Popper, Objectification and the Problem of the Public Sphere

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1. Introduction: World 3

Popper’s approach to philosophy was anti-psychologistic, at least since he wrote *The Two Fundamental Problems of the Theory of Knowledge* (cf. Popper 2009 [1979; 1930-3]). In his work, anti-psychologism meant not an opposition to the recognition of psychological activity and its significance (in correspondence with Hayek in the 1950s he identified himself as a dualist interactionist), but, rather, an opposition to the reduction of knowledge to psychology. He stressed – in ways that are familiar from Frege and the early Husserl – the non-psychologistic status of logic. And in *The Open Society* (Popper 1945), with reference to Marx, he stressed his opposition to attempts to offer psychologistic explanations in the social sciences. His own interpretation of ‘methodological individualism’ viewed human action as taking place in social situations. His short papers on the mind-body problem in the 1950s (included in Popper 1963) developed an argument that the descriptive and argumentative functions of language posed a problem for reductionistic accounts of the mind-body relation. While in his ‘Of Clouds and Clocks’ (in Popper 1972), issues concerning what he was subsequently to call ‘world 3’ played an important role in his more systematic treatment of the mind-body problem. As David Miller suggested, Popper called world 3 in to redress the balance of world 1 and world 2 (see Popper 1976b, note 302).
At the same time, I recall the somewhat shocked reaction, at his seminar in 1968, when Popper spoke about ‘world 3’. His colleagues – who agreed with his anti-psychologism – did not seem to know quite what to make of world 3. And others, too, who were broadly sympathetic to his work, also seemed somewhat puzzled. Quinton argued that the idea seemed to sit somewhat uneasily between Hegel and Plato (Quinton 1973). Others raised the question of whether, once a contradiction was admitted, this did not mean that the entire content of world 3 had been brought into existence at a stroke, just because anything could be understood as following validly from a contradiction (Cohen 1985, p. 4).

It seemed to me clear from discussions with Popper, when he was writing his contributions to *The Self and Its Brain* (Popper and Eccles, 1977), that he was not offering, or interested in trying to develop, a formal ontology. He readily admitted that one could consider the way in which some world 3 objects could be looked at as intentional objects – which had the consequence that aspects of our psychology came to have characteristics like world 3 objects. In addition, he was agnostic as to whether, eventually, there might be some possibility of reductive explanations of world 3. One might say that, for Popper, what mattered about ‘world 3’ was the light that the idea threw on various other issues.

A key notion was that – relative to the adoption of particular rules of inference – our ideas had a content which went beyond what we were, or could be, aware of at any one
time, and within which we could make discoveries. In addition, world 3 had a historical aspect to it: certain things had, at particular points, been discovered – by people generally, and by us as individuals. Popper also stressed the way in which we were shaped through our interactions with these world 3 objects.

All this is of great importance, and attempts to offer quick reductions of world 3 to other things – including the social – seem to me not only unsuccessful, but also liable to make us to lose sight of some of the key themes to which Popper has drawn our attention. However, there is another side to Popper’s work, the significance of which in my view needs to be reaffirmed, and the consequences of which need, in our present context, to be explored.

2. Methodological Rules

Popper in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (Popper 1959) stressed the significance of the objectivity of theories, and of our taking a non-psychologistic approach to them. However, in that work a key role was also played by ‘methodological rules’. Popper’s epistemology is often discussed as if a major problem is posed for it by the ‘Duhem-Quine problem’. But, in fact, not only was Popper well aware of the issue (the topic was discussed in the Vienna Circle, and Popper also engaged with conventionalism in relation to the work of Hugo Dingler), but a central feature of his epistemology is constituted by his response to it. Popper’s view is that it is perfectly possible to take a conventionalist view towards any element of our knowledge, holding it true by methodological decision,
and diverting responsibility for putative falsifications elsewhere. He argued, however, that taking such an approach – as opposed to the kind of view that he favoured – would hold our key ideas as immutable by convention, as opposed to their being open to the kind of growth that Popper favoured, and which was, for him, exemplified by the replacement of Newton’s work by Einstein’s. Popper, when he wrote *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, downplayed his ideas about metaphysics; but one might, with hindsight, say that Popper’s response to this problem was chosen because of his concern with the ideal of a fallibilist and realist view of the aims of science. Popper clearly accepted the idea that we should see our knowledge as a system of ideas, and that our response to problems should be in terms of making modifications of our ideas that increase the content of what is being asserted. Perhaps the best brief formulation of this is given in his ‘Truth, Rationality and the Growth of Knowledge’ (in Popper 1963). A particularly illuminating interpretation of Popper’s philosophy of science that stresses the role played by methodological rules is Ian Jarvie’s *The Republic of Science* (2001).

