

## Critical Rationalism and Postcolonial Experience\*

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I address the issue of the possible applicability of the ideas of Karl R. Popper's social and political philosophy in contemporary postcolonial countries. Referring to the reception of Popper's philosophy in Central and Eastern Europe, I argue that Popper's writings were effective in catalysing the political wholesale transformation by undermining Marxists' pretensions to scientific status rather than through his anti-utopian and anti-revolutionary political recommendations. In the context of attempts to apply Popper's ideas in postcolonial countries, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, I claim that the influence of Popper's social thought on the politics of those countries may not be as effective as expected or desired. A consideration of the above issue throws new light on the controversy between conservative and progressive interpretations of Popper's political and social thought. Without denying serious limitations to the applicability of Popper's political philosophy as a guide in coping with the problems of postcolonial countries of the Global South, I argue that a conservative reading of Popper's political ideas, which focuses only on his concept of piecemeal engineering as an instrument of social change, underestimates the transformative potential of his ideas and is contradicted by their inspirational role in the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe.

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## Introduction

The philosophy of Karl R. Popper is known for recommending an audacious attitude in theoretical research, and a restrained, piecemeal action in social practice. For this reason, his social and political views are interpreted as politically conservative. Popper's positive programme for social change is indeed moderate. The conservatism of his political thought lies not only in his repudiation of the possibility of wholesale social transformation but also in his rejection of the utilitarian pursuit of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Instead, he advocated "negative utilitarianism", according to which the business of government should rather be to improve the condition of the least advantaged (Popper, 1961, 361; 370; Watkins in: Acton & Watkins 1963). Moreover, Popper's post-war political sympathies, which gradually moved from the German socialist Chancellor Helmut Schmitt to the conservative Chancellor Helmut Kohl, testify to his conservative tendencies. At the same time, however, Popper is credited with inspiring a wholesale and indeed revolutionary political, economic, and social transformation of Central and Eastern European countries, and his ideas helped to undermine the communist system as a whole. This suggests that Popper's ideas, though expressly anti-revolutionary, do have an undeniable emancipatory potential. Viewing Popper as a conservative makes it difficult to understand why his ideas helped to precipitate a comprehensive change in Central and Eastern Europe.

The above ambiguity is reinforced by the customary interpretation of Popper's work as consisting of two separate contributions: the revolutionary, indeed "Trotskyite" philosophy of science, and the anti-revolutionary political philosophy, which obviously differ not only in their subject matter but also in the boldness of his methodology and the timidity of his social recommendations. Though this view was expressly contradicted by Popper's own claim that his political philosophy is an extension and application of his ideas in the philosophy of science, it did little to settle the matter. For example, John Watkins's argument on the unity of Popper's thought (Watkins, 1974), was contested by Anthony A. Derksen (1985). Raphael Sassower (2006) pointed out and aptly summarized a number of other important ambiguities both in Popper's philosophy and in its interpretations (esp. Sassower, 2006).

In this paper, I address the above ambiguity of the existing interpretations of Popper's philosophy. In Part I, I argue that the unity of both parts of Popper's philosophy may be sought especially in its subversiveness. From this point of view, a conservative interpretation of Popper's political ideas, which stresses his concept of piecemeal engineering, underestimates the transformative potential of his work. It is also contradicted by the inspirational role of Popper's ideas in the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe. Despite this, in Part II, I claim that there are serious limitations to the applicability of Popper's political philosophy as a guide in coping with the problems of postcolonial countries of the Global South, and conclude that this fact does not help to dispel the above ambiguity.

## Part I

### The Subversiveness of Popper's Thought

It has been remarked that “giant slaying” was a significant motif in Popper's intellectual life (Kapuściński, 1995; Shearmur, 1996: 39; 196; Watkins, 1997: 213). Indeed: his philosophy of science subverted the inductivist and empiricist views of scientific knowledge, for millennia entrenched in philosophical thought. In challenging the view of exponents of logical positivism, but also those of psychoanalysis, Popper was not daunted by the stature of such thinkers as Rudolf Carnap, Moritz Schlick (Popper, 1992, 98-101) or Sigmund Freud (but see Kenaw, 2010).

The subversiveness of Popper's political ideas is less straightforward. On the one hand, his “war work”, as he called his *Open Society* (Ryan, 2013, xvi) was designed, first and foremost, to subvert the historicist philosophical ideas which, as he argued, undergirded the totalitarian Nazi and Communist regimes. In his revisionary and controversial interpretations of political philosophy, he was undeterred by the authority of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, or Marx, and sought to demonstrate that the roots of totalitarianism may be found in their philosophical conceptions. The echoes of the scandal he provoked by such claims reverberate through the philosophical milieu until today.

On the other hand, however, the claim on the subversiveness of Popper's philosophy is *prima facie* undermined by his positive programme for social reform, based on the idea of piecemeal social engineering which is in glaring contrast with the radicalism of his political critique of the most revered philosophical minds. Popper's programme of permissible social change, formulated to counter the utopian ideas of revolutionary Marxism, was grounded in an epistemological and methodological demonstration of the unfalsifiability of Marx's historical materialism. By undermining the claims to scientific status espoused by the Stalinist Marxists, the argument had a damaging effect on the public perception of the doctrine, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe many years prior to the watershed change in 1989. Popper's methodological argument did more to upset Marxists' claims to the scientific status of their doctrine than any other known criticisms, thereby irreversibly undermining also their political authority and legitimacy. Thus, even though Popper as a political philosopher was not a revolutionary, his ideas, paradoxically, turned out to be performatively subversive in an area of politics in which he recommended a restrained attitude.

The above, however, may be read as an argument against the possible applicability of Popper's political theory in dealing with the present problems of the postcolonial countries: after all, the currently prevalent regimes in such countries, though often repressive and far from accepting the ideals of Western liberal democracy, are not communist, nationalist, or totalitarian. Thus, an answer to the question of the possible efficacy of Popper's thought in the postcolonial context, if there is one, is to be sought elsewhere. A more detailed analysis of the functioning of Popper's work in Central-European countries may offer some clues.

