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## THE ROOTS OF ALEXANDER HERZEN'S POPULIST SOCIALISM

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*Abstract:* the author describes the roots of Herzen's political thought and its development after the disappointments of 1848 and, in general, in the mid-nineteenth century. The paper is divided into three parts. The first, describes the controversy between Slavophiles and Westernists regarding relationships with European civilization and the idea of Russian identity that will have a clear influence on Herzen's thought. In the second part, Herzen's «philosophy of action» is described as the overcoming of a certain interpretation of Hegelianism, which could represent a philosophical system that in contrast to the affirmation of subjective freedom. In the last part author describes the ideal of populist socialism as a synthesis of western individualism and the harmonious collectivism of Russian rural communities.

*Keywords:* Westernism/Slavophilism – philosophy of action – socialism – populism.

### 1. Slavophilism and Westernism

Describing the Russian culture Pushkin writes: «It is known that the culture is the consciousness of a nation. It is important to mention what culture implies. Some people believe that it is concluded by the sum of works of art made out of any material. But you can't pack a culture in a suitcase. That mainstream point of view is shallow. That personalized authorial culture is highly important, but it is only a part of the national culture with its lifestyle and psyche, its ideals and traditions, its morals and human relation (...). All of that is a base of personal culture. In other words, authorial culture is the intermediated nation's self-consciousness»<sup>1</sup>. According to the pre-Revolutionary Russian historiography, the history of Russian social thought could be identified with the history of the Russian intelligentsia<sup>3</sup>. The emergence of this social stratum<sup>2</sup> marked the

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<sup>1</sup> A. S. Pushkin, 1958, 216.

<sup>2</sup> There is no agreement on the exact origin of the Russian intelligentsia. R. Pipes, 1960, 487. Arnold Toynbee believed that the Russian intelligentsia was generated by the impact of the modern West and was «an artificial substitute for a home-grown middle class» installed by «high-handed apostles of



beginning of the history of enquiries relating to a set of issues, such as the Russian identity, the sense of the Russian past, the perspectives of Russia's development<sup>3</sup> in the international context. Any role can be attributed to intelligentsia, it can be argued that the representation of national identity, and the relationship between the Russian nation and other nations, belongs to this inhomogeneous<sup>4</sup> social class «distinguished from the mass of the population by its education, its way of life, and a general sense of affinity with the western cultural community»<sup>5</sup>. The reflection on national identity by intelligentsia became a reflection on itself as a leading social class, and on the role it might play in order to build a national consciousness that is connected to the model of civilization in Russia<sup>6</sup>. Considering the correlation of «intelligentsia-consciousness» and «national consciousness», it is appropriate to specify that the definition of national identity is ultimately a question that concerns only a minority social group<sup>7</sup> or, in other words, an elite.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, intelligentsia appeared to be split among themselves<sup>8</sup> over the definition of national identity and their approach to western culture. On one side «the Slavophiles», while on the other «the Westernists». The distinctive character of the «Slavophiles» was the affirmation of the primacy of the Slavic culture over the western one. The Western civilization, founded on the legacy of the

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Westernization from above downwards». For some Marxists the Russian intelligentsia was composed «of epiphenomenal figures who by the very nature of the historical process had no influence: history is made by class struggles over the means of production». The intelligentsia is a constellation of men of culture – alienated and without a class consciousness – or a large social group servile to capitalism. A. McConnel, 1964, 1. The term «intelligentsia» was introduced into the Russian language in 1860 by Boborykin. M. Malia, 1960, 441. Some scholars argue that the intelligentsia arose in Poland in the second half of the eighteenth century. The term denotes «intelligentsia» (in polish *inteligencja*): the group of *hommes de lettres*, who undertook to provide moral leadership or the «intellectual servants», whose goal was to decrease social backwardness and political repression in partitioned Poland. M. Janowski, 2014, 13. This social class «emerged – chiefly in Freemason circles– as an intellectual elite independent of modernizing authorities and united by a common system of values and the sense of a emancipatory social mission». A. Walicki, 2015, 30. Arnold Toynbee believed that the Russian intelligentsia was generated by the impact of the modern West and was «an artificial substitute for a home-grown middle class» installed by «high-handed apostles of Westernization from above downwards».

<sup>3</sup> The Russian intelligentsia, as both an historical phenomenon and a social concept has been connected with the process of Westernization, the fundamental features of which mainly refer both to the adoption of certain models of life associated with modern European secular society and to specific ideological currents emanating from the West, that in a broader sense may be described as «rationalist». While in the first case, the adherence to western cultural life models has no specific implication from a political point of view, being compatible with both conservative and progressive ideas; in the second case, adherence to rationalistic currents «is predisposed to agree with left-of-center political social view». R. Pipes, 1960, 487.

<sup>4</sup> A. Gella, 1982, 132

<sup>5</sup> R. Pipes, 1960, 487.

<sup>6</sup> «The concept of intelligentsia must not be confused with the notion of intellectuals. Its members thought of themselves as united by something more than mere interest in ideas; they conceived themselves as being a dedicated order, almost a secular priesthood, devoted to the spreading of a specific attitude to life, something like a gospel». I. Berlin, 1978, 117.

<sup>7</sup> M. Shirokova, 2018, 1.

