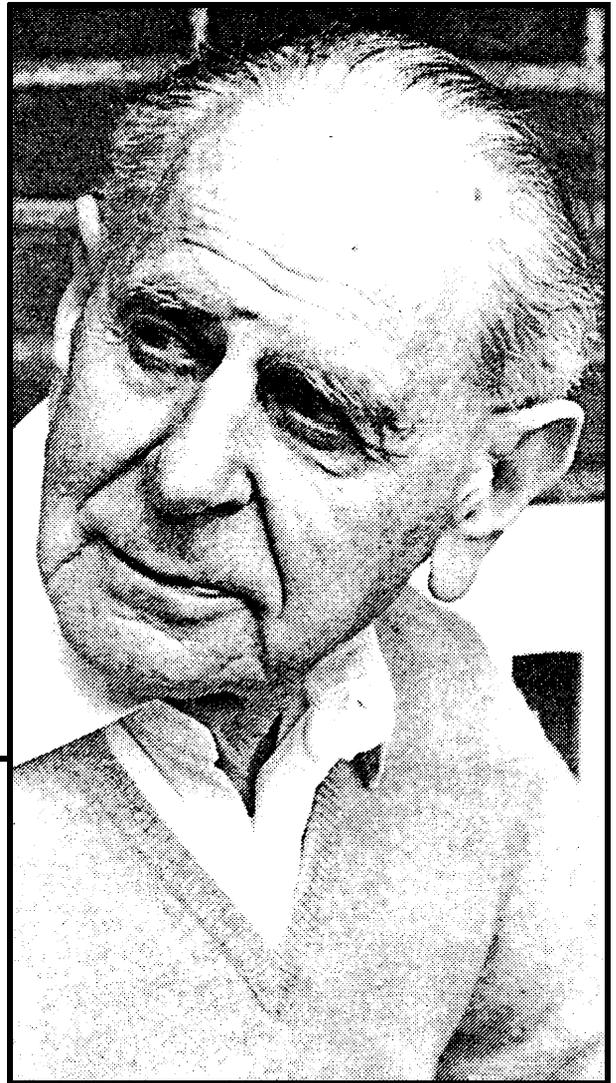

JOHN GRAY

THE
LIBERALISM
OF
KARL POPPER



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John Gray is a Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

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**Libertarian
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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

THE LIBERALISM OF KARL POPPER

JOHN GRAY

The beliefs which we have most warrant for have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded. If the challenge is not accepted, or is accepted and the attempt fails, we are far from certainty still; but we have done the best that the existing state of human reason admits of; we have neglected nothing that could give the truth a chance of reaching us; if the lists are kept open, we may hope that if there be a better truth, it will be found when the human mind is capable of receiving it; and in the meantime we may rely on having attained such approach to truth as is possible in our own day. This is the amount of certainty attainable by a rational being, and this is the sole way of attaining it.

J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 83, Everyman Edition.

Despite its wide influence, the political thought of Karl Popper has received, until recently, remarkably little systematic attention from academic political theorists. Hailed by Isaiah Berlin as the most formidable of Marxism's living critics¹ and reviled by Marxists as the most prominent luminary of that White Emigration whose pernicious influence is mainly responsible for the ideological rejuvenation of a moribund reactionary culture,² canonized as a prophet of freedom and enterprise³ and lumped together with such despised conservatives as Oakeshott, Namier and Butterfield as one of those who want only "to keep that dear old T-model on the road by dint of a little piecemeal engineering",⁴ Popper incontestably has been a storm centre of several ideological controversies. Equally, Popper's dissident reinterpretations of the thought of Plato and Hegel, like his defence of value-freedom and methodological individualism in the social sciences, have generated massive and subtly ramified literatures, while the form of critical rationalism which has been developed by some of his disciples has been seen, both by its proponents and by its enemies, as the foremost contribution to the contemporary struggle against irrationalism.⁵ Yet, though its central importance is attested by the long-standing controversies it has engendered and by its impact on a broad range of disciplines, Popper's work in social and political philosophy has not received anything like the sustained critical examination it warrants. It may be that Popper's contributions to social and political theory, like those of Russell, have been overshadowed by his achievements in epistemology and logic. Certainly, it is true that the polemical form of Popper's political writing has obscured his many positive contributions to political theory. Arguably also, the fact that many of Popper's most important arguments are directed against revolutionary ideologies has fostered the misconception that this political philosophy is a species of conservatism which (in an era in which conservative political thought is rarely thought worthy of serious study) has only served to reinforce its neglect.⁶

My aim in this article is not to support my conviction of the value and relevance of Popper's political thought by conducting the reader on a guided tour around the manifold controversies it has touched off. The object of this exploration of Popper's work in political theory is to identify its most distinctive features, to comment on its relationship with the philosophy of science, and to evaluate its contribution to some of the central problem-areas of contemporary

political thought. In working out the research programme, I hope so support a substantive thesis regarding the character of Popper's achievement as a political philosopher: it is that his works contain a defence of liberalism (the most formidable anywhere in 20th-century thought) which gains much of its power from the fact that, like Kant's, Popper's liberalism is embedded in a comprehensive philosophical perspective on the nature of human knowledge, rationality and freedom of thought and action. In Popperian fashion, I shall support this thesis by way of a critical examination of a recent rejoinder to Popper's assault on the basic assumptions of revolutionary thought. Next, in the context of a comparison of Popper's liberalism with that of J. S. Mill, I shall attempt to evaluate the extent to which Popper's political thought is securely based in his general philosophy. I conclude by suggesting some lines of research by means of which Popper's political philosophy may be further developed.

