

ISAIAH BERLIN

A Twentieth-Century Thinker

Alexis Butin

This article is based on a paper presented at an international seminar on Isaiah Berlin's negative and positive freedom on 29 May 2017 at Université Paris II.

Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) was a philosopher and a historian of ideas. His work includes books and essays dealing with political theory and intellectual history. He was a man of the twentieth century: he had witnessed both world wars, Nazi and communist totalitarianisms, and the fall of the Berlin wall, and knew the greatest political and artistic personalities of the time. A British Jew of Russian origin, an intellectual and a man of action, he was an extraordinary figure. Readers interested in his life and ideas can only be astonished by the diversity and complexity of this man, whose thought cannot be fitted into any specific category or class. Thus, it would be too ambitious, and even incoherent, to try to present the whole life and thought of a philosopher, political theorist, historian of ideas, analyst of European and American politics, biographer of Marx, translator of Turgenev, director of the Royal Opera House, founding president of Wolfson College, Oxford, and President of the British Academy.

Through his writings, Berlin contributed mainly to the three following areas: firstly, research into the intellectual roots of totalitarianism, linked, he believed, to the perversion of the idea of freedom and more generally of the ideals of the philosophers of the Enlightenment; secondly, to value pluralism and its implications; and finally, to a specific approach in the history of ideas. According to George Crowder, the main project that underlies all his work is research into the intellectual roots and

moral psychology of totalitarian thought.¹ For Berlin, totalitarian regimes and societies emerged partly for historical, accidental, economic and personal reasons, but above all because of ideas. Indeed, Berlin believes in the power *of* ideas either to save lives or, on the contrary, to destroy millions of lives. Ideas can also be corrupted and transformed to become the catalyst of an authoritarian or even totalitarian society. That is what happened, according to Berlin, when freedom was defined by the philosophers of the Enlightenment in such a way that it was eventually destroyed for many of their contemporaries.

To discover the intellectual roots of totalitarianism, Berlin first focuses on the concept of liberty and its betrayal. Secondly, Berlin explicitly and clearly defined the concept of value pluralism and made it the cornerstone of his political philosophy. Finally, Berlin suggests a fairly original approach to the history of ideas. This approach can be called ‘psychological’ and rests on empathy – a real ability to enter the minds of the thinkers or societies he studies. The history of ideas as defined by Berlin closely associates philosophy and history.

Berlin’s life cannot be disconnected from his work, as Michael Ignatieff shows in his intellectual biography of Berlin, entitled *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*,² published in 1998. Thus, taking his personal background into account can help us understand his thought. This approach does not aim to demonstrate that Berlin and his thought are the consequence of historical and sociological facts. Those facts influenced the author and his thought, but did not mechanically determine the content of his philosophy or his political views. Other men, with a similar personal background, developed different ideas. He explained in *Personal Impressions*³ that his Russian origins may account for his interest for ideas. The reconstruction of the intellectual mood which prevailed in Oxford in the 1930s might enable us to understand Berlin’s methodological standpoint. Taking the tensions of the Cold War

¹ George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism* (Cambridge, Polity, 2004), p. 188.

² Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1998).

³ Isaiah Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardy, with an introduction by Noel Annan, 2nd ed. (London, Pimlico, 1998).

into account can also help us explain some exaggerations which seem to be present in some of his essays. Berlin himself recognized that he sometimes went too far because of the historical context in which his essays had been produced. In order to establish as faithfully as possible what Berlin thought on one topic, you have to study several essays and favour intertextuality. I would like to demonstrate that Berlin's thought is coherent, although this coherence is not always obvious: he wants to defend and promote a decent society. I will first introduce the way Berlin defines value pluralism and freedom before focusing on Berlin's epistemological views. Then, the issue of his reception in France will be tackled, and I will conclude by hinting at his legacy.

Liberalism and value pluralism in a decent society

Value pluralism and liberalism constitute the two core ingredients of Berlin's thought. We should notice that, in general, he tackles both notions separately and never explicitly or theoretically developed the links between these two concepts. Are value pluralism and liberalism compatible or do they exclude each other? Do they support each other? Isaiah Berlin's work constitutes a very good basis in the history of political ideas for answering this question. I claim that value pluralism and liberalism are not logically or necessarily inextricably related, and are not ipso facto compatible. However, this issue depends on the way both concepts are defined. In other words, the issue of the compatibility between value pluralism and liberalism cannot be separated from the issue of the definition of both concepts. If they are defined properly, these concepts can be compatible and even support each other. But why should we choose to define them so as to make them compatible? In other words, why do we not define freedom so as to give priority to freedom and to a monist definition of freedom, even if it means we have to abandon value pluralism?

