Review of “Popper's 'Open Society' After 50 Years”

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Sir Karl Popper is perhaps best known as one of the greatest philosophers of science; he is also recognized as one of the most influential thinkers in social and political philosophy. Born in Vienna in 1902, he emigrated from Austria in 1937 where he accepted a post at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. He subsequently accepted a position at the London School of Economics (LSE) and began a distinguished academic career lecturing all over Europe, Australasia, India, Japan, and the United States. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society, a Fellow of the British Academy and the holder of numerous honors and memberships. Popper won the Lipincott Award of the American Political Science Association, the Sonning Prize for meritorious work that furthered European civilization, and the Kyoto Prize. He died in 1994.

The present volume deals with Popper's early work in social and political philosophy, centering on his book *The Open Society and It's Enemies*, which Routledge and Kegan Paul took a chance on publishing 50 years ago by a then unknown author. The book was perhaps the first to put totalitarianism in perspective and to conceive of a framework for the study of society that could identify all types of closed societies, be they tribalist, fascist, communist, religious-fundamentalists, and so on. The book advocated the search for knowledge, thinking for oneself, questioning authority, criticism and self-criticism. All these, Popper claims, are tools of freedom. He also argues that we should not simply defer to great figures, for great people make great mistakes. Popper was referring especially to Plato, Hegel and Marx.

*Open Society* was published in two volumes. Volume One, entitled "The Spell of Plato", is a sustained attempt to trace the doctrines of historicism to their Greek origins, especially Plato. Readers must note, however, that Popper uses the term "historicism" to refer to inevitable laws of historical development. This use of the term was not always the established usage in historiography, and Popper's usage gave rise to much misunderstanding and controversy. Popper argued that Plato was a pessimist who held that the laws of development govern a tendency toward deterioration. To slow down this process, Plato advocated, in *The Republic* and in *The Laws*, tyrannical measures.

Apart from criticizing the Greek idea that science was the search for essences, Popper argued that education and training should empower one to be autonomous, to be able to cope with situations and to make choices. Above all, Plato was presented as an archetype utopianist who, in the name of virtue, was willing to consider coercion appropriate. Popper, by contrast, advocates the open society, one which attempts to maximize freedom of choice and is democratic in the sense that the citizens can overthrow
the government without violence.

Volume Two of *Open Society* is entitled "The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx and the Aftermath." Here Popper looks principally at Marx, whom he describes as an optimist historicist. According to Popper, Marx held that the laws of history governed an exorable progress, which could be assisted or smoothed in its progress, but not staunched. Where Plato was pessimistic, Marx was optimistic. Marx, Popper maintained, offered hope to humankind. One day the exploitation and oppression would come to an end, even if it should need a period of violence. Popper analyzes Marx's position with the same care as he does Plato's and concludes that both philosophers have mixed brilliant ideas about science and politics with claims about the future course of things that cannot be known in advance.

*Open Society* was widely discussed in the intellectual press and Popper's ideas were taken seriously. The book argued that historicism (as Popper used the term) was able to gain ascendancy largely because the struggle for freedom and democracy had been misformulated by their advocates. However, within academe, the book tended to polarize serious readers. The essentialists, Platonists, historicists, Marxists and positivists resorted to various defensive tactics, including distortion and vilification. But the most simple and widely used tactic was simply to ignore Popper.

In the United States, Popper was vehemently opposed by Leo Strauss and Eric Vogelin. Both considered themselves political philosophers who were deeply immersed in the Greek classics, and both considered that modern thought had to start with a careful consideration of Hegel. Vogelin, amongst other extremely strident remarks, accused Popper of being impudent, dillentantish, and incapable of reproducing the ideas of Plato and Hegel. This undignified diatribe focused around Popper's strong claims about the duty to think for oneself and not to defer to the authority of others. Strauss and Vogelin, however, agreed on the opposite view and on the duty of the enlightened elite to defend standards.

The intellectual public bought enough copies of *Open Society* to keep it continuously in print, frequently revised. Popper was read in Britain by working politicians such as Richard Crossman, Anthony Crosland, Sir Keith Joseph and Sir Edward (later Lord) Boyle. Furthermore, Popper's ideas gained ground in both Germany and Austria. After the fall of the USSR and the Eastern European empire in 1989, Popper was one of the few Western philosophers whose ideas were of sufficient scope and depth to be applied to freedom of inquiry, freedom of communication, freedom of entrance and exit to various countries with openness and freedom in politics. Indeed, to further Popper's ideas, George Soros, the American billionaire of Hungarian origin set up a network of philanthropic organizations, called "Open Society Foundations", and helped founded the Central European University (CUE) in Prague and then Budapest. Another of the CUE's founding fathers was Ernest Gellner, who took special leaves from England to commute to Prague to set up there his Center for the Study of Nationalism.

