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KARL POPPER'S OPEN SOCIETY: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract
Though popularly acclaimed for his scientific works, Karl Popper made a mark in political philosophy as well. The need to address totalitarianism and autocratic rule is a common concern to both scientists and the rest of us. Political power has been in constant abuse by political actors. Leaders elected under democratic platform face the constant temptation of adopting undemocratic and totalitarian techniques in desperate attempt to keep their subject in subjugation and retain power. This often involves suppression of contrary views while promoting pro-regime ideology. The scenario in Nigeria is worsened by cultural norms and thinking patterns that are heavily derived from the rubrics of what Popper classified as closed society. Many of these negative cultural traits are a major hindrance in the nation's quest for democratic progress. In this paper attempt is made to review the concept of Open society as enunciated by Karl Popper in relation to democratic and policy implementations in Nigeria. The paper will finally recommend ways of enhancing democratic practice and institutions in Nigeria in line with Popper's philosophy.

Key Words: **Open Society**, **Closed Society**, **Totalitarianism**, **Democracy, Nigeria.**

Introduction

Open and Closed Society

Ever since the world started moving towards democracy, there has been great quest for openness. The administration and the political process of countries in the world is facing increasing demand on the liberalisation of thought, speech and actions. This quest and demand made Karl popper's book *Open Society and its Enemies* attractive to seekers of a better society devoid of the usual high handedness and dictatorial tendencies of leaders. Though, Popper's aim in publishing the book was to offer an alternative path to the growing advance in fascist and totalitarian ideology, the content of the book set a new agenda for democratic governance even in the so-called democratic countries.

The concept 'Open Society' was not first used by Popper. It was used Bergeson. But the meaning Popper attached to it was different. Bergeson regards the closed society as a society based on closed morality and a closed soul while open society is characterized by open morality and an open soul. He used the term in reference to religious openness. He noted that this openness is accessible only to the saints of Christianity. In fact, he called it a mystic society (Steinvorth, 2006:240).

Popper on the other hand used the concept in a different sense. He writes, "my terms indicate a rationalist distinction; the closed society is characterized by the belief in magical taboos, while the open society is one in which men have learned to some extent to be critical of taboos and to base decisions on the authority of their own intelligence (Steinvorth,2006:242).. From the above, we can infer that an open society is founded on the principle of rationality and critical principles. It is a society where men's lives are not ruled by taboos and instincts but by reason. It is therefore a society that offers a wide range of opportunity to the rational and critical input of its citizens without limitations. In such society, citizens have unfettered opportunity to critically express their convictions on virtually every issue. Just as science makes progress through the overthrow or modification of theories through refutation, society makes progress as well through the same principle. The more tolerant a society is to opposing views, the more open such a society is.

Nigeria was under autocratic military rule for several years, within these period all the principles of constitutional governance was suspended. Military decree was the acceptable mode of governance. This affected the political consciousness and culture of the average citizen. The military mentality gradually permeated the entire society. It took concerted mass action led by pro-democracy and civil society

organisations to oust military dictatorship in Nigeria. This therefore shows that Nigeria is a country in transition from the closed society.

What Popper's Open Society Looks Like

In Popper's, classification of closed societies, the situation of tribal societies the situation where people are closely knit together by blood ties and customs became a manifest example. The societal norm, customs and taboos are the major moderating factor in determining human conduct and life patterns. What basically makes this type of society closed is the fact that the lives of men are controlled by either a force or authority outside him. Decisions and attitudes are not products of personal convictions. It can be the authority of the gods or the collective morality of the community.

A closed society Popper contends resembles a herd in being a semi-organic unit whose members are held together by semi-biological ties – kingship, living together, sharing common efforts, common dangers, common joys and common distress (Karl Popper, 1966:2). This type of society appears to provide mutual harmony and brotherhood which is actually absent in modern societies. But it fails to provide the needed intellectual freedom needed for men to exercise their mental and philosophical abilities. This is because the society reasons for everyone through established customs, norms and values.

The breakdown of the tribal society Popper observes is an advance towards the open society. He notes that tribal exclusiveness and self-sufficiency could only be superseded by some form of imperialism (Popper, 1966:173). He therefore contends that Athenian imperialism was an advance towards the open society. This is because by opening up to other nations, the bonds of tribal exclusiveness were destroyed.

