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**Jean Chappe d'Autroche
and his *Voyage to Siberia* (1768).
Demystifying Russia under Catherine the Great**

**Jean Chappe d'Autroche
i jego *Podróż na Syberię* (1768).
Demystyfikacja Rosji pod rządami Katarzyny Wielkiej**

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja, oświecenie, Voyage en Sibérie, Jean Chappe d'Autroche, Katarzyna Wielka

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Streszczenie

Jean Chappe d'Autroche, francuski naukowiec i prominentny członek Académie des Sciences, został wysłany w 1761 r. na naukową misję na Syberię, by dokonać obserwacji rzadkiego zjawiska astronomicznego, a mianowicie przejścia Wenus nad tarczą słońca. W 1768 r. opublikował on w Amsterdamie książkę zatytułowaną *Voyage en Sibérie* (*Podróż na Syberię*), w której nie tylko omówił owe zjawisko, lecz także przeanalizował różne aspekty rosyjskiej społeczno-politycznej rzeczywistości. Jego relacja, wyjątkowo krytyczna wobec współczesnej Rosji, rozwścieczyła Katarzynę Wielką do tego stopnia, że postanowiła ona napisać po francusku i opublikować w 1770 r. *Antidote* (*Antidotum*), zadziwiającą broszurę, w której usiłowała zdyskredytować dzieło Autroche'a i podważyć niekorzystny wizerunek swego imperium przedstawiony przez francuskiego pisarza.

Abstract

Jean Chappe d'Autroche, the French scientists and prominent member of the *Académie des Sciences*, was sent in 1761 on a scientific mission to Siberia to observe a rare astronomical phenomenon, namely the transit of Venus over the sun's disc. In 1768 he published in Amsterdam a book entitled *Voyage en Sibérie (Voyage to Siberia)*, in which not only did he discuss the astronomical event in question, but also analyzed various aspects of the Russian socio-political reality. Extremely critical towards contemporary Russia, his account infuriated Catherine the Great to the point that she decided to write in French and then to publish in 1770 the *Antidote*, a curious booklet in which she attempted to discredit Autroche's work and to contest the unfavorable image of her Empire presented by the French writer.

Jean Chappe d'Autroche, a relatively obscure nowadays French scientist and writer, is the author of the *Voyage en Sibérie (Voyage to Siberia)*, a two-volume work depicting various aspects of the eighteenth-century Muscovy. Born in 1722 in Mauriac in central France, Autroche originally intended to embrace an ecclesiastic career, though eventually dedicated himself to the sciences and became a renowned royal astronomer¹. It is precisely in that function that the French *Académie des Sciences* sent him in 1761 to Russia, to the Siberian town of Tobolsk specifically, to observe a rare phenomenon – the transit of Venus over the sun's disk. Seven years later appeared in Amsterdam a magnificently illustrated book entitled *Voyage en Sibérie*, in which Autroche not only described the astronomical phenomenon in question, but also included a great number of insightful observations related to contemporary Russia, its government, the nature of its socio-political system and the character of its inhabitants. The author based his commentaries on what he had seen and directly experienced in various regions of the Muscovy shortly before Catherine the Great's ascent to the throne in 1762. Most of them, however, were not exactly favorable to Russia. In fact, they were disparaging and rather captious. The *Voyage en Sibérie* was published several years after the author's actual stay in Russia, which at that time was undergoing accelerated institutional reforms under the aegis of the young and enlightened Empress. So when the book finally reached St. Petersburg, its factual content was already considered anachronous by the disappointed if not enraged Russian public. Moreover, not only did it make a very negative impression at the imperi-

¹ Claude de Grève, *Le voyage en Russie. Anthologie des voyageurs français aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles*, Paris 1990, p. 4–5.

al court, it was generally deemed by the Russian ruling classes as a piece of virulent and absolutely groundless anti-Russian propaganda, disseminated purposefully in the philosophical circles of Western Europe².

