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A Forgotten Love Triangle: Voltaire, Diderot, and Catherine the Great

Paul Rogov · Wednesday, January 28th, 2015

If there ever was a Europhilic ruler that embodied the simultaneous retention of and privileging of autocratic rule through numerous, simulative exchanges between Western Europe and "European Russia," and who perpetually employed, was fascinated with, deflected, and then downright rejected certain European Enlightenment ideas on principle, such a ruler was no one other than Catherine the Great, Empress and Autocrat of All the Russias. Catherine, though German-born, after becoming betrothed to Peter the III, converted to the Russian Orthodox Church and learned Russian. Before her reign and during her reign, Catherine was an inveterate admirer of Western culture. She had traveled all over Europe as a young woman, and had devoured French Literature and philosophy in various passionate spurts and critical distances. Catherine, a ruler many traditional scholars have dubbed an "enlightened despot," if anything, serves as a prime example of collusive and prevailing ambiguities inherent within Eastern European/Russian autocracies during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Whereas the Enlightenment was in full bloom during Catherine's rule and the bubbling specters of Romanticism were always already inherent as a direct assault on the notions of "universal Reason," such specters were not only within Western Europe, but also within Russia, which never "fully" embraced Enlightenment ideas, but certainly entertained them. When, for example, the French philosopher and scholar Denis Diderot made his daring trip to Russia to visit Catherine's court and began explaining the importance of reforms for her empire, she patronized him:

> I have listened with the greatest pleasure to the inspirations of your brilliant mind;

> but all your grand principles, which I understand very well, would do splendidly in books and very badly in practice. In all your plans for reform, you are forgetting the difference between our two positions: you work only on paper, which accepts anything, is smooth and flexible and offers not obstacle either to your imagination or to your pen, while I, poor Empress, work on human skin, which is far more sensitive and touchy[1]

Catherine here makes the distinction between theory and action abundantly clear. That is, Catherine is certainly charmed by Diderot's "brilliant mind." However, she insists on emphasizing the difference between Enlightenment *thought* and her own position that "works on human skin, which is far more sensitive and touchy." Such ambiguous statements, of course, those which work "on human skin" evoke a distancing, an essentialist position, a 'we are not you' take on Western ideas. Yet, Catherine, in practice, through her later codification of laws, her famous "Nakaz" (or discipline, decree, in Russian) claims something quite different, writing:

> 6. Russia is a European power.
>
> 7. The proof for this is as follows. The changes which in Russia were undertaken by Peter the Great were all the more successful because the manners which prevailed at the time were quite unsuitable to the climate and had been imported to our land thanks to the intermingling of peoples and the conquest of foreign lands. In introducing European manners and customs to a European people, Peter I then found facilitating factors such he himself had not expect.
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> . . . . . .
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> 9. The sovereign is autocratic; for no other power save that which is united in his person can act in a manner commensurable with the extent of so great a state[2]

Here, Catherine's rhetoric clearly reveals the conceptual inconsistency between a Western *idea of Russia*, which she entertained, and Western *ideas for Russia*, which she rejected. That is, while Catherine insists "Russia is a European power" because Peter the Great reformed "the manners which prevailed at the time were quite unsuitable," she remarkably emphasized the role of the sovereign, which in this case "is united in his person can act in a manner commensurable with the extent of so great a state." How could the "so great a state," one wonders, not be referring to the Russian imperial system itself? Is it not the case that during the Enlightenment, nationalism, especially toward the end of the eighteenth century, was in and monarchy was out—that the French Revolution was brewing and nationalism troubled absolute despots who wished to retain their power, though continued to play the Enlightenment game in order to subsist within the coordinates of the European political climate and not be dubbed "backwards"? Before Catherine even codified the laws for Russia, it is clear she went to Asia with a "universal vision," writing to Voltaire:

> These laws, of which so much is being said at present, are not quite completed as of yet. . .consider only, if you will, that they are destined to serve both Asia and Europe: and what a difference there in between them in terms of climate, people, customs,

> and even ideas. Here I am finally in Asia; I have wanted so terribly to see it with my own eyes. There are in this city twenty different people who do not resemble one another in the least. We shall nonetheless have to design a garment that would fit them all. General principles can certainly be found, but what of the details? And what details! I was about to say: we will have to create, unify, and preserve a whole world.[2,3]

Catherine's utopian vision, however, does not take into account "the details" and seems to skirt them repeatedly. When she writes "we will have to create, unify, and preserve a whole world," one wonders if she means Voltaire and herself OR Russia in general OR general Enlightenment principles and herself exclusive of Voltaire. Such questions can only problematize the modernization project Catherine had in mind, who insisted that "Russia is a European power," though "works on human skin."

