

## **“A SPLENDID ISOLATION?” THE RISE OF A CONCEPT IN VICTORIAN IDENTITY**

Mihai Vişoiu

University of Bucharest, Foreign Languages and Literatures, English  
Department

ROMANIA, Bucharest, Sector 5, 36-46 *Mihail Kogalniceanu* Blvd, 050107

Tel: +40-21-307 73 00

[visoiu\\_mihai87@yahoo.com](mailto:visoiu_mihai87@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

The last decade of the nineteenth century coincides with the appearance of a new phrase in the Victorian press, that of a “splendid isolation”. In 1894, after prime-minister Rosebery’s speech in Cows regarding the possibility of an anglo-german alliance, a real media scandal broke out between the British newspapers *Standard* and *The Times* and the German publication *Hamburgischer Correspondent*. What was the cause of this ‘conflict’? A debate regarding the position which these two great states held in the European balance of power. Initially perceived as an insult, the term ‘isolation’ is more and more frequent in Victorian thought, from political discourses and parliamentary debates to Sunday newspapers. At the same time, British foreign policy stirs more and more concerns in the minds of the great statesmen of Westminster, a fact determined to a great degree by the overuse of this certain phrase. Extremely interesting is also the evolution of this concept in the perception of the public. If in 1894, ‘isolation’ meant ‘a dangerous position’, over the course of the next few years, this way of international conduct becomes ‘a time-honoured tradition’. In 1896 the epithet ‘splendid’ joins ‘isolation’, and in the next period ‘the policy of isolation’ is consecrated the ‘official strategy’ of British foreign policy in the Victorian age.

**Keywords:** isolation, diplomacy, Victorian, Reinhart Koselleck, counter-concepts

### **Résumé**

La dernière décennie du dix-neuvième siècle coïncide avec l’apparition d’une nouvelle phrase dans la presse Victorienne : « le splendide isolement ». En 1894, après le discours du prime ministre Rosebery en Cows, concernant la possibilité de réaliser une alliance anglo-allemande, un véritable scandale media a éclaté entre les journaux anglais *Standard* et *The Times* et la publication allemande *Hamburgischer Correspondent*. Quelle était la cause de ce « conflit » ? Un débat concernant la position que ces deux grands États

ont eu dans l'équilibre des puissances en Europe. Perçu initialement comme une insulte, le terme «isolation» est de plus en plus fréquente dans la réflexion victorienne, à partir des discours politique et débats parlementaires aux journaux du dimanche. En même temps, la politique étrangère britannique attise de plus en plus de préoccupations pour les hommes d'État de Westminster, un fait déterminé dans une large mesure par l'usage excessif de cette phrase. Extrêmement intéressant est aussi l'évolution de ce concept par rapport à la perception du public. Si en 1894, «l'isolation» signifiait «une position dangereuse», au cours des prochaines années, ce type de conduite internationale devient une « vieille tradition ». En 1896, l'épithète « splendide » se rejoint à « l'isolation », et dans la période suivante « la politique d'isolation » est consacrée comme « la stratégie officielle » de la politique étrangère pendant l'époque victorienne.

**Mots-clés :** isolation, diplomatie, victorienne, Reinhart Koselleck, concepts opposés.

## 1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to define the concept of 'splendid isolation' and also of its transformation, from what Reinhart Koselleck calls a counter-concept to the 'traditional way' or the 'one true British foreign policy', followed by the succeeding cabinets of the last decades of the nineteenth century, regardless their political colour. In this sense, the main methodological 'tools' consists in R. Koselleck's books, *Practice of Conceptual History* and *Futures Past*, leading works in the fields of the cultural studies and conceptual history. Regarding historical sources, the main works which were used are historians C. Howard, J. Charmley and P. Kennedy's books and articles, main authors in the study of international relations and British history in the nineteenth century.

