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'Brexit' and the Political Ideals of the Open Society

Rod Thomas

Preface, acknowledgements, lament, dedication and disclaimer

This paper was written in the months preceding the so-called 'Brexit' referendum to decide whether the United Kingdom ought to remain a member of the European Union. It uses starred (*) endnotes to incorporate any post-referendum information that is pertinent to its contents. The rudiment of its analysis of Brexit first appeared in a letter to *Standpoint* magazine Issue 82, May 2016. A shortened version of the paper informed presentations to faculty of the Department of Law, Northumbria University, UK on 30th June 2016 and to the 11th *Philosophy of Management Conference*, St Anne's College, University of Oxford, UK on 17th July 2016. It was also discussed in two on-line seminars on *The Future of Science and the Open Society* hosted by Dr Mark Notturno of the Interactivity Foundation, USA on 9th July 2016 and 26th February 2017. I am grateful for the comments and criticisms that I received at these various events.

In October 2016, the paper was submitted for publication in the European social and political philosophy journal *Res Publica*. The editors of *Res Publica* rejected the paper for what I consider to be inappropriate reasons: one of their referees used their anonymous status to defame me, whereas the other declared the paper's argument to be 'unpersuasive'. Most lamentably, one referee discounted the paper's contents on the grounds that Sir Karl Popper's ideas about democracy and the Open Society are 'now largely ignored by political philosophers, social theorists, and historians'. Thus, I dedicate this paper to those who were more willing to engage with democracy and Popper's idea of the Open Society: the volunteers to the various campaign organisations in the Brexit referendum. Finally, I thank Mark Notturno and Rafe Champion for their efforts to create forums to discuss critical rationalism outside the all too often censorious confines of academia. I thank Rafe especially for his kind offer to post the paper on this web site.

The responsibility for all of the opinions expressed in this paper rests solely with the author and not with any other persons whom he may know, or with any organisations or institutions with which he is associated.

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Abstract

The exegesis of a famous work in social and political philosophy may be made interesting by explaining the problem that engaged its author. It may be made doubly interesting by applying the philosophy to a contemporary issue. That two-fold agenda, when successfully addressed, may also demonstrate the lasting value of the work and that the problem that it sought to investigate is in some sense perennial. This paper pursues such an agenda by supplying an exegesis of Karl Popper's famous work on social and political philosophy: *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. It uses a recently published collection of Popper's previously unpublished or uncollected papers on social and political philosophy to elucidate the work's themes, contents and problem situation. It also applies its central ideas to a contemporary issue: the referendum on so-called 'Brexit', held on 23rd June 2016, to decide whether the United Kingdom ought to remain a member of the European Union. The exegesis that is thereby supplied offers a third outcome of contemporary interest: an unqualified philosophical defence of 'Brexit'.

Introduction

This paper 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*. Both sides of the dichotomy reflect political ideals for the individual life and the historical life of a society; but I shall argue that the political ideals of openness and democracy are peculiar because they represent a kind of *anti-ideal* ideal. This approach to political philosophy is illustrated by a contemporary issue: the referendum held on June 23rd 2016 to decide whether the United Kingdom (UK)

ought to remain a member of the European Union (EU). The referendum is commonly referred to as the referendum on British exit from the EU, or ‘Brexit’.^{1*} I shall propose that the Brexit debate and the political ideals of the Open Society and democracy 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.

Philosophising the Brexit Debate

Some commentators seem to look upon the Brexit debate and the politics of the UK more generally in disbelief or incomprehension. Let us consider, purely by way of illustration, *Brexit - The Politics of a Bad Idea*, edited by David Gow and Henning Meyer (2016). It is a collection of essays by leading academics, former Commissioners of the European Union, journalists and public policy analysts. It presents EU membership as “... the foundation of the ‘open society’ Britain has become... one of the main guarantors of our civilization... to be defended at all costs” (Liddle 2016, pp. 8-9). Brexit, in contrast, is dismissed as a ‘bad idea’ (Gow and Meyer 2016) that is supported by ‘thin arguments’ (Liddle 2016, p. 3). Worse, Brexit is not only a bad idea, it is ‘... among the worst ideas of the century’ (Andor 2016, p. 20).

Unfortunately, the contributors to this collection fail to address the question of why this ‘bad idea’ has endured rather than been criticised to destruction. The editors seemingly attribute this to ‘... the poor quality of debate on a topic as complex as EU membership’ (Gow and Meyer 2016, p. 1).^{2*} Whatever the reason, they were deeply unsettled by the prospect of the Brexit question being subject to a referendum. For that is to:

... risk that this crucial vote is decided not on the basis of the best available information and analysis but on gut feeling and short-term mood swings. This is no way to decide upon fundamental issues of democracy and sovereignty for years to come (Gow and Meyer 2016, p. 1).

Elsewhere, other commentators are similarly unsettled.^{3*} One analyst, writing on-line for the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, has suggested that the 2014 referendum on whether Scotland ought to become an independent nation raised the question of ‘...whether a democratic system is beneficial or detrimental to the governance of a country made up of many nations’ (Suetyi 2014). Another on-line *Carnegie* commentator lamented the Brexit referendum as being symptomatic of ‘... an unpleasant nationalism, which interprets everything in terms of the greatness of Britain’ (Wollard 2016).

Admittedly, it might seem *excessively* democratic of the UK government to have asked its people to decide whether they wanted the UK to remain a member of the EU so soon after establishing, by means of a similar referendum, that the people of Scotland wished to remain a part of the UK. But it is not the short interlude between the two referendums that seems to animate these commentators. On the contrary, my own sense is that what troubles some is that these decisions place their faith in a philosophy of open society and democracy. They seem unsettled by the fact that the decisions are significant and are being made by means of a democratic referendum that is itself preceded by an open critical discussion. Indeed, although they mostly refrain from explicitly saying it, it seems obvious that some think that democracy enabled one of the worst ideas of the century to be posed as a referendum question—an idea so bad that its adoption jeopardizes civilization and open society.

