FOREWORD

Ambivalent Fascination

ISAIAH BERLIN AND POLITICAL ROMANTICISM

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A century ago, Benedetto Croce published his famous commentary, What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel. Now, more than six decades after the lectures than became Political Ideas in the Romantic Age (PIRA), it is possible – indeed necessary – to pose a similar question about Berlin.

At the beginning of PIRA, Berlin states that the social and political ideas of leading thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century are of more than historical interest: ‘they form the basic intellectual capital on which, with few additions, we live to this day’.1 Helvetius and Condorcet are alive for us in a way that Locke or Bayle or Leibniz are not; a direct line connects them to those who framed the Charter of the United Nations. Rousseau is the father of modern nationalism as well as the social contract. Social scientists and central planners channel Saint-Simon. Communists speak the language of Hegel, while the irrationalist and Fascist enemies of democracy inhabit ‘a violent world brought into being, almost single-handed, by Joseph de Maistre’.2

1 p. 1 below: subsequent references to the text of PIRA are by PIRA² page number alone. For abbreviations see xxiii–xxiv.
2 2.
Not everyone agreed with Berlin’s assessment. By the early 1950s, some social scientists were propounding versions of what became known as ‘the end of ideology’. Despite the continuing presence of Communist parties throughout Western Europe and Fascist-tinged regimes on the Iberian peninsula, many believed that the Second World War and its aftermath had largely settled the great ideological struggles of the interwar period and that the amalgam of democratic institutions, civic and social liberties, and the Welfare State represented the West’s all-but-certain future.

Whatever may have been the case in 1952, it is much harder today to make the case for the continuing political relevance of the thinkers Berlin explores in PIRA. To be sure, we have not reached global consensus on liberal democracy – an expectation that became fashionable after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Still, refuted by their consequences, Communism and Fascism have lost not only their grip on the unfortunate nations they once dominated, but also most of their appeal for intellectuals who gravitated to them as alternatives to what they regarded as the shallowness and injustice of bourgeois society. While technocracy is not quite extinct, faith in central planning has surely attenuated. Few now endorse history as the story of progress. Some political theorists still labour to make sense of the General Will, but hardly anyone else cares. Hegel’s influence on the culture and politics of the West has waned; Nietzsche, the nineteenth-century thinker with the greatest continuing influence, makes only a cameo appearance in PIRA.

As for the people: they may be as shallow and fickle as the nineteenth-century thinkers opposed to liberty and democracy supposed, but the alternatives – heroic leaders and vanguard parties such as Russia’s Bolsheviks – proved far worse. The spread of egalitarianism has thrown elitist theories of politics on the defensive. In an ironic victory for the ‘last men’, even Nietzsche has been democratised. The few remaining vanguard parties, such as the Chinese and North Korean Communists, rest their case
for coercion on political necessity – national unity, social tranquillity – rather than positive freedom directed by all-knowing authority.

Nor has the emphasis placed by nineteenth-century antidemocrats on authority as a check on human sinfulness fared well. Indeed, despite Reinhold Niebuhr’s famous observation that ‘The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith’, sin has almost disappeared as a functioning category in Western culture. Religion has weakened throughout Western Europe. Not so in the United States; but the dominant forms of American Christianity now offer salvation without original sin and heaven without hell. Human beings may be weak in the face of temptation, blind in the midst of suffering, selfish in the presence of those who must depend on charity. But they are not innately prone to hatred, oppression or violence – so say today’s religious leaders. Most of them emphasise God’s help and love, not his restraint and punishment. The remaining heirs of Jonathan Edwards find as little resonance in the United States as Maistre does in today’s Europe: fewer and fewer Americans think of themselves as sinners in the hands of an angry God.

The political experience of the twentieth century thoroughly discredited the political ideas of the nineteenth, and we no longer live in their shadow. Berlin’s reconstruction of those ideas continues to be of great historical interest, but it has ceased to be living history.

