

Aqui éa Ucrânia! Ukraine and the global community of the oppressed

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AQUI ÉA UCRÂNIA! UKRAINE AND THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY OF THE OPPRESSED

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “emergency situation” in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this. Then it will become clear that the task before us is the introduction of a real state of emergency; and our position in the struggle against Fascism will thereby improve (Benjamin 2005 [1940]).

In this short intervention, I touch upon the phenomena of *westplaining*, postcolonial and neo-colonial fantasies, and Central and Eastern European exceptionalism present in the public and academic debates around Ukraine before and after February 24, 2022. The issues at stake are the war of aggression and the existential threat to Ukraine as a nation, and this requires more than amplifying the voices of Ukrainian scholars, experts and social movements in response. To be sure, this amplification has been happening, and any attempt to raise the profile of such voices is needed and deeply appreciated when it occurs. Here I call for setting anthropologies and ethnographies of Ukraine in the wider context of global, egalitarian and engaged knowledge production.

The problems of the hierarchies of knowledge entailed in social and economic inequalities between and within Central and Eastern Europe – and elsewhere – have already been widely discussed (see Buchowski 2012; 2018; Capo 2018; Hrymych 2018; Levitt & Crul 2018). The war in Ukraine, which had been ongoing since 2014 until it became a full-scale invasion in 2022, serves as a catalyst for the analysis of pre-existing socio-political issues *within* and debates *about* the current state and future circumstances of Ukraine. As argued by Agnieszka Halemba and Agata Ładykowska, the war might “contribute to shifting hierarchies of knowledge” (2023, p. 150). However, as the authors also note, despite almost two decades of deliberating on these hierarchies, the voices from the locations under discussion are too-often ignored.

There exists an established tradition among anthropologists in Poland, which dates back to the 1990s, of doing ethnography in Ukraine, and writing and teaching about different Ukrainian cultures and its society. This writing and teaching retain some lingering evidence of (post)colonial attitudes, the scent of exoticisation and

the traces of enduring unequal relations between scholars from the two countries (cf. Buchowski 2012; Buyskykh 2016; Hrymych 2018; Józwiak 2011). At some point, though, this tradition also paves the way for some kind of academic convergence and a bridging between diverse world anthropologies (cf. Buchowski 2019). These inequalities and possible bridges put a burden of responsibility on scholars engaged in Ukrainian studies, especially if they are also active outside the ivory tower of academia.

HIERARCHIES OF KNOWLEDGE AND EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE
IN THE SHADOW OF EMPIRE

In 2009, I participated in a Polish-Ukrainian anthropological conference in Warsaw called *Anthropology of borderlands – Polish-Ukrainian neighbourhood*, where my presentation on the regional specificities of the Ukrainian territory of Transcarpathia was met with criticism from Ukrainian participants. I was urged to treat certain regional issues with caution, as some discourses about “regionalism”, “uniqueness” and “exceptionality” might fuel anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian sentiments, thus putting Ukrainian national integrity in danger. It was followed by informal discussions in a mixed Polish and Ukrainian group, where opinions differed along “national” lines. The Polish side (mostly students) represented what “we Poles” then thought of as a reflexive and critical approach to topics like folklore, tradition and nation-building processes. The Ukrainian side (mostly young academics) represented for us what “we Poles” regarded at that time as old-fashioned empiricism, primordialism and the “naïve” search for “objective truth”. One of “us Poles” jokingly remarked that our Ukrainian colleagues represented “engaged anthropology”, which I eventually accepted myself was actually an accurate description. They represented a cause – the right of Ukrainians to exist as a nation – the defence of which was grounded in anthropology. Unlike the Polish students, who embraced postmodernism and deconstructivism, Ukrainian scholars were more oriented to historical and cultural continuity, and a (national) unity manifested in material and symbolic artefacts. Equally, (and yes, I was aware of this back then) certain inferiority-superiority relationships may also have existed between the Ukrainians and “we” Poles, considering the looming Russian imperial menace.

This is not to say that my colleagues were entirely “right” and I was (or we were), entirely “wrong” about our approaches. I might still not agree with some of my Ukrainian colleagues on certain issues, but I believe they were justified in their sensitivity towards the potential silencing of Ukrainian voices and the delegitimising of the integrity of the state. This sensitivity is a double-edged sword, however, as it gives priority to the nation- and state-building efforts at the expense of ethnic minorities, regional specificities and cultural diversity. To this day, I cannot get rid of the impression that, for the Ukrainian conference participants, *any* mention of regional specifics and cultural diversity was considered a threat to Ukrainian national security, which was why my emphasis on the regional characteristics of Transcarpathia created such a controversy back in 2009.

