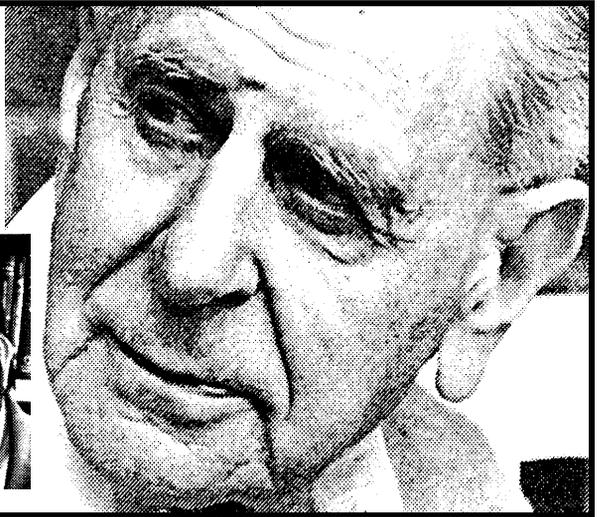
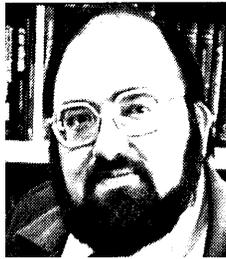


KARL POPPER'S *THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES:*

A CRITIQUE

ROY CHILDS, Jr.



This work is undeniably a classic. Karl Popper decided to write it in March 1938, on the day he received news that the Nazis had invaded Austria, and finished it in 1943. This origin says a great deal about Popper's motivation for writing *The Open Society*,¹ and about its main theme as well, for by 1938 Popper, the Viennese-born Jew, was 36, at the height of his powers, and was forced to witness Hitler's early political and military triumphs. In addressing Popper's main reasons for writing the book, Brian Magee writes that

One has to remember that for most of the period while he was working on it Hitler was meeting with success after success, conquering almost the whole of Europe, country by country, and driving deep into Russia. Western civilization was confronted with the immediate threat of a new Dark Age. In these circumstances what Popper was concerned to do was to understand and explain the appeal of totalitarian ideas, and do everything he could to undermine it, and also to promulgate the value and importance of liberty in the widest sense.²

Popper had produced his major work on the philosophy of science, *Logik der Forschung* (English ed., *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 1959), in 1934, and it was only natural that the politically aware philosopher would want to use his powerful, highly trained intellect to fight the forces of totalitarianism as they confronted the world at that time. Karl Popper moved to assault totalitarianism at its root.

LITTLE MORE THAN A DEFENCE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Popper sees totalitarianism of all stripes as essentially *tribal*, as a "closed society", a rebellion against the "strain of civilization". He assaults it by using his philosophy of science (which greatly emphasizes "falsification", i.e. the refutation of statements and theories) to criticize the doctrines of those whom Popper takes to be behind modern totalitarianism, namely Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Marx. In *The Open Society*, he seeks to "examine the application of the critical and rational methods of science to the problems of

the Open Society. [He] analyzes the principles of democratic social reconstruction, the principles of ... 'piecemeal social engineering' in opposition to 'Utopian social engineering'."

Popper's was one of that brilliant burst of works of the same period that had a similar anti-totalitarian thrust: among others, Paterson's *The God of the Machine*, Lane's *The Discovery of Freedom*, Rand's *The Fountainhead*, Flynn's *As We Go Marching*, Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, and Ludwig von Mises' *Omnipotent Government and Human Action*.

Yet Popper's *Open Society* is, of all these, by far the most namby-pamby and anti-climactic. It begins by wrestling with such giants as Plato, Hegel and Marx, but concludes with little more than a defense of social democracy, of piecemeal engineering with freedom of discussion and controversy. Brian Magee ably summarizes Popper's reasons for defending the "Open Society":

Because he regards living as first and foremost a process of problem-solving he wants societies which are conducive to problem-solving. And because problem-solving calls for the bold propounding of trial solutions which are then subjected to criticism and error elimination, he wants forms of society which permit of the untrammelled assertion of different proposals, followed by criticism, followed by the genuine possibility of change in the light of criticism. Regardless of any moral considerations ... he believes that a society organized on such lines will be more effective at solving its problems, and therefore more successful in achieving the aims of its members, than if it were organized on other lines.³

Such a society is what Popper takes to be social democracy, entailing the "problem-solving" of piecemeal social engineering.

