

## Governance in an Open Society

I want to thank the organizers of this conference for inviting me to address you, and for allowing me to choose my own topic. And I want to thank you, of course, for being here. The title of my talk is ‘Governance in an Open Society’, and it is a title that I have chosen very carefully. I want you to notice that it is *not* ‘Government in an Open Society’ and that it is *not* ‘Governance in a Democratic State’. For while many people use the terms ‘governance’ and ‘government’ as synonyms and while many people regard a democratic state as part and parcel of an open society, one of the chief things that I want to tell you today is that they are actually very different things. Bishop Butler is famous for saying ‘Everything is what it is, and not another thing’. And what I want to tell you today is that governance is not the same kind of thing as government—and that an open society is not the same kind of thing as a democratic state.

So who am I to tell you these things? I can tell you that I have conducted governance projects during the past ten years of my life for the Interactivity Foundation, which is devoted to promoting good governance in an open society. I can tell you that I worked very closely for ten years of my life with Sir Karl Popper, who was the author of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*—and indirectly responsible for giving the Open Society Institute its name. I can tell you that I once worked for the Open Society Institute and conducted workshops on open society in many of the countries of the former Soviet Union. And I can tell you that I am a philosopher who has thought very long and deeply about these matters. But these, of course, are all arguments from authority and of little rational worth. In the end, you will have to judge for yourself whether and to what extent my ideas make sense—which, I might add, is exactly the way things are and ought to be in an open society.

So what is the difference between governance and government? And what is the difference between an open society and a democratic state?

Let me talk about the difference between an open society and a democratic state first. Here, the first things to notice are that open society is a kind of *society*, that a democratic state is a kind of *state*, and that a society is a very different kind of thing from a state. Everything is what it is and nothing else. A society, for the purposes of this discussion, might be characterized as a group of people who are living together in a more or less ordered community—or as a group of people who live in a certain area and share certain values, customs, traditions, and laws. A state, by contrast, might be defined as a country, nation, or territory that is organized under a common government, or as the government of a country, nation, or territory.

Now an open society is often, and rightly, associated with the governmental institutions that characterize modern democratic states. But it is just this association that makes it important to distinguish between the two. For if we fail to distinguish between the two, then it will be tempting to think that an open society will inevitably develop a democratic form of government—or, conversely, that a democratic state will inevitably govern an open society. And if we fail to distinguish between the two, then it will be tempting to infer that a society that is *not* governed by a democratic state cannot really be open, and that a government that features democratic governmental institutions cannot really be democratic if the society it governs is closed. But my purpose today is to show you why these inferences do not work. So let us go a little bit further.

A *state* is characterized by its government, which, in turn, typically consists of a set of governmental institutions, such as a constitution, legislative and executive organs, courts of law, civil and criminal laws and, of course, by the range of governmental institutions that provide state sponsored services, such as police departments, fire departments, public schools, and the like. A *society*, by contrast, is characterized by its members' social life and by the beliefs, values, goals, interests, traditions, customs, mores, and habits that inspire it. Going one step further now, a *democratic* state is characterized by such governmental institutions as popular elections, the separation of governmental powers, and the rule of law. An *open* society, by contrast, is characterized by its members' freedom and free social life; by their freedom to govern themselves, by their freedoms of speech, association, movement, and action that are necessary to govern themselves; by their freedom to make things and to freely sell the things they make to others; by their ideas that everyone is equal before the law and should have the opportunity to improve their lives as best they can without trespassing upon the freedoms of others; by their freedom to criticize their government and government officials without retribution; by the respect with which they treat different beliefs, values, goals, interests, and concerns—and, most importantly, by their freedom and willingness to change their own beliefs, values, goals, interests, and concerns if and when they come to believe that other beliefs, values, goals, interests, and concerns are, for whatever reason, preferable to their own.

