

Popper as a Socratic Public Intellectual

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Philip Benesch's [The Viennese Socrates](#) indeed does justice to its subtitle: “Karl Popper and the Reconstruction of Progressive Politics” (2012). On one level, this is a most audacious battle-cry against Right-wing apologists who claim Popper’s legacy as their own; on the other hand, it’s an outrageous response to decades of Left-wing dismissal of Popper as a reactionary crusader against Marxism. Perhaps that’s why I like it so much: it outlines a critically rational argument on behalf of a reinterpretation of Popper’s thought in politically progressive terms. This isn’t simply finding a comfortable middle ground for the legacy of Popper’s thought, but a search for the useful intellectual tools left for us by Popper, tools with which we should approach our own frustrations and lamentations concerning contemporary political debates.

Benesch argues that Popper should be judged in Socratic terms, namely, as the heir to Socrates’ political philosophy, because “both embrace a similar skepticism concerning the moral integrity and intellectual competence of politicians; neither seems readily corruptible by power.” Moreover, as Benesch suggests with ample citations, Popper indeed follows Socrates’ “political abstentionism”—his avowed dislike for personal intervention in political matters—which is based on and coupled with a deep “epistemological fallibilism”—one that explains his modesty. Hence, the “Viennese Socrates” of the title. Benesch isn’t blind to the critique leveled against Popper for decades about the false dichotomy he set up between Socrates the democrat and Plato the autocrat: “Popper unnecessarily conflated the Socratic-Platonic distinction in classical philosophy with the liberal-anti-liberal antagonism in contemporary politics. He failed to demonstrate that Plato’s political writings—*when taken as a whole*, rather than carefully parsed and selected to fit a preconceived hostile interpretation—advance an authoritarian agenda. Similarly, Popper failed to explain how Socrates might be understood to endorse (other than ironically) any program of political action, whether liberal or otherwise.”

There are those of us, from [Joseph Agassi](#) (who was his student, assistant, follower, and critic) to myself ([2006](#)), who have argued that the Popperian legacy is thoroughly political rather than limited to the affairs of the cloistered scientific community and its ground clearers (as Locke suggested his role was vis-à-vis Newton). Agassi’s ongoing question about the classical demarcation problem that Popper famously reignited was always: for what purpose? Why should we care about it? And the answers were always social and political, moral and psychological. As such, to be brief, to fully understand Popper and the ghosts he fought and the demons he hoped to excise for good is necessarily to contextualize his work in political and moral terms. As Benesch correctly reminds us, Popper’s [The Open Society and Its Enemies](#) was considered by him a contribution to the “war effort.” Indeed, a faint hope to fight European fascism with the power of the word; to remind followers and critics alike that the ideas of the past matter, that they remain alive in the actions of future generations. Indeed, with its negative definition of democracy this book became a best-seller for decades. But my interest here

isn't Popper's scholarship—his own and that of his many critics—but the role of public intellectuals.

Popper was a public intellectual, no doubt. But comparing him to Socrates is unkind to both. Let me explain. Socrates wasn't an academic, like Popper, nor had he the advantage of the history of philosophy that followed him, including the ideas of the Enlightenment. Popper, in turn, was a refugee in New Zealand and then UK—Jewish by Nazi standards despite his father's conversion—unlike Socrates who remained in his home city-state till his untimely death. While Socrates was talking ironically, sarcastically, and of course very seriously in the streets of Athens, Popper was much too reserved for such casual encounters. While Socrates was demanding state subsidy for his future services as he was about to drink the hemlock, Popper was knighted by the Queen. Indeed, the two couldn't have been more different on so many levels. Yet, insists Benesch, the one can be seen as the heir of the other, with a few modifications.

Socrates, as I suggested ([2014](#)), offers two models of public intellectuals: gadflies and philosophers-kings. With typical irony, both models are flawed. Though the latter accounts for the problems of the former—since speaking truth to power becomes an internal affair—these remain distinct and divergent models. Should the intellectual remain an outsider (Benda)? Should the intellectual be an organic insider to affect changes (Gramsci)? In this landscape, Popper is neither a blogger nor a rapper, but just another academic trying to engage the issues of the day (Sartre?). How should we assess Popper's effectiveness as a public intellectual? One criterion can be of courage: he passes with flying colors (like Russell), unlike many academic cowards who remained quiet when oppression surrounded them (Kuhn). The other can be of correctness: once again, he judged fascism correctly (like Aron)—including the Stalinist horrors many leftists chose to overlook (Sartre)—but missed the elasticity of capitalism (when following the Keynesian model of the day). And yet another can be of impact: and here he fails miserably, because his discipleship is miniscule by all counts (like Socrates), and his ideas are rarely discussed in political circle (unless counting Soros).

Yes, Popper definitely counts in my catalogue as a public intellectual, a brave academic who was willing to write about the issues of the day, condemning those worthy of condemnation and supporting those deserving support. Did he have some blind spots, just like our dear Socrates? Of course. Was he as open to criticism as his methodology suggests? Personal reports vary, but on the whole the answer is a qualified no. Was he as public as he could have been? The answer here, too, is a qualified no. But maybe I'll be corrected with additional evidence. In the meantime, I take solace in the herculean effort put forth by Benesch about the potential for political progressive movements that can also draw from Popper. Such movements, as I have lamented for years, can use all the help they can get. So, let's end with Benesch again: “the Socrates offered by Popper was the model of an unyielding critic of the moral failings of society and its political leaders. Should the Left adopt this model it would function as the secular conscience of a

democratic society that might otherwise easily become complacent and indifferent to the injustices inflicted upon the poor, the weak, and the oppressed.” I fully agree.

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References

Benesch, Philip. [*The Viennese Socrates*](#). New York: Peter Lang, 2014.