The region of Central and Eastern Europe was receptive to Popper's work ever since his *Logik der Forschung* was published in 1934. Before World War II, a particularly important role in the propagation of Popper's philosophy and methodology of science was played by scholars of the

Lvov-Warsaw School of Logic and Philosophy who paid close attention to the developments in the Vienna Circle and around it (Woleński, 1985; 2003). It is worth stressing that members of the school were not only interested in Popper's ideas: some of them, like Alfred Tarski (1956) and Janina Hossasion-Lindenbaum, significantly influenced Popper's subsequent development, something he readily acknowledged. Also, despite censorship and repressions, Popper's methodological ideas were lively debated during the post-war period under communist rule. While the influence of Popper's philosophy of science was restricted to academia, his political philosophy, though officially banned, enjoyed a wider interest. His *Open Society* was read by the anti-communist groupings ever since its original appearance in 1945 and its translation circulated in typed copies since the 1950s, and later in a samizdat edition. Thanks to this, Popper's concept of the open society became a keyword in Central European political vernacular. In this way, his ideas strongly informed an important group of liberal intellectuals who later became leaders of the "Solidarity" movement which toppled the communist regime in Poland in 1989.

One may say that by insisting on piecemeal engineering as the only acceptable way of social change, Popper seemed not to appreciate the gravity of the challenges facing various regions of the world. His belief that while the world may not be the best of possible ones, it is the best of the available ones, is likely to have prevented him from perceiving some existing evils as things to be remedied. It stood in the way of his recognising that a comprehensive change is sometimes necessary. Popper did not seem to understand that focusing only on a piecemeal change very often does not go to the heart of the problem. He also did not seem to fully appreciate the fact that established social structures always resist attempts at reforming them. Political radicalism enjoins one to be a realist by demanding the impossible. Popper's political realism was about trimming our goals to the possibilities afforded to us by the established social and political system rather than the pursuit of what the system wants us to believe is impossible. More importantly, he did not see it as an issue that quite often we become accustomed to unjust social structures to the extent that their evils escape our attention due to the structural and symbolic regime constantly shaping our perception of social and political realities. The task of revealing and making us aware of this structural violence is the job of a genuinely critical social theory. In this respect, Popper's critical rationalism proved to be insufficiently critical, and the approach to politics he advocated had a strong conservative dimension.

Despite all the above, the region of Central and Eastern Europe had undergone a thoroughgoing change in a non-violent way through a dialogical process which may be viewed as an implementation of Popper's conception of rational method: "rationalism is an attitude of readiness to listen to critical arguments and to learn from experience. It is fundamentally an attitude of admitting that 'I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth,'" (Popper, 2013 [1945], 431). It is this principle that best expresses the subversiveness of Popper's ideas both in his theory of science as well as in his theory of society and political change. Its subversiveness lies in the belief that in science and politics alike no one is in possession of the

final and uncontested truth. Knowledge is not a justified true belief: it is unjustified, untrue unbelief (Miller, 2012, 97). Just as science is an unending quest, so politics is a perennial pursuit of the best possible forms of social life in circumstances that are constantly transformed by the very pursuit.

Central and Eastern European intellectuals found in Popper three things. First, an incontestable demonstration of the unscientific nature of allegedly scientific Marxism; second, the idea of openness of a society which was understood by them as a call for democratic participation in the government, transparency of political power, and its accountability; third, they saw in his political works great intellectual energy, or, as Watkins put it, “demonic force” which instilled in them a belief that a regime supported by a glaringly false doctrine cannot last indefinitely. His ideas catalysed the people’s faith and helped to unite their political energies. So, even though Popper believed that holistic change is not only utopian but also inevitably violent, his idea of open society nevertheless inspired a large-scale comprehensive transformation. His ideas thus turned out to have not only a theoretical force but also a performative one; they acquired a transformative or indeed subversive power from people’s belief in them. Popular energy was awoken not so much by the idea of piecemeal engineering, backed by Popper’s and Hayek’s complex epistemological arguments, but by the alluring prospect of living in an open, transparent, and just society, resembling the Western democracies which Popper claimed to be the best of existing worlds (Popper, 1989, 369). One may thus justifiably say that Popper performed the role of ideologue of the peaceful revolution of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe (Miller, 1997, 400; Hacohen, 2000, 540). Towards the end of his life Popper, who spent most of his life fighting the enemies of the open society and lived long enough to see their demise, rejoiced in the fact that the peaceful revolution took place.

### Self-Poisoning of the Open Society

The intellectual and political leaders in Central and Eastern Europe seemed to be aware of the imperfections of the Western democratic capitalist system they strove to implement, but they strongly believed that Western political arrangements cannot be bettered. They perceived the liberal democracy and capitalist economy as a self-correcting system, capable of dealing with all forms of injustice and immunised against any serious instabilities. In other words, they believed that if our problems will ever get solved, they will be done away with by the theory and practice of political liberalism, democracy, and the free market. Such an attitude, though perhaps in line with some Popper’s opinions, was much against the Popperian spirit. The error involved was precisely the error of historicism, essentialism, and finalism which he criticized. Such an attitude is based on the mistaken belief that society, once opened, will remain open forever after. In other words, the attitude disregarded Popper’s warning that the future course of society cannot be predicted, and, *a fortiori*, its future problems are equally unpredictable (Popper, 1963, v-vi).

