

# przeгляд rusycystyczny 2020, nr 2(170)

PL ISSN 0137-298X

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## WHAT IS TO BE DONE? BY NIKOLAI CHERNYSHEVSKY AN ATTEMPT AT “NON-REVOLUTIONARY” INTERPRETATION

In the area of aesthetics it was the German philosopher of the Enlightenment Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) who was the greatest authority for Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–1889), since, as the Russian writer believed, he had correctly understood the role of literature in the historical process. In the treatise entitled *Lessing, his time, life and activities* (*Лессинг, его время, его жизнь и деятельность*, 1856–1857) Chernyshevsky wrote:

Literature has always had an influence, larger or smaller, on the development of nations, it always played a larger or smaller role in historical development, explaining the nature of life, serving as a mediator between pure science and mass audience, providing man with ennobling aesthetic impressions, stimulating the mind to activity.<sup>1</sup>

In the historical process, it is science that plays the greatest role, however, political and economic life being subordinate to it.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in the history of various nations, the role of literature – mediating between science and life, tended to be limited. This applied to both Greece and Rome:

Consequently, in the ancient world we will not find a single epoch when the historical process would be dominated by the impact of literature. In Rome life

<sup>1</sup> Н. Г. Чернышевский, *Сочинения в двух томах*, Мысль, Москва 1986–1987, vol. 1, p. 329.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

developed due to wars and the establishing of legal relations, while literature had always been considered by Romans to be a noble respite from political activity.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Chernyshevsky did not consider it unfortunate that literature “for Romans was a noble respite from political activity.” On the contrary, he was convinced that in the countries where a rational historical progress was made, literature did not need to be the teacher of life. After all, for Chernyshevsky, spiritual culture, and literature as its part, constituted an ingredient of civilization. If science made legislators secure a role in government for representatives of all the spheres, and if economists were to give people bread, the literature would have a sacred right not to deal with these fields. This was the case in ancient Rome, and that is why in Chernyshevsky’s view it was a more rational state than the whole medieval Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Chernyshevsky believed that Germany was the most backward state in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe:

In the mid-18th century the Germans lagged two centuries behind the English and the French in every respect [...] In the middle of the 18th century the German nation seemed decrepit, backward and deprived of a future.<sup>5</sup>

Still over the following 50 years, from the beginning of Lessing’s career to the death of Friedrich Schiller (1805), Germany made tremendous civilizational progress and it was thanks to literature. Lessing’s activity resulted not only in the revival of German literature, but also in the revival of the German nation.<sup>6</sup> The basis of Chernyshevsky’s

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> Chernyshevsky’s thought was in total contrast to the Slavophile tradition, which condemned the Roman civilization precisely for its lack of “spirituality.” In the Slavophile ideology, religion and spiritual culture are the only spheres of which the religious nation should take care. Slavophiles saw civilisation itself as a “soulless sphere,” as something superfluous, or even harmful. Cf. A. Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy. History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought*, transl. by H. Andrews-Rusiecka, Oxford University Press, New York 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Н. Г. Чернышевский, *Сочинения в двух томах*, vol. 1, p. 333.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 335. It is difficult to find out from where Chernyshevsky drew this optimistic knowledge about the Germans, since it is well known that as late as in the 1840s there was no parliament in Prussia, no juries, no freedom of the press and speech, and the kings continued to enjoy privileges of divine origin. In this sense, Prussia was hardly different from Russia of Tsar Nicholas I, which Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America* (1835), described as the cornerstone of despotism: “The American struggles against obstacles that nature opposes to him; the Russian is

ky's ideology, from the beginning of his activity until his death, was the conviction that "the course of the historical process is inevitable and irreversible, like that of a great river."<sup>7</sup> If so, it could then be argued that such historiosophical determinism leads to ethical Quietism, but Chernyshevsky believed that it did not:

As we already know, it was not the appearance of Lessing that determined whether the German nation would revive or continue to wallow in lifeless apathy. Nonetheless, what happened quickly, decisively and harmoniously with his assistance, would have taken place slowly and disorderly without him.<sup>8</sup>

In Lessing's time, German science developed only among scholars who did not care for spreading it among the general reading population<sup>9</sup>. According to Chernyshevsky, the German "enlightener" changed this situation, eager for historical progress, by means of literature, the "brilliant mediator between science and life."<sup>10</sup> Although human history develops in accordance to the law equally inevitable as the law of gravity, the appearance of strong personalities like Lessing, greatly accelerated historical progress. Thanks to Lessing, Germany overcame the crisis of their civilization. In the second half of the nineteenth century, in Chernyshevsky's view, Russia faced the same goal. Only scholars were able to carry out this civilizing mission but the task before them was enormous, due to the archaic lack of division of labour among scholars that had persisted in Russia since the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In our field of science, there is almost no division of labor, as there are few people prepared for scientific activity. A scholar, gifted with talents that put him above the crowd, is still in the Lomonosov position: he must take not one, but

