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Enlightenment *versus* Counter-Enlightenment: Isaiah Berlin's account of the role of the sciences and the humanities

Introduction

In the wake of a globalised and far-reaching technological world, the discussion of the roles that both the humanities and the sciences perform in our daily lives has been for some time at the forefront of public debate, either by society in general, or more particularly at universities. Humanities have been claimed to be considered of less importance than the sciences as progress and rational accomplishments allegedly do not stem from them.

This “gulf of mutual incomprehension”¹ between these two cultures dates from the end of the eighteenth century and mainly nineteenth century. On the one hand, the “Romantic champions of the imagination”² intended to shed everything that was rational. On the other, the scientific and Darwinian approach of the nineteenth century in England urgently transformed the educational and cultural setting. Education, therefore, took an acute scientific form in England. This concern with the cultural role of science became the crux of discussion when, for example, T. H. Huxley, who gave a lecture in 1880 under the topic “Science and Culture”, defended science as being part of culture, therefore criticising the traditional classical curriculum restricted to the Classics which represented the only basis for education. In response, Matthew Arnold in 1882, when he delivered the Rede Lecture in Cambridge, claimed precisely that science was part of culture and literature should

¹ C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 4.

² Stefan Collini, “Introduction”, C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, p. x.

encompass works such as Euclid's *Elements* and Newton's *Principia*³. Arnold was just worried about the fact that science was being driven away from a humanist outlook.

Consequently, this discussion is not new. In 1959, C. P. Snow, when he delivered the Rede Lecture under the title of *Two Cultures*, had already alluded to the emergence of planning the union of these areas of study, as they were in the brink of separation. Snow urged for an engagement of the two cultures, the sciences and the humanities, as they were comparable in importance.

For this reason, we need to bring to light Isaiah Berlin, one of the most renowned British liberal intellectuals of the twentieth century. On this matter, Berlin is also a defender of these two cultures, highlighting university education as a means to promote mutual commitment and respect between the two areas concerned. Berlin dates back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to find the origins of this gap, when Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment movements battled each other in the quest for primacy, thus establishing the quarrel that would remain until nowadays.

Berlin dedicated his life to the study of ideas, demonstrating how their power influenced and changed world history. His most notable theories: value-pluralism and the two concepts of liberty, negative liberty and positive liberty, rest precisely upon the power of ideas. These novel and insightful approaches on the history of ideas were sustained by an agonistic liberalism, coined by John Gray⁴, whose main assumptions were the incommensurability and incompatibility of values and human imperfection.

A defender of value-pluralism, Berlin was against a priori, absolute truths and axiomatic premises safeguarded by the empiricist philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this context, we intend to put forth Isaiah Berlin's ideas with regard to the divorce between the sciences and the humanities, which started in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the "champions of reason"

³ Matthew Arnold, "Literature and Science" (Nineteenth Century, 12, August, 1882), pp. 216-230.

⁴ John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 145.

intended “to bring everything before the bar of reason”⁵, consequently triggering arguments between the defenders of reason and those who opposed to it. Berlin gave us a very acute and precise lesson on how this growing tension and great divorce became clear since the seventeenth century up to the present day. An admirer of the Counter-Enlightenment philosophers – Vico, Herder and Hamann – Berlin denied the existence of a perfect world so much sought by the Enlightenment philosophers. This dichotomy will therefore be highlighted as a means to present Berlin’s position, that of agonistic liberalism and value-pluralism, always struggling for the importance of both the sciences and the humanities.

We will focus primarily on Berlin’s essay “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities”, delivered at the second Tykociner Memorial Lecture at the University of Illinois in 1974 and later reproduced in *Salgamundi*⁶. Besides delving into this guiding essay, we will also bring to light some other evocative and enlightening texts, crucial for the understanding of Berlin’s core ideas on the topic under discussion.

Isaiah Berlin on the Enlightenment

A defender of empiricism, as he considered himself a liberal rationalist⁷, Berlin praised the scientific progress of the eighteenth century set in motion by the leaders of the French Enlightenment who, according to Berlin, remained “the great popularisers of science”, as “they have rendered great service to mankind by the open war which they conducted against ignorance and obscurantism in every form”⁸ and they fought for freedom and justice, influencing, for better or for worse,

⁵ Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities”. Henry Hardy (ed.), *Against the Current* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p. 83.

⁶ *Salmagundi*, 27, Summer/Fall 1974, 9-39, Robert Boyers and Peggy Boyers (eds.). We will use the 1997 edition: Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current*, Henry Hardy (ed.) (London: Pimlico, 1997).

⁷ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 2007), p. 70.

⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “Montesquieu”, Henry Hardy (ed.), *Against the Current*, p. 159.

the course of both the American and French Revolutions. Despite the unquestionable endeavours of the Enlightenment age, Berlin was nonetheless aware of the dangers that reason had brought to the world.

