Popper's Open Society and Its Problems[*]

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

After offering an overview of some of the main themes of Popper's political thought, the paper argues that his account faces two problems relating to institutions. The first is that while Popper stresses the 'rational unity of mankind', and the potential for any of us to furnish criticisms of public policy, it is not clear what institutional means currently exist for this to enable this to take place. Second, Popper has stressed the conjectural character of even our best theories. However, at any point, some theories will have fared better in the face of criticism than others, and they may give us important information about constraints on our actions. At the same time, as ordinary citizens we may not be in a good position to understand the theories in question, let alone appraise the state of the specialised discussion of them. There is, it is suggested, a case for thinking of ways to institutionally entrench such fallible theories, especially in the current setting in which social media play an important role.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I discuss Popper's *Open Society*, but also some of the problems that I think that his political ideas face. I should say, at the outset, that I think that *The Open Society* is a very important book. However, I think that it suffers from not being sufficiently concerned with institutional issues, in a sense which I will explain.[1] I will start by presenting briefly what I take the key features of Popper's approach to politics to be.

2. Some Features of The Open Society

Popper's work was written as a defence of a humanitarian and individualistic approach to politics, against various ideas which were influential at the time at which he was writing. His political thought – which I have discussed in some detail elsewhere – was also influenced in important ways by his ideas in the theory of knowledge.[2] He was – I think, devastatingly – critical of teleological ideas about history, and also of uncritical progressivism, while at the same time arguing that we have a moral duty to be optimistic and to do what we can to make the world a better place. He argued that decisions about politics (and thus about the future course of history) are in our hands. He emphasised, at the same time, the fallibility of our knowledge, and that human actions have unintended consequences. As a result, what matters is that there are effective forms of critical feedback to inform those responsible for decision-taking where things have gone wrong.

Popper also argued that what is of key importance is not who should rule, but 'How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?'.[3] He stressed the importance of the critical appraisal of governmental policy by all citizens. He was highly critical of the idea that an elite were entitled to rule, by virtue of their possession of knowledge. He emphasised, in this context, a re-interpretation of the Kantian theme of the 'rational unity of mankind' (see *The Open Society*, chapter 24). Anyone might be in a position to contribute pertinent criticism of our existing society, or of policy proposals. At the same time, it is important to note that the role that he accorded to us was, typically, as potential critics of policy rather than as people who could expect to formulate it. At the very beginning of his *Open Society*, Popper quoted Pericles: 'Although only a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge it'. Popper strongly favoured democracy. But he championed it as a way of changing governments without violence. This contrasts with the way in which 'democratic' is, today, widely looked at as if it was something that is good in itself, rather than its being viewed, as Popper does, in instrumental terms. The contrast is surely in Popper's favour.

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[1] Since writing initial versions of this paper, Piers Turner has mentioned to me that he has an unpublished paper, 'Expert Rule and Open Society', which explores issues similar to those which concern me here, by way of a discussion of Popper and John Stuart Mill.

[2] See Jeremy Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, London: Routledge, 1996, and 'The Logic of Scientific Discovery', in J. Shand (ed.), *Central Works of Philosophy: Volume 4: The Twentieth Century: Moore to Popper*, Chesham, Bucks: Acumen, January 2006: 262-86.

[3] Popper *Open Society*, chapter 7, section 1.

The reservations to which I referred previously about Popper and institutions are, first, because it is not clear what mechanisms there are – or can be – to give effective but pertinent feedback from ordinary citizens of the kind called for by Popper's approach. By this I mean – and I will discuss this further, below – the development of criticisms of theories and of policy proposals, rather than just the expression of people's feelings about them. This I would take to be a pressing problem that needs to be addressed today by those of us who admire Popper's *Open Society*. The institutions of Western democracies which often see themselves as 'open societies' do not, as they currently exist, seem able to play this role effectively.

In addition, as Cass Sunstein has argued,[1] the way in which social media have developed seems in fact to make the kind of interchange between, and learning from, one another that Popper favoured – notably when we have different backgrounds and hold differing views and values - more difficult than it was in the past. We face two particular difficulties here.

On the one hand, Popper has stressed the degree to which we interpret the world in the light of our preconceptions. These, on Popper's account, operate right down to the level of our sense organs and the structure of our understanding of the world. Objectivity,[2] for Popper, can be a product of our interaction with people who have different views and presuppositions from ourselves, provided that we approach them with a proper appreciation of our own fallibility, and with the idea that we might have something to learn from them. Objectivity, for Popper, is emphatically not the product of someone who tries to be objective, or who thinks that they have removed their prejudices.[3] That is not something that people can achieve on their own. (In this respect, Popper's approach is the antithesis of Descartes': rather than isolating oneself and trying to work out what one can be most sure of, for Popper one needs to go out among other people, to interact with them, and receive critical feedback from them.) Indeed, from a Popperian perspective, there is always the possibility that there might be some problem with even our most familiar and best-tested assumptions and procedures.

