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Materialism in Works by I.P. Pnin and P.-H.T. Holbach: Comparative Analysis

El materialismo en las obras de I.P. Pnin y P.-H.T. Holbach: análisis comparativo

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RESUMEN

Los autores estudian el proceso de percepción de las ideas materialistas promovidas por la Ilustración francesa durante el período del surgimiento del liberalismo ruso temprano. El artículo se centra en las características específicas de la percepción y la promoción de la cosmovisión materialista, incluido P.-H.T. Las ideas de Holbach presentadas en los trabajos de I.P. Pnin, quien fue uno de los pensadores sociales más brillantes de Rusia a principios del siglo XIX. En primer lugar, los autores examinan la actividad realizada por Pnin en el contexto del St. Petersburg Journal (1798) que publicó y presentaba las ideas más progresistas de la época.

Palabras clave: Materialismo francés en la era de la Ilustración, P.-H.T. Holbach, I.P. Pnin, emperador Alejandro I.

ABSTRACT

The authors study the process of perception of the materialistic ideas promoted by the French Enlightenment over the period of the emergence of early Russian liberalism. The article focuses on the specific features of perception and promotion of the materialistic worldview, including P.-H.T. Holbach's ideas presented in the works by I.P. Pnin, who was one of the brightest social thinkers in Russia at the turn of the 19th century. First and foremost, the authors examine the activity conducted by Pnin in the context of St. Petersburg Journal (1798) he published, which featured the most progressive ideas of that time.

Keywords: French materialism in the age of Enlightenment, P.-H.T. Holbach, I.P. Pnin, Emperor Alexander I.

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INTRODUCTION

The period encompassing the second half of the 18th century and the first quarter of the 19th century is considered to be the time when a specific time of thinking originated; it was a significant milestone on the way to civil liberation of society (Shelokhaev: 2010, 527). This phenomenon resulted from the adoption of progressive ideas that originated within the European intellectual tradition (Volkov et al: 2019). There is no doubt that the philosophy of French materialism of the Age of Enlightenment played a special role therein as the most consistent system of materialistic views of that time. The aim of this article is to analyze the influence of the materialistic views of the French Enlightenment on the development of the worldview paradigm of the Russian intellectual elite at the turn of the 19th century by means of their comparison. Identification of the specific cultural and historical features of adoption of the Western intellectual experience and clarification of its influence on the perception of the world by ideologists of the Russian social and political thought of that period encourages deeper comprehension of the specific features and historical nature of early Russian liberalism.

One of the historical figures whose activities are connected with the development of early Russian liberalism is an educator, poet and opinion journalist Ivan Petrovich Pnin (1773–1805). His short life journey, which lasted a little more than 30 years, lay along sharp historical turns associated with the end of the old era and the beginning of a new one. The Golden Age of nobility during the reign of Catherine the Great with its overtures to the French Enlightenment and manifestation of the thought doomed to persecution, a very controversial and dramatic reign of Paul I and fervent reformatory initiatives suggested by the young emperor Alexander I — all these changes of ideological and political orientations, dominant ideas and decorations pertaining to corresponding epochs inevitably formed a certain type of thinker by predetermining the unique features of their intellectual biography. Thus, it is no wonder that the interest in the personality, beliefs and activities conducted by Pnin have always been perceived by researchers as an important condition for a breakthrough in the comprehension of socio-political and socio-cultural trends of that time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As early as in Russian pre-Revolutionary historiography, one can trace the attempts of authors to compare Radishchev's and Pnin's views, identify the ideological content of St. Petersburg Journal and raise the issue of Pnin's influence on thinkers of following generations. Thus, they set the main trajectories of research into the personality and activities of Pnin, which were later inherited by Soviet historiography.

Among the research carried out over the Soviet period the most remarkable works are those by A.N. Filippov (Filippov: 1929) and V.N. Orlov (Orlov: 1950), which allowed to consolidate the source base and determine the degree of Pnin's engagement with the ideological and political life of Russia at the turn of the 19th century.

