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RESEARCH AND IDEOLOGICAL (DIS)ENGAGEMENT

ETHNOLOGIA POLONA

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Editorial Address
Redakcja Ethnologia Polona
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Email: ethnologia.polona@iaepan.edu.pl

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CONTENTS

SPECIAL ISSUE
RESEARCH AND IDEOLOGICAL (DIS)ENGAGEMENT

CONVERSATION

VARIA

REVIEW

Ethnologia Polona, vol. 44: 2023, 5–18
PL ISSN 0137-4079, DOI: 10.23858/ethp.2023.44.3619

S P E C I A L I S S U E

INTRODUCTION: THE INTERSECTIONS OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND IDEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT

CATHERINE WANNER

PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

NERINGA KLUMBYTĖ

MIAMI UNIVERSITY

When ideologies are used to justify violence, oppression, or to fortify hierarchies of inequality in order to bring about political change that benefits some while causing harm to others, is there a moral mandate or ethical responsibility for anthropologists to engage with the actors pursuing such agendas? If so, what effects might engagement in ideologically driven political interventions have on the quality and impact of anthropological research? No one can critique from a position outside of ideology. Therefore, interventions are not ideologically neutral. If events in an anthropologist's field site prompt political activism, how should anthropologists reflect on the ideological underpinnings of their own research and their scholarly response to ideas and events they find objectionable?

The aim of this issue of "Ethnologia Polona" is to address these questions by interrogating the intersections of academic research and ideological engagement as they have unfolded historically and as they continue to shape our field in this period of growing political tensions. Today's political landscape is characterised by the global rise of authoritarianism, religious nationalism, populism, and neo-imperialism. Their implementation has led to political transformations that include occupation, injustice, and wars on multiple fronts. The entrenched ideological convictions of particular actors and groups have also fuelled the subversion of truth, the normalisation of "alternative facts" and disinformation, and elevated the acceptability of xenophobic and racist rhetoric in many regions of the world.

Anthropologists who conducted fieldwork during the Cold War had to contend with a polarised ideological context that either condemned or celebrated socialism, often in black and white terms. Many continued to conduct ethnographic research during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s or in their aftermath, when nationalist, xenophobic or otherwise exclusionary debates raged, much as they do today. Those anthropologists navigated conflicting feelings of allegiance and pressures to disclose who they were even as they withstood attempts to convince them to choose one side over another and to represent that corresponding narrative or interpretation. Regardless of the specific time or the theoretical paradigms to which anthropologists subscribed, there is a track record of anthropologists engaging in public debates, often as critics of the dominant political and social ideologies of their times.

We define ideology as a set of ideas that forms the basis of economic and political systems and social theories and practices by linking social processes to relations of power and domination. Global capitalism, nationalism, socialism, and liberalism are ideologies that have been particularly significant in shaping state policies and geopolitical alliances in the 20th and 21st centuries. For anthropologists, one of the most influential and succinct definitions of ideology was penned by Clifford Geertz (1973). He defined an ideology as "a cultural system." In doing so, he sought to reposition ideology away from a Marxist interpretation of ideology that equated "ideas as weapons" wielded by certain groups in their quest for power. Rather, Geertz depicts ideology as a meaning-making framework, and specifically one that bridges the gulf between the way things are and the way they should be, thereby allowing individuals to orient themselves and act purposefully.

According to Louis Althusser (1976), ideology, or the ideas we hold about the world and our place in it, has a material existence that is always present in our consciousness, concepts, and institutions. Ideologies permeate advertisements, election campaigns, government slogans, national holidays, and monuments. Once accepted by the majority and institutionalised, ideologies fade into the background of public and political life and are denegated, to use Althusser's term, which allows them to go unnoticed and therefore unchallenged. It is easier to critique the ideological engagement of others, especially when it is unacceptable to us, than it is to recognise, let alone criticise, our own ideological biases, assumptions, and blind spots. Ideologies are impactful and powerful since they naturalise and normativise certain perspectives, ideas and actions as well as erase the validity of others. They smuggle their value-laden premises into everyday practices and the rhetoric of daily life in such a way that inclinations, preferences, and orientations come to be experienced as second nature. This contributes to the negative connotations of ideology in the Marxist sense as "false consciousness," as a means to manipulate individuals and groups into serving the interests of others. Paul Ricoeur (1986) reminds us that utopian thinking

posits that it is possible to create a world without or beyond ideology which he, like Althusser, understands as illusory.

The importance of recognising the intersection of ideology and research, and the impetus to act it often yields, became especially poignant for anthropologists living or working in Eastern Europe after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This war prompted anthropologists to re-evaluate their own research and the existing theoretical paradigms that had been developed to understand power and political change. How can we explain the multiple outbreaks of war we witness today and the will to fight and destroy among some and the will to uncompromisingly resist among others? Which ideologies motivate these convictions and which do we want to inform our own? We can learn from how prior generations of anthropologists have responded to political crises, authoritarian regimes, and war.

PAST DEBATES

Throughout the twentieth century, there have been multiple instances in which anthropologists have engaged in public debates, by offering their research findings as evidence to overturn dominant paradigms and thwart ascendant political positions that they found empirically unjustifiable and morally objectionable. It is tempting to overlook the risks these anthropologists took and the incisiveness with which they argued their positions. In many instances, after initial criticism, the ideas they offered were embraced over time and emerged as new ethical, cultural, and institutional norms. We can benefit from recalling their experiences. We offer several examples of how ethnographic research has challenged ideological views on race, gender, and colonialism in the past.

Racism has long been a culturally embedded ideology that grounds certain ideas about personhood and legal rights in biology. Racism posits that there is a causal link between physical and psychological traits, intellect, and other cultural features that can be generalized in racial categories. As an ideology, racism has been used to inform, explain, and justify policies that have systematically disempowered racial minorities. In the early 20th century, Franz Boas was one of the earliest pioneers to use anthropological research to challenge the legitimacy of scientific racism and the dominant view that humans should be grouped into a few, unchanging, bounded racial types (King 2020). Boas' research argued for the importance of history and socio-political context as explanatory factors for cultural and even cognitive and physical differences among peoples. He illustrated this by showing the considerable differences that arose between the offspring of immigrants and their European-born parents. His data challenged the prevailing views about immutable differences between races by showing that even the cephalic index, a parameter for determining

the shape of the skull, which had "always been considered one of the most stable and permanent characteristics of human races" (Boas 1912, 5), was sensitive to environmental influences. These factors prompted Boas to insist on the importance of historical processes in shaping all facets of human experience and led him to challenge white supremacy and become a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. As early as 1910, Boas supported racial equality in the US, which was a radical position at the time, and was an outspoken opponent of imperialism as well.

Two of Boas' students, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, went on to challenge dominant ideas regarding gender ideologies and gender-based roles and identities. Both women made critically important contributions that shifted our thinking by arguing that biological sex was different from socially constructed gender. This was a novel and highly controversial idea in the 1930s. Through ethnography, Mead illustrated the variety of gender roles found across cultures and challenged the dominant understandings of gender as fixed and biologically determined by sex. Mead's and Benedict's findings drew on fieldwork conducted in Samoa, Japan, Papua New Guinea, and among North American indigenous peoples. Initially, such arguments generated much criticism and were derided. Their views gradually gained acceptance and today few would argue for a biological basis for gender roles. Overall, these two women used their ethnographic expertise to formulate fundamentally new ideas that reshaped gender ideologies by upending preconceived notions of gender roles.

The dynamics of challenging dominant ideologies also worked in the other direction, not just from anthropologists to the greater society. World War II was a watershed in world politics and in terms of imposing change on the discipline of anthropology. Talal Asad wrote that World War II ushered in changes that "affected the object, the ideological support, and the organisational base of social anthropology itself" (1973, 88). This reminded him of the extent to which "anthropology does not merely apprehend the world in which it is located, but the world also determines how anthropology will apprehend it" (1973, 88). The post-war period was characterised by numerous colonial rebellions that challenged the validity of European imperialism. As empires broke up, political power in the new sovereign states shifted from local to national elites who used nationalism to forge national cultures even as their economies and ecologies became more firmly integrated into the capitalist world system. Decolonisation movements changed anthropological thought through their objections to the colonial roots of the discipline, its claims to "value-free" study of "other cultures", and its role in replicating inequalities between the European and non-European worlds. As a result of such criticisms, new disciplinary priorities based on respect for human rights emerged and shaped theoretical and methodological engagements. Giving greater voice to indigenous peoples, recognising the political

and economic contexts that structure research, and acknowledging that a person's subjectivity can be a vessel for multiple systems of ideas that are often not singular, coherent, or reducible to state influence, became new research practices that yielded greater sensitivity to the power relations between researcher and subject. These new practices defined research in the postcolonial, post-war era.

Recent research on Cold War anthropology (Price 2016) illustrates how anthropologists were affected by state policies and ideologies. In the post-WWII era, Soviet ethnographers embraced Marxist anthropology and claimed Western ethnography served the imperialist cause. They engaged in ideologically vigilant critiques of "bourgeois anthropologists", who were known for their "aversion to Marxism" and "wariness of the USSR" (Alymov 2022). Western anthropologists, on the other hand, were constrained by restricted possibilities for conducting long-term, fieldwork-based ethnography. This limited interactions and encounters, and eventually slowed the growth of the discipline. Those who did conduct anthropological research in communist states had to contend with constant fears of endangering their interlocutors and losing access to their field sites. Westerners were pressured to reveal their political persuasions as either favourably inclined or critically opposed to Marxism, Soviet-style socialism, and leftist initiatives more broadly.

Katherine Verdery's book, *My Life as a Spy*, published in 2018, reveals the ideological circumstances that shaped her research during the Cold War. She describes how the Romanian secret police viewed her through the lens of Cold War ideological biases and concluded that, as a foreign agent, she must be a spy. They took steps to influence her contacts and shape her research outcomes. Ideological intervention also worked in the other way. Unbeknownst to her at the time, Verdery (2016) now acknowledges that, as an IREX grantee, the money that supported her research was ultimately traced back to the Ford Foundation and the CIA. She argues that her research was "tantamount to the product of a struggle between the CIA/Ford Foundation/Department of State and the Securitate to control representations of "communism" for US audiences" (2016, 450). She claims that most anthropologists working in socialist Romania did not intentionally denigrate Romanian communism. Yet, their ethnographies did not convey the "radiant future" of communism either. Verdery concludes that even "while thinking we combatted Cold War ideology, we played roles this ideology dictated" (2016, 450).

After the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991, Western scholars often analysed the so-called "transition," variously understood as a shift from socialism to capitalism, from the Soviet people to post-Soviet nations, or from authoritarian rule to democratic forms of governance, including the development of civil society (Burawoy and Verdery 1999, Dunn and Hann 1996, Grant 1995, Hann et al. 2002, Phillips 2010, Ries 1997, Wanner 1998). In each instance, the premise was that

Eastern Europe was Westernising by trading in communist ideology for globalised capitalist principles of organising political and economic life.

Eastern European anthropologists embraced Western ideas and yet critiqued the ideological projections of their Western colleagues that orientalised Eastern Europe by representing the region as radically different from the West (Cervinkova 2012; Thelen 2011) and presenting Eastern European societies as mired in history and unchanging (Buchowski 2012). Most poignantly, Michał Buchowski (2004) criticised Western anthropologists for treating Eastern European scholarship mostly as a source of ethnographic data and disregarded its theoretical implications. He also asserted that Western scholars frequently subscribed to an attitude of superiority that made them the "observers" of the "observed", which rendered Eastern European anthropologists as "natives" rather than counterparts.

THE PRESENT MOMENT AND CALLS FOR DECOLONISATION

The Russian annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, followed by Russia's support for armed separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, became a moment of reckoning. They led to the emergence of new frontiers of war in Eastern Europe that definitively marked the end of post-socialism by destroying any sense of "fraternal brotherhood" (Klumbytė 2019; Wanner 2014). After 2014, the Donbas region of Ukraine joined South Ossetia as another destabilised region on its way to becoming another conflict zone, much like Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. Equally important is that the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 were followed by bombings and the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, the Brexit referendum in 2016, and the US presidential election in 2016. This succession of events had an enormous impact on Eastern Europe. It fractured the commitment of Eastern European states to Western liberal and neoliberal projects. For some, it justified increased militarisation, which led to the polarisation of civil societies (Klumbytė 2019). As the anticipation of an uncertain future grew, populist and illiberal ideologies took root throughout Europe and Eurasia. We must recognise the failure of post-socialist studies in anthropology to anticipate these developments. The political and humanitarian crises that characterize the recent past motivated many to use their research as a platform to advocate for specific political positions.

Divergent interpretations emerged among anthropologists to explain the war, revealing a gulf in understanding. Which country was the imperial power to blame for the tragedy of invasion, the US or Russia? (Dunn 2022; Hall 2022; Hann 2022; Harvey 2022; Kalb 2022; Ries and Wanner 2022). Despite this gapping division, the invasion elicited demands to "decolonise" the field in order to avoid the kind of

misguided assumptions that produced the blind spots that (once again) prevented us from anticipating the prospect of such state-led violence in the region. The calls to decolonise knowledge production include decentring Russia-focused research agendas; upending the Russo-centric logic that permeates institutional organisations, hiring practices, and journal content; and developing new theoretical paradigms and perspectives to inform the study of the region. Decolonising demands are made even though it remains difficult to delineate the geographical scope of the object of Slavic, Eastern European, and Eurasian research. Where is the border that separates Eastern Europe from Eurasia, the Caucasus from Turkey, and the former Central Asian republics from the rest of Central Asia? In other words, at this critical juncture, there is consensus that the infrastructure that supports knowledge production must change, but what it will become remains to be seen.

Appeals to decolonise research in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union recognise the 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a war of colonial liberation, suggesting that the USSR only seemed to collapse almost bloodlessly in 1991. Inspired by postcolonial studies, new research agendas have already begun to highlight the interstitiality and hybridity of Ukrainians and other Eastern European peoples, recognise the mimicry of colonisers, the power of self-colonisation, and the perils of postcolonial in-betweenness (Dzenovska 2018; Wanner 2022). Decolonisation is therefore interconnected with other strategies of knowledge production and writing that signal competing ideological assumptions and engagements to which we now turn.

IDEOLOGY AS A CATALYST FOR REFLEXIVITY AND POSITIONALITY

Ideological engagement was previously framed by anthropologists in terms of "moral models". Roy D'Andrade argued that anthropology shifted from a discipline that understood its mission as offering "an objective model of the world" based on empirical data to a discipline that produces knowledge by drawing on "a moral model of the world" (1995, 399). He cautioned against two hazards of relying on moral models while conducting research. First, he argued that "moral models should be kept separate from objective models because moral models are counterproductive to discovering how the world works" (1995, 402). In other words, moral models, and the ideologies that often stem from them as *systems* or *sets* of ideas, can potentially lead to erroneous conclusions. A researcher can be predisposed to see connections and make causal explanations for social phenomena because the ideology posits that they should be there. In this way, ideological commitment to a set of ideas can produce its own blind spots and ultimately be counterproductive. Second, to ensure the widest analytical vista and the most accurate research findings, D'Andrade urges anthropologists to "keep their politics separate from the way they do their science"

(1995, 402). While D'Andrade and others see moral models as epistemologically problematic, few today would argue that "objective" models based on empirical data are morally or ideologically neutral. Scientific knowledge, anthropological or otherwise, is always partial and embedded in power relations, beginning, for example, by the privileging of anthropologists' knowledge and authority over their interlocutors.

Activist anthropology emerged in the late 1980s and drew on such works as *Reinventing Anthropology* (Hymes, 1972), published in the aftermath of the turbulent 1960s. Led by figures such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes, activist anthropology came to diametrically oppose the views offered by D'Andrade. In contrast, Scheper-Hughes urged anthropologists to take moral models as the starting point for their scholarship, arguing that public anthropology "has an opportunity to become an arbiter of emancipatory change not just within the discipline, but for humanity itself" (Scheper-Hughes 2009, 3).

More explicit anthropological activism, including interlocutors who critically evaluated the ethnographies produced about them, gave way to native anthropology and other paradigm shifts that overturned the colonial dichotomy of anthropological "observers" studying the native "observed" (Abu-Lughod 2008; Buyskykh, this issue; Jacobs-Huey 2002; Kubica 2016; Wanner et al., this issue). Such new perspectives and understandings of who anthropologists study triggered a more critical evaluation of the cultural norms and institutional constraints that privilege or marginalise certain types of knowledge and an anthropologist's access to them. Researchers more explicitly considered their positionality in the research process, that is, the relations an anthropologist has with others as they inform power dynamics and access to knowledge. Power dynamics between an anthropologist and interlocutors are shifting once again as interlocutors increasingly Google an anthropologist before agreeing to an interview. Anthropologists are now trained to reflexively analyse and disclose how their positionality might influence their assumptions, perceptions, and ability to observe and understand. Precisely because positionality is analytically consequential, it needs to be factored into the research process and the ultimate research goals. Ideologically laden narratives both enable and constrain the ability to analyse events, how gendered and racially marked bodies are read, and how our own reflexivity and positionality influences the research process. Yet, it is increasingly incumbent upon anthropologists to try to articulate these issues and to recognise shortcomings and limitations where they exist. Such reflection is essential before advocating activist engagement based on one's research findings.

Humphrey (this issue) importantly asks what it means to "have an ideology". She writes:

> How does an anthropologist educated to think in terms of the inter-relatedness and mutual subject-constituting processes of language, concepts, subjectivity, social institutions, economy, politics, ritual, and everyday activity deal with the existence of a self-segregated ideology — one that sees itself as a separate advanced vanguard acting upon the rest of 'society'? […] what are the implications when a studied people are seen to 'have an ideology' — which during the Cold War was perceived as alien and threatening — while the anthropologist's own intellectual formation is self-constructed as non-ideological in that sense.

By reflecting on their positionality scholars can speak openly about their ideological persuasions and motivations, whether they are writing with the express intention of evoking empathy in the reader (Buyskykh, this issue); encouraging engagement in radical activism (Trzcionkowski and Zawiejska, this issue); analysing the ideological underpinnings of rhetoric that facilitates state-orchestrated violence (Ries, this issue); uncovering "uncomfortable facts" through ethnography (Hayden, this issue); interrogating critical anthropology and neoliberal positionality (Songin-Mokrzan, this issue); or reflecting on how interlocutors have interpreted the identities and ideological biases that anthropologists might have in practice (Wanner et al., this issue). All forms of writing are embedded in certain ideological engagements. An analysis of positionality can reveal which ones.

THREE THEMES

The articles in this issue represent three broad themes: retrospectives on ideological engagement; positionality and ethnographic perspectives; and anthropological activism. In terms of the first theme, Caroline Humphrey reflects on the ideological underpinnings and her own ideological (dis)engagements during her decades of research in Soviet Buryatia. Humphrey recalls how her research was initially influenced by her Cambridge education and later by her experiences in Moscow. Her research task (to study Buryat kinship), ethnographic sites, timetable, and supervision were all decided for her. Her work was banned in the Soviet Union for "revealing too much reality" and criticised in the USA for sympathising too much with Soviet socialism. Reflecting on the importance of context in the production of knowledge, Humphrey insightfully notes that during the Cold War era it was ethically justifiable for "an anthropologist to adopt a non-judgmental stance to everyday Soviet life. This is no longer the case." However, she concludes that today, in the context of war, "[i]deology has become toxic, almost too hot to handle in a self-reflective manner, and from both sides it casts a shadow over whatever is written about it."

Robert M. Hayden is empathetic to such dilemmas. He unintentionally became a war anthropologist. He writes that "some scholars with expertise on Yugoslavia were paralyzed, unable to formulate responses to events that they had not anticipated and were not trained to deal with." And yet, they all felt obliged to respond to the tragedy of war by carrying out research. Hayden poses the same questions that anthropologists facing the reality of war in Ukraine ask: "What can a field-experienced anthropologist actually offer, and to whom?" His answer to this question is instructive — "the ability to make clear to foreigners why matters were developing as they were and how they seemed likely to go." Hayden's own contribution to the anthropology of war engages the ethics of responsibility, which he expressed in his commitment to uncover "uncomfortable facts" (Weber 2020) when writing about war-torn societies (Hayden 2007).

Julia Buyskykh and Marta Songin-Mokrzan engage the second theme and questions of positionality and ethnographic knowledge production. Inviting us us to write with empathy as an alternative means of producing anthropological knowledge, Buyskykh reveals how war reshapes positionality and writing. She argues that Ukrainians have "every right to express themselves emotionally" in academic writing because emotional testimony is a "deeper form of knowing, which contributes to more insightful and contextualised knowledge production in anthropology." For Buyskykh, writing with empathy indicates recognition, respect, and awareness of other "lifeworlds." She challenges established conventions that dismiss empathy as feminine, emotional, biased, and inconsistent with Western rational science. In the context of the atrocities of war, which include death, internal displacement, and exile, Buyskykh argues that anthropology "has a right to engage, to intervene, and to be a moral science."

Empathy can indeed be germane to the anthropological enterprise and to successful fieldwork. It can lead to genuine insight derived from overcoming our own limitations by imagining the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of others. Marta Songin-Mokrzan argues that neoliberalism "diffuses power and complicates the pursuit of critical anthropology." Her strategy is to find ways of writing outside of a validating neoliberal framework, or even beyond any particular ideology. Songin-Mokrzan invites anthropologists to navigate the complex web of power and their own positionality within it and within particular socio-political contexts as a means to produce transformative scholarship.

Nancy Ries, Lech Trzcionkowski and Natalia Zawiejska, in their respective papers, use their research to ideologically engage with issues that are of great moral and political significance to them, as demonstrations of anthropological activism. Ries analyses the disturbing rhetoric promulgated by Russian state authorities, media ideologists, and militant bloggers. Her article serves as a testimony to Russia's genocidal intentions towards Ukraine and how they are instrumentalised as tools of agitation

and propaganda. "Cruel discourse" is the phrase she uses to depict the ideologies of violence used in Russia to legitimise, justify, and instigate violent action. Cruel discourse "reinvents institutions, hierarchies, boundaries, selves, expectations, desires, and futures" that enable this war to function "for its own sake and for the amplification of power. Orgiastic, ritualistic, sadistic."

In a similar vein, Lech Trzcionkowski and Natalia Zawiejska see activism among religious studies scholars as a form of political intervention. Lawsuits linked to religion replicate ideological cleavages in Polish society between those who want to protect Christianity and those who promote liberal views. The polarisation of the religious field is influenced by the rise of the right-wing political faction "Solidarna" and their mobilisation "in defence of Christians". Scholars who engage in religious activism, they argue, could aim to destabilise the very existing power structures and societal conventions that normalise initiatives that claim to defend Christians as well as other ideologies supported by right-wing politicians.

The final contribution to this issue, "A Conversation: On the Challenges of Engagement and Doing Ethnographic Research in Conflict Zones," integrates and illustrates each of these three themes through a conversation between anthropologists who conduct ethnographic research in the former Yugoslavia in the aftermath of war (Sandra King-Savic and Jelena Tosic) and two scholars who conduct research in Ukraine during an active phase of combat (Oleksandra Tarkhanova and Catherine Wanner). They provide specific illustrations of how ideology and ideological engagement, their own and that of their interlocutors, have affected their ethnographic research by providing concrete depictions of how these dynamics have played out in the course of their research.

In sum, this issue was inspired by the recognition that the war in Ukraine will likely lead to substantial shifts in European anthropology, ethnographic methodology, and theoretical paradigms. A decolonising movement away from an ideologically induced privileging of certain centres of power and objects of research will surely have a domino effect on how we study other issues, problems, and places. These changes highlight our interconnectedness and signal that the era of "us" writing about "them" is definitely over as is the Western gaze on the Eastern other with its paternalistic and disciplining voice. This moment will likely give rise to new forms of activist anthropology and morally informed models of perceiving, researching, and writing with empathy. A recalibration of the East as a new ideological paradigm invites us to reconceptualise very basic categories, such as East/West relations, Russia/Eastern Europe, empire/colonies, and to revisit earlier perspectives on Eastern Europe in order to reveal how East European anthropology intersects with global postcolonial and post-imperial historical developments.

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AUTHORS' CONTACTS:

Catherine Wanner
Pennsylvania State University
E-mail: cew10@psu.edu
ORCID: 0000-0001-6079-8542

Neringa Klumbytė
Miami University
E-mail: klumbyn@miamioh.edu
ORCID: 0000-0003-1758-7023

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ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORK AND "HAVING AN IDEOLOGY"

CAROLINE HUMPHREY

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBIRDGE

In European anthropological circles there was a burst of interest in the topic of ideology in the 1970s in the wake of the riots of May 1968 in Paris and consequent intense interpretative conflict about theory among French intellectuals. The ideas then discussed in the wider context of the Cold War still have pertinence to the present day when ideology seems to clothe, if not inspire, armed confrontations and authoritarian forms of government. This article reviews the intellectual formation then current among Western anthropologists, points to its deficiencies, and notes that even though the issues then debated about ideology still have some interest they were proper to their time. Since then, not only has anthropology moved on, but the world and the very purchase of "political ideology" has fundamentally changed. In this light I re-visited my fieldnotes from research in Siberia in the 1990s and 2000s and I attempt with hindsight to reflect on my ethnographic experience and its relevance for today. Finally, I introduce some remarks about the relevance of all this to the contemporary situation in Russia.

