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Alexander Herzen

Robert Neil Harris

We need Europe as an ideal, as a reproach, as a good example; if she were not so, it would be necessary to invent her. A lie for salvation may be a good thing, but not all are capable of it. One month ago [John Stuart Mill] published a strange book in defence of freedom of thought, speech, and the individual; I say 'strange,' for indeed is it not strange that in the country where two centuries ago Milton wrote on the same theme, it again appears necessary to lift one's voice 'on Liberty.' He decided to speak because evil was growing worse. Milton had defended freedom of speech against the aggression of authority, against violence. Mill has an entirely different foe: he defends liberty not against an educated government, but against society, against custom, against the numbing force of indifference, against small-minded intolerance, against 'mediocrity.' The constant depreciation of personalities, taste, and manner, the hollowness of interests, the absence of dynamism, appalled him; he looks intently and sees clearly, how all is degenerating, becoming commonplace, ordinary, effaced – more 'respectable,' perhaps, but more banal. He sees in England ... that generic, herd-like types are being produced. Shaking his head in earnest, he says to his contemporaries: 'Look – your soul is dwindling away.' The truly important question, which Mill has not touched upon, is this: are there shoots of new strength which can reinvigorate the old blood? This question will be answered by events, not by theory. If the people is crushed, a new China and new Persia are inevitable. The transition will occur imperceptibly. No right will be abrogated, no freedom eroded. The sole loss will be the ability to utilise those rights and this freedom!'¹

During the late 1850s, at the very time that progressive Russian thinkers were looking to Europe for models of good governance and social amelioration, Alexander Herzen (1812–70), to the dismay of his close compatriots, unsparingly

attacked Western political, economic and cultural paradigms in the name of his bold and eclectic liberal synthesis of socialist, anarchist and Slavophile thought. The scion of a wealthy Muscovite nobleman, Herzen had left his homeland in 1847, spending his remaining decades in Western Europe. His mature doctrine speaks both to the catholic, transnational appeal of liberal values and to the cultural specificity of his idiosyncratic variant, which is imbued with Russian terms, perceptions and realities.

More a publicist and polemicist than theoretician, Herzen is largely a reactive writer who tends to set his ideas against those of others. Though he rarely engages in the sustained analysis of concepts in their own right, his writings were profoundly influential on following generations of ideologues and activists – from the Populists to Lenin – who fleshed out Herzen's broad outlines according to their own conceptual bent and political inclinations. Among his most striking statements on liberalism and the conditions he considers necessary for its unfettered advance is his 1859 review of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*.

A distinct and dissenting voice in the midst of Moscow's emerging intelligentsia, Herzen ardently disputes the supposition that European models will lead to a society in which individual freedom is bound to flourish. Like many of his peers, he had once been 'enthralled' by the West. However, his experience in France, during which he witnessed class division, public unrest and the 1848 revolts, persuaded him that the Continent was 'typhic', an 'ailing organism' in the last throes of death.² In his missives from Paris, he highlights the chronic antagonisms, inequalities and social divides which, more than a half-century after the Revolution, continued to impede meaningful progress.³

In 1852, Herzen arrived in London, ensconcing himself in a leafy suburb. However, the comfort of England and the fact that he could write without fear of censorship or reprisal was not enough to remove his unsettled thoughts. His warnings – relayed back to his native countrymen – that the West was destined for a 'terrible' future from which Russia must shield itself,⁴ were met with accusations of 'contempt for democracy, for the masses, for Europe'.⁵ He suggests that his sombre message was scoffed at because these were *his* opinions. Who was he to speak against the lofty ideals of the civilized world and shatter the hopes of his liberal comrades?⁶ Herzen sought to expose the West, with its veneer of freedom, as a false idol, but believers refused to listen to such heresy from a fellow Russian – *non est propheta sine honore nisi in patria sua*.

It was, therefore, with a great sense of vindication that Herzen found corroboration for his thesis from an unlikely individual – not an activist or

revolutionary, but an eminent logician and former high-ranking civil servant, John Stuart Mill, who exposed flaws that ran deep, not only in contemporary political theory, but in the sclerotized arteries of Western society itself. Mill's essay confirmed, with the authoritative imprimatur of the leading liberal thinker of the age, what Herzen had been suggesting for over a decade. Yet Herzen's essay is less a considered review of Mill's treatise than a springboard to launch his own, more stringent critique of Western liberalism. He is bothered neither by the consistency of Mill's position nor by the problems of the main argument itself. Maintaining that abstract doctrines are unable to provide adequate answers to complex existential questions, Herzen had little interest in the hair-splitting distinctions in which some critics indulged. What so excited him about Mill's essay was its remarkable span and overview, combined with its incisive analysis of the bovine behaviour of the contented masses, the sameness and predictability that was increasingly characteristic of modern society.

Using Mill as a foil, Herzen questions why, if liberal teachings have proven so successful in the West, Mill perceives the need to return to the very theme that Milton long ago had dealt with so admirably?⁷ Certainly, in England, where there was an electoral process, a parliament with opposition parties, a robust adversarial press and the right to assemble – civil liberties that Russian reformers could but dream of – was freedom not a fact?

