



Conservative History Journal

Volume II • Issue 7
Autumn 2019

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Isaiah Berlin and the defence of liberty

The Hon. George Brandis QC

The text below was delivered as the 2019 Isaiah Berlin lecture at the Latvian Embassy in London on 4 July 2019. Her Excellency Baiba Braže, Ambassador of Latvia to the United Kingdom, who inaugurated this annual lecture series, says: 'Sir Isaiah Berlin was born in Riga and was a Latvian citizen, part of our nation and state. Latvia's 100-year history proves that only freedom for the country and nation guarantees individual or collective liberties. They are preconditions for successful development. My dear colleague George Brandis in his lecture proved that these values still stand and are as relevant today as they were in Sir Isaiah's time.'

Sir Isaiah Berlin, the 110th anniversary of whose birth this lecture commemorates, was one of the most important, most civilized, and most influential liberal voices of the twentieth century. As we approach the close of the second decade of the twenty-first century, with liberal values and liberal societies under attack from seemingly every quarter, Berlin's eloquent defence of human liberty could not be more relevant and the power of his critique of the enemies of freedom more urgent.

Isaiah Berlin was born to a family of

relatively prosperous Jewish timber merchants in Riga, in what was then the Russian province of Lavinia, on 6 June 1909. With the outbreak of war in 1914, the family fled to the Russian city of Petrograd, where they were caught up in the revolutions of 1917. He is the only person I ever met who was able to tell me about the Russian revolution from personal experience; I still remember his description of how, as an eight year-old boy, he watched from the window of his family's apartment as the Bolshevik mobs surged through the streets below. They endured the chaos of the next few

years in a state of constant peril, being both Jews and bourgeoisie, until in 1921 they seized the opportunity to flee again, first back to Riga, by now the capital of the newly-independent nation of Latvia, and then make their way to the security and tranquillity of England. They settled in south London. The young Isaiah Berlin loved England and its ways, and he remained an Englishman for the rest of his life.

He was a prodigiously gifted scholar at St. Paul's School in Hammersmith where, according to his biographer Michael Ignatieff, he quickly mastered English and precociously devoured books of every sort: writers as various as Aldous Huxley, Anatole France, Dickens, Thackeray, Austen (who, he said, bored him stiff), Chesterton's essays, the poetry of T.S. Eliot and Carl Sandburg, Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, Gilbert Murray's essays on the Greeks, and Macaulay's history of England.¹ He had already read *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, in his original tongue, at the age of ten.

He went up to Oxford in 1928 to be an undergraduate at Corpus Christi College, and – despite occasional peregrinations, in particular to New York and Washington during the Second World War, and to undertake visiting professorships, mostly at American universities – basically

stayed there for the rest of his life. It was in Oxford that he died, in his eighty-ninth year, in 1997.

Over the course of that long life, Oxford rewarded Isaiah Berlin's genius with many of its most glittering prizes: double first-class honours in both Classics and PPE, the John Locke Prize for Philosophy, election as a Prize Fellow of All Souls at the age of twenty-three in 1932 (the first Jewish Fellow ever elected), the Chichele Professorship of Social and Political Theory in 1957. He was the founding President of Wolfson College. The great world beyond Oxford showered him with distinctions as well: in 1977 he was awarded Israel's most prestigious literary honour, the Jerusalem Prize, for his contribution to the defence of human liberty; in 1983, the Netherlands awarded him the Erasmus Prize for his contribution to human culture; and in 1987 Italy awarded him the Agnelli Prize for his writings on the ethical aspects of modern industrial societies. Many of the world's greatest universities conferred honorary doctorates upon him – Oxford itself, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, London, Athens, Bologna, Toronto, Brandeis, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv among them. He was first a Fellow, and later President, of the British Academy. He was knighted in 1957 and, in 1971, the Queen conferred upon him what the *cognoscenti* recognize as the greatest honour of all – the Order of Merit.

