

**A DEMOCRATIC CONSENSUS?: ISAIAH BERLIN, HANNAH ARENDT, AND THE
ANTI-TOTALITARIAN FAMILY QUARREL**

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Abstract

Amid the on-going political turmoil, symbolised by the recent violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, books and articles abound today to encourage us to re-read anti-totalitarian classics 'for our times'. But what do we find in this body of work originally written in response to Nazism and Stalinism? Do we find a democratic consensus forged by a shared anti-totalitarian commitment? I doubt it. Considering the cases of Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt, this article highlights discord beneath what may today appear like a post-war democratic consensus. I argue that the anti-totalitarian literature of the last century encompassed multiple political philosophies, which sometimes differed irreconcilably from each other.

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On 11 August 2017, several hundred far-right activists marched on the campus of the University of Virginia, chanting white nationalist and anti-Semitic slogans: ‘You will not replace us’, and ‘Jews will not replace us’. Next day they joined other groups for a ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville, where various racist, white supremacist, and fascist symbols including the swastika and the Iron Cross were proudly on display. As onlookers followed live coverage on TV and online, violence erupted between the demonstrators and counter-protestors, and a white terrorist rammed his car into his adversaries, killing 32-year-old legal assistant Heather Heyer and leaving nineteen others injured. The statement by the US President Donald Trump in the afternoon exacerbated the crisis, failing to name the crime and condemning the ‘egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence *on many sides*’ (my emphasis). Awful though it was, this series of events was not so much a surprise as yet another confirmation of what many had suspected for some time: the end of political order as we have known it. A recent *New Statesman* article mobilised strong rhetoric to articulate the widely held view: the democratic West is crumbling and President Trump is, like ‘the emperor Nero, fiddling while Rome burns’.¹

One corollary of the current turmoil has been the resurgence of interest in the body of work originally written in response to Nazism and Stalinism. As swastika graffiti announces its appearance in today’s Armagh, Sheffield, Plymouth, Leicester, London, Glasgow, Chicago, Houston, New York and elsewhere,² the anti-totalitarian classics of the last century are claimed to be urgent and prescient, ostensibly capable of helping us preserve the world built over the last seventy years. But it is worth asking if the post-war West was really a ‘Rome’ characterised by greater moral and political certainty.

Granted, we live in a turbulent time today; but was there a democratic consensus forged by a shared anti-totalitarian commitment? I doubt it. At least among thinkers and philosophers, there was significant discord beneath their common opposition to Nazism and Stalinism. They often disagreed with each other when it came to the question of what the democratic world should stand *for*. If they are to be called a family, the post-war anti-totalitarian thinkers formed a troubled family with bitter quarrels. Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt, two of the most influential members of this family, present a case in point. The two iconic thinkers are frequently drafted into the current battle to save the democratic West from (self-)destruction. But they themselves were hardly allies, proposing different normative visions that were irreconcilable with each other. To recall this difference serves as an antidote to the temptation to romanticise the recent past.

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Let me begin with Isaiah Berlin, whose political philosophy represents the most influential strand of anti-totalitarian thought known as Cold War liberalism. Simply put, there are six ingredients essential to the ideal society he envisions. First and foremost, there must be a degree of peace, order and stability. This might sound like a boring idea. But as someone who lived in the age of extremes and saw first-hand the Russian civil war as well as the Second World War, Berlin did not take peace, order and stability for granted. Like Thomas Hobbes, Berlin is aware that peace is something that we must earn, a condition of society that we must achieve. While Berlin certainly does not support Hobbes's

defence of the absolutist state, there is a sense in which Berlin is 'Hobbesian': he never underestimates the scarcity and normative importance of peace.

The second key ingredient of Berlin's ideal society is his famous conception of negative liberty as non-interference. In Berlin's terms, a person is negatively free if he is not prevented by others from doing what he could otherwise do. This concept is called 'negative' because liberty is defined in terms of the *absence* of that which negates freedom. To be free in this sense is to be free from unfreedom conceptualised as external interference. What, then, does it mean for a society to guarantee this type of freedom? In practical terms, it minimally demands that men and women should be able to choose for themselves how to live, and live according to their own conceptions of the good. The Berlinian society is not only a peaceful society but also a negatively free society.