Such concerns echo in other social sciences and humanities, as a philosopher friend of mine from Ukraine discovered. In 2001 he participated in a series of seminars with philosophers from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. The seminars took place in Kyiv and Crimea, where the initiative had come from Russian academic institutions, as part of an effort to strengthen cooperation between humanities scholars from CIS countries. At the roundtable discussions, the common historical and cultural legacy of Russians, Belarussians and Ukrainians and their respective lands came up. The Russian delegation, however, seemed uninterested in their Ukrainian and Belarussian colleagues' opinions. At one point, a participant from Russia expressed his interest in exploring possible ways to bring parts of Ukraine "back to Russia", to which another philosopher responded "we should tell them that they are Ruthenians" (*nada im skazat' chto oni rus'kiye*).¹ Such a formulation re-presented the imperialist and chauvinist ideology of the so-called *Russkii Mir* (Russian World), which perceives Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians as one people, originating in Rus' (Ruthenia) and inhabiting "Rus(s)ian lands" in an academic setting. This experience has made my friend cautious about making any supposedly "innocent" statement regarding ethnic boundaries, nation-building, languages or dialects; "Russia is waiting with its tanks for these kinds of statements" was his remark.

The above-mentioned anecdotes highlight the difficulties Ukrainian scholars have faced when confronting Russian imperialist propaganda. The events of 2014 and 2022 further show that, in light of the emerging threat from the Russian (neo-)Empire, concerns for Ukrainian national vulnerability have been justified. It is debatable whether the Russian leadership actually needed any rational grounds in order to invade (according to an old Polish proverb, if you want to hit a dog, you will always find a stick). It is more likely, in fact, that these discourses of Ukraine's "culpability" would not exist without the Kremlin's imperialist and revanchist policies. The ignorance of this powerful propaganda that some intellectuals and opinion makers in the "Global West" display is another obstacle one encounters while discussing Ukrainian-related topics at the international level.

Since March 2022, I have taken part in countless discussions with people from all over the world about Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In most cases these were people outside of academia and not involved in Ukrainian issues. All of my interlocutors condemned the Russian aggression, each felt sorry for the Ukrainian losses, and most of them were in favour of Ukrainian defensive efforts. Still, some of them presented opinions that I found either *difficult* to accept or *outright* unacceptable.² I was told that: the war in Ukraine is actually a proxy war between the USA, Russia and China; Ukrainians are pawns in a global game; peace and ceasefire are always

¹ Unlike *russkie* (with double s), the word *rus'ki* (single s and a soft sign) does not refer to Russians and Russia but to the broader and diffuse category of Ruthenians or Rusyns. The use of this concept does not necessarily imply pro-Russian or greater-Russian sentiments but can also be used to stress the supposed community of Russians, Belarussians and Russians as one "family" with common ancestors.

² In order not to create a national differentiation, I do not name the nationalities of the people who expressed these views.

better than war; Ukrainian people should not take part in a war waged by elites and in the interests of elites on both sides; Russia was provoked into invading Ukraine.

Juxtaposing the lived experience of the people of Ukraine with the fantasies of Western commentators, Oksana Dutchak, a Ukrainian sociologist, exposes the limitation and superficiality of such “popular” opinions and the arrogance and ignorance of those who voice them (Dutchak 2022). Importantly though, similar opinions have also been expressed by Western academics and public intellectuals. The choir which repeatedly sings the same old “peace now” and “Russia was provoked” tunes is led by the linguist and political theorist Noam Chomsky and is joined by, among others, economists Yanis Varufakis and Jeffrey Sachs, sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas, and diplomat and political theorist Henry Kissinger (cf. Gorodnichenko et al. 2022; Gorodnichenko 2023; Wężyk 2022). It is notable that these choristers are from such radically different political positions, ranging from anarchism and socialism through liberalism to conservatism.