THE GENERAL CHARACTER OF POPPER'S PHILOSOPHY

The central core of Popper's epistemology is the proposal⁷ that falsifiability be treated as a criterion of demarcation between empirical and non-empirical statements, propositions and theories; Popper suggests that we use the falsifiability of its theories to distinguish science from myth and metaphysics, for example, and he points out that the adoption of the proposal will enable us to characterize as pseudo-scientific such enterprises as psychoanalysis, astrology and Marxism. Contrary to innumerable accounts of his philosophy,⁸ Popper's demarcation criterion was never intended as a criterion of the meaningfulness of sentences. As well as supplying a demarcation criterion between science on the one hand and metaphysics, myth and pseudoscience on the other, Popper's falsificationism enabled him to propose a solution to Hume's problem of induction. For, accepting the validity of Hume's arguments against the propriety of reasoning from instances of which we have had experience, to the truth of the corresponding laws of nature, and trading on the (purely logical) asymmetry between verification and refutation, Popper's falsificationism allowed him to characterize science as a strictly deductive enterprise in which conjectures are boldly propagated and then severely tested by attempted refutations. When science is so understood, the growth of scientific knowledge is seen to occur, not through the use of any form of "inductive inference" by

means of which theories might be verified, confirmed or probabilified, but by any error-elimination procedure in which hypotheses of ever increasing empirical content (or verisimilitude) are corroborated by withstanding ever more stringent tests. Unlike Hume, Popper draws no irrationalist conclusions from the collapse of induction: rather, appealing to a principle of transference from validity in logic to efficacy in psychology, he rehabilitates rationality in thought and action with the conjecture that learning occurs in human beings and all other problem-solving organisms, not through any (mythical and logically invalid) piling up of inductive confirmations in support of general hypotheses, but by an error-elimination process closely analogous to evolution by natural selection.

With his account of scientific progress as a process in which theories of increasing verisimilitude are developed in response to ever deeper problems, Popper links the growth of knowledge with the evolutionary passage from lower to higher forms of life, preserving a qualitative distinction between problem-solving in the lower organisms and in science by emphasizing the self-critical character of error-elimination procedures in the latter. Popper's evolutionism is further linked with his pluralist theory of a three-tiered world, comprising not only material things and states of mind (which he calls "World 1" and "World 2" respectively), but also a domain of intelligibles, virtual objects or objective structures (which he calls "World 3").⁹ It is in this third world, man-made but autonomous in that objective problems and theories await discovery within it, that man's cultural evolution mainly occurs, and it is the central thesis of Popper's philosophy that growth in human knowledge and understanding presupposes the adoption of a method of criticism. A critical approach to empirical science is shown in the adoption of the method of conjectures and refutations, but Popper has himself applied the critical method to the study of irrefutable theories in philosophy,¹⁰ and it has implications for the whole span of human thought. In fact, Popper's "critical approach" embodies a revolutionary theory of rationality as consisting in openness and criticism.¹¹ It is in its critical theory of rationality, together with its unique combination of fallibilism or dynamic scepticism¹² in epistemology and realism or objectivism in ontology - a combination which he characterizes as involving a rejection of the commonsense theory of the world - that the chief interest of Popper's general philosophy lies.

The nature of the relation between Popper's philosophy of science and his political philosophy has always been one of the most disputed aspects of his thought. Since it is one of the central theses of Popper's critics that his political philosophy consorts badly with his account of scientific method - in that Popper appears to commend permanent revolution in science while favouring incremental reformism in political life - it is vitally important that we settle the prior question whether the two parts of his philosophy are indeed logically related. For, plainly, both the claim that Popper's political philosophy is inconsistent with his philosophy of science, and the claim that the former is entailed by the latter, presuppose that a strong logical connection holds between the two. Some of Popper's most authoritative interpreters have seen his contributions to political thought as issuing directly from his account of scientific method. Brian Magee, for example, has asserted that "it [Popper's

political philosophy] is seamlessly interwoven with Popper's philosophy of science",¹³ and in response to Magee's suggestion that his thought 'in these two apparently different fields is all of a piece', Popper has himself acknowledged that "there are a number of common ideas".¹⁴ Elsewhere, however, he has asserted that his social theory "strongly contrasts with" his philosophy of science.¹⁵ Rather than attempt to settle by appeal to testimony or secondary sources the question whether the epistemological and the political aspects of Popper's thought are as inextricably linked as is presupposed both by accusations of inconsistency and by claims to detect an entailment relation between them, it may be more worthwhile to state directly (and then to proceed to defend) my main thesis with regard to Popper's political thought. This is that those of his critics who have postulated a relation of dependency between his political philosophy and his epistemology are not mistaken, but that the claim that there is any inconsistency between these two parts of Popper's thought rests upon a demonstrably defective understanding of both of them, and so fails to conceive correctly the nature of the relation between them.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE AND A SCIENCE OF POLITICS: SOME REFLECTIONS ON DR. FREEMAN'S CRITIQUE OF POPPER'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

