

‘WAGING WARS FOR PEACE’*

Spiegel Herr Popper, the collapse of the Soviet Union has fulfilled a prophecy you made as much as half a century ago. Is this the triumph of critical rationalism over the enemies of the open society?

Popper I made no such prophecies, because I am of the view that no prophecies should be made. I think it is a completely wrong attitude to judge intellectuals by whether they make good prophecies.

The philosophy of history in Germany, at least since Hegel, has always thought it must somehow be prophetic. I think this is wrong. One learns from history, but history ends here and now. Our attitude to the future must be quite different from one of trying to extrapolate from history and, as it were, following the paths of history through into the future.

Spiegel Very well, if it was not a prophecy, you did at least expect liberal democracy to be victorious over various forms of despotism.

Popper Our attitude to the future must be: we are responsible now for what happens in the future. The past is something already given. We can no longer do anything about it, even if we are in another sense responsible for the past: that is, held responsible for what we have done. But for the future we are morally responsible here and now; we must do the best we can without any ideological lenses – even when the prospects are not too bright. The best is quite definitely what is least violent, what reduces suffering, unnecessary suffering.

Spiegel Is it not true that, already in Lenin’s time, Left Communists

complained that the stare ideology established in Russia with a single-party dictatorship had little in common with the original theories of Karl Marx, who wagered on a proletarian revolution in the industrialized West?

Popper I would say the following to that. The communist mania – and you find this already in Marx – is essentially a view of the so-called capitalist world as diabolic. What Marx called capitalism has never existed on earth, nor anything like it.

Spiegel Do you mean that there was never such a thing as Manchester liberalism with its terrible working conditions?

Popper Of course those were terribly hard times for the workers, but also for other people. Marx was mainly interested in the workers. As a simple historical fact, things have kept getting better for them since that time, whereas Marx claimed that they would keep going downhill and must keep going downhill.

Spiegel Do you mean his theory of absolute impoverishment?

Popper Yes. And because the impoverishment theory did not prove true, the impoverishment was transposed to the colonies – to what is nowadays called the Third World ...

Spiegel The so-called theory of imperialism.

Popper A typical intellectual’s formula and, of course, complete nonsense. For industrialization cannot be the same as impoverishment – that is as clear as anything can be. Things kept getting better for the colonies too.

So what was so-called capitalism? It was industrialization and mass production. And mass production means that a lot is produced, so that very many people get something. For mass production requires a large market and therefore a lot of buyers. Marx compared capitalism to hell. And hell has existed on earth just as little as Dante’s Inferno. *Lasciate ogni speranza* (‘Abandon all hope’) that is a conception of Dante’s Inferno that Marx explicitly attributed to capitalism. And if capitalism necessarily leads to impoverishment, then the only possible way out is a social revolution.

I am very critical of our contemporary society. A lot of things could be improved in it. But our liberal social order is the best and justest there has ever been on earth. It arose through evolution from *the one that Marx knew*.

Spiegel Is anything at all left of the ethical appeal of Marx’s critique

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of capitalism as socially unjust? Has the gulf between rich and poor actually narrowed on a world scale?

Popper The ethical appeal has existed in various forms since the Middle Ages. Among Christian thinkers, as well as among Enlightenment thinkers, the ethical appeal was paramount. And those opposed to this ethical appeal were essentially the Romantics.

Spiegel When you mention the Enlightenment, are you mainly thinking of Kant's call for a just civil constitution to spread throughout the world, as the highest duty of humanity? And is Hegel the chief Romantic for you?

Popper Quite right. The Romantic alternative was more or less that nothing can work without war and violence; that was how Hegel applied his experience of history. But if you consistently apply the past experiences of military conflict to our future, then there is really no hope left. For our weapons can now annihilate us. The omnicidal bath of atomic radiation has taken the place of the bloodbath of steel that seemed so invigorating to our Romantic forebears.