<sup>8</sup> I. Berlin, 1978, 6.



classical antiquity, on the tradition of Christianity and on «young barbarian race that destroyed the Roman empire»<sup>9</sup>, is opposed by Slavophiles to the «Orthodox East», composed of the «young and healthy Slavic race» to which the future belongs. Slavophiles argue that the political order in the West is the result of individualism and materialism, that gave shape to a nihilistic society. Diametrically different is the Orthodox East characterized by a social order in which altruism and solidarity find their place. Konstantin Aksakov affirms that the origin of the western states was violence, slavery, enmity, unlike the Russian state which is the result of consensus, freedom and peace<sup>10</sup>. Walicki notes that a leitmotiv of Slavophile ideology is the antithesis between the people and society: the enlightened elite that had adopted Western ways. «The people cultivated stable customs, whereas society bowed to the caprice of fashion; the people had preserved the patriarchal family, whereas society was witnessing the breakup of family ties; the people had remained faithful to ancient Russian traditions, whereas society was an artificial product of the Petrine reforms»<sup>11</sup>. The reforms of Peter the Great compromised the «integrality» of Russian society, dividing it into an elite, fascinated by Western customs, and the people who held the authentic spirit of the nation.

Western society is predominantly industrial, dominated by soulless industry rules. One of the founders of the Slavophile movement, Ivan Vasilevic Kireevsky, in this regard wrote: «Industry rules the world without faith or poetry. In our times it unites and divides people. It determines one's fatherland, it delineates classes, it lies at the base of state structures, it moves nations, it declares war, makes peace, changes *mores*, gives direction to science, and determines the character of culture. Men bow down before it and erect temples to it. It is the real deity in which people sincerely believe and to which they submit. Unselfish activity has become inconceivable; it has acquired the same significance in the contemporary world as chivalry had in the time of Cervantes»<sup>12</sup>. The main characteristic of western society is selfishness that prevails over solidarity; social ties concern pure individual interest. Private and social life in the West, Kireevsky affirmed, «are based on the concept of an individual and separate independence that presupposes the isolation of the individual. Hence, the external formal relations of private property and all types of legal conventions are sacred and of greater importance than human beings»<sup>5</sup>.

The roots of Western individualism are to be found, according to Kireevsky, in the rationalistic culture of Rome that represented «the triumph of naked and pure reason relying on itself alone and recognizing nothing above or outside itself»<sup>13</sup>. Roman society constituted an aggregation of individuals motivated by personal advantage and knowing no other social bond than that of common business benefits. The sphere of political

<sup>9</sup> I.V. Kireevsky, 1911, 111.

<sup>10</sup> L. Schapiro, 1960, 459

<sup>11</sup> A. Walicki, 2015, 173.

<sup>12</sup> I.V. Kireevsky, 1911, 113.

<sup>13</sup> Ivi, 111.



authority embodied by the state constitutes the result of antagonistic interests. The state represents a force that chained people together but did not unite them<sup>14</sup>. The state in western society, in similarity to the Roman civilization, is founded exclusively on the set of individual advantages from which a stable order cannot derive. In such a situation, a true social harmony appears unattainable.

The Slavic spirit arising from the peasant reality, in particular from *obshchina*, the Russian peasant community is, as opposed to the western civilization, founded on the harmony of relations between its members, the tradition of customs and the stability of the laws. The *obshchina* was governed by a *mir*, an assembly of elders bestowed with the task of settling any disputes by referring to tradition. The Slavic peasant civilization is animated by the «inner truth», that is of conscience, superior to the «outer truth» given by the set of laws that govern a state<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, the bond between members of the traditional Slavic community is moral and not exclusively material. This bond is based on altruism and not exclusively on the care of one's well-being. The «natural» dimension of inter-individual relationships in the rural community is greater than the «artificial» one, the latter founded on the impersonality and formalism of positive laws. The spontaneous adherence to moral principles -«the agreement with one's conscience»- is superior, under the profile of the stability of social order, to «the agreement with the law», and the cold formality of the norms, typical of the states of the West. «In the West – Kireevsky wrote- laws issue artificially from the prevailing opinion, while in Russia they were born naturally out of the way of life. (...) In other words, in the West we find a dichotomy of the spirit, a dichotomy of thought, a dichotomy of learning, a dichotomy of the state, a dichotomy of estates, a dichotomy of society, a dichotomy of familial rights and duties, a dichotomy of morals and emotion (...). We find in Russia, in contrast, a predominant striving for wholeness of being, both external and inner, social and individual, intellectual and workaday, artificial and moral»<sup>16</sup>.

The Slavophilism represents a conservative movement<sup>17</sup>, similar to the German romantic conservatism of Jacobi, Schelling and Schlegel. The main feature of the Slavophile movement is utopianism, dating back to an image of the Russian peasant community as a synthesis of some values opposed to industrial society, the western urban morality and the selfishness of western man. As Walicki argues, slavophilism is utopian conservatism: *utopianism* because it was a comprehensive and detailed vision of a social ideal, sharply contrasted to existing realities; and *conservative*, or even reactionary, because it was in fact an ideal located in the past<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> A. Walicki, 2015, 169.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, s. 171.

<sup>16</sup> I. Kireevsky 1852, 229.

<sup>17</sup> A. Walicki, 2015, 183.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.



In defining the differences between the Slavic civilization and the West, a non-secondary role is played - as Berlin notes<sup>19</sup> - by «the wounded national pride» of a society whose leaders were not only aware of its backwardness, but suffered from resentment of the civilized West. The slavophiles retreated into «mystical nationalism» because according to them, the organic form of nation's life had been ruined by Peter's I reforms which as the same way as in the West created a great divide between people and political, cultural elite.

