



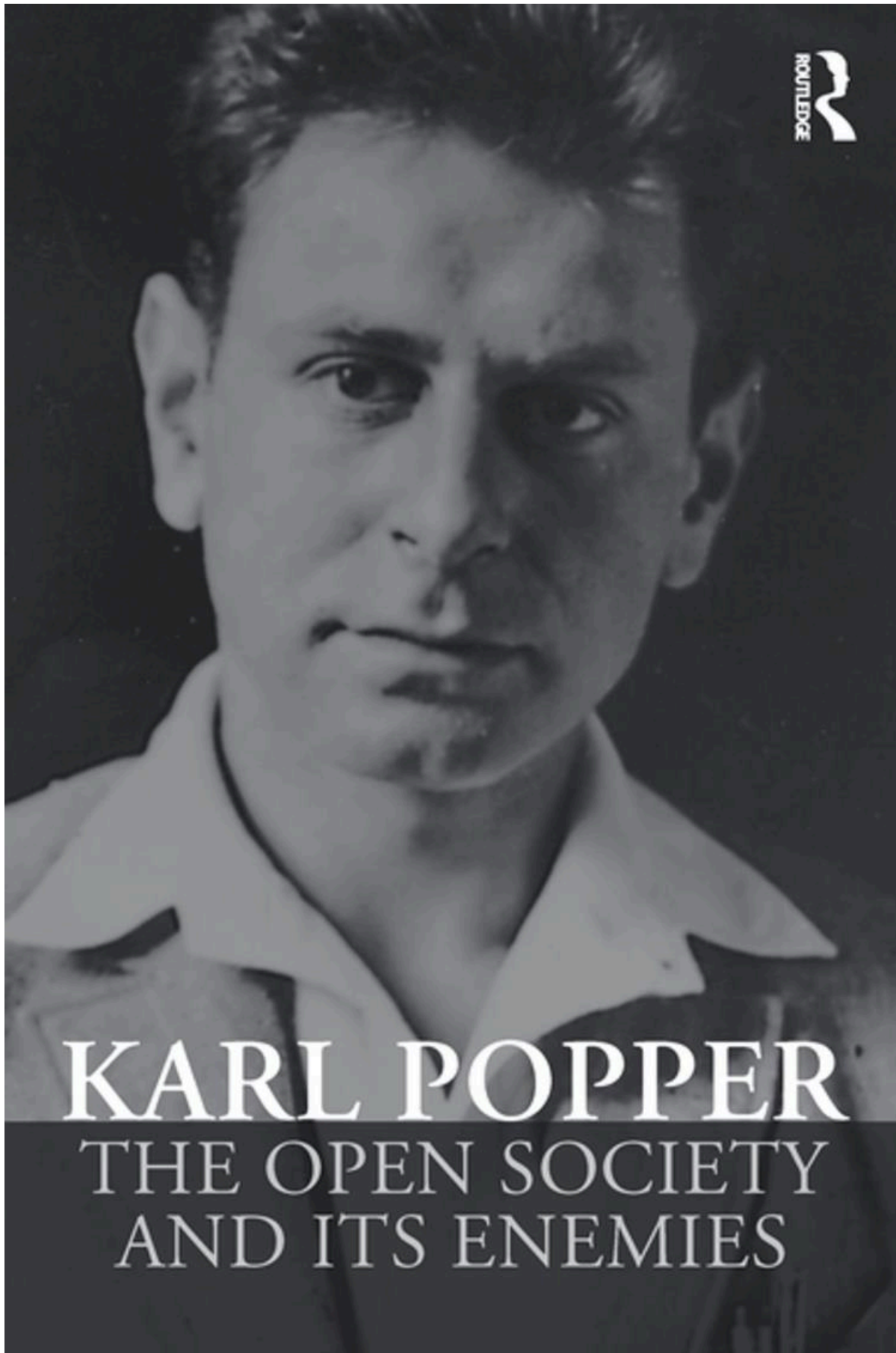
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The Open Society and its enemies: Karl Popper's legacy

*Karl Popper, one of the most influential philosophers of science of the 20th century, was the founding figure of the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method at LSE. Professor J McKenzie Alexander explores some of the twists and turns of Popper's precarious start, how he managed to finally establish himself, and his book *The Open Society and its Enemies*, which played such an influential role in his life's trajectory.*

Karl Popper had a surprisingly uncertain start to his career. Born in Vienna in 1902, he grew up during the final years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, watching it collapse around him amid the chaos at the end of the First World War. His experiences during these formative years left a lasting impression, sowing the seeds which eventually blossomed into his two most well-known books in social philosophy: *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and its Enemies*. These two works played a key role in bringing Popper to LSE, putting his academic career on a solid footing for the first time, enabling him to become one of the key figures in Anglo-American analytic philosophy of science.



