

This new Preface to Jarvie and Pralong, *Popper's Open Society After 50 Years* (1999) was read in Part at the conference, Karl Popper 2002, held in Vienna that year. Unfortunately, the Appendix was omitted from the printed version, so it is given here in lieu of the appearance of a revised reprint of that volume.

POPPER TODAY

Ian Jarvie

Today's world and its problems seem, at least at first glance, very different from those addressed by the author of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945). Popper himself, looking back on the book only five years after its publication, was struck by the naïveté of its optimism, and the distance of his own voice (Preface to the second edition, 1950). Some of that sea-change was due to the Cold War. In turn, that period and its problems have come to seem distant from today. Although the tone and emphasis of the book owed a lot to its time of writing (1938-1943) and its author's aims, it turned out to be much more than a pièce d'occasion. Popper's aim at the time was to articulate those lines of division between the true friends and the true enemies of the open society that went deeper than the immediate conflict. Perhaps it was success in his chosen task that has kept the book alive for so long. Now that its author has gone, it passes to those of us stimulated by his ideas to show their continuing relevance by thinking through their application to the problems of the world today and tomorrow. Let us examine the book's relevance today by reviewing its main ideas (section 1) with a view to working them out for the present time (section 2) and, very tentatively, projecting them into the future (section 3).

1. The Original Enemies of the Open Society

Popper completed the manuscript of The Open Society and Its Enemies in 1943, when he was 41.¹ At the time he considered it his "war work", that is, his contribution to the war effort, given his liminal status as an enemy alien domiciled in the Dominion of New Zealand. The war was being fought against Fascist powers; but he regarded Communism as a more insidious menace waiting in the wings should the current enemy be defeated. Although deeply engaged with intellectual problems of "pure" philosophy, Popper tried on this occasion to think through and expand upon his ideas as they applied to practical affairs, in light of his social and political values. He wrote at a time (1938-1943) when there was no assurance of victory over the Axis and hence no assurance that those values would survive.

The overall problem Popper set himself is simple: why is the attack on freedom and democracy so popular? He answered: it is popular, at least partly because too many of the intellectual leaders of the free world, so far from standing up for the cause of freedom, have muddled it, even betrayed it. Thus those who might most benefit from freedom are bamboozled into opposing it.

It was not the answer that made the book unique. What was unique was Popper's particular version. Freedom, he insisted, was the true value. Democracy was valuable to the extent that it promoted freedom. Such a democracy was one where the government could be dismissed without violence (ch.7, section II). A government that could not be so dismissed was a tyranny. With this one stroke he

¹ A full account of the composition of the work is to be found in Hacoen 2000.

swept away previous discussions of the misleading question “who should rule” and of sovereignty. Provided the citizens could get rid of their government peacefully they lived in a democracy and could decide the extent of their own freedoms.

Popper’s attack on the intellectual leadership and his dismissal of traditional political philosophy did not endear him to many of his fellow intellectuals. For Popper declared that our intellectual tradition in general, and philosophy in particular, harboured enemies of freedom of all kinds: flagrant, tacit, and muddled. Intellectuals all-too-often deployed their skill to defend injustice, privilege, and oppression. Thus many works at the centre of our tradition of thinking about freedom were attacks on it, open or disguised.

A particularly insidious intellectual error that Popper diagnosed was the deference to great thinkers and to their great ideas. As a fallibilist he thought great thinkers could make great mistakes, so we should defer to no authority. His major example was the beautification, even worship, of Plato in the western intellectual tradition. Plato, Popper agreed, was a very great thinker indeed. This central contention of the book is too often taken to be mere lip-service. Notwithstanding his greatness, Plato hated freedom and used all his intellectual powers to subvert its defenders. Thus those who presented him as a champion of freedom were, at the very least, self-deceived. Marx and Marx's followers were a more complicated version of a very similar process. Marx's concern for the oppressed was genuine. Only a total transformation of society, a revolution, could hope to end oppression.