Peter Chaadaev's *Philosophical Letters*, one of the most important works of Russian Westernism were published in 1836. Chaadaev's «Letters» constitutes a critique of Russian mentality and culture. Unlike Slavophiles, he claims that Russia is a backward and isolated country. The reasons for its backwardness are to be found in not having completely absorbed the cultural models of the West, and in the role of the Orthodox religion, an authentic cause of regression for the entire society<sup>20</sup>. Western civilization for Slavophiles leads to disunity and social disorder. On the contrary, Chaadaev believed that: «In Europe, the vital principle of unity animated everything. Everything emanated from it and converged on it. The whole intellectual movement of this period was directed toward the unity of human thought, and all progress came from this powerful necessity of arriving at a universal idea, which is the creative genius of modern times. Alienated from this wonderful principle, we became the victims of conquest»<sup>21</sup>. The general idea of Russia's backwardness *vis-à-vis* other countries is founded on some historical events, such as Christianity and the Renaissance, which did not occur in Russia or whose faint echo has come with difficulty to the East. For this reason, Russia fell into the bondage of absolutist and obscurantist tsarism. Chaadaev saw in the great transformation introduced by Renaissance the *differentia specifica* of Europe in relation to Russia<sup>22</sup>.

Russia has not yet made her own contribution to the universal genius. But it does not have to be so in the future. Russia- argues Chaadaev- is a young country «without history»: a virgin land that could contribute to create a new history for humanity. Despite its backwardness and isolation, Russia constitutes the land where the contradictions of modern western society can be resolved. «Our virgin mind receives every new idea (...) I do not know. Perhaps it would have been better to go through all the trials and tribulations of the other Christian peoples and to receive from them, like these peoples,

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<sup>19</sup> I. Berlin, 1982, XXIV-XXV.

<sup>20</sup> He wrote: «Isolated in the world, we have given nothing to the world, we have taught nothing to the world; we have not added a single idea to the mass of human ideas; (...) From the very first moment of our social existence, nothing has emanated from us for the common good of men; not a single useful thought has sprouted in the sterile soil of our country». P. Chaadaev, 1976, 116.

<sup>21</sup> P. Chaadev, available online at <http://www.philosophy.ru/library/chaad/lettr/chaad1.html>

<sup>22</sup> «The character of modern society had already been fixed. Bathing in pagan antiquity, the Christian world acquired the forms of Beauty it lacked. Relegated to our Schism, nothing of what was happening in Europe came to us. We had nothing to do with the great subject of the world (...) While the whole world was rebuilding everything, nothing happened to us (...) Although we are Christians, the fruits of Christianity did not mature among us». *Ibidem*.



new forces, new energies and new methods. And perhaps our special position kept us from the miseries that accompanied the long and arduous learning of these peoples. However, we should not talk about it now. Now we must only try to understand the present character of our country in the definitive form, which the very nature of things has imputed to it and derive every advantage there from. It is true that history is no longer in our power, but science belongs to us. We are not able to do all the work of the human spirit again, but we can participate in its additional works. We have no power over the past, but the future depends on us»<sup>23</sup>. The controversy between Slavophiles and Westernists revolves around the problem of the identity of the Russian nation and, more generally, of the Slavic world in relation to Western culture. Although the two schools of thought are divided with respect to their judgment on Western culture, both in many aspects share the feeling of being custodians of the national identity. Despite the differences, both schools of thought essentially agreed on conservative political positions as regards the overall political structure of their country<sup>24</sup>. A turnaround in Russia that puts the world's largest nation at par with the rest of Europe must not take on a democratic character. Chaadev wrote: «I have never sought popular applause. I have not sought the favors of the crowd. I have always felt that mankind should follow only its natural leaders anointed by God; that it can only advance on the path of true progress when it places itself under the leadership of those who have received from the heavens the task of leading it; that general opinion is not identical with absolute reason, as a great writer of our time put it; that the instincts of the masses are infinitely more passionate, narrower, and selfish than the instincts of an individual person; that the so-called folk wisdom is absolutely not wisdom; that truth is not born of the multitude and is impossible to be expressed by numbers; finally, that in all its power and brilliance human consciousness is found only in the individual mind»<sup>25</sup>. Russia's evolution towards western-style cultural models must not lead to a transformation of its political structure. One of the duties of the intellectual class is to indicate to the masses respect for political authority. Contrasting with Kireevsky, Chaadev argues that the difference between the common people and the elites is necessary to guarantee order and social development. The divergence between the two authors is about the role of the elites: opposed to the people and the authentic spirit of the nation in the first case; necessary to limit the anarchy and instincts of the masses in the second.

The divergences between «Slavophiles» and «Westernists» concerned their difference in judgment on Western culture; the diagnosis of the Russian past, in particular the experience of modernization of the country by Peter the Great; the definition of the

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, 7-8.

<sup>24</sup> «The Slavophiles were a homogeneous group made up of land- holders who in their thinking, at least, maintained close connections with their estates, their provinces, and their localities. They represented, on the whole, the estate and serf owners of comfortable and substantial, rather than extensive or small holdings». F. I. Kaplan, 1958, 163.

<sup>25</sup> P. Chaadev, available online at <http://www.philosophy.ru/library/chaad/lettr/chaad1.html>



Russia's future in the concert of nations. The issues, that both movements faced, from different points of view, are related to the organization of the Russian state and the role of the masses, in particular of the peasant communities in the creation of a social order similar, in the case of Westernists, or different, in the case of Slavophiles, to the western one. These questions constitute the themes of political thought of one of the greatest exponents of Westernism: Alexander Herzen.

