



TWO CONCEPTS OF NATIONALISM
An Interview with Isaiah Berlin
Nathan Gardels

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

The series will make digitally available both selected published essays and edited transcripts of unpublished material. As in the present case, topical published material will also be included from time to time for ease of access.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

TWO CONCEPTS OF NATIONALISM

An Interview with Isaiah Berlin

Nathan Gardels

This interview, conducted at the end of the summer of 1991 in Portofino, Italy, was first published as ‘The Ingathering Storm of Nationalism: The Return of the Volksgeist’ in *New Perspectives Quarterly* 8 no. 4 (Fall 1991), 4–10. It was reprinted with amendments and additions as ‘Two Concepts of Nationalism’ in the *New York Review of Books* (NYRB), 21 November 1991, 19–23 (corrections 5 December 1991, 58), and in its original form as ‘Return of the Volksgeist: Nationalism, Good and Bad’ in Nathan Gardels (ed.), *At Century’s End: Great Minds Reflect on Our Times* (La Jolla, 1995: ALTI Publishing; Dublin, 1997: Wolfhound Press). It is published here by kind permission of the interviewer.

The text used here is taken from the NYRB, with minor adjustments. The page numbers in [] mark the beginning of the relevant page in the NYRB version, and are provided so that citations from that and the online PDF can use the same page-numbering.

NATHAN GARDELS According to the late Harold Isaacs, author of *Idols of the Tribe*, today we are witnessing a ‘convulsive ingathering’ of nations. Open ethnic warfare rages not far from here in Yugoslavia. The Soviet Union has been rent asunder by resurgent nationalist republics.

The new world order built from the rubble of the Berlin Wall has already gone the way of the Tower of Babel. What are the origins of nationalism? Whence this ingathering storm?

ISAIAH BERLIN The Tower of Babel was meant to be unitary in character; a single great building, reaching to the skies, with one language for everybody.

TWO CONCEPTS OF NATIONALISM

GARDELS The Lord didn't like it.

BERLIN There is, I have been told, an excellent Hebrew prayer to be uttered when seeing a monster: 'Blessed be the Lord our God, who introduceth variety amongst Thy creatures.' We can only be happy to have seen the despotism of the Soviet Tower of Babel collapse into ruin, dangerous as some of the consequences may turn out to be – I mean, a bitter clash of nationalisms. But, unfortunately, that would be nothing new.

In our modern age, nationalism is not resurgent; it never died. Neither did racism. They are the most powerful movements in the world today, cutting across many social systems.

None of the great thinkers of the nineteenth century predicted this. Saint-Simon predicted the importance of industrialists and bankers. Fourier, who understood that if glass was made unbreakable there could be no business for the glazier, grasped the so-called 'contradictions of capitalism'. Jacob Burckhardt predicted the military–industrial complex. Not very much of what Marx predicted turned out to be true, except for the vitally important insight that technology transforms culture. Big Business and class conflicts are among its results.

Liberals, democrats, republicans thought that the great European imperial regimes were perhaps the central problem of their century. Once these tyrannical conglomerations – the British Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire – were, together with colonialism, destroyed, the peoples under their heels would live peacefully together and realise their destiny in a productive and creative manner. Well, they were mistaken.

Although most liberal philosophers of the nineteenth century opposed the cruel exploitation of the 'dark masses' by imperialism, in no case did any of them think that black, Indian or Asian peoples could ever have states, parliaments or armies – they were completely Eurocentric.

That, I suspect, changed with the Russo–Japanese war of 1904. The fact that an Asiatic nation defeated a great European

power must have produced an electric shock in the minds of many Indians, Africans and others, and given a great fillip to the idea of anti-imperialist self-assertion and national independence. In the twentieth century left-wing movements might not have succeeded in, for example, in Egypt or Algeria, or Ghana or Syria, or Iraq if they had not come arm-in-arm with nationalist feeling.

Non-aggressive nationalism is another story entirely. I trace the beginning of that idea to the highly influential eighteenth-century German poet and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.