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grappling with men. The one combats the wilderness and barbarism; the other, civilization clothed in all its arms. Consequently the conquests of the American are made with the farmer's plow, those of the Russian with the soldier's sword. To reach his goal the first relies on personal interest, and, without directing them, allows the strength and reason of individuals to operate. The second in a way concentrates all the power of society in one man. The one has as principal means of action liberty; the other, servitude." A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edit. by E. Nolla, transl. from the French by J. T. Schleifer, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 2012, p. 655–656. Cf. Ch. Clark, *Prusy. Powstanie i upadek 1600–1947*, transl. from English by J. Szkudliński, Bellona, Warszawa 2009, p. 387–485.

<sup>7</sup> Н. Г. Чернышевский, *Сочинения в двух томах*, vol. 1, p. 338.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

ten, twenty things into his hands if he wants to be truly useful. In Germany, England, a historian can quietly study a given topic without distraction — he is a servant of science and only that; his only duty is to be a hardworking specialist — the other needs of society are met by others. In our case, the position of a true scholar [...] is not yet such. To date, he is a servant not so much of his specific science as of education in general — a much broader task.<sup>11</sup>

Chernyshevsky considered himself precisely such a “servant of Enlightenment,” which he confirmed in 1878 in a letter to his sons from his place of deportation in Vilyuysk (Yakutiya):

I am a scholar, one of the scholars they call “thinkers.” I am one of those scholars who adhere to a strictly scientific point of view. They are, in the strictest sense of the word, “people of science.” That’s what I have been like since my earliest youth (III 749).

During the seven years between the article on Lessing and the novel *What is to be done?* (*Что делать?*, 1863) Chernyshevsky, “wanting to be truly useful,” “took not one, but ten, twenty things into his hands.” He wrote articles on aesthetics, ethics, philosophical anthropology, gnoseology, ethics, history, geography and economics. He treated his activity in the “Sovremennik” journal as an educational mission. Since in his youth he dreamed that one day he would construct a perpetual motion machine or at least would achieve a Copernican-style breakthrough in science (cf. II 827), why should he not believe in his mature age that he would play the same groundbreaking role in Russia’s history in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Lessing had played in Germany a hundred years earlier? He believed this until his arrest in 1862 and did not cease to believe it during more than a year-long stay as a prisoner in St. Petersburg’s fortress of SS. Peter and Paul’s. The artistic fruit of this belief was the Enlightenment prose treatise *What is to be done?*<sup>12</sup> It represented the world, although fictitious, but still the one that was to be a frame for the real world, since the latter did not exist yet.

<sup>11</sup> Н. Г. Чернышевский, *Избранные философские сочинения*, ред. и предисл. М. М. Григорьян, т. 1–3. Государственное Издательство Политической Литературы, Москва–Ленинград 1950–1951. Further quotes from this edition will include volume number and page and will be placed in the text, without referring to footnotes.

<sup>12</sup> The term “Enlightenment prose treatise” introduced here refers both to the “didactic novel” of the Enlightenment and the “tendentious novel” of the late nineteenth century. In all these literary subspecies, the ideological claim is more important than the presented world and narrative construction.

May art enjoy its beautiful, noble mission — in the absence of reality acting as a substitute for it to some extent and being man's manual of life (I 163).

The novel *What is to be done?*, which came out in a specific time and place in history, was to fulfil both of these missions: first replace the “non-existent reality” in Russia of the 1860s, and secondly — become a teacher of life for the contemporaries, in accordance with the definition of beauty formulated by Chernyshevsky:

Beautiful is the creature in which we see life as it should be according to our concepts; an object is beautiful if it either contains life or reminds us of life (I 59).

In one of the key scenes of the novel, Lopukhov explained to Vera Pavlovna that one should look at life as “cold and practical people say.” According to their theory, all lofty feelings and idealist impulses are only a mask concealing the pursuit of everyone's own benefit. The protagonist advised her interlocutor to always do what is useful for her. In response to Vera Pavlovna's doubts whether such a cold and merciless ethical theory will not make life itself cold, merciless and prosaic, Lopukhov explained:

No, Viéra Pavlovna; this theory is cold, but it teaches a man to bring out the warmth. A match is cold, the matchbox on which you scratch the match is also cold; but there is fire in them which gets a man warm food, and warms him also. This theory is merciless; but if it is followed, people will not become the wretched objects of idle charity. The lancet must not bend; otherwise it will be necessary to pity the patient, who will suffer none the less because of your sympathy. This theory is prosaic, but it reveals true motives of life and poetry in the truth of life.<sup>13</sup>