Forewarnings of the rise of such *post-democratic* sentiment were issued long ago (Siedentop 2000; Crouch 2004; Oborne 2008; Hitchens 2009). *Post-democracy*, however, was the term coined by the political economist Colin Crouch (2004) to describe a society in which the institutions of democracy become a formal shell for the closed broking arrangements of the politico-economic elite comprising politicians, banks, multi-national corporations, inter-governmental bodies, lobbyists and media organisations. *Anti-Democracy*, of course, would dispense with even the formal shell.

^{1*} On a turnout of 72.2%, the referendum result was declared as 17,410,742 (51.9%) to leave the EU and 16,141,241 (48.1%) to remain in the EU. See, The Electoral Commission (2016).

^{2*} The returns to the Electoral Commission later revealed that the referendum campaign was the most expensive in British history: £16,152,899 being spent in support of a ‘Remain’ outcome and £11,534,426 being spent in support of a ‘Leave’ outcome. See, The Electoral Commission (2017).

^{3*} The unease has continued. For instance, after the referendum, The Royal Institute of Philosophy broadcast a facilitator-led discussion between four British philosophers: 3 supporting ‘Remain’ and 1 ‘Leave’. The discussion addressed the question of whether the EU referendum was a truly democratic process and whether the outcome of the vote should in some way be ‘resisted’. See, The Royal Institute of Philosophy (2017).

How should one view this situation? Is a democracy, with the power to both appoint and dismiss its leaders, an acceptable form of control on the management of a society and its state institutions? Is a society that asks of each and every enfranchised adult that they think critically about, and take a measure of responsibility for, the social laws and arrangements under which they live, a society that asks too much of its people? In place of the burden of asking all to share in this strain, is it not more desirable to sit back and leave the entire responsibility for ruling a society, or even a multitude of societies, to established decision-makers and authorities who know what is best for everyone? What kind of society would that be? And how do anti-democrats convince a democratic people to transit from one kind of state to the other?

Seventy-one years ago, Karl Popper's (1966a [1945]; 1966b [1945]) *The Open Society and Its Enemies* posed pretty much exactly the same set of questions. That resonance raises further questions of interest: whether that book's problem situation is in some sense perennial and whether it thereby contains ideas of lasting value. All importantly, would answering any of these questions help to explain why so many Britons refuse to endorse the political project of the European Union? Or is their thinking simply predicated upon a bad idea?

The Open Society and Its Enemies

Karl Popper's (1966a [1945]; 1966b [1945]) *The Open Society and Its Enemies* 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 (2002a [1974]) described how he left Austria in 1937, first staying in England before accepting a lectureship in New Zealand. It was in New Zealand, against the distant back-drop of the tragedy enveloping Central Europe, that he wrote *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (OS&E).

The book, which Popper (2002a [1974], p. 131) described as his 'war effort', complemented an earlier series of papers on the methodology of the social sciences (Popper 1944a; 1944b; 1945);⁴ but neither work directly mentioned the war. It is a book that different readers might take very different lessons from. This is not because it is hard to understand or because it was written for the benefit of a specialist audience. On the contrary, it is written in a simple and direct style that '...presupposes nothing but open-mindedness in the reader' (Popper 1966a [1945], p. vii). Yet as the Popper scholar David Miller (2006, p. 13) noted '...the text teems with arguments; the abundant notes, on a huge range of peripheral topics, only add to the profusion of thoughts'. Indeed, Popper later said that he regretted not explicitly stating in the book 'what it was all about' (2012 [2008], p. 132; see also Popper (2012 [2008], chapter 16). Consequently, discerning what exactly OS&E is *all* about—as opposed to what a particular chapter is about—presents a significant problem to an exegete.

Recently, however, this difficulty has been considerably eased. After *The Open Society* (Popper 2012 [2008]), edited by Jeremy Shearmur and Piers Norris Turner, assembles a collection of previously unpublished or uncollected papers on social and political philosophy that Popper authored in the period 1940-1994. This collection, which is largely drawn from archival sources, includes correspondence, lectures and draft papers that illuminate the themes, contents and problem situation of OS&E. Thus the exegesis of OS&E that is presented here is informed by this complementary volume and especially its chapter 14—a previously unpublished manuscript of an untitled talk that Popper gave, seemingly in 1946 to the *Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society* and possibly elsewhere, and its chapter 16—various drafts of the preface to the American second edition of OS&E that were written in the period 1948-1950. Taken together, they offer an additional insight into what Popper's own nutshell exegesis of OS&E looked like, the problem situation that it sought to address, and what, precisely, Popper considered to be the enemies of the Open Society: not the personage of Plato, Hegel and Marx, but the ideologies of 'historicism', 'collectivism' and 'irrationalism'.⁵

That said, my reading of OS&E, at least as a work of social and political philosophy, is that it is a defence of two political ideals: open society and democracy. By an open society, Popper meant '...a form of social life, and the values which are traditionally cherished in that social life, such as freedom, tolerance, justice, the citizen's free pursuit of knowledge, his right to disseminate knowledge, his free choice of values and beliefs, and his pursuit of happiness' (Popper 2012 [2008], p. 240; see also (1966a [1945], chapter 10 §VIII)). And by 'democracy' he meant something equally specific: a form of government in

⁴ The papers were later published in book form as Popper (1957).

⁵ I acknowledge Joseph Agassi's (2010) review essay of *After the Open Essay* which contains many interesting remarks on exegeses and on the important contribution that Shearmur and Turner's edited collection has made to the understanding of Popper's social and political philosophy.

which the rulers can be dismissed by the ruled without violence or bloodshed (Popper 1966a [1945], chapter 7 §II; see also Popper 2012 [2008], chapter 41).

