

My Paradox, Fyodor Dostoevsky

My Paradox

Again a tussle with Europe (oh, it's not a war yet: they say that we – Russia, that is – are still a long way from war). Again the endless Eastern Question is in the news; and again in Europe they are looking mistrustfully at Russia . . . Yet why should we go running to seek Europe's trust? Did Europe ever trust the Russians? Can she ever trust us and stop seeing us as her enemy? Oh, of course this view will change someday; someday Europe will better be able to make us out and realize what we are like; and it is certainly worth discussing this someday; but meanwhile a somewhat irrelevant question or side issue has occurred to me and I have recently been busy trying to solve it. No one may agree with me, yet I think that I am right – in part, maybe, but right.

I said that Europe doesn't like Russians. No one, I think, will dispute the fact that they don't like us. They accuse us, among other things, of being terrible liberals: we Russians, almost to a man, are seen as not only liberals but revolutionaries; we are supposedly always inclined, almost lovingly, to join forces with the destructive elements of Europe rather than the conserving ones. Many Europeans look at us mockingly and haughtily for this – they are hateful: they cannot understand why we should be the ones to take the negative side in someone else's affair; they positively deny us the right of being negative as Europeans on the grounds that they do not recognize us as a part of 'civilisation'.

They see us rather as barbarians, reeling around Europe gloating that we have found something somewhere to destroy – to destroy purely for the sake of destruction, for the mere pleasure of watching it fall to pieces, just as if we were a horde of savages, a band of Huns, ready to fall upon ancient Rome and destroy its sacred shrines without the least notion of the value of the things we are demolishing. That the majority of Russians have really proclaimed themselves liberals in Europe is true,

and it is even a strange fact. Has anyone ever asked himself why this is so?

Why was it that in the course of our century, virtually nine-tenths of the Russians who acquired their culture in Europe always associated themselves with the stratum of Europeans who were liberal, with the left – i.e., always with the side that rejected its own culture and its own civilisation? (I mean to a greater or a lesser degree, of course: what Thiers rejects in civilisation and what the Paris Commune of 1871 rejected are very different things).

And like these European liberals, Russians in Europe are liberals 'to a greater or lesser degree' and in many different shades; but nonetheless, I repeat, they are more inclined than the Europeans to join directly with the extreme left at once rather than to begin by dwelling among the lesser ranks of liberalism. In short, you'll find far fewer Thierses than you will Communards among the Russians. And note that these are not some crowd of ragamuffins – not all of them, at least – but people with a very solid, civilised look about them, some of them almost like cabinet ministers.

But Europeans do not trust appearances: 'Grattez le russe et vous verrez le tartare,' they say (scratch a Russian and you'll find a Tatar). That may be true, but this is what occurred to me: do the majority of Russians, in their dealings with Europe, join the extreme left because they are Tatars and have the savage's love of destruction, or are they, perhaps, moved by other reasons? That is the question, and you'll agree that it is a rather interesting one.

The time of our tussles with Europe is coming to an end; the role of the window cut through to Europe is over, and something else is beginning, or ought to begin at least, and everyone who has the least capacity to think now realizes this. In short, we are more and more beginning to feel that we ought to be ready for something, for some new and far more original encounter with Europe than we have had hitherto.

Whether that encounter will be over the Eastern Question or over something else no one can tell! And so it is that all such questions, analyses, and even surmises and paradoxes can be of interest simply through the fact that they can teach us something. And isn't it a curious thing that it is precisely those Russians who are most given to considering themselves Europeans, and whom we call 'Westernisers,' who exult and take pride in this appellation and who still taunt the other half of the Russians with the names 'kvasnik' and 'zipunnik?' Is it not curious, I say, that these very people are the quickest to join the extreme left – those who deny civilisation and who would destroy it – and that this surprises absolutely no one in Russia, and that the question has never even been posed? Now isn't that truly a curious thing?

