

Freedom for Whom?

Liberalism as Ideology

(January 2004): This paper also comes out of the work I did with Bronwyn Winter and Sheila jeffreys. I presented the first half of it (it was too long to present in its entirety) at a seminar at the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at Sydney University on 1 September 2003. I was surprised at how much support for Rawls there was in the Department, although I shouldn't have been surprised because I already knew from my reading how much in favour he was. Needless to say, no one agreed with me. One person disagreed with my arguments against Rawls' notion of the 'original position', saying she successfully used it with her students all the time. (My response was that I very much doubted that the students did not include their own social circumstances in their ideas about 'original positions', not least because social circumstances have an unconscious dimension none of us is aware of). Another person said that 'ideology critique' (his characterisation of my position) wasn't used any more, but when I tried to get him to clarify why and in what way that was so, he eventually conceded that it might have its uses. Still, despite the disagreements we had a good discussion and a number of people said how much they enjoyed themselves.

Freedom for Whom? - *Denise Thompson*

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To begin with a bald statement: My interest in liberalism involves investigating the ways in which it serves as an ideological justification for domination.

Having said that, I need to do a bit of defining.

First, the term 'ideology'. I don't mean just any system of ideas. I use it in the Marxist sense, the way Marx and Engels used it in *The German Ideology*, to mean 'the ideas of the ruling class', although I'd prefer to talk about meanings and values, rather than ideas. So by 'ideology', I mean those meanings and values, and the practices and behaviours that flow from them, which present themselves as in the interests of all, but which actually serve the interests of the powerful few.

Next, the term 'ruling class'. It's not one I use very often. I prefer the terms 'domination' or 'relations of ruling'. By 'domination', I mean the likelihood that powerful vested interests will prevail at the expense of even the most basic and necessary interests of others, for example, what the cowboys of the finance industry want at the expense of most of the population of the third world and of the unemployed in the industrialised nations. The term 'domination' is meant to imply a logic structured around the meanings and values of a hierarchical social order which divides people into categories of worthiness and unworthiness, which requires that some people flourish at other people's expense, and which purveys the interests of the powerful as the interests of everybody and as social reality per se. Although it can be overtly and brutally imposed, in the context of the so-called democracies it is normally maintained through consent. In order for it to be maintained through consent, it must be ideologically justified.

So how does liberalism function as an ideological justification for domination? The short answer is that it masquerades as the interests of all while actually serving the interests of the powerful few. It does this by denying the existence of those structures of domination that ensure that the benefits of society are not available to all. But liberal denial, like all forms of denial, also exposes the very things it is meant to hide, by reversing the order of reality.

So what is negative in social life, liberalism turns in to a positive, and what ought not to be, it turns into an 'is not'. For example, while domination makes us unfree, liberalism prates endlessly about freedom; while domination gives rise to injustices of all sorts, liberalism gives us a theory of justice; while domination imposes a single overarching value on everyone, liberalism insists on the plurality of values; while domination breeds intolerance, distrust and hatred, liberalism stresses the fact of tolerance; and while domination reduces us to blind automata in the service of power, liberalism portrays the individual as an unencumbered, self-engendered entity who contains within himself all that is necessary for human flourishing, and as less worthwhile and entitled to fewer rights and entitlements if she (and he, too) doesn't.

All this, of course, needs to be illustrated, but to do that adequately would probably require a book or two (or more). But I thought I could give you some idea by looking at two attempts to deal with liberalism's central defining concept, the notion of freedom. (Both 'liberalism' and 'liberty' come from the Latin word, 'liber', meaning 'free'). For despite this centrality, liberalism is unable to give any coherent account of liberty.

