Introduction

Open Society Unresolved: Charting the Contested Terrain

Christof Royer

As the editors of this volume, Liviu Matei and I settled on the title “Open Society Unresolved” for two main reasons: One is that open society has always been a contested concept; it has been vaguely (if at all) defined by its original architects, and its precise meaning has remained elusive ever since. The second is that many of the questions that surround the idea of an open society are still—and will remain—unresolved. There is, in fact, a good reason why Karl Popper, the thinker who popularized the term “open society,” was so smitten by Michael Oakeshott’s expression of a “politics of conversation” to capture the open-endedness of open societies.¹ For in a genuinely open society, solutions to moral, social, and political questions can only be tentative and must remain open to contestation; there can, in other words, be no final “once and for all” solutions. Inevitably, then, the question(s) of open society will remain unresolved, and they will—as they always have been—be confronted on contested terrain.

It is, of course, true that in public discourses as well as in the academic literature, open societies are routinely portrayed as liberal societies. For better or worse, open society has, as Norbert Götz and Carl Marklund put it, “become a watchword of liberal democracy” (2014). Seen in this light, things, indeed, look rather dismal for open societies. History has returned with a vengeance. Russia and China have (re)emerged as authoritarian challengers of the liberal international order, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine only being the most extreme expression of this conflict. Populist movements around the world claim to defend “the people” against “elites” while, at the same time, hollowing out fundamental pillars of liberal democracy. Political polarization threatens to tear apart even established democratic societies. Capitalism has turned out to be unsustainable and—depending on the view of the respective author—needs to be either reformed or abolished. Evils such as racism and sexism have anything but disappeared from human relations. In response, advocates of critical social

¹ For a splendid overview of this discussion, see Jacobs and Tregenza (2013).
Introduction

justice have gone so far as to reject freedom of speech as an ideological weapon of powerful elites to oppress marginalized groups. Modern technologies such as artificial intelligence produce new forms of domination on a global scale. The climate disaster is no longer a distant dystopia but has become a present-day reality. And then there is, of course, Covid-19 with its double effect of producing new fault lines, precarities, and exclusions, while exacerbating previously existing ones.

Yet, even if we leave aside for the moment the objection that it is too simplistic to equate open society with liberalism (or liberal democracy), there remains a further problem: it is one thing to diagnose that liberal, open societies are under attack and quite another to take open society seriously as a philosophical and political idea. Indeed, there are several potential reasons to doubt the usefulness of the concept, perhaps even to “forget” open society altogether.\(^2\) To start with, open society has always been a contested idea. It is, of course, true that most—if not all—of the concepts of the social sciences and humanities share this feature (Connolly 1993). In the case of open society, however, we face the problem that even its original architects (as will be seen in the next section) have left it rather underspecified. This “underspecification” invites radical criticism that questions the meaningfulness of the concept itself. Mark Lilla (2018), for instance, asserts that open society is an “oxymoron” as societies are by their very nature “closed”; unless one believes in the existence of a borderless world society, he thinks, open society is a contradiction in terms.

A second line of argument questions not so much the meaningfulness of the concept, but its normative desirability. Neil McInnes, in his criticism of Karl Popper, expresses this point most eloquently: “A society as open and abstract as the one Popper sought sounds like a cold, draughty place to those of us who come still trailing clouds of partisan loyalty from the old closed society” (2002, no pagination). No one really wants to live in such an environment.

Finally, it might be argued that a paradigm developed in the first half of the twentieth century is simply outdated. The world has radically changed, the challenges of today are unprecedented, and the enemies have changed their faces and tactics. Thus, rather than clinging to old ideas, we should focus our attention on developing new concepts and vocabularies better equipped to guide our thought and action in the twenty-first century.

To be sure, advocates of the open society need not be swayed by these criticisms. Lilla’s accusation of the open society as an oxymoron might well be based on a conflation of open society with “open borders.” The communitarian counter-argument wrongly assumes that theories of open society are necessarily oblivious to the importance of identification and belonging in social

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\(^2\) “Forget Open Society? Critical Conversations on a Contested Concept” was the—deliberately provocative—title of the first annual conference of the Open Society Research Platform (OSRP) held on October 28–29, 2021. Many of the chapters in this volume were first presented at this conference.
and political life. And those who think that the idea of open society is outdated tend to underestimate the adaptability of this concept. Nonetheless, those who advocate open society today cannot simply take its relevance or usefulness for granted. For such a presumption of self-evidence would, in fact, go against the critical ethos that lies at the heart of the concept of open society, a critical ethos that rejects every form of dogmatism and does not shy away from radical self-criticism and self-questioning. As such, the best way to promote open society is to demonstrate why and how this concept still matters in today’s world and, in doing so, take the self-critical ethos of the open society idea seriously.

