

The Open Society and its Enemies

Hegel and Marx

K. Popper

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Popper is a rationalist. This is his faith based ultimately on morality. He recognizes that rational thinking cannot be founded on rational thinking, that science cannot prove the soundness of the scientific method. Anyone who naively believes so (referred to by Popper as an 'uncritical rationalist') falls prey to circular thinking. This is of course not a new insight, the Greeks understood it well, realizing that not everything could be deductively proved, but that one has to start somewhere. Some things simply have to be taken on faith, and such self-evident things are of course known as axioms¹. Thus in a more general context, rational discourse is but an ordered island in a chaos of irrationality. From this one may be tempted to conclude that irrationality is more basic than rationality, and hence that it is deeper (whatever that means). The rational approach is after all ultimately founded on an irrational decision. An act of blind Faith. Rationality can be embedded in irrationality, but not the other way round. Irrationality means everything and hence nothing. When it comes to human beings we are bound to order that chaos in one way, choosing an irrational approach simply means that our ordering is done less imaginatively, because imagination only arises when there are obstacles and restraints. And this is one major reason why Popper prefers rationality as exemplified by the scientific method. Far from reducing the search for truth to a mechanized procedure, it mobilizes our powers of imagination and amplifies its fruits. The procedure is in fact an old and established one, well known to the Greeks, extolled by the empiricists such as Bacon, and instinctively practiced by generations of scientists since then. What Popper has done, and done well, is simply to clearly delineate what characterizes scientific activity, to elucidate its far-reaching consequences, and to point out many counter-intuitive and rather subtle features of this activity, features of which certainly are not appreciated by the general public, nor even by most intellectuals including scientists themselves. Thus in order to clearly present his case we need to contrast it to more vulgarly held notions.

To many people science is about objectivity. The scientist produces what can be referred to as facts and results. And how this is done is remains but vague in most peoples

¹ In the modern confusion between axioms and postulates, the former referring to principles of thought, the latter pertaining to 'facts', the notion of self-evidence has been replaced by the notion of convenience. We simply chose the axioms we want (in fact not really the axioms but the postulates serving as initial conditions), and then we work out the consequences, anything is as true as anything else as long as it is consistent. This formalization of mathematics deprives it of its moral dimension, and somehow misses the point and simply pushes the same problem to a slightly deeper level. Thus nowadays the so called 'Axiomatic method' simply refers to a method of exposition vying for clarity and economy, not necessarily understanding.

mind and somehow connected with an unsentimental kind of scrutiny which enables him (or her) to weed out the merely superstitious from the real thing using scientific criteria. Experiments are of course done, and they are done more or less by rigid schemes and can thus be characterized as rigorous scientific tests. When the process is completed a scientific verification has been made, and one thinks of something as having been scientifically proved. Often this boils down to passing various statistical tests. Medicine is seen as a typical representative of this activity. People are very interested in the preservation of their health, so any results that can be used to cure diseases or ever better prevent them are of outmost interest. In general, the social rationale for supporting scientists and their activities is for them to provide society with useful knowledge, improving not only health but increasing general well-being including amusement. Sometimes this rather humdrum activity is dramatized by so called discoveries. Those are particularly spectacular facts which have been unearthed, like striking gold, and the dream of every scientist.

The discussion above is obviously meant to be a caricature, but sadly it may not be experienced as such by most people, who in it may see the essentials, that only need to be somewhat elaborated in order to get a better feel in particular circumstances.

A key-word is objectivity. To attain objectivity is not trivial. It involves shedding yourself of all conceivable prejudices which may hamper your search. This ties in with what Popper refers to as 'pseudo-rationalism' and which he in its purest form associates with Plato. According to Popper Plato holds the view that only certain people possess the power of mind and intellect to perceive the truth. How they do it is a mystery that cannot be explained, but somehow they possess a direct pipe-line to Truth² The purified mind, which is of course superior to all other minds, alone can pursue the scientific quest. This attitude is prevalent among so called post-modernists. They claim that every scientist is riddled with unacknowledged prejudices, those implicit assumptions do influence the scientist in his work, and thus the fruits of those labour are not really objective but contingent upon circumstances. Truth rather than being of metaphysical nature becomes a mere social construct, relative not absolute, and to ascertain anything else is naive. The problem with such an attitude is how to interpret the meta-truth of relativity. Is this also a relative truth, and hence not always true, meaning that some truths are indeed absolute? Or is it absolute? Anyway we reason there will be some absolute truths. This is indeed a rather strong statement, and how are we able to achieve it by the mere quibbling with words? This all ties up with the Liars Paradox, and its modern formulation, inspired by Cantor, and proposed by Russell. One may find such objections a bit trivial, but Popper takes them seriously, as after all they may be irritating (as Russell found out) but they simply do not go away. The ultimate conclusion must be that the Post-Modernists do take themselves seriously, that the only absolute truths that can be ascertained are those that they pronounce, and the reason that they can do so is due to they having by an act of will indeed shed themselves of prejudices and attained that purified state.

