

Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt

Isaiah Berlin did not have a high opinion of Hannah Arendt's work.

"I do not greatly respect the lady's ideas, I admit", he stated during an interview he gave to Ramin Jahanbegloo in the book *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (1991). Knowing that I had been her student, he made this very comment to me in almost the same tone about ten years ago, when I had the privilege to meet him at his London club, the renowned *Athenaeum*, in the company of José Guilherme Merquior. Sir Isaiah's comment came up during a comprehensive discussion about people and ideas, in which he fully lived up to his reputation for charming and arresting conversation. At that time, I put forward arguments in defence of the relevance of Hannah Arendt's work and spoke of how fascinating she had been as a professor. But this was just one topic in a much broader conversation. Thinking aloud today, if Auden, a great admirer of Hannah Arendt and himself a poet and an intellectual Isaiah Berlin appreciated, could not, as we learn from the same interview to Jahanbegloo, convince him that she was an original and stimulating thinker, I would not be the one to do so.

It has occurred to me now, partly inspired by a taste for intellectual mediation and partly instigated by having read a collection of Isaiah Berlin essays published in 1996 – *The Sense of Reality*¹ – but also motivated by the desire to pay tribute to him, that it would be worthwhile to carry forward the arguments of our discussion at the *Athenaeum*. In short, I wish to point out that Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin have more affinities than the latter suspected or would admit, and that as I see the such affinities only add quality to his works.

I. I begin with an attempt to show the differences that in my view explain Isaiah Berlin's mental resistance to Hannah Arendt. As she herself said in the well known letter to Gershom Scholem in 1963: "If I can be said to 'have come from anywhere', it is from the tradition of German philosophy." Indeed, she

starts from German philosophy as it was being formulated amidst the intellectual fervour that was to be found in the universities at the time of the Weimar Republic, where she studied and graduated in the 1920's. She recalled this atmosphere in an important text celebrating Heidegger's 80th birthday, published in the French and Brazilian editions of *Men in Dark Times*. Her initial points of reference are, therefore, Heidegger, Husserl and Jaspers. This explains why her view of the world is expressed in a blend of German existentialism, phenomenology, ontologic discussion, hermeneutic inquiry – a restless amalgam which is original, although not always consistent. This restless amalgam is described by Sir Isaiah as "a river of free metaphysical association". He would say that it originates in the obscurity of German philosophy, streaming into dark Heideggerian forests, which he explicitly does not appreciate. In short, this surely wasn't his "cup of tea".

Such a posture – an intentional opacity of conscience, I would say in the style of Husserl – is understandable, up to a certain point. Sir Isaiah graduated and lived most of his long life in Oxford. There he participated, during the 1930's, in the activities of the English Analytical school under J.L. Austin and A. J. Ayer, as he recalled in an excellent essay published in *Personal Impressions*. It was from that starting point that he began his trajectory as an intellectual, examining concepts and categories as an "insider", although a critical one, of logical positivism. At that time, he believed that there couldn't be much to learn beyond the Oxford, Cambridge and Vienna circles.

In this sense, Sir Isaiah's thinking has the English liberal tradition as one of its basic points of departure. Starting with Locke and later with Hume and Stuart Mill, this school, in line with English philosophy, put forward political and economic arguments sustained by a theory of knowledge complete with its own rigorous rules, method and verification procedures. That tradition has nothing in

1 Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality, Studies in Ideas and Their History*, London 1996

common with the “mists” of German philosophy under the influence of which Hannah Arendt graduated. Thus the intransitive incompatibility of the respective points of departure.

The English tradition does not, however, encompass the various facets of liberalism, nor does it cover the complexity of the work of Isaiah Berlin. In an important essay published in a volume dedicated to Isaiah Berlin, Larry Sidentop draws attention to French tradition. The latter was not dominated by epistemologists, but rather elaborated by jurists, historians and sociologists such as Montesquieu, Guizot, Benjamin Constant and Tocqueville. For this very reason, they dealt with the social conditions for political action and developed other facets of liberal doctrine which took into account the distinction between political institutions and social structure. Isaiah Berlin – who, swimming against the tide of the prevailing Oxford intellectual interests, wrote an important book on Marx in 1939 – has much in common with what could be described as a more comprehensive aspect of the French tradition. This is confirmed by the manner in which he focused on the history of ideas.