I'll tell you frankly that I have framed an answer to this question, but I don't intend to try to prove my idea. I shall merely explain it briefly in an effort to bring forth the facts. In any case, it cannot be proven, because there are some things which are incapable of proof.

This is what I think: does not this fact (i.e., the fact that even our most ardent Westernisers side with the extreme left – those who in essence reject Europe) reveal the protesting Russian soul which always, from the very time of Peter the Great, found many, all too many, aspects of European culture hateful and always alien? That is what I think.

Oh, of course this protest was almost always an unconscious one; but what truly matters here is that the Russian instinct has not died: the Russian soul, albeit unconsciously, has protested precisely in the name of its Russianness, in the name of its downtrodden and Russian principle. People will say, of course, that if this really were so there would be no cause for rejoicing: 'the one who rejects, be he Him, barbarian, or Tatar, has rejected not in the name of something higher but because he himself was so lowly that even over two centuries he could not manage to make out the lofty heights of Europe.'

People will certainly say that. I agree that this is a legitimate question, but I do not intend to answer it; I will only say, without providing any

substantiation, that I utterly and totally reject this Tatar hypothesis. Oh, of course, who now among all us Russians, especially when this is all in the past (because this period certainly has ended) – who, among all us Russians can argue against the things that Peter did, against the window he cut through to Europe?

Who can rise up against him with visions of the ancient Muscovy of the tsars? This is not the point at all, and this is not why I began my discussion; the point is that, no matter how many fine and useful things we saw through Peter's window, there still were so many bad and harmful things there that always troubled the Russian instinct. That instinct never ceased to protest (although it lost its way so badly that in most cases it did not realize what it was doing), and it protested not because of its Tatar essence but, perhaps, precisely because it had preserved something within itself that was higher and better than anything it saw through the window (Well, of course it didn't protest against everything: we received a great many fine things from Europe and we don't want to be ungrateful; still, our instinct was right in protesting against at least half of the things.)

I repeat that all this happened in a most original fashion: it was precisely our most ardent Westernisers, precisely those who struggled for reform, who at the same time were rejecting Europe and joining the ranks of the extreme left . . . And the result: in so doing they defined themselves as the most fervent Russians of all, the champions of old Russia and the Russian spirit. And, of course, if anyone had tried to point that out to them at the time, they would either have burst out laughing or been struck with horror.

There is no doubt that they were unaware of any higher purpose to their protest. On the contrary, all the while, for two whole centuries, they denied their own high-mindedness, and not merely their high-mindedness but their very self-respect (there were, after all, some such ardent souls!), and to a degree that amazed even Europe; yet it turns out that they were the very ones who proved to be genuine Russians. It is this theory of mine that I call my paradox.

Take Belinsky, for example. A passionate enthusiast by nature, he was almost the first Russian to take sides directly with the European socialists who had already rejected the whole order of European civilisation; meanwhile, at home, in Russian literature, he waged a war to the end against the Slavophiles, apparently for quite the opposite cause. How astonished he would have been had those same Slavophiles told him that he was the most ardent defender of the Russian truth, the distinctly Russian individual, the Russian principle, and the champion of all those things which he specifically rejected in Russia for the sake of Europe, things he considered only a fantasy.

Moreover, what if they had proved to him that in a certain sense he was the one who was the real conservative, precisely because in Europe he was a socialist and a revolutionary? And in fact that is almost the way it was. There was one huge mistake made here by both sides, and it was made first and foremost in that all the Westernisers of that time confused Russia with Europe.

They took Russia for Europe, and by rejecting Europe and her order they thought to apply that same rejection to Russia. But Russia was not Europe at all; she may have worn a European coat, but beneath that coat was a different creature altogether. It was the Slavophiles who tried to make people see that Russia was not Europe but a different creature altogether when they pointed out that the Westernisers were equating things that were dissimilar and incompatible and when they argued that something true for Europe was entirely inapplicable to Russia, in part because all the things the Westernisers wanted in Europe had already long existed in Russia, in embryo or potentiality at least.

