ON ALEXANDER RADISHCHEV'S
ETHICAL IDEAS

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Alexander Nikolaevich Radishchev (1749-1802) has attracted attention not only in the USSR but also in other countries. Japan is no exception. His major work, A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow, was translated into Japanese\(^1\) and not a few monographs upon him have been published.\(^2\) But his ethical ideas don't seem to have been studied as much as his economical and social ideas. This paper is intended as an investigation of the ethical basis of his criticism of social injustice.

1. A. N. Radishchev, A Journey from Petersburg to Moscow, trans. by Ichiro SHIBUYA (Tokyo, 1958).
2. Toshiro YAMAMOTO, "Alexander Radishchev," Shikan, 40 (1953); Ichiro SHIBUYA, "A. N. Radishchev's 'A Journey from Petersburg to Moscow'," The Hitotsubashi Review, vol. XXXII (1954), No. 1; Ichiro SHIBUYA, "A. N. Radishchev's 'On Man, on his Mortality and Immortality'," The Hitotsubashi Review, vol. XXXIII (1955), No. 4; Ichiro SHIBUYA, "The Literary Posture of A. N. Radishchev," The Hitotsubashi Review, vol. XLII (1959), No. 3; Ichiro SHIBUYA, "R. P. Thaler's 'Radishchev, Britain and America'," The Hitotsubashi Review, vol. XLIV (1960), No. 3; Katsufumi SHIRAKURA, "A Journey of A. N. Radishchev to Ilimsk," The Hitotsubashi Review, vol. LXXVI (1976), No. 3; Katsufumi SHIRAKURA, "On Radishchev's 'On Man, on his Mortality and Immortality'," The Russian Thoughts and Literature, ed. by Yukihiko KANEKO (Tokyo, 1977); Katsufumi SHIRAKURA, "A. N. Radishchev in Siberia," Mado, 29 (1979); Akio OKI, "The Researches into the Thought Tradition which is Peculiar to Russia—(I) Radishchev," Obirin Economics, VII (1978), et al.
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I

It is reported that the Empress Catherine II said about Radishchew: “He is a rebel, worse than Pugachev.”3) Such a view is also expressed in her notes on his Journey. After having read it through, she wrote about its author: “... it seems probable that he has appointed himself the leader, whether by this book or by other means, in snatching the scepters from the hands of monarchs. ...”4) Clearly Catherine II found Radishchew a rebel against her, and that was the reason why she sentenced him to an extreme penalty.

The Empress took a strong attitude toward Radishchew with good reason. In his Journey Radishchew expressed the idea that the people have the right to rise in rebellion when they have been pushed too far. For example, in the chapter “Mednoe,” where a public auction of serfs is described, man’s rights to rebel and revolt if oppressed and exploited are insisted on, and this chapter is closed with this: “...freedom is not to be expected from their (=great landed proprietors’) counsels, but from the heavy burden of slavery itself.”5) (352)

The approval of rebellion naturally leads to approval of revolution. Radishchew’s attention is not restricted to smallscale spontaneous rebellions. In his Liberty: An Ode, which is partially included in the chapter “Tver” of Journey, he describes how the people have risen in a revolution and have killed a despotic Tzar and how they have constructed a society permeated with the spirit of liberty. (Italics by K. S.). In this Ode Radishchew clearly asserts the people’s right to rise in revolution.

Radishchew is sure that the people have the potentiality to succeed in rebellions or revolutions. But, at the same time, he understands revolutions from a far-sighted view, not from a short-sighted view. This is shown, for

3. Pavel A. Radishchew, “A. N. Radishchew,” Biografiya A. N. Radishcheva napisannaya ego synov’yami, ed. by D. S. Babkin (M. -L., 1959), p. 65.
4. Catherine’s notes on Journey, in A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow, ed. by R. P. Thaler, trans. by Leo Wiener (Cambridge, Mass., 1958). In Russian, quoted in D. S. Babkin, Protsess A. N. Radishcheva (M. -L., 1952), p. 164.
5. The number in the parentheses indicates the page of Akademiya Nauk, A. N. Radishchev, Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii, vol. I (1938). Thaler’s translation, based on Leo Wiener, has been used throughout.
example, in the following lines in the chapter "Gorodnya":

Oh, if the slaves weighted down with fetters, raging in their despair, would, with the iron that bars their freedom, crush our heads, the heads of their inhuman masters, and redden their fields with our blood! What would the country lose by that? Soon great men would arise from among them, to take the place of the murdered generation; but they would be of another mind and without the right to oppress others. This is no dream; my vision penetrates the dense curtain of time that veils the future from our eyes. I look through the space of a whole century. (368–369)

This insight into the realization of revolutions in the far future is closely related with Radishchev's view of history.\textsuperscript{6} In his \textit{Ode} he describes history as repeating itself and as cyclical. "This is the law of nature: from tyranny, freedom is born; from freedom, slavery ..." (361) And, what is most important, Radishchev regards his own time as a time of slavery. Therefore, he is convinced that necessarily a more rational and more hopeful free society will come next.