## 2. Reinhart Koselleck's concepts and counter-concepts

In his works, R. Koselleck defines conceptual history as a discipline whose main subjects are *concepts*, *texts* and *words*, as opposed to social history which uses the text only in order to deduct some circumstances or contextual modifications. In this sense, there is a permanent state of tension between concepts and society.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike the *history of ideas*, which defines its most basic notion, 'the unit-idea' as its basis, fixed in structure, discovered and rediscovered throughout time, concepts hold the fundamental property of being able to change, modify, and evolve depending on the social context. As a result,

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<sup>14</sup> Koselleck, Reinhart. *Futures Past*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, pg. 76;

concepts do not serve only to define certain situations or events, but hold the valuable possibility to break through the barrier of time, being, at the same time, important indicators and tools for the study of society. An example given by Koselleck is that of the concept of 'revolution', with the changes it had suffered over the course of the last two centuries. As a result, a history of a concept becomes the determination of its past meanings, at every specified moment in time, be it past or present.<sup>15</sup>

Regarding the evolution of their meaning, social and political concepts can be structured into three categories: firstly, that of *traditional* concepts, whose meanings have persisted to a great degree and which hold an empirical validity. The second category comprises of concepts whose meaning changed so radically that despite a linguistic link, the original meaning can only be recovered through a historical analysis. Finally, the third category consists on recurrent neologisms which react to specific social and political circumstances.

Social and political concepts are characterized by a generality, having more often than not, a number of meanings, with the concept representing not only and indicator of these meanings but also a factor of the relationship between them.

Extremely important is the study of what Koselleck defines as *counter-concepts*. Some terms can be defined through important concepts which are widely used, such as 'polis', 'society' or 'church' which are easily understood without preventing other terms to employ them. For instance, for a German citizen, 'society' or 'town', can mean 'German society' or 'the town they inhabit' while for a French citizen these terms may hold different meanings. These types of 'general' concepts are founded on the basis of mutuality and can be transferred. However, over the course of history, some general concepts tended to, and have achieved, a certain specificity. As an example, for a participant to the French revolution, 'the Nation', or to a communist enthusiast, 'the Party', may have a very specific sense. At the same time, for a Christian, 'the Church' may be a religious institution, a branch of a religion or simply the congregation of which he is a part of. This mode of 'defining' concepts leads to the appearance of the excluded element, of that certain 'other'. In this sense, a 'non-Christian' becomes a 'heathen'.<sup>16</sup>

Koselleck proposes the pair *Helene – Barbarian* for his definition of counter-concepts. The term *Helene* implied the Greek civilization in ancient times whereas *Barbarian* came to mean 'the rest of the world', constituting at the same time what Koselleck calls *the negative* of *Helene*. If we consider that the basis for the meaning of *Barbarian* has its origin in the dichotomy

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 81;

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pg.156;

*inhabitant of the city – inhabitant of the space outside the city*, we have set before us the evolution of the meaning of this concept (counter-concept). At the same time, a clear *asymmetry* can be noticed through the contrast between the *specific* term and its *negative*. *Evolution* and *asymmetry* are in many cases more obvious with the passage of time. If *Helene* defines in a very specific and historical way a certain population, *Barbarian* has come to hold a much wider meaning.<sup>17</sup>

### **3. Britain's position among the Great Powers – a diplomatic enquiry**

Precisely this *evolution* and *asymmetry* follow the phrase 'splendid isolation' as well as any attempt to define it. This phrase starts out in international relations jargon as a 'counter-concept', to use Koselleck's term, only to become a 'concept', typical, traditional, fundamentally British. One must add the recurrence and overuse of this phrase in the Victorian era. This is not a product, which is often the case, of historical research. 'Isolation' is extremely common, be it in parliamentary debates, diplomatic notes, newspapers articles or popular pamphlets, ubiquitous in Victorian times.