What is needed, here, is a willingness on our part to accept criticism, something which, as Sunstein has argued – referring to a lot of empirical evidence – does not come easily to us. We also need to give serious thought to what would constitute an improvement to our existing theories and institutions. As I will argue later, a particular problem here is that we may be in a situation in which, to accomplish important social purposes which we value, we have to make use of institutions which preclude our also being able to achieve some other things which we may also value very much. Further, what these constraints are may be a matter of (fallible) expert knowledge which it may be difficult for us to understand and appraise.

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[1] See, notably, Cass Sunstein, #*Republic*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017

[2] Or at least progress towards it.

[3] See, on this, Popper's discussion in *Open Society*, chapter 23.

On the other hand, we face, today, a problem that seems to represent the other side of a feature of modern Western societies that Popper welcomed: that they have become what he described as 'fatherless' societies.[1] He wrote:

> For the society of our free world since the Reformation has indeed seen a decline
> of authority without parallel in any other epoch. It is a society without authority,
> or, as one might call it, a fatherless society.

And further, describing the 'Atlantic Community', he wrote of it as

> … a fatherless society ruled by the interplay of our own individual consciences.

Popper had, earlier in the same lecture from which these quotations are taken, written of the contrast between such an approach, and that of authoritarians – even though they he thought that they were correct in their criticism of the over-optimistic epistemological ideas of liberals. Popper thought that we could reject the ideas of pessimistic authoritarians because of our respect for truth, our toleration of those who have beliefs that differ from our own, and because we have learned that 'by listening to one another and by criticizing one another, we may get nearer to the truth'. My concern is that, today, we have moved away from these very things, in terms of both intellectual ideas and institutions.

Intellectually, there has been the destructive impact of postmodernism and poststructuralism. This, strangely, often shares points which were made in Popper's work; notably the criticism of teleological views of history, and of positivistic empiricism. But while, in Popper, this was coupled with fallibilism and an aspiration for truth (and to achieve realistic theories about the world), the recent influence of these ideas has been in a very different direction. There is, typically, a repudiation of the ideal of truth[2] and of realism. And at the same time, the assumption that the cogency of the kind of view which represents one's own perspective or identity cannot legitimately be questioned. The full horror of the consequences of all this seems to be displayed in Steve Fuller's *Post Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*, and his *A Player's Guide to the Post-Truth Condition*.[3] The search for knowledge, on his account, is replaced by people simply trying to gain influence and exercise power.[4]

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[1] See, on this, Popper's 'The History of Our Time: An Optimist's View', in *Conjectures and Refutations*, London: Routledge, 1963. This lecture (from which the references in my text are taken) dates from 1956; there is more material on this idea in his (unpublished) Emory lectures of the same year. Popper had indicated that he introduced the idea in his William James lectures of 1950 (but all we have from this are some fragmentary notes) and in the first American edition of *The Open Society*, but I have not been able to locate a discussion of this material there.

[2] Even though it is not clear how the claims of these theorists could be taken as they clearly wish them to be taken, unless one understood them as aspiring to truth in the very sense that they seem to be calling into question.

[3] London: Anthem Press, 2018 and 2020, respectively. I have discussed this aspect of Fuller's work in my 'Steve Fuller and Critical Rationalism', delivered at the 5th International Zoom Conference on Karl Popper and Critical Rationalism, March, 2023.

[4] It is striking that in his work – as in that of Feyerabend before him – there seems to be no real appreciation that invoking power and contending political ideals outside of a context of their critical appraisal, leads us back to key problems of political philosophy concerning how people with such diverse concerns are supposed to interact.

In terms of institutions, the very ideas to which Popper appealed seem to have been dramatically undermined by recent social developments. Social media has here played an important role; but there is much more involved, not least the kinds of issues relating to the physical and cultural separation that has taken place in the United States as explored in Bill Bishop's *The Big Sort*.[1]

A key issue, however, is this. It is important to argue, as did Popper, and before him Mill in *On Liberty*, for fallibility and for the importance for us all of public discussion. But it is crucial also to pose the sociological problem of where, and under what conditions, this is to take place. Here, Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*[2] is particularly interesting – if read through Popperian spectacles. For one of the arguments of Habermas's book is that greater 'democratization' of 'the public sphere' in fact led to the destruction of something that (however inadequately) served to exemplify the concerns of Kant, Mill and Popper for the existence of a forum within which ideas could be scrutinized on their merits. This is not to say that greater openness of the public sphere, so that it better exemplifies 'the rational unity of mankind', is not desirable. But a key issue is that it plays the epistemological role that we need it to, and this is not something that we can simply expect to occur spontaneously.[3] Rather, it calls for an ongoing project of deliberate critical construction. We need critical scrutiny of how, currently, institutions operate so as to discharge the kind of critical function that Popper was looking for, and then both theoretical discussion and piecemeal social engineering to try to improve things.

