication. Here an interest in non-distorted communication has practical implications. It amounts to an interest in emancipation, which is a political interest. The drive for genuine knowledge and the drive for the political goal of a non-distorting political order coincide. There is a unity of theory and practice. Epistemology must formulate a political ideal and end, because when it does not, it cannot aim at its own fulfilment, since it does not aim at establishing the conditions for its fulfilment.

#### THE DIFFICULTIES IN THE STRAUSSIAN CRITIQUE

The main thesis of the two critiques are very similar. Both identify current social science with a self-willed restriction in the scope of discourse. The consequence of the restriction is that this science cannot account for its own significance. Strauss describes the restriction largely in terms of the fact-value distinction or separation. His critique of Weber rests primarily on this issue. Yet Strauss frequently refers to the new conception of science that articulates with the fact-value separation. Habermas describes the restriction of scope primarily in terms of this new conception or self-understanding of science. In comparing the critiques, one is thus compelled to ask which viewpoint is the more fundamental. Strauss' critique of Weber and of contemporary political science proceeds from an idea stated in the last line of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*: while 'philosophy must beware of wishing to be edifying, it is of necessity edifying'.<sup>30</sup> He wishes to convict his opponents of the

erroneous or self-negating implications of their explicit teaching, that the person living the political life or the life of the mind must draw. He regards several kinds of consequences, such as nihilism, as self-negating. The remainder are doctrines of natural right and can be defeated on their inadequacies or inferiority to the classics as a doctrine of natural right. He wishes to convict Weber of nihilism. Other positivists he wishes to convict of teaching a manifestly inferior natural right.

This strategy in itself raises a difficult point of hermeneutics. Peter Winch, in a discussion of Evans-Pritchard's imputation of 'contradiction' to Zande thought, remarks that 'it is the European, obsessed with pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go – to a contradiction – who is guilty of the misunderstanding, not the Zande'.<sup>31</sup> There is undoubtedly a sense in which this same point can apply to individual thinkers. To say that a thinker has 'hidden the nihilistic consequences of his own thought from himself', as Strauss says of Weber, one must be very careful that these consequences can be seen only by pushing the thinker's thought where it would not go for reasons inherent in the thinker's own doctrine. Strauss gets into precisely this difficulty in his critique of positivism. In the Epilogue to Storing's collection of critiques of behavioural political scientists, he recognizes that his opponents hold their scientific claims to be without normative implications. He denies that they are without such implications. The theories of the new political scientists have, he says, 'grave political consequences'. 'The Is necessarily leads to an Ought, all sincere protestations to the contrary'.<sup>32</sup>

Strauss thinks such consequences are evident to common sense. 'Everyone knows what follows from the demonstration . . . that there is only a difference of degree between liberal democracy and communism in regard to coercion and freedom'.<sup>33</sup> The issue between Strauss and Habermas, as we shall see later, rests on the question of *how* these consequences flow from positivist social science.

For Habermas, positivist social theory can only resolve into a critique. So to this extent, and only to this extent, does positivist political science or the bourgeois critique of ideology have normative implications. 'A positivistically limited social science cannot allow itself to go beyond the level of dissolving the empty formulas of Natural Law by means of the critique of ideology'.<sup>34</sup> Strauss agrees that positivist political science serves as a critique, and has negative implications for the central concepts of classical political theory, such as the idea of wholes and the common good. But Strauss also wishes to insist that there are positive implications of the new political science – that it

warrants a conception. The conception is 'permissive egalitarianism', and Strauss makes the connection in this way: the new political scientists make an assumption about values, that value-choices are irrational.

