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Karl Popper

# On Reason & the Open Society

## A Conversation

YOU are primarily a philosopher, but can you tell us a little about your "political" biography?

POPPER: I became a Marxist in about 1915, when I was thirteen years old, and an anti-Marxist in 1919, shortly before my seventeenth birthday. I remained a socialist until I was thirty, although I began to doubt more and more whether freedom and socialism are compatible.

The incident that turned me into an anti-Marxist was of crucial importance. It occurred in my native Vienna. Shooting broke out during a demonstration by young unarmed Socialist and Communist workers, and several of the youngsters were killed. I was horrified and indignant at the police, but also at myself because I felt that, as a Marxist, I bore part of the responsibility—at least in principle—for the tragedy. Marxist theory demands that the class struggle be sharpened and intensified. It asserts that an intensification of the class struggle speeds our approach to socialism and that, although revolution may claim some victims, capitalism daily claims more victims than the whole socialist revolution would ever do.

That was the Marxist analysis. I now asked myself whether we could ever rationally defend such a calculation. I began to read Marx critically, and I discovered what scant foundation there was for the Marxist beliefs in the historical inevitability of the coming of socialism, the prevalence of a malignant social system, and in such notions as that of so-called *Spätkapitalismus*.

What really exists is people, their joys and sorrows. I was, and I still am, an individualist in the sense that I realised that what mattered was that justice should prevail between individuals, and that concepts such as Mankind—let alone Class—are abstractions, perhaps important in some theoretical context, but sometimes exceedingly dangerous. What are we to say, for instance, of those Marxists who are prepared to sacrifice

concrete individuals for the sake of an abstract Humanity—who believe that the worse human beings fare, the better it is for the Inevitable Social Revolution, and thus for Mankind? Of course there are conflicts of interest in society, but it is extremely doubtful whether the intensification of these conflicts would lead to a better society or to a worse one (such as, for example, a fascist society).

My critical attitude towards Marxism did not, at first, shake my socialist convictions in the least. To me, socialism was an ethical postulate—nothing more or less than the idea of justice. A social order which managed to combine abject poverty and great affluence struck me as both inequitable and intolerable. However, my growing realisation that institutionalised socialism renders the state too unwieldy and bureaucrats too powerful vis-à-vis citizens prompted me to abandon my youthful convictions. I have never regained my belief in the compatibility of socialism and freedom. I have become convinced, moreover, that every simple formula is misleading. If "socialism" means "the socialisation or nationalisation of the means of production", then it is clear that this is not a remedy for all social evils, but rather—and this is most important—a threat to the freedom of the individual.

—But still, politics of another sort changed your life.

POPPER: At the age of twenty-eight I was appointed as a teacher at a secondary school in Vienna. I had written a great deal in the interim, but had published virtually nothing. Encouraged by friends, I now wrote two books. The second of these, published in 1934 under the title *Logik der Forschung*, propelled me, almost against my intentions, into academic life. Austria at that time was ruled by a fascist dictatorship, and I realised that Hitler would soon invade the country and

make it part of Germany. Being of Jewish descent, I decided to emigrate. My book brought me an invitation to give lectures in England, and on Christmas Eve, 1936, I was offered an appointment as a University lecturer in New Zealand. It was there, in March 1938, that I learned of Hitler's entry into Austria and decided to publish my two critiques of Fascism and Marxism, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism*. In the spring of 1945 I was offered a post in England, and left New Zealand. I taught at London University from 1946 to 1969 with intermediate spells as a Visiting Professor in America and, for brief periods, in Austria, Japan and Australia. I retired—if that is the right word—three years ago, but I am now working harder than ever.

—How, and where, during these travels did you come to a new view of society?

POPPER: I first visited England in the years 1935-6. Coming from Austria, which, while governed by a comparatively mild dictatorship, was menaced by its National Socialist neighbours, I now found that I could at last breathe freely. It was as if the windows had been flung open. The term "open society" (which, as I later found, had been used by Bergson in a different sense) derives from this experience.

What do I regard as the characteristic features of an open society? I would quote two. First, that free debate and especially debate about the wisdom or otherwise of governmental decisions, should be possible within a society and should exert an influence on politics; and, secondly, that institutions should exist for the protection of freedom and the protection of the poor and the weak.

To take the second point first, the state protects its citizens from physical violence by means of legal and social institutions, and can also shield them from abuse by economic forces. This is already happening, and it is susceptible to improvement. We must, in fact, construct social institutions which protect the economically weak against the economically ruthless. Political power can control economic power. Marxists underrate the potential of politics and, in particular, of what they disparagingly term "formal freedom."

