

POPPER'S 'CLOSED SOCIETY' RECONSIDERED

1. Introduction

1.1 Karl Popper's work *The open Society and its Enemies* is widely read but it seems to have not generated much philosophical research. Whatever attention it has drawn mainly consists of (i) fragmentary accounts or criticisms in philosophical journals and books and (ii) the defence by some philosophers of thinkers like Plato, Hegel and Marx who were attacked by Popper. John Wild (1953) and Richard Robinson (1951) defend Plato, Walter Kaufmann (1951) defends Hegel and Maurice Cornforth (1976) defends Marx. These defences, however, fail to see other issues involved within his political philosophy.

This paper attempts to discuss some of these issues. In doing so, we do not propose to criticise the overall thrust of Popper, nor do we seek to belittle his remarkable exposure of the great systems which are capable of committing 'great' mistakes. Nevertheless, we maintain that while many of his claims are in general tenable they require reassessment particularly keeping in view some recent studies.

1.2 Popper in *The Open Society and its Enemies*, while discussing totalitarianism, makes a distinction between 'open' and 'closed' societies. His study of the nature of closed societies has brought into focus the socio-politico-philosophical issues underlying the totalitarian theories that cut across the vast temporal gaps. His analysis of Greek as well as modern forms

of closed societies draws our attention to a continuous tendency whereby a particular theory of social organization inevitably leads to the pernicious political order which suppresses individual liberty and the creative role of various social institutions in the name of efficiency and justice.

The general philosophical stand of Popper can be summarized as follows: He is against all eternal truths – whether they are the Platonic theory of Ideas, the Hegelian Absolute Idea or the Marxian classless society. His principal reason for this is that these absolute truths are claimed to be self-evidently true, i.e., they are not subject to falsification. They exclude any discussion regarding their validity and do not allow any deviation from the laws which are already postulated. They try to organise all experience with reference to these laws. They do not learn from mistakes. As opposed to this essentialism and historicism, Popper seems to be arguing for the possibility of pluralities in future.

Regarding the phenomena of social change, Popper appears to hold that the closed societies are characterised by the presence of some definite ends. To realise these ends, society has to be totally reconstructed and controlled. Any deviation from this is to be curbed. This total reconstruction of society has been termed by Popper as 'utopian social engineering'. Utopian social engineering attempts at total change. This is different from the one he suggests as a method of change, characterised as 'piece-meal social engineering'. Piece-meal social engineering attends to specific social problems, and attempts only at reforms. It is from the point of view of his method of falsification that he examines various social systems and lists the totalitarian elements in Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Marx.

1.3 In what follows we propose to discuss two Popperian generalisations as they appear in his *The Open Society and its*

Enemies. The first one is Popper's inference that Plato and Aristotle are closed minds. We find, however, that such a generalisation is not based on a proper discussion of Aristotle. In fact, it entirely rests on the discussion of Aristotle in the context of Plato with an emphasis on common features between the two, such as essentialism or inequality. Our attempt here is to show the significant aspects on which they have differences. Concepts like 'unity of State' and 'plurality of Society', provide ample ground for such an attempt, and enable us to counter Popper's generalisations and prove it otherwise.

The second generalisation of Popper in this context is his thesis that Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Marx are totalitarians. On the contrary, we find that totalitarianism has its roots in the seventeenth century assumptions of contract philosophers. By showing the structural differences between totalitarian and non-totalitarian closed societies (with the help of J. L. Talmon and H. Arendt), we are able to point out that totalitarian governments function by the rule of few, but with the support of the masses whereas dictatorship is characterised by the rule of the few with the intentional ignorance or suppression of the masses. In this context, we can state that Plato can be called a non-totalitarian closed mind; and hence may counter Popper's judgement of Plato as a totalitarian.

2. *Plato and Aristotle*

2.1 Popper elaborately discusses Plato. Aristotle is referred to only in the context of Plato. Popper offers two different reasons for not discussing Aristotle. The first is a practical but non-intellectual one namely, space limit of the book. Secondly, since Aristotelian theory is basically platonic, it does not need to be elaborately discussed. He offers the second reason in the context of consoling his readers who may think that not discuss-

sing Aristotle may cause a serious loss. Here our contention is not against these reasons as much as about the inconsistencies between the reasons and what follows froms them. To state it clearly, we think that Popper's criticism of Aristotle without properly discussing his philosophy but only referring to it in the context of Plato is not being fair to Aristotle. If there is not space then one would expect him to be content with Plato only. But he draws generalizations on both Plato and Aristotle without properly discussing the latter.