The significance of works by I.K. Luppol (Luppol: 1925; Luppol: 1934; Luppol: 1935) should be emphasized, since he conducted textological analysis of Pnin's writings, having compared the ideological content of his works with "The System of Nature" and "Universal Morality" by P.-H. T. Holbach. It was at the instigation of Luppol that Pnin was nicknamed "the Russian Holbachian".

Foreign historians have also studied the personality and activities carried out by Pnin. For example, at the suggestion of M. Raeff, one of the most recognized researchers of Russian social thought, who thoroughly studied the publishing activities of Pnin, the latter was assigned the status of a person who "filled the gap" between A.N. Radishchev and Decembrists (Raeff: 1967, 396, 406). The same assessment of Pnin's activities was provided in the monograph devoted to the political history of Russia in the 19th century (Saunders: 1998, 6, 26). Pnin's ideological legacy, including his work in the context of St. Petersburg Journal, became the subject of specialized research by S.C. Ramer (Ramer: 1975).

Pnin's breadth of views and multifaceted intellectual strivings could not but have been reflected in research literature. This is how research in the sphere of pedagogy, philosophy, cultural, legal and political studies appears, where a significant role belongs to Pnin's findings. One of the works that stand out among foreign research is the work by H. Winkelmann, which focuses on Pnin's ideas on enlightenment and education (Winkelmann: 1990, 103-108).

Finishing this unwillingly short literature review devoted to research into Pnin's life and work, it should be noted that the issue of continuity between early Russian liberalism as presented in Pnin's writings and the ideas of French materialism of the Age of Enlightenment has not been fully addressed up to now and requires further clarification. The specific features of perception and promotion of materialistic ideas in Russian society are of particular interest.

RESULTS

French materialism of the 18th century is a unique phenomenon in the history of philosophy. First and foremost, its uniqueness lies in its unprecedented consistency. It involves many things, such as consistent commitment to the achievement of scientific cognition, consistent anticlericalism and hard-line atheism, unshakable faith in the infinite power of the human mind and swift reasonable reorganization of social reality. There is no doubt that one of the most outstanding figures among the French materialists is Paul-Henri Thiry Holbach (1723–1789) – it was him who materialistically conceptualized the discoveries made in mechanics, determined their meaning in terms of the philosophical substantiation of the basics of thinking and being and turned mechanicism into a universal method of studying nature and society (Dlugach: 2015, 137). Holbach's main work, "The System of Nature, or the Laws of the Moral and Physical World" (1770), represents a review of philosophical, socio-political, and sociological aspects of the materialistic paradigm. In this writing, Holbach provided numerous arguments against "religious errors", which, according to him, are the reason for ignorance and the grounds for the enslavement of people (Holbach: 1963, 98–101) Holbach's arguments were based on consistent materialistic interpretation of Isaac Newton's mechanics. Trying to "restore the truth", in the preface of his book Holbach wrote that "to error must be attributed those insupportable chains which tyrants, which priests have forged for most nations" (Holbach: 1963, 56–57), which is why the point of his work is to return the power of mind to people, show them their nature and legitimate rights. It was Holbach who created "the first generally accessible description of movement of material particles", thinks a Russian researcher T.B. Dlugach, "The ideas of the ability of mechanical particles that comprise the whole universe to independent movement developed by Descartes were extrapolated by Holbach to human society and allowed him to present human life as activities carried out by independent and autonomous individuals" (Dlugach: 2015, 136-137).

It is no wonder that in Russia, Holbach's writings were included in the list of books banned from publishing as "destroying the fundamentals of faith, politics and morals". Holbach's treatises were subject to censorship in 1771, 1820, 1828, 1841, 1855 and 1898. Even when he was awarded the title of Honorary Fellow of the Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences, it did not lift the ban on his works to be published without censorship.

