

Valuing Diversity Without Illusions: The Anti-Utopian Agonism of Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a novel interpretation of Karl Popper's influential yet controversial book, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945). Popper, it argues, sheds light on a pivotal social and political question: How can we value genuine human plurality without succumbing to the illusion that enmity can be removed from the socio-political realm? What we find in Popper, I argue, is an "anti-utopian agonism," that is, his conception of an open society harbors significant agonistic elements—a commitment to human plurality, an endorsement of (some) social and political struggles, and an acute awareness of the tragic dimensions of political life. Simultaneously, Popper's distinctive anti-utopianism makes an important contribution to agonistic theory on two fronts. First, his concept of "the strain of civilization" reveals a deeper notion of tragedy, which gives him the edge over the rather shallow notion of tragedy we find in the agonistic tradition. Secondly, he develops a tripartite notion of enmity, which is theoretically interesting and practically relevant. The aim of this article is not only to contribute to the scholarship on Popper and agonism but, first and foremost, to demonstrate how *The Open Society* still matters as an inspiring work that illuminates the practically relevant question of how to value diversity without illusions.

KEYWORDS

Karl Popper; *The Open Society and Its Enemies*; democratic theory; anti-utopian agonism; enmity

"Popper's book is a scandal without extenuating circumstances," Eric Voegelin wrote to Leo Strauss when asked about his opinion of Karl Popper:

[I]n its intellectual attitude it is the typical product of a failed intellectual; spiritually one would have to use expressions like rascally, impertinent, loutish; in terms of technical competence, as a piece in the history of thought, it is dilettantish, and as a result is worthless.¹

Strauss, of course, seemed to have made up his mind before soliciting Voegelin's counsel. He wrote to Voegelin that Popper's 1950 lecture at the University of Chicago was "beneath contempt, it was the most washed-out lifeless positivism trying to whistle in the dark, linked to a complete inability to think 'rationally,' although it passed itself off as 'rationalism'—it was very bad."² Of course, such vitriolic assessments of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* are outliers.³ The two more common reactions to Popper's social and political theory have been the indifference of major thinkers such as John Rawls, Hannah Arendt, and Judith Shklar who—despite interesting parallels in their thought—hardly

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ever engaged with Popper,⁴ or the (more or less) fair criticism that Popper glosses over crucial questions concerning power, order, or legitimacy.⁵

This is not to say that *The Open Society* is a neglected work. It has exerted a major influence on public figures such as Vaclav Havel and George Soros, and it features in several lists of the 100 “best non-fiction books.”⁶ It would also be wrong to assume that social and political theorists have univocally rejected Popper’s ideas.⁷ But, in many respects, Popper renders himself vulnerable to criticism by a curious and, no doubt, ironic fact: *The Open Society and Its Enemies* leaves the concepts of “open society” and “enmity” underdeveloped. In fact, Popper devotes so much time to attacking Plato, Hegel, and Marx that he seems to have little time left for putting more flesh on what are supposed to be the central ideas of his major political work. This allows critics like Voegelin to claim that Popper “is not able even approximately to reproduce correctly the contents of one page of Plato,”⁸ and thus to dismiss the book without seriously engaging with its argument. It also, however, makes it easy for more respectful critics to expose the weaknesses and blind spots of Popper’s thought. Thus, Fred Eidlin, certainly one Popper’s most perceptive critics, concludes that his theory of democracy “misconstrues several very important problems of democratic theory,” and that his account of democracy is, therefore, “flawed and incomplete.”⁹

In this article, I am not interested in the accuracy of Popper’s interpretations of Plato, Hegel, and Marx. Moreover, although I agree with the criticism that Popper’s social and political theory suffers from several blind spots, I will not dwell on these. The purpose of this article, rather, is to offer an original reinterpretation of Popper’s concepts of *the open society* and *enmity* that brings to the fore the contemporary relevance of his book, *The Open Society*.¹⁰ My argument is that Popper sheds light on a pivotal social and political question: How can we value genuine human plurality without succumbing to the illusion that enmity can be removed from the socio-political realm? The answer is to be found in what I dub Popper’s “anti-utopian agonism”: I argue that Popper’s conception of the open society harbors significant agonistic elements—a commitment to human plurality and diversity, an endorsement of (some) social and political struggles, and an acute awareness of the tragic dimensions of political life. At the same time, Popper’s distinctive anti-utopianism makes an important contribution to agonistic theory on two fronts. First, he draws on a deeper notion of tragedy, which gives him the edge over the rather shallow notion of tragedy we find in the agonistic tradition; and secondly, he develops a tripartite notion of enmity of which at least the first two prongs (what I call “internal enmity” and “external enmity”) are theoretically interesting and practically relevant (I will, though, reject the third prong, “international enmity,” as counterproductive and dangerous). Importantly, then, the aim of this article is not only to contribute to the scholarship on Popper and agonism but, first and foremost, to demonstrate how *The Open Society* still matters as a (perhaps surprisingly) inspiring work today that illuminates the practically relevant question of how to value diversity without illusions.¹¹

Before I flesh out my argument some clarifications are in order. My reinterpretation of Popper is original, but it is certainly not uncontroversial. Some commentators, undoubtedly, will reject my reading. I will respond to four potential criticisms in the Conclusion, but here I already concede to potential critics that, while my interpretation is firmly rooted in *The Open Society*, I foreground particular elements of the text and de-emphasize others. However, as Bonnie Honig says, “reading is never innocent or passive; it is an engagement,

constructive and productive, a practice of knowledge that is never freed of power. Better, then, not to pretend otherwise.¹² More to the point, I doubt that there is one “correct” interpretation of this—on closer inspection—complex tome. The point of this article, then, is not only to offer an alternative reading to what I call the standard account of *The Open Society*, but to bring to the fore the continuing relevance of this work in today’s world. I also suspect that agonists will have little sympathy for my interpretation. But to pre-empt an all too obvious criticism: I do not argue that Popper *was* an agonist. Popper never used the term “agonism,” and it might well be possible to identify “anti-agonistic” elements of his thought. What I argue is that we find central *agonistic elements* in his conception of the open society, a fact that has eluded both Popperians and agonists thus far.

