

CHERNISS'S BERLIN

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*Daniel Boomsma*

Review of Joshua Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (Oxford, 2013: Oxford University Press). The review was written in Dutch – see <http://www.liberales.be/boeken/amind> – and this version, revised by the author, is translated by Maryleen Schiltkamp.

I

I discovered the works of Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997) four years ago, when I borrowed an old copy of *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. The essays spoke to me so strongly that I decided to buy Berlin's other collections. Since then, I regularly reread his work. The continuous reflection on key questions in philosophy, placing (obscure) philosophers in the broad context of intellectual history, the often clarifying categorisation of thinkers, the constantly recurring dialectics, the associative style of writing: discovering Berlin, to me, was 'as if the whole landscape of history had suddenly been lit up by a burst of sunlight', as the British lawyer and liberal politician Lord James Bryce declared after a conversation in which the famous historian Lord Acton set out his theory of history.

I was temporarily gripped by doubt, however, after rereading Christopher Hitchens's review of Michael Ignatieff's *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*. In his review for the *London Review of Books* (November 1998) Hitchens called Berlin a 'fabled synthesiser', 'a skilled ventriloquist for other thinkers', someone very skilled in 'proposing wobbly antitheses' but who 'never broke any real original ground in the field of ideas'. But originality and renewal (I objected to Hitchens in an imaginary debate) are very relative – and romantic – terms in the history of ideas. 'To exact of every man who writes that he should say something new', Doctor Johnson wrote, 'would be to reduce authors to a small number.'

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Those who study ideas are not like Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel or Marx. Their concern is not primarily to develop new theories or to deliver definite answers to philosophical problems, but to perceive patterns, and relationships between our thinking and our actions, which is (strictly) ‘unoriginal’. In his work *Ideas and Men*, the American historian Crane Brinton writes that it is the task of the historian of ideas ‘to follow ideas in their often tortuous path from the study or laboratory to the market, the club, the home, the legislative chamber, the law court, the conference table, and the battlefield’. To interpret old ideas anew, to cast a new light on them, *that* is originality, on this view.

If originality includes illuminating existing ideas, then Isaiah Berlin, ‘Sir’ since 1957, is highly original. And the reader of *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin’s Political Thought* by Joshua Cherniss, Ph.D. candidate in political theory at Harvard University, finds this thought confirmed. Cherniss characterises Berlin both as a mind of the age he lived in and as a unique thinker who launched himself upon the history of ideas in an idiosyncratic way.

II

To start with: to understand Berlin, one has to admit that he was at the same time a political and an unpolitical thinker. He focused on the most important political-philosophical themes, such as liberty, equality, populism, pluralism, utopianism, Fascism, Enlightenment, romanticism etc. However, Cherniss states in the first chapter, Berlin had little interest in practical politics. In an interview with Michael Ignatieff for the BBC (early 1990s, near the end of his life) Berlin said he was never a man of ‘daily events’. He was mainly interested in ‘the more permanent aspects of the human world’. Therefore, Berlin’s work should especially be understood as a *Weltanschauung*, whose development started in the Oxford of the 1930s. Cherniss explains lucidly how at an early stage Berlin encountered the then dominant Philosophical Realism. This doctrine is based on two assumptions: there is a tangible, material world (existence), and the objects in this tangible world are ‘independent’, meaning they exist in themselves, regardless of the thoughts, feelings and sentiments of human beings. Trees exist, and the fact that they exist and have certain properties (roots,

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leaves etc.) is independent of any human judgement. Realism was introduced in Oxford by John Cook Wilson (1849–1915), professor of logic. G. E. Moore (1873–1958) and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) did the same in Cambridge.

Berlin shared the anti-metaphysical empirical convictions of the Realists to some extent. He embraced, Cherniss writes, 'their general denial of anything that professed to give information about the world as a result of pure thought, their suspicion of the a priori necessary connections which [Berlin] associated with scepticism towards dogma'. Not for nothing did Berlin greatly admire the philosopher of language J. L. Austin. Austin was not doctrinaire and did not try to develop a system to solve philosophical questions. This aversion to philosophical 'straitjackets' always remained with Berlin.