However, his writings were still published. It was Pnin who deserves credit for the first translations of the works by Holbach. Pnin was the publisher and editor of St. Petersburg Journal (1798), the initiative of founding which belonged to the future emperor Alexander I (Trotskii: 1931, 18-19; Hrech: 2002, 147; Shilder: 1904, 163-164).

According to Russian researchers (Orlov: 1950, 97), the content image of St. Petersburg Journal made it the second brightest manifestation of philosophical and socio-political radicalism in the Russian press at the 18th century after "A Journey from Saint Petersburg to Moscow" by A.N. Radishchev (Radishchev: 1906).

Pnin was able to detect shrewdly, which ideas the Russian progressive audience was ready to perceive and found the corresponding views matching the readers' expectations in Holbach's material ideological

framework (Luppel: 1934, 13). Due to Pnin's interpretations of the works by the French philosopher, his ideas published in the journal were adapted to the Russian mentality and presented in the most comprehensible way for the Russian reader. Most importantly, the publisher of St. Petersburg Journal toned down Holbach's original texts to a certain extent. For instance, radical atheism, which is the direct equivalent of Holbach's consistent materialistic views, was significantly smoothed down. It was done for a few reasons, not least of all being in order to put censorship off its guard.

The publication of the first chapter from "The System of Nature" says that nature is "the great whole that results from the collection of all beings that comprise the universe", while a man is "the perfect work of the creator of nature" (Pnin: 1934, 199). Therefore, in the course of research, man should use "physics and experiments to a large extent", since nature acts according to laws which can be comprehended through experiment; by abandoning experiments, man falls into emptiness and error (Pnin: 1934, 200–201). Thus, Pnin selected Holbach's passages focusing on the natural descent of man and his belonging to nature, thus warning readers against religious misconceptions. However, the text of translation contains religious connotations, though in a weakened deistic form. "Let us stop trusting distorted imagination; let us take experience as our guide; let us consult nature; let us consult reason, and such examination will definitely lead us to knowing the invisible creator of the visible world (Pnin: 1934, 202).

In the following issue, Pnin published translation of the chapter "Of motion and its origin", which says that nature is "an immense chain of causes and effects, which unceasingly flow from each other" (Pnin: 1934, 207); natural phenomena and processes perceived by man are viewed from the perspective of natural science.

"The voice of heaven", the final chapter of "The System of Nature", published by Pnin in the July issue of St. Petersburg Journal, guides man to live according to the laws of nature, work "for their own happiness", live a virtuous life and "be a citizen", since "state is necessary for providing security and welfare" and "virtue has never been deprived of the rewards it deserves" (Pnin: 1934, 208–210, 212).

Chapters from Holbach's "Universal Morality", such as "On excess", "On idleness", "On moral teachings and duties", "On humanity", "On pleasure and sadness", "On welfare", "On conscience" and "On benevolence", published in different parts of the journal, motivate a person for education and self-development, which can give them an idea about themselves, about society, natural laws and justice. These materials educate readers about their duties to other members of society and persuade them to be virtuous and hard-working by reference to human nature.