Here it is easy to see why open societies are so often governed by democratic states. Democracy is supposed to be government of the people, by the people, and for the people. But the members of an open society very often have very different beliefs, values, goals, interests, and concerns—and thus will very often differ about how to govern themselves too. Such differences would not matter all that much in a closed society. Closed societies are structured around beliefs and institutions that are supposed to be certain and immutable. Their members may also value freedom, equality, and social harmony. But they tend to value security and stability more. They are often born with a predetermined place in their society. They are expected both to know what it is and to stay put in it. And they are generally quite willing to do so. Nor would such differences matter very much in an autocratic or oligarchic state. Such states are governed either by a single person or by a small group of people, and they are typically able and willing to impose their beliefs, values, and traditions—by force if necessary—and to enforce them against all dissent. This is the reason why political change in closed societies and non-democratic states is so often accompanied by violence and bloodshed. They simply have no other way to do it. But the institutions that characterize democratic states—popular elections, the separation of powers, and the rule of law—offer the members of an open society a way to make their collective decisions about how to govern themselves without resorting to violence and bloodshed. Just as important, they enable the members of an open society to change their minds, and to make new collective decisions, if and when they begin to think that the old arrangements no longer work.

We may, for this reason, rightly regard democracy as the form of government that is best suited for *protecting* an open society. But democracy is not open society itself. Freedom, equality before the law, and respect for other people may be ends in themselves that we value for their own sake. But I do not think that we should value democracy for its own sake. If we value it all, we should do so for the sake of the social values and free society it can help us to protect.

Here, it is much more important for us to understand democracy than it is to idealize it. The United States has a pluralistic open society whose members have a wide variety of competing beliefs, values, goals, interests, and concerns—as well as different traditions, customs, habits, manners, mores, and tastes. You can rail to your heart’s content against any and all that are not your own, including the values that are characteristic of open society itself, if that is the sort of thing that you want to do. And you can try to persuade others to change their ways and to adopt your values and beliefs instead. But you will not be able to *impose* your values and beliefs on other people in an open society—let alone your goals, interests, concerns, traditions, customs, habits, manners, mores, and tastes. The same, however, is not always true in a democratic state. Here, the most important thing to understand about democracy is that a well-functioning democratic state can work reasonably well to protect the values of an open society *if the members of that society, and especially the members who operate its democratic institutions, already share those values*. But democracy and the institutions of a democratic state cannot create an open society by themselves. They cannot make people value freedom, equality before the law, and respect for the views of other people if they do not see why they should value them. And democracy can all too easily be manipulated by authoritarians and totalitarians who neither value nor want an open society, but who can nonetheless work the democratic institutions well enough to be elected to public office.

This brings me to the difference between government and governance.

Many people use the terms ‘government’ and ‘governance’ interchangeably. The dictionaries tell us that ‘government’ refers to ‘the governing body of a nation, state, or community’, or ‘the system by which a nation, state, or community is governed’, or ‘the action or manner of controlling or regulating a nation, organization, or community’— and that ‘governance’ refers to ‘the action or manner of governing’. The International Monetary Fund promotes good governance as the key to successful economic policies. It focuses upon improving the management of public resources and supporting a transparent and stable economic and regulatory environment that is conducive to efficient private sector activities. I do not want to criticize the IMF’s ideas about good governance. But I will use the term in a broader sense to talk not simply about governance pertaining to economic policies, but about governance in an open society. In my view, rational criticism and a respect for truth are the hallmarks of an open society, and ‘governance’ refers not so much to the manner in which a government governs, but to the various ways in which a society can influence the development of its government’s procedures, practices, public policies, and, most importantly, its laws.

Here, the first thing to notice is that government influences the members of a society primarily through coercion, by instituting and enforcing laws, policies, rules, and regulations that control their behavior. And here, the second thing to notice is that government coercion ultimately boils down to the government’s power to imprison, and hence curtail the freedom of, people who disobey its laws—even, in extreme cases, to the point of taking their lives. This is true of government and governmental coercion everywhere. It is true regardless of whether we are talking about democratic or autocratic regimes, and regardless of whether we think that the laws, policies, rules, and regulations that government enforces are just, sound, desirable, or good. And there is no reason whatsoever to think that it is any less true in a democratic state.