Unsurprisingly, the initial success of the transformation in Central and Eastern Europe revealed deep-seated tensions which had drawn the societies into internal conflicts. Neoliberal reforms



produced their own problems, most especially extreme economic inequalities. As a result, those countries, presented as models of successful political transformation from communism to liberal democracy, became divided by social and political discontent and slipped into a self-imposed closure again. Popper's belief in the Socratic method of solving problems through dialogue gave way to the politics of mutual contempt. Neophyte neoliberals did not pay attention anymore to Popper's warning not to make a godhead of the free market (Chmielewski, 1999, 36). Popper's cosmopolitan ideas have been replaced by appeals to national sovereignty and ethnic pride; the countries, especially Poland and Hungary, have become a seedbed of rampant nationalism, which Popper strongly criticized as the principle of national self-determination (Popper, 1999, 149). Inclusionary ideas advocated by Popper were superseded by radical exclusionary, xenophobic, and racist ideologies. A telling symbol of the reversal is the fate of the Central European University, established in Budapest in 1991 by Popper's pupil George Soros. The University, known for its active promotion of Popper's critical rationalism, has been expelled in 2018 to Vienna by former Soros's protégé Victor Orban, presently the Hungarian prime minister, who swapped his initial and ardent allegiance to liberal democracy for no less ardently professed and implemented "non-liberal democracy." Some Central and Eastern European countries have become repressive, intolerant, and corrupt regimes. To use Leszek Kołakowski's prophetic phrase, the newly open societies fell victim to self-poisoning (Kołakowski, 1990). Popper was much incensed by this claim; as he wrote in a letter, "Leszek Kołakowski[s]... opinions about my work are totally mistaken" (Popper to Chmielewski, April 8, 1991).

George Soros, a billionaire who claims that he owes his fortune to the practical application of Popper's philosophy, is a dedicated advocate of the idea of the open society which he actively promotes in many troubled places in the world, Africa included (Soros, 1995; 2010). At the initial stages of the wholesale transformation of the Eastern European countries, he argued that they may become permanently democratic only on the condition of substantial assistance from the West which should help them to turn their aspirations into reality. The financial aid, access to the European Common Market, promotion of the cultural and educational ties between the East and the West, and eventually inclusion of Eastern Europe into the European community would foster the pluralistic societies in the region and "prevent the continent's future repartitioning" (Bessner, 2018). Soros believed that the problems emerging in the transformation of the Eastern part of Europe were a result of the unwillingness of the Western world to extend the necessary assistance (Soros, 1995, 178).

As a matter of historical fact, however, all the preconditions of stabilisation of the open and pluralist regimes, specified by Soros, *have* been satisfied: the countries in question did receive ample financial aid, they gained access to the European market, the cultural and educational ties between the West and the East have been formed, and they have also been included into the European community. Yet this tremendous effort and assistance did not bring about the expected result and did not prevent those countries from relapsing into non-democratic forms of government.

The reversals occurred very much in accordance with Popper's diagnosis of paradoxes of democracy, freedom, tolerance, and sovereignty (Popper, 2013, 581-582). For example, Hungary and Poland, the countries which spearheaded the democratic and liberal change in the region, three decades later turned to nationalism and authoritarianism.

Ironically, among the victims of this turnaround was Popper's philosophy itself. His political philosophy, the "charter of cold-war liberalism" (Hacohen, 2000, 2), once informing the everyday public discourse, suffered a dramatic setback. His idea underlying the concept of the open society became a subject of criticism and fell into oblivion. The following incident from my teaching practice may serve as an illustration. Optimistically assuming that the very mention of Popper's name will be as informative for my students as it had been for me, I recommended to my students to read Popper as an inspiration for their essays. After the lecture one of the students approached me and asked with a rather puzzled look on her face: "Professor, do you really want us to read Potter? Harry Potter?" More seriously, Popper's idea of the open society, the symbol of the initial political aspirations of the region, along with Soros's charitable activities, became anathema to many of its leaders.

## Part II

### Popper and the Post-Coloniality

Volumes have been written about problems of postcolonial countries. There is none written by Karl Popper among them. He addressed the topic of colonialism only obliquely, in the context of his criticism of Marx's political economy. He did so by taking the concept of colonial exploitation into quotation marks and suggesting that he did not consider colonialism exploitative, though simultaneously claiming that "although the misery imposed upon the natives through colonization is one of the darkest chapters in the history of civilization, it cannot be asserted that their misery has tended to increase since the days of Marx. The exact opposite is the case; things have greatly improved" (Popper, 1945, 393-394). He rarely referred to colonized regions, only once expressing his satisfaction with the end of apartheid in South Africa (Popper, 1994, 149).

Reciprocally, Popper is referred to by contemporary postcolonial scholars, if ever, as an author of a significant contribution to the philosophy of science and methodology (e.g. Masolo, 1994, 124; Táíwò, 2004, 310) rather than a political thinker. Oseni T. Afisi, a Nigerian philosopher, recently attempted to tap into Popper's *oeuvre*, seeking in it some guidelines for possible solutions to political problems in Nigeria (Afisi, 2016a; 2016b; 2020). He sought to reconcile Popper's individualist ethics with the traditional Afro-communal one, and more recently he assembled numerous thinkers to search in Popper's work for inspiration to the solution to Sub-Saharan problems. In the now-published volume (Afisi, 2022), they discuss such issues as the problems of equality, postcolonial justice, epistemic justice, and decolonization of philosophy. Following Afisi, I shall confine myself below mainly to a reference to the Sub-Saharan postcolonial experience, and to his attempt to employ Popper's social and political ideas as a guideline for much-needed reform in Nigeria.

Though greatly appreciative of Popper's ideas, Afisi stressed Popper's conservatism and insufficiency of his programme of permissible social reform. Despite his evident enthusiasm for Popper's philosophy, Afisi critically assessed its possible efficaciousness in dealing with problems that postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa must cope with nowadays. As he argued, Popper's insistence on boldness and audacity in theoretical investigations was not coupled with an analogous call for bold intervention into social and political matters, much to the contrary (Afisi, 2020, 11). He also attempted to demonstrate, against Popper, that it is possible to design social engineering in a way which would be more than piecemeal yet not fall into unmanageable holism and rash utopianism. Below I shall argue that the issue of the practical efficacy of Popper's political thought cannot be reduced to the assessment of his view as to the acceptable and unacceptable political reforms.