Herder virtually invented the idea of belonging. He believed that just as people need to eat and drink, to have security and freedom of movement, so too they need to belong to a group. Deprived of this, they felt cut off, lonely, diminished, unhappy. Nostalgia, Herder said, was the noblest of all pains. To be human meant to be able to feel at home somewhere, with your own kind.

Each group, according to Herder, has its own *Volksgeist* or *Nationalgeist* – a set of customs and a lifestyle, a way of perceiving and behaving that is of value solely because it is its own. The whole of cultural life is shaped from within the particular stream of tradition that comes of collective historical experience shared only by members of the group. Thus one could not, for example, fully understand the great Scandinavian sagas unless one had oneself experienced (as he did on his voyage to England) the struggles of rough, doughty sailors against a great tempest in the North Sea.

Herder's idea of the nation was deeply non-aggressive. All he wanted was cultural self-determination. He denied the superiority of one people over another. Anyone who proclaimed it was saying something false. Herder believed in a variety of national cultures, all of which could, in his view, peacefully coexist. Each culture was equal in value and deserved its place in the sun. The villains of history for Herder were the great conquerors such as Alexander the Great, Caesar or Charlemagne, because they stamped out native cultures. He did not live to see the full effects of Napoleon's victories – but since they undermined the

TWO CONCEPTS OF NATIONALISM

dominion of the Holy Roman Empire, he might have forgiven him.

Only what was unique had true value. This is why Herder also opposed the French universalists of the Enlightenment. For him there were few timeless truths: time and place and social life – what came to be called civil society – were everything.

GARDELS Of course, Herder's *Volksggeist* became the Third Reich.

And today the Serbian *Volksggeist* is at war with the Croatian *Volksggeist*, the Armenians and the Azeris have long been at it, and, among the Georgians and Russians – and even the Ukrainians and the Russians – passions are stirring.

What transforms the aspiration of cultural self-determination into nationalist aggression?

BERLIN I have written elsewhere that a wounded *Volksggeist* is like a bent twig, forced down so severely that when released, it lashes back with fury. Nationalism, at least in the West, is created by wounds inflicted by stress. As for Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Empire, they seem today to be one vast, open wound. After years of oppression and humiliation, there is liable to occur a violent counter-reaction, an outburst of national pride, often aggressive self-assertion, by liberated nations and their leaders.

Although I am not allowed to say this to German historians, I believe that Louis XIV was principally responsible for the beginnings of German nationalism in the seventeenth century. While the rest of Europe – Italy, England, Spain, the Low Countries, above all France – experienced a magnificent renaissance in art and thought, political and military power, Germany, after the age of Dürer, Grünewald and Altdörfer, became, with the exception of architecture, a relative backwater. The Germans tended to be looked down upon by the French as

provincials – simple, slightly comical, beer-drinking yokels, literate but ungifted.

At first there was naturally much imitation of the French, but later, as always, there was a reaction. Some devout German preachers asked, ‘Why not be ourselves? Why imitate foreigners? Let the French have their royal courts, their salons, worldly abbés, soldiers, poets, painters, their empty glory. It’s all dross. Nothing matters save a man’s relation to his own soul, to God, to true values, which are of the spirit, the inner life, Christian truth.’

By the 1670s this pietist–national counter-movement was under way; this was the spiritual movement in which Kant, Herder, Hamann, the sages of East Prussia grew up. This clerical Francophobia, fuelled, no doubt, by anti-Romanism, looks very like a grand form of sour grapes. That is when nationalist self-assertion begins. By 1720 Thomasius, a minor German thinker, dared to give university lectures in his own tongue, in German, instead of Latin. That was seen as a major departure.

The corresponding consequences of the deeper German humiliations – from the Napoleonic wars to the Treaty of Versailles – are only too obvious.

Today Georgians, Armenians and the rest are trying to recover their submerged pasts, pushed into the background by the huge Russian imperial power. Persecuted under Stalin, Armenian and Georgian literature survived: Isakian and Yashvili were gifted poets; Pasternak’s translations of Vaz Pshavela and Tabidze are wonderful [20] reading – but when Ribbentrop went to see Stalin in 1939 he presented him with a German translation of the twelfth-century Georgian epic *The Knight in the Tiger Skin* by Rustaveli. Who, in the West, knew of later masterpieces?