The problem is, as Popper points out, that you cannot identify all your prejudices and

² Now this is certainly a caricature by Popper, and we will return to it below. Let us but note that the hostility that Popper feels against Plato is rather complicated. Against Plato he sets up as an ideal Socrates. But in one interpretation Socrates can be thought of as a literary creation of Plato. Surely most of what we know about the historical Socrates has been filtered through Plato.

shed them. Prejudices can only be shed one at a time, and not by an act of will, but by necessity. As William James noted, if allowed to, we are prone to believe anything. And even harder than shedding a prejudice is to identify it, and identifications certainly cannot be made by will, only by circumstances.

One example of a deep-grained prejudice is our instinctive conception of space and time. Those are indeed so basic that Kant included them in his categorical imperatives. Ways of thinking that are so ingrained that they must form the very superstructure of all thought. In fact no one who would not be forced to, would ever conceive of questioning them (unless in the empty and fruitlessly irresponsible way one can question everything, but such activities are more in the nature of frivolous games than serious inquiry). But they were ultimately questioned famously by Einstein. The story is well-known but deserves to be retold. It is a common-sense assumption that velocities add, and thus one would expect that the speed of light would measure differently depending on how we are moving, in particular the velocity of light from given sources should differ depending on whether we are moving along with them or against them. The famous Michelson-Morley experiment in the 1890's was negative. No difference could be detected. Now one are up against a contradiction, and when so one thing has to give. Either our well-founded views of space and time, or the correctness of the particular experiment. After all there is a natural hierarchy, when there are conflicts, such say those produced by optical illusions, you stick to the most basic³. Most people would question the experiment, and in fact the standard ad-hoc explanations (such as Lorentz contraction) were produced in order to exhibit subtle conceptual errors in the way the experiment was set up. The formalism of what would be special relativity was to some extent anticipated by Lorenz and Poincaré, but the real conceptual breakthrough was due to Einstein who took the invariance of the speed of light in all systems of reference moving uniformly with respect to each other as the basic notion, and then working out the consequences, none of which were refuted. This does not mean that this verifies Special Relativity, only that so far we have no reason not to accept it. But the morale of the story is not this, just that Einstein never set out to question the nature of time and space, such questionings were forced upon him by circumstances. Without the right circumstances such speculations would have been idle.

And thus Popper goes beyond the post-modernists. He does not believe that you can attain an ultimate state of purity as to the freedom from misconceptions⁴. There are no absolute truths known to man, but this does not mean that all 'truths' are equally worthless. On the contrary there is a hierarchy, and ultimately there is an absolute truth to which we can only hope to attain asymptotically. A hypothesis can only be refuted, it can never be verified, as observations only hold for a finite number of cases, while verification needs to check an infinitude⁵ Thus all knowledge is provisional but needs to be accepted

³ When in an 'optical illusion' we experience two lengths as unequal we check by using a marked ruler. But this also involves using your eyes. So why should you believe this check more than your instinctive reaction? Would you not as well start to question the invariance of the ruler, or your ability to match up visual impressions that constitute the very basis of comparing lengths with rulers. Are our instinctive choices due to an unflinching intuition?

⁴ This is what Descartes tried to attain by doubting everything, except his own doubting

⁵ The distinction between refutation and verification may formally be seen as non-existent. The refuta-

as long as it is not refuted.

This description of science and its asymptotic relation to truth is not science, it is metaphysics, with a strong Platonic tilt in its belief in an ultimate, if unreachable Truth. But as noted above, rationalism cannot be based on rationalism, science not based on science. Rationalism is but an ordered structure cast adrift in an irrational chaos.

Science is a process, its purpose is not to produce true facts, but to search for them. Thus people who claim equal time for the teaching of so called 'Creationist Science' simply miss the point. No one denies that it is an alternative to Darwinism, and in fact that it could be true for all what we know⁶ But such a truth would be revealed not found. Thrust upon us and not conquered. The scientific method is the one of asking questions, and framing hypotheses which can be answered, i.e. refuted. To claim that the organic world was intelligently designed explains nothing, because it provokes no questions that lead to further questions, because it is in the oft-quoted formulation of Popper - *non-falsifiable*.

