



***The Political Thought of Karl Popper* by Jeremy Shearmur. London: Routledge, 1996, 217 pages. ISBN 0-415-09726-6.**

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Anyone who reads Jeremy Shearmur's book will be struck by the degree to which Popper's vast output is an integrated work. In particular, Popper's political thought is closely connected with his explanation of science. One of Popper's more impressive achievements was to expose the authoritarian element in the Western intellectual tradition.

For instance, traditional theories of knowledge address the question: what is the source of true belief? They assert that a theory cannot be accepted as genuine unless it can be positively justified, that is, proven true. They only identify knowledge with certain knowledge, thereby demanding very high epistemological standards. Traditional theories of knowledge recognise different foundations of knowledge but they all share the feature that some unquestionable authority must be appealed to in order to legitimise our beliefs—whether that authority is the power of the intellect (in the case of Descartes and Spinoza), the evidence of the senses (logical positivism) or some other source.

A similar authoritarian bias permeates the traditional conception of politics. The fundamental problem that has engaged political thinkers, from Plato to Marx, has been the question: who should rule the state? Plato's answer was simply 'the best' should rule, and possibly 'the best few—the aristocrats', but certainly not the many, the people. For Marx it was 'the workers' who should rule rather than 'the capitalists' (Popper, 1988, pp. 23–24).

Popper developed an approach to knowledge and to politics which was free of authoritarian assumptions. As for his theory of knowledge, Popper argues that we learn from our mistakes, by trial and the elimination of error. He applied this simple idea to science and to politics. According to Popper, all our beliefs are guesses about the world, mere conjectures. What is distinctive about science is that we seek systematically to make our theories open to interpersonal criticism and empirical testing, with a view to discovering our mistakes as soon as possible:

The scientific community, when living up to its own best ideals was, moreover, a paradigm of an 'open society'. The search for scientific truth was a disciplined, and, in a manner of speaking, a constitutionally controlled search for an informed and intelligent consensus on the mechanisms underlying and explaining the way the world works (Ryan, 1994, p. 19).

His beef with Marxists and Freudians was that they seemed unwilling to face the question of what would falsify their expectations and they explained away any apparent contrary

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evidence. His political ideas are all of a piece with his views about the growth of knowledge:

Both [*The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and its Enemies*] grew out of the theory of knowledge of *Logik der Forschung* and out of my conviction that our often unconscious views on the theory of knowledge and its central problems ('What can we know?', 'How certain is our knowledge?') are decisive for our attitude towards ourselves and towards politics (Popper, 1982, p. 115).

In particular, Popper says that the distinguishing feature of a good system of government is that it should be open to criticism. No system is capable of doing everything right, so no system should have too much power. Such a view led him to reformulate the central problem of political theory:

In *The Open Society and its Enemies* I suggested that an entirely new problem should be recognised as the fundamental problem of a rational political theory. The new problem, as distinct from the old 'Who should rule?', can be formulated as follows: how is the state to be constituted so that bad rulers can be got rid of without bloodshed, without violence? (Popper, 1988, p. 24).

Throughout this volume, Shearmur (1996) rightly points out that Popper's notion of openness to mutual criticism is of great practical importance in the political sphere. We all need criticism, in respect of virtually everything we do. 'The proposals whose effective criticism is more desirable, because most fruitful, are those of government, because these are the ones that are put into practice on the largest scale, and with the most powerful backing, and with the greatest effect on peoples' lives' (Magee, 1995, p. 263). Indeed, Popper develops an argument for the 'rational unity of mankind', according to which we are all considered to be of value, and to be equal in our rationality, because of our role as sources of possible criticism. Criticism is the most effective agent of desirable change. The upshot is that we must take the need for criticism into account in respect of our institutional arrangements, though Shearmur is less than sanguine about the performance of current political institutions in modern Western societies:

In some regimes—such as the Presidential system of the United States—criticism, while it may be voiced, is frequently ineffectual because of the weakness of the public forum in the United States and because the various internal divisions within governmental responsibility make it difficult to hold anyone politically responsible for anything. While in some parliamentary systems, the combination of the party system, close interrelations between the press and government, together with restrictive libel laws, can also limit the effective power of criticism (Shearmur, 1996, p. 122).

Popper speaks favourably of two-party democratic systems because they encourage a continual process of self-criticism by the two parties. 'As things stand, an inclination to self-criticism after an electoral defeat is far more pronounced in countries with a two-party system than in those where there are several parties' (Popper, 1988, p. 26). For this reason he rejects proportional representation.

