

Discuss the social and political ideas of Alexander Herzen

Often named "the founder of Russian Socialism" (Chubarov 1999, Page 64), Alexander Herzen was an important part of the early Russian revolutionary movement, and later an influence upon the revolutionaries of 1905 and 1917. He was a strong advocate of free speech as well as being critical of the European Bourgeoisie, the inequality of serfdom and the autocracy of the Tsar and the Romanovs'.

His beliefs began in the radical Westernisers who, unlike the classical Westernisers believed that industrialization and the inevitable rise in the bourgeoisie class would not be beneficial to Russia in the long term. Whilst serfdom would be abolished under the capitalist system, it seemed illogical in the eyes of socialism to undergo the capitalist phase of development when you can just skip it, avoid the exploitation and advance immediately to the socialism stage of development. Herzen believed that Europe was nearing collapse and could not "foresee an early downfall of the bourgeoisie and the reform of the old political order without a most frightful, bloody struggle" (Herzen 1857, page 1563), surely Russia should seek to avoid this future by avoiding capitalism and the bourgeoisie society itself. Why would Russia want to follow the same capitalist model as Europe? The same model which, according to socialism, will inevitably collapse in a horrific conflict. "What particularly attracted Herzen in socialism was the idea of a brotherhood of peoples – liberated individuals – united in a free community for the sake of lofty and noble goals of goodness and justice" (Chubarov 1999, page 65) something which capitalism could not bring due to competition. In socialism too you avoided "a political revolution [that] was not enough to alter radically the basis conditions of the life of society. [whereas] What was needed was a transformation of social conditions and, above all, of the relations of ownership" (Chubarov 1999, page 66). So for Herzen, society and the roles of people inside it could only be changed for the better to advance Russia by changing conditions specifically of the peasants, and by changing the way possessions are owned to adapt this to a more communal ownership similar to the peasant communes (the Obshchina).

In the Obshchina Herzen saw the future of post-Tsarist Russia in what became known as "Narodnichestvo" or "peasant socialism" "through a fusion of the three elements of Westernism, Slavophilism and socialism" (Chubarov 1999, page 65). Westernism in the intent for the defeat of the Tsars and use of an elected government, Slavophilism in the move away from the perceived corrupt Bourgeoisie class of Europe, and socialism in the use of the Obshchina to change the system of ownership and the status of the peasants. All these overlapped with each other, to create a "uniquely Russian philosophy" (Chubarov 1999, page 65).

To him, this would be the basis for a new fairer Russia; with ownership controlled completely by the communes. As well as the system of ownership radically altered, the status of the peasants would be changed too from the inhumane system of serfdom that was presently in place, where "the peasant is literally an outlaw. The law-court affords him no protection and his share in the existing order of things is entirely confined to the twofold tribute that lies heavy upon him, and is paid in his toil and in his blood" (Herzen 1851, page 483).

It was believed by Herzen however that "our problems [referring to the backwardness of the Russian state] are posed in such a way that they can be solved by general social and political measures without violent upheavals" (Herzen 1957, page 1568) simply due to the continued existence of the Obshchina.

Where feudal Europe had evolved fully into capitalist societies, events in Russian history such as the Mongol Yoke and the continuation of absolute rule, had led to social, economic and industrial progress become stifled comparatively to the rest of Europe. This lack of evolution on the scale of that in Europe led to the continued existence of the feudal system in Russia, in the form of the Obshchina. Since it seemed inevitable to Herzen ideologically that capitalism was going to be defeated, and eventually replaced by socialism, Russia is fortunate, in "that the village commune has not perished and personal ownership has not split up the property of the commune; how fortunate it is for the Russian people to have remained outside all political movements, outside European civilization, which would undoubtedly have undermined the commune, and which has today reached in socialism the negation of itself" (Herzen 1851, page 489). Socialism could be achieved in Russia, without the capitalist stage due to the Obshchina which promote socialism in their nature (in the communal ownership of property). This way there was no need for bloodshed in any revolution as the system of communal governance was already inherent in Russian society, "his theory, based on a belief in the inbred socialist tendencies of the Russian people, allowed Herzen to adopt the European concept of socialism to Russian conditions and to show for the first time that backwards Russia was actually more prepared for the introduction of socialism than industrialized Europe" (Chubarov 1999, page 67).

On Serfdom too came Herzen's views upon the Tsar and his autocratic system, believing that the reason for the continued backwardness of Russia in the feudal system as opposed to freeing the serfs was because the Tsar (Nicholas I) "realizes that freeing the peasants involves freeing the land; that this, in turn, means the beginning of a social revolution, the proclamation of rural communism" (Herzen 1851, page 488), so in order to prevent a snowball effect in the form of social revolution, serfdom must remain. Herzen's criticisms upon the Tsar and on autocracy continue, in the firm belief of the inexistence of the divine right to rule, stating that "nations are a product of nature, history is the progressive continuation of animal development" (Herzen 1851, page 480). Ideas like these undermine and illegitimate the Tsars regime, as are indication that the Tsar and his ancestors' divine right to rule to be a fraud. To keep his regime intact, the Russian press was severely censored in an attempt to prevent any sort of ideas blossoming. Censorship and the severe lack of freedom in the Russian press was something which Herzen strongly objected to, claiming that the autocracy "try to silence us, to stifle free speech in its cradle" (Herzen 1851, page 499) for the same reason as they refused to free the serfs; for the fear that it will lead to more reforms and the eventual abolition of the monarchy. This can be summarized in the words of Herzen who claimed that "a time comes when thought reaches its maturity and can no longer be kept in fetters by the censorship, nor by prudence" (Herzen 1851, page 499); meaning that, in basic terms, if one idea is allowed to develop, this will develop into more ideas and truly will (and did) undermine the autocracy.

