Uncharted Territories of Organizational Research: The Case of Karl Popper’s *Open Society and Its Enemies*

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**Abstract**

This paper argues that Karl Popper’s notions in his work *The Open Society and Its Enemies* offer an approach to under-explored issues in organizational research, independent of Popper’s epistemology. Popper’s thoughts on the philosophy of science have largely been rejected in organization studies, and his socio-philosophical notions have hardly been considered. Yet they provide a frame of reference for viewing management trends, such as anti-bureaucratism and collectivist forms of work organization, in a different light. Popper’s socio-philosophical notions suggest that ‘closed’ patterns of thinking are detrimental to a liberal–democratic social order. The paper argues that an outline of the philosophy of openness and closedness and an application to managerial concepts allows for insights into whether certain types of managerial thinking stand in contrast to, or in accordance with, a liberal–democratic order. It is concluded that, through the Popperian lens, some supposedly liberationist movements of management (liberation from bureaucracy or from a lack of belonging and emotion at work) possess clear traits of closedness and thus resemble the intellectual underpinnings of totalitarianism.

**Descriptors:** Popper, bureaucracy, collectivism, closed society, critical liberalism

**Introduction**

In spite of, or simply because of, its fundamental controversies, Popper’s publications in logic and scientific methodology have left a lasting impression on the philosophy of natural and social sciences. Because of his epistemological publications, Popper’s name is strongly associated with the falsification principle, the criticism of historicism, the positivism controversy in Germany in the 1960s, and with continuing debates on positivism. His social philosophy of the open society has had an impact far beyond academia. *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945: Vols. I and II), first published in the UK, has become well known outside academia, particularly in the field of politics. Various European politicians of different camps have repeatedly referred to critical rationalism and the open society in their political programmes. Popper’s social philosophy has even been misused by political parties, as Spinner (1978) points out. More recently, since the end of state communism in Europe, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* has
also been widely read in Central and Eastern Europe (cf. Jarvie and Pralong 1999b).

However, in Western social and political sciences, there is disagreement on the current relevance of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and its debates. On the one hand, the term ‘open society’ is used merely as a catch phrase in political and social philosophy. On the other hand, the open society is regarded as a matter of continuing importance, and problems of closedness are always considered to be very relevant (Spinner 1978; Dahrendorf 1991; Jarvie and Pralong 1999a). Döring (1996: 8) points out that, according to critics, it is not the scientific level, but the passionate and often polemic defense of democracy that accounts for the success of this book. The criticism of Plato, Hegel, and Marx is said to be an expression of personal aversion, rather than a scientific interpretation. According to Döring (1996: 42), Popper himself said later that *The Open Society and Its Enemies* is more a feature pages supplement to the scientifically argued *The Poverty of Historicism* (1960). However, the work was clearly written with a scientific purpose. It can be assumed that this confession by Popper can be interpreted more as coquetry, after the event, than that he wrote the book with that awareness in mind.

In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper does not use technical philosophical terminology, but a style that is more readily accessible for those unfamiliar with philosophical terms, thereby meeting his own demands for clear expression and understandable phrases. However, he can be criticized for using a writing style that is not sparing in polemic or defamatory methods (cf. Döring 1996: 41). Nevertheless, Popper has received great support for his ideas on the connection of the Socratic notion of cognitive modesty with the modernist concepts of enlightenment, emancipation and individual freedom. His criticism of intellectual icons such as Plato, Marx and Hegel, the first of its kind, has received similar controversial prominence, and because of the critical capability of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper’s polemics are usually forgiven. As selective and controversial as is his reading of Plato, Hegel and Marx, none of Popper’s critics doubts the importance of his work, disclaiming the collectivist herd instinct and demands for a charismatic or utopian leader, in defense of democracy.

According to Popper, closed forms of society (by this, he meant the totalitarian social orders of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as they were at the time when he wrote *The Open Society and Its Enemies*) are preceded and accompanied by a pattern of thinking of which collectivism and the assumption of a possible ultimate truth are important parts. Applied to organizations, this approach presents itself as a frame of reference that suggests alternative ways of thinking about management concepts and managerial thinking. This paper outlines this approach and applies it to current managerial thinking in terms of anti-bureaucratism and collectivist forms of work organization. It suggests that the Popperian frame of reference may allow for a re-ordering of the material in organization studies according to whether it reflects closed patterns of thinking, and hence
according to whether it is likely to create and propagate tenets of the closed society.

The Popperian Paradigm in Its Socio-philosophical Component

Popper neither develops a ‘concept’ of open society nor outlines characteristics of it. His main aim was to delineate a pattern of thinking that advocates, precedes, and accompanies the development of totalitarian social orders. The constructive part results from his defense of democracy, or rather, by reverse deduction, from his criticism of its enemies. At the most, the concept of voting governments out of office and the plea for political institutions controlling one another may be seen as constructive characteristics of an open society. These are the two criteria which may be necessary, or even sufficient, preconditions to make up an open society. However, Popper does not build up a holistic ‘conception’ of society on this basis, since this would contradict his warning against utopias. Nevertheless, his plea for a social technology of small steps (piecemeal engineering) is constructive. He suggests the principle of permanent elimination of errors: the method of permanently searching for mistakes and inaccuracies in order to correct them early on. This principle was already explained in the manuscript for *The Poverty of Historicism* (1960), which Popper had finished before he began on *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Popper’s critical-liberal social philosophy has been paralleled by the philosophy of Isaiah Berlin (Berlin 1969, 2000), whose topics and notions are sometimes amazingly close to those of Popper (see, especially, Berlin 2000: 1–23). However, since Berlin published his philosophy after the Second World War, we regard Popper as the first of the two to put forward these ideas, even though Berlin hardly ever refers to Popper.

