

GOLD MEDAL BSPEE 2014 Elisabeth Dietz, Norway
Red Cross Nordic United World College (Fjale, Sogn og Fjordane)

«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, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.»

Karl Popper: *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 1945

The paradox of the liberal tolerant society, as articulated by political philosopher Slavoj Žižek, lies in the emergence of illiberal intolerant groups being tolerated by the very society they want to destroy. According to Popper, it is self-defeating for the tolerant society to extend unlimited tolerance to those who are intolerant, as it inevitably dismantles tolerance itself. Consequently, we must take an active stance and defend the tolerant society against the ambitions of the intolerant. This idea evokes associations to the recent controversy regarding the neo-Nazi political party Golden Dawn's success in the Greek elections, which raised questions on whether there is room within a liberal democracy for antidemocratic parties. It appears intolerance poses an immediate contradiction to a tolerant society, yet can we limit tolerance without destroying the nature of tolerance itself?

In a democratic society, allowing undemocratic movements to exist introduces the threat of the undermining of this very society - what is undemocratic simply contradicts the purpose and value of the system. Similarly, we cannot simultaneously argue for a tolerant society and accept intolerance, if we want a society which tolerates minority groups it is incompatible to also allow movements that want to eradicate certain minority groups. Popper argues against tolerance plunging into extreme relativism in which everything is accepted, instead he calls for alertness to defend the value of tolerance against those who oppose it. We could interpret this as a call for the self-perception of a tolerant society, in our modern world most commonly functioning as a liberal democracy, to move beyond the idea of being post-ideological and some kind of universal neutral ground. Here tolerance is considered the «logical» and most convenient way of governing increasingly multicultural societies, apparently posing no judgements as everything is allowed. Instead, Popper argues, we ought to recognise the idea of tolerance as a politically distinct value and ideology which must be fought for - the tolerant society is not beyond opinions and values but is very much based on specific versions of these such as openness, diversity and the freedom of the individual to pursue personal interest without external interference. Unless we recognise this ideologically loaded nature of tolerance, we are bound to let the intolerant exploit the system and eradicate its virtues.

However, this approach does not avoid the question of whether our tolerance is truly tolerance if it only stretches to those who share our views. Is it not contradictory to the doctrine of tolerance to not acknowledge that there might be something wrong in tolerating certain things? For instance, if we adopt an irrealist perspective, who is to judge whether the intolerant perspective against homosexuality is not actually right in claiming it is immoral to be homosexual and that it should be prohibited? Mill in his articulation of liberal principles argued for the value of freedom of expression, prompting a free flow of ideas in which truth would collide with error for the clearer perception of truth by society. If we recognise our own fallibility, we should be open to those who hold opposing views and encourage all to speak their opinions. Similarly, there is no right way of living, and we all benefit if a wide range of lifestyles is present in society. Yet should these principles extend to those who want to limit the expression of others, who are not open to opposing perspectives, and want to eradicate certain lifestyles? Paradoxically, this argument also backfires, as we ourselves are not willing to change our minds on the concept of tolerance if we do not tolerate intolerance. Žižek argues that in being eager to fight against intolerant groups, we end up negating tolerance itself and thus wrecking the qualities of a tolerant world out of contempt for the intolerant other. Consequently, we are left in a situation in which the tolerant society is constantly reinforcing its own limits, rather than highlighting its virtues.

If our objective is to attain a tolerant society, it therefore seems like we're damned if we do tolerate the intolerant, and damned if we don't. It can easily be argued that intolerance only breeds further intolerance, and that extremism is the consequence of a lack of real societal acknowledgement of certain political or religious perspectives - thus we are currently not being tolerant enough as there are intolerant sentiments present. Contrastingly, it could be argued that the emergence of intolerance is the consequence of a society which is already displaying certain tendencies of hostility towards ideas, groups, or lifestyles - for instance it is argued that extreme right wing theories of «Eurabia» would not be possible unless mainstream media did not already perpetuate criticism towards immigration and Islam in general. Thus, we are too tolerant at the expense of minority groups, and by allowing such movements a platform we only further encourage intolerance.

However, to avoid getting stuck in a debate on whether we are tolerating too much or too little, we need to consider what is really the objective of tolerance. It is within the nature of a tolerant society that it does not move beyond mere tolerance of groups - the objective is not a passionate debate and the clash of contrasting opinions, but rather one of relativist acceptance of diversity, resulting in what we could describe as multicultural society in which many groups coexist, agreeing to tolerate each other out of convenience. Thus, even if an open and free debate is the solution to intolerance, we will never eradicate intolerance from mere tolerance which does not really recognise the possible validity of opposite claims. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, if the solution to intolerance is to tolerate less, we are thus contradicting our own values and end up in the same deadlock.

Taking this into consideration, it appears that the concept of tolerance is counterproductive to the virtues it tries to attain. By making us perceive sentiments of extremist groups as a lack of tolerance rather than the display of certain ideologies, we ignore that these are actually problems of injustice and inequality which need to be addressed in society. For instance, fundamentalist groups which do not tolerate the existence of foreigners in society are really posing a problem of racism rather than simply «intolerance». What is considered a matter of tolerance is in fact often highly political questions of power and interest, which are concealed as cultural, religious or political preferences which in the framework of tolerance must be allowed to coexist. Consequently, we are limiting ourselves from passionately engaging against ideas such as hate and discrimination, in the words of Yeats we are stuck in a situation in which «*The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity*». The passionate ones are the intolerant fighting for their alternative vision of society, which they contrast to the «bland» and «ideology-less» tolerant society which unlike their vision has no explicitly stated purpose.

Therefore, we could alternatively envision the virtues of a tolerant society being achieved by the active creation of a shared project across group distinctions. This vision would not maintain the structure of the «tolerant» and the «tolerated», but rather include all groups based on common struggles and traits. By letting go of the idea of openness and equality being the doctrine of development and universality, one ought to advocate for the benefits of an open and diverse society, rather than passively tolerating «others» we have removed ourselves from, looking from an illusory external perspective. Within the concept of tolerance, we are merely obligated to respect the other - instead we could have a participatory society in which groups do not simply tolerate each other but clash together in debate, thus allowing us to passionately oppose those who disregard values such as individual freedom and equality.

GOLD MEDAL BSPEE 2014 Elisabeth Dietz, Norway
Red Cross Nordic United World College (Fjale, Sogn og Fjordane)