Although on a few occasions Autroche praised the future Empress of Russia, she did not fail to express her profound indignation once his book came out. She instantly condemned the author accusing him of paying insufficient attention to the positive and far-reaching effects of her sweeping reforms³. It was precisely Autroche's propensity for generalization and his alleged anachronistic image of Russia, reminiscent of several other negative accounts publicized earlier by foreign travelers, that prompted Catherine to write – most probably in co-operation with the count Shouvaloff – and then to publish anonymously in 1770, one year after her French detractor's death, a book entitled *Antidote, ou Examen d'un mauvais livre superbement imprimé, intitulé Voyage en Sibérie* (Antidote or examination of a vicious book superbly printed, entitled *Voyage to Siberia*)⁴.

Catherine's booklet was part of a persistent and carefully planned strategy to fend off the attacks of many distrusting Western intellectuals who openly disapproved of contemporary Russia and questioned the effectiveness of her reformatory zeal. The *Antidote* also aimed at thwarting the position of the Duc de Choiseul, the French minister responsible for foreign affairs, whose strong anti-Russian and pro-Polish sentiments notably affected the major lines of the foreign policy of Louis XV⁵. Catherine the Great considered Autroche to be a paid partisan of Choiseul, an agent sharing his inveterate hostility towards Russia.

One of the reasons for Catherine's fierce repudiation of the *Voyage en Sibérie* were, as she argued, its innumerable astronomical errors. In a letter to Falconet (November 9th 1769), she expressed the following opinion about its scientific value: „I despise l'abbé Chappe and his book and I don't even deem it worth refuting, since the absurdities he advances will fall by their own virtue⁶.” But Catherine's irritation aroused by the astronomical inaccuracies of the *Voyage en Sibérie* was only a prelude to a more violent refutation of the book, for the principal target of her criticism was not really the scientific negligence of Autroche, which she did not even intend to further discuss, but his defamatory portrayal of

² Ibidem.

³ J.T. Alexander, *Catherine the Great. Life and Legend*, New York 1989, p. 133.

⁴ Albert Lortholary, *Le mirage russe en France au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 1951, p. 192–193.

⁵ J. de Viguerie, *Histoire et dictionnaire du temps des Lumières*, Paris 1995, p. 836–837.

⁶ *Correspondance de Falconet avec Catherine II 1767–1778, publiée avec une introduction et des notes par Louis Réau*, Paris 1921, p. 109.

Russia. Hence the *Antidote* contains an extensive repertory of patriotic slogans, often bordering on tasteless *ad hominem* attacks. Here are just a few examples randomly chosen from a much lengthier and more accusatory text. The reference to Autroche's stupidity or to his alleged venality to Choiseul and his anti-Russian acolytes are the least offensive weapons in the inexhaustible arsenal of infuriated Catherine. Surprising as it may seem, the following charges were articulated shortly after Autroche's unexpected death, which occurred during his scientific mission to California in 1769:

Have you been intoxicated, monsieur l'abbé? (...) Be aware, ignorant creature, that there are perhaps very few other governments where the laws are more respected than in our country. (...) Only another fool like you would be able to believe your lies. (...) You dare to claim that these Russian souls were vilified? It is rather you who is vilified. (...) Our country is less replete with bears than yours with savage beasts. (...) Are you being paid by someone? How much money are you then getting? Your book merits more than just one rectification. (...) It is a real misfortune for the truth as well as for the general public that an author like you had not been drowned. (...) And since, Monsieur deceased, you treat us bluntly as animals, I reserve myself the right to tell you that while you were still alive, you yourself were in fact a beast⁷.