The third and fourth key ingredients directly follow from negative liberty. The third is toleration. It follows from negative liberty because a society in which men and women can choose how to live and live as they choose is *of necessity* a society in which different conceptions of the good are accepted as legitimate. For example, suppose you are a Corbynite labour and your neighbour a Thatcherite conservative. Suppose, further, that you do not like each other on a personal level, either. But unless you are or your neighbour is a very special person, you would not want to attack one another as a result of your differences. On the contrary, so long as both you and your neighbour are members of a (negatively) free society, you tolerate each other because we believe each and every member is entitled to his opinion, his choice, and his conception of the good. Of course, there is a limit

to toleration. If, for example, you find your neighbour radicalised and plotting an act of terror, you should not say, 'well, it's his negative liberty and I respect his choice to be a terrorist'. No. You should contact the police in the interest of public safety. But so long as people do not harm others, you must tolerate them, even if you disagree with them and even dislike them.

The fourth ingredient is privacy, and it also follows from negative liberty. In this context it is worth highlighting that Berlin is especially concerned with interference *by the state* in individual conduct. Here he departs from Hobbes and allies himself with Benjamin Constant. For Hobbes, the primary threat to human life and liberty comes from anarchy, or the absence of political authority. For Berlin, as for Constant, it comes at least as much from the excessive concentration of power in the government, which could undermine negative liberty in the form of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, unwarranted policing and censorship, and so on. In Berlin's free society, there is a space in which individuals are entitled to do whatever they wish to do so long as they do not harm others. That is the space of privacy.

If you live in a peaceful and tolerant society, where men and women enjoy privacy and negative liberty, you already live in a minimally good society in Berlin's terms. But that is not enough. Berlin adds two further ingredients, which make his society a richer and more fulfilling place to live. One is decency. By this he basically means the propensity for treating others in a humane manner. This is similar to tolerance to the extent that both decency and tolerance are about the relations you have with others. But decency is more robust than tolerance. While tolerance can take the form of cold

indifference, decency requires a degree of warmth, a willingness to recognise dignity in others and show an appropriate level of kindness to them.

Finally, Berlin is aware that your life could be deeply unsatisfying if you don't feel like you belong to the society you are part of. The last ingredient of the Berlinian society is a 'sense of belonging'. Perhaps the best way to understand this idea is to imagine what your life would be like if you are all of a sudden transported to a foreign country, which is peaceful, tolerant, free and decent, and yet where you neither know anyone nor speak the local language. You are a stranger. Nobody condemns you for being different, but you know that you are different. Nobody tries to humiliate you, and everybody treats you respectfully and humanely. But you have no friends; you have no one to talk to; you are estranged, alienated, *alone*. Would you be happy? No, you would not – or so says Berlin. According to him, it is the late eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder that recognised the centrality of the need to belong for human life. Berlin says, paraphrasing Herder:

Men need food, they need drink, they need security, they need shelter, and among other things which they need equally strongly is to belong. That means they want to be members of a society [...] which speaks their language, which shares common memories with them, so that they feel at home among these people, and when they speak, they don't need to explain themselves, there's a certain degree of instinctive mutual understanding [between] people like that.³

To recapitulate, the essential ingredients comprising Berlin's ideal society are: peace, order and stability; negative liberty; tolerance; privacy; decency; and a sense of belonging. Does such a society exist? Yes, according to Berlin, one actually existing society that already embodied all those ingredients, albeit imperfectly, was the post-war England in which he lived. Berlin certainly idealised England, and one wonders what he would say about the increasingly xenophobic post-Brexit England today. But he lived in a different and perhaps more innocent time, and this is what he had to say in an interview: 'liberalism is essentially the belief of people who have lived on the same soil for a long time in comparative peace with each other. An English invention'.⁴