Although – apart from his wartime stint in America as a secondee to the Foreign Office – his entire life was spent in universities, it would be the opposite of the truth to think of him as a cloistered scholar. Indeed, he had an uncanny knack of finding himself at the elbow of great men at pivotal points in history. In his early life, he became close to Chaim Weizmann, one of the founders of Zionism, and counselled him in the creation of the state of Israel, of which Weizmann became the first President. His wartime diplomatic despatches from Washington were so brilliant that Churchill was said to have devoured them hungrily. The response of officials to the Prime Minister's inquiry as to identity of the author is pure Foreign Office *sang froid*: 'Mr. Berlin, of Baltic Jewish extraction, by profession a philosopher.'² Despite the slightly condescending tone of the reply, arrangements were made for

them to meet during Churchill's visit to Canada in August 1943. There is a story – perhaps apocryphal – that, when the name 'I. Berlin' appeared in Churchill's daily appointments diary, the Prime Minister was surprised to find that his visitor was an Oxford don: he had been expecting to see Irving Berlin.

Of greater historical consequence, perhaps, was the occasion when, in October 1962, Isaiah Berlin was a guest at a fashionable Georgetown dinner party hosted by the American journalist Joseph Alsop. The guest of honour was Alsop's good friend John F. Kennedy. The President arrived late and seemed uncharacteristically distracted and subdued. Throughout the dinner, his only conversation was to quiz Berlin about Russia and, in particular, what Russian history taught us about that country's reaction to crises. After dinner, he took Berlin aside and continued the interrogation. What did Russians typically do when backed into a corner, the President wanted to know.³ Berlin later said of the conversation:

I've never known a man who listened to every single word that one uttered more attentively. His eyes protruded slightly, he leant forward towards one, and one was made to feel nervous and responsible by the fact that every word registered.⁴

The President then left. The reason for his peculiar behaviour became clear the following morning: earlier that day, Kennedy had first been briefed on the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba. The President was considering his response. We now know that his skilful and measured manoeuvres over the following thirteen days, which ended with Khrushchev's back-down, averted nuclear catastrophe. We will never know what, if anything, Berlin contributed to Kennedy's thinking in judging the Russian reaction. However, we do know that when, after the crisis was over, the President himself held a small dinner party to celebrate, Berlin was among the select few invited.⁵ Two decades later, he was invited to another dinner, at 10 Downing Street, at which the guest of honour was Mikhail Gorbachev. When Mrs. Thatcher introduced him,



All Souls College, Oxford



Berlin became the first Jewish Fellow of All Souls in 1932

Gorbachev is said to have fixed him with an intense – though by no means hostile – look and said: 'We know all about you.'⁶

So, as I have said, Isaiah Berlin was no cloistered academic. Nevertheless, despite his occasional presence on the margins of great events – a privilege vouchsafed to few scholars – his fame consists, of course, in his writings and, in particular, in his strong and lifelong avowal of the tolerant, rational, liberal values of the Enlightenment in an age darkened by tyranny, irrationalism and authoritarianism.

During my time at Oxford I met him twice. Most memorably, he kindly accepted an invitation to a small dinner I hosted in his honour, mostly for Australian students, at Magdalen. I had



Sir Isaiah Berlin, Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory, in 1959

his attention for most of the night. It was a rare privilege. The conversation was, of course, wonderful. He told me that he had originally intended to be a philosophy don, but that he found Oxford philosophy in the 1930s, dominated by the linguistic philosophy school of J.L. Austin and his disciples, narrow and pedantic. Nevertheless, he did produce some significant philosophical papers in that early period, which are to be found in one of the several volumes of his works collected by Henry Hardy, under the title *Concepts and Categories*.⁷ However he was increasingly drawn away from pure analytical philosophy into the broader stream of the history of ideas. Indeed, there are some who make the claim that Berlin invented 'the history of ideas' as an academic discipline.

