

After the Open Society

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Popper does not consider this world to be the best of all possible worlds, but he considers modern Western society to be the best society which has ever existed in human history. It is not a perfect society but it is perfectible. It is a capitalist society, but he considers the terminology misleading. It has little if anything in common with the capitalistic society of unmitigated misery, which Marx considered; a society which never really existed, and now less than ever, at least in modern history. The lot of the workers did not get worse and worse, as Marx predicted, in fact workers have never had it so good as they have now¹. But Marx was blinded by his conception of history as a drama with an inevitable end, namely the overthrow of the capitalist society with the establishment of a communist paradise with no class distinctions hence no exploitation of one class by another. The worse the situation developed, the closer society was to its deliverance from misery. What characterizes Western Society is its freedom. The freedom to criticize and hence learn from your mistakes, and also the freedom to get rid of a bad government without bloodshed. Western societies may be more prosperous than others, but this is not the main point, prosperity is rather a consequence of freedom not its ultimate goal.

Popper was a socialist in his teens, and even a Marxist, but as he writes, he was cured by it in his late teens. He did initially believe that the victims of revolutions would be far fewer than the victims of ongoing capitalism, but then ceased to believe it. For many years he had Social-Democratic leanings and sympathies, he took exception to huge income differences, although thinking that if everybody is adequately cared for, why should they begrudge the very rich, who may spend their money wisely? This is no doubt a classical argument, which, however, holds even less now than in the past², but eventually he shed his appreciation of socialism totally, and instead saw socialism as a threat to freedom, in fact as inevitably strangling freedom altogether (if one is cynical one may ask how this squares with the impossibility of establishing historical laws and hence inevitable developments.) In his thinking he was very influenced by Hayek. They were almost exact contemporaries, they were both from Vienna, and both had had socialist periods in their early youth. Hayek's book *The Road to Serfdom* made a deep intellectual impression on Popper. But Popper was also bound to Hayek by friendship, in fact Hayek had helped him during critical phases of his life and career. In particular he had been instrumental in getting him an appointment at the London School of Economics, for which Popper always expressed

¹ One reason for that was the development of new technology, Popper in particular brings forth the improved communications introduced by the railways, which was one of those unnoticed and hence unsung revolutions. Incidentally the word 'alienation' which pops up repeatedly in Marxist jargon is nothing else than adaptation to new realities. Technological change create such and hence inevitably alienate us.

² In the past wealth may have put on their beneficiaries a certain amount of moral obligation to the community providing what the state ordinarily was not able to do. I fear this is no longer the case.

his thankfulness (one may wonder whether this debt of gratitude did not sometimes feel as a burden to him).

Popper's attitude to Marx was not straightforward. He admired him intellectually, while of course despising his followers, who in most cases would not even be bothered to read his major works only to brand a few empty slogans. He was also deeply sympathetic to Marx's moral commitment and saw him as a philosopher who revived Christianity. And he could sympathize with Marxism intellectually so far as it addressed fundamental problems in the service of mankind as well as to link those with history raising interesting questions. Nevertheless he found Marx to be mistaken and that Marxism did not succeed in resolving the fundamental problems even if we should be grateful to him for having formulated them. His critique of Marx, and more specifically Marxism, was based on a close reading of Marx's work. He was determined to read Marx sympathetically and thus not to attack him at his weakest points but at his strongest (and of course to refrain from any personal or moral criticism of the man, which too often has been the case). Not to win an argument but to really think Marx's thinking through. One point of his critique has already been pointed out, namely the idea that human history is subject to laws and thus that it is a human drama with a predictable end to which it inexorably heads. The claims that Marxism was scientific were completely wrong and it was adamant to expose this fallacy. The essence of science in the Popperian view is the principle of trial and error. That you make mistakes and learn from them, and you identify mistakes by relentless (but impersonal) criticism. In this way your theories never become dogmatic as they are open to criticism and thus to improvement. Marxism has degenerated to a dogma, it was not allowed to develop and be confronted with factual circumstances, i.e. be subject to potential falsification. Popper is of course not a Marxist, and in this respect, he cannot resist adding, he is in good company, as Marx claimed not to be a Marxist himself³.

