

Liberalism

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‘The Problem with “Problems”:
Popper, Negative Utility and the Open Society’

Abstract

Popper’s political philosophy can be summarised as an attempt to integrate a scientific approach to politics with a Kantian-inspired defence of the individual against the encroachments of the state. The claim of this paper is, firstly, that Popper fails to establish that the approach he recommends is a suitable one for the resolution of political issues, and secondly, that, far from complementing his concern for the individual, Popper’s approach, if implemented, is likely to lead to injustice and a diminution of individual autonomy. In short, Popper’s desire to put politics on a rational footing is likely to harm rather than safeguard liberty.

Towards a Rational Society? Popper’s Negative Utilitarianism¹

Popper, it is clear, does not like radical blueprints for social change which involve far-reaching or ‘utopian’ social engineering. Utopias are by definition unattainable and thus the attempt to perfect society is doomed to failure. Although Popper’s critique is based primarily on *a priori* grounds in the sense that he feels it is a logical impossibility to plan holistically, it is clear that an important part of his objection to utopianism is the assumption clearly contained in the work of utopian thinkers that there is, ultimately, one model of human happiness and thus one model of the ideal society. Popper in his ‘Kantian’ mode is clearly hostile to this idea of uniformity, to the notion that we are all in this important sense the same. He wants to say that happiness is a subjective state of affairs; and hence that what makes one person happy might produce indifference or even unhappiness in another. It is for this reason that it is enormously difficult to, as it were, manufacture happiness, contentment, or fulfilment for all and it is the difficulty of doing so which makes such an ambition so fraught with danger. As Popper argues, ‘of all the political ideals, that of making people happy is perhaps the most dangerous one ... the attempt to produce heaven on earth invariably produces hell. It leads to intolerance’.² The state is a powerful weapon; but like all weapons it can be used for good or ill. If allowed to fall into the hands of those like Plato or Marx, those in other words with ‘romantic’ blueprints for collective happiness, it will surely be used as a weapon of despotism. As Popper reminds us, it is not so much the nature

¹The clearest formulation of Popper’s negative utilitarianism is in chapter 9 of K.R.Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 2 volumes, fifth edition (revised), Routledge, 1984, hereafter *OSE I/II*rm.

²*OSE II*, pp.237.

of the institutions of state which counts so much as who is 'manning' them, who is in charge of them. Leaving them manned by those thinking only of our happiness will lead to the creation of a society of happy slaves, not free men and women.

Politics must not therefore be about ultimate states of affairs, then, but about what needs to be done in the here and now. It must be concerned with the tangible problems and difficulties which we see around us. As Popper puts it, [p]ain, suffering, injustice and their prevention, these are the eternal problems of public morals, the 'agenda' of public 'policy'.³ Problems, no matter how knotty, emit of solutions. Problems are the very stuff of human life, for we are in a sense problem-solving creatures, not only in our own lives, but in all worthwhile fields of human endeavour including politics. What is crucial is that a scientifically rigorous method be applied to the resolution of problems. Popper's complaint about political practice is that it lacks rigour or scientificity. Politics in societies such as our own is an arena of rhetoric, of ideology, of 'passion' and 'violence'.⁴ Politics is like science before the Enlightenment: full of mystification, half-baked ideas, superstition and demagoguery. Politics lacks a standard against which to measure irrational from rational beliefs, good practices from bad, hocus-pocus from detached neutrality. Politics must therefore be placed on a new footing if it is to serve the true interests of society. It must be guided by maxims of reason rather than prejudice, and above all it must adopt a method which guarantees results and which gives a focus to the efforts of policy-makers. Politics must be divorced from ideology.

