

The Open Society—A Comment

E. H. GOMBRICH

Sir,

In the last issue there appeared a review article by Mr. John Plamenatz of the second edition of Professor Popper's book, *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Unlike the reviewer I cannot claim to be a specialist in this field, but as a friend of Professor Popper I was somewhat involved in the publication of the first edition of his book and so I know it well. After reading Mr. Plamenatz's article I feel that "so much that is careless, confused, badly argued or unjust ought not to pass without censure". The phrase, of course, is one Mr. Plamenatz sees fit to apply to the book (p. 273) and this, Sir, is the type of evidence on which he bases his verdict.

Mr. Plamenatz

p. 268 :

Professor Popper has also been unjust to Hegel . . . he gives to Marx the credit for an idea he very probably got from Hegel . . . it was probably from Hegel . . . that Marx learnt to consider "psychologism" a cardinal fault of method.

p. 270 :

Professor Popper believes that the Marxian doctrine that the economic factor is fundamental "is perfectly sound, as long as we take the term 'fundamental' in an ordinary vague sense, not laying too much stress upon it". Now this, in effect, is to invite us first to misinterpret Marx, and then to conclude that he was right provided he is understood to have said what he did not say . . . ; but there is too much evidence . . . that they (viz. Marx and Engels) meant much more than this . . . for anyone really familiar with their writings to be able to maintain the contrary.

So much for carelessness. Now for confusions which, by their nature, cannot be disentangled without a little comment. Mr. Plamenatz writes :

Professor Popper is sometimes quite reckless in what he says about Plato's admirers. For instance he suggests that Sir Ernest Barker has not noticed that Plato *deliberately* (my italics) confused egoism and individualism, and then attacked individualism as if it were the same thing as egoism. The impression left on the

Professor Popper

vol. II, p. 99 :

. . . it was . . . the influence of . . . Hegel's Platonizing collectivism, . . . that led Marx to the view expounded in this chapter [viz. his criticism of psychologism].

vol. II, p. 107 :

[After the quoted passage Professor Popper continues:]

But we must not take the term "fundamental" too seriously. *Marx himself undoubtedly did so . . .* [Italics mine; Marx's position is, of course, discussed and criticized in detail by Popper.]

reader is that Sir Ernest Barker has been so blinded by his admiration for Plato that he has not noticed that Plato did not like what we nowadays call individualism.

There are two confusions here. First, Professor Popper nowhere asserts that Plato's confusion—the one here in question—was *deliberate*, and so he cannot and does not blame Sir Ernest Barker for failing to notice that it was deliberate. Secondly, far from recklessly trying to leave such an impression on the reader, Professor Popper was careful enough to add a footnote to the passage concerned to exclude any misunderstanding. It reads (vol. I, p. 247):

Barker states (p. 176 f.) that "Platonic Justice" is "social justice" and *correctly emphasizes its holistic nature*. [My italics.]

"Holistic", of course, is here the equivalent of "anti-individualistic" (cf. vol. I, p. 100, lines 11 and 18).

The question of Plato's "caste state" is another case in point. Your reviewer says (p. 266) that "where a caste system prevails, a man's birth decides his social status and profession", and then accuses Professor Popper of "wantonly" misusing the word "caste" because "in Plato's ideal state everyone whatever his birth may be educated as a guardian". But there is no question of Professor Popper misusing the word "caste" for, on his reading of Plato's text, the *Republic* happens to be a caste state in precisely the sense of Mr. Plamenatz. Professor Popper discusses the evidence in detail (especially vol. I, p. 46, with notes 28, 27 and 31, and pp. 141, 149 ff., 51 ff.; notes 11 and 12 to chapter 8, etc.); and it is this evidence and not the alleged misuse of a word with which Mr. Plamenatz should have been concerned here. The same applies to Professor Popper's interpretation of Plato's theory of the downfall of cities as "historicist" or to his analysis of the elimination of equalitarian Justice from the *Republic*. Based, as they are, on a fresh reading of the text, they cannot be disposed of by a simple repetition of the traditional reading. But surely it is the height of confusion for Mr. Plamenatz to dismiss these central tenets of Professor Popper's interpretation of Plato's political philosophy as "mistaken", "quite misleading" and "fantastic" and to suggest at the same time that "Professor Popper's own account of Plato's political philosophy, being largely traditional, is mostly true" (p. 265).

But Mr. Plamenatz's review is not only "confused", it is also "badly argued". There are several instances in which your reviewer does not sustain his own argument. Mr. Plamenatz assures your readers (p. 269) that Professor Popper "says, not once, but several times, that Marx believed in the 'impotence of politics'". Now I have searched in vain for a single passage in the book containing the assertion that Marx *believed* in this. Professor Popper's point is, however, that it is (vol. II, p. 119) one of the "consequences of this theory" (i.e. Marx's economic theory of the state) that legal or political matters are comparatively powerless to produce a better state of the world. This, Popper says (vol. II, pp. 125-6), "is a consequence of the third-rate place which it (i.e. the theory) attributes to political power in the hierarchy of powers". Mr. Plamenatz does not deny this. He only assures us that

Marx "believed" in the power of politics and proceeds to tell us that "whether or nor Marx did (or could) reconcile these opinions with his economic determinism is another matter"—the very matter with which Professor Popper's analysis is concerned.

It would be tedious to give chapter and verse for all the other misreadings on which Mr. Plamenatz bases his grave charges, such as his supposition that Professor Popper's expression "affinity" really means "compatibility" (pp. 266-7), or his assertion (p. 271) that Professor Popper believes "tribal and other primitive societies" to be "totalitarian". One last instance must suffice. Your reviewer takes Professor Popper to task for writing that "Marx discovered the significance of economic power". "What about Saint Simon?" your reviewer exclaims. "What about Montesquieu?"—only to discover for himself that, after all, "it did not need the emergence of a special science of economics to teach men that wealth is one of the important factors of power".

If we turn to the censured passage, we discover that the context is not, after all, historical but rather psychological and explanatory. For Professor Popper writes, in the course of his polemic against Marx (vol. II, p. 127), "Marx discovered the significance of economic power; and it is understandable that he exaggerated its status. He and the Marxists see economic power everywhere." Had your reviewer quoted the passage in full, his exclamations would have appeared what they are—"unjust".

Mr. Plamenatz is under no obligation to like Professor Popper's book. Just as little, I suppose, as Professor Popper is under an obligation to like Aristotle's *Politics*. But in Mr. Plamenatz's article there is not even a reference to the purpose and the argument of the book he reviews at such length. Your readers will have been unable to guess that, and why, Professor Popper chose to discuss Plato, Hegel, and Marx as the most influential representatives of the type that sought and still seeks refuge in utopian totalitarianism and fatalistic historicism from the inevitable "sense of drift" caused by the breakdown of the Closed Society. Since your readers are even misled (pp. 270-1) as to the meaning Professor Popper attaches to the term "Open Society" they can have no inkling of the real issues raised by this book. Instead they are being presented with an incoherent selection of "mistakes"—as it happens, however, not of mistakes made by Professor Popper.

I am, Sir, yours faithfully,
E. H. GOMBRICH.

London, October, 1952.