Furthermore, I think that these ideals reflect ideals for the individual life and the historical life of a society; but they are peculiar because each reflects a kind of *anti-ideal* ideal. This is because they are sceptical as to whether there is a single ideal life for all men and women, just as they are sceptical as to whether there can be an absolute and unchanging ideal society and state.⁶ Consequently, the political ideal that is embodied by openness is 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 not that the people should rule, it is that the people should have institutional methods that are capable of dismissing 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.

Yet how does a move to close down an open society succeed? This is the question that implicitly made OS&E pertinent to understanding the European politics of its time. It is also the question that makes the book pertinent to understanding the European politics of today.

Volume I of OS&E (Popper 1966a [1945]) begins with an epigraph taken from Samuel Butler's (1872) *Erewhon*:

*It will be seen... that the Erewhonians are a meek and long-suffering people, easily led by the nose, and quick to offer up common sense at the shrine of logic, when a philosopher arises among them who carries them away... by convincing them that their existing institutions are not based on the strictest principles of morality.*⁷

Popper (2012 [2008], chapter 24) later revealed that he selected it in order to stress the perennial tendency of intellectuals to lead an attack on the Open Society. Such attacks, he argued, are not made by appealing, as is widely supposed, to wickedness; what they appeal to is ‘moral enthusiasm’ (Popper 2012 [2008], p. 234).

But the moral appeal, whatever its particular form, is the dressing to the main course. This is an offer to fulfill a powerful psychological desire: to artificially close down or arrest change within society. In place of the discomforting demands of having to adapt to the constant change that is generated by the freedom of the Open Society, a leader and/or their intellectual guru offers something that is more secure, more prosperous, more innocent, more romantic or more beautiful (Popper 1966a [1945], chapter 10 §II). An open society thereby closes itself down: its people surrender to what Popper called ‘the strain of civilization’ (1966a [1945], p. 176). Instead of taking personal responsibility for their own life and its contribution to the historical life of their society, the individual averts the responsibility by passing it to those who offer a perfected and ideal arrangement, one that supposedly harmonizes the society and each individual’s contribution to it, whilst also arresting those developments that threaten the perfected ideal. And of course, there may be little to no need for democratic accountability in such an arrangement; for the coming of the perfected arrangement may be presented as being inevitable, or its requirements may be presented as being only understandable by the intellectual or established leadership elite. The enemies of the Open Society thereby successfully replace the political ideals of openness and democracy by those of closure and tyranny.

The principal philosophies that OS&E presented as the enemies of the Open Society were those of Plato, Hegel and Marx to whom Popper attributed a series of ideas that he thought to be 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’. These ideas do not always form an alliance—although they may do so. By a form of insinuation, OS&E thereby suggested that these ideas had become the intellectual armoury of the totalitarian political projects of the book’s time—the ideological enemies of the Open Society and a form of anti-democratic politics that it must at all costs oppose (Popper 1966a [1945], Introduction; 2012 [2008], chapters 14, 16). To Popper, they were also the ideologies that a philosophy for post-war reconstruction had to at all costs avoid (Popper 1966a [1945], p. vii, Introduction; 2012 [2008], chapters 14, 16).

⁶ The question of whether man is perfectible is one of the central issues of traditional philosophy. See John Passmore (1970) for a detailed discussion of its long history, which also reaches sceptical conclusions.

⁷ Butler’s story describes a civilization called ‘Erewhon’ whose morality and logic is characterised by reversals when compared to that of England. For instance in Erewhon children are held responsible for their own birth; illness is punished as a crime, whereas crime is treated as an illness; debate about the rights of animals and vegetables leads to hunger etc.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage with Popper's multi-faceted argument in very much detail. Neither is it feasible to offer a detailed discussion of how Popper located the aforementioned ideas in the philosophies of Plato, Hegel and Marx, nor of how his analysis was received by adherents of those philosophies.⁸ But, for the purpose of this essay, it is important to discuss the meaning of these terms as Popper presented them. By implication, if Popper's diagnosis is correct, a society that values openness and democracy will be deeply suspicious of any political project that carries the slightest whiff of closure and tyranny. This is a fundamental reason why, or so I shall argue, so many Britons refuse to endorse the political project of the European Union. And it also explains, at least to my satisfaction, why they are right not to do so. Let us consider the nature of the EU's political project in these terms.

Anti-Democratic Politics

For Popper (1966a [1945], p. 124; see also 2012 [2008], chapter 41), there are two types of government. Firstly, those in which the rulers can be dismissed by the ruled without violence or bloodshed; that is to say those with democratic institutions that are capable of doing this. Secondly, those in which the ruled cannot do this; that is to say an anti-democratic dictatorship or a tyranny.

To emphasise the point that in a democratic institutional arrangement a government must face a 'day of judgement', Popper was fond of citing Pericles of Athens: 'Although only a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge it' (1966a [1945], p. 7; 2012 [2008], p. 368). And if a *post-democratic* political class emerges, in which the politicians of different political parties are wholly interchangeable because their policies are essentially all the same, then the people of the Open Society, if they sufficiently value a tradition of democracy, may try to found a new political party. Much thereby depends upon the vigilance and strength of character of a people in upholding what is often nothing more than tradition.⁹

For all of their imperfections, the Open Society and the institutions of a democracy are therefore bulwarks against any political class seeking to reduce politics to a closed process of entreaties, broking, negotiations, cronyism and 'Danegeld' arrangements. This was memorably summarised by the socialist British Parliamentarian Tony Benn (1998) when he said that democracy poses 5 little questions to the powerful:

*What power have you got? Where did you get it from? In whose interests do you exercise it?
To whom are you accountable? And how can we get rid of you?*

