

## Post-Truth and Popper's Paradox

*The purpose of poetry is to remind us  
how difficult it is to remain just one person,  
for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,  
and invisible guests come in and out at will.*

Czesław Miłosz

### Introductory remarks on two phenomena

After the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election two interesting socio-political phenomena have been noticed and widely discussed in the literature on post-truth. One may be called the Encapsulated Mind, the other – the Reckless or Scatterbrained Mind.

The former term refers to any person encapsulated in an information bubble. Such a person while searching for more and more information on which to base their decision becomes in the end a target of more and more personalized messages that correspond to their preconceived preferences, inclinations, and political views. Firms like Cambridge Analytica offer, to political parties and

to persons running for public offices, algorithms that function as such personalizing machines. In this way, political blocks are identified, then slightly reshaped, and finally cemented to form the core electorate of a party or a candidate.

The latter term briefly characterizes the behaviour of a segment of the British electorate that participated in the Brexit referendum. A considerable number of these persons, probably being busy with their manifold interests and activities, opted for Brexit on the day of the referendum, as it turns out, quite recklessly since they only googled for the information on what the EU is and what Brexit means the day after.

In what follows I shall try to shed some light on these phenomena drawing on the historical resources of political thought. I start with Popper and I shall, in due course, continue with Plato. There are seven points that I wish to make.

### 1. Closed society and open society in the past and today

Let us recall Popper's key distinction. As we know, Popper dichotomizes all societies into closed and open ones. And although he deprecates giving human history a holistic construal, we would not be mistaken in ascribing to Popper a historiosophical view: the democratic revolution, which originated in ancient Athens, has been a difficult, lengthy and still unfinished process of transition from closed societies to open ones.

This process has been difficult because it consists in rejecting the tight, almost biological links with the group that shares our origin, common activities and traditions, and gives us a well-defined place in the established structure. The closed society – the society of a tribe, clan or horde – constitutes such an organically bound whole that Popper sometimes calls it a flock.

The closed society demands a high price for these organic bonds, for natural closeness, and for being embedded in tradition. It is a society that is far from equality and freedom, because it overwhelms the individual to such an extent that they are unable to fully break away from the group, even when it comes to formulating thoughts.

While the open society liberates an individual: it is a society of free and equal people who exchange commodities, political views and positions in an unrestricted game, subject only to abstract rules; and this whole exchange knows no limits other than these abstract rules, which – nonetheless – bind everybody equally. The open society does not know privileges; in such a society, there are no distinguished positions or extraordinary rights.

Obviously, Popper leaned entirely towards open societies. And it is hard not to share his leanings when we learn that, according to Popper, modern totalitarian societies created as a result of large-scale social engineering projects – Communism and Nazism – are merely more contemporary, “bolder” and enlarged, versions of primitive closed societies. Popper finds the intellectual roots of these disgusting political practices in the theoretical concepts of Fichte and Hegel, Marx and Engels, and above all Plato, to the criticism of whom he devotes almost all of Volume I of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, titled *The Spell of Plato*.

### 2. Open human being in completely open society

On the other hand, however, there is something disturbing in Popper's image of open society and in the image of – let us call it – “open personality” correlated with it. Let us start with the latter by asking: who is “this individual with a fully open personality” – the product and carrier of an open society?

First of all, two components of the image of “open personality” should be emphasized, namely: on the one hand, this individual seems to be a perfect participant in an endless discussion carried out by debaters who are rational and, therefore, abiding by the principles of rationality in the discussion. The issues raised in the discussion are of fundamental importance: life, political views and attitudes, projects, and intentions. In a free and rational manner, unhindered by any authority – after all, everyone is equal – an open person is ready to change every view and position at any time, provided that rational arguments support the change. As far as the exchange of commodities is concerned, an open person is ready to exchange all commodities – and this is the second component of an open person's image – as long as an economically rational cost-benefit calculation speaks for this exchange. In short, an “open person” – a member of an open society – is always ready to make a rational change of opinion and exchange of commodities.

What can be of concern? Much, let us first point out that the total “openness of personality,” which is only subject to abstract rules of change of views and exchange of commodities, can – apparently paradoxically – lead to almost total isolation. Popper himself notices this. He writes:

As a consequence of its loss of organic character, an open society may become, by degrees, what I should like to term an “abstract society.” (...) We could conceive of 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. (Artificial insemination would allow even propagation without a personal element.) Such a fictitious society might be called a “completely abstract or depersonalized society.”