## 2. The «philosophy of action»

The most significant episode of Herzen's<sup>26</sup> youth is having witnessed the failed revolt of the Decembrist of 1825. Herzen and Nikolai Ogarev, with whom he established a long intellectual partnership<sup>27</sup>, were struck by the revolt and swore that they would dedicate their lives to continuing the struggle for freedom that the Decembrists had started. In 1831, Herzen and Nikolai Ogarev founded a discussion group: the so-called *Circle of Herzen and Ogarev*, whose *raison d'être* was to carry out on the Decembrist tradition by fighting against serfdom and autocracy<sup>28</sup>. Herzen shared with the members of the Circle the interest in Schiller's Romanticism and Schelling's philosophy, but he also studied the French philosophers, in particular the utopian socialism, especially that of Saint-Simon. In the young Herzen's world view, as wrote Walicki, French influences (those of the Saint-Simonians, Buchez and Pierre Leroux) coexisted with equally influential ideas borrowed from Schelling and German romantic literature and philosophy<sup>29</sup>. What interested young Herzen was the revelation contained in Saint-Simon's thought of a new era and the advent of an «organic society». Emancipation from serfdom, freedom from autocracy could be achieved in a socialist society<sup>30</sup>. Due to the ideas spread by the club, it was closed by the tsarist government in 1834 and Herzen and Ogarev were arrested. Herzen was sent to exile. He spent more than five years in the provinces – two years in Viatka and three in Vladimir. He returned from exile only in 1840, when the influence of Hegelian philosophy was at its peak<sup>31</sup>. The fruit of Herzen's reflection on Hegel was an

<sup>26</sup> Herzen was the illegitimate son of a wealthy Russian nobleman, Ivan Yakovlev, with a German woman. The name chosen by the father, which literally means «two hearts» (*herzen*) in German, was to indicate the fruit of love between the noble Russian man and Alexander's mother. The origin of the name is actually controversial. . Constance Garnett affirms that Yakovlev gave his son the surname Herzen because he was a «child of his heart». C. Garnett, 1982, 3.

<sup>27</sup> In 1840, Ogarev reminisced about their days as students: «That was the holy time our friendship (...) what a marvelous time, Herzen! Our friendship is a point of movement into the future (...) our whole life passed before my memory». R. Friedman, 2005, 92.

<sup>28</sup> P.K. Christoff, K.S. Aksakov, 1982, 29.

<sup>29</sup> A. Walicki, 2015, 216. As wrote Jakovenko: «Some notions "taken out" from Hegel's works they were even known to residents of provincial noble manors». B. Jakovenko, 1938, 31.

<sup>30</sup> P.K. Christoff, 1982, 29.

<sup>31</sup> A. Walicki, 2015, 216.



essay cycle titled *Dilettantism in Science* (1843)<sup>32</sup>, which was crowned by the fourth, the famous *Buddhism in Science*. He perceived elements in Hegelianism that – if interpreted formalistically – could give rise to a cult of Historical Reason as an impersonal and cruel force<sup>33</sup>. In Hegel's philosophy the individual personality is *de facto* sacrificed on the altar of the universal spirit. Herzen argued that «The reconciliation with reality», as Bakunin defined Hegel's philosophy<sup>34</sup>, cannot be reduced to a passive acceptance of the reality of the moment. On the contrary, man, as a moral creature can through action change that reality according to his needs and ideals. The only possible reconciliation with reality is in the action, and this means in an effort to transform existence into a sense that corresponds more to man's needs. In an attempt to change reality - and therefore to act - man is reconciled with himself: he affirms his own personality. «In the morally free and passionately vigorous rational action, the human being achieved the reality of his personality (...). In the action, the human being becomes eternal in the temporary, infinite in the finite, represents the race and himself»<sup>35</sup>.

The analysis of Hegel's philosophy leads Herzen to elaborate – different from the simple «reconciliation with reality» a «philosophy of action» based on a link between the individual and existence. In the essay *Buddhism in Science*, Herzen observes that Buddhism denies the existence of the individual. He asserts that, like Buddhists, thinkers who viewed Hegel's «reconciliation with reality» as a mere passive acceptance of contemporary reality assumed a position like Buddhists in religion<sup>36</sup>. Science cannot constitute a form of knowledge indifferent to action. The abstract impersonality of science – wrote Walicki – «is in turn negated by conscious action; having transcended its immediacy, the self realizes itself in action, bringing rationality and freedom to the historical process. In Herzen's argument, therefore, personality is not just an instrument, but the ultimate goal of all development»<sup>37</sup>.

Herzen, thus creates a philosophy of action understood as a dialectic overcoming of the impasses placed between the general and the particular<sup>38</sup>. He saw danger in the great abstractions or narrations, that produce idols on whose altars human blood was to be shed and sacrificed in honor of older divinities-church or monarchy or the feudal order:

<sup>32</sup> Available at [http://az.lib.ru/g/gercen\\_a\\_i/text\\_0174.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/g/gercen_a_i/text_0174.shtml)

<sup>33</sup> A. Walicki, 2015, 217.

<sup>34</sup> Bakunin is author of so-called «manifesto of Russian Hegelianism»: his Preface to his translation of Hegel's *Gymnasium Lectures*. In a letter of 1837 he wrote: «I am more and more absorbed in Hegel and am increasingly convinced of the absoluteness of content and in the absolute objectivity of the forms of this content. Hegel is the complete reconciliation with reality, and this was so necessary for me, as there so much emptiness (...). I feel that my life and the scope of my spiritual existence are becoming more real, that I am becoming closer to a normal state. I believe in life, I believe in its wonderful destiny, and hope that I shall in time, take a real part in it (...)». M. Bakunin, 1837; From M. Del Giudice, 1982, 162.

<sup>35</sup> A.I. Herzen, 1954-1965, (vol.III) 71. Available online at <http://philolog.petrsu.ru/herzen/texts/texts.htm> and <http://philolog.ru/herzen/index.html>

<sup>36</sup> Ivi, 77-79.

<sup>37</sup> A. Walicki, 2015, 218.