But before going on with that, I want to say that I agree with much that has been said under the liberal banner. For example, when Brian Barry says, from the standpoint of what he calls 'egalitarian liberalism' (in a book called *Culture and Equality*), that 'there are certain rights against oppression, exploitation and injury to which every single human being is entitled to lay claim' (Barry 2001: 132), that 'nobody, anywhere in the world should be denied ... protections against injustice and oppression' (p.138), that citizens 'should know enough to be able to detect lies and fallacies, and that they should be immune to the rhetoric of demagogues' (p.213), that 'all human beings are entitled to equal respect' (p.266), and that 'justice ... concerns the distribution of rights and resources' (p.269), I have no objections to raise. These are indeed things that ought to be available to all. My problem with liberalism stems from its obliviousness to social structures of domination, and hence to the kind of social reality which ensures that principles such as these will not be translated into practice. Nonetheless, there are many liberal ideals (or at least, ideals that have been identified as 'liberal') which I would not want to repudiate. In other words, my criticism is not illiberal. I accept much of the liberal ethic, but I seek to go beyond liberalism, retaining what is

worthwhile and necessary for human well-being while attempting to fill in the gaping hole at its centre.

The two accounts of freedom I'll be discussing are by John Rawls and Isaiah Berlin. In the case of Rawls I'll be discussing how he deals with liberty in the context of his theory of justice; and in the case of Berlin, I'll mainly be discussing his notion of 'positive liberty'. These are two quite different views of liberty with, on the surface, little in common. What they do have in common, though, is that neither makes very much sense.

John Rawls' primary task was to devise a theory of justice, and in his view liberty had priority in any definition of justice. His two principles of justice are as follows: 'a) Each person has an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for all. b) Social and economic inequalities are permissible provided that they are i) to the greatest expected benefit of the least advantaged; and ii) attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity' (Rawls 1996: 271). The priority of liberty in this schema means both that the first principle of justice takes precedence over the second, and that liberty ought not to be sacrificed except in the interests of greater liberty. He claims to have arrived at these two principles by setting aside any consideration of social circumstances, by thinking about justice from the 'Archimedean point' of an 'original position' from 'behind a veil of ignorance':

Among the essential features of this situation is that no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does any one know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like ... [nor] their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities ... this initial situation is fair between individuals as moral persons, that is, as rational beings with their own ends and capable ... of a sense of justice (Rawls, 1971: 12).

There are two major and insuperable problems with this—first, as a theory of justice, since by excluding any consideration of 'social circumstances' in determining what counts as justice he's actually excluded the conditions of justice (and not incidentally, injustice) themselves;

and second, as a theory of anything, since what he was trying to do with the thought experiment of an 'original position' can't be done. It's simply not possible 'think outside' one's social circumstances.

In the case of the social circumstances he claims to have set aside, Rawls does seem to be aware that they do cause something of a problem for his theory of justice. Although he himself claims that his conception of justice is relevant in the here and now—'Conceptions of justice must be justified by the conditions of our life as we know it or not at all' (for example) (Rawls, 1972: 454)—he also acknowledges that his principles cannot be justified in the here and now. 'Historically', he said, 'one of the main defects of constitutional government has been the failure to insure the fair value of political liberty'. As examples of the failure to ensure equal liberties for everyone (his first principle), he mentions 'disparities on the distribution of property and wealth', 'the rapid accumulation of political power' and 'the constraining of the political forum by the wishes of the dominant interests'. But, he goes on to say, 'these questions ... belong to political sociology', and hence are irrelevant to his purpose, which is to 'describ[e] an ideal arrangement, comparison with which defines a standard for judging actual institutions' (pp.226-7).

