

# ‘LETTERS FROM RUSSIA. RUSSIA IN 1839’ (MARQUIS DE CUSTINE). A POSTMODERNIST ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** *How does a despotic state function? Which is the relationship between the sovereignty's power and the individual? How do the individual's desires integrate in a despotic society's social body? What is the role of violence within the state or the civil society? To what extent does a social fact become a cultural fact? Are all of these facts connected to the tsarist empire's XIX century expansion? These are the questions upon which the current analysis was based.*

**Key words:** *authority, despotic power, violence, social field, desire.*

## 1. Justification

Did any member of the scientific or literary world know this Custine before his ‘Letters’, which are considered to be ‘the most intelligent book on Russia ever to have been written by a foreigner’ (Pierre Nora), were edited by the ‘Humanitas’ publishing house? [1]. This is the origin of the present undertaking's novelty, in the meaning Foucault gives it: ‘novelty lies not in what is being said, but in the event of its reoccurrence’ [2].

What would be essentially the major significance of Custine's ‘Letters’? We could assert that Custine's relevance consists in bringing the role of government in the Russian social organization and the relationship between government and individual into prominence.

## 2. Analysis schemes

Custine's work hypothesis: ‘I ask myself whether it is the nation's character which gave birth to autocracy, or whether it is the autocracy which gave birth to the Russian character’, and Custine arrives at the conclusion: ‘it seems to me the influence is mutual: the Russian government could not have evolved in a place other than Russia, and the Russians couldn't have become what they are under a different form of government’ [1]. Despotism and the desire for despotic government are on the same level. What is the origin of this desire? ‘Why are there people who endure exploitation, meekness, and slavery for centuries and arriving at a point where they desire them not only for others, but also for themselves?’ [3], Deleuze and Guattari ask themselves. We are facing a ‘coextension between the social field and desire’ (Deleuze-Guattari). How does this

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'coextension' appear within despotic government?

The Russian society's organisation, Custine points out, is military in its nature and it means that 'the discipline of the military camp replaces the fortress' order, the state of siege becoming society's normal state' [1]. Within this organisation the sovereign power has no limits be it in space or time. This power of sovereignty rests on two pillars, the direct filiation and the new alliance (concepts used by Deleuze and Guattari), and it is the generator of a certain type of 'socius'. While the relation between direct filiation with divinity doesn't pose any interest here we can assert that the construction of new alliances is produced by destroying all lateral alliances by rejudging any right ever to have been granted making every person unsure regarding its position. In other words, in your relation with the tzar there is nothing to protect you. The despot's paranoia, as 'social formation investment type' specifically relies in 'this capacity to protect, this force to start off from zero, to objectify a complete transformation' [3]. Custine has the intuition of the strong bond between the uprising of the tzarist empire under Peter I and the construction of Petersburg in a naturally harsh region. The Russian personality is formed within this frame of the military society [4].

Let us remark that the tzar's every gesture has a value of truth and is part of discourse. We are thus facing a performative discourse since the discourse is associated with a practice, an exercise of power. Factually, authoritarianism is based on this unity between an enouncement and a practice. Hence the importance of nonverbal behaviour within the relationship structure of sovereignty's power sphere. A certain regard can allow life or, on the contrary, affect it, and 'a person is buried as soon as she has fallen

in disgrace' [5]. Despite this limitless force, the tzar feels his power constantly threatened by any minor thing which would oppose him, ergo his violent reaction which contributes toward assuring the supplement of violence. Facing insecurity, generating insecurity, these are the sources of the sovereign power, despotic in its nature. Any army is confronting an enemy and he is invented. One of the enemies is the stranger: 'any stranger is treated as guilty upon arriving at the Russian border'