<sup>38</sup> P. Kropowski, 2015, 189.



the true obstacles to the progress of mankind<sup>39</sup> and individual freedom. «The world will not know liberty until everything religious and political is transformed into something simple, human, susceptible to criticism and denial. Logic, when it comes of age, detests canonized truths ; it demotes them from angelic rank to human status (...). This is the whole point : to surrender what we love if we are convinced that it is not true. (...) If the past is triumphant in fact, let us kill it in the idea, in the conviction, in the name of human thought»<sup>40</sup>.

His interpretation of the Hegelian philosophy, which had a wide echo in his country, aimed to push the progressive current of Russian intelligentsia into a battle against those parts of intellectual class in favor of the conservation and primacy of the Slavic world over the western one. The radicalism gained after witnessing the sad end of the Decembrist and the «philosophy of action», which is nothing more than a reworking of Hegelianism, characterize the «Russian period» of Herzen. He will leave Russia for France in 1847 and never to return to his homeland.

### 3. The populist socialism

Herzen arrived in France in January 1847 with high hopes in relation to the progressive forces in the «country of revolution». His illusions soon met with a reality different from that which he had idealized. In a series of essays, titled *Letters from France and Italy* (written in 1847-1852), he described the scenario he encountered in Paris and his negative experience with the European bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie appears to him a class devoid of a great past and of no future<sup>41</sup>, without any ethos comparable to the aristocracy. «Heir to a sumptuous nobility and an impolite citizen, the bourgeois summarizes the most intense disadvantages of both as losing his dignity. He is as rich as an aristocrat, but he is like a merchant»<sup>42</sup>. The «social religion» of the aristocracy had been replaced by the mundane world of shopkeepers and not by the socialist ethics<sup>43</sup>. The bourgeoisie deals exclusively with economic issues. «He sacrificed all his interests for them (...), saying I repeat that the bourgeoisie has no future. He already feels the beginning of the deadly disease in his chest which will eventually lead him to the grave»<sup>44</sup>.

By 1848, when a series of revolutionary upheavals broke out in Europe, Herzen found himself with Bakunin and Proudhon on the extreme left wing of revolutionary socialism<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> I. Berlin, 1982, XXVII.

<sup>40</sup> A.I. Herzen, 1956, 51-52.

<sup>41</sup> A.I. Herzen, 1954-1965, (vol. 5), 34.

<sup>42</sup> Ivi, 238.

<sup>43</sup> A. Walicki, 2015, 252.

<sup>44</sup> A.I. Herzen, 1954-1965, (vol. 5) 238.

<sup>45</sup> I. Berlin, 1982, XXV.



Progressive forces, especially the Socialists and the Communists, appeared to the Russian thinker as insufficiently equipped to avoid the victory of the cynical and retrograde bourgeoisie and Reaction<sup>46</sup>. Herzen's frustration and bitterness<sup>47</sup> bore fruit in his work *From the Other Stone*<sup>48</sup>, published in German in 1850. In it, Herzen definitively abandons the ideas of Hegel and Saint-Simon, relying on historical perspective, to claim that and affirmed that history was guided by chance and irrational forces<sup>49</sup>. His disillusionment towards the western world, in general, leads him definitely in the direction of the so-called Russian socialism, an eclectic theoretical elaboration, containing ideas taken from both the cultural current of Slavophiles and that of the Westernists<sup>50</sup>.

The events of 1848 confirmed that the revolutionary possibilities in Europe were exhausted, above all because of the heavy legacy of the past, the resistance of the conservative classes and the role of a bourgeoisie which was *de facto* anti-progressive. In a 1854 letter to William Linton he wrote: «It seems to me that Europe, as it exists, has finished its role; the dissolution has continued (...) since 1848. Certainly, it is not the peoples who will perish, but the States, but parliamentary (...), monarchical or republican institutions, whichever»<sup>51</sup>. In Europe a socialist revolution would be simply impossible. «Our revolutionary idea is completely incompatible with the existing state of affairs. (...)The State, based on the Roman idea of the absorption of the individual by society, on the sanctification of accidental and monopolized property, on a religion consecrating the most absolute dualism (even in the revolutionary formula God and the People), - has nothing to give the Future except his corpse, only his chemical elements emancipated by his death»<sup>52</sup>.

Instead, Russia was a «new country» or, as had been written Chadaeev, a «country without history», where the weight of the past was not an obstacle to planning the future<sup>53</sup>. Russia, and the Slavic world, in general<sup>54</sup>, were therefore more fertile grounds

<sup>46</sup> Herzen was very critical of revolutionaries in 1848 who were «so revolted by the Reaction after 1848, so exasperated by everything European, that they hastened on to Kansas or California». A. Herzen, 1968, 1683.

<sup>47</sup> His frustrations were vastly increased by his wife's infidelity with his friend and German poet Georg Herwegh and by her death in 1852.

<sup>48</sup> A. Herzen, 1956, 135.

<sup>49</sup> A. Walicki, 2013, 126.

<sup>50</sup> He will develop this idea in several essays (most written originally in French for the European public), such as: *La Russie* (1849), *Du Développement des Idées Révolutionnaires en Russie* (1850), *Le Peuple Russe et le Socialisme* (1851), *La Russie et le Vieux Monde* (1854).

<sup>51</sup> «L'Europe doit se transformer, se décomposer, pour entrer dans de nouvelles combinaisons. C'est ainsi que le monde romain s'est transformé en Europe chrétienne. Il a cessé d'être lui-même; il n'est entré que comme l'un des éléments - les plus actifs - de la constitution du nouveau monde. Jusqu'à aujourd'hui, le monde européen n'a subi que des réformes; les fondements de l'État moderne sont restés intacts: nous avons continué sur le même fond, en améliorant les détails». A.I. Herzen, 1954-1965, (vol. 12), 134.