Spiegel What caused the collapse in Eastern Europe? Was it the economic drain of the arms race, or an intellectual bankruptcy, or doubt about their mission?

Popper A lot of things were involved: for example, that Hungary opened its borders for East Germans fleeing the GDR; or that Gorbachev instructed the Soviet Politburo to make an attempt at reform. But the economic reform was of absolutely no avail. The economy cannot be reformed from above. Then there was the intellectual desolation. All that was left of Marxism were empty words and a single substantive formula: 'Liquidate capitalism!' – the non-existent diabolical capitalism. Khrushchev tried to translate that into reality.

Spiegel Are you thinking of the poker game in 1962 when Soviet missiles were deployed in Fidel Castro's Cuba?

Popper Khrushchev had planned a devastating assault on the USA. He pulled back only when the Americans were ready to attack. The nuclear physicist Andrei Sakharov wrote in his *Memoirs* that even in a 'clean version' his Big Bomb would still be several thousand times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. Thirty-six of those bombs had already arrived in Cuba. And if Sakharov's 'several' means only three, that makes 108,000 Hiroshima bombs. You just have to try to

imagine it. In his farewell speech, Gorbachev said there exist some 50,000 of these bombs.

The Cuban crisis revealed what Marxism was capable of doing to achieve its aims: it was capable of trying to destroy capitalism with nuclear weapons. This should never be forgotten. Not only America would have gone under in such an attack; the whole world would have perished in a bath of radiation – even if it took a few terrible years.

Spiegel What does the world owe the perestroika reformer Gorbachev, who has now been swallowed up by his own reforms?

Popper A great deal. Gorbachev started to look at America in a way that Soviet rulers had not done before. He went there more than once and enjoyed being feted. Then he came up with an interesting un-Marxist formulation: I want the Soviet Union to become a normal country. That was an approximation to our idea of the rule of law. Gorbachev wanted to make the Soviet Union normal. We owe this completely new idea to him. That the Soviet Union had not previously been a normal country, we can see most clearly from Sakharov's *Memoirs*.

Spiegel The collapse of Soviet Communism and the end of the bipolar system have not made the world a safer place. Everywhere we have to face the return of nationalist demons, loosely controlled nuclear weapons, and the migration of people stricken by poverty. Are these the new enemies of liberal democracy?

Popper Our first objective today must be peace. It is very hard to achieve in a world such as ours, where Saddam Hussein and other dictators like him exist. We should not shrink from waging war for peace. In present conditions that is unavoidable. It is sad, but we have to do it if we want to save our world. Resolve is crucially important here.

Spiegel War to stop the further spread of weapons of mass destruction?

Popper At the moment, nothing is more important than to prevent the spread of these lunatic bombs, which are already being traded on the black market. The states of the civilized world that have not gone mad must work together on this. For I repeat: just one Sakharov bomb is several thousand times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. This means that, in any densely populated country, the detonation of just one bomb would cause millions of deaths, quite apart from the victims of radiation who would die of the effects over a

number of years. We must not get used to such things. Here we must take action.

Spiegel Should the Americans act against Saddam again if it looks as if he is making bombs?

Popper Not only against Saddam. There should be a kind of task force of the civilized world for such cases. To be pacifist in the outmoded sense would be madness. We must wage wars for peace – obviously in the least terrible form. Since it is a question of force, force must be used to stop the bomb being used.

Spiegel Now you are talking almost like Pentagon strategists who wish for a new world order against a background of *Pax Americana* that would also stall economic competition from Japan and Europe.

Popper I think it is criminal to talk like that. The need to prevent nuclear war cannot be confused with economic questions. We should try to cooperate so actively in this *Pax Americana* that it becomes a *Pax civilizata*. This is simply what the situation requires. It is not a minor issue but the survival of mankind that is at stake.

Spiegel During his trip to Germany, Gorbachev complained that if the West had given massive aid, the August putsch in Moscow would not have happened and he would not have fallen in its aftermath. Should the West do more for Boris Yeltsin, so that Russia does not sink into a still worse despotism?