Second, Popper's account in *The Open Society* quite properly stresses the fallibility of the views of experts and the importance of their ideas being open to criticism. But Popper does not discuss what I would argue to be an important complement to this.[4] It is the idea that each of us has typically to rely on tentative knowledge produced by fallible experts. This knowledge may suggest that there are significant constraints on what it is possible for us to achieve which are not obvious at the level of common-sense. It may suggest that things which we dislike, which may be an affront to our values, or to our ideas about what is just, or about the rights that people should be able to enjoy, cannot in fact be remedied in the presence of other things which it is unclear if there are ways of changing.[5] (See, my discussion in section six, below.) Clearly, as any such claims are fallible, we might be provoked by such discoveries into contesting the ideas which constitute current fallible expert opinion, which is fine. But it is important to bear in mind that doing this involves one in offering criticism, and further suggesting how our existing fallible knowledge can be corrected and improved on, not simply saying that one does not like something. We may wish to come up with

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[1] Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

[2] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* [1962], Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.

[3] It is worth noting, here, the way in which in his 'Back to the Presocratics' (see *Conjectures and Refutations*), Popper argued for the importance of a distinctive tradition of preserving the ideas of key historical thinkers, while at the same time criticizing them. A problem, however, is how this is to be accomplished institutionally.

[4] Indeed, there is a sense in which Popper, personally, was one of the last exemplars of the approach – not uncommon among those of his generation who grew up in the Austro-Hungarian empire - that it was possible for a diligent, intelligent and hard-working person to engage with almost any intellectual problem. This does not seem something to which we can sensibly aspire, today.

[5] Or which no-one sensible would wish to change, once they understood what these interconnections are.

an alternative to our current ideas which will constitute an improvement upon them. However, there is no reason to suppose that one will actually be able to do this. This is something to which one might still aspire even when one currently does not know how it can be accomplished.[1] But until one has actually come up with cogent criticism of current leading ideas and also with ideas about how they might be improved on, it seems rash to disregard the constraints that they suggest exist on our current actions.

Popper, by contrast with this, tended to stress the importance of 'piecemeal social engineering'.[2] Piecemeal social engineering is itself of the greatest importance. But it would seem wrong to treat such an approach as giving us a licence to disregard our best current (but of course fallible) knowledge. And as I argued in my *Political Thought of Karl Popper*, this is something that Popper underplays. Further, in approaching these matters in the sphere of public policy, it is important to bear in mind three things.

First, that for Popper there needs to be an initial approach which takes seriously that determining what problems should be addressed is difficult, and that different people will have different ideas about this, influenced by their various different ideals. Popper in his *Open Society*, and in 'Public and Private Values' (see, now, his *After the Open Society*), emphasised the importance of looking at the degree to which there can be agreement across different perspectives, and in particular stressed that people should concentrate on what they thought was unacceptable. It is not enough that some people think that something is bad.

Second, I have suggested that there needs to be a concern for our current (fallible) theoretical understanding of what the limitations are as to what we can achieve. We may, for example, have ideas about people's rights which – while all might agree that it is desirable if people[3] could enjoy them – may not be feasible to try to implement in the light of, say, constraints imposed upon us by the demographic and economic structures of the society in which we are living. Clearly, what one is appealing to here are fallible and contestable knowledge claims. But these matters may be complex, and not easily grasped by, let alone easily contestable by, the non-specialist.[4] There is, I would suggest, a need for a certain (critical) deference to fallible expert judgement, in an Open Society of any sophistication – although I make this point fully conscious of the fact that Popper would not have welcomed it.

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[1] See, for a discussion of this issue, my 'Why the "Hopeless War": Approaching Intelligent Design', *Sophia*, 49, Issue 4 (2010), pp. 475ff.

[2] It is interesting that Peter Munz, in his recollections of conversations with Popper in New Zealand in the 1940s (see *Beyond Wittgenstein's Poker*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) reports Popper as regretting that Hayek, in his *Road to Serfdom*, London: Routledge, 1944, was not more concerned with piecemeal social engineering than with theories which discuss the kinds of constraints to which I am referring here. I would stress, however, that – as I shall explain later – the kinds of constraints with which I am concerned are not limited to what might be called 'Hayekian' ones. For a recent appreciation of incrementalism and both Popper and Lindblom's work on 'muddling through', see Greg Berman and Aubrey Fox, *Gradual: The Case for Incremental Change in a Radical Age*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

[3] I will leave to one side the difficult issue of whether these issues can sensibly be addressed just on a national basis.

[4] I would commend, here, Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basten, *Why Demography Matters*, Cambridge: Polity, 2017.

Third, it is important that knowledge claims that affect us, as ordinary members of the public, should be clearly explained to us, and that we have the opportunity to ask questions about them – and to get them answered. Similarly, if people have concerns about how policies are working, it is vital that they be assisted to put their concerns in ways that can be responded to, and our institutions submitted to ongoing processes of piecemeal social engineering as a result. All this is something utterly different from the kinds of exchanges which are coming, currently, to dominate the public sphere under the influence of social media. In my view, a deliberate effort needs to be made to re-construct the institutions of the public sphere, of course on a voluntaristic basis, so that they will better serve the purposes needed if a Popperian Open Society is to operate.