The ideas that remain practically relevant in the West today are thinner and less exciting than were those of the past century, but they are more workable and less destructive. Some version of welfarist social democracy dominates the policies and self-understanding of Western nations. The West is in trouble because social democracy is in trouble. The question before the West is how social democracy can be reformed to make its promises consistent with the imperatives of economic growth.
While this challenge has sparked bitter controversy, few believe that the social democratic model should be scrapped. While representative systems need to strengthen the bond of trust between the people and elected officials, direct democracy does not offer a viable alternative, at least not above the local level. Market economies may need more regulation, less regulation, or a different kind of regulation, but public ownership and control of the means of production is not considered a viable option. In the face of rising inequality, new forms of redistribution may be in order, but hardly anyone proposes scrapping private property in favour of communal ownership. Social insurance programmes may need to be reined in or refinanced; hardly anyone wants to scrap them altogether. Economic growth is regarded as the precondition of prosperity and security; only a handful of arch-environmentalists question its merit or necessity. The challenge is how to restore or accelerate growth, not to replace it with other economic goals.

In short, the internal divisions the West faces today focus far more on means than on ends. To be sure, if new policies for growth, regulation, social insurance and fairness fall catastrophically short, and trust in the established order further weakens, more radical proposals may well find a hearing. But at present the deep challenges to that order – Islamist fundamentalism and Chinese authoritarianism – are external rather than internal. Unlike Communism, Fascism and romantic nationalism, they are not rooted in the political ideas Berlin probes in PIRA.

None of this is to say that we have reached the end of history; some traditional criticisms of liberal democracy and bourgeois society remain powerful, and new sources of resistance have arisen. Intellectuals with impeccable democratic credentials continue to offer critiques of democratic popular culture that rest on (often unacknowledged) aristocratic grounds. While the idea of the General Will has lost its political efficacy, Rousseau’s critique of representation is alive and well, and the ideal of direct popular participation still moves insurgent democratic movements.
Still alive, as well, is the social contract, although in the English-speaking world it is understood in terms closer to those of Locke than to those of Rousseau. It is not hard to see why this concept has retained its currency. The social contract is the all-but-irresistible product of two premisses that enjoy wide currency today: that despite their social embeddedness and complex interdependencies, human beings are distinct individuals with their own lives to lead; and that consent is the most authentic source of political legitimacy. No doubt individual consent is in part fictional. Still, it retains great normative power, and it manifests itself in practices such as naturalisation ceremonies.

Although individualism helps lend the idea of the social contract its enduring hold on the Western political imagination, aspects of nineteenth-century collectivism have survived as well. Few students of politics today would deny the impact of group membership – especially ethnic and religious groups – on identity and conduct. Nor would they assume that group loyalty could be reduced to rational self-interest. One might well argue, in fact, that a version of Herder’s thesis has been incorporated into the lingua franca of contemporary political analysis.

The explanation for Herder’s continuing relevance is straightforward. During the nineteenth century, nationalism was a key source of both political energy and political legitimacy. Groups whose members shared ethnicity, language, history, and often religion, increasingly demanded the right of self-determination, a claim that struck at the heart of multi-ethnic empires. Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points endorsed that principle, which served as the basis for redrawing the map of Europe after the First World War.

Problems soon emerged. Because ethnicity and geography did not coincide, the formula of ‘one people, one State’ implied – and soon produced – massive, often bloody, population transfers and the rise of irredentist movements. To the extent, conversely, that the formula could not be put into practice, minority groups
advanced claims against dominant majorities that outside powers were only too willing to exploit. (Czechoslovakia’s Sudeten Germans turned out to be the most consequential instance.) And dominant powers were all too willing to ignore the formula whenever it suited them. The redrawn map of the Middle East included new multi-ethnic countries (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon) and a large people (the Kurds) with a common language and shared aspirations who none the less remained divided among half a dozen countries.

The net effect of this history was to drive a wedge between peoplehood as fact and as norm. Although division of human beings into Herderian groups was acknowledged as an important political fact, it ceased to be viewed as the presumptive ground of political self-determination. Whether peoples should live together or apart, or partly both, becomes a matter of prudential statecraft. (The Kosovars were helped to separate from Serbia, but the Serb minority in Kosovo could not successfully press its claim to separate from Kosovo.)

Berlin’s emphasis on identity and loyalty is part of an even larger continuing debate about political psychology. When it came to political arrangements, Berlin was firmly in the liberal camp. But he argued – compellingly, I believe – that the psychology underlying most liberal theories was thin and unpersuasive. As Albert Hirschman shows,1 for centuries liberals have viewed the passions – especially aristocratic and religious passions – as dangerous and potentially destructive. Liberals have typically tried to construct theories and institutions on the basis of self-interest rightly understood. John Rawls insisted that liberal individuals must be understood as ‘reasonable’ – that is, as possessing the capacity for a sense of justice – as well as rationally self-interested. But a sense of justice is nothing like the desire for

vengeance. In nearly six hundred pages, his *A Theory of Justice* barely mentions anger in human life, let alone its pivotal role in politics; or the passion to rule others; or the burning quest for lasting fame.