What exactly were Autroche's scathing comments which enraged the Russian Empress so much that she decided to publish the *Antidote* and circulate it all over Europe with the sole purpose of counterbalancing the negative image of Russia presented in the *Voyage en Sibérie*? What was so devastating about this „superbly illustrated” book that Catherine's oversensitive ego could not tolerate? To answer this questions we should only imagine Catherine's reaction to the following lines, where she surely found direct references to her palace revolution and her alleged murder of Peter III. A writer, who ridiculed Catherine's sudden rise to the Russian throne and questioned the legality of her succession by placing her coup d'état in the context of an endless series of bloody Russian revolutions, both past and easily predictable for the future, could certainly not be expecting a positive response from Her Imperial Highness:

Various revolutions that Russia had experienced in the past only prepared the new ones and facilitated the means for their execution. This people, always enslaved, was attached to its sovereign neither by laws nor by love: the intrigue

⁷ *Antidote ou examen du mauvais livre superbement imprimé intitulé Voyage en Sibérie*, Amsterdam 1771, p. 147–169.

and the prevailing law of the strongest offered the throne to whoever dared to seize it⁸.

Autroche's in-depth analysis of the Russian political system covered not only the highest ruling classes of the empire engaged in the coup d'état of 1762. In fact, it represented all layers of Russian society. The passages dedicated to Catherine's infamous „revolution” and the devious relationships within her aristocratic entourage were only an overture to a more intricate repudiation of Russia. Autroche's account encompassed the court, the nobility, the Orthodox clergy and the peasantry. No social group escaped his scrutiny and nobody was free from his uncompromised criticism. His depiction of the Russian nobility, for instance, was that of a subservient class, paralyzed by despotic power of the Czars to the extent that its members feared to even voice their own vital interests. Autroche deplored the enslavement of the Russian nobles to the throne and their unconditional obedience to the monarch's arbitrary will. He stressed the miserable predicament of the boyars, silenced by fear of retributions, exile to Siberia and recurring confiscations of property. He also brought into sharp focus the secrecy of the Russian public life, the byzantine intrigues of the court and the atmosphere of reticence and endangerment, which governed the conduct of the entire Russian nobility. The highest caution was the only constant element underlying all social interactions of these disenfranchised people. The mandatory worship of imperial power and lack of critical spirit seemed shocking for this Western observer:

The nobles do not dare to approach the throne in any other way than trembling. The smallest intrigue suffices to send them into exile in Siberia and the confiscation of property makes the whole family victim of a courtesan's deviousness. While in St. Petersburg, I had commerce with a high-placed foreigner. Eager to be informed, I asked him whether the Prince Iwan was dead or alive. He quietly whispered to my ear that in Russia this Prince's fate was not discussed. And yet there were only three of us, all Frenchmen, in his large apartment of more than thirty feet squared. On the eve of the Empress Elisabeth's death people did not even dare to inquire about her health. She was dead and everyone knew it, but people were afraid to talk about it⁹.

Institutionalized subjugation of the nobility to the absolute authority of the Czars was only the first element in a self-replicating chain of slavery and subser-

⁸ J.Ch. d'Auteroche, *Voyage en Sibérie*, vol. 1, Paris 1768, p. 114.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 122–23.

viene ingrained since times immemorial in the political structure of Russia. Autroche maintained that all social interactions of the nobles, the principal foundation of the Muscovite empire, stood on fear, caution, conspiracy and rewarded accusations. Tyranny was the most accurate word to describe this chaotic and unpredictable system¹⁰. But the boyars, subject to the most atrocious political slavery in European history, were perpetuating their own misery by oppressing and exploiting the peasantry, reducing their serfs to an animalistic state. They were merciless, cruel and often abused their seigniorial power. Their control over the peasants, although in theory somewhat curtailed by unspecified and vague laws, was in practice unrestricted. The boyars had the full right of life and death. Thus the vicious circle of Russian serfdom seemed complete. Indeed, the French explorer did not expect any possible improvement in this ossified political monstrosity governed by mistrust and suspicion:

The landowners sell their serfs just like elsewhere the cattle is sold. They select amongst them a number of domestic servants they need and they treat them in a very cruel fashion. From the civil point of view they have no right of life and death over their domestic servants and over their other serfs, but having the right to discipline them with a knout they apply this form of retribution in such a way that in fact they morally acquire the right to punish them with death¹¹.

