

## **Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin: Freedom, Politics and Humanity, by Kei Hiruta.**

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The first thing to notice about Kei Hiruta's monograph is that it is not a partisan book. The second is that it is one of those works that, while including the historical itinerary, also covers the philosophical debate that runs through it. Kei Hiruta's research is thus, located at the intersection of political philosophy and intellectual history.

The present monograph is the outcome of his project entitled "Berlin's Bête Noire: Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin on Freedom, Politics, and Humanity" which chronicles the intellectual, political, and personal conflict between Arendt and Berlin. Hiruta has also edited the book *Arendt on Freedom, Liberation, and Revolution* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). Here, the author delves into the idea of freedom and totalitarianism as points of disagreement and agreement between two giants of twentieth-century thought. He thus elaborates a concise and essential document of political theory.

The reasons that led Hiruta to write the book arose as a need to fill a significant gap in the history of thought: the disagreement between two approaches that pursued one and the same opponent. This research addresses not only the notable differences between Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin but, as Hiruta explains, their common enemy, which was totalitarianism, both in its Nazi and Stalinist dress. Arendt and Berlin were contemporaries, emigrants, and Jewish intellectuals who left the European continent. Arendt settled in the United States, Isaiah Berlin developed his academic career in Britain. Both agreed that totalitarianism denigrated social and human freedom and sought ways to respond to the totalitarian threat. However, having a common enemy did not forge a friendship. On the contrary, each separately developed different ideas, and, for diverse reasons and misinterpretations, they remained estranged to the point of proving incapable of understanding each other. Hiruta delves into the history of the conflict between two of the twentieth century's prominent thinkers. Yet goes further and shows how their profound disagreements continue to offer important lessons for political theory and philosophy.

The book is composed of seven chapters comprising "Introduction" and "Conclusion". It includes bibliographical references, notes, and a practical Index at the end, which with the acknowledgements and an appendix, make up the final sections.

The appendix with Isaiah Berlin's review of Arendt's *The Human Condition* is very apt as an exemplification and sample of the misunderstandings between the two thinkers, as is the quotation with which the "Introduction" begins. It is an entry from Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s diary, a direct witness of the first misunderstandings between Arendt and Berlin. It serves as an introduction to the second chapter: "A Real Bête Noire". Indeed, Isaiah Berlin had a particular dislike for Arendt. The motives behind his dislike are unraveled by Hiruta. But both Berlin and Arendt suffered from symmetrical

prejudices: “(...) just as Berlin was unable to appreciate German phenomenology, Arendt was unable to appreciate British empiricism” (p. 2).

Chapter Two relates the plot of how the two protagonists failed to get along. Isaiah Berlin was the great theorist of liberal pluralism. One of his salient qualities lay in his ability to empathize with his opponents in his voracious curiosity about what was alien to him. However, this quality did not emerge with Arendt.

Chapter Three, “Freedom”, presents the two authors’ theories of freedom based on opposing views of the human condition. This chapter also deals with some overlapping interactions of the protagonists in their mature years as political thinkers.

Chapter Four, “Inhumanity”, offers the wartime analysis of totalitarianism and the subsequent history of Western political thought; the reader is led into a more extended period in which the commitment of both thinkers to the critique of totalitarianism is visibly witnessed.

Chapter Five, “Evils and Judgment”, is devoted to Arendt’s controversial work “Eichmann in Jerusalem” and the works of Arendt and I. Berlin on the moral and political concepts that give the work its title. In Chapter Six, “Islands of Freedom”, Hiruta unravels the contrasting views of politics in the late works of both authors. It is worth to note the contrast and reconstruction of both rival perspectives from examples from the 1960s. Chapter seven contains the Conclusion with the main implications that can be drawn for current political philosophy.

Hiruta has a twofold objective: on the one hand, to trace the development of the disagreements between Arendt and Berlin from a historical and biographical point of view. On the other hand, to make visible the fundamental theoretical questions that these authors faced, at times, in opposing ways. The main disagreement, according to Hiruta, concerns what it means to be human. But it is also to be found in the rival approaches to freedom. These opposing views are a product, according to Hiruta, of their different approaches to totalitarianism.

The fact that Hiruta examines the histories of Arendt and I. Berlin and, at the same time, from a philosophical approach, reconstructs theoretically the ideas of both from the contexts in which they took place, far from being a weakness, is a strength. It allows us to look from two rival approaches. By traversing this bridge, it is possible to address the implicit assumptions of both thinkers, their main ideas, and even their prejudices.

Hiruta is not the first to address some aspects of the conflict between Arendt and Berlin. Seyla Benhabib (2003; 2019) and David Caute (2013)<sup>1</sup> have referred to several divergences. However, Hiruta’s book, besides being readable, is excellently documented. As we have said, it alternates the historical genre with philosophical analysis; it is generously illustrated with numerous anecdotes of both thinkers at various points in their lives. Besides, Hiruta has the ability to interweave the experiences and sensations of his protagonists. He takes the reader through the scenarios in which Arendt and Berlin lived, suffered, and avoided each other.

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1 Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, new ed. (Lanham, MD: Lawman & Littlefield, 2003); Seyla Benhabib, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration: Playing Chess with History from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); David Caute, *Isaiah and Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

The truth is that the great protagonist of this novel is neither Arendt nor Berlin, nor their misunderstandings. The protagonist of this novel is the fateful twentieth century which, seen through the insightful vision of our protagonists, makes us attentive to the challenges of the twenty-first century. Berlin is not wrong when he says in his speech dedicated to J. Stuart Mill, one of the standard-bearers of the defence of liberties:

“Yet what solutions have we found, with all our new technological and psychological knowledge and great new powers, save the ancient prescription advocated by the creators of humanism –Erasmus and Spinoza, Locke and Montesquieu, Lessing and Diderot– reason, education, self-knowledge, responsibility; above all, self-knowledge? What other hope is there for men, or has there ever been?” (Berlin 2002, pp. 243-244).<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of their unfortunate misunderstandings, as Hiruta points out, Arendt and Berlin have left us with many resources to explore issues of common interest: freedom, politics, humanity, and the sense of responsibility; as Isaiah Berlin indicates in the above quote, an idea that we hope will come into sharper relief in future monographs.

It would also have been desirable to venture some current issues from both perspectives. For example, whether current trends of political correctness excessively limit freedom of expression, a subject on which both Arendt and Isaiah Berlin would have much to say.

In any case, it is a complete work: powerful themes, brilliant characters, a well-driven and well-directed narrative, and a well-spun strategy. Perhaps the author allows himself to be seduced a bit by the charm of his protagonists, but instead of taking a risk and choosing one of them, he has preferred to maintain a certain impartiality.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah Berlin. 1959. “John Stuart Mill and the ends of life London”. In: *Liberty. Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*. OUP (2002), pp. 243-244.