KEYWORDS: ideology, USSR, Cold War, Siberia, Buryatia, Russia

With nationalist and authoritarian ideologies rising around us, it is still useful to return to the ways in which ideology was debated in the past. In European anthropological circles there was a burst of interest in the topic in the 1970s in the wake of the riots of May 1968 in Paris and consequent intense interpretative conflict about theory among French intellectuals. This may seem a long time ago, but the ideas then discussed in the wider context of the Cold War still have pertinence to the present day when ideology seems to clothe, if not inspire, armed confrontations and authoritarian forms of government. In that same distant period, when I was fortunate to

have been able to conduct fieldwork in collective farms in Siberia, I not only encountered from outside but also was to some extent enveloped by Soviet ideology and I tried to find some way to write about it (1983, 6-9, 230-231, 240-241, 359-363). However, I did not specifically address the question of my own engagement with anthropological theory and the way in which it influenced my approach to explaining the social effects of dominant ideology. This article reviews the intellectual formation then current among Western anthropologists, points to its deficiencies, and notes that even though the issues then debated about ideology still have some interest they were proper to their time. Since then, not only has anthropology moved on, but the world and the very purchase of "political ideology" has fundamentally changed. In this light I re-visited my fieldnotes and here I attempt with hindsight to reflect on my ethnographic experience and its relevance for today.

A central issue in the 1970s was the question of how the term "ideology" should be understood. In France, Louis Althusser had shaken the foundations of Marxist class-based certitudes by arguing that ideology is all pervasive and present throughout history: our values, desires and preferences are always inculcated by ideological practice and institutions (Althusser 1976). This break with the old Marxist position, "ideology as false consciousness inculcated by a ruling class", lay behind the two main versions of ideology that prevailed among anthropologists (if they thought about ideology at all). One, which I identify with Maurice Bloch, who was British educated yet also steeped in French thought, used the term to refer to an integrated totality of social classifications and meanings that made communication possible and structured a prevailing social order (Bloch 1977). Alternatively, "ideology" referred to an explicit doctrine held by a politically dominant group to justify and mystify their own interests at the expense of others', which was the position held by many British sociologists and anthropologists. The latter position, which separates ideology from the entirety of everyday assumptions, even if it attempts to suffuse them, makes it possible to describe some, but not all, societies at some periods as "having an ideology". It sets up ideology as an object of potential resistance within the society and as an element in dynamically interactive political change. By the same token, ideology is conceptualised in such a way as to become a target of critique by scholars.

Although there were several attempts to bridge or combine the two viewpoints, notably by Edmund Leach and Maurice Godelier, they did not fully address the question of the relation between the understanding of ideology adopted and the positionality of the anthropological fieldworker. In the first ("Blochian") case, when "ideology" equates almost to "culture", an external anthropologist would have to be acknowledged as a member of a different ideological/cultural formation from that of the society studied. But that admission gave no grounds for political critique, only for description and analysis based on recognition of the difference of ideas and

values. The insoluble problem with this position, as pointed out by Asad (1979) in his discussion of Bloch, is that the implied ideological relativity provides no external criteria by which either to explain change or to justify critique. How is ideology ever shaken off if it is seen as powerfully all-embracing and self-reproducing? My own view is that if we are addressing states like the USSR or the USA in the 1950s-70s it makes sense to use the term ideology in the partial "having an ideology" sense that identifies a dominating discourse, its holders, its conditions of existence, and its limitations.

It could be argued that in those years a binary ideological divide was sharper and played a clearer role in the opposition between "the West" and Russia than is the case today, despite confrontation over the war in Ukraine. Ideological positions are no longer such clear binaries when the world scenario involves new and complex geopolitical alignments, the rise of China, and global concerns about climate change, environments, and access to resources.[1] But the Soviet Union when I did research there in the 1960s and 70s certainly "had" ideology in the sense just mentioned. Of course, as another colleague, Inna Leykin, has helpfully observed to me, the Soviet Union attempted to be ideological in the Althusserian-Blochian sense. The Party hoped to make the ideology so pervasive that it would provide Soviet people with a totalising cognitive map through which they could experience and understand the world around them. In many ways, it succeeded. However, as pointed out later in this article, the saturation could never be total. If that was the case with Soviet ideology in the 1950s-70s, the limitations of the reach of Putin era ideology are even more evident today.

However, as an anthropologist I did not come approach fieldwork in the USSR as an advocate or a theorist, Marxist or otherwise. This was the period of the Cold War, but despite that I was not equipped with an armature of Euro-American type "universal" human values or Marxist "laws" of objective rationality with which to prove a thesis or reveal oppression. I was an anthropologist one could say in Blochian mode. Indeed, Maurice Bloch had been one of my teachers at university. The impasse outlined above is the subject of this article. How does an anthropologist educated to think in terms of the *inter-relatedness* and mutual subject-constituting

1 I am much indebted to Dominic Martin for his comment on this point, which I have summarised as follows. The ideological separation/distinction between the so-called West and Russia today is less clearly defined and perhaps less intuitively experienced and appreciated by those who inhabit those ideological and geographic blocs. Today, authoritarian nationalism, alt-right attitudes, vague liberalism and sexual politics jostle with one another across the divide. Furthermore, global issues such as the effects of neoliberal capitalism, the so-called datasphere, and the emerging Anthropocene supply a ubiquitous background canvas that arguably has more purchase than any mere "political" ideology on either side.

processes of language, concepts, subjectivity, social institutions, economy, politics, ritual, and everyday activity deal with the existence of a self-segregated ideology – one that sees itself as a separate advanced vanguard acting upon the rest of "society" (defined as something other than itself, requiring improvement) and on no account as acted upon by that same imperfect society? And the million-dollar question in my case was: what are the implications when the studied people are seen to "have an ideology"? This is what I grappled with at a time when the Soviet ideology was generally perceived as alien and threatening, while my own intellectual formation was self-constructed (in an illusory way) as non-ideological in that sense, or at least as being academic and therefore free from the passions and convictions that lurked in other parts of my own society.

These questions debated in the 1970s still have pertinence for anthropologists today. Discussions around contemporary ideological dividing lines, such as the war in Ukraine or the conflict in Palestine and others around the world, have only sharpened previously emerged divisions about research agendas. A great variety of approaches are now argued for, from plain description, measurement and refraining from "speaking for" the other, to self-reflection, advocacy, participation in protest, publicising of injustice, calls to action, and the inclusion of the "non-human" in the field of the political. Amidst all of this, many university departments nevertheless attempt to maintain the position of their own freedom from ideology.[2] One basic teaching imparted to students of anthropology has been that to achieve scholarliness it is necessary at the very least to convey sources accurately, withhold judgement, and banish the use of tendentious language. This raises the question of whether the non-committal stance is ethical in extreme circumstances of war and violence. And is withholding judgement even possible? The choice to research and discuss a given topic (or not) even in the blandest terms is in itself the outcome of a kind of interest or unadmitted appraisal. There can be no single answer to such questions, and I wish to underline in this article my own retrospective reflexivity, to acknowledge the illusoriness of the "objectivity" I imagined I was free to exercise.

To explore these issues, it is instructive to look at anthropological experience – in this case, my own in relation to the Soviet Union of the 1960s-70s. In what follows I will first outline my "ideological background" and university formation. The remainder of the article will detail the blunderings and limitations of my actual fieldwork and draw some conclusions made after reconsideration of my fieldnotes. There

2 See the critique of "scholarly reason" by Pierre Bourdieu in his *Pascalian Meditations* (2000). Joel Robbins (2020, 94-104), taking inspiration from theologians who have thought deeply about these matters, has made a recent intervention about how anthropologists might be more explicit and debate their criteria of judgement in a climate when the stance of non-judgment or cultural relativism is no longer an option.

follows a discussion of subsequent visits to the same field sites in the 1990s – 2000s in the light of ideas produced by a revision in Bloch's thinking. Finally, I introduce some remarks about the relevance of all this to the contemporary situation in Russia.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL FORMATION IN THE 1960s

When I graduated from the University of Cambridge Department of Social Anthropology in 1965 the place was liberal, vaguely leftist, and anti-colonialist. It was free of bureaucracy and riven with disputes about anthropological theory, even though this was a time before the discipline in Britain had developed radical critiques of capitalism, gender, or race. My own family background was middle-class and definitely to the left, as my mother had been a member of the Communist Party until 1956; she resigned after the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising. The Soviet Union was not at the forefront of my parents' concerns, and I do not recall them giving me any opinions about it. Anthropology, on the other hand, greatly interested my father, and we had books by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead at home. I knew Orwell but had not read many of the major denunciations of Communism, such as Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*. To me the USSR was the great unanswered anthropological question of the time: it was a vast realm of many cultures that had created a kind of society different from anything I had known. It had had a terrible past and was still forbidding, but by the mid-1960s the more liberal "thaw" under Khrushchev had happened. In what turned out to have been a brief gap, the country at that point seemed to have stabilised into a more liveable place that might even turn into what was later known as "the human face of socialism".

All this meant that I was open to, and accepted without question, the anthropological positionality instilled in us by the Department: that we must be "objective" and not partisan in our research. The nature of this "openness" would astonish research students today. My first postgraduate supervisor was the eminent Africanist Meyer Fortes, who had earlier been the supervisor of Maurice Bloch. Fortes instructed that preparation for fieldwork should be devoted to study of the language, previous descriptions, history and so forth of the people you were going to research. But there must be no detailed research plan, no devising of "research questions", and above all no introduction of theory, because all of that would introduce pre-suppositions and bias into the research. Likewise, completely absent was the bureaucratic apparatus of preliminary examinations, ratification of ethical guidelines, planned budgets and timelines, obligatory reports to supervisors, or medical and insurance documentation. No bibliography was required, ready to be deployed as evidence of theoretical preparedness and a guide to our research. We were to go to the field maximally open, like sponges, to soak up what we found.

The existence of Soviet ideology was the main reason why Fortes advised me not to go to Russia. He told me that I would encounter closed minds, Party propaganda, no one would speak to me honestly, and in any case, I would likely be arrested and deported as had happened to a previous anthropology student planning to work in the Caucasus. These warnings did not deter me. For in Blochian mode, I was ready to study the workings of the Communist ideology along with everything else. The independence allowed us graduates enabled me to make my own arrangements to get to Russia via a student exchange scheme.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY RESEARCH STUDENT IN MOSCOW

I spent a preparatory year in Cambridge reading up on a Siberian people then called the Yakut and expecting to research Yakut shamanism. But when I got to Russia as a graduate student in the Department of Ethnography at Moscow University, I was immediately told that I could on no account go to Yakutia, and that shamanism had been eliminated in the 1930s. I had to obey my Moscow supervisor on this point. This was my first lesson in "participant observation": in an authoritarian regime one participates by also being a subject to authority. One complies, one lies low, one accommodates, and when possible, negotiates (in my case, a switch from Yakutia to Buryatia).

The ideologies on both sides during the Cold War dictated that for citizens of Britain or the USSR there was no neutral position. In principle, the supposition in Soviet security services was that students from the West were not sponges but more like heat-seeking missiles. Anyone crossing the Iron Curtain not as a tourist must have been sent for an investigative purpose.[3] Luckily, however, this supposition did not seem to be strongly held by my gentle and genial professor in the Department of

3 This meant that my role as a student of anthropology was seen by many people I met in Moscow as likely to be a cover-up. The question I remember being asked endlessly was "Who sent you?" When I answered that it was my own decision to come (which it was, because my Cambridge supervisor was against my going to Russia) an expression of disbelief crossed people's faces. I had to be a spy of some kind, as Sheila Fitzpatrick (2013) and Katherine Verdery (2018) document for their sojourns as research students in the USSR and Romania. I should add that before our little bunch of British students set off for Russia we were given a briefing by the Foreign Office, during which we were told to expect entrapments by the KGB; and it was also made clear that while we British were genuine students, the exchange bunch coming from the USSR had assuredly been sent as spies. This was the Cold War, after all. I remember laughing off the Foreign Office briefing as we walked out of the building. But as students in Moscow State University our rooms were indeed bugged, our conversations listened to, and a few of our group were trapped, drugged, arrested, and deported by the KGB.

Ethnography of Moscow University. There I was seen rather as misguided, a wrongly instructed student who needed to be educated.

Ethnography at that time was institutionally placed as a minor branch within the Faculty of History. It was thus regarded as a subdiscipline subject to the laws of dialectical materialism and the inevitable stages of historical development. By attending lectures, I caught a glimpse of what would have been my academic formation had I been a Soviet citizen. My main task, as far I could understand, would have been to know and demonstrate the operation of the Marxist historical laws by means of ethnographic investigation and then fine tune the resulting theories as they applied to a particular case. But I was not ready to abandon my Cambridge education. I took the characterisation of ethnic groups in Russia in terms of ancient modes of production, the delineation of class struggles, the types of domination and so forth simply to be relativised as "Soviet ideology". The classes were indeed rather dogmatic, but I now think that I should have tried harder to learn from them. One class did teach me a lesson. It was about Bronislaw Malinowski, who was still a heroic ancestral figure in Cambridge. His work had been taught to us as a remarkable and insightful advance in anthropology, even if his functionalist theory was seen as misguided. In Moscow Malinowski's anthropological discoveries were barely mentioned, since they were overshadowed by the fact that he was a stooge of colonialism and consequently failed to analyse correctly the imperialist conditions of his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands. Initially shocked, I could digest at least part of this idea. Gradually I began to see that the Buryats, allocated as my research topic instead of the Yakuts, should not be approached as an isolated pristine "society" but were no less implicated in external forms of domination than the Trobrianders. Still, just as I was convinced that Malinowski had not been a stooge, in my naivety I neglected to think about whatever ideological currents (in the Blochian sense) I would be bringing to my fieldwork in Buryatia.

FIELDWORK IN BURYAT COLLECTIVE FARMS IN 1967 AND 1975

It is worth elaborating on the point I made earlier about the impossibility for a fieldworker to be altogether outside the ideological formation of an authoritarian regime. Although I was privileged in many ways by being a British citizen (able to leave Russia if I wished, given favoured accommodation, not subject to punishments and privations), I was also subject to the generation condition of mystified subordination of Soviet citizens. From some enigmatic realm my research task (study Buryat kinship), ethnographic sites, timetable, and field research supervisor-minder were all decided for me. These conditions also applied to my field supervisor, the respected Buryat Tibetologist Ksenia Maksimovna Gerasimova, who had been allotted the task

of accompanying and taking responsibility for a foreign student in uncomfortable farms she was happy not to have to live in herself. She, like I, had to give written and oral reports (*otchet*) to hierarchical seniors on the fulfilling of these tasks.

In this sense, I was already somewhat attuned to and incorporated in the fringes of the Soviet system; to be more exact, I was living in ideology while not "having" that ideology. Still seeing myself in the "sponge" mode, I tried to blend in. I tried to lie low; I wore a collective farm type work jacket (*vatnik*), sometimes a headscarf like most women, and in winter (1974-5) felt boots (*valenki*). I was happy when the farmers took me to be the young field assistant of Ksenia Maximovna. I tried to pay close attention to what I saw – though that wasn't easy, because of the huge amount of vodka I was plied with. I tried to absorb what the famers wanted to talk about: hard work, the targets, their wages, what they had built and achieved, and kinship and families. They did not talk about religion unless I asked specifically, and then they pretty much always talked about it as something that belonged to the past.

If fact, these two collective farms were set up as local actualisations of the Soviet ideology – even though that was not all that happened in them as I discuss later. The Soviet state ideology when I reached the field was not an unchanging monolith, but an amalgam designed for the agricultural sector stacked up over the decades from sources garnered from Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and most recently Khrushchev.

From Marx, the "labour theory of value" held sway. Each farm consisted of around 3,000 population, several villages and hamlets, and a huge area of land. The members had to work in the jobs they were allocated and could not leave the farm without permission. They were paid by hours of labour they devoted to their tasks, topped up with bonuses for productivity and the achievement of targets. The workers had massive workloads. For example, a shepherding unit of 2-3 workers had to manage a flock of 700-800 sheep and was exhorted to achieve high targets of lambs per ewe and weight of wool and meat. If a single sheep was lost, the shepherd had to pay personally – and remember this was Siberia, with terrible winter storms and plenty of wolves, so sheep were always being lost. For such faults, shepherds were publicly reprimanded and could be punished in various ways. If they achieved high results, on the other hand, their photos would go up on the "honour board" in the centre of the farm.

From Engels and Marx came the principle of social equality. The collective farms were in fact socially and materially egalitarian relative to any other society I have been in. The Party Secretary and the Chairman's families lived in the same kinds of houses, sent children to the same school, ate the same food, spoke the same language, and had obligatory "targets" and "indicators" like everyone else. They had use of a car, rather than a horse and cart like the ordinary farmers, but not as their private property.

Women worked equally if not more than men, children were cared for communally at kindergarten and a boarding school. Private property was down to a minimum: no one owned any land or even the house they lived in. Household livestock was strictly limited. So was commerce. People were paid partly in kind (butter, meat, grain, etc.) and there was little they could do with any money they earned, for the *kolkhoz* shop was virtually bare and towns were distant. The socialist "cultural" emphasis of Marx was there too: both farms had a panoply of schools, kindergartens, and a culture centre. Everyone except the very elderly was literate, was encouraged to read, educate their children, learn an instrument, put on plays, take part in festivals, etc. One of the collective farms even had its own separate music school.

If all that was the Marxist legacy, the Lenin-Stalin dirigiste one was there too. The production targets were planned down to the last detail according to Leninist ideas of scientific rationalism and Stalinist goals of supplying produce to support industrialisation and urbanisation. The farms had extensive staffs of planners, technicians, accountants, and lowly bookkeepers making a tally of everything. From Stalin, the farms exemplified the principle of Party discipline, universal surveillance, punishment for infringements, and reporting of misdemeanours. The strictness and hierarchy went all the way down to the shepherds and milkmaids. The members of each team were ranked (1st, 2nd, 3rd shepherd, etc.).

As for anthropological positionality, Ksenia Maksimovna and I saw the same things, but we saw them through different epistemic paradigms. Someone would remark about marriage practices. I saw what was interesting to me as an anthropologist, "exogamy" for example. Through the lens of historical materialist categories, she saw a "survival of the past"(*perezhitok proshlego*), a remnant of old clan society that should be swept away.[4]

BEYOND IDEOLOGY

The top-dog locally was undoubtedly the Chairman of the farm. However, by 1967 this leading role had been subject to an ideological revision, as I discovered from re-reading my fieldnotes. With his campaign against the "cult of personality", Khrushchev had introduced an ideational shift to displace absolutist Stalinist forms of leadership among powerful heads of production. Officials in the collective farms were at pains to point out to me that the Chairman's nomination had to be positively voted for by farm members, that there was a specific regulation limiting his tenure, that complaints about him could be made to the Party, and that rules were in place

4 For a study of the Soviet ideological concept of the "survival" applied to religious beliefs and activities, see DeWeese (2012).

to ensure that he did not pack influential positions with his relatives and cronies. It is possible that the implementation of all this was largely gestural or performative, as Yurchak (2006) argued was characteristic of late socialist society in educated urban settings. But I have no evidence that this was so in remote rural Siberia in the 1960s. My impression was that people were sincere in their respect for the Soviet ideology. "*My verili*! (We believed!)," a Buryat friend fervently assured me later. Comparative evidence comes from Sonja Luehrmann's description (2011) of the enthusiastic embrace of "ideology" and "propaganda" to describe their own activity by culture workers in a collective farm in the Volga region in the 1960s. They saw their work of "agitation" as valuable, creative, and responsible: giving lectures in outlying dairy farms, posting slogans or information sheets, or indeed hanging the portrait of Lenin in a respected location.

However, this could not be all there was to the situation. The "having an ideology" approach I have adopted here supposes a complex human subject that does the "having", one composed of diverse, including non-ideological, elements, unlike the Althusserian subject that is wholly constituted as such by means of the ideology. At the time, however, since I was operating with the early Blochian idea of ideology as akin to political culture, I could only make the rather banal observation that while the carriers of the Soviet state ideology (the Party Secretaries, farm Chairmen, "culture workers", etc.) were all Buryats, the ruling ideas had nevertheless come to all of them from outside as a corpus invented long ago and elsewhere. The Buryats were consenters to an ideology brought to them from Russia. It was not until I returned to my notes and discovered some pages a farm accountant, Synge Sanzhiev, had given me in winter 1974-5 that I began to think more about how the separate identity of the "subject of ideology" could also be understood in individually human rather than ethnic terms.

Sanzhiev was an erectly standing, granite-jawed man in his early 60s. A day or two after we talked, he came round of his own accord to give me two blurry, closely typed pages containing his autobiography. It was carefully organised by date. Summarising, it showed he had been born in September 1911 in a middling herding family in the Barguzin district. At the age of 10 he was able to attend a local school for four years. He then herded livestock in his father's household farm until age 20. In 1931, collectivisation was imposed. Sanzhiev was sent to a 3-month course in bookkeeping and immediately got a job as bookkeeper of the Urzhil collective farm in Bayangol in the Barguzin district. After holding the job from May 1931 to March 1932, he was appointed Chairman of Urzhil. But this post lasted only a few months and in June 1932 he was demoted to become bookkeeper in Karl Marx Collective in Bayangol. In April 1939 he was elevated as chair of the Bayangol *Selsoviet* (district council) but this position too was cut short, for in November the same year he was made head of the accounting scrutiny board back in Karl Marx farm. Five

months later in April 1940 Sanzhiev found himself appointed first secretary of the Komsomol (youth section of the Communist party) of the Karl Marx. After only three months, he was side-lined to head a milk production brigade. Nevertheless, five months later in November 1940 he was elevated to Chairman of the Karl Marx Collective. In August 1941 he was enlisted in the Soviet army, serving initially in an evacuation hospital in the Buryat capital Ulan-Ude. Here misfortune befell him, as he was arrested, through the fault of investigative officers of the KGB as he added. He was held in prison from 1942 to 1943 under investigation. Released, rehabilitated, and allowed to keep his precious Party membership, he was sent to serve first in the artillery near the Chinese border and then from June 1943 to February 1945 in special forces in Belorussia supplying provisions to partisans operating behind the German lines. Returning to Barguzin after the war, he found himself again engaged in a series of yo-yo moves in the Karl Marx Collective. From Chairman of the farm, plunged down to "ordinary *kolkhoznik*", back to bookkeeping, elevated to chief economist, a spell as Party Secretary, and demoted again to chief planner, he was approaching retirement when I met him.

What are people *doing* when they seem to be just saying something – is this giving information, reminding, blaming, or "performing" an ideal of citizenry (Sántha and Safonova 2011), or what? Sanzhiev gave me no explanation when he handed over the pages. Now the worker's autobiography was a Soviet ideological form, a record of a worthy life of labour, and as Hellbeck has argued "a means by which citizens could come to think of themselves as conscious revolutionary subjects" (Hellbeck 2001, 341). But Sanzhiev's autobiography did not follow a standard form, and very unusually for 1974 included accusation of "fault" by the KGB. It contained none of the expected ideologically tinged statements of having been forged as a subject by the Revolution and collectivisation. What these pages wordlessly tell us is that while the organisation of the farm remained a coherent ongoing structure, the life of this man had a different temporality, one of sharp breaks and unsought turbulence. Yet no one in 1974 regarded such an actual zig-zag life experience as exceptional. Sanzhiev's life was intertwined with the collective farm, the institutional carrier of the ideology, and he proudly listed his medals and honour certificates at the end of his biography. But part of his life and his sensibility must also have consisted of non-ideological stuff: fear, apprehension, frustration. Fear, one could say, was an *effect* of the brutal Soviet methods of transmitting ideology, without itself being part of the doctrine. I didn't write about this in my first book (1983; but see Humphrey 2003 for subsequent thoughts). Fear in the 1960-70s was hidden behind tactical silences, equanimity, and a sort of jollity that was also present. But through later conversations I realised that terror was inculcated so early in people's lives that they assumed its implicit presence as a barely conscious substrate. A friend told me that when he was at kindergarten

aged four there was a portrait of Lenin on the wall. One day he had a pencil and a bit of paper and idly sketched a copy. Of course, his picture didn't look at all like Lenin. When he proudly showed it to the teacher, she went white and hissed at him: "That is forbidden! Never, never do that again!" He was terrified and shrank away. The dread of committing an incomprehensible ideological error never left him.[5]

The point here is that, on the other side of an ideological divide, you don't know what the fears are going to be or where they will lie. But it is also difficult to gauge the sincerity of feelings of positive loyalty and respect. The Chairman of the collective farm in Selenga was Zhamso Vankeev, a physically commanding figure of archetypally patriarchal dominance. Condescending to Ksenia Maksimovna and me, whom he probably saw as annoyingly irrelevant visitors, he seemed to have an iron grip over the farm. He certainly had enough power to be a tyrant if he wanted.[6] I carefully wrote about him under a changed name and in neutral terms that poorly conveyed the controlling effect of his presence (Humphrey 1983, 120-22, 344-6). It was a surprise when many years later Vankeev's family sent me a copy of a book they had edited about him entitled *Khozyain Zemli* (Master of the Land). It was full of loving and admiring accounts of his life and achievements from a wide range of people. "He was a hard man" (Bur. *Berkhe khün baigaa*) wrote one woman, "but with his devoted efforts he created the farm and when he became a Hero of Socialist Labour we were proud of him" (Sem'ya 2014, 196). The aim of this book is to place Vankeev in the geographical-cosmological-social micro-world of the Iroi valley in the basin of the river Selenga; the first half is devoted to the mountains, pastures, history, clan genealogies (including Vankeev's own), varied ethnic groups, songs and rituals, and its long ago destroyed Buddhist monastery, even listing the full names and ranks of the 48 lamas remaining in 1935. A further statement would have surprised me had I known about it back in the 1960s. According to a family member, Vankeev was "although a Communist of war vintage, a religious (*veruyushchii*) man. He worshipped his ritual birthplace (*toonto*) and the sacred mountain Burin Khan" (Sem'ya 2014, 129). Veneration of this kind of holy site is inculcated through kinship from childhood. One contributor to the book said that Vankeev "lived in the *kolkhoz* like in a family" (2014, 120).