I, therefore, stress the central role of political institutions in social reform. It is far less important *who* governs than *how* governments are influenced and controlled. The old question "Who should rule?", which was regarded as being the central question of political theory from Plato to Marx, is *wrongly put*. This brings me back to my earlier point, namely, the major significance of public debate. The United States is the most important of those countries which possess a

relatively open social order; all the rest are dependent on its fate. Little more than a century has passed since the emancipation of America's Negro slaves, and since the conclusion of almost five years of Civil War between North and South. It was a terrible national crisis: a crisis of conscience. Now the United States is, once again, going through a terrible crisis of conscience with regard to the Negro problem and simultaneously with regard to Viet Nam.

This clearly shows us what is most relevant to the openness of a society: freedom of speech and the existence of an influential opposition. America's major newspapers and the most influential television commentators are sharply critical of government policy. The opposition calls for the withdrawal of American forces from Viet Nam; and the Government has indeed accepted this as its programme at the prompting of the opposition. We encounter here a unique occurrence which would be inconceivable save in an open society: after a war lasting for years, the Government concedes, under the pressure of public debate, that the war was a grievous mistake and should be terminated as soon as possible.

I would not, of course, want to represent American democracy as an ideal. Far too many crimes and acts of violence take place in America. Furthermore the country seems to have changed with remarkable speed since the assassination of President Kennedy. Before that, the mood was one of hope, and of confidence in America's moral superiority. Now, the country is in the throes of a spiritual depression which has been deepened still further by the murders of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and by the war in Viet Nam. The Americans are no longer certain that their country and form of government are the best. These acts of violence may, in part, be a consequence of some American frontier traditions, but they are not a consequence of the form of government or of a so-called authoritarian system. Life styles and convictions do, in fact, change very rapidly in America: open societies are not very stable, precisely because they are exposed to critical discussion. Dictatorships are more stable, and so are utopias, which are always represented as static.

YOU SAY *the state can protect its citizens from economic violence, by means of political institutions. It certainly could do so—but Marxists argue that these same institutions are manned by the ruling groups and therefore become ineffective.*

POPPER: I think this is a gross exaggeration. Every institution in a democracy is manned by different groups—often opposed—at different moments of time. That much is obvious. But the idea that institutions in a democracy are, so to speak,

permanently controlled by the bourgeoisie is simply a version of the Marxist myth of class dictatorship: that every state is a dictatorial state and that so-called "formal democracy" is nothing more than a class dictatorship. To repeat, I regard that as a fantasy.

*—But isn't there evidence of at least elements of class dictatorship when, as in the West German Republic, 70% of newly created private wealth accrues to the smallest group of "self-employed" persons whereas the seven times larger group of employees is fobbed off with the remaining 30%? When the tax system one-sidedly favours a small section of society? When owners of capital continue to amass wealth without personal effort while most employees are compelled to expend their entire income and can therefore never become owners of capital themselves?*

POPPER: You are posing several questions at once. The word "class" can have many misleading connotations. Marxists claim that all democracies are disguised class dictatorships, but this misleading assertion has little to do with the existence of wide variations in wealth. One can, for example, conceive of a free society which grants equal opportunities to all—all enjoy the same education, and death duties distribute all wealth equally—but which nonetheless exhibits great contrasts in newly-created wealth. Provided there is no poverty, this can scarcely be accounted an evil: large fortunes are almost entirely invested and make it possible to innovate. The same kind of society might also contain extremes of poverty and wealth. And while I should regard this as a great evil, rich and poor would not constitute *classes* in the Marxist sense.

But your remark was aimed at the West German Republic, which you reproached for great inequality in the distribution of newly-created wealth. This proves little about its class character and nothing about a class dictatorship. You also assert that the tax system one-sidedly favours a small section of society. If that be so, democracy has a *remedy* of the sort which can be observed in the British and even in the American systems of taxation. Marx believed that a progressive system of income tax was incompatible with "capitalism", but in Great Britain, a very large part of the national income goes to the state in the form of taxes: income tax, corporation tax, and indirect taxes. (Besides, there are nationalised industries.) But the burden of taxation can become so great that the entire economy—including the lowest-paid—suffers in consequence.

