



Fighting Words

Isaiah Berlin Online aims to post, in the fullness of time, PDFs of all Berlin's uncollected and unpublished work, including lectures, interviews and broadcasts, so that it is conveniently readable and searchable online. The present PDF is part of this series.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

Fighting Words

'*Fighting Words* is a [TV] program in which four people of assorted activities and temperaments are invited, without any preparation or rehearsal, and often without knowing one another, to identify the authorship of quotations which they must then discuss.' Thus Nathan Cohen, host of the programme, in the Toronto magazine *Saturday Night*, 30 March 1957.



Nathan Cohen hosting Fighting Words

In an audio-only episode recorded in London on 18 March 1959, and broadcast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Dominion radio network on 31 March 1959, the contributors were Isaiah Berlin, Fleur Cowles, Doris Lessing and Bernard Levin. This transcript of IB's contributions (plus necessary context) paraphrases rather than quoting Cohen because CBC required a fee if his exact words were included.

FIGHTING WORDS

Nathan Coben mentions IB's book The Age of Enlightenment (1956), and wonders whether this name might be applied to the world of 1959.

IB Oh, goodness only knows. The people who invented that particular phrase obviously thought the more we knew, the nicer and wiser and better and happier we should become; and we know a very, very great deal more than we used to know in the eighteenth century. Whether we're wiser and nicer and happier is more than doubtful.

NC announces the first quotation, 'Liberalism is the destructive force of the age'. No one can identify its author [Malcolm Muggeridge]. Bernard Levin observes that 'we live dangerously if we are liberals', and NC asks IB if he likes to live dangerously.

IB No, I hate to live dangerously. At the same time I agree with Mr Levin: I think it's perfectly true. I think the thing about liberalism is that – it is in some sense to do with individual liberty: I think that's how it started – something rather queer has happened to liberalism in our age. I think what really happened in terms, for example, of the British Liberal Party, I've always thought – I don't know if that's true or if anyone will agree with me – is that when the great Party died, it infected the other two parties, so that in some curious sense the Conservative Party and the Labour Party became infected by the liberalism of the decomposing Liberal Party, and both became much more liberalised than they were before. This wasn't a very conscious process: the entire left wing of the Conservative Party became liberal; the right wing of the Labour Party became, in a certain sense, liberal – the distance between them diminished.

[...]

IB Mrs Lessing, I want to take issue with you. You said, I think, if I didn't mishear you, that the trouble about liberals was they sat on

FIGHTING WORDS

the fence because they saw too many sides of the question. How *can* one see too many sides of a question? If the sides are there it's proper to see them. I see that one can economise effort by ignoring some sides of some questions; I see that if you sit on the fence and this paralyses action because you simply think round and round and round and do nothing at all, this is a danger; but seeing a lot of sides of a question makes choice agonising.

*

NC's second quotation is 'Adults need obscene literature as much as children need fairy tales' [Havelock Ellis].

IB I don't think people *need* obscenity, no. Havelock Ellis is a wonderful, very noble, splendid old man; but he talked a great deal of nonsense, I think, in his lifetime. I disagree with Mrs Cowles: I think children probably do need fairy tales, and adults don't need obscenity, but the mere fact that a book's obscene is certainly no bar, shouldn't be an absolute barrier against its publication, otherwise some of the greatest masterpieces we have wouldn't have seen the light, including the Bible and many other documents.

[...]

NC asks whether 'established society' has imposed a taboo on any frank treatment of sex, whereas Ellis rejects such censorship.

IB No, I don't think he could have meant that, you know, because the analogy of fairy tales I don't think would work in that case. I want to defend fairy tales a little. I don't know why it should be assumed that fairy tales cushion you from reality in some way. I think fairy tales enshrine extremely basic, symbolic human situations. I mean *Cinderella* or something is a genuine myth which occurs in all kinds of situations, which really contains a profound truth. These things which are enshrined by ancient tradition are a direct way into some of the most permanent human situations

FIGHTING WORDS

there are. I should have thought that is why fairy tales appeal to children. They're not screens against reality, necessarily, but a sort of insight into it. With regard to the other thing, if you're saying that the more light is poured in dark places, and the more truth is produced, which is I think what probably Ellis did mean, because what he was talking about was people like Zola, I think, principally ...

[...]

NC suggests that Lolita is just as important for adults as The Hedgehog and the Fox.

IB Oh, more important than that, I should hope, as far as – by the controversy it provoked, I must say.

[...]

Fleur Comles says she doesn't regard Cinderella as a fairy tale.

IB Oh, why don't you?

FC says 'it's almost the most real thing that ever happened in childhood'.

