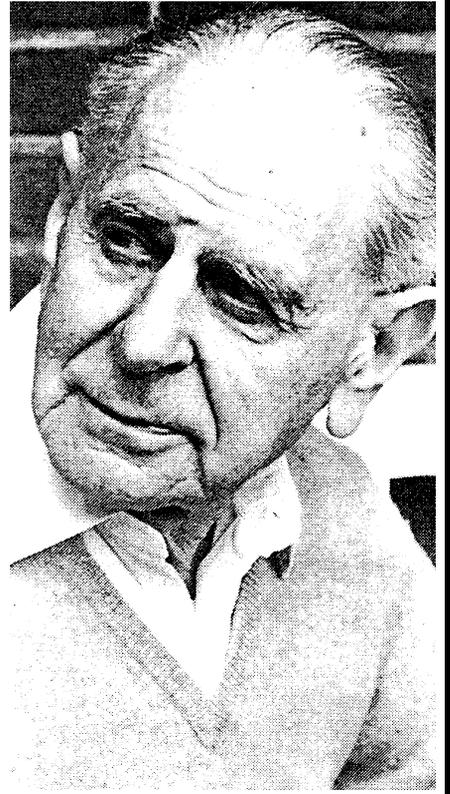


POPPER'S EPISTEMOLOGY VERSUS POPPER'S POLITICS: A LIBERTARIAN VIEWPOINT

JAN CLIFFORD 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.¹ 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 to Popper's own social philosophy.

Let us briefly recapitulate Popper's scientific epistemology and methodology. As Hume showed, it is logically impossible to support a universal theory with evidence. 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.² 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 have individually to choose to buy such products or try such practices. New goods and services offered by the individual enterpriser are analogous with the bold new theories of the individual scientist. Analogous with

Philosophical Notes No. 34

ISSN 0267-7091 ISBN 1 85637 307 X

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1995: Libertarian Alliance; Jan Clifford Lester.

This article was first published the
Journal of Social and Evolutionary Systems, 18(1), 1995,
and is reprinted with permission.

Dr Jan Clifford Lester is a Visiting Academic in the
School of Philosophy at Middlesex University.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author,
and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its
Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame
Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

**Libertarian
Alliance**

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

having scientific theories aimed at truth, consumer goods are aimed to satisfy demand. Social practices are aimed at satisfaction. They increase immediate utility or at least are useful experimentation.³

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. Such things as state subsidies to failing businesses and imposing import restrictions to protect so-called ‘domestic’ production, are analogous with *ad hoc* defences 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, 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.⁴

Popper writes that the question “‘Who should rule?’ ... begs for an authoritarian answer” (1978, p. 25). Libertarians disagree. ‘Each should rule himself: a sovereign individual’ is a coherent non-authoritarian answer. Popper prefers to ask, “How can we organise 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 defence 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).

If you cannot see the prejudice here, then try inserting ‘Marxism’ (or whatever you dislike) for ‘democracy’ (e.g. ‘It is quite wrong to blame Marxism for the political shortcomings of a Marxist state ...’). For Popper, then, democracy itself is apparently put beyond rational criticism.

I expand on and make slightly more precise these supposed similarities and dissimilarities between Popper’s epistemology, the libertarian view, and Popper’s political philosophy in the following, somewhat schematic, list (I do not doubt that this list could profitably be extended, clarified and elaborated). Points are grouped together with the same numbers for each (dis)similarity, for ease of comparison and criticism.

(PE) Popper’s Epistemology and Methodology: Critical Rationalism

(LL) Liberty & Laissez-Faire: Individual Sovereignty & the Free Market

(PP) Popper’s Politics: Democratic Liberalism

PE 1. No one has the authority to establish whether a theory is true or to impose theories on others.

LL 1. No one has the authority to establish whether a product or practice is desirable or to impose products or practices on others.

PP 1. The state has the authority to establish and impose what it sees as desirable products and practices.

* * *

PE 2. We can be optimistic about attaining truth via free competition among theories.

LL 2. We can be optimistic about achieving liberty and welfare via free competition among products and practices.

PP 2. To the extent that one advocates political intervention one is thereby pessimistic about achieving liberty and welfare via free competition among products and practices.