Make the thought-experiment Popper urges the reader, that in the past some Cassandra had some visions and wrote down in a collection of thick volumes the essentials of modern science. The 'true' facts would be there, but it would not be scientific facts, because they had not been obtained in a scientific way, they would be 'revealed science'. Similarly assume that Robinson Crusoe had worked on his island performing scientific experiments and produced a significant oeuvre of results. But not even this would be science, Popper claims, because science is a social undertaking, it does not make sense when restricted to a single individual. A mind needs the stimulation of other minds, and even more importantly he needs not only the resistance of natural facts, he also needs the resistance of other minds. True opposition and relentless refutation can only arise in the confrontations between different minds, not in a single isolated mind. Just as we learn to speak through social interaction, we also learn to reason in the same way. And if we

tion of a statement is simultaneously also a verification of the negated statement. Giving a counterexample to a mathematical theorem, it also proves that of all the potentially infinite number of purported proofs of the same, none can be correct, something that we can verify without having to look at a single one. However, there is a principle behind this, namely the metaphysical principle that wrong theorems cannot be proved. Similarly finding your wife at a particular location, shows that she is nowhere else in the universe, and you need not check that she is not in the immediate vicinity of Sirius to be able to discard the possibility. Once again this inferences based on an overarching principle - the principle of the uniqueness of human beings. Thus the presumed equivalence between statements and their negations is a misleading one. There are different kind of statements, those that can be refuted by a single example, namely those which claim that something holds for all of a certain type, and those which cannot be so refuted, namely those that claim the existence of something, and hence which can be verified by a single example. There are many kinds of interesting truths, scientific truths with ambitions of generality belong to the first type and can thus only be refuted never verified. Negation interchanges the two.

⁶ For all we know, the Universe as we know of it could be a virtual simulation conducted in a super-universe, or what is essentially the same, the confused dream of a giant, soon to wake up, and in the process annihilating us all. Those speculations may seem wild. But there is no way of refuting them. If it makes you feel better you are welcome to entertain them, but they will have little practical effect on your life.

sometimes reason with ourselves, it is because we have learned to reason with others⁷

In order to illustrate the above point of Popper further and drive home the ultimate message, we may think of chemistry. What is chemistry? Chemistry concerns chemical compounds. If chemical compounds could be produced the same way as at least chemists of the past constructed models by sticking things together there would be no chemistry at all. Chemical compounds have so called chemical properties, and this is what makes them interesting. And what is a chemical property? How does it manifest itself? It manifests itself in chemical reactions, and chemical reactions are nothing but processes in which new compounds are being formed. In other words it is the very process of creating compounds that makes chemistry come alive and which make compounds interesting. By themselves they are completely inert and uninteresting. Similarly with the Borges library of Babel which contain all possible books. Books would be as pointless as inert compounds. Books beget books, it is the process in which books are formed, which is interesting, not books as such. A selective sub-library which would contain all the truths would be of a revealed nature, and as such ultimately as uninteresting as unrealistic.

According to Popper belief in Rationalism is above all a moral stand. It presupposes a sharing of a universal language, the language of reason. Thus it recognizes in every individual a potential source of arguments, and as arguments should be judged on their own merits, not on the merits of the person formulating them, it implicitly implies a brotherhood of equality. Thus a commitment to reasoning makes a just and equal society possible as well as a commitment to safeguarding the freedom which is necessary. The freedom of expression, of argument and of questioning. This is a society which encourages language to be used not primarily for self-expression, but as a vehicle of conveying information and thought. A society which forces language towards clarity and economy in order to be an efficient and supple means of communication. This is indeed the Open Society of which Popper is ultimately the advocate of. It is a society of transparency. This is not an attitude based on democracy, but one which makes democracy not only possible but more or less inevitable⁸. The falsifiability criterion is ultimately a democratic one, because it prevents any sect the claim to possess the ultimate truth. Any truth can be challenged,