Popper had to draw the distinction between closed and open society from the policy of Sparta and Athens. The Spartan policy according to Popper, were based on the following; (a) Shut out all foreign influences which might endanger tribal taboos (b) shut out all equalitarian, democratic and individualistic ideologies (c) be independent of trade (d) uphold the differentiation between your tribe and others and do not mix with inferiors (f) dominate and enslave your neighbours (g) the city should not become too large karl Popper, (1966:184) It is in this respect that Popper appraises the Athenian imperialism as being liberal.

The above characterisation is typical of even modern closed societies. In such societies, plurality of ideas is treated as taboo. The democratic space is so narrow such that it excludes a large segment of the society. Sometimes leadership is the exclusive right of a few families. Even in some so called democratic countries, political power has been hijacked unofficially by the rich. This is because the system has been skewed in such a manner that only people who belong to the billionaire club can afford the cost of political contest.

On the broader scale, even the privatization of power and governance by a political party, under the pretext that it won election is a measure of closed society. Recently, in Nigeria the ruling party chairman insisted that all the principal officers of the national assembly must come from their party and legislators as matter of party supremacy must elect the candidates chosen by the party. This is in a multi-party parliament. Even the legislators themselves have lost the right to choose who leads them. It has to be dictated by the party and executive. This is notwithstanding that sovereignty is the popular sovereignty shares possessed by each citizen (Zdzisiwa and Hauser, p.4). When the political party dictates the line of thought for members of parliament, who primarily represents themselves and their constituents, the voters who in most cases are not party members are alienated and their views finds no expression in the political process. Not because their representative doesn't agree with their feelings and perceptions, but his mouth is sealed by the principle of party supremacy. This has a tendency of returning a democratic society into a closed society. This is the scenario that is about to play out in Nigeria.

Popper is advocating for a society that is open to accommodate contrary and conflicting views on virtually all government policies and decisions. In such society, government policies are not sacrosanct but adjustable based on critical input by the citizens. An open society therefore, creates a political space where the leaders are open to receive criticism and the citizens are open as well to make critical input into the operation of government policies.

It should also be noted that unbridled capitalism as it is currently practiced in some countries is anchored on the theory of dominating and enslavement of others. This, in itself is a symptom of lack of democracy. Big nations enslave poorer nations. Most people working in the private sector even in Nigeria are being enslaved by their employers. And such workers do not even have the right to form associations or unions.

Epistemologically, the closed society can be likened to the bucket theory of the mind. This is a pedagogical principle where ideas and knowledge are dumped in people without an opportunity on their part to critically accept or reject it. Citizens in a closed society are denied the opportunity of critical reflective thought on the affairs of their society. Their lives, patterns of life and living are moderated by the customs and taboos of the community. By implication, any society where the government exercises absolute control over the affairs of the people also falls within the category of closed society.

One other attribute of Popper's open society is the fact that it is a society where individuals are confronted with personal decisions. This is as opposed to closed society where taboos and collectivism replace personal decisions (Popper, 1966:186). Roberta Corvi contends that the open society carries a risk of abstractness as it involves a loss of organic character which made society feel like a real concrete group (Popper, 1966:182).

The organic and concrete character of closed societies provides social security, comradeship and fraternity which are seriously absent in modern western societies. This is why closed societies are attractive to the conservative minded. Without prejudice to the points raised above, a few challenges confront Popper's aversion to collective morality and norms. It may be wrong to assume that every collectively imposed moral order is done in bad faith. Some of such moral injunctions are results of collective decisions and agreements of community members. For instance, in some African societies, one finds traditional instructions in form of taboos saying you don't bath or wash clothes in such and such river. Though there may not be any explanation to subsequent generations in respect of the reasons for such decision, yet it usually arises as a rational community decision to safeguard public health through hygiene. This applies to several norms and values in traditional societies. Some traditional societies are open at the point of arriving at community decisions which they hold binding on themselves and their offspring, and to ensure stability in the community, the door is not thrown open for people to question the decision afresh.

Totalitarianism: **A feature of Closed Society**

Totalitarianism describes a political scenario in which the state bears unlimited control over the people in its attempt to achieve its set out ideology. This often results in repression and suppression of contrary views. Sabine and Thorson state that "according to the theory of totalitarianism, government was not only absolute in its exercise but unlimited in its application. Nothing lay outside its province. Every interest and value – economic, moral and cultural- being part of the natural resources were to be controlled and utilized by the government" (Sabine, G.H., 1973:23). The state maintains a firm control over every sector of the people's life and virtually controls everything. In most cases, personal liberty is completely eroded.