Vera Pavlovna immediately agreed with Lopukhov, although she was surprised that so many writers she had read so far had said something quite the opposite:

I myself long ago felt the same thing, especially after I read your book and heard it from you. But I thought that these were my individual ideas, that clever and scientific men thought otherwise, and so I was in doubt. All that we used to read was written in a spirit of contrariety; it was full of adverse criticism, of sarcastic attacks upon what we used to see in ourselves and others. Nature, life, reason, lead you one direction; books drag you the other: they say, “This is mean, contemptible.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> N. G. Tschernuishevsky, *A Vital question, or what is to be done?*, trans. from Russian by N. H. Dole and S. S. Skidelsky, Thomas Y. Crowell, New York 1886, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.



Vera Pavlovna, straightforward as she was, did not even realize that Lopukhov introduced her into the mysteries of the great ethical discussion that the Enlightenment had held with the Middle Ages for over a hundred years: In the Middle Ages it was claimed that ethical norms had their basis in religion, and that man knew how to act thanks to God's revelation. Referring to good behaviour, this tradition used the following concepts: love and self-sacrifice, humility, mortification of the body, etc. Human nature, tainted with the original sin, was responsible for evil in this system, and evil itself obtained the certainty of existence until the end of time.

French Enlightenment with the works of Paul Holbach and Claude Helvétius denied this medieval metaphysical tradition and derived ethical norms from an anthropological basis. The author of the main ethical treatise of the period of Enlightenment, *On the mind (De L'esprit, 1758)*, Helvétius argued that the driving force of all human behaviour is *amour propre*, or egoism. The French deist considered a basic task of ethics to describe the conditions under which the personal interest of man would be combined with the interest of humanity. It is human institutions, primarily political ones, that were solely responsible for evil in this system, so all that was needed to change them and evil would cease to exist. In the mid-nineteenth century, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) took part in this discussion, publishing his work *On the Essence of Christianity (Das Wesen des Christentums, 1841)*. The German thinker clearly took the side of the radical Enlightenment, and religion in his system was a purely human creation. Man created God in his own image and likeness, thus no transcendence ever objectively existed. There is no divine morality either, and the main ethical issue that an individual faces is his relationship with other people. In later *Lectures on the Essence of Religion (Vorlesungen über das Wesen der Religion, 1851)* Feuerbach wrote very clearly how a person can defend himself against “religious usurpation:”

In short, I mean by egoism the instinct of self-preservation thanks to which man refuses to sacrifice himself, his intelligence, his mind, his body — I draw my examples from the subjects we have just been discussing, from animal worship — to clerical donkeys and sheep, political wolves and tigers, philosophical maggots and bookworms; that rational instinct which tells man that it is sheer folly to let lice, fleas, and bedbugs suck the blood from his body and intelligence from his head, or let himself be poisoned by snakes and otters or devoured by tigers or wolves, out of religious self-denial.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> L. Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, transl. by R. Manheim, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugen (Oregon, USA) 2018, p. 50–51 (Seventh Lecture).

But the egoism of Feuerbach had a positive dimension as well:

By egoism I mean the individual's love for his fellow man — for what am I without them, what am I without my love of my fellows? — his love of himself only insofar as every love of an object or being is an indirect self-love, for I can love only what is in keeping with my ideal, my feeling, my essence.<sup>16</sup>

In the field of morality, Chernyshevsky stood definitely on the side of the Enlightenment and Feuerbach. At the beginning of every human act lies the desire for self-benefit, contentment and happiness, that is egoism (III 240). This law is universal and necessary, as the law of gravity, and does not depend on human will. All phenomena in the field of morality result from one another by the law of causality. And the phenomenon which man calls the will is only a link in the chain of phenomena and facts connected by the principle of causality (III 210–211).

The identity of motive that lies at the root of human deeds does not deny the fact that some deeds are good and others bad. In the novel *What is to be done?*, both Marya Rozalskaya, mother of Vera Pavlovna, and her future husband Lopukhov, behave with regard to the young protagonist according to the “principle of greater benefit” formulated above. Nevertheless, the effects of their behaviour are different: the mother imprisoned her daughter, and forced her to marry a rich wicked man; the bachelor sacrificed his time for her, gave up medical studies, and finally married her to free her from the power of her mother. Each of them acted for their own benefit, but their benefit was seen by them as different, and its results were different. Chernyshevsky clearly prioritizes interests: the universal interest stands above national interest, national interest stands above the estate interest, while the interest of a more numerous estate prevails over the interest of the less numerous estate. In his opinion, the geometric axiom applies in such a hierarchy and the whole is always larger, or more important, than a part. The Russian thinker believed that the misuse of this theory ultimately leads to the undoing of those who violated the rules. All positive protagonists of the novel *What is to be done?* are guided by the utilitarian principle of greater benefit.