One thus arrives at the notion of the rational society or of the non-ideological regime: a society that is based on the understanding of the character of values. Since this understanding implies that before the tribunal of reason all values are equal, the rational society will be egalitarian or democratic and permissive or liberal: the rational doctrine regarding the difference between facts and values rationally justifies the preference for liberal democracy – contrary to what is intended by that distinction itself. In other words, whereas the new political science ought to deny the proposition that there can be no society without an ideology, it asserts that proposition.<sup>35</sup>

But how precisely does one 'arrive' at this notion? Max Weber, who is described elsewhere by Strauss as the 'greatest representative of social science positivism',<sup>36</sup> wrote a famous characterization of the men who are the final product of the development of the rational spirit:

Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.<sup>37</sup>

This remark, Weber adds, 'brings us to the world of judgments of value and of faith'. Suffice to say that the remark hardly constitutes a personal preference for the rational society. But for Weber, neither the preference for the 'rational society' nor for the irrational society, such as a society in which authority is based on charisma or tradition, is implied by science. So the preference for the 'rational society', upon which Strauss' formulation of the argument connecting the fact-value distinction and permissive egalitarianism depends, is evidently not a part of the positivist canon. If one can be a positivist without being committed to such preferences, there is no necessary connection between the preference and positivism.

The argument that the fact-value separation promotes 'permissive egalitarianism' is perhaps not central to the Straussian critique. The question is whether the difficulty that is encountered here – that in order to criticize the positivist position it proved necessary to reformulate it and supplement it by some non-positivist (and perhaps counter-positivist) premises – is a difficulty which arises in the central arguments as well. The central Straussian criticism is that Weber's conception of facts and values has nihilistic consequences, and these nihilistic consequences necessarily extend to and deny the justification of his own position. Yet in Weber's terms, the question of the value of science or the justification of science is not a scientific question. It is not needful

of a scientific answer, for there could be no scientific answer. The point of the fact-value separation, the claim that facts and values are absolutely heterogeneous, is that factual claims properly understood and value claims properly understood cannot conflict. But claims which are falsely understood or which are misrepresentations, such as political advice which claimed to be based on nature, may indeed 'conflict' with factual scientific claims, in the sense that when the standards of evidence used to evaluate scientific claims are applied to the political advice, these standards prove inapplicable and therefore do not serve to warrant the claim that the advice is based on nature. But the conflict is not a 'scientific' conflict. It is a conflict between scientific claims, or claims which are warranted by these standards, and pseudo-scientific claims, or claims which cannot be warranted by these standards. A 'scientific claim' for or against the value of science would, in Weber's terms, be a misrepresentation or falsely understood claim as well. He therefore makes no such claims, and no such conflict arises. So Strauss' criticism founders on the self-understanding of Weber's science. To convict Weber of inconsistency, one must supply premises that this self-understanding precludes. Minimally, one must supply the premise that science must be scientifically justified. But this premise is not part of the positivist canon, at least not the modern positivist canon. Indeed, it may be said to be the chief claim of the Logical Positivists that science does not have what E. A. Burtt called 'metaphysical presuppositions', that it has no presuppositions at all but is marked off from the realm of metaphysical 'argument' by the criterion of meaningfulness.

Of course, Weber writes in the face of a long tradition of philosophic thought which conceives of 'science' and 'values' in a different way. He must establish his own conception by refuting these previous conceptions. And Strauss can rightly raise the question of whether these conceptions are in fact refuted. But this is a different question from the question of self-refutation, and it has more limited implications. A viewpoint cannot be rejected just because it does not refute its rivals. Its rivals may, after all, prove to be self-refuting or wrong on other grounds, and therefore not properly regarded as rivals at all. It is this weaker kind of argument – the claim that Weber has failed to demonstrate the superiority of his own view to that of the classics – that Strauss is forced to rely on again and again in his treatment of Weber. His claim that the nihilistic consequences of Weber's thought extend to his own position also implicitly relies on this kind of criticism – it is the classical philosophers who are the source of the premise

that science must be justified scientifically.

We may state Strauss' criticism as an argument that if it is possible to do such things as justify a scientific or philosophic conception scientifically, then Weber's conception is inadequate, for it does not and cannot be so justified and since there are conceptions which purport to be able to do so – i.e., the conceptions of classical philosophy – which have not been refuted by Weber, then Weber's conception is inadequate by contrast. How persuasive is this argument?

