Twenty Five Years After Popper (1902-1994): Plato and Marx as Social Engineers (Karl Popper’s Criticism)

Kamen Dimitrov Lozev

South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, BULGARIA
Faculty of Philosophy, Blagoevgrad

Abstract

The paper exposes Plato’s and Marx’s doctrines for thorough social changes as being specific versions of utopian large-scale social engineering. In the basis of these views lies what Popper names as “radical historicist thinking”. The issue of the use of violence is discussed in the context of the search for justice, both in Plato’s ideal city-state and in the future communist society outlined in broad lines by Marx. The paper concludes by emphasizing that both types of the proposed large-scale social changes can best be understood as specific types of utopian thinking which always invites for violence.

Keywords: social engineering (large-scale and piecemeal), historicism, violence, ideal city-state (Callipolis), communist society.

1. Introduction

Social engineering, the way Karl Popper understands it, obviously possesses universal features which make it characteristic for all societies and times. This, by itself, is one of the reasons allowing Popper to bring under a common denominator Plato and Marx and critically review their doctrines in his two-volume book The Open Society and Its Enemies. Both thinkers occupy the central place in Popper’s book, while other thinkers like Heraclitus, Aristotle and Hegel stand somehow “in the periphery”. They, though, receive no less vehement criticism.

The core notion discussed in the Open Society no doubt is the notion of historicism, which is closely linked to the notion of utopia. In his book Popper undertakes to reveal the reasons and the specific patterns of historicist thinking which inevitably produces utopias of different kinds leading to the establishment of violent totalitarian regimes. Therefore, considering the critical nature of Popper’s analyses, we can put the notion of social engineering on equal footing next to the notions of historicism and utopianism. These three, I presume, form the critical theoretical “lenses” through which famous totalitarian thinkers are viewed.

The objective of this paper is to go into the details of the specific “Popperian” approach as exhibited in the Open Society with special attention to Popper’s understanding of “social engineering” and “social technology”. As Popper himself notes in his Intellectual Autobiography, the latter notions were first developed in The Poverty of Historicism and then successfully applied in his Open Society to explain fundamentally important aspects of totalitarian holistic thinking and totalitarian programs. In the lines below my attention is focused only on Plato and Marx and my intention is to show that, assessed as “social engineers”, they are very different and yet no less
harmful as social thinkers who have proposed and defended models of social reconstruction
elements of which stood in the basis of typical totalitarian ideologies.

Like any other significant thinker, Popper had his severe critics. However, having this
in mind, I should make it explicitly clear that I find Popper’s critical analyses of totalitarian
thought in both volumes of The Open Society still classical in the sense that they still exert their
strong influence over the thinking minds, and this allows Popper to still enjoy his popularity in the
fields of contemporary Philosophy of politics and Philosophy of history.

2.

The Platonic approach I have in mind can be called Utopian engineering,
as opposed to that kind of social engineering which alone I consider as rational,
and which may be described by the name of piecemeal engineering.
Karl Popper (Popper, 1947a: 138)

It should be emphasized right from the start that the link between social engineering,
historicism and utopianism is by no means predestined. Social engineering is not bound to be
based on historicist thinking. When analyzing the notion of social engineering in The Poverty of
Historicism Popper especially stresses on its two fundamentally different types and draws the
contrast between them (Thomas, 200: 32–33). The first type he calls large-scale or utopian social
engineering (which is not simply unacceptable but should be denounced and rejected wherever it
is proposed to be carried out in practice); and the second type, dubbed as piecemeal social
engineering, is the acceptable (humane) form of materializing changes in social reality based on
careful planning of small transformations of existing institutions observing possibilities of failure
and unintended negative consequences.

The difference between the two types of social engineering is crucial. Why?

Karl Popper wrote both books, the Poverty and The Open Society, as his “war effort”
(Popper, 2002: 131), that is years after the publication of his first book Logik der Forschung (The
Logic of Scientific Discovery, 1957), 1934. Logik established Popper as a critical rationalist for
whom scientific method is nothing more than application of the rule we follow in all our daily work –
that is the rule of “trial and error”: we can learn and improve only through our mistakes (Lozev,
2015, ch. 2). For Popper critical discussion is at the basis of any rational thought and action. This
applies especially to politics and social planning. Just like in science, in decision-making and in
our social activity we should be able to learn from our experience, that is we have to be able to
make experiments and judge on their basis whether we are making progress or not. When social
engineering is done on a relatively small scale, it allows us to be clear about the cause-effect chains
and therefore judge easily whether we are moving closer to our goal or, on the contrary, we are
moving away from it. The rationality of our actions here is guaranteed by our ability to judge
clearly whether the experiments we make are successful or not. We can learn from our failures.