Contemplation of Sanzhiev's and Vankeev's lives returns me to theoretical issues raised at the beginning of this paper. How does one explain *living in* and *breaking out* of ideological structures? Maurice Bloch changed his understanding of ideol-

5 Later he found out that only licensed artists were permitted to represent Lenin and the other great leaders, and then only in approved ways. Non-standard images were regarded as insulting to the great leader, or possibly subversive.

6 In the 1970s a violent incident that needed to be covered up happened in Vankeev's farm and I was not allowed to return there.

ogy during the 1970-80s, moving away from the Durkheimian-Maussian theory of the social ("ideological") determination of perception and communication. He switched to the "having an ideology" position, restricting the use of the term ideology to knowledge about social life that cannot be derived from everyday experience but instead is transmitted through institutions specifically dedicated to that purpose (Bloch 1985). Ideological state apparatuses, such as schools or political parties, systematically undermine sensory perception and tacit everyday knowledge in their attempt to render people receptive political subjects (see discussion in Luerhmann 2011). But they can never succeed totally. Bloch argued for the inevitable presence of a psychological-emotional-bodily substrate that is out of kilter with and untouched by ideology, and also for the existence of "non-ideological thoughts". The validity of this argument is borne out by what was gradually revealed to me concerning the actual experience of Vankeev and Sanzhiev. Different conceptions of time are involved. Sanzhiev was a devoted Communist, yet he lived in the contradiction between the breaks and reverses of his helter-skelter individual life and the ideological insistence on linearly advancing rational progress. For Vankeev, certain Buryat rituals might be "survivals of the past" but for him in his actual life, they had a timeless efficacy.

The character of consent and dissent within ideological domination was intensely debated at a seminar about social change held in 1976 in King's College, Cambridge, attended by major luminaries of the European and British social sciences.[7] Maurice Godelier insisted that neither the existence of "non-ideological" experience and ideas expounded by Bloch nor everyday dissent can bring about change in the dominant ideology. He gave the example of the Baruya people of New Guinea, where women were subject to a kinship ideology of male domination. Women should feed their husbands, do the work in the fields, have sex with their husbands, and so forth. Godelier saw during his fieldwork that in fact, they often resisted. They often did *not* provide the husband's food, did *not* do the weeding, and refused sex. But this everyday revolt did not change the ideology nor the threat of violence that went along with it. The women continued to agree with the male ideology because they had no theory or consciousness of their social condition with which to question it. In such a situation, he maintained, violence and consent are always co-present. Round the seminar table, there seemed to be a glum acquiescence. But Bloch objected. He argued that it was wrong to conclude that change to ideology could come only from outside. Even in the most subjected group of people not only is there non-ideological bodily-psychological experience but also the presence of non-ideological ideas. And out of somewhere, probably following a radical change in the mode of production, there would appear a different phenomenon, the revolutionary counter-ideological

7 Maurice Godelier, Edmund Leach, Ernest Gellner, Jack Goody, Edward Thompson, Arnaldo Momiliagno, Maurice Bloch and others took part. See: https://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/2683583

ideas that would bring about the collapse of a dominant ideology. Godelier immediately gave way; no longer referring to the Baruya, left to their patriarchal fate, he now said that he had written all along that consent could turn into dissent and that ideologies contained internal contradictions, a topic on which I have written in the case of conflicts within the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party (Humphrey 2008). In other words, he and Bloch arrived at agreement.

COUNTER IDEOLOGIES

Listening to this debate now and thinking again about my subsequent visits to the Karl Marx collective in Barguzin, I realised that it suggested several heuristic tools with which to get a better understanding of my fieldnotes. These include: "human experience", such as Sanzhiev's visceral experience of the arbitrariness of subjectification, and "non-ideological ideas", such as Vankeev's conception of the sacredness of a mountain. In my fieldnotes I also discovered "dissent" and "counter-ideological ideas" and "revolutionary thinking".

I first returned to Barguzin in 1990,[8] a turning point when *perestroika* and *glasnost'* were under way, but the Soviet Union still existed and the Karl Marx collective farm seemed prosperous, with new roads and buildings. What had evaporated was fear. Dissent was openly expressed, for example about a demand that funds collected by a local Buryat organisation should be rendered to the state and then redistributed according to official priorities. Revolutionary ideas also swirled around. Some were philosophical ("We have been misled by technology; we need a revolution in values and a new ethical relation to nature"). Some were unreal ("Set up a Buryat parliament based on clans, so everyone will know who they are and who represents them") and some not so ("Buryats and Russians must be treated equally"). Most surprising to me was the popularity among diverse people from farmers to intellectuals of "counter-ideological ideas", by which I refer to statements from "other" ideologies that differed radically from Soviet values but without necessarily proposing a political agenda. My next visit was in 1993. By this time Bloch's "change in the mode of production" and the demise of the Communist Party had now happened, but they did not have the radical effect in the Buryat countryside he might have predicted (Humphrey 1998). Regret at the loss of the Soviet order was more evident. Few talked of freedom or argued for multi-party democracy. People yearned for a single line of control, to which complaints could be made and which was powerful enough to sort out problems effectively. Enthusiasm for "revolutionary ideas" seemed to have withered away.

8 I took the chance to visit the farm on my own for a few days following a conference about environmental issues held on the shores of Lake Baikal not far away from Barguzin.

Still, my fieldnotes document the unquestioning enthusiasm for "counter-ideological" thinking. There was an overall turn to positive revaluation of Buryat-Mongolian history, language, and culture. The Barguzin collective farm had reconsidered its own history and built a museum at its own expense. Prominent in the display was Elbegdorj Rinchino (1888-1938), a nationalist revolutionary native of Barguzin, who had become a leading Communist politician in Mongolia but was purged in the 1930s as a pan-Mongolist and nationalist. Previously unmentionable, now he could be celebrated as a '"great man" of the locality. A more startling counter to the overall rationalist-enlightenment aspect of Soviet ideology was the sudden popularity of magical, religious, and prophetic thinking. In the Barguzin farm they had kept alive the memory of Soodoi Lama (1846-1914). As a monk he had had travelled to Tibet where he received advanced Buddhist teachings and returned to establish a Buddhist monastery in Barguzin. It was destroyed in the 1930s. What people were most keen to tell me about was not only his magical powers: he could change the weather, bring fertility, avert epidemics, etc., but also his prophecies. He was not an ordinary human but an enlightened being with access to eternal verities. Soodoi Lama had prophesied that men in leather clothes would come and redistribute all the property, and those who would come to power would be called "red". They would be able to hold on for a hundred years, and then their ideas would be forgotten. Soodoi Lama's ethical teachings were also widely known among the villagers.

It was now Soodoi Lama who provided a kind of truth that was an alternative to the governmental version found in *Pravda* ("Truth") newspaper – especially as that publication was shortly to split into different entities under diverse ownership. In other Buryat communities, it was shamans who came forth with the spiritual verities of cosmological-natural processes. Mathijs Pelkmans in his book *Fragile Conviction* (2017) documents the uncertainty and wavering enthusiasms in Kyrgyzstan where no single ideology among a plethora of alternatives (nationalism, neoliberalism, Pentecostalism, atheism, Islam and shamanism) was able to replace the all-encompassing Soviet ideology. In Buryatia Buddhism is divided and likewise is one among other belief systems; it pertains to only part of most people's lives and thoughts. But the dominant monastic version has a robust institutional history in the region, and it has by now (re)built monasteries, temples, or shrines in almost all centres of population. In 1990-93, the Buryat farmers were already using Buddhist thinking to place a new idea in mainstream discourse. This was to relativise the entire Communist politico-social experiment by inserting it as a passing phase in a far longer Buddhist chronology. It was now just a period in the latest vast eon of degeneration of faith and morality, an era that would only be overturned far in the future by means of the accumulated meritorious deeds of humanity. When I revisited Barguzin again several

years later, I found that the collective farm had dissolved. But the good deeds had begun, notably by rebuilding Soodoi Lama's destroyed monastery.

TOWARDS THE PRESENT DAY

When I began writing this article, I had almost forgotten that in 1990 I paid a visit to Ksenia Maksimovna in her apartment in Ulan-Ude. My notes on that reunion are a reminder that anthropological positionality is shifting and relational. By 1990 I had published a monograph and Ksenia Maksimovna, no longer my "minder", was a very senior academic. We had an interesting conversation about anthropological matters in which it was clear that we would no longer necessarily see the same ethnographic facts differently. Now, Ksenia Maksimovna reminisced about our time in the farm as a joint trial and adventure. It was "us" against the farm authorities, who in her view had not given us due respect. Rather than treating us an honoured visitors we had been provided with ordinary accommodation and food (we shared a house with a milkmaid). The earlier condition of political fear having evaporated, Ksenia Maksimovna also railed against the pressure she had been under from as high as the regional (*Obkom*) Party, which had hauled her to a meeting to criticise her insufficient control of my activities.

What is the relevance of all this for anthropology and ideology today? The conditions in Russia at this time, when a terrible war is being waged in Ukraine, are quite different to those I encountered in a relatively peaceful era of East-West international relations. Then, it was ethically justifiable in my view for an anthropologist to describe everyday Soviet life in a non-judgemental way.[9] That attitude was underpinned not only by my own background and education described earlier, but also by involuntary ignorance: in the 1960s-70s it was systematically hidden from me that a prison camp was located not far from the Barguzin farm, and that former exiles were among the workers in the Buryat collective farms, existing in conditions of social exclusion (Humphrey 2001). Maybe I should have known, but at the time I did not. Like many anthropologists, whether or not I "had an ideology", depending on how readers define this term, I did have values that turned away from the "totalitarian" interpretation of the Soviet Union,[10] and did register the complexity, indirectness

9 It could be argued that a certain distantly underlying common heritage of enlightenment thought was shared between the European system of values of Western anthropologists and the Soviet project of social transformation, and that this would provide grounds for looking with a certain "objectivist" understanding at mid-Soviet rural attempts to create a socialist society.

10 Both Russian and Western authors have argued recently that the Soviet establishment of state hegemony by means of terror, purges, incarceration, etc. justifies the use of the idea of totalitarianism, which however can be studied in new ways (see for example Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2020).

and multivocality of life there. These values inclined me towards respect for the toils of the farmers and hopefulness as regards the prospects for a more humane version of socialism in Russia. But that entire situation, the socialism, and the hope, have long ago evaporated.

Today, it is not just that the global political alignments are shifting and that existential world problems loom over Russia as over other countries, but that the conditions for anthropological research in ideologically dense situations have become much more challenging and in war-time Russia, practically impossible for non-citizens. The current (2023) state ideology has increased in stridency and pervasiveness with the war. For collective farmers in the 1960s-70s "tuning out" from state ideology was possible for swathes of time: the radio could be switched off, there was no television, newspapers arrived weeks late, and no one had a private phone; indeed, some remote farm settlements had no electricity. In those days there was only one state ideology around and party theoreticians had had decades to hammer it into an apparent monolith. But post-1991 many different interest groups and political parties developed their own ideologies. They roamed the world of ideas to produce previously unimaginable concatenations that yoked together nationalist, leftist, rightist, fascist, aesthetic, ecological, gender-focussed, religious, anarchist, geo-strategic, and neo-imperialist ideas in new and strange combinations.[11] As Fabrizio Fenghi (2020) has commented about the National Bolshevik Party, the aim was to shock, provoke, and make new connections by uprooting the old structures of ideas rather than to establish monolithic consistency. For now, however, the "undesirable" (for Putin) ferment of ideas has been squashed. The war has enabled the Kremlin to stamp on heterodox phantasmagorias and to impose the authoritarian, unitarian, nationalist and xenophobic state ideology that seems "necessary" and "right" at a time of war.[12] Even cleverly disguised infringements of the peremptory new norms have become dangerous, so, all the more perilous is providing answers to curious anthropologists.

This means that advancing study of contemporary ideological forms and providing reflexive, yet as far as possible "objective", accounts of how they work is ever more

11 Certain influential ideologies emerging in the 1990s-2000s have been analysed by Fabrizio Fenghi (2020). He describes how the "ultra-ideology" of the New Bolshevik Party concocted an innovative, "paradoxical" medley that embraced the revolutionary legacy of Bolshevism, Stalinist culture, the ideology and aesthetics of Italian Fascism, German Nazism, as well as strands of various Western counter cultures. Fenghi (2020, 10-11; 80-81) argues that this saturation of contradictory ideologies was a way of denying the possibility of a normalized, "unideological" society based in a generic vision of an imaginary Western democracy.

12 Commenting on the blocking of social media and closing of the remaining independent news outlets, Maksim Samorukov (2023) writes: "In pre-war times that seemed to the powers a risky step with unpredictable consequences. The war quickly dispelled those doubts – this crackdown has become not just possible but also somehow obvious, so that to object to these measures would be strange."

urgent. Russian researchers have recognised this. Two examples, admittedly from the pre-war period, are particularly relevant to this article because they discuss both the scope of ideology in 21st century Russia and the question of the "observer". Sergei Prozorov (2005) sees conservatism in the Putin presidency as an ideological hegemony in Russian politics. His Foucauldian approach sees this hegemony as a "discursive system of dispersion" and a space of self-definition by its practitioners. For Prozorov the multiple strands of left and right mentioned above are emergent practices within the overarching conservatism. He argues that they have an inherently specifically Russian rationality emerging at a time of profound historical discontinuity and innovation that cannot be collapsed into the "complacent quasi-universalist rationalism" of the observer (2005, 123). If Prozorov thus seems to insist that the observer should abandon his/her academic rationalism to track "Russian discourse" Anna Kruglova (2017) makes a different argument that considers the observer explicitly as an anthropologist.

Both Prozorov and Kruglova write of ideological "hegemony," which returns us to the issues raised long ago in the spat between Bloch and Godelier. For Kruglova, Marxism is not just the powerful and dominant ideology of the Soviets but has evolved and continues to evolve as a *vernacular* version of itself, "further modified by a broad range of people who use it to build, explain, and make sense of their ordinary worlds" (Kruglova 2017, 760). Not unlike Prozorov's use of the term hegemony, Kruglova's is a Gramscian usage; it brings up again the question of whether ideology is something people consciously "have" (as a removable, contestable part of their thinking) or is constituted simply as visceral and affective common sense. Kruglova answers this question by differentiating between the former state ideology of Marxism and the everyday Marxism that seeped from it. This latter vernacular Marxism "goes beyond ideology by encompassing not only ideas and beliefs but the whole lived social process organized in practice by specific and dominant meanings and values" (Kruglova 2017, 764). While that formulation sounds familiar from earlier in this article, Kruglova adds a most interesting thought about the observer: his/her tools of anthropological analysis, such as the very concept of "ideology" (not to speak of "class," "capitalism," "exploitation" and so forth), share an intellectual genealogy with vernacular Marxism and use the same local categories that elicit visceral reactions. Anthropology in such circumstances has a recursive character. The problem is that in the world of Kruglova's interlocutors "political economy is not a matter of analytical optics but rather the default human condition, where every process is social and a type of production" (Kruglova 2017, 769). This observation inserts a sliver of difference between the anthropologist and her respondents. The article goes on to discuss examples, such as inventive local usage of the adjective *material'nyi* ("having material substance") to describe thoughts and words. As one interlocutor said, thoughts affect objective reality just like any physical matter would

– for example, they can cause magical harm (Kruglova 2017, 769) – an elaboration of Marxist materialism that was clearly foreign to Kruglova herself, for all her upbringing in the household of a Soviet culture worker of the creative kind described by Sonja Luehrmann (2011).

Prozorov and Kruglova provide examples of theoretically aware and self-reflexive approaches that are possibilities in the study of ideology in Russia. Both authors see the presence of ideology as a challenge for creative interpretation and suggest some form of co-production of knowledge with interlocutors. But these works were written before the power-grip imposed by war mentality in Russia. Similar studies addressing the real life of "Putinism" as an ideology could only with great difficulty be carried out within the country at present (2023). It is worth noting that these two writers are now based outside Russia and have turned their attention away from Russia itself. Ideology has become toxic, almost too hot to handle in a self-reflective manner, and from both sides it casts its shadow over whatever is written about it. A plea for the relevance of this article is that something similar was true even in Soviet times. My attempt to write a straightforward account of the collective farms (1983) was banned in the Soviet Union[13] - for revealing too much reality - and was also criticised in the USA - for the book's perceived sympathy with Soviet socialism. That impasse, in which conflicting ideologies make urgent demands on the writer, is only more pronounced today.

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13 The book was consigned to the *spetskhran* (special collection) of the Lenin State Library along with dissident and other banned literature. Books in the *spetskhran* had a separate catalogue; they were mostly not even registered in the internal list used by librarians and certainly were not to be found in the public catalogue.

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AUTHOR'S CONTACT:

Caroline Humphrey

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge

E-mail: ch10001@cam.ac.uk

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MINERVA'S OWL FLEES FROM GUNFIRE: AN AFTER ACTION REPORT FROM A VETERAN OF THE SCHOLARLY WARS ABOUT EX-YUGOSLAVIA

ROBERT M. HAYDEN

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

Anthropologists who do research in regions in which armed conflict breaks out between ethnic or religious-heritage communities are often called upon to give opinions on the events there. When such a conflict becomes the subject of international moral discourses, the pressure on scholars to conform to dominant positions is acute, and can lead to analyses that are not well grounded in what can be reasonably understood as facts on the ground, but that adhere to moralizing discourses that not only favour one side over another, but that depict as illegitimate, and often immoral, discussions that do anything more than condemn the other side. In the 1990s, the wars in ex-Yugoslavia led to conflicts between scholars that were too often phrased as *ad hominem* moral disqualifications of those taking unpopular positions, even when the latter's views were well grounded in what could be learned about the conflict. This article is a reflection by a veteran of such ad hominem attacks by scholars whose concerns were not with the accuracy of the writings they attacked, but rather with whether the positions assailed were supposedly in conflict with moral(ising) stances. The issues are not new, or unique to the conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia, so perhaps this personal account can be of some relevance to others who may face similar issues.

KEYWORDS: Wars in Yugoslavia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, scholarship during conflicts, ethics of scholarship, *ad hominem* attacks in scholarship

INTRODUCTION

The Call for Papers for this thematic issue refers to the war being waged by Russia against Ukraine, and frames issues in that specific context, such as NATO enlargement, the (im)possibility of cooperation with Russian academics, and an obligation

to respond to unprovoked violence. Not being a specialist on Ukraine or Russia, I cannot address that specific context. Yet, despite the specificities of each case, the issues of how scholars should respond to armed conflicts are not new, nor delimited, so perhaps there may be relevance in some reflections on how these issues looked during the last international conflict in Europe that was a *cause célèbre*, the wars in ex-Yugoslavia, 1991-95 in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and 1999 in NATO's war against Serbia. The armed conflicts split the academic communities within what had been one country, and also those of the non-Yugoslavs who studied the place. On a panel at a conference in the USA in 1993, the chair looked at the audience and passed a message to the participants: *Pazi! Snajperi!* (Watch out! Snipers!). This warning quoted graffiti on "sniper alley" in Sarajevo but the reference on the panel was to the partisans of all of the various sides who were in the room. The scholars who had been studying Yugoslavia for years before it broke up often found themselves in strongly worded opposition, which was often abetted by academics new to the topic, most of the newcomers without such experience but with passionate conviction, if not generally local language competence, fieldwork experience, or even awareness of the existence of Bosnia-Herzegovina or Croatia before 1991-92. Wanting to avoid being such a participant in discussions of the war in Ukraine, I will stick with the ones I was involved in, although I make some more generalized comments in conclusion.

I should note that these comments on participant observation in the academic conflicts over the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s are situated in their own ethnographic present: the late 1980s until very early in the 21st century. My colleagues and I were observing, analysing and writing about the wars in real time, as they were taking place, and thus without knowing what the outcomes would be even in the short term, let alone in longer perspectives. This time frame is appropriate for comparisons to scholarly discourses/disputes while the Russian war against Ukraine is in progress, but it means that I do not address theories now in vogue, such as decoloniality (Kušić, Manolova, and Lottholz 2019), which were not part of our discourses then.

AN UNTRAINED DRAFTEE IN AN INTELLECTUAL CONFLICT

The Call for Papers for this thematic issue referred to scholars' "obligation to respond to unprovoked violence." In my experience, some scholars with expertise on Yugoslavia were paralysed, unable to formulate responses to events that they had not anticipated and were not trained to deal with. Others did feel an obligation to respond to the violence, although the extent to which it was "unprovoked" itself became an issue. Still, anthropologists, historians, sociologists and political scientists had been studying Yugoslavia because it was seen as a successful case of a multi-ethnic state and the most prosperous and open socialist state in the world. After all, after 1945

Yugoslavia had been a land at peace and one of relative prosperity, compared not only to the countries of the Warsaw Pact but also to Greece or Portugal. Politically, the uniquely Yugoslav system of "self-management socialism" may not have been exactly democratic (Rusinow 1977), but then again, Greece had been under military dictatorship from 1967-74, while fascism ended in Spain only in 1975, and in Portugal in 1974; Cyprus was invaded and partitioned by NATO member Turkey in 1974 following a failed coup staged by Greece; and Turkey experienced military coups in 1971 and 1980 (so much for NATO being a guarantor of democracy: fascist Portugal, Greece under the colonels, and Turkey under the generals were all NATO members, as are Orbán's authoritarian Hungary and Erdoğan's authoritarian Türkiye today). Yugoslavia had no violent political organizations within the country like the Red Brigades in Italy or the Red Army Faction in West Germany. Internationally, Yugoslavia was a founder and leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the alliance of the recently decolonized states.[1] Ironically enough, considering the events of the 1990s, Yugoslav military personnel were in demand for UN peacekeeping missions.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain, the former Yugoslavia underwent a mirror inversion of the processes taking place in the rest of formerly socialist Europe. As borders opened between these other countries, facilitating trade and travel, new ones were created in what had been Yugoslavia, so that driving the length of the former country required crossing at least three borders where before there were none. As the rest of Europe celebrated "multiculturalism," the most multi-national and multicultural country in Europe was broken up into much more homogenous states. As the European Union celebrated the end of the Cold War, much of Yugoslavia went into hot wars. With the end of those conflicts, the principle that borders could not be changed by force and without consent had been modified: that can indeed happen, as long as it is done by NATO.[2] And as most of Eastern Europe became more prosperous (at least until 2007-2008), most of what had been the most prosperous

1 The importance of Yugoslavia's support to these newly independent states has been captured in two documentaries in 2022 by Mila Turajlić, *Non-Aligned: Scenes from the Labudovic Reels* and *Ciné-Guerrillas: Scenes from the Labudovic Reels*. Turajlic uses outtakes from the massive corpus of films made by Tito's cameraman, Stevan Labudović, during Tito's travels to Asia and Africa and during the founding meeting of the NAM; and of Labudović's year working for the Algerian independence movement as their primary propaganda film maker.

2 Following Russia's invasion on Ukraine in 2022, we have seen the odd spectacle of NATO supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine while denying the territorial integrity of Serbia, while Russia supports the territorial integrity of Serbia but not that of Ukraine or Georgia. Serbia and Ukraine officially support each other's territorial integrity, the only stance congruent with the UN charter and one also taken by China, India, South Africa, five EU members and many of the post-colonial states of Africa and Southeast Asia; but this puts Ukraine in opposition to NATO's stance on Serbia and Serbia against Russia's position on Ukraine.

country of the region became impoverished, with the so-called Federal Republic of Yugoslavia experiencing hyperinflation of 65% *per day* in early 1994 (Lyon 1995), meaning that prices doubled every 1.4 days. While other post-socialist states in Europe saw high inflation, none of them came remotely close to this level, which is the third highest inflation rate ever recorded.