Indeed, in London Herzen had witnessed town hall meetings and lively political debate; he mingled among journalists and activists, and established his own Russian-language press that printed landmark dissident books, journals and pamphlets. Yet he did not conclude that such benefits were enough to justify emulation of Britain, which, he asserts, had failed to create a truly free society. Despite the nation's impressive political achievements and its prodigious economic, military and technological prowess, these advances had not significantly enhanced – and in some respects had actually degraded – the sphere of personal autonomy.

In one of Herzen's most intriguing insights, he observes a disturbing paradox: as the external structures of the liberal nation state expand, providing electoral representation and legal rights, the *inner liberty* of the person appears to decrease, leading to 'moral servitude'. The intolerant throng instinctively steps into the role of the previous enforcers of thought and behaviour, subjecting the nonconforming citizen to the 'torture chamber' of public opinion, which is amplified by the tabloid press. 'The Englishman's liberty is more in his institutions than in himself or in his conscience. His freedom is in the "common

law" ... not in his morals, nor his way of thinking.⁸ Conversely, in countries where people are 'politically enslaved' and 'powerless before authority,' they are 'morally freer,' with more 'ideas and doubts.' Herzen's object lesson, his most powerful cautionary tale, is Holland, the envy of nations, whose denizens could boast of their ample lifestyle. Of this perfect paradise, Herzen rhetorically asks: 'And so what – what does one gain from such a life? What comes from it?' Having reached the pinnacle of success, the Dutch have become eminently comfortable, yet lacklustre and grey, a nation of businessmen and functionaries chained to the wheel of commerce. Rather than the expected images of happy citizens, Herzen presents the reader with a young man strapped to his desk, a hamster on a career treadmill, working without pause until his departure in a 'posh, varnished coffin.'⁹

'The liberty of the individual is paramount; it is on this and *on this alone* that the true will of the people can develop.'¹⁰ This personal freedom is expressed through distinctiveness, originality and creativity. Representative government has contributed to the fight against oppressive regimes, but it does little for the growth of the individual. 'Democracy is not able to create anything. ... It will be a nonsense after the death of its last enemy.'¹¹ Moreover, it can result in what Adams and Tocqueville referred to as 'the tyranny of the majority'. More insidious than any repressive ruler or censor is the invisible presence of public sentiment, what one might refer to as 'groupthink'. The stifling silence and inertia of foregone conclusions can be as pernicious as any authoritarian government. Modern society needs protection against this 'tyranny' of opinion, ideas, custom and practice.

The values that Herzen champions centre on what Russians refer to as *dukhovnyi*, in the wide-ranging sense of the German *geistig*; that which relates to the non-material elements of the human experience. At the very centre of his doctrine is the Russian notion of *lichnost'*, a vibrance, independence and essential dignity of personality. The mere presence of liberal institutions does not facilitate these inner processes. Moreover, as Herzen well knew from outstanding individuals such as Pushkin, even under despotic rule one may still manage to cultivate one's intellect, character, artistry and humanity to a remarkable degree. The greatest threats to the fashioning of *lichnost'* are not political or legal restrictions but far more intangible dangers. These include blind adherence to custom, a reluctance to stand out from the dull, undifferentiated pack and an uninspiring public sphere. The resulting apathy and passivity continually pull one into the centre and down to the average. This 'mediocrity' – the term, both

in Russian translation (*posredstvennost'*) and in the original English, occurs six times in Herzen's review of Mill – is the antithesis of everything Herzen stands for. He extols most of all the productive potential that emerges from breaking custom and routine, from disruption and disorder. Variety, experimentation and chance enable eccentricity of personality, the spice of life, allowing each individual and each generation to make a unique and meaningful contribution to humanity.

The emphasis on *Innerlichkeit* – the ethereal world of the mind and the spirit – is pronounced in Herzen's writings, but this does not mean that he considers concrete factors irrelevant to these internal processes. Impressed by early socialists, including Saint Simon, Owen, Fourier, Proudhon and Blanc, Herzen argues that the economic framework of modern industrialized nations is particularly detrimental to personal development. Although capitalism is often associated with individualism, Herzen regards it as an irrepressible levelling and homogenizing force. Thriving on efficiencies of scale, it dictates standardization and replication, generating not only a uniform material environment but a bland mass culture. A reservoir of independent spirit remains in those who are less affected by the corrosive effects of capitalism and its bourgeois values. Europe's proletariat still display vibrant folk traditions, which Herzen contrasts with the drab lifestyle of the property owner, broker and banker. America, despite its much-vaunted liberty, is much the same as Europe; it is the old world on new soil, 'old buildings from new brick'.¹² With its unabashed market-driven commercialism, it dissipates its creative energy, funnelling it into a single mind-numbing aim: business.