This is, in my view, a fundamental reason for the Brexit referendum occurring. The EU has long been accused by Brexit campaigners of being *anti-democratic* by design: its government is not formed from an elected Parliament, cannot be collectively dismissed by a demos, mostly does not have its legislation initiated by those who are elected to its European Parliament, and has a judiciary that is increasingly empowered to override the law of its democratic member states wherever it finds it to be contrary to EU law. As an institutional structure, the EU declares itself to be 'unique' (European Union 2016). But even those who favor the creation of a federal European government that is elected by a unified European demos—a United States of Europe—concede that this is unlikely to happen any time soon. Indeed, the EU's present institutions were described by Yanis Varoufakis, the former Greek Finance Minister and a supporter of the project of European Union, as being:

*...designed purposely to ensure that laws could be passed without any serious scrutiny by any sovereign parliament vested with the authority of democracy's final arbiter, the people
(Varoufakis 2016, pp. 223-224).¹⁰*

Indeed, the EU's institutional structure is so hard to understand that it is probably fair to say that hardly any members of the British general public fully understand it. Nonetheless, I very much doubt that many Britons would find the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon's Article 8b provisions on the democratic principles of the EU to be satisfactory (European Union 2007). For instance, that 'citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament'—the Parliament, one should remember, from which the EU's executive leadership are not selected. Nor, I suspect, do they feel particularly enfranchised by their democratic entitlement to submit, as an individual and if accompanied by at least 999,999 others from a

⁸ For a brief survey see Keuth (2005, part II).

⁹ Popper's social philosophy presents traditions as playing '...a kind of intermediate and intermediary role between persons (and personal decisions) and institutions' (Popper 1966a, Chapter 7 fn. 7* [emphasis removed]). See Popper (2002b [1963], chapter 4) for a further discussion.

¹⁰ Yanis Varoufakis's *And The Weak Suffer What They Must?* (2016) supplies a compelling history of the EU, the establishment of the Eurozone single currency area, and the background to his own resignation as Greek finance minister after he refused to accept that the terms of the Eurozone's bail-out of his bankrupt nation respected its sovereignty.

significant number of EU member states, a proposal to the European Commission that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties—all of which are predicated upon an ever-closer union of the EU's member states. And then there are the reports of the mind-boggling 'back-room' deals that precede the 'election' of the President of the European Parliament (Waterfield 2014).

Of course, the famous Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty on European Union does permit the holding of a Brexit-style referendum on withdrawing from the EU and this is an exercise in popular democracy. But one should note what is being permitted. It is not that a popular referendum may be used to advise the elected representatives or rulers of a democracy to dismiss another set of elected representatives or rulers. What is permitted, and what the Brexit referendum may initiate, is that a member state may 'withdraw' from the Union and seek to negotiate an agreement for the arrangements for its withdrawal, or failing that, leave without such a negotiated agreement. In other words, the EU permits a member state to decide to exile itself or be banished.

What a significant number of Britons do seem to feel is that they are increasingly 'governed by Brussels', but they do not understand how, or even why, they are governed by Brussels, nor why the supposedly sovereign UK parliament that they do elect cannot change the way that they are governed by Brussels, or rather, why they cannot do so without first getting the approval of a multitude of rulers from other EU member states and EU bodies that they cannot name, did not elect, and cannot dismiss. Those embedded within this semi-closed system of government do not even seem to recognize the potential damage done to its public image when they openly characterize it as a process of entreaties, broking and bargaining (House of Commons 2015; Tusk 2015; 2016). And Britons could only wonder at the complete indifference of the EU's leadership when a party wishing to withdraw the UK from the EU effectively won, by any commonly-used measure, the UK elections to the European Parliament in 2014 (BBC News 2014). Indeed, it was only the prospect of further electoral success for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), in the 2015 general election of representatives to the UK Parliament, that seemingly brought matters to a head—not through any EU-led initiative, but with the decision of the more mainstream Conservative Party to include a manifesto pledge to renegotiate the terms of the UK's membership of the EU and subsequently hold a referendum on Brexit (The Conservative Party 2015).

But an anti-democratic politics, according to OS&E, usually goes hand-in-hand with the move to close down an open society. Surely, the EU, as a project of *post-war* reconstruction, was not informed by the philosophies that inspired totalitarianism. Did it not bury historicism, collectivism and irrationalism alongside their corollaries of 'messiahs', 'prophets', 'principles of leadership', 'philosopher kings', 'noble lies', and 'utopianism'?

Sadly, I think not.

Historicism

'Historicism' is a doctrine that comes in a variety of guises (Popper 1957; 1966a [1945]; 1966b [1945]; see also Gellner 1964). In its more elaborate forms it presents the history of a society, or group of societies, as being governed by a natural law of succession, or by laws of historical development. In its simple forms it presents human history as having an intrinsic meaning, or as unfolding according to an inexorable law of historical destiny, or very simply that a chosen people, or a class of people, or a group of peoples, has a destiny or fate.¹¹

A historicist doctrine typically places historical events into a developmental series by using a deterministic theory that purports to explain the series, or it gives the events a meaning or justification. Thus it makes history in the traditional sense of a chronicle of events almost superfluous to the historicist account of that history. No matter how tragic and unfortunate the events may be, they are always simply the conditions on which the remorseless logic of a supposed 'law of destiny' or 'law of development' sets to work. In other words, *And the Weak Suffer What They Must* (Varoufakis 2016). For this reason, Gilbert Ryle memorably described historicism as the 'Juggernaut theory of history'.¹² It presents a picture of a

¹¹ It ought to be noted that Popper (1957, p. 17) distinguished 'historicism' from what he called 'historism'. To him, 'historism' was the doctrine that theories and opinions reflect the predilections and interests of a historical period. As such, Popper accepted historicism and he often argued that understanding a social and historical context may be relevant to understanding the theories and ideas that are developed within it. See, for example, Popper (2002b [1963], chapter 2). Unfortunately, other writers use the term 'historicism' to represent what Popper called 'historism' creating the prospect of terminological confusion. For a discussion, see Page (1995).