Jean D’Alembert characterised the eighteenth century as “the century of philosophy par excellence” because philosophy was expected to improve human life in an age of scientific progress⁹. D’Alembert was part of the flock of philosophers that strove for intellectual progress, backed up by the advance of sciences hastened by the triumph of Newtonian Science and the Copernican revolution that destroyed the Aristotelian geocentric conception of the Cosmos. The Enlightenment philosophers believed philosophy would improve human life because of the tremendous intellectual progress of the age, the advance of sciences and the enthusiasm for that progress. In an *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume, from the Scottish Enlightenment School and, according to Gray, its “greatest representative”¹⁰, defended that man was a rational and social being, but flawed. Man would only be able to achieve metaphysical knowledge, and therefore human perfection, if the genius of philosophy was carefully cultivated and diffused throughout the whole society, bestowing “a spirit of accuracy” on “every art and calling”¹¹. Berlin considered Hume a decisive influence on his ideological perception of the world, as, like Hume, Berlin also defended the idea of human faultiness. However, Berlin believed human perfection was unattainable as the ultimate and unavoidable radical choice between the ends of life would be the direct cause for the tragic conflict of values.

The Age of the Enlightenment represents therefore a new paradigm in the eighteenth century status quo. According to Hamilton, the Enlightenment is “A term which implies a general process of society awakening from the dark slumbers of superstition and ignorance.”¹²

⁹ William Bristow, “Enlightenment”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/enlightenment/> (retrieved 12 June 2016).

¹⁰ John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 134.

¹¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Tom L. Beauchamp (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 8.

¹² Peter Hamilton, “The Enlightenment and the Birth of Social Science”, Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (eds.), *Formations of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with the Open University, 1992), p. 25.

Mankind would then be emancipated through knowledge, education and science from the chains of error, superstition and theological drama that defined the medieval worldview. The movement represented the triumph of reason, empiricism, universalism, science, progress, toleration, freedom, individualism and uniformity of human nature, only to mention some of the main guiding principles. Nonetheless, the age of reason is somehow a misleading term, because “divorced from experience and sensitivity, reason equally led to error and absurdity, [...]”¹³, as it would be proved for example in the Age of Terror (1793-4) following the French Revolution or even the World Wars of the twentieth century, backed up by Darwinian and Lamarckian principles of social evolution and eugenics.

It is precisely this flawed idea of the human mind and of human nature defended by the Enlightenment philosophers that Berlin tried to expose by presenting its core reactionary movement – The Counter-Enlightenment – and its main agents – Giambattista Vico (1668-1774), Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) and Johann Von Herder (1744-1803). Berlin wrote widely on the topics of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment and he provides evidence for the differences between these two great movements, emphasising the good and ill aspects of both. In the essay “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities”, Berlin’s intention is to relate the natural sciences to the humanities by means of describing the origins of the growing tension between them as, being concerned with different issues, they carried out different aims and methods. This division already became clear in the eighteenth century¹⁴.

Enlightenment *versus* Counter-Enlightenment: ideas and conflicts

Berlin was critical of the ultimate goal of the Enlightenment – which aimed at the attainment of human perfection –, and then of rational movements such as socialism and liberalism, because Berlin

¹³ Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment* (New York: Palgrave), p. 3.

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities”, p. 80.

truly believed in the Kantian premise that out of the crooked timber of humanity nothing straight has ever been built. Berlin preached value pluralism whose distinctive feature lay on the inevitability of choice regarding some values, because values are incommensurable and incompatible, even though he defended that there are some objective universal moral rules, even though not absolute, in the sense that many people, in many countries, have accepted to live by. This premise makes it possible for people to live together¹⁵. Berlin owes this very innovative and most influential theory to Vico who, in the seventeenth century, “was interested in the progression of cultures and distinguished one culture from another”¹⁶, as human nature changes within cultures and throughout time. As Berlin put it “human beings differ, their values differ, their understanding of the world differs”¹⁷. Even though Berlin believed in the resemblance of cultures far more than Herder, he was well aware of the irreconcilable differences that could set cultures apart¹⁸.

In the opposition pluralism/monism, Berlin defined the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as monistic centuries because the empiricist philosophers of those centuries created and promoted the formula of “eternal, timeless truths, identical in all the spheres of human activity”¹⁹. Berlin was against this dogmatic approach followed by the entire Enlightenment movement and held the position of the Counter-Enlightenment reactionaries in their defence of cultural diversity and in the denial of a doctrine based on the natural law of eternal truths.

