

Cameron saw the Liberal Democrats primarily as a useful aide to resisting pressures from his right wing and as providing a secure Commons majority. Governing alone from 2015, he failed to manage the loss of that constraint, stumbling into a referendum which he lost. The political chaos of 2016 onwards is covered here in terms of the cross-party manoeuvres of the EU referendum campaign and after. But what the study also shows, without fully exploring, is the growing contradiction between an entrenched two-party system and the internal divisions within both of the two main parties. Theresa May's efforts at cross-party cooperation to achieve a 'soft' Brexit were defeated by tribal and factional groups within her own party. Attempts at cross-party cooperation to defeat the Conservatives in the 2019 election campaign were blocked by Corbyn's insistence that he was the only alternative prime minister available.

Wager concludes that the institutional and cultural aspects of Britain's two-party system continue to provide strong barriers to coalitions and multi-party cooperation. Electoral reform has been on the agenda for a century, robustly resisted by both major parties whenever pressed upon them. The power of the prime minister, and the need for a credible alternative prime minister in every election,

squeezes insurgent parties out. Yet he also notes both the difficulties that the rise of the SNP posed for Labour in 2010 and later, and those that the rise of UKIP threatened for the Conservatives in 2018–19. Reading this in 2025, with a government which won a massive Commons majority on 33 per cent of the votes cast, with the 'official Opposition' winning less than 24 per cent and seven other parties with four or more seats in the Commons, the two-party hold on British politics

looks weakened. This study reminds us that the resistance to change is powerful, and the reluctance of successive Conservative and Labour governments to alter Britain's constitutional and political rules is undiminished. ■

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Isaiah Berlin and liberal pluralism

George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin in the Twenty-First Century: Liberal pluralism for troubled times* (Routledge, 2025)

Review by Eugenio F. Biagini

Isaiah Berlin was a celebrated defender of liberal democracy in the bipolar world of the Cold War, but does he have much to say to our age of proliferating populism and fragmenting identity politics? For Crowder the answer is yes; his book argues that Berlin's liberalism is as relevant as ever. The author identifies the key to Berlin's continuing importance in his commitment to 'value pluralism', about which Crowder has written extensively (see for example his *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 2002). Berlin himself never used this expression, but Crowder argues that it represents the best way to account for Berlin's

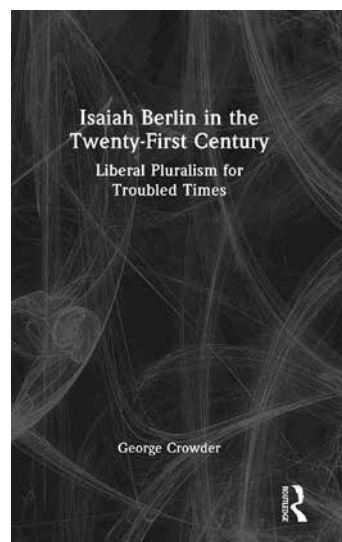
understanding of the interaction between universal values and cultural and national specificity. For Crowder, value-pluralist liberals engage with and listen to a broad range of views – including those of people with whom they disagree, believing that there is much to learn in the process – but without compromising the integrity of their own fundamental principles. Using value pluralism as a tool, Crowder seeks both to clarify the question of 'how much cultural fragmentation a society can tolerate' before it loses its viability (p. 10), and to refine the method in order to address the key question in

value pluralism, which concerns 'how we should choose between conflicting values, none of which is fundamentally more or less important than the others' (ibid.). However, Crowder's key strategy to highlight the wide relevance of Berlin's critique of the 'inversion of liberty', extending it from the abuse of 'positive liberty' to the manipulation of negative liberty. As for the former, in Berlin's day, the typical example was the USSR, which claimed to empower the proletariat, though in fact it established a totalitarian despotism over society as a whole. As for the latter, Crowder notes that, in our day, Trump and other populists are eager to claim their intent to secure negative liberty, while in fact they undermine the institutions and the rule of law on which such liberty is based.