<sup>52</sup> Ivi, s.135.

<sup>53</sup> In *A Russian's Letter to Mazzini* of November 1849, he wrote that the dream of Byzantium expressed the historical validity of Russia's Slavic mission. Tsar Nicholas was afraid of that mission – «instead of appealing to the kindred nations, he rejects them; instead of heading the Slavs' movement, he offers his help and gold to the Slavs' executioners». A.I. Herzen, 1954-1965, (vol.6), 228.



for new experiments, including the socialist one. Russia, as a «virgin country», lent itself better to the revolution than the West. Herzen wrote in *Le Peuple Russe et le Socialisme* (1851): «It seems to me that Europe, as it exists, has reached the end of her historical role. This decadence has been running ever faster since 1848 (...) To this day the European world has only gone through reforms with the foundations of the modern state have remaining intact, maintaining the base and improving the details. (...). Socialism is the negation of everything that the political republic has preserved from the old society. Socialism is the denial of all that the political republic has retained from the old society. Socialism is the religion of man, the religion of the earth, without heaven: it is a society without government (...) The idea of social revolution is European. However, this does not mean that the peoples most capable of realizing it are the peoples of the West (...). Europe has much to conserve, it is too civilized (...)»<sup>55</sup>. Even the United States appears to him as simply a «continuation of Europe» and its imperfections. On the contrary, the Slavic world:

«(...) known for making common cause neither with Europe nor with Asia. Europe is crusading, - the Slavs stay at home. Europe is developing feudalism, big cities, legislation based on Roman law, on German laws: civilized Europe is becoming Protestant, liberal, parliamentary, revolutionary. - The Slavs have neither large cities nor aristocratic nobility; they ignore Roman law, do not know of any distinction between peasants and citizens, they preferably live in their villages, keep their communal, democratic, communist and patriarchal institutions»<sup>56</sup>.

Socialism hence is the religion «of the earth and without government» which can be realized in Russia. The position of the Russians, from this point of view, is remarkable. «We are morally freer than the Europeans. (...) we have nothing of the past that dominates us. Our history is poor, and the first condition of our new life is to renounce it entirely. We have nothing left but the national life, the national character, the crystallization of the state: everything else is formed by the elements of the future. Goethe's words about America applies well to Russia: "Your inner lives are not disturbed by useless memories and vain strife"»<sup>57</sup>.

In his description of Russian socialism, a central place is covered by the letter to Jules Michelet, who affirmed that «Russia does not exist, that Russian are not human, that they lack any moral sense»<sup>58</sup>. Herzen replied that: «The Russian people, my dear sir, exists, strong and vigorous, and not old-indeed very young. Men happen to die even in their

<sup>54</sup> Walicki explains that the Herzen's new faith in Slavic world and in particular in the collective peasant commune was inspired by Mickiewicz's Lectures at Collège de France of 1844. The polish poet had idealized the Slavic peasant community which embodied the values of socialism. A. Walicki, 2013, 129.

<sup>55</sup> A.I. Herzen, 1954-1965, (vol. 12), 134

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>57</sup> A.I. Herzen, 1954-1965, (vol.6), 150-151.

<sup>58</sup> The letter, was written in Nice on 22 September 1851 and appeared in a feuilleton of the journal *L'Événement* in 1851. A. Herzen, 1956, 470-502.



youth but it is not the usual thing. The past of the Russian people is obscure, its present is frightful, but it has claims on the future (...). I think, however, that too much attention is being paid to imperial Russia, to official Russia, and too little to the voiceless Russia of the people»<sup>59</sup>. Contrary to Russia, Europe is now the victim of its contradictions, including the inadequacy to achieve freedom and legal order.<sup>60</sup> In Europe, there is no «regard for law, no justice, not a ghost of freedom; instead of legality, there is a state of siege, all are governed by a single feeling-fear, and there is plenty of it»<sup>61</sup>.

The comparison between West and East, Europe-United States versus Russia-Slavic world, now coincides with the comparison between a world in decline and a reality open to the future<sup>62</sup>. Russia is quite a new state, «an unfinished structure in which everything smells of fresh plaster, in which everything is at work and being works out, in which nothing has yet attained its object, and in which everything is changing, often for the worse, but nonetheless changing. In brief, this is the people whose fundamental principle, to quote your opinion, is communism, and whose strength lies in the re-division of the land...»<sup>63</sup>. Socialism therefore appears at hand with Russia. Socialism, however, is based on the peasant community. Herzen argues that for nearly two hundred years the peasant has lived «in mute opposition to the existing scheme of things». He submits to coercion, and suffers in silence, but evinces no concern for anything that goes on outside the village commune. The peasant lives in a primitive and communist society, immune from political power and religious authority<sup>64</sup>. The peasant is an «outlaw» who has instinctively realized «that the whole system is built up not for his benefit, but to his detriment, and that the aim of the government and the landowners is to wring out of him as much labour, money, and recruits as possible»<sup>65</sup>.

Outside the common life of rural society «everything seems to him based upon violence». The peasant respects «only those institutions which coincide with his innate conception of law and right (...). The peasant rarely cheat each other. Their trust in each other is almost boundless, they know nothing of contract and written agreements. (...). The landowners and the government eagerly seek an opportunity for interference, but in vain. Petty disputes are submitted to the judgment of the elders of the commune at the

<sup>59</sup> Ivi, s.471.