Economic activity cannot be planned, any such attempt will, according to Hayek, result in a lack of freedom and politically a totalitarian society. The only way an economic activity can be planned is to let it be ruled by a free market (is this a scientific fact?). A free market acts like evolution, solutions are evolving without any conscious design. How this could be effected was shown by Adam Smith and subsequently more grandly by Darwin (whom Marx ironically was influenced by because Darwin was materialistic and not sentimental), and the idea of evolution carried the day against so called creationism. But Popper qualifies his claim. A free market cannot be absolutely free then it would collapse. A free market requires rules and regulations which have to be upheld. This is commonly referred to as the rule of law. A market cannot function without it, because left to itself it would degenerate into criminality. Contracts have to be honored and the actors have to be protected. And, he adds, that freedom in society is not possible without some form of economic equality. Even Hayek makes exceptions to an unrestricted free market, thinking that Social Security is essential and that there should be anti-cyclical measures to be taken.

Popper rejects revolutions in the affairs of men, although he does of course welcome them in science. A revolution in a society is to be seen as an experiment, a huge experiment

³ A problem of a successful philosopher is his disciples. In addition to Marx one also thinks of Wittgenstein, Hegel had many as well, but this did not seem to trouble him.

which cannot be predicted and thus not controlled. The outcome of a societal experiment brings with it a lot of collateral damage. Innocent people may die, and in fact do, not seldom in huge numbers. From a big revolutionary experiment which fails, as most of them have done, you cannot learn anything, and the point of an experiment is precisely to learn. You can only learn from experiments if you perform them in controlled ways. What Popper thus proposes is piecemeal reform, not grand changes. But of course Revolutions are intellectually exciting and has a grandeur that small reforms lack. They can generate enthusiasm and a readiness to make great sacrifices. There is nothing wrong with sacrifices as long as they remain personal and limited to yourself; but revolution too often involve sacrifices going way beyond those who effect them.

Does Popper condemn all revolutions? He seems to make an exception for the American one hailing it as the only successful revolution. It did not stay away from bloodshed and thus was not democratic. It could not be as it was not really taking place in a democratic society, but it was intended to institute and develop democracy using all the modern ideas which had sprung out of the Enlightenment. But so did the French revolution which ended up in bloodshed (but admittedly rather modest such, the guillotine being a much slower implement than gas and mechanized execution) which became even greater as it was concluded by the rise of Napoleon to emperor. How come such divergent outcomes? There are no laws of history which allows you to predict, each historical process has to be looked upon on its own merits and in its own context. In Popper's rejection of what he terms 'historicism' he was in many ways in accordance with R.G. Collingwood, but more of that later. As to historicism he rejects it as mere superstition, the belief that we need not to make our own decisions but can leave that to history. In fact that we just need to fall in step with history and things will work out automatically. That we can reap where we have not sown. It is a gamble in which we relinquish our sense of responsibility and hence also stands in opposition to traditional religion.

Popper has an abhorrence of violence and found it intolerable. Tolerance is a great virtue but it should not be extended to the intolerant. And he at times regret that Western Society is a little bit too lenient towards the intolerant bent upon its destruction. The virtues of democracy are mainly negative ones. Democracies do not necessarily elect the best to rule, but it allows the worst to be disposed of without bloodshed (the case of Trump will hopefully be an illustration of both those facts, not only the first). Also the role of a democratic government is to abolish misery, but not to ensure happiness. To become happy is the sole responsibility of the individual because no one else can bring this about, the government can only avoid putting obstacles in its way. Thus the old Utilitarian principle of 'Maximizing happiness (pleasure)' should be replaced by the more modest one of 'minimizing misery (pain)'. Political movements with the ambition to make people happy, at least people in a distant future, will invariably in their effort of creating heaven on earth, instead make the latter descend into hell. History is here and now in the making, it has no relation to the future, and thus it is as criminal as meaningless to sacrifice the present for a future which may just exist as a chimera in the minds of a few. Thus one should be wary of demanding that the greatest good is worth the greatest sacrifices. Once again sacrifices are here and now, while the good may never come to