Some years ago, I suggested that this aspect of Popper’s work had some interesting consequences. The first is that institutions, customs and habits might sometimes play the role of methodological rules in Popper’s sense. Second, we might not be aware of this fact, and of its consequences. The result could be (it would be a matter for investigation how significant it was) that there is a discrepancy between the way in which we are understanding an idea – i.e. as a straightforward claim that something is true – and what the idea amounts to as a consequence of how it is being so handled. That is to say, there could be a contrast between the *prima facie* character of a theory, and the character that it
actually has as a result of the rules and procedures that those people who entertain it adopt towards it. A theory might be being *held as true*, when those who favoured it simply thought that it *was* true, because of the ways in which the people’s institutions and institutional procedures operated. That is to say, they might not understand that their behaviour had these consequences (compare Shearmur 1980 and 1985). To appreciate what is going on, we may need to understand this discrepancy and its consequences. This would suggest an important reason why we should avoid any approach – such as that of David Bloor (1974) – in which world 3 is treated as simply a mystification of the social. For if we took such a view, we would lose out on the key interplay between how an idea is understood by those who entertain it, and what its social treatment makes it amount to.

If my suggestion here is accepted, we would be in a situation, familiar to critical rationalists, where the investigation of such things would be a matter for piecemeal learning and (if we are concerned by what we discover about our own ideas) continual improvement. Such an approach could be put to many possible uses. It could form the basis of a theory of ideology (in the sense of offering explanations as to how people are able to hold, in good faith, certain views which are known in the wider community to be problematic). It might also suggest ways in which we might improve our existing institutions in areas which relate to the production and growth of knowledge, where we would take our best current ideas about the philosophy and (normative) sociology of science as a basis on which our other practices could be tentatively appraised. (It would for example suggest the basis for a critique of current governmental schemes to evaluate
research, which tends to treat all research as if it amounted to a Kuhnian ‘normal science’, in which no fundamental changes ever took place.)

Should the approach be accepted, it would suggest that Popper’s own attitude towards sociological issues relating to the production of knowledge stands in need of modification. For example, in his ‘The Logic of The Social Sciences’ (1976a), Popper was critical of an anthropologist who was a participant in a scientific discussion because he was more interested in issues relating to the dynamics of group behaviour than in the substantive content of the discussion. Popper’s particular criticism may have been fine. But if I am correct in my argument, there is a genuine intellectual issue here from which we may learn a lot. Popper’s own (1945) criticism of the sociology of knowledge was important. But at the same time, there seems to me every reason to suppose that how we currently conduct our arguments, seminars and so on is not necessarily the best way in which we might do so. Popper’s own seminar – at least in its earlier days – was in some ways highly problematic in terms of how it was conducted. (See, for an uncritical account, Bartley’s essay in Levinson (ed.) 1982.) While Deborah Tannen, e.g. in Tannen 1994, has written important things about how women may often be excluded from discussions (there are also important discussions of related issues by feminist writers in the philosophy of science; but they raise wider issues than I can discuss on the present occasion).

At the same time, I should stress that the point that I am making relates to the growth of knowledge and what would best serve to further that. It may, indeed, be the case that
such epistemological concerns could provide an argument for our according what might be termed ‘dialogue rights’ to people who currently do not enjoy them. (See, on this, Shearmur 1986a and 1986b.) Institutional change may be required. Compare, on this, John Stuart Mill’s *Subjection of Women*. He there noted that some men claimed that their wives did not object to their position of social subordination. Mill suggested that they might not be objecting as a consequence of their very subordination (of which Mill was critical, and in respect of which he made suggestions for institutional reform).

However, one should not assume that reforms that may be suggested on the basis of such epistemological considerations would necessarily fit our favoured political ideals. If there is such a clash, it also does not necessarily mean that our epistemologically-driven ideas should win out. On occasion there may be other pressing reasons for keeping things as they are.