IB But I think that lots of fairy tales are exactly that. I think they think in terms of those sorts of images, but they only think in terms of them because, I think, they're very deeply enshrined in life; I think they're very deeply rooted. [*FC says they shouldn't be taught as fairy tales.*] Well they are, you know, fairy tales; difficult to say [?] – it's true – difficult to say that. [*FC says they are almost true.*] Almost, not [?] ...

*

Quotation no. 3: 'Every single English intellectual is provincial'
[Angus Wilson]

FIGHTING WORDS

IB No. [*laughs; NC asks if a majority are*] I should have thought not. I don't quite know why Mr Angus Wilson, who is otherwise a perfectly intelligent man, said that. I don't know what English intellectuals p[?] [re?]views who[?] think of them; I don't know, Matthew Arnold is an English intellectual, he's very unprovincial; Aldous Huxley was an English intellectual, he was very unprovincial; Bertrand Russell is tremendously unprovincial. I don't know what he means.

Bernard Levin instances the attitudes of High Table at All Souls College, Oxford, 'and centres like it', as being provincial before the war.

IB It was not intellectual all right; what it's criticised for is political opinions.

BL Well, yes indeed, but they were the political opinions of the intellectuals (IB Well, hardly; I don't think ...) and I think the tendency for many intellectuals in this country in their political opinions and social opinions is precisely this: to be provincial, to be behind the times, and to be out of contact with the more pressing realities [...]

IB [?] weren't [?] intellectuals at all anyhow. All Souls before the war, on the whole, must be accused of exerting undue influence over the political policy of this country [?].

BL Yes, and in a harmful direction.

IB Yes, it was; and I think on the whole it was a myth, I mean so far as its power and influence were concerned. I think some of the fellows of All Souls certainly had views that I myself disapproved of.

BL Exactly: but I think the tendency existed.

FIGHTING WORDS

IB Not to an enormous extent, I should have thought. If one was there, as I was – a very, very junior fellow; I was very, very young at the time – I don't know, perhaps there were two or three persons of a powerful kind who did have a very deleterious influence on the fellows at All Souls, but I should have thought if the entire place had been blown up by a bomb at that time, it wouldn't have made one ha'p'orth of difference.

FC says that in a typical roomful of intellectuals it is rare to find that even half of them are English.

IB Ah, but there never was an English intelligentsia. There never was an English intelligentsia, and in a certain sense it's a socially interesting fact. Apart from Bloomsbury, there never was one. (*NC asks why*) Well, because – I don't know how intelligentsias arises. It's a Russian word.¹ I think intelligentsias arise when you have a state of affairs where there's a lot of oppression and ignorance on one side, and let us say an extremely oppressive Church and extremely ignorant peasantry, say as in Spain or in Russia; and then everyone who can read and write at all, who has any degree of enlightenment – doctors, engineers – feel themselves part of a self-conscious enlightened minority and hold hands together, so to speak, in order to fight against this blackness which surrounds them. This certainly happened ...

DL says she's using the word 'intellectual' more loosely to mean 'the kind of people who in Britain are now contributing to the arts and thought', especially 'the younger ones'.

IB [?] Well, I sit in a provincial town; I'm deeply provincial myself; there I sit; I [?].

BL What could be more provincial than the Bloomsbury movement?

¹ Originally Polish: see POI2 125.

FIGHTING WORDS

IB No, I didn't think that was provincial. I thought that was one of the few things which happened in England which had a certain cosmopolitanism of outlook.

[...]

BL [...] I just wanted to take up this Bloomsbury point. The thing that strikes me from reading not only the works of the Bloomsbury writers, but works of social and political history at the time – the thing that strikes me most forcibly is the astonishingly little impact they seem to have on the thought of the country as a whole. The books may still be good books, and they may still be readable today, though I think precious few of them actually are, but the effect they were having on the country as a whole seemed to be to be minimal.

IB I wonder if that's true. Keynes had a very large impact one way or another.

BL Later on.

IB Well, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, which was a Bloomsbury book produced in Bloomsbury conditions, had a very considerable political effect upon a small group of persons, who in their turn had a further political effect upon the Labour Party, the Liberal Party, and so on. I should have thought that even Lytton Strachey had an effect, for better or for worse, in blowing up Victorianism in general – showing up and general unmasking of the established authority.

[...]

DL suggests that anti-intellectuals regard thinking as 'rather suspect'.

IB An old English thing, that.

FIGHTING WORDS

[...]

DL says that the class system in Britain creates a social divide that it is difficult for intellectuals to bridge.

IB You think that's true of England, certainly[?].

The bells rings and NC closes the discussion.

Contributions by Isaiah Berlin © Isaiah Berlin 1959, © The Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust 2025

Contributions by other speakers © those speakers severally 1959, © their several estates 2025

Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online and the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library 3 February 2025