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978-0-521-07758-3 - Fact and Relevance: Essays on Historical Method

M. M. Postan

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# FACT AND RELEVANCE

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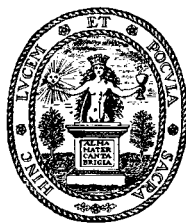
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M. M. POSTAN



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## PREFACE

My decision to re-publish the essays in this book requires an explanation, perhaps even an apology. The essays have been selected and brought together on the strength of their common theme, which is that of the inter-relation of history and the social sciences. Indeed, the object of the publication is not to salvage a number of articles and lectures from oblivion, but to re-assert anew their point of view. In *anno domini* 1970 this re-assertion may turn out to be, to say the least, unpopular. Readers familiar with current intellectual fashions will find it only too easy to recognize and to docket this collection as 'positivist' or 'scientific', and there is no need for me to remind them of the opprobrium which these dockets nowadays carry. Except for Marxists, most historians writing about the philosophy of history, most philosophers concerned with the methodology of historical and social study, and even some influential social anthropologists, have in recent years ranged themselves against the supposed fallacies of 'scientism'. They accept, however unconsciously, the idealistic dichotomy of 'physical' and 'humanistic' studies, or that of pure and practical reason, and consequently decry all attempts to use the methods of natural sciences in the study of history or of human affairs in general. It matters not that 'positivist' and 'scientific' assumptions in fact underlie, as they must do, all current work of historical and sociological discovery. So unconscious is the average social scientist or historian of the gnoseological presuppositions of his study that he finds it only too easy to avow allegiance to doctrines wholly at variance with the philosophical pre-requisites of his own researches. Unfortunately, intellectual fashions are made up of avowed philosophies and not of assumed ones; and among avowed philosophies that represented by these essays ranks low.

However, to me the low ranking of my theme in philosophical fashions is merely an added justification for the decision to re-assert it. Nor am I, as a non-Marxist, deterred by the fact that Marxists now appear to be the sole protagonists of a point of view similar to mine, for I do not think it would be right to leave the Marxists in sole possession of the truth. All students of history and sociology must be reminded that they share with the Marxists a common descent from the scientific tradition and the scientific hope of the nineteenth century.

Such unity as these essays possess derives from their common theme:

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otherwise they differ in the manner and the detail of their argument. Some were composed as deliberate attempts to state a methodological theory; others were forged in the heat of controversy; others still were conceived somewhat lightheartedly with the clear intention to provoke and even to irritate, and therefore present their case in an extreme, perhaps even paradoxical, form. Moreover, while some of the essays serve their common theme directly, others relate to it obliquely.

For all these reasons the essays are not arranged in the chronological order of their publication, but in that of their relevance. The three opening essays contain direct and more or less comprehensive statements of their point of view: the Germans would have called them 'programmatic'. The fourth and the fifth essays deal with two principal items of the programme – that of time sequences and that of theoretical relevances. The third group of the essays is made up of articles and lectures which in some way or other exemplify my general attitude to history and social sciences. Thus the two essays on macro-economics (numbers eight and nine) bring up to date, and to this extent correct, the references to economics in my inaugural lecture of 1938. Essays six, seven, eleven and twelve re-capitulate the general point of view with special reference to economic history in general or to individual topics of economic history. Least relevant may appear to be essays thirteen and fourteen. The reason why I have decided to include them is that the former may supplement and perhaps moderate my treatment of Marx and the Marxists in essay number three; while the latter may help to reconstruct the intellectual climate and the company in which the point of view represented by my essays was formed.

In preparing the essays for re-publication I refrained as far as I could from changing their original text. A few grammatical and stylistic emendations have, however, proved necessary. In essay number one several passages had to be slightly altered to make the essay as a whole intelligible without reference to Michael Oakeshott's article which had prompted it. Its title has been altered for the same reason. But in general the essays are now reproduced in their original version.

The decision to adhere to the original version may account for some of the statements to which I no longer subscribe. The earliest of the essays saw the light of day more than thirty years ago; and after a lapse of time as long as this I sometimes find it difficult to subscribe to the original argument in all its details. More especially, the references to the condition and prospects of economics and sociology in my inaugural lecture of 1938 (essay number three) no longer represent what I believe to be the present

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position of the two subjects. Sociological study and writing have greatly progressed since the thirties, and my strictures of timeless and spaceless generalities of sociology no longer apply. On the other hand, the prospects of empirical and historical study and hence of practical wisdom, which I presented so hopefully in my references to the Keynesian economics, have been belied by post-war experiences. These are, however, the only points at which I find myself seriously at variance with the views I held when my essays were first published. All the other divergences are small and unimportant.

*Peterhouse**Cambridge**March 1970*

M. M. P.