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CRITICAL RATIONALISM AND THE THEORY OF SOCIETY

CRITICAL RATIONALISM AND THE OPEN SOCIETY VOLUME 1

Masoud Mohammadi Alamuti

ROUTLEDGE

Critical Rationalism and the Theory of Society

Investigating Karl Popper's philosophy of critical rationalism, *Critical Rationalism and the Theory of Society*, Volume 1, explores a non-justificationist conception of critical reason and its fundamental outcomes for the theory of society.

Through a set of fundamental contributions to epistemology, the theory of rationality and sociology, this volume (a) situates the idea of critical rationalism in its true epistemological context, (b) uses non-justificationist epistemology to reinvent critical rationalism and (c) applies its revised concept of rationality to show how people's access to critical reason enables them to agree on the common values and social institutions necessary for a peaceful and just social order. These contributions lead the reader to a new epistemological understanding of the idea of critical rationalism and recognition of how a non-justificational concept of reason changes the content of the theory of society.

The reader also learns how thinkers, movements and masses apply their critical reason to replace an established social order with an ideal one through activating five types of driving forces of social change: metaphysical, moral, legal, political and economic. Written for philosophers and sociologists, this book will appeal to social scientists such as moral philosophers, legal scholars, political scientists and economists.

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Critical Rationalism and the Theory of Society

Critical Rationalism and the Open Society Volume I

Masoud Mohammadi Alamuti

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To Thomas Gutmann

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Preface

This is a radical book – radical in the sense that it pertains to the common roots shared by sociological theory and theories of knowledge and to the basic nature of society. It is also radical in the sense that it favours fundamental change, change at the root of social matters and that it provides a thoroughgoing and far-reaching analysis of how to accomplish this significant shift.

How we think is what we are. This book explores the role of human reason in the formation of social order and its change. It shows that an adequate theory of society and social development depends on an appropriate theory of knowledge and that rising to the challenge of converting social structures and institutions has to start with epistemology.

This book is radical in that it has fundamental merits with revolutionary conclusions for the way we should conceive objective knowledge, critical reason and social order. It is radical in that it reveals that our very conceptions of objective knowledge, critical reason and social order have a common root and that understanding this root might result in changing all three areas. In doing so, this book makes three main contributions: the introduction of a non-justificational theory of knowledge liberated from the justified true belief account of knowledge, the offer of a radically new philosophy of critical rationalism on the basis of this non-justificational epistemology and, finally, the application of this new concept of critical reason to reformulate the sociological theory of society.

In the process of offering its non-justificational theories of knowledge and rationality, the book firstly provides an entirely new critique of Popper's critical and Bartley's pancritical rationalism with significant results for the philosophy of science, thereby truly situating the idea of critical rationalism in its epistemological context. Secondly, through critical reviews of Durkheim's, Weber's, Parsons's and Habermas's theories of society, it explores, for the first time, the impacts of justificationism on the theory of society in order to show how justificational concepts of reason have prevented sociologists from addressing the role of human reason in the formation of social order and its change. It thirdly offers a "critical rationalist theory of society" by using its theory of critical rationalism to reformulate the theory of human action, showing that not only the means of action, but also the goals of action can be rationalized via conjecture and refutation. In doing

so, it enables us to explore the epistemology of rational dialogue and mechanisms of transition from a closed to an open, more rational, freer, more just and peaceful society. This book hereby demonstrates that a reinvented critical rationalism is an indispensable part of Critical Theory, a relationship that has been blurred since the so-called (and wrongly labelled) *positivism dispute* between critical rationalists (Karl Popper, Hans Albert) and the Frankfurt School (Theodor W. Adorno, Jürgen Habermas) in 1961. Masoud Mohammadi Alamuti establishes a necessary connection between non-justificationism and emancipatory action: it is due to their access to critical reason that human actors can change the social order they have previously and unconsciously created.