There was another society which Berlin thought could realise his ideals, and that was the State of Israel. In an essay he wrote in 1953, known as 'The Origins of Israel', he memorably said: 'Israel remains a living witness to the triumph of human idealism and willpower over the allegedly inexorable laws of historical evolution. And this seems to me to be to the eternal credit of the entire human race'.⁵ True, Berlin came to be disappointed in later developments in Israeli politics and, again, one wonders what he would say about Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel today. But Berlin thought that Israel could mature into a stable, democratic, secular, liberal, tolerant, and decent society. With a bit of luck, he thought, it could provide a home for cultural belonging to the majority Jewish population, while sufficiently meeting the needs and demands of the minority populations and forming peaceful relations with its neighbours. Of course, there was an important difference between Berlin's England and his

Israel. In England his ideals had allegedly been realised to a considerable extent. Israel, by contrast, had a long way to go. But in 1953 when he wrote 'The Origins of Israel', he thought the country *was* developing in a right direction. Even later, when he became far more pessimistic, he never gave up the hope that it might return to the right track.

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To turn to Arendt, a word about terminology is firstly in order. It is problematic to talk about an Arendtian 'society' because, when she speaks about politics, she generally avoids the term 'society' and speaks about a body politic, a political community, and most typically a republic. The reason is that she follows a broadly Hegelian distinction between the social and the political and associates society with economic activities, and a republic with political activities proper. Of course, whether the political and the social can be so neatly separated has been a matter of debate. But I am not concerned with this issue. In the rest of the essay, I shall for the sake of convenience follow Arendt's terminology and discuss her republic.

The first ingredient fundamental to the Arendtian republic is *a* conception of belonging. But unlike its Berlinian counterpart, Arendt's belonging is not about being a member of a *cultural* group. It is to have membership in a distinctly political community. In other words, it is about citizenship. Herein lies one of the most important differences between Berlin and Arendt.⁶ Berlin, on the one hand, believes that a society has to be relatively homogeneous in cultural terms if it is to be stable and give its

members a sense of belonging. He conceptualises the people or the demos as a *nation*, endorsing the nation-state system not only as a legitimate form of governance but also as a way of providing cultural homes for different peoples. Of course, Berlin is aware that the nation-state system is a relatively recent invention. But he does not believe that this system will or should end in the foreseeable future. On the contrary, he thinks that the specifically *national* belonging is arguably the most promising basis for satisfying people's need to have a sense of belonging. Arendt, on the other hand, never tires of insisting that the nation-state system is profoundly defective because it always raises, and is never able to solve, what she calls the 'minority problem': the existence of minority populations who do not belong – ethnically or culturally or linguistically – to the nation. If the 'refugee crisis' of the early twentieth century told us anything at all, it is the deficiency of the nation-state system. She writes: 'The nation-state's unsuitability for life in the modern world has long been proven, and the longer people cleave to it, the more wickedly and recklessly will the ways in which the nation-state and nationalism have been perverted assert themselves'.⁷ The first ingredient of the Arendtian republic is citizenship as strictly separated from nationality.

The second key ingredient follows directly from her conception of citizenship. It is a set of constitutionally guaranteed rights and liberties. As citizens, members of a republic are entitled to the right to free speech, the right to free movement, the right to free association, and so on. To have no such rights is to be excluded from a political community; to have the rights is to be a citizen.

It is one thing for citizens to *have* the rights; it is quite another to *use* them. The third key ingredient of the Arendtian republic is her conception of active citizenship. She contrasts this with the complacency of bourgeois individualism, which she believes to characterise liberalism. Whereas bourgeois individuals are preoccupied with production, consumption, and moneymaking, Arendt's citizens are public-spirited and enjoy the experience of discussing and making decisions about matters of common concern. Similarly, whereas bourgeois individuals conceptualise politics as the pursuit of private *interests* by way of voting, Arendtian citizens want to make their *opinions* heard, either by direct participation in an assembly or by forming voluntary associations in civil society. Finally, while bourgeois individuals stay in the comfort of family and household, Arendtian citizens show the courage to express themselves in public, ready to be seen, heard and judged by others. If Berlin wants members of his free society to be decent, tolerant, moderate, humane and kind, Arendt wants her citizens to be courageous and independent, resisting social conformism and the tyranny of the majority, which she believes are pervasive in modern liberal democracy.