Despotic power can't work without controlling the economic mechanism and suppressing any other competing powers. The Russian serf is tied to his land, sold along with it. Land is sold with great difficulty, ergo it is excluded from commercial circuits. Custine observes that the peasants can choose the landlord who is to buy them by lending him money given he is a mild person. An interesting social fact, the serf buying his serf condition, spending money in order to sustain serfdom. However, the best situation for a serf is to be bought by the tzar. Consequently the serfs' authentic desire is not to be free but to remain in serfage and for this they offer money, sustaining the despotic government. Given the fact that land can't be sold, the bankrupting noble borrows from the imperial bank and the tzar turns into the entire Russian nobility's creditor. In the words of Deleuze-Guattari: 'on the horizon of despotism there is always a monotheism taking shape: duty becomes existential duty, duty of the obedient's very existence' [3]. In short, the problem is not that the serfs or the landlords can't free themselves from a mechanism of servitude, it is that they strive for this mechanism, supporting 'the new alliance'. We are thus facing a desiring machine, desire which is part of social and economic production. The tzar represents the only 'surface for registering

the entire process of desire production' (Deleuze-Guattari) by means of money and the right to grant or cancel nobiliary titles, to punish or reward, for an indefinite duration hence his limitless power, on which the entire Russian society depends.

Despotic power is based on three types of expenses, maintenance, surveillance and representation. These representational expenses are caused by the monumentality of architecture. Petersburg is the most consistent example of 'squandering' in the meaning defined by Bataille [6], acting as national symbol. Custine argues that 'Russia is a country where the greatest of things are to be accomplished in order to achieve the smallest of results'. Wherefrom his conclusion 'I'm not saying that their political system produces nothing good; I'm just saying that everything it produces is expensive' [1]. This 'squandering' is related to national pride and the inheritance left for future generations. High expenses related to representation and control are sustained, internally, by general permanent indebtedment, externally, by territorialisation and conquering new space.

It has to be said that despotism tries to cancel any other competing position. Custine claims that 'Russian politics have managed to merge church and state, heaven and earth' [1]. By being strictly subordinated to the czar, The Russian Church becomes a slave, and as a slave it 'only perpetuates slavery'. In Russian churches preaching never takes place since 'the Gospel would reveal freedom to the slaves'. This reality leads Custine to his consideration that the role of the Russian Church is that of social disorder prevention. Russian despotism transforms religious power in a subordinate one, of disciplinary nature, whose constantly postponed project is the production of citizen rather than humans. Custine's prophecy is that when inside the religious

institution the disciplinary role pertaining to the church will be contested, Russia will be facing of a social revolution.

Authoritarianism generates a high power distance (Hofstede) and leads to a simulating behaviour from the czar as well as from the individual. The czar has many masks but no face, Custine argues. The simulation up-top is confronted with the simulation down-below. This leads to the second type of symmetry, between the government and the Russian's duplicitous personality which is his sole means of survival. 'The Russians are still convinced of the efficiency of lying', Custine affirms, because, in creating social equilibrium, the noblemen's dishonour can't be confronted by anything but slyness. This translates in a reality where both the person exploiting as well as the one being exploited have no desire to be faced with truth. To lie means to flatter. The despot has to pretend he's duping his people, and the Russian makes a proof of intelligence by seeing through; he arrives at a point where he considers everything to be deception, even if reality is hard to bear. In the words of Custine: 'humanity accepts its being despised, utterly derided, but will under no circumstances accept its being told that it is despised and derided. Offended by facts, it escapes in the realm of words' [1].

The common Russian's simulation is facing not only power, but also the foreigner. If the simulation toward power manifests itself through submission, the one toward the foreigner manifests itself through dignity, a kind of patriotic love. This is the source of Custine's surprise when he discovers that servility is associated with arrogance. Consequently, the protest against power has a chance of being perceived as an undermining of the state's authority, wherefrom the assertion that 'all true patriots approve, without any restraint, of the Russian-invented political convict prison' [1]. For Custine this type of

patriotism is a form of 'lèse-humanité' and expresses the profound cultural differences which separate the West from Russia, differences which are neglected in certain historical situations, for instance during Second World War when Nazi-Germany decided on attacking the Soviet Union believing that the socially and politically oppressed population will use the opportunity to rise against the Stalinist regime.

This militarized society is characterised by violence. Russia seems to have been born and built on this matrix of violence, starting from the violence inflicted by the khans upon the Russian kniaz. It continues as the violence of upheaval from beneath the khans' authority, and turns into a fundamental social fact. This violence acts on multiple levels. The violence of the czar related to his close ones, the violence of clerks related to citizen. We are confronted with the logics of a natural right, specifically the legitimacy of using any possible means if the purpose is justified [7]. What justifies the purpose? The relation with the state. A paradoxical fact since one expects that anything concerning the state would enter the jurisdiction of positive right. At the same time Custine observes the way in which even certain interpersonal relationships are marked by violence. In this case, the beating is regulated: 'In Russia you can't get beaten without you belonging to a specific class and the person beating you belonging to a specific class' [1]. To be in the situation to beat represents a socially regulated marker. Hence the 'irrational' element, violence incorporated both in statal organization and social organization. Positive law is not totally assumed, natural law is not abandoned but strengthened with the aid of the state.