The limited freedoms enjoyed by some needed, in Platonic spirit, to be swept aside.² Popper tried to show that sweeping changes were a recipe for disaster. By divesting ourselves of any standard against which to measure progress in freedom, we would open the way for leaders and followers to convince themselves that unparalleled oppression was true freedom.³

Much of volume I of The Open Society and Its Enemies is a superb historical reconstruction of how and why Plato appropriated the language of freedom for a repressive political vision, together with notes on how intellectual commentators avoided facing this distasteful fact. Plato's genius was such that most modern commentators were taken in sufficiently to describe his intellect in beautified language. Thus Popper held that generations of modern intellectuals were derelict in their duty to be clear and honest, to call repression by its name, to endorse for others

² I allude here to Popper's discussion of "canvas cleaning" in ch. 9. Such canvas cleaning would, of course, have included sweeping away Marx's limited freedom to write and publish in London, as opposed to his inability to do so almost anywhere else.

³ "...a revolution always destroys the insitutional and traditional framework of society. It must thereby endanger the very set of values for the realization of which it has been undertaken. Indeed, a set of values can have social significance only insofar as there exists a social tradition which upholds them. This is true of the aims of a revolution as much as of any other values" (Popper 1962, p. 343).

the freedom that they enjoyed, and not to obfuscate repression by talk of real, or true, or merely formal freedom. The privileged among us experience the stress of freedom with an extra twist. If freedom is more generally acquired, the privileged will likely lose some of their privileges. Hence the intellectual opponents of freedom are not just self-deceived when they claim that their attacks on freedom get closer to its true nature; they are also deceivers tout court in that they do not declare their personal stake in thwarting general emancipation.

How, though, are the masses misled into supporting movements inimical to their emancipation? Too often overlooked is Popper's unsettling thesis: freedom is not a comfortable option for everybody. Above all it makes individuals responsible for choosing, and responsible for the consequences of their choices. To choose responsibly we need to use our reason. Choice, reason, and responsibility: these are stressful impositions. Nostrums that offer to reduce the stress, especially if cloaked in rhetoric that assures that they enhance true freedom, readily gain more credence than they merit. This is partly, he argued, because some of the greatest intellectual leaders of humanity have peddled such nostrums. To counter them, and to counter the appeal of security of the closed society, Popper looked to institutions: especially education for freedom and schemes to provide social security.

His passion for freedom clearly qualified Popper as a spokesperson for the Western side in the Cold War, as did his elaborate critique of Marxism's analysis of our social deficiencies. That did not mean that he supported all the strategies of the

Cold War. In particular, he was not a defender of unbridled capitalism. Popper was a socialist when he wrote the book, and indicated in Unended Quest his sentiments were socialist still. An argument in The Open Society that was not there used to attack socialism, seems in later life to have come to seem to him an insuperable objection to any practical attempt to implement it. This argument was the problem of power. All power, he held, was subject to abuse, hence all power was bad and its use should be minimised; and so state power was tolerable only if it was deployed to right injustice: crime, for example, or exploitation due to imbalance of power. Indeed, his name for his own view was "protectionism": the state's excuse for exercising power lay in its task of protecting of the weaker, the sicker, the hapless in the population. Only it could protect them from exploitation, bullying, and oppression. There can be no doubt that he was a partisan of the welfare state.⁴ He never took back his assertion that protectionism imposes intervention. Intervention is an exercise of power. Power should always be used minimally, he argued; but to protect it must be used.