In place of the haphazard practices of current democratic practice Popper proposes introducing the inductive methods of the sciences into political practice. Politicians, or rather 'piecemeal engineers' as Popper would like to call them, should as in 'true' science start not with theories purporting to explain everything, but with particular problems, in this case 'evils' thrown up by society. Once a clear view of the problem is obtained, different solutions based on different hypotheses about the cause of the difficulty should be, like scientific hypotheses, submitted and tested in the open. In other words, it should never be assumed that a hypothesis does not need testing before it is put into action, because given the fallibility of knowledge how will we know in advance of trying it out that it will work? At the same time these experiments should be 'piecemeal' rather than holistic and carried out on a small scale first of all so as to limit any 'damage' caused by failed 'experiments'.⁵ It is this unwillingness to take anything on face value which is of course the essence of the open society. Once it is clear which of the competing hypotheses seems to offer the best results it should be put into practice until further problems throw its findings into doubt. Thus we must, as in science, never assume that our results are final, that they represent the Truth. We should never become so attached to our findings that we are unable to cast them aside when better hypotheses and theories present themselves. This is the essential modesty of 'piecemeal social engineering' and the reason why it is less 'risky' and less 'controversial' than more ambitious forms of political practice.⁶ It is an approach which by contrast to the engineering of the utopian variety is cautious, rigorous, and neutral. It

³ OSE II, p.237. See also K.Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, fifth edition, Routledge, 1991, pp.345-6.

⁴ OSE I, p.159.

⁵ OSE II, pp.222-3.

⁶ OSE I, p.159.

is government by 'repeated experiments and continuous readjustments'.⁷

Problems, Problems ...

According to Popper what makes his account of politics as science rational is that it is in this fashion concerned exclusively with problems, with human suffering and evil. There is in his view something undeniable about the existence of problems. Problems are tangible; they are 'out there', and everybody can see them. Being happy, on the other hand, is something personal to me rather than being a property of the world or society. Experience has taught us that happiness is not produced by any one thing and thus there is no prospect for unlocking the key to happiness. Happiness is as often as not a fleeting or transitory moment and hence is intangible. Social problems on the other hand are not like this. Turning our backs on them will not get rid of problems but simply delay the day when a decision as to what to do with them needs to be made. For this reason it is in Popper's view much easier to mobilise support for the alleviation of suffering, of what is manifestly wrong, than it is to mobilise people in support of the 'good'.⁸ People are, he thinks, more willing to come to the aid of someone in pain than they are to attempt to make him or her 'happy'.⁹

It seems clear from what Popper is saying that he is operating with a mechanistic account of the structure of society. Popper feels comfortable not only with deploying a vocabulary ('engineering', 'scientific politics', etc) which has, as he almost gleefully admits, 'objectionable associations', but with making direct analogies between the work of the piecemeal engineer and that of the mechanical engineer.¹⁰ As we noted earlier, it is precisely his mechanistic view of society which reduces institutions and structures to mere instruments for the realisation of ends which has made conservative commentators hostile to Popper. Society, Popper seems to be claiming, is like a piece of machinery in the sense that at least some of the problems which develop with it are similar in their effect to problems which can develop in machines. It is in this sense that Popper urges us to develop a 'social technology' to mirror scientific technology. He wants his piecemeal engineers to approach their task in much the same fashion that a mechanical engineer keeps an engine in good condition, 'ticking over' as it were.¹¹ Yet from our point of view there are serious objections to this analogy, ones which, if allowed to stand, would seriously question Popper's attachment to an ethic of individual choice and responsibility.

The main difficulty with the mechanistic conception of society is that we lack an immediately obvious model of how society should perform. When a machine develops a problem it affects its performance. We can tell that, for example, a

⁷ OSE I, p.163.

⁸ OSE I, p.158.

⁹ Presumably what Popper is getting at is that people feel a greater sense of obligation or duty to those in need than to those who are not immediately troubled by anything other than unhappiness. Space precludes an examination of this issue, but I think Popper would need to tell us more about who is to benefit from our actions than he does. I don't think it is too far fetched to imagine a person saying that he or she would rather attempt to make members of his or her own family happy than to come to the aid of a person unknown to him or her.

¹⁰ See, for example, OSE I, pp.163ff; K.Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, Routledge, Ark edition, 1986, pp.64-5.