3. The Book

So far, I have discussed Popper’s ideas about ‘world 3’, and have then suggested that our approach to world 3 phenomena might usefully be supplemented by concerns which flow from Popper’s discussion of ‘methodological rules’. In this section, I would like to suggest a further source of supplementation, in this case drawn from issues – which fit the theme of the conference at which this paper was presented – relating to the study of books.
Particularly important is research that has been influenced by Robert Darnton’s work on ‘the book’.2 Darnton in ‘What is the history of books?’ reviewed a range of investigations that had already been taking place concerning the production, dissemination and readership of books. I will discuss, shortly, some specific issues which have emerged, and which are important for ‘Popperian’ themes. But a crucial factor seems to me to be this. Popper would often point to books – and libraries – as important physical manifestations of world 3. He was surely right about this. But the work to which I am referring looks at issues concerning the physical existence of books, their production and dissemination, at who had access to them, and how they were read. Not only are the specifics sometimes fascinating – and important for us to think about today, when the internet makes available to us vast amounts of material instantly, and at little or no cost.3 But there is, again, an interesting tension between the abstract world 3 content of a book or paper, and the history of its publication and availability. For example, one of the key themes in Popper’s discussion of world 3 is his emphasis on objectification and its consequences. He has often stressed the difference between having an idea, and objectifying it in some form so that not only we but others can work on it critically. In this, he is surely correct. But, at the same time, one can see the literature that has followed Darnton’s work as throwing light on what all this means in practical terms. I would again suggest that we both take note of the social dimension of knowledge to which this work draws our attention, but also that we don’t collapse world 3 – and its autonomy – into the social. What am I here suggesting?
First, this work seems to me important in taking us away from that approach to the history of ideas that has been concerned simply with anticipations and world 3 resemblances. The kind of work which has been done in the tradition of Darnton would stress that we need to look not at dates of publication, but at issues of actual access to the work in question. In addition, there is the question of how a book is read. That people had access to ideas that would have been important for the problems on which they were working does not, in itself, mean that they would have been able to appreciate them as such. (Consider even Popper’s own speculative remarks (Popper 1972) about Galileo’s failure to appreciate aspects of Kepler’s work, because he would have associated some of Kepler’s ideas with theories about celestial ‘influences’ of a kind for which Galileo would have had no time.) One of the studies with which I will be concerned shortly, discusses the way in which an important work in natural theology was read in strikingly different ways, by different and non-interacting audiences, in early Nineteenth Century Britain. It is also striking that, say, Popper’s own work has been mis-read in terms of the tradition of logical empiricism, and that philosophers who, in broad terms, know a reasonable amount about his work, nonetheless fail to inter-connect it with many current discussions in contemporary philosophy.4

Second, there is a somewhat complex issue relating to how we might best understand the idea of a ‘public sphere’. Such an idea plays a key role in Popper’s work. In his later writings Popper generalized his ideas about intersubjective testing, to stress the importance of openness to inter-subjective criticism. This suggested how ‘critical rationalism’ might be taken beyond the areas of science, logic and mathematics and
methodology, so as to apply to intellectual issues, more generally. Already in Popper’s theory of the ‘empirical basis’ in (Popper 1959), he had placed emphasis on the inter-subjective character of the tentative statements on the basis of which theories are assessed. And, in (Popper 1945) he had drawn attention to the (Kantian) theme of the ‘rational unity of mankind’ – to the way in which ideas about public policy might be appraised by anyone. As I have argued elsewhere, the character of effective intersubjective assessment is limited in the sense that on Popper’s account, while critical discussion is always important and something from which we might hope to learn, we can only expect that we may reach consensus in rather limited areas. However, inter-subjective critical appraisal is nonetheless at the heart of Popper’s approach. But we may usefully ask: how is it to take place, and, in particular, by what means can the notion of the ‘rational unity of mankind’ be exemplified?

The issue arises in two different contexts: public policy, and science itself. Let me discuss them, and the problems posed for them by work in the tradition of Darnton, in turn.

4. Public Policy and The Periodical

The idea that inter-subjective criticism of proposals about public policy has an important role to play is, it might be said, a staple idea of liberalism. I will not try to offer a history of this theme. But it plays a key role in Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment?’, and in Mill’s On Liberty and The Subjection of Women. In each case, a particular concern is with the
freedom of the individual to contribute criticism. Kant’s concern was with the idea that
the public servant, or the church official, should be free to voice criticism, in an academic
context, of the policies of their employer. Mill, in addition to arguing for the importance
of the freedom of opinion, and that unpopular voices should not be suppressed, also
argued that, in the case of women, issues of power (relating, in their turn, to a lack of
individual property ownership) might serve to stop women criticizing the views of their
husbands. Suppose that such problems were overcome. We would still face two
difficulties.