Despite his clear position on these matters, in the latter part of the Cold War Popper tended to get grouped with so-called "economic liberal" defenders of the West, including those who endorsed its capitalism as morally virtuous. This had

⁴ But in a note added to the second edition he attacked the postwar socialist government in Britain for giving itself the power to coerce people to take jobs. It was dangerous legislation enacted without compelling need. See note 28 to chapter 17.

much to do with his close association, immediately after the war, with F. A. von Hayek, cited several times in the notes to the book.⁵ Yet Hayek had dedicated his major political work of 1944, The Road to Serfdom, "To The Socialists of All Parties". Popper shared such sentiments, as can be attested by reading their correspondence from the period (Shearmur 1996, ch. 1; Notturmo 2000, ch. 8). Popper was a European social democrat. He explained the rise of totalitarianism in Central Europe by the failure there of the alternative, democratic version of Marxism – social democracy. In Cold War discussions about what the West stood for Popper stood for freedom and protectionism, including interventionism.

2. Today's Enemies of the Open Society

Now let us turn to the question, what problems would the author of The Open Society and Its Enemies focus on in our present world? In particular, who or what would he identify as the main enemies of the Open Society? The many purchasers of his book who have kept it in print in all these years probably have their own ideas. My guesses (and by his own philosophy that is all they can be) are these. Given the value he placed on freedom (he placed it above democracy), and on protection and succour of the weak, what would he identify as the main threats of our new millennium? In late interviews and writing he always spoke of population control, environmental catastrophe, and general nuclear war as the great dangers to freedom

⁵ Jeremy Shearmur (1996, p. 36) has even argued that in so far as Popper did not agree with Hayek's economic liberalism, by his own principles he should have.

and to protectionism. These dangers are well-known and, while philosophers can help analyse and combat them, they are ones on which philosophers have no particular expertise and hence they bear no particular responsibility. There inhere in the present situation, however, two threats to freedom and protectionism that are of special concern to philosophers. They are religious and national zealotry and uncritical, irresponsible advocacy of unbridled capitalism. Popper would, I think, subject both of these to critical arguments were he to pen an update that we may call The Open Society and Its Enemies 2002.

Zealotry is not a topic discussed under that label in the original book. Yet it is covered and criticised nonetheless. Dogmatism of any kind is sharply criticised and contrasted with a more humble fallibilism. All claims to divine authority are suspect and should be so treated. Such claims are easily shown to be human authority over-claiming for itself. All authority, human or allegedly divine, is shown not to release its claimants from personal responsibility. Popper regards most of human history as a litany of crime. For example, murder in the name of religion or of nationalism is still murder. Murder is a crime, and crimes should be condemned. Punishing crime is one of the legitimate uses of power. Using religious authority to impose laws and values on believers, as well as unbelievers, is a totally illegitimate use, indeed abuse, of power. While not an advocate of the minimal state, because of his protectionism, Popper has strong sympathies with it, for he opposes any attempt to use state power

to enforce the reign of virtue. Plato is soundly criticised for this, although he was writing before any of the three monotheistic religions had been invented.

Popper's critique of dogmatism, authority, and the reign of virtue can also be turned against those who think that capitalism as such, and capitalism as untrammelled as possible, will bring us the best of all possible worlds. The claim is sheer dogmatism, and the implementation would involve the kind of large-scale social engineering Popper would criticise as Utopian. He did live long enough to point out that the "shock therapy" approach to the economies of the former Soviet Empire was dogmatic and a recipe for chaos, further injustice, and almost impossible to test and thus to control.⁶

Utopian liberalism is alive and well. It is claimed that liberalism is exemplified in the free market. The free market should be maximally extended and maximally unregulated. The protectionist use of state power as a shield for the weak gets roundly attacked as interfering with some supposedly natural and untrammelled state of economic freedom. Two knock-down arguments are thus overlooked by such dogmatists. One is that no state of society is natural. The other is that the free market is created and sustained by the use of state power, especially the law. To spell it out: markets require property law, contract law, banking and currency law, laws against fraud, laws of liability, and more. All of this legal framework is created

⁶ For an interesting philosophical discussion of post-Communist nostrums, see Pickel 2001.