Strauss takes Weber's discussion of the irreconcilability of values conflicts as an attempt to refute the classics, i.e., to refute natural right, and pronounces the refutation unsatisfactory. According to Strauss,

The true reason why Weber insisted on the ethically neutral character of social science as well as of social philosophy was, then, not his belief in the fundamental opposition of the Is and the Ought, but his belief that there cannot be any genuine knowledge of the Ought.<sup>38</sup>

This 'true reason' is what distinguishes Weber from the classics, and is the focus of Strauss' critical attack. But this is an odd interpretation of Weber. Strauss must say that this demonstration of the irreconcilability of value conflicts, which occupies so little of Weber's writing, is 'the basis of his whole position', of his 'whole notion of the scope and function of the social sciences'.<sup>39</sup> But is it? Weber wrote his methodology in a period when writing in social science methodology was dominated by the work of John Stuart Mill, and Mill is more plausibly regarded as Weber's target than the classics. Weber accepted many of Mill's ideas on methodology. Among Mill's doctrines was the view that our knowledge of nature's law can only be knowledge of invariant successions of events. The maxim 'follow nature' can only be 'superfluous and unmeaning' in connection with such laws. The true foundation for ethics, thus, must lie elsewhere, and the character of ethics must be that of an 'Art' and not a 'Science'. Mill supposed ethics, the Art of living, to be a deductively rational discipline. Weber's account of the irreconcilability of various value conflicts is clearly aimed against this view of ethics.<sup>40</sup> But Weber accepted Mill's doctrine that knowledge of nature is knowledge of invariant successions. It is this doctrine which implies the separation between Is and Ought. And it is the 'true reason' for Weber's insistence on this separation.

Strauss' failure to examine the philosophy of science that underlies the position of Mill and Weber thus vitiates his critique. The charge of inconsistency depends on the demand that Weber warrant his science

on scientific grounds, something that a follower of this conception of science would say could not be done in a non-spurious fashion. The claim that Weber's science or philosophy is inferior to that of the classics depends on the claim that the classics contain such non-spurious arguments, as well as non-spurious arguments from nature to human ends, and so forth. To accept this claim prejudices the issue in the favour of the classics.

#### THE DIFFICULTIES IN HABERMAS' CRITIQUE

The starting point of Habermas' analysis, the problem of the self-understanding of positivism, is thus the more fundamental. The difficulty in criticizing the positivist position to which Strauss succumbs may be formulated in more general terms. To criticize the positivists one must establish a standard against which the positivist conception itself may be judged. The standard Strauss adopts is classical natural right. Habermas' standard is the ideal-speech situation. The two conceptions thus play analogous roles in the critique.

Habermas rejects the classical solution on grounds which are very revealing of the character of this alternative standard. The attempt to treat the political order as a portion of the cosmological order, he argues, is itself a mystification which conceals the interest of classical philosophy:

Theory in the sense of the classical tradition only had an impact on life because it was thought to have discovered in the cosmic order an ideal world structure, including the prototype for the order of the human world. Only as cosmology was *theoria* capable of orienting action . . . Theory had educational and cultural implications not because it had freed knowledge from interest. To the contrary, it did so because it derived *pseudonormative power from the concealment of its actual interest.*<sup>41</sup>

The interest of classical philosophy was to purge the world of demons of archaic super-human powers so that the individual ego could develop. The individual emancipated himself by identifying his ego with abstract laws of the cosmic order. The basic ontological assumption of a structured self-subsistent world order thus served an emancipatory psychological function in the communication system of the polis.

From the point of view of the ideal-speech situation, the origin of philosophy in this psychological problem constitutes a constraint on the speech situation. The consensus the classics achieve is in part a result of the constraint that the members of the speech community, the

philosophers, have a common psychological need. This need is not a matter that enters into the discourse, because it is common to all members of the community. Since it is not the subject of disagreement between members of the philosophic speech community it does not become problematic in the discourse of the community. Discourse is thus constrained, just as discourse is restricted by the positivist's refusal to enter into dialogue on certain claims on grounds of their alleged 'meaninglessness'.