The first of these concerns the problem of specialization. Popper – as part of his critical
engagement with Thomas Kuhn, and more generally – deplored the growth of
specialization in science. He was concerned with the way in which, as science had
developed, people had tended to become increasingly specialized in their work, without
having an overview of the wider context into which it fitted. Indeed, with the exception
of leading people in different disciplines, scientists tend to be socialized in exactly the
way in which Kuhn has described: they increasingly became puzzle-solvers within taken-
for-granted intellectual frameworks and traditions, of the content of which (and of the
existence of alternatives to which) they were frequently at best dimly aware. For Popper,
this was a betrayal of all that science – in the wide sense of cosmology or natural
philosophy – should be about. He frequently deplored it, but – or so it seems to me – he
did not really suggest what might be done about it. In my view, one reason for this was
that it would have involved exactly the kind of exercise that Popper distrusted, but which
has been the main topic of the present paper: the need to inter-relate institutional and ‘world 3’ issues.

An important point was made in the diagnosis of this problem by Robert Young (1985). He discussed the way in which the generalist character of key intellectual periodicals in the early part of the Nineteenth Century changed over time. He considered the particular example of the centrality of debates concerning natural theology in the first three decades of that Century. But his study brings out the way in which the circulation of, and the character of contributions to, serious generalist periodicals declined markedly in the last few decades of that Century. Scientists gradually shifted their work to specialist publications, and the quality of ‘generalist’ discussion declined. The same process has clearly continued through the Twentieth Century and beyond – it is, in this context, worth comparing academic journals from the middle of the Twentieth Century, with their contemporary equivalents.

Popper, and those associated with him, took issue with Kuhn’s account of science and its history. It has been argued that the development of science has, historically, been much more pluralistic than Kuhn suggested – with argument taking place at a number of different levels, and work being undertaken from differing perspectives. But what, in the face of this, is to be done? It would seem to me inappropriate to ask for action by government. Better to call for a lessening of control, than to call for more controls in the hope that their consequences will be better. I do, however, have a specific suggestion to make here; for there is a parallel to the suggestion made – to good effect – by Sir Peter
Medawar (Medawar 1964). In this paper, Medawar took issue with the inductive style that, at the time, was mandatory for the presentation of scientific work in journals. He referred, in that context, to Popper’s criticism of an inductive view of science. But the point that he was addressing did not depend just on Popper’s views.

My suggestion is that we might, in the face of the problem to which I have referred, take off from a comment that Popper made in ‘Truth, Rationality and the Growth of Knowledge’ (see Popper 1963). He there set out, over and above the aim of getting nearer to the truth, dealing with experimental facts and resolving theoretical difficulties, three further requirements for the growth of scientific knowledge. The first of these – which I’d like here to discuss – was (Popper 1963, p. 241):

The new theory should proceed from some simple, new, and powerful unifying idea about some connection or relation (such as gravitational attraction) between hitherto unconnected things (such as planets and apples) or facts (such as inertial and gravitational mass) or ‘new theoretical entities’ (such as field[s] and particles).

Clearly, it will be unusual – to say the least – that a newly advanced theory is able to do this. But we might, with an eye to the more day-to-day work in which most scientists are engaged, ask that the detailed work be situated, by way of an initial paragraph or two at the start of the paper, within the wider problem-situation towards which it is addressed. This might well consist of a reference to well-known scientific work, and to the significance of what is being proposed in that context. It might, further, go beyond this to
explain, where there is one, the metaphysical research programme (or the intellectual aspects of the ‘paradigm’) within which the work is being conducted.

There are three reasons behind my making this suggestion.

First, if it were required – and I am thinking, here, of a requirement imposed by such journals as are open to the argument that it would be desirable – it would in its turn have the consequence that the scientist (and, more generally, the intellectual) has himself or herself to become aware of what the intellectual framework is within which they are working. It would not be sufficient just to be a ‘normal scientist’ working unreflectively within an approach into which one has been socialized.