This book aims to achieve no less a goal than to alter the very meaning of critical thinking on the basis of its new concept of critical reason and to demonstrate how a non-justificational concept of reason changes the content of the theory of society. As a result, the book fundamentally challenges mainstream sociological analyses of social order and social transformation: how we will think is what we will be, individually and as a society which has, in the course of time, become a world society.

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Having written this book while a visiting scholar at the Cluster of Excellence 'Religion and Politics' at the University of Münster, I am especially grateful to the staff of the Cluster for their support. I wish to thank Judith Grubel, Coordinator of Visiting Scholars, Viola van Melis, Head of the Centre for Research Communication, and Katharina Mennemann and Mareike König from the administrative staff. Moreover, I extend my thanks to the University of Münster, which has not only facilitated my writing of this first volume, but has also provided me with a research agreement to allow me to write a follow-up second volume to be entitled 'Towards a Sociology of the Open Society'. I am very grateful to Audrey Busch for her efforts in making this research agreement possible.

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Masoud Mohammadi Alamuti
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Introduction

Masoud Mohammadi Alamuti

This is the first volume of a collection entitled 'Critical Rationalism and the Open Society'. Its purpose is to reinvent the philosophy of critical rationalism and introduce it to the theory of society. The second volume applies the critical-rationalist theory of society to present a sociology of the open society. Through these two volumes, I aim to show that a non-justificationist understanding of rationality enables us to explore mechanisms of transition from a closed to an open society. It can be said that these volumes are the first systematic attempt to apply critical rationalism as a theory of rationality for a fundamental reformulation of sociological theory in general and as well as its application for understanding of closed and open societies in particular.

The question of how critical rationalism gives rise to the ideas of closed and open societies has received notable attention in epistemology and social philosophy. Karl Popper was the champion of the two ideas of critical rationalism and the open society. While I respect his valuable contributions to these ideas, I intend to criticize the way Popper has defined critical rationalism in terms of an irrational faith in reason. Later, in the second volume, I argue that Popper's definition of critical rationalism as irrational faith in reason has prevented him from a sociological understanding of the open society.

My intention to integrate critical rationalism in the theory of society in order to establish the idea of an open society upon a sound sociological theory directed me to the deeper question of whether or not critical rationalism itself has been understood correctly. These queries lead to the realization that Popper's critical rationalism cannot be used to formulate s sociology of the open society due to his definition of critical rationalism an *irrational* faith in reason or *a moral attitude* of openness to criticism. These observations result in two major insights: (i) the philosophy of critical rationalism ought to be reinvented in order to achieve liberation from irrational faith in reason and (ii) before addressing the question of how critical rationalism can be introduced to the sociology of the open society, we need to explore how it may be introduced to the sociological theory itself.

Therefore, the strategy of my two-volume book is as follows: the first volume has two purposes, one, to liberate the philosophy of critical rationalism from an

irrational faith in reason, a task already been taken on seriously by one of Popper's students, William Bartley, but has not accomplished satisfactorily, the another, to use a new philosophy of critical rationalism to develop a sociological theory of society. Thus, the second volume has two tasks: the first of which is to show that Popper has not succeeded in presenting a social theory of the open society due to the lack of a theory of society; the second to provide a sociological analysis of the open society.

During my investigations for liberating critical rationalism from an irrational faith in reason, it became clear that Popper's defence of critical rationalism is justificationist. Popper argues that (a) although a rational belief requires justification in order to be regarded as true, (b) the rationalist cannot justify critical rationalism itself as a rational belief. Therefore, Popper concludes that the rationalist should accept critical rationalism with an irrational faith. Thus, Popper's justificationism forces him to define critical rationalism as an irrational faith in reason.