This, indeed, is the purpose of the present volume. Its fourteen chapters bring together the theory of open society with the realities of social, moral, and political life. This, therefore, is a book neither on abstract philosophy nor on empirical social science; rather, it aims to bring to the fore the critical and constructive potential of open society to analyze, rethink, and address contemporary problems and challenges. It should be made clear from the outset, though, that the authors do not draw on a uniform conception of open society. Indeed, given the concept’s contested (or unresolved) nature, and the variety of possible interpretations, uniformity would be counterproductive and problematic. To impose uniformity would also contradict this volume’s ambition to be the first geographically and intellectually global volume on open society in theory and practice. Individual authors hail from different geographical and cultural backgrounds, they come from a variety of academic disciplines and scholarly traditions, and they address themes as diverse as public health, cognitive science, African cosmology, colonialism, or deliberative democracy. Thus, the commitment to a genuine diversity and plurality of viewpoints is one that lies at the heart of this book as much as it lies at the heart of the open society concept itself. However, what unites the individual authors and chapters is an interest in open society’s continuing usefulness and relevance to address contemporary problems.

In this introduction, I would like to set the stage for these contributions. As such, the introduction serves three purposes: The first is to give an overview of how the “original architects” (i.e., Henri Bergson, Karl Popper, and Friedrich Hayek) developed the concept of open society. Obviously, these “open society portraits” have to remain sketchy. Nonetheless, in the following section, my aim is not only to sketch out the basic contours of the three respective conceptions of open society but also to tease out some of the parallels and divergences between them. The second purpose is to map out the contested terrain of open society. In other words, I will give the reader a sense of how the concept of open society has (more) recently been used in the literature of the social sciences and the humanities. Again, this is not a comprehensive literature review but, rather, a critical overview of the state
of the debate on open society. The third purpose is to introduce the individual chapters of this book. This will not be done through a separate chapter outline, but as an integral part of the introduction. My aim is to show how the contributions to this volume relate to the existing literature on open society, how they push its boundaries, fill existing gaps, and open up further avenues for research.

Three Architects of Open Society: Bergson, Popper, Hayek

To be sure, the idea of open society long predates its coinage (Germino 1982). It is also not, as is often assumed, an exclusively “Western” concept. Echoes of this idea can be found in the philosophies of societies around the world, among others, as Nwankwo Nwaezeigwe demonstrates in this volume, in the Igbo culture of Southern Nigeria. This society, as Nwaezeigwe shows, is characterized by democratic structures and dispersed authority, high degrees of freedom and social mobility, and a strong egalitarian spirit.

As a philosophical concept, however, open society was introduced by the French philosopher Henri Bergson in his last major work (originally published in 1932)—The Two Sources of Morality and Religion (1977). The Two Sources is Bergson’s attempt to bring his ideas and insights developed in earlier works (especially in Creative Evolution) to the moral, social, and political realm. Bergson distinguishes here between what he calls a “mystic” or “open” society and a “static” or “closed” society. The mystic or open society is characterized by the “strength to love mankind” (1977, 23)—this strength, indeed, is what openness means for Bergson. Such a passionate “love of mankind,” according to Bergson, can be found in “open souls,” that is, in the mystic figures that “are not simply humans of vision, raptures, and ecstasies, but figures of action” (Ansell-Pearson 2018, 123). These open souls can act as the “harbingers of humanity” (ibid.) as it is through their emulation that we can (perhaps) bring into existence the “open society.” In the final chapter of The Two Sources, Bergson lays out the distinction between the open and the closed society in the following terms:

[There is] a sharp distinction, in the sphere of society, between the closed and the open. The closed society is that whose members hold together, caring nothing for the rest of humanity, on the alert for attack or defence, bound, in fact, to a perpetual readiness for battle. Such is human society fresh from the hands of nature. Man was made for this society as the ant was made for ant-heap. (1977, 266)

While this brief discussion cannot do justice to Bergson’s complex conception of open society, I want to draw attention to several features that I think are important: For Bergson, an open society is a form of democracy. It is not, however, an

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4 For a comprehensive review of the literature on open society between 1989 and today, see the database of the OSRP (https://elkanacenter.ceu.edu/database).
Introduction

already existing democracy but, rather, a “democracy to come” (Baugh 2016). Of course, it is anything but clear from Bergson’s account if such an open society can ever be realized. For the realization of the open society depends, as we have seen, on the emergence of mystical figures who embody the (radically) cosmopolitan “strength to love mankind.” To be fair, for Bergsonians this is not necessarily a problem. Rather, they embrace the fact that “the vague, or indefinite, is a technical idea at work throughout his writings” (Mullarkey 2012, 71). But let us go a step further and ask: What if such an open society were realized? Bergson’s open society, it seems, would have overcome many of the recalcitrant problems that have always haunted moral, social, and political life. Exclusion, struggle, and enmity would have been replaced by a love of mankind that would render politics obsolete. Obviously, the utopianism that undergirds this conception of open society is appealing to some and rejected by others. While prominent thinkers such as Eric Voegelin (1967) or Gilles Deleuze (1990) have found inspiration in Bergson’s work, Judith Shklar diagnoses in Bergson a “desire to escape from politics, from the unpoetic realities of everyday social life” (1998, 335).