Among anthropologists, or scholars recognised by the anthropological audience, we find similar views expressed by David Harvey, in his short entry on the *Focaal-blog*, where he blamed “Global Western elites” for the supposed “humiliation” of the Russian leadership, and pointed to NATO’s “eastward expansion” for what he called “recent events in Ukraine” (Harvey 2022). Interventions by Don Kalb (2022) and Chris Hann (2022) provoked emotional reactions among many of my colleagues, too, both in social media and in our conversations. Kalb and Hann, who are both engaged in fieldwork in Central and Eastern Europe and in debates with anthropologists from this region, condemned Russian aggression and declared that they had “understanding” for Ukrainian self-determination. Still, they fell into the trap of tracing CIA plots that were supposedly playing out behind the scenes, and they paid disproportionate attention to the frankly exaggerated problem of the Ukrainian far-right. They also called for acknowledging the Russian “perspective” of the events. In her polemics with Harvey, Elizabeth Cullen Dunn claims that this blame-the-west approach gives a *carte blanche* to Russian expansionism:

The notion that the Russian invasions of Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Ukraine again now are defensive actions on the part of Russia is deeply wrongheaded. They are pure aggression. They are first of all aggression towards the peoples and territories forcibly incorporated into the Russian Empire in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. As the experience of Chechnya shows, Russia is willing to utterly destroy places and people that seek to leave the empire (Dunn 2022).

In a similar manner, Derek Hall criticises Harvey’s West-centric approach and his lack of sensitivity towards relations of dependency and oppression in this part of the world:

The possibility that the liberated states might have desperately wanted, and might now want more than ever, to be protected from the re-imposition of a Russian imperialism from which they have suffered grievously in the past is not raised. [...] The goals, aspirations, initiatives and fears of

Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Moldova, and many other countries are ignored in favour of a narrative in which all agency is attributed to “the US and the West” (Hall 2022, np).

In the anthropological milieu, these Harvey-esque voices seem rather an exception than a rule. They nevertheless require a counter-narrative, one which can also serve as a contribution to public debate about Ukraine in the context of global inequalities and injustices.

INJUSTICE, EXPLOITATION AND THE COMMUNITY OF THOSE WHO RESIST

In March 2022, Andrii Sadovyi, the mayor of Lviv, publicly suggested seizing the London properties of Russian oligarchs in order to convert them into reception centres and living spaces for Ukrainian refugees (Harding 2022). In May 2022, a group of activists occupied the Zattere art gallery in Venice belonging to Leonid Mikhelson, the CEO of Novatek gas corporation, a Russian oligarch and patron of the arts (Global Project 2022). The campaigners pointed to the patron's close links to Putin and the hypocrisy of “Western/democratic” elites doing business with Russian companies, which in fact delivered more money to Russia, in their payments for fossil fuels, than to Ukraine in humanitarian and military support. In an accompanying statement they released, the campaigners situated their occupation of the gallery within a context of the Russian war against Ukraine. They also invoked a global context of wars, various imperialisms and exploitations involving Russia, the Unites States, other powerful governments and other international, non-state actors:

Since the invasion of Ukraine, EU countries have paid around \$35 billion to the Russian Federation for oil and gas, their spending to militarily support for Kyiv amounts to €1 billion [...] The use of art and so-called philanthropic foundations are a powerful means to cleanse the reputation of those who owe their wealth to exploitation and devastation³ (Global Project 2022).

This identification of Ukraine as an entity subjected to violence and Ukrainians as fighting against an oppressor could also be seen in late May 2022 in the district of Carapicuíba, São Paulo. A friend of mine who an activist and union organiser from Brazil sent me a picture of a group of tenants protesting their eviction. One of their slogans, visible on the façade, was “Aqui éa Ucrânia!” – “Ukraine is here!”. The tenants were comparing their situation – of being under attack by the oppressive force of the Brazilian police – with that of Ukrainians being under attack by an oppressive and violent arm of the Russian war machine, with both powers acting out of greed

³ Automatic translation from Italian with the use of Deepl. The original text reads: *Dall'invasione dell' Ucraina, i Paesi dell'UE hanno pagato circa 35 miliardi di dollari alla federazione russa per petrolio e gas, la spesa europea per sostenere militarmente Kiev ammonta a 1 miliardo di euro [...] L'utilizzo dell'arte e di fondazioni cosiddette filantropiche sono un mezzo fortissimo per pulire la reputazione di quanti devono la propria ricchezza allo sfruttamento e alla devastazione. Artwashing, cultural washing: nomi diversi per una pratica assai diffusa, invasiva e dannosa.*

and lust for power. “It is a kind of solidarity among the oppressed,” I was told. One might doubt if a comparison between being evicted by the police and being bombed by missiles is legitimate but it is the historical and systemic exclusion, submission, violence and the continuous struggle for justice and dignity, not the scale of suffering, that is being weighed in such a juxtaposition. It resonates with Ukrainian economist Zakhar Popovych’s thinking that Palestinians and Syrians tend to have a better understanding of Ukraine than Western Europeans (Popovich 2023).

