

Nation, citizens not same thing

Mikhail Zadornov is very popular in Russia. Which is too bad, because America is not popular with him. Here's an excerpt from one of his comic routines:

"Often my friends ask me 'Why do you always talk about America in your shows? Why do you criticize her?' It's because the influence of the West, for all our countries in the former USSR, has become a trap for us.

"Everywhere, there's this food, it's not 'imported from the West', no, it's 'tied to the West.'

"Watermelons in sugar syrup, sanitized bouillon, cloned sausages, transvestite chickens, eggs from artificial parakeets, Italian pizza that no Italian would ever eat in Italy ..."

"And all these products, how anyone could possibly eat them? Garlic without scent? Jam that wouldn't even attract flies? Horseradish that doesn't make you cry? And it seems like we don't care about the product any more, only that it comes in a nice package:

"CARROTS KING-SAIYZE!" (Russians have trouble with the English long 'i')

"APPLES, SECOND-XHAND!" (They also have trouble with soft 'h');

"PANCAKES FRESH FROM NEW ZEALAND!"

I should point out that these jokes are much more clever in the original Russian, there's lots of punning and wordplay. I should also point out that after each one of these zingers, the audience laughs hysterically. Don't feel bad, I don't understand Russian humor either.

But regardless of how well his humor travels, Zadornov has struck a chord with Russian audiences. When it comes to Western culture, there is definitely a sense of invasion.

Some of it is probably Russia's age-old fascination with and simultane-



OPINION

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COLUMNIST

ous fear of the West. But there's more to it than that. Zadornov just doesn't get America. Sadly, neither do many Americans.

The problem is that Zadornov and his audience can't distinguish between a country that does something and a country that permits its citizens to do something. This simple distinction is not hard to

make, if you understand something about freedom.

The products that Zadornov rails about, comic exaggerations aside, exist because some people want to buy them and other people want to sell them. No one forces anybody to eat food they think is weird. After all, there's plenty of ordinary produce out there.

And eventually, once Russia becomes wealthy enough, they'll see the emergence of places like Whole Foods to cater to people with exactly this kind of anxiety.

Capitalism is great because it provides opportunities for people who think capitalism stinks.

So it's not that "The West" is pouring evil Frankenfood into the stomachs of Russian babies. It's people at long last making their own decisions about what to eat. That's all.

Sadly, plenty of Americans also don't understand how free societies work. One particularly sad example comes from Bill Maher's film "Religulous", in which he interviews a former American who converted to Islam and now lives in Israel. He describes America as "dressing its women like whores." Funny, I always thought "our" women dressed themselves.

Closer to home, Dr James Dobson

of Focus on the Family has written about the "violence" and "decadence" of American popular culture. I think he speaks for many social conservatives on this point. But he fails, just like Zadornov, to recognize the distinction between a country doing something and a country permitting its people to do something.

America, for example, does not "endorse" homosexuality. We merely permit our homosexual citizens to openly acknowledge and act on their feelings. Yes, we permit our artists and musicians to create works that are violent. But they also make things that have great beauty, are full of passion, and are just plain fun. That's because America lets its creative artists do pretty much what they want.

Sure, Russian conservatives like Zadornov worry about the consequences of economic freedom (in Russia, economic "liberals" and "conservatives" are the opposite of their American counterparts). Social conservatives stateside worry more about personal freedom. Ultimately, though, the difference is meaningless.

What links them is an inability to understand the difference between nations and their citizens, between endorsement and permission. Anytime someone says things like "Americans eats too much fast food," "Americans drive too much" or "Americans have too many guns," you can tell they don't get it either.

I can understand modern Russia's difficulty with the concept: They've had 75 years of communism. What, pray tell, is our excuse?

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