



9th Erasmus Week Teaching Crossroads

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EDUCATION

Elisabeth Fernbach

With an Open Mind 71

Cláudia Martins

Diatopic variation in Portugal: notes on European Portuguese dialects.... 81

LIFELONG LEARNING PROGRAMME. ERASMUS MOBILITY FOR TEACHERS

Isabel Chumbo

Translators censoring Propaganda – a case study on the translation of Salazar’s speeches into English 101

Elisabete Mendes Silva

Isaiah Berlin and the Role of Education: from Riga to Oxford..... 117

Prefa

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2020 and
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2016). Th
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Isaiah Berlin and the Role of Education: from Riga to Oxford

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Abstract

Being the result of a lecture to Latvian students in May 2011, this article aims at introducing Isaiah Berlin, who was born in Riga in 1909. The focus will be on the man and the intellectual, how his life experience (his childhood in Russia and the fact that he was an emigrant in Britain) affected his intellectual route, and how he became a defender of liberalism and value-pluralism.

Furthermore, special attention will also be given to Berlin's opinions on Education, the way he regarded the educational problems of his time and how education should be enhanced in order to escape from obscurantism and dogmatism towards a freer intellectual life and also to develop capacities for thought and feeling. Berlin believed education, and particularly university education, could be a powerful means to achieve these ends.

Keywords: pluralism, liberalism, diaspora, education

Introduction

This article embodies the result of my Erasmus mobility to the Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy in May 2011, within a Lifelong Learning Programme Erasmus grant for teachers. I defended my PhD thesis on Isaiah Berlin in 2012 and the year before I was still doing research. For that reason, going to Riga represented a unique opportunity to witness in loco the city where Isaiah Berlin was born in 1909.

Therefore, in my lecture I intended to introduce Isaiah Berlin to the Latvian students and discuss his with them. My focus was on the man and the intellectual, the way his life experience – his childhood in Russia and the fact that he was an emigrant in Britain – affected his intellectual route. Oddly enough and to my surprise, students, who were around 20 to 22 years old, hadn't heard about the author before. The name was familiar only to one of the professors who were accompanying some of the students. My task revealed then much more challenging.

Besides, and as most of my audience would very soon become teachers, I also gave special attention to Berlin's opinions on Education, how he saw the educational problems of his time, which continue applicable to nowadays' education. Berlin believed education, and particularly university education, could be a powerful means to escape from obscurantism and dogmatism towards a freer intellectual life.

This article is divided in three main parts: to begin with, Berlin's main achievements, briefly describing some of his major works and ideas. Secondly, I focus on Berlin's personal life, from Riga to Oxford, highlighting other names in the intellectual diaspora. Finally, the last point is dedicated to the role of Education as it was seen by Berlin, establishing also some links with Education in Portugal, now and the time when the Portuguese were under the dictatorial regime, led by Salazar.

Berlin's main achievements

Isaiah Berlin is mostly remembered as an Oxford intellectual renowned in every academic circle. Berlin started to study philosophy and only later did he become interested in the History of Ideas. He chose this area of study because at some point in his life he realized how eager he was to learn more about one's ancestors and understand the course of history and the ideas behind every historical event, as he had pointed out in an interview to Ramin Jahanbegloo:

As a philosopher I was not lonely. When I taught philosophy at Oxford I was a member of a group of philosophers, we all spoke the same language (...). Then my interests changed. The history of ideas is not fashionable in British academic life. In fact I became intellectually somewhat isolated. There are not many people I could talk to about this. This is not a subject which the English take much interest. Maybe it does not interest people

who assume that their ideas are universally accepted, hence they do not bother to understand their history. (Jahanbegloo, 2007, p. 91)

His work achievements are mainly related to the topic of liberty and to the concept of value-pluralism. Berlin did indeed dedicate his life to studying and writing about liberty and its importance in people's lives. Berlin renowned works include "The Hedgehog and the Fox" (1953), "Historical Inevitability" (lecture delivered in 1953 and published in 1954), *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. Chapters in the *History of Ideas* (1992), *Against the Current. Essays in the History of Ideas* (1997a), *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History* (1997b), *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (2000a), *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamman, Herder* (2000b), *The Power of Ideas* (2002), *Russian Thinkers* (2008). Isaiah Berlin's political thought focuses on an interpretation of our political, historical and cultural past, as a way of facing current reality and also as a means to provide us with the crucial questions of our present life. In his interesting, precise and detailed journey into the world of ideas, Berlin always alerts us to the power of abstract ideas which can be the cause of a lot of distress in the world based on power abuse. And of course, history has already proven this right several times, namely the Second World Wars in which the ideals of fascism and national-socialism were supported by 19th century ideas on eugenics and natural selection resulting in an inflamed idea of nationalism, as Berlin so repeatedly stated (Berlin, 1992, p. 245).