⁷ Language is supposed to be innate, hard-wired into our brains, as some kind of wet Platonic forms. Only the particular form language happen to take is something people learn socially. In other words when it comes to language learning, the mind is prepared, and indeed this kind of learning is quick and instinctive as natural as learning to walk, and few individuals fail to achieve it, unlike the cultural learning offered in schools. Now reasoning is supposed to be very tied up with language, and in fact it is hard, but not impossible, to conceive of reasoning without language (just as it is hard to conceive of mechanical computation without the crutches of paper and pen, or nowadays electronic contraptions). Reasoning as such must be tied into the deeper innate structures of language, and as such ultimately be a manifestation of neurology. This might lead to speculation as to the nature of mathematics, as purified reasoning, and quickly lead to the kind of Liars paradox we have encountered above. Thus we will not pursue the matter further, only note that it is far from being unproblematic. Suffices it to say that for all the sound philosophical instincts of a Chomsky and in spite of his valiant attempts of formulating what such a deep structure of language really would consist in, the solution to this tantalizing riddle seems still very far off.

⁸ The idea of democracy is often vague. It is not, what many people seem to believe, primarily one of election and majority rule. The notion of majority rule is self-contradictory as noted by Plato.

even by those who are not privy to a particular subject nor possess any expertise, because a test of a theory is ultimately a social act, it pertains to the lowest denominator where the opponent and the proponent can find common ground. Few people are qualified to judge the technicalities which go into the construction of an Atomic bomb, but everyone can judge the effects of an exploded one.

Of rationalism there is only one, science is a universal endeavor rising above the petty details of particular cultures. But of irrationalism there are plenty of varieties, each contradicting the other, and none, according to Popper, designed to lead in a consistent way to an Open, free and just society. Because emotions, no matter how strong, sincere and admirable have a limited range. You cannot love everyone, in fact you can only love a few (at best), and justice cannot be based on good-will alone. Only reason is sufficiently objective to serve universal purposes⁹.

This is the conclusion of Poppers work on the Open Society. It is ostensibly on Society, but the real interest of Popper is not the study of Society per se but of the scientific Quest. To what extent can we speak about a science of politics, a science of history? Natural science is just one part of the quest of knowledge. In the words of C.S. Peirce it is developed from our basic need to feed. But there is also a need to breed. The relativity of post-modernistic thinking is no doubt inspired by the shifty grounds of social intercourse, when truth is indeed instrumental and contingent upon circumstances. Such considerations make it questionable whether there may after all be something like Social science, and if so only when reduced to psychology and ultimately biology in particular neurology. Such a reductive procedure invites problems of its own, once again related to the Liars paradox, but as Popper does not delve into matters, I will refrain as well, save from relaying Poppers remarks to the effect that the irrationalists have got it all backwards. It is not the basic features of the universe which are mystic and inscrutable, it is man himself, the irreducible of his unique experiences and concomitant emotions.

Popper is not that interested in political science, he offers no concrete examples, all what he advocates is the possibility of social engineering, involving a pragmatic attitude and piecemeal changes. The grand sweeps are dangerous and self-defeating. The point of experiments are to learn from your mistakes, if your mistakes are too extensive, chances are that you may not have survived them. Just as you cannot shed all your prejudices at one go, you cannot solve all the social problems by some radical revolution. Social problems have to be encountered one by one, and solved one by one.

The essence of the scientific method is to ask questions. Not about everything, but about things that interest you. Man is no passive bucket receiving sense data and processing them, the search for knowledge is indeed a search, an active quest, and the appropriate metaphor is indeed the searchlight focused on a very small area. One question leads to another question, just as one thought leads to another thought. I would say that this

The institution of general elections, which are usually associated with democracy is just one aspect of it, designed to allow a change of power without bloodshed. In a state without functioning democratic institutions, elections tend to be meaningless shams.

⁹ Emotions are fickle and unpredictable, if not they would not be emotions. They are very liable to mislead you. Fascists could be very charming personalities, and it could be quite easy to come under their spells. Only reason is a reliable anti-dote to such impulses

sequence and this linkage constitute a tradition, and it is the tradition as such that conversely decides what is interesting or not. Questions should be tied to previous questions, and interests do not arise spontaneously but are related to previous interests¹⁰. Such an inquisitive approach is by no means limited to natural science, but the proper study of history involves asking probing questions as well, as has been admirably explained by Collingwood¹¹. Then the ability to have the question answered, i.e. hypothesis refuted, differs from subject to subject, and one may as a general rule state that the easier it is to refute, the deeper into a subject is one able to probe.