Scepticism would eventually lead Berlin – how could it be otherwise? – to David Hume. In the late 1930s Berlin intended to write a book about him. Unfortunately, this work was never written, but Hume's epistemology and anti-metaphysics became deeply rooted in Berlin's (far from mature) thinking. Hume argued that there is no completely certain knowledge, or rather that through reason (induction) man cannot acquire definite, independent knowledge. Hume's principle is based on the idea of cause and effect as a source of knowledge. An example: if a man finds a watch on a deserted island, he will conclude there has been someone before him on the island. The connection between one fact and the other fact deduced from it is called knowledge. This knowledge isn't carried over a priori from human reason, but from experience, in the broadest sense of the word. In this way, Hume confronted philosophy with an almost insoluble problem: in essence, that man cannot know anything. How could man possibly obtain any knowledge of the objective order of things if all knowledge derives merely from experience? For Berlin, '[Hume's] rejection of the idea of a common reason' was going to play a central role in his views on liberty, pluralism, Enlightenment and romanticism.

After discussing the Oxford Realists, Cherniss turns to Karl Marx, about whom Berlin, surprisingly enough, wrote his first, genuine work of political history. *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, appearing in 1939, not only led Berlin to study Marx himself – it evoked in him an insatiable interest in the history of

ideas, and enabled him ‘to climb out into a different [...] universe from that of Oxford academic philosophy’. Besides this, according to Cherniss, the study focused his attention on monism (and rationalism and utopianism) – the thought that ‘error’ was infinite and multiform, and ‘truth’ characterised by a harmonious unity. In this way, Berlin’s study of Marx built a bridge between philosophy and the history of ideas.

While he was working on Marx, especially in the London Library, Berlin also discovered the Russian thinkers about whom he would later write a series of essays. The most prominent of these thinkers – one in whom Berlin saw himself reflected – was Alexander Herzen (1812–70). Herzen combined idealism with scepticism, and turned strongly against historical determinism, stating that history has ‘no libretto’. In this way he supplied Berlin with ammunition for his later criticism of Hegel and of thinkers such as E. H. Carr, Auguste Comte, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, who all believed in historical inevitability. Herzen, like Kant, saw such ideas as dangerous to the ideas of human free will and responsibility. This was the starting point for Berlin’s later elaborations of his thoughts on liberty.

Besides Herzen, Berlin hit upon the lesser-known Nikolay Mikhailovsky and Petr Lavrov, two ‘moderate populists’, as Cherniss describes them. Berlin thought both thinkers, and their thoughts on determinism and materialistic reductionism (a form of philosophical monism which includes the Cartesian idea that all phenomena – ideas, theories of history, etc. – are merely the sum of their separate parts) ‘morally admirable’, to use Cherniss’s term. Lavrov characterised history as a series of unique events in which a variety of values and meanings could be found. Mikhailovsky argued, Cherniss explains, that ‘there is no system of philosophy which treats the individual with such withering contempt and cold cruelty, as the system of Hegel’. Berlin agreed with this, and wrote an essay on Hegel which made a similar point. It was later published in *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*.

### III

In the chapters ‘Against “Engineers of Human Souls”’: Berlin’s Anti-Managerial Liberalism’, ‘The Road to Liberty’ and ‘The Inner Citadel: Berlin’s Conception of Liberty’, Cherniss’s erudition

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reveals a coherent picture. The chapter on 'Engineers of Human Souls' (a phrase of Stalin's) is a rich text, placing, outstandingly, Berlin's thoughts within the context of European intellectual movements after the war. During the 1940s, the ruling idea was that the post-war world was going to be a 'planned world'. Although there was some resistance to this – the violinist Joseph Szigeti wrote an article in 1947 for the *Saturday Review* with the ironic and striking title 'The Art of Unplanning' – it came too late. 'Planning', the inevitable result of the idea of the malleability of man – the notion that man could be subject to social engineering – gradually acquired the same reputation as the *laissez-faire* economics of the mid-nineteenth century.