Governance, on the other hand, has no power to coerce aside from the power of rational argument. It tries to influence the government officials who institute and enforce the laws of a state primarily through persuasion. And governance persuasion can run the gamut from the personal influence that an individual might exert upon certain government leaders, to the lectures and talks about policy matters that experts may give in universities and think tanks, to the editorials and opinion pieces that journalists might publish in newspapers, to the blue ribbon committees commissioned by government leaders to study an area of concern, to town hall meetings, to the ballot box, to peaceful demonstrations in the streets, and, when all else fails, even to the violence and bloodshed that we currently see in many of the countries in the Middle East. Just as with democracy, it is more important for us to understand governance than to idealize it. And if we are going to understand governance at all, then we must understand that not all of it is good.

I think that it is, or should be, obvious that many, if not most, of our most important governance decisions are made in crisis situations where there is a need to act very quickly to avert a potential disaster, and very little time to think carefully about what to do about it. I think you know that kind of thing I have in mind. Suppose, for example, that the Secretary of the Treasury and the Chairman of the Federal Reserve show up at the Oval Office on a Friday afternoon and tell the President that there is a crisis in the credit markets and that they need seven hundred billion dollars by 8 AM Monday morning—*in cash*—or the entire economic world as we currently know it will come to an end. (Don't laugh, it could actually happen.) Now some of you may think that it would actually not be so bad if the entire economic world as we currently know it were to come to an end. But the point that I want to make is that if something like this were to actually happen, then the decision that the President would make would inevitably be governed by the ideas that he or she had at hand. So if he or she had only one idea at hand—if no one had thought about the possibility of a credit crisis in advance, or about the different policy possibilities for addressing it—then he or she would have very little choice at all. This, no doubt, would make the governance decision easy. But it would not necessarily make it good.

I think it is obvious that the more contrasting policy possibilities someone has at hand, the more ideas that we have thought about seriously, the more difficult it might be to make a decision. But I also think it is obvious that the more we have thought about different policy possibilities for addressing an area of concern, and the more we have thought about how to implement them and about the likely consequences of implementing them, the more likely it is that we will be able to make more thoughtful policy choices about how to address the situation at hand.

I believe that good governance in an open society more often involves careful, critical, and collaborative *discussions* in which the members of a society explore a potential area of public policy concern—including the conflicting values, beliefs, interests, and goals that make it an area of public policy concern—and try to develop contrasting policy possibilities pertaining to it well in advance of a crisis situation. I believe that it is important that the people who participate in such discussions are able to freely explore their concerns and the possibilities for addressing them without the rush of having to make a decision immediately and without fear that they might step on somebody's toes. But in my view, management, transparency, and stability are neither the hallmarks of good governance in this process nor even particularly desirable in an open society, for they often have a way of discouraging people from saying what they really think is true.

This came up recently in two of the governance projects that I am currently conducting. One project is about Money, Credit, and Debt. The other is about The Future of Higher Education in Post-Communist States. They are entirely different areas of public policy concern. But the panelists in both projects said that management in these areas—and, more specifically, the people responsible for making management decisions in these areas—are very often out of touch with what they are trying to manage. This idea, that management is generally out of touch with what it is managing, has come up in each of the governance projects that I have conducted for the Interactivity Foundation. I think that it is now one of the major areas of concern that we face as a society, and we even have a joke about it that I am sure you have heard in one of its many variations: ‘Those who can do, do what they can—those who can’t try to manage it’. The typical response to this problem is to hire more managers. And so we have another joke about it: ‘How many managers does it take to manage a manager?’ (Some of you may sense an infinite regress lurking here.) The various management techniques that managers adopt—positive or negative reinforcement, the carrot and the stick, the good cop and the bad, total quality management, or total time-consuming self-evaluation—only seem to magnify the problem. We even have a name for it here in Washington. We call it a ‘wicked problem’. A wicked problem is when the management of an organization recognizes that it has a problem, calls in some management guru to diagnose it, only to have the guru tell them that the cause of the problem is the management itself. This is not a good situation. Hence the term ‘wicked problem’. But it is a problem that we often face in government. Indeed, the panelists in my Money, Credit, and Debt project, most of whom have held high level managerial positions in government—in the White House, the Senate, the House of Representatives, and various government departments and agencies—described the problem precisely in terms of government being out of touch with the causes of the recent credit crisis.