Afisi sets out to fill the lacuna between Popper's audacity in theory and his timidity in practice. Influenced by Shearmur's criticism of the idea of piecemeal social engineering (Shearmur, 1996, 57-61; Sassower, 2006, 137), he argues, against Popper, that social scientists *are* able to gain an understanding of co-variation even if they do not have full control of all variables in a reformed system.

Relatedly, then, piecemeal engineers could operate on more than one factor at once and potentially still learn from their mistakes. They would need to use statistics and regression analysis but by these means they could combine 'many-pieces-at-once' piecemeal engineering with qualities of trial and error, learning from their mistakes in bits and pieces. The key issue, therefore, is limiting and controlling experimental variables so that causal factors can be identified" (Afisi, 2020, 15).

The suggested modification aims to demonstrate that such a multitasking social engineer who wants to learn from his own mistakes to be able to correct them, does not have to be a holistic designer or a revolutionary (Afisi, 2020, 15). The issue is not limited to the questions of the methodology of social sciences and has direct relevance to social reform much needed in such countries like Afisi's native Nigeria. Commenting upon Popper's piecemeal engineering, Afisi states that "[i]f one considers [...] the continent of Africa where I am from, where there are a great many socio-economic problems, upon which one would surely want work done many-pieces-at-once" rather than piecemeal social engineering as envisaged by Popper (Afisi, 2020, 14).

Though Afisi is vague in specifying troubles afflicting his native Nigeria, my own Nigerian experience, though all too brief and confined to the largest Nigerian city of Lagos, suggest that the challenges the country faces are indeed overwhelming. Despite being one of the world's largest oil producers, most of the Nigerian population is extremely poor. It has been argued that the chief source of the Nigerian problems is the corrupting poison of immense riches coming from oil struck in 1956 and the inability to deal with it properly by the Nigerian authorities. Suffice it to say that between the years 1970 and 2000 Nigeria earned more than \$350 billion from oil. In the same period, however, the poverty rate rose from 35 to 70 per cent. Its economy, including traditional



strong Nigerian agriculture, shrank by nearly 70 per cent; as a result, hunger has become a widespread problem in this rich and fertile country. A comparison with Indonesia is illuminating. In the 1960s Nigerians and Indonesians had more or less the same average income, and their countries earned similar amounts from oil. Yet in this period, Indonesia's economy has quadrupled, while Nigeria's has contracted (Shaxson, 2007, 24). The difference may be explained by pointing to postcolonial heritage, ethnic squabbles, religious diversity, etc. However, the most important reason for the deplorable condition of Nigeria seems rather that the postcolonial successive governments, too busy with privatizing the proceeds from the national wealth and transferring them abroad, are not excessively bothered with the modernization of the country. The immense riches flowing to Nigeria from oil sales do not help to democratise the country or to improve the condition of living of its population. Indeed, the reverse is true. According to a former high-ranking Nigerian politician, in the past, the civil servants in Nigeria were watchdogs of the commonwealth; now they are part of the looting (Shaxson, 2007, 25).

Afisi seems thus right: immense problems generated by misgovernment will not be done away with by means of piecemeal reform. What is needed is, first and foremost, the rule of law, and accountability of the government which are part and parcel of Popper's idea of the open society. Transparency of the government alone, though vital, will be insufficient, however: after all, anyone paying attention has been able to point out the culprits for decades. The practical question is how to instil accountability in a country whose untransparent government, immersed in corruption generated by oil money, does not respect the rule of law nor cares about the common good. It should be remarked that the revolution in Central and Eastern European societies, which succeeded in establishing more or less accountable governments, did not follow Popper's recipe for reform, on the contrary: the change was affected by means of the general strike, a weapon taken from Rosa Luxemburg's revolutionary armoury rather than from the liberal ideology. Such tactics were possible, however, in a situation of a strong and well-organised working class, something which is missing in present-day Nigeria.

### **Individualism vs. Tribalism**

Moreover, and paradoxically, the opening of Nigeria to the world economic system, instead of doing away with its traditional tribalism, only enhanced it. The new Nigerian tribalism draws its vigour both from the opposition to Western influence and from a desire to tap into the stream of oil money. Ethnic distinctions between Yorùbá, Igbo, Hausa, Edo, Ijaw, Fulbe, Kanuri, Urhobo-Isoko, Ibibio, Epira, Nupe, Gbagyi, Jukun, Igala, Idoma, and Tiv, divided further into clans, are employed as entitlements to their share in the oil proceeds. As to be expected, this generates animosities between them instead of unity, additionally amplified by religious differences between Christian, Muslim, and traditional African denominations. In view of this, the option of a popular movement working for a unified vision of Nigerian society seems immediately unavailable. No wonder violence is the primary mode of protest against the overall situation in Nigeria.

The following example will help to underline the major difficulty in adopting the attitude of mutuality recommended by Popper in the Nigerian predicament. Alhaji Mujahid Dokubo-Asari, a well-educated leader of the Ijaw opposition, disappointed with Nigerian politics, concluded that “dialogue will lead us nowhere” and organised a military organisation Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force to protect the interests of the increasingly disinherited people of Niger Delta (Shaxson, 2007, 192). Another example of social discontent is the radical militancy of Boko Haram who not only kill people and abduct children to extort ransom. They also steal food grown by small farmers in the villages, leaving them without means of subsistence. By destroying their livelihood, they undermine domestic agriculture and push people to urban centres such as Lagos. Boko Haram’s activity perfectly illustrates Thomas Hobbes’s view of the state of nature: “In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently, no Culture of the Earth” (Hobbes, 1996 [1651], 84). In view of the complexity and gravity of Nigerian problems, piecemeal social engineering seems utterly ineffectual. One may argue that Central and Eastern European party nomenclature was no less corrupt than the Nigerian one, but the resources available up for their grabs were diminutive in comparison to the Nigerian riches and for this reason were more amenable to engage in the dialogue with revolted societies. It thus seems that countries like Nigeria, stuck in the deadlock between the ineffectuality of piecemeal improvement and the impossibility of a revolutionary change, are condemned to a drifting gradual change whose course will be haphazardly determined by the ongoing antagonism between untamed capitalist forces and a disorganized, discontented, and impoverished society.