¹¹ OSE II, p.222.

car has a problem when fumes or loud grinding noises are emitted by the engine, when it refuses to respond to the brakes or accelerator or, finally, when it comes suddenly to a halt. We have a model, in other words, of what a 'healthy' car is like and we know when the car is malfunctioning by reference to it. If something goes wrong with the car we have a model to which we can refer in order to verify that what we are doing is in fact 'rational' in these terms. But what is the equivalent model of the 'healthy' or 'rational' society which we could use to locate the source of the problems and difficulties society throws up? Some of Popper's remarks might well lead us to the conclusion that he does possess such a model. He notes, for example, how important full employment is to a healthy society and it is clear that he feels it symptomatic of such a society that there be evidence of a greater equalization of incomes. It would also be entirely characteristic of Popper to add to that list the alleviation of obvious suffering of the sort associated with homelessness, ill-health and poverty (hence Magee's understandable insistence on claiming Popper for the social democratic tradition). We might expect that such a society would be one where there was little protest or discontent. Assuming for the moment that Popper is arguing that we have a model of a rational society available to us what we then have every right to ask is how in essence his approach differs from that of thinkers such as Marx and Plato who are castigated by Popper for putting forward just such 'finished' models of the good, happy or just society. We could also ask why, if we know what will produce the rational society, we must continue repairing our own flawed society in this rather pedantic 'piecemeal' fashion. Why not do all the 'repairs' at once (as of course the mechanical engineer or garage mechanic might do) and be done with the whole business of politics – at least until the next problem arises?

I think the only way Popper can get out of this conundrum whilst keeping the basic argument intact (assuming for the moment that this is his argument) is for him to claim that there is a world of difference between offering a model of a society without problems – or, let us say, fundamental problems – and offering a model in which people are supposed to be happy, fulfilled or content. The claim here is, as just mentioned, that suffering and pain are tangible, real 'things' which emit of solutions whereas the pursuit of happiness is far more elusive. But this is not a particularly convincing argument, nor one which puts as much space between Popper and his quarry as he might think. After all, is it not at least part of Marx's argument – and, in his own fashion, Plato's – that the advantage to humanity of a communist society is that it would be one in which the fundamental causes of suffering and pain have been eliminated or transcended? If Popper is willing to admit (as he seems to be) that we can identify certain conditions as causing unhappiness and suffering, for example, unemployment, poverty, etc., then it is difficult to see why we would have to reject the arguments of those such as Marx who argue that the validity of their political programme or 'blueprint' is derived from an analysis of what makes men unhappy, what creates suffering and social 'evil'. In other words, we might want to say that the moral argument for communism is at least partly based on similar premises to Popper's argument for negative utility, which is that society has a duty to relieve pain and suffering. That Marx expected the abolition of wage labour, alienation and exploitation to lead to a more contented form of life is hardly in this sense a fantastic or even an unreasonable one taken on its own terms, for what, after all, is the *point* of relieving misery, suffering if

not to make men happy or at least less unhappy than they currently are? Is not, in other words, the relief of pain and suffering merely the flip-side of the provision of happiness and contentment?

I think it unlikely that Popper really wants to say that it is possible to erect an ideal model of society against which to measure the rationality of our own arrangements and of course the efforts of piecemeal engineers to improve matters. It would, as is implied above, make a nonsense of his critique of holistic planning and indeed of his critique of radicalism more generally, for once we admit that it is possible to arrive at a model of the Good Life then the argument for incremental or piecemeal change is weakened. Although from his terminology we might expect Popper to defend a mechanistic conception of society, such an approach is inconsistent with certain other ideas he has about the character and limits of social engineering, and with the (quasi-) Kantian notions about the autonomy of the individual he holds as well. It seems more important for Popper to defend his argument about the incommensurability of concepts such as 'happiness' than to be fully consistent with the logic of his argument about the nature of social problems; and it certainly fits better with his more general scepticism about holism as an approach to reform. After all, if it *were* accepted that societies were actually like machines then this would open the door wide open to those who argue that a radically malfunctioning society with a proliferation of social problems is one that is crying out for radical reform. Popper of course wants to keep this door firmly shut.

Helping Popper escape difficulties in such fashion leads, however, to further problems in attempting to decide what constitutes a problem pressing enough to merit the attention of the state. As we saw earlier, I know when I have a problem with my car (or whatever) when it behaves in an abnormal way or, indeed, it refuses to move at all. There are, in other words, signs that tell us when a problem has appeared or is about to appear. Our view of what constitutes a problem is thus normally derived from our knowledge or memory of how a particular machine or object should operate. The car should start when I turn over the starter motor; the computer should run when I press the right button; the telephone should sound when I dial this number, and so on. Failure of the machine to operate in the way we expect

it to leads us to think that there may be a problem with it, so if a machine appears to be behaving normally then there is little *prima facie* ground for suspecting that there may be something wrong. We start then with an idea of what the machine should be like, how it should be behaving and work from that model to problems as and when they occur. The difficulty with Popper's approach is that if we deny it is possible to describe the final form of society because of the objection that we all have different ideas about what this ideal society might be like, it surely makes it equally difficult to decide what constitutes a problem. How will we know whether to consider something a (social) 'problem' if we do not have before us a model of what a society *without* problems would be like?