*The cover of Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*, reprinted by Routledge*

Popper's early years

Karl Popper was born in 1902 to an upwardly-mobile family of Jewish heritage in Vienna, during the final years of the Austro-Hungarian empire. His father, a lawyer, was a partner in the law firm run by Vienna's mayor Raimund Grübl, taking over the firm on his own in 1898 after Grübl's death (Hacohen, 2001). His mother, a talented pianist, instilled in Popper such a love of music that Popper very nearly chose to pursue it as a career. Ultimately, though, it was his "decidedly bookish" upbringing which won the day: Popper's father had a massive library of more than 10,000 books (Raphael, 2001), a love of philosophy, and a strong social conscience which had a profound influence on the young Karl (Thornton, 2022).

Despite his enthusiasm and intellectual gifts, Popper found secondary school insufferable. In his autobiography, *Unended Quest*, he described the teaching as "boring in the extreme – hours and hours of hopeless torture". The one exception was an inspiring mathematics teacher named Philipp Freud. (Popper was never able to determine if Philipp was related to Sigmund Freud, whose psychoanalytic practice was also running in Vienna at this time.) But not even the inspiring Mr Freud could hold Popper's interest: when Popper returned to school, in 1918, after a two-month absence due to illness, he "found that my class had made hardly any progress, not even in mathematics." He decided he had to leave.

A burgeoning political conscience

Popper quit school at the age of 16, taking up a course of self-study at the University of Vienna as a non-matriculated student. In the social unrest of the time, Popper found himself smack in the middle of a tumultuous political environment. On 12 November 1918, when the First Austrian Republic was declared by the members of the Provisional Government on the steps of the Parliament building, Popper reported being close enough to the action to hear bullets whiz past when people started shooting.

In this heady environment, Popper devoted himself to his studies and discussions of politics with his friends. As is common to many a young university student, he got swept up in the spirit of revolutionary change and "was converted" (Popper, 1992, p 32) to communism in the spring of 1919. That conversion only lasted for a couple of months, though, before being shattered by an outbreak of violence which occurred shortly before Popper's 17th birthday. A small group of unarmed socialist youth had been persuaded to try to help some communists escape from the police station in Vienna, where they were under arrest. The police response to the escape attempt was brutal and fierce, and several of the young activists were killed.

Popper was horrified by the violence, and felt partly responsible – at least in theory – for the deaths insofar as he had bought in to some of the underlying Marxist ideology which legitimated political violence. Reflecting on this, later in life, Popper wrote:

“Marxist theory demands that the class struggle be intensified, in order to speed up the coming of socialism. Its thesis is that although the revolution may claim some victims, capitalism is claiming more victims than the whole socialist revolution [...] I now asked myself whether such a calculation could ever be supported by ‘science’. The whole experience, and especially this question, produced in me a life-long revulsion of feeling.” (Popper, 1992, p 33)

Popper never again considered himself a communist.

The accidental academic

In 1922, Popper finally matriculated in the University of Vienna, receiving a teaching degree in 1925. He then enrolled in a doctoral programme in the department of psychology (not philosophy), receiving his PhD in 1928 for a thesis entitled “Zur Methodenfrage der Denkpsychologie” (“On the question of method in the psychology of thinking”). After obtaining his PhD, he qualified to teach mathematics and physics at the secondary school level in 1929, and starting doing so in 1930.

Popper’s decision to pursue a life in academia happened largely by happenstance. His uncle, a Professor of Statistics and Economics at the University of Vienna, knew of his nephew’s interest in philosophy, and arranged a meeting between Popper and Herbert Feigl, one of the early members of the Vienna Circle. Feigl was remarkably supportive, and urged Popper to consider publishing some of his ideas as a book. At Feigl’s encouragement, Popper began working on a book entitled *The Two Fundamental Problems of the Theory of Knowledge*. As he had a full-time job as a schoolteacher, he would work on this book in the evenings and late into the night.

