
“Partisanship” and the sciences

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I

Though there has been a great deal of discussion about the nature, or even the possibility, of objectivity in the social sciences, there has been much less interest in the problem of “partisanship” in these sciences, including in history. “Partisanship” is one of those words like “violence” or “nation” which conceal a variety of meanings beneath an apparently simple and homogeneous surface. It is more often used as a term of disapproval or (much more rarely) praised than defined, and when it is formally defined¹, definitions tend to be either selective or normative. In fact, the common usages of the term conceal a wide range of meanings, stretching from the unacceptably narrow to the platitudinously broad.

At its broadest it may merely be another way of denying the possibility of a purely objective and value-free science, a proposition from which few historians, social scientists and philosophers would today totally dissent. At the opposite extreme it is the willingness to subordinate the processes and findings of research to the requirements of the researcher’s ideological or political commitment and whatever this implies, including their subordination to the ideological or political authorities accepted by him or her; however much these may conflict with what these processes and findings would be without such dictation. More commonly, of course, the researcher internalizes these requirements which thus become characteristics of science, or rather (since partisanship implies an adversary) of the “right” science against the “wrong” science – of women’s history as against male chauvinist history, proletarian science as against bourgeois science etc.

In fact, there are probably two overlapping spectra, of which one expresses the various nuances of the objective political or ideological

dimension of the processes and findings of research, and the other, the consequences which may be claimed to derive from this for the historian's subjective behaviour. To put it simply, one is about the partisanship of the facts, the other about that of people.

At one extreme of the first spectrum there is the general, and by now virtually uncontroversial, proposition that there can be no such thing as a purely objective and value-free science; at the other there is the proposition that everything about science, from its procedures to its concrete findings and the theories into which these are grouped, is primarily to be seen as having some specific political (or, more generally, ideological) function or purpose, associated with some specific social or political group or organization. Thus the main significance of the helio-centric astronomy of the 16-17th century would not be that they were "more true" than the geocentric ones, but that they provided a legitimation for absolute monarchy ("le roi soleil"). Though this might sound a *reductio ad absurdum* of this position, let us not forget that most of us have on occasion taken a hardly less extreme view when discussing, say, the various aspects of genetics and ethology favoured by National Socialism. The possible truths of various hypotheses in these fields seemed at the time to be much less important than their use for the horrible political purposes of the regime of Adolf Hitler. Even today there are many who refuse to accept research into possible racial differences within the human race, or who reject any findings tending to demonstrate inequalities between various human groups, on analogous grounds.

The nuances of the second spectrum range equally widely. At one extreme there is the barely controversial proposition that the scientist, a child of his or her time, reflects the ideological and other preconceptions of his/her milieu and historically or socially specific experiences and interests. At the other there is the view that we must not merely be willing to subordinate our science to the requirements of some organization or authority, but should actively favour this subordination. Except insofar as we make purely psychological statements about scientists, spectrum 2 derives from spectrum 1. Men are or ought to be partisan in their attitude to the sciences, because the sciences are themselves partisan. It is also possible, though not certain, that each position on spectrum 2 corresponds to a position on spectrum 1, and may be regarded as corollary of it. Hence it will be convenient in the following discussion to concentrate on "partisanship" as a subjective attitude of, or imperative for, historians.

Nevertheless, one important proposition about "objective" partisanship must first be made. It is that partisanship in science (using the word in the general sense of the German "Wissenschaft") does not rest on disagreement about verified facts, but about their selection and combination, and about what may be inferred from them². It takes for granted non-controversial procedures for verifying or falsifying evidence, and non-controversial procedures of argument about it. Thomas Hobbes' observation that men would suppress or even challenge the

theorems of geometry if they conflicted with their political interests of the ruling class may be true, but this kind of partisanship has no place in the sciences³. If anyone wishes to argue that the earth is flat or the biblical account of creation literally true, they would be well advised not to become astronomers, geographers or palaeontologists. Conversely, those who resist the inclusion of the biblical account of creation into the school textbooks of California as a "possible hypothesis"⁴ do so, not because they may have partisan views (which may be the case), but also because they rely on a universal consensus among scientists that it is not only factually wrong, but that no argument in its favour can claim scientific status. It is not, so far as can be seen, "a possible scientific hypothesis". To challenge the refutation of the flat-earth thesis, or of the belief that God created the world in seven days, is to challenge what we know as reason and science. There are people who are willing to do so explicitly or by implication. If they should, by some unlikely chance, prove to be right, we as historians, social or other scientists, would be out of a job.