But it doesn't since, on his own admission, the standard does not apply until after the ideal has been reached. The priority of liberty does not come into play until and unless the basic needs of the 'least advantaged' members of society have been provided for, he said: 'Until the basic wants [i.e. needs] of individuals can be fulfilled, the relative urgency of their interest in liberty cannot be firmly decided in advance. It will depend on the claims of the least favored', and on whether or not those claims have been recognised in the legislative and constitutional arrangements of nation states (Rawls 1972: 542-3). But this is not the case with 'actual institutions'. Nowhere in the world are the interests of the least advantaged incorporated in the decisions of policy makers, even in the so-called 'free world' of the liberal democracies. (Although the existence of the welfare state might seem to contradict this statement, there are a number of reasons why this is not so. Welfare policies have always been grudging, mean-spirited and dehumanising, and far from being motivated by the interests of the least advantaged, they are firmly grounded in capitalist labour requirements. Even so, this was as good as it ever got, with liberal democratic governments

everywhere now dismantling even that exiguous safety-net. If the life conditions of the least advantaged provide the standard for judging whether or not a society is just, then 'the conditions of our life as we know it' within the liberal democracies fail abysmally).

So Rawls' 'ideal standard' can't be used to judge the justice or otherwise of 'actual institutions', because the claims of the least favoured have not yet been recognised. In fact, Rawls' principles make more sense as a theory of justice the other way around, with the benefit to the least advantaged decided first by looking at those elided 'social circumstances', and the question of liberty relegated to second place. Why, then, does Rawls give such priority to liberty? I would suggest the reason is ideological. The kind of justice Rawls advocates is not in the interests of all. Rather, it is an apologia for existing inequalities which unashamedly embraces the interests of the dominator for whom alone liberty has the highest worth, both because he already has everything else and because he wants no impediment to the exercise of his powers and prerogatives. In contrast, liberty is worthless to those without the means to exercise it.

In fact, he acknowledges this. With his concept of 'the worth of liberty' Rawls explicitly argued that justice (at least as he defined it) allows more consideration to be given to the freedom of the rich and powerful than to the freedom of the poorest and most deprived. He said that it is sometimes argued that 'poverty and ignorance, and a lack of means generally' are constraints on liberty because they lead to '[t]he inability to take advantage of one's rights and opportunities', but that he himself was not going to say this. Instead, he said, 'I shall think of these things as affecting the worth of liberty' which he distinguished from liberty itself. 'The worth of liberty' means the ability to exercise liberty—'capacity to advance their ends', 'authority', 'wealth'. He argued that, although justice required equality of basic liberties, it was quite compatible with inequalities in the worth of liberty:

the worth of liberty to persons and groups is proportional to their capacity to advance their ends within the framework the system defines ... the worth of liberty is not the same for everyone. Some have greater authority and wealth, and therefore greater means to achieve their aims ... [This] allows a reconciliation of liberty and equality. (Rawls 1972: 204)

Of course, it does no such thing. To the extent that the worth of liberty is 'proportional to [the] capacity to advance ... ends within the framework the system defines', that is the problem, not its solution. That some have more capacity than others to advance their interests, while others do not have sufficient to satisfy their basic human needs, is injustice, not justice (tokenistic references to 'the least advantaged' notwithstanding). Similar attempts to reconcile inequality and liberty had already been criticised by Isaiah Berlin. In response to assertions like 'Freedom for an Oxford don — is a very different thing from freedom for an Egyptian peasant', he replied that, although there may be things people need before they need freedom, e.g. clothes or medicine in the case of the Egyptian peasant, their freedom was 'identical with that of professors, artists, and millionaires' (Berlin, 1969: 124-5).

Rawls' theory has been enormously influential. To quote from some of the obituaries when he died at the end of November last year: 'a giant of modern political theory fell last week', from *The Australian Financial Review* (Barker, 2002); 'Thomas Nagel calls Rawls "the most important political philosopher of the twentieth century"', from *The Nation* (Alterman, 2002); 'one of America's most distinguished political thinkers', from *The Economist* (US) (The Economist (US), 2002); and 'He is undeniably the most influential political philosopher of the twentieth century in the Anglo-American tradition', from *The Review of Metaphysics* (Sterba, 2002). And yet it is incoherent in a number of ways. He claims to be writing a theory of justice and yet he deletes the very subject matter of justice, i.e. social circumstances. He claims to be using a method of thinking that is, quite literally, unthinkable. He claims to be arguing in the interests of the 'least advantaged' while failing to notice the causes of disadvantage and insisting on the priority of something of no use to the poor and oppressed (not his terminology, of course). His work is full of such contradictions (an many commentators have pointed out). In fact, there isn't a single aspect of it that hasn't been thoroughly demolished. Why, then, has he been so influential?