And this was all accomplished in part through war. In my view, at the time and since, the best studies of the violent breakdown of this peaceful country were written immediately, during the wars, by people such as Susan Woodward (1995), Steven Burg and Paul Shoup (1999), Xavier Bougarel (1996b, 1996a), among a few others, who had been studying Yugoslavia for years or even decades, and who got their information mainly in Serbo-Croatian from local sources. Not knowing what the outcomes of the processes would be, our analyses could not be teleological — we had to look for causes of events that had not been expected. Scholars who became interested in the region largely because of news reports of atrocities in what was billed as the first war in Europe since 1945 (Cyprus was apparently not part of Europe in 1974, during the Greek coup and the subsequent Turkish invasion and partition of the island), tended to write teleological accounts, analysing events as part of a pre-assessed process of criminality by Serb, Croat, or occasionally Muslim/Bosniak leaders.[3]

The scholars named above, and others, certainly responded to what they saw as an obligation to bring their expertise to bear on the conflict, even though none had trained for that role. For my own part, I certainly never intended to study a war, up close and in real time, or ethnic cleansing and its tools of targeted killings, mass sexual violence, and forced expulsions. Nor did I ever intend to study the construction and successful implementation of constitutional and legal systems of discrimination against minorities, in European states that were presumed to be democratic after the fall of communism. As for interventions, had anyone told me when I finished law school that in about two decades I would be an expert witness in the first trial of the first international criminal tribunal after Nuremberg and Tokyo, I would have wondered what hallucinogen the questioner was on. The same would have been said if someone had predicted that I would be a sherpa at a summit conference, as a personal advisor to the last prime minister of Yugoslavia, the Serbian-American

3 One scholar who did have long experience in Yugoslavia did pursue an explicitly teleological approach grounded on the position that scholars must assess guilt for atrocities rather than attempt to find social processes that led until-then normal people to commit them (Ramet 2005). This position of itself is unexceptional, except that the author made the false statement that Woodward, Burg, Shoup, and several others, myself included, were "moral relativists" who "tended to be more sympathetic, in the 1990s, to the arguments made by Milošević, Karadžić and their collaborators", an outrageously untrue statement meant to disqualify the work of those scholars most highly qualified by training and experience to analyse events in Yugoslavia as they occurred.

businessman Milan Panić, in London in August 1992; engage in fact-finding for international organisations in a war zone in Europe; do advance work for a peace conference; or participate in meetings, seminars and discussions with a range of US governmental figures: ambassadors, politicians and their staff, and a variety of people in various roles from various units of the government. After all, when I started to do research in Yugoslavia in 1981, it was the "communism with a human face" that the Czechs had longed for in 1968, but which had been crushed there by the Soviets, and a model for the world of how a multilingual/religious/national society could overcome the terrible legacies of a ghastly war, the one from 1941-45 (see, for example, Rusinow 1977). Yugoslavia had open borders, and Yugoslavs in the 1970s had a standard of living higher than that of most Portuguese and Spaniards, though there were increasing tensions caused by foreign debt and IMF mandates (see Woodward 1995). And I was studying workers' courts in a socialist system (see Hayden 1990). What could have seemed more stable and progressive? I was a research scholar, not involved in politics or policy making.

But post-socialism in Yugoslavia experienced what Michael Mann (2005) has called "the dark side of democracy," in which majority group politicians proclaim a territory to be that community's exclusive homeland and build support by portraying the largest minority as the enemy. Yugoslavia's disintegration began in 1989-90 as a constitutional crisis, with the victorious nationalists in various republics rejecting federal authority, and I was among the very few non-Yugoslav scholars who understood the constitutional and political issues involved (Hayden 1999a). When the constitutional system then broke down, so did the federal state, leaving no mechanism for resolving issues between the Yugoslav peoples other than threat, *fait accompli* and, ultimately, wars to bring ethno-national homogeneity by expelling minorities through "ethnic cleansing" (Hayden 1996). When the wars started, I was one of the few scholars in the English-speaking world who knew the main language, the legal and political systems, and the players — some of the latter personally, as in Serbia, at least, many opposition leaders were young PhDs of about my age. And I then spent the war years monitoring it all, very closely, and taking part in a really large variety of efforts to deal with it – including a very great deal of scholarly publishing on the forms of violence mentioned above (see Hayden 2013).

My personal crisis was acute: the country in which I had been doing research for nearly ten years, where my wife was from and my oldest child was born, was suddenly moving towards a breakup that everyone knew would be violent — the common phrase was "we'll be in blood up to the knees" (*bićemo u krvi do kolena*). I felt that I did not have the option of not responding; and in any event, if I could not say something now, what was all of my training, research and experience in the country worth? But that position inevitably raised complications and questions.

WHAT DO SOCIAL SCIENTISTS UNTRAINED IN STUDYING CONFLICT OFFER AND TO WHOM?

The most fundamental, threshold question, for me at least, is: *what can a field-experienced anthropologist actually offer, and to whom?* Or any other social scientist, for that matter. It seemed and still seems to me that the most important answer to that was and is: *the ability to make clear to foreigners why matters were developing as they were and how they seemed likely to go*; and that these explanations had to be made on the basis of analyses that were as objective and fact-based as one could make them. I followed Max Weber's ethics of science as a vocation, and specifically the *ethics of responsibility*, assessing situations not on the grounds of what one might wish would happen but rather making accurate observations of what was actually happening, and why (Weber 2020).

Lest this seem self-evident, I was constantly confronted with well-meaning people who grounded their work instead on what Weber had called the *ethics of conviction*, basing analyses on pre-determined moral determinations of who had been victimized and by whom, and letting their preferred outcomes drive the analysis. I have referred to such work as engaging in the analysis of "wished-for counterfactuals," and ignoring what Weber called "uncomfortable facts" (Hayden 2007). Tzvetan Todorov, explicitly neo-Weberian and perhaps the most discomfiting moral philosopher since Hannah Arendt used Karl Jasper's phrase "the banality of evil" to such telling effect, has put it well: "Truth, it seems, is often incompatible with inner comfort, and most of us prefer comfort" (Todorov 1996, 257).

Some of the most noteworthy forms of such work were driven by the view that the primary goal of analysis should be to determine who bore criminal guilt for massive human rights violations, a determination that could then determine what should be done next in the pursuit of justice; and also that could lead to what soon came to be called "transitional justice," as a way to forge "reconciliation" and thus peace — a presumption for which there is very little reliable evidence (see Hayden 2011). Even acknowledging the seriousness of the crimes, this approach always seemed to me to be analogous to letting moral views influence epidemiology (although this actually has become popular amongst some right-wing politicians since 2020, in the USA and elsewhere); and ignoring that the crimes were the result of social processes rather than, in most cases, the desire (or even willingness) of the people committing them. It became particularly perverse when organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International called for economic sanctions to be imposed in order to force regimes to honour human rights – inevitably, this actually meant calling for the increased impoverishment of the weakest sections of societies already devastated economically, while actually increasing the powers of the regimes since in an economy of scarcity, the power to allocate resources is crucial (see Hayden 1999b, 2007).

Note that I saw, and still see, the task as *informing foreigners* about what was happening and why the Yugoslavs were acting in ways that they themselves knew would bring terrible consequences. The ethics-of-conviction people pretty much wrote off the Yugoslavs themselves as with rare exceptions being misguided fools misled by evil elites; although these enlightened Westerners were also very interested in teaching the natives the errors of their ways — essentially missionary activity by post-theistic humanists. Inspiring for those rare exceptions who quickly came to form the choir but were not often successful in converting many of the rest of the supposedly heathen, although some of the latter were very willing to become acolytes in the new Church of Human Rights,[4] and reap the material benefits of such a position by founding NGOs and getting funding from Western governments. Many such projects were admirable, but they were driven not by what local people defined as their needs, but rather by whatever programs the international determined that the locals needed even if the latter might have thought otherwise (see, for example, Stubbs 2013).

Negative consequences for scholarly discourse

Negative consequence 1 – ad hominem attacks: Trying to ground analyses on basic principles of empirical social science instead of parroting human rights accusations gets one labelled as an apologist for the crimes and thus "complicit" in them ("complicit" being one of my favourite terms of opprobrium, since it imputes criminal guilt without looking either at the actions or intentions of the accused, and thus cannot be denied or defended against). In anthropology, one can be attacked in print without advance warning or opportunity to respond – a violation of journalistic eth-

4 The Church of Human Rights is an ideological field with sacred texts, commentaries on the sacred texts, prophets, martyrs, saints, heretics and passion plays, and is fighting the Powers of Evil, which seem never to sleep. It also claims universal jurisdiction superior to that of states, with decisions of its courts not subject to appeal to secular courts – a superiority claimed by all church courts, notably including the Inquisition. (Interestingly, the European Court of Human Rights says that it lacks jurisdiction to hear appeals of the actions of the international tribunals located in the Hague, and which has some rules and procedures that violate fundamental standards of judicial human rights; see Hayden 2000). As of the Kosovo war in 1999, human rights organizations were also openly urging NATO to go to war — one can almost hear a new version of the old Protestant, Imperialist anthem, becoming "Onward humanitarian soldiers, marching as to intervention" though calling in fact for war. And yes, there were humanitarian war crimes, but those cannot be prosecuted. This is not to say that many human rights organizations did not engage in worthwhile activities, just as many religious organizations do, or to imply that adherents of the Church of Human Rights were any less true in their faith that are many adherents of religious denominations.

ics, but apparently not anthropological ones.[5] Or human rights ones, either – what is often justified as "naming and shaming" is quite literally defamation, both libel and slander; and it works because it is presented in ways that not only do not offer an opportunity for denial, but treat denial itself as further evidence of moral culpability.

But another question was: *should a scholar even talk to officials of The State? And especially the American state?* This is a long-standing issue for anthropologists. Franz Boas was censured by the AAA in 1919 for having published a letter accusing four unnamed anthropologists of being spies, although he was uncensored in 2005.[6] In 2007, an AAA Task Force on the Engagement of Anthropologists with the US Security and Intelligence Communities issued a Final Report arguing that in "localized conflicts pitting culturally divided groups" anthropologists can "contribute to" the suddenly increased need for cultural knowledge. Specifically, they can help "shape kinds of engagement and directions of policy; alternatively they can abstain from involvement *and condemn the involvement of others*" (Peacock et al. 2007, 24, emphasis added). This last phrase seems to envision open season on anthropologists who take the first option and do feel an obligation to respond to the start of a war, and virtually invites the kinds of *ad hominem* attacks mentioned above through its endorsement of "condemning" others.

In crisis situations, this can all get very real very quickly. Thus, in late 1990 and early 1991, as war seemed increasingly likely, the last US Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann, several times invited me for informal coffee, late in the day — I was in Belgrade as a Fulbright senior fellow, and he knew that I was likely to have some ground-level experiences that his political officers could not have. When the country fell apart, calls came to me from people in different parts of the US government, plus some European ones.

My view was that these were the people involved in advising those making decisions, and that almost everyone I was talking to seemed really to be trying to help avoid the catastrophe, and later on, to mitigate it. So why wouldn't I talk to them? Actually, a common ground was that we often shared dismay (and worse) when the highest-level politicians routinely ignored the reports and well-informed advice of the people talking to experts like me. For that reason, the CIA's unclassified military history of the Yugoslav Wars, *Balkan Battlegrounds,* was written explicitly to counter the inaccuracies in most popular and political invocations of events there (see Central Intelligence Agency 2002, xi-xii). For what it's worth, when the government's analysts call you, identifying themselves as such and asking your views on a situation,

5 I will not publicize any such scurrilous attacks by discussing or citing them, but Bette Denich (2005) wrote a dignified response to one such attack for those wishing to see an example.

6 https://americananthro.org/about/policies/uncensoring-franz-boas/

take it as a compliment — many of their analysts also generally hold to the ethics of responsibility and look for the most reliable information they can find, mainly from open sources, like scholars. They have read your work and take it seriously!

However, talking to the people who try to inform the politicians who make the decisions in order to steer those decisions towards realistic ways to bring hostilities to an end, brings one a lot of criticism, and again can lead to personal attacks. Oddly enough, these attacks often come from the same people who accuse one of being complicit in war crimes.

Negative consequence 2 — Defendants before international criminal tribunals apparently should not have access to qualified experts and are thus to be denied a fair trial: The Yugoslav and Rwanda conflicts led to the creation of the first international war criminal tribunals since Nuremberg, which leads to another issue: *Expert Witnessing: To Be or Not to Be One — for the Defense?* The field of transitional justice has been a growth industry, spending lots of money and creating lots of jobs for lawyers from North America and Western Europe (mainly) to bring war criminals to justice and thus foster reconciliation. At least that was the theory, and in 1996, when the Yugoslav Tribunal got going, the invocation of Nuremberg as inspiration made it seem plausible (it is not very plausible now [see Hayden 2011], but that's another story).

Obviously, being an expert witness for the prosecution would generally be seen as admirable — is there a link here to those stirring calls for anthropologists to be witnesses more generally? The problem for me was that I was called to be the first expert witness *for the defence* in the first war crimes trial since Nuremberg. The issue had nothing whatsoever to do with the crimes charged, but was rather jurisdictional, concerning what kinds of crimes actually could be charged in the Tribunal, and hinged on rather technical issues of Bosnian constitutionalism and laws.

I did it — the defence lawyer beat down my initial refusal by saying that he only wanted me to say on the stand what I had already said in print. I decided that the Tribunal could not provide real trials if qualified witnesses could not testify truthfully for the defence, in connection with legitimate issues. And I still believe that.

However, once again, the same kinds of people who criticize one for trying to provide objective analyses, and for speaking with people in government who are involved in making real decisions, criticize one for trying to take an international tribunal seriously as a real court, instead of as a show trial, or "process" as per Kafka (*The Trial* in English being *der Process* in the original German).

Negative consequence 3 — being beaten into submission: At what point, though, do you ignore your own ethical principle rather than testify? In my case, turning away the feelers from Slobodan Milošević's lawyers was easy and instantaneous, and based mainly on my knowledge of how deeply responsible he was for the hardships of people throughout Yugoslavia. More troublesome was turning down requests from

counsel for some Bosnian Croat politicians, when I thought that I could provide information that could aid their defence, and that they were being tried unfairly, at least in regard to some charges. But being perceived as a repeat witness for the defence in the Tribunal would clearly come at great cost to my professional reputation.

That is where I found that I had been beaten down by Negative Consequence #2 — the strident criticisms I received for having been an expert witness on a technical constitutional issue in the first case. It seems that if you take seriously the position that defendants have the right to a real defence instead of only a token one, you have to be prepared to sacrifice your reputation and maybe much of the rest of your academic career. I could not do that.

MINERVA'S OWL FLEES FROM GUNFIRE

In trying to deal with all of this I was able to draw on the thoughts of others who have faced such dilemmas, which are not new. Weber's classic lectures "Science as a Vocation" and "Politics as a Vocation" were written during World War I and published after his unsatisfactory experience as support staff to the German delegation at the Versailles negotiations, which produced what has been called "the peace to end all peace." John Maynard Keynes' brilliant *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* ([1920] 2019) was one of the first major attempts at a social science intervention into policy, arguing very convincingly against the punitive economic provisions of Versailles, and saying prophetically that imposing them would impoverish not only Germany but thereby, all of Europe. The attempt failed, of course. His arguments against what we now call "sanctions" have also been largely forgotten, including by human rights organizations:

> The policy of reducing Germany to servitude for a generation, of degrading the lives of millions of human beings, and of depriving a whole nation of happiness should be abhorrent and detestable, — abhorrent and detestable, even if it were possible, even if it enriched ourselves, even if it did not sow the decay of the whole civilized life of Europe. Some preach it in the name of Justice. In the great events of man's history, in the unwinding of the complex fates of nations Justice is not so simple. And if it were, nations are not authorized, by religion or by natural morals, to visit on the children of their enemies the misdoings of parents of rulers. (Keynes [1920] 2019, 173)

We might bear those words in mind the next time we hear for calls for sanctions in the name of enforcing human rights, at least, if not as a means of warfare.

The Call for Papers raises an additional issue, in its references to problems with "cooperation with Russian academics," and the rhetorical question of "How will we engage in discussions if Russian scholars are unwilling to mention 'war' or invoke human rights fearing criminal persecution?" This is a rhetorical question because international law itself gives the answer in its frequent references to "armed conflict" rather than "war," so that it is easy to conceive of phrasing issues in this way, and I might argue that it would be unethical not to do so with Russian colleagues, rather than putting them into possible danger.

Of course, there is also the question of how to deal with colleagues in Russia whose work has no connection at all to Ukraine, who themselves oppose the war, who are in constant touch with friends and family in Ukraine and would like to leave Russia but are held back by extended family and economic considerations. Experience from the Yugoslav wars indicated that those in Serbia who were most against the war were much more impacted by sanctions and shunning than were the supporters of the regime. But such subtleties tend to get lost in the oppositional rhetorics adopted during conflicts.

But the issue of how academics from nations involved in conflicts can communicate is also not new. Thomas Jefferson, that Virginia slave owner who nevertheless wrote so convincingly about the inherent equality of people and also about the necessity for democratic states to be secular rather than grounded in religion, was also a scientist engaged in vigorous international correspondence. He was criticized in 1808 for remaining in communication with scientists in England and France when the new USA was engaged in hostilities, if not declared war, with both. His response referred to organizations of scientists which "are always in peace, however much their nations may be at war. Like the republic of letters, they form a great fraternity spreading over the whole earth, and their correspondence is never interrupted by any civilized nation" (Jefferson [1809] 1984, 1201). Jefferson's specific example was to vaccination as "a late and remarkable instance of the liberal diffusion of a blessing newly discovered," which in view of the political success of anti-vaxxers throughout the world is now ironic. It is also ironic that since the Russian invasion of Ukraine international physics researchers at CERN have stopped publishing works with co-authors who work at Russian institutions (Petrakou 2023). It seems that "civilized nations" now do interrupt the correspondence of scientists even when their own nations are not at war with that of the scientists being excluded.

It may thus be that the Call for Papers for this thematic issue reflects a view of science that would be rejected by classic writers on the ethics of scientific communication such as Max Weber, John Maynard Keynes, or Thomas Jefferson. For that matter, Franz Boas was censured by the American Anthropological Association in 1919 for an article that condemned scientists serving as spies because in so doing they

"have not only shaken the belief in the truthfulness of science, but they have also done the greatest possible disservice to scientific inquiry" and "raised a new barrier against the development of international friendly cooperation" (Boas [1919] 2005).

Yet after more than thirty years of engagement in discourses concerning the wars in the former Yugoslavia and conditions in some of its successor republics, I do not see how an academic can offer much of anything of value to the people and institutions responding to crises that is *not* grounded on the scholarly obligations of basing analyses (and thus recommendations) on reliable and accurate data, analysed without consideration of what might be considered the preferred outcome – preferred even by the academic making the analysis, I should add. Otherwise, what do we offer that is not already provided by journalists, who write better than most scholars do? Or international humanitarian workers, who actually have training and experience for these tasks? Or propagandists for one side or another, secure in their faith that if not God, then human rights are so securely on their side that any contrary argument must itself be unethical and immoral? Or those morally driven people who, knowing nothing at all about the region, still know all that is important to know about the crisis, and call for "something, anything" to be done, even militarily, with no thought as to what the effects of that might be. But then, how could we assess the likely effects of actions *without* adhering to the scholarly responsibilities towards accuracy and reliability? And how do we do this without communicating with those who hold other views?

The problem is that as Boas, Jefferson, Keynes, Weber and a host of lesser lights learned, warfare presumes, even necessitates, the division of the world, and thus of intellectual life and of intellectuals themselves, into those who support the different sides, without regard for whether in fact the academics concerned actually do support the actions of their governments. In this situation everyone's ability to perceive difficult facts, much less analyse them, is impaired, because Minerva's owl cannot wait for nightfall to fly, but rather flees from the gunfire.

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AUTHOR'S CONTACT:

Robert M. Hayden
University of Pittsburgh
E-mail: rhayden@pitt.edu
ORCID: 0000-0002-4379-3325

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OLD-NEW COLONIAL TENDENCIES IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY: EMPATHY IN WARTIME

JULIA BUYSKYKH

THE CENTRE FOR APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY, KYIV
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK

Taking autoethnographic and reflexive approaches as a background, this article reflects on the tendency of a number of Western Anglophone academic writings to impose a patronising perspective on, and indeed try to silence, commentary on Ukraine concerning the ongoing Russian invasion. This line of argumentation has become known as *"westplaining"*, and it seems to have taken the place of the old "orientalism". Such interventions neglect or elide the variety of regional perspectives and their entangled histories, embodied experiences and emotional contexts that are all too germane to those of us who have been doing fieldwork in Ukraine for years now. Such a regrettable imposition of ill-equipped *"westplaining"* thinking results in a presentation of a distanced, patronising, sometimes partisan and too-commonly facile view of the complexity of current events. Through ostensibly disinterested and compassionate appeals to listen to the "western" perspective first, the local insiders' voices are effectively silenced. In contrast, I discuss the importance of emotional testimonies and active empathy in social anthropology as responses to collective evil and violence, and as one possible way to overcome the borders that intellectual colonialism creates within the academic community.

KEYWORDS: Ukraine, war, empathy, emotional testimony, insider's perspective, colonialism, westplaining

In eternal memory of my friends Mykola Fetisov, Vyacheslav Zaitsev, and Serhiy Dovhan', perished on a frontline of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022-2023

> I live *here* and *now*, and for the moment it is to *this* audience that I wish to tell a story, to explain and to oppose something that is being produced *here* and has adverse effects *there*. Of course, it is very uncertain whether we ever reach the audience we speak to; it is equally uncertain whether whom we think we speak for will actually recognize or accept it. [original emphasis]
>
> (Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*)

WAR EXPERIENCES, EMOTIONAL TESTIMONIES, AND AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

I am writing the core of this paper during April-June 2022, living at my friend's house in Warsaw, and trying not to consider myself a "war refugee". However, I had to flee Ukraine on 20 March 2022, leaving my mother and my pet cat in Kyiv, because there was no possibility to get the medicine I must consume regularly there; being in Kyiv under siege, with Russian troops in its suburbs, we lacked the basics. The spring of 2022 has been the darkest time both for me and for many of my friends who had to flee, leaving behind their relatives, damaged flats, burning cities and ruptured lives (Buyskykh 2022). We still cry when we discuss this exodus between us, Ukrainians, where no one accuses us of being "too emotional".

I think, though, that Ukrainians have every right to express themselves emotionally, including in scholarly writings, where we embed our lived experiences of war into knowledge production. We need to speak openly from the point we are at now. And there is some naivety in the proposition that we can, or should, write about the war without emotions, where we are not presenting our experience, but a distanced, sanitised, representation. Emotions shape the surfaces of individual and collective bodies (Ahmed 2014, 4), however, and deep emotional pain shapes my body now to the extent that sometimes I cannot breathe. As we have known since Marcel Mauss published his groundbreaking paper "Techniques of the Body", we as anthropologists learn not only through mental activity but crucially in combination with our bodies and through our bodies, grounded in our bodily senses (Mauss [1935] 1973).

I experience shortness of breath every time I receive news from the frontline that another friend of mine, with whom I had shared part of my youth, has been killed by Russian invaders. I feel pain in my chest every time I speak to my friends who live in the South and East of Ukraine, experiencing constant shelling and bombing. One year later, making the last changes to this paper, after another sleepless night back in Kyiv filled with the sounds of air alerts and explosions caused by missiles that follow so soon after, I am inundated with tears as I read of Southern Ukrainian villages, with people and animals, fertile soils, natural preserves, and archaeological sites, being flooded after the Russian army detonated Nova Khakovka's vital dam on 6 June 2023. I have a persistent lump in my throat at not being able to go to my father's grave in a village cemetery in Mykolaivs'ka oblast', Southern Ukraine, now severely damaged by Russian shelling and bombing. And yet, I have hope, which soothes my soul and makes my sore body move on in search of a future — for myself, my people, and my country. This hope is grounded in my sense that *respect for an emotional testimony should be perceived as a deeper, embodied form of knowing which contributes to more insightful and contextualised knowledge production in anthropology*.

Denying emotion does not necessarily lead to clearer research. Here I want to speak from a personal, emotional perspective, using the tool of auto-ethnography,

and what I hope to meet is empathy. I rely on a methodological approach, proposed by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer, which recognises the researcher's emotion not as antithetical to thought or reason, but as a source of insight that can complement more traditional methods of anthropological research (Davies 2010, 1-14). I also ground myself in Judith Okely's in-depth elaborations on the crucial role of emotions in the anthropological epistemic tradition, the importance of autobiography, participatory experience, and embodied knowledge in anthropology (Okely 1992, 2007, 2019). I ask for the horror I have witnessed and for the pain I have been experiencing with my soul and body to be considered within a moral space that is as valid as the distanced and more theoretically-framed responses on the war in Ukraine by "experts" from the Anglosphere who do not necessarily possess the considerable expertise or experience of the region, its languages, its history or its peoples that such commentary would necessitate.