Popper I think we should help. But Gorbachev has no right to complain. We owe him a lot, but he went on arming. The condition for our aid should be that Russia works together with us, the civilized countries, to bring these terrible weapons under effective control. But the Russian military has to be involved too.

Spiegel You are convinced that we live in the best and justest society there has ever been. But this liberal democracy has no convincing solutions to offer against widespread hunger in the Third World or the destruction of the environment.

Popper We are more than able to feed the whole world. The economic problem has been solved – by technologists, not by economists.

Spiegel But you can hardly dispute that there is mass poverty in large parts of the Third World.

Popper No. But that is mainly due to the political stupidity of leaders in the various countries where there is mass hunger. We freed

them too quickly and in too crude a way. They have yet to become states based on the rule of law. The same would happen if you left a kindergarten to its own devices.

Spiegel Are economic conflicts nowadays the continuation of war by other means? Europe and the USA are afraid they are losing the microchip war against the Japanese.

Popper These problems should not be taken seriously, and they should not be discussed in this way. It is what I have called the cynical view of history: intellectuals want to be clever instead of offering help. The Japanese are really civilized. You can talk to them. But time and again we are up against stupidity, both here and of course in Japan too.

Spiegel Stupidity? Do you mean strategies of economic conquest?

Popper Yes. Japan has big problems: it is overpopulated. But that can be discussed later. Unfortunately there are always journalists who misunderstand these things and are looking for a sensation. We have enough sensations already.

Spiegel But it has not simply been invented by journalists. The current 'Don't buy Japanese goods!' campaign in the USA suggests a deep sense of confrontation.

Popper Such a confrontation is nonsense. The whole thing is unimportant. At present Japan is not at all imperialistic. True, it has the industry and the potential to manufacture nuclear weapons at any time. But the Japanese know what that would mean.

In my view, theoretical economics has ground to a kind of intellectual halt; it has become bogged down in current problems. But the problems can all be solved. No millionaire has yet died of riches. And compared with the prewar world, you in Germany are all millionaires now.

Spiegel But overuse of the wealth of resources is evidently helping to blight our planet. Keyword: ozone hole.

Popper But such things are not known yet. Ozone holes may have existed for millions of years. It is possible they have no connection with anything modern.

Spiegel Renowned scientists see things differently. They think there really is a connection between chlorine concentrations and destruction of the ozone layer.

Popper Renowned scientists are not always right. I am not saying they are wrong — only that we often know less than we think.

Spiegel These are questions you usually argue about with the Greens, and from time to time they really let fly at you. Why is that?

Popper Because of their really crazy hostility to science and technology. There is an anti-rationalist kernel in the Greens that leads to the exact opposite of what they are supposed to want. They also want power themselves, and are as hypocritical as they claim their opponents to be.

Environmental disasters are largely due to the population explosion, which we must solve ethically. Really, only children who are wanted should come into the world.

Spiegel How do you think that can be achieved — through government directives, as in China?

Popper Not through government directives but through education. Unwanted children are at risk, and I mean morally. People who do not want them should have the means not to have them. The means exist already — I am thinking of the abortion pill.

Spiegel The Catholic Church and the Pope are not on your side there.

Popper The Church and the Pope will give way, especially if convincing ethical reasons are given. I am thinking of things like rape, or the birth of children infected with AIDS, or those who, in some countries, come into the world with practically no chances in life. It is a crime not to help such children by stopping them being born. The Church must and will give way on this; it is just a matter of time.

Spiegel Herr Popper, we should now like to talk about a few questions concerning Germany. One of the changes to the balance of power in Europe is the stronger, reunified Germany. Is there any reason why neighbouring countries should feel concerned?

Popper Of course there is. But the present situation in Germany — political and moral — is much better than one might have hoped. This says something about the basic rationality of human beings. But we do not know what lies ahead. It is a paradoxical thing about human well-being that, while it is based on vigilance against a host of dangers, it also undermines that vigilance. Freedom easily comes to be taken for granted — which means that one can again fall victim to a dictator. There have already been some possible signs of this in Austria.