pass⁴. It all boils down to the dangers of Utopianism. To have a vision of a better world, is one thing, who can be opposed to that? After all without such dreams and visions there will be little if any motivation for political action. Similarly to formulate Utopias is also legitimate as such, the danger enters when we take them as blue-prints for practical action. Popper would even go so far as to say that the benevolent tyrant is more dangerous than the malevolent. All in all, there is a difference between a Society and a State and the two should not be confused. A State is needed to enforce the rules and regulations of an orderly and harmonic Society, and there is a tendency to strengthen the State so as to make it more effective in upholding law and order. But this puts us in a quandary, the stronger the State, the greater the risk for abuse, and this holds for all forms of Society, including Open and Democratic ones. A precarious balance has to be struck and that is an ongoing process that requires sustained vigilance.

Popper does not speak about a capitalist society nor a democratic one, instead he has coined the term an Open society⁵. Openness refers to a number of things. Open in the sense of admitting a free discussion and the consideration of new ideas. Thus open to an unpredictable future whose responsibility is that of those living in the present. A closed society is one in which the future is determined and where there is no room for development and surprises which may revolutionize life. A closed society has many advantages though, and therein lies its great seductive power. A closed society has no real history because it is frozen in a permanent presence in which nothing really new happens. A closed society is a traditional way of living to which humanity as a species has been evolved. It is a life of security and deep emotional satisfaction, in fact a society of childhood to which one may nostalgically look back. But as Kant said, the Enlightenment meant mankind finally growing up and taking responsibility for its future realizing that no one else could do it. Political movements such as fascism look back to a paradisaical society ruled by love and not principles and would like to reestablish it again, but that is an impossible task. An innocence lost cannot be regained. A closed society of the future can only be an artificial closed society not the real thing. The allegedly happy society of the past is but another instance of a Utopia.

One feature of the Open society we have already touched upon is toleration. It applies in particular to other points of views. In any discussion you have to be humble and think to yourself that the other fellow may have a point. This does not mean that you should concede defeat and argue that one fellow's point of views is as good as another's. That is relativism. On the other hand you should both scrutinize each other's arguments and as a result sharpen your own, and look for objective referees, namely possible falsifications. The point of a discussion is to come to the truth, not to ascertain who was right and who was wrong, that is clearly of secondary importance⁶. But toleration does not extend to those who are willing to use violence. To use violence is a breach of unwritten rules and should

⁴ One is reminded of Dostoevsky's claim that the sacrifice of a young innocent boy is not worth the saving of mankind.

⁵ Later he found the term also in the writings of Heinrich Heine, as well as employed by Henri Bergson

⁶ One is reminded about arguments in mathematics where the overriding issue is for all parties what is right. In mathematics, because of its objectivity, it is much easier to acknowledge defeat, as the truth is impersonal. To cheat in mathematics is intellectually unsatisfying

not be tolerated. Finally a most important thing to tolerate is mistakes. In older codes mistakes should be avoided at all costs. This is of course understandable in medicine and justice where this intolerance held on the longest. The flip side of this seemingly laudable intolerance towards mistakes is that mistakes cannot be acknowledged and have to be covered up, if necessary invoking colleagues defending the glamour of their discipline. Not to owe up to mistakes is dangerous, because it is only through mistakes you learn.

Tolerance is of course tied up with the freedom of speech and here Popper seems not so readily accept it without restrictions. In his last written, or rather dictated work, he raved against the tastelessness of modern television as a perverter of children and youth. Democracy needs to be controlled, he argues, and especially television. Instead of censorship, which would go too much against his principles of freedom, he advocated some kind of license for people who made programs. In other words they had to provide wholesome programs and if failing to do so, they would be, just as are doctors in malpractice, deprived of their licenses (and livelihood). Were those the ravings of an old cranky man. He died shortly after the conclusion of the piece.

