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Isaiah Berlin. *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997. xx + 278 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-26092-7.

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Soon after our wedding, my husband Geoffrey and I privately divided our philosophical colleagues into those who knew what Smarties were and those who did not. The true intellectuals, Berlin, Hampshire, Hart, were much admired but slightly alarming figures: the notion of a Smartie was foreign to them. The others were less cerebral, though no less clever. Conversation with them could be more unguarded.[1]

The internet's transcendence of national boundaries reduces the intended effect of this tale, so it is incumbent upon me to ensure that readers are aware that the Smartie is a popular item of chocolate confectionery which is usually sold in multiples, packaged in cardboard tubes, and easily recognisable.

The Sense of Reality is a provocative title for a book of essays such as this. This is because what is being conveyed to the reader is the sense of a very particular reality, with which its author is especially well-versed, but which is otherwise not commonly acknowledged. This is not to say that Berlin has no business here, or that he is wasting his time: far from it. But it is, nonetheless, such a rarefied plane of intellectual existence that the value of its engagement is not always apparent. This is assuredly true of this volume of essays, which is something of a curate's egg.

Berlin conveys such a mastery of what he surveys that it is, perhaps, easy to supplant criticism with sheer admiration. Certainly, in the essays where Berlin tackles his chosen subject well, one cannot help admiring the clarity of exposition and the command not only of the literature, but as much of the intellectual milieu in which the literature was produced. But on other occasions Berlin reels off obscure names and associated tales with such apparent abandon that he forgets to consider the reader's patience. This is especially true of the essay "Artistic Commitment: A Russian Legacy." Perhaps it is because Berlin is so at home with these mainly nineteenth-century characters, whose knowledge of Smarties would be similarly doubtful.

The collection is itself a very worthwhile endeavour, and the editor is to be congratulated in bringing together the essays which comprise the volume. Patrick Gardiner offers an interesting introductory essay which reiterates some of Berlin's main concerns, such as the dual inheritance of rationalism and romanticism and their sometimes uneasy coexistence within western culture. Another aspect touched upon by Gardiner is Berlin's criticism of those who would seek to systematize history according to some stadial or teleological model. The demotion of practical wisdom in favour of more "scientific" approaches is given short shrift, as Berlin's exploration of successful statecraft is highlighted.

While there is a sense in which Berlin's philosophy of history veers towards a romantic Toryism in his concentration upon "great men," whether they be politicians or philosophers or both, there is sufficient truth in his castigation of systematization to merit further consideration. For we live in an age in which human judgment and volition is being systematically downgraded in favour of predictability via prescriptive contracts and expert systems. A young Berlin beginning on his academic career today would find great difficulty in fitting into the disciplinary categories which constrain much of what passes for academic inquiry today. For Berlin's weaknesses are also his strengths, and at this time more apparently the latter. The sheer adventurousness of his intellect is not something we ritually prize any more, if indeed we ever did to the extent that he himself did.

This is one consequence of the collapse of Soviet communism and the ending of the Cold War. Like Karl Popper, Berlin was part of an intellectual heavy artillery aiming at the Marxist-Leninist theoretical edifice supporting Soviet-style regimes. With their passing, the need for the eloquent advocacy of individual liberty passed too, or at most was permitted only to have free rein as justification for western consumerist culture. Popper and Berlin were not alone in having little to say to this end. That was the province of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and

the denizens of the Adam Smith Institute. Their crude neo-liberal populism would scarcely allow for the kind of institutions necessary to support the likes of Popper and Berlin and the "great men" so admired by the latter.

