

Exile and interpretation: Popper's re-invention of the history of political thought

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ABSTRACT *The essay explores how Popper used 'critical interpretation' to interpret Plato, Hegel and Marx idiosyncratically as his 'war effort' polemic against fascism waged from forced exile in New Zealand during WWII. 'Critical interpretation' was a form of scientific 'critical rationalism' adapted to textual interpretation. Exile spurred Popper to fight. 'Critical interpretation' was his method of fighting. The Open Society and Its Enemies and The Poverty of Historicism were the weapons he forged.*

As with our children, so with our theories, and ultimately with all the work we do: our products become largely independent of their makers. We gain more knowledge from our children or from our theories than we ever imparted to them. This is how we can lift ourselves out of the morass of our ignorance.¹

Introduction

Exiled in 1937 to the remoteness of New Zealand from the Viennese Jewish intellectual culture that nurtured him, Popper read his existential predicament into his interpretations of canonical texts, transforming the history and interpretive practice of Western political thought in the process. For Popper, the epoch's political emergency was simultaneously an intellectual emergency, leading him to wield the history of political thought as an anti-totalitarian weapon, which he forged on the anvil of a freewheeling account of textual interpretation informed by his scientific method.

This essay explores why and how Popper modified and adapted his method of 'critical rationalism' to interpreting Plato, Hegel and Marx idiosyncratically as harbingers of modern fascism. Interpreting political philosophical texts necessarily rewrites them. We are condemned to re-spin whenever we read and

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interpret. And when our re-spinning is a self-described ‘war effort’ waged from forced exile, as it was for Popper, then the interpretations we re-spin will likely seem polemical and not just idiosyncratic.

Fighting fascism and the power of ideas

This paper primarily examines Popper’s *approach* to textual interpretation rather than the interpretations themselves. Popper’s philosophical thinking was powerfully informed by the traumatic events of his generation. Just after completing *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in 1943, while exiled in New Zealand, Popper wrote Ernst Gombrich that publishing the manuscript was most ‘urgent—if one can say such a thing at a time when only one thing is really important, the winning of the war’.² As he later recounts, his decision to write *The Open Society and Its Enemies* ‘was made in March 1938, on the day I received the news of the invasion of Austria’.³ And as he recalls in his intellectual autobiography, *Unended Quest*, he ‘could no longer hold back’ from waging intellectual battle against Hitler.⁴ *The Open Society and Its Enemies* was a ‘fighting book’ as he confessed to Isaiah Berlin and A. J. Ayer while visiting Oxford in 1946.⁵ Moreover, in *Unended Quest*, Popper describes *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism* as his ‘war effort’, which he wrote ‘as a defence of freedom against the totalitarianism and authoritarian ideas, and as a warning against the dangers of historicist superstitions’, particularly Hegel’s.⁶ Given especially the ‘responsibility of Hegel and the Hegelians for much of what happened in Germany’, Popper felt obliged, ‘as a philosopher’, to expose Hegelianism for the politically perilous ‘pseudo-philosophy’ that it was.⁷ Hegel’s historicism ‘encouraged’ and ‘contributed to’ totalitarian philosophizing and political practice.⁸

Of course, claiming that Hegel encouraged subsequently the rise of 20th century totalitarianism is not equivalent to claiming that he intended to do so. Just because 20th century totalitarians read and were influenced by Hegel does not establish that Hegel was himself a totalitarian. Indeed, he could not have been a totalitarian because the ideology of totalitarianism had not yet been invented when Hegel published *The Philosophy of Right* in 1821. Totalitarianism, as an ideological concept, was simply unavailable to him. Unfortunately, Popper fudged this logical distinction, conflating not just the fact of Hegel’s *influence* with Hegel’s *intentions* but conflating influence with intention in Plato and Marx as well. As Quentin Skinner would surely insist, Popper was guilty of interpretive ‘prolepsis’. More generally, Popper misread seminal philosophical texts by rationally reconstructing them anachronistically through the lenses of his political commitments and forced exile to the hinterlands of impotence in New Zealand while real history was being waged so dramatically and tragically without him in Europe though, as J. G. A. Pocock suggests, ‘the impotence in question was in fact Popper’s own’. Moreover, according to Pocock:

Popper felt impotent because he desired two things: (1) to take part in the *philosophical* war against Hitler, (2) to be a recognized leader and authority figure in an exiled *Gelehrterrepublik* of a strictly German–Austrian and very largely Jewish kind. If he had

found himself in London or New York, the exile community would have been large and articulate enough to accord him this role, but it has always been (and still is) a problem for people in New Zealand with high intellectual ambitions that the likeminded group is not big enough. Popper's relations with the German/Austrian/Jewish refugees in New Zealand would show this clearly; there were quite a number of them, but not enough to give him recognition as the Herr Professor leader of a school and authority figure he desperately want to be. There were those—exiles and natives—who did regard him in that light, but he despised them because they didn't share his culture.⁹

Ambivalence and assimilation

Despite being so much a product of Vienna's Jewish intellectual culture, Popper was ambivalent about his Jewish identity. However, the Nazis were not, which made exile prudent for him. Popper grew up as a quintessential assimilated Viennese Bildungsbürger. His parents converted to Lutheranism in 1900, two years before he was born. Thus, Popper exemplified what Leo Strauss called the 'problem of the Western Jewish individual who or whose parents severed his connection with the Jewish community in the expectation that he would thus become a normal member of a purely liberal. . .universal human society, and who is. . .perplexed when he finds no such society'.¹⁰

Before emigrating from Austria to New Zealand, Popper applied to Britain's Academic Assistance Council, which helped place refugee academics in British academic positions. Though in the application Popper described himself as 'Protestant, namely evangelical but of Jewish origin', he answered 'no' next to the question whether he wished Britain's Jewish community contacted to help sponsor him. And in 1969, when the editor of the *Jewish Year Book* wrote him asking if he would agree to an entry about himself being included, Popper responded that he abhorred all forms of 'racialism and nationalism', that he 'never belonged to the Jewish faith' and that 'I do not consider myself a Jew'.¹¹ Yet, in the very same year, he declined Hayek's suggestion that he join him in taking up academic appointments in Salzburg. Writing to Hayek, he responded that anti-Semitism remained too robust in Austria. He then added: 'I think that people of Jewish origin, like I [sic] (Hennie is of Lower Austrian peasant origins) should keep away, in order to allow the feeling to die down'.¹²

In *Wittgenstein's Poker*, Edmonds and Eidenow describe being Jewish 'as belonging to a club from which there is no resignation'.¹³ And Popper might have appreciated better than he did the futility of trying to resign through assimilation and conversion. After all, as Malachi Hacoen puts it in his recent and very fine study of Popper:

The historian has the right, however, to interrogate Popper's claim to have overcome the conditions of an 'assimilated Jew'. In an open society, those declining to belong to any nationality might be recognized as *Weltbürger*. Popper did not live in such a society. From childhood to death, his closest friends were assimilated Jews. He grew up in an assimilated Jewish family. Progressive Viennese circles were essential to his intellectual formation and Central European networks to his intellectual growth. Both were preponderantly Jewish. His

cosmopolitanism emerged from Jewish marginality and reflected the assimilated Jews' dilemmas. Anti-Semitism drove him to exile. He retained a special relationship to Jewish nationality, condemning it, yet feeling responsible for it.¹⁴

In short, according to Hacoen, Popper always remained an assimilated Jew despite his ambivalence about being Jewish. Jewishness indelibly marked him, informing his political theory ineluctably as much as his anti-totalitarianism, his neo-Kantian cosmopolitanism and, as we shall see, his philosophy of science informed it.

Popper's ambivalence about being Jewish, despite being victimized by anti-Semitism and being forced into exile, was not accompanied by analogous ambivalence about Zionism. Jewish nationalism was both 'stupid' and 'wrong' racial pride like so many other nationalisms.¹⁵ Zionism was just the 'petrified' tribalism of the European Jewish ghetto displaced to Palestine. Israel's treatment of Palestinians made him 'ashamed in [his] origin'.¹⁶

For Hacoen, Popper embodied the spirit of *Spätaufklärung* (late Enlightenment), which caused him to project his disappointed cosmopolitan political aspirations onto an 'imaginary Republic of science' where scientists were citizens of science first and citizens of nations last.¹⁷ As Hacoen nicely says, much like Popper's imaginary republic of science, his republic of politics was the 'last version' of the 'old imperial dream' of *fin-de-siecle* Viennese Jewry: 'Timeless and contextless, free of national, ethnic, or racial distinctions', the open society 'was the assimilated Jewish philosopher's cosmopolitan homeland'. Primarily 'conceived during Popper's exile in New Zealand', his open society 'envisioned a postexilic restoration of an imagined community in which Popper could "arrive at his destination and rest"'.¹⁸ A cosmopolitan Jew who refused to be Jewish, then, Popper displaced his frustrated assimilationist dreams into the emancipatory, impartiality of neo-Kantian republicanism and dispassionate science.