by states which acting together also create the institutions of international law. Such a regime of law involves human actions and design; human action and design is always subject to moral assessment. If we create free, or freer, markets we do so with some aim. Our success in achieving the aim can be assessed practically; the value of the aim and of the means we adopt towards it can be assessed morally. Hence the protectionist arguments cannot be evaded. The free market is not a neutral technology that will lead to the best of all possible worlds. It is a technology that we implement because of a theory that it will work to do good. It follows that we should test and control it.⁷

Furthermore, our general social knowledge tells us that all technology, indeed all action, has unintended as well as intended consequences. Some unintended consequences will be unwanted consequences. Thus, if free market states try aggressively to export their system, some of the importers will be states where power is used not to protect but to exploit the citizens. Hence, following Popper's ideas, all theories of the virtues of freer markets should be put to severe tests. Among the difficult cases one can think of kleptocratic régimes in the former Soviet zone or the third world; of narco-terrorist régimes; of Stalinist and modified Stalinist régimes. They can use the apparatus of the free market to enhance their kleptocracy. Protectionism, after all, assumes that some citizens will always be prone to mistreatment or exploitation simply because of their lack of resources.

⁷ An early critique of neo-classical dogmatism is Agassi 1988.

At a guess, then, I would expect that Popper, were he to undertake a similar project today would focus on the dishonest use of free market rhetoric and ideology to legitimate exploitation in the less affluent parts of the world, and the less affluent enclaves within the affluent parts of the world. My guess would be that his analysis would focus, as it does in The Open Society, on the errors of excessive deference to great men and great ideas, the temptation to self-deception, surreptitious defences of élitism and privilege, rather than on ill-will. The intellectuals would again be made culprits and attention to their mistakes a principal item on the philosophical agenda. It is their responsibility to use their privileged position on behalf of the worst off, not on behalf of themselves. The well-known dependence of the free market on the use of the state power, the well-known situations where the free market will fail, the well-known ability of pressure groups and special interests to distort the law to their advantage, all of these, I believe, are the sorts of arguments Popper would emphasise. He would demand that we be critical of dogmatic claims for nostrums such as the free market, free trade, and globalization.⁸ Promises of benefits are not

⁸ A splendid historicization and critique of globalization cant is Gilpin 2001. See also Alan Wolfe's polemical review of a best selling anti-globalization manifesto, Wolfe 2001

enough when we know that all social change has unintended and unwanted consequences.⁹

One of the beauties of Popper's general philosophy was that it granted a central place to mistakes. Making mistakes is a principal mechanism of learning. But even honest mistakes can take us away from our goals. Popper would, I suspect, have tried to trace the underlying philosophical mistakes that led to the views about free markets and capitalism that I suspect he would oppose. One of these is, of course, simply forgetting the axioms about power, mistakes, and unintended consequences. Another might involve individualism. After a century where both the great movements against freedom decried individualism and lauded the group it is easy to understand that a strong affirmation of individualism would be the backlash. But just because collectivism is a false philosophy, it does not follow that all versions of individualism are true. Popper advocates in The Open Society a methodological individualism and a moral individualism. The methodological kind is not to be satisfied with lazy explanations that terminate in such collectivities as the Zeitgeist, of the destiny of the nation, or human nature. The moral kind is the insistence that the locus of moral and political responsibility is and must remain the individual, not the committee, the Party, the movement, the tradition, or any other collective entity (end of ch. 14).

⁹ Two recent books that deal forefully with the Russian case of naïve large-scale and ill-considered social change are Cohen 2001 and Reddaway and Glinski 2001.