However, one of the most interesting recent developments in the literature on Bergson is that some authors have brought to the fore the “practical relevance” of his thought. Andrea Pitts and Mark Westmoreland, for instance, have recently edited a splendid volume that brings Bergson into conversation with critical scholars of race and decolonial theory (2019). While it is true that some attempts to use Bergson, and especially his conception of open society as a transcendent “democracy to come,” have remained curiously abstract and somewhat detached from worldly realities, this volume demonstrates the radical potential of his thought for contemporary social, moral, and political questions. Jean-Louis Fabiani’s contribution to this volume has a broadly similar purpose. Asking whether or not Bergson’s definition of open society can be “useful today,” Fábiáni thinks that Bergson’s work can help us to alleviate one of the “major contradictions of our time”: that we try to include the socially marginalized by relying on the tools of identity politics, which are based on the distinction of “us” and “them” and the radical critique of Western universalism. Bergson, then, despite his seemingly outdated vocabulary, might well be a valuable source of inspiration for a (more) critical universalism, based on a “radical questioning of the logic of identity.”

If Bergson introduced the concept of open society to philosophy, then Karl Popper popularized it in his The Open Society and Its Enemies (2020). Having

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5 In their (excellent) entry on Bergson in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Leonard Lawlor and Valentine Moulard-Leonard contribute to the enigmatic status of Bergson’s open society when they write that “perhaps in these ideas of an always still to be named coming community, we find the enduring influence of Bergson’s ‘open society.’”

6 For a similar argument, albeit developed through the lens of Karl Popper’s conception of open society, see Gregory Lobo’s chapter. Kenneth Ka-Lok Chan, on the other hand, argues in his chapter that a successful battle of Hong Kong against a repressive Chinese government requires a “generic identity” inspired by the values of open society.
Introduction

penned this tome in exile in New Zealand, it was first published in 1945. Similar to Bergson’s *The Two Sources, The Open Society* is Popper’s attempt to apply his earlier ideas (in his case, in the philosophy of science) to social and political theory. As such, the book is driven by the epistemological outlook of “critical rationalism,” which holds that knowledge claims should be subjected to rational criticism in a trial and error process that seeks to “falsify” rather than to confirm them. This epistemological position has crucial consequences for the concept of open society. On a fundamental level, it even establishes an important parallel between Popper and Bergson. For both thinkers had a strong aversion to “historicism”—that is, the idea that history has a purpose and is determined by underlying “natural laws.” Popper expresses his aversion with characteristic lucidity: “History has no meaning,” he asserts in the final chapter of *The Open Society*. There are no natural laws built into our unfolding history. But although history has no meaning, “we can give it a meaning” (Popper 2020, 482); we—as humans—have agency to “become the makers of our fate.” Bergson, in a similar vein, rejects the idea of historicism: “If there were really a pre-existent direction along which man simply had to advance, moral renovation would be foreseeable; there would be no need, in each occasion, for a creative effort” (1977, 267).

In other respects, though, Popper’s critical rationalism leads to a conception of open society that is strikingly different from Bergson’s. Most obviously, Popper has little sympathy for Bergson’s mysticism. “My terms,” he announces, indicate, as it were, a *rationalistic decision*: the closed society is characterized by the belief in magical taboos, while the open society is one in which men have learned to be to some extent critical of taboos, and to base decisions on the authority of their own decisions (after discussion): Bergson; on the other hand, has a kind of *religious distinction* in mind.

(2020, 512, note 1 to introduction, emphases in original)

Popper, in other words, contrasts “the magical or tribal or collectivist society [which] will also be called the closed society,” with “the society in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions, the open society” (2020, 165). Again, I do not have space here to give a more detailed account of Popper’s conception of open society; but it is worth teasing out some of the central elements. Since open society “sets free the critical powers of man,” it is based on the idea that societal and political progress (just like progress in science) is linked to the critique of existing ideas, theories, taboos, and dogmas. For Popper, moreover, an open society is one in which the status of the individual is superior to the status of the collective (i.e., the community or the state). It is true that some commentators see this individualism as one of the salient strengths of Popper’s open society concept, while others criticize it as its fundamental flaw. At any rate, for Popper, “the transition from the closed to the
open society can be described as one of the deepest revolutions through which mankind has passed” precisely because it is marked by a “new individualism” (2020, 167). Finally, the combination of critical rationalism and the elevated position of the individual, leads Popper to the endorsement of a cosmopolitan position based on the idea of a “brotherhood of all men” (2020, 175). While this might seem to establish a further parallel between Popper and Bergson, it must be noted that this is a very different cosmopolitanism. Popper’s open society, in contrast to Bergson’s, is resolutely “anti-utopian” for two reasons: The first, and more obvious, is that Popper, throughout the book, rejects the utopian tendencies of thinkers like Plato, Marx, and Hegel (and their followers) to contrive “blueprints” for societies. Such a utopianism, Popper thinks, sets societies on a slippery slope toward totalitarianism and should be replaced with what he calls a “piecemeal approach” to social, moral, and political progress. The second (perhaps less obvious) reason is that Popper does not believe in the eventual overcoming of enmity. To be sure, the relationship between the open society and its enemies is more complex than most commentators tend to assume. At any rate, though, Popper believes that open society is not a normatively empty concept—and precisely because it stands for values such as openness, tolerance, or plurality, those who reject or violate these values are to be regarded as its enemies.