Both liberals and Marxists have seen in Popper's attack on what he judges to be the basic assumption of revolutionary ideology the most significant part of his political thought. In conformity with his avowed method of strengthening the opponents' position before subjecting it to criticism, Popper develops his critique of revolutionism by expounding (an on occasion constructing) arguments in support of the principal doctrines which he thinks are presupposed by revolutionary thought. First of the doctrines he selects for exposition is historicism, which he defines as "an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their principal aim, and which assumes that that aim is attainable by discovering the 'rhythms' or the 'patterns', the 'laws' or the 'trends' that underlie the evolution of history."¹⁶ Closely associated with historicism as one of the supporting doctrines of revolutionary ideology is holism, which Popper defines as the doctrine that human events must be understood in the context of the "social whole" of which they are a part. A holistic approach to the methods of the social sciences further suggests the necessity of a *holistic* or *Utopian* approach to social engineering, an approach to social engineering, an approach which "aims at remodelling the 'whole of society' in accordance with a definite plan or blueprint."¹⁷ Popper's contention is that the Utopian approach to social engineering which is commended by revolutionary ideology is based on pre-scientific and irrational modes of thought, such as those embodied in historicism and holism, and that the advocacy of Utopian social engineering is as irresponsible as its attempted practice is disastrous.

In a recent attack on Popper's social and political thought,¹⁸ Dr Michael Freeman has fastened upon Popper's claim that there is a "Utopian" approach to social engineering that is demonstrably unscientific and irrational as clear evidence of that gulf which he claims exists between Popper's fallibilist epistemology and his "dogmatic" and "aprioristic" social

philosophy. Expounding his claim that Popper's political thought embodies a form of "epistemological conservatism" which is manifestly inconsistent with the falsificationist ethic of his philosophy of science, Freeman asks rhetorically: "Why shouldn't utopians defy laws that are only tentative? If any law may be refuted by experience, can there be a case against utopian experiments? If all scientific knowledge is tentative, and if social theories are identified as utopian on the basis of scientific knowledge, then all identification of social theory as utopian must likewise be tentative." Freeman continues: "I wish to suggest the name 'epistemological conservatism' for this aspect of Popper's philosophy. Epistemological conservatism is the position that certain proposed social reforms must be ruled out on the grounds that they violate scientific laws." He concludes: "At the epistemological level, his [Popper's] objection to utopianism is that it violates the laws of science. But, according to Popper's own account, scientific laws are never more than tentative. This weakens the critique of utopianism in two ways. First, it means that the identification of any social theory as 'utopian' must always be tentative. Secondly, since Popper declares again and again that the true scientific spirit is earnestly and vigorously to seek our falsification of our tentative laws, it would seem that Popper's theory of the growth of knowledge encourages rather than discourages utopian experiment."¹⁹ Freeman's accusation of inconsistency against Popper has also been made, in a very similar form, by Ernest Gellner: "There is ... both a unity and a parallelism, and also an asymmetry and strain between Popper's philosophy of science and his social theory. His social ethic consists of the commendation of the virtue of openness, which is the social equivalent of falsifiability - the holding of social principles without rigidity, in a spirit which is willing to learn, innovate, experiment and change ... But a conspicuous asymmetry also appears. In science, openness implies the taking of maximum risks. In social affairs, the contrary is commended."²⁰

Having claimed that Popper's rejection of Utopian social engineering betrays a dogmatism inconsistent with the critical spirit which the falsificationist epistemology inculcates, Dr Freeman proceeds to accuse Popper of having an uncritical and aprioristic approach to the sociology of revolution. Popper's dogmatic approach to the sociology of revolution is disclosed in the fact that he never supports with evidence (or considers evidence against) the claim - made on several occasions in his writings - that adherence to historicist and holist theories was a significant cause of 20th-century totalitarian terror. Again Popper's advocacy of piecemeal social engineering is uncritical in that he refuses dogmatically to consider the hypothesis that "in many important historical situations piecemeal social engineering is not a viable solution to the problems faced by people in a given society."²¹ According to Freeman, Popper's social philosophy is not only (inconsistently) aprioristic and uncritical; it is also deeply conservative and expressing of a sectional interest. Its conservatism is revealed in the fact that, while Popper repeatedly emphasizes the terrible costs of revolution, "he never pauses to count the possible costs of piecemeal social engineering."²² The ideological character of Popper's political thought is attested by the fact that it "ignores the possibility that there might be historical circumstances in which rational men would place other values above that of intellectual freedom", a neglect which is explained by the

thesis that "Popper's philosophy is a class ideology - the ideology of the scientific class".²³