¹² See the publisher's blurb to the fifth paperback edition of volume 1 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1966a). It quotes Ryle's (1947) review from *Mind*. Gilbert Ryle was one of the leading figures of British twentieth-century philosophy.

society as if it were a train travelling along a track, with individual persons aboard it, all inevitably bound to arrive at a terminus station called ‘Collective Destiny’.

My own sense is that the juggernaut theory underwrites the commonplace and long-established political talk of Europe having a ‘destiny’, of there being a ‘two-speed’ and ‘multi-speed’ Europe, of there being an engine unit of ‘Kern Europa’ etc. Indeed, the EU, and its forerunner institutions, have explicitly flirted with a historicist narrative to justify the Treaty of Rome’s (European Economic Community 1957) objective ‘...of an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe’. This is most clearly present in the *Solemn Declaration on European Union* agreed by the Heads of State of the then European Economic Community’s members in Stuttgart in 1983.¹³ This solemnly declared that:

The Heads of State or government, on the basis of an awareness of a common destiny and the wish to affirm the European identity, confirm their commitment to progress towards an ever closer union among the peoples and member states of the European Community (European Community 1983).^{14*}

Popper returned again and again to attack the perniciousness of historicism in his writings (Popper 1957; 1966a [1945], chapter 22; see also Popper 1994, chapter 7; 1997, chapters 1, 2, 5; 1999, chapters 10, 12; 2012 [2008], chapters 8, 33). Throughout his life, he classified Karl Marx as a most influential historicist theorist, often calling historicism ‘the Marxist trap’ (Popper 1999, p. 133).¹⁵ He argued that historicist doctrine traps the individual in moral chains. The supposed inevitability of factual events enables the taking of personal responsibility to be averted. And surely, all are better off swimming with the tide of history, than foolishly attempting to hold it back. Indeed, if something is widely perceived to be inevitable then it is also close to inevitable that those who resist its coming will be dismissed as swivel-eyed cranks, gadflies, or fruitcakes. Even more damningly, such individuals may be judged as unnatural, wicked, or criminal. In a nutshell, historicist morality reduces moral standards to current and prophesied future facts; it invites a ‘moral positivism’ or ‘moral futurism’, or that ‘Coming Might is Right’ (Popper 1966b [1945], p. 206 [emphasis in original]; see also 1966b, p. 393).

Indeed, for the moral futurist, the right thing to do may not be to sit back and wait for the inevitable to happen. They may decide that their duty is to aid its coming and lessen the birth-pangs—to act as a midwife.¹⁶ And, of course, if a belief in a supposed historical common destiny becomes the official ideology of a society’s state institutions, then that belief will hold implications for persons within that society. This is because the power of the State’s institutions will make the belief a force, even if the belief is false. The established institutions of the State will promote the *rightness* of the historicist prophesy. Cue the various inter-governmental Treaties of European Union, all uncritically premised on the ‘solemn’ assumption that there is a European identity, that the people of Europe share a common destiny *tout court*, and that the peoples of Europe must submit themselves to the doctrine of *Acquis Communautaire*.¹⁷

That historicist morality became a feature of the Brexit debate seems, at least to me, also a matter of the historical record. Indeed, voting to remain in the EU was explicitly presented by its supporters to be the ‘moral’ choice because of the economic opportunity and security that it supposedly guaranteed as compared to the unknown economic risks and insecurities that were attributed to the Brexit option. In the words of the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron (2016):

The economic case is the moral case—for keeping parents in work, firms in business, Britain in credit, the moral case for providing economic opportunity rather than unemployment for the

¹³ Confusingly, the communiqué was issued on behalf of the ‘European Community’ which at that time did not formally exist. The Treaty of Rome established the European Economic Community (or Common Market) in 1957. It was renamed the ‘European Community’ by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 and became one of the so-called ‘three pillars’ of the ‘European Union’ that the Treaty also established —the others being concerned with intergovernmental cooperation. The institutions of the European Community were abolished and absorbed into the European Union as a result of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007.

^{14*} The outcome of the referendum on Brexit has of course destroyed the continued feasibility of presenting an ‘ever-closer union’ as ‘the destiny’ of Europe. In the aftermath, the EU Commission had to completely rethink how to present not only the historical evolution of the European Union, but also the options for the EU’s future development. These are detailed in the EU Commission’s (2017) *Whitepaper on the Future of Europe. Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025*. To give a flavor of its contents, ‘kern’ or ‘core’ Europe is rephrased, George Bush style, as ‘a coalition of the willing’. Nonetheless, old habits die hard. Given the document’s title, the EU Commission seemingly thinks that the UK is leaving the continent of Europe and not just the EU.

¹⁵ But as noted a historicist theory need not resemble that of Marx, Engels etc. Marxism may be viewed as replacing the destiny of a chosen people, or the destiny of a nation, with the destiny of the working class (Agassi 1999).

¹⁶ Cf. Karl Marx (1867): ‘And even when a society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the natural laws of its movement—and it is the ultimate aim of this work, to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society—it can neither clear by bold leaps; nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development. But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs’.

¹⁷ The term is French and means ‘that acquired by the community’. The doctrine of *acquis communautaire* asserts that the provisions of the various treaties on European Union, and EU law more generally, has primacy and prevails over any member state’s national law and constitutions. The doctrine is applied via the European Court of Justice.

next generation. Where is the morality for putting that at risk for some unknown end?... It is the self-destruct option.

Moreover, the purported ‘moral case’ was quantified in the very best traditions of moral positivism. By assuming that the UK would be unable to negotiate any favorable trade deals whatsoever under the Brexit scenario, HM Treasury successfully managed to construct an econometric model that estimated the opportunity foregone by a Brexit option to equal £4,300 of GDP per household after 15 years (HM Government 2016).¹⁸ Political standards of good government were thereby entirely reduced, *Erewhonian* style, to a measurement of the value of economic production.

