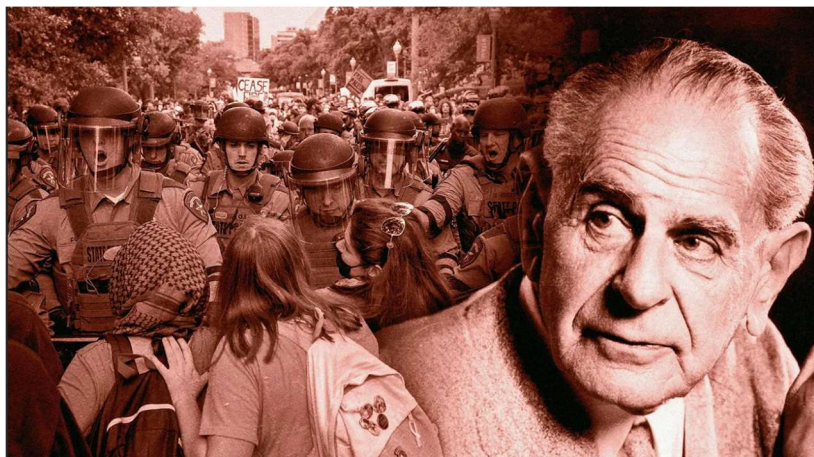


Opinion |

The Limits of Tolerance: What Karl Popper Would Say About Campus pro-Palestinian Protests

Popper, who fled Nazi Europe and coined the term the 'Open Society,' warned of the dangers of both tolerance – and intolerance. At what point would the philosopher, in his own words, have considered pro-Hamas slogans and police violence on U.S. campuses as 'criminal incitement to intolerance and persecution'?



A collage image with a photo of pro-Palestinian protesters facing off with the police at the University of Texas-Austin last week on the left and on the right, a portrait philosopher Karl Popper. Credit: LSE Library / Jay Janner/ AP / Artwork: Anastasia Shub

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As I watch the mounting pro-Palestine protests at American universities, which now stretch from the liberal and Democratic campuses deep into the conservative and Republican heartland, I cannot help but wonder what the influential philosopher Karl Popper would think.

If you, in turn, cannot help but wonder why Popper matters, it is because his work deals with the matter of that [vital yet vanishing virtue, tolerance](#).

Born in turn of the century Vienna to Jewish parents who had converted to Lutheranism, Popper's philosophical writings on [probability](#), falsifiability, and scientific methodology have proved [both controversial](#) and influential, as have his critiques of Marxism and historicism.

But his fame, or infamy, rests on the equally controversial [The Open Society and its Enemies](#), which he wrote in exile in New Zealand as the west went to war against Nazi Germany. Many years later, Popper suggested that the idea for the book was seeded when, still living in Vienna, he met a young man dressed in a Nazi uniform and pistol holster. "He said to me, 'What, you want to argue? I don't argue, I shoot.'"

The book is both a rousing defense of democratic liberalism and even socialism – the isms that reflect open societies – and a riveting denunciation of the closed societies of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism. (Less convincingly, Popper also denounces Plato, categorizing – or, for Popper's critics, caricaturing – the *Republic* as the philosophical fount of totalitarian thought.)

By an open society, Popper means a tolerant society. Yet while we think of tolerance as a virtue, it can also be a vice, leading to what Popper calls "the paradox of tolerance."



Pro-Palestinian protesters gather at an encampment on the campus of the University of California, Irvine, in Irvine, California on Tuesday. Credit: Mike Blake/ REUTERS

"If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant," he warned in *The Open Society*, "then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them."

So far, so good.

But at what point does tolerance become, well, not so good – namely, when it threatens our self-preservation? Popper at first tried to resolve the paradox by limiting our tolerance to the tolerant. But this is too easy, even tautologous, as the rigorously logical thinker soon recognized.

In later years, Popper allowed that an open society, at least in times of peace and strength, can "tolerate its lunatic fringe, that is to say, those who preach intolerance and who, at the same time, accuse the tolerant of hypocrisy, because they are not prepared to tolerate every aggressive form of intolerance."

This is a marked improvement, for it recognizes that just as any serious conception of political freedom carries fine print with clearly defined constraints, so too must a notion of tolerance be framed with similar restrictions.