This does not significantly reduce the scope of legitimate scientific disagreement into which partisanship can and does enter. There can be considerable argument about what the facts are, and where they can never be definitively established (as in much of history), argument may continue indefinitely. There may be argument about what they mean. Hypotheses and theories, however universal the consensus which greets them, do not have the non-controversial status of e.g. verifiable or falsifiable facts or mathematico-logical propositions. They can be shown to be consistent with the facts, but not necessarily as *uniquely* consistent with the facts. There can be no scientific argument about the fact of evolution, but there can be, even today, about the Darwinian explanation of it, or about any specific version of it. And insofar as the "fact" itself is trivial, when taken out of the context of the questions we ask about it and the theories we form to link it with other facts, it also remains caught up in the web of possible partisanship. The same is true even of mathematical propositions, which become significant or "interesting" only by virtue of the links we establish between them and other parts of our intellectual universe. Nevertheless, and at the risk of being accused of positivism, the non-controversial nature of certain statements and of the means of establishing it, must be asserted. Some propositions are "true" or "false" beyond reasonable doubt, though the boundaries between reasonable and unreasonable doubt will be drawn differently, within a marginal zone, according to partisan criteria. Thus most traditional scientists would probably require far stronger and more rigorously sifted evidence to establish the existence of various extra-sensory phenomena than they would to accept, e.g. the survival of some animal believed to be long extinct; and this because many of them are *a priori* reluctant to accept the existence of such phenomena. Conversely, as the Piltdown forgeries and other examples show, an *a priori* readiness to accept verification of a plausible hypothesis can seriously relax the scientist's own criteria of validation. But this does

not seriously undermine the view that the criteria of validation are objective.

Let me translate this into terms relevant to the historian. There can be no legitimate doubt that in the course of the past 200 years the material conditions of the population in the "advanced" countries of the world, has, on average, substantially improved. The fact cannot be seriously disputed, though there may be argument about when this improvement began, and about the rates, fluctuations and divergences of this process. Though in itself neutral, this fact will be widely regarded as having certain ideological and political implications, and insofar as there are historical theories resting on the assumption that it has not taken place, such theories are wrong. It is open to me as a Marxist to do one or more of three things. I can legitimately deny that Marx, at least in his mature years, held a theory of absolute material pauperization or stagnation, in which case I eliminate this element from the theory, and am no longer obliged to seek for evidence of it. I can reformulate the theory of "absolute pauperization" in a way which might enable me to include other elements, hitherto unconsidered, which might offset the improvement (e.g. "insecurity", or mental health, or environmental deterioration etc.). In this case there might be partisan argument of two kinds: about the legitimacy of extending the concept of „pauperization" in this way, and about the actual measurable movement of the various indices involved, their weighting and combination. Lastly, I may maintain the old argument, but seek to establish that the improvement represents merely a temporary or long-term fluctuation in what can still be held to be a secular downward trend. In this case I am *either* removing the proposition from the range of falsifiability altogether, like those constantly revised predictions of the end of the world which millennial sects engage in, *or* I am laying it open to falsification at some time in the future. Similar considerations apply, if I regard the improvement as a regional phenomenon, which might (or might not) be offset by deterioration in the rest of the world. What I *cannot* do is simply to deny the evidence. Nor can I, as a historian, legitimately refuse to accept the criteria of falsifiability, insofar as my views rest on evidence either past, present or future.

In short, for everyone engaged in scientific discourse, statements must be subject to validation by methods and criteria which are, in principle, not subject to partisanship; whatever their ideological consequences, and however motivated. Statements not subject to such validation may nevertheless be important and valuable, but belong to a different order of discourse. They pose extremely interesting and difficult philosophical problems, especially when they are clearly in some sense descriptive (e.g. in representative art or criticism "about" some specific creative work or artist), but cannot be considered here. Nor can we here consider statements of the logico-mathematical type, insofar as they are not (as in theoretical physics) linked to validation by evidence.

II

Let me now turn to the problem of subjective partisanship; omitting, for the sake of simplicity, the question of personal feelings, though these are important in the individual psychology of the scholar. We shall therefore not be concerned with the reluctance of Professor X to give up the theory by which he has made, or hopes to make, his or her reputation or to which long polemics have committed him or her. We shall omit the personal feelings about Professor Y whom he or she has always considered a careerist and a charlatan. We shall be concerned with Professor X only as a person motivated by ideological or political views and assumptions shared by others, and carried into research; and more specifically with Professor X as a committed partisan who accepts that his commitment may have direct implications for his or her work.