Interpretations of The Open Society and Its Enemies

According to Hall (1997), *The Open Society and Its Enemies* contains three basic assertions. The first one is that there is perennial friction between notions of individual freedom, on the one hand, and, on the other, visions of a predetermined and certain future that the individual cannot influence, and ideas that place a higher value on the community than on the individual. The second assertion is that this revolt against freedom is primarily encouraged by the ideas and activities of intellectuals. Popper’s attack on Marx, Plato and Hegel as the intellectual predecessors of totalitarianism may be controversial, but, irrespective of the individual thinkers he attacks, he makes the point that totalitarianism is not necessarily a domination of coercive anti-intellectuals, but rather a situation flanked and secured by intellectuals. Popper’s third assertion is that periods of social change create instabilities that can undermine liberty and freedom. In no way does this mean that stasis is more desirable than change, but that freedom and liberty is constantly under the pressure of the hardships they generate.
Popper assumes that human instincts favouring the ‘herd instinct of the tribe’ are primarily counteractions to the hardships of freedom and liberty. These hardships, the insecurities inherent in changes, the burden of responsibility in a world that is to be shaped by the individuals themselves, go together with the need for stability and security. If backed by intellectual idealism, these needs are bound to overrule the need for individual freedom.

Liberal societies, therefore, are always under threat of being ‘betrayed’ by intellectuals who play upon the ‘fear of freedom’ (in this regard, see also Fromm 1942). This threat is particularly strong from those who draw on the patterns of history and who amalgamate an admiration for authority and superiority with totalitarian concepts of equality. In other words, the ‘justice’ of the allotted position makes totalitarian ideas seductive and legitimizes actions in this direction. Hence, one of the founding principles of a sociology of an open society is that power should always be in different sets of hands. As Hall points out, a ‘multipolar system’ (1997: 32) without a single centre is a key element of Popper’s open society. Moreover, based on Popper’s notions of piecemeal engineering, a sociology of openness is based on the possibility of stepwise changes. As Hall (1997: 34) puts it, ‘when workers have the chance to reform, they will not become revolutionary’. A totalitarian turnaround can be prevented by institutionalized possibilities for changes. An open community, therefore, is an ambiguous situation in relation to changes. On the one hand, openness is a necessary condition for changes and development; on the other hand, the perceived hardships of openness can foster the need for totalitarian turnarounds, thereby endangering openness.

Gebert and Boerner (1995) also see three, but somewhat different, components of The Open Society and Its Enemies; a social, an anthropological and an epistemological dimension. The social dimension describes Popper’s critique of organicism. Popper condemns social theories in which any member of a community has his/her allotted position, knows it, and does not struggle on behalf of any other section of the community. In an organic state everyone fulfils his task and ‘duty’ for the ultimate well-being of the community, just as the stomach digests and cannot become the heart, and a kidney fulfils its task and cannot become a lung, etc. In particular, this distinction is drawn between communities in which individuals always serve the collective, whose well-being must be protected, and, on the other, communities in which the collective serves the well-being of the individuals, that is, protects the rights of its individual members. Gebert and Boerner (1995: 27–28) summarize this comparison by asking whether it is the individual or the collective who should be in the foreground.

The epistemological dimension deals with the question of whether human knowledge is regarded as potentially free from error, or ridden with it. The question is whether people think that there is a definite truth or whether they think that there is always room for revisions and improvements. Put differently, the issue is the extent to which doubts about the opinions of
certain individuals or processes are considered to be acceptable, to what extent such doubts are allowed to be expressed, and to what extent members of the community have those doubts at all. Accordingly, Gebert and Boerner formulate another guiding question by asking what assumptions are there about the reliability of human knowledge. The anthropological dimension expresses Popper’s reference to The Poverty of Historicism (1960) and is a specification of his criticism of attitudes of pre-determinism. Popper denies any form of predetermination of social norms by natural laws, and clarifies his opinion that the future is open and that social norms can be influenced and shaped by the will and decisions of humans. Accordingly, Gebert and Boerner’s anthropological dimension questions the extent of the assumptions held among members of a community regarding the freedom they themselves have to shape their social reality and future. In other words, do humans consider themselves objects of the world, that is, do they play a passive role, thus becoming victims of circumstances, or do they regard themselves as subjects who have certain degrees of freedom, the potential to change circumstances and to shape their own future.

Another interpreter, Bunge (1996), points out that rather than sketching what to do, Popper focuses on what should be avoided. Popper replaces the traditional political question ‘Who shall rule?’ with questions of how to limit leadership and how to replace rulers without bloodshed. Popper shifts from substance to procedure, from the prescription of what is good to the prescription of procedures on how to get rid of evil. Although Bunge (1996) refers to the insufficiencies of this negative concept of social order (an action that does not harm is not necessarily beneficial, but can also be indifferent; and to assess a proposition as non-false does not mean that it has some sort of empirical support; it can also be just undecidable), his discussion points at another important component of Popper’s work, namely that a final agreement about the substance of content will result in dogmatism, independent of how positive the contents are meant to be. According to Popper, it is the agreement about the procedures of change rather than about the contents that ensures that leadership and arbitrariness is limited.

