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THE *MUSCOVIAN LETTERS*
OF FRANCESCO LOCATELLI
(1735), OR THE ILLUSORY
MODERNISATION OF RUSSIA'S
LEGAL AND POLITICAL
SYSTEM DURING THE REIGN
OF PETER THE GREAT AND
HIS SUCCESSORS

ABSTRACT

In the 18th century thinkers of the French Enlightenment discover Russia, whose institutional reforms replace their traditional utopian topics. The myths of Peter the Great and of Catherine II as Minerva of the North are created. Russia also becomes a peculiar laboratory of Enlightenment incarnate. Francesco Locatelli, the author of the *Muscovian Letters*, who between 1733 and 1735 spent two years in Russian prisons, attempts to deconstruct these myths. His book, which enjoyed an immense popularity in Europe, is an accusation of arbitrariness and inhumanity of the Russian regime.

KEY WORDS: Locatelli, Enlightenment, Russia, philosophy, law, politics, reforms.

Russia was a big intellectual discovery for the French philosophers of the Enlightenment. Many reasons explain this fact. One of them, analysed by Paul Hazard in *La crise de la conscience européenne*, is the general shift of interests in France towards the North. This change of tastes from the South, namely Spain and Italy, regarded by the French as a common Latin heritage, was initially directed towards England, whose constitutional monarchy and political liberties were perceived in France as the epitome of modernity. But this reversal of interests also extended to Prussia under Frederick I and Frederick the Great. Around the middle of the 18th century, however, the curiosity of the French shifted to Russia, then considered a Northern, rather than Eastern European country (Hazard 1961: 69–70). Yet Russia was treated differently than England or Germany. To understand the roots of this difference, we must take into account the French literary scene of the late 17th and early 18th century, a period which witnessed an unprecedented flowering of fantastic and utopian genres. Many works depicting

imaginary voyages to relatively unknown or purely fictitious countries were published. Most of these works gained a wide popularity in France and some of them, like *Voyages et aventures de Jacques Massé*, written in 1710 by an utopian thinker, Tyssot de Patot, or *La terre australe connue*, published in 1676 by Gabriel de Foigny, became virtual bestsellers. Another quasi utopian book that turned out to be not only a French but a truly European hit was the trilogy of the Marquis d'Argens, entitled respectively: *Lettres juives*, *Lettres cabalistiques* and *Lettres chinoises*, published and reprinted several between 1735 and 1750. Although in the middle of the 18th century these utopian themes gradually subsided in France, but they never disappeared completely. By this time fictitious islands of socio-political perfection had been replaced by some more realistic and tangible examples. Strangely enough, it was Russia that became a substitute for the French utopian fantasy (Lortholary 1951: 2). The remote areas of the Pacific Ocean, or hardly identifiable Oriental places stirring the French imagination of the early Enlightenment, were supplanted by the geographically much closer, yet no more familiar and no less exotic Muscovy. Russia thus became a new European frontier, a new battleground for radical institutional and cultural reforms (Lortholary 1951: 6). The French topos of the *bon sauvage* gave place to a different, more concrete image of a man newly fashioned, namely the new Russian citizen, initially formed by the genius of Peter the Great, and subsequently perfected by the endeavors of Catherine II.

It was precisely this paradoxical combination of geographical proximity and distance, of familiarity intermingled with ignorance of more specific aspects of the Russian life that directed the French concerns to the Muscovy. Indeed, Russia was far away but close enough to Paris. Eighteenth-century Russia undergoing transformation became a new Utopia (Mohrenschildt 1936: 4). The old Western fantasies of ultimate edenic bliss gradually moved from the tropics to the immense expanses of the Russian Empire, which over the course of just one generation became the biggest theoretical laboratory of eighteenth-century socio-political thought. The French Enlightenment found its new target and its new vital mission, namely to civilize the barbaric and backwarded Russia (Wolff 1994: 87). Thus a dangerous illusion was born. For a large number of French writers Russia represented a tempting image of the Enlightenment incarnate. One of them was Fontenelle, the author of the *Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier*, published shortly after the death of Peter the Great in 1725. This uncritical eulogy, with its ubiquitous metaphors of the battle between the forces of light and darkness, established the Petrine myth in France and propagated it throughout the entire century. According to Fontenelle, Peter the Great was a true hero who created the new Russia out of nothingness, thus imitating the divine *creatio ex nihilo*. A few decades later, Voltaire and Diderot founded the myth of Catherine II as the Semiramis or Minerva of the North. But not all eighteenth-century philosophers shared this enthusiastic vision. One of them was an Italian aristocrat, Francesco Locatelli, author of the *Lettres Moscovites*, published in Paris in 1735, and translated from French into English as early as in 1736 as the *Muscovian Letters*.