Berlin wants to defend a decent society, and the definition of a decent society cannot exclude either of these two concepts, since they constitute the two pillars of such a society. The concept of a decent society allows us to solve the problem of the lack of coherence that some of Berlin's commentators raise. In fact, these commentators see contradictions in Berlin's thought, and more specifically in his choice to defend liberalism and value pluralism at the same time.

Why does Berlin care so much about the decent society? Very early in his life, Berlin was brought face to face with evil in politics. Consequently, the issue he wants to tackle is the following one: how is it possible to protect humankind from such sufferings? This leads him to wonder how the ideals of the Enlightenment were perverted and manipulated to the point of being used to justify the worst atrocities. More specifically, how was it possible for Marxist intellectuals to act in such an irrational and non-liberal manner, precisely in the name of freedom and reason? So Berlin looks for the cracks in Enlightenment philosophy. That is also the reason why he is interested in the philosophers of the Counter-Enlightenment. It does not mean that Berlin agrees with them, but he maintains that these men were able to detect the mistakes made by the Enlightenment philosophers and, in particular, the misuse of their belief in reason. Berlin says that he does not side with Romanticism when it completely abandons reason, but he asserts, like Coleridge for instance, that reason does not enable us to choose among incommensurable values. When you are confronted with real existential dilemmas, reason becomes useless. For some commentators [on Berlin], it is not possible to adopt liberalism and value pluralism simultaneously. From their point of view, as values are incomparable and incommensurable, in accordance with the concept of value pluralism, choosing liberty rather than any other value is incoherent. In other words, value pluralism is understood to mean that no value can have a particular status. I do not share this analysis, but assert that the compatibility of liberty and value pluralism depends on the way they are defined.

Berlin's liberalism

First, it is indispensable to define Berlin's liberalism. It is at the core of Berlin's thought and is one of the pillars of the decent society he wants to promote. However, can we consider him to be a liberal thinker? As far as Berlin's definition of freedom is concerned, I prefer to talk about liberty rather than liberalism. Indeed, Berlin was afraid of nouns with the -ism suffix, and even if he can be considered a liberal thinker, his liberalism has original characteristics. It is a specific, intellectual liberalism, and impacted by value pluralism.

Berlin is famous for his distinction between positive and negative freedom. These two dimensions of freedom do not seem

to him to be opposed, but complementary and indivisible, although irreconcilable to a certain degree. According to Berlin, negative liberty must be understood as the answer to the question: *‘What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?’*⁴ As for positive liberty, it is understood as the answer to the question: *‘What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?’*⁵ In other words, for positive liberty, ‘Who governs?’, and for negative liberty, ‘Up to what point?’ Then, even though he cared about liberty a lot, Berlin was perfectly aware of the need to reconcile it with other values, in particular equality and national consciousness. Berlin is not ready to neglect other values for the sake of freedom. It would obviously go against his pluralist ethics, another pillar of his decent society. Berlin’s wish to go beyond oppositions between positive and negative freedom, equality and liberty or liberals and communitarians proves his pluralist approach. Berlin’s liberalism is unusual inasmuch as it combines freedom and value pluralism.

Berlin’s value pluralism

Now, as for value pluralism, Berlin’s thought constitutes one of the most important contemporary moral theories, and more and more authors contribute to the development of this concept. Besides, value pluralism is certainly, with freedom, the concept with which Berlin’s thought is principally associated. Since the beginning of the 1990s, value pluralism has increasingly been considered to be Berlin’s key idea. It is, in any case, the one which has caused the most numerous debates and controversies. Berlin’s readers might be tempted to consider value pluralism as not being central in Berlin’s thought, inasmuch as Berlin rarely proposes a precise and systematic analysis of this concept. I maintain that the concept of value pluralism occupies a very specific place in Berlin’s thought, and that this place evolves with time. Value pluralism frequently appeared when Berlin discussed other topics. For instance, value pluralism is essential in his essays on Vico and

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 194 (my italics).

⁵ *ibid.* (my italics).