By way of a supplement, we make the following note. Here it is not the case that Popper is mainly concerned with Plato and Aristotle is referred to only in passing. He draws conclusions eqally for both. He carries the conclusion that Aristotle is a closed mind and totalitarian to the later arguments, particularly when he discusses Hegel in the second volume of the book. As a matter of fact, it is in the beginning of this volume where he sets out to discuss Hegel and Marx that he feels the need to give some reasons regarding Aristotle. According to him Aristotle's version of 'Plato's essentialism... influenced the historicism of Hegel, and thereby that of Marx' (1966, Vol. II p. 1). We are making this point only to show how definite and conclusive Popper is about Aristotle. And we want to point out that this conclusiveness is not preceded by a proper discussion.

Soon after giving the limitation of space as a reason for not discussing Aristotle we suddenly see him consoling his readers by saying that this 'does not, however, create as serious a loss as one might fear at first sight'. (1966, Vol. II p. 1) because Aristotelian theory is basically dominated by Plato's ideas. This second reason may be said to make sense because he offers lack of basic differences between Aristotle and Plato as the reason for not discussing the former. But here it is to be seen that this

is not a conclusion drawn but an off hand justification given in support of the practical limitations.

Of course, he acknowledges some differences between them, namely, Aristotle's interest in systematizing knowledge, in empirical and biological problems (1966, Vol. II p. 1) and his endorsement of theory of forms with the difference that they do not exist apart from sensible things. (1966, Vol. II p. 1). To him these differences are not basic. And he sees striking similarities between them. It is on the basis of these similarities that he seems to justify his not discussing Aristotle, and treating him on par with Plato. In this Popper seems to be arbitrary, because he merely states the common assumptions judging them as primary and declares the acknowledged differences to be secondary. He does not properly establish the importance of common assumptions by discussing them against their differences.

This non-establishing the primacy of common features makes his position vulnerable before those who in their works treat the differences as basic. For instance, Gilbert Ryle's *Plato's Progress* (1966) is one such work. According to Ryle there seems to have existed some powerful non-Platonic formative influences upon the young Aristotle and the formative influences of Plato on Aristotle seem to have been 'slighter and patchier' (1966, p. 4). He goes to the extent of suggesting that "Aristotle seems almost to begin his philosophical life fully equipped with an elaborate apparatus of categories" (1966, p. 4). (From this we do not rule out the possibility that though both Plato and Aristotle started separately they might have come up with the same results. Even if it is so, our point still stands because we are complaining about the procedures adopted not about the end results). From the point of view of this work and various arguments provided in support of this point of view one can work out some important bearings it has on Popper's position.

This is because Popper does not establish why the common features between Aristotle and Plato are basic

2.2 Nisbet's *The Social Philosophers* is another work which, while discussing various communities, points out some basic differences between Plato and Aristotle concerning certain ideas like 'unity' and 'plurality'. In what follows we will discuss Nisbet's idea to show that some of the basic differences between Plato and Aristotle militate against Popper's generalization regarding these two thinkers.

Unlike Popper who takes historicism and essentialism as criteria of closed minds, Nisbet discusses various western communities from the institutional point of view presenting different understanding of Aristotle. He distinguishes various communities as military, political, religious revolutionary, ecological and plural. Two amongst these which are relevant to our present purpose are political communities and plural communities. Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau are the exponents of political communities. These communities are endowed with only one form of existence i.e., political existence under one centralized authority. It discards all intermediary social institutions such as family, local communities, church or charities, from social reality.

On the other hand there are plural communities which are characterized by plurality, autonomy, decentralization, hierarchy tradition or localism. The plural communities though independent of each other and even of the state for their origin and existence, are not completely insulated from each other. Each one is related to the others in various ways. They are of course coordinated and governed by a single state. This state does not have a uniform social existence. The intermediary institutions are not the creations of state (like the so called intermediary organizations such as trade unions in Soviet Russia). They are

natural institutions. The state consists of pluralities of these natural intermediary institutions. Man participates in social and political activities through these institutions. They not only make different levels of social existence possible but will not allow centralization. Nisbet treats Aristotle, Althusius, Bonald, Hegel and Tocqueville as the proponents of plural communities.