However, we must begin by eliminating the extreme position of partisanship, as put forward and practised in the Stalinist period in the U.S.S.R. and elsewhere – not necessarily only by Marxists –, and reduced *ad absurdum* in the ever-changing pages of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia of those days. This position assumed 1) a total congruence of political and scientific statements at all times and therefore 2) a virtual interchangeability of statements in both forms of discourse at all levels⁵, on the ground 3) that no specialized field of scientific discourse or specialized public for such discourses existed. In practice this meant 4) the superiority of political authority (being by definition the repository of science) over scientific statement. It may be pointed out in passing that this position differs from the one, held fairly generally, that there may be imperatives – e.g. moral or political – which are superior to those of scientific statement, and from the one held e.g. in the Catholic Church, that there are truths superior to those of secular science, which may be imposed by authority.

In theory, of course, the unity of science and politics may be maintained as a general proposition, at least by those who believe that politics should be based on a scientific analysis (e.g. “scientific socialism”). That science is inseparable from the rest of society, including the non-scientific public, is also accepted by most people as a general proposition. Yet in practice it is evident that a certain division of labour and functions exists and that the relations between science and politics cannot be those of congruence. The imperatives of politics, however much it may be based on scientific analysis, are not identical with scientific statements, though they may be ideally derivable from them at a greater or lesser remove. The relative autonomy of politics (which includes e.g. considerations of expediency, of action, will and decision) precludes not only identity, but even simple analogy between the two spheres. Hence any form of partisanship which holds that whatever is politically required at any moment, must have its equivalent in scientific discourse, can have no theoretical justification. In practice it may also be observed that the existence of authorities, each of which claims the validity of science for its political analysis and consequently

imposes certain imperatives on those of its members who engage in scientific discourses, raises the problem of how to decide between such rival scientific claims⁶. To this problem partisanship itself can contribute little except a sense of subjective conviction.

The dilemma of what may be called for the sake of convenience the Zhdanovite version of partisanship, may be illustrated by a non-marxist example: cartography. Maps are held by cartographers to be factual descriptions (according to various conventions) of aspects of the earth's surface, but by governments and certain political movements to be statements of policy, or at least to have implications for policy. Indeed, this is an undoubted aspect of political maps, and in principle it cannot be denied that, where there is political dispute, the mere fact of drawing, say, a frontier in one place rather than another, implies a political decision. Thus, to record the Falkland Islands as a British possession implies either denying the Argentine claim to them, or at least it implies the views' that at that moment this claim is considered as academic. To record the country to the east of the German Federal Republic as the German Democratic Republic implied at least a *de facto* recognition of the existence of the G.D.R. as a state within the 1945 frontiers. Yet, however sympathetic the cartographer may be to the claims of Argentina or the cold-war attitudes of the western states, he or she cannot be expected to conceal the actual situation. It is as absurd to turn countries into un-countries on maps as to turn people into un-persons in history books. Nor did the configuration and character of the G.D.R. change at the moment when the political decision was taken to describe it as such, instead of as a "Soviet-occupied zone" or as "Mitteldeutschland", or by some other term which expressed not reality but policy. Insofar as cartographers are not acting under compulsion, they must realize that in describing the Falklands as Argentinian or the G.D.R. as "Central Germany", they are acting not as geographers but as politicians. They may justify their decision on various grounds, including the philosophical or even scientific, but not on geographical ones. Failure to make this distinction would lead not merely to a breakdown in intellectual communication (which is familiar enough) but to the substitution of cartography as a form of programmatic statement to cartography as description, i.e. to the abolition of cartography.

Fortunately, since we are dealing with a field in which theoretical fantasy has severe practical consequences, programmatic cartography is not allowed to interfere with real maps except marginally and in special fields such as education and propaganda. After all, it would be unwise to suggest to airline pilots that in landing at Kaliningrad they would find themselves in a German state, or that in landing in Schoenefeld rather than Tegel their administrative problems would not be rather different.

What may be called Stalinist partisanship⁷ – though it is not by any means confined to Stalinists or even Marxists – can therefore be excluded from scientific discourse. If scholars and scientists believe that their political commitment requires them to subordinate their

science to their commitment, as is perfectly legitimate under certain circumstances, they should admit it, at least to themselves. It is much less dangerous to science, and to a scientifically based political analysis, to know that one is practising *suppressio veri* or even *suggestio falsi* than to convince oneself that lies are, in some complex sense, true. Similarly, if they believe that their political commitment requires them to drop their activity as scholars altogether, which may also be legitimate or even necessary under certain conditions, they should also recognize what they are doing. The historian who becomes editor of a party organ does not write his editorials as a historian but as a political editorialist, though his historical background and interests may show through. This need not prevent him from continuing to practice history at other times. Jaurès produced rather good (partisan) history while leader of the French Socialist Party; but not *while* evolving formulas for conciliation at party congresses.