* * *

- PE 3. There must be individual perception of a problem by the particular scientist.
- LL 3. Persons and businesses, genuine *economies*, perceive their own problems clearest.
- PP 3. There is collective governmental perception of collective problems for the country/nation/society/public/economy (though these are usually euphemisms for what are really vested interests).
* * *
- PE 4. To solve a problem, one needs to specialise in a problem and not a subject with its conventional boundaries.
- LL 4. Persons and businesses specialise in their own problems.
- PP 4. Politicians are generalists without specialist skills — except in oratory and sophistry.
* * *
- PE 5. Scientists seek interesting and substantial new truths.
- LL 5. Persons and businesses seek valuable and substantial new products and practices.
- PP 5. Politicians usually seek only marginal vote gains.
* * *
- PE 6. Scientists start with as bold a conjecture (tentative theory) as they can think of.
- LL 6. There are degrees of boldness with personal and business conjectures.
- PP 6. Politicians usually try cautious, politically expedient, small policy variations.
* * *
- PE 7. Paternalism or vested interest is not to impose or restrict scientific conjecture and experimentation.
- LL 7. Paternalism or vested interest cannot impose or restrict individual and business conjecture and experimentation.
- PP 7. Paternalism and vested interest often do impose or restrict individual and business conjecture and experimentation.
* * *
- PE 8. Error elimination is required: so seek falsification, not *ad hoc* defences.
- LL 8. Error elimination is automatic: ‘falsification’ is obvious in lower profits or less satisfaction; coerced subsidies are not possible.
- PP 8. Error is unclear to politicians, except in terms of lost votes. So they deny error, subsidise mistakes, and buy votes.
* * *
- PE 9. After error elimination there is a new scientific problem situation.
- LL 9. After error elimination there is a new business or personal problem situation.
- PP 9. No clear new problem situation emerges, except that they have to buy back lost votes somehow or other.
* * *
- PE 10. This requires a new scientific theory.
- LL 10. This requires new products and practices.
- PP 10. Politicians usually seek a short-term botch without a clear theory, hence testing is difficult.⁶
* * *
- PE 11. The social picture generally is of peaceful, polycentric competition among scientists over theories.
- LL 11. The social picture generally is of peaceful, polycentric competition among businesses and individuals over products and practices.
- PP 11. The social picture generally is of Procrustean rules imposed on all subjects, and mutual predation among interest groups.
* * *
- PE 12. This is against holistic (society-wide) experiments because they are impossible to understand and test with so many variables.
- LL 12. This ensures individualism in understanding and testing in personal or business problems.
- PP 12. Politics is essentially holistic about understanding and testing problems of ‘society’ and ‘the economy’.⁷
* * *
- PE 13. This is against the historicist theory that social sciences prophesy long-term about changing eras and that technology of social science is impossible.
- LL 13. This views the market catallaxy and unique individuals as unpredictable in the long-term, but embraces social science technology (especially micro-economics).
- PP 13. Politicians often rely on historicist theories (to defend both change and tradition) and belittle social scientific technology.⁸

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 minimised and equalised as much as possible ...” (1978, p. 351).

Let us focus on number 3. It is probably Popper’s anti-essentialism that 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’ (withholding 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 (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 the ordinary man is substantially free because he can speak his mind about politics 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 civilisation is an essentially pluralistic one ...” (1977, vol. 2, p. 396).

But what 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 to 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 revolutionary 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: Molinari (1977 [1849]); Rothbard (1978); Friedman (1989).
5. He also argues explicitly against the free market and in favour 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 writ 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 or herself and his or her purchases.

REFERENCES

- Friedman, David (1989), *The Machinery of Freedom: Guide to Radical Capitalism*, Second edition, Open Court, La Salle, Illinois.
- Lester, J. C. (forthcoming), *Liberty, Welfare, and Market-Anarchy: A Philosophico-Economic Reconciliation*, Open Court, La Salle, Illinois.
- Molinari, Gustave de (1977 [1849]), *The Production of Security*, Centre for Libertarian Studies, New York.
- Polanyi, Michael (1951), *The Logic of Liberty: Reflections and Rejoinders*, Routledge, London.
- Popper, Karl (1977 [1945]), *The Open Society and its Enemies*, two volumes, fifth edition, Routledge, London.
- Popper, Karl (1978 [1963]), *Conjectures and Refutations*, fourth edition (revised), Routledge, London.
- Robinson, Colin (1993), *Energy Policy: Errors, Illusions and Market Realities*, Institute of Economic Affairs, London.
- Rothbard, Murray N. (1978), *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto*, revised edition, Macmillan, New York.