In this vein, I have chosen to respond to several anthropological publications on the "Focaal blog", written immediately after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine: one essay by David Harvey (Harvey 2022) and two by Chris Hann. Hann's first essay was written in 2014 during the initial stage of the Russian invasion (Hann 2014a), with his second one coming out after 24 February 2022 (Hann 2022). I also speak to two essays by Don Kalb (Kalb 2022a; 2022b). It is important to underline that none of these scholars have published significant research on Ukraine, and none have conducted fieldwork there. Neither do they seem to possess any demonstrable knowledge of the Ukrainian language, nor are they apparently familiar with the kind of local, multi-layered perspectives and the long and diverse history of Ukraine. And yet, they have felt empowered to express their opinions on Ukraine, without citing or acknowledging the perspectives of "local" scholars, instead relying on views from nowhere. To their credit, Hann and Kalb consistently condemn the Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, their writings contain a number of serious shortcomings and specious assumptions regarding Ukraine, its history, and the nature of the ongoing war that remain relatively unchallenged. Several critical responses have, though, already appeared on the "Focaal blog" (Hall 2022; Dunn 2022) and elsewhere (Bošković 2022). I see my contribution as one such response.

FACING THE EVIL, AND EMPATHY AS A POSSIBLE RESPONSE

Between 2015 and 2018 I conducted fieldwork in the north-western and eastern borderlands of Poland, researching inter-confessional relationships, pilgrimages, memory, sense of belonging, and silences that resulted from the violence of the Second World War and the repressive policies of communism. Working with the consequences of multilayered trauma, I embraced two important insights: first, that it is

crucial to elaborate empathy for other people's life-experiences, and thereby develop understanding. Second, that there are events in life when there are no shades, no place for statements like "this is all very complicated and ambiguous". There is however *good* and there is *evil*, a dichotomy as ancient as humanity is. By "evil" I mean a profound immorality, an absence of ethics and blind ignorance. I echo Plato's idea, developed in his early dialogues, particularly in the *Protagoras*, that a profound, deliberate ignorance becomes a bedrock for wrong actions and feeds evil. Today we cannot allow scientific discourse to make us ignorant of the ethical stance required in conducting research and providing commentary on the world.

The most profound research on the concept of "evil" in social sciences and humanities was conducted by Hannah Arendt, whose thoughts on the origins and nature of evil emerged from her attempts to comprehend the horrors of totalitarianism, Nazi ideology, and the concentration camps. Arendt uses the term "radical evil" to describe the horrors of the Holocaust, borrowing from Kant and elaborating it further (Arendt 1962, IX, 459). Arendt believed that what she described as the "banality of evil" results from the failure of humans to fully experience our unifying human qualities, such as thought, will and empathy. When human beings are able to experience and express these qualities it may help prevent the emergence of "radical evil", such as that which arose in Nazi Germany. Since the Nuremberg prosecutions of Nazi criminals for "crimes against humanity" established the principle of a higher duty to one another, one is left frankly bereft by the ongoing global failure of empathy to be an antidote to a recurrent tendency to dehumanise one another through wars for example in Ukraine, Georgia, Chechnya, Congo, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen and the Balkan wars, to name but a few in the last decades.

Moral evil is a fundamentally human phenomenon, embedded in our moral worlds and shaping ethical systems — fields of enquiry from which anthropology has no moral right to distance itself today. Thomas Csordas speaks of moral evil as a "malevolent destructiveness", distinguishing between active and passive evil at the collective (genocide, environmental degradation) and interpersonal (murder, abandonment) levels (Csordas 2019, 41-42). Following Csordas, I understand the Russian invasion and occupation of sovereign Ukrainian territory, and the subsequent propagandising and targeting of the civilian population, to be acts of genocide, of human and environmental destruction. As such, I consider them to be instances of active, collective evil. But this is not just my subjective, scholarly perception. According to the UN declaration on genocide,[1] all the crimes Russia is unequivocally committing in Ukraine are genocide, as international law defines it.

1 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf

The massacres that the Russian army have committed in Bucha, Irpin, Borodyanka, Makariv, Hostomel, all suburbs of Kyiv, during this occupation (end of February 2022 – end of March 2022) are embodying a collective evil. The Russian army has also committed numerous atrocities in many other Ukrainian cities: Mariupol, Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Sumy, Okhtyrka, Popasna, Volnovakha, Izium, Kherson, Bakhmut (van den Berg, Stephanie and Deutsch, Anthony 2023).[2] These include the violent deaths of civilians, the rape of women and children, the torture of people and their pets, the looting of their houses, the theft of jewellery from dead bodies and its sale in the territory of Belarus — all of these are crimes against humanity, and must be condemned as evil acts. The missile attacks targeting schools, museums, theatres, hospitals, and sacred buildings (churches, synagogues, mosques, prayer houses), where people took shelter in basements, are evil. The suffering of the children I saw vomiting on an evacuation train to L'viv at the end of March 2022, because their stomachs were unable to absorb food after weeks of hunger and dehydration, following the Russian blockade of their hometown of Mariupol, is evil. The mass graves of civilians tortured to death in contemporary Europe, the region that survived the unbelievable human catastrophe of two world wars in the last century, are evil. The forcible deportation of seven million refugees,[3] eight million internally displaced persons,[4] and more than one million Ukrainians to Russia by the Russian military through filtration camps (Tsui 2022), is evil. What strikes me is that academics and intellectuals in the Western Anglosphere world do not seem to be as shocked by these facts as they might be. I simply cannot capture the moral significance of these actions and their perpetrators by calling them "wrong" or "very bad". I see this in the category of "evil". Here, rote condemnation ("we don't support Putin", "we are against war") by individual scholars or academic organisations is insufficient. In such an unbearable situation, anthropology has the right to engage, to intervene, and to be a moral science that recognises moral challenges (Csordas 2013).

Indeed, the new wave of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has provoked unprecedented attention. Scholars, professional associations, universities and research institutions have all issued supportive statements condemning Russian aggression and the violence against Ukraine. Public intellectuals (Ukraine's cause 2022) and academics

2 The ongoing documentation of Russia's war crimes in Ukraine: https://war.ukraine.ua/russia-war-crimes/ ; https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/05/22/world/europe/ukraine-war-crimes.html ; https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/03/ukraine-apparent-war-crimes-russia-controlled-areas ; https://ukraine.un.org/en/224744-un-human-rights-ukraine-released-reports-treatment-prisoners-war-and-overall-human-rights (accessed 20.06.2023)

3 https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293403/cee-ukrainian-refugees-by-country (accessed 28.06.2022)

4 https://www.minre.gov.ua/news/kilkist-vnutrishno-peremishchenyh-osib-vpo-v-ukrayini-perevyshchyla-8-mln-lyudey-zvidky-y-kudy (accessed 01.07.2022)

(Wanner 2022) followed Adam Michnik's empathic statement, written on the first day of war, when he declared: "We must say it loud and clear — *we are all Ukrainians now* [emphasis added]. In Warsaw and in Paris, in Berlin and in Prague, in London and in Budapest, one thing must be said loudly: today, Ukrainians are not only fighting for themselves; they are fighting 'for our freedom and yours'" (Michnik 2022).[5] However, not all of the texts that emerged from the West as a response to the war in Ukraine are properly empathic, deep or contextualised, and not enough of them encompass embodied knowledge about certain areas of life in Ukraine. On the contrary, there are texts about the war that reveal high levels of ignorance, patronising attitudes and intellectual arrogance towards Ukraine with unreflective, colonial statements. When I read them, I think mostly about *the failure of empathy* and understanding.

Empathy has always been a central analytical and reflective category in the phenomenological tradition. Since Edmund Husserl, phenomenologists recognise that human empathy allows access to other people's "lifeworlds" and experiences (including in the emotional spectrum) with awareness of and respect for the Other. Anthropologists embrace empathy as a key tool in fieldwork research when we try to step into the shoes of the other person and see the world through the eyes of someone else. I see empathy as the ability to come to an understanding of or sense another person's perspective, feelings, needs, or intentions, even when one does not share the same life experiences. Empathy can be an emotional response to people and events, an expression of solidarity, of imaginative co-feeling, where we can conjure up a sense of how someone else must be feeling and have that insight register within us not only as a form of social cognition (Throop and Zahavi 2020), but also in the deeper registers of our own bodily sensorium.

To experience another's suffering in my presence and not to have an emotional response, a sensorial and intuitive turning of my attention towards this person, or this event, resounds with an absence of ethics, indeed of basic humanity. As humans we are social beings, and to be able to witness human suffering without a deeper response speaks to our deficiencies, not to our intellectual acumen. Co-feeling is thus an ethical response to the human condition in its fragility. To insist on a distinction between thought and feeling, while logical, is not humane, certainly not for humanistic intellectuals.

5 Michnik was referring to the famous slogan widely used during the "Solidarity" period in Poland. Its history goes back to the Polish anti-imperial resistance, when Polish soldiers, exiled from the partitioned Poland, fought in various independence movements around the world. It is held that this slogan was first seen during the Polish anti-imperial demonstration, held in Warsaw on 25 January 1831. It was most probably authored by Joachim Lelewel.

This ethical implication of human suffering is a launching point for an empathic understanding of geopolitical instability, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Empathic discernment can contextualise the floods of reports of those life-threatening or life-ending events as propaganda.[6] It can also act a call to "turn towards", to know, to respond with more than intellect, to respond with heart and attention to the point of recognising the Other in their need to be witnessed to. In other words, co-feeling is its own form of intelligence and intelligibility. As anthropologists who rely on empathy as a way into the lives of others, we can transcend empathy per se into a deeper form of witnessing through an existential grounding in our shared, if unequally distributed, sense of justice in this world. While other humanities or the political sciences may be oriented to subsist on the theoretical plane of analysis, anthropologists are decidedly empirical. They are emotionally open, for instance, to empathising with people threatened by or experiencing violence, where empathy addresses the very moment of another person's suffering. It is the possibility of being with someone else in the world that implies a deeper moral dimension; co-engaging, establishing solidarity.

A mistake that intellectuals often make is that we rely on the reading of honoured elders to discern an intellectual niche from which to speak with reflected authority, rather than relying on our deeper insights to read the world in order to know how to respond. More subtly, we lack the imperative to realise that a response is *required*. Lack of empathy can then lead to unreflective thinking and insensitive, and frankly ignorant, perceptions of a different kind of life that other people live, even when they are under fire.

As images of Ukrainian citizens fleeing west to safety from the Russian colonial invasion flooded the world's screens, commentators struggled to make sense of the import of these fragments of reports they were witnessing. One national broadcaster in Ireland at the time, Ryan Tubridy, said on live radio: "I kept thinking: 'They all look like us. They look like our neighbours. That could be anyone I work with or who I buy things off […] or I could be related to. It just feels so real'".[7] What Tubridy inadvertently articulated was the double tragedy that the previous victims of Russia's imperial ambitions, the Syrians, did not look like the white, Catholic Irish when they came to Ireland. Their plight was culturally more recognisable as a "Third World" issue from an invisibly foreign country. More poignantly though, Ukrainians do look like other Europeans, but before the full-scale invasion we were just as invisible. Yet we are also, it seems, "European" enough. If Syrians are the cultural "other", we

6 Russian information about the invasion not only lacks credibility but is orchestrated to further a campaign of lies that identifies Ukraine with neo-Nazism as a basis for invasion, war crimes and the incitement to genocide. At no point, therefore, can I ethically entertain any calls for room in my claim for empathy to include any Russians who claim to have a state-manufactured 'grievance' with sovereign Ukraine.

7 https://www.thejournal.ie/ryan-tubridy-2-6076248-May2023/ (accessed 15.06.2023)

are the cultural "in-between", the "domestic others", residents of the "former 'white' colony of Russian and Soviet empires", as Vitaly Chernetsky aptly framed it (Spivak et al. 2006, 834). The complex history that has created the nation-state known as Ukraine is almost entirely absent from modern Western thought, even though at the basic level of the grain produced in this region, Ukraine accounts for as much one third of the world's needs.[8] There is a certain historical lacuna where basic knowledge of the role of Ukraine in the formation of modern Europe is utterly and stubbornly absent from Western minds.[9] All people see is people "who look like them". But we are still not one of them. In the face of such gaps in knowledge, understanding and empathy, anthropologists should have a powerful role to play.

Today, Western intellectual thinking dominates when about it comes to the war in Ukraine. Scholars from Ukraine have been petrified since 24 February 2022, when the war woke us up with a series of shelling all over the country. For weeks and months, many of my colleagues were struggling for their lives, hiding in bomb shelters, basements, bathrooms of their flats, or inside the metro stations in Kyiv and Kharkiv, adjusting to a new horrible reality, trying to ensure food and medicine supplies, escaping their permanent places of residence while under attack from missiles, saving their family members and pets, risking their lives, or being forced to flee the country. Doing routine academic work has become almost impossible under the conditions of war.[10] Meanwhile we are often referred to as "local" or "native" scholars — not to mention regular categorisations as "post-communist" or "Eastern European" due to the existent hierarchies of knowledge and power relations in academia — while we cope with the constant political, economic and social fluctuations in our states-in-transition. Some are even physically endangered, captured or tortured.[11]

8 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-61759692# (accessed 10.06.2023)

9 What Timothy Snyder is currently working hard to popularise is the history of Ukraine for Western audiences, placing it in a world-historical context: https://online.yale.edu/courses/making-modern-ukraine (accessed 15.06.2023)

10 When thinking about the most recent series of wars in Europe, before Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, the Balkan wars come to mind: from the ten-day war in Slovenia for its independence to the insurgency in Macedonia in 2001. It took years for scholars from the former Yugoslav republics, now all independent states, to distance themselves, reflect and respond academically to this series of wars (Maček 2009). Therefore, local scholars' understandings of the Balkans and the consequences of those wars were strongly overshadowed by Western academic characterisations of these events, which were often produced quickly and without a similarly deep knowledge of the region, its history or its people (Mishkova 2018).

11 For example, on 27 January 27 2016, Dr Ihor Kozlovskyi, head of the Centre for Religious Studies and International Spiritual Relations, who worked as an associate professor at the Department of Philosophy of the Donetsk National Technical University (2011-2015), was captured by the militants of

I reflect here on tendencies in writings produced in Western academia, which result in denying the citizens of Ukraine their subjectivity and the state its sovereignty with regard to the ongoing Russian invasion. I consider these tendencies to be a dangerous phenomenon, resulting in ignorant opinions from the "West" towards the "East". "Western" voices speak from a centre to a periphery of their own imagination, while "Eastern" voices represent a resistant, embodied knowledge that is unjustly orientalised. Those "Eastern" voices from within speak back, but do not speak down, to potential "Western" allies. I highlight the importance of *active empathy* as one possible way to overcome the boundaries that this intellectual colonialism creates in academia. By active empathy, I mean an engagement that is equal parts intellectual, psychological and emotional: "Sympathy is seeing someone's pain, whereas empathy is relating and feeling it" (Anderson 2022, 257).

I worry that esteemed academics have platforms that allow their voices to be easily amplified, and even more easily allowing them to amplify Russian propaganda that has been laundered as "anthropological knowledge". I am concerned that other Western scholars are not quicker to condemn such views as serving a dark turn in modern European history, and furthering cooperation with contemporary colonising forces is an infernal return of the bad habit of being on the wrong side of history. And make no mistake, this is the history of Europe being written before our eyes, in rough draft, at the expanding edge with the unfinished project of EU expansion on one side, and the anachronistically evil Russian colonial apparatus on the other. History will not judge propagandists lightly, and neither should our discipline.

I address this paper to those amplified voices; white, male, Anglophone. I ground this response to propaganda in European examples because I want scholars and intellectuals at every level of influence to focus on the reality that this evil has come to them too. Saying nothing is providing support to someone; who do you wish to support? It is not even enough to merely document the downfall of a country, a people, and a set of values that can guarantee my home country a future out of the shadow of a failed empire of evil. Empathy, then, entails more than just silent witness, timid condemnation of war, commentary behind a paywall, or whispered rebuttals of elder statesmen for alarming solecisms. Empathy can embrace a call to public awareness, to tell a story that can be heard, understood and can change minds and hearts. Anthropologists have a record of being counted in the public sphere (González 2004), and it is time to meet the moment again. Let us begin with our humanity, then, our capacity to emote and empathise, and deploy our intellects ethically and imaginatively to the task of speaking truth and discerning threats. Let us be heard as we stand

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the so-called terrorist organisation "Donetsk People's Republic" because of his pro-Ukrainian position and was subjected to torture and kept in a prison until 27 December 2017, when he was released and brought to Kyiv. Unfortunately, he passed away on 6 September 2023.

for something or someone in this world, something other than our own careers, someone other than ourselves.

HIERARCHIES OF KNOWLEDGE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A "LOCAL" SCHOLAR

The division between "the Western" and "the other" academia is less a matter of geographical distances than an epistemic question related to the colonial histories of anthropology. Decolonising the academic tradition of dividing scholars into "indigenous", "local" or "native" on the one hand, and "global experts" on the other, seems like an unachievable dream. Many of us would love to find ourselves in an academic world that is not dominated by Western-centric vision and that actually encourages a variety of perspectives. But the reality is different.

Debates about how to decolonise anthropology started prior to the post-structuralist turn of the 1970s with attention to the inner perspective, emotions, empathy, and what Kirsten Hastrup calls "reflexivity" (Hastrup 1995, 49-51). Talal Asad's collection *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Asad 1973), was one of the first and the most powerful re-examinations of the relationships between anthropology and colonialism. In order to decolonise perceptions of the "other", Glenn H. Jordan argued that the new cultural anthropology that emerged in the mid- to late 1980s needed to incorporate reflexive and interpretive techniques in addition to radical innovations (Jordan 1991, 42). One of the most vocal calls for the decolonisation of anthropology has been the "anthropology of liberation" addressed by Faye V. Harrison and her strong position for radical and critical perspectives in anthropology that should focus on the empowerment of the cultures being studied (Harrison 1991, 1-11). Contributing to the same volume, Edmund T. Gordon argued that a decolonised anthropology would have to be reinvented outside of the West (Gordon 1991, 152). In their iconic volume *Writing Culture*, James Clifford and George Marcus opened an important conversation on decentring the West and shifting power relations in academia (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Later, in his essay "Feeling Historical," Clifford reflected on the historic origins of anthropology embedded in the discipline's role in building empires, even though many anthropologists believed they were advocating for indigenous cultures (Clifford 2012, 419). He describes the present historical moment as "a contradictory, inescapably ambivalent, conjuncture: simultaneously post- and neo-colonial" (Clifford 2012, 421). A decade later, in 2022, his insightful description of the current historical moment, remains highly relevant.

If we look attentively at all the work that has been done, we see that the research that claimed to decolonise anthropology almost exclusively concerned relations between Western European states, former metropolises, and the Asian, African and

Pacific states, erstwhile Western colonies. This scholarship also addressed relationships between Western anthropologists with their research assistants, or fieldworkers, too-often demoted to the rank of "local" or "native" scholars, or "indigenous ethnographers". However, little has been said about the other scars of inequality that colonialism caused. I am referring to the colonial approach towards Eastern Europe, which Larry Wolf called "the paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, Europe but not Europe" (Wolf 1994, 7). Serbian feminist and philosopher Marina Blagojević stressed that the indefiniteness of Central and Eastern Europe and its vague state-in-transition may be related to the notion of the semi-periphery and how the regions' inhabitants are perceived as "non-'White' whites, non-European Europeans" (Blagojević 2009, 27).

Ukraine has been clamped down and held between two colonial discourses, one of lingering Western Cold War supremacy and the other of resurgent Russian imperialism. This is revealed in the perception of Ukraine exclusively through the prism of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and Russia, which is a very limited perspective regarding Ukraine's diverse history connected to Polish, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Romanian and Russian political entities, and extant heterogeneous cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. Historian Andrii Portnov emphasises the country's diversity as a "crucial source of political pluralism." He stresses that "even in the face of the invasion, diversity did not prove to be a weakness: religious and linguistic differences did not undermine the unity of the country" (Portnov 2022). This issue is not acknowledged in a line of thought that limits perceptions of Ukraine only through the Russian neo-colonial prism.

Todd Prince has recently argued that most of Western scholarship, with a strong focus on Russia, has "overlooked" the trauma inflicted on Ukraine — as well as the Caucasus and Central Asian states — by Russian imperialism and colonialism (Prince 2023). But why did it take a full-scale war to make Ukraine visible, even recognisable? It should have been recognised at least in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas. And while some Western European cases of former colonies that gained their independence are recognised, as in the case of Ireland, which has both an early and a late colonial experience, the Eastern European colonial and post-colonial experiences are far less acknowledged on the global Western-centric scale. Even the fact that the Western world firmly believed that Ukraine could withstand Russia's aggression for only three days before surrender would be inevitable suggests, as I argue, that Ukraine has not been seen as a sovereign subject or a viable modern nation-state. Only a small number of specialists who have studied Ukraine for decades and military historians understood its ability, will, and existential need to fight for freedom.

When Alexander Fiut encourages academics "to break the conspiracy of silence concerning Russia's colonial practices," he suggests that they should be analysed not only in relation to Poland, but "also with reference to other nations that still remain in the grip of the former Soviet Empire" (Fiut 2014, 35). While decolonising their methodological approaches and theoretical frames concerning Western imperial legacies (e.g. British, French or Belgian), anthropologists are not as yet skilled at seeing the same inappropriateness when it comes to the Russian (Neo)empire. Olesya Khromeychuk addresses exactly these issues in her lecture "Where is Ukraine on the mental map of the academic community? " (Khromeychuk 2022). Indeed, some Western anthropologists are simply not ready to recognise many states, including Ukraine, that have long stood in the shadow of Russia in the academic knowledge they produce.

Almost twenty years ago an anthropologist from Poland, Michał Buchowski, entered into a debate with Chris Hann that developed into a vigorous discussion on "hierarchies of knowledge". Starting in 2004, Buchowski published his article "Hierarchies of Knowledge in Central-Eastern European Anthropology", where he exhibited his vision of colonial practices in academia and the self-perception of the "Western" scholars as those who are "better" than their colleagues from the "East" (Buchowski 2004). Buchowski criticised Western researchers for their use of Central-Eastern European scholarship mostly as a source of ethnographic data and not as a font of theoretical inspirations. Similarly, he condemned the superior attitude of Western scholars towards their Eastern colleagues as "natives" in a way that failed to consider them as equal (Buchowski 2004, 10).

A response written by Chris Hann, where he admitted that there were hierarchies, argued that these hierarchies existed because of the "lesser" quality of "local" scholars' work; "If […] other "local scholars" wish to be as widely read as some of the outsiders who write about CEE, then they need to put in the field time and write monographs of equivalent depth and sophistication" (Hann 2005, 195). The main idea he pursued was that no matter how educated and trained scholars from Central-Eastern Europe are, they should fit the Western frame, and "pull themselves up" to the level of their Western colleagues. Otherwise, their demands for recognition are nothing more than complaints without the grounds to claim an equal place "on the market". Hann also claimed that to become "true" anthropologists, we should go to the West first, to learn how to tackle research, and then do studies at home. Buchowski responded by advocating for a Central-Eastern European anthropology, opining that such neoliberal terms as "market", "competition", "rivalry" indeed frame some Western anthropological thinking, but still had not invaded academia in Central-Eastern Europe. Buchowski also said that in Western studies on Central-Eastern Europe, "one can hardly find anthropological ideas, much less theories, produced by local anthropologists and that Western scholars refer almost solely to

other 'Westerners' as theoretically entitled" (Buchowski 2005, 200). In a later article (Buchowski 2012) Buchowski argued that "in a hierarchical order of scholars and knowledge, post-socialist anthropologists are often perceived as relics of the communist past: folklorists; theoretically-backward empiricists; and nationalists. These images replicate Cold War stereotypes, ignore long-lasting paradigm shifts as well as actual practices triggered by the transnationalisation of scholarship" (Buchowski 2012, 20). This is not to mention the obvious multicultural skills of many intellectuals from Central-Eastern Europe that include mastering multiple languages and having a (admittedly imposed) common world language to draw on when thinking beyond their "parochial" sovereignty. In a subsequent publication, Chris Hann noted that we could speak of a "new academic Cold War" between disciplinary traditions of the academic East and West. In his view "anthropology/ethnography throughout Eastern Europe nowadays is a field of internecine skirmishing, whingeing and ressentiments" (Hann 2014b, 46). Nonetheless, this argument did not encompass any attempt to give due weight to the perspectives of anthropologists from Central-Eastern Europe, connected as they are with the economic, social, and cultural contexts in which they live.