An example of a false individualism would be Margaret Thatcher's notorious saying that society does not exist. We cannot avoid admitting the existence of collective entities, Popper held, at least for methodological reasons. More robustly, collective entities do indeed exist, and they do indeed constrain individuals, and they do indeed change under the impact of individual decisions. Individuals, for example, are born into families, that are certainly real, and which are part of the mechanisms that socialise them and teach them the language that makes their selves possible. Hence the individual self, on Popper's account, is a product of a collective, not the collective an aggregate of selves. In this respect Popper was perfectly serious when he placed in the first sentence of chapter 14 Marx's epigram that "It is not the consciousness of man that determines his existence - rather, it is his social existence that determines his consciousness". He added that this was a view to which he subscribed. The primacy of the individual is, for him, entirely a moral and a methodological, not a scientific matter. Hence the underlying individualism of Adam Smith, and his invisible hand argument that individuals acting selfishly will produce the greatest wealth should not be read as meaning it will produce the best, or most moral, or most decent, or most tolerant society. If those values trump wealth, it is our responsibility to create institutions that curb the deficiencies of wealth-generating institutions.

3. Future Enemies of the Open Society

Popper's hostility to prophecy, and his sharp distinction between prediction and prophecy, was plainly set out in the book. In tentatively looking forward, I have no wish to prophesy. However, he looked forward, too: anticipating in 1943 that Marxism was a coming threat. It was already very popular among intellectuals, indeed almost universal amongst those who hoped for the emancipation of humanity. Because it canalised so much hope and good will, he thought it essential to expose and criticise its intellectual errors. No similarly clear-cut ideological movement sits in the wings at the moment. The enemies of freedom these days make little pretence that that is just what they are. Both evangelical Christians and the Roman Catholic hierarchy would like to reduce freedoms that people in many places already exercise, such as secularised education, thinking for oneself, educating women for equality, practising birth control. Various movements claiming the authority of Islam would like to do the same, perhaps in even more retrograde ways. Fortunately for partisans of the open society those enemies of freedom are as interested in fighting with one another as they are in fighting the open society. Some zealots may agree on what constitutes decadence and vice, but only a tiny minority think that killing in the name of virtue enhances their campaign.

Underneath religious opposition to freedom are some philosophical mistakes that we might expect Popper to expose. They could be summed up as the fallibilist approach to secularism. Since our knowledge of what is virtuous is conjectural, like all our knowledge, it would be dogmatic and risky to shape society according to one

recipe. However, a liberal and secular society can accommodate within it almost all experiments in ways of living, in cultivation of the virtues that different groups wish to advocate. A plural, secular order is a means to guard against catastrophic mistakes. It will not satisfy zealots, who may judge its very diversity an offence. Education towards tolerance as a supreme virtue is a long-term project.

Opposition to the open society also comes from a different intellectual tradition that can, however, sometimes make common cause with the religious enemies. I am thinking of those movements that want to create states that are single-nationed or of single ethnicity. These are dangerous because, like the religious, they oppose the open society in the name of a better alternative, i.e. one in some way more virtuous, more conducive to the Good Life. They use the positive argument that every nation or ethnic group is entitled to be an autonomous governing unit; and they use the negative argument that all multi-national or multi-ethnic states are failures because they oppress their minorities.

The philosophical errors behind the positive and the negative arguments are quite different. The negative arguments are true but not necessary. That is to say, the fact that there has been a history of oppression and discrimination is not to say that it cannot be corrected. The positive argument is faulty because it is incoherent. Within every group that is oppressed there are sub-groups that are also oppressed, right down to the oppression of women and children. The oppression of women and children should undoubtedly be opposed, but the suggestion that they should become

autonomous self-governing units is incoherent. Neither women nor children constitutes a nation or an ethnic group. But the case of women and children brings it out that every group that is discriminated against and oppressed is also linked to other groups, including the oppressors and discriminators, by ties of neighbourhood, kinship, forms of identity, and the like. There is no way all of this could be disentangled. It would seem to follow that the multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic state should come to be regarded as the liberal norm. While the social engineering problems of lowering its discrimination and oppression should be permanently on the democratic agenda.

