

In our Time Programme 1
Isaiah Berlin

Melvyn Bragg : Hello, and welcome to a new series of programmes in which I hope we will be looking at some of the ideas and events that have influenced the century.

My guests today are the writer and broadcaster Michael Ignatieff, whose most recent book was called "The Warriors Honour" and whose biography of Isaiah Berlin, the philosopher is published this month, and Sir Michael Howard, formerly Regis Professor of History at Oxford who is joint editor of the new "Oxford History of the 20th century".

Michael Ignatieff, Isaiah Berlin often used the image of the fox who knows many things and the hedgehog who knows one big thing, an image taken from the Greek poet Archilochus. You say that in his 40's, Isaiah Berlin discovered the big thing that he believed in and he then pursued it in his political philosophy. What was that big thing?

Michael Ignatieff : Well, he always thought of himself as a fox, that is, who ran around, who darted, who eluded pursuit, who knew many things. In his 40's, I think, as a result of going to Moscow, meeting the poet Archmatava, seeing how Russian intellectuals were being persecuted, steel entered into him and he saw that he was a committed Western Liberal, who loathed Soviet tyranny, and the one big thing he knew was the defence of liberty against that kind of Utopia, that kind of totalitarian tyranny, and then further, that the liberty that he believed in, was the liberty of allowing people the chance to make choices, free choices, but choices where you could never be certain that you were right, and therefore the choices that you would make would always involve some kind of loss. That's the kind of central vision, that's the hedgehog core of what he came to defend for the rest of his life.

Melvyn Bragg : Because, as you say in your book, he was a fox in his habits, it was lunch in Washington and dinner in Jerusalem and the opera in London and chatting with people in (indistinct) in Oxford, it was that life, but yet this idea became central, the theme of freedom and it's betrayal in a way, in a way wasn't it? Why d'you think his ideas were thought to be important outside the context of political philosophy? And d'you think they have real importance, they have gravitas, they *mean* something to people today, people actually *act* on them?

Michael Ignatieff : He's a liberal philosopher, and there are all kinds of liberalisms out there, there are liberalisms that are apologists for the free market, there are liberalisms that are basically defences of individual liberty. His liberalism, the thing that makes his liberalism different than anybody else's I think is his sense that our values are often in contradiction, liberalism will be in contradiction with equality, justice will be in conflict with mercy, all the good things that we want in this life we can't have at the same time, we have to choose.

Liberty is a state of making, often tragic choices, in which whatever way we move, we'll lose. There's more emphasis on tragedy in his liberalism than in anyone else's. The reason that he's got shelf life, the reason that he'll last I think is that he's the liberal philosopher who speaks most directly to multicultural, multiethnic, plural societies, where you've got secularists versus religious people, you've got socialists versus liberals, you've got..... you've got people holding world views that are in conflict, and can't be squared by some bland consensus. The good thing about Isaiah is that he cuts liberalism loose from the idea that society should be a bland consensus.

Melvyn Bragg : When he says you can't have too much....Too much freedom, means the freedom of the strong to trample on the weak, and the freedom of the rich to consume the poor, and so on. But this, as it were, uncompromising compromise, which he seems to put forward is a very difficult thing to make er....to catch the imagination, isn't it? We can see Mar...the extremisms, Marx are the power of social Darwinism, how do you think that Isaiah Berlin's ideas, which it seems to me, are both sensible and humane and right, in the way that I look at life, how do you think that they can inform people with the energy and excitement to make an act on them, in political.... because he was a political philosopher?

Michael Ignatieff : I'm sure they can't. They can't be reduced to slogans, they can't..... they don't offer a bright tomorrow, they don't promise full and final victory against life's difficulties and life's..... I mean that's precisely the message, there is no full and final victory.

It's not merely that Utopia isn't attainable, Isaiah (Berlin) bet on the proposition that Utopia was a contradiction in terms, that you simply couldn't have a society in which people would be perfectly happy, perfectly reconciled with their situation. Now....

Melvyn Bragg : He said actually, that "Utopias have their value, nothing so wonderfully expands the imaginative horizons of human potentialities, but as guides to conduct, they can prove literally fatal. "

Michael Ignatieff : Absolutely, and his whole sense of this century was, it was a century that had nearly destroyed itself in its pursuit of Utopia.

I think he's therefore, a sceptic, someone who will be listened to as long as people want to hear sceptical deflations of Utopia. But you know we've been so proof and so susceptible to Utopia in this century, there's no guarantee that there won't be long periods of time where people don't want to hear what Isaiah has to say at all.

Melvyn Bragg : I can see Sir Michael Howard nodding, and I'm coming to you in a moment, but just one more thing before I leave you Michael Ignatieff, In "The two concepts of Liberty", Isaiah Berlin wrote: "Over a hundred years ago the German poet Heiner warned the French not to underestimate the power of ideas. Philosophical concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor's study could destroy civilisation", and, he added : "If professors can truly wield this fatal power, may it not be that only other professors, or at least other thinkers can alone disarm them, our philosophers seem oddly unaware of these devastating effects of their activities". That's a very high claim for thinkers, do you think that he, in his thinking, justified or testified to that?