Sooner or later the backlash comes with irrepressible force. People tire of being spat upon, ordered about by a superior nation, a superior class or a superior anyone. Sooner or later they ask the nationalist questions: ‘Why do we have to obey them?’ ‘What right have they ...?’ ‘What about us?’ ‘Why can’t we ...?’

TWO CONCEPTS OF NATIONALISM

GARDELS All these bent twigs in revolt may have finally overturned the ideological world order. The explosion of the Soviet system may be the last act of deconstruction of the Enlightenment ideals of unity, universality and liberal rationalism. That's all finito now.

BERLIN I think that that is true. And Russia is an appropriate place to illuminate the misapprehensions of the *lumières*. Most Russian Westernisers who followed the eighteenth-century French thinkers admired them because they stood up to the Church, stood up to reactionary tendencies, stood up to the authority of tradition. Voltaire and Rousseau were heroes because they enlisted reason and the right to freedom, against reaction.

But even the radical writer Alexander Herzen, my hero, never accepted, for example, Condorcet's claims to knowable, timeless truths. He thought the idea of continuous progress an illusion, and protested against the new idolatries, the substitute for human sacrifice, the sacrifice of living beings to new altars – abstractions, like the universal class or the infallible party or the march of history – the victimisation of the present for the sake of an unknowable future that would lead to some harmonious solution.

Herzen regarded any dedication to abstract unity and universality with great suspicion. For him England was England, France was France, Russia was Russia. The differences neither could nor should be flattened out. The end of life was life itself. For Herzen, as for Herder and the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, cultures were incommensurable. It follows, though they do not spell it out, that the pursuit of total harmony, or the perfect state, is a fallacy, and sometimes a fatal one.

Of course, nobody believed in universality more than the Marxists: Lenin, Trotsky and the others who triumphed saw themselves as disciples of the Enlightenment thinkers, corrected and brought up to date by Marx.

If one were to defend the general record of Communism, which neither you nor I would be particularly willing to do, it would have to be defended on the basis that Stalin may have murdered forty million people – but at least he kept nationalism down and prevented the ethnic babel from anarchically asserting its ambitions. Of course, Stalin did keep it – and everything else – down, but he didn't kill it. As soon as the stone was rolled away from the grave it rose again with a vengeance.

GARDELS Herder was a 'horizontal' critic, if you will, of the French *lumières* because he believed in the singularity of all cultures. Giambattista Vico also opposed the Enlightenment idea of universality from a 'vertical', or historical, perspective. As you have written, he believed each successive culture was incommensurable with others.

BERLIN Both rejected the Enlightenment idea that man, in every country at every time, had identical values. For them, as for me, the plurality of cultures is irreducible.

GARDELS In your perspective, does the final breakup of Communist totalitarianism, a creature of the ideal of universality, suggest that we are living out the final years of the last modern century?

BERLIN I almost accept that. The ideal of universality, so deeply perverted that it would utterly horrify the eighteenth-century *philosophes* who expounded it, evidently lives on in some form in the remote reaches of Europe's influence – China, Vietnam, North Korea, Cuba.

GARDELS One can only imagine how differently the twentieth century would have turned out had Vico and Herder prevailed rather than the French *philosophes*, or Hegel and Marx, if the local

TWO CONCEPTS OF NATIONALISM

soul had not been overrun by the world soul. We might have had a century of cultural pluralism instead of totalitarianism.

BERLIN How could that have happened? Universalism in the eighteenth century was the doctrine of the top nation, France. So everyone tried to emulate its brilliant culture.

Perhaps it is much more the rise of the natural sciences, with the emphasis on universal laws, and nature as an organism or a machine, and the imitation of scientific methods in other spheres, which dominated all thinking. Fuelled by these ideas, the nineteenth-century explosion of technology and economic development isolated the intellectual stream deriving from such non-quantitative – indeed, qualitative – thinkers as Vico and Herder.

