

## The Open Society

The Open Society, the single work in political philosophy by Karl Popper, was published at the end of 1945, and it created an instant sensation. (1) Its first volume labeled Plato a totalitarian and outraged Platonists; its second volume attacked Marx and heartened Cold War liberals. (2) The Open Society has remained continuously in print since 1945, though it, like Popper's work in the philosophy of science, has declined drastically in reputation. A collection of essays marking the fiftieth anniversary of The Open Society contained valuable contributions, but it did not stop the slide in reputation. A stunning intellectual biography of Popper by Malachi Haim Hackonen has revealed the convoluted development of The Open Society, but the difficulties of interpretation remain. (3) Popper's claim that average readers of his acquaintance read the book in a week-end is bafflingly far from the experience of most readers. (4)

The art historian Ernst Gombrich found an English publisher for Popper's manuscript and supervised the revising of the manuscript for the publisher (since Popper was in New Zealand and war-time mail from New Zealand to London was slow and difficult). (5) Gombrich suggested that Popper trim the manuscript and soften its tone. Gombrich failed in both respects and judged that the "lengthy polemics" of the work caused many readers to miss its thesis. (6) Certainly the balance of the book is a problem; it is devoted overwhelmingly to analyzing the enemies of the open society and scarcely describes the open society. The story of Popper's shifting priorities and interests over the decade before publication of The Open Society help to explain its puzzling proportions.

Those changing priorities and interests have been described in Hackonen's masterful intellectual biography that traces Popper's path to political theory. But Hackonen has a purpose beyond biography; his mission, he says, is to rescue the contemporary left from the dead end of moral and epistemological relativism. His biography of Popper is the means to this purpose. Consistent with this mission, Hackonen prefers the young socialist Popper and criticizes the post-

war liberal Popper. (7) Hackonen shifts – occasionally with disturbing rapidity – from appreciating the element of idiosyncratic, pre-war democratic socialism in The Open Society to bemoaning its reliance on Hayek's conservatism. Deeply indebted to Hackonen, we cannot rely on him unreservedly.

Popper was born in 1902 in Vienna; his parents were assimilated and politically progressive Jews. As a teen-ager Popper saw World War One and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the end of 1918 Popper joined the Free Association of Socialist High School Students. In 1919 its leaders became Communists, and Popper, though he may not have joined the Communist Party in Austria, began working at its headquarters as an office boy. In June, 1919, Popper took part in a massive workers' protest march organized by the Communists. The police opened fire on the unarmed workers, killing a dozen of them. In the aftermath, Popper learned that the protest was designed as part of a coup plotted by the Austrian Communists in cooperation with and under the influence of Bela Kun, the Hungarian Communist leader. Popper also learned that the loss of life, which bothered him greatly, was of little concern to the Communist leaders who expected these and further losses as the class struggle intensified. This episode was decisive in the development of Popper's political views and is the basis for his political philosophy. Popper left the party because he concluded that its leaders treated party members from the working class as pawns to maneuver and showed little concern when workers died in a conflict the leaders orchestrated.. Hackonen does not assert, but it seems a clear inference from his account, that Popper had an intense personal reaction to this episode. He hated having been deceived by authority figures, and he hated being thrown into a chaotic and deadly disturbance. When in the 1930's German and Austrian Socialists proved ineffective in opposing the rise of the Nazis, and some Austrian leftist intellectuals rationalized the Nazi take-over as part of the bourgeois stage of history preliminary to Communism, Popper's suspicions about the escapism of the left seemed confirmed. Here lies the origin of The Open Society.

Given that Popper had identified the paralysis of left-wing politicians as the problem, one might expect his studies to focus on social psychology, but that was not the case. (8) Popper's first publications in the 1920,s were attempts to clarify the basis for socialist school reforms. Popper was for several years committed to that movement and taught in a progressive school.

Difficulties in dealing with working class youth and the forceful resistance of the conservative education bureaucracy as well as his inability to ground socialist pedagogy in a satisfactory developmental psychology led Popper away from the field of psychology. His interest turned to the philosophy of science, a field enlivened by and given new importance by Einstein's revolutionary relativity theories of 1905 and 1915 and the contemporary creation of quantum theory. Popper threw himself into learning relativity, quantum physics and philosophy of science. While preparing for and then beginning employment as a high school math teacher, Popper was also studying the most challenging issues of contemporary science and philosophy, and the unique circumstances of Viennese intellectual life allowed him to study with some of the leaders of this revolution. (9)

