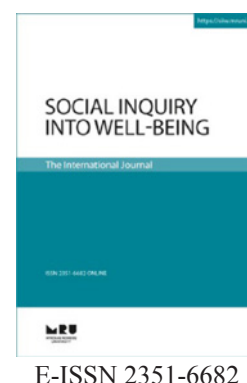




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# Social Inquiry into Well-Being



## The Illusion of an Open Society

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### Abstract

Creating an open society depends on having the proper social ontology. Most often the focus is on individualism and the adoption of market social imagery. The result of this strategy is often social divisions and conflict, with many persons lamenting the demise of the common good. But this vacillation between the individual and the collective overlooks a source of order--referred to by Martin Buber as the in-between--that is compatible with generating an open society. As a result of this omission, most proposals for an open society lack vitality and a creative vision.

Keywords: neo-liberalism; statism; intersubjectivity; open society; responsible social order.

### Introduction

Social critics have been enthralled by the prospects of developing an "open society" ever since Popper (1963) published his book with this title. But in many countries around the world nowadays, particularly those that have recently freed themselves from repressive regimes, this idea is much more than a theoretical issue. In Eastern Europe, for example, this theme has captivated many persons during the past twenty years or so. The aim of these societies is breathe the air of freedom and become increasingly open. In many respects, their escape from the past is predicated on the realization of this openness.

The aim of socialist societies, such as the Soviet Union, was to overcome the class conflict, exploitation, and alienation associated with capitalism, and gradually create a more commodious environment. These societies, in short, wanted to establish a sense of solidarity as a normal condition. Many of these places, however, adopted an abstract model of collectivity. To borrow from Camus, this model represented a metaphysical singularity that, in the end, demanded uniformity and the related compliance. This mode of solidarity, furthermore, often undermined the high ideals that were espoused.

The problem, however, is that there is some confusion about the nature of an open society. In some cases, the idea is that in such a society persons are guaranteed almost unlimited freedom. Along with this misconception is that cultural mores and traditions tend to restrict persons and thus the influence of these elements must be reduced. Persons are thus encouraged to be skeptical of all planned institutions and other intentional ventures, especially those that may emphasize social responsibility. The only acceptable method of organizing an open society, accordingly, is through the operation of markets. After all, these devices regulate persons without imposing an ideology.

Bergson provides some insight into this trend, although Popper did not think favorably of his analysis. In his *Two Sources* (1977, p. 282), Bergson summarizes the differences between an open and closed society. A closed society, for example, is predicated on authority and hierarchy, while one that is open stresses liberty and inclusiveness. In the second option, persons are free from imposed obligations and encouraged to offer criticisms.

Nonetheless, this formula has not produced the paradise that was promised. In the case of Eastern Europe, there is no doubt that liberation from the Soviet Union has produced some positive results. Personal expression has increased,

along with the commercial side of life. But even a cursory examination reveals that these places have experienced the dark side of the market, or what Hinkelammert (1991) calls “savage capitalism.” As a result change proliferates, along with conflict and uncertainty, as unemployment soars and deep social divisions are revealed. In fact, in the aftermath of relying on the market to promote prosperity, solidarity is often dismissed as a harmful dream.

But is an open society worth pursuing? Indeed, hardly anyone would dismiss this idea out of hand. A closed or repressive order, almost by definition, is not very appealing. Nonetheless, the development of an open society has not necessarily had an auspicious beginning in many countries, such as Lithuania. Social fragmentation and strife are not very favorable traits. If an open society is still desired, however, perhaps some serious reflection on this issue should be entertained. In this way, some of the miscues that have occurred can be corrected.

But what may also happen is that the original image of an open society held by persons in these countries may have to be abandoned. The rendition of freedom that has been extolled, for example, may come to be viewed as untenable in both theory and practice. In this regard, a truly open society may not be compatible with market regulation. Cutting jobs to increase profitability may become an unsavory proposal. In this regard, a society may be open when the communal nature of social life is recognized. In other words, there is no way to know ahead of time where this reflection will lead. Still many persons would agree that the current image of an open society is problematic.

### The Liberal Tradition

Those who covet an open society are often influenced by the liberal tradition of political philosophy. At the core of this perspective is the work of Mill, Locke, and, more recently, Hayek. As is well known, the centerpiece of this outlook is the individual. While referring to Locke, the individual is sovereign.