According to John Gray, the Counter-Enlightenment gathered momentum at the same time as the Enlightenment, and it became a movement with its own agenda, “an intellectual movement of genuine power and insight, whose vitality derived in part from its exploitation of self-undermining aspects of the Enlightenment itself”²⁰. The

¹⁵ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, p. 108.

¹⁶ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, p. 80.

¹⁷ Beata Polanowska-Sygulka, *Unfinished Dialogue* (New York: Prometheus Book, 2006), p. 40.

¹⁸ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, p. 109.

¹⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities”, p. 88.

²⁰ John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, p. 135.

Counter-Enlightenment attacked everything that was based on rational premises. Hamann's work and the Romantic movement had inaugurated the great endeavour of the dissolution of reason²¹.

For Vico, poetry and myth, totally obliterated by the eighteenth century French *philosophes*, adopting Berlin's²² recurrent term, did not represent false statements of reality but instead incorporated a vision of an authentic world that allowed for a better interpretation of the past of a culture. Hamann also condemned the Enlightenment dogmatic rules claimed to be universally valid. Just like Vico, Hamann believed in the particularities of a culture and in the importance of tradition and memory to keep that same culture alive. Hamann was also critical of the use of the rational and scientific approach to distort reality²³.

According to Berlin, Hamann was:

the most passionate, consistent, extreme and implacable enemy of the Enlightenment and, in particular, of all forms of rationalism of his time [...]. His influence [...] upon the romantic revolt against universalism and scientific method in any guise was considerable and perhaps crucial.²⁴

Herder would then be a follower of Vico and Hamann regarding this position as he also strove for the plurality of cultures and empathy towards different cultures. Berlin described Herder as "the most influential apostle of the great intellectual revolution that reacted against the classification of all human experience in terms of absolute and timeless truths"²⁵. Herder was thus critical of the uniformity of science and universal laws generated by the Enlightenment rationalism. A defender of the particularism of each culture, Herder claimed that one should preserve what belongs to a culture because human nature

²¹ John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, p. 137.

²² Isaiah Berlin, "The Philosophers of the Enlightenment", Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Power of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 44.

²³ Isaiah Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment", Henry Hardy (ed.), *Against the Current*, p. 9.

²⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, Henry Hardy (ed.) (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 255.

²⁵ Isaiah Berlin, "The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities", p. 92.

is “compliant clay which assumes a different shape under different needs and circumstances”²⁶. Herder stood with Vico and Hamann in the defence of myths, poetry, and irrational elements in order to understand a culture and its past, as Berlin so well explained:

The shamans of central Asia [...] are not just deceivers; nor are myths simply false statements about reality invented by wicked priests to bamboozle and acquire power over the masses, as Bayle and Voltaire had made the world to believe; nor are the inventions of poets merely to give pleasure or to instruct. Here he stands with Vico [...]. Shamans express in the form of myth and superstition objects of men’s natural wishes – a vision of the world from which poetry naturally springs and which it expresses. Whole worlds are created by such poetry, worlds worthy of man and his creative powers, worlds not commensurable with other worlds, but all equally worthy of our interest and in need of our insight, because they are worlds made by men; [...].²⁷

The divorce between the sciences and the humanities

This mystical irrationalism counter-current emerged as a reaction to the total claim of the new scientific method to dominate every realm of human knowledge and opinion as the new rationalism also “spread into the creative arts”²⁸. Consequently the radical differences of attitudes between Voltaire and Vico “brought about a crucial parting of the ways”²⁹, thus provoking a divorce between the sciences and the humanities. On the one hand, Voltaire, “the most gifted propagandist of the Enlightenment ideals” and “a kind of scorer in the contest of light against darkness, reason and civilisation against barbarism and religion”³⁰, believed the only way to interpret the past was by reason

²⁶ Johann G. von Herder, “Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind”, F. M. Barnard (transl./ed.), *Herder on Social and Political Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 185.

²⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, p. 219.

²⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities”, p. 85.

²⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities”, p. 88.

³⁰ Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities”, p. 90.

because it was too difficult to assess the general character of an age or a culture. Individual character, soul, poetry, myths are all part of “an impenetrable chaos which can never be grasped”³¹. The role of historians for Voltaire was hence the description and celebration of moments of high culture, opposing them to the disseminated idea of the dark and “barbarous ages of faith and fanaticism” in which the Middle Ages had been allegedly immersed. History must avoid peddling fables as it would degrade mankind with stupid accounts such as religious wars or other barbarian episodes. In this context, Herodotus and his fables, Shakespeare and Milton were not worth reading because they were barbarous and tedious and enemies of progress because lacking historical accuracy³².