When it comes to history Popper sees a mess. There are so many things that has happened, that every study has to be extremely limited. There are so many aspects of history one may consider, and so many different perspectives. Of Rankes notion that the object of history is to found out what really happened, he does not think much of. There is no such thing as what really happened, it is all a matter of interpretation. Of Collingwoods more sophisticated notion that history is the reconstruction of the past into the present with the ultimate ambition of reconstructing thought (at least that part of thought that is exportable, in other words the rational part, not the emotional which is too dependent upon unreproducible quale), Popper makes no reference¹². But among all the possible histories there is one that stands out in the public mind, and that particular history is simple referred to as History. It is the history of politics, the history of empires which ascend and descend, ultimately it is the history of crime in which petty murderers are exalted as heroes. Popper cannot hide his disgust.

The main foe of Popper is the notion of historicism, a notion that he never really defines clearly, apparently assuming that this is a notion of the same fundamental nature say as truth, love, or intelligence, of which most people have a strong intuitive conception. Historicism as I understand it concerns the voluntary absolution of the responsibility of being human, denying ourselves the possibility of controlling our fate, but delegating it to blind historical forces. This is the natural outcome of giving political history pride of place. To this we owe the specious notion of History as some kind of tribunal in which we participate, and which will ultimately pass judgement. 'Let History Judge', a saying so often and solemnly repeated¹³.

It is this notion of history which have led to attempts of grand synthesis such as those by Spengler and Toynbee. Collingwood takes both to task, but Popper is content with dealing with Toynbee alone. Both Collingwood and Popper treat Toynbee with respect, admitting that he is well-read and provides many an interesting idea. He certainly can

¹⁰ William James recalls that when Cooke arrived in the Polynesian islands, the natives were far more curious about the smaller boats deployed by the explorer and his crew, than the large vessel in which they had arrived. To the smaller boats they could relate, but not to the large, which according to James was an object of indifference.

¹¹ In his 'the idea of history'

¹² In the works of Popper I have read so far, there is no single reference to Collingwood. Maybe Popper never read him, maybe he was not even aware of him.

¹³ However this ties up with C.S.Peirce definition of truth as what which will be ascertained by the community of scientists in the long run, and which is also a pragmatic interpretation of Poppers dictum that science progresses by refutation and approaches truth asymptotically, as noted above.

be criticized as to details, and who would not be subject to such attention having written twenty five volumes; but the main bone of contention is the ambition as such.

But ostensibly the second and concluding volume of the *Open Society* is about Marx and Hegel, and so far in the essay I have mentioned neither. So let us conclude by turning to what to most people probably believe is the main purpose of Poppers book, namely the deconstruction of Marx and Marxism.

First and foremost Popper admires Marx. Especially he is taken by his moral passion. A passion for what is right and just, and a passion for wanting to change it all¹⁴. In fact Popper thinks that Marx revitalized Christianity, which in recent times had become too complacent. Marx harked back to the core of Christianity, its pure essence as it was manifested during the persecution during first centuries of its existence. A creed that really believes in the equality of man¹⁵. Marx is also hailed as a social scientist. In particular Popper approves of his rejection of the psychologism of Mills. Sociology cannot be reduced to psychology. Our psychology is to a large extent determined by our social context. Individual psychology may have some influence in the other direction, but the individual man is far more guided by the opinions of others, than he is able to direct them. In fact innately we all have a natural propensity for learning language, but the particular manifestation this takes is due to tradition, i.e. to the perpetuation of society. Historically society is not formed by man, there is no original social contract formed, just as there never were any Adam and Eve. Instead Society as such, be it in primitive form, antedates man. Man is evolved into it, and the prehistory of Society includes the prehistorical origin of other social mammals. This notion of the independence of the social, as some kind of superstructure in the evolution of organisms, is not explicitly elaborated by Popper, but it certainly constitute an interesting avenue of inquiry. As organisms we are not only articulated by our genes, but also subject to non-genetical traditions, which pace Mills, should not be thought about as genetic articulation. Thus, to digress away from Popper, the notion of altruism may not have to be genetically anchored. It could simply be a tradition reaching far back¹⁶.

By making society primary we are also able to make sense of such notion as being

¹⁴ Popper is a leftist. In fact in his youth he was flirting with Communism but was severely disillusioned. Still he associates a superior moral aspect to the political Left, and he is an unabashed admirer of the Scandinavian Social Democratic system.

¹⁵ Popper also includes Islam as an egalitarian religion. This strong case at least for Christianity is somewhat startling. Clearly Popper must be an atheist, but he makes a clear distinction between the moral lessons taught by religions and their metaphysical basis.

