

Sir Karl Raimund Popper
(1902–1994)

AGAINST WHAT MAY BE CALLED THE CYNICAL INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

Sir Karl Raimund Popper

I wish to thank all of you who have come here, honoring me in your presence. I feel that I am deeply in your debt. So much so that I shall try to return the compliment by making a serious effort not to bore you with my lecture. Throughout my long life I have never felt bored—except during some lectures. I remember in particular the torture I suffered in high school during the lectures in the subjects of history and geography. The effects of boredom produced in me an extremely painful and almost lethal paralysis of the brain.

These experiences remain painful even in retrospect, after some 78 years, to be precise. And they make me sympathize with those high school teachers who succumb to a need to pepper up their lessons on history by adding a pinch of cynicism. I therefore can understand, even though I cannot excuse, their efforts to make a great new fashion out of what I call the cynical conception of history.

The cynical conception of history says that—in history, just as everywhere else—greed is always the only thing that governs: greed for material objects, greed for money, for gold, for oil, for power. “It has been so,” says the cynic, “and so will it most likely always be. It has been so in despotic regimes, and it is not much different in a democracy, except for the fact that in a democracy, the hypocrisy is possibly even worse.”

I consider this doctrine to be not only wrong but also irresponsible, especially because a certain plausibility seems to support it. And I consider it a compelling duty to fight against it, for how we think about ourselves and our history is important; it is important for our decisions and for our actions. That is the reason why I have picked this theme for my lecture.

This cynical interpretation of history is the third of the three great fashionable conceptions of history which I must briefly discuss. Nowadays, it appears to be the direct successor of the famous Marxist conception of history, which in turn became the great fashion in Germany after the nationalistic, or racial, interpretation of history collapsed, together with Hitler.

The nationalistic or racial interpretation was dominant in Germany between the Napoleonic Wars and the fall of the Hitler regime. It became fashionable long before Hitler; indeed, it was the success of this interpretation that created the intellectual atmosphere—the world view—without which Hitler would not have been possible. It is in part Napoleon and in part his contemporary Hegel to whom we are indebted for this *Weltanschauung*. History, according to this conception, was a war of nations or races for dominance. This war was seen as a total war of annihilation. According to this theory of history, the defeat of the Hitler regime would have had to have meant the total destruction of the German people. It is well known that in the end, Hitler did all he could to bring about in practice this theoretically predicted total destruction of the German people. Fortunately, despite his efforts, the prediction did not come true.

Any serious theory is discredited if its predictions are shown to be false. This is what happened to the nationalistic interpretation of history. It may have contributed to the fact that after Hitler and after the Hegelian nationalistic conception, the Marxist interpretation of history became immensely fashionable—and not only in East Germany. Since it was the intellectual collapse of the Marxist conception of history that led to the recent victory of the third, cynical conception, I must first discuss a little more the Marxist conception. I also would like to do this because the battle against the Marxist interpretation of history has played an important role in my life.

The Marxist interpretation of history is famous under the names “materialistic conception of history” or “historical materialism”—two names that go back to both Marx and Engels. It is a reinterpretation of Hegel’s philosophy of history. This time, however, history is no longer seen as a history of a war between races, but rather as a history of a war between classes. This interpretation has one single goal: to offer a *proof—a scientific proof*—that socialism—(or communism, words are not important here) must prevail, owing to a mechanism called “historical necessity.”

This supposed proof is found for the first time in the last three pages of Marx’s book *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847); it also appears in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Capital* (1867). Here follows a short summary in two paragraphs:

(1) All history is a history of class war. In our time (1847 and later) the struggle is between the bourgeoisie, the exploiters, the ruling class since the French Revolution, on the one side, and the working class, the exploited proletarians, on the other. This struggle cannot end except with the victory of the workers, the producers, for they will become class conscious; and if they organize themselves, they can call an all-out strike and put an end to production. Provided that they are organized, they have the power. All wheels stop turning when the strong arm of the worker so decides. The producers have the material power (even if they are not yet conscious of holding it). Besides, they form the overwhelming majority. It follows that their emancipation is inevitable, as is their victory in the coming “Social Revolution.” This will end with the liquidation of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, a process made certain by the establishment of a dictatorship of the victorious proletarians.