Locatelli, born in Bergamo in 1687, settled in Paris in 1720. In 1733, agent of several financial scandals, he was forced to flee the French capital (Gallizioli 1982: 2). The escape from Paris set him on a long route to Russia via Germany and Poland, where he spent two memorable years, most of the time behind bars in various Russian prisons. His encounter with the Russian judicial and penitentiary system was no doubt

a shocking experience for him. Thus the *Muscovian Letters*, scrupulous testimonials written in form of letters to a close friend, offer an inestimable source of first-hand information on early eighteenth-century Russia, mostly, however, on the inadequacy of Russian public institutions. Indeed, Locatelli's *Muscovian Letters* are a scathing accusation of the unreformable, in his opinion, Russian barbarism, which, as he claimed, will never reverse. No other work written during that period reveals better the absurdities of the Russian socio-political life, so contrary to the enthusiastic myths propagated in France. A close perusal at the *Muscovian Letters* brings into sharp focus the fundamental difference between this curious book and the excessively idealistic eulogy of Fontenelle, who envisaged the emergence of the new Russia from a strictly theoretical perspective, without necessary attention given to historical facts.

The publication of the *Muscovian Letters* had an interesting history. In 1735, upon his final release from prison and departure from St. Petersburg, Locatelli arrived incognito in Paris. His immediate thought was to share his experiences with a wider public in order to rectify Fontenelle's erroneous vision of Russia. He intended his account to be a warning to the unaware French and Europeans deluded by the Russian myths. The *Muscovian Letters* were published anonymously, due to Locatelli's awareness of the book's potential success, which would bring him to the attention of his former creditors and enemies (Gallizioli 1982: 3). Interestingly enough, Locatelli did not arouse any objection from the official French censorship, which welcomed his book with genuine enthusiasm. During the period following the War of the Polish Succession of 1733, the French court, supporting Stanisław Leszczyński as the pretender to the Polish throne, was in open conflict with Russia, which favored the claims of Augustus III of Saxony. This political configuration was the main reason for the royal permission to publish immediately Locatelli's book and for its subsequent popularity, both in France and in other parts of Europe.

The *Muscovian Letters* open like a typical eighteenth-century work of fictional literature. The editor of allegedly anonymous letters claims to have found them in a wooden box, rescued miraculously from a shipwreck. One day, walking on a beach, he noticed a wooden trunk and decided to open it. His curiosity was raised by an ominous Latin inscription attached to the trunk's cover, written on a paper pasted inside the lid, which perplexed him profoundly. It warned him against going to Russia and urged to abstain from travelling to that God-forsaken place: *Cum monitu ne adeant ad istem inhumanum nationem nisi ferro et igne eam depopulandum* (Warning not to venture to that inhuman nation other than with the purpose of depopulating it by means of iron and fire) (Locatelli 1736: iii). The inscription, although terrifying, did not fail to incite the editor to continue his exploration. His curiosity was soon rewarded, for the content of the trunk revealed the existence of a peculiar manuscript, depicting a story beyond imagination. It was an epistolary account relating its author's disastrous trip to the Muscovy between 1733 and 1735, and which, as the editor claims, should inform the public about the truth on Russia:

The public will (...) be desirous to know by what accident these letters fell into my hands and what induced me to publish them. I do not question, but many will be apt to blame my temerity to expose the foibles of so powerful a nation. To these critics I shall only answer, that the interest of all the rest of Europe has, with me, taken place of every

other consideration. Besides, our author says no more than the bare evident truth; and, for my part, I shall think my labour more than recompensed, if the redacting of these letters may have the wished-for effect, to deter every man of worth from travelling into Muscovy, where he would run the risk of being exposed to the same tragical events our Italian here relates (Locatelli 1736: ii).

