

Aileen M. Kelly. *The Discovery of Chance: The Life and Thought of Alexander Herzen.* Harvard University Press 2016. 608 pp. \$39.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674737112).

Aileen Kelly's *The Discovery of Chance* breaks several decades of relative silence around the philosopher, journalist, novelist, and socialist agitator, Alexander Herzen (1812–1870). Balancing discussion of Herzen's turbulent life with treatment of his ideas and the intellectual milieu in which they took shape, Kelly's book is anchored in an argument concerning the overall philosophical import of Herzen's work. According to Kelly, Herzen's work should be seen as an extended meditation on contingency. What Herzen principally wanted to understand, she states, was how we should think about history given that we must regard it as entirely subject to chance, as developing independently of any kind of inner plan or immanent direction.

This way of understanding Herzen's thought is indebted to Kelly's mentor Isaiah Berlin, whose *Russian Thinkers* presented Herzen as prophetically attuned to the dangers of imposing abstract ideas onto living societies. It is also strongly linked to Kelly's central biographical claim. According to Kelly, Herzen was much more influenced by contemporary developments in natural science than has so far been appreciated. She notes that the natural sciences were central to his studies at Moscow University in the 1830s and that he continued to pursue studies in this area in earnest throughout his life, publishing an essay on the evolutionary theorist Karl Rouillier in 1845. In chapters four and five of the book, which are focused on the intellectual background to Herzen's thought, Kelly suggests that the principal lesson to be taken from the natural science of this period is the open-endedness of nature. Whereas previous generations of naturalists had sought to discover an eternal order within nature, a 'static' system of classification, thinkers such as the Comte de Buffon and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck reimagined nature as something essentially fluid. As Lamarck famously argued, species are subject to ad hoc changes in response to local environmental circumstances (65). This way of thinking about nature was connected with a newfound emphasis on empirical methodology. Since we cannot predict nature's path in advance, it is necessary to attend carefully to what actually happens in the natural world.

These natural scientific motifs find expression in Herzen's thoughts on social progress. As Herzen explains in his 1850 essay collection *From the Other Shore*, it is a mistake to regard history as tending inevitably toward some desirable outcome, such as the socialist utopia envisioned by the radicals of his day. The present is open to development in any number of directions; it is not pregnant with a determinate future (349, 356). This position is at the heart of Herzen's debate with the novelist Ivan Turgenev, which unfolded across a series of articles and letters in the early 1860s. Whereas Turgenev is confident that the current of history will bear Russia in the direction of liberal democracy, Herzen denies that social development necessarily proceeds along a single, pre-determined track. Arguably, as Kelly notes, the recent history of Russia has vindicated Herzen on this point. Following the collapse of socialism, Russia did not develop in the direction of liberal democracy, but in a different direction altogether (450).

How should we feel about the fact that social progress is not a foregone conclusion? According to Herzen, we should not follow Schopenhauer into pessimistic resignation. From the fact that history does not 'dance to our tune,' we should not conclude that history is simply meaningless, or that it is somehow pitted against us. Our task, rather, is to try to make social progress come about, by attending carefully to history as it actually unfolds, and by exploiting opportunities for change as they present themselves (438). Unfortunately, social and political arrangements are no less contingent than the course of history. Even if we succeed in bringing about the change that we seek, we can have no expectation that this outcome will endure. Like the forms of living things, forms of

social organization are subject to constant change. They are destined to be constantly renovated in response to the circumstances and preferences of successive generations.

Herzen's strong commitment to contingency also reflects influences beyond the realm of natural science, above all, that of the French socialist philosopher Joseph Proudhon. As Kelly explains, Proudhon rejected the view that the objective of social reform is to achieve a 'final state of harmony.' Not only are we unable to clearly envision what such a state might look like—a point that Proudhon made in a well-known letter to Marx, taking exception to Marx's view that communism represented precisely such a 'definitive solution' to history (353)—such a final state of harmony runs contrary to the essence of human beings, which is defined by 'change, progress, and conflict' (296).

Proudhon also influenced Herzen's sense of how political change in Russia could proceed. According to Proudhon, the appropriate agent of political transformation is the cooperative association. By encouraging the growth of such associations, it would be possible to gradually make the state redundant (293). For Herzen, likewise, the key to a socialist future for Russia lay with the village commune. Given an 'injection of Western principles'—in the form of increased respect for the rights of individuals—the commune could become the basis of widespread social transformation (371). Ironically, in light of the widespread perception of Russian political backwardness, the availability of this indigenous resource suggested for Herzen that Russia was actually further along the road toward socialism than the countries of Western Europe. Where the latter were still stunned by the failures of the 1848 revolutions, Russia stood poised and equipped for social change, boasting of an intelligentsia that felt no particular allegiance to prevailing political traditions and so were willing to embrace a new political future (326-28).

Kelly also locates a basis for Herzen's philosophical preoccupation with contingency in the facts of his life. She notes that the premature deaths of several children early in his first marriage made him intensely conscious of the way in which chance events can derail the expected course of events (173). Whether or not Herzen drew this lesson himself, his life also clearly exemplifies the instability and impermanence that he attributes to political configurations. Following an idle, aristocratic childhood in Moscow and studies in natural science at the Moscow University, Herzen was imprisoned in 1834 for expressing seditious sentiments in private letters. He was subsequently sent into exile in Vyatka, in western Siberia. After a second period of internal exile in Novgorod and protracted negotiations with the government, he left Russia in 1847, spending an extended period in London—where he launched the celebrated émigré periodical, *The Bell*, a forum for debate on political reform in Russia—but ultimately drifting peripatetically from one European capital to another for the rest of his life.

Kelly's comprehensive and eloquent account of Herzen's life and thoughts is certain to be the benchmark work of scholarship on Herzen for many decades to come. One minor reservation that I have with it, however, concerns a persistent framing device that Kelly employs. According to Kelly, Herzen is best understood as a 'Darwinian *avant la lettre*' (418). She suggests that we can regard his ideas—particularly as expressed in *From the Other Shore*—as *anticipating* Darwin and the non-teleological conception of history that Darwin would thrust to the forefront of scientific and popular consciousness. My response is that this way of representing Herzen somewhat ironically neglects what we're told is the primary tenet of his thought, which is that the meaning of the present moment resides strictly in the present moment. In trying to view Herzen retrospectively through the lens of Darwinism, I think, we risk losing sight of the specificity of his moment and his philosophical accomplishment.

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