The article proceeds in four steps. In the first section, I provide a preliminary sketch of the idea of the open society. I call this the standard account because it yields the picture that the overwhelming majority of commentators have upheld: the notion of the open society as a passionate defense of liberal democracy, and of totalitarianism as the quintessential expression of enmity. But since I assert that there is more to *The Open Society* than this standard account, I subsequently embark on a reinterpretation by excavating two central agonistic characteristics of Popper’s open society—the idea of human plurality and diversity as a precious moral, social, and political value, and an endorsement of at least certain forms of conflict. However, in line with my claim that Popper’s agonism is distinctively anti-utopian, I show in the third part that Popper’s concept of the strain of civilization reveals a deeper idea of tragedy than the rather shallow notion of tragedy we find in the agonistic tradition. Finally, I turn to the tripartite conception of enmity in *The Open Society*—internal, external, and international enmity—and demonstrate how it relates to Popper’s agonism. This reinterpretation of Popper will demonstrate how it is indeed possible to value genuine human plurality without succumbing to the illusion that enmity can be removed from the socio-political realm.

Popper’s Conception of the Open Society: The Standard Account

Popper was primarily a philosopher of science. He wrote *The Open Society* relatively early in his career and it remained his only sustained engagement with social and political theory. When he was later asked why he never returned to the subject, he only half-jokingly replied that he had more important things to do. In fact, though, Popper was convinced that the philosophy of science provided the necessary framework for addressing social and political questions. Already in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957) he emphasized the need to “apply something like scientific method in politics”—and *The Open Society* represents his most sustained attempt to do so.¹³ This finds its clearest expression in an idea that runs through the book like a red thread: Popper’s rejection of “essentialism” and his endorsement of “nominalism.” Methodological essentialism, Popper says, is the erroneous assumption “that it is the task of pure knowledge or ‘science’ to discover and to describe the true nature of things, their hidden reality or essence” (29). His objection is straightforward: things do not have a fixed and unalterable essence. This anti-essentialism implies a rejection of what Popper calls the “Platonic-Aristotelian theory of definition” (see chap. 11). Definitions, after all, are descriptions “of the essence of a thing”

(29); but if things do not have a fixed essence, they become suspicious, to say the least. Thus,

instead of aiming at finding out what a thing really is, and at defining its true nature, methodological nominalism aims at describing how a thing behaves in various circumstances, and especially, whether there are any regularities in its behaviour. In other words, methodological nominalism sees the aim of science in the description of the things and events of the things and events. (29)

The problem, of course, is that Popper's aversion to definitions does not really help us to understand the idea of the open society—for even if it does not have a fixed essence, it must stand for (and against) *something*. Fortunately, though, Popper gives us a couple of pointers.

His famous distinction is the one between an “open” and a “closed” (or a “tribal”) society. An open society “sets free the critical powers of man,” whereas a closed society submits to “magical forces” (xlili). Popper is at pains to distinguish his conception of open society from Bergson's:

My terms indicate, as it were, a *rationalistic decision*: the closed society is characterized by the belief in magical taboos, while the open society is one in which men have learned to be to some extent critical of taboos, and to base decisions on the authority of their own decisions (after discussion): Bergson, on the other hand, has a kind of *religious distinction* in mind. (512 note 1)

An open society, therefore, is one that rejects the uncritical acceptance of dogmas and superstitions, a society that develops and progresses through critique. In Chapter 10, Popper returns to his explicit distinction: “the magical or tribal or collectivist society will also be called the *closed society*, and the society in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions, the *open society*” (165). As we can see, the open society rests on a strong commitment to individualism—to individual rights but also to individual responsibilities—and on a rejection of the “organic theory” that prioritizes the collective (the tribe, the nation, etc.) over the individual (165–66). For Popper, the importance of the transition from the closed to the open society cannot be overstated—this is nothing less than “one of the deepest revolutions through which mankind has passed” (167).

Through his analysis of Plato, Hegel, and Marx, philosophers who, according to him, established the intellectual foundations of totalitarianism, Popper brings to light further characteristics of the open society. Plato is criticized as an anti-democratic enemy of the open society; an open society, by contrast, is a democratic society. Hegel is described in even more scathing terms. Hegel, according to Popper, rejects “liberty and equality, so he opposes the brotherhood of man [and] humanitarianism. . . . Conscience must be replaced by blind obedience and by a romantic Heraclitean ethics of fame and fate, and the brotherhood of man by a totalitarian nationalism” (262). This contrasts with “a new faith in reason, freedom and the brotherhood of all men—the new faith, and, as I believe, the only possible faith, of the open society” (175). Finally, a common feature of the philosophies of Plato, Hegel, and Marx is their historicism—the idea that there are laws of historical development that reduce individuals to mere pawns or powerless victims. But “history has no meaning,” Popper asserts in the final chapter of *The Open Society*. There are no “natural laws” built into our unfolding history; instead, “we can give it a meaning” (482).

This is what I take to be the relatively well-known picture that a quick reading of *The Open Society* yields. Thus even sophisticated commentators have interpreted the book as a passionate defense of liberal democracy and/or as a *Streitschrift* against totalitarianism.¹⁴ This standard account is by no means wrong. However, in this article, I want to go beyond it and propose a novel interpretation of the concepts of the open society and enmity. To put it bluntly: I want to show that there is more to the idea of the open society than a mere defense of liberal democracy; and there is more to the idea of enmity than totalitarianism.

