

OPEN SOCIETY AS ITS OWN ENEMY

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With his invitation to speak here, Prof. Bas van Bavel, scientific director of Institutions for Open Societies, gave me the instruction: “You can be nice”. Perhaps that is what happens when you are a representative of an institution that is by nature aiming on what goes wrong, and whether we are still living up to standards, laws, and procedures.

My predecessor described herself the following: “I am walking bad news”. I describe my institutional role as “putting the lights on at a party”. That job is President of the Netherlands Court of Audit. And to the readers from abroad; we are in fact not a Court. I do not exactly know why it is translated that way. Internationally, the Netherlands Court of Audit belongs to the Supreme Audit Institutions. That is SAI as abbreviation. And ‘SAI’ in Dutch means ... boring.

So coming from a world of supreme institutions in a national context, a world that is working on very practical audit routines every day, I feel a bit uncomfortable about the debate on the Open Society and its Future, the central theme of this publication. Let me put it forward as a thesis: **Society ceases to exist when it is not**

defined as something that is recognizable for its ‘members’ – and when it does not exclude others, even other societies. Without a notion of group-identity the open society becomes its own enemy.

So coming from world of supreme institutions in a national context, a world that is daily working on very practical audit routines, I have this uncomfortable feeling in the debate. Let me put it forward as a thesis: Society ceases to exist when it is not defined as something that is recognizable for its ‘members’ – and when it doesn’t exclude others even other societies. Without a notion of group-identity the open society becomes its own enemy.

Why this thesis? What strikes me is that most of the attention goes to the definition of ‘openness’. The question is mostly: what makes a society an open society? And, if a society is not open, what makes it a closed society? So the debate mostly focuses on: What is open and what is closed? But what about the concept of society itself? Why not focus on the question: What makes a certain group of people a society?

Let me take you back in time. A little more than a 100 years ago this continent had three multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual empires: the Austrian, the Russian and the Turkish emperors, tsars and sultans ruled over many people, not only in numbers of people or in square kilometers of area, but mostly and foremost in an immense diversity of nationals with a variety of cultural backgrounds.

This all changed after WWI. As a young diplomat, the later British Member of Parliament Harold Nicolson met as secretary with the three leaders of government to discuss the future. He was shocked by the outcome of the meeting and wrote his wife, the well-known writer Vita Sackville-West, afterwards: “My god, they are cutting Asia Minor into pieces, like it was a piece of cake”.

American president Woodrow Wilson, who served as president of the United States from 1913 to 1921, wanted to use the principle of self-determination of people as a guiding principle for the future.

The French president Clemenceau and the British prime minister Lloyd George asked him multiple times: “What defines a people? Is it language? Is it religion? Is it ethnicity?”

They did not get a clear answer from their American colleague. But the principle of self-determination was determinative for the creation of many new countries. From Iraq to Yugoslavia.

The result was, as you all may know, the start of many, many new wars and conflicts in which historic heritage and cultural identity played an important role. And yet today, we witness that there is no Czechoslovakia anymore, the Crimea got occupied, Kurds still fight for their self-determination, Catalonia wants more independence.



We also see that the governance of countries like Belgium and the United Kingdom are adjusted in such a way, that state institutions that bear legal powers and representational bodies, decentralise to the Flemish and French speaking people, to the Scots, the Welsh and the English.

There is more to illustrate the quest for identity. Furthermore, of course, there is Brexit. But we should not forget that before the British referendum, a majority of the Dutch and the French voted 'no' in EU-referenda as well. But in those cases the national government did not want to 'deliver'.

So my question is: what is currently really happening with the concept of society? How can we understand these developments after decades of change, in terms of globalisation, migration, and multilateral forms of government like the EU?

Could it be that the idea or the concept of 'society' is underexposed? That the things which bind people together are ignored? And if so, should that not be an object of study itself: society as an institution?

In a notorious speech – to some it was the speech that opened Pandora's box of nationalism, Euroscepticism and ultimately Brexit – then prime-minister Margaret Thatcher stated that:

“Europe will be stronger precisely because it has France as France, Spain as Spain, Britain as Britain, each with its own customs, traditions and identity. It would be folly to try to fit them into some sort of identikit European personality.”

Anyone who reads that Brugge-speech today might question why it was perceived as startling at the time. Nowadays, the words that Thatcher spoke could be considered 'mainstream'.

Take this quote for example: *“Certainly we want to see Europe more united and with a greater sense of common purpose. But it must be in a way which preserves the different traditions, parliamentary powers and sense of national pride in one's own country; for these have been the source of Europe's vitality through the centuries.”*

And: *“Let Europe be a family of nations, understanding each other better, appreciating each other more, doing more together but relishing our national identity no less than our common European endeavour.”*

Back on topic: the Open Society. Let us not forget that the institutions of an open society were born and created in a specific context: cause, location and persona. And it is this context that partly defines the idea of 'society'. A society comprises a group of people that created something together and passed that on. It requires a group of people that take care of that specific heritage together and feel responsible for it. That shared heritage makes you able to be part of it.

In his contribution to this Think Papers series, Mark Bovens writes: “For Popper the opposite of an open society was a closed society in which laws, institutions and scientific principles are beyond criticism (...).” Could there be a negative, in addition to the opposite? A situation where criticism on laws, institutions and scientific principles finds its root-cause somewhere else? Something that is perhaps too easily put aside as 'populism'?

My question to you is: Could a society, and especially an open society, be something without borders? Without a clear definition of what it is and what is not? Is the open society the salad without the need of a salad bowl: a mix of ingredients sticking together by itself without the need for something that gives shape? Is an open society so open that anyone can enter

or leave it? Is it boundless? But then, if you can enter and leave something so easily, does it really exist?

So do we not only need to (re)define the concept of openness, but also the concept of society itself?

That is why my thesis for the minds from the academia is: **Society ceases to exist when it is not defined as something that is recognizable for its 'members' – and when it doesn't exclude others even other societies. Without a notion of group-identity the open society becomes its own enemy.**

I do hope you take time to answer this, while I will take some more time to scrutinise public spending.

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