As to history we have already referred to his rejection of historicism. In this regard his thinking is close to that of Collingwood, but where he differs from him, is his objective version finding that of Collingwood too unabashedly subjective and that this is his main mistake. Here, I think, he is mistaken and unfair. It is true to understand say some action of Caesar you have to put yourself in his place, but that does not mean trying to become Caesar. It is not a case of individual personification. All thinking is not psychological, there is to human thought a high degree of objectivity, at least a local such confined to mankind. There are subjective parts of human thinking and mental experiences to which Collingwood refers to as 'qualia' although not using that term. Such subjective experiences are irrelevant to making sense of history, they belong to the private sphere to which we have no access; however putting yourself into the place of Caesar means putting yourself in the position of Caesar, meaning that you will understand his intentions. Intentions is something you can share with others and is part of objective human thinking. Innate material has no intentions thus the way they act has to be sought elsewhere. Now one may reason with Popper that this effort to reveal the intention is ultimately based on some intuition. Now there is nothing wrong with intuition Popper is the first to admit. Without any intuition you have nothing to base your theory on. Only when you have a theory which is so specific to be falsifiable can you talk about the objective aspect of your vision. The objectivity lies not in who and how a theory has been concocted but in its testing. Now the latter procedure is not a stranger to Collingwood who is all for testing historical assumptions but any kind of testing must be dependent upon our ability to think in terms of human intentions to make sense of historical events. In other words he proposes ideas close to those of Collingwood, namely that history is never completed, that it is but a provisional reconstruction of the past into the present and that each generation has a duty to rewrite history, both because new evidence is revealed, but also because each historical presentation has relevance to the present, and as the present changes, so does what is relevant as well. In a historical account you are interested in the events which impinge on those concerns that matter to us now. Those concerns will of course change. History is by necessity selective, it needs to be and cannot be otherwise, because, I am tempted

to add, it would in that case overwhelm the present. As to the notion of a historical interpretation Popper claims that this is no longer a question of correct or not, but one of fertility. An interesting explanation is open ended, it shows its mettle by indicating a wealth of new problems and avenues of exploration.

This has been an attempt to summarize Popper's political philosophy through which he became more widely known. His real interest was always the philosophy of science, pointing out that problems of society was not in the nature of scientific problems, but more a question of what policies to choose. He was nevertheless willing to speak about social science, but then in a pragmatic and applies sense as being useful without being prophetic. However, his work *Logik der Forschung*, written in the thirties during the first phase of his life while working in the margins of the Vienna Circle, to which he was never accepted and always made a point of not adhering to their philosophy of logical positivism, did not gain much attention until he became known for the two volumes of his *The Open Society and its enemies* written during the war while in exile in New Zealand, a book he liked to think of as his contribution to the War effort. This present volume is reaped out of his *Nachlaß* and pertains to his political writings, interspersed with various letters. It does not really contain anything new not present in his published work yet it provides valuable summaries and comments on his thought which shows a remarkable consistency. The prose of Popper is simple and he has a few main points with rich ramifications which he comes back to over and over again. Popper repeatedly takes exception to mere verbiage and scholasticism which he sees to be characteristic of modern philosophers and intellectuals, making one exception (in a letter to Carnap) of Bertrand Russell as (with a few exceptions) being free of the bumptiousness pretentiousness of his colleagues. His admiration and respect for Marx does not measure up to his admiration and respect for Plato (and his criticism of Plato has caused even deeper resentment than his critic of Marx) in fact he considers him the greatest philosophers ever, but adds that this might not amount to as much as most philosophers would like to think. The persona he presents is of the elementary school-teacher⁷ filled with common sense he wants to impart. He stresses humility of the Socratic variety, namely of admitting how little you know and how you should always be prepared to question that little in face of new evidence. However, privately he seems to have been a rather cantankerous character with high self-regard and not above arrogance.

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⁷ Traditionally the elementary school-teacher was at the head of the educational mission of society. He or she faced children, in fact all children, wherever compulsory elementary education had been put in effect, and thus could exercise a wide civilizing mission. There may be little prestige in it, especially not now, but in the past it was a honorable occupation which was instrumental in raising new generations.