(2) This establishes a society that consists of one class only: it is a *classless* society of the producers. Therefore, there can be no longer any ruling class, since with the liquidation of the bourgeois-

sie, there are no longer any rulers and any ruled; mankind is set free. And with the classless society, the longed-for eternal peace is achieved. For all wars are class wars, and there are no longer any classes in a classless society.

This is the “scientific proof” that “historical necessity” forces the coming of socialism.

Marx himself raises an objection in the penultimate page of his book *The Poverty of Philosophy* in 1847: Could it not be possible that after the disappearance of the old class society, a new class society would rise to power and, with it, a new class-divided society? To this question, obviously of crucial significance, Marx answers with one word: “No.” He seems to presume that the producing class—the working class—will not split up. Marx does not foresee the fact that (as later in the French revolution) a split will occur between a new ruling class (of Napoleonic dictators) supported by the newly risen bureaucracy, their police, and their henchmen on the one side and, on the other side, the rest of the nation. In the case of France, this split was healed by Napoleon’s incredible victories which excited and united a torn nation.

The Marxist claim to the scientific provability of the predication that history must result in a social revolution and therefore that the coming of socialism is inevitable—in the same way as Newtonians can predict a solar eclipse—this claim contains a frightening moral danger. This I experienced myself when I was sixteen-and-a-half years old. When a young person is taken in by and believes in the scientific proof of socialism’s historical necessity, he or she then feels a deep moral duty not to stand in the way but to help out the coming of socialism, even when he or she realizes—as I did—that the communists often lie and that their means are morally reprehensible. For if socialism *must* come, then it is obviously *criminal* to fight against its coming. Indeed, it is the clear duty of everyone to foster it, so that what must come in any case faces as little resistance as possible. One cannot, of course, do this alone. He or she must join a movement, follow the party and loyally support it—even when that means that one supports, or at least swallows, things which he or she finds morally repulsive and, indeed, nauseating.

This is a mechanism that must lead to personal corruption. One swallows more and more intellectual tricks, excuses, and lies, and when one has crossed a certain threshold, he or she is—presumably—ready for anything. This is the way that may lead to political terrorism and crime.

I myself escaped from this frightful mechanism after being caught up in it for about eight weeks. Shortly before my 17th birthday, I gave up for good: I condemned Marxism. Struck by the death of several young companions who were shot by the police in a demonstration, I asked myself, “Do you actually know that this scientific proof is correct? Have you really examined it critically? Can you accept the intellectual responsibility for supporting the resolve of other young people, so that they can put their own lives at risk?”

I found that the only honest answer to this question was a clear “No.” I had not critically examined the Marxist proof. I had mostly relied on the approval of the proof by others who believed that, as Marx’s proof was “scientific,” his conclusions must be true; and again of others, who, for their part, relied on the approval of others, including me: a mutually reassuring assurance in which all the partners are intellectually bankrupt and in which all of them—in most cases unknowingly—always seduce each other into engaging in falsehoods. It is a condition which I recognized in myself and which clearly was found most blatantly in the party leaders.

I realized that everything depended on the Marxist proof for the coming of the classless society. But this proof falls apart precisely at the point at which Marx saw the possibility of, and subsequently rejected, a counterargument. Obviously it is the party leaders who, with the help of the Party, destroy Marx’s hope by moulding the foundation of the “New Class,” that ruling “New Class” which deceives and distrusts its future subjects but demands from them their trust. Already before their victory and before the dictatorship, the party leaders were the rulers who kicked all those who asked discomfiting questions out of the party. (They couldn’t kill such people yet.) That was their method of dealing with people. That was the source of the party discipline.

