

# KARL R. POPPER AND THE MORAL DUTY TO DEFEND DEMOCRACY

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**Abstract:** In *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Austrian philosopher Karl R. Popper states that it was the Greek who started the transition from the close to the open society somewhere during the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Even though their democratic experiment did not survive, we are still puzzled by the same issues as they were. For instance the question “who should rule in a democracy?” According to Popper this is the wrong question to ask. We should find an answer to another one instead: what should be done to avoid the danger of tyranny? A real democracy goes beyond its etymological meaning - the power of the people - and stresses the value of an institutional framework meant to safeguard us against dictatorship. Fighting the latter becomes a moral obligation, and the principle of critical rationalism offers the means to do it. This paper aims to stress the importance of Popper’s critique of totalitarianism for the challenged societies of our own time.

**Keywords:** Karl R. Popper, open society, democracy, dictatorship, critical rationalism

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In his intellectual autobiography, *Unended Quest*, originally published in 1976, Karl Popper describes *The Open Society and Its Enemies* as his personal war effort, a defense of freedom against the dangers of totalitarian ideas<sup>1</sup>. Because of his critique of Marx’s economic determinism he felt reluctant to publish the book while in Europe only the social democrats were fighting the fascists. Published in 1945 *The Open Society* tackles the history of political ideas from Plato to Marx. As Popper himself admits in his autobiography, it grew from his theory of knowledge expressed in *Die Logik der Forschung*. “Both grew out of the theory of knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> Karl R. Popper, *Unended Quest. An Intellectual Autobiography*, Routledge, London, p. 131

*Logik der Forschung* and out of my conviction that our often unconscious views on the theory of knowledge and its central problems ('What can we know?', 'How certain is our knowledge?') are decisive for our attitude towards ourselves and towards politics."<sup>2</sup>

According to Popper, the real problem of the philosophy of science is to demarcate between scientific theories and pseudoscientific ones (metaphysics, psychoanalysis). Falsifiability is the criterion for such demarcation. A theory gains scientific status only if it is refutable or falsifiable, meaning that one counter-instance can prove the whole theory being false<sup>3</sup>. If they are not falsified, theories will remain hypothesis. Thus scientific progress is possible by moving towards theories of greater content. "A theory of greater content is one which can be more severely tested", writes Popper. "The more a theory says the more it forbids, the greater are the chances to falsify it."<sup>4</sup> Old theories are replaced by new and better ones. Growth of knowledge can be gained only by asking new questions, displaying a critical attitude towards everything. The critical attitude – "asking the why-question", as Popper put it – is the only rational attitude that will eventually lead us to know more about the world. It is this "rational criticism" the philosopher applies to history and social sciences in *The Open Society*.

"Only democracy provides the institutional framework that permits reform without violence, and so the use of reason in political matters"<sup>5</sup>, writes Popper in the introduction to his 1945 book. He then dwells on Plato, Hegel, and Marx, the philosophers who did not endorse democracy in their writings. Popper describes them as historicists who ignore individuals and look rather upon the greater forces on the Stage of History: Great Nations, Great Leaders, Great Classes, Great Ideas<sup>6</sup>. They seek the greater meanings of history while trying also to predict its future developments. These ideas grew out from a tribal form of life centered upon irrational, magical ways of thinking. Modern versions of

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2 Ibidem.

3 Stephen Thornton, "Karl Popper", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/popper/>>.

4 Ibidem. p. 99

5 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. xxxviii

6 Ibidem. p. 7

these ideas are the staples of Nazism (were the idea of the chosen people turns into the chosen race), but also in Marxism (the chosen people become the chosen class)<sup>7</sup>. In order to avoid such false prophecies, we need to defend the open society.

Despite accusations that he is minimizing Plato's philosophical genius, Popper carefully notes that his critique of the ancient philosopher's writings tackles only the theory of the state, and not his entire philosophy. It is the "totalitarian tendency of Plato's political philosophy"<sup>8</sup> in the *Republic*, the *Statesman*, and the *Laws* that appalls the Austrian philosopher. For Plato human race is prone to degeneration. Individual citizens are imperfect copies of the state, the state being a natural unit, like the human soul. Therefore, any attempt to undermine the unity of the state is like a disease of the soul, thus an immoral act. Individuals must live in this organic unit according to specific divisions that correspond to the natural inequality of men: the guardians, the warriors, and the workers. Thus, a racial theory of society arises. The three classes should not interbreed for this allows racial degeneration and spoils the integrity of the state. It is best that everyone keeps their place, so that the guardians can rule, the warriors fight, and the workers work. Those who try to sabotage this natural order are wicked and immoral.

