

Empire Building and Modernity

Organização

ADELAIDE MEIRA SERRAS



University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies
Centro de Estudos Anglisticos da Universidade de Lisboa



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Lisboa 2011

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Adelaide Meira Serras

CAPA, PAGINAÇÃO E ARTE FINAL

Inês Mateus

Imagem na capa

The British Empire, 1886, M. P. Formerly

EDIÇÃO

Centro de Estudos Anglísticos
da Universidade de Lisboa

IMPRESSÃO E ACABAMENTO

TEXTYPE

TIRAGEM 200 exemplares

ISBN 978-972-8886-17-2

DEPÓSITO LEGAL 335129/11

PUBLICAÇÃO APOIADA PELA

FUNDAÇÃO PARA A CIÊNCIA E A TECNOLOGIA

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Foreword

Following the organization, in 2009, of the first conference on *The British Empire: Ideology, Perspectives, Perception*, the Research Group dedicated to Culture Studies at the University of the Lisbon Centre for English Studies organized, in 2010, a second conference under the general title *Empire Building and Modernity*. This conference constitutes the second part of a three year project undertaken by the group, which will be followed, in 2011, by a third initiative, called *Reviewing Imperial Conflicts*.

The proceedings of the second conference are now presented in this book. *Empire Building and Modernity* gives a larger scope to the original project, which was developed more strictly around the British Empire, and provides the opportunity to deal with questions related to the formation of modern European empires, namely the Portuguese Colonial Empire. The different chapters in this book reveal a variety of approaches that are very often at the cutting edge of the methodologies adopted in cultural studies, particularly in the field of post-colonial studies.

The building of new perceptions on imperial issues interpreted through literature, the visual arts, history and political science, the role of museums, questions of gender and race and the construction of identity through language constitute the guidelines of the contributions presented in this volume. I hope you will enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed discussing the issues that contributed to its making.

Luísa Leal de Faria

Isaiah Berlin and the Anglo-American Predicament

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Isaiah Berlin and the Anglo-American Predicament

During almost three centuries Britain managed to create and maintain a vast worldwide empire. (Gamble 2003: 5) In mid-Victorian period Britain was the dominant sea-power, the leading colonial power and the world's industrial giant. (Reynolds 2000: 8) However, in the middle of the 20th century its world supremacy was practically extinct. Britain had lost nearly all its overseas possessions and its industry and economy were on the verge of collapse after two World Wars. The Second World War marked the irreversible decline of Britain and the loss of India in 1948 was the first step to decline. (Aldred 2004: 2-3) The solution lay on the co-operation and alliance with the United States of America, one of the superpowers resulting from the war. Despite being on the edge of bankruptcy, Britain also tried to act as a superpower (Reynolds, 2000: 2), but it could only behave as such with the diplomatic, intelligence and economic American co-operation. In addition to finding itself involved in a difficult balancing act between claiming great power status and needing American help, (Hopkins 2005: 1) Britain also had to determine its post-imperial role. The British still shared feelings of imperial nostalgia and insular parochialism which had been appointed as some of the causes for decline. (Reynolds 2000: 1)

In British society and politics there were two opponent positions regarding the Anglo-American relations. On the one hand, there were those who believed the Anglo-American association would diminish British sovereignty. On the other, some people believed this alliance would bring great benefits to Britain as it would reinforce its economic and cultural status in the world.

Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), British philosopher, historian of ideas and an Oxford don, mostly known for the essays/studies *The Hedgehog and The Fox* (1953), *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958) and *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (1990),

belonged to those who saw a positive outcome concerning the Anglo-American alliance. His own experience in Washington and New York during the Second World War and also in Russia as a diplomat working for the British Ministry of Information allowed him to be aware of the realities of both the United States of America and Russia. Even though Berlin did not consider himself a political scientist, he did in fact take very clear positions on this subject. Berlin (2009: 131) delivered on the BBC Third Programme on 21 September 1949 what he called 'a violently pro-American broadcast' which was named 'The Anglo-American Predicament'.¹ Therefore, this paper's main goal is to analyse Berlin's position regarding this alliance which, in my opinion, was based on a liberal framework and sustained by a broader vision of the world. I also intend to highlight the reactions to Berlin's arguments and the controversies in Anglo-American relations still framed in an imperial stance.