But why did it have such an impact? Why such a large interest for a 'press accusation' and a 'media scandal'? Alongside the obvious rivalry between 'the two great civilization of the Germanic race', to employ a well-known phrase of the era, the answer is simple: because 'isolation' implied vulnerability; It meant a state of decline which the citizens of the greatest empire of the time were beginning to acknowledge.

At that moment, from an international relations perspective, 'isolation' simply meant a weak status, or, to use C. Howard's words: 'an embarrassing lack of friends among the great powers'<sup>18</sup>. It was without a doubt, a situation which should be avoided at any cost.

But to what degree can a great power, such as the British Empire at that time, could truly be isolated? Such fears are obvious in Queen Victoria's discourse. In her correspondence with the Conservative prime-minister, Lord Salisbury, she highlights the danger which the perpetuation of this state and the over use of this phrase poses. The result was an exchange of letters between the Crown and the Chancellery which led to a vast enquiry of the Foreign Office's archives in order to determine the current state of events. The outcome was easily anticipated: Britain was involved in a series of alliances and accords with a number of states in Europe as well as in Asia and the Americas.

Britain's oldest surviving alliances were in the form of a series of accords with Portugal, dated between 1373 and 1815. Also, as a result of the

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pgs. 157, 158;

<sup>18</sup> Howard, Christopher. *Splendid Isolation*, London, Macmillan, 1967, pg. 1;

Treaty of Stockholm, signed in 1855, Britain along with France, agreed to defend Sweden in the event of any Russian aggression. At the same time, Britain was part of the concert of powers and in this role was involved in a series of conventions and treaties, the most important of which were that of Berlin, 1878, or the treaty regarding the integrity of Belgium, signed in 1839<sup>19</sup>. Diplomatic ties were also very close with the United States and China.

Most importantly, holding an empire equivalent with one quarter of the globe's surface and the title of the greatest commercial power meant that the notion of 'isolation' was, at least on paper, false. Again, one raises the question, why did this phrase have such an impact, then? The answer is found in the specificity of the international scene of the nineteenth century, or, to be more clear, in the system of the balance of power which followed the Congress of Vienna that ended the Napoleonic Wars.

The concept of the balance of powers became the norm of the century, its only objective being to hold the peace and the state of equilibrium between the main states. This system has proven its utility but also has shown its limits in a number of cases, and in the last decade of the nineteenth century has announced its end with the formation of the two great military 'blocks', consolidated in the political alliances of that time.

The consolidation of the Franco-Russian Entente alongside the formation of the Central Powers left Britain isolated, not from a commercial or diplomatic perspective, but through a lack of agreement with any other major country, a position held by none of the other powers.

#### **4. Defining Britain's 'splendid isolation'**

The first accurate attempt to define the state of 'isolation' was made by Salisbury: in a speech that was aimed at calming public arousal, he described this foreign policy strategy as 'the conduct of not being part of any military alliance'<sup>20</sup>. Then, this description evolved into 'the conduct of not being part of any alliance in peace-time', a fact pointed out by both C. Howard and J. Charmley.

As previously mentioned, Great Britain was involved *de jure* in a series of agreements. However, Salisbury's characterization of the state of affairs is extremely valuable as it places 'isolation' in the international context: it becomes *the negative*, to cite Koselleck, of the policies of the other great powers. As a result, 'isolation' is a counter-concept which can be

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<sup>19</sup> Howard, Christopher. „*The Policy of Isolation*”, in *The Historical Journal*, vol. 10, nr. 1, 1967, pg 84;

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 79;

defined in opposition with the `norm`, represented by the alignment of the other states to the two great military blocks.