But the idea that the management of an organization is out of touch with what it is supposed to managing, or that a government is out of touch with what it is supposed to be governing, is only the tip of the iceberg. For the panels in these projects—and, indeed, the panels in all of the governance projects that I have conducted—have said that the real problem is not so much that management is out of touch with what it is managing, as that it often seems to actively discourage the people they manage from thinking for themselves, from saying what they think, from engaging in rational criticism, and from taking the initiative to speak truth to power.

Did I just say ‘speak truth to power’? Many people today seem to believe that it is impossible to speak truth at all—let alone speak truth to power. They say that truth is relative, or a social construction, or that it does not really exist, and that we call ‘truth’ is whatever we can convince other people to believe. I find it ironic that some of the very same people who once told us that history is important because its laws determine the future, now tell us—after their historical predictions have proved false—that history is important because we can rewrite the past. It is as if Marxists have now recognized that Marxism is false, and have concluded from this that there is no truth. I think that the major attraction of these ideas lies in their dissatisfaction with authoritarian regimes that once proclaimed the absolute truth and scientific certainty of beliefs that we now believe are false—and with the idea that we can somehow get beyond authoritarianism by saying that truth is relative, or that it does not exist.

But most of the people who say these things do not really believe they are true. When you question them about it, you typically find that it is not really *truth* that they think is relative, but our *beliefs* about what is true. Indeed, what most of them seem to really want to say is that even the best of our beliefs are fallible and subject to error—something that would actually be impossible if truth were really relative, or did not exist at all. This kind of relativism clearly poses a threat to good governance in an open society, if not to open society itself. But a far greater threat to good governance comes from people who say not that truth is relative, or meaningless, or without value, but that it is one among many values, and not the one that matters most. Today, many people say that family, or community, or nationality, or solidarity, or party loyalty, or ethnic identity, or gender—the list goes on, and it is very long—are far more important than truth. And they say that we are not only justified in misrepresenting the truth when it conflicts with one of these values, but that it may actually be our duty to do so. I have no doubt whatsoever that the people who say these things have the very best of intentions. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and the idea that truth is relative, or that we should ignore the truth when it conflicts with one of our other values, leads all too easily, and far too quickly, to a worse kind of authoritarianism than the ones it seeks to deconstruct.

Still, the real reason why most people are reluctant to speak truth to power is far less philosophical and much more mundane. The real reason is that they fear the wrath and retribution that they might provoke from their superiors for telling them something that they all too obviously do not want to hear. They fear that they might be denounced as unqualified or stupid—or criticized for not being ‘team-players’. They fear that they might be passed over for salary increases and job promotions, that they might lose their positions altogether, and possibly much more. And their fears, unfortunately, are not altogether unfounded. Make no mistake about it. Speaking truth to power can often have tragic results.

But the failure to speak truth to power can also have tragic results.

I recently came across a good illustration of the problem. It seems that Leonid Brezhnev had an idea back in 1967 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Communist revolution by sending two cosmonauts into space and having them perform a docking exercise in which the cosmonauts would crawl back and forth between their spaceships. Vladimir Komarov was to go up first and meet up with a ship that would be launched the next day. But as the date for the launch approached, the flight technicians realized that his ship was not fit to fly. It had over two hundred different problems that required immediate attention. Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, wrote a formal ten-page memo in which he outlined them in detail. But no one knew what to do with it. There was an old tradition in the Soviet Union of killing the messenger. So no one wanted to send the memo to Brezhnev, whom they knew was very keen on the project, and no one wanted to take the responsibility for acting without his authorization and consent either. So the upshot is that nobody did anything. Komarov knew he would probably die in the event, but nonetheless went up on schedule. The problems with his ship manifested themselves immediately. The second ship was never even launched. And Komarov did not survive the flight. The parachute on his capsule failed to open upon reentry, and the result was a photo of his colleagues viewing his charred and molten remains in an open casket. I am told that the US has a tape of him cursing the Soviet Union from here to eternity all the way down.