The liberal ethos in Herzen's writings is not expressed as a bald, abstract ideal but within a concrete, historically determined context, for the universality of freedom can only be realized within the consciousness of a specific individual who belongs to a particular era and civilization. The 'true sensitivity of soul' of Parisian workers is 'the product of the life of whole generations, of a long series or organic, psychic, and social influences'; it is a culmination of a received cultural inheritance and the labour of self-development, 'internal work' and 'cerebral activity'.¹³ Herzen revels in his encounters with the common folk of Italy, who are marvellously indifferent to the state and to politics. Recoiling from the monotony of bourgeois discipline, their saving grace has been precisely their 'elusive lack of order'. They exude a 'respect for oneself, for personality' and have internalized these values in their daily life.¹⁴

Yet, these bright flickers of Europe's folk are regarded as the dying embers of a civilization rather than hopeful sparks of rejuvenation. Influenced by the

notion of progressive historical stages, Herzen declares that Europe has entered its 'final form ... its coming of age, its maturity'. With the malignant spread of bourgeois aspirations, ensconced in the 'calm, sandy haven of liberalism', all significant growth has come to a halt.¹⁵ The lower classes are 'sad and deserving of compassion' but, bereft of self-understanding, these 'semiconscious masses' will not likely be able to save Europe from its downward trajectory.¹⁶ Grand public gestures, such as extending the franchise to a 'crowd of ignoramuses', will not lead to the formation of a liberal society: 'And what result *could* emerge from *suffrage universal*? Whom could the peasants – voting for the first time, without preparation, without education, under the influence of the clergy, wealthy landowners, and urban bourgeoisie – elect?'¹⁷

The question of Europe's future, claims Herzen, is glaringly absent from Mill's discussion. If the proletariat is 'crushed' – not by despotism, deprivation, injustice or censorship, but by assimilation into the middle class and the mindless acceptance of *vox populi* – then Mill's essay will prove to be a eulogy for liberalism in Europe, which will follow the path of other spent civilizations.¹⁸ By contrast, Russia is a virgin land of opportunity. Precisely because of its isolation from world history and the antipathy of its people to the contrived social arrangements of more developed nations, it has escaped the ills of the West.

What, then, is Herzen's vision for a healthy society in Russia? He provides few details. A liberal existence cannot be reduced to a universal formula, and even were this possible, it cannot be dictated to or foisted upon a people. Herzen insists upon the absolute inviolability of the person, who should not be sacrificed or subordinated to any political, social or religious system. In this regard, as one astute commentator has noted, Herzen's liberalism 'is not so much a political doctrine as a mode of resistance against doctrines – an assertion of human freedom against all political projects, including those that claim to serve the cause of freedom.'¹⁹ The pursuit of liberty must be worked out freely by individuals who are conscious, to as great a degree as possible, of their potential to develop the sole elements which are truly theirs – mind, spirit and personality – within an environment that is supportive of this aim. To facilitate this process in Russia, Herzen refuses to endorse any all-embracing programme or ideology, but rather petitions for the right of free speech²⁰ and the elimination of serfdom and corporal punishment.²¹ Even with these major concessions, could Russia succeed where the West had failed? Herzen admits that, in Russia, liberalism as a doctrine remains 'quite alien to the national character',²² while socialist theory has hardly made inroads beyond a few literate individuals. He suggests, however,

that the embryonic seed of a model society already exists in the form of the *mir*,²³ the peasant village commune.

How could a premodern, paternalistic, agricultural society embody Herzen's notions of liberal socialism? By conceiving liberalism as an open-ended process of personal actualization and self-expression, Herzen essentially requires a community that does not exert undue pressure, whether material or psychological, on its members.²⁴ His idealized image of a harmonious, self-governing *mir*, derived from the Romantic accounts of Haxthausen and the utopian conservative writings of the Slavophiles, was informed by Rousseau's vision of the freedom and equality of pristine man and Proudhon's communitarian anarchism. Precisely because of its remarkably primitive construction and relative lack of controlling administration, bureaucracy or hierarchy, the peasant commune provides a flexible platform, *Spielraum*, in which the distinct *lichnost'* of each associate can achieve true liberty.

However, this is not quite enough to instantiate freedom in Russia. The *mir* represents potential; it does not yet constitute realization. For the latter, the peasants must comprehend their essential nature and seize the opportunity to participate in the historical process of the actualization of liberty – not a simple task for those who are entirely unaware of such constructs and conceptions. Here, Herzen effectively writes himself and a few close associates into this epic historical process. In some eras, there were as few as 'five or six intellects that understood the general contours of the social process and that nudged the masses to the fulfilment of their destiny'.²⁵ Those with the most highly developed level of consciousness must guide the transformation of society, crafting enlightening essays and socially engaged literature for those who could read²⁶ and, for those who could not, venturing into the countryside, going 'to the people'.²⁷ Thus, it will be on Russian soil and with the Russian people – following a Russian *Sonderweg* – that the next important phase of the global iteration of liberalism and socialism will unfold.

Ever the iconoclast, Herzen resisted attempts by his readers to pigeonhole and assign labels to his thought.²⁸ Notwithstanding his acute criticism of Western liberalism, he incorporates key tenets of European liberal thinkers into his socialist doctrine, which, he conceded, would eventually encounter its own challenges. Herzen believed in no structural or ideological panacea, as national, historical, and cultural factors, along with the vagaries of human behaviour, play a significant role in determining the ultimate efficacy and benefit of any political or social system.