Second, to have to consider matters in these terms might, in itself, lead people to ask questions about the coherence or significance of what it is that they are doing. This, on the face of it, should lead to an improvement in science – and the advance of knowledge – itself. For it is striking how much work is undertaken, in circumstances where it is not clear that the work has any significance at all. In making this point, I would see myself as standing between two views. On the one hand, there is the approach of Nicholas Maxwell. He advocates a stronger form of the ideas suggested here (by the discussion of which over the years, I have been influenced). From his perspective, not only may such ideas – and debate about them – play an important role as heuristic. But, if I am correct in my reading of his approach, he argues that we can, by means of rational discussion, develop a single approach, taking issue with alternatives as not fully rational or coherent.
(Compare, in this context, the critical treatment of Popper in Maxwell’s 2016.) By contrast with this, there was a most interesting correspondence between David Probst and Thomas Kuhn about the merits of alternative approaches and their discussion as an ongoing feature of science, as contrasted with Kuhn’s account of science as normal science punctuated with occasional revolutions. Kuhn’s response to Probst’s argument for a more Popperian approach was that he was sceptical as to whether science could still flourish if the wider discussion which Probst was calling for were to occur. My own view is that the requirement to articulate such background assumptions need not upset the ‘normal scientist’ who has no interest in it. But that there is every reason why it would serve to stimulate people whose concerns were larger, or who wished to explore alternatives.

This leads to my third argument. It is that if such ideas were articulated it would mean that their critical discussion and investigation could become a field in its own right. It would not be removed from science – just because of the inter-relation between the statements being made in scientific work, and this area of investigation. But it would designate a clear field of activity for those – and they are now a growing number – who think that there should be an interplay between philosophy and different substantive disciplines. It would also serve to make sure that those who engage with such issues actually take as their starting-point (but not necessarily uncritically), the current views of scientists, rather than simply inventing their own view of what such ideas ‘must’ be like.

5. Politics and the Public Sphere
The second area in which there are interesting implications concerns the public sphere in the context of politics. We are concerned, here, with deliberation, rather than just with public opinion.9

Popper’s approach to politics has two striking aspects. On the one side, he stresses the fallibility of rulers and those who undertake public policy initiatives, and the need in this context for critical feedback from all citizens. On the other, Popper is – I think rightly – cautious about our ability to come to agreement on political issues. Geoffrey Stokes has, in several papers, suggested that Popper’s views here are problematic, and that his approach should be more open to the ideas of Habermas and of ‘deliberative democracy’ (compare Stokes 2016).

But this seems to me mistaken. Popper suggested that we might hope for a fallible consensus in two areas: basic statements (used in the critical appraisal of scientific theories), and – at least among the well-intentioned and sensitive – statements about what might need to be remedied through government action. Popper was all in favour of critical discussion more widely – of metaphysical theories and of different cultural, religious and political attitudes. But it is clear that, in these areas, while he thought that we might learn from one another, he was sceptical that we would come to agreement. The reason for this is I would have thought fairly simple – that it is just not clear that we have the kinds of arguments available to us that would lead us to consensus. Consider, after all, the history of philosophy. If people are sufficiently open-minded, we might be
able to get some agreement as to how the discussion of the relative merits of different competing theories has gone, to date. But it is not likely that this will lead to substantive agreement. For different views have their strengths and weaknesses, and even if we could get agreement about what these are, what people make of them may well differ. It is clearly possible for people to take the view that it is sensible to pursue contrasting views to which they are each attracted, in the hope that, over time, they will be able to resolve problems and to strengthen their positions. With regard to empirical theories, it is clearly possible – in the face of prima facie refutations – for different people to take differing views as to what elements of a theory it is sensible to change, and what should be retained. In the area of politics and social policy, we might be able to agree that certain issues are matters of concern while not being able to agree what should be done, because of differing theories about rights and entitlements, and as to who should be responsible for what and whom. One other issue of importance was highlighted in Friedrich Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom* (Hayek, 1944). It is that people involved in a single political unit may simply not be able to agree on the relative merits of different competing proposals for public spending, or their relative priorities. Those who pay attention to empirical and theoretical work on politics and public policy might also comment that the actual process of political decision-making is a far cry from accounts of rational deliberation between citizens, and that it is difficult to see how they could be brought together.

A further problem was posed by Jürgen Habermas. In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), he offered an interesting and provocative account of the way in
which a ‘bourgeois’ reflective, critical public sphere – the kind of thing that grew up among merchants in London coffee houses in the Eighteenth Century – was shattered by the development of a greater degree of democracy. Rather than enhanced forms of deliberation, we got political demagoguery and machine politics. What happens more generally will be different in different countries. In Britain, it is striking that the development of some strands in Protestant Christianity, and the Trades Union movement, offered opportunities to people from working class backgrounds to participate, and to represent the concerns of many people who were previously excluded from discussions. Yet with the passing of time, and the greater openness of the social system, people who in the past would have played this representative role have typically become bureaucratic functionaries; and a key feature of bureaucracy is the way in which it shuts down independent voices.¹⁰

The kind of high-quality discussion of a sort that exemplified the concerns of Kant, of Mill – and also of Popper – did exist.¹¹ But it was typically exclusionary in terms of class and gender. There is now a greater degree of social openness. But the very discussion that was our concern seems to have become a victim of this growing openness. Much the same has also occurred with regard to the media. Historically, a relatively small group of people who had face-to-face relations were involved. The impact of various kinds of technical and organizational change,¹² and subsequently the development of the internet, have – while, again, giving us many benefits – had devastating consequences on the kind of high-quality exchange which used to take place as a matter of routine. What, I would
suggest, is needed is an attempt at the creation of social institutions, aimed at addressing these problems.