**The Closed Pattern of Thinking**

In summary, Popper extensively discusses the internal characteristics of polities with regard to tendencies towards totalitarian social orders. However, it is important to point out that Popper referred to them as a *pattern of thinking* that precedes, underlies, and fosters tendencies towards totalitarianism, rather than as ‘features’ of communities. He argues that this closed pattern of thinking is characterized by a value-positive attitude towards

- collectivism as opposed to individualism,
- certainty of knowledge as opposed to continuous learning,
• all-encompassing planning as opposed to stepwise changes/improvements,
• and substance of content as opposed to procedures for change.

According to him, this totalitarianism marks the ideational underpinning of totalitarian social orders. He argues that these closed beliefs advocate and may hence precede (in order of time) a closed social order. Since the analysis of beliefs, patterns of thinking and cultures at the organizational level have a long tradition in organization studies, it seems more than appropriate to analyze organizations, organizational cultures, and especially managerial thinking in this light. Popper’s contribution is the unveiling of the philosophical and mental roots of totalitarianism, and by applying his ideas to ‘management philosophies’ and patterns of thinking in organizations, it may be possible to find an alternative way of ordering material in organizational research. As will be argued in the following sections, it provides a frame of reference for analyzing managerial thinking and concepts in terms of whether they promote the tenets of closedness. On this basis, a closed managerial pattern of thinking can be examined from the point of view of the repercussions it might have on the political culture and thus for a liberal-democratic social order.

Management and Organization through a Popperian Lens

It is not the issue here to ‘apply’ the Popperian ‘social philosophy’ literally to organizations or to demand normatively the tenets of openness — such as institutions controlling one another or being able to vote top management out of office — in organizations. Organizations, and commercial companies in particular, are not designed as democracies, but as a goal-oriented co-ordination of activities (at least this is the idea). Two general points mark the difference between the organizational and the societal level: as opposed to societies, (a) organizations have expressed goals, societies do not (the peaceful co-existence of individuals or the provision of procedures to solve conflicts is the goal of politics and legislation, not of societies); and (b), individuals sign a contract to join an organization and are not forced to do that (except in prisons, asylums, etc.), whereas they are ‘members’ of society without a voluntary contract (laws apply without contract, company rules do not). Although it is ridden with considerable dangers (poverty, deprivation of goods and social contacts, etc.), individuals are free to leave a work organization. In societies this is much more difficult, to say the least. In organizations, goal-oriented activity legitimately requires a division of tasks and a need to co-ordinate them which, from a certain size, generates a need for coordinative roles, a distribution of information needs and, hence, some sort of stratification. Even ‘democratically’ conceived organizations, therefore, cannot be equated with a demise of hierarchy (Abell 1979, 1981). Even if we take economic constraints that force individuals into work organizations into account, not to mention econom-
ically based domination, then membership in work organizations is based on substantially different grounds than membership in society, since the latter applies to all spheres of life and not just to work-related ones. Taking these aspects into account, an unquestioned demand for ‘open organizations’, that is, a normative application of the Popperian criteria of openness to work organizations, would be absurd. However, independent of the cultural level (in organizations or society), patterns of thinking — their origins and consequences — have long been one of the main interests of social scientists. Taking ‘open’ versus ‘closed’ patterns of thinking as a frame of reference, therefore, appears useful precisely because of the link between the two cultural levels. An analysis of the extent to which patterns of thinking in organizations, current management trends, or organizational cultures resemble the patterns outlined by Popper, allows us to study whether they foster thinking towards openness or towards closedness, which might have considerable influence at the societal level. An ‘application’ of these notions to the organizational level, therefore, seems justified, because managerial thinking does not stop at the exit gate, but is carried over into other spheres of life. Because of the central role of the economy in Western societies, it appears necessary to investigate some of the ideational elements of management trends and concepts, since only then can potential consequences for democratic societies be discussed. Two issues stand out as immediate concerns at this point, managerial anti-bureaucratism and collectivist forms of work organization.

**Bureaucracy Reconsidered**

Only at first sight does Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy appear to be a pure form of Popper’s notion of closedness. The characteristics of a ‘sphere of obligations to perform functions which has been marked off as part of a systematic division of labor’, the ‘organization of offices that follows the principle of hierarchy’, and the set of rules that govern performance (Weber 1978: 218) seem to be traits of what Popper criticized as organicism, and thus pertain to the closed side. However, this view would be misleading for understanding both Weber’s bureaucracy as a form of rational and legitimate authority, and Popper’s closed society. Other characteristics of Weber’s ideal type have clear traits of openness: a ‘continuous rule-bound conduct of official business’ (Weber 1978: 218); the fact that the superior, too, is subject to the rules and to an impersonal order; that obedience is not owed to the superior as an individual, but to the impersonal order; and, lastly, that the administrative staff is completely separated from ownership. All these features are in accord with Popper’s demand to change the question ‘Who will lead?’ to ‘How can we limit leadership?’. Popper’s anger at his contemporary closed societies, the ‘Third Reich’ and the Soviet Union, was fed by his dislike of a social order and its administration that had lost all means of legitimacy. In other words, Weber’s bureaucracy, with its impersonal order set up to guarantee the rule of law, is only a step in the direction of ‘rational’, rule-bound order from that exist-
ing under feudalism. In Popperian terms, the establishment of bureaucracy is a step from the closedness of patronage towards the openness of rules and procedures.