This is just one example. There are many, many others. But it is part of the reason why I believe that management, transparency, and stability are neither the hallmarks of good governance nor even particularly desirable when it comes to governance in an open society. To be transparent is to be open and frank and candid and honest. And an open society is one that values freedom of speech. So we tend to associate transparency with an open society. But if you really want people to be frank, and open, and candid, and honest in what they say to you—and if what they say to you has any effect upon anything at all—then you will need to guarantee them confidentiality. There may, no doubt, be a paradox here. But unless you guarantee confidentiality, most people will be unwilling to tell you what they really think. There can be little doubt that transparency in a company's books and plans will be beneficial to anyone who is thinking about investing in a company. But there can also be little doubt that transparency in governance discussions can put a damper upon the willingness of people to say what they really think about the problems in an organization. Management has a clear interest in not rocking the boat, even if it wants to be transparent and asks people to say what they think. And the primary reason why transparency in governance discussions will put a damper upon the willingness of people to speak truth to power is that they fear the kind of retribution that will threaten their security and stability: the possibility that they will offend the powers that be, and will be passed over for job promotions and salary increases, if not, indeed, be demoted or even fired from their positions. The primary goal of management is to steady the ship and to maintain peace and harmony in the organization. And it seldom rewards people who threaten the stability of the organization, or who damage its public image, or who tell them what they don't want to hear. We may praise the whistle-blowers and heroes who dare to speak truth to power in theory. But we tend not to fully trust them in practice. And we all see what happens to them in the aftermath. They are vilified in public. Their reputations are dragged through the media mud. They often lose their jobs for 'unrelated' reasons. And they all too often find themselves licking the short end of the stick for rocking the boat with their revelations.

Earlier I said that it is more important to understand democracy than it is to idealize it. The first thing to understand is that democracy is not open society itself, but a set of governmental institutions that can, at best, help to preserve an open society. The second thing to understand is that democracy may help people to *preserve* their freedom, but can never *create* freedom in a society whose members do not value it. And the third, but most important, thing to understand is that democracy can pose a serious threat to open society. Democracy can pose a threat to open society because we have to invest a great deal of power in a government in order for it to work—and because whenever there is great power, there is a great potential for abusing it. All forms of government are dangerous, and democracy is no exception. Governments are always led by imperfect and fallible human beings who, like most human beings, can always fall prey to the temptation to abuse the power that is invested in them. The primary virtue of democracy is not that it allows its citizens to select better leaders than other forms of government. The primary virtue of democracy is that it has institutional mechanisms that, when they work, allow people to remove their leaders without violence and bloodshed when they no longer seem to be as good as they once did. Power always has a tendency to corrupt. So the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. The members of an open society must thus maintain a constant vigilance to see that their government and its leaders do not overstep their legitimate powers and infringe upon their rights and privileges.

The government of an open society, be it democratic or otherwise, should always exist for the sake of its citizens—to protect their freedoms, their interests, and their rights—and not the other way around. And the role of governance in an open society is to give all of the members of that society the opportunity to ensure that it does so.

Here I do not want to be misunderstood. I have emphasized the serious dangers that a democratic state may pose to an open society not because I think that it may pose greater dangers than other forms of government. On the contrary, a well-functioning democracy is probably the form of government that is best suited to protect the freedoms of an open society. I have emphasized its dangers, however, partly because democracy does not always work, and partly because I perceive a tendency to idealize it, to think of it as a panacea, to conflate it with open society, and with freedom itself, and to regard it as a universal human right that should be pursued for its own sake, as an end-in-itself, and not simply as a useful means for protecting a free and open society. Democracy will work fairly well in countries whose people share the values, beliefs, and traditions of an open society. But it may not work at all in countries whose people do not. And once we begin to think of it as an end-in-itself, as we sometimes seem to do when we engage in democratic nation building projects abroad, it becomes all too easy to forget the serious dangers that it might pose. We may begin to think of democracy as a way to create freedom instead of simply protecting it. We may forget that democracy and its institutions—and indeed freedom itself—can be deeply destabilizing to societies whose members have no traditions or experience in governing themselves, or participating in public policy deliberations, or electing their own leaders. We may begin to think of those people as inferior beings who have no worthy concerns, beliefs, values, interests, aims, and traditions of their own. We may think that they simply do not understand what is in their own best interests. We may resent their resistance to our attempts to ‘democratize’ them. And we may, if we take this line of thinking too far, even try to introduce them to democracy and create freedom by force, and through the barrel of a loaded gun.