I had the great and undeserved luck to see all this at the right time. On my 17th birthday, I turned my back on Marxism forever. What would have become of me, if I had participated longer? Consider Sacharov (1921–1989) who later in his life became a brave and determined dissident. Although not a party member, he was bound to Marxism, and to the Marxist “proof,” at least up to his 41st year, by an almost compulsive belief. This made him do the most terrible things: he worked hard to provide the most horrifying weapon of mass destruction that had ever been invented, first to Stalin (via his executioner Beria) and later to Khrushchev. Of this “Big Bomb,” as he called it, he wrote in his *Memoirs* (p. 218): “I had decided to test a ‘clean’ version: this would reduce its force, but

this Big Bomb would still greatly surpass any previously tested charge, and would be several thousand times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.” Of the consequences of the radioactive fallout released by this particular “clean” test he writes that “radioactive carbon would still cause an enormous number of victims over the next five thousand years.”

I later met prominent scientists who believed in the Marxist proof and belonged to the communist party. I am proud that I was able to convince one of the greatest of them to leave the party. That was the great biologist J.B.S. Haldane.

When Stalin died in 1953, Sacharov (who was 32) still believed in him. He excused Stalin’s crimes as humanistic acts because (he thought) such things were necessary during a social revolution of such paramount significance for mankind. He tells the story in his *Memoirs*, page 164. It is clear that, looking back, he was unable to understand himself.

With Sacharov’s example before me, I feel how lucky I was. Living in the West, I was able to get away in time. It became clear to me very early that one may have the right to sacrifice oneself for one’s ideals, but never anybody else.

Although the goals and the purpose of the Marxist proof were to guarantee the necessary coming of socialism and of peace on earth, there are also other characteristics in the Marxist interpretation of history which one may call vulgar-Marxist. To sum up briefly: Everybody except those who are fighting for socialism have only their own interests in mind, and nothing else. Those who do not admit to this are swindlers and hypocrites; worse still, they are criminals—criminals of a grand scale. For if they try to halt the coming of socialism, then they carry the responsibility for all the human beings who had to be sacrificed, for the revolution. Indeed, it is the resistance to a historically necessary revolution that leads to violence. In the last analysis, it is the material greed of these criminals that forces the revolutionaries to spill blood.

With this I now come to explain the rise of the last great fashion in the interpretation of history, what I will call the cynical interpretation.

It is clear that if one leaves the coming of socialism out of Marxist theory, the result leads directly to the cynical interpretation. A new idea is not required, except perhaps the pessimistic idea that greed has always been the main driving force and that it will always re-

main so; even in our affluent society it is still hunger, expulsion, war, and suffering which will continue to play the main roles. It is still the greed for power, the greed for gold, the greed for oil, and the corrupt defense industries that rule the social world as Marx revealed it. But since socialism will not come, there is now something else.

Marxism, and hence now the cynics, teach that all this is, of course, worst in the richest of all countries: the United States of America. Thereby arises anti-Americanism in other countries—especially in Germany, which is the next in wealth.

With this observation I close my brief sketch of the currently so fashionable cynical interpretation of history and its two influential and dangerous predecessors. And now, with a sharp about-face, I come to explain some of my own views.

You will see how sharp this about-face is in my next sentence, for I could to a certain extent call it the title of the second half of my essay. This title is: *I am an optimist*.

I am an optimist. But I am an optimist who knows nothing about the future, an optimist who cannot and does not make any predictions. I maintain that we must make a very sharp distinction between the present, which we are able to assess (and even to judge morally), and the future, which is wide open and which can be influenced by us. We therefore have the moral duty to look upon the future in a completely different manner from the past—not as an extension of the past and present. The open future contains innumerable possibilities that are unforeseeable, and most of these possibilities are very different from a moral or humanitarian point of view. Therefore, we cannot allow our actions to be ruled by the question, “What will happen?” but rather by the question, “What should we do in order to make the world a little better? And if we are really in a position to improve the world, what should we do when we know that later generations may perhaps worsen everything again?”

Here I begin with the second half of my lecture. It has again two halves. The first is a defense of my optimism in regard to the present. The second is a defense of my activism in regard to the future.

