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Independence

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ATYPICAL POST-COLONIALISM: UKRAINE IN GLOBAL POLITICAL THOUGHT

Dr Volodymyr Yermolenko
Internews Ukraine

Written by a Ukrainian philosopher and journalist, this article focuses on Ukrainian intellectual history and current political and social dilemmas. It examines at key contemporary controversies such as modernity vs tradition, republic vs empire, colonialism vs postcolonialism, and identity vs otherness. These issues form the basis for an analysis of how Ukrainian intellectual history can provide some new insights into issues of global political thought today.

There are two contradicting fallacies when looking at history and the political experience of a nation. The first fallacy states that the world is ruled by universals and therefore no national experience is specific enough to challenge these universals. The second fallacy argues that a particular national experience is unique and therefore no universal concept can apply to describe it fully.

The art of political thinking is, in a way, the art of avoiding these two traps: the Scylla of abstract universalism and the Charybdis of utopian national uniqueness. The cases of specific nations and societies can, indeed, put some universalist clichés in doubt, but no nation is so unique that it is exempt from commonalities.

In this context, Ukraine's history and political experience deserve a fresh look because this can help bring new nuances into the way we think about our world today. The question is, which *specific* traits of Ukrainian political experience might help rethink some *universal* problems we are all facing today.

Ukraine's situation can give us examples of how to possibly bridge certain key



The art of political thinking is, in a way, the art of avoiding these two traps: the Scylla of abstract universalism and the Charybdis of utopian national uniqueness

controversies we are globally going through now. It does not mean that Ukraine has a recipe for dealing with these problems: sometimes it does have answers, sometimes it does not. What the country's experience can tell us, however, is how the binary oppositions, between tradition and modernity, liberalism and conservatism, liberty and identity, colony and metropole that define today's world, can be looked at with a fresh eye, in the light of this Ukrainian experience, which we might call "atypical postcolonialism."

Tradition and Modernity

The struggle between tradition and modernity defined key controversies in the Western intellectual and socio-political history in the 19th century. This opposition was weakened in the second half of the

20th century, creating space for the conflict between liberalism and communism, which ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the early 21st century, however, especially since the 9/11 attack, this opposition has come back, splitting societies in the US, the United Kingdom, France, Poland, and many other countries into polarized clusters, often barely able to talk to each other.



Ukrainian intellectual debate was formed in the 19th and 20th centuries as a reflection of a nation under imperial rule. Striving for freedom and emancipation often meant striving for both individual rights and community rights

Interestingly, Russian intellectual history knows this opposition too: its key 19th century debate, which has reappeared in the 21st century, has been the debate between traditionalist “Slavophiles,” and modernist “Westernizers.” Paradoxically, the Soviet Union was the result of a victory for the “Westernizers:” progressive, atheist, often materialist, intellectuals and activists. And yet, this victory gave rise to the most anti-Western empire in Russian history.

Ukraine’s historical experience has been different. Ukrainian intellectual debate was formed in the 19th and 20th centuries as a reflection of a nation under imperial rule. Striving for freedom and emancipation often meant striving for both individual rights and community rights. The modern – or modernist – focus on the individual rights went hand-in-hand with the traditionalist focus on the rights of the community and its unique identity.

This explains why many prominent Ukrainian writers and intellectuals were *modernizing traditionalists*. The “modernism” in fin-de-siècle literary Ukraine – Lesya Ukrainka, Ivan Franko, Vasyl Stefanyk, Olha Kobylianska, Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi – also involved the re-inventors of tradition: look at Ukrainka’s *The Forest Song*, Kotsiubynskyi’s *Shadows of the Forgotten Ancestors*, which later became the plot for Sergei Parajanov’s cinema masterpiece, or Stephanyk’s rural short stories. The “traditionalist” element differentiated this Ukrainian literary modernism from many European contemporaries. At the same time, when it worked with the “traditionalist” peasant or rural subjects, Ukrainian modernist literature did its best to not only preserve the tradition, but also to give it new and modernized means of expression.

But looking at both the predecessors and successors of this literary modernism, similar patterns emerge. In the 1920s, communist Ukrainian writer Mykola Khvylovy was professing a radical aesthetic revolution founded on the great European tradition but projecting itself on what he called an “Asian Renaissance.” This is why he found an ally in the neo-classicist poet Mykola Zerov, a professor of literature and translator of ancient Roman poets. So, a revolutionary modernist was seeking his roots in a great European heritage, that is, looking at the future and into the past at the same time.