Popper criticized the idea that we could work out what an ideal politics should look like and guide our efforts by that. Not only, say, might some ideal for a just society to which people are attracted at a particular time be flawed. But we may well only discover what is problematic about it, over time. He also criticized the idea that we were justified in requiring that people make sacrifices for the achievement of some such ideal.[1] At the same time, while he was an ethical individualist in the sense of stressing that it was individual well-being and suffering that mattered, he stressed that ethical individualism was not incompatible with altruism (as many at the time at which he wrote seemed to think). His writings also exhibit a long-standing concern for the relief of the suffering of others.[2]

Popper also stressed the way in which people may be attracted to different – and contrasting - visions of a good society.[3] Not only might some people dislike strongly what, for others, would be an ideal. But he also discussed the way in which there were limits to the extent to which people would be likely to be able to convince others that there was something wrong with their ideals. In the face of this, Popper proposed an approach which has sometimes – but I think incorrectly – been referred to as 'negative utilitarianism'

3. Was Popper not a 'Negative Utilitarian'?

I think that the answer to this question is: 'no'.[4] Popper commends an approach which – across people of a humanitarian character – tries to see what agreement might be reachable, concerning what is socially unacceptable. He in this context refers to involuntary suffering, but also to injustice.[5] He also argues that we should set out to cooperate with one another, across ideological divides, to see if we can form an agenda for politics which addresses such issues. He advocates

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[1] For recent explorations of this aspect of Popper's work, see my 'Lessons from Twentieth Century Political Philosophy before Rawls' in *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory*, second edition, ed. Gerard Delanty and Stephen P. Turner, London: Routledge, 2021, and the reference there to Gerald Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.

[2] This is a striking theme in Popper's Autobiography, *Unended Quest.*

[3] See on this Popper's 'Public and Private Values', in his *After the Open Society*.

[4] See, however, H. B. Acton and J. W. N. Watkins, 'Symposium: Negative Utilitarianism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, supplementary volume 37, 1963, pp. 83-114.*

[5] See on this my *The Political Thought of Karl Popper.*

working by way of 'piecemeal social engineering', to try out ways in which these problems might be resolved, controlled by critical feedback if the measures are not working, or if they have unanticipated problematic consequences.[1] 'Piecemeal social engineering' is not for Popper restricted to small-scale changes: the key issue, for him, is whether we can learn if things are going wrong, and make changes to what we have done.[2]

Two points might, at once, be noted about all this. The first, is that this is to take place in a setting to which Popper refers as 'protectionism'. This amounts to the protection of ideas about the rights of individuals – including protection against economic exploitation.[3] It is not clear how Popper thought that the content of this would be established. What I have in mind, here, is that Popper gives us an account as to how a tentative agenda for 'piecemeal social engineering' should be set. On the face of it, his 'protectionism' would in part be an element of this (e.g., insofar as it is setting an agenda to protect people from economic exploitation). But if it is also playing a role of safeguarding people's rights – including in respect of what government might wish to do to them in achieving its goals, in the pursuit of 'piecemeal social engineering' - then on the face of it we stand in need of an account of how the content of such rights is to be determined which is different from the general account that Popper offers as to how the agenda for piecemeal social engineering should be formed.[4]

The second, is that – as Lord Boyle pointed out in his contribution to *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*[5] – Popper's emphasis on injustice and suffering, and a consensus as to what is unacceptable, might be understood as having consequences which are at odds with what one might take to be the broadly social democratic spirit of his work. For consider programmes like the establishment of free libraries to which anyone can get access. These would seem worthy, and to be something for which there would be broad support. But they are hardly concerned with the relief of suffering or injustice as such. Someone might try – as my friend Professor Ali Paya has done in a private communication – to argue that the failure to provide public libraries should count as 'injustice'. This does not work. For the content of the agenda for 'piecemeal social engineering' is given by an attempt to reach a consensus as to what is problematic. Public libraries, and other

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[1] I should stress that what is involved in 'piecemeal social engineering', in Popper's account need not be small-scale: what he emphasises is the possibility of our learning that things are going wrong, and our being able to correct them.

[2] Something that makes this clear in an interesting manner, is his letter to Rudolf Carnap of January 6th, 1947, in response to Carnap asking him whether he is still a socialist. See Karl Popper, *After the Open Society* ed. J. Shearmur and P. Turner, London, 2008, pp. 103-5.

[3] I have put this in terms of rights just for ease of comprehension, although I am increasingly uneasy about the discourse of rights which has become such a feature of recent politics and political thought. To cut a long story short, it seems to me that we need to think, here, in terms of a Hegelian notion of Sittlichkeit – in the sense of what concrete practical arrangements we might aim at which would involve people being treated better than they are currently, rather than thinking that it is useful to address this issue in purely abstract terms.