In 1933, Popper’s book was accepted for publication in a book series edited by Moritz Schlick, the founder of the Vienna Circle, and Philipp Frank, one of its first members. However, by this time the book had grown to two lengthy volumes – nicely foreshadowing Popper’s disposition towards verbosity which would reoccur throughout his life. The publisher insisted that the book had to be cut down to a maximum of 240 pages, a prospect which Popper felt unable to do. The task of cutting the manuscript down to size fell to Popper’s supportive uncle, whose editorial work managed to whittle down the manuscript to an acceptable length. This slimmer book was published in 1934 as *Logik der Forschung*. (The English translation, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, would not be published until 1959.)

Searching for safety

Logik der Forschung met with a very positive reception and, as a result, Popper was invited to a number of universities to give lectures. With the support of his wife, who continued to work as a teacher, Popper took nearly two years of unpaid leave from his teaching job in order to galivant across Europe, giving talks. What prompted Popper to follow such a precarious existence? In his

autobiography, Popper claims that from about 1929 on he was prescient enough to anticipate Hitler's rise to power, the annexation of Austria, and the start of a war against the West. If so, Popper likely thought that securing a teaching position in another country was one of the few ways he could achieve a degree of safety. Although Popper wasn't religious, he knew his Jewish heritage put him squarely in the sights of the Nazis.

During 1935 and 1936, Popper had two extended visits in England. He gave talks at Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial College and, in what would prove a fateful meeting, at [Friedrich Hayek's](#) research seminar at LSE. In that seminar, Popper read a paper called "The Poverty of Historicism", a paper providing a robust critique of the idea that there were general laws of history and that social scientists, such as Marx, were capable of identifying them. Hayek was impressed and made a mental note of the young scholar.

In the middle of 1936, Popper was following multiple leads, still trying to secure a way out of Austria. He applied for a lectureship at Canterbury University College, in Christchurch, New Zealand. At the urging of some of his English acquaintances, he spoke to the [Academic Assistance Council](#), an English organisation which had been helping German refugee scientists secure positions in the UK and which had recently branched out to helping refugees from neighbouring Austria, as well.

Towards the end of 1936, both endeavours bore fruit: Popper was offered the lectureship in Christchurch as well as an offer of "academic hospitality" on the Moral Sciences Faculty at Cambridge. Much to the regret of both Popper and his wife, Popper decided to take the post at Canterbury University College over Cambridge, their preferred destination. Why? I think the choice came down to a combination of greater security and status. The lectureship in Christchurch was a proper academic post, and about as far away from Nazi Germany as it was possible to be. In contrast, the Cambridge position was temporary, clearly earmarked for a refugee, and still quite close to Nazi Germany.

Popper's "war effort": *The Open Society and its Enemies*

Popper arrived in New Zealand in March of 1937, shortly before the beginning of the academic term. He had a heavy teaching load, doing all of the teaching in philosophy for the university. Despite that, he continued with his research, maintaining the intense work ethic he had established during the composition of *Logik der Forschung*.

He first turned his attention to revising "The Poverty of Historicism" with an eye to turning it into a lengthy paper, arguing how historicist thought lead to support for fascism. However, Popper's tendency to verbosity, previously encountered with his first draft of *Logik der Forschung*, reappeared. Popper found himself developing a detailed critique of Plato's totalitarian tendencies as

expressed in *The Republic*, and this ballooned to the point where it started to overshadow the rest of the article. Popper soon realised that this critique needed to be a stand-alone work of its own, and so he cut it out of “The Poverty of Historicism”, and *The Open Society and its Enemies* was born.

What was *The Open Society and its Enemies* about?