The temper of the times is illustrated in a story told in one of Jacob Talmon's books. He writes of two Czech schoolmasters talking with each other around the early 1800s. 'We're probably the last people in the world to speak Czech,' they said to each other; 'our language is at an end. Inevitably, we'll all speak German here in Central Europe, and probably the Balkans. We're the last survivors of our native culture.' Of course, such survivors are today in the saddle in many lands.

GARDELS Is Balkanisation – even the Balkanisation of the Balkans – then a good thing?

BERLIN Balkanisation means many small nations filled with national pride and hatreds and jealousies, egged on by demagogues, marching against each other as they did in the Balkans around 1912. That is a very bleak prospect.

Herder believed, perhaps rather naively, that societies could develop peacefully and non-violently along their own internal lines, not jealous of or hostile to others who do the same – on the contrary, positively sympathetic to each other. This was also the

faith of [21] the great nineteenth-century Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini.

GARDELS Perhaps the wounds of totalitarian humiliation are too deep for such a benign vision?

BERLIN Václav Havel will tell you that the Czechs have no aggressive intentions. He is exactly the kind of cultural liberal that Tomáš Masaryk, the founder of modern Czechoslovakia (now, I gather, called the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic), was, all his honourable life. Adam Michnik or Bronislaw Geremek would, I am sure, like this to be true of Poland. I should like to believe this about Lech Wałęsa and Boris Yeltsin. But there is no doubt that the possibility, unfortunately even the likelihood, of ethnic strife abounds in that part of the world.

GARDELS What political structure can possibly accommodate this new age of cultural self-determination, preserve liberty, and perhaps stem some of the impending bloodshed?

BERLIN Cultural self-determination without a political framework is precisely the issue now, and not only for the East. Spain has the Basques and Catalans; Britain has Northern Ireland; Canada the Québécois; Belgium has the Flemings; Israel the Arabs; and so on. Whoever in the past would have dreamed of Breton nationalism or a Scottish national party?

Idealists like Herder evidently didn't consider this problem. He hated the Austro-Hungarian Empire for politically welding together incompatible elements.

In Eastern Europe they really do seem to loathe each other. Romanians hate the Hungarians and Hungarians have for years disliked the Czechs in a way the Bretons can't pretend to hate the French. It is a phenomenon of a different order. Only the Irish are like that in the West.

TWO CONCEPTS OF NATIONALISM

Only in America have a variety of ethnic groups retained at any rate some part of their own original cultures, and nobody seems to mind. The Italians, Poles, Jews, Hispanics have their own newspapers, books and, I am told, TV programmes.

GARDELS Perhaps when immigrants forsake their soil they leave behind the passionate edge of their *Volksgeist* as well. Yet even in America a new multiculturalist movement has emerged in academia that seeks to stress in the curriculum not what is common, but what is not.

BERLIN Yes, I know. Black studies, Puerto Rican studies and the rest. I suppose this too is a bent-twig revolt of minorities who feel at a disadvantage in the context of American polyethnicity. But I believe that the common culture which all societies deeply need can only be disrupted by more than a moderate degree of self-assertion on the part of ethnic or other minorities conscious of a common identity. Polyethnicity was not Herder's idea. He didn't urge the Germans to study Dutch or German students to study the culture of the Portuguese.

For Herder there is nothing about race and nothing about blood. He only spoke about soil, language, common memories and customs. His central point, as a Montenegrin friend once said to me, is that loneliness is not just the absence of others but far more a matter of living among people who do not understand what you are saying; they can truly be understood only if they belong to a community where communication is effortless, almost instinctive.

Herder, I think, would have looked unkindly on the cultural friction generated in Vienna, where many nationalities were crammed into the same narrow space. It produced men of genius, but with a deeply neurotic element in a good many of them – one need only think of Gustav Mahler, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Kraus, Arnold Schoenberg, Stefan Zweig, and the birth of

psychoanalysis in this largely Jewish – particularly defenceless – society.

All that tremendous collision of not very compatible cultures – Slavs, Italians, Germans, Jews – unleashed a great deal of creativity. This was a different kind of cultural expression from that of an earlier Vienna, that of Mozart or Haydn or Schubert.