In his philosophy of science, however, Popper argues that a hypothesis cannot be proved, but rather only refuted. Surprisingly, when it comes to defining critical rationalism, Popper claims that critical rationalism which cannot be proved by argument makes our faith in reason an irrational faith. This irrational faith in reason cannot be an accurate definition for critical rationalism because the inability to *prove* any claim prevents the proof of an irrational faith in reason. This observation by Bartley led me to look for a sound non-justificationist theory of critical rationalism, which I found in Bartley's pancritical rationalism.

Bartley considers Popper's philosophy of critical rationalism unpersuasive and openly criticizes it. If critical rationalism is itself an irrational faith, what differentiates it from irrationalism? Bartley realizes that Popper admits an epistemological position of sceptic irrationalism by sharing with the sceptic the view that the rationalist cannot justify his claims of rationality by argument. Hence, Popper's critical rationalism and irrationalism agree that a justified rational belief does not exist; both result in any faith in reason being an irrational faith. Thus, Bartley correctly concludes that irrational faith in reason cannot demark the boundary between the rationalist and the irrationalist.

With these considerations in mind, I realized that Bartley seeks the origin of Popper's irrational faith in reason in justificationism, but does not base his theory of pancritical rationalism on a non-justificational epistemology; instead, he situates it within the context of Popper's philosophy of science. Hence, the lack of such a non-justificationist epistemology leads pancritical rationalism to another type of justificationism, as will be discussed. Bartley asks why the rationalist should justify all his beliefs by argument or experience. If justification is untenable, the rationalist is not required to justify his own belief in reason. This argument is persuasive. Bartley simply argues that a hypothesis which cannot be proven can only be refuted, which means the same as saying that a rational belief that cannot be proved can only be refuted. Just as Popper offers a non-justificational solution to the induction problem in science, Bartley suggests a non-justificationist

solution to the problem of rationality, arguing that our faith in critical reason is actually a *rational* faith.

The question of whether or not Bartley's pancritical rationalism enables redefinition of the conception of rationality in sociological theory remains unanswered, however, and has led me to the justificatory nature of pancritical rationalism. Bartley's theory of rationality implies that the pancritical-rationalist holds all his beliefs open to criticism, including the belief in critical rationalism, and accepts only beliefs that pass a severe test. However, this theory does not tell the pancritical-rationalist how to refute his claims of holding rational beliefs open to criticism. Hence, I understand that Bartley's theory of rationality cannot address the question of how critical reason operates because the pancritical-rationalist cannot refute his claims of rational belief, so his openness to criticism does not put him in a better position than the irrationalist who argues that a claim of rational belief is not at all possible.

An important question regarding critical rationalism is whether Popper and Bartley establish their critical rationalism upon a sound epistemological foundation. In response, I realize that they have not. While Popper rejects a justified true belief account of knowledge, he fails to create a link between his idea of conjectural knowledge and the theory of rationality. What Bartley does is to expand the separation of justification and criticism from the theory of science to the theory of rationality. These observations shape my strategy for reinventing critical rationalism: I comprehend that a theory of rationality aiming to tell us whether or not our claims of rationality are true requires a theory of knowledge for addressing a general question of whether or not our claims of knowledge, metaphysical as well as empirical, may be judged true.

Since the justified true belief account of knowledge suffers from the problem of infinite regress, I establish my project for the integration of critical rationalism into the theory of society on an entirely new epistemological foundation. Thus, this volume is divided into two main parts: Part I 'Epistemology and Critical Rationalism' and Part II 'Towards a Critical-Rationalist Theory of Society'.

