

Isaiah Berlin's Two Concepts of Liberty

Roberto Toscano*

It has always been difficult, if not impossible, to categorise Isaiah Berlin according to specific intellectual disciplines: Was he a «historian of thought» or a political philosopher? Berlin himself, with his eminently critical mind and non-dogmatic approach, always refused to be included in any school or intellectual group, and even to stick, in his interests and in his work, to a single discipline. This is why he never wrote any *magnum opus*, preferring instead, both Fox and Hedgehog, to transmit what was the main core of his liberal belief (the Big Truth he knew) through a lively and manifold series of essays only apparently scattered but actually deeply consistent and coherent.

What is certain, is that, by his brilliant exploration of several threads of intellectual history (from German Romanticism to French reactionary thought, from Russian populism to Soviet literary figures) he has given us original insights that we can use as invaluable instruments in the field of political theory.

I would like to focus on one of these contributions, one that after almost half a century is still with us as an unavoidable element in political discourse: his «Two concepts of liberty». The idea was organically spelled out on 31 October 1958 on the occasion of Berlin's inaugural lecture at the University of Oxford, but had been previously sketched by him in other essays.

Let us recall his definition of the two concepts:

– *Negative liberty*: «A right to act without unreasonable external constraint or interference according to one's own purposes»¹. It is an answer to the question: «What is the area within which the subject – a person or a group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or to be, without interference by other persons?»².

– *Positive liberty*: «A capacity to pursue and perhaps achieve one's ends, which capacity might demand constraints on oneself or others, or the provisions of certain basic conditions

* *Ambassador of Italy in Iran.*

¹ I. Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six enemies of Human Liberty*, 1952 BBC radio broadcasts, quoted in M. Lilla, *Inside the Clockwork*, in «The New York Review of Books», 25 April 2002, p. 43.

² I. Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, in *Four Essays On Liberty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 121-122.

for that pursuit»³. It answers the question: «What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?»⁴.

To put it differently, negative liberty means «freedom from»; positive liberty means «freedom to». The former is the realm of individual self-determination, the latter addresses the area of institutions and rules which can supply (or deny) the means through which individual goals are attained.

It is important to stress how much Berlin's concept of negative liberty owes to the political tradition, I would say to the identity and the very instincts, of the British. Not only does in fact Berlin states very categorically, as if believing that such a statement does not need any demonstration: «Some portion of human existence must remain independent of the sphere of social control»⁵, but he adds: «The decline of the sense of privacy would mark the death of civilization, of an entire moral outlook»⁶. What could be more British than to put privacy at the center of the concept of human liberty?

And yet this special sensitivity, though being to a certain extent culture-specific, can claim universality. One example will suffice, taken from that world of Russian culture to which Berlin always remained attracted: Zamyatin's *dystopia*, *We*, a novel written in the 1920's describing a totalitarian system in which everybody lives in glass houses, deprived of liberty insofar as they are denied privacy.

And yet Berlin was well aware of the possible pitfalls of an exclusively negative, privacy-obsessed concept of liberty. This is the way he describes it: «I wish to be master of my kingdom, but my frontiers are long and insecure, therefore I contract them in order to eliminate the vulnerable area»⁷.

The search for negative liberty, in other words, can be negative. One could of course say that a strategic retreat into an inner citadel – to quote Berlin – is a perfectly conceivable option. Moreover, reducing the area that is exposed to external interference is perhaps a path to wisdom, from the Stoics to Voltaire's conclusion at the end of *Candide*: «*il faut cultiver son jardin*». But individual spaces are not necessarily gardens. They can be holes where phobic beings live in constant fear of intrusion, as in Kafka's hallucinatory short story *The Burrow*.

Isaiah Berlin, however aware of the limitations of negative liberty, and while repeating throughout his essay that both kinds

³ M. Lilla, *Inside the Clockwork*, cit.

⁴ I. Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, cit., p. 122. Berlin also gave a very effective and forceful definition of positive liberty in his dialogue with Ramin Jahanbegloo: «Who governs me? Do others govern me or do I govern myself? If others, by what right, what authority? [...] Who makes the laws or implements them? Am I consulted? Does the majority govern? Why? Does God? The priests? The Party? The pressure of public opinion? Of tradition? By what authority?» (I. Berlin, R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversation with Isaiah Berlin*, New York 1992).