In startlingly psychoanalytical terms Popper asserted that Western civilization “has not yet fully recovered from the shock of its birth – the transition from the tribal or ‘closed society’, with its submission to magical forces, to the ‘open society’ which sets free the critical powers of man” (Popper, 2013, xvli; Kenaw, 2010). Accordingly, he aimed to show that “the shock of this transition is one of the factors that have made possible the rise of those reactionary movements which have tried, and still try, to overthrow civilization and to return to tribalism. And it suggests that what we call nowadays totalitarianism belongs to a tradition which is just as old or just as young as our civilization itself” (Popper, 2013, xvli). Popper’s liberalism was formulated in opposition to collectivist ideologies of nationalism and communism. In extolling the values of Western civilisation, he condemned tribalism to which, as he argued, the Nazis and Communists intended to return. Ernest Gellner, a robust champion of critical rationalism, took a differing view of the matter (Gellner, 1983; 1997). Afisi argues that Popper’s individualism in fact assumes some elements of communitarianism. As he claims, Popper well understood that it is

Hardly possible for individuals to author their own values without truly engaging critically with others. This is a communitarian impulse which reflects the intersubjectivity in rational reflection, and the inevitability of critical appraisal by others of the way we ourselves are in social interaction. In this respect, Popper found a middle ground between the negative and positive concepts of freedom.

In fact, Popper's concept of freedom is a balance between negative freedom and positive freedom. (Afisi, 2016a, 2).

Following Philip Pettit, Afisi argues that cognitive processes demonstrate human mutual dependence on each other. Coming up eventually with a concept of liberal communitarianism, he attempts to place Popper's views halfway between liberalism and communitarianism by highlighting the "inherent social aspect of Popper's liberalism" which underpins the emergence of a coherent liberal concept that derives support from the nature of the social character of the self and the social nature of human consciousness (Afisi, 2016a, 13).

Afisi's endeavour to stress a communitarian dimension in Popper's theory of knowledge and his political philosophy seems, on the one hand, incomplete, and, on the other, too generous to Popper. First of all, Afisi's interpretation of Popper as a liberal-communitarian overlooks his concept of abstract society through which he intimated the importance of rich social relations for a human individual.

Popper explained the idea of abstract society as "a society in which men practically never meet face to face – in which all business is conducted by individuals in isolation who communicate by typed letters or by telegrams, and who go about in closed motor-cars. [...] Such a fictitious society might be called a 'completely abstract or depersonalized society'" (Popper, 1995, 166). He went on to say that "our modern society resembles in many of its aspects such a completely abstract society. Although we do not always drive alone in closed motor cars (but meet face to face thousands of men walking past us in the street) the result is very nearly the same as if we did—we do not establish as a rule any personal relation with our fellow-pedestrians." (Popper, 1995, 166). Despite advocating individualism, Popper formulated a mild critique of the abstractness of modern societies by saying that many people living in them "have no or extremely few intimate personal contacts, who live in anonymity and isolation, and consequently in unhappiness. For although society has become abstract, the biological make-up of man has not changed much; men have social needs which they cannot satisfy in an abstract society" (Popper, 1995, 166).

The above may seem to support Afisi's argument that Popper was aware of the importance of social relations not only in the pursuit of knowledge but also in social life. At the same time, secondly, in comparison with robust claims of contemporary communitarians, especially Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), communitarian elements in Popper are rather thin and do not go beyond a mere acknowledgement of the individual's need for intersubjective relations with other human beings. For this reason, they cannot become a ground for any normative claims which would bring him closer to anything resembling communitarian ethics.

The point has been persuasively made by Thaddeus Metz who challenged the attempt to square Popperian liberal values of the open society with African morality. Building upon the *Ubuntu* wisdom that "A person is a person through other persons", the contemporary research on African ethics (e.g., Tutu, 1999; Masolo, 2010), as well as his own extensive investigations, Metz argues that there is a decisive if not unsurmountable difference between the moral outlook advocated by

Popper and the one inscribed in the Afro-communal ethics (e.g. Metz, 2011; 2014; 2015). He demonstrates that for Popper, the worth of a human being comes from her capacity for rationality, while in Afro-communal ethics it is a result of the human capacity for relationality” (Metz, 2020, 9). According to Metz, it is not

this communal relationship that has a basic moral value, but rather an individual’s natural capacity for it. Typical human beings, for example, have dignity insofar as they are in principle able both to be communed with and to commune. The highest moral status accrues to human persons generally, beings that by nature can be both objects of a harmonious relationship, viz., able to be identified with and cared for by others, and subjects of it, able to identify with and care for others. (Metz, 2020, 10).

This allows him to point out two major differences between the liberal Enlightenment morality advocated by Popper, and the traditional African ethical views. One of them is that if a person fully capable of reasoned decision-making was unable to cooperate with others, she would still be considered by Popper as possessed of dignity, yet from the point of view of Afro-communal ethics, her dignity would be questioned. The other difference is that Popper deems human rational agency sufficient to confer dignity upon an individual, whereas within the Afro-communal perspective, human dignity has its source in the individual capacity to exhibit solidarity toward others (Metz, 2020, 11).