The first part of the book consists of five chapters. In order to show why Popper's 'critical' and Bartley's 'pancritical' rationalism have not liberated themselves from the justified true belief account of knowledge, Chapter 1 studies two major schools of epistemology, dogmatist and scepticist, arguing that their lack of success in addressing the problem of objective knowledge is to be found in the definition of knowledge in terms of justified true belief. If the process of knowing is modelled to show justification of the conclusion of rational argument, not only the premises of such an argument should be justified by argument or experience, but also the inference forms of such an argument should be considered undisputable. However, if neither premises nor inferences are infallible, the dogmatist theory of knowledge, whether the intellectualist or the empiricist, cannot address the question of objective knowledge, for, if the premises are not justifiable, neither is the conclusion. The main problem with dogmatist epistemology is the infinite

regress imposed on it by the assumption of infallible premises and inferences. Chapter 1 concludes that sceptic epistemology recognizes this infinite regress and argues that objective knowledge is untenable with the justified true belief account of knowledge. However, the sceptic is wrong in saying that knowledge is untenable since the premise of justified true belief upon which the sceptic's argument is based is itself a wrong premise.

Before proposing my non-justificationist epistemology as an alternative to justified true belief account of knowledge in Chapter 4, I situate Popper's critical rationalism in its epistemological context in Chapter 2 and criticize irrational faith in reason due to its justificationist origin. Chapter 2 argues that, while correctly realizing that the justificational account of knowledge does not correspond to the conjectural logic of empirical science, Popper focuses his epistemology mainly on the logic of science. Popper offers an innovative solution to the problem of induction, arguing that objective science can exist, not because our hypotheses can be justified, but because they can be refuted. While using classical logic; i.e. the modus tollens, to show how logic allows re-transmittal of the falsity of the conclusion to the premises, Popper does not deal with the question of whether logic allows transmission of falsity from the premises to the conclusion.

Without a logical standard to show us how a metaphysical theory, e.g. the theory of rationality may be refuted by argument, Popper is not equipped with an epistemology to show that a claim of rationality is actually examinable to reveal its truth or falsity. Hence, when defining critical rationalism, Popper claims that critical rationalism not justifiable by argument should be accepted by an irrational faith. Chapter 2 shows that it is Popper's epistemology that leads him to an irrational faith in reason, rather than to critical rationalism as a theory of rationality.

Chapter 3 offers a similar epistemological critique of Bartley's pancritical rationalism, demonstrating that Bartley's critique of irrational faith in reason originates from the general separation he creates between justification and criticism. Bartley argues correctly that Popper is the first philosopher to offer a non-justificational concept of criticism, arguing that a scientific hypothesis cannot be justified by experience, but rather only falsified by it. Popper realizes the separation of justification and criticism through his philosophy of science, while Bartley wonders why Popper does not expand this separation to the philosophy of critical rationalism.

Bartley then attempts to find a solution for the unfinished project of critical rationalism. Chapter 3 situates Bartley's pancritical rationalism in its epistemological background, arguing that he uses the separation of justification and criticism to show that critical rationalism need not have a justification, but need only be held open to criticism. However, my critique of Bartley is that a metaphysical theory, like a theory of rationality, would not be refutable by argument without a non-justificationist theory of knowledge. My position is that Bartley uses the idea of the problem-solving ability of a theory, i.e. judging whether or not the theory solves the problem posed, to argue that pancritical rationalism can solve the problem of the rationalist identity.

In Chapter 4, the first systematic attempt to realize the ideal of separation between justification and criticism at the level of the theory of knowledge is revealed. Until now, No one has previously presented a non-justificational epistemology to help the philosophy of critical rationalism show how logic lets us refute a claim of rational belief and liberate critical rationalism from justificationism.

Chapter 4 addresses the question of how a claim of knowledge, whether metaphysical or empirical, may be refuted in order to prepare the epistemological ground for logical judgment regarding a rational belief. My epistemological inquiries into the aforementioned question lead me to an unintended, but far-reaching novel solution to the problem of objective knowledge, namely the proposal to use the separation of justification and criticism to replace the justified true belief account of knowledge with a non-justificational account, i.e. the consideration of objective knowledge as *unfalsified conjecture*. This concept of unfalsified conjecture is then used to introduce a non-justificationist theory of knowledge, which means that the conclusion of a rational argument defined as unfalsified conjecture does not permit premises or inferences to be considered infallible. A non-justificationist model of deduction is proposed through which the conclusion of a rational argument can be refuted by one of its premises when shown to be false by argument or experience. The novelty of my theory of knowledge lies in the deductive inference in its non-justificationist model.