There is a troubling feature of this analysis of the classics. It suggests that the person who claims to be in the 'ideal-speech situation' and to have arrived at his conclusions through discourse in the ideal-speech situation is analogous to the radical historicist described by Strauss, who claims to be living in the absolute moment in history, the moment at which the historicity or historical boundedness of all previous thought stands revealed. One may ask the radical historicist whether his 'knowledge' that he lives in the absolute moment is not also historically conditioned and therefore suspect. The claim to live in the ideal-speech situation is also conditioned by the speech situation. If the speech situation is one in which the distortions are self-concealing or inaccessible to discourse, such as the conditions of classical philosophy, the speaker may mistakenly suppose himself to be free of the distortions, and he will have no way of checking this out within the language games of his speech community. Habermas characterizes the process of emancipatory discourse in psychoanalytic terms as a self-formative process. The psychoanalytic patient, like the participant in self-reflexive emancipatory discourse marks his success, he suggests, by his recognition of the successful continuation of a self-formative process. But how does one distinguish 'success' here? Do paranoids and schizophrenics not go through a self-formative process? Is this not successful? If not, how precisely does one distinguish 'success' here? It has been suggested that groups of persons who believe in 'Auras' and 'Astral projection' satisfy neurotic narcissistic impulses through their participation in the discourse and agreement with the consensus of these groups. Is the development of the ideology and practice of such groups not an example of theory-guided action developed through discourse, of the self-formative development of a speech community? The positivists have answers for such questions – according to the verification criteria of meaning the assertions about 'auras' and astral projections would be meaningless. Habermas, by rejecting such criteria, lays down the means for answering them in an epistemologically satisfactory way. His own explanations, like the radical historicist's claim to be speaking in the

absolute moment, are subject to the same suspicion as all other claims – that they are based on the consensus of a speech community which is acting under conditions of communicative distortion. To his credit, Habermas concedes this difficulty.<sup>42</sup>

This difficulty arises at a point where Strauss too gets into trouble, the point of selecting the standard against which positivism is to be judged. Strauss assumed the classics as a standard of philosophical adequacy, held positivism against this standard and found it wanting. But by assuming that the classical conception of philosophy represents a genuine possibility, he prejudges the central claim of positivism, that it does not represent a genuine possibility. Had Habermas gone on to formulate an applicable standard, a serious test of its meaningfulness could be applied to it.

There are a few things that can be said about the moves Habermas makes in constructing the concept of the ideal speech situation. His argument, that a language game rests on a background consensus about the truth of certain beliefs and correctness of certain norms, is worth contrasting on this notion of the nature of the 'consensus' in a language game with that of Wittgenstein, from whom the notion of 'language-game' was taken. Rush Rhees has described the consensus in Wittgenstein's conception of language game in this way:

We see that we understand one another, without noticing whether our reactions tally or not. *Because* we agree in our reactions, it is possible for me to tell you something, and it is possible for you to teach me something.<sup>43</sup>

For Wittgenstein, the 'consensus' is in the common use of the rules that make up the language game – it does not 'rest' on anything 'outside' of the language game. Habermas wishes to say it does. His view seems to be this. We can always talk *about* the rules of a language game, and sometimes what is said about these rules or usages leads us to change what we are doing and adopt new rules or usages. In some contexts this may be a plausible picture. Particular legal usages may be discursively justified by arguments involving such things as precedent, and the consensus on the usage may be said to 'rest' on the consensus on the precedents and therefore on the rule of precedent and related 'norms' of legal discourse. But when we look carefully at this case we find that it is atypical. In legal reasoning, there are language-games of discourse about law, such as that involving the rule of precedent, on which there is a consensus in Wittgenstein's sense. But discourse in the law is almost unique in this respect.

In other contexts, it is implausible to speak of 'justification' of the

rules. One can certainly talk about arithmetic. But what can one say to *justify* it? What can one say about the classical French cuisine and its standards which justify them? One can explain arithmetic or the French cuisine, but such explanation consists not in justification but rather in showing or explicating. Someone can show you how to do sums, until sooner or later you 'catch on', and it may help for you to hear explications like 'think of it this way – pretend you have three apples in this pocket, and . . .' Similarly, you can come to learn the fine points of the French cuisine, to 'develop a palate'. But in doing this, you would never hear a 'justification', nor would you learn what a justification of the rules or criteria would look like.