This social democracy may indeed have once inspired the intellectual elite of the West, seeking (as many were) alternatives to fascism and communism, but today it inspires hardly anyone. And for good reason, for what else *is* democratic social reconstruction but that postwar system of fine-tuning the economy, the reign of countless redistributive social programs designed by politicians and social scientists to meet those alleged "social needs" that a host of interest groups are pressing upon the political systems of the West as "non-negotiable demands"? Since the Second World War, most of the Western democracies have followed Popper's advice about piecemeal social engineering and democratic social reform, and it has gotten them into a grand mess. Intervention has been piled upon intervention; regulations have been continually modified in unpredictable ways (Popper advocates such "revisions" in the light of experience); taxation has increased drastically to finance social welfare programs (as has inflation, with its resulting economic fluctuations); and the unhampered market economy, so forcefully defended by Popper's close friend F. A. Hayek, has been "reformed" out of existence.

Interventionism, piecemeal or not, has worked its inevitable way, and has led to precisely those consequences that Mises, Hayek, Rothbard and others had predicted: economic stagnation and politi-

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cal conflict. Democratic institutions themselves are threatened by those whose vested interests are entwined with the State apparatus. Dime store tinkering, even with freedom of criticism and revision, is leading to the closed society that Popper so fears. There is indeed nothing new in this warning; it is the theme of both Ludwig von Mises' *Socialism* and F. A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*.

A NATURAL LAW APPROACH GIVEN NEW WINDOW-DRESSING

In short, the Open Society is not enough. Why this is so has a direct bearing on the major themes of Popper's book. Popper attacks the views of Plato, Hegel and Marx. (Here we cannot consider the merits of his case, but the interested reader should at least consult Levinson's *In Defense of Plato*, Cornford's *The Open Philosophy and the Open Society*, and the earlier writings of John Wild defending the tradition of Plato and Aristotle.)

One element of these views that Popper is anxious to refute is the "natural law" tradition, the basing of norms on human nature or some other "natural" standard. He opposes "essentialism", emphasizing instead the dynamic element in knowledge, that knowledge must always be open to revision. It is from *this* view of the functions of the human mind and the nature of knowledge that Popper derives the characteristics of his Open Society, which amounts to little more than democracy combined with a critical approach to social programs and the constant willingness to revise such programs in the light of experience. (He wants in fact to develop a *technology* of "social reform" that would make such revisions possible; this is astonishingly naive.)

Now one should ask at this point: just what is this if not the essence of a natural law approach given new window-dressing? The natural law tradition insists that norms for human conduct and for political organizations should be based on the requirements of man's nature. Popper tacitly uses a variant of this approach, in the very process of denouncing it: he criticizes "fixed" political principles because they conflict with the (presumably universal and permanent) requirements of human knowledge, of man's nature. But in doing this, has Popper done anything other than to erect new standards of precisely the form that he initially rejects? Popper should be reminded of Etienne Gilson's quip: "The natural law always buries its undertakers."

DEMOCRACY VERSUS LIBERTY

If the Open Society is equivalent to a society in which everything and anything is open to democratic revision — except the basic institutions that make democratic revision possible — then Popper is only focusing on one need of human beings (that a dubious collective need), not the broader need for liberty that is implied in the outline of his argument as stated by Magee. Popper makes a great deal of noise about "individualism", but nevertheless only applies the structure of that argument to *collective* processes of hypothesis, testing (action) and revision in the light of experience; the argument would apply to individuals as well, since they are the sole constituents of "society". By focusing on this collective democratic character of the Open Society, Popper ignores the more basic need for *individual* liberty in art, business, science, and all other areas as well.