This demonstrates the untenability of the Marxist doctrine that all democracies are disguised dictatorships. And although it may be possible to speak of "elements of class dictatorship," as you did, one may claim with equally strong arguments that the various democracies

embody differing degrees of approximation to a classless society.

*—Don't you believe that the formally democratic political structure must be based on democracy and equality in the economic sphere before it can become fully alive?*

POPPER: Allow me to restate your question in a slightly more primitive form. "Is the coexistence of wealth and poverty an intolerable social evil?" My answer is, yes, poverty is a great evil and becomes still more iniquitous when it coexists with great wealth. More important than the contrast between poverty and wealth, however, is the contrast between freedom and its absence—the contrast between a new class, a new ruling dictatorship, and citizens in disfavour who are banished to concentration camps or elsewhere.

Thus I regard the possibility of free rational discussion and the influence of such critical discussion upon politics as the greatest virtue of a democracy. This places me in diametrical opposition to those who believe in force or violence, particularly to the Fascists and to some adherents of the New Left. Similarly, I am opposed to those revolutionary Marxists or neo-Marxists who assert that there is no such thing as an "objective" discussion: before engaging in a debate with someone they have to be certain that he shares the revolutionary Marxist approach to society—in other words, that he radically rejects the so-called capitalist society of today. This precludes any serious discussion of central problems.

Fascist anti-intellectuals and these revolutionary Marxists are, thus, agreed that one cannot and should not debate with an opponent. Both groups reject all critical discussion of their own standpoints.

But consider what this rejection means. It implies that, once in power, one suppresses all opposition. It implies a rejection of the open society, a rejection of freedom, and an adoption of a philosophy of coercion.

Being influenced by such considerations, Marxists and neo-Marxists are blind to the achievements of democracy, which alone permits them to disseminate their ideas without persecution. Their theory teaches them that political liberties are worthless, or almost so, because they are no more than a cover for a sinister dictatorship.

But this is wholly unrealistic, as one can see from the fact that the recent revival of Marxist ideology has occurred in all the open societies of the West. Democracies are always open to ideas, especially dissenting ideas. Far from being disguised dictatorships, these democracies are always prepared to doubt themselves: they know perfectly well that much is not as it should be,

Only in an open society do ideas have a chance to prevail, and Marxists, who believe that democracies are merely disguised dictatorships, fail to see that all dictatorships, whether of the Right or Left, are fundamentally similar to each other, and dissimilar to democracies.

All this stems from false theories which are liable to blind us to the importance of the critical battle of ideas, to intellectual debate.

**Y**OUR "OPEN SOCIETY" presupposes a pluralism of forces and universal equality of opportunity which is embodied in the constitutions of the Western democracies. But it does not necessarily form part of political reality. Do you believe that the "open society" already exists, or has it still to be built?

POPPER: I believe it to be both a reality and an ideal. There are, of course, various degrees of openness. In one democracy, society may be more mature, evolved, and open than in another. How good or bad it is will depend on several factors: on its prior history, its traditions, its political institutions, its educational methods and, finally, on the human beings who alone can bring these institutions to life. I would suggest that a fairly sharp distinction should be drawn between democracies and dictatorships. People live in a democracy if institutions exist which enable them to oust their government without using violent means; in other words, without shooting it down. That is the characteristic of a democracy. Even in a democracy, however, the road to a widely open and pluralist society may remain a long one. It is a gradual process; and it is always in danger of a set-back.

—Do you believe, then, in the fundamental power of reason?

POPPER: I do not, of course, believe that an attitude of reasonableness is easy to adopt, or that all human beings are consistently rational: they are only rarely so. Nor do I believe in the "force" of reason or the "power" of reason. Rather, I believe that we have a choice between reason and force. I further believe that reason is the sole alternative to the use of violence; and I regard as criminal the use of force or violence where it could be avoided.

But Marxists nowadays do not believe in reason because they think that all arguments merely conceal or "rationalise" social interests. It is, of course, true that interests—and economic interests in particular—play a major role in politics. It is equally clear, however, that a role is played by very different factors, such as the wish to be just and equitable.

Because it is based on an extremely shrewd speculative theory, Marxist practice is not quite

as anti-intellectual as Fascist practice, but it only too often amounts to the same thing: it is, in effect, anti-intellectualistic and irrational, despite its dependence on a somewhat over-intellectualistic and dialectical theory.

Violence embroils one ever more deeply in violence. Violent revolutions kill off revolutionaries and vitiate their ideals. The sole survivors are those who specialise most efficiently in survival.