His first important published work was a reasonably short monograph on the life and work of Karl Marx for a series published by the Home University Library. This was commissioned in 1933 but not finally published until 1939. The 1930s were a time at which Oxford was awash with communism. Most of the choice and master spirits of the age among the Oxford academic community were entranced by its mendacious promise. Berlin – who, unlike any of his credulous academic colleagues, had actually experienced life in Soviet Russia – was not. As Ignatieff observes of Berlin's decision to choose Marx as the subject of his first major work:

To write about Marx ... was to join the swim of the major ideological current of his age and to take the measure of the challenge that it represented to his own inchoate liberal allegiances. What fascinated him was Marx's loathing for the very civilization he himself admired. This set a pattern that was to last for the rest of his life: he defended his own commitments by writing about those who were its sworn enemies. So an ironic, self-mocking, uncommitted bourgeois decided, in the spring of 1933, to spend five years in the company of a fiercely dogmatic ideologue, who despised everything Berlin

*stood for.*⁸

Berlin did not in fact devote his life to the critique of Marxism as such – so far as I know, his book on Marx is the only sustained treatment specifically of Marxism in his *oeuvre* – but to a broader and even more consequential topic: the critique of ideology itself, and the threat to human liberty which ideologically-driven leaders may represent. His fear of the potentially dreadful consequences of ruthlessly ideological government, in crushing individual humanity in the service of Utopian abstractions, may have had its seed in his own childhood experience in revolutionary Petrograd. It was likely influenced by his embrace of the liberal English culture of his youth and, in particular, the Whig tradition which he absorbed from Macaulay. It was also, perhaps, influenced by his early exposure to logical positivism, in vogue among some of his contemporaries among Oxford philosophers such as A.J. Ayer, which demanded that all propositions be empirically verifiable – although that did not prevent some of the positivists falling for Marxism themselves. It was undoubtedly given focus by the writings of the Russian nineteenth-century liberal writer and political activist, Alexander Herzen, whose work he discovered when researching his book on Marx and whom he found deeply sympathetic. It also clearly bears the strong impression of another great philosopher born on the shores of the Baltic, Immanuel Kant, and in particular the doctrine known to scholars of Kant as the second Categorical Imperative: 'Treat every person as an end in themselves and not merely as a means to an end.'

Whatever the tributary streams of Berlin's thinking, the belief in the inviolability of the human person, and his acute awareness of the risk that dogmatic adherence to rigid ideological formulae by leaders and demagogues may lead to the crushing of individual men and women for the sake of some purely abstract end – is the very heart of Isaiah Berlin's liberalism.

Perhaps Berlin's most widely read work is his Inaugural Lecture as Chichele Professor of Social Political Theory, at Oxford in 1958, subsequently published under the title 'Two Concepts of Liberty'. In the sixty years since, it has been a staple of almost every student primer on

twentieth-century political philosophy. The following passage – from some of which I quoted in my maiden speech to the Australian Senate in 2000 – captures the essence of Berlin's thinking, and demonstrates the influence of Kant in shaping his belief in the true basis of political liberty, rooted in the inviolability of the individual:

[I]f the essence of men is that they are autonomous beings – authors of values, of ends in themselves, the ultimate authority of which consists precisely in the fact that they are willed freely – then nothing is worse than to treat them as if they were not autonomous, but natural objects, played on by causal influences, creatures at the mercy of external stimuli, whose choices can be manipulated by their rulers ... To treat men in this way is to treat them as if they were not self-determined. 'Nobody may compel me to be happy in his own way,' said Kant. 'Paternalism is the greatest despotism imaginable.' This is so because it is to treat men as if they were not free, but human material for me, the benevolent reformer, to mould in accordance with my own, not their, freely adopted purposes.