The arguments for democracy that Popper presents, then, are in principle identical to arguments for individual liberty. It is the principle of non-aggression, the first principle of liberty, that properly limits the domain of democracy. If Popper's *arguments* for democracy (as opposed to his advocacy of democracy itself) are valid, then it is not the rigidity of a technology of social engineering that we should seek, but an unhampered market economy, where people can constantly act on their own judgment and can continually revise their plans in accordance with the new information brought by change. This brings us not to social democracy, but to the doctrine of libertarianism.

Far more important than the principle of democracy, then, even by Popper's own arguments, is the principle of individual liberty. Liberty is paramount, democracy at best secondary: democracy is important only insofar as it is the servant of and means to the end of

liberty. Thus, in following the logical implications of Popper's views (which are not, after all, *that* original), we move from the open society to the "Free Society", and find ourselves agreeing with Michael Polanyi's claim, *contra* Popper, that the Free Society is *not* an Open Society, but a society committed to a very definite set of rules. In Popper's Open Society, the principle of democracy is regarded as fixed, as not being open to revision. In the Free Society, it is the far more fundamental principle of individual liberty and non-aggression that is not open to revision (though its implications may be refined with growing knowledge). Popper's reasoning is, by and large, correct, but it is *individuals* who must solve problems to survive, not "societies", and therefore individuals who must be free to think and act to achieve values and to revise mistaken plans and impressions in the light of experience or more critical thought.

Why is it important to consider *The Open Society and Its Enemies* after all these years? Very simply, because these are the times when totalitarianism is on the rise, and Western democracies are in the midst of crises that are threatening the stability of their basic institutions, and perhaps even their very survival. In this battle against totalitarianism today's right-wing social democrats — the neo-conservatives such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Irving Kristol and Daniel Bell — are once again raising the banner of social democracy against tyranny. But this is pointless, for such democracy combined with social engineering and statist "reforms" is inherently unstable and is unjust as well.

No mere democratic machinery, no mere procedure, is enough to oppose fascism or communism, not in a world of those real social dynamics that are set in motion by interventionism. Only liberty can fully oppose closed societies, and only if liberty is seen as something that is *not* to be bargained away or abandoned through a series of insignificant piecemeal reforms. Liberty must be regarded as the ultimate political end, foremost among those political values held dear by reasonable men and women, the highest and most noble political form possible to human beings.

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY HAS BEEN TRIED AND FOUND WANTING

I do not wish to leave the impression that *The Open Society* is worthless. It is indeed a heuristic work, tossing off suggestive arguments and insights on nearly every page, and the criticisms of Plato, Hegel and Marx are always pregnant ones. Popper is a great and forceful advocate of reason, science and progress, and his passionate idealism shines forth continually from the pages of this work. But so too does nearly every moth-eaten philosophical cliché around, e.g., the attack on "certainty", the fact/value dichotomy, and the Humean assault on induction. Moreover, Popper is unnerving in his treatment of capitalism. Opponents of the Open Society who see it as being *too coercive* are slighted by Popper's astonishing smears of laissez faire, his continual granting of Marxist historical points against capitalism, and his cheerful parading before us of those "democratic reforms" that have all but obliterated the unhampered free market economy.

Social democracy, the Open Society, has been tried and found wanting. The question that faces us now is simply whether those lovers of "experiment" and "flexibility" are experimental and flexible enough to advocate that liberty be given a chance. If it is not given that chance, there may be no turning back, and we may yet arrive in an era when we shall look back at the totalitarianism of the 1930s as a veritable golden age.

But in one sense, at least, Popper is right: the future is ours to shape. Liberty has never been fully tried. It is the task of readers of this journal to remedy that unfortunate situation; if we do not, no one else will.

NOTES

1. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Volume I: Plato, Volume 2: Hegel & Marx*, first published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, in 1945.
2. Bryan Magee, *Popper*, Fontana Modern Masters, Fontana/Collins, London, 1973, p. 87.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 74.