In the end, Sadovyi’s plea has never been seriously considered by the London boroughs or the British government. Equally, the occupation in Venice lasted only a few hours. Nevertheless such symbolic statements provide critical lenses through which anthropologists (and anyone else interested in Ukrainian issues) can look at Ukraine: its statehood, its society, colonisation, war and various intersecting inequalities at national and international levels that are part of public research and debate. These lenses see the people of Ukraine and their struggles as, respectively, agents and contexts of resistance from the perspective of the global oppressed and dispossessed.

WESTPLAINING VS GLOBAL RESISTANCE

It is difficult to trace the exact origin of the concept of *westplaining*, but Srdjan Garčević, a Serbian writer and traveller, is usually credited with coining the term in his 2017 article “Westsplaining the Balkans” (Garčević 2017). Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the concept became increasingly prominent in debates and was adopted in anglophone opinion journalism and online forums worldwide. The term points to the privileged position of those from the West who express their opinions and make their claims, and confer a certain inferiority to Central and Eastern European actors. These Central and Eastern Europeans are then understood to be unable to judge their own situation properly, as they are seen to lack the basic knowledge of their own countries and regions and of geopolitical realities. *Westplaining* as a practice thus often refers to a Global Western commentariat that ignores voices from less-privileged parts of the globe (Brom 2022; Smoleński, Dutkiewicz 2022). It also means perceiving the whole world through the prism of a stable paradigm of “the West”, thus “explaining” not only *by* but also *through* the West. The latter can be seen, for example, in how the USA and NATO are being blamed for the war waged against Ukraine by Russia, so that only Western institutions retain agency (Artiukh 2022). In both cases, we can speak of West-centrism and forbidding people (whole populations!) from debate and decisions about their fate, from even expressing themselves. Perceiving Ukrainian resistance through the lens of global struggles of the oppressed, exploited and disposed allows us to counter this kind of geopolitical – or civilizational – narrative. It is also helpful in avoiding the traps of idealising the supposed war between “Western values” and “Eastern barbarianism”.

Seen through the lens of resistance against centuries-long oppression, Ukraine appears neither in the “East”, nor in the “West” and not even in the “Centre”. As

expressed in the graffiti on the walls of an evicted house in the outskirts of São Paulo, “Ukraine is here”: among activists, housing initiatives and other social justice movements; among colonised peoples fighting for their self-determination; and among those who oppose racism, apartheid and other forms of structural violence. This is not to claim that there is no injustice within Ukrainian society or that there is no racism in Ukraine. In many cases, the same people resisting Russian invasion also fight against social inequalities, corruption, racism and queer-phobia in modern Ukraine. Among academics, the war has triggered discussions about prevailing West-centrism, blame-the-West approaches and the agency of the people of Central and Eastern Europe. On the ground in Ukraine, Russia’s full-scale aggression has been met by a multitude of social mobilisations in support of civilians and the army alike. Among soldiers in the trenches and activists providing different kinds of help, we find the unemployed, farm workers, industrial workers, returning migrants, trade-union members, feminists, LGBTQ+ people, Roma people, anarchists, socialists and international volunteers of different backgrounds.⁴ As well as calling for dismantling the global hierarchies of knowledge, this situation calls for putting participatory and justice-seeking anthropology in its place. *And – to quote Walter Benjamin – our position in the struggle against Fascism will thereby improve.*⁵

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⁴ The three international fighters, Cooper Andrews (a Black American activist), Dmitry Petrov (a Russian anthropologist with anarchist convictions) and Finbar Cafferkey (an Irish socialist), who fought in the same military unit and who were killed in the same battle in Bakhmut, are symbols of global resistance in Ukraine. What places this emancipatory struggle in the context of contradictions, unlikely alliances and possible convergences in the time of war is the fact that the military unit they served in was run by the conservative-orthodox “Brotherhood” group (cf. Filiu 2023).

⁵ Writing about the “struggle against fascism” in 1940, Benjamin was clearly referring to German National Socialism in the opening months of WWII, as well as Italian fascism. The word “fascism” is often abused in public debate but there are also justified claims to think of the Russian Federation AD 2023 as either a fascist or quasi-fascist state (cf. Budraitskis 2022).

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