I do not mean to suggest that Berlin’s understanding of liberalism draws solely from the Enlightenment tradition. Indeed, he often suggests that modern liberalism – from Mill onward, anyway – represents a synthesis of older Enlightenment thought and elements of the Romantic protest against the Enlightenment. Some of his deepest commitments – his celebration of human freedom, his insistence on the variety and unpredictability of human affairs, his admiration for sincerity, individuality and passion – bear unmistakable traces of the Romantic tradition he did so much to bring alive for generations of readers.

The question Berlin poses, not always intentionally, is whether liberal politics and romanticism fit together. As he observes, readers of Herder cannot be blamed if they found that his psychology of individual and group life ‘came closer to their own experience than anything they might hear from Bentham or Spencer or Russell about the rational purposes of society, its use as an instrument for the provision of common benefits and the prevention of social collisions’.1 To be sure, he continues, liberals may be right to regard Romantic writers as the ‘originators of the triumph of irrationalism in our day’. But the Romantics did what the classic liberal thinkers so conspicuously failed to do: ‘they described the facts of both social life and history, and of everything in the life of the individual which can broadly be called creative or inventive, with a subtlety and depth […] which made them seem, as indeed to some degree they were, profounder thinkers than their opponents’. Liberals cannot evade the truths the Romantics articulated; if liberals deny those truths in theory or suppress them in practice, they are bound to manifest themselves in ‘socially

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1 295–6.
destructive ways'. The inadequacies of liberalism, Berlin implies, helped open the door to the disastrous triumph of twentieth-century political irrationalism.

Psychology is not the only feature of romanticism that poses problems for liberals. Berlin highlights the Romantic focus on imagination, invention and creativity. But these are more than aesthetic categories; they structure morality as well. Before the Romantic revolution, Berlin claims, the ends of life – ultimate purposes or values – were understood as ‘ingredients of the universe’. Moral propositions were regarded as descriptive statements that could be discovered and understood by the capacities that humans deploy to acquire knowledge in general. During the Romantic epoch, however, the idea emerges that value judgments are not descriptive propositions and that values ‘are not discovered but invented – created by men like works of art’. This led to a transformation of values (Berlin appropriates Nietzsche’s term ‘transvaluation’ to characterise it): ‘the new admiration of heroism, integrity, strength of will, martyrdom, dedication to the vision within one, irrespective of its properties, veneration of those who battle against hopeless odds, no matter for how strange and desperate a cause’.

Berlin goes so far as to describe the moral and political thought of his time as ‘the product and the battlefield’ of the clash between classical and Romantic understandings of morality. The question is whether liberalism is compatible with the Romantic conception. The Romantic virtues as Berlin describes them are hardly the ones liberalism requires (or fosters). Worse, liberalism would seem to require at least a minimum of moral universalism – perhaps Kant’s insistence that human beings are ends in themselves and not simply means; that we have rights, including the right to make mistakes; that the act of individual

1 296. 2 11. 3 12. 4 13. 5 ibid.
choice enjoys a kind of ‘sacredness’ that trumps even the best intentioned paternalism of the State.¹

This difficulty, which remains largely latent in PIRA, would become explicit in Berlin’s later writings. In the introduction to Four Essays on Liberty he puts it this way: ‘No doubt the view that there exist objective moral or social values, eternal and universal, untouched by historical change, and accessible to the mind of any rational man if only he chooses to direct his gaze at them, is open to every sort of question.’ And yet, he continues, ‘the possibility of understanding men in one’s own or any other time, indeed of communication between human beings, depends on the existence of some common values’. Indeed, ‘Acceptance of common values (at any rate some irreducible minimum of them) enters our conception of a normal human being’ and ‘serves to distinguish such notions as the foundations of human morality on the one hand from such other notions as custom, or tradition, or law, or manners.’² The contrast between this formulation and the language of Romantic moral creativity is stark, and I can see no easy way of bridging the gap. Berlin’s robust common sense drew him back from the ultimate implications of the Romantic world view, but at considerable cost to the coherence of his own.