Du Gay (1994, 1999, 2000) has made the point that general criticism leveled against bureaucracy from many areas of organizational analysis—from manageralist anti-bureaucratism to feminist critique and Bauman’s (1989) connection of bureaucracy with the holocaust—is, in crucial respects, misplaced. He gives an account of the contemporary managerial discourse on ‘excellence’, enterprise culture, the charismatic entrepreneur, etc., where bureaucracies are not only identified as an obstacle to the efficient and effective provision of goods and services, but also as an unethical separation of reason and emotion, of the public and the private, and hence as an unethical obstacle to individual self-actualization. Based on the notion that liberalism rests on a separation of different value spheres of life, du Gay criticizes the enterprise attitude as romantic anti-liberalism, since ‘managers are charged with leading their subordinates to the promised land of self-realization by encouraging them to make a project of themselves, to work on their relations with employment and on all other areas of their lives in order to develop a style of life and relationship to self that will maximize the worth of their existence to themselves’ (1994: 664). Enterprise culture, in this sense, ‘seeks to “re-enchant” organized work by restoring to it that which bureaucracy is held to have crassly repressed — emotion, personal responsibility, the possibility of pleasure, and so on’ (1994: 663).

In a paper on the potentially enabling function of bureaucracy, Adler and Borys (1996: 78) argue along the same line. They mention that a low degree of formalization can, under certain circumstances, foster autocracy in organizations. In this sense, bureaucratic rules may not only have the function of enabling innovativeness (under the circumstances that Adler and Borys describe), but also the function of preventing autocracy and arbitrary leadership. The Popperian approach parallels both this view, and du Gay’s account, in that it points at the ethical component of the adherence to procedures, of the abnegation of personal moral enthusiasm, and conduct according to certain norms. At the same time, this frame of reference potentially augments these viewpoints. It allows us to view the anti-bureaucratic enterprise culture and ‘excellence’ movement not only as a result of antilibertarian thinking or lack of formalization, but also as a pattern of thinking that may produce an attitude where the legitimate bureaucracies of a liberal–democratic state can be overruled in the name of the grand idea, be it only on behalf of efficiency and effectiveness or with an allusion to a more political agenda such as ‘liberation management’ (Peters 1992). Through the Popperian lens, the hostility to bureaucracy to which prominent managers and management authors explicitly urge their readers is reminiscent of the attack of institutions by anti-democratic movements and their disregard of procedural legitimacy. The visionary component of ‘excellence’, the holistic planning of the organization’s totality (re-engineering, total quality), the emphasis on charismatic leadership and ‘personal mastery’ (Senge 1990), the enthusiasm, the excitement for the grand idea, and
the admiration for superiority, are reminiscent of the mood in Germany in the 1930s and Austria in 1938, from which Popper had to flee. Seen through the Popperian lens, it is exactly this ideational idealism of ‘excellence’ which is bound to overrule the need for individual freedom. The abolition of bureaucracy in totalitarian systems has been documented by Gross (1984) with respect to a communist/military case, and by Birn (1986: 350–395) with respect to the replacement of bureaucracy by personal dependence in the Third Reich’s SS. We choose this admittedly extreme case in order to illustrate vividly the basic structure of our arguments.

Birn (1986) studied the lives and activities of the Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer (Higher SS and Police Leaders),¹ which reveals interesting points about the internal functioning of the SS. Most notable is that these individuals, who were responsible for a significant number of the SS’s crimes, were highly dependent on the person of Heinrich Himmler. The Higher SS and Police Leaders were personally selected by Himmler according to their ‘personality’ and ‘personal attitude’, rather than expertise and technical knowledge (Birn 1986: 362, 365–368). They had to ask for his permission to marry or were pressured by him to get married; they were financially dependent on occasional grants from Himmler’s accounts, and constantly endangered by degradation (five of them were degraded or dismissed from office after they had fallen out of favour with Himmler). Also, the emotional connection among the Higher SS and Police Leaders was fostered by frequent personal letters which reflected and reproduced the concept and attitude of the SS as a Lebensgemeinschaft (a life community). In summary, Birn (1986) presents a variety of evidence that makes it difficult to suggest that ‘bureaucratic consciousness’ guided the functioning of the SS. Despotism, the absence of all means of bureaucracy, and the assumption of a Lebensgemeinschaft, seems to be more characteristic of this institution. Alternatively, as Sofsky (1993) observes in his study of the administration of the concentration camps:

‘The organization of the concentration camp is nevertheless not to be equated with military units or public administrations. The SS was an organized “movement”, a party [NSDAP] facility, which the top regarded as the engine of the expansion and the terror. A rigid bureaucracy would have only stood in the way. The formalization did not achieve the degree of objectivity as conventional administrations, in which the established rules apply to everybody. The bureaucracy of the SS was not a domination of anonymity. The organization was characterized by corruption and protection, by rivalries and camaraderie. The extent of power delegation, local independence and spontaneous improvisation must not be underestimated. From its members, the SS demanded individual initiative rather than blind obedience, and flexible “actions” rather than accurate faithfulness, according to the principle that those who act are in charge. Down to the lowest personnel levels, the SS expected not only accurate book keeping, but also autonomous action and personal compliance. Although this lowered the power of calculability, it increased the power through uncertainty and calculated disorder. The personalized organization leveraged that arbitrariness on which terror is based.’ (Sofsky 1993: 30, our translation, emphasis added)

The Popperian critique of closedness points exactly at this, the movement,
a sense of collectivism, driven by the grand idea and initiative, regardless of rules and procedures that represent legality and legitimacy. This is not to say that the excellence movement is ‘totalitarian’ in the political sense of a total organization in the interest of a leader. However, the excellence movement may foster a pattern of thinking and a value system in which rules and their legitimacy are dismissed at petit-bourgeois pettiness and where the grand idea, the collective movement and radical change — all of them features of business re-engineering and total quality; all of them amazingly close to the closed pattern of thinking in the Popperian sense — are appreciated instead.

At this point, a gap is emerging between this Popper-based interpretation of bureaucracy on the one hand, and the understanding of Zygmunt Baumann, whose publication (Baumann 1989) has gained much attention in the last decade, on the other. Bauman’s interpretation of bureaucracy is based on a distinction between instrumental rationality and moral criteria of action, and bureaucracy is seen as the central mechanism through which the former rather than the latter is promoted (du Gay 1999, 2000). Indeed, in his reading of Milgram’s experiments on obedience, Bauman (1989: Chapt. 6) persistently connects compliance to the authority and discipline of bureaucratic settings. He does not discuss an alternative function of bureaucracy (legitimacy through procedure), or an alternative source of authority and compliance such as the social movement. In the Popperian frame of reference, bureaucracy represents the legitimacy of the liberal-democratic state. The excellence movement, rather than bureaucratic action, must be viewed in the light of ‘instrumental rationality’, since, in the culture (Lebensgemeinschaft?) of ‘total quality’ and ‘excellence’, means and ends become interwoven and radical organizational change becomes an end in itself, independent of the consequences for individuals. This weight of bureaucracy can also be seen in Popper’s notion that the societal assumption that humans are equal in value (though unequal in character) is a trait of openness, and is closely connected with his claim for equal opportunities in an open society. Only a bureaucracy can guarantee equal opportunities and individual rights such as data protection, because their establishment requires laws, controls to ensure abidance to these laws, and hence some sort of administration. As du Gay (1994) writes, the absence of bureaucracy would be equal to a re-establishment of arbitrary forms of dominance, or patronage.

Against this background, accounts that label bureaucracy as an enemy of the open society appear inconclusive. Notturno (1999: 53) argues that bureaucracy ‘leads to the transformation of human beings into little computers, programmed to follow a set of well-defined rules and capable of performing limited tasks according to them, but unable, or at least unwilling, to think for themselves, even so far as to distinguish between those rules and the ends that they are meant to achieve’. By that, he neglects the above arguments that bureaucracy is a step away from feudal or charismatic forms of governance in the direction of a ‘rational’, rule-bound order aiming at creating equal opportunities and individual rights. Through the
Popperian lens, it is not bureaucratic consciousness which makes closed societies possible, but a collective belief in grand ideas that overcomes bureaucratic regulation. Openness, in conclusion, rests to a large extent on bureaucracy.

Collectivist Organization of Work Viewed through the Popperian Lens

The managerial discourse of the 1980s and 1990s towards participative and integrative work environments is still continuing, and has ample influence on managerial thinking. As well as the human relations tradition and adaptations of Japanese management, this trend towards teamwork organization and cohesive culture is explicitly or implicitly based on Durkheimian thinking in terms of organic solidarity (cf. Starkey 1992). Rothschild’s (1979) and Rothschild and Whitt’s (1986) ‘collectivist’ organization can be considered a classical conception, or even a climax, in this respect. Rothschild outlines work organizations as collectives with alternative forms of authority, rules, social relations, and incentive structures. Here, authority is supposed to reside in the collective as a whole; calculability is supposed to be possible on the basis of knowing the ‘substantive ethics’; and social control is based on personalistic or moralistic appeals and on the selection of homogeneous personnel. Internal relations have to be ‘holistic, personal, of value in themselves’, so that the ideal of a community is achieved (Rothschild 1979: 461). Rothschild hardly tries to disguise her value-judgement in favour of collectives, for example by calling them ‘collectivist–democratic organization’, juxtaposing them to bureaucracies, and hence putting bureaucracy into an anti-democratic corner:

‘They [collectivist–democratic organizations] are organizations without domination in that ultimate authority is based in the group as a whole, not in the individual. Individuals, of course, may be delegated carefully circumscribed areas of authority, but authority is delegated and defined by the collectivity and subject to recall by the collectivity…

In place of the fixed and universalistic rule that is the trademark of bureaucracy, operations and decisions in alternative organizations tend to be conducted in an ad hoc manner. Decisions generally are settled as the case arises, and are situated to the peculiarities of the individual case. No written manual of rules and procedures exists in most collectives, although norms of participation clearly obtain. Although there is little attempt to account for decisions in terms of literal rules, concerted efforts are made to account for decisions in terms of substantive ethics.’ (Rothschild and Whitt 1986: 52, emphasis added)