However, he became internationally famous for "The two Concepts of Liberty", which he wrote in 1958 and delivered at the inaugural lecture at All Souls College in Oxford as he was honoured with the Chichelle Chair in political and social theory, and on his theory of value-pluralism. Pluralism for Berlin meant the ideal of liberty to choose ends without claiming eternal validity to the ends of life. Human values are thus incommensurable and in constant conflict and rivalry with one another.

In "Two Concepts of Liberty" Berlin concentrates on the recognition of liberty and on the importance of individuality. Based on these premises, Berlin devised the idea of the two concepts of liberty: the negative liberty and the positive liberty. The latter is about the idea of being your own master, of not being influenced by external factors. Positive Liberty worries about finding answers to the questions: "Who governs me?" Do others govern me or do I govern myself? If others, by what rights?" (Jahanbegloo, 2007, p. 40). The former concept devotes itself to the area of control and not to its source, and it tries to answer the following questions: 'How far does government interfere with me? How many doors are available to me?'

However, I believe that the choice of the history of ideas as his main area of study and all his concern with the concept of liberty was, somehow, moulded by his own personal experience and his roots. Isaiah Berlin was a Jew born in a former Russian State, Latvia. This legacy would definitely influence his life and his political thought.

Berlin: from Riga to Oxford

Berlin was born in Riga, on June, 6, 1909, in a middle-class family. Later on, when Berlin was asked about his birthplace he gave a very laconic answer, of which part is reproduced here:

'Where were you born?' an official asked Isaiah. 'In Riga,' was the unexpected reply. 'Where is that?' came the suspicious query. Isaiah was feeling puckish that day. 'It is,' he replied with literal accuracy, 'a part of the Eastern Baltic. 'Who does it belong to?' with the air of one delivering a lecture to a backward class, Isaiah answered, 'My native country of Latvia, when I was born in it in 1909, was indeed a part of the Russian Empire. However, during the First World War it was annexed, along with the other Baltic States, by Germany under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, but only, as you doubtless recall, for a short time. At the Peace Conference the independence of these States was recognised and they remained in this happy state until re-annexed by Russia in 1940. However, they were re-occupied by the Germans in 1941. (Berlin, 2009, p. 536)

Even though this might seem a somehow cold-hearted and distanced answer about his hometown, Berlin considered it as a "little bourgeois democratic republic, provincial, not very interesting, nobody very distinguished, as far as I know, but a perfectly decent place in which people could be free and happy" (Polanowska-Sygulska, 2006, p. 108).

The author of Berlin's excellent biography, Michael Ignatieff, also gives emphasis to his birthplace and stresses his main memories of his house in Riga:

His memory of his birthplace was framed by two sphinxes, standing guard at the entrance to the Albertstrasse apartment, reclining plaster figures with paws, breasts and a pharaoh's head-dress. They are still there – mossy with damp and chipped with age – guarding the entrance to the Art Nouveau apartment block where he was born, on the fourth floor, on 6 June 1909. (Ignatieff, 2000, p. 10)

His father, Mendel Berlin, adopted his grand uncle's last name, Berlin. Shaya Berlin was the millionaire of the family, having made his money in timber. Mendel Berlin also entered this business with his grand uncle, and he was doing well in life. They lived at 2A Alberta Ieva (Albert Street), in a very trendy street, with German Art-Nouveau buildings, as figures 1 and 2 show.



Figure 1 - Alberta ieva



Figure 2 - Entrance to Berlin's house building 2A

(My photographs)

He spoke German until the age of three and then, as his parents didn't send him to school, he got a Russian governess and became a Russian speaker. He read all the novels of Jules Verne in Russian, as well as Dumas' works and Tolstoy's War and Peace. However, the future political events would alter the destiny of the Berlin family. In 1915, when Riga became the front line of First World War, they moved to Andreapol. Then, later in 1917, they moved to Petrograd and there Isaiah witnessed the Russian Revolution at the age of eight and, in correspondence he exchanged with Beata Polanowska-Sygulska, he confessed that the ones who witnessed the revolution would find it difficult to adhere to the Communist cause:

(...) I saw the Russian Revolution in 1917. Anyone who has gone through it even as an innocent child, as I was at the age of eight, would have found it difficult to join the Communist Party later; I never knew anybody who was there at the time, and went abroad, and nevertheless later became Leninist in the West. But of course there may have been such people. (Polanowska-Sygulska, 2006, p. 108)

He would remember very vividly this moment all his life. This event would, in fact, be a determinant factor for the choice of liberalism as his political inclination. In 1920, when Latvia was made independent, Isaiah and his family returned to Riga but only to stay two more months. Immediately after, the Berlins moved to London, England, where his father had already established some business contacts and had all the money transferred to English banks.

