

Karl Popper on the state, democracy and the importance of freedom of thought and free discussion¹

(...)

(1) The state is a necessary evil: its powers are not to be multiplied beyond what is necessary. One might call this principle the '*Liberal Razor*'. (In analogy to Ockham's Razor, ie, the famous principle that entities or essences must not be multiplied beyond what is necessary.)

In order to show the necessity of the state I do not appeal to Hobbes' *homo-homini-lupus* view of man². On the contrary, its necessity can be shown even if we assume that ..., because of their gentleness, or angelic goodness, nobody ever harms anybody else. In such a world there would still be weaker and stronger men, and the weaker ones would have *no legal right* to be tolerated by the stronger ones, but would owe them gratitude for their being so kind as to tolerate them. Those (whether strong or weak) who think this an unsatisfactory state of affairs, and who think that every person should have a right to live, and that every person should have a legal claim to be protected against the power of the strong, will agree that we need a state that protects the rights of all.

It is easy to see that the state must be a constant danger, or (as I have ventured to call it) an evil, though a necessary one. For if the state is to fulfil its function, it must have more power at any rate than any single private citizen or public corporation; and although we might design institutions to minimise the danger that these powers will be misused, we can never eliminate the danger completely. On the contrary, it seems that most men will always have to pay for the protection of the state, not only in the form of taxes but even in the form of humiliation suffered, for example, at the hands of bullying officials. The thing is not to pay too heavily for it.

(2) The difference between a democracy and a tyranny is that under a democracy the government can be got rid of without bloodshed; under a tyranny it cannot.

(3) Democracy as such cannot confer any benefits upon the citizen and it should not be expected to do so. In fact democracy can do nothing - only the citizens of the democracy can act (including, of course, those citizens who comprise the government). Democracy provides no more than a

¹ From: Karl Popper, *Public Opinion and Liberal Principles*, in: *Conjectures and Refutations*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963.

² Editor's note: that is, the view that man is man's worst enemy.

framework within which the citizens may act in a more or less organised and coherent way.

(4) We are democrats, not because the majority is always right, but because democratic traditions are the least evil ones of which we know. If the majority (or 'public opinion') decides in favour of tyranny, a democrat need not therefore suppose that some fatal inconsistency in his views has been revealed. He will realise, rather, that the democratic tradition in his country was not strong enough.

(5) Institutions alone are never sufficient if not tempered by traditions. Institutions are always ambivalent in the sense that, in the absence of a strong tradition, they also may serve the opposite purpose to the one intended. For example, a parliamentary opposition is, roughly speaking, supposed to prevent the majority from stealing the taxpayer's money. But I well remember an affair in a south-eastern European country which illustrates the ambivalence of this institution. There, the opposition shared the spoils with the majority.

To sum up: Traditions are needed to form a kind of link between institutions and the intentions and valuations of individual men.

(6) A Liberal Utopia - that is, a state rationally designed on a traditionless *tabula rasa* - is an impossibility. For the Liberal principle demands that the limitations to the freedom of each which are made necessary by social life should be minimised and equalised as much as possible (Kant). But how can we apply such an *a priori* principle in real life? Should we prevent a pianist from practising, or prevent his neighbour from enjoying a quiet afternoon? All such problems can be solved in practice only by an appeal to existing traditions and customs and to a traditional sense of justice; to common law, as it is called in Britain, and to an impartial judge's appreciation of equity. All laws, being universal principles, have to be interpreted in order to be applied; and an interpretation needs some principles of concrete practice, which can be supplied only by a living tradition. And this holds more especially for the highly abstract and universal principles of Liberalism.

(7) Principles of Liberalism may be described as principles of assessing, and if necessary of modifying or changing, existing institutions, rather than of replacing existing institutions. One can express this also by saying that Liberalism is an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary creed (unless it is confronted by a tyrannical regime).

(8) Among the traditions we must count as the most important is what we may call the 'moral framework' (corresponding to the institutional 'legal framework') of a society. This incorporates the society's traditional sense of justice or fairness, or the degree of moral sensitivity it has reached. This moral framework serves as the basis which makes it possible to reach a fair or equitable compromise between conflicting interests where this is necessary. It is, of course, itself not unchangeable, but it changes

comparatively slowly. Nothing is more dangerous than the destruction of this traditional framework. (Its destruction was consciously aimed at by Nazism.) In the end its destruction will lead to cynicism and nihilism, ie, to the disregard and the dissolution of all human values.

THE LIBERAL THEORY OF FREE DISCUSSION

Freedom of thought, and free discussion, are ultimate Liberal values which do not really need any further justification. Nevertheless, they can also be justified pragmatically in terms of the part they play in the search for truth.

Truth is not manifest; and it is not easy to come by. The search for truth demands at least

- (a) imagination
- (b) trial and error
- (c) the gradual discovery of our prejudices by way of (a), of (b), and of critical discussion.

The Western rationalist tradition, which derives from the Greeks, is the tradition of critical discussion - of examining and testing propositions or theories by attempting to refute them. This critical rational method must not be mistaken for a method of proof, that is to say, for a method of finally establishing truth; nor is it a method which always secures agreement. Its value lies, rather, in the fact that participants in a discussion will, to some extent change their minds, and part as wiser men.

It is often asserted that discussion is only possible between people who have a common language and accept common basic assumptions. I think that this is a mistake. All that is needed is a readiness to learn from one's partner in the discussion, which includes a genuine wish to understand what he intends to say. If this readiness is there, the discussion will be the more fruitful the more the partners' backgrounds differ. Thus the value of a discussion depends largely upon the variety of the competing views. Had there been no Tower of Babel, we should invent it. The liberal does not dream of a perfect consensus of opinion; he only hopes for the mutual fertilisation of opinions, and the consequent growth of ideas. Even when we solve a problem to universal satisfaction, we create, in solving it, many new problems over which we are bound to disagree. This is not to be regretted.

Although the search for truth through free rational discussion is a public affair, it is not public opinion (whatever this may be) which results from it. Though public opinion may be influenced by science and may judge science, it is not the product of scientific discussion.

But the tradition of rational discussion creates, in the political field, the tradition of government by discussion, and with it the habit of listening to

another point of view; the growth of a sense of justice; and the readiness to compromise.

Our hope is thus that traditions, changing and developing under the influence of critical discussion and in response to the challenge of new problems, may replace much of what is usually called 'public opinion', and take over the functions which public opinion is supposed to fulfil.

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