The history of ideas came to be, above all others, his academic field after the brief interlude provided by a diplomatic experience as Secretary at the British Embassy in Washington during World War II, and for a short time in Moscow. In these occasions he clearly stood out as a shrewd political observer, as attested by the fact that Churchill himself read his dispatches with great interest. But the experience also convinced him that reality did not conform to the strict canon of the English analytical school.

In the field of the history of ideas, Isaiah Berlin finds himself at ease among various cultures – Anglo-American, German, French and Italian – quite an uncommon feature. He made use of this repertory, which expresses but also goes beyond the idea of a European cultural unity, to deal with that field from the perspective that Bobbio qualified as “the politics of culture”. In other words, he did not subordinate the history of ideas to the friend-

enemy division expressed by the political interests of ideological confrontation. Quite the contrary, as an intellectual he explored up to what point culture can expand the reach and the scope of dialogue and thus can bring people together instead of dividing them. He therefore studied currents and concepts, as for example the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Nationalism, Liberty. He likewise analysed with originality, knowledge and empathy authors and personalities which are very diverse in their objectives and very different from the point of view of their intellectual and political affiliation. Among those we find Hume, Stuart Mill, Montesquieu, Joseph de Maistre, Sorel, Machiavelli, Vico, Herder, Herzen, Tolstoy, Bakunin, Moses Hess, Chaim Weizmann, Disraeli, Roosevelt and Churchill.

In such wide-ranging incursions, Sir Isaiah articulated the importance and the richness of human diversity. He did so with superior civility and with a style that is both rigorous and subtle and that expresses, as does all style, a way to deal with reality. Therefore, recalling his well-known dichotomy, he did not act as a hedgehog-thinker in the manner of Plato or Hegel, whose key to knowledge corresponds to a centripetal or monist view of the world. On the contrary, as a fox-thinker from the intellectual tradition of Aristotle, Shakespeare and Montaigne he used centrifugal focus and successive approaches to analyse the modern world and to perceive the contradictory processes that mark the historical experience of the XX century. It is thus that he elaborated the “corpus” of his work, not as eclectic relativism but what can be qualified as “objective pluralism”.

Within his pluralism and inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment, Sir Isaiah reaffirms, in the best tradition of liberal doctrine, the themes of liberty, human dignity, identity and recognition, and explores possibilities for dialogue between cultures and thinkers with wisdom, scholarship and empathy. He nevertheless recognises, as for example in the essay “The Pursuit of the Ideal”, that values of the highest importance, such as liberty, equality, justice, individual identity, can collide. Reason can lessen the mismatch between positive

values, including through peaceful “trade-offs”, but does not eliminate this type of axiological conflict, since truth is not singular but multiple.

That is why, as John Gray, one of his lucid interpreters points out, Berlin is a rare case of an agonistic liberal – in the sense of the Greek word *agon*: clash. Berlin has an unequivocal perception of this clash of values. He describes it with almost stoic self-restraint, according to the best English tradition. Such self-restraint is nonetheless quietly permeated by a tragic sense of choice in individual and collective life. An understandable attitude, it should be said, on the part of someone who considered his original Russian and Jewish traditions the two other guiding lines of his intellectual personality. This is where I first see Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt moving closer to each other, since I detect an affinity between his liberal *agon* and the existentialism that pervades Arendtian thinking. It is precisely the scope of such approximation that I explore next.

II. As a preliminary remark, although Hannah Arendt owes a great deal of her way of seeing the world to the philosophical tradition in which she was educated, her work cannot be explained by such tradition, which inspires as it does a life of contemplation and reflection. Her work is a product of the clash with the realities of the XX Century, first and foremost with Nazism which existentially brought upon her the harsh Jewish German refugee status. To borrow her own words from an article written in 1943 (We Refugees), she was in the extreme situation of having lost her home and therefore the familiarity of daily life; her occupation, and therefore the confidence of being of some use in the world; her native language, and therefore the naturalness of reactions, simplicity of gesture and unaffected expression of feeling. In such circumstances she had, in contrast with Sir Isaiah, to deal with life and to reflect upon things and occurrences without the help of institutions and detached from traditions.