Herder.⁶ It is even possible to assert that value pluralism underlies Isaiah Berlin's intellectual biography of Karl Marx,⁷ his studies on *Russian Thinkers*,⁸ or even his studies on the enemies of freedom.⁹ It first explicitly appears in the essays of the Cold War period such as 'Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century'¹⁰ or 'Two Concepts of Liberty', or even the essays on the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment. For example, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' was not only about defining two complementary and competitive conceptions of liberty but also and above all about emphasizing their contentious and incommensurable dimension. However, the critics did not pay attention to this aspect of the essay and it was rediscovered much later, for historical reasons. Indeed, at the end of the 1950s, the debate between these two conceptions of liberty was particularly significant because of the competition between the two models of society during the Cold War. Finally, at the end of his career, as he was commenting on his work, Berlin asserted in essays like 'My Intellectual Path'¹¹ or 'The Pursuit of the Ideal',¹² that value pluralism occupied a central place in his entire work. From his standpoint, value pluralism constitutes a kind of antidote against moral monism, which is one of the most important foundations of twentieth-century totalitarianisms¹³.

The concept of value pluralism is presented in the last section of 'Two Concepts of Liberty', called 'The One and the Many'. It should be pointed out that value pluralism cannot be reduced to a specific doctrine or set of ideas, or even a methodology, inasmuch

⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. Henry Hardy (London, Pimlico, 2000).

⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (London, Thornton Butterworth, 1939).

⁸ Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (London, Hogarth Press, 1978).

⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty* [1952], ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, 'Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century', *Foreign Affairs* 28 (1950), 351–85.

¹¹ Isaiah Berlin, 'My Intellectual Path', *New York Review of Books*, 14 May 1998, 53–60.

¹² Isaiah Berlin, 'On the Pursuit of the Ideal', *New York Review of Books*, 17 March 1988, 11–18.

¹³ George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism*, op. cit., 127.

as it is, rather, an intellectual temperament.¹⁴ Value pluralism is above all for Berlin an undeniable fact of human life and all human beings regularly experience it in their daily lives. Therefore, many men and women may wonder: ‘Shall we favour our professional lives or, on the contrary, our personal lives?’ Value pluralism is a fundamental concept of Berlin’s thought which makes him an original liberal.

Isaiah Berlin’s epistemological views

Berlin had a very particular view of what political science and the history of ideas should be. Even if his ideas on this topic today seem outdated or old-fashioned, they are worth remembering. Indeed, they reflect an original approach which was not exclusively his own and constitutes an important development in intellectual history in general and in the history of political science in particular. Berlin’s work in the history of political ideas seems to be outdated when judged by current standards since Berlin does not pay much attention to problems of method and does not found his work on a very developed theoretical model. To show the originality of Berlin’s approach, we can compare his work to that of Quentin Skinner, one of the greatest historians of ideas of the contemporary English-speaking world; moreover, Skinner developed a very sophisticated method for the study of the history of ideas. Indeed, the contextualist school imposed itself as a dominant model in the study of the history of ideas. Quentin Skinner does not deny the possibility of understanding the authors of the past even if he fears the risk of anachronism more than Berlin. He does not contest the fact that the ideas of the past may be useful for contemporary debates about ‘republican’ or ‘neo-roman’ theories. For Skinner, who is influenced by Austin and Wittgenstein, the thinkers of the past write in an intellectual or linguistic context which must be distinguished from the social context, which Skinner largely ignores. The former determines not only the connotations of the words they use, but also more generally their arguments and their intentions.

Berlin does not subscribe to this approach at all and ignores the idea of linguistic context to focus on individual thinkers, or big

¹⁴ Pierre-André Taguieff, *La République enlisée: pluralisme, communautarisme, et citoyenneté* (Paris, Éditions des Syrtes, 2005), 44.

intellectual movements which cover several historical periods. Nonetheless, this difference should not be exaggerated: Berlin recognized the importance of the linguistic and intellectual context in *Freedom and its Betrayal* and even in *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*,¹⁵ and these works date from much earlier than Skinner's on the topics of method in the history of ideas.¹⁶ In them, Berlin explains that the political thought of the French Revolutionary period is particularly important and interesting for the thinkers of his time because the terms and political problems of that period are the same as those of his own era. Thus, the terms and political problems of the thinkers of the Revolution are more easily understandable than those of earlier thinkers like Hobbes or Locke, who wrote in an intellectual context which was radically different from his own.¹⁷ Berlin also asserts that we cannot completely understand the thought of Ancient Greece because we do not know enough about the political context in which this thought was allowed to develop.¹⁸

There is another great difference between Skinner's work and Berlin's. Berlin's approach can be considered 'psychological', because he is interested in the inner world, in the convictions, in the emotions and in the personal characteristics of the thinkers he studies. Quentin Skinner does not share this preoccupation, considering that it is neither possible nor desirable to know what motivated an author, that is to say, the personal feelings and beliefs which led a specific author to write what he wrote.¹⁹ However, Skinner maintains it is important to know the intention of a text: its meaning and the argumentative goal it is expected to reach in a particular context.