However, neither Helvétius nor Feuerbach dealt with economic problems,<sup>17</sup> which for Chernyshevsky were probably the most impor-

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>17</sup> In 1877 Chernyshevsky wrote that Feuerbach was only able to systematise issues related to religion, and on other topics he rarely expressed his opinions (III 714). In order to draw the ultimate consequences from Feuerbach's teaching, Chernyshevsky had to resort to the books of Utopian socialists.



tant of all the issues. It is no accident that one of the protagonists of the novel said:

This is what I think: give men bread, and they themselves will get education. It is necessary to begin with bread; otherwise, we are simply wasting our time.<sup>18</sup>

Vera Pavlovna therefore brought to life the ideas of intelligent selfishness by organizing two sewing shops modelled after the association described by nineteenth-century students of the Enlightenment — Utopian socialists. She founded her shop without any capital and recruited hardworking dressmakers of reasonable and agreeable nature to work in it. After a month of work she presented the seamstresses with a plan to divide the association's income. In addition to the regular payment for work (a bit higher than in similar enterprises), she also handed over to her employees all the profit in proportion to the amount of their work.<sup>19</sup>

It should be added that she did not take advantage of her rights as the owner, but worked as a seamstress herself, receiving remuneration and sharing profit on the same basis as her female employees. In the third year of the operation of the shop, the pay was still proportionate to the earnings made, although the profit was already divided equally per person.<sup>20</sup>

Next the seamstresses founded the employee bank, whose capital was constituted by part of the proceeds from profits. Interest-free loans could then be granted to the most needy employees. To reduce expenses, seamstresses made joint wholesale purchases, and also lived together and ate at the common table.<sup>21</sup> The owner (Vera Pavlovna was one only in name because she worked as a fabric cutter and as such she received payment and an equal share in profits) did not forget about the spiritual, organizing lectures for employees in the spirit of Feuerbach, as well as walks, trips to a theatre and Italian opera.<sup>22</sup> In order for the Italian opera not to be considered excessively expensive, the narrator added that the girls bought the tickets for seats in the side rows.

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<sup>18</sup> N. G. Tschernuishevsky, *A Vital question, or what is to be done?*, p. 427.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173–174.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

Chernyshevsky knew that such associations were not there in Russia in his time;<sup>23</sup> he wrote elsewhere that for a similar ownership and production system to prevail is a matter of the distant future:

[Whether] we are close or far away from these times is another matter; I think [we are] still far away, though no, may not be in a thousand years, but probably not earlier than in one hundred or even one hundred and fifty years (II 598).

This is why, in the realistic novel *What is to be done?* four dreams of Vera Pavlovna have been skilfully woven in, the most important of which is the second part of the fourth dream, where the future and distant reality is described, but for Chernyshevsky it was by no means utopian. The writer presented there a vision of future society, whose happiness (material one, for there is no other) is due to the proper organization of work and development of technology. There was nothing in Chernyshevsky's artistic description that would contradict his economic treatises. The difference between the present and the future was to be only quantitative. Grain, flowers, buildings were to be bigger and thus more beautiful. Here is what the protagonist saw in her dream:

An edifice; an enormous, enormous edifice, such as can be seen only in the largest capitals — or, no, at the present time there is none such in the world. It stands amid fields of grain, meadows, gardens, and groves. The fields of grain — this is our grain — they are not such as we have now, but rich, rich, abundant, abundant. Is it wheat? Who ever saw such heads? Who ever saw such grain? Only in forcing-houses is it possible to make such heads of wheat, such royal grain! The meadows are our meadows; but such flowers as these are now found only in flower-gardens.<sup>24</sup>

The heroes of the future work in the field with songs on their lips — most of the work is done by machines for them. Although the day is tiring, the heat doesn't bother them. A huge awning is spread over the part of the field where they work, protecting them from the sun. At the palace of aluminium and glass the workers eat a common meal,

<sup>23</sup> After the publication of the novel, the “women's case” advocate, Aleksandr Slepov, founded a commune in St. Petersburg that was to implement Fourier's and Chernyshevsky's plan. The commune collapsed at the end of the “season of 1864” — probably not only because, as Korney Chukovsky claimed, “no commune could succeed in a capitalist society.” К. Чуковский, *Люди и книги шестидесятих годов. Статьи и материалы*, Издательство Писателей в Ленинграде, Ленинград 1934, p. 172.