GARDELS In grappling with the separatist Québécois, Pierre Trudeau often invoked Lord Acton. He felt that wherever political boundaries coincided with ethnic ones, chauvinism, xenophobia and racism inevitably threatened liberty.

Only individual constitutional rights – equal citizenship rights for all, despite ethnicity – in a federal republic could protect minorities and individuals. ‘The theory of nationality’, Trudeau quoted Acton as saying, ‘is a retrograde step in history.’

BERLIN Lord Acton was a noble figure, and I agree with him. Yet we have to admit that, despite Trudeau’s efforts, the Québécois are still seeking independence.

In the grand scale of things one has to consider that, despite royal and clerical monopolies of power and authority, the Middle Ages were, in some ways, more civilised than the deeply disturbed nineteenth century – and, worse still, our own terrible century, with its widespread violence, chauvinism and, in the end, mass destruction in racial, and Stalin’s political, holocausts. Of course, there were ethnic frictions in the Middle Ages, and persecution of Jews and heretics, but nationalism as such didn’t exist. The wars were dynastic. What existed was the universal Church and a common Latin language.

We can’t turn history back. Yet I do not wish to abandon the belief that a world which is a reasonably peaceful coat of many colours, each portion of which develops its own distinct cultural identity and is tolerant of others, is not a utopian dream.

TWO CONCEPTS OF NATIONALISM

GARDELS Of what common thread can the coat be spun, though?

In a universe of autonomous cultural worlds, each in its own orbit, where is the sun that keeps the various planets from careening out of orbit and colliding with the others?

BERLIN That can lead to cultural imperialism again. In Herder's universe you didn't need a sun. His cultures were not planets, but stars that didn't [22] collide. I admit that at the end of the twentieth century there is little historical evidence for the realisability of such a vision.

At eighty-two, I've lived through virtually the entire century, the worst century that Europe has ever had.

In my life, more dreadful things occurred than at any other time in history. Worse, I suspect, even than the days of the Huns.

One can only hope that after the various peoples get exhausted from fighting, the bloody tide will subside. Unless tourniquets can be applied to stop the haemorrhaging, and bandages to the wounds so that they can slowly heal, even if they leave scars, we're in for the continuation of a very bad time.

The only nations about which one need not wring one's hands are the sated nations, unwounded or healed, such as the liberal democracies of North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand and, one hopes, Japan.

GARDELS Perhaps the two futures will live, decoupled, side by side. A civilisation of the soil, so to speak, and a civilisation of the satellite.

Instead of the violent splintering of nations, the sated nations will become a small world after all, with the passions of blood and soil drained away by homogenising consumerism and mass entertainment?

Perhaps that is the price of peaceful integration? As Milan Kundera has recently written, frivolous cultures are

anthropologic-ally incapable of war. But they are also incapable of producing Picassos.

BERLIN As for that, I don't believe that only tragic events and wounds can create genius. In Central Europe, Kafka and Rilke bore wounds. But neither Racine nor Molière nor Pushkin nor Turgenev – unlike Dostoevsky – bore deep spiritual wounds. And Goethe seems completely free from them. The fate of the Russian poets of our century is another, gloomier, story.

Without doubt, uniformity may increase under the pressure of technology, as is already happening with the Americanisation of Europe. Some people hate it, but it clearly can't be stopped.

As we discussed, it is possible, as in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to have political and economic uniformity, but cultural variety. That is what I ultimately visualise, a degree of uniformity in the 'sated' nations, combined with a pleasing degree of peaceful variety in the rest of the world. I admit that the present trend is in the opposite direction: sharp, sometime aggressive self-assertion on the part of some very minor human groups.

GARDELS What about the emergence of a new set of common values – ecological rights and human rights – that can to some degree unite all these erupting cultures without cramping their style?

BERLIN At the present there don't seem to be accepted minimum values that can keep the world straight. Let us hope, one day, that a large minimum of common values, such as the ones you mention, will be accepted. Otherwise we are bound to go under. Unless there is a minimum of shared values that can preserve the peace, no decent societies can survive.

