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St. Petersburg as Res Publica: Common Things and Common Weal.

Writing in the late 1840s, a Prussian visitor to St. Petersburg Eduard Jerrmann gave an account of life in the city that required his English translators to supply the book with a special introduction (1852). Given usual unfavourable foreigners' descriptions of life under the tsars, with Marquis de Custine being most famous among numerous works of this type, it was rather surprising to find positive evaluations in the book by a German – and it led the English translators to posit a question of whether direct largesse of the tsar had influenced the exposition of Jermann. For example, one of the most surprising features of life in St. Petersburg in the 1840s, as Jermann wrote, was a widely shared liberty to discuss politics during social occasions like dinners or salon visits and different other freedoms enjoyed in private life. Of course, previous accounts on the autocratic nature of tsar's rule were right in that none of this discussions led to a public debate either on the pages of journals or within governmental institutions, but a certain freedom was there nevertheless – a freedom to talk about politics and enjoy rich cultural life in private that Jermann found so enticing. However, reading these lines today, one is bound to follow the scepticism of the English editors of the German author: because the extent to which this contradicts our usual perception of life under Nicholas I, the "gendarme of Europe", is far too great.

But Jermann was never alone. If we forget about all the usual apologetics for Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality and the pocket pens that were well paid to laud this official triad, we still find many intelligent people who would like to point out the existence of certain liberties in Russia at that time. St. Petersburg as the city is the best bet of the authors supporting this unpopular thesis, and I will rely now on George Fedotov as an obvious example.

In a short essay written in 1945 in New York, and reflecting on the prospects of freedom in post-war Russia, this famous émigré thinker stressed the component of freedom in St. Petersburg life that outside observers tended to overlook. Western Enlightenment has brought to St. Petersburg some yearning for political freedom and a surprising freedom in private, what Fedotov calls *fakticheskoe raskreposchenie byta,* the effective liberalisation or de-enserfment of everyday life. The development of political freedom – a story familiar to many a reader of Russian history – failed: the 1730 attempt at putting the monarchy into a constitutional framework and the Decembrists are obvious examples. But freedom in everyday life did not. "Usually we do not sufficiently value

this freedom in everyday life that Russian society had enjoyed already since Peter the Great and which allowed it for a long time to ignore the absence of political freedom. The tsar Peter was still putting his enemies on the stake, Biron's executioners were still subjecting to strappado torture everybody who was suspected in anti-German feelings, but in the palace, at tsar's festive dinners and assemblies, a new courteous way of behaviour was asserting itself, almost equalizing the yesterday serf and his master." (2: 290) It is surprising to notice that having the most wide divine-sanctioned powers to persecute each of the subjects of his rule at his own whim, the tsar rarely used this power. Not only was he looking at his civilized German cousins, but also the Russian aristocracy gradually made him accept the proposition that he is the first among aristocrats, and hence the primary example of civility, secular virtues and fine manners.

The Russian aristocrats serving the tsar, wrote Fedotov, were the very agents of power who imposed and maintained this rule of civility. According to an unwritten law, an aristocrat could be exiled or executed, but his body or dignity could not be assaulted. Personal honour coupled with the liberation of aristocrats from compulsory state service under Catherine the Great freed them for liberal professions and world of learning, and founded the future Russian intelligentsia. This initial layer of the educated was later accepting people from all ranks, and education became a means to enter the aristocratic estate. "Graduation from a secondary… school transformed a human being from a *moujik* into a lord (*barin*), that is, into a free person, defended his personal rights to an extent from arbitrary power, and guaranteed polite procedure in a police precinct, in a prison. The gendarme was saluting the student, whom he could beat only on special occasions – during rebellions. This everyday freedom was, of course, a privilege, as it was everywhere in the early days of liberty. This was just an island of St. Petersburg in the Muscovite sea. But this island was consistently growing, in particular after the liberation of serfs." (2: 291)

Now, one may legitimately doubt the panegyric aspects of this description of meritocratic entrance to the worlds of civility and learning that somehow liberated the former serfs, or put them on the par with masters. Equality of rights and dignity in court festivities and democracy of street life are not linked directly to broad changes in the rights of estates – otherwise social revolutions would be unnecessary. But one could hardly doubt the certain democratic qualities of street life on Nevsky prospect, in the theatre, or in a St. Petersburg café: there a former master and servant mixed, intermingled and brushed sides, ruled by common laws of polite comportment and civilized behaviour.

Beaudelaire's flaneur could easily find himself at home on Nevsky, rather than on just a Paris boulevard. Hence the thesis of the book by Marshall Berman, which misinterpreted the city in all other ways but this one: Walter Benjamin's analysis was applicable to a city where conflicts between classes are reflected in personal encounters of protagonists in fleeting meetings on Nevsky. We find these scenes in Gogol, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and so on. Hence also the distinction between everyday life in St. Petersburg and Moscow, famously outlined in a series of sketches on the "physiology" of the northern capital. As Belinsky wrote in this collection from the 1840s, in Moscow life was pervaded by a stifling tyranny of family arrangements and connections, hierarchies and incessant tea drinking. In St. Petersburg the most miserable apprentice in a fashion shop longed for a minute to abandon her chores and run for a cup of coffee in the closest café.