Locatelli's tragic predicament started when travelling from St. Petersburg to Persia with the purpose of joining a friend he was intercepted in Kazan by the Russian police and arrested on account of his alleged spying. However, this accusation was never proven to be valid. The Italian traveller was initially put into a local jail and then transported by the police escort across snowy Russia back to the country's new capital. For the entire duration of his ordeal, Locatelli was never informed about the precise reason of his detention. He was refused legal assistance, kept in total isolation and, what was perhaps the most unbearable, he did not know what kind of treatment to expect from his Muscovite oppressors. He compared his long journey from one Russian prison to another to a voyage throughout the land of the Dead. The incredible nature of his adventure might at first glance look like perfect material for a ghostly thriller, having the appearance of a morbid, surreal nightmare. The image of Russia as an imaginary rather than tangible entity, Russia's formlessness and her never clearly delineated character, are the constant elements of Locatelli's account:

You say, you cannot forbear looking at me, as a person risen from the dead; and you are so far right; I am not dead, indeed, because "mors miseris fugit", but I may, nevertheless, be esteemed a ghost, since I am actually returned from another world, where I have made no short abode. (Locatelli 1736: 1)

Locatelli argues that the true essence of Russia is beyond capture, for Russia functions on a different level than other European countries and follows different logic. The Westerners who wish to comprehend Muscovy should abandon their system of values and suspend their socio-political and legal concepts. Russia has an existence of its own:

I am persuaded, there is no other country, in which I could have been exposed to the like events. I shall leave you to judge of these matters; be prepared only to give attention to what I am about to relate. You will find some things to amuse you, and others will justly raise your indignation, and compel you to allow, that it is with truth, I say, I am returned from another world. (Locatelli 1736: 3)

Locatelli is struck by a very peculiar notion of time the Russians have. Nothing in Russia is perceived within a linear, chronological order. Issues that need to be addressed immediately are always postponed. No political or economic decision is implemented with due seriousness and nobody knows what to expect from the inept government or decision-makers. The same was valid for his detention: "Nothing is done there today, everything is put off till tomorrow, which I have too often experienced to my cost, and been forced to put up with those todays and tomorrows for three months together" (Locatelli 1736: 12).

The ineptitude of the Russian rulers, the lack of solid political foundation or well-defined laws perplexed Locatelli from the beginning of his trip. One of his earliest comments on the purely fictional character of most Russian projects regarded the use-

lessness of the famous Ladoga canal, built by Peter the Great to connect the Volga river with the Baltic sea. This canal was an ambitious, but totally abortive endeavor. Although its completion required enormous funds and manpower, it proved to be a financial and human disaster. The Ladoga canal story is only the first example in the *Muscovian Letters* of how Peter the Great misread economics. It illustrates how he wasted human life, industriousness and hard labor, for the fruits expected from the Ladoga canal were purely imaginary:

This canal is situated in a very marshy soil, and is of a vast extent; but I very much question, whether the advantages accruing from it answer the immense sums it cost at first; not to mention the prodigious number of lives sacrificed in that undertaking. I make little or no doubt, but it will insensibly fall into decay. (Locatelli 1736: 13)

Locatelli claims that in Russia human natural desire for liberty and progress, inherent in Western societies, is regarded with suspicion. The Russians do not understand the notion of order, their customs and behavior defy logic and arbitrariness of their rulers squanders the nation's resources. For Locatelli Russia is a permanent state of chaos. The Russians are deprived of elementary rights, nobody is certain of the future, there is no sound judicial system to defend ordinary subjects from the abusive power of the Czars or their local representatives. We find this grim picture everywhere in the *Muscovian Letters*, but it is particularly poignant in the description of the interrogation inflicted upon imprisoned Locatelli by the Governor of Moscow. The facetious interplay of sense and non-sense, the truly grotesque mixture of reality and false pretense, combined in the person of the Governor of Moscow, create a very peculiar setting. Russia is nothing but a perpetual farce:

To dismiss me, he at length gave me a gracious nod; But as I did not seem to understand these apish tricks, he was constrained, at length, to tell me, by the mouth of the interpreter, that I must retire. And thus ended this formal appearance, which I was forced to make before the Governor of the great city of Muscovy. I do not doubt, but you have seen the play called Arlichin finto Principe. Imagine, you see me received with much the same grimaces, as Harlequin receives his people with, and that the discourse which passed was not much unlike that of the illustrious buffoon, I have just mentioned. The farce which followed did not in the least deviate from the absurdity which preceded it. (Locatelli 1736: 46–47)