Such anti-equalitarian ideas were perpetuated by Plato's followers, mainly Aristotle who in turn influenced Hegel and Marx. "With Hegel started the age of intellectual and moral irresponsibility, the power of jargon"<sup>9</sup>, wrote Popper in the second part of *The Open Society*. Hegel was a state-paid philosopher appointed by Frederik III of Prussia to find a new ideology in order to oppose the ideas of the French Revolution. Consequently, a nationalist theory emerged. The national state is an organism with a Spirit. The Spirit of the nation determines its destiny. The state is also the sole protector of truth and law, and themorality of the state is above individual morality. Monarchy is the perfect form of government.

"The very essence of Spirit is activity; it realizes its potentiality—makes itself its own deeds its own work—and thus it becomes an object

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7 Ibidem. p. 9

8 Ibidem. p. 31

9 Ibidem. p. 243

to itself; contemplates itself as an objective existence. Thus is it with the Spirit of a people: it is a Spirit having strictly defined characteristics, which erects itself into an objective world, that exists and persists in a particular religious form of worship, customs, constitution and political laws, —in the whole complex of its institutions, —in the events and transactions that make up its history. That is its work—that is what this particular Nation *is*. Nations are what their deeds are. (...) A Nation is moral—virtuous—vigorous—while it is engaged in realizing its grand objects, and defends its work against external violence during the process of giving to its purposes an objective existence.”<sup>10</sup>

By reading the fragment it is easy to understand why Karl Popper found the seeds of modern totalitarianism in Hegel’s work.

As Isaiah Berlin wrote in *The Bent Twig: A Note on Nationalism*<sup>11</sup>, nationalism grew into a coherent doctrine during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Germany, mainly as a reaction against French universalism and cosmopolitanism. While France was dominating the Western world, politically and culturally, Prussia was still its backwater. Humiliated by the French during the Thirty Years War the Germans turned the embarrassment “into messianic trust in one own’s spiritual power as a nation”<sup>12</sup>. It started as a cultural nationalism promoted by Herder and Fichte. Herder glorified individual cultures and underlined the basic need of people to belong to a group with a single national character. Fichte believed that language determines the “geography of nations”. The Franco-Prussian war of 1870 sharpened German military ambitions. Nationalism took a violent form and spread to France, Italy, Austria, the Balkans, Turkey.<sup>13</sup> It became an ideology going beyond national frontiers. In modern times, every successful movement allied itself with nationalism. According to Berlin, even the United States of America acquired a nationalism of its own<sup>14</sup>.

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10 G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History* in A. Singh, R. Mohapatra, *Reading Hegel: Hegel’s introductions*, re.press, Melbourne, 2008, p. 150

11 Isaiah Berlin, “The Bent Twig: A Note on Nationalism” in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 51, no. 1, 1972, pp. 11–30

12 Ibidem, p. 18

13 Isaiah Berlin, “A Note on Nationalism”, in *The Power of Ideas*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2013, p. 281

14 Ibidem.

Karl Marx was not a nationalist. But Communism merged with strong nationalistic feelings in Russia, Eastern Europe, and China. Popper acknowledges Marx's genuine desire to help the oppressed but rejects the materialist interpretation of history offered by the German philosopher. Not everything should be taken in consideration only on economical background<sup>15</sup>. For Marx, people are the product of their life in society. They are bound to their class and social relations. The unrestrained capitalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in England horrified him, so he ventured into prophecy stating that it is a system that will bring about its own downfall. If one analyzes the forces which will bring about its destruction, one will be able to predict the characteristics of the new historical period ahead of us<sup>16</sup>. But then Marx makes a leap of faith and prophesizes a classless socialistic society, an earthly Paradise. Popper seemed convinced that "the secret of Marx's religious influence was in his moral appeal" mainly because his criticism of capitalism comprised a moral criticism<sup>17</sup>.

Isaiah Berlin states that Karl Marx's worldwide influence and fame is due to the success of the movement he was identified with. He was by no means a popular writer, nor a charismatic one. He spent most of his days in solitude, writing and reading extensively, his work largely unknown to the general public, and yet "no thinker in the nineteenth century has had so direct, deliberate, and powerful an influence upon mankind as Karl Marx."<sup>18</sup> He addressed the issues of his time in a practical, realist way. He was familiar with the social theories of the eighteenth century extracting from them the ideas that suited his theory best. He then connected these ideas to the popular slogans of the Communist movement. Thus the Communist chants gained specific political and economic ends.<sup>19</sup> That is why Berlin considers him "to have given clear and unified answers in familiar empirical terms to those theoretical questions which most occupied men's minds at this time, and to have deduced from them clear practical directives without creating obviously artificial links between the

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15 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, p.320

16 Ibidem. p. 345

17 Ibidem. p. 416

18 Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx. His Life and Environment*, Oxford University Press, 1996, Oxford, p.1

19 Ibidem. p. 11

two [...], and endowed it with that singular vitality which enabled it to defeat and survive its rivals in the succeeding decades.”<sup>20</sup> The context of his time, his cunning scientific observations, and the moral appeal of his critique of capitalism ensured him notoriety.