<sup>60</sup> Europe – he wrote – «is approaching a terrible cataclysm. The medieval world is crumbling into ruins. The end of the feudal world is drawing near. Political and religious revolutions are flagging under the weight of their own impotence; they have accomplished great things, but have not proved equal to their tasks. They have stripped the throne and the altar of their prestige, but have not realized the ideal of freedom; they have kindled in men's hearts desires which they are incapable of satisfying». Ivi, s.472.

<sup>61</sup> Ivi, s.472.

<sup>62</sup> «In the midst of this chaos, of these agonies of death and throes of birth, in the midst of a world falling into dust at the foot of the cradle of the future, men's eyes involuntary turn to East». Ivi, s.473.

<sup>63</sup> Ivi, 481.

<sup>64</sup> «The name of the Tsar stirs a superstition feeling in the people. It is not, however, to Tsar Nicholas that the peasant does homage, but to the abstract idea, the myth: in the popular imagination the Tsar stands for a menacing avenger, an incarnation of truth, an earthly providence». Ivi, s.482.

<sup>65</sup> Ivi, 483.



commune assembly, and the decision is unconditionally accepted by all»<sup>66</sup>. The same can be said for the *artels*, the associations of workers who lived as a commune. The *artels* are often made up of several hundred workmen, who form a cooperative for a definite period- for instance, for a year. At the expiration of the year the workmen divide their earnings by common agreement, in accordance with the work done by each. «The police never get the satisfaction of meddling in their accounts»<sup>67</sup>. As a rule, the *artel* makes itself responsible for every one of its members»<sup>68</sup>. The Russian people are «naturally communist», that is their morality instinctively derives from his communism<sup>69</sup>. The communist spirit of the peasant people is the main feature of the identity of the Russian nation. This spirit made Russia remain outside the sphere of influence of European and Eastern civilization<sup>70</sup>. Russia, Herzen says, is therefore a fortunate nation because it has remained outside all political movements, outside European civilization, which would undoubtedly have undermined «the commune». Europe has not solved «the antinomy between the individual and the state, though she has set herself that task. Russia has not found the solution either. This is what we have in common. At the first step towards social revolution Europe encounters a people that offer a system- of perpetual re-division of the land among tillers»<sup>71</sup>.

In the rural community every hierarchical power is dissolved in favor of the self-organization of common people. «The peasant is never defiled by contact with this cynical world of government; he endures its existence- and that is all he is to be blamed for»<sup>72</sup>. Therefore, the fundamental character of the Russian people is its rejection of any form of power not attributable to the simple, spontaneous system of the rural community<sup>73</sup>. The selfishness of the western elites is a sentiment unknown to the Russian agrarian reality. Although Herzen deplores the «values» of bourgeois society, he defends the principle of individuality proper to the western culture. The principle of individuality is linked to the free expression of each person and, in general, to the realization of the individual freedom. The «Russian socialism» must not deny the principle of individuality

<sup>66</sup> Ivi, 484.

<sup>67</sup> Chomjakov underlines the analogies between Russian *artel* and Fourier's phalanstery. A. Gerschenkron, 1974, 162.

<sup>68</sup> A. Herzen, 1956, 484-485.

<sup>69</sup> Ivi, 485.

<sup>70</sup> «The commune has saved the Russian people from Mongol barbarism and imperial civilization, from the Europeanized landlords and the German bureaucracy». Ivi, s.486.

<sup>71</sup> Ivi, 489.

<sup>72</sup> Ivi, 492.

<sup>73</sup> «We have no law – Herzen wrote – but our nature, our national character; it is our essence, our flesh and blood, but by no means a binding authority. We are independent because we possess nothing. (...) what respect can be inspired in us by your roman-barbaric law, that hollow clumsy edifice without light or air, repaired in The Middle Ages and whitewashed by the newly enfranchised middle classes? (...) your laws begin with a revolting falsehoods, the ironical abuse of the name of the French people, and the words Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. The code of Nicholas is drawn up for the benefit of the autocracy and to the detriment of his subjects. The Napoleonic code has absolutely the same character. (...) We are slaves because we have no possibility of being free; but we accept nothing from our enemies». Ivi, 496.



but must be based on it. «The State- he wrote- and the Individual, Authority and Liberty, Communism and Egoism (in the broad sense of the word); these are the Herculean columns of the great struggle, the great revolutionary epic. Europe poses a truncated and abstract solution; Russia, a truncated and savage solution. (...) The Anglo-Saxon people emancipated the individual by denying the community, by isolating man. The Russian people preserve the community by denying individuality, by absorbing man. The ferment that must be set in motion, the mass of the inert forces made dormant by communal patriarchalism is the principle of individualism, of the personal will»<sup>74</sup>. Intelligentsia must play a fundamental role for the revolutionary movement as a whole<sup>75</sup>. Without intelligentsia<sup>76</sup> the revolutionary movement becomes mere peasant revolts that ultimately did not bring changes in the social regime. The Russian rural community must, however, be fertilized by western values: personal freedom and above all freedom of thought<sup>77</sup>. For this purpose, the intelligentsia is needed as a class with the duty to put itself in the hands of the nation and build a new identity. This is an identity that coincides with a project of social transformation as a synthesis of western and eastern values.

The rural community represents a model of social organization - anti-authoritarian and anarchist – anyway alternative to western society. Only from this community is it possible to build socialism that overcomes inequality and the ambiguities of the historical legacy<sup>78</sup> of the West. The future of socialism is therefore in Russia, in the peasant people opposed to any form of power that has taken place in Europe<sup>79</sup>. In this sense, Herzen affirms that agrarian socialism unites Russia and Europe in a single horizon of social

<sup>74</sup> A.I. Herzen, 1954-1965, (vol.12), 156.