<sup>24</sup> N. G. Tschernishevsky, *A Vital question, or what is to be done?*, p. 378.

consisting of five, six dishes, prepared by children and grandparents. All this happens in the summer in Russia, on the Oka river.<sup>25</sup> In the autumn, however, almost all residents of the glass palace leave cold Russia. Out of two thousand people only ten, twenty eccentrics have not left the autumn wilderness; in winter tourists will come here for short stays. For one third of the year, when the weather on the Oka is warm, there is no shortage of work, and Russians live and work there, visited by crowds of guests from other nations from the south, with whom they often live and eat together. In the autumn in turn they move south to a place called New Russia, where in the former desert, transformed into fertile land overflowing with milk and honey, they spend the next two thirds of the year.<sup>26</sup> The desert has been revived by skilfully hydrating it and bringing in clay to bind sand. In New Russia, a crystal palace has also been built, where iron dark columns were replaced by bright aluminium ones. Above the palace a huge white awning is stretched, sprinkled with water from fountains placed in aluminium columns that protrude above this awning — all for sun protection. The crystal palace is lit with electricity. Women and men are dressed in exquisite, yet light clothes reminiscent of old Athens. Every ordinary evening resembles a festive ball from the time of Vera Pavlovna.

In the fourth dream, two “sisters” speak to the protagonist. The elder of them is the cause of “enlightenment” of people and their material well-being. She had always existed, even before people appeared on the earth. The younger sister was born only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – her existence was noticed first and her discovery shared with others by Jean Jacques Rousseau in *New Eloise*.<sup>27</sup> That younger sister is an allegory of a woman of equal rights, liberated from the superstitions of the ancient time (kingdom of a slave woman) and the Middle Ages (kingdom of a sterile virgin). The elder sister is an employee, while the younger sister was born for love and life. It is only in the latter that people who had earlier acted according to the

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 379–381.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 381–382. We learn from the draft of the novel that this “New Russia” lies near Mount Sinai. This is an interesting motive for a researcher who would like to deal with the issue of the impact of Chernyshevsky’s seminary upbringing on his mature Messianism. Cf. Н. Г. Чернышевский, *Черновая редакция романа «Что делать?»*, in: Н. Г. Чернышевский, *Что делать? Из рассказов о новых людях*, ред. Т. И Орнатская, С. А. Рейснер, Издательство «Наука», Ленинград 1975, p. 653.

<sup>27</sup> Н. Г. Чернышевский, *Что делать? Из рассказов о новых людях*, p. 280.

instructions of her elder sister will find the highest happiness. Here is what Vera Pavlovna heard in the final part of the dream from the younger sister:

You saw how their cheeks burn in the room, how their eyes shine; you saw them leaving and returning – I had tempted them, here is the chamber of each one, man and woman – my haven, my secrets are intact there, curtains on the door, delightful, sound-damping carpets, silence reigns and mystery; when they returned, I restored them from the kingdom of my secrets to a world of light joy.<sup>28</sup>

The proper shaping of economic relations and material prosperity was not therefore for Chernyshevsky the ultimate goal of life, but only a path towards it. The fulfilment of the final goal was to take place in the sphere of intimate communion of a man with an equal and free woman; Chernyshevsky could not leave this basic sphere of life aside which was “materially” responsible for the creation of new generations. The theory of rational egoism required that man acted usefully and felt pleasure while doing so. Vera Pavlovna heard in her dream that she herself would not experience this great material happiness. Prosperity will only be shared by her late grandchildren. Still, she was instructed to work persistently to bring this form of life into effect. Therefore, immediately after waking up, she continued the effort of organizing both sewing shops with all the more energy.

In Chernyshevsky’s reception, both scholarly and journalistic, the claim is extremely popular that the fourth dream of Vera Pavlovna because of its utopian nature is not an integral part of Chernyshevsky’s doctrine, but is at most its dreamy sublimation. It must be said, however, that in this dream there is nothing that would not consistently stem from Chernyshevsky’s post-Enlightenment ethics and his socialist economic doctrine. Every motive of the dream, every detail of it was deeply thought over by Chernyshevsky and, from his point of view, realistic for the future.

Chernyshevsky’s economic thought was most influenced by ideas of associationist socialism. Representatives of this trend in utopian socialism were Charles Fourier (1772–1837) and Robert Owen (1771–1858). The teaching of Owen was closest to Chernyshevsky as, like most utopian socialists, Owen adhered to the Enlighten-

<sup>28</sup> Н. Г. Чернышевский, *Что делать? Из рассказов о новых людях*, p. 290. It is interesting to note that this passage had been left out in English translation on moral grounds. Cf. N.G. Tschernuishevsky, *A Vital question, or what is to be done?*, p. 387.

