

Editorial: Open Nightmares?

'We could conceive of a society in which men practically never meet face to face, in which all business is conducted by individuals in isolation, who communicate by typed letters or by telegrams, and who go about in closed motor-cars. Artificial insemination would allow even propagation without a personal element. Although we do not always drive alone in closed motor cars, but meet face to face thousands of men walking past us in the street, we do not establish as a rule any personal relationship with our fellow pedestrians. Similarly membership of a trade union may mean no more than the possession of a membership card and the payment of a contribution to an unknown secretary. There are many people living in a modern society who have no, or extremely few, intimate personal contacts, who live in anonymity and isolation.'

Rather remarkably the above is Karl Popper's vision, published in 1945, of what an open society was, even then, on the road to becoming, and, although he rather remarkably foresaw developments in human biology, he had at that time no inkling of the way electronic communications would reinforce impersonal dealings in so many domains, including even the educational. Popper's musings conclude that 'although society has become abstract, the biological nature of man has not changed much; *men have social needs they cannot satisfy in an abstract society*'.* This warning is all the more telling in that Popper was a staunch advocate of open societies, and a fierce critic of closed societies. Much of his rhetoric has now become part of the spirit of our age, part of an age whose drive is to replace societies based on ancient and traditional bonds and hierarchies, with new societies based on abstract conceptions of human rights and on freedom from biological and other historic ties and categories.

Maybe we in the West are coming to terms with life in a Popperian abstract society. At least we seem to be content to live much of our lives on-line and vicariously through the mass media, as well as benefiting from techniques of artificial insemination (way beyond anything Popper could have envisaged) and to contemplate genetic 'enhancements'. Much of this contributes to or results from the openness we in the West now take so much for granted. But in heeding

* See Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol 1*, 5th Edition (revised), London, 1966, 174–5 (originally published 1945).

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Popper's warning, we should be more understanding of the instinctive rejection of this vision in parts of the world unready for it, where much of what he envisages would be seen as a nightmare rather than a utopian dream. It is unlikely that many of the people we call fundamentalists have read Popper, but their response to Westernisation, for all its seeming barbarity, can be a desperate attempt to satisfy those deep human needs which Popperian open societies leave unmet. This is part of what, even now, we are seeing tragically played out in the Middle East and in parts of Asia.