Fedotov's thesis may of course be criticized as largely influenced by his personal experience. A distinction between political and social freedom that he outlines in his 1945 essay might have been a common place among West European émigrés who had been arriving in America after 1939. Fedotov moved to New York from France in 1941, but he could have shared the feelings that Hannah Arendt - who moved to the US not long before him – aired in a letter to Karl Jaspers. She found an amazing political freedom against the background of a surprising social unfreedom. For a European of her background, it was an inspiring and elevating experience to see her New England lady, with whom she first stayed and learned English, write letters to her senator or participate in local township meetings. This surely was what the Germans lacked and what could have forestalled the advent of fascism, in her opinion. But this political freedom was coupled with a ferocious insistence of the New England lady on explaining the right mores to an émigré and enforcing them, since she did not have obvious basic social skills necessary for life in a different culture. Fedotov, as I said, might have seen the same, given his constant laments that his Russianness was not properly heeded, and his consistent effort to explain in English the depths of Russian heart and the beauty of Russian life to his American audiences. Political freedom was accompanied by a social unfreedom, a situation opposite to the one in tsarist Russia that he described in so much detail. The prospects of liberty depended on furthering both.

However, looking at an earlier period of his work, one finds a different type of lauding St. Petersburg's freedom, not yet dependent on his American experience. Writing in 1926 for an émigré journal in France, Fedotov first articulated the contrast between Moscow and Petersburg as

part of reflections on three historical Russian capitals (Kiev included). Only recent post-revolutionary years, suggested Fedotov, “have revealed with particular clarity in the city of Peter the Great the city of Alexander Nevsky, the prince of Novgorod.” (1: 55) In the hungry years after 1917, looking for such mundane things as potatoes, Petersburgers went to their most immediate province – what they never did before – and discovered that chapels of Northern Russia and its religious freedom was next to them. Of course, this renascent feeling of proximity to the medieval civilization of Novgorod became possible because of the radical deterioration of transportation during and after the Civil War: Moscow was now at the end of the world, Ukraine – in the nether land, and only Ladoga, Pskov, Belozersk, Vologda and Novgorod itself were proximate. But there is another, non-geographical proximity that was revealed by the experience of 1917-25: “Rich and complicated is Novgorod the Great. Even now we cannot understand how it could combine its rebellious public assembly (*veche*) with monastic quest, a Russian icon and Hanseatic commerce… But in the heritage of Great Novgorod bestowed upon St. Petersburg there is something that cannot be understood by anybody else except for the city of Saint Peter. First – Alexander’s testament – never to ruin the fruits of the victory on the Neva, to defend… the Neva shores. Second – to preserve the sanctuaries of Northern Russia, the most pure and elevated entity in the Russian past. Third – to listen to the voices coming from across the sea, not losing sight of Hanseatic beacons. The West, that once saved us and that afterwards almost corrupted us, should enter with its just share into the creation of national culture… And even if all the country has this vocation, here, in Petersburg, is heard this historical calling…” (1: 55)

Future exposition:

Fedotov on two types of liberties (*Rozhdenie svobody*, 1944): liberties of spirit and liberties of the body (e.g. *habeas corpus*). Novgorod as representative of the first one – treasures of inner spiritual development and ecclesiastical democracy.

Novgorod, 1136-1471: elections of bishops by the laity, the role of canon law in republican government, personal liberties and tyranny of the majority, political liberty under twin threats of democratic despotism and oligarchic rule. Buslaev and Sadko: nihilistic personal self-assertion and free creativity – as two sides of Novgorod’s paradox.

What was common in Novgorod, apart from well-described institutions? The perspective of the sociology of things rather than sociology of

humans: crosses, churches and bridges. The bridge as a central background element for the gathering of a public assembly, ostracization of the outcasts, trade, certain religious rites. Heidegger on bridges in "Question Concerning Technology" and "The Thing".

Gathering of four elements as characteristic of the phenomenon of the thing, understood as an assemblage, as *ding* of the early Scandinavians and Germans, i.e. a public assembly. Parallels in Russian: *vesch'* and *veche*. Novgorod: a certain type of sharing this common thing, *res publica*. Muscovy as *res Moscoviae* (Herberstein) or *Russe Commonwealth* (Fletcher): deficiencies in sharing. Petersburg as an heir of Novgorod: the genuinely common space, allowing both for the space of appearance of equals among equals, and for the recognition of a unique deed, in Hannah Arendt's terms.

Isaiah Berlin: negative and positive freedom. Heidegger: their groundedness in the more fundamental freedom of disclosing the new world, letting the new phenomena into existence. St. Petersburg as perhaps this very opening: the disclosing of the new world of more or less equal city-sharers (noted by so many observers) without, however, similar equal sharing in relation to the country. The mission of St. Petersburg: generalize its achievement, make it applicable and available to the whole country.