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The Roots of Chaadaev's Philosophical Thought

In Russian thought the opposition between culture – civilization is quite frequently identified with the opposition Russia – the West, in which the West is associated with the term civilization, a subject of sharp criticism by the Slavophiles.

The Slavophile movement flourished for three decades – from the 1840s to the 1860s. The Slavophiles were convinced that Russia's strength was in her indigenous cultural roots and in her adherence to tradition. They idealised her autocratic form of government, Orthodox religion, and the patriarchal organisation of her peasant society. The Slavophiles set Russian religiousness against Western rationalism and attacked Western Europe for its materialism, and parliamentary democracy. They saw the self-governing body of the Russian peasants, the village commune, as an example of true democracy. Anti-rationalists and romantic idealists, they believed that Russia's religion and culture were better because they were infused with true spirituality and deep feeling, while materialism dominated all phases of life in the West. They were not opposed to but rather supported the introduction of Western technology. In the 1860s the Slavophile group fell apart. The liberation of the serfs and other reforms of this decade, however, brought a partial fulfillment of their demands.

The Westernizers, on the other hand, lamented the country's backwardness and isolation and wanted it to catch up with Europe as fast as possible: the reactionary government first of all wanted Western efficiency,

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liberals looked to the political freedom of England and France, and radicals found inspiration in anarchism. They believed that Russia must adopt not only European technology, but also Western culture and progressive forms of government and social organisation developed by Western political thought. The Westernizers (V. Belinsky, T. Granovsky, A. Herzen, K. Kavelin, V. Botkin and others) shared the will to import ideas to overcome the menace of the “lost” past centuries. They postulated the abolition of serfdom, establishing a constitutional monarchy, and, in the future, a parliamentary republic, securing civil liberties. They also demanded social changes: the abolition of the peasant commune and legally sanctioned class inequalities. Unfortunately for them, the Westernizers could not express their ideas openly under the reactionary regime of Nicholas I, and the complete formulation of the Westernism came only with Alexander Herzen’s emigration to the West in 1847. In London he founded a weekly *Kolokol* (*The Bell*) in 1857. Herzen’s later views, however, represent a synthesis of the Slavophile and Western ideas in the form of agrarian socialism.

One of the central issues in the arguments between the Westernizers and Slavophiles was the role of the 18th century reforming tsar, Peter the Great (1672–1725). It should be underlined that from the time of Peter the Great, Russian leaders made serious efforts to shape the Russian state in a European way.¹ There was a deep historical and cultural gulf between Russia and the West so it would be detrimental for Russia to blindly imitate the West. The Westernizers approved of Peter’s reforms which put Russia on the path of assimilating the ideals of Western Europe. Unlike the Westernizers, the Slavophiles indicated that Peter’s reforms gave rise to the division of Russian society into those who remained faithful to patriarchal traditions and religious orthodoxy, and the enlightened cosmopolitan elite.² The denunciation of the West was primarily a critique of present-day European society in all its materialist degeneration. The

¹ See K. Chojnacka, *Osoba i dzieło Piotra Wielkiego w dziewiętnastowiecznych sporach doktrynalnych o miejsce i przyszłość Rosji w Europie*, Kraków 1998.

² R. Freeborn, *Turgenev: The Novelist’s Novelist. A Study*, Oxford 1960, p. 5–6.

common roots of Russia and Europe in Greek culture were stressed, and often Russia was accorded a messianic role as “savior” of Europe. In fact, messianism is the one of the most prominent features of Russian mentality, the attitude which constitutes the core of their identity. The identification of Moscow and Rome is one of the seminal ideas of Russian historiosophy and in order to propound it, the term “the Third Rome” was coined. This idea emerged as early as the beginning of the 16th century. After the fall of Constantinople, “the Second Rome,” in 1453, it was Russia which was predestined by God to take over the heritage of Byzantium, defend Christianity and assume the leading role in building the Heavenly Kingdom on earth. The idea was abandoned at the time of Peter the Great onwards, but was resuscitated in the 19th century, yet in a modified version. Now the state and the tsardom as the vehicles of the holy mission were displaced by the Russian nation.³

Neither the Slavophiles nor the Westernizers escaped the influence of the messianic mentality. It is traditional to consider Peter Chaadaev (1793–1856) erudite, but, as he maintained contact with both groups throughout his life and favoured the historical influence of the Roman Church, which was not shared by either the Slavophiles or Westernizers, he does not fit closely into the Slavophile-Westerniser dichotomy. Chaadaev perceived Christianity as the source of universal historical development and the Western Church as the embodiment of human unity. He believed that the reason acts through the church which role is to guide humanity to the Kingdom of God. In his first Euro-centric conception of the philosophy of history, Chaadaev clarified the question of Russia's position in the story of the development of civilization. The ideal was best reflected, according to the thinker, by medieval Christian Europe. Chaadaev's Westernism represented a specific type of conservatism in its accusation that Russian society lacked tradition and grounding in the contemporary history identified with the history of Europe. According to Chaadaev, Russian culture is characterised by discontinuity;