Habermas is compelled to deny that 'showing' or 'explicating' can suffice as justification. For if he were to say this, he would be forced to give up his case against contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of science, paralleling its logical positivist predecessor, which holds that science does not stand in need of justification but only of explication or analysis. To protect his meta-scientific theory, Habermas must demand that discourse on science involves something stronger than mere explication or analysis. This is a demand of doubtful coherence. 'Justification' is an especially strong term. From Wittgenstein's point of view, if there are no criteria for calling something a justification, no criteria for distinguishing 'mistakes in the argument', then it is conceptually misleading to call it a 'justification' at all. Some of Habermas' writings suggest that the process of self-reflection involves just such questionable 'justifications'. In analysing the self-reflective significance of the claims of psychoanalysis, he argues that they cannot be 'subjected to externally imposed standards, whether of a functioning language game or of controlled observation'.<sup>44</sup> A post-positivist analytic philosopher would suggest that by leaving the control of an established language game in this way the claims would go beyond the bounds of intelligibility.

The difficulty Habermas encounters here in giving an account of the connection between talk about a language game and the truth or validity of the language game has a parallel in Strauss' critique as well. In demanding a metaphysical justification of science, Strauss demanded something the positivists denied could be given. Habermas, in arguing that all discourse rests on a 'background consensus' which must be open to discursive justification if it is to be a 'true consensus', demands that science, among other activities, be 'justifiable'. Post-positivist analytic philosophy would reject this demand, for it would reject the view that the 'justifications' actually serve as, or constitute, justifications at all.

## NOTES

- 1 Leo Strauss, 'What is Political Philosophy?' *The Journal of Politics*, XIX, 3 (August 1957), 343-68; Leo Strauss, 'Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Our Time', in George J. Graham, Jr. and George W. Carey (eds.), *The Post-Behavioral Era. Perspectives on Political Science* (New York: McKay, 1972), 217-42.
- 2 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 25.
- 3 Usually radical historicism has been the prelude to renewed attempts to find a way out of the paradox. Hegel supposed that there was an 'absolute moment' in which the fundamental riddles would be fully solved. But, as Strauss points out, 'one cannot simply assume that one lives or thinks in the absolute moment; one must show, somehow, how the absolute moment can be recognized as such'. Ibid. This demonstration must be claimed to be exempt from the historicist judgment on thought, so the paradox merely arises in a new form over this claim.
- 4 Strauss, 'What is Political Philosophy?' op. cit., 351.
- 5 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, op. cit., 41.
- 6 Ibid., 42.
- 7 Ibid., 70.
- 8 Ibid., 71-72.
- 9 Ibid., 124.
- 10 Ibid., 77.
- 11 Strauss, 'Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Our Time', op. cit., 225.
- 12 Ibid., 229.
- 13 Jürgen Habermas, trans. John Viertel, *Theory and Practice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 41.
- 14 Ibid., 72.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., 78.
- 17 Ibid., 77.
- 18 In e.g. William Graham Sumner, *Earth, Hunger and Other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1913), 128-29.
- 19 Habermas, op. cit., 120.
- 20 Ibid., 115.
- 21 Ibid., 228.
- 22 Ibid., 208.

- 23 Jürgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).
- 24 *Ibid.*, 315.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 193.
- 26 Jürgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, *Toward a Rational Society. Student Protest, Science and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 75.
- 27 Jürgen Habermas, Discussion in Otto Stammer (ed.), *Max Weber and Sociology Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 63.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 29 T. A. McCarthy, 'A Theory of Communicative Competence', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, III, 2 (June 1973), 142.
- 30 Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 299.
- 31 Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', in Bryan Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 93.
- 32 Leo Strauss, 'An Epilogue', in Herbert J. Storing (ed.), *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 319.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Habermas, *Theory and Society*, op. cit., 120.
- 35 Strauss, 'An Epilogue', op. cit., 324.
- 36 Strauss, 'What is Political Philosophy?' op. cit., 351.
- 37 Max Weber, trans. Talcott Parsons, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's, 1958), 182.
- 38 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, op. cit., 41.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 64.
- 40 It is Mill who is mentioned in two of the crucial passages formulating Weber's position on values. Max Weber, trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (eds.), *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1949), 17.
- 41 Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, op. cit., 306.
- 42 McCarthy, op. cit., 146.
- 43 Quoted in Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 85.
- 44 Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, op. cit., 269.