A hundred years before him, the key symbol of Ukrainian national poetry, Taras Shevchenko, was not only a re-inventor of a Ukrainian tradition, but also an avant-garde poet for his time. This is why Dmytro Horbachov, the Ukrainian art critic and expert on literary avant-garde, compared Shevchenko’s 19th century poetry to the futurist aesthetics of 1910-1920s.¹

1 Дмитро Горбачов, «Авангардизм ХХ століття і Шевченко» [Dmytro Horbachov, “20th century avant-garde and Shevchenko”], in Дмитро Горбачов, *Лицарі голодного Ренесансу*. Київ, Dukh I Litera, 2020, p. 49-68.

The specific relationship between tradition and modernity in Ukraine has one explanation. Modernization implied emancipatory discourse: emancipation from hierarchies, inequalities, and oppression. But going deep into national tradition meant yet *another emancipation* – from the transnational empire. This modernist traditionalism defined many phenomena in Ukrainian culture, even to this day. When a progressive reformist wearing a *vyshyvanka*² holds an iPhone, or an ethnic music band combines Ukrainian folk songs with electronic music and modern rhythms, such as *Onuka, Go_A, Dakha Brakha*, and others, these are the heirs of the phenomena taking place a century ago.

While outside observers are often myopically focusing on the “far-right” challenge in Ukrainian politics and society, they are missing an important key to understanding the Ukrainian approach to the past. Far-right parties consistently get no more than 1-2% during parliamentary elections, but Ukraine’s “modernizing traditionalism” has far deeper roots, permeating moderate and liberal discourse, but rarely venturing into the political extreme.

Much of this Ukrainian traditionalism employs what I would call a *soft tradition*, meaning it is often flexible and adaptable to modernity. It can embrace technological progress, democratization and inclusion. Politically, a Ukrainian citizen is unlikely perceive tradition as a “Golden Age” to which they need to return. Ukrainian history did not have a proper Golden Age, given too many tragic events and losses of identity and agency, so there is little genuine basis for nostalgia. Yet the idea of “returning” is a key slogan in today’s conservative backlash: Trump’s “Make America Great Again,” Brexit’s “Take Back Control,” or the popular Russian slogan “We Can Do It Again” with reference to World War II. In Ukraine,

however, the idea of repeating the past is horrifying: in Ukrainian history, the main “repeats” were fateful mistakes and grave tragedies.

Ukrainian historical and political experience is thus developing in a different dimension than the simple binary opposition of “tradition” and “modernity,” or “conservatism” and “liberalism.” And this deserves some special reflection.

Republic and Empire

Ukraine’s history can also provide an unusual perspective on the conceptual struggle between the ideas of the Republic and the Empire.

As an independent state, Ukraine was born on the territories of former empires: Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian – turned the Soviet Union in the 20th century. The idea of a “dismembered nation,” a collective body whose parts were divided between empires, was important for the imagination of the 19th century, which saw the birth of founding myths for many nations, especially in Eastern Europe. The Ukrainian story of a “dismembered nation” was promoted by the Ukrainian romantics, primarily by historian Mykola Kostomarov and poet Shevchenko, in 1840s.

In some aspects, it echoed the Polish myth of the time, in particular Adam Mickiewicz’s vision of Poland as a collective Christ striving for a resurrection. But Ukrainians applied considerable creativity to the Polish imagining. For one thing, they pointed out that Ukraine’s “dismembering” experience preceded Poland’s. While Polish “disintegration” dated to the late 18th century, Ukraine had been divided between the other states – Muscovy, Poland, the Ottoman Empire, and between Eastern Christian, Western Christian, and Muslim states – since

2 The Ukrainian national embroidered shirt.

the mid-17th century, during the period called *Ruina* or Ruin. This explains why the *Ruina* was given such enormous attention in 19th century Ukrainian literature: by Shevchenko, Panteleimon Kulish, Marko Vovchok, Ivan Nechuy-Levytsky, and others. While projecting the Polish Romantic imagining of a “dismembered nation” on their own experience, Ukrainian romantics argued that the Ukrainian experience had deeper historical roots.



The construction of nationhood was beyond and despite political borders, which at different periods cut right through the “body” of the Ukrainian nation. The idea of “remaining on our land” despite borders that were often shifted by imperialist expansions has become one of the key notions in Ukrainian political imagining

This imagining was not unique: it was a continuation of an old European notion of *palingenesis*, the passage through suffering, dismemberment and death to a higher stage of development developed by French, Italian, Polish and other writers and philosophers in the early 19th century. What differentiated the Ukrainian case was its longer horizon of memory. History also showed that it was set to be more patient, able to create a sustainable national state of the collected “fragmented parts” of the national body only in the late 20th century.