In sum then, for Popper, whereas the republic of science required its citizens to assimilate by being non-sectarian and remaining open to criticism in order that epistemological emancipation (truth) might prevail, the open society similarly required its citizens to assimilate by displaying open-mindedness and embracing tolerance so that political emancipation (freedom) might flourish. Both truth and freedom presupposed non-sectarian equanimity but only as a necessary though insufficient condition. By contrast, epistemological and political dogmatism were mutually-reinforcing tribalisms, facilitating falsity and unfreedom. All religions were therefore tribalisms of ignorance and superstition. Likewise all nationalisms, including Zionism, were ethnocentric fantasies overflowing with exclusionary intoxicating fevers.

Being a Jew and being of Jewish origin

Now in suggesting that Jewishness, along with other factors, 'informed', Popper's political theorizing, we are not claiming that *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism* were Jewish philosophy. Conceivably, both books

could have been written, and written from the same approach to textual interpretation, by non-Jewish philosophers forced into exile by Nazism because they were communists, socialists, or homosexual. Hence, Popper's canon and his method of reading and constructing it, are not reducible to whether or not, and in what sense, he considered himself a Jew.

Regardless of whether Popper identified himself as a Jew, the fact of exile clearly *informed* his political theorizing and interpretative methodology. He wanted to fight fascism but he was unfit for military service as well as too far away from the war. Exile was frustrating but he could still fight philosophically.

When interpreting Popper, or any political philosopher for that matter, one should distinguish *why* he wrote what he did from his *intentions*, or motives, in writing what he did. By *why* someone writes as they do, we mean the background conditions that explain what and how they write. *Why* someone writes as they do in this unconventional sense does not, or need not, directly motivate their writing. Being categorized biologically as a Jew by Nazis conditioned Popper's political philosophy in part in the sense that had he not been categorized as a Jew, he would not have fled into exile, which directly motivated him, as much as anything did, to write unconventional history of political thought. Being categorized as a Jew by the Nazis, and his fears about what would happen to him if he ignored their categorization, may have had little or nothing to do with Popper's preference for categorizing himself as merely of 'Jewish origin'. And being categorized as a Jew may therefore have had little to do with his motives for combating fascism via political philosophy. Therefore, one cannot say that he *intended* to write what he wrote because he considered himself a Jew, however ambivalently. That is, Popper wrote neither *The Open Society and Its Enemies* nor *The Poverty of Historicism* intending to defend himself or others *as* Jews.

But Popper did self-consciously identify himself as a cosmopolitan liberal, exiled against his wishes, resolutely committed to fighting fascism with philosophy quite explicitly (and, we can surmise, anti-Semitism implicitly not because he saw himself as Jewish or not but because anti-Semitism is racism, which he abhorred and wanted to annihilate). Rather, Popper saw himself as fighting fascism, and all its attendant prejudices, from distant exile and this is how we should interpret his political philosophizing *in part*. How Popper saw himself doing what he was doing is unquestionably relevant to our getting him right. But how others saw him is equally relevant though perhaps less obviously so. In other words, how *others* see us may have little to do with how we consciously see ourselves, how we insist on identifying ourselves, and therefore may have little to do overtly or *directly* with our motives for writing what we do. How others see us constitutes what we are calling a background condition, which nevertheless partially explains why we write as we do. And if how others see us leads them to threaten our lives, then their threats will invariably *indirectly* motivate us to write as we do, however much we adamantly prefer to see ourselves differently. Identities are imposed as much as they are chosen. And maliciously imposed identities powerfully motivate us indirectly whether we like it or not.

Though *being a Jew* is not equivalent to *being of Jewish origin* (which Popper never denied), he sometimes nevertheless *felt* himself to be a Jew. For instance, by acknowledging that Israel's mistreatment of Palestinians made him feel 'ashamed in [his Jewish] origins', he implicitly identified with those origins. That is, he implicitly identified with being at least Jewish if not with being a Jew. To feel ashamed is to acknowledge responsibility. And to acknowledge responsibility is to identify with.

In sum, although Popper never more than implicitly identified himself as being Jewish, he explicitly identified himself as being of Jewish origin. We may not be able to determine precisely how, and to what extent, these modes of identification informed his interpretation and construction of our political philosophical canon. But there is little doubt that anti-Semites identified him as a Jew according to their vicious criteria, that Popper understood what this meant and that he fled into exile as a consequence. And this forced exile provided him with more than enough reasons, though there were clearly others as well, to fight fascism by writing eccentric history of political thought. In other words, Jewish identity partially explains indirectly *why* he wrote political philosophy in the way that he did though it may not directly inform his *intentions* in writing political philosophy as he did. In this sense at a minimum, Charles Taylor is entirely justified in accusing Popper of 'argu[ing] from the concentration camp'.¹⁹

Historicism and totalitarianism: Arguing 'from the concentration camp'

Popper argued repeatedly against historical inevitability, which he idiosyncratically labelled historicism. Consequently, we should not confuse the unusual way he understood the term with more conventional understandings of it. For Popper, historicism is the view that history is governed by historical laws that make historical prediction possible. By contrast, for him, historism means what historians have traditionally meant by historicism.

Popper's earlier critics, such as Hans Meyerhoff, derided him for setting up and attacking a 'parody of historicism' that bore little resemblance to Meinecke, Croce and Collingwood's more established definitions of the term.²⁰ But Alan Donagan has perceptively defended Popper, arguing that his language would be misleading only if the German word 'Historismus' generally meant the English 'historicism' at the time Popper was writing *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. But the German term did not convey this meaning at that time. According to Donagan, when Popper was writing *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in his New Zealand exile, Historismus was typically translated as historism, namely the view that ideas and truth were relative to the historical contexts that produced them. Hence, Popper was perfectly entitled to deploy historicism as he did with such novelty.²¹ Replying to Donagan, Popper not unexpectedly approved Donagan's defense of his terminology though he added that Donagan failed to appreciate how historicism and historism have often been conceptually intertwined.²²

Notwithstanding Popper's uncommon understanding of historicism, both *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* excoriated historicism on the basis of the epistemology of his earlier *Logik der Forschung*. Whereas, according to Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* analysed and criticized 'anti-naturalistic' and 'pro-naturalistic' varieties of historicism, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* traced historicism's 'pernicious influence' on philosophy and politics.²³ Both works, moreover, condemned historicism for justifying totalitarianism. According to Popper, Hegel was especially dangerous for liberal political theory because, by reconceptualizing it through the prism of historicism, he contaminated it. Since historicism encouraged political fatalism, it tended to excuse totalitarianism's evils. 'Harsh words' needed to be spoken about counterfeit liberals, like Hegel, as well as about anti-liberals such as Plato and Marx if our 'civilization is to survive'.²⁴ These 'harsh words' must be said in 'memory of the countless' victims of belief in the 'Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny'.²⁵

For Popper, historicism, especially anti-naturalistic historicism, was so politically dangerous because it was fundamentally a metaphysical superstition. Or rather, to borrow from Hacoen, it was contaminated metaphysics.²⁶ Being neo-Kantian, Popper was simply interested in keeping metaphysics in its post-critical place and not in banishing it as entirely meaningless, as logico-positivists sought to do. There was good metaphysics and there was bad metaphysics. Whereas the former variety inquired into the presuppositions of empirical knowledge, corrupted varieties, like historicism, over-reached by postulating grand historical laws that could not possibly be empirically confirmed or refuted. Such spoiled varieties were merely mythologies and, therefore, meaningless. And, for Popper, historical mythologies, especially grand dramas about irresistible historical forces, were politically dangerous indulgences because, as suggested above, they promoted fatalistic thinking, which, in turn, justified systematic political violence and suffering as unavoidable.

