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'Society' in British political thought, c. 1930 to 1960: some rival conceptions of 'positivism'.

The Author

Jose Harris is Emeritus Professor of Modern History, University of Oxford. She did her BA and Ph.D. in Cambridge, was a research fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford, and taught for many years at the London School of Economics, before becoming a fellow and tutor at St Catherine's College, Oxford. Her main interests are in social history, the history of social policy, political thought, and (especially) the interaction between these three spheres over long periods (and particularly in Britain, France and Germany). Her latest publication is a French selection of some of her writings on Beveridge and the welfare state, which appeared last year with a preface by Francois Hollande.

The Paper

Between the late-1930s and the late-1950s various powerful authorities ranging from Talcott Parsons to Noel Annan declared the British tradition of political theory to be 'terminally dead': a death which both authors ascribed to the pernicious influence of late-Victorian 'positivism' (meaning the view that 'society' meant nothing more than the arithmetical sum of the individuals of whom it was composed). Simultaneously, the economist F. A. Hayek diagnosed what he saw as exactly the opposite problem – that traditional British notions of personal liberty and economic individualism were being increasingly submerged under a blanket of 'positivist' state-controls ('positivism' here meaning, not 'Victorian individualism' but the exact opposite, i.e. corporate management of a centralized economy, as envisaged by the French positivist philosophers, Auguste Comte and Saint-Simon). And over the same period, the very language of political thought (as a discipline traditionally relating to collective entities such as 'state' and 'society') was seen in some quarters as being fatally de-legitimised by the rise of 'positivism' of a third and very different kind (namely, the linguistic or 'logical' positivism imported in the 1930s via Oxford from Vienna). One consequence of these trends was to be a recurrent strand of confusion in historical writing over the next half-century, about whether 'positivism' as a political theory implied extensive state-intervention in the activities of 'society'; or whether on the contrary 'society' (as anything more than a convenient shorthand for the arithmetical sum of individual citizens) didn't 'really exist'. A consequence of this was that for several decades in the later post-war era few British historians investigated 'positivism' seriously (other than as an

aspect of formal jurisprudence). More recently, however, studies by a number of historians (Michael Freedman, Mark Bevir, Brian Simpson, Tony Judt, Ben Jackson, Stuart Jones, Paul Kennedy, Jan Wehrner-Mueller, Edmund Neill, etc) have drawn attention to the continuing salience of a dynamic and innovative 'positivist' strand in mid-twentieth century political ideas, ranging from discourse about the role of the state, through to economic reconstruction, social justice, Catholic and Protestant theology, and the evolution of human rights. This paper will aim to open up this discussion by reviewing some of the major political debates of the second world war and post-war periods, and the part played in those debates by 'positivist' social, economic, and political ideas. And it will also comment on the supposedly fatal impact of 'positivism' upon wider British political thought during the post-war era: tentatively suggesting that the 'death of political thought' (if in fact there was one?) came less from 'positivism' than from other less well-publicised developments in traditional political thought.