Are we in the same position with respect to large-scale social engineering? Obviously,
not. In large-scale social engineering we are faced with such complexity of factors and mutual
connections that it is practically impossible to judge whether our experiments are successful or
not. We are lost in an ocean of multi-dimensional dependencies where no clear cause-effect chains
can be discerned. Therefore we can learn nothing from our experience and it is of no use whether
we have a relatively well-defined goal we are aiming at or not. We are exposed to voluntarism and
subjectivism. In our actions there can simply be no rationality the way Popper understands it.

There are also other important differences between the two types of social engineering
but this is the crucial one. All in all, in the endeavor to improve the social reality we live in,
piecemeal social engineering is Popper’s preferred method to proceed; it is the embodiment of his
view of rationality and science-based methodology.
3. 

**Great men may make great mistakes...**

Karl Popper, Preface (Popper, 1947a: i)

Turning now to Plato and Marx, and having in mind the two types of social engineering, Popper unfolds the reasons why these distinguished men took the slippery road of historicist thinking. His analyses lead him in the end to categorize them as belonging to the group of the “great men”, the “leaders of humanity” of whom he speaks on the opening pages of his book. Popper in fact warns that “great men may make great mistakes” (Popper, 1947a: i) and that if we want to survive as civilization we have to boldly criticize the “great men” and their heritage.

According to Popper the dangers spring from a common source – namely, the radical historicist thinking. The latter takes different paths but the harm is no less great. Plato, as Popper portrays him, is the more active social engineer while Marx is the more prophetic one. Popper would be perhaps inclined to call Marx a somewhat *quasi* social engineer since the Marxist theory of history, emphasizing on its *scientific* nature, holds that history is subject to inexorable laws and that revolutions cannot be planned on paper.

Does it mean that Marx’s prophetical teaching was of less importance and therefore was not so harmful? No. Marx created what he himself called “a science”, but in the end his science turned into a powerful ideology with great activist potential. I am inclined to accept even Russell’s description of Marxism as a specific “religion” (Lozev, 2002: 83) because the spiritual effect of it is really comparable if not greater, than the effect of a religion. Below we shall illustrate this point in more details.

4.

To Plato, the Divine Philosopher, Popper devotes nearly all of the first volume of *The Open Society*, investigating his main teachings. The investigation is carried out on the basis of Popper’s attempt to justify his thesis that Plato was in fact an ardent defender of the “closed society” and therefore great rival of democracy, freedom and individual rights.

Contrary to other opinions, I highly appreciate Popper’s analyses of Plato’s teaching. These analyses, I presume, succeeded to show that Plato created a philosophy which had its pernicious effects not only on his contemporaries but also throughout the ages up to our own time. It is not for nothing that the first volume is entitled *The Spell of Plato* where “spell” should be taken in its meaning of “spoken words that are thought to have magical power, or (the condition of being under) the influence or control of such words” (Cambridge dictionary). Popper himself praises Plato as one of the greatest masters of philosophical prose. Through fascinating (bewitching) his readers he was able to “put them under his spell” to the point of inculcating and justifying some of the worst ideas which we find repeated in essence in the most repelling and disgusting ideologies after Plato.

Popper’s criticism of Plato culminates in Chapter Ten, the last chapter of volume one, entitled *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. The repetition of the title of the two volumes is indicative as there can be little doubt that the task of exposing Plato as defender of the “closed society” is best carried out here.

However, with respect to our topic of portraying Plato as a “social engineer”, we should focus our attention on Chapter 9 which best reveals Popper’s views on the dangers of large-scale (utopian) social engineering and exposes Plato as a radical totalitarian thinker.

The chapter’s title is *Aestheticism, Perfectionism, Utopianism* and here Popper’s attack on Plato is in fact an attack upon all holistically minded thinkers and activists who cannot
wait to see the “detested society” they happened to live in totally transformed into a fresh-new society where no traces of the past exist.