[4] One suggestion which I have explored in my *Political Thought of Karl Popper*, London: Routledge, 1996, and my *Hayek and After*, London: Routledge, 1996, is that a contribution might be made by the kind of protection that needs to be given to people if they are to be able to contribute to the critical evaluation of theories and policy proposals.

[5] Lord Boyle on the Dualism of Facts and Decisions in *The Open Society* in P. A. Schilpp (ed.) *The Philosophy of Karl Popper,* and also Popper's response.

measures which would foster individual self-development look worthy. But they are issues which it is not clear would be consensually agreed to. However, the needs involved could be addressed, say, by a mixture of subscriptions and charitable giving by those who favour them, rather than by governmental action.

If what I have argued here is right, there is, as Boyle indicated, the risk that Popper's approach might be unduly narrow in its consequences in terms of what it admits to the agenda for public policy. To Boyle, Popper responded[1] that he was in agreement in terms of legitimate governmental action having a wider scope (in effect, than his earlier suggestions had indicated). And, in a draft of his address for the Sonning Prize which is available in *After the Open Society*, Popper indicated that he favoured government assistance for 'boarding schools of the communal living type'.[2] All this, though, leaves us with a couple of problems.

The first is: such approaches involve the over-riding of some people's views. Conservatives, say, might be unwilling that public funds should be spent on any such purpose. Indeed, they might say that they care passionately about the welfare of children, and on those very grounds would not want to be involved in the funding of an experimental school of any kind!

Second, are just any such schools to be funded: e.g., what about those set up by religious groups? A risk, in all this, is that if we move away from a 'negative consensus' approach (as in Popper's 'Public and Private Values') to the government funding of 'good' projects, we face the problem of how what is 'good' is to be decided. There is a risk that those whose sensibilities are of the kind that, at the time at which I write, are commonly referred to as 'liberal', are apt to see their ideals as self-evidently correct. But are only some things to count, or are all main groups in society to get their favoured concerns underwritten from general taxation?[3]

4. A Problem

The issues that I have raised so far, are intended as suggestions as to how an Open Society understood in Popper's terms might be improved. I'd like to turn, now, to a wider problem. It relates to the fact that that what constitutes the material that government works on when undertaking 'social engineering', are activities that, on the face of it, people are choosing to undertake, on the basis of their own tastes, values etc, and are ones which don't infringe on what are taken to be the rights of others.

What I have in mind, here, is that problems can well be consensually recognised, but that they may occur at a macro or emergent level in relation to people's behaviour. What micro-behaviour they are related to, and what it might be most effective for government to try to influence (e.g., by

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[1] See his 'Replies to my Critics' in *The Philosophy of Karl Popper.*

[2] See, on this, 'For a Better World', chapter 32 of *After the Open Society*, p. 297.

[3] After the fashion of, say, the Dutch model of 'consociational democracy'. On this, see Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977. A useful overview of some of the critical literature on this is given in the Wikipedia article on 'Consociationalism': https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consociationalism

way of regulation, by way of providing incentives or by means of 'nudging'[1]) may not be something that citizens understand, when they indicate that they agree that the issues in question are problematic. We may also well object to government setting out to manipulate us, even to bring about something that in the abstract, as it were, we recognise as good. (Consider, in this context, periodic discussions about whether, if citizens are over-weight, and this has consequences for their health, government can legitimately attempt to control what they eat, or how much exercise they get.) And, further, if the issues are extended to, say, how people relate to minority ethnic groups or people with particular kinds of gender, this may well involve government interfering with things that people take it that they are entitled to do – e.g., because they are related to their religious beliefs, or to social practises to which they are attached. All these raises problems which merit detailed discussion.

A second issue, here, relates to traditions. One might say that Popper's *Open Society* was, itself, in some ways anti-traditionalistic (see notably chapter 24). But Popper modified his views – or at least how he expressed them – in 'Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition' (see his *Conjectures and Refutations*). However, the recognition of the significance of traditions (obviously, not all of which are good) poses a problem for a trial-and-error, social engineering approach to politics. For when significant changes are made to how we have done things in the past, if they do not work out well, we may find that traditions are difficult to restore.

Or, to put matters more accurately, the restoration and modification of traditions, or even the invention and implementation of new ones, might require some activities which I am not sure we should wish to see in the hands of the government. Hobsbawm and Ranger's collection *The Invention of Tradition*[2] offers a most interesting account of the way in which various traditions were, in fact, invented rather than being the products of time immemorial. But the deliberate invention or re-invention of tradition seems something that is best addressed by way of voluntary or commercially based activity, rather than by way of the exercise of the powers of government.[3]

A further problem is that there may be difficulties about what people want. Let me explain this, as it brings me to what I think is a key problem facing Popper's *Open Society.*

5. Plato's Revenge

One rather odd feature of Popper's *Open Society*, is the kind of criticism that he offers of Plato. In some ways, he obviously admires Plato's philosophical ideas, and he is obviously sympathetic to, and in some ways sees himself in the mould of, Socrates as Plato depicts him. But what is odd, is that when he criticises Plato's *Republic* and his *Laws* in *The Open Society*, Popper offers the kind of criticism that one might expect from someone in the Marxist tradition: i.e., a critique of Plato as a reactionary class ideologist.