Chapter 5 is now in a good position to use the non-justificationist epistemology to reinvent the philosophy of critical rationalism. Inspired by the general theory of knowledge, I argue that a claim of rationality which is *itself* a knowledge claim allows us to infer that rational belief is belief resting on objective knowledge. Chapter 5 argues that a claim of rationality can be judged true if and only if its premises and inference forms are not shown to be refuted by argument. In sum, a rational belief is an *unfalsified belief*. This non-justificationist concept of rationality offers an alternative for the justified true belief account of rationality.

The second part of the volume applies the non-justificational account of rationality to integrate critical rationalism in the theory of society. Why should critical rationalism be important for sociological theory? I contribute to this question by saying that that the integration of critical rationalism in the theory of society is not an *option*, but a *necessity* because, due to their infinite regress, justificational concepts of rationality cannot explain the function of reason itself; hence they cannot aid the sociologist to develop an accurate model of rational action. Seen from this perspective, the general theory of critical rationalism offers the theory of society that it seriously requires: a *non-justificational understanding of rationality*.

Chapter 6 illustrates how four classical and modern sociologists, namely Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Talcott Parsons and Jürgen Habermas, have based their theories of society on justificationist accounts of rationality. I confess that my selection of these four sociologists may not be regarded as sufficient coverage. I argue, however, that these four major sociologists are the most relevant scholars in view of their theories of society in the context of my purposes in this book.

In this way, Chapter 6 illustrates how justificationism has affected the theory of society through the concepts of reason it proposes in regard to the ideal types of rational action. If a rational belief cannot be justified due to infinite regress, it is not possible for the ideal type of rational action to show that it is human reason that guides action, whereby the word 'reason' is not used correctly in this respect, as discussed below.

Chapter 6 aims to explain why justificationism has fundamentally prevented the theory of society from addressing the role of reason in shaping the goals and means of action and, subsequently, the role of reason in the creation of the common values necessary for peaceful social order. Perhaps Chapter 6 is the first systematic effort to explore how justificationism has contributed to sociological theory. It will do so by connecting Durkheim's, Weber's, Parsons's and Habermas's epistemologies to their theories of society.

Using the ensuing observations, Chapter 7 attempts to establish the theory of human action upon an accurate reading of rationality, beginning with the important assumption that it is the theory of action that integrates critical rationalism into sociological theory. This chapter argues that the main claim of a theory of critical rationalism is that the rationalist can have rational beliefs, that is, beliefs which have not been refuted by argument or experience. However, the problem of rational action refers to the question of whether it is reason or passion that drives human action. Chapter 7 addresses the question of rational action in an innovative way: the main reason the two major theories of action, utilitarian and normative, are not successful in showing that it is actually reason, not passion, that drives action because they apply justificational accounts of rationality.

In the utilitarian model of action, utilitarians argue that action goals are subjective and cannot be rationalized for the epistemological reason that they want to justify moral claims regarding the goals of action. When their claims cannot be proved by argument, utilitarians deduce that it is only the means of action that needs to be rationalized. They forget, however, that goals of action which cannot be justified as true have as a consequence that the same follows for the means of action. Chapter 7 concludes that justificationism prevents the utilitarian model from seeing reason as the driving force of action. In the normative model of action, justificationism plays a similar role, but in a different manner.

Inspired by Kantian practical reason, the normative model of action argues in Chapter 7 that goals of action can be rationalized because the actors apply reason to justify their orientation towards a system of values in society. However, due to the assumption in the normative model that the ultimate values have to be *justified* in order to be seen as true, the actors are unable to rationalize the goals of action without creating values by basing their moral beliefs on unfalsified conjectures.