³ *The Russian Mentality. Lexicon*, ed. A. de Lazari, transl. W. Liwarowski and R. Wawro, Katowice 1995, p. 61–62.

new ideas appear unexpectedly, lacking grounds and roots in the efforts of earlier generations. It was found completely unsatisfactory by the Westernizers of the 1840s, who followed the liberal and the rationalist tradition of the 18th century. When, in 1839, the Slavophiles adopted Chaadaev's conservative hierarchy of values, rejecting his pessimistic view of Russia's future, the Westernizers associated with Belinsky criticised it openly. But soon nationalist reactions to the admiration of the West set in. The Slavophiles praised the uniqueness of the Russian national spirit and called Russia a world of its own. They argued that all negative aspects described by Chaadaev are predominantly the outcome of Peter's reforms aiming at modernisation and in this context they interpreted the appearance of the superfluous man whose duality, caused by self-reflection, manifests itself as the dichotomy of reason and heart, of thinking and doing.⁴ Nevertheless, although the Slavophiles were far from endorsing Chaadaev's pessimistic diagnosis of Russia, they could not ignore the ramifications nor escape the framework he established for the Russians' debates on their self-identity. They adopted Chaadaev's religious conception of history and took up his diagnosis of Russia's unique path, but they gave his ideas a messianic twist and emphasised Russia's future significance for civilization. They dismissed the contemporary political reality in Russia as corrupt and destructive, alienating the people from the elite. The Slavophiles treated Russia's Byzantine heritage as a blessing not a curse. For them, Russia's distinct historical development was a source of pride. The original concept of man and nation who cherish God in their heart, with its roots in the patristic epoch and in the perennial relation between God and man and between God and the nation, found its expression in the Slavophilism and philosophical enquiries.

Chaadaev had made a study of European, and especially ecclesiastical history, and in his *Philosophical Letters* was to prove the most interesting Russian thinker up to 1840. His eight *Philosophical Letters*, written from 1828–1831, from which only the first is devoted to Russia, are deeply

⁴ See A. Walicki, *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii. Struktura i przemiany rosyjskiego słowianofilstwa*, Warszawa 2002, p. 259.

rooted in the European intellectual tradition and contemporary thought. Chaadaev, who read Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Schelling, was mainly influenced by the French Catholic philosophers: Joseph de Maistre, Louis Gabriel Ambroise de Bonald, Pierre-Simon Ballanche, François-René de Chateaubriand, and Jean-Marie Lamennais. In his letter to Schelling, written in 1832, Chaadaev praised Schelling for his great idea of reconciliation of religion and philosophy.⁵ In his letters, Chaadaev's thought does not escape the indictment which he himself levelled against the best thinkers Russia had had so far produced: they lack certain logic and their ideas are paralysed by incoherence. The Russian thinker in his famous 1829 *Philosophical Letter*, in punishment for writing which the author was declared insane by the Tsar,⁶ proclaims that Russia has no past, no framework of intellectual habits or traditional values: she has come onto the stage of history like an illegitimate child – without inheritance or bonds of former times and generations; her social groupings are rootless and unstable; and her individuals are still in the chaotic fermentation of a primeval moral world. In the letter Chaadaev writes that Russia has never known the basic Western moral ideas “of duty, justice, law, and order.”

[We] have never advanced along with other people; we are not related to any of the great human families; we belong neither to the West nor to the East, and we possess the traditions of neither. [...] [I]solated by a strange destiny from the universal development of humanity, we have absorbed nothing, not even traditional ideas of mankind. [...] What is habit and instinct in other people must be forced into our heads with hammer blows. [...] Our memories do not go back beyond yesterday; we are, in a manner of speaking, strangers to our own selves. [...] [W]hat renders us so indifferent to the hazards of life also renders us equally indifferent to good and evil, to truth and falsehood. [...] Even in our expressions I find that there is something

⁵ The Letter of P. Chaadaev to F. W. J. von Schelling from 1832 (P. Chaadaev, *Fragments and Diverse Thoughts*, in: *Philosophical Works of Peter Chaadaev*, ed. R. McNally and R. Tempest, Dordrecht 1991, p. 153–154). The letter written by Chaadaev in 1832 was actually sent in April 1833.