In discussing Aristotle, unlike Popper, Nisbet particularly refers to his differences with Plato regarding the idea of unity. Platonic unity is unity devoid of diversities. Aristotelian unity is unity of diversities. Plato's conception of unity accepts only one level of existence though of a superior level. The unity in Aristotle supposes various intermediary levels, coordinated at a higher level. It is this which makes him oppose Plato's conception of unity of state even if it is possible, and recognize the significance of natural institutions such as family. Nisbet quotes Aristotle, who says,

It is not obvious, that a state may at length attain such a degree of unity as to be no longer a state – since the nature of a state is to be a plurality, and intending to greater unity, from being a state, it becomes a family, and from being a family, an individual; for the family may be said to be more one than the state, and the individual than the family. So that we ought not to attain this greatest unity even if we could, for it would be the destruction of the state. (Aristotle in Nisbet, 1974, p. 393).

According to Nisbet it is Plato's insistence on unity which makes Republic an advocate of political community leading to centralization of power and it is Aristotle's insistence on diversity that makes Aristotle's view of society decentralized and plural. To Aristotle the error of Socrates is his notion of unity

devoid of diversities. Not completely denying the place of unity and romanticising diversities, Aristotle says that there should be unity, say unity between family (the basic unity of society) and state. This unity should be restricted to some aspects only. Beyond that it is not possible; even if it is possible it is not desirable, because that would make the state "no longer a state, or at which, without actually ceasing to exist, it will become an inferior state, *like harmony passing into unison, or rhythm which has been reduced to a single foot*". (Aristotle in Nisbet 1974, p.393). Here we can observe Aristotle's comprehension of reality from different levels, going from lower to higher levels and back, unlike Plato who looks only ahead and upward. The former's recognition of concrete intermediary institutions such as family, private property, legitimate associations and social classes etc., propel him to hold the view that as long as these institutions remain strong it does not matter much what kind of government one has. Nisbet says,

"From Aristotle's view point... almost any form of political government was good if it preserved the all-important spheres of autonomy to which each of the major groups and institutions was entitled within the social order" (1974, p, 396).

When we refer to centralization or totalitarianism one of the important aspects is power. When power is delegated to the intermediary institutions or organizations and their autonomy is recognised the tyranny of the central organizations such as state will not become possible. Even if it becomes possible, it would be easier with the help of the intermediary associations to check it and in their presence it would not be very much felt. But the insistence of 'political communities' is the removal of these intermediary associations. Following Aristotle, Nisbet in another work observes that totalitarian and centralized societies become

powerful not by taking away individual liberties but by virtue of what it takes from the spiritual and social associations which compete with it for men's devotions (1962, p. 163).

Keeping the points discussed above in mind – we maintain that society in so far as it consists of various institutions, whether its direction is towards centralization or decentralization, its structure – open or closed, its basic units – individuals or collectives, largely depends upon how institutions are placed or treated. So that centralized societies can be seen not only from the point of view of essentialism, racism, fatalism or historicism, like Popper but it can also be seen in the light of institutional criteria.

Plato's *Republic* can be said to represent a centralized community. But Aristotle who insists on plurality of social institutions, cannot be said to advocate closed society. Hence Popper's treatment of Aristotle on par with Plato is untenable.

3. *Closed Society : Totalitarian and Non-totalitarian*

3.1 In the preceding section we have shown the baselessness of one of Popper's generalizations regarding Aristotle. We argued that Aristotle cannot be treated as advocating closed society like Plato. We did not say much about Plato though we implicitly agreed with Popper that the *Republic* idealizes a closed society. This difference, however, is not recognized by Popper.

Concepts such as 'closed society', 'totalitarianism', 'dictatorship', 'authoritarianism' are used by Popper as synonymous without recognizing the distinctions involved in them. Recent literature on totalitarianism, while discussing its various facts, comes up with new discoveries raising controversies. These studies make it necessary to reassess these notions in Popper's work. It is necessary not only to avoid ambiguity but it is also relevant as they lead to different consequences.

Granting that the modern form of totalitarianism and Plato's Republic are both closed societies in so far as they share some common assumptions, the question arises 'Are they both totalitarian?' Popper's answer is 'yes' because for him they are synonymous. It is from this belief that he attempts to trace the antecedent conditions of the modern totalitarianism to the Greeks. But there are studies which seem to implicitly maintain that closed society does not always mean totalitarian society because there also exist non-totalitarian closed societies. We will discuss them in the following section.