Popper's claim is that problems, 'suffering', 'evil' or 'pain' are tangible, real and, in a sense, obvious, and with good reason. To assert that someone lying in a cardboard box under Waterloo Bridge does not represent a 'problem' for society seems to fly in the face of common nostrums about the nature of the obligations we owe to each other. The same or similar might be said about a whole range of other pressing matters from unemployment and poverty to inadequate transportation, from the destruction of the environment to low levels of educational attainment. Popper seems at one level quite justified in asserting that problems have a tangibility or objectivity which is lacking in concepts such as happiness, fulfilment or contentment. There are, nevertheless, good reasons for us to think that the tangibility of problems as opposed to concepts is more illusory than real. To take the example just mentioned, it might be claimed that whether one views homelessness as a problem or not depends on one's view of what it is that the individual minimally needs in order to live any kind of civilised existence. I can say that someone needs a roof over his or head because without it, he or she lacks somewhere permanent to put his or her possessions, to wash, eat or be a part of the community. Homelessness, I want to claim, is something pressing and immediate; it excludes and isolates individuals in a manner detrimental not only to themselves but also to society. But what is the defence against the view that, after all, this is just my opinion? What do we say to the objection that my view of homelessness has been informed by my attachment to prior notions about what constitutes 'need', 'civilised existence', 'exclusion' and so on, that these are value judgements derived from my own perception of what, ultimately, makes people 'happy'? If Popper really is a serious moral pluralist in the sense that he does not want to privilege any particular notion of the Good Life over another, then how is it possible unproblematically to locate problems in the first place?

Some critics have indeed seen this problem of incommensurability as one threatening the basis of his political philosophy.¹² Popper on this view is a moral relativist who simply contradicts himself when he says on the one hand that we must not chase the promise of happiness, while on the other urging us down the road of what will clearly approximate a welfarist social democratic state. There seem, however, to be good grounds for rejecting this critique, not least because Popper explicitly denies that he a moral relativist. To begin with, Popper rejects the view that all moral positions are of equal value and thus that moral judgements cannot be weighed against each other regarding such a position as based on 'faulty

¹²I take this to be the thrust of, for example, Terence Burke's critique of Popper. See T.E. Burke, *The Philosophy of Popper*, Manchester University Press, 1983, especially chapter 5, 'Freedom and Values'.

reasoning'.¹³ He claims that in societies such as our own it is possible to talk about the existence of some sort of consensus regarding what is acceptable and unacceptable, good and bad behaviour, just and unjust states of affairs. It is this consensus, this shared moral understanding, which allows us to expect that people will react to a given situation – such as a person suffering – in the same way. People living in cardboard boxes constitute a problem not only for me but for society, because in Popper's view most people in our society regard homelessness as a moral evil. The tangibility of suffering is thus given in this shared moral horizon. Part of what it means to be a member of society is to share 'moral standards' with others in that society, to look upon people's behaviour in a similar light. Morality is thus conventional and part of our becoming a social subject is learning what these moral standards or 'higher values' are.¹⁴ Popper argues that in a civilised society these moral standards form the bedrock of government action and ensure that the state's actions are regarded as legitimate by the population. There are of course limits to the degree to which this consensus is able to guide the actions of the state, the implication being that whilst it may be possible to mobilise opinion for particular objectives such as helping the unemployed it would much more difficult to get people to agree on an entirely new set of social arrangements. Our attachment to 'higher values' encourage us to act in a piecemeal fashion to help the disadvantaged, but evidently not to act so radically that we risk having to re-design current institutions and practices.