England meant the start of a whole new life. Isaiah Berlin had no difficulties adjusting to a new reality. He was a good student, and in 1928 Berlin won a scholar-

ship to Oxford, entering thus Corpus Christi College. He was also at New College (1938-50) and later at All Souls College (1957-67) where he became a don. Michael Ignatieff described Berlin at that time, considering Oxford the turning point in the author's life:

He went up to Oxford in the autumn of 1928, a plump young man with crinkly black hair and animated dark eyes, bushy eyebrows and thick glasses. He wore a three-piece suit like his father and in photographs cradled his left arm. His mother worried about him – he was bookish; didn't dance; didn't circulate – but she needn't have done. Oxford was a liberation. He was getting away from his parents and launching himself into the big world. (Ignatieff, 1998, p. 46)

Oxford would be his home, the place where he always returned to after his absences. Berlin really felt homesick when he had to leave Oxford for some years during the Second World War, when Berlin worked for the British Library of Information in New York and Washington and he always showed opposition to totalitarianism and to communism. During Cold War, in "The Hedgehog and the Fox" Berlin distinguishes precisely between the ones who know one only big thing, the hedgehogs, and the ones who know many things, the foxes. That is, the latter are open to many possibilities life offers us and are willing to discuss and doubt them, whereas the former, one-eyed, linger on only absolute truths taking them for granted at any time, regardless of the changes in the status quo of societies.

Great-Britain benefited greatly from the coming of exiled intellectuals, such as Isaiah Berlin, Arnaldo Momigliano (1908-1987) and John Plamenatz (1912-1975), as they gave a whole new approach to the history of ideas in Britain. However, contrary to Momigliano who dedicated his work to British thinkers, Berlin, Russian by birth, Jew by blood, heritage and legacy, and British by adoption, preference and tribute, studied Russian and German thinkers, such as Herzen, Vico and Herder.

Berlin's contribution in Washington to the war efforts, along with his visit to the famous Russian poet Anna Akhmatova turned him into a public personality, being thus invited to participate in BBC's radios broadcasts and television shows. This popularity brought him prestige among his peers and British society:

Akhmatova and the war had changed him. The thirty-seven-year-old who returned to Oxford in April 1946 was a more seasoned and accomplished figure than the naïve accomplice of Guy Burgess' transatlantic expedition in June 1940. He had proved himself, and the world's view of him shifted accordingly. The prestige of the Washington despatches gave him a reputation in Whitehall that percolated through to the upper reaches of London society. Berlin became someone it was creditable or amusing to know. Society hostesses invited him to dinner; the BBC asked him to broadcast. (...) By 1951 he was being seriously considered as a candidate for the Wardenship of All Souls; in 1953, for

the Wardenship of Nuffield College. His reputation began to ripple out around him. (Ignatieff, 1998, p. 170)

Berlin and the Role of Education

Besides being an intellectual, writing about many topics, ranging from political philosophy to the history of ideas (his main field of study) or just simply about his personal impressions on personalities belonging to different areas (Churchill, Akhmatova, Pasternak, Chaim Weizmann, Albert Einstein, L. B. Namier, Felix Frankfurter, Aldous Huxley, to name just a few), Berlin was mainly an Oxford don and he felt very comfortable and at ease in this role. He served as President of Wolfson College (1966-75) which he founded. From 1975 onwards he was a professor at All Souls College. Berlin had a very clear idea of the purpose of education and, of course, tried to instil his students' minds with the importance of education regarding its role against ignorance.

In Berlin's mind, education meant to every man the chance to find out what kind of world they lived in, what they have made, are making, and could make of it. This can only be done if they are aware of what other men are thinking, feeling and doing, and how and why. According to Berlin, unless men didn't want to learn more about the world they lived in, they would continue living in obscurity (Berlin, 2000, pp. 214-5). Contrary to this position, Portugal lived its dark period in education during Salazar's rule, as Salazar had a quite different opinion from Berlin's. The President of the State, António de Oliveira Salazar, believed that if the population was kept illiterate, less social problems there would be. Against party pluralism, the 'Estado Novo' extended from 1933 to 1974 and constrained people's personal and political liberties. The motto of this period, as it is common in dictatorships, was based on the defence of family values, sustained in an ultra-Catholic framework. Education was neither widespread, nor was it a key area in the policies of the 'Estado Novo'. The country was in a retrograde condition and people from the most secluded areas, namely the interior regions of mainland Portugal, survived living and working in agriculture. Illiteracy was consequently higher in these regions than in the main cities, Lisbon, Porto and Coimbra.

Isaiah Berlin produced rather interesting and curious remarks about Portugal, more specifically about Lisbon and Estoril, the only places he went to. In his forced stops in Lisbon in January 1941, when coming from America to England, due to the Second World War controls, Berlin defined the country as "very agreeable", "... Lisbon full of remarkable faces & buildings", but with "simple Portuguese" (Berlin, 2005, pp. 252-3).

