

# Open Society Unresolved: The Contemporary Relevance of a Contested Idea

Christof Royer & Liviu Matei, Editors

Budapest-Vienna-New York 2023: Central European University Press, 228 pp.

Robert Schuett

Diplomatic Academy Vienna

robert.schuett@da-vienna.ac.at

What are open societies? Why are they under attack? How shall we think of them in the new Cold War between Russia, China and the West and at a time of political and cultural division at home? What is to be done? These are the questions discussed in *Open Society Unresolved*, a perceptive collection of fourteen articles edited by Christof Royer and Liviu Matei. Though interdisciplinary, the book adds to recent political theory research on open societies (Schuett 2021). For lack of space I'll discuss it selectively and focus on the book's general thrust.

From where *Open Society Unresolved* starts is that contrary to popular belief and political weaponry from Left and Right, including widespread (antisemitic) vilification of George Soros' Open Society Foundations initiatives, open society has always been an ambiguous concept, rarely defined except by implication in terms of protecting human rights, that is, the legal, political, and moral protection of the freedom of the individual vis-à-vis naked state power, employed loosely and in several senses. Hence, to rescue it from the confusion and battles into which it has sunk, 'the best way to promote open society', as Christof Royer writes in his astute introduction, is to 'take the self-critical ethos of the open society seriously' (p. 3). He himself does this by offering a neat account of the philosophical roots of open society thinking in Henri Bergson, Friedrich Hayek, and Karl Popper, thereby carving out the nuances of—and between—them and setting the stage for a renewed understanding why, today, open society means different things to different people. A libertarian open society in Hayekian mould is different to a Popperian epistocracy,

is different for that matter to the kind of open society thinking of, let's say, Hans Kelsen or Soros.

The book's contributions written by a global interdisciplinary cast, divided into two parts (theory and practice), reflect this variation. Starting off with theory, Thom Scott-Phillips argues that based on modern 'human nature' science, open society is about greatest possible open governance. Reaching back to Helmuth Plessner, Rachid Boutayeb makes the case for an open society ethos of 'open neighborhood' (p. 38). Rooted in Popper's anti-essentialism, Gregory Lobo provides us with a rich individualist open society critique of identity politics. Gazela Pudar Draško and Predrag Krstić bring Popper's open society of critical rationalism into dialogue with deliberative democratic theory. Piers Norris Turner thinks of open societies as an 'achievement' in terms of us cultivating certain norms of social morality and protecting them carefully. In a bold statement, Avery Fox White brings Robert Nozick's libertarianism into the open society frame. Using Hannah Arendt, Andrea Timár models open societies according to literary discussions in the classroom. Taking us back to Bergson, Jean-Louis Fabiani discusses the double blind of inclusion and identity politics which necessarily must clash. So, what the theory part does well, is showcase the breadth and depth of open society legitimation and its political and cultural purposes.

The book's second part deals with different regional perspectives and is spearheaded by Katalin Fábrián who analyses why reactionary gender politics is so divisive. Kenneth Ka-Lok Chan looks at present-day Hong Kong and into what may be expected in terms of open society

resilience. Lubomir Terziev explores the dehumanising targeting of 'sorosoids', i.e., the pejorative term for individuals that are allegedly funded by 'Soros' money in Bulgaria. Bringing in the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, Nwankwo T. Nwaezeigwe shows that the open society is not as Western an invention as often believed. Attempting to rethink intelligence work in open societies, Anna Eva Grutza discusses how spooks and scientists may find new collaborative ways, especially in strategic foresight questions. And similarly concerned with the twilight zone of public emergency and individual liberty, Tarun Weeramanthri asks how public health and expert advice can contribute to an open society in times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Adding to the theory part then, what the contributions in this practice part offer as part of the book's quest to understand the essence (if there is one) and value of open societies, are truly interdisciplinary and global perspectives.

Not much in *Open Society Unresolved* is surprising, but that is a good thing—let me repeat: that is a good thing. If looked at the concept of open society from within the broader intellectual open society context, there's nothing new or radical or startling for us to uncover because what open society signifies is what it always did: a set of liberal ideas to protect the freedom of the individual; and the same goes for the threats to open societies from within and without: for today, as in the past, closed society makes individuals to serve the 'interests' of a community, tribe, state, or nation. Perhaps it's time that open society theorists and supporters of all stripes recognise the inherent *openness* inbuilt in the idea and real politics of defending individual freedom against all sorts of collectivist us/them dogmas wherever it comes from and with whatever 'good' intentions. The distinctive contribution of Royer and Matei's book is to have reiterated in diverse ways the challenge where to draw a clear boundary line between open society's friends and foes.

## References

Schuett, Robert (2021). *Hans Kelsen's Political Realism*. Edinburgh University Press.