... [T]o manipulate men, to propel them towards goals which you – the social reformer – see, but they may not, is to deny their human essence, to treat them as objects without wills of their own, and therefore to degrade them. That is why to ... use [men] as means for my, not their own, independently conceived ends, even if it is for their own benefit, is, in effect, to treat them as sub-human, to behave as if their ends are less ultimate and sacred than my own. In the name of what can I ever be justified in forcing men to do what they have not willed or consented to? Only in the name of some value higher than themselves. But if, as Kant

*held, all values are made so by the free acts of men, and called values only so far as they are this, there is no value higher than the individual. Therefore to do this is to coerce men in the name of something less ultimate than themselves – to bend them to my will. ... I am aiming at something desired (from whatever motive, no matter how noble) by me or my group, to which I am using other men as a means. But this is a contradiction of what I know men to be, namely, ends in themselves. All forms of tampering with human beings, getting at them, shaping them against their will to your own pattern ... is, therefore, a denial of that in men which makes them men.*⁹

Of course, most political leaders claim to want to change their societies, and invariably they claim that it is for the better. It is not reformers, as such, who concern him – how could they, since he was a fully-subscribed admirer of the Whig view of English history? It is, rather, one particular kind of political leader he has in his sights: those who, like the revolutionaries in the Russia of his childhood, claim to have discovered the key to human progress – the inevitable, ineluctable course of history – and who are so certain in their belief that they have done so, that their certainty justifies the

elimination from public discourse of all alternative voices; and, even worse, who treat those who stand in the way of the realization by mankind of its ultimate, inevitable destiny as obstacles to the course of history who may for that reason be swept away, regardless of the cost in human suffering involved.¹⁰ Ideological dogmatism of such stunning certitude is commonly inspired by a metaphysical conceit – be it Rousseau's theory of the general will, or Hegel's world spirit, or Marx's dialectical materialism. Whatever its inspiration, when gathered into the hands of a political leader both powerful and ruthless enough, the result is the death and suffering of innocents: sometimes, as we have seen in the twentieth century, on a massive scale. The systematic starvation of the Ukrainian kulaks, the death camps of Auschwitz, the Gulag archipelago, the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia: these are the livid, bloody proofs of that against which Isaiah Berlin warned.

Behind most of Berlin's writings lurks, I think, the malign shade of Marx. Yet, as I have said, Berlin's philosophy is not just a critique of Marxism. It is a critique of all political ideologies which sacrifice human beings to Utopian dreams. Listen to what he has to say about his hero Alexander Herzen:

He is terrified of the oppressors, but he is terrified of the liberators too. He is terrified of them because for him they are the secular heirs of the religious bigots of the ages of faith;

because anybody who has a cut and dried scheme, a straitjacket which he wishes to impose on humanity as the sole possible remedy for all human ills, is ultimately bound to create a situation intolerable for free human beings ...

... He understood only too well the misery, the oppression, the suffocation, the appalling inhumanity, the bitter cries for justice on the part of the crushed elements of the population under the ancien regime, and at the same time he knew that the new world which had risen to avenge these wrongs must, if it was given its head, create its own excesses and drive millions of human beings to useless mutual extermination.

*... The new liberators ... resemble the inquisitors of the past, who drove herds of innocent Spaniards, Dutchmen, Belgians, Frenchmen, Italians to the auto-da-fe, and then went home peacefully with a quiet conscience, with the feeling that they had done their duty, with the smell of roasting human flesh still in their nostrils, and slept the sleep of the innocent after a day's work well done.*¹¹

And so, says Berlin:

The purpose of the struggle for liberty is not liberty tomorrow, it is liberty today, the liberty of living individuals with their own individual ends, the ends for which they move and fight and perhaps die, ends which are sacred to them. To crush their freedom, their pursuits, to ruin their ends for the sake of some vague felicity in the future which cannot be guaranteed, about which we know nothing, which is simply the product of some enormous metaphysical construction that itself rests upon sand, for which there is no logical, or empirical, or any other rational guarantee – to



George Brandis delivering the Isaiah Berlin lecture at the Latvian Embassy, 4 July 2019

do that is in the first place blind, because the future is uncertain; and in the second place vicious, because it offends against the only moral values we know; because it tramples on human demands in the name of abstractions – freedom, happiness, justice – fanatical generalisations, mystical sounds, idolised sets of words.