One certain result of a Revolution of the Left would be the loss of the freedom to criticise and oppose. (Whether the resulting dictatorship is of the Right or Left, reactionary or radical, depends partly on chance, and is often only a difference in nomenclature.) I claim that only a democracy, an open society, gives us a chance to remedy evils. If we destroy a democratic social order by a violent revolution we not only incur responsibility for the heavy casualties that a revolution inflicts but we are also likely to establish a new social order in which it will be impossible to struggle to abolish social evils, injustice, and oppression. As a believer in individual freedom, I am second to none in my detestation of bureaucratic powers and official arrogance. But government is a necessary evil. Total absence of government is an impossibility, and—another regrettable truth—the more people, the more government. Humanity can be very easily destroyed by violence in our time. What is required is that we work for a more sensible society in which our basic conflicts are resolved in an increasingly rational manner.

I said "more sensible". There are, in fact, no sensible societies, but there is always one which, being a little more sensible than the existing one, we should aspire to. That is a realistic demand and not one which is utopian.

—In your "Logic of Scientific Discovery" (1959) and in "Conjectures and Refutations" (1963) you developed a scientific-theoretical approach which has been called "critical rationalism." Another name you give to your views is "fallibilism." Can you explain these ideas?

POPPER: Socrates remarked in his wonderful *Apology*: "I know that I know nothing, and scarcely that—yet the Delphic oracle describes me as the wisest of men." After some reflection, Socrates hit upon the following solution: "I am aware of my ignorance. Perhaps it is this awareness of my limitations which makes me a little wiser than the others, who do not even know that they know nothing." Socrates also said that a politician or a statesman should be wise. What he meant was, a politician ought to be even more aware of his ignorance because a heavy responsibility rests on him. This responsibility should lead him to an understanding of his limitations and to intellectual modesty.

I agree with Socrates, and this is the point at which I can best formulate my basic quarrel with modern Marxists. Modern Marxists believe that they know a great deal. They are wholly lacking in intellectual modesty. They flaunt a little knowledge in an oversized terminology.

My reproach does not apply to Marx or Engels. They were formidable and original thinkers who did have new ideas, many of which were not easy to formulate. The man who has something fresh and important to say is concerned to be understood. He will attach the utmost value to writing as simply and comprehensibly as he can, though he may not succeed. Difficult language is the easiest thing in the world to write. What I dislike most in contemporary Marxist intellectuals is their love for the big word, their parade of learning in highly pretentious verbiage. Nothing could be further from their minds than intellectual modesty. They take their cue from Hegel, not from Socrates or from Kant. I believe, like Socrates, that we know little or next to nothing. Our ignorance is vast. But that is clearly not all: we cannot, of course, overlook the existence of the natural sciences and their brilliant successes. Yet when we examine these sciences somewhat more closely we discover that they consist not of positive or certain knowledge, but of bold hypotheses which are continuously improved—or even eliminated altogether—by rigorous criticism. This produces a gradual approximation to the truth. We have, then, no positive or certain knowledge. But there is such a thing as hypothetical or conjectural knowledge.

Above all, there is scientific progress. In critically discussing our hypotheses, we always evaluate them from a definite aspect—we favour those which strike us as a closer approximation to the truth, those which can better withstand our efforts at refutation. Thus there is no point of rest in science, no point at which we can say: "Now at last we have got hold of the truth!" There are only daring hypothetical theories which we endeavour to criticise and to replace by better ones. The more scientific revolutions the better—that is the rule of science. So the Marxian battle-cry—"permanent revolution!"—has at least this validity.

—So you are, at least in this sense, a revolutionary?

POPPER: I have been charged with inconsistency on the grounds that my revolutionary theory of science ought logically to turn me into a political revolutionary. But this is a grave misconception. Radicalism in the theoretical and moral domains—the bold theoretical devising of new revolutionary theories and the subversive critical overthrow of theories old and new—is just what may enable

us to avoid all acts of violence in the political domain. To illustrate my thesis more clearly, permit me to compare the struggle for existence in the animal and plant worlds with the "struggle for existence" of our hypotheses.

Plants and animals throw up changes or mutations, and those rare mutations that facilitate better adaptation to the conditions of life are those likely to resist elimination by natural selection. Less well-adapted mutations are eliminated by the extinction of the plants and animals which are the carriers of such bad mutations: they either fail to survive, or produce so few offspring that they ultimately die out. A hypothesis may be compared with a mutation. Instead of producing new mutations, human beings sometimes advance new hypotheses or theories. If they are uncritical, those who support ill-adapted or bad hypotheses are eliminated.

