

The Open Society and its continual enemies: The need to re-balance education and develop a more critical attitude to knowledge and accepted practice

After WWII, in an uncertain American world of racial segregation and political paranoia, Martin Luther King (1947) wrote: “The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society.” (P.1)

What prevents us from balancing education between efficiency and criticality in our current uncertain climate?

In this essay, I argue that the problems of our current education system are at least in part due to the favouring of knowledge and education that represents the Closed Society over the Open Society (Popper, 1999). In this Closed Society, knowledge is relatively unexposed to critical analysis, and debate is restricted to all but close confines.

After his own experience of political extremism in the uncertain Vienna of the 1930s, Popper (1999) observed Closed Societies are essentially a problem of critical dualism and critical proof. Consequently, his thesis on the Open Society examined the ontology and epistemology of historical facts that needed to exist in democratic political cultures: the Open Society.

At the root of the Closed Society, Popper’s antithesis of progressive democracy was Plato’s notion of the Republic – the template of what Plato felt was an ideal society, forged in a time of uncertainty for the Athenian culture. In his Republic, instead of a democratic consciousness, Plato proposed a natural order of society, one in which his own aristocratic political class had an inherent right to rule as an elite (Plato, 1955; Popper, 1999).

Therefore, it can be said that the Closed Society is one that favors individuals who make decisions, at the expense of those whose rights they are rhetorically defending – often those whose rights they say they are putting above their own. On the other hand, the Open Society is one in which those who make decisions put the rights of those they are rhetorically securing ahead of their own. The Open Society is thus a political culture that is genuinely self-less.

The views of Plato can be compared to those of the pre-Socratic Ionian philosopher Heraclitus. Heraclitus observed that historical states, even those believed to be the most solid and permanent natural structures, are impermanent and therefore inherently unstructured. On

this issue, a follower of Heraclitus or Heraclitus himself – the source was unsure - theorizes, “Everything is in flux ... You cannot step into the same river twice.” (Popper, 1999: P.13)

Popper (1999) similarly problematized this debate, summarizing Plato’s unwillingness to differentiate between the ontology of laws, and Plato’s belief that natural laws are a-priori valid. In a reinterpretation of this ontological pillar of Western philosophy and later Western science and social science, Popper proposed that Plato’s laws should instead be divided into two: those inside and those outside human comprehension. Popper termed this critical duality.

The subdivision of these two epistemological laws can also be defined as per the facts explained through the world inside and outside human control: the world outside being nature and the world within being the social and cultural world – or, to put it another way, events that we can control through engineering versus events outside our control that we can only observe and analyse. Popper referred to these states as natural laws and normative laws:

(a) natural laws, or laws of nature, such as laws describing the movements of the sun, the moon, and the planets, the succession of the seasons, etc., or the law of gravity or, say, the laws of thermodynamics and on the other hand,

(b) normative laws, or norms, or prohibitions and commandments; that is to say, such rules as forbid or demand certain modes of conduct; examples are the Ten Commandments or the legal rules regulating the procedure of the election of Members of Parliament, or the laws that constitute the Athenian Constitution. (Popper, 1999: P. 57)

Philosophically, the differences between the human realm – such as the interpretation of rules, and civil and criminal laws – and laws that help us predict the natural physical world are clear (Popper, 1999, 1979). However, these laws also have grey areas. These grey areas are either created through human belief or a human need to categorize and promote sociological rules as natural, when in matter of fact they are forced upon us by humans. As Popper (1979) stated:

It was first in animals and children, but later also in adults, that I observed the immensely powerful need for regularity - the need which makes them seek for regularities; which makes them sometimes experience regularities even where there are none. (P.23)

Those who develop social norms, and the knowledge that we still teach in schools and colleges, still exploit what Popper saw as these grey areas of belief (Popper, 1999). Subsequently, in the process of developing knowledge for education, this need to regulate culturally evolved into a need to institutionalize, classify and formalize – that is to say, it is a human need to create ontological systems and group individuals as per these ontologies. Furthermore, the social groupings and classifications that occur because of this critical duality are mythologized, and lead to discrimination and exclusion.

Similarly, social classification is also based on a combination of shared mythological characteristics. These characteristics are defined as per institutional need – as Barthes (2000) argued, their importance or meaning is also mythological and not natural. These mythological characteristics can also include biological or cultural appearance, behavior, prowess, and political or religious philosophies (Hayhoe, 2012, 2016).

Likewise, human classifications are not designed uniformly or using their own internal rules. Depending on the type of social group, more emphasis is placed on single characteristics over all others. In addition, the manufacture of the characteristics themselves can be mistaken for being naturally rather than culturally created.

For example, in the twentieth century Western racial classifications traditionally emphasized physical prowess and strength over perceived intelligence. These classifications were measured by IQ tests, which artificially classified language and intelligence (Herrnstein & Murray, 2010). Similarly, in the nineteenth century intelligence and ethics were linked with the ability to see, hear and speak formal language, and thus participate in education or acts of worship. Consequently, people who were deaf and blind were thought to be less intelligent or immoral (Hayhoe, 2015, 2016).

Popper's thesis on the blurring of beliefs between natural and human laws is not exclusive to philosophy or sociology. Similar interpretations of culturally subjective ontologies and epistemologies are also found in the anthropological literature, particularly that of cultural anthropology. For instance, Geertz (1983) identified artificial cultural knowledge, such as *common-sense*, and identified anomalies that disproved its natural qualities. For example, on the common-sense belief in two natural genders, Geertz (1983) discussed the cultural reactions to hermaphrodites, and the institutional anomalies this caused.

Anomalies such as Geertz's hermaphrodites also exist in wholly culturally constructed groups. For example, until relatively recently some US states legally classified people as African American even if their African heritage was a minimal part of their ancestry – a person could be up to seven eighths or nine sixteenths from other “races” (Hickman, 1997; Khanna, 2010). Similar subjective distinctions were also applied to people who were identified as First Nations (Weaver, 1997; Garrouette, 2001). To these American institutions, therefore, it was the *African* or *Native Americanness* of the person that counted, not their *otherness*.

In the exclusion of mythologized groups, power and knowledge can be said to have two atomic elements of constructing exclusion - where these elements are also seen as inputs to and outputs of exclusion. In this way, power influences the creation of knowledge and can be a result of knowledge; and knowledge informs power and its application of this knowledge.

For example, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, people with disabilities from higher social classes thought they had a right to dictate to others who were disabled (Hayhoe, 2015, 2016), much as Plato did to lower social classes. As with Plato, there were also moral justifications for this dictatorship. The original motivation to actively exclude many people with disabilities from general society, for instance, resulted from an outcry about people with disabilities begging or offending morals (Hayhoe, 2015, 2016). The profit of the elite was thus a feeling of cultural, ethical and intellectual superiority (Bourdieu, 2010).

What can these historical influences teach us about our present, increasingly extreme and uncertain world?

To rebalance our education, we must go further than just raising our children critically and intensely. We must also criticize our own ontologies and epistemologies, particularly those in our institutions and those of our own human classifications. To divide society according to these artificial groups allows our self-appointed Platonic elites to divide-and-rule as a Closed Society. Thus, in not self-analyzing the rules of our present, we disallow future generations from opening their minds and their societies, and educating for a progressive world.

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