In the beginning of the chapter Popper reveals why Plato’s thinking is so attractive and so dangerous. The reason is because he, seemingly, is “very rational” in defending his method. How does his argument go? To be successful as a social reformer, Plato claims, one has to have a vision of how the future society should look like (Wright, 2012). The vision should be the goal we are aiming at, the end-point of our endeavor, of our ‘transformation journey’ so to say.

Therefore, the social reformer should be a good (perfect) “visionary”. He should be the one who possesses the ability “to peep into” the future and envision what the best state of society should be. He should have a clear vision of how the best, or the Ideal, state should look like. Plato claims to have this vision. In his Republic he convinces his readers that the best state should be the one which represents and embodies the very Idea of Justice (Plato, 1981: ch. 10). Only a few understand and know what justice is (ultimately, it is only Plato, the holder of Wisdom, who knows this). Therefore, only a few (ultimately, only Plato) will be able to propose a vision of the Ideal state. This means that only a few (or only Plato) are able to transform the present, decaying city-state into a Kallipolis, that is Ideal City-state, which will resemble its Divine Form or Idea and will be organized in such a way as to arrest all changes leading to decay.

This approach in social engineering Popper calls utopian. Plato and Marx, though for different reasons, are both typical utopian thinkers. Their approach requires that we should first have a “picture” of the future state of society and then put the efforts of generations – no matter how many, and no matter how hard it would be – to attain it.

In the case of Plato this approach is based on his aestheticism. Plato is an artist, and a visionary: like all great artists and visionaries, he is a perfectionist who has a vivid picture of what the Ideal City-state must have as its attributes, and how it should be organized. (This immediately calls to mind the fact that Hitler (and many other “great leaders” of humanity) also considered himself an “artist”, and he, too, insisted that he well knows how the Third Reich, designed to exist for a thousand years, should look like).

Plato envisioned the society as whole; for him the city-state was like a living organism. Plato’s organic worldview placed little or no importance on the individual citizens. Plato was obsessed with the “Good of the State”. He spoke of its “soul”, its “virtues”, and its “life”, as if it were a single individual. For the “Good of the State” Plato was not hesitant to sacrifice its citizens. They are deemed as mere tools, as instruments in the hands of the great wise master who knows how to attain State’s goals. The Republic (the most famous of all Plato’s dialogues which Popper considers to be authentically Platonic, that is belonging to his latest dialogues) is an apotheosis of “the Whole”, the City-state at the expense of the individual human beings. (All totalitarian ideologies share this Platonian attitude, they all deify “the Whole”, the state, sacrificing the rights and interests of the citizens).

Plato was convinced that he possessed the Divine knowledge of how to construct the Ideal City-state, the Kallipolis. From this conviction sprang his radicalism and resolute willingness to apply violence to all who do not obey. Plato intended to transform the existing “decaying” society leaving no stone unturned.

The Philosopher-king of Plato’s Ideal state is a symbol of sophocracy (power of or power of the wise man), power that is unquestioned, unchallenged, ultimate. The possessor of such power engages himself with nothing less than radical social engineering which should bring, mockingly notes Popper, paradise on earth, but in the end all his effort leads to “… hell which man alone prepares for his fellows” (Popper 1947a: 148).
5.

Popper’s attitude to Marx, compared to that of Plato, was much more favorable. No matter how harsh his critique of Marxism was, Popper never missed the chance to speak of “the spirit of Marx”, that is the spirit of his resolute defense of the exploited, compassion with the poor, the proletariat, readiness to fight all injustices in life. Marx, however, was very careful not to mix or confuse his feelings for the “oppressed” and his willingness to change their lot (which is a moral, axiological issue) with his “scientific”, presumably objective, investigations, that is with his “scientific” theory of how history develops. He hated all moralism and charity talk, all verbal rejection of social ills.

Popper was quick to uncover something paradoxical in Marx’s teaching. On the one hand, Marx is famous for being a “revolutionary”, both in science and in practice (remember how actively he was involved in the events of 1848 in Germany, Belgium and France). On the other hand, in his theoretical research he came to implicitly formulate, according to Popper, a certain theory of the “impotence of all politics” (Popper, 1947b: 110). One of the most famous dictum of Marx is his Eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, 1845, according to which “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”. This thesis seems to point in the direction of expected active social engineering. Yet, Marx believed history develops, so to say, “objectively”, according to its own inexorable laws, with no regard to any subjective will. Marx seemed to envision history subjected to laws just the way nature is subjected to laws.