This normative thrust of Popper’s conception of open society is pivotal but easily overlooked (or willfully ignored). Open society, after all, does not stand for “anything goes” relativism; open society stands for very specific values and it is of crucial importance to express these values as clearly as possible, to stand up for them, and, if necessary, to defend them. Perhaps the most sustained engagement with Popper’s thought in this book is Gazela Pudar Draško and Predrag Krstić’s chapter. Based on a careful and imaginative reading of *The Open Society*, they unearth the deliberative elements in Popper’s thought and, more importantly, the reciprocal relationship between the traditions of open society and deliberative democracy. The one—deliberative democracy—institutionalizes what the other—open society—promotes: “a loud and well-founded protest against expectations, demands and, especially, against prescriptions of paths to social happiness.” Deliberation, they emphasize, does not take place in a normative vacuum; deliberation, rather, can only take place against a relatively stable normative background, provided and sustained by a “unity of human reason,” in which openness toward the voices and opinions of others is secured.

The third and final conception of open society I would like to sketch out is Friedrich Hayek’s. This selection might seem a bit more controversial since Hayek preferred the term “great society” to “open society.” There is, however, renewed interest in Hayek’s account (see below), which warrants a brief discussion of his

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7 Hayek’s use of the term “great society” is borrowed from Adam Smith; he sees it as a synonym to Popper’s “open society” (1977, 2).
conception of open society. Hayek is, of course, known (and much criticized today) as one of the fathers of neoliberalism—an ideology that also shaped his idea of a spontaneously generated and self-generating order that should not be interfered with. Hayek shares with Popper the idea that the “closed society” holds an enduring (even perpetual) attraction and that a return to tribalism is an ever-present possibility. But Hayek’s neoliberal principle of non-interference stands in marked contrast to Popper’s “piecemeal engineering” approach—laissez-faire instead of Popper’s *peu à peu* or Bergson’s “sudden leap.”

Of crucial importance in understanding Hayek’s idea is his distinction between a “spontaneous order” that leads to “rules of just conduct” and an “organized order” that decouples considerations of justice from a legal order. For Hayek, the open (or great) society is the outcome of the former, spontaneous order, based on rules of just conduct. He calls this order a “rule-connected” *nomocracy* that strictly applies the concepts of universalization and equality.  

“The conception of justice as we understand it,” he writes, “that is, the principle of treating all under the same rules . . . became the guide in the progressive approach to an Open Society of free individuals equal before the law” (1976, 39). An open society, therefore, is understood as an order “brought about by the observance of abstract and end-independent rules” (Hayek 1978, 39). The rationale behind this conception is clear enough: equality before the law is the central cornerstone of an open society; it is, indeed, the principle that made its emergence possible in the first place. For Hayek, this equality requires the abstract and universal application of the law; the law cannot—indeed, must not—take into consideration the peculiarities of individual cases lest it becomes arbitrary and, therefore, unjust. Hayek’s insistence on “universalization” leads him to a cosmopolitan position that—albeit in different expressions—we also find in Popper and Bergson. As Calvin Hayes observes, “Hayek is amazingly lacking in chauvinism of any kind: national, racial, even cultural and he was cosmopolitan in the best sense of that much abused and contested term. This is what he means by the ‘Great or Open Society’” (2008, 126). Now, the various criticisms of Hayek’s neoliberalism are, I think, well-known and do not need to be ruminated here. But there is a further important point that Hayek’s conception of open society finds difficult to account for. As Mark Notturno observes, one of the main differences between Popper and Hayek is that for the former, the recognition that the laws can be changed by the people marks the end of the closed and the beginning of the open society; for Hayek, on the other hand, a change of laws sounds the death knell of the open and ushers in the closed society. Indeed, what seems to be decisive for Hayek is the recognition that we are all equally bound by the same universal rules of conduct (Notturno 2014, 121). There is, then, a

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8 In distinguishing between “teleocracy” (an end-connected tribal society) and a “nomocracy” (rule-connected open society), Hayek is inspired by Michael Oakeshott’s distinction in *On Human Conduct.*
dynamic element built into Popper’s conception of the open society that seems to be absent from Hayek’s more static account.

Yet, Hayek’s conception of open society has made a, perhaps surprising, recent comeback via the work of Gerald Gaus. Gaus accuses Popper of advocating a “sectarian” vision of open society, which is deeply flawed and inadvertently encourages a retreat to the very reactionary tribalism it opposes—the two most tangible manifestations of this mindset are Brexit and the election of Donald Trump (2017). Against Popper, Gaus advocates an account of open society inspired by Hayek. Hayek, he claims, conceived of the open society as “an evolving moral, legal, and economic framework that encourages toleration, trust, mutually advantageous interactions, and the flow of information.” In contrast to Popper’s “arrogant sectarianism,” the core of Hayek’s open society “is free and willing cooperation of strangers on the basis of rules that allow each space to effectively pursue her aims and values” (Gaus 2017, 2–3). Ultimately, as Gaus asserts in his posthumously published *The Open Society and Its Complexities*, what Hayek allows us to see is that the open society is “an ever-increasing and relentless engine of diversity and inclusivity” (2021, 248). In this volume, Piers Turner’s chapter offers a powerful defense of Popper, arguing that Gaus wrongly associates Popper’s fallibilistic problem-solving and piecemeal social engineering with hyper-rationalism and hubristic ideal theory. He also asserts that Popper is right that the preservation of open society depends on the development of norms and traditions that can sustain liberal attitudes and modes of interaction. Pace Hayek and Gaus, then, a diverse, open society does not sustain itself without effort: “To obtain the benefits of diversity and to avoid its pitfalls, we must cultivate certain norms within our social morality, and protect them once established.” Hence Turner’s conviction that open society is an “achievement.”

