

2010

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Review ESSAY

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/>

Published on **7 September 2010**

H-Diplo Review Essays Editor: Diane Labrosse

H-Diplo Web and Production Editor: John Vurpillat

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse

Isaiah Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," in *Liberty, the Collected Essays of Isaiah Berlin*, edited by Henry Hardy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

With reference to **Robert Kaplan, "Man versus Afghanistan," *The Atlantic*** (April 2010).

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Guilhot-Berlin.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Nicolas Guilhot**, NYU / CNRS

Who reads Isaiah Berlin these days? There is indeed something quite outdated about the work of the Oxford philosopher. The punctilious distinctions between the different ways in which liberty can be construed and in particular the opposition between "negative" and "positive" liberty are by now part of the mental furniture of any student of the discipline, so ingrained, in fact, that they have been detached from their author. They also seem to be wedded to intellectual battles that are no longer ours. Berlin's fights retrospectively appear as the fights of an era, the Cold War, which seems to have taken place light-years away from our confused post-9/11 condition. A fellow traveler of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an international organization fighting for the heart and mind of European public opinion, Berlin was, along with Karl Popper, Raymond Aron, and a few other political theorists, one of the intellectual foot soldiers of the cultural Cold War, wary to keep politics detached from any sense of fulfilling some historical mission. But the neat frontlines and borders of the Cold War have been replaced by ill-defined "tribal areas" and shaky distinctions between "civilians" and "insurgents," the ideological conflict has abandoned the terrain of science and culture to invest the grounds of religion, and postmodernism has succeeded in defeating narratives of historical progress where scores of people like Berlin have tried and failed.

And yet, for some commentators of current affairs, Berlin continues to provide an intellectual compass for navigating the uncertainties of global politics. In a recent issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Robert Kaplan wrote that "the ur-text [sic] for a philosophical discussion of the role of the U.S. military in the post-Cold War era is Isaiah Berlin's 1953 Oxford lecture, 'Historical Inevitability,' in which he condemns as immoral and cowardly the belief that vast impersonal forces such as geography, environment, and ethnic characteristics determine the direction of world politics. Berlin reproaches Arnold Toynbee and Edward Gibbon for seeing 'nations' and 'civilizations' as 'more concrete' than the

individuals who embody them, and for seeing abstractions like ‘tradition’ and ‘history’ as ‘wiser than we.’”¹ In Kaplan’s surprising rendition, Berlin becomes the ideological weapon of choice against the pessimistic voices predicting the failure of state-building operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Kaplan’s article focuses mostly on General Stanley McCrystal, who seemed to have been more cautious in his conversations with Kaplan than in his later confessions to the magazine *Rolling Stone*). Against those who point at the insignificance of reconstruction efforts compared with the strength of historical trajectories, local constellations and traditions, against the area specialists and the historians of the region, or against those who are considered “realists” in international affairs, Berlin seems to offer the reassuring thought that failure is not a destiny and that individual agency is the only historical force there is. No historical determinism can be summoned to deter the imperial efforts at remaking the world into a better place. Berlin – an unwitting ally of the neoconservative project? After all, the evolution from cultural Cold Warrior to neoconservative is a very common one, and the idea would not be totally spurious.

But before buying into Kaplan’s Berlin, it may be wise to take a fresh look at the essay he quotes. *Historical Inevitability* originates as the first August Comte Memorial Trust Lecture, delivered on May 12, 1953 at the London School of Economics and Political Science (and not at Oxford, as Kaplan writes). Although it starts as a tribute to one of the founding figures of sociology, Berlin’s lecture quickly turns into an extended critique of the very project of building a science of society modeled after the natural sciences, i.e. a social physics. If the application of the method of the latter to the study of social and historical phenomena is flawed in Berlin’s view, it is because it implies that such phenomena, and indeed human history in general, are governed by deterministic laws, susceptible of formal specification, which the scientist would only have to disclose. The very project of developing a social science implies that any event, any action, any episode of history had to be what it ended up being. According to Berlin, this downgrades our capacity to choose and our free will to the rank of a comforting illusion, at best. It also makes meaningless the formulation of moral judgment beyond the limited horizon of one’s own historical situation (if that): “To each condition and generation its own perspective on the past and future” (p. 102), which could not have been different, determined as it was by the immutable laws of society and history. *Historical Inevitability* is a long – sometimes, indeed, too long – disquisition on and indictment of the belief that history is driven by forces located beyond individual agency and blowing in its back.