At best, in Popper's view, historical trends allow us to make weak conditional predictions to the effect that, given continuing historical circumstances, certain historical consequences will likely follow. Historical trends don't entail unconditional prophecies as historicists wrongly suppose. Purported historical laws cannot be tested and therefore falsified. They thus excuse political repression. Rather than trying to be 'all-knowing prophets', we should 'cautiously feel the ground ahead of us, as cockroaches do'.²⁷

Now Popper willingly conceded that his account of historicism was an historical exaggeration. He frankly admitted that no philosopher ever actually defended the varieties of historicism that he criticized.²⁸ This concession can mean one of two things, it seems to us. Either Popper felt comfortable attributing historicism to Plato, Hegel and Marx because he was *never* really interested in correctly interpreting any of them to begin with. Rather, he regarded historicist thinking as perilous politically and felt compelled to attribute it to whichever philosophers it came closest to fitting. As a philosopher doing his bit to fight fascism, he had to put historicism into the mouths of some credible philosophic opponents. Historicist

thinking was a real danger. It was out there infecting and animating public intellectual discourse and it had to be exposed and marginalized. But he was a philosopher who was used to doing battle mostly with fellow philosophers and he was good at it. Whether Hegel really said what Popper claimed he said was not as relevant as the menace of what later neo-Hegelians took him to say. Reading Hegel carefully and sensitively was secondary. As Popper admitted in the Addenda to the 1962, fourth edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, in interpreting Hegel, he ‘neither could nor wished to spend unlimited time upon deep researches into the history of a philosopher whose work I abhor’.²⁹

Alternatively, Popper’s surprising concession, that he was mostly interested in ‘building up a position really worth attacking’ even though no one had, in fact, ever defended such a position, could have meant that he truly *was* interested in properly interpreting historicists. Unfortunately, correct interpretations were illusory. There were no such things as authentic and authoritative interpretations of philosophical texts. Even the best intentioned interpretations were rational constructions. Therefore, by conceding unapologetically that he was perfecting arguments that no historicist ever made in fact, Popper was simply restating, albeit rather crudely, the idea that textual interpretation was inherently unstable and conjectural.³⁰ We shall return to this account of his approach to textual interpretation momentarily because we believe that it follows from his epistemological skepticism and his rejection of induction. But regardless of the sources of his method of textual interpretation, the method itself proved polemically fecund as we shall shortly see as well.

But even if the source of Popper’s interpretive methodology lay in his skepticism and dismissal of induction, the end result was much the same. If correct interpretations were illusory, then whether one was really interested or not in interpreting other philosophers accurately did not matter. If accurate interpretations were specious, then one might as well guiltlessly and shamelessly appropriate and recast past philosophers to fight fascism and demolish the concentration camp.

Critical rationalism and critical interpretation

Indeed, a great work of music (like a great scientific theory) is a cosmos imposed upon chaos.³¹

Popper sometimes claimed that the best textual interpretations were always reorganized rational reconstructions. Indeed, intellectual historians ‘who believe that they do not need an interpretation, and that they can “know” a philosopher or his work, and take him just “as he was”, or his work just “as it was”, are mistaken. They cannot but interpret both the man and his work; but since they are not aware of the fact that they interpret (that their view is coloured by tradition, temperament, etc.), their interpretation must necessarily be naïve and uncritical’. By contrast, ‘critical interpretation must take the form of a rational construction, and must be systematic’ by reconstructing ‘the philosopher’s thought as a consistent edifice’. According to Popper, as A. C. Ewing said about properly

interpreting Kant, 'we ought to start with the assumption that a great philosopher is not likely to be always contradicting himself, and consequently, wherever there are two interpretations, one of which will make Kant consistent and the other inconsistent, prefer the former to the latter, if reasonably possible'. In short, deliberate 'systematization is a necessary test of any interpretation'.³²

Preferred textual interpretations, then, make sense of texts by rearticulating them systematically. They impose coherence on textual realities much like scientific hypotheses impose coherence on empirical reality (and like great music orders chaos). They are therefore tentative conjectures too. And just the way logico-positivists, according to Popper, mistakenly and naively thought that good science simply read inductively the natural world 'out there' just 'as it was', uncritical readers naively supposed that texts, including philosophical texts, were similarly just 'out there' waiting to be correctly read as long as we scrutinized them carefully without prejudice.

Not surprisingly, Popper also held that just as correct textual interpretations unfiltered by bias do not exist, there is likewise 'no such thing as a grammatically correct and also almost literal translation of any interesting text'.³³ Rather, every 'good translation is an *interpretation* of the original text; and I would even go so far as to say that every good translation of a nontrivial text must be a theoretical reconstruction'. A 'precise translation of a difficult text simply does not exist' because the 'idea of a precise language, or precision in language, seems to be altogether misconceived'. And this idea is fundamentally misplaced because the '*quest for precision is analogous to the quest for certainty, and both should be abandoned*'.³⁴

Thus, for Popper, points of view characterized *textual* interpretations (and translations) just as they did *historical* interpretations of which they were a mode. Just as 'history has no meaning' outside of the meaning we give it, so philosophical texts mean what we impute to them. Just as historicists fail to see that we 'select and order' historical facts, naïve readers don't see that reading is simultaneously selecting.³⁵ Both naïve historicists and naïve readers fail to recognize that they interpret from a point of view. If they were not so unsophisticated, they would concede that their points of view were simply one of many possibilities and that, even if we prefer to call them theories, we should demur from assuming them to be easily testable theories. Hence, unlike our best scientific conjectures which are objective and certain insofar as they are testable and falsifiable, historical and textual interpretations are necessarily uncertain and subjective.³⁶

Furthermore, regarding historical interpretations specifically, Popper contends: 'Such untestable historical theories can then rightly be charged with being circular in the sense which this charge has been unjustly brought against scientific theories. I shall call such historical theories, in contradistinction to scientific theories, "general interpretations"'. Moreover, Popper continues: 'But we have seen that a point of view is always inevitable, and that, in history, a theory which can be tested and which is therefore of scientific character can only rarely be obtained. Thus we must not think that a general interpretation can be confirmed by its agreement

often with all our records; for we must remember its circularity, as well as the fact that there will always be a number of other (and perhaps incompatible) interpretations that agree with the same records, and that we can rarely obtain new data able to serve as do crucial experiments in physics'.³⁷ But Popper also says in the same discussion that such crucial differences between science and history does not mean that we may historically 'falsify anything, or take matters of [historical] truth lightly'. On the contrary, any 'historical description of facts will be simply true or false, however difficult it may be to decide upon its truth or falsity'.³⁸ Of course, how a 'general [historical] interpretation' can be simultaneously 'simply true or false' and yet be unfalsifiable and therefore 'circular' is unclear.

However, in 'On the Sources of Knowledge and Ignorance', Popper says: 'There is no criterion of truth at our disposal, and this fact supports pessimism. But we do possess criteria which, if we are lucky, may allow us to recognize error and falsity. Clarity and distinctness are not criteria of truth, but such things as obscurity or confusion may indicate error. Similarly coherence cannot establish truth, but incoherence and inconsistency do establish falsehood. And, when they are recognized, our own errors provide the dim red lights which help us in groping our way out of the darkness of our cave'.³⁹ Now, this passage follows shortly after a passage where Popper discusses both scientific and historical assertions, claiming that both kinds of assertion are open to validation. Hence, we should assume, here at least, that Popper holds that 'obscurity or confusion' and 'incoherence and inconsistency' suggest the likelihood of historical error as much as any other kind.

In the 'Preface to the First Edition' of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper says forthrightly that even though his study 'looks back to the past, its problems are the problems of our own time. ...'⁴⁰ In other words, his study has a decided point of view, namely the political problems and disasters of the 20th century. And in *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper insists that in writing history, one should consciously 'introduce a *preconceived selective point of view* into one's history; that is, to write *that history which interests us*'.⁴¹ As he says in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, we 'want to know how our troubles are related to the past. ...' We are 'interested' in history because want 'to learn something about our own problems'. This is why 'such admittedly personal comments as can be found in this book are justified, since they are in keeping with historical method'.⁴² Moreover, this is also why history '*in the sense in which most people speak of it simply does not exist*' and why it therefore has no meaning in itself 'other than the meaning we give it'. (Popper's emphasis)⁴³ And if history has no meaning other than that we impute to it, then, by implication, philosophical texts have no meaning other than the meanings we read into them. Philosophical texts are, after all, historical artifacts like any other.

Now if history, as well as philosophical texts, merely have the meanings we give them, then both would seem open to innumerable interpretive possibilities. And indeed Popper concedes as much where he says that there 'is no history of mankind, there is only an indefinite number of histories of all kinds of aspects of human life'.⁴⁴ For Popper, then, the interpretation of the past, including our textual past, is a political act informed by the demands of our contemporary political 'problems' and 'troubles'. If fighting fascism happens to be our most pressing

political task, then we are perfectly entitled, and even obliged, to appropriate texts as we see fit as part of our polemical ‘war effort’. If reconstructing Plato, Hegel and Marx, and then criticizing our reconstructions, is useful for defeating Hitler and this is all we can do from our exile, then we should not hesitate to do so. Textual interpretation may not be the only weapon for fighting fascism. And it need not be the most decisive weapon. But if we happen to be a philosopher forceably exiled to New Zealand while Europe seethes in anguish, and if we also believe that ideas really matter politically, then fighting philosophically may seem obligatory. If we are convinced that the ‘power of ideas, and especially of moral and religious ideas, is at least as important as that of physical resources’, then we are morally obliged to battle malicious ideas, especially those disguised in the garb of historicism. Consequently, Popper sounds much like Berlin: ‘For I believe in the power of ideas, including the power of false and pernicious ideas. And I believe in what I might call the war of ideas’.⁴⁵ Berlin, too, believed in the power of ideas and, like Popper, he was a displaced Jew but of a very different sort who was also preoccupied with combating totalitarianism via intellectual history.