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[1] See, on this, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, Nudge: *The Final Edition*, London: Allen Lane, 2021, and for some interesting reflections on criticisms of his approach, Cass Sunstein, *The Ethics of Influence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

[2] *The invention of tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

[3] Although this is something that totalitarian governments have often done, and even democratic ones in wartime.

Popper does stress that our best ideas are fallible, and that criticism might come from anyone. What, I would have thought, goes badly wrong, is that Popper does not confront, and to deal with, a major issue raised by Plato. Namely, that some ideas are better than others, and that these ideas, and their merits, may be difficult for some of us to grasp and evaluate. There is, as I have suggested, a risk that Popper's approach of 'piecemeal social engineering' may be too responsive to issues about which we are concerned when, if we were better informed, we would not press for their resolution. A key issue may be: how do we bring to bear our best (fallible) theoretical knowledge to limit what we ask to be done?

An important point, here, was made by Hayek in his inaugural address at the L.S.E., 'The Trend of Economic Thinking'.[1] In this, Hayek delivered some reflections on Ludwig von Mises' argument about the problems of economic calculation in a socialist society; a line of argument that Hayek was, himself, to take further.[2] Hayek argued in the following way:[3]

> It was only when, because the economic system did not accomplish all we wanted, we prevented it from doing what it had been accomplishing, in an attempt to make it obey us in an arbitrary way, that we realized that there was anything to be understood. It was only incidentally, as a by-product of the study of such isolated phenomena, that it was gradually realized that many things which had been taken for granted were, in fact, the product of a highly complicated organism which we could only hope to understand by the intense mental effort of systematic inquiry. Indeed, it is probably no exaggeration to say that economics developed mainly as the outcome of the investigation and refutation of successive Utopian proposals.

What, you might ask, does this have to do with Popper? It is relevant because, when, in his *Poverty of Historicism*, Popper reflects on issues that Hayek had raised about the problems of economic calculation in a (market-less) socialist economy, Popper re-phrased the lesson that he thought that we should draw from Hayek's argument, and then wrote:[4]

> the [social] engineer must use the technological knowledge embodied in these hypotheses which inform him of the limitations of his own initiative as well as of his own knowledge

This is all well and good. But it poses two kinds of problems that Popper himself does not address. The first, is the character (and also the issue of the social entrenchment) of such fallible but expert knowledge. And, second, there is the problem of how it can be conveyed to ordinary citizens that there are some things which they might find attractive, but which it would be a disaster

[1] Now most easily available in *The Trend of Economic Thinking* ed. W. W. Bartley and S. Kresge, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

[2] See, on all this, *Socialism and War* ed. Bruce Caldwell, in his Collected Works, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

[3] Hayek, 'The Trend of Economic Thinking', p. 19 in *The Trend of Economic Thinking*.

[4] *The Poverty of Historicism*, London: Routledge, 1957, section 21, p. 64, note 1.

if they were to seek for – e.g., by putting them on the agenda of issues to be addressed by means of 'piecemeal social engineering'.

Before I turn to these two issues, it is worth noting that Popper himself had some ideas which it could be claimed are of a similar character. Consider, for example, what he had to say about the way in which life in 'abstract' societies, in which there was little by way of traditional community and diminishing face-to-face relations between people, might set up psychological tensions which it would be dangerous if we were to try to meet.[1]

Why do I suggest that there are such issues? First, (and the relevance of this will become clear) I think that there is a problem about Popper's criticism of Marx. I think that Popper was completely and utterly right to repudiate ideas of historical teleology which had played a key role in Christian, Hegelian and then Marxist social thought. However, I think that he was wrong to simply discard what he called 'essentialism'.

This in Popper was something of a portmanteau term. Into it, Popper packed various disparate ideas; e.g.: Ideas about ultimate explanation; Ideas about there being 'essences' behind each word, the grasping of which was claimed to be a particular concern of the social sciences; and Ideas about the infallible intuitive grasp of essences. All of these, indeed, seem to be problematic.[2]

However, also involved in 'essentialism' there is an idea which is perfectly correct, and something that Popper should, in fact, have embraced: a realist view of the social sciences, within which human actions give rise to structures which may then, constrain us.[3] This last point – for which John Wettersten has also taken issue with Popper[4] – is of real importance, and to be related to the issues that I have raised above in connection with Hayek's work. It also relates to Popper's own points about an 'abstract' society. For such views suggest that, as an unintended consequence of our actions, we may bring into being structures which then constrain what we can sensibly do or aspire to achieve, including things which we may find highly problematic.