Gellner, who had a spectacular undergraduate career at Oxford, where he graduated with first class honors and won the John Locke Prize, was hired to teach philosophy to sociology degree students at the LSE. Over the course of 20 years at the LSE, however, Gellner and Popper had little informal contact, although Popper's colleagues, John Watkins and Imre Lakatos, were close friends of Gellner. Towards the end of his life (1925-1995), Gellner published several pieces on Popper's thought, and made it clear that Popper's influence on him was second to none. And so it was perhaps no surprise that it was Gellner who organized the conference at CEU, Prague, one year after Popper's death, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Open Society*. Although the enemies Popper had argued against in 1945--fascism and
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communism--had been routed from Europe, new enemies were abroad in the world, such as military dictatorships, clerico-fascist regimes, and so on. No one coming to the conference was under the illusion that the open society was universally endorsed in practice, although there was still cause for celebration and reflection on a new situation in Europe partly brought about by the ideas in Popper's book. Unexpectedly, the decisive influence on the tone and structure of the Prague conference was the sudden death of its organizer, Ernest Gellner.

The present volume is not strictly speaking the proceedings of the conference in Prague. Editorial judgment dictated that the articles appear as revised and reconsidered texts in light of the conference's discussions. For example, Bryan Magee's reflections on Popper and practical politics, when delivered at the conference, were already published elsewhere and are again published here unaltered. The present volume has three parts.

Part I is entitled "Preliminaries" in which Open Society and its author are introduced. There is a particularly poignant article by Popper's close friend, the art historian Sir Ernest Gombrich, who recounts the precarious origins of Popper's book. Also published is Adam Chmielewski's interview with Popper, one of the last that he gave, in which Popper discusses his latest projects, which included a study of the Pre-Socratics, his interest in evolutionary epistemology, his concern over the possible resurgence of Marxism, and his concern about the educational impact of television.

Part II is entitled "Addressing the Text" and consists of five articles offering interpretation and critical comment on Open Society. Mark Notturno takes up the lasting value of Popper's arguments against totalitarianism and weaves his ideas with Popper's. For Notturno, the enemies of the open society--for which Plato, Hegel and Marx are symbols--are authority, community and bureaucracy. David Miller, one of Popper's closest collaborators in his last 25 years, discusses the crucial transition in Popper's thought from his original work in philosophy of science to his discovery of Tarski's work and its impact on him, which Popper first mentions in Open Society. Another close friend of Popper's, Ian Jarvie, argues that the open and closed societies can be more fruitfully presented as Weberian ideal types. John Hall, a life-long student of Popper's work, who succeeded Gellner as the Director of the Center for the Study of Nationalism at the CEU, criticizes the Open Society in terms of its sociological assumptions, its idealism and its analysis of what could and should have been done with a closed society. The last article is by John Watkins, who had been associated with Popper since the 1940s. Watkins exposes an implicit Hegelianism in Popper's book and argues that Popper is sometimes deeply attracted by those things he often rejects.

Part III is entitled "Applying the Text" and the authors here look at the implications of Open Society for law, ethics, practical politics, political developments in Poland, liberalism, nationalism, historical causation, and the pitfalls of trying to apply Popper's ideas. The contributors include Christoph von Mettenheim, a distinguished German jurist; Sandra Pralong, a former Director of the Open Society Foundation in Romania and a doctoral candidate in political science at Columbia University; Bryan Magee, philosopher, politician, journalist, and personal friend of Popper; Andrzej Flis, a Polish social scientist; Adam Chmielewski, a Polish philosopher mentioned above; Joseph Agassi, another former Popper student; Cyril Hoeschl, Dean of the Charles University School of Medicine; and Fred Eidlin, a political scientist and founder of the Popper Newsletter.

Of particular interest are the critical articles by Magee and Agassi. Magee considers how well or ill Popper's ideas had on current events. His conclusion is a mixed one: if followed, Popper's ideas would
much improve practical politics, even if Popper's personal adherence to principle led him to errors of judgment. Also in the spirit of criticism, Agassi takes issue with Popper over the topic of whether nationalism can be reconciled with liberalism. Although Agassi carefully considers Popper's stand against nationalism, Agassi contests Popper's position and tries to argue for the possibility that nationalism is compatible with liberalism.

Overall, the articles in the book make exciting reading as we reflect on an important part of Popper's philosophy. Readers who know Popper primarily through the philosophy of science will be especially enlightened as they read about this philosopher's concern with very practical issues of politics and society.

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