Where does that leave us with the open society concept? As we have seen, the three “architects” of the idea have developed rather diverging notions of open society. Of course, it should not come as a surprise that differences arise between Bergson’s mysticism, Popper’s critical rationalism, and Hayek’s neoliberalism. Moreover, “opening up” the idea of open society to thinkers beyond the original architects, a project that seems theoretically and practically useful, would complicate the picture even further. As Andrea Timár’s Arendtian notion of open society or Avery White’s bold assertion of Robert Nozick’s meta-utopia as an expression of open society in this volume show, broadening the intellectual repertoire of open society invigorates the concept but surely does not render its terrain less contested. At the same time, though, there are family resemblances: a commitment to genuine human plurality and diversity, an aversion to all forms of authoritarian domination, a cosmopolitan conviction of the equal worth of individuals, a rejection of narrow (“tribal”) attachments to collectives and uncritical groupthink. These family resemblances, to be sure, do not change the fact that open society has always been, and will always be, a contested concept. This, however, does not devalue the idea of open society; quite the contrary. For one of the most fundamental features built into the idea
of open society is openness to contestation, which extends to the very concept of open society itself.

Open Society in Selected Thematic Areas

Turning away from the original architects of open society, I now want to offer a necessarily sketchy overview of several thematic areas in which open society has recently been used and link them to the contributions in this volume. Before doing so, allow me a more general comment. It is perhaps not too surprising that, in terms of sheer quantity, the literature on open society cannot compete with other concepts of the social sciences and humanities (e.g., democracy, liberalism, human rights, or globalization). Open society, however, also faces a more specific dilemma: the widespread unreflective use of open society as a mere slogan in book or article titles. Indeed, there are countless works out there that have open society in the title without ever discussing the concept—sometimes even without mentioning open society at all in the text. It is, thus, unfortunate but true that, as two perceptive commentators argue, open society is all too often “merely used as a catch phrase in political and social philosophy” (Armbrüster and Gebert 2002, 170). Yet, this is not to say that the contemporary literature on open society is generally dull or unsophisticated. In what follows, I will focus on the areas of authoritarianism, feminism, belonging and identification, education, and digital technology and public emergencies to introduce some of the most interesting works in these areas as well as the contributions of this volume to them.

Authoritarianism

One theme that has always been prominent in the literature is that authoritarian states reject (and violate) the values of an open society. But, of course, a direct analogy between the first half of the twentieth century (i.e., the historical background against which Bergson, Popper, and Hayek developed their conceptions of open society) and today is anything but straightforward. Michael Ignatieff (2018a and b) rightly argues that today’s enemies of the open society are very different: we are today faced with closed societies that have “shed their totalitarian form” and “assumed new authoritarian guises” (2018a, 2). For Ignatieff, the “new” enemies of open societies are “authoritarian single party states that are actually parasitic on our freedoms” (2018b, 335). And it is important to understand that these are not the “closed societies” of the past as they are not in the grip of messianic, totalizing ideologies. Still, it is clear what kind of “enemies” Ignatieff has in mind: states and governments that are relying—once again—on nationalist sentiments, on a sense of unity and (internal) solidarity that questions and even rejects the liberal democratic and cosmopolitan outlook of the open society. In a similar vein, Mark Bovens (2020) stresses that authoritarian states like China or Russia, populist movements, and democratic backsliding...
Introduction

around the world constitute a severe threat to the open society. This argument is also reiterated by those who focus on Hungary’s eviction of Central European University, which they portray as an assault on open society (Gagyi 2017; Bárd 2020). What the literature clearly illustrates, in short, is that authoritarianism is a specter that continues to haunt open society in theory and practice.

