Isaiah Berlin and the Problem of Counter-Enlightenment Liberalism

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Abstract

This thesis will explore the complex relationship between Isaiah Berlin’s liberalism and his work in the history of ideas. While Berlin’s explicitly political thought reads like a scion of the Enlightenment, albeit with a pronounced Cold War inflection, his work in the history of ideas appears to indict the Age of Reason as partially responsible for the rise of totalitarianism. As a liberal thinker, therefore, Berlin seems Janus-faced. He appears to charge the Age of Reason with complicity in the rise of totalitarianism, yet continues to defend the most legitimate child of Enlightenment thought: liberalism in a negative form. As some of his critics have observed, notably Mark Lilla and Zeev Sternhell, Berlin seems intent on divorcing liberalism from the its foundation in the Enlightenment. This project, they are united in charging, is philosophically incoherent and politically ill-judged.

The thesis will present an alternative reading of the relationship between Berlin’s liberalism and his intellectual history. Instead of interpreting Berlin’s turn to the Counter-Enlightenment as an assault on the Enlightenment and a blow against his own liberalism, his interpretation of the Counter-Enlightenment, especially the proto-fascist work of Joseph de Maistre, will be read as a search for a ‘lens’ with which to examine the nature of totalitarian thought. In this context, Berlin’s lengthy and neglected essay on Maistre is of greatest importance: the darkly prescient thought of the reactionary and ultramontane Savoyard – strikingly out of place in his own time, yet an intellectual contemporary of the twentieth century – provides an analytical ‘window’ onto the presuppositions and character of totalitarianism. Berlin’s turn away from the Age of Reason, therefore, is guided by an overarching methodological conviction: it is Maistre, rather than Voltaire, who is the better guide to the twentieth century’s most shockingly original contribution to political thought and practice, totalitarianism.
Plagiarism Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Mark Bode and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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As this thesis has taken shape over the years, a few more than I care to remember, I have incurred many personal and intellectual debts, all of which I would like, were I able, to acknowledge individually. Unfortunately but not surprisingly, I simply do not have sufficient space. I hope that the lack of correspondence between my many reasons for gratitude and the actual number of people thanked will signal the overall scope of my debt – too large to easily express – lest it be seen as a hierarchy of importance, or as the first sign of a faulty and fading memory.

My greatest debt is to my supervisor, Paul Corcoran, who has accompanied the sometimes rocky development of this work with a combination of patience, sage counsel and moral support. Its completion owes a great deal to him. As a supervisor, Paul has been, as I knew that he would be, a source of sound advice and unfailing support. On a more intangible and human level – which is no less important, in many ways – he has contributed just as much, for which I am more than merely grateful. Paul is, as my father would have said, *ein Mensch*.

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On a more mundane level, I would like to point out, at the risk of stating the obvious, a risk that I am happy to take, that I am solely responsible for the argument advanced in this work. All of its limitations are mine: some of the strengths that it might be said to possess have a decidedly more mixed parentage.