Despite prior cultural, linguistic and historical links, the USA and Britain strengthened a special relationship (Dumbrell 2001: 2) during the Second World War which was sustained by the financial support granted by the American loans to Britain. The Lend Lease Programme passed Congress in 1941 and it represented to Britain a valuable help to face the expenses of war. (Hopkins 2005: 5) Additionally, the Marshall Plan was introduced in 1948, deepening therefore the dependency of Britain towards The United States of America.

The Anglo-American predicament did not lie on the acceptance of such alliance between America and Great Britain, but on how to balance the different interests and ideals of both countries which obviously instigated unavoidable resistance. There were some dissonant voices in both countries which vociferously criticised this union. On the one side, defenders of Britain were worried about the financial dependency that such a co-operation would cause. They longed that this dreadful union forced upon them by the demands of war would not last forever and 'that one day they will breathe freely, liberated from the fear of plutocracy and materialism, and political witch-hunt, and racial intolerance, and the death of individual life and art'. (Berlin 2009: 747) The problem was, according to Berlin (2009: 744), on 'how to get the ancient and powerful organisation to fit into the political and economic pattern

¹ It was later published in the *Listener* on the 29th September of the same year.

that governs the thinking of the policy-makers of the State Department or the Senate or the White House.' American help would thus menace Britain's ideals and interests in keeping her leading role in the world.

On the other side, there were some Americans who shared anti-British feelings during the Second World War, which still persisted in 1949. Americans saw the British as idle, inefficient, economically blind and embittered nationalists. Berlin (2009: 744) explained that 'the purpose of the traditional anti-British outcry was to liberate the United States from what were conceived to be the tentacles with which the sinister British octopus had all but enveloped an all too trustful American democracy'. However, the central problem for the Americans was related to the policies of Britain and its Empire which the Americans viewed critically. Britain was still seen as a 'great unredeemed imperialist oppressor'. In the reports that Berlin frequently wrote while he was in the British Propaganda office in Washington, Berlin (2009: 400-403) collected a list of things which Americans held against the British. British imperialism, the rigid class system in Britain, the fact that the British believed in 'balance of power, in divide and rule', encouraging therefore wars; 'irritation caused by over-civilised English accent as opposed to Scots, Welsh or any other home-bred accent' represented some of the American criticisms towards the British, which were based 'on racial, inherited political prejudices and widespread ignorance'.

Nevertheless, this 'stereotyped mythological image' of Britain as a great unredeemed imperialist oppressor (Berlin 2009: 745) has become altered in America. For Berlin, the main reason for such a change of attitude was immigration. Immigrants had an extremely important role in American thinking about foreign nations once they pooled their grievances many years ago. For Berlin (2001: 20), the American vision was larger and more generous than the European vision. The American thought 'transcended barriers of nationality and race and differences of outlook, in a big, sweeping, single view' whereas for the Europeans that attitude seemed flat and colourless. Despite such two disparate cultures, Roosevelt and Churchill had put their differences away during the war and fought for a common goal: the regeneration of the Western world.

After the war, Berlin (2009: 746) stated that the union between both nations was inevitable and, despite expected frictions, both parts had to collaborate with each other as this was the price of a transformed world condition:

The celebrated marriage between Britain and America for which Mr Churchill has sighed so often, and which seemed so desirable and unattainable a goal in the England of 1940-1, has almost come about. It is a marriage from which, in the view of one of the partners at least — the American — there is no hope, or fear, of ultimate divorce. The marriage may at times be unhappy, but it cannot be annulled without destroying both partners equally.

In Berlin's (2009: 131; 746) point of view the Americans were more realistic than the British because they considered this alliance the best way of keeping away the Soviet menace and thus maintain a tolerable life in Western Europe. Berlin (2009: 747-8) believed that this union would guarantee the values that he praised so much and had always been the citadels of a liberal society, liberty and individual life:

To anyone lately returned from the United States it seems that British irritation with America (...) goes beyond the norm to be expected even of a people as naturally reluctant to recognise a shift in world balance as we obviously are; goes beyond the degree to be expected of a people deeply irked by the need to receive benefits at all, even if only temporary, and even though (...) these benefits are but a small return for the heroism and suffering which Britain showed when she saved humanity by her example. It is an irritation which arises partly from a lack of historical imagination, which is a faculty born of the buffetings of fortune from which this once happy island has so long been mercifully preserved; and it leads to a desire to close one's eyes to the kind of close relationship which must be maintained with the great American giant if we are to preserve not merely an adequate standard of living, but life and liberty itself.