In my view, Dr Freeman's attack on Popper's social thought encapsulates several widespread misconceptions regarding his account of the growth of scientific knowledge and the grounds of his rejection of Utopian social engineering. In the first place, it is worth pointing out that nowhere in his political writings has Popper definitely identified any proposed social reform as "Utopian" on the ground that it is excluded by scientific laws. Such an identification would indeed be contrary to Popper's fallibilism: it would also contradict Popper's affirmation that "... it is necessary to recognise as one of the principles of any unprejudiced view of politics that everything is possible in human affairs; and more particularly that no conceivable development can be excluded on the grounds that it may violate the so-called tendency of human progress, or any other alleged laws of human nature."²⁴ So careful is Popper to guard himself against any accusation of dogmatism that, immediately after giving a list of candidate sociological laws or hypotheses, he goes on to remark: "Nothing is here assumed about the strength of the available evidence in favour of these hypotheses, whose formulations certainly leave much room for improvement."²⁵ Dr Freeman has rightly emphasized that it is an inexorable consequence of Popper's account of the unity of method in natural and social sciences that explanation and prediction are the same in both: as Popper has put it, "a really fundamental similarity between the natural and social sciences" lies in "the existence of sociological laws or hypotheses which are analogous to the laws or hypotheses of the natural sciences". In both cases, these laws can be stated in a technological form by asserting that such and such a thing cannot happen: but there is no evidence to suggest that Popper is unaware that any such claim may be unfounded. In general, it is bizarre to characterize as "epistemological conservatism" an account of scientific knowledge whose central thesis is that even the best corroborated theory should be accepted only as long as testing by attempted refutation has not revealed its weaknesses and suggested another, better theory, and whose implications for politics Popper has himself emphatically stated.

If Popper's argument against Utopian social engineering is not an argument based on the claim that some proposed social reforms are excluded by scientific laws, what is it? It is, at least in large part, an argument which appeals to the empirically necessary conditions of any kind of effective social engineering. Admittedly, it is also an argument which appeals to the logical impossibility of achieving the Utopian aspiration to control and reconstruct society "as a whole". As Popper has said, "It is for many reasons quite impossible to control all, or 'nearly' all these (social) relationships; if only because with every new control of social relations we create a host of new social relations to be controlled. In short, the impossibility is a logical impossibility."²⁶ Popper's argument against the logical possibility of a Utopian approach to social engineering is closely connected with his argument against a holistic method in social science, which (he demonstrates) ignores the inevitable selectivity of all observation and description and attempts the logically impossible task of studying "social wholes". Consistently with these arguments, Popper affirms that "of the two methods (piecemeal and utopian social engineering), I hold that one is possible, while the other simply does not

exist; it is impossible".²⁷ Popper's arguments against the logical possibility of Utopian social engineering are, of course, logical arguments, precisely: what else could they be? They are *a priori* arguments because no other kind of argument is appropriate at this stage of the critique of Utopianism.

In view of Popper's repeated denials of the existence and logical possibility of Utopian social engineering - denials which Dr Freeman cites without comment - it is paradoxical to find him proposing "a sociological hypothesis which Popper rejects *a priori*, and the rejection of which vitiates much of his polemic against utopian social engineering" - the hypothesis that "in many important historical situations piecemeal social engineering is not a viable solution to the problems faced by people in a given society".²⁸ For, as Dr Freeman has noted,²⁹ Popper's thesis is that in practice the Utopian is always forced to resort to a "somewhat haphazard and clumsy although ambitious and ruthless application of what is essentially a piecemeal method without its cautious and self-critical character."³⁰ If the hypothesis that Dr Freeman asks us to consider implies that there are situations in which Utopian social engineering is a viable approach to social problems, it would seem that it is a hypothesis which Popper is entitled (and, indeed, obliged) to reject *a priori* if the arguments against its logical possibility have any validity. Alternatively, of course, Dr Freeman's hypothesis may have no such implication: but in that case no one (least of all Popper) will be inclined to reject it. For, as Popper has reminded us, "there are infinitely many possibilities of local, partial or total disaster",³¹ so there may well be "important historical situations" in which there is *no* "viable solution to the problems faced by people in a given society".

In fact, however, it is not at all clear in what sense Dr Freeman is using the expression "piecemeal social engineering". He criticizes Popper for using 'holism' in two senses, each of them inadequate; a strong sense, implying the aim of changing the *whole* of society, which is too strong to apply to Marx or any other important thinker; and a weak sense, implying piecemeal change lacking caution or self-criticism, which is too weak (since no one, presumably, wants to be incautious or uncritical) in that it does not allow us to settle the ideological controversy between radical revolutionism and liberal reformism. Though he rejects as defective both the sense in which he claims Popper to have used the term 'holistic (or utopian) social engineering', Dr Freeman supplies us with no criterion of demarcation between the two approaches to social engineering. The closest he comes to defining his alternative to Popper's piecemeal social engineering occurs when he acknowledges that there is a sense in which Marx can be described as a holist: "he ... wished to 'radically transfigure the whole social world' in the weak sense of whole, that is to say, in the sense of changing certain structural features deemed to be of critical importance for the distribution of power and life chances in society."³² By this criterion, social engineering ceases to be unacceptably piecemeal, reformist and incremental when it succeeds in changing "certain structural features" of a society. What are these features? Plainly enough, any account of what are the aspects of a society's organization which are decisive for distributing life chances within it cannot be other than conjectural. Accordingly, the description of a proposed social reform as radical and holis-

tic rather than piecemeal and reformist presupposes the adequacy of an original conjecture regarding what are the decisive features of a society's organization: and "Utopian social engineering" becomes a theory-impregnated term. Moreover, the conjectural character of any identification of a society's structurally decisive features suggests that social engineers must expect their experiments to disclose weaknesses - perhaps decisive weaknesses - in the original conjecture. It is, in fact, Popper's view (to which I shall return shortly) that this is precisely what has happened in those societies whose rulers have attempted Utopian social engineering projects.