There is also considered the question of spatial extension and its influence on social organization. We shall only be referring to

the czar's way of exerting his will. In order for a decision to produce consequences the administrative apparatus has to be reduced and easy to control. A reduced apparatus has no chances to develop a strong and autonomous 'organisational culture'. The absence of the state of 'juridical person' and the fact that the bureaucratic apparatus is reduced allow the personal will and the violence this will disposes of to regulate social relationships. Moreover, the social texture is strongly shaken by the lack of interpersonal trust. In Russia friendship can't exist since here 'things are happening as if friendship is connected to the police', and 'politeness here turns into a means of surveillance'. Two consequences would deserve to be described. The first, the inexistence of what Tocqueville identifies in his American experience: 'civil society'. A second consequence, the Russian's characteristic sadness, the consciousness of the fact that his existence hangs on a wire and of his life's lack of value. Life belongs to the sovereign. At the opposite end we find the occidental pattern, characterized by an individual with a juridical status being the product of a complex disciplinary system [8]. One final aspect to be considered is that of the context in which the letters have been written. It seems that Custine represents the prototypal thinker that Foucault envisions when he says that philosophy is a form of radical journalism. Custine is permanently afraid for his life during his Russian visit, because of the facts he is writing down. He observes that at the scale of government a set of information is to be found, totally different from the information existing at the scale of daily life and the latter can no longer make out the difference between real and induced, leading to a permanent lack of security. The Russian climate doesn't permit free expression thus making truth as difficult as it is revolutionary: 'to lie, here, means to protect society, to say

the truth means to shake the state in its foundations' [1]. In short, Custine identifies the country as being unstable and prone to ultimately explode.

### 3. Significances

The analysis of Custine's book shines light upon certain themes. One of these are historical aspects, specifically the comprehension of Stalinism, its relationship with tradition, on the one hand, the modernization and bureaucratization of the Russian (Soviet) society on the other. A second historical aspect which is to be considered is related to the sacrifice of the Russian people during the Second World War, sacrifice which cannot be comprehended without an understanding of what would be called 'the Russian spirit'. Finally, a third historical aspect, regards diplomacy, one of the fundamental and traditional pillars upon which Russian power rests and which is based on the Russians capacity to take advantage of an dissymmetry in information. Custine observes it in 1839: 'instead of carefully concealing our weaknesses, we passionately reveal them every morning, whereas their Byzantine politics, lurking in the shade, carefully masks what they are thinking, what is being done and what should be feared.' [1].

Still there are also other benefits to be gained from analyzing the 'Letters'. One of them being the Letters' didactic character. By reading them you can make an exercise of teaching sociology, related to how a despotic society works. Custine is tormented by a moral and political problem which is still valid today, 'it is the share of merit or responsibility which every individual holds for his own actions and the share of the society he was born in' [1], the old problem of determinism - freedom and the fact that manners are the slow

product of the mutual action of law on habit on one another and not the ones which can instantly be changed [1].

While reading the 'Letters' one is constantly faced with the temptation to permanently confront the author's prophecies with the subsequent historical development. The fact that this society exploded wouldn't have surprised Custine as much as the fact that it managed to survive for so long. Russia's hegemonic role in international relations during the 20th century wouldn't have surprised Custine since he states: 'strive to conquer with your weapons the countries which are useful to you and starting from there oppress the rest of the world through terror'!. Consequently, when reading Custine you can only be bewildered by history's validation of some of his prophecies, hence the question: what are the terms and conditions a prophecy has to satisfy in order to prove its validity?

In short, Custine's construction consists of multiple analyses regarding the relationships between the Russian's personality, despotic government seen as political and economic administration and the policy of territorial expansion - the means of the government's survival. It deserves to be analyzed as an exercise of sociological application in itself, but also in comparison with Tocqueville's wider known 'Democracy in America'.

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