ment principle that an individual gains his happiness in harmony with society. He considered ignorance as the only source of evil, not blaming human nature, contrary to the Christian Middle Ages. His practical goal was to eliminate exploitation, poverty and crime. He saw the only chance to achieve these goals in an immediate but peaceful change in economic relations. That is why in his theoretical works Chernyshevsky repeatedly referred to the name of the English associationist, calling him “a brilliant thinker” (II 716) and “a true reformer” (III 336). We know from Chernyshevsky’s biography that during the writing of the novel he had two volumes of Owen’s<sup>29</sup> with him. In the room of Vera Pavlovna, her first husband Lopukhov hung a picture of the “saintly old man,” while Owen wrote a letter to Lopukhov, in which he praised Pavlovna’s associationist activity.<sup>30</sup>

It is well known that generations of later revolutionaries recognized *What is to be done?* as their “Romantic” catechism. The answer to the question why this has happened should be sought outside of the text of the novel. The ethical “rational egoism” of the protagonists and the derived economic activity had nothing to do with the ideas of social revolution. Chernyshevsky’s exile companion recalled that the author of *What is to be done?* had rejected the argument that Fourierism and communism stemmed from the same source. The biographer quoted the following words of the writer:

Who likes Fourierism will not find communism to his liking. This can be compared with gastronomic tastes: one who is used to sophisticated French cuisine will frown when he is treated with our cabbage soup with buckwheat.<sup>31</sup>

From among the four main protagonists of the novel, Vera Pavlovna and Lopukhov had nothing in common with revolutionary struggle. They were followers of Fourier and Owen who focused all their efforts on the Enlightenment and economic activity. The Marxist critic was wrong when trying to assure the reader that the mysterious fiancée mentioned by Lopukhov to Vera Rozalskaya was

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<sup>29</sup> Н. М. Чернышевская, *Летопись жизни и деятельности Н. Г. Чернышевского*, Государственное Издательство Художественной Литературы, Москва 1953, p. 279.

<sup>30</sup> N. G. Tschernuishevsky, *A Vital question, or what is to be done?*, p. 241.

<sup>31</sup> С. Г. Стахевич, *Среди политических преступников*, in: *Н. Г. Чернышевский в воспоминаниях современников*, Художественная Литература, Москва 1982, p. 325.

“revolution.”<sup>32</sup> In the first dream of the protagonist she refers to herself as “love of the people,”<sup>33</sup> and we can call her here, in accordance with the adopted terminology, a “rational egoist.”<sup>34</sup> It was not accidental that Lopukhov, having agreed to his wife departing to live with a friend, Kirsanov, did not take up revolutionary activity but left for the USA in order to focus on work. He returned to Russia wealthy in order to take up economic activity in Owen’s footsteps.

An interesting extract survived in the draft of the novel, which allows us to reject the view about the revolutionism of the third protagonist of the novel, Kirsanov (second husband of Vera Pavlovna). The latter was visited by a mysterious gentleman who did not like the socialist shop of the Kirsanov family on the Nevsky Prospect with the “revolutionary” name of *Au bon travail*. When this gentleman learned to his surprise that the shop was oriented on profit and not on spreading “Jacobin” ideas, he kindly advised the owner to change the name to a “more Russian” one. Kirsanov, denying that he had anything to do with the revolution, hastily agreed to change the name. He only asked that he be allowed to retain the French name (*A la bonne foi*) for commercial reasons. At that time, the store on Nevsky Prospect which would have a Russian name, did not have a chance for many customers.<sup>35</sup>

The most mysterious hero of *What is to be done?*, however, is Rakhmetov — in his case, none of the Leninist researchers had any doubt that he is an apostle of Revolution. Yet, if we leave the routine

<sup>32</sup> Н. Г. Чернышевский, *Что делать? Из рассказов о новых людях*, p. 55–56 (the scene in the novel), p. 839 (the critics commentary). Cf. N.G. Tschernuishevsky, *A Vital question, or what is to be done?*, p. 67–69.

<sup>33</sup> Н. Г. Чернышевский, *Что делать? Из рассказов о новых людях*, p. 82.

<sup>34</sup> Alain Besançon, calling her “Revolution,” makes a mistake typical of the opposition, Leninist scholars. A. Besançon, *Les Origines intellectuelles du leninisme*, Calmann Levy, Paris 1977, p. 126. He is similarly wrong when he claims that in *What is to be done?* Chernyshevsky created “individual revolutionary ethos” in his ascetic character Rakhmetov. Ibid., p. 121. Cf. G. Przebinda, *Mikołaj Czernyszewski. Późny wnuk Oświecenia*, Śląsk, Katowice 1996, p. 54–72; 84. G. Przebinda, *Nowe Oświecenie (Nikołaj Czernyszewski)*, in: Idem, *Od Czaadajewa do Bierdiajewa. Spór o Boga i człowieka w myśli rosyjskiej (1832–1922)*, Polska Akademia Umiejętności, Kraków 1998, p. 217–270. E. В. Бессчетнова, «Новые люди» в романе «Что делать?» Н. Г. Чернышевского. Взгляд из XXI века, in: *Н. Г. Чернышевский. Статьи, исследования и материалы*. Сборник научных трудов, вып. 20, ред. А. А. Демченко, Издательство Техно-Декор, Саратов 2015, p. 29–35.