In order to answer that question, we need to return to Rawls' claim to have set aside social circumstances. As I said above, it's impossible, and it's impossible with the same kind of impossibility as the sound of one hand clapping, because thinking and social circumstances are two aspects of the same thing. And if it's impossible, then Rawls' 'original position' must

remain embedded in social circumstances. It has been argued that those social circumstances are liberal democracy (Schwartz, 1973; Mouffe, 1995; Shapiro, 1986). But if consideration for the least advantaged members of society is an important aspect of justice, Rawls' account of justice resembles no liberal democracy that has ever existed.

Ian Shapiro, however, has pointed out that the social democratic tradition has always had an 'ambiguous moral status'. While it recognises that capitalist economic arrangements 'generate serious inequities for some', he said, at the same time it is committed to 'the desirability, efficiency, and justice of capitalist markets', and it attempts to address the inequities 'without altering the essential nature of the system'. As a consequence, it generates theories and policies which, while purporting to rectify the disadvantages, are directed towards sustaining the very system which gives rise to the disadvantages in the first place (Shapiro, 1986: 151-4).

In that sense, then, Rawls' theory is precisely a liberal democratic one, in that it reproduces the contradictions of liberal society without resolving them. He acknowledges the existence of 'least advantaged' members of society (although he never refers to disadvantage), but at the same time insists on the priority of liberty for everyone. In true liberal fashion, his theory fails to acknowledge that people are differently situated and have different needs in relation to freedom. Under the liberal view of liberty, it would appear that justice requires that as much consideration be given to the freedom of the billionaire as to that of the pauper, of the wealthy US congressman as of the single mother forced into 'workfare', of the successful trader on the stock market as of the homeless person, of the corporate raider as of the unemployed. Thus does Rawls join a long line of liberal theorists who deal with the effects of domination by simply ignoring their existence. The 'ought not'—there ought not to exist such gross inequalities—becomes an 'is not'—such gross inequalities don't exist.

In the case of Isaiah Berlin, you will have heard of his distinction between positive and negative liberty in his paper, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', his inaugural lecture as Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford in 1958. The meaning of negative liberty is pretty clear. It's the usual meaning of the word, freedom from. It is the notion of non-interference, non-coercion, the absence of barriers or impediments: 'I am normally said to be free to the

degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity', said Berlin (Berlin, 1969: 122). The meaning of 'positive liberty', however, is less clear (to put it mildly). Not only can it be used in both a positive and a negative sense, there are two positive senses, making three in all. In the first of the positive senses, positive liberty, says Berlin, 'derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master' (p.131). This is not just a matter of non-interference. It originates, Berlin says, in the notion of a self divided into a higher, better one and a lower, despicable, slavish one. The higher self is identified with the best of which one is capable, while the lower is identified with the worst—'irrational impulse, uncontrolled desires ... the pursuit of immediate pleasures' (p.132). Positive freedom consists in the higher worthwhile self mastering the lower self. This is 'freedom as rational self-direction' (p.145), in Berlin's words.

The second positive sense of the notion of 'positive liberty' takes account of the reality of poverty and of the fact that liberty is useless to those who are deprived of the resources necessary to exercise it. In this sense, which is usually attributed to socialism or to what one writer refers to as 'the more egalitarian sorts of liberalism', 'positive liberty' includes notions of a decent standard of living (Zimmerman, 2002: 577). It means being free, not in the usual non-coercion sense, but in the sense of having adequate material resources with which to exercise one's freedom. Berlin doesn't mention this second positive usage of the term 'positive liberty'. He acknowledges the existence of poverty—'my brothers ... in poverty, squalor, and chains'—and the praiseworthiness of any attempt to alleviate suffering. But he doesn't call that alleviation 'freedom' for those on the receiving end of those attempts, as socialism might. Instead, he argues that any sacrifice of freedom on the part of the alleviator, 'for the sake of justice or equality or the love of my fellow men', is just that, a sacrifice of freedom, not an increase in it (Berlin, 1969: 125). Perhaps this is an argument against using 'positive liberty' in the second (socialist) way. But if so, he is mistaken about whose freedom is at stake. The socialist usage of the term refers to the one whose poverty is alleviated, not to the one who does the alleviating by sacrificing his (sic) own freedom.

