

# The Open Philosophy and The Open Society

by Maurice Cornforth

A  
Reply to  
Dr. Karl Popper's  
Refutations  
of  
Marxism



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# THE OPEN PHILOSOPHY AND THE OPEN SOCIETY

*a Reply to Dr. Karl Popper's Refutations of Marxism*

By MAURICE CORNFORTH



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## FOREWORD

The object of this book is to discuss fundamental ideas of Marxist philosophy and their implications for social theory and socialist policy. My premise is to accept Marxism as essentially a scientific outlook which seeks to work out and test ideas and policies, in all spheres, in accordance with the canons of rational scientific discussion and in no other way.

I have chosen the method of constructing this book as a reasoned reply to criticisms of Marxism. And of all the critics, I have picked on a single one, Dr. Karl Popper, as the one to answer. I have done this because Dr. Popper's whole case against Marxism rests on his contention that it is nothing but a system of dogmas, so that his arguments against Marxism provide a ready-made and accommodating peg on which to hang the argument that Marxism is, on the contrary, a rational scientific discipline.

There is the more reason for a Marxist to tackle the case put against Marxism by Dr. Popper because not only is he perhaps the most eminent of our contemporary critics, and not only does he present his case with great ability and force, but because, so far as I can judge, the points he makes against Marxism include practically all the main points against it which carry most weight in contemporary debate. Of course, some of his arguments (for example, those he directs against Marx's *Capital*, or again, against the theory and practice of socialist economic planning) are borrowed from arguments originally put forward in greater detail by other critics. However, I have preferred to stick throughout to tackling the case as put by Dr. Popper rather than encumber the discussion with references to the writings of others who have put the same case before or since. Dr. Popper's arguments against Marxism are extremely comprehensive, and it is high time someone tried to answer him in detail.

Dr. Popper himself occupies an unchallengeable position in modern letters as an exponent of principles of scientific method. His contributions in this sphere, first in his famous book *Logik der Forschung* (published in English under the title *Logic of Scientific Discovery*) and then in numerous articles in English and American journals, have had and continue to have a great and beneficial influence on modern thought. I would like to emphasise that I do not seek to attack or refute all that Dr. Popper has to say about science or about society. On the contrary, I accept and agree with a good deal of it. This book is not a

polemic against Dr. Popper, but an answer to his polemic against Marxism. I am seeking only to answer his charges and (as the sequel will show, this is often the right word) smears against Marxism, so as to make as clear as I can what Marxism really stands for, and to show that a rational and scientific approach to social problems (which Dr. Popper professes to demand) lends support to Marxism.

Dr. Popper has popularised in sociology and politics the use of the word "open". In the title of this book, and in the discussions it contains, I have ventured to borrow it from him. A society is "open" when there is nothing to stop individuals, if they choose, from developing their abilities and personalities to the fullest extent, and when social institutions are so ordered that they can be changed and developed, by decision of the members of society, in any way that will assist individuals to live more fully and more freely. On the other hand, it is "closed" when the members of society are bound by rules and regulations, conventions and prejudices, strictly enforced, which restrict their choices and impose on them a pattern of life rigidly limited by institutions which may not be changed.

The open society and progress towards the open society demand (so Dr. Popper declares, and I agree with him) an open way of thinking, characterised by rationality as opposed to blind belief in dogmas. For the open society we need an outlook which rejects dogmas and judges things only on the basis of evidence, always ready to think again when experience falsifies earlier conclusions. This I have ventured to call an "open philosophy".

Dr. Popper's objection to Marxism is that he imagines it to be a closed philosophy, a system of dogmas, what he calls "a reinforced dogmatism". And inevitably, so he maintains, the Marxist dogmas enjoin a corresponding closed attitude in social life—the imposition on society of rules, regulations, tyrannies of custom, enforced by political tyranny, which effectively close for individuals, and for society as a whole, all the avenues of free development.

But, one may ask, is a society really "open" when social production is tied to ensuring the accumulation of capital from surplus value, and the enjoyment of benefits and privileges by some depends on exploiting the labour of others? And can one's mind be really "open" so long as one is unable to see that such is the case with contemporary capitalist society, or to see the possibilities of advance which could be opened up for mankind if only the exploitation of man by man were done away with? So far from Marxism being a system of dogmas to close

our minds and discourage the unfettered exercise of reason to work out how best to promote freedom and the brotherhood of men, it systematises a way of thinking to open our minds to the appreciation of things as they are and the practical possibilities of changing them for the better.

The open way of thinking is the way of thinking which bases itself on demonstrable rules for finding out how things are, and which strives to appreciate, therefore, the actual conditions of our material existence and the necessary conditions for changing them—which therefore closes the mind to misrepresentations and dogmas, and opens the mind to the real possibilities of human life. That is why I have called the philosophy of Marxism “the open philosophy” and the communist society towards which Marxism directs our sights “the open society”.

A good deal of this book is controversial—not only because I engage in a controversy with opponents of Marxism but because there is controversy within Marxism itself. Inevitably, to answer the objections of opponents, especially the kind of objections Dr. Popper makes about Marxism being a dogma and the policies it advocates policies of dictatorship and tyranny, involves discussions which are controversial as among friends. In this connection I cannot but conclude this Foreword by acknowledging a particular debt of gratitude to R. Palme Dutt, who read through most of this book in the form in which I first drafted it. I alone am responsible for the point of view I express and for such unclarities and fallacies as may be found in it. But by his critical observations he helped me on several points to make it more clear and, I hope, more cogent than it would otherwise have been.

M. C.

London, October 1967





## NOTE

Dr. Popper's anti-Marxist writings are contained in three of his books, from which I have quoted extensively. For this purpose I have adopted the following abbreviations in references to them:

<i>The Open Society and its Enemies</i> , Vol. 1	1-OS
Vol. 2	2-OS
<i>The Poverty of Historicism</i>	PH
<i>Conjectures and Refutations</i>	CR

Page references refer to the fourth (revised) paperback edition of *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 1962; to the paperback edition of *The Poverty of Historicism*, 1961; and to the original edition of *Conjectures and Refutations*, 1963.



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**PART ONE**

**TOWARDS AN OPEN PHILOSOPHY**