In 1918 A. Lunacharskii described Radishchev as "a revolutionary from head to foot."\textsuperscript{7} Ever since, every Soviet scholar has, to a greater or less degree, laid emphasis on him as a revolutionary.\textsuperscript{8} This may be said to be reasonable, considering that there flows some revolutionary ardor in his writings.

Some Soviet scholars, however, have run to an extreme. They try to establish that Radishchev was a consistent, resolute, implacable revolutionary who, regarding revolutions as the only possible way to liberate serfs, criticized a whole series of reforms by the nobility.\textsuperscript{9} One basis for this assertion is the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Cf. G. P. Makogonenko, "A. N. Radiščev und das Problem des Historismus," \textit{Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift, Karl-Marx-Universität Leipzig}, 4 (1977); G. N. Moiseeva, "Russkaya istoriya v tvorchestve Radishcheva 1780-kh godov," \textit{XVIII vek, Sbornik} 12 (L., 1977).
  \item \textsuperscript{7} A. V. Lunacharskii, "Alexander Nikolaevich Radishchev," \textit{Sobranie Sochinenii I} (M., 1963), p. 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{8} This is also true of some scholars in the German Democratic Republic. Cf. H. -M: Grimeschl und H. Seidel, "Naturrecht und Revolution—Zur Stellung A. N. Radiščevs in der russischen Aufklärung," \textit{Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift, Karl-Marx-Universität Leipzig}, 4 (1977). A view contrary to this is shown, for example, in J. V. Clardy, \textit{The Philosophical Ideas of Alexander Radishchev} (London, 1964).
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Cf. Yu. F. Kariakin and E. G. Plimak, \textit{Zapretnaya Myst' obreetaet svobody} (M., 1966), p. 76.
\end{itemize}
assumption that Journey has a certain plot and that the only subject of this work is the history of a man who, knowing by experience the stern realities of life, has become conscious of his political delusions and has grown to be a revolutionary.10)

But this assumption is too arbitrary. Accepting A. S. Pushkin’s opinion about the structure of Journey,11) V. P. Semennikov wrote in 1923: “... Journey does not represent the evolution of one whole plot; the connection between each chapter is supported only by the unity of the character (the tourist), and in each individual chapter an independent motif is evolved.”12) There seems to be more truth in this old opinion, for Radishchev chose the form of the journey in order that he could comment on and criticize a great variety of things, without being troubled about any logical sequence.

Radishchev did not criticize reforms in the name of revolution. He appealed to the nobility to initiate social and political reforms of their own will. It is true that he did not fully trust the effects of appeals to the nobility. In Journey there are several passages which express his doubt and pessimism on this point. Nevertheless, he still could not but continue to appeal to the conscience of the nobility.13)

It would be better to think that Radishchev did not live in times when the alternatives were reform or revolution.14) His principal attention was paid to the revelation and criticism of social injustices. The way to get rid of them was of secondary interest to him. Above all he exposed the facts of individual suffering Russians. He thought that the nobility were not aware of the harsh actualities faced by the poor and humble, or that, even if they were aware of them, they made no efforts to remove them. He believed that he

10. E. g. P. Makogonenko, Ot Fonvizina do Pushkina (M., 1969), pp. 453–461.
11. A. S. Pushkin, “Puteshestvie iz Moskvy v Peterburg,” Sobranie Sochinenii v Desiaty tomakh, VI (M., 1976), p. 336.
12. V. P. Semennikov, Radishchev; ocherki i issledovaniya (M.-L., 1923), p. 284. Cf. O. V. Orlov and V. I. Fedorov, Russkaya Literatura XVIII veka (M., 1973), pp. 228–265.
13. It cannot be denied that Journey was directed to the literate gentry, not to the peasants. Cf. A. McConnell, A Russian Philosopher Alexander Radishchev 1749–1802 (The Hague, 1964), p. 94.
14. Cf. E. Vilenskaya, “O spornykh voprosakh i metodakh izucheniya ideinogo naslediya A. N. Radishcheva,” Voprosy filosofii (1956), No. 6; V. F. Shchipanov, “Esche raz o A. N. Radishcheve,” Voprosy filosofii (1957), No. 6.
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could, in some degree, excite the sentiment of compassion on the part of the nobility by making them acquainted with the sufferings of the masses. This will be clearer when we turn to two of his conceptions, virtue and sensitivity.