3.2 J. L. Talmon seems to maintain that there is a structural difference between the two forms of closed societies, totalitarian and non-totalitarian such as despotic rules, dictatorship, autocracy etc. That is, the structure of non-totalitarian forms of closed society seems to be that a few (minority) rule the majority by keeping them under intentional ignorance or suppression. Whereas the totalitarian governments, though ruled by a few (minority), are supported by the majority. But these two modes of social organization are often treated as the same and have been treated as synonymous both by Popper and his critics. In a sense both these forms of social organization may be taken to be alike as far as concentration of power is concerned. This in itself may not be sufficient to conclude their sameness. The sources of this power may vary. We will discuss this later. Let us briefly elaborate on the distinction made above,

In discussing the curious phenomenon 'totalitarianism' which is backed by the support of the majority Arendt says that the 'social automatization' and 'extreme individualization' (which are the accepted assumptions of seventeenth-century) – which constitutes what is called as mass phenomena – is the pre-condition for the possibility of totalitarianism. To quote her: "Totalitarian movements are possible whenever masses for one reason

or another have acquired the appetite for political organization" (1958, p. 311). Unlike non-totalitarian governments, totalitarian governments are backed by the popular enthusiasm of the masses who are in majority. This is not a false enthusiasm nor is it induced by totalitarian leaders through false propaganda "over ignorance and stupidity" of people." The propaganda of totalitarian movements which precedes and accompany totalitarian regimes is invariably as frank as is mendacious..." (1958, p. 307). As a matter of fact totalitarian rulers begin political career by boasting about their past crimes and hinting at future ones. The worst crimes committed by Hitler and Stalin could not have been done by them "if they had not the confidence of the masses". She adds, "Neither the Moscow trials nor the liquidation of the Rohm faction would have been possible if these masses had not supported Stalin and Hitler" (1958, p. 306). (For further details see Arendt, 1958).

The background of traditional non-totalitarian closed societies is institutional way of life where the subjects do not elect their rulers. Since people do not participate in political activity and rulers are not elected by them it is understandable that despotic or dictatorial governments are oppressive and tyrannical. But the curious thing is that the background of totalitarian governments is individualism and peoples support their rulers.

Talmon coined a paradoxical term 'totalitarian democracy' to denote this paradoxical phenomenon. He contrasts totalitarianism or totalitarian democracy as he calls it, with traditional forms of closed societies. He says :

Modern totalitarian democracy is a dictatorship resting on popular enthusiasm, and is thus completely different from absolute power wielded by a divine-right king, or by a usurping tyrant. (1966, p. 3).

The difference stated above is an important one particularly because Popper has assimilated all closed societies under one category, possessing similar features. But there are different kinds of closed societies. Some are totalitarian and others non-totalitarian. They seem to belong to different historical periods. In the following section we shall briefly discuss the origins of totalitarianism.

3.3 Acceptance of the above distinction further makes us raise the question whether both forms of closed societies have the same origin. If the answer is 'yes', then what made them different? If the answer is 'no', then where did they rise from?

Talmon in the same book attributes the origins of the totalitarian democracy in the 'second part of the eighteenth century' to the writings of men like Rousseau, Diderot, Mably, Saint-Just and Bownarroti. He discusses three important stages from the beginning viz., eighteenth century postulates, the Jacobian improvization and Babouvirt crystallization before it culminated in the twentieth century totalitarian democracy. Without going into the details discussed by Talmon, let us briefly state the presuppositions from where totalitarian phenomena seem to have emerged.

There appears a serious discontinuity in Western thought during the renaissance, from where totalitarianism seems to have risen. It may be significant to note that the modern political philosophy (starting from contract philosophers) is based on entirely different assumptions namely the hypothetical man and contracted society of the contract philosophers. This resulted in a serious break with, or a 'paradigm shift' in Kuhnian terminology from, traditional theories. This paradigm shift in social thought of man can be compared in essentials to the Copernican revolution in astronomy, in the sense that the Copernican theory

brought the sun to the centre of the universe and the renaissance brought man to the centre of social reality.

It is for the first time that in human history man is given this status of centrality. This man is not a real man in society but the hypothetical man of the contract philosophers belonging to pre-societal state. Indeed the contract philosophers like Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke have some sharply opposed views but the opposition is regarding the attributes of this pre-societal man. The concept of pre-societal man is common to all of them.