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 135.

of liberty are essential, had a clear preference for it. He especially feared, when considering positive liberty, the willingness of people to give up their negative freedom, their individual space, in order to feel included within a common, «positive» project (belonging to class, community, race, profession, etc.). He feared, not only on the basis of his «British» preference for privacy and individual self-determination, but also having been a witness of the historical horrors of the XX Century, a product of totalitarian dreams of positive liberty.

Let us listen to his words:

Pluralism, with the measure of negative liberty that it entails, seems to me to be a truer and more humane ideal than the goal of those who seek in the great, disciplined, authoritarian structures the idea of “positive” self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind⁸.

And an even clearer quote from his conversation with Ramin Jahanbegloo:

Positive and negative liberty are both perfectly valid concepts, but it seems to me that historically more damage has been done by pseudo-positive than by pseudo-negative liberty in the modern world⁹.

It has to be stressed, indeed, that Berlin was very much aware of the fact that his suspicion toward positive liberty and his preference for negative liberty were to a large extent historically more than philosophically determined. In his 1969 introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*, he writes:

...whereas liberal ultra-individualism could scarcely be said to be a rising force at present, the rhetoric of ‘positive’ liberty, at least in its distorted form, is in far greater evidence, and continues to play its historic role (in both capitalist and anti-capitalist societies) as a cloak for despotism in the name of wider freedom¹⁰.

Revisiting Berlin's definitions at the beginning of the XXI century we are inevitably led to asking a fundamental question. Can we repeat with him today, as he did in 1969 (a year after the global burst of youthful energy in search of a utopian positive liberty in open hostility to «bourgeois» negative

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 171. See also the following quote, effectively reconstructing a mood that could not have been farther from Berlin's ethos, but which he understood with great clarity: «We are soldiers in an army, and no longer suffer the pains and penalties of solitude; the army is on the march, our goals are set for us, not chosen by us; doubts are stilled by authority» (p. 77).

⁹ Berlin and Jahanbegloo, op. cit., p. 41.

¹⁰ *Two Concepts of Liberty*, cit., xlvii-xlviii.

liberties) that «liberal ultra-individualism could scarcely be said to be a rising force at present»?

Both from the point of view of ideological hegemony and of conventional wisdom, today, after the historical defeat of the great positive-liberty project (shameful for the violent, totalitarian versions, pathetic for the merely utopian ones), liberal ultra-individualism, a radical version of negative liberty is indeed a rising force.

Berlin had no illusion that such individualism would inevitably produce democracy, and wrote instead: «There is no necessary connexion between individual liberty and democratic rule»¹¹.

There is something very specific and contradictory, however, in the way negative liberty is perceived – and pursued – in our time.

Today more than ever, facing the menace of global terrorism and the perceived threat of difference-with-proximity (immigration of people who are culturally different), we are not seeing Voltaire's *Candide* in his serene garden, but rather Kafka's terrified mole buried deep in its subterranean shelter.

The mole is afraid that someone will break through the walls, attack and annihilate. But today's mole, the fearful individual of the developed world, needs and demands one specific kind of positive liberty – security against what is perceived as menacing, as trying to break through the defensive walls enclosing the space of negative liberty. Negative liberty, today, is no longer the liberal utopia of the past, but rather a sort of gated community whose borders are patrolled by the antithesis of negative liberty, a security state. We are not very far from Hobbes' view of the Sovereign, whose power is recognised and instituted so that individuals will not live in the constant fear of being killed. Positive freedom, as Berlin conceived it, is, instead, much more than security. It is participation in civil and political life, it is solidarity within each community, it is the constant improvement, in democracy, of institutions guaranteeing the space for the individual against much more than violent menace. If the mole does not cower in its burrow, maybe it will have a say and an impact on the environment from which threats can originate, because it is only by exercising positive liberty that the space for the individual can be guaranteed not just in rhetoric but in reality. As Amartya

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

Sen has written in purely «Berlinian» terms, «Lack of positive freedom makes individuals vulnerable as to their negative freedom»¹².