As our time is not peaceful and our society is not strong, this seems to mean that a protest leader at Columbia who told administration officials that "Zionists don't deserve to live" and "Be grateful that I'm not just going out and murdering Zionists" certainly does not deserve to remain a student at Columbia and indeed he has been given an ["interim suspension,"](#) which seems to be a bureaucratic purgatory.



Demonstrators clash at a pro-Palestinian encampment at UCLA early Wednesday in Los Angeles. Dueling groups of protesters have gotten into fistfights and shoving, kicking and using sticks to beat one another. Credit: Ethan Swope, AP

This also seems to mean, however, that the University of Texas officials who sent in state troopers, wrapped in riot gear and astride horses, to break up a peaceful protest rally – an action, according to witnesses, [that included](#) "police punching a female student, knocking over a legal observer, dragging a student over a chain link fence, and violently arresting students simply for standing at the front of the crowd" – might not deserve to remain at their posts either.

It is pointless to list the many other instances of violent intolerance, verbal and physical, on both sides. But there is a point to underscoring why they are the rule, not the exception. Tolerance is a virtue, and like any virtue, it is damnably difficult to achieve.

Just ask those who knew Karl Popper. He was impossibly intolerant of those – and there were enough to fill a stadium – who took issue with his views. He reminded one colleague of a "human blowtorch," while another quipped that *The Open Society and its Enemies* should be amended to *The Open Society Written by One of its Enemies*.

This cuts to the bone of our predicament. As with any virtue, be it compassion or courage, humility or fidelity, tolerance means the acceptance of discomfort and, at times, even distress. It is easy to tolerate, say, a fellow admirer of Leonard Cohen who disagrees that "Hallelujah" is his best song. But it is more difficult to tolerate someone who dislikes the song because he dislikes its Jewish character.

And yet more difficult, of course, to tolerate someone who dismisses the legitimacy of a Jewish state. It is impossible to know the minds of protesting students who chant "From the River to the Sea, a Palestine that is free." Perhaps it is impossible for many of those same students to truly know what they mean. But those organizations spearheading the protests, specifically Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Palestine call to dismantle Israel and have described Hamas atrocities as "resistance."

So it's not so difficult to grasp what this speech act – not to mention "resistance to colonial rule by any means necessary" and other related chants and statements means to most Jewish students (or, for that matter, Jewish professors like myself).

Of course, I must also respect that protestors have a constitutional right, at least at public universities, to make such statements. As I would a fellow Jew who declares that Israeli policies in the occupied territories not only "makes me ashamed in my origin," but also goes on to assert that the very notion of a chosen people was, quite simply, "evil." Needless to say, that same Popperian would not be influenced by the fact that Popper himself made this declaration in 1984. (Several years earlier, Popper refused inclusion in the *Jewish Year Book*, explaining "I do not believe in race; I abhor any form of racialism or nationalism; and I never belonged to the Jewish faith.")



Police detain a protestor, as other police officers enter the campus of Columbia University on Tuesday.

Credit: David Dee Delgado/ REUTERS

A careful reader of Popper, the French philosopher André Comte-Sponville, observes that tolerance "has value only when exercised against one's interests and for the sake of someone else's."

In short, if an act of tolerance does not hurt, it is only that, an act. But, at the same time, if acts of intolerance threaten real hurt to others, they qualify as intolerable acts. Should our laws then tolerate someone who, say, might admire Cohen's song but nevertheless wishes to shoot him upon learning he's Jewish? Or, for that matter, [Zionist](#)?

While much is unclear in the current fog of our campus wars, a couple of truths nevertheless are blindingly clear. First, both the unimaginable suffering of Palestinian civilians in Gaza and Israeli hostages held in the tunnels below Gaza – not to mention those who were killed, in some cases after rape and torture, during the Hamas attack are morally and equally intolerable.

Second, real and present threats to the imperative of tolerance, whether in Texas or Tel Aviv (including police aggression against protesters demanding a hostage deal and the arrest of Hebrew University [Professor Nadera Shahloub-Kevorkian](#)) are politically intolerable. No less intolerable, however, are explicit calls for the [destruction of Israel](#) (or, for that matter, [towns in the West Bank or entire cities in Gaza](#)). "We should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal," Popper declared, "in the same way as we should consider incitement to murder...or to the slave trade as criminal."

Without tolerance, the open society proposed by Popper will sooner or later descend into the open season feared by Hobbes, one where each of us becomes a wolf to the others. That our campuses seem to be the pedal to this headlong descent rather than the brakes is too heartbreaking for words.

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