In his essay on "Philosophy and Government Repression," Berlin explains what he believes philosophers actually do and what philosophy as a pursuit is all about. The major triumphs of philosophy are those occasions when it completely reformulates the questions individuals and societies are accustomed to asking, and when it upsets the previously existing synthesis of assumptions and habits of thought (p. 59). Philosophy is not empirically based:

It is concerned with the formulation of problems which are genuine simply because they are felt as such, and the solution of these by *ad hoc* methods dictated by the nature of the problem itself, by the kind of demands which it makes, by the kind of perplexity which it causes; and the greatest of philosophers have done this, whether consciously or not, by altering the point of view from which the problem seemed a problem; by shifting emphasis, by transposing, by shifting the vision of those who are perplexed, in such a way that they perceived distinctions which had hitherto not been visible, or came to see that the distinction upon which they had laid much stress did not in fact exist, or rested upon muddles or lack of insight. (p. 60)

Here Berlin sounds almost at one with the pragmatism of John Dewey. However, among those features of his thought which tend to distinguish him from Dewey is the overwhelming acceptance of what is, as opposed to the common effort required to reconstruct the status quo in pursuit of what could be. For that reason alone Berlin could not count himself among his litany of great men. He is Alexander Hamilton to Dewey's Thomas Jefferson.

Berlin's idea of philosophical triumph is not unlike the succession of scientific paradigms so modeled by Thomas Kuhn. Unfortunately, success in philosophy is the preserve of a few, while the rest labour and toil in the obscurity of convention. Berlin hints at what Robert Pirsig makes explicit in the latter's *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*: that most of what we call "philosophy" is in fact "philosophology": the study of others' philosophies. But those new, exciting, ideas which shatter old orthodoxies themselves become new orthodoxies in time, and as such are as vulnerable to obsolescence. Every philosophical idea is a product of its time. As inherently radical, true philosophy requires freedom "to subvert, break through, destroy, liberate, let air in from outside" (p. 67). We can only infer that Berlin would not have approved of such innovations as the British higher education quadrennial Research Assessment Exercise, which rewards convention and conformity above imagination and insight. His romanticism would have prevented him from so doing.

By far the best essay in this collection is "Marxism and the International in the Nineteenth Century." Here Berlin is on solid ground and certainly fleet of foot. His recounting of the circumstances leading up to and during the First International is itself a gripping rendition of events. His criticisms of Marx are fundamental and are appropriately timely. In recent years there have been attempts to attribute blame for the failure of the Soviet experience upon particular individuals. Prior to these efforts, it was common among certain Marxists to blame Stalin for all that went wrong with the great social experiment. One of the latest books on the Soviet leaders attaches firmly to Lenin the blame for the system's evils.[2] After all, Lenin himself was responsible for subverting the more democratic elements of Marx's thought by justifying the Party's leadership and seizure of power on behalf of the proletariat. But Berlin identifies Marx as the true source of the evil that came into being, in outlining his theory of class warfare which legitimated the literal extermination (and not mere conversion) of an entire section of society in the name of unrelenting, inevitable historical progress. For Berlin, Lenin clearly understood Marx's theory and all its implications (p. 142). Whether or not scholars of Marx agree with this ex post rationalization, this is Berlin at his finest and most convincing. But in another essay he declares that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, "however closely deduced from principles enunciated by Marx or Engels, was turned by Lenin into an instrument not dreamt of by the founding fathers" (p. 195). Whether he had radically altered his opinion between writing each essay, or if it is simply an unremarkable admission of the inability of Marx and Engels to foresee circumstances in Russia leading to the Bolshevik revolution and beyond, is not clarified. Elsewhere Berlin is careful to distinguish Marxism from other kinds of socialism (pp. 114-5), a distinction apparently missed by another contemporary heavyweight, Ernest Gellner.[3]

Isaiah Berlin's legacy is as troubling as the dual inheritance of romanticism and rationalism he so clearly identified. His detachment from the everyday and consequently apparent conservatism is compounded by his Tory emphasis upon "great men." Yet these same great men were the radicals and iconoclasts who bucked the conventional wisdom to bring about radical upheaval. His world is almost exclusively male, just like the salons

and rooms where the subjects of his scrutiny would have discussed and composed their theories. If one were to draw a single lesson from these essays, it would be one in humility: not for being in the presence of so great an intellect, but for recognising the failure of humanity's repeated attempts to discern the immutable destiny accorded it by history. But John Dewey learned this too, and to greater effect.

Notes

[1]. Warnock, Mary. "Jeeves, Smarties and arch aliens." *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 17 July 1998.

[2]. Volkogonov, Dmitri. *Autopsy of an Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built the Soviet Regime.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998.

[3]. Gellner, Ernest. *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.

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