

## The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library

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### INTERVIEW WITH HENRY HARDY

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*The original text of an interview published, in a shortened and adapted form, in Spanish, in the online newspaper El Imparcial on 1 February 2008*

JCM You have published over fifteen volumes of Isaiah Berlin's works. Do you think Isaiah Berlin would have been so well known and influential had it not been for your effort as a publisher?

HH No, I say immodestly. Herbert Hart once said that the volumes I had edited had transformed Berlin's reputation, and Berlin agreed. He was amazed at the acclaim that greeted the volumes when they appeared. 'Such fame at my age!' he wrote to me.

JCM When you first contacted Isaiah Berlin to publish his works did he give you any instruction on the kind of work he would like you to publish?

HH Not really. I made suggestions, which in the end he more or less accepted, with adjustments. He was not at all proactive, but yielded reluctantly to persuasion. He was always a reluctant publisher, underestimating the value of his work.

JCM To what extent is it legitimate to publish the complete works of a famous intellectual? Didn't Isaiah Berlin, like many other intellectuals, have documents that he would not like to see published under any circumstance?

HH He always said he didn't mind what happened after his death, but yes, while he was alive there were things he didn't want me to publish – mainly unrevised transcripts of unscripted lectures: to

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publish such things in one's lifetime he regarded as an act of vanity. But as you know I have now published two volumes of these lectures, *The Roots of Romanticism* and *Freedom and Its Betrayal*. The only things he wanted me not to publish posthumously were those that would cause unwarranted pain to living people.

JCM After your extraordinary task of publishing fifteen volumes of Isaiah Berlin's works, is there still material that deserves publication?

HH I believe there is, yes, but the major work is now in print. Further items will appear in the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library in the first instance – several have already been posted there – and later it may be possible to publish some of them conventionally too.

JCM Not only are you more familiar with Isaiah Berlin's works than any other academic, but you also knew him very well personally. Haven't you been tempted to write his biography?

HH I have occasionally thought of this briefly, only to reject the idea. I don't think I could do the job well, since my talents are principally editorial rather than authorial; and in any case Michael Ignatieff has now done the job far better than I could.

JCM Isaiah Berlin's ideas and his explanation of the ideas that determined history are based on his study of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To what extent are they relevant in the twenty-first century?

HH In my view they are ever more relevant. Globalisation and population movement make questions of multiculturalism and tolerance central to our time. The stand-off between Islamic and Western culture is a paradigmatic case of pluralist conflict. Besides, the problems of plural values are permanently endemic in the human condition, and each one of us has to face conflicts of value of the kind that Berlin illuminated. And of course the defence of liberty is a task that has not grown easier or less urgent as time goes by.

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JCM How would Berlin respond to the present challenge posed to liberal democracy and open societies by Islamic fundamentalism or international terrorism?

HH His response is clear, and can be seen in its most concentrated form, perhaps, in his brief 'Notes on Prejudice', written for a friend who asked for his help with a lecture. These notes are published in *Liberty*. Fundamentalism and terrorism are to a great extent based on ignorance, prejudice, propaganda and stereotypes, which can be combated by education: our enemies' enemy is knowledge.

JCM Berlin became famous at a time when intellectuals played a very important role in public life. Do you think his influence would have been similar at present?

HH Very hard to say. In England, perhaps not, given the fragmentation and dumbing-down of our culture in recent decades. Berlin's hour-long lectures on the BBC in the 1950s and 1960s are inconceivable today, now that people's attention-span is (supposedly) so short. But one should bear in mind that England has long been less impressed by intellectuals than the cultures of mainland Europe, including, of course, Spain, where interest in Berlin appears to be growing rather than declining.

JCM After the tragedies caused by the main ideas in the twentieth century, people are sceptical of great ideas; politicians avoid them, and instead propose practical solutions to our problems. Isaiah Berlin quoted his admired Russian thinkers as saying that ideas can enslave people. Following Berlin's logic, is this the reason why we live in a world where ideas are in decline and so-called idealists are treated with great caution?

HH This may be part of the story, but Berlin believed in 'the power of ideas' as a permanent feature of life, and I doubt whether he would have thought that the failure of one set of ideas would prevent competitors from occupying the vacuum. And he would have been right not to do so. You mentioned Islamic fundamentalism and international terrorism: these phenomena are driven by ideas just as much as Nazism and Communism were. The ideas

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may be in some ways cruder and less well articulated, but they are no less powerful for that. The price of liberty, famously, is eternal vigilance, and the same goes for our defence against all intellectual malignity. Humans' susceptibility to ideological manipulation is inbuilt.

JCM Many parties and think-tanks within the liberal-conservative political sphere in Europe claim allegiance to Isaiah Berlin's ideas. Yet Berlin voted Labour on most occasions. Which parties and which political leaders (if any) are the legitimate followers of Isaiah Berlin's legacy?

HH No simple equation between Berlin's ideas and a specific party or leader makes sense. He did support specific social-democratic policies – the New Deal, the Welfare State etc. – and admired specific leaders in specific circumstances – Churchill, Roosevelt, Weizmann – but his pluralism and his associated sensitiveness to nuance and variety rule out fixed allegiances of the kind required in the political arena. This is not to say that politicians of various parties cannot be inspired by his ideas, and try to incorporate them into their thinking, but the moment they claim him as their own exclusive property they betray his principles. One can only welcome the interest taken in his thought by politicians, since his ideas constitute a prophylactic against political extremism. Some claim him as theirs illegitimately, especially if they argue that he would have supported certain specific policies, but it is hard to conceal his insistence that all inflexibly assertive political ideologies are dangerous, and if politicians misappropriate him, it is up to his interpreters to put the record straight.

JCM In Spain, former prime minister José María Aznar claims to be a disciple of Isaiah Berlin's ideas. In Latin America writers and intellectuals such as Enrique Krauze and Mario Vargas Llosa have expressed their admiration for and intellectual debt to Berlin. Several influential journalists often quote Berlin. Also, within the publishing world, there is great interest in publishing his works in Spanish. How do you account for this interest in the Spanish-speaking world? After all, this part of the world was outside Berlin's field of study.

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HH As I say, intellectuals are taken more seriously in continental Europe than in Britain. And although Berlin was English by adoption, his mind remained much broader than the typical British mind. He was a European thinker. His Russianness and his Jewishness are palpably present in his work. He is a man for all seasons, interested in the human condition in the broadest terms, and as such speaks to any receptive and intelligent reader.

JCM Are you aware of interest in Berlin's ideas in any country outside the Western world? How influential are his works in his land of origin, Russia, or in Israel, to whose foundation he contributed?

HH In Europe, Spain, Portugal, Italy and the countries of the former Communist bloc seem to take a special interest in his work. Latin America has always found his ideas relevant to its predicaments. In Russia interest has been growing since the collapse of Communism, though there is still some way to go: he is still known there mostly for his association with Anna Akhmatova. Today his works are being actively published in China, and he has long had a following in Japan.

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