GARDELS The liberal dream of cosmopolitanism, even in the sated world, is not on the agenda as far as you are concerned?

TWO CONCEPTS OF NATIONALISM

BERLIN Like Herder, I regard cosmopolitanism as empty. People can't develop unless they belong to a culture. Even if they rebel against it and transform it entirely, they still belong to a stream of tradition. New streams can be created – in the West, by Christianity, or Luther, or the Renaissance, or the Romantic movement, but in the end they derive from a single river, an underlying central tradition, which, sometimes in radically altered forms, survives.

But if the streams dried up, as, for instance, where men and women are not products of a culture, where they don't have kith and kin and feel closer to some people than to others, where there is no native language – that would lead to a tremendous desiccation of everything that is human.

GARDELS So for you Vico and Herder, the apostles of cultural pluralism, are the philosophers of the future?

BERLIN Yes, in the sense that we are all affected by a variety of values to some degree. From the Greeks and the Hebrews to the Christian Middle Ages to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, unity was the great virtue. Truth is one, many is error.

Variety is a new virtue, brought to us by the Romantic movement, of which Herder and Vico, whom I regard as the prophets of variety, were an important part. After that, variety, pluralism (which entails the possibility of many incompatible ideals that attract human devotion), sincerity (not necessarily leading to truth or goodness) – all these are thought to be virtues. Once pluralism of ways of life is accepted, and there can be mutual esteem between different, uncombinable outlooks, it is difficult to suppose that all this can be flattened out – *gleichgeschaltet* – by some huge, crushing jackboot.

On this score, let me make a prophecy for the twenty-fifth century. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* – a less dramatic but in a way more insidious prospect than Orwell's *1984* – could

perhaps be established, in part as an irresistible response to the endless ethnic violence and nationalist rivalry at the turn of the millennium. Under this system everyone would be clothed and fed. All would live under one roof, following one single pattern of existence.

But sooner or later somebody will rebel, somebody will cry for room. Not only will people revolt against totalitarianism, but against an all-embracing, well-meaning, benign system as well.

The first terrible fellow to kick over the traces will be burned alive. But other troublemakers will be sure to follow. If there is anything I'm certain about, after living for so long, it is that people must sooner or later rebel against uniformity and attempts at global solutions of any sort.

The Reformation was such a rebellion against claims of universal authority. The domination of the vast territories of the Roman Empire collapsed in due course. So, too, the [23] Austro-Hungarian Empire. The sun set on the British Empire. And now the Soviet Empire.

There is a Russian story about a sultan who decided to punish one of his wives for some misdeed and ordered her sealed up, with her son, in a barrel. The sultan set them afloat at sea to perish.

After several days the son said to the mother, 'I can't bear being so cramped. I want to stretch out.' 'You can't,' she responded, 'you'll push out the bottom, and we'll drown.'

Several days later, the son protested again. 'I long for room.' The mother said, 'For God's sake don't do it, we'll drown.' The son then said, 'So be it, I must stretch out, just once, and then let it come.' He got his moment of freedom, and perished.

The Russian radical Herzen applied this brilliantly to the condition of the Russian people. They were, sooner or later, bound to strike out for freedom – no matter what came after.

GARDELS In Herder's day we might have been unable to grasp the masterpiece of a Scandinavian saga without experiencing a

TWO CONCEPTS OF NATIONALISM

North Sea tempest, but today, through MTV, teenagers from Hong Kong to Moscow to Los Angeles can share the same thrill of watching a Madonna concert. What can cultural self-determination mean in such an age?

BERLIN All the same, past differences take their toll: the spectacles through which the young of Bangkok and Valparaiso see Madonna are not the same. The many languages of the islands of Polynesia and Micronesia are said to be totally unlike one another; this is also true of the Caucasus. If you think that all this will one day give way to one universal language – not just for learned purposes or politics or business, but to convey emotional nuances, to express inner lives – then I suppose what you suggest could happen: this would not be one universal culture, but the death of culture. I am glad to be as old as I am.

© Isaiah Berlin and Nathan Gardels 1991

First posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 20 November 2018

Corrected 20 September 2019