Michael Ignatieff : Oh, Isaiah was very, very self critical, and he would have thought that would be putting claims for himself much too high. If that's what you're getting at it's certainly right.

Melvyn Bragg : Would you say he had a life of being accused of over-achieving?

Michael Ignatieff : Exactly, and he said, "Long may I be over-estimated", but he never.....

Melvyn Bragg : But do you think he's right about other philosophers then? Leave him aside for a moment.

Michael Ignatieff : I just think that his there is absolutely no doubt that the 20th century has been driven by ideas, there's a kind of anti-intellectual populism which says that what intellectuals say and write doesn't matter, but the 20th century *really* vindicates the kind of ways in which a kind of bastardised Darwinism got into European fascism and led to this kind of survival of the fittest ideology, that literally led to the concentration camps, or conversely, these Utopias of Socialist equality, that led again to the Gulag. I mean, he had a very strong sense that his stuff didn't arise simply because people are tyrannous and brutal and cruel, these kind of concentration camp endings, arise because people believe in certain kind of Utopias, they're driven by intellectual projects, and it's those that are the catastrophic beginnings, the bright beginnings are these catastrophic ends.

Melvyn Bragg : Michael Howard, you co-edited the Oxford History of the 20th century, there are about two dozen essays by different hands, but you introduce it, but this idea of Utopia is picked up by Darandorff at the end, Professor Ralph Darandorff, in his last essay, and you talk about ideas very much in your prologue and in your introduction, Michael Ignatieff has just said that the 20th century was driven by ideas, do you agree with that?

Michael Howard : Yes, it was the century of ideologies, and I think what I try to show in my introduction that other things came through, is why it should have been. It was because the great movement of the last 300 years has been that which began with the "Enlightenment", the belief that mankind had emancipated themselves from traditional values which were based fundamentally on a belief in God, or a God, transmitted by priests whose authority was upheld by, and upheld that of a landed aristocratic rule, with a King at the head of it.

All that was smashed by the encyclopaedist of the 18th century, they said that man could live by reason alone. In the 19th century one saw the modernisation process, extending over the whole of Western Europe, one saw the gradual disintegration of those hierarchic agrarian societies, of the traditional beliefs in one kind of religion or another, and the development of urban-based societies, as opposed to agrarian-based societies, egalitarian as opposed to

hierarchical, and the elimination, with the 1st world war as the final catastrophic conclusion, of the whole of traditional values and beliefs as they had been inherited over the centuries, and had been absorbed by peoples, without them realising that that was really it, leaving an absolutely, sort of, blasted heath on which anybody could come and build, and provide ideas, if they were no longer going to believe in God or King, what were they going to believe in?

Melvyn Bragg : Yes. Is the 20th century's belief in ideology in some definitive way, which you can tell us, different from say the 14th, 15th, 16th centuries belief in the ideology of Christianity?

Michael Howard : It depends how you define ideology. I think the difference between the ideology of Christianity is that it had developed slowly and incrementally, over centuries.....

Melvyn Bragg : But it had developed in different ways, it had re-invented itself again and again.

Michael Howard : But it was in its way, it was a sort of a totalitarian belief, which had become civilised, that it underpinned a pretty static kind of society, although it also underpinned revolutions at various points. The difference I think between that and 20th century ideologies, is that these were inventing new Utopias, as Michael Ignatieff has said, which had to be enforced by new kinds of models, by new kinds of compulsion, with the abolition, the renunciation of all the modifications, all the civilised elements, which had been built in and had gradually evolved by the 18th and 19th century.

Melvyn Bragg : Why do you think that we, if you're right, and if the 20th century, and if you and Michael Ignatieff, I have to keep calling you by your full names because I have two Michaels but there you go, if you and Michael Ignatieff are right, if you're right that the 20th century has been peculiarly marked, peculiarly susceptible, peculiarly inflicted on by ideologies, why do you think that is? Is it because of the strength of the ideologies? Is it because of the disruption of the time? Is it because we ourselves have become more susceptible? Why do you think it is, if it is so, why is it so?

Michael Howard : Well it is because, as I suggested, because of the disruption, if not, the actual destruction of all the older belief systems, and that was particularly so in those countries, particularly Russia, and then later on Germany, where the whole of society had really been torn apart and destroyed by the effects of war.

Melvyn Bragg : But you had the old belief system, for example, in Spain, the old belief...the Catholic system in Spain, was more or less intact, and fascism was superimposed on it, so the old belief system was still maintained.

Michael Howard : Fascism was a very, very minor part of the general reaction in Spain. In Spain what you get basically is an old fashioned clerical society with a very, very nasty edge built into it. Fighting against the new secularist socialism.

Melvyn Bragg : Italy again maintained its religion, so to a great extent did Germany, Britain was a religious society which didn't go that way, so you can't.....

Michael Howard : Aahh, well, because you see Britain has never become an ideological society, very largely because we have been very, very gently changed, as opposed to the catastrophic changes of our continental neighbours. If we had lost the 1st world war, and been through the kind of catastrophes that Germany went through in the 1920's, I would not put any money on our remaining a liberal society, or of avoiding the kind of ideological confrontations that happened elsewhere.