Locatelli denounces Russians' unfounded claims to the uniqueness of their national and religious identity. He compares them to brutes who revel in their inveterate ignorance, unable to distinguish between truth and fiction, and who live in a perpetual shadow of their imaginary universe, thus resembling the cavemen in Plato's *Republic*:

But since I am speaking of religion, you must know, the Muscovites think they alone have a title to the name of Christians. They look upon all other people, the Europeans not excepted, to be idolaters, who have no knowledge of the true God. (...) Wretches that they are! They are not sensible of the profound ignorance, in which they themselves are immersed. What a strange worship is theirs? (Locatelli 1736: 35)

Locatelli makes a specific reference to Plato's political writings when he discusses the recent attempts of the Czars to infuse some liberal elements into Russia's antiquated

socio-political system, thus making it more European. His sarcasm reaches its climax in the passage, where he points out that westernized Russia has only one potential, that of becoming its own caricature: "A motion was then made to form the government into a commonwealth. If this project had taken place, we should have seen a plan of government very different from Plato, a Muscovian Republic! It would, without doubt, have been a masterpiece." (Locatelli 1736: 63).

The author of the *Muscovian Letters* also gives a humorous account of the Russian Senate. This allegedly supreme political body, whose task was to address the most urgent issues of the state, is once again presented as a purely fictional establishment, the daily operations of which fluctuate between inaction and indolence. For Locatelli the Russian Senate is a sheer illusion. It passes no laws, thus it has no effect whatsoever on the political life of Russia. Its existence is purely nominal and so are the problems it pretends to be solving:

They [the Senators] generally meet four or five hours a day. (...) They take a great deal of pains themselves, and give no less to others, without advancing the interests of the state. (...) As they cannot venture to deliver their opinions with an entire freedom, they are often necessitated to defer the most urgent affairs to another time. The door of this illustrious Areopagus might be properly adorned with the following device: Hic operose nihil agitur. (Nothing is being done here). (Locatelli 1736: 61–62)

Contrary to Fontenelle, Locatelli passes a highly critical judgement on Peter the Great and the role he played in Russian history. He claims that the Petrine reforms did not trigger genuine modernization. They only perpetuated the oppressiveness of Russian absolutism and injected technology into the Russian militaristic machine (Lentin 1973: 5). Locatelli argues that Peter's resolve to transform Russia was based on his fundamental misconception of the spirit of his subjects, whom he took for what they were not. The Czar's erroneous appraisal of the Russians only served to create a new fiction. Peter believed too easily in the reformability of the Muscovites, which Locatelli regarded with utmost skepticism. Most of the French thinkers of the period deemed Peter the Great a political genius. For Locatelli, however, he was no epitome of the Enlightenment, but rather a supreme priest of the most detrimental delusion in Russian history. Instead of pulling the Russians in such a haste of their native barbarity, the Czar should have allowed them to preserve their natural character, that of the uncivilized beasts, which, as Locatelli claims, they really were:

Was Peter the Great with all his fine schemes and establishments, sufficiently acquainted with the genius of his subjects? I have a great room to doubt it, and this is my reason: There is not to this day a single Muscovite who is not better pleased with his village, and his oven, than with the most eminent post of honor. They would have been better pleased, if Peter the Great, instead of attempting to change beasts, as they were, into men, had, on the contrary, laboured to reduce them from a state of humanity to that of brutes. (Locatelli 1736: 63–64)

Locatelli denounces all Russia's claims to modernity. His prolonged captivity and inhuman treatment, which he suffered in various Russian prisons, were undoubtedly the main reason for his uncompromising criticism. Locatelli's Russia is a land of demons, it is a domain of sheer legal arbitrariness, where there is no relation between causes and



effects, where every absurdity is possible and nothing certain. Dignity of the human person means very little under that repressive regime. There is a curious analogy between his account on Russia, dating from 1735, the account of the Marquis de Custine from 1839 and that of André Gide from 1936, when the latter published his *Return from the U.S.S.R.* But to call Locatelli a prophet of totalitarian Russia would be erroneous, for prophet was he not. He was simply a perspicacious observer, who examined the Russian cultural complexities without the touch of purely theoretical enthusiasm, so typical for many French philosophers of the Enlightenment, infatuated with the newly emerging Russia. His account is a sober accusation of the organic faults of the Russian political and legal system:

Their way is to seize a person without any cause, without any examination, and, without any alleging the least pretext for it; they treat him immediately as a state criminal. (...) Can a people, who behave in this manner, be called civilized? And who then are barbarians, if they are not so? (Locatelli 1736: 30–31)

What distressed Locatelli the most, however, was the idea that all the reforms of Peter the Great were in vain and that the fruits of his projects were wasted before they even had a chance to mature. Deploring Russian fake modernization, Locatelli expresses a genuine pity for the Muscovites and reveals his personal frustration with the vicious circle of impossibility in which Russian civilization functions. One may only wonder if this vicious circle, regardless of the lapse of time, does not pertain to the Russia of today:

I first called to mind all that Peter, the Great, had done, (...) the torrents of blood he had shed, to extricate his subjects from that barbarity and ignorance into which they were plunged. I then reflected on his voyages, enquiries, labours and establishments; and I said to myself: where are now the effects of all the pains this great monarch took to reform his people? Is it possible that his subjects should be yet in the same state of barbarity, they were in, long before his reign? Where are the fruits of his labours? I could not find that this prince had changed the genius of his nation, and I had but too much experience of the contrary (Locatelli 1736: 28).

Locatelli was one of the first, but surely not the only detractor of the highly enthusiastic image of the allegedly modernised Russia, generated in the Parisian intellectual salons of the eighteenth century. Similarly critical and demeaning arguments were frequently voiced by many other French writers of the period, including Jean Chappé d'Autroche, the author of the *Voyage en Sibérie* (1768), Claude Carloman de Rulhière, who upon returning from Russia circulated in various political circles of the French capital his revelatory *Anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie, en l'année 1762*, in which he denounced Catherine the Great's coup d'état of 1762 and her criminal seizure of power, or Marie-Daniel Bourré de Corberon, a French diplomat, the author of another trenchant anti-Russian account, entitled *Un diplomate français à la cour de Catherine II*. Not to mention Astolphe de Custine and his famous book *La Russie en 1839*, a detailed, yet highly censorious picture of the reforms implemented in Russia by Peter the Great and his successors. All these writers did not view Russia's unprecedented transformation and its cultural as well as socio-political advancement with the same uncritical attitude as Voltaire, Grimm or Diderot so often did. In many respects their uncompromis-



ing assessment of Russia calls to mind that of a suspicious Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in the *Contrat social* exposed the purely illusory nature of Peter the Great's efforts to modernise Russia. Rousseau claimed that instead of enabling the Russians to cultivate and fully develop their own native genius, Peter the Great erroneously attempted to convert them into what they would never become, namely the French, the English or the Germans. Rousseau compared the effects of Peter the Great's ambitious task to civilise the Russians to the dubious effects of a French *précepteur* (tutor), so fashionable a figure all over Europe during the Age of Enlightenment, whose efficiency, according to Rousseau, amounted to no more than making his foreign student brilliant and admired in his infancy, only to plunge him next into a purely imitative nothingness of adulthood. (Rousseau 1973: 386). Yet Russia's westernisation, the extent of which was very often questioned by many skeptical French thinkers, was nonetheless generally accepted towards the end of the eighteenth century as a fact and considered irreversible. The final stage in this long and arduous process of the French accepting Russia as an equal partner, initiated at the dawn of the Enlightenment by Fontenelle's *Éloge*, is best exemplified by the Count de Ségur. For this French diplomat, who stayed in St. Petersburg until 1789 as the French ambassador, the controversies surrounding the issue of Russia's modernisation were completely irrelevant. Louis-Philippe de Ségur, a liberal cosmopolitan aristocrat, considered the Russian ruling classes entirely civilised and European. In his posthumously published *Mémoires* (1859) he did not even deem it necessary to elaborate on that subject or to question it. European Russia was a *fait accompli* for him. Ségur was thus one of the first French diplomats to create a solid ideological foundation for the future military and political alliance between Russia and France, which eventually resulted in *Entente cordiale*. Ségur, in many respects, represents the threshold of the nineteenth century, both in his romantic image of the exotic Russian South, namely that of the Crimean Peninsula, where he accompanied Catherine the Great during her victorious inspection of the newly conquered territories, and his vision of Russia as the major strategic partner of France in continental affairs. But this is another vast subject, which goes beyond the scope of the present article.

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