But rational critical discussion enables us to eliminate bad hypotheses and to dismiss them as erroneous without exterminating their authors or proponents. That is the major achievement of the critical method. It enables us to recognise the falsity of hypotheses and to condemn them—without condemning those who support them.

Critical debate is a method which permits our hypotheses to die for us—whereas the uncritical method of the fanatic demands that we testify as martyrs to our hypotheses: if they are faulty, we perish with them. Rigorous criticism, revision, and re-examination of our hypotheses can thus replace the violence of the struggle for existence. In the same way, a revolutionary change in our ideas, theories, or hypotheses can deputise for the violent revolutions which have claimed so many human lives.

It is interesting that I should recently have been labelled a "positivist" in Germany by my Marxist opponents, obviously people who don't quite understand what they are talking about. Positivists are philosophers who oppose speculative theories: they try to adhere as closely as possible to what is "given" or can be perceived. But I try to teach: "be bold in advancing speculative hypotheses but merciless in criticising and re-examining them thereafter."

—You call for revolution in science and thought—but not in practice. You also say that science itself can never provide certain knowledge, only hypotheses which have not—for the moment—been refuted. How does that look from the point of view of social problems?

POPPER: Very similar. We also have ideas and theories in the social sphere. We are deeply indebted to revolutionary social ideas. We evolve theories for the elimination of social ills, try to work out their consequences critically, and then assess our theories accordingly.

—But what do "social ills" mean in this context? Surely, social defects of this type can only be measured against conceptions of value. How can one prove which of these values are correct and which are not?

POPPER: One cannot, any more than one can prove anything in the natural sciences. But one can discuss the question, and compare various social attitudes and their real effects. In the last analysis the adoption or repudiation of a social value is a matter for decision.

—So one can't ultimately prove one's social or political axioms—only make a personal decision for or against them! Then your idea of the "open society" is founded on a basic decision of this sort, namely, a decision in favour of rationality?

POPPER: Rationalism esteems argument, theory, and empirical examination. But one can't justify one's decision in favour of rationalism by recourse to argument and experience. Although even this problem is open to debate, it ultimately demands from us a human decision—some decision in favour of faith in reason and the value of human lives. This decision in favour of reason is moral and not simply intellectual. It influences our entire attitude to other people and the problems of social life. Closely connected with it is a faith in the rational unity of man, in the value of every human being. Rationalism lends itself better to association with a humanitarian approach than does irrationalism, with its doctrine of the chosen élite. Individual human beings are unequal in many respects, of course; but this does not militate against the claim for equal treatment and equal rights. "Equality before the law" is not a fact but a political demand based on a moral decision. Superiority creates duties rather than rights.

Faith in reason—the other man's reason included—implies the idea of impartiality and tolerance, and includes the rejection of all claims to authority.

IN CONCLUSION, a question of principle: do you regard revolution, or the forcible imposition of that which is held to be better, as altogether unthinkable?

POPPER: We must distinguish between revolution against a democracy (including the kind which Marxists call "purely formal") and revolution against a real dictatorship. This, although a legitimate revolution, regrettably seldom succeeds in eliminating it. What is more, the word "revolution" can signify non-violent upheavals as well as violent ones. Marxism has left this ambiguity open; but the historical consequence of violent upheaval has often proved to be a dictatorship. Thus it was with the English revolution of the 17th century, which led to Cromwell's dictatorship; with the French revolution, which led to Robespierre and Napoleon; and with the Russian revolution, which led to Stalin. Violent revolutions which succeed in realising their aims are rare: the American revolution is perhaps the one great exception, but even some of its ideas have been doubtful blessings. I greatly admire, as I made very clear in my *Open Society*, the ideas which inspired the French in 1789 and I am aware of our indebtedness to them. But revolutionary ideas and their supporters are almost invariably destroyed by the revolution itself. Non-violent changes are altogether different. They enable us to watch for the unintended and undesirable consequences of our social policies and to modify their effects in good time when they become manifest. They thus create an atmosphere in which pertinent public criticism of existing social institutions need not be forcibly suppressed, and a social framework which affords human scope for humane reforms.

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### In an emergency

You turn off.  
The screen, extinguished, screeches;  
the room sets hard,  
the silence strains.

The basalt phone picks up a hand,  
the dial sucks a finger.  
In an emergency. . . .

Daniel Weissbort