The Agonistic Elements of the Open Society: Plurality and Conflict

Having prepared the ground for a reinterpretation of Popper's *The Open Society*, my aim now is to bring to the fore the agonistic elements that lie at the heart of the open society. This makes it necessary to first outline the democratic tradition of agonism, and subsequently to demonstrate how agonistic elements manifest themselves in Popper's idea of the open society.

As a tradition of thought, agonism harks back to the ancient Greek notion of the *agon*, which can be translated as competition, struggle, or conflict. In ancient Greece, the *agon*—the most famous example of which were the Olympic games—played such a central role that Jacob Burckhardt dubbed the archaic period “the agonal age.”¹⁵ Nietzsche, who was influenced by Burckhardt, took up the idea of the *agon* in his work, and in turn inspired (in very different ways) Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. Among the most prominent contemporary agonists are Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig, James Tully, William Connolly, and David Owen. Boasting such an array of different thinkers, it should come as no surprise that agonism is hardly a homogenous “theory.” Nonetheless, as Mark Wenman shows in his splendid analysis, it is possible and useful to tease out a number of core assumptions that agonistic thinkers share.¹⁶ The first and most salient feature of agonistic thought is that conflict is not necessarily a vice, and harmony not necessarily a virtue of ethical and political life; rather, certain forms of struggle, competition and conflict—the *agon*—are morally, socially, and politically desirable phenomena. There are two reasons for this: The first is that for agonists human plurality and diversity are not just (as it is for liberals) “facts” of political life; they are precious values. But agonists are under no illusions here; they are well aware that diversity and plurality inevitably create conflict and struggle. Conflict, then, is an expression of the agonistic core value of human plurality. Secondly, the *agon* is more than simply a by-product of human plurality: struggle is in and of itself a productive force in political life. “It is not simply that inevitable differences in identities, lifestyles and moralities might lead to conflict,” Derek Edyvane writes, “it is rather that identities, lifestyles and moralities are in the first place formed through conflict.”¹⁷ In the agonistic outlook, therefore, politics is—and should be—about “unruly” practices; administration, law, and the imposition of order, on the other hand, can “displace” politics and act as a straitjacket for progressive political action.¹⁸ The final element of the agonistic conception of politics is “tragedy.” The concept of tragedy is employed here to challenge rationalistic ideas of inevitable progress, which often underlie liberal thought, and to express the idea “of a world without hope of final redemption from suffering and strife.”¹⁹ Thus against the rationalistic idea that, at some point, the progressive development of humanity will overcome conflict, agonists argue that this is

unrealistic wishful thinking at best and a dangerous illusion at worst. The world, agonists insist, is a place of never-ending struggle and conflict.²⁰

How, then, do these agonistic elements manifest themselves in Popper's conception of the open society? A useful starting point is, again, to note that in *The Open Society* Popper sought to apply his philosophy of science to the social and political realm. This, as noted, finds expression in his rejection of essentialism; here, I would like to elaborate on a second expression of his rejection of essentialism: his epistemological outlook of "critical rationalism." The central idea behind critical rationalism is that the natural and the social sciences (as well as moral, social, and political life) progress through a process of trial and error.²¹ The method here is not to prove that a theory is correct (justificationism) but that a theory is wrong—this is Popper's famous concept of falsification. In other words, new knowledge is created through a process of "conjectures and refutations."²² Now, it is of course questionable if the task of the social sciences is really to come up with hypotheses, conjectures, and theories. The more important point, at least for our purposes, is that a society that progresses through bold theorizing and vigorous (but rational) criticism, a society in which there is a genuine possibility of change in light of the criticism of others, can be called an *open society*.

This leads to several points that bring Popper into dialogue with agonists. The first is Popper's endorsement of human plurality and diversity as a fundamental value of an open society. Now this might sound surprising. The notions of pluralism and plurality, after all, do not seem to play a prominent role in *The Open Society*—indeed, Popper mentions plurality (or pluralism) only three times in the book.²³ Moreover, the secondary literature does not yield a clear picture. Andrew Vincent, for instance, argues that "Popper clearly did not celebrate plurality for its own sake. It was a [sic] more of an empirical fact than a value."²⁴ Harald Stelzer, on the other hand, paints a very different picture:

The diversity of opinions, ideas, and goals is not only characteristic for an open society but also vital for social progress, as it gives leeway for new developments and problem solutions. Therefore, pluralism is not limited to the recognition of heterogeneity, but is a prime concern for an open society, as it is an important precondition for rational optimization processes in the sociopolitical field.²⁵

Stelzer's interpretation is very much on point. In an open society, plurality is more than a simple "fact" to be tolerated because it constitutes the necessary precondition for progress. For Popper, this is primarily an epistemic point—a plurality of opinions is the enabling condition for seeking truth. There is an interesting parallel here between Popper's critical rationalism and Nietzsche's "perspectivism." Nietzsche famously holds that the more perspectives we bring to bear on one "thing," the more "objective" our conception of this "thing" becomes. In other words, only by multiplying the number of perspectives on this thing, will we come closer to the truth. In Nietzsche's words, "there is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective 'knowing'; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity', be."²⁶ Popper shares this perspectival conception of truth, which is why in an open society genuine human plurality and diversity must be more than a mere "fact" to be tolerated: it is a value to be cherished.

However, it would be a mistake to sever Popper's epistemological outlook from his social and political theory.²⁷ For Popper, the epistemological quest for truth and social

and political progress are inextricably linked. This establishes a parallel to the agonist James Tully, who equally regards human plurality (“strange multiplicity”) as the necessary pre-condition for progress.²⁸ And there is a further striking similarity between the two thinkers. Popper writes in a key passage towards the end of *The Open Society*:

We could then say that rationalism is an attitude of readiness to listen to critical arguments and to learn from experience. It is fundamentally an attitude of admitting that “*I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth.*” (431)

For Tully, *audi alteram partem*—always listen to the other side because “there is always something to be learned from the other side”—counts as “the first and perhaps only universalizable principle of democratic deliberation.”²⁹ This norm of reciprocity, Tully says, should guide intercultural dialogue and democratic deliberation. It would be difficult to miss the parallels between Tully’s and Popper’s respective norms of reciprocity—both require a serious engagement with “the other side” in the hope that through a common effort “we may get nearer to the truth.” Epistemic and social progress, then, are closely intertwined and based on the same method of engaging in, and facing up to, criticism of “the other side.”