Several contributors to this volume continue this line of argument and develop it further. Kenneth Ka-Lok Chan, for example, sheds light on the ongoing conflict between mainland China and Hong Kong’s civil society through the lenses of “Liberal Universalism” and “Autocratic Functionalism.” He argues that while Hong Kong’s civil society organizations are in retreat under the pressure of Chinese autocratic rule, the normative appeal of open society as a custodian for the city’s distinctive values and identity can be expected to grow against the backdrop of the moral and institutional decay of the official, “Orwellian,” realm. However, the “uphill battle” against the oppressive government can only be successful if it is accompanied by “a generic identity that is both global and local, post-sovereign and post-national.” Lyubomir Terziev shifts the geographical focus and analyzes the neologism “sorosoid,” which has established itself as a buzzword with a strongly pejorative connotation in Bulgaria. A “sorosoid,” according to this narrative, is someone who (allegedly) receives money from George Soros, for whom the West, the European Union, and NATO are “sacred cows” and for whom the establishment of liberal democracy with its “hollow mantras” is a primary goal. Terziev’s central argument is that this neologism is not only an expression of tribalism but, more importantly, a linguistic ruse to dehumanize liberal-minded citizens. Not unlike the word “humanoid,” “sorosoid” describes someone (or something?) who resembles—but is not quite—a human being. According to Terziev, these attempts to close Bulgarian society must be resisted, and he outlines two potential strategies to do so: the “rationalist approach” and the “affective strategy.” Finally, Katalin Fábián turns to transnational alliances against feminism in Central and Eastern Europe. She argues that the reappearance of conservative, expressively masculine, and populist forces in post-communist politics has led to the embracing of anti-genderism in different national contexts. For Fábián, these movements resemble the proverbial canary in the coal mine: with the insistence on their monopoly to define sexual roles, these developments signal the instability of democracy and how much exclusionary nationalism has strengthened along with the normalization of anti-EU and anti-immigration sentiments and Islamophobia.

Feminism

Fábián’s contribution also opens up a second important line of inquiry: it brings the literature on open society in conversation with feminism. This, it has to be noted, has been one of the blind spots of the open society literature. In fact, it is telling that the only engagement with open society from a feminist perspective until now has been Fábián’s 2010 article, in which she analyzes the emergence
Introduction

of women’s groups in post-Soviet countries as a response to globalization and democratization. The rise of these movements is, according to Fábián, inextricably linked to the fact that “the regime transitions have opened up a space where gender analysis, social movement activism, and domestic and international economic and political changes clash” (2010, 124). Fábián, in other words, demonstrates how the “new openness” (i.e., the pressure of international exposure) affected gender relations in this region and, thus, demonstrates the fruitfulness of a feminist perspective to open society in theory and practice. With the chapter in this volume, Fábián once again seeks to build a bridge between the literatures on feminism and open society.

Apart from Fábián’s pioneering work, though, feminist engagements with the concept of open society have remained few and far between. It is to be hoped that future research will explore the complex relationship between these two traditions of thought in more detail.

Belonging and Identification in Open Society

The theme of feminism brings us up against the complex relationship between open society and what I would like to call “the problem of belonging and identification.” This problem has, in fact, three sides: The first is that rallying around collective identities such as gender, race, or the nation seems to throw us back to the “tribalism” that the original architects of open society sought to transcend. The second side of the problem, however, is that even open societies depend on common bonds and relationships that serve as a glue holding them together. Finally, open society’s anti-authoritarian thrust, and its corresponding concern for the marginalized and oppressed, establishes a clear link to some forms of (so-called) identity politics.

The literature on open society finds it very difficult to get around this tripartite problem. With few exceptions, it has had precious little to say about (as noted) feminism or critical race theory. One of these exceptions is the aforementioned edited volume by Andrea Pitts and Mark Westmoreland, which brings Bergson into conversation with critical scholars of race and decolonial theory (2020). On the other side of the spectrum, we find Danny Frederick’s scathing criticism in which he criticizes leftist identity politics through a Popperian lens as “the latest fashion for totalitarianism” (2019, 33).

In general, though, advocates of open society have paid more attention to nationalism. Particularly revealing in this context is a conversation (published in Rethinking Open Society) between Michael Ignatieff and Mark Lilla. Ignatieff admits that “an open society view of the world simply does not understand

9 The more common label, of course, is “identity politics.” This term, however, suffers from several inconsistencies, which is why I prefer the terms “belonging” and “identification.” What I mean here is that social and political relations are, for better or for worse, driven by the sentiment of belonging to, and identifying with, a specific group.
nationalism. For an open society credo, nationalism is almost exclusively negative” (2018, 21). For Lilla, this is a glaring blind spot of the open society ideal. Highly individualistic conceptions of open society simply turn a blind eye to the glue that holds societies together; thus, any conception of open society that neglects the fundamental human sentiments of belonging and identification is doomed to failure.10 In his short essay “Popper’s Return Engagement,” Neil McInnnes offers a similar, but perhaps even more radical, critique of Popper’s conception of open society. In a passage worth quoting at length, McInnnes eloquently expresses the gist of what might be called the communitarian critique of open society.