In other words, the collective knows what is good for the individual and thus must be protected against individualist charges. In addition, decisions do not obtain legitimacy through the transparency of procedures and their universal applicability to all members, but through certain knowledge of the ‘substantive ethic’, that is, through ad-hoc definitions by those (chosen ones?) who ‘know’ the contents of this ethic or ‘vision’. In order to do justice to these authors, it must be pointed out that they do mention that substantive values are to be applied consistently, that rules need not be
anti-democratic, and that the lack of universalistic standards in pre-bureaucratic modes of organization did invite arbitrary and capricious rule (Rothschild and Whittle 1986: 53). Nevertheless, they openly admit that third-order control is the common feature of ‘collectivist–democratic organizations’, without discussing the potential consequences of this form of social control (p. 55). ‘Non-democratic’ habits or values are only discussed in the context that ‘individuals of this provenience’ are ‘unsuitable’ for their supposedly collectivist–democratic organizations (pp. 66–68). Thus, by downplaying the relations between bureaucracy and liberalism (Du Gay 1994, 1999), between legitimacy and procedure (Popper; see in this context also Rawls 1971, 1993 and Luhmann 1975), between collectivism and totalitarianism (Popper), and between ‘substantive ethics’ and personalistic, moralistic appeals on the one hand, and the incontestable knowledge of the chosen few on the other (Popper), Rothschild and Whittel passionately outline an organization that can only be called ‘closed’ in this context. Against the background of the Popperian framework, such an organization — or those worshipped by the managerial literature on team work, corporate missions, participative work environment, etc. — cannot only to be regarded as a naïve, ignorant form of ‘democratic’ or ‘liberal’ organization, but it even acquires a taste of the closed society. By becoming aware of the control aspect of collectives, organization theory is now more critical of collectivist work organizations. In an often-cited article, Barker (1993) introduced the term ‘concertive control’, which ‘represents a key shift in the locus of control from management to the workers themselves, who collaborate to develop the means of their own control. Workers achieve concertive control by reaching a negotiated consensus on how to shape their behaviour according to a set of core values, such as the values found in a corporate vision statement.’ (Barker 1993: 411)

Since Barker’s publication, the notion of concertive control in participative work environments has become a major concern of critical organization studies. Pollert (1996) studied the introduction of teamwork in a mass-production food company and found in interviews with workers that the new organization of work caused inter-team competition, which nourished mistrust rather than improved quality (p. 199). She quotes a female worker: ‘“Everyone’s watching everyone else — we didn’t used to do that...”’ (p. 200). McKinley and Taylor (1996) parallel this view in discussing peer review as a disciplinary practice, in Foucault’s sense. In their study of a telephone manufacturing company, they found that the supposedly collectivist design to force workers to rate each other’s performance strikingly resembled Foucault’s vision that every warder becomes a prisoner and every prisoner becomes a warder. They observed that the team-based work organization and an empowerment ideology did not eliminate the control imperative from the workplace. Rather, discipline was perceived as *ad hoc*, arbitrary, and distorted by personality clashes, which eventually led to strong and collective opposition to this practice. The latest studies on this issue, by Ezzamel and Willmott (1998) and Sewell
(1998), have carried over and extended this critical view on participative work environments. Ezzamel and Willmott’s study of a global retailing company expands Barker’s (1993) critique in two ways. It highlights the role of accounting measures in justifying the introduction of teamwork, and addresses the issue of employee self-identity that renders them receptive to moves towards teamwork. They show how ‘teamwork reforms and elaborates, rather than replaces or eliminates, a traditional, hierarchical system of management control’ (p. 391). Although they acknowledge that managers were sincere when they wanted teams to become self-managing, employees viewed the shift towards teamwork as ‘a threat to the narrative of the self’, that is, as a threat to regarding each other as ‘work mates’. Within a fragmented, hierarchical line system, work involved a minimum of overlap and potential for collision, so that work-mate collegiality could easily arise. The new teamwork system, however, was associated with work intensification, thereby raising the pressure of mutual surveillance and horizontal social control. The employees hence declined to become more than minimally involved in what they viewed as managers’ responsibility (p. 390). Sewell (1998) highlights that the apparently consensual workplace relations associated with teamwork are, in certain circumstances, founded on new technologies and peer group control. He suggests a model of hybrid control with electronic control as vertical components, and team control as horizontal ones. With regard to horizontal control, he refers to group norms that become a discourse of ‘correct’ behaviour, and to the fact that group norms are less open to wider scrutiny and processes of appeal than externally determined rules. He also refers to the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’.