### **The Best of Possible Worlds**

We are thus presented with a choice between two moral outlooks which seem incommensurable: western culture is individualistic, while African cultures are collectivist. Popper had no doubts about which of these two moral views is better. His claim about the Western world being the best of the existing worlds reappears in an even stronger version:

I think that our world and the human beings in it are both wonderful. Of course, I know there are also a lot of bad things in our world, and yet it is still the best there has ever been in history. (...) I am prepared to defend myself against anyone and argue that the general moaning about the evil world in which we live – which may be called the dominant religion of our times – is in conflict with all the facts (Popper, 1999, 99-100).

He extolled European rationality whose roots he located in ancient Greece, and which culminated in western science and technology. The main feature of the openness of a society is the rationalism of its members; the conflict between rationalism and irrationalism “broke out for the first time in the Middle Ages, as the opposition between scholasticism and mysticism. (It is perhaps not without interest that rationalism flourished in the former Roman provinces, while men from the ‘barbarian’ countries were prominent among the mystics)” (Popper, 2013, 434).

Popper was not the only Western philosopher to make such a claim. Edmund Husserl argued that Europe is a site of the emergence of universal and rational thinking *par excellence* and the

motherland of universal truth. He also argued that its ultimate aim should be seen as a spiritual aim for all nations and individuals. “The spiritual *telos* of European humanity, in which the particular *telos* of particular nations and of individual man is contained, lies in the infinite, is an infinite idea toward which, in concealment, the whole spiritual becoming aims” (Husserl, 1970, 275). Jan Patočka followed in the footsteps of his mentor in asserting the spiritual Greek element as the essence of authentic Europeanness and the driving force of its historical expression. Both thinkers, very much like Popper, distinguished those European tendencies as fulfilling the philosophical vocation from those which, through the instrumentalization of human rationality, repudiated it (Alexandravicius, 2019, 163). It is worth remarking that while Popper praised the Sophists for their egalitarian views and harshly criticised Plato and Aristotle for their proto-totalitarian antiegalitarian conceptions, Husserl, on the contrary, repudiated the relativism of the Sophists and adopted the Platonic rationalist epistemological position.

Popper, however, went on to formulate an even stronger claim: “My main thesis is that not only are we doing better economically, we are also morally better” (Popper, 1999, 100).

Several things need to be said in relation to this bold assertion. First of all, the rationalist universalism informing this claim was a foundation of the Enlightenment liberal cosmopolitan politics of which Popper has been an outspoken exponent. According to this version of cosmopolitanism, all human beings are essentially equal and deserve equal treatment. That liberal intellectual order, however, established upon the Enlightenment concept of individual rationality, encouraged practical action and politics which utterly and callously belied its declared universalism. In particular, by attributing rationality to white men, it tended to deny it to women and people of colour, and has lent itself to extreme racist distortions (Mignolo, 2011, 181-209; Losurdo, 2014, 16).

Secondly, such construal of the Western world, based on moral opposition of the good and evil elements, is likely to cater, as it did, to a variety of questionable attitudes. The most benign is the attitude of moral exoticism with which people of the West tend to view nations of other continents and other skin colours. It also caters to the attitude of “orientalism” diagnosed by Edward Said. In its most extreme forms, it encourages the occidental exclusionary, racist and supremacist ideologies and policies. The most recent and painful proof of that tendency is the present continuous crisis of mass migration of peoples from non-European regions who seek shelter from the consequences of wars staged by the European and other Western countries on their territories, as well as the Black Lives Matter movement, aimed against the racist policies in the United States of America and elsewhere. The universalist cosmopolitanism based on the idea of Europe, or the Western world, as embodying the supreme human values, has been all too easily construed in an exclusionary way.

Thirdly, this well-intended approach is undermined by the fact that the Western world owes its economic superiority not only to intellectual, rational, and technological skills but also to the ruthless exploitation of the peoples of other continents, most especially and tragically, the peoples of Africa. For example, the US foreign aid extended to countries in need works in fact as a domestic



subsidy for American agricultural and manufacturing interests: the aid is extended on the condition that it is spent on the purchase of American goods (Sassower, 2017, 195). No less exploitative are the Chinese and European economic activities in Africa. More generally, after a decade since the Structural Adjustment Programs were imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in 1986 on many African countries, Nigeria included, there was no measurable economic progress registered in the countries affected. Instead, after a decade of the implementation of these programmes, “Africa economically is much worse off today than it was a decade ago” (Ogbonna, 2012, 54).

Popper’s admiration for the culture of Britain is unlikely to win him sympathy in India, the Middle East, and Mesopotamia, or “Arabia”, where the British are remembered as ruthless colonists who disregarded the value of the lives of the local populations. The Indians remember the Amritsar massacre in 1919, perpetrated by the British. Popper’s hero Winston Churchill is remembered in India for his refusal to send food to India to alleviate the famine which contributed to the death of three million Indians. Iraqis were indiscriminately killed by the British in aerial bombardments, a scheme conceived by Churchill and Thomas Edward Lawrence, known as Lawrence of Arabia. Public condemnation of this practice was defended by assurances that “[Iraqis] have no objection to being killed” (Satia, 2008, 249) and the belief that the fate of Iraqi women and children killed in bombing should not trouble the British conscience, because local “[sheikhs] ... do not seem to resent ... that women and children are accidentally killed by bombs” (Satia, 2008, 250). It is unfortunate that Popper, like other occidental philosophers, did not see it worthwhile to dwell upon this dark aspect of Western civilization. The idea of the superiority of the West, especially its moral superiority, is thus not just a myth. It is a perverted lie which obscures atrocities inflicted by the European colonial powers on peoples outside their continent.

Popper’s work in the area of political philosophy is not only an exercise in historical interpretation and analysis. His opposition between open and closed societies, together with the contention about European moral superiority, is an attempt to redefine the European civilisation. More specifically, his argument purports to disown and expunge the attitudes of exclusion, racism, and superiority towards non-European peoples from the European tradition, and to present them as foreign to the genuine European spirit. There are several problems with this.

