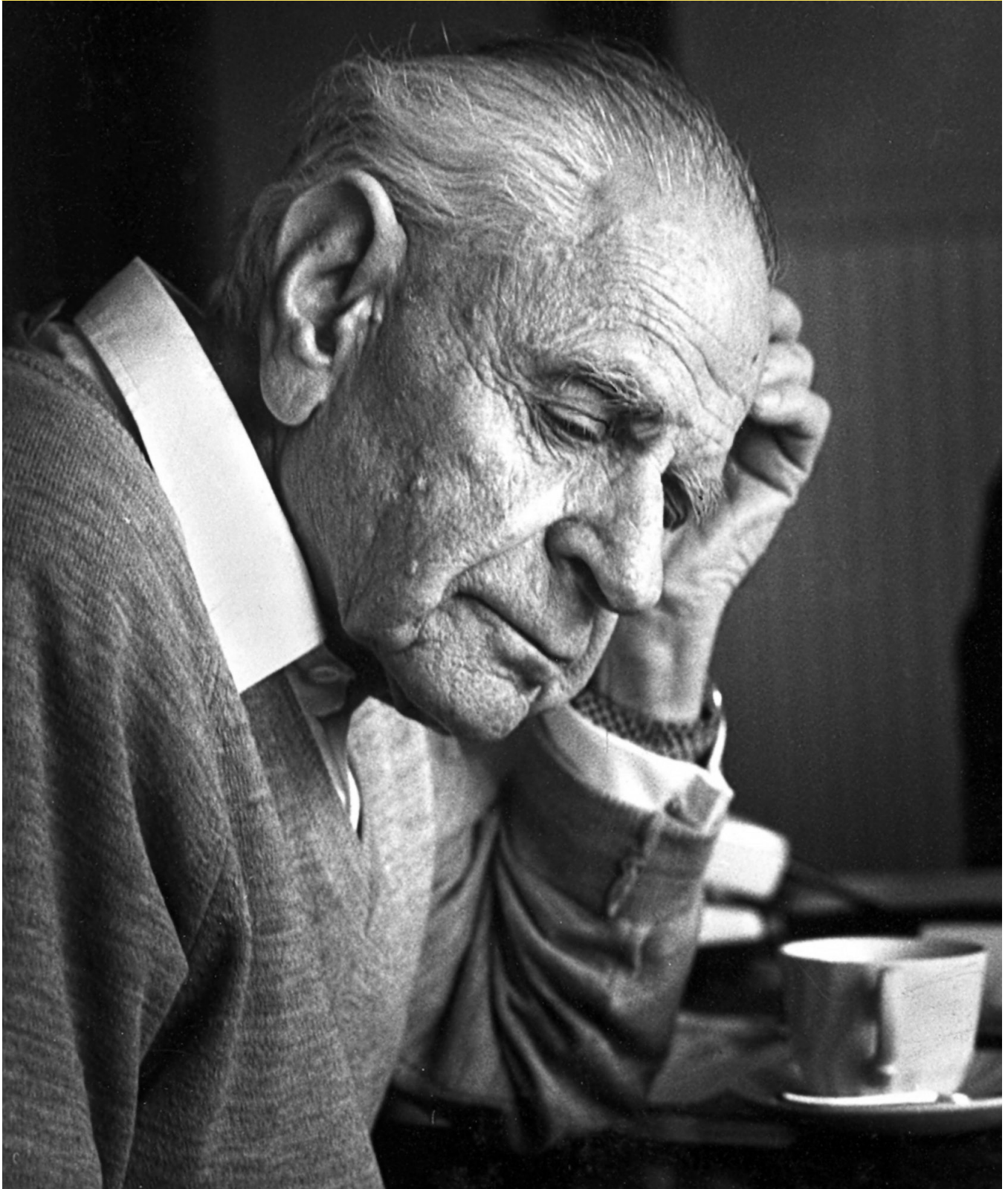


25 years since the
death of Karl Popper



Identity Politics, Irrationalism, and Totalitarianism: Karl Popper and the contemporary malaise

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Karl Popper was a philosopher who advocated and defended rationalism at a time when irrationalism was popular, not only in philosophy, but in political and social life. The rationalist (in Popper's sense) seeks to solve problems by means of argument, unlike the irrationalist, who generally disdains arguments and is swayed by affections.