But Berlin isn't interested in the positive senses of 'positive liberty' anyway, neither his own individualist sense, nor the socialist one (especially the socialist one—see below). His task in the paper is to argue for a negative sense of 'positive liberty' (the third sense), that

is, as a threat to human freedom, an imposition on people of 'one prescribed form of life' (p.131) instead of the freedom to choose between the many incommensurable goals people actually aspire to. The argument proceeds from a notion of two selves (a higher and a lower) within the individual, to the notion of 'an even larger gap', that between individual and society. This larger gap involves identifying society as 'the "true" self which, by imposing its collective, or "organic", single will upon its recalcitrant "members", achieves its own, and therefore their, "higher" freedom' (p.132). Berlin says that this is the kind of argument which can be 'used by every dictator, inquisitor, and bully who seeks some moral, or even aesthetic justification for his conduct' (pp.150-1).

For a number of reasons, this notion of 'positive liberty' doesn't make sense.

In the first place, Berlin gives no account of how we get from the split within the individual to the imposition of society upon the individual. He simply asserts it. There's nothing wrong with assertion in itself, but here he makes the typical liberal category error of explaining social phenomena in terms of the characteristics of individuals. Individuals split into higher and lower selves are assumed to exist prior to the use that is made of them to justify coercing people in the name of a 'higher' freedom. It doesn't occur to him that split individuals might be a *consequence* of social domination, not its cause. He doesn't consider that people might be torn between their sense of themselves as entitled to human dignity on the one hand, and the innumerable categories of degradation which domination creates on the other.

Moreover, it's difficult to see how the theories which (in his view) argued for 'positive liberty' come to provide justifications for tyranny. What is the connection between saying that the only freedom worth having is one which serves worthwhile aims, and tyranny. He says that the imposition on people of 'positive liberty' is done in the name of reason. He blames 'the rationalist argument with its assumption of a single true solution' (p.152), for 'the nationalist, communist, authoritarian and totalitarian creeds of our day' (p.144). This argument is purveyed by what he refers to as 'philosophers of "Objective Reason"' (p.150). These are a miscellaneous bunch. Rousseau, Kant and Fichte are mentioned at one point, Herder, Hegel and Marx at another. But it's unclear how the arguments of these

philosophers gave rise to tyranny. Berlin is aware there's something of a problem here. At the beginning of the paper he says, 'It may be that, without the pressure of social forces, political ideas are stillborn' (p.120). In other words, ideas need to be carried along by social forces if they are to have any life and influence. But he doesn't follow through with this insight, and the notion of 'social forces' drops out of his account altogether. (In fact, he spent a good deal of his writing life arguing against 'social forces' on the grounds that arguing that they existed was determinist).

So we're not told what the social forces are that picked up the arguments of these philosophers and distorted them into justifications for tyranny. And those ideas would have to be distorted because none of them is an obvious justification for tyranny. It might plausibly be said of Marx, perhaps, given the horrendous things that have been done in his name, although it would be false. I'm not going to defend Marx in detail here. All I'm going to say is that Marxism is an exposure of capitalist exploitation and domination, and although it is also a recommendation for revolution, that revolution was intended to end tyranny, that is, class society, not impose it. As Erich Fromm said: 'to believe that Stalinism and the stamp it put on communism are the realization of Marxist socialism is, as Schumpeter has already said, like viewing the Grand Inquisitor as a successor to Christ' (Fromm, 1976: xv). Still, it would be plausible to blame Marxism for Stalinism, if only because it's been said so often and there are such powerful vested interests keeping it going. But Marxism can't be blamed for Nazism or fascism, and it's highly implausible that the other philosophers named had any influence on the social forces identified by the names of Franco, Mussolini, Stalin and Hitler. So the connection between the 'philosophies of "Objective Reason"' and dictatorship remain obscure.