... One of the greatest of sins that any human being can perpetrate is to seek to transfer moral responsibility from his own shoulders to those of an unpredictable future order, and in the name of something which may never happen, perpetrate crimes today which no one would deny to be monstrous if they were performed for some egoistic purpose, and do not seem so only because they are sanctified by faith in some remote and intangible Utopia.¹²

This is the essence of Isaiah Berlin: his fusion of the Kantian doctrine of the inviolability of the person with his well-grounded fear of the ideologue, ramified in his certainty by a metaphysic which brooks no argument, which may – and, as history teaches us, almost invariably does – lead to the sacrifice of men and women on the altar of mere ideas. As a child in revolutionary Petrograd, he had seen it with his own eyes. As an Oxford don, he had observed it, in monsters like Lenin, Stalin and Hitler, and studied its philosophical antecedents. And, by the way, he had seen it in the academy as well, as some of his academic colleagues, like Isaac Deutscher, E.H. Carr and Eric Hobsbawm sought, with chilling indifference to the mass slaughter of innocents they were in fact condoning, to justify that slaughter in the name of a Marxian Utopia that never came.

So the teachings of Isaiah Berlin are, at heart, a plea for tolerance; an eloquent and emphatic warning against systems of government based upon an ideology, rooted in a metaphysical scheme so comprehensive that its avatars feel justified in eliminating any ideas which do not fit into its world view and extinguishing those whom they see as obstacles to it.

His defence of freedom of thought and expression leads us to a somewhat similar conclusion to that of John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* but, it is important to note, from an entirely different set of premises and process of reasoning. It should never be forgotten that Mill's defence of liberty was avowedly based upon utilitarianism. Berlin, for whom the end never justified the means, bases his defence of freedom on much sturdier ground: on an *a priori* conviction, traceable ultimately to Kant, of the moral inviolability of the human person, seasoned by a pragmatic and undelusional reading of history – in particular, the bloody recent history of his own country.

An epigram of Kant's captures Berlin's own richer, more modest, more tolerant vision: 'from the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.'¹³ Berlin valued the uniqueness of every individual man and woman; he defended the inviolability of every human soul; he rejoiced in the variety and diversity of humanity; and he understood, better than almost any other twentieth-century political philosopher, the shocking inhumanity of violating that individuality by seeking to torture humanity into rigid conformity, the better to fit a political system. No twentieth-century liberal thinker of whom I am aware made the case for liberty so persuasively or so compellingly.