However, there remains a grey zone between scholarship and political statement, which perhaps affects historians more than others, because they have been used from time immemorial to legitimate the claims (e.g. dynastic or territorial) of politicians. This is the zone of political advocacy. It would be quite unrealistic to expect scholars to refrain from acting as advocates, especially if (as is often the case) they believe not only that a case ought to be made on the grounds of patriotism or some other political commitment, but that it is actually valid. There will inevitably be Bulgarian, Yugoslav and Greek professors who, even without the urging of governments, parties or churches, are prepared to fight to the last footnote for their interpretation of the Macedonian question. There are, of course, plenty of cases when historians, though personally quite indifferent, may also accept the partisan duty of making some case such as to back their government's claim to a disputed frontier or to write an article on the traditional friendship between the Syldavian and Ruritanian peoples at a time when Syldavia is engaged in improving its diplomatic relations with Ruritania. However, though academics will undoubtedly continue to act as advocates, with more or less conviction, and although the element of advocacy is inseparable from any debate, the difference between it and scientific discussion (however partisan) must be clearly borne in mind.

To put it in its simplest terms, the function of the trial lawyer is not to decide on the guilt or innocence of the client, but to secure his conviction or acquittal; the function of the advertising agency is not to decide on whether the client's product is worth buying, but to sell it. In short, unlike science (however committed) advocacy takes the case to be made as given. The degree of sophistication involved in advocating it, is irrelevant to this basic decision. Even where we approve completely of both the case and the manner of advocacy, the distinction remains: Huxley was not Darwin, but "Darwin's bulldog". However reluctant to do so in practice, in theory every participant in scientific debate must entertain the possibility of allowing himself to be publicly persuaded by contrary argument or evidence. Of course the very fact

that he is known to do so, makes him particularly valuable as an advocate, and makes the slide from scientific to partisan tempting. In liberal, and especially parliamentary, societies, given both to the idealization of the "independent scientist" and the belief that the truth is likely to emerge from the clash of gladiatorial advocates, this temptation tends to produce more illegitimate partisanship than anything else does. The history of recent debates on poverty and education in the Anglo-Saxon countries bears witness to this.

III

Having established the limits beyond which partisanship ceases to be scientifically legitimate, let me argue the case in favour of legitimate partisanship, both from the point of view of the scientific or scholarly discipline and from that of the cause to which the scholar feels committed.

The latter is somewhat more difficult than the former, since it assumes that the cause will benefit by the scholar's work as a scholar, even if a committed one. But this is plainly not always the case. There are causes such as a belief in Christianity, which not only do not require scientific or scholarly backing, but may actually be weakened by attempts to reformulate faith and dogma in terms which are, by definition, the opposite of both. (Of course most such attempts have been defensive actions against attacks from encroaching secular forces.) This is not to deny the value of Christian commitment as a stimulus for certain kinds of scholarship – e. g. philological or archaeological. But it may be doubted whether this scholarship has ever strengthened Christianity as a social force. One might at most claim that it provides esoteric services, e.g. by establishing the correct translation of sacred texts for those to whom this is of more than scientific importance, or that it provides the cause with propagandist arguments or the prestige which scholarship and learning in most societies still bring to the groups with which they are associated. Still, judgment on such matters is to some extent subjective. No doubt it is of enormous significance to the Mormons to collect a mass of genealogical information about ancestors who are, one understands, by this process, in some way brought posthumously closer to the true faith. For non-Mormons the exercise is interesting and valuable only because it has incidentally produced one of the most comprehensive collections of sources for historic demography.