Spiegel You can hardly say that, really. Presumably you are thinking of Jörg Haider, the spokesman of the right-wing Freedom Party?

Popper Yes. Young people there are keen on Haider. It has to do with the stupidity of their education. Haider's ideal is Hitler. He would like to do what Hitler did.

Spiegel He is not really saying that.

Popper He says it clearly enough to be heard. He says it for those who want to hear.

Spiegel In sixty years Germany has lived through two totalitarian systems. Right now we are faced with the problem of integrating the SED-Stasi state, where there was no rule of law. How can political guilt be measured? Can we in the West sit in moral judgement?

Popper We can certainly sit in moral judgement on the leading group of the former GDR, on those who were really responsible. I think that the attempts to make Honecker stand trial are very important.

Spiegel So you are not in favour of a widescale reckoning in a blaze of public denunciations, but only of the trial of some exemplary cases?

Popper It is extremely important that we manage with the least possible vengeance and similar abominations such as those committed in the former GDR.

Spiegel And without bigotry.

Popper Without bigotry too. The court must proceed with the utmost caution. The trial should deal only with the crimes of the former leaders — a hundred and fifty people at the most. That much should be done, but it is simply not possible to go any further — apart from anything else, it would rivalize things.

Spiegel And would you spare the collaborators because people are not heroes and, in a totalitarian society, they do what has to be done to lead a reasonably normal life?

Popper That is right. Too much should not be done to those who collaborated. Most of them were afraid. That is the method of terrorism — to frighten people. But there is some point at which heroism begins for everyone — the point when one is being forced actually to commit base and evil deeds. Then one does have to be a hero and to resist.

Spiegel The neo-conservative philosopher Francis Fukuyama, who is

currently in fashion in America, thinks that the ending of ideological conflicts and the worldwide spread of liberal democracy have brought 'the end of history'. The victory of democracy is supposed to have concluded the ideological evolution of humanity.

Popper Those are just silly phrases. There is no philosophical miracle. Marx too said that with the 'social revolution' the end of history would be nigh, because history is only the history of class struggle.

Spiegel Behind Fukuyama can be seen someone you do not greatly appreciate: namely, Hegel and his theory of the historical process as a series of contradictions that finally reaches its goal with the realization of freedom on earth.

Popper Of course. Hegel would say 'yes' to that, because he saw history as a history of power. That is also largely what it was. Our history books never took the development of humanity as their main theme, but only the history of power.

Of course, we do need an end of history – that is, an ending of the history of power. This has become necessary because of nuclear weapons. It was always morally necessary, but now the excess of weapons has made it necessary for survival.

Spiegel Already before Hiroshima, you wrote that man will one day disappear from the face of the earth.

Popper Why not? There are incalculable dangers. Just as all of us die, mankind too will probably die. Perhaps we will one day perish along with the solar system. But there is no point in talking, or even thinking, about such things. More likely is what I predicted long before AIDS – that some microbe will polish us off. That could happen very quickly. Any time. But there could still be many thousands of years to go until then.

Spiegel To repeat, then: there is no law of progress, no logical endpoint?

Popper Nothing like that. What there really is, is our enormous responsibility not to be cruel. For example, it is simply incomprehensible how we can allow children with AIDS to come into the world. For the Churches, too, the first attitude to life must be: no cruelty.

Spiegel Herr Popper, you are nearly ninety years of age and have always described yourself as an optimist through and through. But

this interview has struck some very pessimistic notes. Has new knowledge come in the evening of life?

Popper Optimism is a duty. One must focus on the things that need to be done and for which one is responsible. What I have said in this interview is meant to make you and others vigilant. We must live so that our grandchildren have a better life than ours – and not just in an economic sense.

Spiegel Herr Popper, we thank you for this interview.