In the special issue of the journal "Cargo" (2014), dedicated to rethinking the anthropology of Central-Eastern Europe,[12] Agnieszka Pasieka, an anthropologist from Poland, whose academic career developed in the West, stressed that Buchowski's observations were still valid. She underlined that the existing division in academia manifests itself "in the perception of some academics as 'local scholars'— as those who can barely illuminate local specificities — and others as 'global experts', capable of shedding light on universal phenomena and concerns" (Pasieka 2014, 52-53). She stressed that "local" scholars are often evaluated by "global experts" not from the point of view of their anthropological sensitivity, education, training and fieldwork experience, "but rather from their 'insiders' perspective or even the 'national lenses' through which they supposedly view the world" (Pasieka 2014, 52).

Sadly, I experience the continuity of colonial hierarchical thinking, instead of any real acknowledgments of the insider's experience and expertise. Moreover, the Russian war in Ukraine sharpens these ruptures, deepens the divisions in academia, and makes the hierarchies in academia more explicit. As Darya Tsymbaliuk, an anthropologist from Ukraine working in the UK, writes, the invasion of Ukraine causes academics "to question the epistemic authority of scholarly knowledge production, when it keeps a safe distance from the wreck of reality" (Tsymbalyuk 2022). Thus, analysis is surrendered to a facile "westplaining".

12 http://www.cargojournal.org/index.php/cargo/issue/view/1/showToc

"Westplaining" seems to have replaced Said's notion of orientalism (Kazharski 2022), particularly in reaction to commentary on Ukraine by established Western intellectuals — be they German intellectuals (Krieg in der Ukraine 2022), American realists (Walt 2022) or cultural anthropologists and historians (Harvey 2022; Kalb 2022a, 2022b; Fitzpatrick 2022) — that reveal a patronising and privileged position when expressing their opinions and claims about "backward" Eastern Europeans who are not "able" to understand the situation in their countries and lack basic knowledge about their region. It can also mean perceiving the world exclusively "through" and "by" the West. The latter can be seen, for example, in the facile accusation against the USA and NATO of seeking the Russian invasion (Artiukh 2022a).

Many "local" scholars from Central-Eastern Europe, as well as some of their Western colleagues, tend to find such commentary useless and even harmful, as it introduces false assumptions and projections into public opinion and media coverage. In doing so, "westplaining" strengthens existing boundaries in academia and creates new ones. Taras Bilous, the editor of the left-wing Ukrainian magazine "Commons" wrote a "letter to the left in the West" shortly after the war began, on 25 February, when Kyiv was under Russian siege. In his piece, he criticised the fact that actual people in Eastern Europe and their political ideas — as well as aggressive Russian imperial chauvinism — do not seem to exist for left-wing intellectuals in the West, who are instead obsessed with "NATO imperialism". He wrote, "a large part of the Western Left should honestly admit that it completely fucked up in formulating its response to the 'Ukrainian crisis'" (Bilous 2022). There has also been a considerable critical response from Ukrainian sociologist Oksana Dutchak (2022), anthropologists from Ukraine Volodymyr Artiukh (2022b) and Taras Fedirko (2022), both currently living in the UK, Polish journalists and publicists (Troost 2022; Smoleński, Dutkiewicz 2022) who also condemn the false logic of "westplaining" Ukraine.

THE FAILURE OF ANTHROPOLOGISTS' MORAL IMAGINATION: SEEKING "RUSSIA'S PERSPECTIVE"

Writing about the Western condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Hann claims that: "there is little or no attempt to representation [sic] of the Russian perspective" (2022). However, what kind of perspective he means remains unarticulated, even by Hann himself. The "Russian perspective" we hear from Russian sources and officials is a mixture of imperialism, lies, justified violence, and alternative facts in the surrealist mirror. In early April 2022, for instance, a Kremlin media outlet "RIA Novosti" published a piece written by pro-Kremlin analyst Timofei Sergeitsev, entitled "What Russia should do with Ukraine", in which one finds justification for the war by calling for the destruction of the Ukrainian identity, language, state and

people. Sergeitsev even claims that the word "Ukraine" is synonymous with Nazism and should not be allowed to exist, therefore the entire Ukrainian people and the country should be erased.[13] There are no illusions: Russia does speak; its "perspective" is very vocal; and it is expressed in documented cases of bombing, shooting, rocketing, shelling, raping and killing civilians, kidnapping children, stealing, and causing famine in the occupied territories of the Ukrainian South.

Unfortunately, this "Russian perspective" is neither seen nor heard in Hann's essay. It is also absent from other essays by Western intellectuals and scholars commenting on the war, such as Sheila Fitzpatrick's text, where she cares about "ostracizing Russia" and "anti-Russian rhetoric", but shows no empathy towards the Ukrainian perspective (Fitzpatrick 2022). A response has been written by Ukrainian historian Vitalii Mykhailovskyi, refuting such concerns (Mykhailovskyi 2022). However, despite their existence, voices and insider perspectives from Ukraine are still marginal on a global scale (see in particular Cherepanyn 2022; Dostlieva and Dostliev 2022; Gomza 2022a, 2022b; Hrytsak 2022; Kasianov 2022; Kulchytskyi 2022; Kulyk 2022; Radynskyi 2022).

Historian Tymothy Snyder was one of the first influential Western scholars (and perhaps the most eloquent) openly calling things as they are when he declared that "the war in Ukraine is a colonial war" (Snyder 2022a). When Putin denies the very existence of the Ukrainian state by identifying it as Terra Nullius, it is colonial erasure. When the Russian army steals everything, from grain and seeds to toilets and kitchen sinks, it is colonial erasure. When Russian soldiers rob Ukrainian ethnographic, archaeological and art collections from the museums of Mariupol, Melitopol, Berdyansk, Kherson, and remove cultural and historical artefacts to Russia, it is colonial erasure of the existence and the right of a people to exist. When the Russian army destroys architectural, religious, and historical sites, it is colonial erasure.[14] When the Russian authorities claim that they want to "liberate the Russian-speaking people" and "their own people" (*"svoich"*) in Ukraine, it is colonial erasure. Snyder, taking into account Ukrainian historical and cultural contexts, sees the whole multi-layered tragedy of the ongoing war in its historical background. He urges other scholars to join him in calling things as they are and name the anticipated genocide of the Ukrainian people, inspired by Putin who "has long fantasised about a world without Ukrainians" — a fantasy that he is now attempting to realise through the Russian army (Snyder 2022b).

13 http://web.archive.org/web/20220403060102/https://ria.ru/20220403/ukraina-1781469605.html (accessed 16.06.2022) English translation and analysis provided by CBC News journalist Chris Brown: https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/kremlin-editorial-ukraine-identity-1.6407921 (accessed 16.06.2022)

14 The Ministry of Culture of Ukraine keeps records of the damaged, destroyed and stolen cultural, historical and religious objects: https://culturecrimes.mkip.gov.ua/ (accessed 19.08.2022)

As scholars, we have to understand the nature of fear, despair, obedience, violence, and imperialism in Russian society and among ordinary people that have allowed the war in Ukraine to happen. Russian soldiers are committing war crimes on the ground. This is also their "voice"/"opinion"/"perspective". Should it be "represented", as Hann proposes? Whose opinion and which opinion does he wish us to hear?

A MISREADING OF UKRAINIAN-RUSSIAN HISTORY

The essays written by David Harvey, Chris Hann, and Don Kalb erroneously assert a one-sided critique of the war as essentially provoked by NATO, along with a misreading of Ukrainian-Russian relationships. Hann claims, for instance, that back in his school days, he "looked at the map and pointed out that USSR militarism was limited to neighbouring "allies" in Eastern Europe, whereas NATO members seemed to think they had the right and duty to be active on the world stage, from Suez to Vietnam […]" (Hann 2014a). This echoes David Harvey's opinion that "up until 1991, the Cold War provided a fairly constant background to the functioning of the world order" (Harvey 2022). It is important to note that both scholars write from the perspective of "their" West, and sadly do not develop any empathy for how life was lived on the other side of the "Iron Curtain". Following the colonial approach, Harvey constantly refers to Ukraine in regional terms, "*the* Ukraine", denying Ukrainian statehood and referring to a geographical territory (Mellen 2019) that lacks sovereignty and defined borders. As Derek Hall notes in his response to Harvey's essay:

> Harvey lists many wars […] since 1945 but omits Russia's invasions of Georgia in 2008 and of Ukraine in 2014-15 and the Russian proxy war in Ukraine's Donbas region. Putin's conservative ultra-nationalism, his denial of the existence of the Ukrainian nation, his ludicrous statements about the threat Ukraine poses to Russia, and his claims that Ukraine, a country with a Jewish President, is run by "neo-Nazis" are all ignored. (Hall 2022)

I would also mention the second war in Chechnya that brought Putin to power, and add that Harvey fails to condemn Russia's war in Ukraine. Instead, what one finds are *"the Ukraine conflict"* and *"recent events in the Ukraine"*, terms that are more agitprop than analysis and that mask the war that Russia has started and continues to wage in Ukraine. Similarly, "the turmoil", "events", "proxy war", "crisis", "the conflict" or "the situation in Ukraine", are all linguistic substitutes for the Russian invasion, which is an illegal occupation of the territory of a sovereign state, and for an ongoing war that has become inconvenient for some in the West. When everyone

became tired because of this uncomfortable and unresolved problem, when they became used to a frozen war that seemed to be far away, the "Ukrainian problem" began to disappear from television screens. The war in Ukraine has been muted, even though more than 14,400 Ukrainians have been killed since the Russian army occupied Crimea in 2014 and armed a separatist movement in Donbas.[15] In this way, the collective West, including parts of Western academia, convinced Putin of his complete impunity.

Elizabeth Cullen Dunn rightly points out that "Harvey ignores the politics of the USSR's successor states as well as regional economic dynamics. It is Russian neo-imperialism, not Western actions, that motivates the Russian invasion of Ukraine" (Dunn 2022). Here we have the ideology of *"russkiy mir"* (the ethnic and cultural "Russian world") being used to attack Ukraine under the guise of the idea of "defend[ing] the Russian-speaking population" (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2021). Russia has done the same in Transnistria, Georgia and Chechnya. When occupying Crimea and invading Donbas, Putin's *casus belli* was that Russia was "returning originally Russian lands" and "defending the Russian-speaking population". This concept of "Russianness" is rooted in a nineteenth-century imperial concept of the Russian nation that reduces Ukrainian and Belarusian identities to variants of Russian identity rather than distinct national identities. This denial elides the existence of Ukrainian and Belarusian languages, cultures, nations and states. The use of this concept in official Russian rhetoric implies the negation of an independent Ukrainian nationality and statehood.

Hann writes about the closeness of Russians and Ukrainians, claiming that "the interwoven Slav history make[s] the Ukrainian case very different" from the case of the Baltic states which have been accepted into the EU and NATO (Hann 2014a). However, despite the apparent closeness of two "'fraternal' nations based on history", the substantial number of mixed marriages during the Soviet era, a large Ukrainian diaspora in Russia, and the Russian language as a lingua franca inherited from the pre-Soviet imperial times, the issue is not as simple as describing it in terms of "closeness" or "fraternity" (Wanner 2014). The "fraternity" thesis on which Hann bases his sense of Ukraine's closeness to Russia, and therefore its lack of nationhood and right to a sovereign state, needs to be problematised and challenged in at least three ways.

First, because of this war, we need new terminology as well as a more complex set of research lenses, because our historical and anthropological concepts of ethnicity and nationalism currently fall short when applied to the Russian war in Ukraine. My

15 United Nations Human Rights. Conflict-related civilian casualties in Ukraine. 27 January 2022: https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Conflict-related%20civilian%20casualties%20as%20of%2031%20December%202021%20%28rev%2027%20January%202022%29%20corr%20EN_0.pdf (accessed 24.06.2023)

acquaintances of Ukrainian, Jewish, Polish, Russian, and Hungarian ethnic origin are now defending Ukraine in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, enacting a Ukrainian political identity and allegiance to a Ukrainian state under attack. Being Ukrainian in Ukraine does not mean to be of Ukrainian origin. But it does mean having certain values, including the centrality of freedom and peaceful coexistence of many nations. One can clearly see that the ideology of the Russian government is to destroy Ukraine, and this means all nationalities and citizens of Ukraine: Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Poles, Crimean Tatars, Romanians, Moldovans, Roma, Hungarians, Slovaks, Belarusians, Bulgarians, Albanians, Gagauz, Greeks, and other nationalities that have lived in Ukraine for centuries and are now part of the Ukrainian political nation. I recall here Volodymyr Kulyk who argued that since the Maidan revolution, the growing identification with Ukraine has brought about a change in what it means to be Ukrainian: in addition to ethnic dimensions, the politics of Ukrainian nationality rests on strong civic associations (Kulyk 2018, 120-121, 134-135).

Second, I argue that a "fraternity of Russians and Ukrainians" is a rather grand Russian propaganda claim that is not supported by anthropological scholarship. Similarly, the specious assertion that, as Russian speakers, Ukrainians are politically loyal to Russia and thus favourable to Russian territorial claims have been refuted by ethnographic studies. This claim does not reflect the lived reality of Ukrainians today. The very first days of the war have finally shown how simplistic and far-fetched these ideologically-induced ideas are. There are no millions of Ukrainians collaborating with the Russian occupiers and bringing them bread and salt, as some unfamiliar with Ukraine might have expected. Instead, the Russians have encountered strong local resistance and partisanship (such as *Zhovta strichka*, "The yellow ribbon"[16]) and a brave, determined Ukrainian army.

Third, such ahistorical claims about "the fraternity" of Russians and Ukrainians made by Putin, the Russian government, and in some cases, vox-popped Russian citizens, can be explained by post-Soviet Russia's difficulties in finding a new, non-imperial version of its identity and therefore, its democratic future. Mykola Ryabchuk argued, for example, that a historically-rooted, Russian, hegemonic view of Ukrainians as "younger brothers", who should be "patronised and censured" for "improper behaviour", has long dominated the political, cultural, and religious discourse in the two countries' relationships. Since the fall of the Russian Empire and throughout the Soviet era, Ukraine and Ukrainians have been perceived only as part of Russia, that is, as being underdeveloped and making the wrong choices. Ryabchuk argues that Russian-Ukrainian relations cannot be normalised until Russians learn to see Ukrainians as neither "good" nor "bad" but simply different, with their own culture and political perspective

16 https://m.facebook.com/yellowribbonUA (accessed 25.04.2022)

(Ryabchuk 2016). In order to begin to see Ukraine in a different way, Russian society must first see itself in a new way, completely deconstructing its historical and cultural identity based on imperial legacies and building a new one on a different basis, one which has yet to be found.

This article is not the place for a broader discussion of the multilayered and complicated Russian-Ukrainian history and the role of Russian imperialism in it. However, I will refer to some episodes in the larger Russian-Ukrainian history which, from the Ukrainian perspective, provide important provenance for continuing Russian imperial policy. First, The Rape (Slaughter) of Baturyn (ukr. *Baturynska Rizanyna*) was a part of "punishing" military actions of the Russian Imperial Army against the Ukrainian Hetman Ivan Mazepa and the Cossack state during the Great Northern War (1700–1721). In November 1708, the Russian army under Alexander Menshikov entered the town of Baturyn, defeated the garrison of the citadel, slaughtered the entire civilian population, and razed the town to the ground. Many of the inhabitants hid in churches, where they were burned to death by Menshikov's troops. According to archaeological excavations in Baturyn in 1995–1997 and 2000–2010, the highest number of civilian casualties was recorded in the Church of the Life-Giving Trinity, where the women of the town hid with their children. The number of victims varies between 13,000 and 15,000 people (including 6,000–7,500 who were mainly women, children, and elderly) (Kovalenko 2009, 52).

The Rape of Baturyn is not the only brutal episode in a long history of Russian imperial destruction of Ukraine; The Valuev Circular (Russian: *Valuievs'kyi tsyrkuliar*) of 1863 declared that the "Little Russian language" (the Ukrainian language) had never existed (the Russian imperial government officially referred to Ukrainians as *Malorosy*, or "Little Russians"). Equally, the Ems Ukaz Decree (Russian: *Emskiy ukaz*), issued by Emperor Alexander II of Russia in 1876, prohibited the use of the Ukrainian language in print. More recently, the Holodomor, the manmade famine of 1932–1933, was orchestrated by the Soviet regime using methods inherited from the Russian colonial apparatus. It caused the deaths of more than 3.5 million people in the territory of Soviet Ukraine.[17] In the late 1930s, the NKVD murdered the most prominent representatives of the Ukrainian cultural and intellectual elite in what is known as "The Executed Renaissance" (Ukranian: *Rozstriliane Vidrodzhennia*), during a systematic slaughter of up to ten thousand people from fifty-eight nations in Sandarmokh, Karelia (modern Russia). Such repressions destroyed for decades the development of Ukrainian social sciences, humanities, culture and literature, and eradicated for too long any hope for a better future. Putin is currently trying to repeat Russian imperial and Soviet methods of destroying Ukraine. His invasion of Ukraine is nothing new, just another chapter in the long book of Ukrainian subjugation. Therefore the "fraternity" thesis is another

17 https://www.idss.org.ua/golodomor/html/holodomor (accessed 20.06.2023)

myth, coined by Russian propaganda and successfully sold to a West largely ignorant of Ukrainian history.

David Harvey writes that the people of the USSR were not consulted when the Soviet Union was dissolved into successor states: "the Soviet Union was dismembered into independent republics without much popular consultation" (Harvey 2022), and he is factually incorrect and shows a basic lack of literacy regarding modern Eastern European history. There was a huge wave of mobilisation, with millions of people demanding independence for their nation-states. The people's chain across the Baltic, connecting Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, was an overwhelming symbol of the people's wish to separate from the Soviet Union. Ukraine was no different. On the anniversary of the Ukrainian People's Republic's declaration of independence on 22 January 1918, a huge human chain (Ukrainian: *Lantsiuh Jednosti*) was organised from Kyiv to Ivano-Frankivs'k through L'viv, in which almost a million people participated, showing their desire to be separated from the USSR and to live in an independent Ukraine. On 1 December 1991 there was a pan-Ukrainian referendum in which 92.3% of the population — including my diverse family and the then almost entirely Russian-speaking Crimea and Donbas — voted "yes" to independence. The failure to recognise this historical fact highlights the ongoing invisibility of Ukraine on the European and global stages, as it was during the Soviet era and in the years after the fall of the USSR (Klumbytė 2022, 6). It is now time for recognition.

What Harvey and Hann also crucially miss is that the Baltic States, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine gained their independence after the fall of the empires in 1918. Ukraine declared its independence from Russia through the Fourth Universal of the Ukrainian Central Council in Kyiv on 22 January 1918, a political, governmental act that proclaimed the independence of the Ukrainian People's Republic, which existed until late 1920, when the fledgling state lost its territory to the Bolsheviks. In fact, all the above-mentioned new, and therefore weak and still-unstable, states were invaded by the Bolsheviks and failed. However, these states had incontestably existed and contributed to the tradition of statehood called upon in anticipation of the faltering Soviet Union of the late 1980s, providing an essential point of reference in 1991 when these Soviet republics declared their desire to return to an independent mode of existence.

For his part, Don Kalb writes: "There is no doubt, this *is* Putin's war", and stresses that this is a "'proxy war' between Russia and NATO". He decides how Ukrainians should feel about this war, arguing that "Ukrainians continue to heroically play their part and to actively imagine, and being made to imagine, that it is a war for their 'sovereignty and freedom'" (Kalb 2022b). However, from the Ukrainian perspective, it is indeed a war for freedom and independence from Russia on all levels: economic, cultural, political and existential. As Ivan Gomza pointedly argues, "the imperial

nature of the war is often unnoticed by the Western general public", including by anthropologists such as Kalb and Hann (Gomza 2022a).

In Hann's view, Ukraine is not the subject of its own history and politics, but merely an object dependent on Russia: "If we truly cared about a transparent liberal democracy within the boundaries of this sovereign state, we should long ago have made it clear that in no circumstances would Kiev [sic] be able to accede to NATO, the EU, or any other Western association until identical forms of integration had been negotiated with Moscow" (Hann 2014a). One would expect an anthropologist whose research agenda covers Eastern Europe to spell the names of Ukrainian cities correctly: *Kyiv*, not Kiev. When will academics finally abandon the colonial discourse that dictated a Russian language hegemony in the administrative and geographic names of former Soviet republics? Today, it is hard to imagine anyone referring to Kolkata as "Calcutta" or Mumbai as "Bombay". It would rightly be seen as a sign of imperialism and disrespect for Indian statehood and linguistic sovereignty. What prevents Western academics from extending the same respect to Ukraine? Re-evaluating and recognising our tacit acceptance of colonial nomenclature should lead to a moment of rethinking of academic language to derussify our analysis and commentary. It would not be too much to ask for similar decolonising projects to feed into European values and international law. Academia now needs new tools and lenses, more empathetic, more engaged and more focused on local contexts that need champions more than they need intellectual "westsplanations" which parrot Russian talking points in Russian terms.

THE WAY FORWARD

The world as the Ukrainian people knew it has been destroyed. For my friends and me, this war has already brought so much loss and grief. I cannot shake off the feeling that the world closes its eyes in horror when acts of genocide happen. Since 24 February 2022, when the explosive sounds of our air defence systems shooting down Russian missiles woke me up in my apartment in Kyiv, I felt nauseous. I just could not digest the fact that humanity had learned nothing from its many experiences of war over the last century. The evil inflicted on Ukraine by the Russian army is such that all our mechanisms of justice seem inadequate. The very word "evil" describes the limits of malevolence we can bear, not only as Ukraine, Europe, or the Western world, but we as humanity. Wars and other humanitarian catastrophes are not unique to Ukraine, so there are shared struggles in many countries for a more just and humane future, struggles that can begin with empathy for human suffering, leading to what the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg recently called "cathedral thinking" for the world (Thunberg 2019).

Following Michnik's declaration that "We are all Ukrainians now", there are scholars who empathise and care about strangers, who show deep sensitivity and turn empathy into active, engaged action. Many of my friends and colleagues from Poland do this constantly, by bringing humanitarian aid to Ukraine since March 2022. They empathise with Ukraine as researchers, translators, and volunteers. Anthropologists Catherine Wanner and Nancy Ries showed empathy as early as the end of February 2022 by creating the Hot Spot series "Russia's War in Ukraine" at *culanth.org*, bringing the voices of Ukrainian scholars to the surface (Ries and Wanner 2022). Historian Timothy Snyder continues to write about the colonial nature of the Russian invasion, coming to L'viv to give public lectures, meet Ukrainian soldiers and conduct field research. Anthropologist Fiona Murphy and documentary filmmaker Maria Loftus together with the Irish Refugee Integration Network, made a short film "Ordinary Treasures: Objects from Home", which empathically tells the stories of people in Ireland, who have had to escape the war or other forms of violence in their home countries, including Ukraine.[18]

By recognising Michnik's statement, that other people around the world care about fighting for freedom and defending the values of democracy, values which are so fragile, then we must ask how can we help others to acknowledge this new social fact. There is an Irish saying *Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine*, which literally means "Under the shadow of each other, people survive". In a broader sense it means that "we exist in each other's shelter" (Brennan and Dolan 2022, 333). Those were exactly the words the Irish government used to refer to the Ukrainian nation and other suffering peoples in March 2022, when it lifted visa requirements, opened Irish borders and accepted an unprecedented wave of Ukrainian refugees into Ireland.[19] In January-April 2023, I was honoured to be part of the storytelling project "The Inner Light" initiated by the Irish Red Cross, Irish writers from the Fighting Words community and Ukrainian Action in Ireland (Buyskykh 2023). The project aimed to show solidarity with Ukrainians and to bring to the surface the voices of those who were in Ireland having fled the war, making their experiences and perspectives visible, vocal, and accessible to Irish society and to the broader English-speaking world.[20]

The Polish people, being geographically the closest to Ukraine, also responded without hesitation, sheltering millions of Ukrainians in the first weeks of the full-scale invasion. Perhaps this kind of empathy derives from our common history and

18 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAa3eWbU4DM (accessed 22.06.2023)

19 https://m.facebook.com/ExplosiveLiving/videos/ar-sc%C3%A1th-a-ch%C3%A9ile-a-mhaireann-na-daoine-meaning-we-live-in-each-others-shelter-f/489842485957844/ (accessed 1.03.2023)

20 https://www.innerlight.ie/ (accessed 20.06.2023)

common anti-imperial resistance to Russia. One could assume that Irish empathy is also rooted in the social memory of its own anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggle, and the understanding of a colonised nation fighting for its sovereignty. However, I see here a global empathy for the values of a free democratic world where life is the biggest value, and where life is now under threat.

This is a new challenge for all of us, including those in academia. These are precisely the times to show sensitivity in dealing not only with loved ones, but also with strangers, "others", who are Ukrainians now. And if decolonised and recentred, then anthropology has huge potential to become a means of healing in this uneasy process. Anti-colonial, anti-imperial historically-rooted empathy oriented towards social justice can become a new way of thinking and acting, recentring knowledge, changing hierarchies and improving communication.

