
Originally composed between 1950 and 1952, Political Ideas in the Romantic Age (hereafter PIRA) was initially delivered by Isaiah Berlin at Bryn Mawr College as the Mary Flexner Lectures in 1952. PIRA not only represents Berlin's longest continuous text, it also contains in embryonic form most of the ideas found in Berlin's mature work: positive and negative liberty, his analysis of the philosophy of history, his critique of determinism, and his account of the Enlightenment and its varied critics and successors. As such, PIRA represents a key stage in the development of Berlin's political thought and its greatest value lies in its ability to speak to the question of whether or not Berlin can be understood as a systematic political thinker.

This review of PIRA begins with an overview of the intellectual focus of the book. Next, I assess Berlin's analysis of two major elements of his thought: romanticism and positive versus negative liberty. The review concludes with a critical examination of Berlin's treatment of Rousseau with the objective of assessing Berlin's critique of romanticism.

Berlin focuses on the time period at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century because the ideas of this period are "not only interesting," but also because they "generated and counteracted the period's greatest upheaval, the French Revolution" (p. 1). The French Revolution is important not only as a watershed political event, but also as an intellectual event as the "zealots" of the French Revolution attempt to put into practice some of the conflicting arguments of this period (p. 13). Thus, the Revolution and its consequences represent for Berlin tangible evidence of a tension inherent in the romantic vision that resides at the core of the Revolution's rationale, but more importantly it represents a window through which we gain insight into our own intellectual capital. According to Berlin, the political ideas of this period constitute the "basic intellectual capital on which, with few exceptions, we live with today" (p. 1).

Another aspect of the time period Berlin focuses on that warrants consideration are the varied intellectual camps encountered during this period. Berlin identifies seven intellectual camps of consequence (pp. 3-11). Of these camps, it is ultimately the romantic movement that provides the most revolutionary thesis and it is Berlin's express objective to "draw attention to its consequences--the degree to which it modified existing attitudes, the reaction against itself which it stimulated, and the degree to which it marks a chasm between the generations ..." (p. 11). In order to understand the romantic revolution and properly assess "its intrinsic importance and its vast consequence," it is necessary to situate romanticism within its larger intellectual context (p. 11). Of the importance of context to understanding political philosophy, Berlin writes, "each political philosophy responds to the needs of its times and is fully intelligible only in terms of all the relevant factors..."