To say it right away, it was my first visit to the United States in 1950 that made me into an optimist again. Since then, I have been in America about 20 times, and every time my impression has al-

ways become more deepened. That first visit tore me away from my depression that resulted from the all overwhelming influence of Marxism among the intellectuals of post-war Europe. My book, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* that I began in 1938 after Hitler's march into Austria, had been published in 1945. But despite good reviews and wide circulation, it seemed unable to influence the triumphant progress of the Marxist ideology.

I must now explain in more detail the main points of my optimism:

1) My optimism refers exclusively to the present and not to the future. I do not believe that such a thing as a law of progress exists. No such law exists, not even in the natural sciences or in technology. Progress should only be described as probable. It depends exclusively on us, on our efforts.

2) I assert that we in the West live at this moment in the best social world that has ever existed—despite the high treason of most intellectuals who proclaim a new religion, a pessimistic religion, according to which we live in a moral hell and are being destroyed by physical and moral pollution.

3) I maintain not only that this pessimistic religion is a blatant lie, but also—to come straight to one of my most important points—that there has never been a society which has been so willing and open to reform as our Western society.

4) This willingness and openness to reform is the result of a new ethical readiness to make sacrifices, a readiness that showed itself already in the two world wars, and indeed on both sides. In the Seven Years War Frederick II still had to drive his soldiers to face the enemy by the constant threat of execution. But it turned out that an appeal to duty, an ethical appeal, was enough: duty to the fatherland in Germany; to the fatherland, to freedom and peace in the West; and an appeal to comradeship on both sides.

As I have already indicated, I believe from my own experiences that the power of communism lay in its ethical appeal. The so-called “peace movement” is similar. Indeed, I believe that some terrorists also originally followed an ethical appeal, which entangled them in that inner falseness which I tried to describe earlier.

Bertrand Russell, to whom I felt very close for many years (until in his later years, he fell into the hands of a communist secretary) wrote that the problem of our times lay in the fact that our intelligence has developed too quickly while our morals have developed

too slowly, and that as we discovered nuclear physics we did not generate the necessary moral principles. According to Russell, we have become too smart, but morally, we are underdeveloped. Russell's view was shared by many, including the cynics. I believe exactly the opposite. I believe that we are too good and too stupid. We are uncritical and easily led by the nose—by ideologies that appeal directly to our morals. And we do not question theories critically, especially if they were invented by great men, for we believe that great men must be right. But I think they are fallible. We are intellectually immature, and thus we become the willing and sacrificial lambs of silly ideologies.

I would like to summarize the positive side of my optimism in the following way: We live in a beautiful, wonderful world, and we have created here in the Western world the best social system that has ever been created. And we are continually striving to make it better, to reform it—a task that is not at all simple. Many reforms that seem to us at first to be full of hope unfortunately prove to be failures. For the consequences of our sociopolitical actions are often completely different from what we predicted and intended. Most of what happens in society consists of the unintended consequences of our well-meant actions. This is one of the most crucial insights that can be made. Nevertheless, we have achieved much more than many of us (for example, myself) have expected.

To sum up, the currently dominating ideology that we live in a morally evil world is a flagrant lie. Its promulgation disheartens many young people and causes them to be unhappy—in an age in which they may not be able to live at all without being supported by hope. As I have already briefly formulated: I am not an optimist in regard to the future. *The future is open*. There is no historical law of progress. What will happen tomorrow, we don't know. There are billions of possibilities, good and bad, that no one can predict. I reject the prophetic aims of the three interpretations of history here discussed, and I assert that for moral reasons, we should not try to put anything in their place. The idea that history is a mighty stream whose future course should at least partially be foreseeable is an attempt to exalt a metaphor into a theory; to make a religion out of a sacrificial picture.

The only proper attitude is to see the past and the future in a completely different light. We should historically and morally judge the facts of the past in order to learn what may be possible and what is ethically correct. And we should in no way attempt to observe movements and trends from the past in order to make predictions about the future. For the future is open; anything can happen.

At this moment there are thousands of Sacharov's superbombs in the former Soviet Union and there are surely many megalomaniacs who would be glad to use them. Humanity *can* be wiped out tomorrow. But there are also great hopes: there are innumerable possibilities for the future that are even better than the present; and for these we must work.