Whether or not multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural societies become the norm in the current set of nation-states that make up the world, there are powerful trends towards supra-national and supra-ethnic communications which create even more links and ties between people and groups around the world. As an unintended consequence of defence technology the world has become linked by satellites that support phone, fax, and internet communications that leap across the old legal and geographical barriers that for so long were the main features of the world landscape. This facilitation of trade and commerce, of intellectual and political exchange, is one I believe Popper would have welcomed as a new face of the open society.¹⁰ To the extent that some intellectual leaders express fear and apprehension towards these

¹⁰ He foresaw and warned against its dangers in the passage about the “abstract society”, added in the second and subsequent editions to ch. 10, section I.

trends, his book would suggest to us that we be alert for reversals of language, for oppression disguised under misleading rhetoric, for restrictions of the freedoms already in place to be presented as curbing abuse. All technology, social and material, has unintended consequences, and some of those are likely to be undesirable. But The Open Society argues clearly that such problems should be tackled piecemeal, while being very clear how things are to be improved by institutional innovation, and specifying tests and counter measures in case they become worse.

To go further than this would not be in the spirit of the book. Globalization and the new communications technologies are, technically, trends. Popper was very clear that trends are caused rather than causal. If they present dangers these stem from underlying errors which I believe he would have done his best to expose.

September 2001

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APPENDIX

As an Appendix to the Introduction to this book we gave the full text of a letter Popper wrote to Gellner in 1946, answering criticisms of The Open Society and Its Enemies. At the time of our writing, it seemed as though Gellner's initial letter of criticism was lost. Because of the sleuthing of Dr. Jeremy Shearmur it has now been found and is included here as not only an exceptionally succinct critique, but also an indicator of the precocious talent of the 21-year old Gellner. The original is in the Archives of the Hoover Institution in the Popper Papers Box 539 File 2. It is reproduced by kind permission of Susan Gellner and David Gellner.

Gellner's 1946 letter to Popper.

(For Popper's reply, see the Appendix B to the Introduction, pp. 15-16.)

E. A. Gellner

11, Makepeace Ave

N.6.

August 10th

Dear Dr. Popper,

I am afraid I owe you an apology for this: when you so kindly came and addressed the 'Oxford Social Studies Association' last term, we forgot to repay you your fare; this was suddenly remembered at the end of term, and I was given the money to be sent on to you. As, however, you had invited me to write to you about your book when I read it, I kept on postponing sending the money until I had had time to read it. I now enclose a P.O., and hope you will excuse the delay!

As for your book – its problem, if I understand it, is to provide an answer to some widespread doubts of the 'rationalist' tradition which had led many of its adherents to desert it; this attempt at re-persuasion, I suppose, is what you meant by your claim that it is a 'fighting book.' The crisis arose as follows: the rationalists of the 18th century (largely) had two sets of value-beliefs, (1) what you call 'openness',

the destruction of arbitrary and irrational authority, taboos, etc., and (2) amelioration of mankind's material state. They also believed, falsely, that the achievement of (2) would automatically follow the achievement of (1), i.e. they were 'liberals.' The first crisis arose when the 19th century showed this latter belief to be wrong; and this problem was overcome by the replacement of the belief in (2) as an automatic consequence of (1), by the belief in (2) brought about 'socialism' or 'planning.' (1) was still ardently believed in, but no longer as an agent for bringing about (2), but for its own sake only, and it was assumed, usually tacitly, that the process of material amelioration by planning would not hinder (or would even aid!) the achievement of those factors of the Open Society other than material well-being (esp. intellectual freedom.) The 20th century has on the whole shown the later rationalists' (socialists) belief in the absence of an incompatibility between (2) by 'planning' and (1) as false as the earlier rationalists' ('liberals') belief in (1) implying (2).