To all three philosophers who undermine the belief in reason in favor of collectivist, nationalist, or prophetic revolutionary ideals, Karl Popper opposes a different, rationalist view in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

Convinced that “our dream of heaven cannot be realized on earth”<sup>21</sup>, Popper argues against great holistic systems and in favor of a “piecemeal social engineering”<sup>22</sup> approach to social and political science. To him only a step-by-step attempt to reform society is manageable. This “piecemeal” form of social engineering should be conducted in an empiric way, by trial and error. Thus errors become a means to improve ideas in the same way science improves itself to gain more knowledge. Scientific progress is like a “Darwinian struggle for survival”<sup>23</sup>: less good theories are overthrown by better ones in order to discover more and more about the world. The aim is to expand the content of a theory – to know more and more – by eliminating errors. The true scientific method is the critical one. According to Popper we must display the same critical attitude in the social sciences. He calls it “critical rationalism.”<sup>24</sup>

For the Austrian philosopher every society is the sum of its individual members, not a collectivist entity as Hegel described it. Therefore, no one can predict the future of history or find out the laws which govern it – as Marx envisioned – because history is made by individuals and individual actions have consequences that cannot be predicted. In this respect, Popper declares himself against determinism, stating that history does not evolve according to intrinsic laws and that in the absence of such laws, any prediction about the future of mankind

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20 Ibidem. p. 11-12

21 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, p. 189

22 Ibidem. p. 341

23 Karl R. Popper, *Unended Quest*, p. 99

24 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, p. 442

is impossible.<sup>25</sup> As he writes in the last pages of *The Open Society*, there is no such thing as “history of mankind”, but only an indefinite number of histories of all kinds of aspects of human life<sup>26</sup>.

Yet, even if history has no intrinsic meaning, we can lend it some meaning by appealing to reason. For the Austrian philosopher, reason, like science, grows by way of mutual criticism.<sup>27</sup> It is the freedom to criticize that guarantees the existence of an open society. Any attempt to stifle the freedom of thought or the respect for other people’s ideas and points of view is a sign of irrationalism. To Popper, irrationalism is dangerous because it emphasizes emotions rather than reason. Emotions tend to divide people whereas reason brings them together. Any open society needs tolerance for different opinions and various ways of life. A critical attitude towards other people’s ideas – not their person – makes any society capable to grow and reform itself. Openness to criticism also makes a society less prone to violence, and therefore more democratic.

American cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker links the decline of violence in the Western world to the decline of attitudes that tolerate or glorify violence<sup>28</sup>. According to him, the decline of violence is a byproduct of the Enlightenment and of the civilizing process that started in Western Europe with the advancement of a scientific attitude towards the world. People who “choose to perfect this faculty [reason] and to exercise it openly and fairly”<sup>29</sup> opened the path to humanism. We live today in a more peaceful and a more civilized world than ever before. Of course, there is no guarantee that this “Civilizing Process” – the term was coined by Norbert Elias – cannot be reversed. Like Popper, Pinker emphasizes the importance of reason. Emotions tend to disunite people by making them focus on individuals instead of ideas. Hurdling people into categories that can be moralized is a risky venture. Tackling the topic

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25 Stephen Thornton, “Karl Popper”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/popper/>>.

26 Popper in “Has History any Meaning?”, the conclusion to *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, p. 475

27 Ibidem. p. 433

28 Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature. A History of Violence and Humanity*, Penguin Books, London, 2011, p. xx

29 Ibidem. p. 218

of essentialism and its dangers. Pinker shows how the emotion of disgust becomes moralized, making way for the worst:

“The human mind has evolved a defense against contamination by biological agents: the emotion of disgust. Ordinarily triggered by bodily secretions, animal parts, parasitic insects and worms, and vectors of disease, disgust impels people to eject the polluting substance and anything that looks like it or has been in contact with it. Disgust is easily moralized, defining a continuum in which one pole is identified with spirituality, purity, chastity, and cleansing and the other with animality, defilement, carnality, and contamination.”<sup>30</sup>

The same reductionist way of thinking is denounced by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Orientalism “approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint.”<sup>31</sup> Without the belief that people over there were essentially different from us, there would have been no wars, writes Said in the preface.<sup>32</sup> He argues in favor of a humanist education and its “rational interpretative skills” including the practice of critical thought. We need a wider perception of the world because “humanism is the only, and, I would go as far as saying, the final, resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history.”<sup>33</sup>