Born in 1902, Popper was a young Austrian during the turmoil of the inter-war years. In his first published book, *Logik der Forschung* (1935), which was translated into English as *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959), he developed his critical rationalist epistemology in opposition to the uncritical rationalist epistemology of the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle. During the Second World War, while in exile in New Zealand, he wrote *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), in which he defended liberal democracy against the various kinds of tribalist authoritarianism, whether socialist or fascist, that were wreaking such devastation in the world. He argued that liberal democracy is the socio-political counterpart of critical rationalism, an environment in which critical rationalism can thrive and which critical rationalism endorses.

In the years and decades following the Second World War liberal democracy seemed to be triumphant in the Western countries and extending its reach elsewhere, especially with the collapse of the Soviet Union. But more recent times have seen a resurgence of the irrationalism of tribalist authoritarianism. On the Right there has been a growth in nationalist and traditionalist movements. On the Left we have seen an epidemic of 'identity politics.' On both Right and Left there is increasing opposition to free trade, freedom of expression, science and the use of argument generally, as well as a recurrence of anti-semitism, us-and-them antagonism and readiness to settle disputes by resort to violence. It is therefore timely, in this year which marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Popper's death, to revisit Popper's critical rationalist philosophy and his critique of irrationalism.

The following three papers are intended as a contribution to that endeavour.

The first paper explains Popper's contrast between open and closed societies and the superiority of critical rationalism to other forms of rationalism and to irrationalism. It then goes on to exhibit the irrationalism of each of a collection of positions and theories that make up different strands of the current identity politics. The critical treatment of these themes is quite brief: each could be given an article or, in some cases, even a book, to itself. My somewhat summary dispatch may be regarded as an pointed invitation to further debate.

The second paper criticises a critique of Popper's *Open Society* by Anthony O'Hear. The latter takes a position that, in my first paper, I label 'fideist rationalism.' O'Hear impugns Popper's assimilation of an open society to a scientific community and he claims that a liberal society can survive only if it outlaws critical debate of its defining principles. I concede the first point but not the second. O'Hear makes his second point in connection with the presence in contemporary liberal societies of cohorts of highly illiberal Islamic fundamentalists. This is a serious problem that demands a solution. I argue that limiting, but not prohibiting, immigration from societies permeated with an intolerant culture provides a better solution than a lurch into the authoritarianism of censorship.

The first two papers, each about the open society, are complementary. The third paper may seem disconnected from them, as it is a brief and systematic exposition of Popper's epistemology. As indicated above, however, it was Popper's epistemological insights that guided his social-political philosophy.

Traditional epistemology is preoccupied with justification, verification, proof or certainty. It tries to start from scratch, wiping the slate clean and beginning with no assumptions (thereby, self-defeatingly, making the huge assumption that one can proceed with no assumptions and

still make progress). In contrast, Popper's epistemology is concerned with improvement through criticism. It starts with what we have and tries, through criticism, to improve upon it, bit by bit. Anything may be criticised and replaced; but not everything at the same time. Even the revolutionary overthrow of a highly successful scientific theory about the whole universe (such as Newton's) is a replacement of just a part of the fabric of scientific knowledge. While traditional rationalists have been disposed to utopian social-revolutionary projects, the critical rationalist favours piecemeal reforms that can be evaluated with regard to their impact and, if necessary, revised. Similarly, traditional rationalists, keen to establish final answers, have asked the question 'Who should rule?' But the critical rationalist, focusing on criticism and improvement, asks the question 'How can we arrange things so that bad rulers can be replaced?' Further, unlike utopians seeking arrangements or policies to maximise happiness, the critical rationalist favours arrangements or policies that minimise suffering, leaving individuals free to exercise their critical rationality to discover for themselves, by the process of conjecture and criticism, their own paths to happiness. The flip-side of this recognition of the "rational unity of mankind" is that the critical rationalist evaluates theories, proposals, policies and arrangements according to the acceptability of their implications, not according to the characteristics (race, class, nation, sex, religion, etc.) of the people who propose or oppose them.

Popper's epistemological insights therefore tend to favour social and political arrangements that are open to piecemeal improvement, that permit all individuals the freedom to make their own mistakes (and learn from them), that guarantee freedom of expression, particularly freedom to criticise, that enable rulers to be replaced by peaceful means (typically, democratic vote with a universal franchise), and that give government a role in relieving suffering.