It is clear enough that such an openness towards “the other side,” an openness towards a plurality of voices and opinions, presupposes a critical ethos—the critical ethos of the open society. But Popper would be naïve if he believed that the relentless criticism he advocates cannot also lead to conflict. Of course, he is neither naïve nor does he think that conflict is necessarily a threat to open societies. On the contrary, “in an open society,” he asserts, “many members strive to rise socially, and to take the places of other members. This may lead, for example, to such an important social phenomenon as class struggle. We cannot find anything like class struggle in an organism” (165). Class struggle, then, is by no means something to be eradicated; it is not even a “necessary evil” in an open society. Rather, class struggle is an “important phenomenon” for two reasons: first, because it is a consequence of the social mobility that characterizes open societies; and second, because it can break up the ossified structures of oppression and domination that threaten to “close” societies. Just as in the agonistic tradition, then, struggle has a dual function in *The Open Society* as a consequence of human plurality and as a constructive force in society.

We can take this important point even further, noting that there is no reason to limit the struggle to “class struggle.” An open society, after all, is characterized by openness towards different ideas about race, gender, sexuality, religion, moral convictions, or political affiliations. These differences create struggles, tensions, and even conflicts. The point is that in an open society these conflicts are not problematic per se. They are expressions of a healthy plurality of standpoints in a vibrant democratic environment, which, ultimately, is also the driver of moral, social, and political progress. An open society, in short, *is* a conflictual society.

A Deeper Notion of Tragedy

As noted, in addition to the endorsement of plurality and conflict, agonists have a *tragic* view of the world. There is, in the agonistic outlook, no final resolution of social and political conflicts, no inevitable march towards human rights, no Communist utopia, and

certainly no “end of history.” The agonistic notion of tragedy, then, is one of a world of never-ending struggle and conflict. Yet there is a problem with this conception of tragedy: it is rather shallow. This might sound counterintuitive, but recall that for agonists struggle and conflict are not negative phenomena—they are desirable. Thus the agonistic idea of a world of never-ending conflict and struggle is, in fact, a highly optimistic one.³⁰ Popper’s conception of tragedy is much bleaker. To see why, let us return to his point that an open society is full of tensions, struggles, and conflicts. This conflictual nature of the open society generates what Popper calls “the strain of civilization”:

This strain, this uneasiness, is a consequence, of the breakdown of the closed society. It is still felt even in our day, especially in times of social change. It is the strain created by the effort which life in an open and partially abstract society continually demands from us—by the endeavour to be rational, to forgo at least some of our emotional social needs, to look after ourselves, and to accept responsibilities. We must, I believe, bear this strain as the price to be paid for every increase in knowledge, in reasonableness, in co-operation and in mutual help, and consequently in our chances of survival, and in the size of the population. It is the price we have to pay for being human. (168)

This is a highly complex passage, which is, nonetheless, pivotal for understanding Popper’s conception of the open society. At first glance, Popper’s argument seems straightforward: the open society is marked by a loss of security; struggle and conflict are the “price we have to pay” for it. However, the problem that arises here is both subtle and important: On the one hand, struggle and conflict are important phenomena in an open society as they are drivers of social and political progress. But struggle and conflict are also the “price to be paid” for the open society. Conflict, then, is at once the achievement of, and the price to be paid for, the open society.

This paradox at the heart of the open society leads to a deeper notion of tragedy. For it is tempting to believe that Popper celebrated the open and condemned the closed society—this idea also underlies the standard account of the open society. And it is true, of course, that Popper was a defender of the open, and a critic of the closed, society. Yet there is more to *The Open Society* than a simple (and perhaps simplistic) dichotomy. Ernst Gellner once rightly remarked that Popper “is desperately attracted precisely by those things that he also rejects.”³¹ What Gellner means is that Popper does not just celebrate the open and condemn the closed society. As his statement about “the strain of civilization” reveals, Popper is under no illusions that the open society comes at a price—and a heavy one at that. An open society is uncomfortable, it is demanding, and it is notoriously insecure. Moreover, it is, indeed, possible to detect a certain “attraction” when Popper speaks about the closed society. A closed society, after all, is held together by “kinship, living together, sharing common efforts, common dangers, common joys and common distress” (165). We have no reason to believe that Popper depreciates the “common life” of the closed society—he accepts that these are important values, which can serve as the bonds holding societies together. Relatedly, Popper is not naïve about individualism either. This becomes clear in his section on the open society as an “abstract or depersonalized society” (166), which, he acknowledges, lacks social cohesion and solidarity. Popper’s point, though, is that both individualism and collectivism carry undeniable risks and dangers—but he finds that the dangers of the former outweigh those of the latter.

This, then, is Popper's deep notion of tragedy: *The Open Society* is not constructed so much around a dichotomy but around a choice. Just as we must opt for either individualism or collectivism in the knowledge that there is no perfect option, we have to make a choice, more broadly, between the open and the closed society. Again, it is by no means an easy judgment—both options come at a heavy price, and both options require us to sacrifice important values. Popper clearly wanted us to come down on the side of the open society because he thought that the price for it is ultimately worth paying. Nonetheless, the call is essentially based on a “lesser evil” calculation—which makes it a genuinely *tragic* one.