This change in loyalty was of great consequence to philosophy. Intellectuals such as Karl Mannheim, E. H. Carr, Sidney Webb (the Condorcet of the twentieth century) and others rejected a liberalism that focused on the plurality of values and ideas. This form of liberalism embodied for many what Cherniss calls 'an enervating lack of conviction'. The planned world needed security, or rather truth. Facts, formulas, models: these were the things man should aim for. The planners, whom Berlin regarded as those who brought the ideas of Henri de Saint-Simon and August Comte into effect, wanted to organise politics on the model of natural science. That meant the accumulation of information, science as a panacea, and 'the control of policy by a technocratic elite possessed of "expert knowledge"'. The new creed was diametrically opposed to the idea that politics is a clash of incompatible values. Values and opinions were believed to be true or false; right and wrong, justice and injustice, had nothing to do with it. Pluralism, which places values at the heart of politics, was an obstacle to a harmonious, rationally organised society. Raymond Aron argued later, in his essay *The Future of Secular Religions*, that this doctrine took 'the place of the faith that is no more, placing the salvation of mankind in this world, in the more or less distant future, and in the form of a social order yet to be invented'.

Others who were opposed to the scientisation and rationalisation of politics were Friedrich Hayek, the extremely witty and original thinker Lionel Trilling, and Aldous Huxley. The latter, in his famous *Brave New World*, warned that 'the pursuit of efficiency would generate a new totalitarianism in which "the all-powerful executive of political bosses and their army of managers

control a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced because they love their servitude”’.

Berlin found himself close to Huxley, Trilling, Hayek and Aron. Between 1949 and 1953, his targets were mainly what we today still call ‘managerialism’ and ‘scientism’. In his essay *Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* he formulated his own objections against the ‘planning mentality’. Cherniss writes: ‘[Berlin] focused on what he claimed was a novel, dangerous idea which had come to dominate twentieth-century thought. [...] The novelty was to regard the remorseless pressure of unanswered questions as ‘a species of psychological malaise, needing [...] a remedy’. Words and ideas were to be ‘so adjusted as to involve as little friction as possible between, and within, individuals. The tendency of such an outlook was ‘to reduce all issues to technical problems’.

Berlin found an ally in Immanuel Kant. Kant’s monism never attracted Berlin, but his ideas on human dignity did make an impact. Kant rejected the idea that the individual could be used as a means to obtain a goal which is not his own. This view of the individual is called self-determination (*compos mentis!*), the ability to make independent choices (by which morality stands or falls), choices that are ultimate, meaning they are valuable in themselves. This became Berlin’s weapon against ‘all the great managers of society, all those who confidently and tidily arrange the destinies of others’, as he writes in his essay on Montesquieu. This opposition to the post-war planners and positivists also explains Berlin’s rejection of nineteenth-century thinkers who believed uncompromisingly in progress. Their optimism he found ‘wildly irritating’.

Cherniss points out that Berlin made a distinction between ‘scientism’ and ‘reason’ – two terms which are today sometimes taken as having the same meaning. ‘Reason is but choosing’, Milton had written in his *Areopagitica*. Reason is neither a divinity leading mankind on the road to redemption (as Robespierre thought), nor a measure of the ‘just’ as opposed to the ‘unjust’.

#### IV

The best chapters of *A Mind and Its Time* are those on liberty. With outstanding precision, Cherniss traces the influences on the concepts of positive and negative liberty which Berlin formulated

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in his well-known work *Two Concepts of Liberty*. In 'The Inner Citadel' Cherniss presents Berlin's choice of negative liberty as true liberty.

First: how did Berlin begin to consider liberty his most important topic? Cherniss mentions two obvious reasons (he would have done well to add a more personal reason, Berlin's experience of the outbreak of the Russian Revolution as a young boy): a political one (he sensed an attack on individual liberty, as mentioned above); and a philosophical one (he regarded liberty as an absolute requirement of humanity).

To understand why Berlin saw negative liberty as true liberty, we need to turn to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century romanticism. This period and its thinkers played the role of agitator where Berlin's concepts of liberty are concerned. In *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age* Berlin identifies romanticism with the view that liberty must either be defined in terms of an all-pervading ideology or be directed towards some higher goal. The Romantic thought is based on the notion that our actions are determined by a 'transcendent self' to which one should listen. Only then can 'real' liberty be achieved.

