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2023

# Picaresque Rogues and Early Soviet Society with Cassio de Oliveira

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## Repository Citation

de Oliveira, Cassio, "Picaresque Rogues and Early Soviet Society with Cassio de Oliveira" (2023).  
*PDXPLORES Podcast*. 31.

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*Welcome to PDXplores, a Portland State Research podcast featuring scholarship, innovations, and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge practice and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.*

My name is Cassio de Oliveira. I am an associate professor of Russian, in the Department of World Languages and Literatures at Portland State University. My research and scholarly interests are Soviet and Russian literature and culture. Specifically, I study how Russian culture has played a central role in the definition of a collective identity, both in the country of Russia itself and during the Soviet period. My new book, *Writing Rogues: The Soviet Picaresque and Identity Formation 1921 -1938*, is an attempt to make sense of this process of identity formation during a seminal period, which is the two decades between the foundation of the Soviet Union and the Nazi invasion in 1941.

So we tend to think of Soviet society and Soviet culture as being conformist. The time period that I study shows that this is not quite true. The works of literature that I discuss in my book, which I put under the broad label of Picaresque works, they depicted the underbelly of society. They, and they did that sometimes in admiring ways. The Picaresque works I show in my book were not suppressed despite depicting this underbelly of society. They were rather actively debated. And this is significant because it shows that Soviet society at that time in the 1920s and 1930s was in fact a society in which ideas were actively debated and sometimes ideas that were quite outside of what you would expect in a conformist society.

Soviet Picaresque novels depicted the society and the country as it was being constructed, as the Soviet society was being constructed in the 1920s and 1930s. So when we talk about Picaresque, we typically understand works of literature that involve

characters on the margins of society; marginal characters, whether they are actively criminals, or they are just people who are down and out. And the focus on this character allows us to, in a way, criticize this society, but also to show how this character manages to kind of climb the social ladder to find his own place in it.

The Rogue is a character at the margins of society. In my book, I focus on male rogues. This does not mean that there weren't female rogues. Really, the way that female characters were depicted in female rogues were depicted in novels of this time was different, and they do display different traits. The male rogue, again, it's a character in the marg... margins of society. Oftentimes, they also belong to an ethnic minority. More often than not, they're Jewish heroes. They are not just characters on the margins, but also they diverge from Soviet power, or they disagree with Soviet power in fundamental ways. One classic example is Ostop Bender, the hero of Ilf and Petrov's *12 Chairs* and the Golden Calf who says, at one point, that there are irreconcilable differences between myself and Soviet power. Soviet power wants to build communism, and I don't.

These characters also will oftentimes allude to past traumas of Soviet society, whether it is the early years of the revolution or the experience of the Gulag the forced labor camps. Once again, they're social climbers, they're gang leaders, they're criminals, but also they are sometimes just small-time crooks. They pursue social affirmation or some kind of relief to try to find a place in society, even though that does not always work out. They, more importantly, their actions in these works that I discuss, expose the under seams of Soviet society. And in this sense, they also possess creative potential. The question here is what happens when they are willingly or against their will reconciled with Soviet power? And when this reconciliation just does not take place the way the Rogue wanted it?

So in the works that I discussed, the Rogue is operating within a society that is in the process of becoming conformist, evermore conformist. But in fact, the 1920s were a

period of great creative, actively heated debates about the future, the path that the Soviet Union was taking, the future of the Soviet Union. My primary thesis in writing this book was that by eliminating these characters, the figure of the rogue, the authors I discussed were attempting to expose the contradictions of life in the Soviet Union. They were exploiting the conflict between the individual and the collective or how to reconcile the collective mandate and individual will. And this is especially important because it took place during the first two decades of the existence of the Soviet Union. So my aim in developing this argument was to make sense of this body of work-- this large assortment of novels, memoirs, plays, films, shorter works of fiction-- to make sense of this body of work taken together. So when novels were with characters who were critical of the regime were being read, and people were readers, critics were even taking the side of the rogue or trying to help him, providing advice on how he should become a better Soviet citizen for instance, my aim is to understand when this was happening, what does that mean for the big picture of Soviet society? What does it mean when readers were actually perfectly fine with characters who were in fact on the margins and who were, who could potentially be dangerous to the stability of the regime?