Now the interesting point is 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. (...) There are many people living in a modern society who 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.<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Three problems related to depersonalization: Popper's paradox**

In this long quotation, there are a few key points that deserve attention. Popper rightly calls an abstract society a depersonalized society. It seems, however, that this depersonalization has a deeper meaning than that Popper gives it: it is not only that the relationships between people are devoid of personal character. Even more importantly, members of this society are themselves impoverished individuals, they are not fully developed persons, they are themselves – as individuals – “reduced”, depersonalized; that is, depersonalization has also an intrapersonal dimension.

Another crucial point concerns Popper's opinion on the sources of “social needs”. Popper finds them, it seems, only in the biological structure of man. And in this point, Popper is only partly right: social needs result from the whole human being, also from the highest levels of his nature. Which is why, a significant disruption in the process of satisfying those needs entails impoverishment of the person, depersonalization of the human being

<sup>2</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, (London, 1994), Vol. I, 167

and their fundamental incompleteness and immaturity, in other words: permanent unhappiness.

There is one more among Popper's opinions that cannot be accepted either, namely: the fact that he recognizes the difficulty resulting from the depersonalizing impact of an abstract society as transitional and easy to overcome. Popper believes that one should be able to replace old bonds with "abstract" surrogates, and then, the depersonalizing effects will simply disappear. It is only a matter of time and proper education. There is no alternative to full openness; which is why, one has to learn how to handle all the effects, including those that – at first – may be troublesome because of our biological structure. I shall further try to explain in detail why this view cannot be accepted.

Summing up this part of deliberations, we can present such a paradox – let us call it Popper's paradox: although one is supposed to be a fully open monad, a completely open person, a member of an open society (let us add: "open society" is, so to speak, the ideal limit of "abstract society"; and the way to that limit may be long). One turns out to be an anonymous, in fact completely closed monad, isolated "*in closed motor-cars*" and similar devices and because of that closing – unhappy.

#### 4. Further difficulty: Plato's paradox

We have already noticed an important aspect of the problem arising from the complete "openness" of the society: depersonalizing effects of that complete openness – the fact that complete, full openness has a depersonalizing effect both on the interpersonal and intrapersonal reality. With regard to interpersonal bonds, extreme openness of the "abstract society" results in the virtual disappearance of these relations, which are then replaced by anonymity,

isolation, closing off other human beings. As regards intrapersonal reality, the effect is similar: in its extreme variety, a strong, integrated person almost disappears and is replaced with uncertain, insecure, volatile and nearly disintegrated personality.

To put it briefly: a fully open person, an ideal member of an open society, has little chance to become, and stay, a fully developed, mature person. This difficulty – let us refer to it as Plato's paradox – was described by the author of *Politeia* in book 8 of his masterpiece. It is indeed a paradox: full openness is postulated as a *sine qua non* for the complete development of personality, whereas – if Plato is right – this very openness necessarily makes the complete development of a person impossible, and one should rather speak of a progressive disintegration, disorder of a person.

For the sake of historical illustration, let us now recall some theses and formulas devised by Plato. Of course, it will be a caricature of a "democratic man." However, this caricature does not seem so distant and different from the reality of contemporary open societies:

Yes, I said, he lives from day to day indulging the appetite of the hour; and sometimes he is lapped in drink and strains of the flute; then he becomes a water-drinker, and tries to get thin; then he takes a turn at gymnastics; sometimes idling and neglecting everything, then once more living the life of a philosopher; often he is busy with politics, and starts to his feet and says and does whatever comes into his head; and, if he is emulous of any one who is a warrior, off he is in that direction, or of men of business, once more in that. His life has neither law nor order; and this distracted existence he terms joy and bliss and freedom; and so, he goes on. Yes, he replied, he is all liberty and equality.

Yes, I said; his life is motley and manifold and an epitome of the lives of many; he answers to the State which we described as fair and spangled.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Republic*, book VIII, 561 D, E

Let us add, by way of supplementation, that the above mentioned image of a fully open person is a sort of idealization: the observation of fully open societies as well as the “democratic types” – as Plato describes them – who populate such societies, makes us think that opinions, views and attitudes are subject to change and exchange not only under the influence of rational arguments, but also when affected by minor, less serious “reasons” such as those dictated by fashion. It is astonishing to see how much effort is put by our contemporaries in following the fashion; previously, it was said that somebody was “*au courant*”, now we would rather say they are “trendy” or “hip”. People are becoming “motley and manifold”, because they switch from one view or opinion to another when affected by snobbery, a momentary whim, the wish to experiment *etc.* The effect is often as described by Plato.

### 5. Should the initial alternative between an open and closed society be maintained?

We are, therefore, in a difficult situation: on the one hand, we have the primitive nature of quasi-biological bonds, social inequality and personality enslaved in closed societies, especially in their totalitarian variety, on the other hand – obvious problems posed by an open society when full openness is postulated both in personal and social dimension. A closed society, or Popper's paradox plus Plato's paradox, this is, essentially, our situation.