The final ingredient of the Arendtian republic is her conception of political freedom. What does this mean? A formal definition may be given as follows: a person is politically free in Arendt's sense when he is acting and interacting, and speaking and deliberating with others about matters of common concern in a public realm. A useful, if imperfect, way of understanding this idea is to see Arendt's political freedom as a variant of 'positive liberty' in a broad sense. All conceptions of negative liberty, including Berlin's liberty as non-interference, are defined as *non-X*, in terms of the

absence of that which makes one unfree. Positive liberty, by contrast, is defined in terms of the *presence* of something that makes one free. What, then, is it that must be present in Arendt's political freedom? The answer is political action, understood as direct, discursive, and performative participation in public affairs. Freedom and politics are inseparable because it is only through political action that men and women appreciate and appropriately respond to 'natality' and 'plurality' that fundamentally condition our being as human beings. I cannot do justice to the complexity of Arendt's argument here, but her basic idea is that each and every human person is unique not only in the sense that everyone is different from everyone else but also in that everyone is endowed with the capacity to do something to bring about a change to the world that would have developed differently had he not acted as he did. To exercise political freedom is to actualise spontaneously the distinctly human capacity for doing something new to make unique contributions to the common world that we share with others. To be free is to 'act' in this specific Arendtian sense.

In short, the key ingredients comprising Arendt's ideal republic are: belonging as citizenship; legal protection of rights and liberties; citizens' willingness to exercise those rights, especially the right to free speech and free assembly; courage as a political virtue; and political freedom as 'a state of being manifest in action'.⁸

Has there been a place in history that approximated Arendt's ideals? There are at least several candidates. One is the ancient Greek city-states, especially democratic Athens, to which Arendt repeatedly refers as a kind of ideal polity. Another candidate is self-governing small-scale

communities and town-hall meetings in Colonial America, and here one hears the echo of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. A further example is the late 1960s USA and several European countries, where some among the New Left seemed to Arendt to be acting together spontaneously out of a genuine desire to do something to rectify the poor state of actually existing democracies.

Ultimately, the examples Arendt mentions to illustrate her ideals concern not so much geography as temporality: America in 1776 (rather than America), France 1848 and 1870 (rather than France), Germany 1918–19 (rather than Germany), Hungary 1956 (rather than Hungary), and so on. Those dates stand for times of crises, revolts and revolutionary upheavals. This is no coincidence because 'politics as usual' within the framework of the modern nation-state system is incompatible with Arendt's radical democratic vision. Only at those moments when ordinary parliamentary democracy breaks down do we have the chance to see the kind of politics Arendt truly admires. This does not mean that she wants a permanent crisis. She is emphatically concerned with the question of how to institutionalise freedom, though she is keenly aware of its difficulties and, perhaps, its oxymoronic impossibility. Rather, her ultimate goal is an alternative political structure to replace the nation-state system altogether. The alternative is a highly decentralised federation of democratic units or 'councils'. A particularly vivid exposition of her ideal polity is found in an interview she gave in 1970:

We want to participate, we want to debate, we want to make our voices heard in public, and we want to have a possibility to determine the political course of our country. Since the country is too big for all of us to come together and determine our fate, we need a number of public spaces within it. [...] [I]f only ten of us are sitting around a table, each expressing his opinion, each hearing the opinions of others, then a rational formation of opinion can take place through the exchange of opinions. There, too, it will become clear which one of us is best suited to present our view before the next higher council, where in turn our view will be clarified through the influence of other views, revised, or proved wrong. [...] In this direction I see the possibility of forming a new concept of the state.⁹

