

# Closed minds - TLS

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The Austrian philosopher Karl Popper introduced a host of terms and phrases into academic discourse over his lifetime. They include “the open society”, “piecemeal social engineering” and “falsifiability”. But only one phrase coined by Popper has entered everyday language, though Popper himself is rarely (if ever) identified with it. In the second edition of *The Open Society and its Enemies*, published in 1952 (the original appeared in 1945), Popper included a new section where he discussed the anti-scientific view that a social phenomenon could be explained by “discovering the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed) and who have planned and conspired to bring it about”. Popper’s name for this way of thinking is “the conspiracy theory of society”.

We now live in an age when the idea of the “conspiracy theorist” has become ubiquitous. It is how many of the politicians who are identified in this volume as the new enemies of the open society are routinely described. Donald Trump is sometimes called “the Conspiracy Theorist-in-Chief”. Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, the Law and Justice Party in Poland, the League in Italy: all these leaders and movements seek to explain phenomena they dislike as the result of secret plots against them. The plotters vary from case to case, though the cast list is depressingly familiar: it’s the EU, or the banks, or the Russians, or the deep state, or, inevitably, the Jews. Jan-Werner Müller, in his essay in this collection, calls conspiracy theory part of “the logic of populism”. If populist politicians represent the overwhelming majority of solid citizens (“the people”), and yet those politicians are not getting their way, it must be because hidden forces have secretly blocked them.

Yet it is striking in a book about the legacy of Popper’s *Open Society*, in which the hold of conspiracy theories is widely discussed, that none of the contributors considers, or even acknowledges, that the phrase might have originated with him. This may be because Popper’s original meaning doesn’t quite map onto the way the term is now understood. For Popper, these were conspiracy theories of “society” – they sought to explain deep-rooted social phenomena, such as why the poor are always with us (someone must have arranged it like that – the Jews!) But most contemporary...

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