With these ideas you can see a trend of a belief in some kind of end result for societies in almost a Marxist manner; "neither Roman law, nor subtle casuistry, nor threadbare philosophic deism, nor sterile religious rationalism can retard the fulfillment of social destiny" (Herzen 1851, page 472). This social destiny isn't strictly along Marxist revolutionary doctrine for Herzen, as he believed that violent revolution would lead only to a replacement of an autocratic regime by another oppressive one which would be harmful for the Russian people, and "What he detested above all was the conceit that future bliss justified present sacrifice and bloodshed" (Stoppard 2002). In other words, the perceived 'promise' of a better future was not the correct justification for a violent revolution.

This difference to socialism is made clear in the words of Lenin; as "in the doctrine of Herzen's as, indeed, in the whole of Russian Narodism, right down to the faded Narodism of the present day "socialist-revolutionaries", there is not a grain of socialism" (Lenin 1912, page 7), because, for Herzen, 'socialism' was the "emancipation of the peasants

with land, in community landownership and in the peasants idea of "the right to the land"" (Lenin 1912, page 7).

As well as these ideas concerning the future of the Russian people, Herzen had ideas about the future of the Slavic people as a whole, whose development compared to the Europeans had been stifled and claims that this has "the Slav world is striving towards unity" (Herzen 1851, page 475). The only way to achieve unity as well as freedom and rights to the extent Herzen wished for the Russian peoples, was "to fight is to fight for their freedom and ours as the inscription on their revolutionary banner reads" (Herzen 1851, page 476); by uniting in revolution the Slavic people could eventually "at last enter upon its genuine historical existence" (Herzen 1851, page 478). This again has roots in a so-called social destiny with the belief that the reasons for the Slavic world being fractured is due to interference by other agents such as the Mongol yoke, and in particular Russia's establishment creating fractures in the form of "slavery, the knout and executions, the Russian people have been driven into making a vast empire" (Herzen 1857, page 1567). With this is the belief that one day the Slavic people will be united.

Whilst Alexander Herzen's political and social ideas were not socialist, he "had 'invented' Russian populism in reaction to the failure of Western socialist democracy in the European revolutions of 1848" (Stoppard 2002) in order to adapt it to the interests of the Russian peoples, primarily because of the *Obschina*. What defined Herzen's ideas "was the individual over the collective, the actual over the theoretical" (Stoppard 2002) in comparative to the revolutionary ideals of Marxism. Herzen's theories (particularly on the inherent communist nature of the *Obschina*) could be physically applied to Russia as opposed to Marxist theories upon society's stages of development; Herzen's theories were specific to Russia. This is what made Herzen's ideas unique and convincing.

He fought for freedom of the people in Russia; freedom of speech through his newspapers in which he attacked the Tsar and his system of autocratic rule; in this he was easily "the most visible and most eloquent opponent of Russian autocracy" (Stoppard 2002), as well as the system of serfdom

His views upon the freedom of speech in particular are important in summarizing his ideology in political and social terms, and their inspiration upon Narodniks; "my word shall avenge those unhappy lives crushed by the Russian autocracy which prostrates men morally, kills them spiritually" (Herzen 1851, page 499). With this you can see the belief that as long as critics of autocracy and immorality message reaches the people, they will be avenged, and the wrong doers will be defeated; "The future, said Herzen, was the offspring of accident and wilfulness (sic)" (Stoppard 2002) which definitely "formed the ideological core of the Russian revolutionary tradition" (Chubarov 1999, page 64)

References

- Chubarov A (1999) **The Fragile Empire. A History of Imperial Russia.** London: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc. Pages 64-69
- Herzen A (1851) The Russian people and Socialism. A letter to J Michelet. In Gertsen AI (1956) **Alexander Herzen: Selected Philosophical Works.** Translated from the Russian by L Navrozov. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House. Pages 470-502
- Herzen A (1857) Another Variation on an Old Theme. A letter to X (I.S Turgenev). In Higgins H (1968) **My Past and Thoughts: The memoirs of Alexander Herzen** vol IV. Translated from the Russian by C Garnett. London: Chatto & Windus. Pages 1560-1573

- Hosking G (1997) **Russia: People & Empire 1552-1917**. London: Harper Collins Publishers. Pages 283
- Lenin VI (1912) In Memory of Herzen. In Gertsen AI (1956) **Alexander Herzen: Selected Philosophical Works**. Translated from the Russian by L Navrozov. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House. Pages 6-12
- Stoppard T (2002) The forgotten revolutionary. **The Observer**. [Online] Sunday 2nd June 2002. Available at:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2002/jun/02/featuresreview.review3>
[Accessed 14 February 2011]