

# Karl Popper's View of Social Liberalism and His Philosophical Contributions

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**Abstract:** Karl Raimund Popper was one of the major philosophers of science of the twentieth century. Although Popperian philosophy did not develop into a closed school of thought, his contributions have been widely welcomed and acknowledged. Among his notable contributions is social liberalism, the political standpoint from which he criticized historicism and the enemies of the open society. Therefore, to understand Popper's view of the open society and historicism, it is necessary to examine the substance and defining features of his social liberalism. This article analyzes the basic elements of Popper's social-liberal position and, on that basis, identifies several of his philosophical contributions.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of science; social liberalism; open society; historicism

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## I. Introduction

Social liberalism was both Popper's political position--distinguishing his political attitude from socialism and from other liberal currents, such as Hayek's neoliberalism or the present Libertarian Party in the United States--and the foundation of his political philosophy. Popper stood firmly on the ground of social liberalism when criticizing historicism and developing his model of the open society. In that model, he emphasized the role of individual freedom in creating a new society, while also arguing for the role and methods of the state in combating oppression and injustice and in correcting the defects of capitalist society.

## II. Content

After abandoning communism, Karl Popper moved to a liberal standpoint. He wrote that he was "not only an empiricist and a rationalist of sorts," but also "a liberal." On the basis of Popper's own statements and his specific views on liberalism, Western scholars have often described his liberalism as "social liberalism." Popper's social liberalism contains several features that oppose communism and set it apart from other forms of liberalism.

### 2.1 Karl Popper criticized collectivism and communitarianism, arguing that they originated in "tribalism," a primitive form of collectivism.

If communism is understood as a form of communitarianism--as some scholars note, the English word "communism" and the German "Kommunismus" derive from the Latin adjective *communis*, meaning "common"--then Popper took the opposite position. He criticized collectivism and communitarianism and traced their roots to "tribalism," a primitive collectivist mentality. Popper wrote that tribalism, that is, the stress on the supreme importance of the tribe, without which the individual is nothing, is an element found in many forms of historicism. Other forms, even when no longer strictly tribal, still preserve a collectivist element by emphasizing the importance of some group or collective--for example, a class--without which the individual supposedly counts for nothing.

In fact, identifying socialism and communitarianism with tribalism is not historically precise. Tribalism belongs to the primitive period of human history and was necessary under the early conditions of human development. By contrast, in the modern context of capitalism and the market economy, with their defects and negative consequences, communitarianism can help correct society's drift toward extreme individualism. In advanced countries today, people often enjoy a high quality of life because the relationship between the individual and the community has been handled in a relatively balanced way.

Social liberalism is also one attempt to resolve this relationship. However, overemphasizing the individual while downplaying the role of community is a negative tendency on the other side of the same relationship. This is a common weakness of all forms of liberalism. The shortcomings of socialism before renovation were largely due to an inadequate understanding and combination of the relationship between the individual and the community. For that reason, liberal theorists are not without grounds when they criticize communitarianism. The current renewal of socialism in Vietnam raises the need to harmonize community interests

with individual freedom, as Marx and Engels stated in *The Communist Manifesto*: "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

**2.2 Although Karl Popper called himself "a liberal," he declared that he was not dependent on any liberal ideology or liberal party.**

Although Popper called himself "a liberal," he made it clear that he did not bind himself to any liberal ideology or party. He stated: "In order to avoid misunderstandings, I should like to make it quite clear that I always use the word 'liberal,' 'liberalism,' etc., in the sense in which it is still commonly used in England (though perhaps not in America)." For Popper, a liberal was not necessarily a person aligned with any political party. Rather, a liberal was simply someone who valued individual freedom and was aware of the dangers inherent in every form of authority.

**2.3 Popper's social liberalism did not demand "minimum state, maximum freedom," as in the platform of the U.S. Libertarian Party. On the contrary, it supported necessary state measures to fight oppression and injustice and to reduce poverty and unemployment.**

Social liberalism emerged and became influential in the mid-twentieth century, before and after the Second World War, in the context of global economic depression and mass poverty. Popper adopted and supported this newer form of liberalism. Social liberalism highlights the role of the state and endorses technical measures--what Popper called "social engineering"--in the struggle against oppression, injustice, and social vices. Popper opposed social injustice and supported social reform in a more humane direction. He not only agreed with Marx's descriptions of exploitation, oppression, and injustice in German and Austrian society at the time, but also supplemented them. However, Popper did not regard those phenomena as the essence of capitalism, nor did he view the struggle to build a better society as the construction of socialism in Marx's sense. For this reason, scholars have identified Popper's political position as social liberalism.

