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Public Ownership and Totalitarianism: Hu Shih's Reflections

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In the lecture that I delivered in June, 15th year of the Republican Era, I said, 'During the 18th century, liberty, equality and fraternity used to be the new religious creed. Since the mid-19th century, however, this creed has been replaced by socialism.' I spoke a lot about this at the time to elaborate on this notion. As I think of it now, I'd say that a public confession would be necessary, although what I am confessing now was a mistake that I made along with many other intellectuals. At that time, a large number of intellectuals believed that socialism would be a logical sequence for the future.

*We shall discuss this publicly again: are we on the road to liberation or the road to serfdom?*¹

Hu Shih (1891–1962) is arguably the most influential among the intellectuals who brought liberalism to China. Growing up with a traditional Chinese education, in his late teens he went to the United States, where he studied agriculture and later literature and philosophy at Cornell and Columbia Universities. At Columbia he met John Dewey, under whose influence he encountered liberalism not only as an intellectual tradition but as an ongoing experiment. Returning to China, Hu Shih became an outspoken proponent of liberalism, constitutional parliamentarianism and individual rights, and he advocated bringing China's intellectual and social development in line with the Western model. While he maintained his liberal commitment throughout his life, he was also constantly modifying it and at times even questioning it when confronted with the (chaotic) condition of China. The development of Hu Shih's thinking can be considered a reflection of how liberalism was received in China.

In 1953, the *Free China Journal*, published in Taiwan, serialized Friedrich A. Hayek's monumental work *The Road to Serfdom*, translated into Chinese by Yin Hai-guang. The following spring, when Hu Shih revisited Taiwan from the United States, he gave a lecture entitled 'Starting the conversation with *The Road to Serfdom*' (from which the above passages are taken) in order to promote the public discussion of Hayek's work. He had a high regard for Hayek's views, proclaiming that 'all planned economies are antithetical to freedom, or illiberal', and that 'although liberal thinkers more or less consider socialism an inevitable trend for the future, Mr. Hayek, a renowned economist, has said that all socialisms are anti-liberal, because the foundational principle of socialism is a planned economy'. In that lecture, Hu Shih renounced his blind belief in socialism (in the economic sense) of the past thirty years and returned to a philosophy of individualism, capitalism and liberalism. How did he come to this point at nearly the end of his life? To answer this question, it is useful to take a brief look at the history of the reception of liberalism in China, and at Hu Shih's influence on the process.

Liberalism was first planted in China through the translations of Yan Fu and the introductions of Liang Qi-chao in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. After studying at the Royal Naval College in England, Yan Fu, one of the earliest Chinese scholars to study in the West, translated a series of Western classics which included Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, Herbert Spencer's *Study of Sociology*, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*. The most consequential part of his influence, however, turned out to be Social Darwinism, which resonated deeply with all intellectuals who were worried about China's survival at the time. Liang Qi-chao, who studied Western thought through the medium of Japanese translations, made important contributions by introducing Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Bacon and Kant into the Chinese-speaking world. In many ways, they were the trailblazers for the intellectuals of the next generation.

Both Yan Fu and Liang Qi-chao prepared and later witnessed the cultural and intellectual flourishing which was unleashed by the so-called 'May Fourth New Culture Movement' (1915–21) – an anti-traditionalist movement, initiated by Hu Shih, that called for creating a new Chinese culture based on democracy and science. As part of its programme for modernization, it advocated a literary reform that enabled (and, some might argue, revitalized) the use of vernacular language, paving the way to broader education and cultural reform. As Hu Shih became one of the leading figures of the New Culture Movement, liberalism

was also widely disseminated among intellectuals. However, thanks to other prominent figures like Li Ta-chao and Chen Du-xiu, Marxism-Leninism was also becoming more and more popular in China. In fact, the communist movement became so energized, and its tone so radicalized, that Hu Shih felt obliged to offer a response, despite being reluctant to enter political debates. As the leading liberal intellectual, he wrote the famous essay 'More Study of Problems, Less Talk of Isms' (1919), proposing that social reforms should be realized by incremental changes aimed at solving individual, practical problems rather than by taking up 'fanciful, good-sounding isms.' However, one should bear in mind that Hu Shih himself was more interested in serious academic pursuits such as the re-examination of the national heritage rather than the study of concrete political problems. Nor was his pragmatic approach free of theoretical commitments. His opponents thus argued that he had likewise not exempted himself from basing his proposals on the ideology of experimentalism.

During the so-called Warlord Era (a period in the Chinese republic when political control was divided among military cliques), the warlords suppressed freedom of the press and battled against any journalist who dared to disclose the truth about them by shutting down publishers, or even assassinating journalists. Hu Shih, along with a few other renowned and like-minded intellectuals, published *Declaration of the Struggle for Freedom*, urging the government to protect freedom of speech. In April 1922, in response to the gloomy atmosphere of the political arena at the time, he wrote *Our Political Proposals*, and persuaded over ten other famous intellectuals to undersign this programmatic essay. Based on the fundamental principles of liberalism, the article argued that government is just a tool developed by the people to serve their interests. Therefore, a 'good government' is a government which 'fully utilizes the political regime to serve all members in a society', and one which 'tolerates individual freedom and treasures the development of personalities'. The concrete sign of a good government, according to Hu Shih, is a 'constitutional government', 'because that is the first step towards healthy political reform'. He demanded a 'transparent government' which discloses its financial operations and the procedures of its test-based official-recruiting programme. 'We firmly believe that transparency is the only weapon against shady politics.'²

In 1927, after the Nationalist Party unified most of China, it followed the Soviet model and created a 'Party government' system which did not have a constitution. In the wake of a series of dreadful human rights violations by the party after April 1929, Hu Shih published *Human Rights and Contract Laws, Discourses on*

'Human Rights and Contract Laws, When Can We Have a Constitution, The New Culture Movement and the Nationalist Party and Knowing is Difficult, but Doing is not Easy Either' – a series of essays which sharply criticized the Nationalist Party for its human rights breaches and marked the beginning of the human rights movement. The principal argument underlying these essays is that all human beings have basic rights that are inviolable, and that any curtailing of these rights would have to be *preceded by* legal and transparent processes. Therefore, the government should immediately establish a constitution that guaranteed these basic human rights.