The issue of coherence extends not only to the Romantics, but also to Berlin’s favorite thinker of the eighteenth century. Richard Wollheim contends that ‘The truth of the matter is that the historian and connoisseur of German romanticism, the rediscoverer for our age of Vico and Herder, is a Humean.’³ Evidence for this contention abounds, starting with their orientations toward religion. As Michael Ignatieff puts it, ‘Before [Berlin] entered Oxford, before he had read a line of Hume, he

¹ Liberty, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford etc., 2002), 24.
was already a Humean sceptic. And so he remained, all his life.”

Hume’s moral philosophy – specifically, his distinction between factual and moral statements – had a more direct and equally profound effect on Berlin’s thinking. The essay on ‘Subjective versus Objective Ethics’ is a reflection on the implications of the fact/value distinction, which he terms ‘Hume’s abiding service in the history of human thought’. True, Berlin rejects Hume’s effort to ‘reduce ethics to psychology’, insisting that his argument ‘can easily be shown to lead to a somewhat different conclusion’. And later in his career he propounded the thesis that values are in some sense ‘objective’. But during the period in which PIRA was taking shape, Berlin accepted a version of Kant’s claim that normative propositions are ‘not statements of fact at all, but orders, commands, “imperatives”, deriving neither from an artificial convention, like mathematics, nor from the observation of the world, like empirical statements’. For that reason, the terms ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ simply do not apply to moral statements. Denying that morality is objective does not imply that it is subjective; imposing that distinction on morality is a prime example of what the Oxford philosophers in Berlin’s time termed a ‘category mistake’.

It is not hard to square Hume’s account of morality with that of the Romantics. Denying that morality reflects facts in the world is consistent with Hume’s own linkage of ethics and psychology, and with Kant’s analysis of morality as categorical imperatives. It is also consistent with the Romantic view of values as creations on a par with works of art. It is not easy, however, to square the Humean view with Berlin’s account of common human values. If those values enter into our conception of what it means to be human (at least normally so), then the

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2 First published as an appendix to the first edition of PIRA.
3 331. 4 328. 5 329.
line between the empirical and the normative has become very blurry indeed. If the characterisation of our common humanity in moral terms is the condition of intersubjective understanding, as Berlin asserts, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that an element of objectivity has entered the moral world, and therefore that applying the objective/subjective distinction to that world is not obviously a category mistake after all.

As Berlin understood better than most, a direct line connected political romanticism of the nineteenth century to the murderous irrationalisms of the twentieth. If the Romantic statesman is akin to the Romantic artist (an analogy Berlin drew), then it is natural to see the nation as the statesman’s clay to mould in accordance with his vision. If ‘Freedom is the state in which the artist creates’, it is also the condition in which the statesman acts. The worship of the artist as ‘the only entirely liberated personality, triumphant over the limitations, the fears, the frustration which force other men to follow paths not of their choosing’ feeds fear of, and contempt for, democracy as ‘simply a conjunction of the enslaved wills of such earth-dwellers’. ¹

For all of Romanticism’s contributions to the understanding of the human condition, in the end Berlin had no choice but to draw back from it. Its moral and political implications were at odds with his deepest commitments. And more: its unironic, passionate, even ecstatic stance could not have been further from Berlin’s. George Crowder puts it well: ‘[O]f all the Russian thinkers, [Ivan Turgenev] is closest to Berlin in both politics and temperament. Indeed, the picture Berlin presents in “Fathers and Children: Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament” […] is virtually a self-portrait.’ ² Michael Ignatieff elaborates on this intimate similarity: ‘Like Turgenev, [Berlin] was fascinated by radical temperaments, but incapable of being a radical himself.

¹ 252.
² George Crowder, Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism (Cambridge, 2004), 32.
Like Turgenev, he had a preternatural gift of empathy, “an ability to enter into beliefs, feelings and attitudes alien and at times acutely antipathetic to his own”. Like Turgenev, he could not enter into radicalism sufficiently to surrender his own detached and ironic scepticism.¹

Berlin may well have been an ironic sceptic, but he was neither ironical nor sceptical about liberalism as a political creed – or about the view of human liberty that undergirds it. Among its many fatal flaws, political romanticism left no space for ambiguity or detachment. It was liberal society that made Berlin’s life and work possible – a gift he never lost sight of and for which he remained grateful to the end.

¹ Ignatieff, op. cit. (xx/1), 256, quoting RT 301.