Once Popper began to study the philosophy of science, he determined to contribute to it. He assumed that all previous philosophers of science were mistaken about the nature of scientific knowledge and decided he would resolve the issue, which he did to his own satisfaction with the publication of The Logic of Scientific Discovery in 1934. That work resulted from prodigious and exhausting study, but after completing it his energy and ambition were undiminished. The next year he was invited to participate in Karl Menger's mathematics seminar. The seminar's discussions of probability and economic theory gave Popper entrée to leading participants in debates on method of social science. Very quickly Popper (and some of his colleagues) understood that his proposed revision of the method of natural science also applied to the method of social science. The next – and final – step was Popper's perception that his vision of scientific theory testing provided a model for the best society, the open society. (10)

This unusual path toward political philosophy (not to mention relocation to New Zealand) may explain the imbalance in Popper's single work in political theory. Hackonen claims that Popper concealed from his readers (and to some degree from himself) the purpose of The Open Society. Certainly Popper was in part "settling scores" with the leaders of Austrian socialism for their failures in the 1920's and 1930's. But, while the manuscript grew and the outcome of World War Two was still in doubt, Popper refused to attack Stalin and Stalinist totalitarianism, so Popper had a second purpose – war-time propaganda. (11). And as the end of the war approached the manuscript took on a third purpose. Popper wrote Hyman Levy and Ernst Gombrich that his

purpose in publishing The Open Society was “showing how much of [Marxism] must be dropped, if we are to bridge the gulf which at present...paralyses the camp of those who have a will to build a better future.” (12) But Popper, as he moved from socialism to welfare liberalism, was not clear about how much of Marx he was recommending be dropped. (13)

It is now clear, thanks to Hackonen’s exhaustive detective work, that The Open Society reflects Popper’s multiple motives, wretched working conditions in New Zealand, and spotty knowledge of the social sciences. Alert to, and no longer overwhelmed by, the oddities of the work, we can ask what positive delineation of the open society Popper provided.

Given contemporary economic realities, Popper pictured the Open Society as the liberal (interventionist) democracy that is usually described as the democratic welfare state. Popper devoted little attention to the institutions of democracy. He identified democracy as the system allowing the majority to peacefully remove bad leaders. Popper recommended limits on candidate spending and campaign literature as well as higher standards of accuracy for political journalism and higher penalties for newspapers inaccurately reporting campaigns. He suggested that further “laws to safeguard democracy” could be developed. (14) How much and what specific electoral legislation strengthen democracy, Popper does not consider. He declined to go further on the grounds that democratic electorates have to make that kind of judgment without any guarantee of getting it right. Popper also mentioned the need for the majority rule to respect the rights of minorities, but the passage is too brief to analyze.

Government must provide equal freedom to all citizens, Popper insisted. Therefore, government intervention must protect the economically weak against the economically strong. Legislation should limit the hours of work and provide workmen’s compensation, old-age pensions, and guaranteed employment. (15) Popper also recommended counter-cyclical economic policy. He recognized that too much government intervention impinges on freedom, and again he left to the electorate the decision on the proper extent of government economic activity. (16)

Popper recognized that both too much and too little government economic intervention harmed individuals. He termed this the “paradox of state planning,” and used it as the opportunity to

recommend piecemeal social engineering and condemn utopian planning. (17) He discovered three reasons why Utopian planning for a total transformation of society could not succeed. It is beyond our intellectual capacity; it would take years and thus impose its costs on those who were not old enough to approve them; and it would change over time into something never approved in the first place, losing both its mandate and its constituency.

As opposed to this, blueprints for piecemeal engineering are comparatively simple. There are blueprints for single institutions, for health and unemployment insurance, for instance, or arbitration courts, or anti-depression budgeting or educational reform. If they go wrong, the damage is not very great, and a re-adjustment not very difficult. They are less risky, and for this very reason less controversial. (18)

Popper noted but rejected the possible problem that a small experiment would be swamped by the environment and fails to be a fair test. (19) Commentators have pointed out that Popper's measurement of what could be defined as small-scale was dangerously elastic when it came to projects he endorsed. One man's piecemeal social engineering is another man's utopian engineering. (20) Popper's hope that politicians would be eager to find problems and failures in their favorite small-scale programs has failed to materialize as has his hope that small-scale programs would easily win legislative approval. (21) In fact politicians, bureaucrats, and interest groups are emboldened in their opposition when they know they are fighting a temporary, modest program. Neither did Popper foresee how corporations, unions, parties, and special interest groups would employ scientists to churn out favorable research defending their programs. (22)