Berlin’s main argument is not deeply epistemological, nor does *Historical Inevitability* set forth to propose a new theory of history: rather, Berlin’s simple contention, as he later pointed out, is only that the deterministic view of history does not fit with the pragmatics of everyday life, nor with the language we use to represent to ourselves our actions and their consequences. This is primarily reflected in our capacity to formulate moral judgments. We may be subscribing to the existence of determinism in certain instances, but we are simply not acting in accordance with such a belief. The reader interested in the history of the social sciences will find in *Historical Inevitability* a number of themes that will grow in importance in subsequent British historiography: the fact that the “intentions” of

¹ Robert D. Kaplan, “Man versus Afghanistan,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 2010.

historical agents are important, or the attention paid to the pragmatics of language, for instance, are two ideas that will work their way into the writings of the Cambridge school. But the importance of *Historical Inevitability* goes beyond the field of historiography, and cuts deep into the culture wars of the 1950s.

The time at which Berlin was elaborating the ideas contained in his lecture was indeed a critical time for the discipline of history. The rise of the social sciences and the correlate project of building an integrated theory of social phenomena modeled after physics triggered an identity crisis among historians, unsure of the place of their discipline within the emerging ecology of academic knowledge.² Efforts at strengthening the theoretical basis of historiography or at writing a more “scientific” kind of history were indeed attractive for some historians, such as Braudel and the members of the *Annales* school in France, or E.H. Carr in the UK, while others strongly opposed the idea that historical material could ever satisfy the nomothetic ambitions of a social science. Berlin sided squarely with the latter. His main concern was that the social sciences were unwittingly reactivating – albeit under a very secularized form – a philosophy of history. Applied to history, the scientific worldview fostered “the belief that everything is caused to occur as it does by the machinery of history itself – by the impersonal forces of class, race, culture, History, Reason, the Life-Force, Progress, the Spirit of the Age.” (p. 103), and Berlin had many good reasons to believe that the ability to specify a “march of History” was inherently dangerous. In framing his discussion of historical inevitability at such a high level of generality, Berlin was able to catch in the same net very different if not opposed ideological enemies. For the reliance on an explicit or implicit philosophy of history was typical of what Berlin called the “collective” thought (p. 100) common to Marxism and fascism, but also of liberalism in general. Even the benign “belief in the possibility (or probability) of happiness as the product of rational organization” (p. 112) was indeed premised on the idea that there existed laws of historical or social development that, once discovered, could guide political practice. And the fact that this is the message that an Oxford philosopher was delivering at the London School of Economics, a reformist institution created to train civil servants and administrators, was far from benign.

In other words, it is precisely the type of large-scale social engineering defended by Kaplan in his article that Berlin was attacking frontally. Reading Berlin as a thinker who can be summoned in defense of a state-building operation and a counterinsurgency campaign that have gone awry, as Kaplan does, is simply a gross misunderstanding of what *Historical Inevitability* stands for. Berlin was in fact developing a *realist* argument, and he indeed defined realism as “the placing of what occurred (or might occur) in the context of what could have happened (or could happen)” (p. 121). His later writings, in particular those on political judgment contained in the volume *The Sense of Reality* (1996), would make explicit the deep convergence between his thought and that of the postwar realists who were laying at the same time the foundations of international relations theory. This should be a reminder that political theory, of which Berlin was one of the towering figures, was born

² For an example of this anxiety and an overview of these debates see E. K. Francis, “History and the Social Sciences: Some Reflections on the Re-Integration of Social Science,” *The Review of Politics* 13, no. 3 (1951).

not only at the same time as (realist) IR theory, but that the boundary between these discursive formations was initially non-existent. Both emerged in the 1950s as critical enterprises primarily defined by their attempt at separating politics from any teleological or even progressive vision of history.³ Both attacked that idea that politics could be reduced to a set of rules or laws, and defended instead a concrete, situational conception of politics. That a number of thinkers – Aron comes to mind here – actively participated in both enterprises further underscores how close they were. In fact, despite the fact that he describes Butterfield as a “Christian apologist” in *Historical Inevitability* (p. 133), Berlin was much closer to Butterfield, who maintained a providentialist view of history and politics and participated actively in the development of IR theory in both the U.S. and the UK, than to Carr, whose views on historiography, according to Berlin, “breathe[d] the last enchantments of the Age of Reason” (p. 20). A vision of politics not as the fulfillment of history but as a prudential muddling-through that can never attain full rationality was the common sensibility that a number of realist thinkers shared at the time.

If *Historical Inevitability* is topical again today, it is certainly not because the essay can be summoned to the rescue of imperial projects, but rather because it is a coruscating critique of the propensity of any empire to justify itself on the basis of its historical meaning. And the contention that one is in Afghanistan to prevent the country from reverting to the 13th century, as one often hears, is no exception, *pace* Kaplan.

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³ This point is developed in my Nicolas Guilhot, “The Realist Gambit: Postwar American Political Science and the Birth of IR Theory,” *International Political Sociology* 2, no. 4 (2008).