Now Popper modelled his theory of ‘critical interpretation’ (and his larger theory of historical interpretation as well) on his theory of the logic of scientific discovery. ‘Critical interpretation’ was simply scientific ‘critical rationalism’ applied to written texts instead of nature’s. Just as ‘critical rationalism’ (the scientific method of ‘conjecture and refutation’) rejects the idea that ‘truth is manifest—that it is an open book, there to be read by anybody of good will’ or the idea that ‘truth is hidden’ and ‘discernible only by the elect’, likewise ‘critical interpretation’ rejects the analogous notion that written texts contain stable meanings accessible to well-intentioned readers or a privileged ministry of initiates.⁴⁶ Just as there is ‘no such thing as an unprejudiced observation’ of natural phenomena because all observation is problem-guided, there is no unprejudiced textual interpretation.⁴⁷ Textual interpretation is problem-guided observation too. All ‘observations [including textual ones] are theory-impregnated’.⁴⁸ Just as we should abandon the quest for scientific certainty, we should abandon the quest for interpretative objectivity and precision. We must ‘always remember that it is impossible to speak in such a way that you cannot be misunderstood’.⁴⁹

In his important essay, ‘Science: Conjectures and Refutations’ in *Conjectures and Refutations*, Popper observes that ‘we may hesitate to accept any statement, even the simplest observation statement; and we may point out that every statement involves *interpretation in the light of theories*, and that it is therefore uncertain’. Hence, there ‘can never be anything like a completely safe observation, free from the dangers of misinterpretation’.⁵⁰ And if this goes for scientific interpretations of natural phenomena, then it surely goes as well for other forms of interpretations, including especially historical and textual ones.⁵¹

Nevertheless for Popper, even though the very best theorizing, whether scientific, sociological or historical, invariably misinterprets, it nonetheless remains somehow objective. That is, insofar as we try as hard as we can to falsify theories and fail, we may take them as objectively true and certain provisionally. True theories of any kind are simply conjectures that have thus far stood up to all

attempts to falsify them. We explain our world deductively and not inductively. Pure induction is a metaphysical phantom. We never simply collect empirical data without prejudice and then generalize. We always begin with tentative generalizations or conjectures that orient where we begin looking and collecting, which makes our resulting generalizations interpretations. To look, gather, generalize and explain is always to interpret.⁵²

Finished theories, that is unfalsified conjectures, whether scientific, sociological or even historical, constitute primarily what Popper calls ‘World 3’. They are ‘World 3’s’ inhabitants, its objects. Whereas ‘World 1’ is the world of physical objects and ‘World 2’ is the world of our subjective experiences of ‘World 1’ (in other words, our subjective experiences of physical objects), ‘World 3’ consists of our statements and generalizations of ‘World 1’ mediated through ‘World 2’. We experience ‘World 1’ as ‘World 2’ and theorize it as ‘World 3’. And for Popper even though the objects (theories, conjectures, ideologies, *interpretations*, etc.) that inhabit ‘World 3’ are not as real as the tables and chairs, etc. that inhabit ‘World 1’, they are somehow very real nevertheless. At least ‘World 3’ objects (our theories, etc.) are sufficiently real in that they powerfully affect what transpires in ‘World 1’ and ‘World 2’. In brief, theories, ideologies and interpretations have real consequences, including political consequences. Ideas matter and often they matter politically for better or for worse. The ideas of Plato, Hegel and Marx mattered mostly for the worse, especially in the 20th century and therefore had to be combated vigorously and mercilessly. In Popper’s words: *‘I regard world 3 as being essentially the product of the human mind. It is we who create world 3 objects. That these objects have their own inherent or autonomous laws which create unintended and unforeseeable consequences is only an instance (though a very interesting one) of a more general rule, the rule that all our actions have such consequences’*. Thus, our theories [including our interpretations], like our children, ‘become largely independent of their makers’.⁵³

But even if we think of Plato’s *Republic*, Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and Marx (and Engel’s) *Communist Manifesto* as children who grew into independence, living lives differently than how their makers intended, we should be wary, as we suggested above, of reading what these children became into what their creators intended them to be even if we cannot ascertain for sure what their creator’s intentions actually were. And Popper seems not to have kept this distinction between authorial intentions and theory consequences firmly in mind when branding Plato, Hegel and Marx as wayward historicists.

Plato, Hegel and Marx

I hate the history of philosophy even more than any other history; it is so hard to know what any particular man thought, and so worthless when you do know it.⁵⁴

Popper’s interpretation of Plato, Hegel and Marx as historicists in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* is controversial as we have been intimating.⁵⁵ His account of Plato immediately drew considerable critical fire for being so alien to received

views of him. Most, but not all classical scholars condemned Popper for anachronistically mapping onto Socrates and Plato the modern struggle between democracy and totalitarianism.⁵⁶ Even classical scholars who fled totalitarianism for reasons similar to Popper's, criticized his reconstruction of Plato as wildly misguided. For instance, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin followed Popper in blaming the rise of fascism, in part, on the influence of pernicious philosophical ideas. But for Strauss and for Voegelin, in contrast to Popper, Enlightenment rationalism was culpable and, surely, not Plato. According to Voegelin, Popper's account of Plato and Hegel was 'dilettantish', exposing Popper as little more than 'a primitive ideological brawler'.⁵⁷ More recently, Hacoen has discussed at length Popper's unconventional appropriation of Plato, claiming, among other things, that Popper 'made Greek intellectual and political life speak directly to the present' albeit in a 'scholarly well supported' fashion.⁵⁸ For Hacoen, Popper's Plato was imagined but not entirely so: 'Totalitarian tendencies Plato certainly had; a fascist ideologue he was not'.⁵⁹ Hacoen also recognizes that Popper's approach to interpretation facilitated the ease with which he could make Plato 'speak directly' to us. But Hacoen never explores Popper's theory of textual interpretation beyond briefly noting that Popper believed that the best interpretations reconfigured texts systematically.⁶⁰

Popper argued that his interpretation of Plato as a totalitarian was irrefutable. Despite diligently trying to refute his interpretation of Plato, he instead became even more convinced that Plato was a totalitarian. Popper insists: 'I have tried, in other words, to apply as far as possible [to Plato] the method which I have described in my *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*'.⁶¹ That is, his conjecture that Plato was a totalitarian had to be correct because he had tried his best to refute it without success. Hence, his account of Plato was accurate, or at least as accurate as any interpretation could possibly be. Scholars who disagreed, he asserted, merely speculated wildly; their readings were illegitimate conjectures that had yet to withstand withering and sustained critical fire.⁶²

But it seems that all Popper is really saying is that his account of Plato is scientific just because it is *his* account. Any counterevidence that others might marshal to refute it would fail because Popper had already tried as hard as he could to refute it himself. Their counterevidence was bogus since nobody more doggedly tried to refute his controversial interpretations than himself. Scientific interpretation, then for Popper, seems just so much cover and convenient excuse to read Plato wilfully, polemically and so unconventionally.⁶³

Popper's account of Hegel is considerably briefer than his account of Plato. According to Hacoen, Popper wrote about Hegel in "scherzo-style" as an intermezzo between Plato and Marx'.⁶⁴ But Popper's intermezzo on Hegel was critical to his explanation of the rise of totalitarianism and its debts to historicism. Hegel, a 'direct follower' of Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle, was the 'source of all contemporary historicism'.⁶⁵ Hegel was the 'missing link' between Plato and the new tribalism of modern totalitarianism.⁶⁶ He rediscovered the conceptual weaponry of authoritarianism in the 'ancient war treasuries of the perennial revolt against freedom', refurbishing and placing them in the 'hands of his modern

followers'.⁶⁷ Indeed, deciphering Hegel's nearly impenetrable thinking would not be worth the great effort were it not for its 'sinister' political consequences in the 20th century, which shows most regrettably and tragically 'how easily a clown may be a maker of history'.⁶⁸ The 'Hegelian farce' had to be stopped: 'We must speak—even at the price of soiling ourselves by touching this scandalous thing', which had become responsible for so much contemporary human misery.⁶⁹ Even fraudulent and farcical ideas could be politically formidable and hazardous. Indeed, those which so seductively seemed to soothe the anxieties of modernity, such as Hegelian historicism, were incomparably hazardous and therefore had to be combated mercilessly. As Hacothen writes, exposing Hegel's fraudulence and, along with Plato and Marx's, became, for Popper, 'his political mission' and 'testament for Western civilization'.⁷⁰

Hacothen also insists that, in caricaturing Hegel, in misrepresenting him so unfairly, Popper 'betrayed' his method of critical rationalism.⁷¹ But this claim seems misplaced. On the contrary, how could Popper be said to betray critical rationalism at all, at least with respect to interpreting seminal texts, when interpreting them sanctioned reconstructing them systematically as one saw fit?