In this sense, Popper (1977, Vol. 2, 91) praises the benefits of Mills’ psychologism, particularly the opposition to holism or collectivism. Along with Mill, Popper insists that the behavior of any group reflects nothing more than the actions of individuals. Nonetheless, Mills disappoints Popper by trying to provide universal rules of behavior.

With respect to the Medieval Period – the backdrop of the ruminations of Mill and Locke – the liberal position appears to be quite enlightened (Hinkelammert, 2002a, pp. 48–50) Persons are no longer subservient to arcane cosmic themes, religions dogmas, or questionable social hierarchies. Now everyone is free to reflect and act in a rational manner. The social status attained by persons, accordingly, depends on their goals and ambition. Additionally, customs and other institutional barriers are characterized as anathema to this freedom.

Persons are thus encouraged to care for themselves and pursue their respective aims. For this reason, personal responsibility is very important, along with the dignity that is

attached to the individuals. No-one should be allowed to violate the rights of others, even the government.

But soon a problem begins to arise. Specifically, how does social order develop? The liberal tradition, in this sense, shares a bias that is present in various other theories and difficult to overcome. The assumption is that persons are basically a-social, but must somehow become part of a coherent unit. At least in the work of Mill and Locke, in contrast to Hobbes, persons are not totally blinded by self-interest and in constant need to supervision. Consequently, a version of order is enacted that is not necessarily synonymous with repression.

Due to their ability to reflect, persons can appreciate the need to include others in their plans. In effect, given the attention directed to individuals, social life could be quite chaotic. For example, persons might begin to achieve their own goals at the expense of others. The result of the freedom granted to individuals could be conflict and uncertainty.

In the case of Mills and Locke, persons can see the wisdom of tempering their freedom. In order to insure tranquility, they are all expected to relinquish some of their sovereignty to the state (Waldron, 1989). The government, accordingly, mediates all relationships and guarantees order. But this intervention should be minimal, since individuals are still presumed to be autonomous.

As a result of this maneuver, associations are thought to be basically contractual (Hinkelammert, 2002a, pp. 80–81). Certain rules are outlined, and legitimized and enforced by the government, which guide all interaction. Nonetheless, the key shortcoming is this strategy is that persons do not necessarily view themselves to be truly connected. Consequently, their relationships are mostly tactical and designed to meet the letter of the law. In actuality, these rules are treated often as an imposition to be circumvented, if the possibility arises.

The result is a society where persons revel in their own needs and exhibit little or no social solidarity. Indeed, any talk of community responsibility is met with dismay or resistance, because basically persons are encouraged to pursue their own goals and achieve individual happiness (Hinkelammert, 2002b). Any connection to others is ancillary to these aims.

At first, however, the freedom offered by the liberal tradition is quite alluring. Personal ambitions are elevated in importance, with minimal interference from others or outside forces. Enjoyment, comfort, and consumption become key themes, while sacrifice and community are pushed into the background. What could be more enticing? Nonetheless, societies that view openness in this way are very lonely places, where the pursuit of success often promotes internecine rivalries and culminates in widespread alienation. As persons become increasingly self-absorbed, social issues become a burden and are ignored.

### Market Imagery

In many countries, the correct operation of markets is thought to be synonymous with the development of an open society. In fact, this is the argument advanced by Hayek. *Lais-*

*sez-faire* economics, accordingly, is viewed as the best vehicle to bring an open society to fruition. But due to this emphasis, any talk about collectivism is criticized as leading to inefficiency and oppression. The term popularized by Hayek (1944) in this regard is *serfdom*.

Many places in Eastern Europe adhere to this position and have adopted the neo-liberal model of economic and social life. Similar to the liberal tradition, the individual is supreme. In this updated rendition, however, another step is taken. Specifically, the person is treated as an atom.

According to Mill and Locke, persons are aware of others and, eventually, engage in tactical relationships. Such associations may even morph into cooperation, although short-lived. In the case of neo-liberalism, however, such insight is dismissed as a distraction. Reminiscent of the statement made by Margaret Thatcher, society does not exist in this theory; in the neo-liberal philosophy, social order is a collection of individuals and their familial associates.