Such things even comprise Russia's essence, not in any revolutionary sense but in the sense in which the notions of universal human renewal should appear: in the sense of divine Truth, the Truth of Christ, which, God grant, will someday be realized on earth and which is preserved in its entirety in Orthodoxy. The Slavophiles urged people to study Russia first and then draw conclusions. But it was not possible to study Russia then and, in truth, the means to do so were not available.

In any case, at that time who could know anything about Russia? The Slavophiles, of course, knew a hundred times more than the Westernisers (and that was a minimum), but even they almost had to feel their way, engaging in abstract speculation and relying mainly on their remarkable instincts. Learning something became possible only in the last twenty years: but who, even now, knows anything about Russia? At most, the basis for study has been set down, but as soon as an important question arises we at once hear a clamour of discordant voices. Here we have the Eastern Question coming up again: well, admit it, are there many among us – and who are they? – who can agree on this question and agree on its solution? And this in such an important, momentous, and fateful national question!

But never mind the Eastern Question! Why take up such big questions? Just look at the hundreds, the thousands of our internal and everyday, current questions: how uncertain everyone is; how poorly our views are established; how little accustomed we are to work! Here we see Russia's forests being destroyed; both landowners and peasants are cutting down trees in a kind of frenzy. One can state positively that timber is being sold for a tenth of its value: can the supply last for long? Before our children grow up there will be only a tenth of today's timber on the market. What will happen then? Ruination, perhaps.

And meanwhile, try to say a word about curtailing the right to destroy our forests and what do you hear? On the one hand, that it is a state and a national necessity, and, on the other, that it is a violation of the rights of private property – two opposite notions. Two camps will at once form, and one still doesn't know where liberal opinion, which resolves everything, will side. Indeed, will there be only two camps? The matter will drag on for a long time. Someone made a witty remark in the current liberal spirit to the effect that there is no cloud without a silver lining, since cutting down all the Russian forests would at least have the positive value of eliminating corporal punishment: the district courts would have no switches to beat errant peasants. This is some consolation, of course, yet somehow it is hard to believe: even if the

forests should disappear altogether, there would always be something to flog people with; they'd start importing it, I suppose.

Now the Yids are becoming landowners, and people shout and write everywhere that they are destroying the soil of Russia. A Yid, they say, having spent capital to buy an estate, at once exhausts all the fertility of the land he has purchased in order to restore his capital with interest. But just try and say anything against this and the hue and cry will be at once raised: you are violating the principles of economic freedom and equal rights for all citizens. But what sort of equal rights are there here if it is a case of a clear and Talmudic status in statu above all and in the first place?

What if it is a case not only of exhausting the soil but also of the future exhaustion of our peasant who, having been freed from the landowner will, with his whole commune, undoubtedly and very quickly now fall into a far worse form of slavery under far worse landowners – those same new landowners who have already sucked the juices from the peasants of western Russia, those same landowners who are now buying up not only estates and peasants but who have also begun to buy up liberal opinion and continue doing so with great success?

Why do we have all these things? Why is there such indecisiveness and discord over each and every decision we make? (And please note that: it is true, is it not?) In my opinion, it is not because of our lack of talent and not because of our incapacity for work; it is because of our continuing ignorance of Russia, of its essence and its individuality, its meaning and its spirit, despite the fact that, compared with the time of Belinsky and the Slavophiles, we have had twenty years of schooling. Even more: in these twenty years of schooling the study of Russia has in fact been greatly advanced, while Russian instinct has, it seems, declined in comparison with the past. What is the reason for this?

But if their Russian instinct saved the Slavophiles at that time, then that same instinct was present in Belinsky as well, and sufficiently present so that the Slavophiles might have considered him their best friend. I repeat, there was an enormous misunderstanding on both sides here.

Not in vain did Apollon Grigorev, who also sometimes had rather acute insights, say that 'had Belinsky lived longer he would certainly have joined the Slavophiles'. He had a real idea there.

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The End