Now Marx lived in a time immediately after the great European “eruption”: the French revolution. Its echo could still be heard and felt everywhere. Marx was convinced that great historical events, like wars, revolutions, crises – the milestones in history – cannot be planned in advance and carried out “consciously” according to agreed blueprints. They come objectively, disregarding our will and manifesting that there are uncontrolled (uncontrollable) driving forces in history of which we have a sense when eruptions of the sort of the French revolution happen to shake the European social world.

Marx started his career as a “young Hegelian”. For Hegel the driving force of history was the World Spirit which strove to realize itself moving to its goal through successive historical stages. Marx also found the driving force of history and offered his understanding of history’s goal. Class struggle (war) for Marx was the notion which gave him the key to explain all major historical events outlining the teleological development of history.

Marx believed that he was living in a very significant era, the era of “proletarian revolutions”. The class struggle of his time is the struggle between the working class, on the one side, and the capitalists, on the other. For Marx, however, the outcome of this struggle was not a question of taking sides. Marx searched for and believed he had created a science (remember the book of Engels, The Development of Socialism from Utopia to Science). Marx believed he had found the laws of history and it was because of these laws the proletariat would be victorious in the struggle with the capitalists. The fall of capitalism was inevitable. As Marx wrote in Das Kapital, the Twelfth hour is striking for capitalism and it will inevitably fall.

Popper says we cannot blame Marx for holding such a strong belief in science and seeking in social science the tool to predict the future: this was the general view of it during the whole Nineteenth century. It was taken for granted that to predict was one of the specific functions of science. For Marx, however, took this to be its main function. Thus the combination of his “historical materialism” and the investigation of the current struggle of the oppressed workers produced one of the most powerful prophecies in human history, namely the coming of the classless society as an inevitable result of the victorious proletarian revolution. Marx predicted that the world is entering into a totally new epoch: the proletariat, doing away with the capitalist class, is in fact doing away with “the society divided by classes”. Marx believed that thus the main
source of inequality and injustice, *the Hell*, is wiped out from the face of the earth once and for all time.

Marx, however, never went into the details of how the capitalist society will be transformed into a classless communist society. He never went beyond the general phrases of “proletarian revolution” or “proletarian dictatorship”, “expropriation of the expropriators” or “doing away with the private property”. This is one of the reasons why Popper calls his political program “poor”. This explains why, as a social engineer, Marx was way behind Plato. Yet, what Marx created – the Marxist ideology or “religion” – had great motivational force. Strangely enough, Marx believed that he had forged ‘the spiritual weapon’ in the hands of the working class to fight the capitalists. In a letter to Engels, after publishing *Das Capital*, he compared the book to a bomb which he had fired right in the head of the capitalist society.

This by itself speaks of the activist nature of Marx’s works. And since Marx insisted that capitalism can never be reformed but only overthrown altogether, we can claim that his activism was of radical kind. A good deal of this Marxian activism had been passed to his followers and especially to the Russian ones. We shall hardly go wrong to say that the real social engineers who in practice materialized some of Marx’s ideas the way they understood them were Lenin and Stalin who showed the world to what tragic extent a prophetic teaching can be taken in an attempt to carry it out in reality. Popper rightly claims that the Russian revolution (in October 1917) was not “Marxian” in nature. That raises the question of whether Marx would recognize in the face of Lenin, Trotsky or Stalin “true adherents” of his. Discussion on this question goes beyond the limits of our topic but undoubtedly these leaders personified the fiercest utopian social engineering.

6. Conclusion

Our analyses, fixed on Plato and Marx, were in fact fixed on the negative type of social engineering, the utopian one. Though different in many respects Plato and Marx exhibit common features in their way of thinking and the results produced. Plato elaborated in detail his Ideal City-state as a totalitarian structure relying on knowledge preserved only to him and the wise men; this knowledge underlying their supreme power. Marx also focused on knowledge, the scientific knowledge, and it also served as basis of his power, but this was the power of predicting what the future would bring. His specific doctrine of lessening the “birth pangs” of what irrevocably will happen gave expression to how very prophetic his general teaching is. The specific radical Marxian prophecy of the coming death of capitalism gave birth to no less radical social engineering which was carried out throughout the Twentieth century. Pondering over the nature of these teachings of Plato and Marx we once again come to see the efficacy of Popper’s remedy: criticism through and through at every step taken in an argument, especially in an argument for power.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.
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