

“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 citation of Karl Popper, concerns at the surface the scenario in which a tolerant society might find itself one day. The implications of a society with unlimited tolerance might ultimately, cause its downfall. Such a tolerant society, will be destroyed if it is not defended, according to the citation of Popper.

But how exactly will it be destroyed? At first, it might seem like an invasion of the tolerant society by the intolerant. The tolerant society does not defend itself, and therefore it is destroyed by the intolerant onslaught.

Beneath the surface though, a much more sinister implication lies. If the tolerance is not defended; the tolerant will become intolerant toward the intolerant. The tolerant will lose what they once had, and become intolerant themselves. They are not willing to tolerate the intolerants' opinions and become no better than them. Their moral high ground disappears from beneath them.

The citation can be viewed as a matter of the mind or of actual politics. The takeover of Germany by the NSDAP led by Adolf Hitler can be used as an example of the latter. In which a tolerant society does not defend itself, and therefore succumbs to the pressure of a group of intolerants. The time at which “The Open Society and its Enemies” was published, leads me to believe that it is a very likely possibility. And even today, the question of tolerating adherents of Hitler's ideology is an important issue concerning the implications of the open societies that one finds today in Europe, and other places. Several expressions in connection to National-Socialism are banned in several European countries. In connection to Poppers statement, this might have quite bad implications concerning the future of tolerance in the countries it concerns.

The question of tolerance in conjunction with free speech and the right to express oneself is also related to the citation. An argument often used by people who consider themselves tolerant is; if society lets intolerant people speak their minds and express their views, it will lead to decay in society and that the intolerant will grow in numbers. People's feelings will

also get hurt and such. If they are not tolerated, the tolerant will strengthen their positions and people will not be offended.

An argument used against this, is that if the intolerant are not allowed to be speaking their mind, the tolerant have become intolerant towards them. The tolerant become hypocrites. If they are allowed to speak their mind, they will be exposing themselves, and they can be countered in a public debate. Such groups also tend to find a sense of community in being an outlying group in society, by being shunned by the majority and being unable to speak their mind in public without persecution. If those conditions no longer apply, and they are allowed to speak their mind, then their strength and sense of community will disappear, making it much easier to handle such persons. Their echo chamber is destroyed. And the dialogue between the tolerant and the intolerant strengthens the tolerant and open society. All viewpoints welcome, but open for debate.

Personally, I find myself to be in the latter group. My personal belief is that if one wants to have free speech and an open society, opposing and often offensive opinions must be allowed to enter the public market of ideas. Claiming that a society is tolerant and open, while such differences in opinions are suppressed, becomes hypocritical. The society of the proclaimed tolerant persons becomes an echo chamber for them. And the intolerants have their own echo chamber. The public dialogue suffers from this. Claiming that there is free speech in such a society is false. The more fitting term would be limited freedom of speech or free speech under special terms and conditions.

The citation does not only cover what I have talked about so far, it also relates to hypocrisy – as in not practicing what you preach. It concludes that tolerance is not something that should be taken for granted, it has a certain cost, and if that cost is not paid, the tolerance will be defeated by intolerance.

So in short, Karl Popper's statement is about the cost of a tolerant society, but also implies that losing your own ideals, means that you lose yourself.

This form of human folly is an enemy of an open society. It is not an ideology or a specific group of people against it, it is a lingering threat. If it is not something that the tolerant

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society is aware of when they extend their hand towards the intolerant, their fate is sealed.

If the intolerant are let in, and tolerance is not defended, intolerance will emerge victorious.