I have said that Popper's argument against Utopianism is largely an argument which appeals to the empirically necessary conditions of any kind of effective social engineering. What are these conditions, according to Popper? Unsurprisingly, they are closely analogous to the conditions which he has postulated as favouring scientific progress: "... it is the public character of science and of its institutions which imposes a mental discipline upon the individual scientist, and which preserves the objectivity of science and its tradition of critically discussing new ideas."³³ "Ultimately, progress depends very largely on political factors: on political institutions that safeguard the freedom of thought: on democracy."³⁴ In its application to political life, Popper's institutional theory of progress suggests that the opportunity for criticism of governmental policies must be protected by social and political institutions constructed (or reformed) so as to achieve that purpose. That all social engineering must be ineffective in the absence of constant criticism of its aims and methods follows directly from the Popperian conception of the growth of knowledge as an (ideally self-critical) error-elimination process, but the necessity for continual criticism of governmental policies grows also from the unintended (and often unwanted) consequences with which all political action is inseparably linked.

In particular, Popper advances several important hypotheses which suggest that large-scale social engineering designed to achieve far-reaching social changes is likely to be especially ineffective. In the first place, in any programme of social engineering carried out on a scale that approaches the holistic aspiration, so much will be done at once that it will be extremely difficult to determine which measures are responsible for any of the resultant changes. Just as in the physical sciences, so in the social sciences the testing of theories normally require stable background conditions against which the results of variant policies can be compared. As for the holistic argument that "the effects of small-scale changes are, in any society, swamped by the pervasive effects of the unchanged remainder of the social framework, and hence can neither be evaluated, nor be effective",³⁵ it must be pointed out that any such argument has difficulty in accommodating that large measure of experimental knowledge of social life which is acquired in the absence of holistic experimentation. This is not to say that acquiring knowledge of a society through piecemeal engineering is ever a straightforward business. As Popper has said: "Many experiments which would be most desirable will remain dreams for a long time to come, in spite of the fact that they are not of a Utopian but of a piecemeal character. In practice, he (the social scientist or piecemeal engineer) must rely too often on experiments carried out

mentally, and on an analysis of political measures carried out under conditions, and in a manner, which leave much to be desired from the scientific point of view.”³⁶ To admit that the knowledge of society’s workings gained from piecemeal social engineering is often sadly limited and inadequate to our purposes is not to imply, however, that we can learn nothing through such an approach. Still less does recognition of the limitations of a piecemeal approach show that any better exists.

In the second place, Popper advances a number of conjectures about the effects of attempts to undertake holistic social control and planning which together go a long way toward establishing that such attempts cannot avoid being counter-productive. For, whenever attempts are made to implement a holistic plan for social reconstruction, they may be expected to encounter widespread opposition, partly because the interests of many people will be damaged by a holistic plan that is radical in conception and implementation, partly because it is unreasonable to suppose that any general consensus will exist on the desirability of the objectives of the holistic planners. If the implementation of the plan is not to be obstructed by such opposition, the revolutionary regime must become authoritarian and coerce recalcitrants into reluctant compliance with the plan. Once this has occurred, however, the revolutionaries will find themselves constrained to suppress criticism and dissent, no matter how well-intentioned and constructive, and they will soon lack the means of finding out how far their original conception of the Utopian plan is likely to be protected from all criticism (and, above all, from radical criticism), which increasingly will be characterized as traitorous and malicious. The process is summarized by Popper graphically in another context: “The most likely development is ... that those actually in power at the moment of victory ... will form a New Class; the new ruling class of the new society, a kind of new aristocracy or bureaucracy; and it is most likely that they will attempt to hide this fact ... the revolutionary ideology will serve then for apologetic purposes; it will serve then both as a vindication of the use they make of their power, and as a means of stabilizing it; in short, as a ‘new opium of the people’.”³⁷ Having centralized power in order to prevent sabotage of the Utopian blueprint, and so effectively deprived themselves of much of the information relevant to the success of their plan, it is likely that the revolutionaries will resort to *ad hoc* measures (“unplanned planning”) in order to maintain themselves in power. In this way, according to Popper, Utopian social engineering (or projects approaching it in scale and ambition, to be more precise) cannot avoid being systematically self-defeating.