Collectivism

Like historicism, ‘collectivism’ also comes in a variety of guises (Popper 1966a [1945]; see also O’Neill 1973). In its most simple form it presents itself as tribalism or ‘... the emphasis on the supreme importance of the tribe, without which the individual is nothing at all’ (Popper 1966a [1945], p. 9). To Popper, a tribal society exhibits 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’; for instance, one ‘...with the belief that both are enforced by a supernatural will’ (Popper 1966a [1945], p. 172). A tribal society is therefore rigid: its social conventions, customs and regulations are not open to critical consideration, evaluation or discussion. The individual’s social position is largely prescribed by custom and their social action may be proscribed by taboo. Hence changes to the way of life within a tribal society are infrequent: ‘... taboos rigidly regulate and dominate all aspects of life’ (Popper 1966a [1945], p. 172). This is what Popper meant by ‘the Closed Society’ (Popper 1966a [1945], p. 57).

But tribalism is a simple and natural form of what Popper more generally called ‘collectivism’: “... a doctrine which emphasizes the significance of some collective or group, for instance ‘the state’ (or a certain state; or a nation; or a class) as against that of the individual” (1966a [1945], Chapter 1 fn. 1). Moreover, collectivist doctrines are often based upon the psychological desire to artificially close or arrest change within a society, supposedly alleviating the uneasiness of ‘the strain of civilization’ by returning to the security, innocence and beauty of a tribal society (Popper 1966a [1945], p. 176). A Closed Society may therefore be either naturally closed as per the tribal society, or artificially closed through the adoption of a collectivist doctrine. And a collectivist doctrine that seeks artificially to close a society will embody a moral standard. In a nutshell, ‘*the criterion of morality is the interest of the state*’ (Popper 1966a [1945], p. 107 emphasis in original).

Popper argued that collectivism, with its emphasis on the primacy of some abstract whole—the tribe, the State etc—may connect with a historicist doctrine via the corollaries of ‘holism’ and ‘utopianism’ (Popper 1957, p. 17, p. 46; 1966a [1945], p. 80, p. 157). Holism is the idea that a social group, or a people, is more than the sum total of its members, more than the persons who comprise it.¹⁹ But historicists, with their idea that a society moves as a *whole* toward a destiny or fate, are inclined to interpret ‘whole’ as ‘the totality of all properties or aspects of a thing, and especially of all the relations holding between the constituent parts’ (Popper 1957, p. 76). Popper (1957) held such a notion to be confused, for wholes in that sense, can be neither described nor studied because their content is infinite. Hence, the doctrines of historicism and collectivism travel to the terminus station of ‘Collective Destiny’ on a train called ‘Holistic Jargon’. Furthermore, in a historicist prophesy, the destination point of ‘the whole’ may be a perfected ideal: an Ideal State or a utopia.

Popper (1966a [1945]) classified Plato as a most influential collectivist theorist and a historicist of sorts. He opposed what he regarded as Plato’s doctrine of tribal collectivism, and his historicist sociology of how to arrest the degeneration of the Greek City State, with a doctrine of ‘individualism’. The latter, in contrast to the former, emphasizes the supreme importance of the individual man and woman and his or her conscience (Popper 1966a [1945], p.100; (2012 [2008], chapter 7). Popper regarded individualism as a component to ‘humanitarianism’, or the doctrine that there is a basic ‘unity of mankind’ and that there are no natural divisions between, for instance, Greeks and barbarians, free men and slaves (Popper 1966a [1945], Chapter 5 fn. 13), or for that matter Europeans and non-Europeans, or the British and the rest of the world. He contrasted the jurisprudence of a humanitarian individualism with what he called the

¹⁸ It would seem that some place this report in the pantheon of UK government sponsored ‘dodgy dossiers’ (Blake 2016). Another respected British economics commentator classified the report as being in the tradition of those produced by George Orwell’s Ministry of Truth (Halligan 2016).

¹⁹ Popper (1957) held this idea to be unobjectionable if it was a shorthand label for the idea that special properties or aspects may emerge from an organised structure of relations. Economics has long studied such phenomena. In more recent times, system dynamic and complexity scientists have specialized in understanding it across all kinds of natural and social domains.

‘totalitarian justice’ of Plato’s tribal collectivism (Popper 1966a [1945], chapter 6). For Popper, individualism produced an ‘equalitarian’ concept of justice, characterized by no one being above the law and all being subject to the same law; a law that is administered impartially to all in the same courts (Popper 1966a [1945], chapter 6). Today, this doctrine is usually summarized by the phrase ‘the rule of law’, at least in the jurisprudence of English law.²⁰

For Popper, the doctrine of a humanitarian individualism places only those constraints on individual freedom that are necessary for social co-existence, whilst allowing all to share in those advantages of social life which membership of a state may offer and the protection of liberty may afford.²¹ In a nutshell, ‘... *the State is to exist for the sake of individuals and not... the individual for the sake of the State*’ (Popper 2012 [2008], p.66 emphasis in original). Popper therefore presented humanitarian individualism and equalitarianism as ‘fundamentally a liberal theory’ (Popper, 1966a [1945], p. 111). He contrasted it with what he considered to be Plato’s authoritarian collectivism and his holistic perfectionism and utopianism. To Popper, Plato defended inequality on the basis of the natural privileges of natural leaders. The famous Platonic *philosopher kings*, with their access to the eternal Forms, were placed by Plato above all ordinary men.²² They alone had access to the form of the Ideal State—the utopian blueprint for the organisation of the whole of society. Hence only the messianic elite can devise a political programme to perfect society, by harmonizing all of its elements, arresting unwanted change, and protecting the actual state from degeneration. Consequently, the individual’s purpose is to do whatever is deemed necessary to maintain and strengthen the philosopher king’s leadership of the collective. Popper (1966a [1945], chapters 6, 7, 8) proposed that other Platonic principles and doctrines follow as corollaries. Notably, a ‘*principle of leadership*’: that nobody, not in the smallest matter, should be without a leader telling them, via rules and directives, what to do and how to do it. And the doctrine of ‘*the noble lie*’: that the leadership elite may tell whatever lies that are deemed necessary to implement the Ideal State.