The central political policy that Popper sought to advance was a new social engineering opposed to what he termed utopian social engineering. The utopian engineering is one of the enemies of the open society. Utopianism assumes that it is possible to attain a societal ideal through a well thought out blueprint. Popper considers utopian social engineering as one of the most dangerous approach towards politics (Corvi, 1997:52). To implement the blueprint of the utopian engineer, a totalitarian philosophy and a benevolent dictator is needed.

Bryan Magee notes that Popper's major concern in his political thought was to understand and explain the appeal of totalitarian ideas and to do everything he could to undermine it, and to also promulgate the value and importance of liberty in the widest sense (Magee, B., 1973:84).. Totalitarian political theories have a strong appeal to people. This is because it promises an ideal political paradise where all societal problems find instant resolution. Popper thus became the first philosopher to historically trace the intellectual roots of such philosophies. Magee contends that the foremost reason why Popper defends the open society is because he regards living as first and foremost a process of problem –solving (Magee, B., 1973:86). He favours forms of society which permit the untrammelled assertion of different proposals followed by criticism which leads to change (Magee, B., 1973:86). This method ultimately will result in greater positive result.

Popper's attack on utopianism and totalitarianism came as liberation. It came at a time when the dominant thought among philosophers and others was under the influence of totalitarian theories. This apparently was the reason why he had to take the pains to trace the philosophical roots of the idea.

Popper (2005:59) contends that the root of totalitarianism can be traced to the ideas of Plato. Plato argues that all changes as observed in the world are evidences of decay and corruption. Since change is driving the world and society towards death, Plato sought to arrest change so as to stem the tide of continuous

decay and degeneration. He postulated the theory of ideal forms for which every other thing we see is a copy. The ideal is the real and genuine copy while what we see around in the human society is the fake or adulterated copy of the original. The more changes and development takes place the more we are moving away from the original. He therefore advocated a return to what the society used to be before change overtook it. Popper contends that this is the origin of the political theory of totalitarianism.

Hegel in the opinion of Popper contributed little to the advancement of knowledge since there is nothing he said that has not been written by earlier thinkers. But he observed that he is the source of contemporary totalitarianism and historicism (Popper, pp. 20-21. While Plato posits that things are tending towards decay as they change, Hegel on his part argues on the contrary. He perceives things including its essence to be involved in the process of change, but this time not towards decay, but towards perfection. This perfect state is what he called the absolute Idea. Anchoring on this idea, the Marxists developed the idea of a perfect communist state. The practical political process of realizing communism requires absolute state control to steer the society to this ideal end.

However, totalitarianism is not a feature peculiar to communism. It is common in every regime in which the state is pursuing a blue print that is targeted at revolutionary overhaul of the entire society. It can arise as a result of attempt to arrest what is perceived as societal decay or an attempt to steer the state towards an ideal political end that promises better welfare for everyone. Both the conservative and the progressive inclined regimes can actually become totalitarian.

In an attempt to actualize the blueprint, the state adopts an approach to compel all social forces and individuals to align themselves to the pursuit of this ideal. To effectively do this, individual liberties are compromised and contrary views are treated as destructive. The state and its actors assume the role of wise men while the rest of the society must follow instructions as dictated by them. The police and security agencies are set lose to track men and women who are enemies of the government, by not cooperating enough to realize the blueprint.

Historicism: **The killer of intellectualism**

Historicism is a doctrine which claims that "history is controlled by specific historical or evolutionary laws whose discovery would enable us prophesy the destiny of man" (Popper, 1966:257). It is an attempt to adopt a form of scientific step towards the study of social sciences and its institutions. It is hoped that this approach, will help discover the patterns and trends [1966:4] in history with a view to predicting the future. Popper affirms that historicism is an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim, and which assumes this aim is attainable by discovering the rhythms or the patterns, the laws that underlie the evolution of history(1966:3). The generally accepted norm by historicists is the thesis that history proceeds in accordance with a law of destiny. This law operates independently of human actions. It is this historical law that determines the future course of events on earth. It is therefore the degree to which man understands and masters this law that will predict the historical destiny of the society. Each historical epoch is assumed to possess its peculiarities.

In Karl Marx analysis of capitalism, he predicted the emergence of a classless society. This is to be brought about through a social revolution led by the working class or the proletariat. Marx contends that every social system is self-destructive because it produces the forces that ultimately destroy it. Based on this, he asserts that revolutions are inevitable as these forces are beyond the control of any man. This position is based on the assumption that historical facts points to its inevitability. The historicism of Marxism is based on the assumption that history is controlled by invisible laws, which determine the future.