It is, of course, a feature of Popper’s hypothesis regarding the empirically necessary conditions of effective social engineering that, like all scientific hypotheses, they are conjectural and thus falsifiable. It will be objected, accordingly, that a critical approach to these conjectures dictates that we attempt to falsify them, and that such attempted falsifications would be none other than Utopian experiments. Such a rejoinder would, however, betray a basic misconception of Popper’s theory of knowledge and its relation to practical life. For, though Popper’s conjectures are no less falsifiable than any other scientific hypothesis, they are very well corroborated; and it is a cardinal tenet of Popper’s philosophy (which distinguishes it from any kind of radical

or Pyrrhonian scepticism, for example) that we are rational if we prefer the best tested theory as a basis for action. As Popper has put it: “... criticism will freely make use of the best tested scientific theories ... will collapse under criticism. Should any proposal remain, it will be rational to adopt it.”³⁸ According to Popper’s theory of pragmatic preference, then, rational choice in practical action consists in guiding our conduct by the best tested theory. Popper’s theory of practical rationality shows how he can avoid Humean irrationalism while accepting Hume’s negative results regarding inductions: but it also shows why we are rational if we refrain from holistic-style social engineering. For, though many of Popper’s most important arguments against Utopianism are indeed conjectural, they are so well corroborated that it is difficult to conceive conditions under which it would be rational to ignore them as a basis for action. One such situation can, indeed, be imagined: it is the situation in which we possess a theory, better than Popper’s in that it has greater empirical content, explaining the degeneration of revolutionary regimes and the failure of Utopian planning. Applying the method of reconstructing the logic of a situation he has often advocated,³⁹ Popper’s conjecture regarding the origins of post-revolutionary situations rather than the alleged character defects of revolutionaries. As he has often emphasized, we are rational in “rejecting” or “abandoning” a theory only if we have a better one: that is to say, we must possess a theory which not only contradicts previous theories, but which also explains their successes. Popper is entitled to demand of Dr Freeman (and others who criticize his advocacy of piecemeal social engineering) that he advances a theory of the degeneration of revolutionary regimes which not only explains the successes of Popper’s theory, but identifies conditions under which the Popperian theory would be falsified.

Dr Freeman has, to be sure, asserted dogmatically that “it is simply not the case that Marxist or other utopian revolutionaries are not able or willing to learn from their mistakes”⁴⁰ but since he cites no examples we are unable to assess this claim critically. For what it is worth, the little we know of the revolutionary regimes in Russia, China and Cuba makes Freeman’s claim *prima facie* implausible. In order to support it at all adequately, he would need to supply evidence, not merely of occasional outbursts of “self-criticism” on the part of revolutionary leaders, but of radical policy reversals occasioned by popular criticism. Notwithstanding token reforms initiated in response to massive working-class protest in Poland, the fate of the Hungarian Revolution, the Hundred Flowers Movement and of the Prague Spring all seem to corroborate Popper’s conjecture that radical reform is extraordinarily difficult in societies which lack institutional safeguards for criticism of governmental policies. Freeman’s claim looks still less plausible when one considers the strength, even in liberal democracies, of bureaucratic inertia which prevents the abandonment of policies (e.g. rent control, minimum wage laws) whose counter-productiveness is notorious. Popper’s thesis that the institutional preconditions of criticism, the growth of knowledge and of effective problem-solving by error elimination are closely analogous in science and society entails that no amount of moral fervour or purity of heart can make up for the lack of institutional protection of criticism and dissent. So far as I know, there is no plausible counter-example to Popper’s conjecture that the conditions of scientific criticism and so of successful problem-solving are most

closely approximated in liberal democracies, and are inescapably disrupted by revolutionary upheavals in which a non-violent adversarial exchange of ideas is no longer a real option. Until Popper's theory is decisively falsified, and a better one is forthcoming, we are entitled to conclude that Popper's theory of piecemeal social engineering has resisted the attacks of its critics.

If my argument is sound, and we possess no theory of effective social planning more rational than Popper's account of piecemeal engineering, then Dr Freeman's characterization of Popper's social philosophy as a conservative ideology of the intelligentsia or scientific class is seen to be groundless. Equally unwarranted is Alasdair MacIntyre's claim that "To adopt this [Popper's] view of the means available for social change is to commit oneself to the view that the only feasible ends of social policy are limited reformist ones, and that revolutionary ends are never feasible. To be committed to this is to be partisan in the most radical way."⁴¹ That Popper's advocacy of piecemeal engineering is not ideologically or politically partisan is confirmed if one recalls his insistence that such engineering may have the most diverse objectives, totalitarian as well as liberal.⁴² In that attempts at Utopian engineering can be shown to lead to totalitarianism, it is of course true that only piecemeal engineering is appropriate to a liberal society, but this by no means implies that a Popperian social technology cannot be used to illiberal ends.

