

Popper: Success or failure? *Nature*, 10 Sept 1992, 359, p. 100.

SIR - Popper's own estimation of himself does not square with Bondi's¹. "Here I [Sir Karl Popper] am being showered with honours as no professional philosopher before me; yet three generations of professional philosophers know nothing about my work"².

Popper is a remarkable philosopher, but his success—and failure—is even more remarkable. Most human existence has been in closed societies. We are lucky: we live in an open society. Popper more than anybody this century has made us aware of its importance, and its relationship with science. He has also shown that both owe their existence to critical debate and to our collective preparedness, as citizens and scientists, to reason, debate, conjecture and criticize ideas.

But he has also failed. Popper notes that the Greeks invented the tradition of critical debate and the open society³. But from Popper, no tradition has arisen for their study. There is no school of Popper: the only popperians are scientists, like Bondi, not philosophers or those studying society.

Indeed, Popper's failure has been worse. There has been another equally remarkable story: the rise in much of contemporary philosophy and sociology of the conclusion that criticism and open debate are of little or no importance, either in society or science. Instead, scholars of science widely attribute its success, together with that of our open society, to such things as political power, ideologies, and 'social contingencies'. Does the failure of Popper's ideas among those studying science and society matter? I think it does. I focus upon its relevance to science.

(1) Popper and the contemporary study of science cannot both be right. One of them has to be outlandishly wrong. This disjunction is ignored but it should be faced. There is no necessary reason to respect all scholarship. If Popper is right, then the study of science has to be a study of criticism and debate. By implication, those talking about things such as 'social contingencies' must be doing something other than studying science. Perhaps, under the guise of 'theoretical speculation', they are reading things into science that belong more to their imaginations than science. As much as there is a pseudoscience of the stars, there can be a pseudoscience of science. Scientists should not be afraid of saying so.

(2) Does Popper's failure have wider, unnoticed implications for scientists? For Popper, science is one of the greatest achievements of our society—one of its unending quests. For those who see the success of science in terms of social contingencies, it is just another social activity—an overprivileged one. Whichever view of science prevails will shape its long-term welfare. Science depends upon public funds. Its success therefore rests on the value politicians and bureaucrats put upon science. But the chances are that they were once as students taught the contemporary, not the popperian, view of science. If this is the case, Popper's failure may have cast a shadow over science and its unending quest.

John R. Skoyles

6 Denning Road, London NW3 1SU, UK

1. Bondi, H. *Nature* 358, 363 (1992).

2. Popper, K. R. in *In Pursuit of Truth* (ed. Levinson, P.) 249-289 (Humanities, New York, 1982).

3. Popper, K. R. *Conjectures and Refutations* (Routledge and Kegan Paul), London, 1963).