Berlin (2009: 132) compared the British rulers to acrobats on a tightrope with a large net cosily below them. If they fell, they would fall into the net, that is the USA, and would suffer at worst loss of face but not of life. The British would never be allowed to sink completely, because they subconsciously knew the Americans would help them to rise. Besides, Berlin warned the British leaders that the time was excellent for conditions of business with America, but not for spectacular heroism or ideas of genius.

Berlin also defended that Britain should dismiss the alignment with the European Community project or the Eastern Bloc. The political pressure, the purges and persecutions by the Soviet Union in the East European satellite countries represented a danger to civil liberties. Dictatorships in Portugal and Spain under the regimes of Salazar and Franco did not also guarantee full

liberties. Civil liberties were thus under threat in Eastern Europe more than they were in the United States, which Berlin described as a free American democracy. Similarly, being part of the project of the European Union represented decreasing the standard of living and nobody was ready for that (Berlin 2009: 145; 748):

A Western European Union, desirable as it may be in itself, is a very rickety structure unless integrated with the economies of both America and the British Empire; an Eastern orientation is scarcely compatible with the preservation of civil liberties.

However, Isaiah Berlin's views on the Anglo-American alliance triggered lively reactions. In 1949, *The Evening Standard* of 5 October published a column written by Lord Beaverbrook headed 'Mr Berlin' criticising the arguments voiced by Berlin. Berlin's (2009: 129) point of view was considered as:

propaganda in favour of the immediate recognition by the British public that a state of marriage exists between Britain and America. He pictured the American partner as resigned to marriage, but frustrated and irritated by the failure of the British to recognise that the marriage lines had been spoken. So Mr Berlin spent the greater part of his 20 minutes trying to convince his listeners that the marriage was both desirable and inevitable.

The Anglo-American union was somehow considered a tough setback to the once proud and most powerful nation in the World. Consequently, Berlin was also accused of being a pro-American traitor and of not being an Empire man. The writer of the column deplored that Berlin did not even mention the third alternative, which consisted of exploiting the Empire resources (Berlin 2009: 130):

Isaiah Berlin did not even mention the third alternative: that Britain should ride out the storm alone, placing her faith in the strength and the resources of the Empire. Why is Mr Berlin so blind to the attractions of this simple creed? The answer is as simple. He is not an Empire man. His disdain for the Empire is as extensive as his ignorance of its glory. He cannot be expected to appreciate the value of the imperial tradition. Mr Berlin is therefore trying to induce Britain to abandon a faith which he does not understand in favour of a condition of life which he has not experienced.

The imperial tradition was rooted in the minds of those who still longed for a return to the glories of Empire. Even in the minds of the politicians of that time, namely Churchill, the Commonwealth was still seen as one of the most important sphere for the recovery of the country, together with American aid

which could prevent withdrawal from the Empire and the abandonment of the Labour government's reforms. (Hopkins 2005: xv) However, Britain's attitude towards the Empire altered, hastened by the destructive effects of war and the growing power of the United States. Instead of imposing political control over the former colonies, Britain secured financial, commercial and industrial connections through treaties, alongside an enduring and stable Anglo-American agreement. (Parmar 1995: 42)

Despite the awareness of Britain's crumbling economic situation and of the change in the political world status-quo, the national discourse still lingered on imperial nostalgia, backed up by the sense of superiority over the other nations of the world. Social patriotism that had triumphed during the war period remained somewhat influential. Even though the glory of the Empire was fading away, the hope of greatness still lived on people's mind. The Whig discourses of national greatness endorsed by G. M. Trevelyan and Bertrand Russell in the post-war period glorified the Empire and Britain's civilizing mission on the colonies. Imperial values were yet again intimately related to national feelings of Britishness. As Kenneth O. Morgan (2001: 577) emphasized, Britain still hanged on glories of the past, instead of moving forward: 'The sense of Britishness seemed to rest on obeisance to the past, as shown in the flourishing heritage industry of the 1980s extending from Chaucer to Churchill, to the delight of tourists and scorn of social critics'.