Popper was kinder to Marx although he judged Marxism the 'purest, the most developed and the most dangerous form of historicism'.⁷² Popper read much more Marx than he did Hegel though he seems to have been unfamiliar with Marx's earlier philosophical writings like *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* or 'On the Jewish Question'. Nor does he seem to have followed much neo-Marxist theorizing from the 1920s and 1930s, such as Luckacs' *History and Class Consciousness* or Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*, which criticized Marxism after Marx for having become deterministic and prophetic. As Hacothen nicely puts it: 'The brilliance of Popper's critique of Marx was due less to his thorough knowledge of Marxism, more to his application of Ockham's razor to a popular Marx'.⁷³

Popper's 'popular' Marx substituted 'wishful thinking' for social science and was therefore escapist. By prophesizing the inevitable tumultuous collapse of capitalism as the unavoidable birth-pangs of socialism, Marx purportedly encouraged the very consequences he abhorred, namely working class defeatism and fascism. Radical Marxists took this perverse logic to the extreme, claiming that they had 'discovered the "essence" and the "true historical role" of fascism'. Fascism was '*the last stand of the bourgeoisie*' and was therefore an 'interlude necessary for [the revolution's] speeding up'.⁷⁴ Socialist and communists, according to Popper, consequently foolishly hesitated to fight the fascists wherever they seized power. In the end, Marxism was little more than a pathetic tragedy of 'talking big and doing nothing in face of real and increasing danger to democratic institutions'. It was an impotent travesty of 'talking [class] war and acting peace; and it taught the fascists the invaluable method of talking peace and acting war'.⁷⁵

Marxists also unintentionally promoted fascism's rise by embracing what Popper labelled Marx's 'economism' (or 'historism' to use the language of *The Poverty of Historicism*), which explained superstructural phenomena, such as ideas

and culture, by reducing them to their purported underlying economic structural causes. By wrongly understanding ideas and philosophical commitments as mere epiphenomena, Marxists eviscerated them, including Marxism itself, as effective weapons for fighting fascism. Popper writes in 1940: ‘I think that social experience clearly shows that under certain circumstances the influence of ideas (perhaps supported by propaganda) can outweigh and supersede economic forces. Besides, granted that it is impossible fully to understand mental developments without understanding their economic background, it is at least as impossible to understand economic developments without understanding the development of, for instance, scientific and religious ideas’.⁷⁶

Anti-fascist ideas like Marxism, then, could be even more dangerous than proto-fascist ideologies like Platonism and Hegelianism. They were more insidious because they actually encouraged what they pretended to combat. Marxism was a fascist Trojan horse and therefore especially treacherous.⁷⁷ Hence, Popper felt obliged to declare philosophical war against it even more than against Plato or Hegel. And fighting Marx effectively required first reformulating Marx systematically and then attacking the reformulation even if the reformulation was—as it had to be—a freewheeling interpretation. One should never hesitate ‘to treat one’s opponents—Marx in this case—not only fairly but generously; and one should *not only overlook* stupidities which are not essential to their teaching, but actually try to *repair* them’.⁷⁸

Ideology and anachronism

Popper’s method of ‘critical interpretation’ stemmed, in the end, from the confluence of his scientific methodology and his anti-historicism. For him, historicism reduced texts to mere epiphenomena of their historical contexts, which were supposedly governed by historical laws. At least, as far as Popper was concerned, Hegel and Marx’s versions of historicism reduced texts to expressions of underlying historical laws. Marx, as we saw, purportedly regarded texts as merely part of the cultural superstructure cast up by economic conditions, which were scientifically explainable.⁷⁹ Hegel, too, in Popper’s view, tended to make truth, knowledge and therefore textual meanings relative to history’s predetermined course. Hence, historicism and historism were theoretically intertwined in Popper’s account of Hegel and Marx. For both, according to Popper, historism was effectively a mode, or particular feature, of historicism. Hence, for Popper, interpreting texts by trying to read them through the lens of their determining historical contexts was a typical historicist fallacy. Historicism *devalued* the autonomy of texts much the way it devalued individual or personal autonomy.⁸⁰ Historicism therefore rendered texts hapless excuses for history’s worst and bloodiest excesses.

Unfortunately, in our view, Popper’s ‘critical interpretation’ as a method of textual interpretation—that is, as a mode of ‘critical rationalism’—*overvalued* the autonomy of texts. Texts floated freely and untethered above their historical and political contexts though they often powerfully affected these contexts. Texts

could mean whatever their interpreters wanted to make of them. Hence, ‘critical interpretation’ licensed dismissing Plato, Hegel and Marx as proto-totalitarians. If, as Popper claims, we cannot avoid rationally reconstructing texts, especially political philosophical ones, and if we might as well do so ‘systematic[ally]’, then we encourage simplified, if not polemical, readings in keeping with our favourite political preoccupations. Moreover, when those preoccupations are driven by exile and personal ‘war effort’, the Plato, Hegel and Marx we *produce* will be, not surprisingly, unconventional, if not simplistic, reifications. In short, ‘critical interpretation’, no less than non-critical historicist interpretation, can function apologetically. Just as much as the latter, it can acquit, forgive and explain away. It too can reduce philosophical texts into equally hapless excuses for all kinds of politics for better or for worse.

‘Critical interpretation’, then, runs the risk of being critical in name only. When it becomes mere apology and political weaponry, it degenerates into ideology in the narrow and pejorative sense. While all interpretation is ideological widely construed insofar as all interpretation is a narrative, or part of a narrative, aggressively polemical, narrowly ideological interpretation invariably simplifies, compresses and caricatures. It is not so much that polemical interpretation distorts or recasts while non-polemical interpretation does not. Rather, polemical interpretation tends to *produce* un-nuanced cartoons instead of theoretically fine-grained portraits that resonate suggestively. To read Hegel as a ‘clown’, albeit a tremendously influential clown, is to misread him ideologically in the narrower meaning of the term.

Popper and Berlin

Popper was not the only exiled ‘Jewish’ political philosopher from pre-WWII Europe to deploy a theory of interpretation congenial to fighting wars. For instance, Leo Strauss, despite his seemingly very different conception of historicism and his insistence that we should understand texts the way their authors intended them to be understood, wielded an interpretative strategy that was just as context-independent as Popper’s and therefore prone to pejorative-sense ideological mishandling. Straussians, like Allan Bloom, exemplify this peril. Whereas for Popper, Plato is a proto-totalitarian, for Bloom, Plato is the opposite when he is read ironically as, Bloom claims, he intended to be read.⁸¹ The fact that anti-communists like Popper and Bloom appropriated Plato in diametrically opposed ways suggests, though admittedly does not demonstrate, how deeply polemical their respective interpretive strategies were. That Bloom could read modern anti-totalitarianism into the same Plato that Popper read the very opposite should at least caution us that both these Platos are likely oversimplifications that have more to do with Bloom and Popper’s respective political agendas than what Plato might possibly have intended.

We would also like to suggest that Berlin was probably inspired by Popper in attacking historicism, and, in the process, set out a method of textual interpretation congenial to rationally reconstructing political theory’s canon in Popperian

fashion.⁸² Berlin's unsympathetic understanding of Rousseau, Hegel and Green seem to have been informed by Popper's to some extent. Like Berlin, but earlier, Popper blamed romanticism for its irrational aestheticism that intoxicated romantics to dream of heavenly cities. But such dreams invariably only succeeded in making real earthly cities a hell—a 'hell which man alone prepares for his fellow-men'.⁸³ Furthermore, not unlike Berlin, Popper worried that, thanks to Plato, Hegel and Marx, the question 'Who should rule?' had become a dangerously dominant concern for political theorists. Instead, again not unlike Berlin, Popper recommended that political philosophers would do better trying to answer questions like "*how* is...power wielded?" and "*how* much power is wielded?"⁸⁴ The former question is so hazardous because it 'begs for an authoritarian answer such as "the best", or "the wisest", or "the people", or "the majority"'.⁸⁵ For Berlin, the positive theory of freedom, sadly enough, leads its advocates down the slippery slope of unavoidably asking this kind of unwise and perilous question.