The "human skin" factor, however, reveals something else about Catherine the Great: she quite literally flirted both politically and erotically with Western Europe. When Diderot returned to France, Voltaire grew jealous, writing to the Empress:

> Madame, I am positively in disgrace at your court. Your Imperial Majesty has jilted me for Diderot, of for Grimm, or for some other favorite. You have had no consideration for my advanced age. All is well and good if your Majesty were a French coquette; but how can a victorious, lawgiving Empress be so inconstant..I am trying to find crimes I have committed that would justify your indifference. I see that there is indeed no passion which does not end. (Troyat 209)

Voltaire apparently was either an "orientalist" who Catherine entertained from time to time in his correspondences with her, who took offence that he was "jilted" for Diderot, or *Catherine and Voltaire* were both "orientalists" who quite frankly used Western European rhetoric to intellectually seduce one another. Catherine responds to Voltaire:

> Live, Monsieur, and let us be reconciled; for in any case there is no cause for quarrel between us…you are so good a Russian that you could not be the enemy of Catherine (209)

Catherine's predication of Voltaire as "so good a Russian" indicates something inherently intimate. They only communicated through letters, and as it was pointed out above, it was Diderot who went to Russia to visit her court, not Voltaire. Strangely enough, however, Voltaire in another letter emphasizes that his dying wish was to be buried in Russia, writing "why should I not have the pleasure of being buried in some corner of Petersburg, where I could see you pass to and fro under your arches of triumph, crowned with laurel and olive?" (209). Now. . .Voltaire is either obsessed with Catherine, obsessed with dying in Russia, or obsessed with the East in general. Perhaps, all of these are true—for the Voltaire-Catherine-West-East exchange during the period of the so-called Enlightenment are indicative of "orientalism" in both political spheres, Eastern and Western Europe: the frugal application of conceptual framework which Russia, in this case, under

Catherine the Great, refused to accept and the West's unbridled fascination with the East.[7] Such undertones of fascination bring to mind themes of power dynamics which resonate in the Prussian novel *Venus in Furs* by Sacher-Masoch, which not only reeks with direct references to Catherine the Great [28] (being dominated by an "Eastern Empress") but also underscores the sexual/intellectual phantasms between Western "Enlightenment elites" and "Slavic monarchs" who, both operating upon an "orientalist" axis, stop nothing short of redefining "Enlightened Despotism" as nothing short of "orientalist" perversion.

Catherine the Great aside, eighteenth-century Russian historian Karamzin, who, interestingly enough, also traveled to Europe during the Enlightenment period (and also happened to have met with Immanuel Kant, at Kant's home, in what is now Kalingrad), was skeptical to the principle by which Catherine's codification of laws operated, wondering if such laws were not simply a French wolf in Russian sheep's clothing:

> Putting aside all other considerations, let us enquire: is this the time to present Russians with French laws, even if they should be capable of being conveniently adapted to Russia's social conditions? We all, all who love Russia, her sovereign, her glory and well-being, so strongly detest this nation, besplattered with the blood with the blood of Europe and covered with the dust of so many demolished kingdoms—how can we then, at the very time when Napoleon's name makes hearts shudder, place his code at the holy altar of the fatherland?[4]

Karamzin, though certainly open to the idea that French laws "could be capable of being conveniently adapted to Russia's social conditions," appears to be speaking for Russia as whole, claiming that "all who love Russia, her sovereign, her glory and well-being, so strongly detest this nation,"—in this case, France, whose nationalism is typified by the Napoleonic empire. So here, where Catherine, the absolute ruler, and her erotic/literary correspondence with France and its intellectual elite take on some kind of perverted dimension of reflexive mutual intellectual "orientalism" on the vertical axis (autocractic rule, subversive, ambiguous intellectual preoccupations), Karamzin's comments bring to light a particular attitude, on the part of Russia, which rests on the horizontal axis of Western European/Russian reality: French laws might work in Russia, but when its comes to the West attempting to enforce its ways on Russia, Russia would rather set itself on fire.[5]

This is a historical example of why Russia will never be a Western Country.

NOTES

1. See Troyat, Henri. *Catherine the Great.* Trans. Pinkham, Joan. New York: Meridian, 1994. Also see Kliuchevsky, V.O. *A Course in Russian History: The Time of Catherine the Great*. Trans. Shatz, Marshall S. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997.

2. See *Lettres de Catherine II à et à Diderot*, quoted in the publication *Antiquité russe.* Also *Voltaire and Catherine the Great. Selected Correspondences.* Trans. Antony Lentin. London UK:

1974.

3. Ekaterina II, “Iz Nakaza.” Reddaway, Letter XV (29 May/ (June 1767), in *Documents of Catherine the Great*, 17-18.

4. While this seems like a superficial parallel, the “orientalism” which drives the eroticism in the novel does in fact make direct references to the Czarina. There is a striking East-West fusion in the novel where the main characters essentially play out a Master/ Slave, West/East dynamic. One can only wonder if this was not loosely based on the Voltaire/Catherine nexus itself. See Sacher-Masoch, Leopold. *Venus in Furs*. Trans. Neugroschel, Joachim. New York: Penguin Press, 2000.pp. 36-38, 60, 68, 71.

5. See Pipes, Richard. *Karamzin’s Memoir On Ancient and Modern Russia*. New York: Harvard University Press, 1969. pg. 187.

6. Although this “non-sequitur” statement was meant figuratively, it is also literal. When Napoleon’s Grand Army finally reached Moscow they found the city burning. Moscow had been strategically evacuated and set up as a trap, in order to confuse and instill terror. Many scholars agree the Czar’s army such tactics were borrowed by Alexander the Great. See Dukes, Paul. A History of Russia *c. 882-1996*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

Top image: The Inauguration of the Academy of Arts, a painting by Valery Jacobi

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