Our political institutions are often woefully under-equipped to perform such a function [of mutual criticism], while too much governmental activity—notably, interrelationships between government and interest groups, and the activities of policy-making communities—is not subject to genuinely public scrutiny at all. As I have argued earlier, the whole issue of the reconstruction of a public sphere, in the sense of a forum within which such activities are opened to scrutiny, seems to me particularly pressing (Shearmur, 1996, p. 176).

In Chapter 5, Shearmur addresses the situation of someone who wishes to put Popper's political ideas into practice. The analysis is at a very high-level—the nature of the political order. To an extent unparalleled in recent history, political decision-makers in the transition economies of Eastern Europe have been grappling with such large-scale, high-level political questions. Indeed, the drive to create institutions of a civil society in Eastern Europe 'owes something to Popper's emphasis on the pluralism of values and the supremacy of the value of freedom over other political goals' (Ryan, 1994, p. 19).

Shearmur does not say much about the implications of Popper's approach for lower-order public policy. This is not his focus. The interested reader is referred to Bryan Magee's (1995) delightful piece on 'What Use is Popper to a Politician?'. In this essay, Magee emphasises that the real task of the politician is to manage the process of change—the perpetual revision of aspirations and goals—which is inimical to planning on the basis of holistic blueprints. Magee outlines a step-by-step Popperian methodology for managing ongoing social development. This approach requires that politicians identify and clearly formulate problems, then propose alternative tentative solutions (the stage at which creative politics comes in), then critically examine solutions before they are put into practice, and continuously monitor them once they are implemented for unintended consequences.

In the sphere of public policy, Popper recommends negative utilitarianism—whereby the role of the state is not to make people happy (i.e., not to maximise the general welfare) but to relieve avoidable suffering. Further pursuing the connection between epistemology and ethics, Popper sees an analogy between his negative utilitarianism and the emphasis on the negative in his theory of knowledge:

It adds to clarity in the field of ethics if we formulate our demands negatively, i.e., if we demand the elimination of suffering rather than the promotion of happiness. Similarly, it is helpful to formulate the task of scientific method as the elimination of false theories (from the various theories tentatively proffered) rather than the attainment of established truths (Popper, 1966a, p. 285).

Shearmur argues that Popper should have pursued the parallels between his theory of knowledge, on the one hand, and his politics and moral theory, on the other, more consistently than he in fact does. In *The Open Society*, Popper regards 'unregulated capitalism'—i.e., laissez-faire—as problematic and he advocates instead economic interventionism. However, in later editions of this work, Popper does emphasise that he prefers interventions of an institutional or indirect kind (i.e., the design of a legal framework) rather than of a personal or direct form (i.e., the empowerment of organs of the state to achieve some specific

end) (Popper 1966b, pp. 125, 130–132). In this connection, Popper shows an appreciation for Hayek's analysis of the rule of law. Moreover, he stresses that the state should not be empowered more than is required for the protection of freedom. I think Shearmur (1996, p. 114) is right to characterise these views as closest to social democracy.

In his criticism of Popper's 'moderate, rational, liberty-respecting but more substantively interventionist, statism' (p. 16), Shearmur (p. 115ff) develops one of his major themes. He suggests that the logic of Popper's own epistemological arguments should have led him closer to a classical liberal position than his own political writings would themselves suggest (including even Popper's later works). The nub of Shearmur's discussion is that the market process and its institutions provide better monitoring, accountability and learning than do political and bureaucratic forms of organisation, and that a liberal social order relies more on the former whereas a social democracy depends more on the latter:

Here it seems to me that the market has the greatest of advantages. For the relationship between producer and consumer requires constant reaffirmation; whereas the politician is called to account infrequently, and in a rather ineffectual manner. Indeed, the whole apparatus of political accountability appears to be intrinsically very weak.... Liberalism has also the particular advantage that it has at least some sketch of a mechanism that would link the self-interest of entrepreneurial decision-takers to the interests of citizens. Whereas, while one could perhaps expect more genuine idealism in a system favoured by social democrats, controls over decision-makers in privileged political positions would seem comparatively weak (Shearmur, 1996, p. 118).

And the market, as an institution, allows for hypotheses about these things [e.g. the most desirable patterns of the provision of goods and services, the best style of life] to be tried out—and to fail and be discarded if they are unsuccessful. It is this theme of liberalism which seems to me to be particularly close to Popper's epistemological ideas (Shearmur, 1996, p. 119).