⁶ W. Lednicki, *Russia, Poland and the West*, New York 1954, p. 33–39.

strangely vague, cold, uncertain, resembling somewhat the features of people placed at the lowest rung of the social ladder.⁷

In his *Philosophical Letters* Chaadaev was the first to raise the issue of the superfluous man and come up with a diagnosis of this phenomenon. The superfluous man, estranged, fragmentary, unstable in his convictions and modes of conduct, directs his life to no particular purpose. Chaadaev relates the emergence of the superfluous man to a larger historical framework and makes him a perfect embodiment of purposelessness experienced by Russians. According to the thinker, individual superfluity is a corollary of Russia being marginalised and estranged from the patterns of development typical of Western civilization. Since Russia is a country without a historical background, deprived of any sense of historical duration, Russians, who have no traditions to fall back on, are plagued by boredom, emptiness and the sense of aimlessness.

During the seven years which passed from the composition of his first *Philosophical Letter* in 1829, and its publication in the Russian magazine “Telescope” in 1836, Chaadaev’s thought underwent some changes. The 1830 July Revolution in France, the volcanic eruption of the “French dirt”⁸ undermined Chaadaev’s faith in Europe, and although he did not change his view on the Russian history, he became more optimistic about the future of his country. A. Walicki claims that the revolutionary movements in Europe contributed to the change in Chaadaev’s perception of Russia, and he began to value his homeland much more.⁹ In a letter to count Adolf de Circout of 15 January 1845, Chaadaev complained about the invasion of Western ideas which paralysed Russia’s power, falsified all beautiful pursuits, and degenerated all virtues.¹⁰ According to the thinker,

⁷ P. Chaadaev, *The Philosophical Letters Addressed to a Lady*, in: *Philosophical Works of Peter Chaadaev*, op. cit., p. 21–24.

⁸ See the letter of P. Chaadaev to A. Turgenev from September 1835 (P. Chaadaev, *Fragments and Diverse Thoughts*, op. cit., p. 159).

⁹ A. Walicki, *W kreggu konserwatywnej utopii*, op. cit., p. 86.

¹⁰ See The letter of P. Chaadaev to Count Adolf de Circout of 15 January 1845 (P. Chaadaev, *Fragments and Diverse Thoughts*, op. cit., p. 195).

Russia had to search for her past and restore it. Chaadaev is convinced that in a couple of years the results of Russia's "backward progress" will be clearly visible and admired.¹¹

To diffuse the tense atmosphere caused by the publication of his first philosophical letter, Chaadaev wrote *The Apology of a Madman* (1837). In the work, which was not published in his lifetime, Chaadaev expresses his affirmation of the great mission of Russia. Nevertheless, although Chaadaev did not notice any spectacular greatness in Russian history, or strength of the Russian people in the past, he became an advocate of the country's great future. According to the thinker, Russia as a country, not overburdened by her past, could take advantage from the European glorious history and, what is more, by avoiding its mistakes, Russia could create a better future not only for her inhabitants, but also for the whole European community. He was sure that Russia's hidden potential forces would be able to disclose and discover themselves in the future and help her to take the highest place in the spiritual life of Europe. Chaadaev wrote:

I think that if we have come after the others, it is in order to do better than the others [...]. To reduce us to repeating the long series of follies and calamities which nations less favored than ours had to undergo would be, in my opinion, a strange misunderstanding of the role which has been allotted to us. [...] There is more: I have the inner conviction that we are called upon to resolve most of the problems in the social order, to accomplish most of the ideas which arose in the old societies, to make a pronouncement about those very grave questions which preoccupy humanity.¹²

Chaadaev, who believed in the mystical mission of Russia, in the second part of his life also acknowledged the greatness of Orthodoxy. According to the thinker:

¹¹ See The letter of P. Chaadaev to Count Adolf de Circout of 15 January 1845 (P. Chaadaev, *Fragments and Diverse Thoughts*, op. cit., p. 195).

¹² P. Chaadaev, *The Apologia of a Madman*, in: *Philosophical Works of Peter Chaadaev*, op. cit., p. 108–109.

Love of the fatherland is certainly a very beautiful thing, but there is one thing better than that, it is the love of truth. Love of fatherland makes heroes, love of truth makes wise men, the benefactors of humanity, it is love of fatherland which divides peoples, which feeds national hatreds, which sometimes covers the earth with mourning; it is love of truth which spreads light, which creates the joys of spirit, which brings men close to Divinity.¹³

When we look at the social injustices that are commonplace, it becomes obvious that there are too few real patriots. Love of one's country is not blind trust in anything our leaders say or do. Patriotism means loyalty, but not fanaticism. It is greater than one nation. Real patriotism runs deeper than nationalism, which is not an inherent part of patriotism. Disguised as patriotism, it is an evil which has its roots in tyranny, racism and xenophobia. The true patriot is a lover of life, a lover of humanity. According to Chaadaev, it is not through one's native land, but through the truth that the way to heaven leads.