In the neo-liberal version of the world, persons are competitors or adversaries. They are expected to pursue their preferences, with no regard for the impact of their behavior on others. How order emerges from this maelstrom is specified by the market. In an almost magical but perverse way, personal greed promotes the common weal. In this sense, Adam Smith described the market to be guided by an invisible but steady hand.

Within this neo-liberal framework, the market is given the latitude to regulate behavior. But this control is not intrusive. After all, the market is based on rationality and exhibits no biases; the market, as conservatives are fond of saying, is non-ideological. What this device does, accordingly, is allow the best ideas or products to emerge from the competition that is fostered. Advocates of *laissez-faire* contend that every facet of social life would be improved by the discipline introduced by this process (Harvey, 2005).

When regulated in this manner, society becomes a battleground. At the marketplace certain persons triumph, while others lose and try to regroup. But the battle that ensues is downplayed, due to the mediation by the market. There is nothing diabolical or tragic about this conflict, since the rationality that guides the marketplace is designed to improve efficiency and thus upgrade society. Any job losses or personal hardships will be balanced by higher productivity and lower process. The overall calculus of happiness, accordingly, will show positive gains.

Persons are thus ultimately free at the market place. Any misbehavior will be detected by the market and corrected. If one gambit fails, try another. As Milton Friedman once noted, the only moral principle that is operative at the marketplace is profitability. Any other sentiment that might be exhibited, in fact, only detracts from the rationality that is the keystone of the market. Failure to pursue personal gain, therefore, represents irresponsible behavior.

According to this thesis, writes Hinkelammert (1984, pp. 77–118), society can best be described as a “total market.” Persons are free, therefore, to experience losses and gains, and should expect little more than an analytical appraisal of these outcomes. Good traders at the marketplace, for exam-

ple, should be able to identify risky stocks, so that they do not squander their retirements. If they lose their life savings, their decisions were obviously faulty and should have been punished. Furthermore, emotional responses to these tragedies encourage faulty thinking and are unproductive.

The neo-liberal world is thus far worse than lonely. When society is characterized as a market, life is downright hostile. Persons and groups are treated as casualties of an economic rationality that is unrelenting but fair. Persons get what they deserve! But as more persons are harmed, the mantra is that this pain will result in a better economy in the future. In the absence of any immediate fanfare, any of the so-called structural changes that result are touted to be beneficial in the long-term. In many ways, this entire operation is tautological and mysterious, and hardly corresponds to the scientific image associated regularly with neo-liberalism.

But when an open society is equated with the operation of markets, freedom is purchased at a high price. Progress is associated with economic growth—which often has little to do with the overall well-being of a society—while everything pales in comparison. Persons may learn to live with the pain inflicted by the market, but the quality of life suffers because social support is eviscerated. Indeed, mutual support would be an irrational response at the marketplace. Persons are thus left to navigate a world of suspicion, damaged lives, and faux relationships, with everyone jockeying for advantage and recognition. Some time ago, Erich Fromm (1955, pp. 67–77) labeled such a society sick.

### A Faulty Freedom

Both the liberal and neo-liberal positions are based on a faulty premise. That is, persons are portrayed to be fundamentally a-social and thus can flourish only as individuals. Any call for social responsibility, accordingly, represents an unnecessary imposition or something worse, namely the introduction of a totalitarian system. In this situation, a society that pursues openness is left in a serious quandary.

The crux of this issue is that both of these traditions adhere to the standard paradigm adopted by social philosophers. On the one hand, the focus can be the individual. This position is referred to usually as nominalism. Because the individual is reduced to an atom, the social realm is treated as an aberration or illusion. The key consideration is simply individual initiative and the realization of personal goals. At best, as described by Hayek (1973), social order arises spontaneously and is unrelated to collective intentions.

Freedom, in this case, is envisioned to be absolute. The reason behind this claim is that persons are atoms. And when conceived in this limited way, freedom is exercised in a vacuum. In other words, each atom can be actualized without any regard for others because they are not connected. According to this scenario, due to the independence of atoms, others are simply unknown and irrelevant. As a result, the arrival of order can only be mysterious.

The other traditional position is advanced by realists. These writers argue that the society should not be depicted as the result of individual action or even a gaggle of persons.

These realists claim that a community exists *sui generis*, and thus has the duty to control persons. In this sense, the social is considered to be ontologically superior to the individual. Moreover, without this exalted reality order would devolve into a cacophony of viewpoints.