One important aspect of Arendt's work is that she has little to say on the issue of transition: *how* the nation-state system in which we find ourselves today might be transformed into the alternative system that she endorses in theory. One might say this is a flaw or deficiency. But I think Arendt's silence on transition is a testimony to her realism. She says: 'Politics is, among other things, the art of the possible and the possibilities of men and peoples are always limited. Not recognizing such limits is megalomania, even when it hides behind very sublime feelings/intentions'.¹⁰ Declining to be a political megalomania, Arendt candidly conceded that her radical democratic vision was unlikely to be realised in her lifetime. In 1970 she said: 'if you ask me now what prospect it has of being realized, then I must say to you: Very slight, if at all'.¹¹

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How will the recent crises across the democratic world play out in the long run? Will future generations consider the late 2010s comparable to the late 1920s? We are not in a position to know. But there are some worrying signs, and books and articles abound today, for good reason, to encourage us to re-read anti-totalitarian classics ‘for our times’. Useful though it is, this body of literature tends to obscure disputes *within* the anti-totalitarian family, paying little attention to the discord beneath what may today appear like a post-war democratic consensus. But there were multiple anti-totalitarian political philosophies, and divides ran across the trunk of the family tree as well as its numerous branches. To illustrate this, I have focused on two central members of the family whose ideals clashed with each other: Berlin and Arendt. Today we are told to read their works (as well as their contemporaries’) to respond to the challenges confronting us, as if to say both thinkers are equally ‘on our side’. This, however, can be only partially true because they endorsed irreconcilably different ideals. Of course, both supported democracy in some sense. But, on closer inspection, they disagreed over central questions such as whether nationhood should be relevant to the demos, what freedom the members of the demos should be able to enjoy, and what relations they should have with each other.

To recognise disputes like these is to attend to the complexity of the post-war anti-totalitarian thinkers’ works. Realising this complexity by itself does little to resolve our crises. Nevertheless, it helps us appreciate what we should expect when re-reading texts like Arendt’s *Origins of*

Totalitarianism and Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty': not a democratic consensus on which a 'Rome' was securely built but a cacophony of ideas that have assisted democratic citizens to muddle through in times of great uncertainty.

¹ Nigel Hamilton, 'From FDR to Donald Trump – the decline of the American empire.' *The New Statesman* (4 September 2017) at <<http://www.newstatesman.com/world/north-america/2017/09/fdr-donald-trump-decline-american-empire>>.

² Andreas Preuss and Joe Sutton, 'Swastika scrawlings unnerve three US cities.' CNN (5 February 2017) at <<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/05/us/chicago-houston-new-york-swastika-vandalism/index.html>>; Adam Lusher, 'Racism unleashed: True extent of the “explosion of blatant hate” that followed Brexit result revealed.' *The Independent* (28 July 2016) at <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-racism-uk-post-referendum-racism-hate-crime-eu-referendum-racism-unleashed-poland-racist-a7160786.html>>.

³ Isaiah Berlin and Bryan Magee, 'Nationalism: The Melting-pot Myth.' In H. Hardy (ed.), *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library* (2006) at <<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/bigidea.pdf>>, p. 3.

⁴ Berlin and Lukes, 'Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes.' *Salmagundi* (1998) No. 120, pp. 52–134, at p. 121.

⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. H. Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 196.

⁶ For further discussion see Kei Hiruta, 'An “anti-utopian age?”: Isaiah Berlin's England, Hannah Arendt's America, and utopian thinking in dark times.' *Journal of Political Ideologies* (2017) 22 (1) pp. 12–29.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, 'Nation-State and Democracy.' *Arendt Studies* (2017) Volume 1, pp. 7–12, at p. 12.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p.163.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972), pp. 232–233.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt and Hans Jürgen Benedict, 'Revolution, Violence, and Power: A Correspondence', *Constellations* (2009) 16 (2) pp. 302–306, at 305.

¹¹ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 245.