But it’s not just our attempts to ‘democratize’ other countries. Democracy begins at home, and you go to democracy with the citizens you have—not the citizens you wish you had. And here, one of the chief dangers of a democratic state, and even a generally well-functioning democratic state like our own, is that its citizens may gradually grow tired of eternal vigilance, and may not always approach it with respect for their fellow citizens; or their concerns, beliefs, values, interests, aims, and goals; or with the intent of protecting their freedoms and rights as they would their own. They may begin to mistake policy possibilities for moral rights and wrongs. They may approach them with the religious fervor of true believers and moral reformers. And they may be encouraged by charismatic political leaders to do so. They may believe that God has revealed the truth to them, and to them alone, so that the only choice is between their way and the highway, and interpret any compromise as a sign of immorality. They may believe that their own concerns are so clearly compelling, their own beliefs so clearly true, their own values so clearly worthwhile, and their own interests and goals so clearly just that they find it impossible to understand how their fellow citizens—who clearly have concerns, beliefs, values, interests, and goals that differ from their own—could possibly be intelligent and morally upright citizens too. And they may conclude that the fact that some of their fellow citizens disagree with them about these matters can only be an indication of their intellectual inferiority or their moral corruption.

Once we take a step down this slippery slope, democracy can quickly transform itself from a means for protecting the values and freedoms of an open society to a tyranny of, by, and for the majority.

This idea—that democracy is or ought to be majority rule—poses a special danger to open society that deserves a separate talk of its own. Many proponents of democracy believe that rule by the majority is inherently better than rule by a dictator or king. But the idea that modern democracy is majority rule is largely a myth. Benjamin Franklin, upon leaving our Constitutional Convention, famously said that the new government would not be a monarchy, but a republic—and quickly added that the problem would be to keep it. A republic is a state in which the power of the state rests in the body of citizens who are entitled to vote and is exercised by representatives who are chosen either directly or indirectly by them. A republic may be more or less democratic. But it is different from majority rule. Our democratic republic is a government of laws, not men. And the constitution of our democratic republic is written in such a way that the most significant electoral decisions require a ‘super-majority’ vote—which is simply another way of saying that they are written in such a way that the will of a minority can often prevail against the will of the majority. There can be little doubt that our democratic republic has become increasingly democratic over the years, as more and more citizens have won the right to vote. But the fact of the matter is that our democratic republic has never been—and, indeed, neither can nor should be—rule by the majority of the people. For it is all too obvious that a real rule by the majority could all too easily trample upon the freedoms and rights of a minority. And any government that tramples upon the freedoms and rights of a minority would also trample upon the values and beliefs of an open society. There has been a growing tendency through the years to emphasize the democratic aspects of our republic, so much so that we now often forget that it is a republic and describe it simply as a democracy. But there is a serious danger in teaching that democracy is rule by the majority. For the majority will inevitably feel cheated if and when they discover that it is not.

Earlier I said that the primary values of an open society are freedom, equality before the law, and respect for the often very different beliefs, values, and concerns of its members. These are the values that a democracy protects when it protects the free social life of all of its citizens. They are, broadly speaking, the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity that both we in the United States and you in the now post-communist states of the former Soviet Union have inherited from the nineteenth century. We appeal to these values to ‘justify’ policy decisions at every level. But it is too naïve to think that we can do equal justice to them all, let alone that we can do justice to them once and for all. For measures that protect liberty almost inevitably conflict with measures that protect equality and fraternity—just as measures that promote equality, or fraternity, conflict with each of the others. All such measures can, of course, be ‘justified’. But ‘justifications’ based upon the value of liberty are different from ‘justifications’ based upon the others. And the differences are not merely theoretical. For we cannot treat all of these values as inviolable at once. A society that treats equality as inviolable will institute different policies than one that treats liberty or fraternity in the same way. And while ‘justifications’ that appeal to any one of these values will rally the troops who favor that particular value, they will most likely be unpersuasive to those who favor one of the others.