Given Popper's worries about political philosophers asking the wrong kind of questions that, Berlin has famously claimed, positive freedom theorists have improperly asked, we might be tempted to conclude that Popper endorsed negative freedom, like Berlin. Taylor clearly thinks that he did.⁸⁶ And Hacoen thinks so too because the aftermath of WWII reoriented liberal political theorists, including Popper, to take up the standard of negative freedom as an antidote to what they perceived as the totalitarian implications of positive freedom, especially its more robust varieties.⁸⁷ But Popper never advocated negative freedom exclusively. Despite his friendship with Hayek and the received view to the contrary, Popper argued for supplementing negative freedom with robust positive freedom qua meaningful equal opportunities. In his discussion of Marx in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper praises Marx for recognizing that mere negative freedom was 'formal' and therefore impoverished. Negative freedom had to be supplemented by 'material' freedom in order for freedom to be meaningful. Hence, Popper concurs with Marx that 'unlimited economic freedom' characteristic of 'unrestrained capitalism' is 'just as self-defeating as unlimited physical freedom, and economic power may be nearly as dangerous as physical violence; for those who possess a surplus of food can force those who are starving into a "freely" accepted servitude, without using violence'.⁸⁸

In the spring of 1959, Popper and Berlin exchanged letters about Berlin's celebrated 1958 University of Oxford Inaugural Lecture, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', which Berlin had sent Popper. After praising Berlin for exposing the political 'dangers of the ideology of positive freedom' and for his forthright stand 'against moral historicism and historicism', Popper proceeds to criticize Berlin's essay on two counts. First, Popper complains, without elaborating, that Berlin understands rationalism too narrowly, denying that he is a rationalist in Berlin's overly constricted sense. And by conceiving rationalism so narrowly, Berlin, not surprisingly, hesitates to embrace it and thus risks enhancing romantic irrationalism instead, which Popper cautions Berlin is 'at least as great an enemy as an uncritical rationalism'. In any case, Popper reminds Berlin that 'you

yourself are a perfect example of a rationalist, for “rationality” means, for me, the readiness to pay attention to criticism and argument—to other people’s criticism of what one thinks and says, and to be highly critical of one’s own views and predilections’. Second, Popper insists that a ‘simple idea of positive freedom *may* be complementary to negative freedom’, namely the idea of spending ‘one’s own life as well as one can; experimenting, trying to realize in one’s own way, and with full regard to others (and their different valuations) what one values most’.⁸⁹

Berlin responded to Popper’s first criticism conceding that in his ‘zeal to refute metaphysical rationalism’, he may have needlessly ‘cast suspicion on reason as such’. Metaphysical rationalism, such as Rousseau’s and Hegel’s, was clearly perverse and perilous. Scientific rationalism was just as unsavoury and hazardous when, as Hayek warns, we fetishize it instead. That is, ‘there exists a scientific obscurantism no less oppressive than that of historicism: and in our day more menacing: although the former may be a perversion of scientific method and scientific temper, as the latter is of the historical’.⁹⁰ So just as both metaphysical and exaggerated scientific rationalism pervert reason, historicism perverts the historical, which is as much as to say that historicism is perverted rationalism too. What Berlin calls ‘metaphysical’ rationalism encompasses what Popper means by ‘anti-naturalistic’ historicism, whereas what Berlin calls ‘scientific obscurantism’ incorporates Popper’s ‘pro-naturalistic’ historicism.

Berlin says less about Popper’s second criticism, noting, not insignificantly, that the ‘whole of my lecture, in a sense, is a long attempt or a brief study—or prolegomena to the study—of the way in which innocent or virtuous or truly liberating ideas (. . . that a man who is free although he is a slave, in prison etc.) tend (not inevitably!) to become authoritarian and despotic and lead to enslavement or slaughter, when they are isolated and driven ahead by themselves’.⁹¹ So Berlin indeed abandoned the ‘terrain’ of positive freedom to the ‘enemy’ out of ‘fear of the Totalitarian Menace’ as critics like Charles Taylor would later complain.⁹² But similar fears never caused Popper to abandon this philosophical terrain, notwithstanding Taylor’s misconception, noted previously, that Popper advocated ‘an utterly negative view of freedom’.

Berlin and Popper parted company on other issues unmentioned in their letters. Most importantly for our purposes here, Berlin also seems not have agreed with Popper, at least explicitly, that ideas take their power, in part, from the fact that making them public detaches them from their maker’s intentions giving them an independent life and fate of their own. And Berlin surely would have accused Popper of over-exaggerating in blaming intellectuals and their ideas for causing single-handedly the ‘most terrible harm for thousands of years’.⁹³ Unlike Popper, Berlin would not have gone so far as to insist: ‘Mass extermination in the name of an idea, a doctrine, a theory—that is our work, our invention, the invention of intellectuals. If we would stopped stirring people up against one another—often with the best intentions—that alone would do a great deal of good’.⁹⁴

And just as Berlin would not have shared Popper’s conviction that intellectuals could do so much evil, he also would have been much less sanguine than Popper in thinking that intellectuals had the power to do quite so much good. At least, Berlin

would have hesitated in wanting them to embrace Popper's modified utilitarianism. For Popper, given the 'great urgency of the hour', philosophers were obliged to 'bring rational criticism to bear on the problems that face us. . .'⁹⁵ Philosophers and social scientists should assist us in anticipating the 'remote consequences' of social policies so that we can 'choose our actions more wisely'.⁹⁶ Philosophers and intellectuals must be activist, albeit modest utilitarians:

And similarly, [philosophers] should consider the fact that the greatest happiness principle of the Utilitarians can easily be made an excuse for a benevolent dictatorship, and the proposal that we should replace it by a more modest and more realistic principle—the principle that the fight against avoidable misery should be a recognized aim of public policy, while the increase of happiness should be left, in the main, to private initiative.

This modified Utilitarianism could, I believe, lead much more easily to agreement on social reform. For new ways of happiness are theoretical, unreal things, about which it may be difficult to form an opinion. But misery is with us, here and now, and it will be with us for a long time to come. We all know it from experience. Let us make it our task [as philosophers] to impress on public opinion the simple thought that it is wise to combat the most urgent and real social evils one by one, here and now, instead of sacrificing generations for a distant and perhaps forever unrealizable greatest good.⁹⁷

In short, according to Popper, intellectuals should stick to advocating solutions to alleviating immediate social evils. That is, they should concentrate on minimizing pain in the world, rather than more ambitiously, and counterproductively, trying to maximize happiness. Happiness is subjective and therefore unreal, whereas pain is viscerally objective and all-too-real. Hence, minimizing pain in the world piecemeal, step-by-step, is so worthy because it is so practicable, whereas trying to maximize the happiness of the greatest number is unworthy because it is so futile at best and dangerously counterproductive at worst. Popper, then, was what contemporary moral theorists refer to as a negative utilitarian.⁹⁸ Negative utilitarians hold that we are only morally obligated to minimize pain in the world. We are not obligated to maximize pleasure because maximizing pleasure is simply impossible given the fact that pleasurable experiences vary subjectively and endlessly from individual to individual. But we do have a pretty good sense of what causes most of the worst pain, namely poverty, disease and malnutrition. Therefore, we can do something about alleviating pain because we can, in fact, mitigate such evils.

Nevertheless, Berlin clearly followed Popper in believing that ideas were politically powerful for whatever reason. He also seems, at a minimum, to have agreed with Popper that systematic muddled thinking, even when well-meaning, made cultures susceptible to political fanaticism. Munz therefore could have said about Berlin what he said about Popper: 'What is more, [Popper] attributed the advent of Nazis in Germany to the kind of muddled thinking which comes from a failure to understand the difference between knowledge and superstition. He said time and time again that in German culture there had developed a great tolerance of confused thinking because confused thoughts were given the benefit of the doubt: they might be profound'. Consequently, Popper 'was convinced that in

Germany there had been nurtured and treasured an intellectual culture which had made people defenceless against Nazism'.⁹⁹ And Berlin concurred with Popper that romanticism and Hegelianism contributed—at the very least—to enfeebling liberalism at its roots. Consequently, for all these reasons, Berlin, like Popper, counselled intellectuals to wield the power of ideas responsibly and skilfully. Berlin, after all, likewise wrote history of political thought in order to fight totalitarianism.

Conclusion

Popper's forced exile (because the Nazis considered him Jewish however little he considered himself Jewish) drove him to fight totalitarianism by means of constructing the history of political thought idiosyncratically. By debunking Plato as proto-totalitarian, Popper tarnished classical political thought for many post-WWII intellectuals. And by unfairly marginalizing Hegel as a crude historical determinist and pseudo-liberal, he appears to have influenced intellectual historians like Isaiah Berlin and Jacob Talmon (another exiled Jew) to expunge neo-Hegelians like T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet from the liberal canon. As a consequence, in part, the Anglo-American liberal tradition has become a compressed tale that begins with Hobbes and Locke and then leaps forward to Mill and Rawls. Many nuanced permutations of the liberal tradition, including 19th-century English 'new' liberals like Green, have been accordingly discredited and forgotten. Liberal intellectual history has become simplistically repackaged for facile pedagogical dissemination which, in turn, has reinforced our inclinations to interpret the liberal tradition simplistically. Happily, though, second generation, post-war liberals have begun rediscovering much of their discarded tradition. Hegel has begun making his way back into the liberal canon, and Green, Bradley and Bosanquet are being studied seriously once again.¹⁰⁰

Popper likewise misinterpreted Marx, stripping his work of nuance and recasting him as another historicist enemy of liberal democracy. Regrettably, Popper's Marx caused too many post-war English-speaking political theorists to treat Marx with less seriousness than he deserves. As with Hegel, a new generation of political theorists and historians of political thought needed to emerge from behind interpretative shadows like Popper's before Marx could be taken up earnestly once more.