<sup>75</sup> A. Walicki, 2013, 129.

<sup>76</sup> «The emancipated Russian is the most independent man in Europe. What could stop him? Is it respect for his past? (...) We do not consider ourselves only as testamentary executors of your history. Your doubts, we accept them. Your faith does not touch us. You are too religious for us. Your hatreds, we share them. Your attachment to the heritage of your ancestors, we do not understand. We are too oppressed, too unhappy, to be content with half freedom». A.I. Herzen, 1954-1965, (vol. 7), 294-299.

<sup>77</sup> «Even in the worst periods of European history, we encounter some respect for the individual, some recognition of independence, some rights conceded to talent and genius. Vile as were the German rulers of that time, Spinoza was not sentenced to transportation, Lessing was not flogged or conscripted. This respect not merely for material but also for moral force, this unquestioning recognition of the individual – is one of the great human principles in European life.(...) We have nothing similar. With us the individual has always been crushed, absorbed, he has never even tried to emerge. Free speech with us has always been considered insolence, independence, subversion; man was engulfed in the State, dissolved in the community». A.I Herzen, 1956, 12-13.

<sup>78</sup> «On the other hand, the past of the Western European peoples serves us a subject of study and nothing more; we do not regard ourselves as the executors of their historic testaments». A. Herzen, 1956, .495.

<sup>79</sup> «Lo spirito che anima i populisti russi non è il termometro dell'arretratezza dell'immenso paese semifeudale, ma esprime piuttosto l'assimilazione ideologica delle credenze più radicali e irrequiete della società europea da parte di uno strato relativamente sottile di intellettuali rivoluzionari che considerano la loro patria, la Russia, come un carcere da trasformare (...) La caratteristica del populismo è (...) la fiducia illimitata nella capacità della Russia di compiere progressi più rapidi, e soprattutto più rettilinei di quelli che lo scetticismo ivi imperante non consente agli altri paesi europei». F. Venturi, 1972, XVIII.



transformation; it constitutes the synthesis between East and West. «The future of Russia does not depend on her alone, it is bound up with the future of Europe»<sup>80</sup>.

The roots of Herzen's socialism are to be found, primarily, in his profound disillusionment with the Revolutions of 1848. Starting from that date, the homeland of the revolution, France, and Europe in general, no longer appears to him the political context where socialism could be built. He became convinced that the Western «matadors of rhetoric», i.e. cultural and political elite were too imbued with values of the past. Europe's role as a progressive historical force was finished, and that Western institutions were in fact overcome. In that, he borrowed some ideas from his old foes, the Slavophiles. Nevertheless, he saw in intelligentsia, i.e. the cultural elite, the class that would lead the people to recognize the value of individual freedom. «The Russian way to socialism» must allow western-style individualism to be integrated with the spirit of equality, typical of the rural community.

Herzen's reflections on the problems of socialism which mainly concern the question of Russian identity and the values of its common people, can serve as the foundation for a new humanism<sup>81</sup> despite being opposed to the intrinsically unfair moral of the elite, both West and East. The year 1848 marked a watershed in Herzen's life, opening a period of his intellectual trajectory characterized by an idea of socialism as an overcoming of every cultural and political particularism. The revolt in Poland against Russia in 1863 and Herzen's position in favor of the Poles<sup>82</sup> dramatically ended up isolating the Russian thinker away from many of his compatriots, friends and associates. Herzen formed a friendship with some Polish patriots in exile<sup>83</sup>. Although the origins of Herzen's agrarian socialism – as argued Walicki – can be traced back to Mickiewicz's thought, there were still significant differences between the two thinkers, especially in reference to Mickiewicz's messianism and the strong nationalist character of Polish culture<sup>84</sup>.

The nationalistic turn of many sectors of Russia's intelligentsia towards the revolt in Poland, made Herzen's universalistic populist<sup>85</sup> socialism a romantic utopia in comparison with the *realpolitik* and the division of nations of the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the dedication to his son, contained in the book *From the other Stone*, he takes note of his isolation and expresses a hope for «the religion of coming revolution»:

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<sup>80</sup> Ivi, 497.

<sup>81</sup> J. Dobieszewski, 2013, 146-147. Herzen wrote: «Could you please explain to me why belief in God is ridiculous and belief in humanity is not ; why belief in the kingdom of heaven is silly, but belief in Utopias on earth is clever?» A. Herzen, 1956, 120.

<sup>82</sup> On the friendship between Herzen and many Polish patriots since the time of his French period cfr. I. Berlin, 1956, 17.

<sup>83</sup> About the relations between Herzen and some members of Polish *Inteligencja* see R.Śliwowski-W.Śliwowska, 1987.

<sup>84</sup> A. Walicki, 2013, 128-133.

<sup>85</sup> Herzen is defined by Franco Venturi as the creator of Russian populism: a political current, however, that will move away from the work and thought of the author of *From the other stone*. F. Venturi, 1972, 3.



«We do not build, we destroy; we do not proclaim a new revelation, we eliminate the old lie. Modern man, that melancholy *Pontifex Maximus*, only builds a bridge – it will be for the unknown man of the future to pass over it. You may be there to see him . . . . But do not, I beg, remain on *this shore* . . . . Better to perish with the revolution than to seek refuge in the almshouse of reaction.

The religion of the coming revolution is the only one that I bequeath to you. It has no paradise to offer, no rewards, except your own awareness, except conscience . . . . When the time comes go and preach it amongst us at *home*; my language was once loved there and perhaps they will remember me.

. . . I bless you on your way in the name of human reason, personal liberty and fraternity!»<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>86</sup> A. Herzen, 1956, 3-4.



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