The author then proceeds to illustrate his argument by applying Berlinian principles to some of the key issues dividing liberals nowadays. He starts with neoliberalism, which he describes as 'a blight on the twenty-first century' (p. 82). Its 'monistic' assumptions about the universality and preponderance of the desire for gain run against value pluralism. The liberation of the *homo economicus* – which neoliberals from Thatcher onwards championed – becomes an example of 'negative liberty inverted ... when he is taken

as the model for political and policy thinking' and his 'narrow set of values ... is allowed to exclude other important considerations' (p. 73), such as 'equality, justice, culture, [and] human happiness' (p. 69). In its historical applications, neoliberalism also violates the rule, which Berlin derives from Alexander Herzen, that real individuals should not be sacrificed to abstract principles. Moreover, value pluralists must be hostile 'to the spreading of market values across ... different spheres [such as public health, education, policing and defence] as inappropriate and distorting' (p. 75).

The next issue Crowder addresses is identity politics, including radical nationalism, political correctness and cancel culture. Berlin's position on identity is neither clear nor consistent. On the one hand, he often sounded supportive of identitarian campaigns, seeing them as 'a logical extension of his emphasis on group belonging'; on the other, he would have rejected identity politics as used by the champions of 'woke', 'seeing it as undermining the minimal degree of unity that any society needs to function well' (pp. 87–8). As Mark Lilla has noted, this may also result in liberals 'retreat[ing] from practical and consequential politics into "a pseudo-politics of self-regard" ... abandoning any notion of common good and the



practical politics necessary to pursue that good' (p. 89).

While this is inconclusive, for Crowder Berlin's general methodological principle for assessing practical politics demands 'situated judgement' (based on context and balance) rather than 'the model of the natural sciences' and their 'objective' certainties. This is particularly the case in his discussion of 'Populism' (chapter 5). Granted that visionary leaders like Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt are necessary for liberalism to face up to challenges, the problem is where do we draw the line between the visionary virtuoso and the vicious? Again, Berlin's analysis is inconclusive: 'he does not give us tools sharp enough to evaluate Trumpian populism fully' (p. 120). However, populist policies can be dissected effectively through the tool of inverted

(negative) liberty, for example to highlight the invention of an abstract *homo popularis*, 'an ideal distilled by purging away the various social elements the populist disapproves of – the elites, immigrants and experts, together with their values of toleration and diversity' (p. 121).

On the subject of religion – an aspect which has been historically very important for British Liberals – Crowder concludes that the great monotheistic religions are inevitably monist, rather than pluralist, though pluralism is compatible with monotheism in the case of the interfaith movement. Moreover, he stresses that 'pluralists appreciate the value found in multiple ways of life, and that includes religious perspectives, even if they are exclusivist' (p. 152). Surprisingly, however, he does not discuss the key issue of the relationship between religion and political power, and the crucial importance not only of separating the one from the other, but also of recognising the extent to which the religious groups that actually champion such a separation are tendentially pluralist even in asserting their specific dogmas (one of which includes the rejection of forceful conversion or the use of political power to ensure conformity). The author does not seem to realise that there are and have long been religious groups for which

the individual's autonomous decision is what really matters, and this excludes violence as both pointless in practice, as well as abhorrent in principle.

The last chapter is devoted to assessing the relevance of Berlin's value pluralism to the handling of two global crises: COVID and climate. In both cases, the mistake of some groups – including medical and climate experts and environment campaigners – is to stress their view without reference to other values, including the economic viability of the solutions proposed and their short-term costs. This provokes an inevitable backlash and discredits the very policies which these groups champion. The main source of their problems is methodological: a fall into

'monism' instead of pluralism, a neglect of the complexity and legitimacy of competing values, and a lack of balance. In conclusion, 'pluralism has a major consideration on its side: namely, reality. We may want a monist formula, but the fact is that there is no such formula. Attempts to propose and apply one tend to make things worse, as shown by the various efforts of monists – authoritarians, neoliberals, populists, and so on ... It might be nice to live in a monist world ... but that, for good or ill, is not the world we live in' (p. 221). ■

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Margaret Lloyd George

Richard O'Brien, *The Woman Who Helped Win the War – The Welfare Campaigns of Margaret Lloyd George, 1914–1918* (Y Lolfa, 2025)

Review by Russell Deacon

Richard O'Brien's latest work, *The Woman Who Helped Win the War – The Welfare Campaigns of Margaret Lloyd George, 1914–1918*, is the second volume in his study of Margaret Lloyd George, wife of the Welsh and British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. Although it serves as a partial

sequel to his earlier book, *The Campaigns of Margaret Lloyd George: Wife of the Prime Minister, 1916–1922*, this new volume also functions partly as a prequel, tracing Margaret's role before and during the First World War. At 416 pages, complete with a comprehensive index, it is both a substantial and