

New Scientist. 6 December 1997.

Review : A man of ideas

Review of: *Isaiah Berlin's The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History*

By Dr. Ray Scott Percival

FOR anyone who thinks that ideas are just the flotsam and jetsam of the tide of history, Isaiah Berlin's *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History* is adequate remedy (now out in paperback, Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0701165790).

Berlin, renowned, wide-ranging and much-loved intellectual, died last month. He was born in Riga, Latvia, but his family moved to Russia, where at the age of eight he witnessed the Bolshevik revolution. He came to England in 1921 and was educated at St Paul's School and Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Eventually he became a Fellow of All Souls, a Fellow of New College, Professor of Social and Political Theory, and founding President of Wolfson College.

So what is his legacy? Berlin revels in the power of abstract philosophical ideas to shape history. He is poetic and cogent in his defence of the right to free philosophical expression. But there is an important omission. Berlin was admired for his breadth of knowledge, and his essays on Marxism, Romanticism and Russian history are insightful, but surprisingly he completely overlooks a key intellectual debate that shaped the history of Marxism, the debate on economic calculation under socialism instigated by the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises in 1920.

The thinkers who elaborated this line of argument—the chemist Michael Polanyi, Hayek, Paul Craig Roberts, David Ramsay Steele—are nowhere to be seen, yet their arguments will do more to permanently undermine communism than a thousand unexplained food shortages. After all, one of the points that Berlin is making is that people need to interpret their experiences, such as shortages, in terms of ideas for those experiences to make a difference to what they do and therefore to history.