Unfortunately, this way of focusing on the future is not easy to comprehend, and there are many intellectuals who simply cannot comprehend this distinction between the past and the future. These are namely the intellectuals who have learned from Marxism that an intelligent person must be capable of predicting a revolution just as Newton could predict an eclipse. It is not seldom that someone suggests to me that I could not possibly be an optimist without predicting a bright future.

However, I declare: *all that my optimism with regard to the present can give for the future is hope*. It can give us hope and an incentive, for since we have succeeded in making some things better, a similar success in the future is thus shown to be not quite impossible. We have achieved, for example, that there is virtually no slavery in the West since the abolition of housemaids (*Dienstmädchen*) in the 1920's. At least in this sense the West is now free; and of this we can be proud.

As for the future, we shouldn't try to prophesy, but rather try to act in a morally responsible way. This, however, makes it a duty for us to learn to see the present properly and not through the colored spectacles of an ideology. We can learn from the present and from reality what has been possible to achieve. But if we see reality through the spectacles of one of the three ideological concepts of history, we have no longer the duty to achieve anything that is not preordained by "history."

The future is open, and we are responsible for doing our best in order to make the future even better than the present. But this responsibility assumes and requires freedom. Under despotism, we are slaves, and slaves are not responsible for what they do. I now come to my last main topic. It is this:

Political freedom—the freedom from despotism—is the most important of all political values. And we must always be ready to fight for political freedom since this freedom can always be lost. We must never take its existence for granted.

I declare that under despotism all people are in the danger of betraying mankind and thereby losing their own humanity, of becoming dehumanized. Even a person such as Andrei Sacharov, who through his later exemplary actions proved that he had the courage for resistance against despotism, could, when he was younger, behave like a sadist, a criminal. Sacharov, as I already indicated, made a great effort to place the most frightening means of mass destruction into the blood-soaked hands of the sadist Beria, the worst of Stalin's executioners. In addition he had also sketched an even more frightening plan of deployment for the use of the Russian fleet. A higher official rejected this plan because it was against his sense of morality in war. All this happened because Sacharov was blinded by that despicable and insane Marxist ideology that made him believe in the mission of the great humanist Stalin—for this is how Sacharov thought of Stalin. Thus Sacharov, having inhaled the atmosphere of this despotism, became almost insane, from our point of view; only for a time but nevertheless long enough to prepare for the greatest evil; long enough to hang the sword of Damokles over every living organism.

Despotism robs us of our humanity, for it robs us of our humanitarian responsibility. If you try to follow your conscience under despotism you are faced with impossibilities, with unresolvable conflicts. For example, you must fear destroying your nearest and dearest if you help the victims of persecution; you may destroy them even if you resist taking part yourself in the persecution. You must have the courage to not confuse your true duty with an alleged duty toward your superior—the same duty that Sacharov had promised Beria and later Krushchev he would fulfill—much like the German war criminals.

We can see how despotism destroys all human duties and responsibilities, along with the few people who try to fulfill them, in the unforgettable example of the White Rose, that circle of students (and also one of their professors) at the University of Munich, who through the distribution of pamphlets in the Winter of 1942-43 called for resistance against Hitler's war. Hans and Sophie Scholl, brother and sister, were executed along with Christoph Probst on February 22, 1943. The same fate befell Alexander Schmorell and the philosophy professor Kurt Huber on July 13, 1943, and Willi Graf on October 12 of the same year. Hans Scholl was 24 years old. Sophie was 21. The other students were of similar age. A few of their companions from the White Rose are still living today.

Heroes who can serve as a model for us have become very rare in our days. But these people were heroes: they fought what was for

them an almost hopeless battle in the hope that others would be inspired to take up the fight. And they were models for us: they fought for freedom and responsibility and for their and our humanity. The enormous, inhuman power of despotism silenced them. But we must not forget them. And we must speak and act in their stead.

Political freedom is a prerequisite for our personal responsibility, for our humanity. Every attempt to take a step toward a better world must be led by the *basic value of freedom*.