Berlin could not agree with this. His 'untidy liberalism', as he once defined it in a lecture, is based on the idea of negative liberty: the absence of coercion, the removal of obstacles, resistance against oppression. Positive liberty, on the other hand, contains a justification for oppression (though Berlin later writes that this link is not inevitable). This perversion of liberty, Cherniss writes

arose [...] through a transformation in the conception of the self, which turned self-mastery into despotism and destruction of individual liberty. Some parts of the self were real, some not. Only the real, rational, spiritual or noumenal self could be free. Making an individual act in his best interest was therefore not really coercion, since acting rationally was what the individual *truly* willed. Freedom thus came to mean being guided towards doing what one should do.

Positive liberty is not possible without a goal yet to be achieved – it rejects the belief, as Cherniss says, 'that liberty [can] exist only in a condition of open-endedness'. If this goal or striving is left out, real liberty cannot exist. The individual, on this reading, is part of and subordinate to a 'higher sphere', a sublime goal. Berlin characterises positive liberty in terms of three assumptions: (1) of

the existence of an objective moral order; (2) of the existence of a higher and a lower ‘self’; (3) that reality is a coherent and harmonious whole, in which fundamental values don’t collide with each other, because there is a natural order of things to which all these values belong.

Those who rank positive liberty unconditionally above negative liberty, according to Berlin, deny the Kantian idea that liberty is a goal in itself, regardless of its consequences. Berlin is right when he says that positive liberty of its essence sacrifices individual freedom. His criticism, therefore, goes beyond a warning against totalitarianism. Positive liberty presupposes a force outside and within the individual, which enables him to be more free. Together with Kant, Berlin opposed this, stating that choice, good or bad, regardless of consequences, is a fundamental attribute of human morality. ‘[P]ursuing ends for their own sakes by deliberate acts of choice – which alone makes nobility noble and sacrifices sacrifices’ – is a necessary condition of liberty.

## V

In spite of this somewhat obvious conclusion, which follows from his take on Berlin’s conception of liberty, Cherniss’ intellectual biography, ‘an exercise’ (as he emphasises in his foreword), is a very detailed and sharply written book. Cherniss describes Berlin exactly as he was: a sceptic (an intellectual descendant of Hume), suspicious of seemingly esoteric doctrines and all-encompassing systems; someone who unconditionally defended the dignity and liberty of the individual, ‘one man in the crowd’, and stated that many values are essentially incommensurable and incompatible, and that no one good can be achieved without sacrificing another.

In his conclusion, Cherniss places Berlin in the broad context of the history of ideas. Apart from Kant and Hume, which writers were a mirror in which Berlin saw himself reflected? For any historian of ideas this is a legitimate question, especially for Berlin, who regarded ‘people [as his] landscape’. Cherniss did well to include this question at the end of his book. Towering above all the rest is Alexander Herzen, the passionate but sensitive sceptic. Other sources of inspiration were John Stuart Mill, the committed observer Alexis de Tocqueville and Benjamin Constant, whose ideas on liberty inspired Berlin. Also, of course, there are



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Machiavelli, who led Berlin to pluralism, Montesquieu, Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder. Cherniss also rightly includes Ivan Turgenev, the moderate liberal who never took sides, but who was also never indifferent to ideas and politics. Then there is Raymond Aron, the arch-enemy of political myths and ideological illusions, the Scylla and Charybdis of post-war French politics. Ignatieff writes in his biography that Aron 'became the only French figure whom Isaiah respected'. I should like to mention also the British thinkers Lord Acton and Walter Bagehot. Berlin read and admired the former, according to his letters. The latter was once defined as 'a moderate Liberal, rather between sizes in politics – too conservative for many Liberals and too liberal for many Conservatives'. This could also be a description of Berlin. Finally, the aforementioned Lionel Trilling, literary critic and essayist, can also be identified as a congenial mind. At any rate, he and Berlin shared the same moral sensitivity and preference for complexity and ambiguity. Richard Sennett once charged Trilling with never taking sides: 'you are always in between'; to which Trilling replied, 'Between is the only honest place to be.' Berlin, never eager to draw irrefutable conclusions, could have given the same reply.

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