There is, however, an obvious objection to this tragic reading of *The Open Society*. It might be argued that, paradoxically, my attempt to portray the open and closed society as less of a dichotomy in fact generates a rather different dichotomy: We should not have to make these tragic choices; surely, there is a way to *combine* the strengths of the open society with the advantages of the closed society. But is there? Popper, after all, does not mention this possibility. Even more importantly, the belief in such a harmonization runs counter to the anti-utopian thrust of *The Open Society*. What Popper shares with thinkers such as Isaiah Berlin is the belief that social and political life is marked by real and irresolvable conflicts of values and interests. This, to be sure, is an unfashionable argument today, which will draw the scorn of progressive theorists.³² But Mark Lilla's recent essay on the shortcomings of identity politics is particularly insightful for our purposes. Identity politics, Lilla asserts, is based on the “romantic idea” that there is no “real” tension between individual and collective identity, and that it is, indeed, possible to perfectly reconcile the individual with the collective dimension of one's identity. Advocates of identity politics, he asserts, are utopians with a “lack of sensitivity for the tragic” (“*unterentwickelter Sinn für das Tragische*”)—they want to have their cake and eat it.³³

We find a similar line of argument in Popper, not just against advocates of identity politics but against anyone with an “*unterentwickelten Sinn für das Tragische*.” Be under no illusion, Popper tells us, an open society is neither a comfortable environment nor a “safe space”; and least of all is it a perfect system. The open society is the product of a series of decisions in which we had to prioritize certain values and sacrifice others. This is precisely why the “strain of civilization” is so central to understanding *The Open Society*. Mark Notturmo, therefore, is rightly puzzled about the relative neglect of this idea, even in the scholarship on Popper:

Many people who regard themselves as sympathetic to Popper's idea of open society seem to be completely oblivious to [the strain of civilization] and instead regard open society as something warm, fuzzy, and comforting. But this . . . is not the way in which Popper thought about it. He may or may not have regarded open society as original sin. But he certainly did not regard it as a utopia.³⁴

What the tragic strain of civilization demonstrates is that an open society is full of risks that are, simultaneously, opportunities. An open society is uncomfortable, and it is precisely its discomfort that spurs us into action. An open society champions some values and sacrifices others because it is based on the belief that not all values are compatible. Most importantly, there is a real—and, no doubt, heavy—price to be paid for the open society. The alternative, of course, is the warmth, the comfort, and the (false) certainty of

the closed society, which will always be an enticing option. But Popper wanted to convince us that the open society is the lesser evil.

Popper's Tripartite Notion of Enmity

I now turn to Popper's conception of enmity in *The Open Society* and show how it relates to his agonism. Already the title of the book illustrates that, for Popper, the open society is inextricably linked to enmity. This distinguishes Popper's conception from other (mainly Bergsonian) notions of open society. Nonetheless, in *The Open Society* we find relatively few concrete thoughts on enmity. To be sure, Heraclitus, Plato, Hegel, and Marx are singled out by Popper for, as he saw it, having laid the intellectual foundations for totalitarian systems. As such, it is also clear that Popper regarded totalitarian regimes as enemies of the open society. It is thus not surprising that in an age in which populism has transformed democracy,³⁵ fascism seems to have returned,³⁶ and authoritarianism continues to have a "seductive lure,"³⁷ scholars have returned to *The Open Society* as a passionate defense of liberal democracy and constitutionalism.³⁸ Again, this standard account is neither wrong nor outdated. But I think that Popper's conception of enmity is far more interesting and complex than that. Popper, as I will show, develops a tripartite notion of enmity that complements his anti-utopian agonism.

Let us start with Popper's distinction between the "democratic" and the "totalitarian" critic of democracy:

There is no need for a man who criticizes democracy and democratic institutions to be their enemy, although both the democrats he criticizes and the totalitarians who hope to profit from any disunion in the democratic camp, are likely to brand him as such. There is a fundamental difference between a democratic and a totalitarian criticism of democracy. (79)

This passage should be read in conjunction with Popper's deliberations on the strain of civilization. The remarkable feature of this passage (i.e., the strain of civilization) is that Popper formulates it in the first-person plural. "We" face the strain of civilization in an open society; "we" have to pay the price for the open society; and "we" have to resist the perpetual temptation to yield to the charms of the closed society. From these passages, we can extract two forms of enmity: I call the first "internal enmity" and the second "external enmity."

What I mean by "internal" enmity is that we all too often find the enemy of open society within ourselves. For some reason, commentators have rarely (if ever) picked up on this internal dimension of enmity. Yet Popper's use of the first-person plural in his central passage is telling: When he insists that it is *we* who must face the strain of civilization, who must pay the price for the open society, and resist the charms of the closed society, he means that enmity lurks within each and every one of us, even within those who consider themselves friends of the open society. Obviously, this is a psychological form of enmity: Popper admonishes us that we should direct our critical gaze first and foremost towards our own emotions, feelings, and sentiments. We should question ourselves and ask if we resist the "strain of civilization," this temptation that constantly pulls us toward the deceptive comfort of the closed society. Thus when Popper talks about "personal decisions" as one hallmark of the open society, he means the decision that has to be made

again and again to support the open and resist the closed society—not just at the ballot box but on an everyday basis.

Now, Popper's expression of the open society as an "abstract" society might give the impression that we are alone and isolated in facing this internal enmity created by the strain of civilization. However, it is precisely the interaction with others that can help us in this situation. Recall that "I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth" is Popper's guideline for the open society. There is, then, an intersubjective element built into Popper's conceptions of the open society and enmity. This intersubjectivity does not do away with individualism and individual responsibility; rather, it is the critical conversation, struggle, and even conflict with others that is a crucial element that helps us to develop a more critical and holistic picture of the world, and, ultimately, to exercise political judgment. Plurality, critique, and conflict are, once again, the antidotes to the closed society.