¹⁶ Biology is messy. Something mathematicians and physicists do not normally appreciate. In particular life is not just the unfolding of a program provided by genetic information. To start out with we have the mitochondria, the genetic material of which transmitted solely on the maternal line and hence not part of the sexual division. In addition to that the developing fetus is dependent upon bacteria provided by the mother, certainly not part of the genetic make-up (except of course the tolerance of). More generally an organism is born into a context which is perpetrated by other means. Thus it is in principal impossible to recreate ancient extinct species, such as Dinosaurs, simply by getting hold of the complete genetic information. There is more to the engendering of say a Triceratops. It has to be set in a congenial context, the tradition of which has long since been ruptured.

socially subjective but individually objective. Language is such an example, morality probably another one¹⁷. Some people claim that mathematics belongs to the same category. Personally I am not so convinced, but as this is not treated by Popper, there is no need to delve into it now. Being scientific means taking a specific view. The view of Marx is to conceive of economics as an extended metabolism, as such it is inevitable. What separates men from beast, is that the extended metabolism of man has an inner dynamics which compels it to become more and more extensive. In short capitalism has the inner drive to continually increase production. Individual man caught in this juggernaut is deprived of his humanity, he is being alienated, and the purpose of socialism is to cut what fetters him to endless toil which reduces him to a mere machine, a mechanized cog. Thus Marx has a realistic vision of what it means to be a human being, and to be free of deadening material bondage. Marxism often prides itself of being materialistic, meaning I guess that it is scientific and down-to-earth, but of course ultimately the vision of Marx is idealistic. The analysis of Capitalism by Marx is brilliant, Popper concedes. It is a brilliant descriptive analysis of unrestrained capitalism as it was practiced in the Victorian Age. The problem is that Capitalism and Society did evolve, and like all evolution it was non-predictable, in particular it did not develop in the way that Marx thought inevitable. What went wrong?

Popper concentrates on three basic deductions that Marx makes about historical progress. The first involves his analysis of Capitalism. As noted in Capitalism is inherent the drive to greater and greater production, enabled by various labor-saving innovations. The conclusion is that this process inevitably leads to a greater and greater concentration of wealth, and correspondingly greater and greater misery for the rest of the population. In the end there will be just a small capitalist class and a large proletariat, the latter having absorbed all intermediate classes. The second step is that this polarization will lead to a social revolution where the working class will turn out to be victorious. The third and final step is that once the capitalist class has been abolished, there will be only one class, and hence a classless society free from exploitation. I.e. a state of Socialism has been achieved.

Poppers contention is that all three deductions are wrong. As they form a chain it is enough to undercut the first deduction to make the whole thing topple down. But Popper is more ambitious than so, he wants to collapse all three deductions, but in order to do so he must start from the end, otherwise he will find himself in a rhetorically awkward position. If he demolishes an argument only to accept its spurious conclusion nevertheless in order to use it as a premiss for his next demolition, his credibility and sincerity will suffer.

Thus he claims that there is no such thing as a classless society. A society cannot be unified without an external foe that defines its unity, because internal dissension will inevitably rear its head¹⁸. Conflicts are part and parcel of any society. The very vision of a happy classless society is a mirage. A paradise of wishful thinking. There will be no end of history. History, in the sense of political history, will continue nevertheless. Popper blames to some extent Marx idea that politics does not really matter, that economics is all, and at the final stage of socialism, there will be no need for a State. One may argue that the

¹⁷ Our moral precepts not being of psychological origin, but a compliance to a large social norm.

¹⁸ Maybe the Open society needs its enemies?

reasoning of Popper is very speculative. How can he say something about conditions that has not yet arrived? In some sense the third step did work itself out. In some countries there were revolutions toppling the traditional power structure. One such example is Russia¹⁹. The Bolsheviks acquired political power but they did not know what to do with it. Marx had left no guidance whatsoever. He was not particularly interested in politics, and his economical analysis pertained to a state of Capitalism, not to a state of Socialism. And besides he had never singled out Russia as a likely candidate for revolution. It was economically too undeveloped²⁰, England was a far more natural candidate. After a few years Lenin was forced to advocate a New Economic Policy (NEP) which was essentially a throwback to the old one. Marx made a serious mistake in assuming that economics was primary. According to Popper there has to be a political power to underwrite an economic one. Without such a restrictive power, the notion of property, whether private or public, would not make sense, and thus undercut any attempts at economic activity. Julius Ceasar may have been indebted to his debtors, but he was not at their mercy as long as he had the power to kill them, or otherwise to prevent them from exercising their rights. Thus Popper argues, political power is more basic than economic.