More importantly, we have argued that, generally speaking for Popper, there is no intellectual history 'out there' simply awaiting sensitive readers to get it right just as there is no history in general 'out there' open to all who have discerning eyes to see it. On Popper's account, every history, whether intellectual or any other kind, is an interpretative decision for which we are responsible. Every intellectual history is *a* narrative or just *another* narrative. We cannot but help to interpret, narrate and renarrate continuously. We cannot avoid being ideological in this sense. And the sooner we recognize this fact, the sooner we will take responsibility for our narratives, for narratives matter. They especially matter politically for Popper. And narratives of the history of ideas mattered most of all because he

regarded ideas as so politically powerful and consequential, making Popper's own conception of history subtly and ironically historicist.¹⁰¹

Popper's account of the power of ideas and the power of our narratives about ideas and their genealogy depends on his scientific methodology of unending conjecture and refutation. If even science consists of interpretative decisions, then surely intellectual history consists of them too. Different scientific interpretive decisions solve our scientific problems either better or worse. Likewise, for Popper, different interpretive accounts of *our* intellectual history help solve our political problems more or less adequately. But Popper's allegiance to the power of our intellectual narratives is also partially a product, in our view, of his forced exile and victimization as a Jew, regardless of how much he preferred not to be considered one. In the end, Popper's personal fate conspired with his philosophy of science to give us *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and *The Poverty of Historicism*.

In sum, we have explored how Popper's forced exile likely motivated his peculiar brand of anti-historicist anti-totalitarianism, which, in turn, informed his equally idiosyncratic method of textual interpretation. We say 'informed' and 'likely' deliberately because his method of textual interpretation owed much to other independent variables including especially his scientific method. More generally, we have also endeavoured to add to our understanding of how all intellectual history is invariably a narrative *practice*, making it indelibly ideological in the broad, non-pejorative sense (and not surprisingly polemically ideological when circumstances become sufficiently dramatic and dire). How we practice and produce intellectual history in general, and the history of political thought in particular, is as much a crucial and problematic interpretative challenge as are specific textual interpretations themselves.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Leah Hochman especially as well as John Pocock, Fred Rosen, Peter Munz, Michael Freeden, Dan Diner, Jonathan Steinberg, David Heyd, Steve Whitman, Josh Cherniss, Gale Sigal and two anonymous readers for their critical comments of earlier version of this essay.

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14. Hacohen, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, pp. 308–309. Furthermore, according to Hacohen (p. 325), Popper lost sixteen uncles, aunts and cousins, some at Auschwitz, because they were Jewish.
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28. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 25, p. 3.
29. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, p. 585.
30. Jarvie calls Popper's interpretive strategy 'Popper's Hermeneutic Rule', which stipulates, according to Jarvie: 'Always try to reformulate the position under discussion in its logically strongest form'. Accordingly, this rule 'enjoins us that where an author has formulated a promising position in a way that is vulnerable to some obvious objection, the commentator should first try to improve upon it before subjecting it to criticism—not for the author's sake but for the sake of the inquiry'. In effect, then, we *remake* our opponents not out of straw but out of steel for the sake of epistemological progress. See Ian Jarvie, 'Popper's Idea Types: Open and Closed, Abstract and Concrete Societies' in *Popper's Open Society After 50 Years*, pp. 77–78. But what Jarvie recently commends as 'Popper's Hermeneutic Rule', Herbert Marcuse earlier disparaged for its strangeness. See Herbert Marcuse, 'Karl Popper and the Problem of Historical Laws' in *Studies in Critical Philosophy* (London: NLB, 1972), p. 197.
31. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 63. Theories are like fine musical creations. Like beautiful musical achievements, 'we create the world: not the real world, but our own nets in which we try to catch the real world'. (p. 65).
32. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, p. 644, n45.
33. Also see *ibid.*, p. 229.
34. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 21–22.
35. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, pp. 545–6 and 555. For Popper's account of how the meaning of the term 'interpretation' has purportedly evolved much like the meaning of the term 'reading', see Karl Popper, 'On the Sources of Knowledge and Ignorance' in Karl Popper [1963], *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 13–14. Note especially Popper's comment: 'I have here used the word "reading" as a synonym for "interpretation", not only because the two meanings are so similar but also because "reading" and "to read" have suffered a modification analogous to that of "interpretation" and "to interpret"; except that in the case of "reading" both meanings are still in full use. In the phrase "I have read John's letter", we have the ordinary non-subjectivist meaning. But "I read this passage of John's letter quite differently" or perhaps "My reading of this passage is very different" may illustrate a later, a subjectivistic or relativistic,

- meaning of the word “reading.” Popper then adds: ‘I assert that the meaning of “interpret” (though not in the sense of “translate”) has changed in exactly the same way, except that the original meaning—perhaps “reading aloud for those who cannot read themselves”—has been practically lost’.
36. Popper, *op. cit.* Ref. 25, pp. 151–152.
 37. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, p. 542.
 38. *Ibid.*, pp. 537–538.
 39. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 35, p. 28.
 40. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, p. xxxiii.
 41. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 25, p. 150. Popper emphasizes the same point summing up a few pages later that, in writing history, we must ‘be clear about the necessity of adopting a point of view’ and that we must ‘state this point of view plainly, and always remain conscious that it is one among many, and that even if it should amount to a theory, it may not be testable’ (p. 152).
 42. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, pp. 544–545.
 43. Popper, *Ibid.*, p. 546.
 44. Popper, *Ibid.*, p. 547.
 45. Karl Popper, ‘The History of Our Time’, *Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 373.
 46. Popper, *Ibid.*, p. 374. Also see Munz, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 150, where Munz discusses Popper’s rejection of the Vienna Circle’s purported view that observing nature was simply reading the book of nature..
 47. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 55.
 48. Karl Popper, *Popper Selections*, David Miller (Ed.) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 84.
 49. Popper, *Ibid.*, p. 29.
 50. Karl Popper, ‘Science: Conjectures and Refutations’ in *Conjectures and Refutations*, pp. 41–2, n8.
 51. Also see Popper, *Ibid.*, p. 161 where he says: ‘This [method of theorizing] is just one example of the *objectivist* approach, for which I have been fighting in epistemology, quantum physics, statistical mechanics, probability theory, biology, psychology, and history’. By ‘history’, we contend that Popper means to include intellectual history.
 52. Hacoheh would probably argue that we too readily conflate scientific theorizing and textual interpretation on Popper’s behalf. See, for instance, Hacoheh, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 487, where Hacoheh writes that, for Popper, both ‘historical and scientific descriptions represented points of views, but scientific theories were testable and falsifiable and historical interpretations rarely so’. Presumably, then for Hacoheh, Popper regarded descriptions of historical texts (textual interpretations in other words) as seldom testable or falsifiable and therefore seldom objectively true. This might explain what Hacoheh means when he adds: ‘But [for Popper] there was no history “as it actually happened.” Narratives depended on perspective to provide a method for selecting data. The imperatives for good history meant selecting an interesting viewpoint and being aware of it’. But as we have seen, while Popper indeed sometimes viewed science, history and textual interpretation as substantively different, he also sometimes viewed them all as conjectural, differing only in their degree of potential clarity and coherence. Moreover, as we are about to see, in defending his controversial interpretation of Plato as a totalitarian, Popper suggests that textual interpretation was no less conjectural than scientific interpretation.
 53. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 217 and 229.
 54. Henry Sidgwick, from Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick and Arthur Sidgwick [1906], *Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir* (Bristol, U.K.: Thoemmes Press, 1996), p. 140.
 55. In response to a 1947 letter from J. D. Mabbott, Popper concedes that, by his own definition of historicism, Plato may not have been a historicist after all but that this did not undermine his verdict that Plato was a totalitarian. John Plamenatz, ‘The Open Society and Its Enemies’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 3 (1952), p. 366, also claimed that Plato was no historicist on Popper’s idiosyncratic understanding of the term. See Hacoheh, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 407, for Popper’s concession and his exchange with Mabbott.
 56. See Hacoheh, *Ibid.*, p. 399, n64, for a listing of earlier critical reviews of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* most of which dismissed Popper’s construal of Plato.
 57. *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934–1964*, Peter Emberly and Barry Cooper (Ed.) (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), p. 67.
 58. Hacoheh, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 402.
 59. Popper, *Ibid.*, p. 409. Hacoheh adds that Popper ‘was right on target’ in appreciating how Plato’s political ideas had ‘permeated Western philosophy’ largely for the worse. (p. 425).
 60. See Popper, *Ibid.*, p. 409, n102.
 61. *Ibid.*, 186 and 703, n3.
 62. Popper repeatedly dismissed critics of his account of Plato for naively ‘idealizing’ Plato. See, for instance, Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, p. 97.