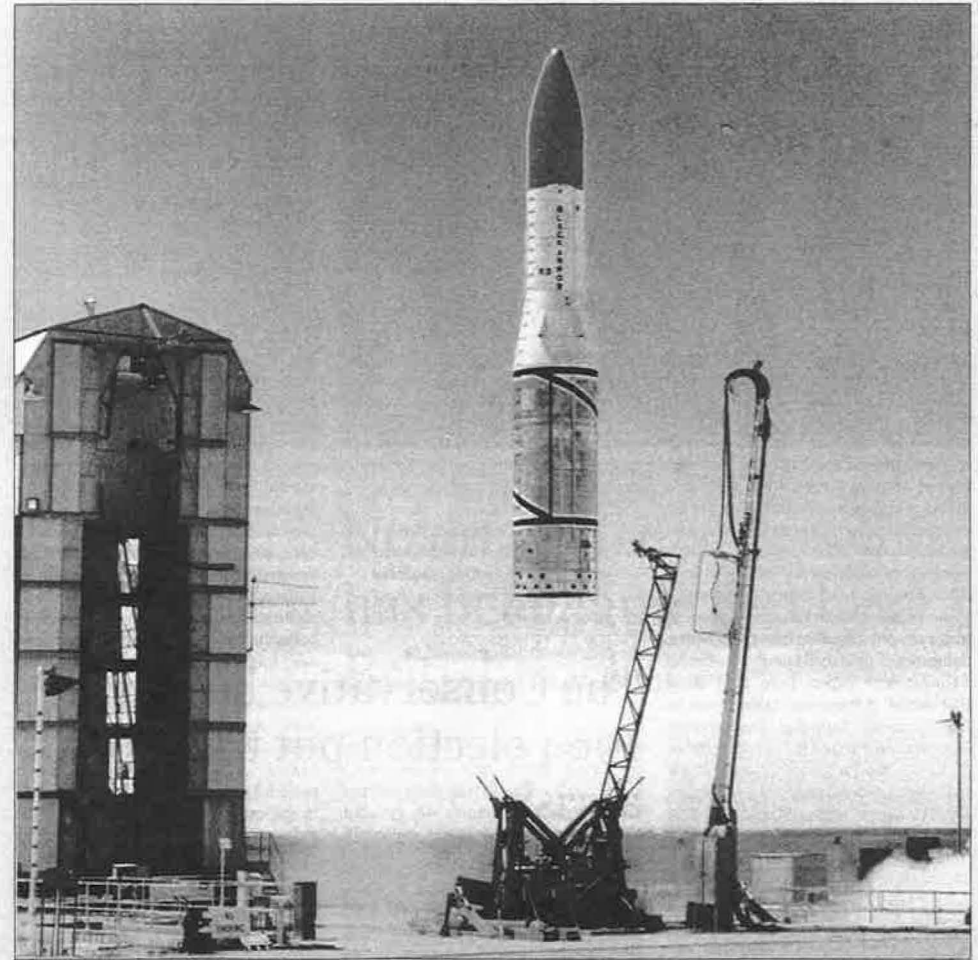
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Only last week, President Vladimir Putin declared in an interview with an

English newspaper that 'the liberal idea has become obsolete.'¹⁴ President Putin is not the only world leader today who seems to think so. I can only say that I believe he is wrong. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true that the liberal order does at the moment appear to be under threat – both from hostile foreign actors and, alarmingly, in some instances from within the liberal democracies themselves, as traditional liberal values, such as freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and intellectual freedom come under attack. It has not been my purpose in this lecture to offer a view of why that is so. Rather has it been my purpose to speak, with undisguised admiration and indeed enthusiasm, about the work of Isaiah Berlin. In reflecting upon Berlin's life and work, I hope that I have been able to remind those who have been good enough to come tonight why the liberal ideal is so valuable, why individual liberty is so precious, why its defence is so vital and – perhaps more urgently today than for many years – to remind us, in particular, as Berlin so often and so eloquently did, of the terrible consequences which befall humanity when liberal ideals are thwarted or forgotten.

■ **His Excellency the Hon. George Brandis QC** is the Australian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. He was previously a Liberal Party Senator for Queensland, 2000–18, serving as a Minister in the Howard, Abbott, and Turnbull Governments, including as Attorney-General for Australia, 2013–17.

1. Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), p. 42.
2. *ibid.*, p. 125.
3. Gregg Herken, *The Georgetown Set* (New York: Knopf, 2014), p. 270; Ignatieff, *op. cit.*, pp. 239 ff.
4. Ignatieff, *op. cit.*, p. 240.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
7. Isaiah Berlin (ed. Henry Hardy), *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (Pimlico: Hogarth Press, 1978).
8. Ignatieff, *op. cit.* pp. 70–1.
9. Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' in *Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 166–217, at 183–4; Inaugural Lecture as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory, Oxford, 1958.
10. See in particular his critique of historical determinism in 'Historical Inevitability', *ibid.*, pp. 94–165.
11. 'Alexander Herzen' in Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 199, 201, 207; originally the Northcliffe Lecture, University College London, 1954.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 197–8.
13. This phrase was used in the title of one of the collected volumes of Berlin's essays, which elaborate the point: *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (London: John Murray, 1990).
14. *Financial Times*, 28 June 2019.



The British-built Black Arrow rocket lifts off from Woomera, Australia, in 1971

A lonely space record: Britain's Black Arrow rocket and the Prospero satellite

Iain Carter