Just in case it is not clear, may I stop here to spell out the connection of these points with my criticism of Popper's anti-essentialism? In Popper's critical engagement with Marx, the realist baby gets thrown out with the historicist bathwater. Amidst the blunderbuss-style condemnation of various features of 'essentialism', we lose sight of a key and important idea. It is that in the social world, structures are created as consequences of our actions, which may then serve as systematic constraints on what it makes sense for us to aspire to, so long as those structures remain in place.

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[1] I was struck that Ian Jarvie's reading of this in his most interesting *The Republic of Science*, Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2001 is very different from mine here. I took it that Popper's point was to say that a dislike of an 'abstract' society was simply one of the things that we had to put up with in an Open Society, while Jarvie took it as highlighting an issue that had to be remedied.

[2] But where we need, it seems to me, to distinguish between the sense in which people act on the basis of particular ideas – such as their understanding of the state, and of their place in it – and the value of those ideas when assessed as explanatory theories. As explanatory theories these ideas may be false, but it may, nonetheless, be vital to understand people as acting on the basis of them in order to understand their actions and the unintended consequences of those actions.

[3] As I argued in *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*, the 'modified essentialism' which he embraced with regard to the natural sciences should also have been extended to the social sciences.

[4] See his *The Roots of Critical Rationalism*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992.

Much of Hayek's work has been concerned with just this issue, in relation to the consequences of having, in place, an effectively operating market-based society, and the kind of legal order on which it depends. (These, Hayek argued, we also need to retain because there is no effective alternative to the organization of a large-scale society of the kind in which most of us live, without having well-functioning markets. While compliance with the rule of law – as Hayek understood it, in terms of the Kantian Rechtsstaat tradition – indicated how government could intervene within a market economy without this intervention being problematic to people's liberty, as well as being vital for people's liberty as such.[1])

However, rather than laying myself open to accusations of political bias, let me illustrate my point with reference to what Marx said about 'relations of production'. The idea, here (to take up one line of interpretation[2]) was that these are products of human actions – relating to the technology and the kind of economic activity which we adopt – but that they then constrain us. For example, the form of economic activity in which we are involved dictates what kinds of jobs there will be available across many sectors of the economy, and also how human relations will be organised – e.g., within a factory. It is not that these things could not be changed. But the key idea – in Marx and in Hayek – is that it is not a straightforward matter. If we have certain institutions and patterns of social activity in place, then other things – which we might like to occur – cannot be achieved at the same time. Clearly, such claims may or may not be correct.

If, say, Marxist ideas about the limitations of social reform under capitalism were incorrect, and the 'revisionists' views were right,[3] then this simply shows that the specific claims of Marx in question about such matters were wrong. This does not, in itself, imply that there is something wrong with the notion that there may be knowledge of the kind which I am here discussing, which poses the problems which I have discussed.

Another illustration is provided by demography. Ideas about 'demography as destiny' are problematic.[4] But demography deals, often in striking ways, with the manner in which the situations in which we are now acting are structured by the consequences of various choices that people have made in the past, and typically in ignorance of what the longer-term consequences of those actions would be, at a macro level. Not only does this mean that some of our hopes about how society might be improved cannot currently be realised, and in ways the rationale for which may not be easy for us to understand. But it may be difficult to plan for our future (e.g., because of the consequences on provision for our old age of unexpected increases in life expectancy). While what would make for good public policy – e.g., in terms of population control or the encouragement of immigration – may rest on technical issues and also not accord well with our intuitive sentiments.

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[1] See, for discussion of this, my 'Hayek, Keynes and the State', *History of Economics Review* 26, Winter-Summer 1997, pp. 68-82.

[2] What to make of Marx's ideas on this and other matters is much-contested, not least because he tended to set out key ideas briefly and sometimes in very cryptic ways.

[3] See for example Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary socialism: a criticism and affirmation*, New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1909.

[4] See, on this, Danny Dorling and Stuart Gietel-Basten, *Why Demography Matters*, Cambridge: Polity, 2017. It is striking the degree to which the methodological concerns which these authors raise are close to some of Popper's arguments.

All of these things will typically be matters in relation to which we will be dependent on people with relative expertise for their evaluation of the ideas in question. Such evaluation may, and in my view should, be open, in the sense that there is every reason why it should be possible for anyone to join in the discussion, if they can acquire the kind of knowledge required to understand what is going on.[1] But it might be the case that the best (fallible) knowledge which we have currently, actually tells us that some things that people generally would like to achieve within current society can't in fact be achieved.

For example, if Marx is right about relations of production, then a lot of people's hopes about large-scale upward social mobility make little sense (just because the slots for them to move into are not available, and cannot currently be made available). When, equally, if Hayek is right, egalitarian ideas about the distribution of income (as distinct from ideas about a welfare system) make little sense within a well-functioning market economy. Such claims are, obviously, fallible. Discussion about the pros and cons of such ideas is of real importance. But – and this is a key point which I wish to make - to the degree to which we do have fallible expert knowledge of this kind, we stand in need of social institutions that are in some respects more like those of Plato's *Republic*, than are those of an *Open Society* of a strongly 'fatherless' character, if we are to be able to make use of it.