My own sense of the EU is that it is a taboo-laden, collectivist, utopian project very much in the tradition of Platonic political philosophy. To pursue a project of ‘ever closer union’ amongst the peoples of Europe is to pursue an undefined objective for an indefinite collective. It may therefore, in my mind, quite properly be called both holistic and utopian. To insist that the undefined objective be pursued no matter what its implications are revealed by experience to be is to make its definition or limitation taboo. To establish a European court and treaty-based system of law that penetrates inside the EU’s member states and takes precedence over national laws, often guided by the supreme goal of pursuing an ‘ever-greater union’, is not to dispense justice in the interest of an individualist humanitarianism, it is to pursue an authoritarian collectivism. For the individual may now be taken to exist not even for the purpose of their own state, but for the purpose of constructing a superstate. Even the crushed and destitute individuals of Greece have their role to play in creating such a superstate, whereas those who do not share the idealised vision, and use democracy to campaign against it, are labeled ‘déserteurs’ (Juncker 2016). And although the Ideal State is not one based upon an obvious form of nationalism, or the political principle that the political and the national unit should be congruent (Gellner 1983), it is, in my mind, based upon a misplaced or concocted form of nationalism, one that seeks to create a political unit where no national unit previously existed. For the political project of European Union can hardly be unproblematic in its anti-nationalism and it is extremely uncritical to view it as some form of ‘little goody two-shoes’ in that regard. Indeed, thinking about nationalism presents a serious philosophical challenge (Agassi 1999). My own sense is that a project of European *Union* cannot avoid either being a peculiar form of nationalism or a peculiar form of internationalist imperialism. It may be interpreted as *Europeanism* and this is manifest in the fact that the EU has a flag, anthem, motto and diplomatic corps in addition to it being a protectionist customs union. Indeed, whereas the general principle of nationalism can, at least in theory, be asserted in a non-chauvinistic, universalistic way, that is compatible with a basic doctrine of the ‘unity of mankind’, by simply saying that a plurality of human cultures and social conventions adds to the diversity of the world and may each and all freely trade with one another and have its own body politic, it is not clear, at least to me, that a Europeanist nationalism does this. *Ab initio*, it seems to assume that all forms of nationalism, except its own form, are dangerously chauvinistic and egoistic. And it infers from this that the right thing to do is to chip them away through a process of harmonization and homogenization. Thus viewed, the EU’s supposed anti-nationalism is merely another seductive form of *Erewhonian* morality.

If this is an accurate diagnosis, then the Platonic *principle of leadership* might also fall into place. Cue the EU’s infamous bureaucracy of directives and regulations on everything from the prohibition of powerful vacuum cleaners [regulation 666/2013] and incandescent light bulbs [directive 2005/32/EC], to the way that prices must be marked on goods for sale [directive 98/6/EC], to the way that goods ‘that appear to be

²⁰ See, for example, Bingham (2010).

²¹ For Popper, this does not entail laissez-faire economics. See Popper (1966b [1945], chapter 17 §III).

²² Indeed, on Popper’s reading of Plato’s *Republic*, the only person fully qualified to join the ranks of the Philosopher Kings is Plato himself (Popper, 1966a [1945], chapter 8).

other than what they are' must be presented [directive 87/357]. And cue the *philosopher kings* who must supply this leadership: the 28 unelected Commissioners of the EU. And cue perhaps the adoption of the doctrine of the *noble lie*—given the many quotes attributed to the architects and leading figures of the EU that suggest exactly this.²³

Irrationalism

The political ideals of the Open Society have far-reaching consequences. A skepticism as to whether there is a single ideal life for all men and women, or whether there is an absolute and unchanging ideal form of society and state, a respect and tolerance of all but the intolerant—these are all at odds with the idea that life, society and state must be constructed, reconstructed and directed by some superior intellect in possession of a blueprint design. The *anti-ideal* ideals of the Open Society mean that there are no values that can unquestionably justify their imposition on others, for there is no way to determine the ultimate ends of political action purely by rational means (Popper 2002b [1963], chapter 18; 1966a [1945], chapter 9). Quite simply: different men and women may value different ends. A politician may use rational argument to clarify the consequences of their political programme and this may assist each to make a decision as to whether they support it—at least it may amongst those who value argument and are willing to listen. But a politician cannot use rational argument to determine conclusively the acceptability of those policies. And what each individual chooses to support and do with their lives is what helps shape the individual and collective future; it is not determined by that future. Our futures are actively shaped by the collective inter-personal critical endeavour—by our learning from others and from our experience, and by the exercise of our always fallible critical reasoning and decision-making autonomy.

This is how Popper (1966b [1945], chapter 24) connected his social and political philosophy to his theory of knowledge and rationality: the philosophy that he and his followers called '*critical rationalism*' (Popper 1966b [1945], p. 232; see also Notturno 2000). Theories, statements, political programmes are not themselves rational, they cannot be justified as true or right by being derived from what is written upon a foundation stone or from what is uttered by some supposedly super-rational authority. What may be rational is *our* attitude toward them. As Popper's colleague William Bartley III later put it:

A rationalist becomes one who holds everything—including standards, goals, criteria, authorities, decisions and especially any framework or way of life—open to criticism (Bartley 1990, p. 238).