Melvyn Bragg : Really, I'd be inclined to be rather more optimistic than you, there's no way of judging it! But er...Michael Ignatieff what do you say to what Michael Howard has said and can you....can I infuse another question here? Do you think that these ideas that you are talking about and Michael Howard's point is talking about, Marx and Darwin, and you were talking about social Darwin, do you think that these ideas that men take on because they are ideas, and it largely is men, or do you think they take them on because it suits their purposes? Do you...like Vlad the Impaler said he was a Christian, but basically he was Vlad the Impaler, and he wantedyou know, he wanted to get

his own back for what had happened to him as a child, as we all know, but he also wanted to conquer the enemy, and he impaled, now erm. .

Michael Ignatieff : Yes, I think that....

Melvyn Bragg : ...how much are we talking about ideas just being the cherry on the cake? Just....and not being the drive really, vicious wicked people are vicious and wicked anyway, and they nab an idea because it helps them along.

Michael Ignatieff : I think you can examine that question by looking at someone like Lenin. I mean, it's clear that Lenin on the one hand was a genuine intellectual, a genuine ideologist. He sat there, lonely yeras in the British Museum in the late 1890's reading books and having thoughts. There's that Lenin, and then there's also the Lenin that..... the ruthless technician of power, and I have a feeling that clearly the ideology simply served the ruthless technician of power. But I think that Sir Michael's made a terribly important point about the "basted heath" after the end of the 1st world war. I mean Lenin takes over the apparatus of one of the biggest states in the world, in a situation of total devastation, total disintegration of the Tzarist regime, total disintegration of all conceivable available values. He has the mechanisms of state power in the right hand, in the left hand he has the hot gospel of communism. You put the two together, and you've got an absolutely irresistable machine. I don't think you can run that machine, that machine of power, unless you give somebody something to believe in. The two..... in other words, you can't....your suggesting that you just use the ideology to just kind of cover the machine, the ideology makes the machine work. People die for the machine because they believe in the ideology, and that's the truly awful thing about the 20th century, we've never had a more efficient state machine, we've never had more efficient technology of domination and we've never had more totalising ideologies, you put the two together, and got something that damn near destroyed the human race, in this century. That's why Isaiah always said, you know, "This was the worst century in recorded history", and when you asked him what was it that astonished him about his own life, it was simply that he'd survived it!

Melvyn Bragg : If....I'm sorry, carry on.

Michael Howard : I think you've got to look at individuals concerned, Vlad the Impaler, about whom you're obviously a greater expert than I am (laughter), was functioning within a certain kind of medeival type of Christianity, and he took the myth as it was, and functioned within it, and used it to justify what he was doing, as people normally do in those kinds of societies.

Melvyn Bragg : Didn't Stalin?

Michael Howard : Erm...Stalin again is somebody who I think is dealing with, as Micahel Ignatieff said, a situation where all beliefs have virtually disappeared, and the party then does become virtually a **church**. Both in Russia and indeed in Nazi Germany. Now clearly, Hitler was somebody who fanatically believed in what he preached, and I should think that somebody like Himler, also did, and one can see various others, who did.

Melvyn Bragg : So do you agree with Micahel Ignatieff that in Hitler's case the idea was integral to power?

Michael Howard : Oh completely, he could could never have got where he did if he did not A) have this idea and B) was able to act as a sort of enthusiastic prosthelitiser for it, and organise the ideology in a brilliant terrifyingly effective way.

Melvyn Bragg : You write about the Social Darwinism of war in your essay in this book of essays about the 20th century, and you talk about Nationalism as the ultimate..... war is the ultimate test of the fitness of nations to survive, now Isaiah Berlin talked a great deal about Nationalism and was against it, although he was for groups, as it were, who also remarked that Nationalism seemed to have come to an end about 100 years ago, yet here it is, still a power at the end of the century. Could you tell us why you think, it thought having been come to an end 100 years ago, it's still flourishing and so dynamic and so disruptive, and perhaps also positive? Can we discuss that?

Michael Howard : Well, there are two different...erm I suppose Nationalism is the same wherever it is, but it appears in different guises and in different kinds of societies. For Western Europe, on the whole, Nationalism reinforced the existing social and political structure, and was used to do that. What had previously been dynastic loyalties to the house of (indistinct) or the house of Bourbon, whatever it may have been, was reinforced by Nationalism, God, King and country all came together, and if there wasn't a King, well it was just too bad, you just said, "La patrie", and this was equally good. They were reinforcing these large solid modernising societies. In Eastern Europe, where there was not an effective coherent society already going, the dynastic loyalties to the Hapsburg family was not enough to hold the empire together, and when that collapsed then it fell into little bits and all the local Nationalisms which had been encouraged by the Nationalist ideology of the 19th century, all the historians who were devising the history of Serbia and the history of Greece or the history of Rumania, all the dictionary writers and the linguists who had been turning what had previously been local dialects into full languages, Gaelic whatever it may have been, creating, as it were, the idea of nations, these then took over, and they were intensely disruptive.