As I hope that I have made clear, this does not mean that I am calling for rule by an isolated elite. What our fallible experts may be able to tell us is that, if they are right, the choices open to us are more limited than we may have expected. But provided that the claims to knowledge are themselves open to effective criticism, it will be important that our best current ideas be socially entrenched. It will also be important that it is explained to the rest of us that while it is open to us to challenge these views (and that it is stressed – in line with what I have said earlier – that it be important that channels be created which make this a real possibility), demands for change that are inconsistent with this knowledge will otherwise simply be disregarded, unless we can cogently contest the claims to knowledge itself.[2]

6. Some Worries about Liberalism

To get such ideas were accepted might be difficult, just because they run up against people's current almost knee-jerk anti-elitism. (The issues that I am raising tend also to be treated in terms of claims about persons, rather than ideas about knowledge.) But I think that we would be in a much better situation if they were accepted. For currently, we are at risk of policy-making being dominated by social media style 'liking' for all kinds of demands for change, or for the recognition of what people tend to regard as their rights, where those doing the 'liking' don't have to face the question of how, or indeed whether, things would work systematically, if their demands were agreed to.

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[1] Which they may not have the capacity to do: I am well aware, for example, that I am simply not likely to be capable of the kind of understanding needed to grasp what is at issue in some areas of economics, despite having studied some economics and mathematics at university.

[2] What would be needed to implement such ideas – notably in terms of the institutional reform of social media – is not an issue which I can tackle here.

I will conclude with what might seem a rather strange diagnosis of the problems facing us here. It goes back to ideas about rights, as they were developed in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. The underlying idea here – as, for example, is illustrated in the work of John Locke, but which is found much more widely over this period – is a notion to which Jerome Schneewind has referred as the idea of a 'divine corporation'.[1]

It is the idea that people have certain God-given duties, to discharge which they need to be accorded various rights. It was further thought that if they behave reasonably on the basis of all these things, God had fixed everything, so that the overall large-scale social consequences of their behaving in this way would be desirable. From such a perspective, agents themselves don't need to concern themselves with macro-level issues in their societies, because all this has been taken care of by God.

Now what is significant about all this, is that we have – for good or ill – inherited, or perhaps better re-invented, rights discourse, which seems to be becoming ever more prominent. However, liberals (among whom I would count myself) seem to have lost sight of the divine corporation problem. Or, to put things another way, that if we don't think that God has fixed it that the macro, or social-level, consequences of our acting on such a basis will necessarily be desirable, then the relation between individual action and large-scale consequences becomes a problem that we need to face, ourselves. (I.e., just what is the relationship understood to be between rights – and how claims for things that people wish for are accepted as rights – and the overall functioning of society?) Accordingly, while Popper's ideas about piecemeal social engineering, with effective critical feedback from citizens, are really important, I think that his account needs to be supplemented by two things – which I would suggest are of equal importance, if our politics and public policy are to work sensibly.

The first, is that we need to articulate, and to critically discuss, our ideas about what the large-scale consequences of various typical human actions, or of the recognition of particular rights, will be. For we may well find that various things are attractive as claims made at the level of the individual, but are problematic if we trace through what the systematic consequences would be of having these things in place.[2]

Second, I have argued that there is a case for the social entrenchment of fallible expert knowledge. That is to say, for the idea that it would be desirable for us to develop institutions that constrain us from taking decisions which our best fallible conjectural knowledge rules out as problematic. Should we adopt any such proposal, we would need to make sure that such ideas are made as comprehensible as possible to those of us without the appropriate expertise to engage with them at

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[1] See Jerome Schneewind's 'The Divine Corporation and the History of Ethics', e.g., in his *Essays on the History of Moral Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

[2] See my 'Contemporary Political Philosophy: post-Hayekian and Popperian reflections', in *Conference Proceedings, Conference on Political Philosophy: Argument, Challenge and Development*, 15th-16th June, Changchun, Jilin: Jilin University: Center for Fundamentals of Philosophy etc, 2019: 79-91.

an expert level, and that our questions about them are answered.[1] At the same time, everything should be done to render them genuinely open to critical appraisal by experts and more generally by interested citizens with the appropriate ability to engage with them.

If there is anything to this - and with this, I suspect, you will be happy to take issue – it may mean that certain of our current ideas about freedom of action and freedom of speech may stand in need of modification. On this provocative note I will stop. For if I am right, here might be more to be said for certain aspects of regimes like that in Singapore,[2] and thus for something which in some respects is in the Platonic tradition, than defenders of the Open Society are usually willing to admit!

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[1] I hope to discuss what this might mean in more practical terms, in the light of our experiences with Covid.

[2] For an interesting, and quite recent, overview, see Kwon Ping Ho, The Ocean in A Drop - Singapore: The Next Fifty Years, Singapore: WSPC, 2015. See also my 'Singapore: Plato's Other Republic?', in G. Moore (ed.) *The Open Society and its Enemies in East Asia,* London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 132-44.

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