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'Brexit' and the Political Ideals of the Open Society

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This essay considers a philosophy of management for a society and its state institutions: openness and democracy. It has an opposite with which it may be contrasted: closure and tyranny. This formulation was the basis of Sir Karl Popper's (1966a [1945], 1966b [1945]) two-volume work: *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. The work is widely regarded as an important contribution to twentieth-century social and political philosophy and it remains in-print to this day.

In his intellectual biography, Popper (2002 [1974] p. 131) described *The Open Society and Its Enemies* as his 'war effort'—having fled Austria in 1937 he wrote it in New Zealand against the back-drop of Nazism, Stalinism, and the tragedy enveloping Europe. But the work—together with an earlier series of papers (Popper, 1957[1944/1945]) on the methodology of the social sciences out of which it developed—did not directly mention the war. What it directly addressed were the philosophies of Plato, Hegel and Marx to whom Popper attributed a series of ideas that he diagnosed as supportive to closure and tyranny: most notably what he called 'historicism', 'collectivism' and 'irrationalism', but also corollaries such as 'messiahs', 'prophets', 'principles of leadership', 'philosopher kings', 'noble lies', and 'utopianism'. By a form of insinuation, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* thereby proposed that these ideas had become the intellectual armoury of the totalitarian politics of the time—a politics that the philosophy of openness and democracy opposed (Popper, 2012 [1946]).

This essay does not have the scope to engage with Popper's argument in very much detail, but it will supply a broad brush summary. It has even less scope to attempt to discuss how Popper claimed to identify the ideas mentioned in the philosophies of Plato, Hegel and Marx, or of how any of this was received critically by other adherents of those philosophies. What it will propose is that the dichotomy which Popper presented reflects political ideals for the individual life and the historical life of a society; but that the political ideals of openness and democracy, at least so far as Popper's formulation is concerned, are peculiar because they represent a kind of *anti-ideal* ideal. This is because they are skeptical as to whether there is a single ideal life for all men and women, just as they are skeptical as to whether there can be an absolute and unchanging ideal society and state. Consequently, the political ideal that is embodied by openness is the protection of the freedom of men and women to discover their own ideals whilst respecting and tolerating the ideals of others. And the political ideal that is embodied by democracy is the capability of a people, via its state institutions, to dismiss its political leaders without resort to violence and bloodshed—a capability that becomes especially ideal when the political leadership of a state seeks to close down openness.

Indeed, according to Popper, the widespread acceptance of these ideals, by a society of people, marks the breakdown of the attitude of the Closed Society and its transition to the attitude of the Open Society. For the attitude of a Closed Society, according to Popper, is characterized by a '... magical or irrational attitude to the customs of social life'; one that '... lacks the distinction between the customary or conventional regularities of social life and the regularities found in nature' (Popper, 1966a [1945] p. 172). Popper wrote of the 'rigidity' of the Closed Society—where social position may be prescribed by 'custom' and social action may be proscribed by 'taboo' (Popper, 1966a [1945] p. 172). The Open Society, in contrast, is one in which the attitude has broken down: '... the great difference is the possibility of rational reflection on these matters' (Popper, 1966a [1945] p. 173). By implication, such a society, if Popper's diagnosis is correct, will be deeply suspicious of a political project that carries the slightest whiff of those ideas that he associated with closure and tyranny: 'historicism', 'collectivism' and 'irrationalism' and the corollaries of 'messiahs', 'prophets', 'principles of leadership', 'philosopher kings', 'noble lies', and 'utopianism'.

This approach to political philosophy will be illustrated by bringing it to bear on a contemporary issue: the referendum on whether the United Kingdom ought to remain a member of the European Union—commonly referred to as the referendum on British exit from the European Union, or 'Brexit'. Many commentators appear to look upon Brexit, and the politics of the United Kingdom more generally, in disbelief or incomprehension. For instance, having recently established by means of a referendum that Scotland wished to remain a part of it, the government of the UK next asked the people of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to decide whether the UK ought to remain a member of the European Union. Some find these developments deeply unsettling, although not particularly, or so it would seem, the people of the United Kingdom itself. For instance, the commentators of the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, whose mission is 'to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decision-makers in government, business, and civil

society' have asked '...whether a democratic system is beneficial or detrimental to the governance of a country made up of many nations' (Suetyi, 2014) and lamented the Brexit debate as symptomatic of '...an unpleasant nationalism, which interprets everything in terms of the greatness of Britain' (Wollard 2016). But this essay will propose that the philosophy of the open society and the institutions of democracy *are* always, to a greater or lesser degree, unsettling because they ask individuals to take responsibility for the social laws and arrangements that they live under. Indeed, Popper called this 'the strain of civilization' (Popper 1966a [1945] p.176). More importantly, I shall propose that the Brexit question and the political ideals of the Open Society and democracy may illuminate one another. By which I mean that the reasons for the Brexit referendum occurring may be better understood when viewed through the lens of Popper's social and political philosophy, and Popper's social and political philosophy may be better understood by applying it to the Brexit debate.

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