The novelty of the critical-rationalist action theory lies in showing that not only the means of action, but also the goals of action can be rationalized via conjecture and refutation. Chapter 7 expands its critical-rationalist model of action from the individual to the social level by introducing a three-level mechanism of

thinkers-social movements-masses through which individuals shape a dialogue for using critical reason to determine action-goals.

This book recognizes two main problems of the theory of society as those of 'social order' and 'social change'. What links the philosophy of critical rationalism with these problems is to be understood in terms of (a) how rational beings apply critical reason to agree on a system of values necessary for controlling egoistic behaviour and (b) how rational beings use critical reason to revise the established values in order to advance social organization, thus enabling them to prevent conflicts of interest while promoting cooperative actions for the social good.

Chapter 8 applies the critical-rationalist models of action to show that rational actors initiate social dialogue and institutional measures to agree on a system of values to be turned into institutions of law, polity and economy. From this departure-point, the critical-rationalist theory of social order distinguishes its explanation of social order from justificationist theories. The novelty of the critical-rationality theory lies in the usage of the non-justificationist action model to address the problem of social order. Unlike Parsons's theory of social order, for example, the critical-rationalist theory shows that the actors give themselves their value system, which not only prevents them from conflicts of interest, but also leads to social cooperation. Hence, the actors are socialized persons who respect a given system of values and who, more importantly, create the value system itself as independent persons.

Chapter 8 argues that it is critical rationalism – in terms of unfalsified belief – that allows the theory of social order to connect action and social order: with its non-justificationist concept of reason, critical rationalism can address the meaning of rationality correctly. The critical-rationalist theory of society argues that the actor's beliefs regarding the universe and the place of man's good life within it can be refuted by argument even though they can never be proved by argument. Thus, critical rationality in terms of unfalsified conjecture with regard to the meaning of the universe and man's place in it enables the actors to reach a moral consensus on the values of the good life. Chapter 8 starts with the metaphysical aspect of social ordering and continues with the actors using their theories of the universe to explore the meaning of the good life, according to which the goals of action are coordinated. With the help of these cultural forces of social order, the actors apply critical reason to draw conclusions regarding such a normative agreement for social institutions. Chapter 8 argues that the actors create social order not only by using critical reason to agree on a system of unfalsified beliefs regarding the universe and good life but also by using it to create social institutions for human-rights, legitimate governance and efficient economy.

Chapter 9 advances the book's theory of society by dealing with the question of social change, arguing that social order originating in common values and social institutions given to the individual actors by themselves due to their access to reason implies the actors can also change the social order that they have previously

created. The importance of the philosophy of critical rationalism for the sociology of social change is detected in its ability to show that the actors' critical reason allows them to subject their established beliefs regarding the universe and the place of man in it to rational criticism once they have realized that the premises or inferences are shown to be false. Without this cognitive capacity, the actors may not be accounted as agents of social change. In order to see how their understanding of the universe and the good life is able to be changed and how their reshaped understanding is employed to revise the social institutions of law, governance and market, these actors are to be regarded as agents with the cognitive capacity of learning from criticism.

Chapter 9 argues that it is the actors' evolving accounts of critical reason that enable them to divine new beliefs regarding the universe, the good life, human rights, legitimate governance and an efficient economy. Critical reason is used to judge whether these beliefs are rational due to the truth or falsity of their premises and inferences. However, the justificationist concept of rationality does not allow for knowledge of how the actors revise their previous concepts of reason and the implications for transition from an old social order to a new one. Chapter 9 argues that the question of the evolution of human society finds a new answer on the basis of the philosophy of critical rationalism: societies evolve as individuals open the premises of their beliefs to rational criticism and learn from mistaken premises.

Chapter 10 brings the book to an end by summarizing the integration of critical rationalism into the theory of society, concluding that the critical-rationalist theory of society, the final product of the first volume, has presented a sociological theory for the second volume, enabling it to argue for a sociology of the open society aimed at addressing the transition from a closed to an open society.