<sup>35</sup> Н. Г. Чернышевский, *Что делать? Из рассказов о новых людях*, p. 388–389.



judgments about Rakhmetov aside and we reach for the places of the novel where the protagonist is described, we get a picture that is quite non-revolutionary. Rakhmetov belonged to the category of “new people.” He was an ascetic, he did not drink wine and did not associate with women,<sup>36</sup> he even once got wounded, trying – like a fakir – to sleep on a straw bed full of nails.<sup>37</sup> He ate very modestly, and thus cheaply: black bread instead of white, he did without sugar and fruit, let alone veal or chicken. He only ate beef in large quantities, and this to keep his physical strength. When asked about the purpose of such asceticism, he answered:

It is necessary. We ask, demand, for all people the full enjoyment of life. We must bear witness with our own lives, that we are demanding this, not for the gratification of our personal passions, not for ourselves personally, but for humanity in general, that we speak only in accordance with principle and not from preference, according to conviction and not individual necessity.<sup>38</sup>

It should not be strange to researchers of Russian ideas and history of the second half of the nineteenth century that terrorists from the “People’s Will” circles, nationalists of the seventies, or Bolsheviki willingly invoked Rakhmetov’s legacy, thus sublimating the practices that neither Chernyshevsky nor his ascetic hero ever dreamed of. Let us recall that Rakhmetov himself slept on the straw bed with nails, while those who later drew on his legacy, preferred to put their enemies on such beds. The difference is fundamental, and let us note that in 1865 one of the Orthodox interpreters of the novel *What is to be done?* recognized Rakhmetov as a Christian ascetic and fighter for the cause of Christ.<sup>39</sup> Both of these extreme interpretations, “revolutionary” and “Christian,” have nothing to do with the real image of the protagonist.

The character of Rakhmetov cannot be understood unless one knows other texts of Chernyshevsky’s, written at the turn of the

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<sup>36</sup> N. G. Tschernuishevsky, *A Vital question, or what is to be done?*, p. 278.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>39</sup> Архимандрит Феодор [А. М. Бухарев] *О романе Н. Г. Чернышевского «Что делать, из рассказов о новых людях»*, in: *Idem, О духовных потребностях жизни*, Столица, Москва 1991, p. 141–142. **The contemporary Russian historian** of ideas interprets Chernyshevsky equally groundlessly, that is in the spirit of Christianity. Cf. В. К. Кантор, «Подпольный человек» против «новых людей», in: *Н. Г. Чернышевский. Статьи, исследования и материалы*. Сборник научных трудов, вып. 20, Издательство Техно-Декор, Саратов 2015, p. 6–21.

1850s. Among economic readings of Rakhmetov, just like in the case of Chernyshevsky before his arrest, we find works by Adam Smith, Daniel Malthus, David Ricard and John Stuart Mill.<sup>40</sup> From other place in the novel, we can guess by deciphering Chernyshevsky's Aesopian language, that Rakhmetov — in his students years, following the advice of Kirsanov — eagerly read Feuerbach and Fourier:

He happened to get acquainted with Kirsànoff, and from this time dated his regeneration into extraordinary man, the future Nikitushka Lomov and the rigorist. He listened eagerly to Kirsànoff the first evening. He wept; he interrupted him with exclamations of curses against all what was to vanish, and blessings on all that must live. "What books shall I begin to read?" Kirsànoff directed him. On the next day, at eight o'clock in the morning, he was walking down the Kirsànoff, from the Admiralty to the Police Bridge, wondering which German or French would be the first to open. He took what he wanted, and read steadily for more than seventy-two hours in succession, — from eleven o'clock on Thursday morning till nine o'clock Sunday evening, — eighty-two hours.<sup>41</sup>

In his views, however, we find no traces of the revolutionary proclamations of Pyotr Zaichnevsky or Mihail Mihailov. For Rakhmetov, like Chernyshevsky, regarded the social evolutionist Feuerbach as the most prominent among contemporary thinkers.<sup>42</sup> Chernyshevsky sometimes used the word "revolutionary" in a positive sense, excluding bloody social rebellions. He then had in mind such ideas and deeds that overcame previous routines and contributed to the development of Enlightenment and economic well-being. From such perspective, side by side with Feuerbach, thinkers such as Fourier, Owen and Louis Blanc were "revolutionary" and thus opposed to social revolutions. The novel *What is to be done?* is an artistic interpretation of the above ideas.