The reception of his work

I want to tackle the issue of the reception of Berlin's work and to try to explain why it has been so difficult and delayed in France compared with what it has been in the UK and in the USA, but

¹⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their Rise and Influence on Modern Thought*, ed. Henry Hardy, with an introduction by Joshua L. Cherniss (London, Chatto and Windus, 2006).

¹⁶ Email from Joshua Cherniss to the author, 23 April 2006.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

also in Japan, Italy, China and India. We should wonder why he is so little known in France, as this situation contrasts with the situation in other countries. This situation is illustrated by the fact that much of his work was only recently translated into French. It should also be noticed that philosophy and political science books rarely mention Berlin, and only in passing when they do.

Very few of his articles have been published in French periodicals. Very little intellectual work has been devoted to Berlin except that of Jean Leca or Gil Delannoi in political science. In any case, almost all these publications concern political scientists, even if some English language specialists, working on the history of ideas, particularly in University of Paris III, sometimes mention Berlin. One of the reasons given for this poor reception is that Berlin's ideas lack coherence and originality or are too multifaceted. Moreover, Berlin mainly wrote essays and articles and very few books, and in France the essay genre suffers from a very poor reputation. Consequently, his work has maybe been considered not serious enough or not scientific enough according to French ideals.

Berlin's difficult reception in France can also be accounted for by the very content of his work. Berlin never supported a political cause or a specific ideology, whereas in France intellectuals traditionally defend political causes. His thought is above all marked by meditation, moderation and pragmatism, and he was never attracted by utopias or partisan fights. During the Cold War, his liberalism and his refusal of too determinist a historicism did not make him a fashionable intellectual. Obviously, Berlin did choose his allegiances, and, like Raymond Aron, he supported the Congress for Cultural Freedom. That being said, he always refused to support people or causes he did not really believe in, and his support of the Western world never led him to give up his intellectual integrity. At any rate, we can say that his political philosophy did not correspond to the dominant political culture of the intellectuals of his time. In France, even more than in the UK, Marxism was very powerful in the political and intellectual field and it prevented Berlin from being well received. Some reproached Berlin for his liberalism and wrote that he advocated the free market and the end of big government, whereas he said he would not die for capitalism, and more generally, was interested only in political liberalism rather than in economics. That is why he had to add an introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty* in order to answer

criticisms and rephrase what he really meant. His reception, like Aron's, was better in the second half of the 1980s. Thirdly, more generally, Anglo-Saxon philosophy was despised in France.

But it seems difficult to say that Berlin's bad reception in France can be explained only by his position in the intellectual field. In fact, his popularity in the UK can partly be explained by his media and public activities. Thus, for instance, in autumn 1952, he reorganized the lectures he had delivered at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, and proposed six lectures on six thinkers of the Enlightenment entitled *Freedom and Its Betrayal* on the BBC's Third Programme. This radio station broadcast much classical music and very top-of-the-range educational programmes, including philosophical discussions. These lectures were very successful. As a matter of fact, his oratorical and lecturing skills played a great part in his fame in the UK and the USA. For example, he did not use notes and often presented the views of his subjects as if they were his own, easily identifying himself with the character he was speaking about. This last rhetorical device was likely to confuse the reader, who sometimes did not know when Berlin spoke in his own name and when he spoke for the author he was examining. His fame was all the more extraordinary in the UK, as the UK traditionally has fewer intellectuals than France with the status and the notoriety of a celebrity. With time, Berlin distanced himself from the media, because he did not want to be seen as a 'showman'.

Berlin's posterity

Berlin did not want to have disciples, and one cannot really argue that he had any. He did not really have a methodology for the study of the history of ideas which could have been mechanically adopted by other researchers, and anyway he never tried to set up a well-codified methodological system. However, his ideas influenced a great many researchers, although it would be wrong to call them 'disciples', since all of them distanced themselves from at least one aspect of Berlin's thought.

Most of Berlin's important work has now been published. The great undertaking of Henry Hardy, his principal editor, ended in 2015 with the publication of the last volume of Berlin's correspondence: after *Flourishing: Letters 1928–1946*, then *Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960*, then *Building: Letters 1960–1975*,

finally *Affirming: Letters 1975-1997*. These letters provide useful clarifications which enable us to clear up misunderstandings and to come to grips with Berlin's very complex thought. These letters should improve Berlin's reception. Commentators pay more attention to his value pluralism than to his liberalism. This change is linked to a less ideological reading of his writings and should be responsible for a more global and smooth understanding of his prolific work, whose full riches are yet to be discovered.

© *Alexis Butin* 2017

Posted 3 November 2017