First, as Popper himself argued, the values which he saw as inimical to the humanitarian tradition have been inscribed from its very beginnings into the European tradition by its greatest thinkers, especially Plato and Aristotle, but also by Pericles, admired by Popper, who introduced in Athens a law which deprived the Athenians of mixed origin (*νόθοι*, a concept closely resembling the Nazi term of *Mischlinge*) of the civil rights, including the right of inheritance. This exclusivist tradition played no less, and in fact more, constitutive role in Western philosophical thought than the works of the champions of egalitarianism. The recurrent vigorous revival of the tradition of European exclusivism suggests that Europe cannot deny what defined its identity and tradition for more than two millennia.

Second, the very idea of openness, the pillar of Popper's political philosophy, suffers nowadays, again, from a strong backlash. It affects not only the region of Central and Eastern Europe, which only recently emerged from the communist predicament and now slide into nationalist authoritarianism. The backlash against openness is also prominent in the countries of "old" Europe, including France and Germany, and other colonial powers of the past, as well as in the United States of America. It is also strong in Great Britain, a country which Popper admired the most. The revival of exclusionary attitudes is often presented as a perfect example of the return of the repressed. Their persistence demonstrates that they are not accidental perversions instilled in the European tradition by evil-minded personalities or imported from elsewhere: they are a part and parcel of the European tradition.

Third, the idea of an open society does not look better when approached from the point of view of postcolonial societies. One may argue that their condition is, paradoxically, not a result of some indigenous tribal traditions, but rather, on the contrary, a result of their excessive openness to foreign, especially Western influences. If those societies are undergoing enclosure, this is due, first and foremost, to the overpowering external impact of forces which never treated them in a partner-like manner and instead projected their own exclusivist ideologies and practices onto them. Former European colonies continue to bear deep scars of their dark past, while their attempts to emerge from subalternity are effectively hampered by new ways of exploitation and denigration. It thus seems that it is not the postcolonial peoples who should strive toward openness but rather the Western world in its relation to them.

### Exclusionary Cosmopolitanism

Popper was a Eurocentric cosmopolitan both in his thinking and life. He supported his cosmopolitanism by invoking the concept of equality and the attitude of egalitarianism. He repeatedly appealed to the Sophists' doctrine of equality against Plato's idea of a hierarchical society, and claimed that "equalitarianism" was the arch-enemy of Plato (Popper, 2013, 89). Obviously, any concept of cosmopolitanism as the basis for a normative political theory has to include the idea of human equality. There are two problems with Popper's cosmopolitanism, however. First, the very idea of cosmopolitanism is difficult to reconcile with the claim of the superiority of the Western world. Secondly, in his discussion of equality, Popper did not dwell on the ambiguity of equality and never fleshed out in detail his understanding of this concept. Ambiguities of equality may be illustrated, for example, by the fact that John Rawls, undoubtedly an egalitarian, in his difference principle postulated the *unequal* treatment of individuals in society just to achieve an overall result of social equality. More comprehensively, Amartya Sen, having distinguished several meanings of the concept, stressed that equality is advocated by most diverse doctrines, sometimes opposed to each other: "In each theory, equality is sought in some 'space' (that is, in terms of some variables related to respective persons), a space that is seen as having a central role in that theory" (Sen, 2009, 292). Boaventura de Sousa Santos draws attention to other problems:

Equality, understood as the equivalence among the same, ends up excluding what is different. All that is homogeneous at the beginning tends eventually to turn into exclusionary violence. World experience is highly diverse in its struggle for equality, and such diversity refers as much to means as to ends. This much has been claimed again and again by the social movements against sexual, ethnic, racial or religious discrimination (Sousa Santos, 2006, 37).

Commenting on Frantz Fanon's concept of the racialization of inequality, Jean-Paul Sartre scathingly remarked on Western ideologies in the following way:

What empty chatter: liberty, equality, fraternity, love, honor, country, and what else? This did not prevent us from making racist remarks at the same time: dirty nigger, filthy Jew, dirty Arab. Noble minds, liberal and sympathetic – neocolonialists, in other words – claimed to be shocked by this inconsistency, since the only way the European could make himself a man was by fabricating slaves and monsters. As long as the status of 'native' existed, the imposture remained unmasked. We saw in the human species an abstract premise of universality that served as a pretext for concealing more concrete practices: there was a race of subhumans overseas who, thanks to us, might, in a thousand years perhaps, attain our status. In short, we took the human race to mean elite. Today the 'native' unmasks his truth; as a result, our exclusive club reveals its weakness: it was nothing more and nothing less than a minority. There is worse news: since the others are turning into men against us, apparently, we are the enemy of the human race; the elite is revealing its true nature – a gang" (Sartre, 1963, lvii-lix).

As the above demonstrates, the concept of equality is beset with serious ambiguities. Moreover, until quite recently it was disparaged and ridiculed within neoliberal discourse. Nowadays, however, at the time of extreme economic and social inequalities, it undergoes a process of detoxication and becomes once again a legitimate concept not only in the economic theory, as in Thomas Piketty, Anthony Atkinson and others, but also a part of social and political agenda across the world. This suggests that equality, as an element of a possible cosmopolitan normative political theory, is as urgent issue as Popper argued but also more complex than he thought.

No less ambiguous is the concept of unity which also makes up a part of the traditional notion of cosmopolitanism. It plays an important role in Popper's argument against the enemies of the open society, and functions in his work in several senses. The first meaning of unity, which appears in expressions like "unity of tribal life", "mystical unity" and related ones, is criticized throughout *Open Society*. Popper censured Plato for an attempt to restore this tribal unity by presenting his "dream of unity and beauty and perfection, this aestheticism and holism and collectivism." He repudiates this meaning of unity as a "product as well as the symptom of the lost group spirit of tribalism" (Popper, 2013, 188). He also finds the idea of 'unbroken harmony and unity' in the

Christian philosophy of the middle ages (Popper, 2013, 241), as well as in Hegel (Popper, 2013, 258).