As to the second step, Popper argues that even if we assume that wealth will become more and more concentrated and misery more and more wide-spread, it neither will lead to a concentration into two polarized classes, nor that the inevitable outcome is the overthrow of the parasitic bourgeois class. As to the first Popper refers to the complications presented by the peasant class²¹, but more significantly is his opposition to the second part of the conclusion. This part assumes the readiness to use force, and here Popper sees the basic issue of Marxism that everyone has to come to terms with, namely its willingness to condone violence²². Popper sees an alternative, namely in the peaceful reforms. And in fact history proves him right. Revisionist Socialist parties and Unified labour did effect most of the reforms which Marx had set up as goals for the Socialist Revolution. The Socialist agenda can be made without a Socialist Revolution²³.

¹⁹ At the time there were also other revolutions or attempts of it. As the Wilhelmine empire collapsed the threat of a German was quite imminent, but somehow it did not take off ground. But there were a revolution in Hungary, and at the time probably seen as important as the Russian Bolshevik, but it petered out after a few months.

²⁰ What seems not sufficiently appreciated is that there was a significant amount of industrialization in Russia in the late Tsarist times.

²¹ The great and to large extent unsung revolution of the 20th century has been the steady migration from country to city all over the world, a migration that really came to its own after WW II. Now the only major countries having a majority rural population are China and India. When this has been reversed, a major *fait accompli* has been achieved.

²² In fact this led to Poppers youthful disillusion with Marxism refered to above, and told in his autobiography.

²³ As Popper wrote, Socialism was on the advance all over the Western World. Far-reaching reforms had been made all over Europe, and the establishment of a well-fare state (and a strong interventionist State, contrary to Marx visions) were foregone conclusions. Even the States had not been unaffected by this, as shown by the New Deal, whose economical ambitions may have been stalled after the War, but whose social ambitions of integration dominated the 50's and 60's.

And now finally to come to the first step, the step that predicts increased misery, be it in extent and/or intensity. Basic components of the argument are based on Marx economic analysis of capitalist society, and it is this to which he devotes the bulk of his 'Das Kapital'. Marx theory of value²⁴ has been made much use of. Popper considers it redundant and irrelevant. The weakness of it is its metaphysical nature, of assuming some kind of intrinsic value of a commodity bound up with the effort and labor that has gone into it. If so, how could this value be computed, as it has to be in any transaction. How to gauge the amount of real effort. In practice those things are determined by the usual means of supply and demand, and Marx has nothing to offer beyond that. More congenial Popper finds his analysis of business cycles, the convincing nature of which he is ready to buy. Marx as an economist was not incompetent, probably on par with the other great names of 19th century economy. But as an economist he was just one of many and played no transcendent role. True once one de-demonizes Marx and thinks of him just as an economist he may have some idea or two worth exploring again. But the 'Inner contradictions' in Capitalist, on which Marx fame as an economist are based on, are not really brought home by experience. It is true that the crash of 1929 and the ensuing depression to some extent corroborated Marx analysis and economic prediction (much to the glee of die-hard revolutionaries), but subsequent developments have not. In fact capitalism in the longer run has been spectacularly effective, especially when properly and politically restrained. It has at least in the Western world created an unprecedented affluence which has led some Marxists, like the historian Hobsbawm, to wonder whether not the classless society has after all been realized. Or at least a society in which the individual is free to pursue his personal goals and not to be tied down excessively to labor for his subsistence. In fact modern capitalism has in recent years become so entrenched that it has become part of orthodoxy and along the goal of democracy has been added the free market economy, as if one would not be possible without the other. The blessings bestowed belong certainly to what every human being are entitled to on this planet, but the problem is that the realization of that goal may very well cause an environmental disaster²⁵. It is in this context very tempting to succumb to some version of irrationalist thinking, especially in the tribalism version, but Popper would have only scorn for those who would wish themselves back in some imagined past. Towering as the problems may be of contemporary society, at least for the pampered individual, they pale next to the very personal problems his ancestors had to contend with. The alienation many people profess to feel towards modern civilization is a sham, as he argued forcefully in his first volume.