II

Radishchev's serious criticism of Russian society can be narrowed down to two points: to throw light on the cruelty and harshness to the peasants of the landed proprietors ("Lyubani," "Zaytsovo," "Peshki"), and to bring into the open the unjust privileges of the bureaucrats and their moral corruption ("Chudovo," "Spasskaya Polest," "Zavidovo"). That is to say, he regards the relations between the peasants and the nobility as the relations between sufferers and oppressors. Here arises one question: What ethical ideas enabled Radishchev, an aristocrat, to put himself in the place of the peasants?

At Kresttsy the tourist witnesses the parting of a father from his children. The father, a white-haired nobleman, sets forth his ethical ideas to his children, who are going into government service. The nobleman points out three rules of social life in obedience to which man should live: customs and habits, laws, and virtue (dobrodetel'). He sets the highest value on virtue and insists that it must be observed at any expense:

The rules of social life refer to the observance of national customs and habits, or to observance of the law, or to the practice of virtue. If social customs and habits are not contrary to law, if the law sets up no obstacle to the progress of virtue, then the observance of the rules of social life is easy. But where does such a society exist? Every society we know of is full of many contradictions in manners, customs, laws, and virtue. Thence arises the difficulty of doing one's duties as a man and as a citizen, since they are often diametrically opposed to one another.

'Inasmuch as virtue is the highest end of human action, its practice should not be impeded by anything. Disregard customs and usages, disregard civil and ecclesiastical law, however sacred they may be in human society, whenever their observance keeps you from virtue. (292)

The Kresttsy nobleman, mentioning the names of Socrates and the Younger Cato, speaks of their lives and deaths in terms of high praise. The man
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who has devoted his life to virtue, he adds, will "live unto eternity in the memory of noble souls." (293)

The idea that virtue should be regarded as the highest value for man, as uttered by the Kresttsy nobleman, can be considered to be Radishchev's own, because this same idea is expressed also in his other writings, such as Conversation about Who is a True Son of the Fatherland and On Man, his Mortality and Immortality.15

Radishchev's ethical thoughts are not an impractical proposition apart from the actualities of life. They are based on his deep and sincere consciousness of existing social injustices. At the outset of the chapter "Kresttsy" the tourist makes ironical remarks upon Russian bureaucrats:

One may safely bet a thousand to one that out of a hundred young noblemen who enter the service, ninety-eight will become good-for-nothing scoundrels, and two, in their old age, or, more correctly, in their decrepitude, although they are not old in years, will become good men. The rest advance in rank, squander or acquire property, and so on. (282)

The nobleman's motive for letting his sons go into the service is not that they may advance in rank, but that they may, "weary of the turmoil of worldly life, joyfully abandon it." (284) Making calls on great personages is obstinately condemned by him. Thus, by insisting that virtue should be superior to laws or customs, Radishchev means that man should critically confront the existing state of things, cherishing a definite idea in his bosom.

G. V. Plekhanov, discussing Radishchev's ethical ideas, directed his attention to the chapter "Kresttsy" and said, "he wanted that progressive Russian people, devoting themselves to virtue, would beforehand learn not to be afraid of jeopardy." (Italics by G. V. P.).16 In fact, Radishchev's virtue assumes a fighting and offensive character:

... if the law, or the Sovereign, or any power on earth should tempt you to falsehood or to depart from virtue, remain immovably true to it. Fear not ridicule, nor torture, nor sickness, nor exile, nor even death itself.

15. A. N. Radishchev, Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii, vol. I (M. -L., 1938), pp. 218-223 and vol. II (1941), pp. 133-134. See also Filaret written in prison.
16. G. V. Plekhanov, "Istoriya russkoi obshchestvennoi mysli," Sochineniya, XXII (M. -L., 1925), p. 355.
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Remain immovable in your soul, like a rock amidst tumultuous but impotent waves. (293)

By preaching virtue, and at the same time exposing the bureaucrats' outrageous despotism and representing the miseries of the peasants, Radishchev insisted on the necessity to try to do away with the existing society and establish a more ideal one.