Summing up Holbach's writings, it is important to emphasize his statement that matter has always existed and there is no point in looking for any external force "that set it in motion" (Holbach: 1963, 78-80). As opposed to the first article published by Pnin, which claimed that man is the work of the creator of nature, Holbach's original texts said that man is "the work of nature, he is submitted to the laws of Nature and he cannot deliver himself from them" (Holbach: 1963, 59, 123). Since man, like any other living being, leans towards self-preservation, his goal is his own good, and he should seek personal happiness (Holbach: 1963 67, 116, 313). Experience also shows that man needs the people among whom he lives, as they encourage his happiness and help him with their talents (Holbach: 1963, 165). Therefore, Holbach argues that man is motivated to commit meritorious deeds in respect of other members of society so that they encourage the accomplishment of his goals and his happiness (Holbach: 1963, 167). G.V. Plekhanov wrote that Holbach, "in his struggle against 'religious morality', tried to prove that people were capable of knowing what 'virtue' is without any aid from Heaven" (Plekhanov: 1956, 49). As a result of ignorance of one's own nature, needs and rights, man living in society has lost his freedom and became a slave "who deems it necessary to sacrifice his welfare for the whims of his chiefs" (Holbach: 1963, 63). Holbach was convinced that people are astonished by phenomena the causes of which they do not know, providing an example of different perception of the effect produced by gunpowder by Europeans and indigenous Americans "the European workman, who labors to manufacture it, finds nothing marvelous in its properties, while the American looked upon it as a divine power and its energies as supernatural" (Holbach: 1963, 92). Holbach criticized religious dogmas that inspired fear, suppressed personality and predetermined the behavior of people (Holbach: 1963, 88). However, Holbach

notes that education and justice are meant to restore man's knowledge about himself, his nature and society, while the aim of the government is to guide human passions in the right direction, i.e. towards universal welfare (Holbach: 1963, 178). It can be concluded that Holbach consistently presented all aspects of social and political life through the lens of materialism. It should be highlighted that Holbach was a representative of metaphysical materialism, which was an important stage in the development of social and political thought as well as atheistic morality.

All these ideas became the ideological foundation of Pnin's own creative work, in the first place his poetry, where he expressed his commitment to materialistic philosophy to the full extent. Whereas in translations of Holbach's writings Pnin had to smooth atheistic statements over, in his own poetic works he expressed his views more freely. The materialistic worldview of the author is presented in a much more distinct way due to the usage of figurative language. In the September issue of St. Petersburg Journal Pnin tried to answer the question, "What is God?".

Сего нам Существа определить неможно! [This Creature we cannot define!]
Но будем почитать Его в молчаньи мы: [But we will honor Him in silence.]
Проникнуть таинство бессильны всех умы, [Anyone's mind is unable to comprehend this mystery.]
И чтоб сказать – что Он? – самим быть богом должно [And to answer who He is you must be God Himself (Pnin: 1934, 99).

Later, in 1805, Pnin developed the topic of anthropology and religion in more detail in his odes "Man" and "God".

The poem "Man" was published in 1805 in Russian Literature Journal. In this poem Pnin answers the question raised in St. Petersburg Journal by saying that the cause of everything is man rather than God:

О человек! что в мире зрю? [Oh man! What do I see in the world?]
Снискавши мудрость сам собою [Having acquired wisdom on his own,]
Через труд и опытность свою, [Through his work and experience,]
Прешел препятствий ты пучину, [Having overcome a sea of obstacles,]
Улучшил ты свою судьбину, [You have improved your fate,]
Ты на земли, что в небе бор! [You are god both in heaven and on earth!] (Pnin: 1934, 69).

Pnin noted that the power of man lies in the enlightenment of mind, comprehending the truth and penetrating into the secrets of nature

Велишь – и бури направлень [You order – and the storm moves]
Берут назначенно тобой. [In the direction you showed].
Измерил ты планет теченье, [You have changed the route of planets]
Висящих над твоей главой. [Hanging over your head.]
С природой связан ты судьбою: [You are connected with nature by your destiny:]
Ты ей живешь, она – тобою [Your life is centered around it,]
Свой жизненный являет вид [And nature expresses itself through you] (Pnin: 1934, 67–68).

Enumerating human achievements, Pnin concluded that all of it became possible due to self-cognition, learning about one's nature and accumulation of experience:

Скажи мне, наконец: какую [Tell me, finally,]
Ты силой свыше вдохновен [By which force you are inspired from above]
Что все с премудростью такую [That with such wisdom]
Творить ты в мире научен? [You do everything in the world?]
Скажи?... Но ты в ответ вещаешь, [Tell me... But you reply to me]
Что ты существ не обретаешь, [That you have not met any creatures]

С небес которые б сошли, [Who would descend from the skies,]
Тебя о нуждах издали, [Tell you about your needs,]
Тебя бы должностям учили [Teach you jobs,]
И в совершенство привели [And turn into perfection] (Pnin: 1934, 69).