We can leave to one side the question of whether it is possible to identify 'moral standards' of the sort Popper discusses. This is of course firmly trampled ground in the literature of moral philosophy and is in any case only tangential to our concerns. What does need clarification is how, assuming that it is possible to talk about the existence of such standards, this helps Popper's case for a scientific, but non-utilitarian politics. Let us go back to the problem we were discussing above, namely homelessness. It is, as we saw, consistent with Popper's argument to say that few individuals in our society could be failed to be disturbed by homelessness or to view it as anything other than a form of unnecessary suffering. However, it is Popper's next move which is difficult, for what he seems to be arguing is that the identification of suffering (or social problems more broadly) goes hand in hand with the desire to want to do something about that suffering.¹⁵ In other words, he thinks that because we share certain moral standards that we will feel the same degree of commitment to resolving situations that we agree are bad, wrong or 'evil'. Yet, this assumption seems to fly in the face of political realities. Even if for the sake of argument we assume that the vast majority believe that homelessness is bad or wrong surely this should not be taken as indicative that they all accord the provision of facilities for the homeless the same priority. Of course some might be expected to feel very strongly about the issue and demand that it be dealt with as a matter of urgency; some others will feel that it is important, but not as im-

¹³OSE II, p.381.

¹⁴Given the potential importance of the idea of 'higher values' to his political philosophy Popper devotes worryingly little time to developing it. The only substantial discussion of what he means is in the addendum to later editions of OSE II. See especially pp.381ff. On this issue see especially Jeremy Shearmur, 'Epistemological Limits of the State: Reflections on Popper's Open Society', *Political Studies*, 38, 1990, pp.116-25.

¹⁵My hesitation at this point is only a reflection of the undeveloped nature of this area of Popper's work. It is difficult, I think, to know with any great certainty what exactly it is that Popper wants to claim here.

portant as, say, providing for the NHS, for schooling or old age pensions; and I think we have to assume that there may well be others who, though agreeing that homelessness is a bad thing, would not want to spend any great sum of money on the problem at all, preferring instead to keep taxation to a minimum. In short, it seems quite unwarranted to assume that the identification of problems is tantamount to the desire to want to resolve them.

All of which leaves Popper's assumption that the equation of politics with problem-solving puts politics on a new, more rational footing looking rather less radical than he thought it might. The identification of problems such as the suffering of particular groups and individuals is surely not a substitute for political debate as Popper seems to think, but rather the precursor to it. The identification of problems is not in this sense the end of the political process but rather the beginning, for, as I think is clear, it is one thing for us to agree that *x* is a problem, but quite another to agree on what, if anything, ought to be done about it. As Popper suggests, problems can emit of solutions, but the acceptability or otherwise of any given solution is the very stuff of political debate. Given that for Popper the essence of the Open Society is in a sense debate, it is more surprising to find a distinct lack of detail about the institutionalisation of these deliberations, about where this discussion is to take place and with whom. In view of his wariness about the 'violence' and 'passion' of debate in our tightly administered society I think we should wonder how extensive and participatory this 'public' discussion is likely to prove.

Negative Utility and the Individual

As I think should be clear from the comments above, it is at least part of Popper's claim that the advantages of negative utility as an approach to setting out the objectives for state action lie in the fact that following the maxim 'minimize suffering' is unlikely to result in transgressions against the rights or, more loosely, autonomy of the individual. Pursuing happiness is fraught with difficulty in Popper's view, because of the impossibility of legislating accurately for such an intangible objective (hence his objection to the traditional utilitarian approach). This is not the case with 'piecemeal social engineering' for two reasons. Firstly, state action is limited to tackling only those objectives which emit of a solution and, secondly, in being piecemeal rather than holistic, state action at all times proceeds with 'caution' and 'modesty' thereby limiting the impact of any faulty policies. Even with these caveats in mind, I think Popper's prescription for rational government is, however, just as likely to trample over the autonomy of the individual and to result in considerable injustice as would the implementation of more traditional forms of utilitarian practice.

We need, firstly, to imagine a situation in which any difficulties with establishing agreement about what constitutes an object for state action can be overcome, and hence where we have a clearly identified problem in front of us together with the political will to solve it. What next? Popper, as already noted, recommends that we 'test' in the manner of scientific theories the various hypotheses which interested parties proffer as proposed solutions to the problem. Exactly which parties or groups are thought to be fit or qualified enough to offer suggestions is not made clear by Popper – a worryingly relaxed stance for someone who has made it

one of his life tasks to ensure the safety of an 'open society'; but I think we can imagine who he might be thinking of, that is, think tanks, institutes, academics and others who make it their business to study and, of course, influence social policy. Perhaps an example here might serve to show Popper's intent.