After the Second World War, economic recovery in Europe and the United States gave rise to another new form of liberalism, known as neoliberalism, advanced by F. A. Hayek, a close friend of Popper. Neoliberalism tended to return to classical liberalism. Popper, however, did not support this form. He continued to maintain his social-liberal position. Today, social liberalism remains broadly supported by large sections of the public in Western countries.

### **III. Karl Popper's Contributions Through His Conception of Social Liberalism**

#### **3.1 Karl Popper emphasized the role of critical thinking**

This contribution helps correct certain limitations of liberalism and remains highly meaningful for philosophical, political, and social theory today.

Reason is a decisive element in rationalism and one of the distinctive features of liberalism. According to liberalism, a free person must first be a person with sufficient reason to master the self and handle social relationships. Yet an important limitation of earlier rationalism and liberalism was their tendency to overvalue reason.

From the standpoint of "critical rationalism," Popper argued that although reason plays a major role, it can also make mistakes. Therefore, the results of reasoning must be exposed to criticism and possible refutation. A critical spirit is also an essential quality of a free person. For Popper, the person with a critical mind is the truly free person; he strongly opposed dogmatic thinking and blind belief.

Critical thinking is especially important in philosophy. Many scholars therefore define philosophy as critical thinking. The *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, for example, defines philosophy as "rationally critical thinking."

From a philosophical standpoint, critical thinking can be understood as the application of dialectics, especially the dialectic of contradiction, within thought itself. The process of knowing truth also moves through the struggle of opposing views. This is why Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato treated dialectics as the art of argument through which truth could be discovered. Only through critical debate can truth be affirmed and error eliminated.

Popper consistently upheld the critical spirit in research. He wrote that the method he had in mind was to state a problem clearly and examine the various proposed solutions to it critically. He emphasized the phrases "rational discussion" and "critically" in order to identify the rational attitude with the critical attitude. For that reason, his philosophical method is known as "critical rationalism." In *The Poverty of Historicism and The Open Society and Its Enemies*, criticism is the dominant spirit. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies* he criticized philosophers from Plato to Marx, while in *The Poverty of Historicism* he criticized historicism and pointed out its limitations.

Criticizing and refuting other doctrines and schools from the standpoint of one's own doctrine has existed for more than 2,500 years. It is a feature of the historical development of philosophy not only in the West but also

in the East, as shown by the "Hundred Schools of Thought" in ancient Chinese philosophy. What was new in Popper's method of criticism, however, was his insistence on criticizing errors within the very doctrine one has long considered correct--and above all, on criticizing one's own ideas. He argued that progress is possible only if we remain ready to learn from our own mistakes, to admit them, and to use them critically instead of continuing to preserve them dogmatically.

Popper's idea and method of critical thinking carry great theoretical and practical significance. In theoretical terms, he revived and further developed the critical spirit that had long been a tradition of German-Austrian philosophy. He offered a theoretical demonstration of the necessity of applying critical thinking in all forms of research.

With a critical spirit, we do not regard any philosophical system as absolute or complete. Every system contains one-sided or mistaken elements that need to be identified, criticized, and corrected. People often have the habit of defending a doctrine once they believe in it, resisting criticism from other sides and treating such criticism as the view of hostile forces. This habit has deep roots in Eastern intellectual life in general and in Vietnam in particular. In the past, Confucianism was regarded as sacred and untouchable; today, a similar habit still exists to some degree in relation to Marxist-Leninist philosophy. It must be recognized that Marxist-Leninist philosophy emerged and developed not only through criticism of other doctrines, but, more importantly, through self-criticism and self-renewal.

In practical terms, as noted above, critical thinking is a characteristic feature of German-Austrian philosophy, including Marxist philosophy. However, philosophers have often applied criticism mainly to the ideas of other schools. V. I. Lenin himself raised the issue of applying criticism to certain questions posed by Marxism. Lenin stated that Marx's theory should not be regarded as something complete and untouchable; rather, it only laid the foundation for a science that socialists must further develop in all directions if they do not wish to fall behind life.