In terms of realism, therefore, freedom can only be envisioned by the collective. But in order to experience this liberty, persons must be subservient to this ultimate or higher reality. The result of this demand is totalitarianism, whereby persons are sacrificed to the group. In the end, they are free but overshadowed by a more powerful source of order.

When those who pursue an open society do not break with this paradigm, they tend to vacillate between two extremes. Either they focus on the individual, and champion a *laissez-faire* position, or desire solidarity but fear the accompanying totalitarianism. Neither option is very satisfying.

According to the liberal and neo-liberal traditions, freedom is idealized. In both theories, persons act with minimal regard for others. But when relief is sought from this condition, the only option is an imposing collective that has the latitude to usurp individual rights. Such a dead end does not bode well for the promotion of an open society.

### A Critical Blind Spot

A serious blind spot is present in both nominalism and realism. Stated simply, in each theory the world is portrayed in a very abstract way. All that exists is the individual or the collective. What is overlooked, however, is the “space” that exists between these two poles. Martin Buber (1965) refers to this realm as the “in-between,” although a host of writers have proposed additional descriptives. Their point is that neither nominalism nor realism captures adequately how social order is actually engendered.

Both positions are sustained by a dualism that many modern writers consider to be outmoded. Simply put, individuals are not atoms that are separated categorically, nor are collectives distinct from individuals. Such distinctions merely recapitulate divisions – between part and whole or particular and general – that are not treated as cogent by many modern writers.

Clearly persons are open to others and are not atoms. Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) describes this new situation as “being singular plural.” In other words, individuals have unique identities but always exist with others, that is, inter-subjectively. They are never isolates but share an existential space. Their uniqueness, in fact, emerges in contract to others.

The collective, likewise, is not something abstract, cut off from human action (Dussel, 1988). This whole does not transcend individuals, like some ethereal entity, but is revealed at the nexus of persons. In this sense, the collective is not something foreign, i.e., ontologically separate, that can, at times, be superimposed on individuals to insure order.

The thrust of “being singular plural” is that persons are primordially connected to one another, before a contract is created to establish regularity. Indeed, this connection permits a contract to be proposed and implemented. The

basic condition of persons, accordingly, is their togetherness – not based on similarity but their differences. As Niklas Luhmann (1982) describes this situation, order is engendered and held together through recognition that unites differences. But this relationship exists prior to any formal acknowledgement.

The rendition of an open society that is predicated on “being singular plural” offers a new perspective on freedom, one that makes sense. Openness, for example, is not equated with absolute freedom or anathema to social solidarity. Now persons are understood to act always in the presence of others, and this relationship determines the validity of all behavior. In this regard, declares Levinas (1968), ethics precedes ontology. This relationship to others, for example, challenges the idea that persons should be sacrificed to any abstraction, such as profit. After all, how can a dignified relationship be maintained with others in view of such manipulation?

An open society, therefore, does not necessarily require unlimited freedom; such a position, in fact, is a myth. But on the other hand, the desire for solidarity does not signal automatically the curtailment of liberty. Within the realm of the in-between, freedom is worked out among equal participants. In this dialogical space, the boundary that both separates and joins persons is negotiated in a way that protects everyone. With respect to maintaining their dignity, could the desire for profitability survive this test?

In this version of an open society, the uniqueness of persons is cultivated but not at the expense of others. And because this basic condition of existence constitutes a community, mutual aid does not signal an end to personal integrity. Existing in the face of others, notes Levinas, invites care rather than subservience. In reality, no-one in this dialogical community has the stature to demand such an undignified outcome.

### Conclusion

Rather than beginning from the liberal tradition, and likely adopting eventually the neo-liberal perspective, those who desire an open society might try a different tact. Guided by the principle of “being singular plural”, openness might be more productively conceived as inter-subjective. What could be avoided, accordingly, are the rampant individualism and fear of collectivity that are found nowadays in many societies where openness is extolled. A more commodious order could thus be established, whereby solidarity and mutual care can be expected without the sacrifice of personal uniqueness and initiative.

After all, in view of the work of Nancy and many others, a sense of community is never imposed on persons. Rather than something rare, and likely dangerous, persons are never removed from others. Their fundamental condition is communal, without any formal designation as a community. Starting from this position could establish a more authentic framework for developing an open society than is currently the case. A society is thus possible that is both open and supportive.

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