At the same time, this counter-concept experiences a rapid evolution. If in 1894 it represented `a passive state` (a position one hardly aspires towards), in just eighteen months, this strategy becomes a chosen policy. In a speech held by George Goschen (a member of the Cabinet) in Lewes on 26 February, the statesman made the distinction between `isolation` as it was interpreted hitherto and what has come to mean a `policy of isolation`:

“There are [he told a Conservative gathering] two kinds of isolation. There may be the isolation of those who are weak and who therefore are not courted because they can contribute nothing, and there is, on the other hand, the isolation of those who do not wish to be entangled in any complications and will therefore hold themselves free in every respect... Our isolation is not an isolation of weakness, or of contempt for ourselves; it is deliberately chosen, the freedom to act as we choose in any circumstances that may arise”<sup>21</sup>.

Clearly explaining this distinction by Goschen has not passed unnoticed on the political scene of the Victorian age and it constitutes a crucial moment in the evolution of isolation as a counter-concept. The speech made by the High Lord of the Admiralty is equivalent to the recognition of this policy as the official strategy of the Salisbury Cabinet and the meaning of `isolation` moves from a `negative` to a `specific`.

Another important element is the adding of the epithet `splendid` to this policy. Originally, the work of a Member of the Canadian Parliament who employed it for the first time in January 1896, the phrase `splendid isolation` truly took off after it was repeatedly used by Joseph Chamberlain, a leading politician, some would argue `the` leading politician of that time. Chamberlain made it his mission to employ this phrase with every occasion, the main goal being, of course, a political one. Nevertheless, one has to notice a cross-party coalition of the whole political class in accepting and promoting Britain's `splendid isolation`.

In 1898, in the context of the talks between London and Berlin to form an alliance, Chamberlain emphasizes the “efforts which Germany has to undertake in order to determine England to abandon its *traditional* policy”<sup>22</sup>. The use of the term `traditional` is extremely interesting and has to be pointed out. `Traditional` gains a significant role, not only through the cultural perspective which, considering the specificity of British space, can be considered of paramount importance, but because it becomes a *specific*

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 80;

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, Paul. *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914*, London, Boston, Allen & Unwin 1980, pg. 234;

element, in opposition with the *negative* form of its earlier meaning. Chamberlain characterized as 'traditional' this policy which was continuously employed, at least from the Crimean War through the nineteenth century, its main artisan being the great prime-minister, Lord Palmerston, and its perception, certainly a favourable one.<sup>23</sup>

At this point one can observe a spectacular evolution of the (counter) concept of 'isolation', from 'an embarrassing lack of friends among the great powers' to 'the traditional way in British conduct', from 'a dangerous position' to 'an assumed policy'.

The end of isolation was just as fulminating as its debut. 'The splendid isolation' ends, *de jure*, in 1902 with the consolidation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and *de facto* in 1904 with the signing of the Entente Cordiale. The reasons of abandoning this policy are extremely pragmatic: an accord with Japan, the rising power in the Pacific was becoming necessary for the security of the British territories in that corner of the world, but even more importantly, in order to obtain a strategic superiority over the other great powers; Said powers, one has to add, were beginning to show a particular interest in areas hitherto considered to have British dominion, India and China to name the most important two. On the other hand, the Anglo-French Entente was the only viable option after any hope of securing an agreement with Berlin was abandoned as the Anglo-German antagonism was becoming more and more obvious and had even started to develop into a full-blown arms race.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

What started as an 'accusation' in the German press, 'the splendid isolation' became in the last years of the nineteenth century a fundamental component of British Identity, a fact proven by the diversity of sources in which it is mentioned. The attempt to define this phrase has led us to its origin, characterized as what R. Koselleck calls a counter-concept. Just as important is its evolution, from a mere 'negative' of the usual state of affairs to 'a time-honoured strategy'. For the Victorian society, 'splendid isolation' became the 'traditional way' which Britain has employed for the better half of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>23</sup> Howard, Christopher. *Britain and the Casus Belli, 1822-1902*, London, The Athlone Press, 1974, pg. 137;

<sup>24</sup> Charmley, John. *Splendid Isolation? Britain and the Balance of Power, 1874 – 1914*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1999, pg. 300-303;

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