In fact, although not English by birth, Sir Isaiah was from a young age an “Oxford Don”, integrated, respected, recognised and admired in English society and with wide projection in European and American intellectual circles. As one realises after reading the recently published *Isaiah Berlin – A Life*, by Michael Ignatieff (1998), Sir Isaiah was, in spite of his uniqueness, cherished and loved. He did “fit in”. Some of his few critics would say even that he fitted in too much.

In contrast, Hannah Arendt was mostly seen during her life as idiosyncratic, even after having become famous in her mid-forties after the publication, in 1951, of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The book gave her projection first in the United States, where she lived

Isaiah Berlin *I do not greatly respect the lady's ideas, I admit. Many distinguished persons used to admire her. I cannot.*

Ramin Jahanbegloo *Why?*

I.B. *Because I think she produces no arguments, no evidence of serious philosophical or historical thought. It is all a stream of metaphysical free association. She moves from one sentence to another, without logical connection, without either rational or imaginative links between them.*

R.J. *Have you ever read any of her books?*

I.B. *Yes, I have tried to read several of her books since some of my friends praised her to me. The first book I looked at was 'The Origins of Totalitarianism'. I think that what she said about the Nazis is correct, if not new; but on the Russians she was mostly wrong. Then I read 'The Human Condition', it seems based on two ideas, both historically false. The first is that the Greeks did not respect work, but that Jews did (...) I met her in New York in 1941 with a friend of mine called Kurt Blumenfeld, a leader of German Zionists. She was working at that time for an organization which tried to get Jewish children out of Germany to Palestine. At that time she seemed to me a hundred per cent Zionist. On the second occasion, when I met her, about ten years later, she attacked Israel. She was perfectly entitled to change her mind – I had nothing against that. It is her ideological writings that repelled me.*

(Conversations with Isaiah Berlin. Edited by Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, New York 1991, p. 82, 84)

and worked from 1941 on after a French period from 1933 until 1941. During a conference on her work held in Toronto in 1972 which she attended, she herself observed to Mary McCarthy that "I somehow don't fit" (*Hannah Arendt: the Recovery of the Public World* – ed. by Melvyn A. Hill, 1979, p. 336). Her affirmative personality caused discomfort, as it did not conform to the usual political orientations (left/right; liberal/conservative) nor did it easily fit in the academic disciplines (political theory, philosophy, history). Hannah Arendt's biography by Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, published in 1982 (*Hannah Arendt, For Love of the World*) explains quite well in terms of "parallel lives" why she "did not fit", in contrast with Isaiah Berlin.

Thus, given her problematic insertion in the world, Hannah Arendt was, in elaborating her work, existentially stimulated by the need to understand what had happened. The personal impact of events led her, understandably, to become a "hedgehog" intellectual in expressing the fracture. That is, in making emphatically explicit the discontinuities brought about by the unprecedented character of the totalitarian phenomenon, which led to what she termed the gap between past and future. Such a gap put in question, not only in the field of metaphysics but also in that of experience, the repertory of those "universal" categories, who provide neither clear criteria for future action nor appropriate concepts for understanding past events.

Isaiah Berlin came to the same conclusion by way of his distinct yet convergent "fox" trajectory. He observes in *The Sense of Reality* that there is no foolproof method to distinguish reality from illusion. There is no masterkey with which to unequivocally open the doors of knowledge. Everything in the XX century was put in question by the consequences of the violent and unprecedented actions of Lenin, Stalin and Hitler. The banisters erected by the creators of the XIX century systems for us to lean on proved insufficient to withstand the pressure of events.

Arendt and Berlin's convergence is underlined by the curious fact that the metaphor he uses – the fragility of banisters – is the same as hers. Indeed, at the above-mentioned Toronto conference, she observed that the fracture led to the absence of the banisters that help us not to fall off the staircase. That is why she felt compelled to "think[ing] without a banister",

adding that this in German would amount to *Denken ohne Geländer*.

The word "banister" in English is derived from "baluster". In the context of the affinities I perceive between Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin, such a word conveys the idea that, although treading different paths, both came to the conclusion that it is necessary to confront reality without the protection of banisters or support fences, given the precariousness of the "keys" to knowledge.