Before I offer a specific suggestion, I would like to discuss one further aspect of the problem; it again relates to my Darnton-rooted issues concerning the study of the book and its ramifications for our current concerns.

6. The Common Context – and its reconstruction

The account that I gave earlier of the development of specialization in journals drew on Robert Young’s work. He started from the idea that a ‘common context’ was exemplified, in early Nineteenth Century England, by exchanges about natural theology in high-quality generalist journals. He also placed particular emphasis on the role played by the Bridgewater Treatises, a collection of books on natural theology that appeared from 1833-1840. But work in the Darnton tradition on this very topic has suggested that Young’s account over-simplifies the situation.¹³

For example, in his ‘Beyond the Common Context’, Jonathan Topham argued strongly for the diversity of ways in which these works were read, arguing that ‘the wide circulation of the series among many classes of readers and … consideration of the distinctive meanings with which the books were invested by readers in divergent cultural groups serves to elucidate the contested meaning of science in the period’ (Topham 1998, p. 233). Similar points have subsequently been made concerning the reading of Vestiges
of Creation (Secord 2000) and also by other authors who have raised problems of a more general kind concerning the notion of a common ‘public sphere’. 14

It is, indeed, this that poses the problem for ‘Popperian’ political philosophy that I would like to address. 15 For while the ideas of critical feedback and the rational unity of mankind seem attractive, the difficulty is to see how they are to be given institutional exemplification. There are, in my view, many other problems facing a ‘Popperian’ approach concerning whether, or under what circumstances, politicians and public servants could operate in the manner needed for a ‘Popperian’ politics to work (i.e. if one compares Popper’s account of what he would like with the empirical literature on how Western politics operates). I am sceptical about whether things could work as Popper wishes (see for some brief exploration Shearmur 1995, 1997, 2006 and 2008). I am also struck that those who take the more orthodox ‘social democratic’ view of Popper simply do not seem interested in addressing these problems. My personal reaction has been to suggest that as much as possible should be handled completely by the private sector (i.e. I would reject approaches which allow for ‘privatization’, but place arrangements for the management of this in the hands of government16). The radical privatization I would favour is not incompatible with there being a system of transfer payments (e.g. by way of a ‘negative income tax’; it is worth noting that Popper himself favoured the idea that there should be a minimum income for all citizens17). At the same time, Popper did not address the difficult questions of what level of support people should be given, and from whom; an issue that become complex as a result of increased international mobility of
populations. I will not pursue this matter here, but will instead return to the issue of critical feedback.

Popper said in some ways surprisingly little about how a public forum might work in his *Open Society* or subsequent writings (although given the huge scope of his interests, it should not really be a surprise). However, he did address the topic briefly in a paper ‘Public Opinion and Liberal Principles’, which he gave to the Mont Pelerin Society in 1954 (it is included in Popper 1963). The paper is largely concerned with offering criticism of a number of what he refers to as myths about public opinion, which he describes as being accepted uncritically (Popper 1963, p. 247). But one theme in the paper is the contrast that he draws between critical discussion and public opinion. (In this context he also says that: ‘the liberal does not dream of a perfect consensus of opinions; he only hopes for the mutual fertilization of opinions, and the consequent growth of ideas. Even when we solve a problem to universal satisfaction, we create, in solving it, many new problems over which we are bound to disagree. This is not to be regretted.’ (Popper 1963, p. 352).) What we would seem to need is, first, an institution through which people can address one another with mutual respect; as Popper wrote: ‘[a]ll that is needed is a readiness to learn from one’s partner in the discussion, which includes a genuine wish to understand what he intends to say’ (*ibid*). But, second, we also have the problem of what institutional means could be used to make it possible for points from anyone to be raised.
One possibility would be to make use not of an elected assembly (which we would still need to have, for the purposes of practical government), but something modelled on Britain’s House of Lords. What I have in mind is a body to which people are appointed – after a process of consultation – to represent different interests in a country. The positions would be ones of high prestige, and people would be paid well for taking them up. This would mean that one could expect people of high calibre to become members, a condition of which would be giving up on their ordinary career expectations. People would only allow their names to go forward – and to be selected – if they were committed to exactly the kinds of conduct that Popper has favoured for those involved in discussion. The people in question would also be picked for their knowledge of, and links to, relevant sectors of society; they would typically be expected to keep in touch with these, on an ongoing basis. They would serve as a means whereby issues raised by people in that sector of society could be raised and discussed in a deliberative manner.