There's another reason for rejecting Berlin's notion of positive liberty, too. The other reason is that he's engaging in a kind of Orwellian 'doublespeak'—he calls something by the name of its opposite and then criticises it for being what it was all along. So he calls tyranny 'positive freedom' and criticises it on the grounds that it's tyrannical. Positive liberty, he says, is 'the source of control or interference' (p.122), 'a specious disguise for brutal tyranny' (p.131), a 'despotism which turns out to be identical with freedom' (p.154), etc. But to agree with the dictators when they call their regimes 'freedom', even if you then turn around and

say it wasn't freedom after all, is to give them too much credence. It is to take them at their word, even if momentarily, and accept what they say. But there is a much simpler way of dealing with fine phrases used to excuse dreadful deeds—dismiss them outright as lies. To call domination 'freedom' is clearly to misuse the word, and the dictators and bullies who do so are, equally clearly, lying. If the dictators' justifications are false, if they rule through terror, violence and cruelty, calling what they do 'positive freedom' is absurd.

So there are three problems with his argument—(1) he fails to tell us how a psychological trait becomes a social fact, (2) he gives no account of how the writings of the Enlightenment became a justification for tyranny, and (3) what he calls freedom is in fact its opposite, as he quite freely admits since it's the crux of his argument.

The fact that Berlin's argument is a mess doesn't make it ideological, but the reason he clings to such an odd notion as 'positive liberty' is. His stated aim was to defend the notion of a pluralist society in the sense that, as he puts it, 'the ends of men are many' (p.169), not all of them are compatible with each other and some are in outright conflict, and there's no overarching principle which could reconcile them. He sees this view as the one most compatible with notions of human freedom and with our knowledge of moral agency. The frameworks he is criticising in this paper are those which appeal to just such a principle. But the only framework he mentions that has been used to justify tyranny, and that still has contemporary relevance, is Marxism (supposedly). His argument, then, is really directed against Marxism (so-called). This is acknowledged twice in the paper. In the context of a discussion of the importance of understanding 'the dominant issues of our own world', he refers to 'the open war that is being fought between two systems of ideas ... held in the world today' (p.121); and later he refers to 'the great clash of ideologies that dominates our world' (p.131). As Lessnoff pointed out, the political context for this 1958 lecture was 'the so-called Cold War between the liberal West and the Marxist or Stalinist East' (Lessnoff, 1999: 212).

There are a number of indications that his argument against 'positive liberty' is ideological. It was part of twentieth century liberalism's use of the notion of 'totalitarianism' within the fiction of a 'Free World' and its military/industrial complex owned by its ruling class. As Michael Bittman has pointed out, the original referent for Hannah Arendt's concept of

'totalitarianism' was Nazism. She herself also applied it to the Stalinist regime, but there are indications in Arendt's own work of crucial differences between Stalinism and Nazism. While it is true that both were equally vile, and that both extended terror against their own populations into every sphere of existence, they were justified differently. Stalinism lacked the overarching racist ideology of Nazism, while Nazism lacked the quasi-Darwinian notion of laws of history (Bittman, 1989: 67). The ideology of 'totalitarianism' not only ignored those differences, it dropped the connection to Nazism and fascism altogether and became focused only on the 'communist menace'. In doing so, it denied capitalism's own culpability in Nazism and fascism.