Let us assume that it is agreed by our political masters that the low reading age of children in state schools constitutes a problem sufficiently pressing to warrant immediate attention.¹⁶ What Popper seems to have in mind is that the government would oversee a process of experimentation in schools to test competing theories about the best means of getting children to read. Children in area A would be taught according to one method, the children in area B according to another, children in C another, and so on. It would of course be difficult to decide exactly how much 'experimentation' was needed to produce 'satisfactory' data, but this is a problem which confronts anyone conducting experiments to test hypotheses, including scientists. The experiment would presumably run for a number of years and be as exhaustive as possible. At the end of the given period of time the results would be compared and the theory producing the best results adopted as the universal policy for teaching in schools. Gone, Popper hopes, the fraught ideological battle between the educationalists of the academy and hard-nosed traditionalists. In its place a rational process designed to promote the best results and, by extension, the interests of the public at large. Popper's point is that the public interest is better served by adopting a neutral, detached method of governing than it is by the existing see-saw between conflicting ideological positions. If there is a method available which transcends the harmful squabbles of politicians then why not apply it to all aspects of social policy?

For someone who professes himself to be an individualist and a lover of liberty it is surely curious for Popper to advocate the approach outlined above. The reason why we should be suspicious is that any talk of using people for experiments surely transgresses their autonomy as human beings. If we follow Kant (as Popper claims to) then autonomy is to be defined as being treated as an end in oneself rather than as a 'mere means' for the satisfaction of the needs or wants of another. No one is to be used as the vehicle for the happiness of others no matter how many others are involved. This is the essence of Kant's uncompromising individualism. Yet Popper's approach would appear to transgress these strictures. If we take the example discussed above, it is clear that on one level the children in the schools in which the experiments are taking place are being used for the purpose of finding the best means of teaching children to read. They are 'guinea pigs' in an experiment to improve the conditions and expectations of those who will follow them into the classroom. Whilst Popper might be justified in arguing that theories need to be tested, he still needs to show how testing is compatible with his own proclaimed individualism. He still needs, in other words, a response to those (for example the parents of the children involved in the testing) who might with some justification worry that the use of people in these experiments is tantamount to employing them as 'mere means' for the development of educational policy. Let us imagine that as a result of having been exposed to a 'flawed' theory concerning the acquisition of reading skill that some of the children are hampered from learning how to read and as a result they do poorly at school. Their poor results

¹⁶Popper himself mentions 'educational reform' as a problem of the sort which might be tackled by the means he proposes. See *OSE I*, p.159.

– let us imagine – feed through into poor self-esteem, into truancy and in some cases delinquency. Some of the subjects of the failed theories end up unemployed and marginalised. As a result of having been exposed to flawed theories, the life chances and expectations of some of the subjects are so severely diminished that they themselves become in turn a ‘problem’ not only for their parents but of course for society as well. The question is, would these people not have a justified claim to compensation for the injustice done to them?

If this case seems too extreme, we can turn the example around. Let us imagine that instead of certain groups of children failing, we can see how the testing produces enormous benefits for one group, say the children who went to school A. The children in this school master the rudiments of reading more quickly. As a result, they are able to make considerable progress in their school work and end up excelling in exams thereby securing places at the top institutions of higher education. Because of their academic success, many of these subjects find their life chances and opportunities considerable enhanced, with a higher percentage of them than normal ending up in prestigious and well paid employment. In other words, the experiment is a great success: it unearths a method of teaching children how to read which allows an acceleration of the learning process with all the advantages that accrue from it. Meanwhile the children in schools B, C and D do no worse than the average. Their capacity to learn how to read is not impaired but neither is it enhanced. Their life chances are thus unaffected by the experimentation and the state can with some authority claim that the experiment has only winners, not losers. But, again, does this encouraging result allow us to wave away the fear expressed above, which is that Popper’s proposals remain utilitarian, instrumental and hence damaging to individual autonomy? Arguably not, since what in essence has changed? The fact that a minority does well will not surely diminish the justified concerns of the many that they are ‘victims’ rather than beneficiaries of the process of experimentation. They have been used for the benefit of others and made to suffer the consequences of not having been treated the same way as the children in school A.

