Popper's Epistemology versus Popper's Politics: A Libertarian Viewpoint

J. C. Lester

What is my thesis? It is not that radical state experimentation, rather than liberal democracy, is more in accord with the spirit and logic of Popper's "revolutionary" epistemology. Mine is the opposite criticism, that full anarchistic libertarianism (individual liberty and the free market without any state interference) better fits Popper's epistemology.

I think this thesis important because I accept Popper's epistemology and methodology, and I think that these are a useful part of the defence of libertarianism: the value of complete liberty is a bold conjecture that withstands criticism rather than a theory to be supported by any specific argument or set of arguments. And, in its turn, libertarianism is a useful part of the defence of Popper's epistemology and methodology: it illustrates their beneficial social applications. In one sense, Popper's picture of the best way to pursue truth is only a part of the more general picture of libertarianism. Popper advocates what can be called "intellectual libertarianism." I am here suggesting that his libertarianism should be extended to the realm of individual persons and businesses.

Popper writes that he seeks to put "the finishing touches to Kant's own critical philosophy" (1978, p. 27). I seek to put the finishing touches on Popper's own social philosophy.

Let us briefly recapitulate Popper's scientific epistemology and methodology. As Hume showed, to support a universal theory with evidence is logically impossible. All corroborating evidence, even if accurate, is an infinitely small proportion of what the theory predicts. But one counter-example shows a universal theory to be false. Thus, the only rational way to pursue truth is to conjecture without evidence and then deliberately to seek refutation. The bolder the conjecture (compatible with background knowledge), the greater the chance of capturing more truth. The scientific community is more or less a libertarian anarchy: anyone can form a theory and test it, and the evidence can be accepted or ignored by other individual scientists (though the individual scientist seeks intersubjective agreement).

There are similarities with the anarchistic working of the free market and individual liberty. Anyone can originate a product or practice. People must individually choose to buy such products or try such practices. New goods and services offered by the individual
enterprises are analogous to the bold new theories of the individual scientist. Analogous to having scientific theories aimed at truth, consumer goods are aimed at satisfying demand. Social practices are aimed at satisfaction. They increase immediate utility or at least are useful experimentation.\footnote{By contrast, liberal democracies coercively ban and enforce various products and practices in a way that tends not to happen in science—unless the state intervenes in science policy. Such things as state subsidies to failing businesses and imposing import restrictions to protect so-called "domestic production" are analogous to ad hoc defenses of a theory (here in the form of a product) instead of accepting the "falsification" that is the absence of consumer demand. Regulating social practices decreases immediate utility and experimentation.}

If the scientific community were run democratically (say, in a majority-rules mode), it would be as great a disaster for the discovery of truth as democracy is a disaster for the promotion of liberty and welfare. Polanyi (1951) shows the deleterious effects on science of greater state-regulation. Full blown democracy could only be more severe.

Popper sees that the people "never rule themselves in any concrete, practical sense" (1977, vol. 1, p. 125). Popper's understanding of "democracy" is not rule by the people but rather a way of limiting bad rule, ultimately in order to preserve maximum equal "freedom"—or so he asserts. But from a libertarian viewpoint, democratic liberalism is a practical contradiction (at least, to the extent that "liberal" means having respect for individuals' voluntaristic liberty): the more liberty individuals have, the less they can be ruled by "the people" (or anyone else). A liberal democracy is a sort of substitute for all-out civil war. The winning side imposes its rules on the others by force and the threat of force. The taxation and regulation of people who are not imposing on anyone are themselves forms of aggressive imposition rather than peaceful persuasion. Popper insists that "any kind of freedom is clearly impossible unless it is guaranteed by the state" (1977, vol. 1, p. 111). But the possibility of competing private police and courts protecting private property is not considered.

Popper writes that the question "Who should rule?"... begins for an authoritarian answer" (1978, p. 25). Libertarians disagree. "Each should rule him/herself: a sovereign individual" is a coherent non-authoritarian answer. Popper prefers to ask, "How can we organize our political institutions so that bad or incompetent rulers... cannot do too much damage?" (1978, p. 25). But this clearly does presuppose the necessity for political authority over subjects. The possibility of individual sovereignty (rather than the "institutional control of the rulers") is also "thereby eliminated without ever having been raised" (1977, vol. 1, p. 126). And with libertarianism, analogously with Popper's defense of good democratic institutions, the institution of individual sovereignty would ipso facto be maximally spread for safety.

I am interested only in what I call "actually existing democracy" rather than some Utopian ideal (just as people used to refer to "actually existing socialism"—meaning regimes calling themselves "socialist"—rather than some Utopian ideal of socialism). I mention this because Popper often explicitly sees some unfortunate state of affairs but he fails to see that it is practically intrinsic to liberal democracy. In fact he goes so far as to assert that it is "quite wrong to blame democracy for the political shortcomings of a democratic state. We should rather blame ourselves, that is to say, the citizens of a democratic state" (1977, vol. 1, p. 127).
A Libertarian View of Karl Popper

Whence Popper's Political Views?