On the basis of this poem, I.K. Luppel made a conclusion that Pnin answered the question about the origin of man in a scientific way from the perspective of materialism (Luppel: 1934, 12).

Discovering the truth through experience changes the mind and soul. According to Pnin, a person not enlightened by cognition is destined to be a slave. A serf “only weaves errors” without knowing nature and “worships only those things he is always forced to pursue”.

В каком пространстве зрю ужасном [What a terrible gap I can see]
Раба от Человека я? [Between a Slave and a Man?]
Один – как солнце в небе ясном, [One of the seems to flourish in the sun,]
Другой – так мрачен, как земля. [The other is a gloomy as earth].
Один есть все, другой ничтожность. [One is everuthing, while the other is nothing.]
Когда б познал свою раб должность, [If a slave realized his position,]
Спросил природу, рассмотрел: [Asked nature and saw]
Кто бедствий всех его виною? – [Who is guilty of his misfortunes,]
Тогда бы тою же рукою [Then with the same hand]
Сорвал он цепи, что надел [He would break the chains he has put on] (Pnin: 1934, 67).

The poem “God” was written by Pnin in 1805 and published in Russian Literature Journal. The main idea of this poem is reflected in the following lines, “То ваши – не мои дела” [“This is your business — not mine”]. Pnin used the image of God to get the message across to readers that they are themselves responsible for their deeds:

О человеки! вы виною [Oh people! You are guilty]
Терпимых между вами бед! [Of the misfortunes you suffer from!]
Коль правосудья вовсе нет [If there is no justice at all]
И суть злодейства без числа, [And evil deeds are legion,]
То ваши – не мои дела! [This is your business — not mine!].
Где опыт, где рассудок здравый, [Where are the experience and common sense]
Что вас должны руководить? [That should be guiding you?]
Они покажут путь вам правый, [They will show you the right way,]
Лишь под щитом священным их [And only behind their sacred shield]
Найдете корень зол своих [Will you find the root of all evil] (Pnin: 1934, 78).

As we see, Pnin insisted that until man enlightens his mind by understanding his predestination, in personal, social and government relations there will be chaos, violence, greed, ignorance, rivers of tears and blood... On behalf of God Pnin blames man for not trying to overcome the imperfections and flaws of his being despite his sufferings and waiting for the grace of God in this respect instead. Interestingly, Pnin ignores the legend of the devil’s temptations from the Old Testament. All “responsibility” rests with man. His mind can be enlightened by knowledge and experience rather than God. It means that the imperfections of the world represent the result of activities carried out by people who were not guided by experience and common sense.

Pnin’s materialistic views became the foundation for his understanding of socio-political processes taking place in society. Besides, he used the same ideas to justify the development of legislation on the basis of human nature, which inherently motivates people for virtuous deeds.

“The Ode on Justice” published in 1805 as a separate brochure contains Holbach’s quote as a preface, “Justice is the basis of all social virtues”. Glorifying the subject of his poem, Pnin called it “the bliss of mortals, the backbone of kingdoms” and wrote the following words addressing it:

Где ты – там собственность священна, [Where you are, private property is sacred,]
Тобою твердо огражденна... [Safely secured by you...]
Там тверды в основаньях троны, [Thrones are steadfast on their foundations,]
И к правде пусть не заражден [And the way to the truth is free] (Pnin: 1934, 79).
The author of the ode glorified equal rights and protection promised by law:
Где ты – там вопль не раздается [Where you are, there is no wail]
Несчастных, брошенных сирот... [Of poor abandoned orphans...]
Ты, кое лиц не разбираешь, [You do not make out faces]
Равно щадишь, равно караешь [And equally favor and punish]
Рабов, вельможей и царей [Slaves, nobles, and tsars equally] (Pnin: 1934, 78–79).