If Hannah Arendt is a "hedgehog" and Isaiah Berlin a "fox" in describing the fracture, Hannah Arendt is, just like Isaiah Berlin, a "fox" in her perception of reality. The latter is also seen by her as ontologically complex and rich in its particularities and contingencies. Her work is powerfully original precisely because she could "stop to think" about the significance of things using an approach that is attentive to the specificity of concrete situations. Thus, she re-elaborated concepts and created categories – for example, totalitarianism, revolution, violence, lies, civil disobedience, action, imperialism, anti-semitism, the banality of evil, etc. With the same objective she sketched profiles and discussed the paths followed by human beings in dark times – among which those of Rahel Varnhagen, Lessing, Walter Benjamin, Rosa Luxembourg, Isak Dinensen, Hermann Broch, Jaspers, John XXIII. The Arendtian intellectual trajectory fuses knowledge from German philosophy with keen observation derived from her insertion in the world and from the vicissitudes that marked her life. That is why she does not operate intellectually in the manner of "a river of free metaphysical association". Although coming from different points of departure, the proposition of her work is compatible with that of Isaiah Berlin. Not as a "hedgehog", but as a "fox" like him, she addresses and examines the conditions which may bring about a common world, marked by pluralism and diversity and brought to life by the newness that only comes from the exercise of liberty.

Liberty and pluralism are concerns shared by them just as the dilemmas inherent to their affirmation in the contemporary world. In this respect, Isaiah Berlin's liberal *agon* and

Hannah Arendt's existentialism converge to bring out judgement – the basis of problematic choice – as the common recurrent theme in their respective intellectual courses. Both dedicated themselves to evaluate and understand the singularity of people and of situations, very conscious of the relevance and importance of the nature of this kind of knowledge, that cannot rely on the “support fences” of the elusive “universals”.

III. The most circumstantiated treatment given to the theme by Isaiah Berlin was an essay on political judgement included in *The Sense of Reality*. In it, he points out, using examples, that neither scientific determinism, nor social mechanics, nor even social anatomy offers us a universal pattern to understand human behaviour. Both the Russian revolution and the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union were not predictable on the basis of this type of knowledge. The level of generality reached after deductions or inductions is not fit to understand practical dilemmas. In the field of ideas, there are few general rules. It is necessary to have the sense of what is qualitative, which is a different capacity from that of describing, calculating or inferring. It requires a contact with reality and not just a recognition of its general characteristics. It presupposes the gift for integrating a certain amalgam of fleeting information – a gift for discrimination similar to that of writers such as Tolstoy or Proust, which can transmit the texture of life and not just the chaotic flux of experience. It is a practical knowledge that is distinct from that of the chemist with his test tubes or that of the mathematician with his symbols. Knowledge can certainly enrich the quality of this gift, but is no substitute for it, just as knowledge of botany or nutritionism helps but cannot make a good gardener or a great cook.

Hannah Arendt would not disagree with this “fox” view in the treatment of judgement. It is not by chance that, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, when searching for the texture of reality she makes use of Disraeli's novels and of Proust's work to analyse anti-

semitism, or of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to peruse the insensitivities of imperialism. As I have already had the opportunity to describe elsewhere, in the illuminating course given by her that I followed at Cornell in the 1960s on the *Political Experiences of the XX Century*, texts on political theory were mixed with poems by Brecht and René Char, with novels from Faulkner, Hemingway, Malraux, Sartre and Thomas Mann, with comments on the paintings of Picasso, Braque and Matisse, with the explicit objective of broadening the comprehension of the facts. The approximation she proposes between political action and the art of the *virtuoso* – the practice of “performing arts”, whose realization is associated with the manner in which it is performed – is not far from the analogy Sir Isaiah makes with the conductor and his orchestra musicians.

At the end of her life, Hannah Arendt tried to come to terms with the philosophical inquiries of her youth. She intended to analyse judging as a faculty distinct from thinking and willing, which she did examine in *The Life of the Mind*, published posthumously under the editorial care of Mary McCarthy. She died before being able to conclude her reflection on the pluralism of the *cogito* which permeates her work. On the theme of judgement, what she left behind in a more elaborated form are lectures – also published posthumously – on the political philosophy of Kant, edited by Ronald Beiner. In them, in a manner not incompatible with the affinities between political judgement and artistic gift made by Sir Isaiah using the method of successive approximations, she explored the scope for historical understanding and for politics of the aesthetic judgement that Kant discusses in the first part of the *Third Critique*. Using Kantian reflective judgement (as opposed to determinant judgement that subsumes the particular under a general rule), she was attempting to find an epistemological path, by means of “exemplary validity,” to deal with the judgement not only of the uniqueness of a work of art but also of an historical situation or of a political context, for which the banister of a “universal” category is unavailable. “Theory” and “practice” come together through “good judgement”. It is

judging that mediates between what is particular and what is elusively “universal”.