A man who is devoted to virtue will be obliged to be in the minority, sometimes in a minority of one. He will be obliged to have an extremely hostile relation to the Tsarist system. He will be an isolated but active and tenacious fighter against the autocratic tyranny, such as the freethinker in the chapter “Torzhok”:

The freethinker who has been stirred to his depths will stretch forth his audacious but mighty and fearless arm against the idol of power, will tear off its mask and veil, and lay bare its true character. Everyone will see its feet of clay; everyone will withdraw the support which he had given it; power will return to its source; the idol will fall. (333)

It has, in this way, become clear that Radishchev's conception of virtue, in spite of its superficial abstractness, has an active and clearly offensive character to it. Devoted to this virtue, Radishchev could, without being restrained by his own social station, put himself in the place of the oppressed masses and exert himself in their interests.

III

Radishchev's conception of virtue is closely connected with another of his conceptions, sensitivity (chuvstvitelnost'). W. E. Brown says that N. M. Karamzin is the enthusiastic defender of “sensibility” and that Karamzin's “sensibility” is virtually a synonym for virtue. This seems to be as much true of Radishchev. No one who has ever read his writings will fail to realize that behind the serious criticism of serfdom and of the entire Russian social

17. W. E. Brown, A History of 18th Century Russian Literature (Michigan, 1980), p.528.
order there flows a soft and mild sensitiveness. Radishchev was a man of ready sympathies, and his sympathy was especially directed to the ill-treated. Our next assignment is to ascertain the meaning of his emotionalism and inquire into the relation between his sensitivity and his criticism.¹⁸

Of all the chapters of Journey it is "Klin" that most clearly reflects the author's emotionalism. This chapter, unlike the others, simply and solely lays stress on human potentiality to sympathize and to be impressed. Giving a description of an old blind bard and his listeners, Radishchev wrote:

...Not one of the bystanders was free from a deep inward agitation when the bard of Klin, having reached his hero's parting, was scarcely able to continue his tale in ever more broken accents. The hollows where his eyes had been were filled with tears proceeding from a soul made sensitive by misfortune, and they flowed down his cheeks in streams. O nature, how mighty thou art! As the women beheld the old man weeping, they burst into sobs; from the lips of youth fitted its customary smiles; on the face of childhood appeared timidity, a sure sign of painful but uncertain feeling; even adult manhood, so used to cruelty, assumed a serious expression. O nature! I cried again... (373-374)

Here Radishchev tries to put much value on human sensitivity, which he thinks underlies all human relations. He insists that sympathy is a feeling characteristic of human beings and that it is originally rooted in human nature. This insistence is very clearly shown in his Diary of One Week, too.¹⁹ According to R. Neuhäuser sentimentalism in Russia became fashionable during the 1770's and 1780's, and lost its role as a movement of the literary avantgarde during the 1790's.²⁰ Thus, Radishchev grew up and wrote under the influence of European and Russian sentimentalism. A vivid and sharp sensitivity was deeply rooted in his nature, and what is more important, his

¹⁸. See: A. S. Pushkin, Sobranie sochinenii v dezyati tomakh, II (M., 1974), p. 614; P. A. Orlov, Russkii Sentimentalizm (M., 1977), pp. 144-162; N. D. Kochetkova, "Russkii Sentimentalizm," Russkii Romanticizm, ed. by K. N. Grigor'yan (L., 1978), pp. 18-37; D. Blagov, Ot Kantemira do nashikh dnei, vol. I (M., 1979), pp. 89-99; P. N. Berkov. "Nekotorye spornyie voprosy sovremennogo izucheniya zhizni i tvorchestva A. N. Radishcheva," XVIII vek, Sbornik 4 (M.-L., 1959); D. M. Lang, The First Russian Radical, Alexander Radishchev 1749-1802 (London, 1959), p. 132.

¹⁹. Cf. W. E. Brown, op. cit., pp. 550-552.

²⁰. Rudolf Neuhäuser, Towards the Romantic Age (The Hague, 1974), p. 87.
sympathy was extended to the suffering masses. He sympathized with the peasants, which led him to criticize their oppressors, the nobility. In this sense his criticism can be said to have resulted from his sensitivity. This will be proved through examination of some characters in Journey.

The first example is the tourist himself, the hero of this work. Through various experiences on the way from Petersburg to Moscow he comes to increase his compassion for the lowly and mistreated, and his hatred of unfair privileges of the nobility. He is one of those repentant noblemen who are so sensitive and compassionate that they cannot but be conscious of being oppressors to the peasants.

The second example is Ch- in the chapter “Chudovo,” a conscientious and sympathetic person. He gets angry at the inhumane conduct of a local commander who will not reach out a helping hand to drowning men. His indignation doubles when he finds that his friends in Petersburg never accuse the commander of heartlessness as much as he. Ch- is too sensitive and passionate to get along well with other noblemen.