To think otherwise, for instance to insist that the ultimate ends of political action can be formulated as an unquestionable principle, or as a preamble to a EU treaty whose contents are placed beyond the reach of criticism, is ultimately the equivalent of adopting an *irrationalist* attitude. For only taboo, or an appeal to passion, or a resort to power or violence, can quell or coerce those who disagree with it.

The Brexit referendum was a long time in the making, but it seems obvious to me that the UK's relationship with the EU has been beset, throughout its history, by a fundamental clash of attitude toward the problem of rationality.²⁴ This may be illustrated in many ways. For instance, whereas one might say that the modern attitude of the British toward what it means to be British, is to not to take too seriously the question of what it means to be British, membership of the EU required, as previously noted, the UK's one-time government to make a solemn declaration affirming the British people's European identity. And whereas a fundamental feature of the UK's unwritten constitution is that there is no law that a UK Parliament cannot change by the ordinary process of legislation, one can hardly say that the European Parliament, Commission, Council and treaty-based system of law operate on a similar principle. To many Britons, these institutions seem to operate on the principle that if progress to 'ever closer union' has a benefit it is used as a justification for more of the same, and if it fails to produce an immediate benefit then... it is used as a justification for more of the same. The disconnection between these differing attitudes to rationality was conspicuous when the UK government developed its own methodology for critically testing the *implications* of joining the single currency Euro-zone (Potton and Mellows-Facer 2003). This involved an appraisal of the implications in the form of 5 tests that were very different to the

²³ The quotes nearly always lack proper citation. But see, for example, Anonymous (2014).

²⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to do so, but one might even formulate an argument that this clash of attitude has its origins in differences between the so-called 'Continental' and 'British' versions of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Deutsch (2012) summarises the clash with the formula that the Continental Enlightenment was utopian because its *philosophes* and *aufklärer* thought *problems to be soluble but not inevitable*, whereas their British counterparts thought *problems to be both soluble and inevitable* because each solution begat new problems. Interestingly, Deutsch (2012, p. 66) presents Karl Popper as 'the twentieth century's foremost proponent of the British enlightenment', even though Popper was born in Austria. See also, Porter (2001, chapter 6) for a study of how differences in the constitutional polities of the European nations produced different Enlightenment experiences.

so-called ‘convergence criteria’ that the EU’s Maastricht Treaty insisted upon and, despite the subsequent course of history in the southern European member states, ostensibly still insists upon. Indeed, the European Commission’s (2015) attitude to problem solving and learning from experience may be gauged from its publication entitled *A Short Guide to the Euro*. It details a timeless solution and an ideal end: that the euro and economic and monetary union ‘...allow our economies to function more efficiently and effectively, ultimately offering Europeans more jobs and greater prosperity’. Thus far, this is difficult to reconcile with the lived experience of millions of Europeans.²⁵

Go, tell the Spartans, passerby,

That here, by Spartan law we lie.

Conclusion

The political project of the European Union may have been conceived as a response to the darkest chapter in European history. Its architects may have acted with the very best of motives, seeking to reconstruct European politics in a way that ended any prospect of further wars between the nation states of Europe. The EU is therefore easily presented as a very laudable and very moral enterprise that is in the very best traditions of peaceful co-operation and civilized conduct.

But this essay has argued that it is nonetheless a project which is impregnated with the very philosophical ideas about politics, history and society that its architects ought to have sought to escape from. Its architects were conscious of their philosophical problems, but not of their philosophical prejudices. These prejudices were the ideologies that Karl Popper diagnosed and exposed in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*: historicism, collectivism and irrationalism. Their handmaiden is an anti-democratic politics. His was a diagnosis of the past that is also a diagnosis of our own time. Perhaps it is even a diagnosis for all of time, or at least until the day that the last democratic people of the last Open Society surrender to the ‘strain of civilization’ and are seduced by ‘...an intellectual who convinces them that their existing institutions are not based on the strictest principles of morality’. And indeed, most strikingly in the Brexit debate, if popular commentary is in any way accurate, it is the *non-intellectual* and *non-expert* classes who are democracy and the Open Society’s stalwart defenders.

Brexit is therefore not among ‘the worst ideas of the century’. Rather, it may be interpreted as the most recent and best reaction of a democratic and critically-minded people to the worst ideas of the last century and of the many centuries that came before. It may be interpreted as a reaction to the perennial ideologies of historicism, collectivism and irrationalism: a reaction to anti-democratic politics and the enemies of the Open Society.

And I suspect that Popper, being someone with a perspective on philosophy and history that was beyond the reach of most, foresaw the essential problem. In 1992, seven months after the Maastricht Treaty on European Union (European Union 1992) was signed, he made a brief speech when aged 90 to mark the passing of his former colleague Friedrich von Hayek. In it he offered these interesting remarks:

Hayek’s books about the legal framework are full of thoughts about the protection of legal institutions. His thoughts recall the problem situation and the atmosphere of the founders of the American constitution. I fear that few care nowadays for these problems...The neglect of Hayek’s ideas can be gauged by their lack of influence upon the plans for a United Europe, with an executive bureaucracy in Brussels, without a clear responsibility to any democratic control, and a parliament in Strasbourg without any competence to control the all-powerful bureaucracy. I think we should learn from our mistakes and start again, very simply with sovereign democratic states bound by treaties of close cooperation and mutual assistance, and a programme for the defence of peace.

It is clear that the architects of the current plans for Europe have not studied Hayek – not even the founding fathers of the American constitution. But I fear that their ideologies make it somewhat unlikely that they will turn to these vitally important sources. Our dreams, if any, should not be of a strong Europe, but of a peaceful and civilized Europe (Popper 2012 [2008], pp. 409-410).

²⁵ For an overview of the impact of the Euro currency union on several of its participant nations, including ordinary persons, see Hewitt (2013).

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