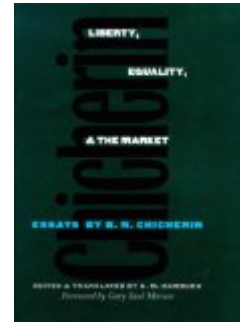


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B.N. Chicherin. *Liberty, Equality, and the Market: Essays*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. xxxv + 457 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-07232-7.

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A Consistent Liberal

Boris Nikolaevich Chicherin (1828-1904) has been a largely forgotten figure in Russian intellectual history. He has been called both a liberal and a reactionary by those historians who have bothered to describe him at all. He certainly fits the role of Westernizer and would be most accurately described as a moderate in the classical liberal tradition. A large-scale estate owner from Tambov province, Chicherin was a dedicated and outspoken opponent of serfdom as it was practiced in Russia. An uncle to the later Soviet foreign minister, he was a foe of Communism and socialism in any of its forms, especially the one espoused by Karl Marx. His writings were produced in the era of the Great Reforms and the more conservative period following the assassination of Alexander II. Had he lived a year or two longer, he would probably have gravitated toward the Octobrist Party.

Gary M. Hamburg offers the reader a sixty-five page introductory biography of Chicherin and then gives us selected readings from his work. The biography shows a man with “an eccentric vision,” often in conflict with the authorities. He was therefore not able to keep the type of position available to intellectuals in free societies. Chicherin spent most of his time unemployed, dedicating himself to the publication of scholarly fact and opinion. He published in both legal and illegal media and commented extensively on works that the tsarist censors prohibited. Hamburg judiciously chooses three hundred fifty pages worth of excerpts from Chicherin’s massive writings to give the Western reader a balanced picture of his thoughts.

The first section of the translated excerpts consists of three articles written in the 1850s, during the formative stages of Chicherin’s intellectual development. The first was a bitter attack against the institution of serfdom, an institution that supported the Chicherin family. Chicherin argued persuasively that serfdom was both immoral and bad for the economy. Russia was, at the time, in the midst of soul searching over the debacle in the Crimean War, and he felt that this institution had retarded Russia. The serf should be liberated with land and should become a free farmer instead. It would take considerable time to bring these former serfs to an intellectual level where they could enjoy full civil rights, but a start must be made at once. He was especially insistent the liberation not be implemented piecemeal, but be put in place by the government in a single stroke. Only in this way can dissatisfaction be kept from mounting into a major state crisis. Another selection in this section is an article which appeared in *The Bell*. This attack on the socialist portions of Alexander Herzen’s ideas caused Chicherin to be repudiated by much of liberal and “right-thinking” society in the late 1850s. Hatred of socialism played a dominant role in Chicherin’s philosophy throughout his career.

Hamburg includes several of Chicherin’s essays from his book *On Popular Representation*, published in 1866. In this work he argued that there should be limited popular representation. Certain categories of people, notably women (p. 160), were incapable of reaching the level of maturity necessary to exercise political rights. For them, representation was as impossible as it was for children.

In these views, Chicherin was not out of line with many western classical liberals who advocated limited suffrage in the 1860s. But some form of suffrage was a necessity if the state were to make the reforms necessary for Russia to become a modern country. Failure to give the tsar the opinion of his people would cause him to remain a despot. There were some in this era who looked to the day when Russia would become a republic. Chicherin saw that as a danger. A constitutional monarchy with the tsar's power proscribed by an elected *duma* would produce the kind of progress necessary for the development of the Russian state. But true democracy was not the answer since the majority had little property and could easily be seduced by the socialists, to the detriment of all.

The third section of Hamburg's selections from Chicherin's writing is by far the longest, although certainly not the most comprehensive. This section consists of selections from his works on political philosophers from both the ancient and modern world. Hamburg makes a judicious selection of these writings, although Chicherin often made references to his essays on other thinkers not included in the text, and this can be irritating to the reader. Chicherin gave a summary of the ideas of the philosopher and then offered his assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of his thought. He was a supporter of the practical thinker, not the idealist or the Utopian. He had kind words for Aristotle rather than for Plato; he preferred Machiavelli to More. Although the writings of the Baron Montesquieu had their weaknesses, he considered them among the finest pieces of political thought that the modern mind has produced. Hamburg describes Chicherin as an Hegelian but his essay on the German master contained much criticism of Hegel's "spirit" which, Chicherin believed, was poorly defined and far too nebulous.

The philosopher for whom Chicherin saved his most acidic vitriol is Karl Marx. The work upon which Chicherin comments was the first volume of *Das Kapital*, which was published in Russian translation and was legally available in 1878, the time of this essay. Chicherin began by attacking the logic found in Marx's writings. A logical thinker begins with the facts and takes his reader through the thought process step by step to show the derivation of the general principle. Marx did not do so, Chicherin said. Instead, he began with a general principle, which he assured the reader was derived from a most careful study of the facts, and then proceeded to argue from highly selected facts which were convenient for him (p. 323).

Chicherin then proceeded to what he believed to be the weakest part of Marxist philosophy, the theory of labor value. Adam Smith noted many components to the value of a commodity, labor value being only one of them. Marx made the theory of labor value central to his theory of exploitation and was thus forced to go through convoluted logic to explain how labor value differed from the price of the commodity. As Chicherin says, "One can only ask oneself whether the deception is conscious or unconscious. Apparently the author himself is hopelessly confused" (p. 342). Marx was not a threat to Russia when these words were written. His writings were largely unknown to the Russian revolutionaries of the 1870s and were espoused mostly by the exiles in the 1880s. Yet Chicherin had an eye sharp enough to see that Marxism contained the seeds of despotism, and feared the philosophy greatly.

The final section of Hamburg's book consists of excerpts on the questions of freedom, equality, and the ownership of property taken from *Property and the State* (1882). This work was designed to win young people away from the socialists (not merely the Marxists) and to set a philosophical basis for the development of a free Russia. According to Chicherin, freedom in a political sense consisted of the right to develop one's talents in a way best suited to the individual. Like the French revolutionaries of 1791, Chicherin believed that the individual should be left free of state control in all areas that do not affect the public interest. While admitting that the sphere of public interest shifts periodically, he wanted that sphere to be as limited as possible.

Equality for Chicherin had nothing to do with equality of possessions. All men were born with different talents and thus had a different capacity to gain riches for themselves. Any attempt to equalize possessions would consist of nothing more than the exploitation of the strong and capable by the weak and the lazy. The only thing that a person had a right to demand from another was a respect for his own personal liberty. As for the socialist claims that the state could run an economy better than a free market could, Chicherin dismisses them, claiming "The state can not run an economy efficiently" (p. 414).

Chicherin is an interesting figure to contemplate in respect to what transpired in Russia after his death in 1904. Gary Hamburg, in his introduction to the work, suggests that he offered an alternative system to that of the Bolsheviks. Considering twentieth-century developments in Western Europe and America, where the state

has intervened massively in the economy, it is difficult to imagine Chicherin's philosophy as an alternative for the Russians after 1917. Nor is he someone who could be studied profitably as a guide to policy in post-Soviet Russia. His critique of socialism and Communism, however, makes him a devastating prophet of what went wrong under Communism. He does represent a line of reasoning in late Imperial Russia that needs to be considered

by scholars of that era. By making Chicherin's thoughts available to the English speaking world, Hamburg has done a service to all students of Russia.

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