But what, it might be asked, of Popper’s concern for the ‘rational unity of mankind’ – for the input that might be made by ordinary people? It would seem to me, here, that what would be needed is for each member of the House of Lords to be equipped with a large and capable staff, who could respond to those who wished to raise issues relating to the Member’s interests and concerns. The Members, themselves, would include people who might have a background in different sectors of society – including industry (both management and trades unions), commerce, education, and various charitable sectors. Their staff would have the brief of handling representations from any member of the public, with a concern in any of these fields (other than requests for services etc, which
would be handled by the first chamber, as occurs at present). They could undertake research (and, indeed, suggest topics for investigation by House of Lords committees; such committees should have the power to require that anyone – public servants included – answer their questions). All this, while not destroying the coherence of government policy, and its electoral accountability, would do a lot to redress the loss of discursive accountability that is a feature of current politics. (Specialized committees of such a reformed House of Lords, with appropriate security clearance but no government majority, could also perform the vital task of monitoring the activities of the security services and police.) The existence of such a body would also provide an obvious focus for the concerns of the writers of opinion pieces, and the activities of think tanks and of bloggers. It might do a lot to improve the ways in which they currently operate if they had to think of the deliberations of such a body as being the potential focus of their activities.

It might be objected: but this does not offer a direct voice to the individual. That is true. But it is not clear that that is what would be needed to address Popper’s concern. For after all, on many topics which may affect our well-being we may not be well-informed or be able to understand the character of some of the constraints that policy-makers are under. In addition, we may not be in a good position to put our points well: recall the old saying ‘A man who is his own lawyer has a fool for a client.’ What my suggestion would offer is a way in which points from anyone could be turned into issues suitable for deliberation, and through which those in power could be compelled to respond to them.
One further problem is that there is obviously an international dimension to many of our current problems, while the kind of institution to which I have referred is very much national in its character (and something that builds upon existing national traditions). It is not clear that one can easily construct a public sphere on an international basis: the EU looks a complete failure in this respect, not least because we typically do not understand the background and traditions from which others are coming. But it might, surely, be possible to have representation in a House of Lords (or its equivalents elsewhere) from those with concerns overseas – whether in Europe, or internationally; equally, of those with links to management or to labour overseas. It is not obvious how such matters are best tackled; but experimentation is surely possible.

7. Conclusions

I have covered a lot of ground in a single and rather short paper. I can, however, sum up fairly quickly.

My argument has been, first of all, that we need to take Popper’s ideas about world 3 seriously.

Second, I argued that we should not here pay attention just to logical issues, but also to methodological ones. Popper himself placed great emphasis on methodological rules, and on how, depending on which of these we adopted, the cognitive status of our ideas might be changed by them. (There is a theme in common between Popper’s work, and the
notion of the ‘pragmatic a priori’; cf. Lewis 1923.) My suggestion, further, has been that we can usefully consider the way in which our institutions and procedures may serve as methodological rules, and can thus be seen as having various epistemological consequences of which we may not ordinarily be aware. It is possible for us to investigate, in a piecemeal manner, what these might be, and how their operation might be improved. These are, thus, matters of which we may seek to become more conscious; although our understanding is likely, at any point, to be provisional, and thus something that may be open to further improvement. What all this calls for is not the collapsing of world 3 into the ‘social’, but an investigation into the interplay between world 3 and our institutional procedures, and, in a Popperian spirit, for this to be undertaken with an eye to improving how our institutions might function.