Still, there are enough political and ideological causes which plainly benefit from science and scholarship, even if often tempted to develop pseudo-science and pseudo-scholarship for this purpose. Can it be denied that nationalist movements have been strengthened by the devoted scholarly explorations of their people's past, even if the movements themselves (as distinct from the scholars associated with

them) may find fantasy and forgery just as useful – perhaps more useful – than sceptical, if committed, enquiry?⁸ Moreover, there are causes – Marxism is prominent among them – which see themselves specifically as the products of rationalist and scientific analysis, and consequently must regard the work of scientific enquiry associated with them as an essential part of their progress – or at any rate not incompatible with it, except for the frictions between scholarly research and political expediency, already mentioned above. Any state requires science for certain purposes. Governments need real economics (as distinct from apologetics or propaganda) insofar as they need to manage their economies. Their complaint is not that economists are insufficiently committed to them, but that, in the present state of the science, they do not solve the problems they desperately want them to. There is thus plenty of scope for the committed scholar to further his cause, without ceasing to be a scholar.

But how far does he require to have a specific form of commitment to do so? Is it not, by and large, as irrelevant to a regime whether its economists are privately conservatives or revolutionaries, so long as they solve its problems? Would the U.S.S.R. not have benefited more from anti-Stalinist biologists who knew their job than from Lysenkoites who did not? (To quote a Chinese communist leader: "What does it matter if the cats are white or black, so long as they catch mice".) Or, to turn the question round, must not a committed Marxist, insofar as he is a good expert, expect his findings to be beneficial even to those whom he or she wishes to combat?

The answer to the last question is obviously: to some extent, yes. Nevertheless, the personal partisanship of the scholar is highly relevant, if only because his cause may not be able to draw upon scholars other than the ones committed to it, and because it may be unable to make use of that large part of science – particularly social science – which reflects other kinds of partisanship. The German Social-Democratic Party before 1914 could hardly expect help, sympathy or even neutrality from the overwhelming majority of the academics of imperial Germany. It had to rely on "its own" intellectuals. What is more to the point, partisan intellectuals may be the only ones ready to investigate problems, or subjects which (for ideological or other reasons) the rest of the intellectual community fails to consider. The history of the British labour movement until late in the twentieth century, was overwhelmingly in the hands of people who sympathized with it – from Sidney and Beatrice Webb onwards – because hardly any "orthodox" historians took any serious interest in it until well after the second world war.

This willingness of partisan scholars and scientists to break new ground leads us to the second part of our argument: the positive value of partisanship for the scientific or scholarly discipline of the partisan scholar. This is undeniable even in some of the natural sciences, though probably marked mainly in those which (like biology) have always had fairly strong ideological associations. We cannot confine this value to any particular kind of partisanship. Modern genetics, for instance, with

its constant battle between the advocates of inherited and environmental factors, was undoubtedly in great part a product of an elitist, anti-democratic ideology – from Francis Galton and Karl Pearson onwards⁹. This does not, incidentally, make genetics into an essentially reactionary science, or indeed imply a permanent ideological commitment of this science, some of whose eminent later practitioners were (like J. B. S. Haldane) communists. Indeed in the present phase of the heredity-environment battle, which can be traced back to the first world war, the geneticists have tended to be on the «left», whereas the main supporters of the «right» come from among the psychologists¹⁰. At all events, we have here a field of the unquestioned natural sciences, whose advance has been achieved largely through the political partisanship of its practitioners.

Whatever the case in the natural sciences – which I am not competent to discuss – the argument is unanswerable in the social sciences. It is hard to think of any of the great formative economists who was not deeply committed politically, for the same reason that it is hard to think of any great medical scientist who was not deeply committed to curing human sickness. The social sciences are essentially “applied sciences” designed, to quote Marx’ phrase, to change the world and not merely to interpret it (or alternatively to explain why it does not need changing). What is more, even today, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, the typical economic theorist considers himself less as a producer of “science” for the use of his or her “side” (as, for instance, the anti-fascist scientists did during the last war when they persuaded their governments that nuclear weapons were practicable), but rather as a crusader in his own right – a Keynes or a Friedmann –, or at least an active and vocal participant in public policy debates. Keynes did not derive his policy from the *General Theory*: he wrote the *General Theory* to provide a sounder basis for, as well as a more powerful means of propagating, his policies. The direct link with policy is less clear among the great sociologists, since in the nature of the subject their general prescriptions are harder to formulate in terms of specific government policies – except perhaps for propagandist (including educational) purposes. Yet the deep political commitment of the founding fathers of sociology hardly needs demonstration, and indeed there have been times when the entire discipline as an academic subject has almost been overwhelmed by the various partisanshipes of its practitioners. It does not take much effort to make a similar case for other social sciences, including – if we choose to include it – history.

