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A Revolutionary Parable on the Equality of Men

Biographers of the outstanding Ukrainian poet, Taras Shevchenko, tell us an interesting story about his revolutionary propaganda among the Ukrainian peasantry in 1845. Shevchenko wanted to demonstrate the power of the common people to the serfs gathered in the village inns. He put a grain of wheat on the table and asked his listeners: "What does this mean?" Since his audience was not able to guess, he explained that the grain meant the tsar. Adding more grains, he pointed out that they stood for the governors and other officials, the army officers, the landlords, and the nobility. Finally, he took from his pocket a heaping handful of grain and poured it over those which were already on the table, with the words: "Look, these are all of us! Can you tell me who was the tsar, the governor or the landlord?"

According to another report, Shevchenko used hazelnuts as well in his propaganda. He filled his fur cap with grain and put a few hazelnuts on top, explaining that the latter were the landlords, generals, ministers, and with them the tsar. Then he shook the cap violently and the hazelnuts dropped to the bottom. "This", he said, "will happen to the landlords and the tsar¹."

The authenticity of this story has been disputed by several Ukrainian authors. They contended that it was nothing but a legend spread by Polish landlords in the Ukraine who wanted to discredit Shevchenko as a demagogue. The Ukrainian scholar and poet, Ivan Franko, claimed that the revolutionary parable attributed to Shevchenko showed much too close an affinity with the egalitarian propaganda conducted by Polish revolutionaries in the period between the two national uprisings of 1830 and 1846. As an example, he quoted the proclamation "Instruction for the teachers of the Ruthenian people" in which the Polish democrat, Kaspar Cięglewicz, appealed to the Ukrainian peasants of Galicia to rise against the authorities, impressing them with their numerical superiority

¹) *N. F. Batchykov*, "Taras Shevchenko. Kritiko-biograficheskij ocherk", 1939, pp 153-4.

over their oppressors. This latter argument, maintains Franko, could easily have led to the methods of propaganda allegedly used by Shevchenko²⁾.

Franko was not aware how close he came to the historical truth with his explanation. He had no access to the archives of the Austrian government in which I found 40 years later a police report about K. Cięglewicz's revolutionary activities. The police director of the Galician capital Lvov (Lemberg), Sacher³⁾ relates in this report how in 1838 Cięglewicz used in his propaganda among the peasants the same parable which we also find in Shevchenko's biography⁴⁾! Let us turn now to other instances of the re-occurrence of this parable. It is also given, for example, in Leon Trotsky's autobiography, "My Life", with the difference, however, that it was used half a century later (in 1897) by Russian revolutionaries in the Ukraine and that instead of wheat grains navy-beans were chosen. Trotsky tells us about his first working class acquaintance, the electrician I. A. Mukhin, in Nikolajev:

"Next day five or six of us were sitting in an inn. The deafening music of the automatic organ screened our conversation from the rest. Mukhin, a thin man with a pointed beard and a sort of shrewd, apprehensive look, watched me through a half-closed eye, amiably scanning my still beardless face. In detail, with well-calculated pauses, he explained: 'The Gospels for me, in this business, are just a peg. I begin with religion, and then switch off to life. The other day I explained the whole truth to the Stundists⁵⁾ with navy-beans.'

'What do you mean, navy-beans?'

'It's very simple. I put a bean on the table and say, "This is the tsar." Around it, I place more beans. "These are the ministers, bishops, generals, and over there the gentry and merchants. And in this other heap the plain people." Now, I ask, "Where is the tsar?" They point to the centre. »Where are the ministers?" They point to those around. Just as I have told them, they answer. Now wait' and at this point Mukhin completely closed his left eye and paused. 'Then I scramble all beans together', he went on. 'I say, "now tell me where is the tsar? the ministers?" And they answer me: "Who can tell? You can't spot them now" . . . "Just what I say. You can't spot them now." And so I say, "All beans should be scrambled."

"I was so thrilled at this story", Trotsky adds, "that I was all in a sweat. This was the real thing, whereas we had only been guessing and waiting and subtilizing. The music of the automatic organ was the 'conspiratia'; Mukhin's navy-beans, destroying the mechanics of the class system, were the revolutionary propaganda⁶⁾."

2) *I. Franko*, "Shevchenko heroyem polskoi revolutsiynoi legendy", 1893.

3) Father of the known Austrian novelist, L. v. Sacher-Masoch.

4) *Gub., Publ.-pol.*, 43, Nr. 12787 ex 1838.

5) A religious sect in the Ukraine.

All three examples which I have quoted so far (Cięglewicz in 1838, Shevchenko in 1845 and Mukhin in 1897) occurred in the Ukraine. However, at least one similar incident has been reported from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, from the island of Haiti. One of the historians of the revolution of Santo Domingo tells us how the famous Negro general, Toussaint l'Ouverture, agitated the Negro population of the island against the white planters:

«Afin d'être mieux compris, il leur parlait en paraboles; il employait souvent celle-ci. Dans un vase de verre plein de grains de maïs noir, il mêlait quelques grains de maïs blanc et il disait à ceux qui l'entouraient: Vous êtes le maïs noir, les blancs qui voudraient vous asservir sont le maïs blanc. Il remuait le vase, et le présentant à leurs yeux fascinés, il s'écriait en inspiré: Guetté⁷⁾ blancs ci-là-là c'est-à-dire: Voyez ce qu'est le blanc proportionnellement à vous⁸⁾.»

The coincidence between this story told about Toussaint-l'Ouverture and the revolutionary propaganda in the Ukraine is certainly striking. Perhaps it could be contended that one of the numerous Polish refugees who emigrated to France after the defeat of the Polish uprising of 1830 read de la Croix's book on the revolution in Santo Domingo and that Toussaint's parable was thus transplanted from the West Indies to Eastern Europe. There is, however, a further complication in the fact that another Ukrainian scholar, M. Drahomaniv, mentioned in a letter to Iv. Franko⁹⁾ that a similar parable was allegedly used by John Brown in his anti-slavery propaganda (but I have not been able to verify this). It is very probable that the motif of the parable is a migratory one and has its origin further back in history (perhaps in medieval religious sects?). In any case, it seems to me that the problem of the origin of this parable is worthy of the attention of folklore specialists.

⁶⁾ *L. Trotsky*, "My Life. An Attempt at an Autobiography", 1930, p. 105.

⁷⁾ "Guetter, verb. trans., to look at, to watch over." — *W. A. Dorrance*, "The Survival of French in the Old District of Saint Geneviève" (*University of Missouri Studies*, v. X. Nr. 2, 1935, p. 80.)

⁸⁾ "Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue." Par le lieutenant-général Baron Pamphile de la Croix. — Paris, 1820, v. I, pp. 409-10.

⁹⁾ Quoted in Franko's essay.