On the other hand, the strongest opponent to the Enlightenment movement, Vico, a religious humanist and a historiographer, ruled out the idea of the austere rationalist science and believed history should be interpreted in the light of what he called “fantasia” or imaginative insight. Vico defended “the multiplicity and relativity of values at different times and places”. For Vico, history, as Voltaire tried to promote, was not a succession of events applicable to all cultures and times; history was not a uniform account of the past of perfect human beings, because perfection is “conceptually incoherent and not compatible” with what the Enlightenment movement was trying to transform it³³.

Herder emphasised this idea for he considered Hume and Voltaire “classical twilight ghosts” who claimed absolute, unchanging happiness. And history wasn’t and shouldn’t be used for Voltaire’s mockery and sardonic observation as this was not a model for history: “History is distorted with this brilliance and would still be more without it.”³⁴

Despite all the reactionary movements against the uniformity of the human mind brought about by rationalism – i.e. Counter-Enlightenment, Romanticism –, in the nineteenth century the gap

³¹ Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities”, p. 91.

³² Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities”, pp. 89-92.

³³ Isaiah Berlin, “Vico and the Enlightenment”, Henry Hardy (ed.) *Against the Current*, p. 124.

³⁴ Johann G. von Herder, “Travel Diary”, F. M. Barnard (transl/ed.), *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, p. 102.

between the sciences and the humanities was even widened as Darwin was added to the scientific and anthropological equation leading, in part, to the disastrous and deadly wars of the twentieth centuries. The rational discourse stripped off of any subjectivity, mysticism, creativity and any other idiosyncratic moods became entrenched in the political and philosophical discourse of nineteenth century movements namely utilitarianism and social Darwinism.

Conclusion

Berlin was the founding President of Wolfson College (1966-75) and he created “the college in his own image, a modern, democratic, multicultural, multidisciplinary, international, free of unnecessary hierarchy or fusty rituals”³⁵. In Wolfson College the “two great fields of human inquiry”³⁶, that is the Sciences and the Humanities, share the same amount of importance in the battle against indolence, ignorance and obscurantism, as he points out in “General Education” in *The Power of Ideas*³⁷. 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 could only be done if they were aware of what other men were thinking and 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 obscurity³⁸.

Therefore, university education in particular embraces the chance for improvement of both personal relationships and personal life that the human being is entitled to. Within this array of possibilities, the sciences and the humanities represent powerful means to uplift men from the ignorance and obscurantism they might become trapped in. Despite the pressure of the world’s increasing technological demands, Berlin alerted to the dangers of ignorance of most part of the population,

³⁵ <https://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/history/berlin> (retrieved on 20 March 2015).

³⁶ Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities”, p. 80.

³⁷ Isaiah Berlin, “General Education”, Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Power of Ideas* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 216.

³⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “General Education”, pp. 214-215.

leaving open ground for scientists and experts who, one-eyed, could turn the world into some sort of totalitarian society, as their power of knowledge renders them immune to democratic control³⁹. Such acute warning should be taken into account all the time and now, more than ever, one should constantly be wary of potential hedgehogs who can take control of a culture by subverting and destroying guiding moral values at the same time they stifle one's freedom.

Even though this might have been a utilitarian reason for a programme of general education in universities, Berlin recognized its importance for mankind at large. Being an empiricist himself, Berlin proposed to boost imagination and intellectual exhilaration through discovery and observation driven by universities⁴⁰ where scientists, mathematicians, historians, philosophers must work compliantly:

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, or of the *Agamemnon* [...]. The problem is one of grasp of mental processes ... not of throwing up hastily constructed bridges between 'cultures'.⁴¹

To conclude, Berlin inherited his empiricism from the Enlightenment philosophers. Despite their flawed theory of human perfection, the Enlightenment philosophers must be praised for their accomplishments with regard to progress and education of humankind. To Vico, Herder

³⁹ Isaiah Berlin, "General Education", p. 218.

⁴⁰ Elisabete Mendes Silva, "Isaiah Berlin and the Role of Education: from Riga to Oxford", Elisabete Silva, Clarisse Pais and Luís Pais (eds.), *Teaching Crossroads. 9th Erasmus Week* (Bragança: Instituto Politécnico de Bragança, 2014), p. 124.

⁴¹ Isaiah Berlin, "General Education", p. 219.

and Hamann Berlin owes his value-pluralism and defence of a tragic liberalism in which values collide and, therefore, there will always be painful choices and imperfect solutions⁴². We can't get total liberty and total equality, but we can reach a balance of these values in the struggle for a decent life. Following the Herderian assumption that "man is a free, thinking and creative being whose faculties operate in a continuous progression [...]"⁴³, Berlin always strove for the importance of both the sciences and the humanities as together they perform crucial tasks in the upheaval of human mind.

⁴² Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, p. 75.

⁴³ Johann G. von Herder, "The Origin of Language", F. M. Barnard (transl/ed.), *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, p. 153.