

A Message to the 21st Century

Isaiah Berlin OCTOBER 23, 2014

Twenty years ago—on November 25, 1994—Isaiah Berlin accepted the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws at the University of Toronto. He prepared the following “short credo” (as he called it in a letter to a friend) for the ceremony, at which it was read on his behalf.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” With these words Dickens began his famous novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. But this cannot, alas, be said about our own terrible century. Men have for millennia destroyed each other, but the deeds of Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Napoleon (who introduced mass killings in war), even the Armenian massacres, pale into insignificance before the Russian Revolution and its aftermath: the oppression, torture, murder which can be laid at the doors of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot, and the systematic falsification of information which prevented knowledge of these horrors for years—these are unparalleled. They were not natural disasters, but preventable human crimes, and whatever those who believe in historical determinism may think, they could have been averted.

I speak with particular feeling, for I am a very old man, and I have lived through almost the entire century. My life has been peaceful and secure, and I feel almost ashamed of this in view of what has happened to so many other human beings. I am not a historian, and so I cannot speak with authority on the causes of these horrors. Yet perhaps I can try.

They were, in my view, not caused by the ordinary negative human sentiments, as Spinoza called them—fear, greed, tribal hatreds, jealousy, love of power—though of course these have played their wicked part. They have been caused, in our time, by ideas; or rather, by one particular idea. It is paradoxical that Karl Marx, who played down the importance of ideas in comparison with impersonal social and economic forces, should, by his writings, have caused the transformation of the twentieth century, both in the direction of what he wanted and, by reaction, against it. The German poet Heine, in one of his famous writings, told us not to underestimate the quiet philosopher sitting in his study; if Kant had not undone theology, he declared, Robespierre might not have cut off the head of the King of France.

He predicted that the armed disciples of the German philosophers—Fichte, Schelling, and the other fathers of German nationalism—would one day destroy the great monuments of Western Europe in a wave of fanatical destruction before which the French Revolution would seem child’s play. This may have been unfair to the German metaphysicians, yet Heine’s central idea seems to me valid: in a debased form, the Nazi ideology did have roots in German anti-Enlightenment thought. There are men who will kill and maim with a tranquil conscience under the influence of the words and writings of some of those who are certain that they know perfection can be reached.

Let me explain. If you are truly convinced that there is some solution to all human problems, that one can conceive an ideal society which men can reach if only they do what is necessary to attain it, then you and your followers must believe that no price can be too high to pay in order to open

the gates of such a paradise. Only the stupid and malevolent will resist once certain simple truths are put to them. Those who resist must be persuaded; if they cannot be persuaded, laws must be passed to restrain them; if that does not work, then coercion, if need be violence, will inevitably have to be used—if necessary, terror, slaughter. Lenin believed this after reading *Das Kapital*, and consistently taught that if a just, peaceful, happy, free, virtuous society could be created by the means he advocated, then the end justified any methods that needed to be used, literally any.

The root conviction which underlies this is that the central questions of human life, individual or social, have one true answer which can be discovered. It can and must be implemented, and those who have found it are the leaders whose word is law. The idea that to all genuine questions there can be only one true answer is a very old philosophical notion. The great Athenian philosophers, Jews and Christians, the thinkers of the Renaissance and the Paris of Louis XIV, the French radical reformers of the eighteenth century, the revolutionaries of the nineteenth—however much they differed about what the answer was or how to discover it (and bloody wars were fought over this)—were all convinced that they knew the answer, and that only human vice and stupidity could obstruct its realization.

This is the idea of which I spoke, and what I wish to tell you is that it is false. Not only because the solutions given by different schools of social thought differ, and none can be demonstrated by rational methods—but for an even deeper reason. The central values by which most men have lived, in a great many lands at a great many times—these values, almost if not entirely universal, are not always harmonious with each other. Some are, some are not. Men have always craved for liberty, security, equality, happiness, justice, knowledge, and so on. But complete liberty is not compatible with complete equality—if men were wholly free, the wolves would be free to eat the sheep. Perfect equality means that human liberties must be restrained so that the ablest and the most gifted are not permitted to advance beyond those who would inevitably lose if there were competition. Security, and indeed freedoms, cannot be preserved if freedom to subvert them is permitted. Indeed, not everyone seeks security or peace, otherwise some would not have sought glory in battle or in dangerous sports.

Justice has always been a human ideal, but it is not fully compatible with mercy. Creative imagination and spontaneity, splendid in themselves, cannot be fully reconciled with the need for planning, organization, careful and responsible calculation. Knowledge, the pursuit of truth—the noblest of aims—cannot be fully reconciled with the happiness or the freedom that men desire, for even if I know that I have some incurable disease this will not make me happier or freer. I must always choose: between peace and excitement, or knowledge and blissful ignorance. And so on.

So what is to be done to restrain the champions, sometimes very fanatical, of one or other of these values, each of whom tends to trample upon the rest, as the great tyrants of the twentieth century have trampled on the life, liberty, and human rights of millions because their eyes were fixed upon some ultimate golden future?

I am afraid I have no dramatic answer to offer: only that if these ultimate human values by which we live are to be pursued, then compromises, trade-offs, arrangements have to be made if the worst is not to happen. So much liberty for so much equality, so much individual self-expression for so much security, so much justice for so much compassion. My point is that some values clash: the ends pursued by human beings are all generated by our common nature, but their pursuit has to be to some degree controlled—liberty and the pursuit of happiness, I repeat, may not be fully compatible with each other, nor are liberty, equality, and fraternity.

So we must weigh and measure, bargain, compromise, and prevent the crushing of one form of life by its rivals. I know only too well that this is not a flag under which idealistic and enthusiastic young men and women may wish to march—it seems too tame, too reasonable, too bourgeois, it does not engage the generous emotions. But you must believe me, one cannot have everything one wants—not only in practice, but even in theory. The denial of this, the search for a single, overarching ideal because it is the one and only true one for humanity, invariably leads to coercion. And then to destruction, blood—eggs are broken, but the omelette is not in sight, there is only an infinite number of eggs, human lives, ready for the breaking. And in the end the passionate idealists forget the omelette, and just go on breaking eggs.

I am glad to note that toward the end of my long life some realization of this is beginning to dawn. Rationality, tolerance, rare enough in human history, are not despised. Liberal democracy, despite everything, despite the greatest modern scourge of fanatical, fundamentalist nationalism, is spreading. Great tyrannies are in ruins, or will be—even in China the day is not too distant. I am glad that you to whom I speak will see the twenty-first century, which I feel sure can be only a better time for mankind than my terrible century has been. I congratulate you on your good fortune; I regret that I shall not see this brighter future, which I am convinced is coming. With all the gloom that I have been spreading, I am glad to end on an optimistic note. There really are good reasons to think that it is justified.

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