The fact that the development of such sciences has been inseparable from partisanship – that some of them would virtually not have come into existence without it – is not seriously to be denied. The contrary belief, that the scholar is a simple seeker after pure academic truth, which may or may not interest anyone else, probably gained ground partly as a reflection of the sheer numerical growth, and therefore the separation in special institutes, of science and scholarship as a profession, partly as a response to the peculiar and novel social situation of

(academie) intellectuals, partly as mystification. At a time when there were no professional economists, it would have made no sense to argue that Quesnay (a doctor), Galiani (a public official), Adam Smith (a university teacher), Ricardo (a financier) or Malthus (a clergyman) were not essentially political in their intentions. The very fact that the multiplication of professional salaried intellectuals as a social stratum, has widened the gap between most of them and the effective economic and political decision-makers, would have been enough to strengthen their tendency to see themselves as a class of independent "experts". Moreover, the power of the *status quo* was greatly reinforced, if the prevalent teachings of the social sciences were presented, not as politically based and oriented views, but as eternal truths discovered with no purpose other than the pursuit of truth by a class of men, working in certain institutions which guaranteed both impartiality and authority. Imperial German professors, a notoriously partisan group, did not intervene in politics so much as reinforce their side by *ex cathedra* declarations of what was "unchallengeable". The intellectual as the member of an occupational category, as the member of a social stratum, and as a secular theologian, had a substantial incentive to claim that he - more rarely she - stood above the battle. However, for the purpose of the present argument it is neither necessary nor possible to go further into this question.

That sciences in the past, and especially the social sciences, have been inseparable from partisanship, does not prove that partisanship is advantageous to them, but only that it is inevitable. The case for the benefits of partisanship must be that it advances science. It can do so, and has done so, insofar as it provides an incentive to change the terms of scientific debate, a mechanism for injecting new topics, new questions and new models of answer ("paradigms", to use Kuhn's convenient term) from outside. There is not much doubt that such fertilisation of scientific debate by stimulation and challenge from outside the specific field of research, has been enormously beneficial to scientific advance. Nowadays this is widely recognized, though the outside stimulus is normally conceived as coming from other sciences, and partly for this reason all manner of "interdisciplinary" contacts and enterprises are encouraged¹¹. Nevertheless, in the social sciences, and probably in all sciences believed to have implications for human society (other than perhaps the purely technological), "outside" is largely, indeed primarily, the experience, ideas and activity of the scientist as a person and as a citizen, a child of his or her times. And partisan scientists are the ones most likely to use their experience "outside" in their academic work.

This does not necessarily require actual political commitment, or even ideological commitment, though in the 19th century and even today strong feelings of hostility to traditional religion have fertilised debates in even the very "pure" natural sciences. It has played a distinct part in such "non-political" fields as cosmogony and molecular biology, through the militantly agnostic motivations of some who have

revolutionized these fields – e.g. Hoyle and Francis Crick¹². For that matter Charles Darwin himself, though reluctant to commit himself in public on the controversial issue of religion, had rather decided opinions on the matter. However, even strong ideological and political commitment has sometimes had a direct influence on the development of theory in the natural sciences. On the left there is the example of A. R. Wallace, co-discoverer with Darwin of natural selection: a lifelong political radical, formed in heterodox Owenite «Halls of Science» and Chartist »Mechanics Institutes«, and naturally drawn to that «natural history» which was so attractive to men of a Jacobin spirit. On the right there is the example of Werner Heisenberg.

It would be possible to give numerous examples of how such a political stimulus may operate in the social and historical sciences, but one may suffice. The problem of slavery has recently become a major field for historical analysis and debate. Since this is a subject which arouses strong emotional feelings, it is not surprising that historical partisanship should enter into it, but it is nevertheless striking how large a part it has played in the revival of interest in this field. Of the 33 titles since 1940 in the bibliography to the article «Slavery» in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968), twelve are the work of authors of marxist provenance, though many of them are remote from this ideology today. In the vigorous debate on slavery in the U.S.A. since 1974 at least two of the leading figures (Fogel and Genovese) were actually militant members of the tiny Communist Party of the U.S.A. in the 1950s. One is almost tempted to claim that this contemporary historical debate is a development which sprang from the intra-marxist discussions of earlier decades.