‘Freeman’s (1974) discussion of the “tyranny of structurelessness” — the emergence of unpleasant bullying tactics in groups that consciously attempt to eschew the orthodoxy of hierarchical organization — provides insights into the potentially coercive dynamics of concertive control. This is not to say that teams will inevitably follow some trajectory of irrationalist decline if left alone, but we should be alert to the potential for petty tyranny to arise in teams.’ (Sewell 1998: 411)

In view of these critical analyses of concertive control, it is interesting to see that the Weberian tenet of legitimate authority through bureaucracy inherently regains attractiveness, since it provides participants with protection against certain forms of oppression. This is lacking in concertive systems of control, when participants go against the collective will. Implicitly or explicitly, these mostly Foucault-based analyses of Barker (1993), Pollert (1996), McKinley and Taylor (1996), Ezzamel and Willmott (1998), Sewell (1998), and also Sinclair (1992), marshal the traditional, liberalist juxtaposition of the individual versus the community. Community is presented in such a manner that it distorts the autonomy of the individual and penetrates the individual with group dogmas that hamper independent thinking. This has led to a consensus among a Foucault-oriented community that collectivist forms of work organization are now to be treated with suspicion.

According to the Popperian frame of reference, collectives are connected with shaping and aligning assumptions and possibilities of action; and social
collectives are identified by their mental uniformization of individual cognition, which may shift towards totalitarianism if it is accompanied by an intellectual vision. Corporate missions that emphasize an idealist goal and a sense of community among the participants are, in this sense, a clear step towards closedness, since they potentially cover fundamental differences of interest and plurality in organizations. With a Popperian framework in mind, therefore, the control aspect of collectivist work organization could have been made explicit and have been systematically analyzed much earlier, after Foucault’s notions had penetrated organizational analysis. However, who was first is not the issue. Rather, with the Popperian frame of reference, the discourse on concertive control can be expanded by two interconnected components. First, it provides an analytical framework for observing whether concertive control is not an unwanted result of efficiency-triggered changes at the workplace, but rather a logical outcome of collectivist organizations of work due to an ideational root in closedness — as opposed to originating in ‘liberation’ (from bureaucracy, formal rules, supervisor control, lack of belonging and emotion, etc.). While Foucault and Popper arrived at entirely different results with regard to the technocratic-liberal state (with Foucault focusing on its potential tyranny; Popper on its potential to maintain a liberal order), they would have arrived at the same scepticism regarding collectivism in organizations — but on the basis of entirely different arguments. Foucault looked at the consequences of political technologies — disciplinization, subjectification — that constitute and structure patterns of perception and behaviour; Popper looked at the ideational conditions on which totalitarian orders are based. With regard to collectivist organizations of work, Foucauldian organization theory focuses mainly on the techniques of control (surveillance and peer-group surveillance) and its consequences for individuals and organizations. A Popper-based analysis would focus on the pattern of thinking on the basis of which pro-collectivist action is taken. Closed features in organizational cultures and managerial cognition would then take centre stage in organizational research. Thus, while Foucauldian approaches are grounded in a political-technical level of disciplinization and subjectification, a Popper-based approach is grounded in an ideational level of patterns of thinking and beliefs.

The second component of expanding the discourse on concertive control is the following. If concertive control is a logical outcome of an underlying pattern of thinking, rather than a result of efficiency-triggered control techniques, then the concerns of the discourse on concertive control can be expanded by a broader, societal perspective: an analysis can be made as to whether managerial thinking such as anti-bureaucratism and collectivism foster closed thinking at the societal level and hence deliver an ideational underpinning of closed societies. While the ontological status of this approach may be controversial, it would re-shift the attention to aspects of organizational culture and managerial cognition. Not only could this shed new light on the relation between national and organizational culture, but it would also provide a path for investigating the penetration of the economic into the social. If the managerial discourse on anti-bureaucratism
and collectivism were to develop into a broader societal consensus, then the concerns about the supposedly liberationist component of the enterprise culture and excellence movement obtain a wider, political dimension. Closed patterns of thinking may be fostered which potentially increase the demand for features of the closed society in the public.

In order not to be misunderstood, it is important to mention that it is no misfortune per se if organizational or managerial trends foster closedness in organizations, in the Popperian sense. Organizations have a legitimate demand for principles which promise creative power and innovativeness, and it would be dangerous to neglect the demand for harmony, consensus, or sense making, since, in turn, neglecting such needs may induce an increasing demand for closed social structures. For example, in certain cases, closed organizations may be functional for the openness of a society, since needs connected to closedness satisfied within organizations might thus stabilize the openness of the society (Gebert and Boerner 1995). A one-dimensional demand for openness in organisations, therefore, would be parochial and dangerous. The significance of the Popperian approach lies not only in its provision of a frame of reference that enables us to observe current tendencies towards closedness in the economic sub-system, but also in its potential to conceptualize the need for a balance between the poles of openness and closedness.