The third character makes his appearance in the chapter “Zaytsovo.” He is Mr. Krestyankin, a presiding judge in a criminal court. Radishchev describes him as a person who has “a very sensitive soul and a humane heart.” (269) One day he is involved in a criminal case: in one village some peasants killed their master and his sons in reprisal for their extremely unjust and cruel deeds. On the grounds of self-defence Mr. Krestyankin insists that the peasants should be regarded as innocent. His insistence, however, does not prevail, because he is an isolated judge and is firmly opposed by all of his associates, especially by the governor. In the end, Mr. Krestyankin petitions for his retirement and renounces the world.

It is true that both Ch- and Mr. Krestyankin have some faults in their characters.21) They are too fastidious and short-tempered, and give up struggling against the social injustices around them and seclude themselves from society. But it is not on their escapism that the author lays emphasis. The author’s attention is directed to how sensitive and sympathetic people regard social injustices and how they make efforts in vain to diminish them, fighting

21. To lay too much emphasis on this is improper. Cf. L. I. Kulakova and V. A. Zapadov, A. N. Radishchev. “Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Moskvu,” Kommentarii (L., 1974), pp. 145-146, and P. A. Orlov, op. cit., p.149.
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against the bureaucrats who find their own profits in protecting and maintaining the institution of serfdom and the corrupt bureaucracy.

As is mentioned above, Radishchev thinks that man is originally born with sensitivity. Why and how, then, does man come to lose it? To this question Radishchev answers in the chapter "Zaytsovo," describing the character of a collegiate assessor:

'Being of very lowly origin himself, Mr. Assessor now saw himself as master of several hundred of his own kind. This turned his head. He is not the only one who might justly complain that the possession of power had turned his head. He considered himself an exalted being, and the peasants—cattle given to him (he almost thought his power over them proceeded from God) to be used for work at his arbitrary will.' (271)

It is the social structure itself that deprives man of sensitivity, Radishchev thinks. He regards the Russian society of his times to be a pyramidal society with the Tzar at the top and innumerable peasants at the base, and between them various ranks of noblemen. In such a society almost all the people who belong to any governing class are tempted into corruption.22) Therefore, those noblemen, who are not led astray and do preserve sensitivity even in this ruinous society are, of necessity, forced to be in opposition to the majority of noblemen. They are inevitably heretics and martyrs.

At the beginning of Journey, explaining the intention in this work, the author wrote:

I looked about me - my heart was troubled by the sufferings of humanity. I turned my eyes inward - I saw that man's woes arise in man himself, and frequently only because he does not look straight at the objects around him. . . . I felt that it was possible for anyone to strive for the well-being of his fellows. Such is the thought which moved me to sketch out what you are going to read. (227)

These lines indicate that Radishchev relied, or more correctly, would like

22. Radishchev not a few times emphasizes the idea that the Russian peasants are much superior both physically and mentally to the nobility Cf. N. K. Piksanov, "'Bednaya Anyuta' Radishcheva i 'Bednaya Liza' Karamzina," XVIII vek, Sbornik 3 (M.-L., 1958).

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to rely on the nobility's sensitivity. Making use of the form of the journey, he objectively described the Russian society of his times and, as a result, made it clear that in Russia everything was arranged for the good of the nobility and nothing for the peasants. He knew that there existed, though very few, conscientious and sympathetic noblemen, such as Ch- and Mr. Krestyankin, and, as Plekhanov indicated, he desired to increase the number of such noblemen.

It is true that Radishchev asserted the people's right to rise in revolution in his Journey, but this does not mean that he directly appealed to the oppressed masses to rise in righteous wrath. He pinned his faith on human forces of sympathy and compassion. His Journey was directed to the literate gentry in order to make them aware of the sufferings of their fellow men and to awaken their passion for justice.

As we have seen, Radishchev's vivid and sharp sensitivity, which was directed to the suffering masses, formed the basis of his criticism of social injustices. This was possible just because his sensitivity was oriented by his clear political and social ideas. Another sensitive writer of his age, Karamzin, did not go the same way. There existed, it seems, a fundamental difference in quality between Radishchev's and Karamzin's sensitivity. To compare their political and social ideas will lead to the clarification of this difference. But this is not our present problem.

Toward the end of Journey Radishchev, explaining his idea about how much effect a thinker can have on his contemporaries or descendants, wrote:

Is Bacon of Verulam not worthy to be remembered because he could only show how to advance learning? Are the courageous writers who have risen against oppression and tyranny not worthy of gratitude because they could not themselves free mankind from fetters and captivity? (391)

Radishchev himself was, of course, one such courageous writer, and he was a thinker who attached much importance to the role of thinkers.

23. G. V. Plekhanov, op. cit., pp. 351-356.