Popper argued for a necessary connection between the open society, rational political debate, and piecemeal social engineering. Popper characterized the open society with broad brush strokes. Open societies are open to international trade and the concomitant free flow of ideas. Open societies have competitive economies, so individuals compete for income and social status. Open societies have rational political debate and decision-making so that taboo and tradition have little power. Popper recognized that the ceaseless social change, economic competition, and individual responsibility characterizing open societies create individual anxiety as well as progress so that the temptation to return to anarchy, tradition, and taboo was ever-present. The

challenge to maintain the open society was therefore continual. Popper held that rational political debate required the examination of possible alternative whose consequences could be realistically estimated and then compared. For the consequences to be calculable the alternatives had to be limited in scope and uniformly applied (the consequences of laws allowing the executive to act arbitrarily cannot be calculated). There could be no limits on rational debate, so everyone had to be free to take part, and no existing laws or institutions were exempt from scrutiny. (23)

Piece-meal social engineering resembled the controlled scientific experiment, and Popper certainly hoped that democracy functioned like the scientific community – citizens, like scientists, would debate rationally, respect data, question their own assumptions. The arrival of the Information Age actualizes part of Popper’s vision, but it has also energized fanatics, so we must still ask if democracy should aspire to the conditions of the Republic of Science. (24) To consider how society might become more rational, compare two paths to increasing rational decision-making.

Hayek claimed the market is rational, and the policy of government should be to maximize market behavior. Popper claimed science is rational, and the policy of government should be to maximize scientific behavior. (25) The means to increase market behavior are clear – (1) end government regulation of existing markets, (2) turn over to markets (privatize) existing government activities like schools and prisons, and military transport, and (3) as technology develops, create new markets – for example, for pollution – rather than regulatory agencies. The means to achieve Hayek’s end are clear. But the means to increase scientific behavior are not so clear. Two possibilities come to mind; the first is a reform of education to include lots more science (hoping that students become more scientific, learning and internalizing the scientific attitude) and the second is the appointment of scientists to more policy making positions (to exert a healthy influence on their colleagues and the public). The latter alternative seems likely to politicize and bureaucratize science, transforming it in ways antithetical to Popper’s ideal of science.

Perhaps it isn't science (or scientific knowledge) that Popper wants to maximize – the goal is rational, curious, humble, disinterested thinking – which might be maximized by means other than increasing scientific education. But what – more years of compulsory general education, more libraries or subsidies to reading groups? In his last years Popper wanted less rather than more, and proposed to regulate television programming. There is an irony here as well as a problem. The irony is that Popper hated school – he was disobedient, rebellious, and unable to accept direction or reprimand. (26)

An increase in the scientific attitude in politics is not likely, as Anthony O'Hear has shown. He points to the long observed difference between natural science and social science. Natural science can be free of personal prejudice, but in social science we are studying ourselves, our own actions and beliefs, which we cannot always put out of mind. Furthermore, solving human problems cannot be entirely transformed into scientific reasoning since solving human problems is at times a matter of making a commitment rather than evaluating data. (27) In the decades since The Open Society was published we have witnessed the very opposite of Popper's vision: instead of society becoming more like the best features of science, science has become more like some of the bad features of society – bureaucratic, politicized, and filled with fraud. (28) And today governments sponsor expensive, highly classified research that will remain secret for decades. The conduct of theoretical physics today is noticeably distinct from the idealization of early twentieth century physics Popper held to.

The hope to make society more like the Republic of Science would be dashed if human nature set limits on the taste for critical rationalism. According to Popper's New Zealand student Peter Munz, Popper believed just that at one time. "Popper thought that people who are honest become scientists but people who are dishonest become historians, sociologists, and so forth, because these were people who could convince others of anything they like." (29) The Open Society contains a much more restricted version of this attitude. Popper admits that institutions, like fortresses, need to be manned; both the fortress and the proper personnel are needed. This example gives the clear priority to the personnel, since armies can win without forts, but forts without armies can never win. In modern conditions, only fractions of the population are in military service, and the gap between military life and civilian life is often wide. The diversity

of human capacities and the division of labor in modern societies limit the indefinite extension of military skill – and also scientific literacy it would seem. Thus Popper unintentionally undermined the credibility of his expectation of increasing the scope of the scientific spirit in society. (30)

After the publication of The Open Society Popper concentrated on the philosophy of science, published no other systematic work in political philosophy, and made no substantive revisions to The Open Society. It stands as it was written in 1938 – 1944, and it is natural to ask how relevant it is today. Popper’s relevance comes in three degrees. The issues that Popper identified – financing of political campaigns, the power of the press, and the paradox of state planning – are just as serious now as then. The expectation that scientific method has an important role in political decision-making is as real today as but much less naïve than it was for Popper. The focus on effective means to remove office-holders and the reluctance to specify comprehensively the constitutional system of democracy which Popper articulated have not worn well at all. Popper’s relevance is modest but real, and for the present time it would be rash to ignore his conception of democracy completely.