I find it tragic that Europe has almost always only paid attention to the failed example of the French Revolution (unsuccessful at any rate until DeGaulle's establishment of the Fifth Republic), while the magnificent example of the American Revolution—in Germany at least—is rarely taken notice of and is almost always misunderstood. For America was first in providing the proof that the idea of personal freedom—the idea which Solon of Athens first attempted to bring to realization and which Immanuel Kant had so well formulated in Germany—is not a utopian dream. The American example has shown that a form of government based on freedom is not only possible but can also successfully overcome immense difficulties, a form of government that is above all grounded on the avoidance of despotism including the despotism of the majority—through the division and distribution of power and through a mutual system of checks and balances. It is an idea that has inspired all other democracies, including the constitution of German democracy.

But America has travelled on a difficult path. It has been on this path since the revolution of 1773 (The Boston Tea Party). And despite the revolution's great success the path has not yet come to an end. The fight for freedom goes on.

The grand idea that inspired the American Revolution was that of personal freedom for all people. It stood in bitter contrast to the American institution of slavery, an institution inherited from the pre-revolutionary period, particularly from the Spanish, and which was deeply anchored in the soil of the South for more than 100 years. When the Southern states began a preventive war against the North, the United States broke apart into two pieces over this institution of slavery. It was perhaps the most terrible war that had ever taken place until that time. It was a civil war that forced friends and families to face and fight against each other. Indeed, it seemed to many that America's path toward freedom would be just as unsuccessful as France's. But after heavy casualties on both sides

during this period (600,000 killed, including President Abraham Lincoln—almost all white free men) the attack of the Southern states, though successful at first, was turned back and eventually overpowered. The slaves were free. But problems of unprecedented difficulty still remained unresolved: the integration of the former slaves' descendants and the surmounting of a horrible social institution that was hundreds of years old and could not easily be forgotten, also because of the differences of skin color.


I have still not seen a German historical work in which this situation is well described and assessed.

I was fortunate in being able to visit the United States often through the years between 1950 and 1989, and to be allowed to experience how the various governments in the United States strained and endeavored to help the former slaves become equal citizens. This experience is one of the great impressions on my life. I will only mention one episode. I was, in 1956, a guest at the University of Atlanta, in the center of the former Southern states. At that time, the University had only black students and the white professors were in the minority. I once asked the president, an esteemed scholar (and incidentally also black), how and when this great and wonderful institution was founded. To my astonishment, I heard that this black University, in the center of the South, was founded six years after the Civil War through the union of several black colleges—I believe it was eight—which in turn were all founded by various Christian churches in which white and black priests and teachers worked together.

I will leave it up to you to think over this story and to compare it with the words from *Meyers Enzyklopädisches Lexikon* which writes about the end of the Civil War: "Slavery, however, the root cause of the war, merely underwent a pseudo-solution (*Scheinlösung*).” For me at any rate, the word *Scheinlösung*, like many others in the article, seems to be completely wrong. I wonder what true solution the author could have possibly recommended in a world in which a Ku-Klux-Klan was possible. At any rate, the story of the University of Atlanta and many other similar efforts which I have experienced have impressed me a great deal.

I have been in many countries, but nowhere have I breathed such free air as I have in America. And nowhere have I found so much idealism, along with tolerance and the wish to help and to learn, such an active and practical idealism and such an eager desire to help. I was also later in American universities in which the integration of blacks was not a success and in others in which it was a

complete success, so that skin color no longer seemed to play any role whatsoever.

I have said all this here knowing fully that it would probably not be welcomed by some of you. Four years ago, I defended America in a lecture during a conference in Hanover, since America had been being attacked in other lectures (mainly by white Americans), and my talk was accompanied by boos and hisses. I welcomed that as a sign that my listeners were not bored. And I was happy because I could flatter myself to be a valiant fighter for freedom and tolerance! 

An address delivered at the Universitat-Eichstatt in Bavaria on May 27th 1991. Translated from the German by Chong-Min Hong

Sir Karl Popper was a professor at the London School of Economics. He is counted among the most influential philosophers of science of the 20th century, and also wrote extensively on social and political philosophy.

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