The work of Hannah Arendt, as that of Isaiah Berlin, establishes such a mediation. He achieves this with the subtlety and rigour of his chamber music style. It is not by chance that the essay was his favourite format. Collected in books with the dedicated help of Henry Hardy, they articulate his vision. Having written a large part of her work in English – a foreign language she taught herself as an exile when she was thirty-five, as Mary McCarthy recalls – Hannah Arendt did not have the same skill for subtlety, although she had the taste and the vocation for “distinguo”. Occasionally, her texts do not reveal the same consistency as those elaborated following the rigour of the English analytical school. To make up for it, Hannah Arendt’s work has the driving force and the vigour of the great symphonies. It is not by chance that her measure went beyond that of the essay and frequently attained the magnitude of decisive and paradigmatic books. Nevertheless, each in his own manner and representing the best in pluralism, both produced music of the highest quality – in a century of great intellectual cacophony.

Geneva, December 1998

A note of the author:

This essay is a slightly revised version of an article published in Brazil in the Cultural Supplement of *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper on December 28, 1997. I am especially grateful to Carlos Sergio Duarte who conscientiously translated the original Portuguese text into English. I have reviewed it carefully and I believe the text conveys what I attempted to express.

Sir Isaiah, in his conversations with Jahanbegloo, made the point that “the most difficult task for philosophers from different camps is the task of translation”. It is, in fact, one of the challenges of communication. I have felt this difficulty myself, in view of my involvement with the publication of Hannah Arendt’s work in Brazil and given that I have written extensively about her work in Portuguese – a language which was not familiar to her or to most of her readers in the developed world. Bearing this in mind, I think it would be interesting in this Newsletter to recall my exchange with Hannah Arendt regarding the translation of her works into Portuguese for publication in Brazil.

Hannah Arendt’s efforts with “Englishing” her texts are well known and have been described with tact by Mary McCarthy in her editor’s postface to *The Life of the Mind*. Hannah Arendt mentioned to me, during my Cornell days, how delicate it is for an author to have a book translated. She observed that when the translation was into German she often felt compelled to

rewrite the text – a compulsion that is easily understandable considering her attachment to her mother tongue (“Was bleibt? Es bleibt die Muttersprache”). When the translation was into French, she told me she carefully reviewed it herself, since the good command she had of that language allowed her to assess the form of transcription that would best express her thinking. Portuguese, of course, was not a language with which she was familiar. Her only contact with it had been (as she told me) during her short stay in Lisbon on her way to the United States. At that time she attempted to decipher newspaper articles using her knowledge of Latin.

In a letter she wrote to me on February 19, 1968, in a response to one where I mentioned I was trying to write a review of “On Revolution”, she said: “I’d ask you to send me the review of ‘On Revolution’ except that I won’t be able to read it. Or, do you write in one of the languages I know?” In my response, dated April 15, 1968, when I mentioned the difficulties I was having with the review, I said that when I had finalized my text I would send her an English translation but recalling what she had told me about her Lisbon experience, I coaxed her to give Portuguese a try: “I am sure you would have no trouble with Portuguese. As you might recall, according to Camões, one of the reasons why Venus defends the Portuguese in the *Lusíadas* is that Portuguese is so similar to Latin. I then quoted the appropriate verse (I,33) in Leonard Bacon’s translation: “... And the language, which, if one lets fancy range, /One takes for Latin with but little change”.

Years later, in 1972, the Brazilian edition of *Between Past and Future* was published. It was her first book translated into Portuguese – and it was her choice that it should be the first. I wrote the Introduction – the first of many others that during the years I was to write to Brazilian editions of Hannah Arendt. We had exchanges on the translation, the editing of the book and on this Introduction in which I tried to convey the importance of *Between Past and Future* of the corpus of her work. In a letter dated October 15, 1972, when she acknowledged having received the book and probably having in the back of her mind her Lisbon experience and perhaps my 1968 letter, she wrote: “I tried my best to stumble through your Introduction but, though I can do a bit with the help of my Latin, it is of course not enough to really understand a text. But I have full confidence and I thank you”.

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