Therefore, Lenin was wrong when he wrote that Chernyshevsky as a "revolutionary democrat" in the years of the peasant reform "stood at the forefront of revolutionaries," and "the spirit of class struggle"

<sup>40</sup> N. G. Tschernuishevsky, *A Vital question, or what is to be done?*, p. 280.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>42</sup> "When on the eve of the Second Baden Revolution one of the revolutionaries urged Feuerbach to participate in riots, he heard in reply: "I am going to Heideilberg now where I will lecture to young students about the essence of religion, and if some of the seeds I will throw now will come out I will do more for the happiness of mankind than you with your attack." T. Kroński, *Ludwik Feuerbach i „Wykłady o istocie religii,”* in: L. Feuerbach, *Wykłady o istocie religii*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1981, p. XI.

oozed from his works.<sup>43</sup> Chernyshevsky as a Fourierist would probably frown at such a one-sided interpretation. After all, he said that anyone who has become accustomed to exquisite French cuisine will not relish a Russian cabbage soup.

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<sup>43</sup> В.И. Ленин о литературе, Издательство Художественная Литература, Москва 1971, p. 66; 89.

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## WHAT IS TO BE DONE?...

Grzegorz Przebinda

CO ROBIĆ? NIKOŁAJA CZERNYSZEWSKIEGO.  
PRÓBA „NIEREWOLUCYJNEJ INTERPRETACJI”

### Streszczenie

Geneza powieści *Co robić?* jest ściśle powiązana z tym, w jaki sposób sam Czernyszewski pojmował rolę literatury w procesie historycznym. Literatura, jego zdaniem, winna być pośredniczką między nauką a życiem, wypełniając poniekąd rolę „służki nauki i historii.” Artystyczna fabuła stanowiła zatem dla autora jedynie punkt wyjścia do demonstracji idei z zakresu etyki i ekonomii. W sferze etycznej nauczycielami Czernyszewskiego byli myśliciele francuskiego Oświecenia i Niemiec Ludwig Feuerbach, którzy głosili idee „rozumnego egoizmu.” W dziedzinie ekonomicznej Czernyszewski szedł śladami dwóch kontynuatorów francuskiego Oświecenia — Charlesa Fouriera i Roberta Owena, którzy w drugiej połowie XIX w. głosili i wcielali w życie zasady socjalistycznych stowarzyszeń. Wszyscy zaś powyżsi myśliciele, których Czernyszewski uważał za swoich nauczycieli, byli przeciwnikami walki klas i społecznych buntów. I właśnie w takim duchu rozumnego egoizmu i utopijnego socjalizmu, a jednocześnie w duchu nierewolucyjnym myślą i działają wszyscy czterej główni bohaterowie *Co robić?*: Wiera Pawłowna, Kirsanow, Łopuchow i Rachmietow. Jak mówił sam Czernyszewski: „komu podoba się furieryzm, temu komunizm się nie spodoba.” Czernyszewski jako „oświeciciel,” występując przeciwko wszelkiej ideologicznej stagnacji i rutynie, głosząc nowe antropologiczne, etyczne i ekonomiczne idee, nigdy wszelako nie pragnął wcielić ich w życie za pomocą „egoizmu” klasowego, ani tym bardziej „walki klas.”

Гжегож Пшебинда

ЧТО ДЕЛАТЬ? НИКОЛАЯ ЧЕРНЫШЕВСКОГО.  
ОПЫТ «НЕРЕВОЛЮЦИОННОГО» ТОЛКОВАНИЯ

### Резюме

Генезис романа *Что делать?* связан с тем, как Чернышевский понимал роль литературы в историческом процессе. Литература должна быть «быстрой посредницей» между наукой и жизнью, т.е. выполнять функцию служанки науки и истории. Художественная фабула была для автора лишь точкой отправления для демонстрации идей из области этики и экономики. В этической сфере учителями Чернышевского были мыслители французского Просвещения и немец Людвиг Фейербах, которые проповедовали идею «разумного эгоизма». В области экономической учителями Чернышевского были два последователя французского Просвещения: Шарль Фурье и Роберт Оуэн, которые в первой половине XIX века проповедовали и воплощали в жизнь идеи «социалистических ассоциаций». Все мыслители, которых Чернышевский считал своими учителями, были противниками классовой борьбы и кровавых социальных бунтов. И именно в таком разумно-эгоистическом пространстве, социалистическом, а заодно и нереволуционном духе действуют все четыре главных героя романа

*Что делать?*: Вера Павловна, Кирсанов, Лопухов и Рахметов. Как говорил сам Чернышевский, «кому нравится фурьеризм, тому коммунизм не понравится». Чернышевский как просветитель, выступая против «идеологической рутины», проповедуя новые антропологические, этические и экономические идеи, никогда не хотел, однако, воплощать их в жизнь при помощи «классового эгоизма», тем более — «классовой борьбы».