A society as open and abstract as the one Popper sought sounds like a cold, draughty place to those of us who come still trailing clouds of partisan loyalty from the old closed society. Before every last one of us is divested of the attachments that made the old society cohesive and secure, we would have to undergo a moral transformation not far short of that mystical rebirth that Henri Bergson saw at the dawn of his open society. In the meantime, while sincerely preferring the open over the closed polity, most people would nevertheless shrink from a society as open, as abstract and as impersonal as Popper . . . conceived of. (2002, no pagination)

The problems of belonging and identification will not go away. Of course, advocates of open society can choose to neglect it, as they often have done. But this will only strengthen the hand of those who want to “forget open society.” A more constructive strategy is to face the problem head on. In this volume, Rachid Boutayeb offers an original defense of an “open migration” based on the work of Helmut Plessner. A key concept in his narrative is, indeed, “coldness” as an anthropological condition that distinguishes society from community and its “suffocating warmth.” Coldness, in other words, can serve as an antidote to the “community radicalism” that undergirds radical contemporary movements as well as nationalism. Gregory Lobo, too, takes on the problem of nationalism in his chapter. Based on a careful engagement with Karl Popper, who rejected nationalism as a “romantic utopian idea,” Lobo portrays nationalism as a dangerous form of identity politics in which the individual is subjugated to the collective. But Lobo’s argument “against identity” is also inspired by Popper’s famous aversion to “essentialism” and the idea that “to claim an identity is,

10 To avoid misunderstandings, Lilla has long been a critic of “identity politics” (see Lilla 2018). Liberals, he argues, should focus on what unites them rather than on what separates them. In the conversation with Ignatieff, Lilla advocates the development of a “healthy nationalism,” based on the idea that “if liberals do not present a view of national attachment and affirm it, someone else will. We, liberal democrats, need to be able to articulate why attachment matters” (2018, 21–22).
essentially, to essentialize oneself.” As a consequence, he insists that there is no identity appropriate to open society.

**Digital Technology and Public Emergencies**

A burgeoning literature has evolved that brings the concept of open society together with digital technologies, big data, or surveillance. A considerable chunk of this literature is devoted to “transparency” as a fundamental ingredient of an open society (Holzner and Holzner 2006; Taylor and Kelsey 2016). One of the most fascinating pieces that brings open society together with the developing global surveillance regime is Ian Hosein’s “Transforming Travel and Border Controls: Checkpoints in the Open Society” (2005). This article vividly describes the post-9/11 travel policies that have increased the collection of information and surveillance of individuals to an unprecedented level. Hosein’s implicit argument is that 9/11 created a permanent state of exception in which measures implemented to combat terrorism are here to stay; and they do not target only terrorists but each and every one of us. It is important, though, not to miss the subtlety of Hosein’s argument: it is not so much the existence of these measures, he argues, but the lack of public deliberation that challenges the open society. What characterizes an open society, according to Hosein, is not so much the result achieved through deliberation but the process itself:

I am not calling for deliberation in the hope of coming to a consensus through some political process, I am calling for deliberation for the sake of deliberation. We need opposing views, not only because it may lead to better policy but also because it leads to public discourse. And the lack of public discourse was the first and greatest casualty in this new security environment. (2005, 620)

Hosein’s article touches upon two—often intertwined—themes: digital technology and public emergencies. This volume features two discussions that at least touch upon the transformative role of technology in modern societies. In her contribution, Anna Eva Grutza asks how Karl Popper’s criticism of certain social scientific methods relates to the work of intelligence services and, more broadly, the role of secrets in supposedly open societies. Bringing Popper’s work into dialogue with the sociologies of Edward Shils, Grutza critically interrogates the unquestioned value of transparency that characterizes the relevant open society literature and brings to the fore the difficult balancing act of, on the one hand, acknowledging the importance of secrecy for the proper functioning of a state, and, on the other, taking into account the dangers this secrecy poses for an open society. Ultimately, then, Grutza’s contribution seeks to demonstrate that reflecting upon and safeguarding the values of an open society points to important matters of futurity, which might help us to venture beyond secrecy and scientific prophecy.
The second theme can be dubbed “public emergencies.” There is very little literature that asks the question if, and to what degree, societies can remain “open” during public emergency situations. Presumably, this blind spot of the literature has to do with the bad reputation of the state of emergency, which was most famously portrayed by Carl Schmitt as a tool in the repertoire of authoritarian sovereigns and later lambasted as such by thinkers like Giorgio Agamben. But Covid-19 has, of course, brought this question into sharper relief. One attempt to address this problem is Michael Esfeld’s recent essay on open society and Covid-19. Drawing on Popper, Esfeld argues that the discourse around, and measures taken against, Covid-19 (as well as climate change) is incompatible with the idea of open society. Today’s fear-mongering elites, in fact, have a lot in common with Popper’s “enemies of the open society” because they “claim to possess knowledge of a common good” (2021, no pagination). Ultimately, the main point of Esfeld’s essay is that “the totalitarianism of all-encompassing control, into which even liberally conceived states and societies can slide if one allows negative externalities to be defined so arbitrarily that in the end everyone with all their actions comes under general suspicion of harming others” (2021, no pagination). In this volume, Tarun Weeramanthri challenges this view. Drawing on the works of Karl Popper, Antonio Gramsci, and Jürgen Habermas, Weeramanthri rejects the idea that open society cannot acknowledge public emergencies. Weeramanthri, a public health expert, argues that in cases such as Covid-19, a delicate balancing act that takes into account both the necessity of governmental interaction and the importance of individual rights in counteracting the crisis is necessary. Against one-dimensional assessments, he insists that in public emergency situations both intervention and non-intervention come at a (heavy) price. The important task is to communicate the complexity of these cases more clearly and openly to avoid counterproductive and dangerous backlashes. Equally important, Covid-19—the “most modern of morality tales”—should be interpreted as an impetus to open up the discipline of Public Health beyond its roots in the biomedical establishment and toward an engagement with other disciplines, especially political philosophy and sociology.

