

Asan Cold War Liberalism Project

Conference: “**Isaiah Berlin’s Cold War Liberalism**”

Monday, August 13, 2012 / 10:00AM~18:00PM

Book Launch: *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* by Professor Michael Ignatieff

Tuesday, August 14, 2012 / 10:00am~13:30PM

Conference Room (2F) and Gallery, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

The Asan Institute for Policy Studies held the inaugural conference of the *Asan Cold War Liberalism Project* from Monday, August 13 to Tuesday, August 14, 2012, on “**Isaiah Berlin’s Cold War Liberalism.**” Following welcoming remarks from Dr. Hahm Chaibong, President of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, the conference commenced on August 13 with inaugural speeches by former Republic of Korea Prime Minister Lee Hong-koo and Professor Jan-Werner Mueller from Princeton University on the overarching theme of Cold War liberalism. During the conference, experts on the philosophy of Isaiah Berlin—gathered from Asia, Europe, and North America—discussed Berlin’s commitment to pluralism and opposition to totalitarianism, Berlin’s views on liberty and nationalism, and the influence and relevance of Berlin’s thought in the context of East Asia. The conference concluded on August 14 with the launch of a Korean language translation of Professor Michael Ignatieff’s *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, presented by Professor Ignatieff.

Cold War Liberalism

In his welcoming remarks, Dr. Hahm outlined the terms of the ideological debate occurring within Korea and the impetus for the *Asan Cold War Liberalism Project*. He stated that South Korea has yet to establish a true liberal foundation. Within South Korea, the political right refer to the political left as progressive communists, while the political left refer to the political right as Japan-ophiles. Because both ends of the South Korean political spectrum use the concept of human rights to suit their respective political purposes, there is reason to doubt both sides’ sincerity when they advocate for human rights and basic freedoms. All the while, a debate is occurring regarding how South Korea can maintain a liberal society while standing fast against the totalitarian regime of North Korea. It is in this context that an examination of Cold War liberalism and the lives of the Cold War-era political theorists

selected for the *Asan Cold War Liberalism Project* seemed both timely and necessary.

Dr. Lee Hong-koo presented to visiting participants the recent history of Korea; from the annexation of Korea by Japan and the division of the Korean Peninsula after the Second World War to the beginning of the Cold War. Though the Cold War is over, Dr. Lee believes that current conditions on the Korean Peninsula and great power relations in the region might accurately be characterized as those of a “Second Cold War.” Isaiah Berlin’s thought may not have been as pertinent to Korea during the Cold War, but it is more than relevant today. However, while Berlin’s liberalism rested in the liberal temperament and culture of Oxford University, such a temperament has been absent in Asia. The question is how to derive practical policy recommendations from Berlin’s liberalism to encourage the spread a liberal temperament in which to firmly establish liberal societies elsewhere.

Professor Mueller presented a three-level template for how one might glean and apply insights from Cold War liberalism generally and Berlin’s philosophy specifically. The first level involves addressing foundational philosophical commitments, such as Berlin’s value pluralism, which essentially accepts that the plurality of incommensurable values makes political conflict inevitable, continuous, and necessary to address through the political art of compromise. The second level involves addressing how first-level philosophical commitments have distinct political implications, such as Berlin’s support for a constitutionalism that can both enable and contain normative conflicts. The third level involves strategies of liberal persuasion that are themselves infused with particular first-level normative commitments. One such strategy could be Berlin’s advocacy for an “ethos of dialogue” through which liberals and anti-liberals may non-militantly interact.

Berlin on pluralism and totalitarianism

Professor Jonathan Riley presented an interpretation of Berlin’s value pluralism that differed from those of other readers of Berlin’s moral and political philosophy. First, he stated that Berlin’s value pluralism results from an empirical approach to ethics. Second, he defined Berlin’s concept of negative liberty as freedom from coercive interference with respect to a field of actions. Third, he argued that at the core of Berlin’s thought was a “common moral minimum” that includes the basic needs of human survival and carves out an overriding sphere of negative liberty to which value pluralism cannot be reduced. Professor Riley argued

that it is on this basis that Berlin advocated for a “constrained pluralism” in which conflicts arising from value pluralism are present but constrained by this common moral minimum.

Dr. Shinichiro Hama addressed the question of why Berlin, with his commitment to pluralism, prefers liberal democracy over other possible political arrangements. Hama argued that, according to Berlin, the chief compromise is between societal institutions and individual liberty. Without institutions, society cannot persist, but if society becomes completely institutionalized, political liberty is extinguished. Democratic governments are both responsive to the will of citizens and protective of individuals’ political rights and liberties. For Berlin, Hama argued that a fundamentally ‘decent’ democratic society is one where institutions and societal members do not cause humiliation.

Professor Graeme Garrard highlighted the potential dilemma for one committed to both liberalism and value pluralism. If one is a liberal, then one gives priority to one value over others, namely, freedom. If this is the case, how can one be a liberal and remain a value pluralist? If there is no objective ranking of plural legitimate values, how does one justify preferring liberty and claim that one is still a value pluralist? He posited that this dilemma presents, at the very least, a tension, and at most a contradiction. Professor Garrard also suggested that one should consider why compromising between conflicting values is any more legitimate than selecting one value to trump all others and accept the loss and sacrifice of other legitimate values, which, he argued, would amount to a form of totalitarian pluralism. Professor Jonathan Riley responded that the essential problem with totalitarianism is that it is indecent, oppressive, and fails to give priority to human rights.