However, the Nationalist Party at the time held the view that the Chinese people didn't yet have the ability to participate in politics – an ability which could only be developed by a gradual process of training. According to Sun Yat-sen, the founding leader of the Nationalist Party, this gradual process should consist of three steps: the first step was called 'stratocracy', which aimed at militarily obliterating all the forces of the opposition; the second step, branded 'political tutelage', aimed at establishing law and order, educating the people and constructing local autonomy. Needless to say, neither of these two steps required a constitution. Only then, at the last step, after the Chinese people were finally well-trained in politics, was a constitutional government to be established.

In response to these views, Hu Shih called on the ruling party to lead by example.

What the people need is civic life under a constitution, while what the government and the party members need is life under the rule of law. The government officials who 'woke up in advance' should use the constitution to train themselves and limit themselves, only then can they expect to lead the people on the path towards republicanism. Otherwise, the party members will be merely paying lip service to 'political tutelage' without its requirements. Granted, maybe the people are not terribly intelligent, but can they be this easily fooled?

His conclusion was: 'We do not believe that political tutelage is possible without a constitution; a system of political tutelage without a constitution can only be authoritarian to the core. We firmly believe that the sole system which is capable of political tutelage is a constitutional government.'³ By writing these articles, Hu Shih immensely agitated the Nationalist Party. Afterwards, *Crescent* magazine was shut down and Hu Shih himself was persecuted. He was forced to leave Shanghai, which had a tense political atmosphere at the time, and go to Beijing to become a professor at the Beijing University.

Despite taking citizens' individual rights very seriously, Hu Shih was in favour of public ownership, or at least not against it. In July 1925, he took a train to Europe through the Soviet Union and stayed in the USSR for a period of time. He came to have positive feelings about the revolutionary Soviet Union, and wrote about it to his friends in a series of letters. In response to scepticism that the Soviet utopia had no theoretical grounding, he pointed out that the same thing could also be said about capitalism, nationalism or partisan politics. Addressing the question of whether the Soviet system was a model with universal applicability suitable for adoption in China, he suggested that all political systems both have and do not have universal applicability. The crucial point, he argued, is about 'practice'. If a system can be well-practiced, it has universality; if not, then it does not. In particular, he called into question the view that 'once private property was abolished, humanity would no longer have the incentive to strive forward', or the claim that 'it is impossible to achieve high productivity under socialism'. He argued against these views by suggesting that private ownership and money were not the sole motivators for human progress and social development. He insisted that talented people and social elites, the ones with real nobility and high ideals, were not solely striving for private ownership. Therefore, social progress does not necessarily cease when private ownership is abolished, 'because talented people will always strive forward and accomplish magnificent deeds, regardless of what system they work under, be it private or public ownership'. Hence, in Hu Shih's view, the reason why capitalism had such advanced productivity was due to the effective functioning of its 'organism of production' (rather than private ownership). In comparison, socialism had not yet created such advanced organisms of production, which is why it could not yet catch up with the productivity of the capitalist countries. But this did not mean that it could never catch up. Indeed, Hu Shih had high praise of Lenin and Trotsky for their efforts, commenting that, ultimately, the Soviet Union would have the capacity to make better products than America.⁴

In 1926, Hu Shih published a long and influential article titled 'Our Attitudes Towards Modern Western Civilization'. The main point of the article was exactly what Hu Shih rejected three decades later, after reading *Road to Serfdom*, namely, the claim that private property should no longer be seen as a sacred human right as it was in the eighteenth century. Rather, its disadvantages were being increasingly exposed. In particular, the rise of capitalism had created tremendous suffering for the workers, which could (only) be cured

by governmental redistribution and/or labour unionization. Unsurprisingly, influenced by the Soviet example, Hu Shih projected most of his hopes onto the socialist movement. Until the 1940s, despite criticizing the Soviet regime, he was never critical of public ownership.

Hu Shih's view was representative. Generally speaking, modern Chinese liberals were inclined to believe that public ownership was capable of bringing a better and more equal society, but they failed to see the relationship between public ownership and totalitarianism. Their ideal sociopolitical system can be summed up as 'Anglo-American politics, Soviet economy'. This yearning for public ownership may well have originated from the Confucian tradition, and the prevailing sense that 'what the people fear is inequality rather than the scarcity of resources' and 'when the Way (or Dao) prevails, public spirit will permeate every inch of the world', a tradition which sees private ownership as an evil.⁵

It was only in 1954, after reading the Chinese translation of *The Road to Serfdom*, that Hu Shih critically reflected upon his advocacy of public ownership and came to have a sober view of the relationship between public ownership and totalitarianism. What caused his change of mind was not only Hayek's economic theories but also (and perhaps more importantly) the radical changes in mainland China after 1949. A series of massive movements such as the Land Reform, the Suppression of Counterrevolutionaries and the Thought Reform had a tremendous impact on him. His growing disillusionment with the Soviet experiment under Stalin also pushed him to revise and criticize the Soviet model. Nevertheless, the encounter with Hayek played a vital role in providing Hu Shih with a theoretical grounding. It was a deeply felt textual moment that paved the way for Hu Shih's return to liberalism.

Translated from the Chinese by Yang Xiao.