Unfortunately essentialist theories often support ideologies. When coupled with political power they unleash murderous events. Racism, antisemitism, xenophobia rely on such essentialist ideas and moralized emotions. Lord Cromer, the British agent and consul general of Egypt for twenty-five years, opposed Egyptian nationalism on grounds that the “mind of the Oriental [...] is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description. Although the ancient Arabs acquired in a somewhat higher degree the science of dialectics, their descendants are singularly deficient in the logical faculty. They are often incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusions from any simple premises of which they may admit the truth.”<sup>34</sup> T. E. Lawrence,

30 Ibidem. p. 393

31 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, London, p.333

32 Ibidem. p.xv

33 Ibidem. p.xxii

34 Ibidem. p. 38



better known as Lawrence of Arabia, joins Lord Cromer in his enterprise of insulting the “subject races”. This is what he writes about them: “All the subject provinces of the Empire to me were not worth one dead English boy. If I have restored to the East some self-respect, a goal, ideals; if I have made the standard rule of white over red more exigent, I have fitted those peoples in a degree for the new commonwealth in which the dominant races will forget their brute achievements, and white and red and yellow and brown and black will stand up together without side-glances in the service of the world.”<sup>35</sup>

Victorian elite feared racial degeneration as oncologist Siddhartha Mukherjee shows in *The Gene: An Intimate History*.<sup>36</sup> Francis Galton, the man who coined the phrase “nature versus nurture”, proposed the idea of positive eugenics to select the best heritable traits in humans. Drawing on Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection and knowing very little about genetics the eugenicists launched a movement in Europe and the U.S. In the United States such programs were pioneered by scientists like Charles Davenport, Edward East, and Hermann Muller. They gained support from politicians. Institutions for the “feebleminded” were isolated facilities where all kinds of people were confined and sterilized: feminists, homosexuals, social rebels, the blind, the autistic, epileptics, people with tuberculosis or syphilis etc. By 1938 more than 30 000 people<sup>37</sup> were involuntarily sterilized across the U.S. During the massive immigration of Europeans in the 1920s the anxiety of the Americans rose. The Immigration Act of 1924 restricted the number of people allowed to enter the U.S to 150 000 a year and consequently reduced the flow of immigrants from southeastern Europe in favor of those from the northwestern parts of the continent. The quota system was abolished only in 1965.<sup>38</sup>

Essentialism, ignorance and irrationalism play a major role in our contemporary history as well. A headline from August this year announces that judges who are not deporting immigrants fast enough

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35 Ibidem. p. 241

36 Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Gene. An Intimate History*, Vintage, London, p. 75

37 <https://www.britannica.com/science/eugenics-genetics>

38 As taken from the History, Art & Archives section of the United States House of Representatives website: <http://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1901-1950/The-Immigration-Act-of-1924/>

will be removed from office.<sup>39</sup> It happens in the United States as President Donald Trump is on his way of making “America great again.” Trump’s immigration politics, which restricted Muslims from certain countries to enter the U.S or the cruel policy to separate undocumented migrants from their children, gained him approval from far-right parties in Europe and scorn from everyone else. But he seems determined to keep at least the Latin Americans out: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”<sup>40</sup> The essentialist doctrine resurfaces here. It is all about “us” and “them”, the outsiders, the strangers, the morally repulsive ones who are not like us. The word “rapist” has a very powerful impact because the human mind has developed a defense mechanism against biological contamination, as Steven Pinker writes. Rape triggers the fear of biological contamination. But it also humiliates and terrifies the victim. Everyone worries about it: girls, women, their families. When a presidential candidate promises to keep your wife and daughter safe from “rapists” you may vote for him without thinking about the faults of his aggressive rhetoric. According to Donald Trump most Mexicans are rapists. Emotions become moralized.

This kind of speech is actually an example of the hate speech President Trump is perpetuating and endorsing in the United States. When the deputy assistant secretary for refugees and migration, an official in the State Department, writes that leaders have no duty to condemn racism or xenophobia, or that nationalism and populism should not be treated as negative words,<sup>41</sup> then fighting for the use of reason becomes a moral obligation, just as Popper saw it.

The Civilizing Process was a reversible phenomenon for Norbert Elias.<sup>42</sup> The same applies to democracies. A democracy exists as long as

39 [https://news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/qymeyd/jeff-sessions-wants-to-remove-immigration-judges-who-arent-deporting-people-fast-enough](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/qymeyd/jeff-sessions-wants-to-remove-immigration-judges-who-arent-deporting-people-fast-enough)

40 Transcription of Donald Trump’s speech in his presidential campaign available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/06/politics/trump-mexico-rapists/index.html>

41 <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/29/politics/veprek-state-dept-un-racism/index.html>

42 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process. Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000

its democratic institutions work according to the law and the government can be peacefully deployed. The use of rational criticism and a constant vigilance of the democratic institutions are mandatory if we want to fulfill the promise made at the end of World War II: “never again”.

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