I call the second element of enmity "external" because it refers not so much to the psychological aspect of the strain of civilization but to the societal temptation to reject the open society. In the passage cited above, Popper draws an important—but by no means straightforward—distinction between "critics" and "enemies." One possible interpretation of this is that Popper has a rather narrow idea of what is acceptable and unacceptable. Yes, you can be a critic of democracy (or open society for that matter) but only within narrowly defined limits. It seems clear, though, that such an interpretation would contradict Popper's fiercely critical spirit and his belief in the value of plurality. For if it is true that moral, social, and political progress is linked to the pluralistic criticism of diverse voices and opinions, then the category of "critic" must be as extensive, and the category of "enemy" as limited, as possible. This Popperian idea has parallels with Chantal Mouffe's distinction between the "adversary" who should be part of the agonistic debate, and the "enemy" who must be excluded from the radically democratic space.³⁹ Admittedly, Popper's distinction (just like Mouffe's) does not give us a clear line to draw between the critic and the enemy, but it gives us at least a broader orientation with which to approach moral, social, and political conflicts in open societies. I want to call this orientation the "presumption of inclusion." This presumption embraces genuine plurality as a moral-political value, as something that might bring us "nearer to the truth," as something that initiates individual and societal progress.

To be clear, the presumption of inclusion does not mean that "true enemies" cannot emerge within the space of the open society, opinions and voices that need to be excluded from this radically democratic space. There are certainly "enemies" whose views and opinions are beyond the pale, enemies who do not seek to contribute to an open society, but to tear it apart. The presumption of inclusion means, rather, that we should step back from our immediate emotions of what we find repellent, of what we might reject in a knee-jerk reaction. It means that the impulse with which we should approach the plurality of opinions that characterize many of today's complex conflicts should be one of inclusion rather than exclusion. This, it must be emphasized, is a truly radical position because it understands and accepts that plurality and diversity are not "fair weather concepts"—they do not come easy and do not come cheap. It is, indeed, another layer of the strain of civilization that in an open society we are constantly confronted with voices, opinions, and people we might find repellent, disgusting, or reproachable. The presumption of inclusion does not mean that one must "like" these

opinions and voices; and it does not mean that one should not struggle against what one rejects. It means, however, to give an overwhelming majority of voices and opinions a legitimate place within the space of democratic contestation that we might legitimately call an open society.⁴⁰

Popper's third dimension of enmity is what I call "international enmity." With the international dimension of enmity, we are on extremely shaky ground. The question here is: What should be done about societies that are not open, that have a one-party system, that have no functioning rule of law or separation of powers, that do not respect human rights or even perpetrate atrocities? Popper's views on this are problematic to say the least. To start with, recall the cosmopolitan current in his thought, expressed most clearly in his repeated reference to the "brotherhood of Man." He also, however, touches more explicitly on international issues and insists that, contrary to what many theorists of International Relations think, "it is possible to bring international affairs under the control of human reason" (460). Yet where Popper's account of international enmity runs into serious trouble is with his claim that there should be an analogy "between ordinary crime and international crime as fundamental for any attempt to get international crime under control" (576 note 44). Moreover, "we must end international anarchy, and be ready to go to war against any international crime" (606 note 7). These arguments are deeply flawed. There are several mechanisms in International Relations and Law (Art 2(4) and Art 51 of the UN Charter, Just War Theory, Humanitarian Intervention) that stipulate guidelines for the use of force in international affairs. What they all have in common is that they emphasize the exceptional character of force. Popper, however, deviates from the idea of war as the *ultima ratio* by explicitly equating domestic and international crime. While he does not go into the "details" of his domestic analogy, its unacceptable implications should be clear enough. Theft, for instance, qualifies as an "ordinary crime"—so does Popper's logic imply that theft should have the same status as the international crime of genocide? This, surely, would be an absurd conclusion. Let us, however, give Popper the benefit of the doubt and assume that he meant only the most serious domestic crimes—murder, torture, rape. Now, imagine a world in which each and every one of these crimes would trigger an international intervention. This, surely, would be a world of perpetual war. Thus the domestic analogy is not only counterproductive but even dangerous.

In sum, Popper's account of international enmity is, in my view, irredeemable and I have no intention of "saving" it in any way. On the other hand, Popper's other two notions of enmity—what I have dubbed internal and external enmity—are extremely insightful and original. Ultimately, they also demonstrate how closely intertwined the concepts of open society and enmity are. Michael Ignatieff writes in this context that "the open society ideal cannot exist without its enemies. An open society depends for its very definition on the presence of a persuasive counterexample."⁴¹ Fair enough. But the notion of internal enmity demonstrates that the enemy is not just "the other"—enmity is to be found even within advocates of the open society. And the notion of external enmity shows that in an open society, enmity remains an ever-present possibility—only a totalitarian system will manage to completely eradicate enmity. This, of course, is tragedy all over again. For what could be more tragic than the fact that an open society—by virtue of being open—constantly (re)produces possibilities for the rise of enmity?

Conclusion

As noted, my reinterpretation of Popper is original but hardly uncontroversial. In fact, several objections might be put forward against it, and I want to discuss four of them here. The most general is Mark Lilla's claim that the very term "open society" is an "oxymoron." Societies, Lilla asserts, are by their very nature "closed"; unless one believes in the existence of a borderless world society, open society is a contradiction in terms.⁴² But what is intended as a radical critique is, in truth, based on a conflation of open society with "open borders." To be sure, the cosmopolitanism of the open society calls for a welcoming attitude toward immigrants. And the overly restrictive measures and tactics to curb immigration employed by many states around the world today are certainly against the spirit of the open society. But an open society is not one with open, let alone without, borders. Thus Lilla's assertion that in the absence of open borders the open society is an oxymoron, is based on a serious misreading of *The Open Society*.