Berlin believed that teachers played a crucial role in this battle against indolence, ignorance and obscurantism, as he points out:

In what follows I shall assume that to understand the world in which we live is (...) good rather than bad; that most men cannot achieve this

without much conscious effort or, as a rule, without help, in particular the help of teachers; and therefore such obstacles to this process as indolence, ignorance, dogmatism, obscurantism, active dislike of the intellect and rational argument, hatred of novelty, (...), are views to be exposed and fought. (Berlin, 2000, p. 216)

Furthermore, Berlin (2000, p. 216) also emphasizes the importance of having one's "capacities for thought and feeling developed even though that might mean not fitting into some centrally social pattern, however pressing the technological demands of their societies." Education, and in particular university education, holds then the relevant position of powerfully sustaining the possibility for personal relationships and personal life that the human being is entitled to.

Berlin highlights, as C.P. Snow had also defended in *The Two Cultures* in 1959, the importance of both the sciences and the humanities as a powerful means to solve the world's problems. In an increasing technological world, Berlin alerts to the dangers of ignorance of most of the population, leaving open ground for scientists and experts who, one-eyed, could turn the world into some sort of totalitarian society: "This situation breeds systematic misunderstanding, and leads to the accumulation of power by the experts – scientific middlemen – whom the awe of both public and politicians renders relatively immune to democratic control." (Berlin, 2000, p. 218)

Even though this might be a utilitarian reason for a programme of general education in universities, Berlin recognizes its importance for mankind at large. Being an empiricist himself, Berlin therefore proposes the enhancement of imagination and intellectual exhilaration through discovery and observation driven by universities:

Merely to preach, merely to encourage scientists to study history or sociology or philosophy, or the great works of man (...) simply to encourage students of literature or sociology to grasp the methods and the goals of molecular biologists or solid state physicists, seems plainly useless. (...) What can be done is something different. To assist scientists or mathematicians towards some understanding of how historians or critics arrive at their judgements (which involves an uncertain but indispensable type of imaginative insight) and how they justify them (an exercise in logic, although at times an unorthodox kind of logic), is at once more feasible and far more intellectually valuable than an attempt to 'civilise' a chemist by dwelling on the properties of the *Divine Comedy*, or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (...). If this task is to be performed, it can be accomplished not by precept but only by example – by the discovery or training of teachers of sufficient knowledge, imagination and talent to make the student see what they see: an experience which, as anyone knows who has ever had a good teacher of any subject, is always fascinating, and can be transforming. (Berlin, 2000, p. 159)

A paradigmatic example of Berlin's pretension to give Education this role of stimulating students' minds through imaginative insight and at the same time exercises in logic is the Wolfson College where the two cultures, the Sciences and the Humanities, are given their due attention. In the College's website we can read the following:

Renowned for a truly interdisciplinary approach to research, Wolfson benefits from the depth and diversity of an international academic community of students and Fellows representing the very best in their field. Wolfson is equally strong in humanities and sciences, making it an ideal home for our interdisciplinary Research Clusters. Covering subjects from quantum foundations to the ancient world, each draws on the scholarly expertise within the College to foster innovative approaches to interdisciplinary research. (<https://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/academic>)

In the website (<https://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/history/berlin>) we can also read about the importance of Berlin as the College's founding president. Berlin created "the college in his own image, a modern, democratic, multicultural, multidisciplinary, international, free of unnecessary hierarchy or fusty rituals." In fact, according to Michael Hughes (2009, p. 248), Berlin revealed instrumental in the College's creation as a building and institution.

Unfortunately, nowadays in Portugal, education policies tend to go the other way round. A few years ago, under the leadership of a Socialist Minister of Technology and Higher Education, the Sciences and technology were pivotal areas. Humanities meant unemployment and lack of entrepreneurship and, of course, were secondary in the progressive plans of the Minister Mariano Gago. More recently, under a social-democrat and neo-liberal government, Education is in retreat if we compare it with the policies being adopted in the rest of Europe. More money cuts are expected on Higher Education, delaying thus Portugal once more in the trail of knowledge and keeping people in ignorance in a backward country unable to keep up with the pace of progress of other western countries.

Conclusion

To conclude, based on Berlin's premises, that is "the capacity for rising to a clear perception of structures of thought and knowledge, of their similarities and differences, or their methods of discovery and invention and their criteria of truth and validity" (Berlin, 2000, p. 223), only by providing this right education, could men be lifted intellectually. That should be one of the main goals of higher Education in every country that supports liberty and pluralism.

Defending these values and ideals all his life, Berlin set them in motion in the way he lived and worked always believing in the powerful influence of both the sciences and the humanities in the formation of people that would hence not be

constrained with a one-eyed, short-sighted vision of the world but should learn how to look at it in a pluralistic and humanistic way.

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