Berlin was one of those sophisticated Cold War ideologues (of whom another exemplar is Karl Popper whose *The Open Society and Its Enemies* contains an argument very similar to Berlin's, although he takes totalitarianism back to Plato), whose more vulgar counterparts were hunting down communists and their 'unAmerican activities' in the US, and trying to ban the communist party in Australia. Berlin's notion of 'positive liberty' takes the same view of political reality as these defenders of the 'Free World' against the totalitarian menace. 'Positive liberty' is part of 'the fiction of the world-wide communist conspiracy' (Bittman, 1989: 68). And yet, if the notion of 'positive liberty' fits anywhere, McCarthyism and the ways in which the US ruling class still proceeds today, is where it is most apt. If ever tyranny was imposed in the name of 'freedom' it was surely in the congressional hearings and employment blacklists orchestrated by Senator Joseph McCarthy and his cohorts, not to mention the latest of the 'made in the USA' forms of 'freedom', the war in Iraq. In fact, Berlin never did come out strongly against the McCarthyites—he 'maintained a degree of detachment' and 'remained aloof ... from the intense intellectual and emotional conflicts of the Cold War' (Ignatieff, 1998: 193-4)—even though he was in the US at the time and had his own little brush with the American right-wing. Nor did he make any connections between his notion of 'positive liberty' and the witch hunts organised against 'communists'.

Another indication that his argument is ideological is that he didn't notice that the value pluralism he insisted was at the heart of liberal society was no such thing, that, on the contrary, one value and one only is imposed by what he referred to as 'our declining capitalist civilization' (p.172), the value of money. Everything would be subjected to it if

the neo-liberal ideologues had their way—education, health, welfare, public services, human needs, life itself. Writing in 1968, he seemed to think that any problems capitalism had ever had were over. He said that 'liberal ultra-individualism' had 'led to brutal violations of "negative" liberty', but that 'the evils of unrestricted laissez-faire', 'the reign of unfettered economic individualism' and 'an uncontrolled "market" economy' were no longer historically relevant. They 'could scarcely be said to be a rising force at present' (pp.xlv-xlvii). He can hardly be criticised for failing to predict the future. But he lived until 1997 (although he stopped writing in the middle of the 1970s), and he didn't notice that 'the evils of unrestricted laissez-faire' (etc.) again came to dominate the whole world as the latter half of the twentieth century developed. In other words, he failed to comment on the fact that his value pluralism became less and less accurate as a description of the real world (if it ever was).

A further reason for calling his argument ideological is the purpose served by 'positive liberty' as an attack on socialism. Socialism in general and Marxism in particular are the only systematic attempts to better the human condition by rational planning of the production and distribution of material wealth. He doesn't say this outright. But the notion of 'positive liberty' was originally a socialist one, an attempt to save the concept of freedom for the poor and oppressed; and socialism is the only political movement to recommend that the state interfere with capitalist profit-making. It also fits neatly into the more recent neo-liberal agenda of government 'non-interference'. This agenda actually means non-interference to aid the poor and deprived or to raise sufficient revenue to provide public goods. It doesn't mean non-interference in the sense of refraining from corporate bail-outs, from acting as lender of the last resort to profligate profiteers, or from siphoning public money into private hands.

His arguments purport to be in the interests of all—everyone wants to live in a free society rather than a totalitarian one, and everyone wants to be able to choose their own beliefs and values. But those arguments actually serve the powerful vested interests that rule the so-called 'Free World' and their ruling passion, money and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few; and it does this by ignoring their existence and explaining away their effects.

So here are two liberal accounts of liberty that make no sense. John Rawls insists that liberty is central to justice when, at the very least, it's irrelevant, and at worst it's implicated in injustice; while Isaiah Berlin calls tyranny 'positive freedom' and then argues against it on the grounds that it's tyrannical. Of course, meaninglessness does not in itself make something ideological. But it does call for explanation, especially in the light of the widespread influence both men have had, despite the incoherence. I've given you my explanation, in terms of the benefits these arguments had for those who benefit from domination, by giving the appearance of redressing the effects of domination while actually leaving the status quo intact.

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