Let us turn to more interesting objections. One potential strategy is to invoke Popper himself against my reading of *The Open Society*. Popper, after all, limited democracy explicitly to the change of power without bloodshed (118).⁴³ My agonistic reading, therefore, might push things too far. However, the former understanding of democracy does not exclude the agonistic position I have uncovered. The peaceful transition of power might well be seen as the absolute minimum condition for both democracy and the open society—but it is not a sufficient one. Otherwise, we would have to face the absurd consequence that regardless of the nature of the political system, a society would still be considered open if only the regime can be peacefully removed at the next election. Perhaps, though, this points to the necessity of distinguishing between the open society and democracy. The overwhelming majority of scholars, to be sure, do not draw this distinction. But Mark Notturmo suggests that democracy and open society must be decoupled as the "tyranny of the majority" poses a threat to the open society.⁴⁴ Notturmo, however, leaves open the question of what kind of political system he regards as more compatible with open society—if not democracy, what then? Even more importantly, Notturmo's position, in many respects, chimes with the agonistic concern for human plurality and the worry that minorities might be oppressed by a majoritarian system. By criticizing *liberal democracy*, Notturmo inadvertently gravitates close to the agonistic conception of open society I have developed. Finally, it might be argued that Popper's vision of politics comes closer to *deliberative* than to *agonistic* democracy.⁴⁵ The reason for this is that Popper arguably puts more emphasis on consent and agreement than agonists. Yet agonists are not opposed to agreement per se, but only to the idea of *permanent* agreement, which, they argue, can only be achieved through domination and oppression.⁴⁶ In light of my reinterpretation of the concept of the open society, I do not see why Popper would have disagreed with this agonistic position. Thus, John Thrasher, in his important article on open society and disagreement, gets it right when he argues that "the open society ... is a society that is not only open to new ideas but also to disagreement."⁴⁷

To repeat: I do not claim that *The Open Society* is a *neglected* book; but I do assert that it is an *underexplored* work. Popper himself, by spending most of his time attacking Plato, Marx, and Hegel, left the concepts of open society and enmity curiously underdeveloped. And the secondary literature has hardly gone beyond the standard account of *The Open*

Society as a passionate defense of liberal democracy against totalitarianism. While the standard account is neither wrong nor outdated, I have tried to go beyond it in this article. I have sought to dig deeper into the key concepts of open society and enmity. Popper's conception of the open society, based as it is on a commitment to genuine human plurality and diversity, an endorsement of (some) social and political conflicts, and an acute awareness of the tragic dimensions of political life, harbors central elements of agonistic democracy. Buried in his key idea of the strain of civilization, I have also found a bleaker notion of tragedy, which gives it the edge over the rather shallow notion of tragedy we find in the agonistic tradition. Finally, I have illustrated how Popper's tripartite notion of enmity complements his agonism.

This reinterpretation matters for several reasons: First, and most obviously, it demonstrates that there is more to Popper's social and political theory than is usually assumed. Second, and more importantly, my reinterpretation brings to light the book's contemporary relevance. Popper's work opens up original—and, no doubt, controversial—avenues for thinking about democratic and open societies. Rather than merely and uncritically claiming that human plurality and diversity are precious values, Popper gives a straightforward answer as to *why* they should be regarded as such: because they are drivers of moral, social, and political progress and emancipation. On the other hand, Popper is controversial because he unscrupulously dispels one of our most cherished illusions: that we can have an open society without paying a price for it. If you want to have your cake and eat it, Popper says, you might well end up with stomach ache.

So what does it mean to be an advocate of open society, that is, to value plurality without illusions? It means to believe that a better world is possible; but it also means to accept that in the process of creating a better world, important values must be sacrificed. It means to hold on to the idea that a society characterized by plurality and diversity is well worth pursuing; simultaneously, it means to acknowledge that it is difficult to live in a society in which you are constantly exposed to criticism. It means to give up on the idea of the "perfect society" and to embrace the "strain of civilization." To be an advocate of open society means, above all, to be at once an optimist and a pessimist: an optimist because you retain an optimistic faith in human progress; a pessimist because you see the deep tragedy lying at the heart of the open society and, indeed, of the human condition. This is why it is more difficult to be an advocate of the open society than many seem to think. But in its exhausting, frustrating, and irreducible ambiguity lies the contemporary relevance—and, I believe, the continuing appeal—of the open society.

Notes

1. Emberley, and Cooper, *Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin*, 69. Throughout his career, Voegelin's conception of the open society was inspired by Henri Bergson who introduced the concept to philosophy in his *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* in 1932. Voegelin writes that "the history of mankind . . . is an open society—Bergson's, not Popper's—comprehending both truth and untruth in tension" (quoted in Embry and Hughes, *The Eric Voegelin Reader*, 169).
2. Emberley, and Cooper, *Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin*, 66–67.
3. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Hereafter all page references are to the 2020 edition. Before one feels too sorry for him, note that Popper was no slouch at scolding colleagues either. In one letter to Raymond Aron he writes: "When I read either Adorno or Habermas, I feel

as if lunatics were speaking. I have translated some of their German sentences into simple German. It turns out to be either trivial or tautological or sheer pretentious nonsense. I completely fail to see why Habermas is reputed to have ‘talent’” (quoted in <https://www.stephenhicks.org/2021/09/30/popper-to-aron-letter-on-adorno-and-habermas/>).