Talking about the government balance in a state, Pnin said that Russia, “being a monarchical state in terms of its government, needs inequality even more, since it serves as the strongest foundations for the country” (Pnin: 1934, 128). There is a similar statement in writings by Holbach, who was spiritually close to Pnin, “Just like nature, society establishes a necessary and legitimate inequality between its members. This inequality is fair, since it is necessary for the purpose of accomplishment of the unalterable goal pursued by society — sustaining its existence and happiness” (Holbach: 1963, 124).

Pnin defines the main purpose of enlightenment as providing “the necessary knowledge to each member of society so that they can perform the job responsibilities they have been called for in a proper way” (Pnin: 1934, 148). However, since “society is made up of various classes of citizens, whose positions cannot be equal” (Pnin: 1934, 148), it means that every person should be educated according to their state, the job they are doing and the lifestyle they are leading. Similar arguments can be found in Holbach’s works, “The benefit provided to state by its subjects leads to inequality between them; this inequality is balanced out by the fact that they equally need each other’s help” (Holbach: 1963, 234). According to Holbach, the participation of each citizen in providing benefit to their homeland compensates for the existing inequality and promotes mutual respect of all categories of citizens. Holbach wrote, “In a well-organized society not a single person is treated with contempt if they are really useful; each citizen is important for society if he performs functions corresponding with his social status” (Holbach: 1963, 234).

Thus, Pnin’s educational program was largely connected with his commitment to materialistic views and was based on taking social stratification of society as given. According to G.V. Plekhanov, “for Holbach ‘equality’ could not mean anything tempting. On the contrary, he saw it as a very harmful chimera” (Plekhanov: 1956, 60). Thus, Pnin, who was a Holbachian, thought that it was impossible to solve the problem of enlightenment observing the criteria of equality of rights of all social classes in the context of serfdom and the historically developed deep division between the social groups (socio-legal, cultural and ethical).

Pnin pictured possible prosperity of his country based on the paradigm of geographical determinism, “Due to its location, Russia requires increased attention and encouragement of agriculture, the success of which determines the prosperity of this state” (Pnin: 1934, 142). He noted that Catherine II “definitely felt the need to seek remedy for this abuse” referring to her opinion in the “Instruction”, where the Empress expressed the thought that “agriculture cannot flourish where no one has any property”. Commenting on her words, Pnin added, “where there is no property, no one can safely enjoy the fruit of their labor” (Pnin: 1934, 142). Holbach had a similar idea, “Only a free nation has confidence in its security and freedom of movement, courage and energy in labor, which encourage its economic prosperity. Without having to worry about his property, a citizen devotes himself fervently to work and plows the filed well, which cannot be taken away from his as a result of

injustice" (Holbach: 1963, 352). Hence the main Pnin's demand — a call for granting serfs the right of property as a necessary prerequisite for economic prosperity and their enlightenment.

CONCLUSION

It should be pointed out that St. Petersburg Journal was the first print medium to publish Russian translations of chapters from the most significant works by Holbach "The System of Nature" and "Universal Morality". This fact itself testifies to the commitment of its editor, I.P. Pnin, who was a typical representative of liberal thought emerging in Russia, to materialistic views that had developed under the influence of Russian reality and adopted due to the works summarizing Holbach's writings. As a publisher, Pnin tried to promote these ideas and communicate this intellectual worldview value to the audience of readers, giving other people an opportunity to adopt them. St. Petersburg Journal was itself one of the brightest phenomena of journalism at the end of the 18th century both in terms of its ideological content and as a precedent of support provided to an unofficial nongovernmental print medium by people close to the Crown Prince Alexander Pavlovich. Pnin deserves credit for carrying out work aimed at developing readers' interest in the current issues of the time and their critical interpretation as well as for promoting materialistic ideas in the context of increasing censorship.

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