63. Also see Popper, Popper, *ibid.*, Ref. 3, p. 232, where Popper says: 'I often tell my students that what I say about Plato is—necessarily—merely an interpretation, and that I should not be surprised if Plato (should I ever meet his shade) were to tell me, and to establish to my satisfaction, that it is a misrepresentation; but I usually add that he would have quite a task to explain away a number of things he had said'.
64. Hacoen, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 428. Moreover, according to Hacoen, Popper only read selections from Hegel and very little scholarship about him.
65. Popper, *op. cit.* Ref. 3, p. 278.
66. Popper, *op. cit.* Ref. 3, p. 282.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 315. That is, almost 'all the more important ideas of modern totalitarianism are directly inherited from Hegel, who collected and preserved what A. Zimmern called the 'armoury of weapons for authoritarian movements' (p. 315). But, of course, it doesn't follow, as we have been suggesting, that Hegel was a Nazi just because modern totalitarians inherited some of their ideas from him.
68. Popper, *Ibid.*, pp. 283–4. Hegel's 'hysterical historicism' was the 'fertilizer', which 'prepared the ground' for the growth of modern totalitarianism. (p. 311).
69. Popper, *Ibid.*, p. 333.
70. Hacoen, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 388.
71. Hacoen, *Ibid.*, p. 439.
72. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, p. 338.
73. Popper, Ref. 3, p. 441. We are mostly following Hacoen's account of Popper's limited familiarity with Marx and neo-Marxism.
74. Popper, *Ibid.*, p. 429.
75. Popper, *Ibid.*, p. 427.
76. Karl Popper, 'What is Dialectic?', *Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 332.
77. Steve Whitfield has suggested to us that Popper must have had communism, and not just fascism, in his sights early on for why else would he bother to 'slug it out' with Marx in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. But as we have just seen, Marxism was not so much dangerous in itself as it was dangerous for playing fascism's fool.
78. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 22, p. 1163–1164.
79. See Karl Keuth, *The Philosophy of Karl Popper* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 232–241 for a discussion of Popper's assessment that Hegel and Marx reduced thought to underlying historical laws. Keuth, by the way, succinctly captures how Popper's interpretive methodology goes awry without dismissing its value: 'We do not need *The Open Society* to recognize how the works of Plato and Marx are well suited to support fascist and communist totalitarianism, respectively. It is more difficult to judge to what extent these authors intended to further totalitarian rule. But we must give Popper credit for reminding us of the *suitability* of their works to this purpose [my italics]' (p. 328).
80. In this regard, see Karl Popper, 'On Freedom' in Karl Popper, *All Life is Problem Solving* (London and New York, Routledge, 1999), p. 84, where he says: 'I fully agree with Hugo von Hofmannsthal when he says in his *Buch der Freunde*: "Philosophy must be a *judge* of her times, things are in a bad way when she becomes an *expression* of the spirit of her times."'
81. See Allan Bloom, 'Interpretative Essay' in *The Republic of Plato*, ed. and trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), especially pp. 409–410.
82. For Popper's influence on Berlin's criticisms of the dangers of historicism qua historical inevitability, see Isaiah Berlin, 'Historical Inevitability', *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 49, n1, where Berlin says that Popper 'has exposed some of the fallacies of metaphysical "historicism" with' unsurpassed 'force and precision. . .' Also see 'Isaiah Berlin to Karl Popper', 4 November, 1957, Popper Archiv, Universitat Wien, Box 276, p. 10, where Berlin thanks Popper for sending him a copy of *The Poverty of Historicism*, noting 'how greatly indebted I am to your views on this particular topic'.
83. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, p. 182. Hacoen alludes to the obvious similarities between Popper and Berlin's anti-romanticism and shared motives for it. Moreover, Hacoen also notes that besides Berlin, Raymond Aron and Jacob Talmon 'echoed' Popper, arguing that 'both the French Revolution, in its Jacobin phase, and Marxist socialism reflected secularized and politicized messianism, searching for salvation in this world'. Such 'messianic neurosis' typically excused the very 'worst repression'. See Hacoen, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, pp. 508–509. Also see 'Isaiah Berlin to Karl Popper', 19 February 1952, Popper Archiv, Box 276, p. 10, where Berlin informs Popper that he won't be able to meet him in Oxford on March 7 because he will be 'delivering a lecture on the Enemy—(Herder, Hegel, etc.)' that same day.
84. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, p. 426.
85. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 35, p. 25. Also see Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, pp. 132 and 392.
86. See Taylor, *op. cit.*, Ref. 19, p. 78, where Taylor claims that Popper's view of liberalism is an 'apology for an utterly negative view of freedom'.

87. Hacothen, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 516. Also according to Hacothen, Popper advocated a ‘new liberalism’, whose ‘focus remained negative liberty’ (p. 510). Hacothen further claims that Popper read and agreed with T. H. Green though he also implies that he rejected Green and L. T. Hobhouse’s respective favorable accounts of positive freedom (p. 507, n218 and 516). Calling Popper a ‘new liberal’ is, of course, curious given that, historically speaking, the ‘new liberalism’ refers to English liberals like Green and Hobhouse.
88. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, p. 383.
89. ‘Karl Popper to Isaiah Berlin’, 17 February 1959, Berlin Papers, Bodleian Library Oxford University, MS Berlin 158, Fols. 234, p. 332–334.
90. ‘Isaiah Berlin to Karl Popper’, 16 March 1959, Popper Archiv, Box 276, p. 10.
91. Berlin, *ibid.*, p. 10. Popper responded to Berlin, in turn, writing that he agreed with Berlin’s criticisms and worries about scientism: ‘For my own work on science... could be described as an attack on scientism where it is *most* necessary to attack it (and perhaps most interesting)—that is, in science itself. My main thesis can be summed up by saying: *science has no authority*; it can claim no authority. Those who claim authority for science, or in the name of science (the doctors, the engineers), misunderstand science. Science is no more than rational criticism... I say all this because I want to interest you in my epistemology. It is the *necessary* background for any critical rationalism: for being a rationalist *without* claiming to know: for being interested—passionately interested—in knowledge while realizing that we won’t have any, and can’t have any, knowledge that can confer authority’. See ‘Karl Popper to Isaiah Berlin’, 21 March 1959, Popper Archive, Box 276, p. 10.
92. Charles Taylor, ‘What’s Wrong With Negative Liberty’ in his *Philosophy and the Human Sciences, Philosophical Papers, II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 215.
93. Karl Popper, ‘Toleration and Intellectual Responsibility’ in Karl Popper, *In Search of a Better World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 189.
94. Popper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 27, p. 86. This essay is a longer and later version of the essay cited in note 93. It is also more immoderate in the power and blame it attributes to intellectuals and their ideas: ‘But even cruelty is not altogether unknown among us intellectuals. In this too we have done our share. We need only think of the Nazi doctors who, some years before Auschwitz, were already killing off old and sick people—or of the so-called ‘final solution’ to the Jewish question’ (p. 87).
95. Karl Popper, ‘Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences’ in *Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 337.
96. Popper, *Ibid.*, p. 343.
97. Popper, *Ibid.*, pp. 345–6.
98. For Popper’s account of the evolutionary and biological sources of utilitarianism, see Karl Popper, ‘Knowledge and the Shaping of Reality’, *In Search of a Better World*, p. 17.
99. Munz, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 50.
100. For a more in depth discussion of how the liberal tradition has become artificially compressed see A. Simhony and D. Weinstein, ‘Introduction: The New Liberalism and the Liberal-Communitarian Debate’ in A. Simhony and D. Weinstein (Eds.), *The New Liberalism: Reconciling Liberty and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
101. We are indebted to J. G. A. Pocock for drawing our attention to how Popper was historicist himself. For Pocock, philosophers who do intellectual history typically do history badly: ‘That is, they think as philosophers; they see something going on in history which they think philosophically significant, and they (1) write its history, which may be legitimate, (2) write history as the history of this philosophic event or contest. Thus history becomes the war between the Open Society and its Enemies (Popper), or positive and negative liberty (Berlin), or ancient and modern philosophy (Strauss). To the extent (and it varies) to which they see history as driven by philosophic issues, their thought becomes historicist in Popper’s sense of the term, so that it can be applied even to him’. From personal correspondence with the authors.