The critical spirit helped Lenin fundamentally change his conception of socialism and move toward the New Economic Policy. According to Lenin, defending Marxist philosophy did not mean opposing all criticism of it. He therefore expressed a willingness to provide space in the press for articles on theoretical questions and invited comrades to discuss controversial points openly.

In Vietnam today, approaching Popper's method is highly meaningful and necessary for theoretical researchers. Valuable elements in Popper's critical method should be inherited and applied to theoretical debate, social criticism, and the critique of erroneous, distorted, reactionary, conservative, or voluntarist views.

Ho Chi Minh also pointed out that the Party could make mistakes; once mistakes occur, they must be frankly identified and resolutely corrected. He said that the Party did not fall from the sky but emerged from the old colonial and feudal society; because the Party is made up of human beings, it can err. In other words, like a person, it can be healthy at times and ill at others. That is normal; illness should not lead to fear, pessimism, despair, or concealment. Therefore, according to Ho Chi Minh, when there is a disease, it must be treated boldly, proactively, urgently, and persistently.

### **3.2 Karl Popper supported necessary state measures in the fight against oppression and injustice.**

This is the point that distinguishes Popper's social-liberal position from classical liberalism and Hayek's neoliberalism.

Popper did not accept the view of extreme forms of liberalism that minimized the role of the state. He argued for the role of the state through certain forms of "social engineering." Although he was a liberal and considered Hayek a close friend and benefactor, Popper did not fully side with Hayek's neoliberalism, a current that tended to revive classical liberalism. Instead, he supported active state measures aimed at realizing social justice. This is why Popper's position is best described as social liberalism. Social liberalism has two sides: it affirms the decisive role of individual freedom, while also recognizing the great role of the social community. With this standpoint, even after leaving communism, Popper still considered himself a socialist in a broad moral sense.

Popper acknowledged the inhuman and unjust character of completely unregulated capitalism. He not only agreed with, but even supplemented, Marx's descriptions of oppression and injustice in capitalist society at that time. For that reason, Popper supported a systematic struggle against concrete evils, against specific forms of injustice or exploitation, and against avoidable suffering such as poverty and unemployment.

Popper highly appreciated Marx's deep humanism and persistent struggle for the happiness of the people. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper observed that Marx had a burning desire to help the oppressed and was fully conscious of the need to prove himself by deeds, not merely by words. Since Marx's main talent was theoretical, he devoted great effort to forging what he believed to be a scientific weapon for the struggle to improve the fate of the great majority.

However, Popper did not agree with--and at times strongly opposed--the method of violent revolution in Marxism, including class struggle, violent revolution, and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In practical terms, Popper's view of individual freedom combined with the role of the state in social management, crisis response, and the struggle against oppression, injustice, and social vices remains highly significant in the contemporary world. Socialism before renovation often overemphasized the role of the state and the collective, thereby restricting individual freedom. By contrast, radical forms of liberalism overemphasized individual freedom, demanded maximum freedom for individuals, and sought to minimize state intervention. Practice shows that such extreme approaches are neither correct nor sustainable. Political parties around the world therefore often attach the term "social" to their political standpoints, giving rise to terms such as democratic socialism, social liberalism, and social democracy. Any political line that wins popular support must combine two aspects: democratic freedom and the social dimension. The "social" dimension refers to the state's role in securing social welfare, employment, living standards, and protection against oppression and injustice; it does not mean leaving everyone to act entirely on their own. Many states set minimum hourly wages, provide social assistance and universal health insurance, and some countries have even held public debates on proposals for a universal basic income.

In short, Popper's advocacy of necessary state measures to combat oppression and injustice and reduce poverty is broadly consistent with the Marxist-Leninist philosophical view of the combination of the two basic functions of the state, in which the social function is increasingly expanded and refined.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Popper's political standpoint changed after he left communism and the Communist Party of Austria, especially after he moved to New Zealand and later to Britain to live and teach. He adopted and supported liberalism, but he sharply criticized the expressions of extreme liberalism. He opposed social injustice and supported transforming society in a better direction. For this reason, scholars have described his political position as "social liberalism." Social liberalism is also the political standpoint of many governing parties in the world today.

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