Of related interest to Austrian economists is the fact that throughout the book Shearmur comments upon the relationship between Hayek and Popper. As Shearmur (1996, pp. 27, 184, 189) points out, it is surprising that Popper did not pay much attention to Hayek's ideas about economic calculation under socialism, which form the core of Hayek's social theory. It is not that Popper ignored Hayek's ideas, or does not discuss them, but that he simply regarded them as information that piecemeal social engineers need to take account of, lest they overextend themselves. Shearmur identifies the different epistemological assumptions from which Popper and Hayek launch their analyses:

The crucial difference between Popper and Hayek... is that while they both make use of epistemological argument for a broadly liberal position, Popper's views centre on the fallibility of scientific knowledge, while Hayek is concerned not with scientific knowledge but with political lessons which might be extracted from what could be called the social division of information. Further to this, central to Popper's vision of politics is the political imposition of a shared ethical agenda, through a process of trial and error: of piecemeal social engineering. What is central for Hayek are markets and their associated

institutions which, on his account, form a kind of skeleton for a free society—one which, at the same time, enables us to make cooperative use of socially divided knowledge, and to enjoy a broadly 'negative' conception of individual freedom (Shearmur, 1996, p. 30).

Shearmur mainly concentrates on the implications of Popper's epistemology for his political ideas. But the direction of analysis could well be reversed. In an interesting twist, Alan Ryan contends that:

Popper's account of scientific rationality is itself in a broad sense political, and that what sustains his commitment to some awkward epistemological views is his liberalism. That is, it is not so much that his philosophy of science supports his liberalism as that it *expresses it*' (1985, p. 89, original emphasis).

Shearmur clearly has an impressive command of the scope of Popper's general philosophical programme, the interconnections between its constituent parts, and the need to reconcile different strands in Popper's work. His description of the development of Popper's political philosophy is sensibly modest. He does not aim at an intellectual biography but rather 'a rough and speculative impression of the development of Popper's political views' (p. 18). Popper aficionados will be interested to find that Shearmur draws on the wealth of documents in the Popper Archive at the Hoover Institution.

Shearmur does a good job of describing the historical context in which Popper's two main political works—*The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and its Enemies*—were written. The major themes of the latter work in political philosophy receive more detailed examination: in particular, Popper's ideas about values, his activist theory of the state (his so-called 'protectionism', a complement to his interventionism discussed above), his ideas about democratic politics and his views about history.

As one would expect, Popper's writings on political philosophy after *The Open Society* receive much less attention from Shearmur. Shearmur focuses on three issues: Popper's ideas about epistemological optimism; his ideas about tradition; and his ideas about objective products of the human mind (i.e. his theory of World 3). His selection of issues is germane to his central argument.

A minor gripe with Shearmur's exposition is that at times his critique of Popper verges upon a sketchy discussion of 'The Political Thought of Jeremy Shearmur', which he freely admits is explicitly at odds with Popper's views (p. 157). At times, I would have liked to see a clearer boundary drawn between the critique and the development of Shearmur's own ideas (e.g., the section on institutional design, communities, socialisation and exclusion p. 144ff) and his idiosyncratic, 'slightly strange' (p. 159) solutions to some problems with social engineering.

In the final chapter, Shearmur comments on the wider contemporary relevance of Popper's political ideas. Shearmur focuses upon post-modernism, critical theory and the sociology of knowledge. Though tantalising, the result is a little unsatisfying because these issues cannot be adequately explored in a single chapter but Shearmur succeeds in whetting our appetites for further work in this direction (in a subsequent work he hopes to address some of these themes more fully). In particular, we await a Popperian antidote to post-modernist

obfuscation. Shearmur hints at the direction of what is to come:

... I am not denying that some of the *arguments* offered by post-modernists and post-structuralists are most interesting, and that they deserve to be taken *very* seriously. It is the idea that they are offering substantive positions that are either attractive or which make any real sense of the world in which we are living which seems to me highly resistible (Shearmur, 1996, p. 164, original emphasis).

As someone who has been more concerned with Popper's theories of knowledge and of scientific method, I found that Shearmur's book was a useful survey and worthwhile critical reinterpretation of Popper's political ideas. And even if Popper's contributions to the philosophy of science were arguably more profound and imaginative than his political philosophy, Shearmur's work serves to remind us of the significance and contemporary relevance of Popper's political ideas.

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