**Conclusion**

The Popperian approach does not deliver a ‘theory’ of organization, but neither did Foucault, Habermas or Derrida (in this regard, see the series of articles by Burrell 1988; Cooper 1989; and Burrell 1994). Although these thinkers did not provide ‘consistent’, ‘hypothesis-generating’ organization theories in the sense of a necessary explanation of organizational events, their lines of thought have nevertheless become indispensable for organizational analysis. The Popperian approach provides a frame of reference for observing management and organization in a manner that sheds new light on phenomena such as anti-bureaucratism or collectivist organizations of work. By viewing these phenomena through a Popperian lens, this paper has attempted to point out that a Popperian approach has a value independent of his epistemology and his contestable rejection of Marxism. Although the epistemological dimension of Popper’s socio-philosophical notions is clearly interwoven with his philosophy of science, the socio-philosophical branch of critical rationalism can be read independently as a framework that enables us to observe an anti-liberal tendency of supposedly liberalizing management trends. It shows that, in spite of sometimes using the wording of political liberalism (‘liberation management’ [Peters 1992]; ‘openness’ and ‘freedom’ [Senge 1990]), managerial trends of anti-bureaucratism and collectivist forms of work organization lend themselves in the other direction, towards a pattern of thinking that comprises and maybe fosters the tenets of the closed society.
Of course, it would be ridiculous to claim that certain ways of managerial thinking are ‘totalitarian’ in nature. Managerial actors tend to regard their work as apolitical, and often have no political agenda whatsoever. The assumption is that their ‘political’ work is limited to making the best of the current political constellations, not to shape them. Yet critical organization theory and the manifold discussions of power in organizations have shown that managerial work can hardly be apolitical. The Popperian approach adds another component to that. It provides conceptual means for observing whether a managerial pattern of thinking possesses features of a belief system of closedness and may hence inherently foster the tenets of the closed society. Keeping the relation between organizations and society in mind, Popper-based thinking allows for the thought experiment of whether openness or closedness at the organizational level fosters the same assumptions at the societal level. This opens up a new agenda for organization studies: studying the link between the societal and the organizational level, based on a conceptualization of these cultural levels in terms of openness and closedness. This could provide a key to empirically studying the interrelation between organization and society, to unlocking this issue from Hofstede (1980)-based conceptualizations, such as Hofstede et al. (1990) and Hofstede et al. (1993). In this regard, of course, the fact that closedness at one level need not ‘cause’ the same on another must be taken into account. As mentioned above, closed organizations may in certain cases be functional for the openness of a society, since needs connected to closedness might be satisfied in organizations thus stabilizing the openness of the society (Gebert and Boerner 1995). Popper repeatedly pointed out that the attractiveness of closedness results from ‘human needs’ for harmony, consensus, sense making, and ‘law and order’, and inherently he criticized a bourgeois pattern of thinking. If these needs could be fulfilled at the organizational level, for example through collective work organizations and homogeneity at the workplace, then tolerance for the distressing features of an open society (conflicts, search for purpose, disorder, intricacy) may be fostered. This, however, would certainly only be the case if closed constellations at the workplace are not connected with ideational tenets of the closed society. Managerial thinking and management trends, therefore, must be carefully observed in terms of the underlying ideas towards openness or closedness. This article has made an attempt in this direction.

If Popper’s ‘Open Society’ is suggestive of alternative ways of approaching problems such as bureaucracy and collectivist organization of work, and if it is a key to unlocking issues such as the relation between organization and society from prior conceptualizations, then it remains to be asked why it has not been introduced earlier into organization studies. One reason certainly has to do with the fact that his name is associated with methodological and epistemological positivism. Since the positivism debate in German sociology in 1961 (Adorno et al. 1976), for many scholars, Popper’s name has lost its credibility for social scientific research. Consequently, even The Open Society and Its Enemies has been read as
a piece of positivist, structure-functionalist social theory and, certainly erroneously, as a piece of political conservatism. The neglect of his socio-philosophical ideas, then, is not a result of intentional marginalization, but rather of a discursive shift towards other approaches, that accounts for why Popper is no longer read. However, the hostility towards Popper on the political left is certainly also due to his opposition to those parts of left-wing forces that demanded radical rather than stepwise changes. However, the attribution of Popper to political conservatism is mistaken, since he was clearly aware of the injustices and dependencies within Western democracies, criticized the bourgeois pattern of thinking without putting forward a neo-liberal or neo-conservative agenda, and continuously demanded urgent changes. His defense of democracy was only directed towards totalitarian tendencies and radical change which, in his opinion, could only lead to less freedom. It is obvious, then, that his arguments can be used or abused against any efforts towards social change that envisage more than incremental steps, so that a misunderstanding of Popper as a supporter of the status quo is near at hand (for this discussion, see Spinner 1978). Finally, the neglect of Popper in organizational analysis certainly can also be traced back to the different level at which he introduced his ideas. As discussed at the beginning of the third section, a socio-philosophical paradigm cannot just be 'applied' to organizations, because organizations are not conceptualized as liberal democracies and people are generally free to leave. Uneasiness would emerge if the difference between these two entities were not sufficiently considered, and care must be taken in order not to set up a value-laden, and therefore superficial, demand for open organizations. Yet, if one draws on the patterns of thinking outlined by Popper, then the extent to which cultural patterns are mirrored by thinking in organizations, and the extent to which, in turn, thinking in organizations fosters or hampers a cultural pattern towards openness or closedness, emerge, then, as urgent subjects of social scientific inquiry. Whether managerial thinking is based on open or closed ways of thinking and whether it fosters the tenets of an open or a closed society cannot leave a modernist scholar of organizations unconcerned.

Notes

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1. The Higher SS and Police Leaders were 47 SS Generals who, under the command of Heinrich Himmler, were in charge of the SS activities in Germany and the territory occupied by Germany between 1939 and 1945. At the time of Birn’s research, five of these individuals were still alive. Birn interviewed two of them during her research.
2. In this regard, it remains to be observed whether the connection between collective organizations of work and a lack of protection against the above-mentioned forms of oppression is inevitable. Romme (1999), for example, may have found an organization in which this connection does not apply.
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