Third, it is in the context of the interplay between world 3 and sociological factors that I was suggesting we might re-visit the theme of the conference at which this paper was presented: the book. For while the book stands, in one sense, almost as a paradigmatic material instantiation of a world 3 object, it has also been the subject of most interesting historical and sociological re-investigation. As I have explained, I am here referring to work undertaken in the tradition of Darnton’s study of the book. I have said a little about this work and its interest (although it seems to me that, to this work, there also needs to be brought a Popperian concern for progress in knowledge, in a world 3 sense). I hope that what I have had to say about this has shown both the interest and the promise of this growing field – into which, on the present occasion, I have just made an initial foray.
Finally, I have suggested that we might bring what we learn from such work back to the field of Popperian piecemeal social engineering. In the concluding parts of the paper, I have made some suggestions about how, if I am right as to some of the problems that face us, we might possibly respond, by way of changes to certain of our scientific and also political institutions and procedures. These ideas are, obviously, set out in a manner that is brief and sketchy. But I would hope that they will, at least, have shown the potential interest of the issues with which I have been dealing – even if the kind of interest that they have kindled, is simply one, on the part of readers, in showing just how mistaken they are.


The chapter is available online at: [http://human-nature.com/dm/pre.html](http://human-nature.com/dm/pre.html).
Notes

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Jeremy.Shearmur@anu.edu.au I would like to thank two anonymous referees for many useful comments and criticisms, to not all of which I have been able to respond as fully as I would have liked because of limitations of space.

2 See for example Darnton 1982. I have briefly explored some of the issues that I will here be discussing in more detail in Shearmur 2011 and in the latter parts of Shearmur 2015.

3 I am struck, here, by the vast electronic holdings of university libraries, but also digitisations of materials such as are available via Google Books and Hathi Trust. In addition, institutions such as Worldcat make available very easily the location of physical material in libraries. Meta search engines dealing with used books make it possible to search vast records of the holdings of used book stores for rare and obscure material.

4 An obvious example, here, is the fact that Popper’s work on indeterminism and free will, and more generally on the mind-body problem, has not been taken note of in discussions of autonomy.

5 I cannot here discuss the role played in these developments by Bartley’s critique of the ‘decisionistic’ elements in Popper’s Open Society, and it would be difficult to do so in a fully satisfactory way, given the limited character of the historical material available to us.

6 See, for example, Shearmur 2016.

7 It is, however, striking that Popper, when discussing ‘What is Enlightenment?’, for example in his ‘Emancipation Through Knowledge’ (reprinted in Popper 1992), Popper
places emphasis on individuals daring to use their own reason, but does not discuss the issue of intersubjective appraisal.

8 The correspondence is held in the Thomas Kuhn archive in the MIT Archives, MC240, Box 11; see for example Kuhn to Probst, November 10, 1969.


10 It is here striking that Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment?’ stressed the importance of the freedom of the employee of the state or of the Church to voice criticism (including of the views of the bodies for which they worked) in the public sphere, while nonetheless teaching (or, presumably, administering) the organization’s policies. But this freedom, and the very idea that it is important, have now virtually disappeared.

11 Or so it might seem – see the following section of the text.

12 See, on this, my ‘Lunching for Liberty’ (Shearmur unpublished), in terms of the media and London’s Institute of Economic Affairs.

13 My discussion here can only be brief, and I will concentrate on Topham. But there is a wider literature on these issues, including Secord 2000; Henson et al (eds) 2004; Cantor et al (eds) 2004.

14 See for example Nancy Fraser 1990 and 1997.

15 There are, in my view, many other problems facing a ‘Popperian’ approach, concerning whether, or under what circumstances, politicians and public servants could operate in the manner needed for a ‘Popperian’ politics to work. I am sceptical about this (see for some brief exploration Shearmur 1995, 1997, 2006 and 2008).

16 If government is not good at doing the kinds of things that Popper favoured, there is no reason whatever to suppose that it will be good at the development and monitoring of
contracts; there are also two further problems: much government business then becomes removed from public scrutiny, on the grounds that it involves matters which are ‘commercial in confidence’, and such arrangements also open up a plethora of possibilities for corruption, when the awarding of contracts are in the hands of politicians and public servants. An important but overlooked paper making the case for this is Blundell (2006).

17 See The Open Society; this was also Popper’s view at the first meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society: see the notes taken of the discussion at Hoover Institution Archives, Mont Pelerin Society Archive.

18 I delivered a paper ‘Against Social Justice’ at a conference in Sydney in 2011, which I plan to revise and publish at some later date.

19 As becomes clear from Popper’s correspondence with Watkins (Popper to Watkins undated, [1954]; Watkins Archive Box 516/1, L.S.E. Archives PA10831), Popper had written the paper very quickly, and was unsure as to whether or not he should publish it.

20 As contrasted with a Habermasian approach, there is no reason to suppose that they will have any particular ideological effect: what effects particular rules, institutions etc may have is something to be investigated empirically.