Popper's open society is anchored on the epistemological principles of critical rationalism. This is one of the facts of life negated by historicism. If history has already determined the course of society, every rational input by man is put on hold and rationality is arrested and imprisoned. It is the application of critical rationalism that formed the basis of his critique of historicism and totalitarianism. It is popper's contention that genuine development begins with the development in human rationality. Development and progress in the scientific, social and economic spheres of society are preceded by a development in critical rationality. It is increasing rationality that defines open society.

The Poor State of Critical Rationality in Nigeria

It is clear from the discussions above that Popper is more concerned about openness in the realm of thought and the prevailing freedom of each person in the society to arrive at personal decision and

responsibility without influence from a higher authority or even his social group. He is therefore advocating for a rational critical society where ideas rule and democratic discourse moderated by the principle of superior argument.

Rational critical thought is still far from being a dominant culture in Nigeria. Chinweuba and Ezeugwu (2018) averred that there has been a steady rise in unseasoned, irrational and uncritical population in Nigeria (·pp.1-13).Thought patterns especially in the political sphere is moderated by ethnic and tribal consciousness. There is hardly any political decision or discourse in Nigeria that is not pursued through ethnic and religious lines. Even who gets admitted into federal schools follow the principle of quota system rather than merit. The quota is a reflection of where one comes from and it is entrenched in the constitution. This places ethnicity as the dominant mode thought in the country. This buttresses the fact that the evolution of democratic consciousness in Nigeria evolved along with ethnic consciousness.

This has perfectly been assimilated into Nigerian political culture with attendance challenges. This reflects what Popper describes as one of the major characteristics of closed society. One can argue that Nigeria as a country, going by the parameter set by Popper is still a closed society. It is as a result of ethnic colouration of the thought patterns that issues like quota system was entrenched in the constitution and is applicable not only in employment but in university admission as well. While developed and developing nations are setting standards of merit and excellence, Nigeria's standard is where you come from, which reflects the ethnic nationality you belong. The above scenario implies that Nigeria currently lacks the critical culture needed to (a) keep leaders in check (b) the critical input needed to advise leaders and (c) a political class ready to learn from the critical input of the opposition.

Totalitarianism as a Manifest Feature of Governance in Nigeria

There are manifest totalitarian tendencies that have infested governance in Nigeria. This is as a result of the desperate desire by public office holders to be lord over all without restriction. The average Nigerian politician is averse to criticism. Critical comments are perceived as insult and disrespect. This may be fallout from the traditional culture in which kings are revered and praised by the subjects. Even institutions and agencies established constitutionally to ensure good governance are gradually aiding the suppression of contrary views and opposition. Some of the agencies and institutions that have been skewed to assert totalitarian control over the people are the Security Agencies, the Anti-Corruption and even the electoral umpire is not free from accusations of bias in favour of the government in power.

It is a clear fact that the Nigerian security outfits has a poor grasp of their role in a democratic society. Their main focus is not to protect the masses, but rather to protect the administration. Rather than police Nigerian society, they police the politicians and the rich, thereby leaving the larger society unprotected.

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, though established with good intention, has gradually been turned into a tool in the hands of the sitting president to persecute his political opponents. The public perception of the agency is that they are more in the business of pursuing personal vendetta than objectively fighting corruption and this buttressed by the penchant of EFCC to resort to media trial of accused persons ever before charging them to court. The impression that arises of this this that focus is not actually conviction of the accused but political image damage. This has reduced the entire anti-corruption war to a mere child's play (2017:5).

Conclusion

The high level of illiteracy in the North coupled with religious biased thinking of the average citizen constitutes a serious hindrance in the application of the principles of genuine open society in Nigeria. *National Bureau of Statistics Report* indicates that there is wide disparity between the level of literacy across the states of the Federation. While the average national literacy rate is 56.9 percent, there are variations between states and the sexes. Lagos has 92.0 percent while Borno is 14.5 percent (2010).. The implication therefore is that in political discourse and actions, the majority of the citizens, leaders not excluded will naturally not be able to engage in correct democratic practice.

For this kind of political and social engineering to work in Nigeria, a restructuring of the educational system must take place. This is because the academic curriculum as it is presently designed does not prepare citizens for political office as it lacks critical content. It is only designed to produce conformists to the existing status quo. Again, there is need for national political education policy which will result in entrenching a democratic culture.

It is therefore not out of place to infer that Nigeria is far from measuring up to the Popperian Open Society. To measure up, some cultural patterns of thought and analysis need to give way especially the habit of perceiving and analysing every issue from the ethnic prism.

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