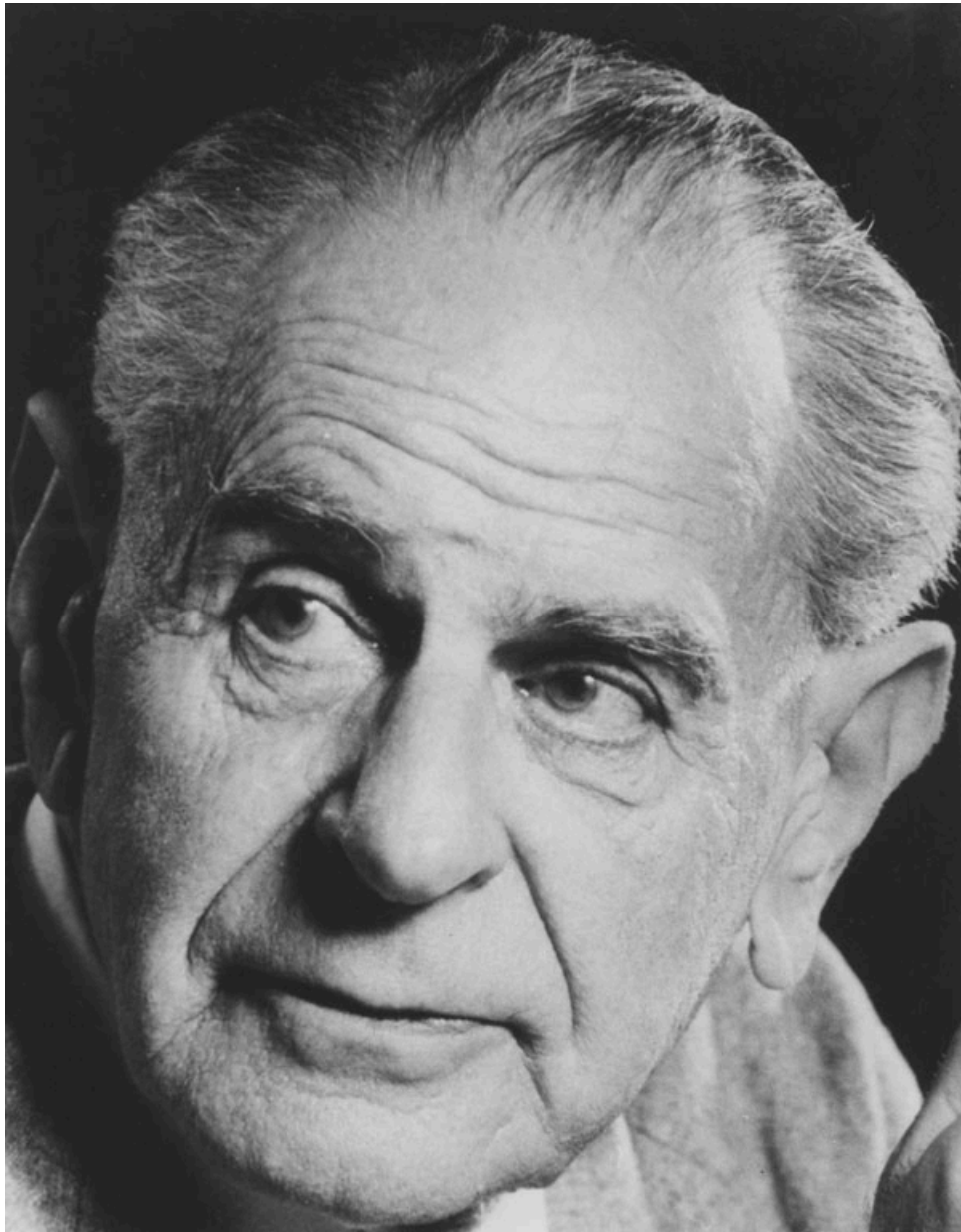
Popper described *The Open Society and its Enemies* as his “war effort”, as he believed the intellectual threats he was addressing wouldn’t go away with the end of the war. The work eventually turned into a massive two-volume set: the first providing a detailed critique of Plato, the second turning its attention to Hegel and Marx. One key theme in *The Open Society* was the danger presented by large-scale social engineering embarked upon by those who claim to know the ideal form of utopian society. In Plato’s case, this was the Republic ruled by philosopher-kings whose epistemic insight enabled them to know what was truly in everyone’s best interest; in Marx’s case, this was the egalitarian communist society which would arise out of the ashes of capitalism. (One of Lenin’s contributions was the idea that the process could be hurried up by revolutionaries setting alight to society.) Popper had no truck with any of this, believing that our ignorance of how society functioned meant that any attempt at large-scale social engineering would inevitably end in tears. As we now know from the painful legacy of Stalin’s Soviet Union and Mao’s China, Popper was right.