The Organization of the Book

Part II is entitled “National and Regional Perspectives on Open Society” and features Katalin Fábián’s “The Gender of Illiberalism,” Kenneth Ka-Lok Chan’s “Open Society Contested,” Lyubomir Terziev’s “Sorosoids,” Nwankwo Nwaeizeigwe’s “An African Background to the Open Society,” Anna Grutza’s “Imagining the Future of Intelligence in Open Societies,” and Tarun Weeramanthri’s “Open Society in Crisis.”

It is to be hoped that this structure helps to establish a certain coherence of the volume as a whole while, at the same time, reflecting the underlying vision of the book as a genuinely interdisciplinary and global effort to unlock the potential of the open society idea in theory and practice. As such, this structure should not be seen as a watertight demarcation. The reader will surely notice that chapters in the “philosophical and theoretical perspectives” part often venture into questions of practical relevance, and that contributions to the “national and regional perspectives” part strive for theoretical sophistication. Nonetheless, the structure of the volume and the arrangement of individual chapters will, I hope, bring to the fore the red thread that runs through the book and ensure its coherence and readability.

Conclusion: Challenges Ahead

The terrain of open society is—and will remain—contested. But the idea is not empty. A commitment to genuine human plurality and diversity, an aversion to all forms of authoritarian domination, a cosmopolitan conviction of the equal worth of individuals, a rejection of narrow (“tribal”) attachments to collectives and uncritical groupthink—these beliefs lie at the heart of the open society concept. Advocates of open society also firmly believe in the value of open discussion and deliberation. Thom Scott-Phillips’s chapter in this volume is a testament to this conviction. Bringing together evolutionary and cognitive perspectives with the social sciences, Phillips describes the human mind as a “fundamentally social mind,” which allows him to defend the argument that “open discussion works.” That is, relative to other forms of group decision-making, conclusions reached through open discussion are more likely to balance the interests of all parties and generate a number of features that defend against closed and populist ways of thinking. These include exposure to diverse perspectives, equality of deliberative opportunity, deliberative transparency, and the production of shared knowledge. Yet, the challenge, as he rightly emphasizes, is: How can we recreate these dynamics in the modern world, where large institutions and complex media can undermine these core features of open discussion? While Phillips proposes a model of randomly chosen citizens to deliberate on the laws and institutions that should govern them, this will remain a core challenge for advocates of open society. How do we build open society institutions?

A slightly different challenge is learning to live with and in an open society. One of the features that distinguishes Popper’s conception of the open society from others is its resolute anti-utopianism. Open societies, Popper argues, are
haunted by a “strain of civilization” that renders them insecure and uncomfortable. It is true that many commentators—including those who seek to advocate Popper’s conception of open society—miss this point. Thus, Mark Notturno rightly admonishes that “many people who regard themselves as sympathetic to Popper’s idea of open society seem to … regard open society as something warm, fuzzy, and comforting. But this … is not the way in which Popper thought about it … He certainly did not regard it as a utopia” (2014, 119–120). Advocates of open society would do well to pay heed to the “strain of civilization.” Doing so raises the question: How can (and should) we deal with the uncertainties, inefficiencies, and imperfections of an open society?

The third challenge is drawing boundaries. For if it is true that open society is not merely a euphemism for relativism, and if it is true that open society stands for certain values, the question is how to defend these values against those who reject and violate them. An open society, as Piers Turner argues in this book, does not create and sustain itself—it is an “achievement.” But this achievement rests on a delicate balancing act: being committed to the values of human freedom and plurality, on the one hand, and acknowledging that these values are not absolute, on the other. Advocates of open society must go beyond formulaic expressions and worn-out clichés and develop new ideas of how to strike this balance. This entails the critical skill to exercise judgment. Andrea Timár’s chapter in this volume, in fact, develops some intriguing ideas on this human faculty. Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s concepts of “enlarged mentality,” “solidarity,” and “representative thinking,” Timár argues that the literature classroom “allows for students to experience the workings of an open society.” It is this setting that produces (literary) judgment based on processes of persuasion, negotiation, compromise, and agreement, and that can serve as a source of inspiration for creating and sustaining open societies. Still, one of the central challenges ahead remains: How do we draw boundaries in, without sacrificing the values of, an open society?

Finally, the previous point circles us back to the importance of avoiding complacency. True, drawing boundaries is important. Yet, open society and its underlying values must not be used as ideological to stigmatize “otherness.” Openness must not become dogmatic. And a belief in the self-evidence of one’s own values is not a hallmark of the open society idea—it is its enemy. This aversion to self-evidence and dogmatism also includes the question of the continuing relevance of the open society idea. Hence our emphasis on the unresolved nature of open society.

11 A related important insight on this question comes from Piers Turner who reminds us—pace Gaus—that “if the line is drawn precisely at the point of protecting diversity itself, then there seems to be good reason to draw it from the perspective of open society, even if it is to the detriment of some.”
Bibliography