Is it so, indeed? Does this exclusive disjunction aptly describe our current situation? The essence of what follows is the rejection of these alternatives. And here are the reasons why.

Let us start with an example. It will be a short story of *school bussing* in Boston. In the early 1970s, the municipal authorities of Boston decided to heal the situation in education. It was

appalling, indeed: next to high-quality public schools attended by the children of affluent, mostly white citizens, there were many schools with unsatisfactory education level and the quality of teaching there was very poor. The authorities decided to counteract this situation: children from better schools were taken by bus to worse schools in the districts inhabited by black citizens. And the other way round: black children from the poor districts were driven to the schools that were previously attended mainly by the children of rich, white parents. Lots were drawn to decide which children would remain in their previous schools and which would have to be driven to the other side of the city. The initiators of this project, called *school bussing*, expected that their idea would result in the improvement of the general level of education in public schools, that the parents of better pupils would be a positive influence on how the schools function in black districts, that the children from black districts would imitate the patterns and follow the example of their white companions as far as behaviour and learning are concerned. In fact, the results of the experiment were opposite: first of all, many parents residing in better areas gave up on public schooling altogether: Boston has quite a number of schools run by churches, especially the Catholic Church. Secondly, among those pupils that remained, it was the worse pupils, not the better ones, who were the driving force, which resulted in a dramatic drop of the education level. Thirdly, the distance from the school made many parents of the children involved in *school bussing* break off any contact with the school whatsoever, choosing to become involved in various forms of protest against the action instead. Once again, it was proved that good intentions are not enough, if the assumptions are wrong.

## 6. Open or closed: wrong assumptions

What are these wrong assumptions? I have already had the opportunity to mention this elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> so I will just recapitulate the main points here:

- It is not true that the internal dynamics of a developing and integrating personality pushes people towards greater openness. Many authors advocating different theories underline that this is not so: the process of human development and integration requires a sort of interchangeability of the phases when one is alternatively open and closed to information, axiological or emotional patterns, social or intellectual contact with others. Unless this interchangeability oscillates around a certain optimum, human personality will be shaken, instead of developing and integrating on a higher level. This, in turn, results in internal discord rather than consolidation of the internal constitution, and finally the person's very integrity will be threatened.
- It is also not true that the postulate of growing openness is applied without any restraints to various social groups and institutions. Even the most open family must sometimes be closed and keep themselves to themselves. Even the most open school must stick to a defined line of conduct, which is not shaken by any feeble pressure from the social and political environment.
- The interchangeable rhythm of opening and closing of people and social groups does not take place on a single plane or in a single aspect. Its dimensions and boundaries are not delineated only by the way people contact and communicate to exchange views, opinions, attitudes and commodities. Human being is not restricted to only the market and the political forum. Interpersonal relations have many aspects and bringing them all down to one

<sup>4</sup> *Uмова społeczna. Renesans idei*, (Kraków, 1999), 218 et seq. For the basic distinction, I'm indebted to Adam Węgrzecki, see: Adam Węgrzecki, *O poznawaniu drugiego człowieka* (Kraków 1982), 112.

(or two, or three) distinct options is a theoretical fallacy and a dangerous reductionism. These various aspects – every human being is a part of some family, but also a subject of civil transactions, a citizen and a member of a club, a fellow human being and a companion, but also a stakeholder, who addresses others by “you”, “Sir”, “my dear” *etc.* – are necessary for people to discover and develop various sides and facets of their essential existence. All of them are also the basis for specific processes of becoming open and closed; they are an opportunity to set boundaries, but also to cross them, to open the windows of a “human monad”, and to close them when appropriate. It is not just anyone who can become a member of a family, or of a club, or become a beloved person. And it always happens in a special way. On the other hand, even the communities with particularly strong ties know the rules of discretion, tact, shame, *etc.* It is only in this perspective that all these rules and conventions gain their proper meaning, imposing a certain order on the interchangeable, multidimensional opening and closing processes. We have to notice that ultimately, this order is there to guard human integrity and culture. It is – as it seems – the core of culture.

## 7. Summing up

Popper's initial dichotomy is illegitimate: nothing forces us to accept his vision that a society along with its individual members must either be open or closed. This dichotomy is based on certain false assumptions, which cannot be accepted. The dichotomy itself – if accepted – seems to impose an obvious choice of a fully open society, which leads to the above mentioned paradoxes: Popper's paradox and Plato's paradox. This is also an objection against accepting the starting point of Popper's considerations – the dichotomy: closed society *versus* open society (and being a fully closed or fully open person).