It may be worth remarking on the *prima facie* implausibility of the claim that Popper's liberalism, insofar as it assigns a moral and political priority to the value of intellectual freedom, expresses the sectional interests of the intelligentsia and the scientific class. If the experience of the 20th-century shows anything, it is that (with honourable exceptions) intellectual and scientific elites are among the first social strata to be recruited as active servants of tyrannies and totalitarian regimes. In any case, the claim that intellectuals and scientists have a special and overriding interest in the preservation of liberal freedom of thought and expression betrays an elitist presumption that the rest of society will not suffer much if it is deprived of these freedoms. If Popper's alleged populism⁴³ amounts to the demand that the common people be protected in the enjoyment of liberal freedoms to which intellectuals have often shown themselves lamentably indifferent, it seems unexceptionable on moral grounds of equality of respect. Again, the criticism that Popper's belief that critical debates may replace violent revolutions as instruments of social progress embodies a Utopian form of rationalism in that it attributes to reason an exaggerated measure of political power seems to rest on an elitist pessimism regarding the openness to rational persuasion of the majority of men. Whether or not such pessimism is warranted, it goes no way towards justifying that elitist optimism regarding the benevolence and efficacy of a violent revolutionary elite which, expressed most clearly in the writings of Herbert Marcuse, is (rather than any form of populism) the most distinctive feature of the political thought of the New Left.

Nothing in Popper's opposition to Utopianism commits him to condemning revolution in all circumstances: he has, in fact, specified circumstances in which he judges it to be desirable. It is a legitimate criticism of Popper's account, however, that his specification of the conditions under which revolution may be legitimate is somewhat unenlight-

ening and might be too restrictive. As Gellner has noted,⁴⁴ Popper's account gives us little assistance in distinguishing between cases where revolution is justified and cases where it is not. In particular, it is a serious weakness of Popper's thought that it does not address itself to the problems of those societies - which probably comprise most contemporary societies - where the empirically necessary social, economic and cultural conditions of an open society are manifestly absent. Unlike Mill's, Popper's liberalism does not pronounce on "those backward states of society" in which 'the early difficulties in the way of spontaneous progress are so great that ... a ruler full of the spirit of improvement is warranted in the use of any expedient that will attain an end, perhaps otherwise unattainable', in which, indeed, "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government ... provided the end be ... improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting the end." We do not know, in other words, if Popper accepts Mill's dictum that "Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion."⁴⁵ If Popper's thought lacks a theory of political development, its critique of Utopianism nevertheless retains all its validity. For, though there are many peoples whose rulers are forced by circumstances to undertake vast schemes of social reconstruction, such projects always run the risk of bringing about a totalitarian nemesis in which neither reform nor revolution - the historic instruments of social progress - is any longer possible.

POPPER AND MILL

It is still too little acknowledged⁴⁶ that it is a form of critical rationalism, in which openness to criticism and falsification, rather than justifiability or susceptibility to verification, is seen as the distinguishing feature of rationality, rather than any form of empiricism or inductivism, which is suggested by the account of the rational life given in Mill's *On Liberty*. It is such a critical, non-justificationist approach which is suggested by Mill's constant emphasis on the vital necessity of contestation, conflict and dialectical argument in public discussion, and Mill's emphasis on the permanent possibility of falsification as a necessary condition of the rationality of belief is brought out vividly when he proposes the institution of an *advocatus diaboli* wherever consensus has caused dialectical argument to wither away.⁴⁷ His fallibilist understanding of the growth of knowledge as proceeding by the rectification of mistakes, by an error elimination process in which an appeal to experience cannot be decisive by itself (contrary to naive empiricism), and which presupposes the existence of a diversity of rival theories (and so the rejection of any mono-theoretic account of the growth of knowledge), is repeatedly evidenced in the great second chapter of *On Liberty*, where many of Popper's epistemological conceptions are at once strikingly anticipated and illuminatingly applied in political contexts. One of my main theses with regard to Popper's work is that the defence of liberalism, which in Mill rests insecurely on a naturalistic conception of man with strong empiricist and determinist commitments, finds in Popper's philosophy an ideally appropriate metaphysical perspective. In Popper's thought, the tension between a liberal political outlook and an empiricist or naturalistic metaphysics of human nature, which has been noted by several recent writers in the philosophies of Mill and Russell,⁴⁸

is resolved by the abandonment of any crudely naturalistic conception of human nature. Specifically, Popper's pluralist ontology, in conjunction with a libertarian account of human action, composes a metaphysical perspective that accommodates without strain the liberal emphasis on personal autonomy, human dignity and self-development. As several of his interpreters have pointed out,⁴⁹ Popper's liberalism is inextricably linked with his critical epistemology which denies authority to any of the sources of our knowledge. In Popper's philosophy, then, positions in the theory of knowledge and rationality, the philosophy of mind and action and moral and political theory, which in Mill's eclectic thought are so much at odds with one another, cohere to form a single outlook.

What are the growth points in Popper's political thought? So far as I can see, a Popperian approach promises to contribute to the advance of knowledge in at least three of the problem areas of political thought. First, Popper's strictly deductivist account of reasoning suggests the question whether political argument can be cast in a deductive form. At least one influential moral philosopher has perceived analogies between Popper's account of scientific inquiry and moral reasoning:⁵⁰ it is interesting to speculate if it also has affinities with political argument. Secondly, Popper's suggestion that criticism in philosophy consists of identifying the problem-situation by which a philosopher was confronted, uncovering hidden assumptions in his conception of his problem-situation, and advancing novel solutions of the problems he faced, merits developing in its application to political philosophy. At the very least, a problem-centred approach to the history of political thought looks worth exploring. Thirdly, I suggest that Popper's conception of the Open Society designates a mode of social life which permits criticism and diversity, and in which the conventional status and alterability of basic social institutions is widely recognized. Popper's references to a perennial revolt against the "strain of civilisation" imposed on men by life in an open society suggest the necessity for a programme of social and psychological research into the causes and character of this revolt. At a time when various forms of neo-tribal barbarism once again claim the allegiance of great masses of men, there can surely be no more pertinent research programme.