Russians often distinguish between "internal" truth and "external" truth. Internal truth is the truth contained in the human soul, the truth of conscience, the truth of faith, and moral truth. External truth is the truth of reason. Russia is seemingly directed most of all by internal truth – the truth of faith. The West, on the other hand, is directed by external truth, i.e. rationalism, which was inherited along with the Roman culture; hence the Russian division between internal and external law.

The Russian word *Pravda* (which is derived from *pravъ*, *pravyi* means – straightforward, proper, correct, innocent) is a human relative, and can be questioned, undermined and even falsified. It is an indispensable attribute of human acts and behaviour. The aspiration to live in truth is man's primary duty. Unlike the hidden *istina*, *pravda* is considered to be more overt and open. It is an attribute fought with and fought for, what is more, malice may attack, conceal, obscure, hide and even forbid it. Nevertheless, truth is indestructible; it rises up to the surface, it is hoarded, and comes into the open. It wins and condemns its persecutors to

¹³ P. Chaadaev, *The Apologia of a Madman*, op. cit., p. 102.

remorse and oblivion. Unlike “the amoral *istina*, *pravda* remains an ethical ideal and, as it is right and just, a sign of frank feelings, clear conscience and open soul, as well as the opposition of wrong.”¹⁴ Unlike *istina*, *pravda* is not self-contained, it can often be relative and therefore it is always somebody's truth or the truth about somebody. True facts are often kept secret as a result of human dishonesty. When revealed, they serve people as an exemplary lesson and a safeguard for the future.

As far as religion is concerned, there is actually no truth (although *pravda* is a necessary condition of the human earthly aspiration for *istina*), there is only *istina* which exists in another dimension and which abolishes all other alternatives and gives a harmonious unity to all. *Istina* cannot be experienced intellectually, but through the gift of illumination. That is why it can be contemplated and experienced as Grace (goodness, beauty), and it is expressed in the language of symbols, as is the case with the Holy Scriptures, which accounts for the impossibility of translating sacral Old Church Slavonic into everyday Russian.

Chaadaev, a true patriot, complains that Russians have always been too little concerned with what is true and what is not, they lack good examples, and there are not many Russians who are in love with truth. He explains:

I have not learned to love my fatherland with my eyes closed, forehead bowed, mouth closed. I find that one can be useful to one's country only on the condition that one sees things clearly; I believe that the times of blind loves are over, that fanaticisms of any kind are no longer in season: I love my country in the way that Peter the Great taught me to love it. I do not possess, I admit, this sanctimonious patriotism, this lazy patriotism which manages to see everything as beautiful, which slumbers upon its illusions, and which has unfortunately afflicted many of our good minds today.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Идеи в России. Ideas in Russia. Idee w Rosji. Leksykon rosyjsko-polsko-angielski*, red. A. de Lazari, vol. 4, Łódź 2001, p. 439.

¹⁵ P. Chaadaev, *The Apologia of a Madman*, op. cit., p. 108.

In other words,

The Russian Land (Russia as a country), the Motherland, the Bread-giver, the Defender and Saviour. [...] [G]ives life to man, feeds him, protects and takes him into her womb when life's path comes to an end.¹⁶

Pagan mythology, Christianity and ordinary contemporary consciousness has always endowed the earth not only with empirical, natural traits, but also supernatural ones. For a Russian the soil is the source of the will and physical health, hence the Russian's relations to the earth are slightly different from those of other nations. One of the reasons for this is that in the pre-Christian epoch the earth was treated as a divine being. While during the Christian period in folklore, for example, in the "spiritual verses" (*духовые стихи*) the earth is depicted as a living organism.¹⁷ The archaic notion of the link between the earth and man's morals is still present in Russian mentality. The earth is all seeing, and as a mother she is inclined to forgive sins, but as a severe judge, for the good of man, she does not forgive certain deadly sins.

During his lifetime, Chaadaev's philosophical ideologies and views were constantly evolving and underwent many changes. His philosophy made an impact on both the Westernizers and Slavophiles. Chaadaev, a true patriot and cosmopolitan, believed that historical continuity based on solid Christian foundations was the key to Russia's glorious future.

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¹⁶ *Идеи в России. Ideas in Russia. Idee w Rosji*, op. cit., p. 189.

¹⁷ For example, in P. Florensky's *The Pillar and Confirmation of Truth* the end's nearness is mournfully foretold.

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