Although in this case there are no victims in the sense that no one has been disadvantaged by the process of ‘engineering’, those who have not benefited from it are, I would have thought, quite likely to feel aggrieved and to feel that an injustice has been done them. In short, the experimental method advocated by Popper would not overcome the traditional objection to utilitarianism which is that it treats people in an instrumental and ultimately unjust fashion in the name of social good or, as in this case, in the name of minimising unhappiness. On this point at least I think Kant is more nearly right than Popper: people are unlikely to look favourably upon being used even if this results in a minimisation of suffering.

We can note, finally, that part of the difficulty with the experimental approach as applied to society is knowing what might count as a satisfactory set of results and hence knowing when the problem has been resolved. At what level does for example unemployment ‘cease’ to be a problem – if indeed we agree that it is a problem? Levels of unemployment that would have been considered outrageous twenty years ago look almost reasonable considered alongside the picture today. The success or otherwise of a policy is always relative; relative to what the situation was like before the policy designed to alleviate it was formulated; relative to the public perception of its importance when set against other problems; relative to the levels of funding available to central government and so on. What policy is counted a ‘success’ is more often than not determined by the ability of the government (and those sympathetic to its policies) to persuade people that, firstly, a problem can be identified which requires governmental action to resolve it, and, secondly, that the proffered solution to the problem has obtained results which ameliorate rather than leave the situation unchanged or even worsen it. Part of the problem with Popper’s approach is that he makes the leap all too readily between laboratory and society, between a world of objective, detached observers and the world of ethical and moral contestation. The traditional utilitarian position has been criticised on grounds that it fails not only to recognise the contentious nature of public policy issues, but that contestation is the very essence of politics. The same objection can, I think, be made against Popper’s approach.

Conclusion: Popper’s Anti-Political Politics (or Saint-Simon Revisited)

As I think should be clear, Popper’s Kantianism and respect for the individual sits uncomfortably with his belief in the necessity for the application of experimental methods to social and political life. On the one hand we have the view that it is never the state’s task to define what the ends of life should be and on the other a method for resolving ‘problems’ which is likely to end up doing just that. The difficulty is in my view caused by Popper’s belief that he can combine a meaningful defence of the individual with what is an essentially utilitarian – if ‘negative’ – account of what the state should be doing. Far from exhibiting a Kantian concern to ensure that each individual is respected for what he or she is, that is, a unique self with needs, rights and desires that cannot be subsumed within a greater entity or class than him or herself, Popper’s philosophy exhibits a marked suspicion of the individual and in particular of the individual *qua* political actor. Popper’s politics is about experts, social scientists and other techno-boffins working away behind the scenes on ‘our’ behalf. Ordinary people, their hopes, desires and expectations

are part of the ‘problem’ of contemporary politics, not part of the solution. It is their ‘passion’ and the ‘violence’ of their views which presents a challenge to the ‘rational’, ‘scientific’ administration of society. How much better the machine would function, how much smoother the operation of institutions would be, if they – we – were kept out of the picture until it is safe for them to be ushered into the polling booth for the five yearly test of their contentment with arrangements.

Although Popper is critical of a number of aspects of Enlightenment rationalism in particular that trend which stressed the necessity for viewing society ‘holistically’, as something to be reformed ‘wholesale’, there is more of the Enlightenment in this vision than Popper might care to admit. Like Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Comte and Marx, so for Popper political questions are ultimately questions of administration. Politics is above all, a problem-solving activity rather than a contest between different conceptions of what should be, of the Good Life. It is about maximising the efficacy of ‘outputs’, of delivering results and ordering policies rationally. But as critics of this vision have long argued, this is a vision of an end of politics rather than of its elevation to something more rational or scientific. It is a vision which does not speak of confidence in the public realm, but of fear of the mob – of the horny handed, the uneducated, the ignorant and the ‘untrained’. It must count as one of the more curious ironies of the history of political thought that a philosopher whose name is so readily associated with the defence of pluralism and individuality against the elitist and inegalitarian schemes of Plato *et al* should himself be charmed into surrendering the Open Society to a minority whose claim to govern rests on a suspiciously similar premise to that of the philosopher kings.