NOTES

1. Karl Marx; *His Life and Environment*, third edition, 1963.
2. Perry Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', in *Student Power*, 1969, p. 231.
3. *Prophets of Freedom and Enterprise*, ed. Michael Ivens, 1975.
4. E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, Penguin edition, 1967, p. 156.
5. See W. W. Bartley III, 'Rationality versus the Theory of Rationality', in M. Bunge, *The Critical Approach to Science and Philosophy*, 1964; and the writings of P. K. Feyerabend, especially *Against Method*, 1975.
6. Among Popper's radical critics are: Maurice Cornforth, *The Open Philosophy and the Open Society: a Reply to Dr Karl Popper's Refutations of Marxism*, 1968; James Petras, 'Popperism; the Scarcity of Reason', *Science and Society*, Winter 1966; A. C. Macintyre 'Breaking the Chains of Reason', in *Out of Apathy*, ed. by E. P. Thompson, 1960; Michael Freeman, 'Sociology and Utopia: Some Reflections on the Social Philosophy of Karl Popper', *British Journal of Sociology*, March 1975.
7. Popper's advocacy of piecemeal social engineering has been subjected to a very different kind of criticism by two Wittgensteinian philosophers, Rush Rhees and Peter Winch, in *Mind* 1947 and the Library of Living Philosophers, *Philosophy of Karl Popper*, pp. 1165-72.
8. I use the word 'proposal' advisedly so as to stress the normative character of Popper's falsificationism, which he himself stressed from the start, but which subsequent critics (e.g. Lakatos, 'Popper on Demarcation and Induction', Library of Living Philosophers) have not always fully acknowledged. See *Logic of Scientific Discovery*, pp. 50-6, for a criticism of naturalistic approaches to the problem of scientific method.
9. See L. Kolakowski, *Positivist Philosophy*, where the legend of Popper's positivism is still alive. It is ironic that the greatest living scourge of positivism should continue to be described as a positivist.
10. The three worlds terminology originates with Sir John Eccles.
11. See *Conjectures and Refutations*, pp. 193-200.
12. It has been argued that, insofar as any criticism of comprehensively critical rationalism only reinforces it by demonstrating its criticizability, the theory is self-validating and therefore self-defeating. See on this, J. W. N. Watkins, 'Comprehensively Critical Rationalism', *Philosophy*, 1969.
13. The expression 'dynamic scepticism' is Popper's; *Objective Knowledge*, p. 99.
14. Popper, 1973, p. 83.
15. *Conversations with Philosophers*, ed. by B. Magee, pp. 79-80.
16. *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 1970, p. 225.
17. *Poverty of Historicism*, p. 3.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
19. Michael Freeman, 'Sociology and Utopia: Some Reflections on the Social Philosophy of Karl Popper', op. cit.
20. Freeman, op. cit., pp. 22, 31-2.
21. Ernest Gellner, *The Legitimation of Belief*, 1974, p. 172.
22. Freeman, op. cit., p. 26.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
25. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. II, p. 187.
26. *Poverty of Historicism*, p. 63.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
29. Freeman, op. cit., p. 26.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Poverty of Historicism*, p. 68.
32. *Objective Knowledge*, p. 22.
33. Freeman, op. cit., p. 24.
34. *Poverty of Historicism*, pp. 155-6.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
36. Gellner, op. cit., p. 172.
37. *Poverty of Historicism*, p. 97.
38. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. II, p. 138.
39. *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, Library of Living Philosophers, p. 1025.
40. *Poverty of Historicism*, Section 31.
41. Freeman, op. cit., p. 25.
42. A. C. Macintyre, 'Breaking the Chains of Reason', op. cit., p. 221.
43. *Poverty of Historicism*, p. 66.
44. Freeman, op. cit., pp. 29-30.
45. Gellner, op. cit., p. 172.
46. *On Liberty*, Everyman ed., p. 73.
47. Paul Feyerabend, 'Against Method', in *Minnesota Studies in Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 4, p. 112, footnote 52, is one of the few who have noted Mill's falsificationism in *On Liberty*.
48. *On Liberty*, pp. 97-8.
49. For example, Martin Hollis, 'J. S. Mill's Political Philosophy of Mind', in *Philosophy*, 1973; Benjamin Barber, 'Solipsistic Politics: Russell's Empiricist Liberalism', *Political Studies*, March 1975.
50. See, for example, W. W. Bartley III and M. Bunge, 1964, *The Critical Approach to Science and Philosophy*, 'Rationality versus the Theory of Rationality', p. 19ff.
51. R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 88.