The key notion developed by this romantic literature of the 19th century was that, despite the fact that they were scattered among various empires, Ukrainians continued to be *one* nation. The construction of nationhood was beyond and despite political borders, which at different periods cut right through the “body” of the

Ukrainian nation. The idea of “remaining on our land” despite borders that were often shifted by imperialist expansions has become one of the key notions in Ukrainian political imagining. Even now, in the early 21st century, it can still be heard in one of the mobilizing memes of recent years, the word *stoyimo*: “We’re taking a stand” (and not going anywhere): holding their ground during protests on the Maidan in the face of police brutality, holding their ground in Eastern Ukraine facing the Russian army, and so on.

This feeling is essentially republican. It combines traditionalist “love of one’s land” with the republican idea of active citizens fighting for their rights. The idea of the republic is a concept of bottom-up politics, politics created by the interaction of members of the community. The idea of a republic can have interesting links to the idea of land, stable borders and the specific attitude of a group of people towards this land – a link that we tend to forget after the far-right devaluation of the “land” and “earth” as metaphors in the 20th century.

The idea of empire, on the contrary, contains the idea of *expansion*, of shifting borders. Empires are built with the intention of going far *beyond* a specific place, far beyond national borders. The imperial mentality, recreated by a rich poetic imagination in Virgil’s *Aeneid* – which had an ironic remake in Ukrainian literature in Ivan Kotliarevsky’s 18th century *Eneida* – contains the core idea of an “evacuation of the motherland.” An empire is a political project able to copy-paste itself everywhere else in the world, a top-down conception of politics acquiring territories through force or seduction.

Many episodes of Ukrainian history can be read as attempts at a republican political practice to oppose the expansion of empire. But Ukraine cannot be understood only as a republic. Being a meeting point among empires, it contains multiple imperial traces.

Ukraine's history was not imperial, it was *inter-imperial*. In a way, it can be described as a place where religious – Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim – imperial projects met in the early modern era, while ideological imperial projects – far right and far-left – met in the 20th century.

These meetings were not innocent. They left horrible trails of suffering and death. But they have also left traces of mutual influence, interpenetration and dialogue. Mixtures, junctions, mosaics, and combinations are left from the imperial interconnections, which Ukrainian republic is now trying to re-appropriate. In a way, Ukraine is a republic trying to re-interpret its inter-imperial heritage.

Colonialism and Postcolonialism

Ukraine's history is also an interesting case in the history of postcolonialism. Ukrainian culture was developing postcolonial optics already in the 19th century, before postcolonial studies became an intellectual fashion, but it still lacks a full voice to persuade the world that its optics are interesting.

At the same time, there are several nuances that make the Ukrainian postcolonial perspective different from others.

First of all, proto-Ukrainian polities were not only a colony but also a "metropole," a centre of influence. In the Middle Ages, Kyiv was the centre of the most powerful state in Central and Eastern Europe, Kyivan Rus'. In the Baroque era, Kyiv was an epicentre of both orthodox influences on its neighbours, as far as the Middle East, and Roman Catholic influences on orthodox Eastern Christianity. In the early Classicist era, Ukrainian intellectuals helped formulate and implement the concept of a Russian empire as a new, highly centralized state under Peter I. Paradoxically, this empire later destroyed Ukraine's autonomy. Then

there's the 19th century Romantic era, when Ukrainian popular culture was a magnet for the literary imaginations of both Polish and Russian intelligentsia.

Secondly, Russian colonialism with regard to Ukraine and its other Slavic neighbour Belarus was not only a colonization *per se*, but also a huge *assimilation* project. Over the 18-20th centuries, Russia was constructing what German conservatives only imagined in the 20th century: a "continental empire" that needs not only to conquer and subjugate other peoples, but also to erase their identity, the assimilate them into the imperial linguistic, cultural, and religious world, that is, to prove that they *did not exist*. The absence of a racial difference between the colonizer and the colonized, in contrast to most European maritime empires and the cultures they colonized, and the proximity of ethnic and linguistic traits made this assimilation an easier task – and less visible to outsiders.

While postcolonial nations colonized by Western European empires had to prove that their identity was valid and their voices should be heard, Ukrainian postcolonialism was a struggle with a somewhat different challenge: it needed to prove that its identity existed *at all*, that it had not been invented by an external conspiracy.

Thirdly, Russia itself has applied postcolonial discourse to its own relations with the West. It has persuaded some international players that the West has been an (unsuccessful) colonizer of Russia and that Russia's "right to self-determination" can be described in postcolonial terms. According to this narrative, encircled by enemies and the victim of several "Western invasions" in the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, Russia itself needed postcolonial emancipation. This fits today's Russian discourse that it is under attack from NATO and that its cultural specificity is not properly cherished in the world.

Significantly, this type of discourse ignores the actually imperial nature of the Russian political project. Applying post-colonial logic to Russian society, which plays on the guilt in Western post-imperial reflexes, automatically eliminates the uncomfortable issue of Russia's own imperialism. By imposing the idea that Russia deserves its part in postcolonial discourse against the West, the very essence of recent Russian history is completely ignored and the fact that it was an empire, not a colony.