This does not mean that all political commitment is likely to have such innovating effects on science and scholarship. Much partisan scholarship is trivial, scholastic, or, if attached to a body of orthodox doctrine, engaged in proving the pre-determined truth of that doctrine. Much of it sets up pseudo-problems of a type reminiscent of theology and then attempts to solve them; perhaps even refusing to consider real ones on doctrinal grounds. There is no point in denying this, even if such practices are not confined to scholars conscious of their own partisanship. Again, there is usually a point beyond which ideological or political commitment, of whatever kind, seriously tempts the scholar to practice what is scientifically illegitimate. The case of the late Prof. Cyril Burt is proof of this danger. This eminent psychologist, as has recently been demonstrated, was so convinced of the insignificance of environmental factors in the formation of human intelligence, that he faked his experimental results to make them more persuasive¹³. Yet the obvious dangers and disadvantages of partisan scholarship hardly need stressing. Its less obvious advantages do.

Today they need to be particularly stressed, because the expansion and size of the academic profession and the growing specialization of each discipline and its multiplying sub-disciplines tend increasingly to turn academic thought inwards upon itself. The reasons are both

sociological and inherent in the development of the sciences themselves. Both combine to push most academics into some small territory within which they are recognized as experts, and outside the boundaries of which only the very rash or the very well-established will like to venture. For, as time goes on, they will simply not know enough outside their "field" to speak with confidence – or even to be familiar with the work done –, while the groups of specialists occupying other territories and defending them against incursions by competitors with barricades of esoteric knowledge and special techniques, make the raids of relative laymen increasingly dangerous. Specialist journals, news-letters and conferences multiply, and the debates within each become incomprehensible to those not already inside it, without long preparation and reading which others can rarely find time for except at the expense of their own specialist knowledge. The exhaustive bibliography of "the literature", increasingly known only to the writers of theses, protects each of these fortresses. 380 or more titles in 1975 warned off the citizens who thought they had something to say about "social movements, riots and protests" against careless incursions into the field of "Collective Behavior", a sub-discipline of sociology now trying to establish itself as a special "field"¹⁴.

But if the professionally and technically unqualified intruder is kept out, the insider in turn tends to lose the sense of the wider implications of the subject. A good example, as Lester Thurow of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has pointed out, is the special field of econometrics, developing mathematical models in economics. These models were originally supposed to test whether a clearly specified theory could be statistically verified, but (largely because they can rarely be) a curious inversion in the relation between theory and data took place:

"Econometrics shifted from being a tool for testing theories to being a tool for exhibiting theories. It became a descriptive language . . . Good economic theory was stronger than the data – at least in the minds of the economists – and therefore it must be imposed on the data. What started off as a technique for elevating data relative to theory ended up by doing exactly the opposite."

Thus, he argues, econometric equations found no relationship between investment and the movement of interest rates such as was posited by classical economic theory, and no way of establishing such a relationship. They then turned to the intellectually legitimate alternative of designing their equations in such a way that interest rates were mathematically forced to have the right sign. "The equations did not test the theory, but they described what the world would be like if the theory were correct." In short, and at the cost of tending to retard the development of economic theory, econometrics was increasingly insulated against the impact of the real world. The incentive to rethink theory, as distinct from developing it in a more sophisticated manner, became weaker¹⁵. Yet this insulation becomes less noticeable, or even more tolerable, largely.

The number of specialists who appreciate – and indeed practise – the

increasingly esoteric intellectual operations of their colleagues has become enormously larger, the time necessarily spent immersed in the literature of the subject immensely greater, notably since 1960. Like the guests of a large hotel, the specialists in a field can supply most of their needs without leaving the building; or through contacts with the outside world mediated through the hotel. There are, after all, probably more economists employed in the academic institutions of the city of Boston and its neighborhood today than the total number of professional economists in Britain between the publication of the *Wealth of Nations* and Keynes' *General Theory*: and all are kept busy reading and criticising each other's works. To take only a rather modest and not very rapidly expanding field, that of economic and social history. The membership of the British Economic History Society roughly trebled between 1960 and 1975. Over 25 per cent of all works in the subject published since its foundation in 1925, appeared in 1969-74; 65 per cent of all this literature appeared between 1960 and 1974¹⁶. By the standards of the 430.000 papers which constituted the stock of the mathematical literature in 1968, the 522.000 papers which embodied the findings of physics on the same year¹⁷, the 20.000 titles in economic and social history are modest. Yet every worker in the field knows how much of this literature is generated not by problems, but by earlier books and articles; how much more of the life of the economic historian is lived within the increasingly ample and varied equipment of his hotel.

It is in this situation that political partisanship can serve to counteract the increasing tendency to look inwards to develop intellectual ingenuity for its own sake, the self-insulation, of the academy. It may indeed fall victim to the same dangers itself, if a sufficiently large "Field" of a self-insulated partisan scholarship develops. There is enough marxist neo-scholasticism in such fields as philosophy and sociology to provide a salutary warning. Nevertheless, mechanisms for bringing new ideas, new questions, new challenges into the sciences from outside are today more indispensable than ever. Partisanship is a powerful mechanism of this kind; perhaps at present the most powerful in the human sciences. Without it, the development of these sciences would be at risk.