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### ***ENDNOTES***

1. Karl R. Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies 2 vol. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966 [1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1945]). Hereafter O.S.
2. E.H. Gombrich, “Personal recollections of the publication of The Open Society, pp. 17-27 in Ian Jarvie and Sandra Prolong, ed., Popper’s Open Society After 50 Years (London: Routledge, 2003).
3. Malachi Haim Hackonen, Karl Popper: The Formative Years, 1902 – 1945 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
4. Op. Cit., p. 22.
5. Either Popper was unable to prepare a complete second version or his wife could not bear to type a complete new version.



6. Gombrich, "Personal recollection," p. 18.
7. Hackonen, Karl Popper, pp. 16-22. Even Popper's strongest advocate, Bryan Magee, expresses - though far more gently - the same opinion. Bryan Magee, Philosophy and the Real World, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (LaSalle, ILL.: Open Court, 1985) p. 86.
8. Popper persistently back-dated his philosophical discoveries - when his musings turned into convictions is hard to determine. In this case the 1920's may be too early. The collapse of the Mensheviks and SR's in the face of the Bolsheviks may have been an influence - a guess I build on the possible influence of Arthur Arndt. Cf. Hackonen, Karl Popper, p. 67. Popper's autobiography is Unended Quest, rev. ed. (LaSalle, Ill. Open Court, 1976 [1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1974]).
9. Popper's later complaints that he was denied membership in the Vienna Circle are inconsequential and ungracious compared to the entry he enjoyed to the most advanced circles in Vienna's intellectual life.
10. Hackonen, Karl Popper, pp. 282-91. Hackonen's narrative is much more detailed and recognizes how debates on economic method and socialist economics had been part of Viennese intellectual life from the 1920's and how Popper may have had knowledge of them before 1935.
11. Hackonen, Karl Popper, pp. 332-33. Could Popper, as an alien resident in New Zealand, have feared to attack one of the Allies?
12. Quoted in Hackonen, Karl Popper, p. 449.
13. This is my gloss of Hackonen, Karl Popper, pp. 449-50. The letter may not be relevant if either (a) it is mere evasiveness for leftist friends or (b) the text itself gives a clear answer. And who, if anyone, in the hard-to-imagine conditions of post-war Europe, was going to listen to Popper?
14. O.S., II, pp. 129, 331 n. 27. These elements suggest that the criticism of Popper's theory of democracy in Herbert Keuth, The Philosophy of Karl Popper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 [1<sup>st</sup> ed., 2000]) pp. 242-44 is partly misplaced.
15. O.S., II, p. 126.
16. O.S., II, pp. 130-31.
17. O.S., II, pp. 130-31. Anthony Quinton observes that the "paradoxes" Popper discovers are better described as difficulties. Anthony Quinton, "Karl Popper," pp. 147-67 in Anthony de Crespigny and Kenneth Minogue, eds., Contemporary Political Philosophers (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1975).

18. O.S., I, p. 159.
19. O.S., I, pp. 162-63.
20. Frederic Raphael, "Popper," pp. 369-406, in Ray Monk and Frederic Raphael, eds., The Great Philosophers (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 394-97. Popper suggested that international government was a quite possible piece of social engineering, O.S., I, p. 113.
21. O.S., I, pp. 161-63. The collapse of Communism made ambitious, large-scale planning necessary. Adam J. Chmielewski "Life after liberalism," pp. 170-81 in Ian Jarvie and Sandra Prolong, eds., Popper's Open Society After Fifty Years (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 175-76.
22. Perhaps in a democracy all legislation is potentially temporary. Cf. Richard P. Nathan, Social Science in Government (New York: Basic Books, 1988).
23. O.S., II, pp. 126-27, 131-32.
24. The scientific community that Popper knew and idolized was the tiny band of theoretical physicists of the 1920's, a group spectacularly unrepresentative of scientists as a whole.
25. Eamonn Butler, Hayek (New York: Universe Books, 1983). Hayek appears often in Hackonen's pages.
26. Hackonen, Karl Popper, pp. 61-70.
27. Anthony O'Hear, Karl Popper (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980) pp. 154, 163, 165.
28. David Dobbs "Trial and Error," New York Times Magazine, Jan. 15, 2006, pp. 18-19; Ian Jarvie, "Popper's ideal types: open and closed, abstract and concrete," pp. 71-82 in Ian Jarvie and Sandra Prolong, eds., Popper's Open Society.
29. Quoted in David Cohen, "Giving Karl Popper His Propers," Chronicle of Higher Education, July 26, 2002, pp. A16-A18, at pp. A17-A18.
30. O.S., I, p. 126.