Assimilation made the identities of the colonized nations of the Eastern Slavic world invisible.

Having similar physical features as the colonizer, they needed to renounce the less visible parts of their nation: language, literature, music, traditions, and so on

Western-type colonialism was essential *racial*: it was built upon an idea that one group is “naturally destined” to be subordinated due to its race and skin colour. It was an imperialism based on *fatal identity*. Eastern European colonialism differs: it was based on the “historical” idea that a people actually *can* – and should – change its place in the universe by renouncing its identity. In short, an imperialism of *changeable identity*. Assimilation made the identities of the colonized nations of the Eastern Slavic world *invisible*. Having similar physical features as the colonizer, they needed to renounce the less visible parts of their nation: language, literature, music, traditions, and so on.

This is what is making Eastern European post-colonialism so focused on identity. Differences between Ukraine and Belarus today are differences in the degree of *assimilation*: Ukrainians were more successful at preserving their identity than Belarusians, and so now

they have more resilience against imperial assimilation. In this context, identity becomes not an opponent of liberty, as in Western world, but its inalienable ally, its *conditio sine qua non*: erasing identity means the victory of empire, and the victory of empire means the destruction of liberty.

Identity and Otherness

This leads us to another crucial question: the relationship between identity and “otherness.”

Twentieth century postcolonial thought was focused on the question of “the Other.” It interpreted colonialism as a massive attempt to denigrate and erase the “otherness” of other peoples, cultures, genders, identities, and so on. Struggling against colonialism meant struggling against the totalitarian voice of identity, and “logocentrism.” It also meant accepting and embracing the *difference* in contrast to identity, embracing “otherness” in its full richness and diversity.

But this view also contains imperial traces. It's easy to embrace any “otherness” when it is *weaker* than you, when it does not pose a threat to your existence – or at most when it is equally strong. What if “the other” is stronger? What if it turns aggressive? And a more difficult question: what if the “other” is trying to erase *your* own “otherness,” your identity? What if this “other” is essentially an empire determined to erase all otherness entirely?

Today, Ukraine faces an interesting dilemma, finding itself between a “bad empire” that is trying to rebuild its previous power (Russia) and “good” or “repenting” empires (mostly Western countries) whose awareness of the moral problems of colonialism is growing and who are trying to undo the harm they have done in the past.

The problem with the “bad empire” is obvious: for today's Ukraine, Kremlin Russia is an existential threat to its very existence.

The problem with “good empires” is a bit trickier: values-wise, Ukraine feels part of Western civilization, but on the practical level there are important discrepancies. A “repenting empire” tends to enact its repenting through a discourse of otherness: the good postcolonial society is only the one that cherishes otherness as much as possible. Multiculturalism was also a product of former empires, in which all possible “others” that were suppressed for centuries are reclaiming their rights.

For a much more local “republican” culture, the situation is more ambiguous: built by the local identity of a local community, it is deeply suspicious towards “others.” In the worst scenario, the local “republican” identity develops a hostile vision of the other, seeing any “other” as a threat. The republican idea, in short, is not immune to diseases like radical nationalism or xenophobia.

In a better and more moderate version, the republican political culture feels important distinctions between “the other,” “the alien” and “the enemy,” and is able to navigate among these modalities. This navigation might lead to an important “mapping of otherness,” since not every “other” is an “alien,” let alone an “enemy.” But this republican feeling will never develop infinite trust towards “otherness.” It is aware that some others can actually be enemies. Here is the point where it finds itself in conflict with “repenting empires” that believe, because of their burden of guilt, that the appreciation of otherness should be infinite, and that there is no bigger enemy than *identity*, which creates clear boundaries with “others.”

Conclusion

The Ukrainian political experience has rarely been on the radars of global political thought. It’s time for it to take its place. This experience often offers atypical answers to the global issues faced today. These

answers come from the specific milieu of the Ukrainian political culture and political thinking, mostly developed in its literature, which often used a different set of concepts and oppositions than the mainstream of European and American political thinking.



The Ukrainian political experience has rarely been on the radars of global political thought. It’s time for it to take its place

This set of concepts come from an experience that Ukraine shares with many other postcolonial countries: a stateless nation that developed the idea of a political community existing outside of political institutions; a republic coping with an imperial and inter-imperial heritage; a nation that expresses modernizing traditionalism, seeing tradition and identity not as opposed to modernity and liberty but as a necessary component of the two.

This experience is shared by other countries that have gone through a similar struggle for identity, statehood, cohesion, and plurality. And this is what makes the Ukrainian case so interesting.

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