4. For a comparison of Rawls and Popper, see Boyer, “Is an Open Society a Just Society?” The parallels between Shklar and Popper are striking, yet Shklar only wrote a (highly critical) essay on Bergson (reprinted in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*) and never engaged with Popper. There are no references in Arendt’s work to Popper (and vice versa), and there is no relevant secondary literature comparing the two thinkers.
5. See, for example, Pickel, “Never Ask Who Should Rule,” or Eidlin, “Popper and Democratic Theory.”
6. In *The Guardian* Robert McCrum, for instance, ranks *The Open Society* as the 35th best nonfiction book of all time.
7. Rod Thomas writes that one of his articles was rejected as one reviewer asserted that Popper’s ideas about democracy and the open society are “now largely ignored by political philosophers, social theorists, and historians,” which renders his analysis redundant. This assertion is simply false. While it is beyond the scope of this article to engage in detail with the voluminous secondary literature on Popper’s political philosophy, some interesting works are Fuller, *The Governance of Science*; Shearmur, *The Political Thought of Karl Popper*; Jarvie and Pralong, *Popper’s Open Society After 50 Years*; Notturmo, *Hayek and Popper*; Stokes and Sheamur, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Popper*; Sassower and Laor, eds., *The Impact of Critical Rationalism*. Hélène Landemore’s recent *Open Democracy* is more subtly influenced by Popperian ideas.
8. Emberly and Cooper, *Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin*, 69.
9. Eidlin, “Popper and Democratic Theory,” 74.
10. I limit my observations (almost) exclusively to *The Open Society* as it represents Popper’s most sustained engagement with social and political theory—and I hope to demonstrate that this work has plenty of underexplored potential. It is true, as Katharina Forrester argues (see “Tocqueville Anticipated Me”), that Popper gravitated to more conservative positions later in his life. But this is not the concern of the present paper.
11. This is an original interpretation that cannot be found in the secondary literature. However, apart from Mark Notturmo’s work, which I discuss in some detail, I find some affinities with Fred Eidlin’s diagnosis of a “radical, revolutionary strain” in Popper and John Thrasher’s idea of the open society as one that is open to disagreement.
12. Honig, *The Displacement of Politics*, 201.
13. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 81.
14. For such accounts, see for instance Pralong, “Minima Moralia”; Müller, “Die Offene Gesellschaft Neu Gelesen”; Ignatieff and Roch, *Rethinking Open Society*; Salamun, *Ein Jahrhundertdenker*.
15. Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, chap. 3.
16. Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*.
17. Edyvane, “Justice as Conflict,” 329.
18. Honig, *The Displacement of Politics*.
19. Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*, 33.
20. One reviewer pushed me on agonism’s “opposition to rationalism.” I am grateful for this as I believe that, on closer inspection, a further parallel between agonism and Popper arises at this point. As noted, it is true that the agonistic tradition positions itself against forms of rationalism that believe in the permanent resolution of conflicts. This position, however, does not rule out the possibility (indeed, the necessity) of a temporary resolution of certain conflicts; that is, agonists are not categorically opposed to rational consensus per se, but only to the idea of a permanent consensus that shuts down contestation and resistance. And this idea, as will become clear, chimes particularly well with Popper’s “critical rationalism,” which denies the possibility of “permanent solutions” to social, moral, and political problems, and insists that all “solutions” must remain open to contestation.

21. The literature on critical rationalism is vast. I only want to highlight two more recent and interesting sources: Afisi, *Karl Popper and Africa* applies Popper's theory in general and his critical rationalism in particular to various African contexts. And Sassower and Laor, *The Impact of Critical Rationalism* explicitly seeks to overcome the divide between analytic and continental philosophy through the idea of critical rationalism.
22. See also Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations*.
23. And the only time in which Popper gives it a *significant* meaning is in the following passage: "Our Western civilization is an essentially pluralistic one . . . monolithic social ends would mean the death of freedom; of the freedom of thought, of the free search for truth, and with it, of the rationality and *dignity* of man" (510).
24. Vincent, "Nationalism and the Open Society," 54.
25. Stelzer, "Principles and Policies," 377.
26. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 119. For an insightful recent account of Nietzsche's notions of agonism and enmity, see Kirkland, "Nietzsche, Agonistic Politics, and Spiritual Enemy."
27. For such a mistake, see Roch, "Educating Skeptical but Passionate Citizens," 48–49.
28. Tully, *Strange Multiplicity*. I am not interested here in the question if Tully really "is" an agonist or if the deliberative elements in his theory water down his agonism.
29. Tully, "The Unfreedom of Moderns," 218.
30. There is, of course, nothing wrong with "agonistic optimism" (see Honig, "The Optimistic Agonist"). But for me the concept of tragedy means, above all, two things: first, the inescapability of making tough choices (think, for instance, of Antigone's dilemma); second, the idea that even "good" things come at a price. We find these two intertwined notions of tragedy in Popper's work, which adds depth to the agonistic idea of tragedy.
31. Gellner, "Karl Popper," 78.
32. See in this context Tully's uncharacteristically harsh criticism of Berlin in "'Two Concepts of Liberty' in Context."
33. Lilla, "Über Identitätspolitik," 129, 140.
34. Notturmo, *Hayek and Popper*, 119–20.
35. Urbinati, *Me, the People*.
36. Stanley, *How Fascism Works*.
37. Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*.
38. Ignatieff and Roch, eds., *Rethinking Open Society*; Engler, *Die Offene Gesellschaft und Ihre Grenzen*.
39. Mouffe, *On the Political*.
40. In some respects, my account of the "presumption of inclusion" chimes with the central argument of Robert Talisse's recent *Sustaining Democracy*. Talisse does not use the concept of open society or draw on Popper. I received his book only after I had finished this article, yet there are some striking similarities between Talisse's ideas of how to "sustain democracy" by treating "the other side" as equals and my agonistic interpretation of *The Open Society*.
41. Ignatieff, "Introduction" to *Rethinking Open Society*, 1–2.
42. Lilla, "Open Society as an Oxymoron," 18.
43. See also Popper, "Utopia and Violence."
44. Notturmo, *Hayek and Popper*.
45. See, for instance, Stokes, "Popper and Habermas," or Landemore, *Open Democracy*.
46. Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism"; Knops, "Agonism as Deliberation."
47. Thrasher, "Agreeing to Disagree," 1147.

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