Autroche claimed paradoxically that the Russian peasants were less miserable than the nobles. They lived in a state of blissful ignorance, owing no property, consequently knowing no commerce, industry or luxury. But however wretched, their state of slavery was more tolerable to them than that of the aristocrats, who, by virtue of their education and contacts with foreigners, perfectly recognized their misery ensuing from political enslavement. Aware of the contingent nature of their fortunes, threatened by absence of social stability, constant retributions and arbitrary sequestrations of their ancestral land, the Russian nobles had no incentive to develop national economy, to aggrandize their private property and to engage in financial operations. They lived for instant gratification, thus wasting national resources. No thriving economy could possibly grow under such conditions. Autroche, a true disciple of the Enlightenment and its utilitarian philosophy, made a direct connection between individual liberties and the economic welfare:

The Russian simple folk, having no idea of freedom, is much less misfortunate than the nobility. Moreover, its appetites are very limited so in consequence

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 125.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 126.

these people have even more limited needs. Beyond Moscow they generally have no industry or commerce. The Russian, having no property, is commonly indifferent to everything capable of increasing his wealth. And even the nobles, who constantly have to fear exile and confiscation of their goods, devote themselves much less to the enhancement of their property than to seeking all possible means how to immediately get hold of the funds required to satisfy their tastes of the moment¹².

Religious fanaticism is another aspect of Russian social life Autroche addressed in the *Voyage en Sibérie*. He pointed to the external nature of religious practice of the Muscovites and their predilection for the superficial, purely ritual expression of faith rather than for internalized spirituality. He affirmed that such conspicuous absence of deep religious experience was the principal reason for the notorious immorality of the Russians, who, contrary to what would be expected from their fanatical attachment to religion, paid no attention whatsoever to the ethical precepts of their own Orthodox creed. What is more, the French author alleged that their simplistic interpretation of Christianity rendered them less moral and more vicious than their pagan neighbors in Asia:

The Russian people is attached to the Greek religion to the point of fanaticism and this fanaticism only increases as you get further away from the capital. However, the Russians are so little enlightened on religious matters that they generally consider fulfilling their duties by simply following a handful of external practices, mostly by observing with utmost severity the Great Lent, especially fasting. Besides, the Russians are inclined to debauchery and to all other sorts of vicious appetites. Good manners are less frequent amongst the Russians than amongst their pagan neighbors. The way the Russians conceive of Christianity is so extraordinary that we might be tempted to believe that this religion, everywhere else conducive to human happiness and social order, is used here to render the Russian people even more depraved¹³.

In the *Voyage en Sibérie* Autroche did not overlook feminine issues. Following into Montesquieu's footsteps, he made a direct connection between political liberties, elegance of social life, sophistication of culture and the civil standing of women¹⁴. He deplored the enslavement of Russian ladies and their blind, unshakable

¹² Ibidem, p. 193.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 136–137.

¹⁴ H. Coulet, *Le Roman jusqu'à la Révolution*, Paris 1991, p. 391–392; P. Hoffmann, *La femme dans la pensée des Lumières*, Genève 1995, p. 338–351.

belief in fossilized patriarchal values. An all-pervasive atmosphere of tyranny, inherent to the whole Russian society, was particularly reflected in the manner the Russian men treated their wives. Sadly enough, the Western notion of courtly love and politeness was completely unknown in Russia¹⁵.

Autroche's criticism reached its zenith when he delved into striking inadequacies of the reforms undertaken by the Czars over the course of the eighteenth century to modernize Russia. In his view incomplete and deficient, they amounted to nothing more than a hasty and superficial imitation of the West. But such wide-ranging transformation could only achieve success in an atmosphere of freedom, completely lacking in Russia. The introduction of luxury and skin-deep transplantation of European values into the old Muscovy seemed fruitless for Autroche, since the most fundamental feature of the West, namely the concept of personal freedom, was not assimilated by the Russians at all. Voyages to the West, so popular and fashionable amongst the most prominent Russian nobles, and direct contacts established with their French, English or German counterparts, only rendered them more despondent, for now they could see in person how archaic their own civilization was. Autroche firmly stated that the advancement of culture, just like the economic welfare, required freedom. Political liberties were the *sine qua non* not only for building wealth and prosperity, but for the development of the arts and for the social sophistication as well. In fact, superficial mimicry of the West was only a source of frustration for the Russians:

European manners made, however, only a limited progress in Russia, since they have nothing in common with that despotic government. They introduced into Russia luxury and facilitated communication between the Russian and the foreigner. Yet voyages made the Russian even more misfortunate, because by virtue of travelling he was now able to compare his own predicament with that of a free man¹⁶.

Autroche emphasized the value of public trust, indispensable for a society to genuinely thrive, yet conspicuously absent in Russia. He asked again and again the same rhetorical question: how can a sophisticated culture flourish in a land where women are oppressed and friendships, stimulating people of similar tastes and interests into mutual development and growth, are intimidated by a despotic system? All the more so as economic prosperity, culture, public trust and freedom were inseparable:

¹⁵ J.Ch. d'Auteroche, *op.cit.*, p. 162–163.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 187.

Society in general is little known in Russia, especially beyond Moscow. But how can it establish itself under a government where nobody enjoys political liberty, which everywhere else warrants security of each citizen? In Russia people mutually fear each other, hence we have here only mistrust, falseness and deceit. Friendship, a sentiment which makes human life charming, was never known in Russia. But friendship presupposes a certain sensitivity of the soul, which identifies the friends, as well as opening of the heart, which enables them to share their common pleasures and pains. Beyond Moscow the Russian men have little consideration for women, who in the Muscovite society mean nothing. How then without women can any society be formed¹⁷?

Perhaps the most inimical comment on Russia, which instantly sent Catherine the Great into a rage, was expressed in the following two very succinct, yet brilliant sentences, in which Autroche advanced an incisive analysis of the nature of Russian despotism: it destroys the spirit, talents and human feelings. What is more, lack of freedom, fear and oppression paralyze the most essential of all human faculties, the faculty of thought. The Russians did not even think – so claimed Autroche – for their souls were brutalized and vilified by an inhuman system. Hence his final conclusion was far from edifying: the Russian peasants, regardless of their perennial misery and wretchedness, were not the only social group reduced to an animalistic state. In fact, their condition characterized the entire Russian society, the whole nation without exception. Even the Czars, theoretically potent and unlimited in their privileges, were actually nothing more than vulnerable puppets, subject to sudden revolutions which continually undermined their power, thus reducing them to the same common level of precariousness shared with the enslaved nobles and peasants:

Love of glory and of the fatherland are completely unknown in Russia. Here despotism destroys the spirit, the talents and all sorts of human feelings. In Russia nobody even dares to think. The soul, brutalized, corrupted and debased, has lost the very faculty of thinking. In a manner of speaking, fear is the only spring animating the whole nation¹⁸.

Catherine the Great found the *Voyage en Sibérie* one of the most noxious narratives about contemporary Russia produced in the eighteenth century. In fact, her disappointment, not to say fury, prompted her to write the *Antidote*, a curious booklet, where she attempted to discredit Autroche's observations on the „un-

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 221.

reformable” nature of Russian society, which she so eagerly wished to modernize. But considering the complexities of Russian history from a more nuanced and subtle perspective, perhaps Catherine should get more credits that she was given by Autroche. After all, it can be argued that the French writer fell too easily into a pattern of radical cultural exclusion constructed during the Enlightenment by Western travelers. Their vision of Easter Europe oversimplified its multifaceted substantiality reducing it into a series of binary oppositions where the West constituted the sole point of reference and the East was measured by the distance separating it from the ideal, yet ultimately fictional model of European culture. And that is precisely what Larry Wolff, the author of *Inventing Eastern Europe*, called demi-Orientalization¹⁹.

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¹⁹ L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Stanford 1994, p. 7.