The liberal democracies of the free world may not survive if Russia is allowed to continue its atrocities in Ukraine and its sponsorship of vassal states and satraps in Belarus, Transnistria, Abkhazia, Southern Osetia, the "LPR" and the "DPR". If the world allows this to happen, then it means that the world is allowing this great evil to remain unpunished. As Anne Applebaum warns, in the hypothetical case of a Russian victory, the tactics of mass violence, massacre, and destruction that have been applied all over Ukraine would be added to the Russian arsenal of mass disinformation, global energy and food crises to create instability for years to come. "And, yes," she writes, "if we accept that outcome, autocrats from Minsk to Caracas to Beijing will take note: *Genocide is now allowed*" [original emphasis] (Applebaum 2022).

Truth is indeed a casualty when one relies on global generalisations and neglects the palette of regional and local contexts. The above-mentioned essays on the "Focaal blog" are written in terms of grand political theories and global narratives. They neglect the value and the main advantage of social anthropology: the focus on minute but important details, the capacity to see a bigger picture from the smaller context, the ability to see global things from the concrete bottom-up local cases, and the attention to the community and individual everyday life, which has become drastically different for Ukrainians since the beginning of the war. As anthropologists, we do care, we do reflect, we do empathise with local communities and contexts; at least we may. In commenting on the unbearable magnitude of the human tragedy we are witnessing, anthropologists should rely on the lived, multiple and changing experiences of people and communities more than on grand political and economic theories. That message was addressed during the panel dis-

cussion "The Geopolitics of Small Things", organised by the University of Bremen in May 2022[21] and June 2023.[22] I wish we could have had more of these discussions.

Here and *now* we have to think about a number of questions: How is our discipline being affected by the Russian war in Ukraine? Will anthropology be decolonised, overcoming its divisions and barriers between "local / native scholars" and "global experts"? To what extent will we confront our own ideologically-constructed assumptions and categories, that serve to prevent us from seeing the suffering in our midst? What exactly is the place of empathy with and for others in contemporary anthropology? I think about the "anthropology of the good" in this instance, which empathises with the "suffering subject" and recognises all experiences and insights within but also beyond suffering (Robbins 2013). I argue that the "anthropology of the good" should become a core methodological approach in current anthropology, especially concerning wars, violent conflicts and refugee crises. It would transform anthropology into something more humanised, more engaged with human experiences, more oriented to the micro-scale of human life, and more contextualised within the local dimensions. As Tim Ingold has stated, "anthropology is philosophy with the people in" (Ingold 1992, 696). I suggest that this call be read as an appeal for an anthropology with empathy put back in for those people.

In respect to Todorova's emotional and powerful argument, I am rather uncertain whether I will ever reach the audience I am addressing here, and it is also uncertain whether this audience will be able to understand, recognise or accept what I am suggesting. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the changes in anthropology I am proposing should come, and we have the responsibility to make them happen. What Ukrainians truly need, what the world desperately needs, and what anthropology undoubtedly needs, is a discerning universal empathy based on our shared humanity.

I hope my voice will be heard.

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21 https://www.uni-bremen.de/kultur/profil/aktuelles/detailansicht/the-geopolitics-of-small-things (accessed 02.06.2022)

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AUTHOR'S CONTACT:

Julia Buyskykh
The Center for Applied Anthropology, Kyiv
University College Cork
E-mail: julia.buj@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-2258-6861

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REVISITING POSITIONALITY IN CRITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: FROM RADICAL ROOTS TO THE CHALLENGES OF NEOLIBERAL ACADEMIA

MARTA SONGIN-MOKRZAN

INSTITUTE OF ETHNOLOGY AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF ŁÓDŹ

Within the field of critical anthropology, the scope of the reflection goes beyond one's own society, encompassing a thorough exploration of anthropologists themselves as complex products of their socio-cultural environments. This aspect is becoming increasingly important in today's critical analysis of the status of anthropology. Drawing on the insights of radical anthropologists, this article explores the economic and political context that shapes anthropological practice.

While radical critics of the 1970s were confronted with well-defined sources of authority, the rise of neoliberalism disperses power and complicates the pursuit of critical anthropology. The question remains: Can critical anthropology maintain its potency amidst the influences it seeks to challenge? This question resonates as a central introspective point for contemporary critical anthropologists, inviting them to navigate the complex web of power, subjectivity, and socio-political context in their pursuit of transformative scholarship.

KEYWORDS: critical anthropology, radical anthropology, positionality, reflexivity, neoliberalism

A critical mode of analysis is characterised by its tendency to question assumptions and beliefs that are often taken for granted. At the same time, it dissects the power dynamics and societal influences that shape not only cultural artefacts, texts, and ideas, but also the totality of human and nonhuman experiences. This mode of analysis delves into the examination of underlying ideologies and biases, challenging well-established norms and revealing the intricate tapestry of power relations. It traces how these dynamics shape various aspects, including identity, representation, and the very framework of socio-material relations. A cornerstone of critical analysis is its unwavering focus on context, encompassing the historical, social, political, economic, and cultural backdrop within which knowledge, an artefact, or a subject emerg-

es. It also ventures into the realm of alternative viewpoints, contributing to a more inclusive and accurate representation of both human and non-human experience.

According to Ghassan Hage, critical thinking is the ability to "reflexively move outside of ourselves" (Hage 2012, 287). In essence, it allows us to recognise what might otherwise go unnoticed and provides a different and alternative perspective on our culture and society. Hage emphasises that different disciplines have their unique ways of being critical, offering insightful analyses into the intricate workings of social realities. Critical sociology, for example, "not only allows us to capture the existence of social relations, structures, and forces that are a *sui generis* reality and as such exist 'outside of us' (...), it also allows us to examine the causal power of these social structures and social forces and ascertain the way they work to help shape us into what we are" (Hage 2012, 287). On the other hand, critical anthropology "takes us outside of ourselves, (…) by telling us that, regardless of what and who we are, we, as individuals and as a society, can dwell in the world in a completely different way from the way we dwell in it at any given moment" (ibid.). As Hage suggests, anthropology enables us to recognize that we have the potential to be radically different from what we are (ibid. 289). Throughout the history of the discipline, anthropologists have used these different modes of critical analyses interchangeably to demonstrate that Western ways of being in the world are not universal and fixed but are rather open to transformation.

A particularly valuable feature of critical anthropology is not only its inherent ability to challenge established norms and power structures or its implicit pursuit of a more equitable society and sustainable practices, but above all, its reflexive nature. Interestingly, critical anthropology takes a transformative journey from scrutinizing Western society through the lens of radical alterity to casting a critical eye on the discipline itself, as one of the institutions constructed within a particular framework of thought. This reflexive turn urges researchers to question the very conditions under which knowledge is produced. It invites us to consider how historical, political, cultural, and institutional factors influence us as researchers, shaping our theoretical frameworks and professional practices. In this sense, critical anthropology offers a profound opportunity for self-examination and introspection. It serves as a mirror through which we can examine anthropologists' own assumptions, biases, and positions that shape the interpretation of the world around us. This introspective process compels us to confront our own standpoints and increases our sense of self-awareness.

The aim of this article is to show how critical anthropology, by "taking us outside of ourselves" helps us to understand our own positionality and, consequently, to better understand the conditions of knowledge production. In particular, I would like to draw attention to the debates raised by radical researchers in the 1960s and 1970s — a moment that I consider to be a turning point in the development of critical

discourse within the discipline — in order to reflect on the challenging situation that critical anthropologists find themselves in today.[1]

CRITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The critical approach within modern anthropology can be traced back to the early days of the discipline, when the focus was on the study of indigenous communities. At that time, ethnographic data collected in the field served not only to demonstrate their similarities to us, but also to question whether our ways of life could be recreated.

The inherent critical capacity of anthropological thought and its impact in challenging the rigidity of our own cultural practices was recognized as early as 1938 by Bronislaw Malinowski in his article "A Nation-Wide Intelligence Service", in which he argued for anthropology at home. In this innovative piece, Malinowski emphasizes the significance of studying ourselves with the same methods and mindset as those used to study indigenous communities, suggesting, for example, that social movements that emerged in the early twentieth century had similarities to primitive mythologies in terms of their use of mysticism, magic, and mythical narratives (Malinowski 1938, 104). Similarly, Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that anthropology "invites us to temper our beliefs in our own importance, to respect other ways of living, and to put ourselves in question through the knowledge of other customs that astonish us, shock us or even make us repulsed" (Levi-Strauss 2011, 51 as quoted in Hage 2012, 288-289). This transformative capacity was particularly evident in the reception of Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Regardless of its factual accuracy and the subsequent controversies it generated, the book sparked debates and discussions about the social construction of gender roles, and the influence of culture on human behaviour.

The critical potential of anthropology stems from the fact that it is rooted in an encounter with radical alterity. The difference between self and other not only gave rise to the concept of culture but also shaped the approach of anthropological analysis, which is fundamentally dependent on this distinction. When socio-political changes led anthropologists to conduct research within their own societies, this perspective was not abandoned but rather adapted to new fields of inquiry. Interpreting the actions, beliefs, and norms of members of one's own culture requires the anthropologist to perceive them as non-obvious, non-natural, and non-universal ways of being in the world. This is only possible when a researcher, by relying on difference as

1 This issue is also addressed in an article I have co-authored with Michał Mokrzan (2020).

a conceptual framework, implicitly acknowledges the presence of the absent other.[2] In this sense, it can be argued that the anthropological mode of analysis is fundamentally critical and has a potential for transformation.

While anthropology is inherently thought-provoking, it also has a historical practice of adopting a critical sociological approach which, as Ghassan Hage points out with reference to Bourdieu, can also offer de-naturalisation or de-fatalisation. Such a perspective allows "us to view ourselves and the social spaces we inhabit as 'social constructs' and/or as 'objects of struggle'" (Hage 2012, 287). This is particularly evident in engaged research that aims to influence change, especially in socio-cultural contexts where power relations are prevalent and significant. By examining and questioning these power dynamics, critical sociology challenges existing structures, cultural norms, and beliefs that perpetuate inequality and oppression. It aims to foster socio-material transformation, promote more equitable and just realities, and create a sustainable future for all living beings. Engaged research similarly focuses on the power dynamics that perpetuate various forms of exploitation and identifies socio-cultural areas in need of reconstruction. Rejecting the status quo, it stimulates action by identifying practices that contribute to imbalances, injustice, and environmental degradation.

REFLEXIVITY

What makes critical thinking in anthropology particularly valuable is its transition from reflection on Western ways of living and thinking to introspection on itself. Initially aimed at challenging Western social structures and cultural dynamics through ethnographic data that suggest the potential for radical difference, critical anthropology then shifts its focus inwards, recognizing its own embeddedness within the society it studies. This introspective approach becomes a particular strength of critical anthropology. It requires a deliberate detachment from established practices and challenges researchers to examine their perceptions of the world through a socio-cultural lens. By acknowledging wider contexts and biases, critical anthropology offers profound insights into how these elements influence scholarly work and shape worldviews. Scholars are encouraged to consider the fundamental aspects of the discipline and the reciprocal relationship between their contributions and the wider socio-cultural landscape. This mode of analysis invites individuals to question assumptions and privileges that influence their understanding of the world and their interactions with others.

2 It can be highlighted that while critical anthropology depends on radical cultural alterity, critical sociology also focuses on the experience of the other — individuals whose lives are shaped by structural inequality and differ significantly from the experiences of the privileged.

Anthropology, as noted above, inherently has the potential to reverse its gaze on its own assumptions, a capacity rooted in its foundational encounter with radical alterity. However, it was not until the 1980s that this potential was first widely acknowledged to any significant degree, marking a period of intense critical debates about the role of the researcher's authority in knowledge production (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Clifford 1988, Geertz 1988, Tyler 1987, Van Maanen 1988). During this period, the emphasis was on locating power in the semantic structures of ethnographic texts as a means not only of describing other cultures, but also of shaping and constructing them. This era witnessed a profound departure from the concept of the objective and detached observer, as anthropologists grappled with the complex dynamics of representation: the power of ethnographic authority and the rhetorical means employed in their work.

While the representational crisis of the 1980s is widely regarded as having had the most significant impact on anthropology, largely because of its emphasis on self-awareness, self-criticism, and the recognition of the researcher's role in knowledge production, it was the radical thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s who first drew attention to the biases and assumptions within the theoretical foundations of the discipline (Hymes 1972, Asad 1973, Huizer 1979). In their analysis, they used a Marxist conceptual framework to consider the status of indigenous communities and, subsequently, the position of anthropology itself as a Western institution created within specific circumstances (Gough 1968, Diamond 1964, Brreman 1968). Their significant contribution to the development of anthropological reflexivity involved a comprehensive examination of the discipline's situational context within a broader political and economic framework. While researchers in the 1980s focused on delineating power dynamics within ethnographic texts, their radical predecessors drew attention to the structures of power that shaped the interactions between indigenous, underdeveloped communities, and Western anthropologists.

The self-reflexive approach pioneered by radical anthropologists is particularly relevant to understanding the challenges facing contemporary critical researchers. It reminds us of the paramount importance of seeing ourselves as social actors embedded in specific contexts. Acknowledging our own positionality enables us to approach research with heightened awareness and a deeper understanding of the complexities of the process of knowledge production.

UNCOVERING CONTEXT: RADICAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS' TAKE ON POSITIONALITY

The concept of positionality has been extensively examined in a number of critical studies, where in-depth analyses of power relations underlying social forces, discourses, and institutions have illuminated their significant impact on shaping individuals'

subjectivity. The fact that the vast majority of these fields of inquiry highlight the importance of the distinction between oppressor and the oppressed as a key element in forming a political subject's identity is especially significant. This perspective is exemplified in fields such as feminist studies, LGBTQ+ studies, disability studies, animal studies, postcolonial studies, and others.

In these academic domains, critical theory derives its disruptive power by drawing on the experiences of those whom Edvin and Shirley Ardner aptly referred to as the "muted groups" (Ardner 1975): slaves, the proletariat, indigenous peoples, women, people of colour, transgender, or non-binary people, the disabled, among others — those whose experiences have been silenced in the dominant discursive fields. The insights offered by these marginalized voices have the potential to refute what was once considered universal and unquestionable. Critical theory offers a distinctive perspective, "a view from below", which emerges from an alternative space of experience and is used to challenge the prevailing viewpoint.

This perspective is also characteristic of the early critical approaches that emerged within anthropology, inspired by Marxist and feminist theory[3]. These studies not only identified the distribution of power within Western societies and across global socio-political landscapes but, more importantly, prompted reflection on the processes of knowledge production and the importance of considering the positionality of the anthropological subject. While feminist anthropology questioned the transparency of gender and emphasized its role in shaping fieldwork and our view of cultures under study, Marxists highlighted the economic and political context.

Radical anthropologists of the 1960s and 1970s gained a new vantage point for their research by adopting Marxist class conflict theory, which, among other things, provided an explanation for the disparities in development between different regions of the world. Through this perspective, indigenous cultures were no longer seen as closed and isolated entities, but rather as entangled in processes of modernity. Critics also suggested that the relationship between the anthropologist and the non-Western other should be seen within a broader economic and political context, recognizing it as a power relationship that influences their understanding of the way knowledge is constructed and disseminated. Marxist theory thus became a means of establishing a perspective capable of challenging structural conditions that had been taken for granted and were not problematic for most scholars until the emergence of countercultural movements and the onset of decolonization processes. They were only recognized when circumstances began to change, and new narratives emerged.

Although Marxist anthropologists opposed imperialism and colonialism, the ultimate object of their reflection was anthropology itself and the conditions of knowl-

3 This topic is extensively covered within feminist studies (Songin-Mokrzan 2014). See for example: Harstock (1997), Harding (1987, 1991, 1993), Haraway (1988).

edge production. This critique showed that anthropology is the European science *par excellence* and could only have emerged within the structural dominance of the West. As radicals argued, anthropologists were the same kind of Western agents as colonial administrators, traders, and missionaries who flooded various parts of the world and were engaged in so-called "scientific colonialism." This was characterized by Johan Galtung as a "process whereby the centre of gravity for the acquisition of knowledge about the nation is located outside the nation itself", by means of the unrestricted exportation of ethnographic data "to one's own home country to have it processed there and turned out as 'manufactured goods', as books and articles" (Galtung 1967, 13). As a result, they operated exactly like entrepreneurs who imported raw materials at a low price in order to transform them into an expensive finished product, through which the researcher gained prestige and climbed the social ladder. Anthropology as a discipline was thus caught up in the network of political and economic relations between the Western imperial powers and their overseas dependencies. Radical critics were so dismissive of anthropology that they claimed that if anthropology did not exist, it should not have been invented (Hymes 1972).

In the view of Marxist thinkers, as mentioned above, the relationship between self and other is redefined in terms of power, which clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of a revolutionary anthropologist (Gough 1968, Stavenhagen 1971). Knowledge becomes a tool for the empowerment of the oppressed. Here, the political subject is constructed through shared experiences which, as in other critical studies and activist movements, form a cohesive community of common interests, with the aim of reclaiming voice and agency while challenging the dominant narrative. This critical approach allows revolutionary anthropologists to unambiguously identify the victims and beneficiaries of the political and economic landscape, provide clear guidelines for action, and point out problems and possible solutions.

It is worth noting that numerous other critical anthropological endeavours have recognized the relationship between self and other as inherently rooted in power dynamics. These projects have sought to redefine this relationship in various ways, transcending the boundaries of the identities as outlined above and moving beyond the constraints of the binary logic that distinguishes between the Western self and the non-Western other. Lila Abu Lughod, for example, sheds light on individuals who identify as "halfies" or those who embrace "hyphenated identities", revealing their unique capacity to critically challenge the theoretical underpinnings of anthropology. This capacity arises precisely because these individuals do not fit neatly into the binary division between self and other that serves as the foundation of the concept of culture. Drawing on her own non-obvious identity as half-Palestinian and half-American, Abu Lughod examines the problematic construction of culture as a manifestation of power dynamics. Her ultimate proposition is to discard the con-

cept of culture and replace it with discourse, a term free from the burden of colonial history (Abu Lughod 1991).

This perspective is also apparent in the concept of "native anthropology", described by Delmos Jones as the "anthropology of the oppressed" (Jones 1970). In this framework, anthropologists benefit from an "insider's perspective" to represent cultural reality. Feminist and women's anthropology also follow this approach, emphasizing the importance of gender identity and the social distribution of power. In all these different anthropological projects, the "view from below" is seen as an authentic representation of one's own experience. Silenced others are regarded as having epistemic authority, a concept rooted in "double consciousness", which enables them to contribute to a more comprehensive and reliable body of knowledge.

For radical anthropologists, conceptualizing the relationship between self and other as a power dynamic also initiates a reflexive introspection of the discipline as a Western institution that has far-reaching implications. This raises questions about its structural and discursive formation, how it shapes the practices of anthropologists, its impact on knowledge production processes, theoretical frameworks and ethnographic practices. As Bob Scholte has observed, anthropology has been rediscovered as "culturally mediated" and "contextually situated" activity, therefore, it must become the subject of "ethnographic description and ethnological analysis" (Scholte 1972, 437).

While previous generations of anthropologists, including the radical critics of the 1960s and 1970s and the cultural critics of the 1980s, have undertaken this profound reflexive task, it should not be considered as a completed endeavour, but as an ongoing project. The changing political and economic landscape in which anthropology as an institution is embedded, together with new tools of critical analysis, can provide new insights into contemporary research practices and reveal the ways in which our own social identities and positionalities are constructed. The critique initiated by radical anthropologists seems particularly beneficial in this context as it draws our attention to the structural and discursive elements that influence the operational framework of universities as institutions, and how they shape the role of anthropologists as social actors within this environment. This is one of the most widely debated issues in academic circles today.

ANTHROPOLOGY OF NEOLIBERALISM

In recent decades, driven by factors such as the 2008 economic crisis and the rapidly growing awareness of climate change due to global warming, many critical anthropologists have shifted their focus to the analysis of capitalism and its more radical

manifestation — neoliberalism (Hilgers 2011, Ong 2006, Collier 2011). While the theoretical tools and vocabularies employed may significantly vary from one researcher to another, they collectively share the goal of defamiliarizing capitalist imaginaries, economies, and policies. In the following sections of this article, I will explore the anthropological analysis of neoliberalism, with a particular focus on the neoliberal academy. This exploration aims to provide a contextual framework for considering the problematic positionality of contemporary critical scholars.

Anthropological interest in neoliberalism gained momentum in the early 2000s, fuelled in part by the burgeoning governmentality studies that focused on the development of Foucauldian concepts of neoliberal power and biopolitics (Foucault 2008). The economic crisis of 2008 further exacerbated these trends and inspired many researchers to actively participate in the various protests organized during that time. In the United States and beyond, demonstrators rallying under the banner of "Occupy Wall Street" brought together students and respected academics to express their dissent not only against the pervasive influence of finance but also against the spread of neoliberal practices into various aspects of our lives, including universities. As Pauline Gardiner Barber, Belinda Leach, and Winnie Lem have noted: "In Canada during April 2011, students mobilized on the largest university campus in the country against the corporatisation of the university. Earlier in the same year, their counterparts in the UK flooded the streets in massive numbers to protest the doubling of tuition fees and the dismantling of social infrastructure" (Barber, Leach and Lem 2012, 1).

The university is one of the many institutions that have experienced the effects of neoliberal imaginative and managerial restructuring. While this phenomenon is recognized as a global trend, the processes of neoliberalisation show variations in different socio-cultural contexts. Accordingly, Aihwa Ong defines neoliberalism as a mobile technology, a global form that interacts with local political and ethical regimes, resulting in the production of site-specific assemblages (Ong 2007). A common thread, however, is that neoliberalism not only produces structural transformations within institutions but, more importantly, it introduces novel languages, norms, ethics, and politics (Shore and Wright 2000). In the realm of higher education, this transformation extends to how we conceptualize universities, the processes of research and teaching, our roles as scholars and the responsibilities that go with them.

What is particularly specific to neoliberalism, as Michel Foucault noted, is the application of the economic model to analyse "a series of objects, domains of behaviour or conduct which were not market forms of behaviour or conduct" (Foucault 2008, 267-268). This implies the application of "the grid, the schema, and the model of *homo oeconomicus* not only to every economic actor but also to every social actor in general" (Foucault 2008, 268). Foucault perceives neoliberalism not merely through

the lens of economic theory or political ideology, but rather as an art of guiding social subjects. What is distinctive about the neoliberal mode of governance is that the source of power is not explicitly defined but rather directed towards generating "economic inducement that will lead to the desired behaviour" (Kipnis 2008, 279). The aim is to foster individuals who are accountable not solely to superiors but primarily to themselves. As a result, power operates not through traditional methods of command and control but rather through the calculated choices of formally autonomous actors (Kipnis 2008, 279). Neoliberal governance is thus characterized by the self-discipline of individuals to embody attributes of accountability, responsibility, flexibility, and entrepreneurship.

There is a significant body of research on neoliberalism and neoliberal governmentality in diverse spheres of life. Critical anthropologists highlight how social subjects employ various forms of self-management techniques to influence desired behaviours (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, Ferguson 2015, Thedvall 2017). In his book, for example, Michał Mokrzan (2019) interprets coaching services as neoliberal governance technologies adopted by the middle class to cultivate their emotional capital, which is now recognized as an essential skill in self-management. Those who receive these services increase their self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-esteem. They also develop entrepreneurial skills and strengthen their sense of responsibility, mental resilience, and emotional regulation. All of these skills help individuals to meet the challenges posed by competitive work environments.

The application of the Foucauldian conceptual framework and the analysis of neoliberal forms of governmentality lead Mokrzan to rather unexpected conclusions. Over time, the anthropologist comes to an uncomfortable realization: his own work has been shaped by neoliberal governmentality. The exploration of coaching practices eventually results in the recognition of the anthropologist's own context — that of working within an institution that employs neoliberal tools of governance. Consequently, Mokrzan comes to the realization that he embodies the neoliberal subject. Although the effects of neoliberalism on higher education in general and on anthropology — as a specific discipline — have been extensively examined and explored from various angles, Mokrzan's ethnographic approach prompts reflection on the researcher's own positionality. This approach shows how even today's critical anthropologists are themselves entangled in neoliberal regimes of knowledge production. This raises a thought-provoking question: Is critical anthropology even possible under such circumstances?

As mentioned earlier, a distinctive feature of neoliberal power, as described by Foucault in terms of neoliberal governmentality, is that it operates indirectly, using various incentives to steer social subjects towards self-guidance through techniques of self-management. As Mokrzan and I argue elsewhere (2020), in the context of

higher education, and similarly to other institutions subjected to the processes of neoliberalisation, considerable emphasis is placed on the development of tools that encourage scholars to engage in competitive behaviours. This process is facilitated by a variety of methods to evaluate the performance of individuals, departments, and universities. For example, in the Polish context, a number of points are assigned to different scientific activities as a means of assessing a researcher's achievements. Although many anthropologists oppose this evaluation system, we are nonetheless involved in the affective and self-management practices that form its basis.