The task of governance in an open society is a political one. But it is not the task of justifying our policy choices in terms of liberty, equality, and fraternity—let alone justifying them once and for all. It is the task of continuously changing them to meet the challenges and changes that we face in life—including the challenge of balancing our changing views about liberty, equality, and fraternity. Liberty, or freedom, may ultimately take precedence over equality and fraternity in an open society. But this does not mean that open society does not value equality and fraternity as well, or that liberty trumps equality and fraternity in every choice. On the contrary, the task of open society is to try to balance these principles in the same way that it attempts to balance political power. And governance in an open society is the unending project of readjusting the claims of these competing ideals when we feel that any one of them is taking too much precedence over the others. This is not the task of justifying our policies in theory. It is the unending task of addressing our most pressing societal problems by establishing, and reestablishing, an acceptable balance between our political ideals—and to find problems that we are, at least for the moment, more or less willing to live with.

There can be little doubt that Marx was aiming at freedom. But there can be no doubt at all that he missed his goal. Marx was rightfully impressed by the suffering of the working class in the nineteenth century, and he criticized capitalism for its exploitation of its workers. But he and Lenin thought that freedom would depend upon security and stability and the centralization of governance—upon governance by a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ instead of the kind of governance that calls upon all members of society to explore their different beliefs, values, interests, goals, and concerns, and to develop policy possibilities that they are all more or less willing to live with. It is easy enough to see a problem in the idea that freedom depends upon a dictatorship. Trotsky, we are told, predicted it early on. He said that ‘These methods lead, as we shall yet see, to this: the party organization is substituted for the party, the Central Committee is substituted for the party organization, and finally the ‘dictator’ is substituted for the Central Committee’. But many Marxists apparently believed that a dictatorship of the proletariat would be acceptable so long as it put an end to the exploitation of the workers. And so it is easy today to forget that Marxists also thought of themselves as fighting for freedom.

So what is good governance in an open society?

I think that it is much more important to understand open society than to idealize it. A closed society is one in which people know their place and know enough to stay put in it. An open society is one in which people try to improve their place as best they can and in whatever way they can. But if there is just one thing that it is open to, then it is open to change.

I think that Marx’s biggest mistake was his belief that capitalism could never change. This idea was predicated upon his belief that capitalism has an essential nature, and that there is a predetermined and unchangeable course of history. It was also predicated upon his belief in the scientific certainty of scientific socialism. These beliefs led his followers to reject the possibility that meaningful change could ever occur through rational governance discussions and piecemeal policy reforms. It also ‘justified’ their rejection of any and all attempts to reform capitalism from within. They insisted instead that capitalism’s exploitation of the workers could not be reformed; that capitalism could only be destroyed; that it must be destroyed in order to have a better society; and that the workers’ lot would only grow worse if it were not.

But the fact of the matter is that capitalism in the West did change over the course of the twentieth century. Or, to put it more accurately, the fact of the matter is that people in the West changed it. They did so by thinking about their problems and about ways to improve their own situations, and by discussing them with each other. They did so by bargaining for better working conditions, by proposing laws and policies restricting labor practices that exploit workers, and by persuading the members of their societies that these laws were ultimately in their own interests too. These negotiations were at times accompanied by the threat of violence, and at times by violence itself. But even when violence did occur, it did not culminate in revolution, or in the destruction of capitalism, as Marx had predicted. I believe that the fact that we were able to make these changes in our social institutions is a tribute to good governance in an open society. It was due, no doubt, to the pressure that some people felt in the face of growing popular support for economic reforms that would deprive them of even greater wealth and economic freedom than the reforms upon which they finally agreed. But it was also due, to an even larger extent, to the fact that most of the people who were involved in making these changes valued a free and open society that provides a rational and non-violent process for making them more than a violent revolution. And it was, in the end, due to the fact that they wanted to maintain a free and open society, and realized that doing so would require that they value and respect the views of others as well as their own.

But I want to be very clear about it. If, during the coming years, we find ourselves facing new changes and challenges that force us to rethink the sustainability of the changes that we have made in the past, if we find ourselves engaged in new governance discussions about what to do about it, if we find ourselves adopting new policies and laws as a result, and if we are able to do it without burning the whole house down—then that will be a tribute to good governance too.

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