Oliver Franks (1996: 56), British Ambassador in Washington from May 1948 to the end of 1952, reported an episode that illustrates this obstinate approach:

In April 1948, my wife and I were asked to lunch by Mr and Mrs Churchill at Hyde Park. (...) After lunch he [Churchill] suddenly took his napkin and with a pencil drew on it three interconnecting circles. 'Young man' he said, looking sternly at me, 'never let Britain get out of any one of these circles'. They represented the three dimensions of British foreign policy, the American dimension, the Commonwealth dimension and the European dimension. In those years after the war the Prime Minister Attlee, and Ernest Bevin, on the one hand, and Mr Churchill and Anthony Eden, on the other, all accepted this view. They were at one in seeing it as the foundation of Britain's power and influence in the world. They all knew that our economy was weak (...). But they believed that if Britain stayed firmly within the three circles of her destiny, she would recover and continue as a Great power and go on being entitled to a seat at the top table where world decisions were taken.

The Suez Canal, together with Palestine, was usually seen as the heart of British Empire. Britain needed to stay in the base-area of Egypt-Palestine as a means to control Middle Eastern oil and to keep the British commercial routes in North West-Africa and the Indian Ocean. Abandoning the area might mean growing dependence on the United States of America and might reduce Britain to a client state of the Soviet Union. (Hopkins 2005: 36) However, Britain would indeed lose control over these strategic places in 1956. The Suez Crisis marked a humiliating drawback in the British international affairs. The British had to withdraw from Egypt and lost their position in the Suez Canal.

However, there was a new world order 'that was built by the old, wise and experienced Imperial Britain and the new, uncertain but incredibly powerful United States'. (Parmar 1995: viii) Despite initial retreat and distrust, Britain would then join the European Economic Community in 1973.

The recurring British insular idea of being proudly alone was rooted in the trendiest symbols of identity — the crown and the commonwealth — alongside with national self-esteem, self-sufficiency and a Whig sense of elected people. Kenneth O. Morgan (2001: 60) explains that the emergence of Britain as one nation after the war was embedded not only in an accepted collectivism at home but also in a spirit of complacent nationalism towards the wider world.

However in 1949 Britain struggled to survive and the symbols of the nation, despite their importance for the national character, did not bring out the key for the economic crisis. The links with continental Europe were not that strong. The only immediate solution was to reinforce Anglo-American Relations. Despite differences about political strategies over China, over Palestine and the Suez Canal, the Anglo-American relationship represented one of the most important decisions in modern times for Britain. (Parmar 1995) Yet, American supremacy and power was confirmed in the most vital element for Britain, the financial help. Nonetheless, Britain always tried not to lose ground over the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold war, by keeping the pace in the manufacture of nuclear weapons, for example. It seemed that this obsession with nuclear power had to do with world power status which was fading away as the Empire slowly collapsed. (Clarke 2009: 13)

Berlin stood for a political position when he broadcast *The Anglo-American Predicament*. Berlin tried to show the benefits of this union which were grounded

on the ideals of liberty and human decency, as the British economic survival depended on the American help. However, Berlin was always very sensitive to criticisms and easily moved to regret. Even though he did not deny his opinion on the Anglo-American Alliance, Berlin (2009: 140) was not able to uphold his position very strongly or insistently, as he himself recognised:

The Time article plunged me, of course, into the deepest dismay; you must remember that I suffer from the deepest contempt for everything that I have ever written — no sooner does it appear in print that it seems hollow, false, vulgar, glib, clumsy (...), but above all it has long ceased to convey anything I wish to say ; and if I defend it, it is out of pure pique — it always seems to me that everything that my detractors say is always profoundly true and unanswerable. This is what happened with my broadcast — immediately I felt I had overdone it, I had understated the British position, insulted my compatriots, over-praised America and, anyhow, failed to convey all the elaborate nuances upon which everything depends.

In conclusion, even though Berlin felt English as he lived most of his life in England, one must not forget that Berlin was also an immigrant in Britain and, in our opinion, that feature allowed him to view the world in a wider perspective than the British themselves. Berlin was a critical observer of the world issues and, quite correctly, he foresaw the solution to the problems of Britain lying on the Anglo-American alliance which was reinforced during the Thatcher/ Reagan governments and still represents today a very strong association, despite all the political and cultural nuances.

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