So the Soviet Picaresque lends to forming a collective Soviet identity in several ways. The main one is the theme of travel. The rogues will travel across space, whether of one's city, that it becomes representative of the entire Soviet Union, moving across the social fabric of the city, or, more often will cover vast swaths of the country. In doing so, the Rogue exposes this two other important themes in this formation of collective Soviet... Soviet identity. One of them is cosmopolitanism. The idea that the Soviet Union was a brotherhood of nations was a multiethnic country. And the idea of life creation, the idea that the Soviet utopia could actually be accomplished, that you could redo yourself and along the way, redo the entire Soviet Union along the model of a communist utopia. The Rogue undermines these ideas. The Rogue, in a way, challenges the idea of the communist utopia, but he's also coming into contact with characters who are trying to bring this utopia to fruition. In traveling across space sheds light on the

makeup of the Soviet Union, as on the one hand, a brother..., brotherhood of nations, again a multi-ethnic country. But on the other hand, also the imperial makeup of the country, what has been called an affirmative action empire because the Soviet Union still resembled in many ways an empire with a very strong central power in Moscow. And, this power spread further to the regions. So the rogue's travels are oftentimes oriented towards the, the center towards Moscow, but also are in their own way of form of colonizing these outer parts of the country. So the bottom line here is that literature becomes a way of knowing the Soviet world. It is in a way, a, a channel into understanding what the entire country was to those who could not travel around the country or who would be unable to cover every single corner of the country. The Soviet Picaresque is, in a way, an attempt to make sense of this geographical makeup of the country.

And my book shows that as the 1930s went on, the figure of the rogue itself undergoes transformation. He is co-opted by the regime and becomes not this independent or free thinking figure that we had encountered oftentimes in the works from the 1920s. But really, the character himself undergoes a transformation over the course of the novel. Or over the course of the work that was being written or published in the 1930s. The Rogue eventually becomes a conformist figure, someone who's looking for material comfort or for new adventures within the confines of Soviet society.

The genre of the Picaresque itself is co-opted by the official discourse. One example is the, is a collectively authored book, entitled Bellamore Canal. It's about the construction through forced labor and convict labor of the White Sea Baltic canal in the Soviet Union, which was one of the big projects of the Stalinist 1930s. And a lot of that book is made up of narratives about the lives of the convicts who were working the construction. And these, these narratives, these life stories, themselves are very much like Picaresque narratives. They are about characters who did not believe in the Soviet project. Characters who are again on the margins, criminals, or sometimes just small time

crooks, conman who eventually, supposedly understand really what the Soviet Union was about and kind of surrender to the idea of the Soviet Union. What I show is that this transformation of the rogue is a little bit ambiguous. The character does not, it doesn't look like the character's transformation is authentic or is really being done in good faith. But this in itself sheds light on the question of Soviet identity, on how to reconcile the individual and the collective when they were sometimes acting at cross purposes.

The rogue's transformation, in a way, harks back to the roots of the Picaresque genre itself. And the Picaresque as we, the modern Picaresque started in works published in 16th, 17th century Spain. And there were later variations on the theme on the genre written by European writers, as well as eventually Russian writers. And, oftentimes, these characters on the margins in these works aimed to really achieve some kind of social status. They were on the margins and they wished to acquire better standing in society to live comfortable life, for instance. And what I argue is that we see a little bit of this dynamic playing out in, for instance, these convict's narratives of transformation into ideal Soviet citizens in the Stalinist 1930's.

I hope that my readers will take away two things from *Writing Rogues*. First and foremost that they'll in fact want to read some of the books that I discuss. Some of them are hugely entertaining novels or short stories, especially Ilv and Petrov's *12 Chairs* and the *Golden Calf*, and Issac Babel's *Odessa Tales*, which are classics of the short story form in 20th Century literature. So I think a lot of us literary scholars, when we write our books, we are writing in order to get people to actually read the books that we discuss. That's, that's oftentimes one of, uh, one of our goals. And this is my goal too.

The second takeaway is that literature plays a large, and oftentimes in the US, an overlooked role in collective self-definition and even in the formation of individual selves. In fact, literature and narrative art in general is an extremely powerful instrument

to accomplish exactly that. The formation of a collective identity. And, and I think that the example of the Soviet Picaresque, these works, which depicted characters who were on the margins, but did become part of the Soviet identity, of the Soviet kind of collective unconscious, so to speak. I think this is a partially powerful example of the way that literature can actually help define what it means to belong to, to a collective group, and oftentimes also help form individuals.

My name is Cassio de Oliveira and my research explores the formation of the Soviet identity in literature and culture and the legacy of the Soviet period through the present day.

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