Why does Popper not see that libertarianism is the better social application of his epistemology and methodology? I suggest three possible contributory factors:

1. Popper came to his political position from a socialist one and retained some sympathy for socialism.

2. He made no serious study of economics, he simply swallowed many popular anti-market prejudices.

3. Popper thinks "absolute freedom is impossible" (1978, p. 345). Instead, following Kant, the "liberal principle demands that the limitations to the freedom of each... should be minimized and equalized as much as possible..." (1978, p. 351)
Let us focus on #3. Popper's anti-essentialism is what probably has caused him to avoid any explicit formulation of a theory of liberty that can be applied. But if we say, as I do, that a "free person" is "someone who is not being imposed on by others" (withstanding a benefit, defending oneself, and enforcing a contract; or restitution cannot really be imposing), then we can have a group of people completely free with respect to each other. And by such a conception of freedom, it follows that state interference with non-invasive activities will be an assault on freedom.

When Popper was writing The Open Society and its Enemies, he was contrasting the workings of democracies with totalitarian regimes of the kind with which the allies were at war. He considered the book to be his war effort. By such a contrast, democracies are certainly more conducive to individual freedom and welfare, and I do not intend to contradict the general thesis for which Popper was arguing. I am happy to agree with Winston Churchill that democracy is the worst form of government—apart from any other. I should merely wish to add that market-anarchy—no government (i.e., commerce and charity completely replacing the state)—is not as bad as democracy. Hegel's "principle of subjective freedom," that free speech is a way of giving the illusion of freedom, seems quite realistic from a libertarian position. Popper's view that this is cynicism and that ordinary people are substantially free because they can speak their minds is quite inadequate (1977, vol. 2, p. 310, n. 43). The illusion that this is "a free country" is sustained by this democratic myth, which Popper perpetuates—instead of taking liberty seriously.

At the end of the addenda to The Open Society and Its Enemies, Popper states that fallibilism "can show us that the role of thought is to carry out revolutions by means of critical debates rather than by means of violence and warfare. . . . That is why our Western civilization is an essentially pluralistic one. . . ." (1977, vol. 2, p. 396).

But what, then, is politics finally backed up by if not aggressive violence? And what could be more pluralistic than respecting individual sovereignty instead, which democracy does not do?

Notes

1. For more on critical-rationalist libertarianism as opposed to justificationist approaches whether using rights, utilitarianism, contractarianism, or whatever see the introductory chapter of my forthcoming Liberty, Welfare, and Market-Anarchy: a Philosophico-Economic Reconciliation.

2. This last point about bold conjecture is the one that has been mistaken as a sanction for evolutionary state experimentation. But, as dry logic and bloody history shows, such state experimentation really replaces millions of individual experiments with one Procrustean one.

3. I am sure we might be able to come up with some prima facie and real dis-analogies as well. But I will not attempt to list and reply to these here.

4. To name but three who have made out cases that private provision of law and order is not only possible but far superior: Mollanari (1977 [1849]); Rothbard (1978); Friedman (1989).

5. He also argues explicitly against the free market and in favor of what he calls "protectionism," by the state, to defend freedom and welfare (e.g., 1977, vol. 1, pp. 110-111). But here we can only refer the reader to the relevant social scientific literature for the evidence against such "protectionism" working.

6. On this point, see Robinson, 1993, pp. 11 ff. This work is a case study on state energy policy that touches on many of the points in this section. The conclusion is a succinct introduction to the economics of government failure.

7. So-called "piecemeal engineering" (Popper's expression and suggestion) by the state is simply authoritarian rather than totalitarian. "Social planning" that is imposed by force has the objectionable character of a revolution even if it is not small. Only genuinely peaceful persuasion along libertarian lines completely avoids the problems of state planning.

8. For instance, rent control and minimum wage legislation are "pragmatic" policies that are economically indefensible. Again, Popper often sees such things but fails to see that this is a practical inevitability in a vote-buying liberal democracy.

9. Though Hayek must have had some influence on him: Conjectures and Refutations, for instance, is dedicated to Hayek.

10. For a comprehensive account of liberty as "the absence of imposed cost," see Chapter 4 of my Liberty, Welfare, and Market-Anarchy (forthcoming).

11. Can the market itself be seen as a sophisticated and fair form of democracy (with money as a store of voting power, which is voted to one by others)? That cannot literally be true as there is no rule in the market, only voluntary cooperation. The consumer is "sovereign" over only him/herself and his/her purchases.

References


About the Author

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