Berlin on liberty and nationalism

In presenting the history of Berlin’s thought among Chinese intellectuals, Professor Chow Po Chung observed that Berlin became well-known in Beijing in 1989, right after the end of the Cold War. On the one hand, Chinese liberals have since found Berlin’s liberalism too weak a foundation to build upon because it is not a first-order theory about how freedom is related to well-being and individual agency and does not inform one how to judge or how to act. On the other hand, Chinese anti-liberals have used Berlin’s thought as an example of why liberalism should be rejected as a basis for Chinese society or politics. They argue that if value pluralism does not tell one how to judge between these values, then maybe some

individuals are in a better position to make choices for others in the event of conflicts between legitimate values. Some Chinese intellectuals have further argued that liberalism leads to moral nihilism. If values are incommensurate then judgments might have to be made based on merely subjective choices. At present, though liberalism remains a popular idea at the grass-roots level of Chinese society, Chinese intellectuals have become increasingly anti-liberal and drawn to the works of Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss. This has, in part, arisen on account of criticisms of Isaiah Berlin's liberalism.

Professor Wang Qian discussed Isaiah Berlin's views on liberalism and nationalism in the context of Berlin's Zionism. In his essays, Berlin wrote that no major political thinker foresaw the rise of nationalism in the 20th century. Many had believed that the nation-state was an interim stage in the ultimate development of world government. Though Berlin considered the concept of cosmopolitanism empty, he did believe in the possibility of liberal nationalism, which Professor Wang argued was at odds with Berlin's Zionism. Rather than being formed on the basis of liberalism, Israel's founding purpose was to be a place where the Jewish people would not be ruled by gentiles. In another context, Modern Chinese nationalism inspired many in China to believe that individual freedoms should be sacrificed for the sake of one's country, which Berlin, as a defender of individual liberty, staunchly philosophically opposed.

Dr. Hahm Chaibong observed that South Korean students in the 80s, after supporting strong liberal pro-democracy movements against South Korea's Park Chung-hee regime in the 70s, also began looking to movements more potent than liberalism. Some turned to Kim Il-sung's *Juche*, a crass North Korean interpretation of Marxist nationalism. Dr. Hahm raised the question of whether Berlinian liberalism requires favorable material circumstances, such as those enjoyed in Oxford University, in order to take root in society and be sufficiently potent. With the current state of economic development and leisure that South Korea has attained, perhaps Berlin's liberalism will be able to take root. Professor Wang agreed, reemphasizing that Berlin's liberalism may be especially relevant to South Korea, which continues to exist in Cold War circumstances.

Berlin in the East Asian Context

Dr. Kei Hiruta discussed whether Isaiah Berlin's philosophy matters in the context of

East Asia, particularly given the little attention that Western political thinkers give to prominent East Asian thinkers. For example, in spite of his abiding concern with 20th century nationalism, Isaiah Berlin did not address Japanese fascism. However, Dr. Hiruta observed that Berlin was both a philosopher and a historian of ideas. Berlin's analyses of totalitarianism including concrete examples from Western Europe exemplify how Berlin used history and philosophy to present his ideas. While Berlin's historical examples may not necessarily be comparable to circumstances in East Asia, the relevance of his political philosophy and opposition to totalitarianism are clear in East Asian cases of vulnerability to malign nationalist movements, exploitation of history for political purposes, and continuing Cold War circumstances. East Asia's experience can in turn provide historical examples to test the validity of Berlin's ideas.

Professor Kim Bi-hwan outlined political implications and insights that can be gleaned from Berlin's thought that might shed light on securing the peace, stability, and democratic future of East Asia. He recommended that the peoples of East Asia should appreciate Berlin's cautious anti-deterministic view of history when assuming that the liberalization, democratization, and economic prosperity of East Asia are inevitable. To South Korea specifically, Professor Kim recommended that Berlin's "political philosophy of moderation," and dislike of all forms of extremism and fanaticism should be taken as warnings against polarized political volatility. By combining a pluralist interpretation of Berlin's theory of freedom and Berlin's philosophical view of history, Professor Kim concluded his presentation by discussing the different forms of liberalism that have emerged in East Asia, arguing that various definitions of freedom have emerged based on countries' unique historical experiences and stages of development.

Isaiah Berlin: A Life, by Professor Michael Ignatieff

In *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, Professor Ignatieff presents an intellectual and biographical history of Isaiah Berlin's life and thought. During his presentation, Professor Ignatieff shared several anecdotes from Berlin's experiences and Berlin's interactions with his circle of friends. He also discussed Berlin's influence, and his continuing intellectual legacy. Professor Ignatieff especially wished to emphasize the distinction that Isaiah Berlin made between enemies and adversaries; a distinction that Professor Ignatieff believes has been largely

forgotten in contemporary politics. Where enemies challenge national sovereignty and threaten a country's future, adversaries simply have different views of values and freedoms, differences that need not lead to schisms and open conflict. Regarding the Korean Peninsula, Professor Ignatieff stated that South Korea should continue to stand up to North Korea and not assume that anything is pre-determined or permanent.