At the same time, in other political systems (that as a rule can be found in the less-developed world) we still see traces, though weaker and weaker, of an unbalanced focus on positive liberty. Class and race, the rallying points for 20th-century totalitarian utopias, have been replaced by nation and religion. Negative liberty is disparaged, attributed to an exclusively Western moral world, denounced as a propaganda tool of imperial domination. To reply to these last gasps of non-democratic ideologies inimical to negative freedom we do not need any special theoretical insight. It is sufficient to consider the harsh lessons of history, especially the history of the 20th century, which have shown us that even the most generous and humanistic schemes of positive liberty end up in blood and failure insofar as the lack of individual spaces of liberty annuls political initiative, moral dignity, human rights. The lack of a space for negative liberty, in other words, poisons and distorts any project in the area of positive liberty.

The contemporary ideological preference for negative freedom has emerged in recent times in the framework of the debate on human rights and, more specifically, in the discussion on social and economic rights. Those who deny them the status of «real» rights, clearly refer to the concept of negative liberty. They contend that:

[...] civil and political rights require non-interference on the part of the state, whereas the implementation of economic, social and cultural rights requires active intervention by the state. The former are, therefore, said to create negative obligations, whereas the latter create positive obligations¹³.

One must say that locating civil and political rights within the scope of negative liberty is indeed a daring proposition, insofar as civil – and more so, political – rights clearly fall within the «freedom to» area, rather than the negative, «freedom from», one.

In other essays, Berlin spells out what he feels are the consequences of both negative and positive liberty if they are

¹² A. Sen, *Individual Freedom as a Social Commitment*, in «The New York Review of Books», 14 June 1990, p. 49 (address at the award ceremony for the Agnelli International Prize, Turin, Italy).

¹³ H.J. Steiner, P. Alston (eds.), *International Human Rights in Context*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 280. The authors quote in particular the arguments utilised by Marc Bossuyt (*La distinction entre les droits civils et politiques et les droits économiques, sociaux et culturels*, in «Human Rights Journal», n. 783, 1975).

brought to their absolute and radical consequences. In his article on Johann Georg Hamann, on one hand, he shows the extremes of negative liberty, and warns: «Every creature has a natural right to appropriate all that surrounds it to the limits of its power»¹⁴.

But this is indeed the core problem of negative liberty, if taken by itself. Negative liberty claims a sphere of individual self-determination which should be subtracted from external interference. But the problem, if we do not introduce the rules, the laws and institutions, the checks and balances that can only be supplied by positive liberty, is that the extent of such sphere is neither given nor self-evident, but it is inevitably the source of contention and conflict.

In his essay on De Maistre, on the other hand, Berlin depicts with utmost clarity and brilliancy the ominous consequences, both political and moral – the essay indeed points at the origins of fascism – of the denial of legitimacy of negative freedom and the disappearance of rights in favor of duties¹⁵.

Let me conclude by saying that Berlin's lesson on liberty can be extremely valuable also in our time, but only if we understand and apply its deeper logic and if we attain its core beyond the influence (an influence that Berlin readily admitted) of Berlin's experience in the time during which he lived and articulated his thought. If we listen to Berlin, we will not be partisans either of negative or of positive liberty, but necessarily of both. And, drawing political consequences from Berlin's thought, we will necessarily be engaged on different sides of this dyad, not a dichotomy, according to time and place.

In totalitarian, non-democratic situations we will act as strenuous defenders of negative freedom, claiming for each and all a space of personal self-determination both in spiritual and lifestyle issues. But when confronted with detachment from solidarity, selfish pursuit of negative liberty against all rules and limitations, we will try to bear with all our strength on the side of positive liberty, of the rule of law, of democracy, of participation, of solidarity beyond walls and borders.

While refraining from giving us a specific political indication, Berlin did much more, and much better. He supplied us with a moral and political compass helping us to steer a decent and humane course in the troubled waters of human history. And for this we will always be in debt to him.

¹⁴ I. Berlin, *The Magus of the North*, in «The New York Review of Books», 21 October 1995, p. 64.

Of course in Hamann there is an external limit to negative liberty, God. But as it is often the case in religion, especially its mystical versions, God can be the name we give to our own individual impulses, which again brings us back to self-referential negative liberty.

¹⁵ I. Berlin, *Joseph De Maistre and the Origins of Fascism*, in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity. Chapters on the History of Ideas*, New York 1991, pp. 91 ff.