Notes

- 1 As e.g. in the article "Parteilichkeit" in G. Klaus and M. Buhr, *Philosophisches Woerterbuch* (Leipzig, 1964).
- 2 Without entering into philosophical arguments, every historian is familiar with statements about the past which can be shown to be either "true" or "false", e.g. "Napoleon was born 1769" or "The French won the battle of Waterloo".
- 3 *Leviathan*, cap. XI: "For I doubt not, but if it had been a thing contrary to any man's right of domination, or to the interest of men that have dominion *that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two angles of a square*; that doctrine should have been, if not disputed, yet by the burning of all books of geometry, suppressed, as far as he whom it concerned was able".

- 4 J. A. Moore, "Creatonism in California" (*Daedalus*, Summer 1974, 173-190).
- 5 Cf. the late Zhdanov's rejection of the argument that technical and specialist questions should be discussed in specialist journals rather than in *Bolshevik* (A. Zhdanov, *Sur la littérature, la philosophie et la musique*, Paris, 1950, p. 57-8).
- 6 This is particularly thorny where orthodoxies of "scientific politics" are split by schisms and heresies, as notably within the Trotskyist movement.
- 7 This has been well defined as "an immediate reduction not only of science to ideology, but of ideology itself into an instrument of propaganda and petty justification of adventitious political positions, whereby the most abrupt changes of policy were in each instance legitimated with pseudo-theoretical arguments and presented as congruent with the most orthodox Marxism". S. Timpanaro, "Considerations on Materialism", *New left Review*, 85, p. 6.
- 8 Admittedly the most spectacular examples of such pseudo-scholarship, such as the forged Königinhof manuscripts among the Czechs, Ossian, or the invention of pseudo-druidism among the Welsh, occurred before modern historical scholarship had made such patriotic fictions unconvincing. However, Czech nationalists did not, on the whole, thank T. G. Masaryk for demonstrating that they were fictions.
- 9 Cf. N. Pastore, *The Nature-Nurture Controversy* (New York, 1949). Karl Pearson, by the way, had earlier shown some interest in Marxism thus confirming his interest in political ideologies.
- 10 Cf. N. J. Block and Gerald Dworkin eds., *The IQ Controversy* (New York, 1976), and the review of this work by P. B. Medawar in the *New York Review of Books*.
- 11 The importance of such "interdisciplinary" activity is not denied here, though it sometimes tends to be little more than a convenient way to carve out a new professional "field" in which careers and reputations can be made and financial subsidies mobilized. The ways in which such interdisciplinary cross-fertilization operates is not yet quite clear. However, it is safe to say that in the social sciences it is not easily separable from non-academic ideological or political commitment: cf. the case of the rapidly developing field of "socio-biology".
- 12 For Crick, see R. Olby, "Francis Crick, D.N.A., and the Central Dogma" (*Daedalus*, Fall 1970, P. 940, 943). The fact that Hoyle's theory of "constant creation", whose motives are largely anti-religious, is not a present accepted does not diminish the significance of his intervention into the modern debates on cosmogony. It is not the purpose of the present paper to argue that scientific partisanship always produces the correct answers. My case is that, whether it does or not, it advances the scientific debate.
- 13 For earlier doubts about Burt's studies - expressed before Prof. J. Tizard demonstrated that he almost certainly cheated - see L. J. Kamin, "Heredity, Intelligence, Politics and Psychology", in *The IQ Controversy*, op. cit., p. 242-250.
- 14 Cf. G. T. Marx and J. L. Wood, "Strands of Theory and Research in Collective Behavior" (*Annual Review of Sociology*, I, 1975, p. 363-428).
- 15 L. Thurow, "Economics 1977", *Daedalus*, Fall 1977, p. 83-85.
- 16 T. C. Baker, "The beginnings of the Economic History Society", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, XXX, 1 (1977), p. 2. N. B. Harte, "Trends in Publications on the economic and social history of Great Britain and Ireland 1925-1974", *ibid.*, p. 24.
- 17 K. O. May, "Growth and quality of the mathematical literature", *Isis*, LIX (1969), p. 363; Anthony, East, Slater, "The growth of the literature of physics", *Reports on Progress in Physics*, XXXII (1969), p. 764-65.