The second meaning of unity, which he approves of, plays an important role in his explanation of the idea of critical rationalism. As he claims, for example, “mankind is united by the fact that our different mother tongues, in so far as they are rational, can be translated into one another. It recognizes the unity of human reason” (Popper, 2013, 444). The critical rationalism he advocates is based on the famous Socratic dictum: ‘I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort we may get nearer to the truth.’ The adage explains Popper’s idea of the rational unity of mankind (Popper, 2013, 432), or “the unity of human reason” (Popper, 2013, 437). As such, it is opposed to

[i]rrationalism, which is not bound by any rules of consistency, may be combined with any kind of belief, including a belief in the brotherhood of man; but the fact that it may easily be combined with a very different belief, and especially the fact that it lends itself easily to the support of a romantic belief in the existence of an elect body, in the division of men into leaders and led, into natural masters and natural slaves, shows clearly that a moral decision is involved in the choice between it and a critical rationalism (Popper, 2013, 437).

There are thus two meanings of unity of particular importance to Popper. One of them may be called the unity of imposed dogma, while the other is the unity of negotiated compromise (Chmielewski, 2020, 21). The meaning of unity which Popper rejects is derivable from the concept of uniformity or sameness of elements united, whereas the meaning he approves of is based on the concept of diversity. However, it is difficult to see how Popper’s understanding of rationality may be conducive to unity in a communitarian sense. Metz’s analysis demonstrates that there are significant differences between ethics based on rationality and those based on solidarity. There are reasons to believe that critical rationalism, with a strong emphasis put by Popper on the critical part, may be seen as engendering more discordant attitudes rather than unifying ones.

### Recognition for Postcolonial Peoples

According to Achille Mbembe “Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of ‘human nature.’ Or, when it is, its things and attributes are generally of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality. It is this elementariness and primitiveness that makes Africa the world *par excellence* of all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for humankind” (Mbembe, 2001, 1). The above captures also the Western perception of other postcolonial regions. Africa, along with the whole Global South, continues to be perceived patronizingly as a continent in need of assistance, development, and support from more developed nations, which implies that its peoples are incapable of achieving anything worthwhile on their own.

Popper’s belief in the superiority of the European civilisation exposes him to charges of exclusionary universalism. What is needed is a cosmopolitanism which would not be exposed to such criticisms and which would help to understand deeper both the history and the present political

problems between former colonies and the West. It seems that cosmopolitanism based not on a mere acknowledgement of differences between individuals and peoples, but on a firm acceptance of human diversity might be immune to the above critique (Draľus, 2020, 18-21). It seems that a theory of recognition based on the idea of diversity would enable one to acknowledge more persuasively the equal moral status of all humans, irrespective of their diverse traditions and skin colour. In particular, it would enable one to say that postcolonial countries deserve not only a more just share in the global distribution of material goods but also the recognition of the diversity of their identities, cultures, and their achievements. No less importantly, they deserve recognition for the evils done to their peoples by the Western world.

The postcolonial struggle for recognition will not be helped by attributing moral superiority to the West nor by viewing the process of recognition as taking place between master and slave, as Hegel did. As Fanon argued, no such relationship takes place between the colonist and the colonized: “There is not an open conflict between white and black. One day the White Master, *without conflict*, recognized the Negro slave” (Fanon, 1986, 217). The postcolonial struggle for recognition cannot be based upon the ambiguous concept of equality alone. The recognition of postcolonial peoples would not do justice to them if it were to be based on the concept of difference for it would be tantamount to reiterating the bipolar and essentialist opposition between the West and the East, the Western Other: “But the former slave wants to *make himself recognized*” (Fanon, 1986, 217, emphasis in original). The cosmopolitan theory of recognition based on the concept of diversity may help to acknowledge the extent to which the allegedly superior Western world has gravely sinned against colonised peoples by refusing to extend to them not only respect and esteem but the recognition of their very humanity. Successful coping with the condition of subalternity by them can be achieved through reclaiming their agency, both individual and collective. It would enable them to direct the course of their development according to their own understanding of their aspirations. A necessary precondition of the process of the emancipation of postcolonial peoples is their own ability to recognize themselves as capable of reclaiming their agency. To do so, they need to recognize themselves as worthy of recognition.

### **The Letter and the Spirit**

It follows from the above that although Popper’s social and political philosophy helped to undermine the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, it does not suggest equally effective measures to deal with the problems of the Global South. It does not mean, however, that the critical rationalist programme he initiated has expended itself already and cannot grow anymore. His programme in philosophy of science was developed in a variety of ways by his followers. Though not always to Popper’s liking, the conceptions he inspired have deepened and broadened our understanding of science. What they left unchallenged is his subversive idea that science is an unended quest rather than a search for final and uncontested truths. This insight applies in equal measure to philosophy in general, and *a fortiori* to Popper’s philosophy too. That is why I believe Popper’s programme of social and political philosophy could be expanded and developed



as his philosophy of science was, to cover areas he left uncharted. It would imply a redefinition and radicalization of some of the conceptual pillars of his approach. In fact, such work is already underway. It seems that what is needed at the present moment in history is a reinterpretation of Popper's rationalism so it becomes more sensitive to the contextuality and historicity of human thought. His radical individualism will have to be reread through a stronger acknowledgement of human associability and mutual dependence. His cosmopolitanism will have to appreciate to a greater extent human diversity. And, finally, his ideas will have to be supplemented by a theory of recognition which it thus far evidently lacks.

A further examination will have to show whether such a reinterpretation of critical rationalism is feasible. What would emerge from such a reinterpretation may not be strictly in line with the letter of Popper's philosophy. But it nevertheless might be a critical rationalism capable of addressing problems which Popper chose not to address, of which he was not aware, or could not be. It could and perhaps should be a critical rationalism capable of solving problems of society and politics, both known and unforeseen, in a spirit he instilled into philosophy.

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