The manner in which the 20th century has shown this to be false is by the tendency of industrial masses to support totalitarianism, at any rate on the continent of Europe. Those of the rationalist tradition, the 'progressives' or what-will-you, now had a number of unpalatable alternatives: (a) abandon (1) for the sake of (2), the course of the communists, excused either by saying that (1) isn't really valuable, or that it will be re-established when (2) is achieved. Both excuses are invalid, though it is difficult to argue against the former; the latter at least is empirical, though it is true that there aren't enough facts available yet to make its disproof absolutely

cogent. (b) To abandon (2), for (1), which on the Continent usually soon meant losing (1) as well, as the active movements opposed to socialism-become-totalitarian were themselves equally totalitarian. In Anglo-Saxon countries it may be possible to escape this dilemma. (c) Attempts to believe both in ameliorism and liberty, either by some neo-liberalism (which, even if it 'supplied the goods', doesn't stand a chance under contemporary economic conditions); or by just staying in the old planning-and-freedom against reason, by a plunge into mysticism like Arthur Koestler's Peter Slavek; one suspects that those Peter Slaveks who weren't forced into the 'mystic plunge of faith' by accidental circumstance, such as Jewish extraction, compelling them to take one side in the late struggle, usually took the course of passivity or even collaboration.

It was, I take it, to those wavering rationalists, that your book was addressed; your solution having two essential parts; firstly, the making explicit and independent of the liberty-element in the rationalist tradition, which had by socialists been so fatally left tacit and/or considered as having only derived value; and secondly the re-establishing of compatibility between planning and freedom through the distinction between Utopian and piecemeal social engineering.

Against the first point the following objections may be made: that the idea of the 'Open Society' is vague, and as such, on the one hand, inadequate in argument, on the other hand liable to abuse (like the pliable vagueness of ideas such as 'Fascism' or the equally convenient 'Anti-Fascism'.) You will no doubt reply that this (i.e. the

Open Society), is precisely what cannot be defined, else it would not be Open. This seems, however, rather like Wittgenstein's paradoxical rule about permissible propositions which you yourself ridicule; for we must make assertions about what exactly the O.S. is if we are to avoid the Closed Society, and anyway you've made an assertion in forbidding all others. And moreover, 'Openness' (or 'liberty') must be more clearly formulated; for there are elements which though prima facie 'closed' (you mention friendship as an example), are desirable; and I think the desire for ordering facts in scientific systems has psychologically a similarity to the yearning for a 'closed' order. On the other hand, German Fascism, though amongst the masses it no doubt appealed [sic] to 'closed society yearning', surely has as a part of its philosophical inspiration, at any rate amongst some of its leaders, an intentional and systematic disregard for 'moral laws' which is, again, prima facie 'open'. I think this shows that the idea of liberty*, apart from the problem arising from its relation to social engineering, needs re-formulating; the principle of "freedom up to the limit of interfering with others' freedom" is perfectly useless, as the decision as to whether a murder interferes with the victim's freedom to live, or the victim with the murderer's freedom to murder, can be made only by appeal to norms which are arbitrary and varied from social group to social group; (in the case of murder most men are agreed; but on the important issues both sides can claim that the principle of 'freedom limited by others' freedom' is on their side.)

* Which I take it is synonymous with 'openness'.

As for 'piecemeal engineering', I'm not clear whether it means engineering not too large-scale, or such s.e. as only removes suffering rather than plans for others' happiness; or both. But surely the large-scale is inescapable for technical reasons; whilst alleviation of misery and planning for happiness are usually inseparable (rebuilding of slums and reduction of working-time involves also designs for the new houses and provisions for leisure.) Some 'Utopian engineering' is inescapable.

Thus I don't think your attitude is a solution, but only a very much clearer re-statement of the problem. Also, surely it isn't admirable to translate the 'womb-yearning' into sociology under the name of 'yearning for the tribal society', as an explanatory theory; it is both unverifiable and, by being equally applicable to all striving for order, not useful.

Apologising for having taken you literally and boring you with a long letter,
Yours truly, Ernest Gellner.