Writing *The Open Society and its Enemies* was not easy for Popper. First, he was impaired by limited access to source materials. Whereas now we find it difficult to wait a few days for an Amazon delivery, in wartime New Zealand it just wasn’t possible for Popper to get the books he wanted. In his intellectual biography, he noted how he was driven to developing his own translations of Plato’s writing because he was unable to find a specific Loeb edition of the *Republic*. Second, his research efforts were not looked favourably upon by his university. The university authorities expressly told Popper not to publish anything because any time spent on research “was a theft from the working time as a lecturer” (Popper, 1992, p 136) for which he was being paid.

When *The Open Society and its Enemies* was finally finished, Popper faced the challenge intimately familiar to all authors: finding a publisher. He circulated copies of the book to some of his friends, and was deflated by its reception. Rather than submitting the book to a publisher, Popper’s friends first sent the manuscript to an eminent scholar who absolutely panned the book. Popper’s irreverent attitude towards Aristotle rendered the book, in that person’s opinion, complete unpublishable.

For about a year, Popper remained in a funk at the languishing state of the manuscript. By sheer chance, he obtained the address of his friend Ernst Gombrich, another Austrian academic who fled the Nazis and settled in England, and sent him the manuscript. Gombrich belonged to a network of Austrian emigrants, all of whom found themselves in England during the war, including Friedrich

Hayek. Gombrich shared the manuscript with Hayek, who remembered the impressive academic from his seminar several years prior. Through their efforts, Routledge agreed to publish the book in 1945.



Karl Popper c 1980s. IMAGELIBRARY/5. LSE

What was the legacy of *The Open Society and its Enemies*?

The book was exceptionally well-received upon publication, with criticism of its interpretation of Plato, Hegel and Marx appearing later. The eminent philosopher Bertrand Russell described it as “a work of first-class importance” which offered “a vigorous and profound defence of democracy”. The philosophical historian Walter Kaufman had a more measured take, acknowledging the importance of its takedown of totalitarian thought while noting the idiosyncratic readings of Plato, and

suggesting that Popper tended to repeat long-standing myths about Hegel. Scholars of a Marxist bent also tended to disagree, arguing that it provided misreadings of Marx's work.

Two great aspects of its legacy are the following. First, the book so impressed Hayek that he persuaded LSE to offer a Readership to Karl Popper, bringing Popper back to London, and back into the heart of Anglo-American philosophy of science from the remote wilderness of New Zealand. Popper was the founding figure of the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method at LSE, and is *the* reason that department – in the middle of a school of social sciences – has such a strong emphasis in the philosophy of *natural* science and the philosophy of *physics*. (Ironically, after arriving at LSE, Popper never seriously pursued political philosophy again.) Second, *The Open Society's* passionate defence of liberty and critical rationalism deeply inspired his student George Soros, who credited Popper with giving him the necessary skills to succeed. In acknowledgement of his teacher, Soros named his philanthropic organisation "Open Society Foundations", an organisation devoted to the protection and advancement of civil societies around the world.

A third aspect of the book's legacy is perhaps a bit more nuanced. As we witness the rise of populist authoritarians in Western countries around the world, and their rejection of the open society, it is worth noting that Popper's defence doesn't seem to be as effective as it was against the earlier threats. Why is that? I think it's because Popper concentrated on the *intellectual foundations* of a threat to the open society posed by a *rival, alternative, coherent ideology*. Communism, grounded in historical materialism and notions of historical necessity, threatened the open society from the *outside*. Yet today's rejection of the open society is a threat from the *inside*, one driven primarily by a desire for power without a similar ideological metanarrative, leveraging a wide variety of psychological biases of persons. For tackling *that* threat to the open society, perhaps we need a different book.

Find out more

Join Professor J McKenzie Alexander at the free public event [The Open Society as an enemy: populism, Popper and pessimism post-1989](#) on 2 December 2024 and read [Can the Open Society survive the information age?](#) on the LSE Research for the World magazine.

The book *The Open Society as an Enemy: A critique of how free societies turned against themselves* by Professor J McKenzie Alexander is published by [LSE Press](#).

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About the author



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J McKenzie Alexander is Professor in Philosophy at the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method at the London School of Economics and Political Science. While his original field of research concerned evolutionary game theory as applied to the evolution of morality and social norms, more recently he has worked on problems in decision theory, more broadly construed, including topics of formal epistemology. His most recent book, *The Open Society as an Enemy*, will be published by LSE Press in 2024.

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