The basic misconception of Marx is to confuse science with prediction. If Social science should be treated on par with Physical Science he assumes that it must be subject to some deterministic laws. (The materialism he refers to). By assuming that we can scientifically predict the social future we get mired into self-contradiction, the most striking being, that if revolution is preordained and nothing can prevent the waves of History why bother bringing it about, why not just sit back and wait for it? Marx and his followers are of

²⁴ ridiculed by Edmund Wilson in his otherwise adulatory treatise 'To the Finland Station'

²⁵ Much of the efficiency of the Climate scare, is that it ties in with the guilt many westerners feel for their profligate lifestyle. This connection has been pounced upon by the stray dissident to question the very existence of Global Warming at all.

course aware of this and they soften the call to bring about revolution to that of easing its birth-pains. But to rely on historical forces means absolving yourself of responsibility, but the prediction of an ultimate revolution is based on a willingness to bring it about, and when the urgency of it is removed by the assurance of its success, the desperate will is sapped as well, and by its disappearance the very basis on which the prophecy was made in the first place will be removed. Once again the Liars Paradox, or more precisely still, the Russell paradox. Marx turning into a mere prophet instead of remaining the scientifically minded philosopher and moral activist he started out to be is the great tragedy of his life²⁶. What happened to his great exhortation that philosophers should no longer be content with interpreting the world but to change it?

The historicist seduction to which Marx eventually fell prey was a prevalent intellectual fashion at the period, and the one responsible for this fashion more than anyone else was Hegel. Hegel is the supreme villain in the eyes of Popper. A philosopher, or whatever the appropriate label is, that has caused more damage on thought than anyone else. Popper discards him as an apologist for the Prussian State. The State according to Hegel is more than the sum of its parts, the individual is nothing, the State is everything²⁷. And the State evolves, this being the meaning of history, and the pinnacle of the State is the Prussian State. Popper cannot resist quoting Schopenhauer and to some extent Kierkegaard as contemporary observers of the Hegel phenomenon. It is well-known that while Schopenhauer scraped out a living having few students, Hegel always amassed a large audience to his lectures. The grand lectures of Hegel must have had a popular appeal. The paradox being that Hegel was as a poor performer, but his ideas must have struck a chord, maybe because of their exalted presentation, or the inevitability of the language in which they were clothed. William James remarks sarcastically that whenever we find well-formed sentences we assume that they carry some meaning, and that this has motivated some people to look for meaning even in Hegel. Schopenhauer warns that the most efficient way to stop constructive thought in a young man is to introduce him to Hegel. Marx had been exposed to Hegel and eventually the exposure turned disastrous. All the excesses of Marxism, all its vulgar interpretations can be traced to its historicistic leanings, and those ultimately are the fruits of Hegels insidious influence.

Finally Popper introduces his second volume by discussing Aristotle briefly. Aristotle is a poor copy of Plato from which he in vain tried to distance himself from by denigrating him. But Aristotle had none of the originality of Plato, and he knew it. As to Aristotle he dissects his essentialist approach. Reasoning, Aristotle realized must start from given premises, but so need definitions. Thus an essential component of any discourse is to find out what the terms really means. Without knowing this, we cannot hope to conduct a clear discussion. This is an attitude shared by many technical philosophers and pedants

²⁶ One can compare this assessment of Marx's tragedy with that of Plato's as explicated in the first volume. Plato was originally a Socratic thinker, but under pressure he renounced his better instincts and joined the forces of reaction to which he had strong social ties.

²⁷ ideas that hark back upon the ideas presented in Plato's Republic in which the State is likened to an organism. But the State is not an organism, its members are not subservient to it in the same way that the cells of a body are subservient to the body as a whole.

in general²⁸. But there is no sense in finding out what words really means, in fact as most people realize at an early stage, dictionaries are by necessity circular. Just as we cannot have an infinite regress in deduction, we cannot have one in definition. We do not start out from scratch, we are part of a social tradition, thus we will have an intuitive feel for concepts like love and truth etc, as noted above²⁹. Definitions should not be read from left to right, according to Popper, but from right to left. The purpose of a definition is to replace a long description by a short label, in this way economy is achieved. In modern computer parlance, Popper is talking about 'macros'. Definitions are just formal conveniences. The explanation comes first, the name or label afterwards.

This finally ties in with one of Poppers main exhortions. Never to ask 'What is' questions, always to ask 'How' questions. Never ask as Plato and Marx did, 'who should rule', instead ask 'How should it be ruled' and 'how can we limit the powers of rulers and how can we replace them'.

March 2-5, 2008 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

²⁸ Popper refers to Wittgenstein, certainly not a favorite of his.

²⁹ Popper disparages the Platonic idea of intuiting knowledge, what Popper here concedes seems rather dangerously close to that.