The pre-societal man of the contract philosophers, we are given to understand, is one who chooses what is good to him and he may have chosen sovereignty as his political alternative. This itself would not make the sovereign totalitarian. As it is of his own creation and choice, it cannot be said to harm him. But these collectivities are not the conclusions arrived at by people. At the same time, they are not externally imposed because they spring from the concept of the pre-societal man. This results in a dilemma where we see that on the one hand the sovereignty is not arrived at by people and on the other hand they are not external institutions. This dilemma as rightly pointed out by Talmon is solved by inducing 'general will' as latent in the pre-societal man - who is taken not as he is, but as he is meant to be and would be given proper conditions (1966, p. 3). This latent feature controls his choice, and he definitely chooses the sovereign as a mode of social existence. This innate feature is not external to him but is in him. So we cannot accuse the contract philosophers for indoctrinating man. The collectivities emerge out of these latent features. Collectivities in Rousseau, for instance, are not arrived at through consent of all people or even of majority. According to Talmon the collectivities in Rousseau are Cartesian truths which "Every member of her

Rousseau's sovereign is bound to will..." (1966, p. 29). And those who do not confirm to the general will should be coerced or intimidated into conformity to it, because according to Rousseau, "left to themselves, the people always desire the good, but left to themselves they do not always know where that good lies. The general will is always right, but the judgement guiding it is not always well informed. It must be made to see things as they are, sometimes as they ought to appear to them" (Rousseau in Talmon, 1966, pp. 47-65).

With this trick of 'objectivity' they made people believe that the sovereignty or state is their own creation which they have to obey. In the functioning of modern socialism it is not the individual choices which are taken into consideration but the objective truths in deciding what is to be done.

The point we are trying to make is that though the basis of modern collectivities is said to be man, this basis has to be understood in the above mentioned way. The modern totalitarians by making people believe that they are the authors of the policies, make them support the collectivities and/or the people by believing that it is their own creation, support them. This phenomenon seems to have been based on contract philosophers' assumptions of man and society.

Popper's failure in distinguishing the two forms of closed societies seems to be due to his not recognising the difference between the assumptions of the modern philosophy and the pre-modern or traditional political philosophy. It amounts to not recognising the historical developments.* The reason for this discontinuity in modern political philosophy is based on a different assumption namely 'man'. Unless this difference is recognised, we are likely to superimpose the modern categories on the pre-modern thought or read modern features in the pre-modern theories. In the light of these differences we may have to disti-

nguish among the theories of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Marx. From the above discussion concerning the differences between totalitarian and non-totalitarian closed societies it appears to follow that it is proper to consider Hegel and Marx as totalitarians, in so far as their theories are rooted in modern assumptions. But this is not so with Plato.

Department of Humanities
and Social Science
I. I. T.
KANPUR 201016 (U. P.)

A. RAGHU RAMA RAJU
and
S. A. SHAIDA

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- * Commenting on Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Talmon points out that it examines "the philosophical aspect, although not the historical, psychological and social side of the distinction" (1966, p. 258).
- Arendt, Hannah (1958). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London.
- Aristotle (1959). *Aristotle's Politics and Athenian Constitution*: ed. by John Warrington, J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., London.
- Cornforth, Maurice (1976). *The Open Philosophy and the Open Society*; International Publishers, New York.
- Kaufmann, Walter (1957). "The Hegel Myth and its Method"; *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 60, pp. 459-86.
- Nisbet, Robert (1962). *Community and Power* (formerly the *Quest for Community*) A Galaxy Book, New York.
- Nisbet, Robert (1974). *The Social Philosophers: Community and Conflict in Western Thought*, Heinemann, London.
- Popper, Karl (1966). *The Open Society and its Enemies*; Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Vols. I and II.

- Robinson, Richard (1951). "Dr. Popper's Defense of Democracy" — *The Philosophical Review*; Vol. 60, pp. 487-507.
- Ryle, Gilbert (Review) (1947). "The Open Society and Its Enemies", *Mind*; Vol. LVI, pp. 167-72.
- Ryle, Gilbert (1966). *Plato's Progress*; University Press, Cambridge.
- Talmon, J. L. (1966). *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*; Seeker and Warburg, London.
- Thorson, Thomas Laudon (ed.) 1963 — *Plato : Totalitarian or Democrat ?*; Prentice Hall Inc., New Jersey.
- Wild, John (1953). *Plato's Modern Enemies and the Theory of Natural Law*; The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.