The neoliberal mode of governmentality operates simultaneously through the rational, calculative decisions of social actors (Rose 1996) and, as Frédéric Lordon explains, through positive (joy, fulfilment, pride, relief) and negative (stress, frustration, shame) affects that guide our thoughts and actions (Lordon 2010). Therefore, the entanglement of individuals in the web of neoliberal power reaches deep into the realm of emotions and affective experiences as well as strategic choices made in response to the evaluation system. This shows that neoliberalism in the sense presented by Nikolas Rose (1996), infiltrates the very fabric of the subject itself, appealing to the constitutive foundation of one's own identity and leaving little room for emancipation. Success, achievement, and recognition are the incentives that it offers, inviting individuals to participate in the complex game of affects and calculations, capturing their attention and ensuring their involvement, which in turn influences their actions and the way they approach work planning and the scientific field as a whole. This rationale can lead to a paradoxical situation: although a research grant is not a strict requirement for my fieldwork, applying for one is nonetheless essential both for the benefit of my employer and for my professional development. As such, its impact ripples not only through my personal evaluation but also through the rankings of my department and university, which in turn affect how much funding they receive.

The Foucauldian conceptual framework of analysis allows us to transcend our individual perspectives and shed light on the complex predicament in which critical anthropologists find themselves today. However, it also seems important in this context is that self-reflexivity, a powerful tool of critical anthropology, does not provide an immediate means of breaking free from the grip of neoliberal power. Even researchers who are critical of neoliberalism may gradually succumb to its emotional influence. There is a sense of satisfaction that comes with securing a grant or publishing in a high-ranking journal. This reveals a further paradox: having a cognitive understanding of the mechanisms of neoliberalism does not necessarily protect one from its emotional seductions. As Mokrzan and I have argued elsewhere (2020), despite our recognition that the value of our work transcends quantifiable measures of efficiency and productivity, the rankings — designed to make our performance ob-

jective — exert considerable influence over our emotional experiences. These rankings have the capacity to evoke feelings of frustration and injustice, and to serve as a source of pride and inner satisfaction. All of these emotional responses are expressions of conformity to the neoliberal affective paradigm. In addition to this element, there are also decisions that need to be made on a daily basis. These include such calculative decisions as where to publish and what specific scientific endeavours to pursue in order to meet evaluation criteria.

CHALLENGES OF PRACTICING CRITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN NEOLIBERAL ACADEMIA

Within the field of critical anthropology, the focus extends beyond the traditional scope of simply reflecting on one's own society. It also includes an in-depth exploration of the positionalities of anthropologists themselves as social actors who are profoundly influenced by their specific socio-cultural contexts. Their insightful and thought-provoking debates have had a profound impact on the development of reflections on the processes of knowledge production in anthropology. This aspect is particularly relevant in today's exploration of the place of critical anthropology within neoliberal academia. The insights of radical anthropologists offer a valuable perspective in this regard, as their analysis focuses on the economic and political context in which anthropology operates.

The particular value of radical criticism is that, by scrutinizing the interplay between the self and the other through the lens of power relations, it not only highlights the importance of critiquing Western society, but also directs this critical gaze towards anthropology itself — an institution that was born within that very social framework. This focus encompassed the intricate interplay between anthropological knowledge production and the prevailing power dynamics that highlighted the complex relationships between researchers and the societies they studied. In contrast to their successors in the 1980s, radical anthropologists were more interested in the structural underpinnings and systemic forces that shape anthropology and its practitioners, and advocated a comprehensive examination of the discipline's embeddedness within broader socio-political landscapes. This perspective is particularly relevant today, as critical anthropologists turn their attention to neoliberalism and engage in a thorough critique of its institutions. In doing so, they may uncover a compelling revelation: that they themselves actively participate in producing neoliberal subjecthood. This realisation raises profound questions about the feasibility of practicing critical anthropology in such a context.

The radical critics of the 1960s and 1970s presented a startling picture of the redistribution of power between the Western self and the non-Western other. This image reflects how the ability to destabilise dominant discourses depends on the perspective and experiences of the subjugated other, which in turn catalyse subsequent political action, ethical commitment, and theoretical reconstruction. As a result, the framework rooted in the recognition of power relations between the self and the other offers a diverse range of avenues for engagement. These avenues are all guided by the fundamental principle that anthropological knowledge should be used in the service of marginalised and oppressed communities. This principle was a guiding beacon for radical critics in the 1970s, when social actors' positionalities were more distinct and well-defined. During this period, the source of power, symbolised by the West and capitalism, could be seen through the lens of Marxist theory and resulted in a relatively straightforward confrontational approach (Armbruster 2008).

However, with the rise of neoliberalism, as Foucault illuminated, power becomes diffuse, lacking a distinct source, and often permeating the subjects themselves. Consequently, the attempt to challenge neoliberalism takes on a more nuanced character as the problem arises when trying to assess it from within an environment which is itself shaped by the neoliberal principles. This situation casts a shadow over the practice of critical anthropology within the framework of neoliberalism. Doubts as to whether critical anthropology can maintain its power and integrity when its practitioners are themselves influenced by the very forces they seek to challenge. This issue is a central point of introspection for contemporary critical anthropologists, urging them to navigate the intricate web of power, subjectivity, and the socio-political context in their pursuit of transformative scholarship.

In Ghassan Hage's perspective, the capacity of critical thought to "take us outside of ourselves" enables us to understand the external influences that shape our identities and behaviours as social agents, and thus holds a certain potential for liberation. As he points out, it implies the promise of transformative possibilities: "There is always an outside of a system of intelligibility, of governmentality, of domestication, of instrumental reason . . . etc." (Hage 2012, 306). However, when examining the dominance of neoliberal power and its infiltration into the academic realm, the critical ability to "take us outside of ourselves" reveals quite the opposite: it exposes the extent of our entanglement, leaving little room for hopes of change and also casting doubts upon the viability of critical anthropology itself.

A remarkable excerpt from Bronislaw Malinowski's book *The Dynamics of Culture Change* is very instructive in this regard. This is the passage where the author proposes to take a bird's-eye view of Africa in order to stimulate the reader's imagination in understanding the ongoing cultural transformations on the continent. Malinowski tries to convince the reader that his intention is not purely metaphorical, but rather

akin to an actual view that "a passenger flying over the inland route of the *Imperial Airways* can obtain [emphasis added]" (Malinowski 1945, 9). The compelling excerpt effectively demonstrates that even an apparently neutral and all-encompassing view is inherently situated. This begs the question: Can we really get out of our airplanes? Is there an escape route? Or do we, as Mokrzan aptly describes, "resistantly but humbly" (2019, 411) perpetuate the circumstances into which we are thrown?

The introduction of the neoliberal mode of governmentality in various institutions, including universities, has led to the establishment of mechanisms that shape the attitudes of individuals. The primary aim of these mechanisms is to internalise the desire for personal advancement. The power of governmentality is evident in our tendency to appraise both our work and ourselves in terms of rankings, even though we recognise their unreliability. This connection between academic achievements and personal growth leads us to subject them to evaluation through available assessment tools. In essence, whether we like it or not, we all assume the role of neoliberal subjects. These considerations raise other significant questions: Can critical anthropology operate effectively within the neoliberal university? How can we actively resist in an environment where the scope for emancipation is limited? This is particularly relevant when even the most radical anthropologists benefit from critiquing neoliberalism by publishing such critiques in high-ranking journals.

As I have attempted to show, the impact of neoliberal governmentality goes beyond mere structural changes within universities; it also shapes our subjectivities, influences our choices, and fundamentally affects our perceptions of science. Despite being enmeshed in the intricate web of neoliberal governance, contemporary critical anthropologists can, at the very least, try to reflect upon the potential reassessment of the role of the university, its codes of conduct, ethical norms, and the type of governance that should inform our practice. This introspection requires us to consider the values we want to promote and the kind of the university environment in which we hope to work in. Consequently, this task represents a significant undertaking, not only for navigating the intricate nuances of the neoliberal academic landscape, but as a fundamental step towards initiating change.

In the context of revolutionary anthropology — a project advocated by radical critics in the 1970s due to the recognition of a clear redistribution of power in the West — the political subject of intervention was straightforward, and the sides were clearly defined. The neoliberal form of governmentality, however, makes it more difficult to form such a cohesive political community of intervention, as power becomes diffused and internalised by the subjects. In addition, there are researchers who accept neoliberal tools of governance as valid and believe in an idea of personal development and an academia structured through the lens of calculative choices made by individuals. The task before us is to decide whether these are the values we

wish to endorse and whether this is the model of university we desire to support. This comprehensive examination of our roles, values and academic environment is essential not only to critically understand our current situation, but also to actively contribute to its transformation.

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AUTHOR'S CONTACT:

Marta Songin-Mokrzan
Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Lodz
E-mail: marta.songin@filhist.uni.lodz.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-0019-9200

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CRUEL SPEECH: RUSSIA'S ATROCITY RHETORIC DURING ITS WAR ON UKRAINE

NANCY RIES

COLGATE UNIVERSITY

This paper interrogates the official purveyance of exterminist rhetoric in Russia's war on Ukraine, with a particular focus on state media discourse. Over decades, the Putin regime has constructed an overarching system of intertwined narratives about Ukraine, centred on historical and geopolitical fables and exhortations to violence, and conveyed via repetitive tropes and tones of speech. These are ritualistic semi-scripted televised discussions ("agitainment") featuring state officials, hack journalists, and pro-war scholars. This elaborate discursive spectacle models a sadistic affect and seems designed to crush empathy towards Ukrainian civilians and among Russia's own citizens. Anthropological and critical discursive approaches to the circulation of utterance suggest avenues for analysing the impacts, obvious and subtle, of these rhetorical and aesthetic devices in the context of terror directed both internationally and domestically.

KEYWORDS: Russia, Ukraine, rhetoric, war propaganda, genocidal speech

> The incumbent president [of Ukraine] recently said he doesn't like a single point of the Minsk agreements. Well, like it or not, you must take it, my beauty. There is no other way.
> (Russian President Vladimir Putin, during an 8 February 2022 Press Conference with Emmanuel Macron, using a veiled reference to a Russian folktale about the rape of a corpse.)[1]

1 Video of press conference: https://youtu.be/7EYqg3jZqKQ?t=2368 (minute 39:28). For analysis, see Ratnikova (2022) and New Lines Institute 2022, 15. Translation here mine. Videos accessed 20 July 2023.

I am often asked why my Telegram posts are so harsh. The answer is I hate them.
They are bastards and degenerates. They want death for us, Russia.
And as long as I'm alive, I will do everything to make them disappear.
(Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev,
Telegram Channel, 7 June 2022)[2]

Simonyan: "We must build our future. With culture, with heating, and without Ukraine."
Solovyev: "Why without Ukraine?"
Simonyan: "Because Ukraine as it was can't continue to exist.
There will be no Ukraine as we've known it for the last many years."
Solovyov: "When a doctor is worming a cat, for the doctor it's a special operation,
for the worms it's a war, and for the cat, it's a cleansing."
(Russian TV host Vladimir Solovyev bantering with regular guest,
head of Russia Today, Margarita Simonyan, 19 July 2022)[3]

We aren't coming to kill you, but to convince you.
But if you don't want to be convinced, we'll kill you.
We'll kill as many as we have to: 1 million, 5 million, or exterminate all of you.
(Blogger and separatist fighter Pavel Gubarev in an interview, 12 October 2022)[4]

In its hybrid war of aggression on Ukraine, the Russian Federation has two armies. One deploys kinetic force and the other mobilises every kind of communicative weapon and warrior. Alongside nightly military attacks on Ukraine's territory, its civilian infrastructure, and its population via dozens of missile and drone strikes, Russia also wages a massive, multi-faceted rhetorical war. The communicative bombardment may appear less immediately or obviously injurious than the missile strikes, but the rhetorical campaign is tightly organised to meet the Kremlin's longstanding strategic goals (Tolz and Teper 2018; Alyukov 2022; Pupcenoks and Klein 2022b). The dimension of this campaign primarily under focus here is the semi-coordinated chorus of cruel discourses, utterances from Russian leaders and public figures which

2 https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/105. Translation mine. Accessed 20 July 2023.

3 Julia Davis/Russia Media Monitor clip on Twitter, 19 July 2022: https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1549381189336711169?s=20&t=cbCBs_kN33cTAW2PRyJySg Translation by Davis. Full episode, 19 July 2022: https://smotrim.ru/video/2445834. VPN connection may be necessary to view, depending on location. Accessed 20 July 2023.

4 YouTube interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dC6qGAWJwaI. Julia Davis/Russian Media Monitor translation on Twitter, 11 October 2022: https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1579820810751324160?s=20&t=PEnmxmyUXSIq389kgAtWzA. Accessed 20 July 2023.

celebrate and encourage atrocity. Such cruel discourse is voiced in guarded ways in President Putin's own pronouncements, but emerges vividly and constantly through the mouths of Kremlin propagandists, in Telegram posts from other state officials, in the output of pro-war video bloggers, and in the social media communication of regular citizens (Hoskins and Shchelin 2022; Garner 2022); the opening epigraphs exemplify this discourse. There is anecdotal and video evidence that such cruel rhetoric is being taken up as a genre of everyday speech. This essay argues that state-organised rhetoric generically packages and purveys the imperialist and exterminist imaginaries (Mbembe 2003, 24) which Russian militaries physically inscribe upon Ukrainian persons and communities. The imaginary inherently precedes and produces the military but also emerges from it in constant loops of atrocity fantasised, actualised, (mis)represented, and celebrated.

The circulation of state-organized cruel speech demonstrates that the excessive, grotesquely elaborate injuriousness of the war is part of a deliberate project (New Lines Institute 2023). Such speech provides ample evidence that the sadistic brutality of Russia's war is not collateral damage from a military land grab but part of a much wider campaign, a revolutionary campaign that is military, institutional, and ideological in its aim (Ries 2022).

As much as the kinetic war changes the landscape of natural and social existence and indelibly transforms lives through injury, loss, displacement, and trauma, so the rhetorical war injures culturally, cognitively, and psychically, and that is its aim. Through bombardment, both physical and rhetorical, the war reinvents institutions, hierarchies, boundaries, selves, expectations, desires, and futures.

Sociologist Michael Humphrey argues that "while all violence threatens normative reality, atrocity – excessive violence – shakes the very foundations of both self and social existence… it exceeds cultural discourses of law or morality" (Humphrey 2013, 3). Echoing Elaine Scarry's seminal theorization of injury in torture and war, he asserts that "through the terror engendered in victims and audiences atrocity can deconstruct the world" (1985, 86). This essay posits as a given that the elaborate, inventive excess of Russia's war on Ukraine is an "atrocity project" whose aim is to deconstruct worlds of many kinds and levels. We can consider the obliteration of Mariupol as an example of monumental *destruction*, the wiping out of a city, its people, its infrastructure, its social existence, its history, its culture: what many scholars call "urbicide" and "ecocide." The *deconstructive* aspect of such a military event is the way it dehumanizes, traumatizes, and alienates through the dismantling of any normal sense of expectation, morality, or trust in the future, and these impacts travel far beyond the destroyed city itself. Such deconstructive, sadistic violence violates so profoundly that it fundamentally changes not just spatial worlds but the ontology of existence itself, the seeming solidity of everyday worlds. It stands as a global specta-

cle, announcing the power and willingness to engage in the deconstruction of civilization, revealing what Scarry (1985, 20) deems the very "structure of unmaking."

Putin's atrocity project takes advantage of any military and political opportunities to deepen and advertise the injury that arises during the war. If something happens that wasn't militarily strategic but causes harm, official propagandists find ways to celebrate that event with mockery and sadistic glee. Russia's cruel speech machine captures, embellishes, and circulates the destructive/deconstructive power made real in missile strikes, bodily wounds, and social dismemberment. Cathected to the kinetic war via propaganda, visual imagery, disinformational narrative, pop culture, and militaristic public rituals, the rhetorical war in its own ways profoundly alters communities and lifeworlds.

One well-known example of this is Russia's years-long promulgation of narratives framing Ukrainian leaders, soldiers, and citizens as "Nazis" (Shestopalova 2023; Dudko 2022; Etkind 2022, New Lines Institute 2023). Russian communications systems design webs of such narratives in an aim to destroy communal trust and security (Wanner and Pavlenko 2023, 135-136; Stânescu 2022). Countless news reports since 2014 have revealed how such campaigns alienate even the closest family members within Ukraine and across borders. Disinformation, a key part of the rhetorical war, targets family and community ties for ideological/cognitive/emotional injury.

If Ukraine, its people, its infrastructure, its sovereignty, comprise the chief physical and ideological targets of this war, nevertheless, Russia's rhetorical targets are far wider. The Kremlin's war exploits Ukraine as the prime object (and object lesson) of its kinetic strikes and terrorization, but the communicative war with all its rhetorical heat and grotesque inventiveness targets the Russian population as well, arguably as a primary target. The question of how to theorise the impacts of this targeting of Russian publics is a key focus of this essay. To consider the Kremlin's "targeting" of the Russian polity as a facet of the war is in no way meant to diminish attention to the primacy of the targeting of Ukraine. It is necessary, however, to use anthropological experience and expertise to consider this other dimension of Russia's war. The campaign of cruel speech directed into Russian spheres of discourse cannot but have significant impacts on Russia's social and political future and thus warrants our attention.

Some might argue that the primary aim of official atrocity speech in Russia is to inhibit resistance to the war by inducing generalized apathy towards the suffering of Ukrainians. It surely does accomplish this. But it does more: as Artem Serebryakov has argued, the sadistic violence of official discourse, entwined with complex disinformational narratives, generates an ongoing kind of shared *enjoyment* of atrocity which is a specific type of social and political adhesive, one which glues broad swaths

of the public together and to the leadership structure despite the disjointed illogic of the expressed aims of the war and its massive impacts within Russia itself (2022, 590). Such enjoyment must be constantly fed and stimulated, and what we observe in following it across the period of war is that it also must be constantly renewed, intensified, and nourished. The rhetorical war within Russia is thus a project to inculcate a desire for vengeance and an aesthetic of violence as widely and deeply as possible, as public culture and as habits of discourse.

I have studied Russian talk professionally since the late 1980s, as an ethnographer and anthropologist (Ries 1997). Across these decades, along with many colleagues and friends, I witnessed the steady evolution of sadistic affect in both face-to-face encounters and popular culture of all kinds. Many people in Russia lamented the growing violence in their cities and the increasingly violent content of everyday speech, popular culture, and urban performativity (Ries 2002a). The first post-Soviet decade was widely characterised in Russia in terms of its aggression, "mafia-ization," and economic chaos. Through the 1990s, Russian citizens reconstructed selves and reorganised their lives within conditions of increasing crime, violence, corruption, and anomie, and while many critiqued it, a great many harmonised their ideologies and aesthetics to it, particularly within spheres of business, politics, policing, and the military (Volkov 2002; Ledeneva 2013). What Olga Shevchenko calls "crisis rhetoric," has been studied and theorised by scholars of language, popular culture, and social life (Shevchenko 2009; see also Oushakine 2000; Borenstein 2008 and 2020; Urban 2010; Gorham 2014; Ryazanova-Clarke 2016). Works in this vein in the humanities and social sciences provide some sense of the cultural baselines and narrative contexts for the vituperative rhetoric directed at Ukraine and other targets of the Kremlin's war making and destabilisation campaigns in ensuing decades.

Yet however much it could have been anticipated, the full-on rhetorical war, the all-out weaponisation of discourse and narrative by Russian elites and militarists in the service of war crimes, the open celebration of atrocity since February 2022, has been profoundly shocking. Although the eight years following 2014 should have been a signal of what was possible — many Ukrainians and scholars of Ukraine conveyed their alarm across those years — the murderous aggression of Russian agitainment, the myriad official speeches and broadcast utterances proclaiming the need to destroy Ukraine, the exterminist enthusiasms of patriotic ritual, the Telegram disinformation by top state leaders, academics, and artists, the regular exhortations to obliterate a sovereign society, and the cavalierly and violent anti-Ukrainian comments by Russian acquaintances and friends in social media have been terrifying, even to scholars of violent discourse. Russia's rhetorical war is confounding and dismaying, in its viciousness, its imaginativeness, its coordination with the kinetic war, its voluminousness, and its unambiguous necropolitical vow (Mbembe 2003; Stephenson

2022). To study it is, frankly, horrifying and revolting, yet as a scholar of Russian talk and war more comparatively (Ries 2002b), with a specific focus on the ways in which perpetrators weaponize symbolic tools in their campaigns of deconstructive violence, I regard it as a scholarly obligation to engage with Russian atrocity speech.

Many online essays, editorials, reports, blogs, podcasts and other readily accessible works by public scholars, writers, and journalists have chronicled and analysed the rhetoric of the war and this will be a crucial resource for future study. The Russian independent press in exile has published extensively on the rhetoric of the war (see Burtin 2022, Stephenson 2022, and Orlova 2022 for good examples). A handful of scholars are actively setting out ways to record, inventory, and analyse this rhetoric. Scholars and writers in Russia quietly curate collections of texts and observations in semi-closed spaces on Facebook, capturing the Russian discourse of the war in the vein of Victor Klemperer's *The Language of the Third Reich* ([1947] 2006). Some are inventorying and sharing the pronouncements of their pro-war colleagues and academic officials.[5] As excruciating as it is to watch and read this propaganda, Russia's promotion and deployment of violent speech demands this meticulous analysis and critical theorization of ongoing pro-war utterances. It is also crucial to inventory its long prehistory, and to consider the degree to which, in the years since Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution but particularly after Euromaidan, Russian propagandists, Eurasianist philosophers, academic nationalists, patriotic filmmakers, and larger Russian publics rallied around elite nationalist projects to reshape Russian society and consciousness (Knott 2022).

Anthropologists, linguists, literary specialists, and many other scholars of narrative and discourse have their work cut out for them in decades ahead, as interdisciplinary critical analysis of this wide performative field and research into its impacts within and beyond Russian society are crucial. There are myriad ways to approach the cruel speech of the war, innumerable questions to pose, and many theoretical or historical frames through which to interpret and understand it. None of this will be easy work, either methodologically or psychologically. Questions of access, the complexity of ethnography at a distance/digital ethnography, the threatening environment for Russia-based scholars who want to carry out ethnographic work on the war, and the moral and emotional cost of engaging with sadistic speech all make this kind of research challenging. Yet it is unquestionably vital, and it in no way compares with the ongoing work of Ukrainian and global scholars experiencing and researching the war in Ukraine itself. This essay is intended mainly as a prolegomenon to some of this work ahead or an inventory of some of the kinds of questions which scholars of Russia might pose about sadistic, exterminist communication, rather

5 To protect the identity of acquaintances and friends still in Russia who collect and share such information in closed groups on Facebook I do not name them here.

than an attempt at close and exhaustive analysis. It is imperative, both ethically and academically, not to align with those who dismiss Russian propaganda as "pointless blather that only some old ladies listen to," as I have heard said more than once. It is inarguable that Russian official propaganda creates a cultural surround of apathy towards suffering and/or a desire for more atrocious violence towards Ukraine. It will require years or decades to fully chronicle its impacts within Russia and beyond, but this is a crucial undertaking for scholars with the stomach for the work.

FROM "AGITAINMENT" TO ATROCITY RHETORIC

Upon his third election as president in 2012, Vladimir Putin unleashed an unprecedented, rapid transformation of Russian socio-political life, using the forces of law, surveillance, political repression, institutional control, professional exclusion, and so on. Ideological campaigns of narrative revisionism and affective capture legitimated and amplified the political, legal, and forceful actions of the regime (Yampolsky 2014; Ryazanova-Clarke 2016; Vishnevetskaia 2014; Ries 2022). Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper (2018) describe the "new media strategy of Putin's third presidency" and highlight the novel type of media campaign which after 2012 provided "univocal coverage," coordinated across all state media channels, technologies, personnel, and genres. Describing the explosion of revanchist propaganda fiction in relation to the Putin regime's external warmaking, Sergej Sumlenny (2022) writes that "from 2014 – which marked the first Russian invasion of Ukraine – Russia's 'battle fantastic' has been underway." Vast regime resources have served to consolidate a nationalist battle to transform public consciousness. This ideological project uses film, television, art, literature, educational institutions, publishing campaigns, museum exhibits, memorials, commemorative rituals, posters and banners, and many other forms of discourse, display, and performance to sell a story of Russian historical victimization and sacrifice, and to draw the public into the fantasy of Russia's imperial resurrection through all necessary means (McGlynn 2020, Balakhanova 2022; Pupcenoks and Klein 2022a, 2022b; Khislovski 2022; Garner 2023). The narratives that constitute the story of why this resurrection is necessary are incoherent, contradictory, ahistoric, and phantasmagoric, but their constant repetition across multiple platforms and media has given them considerable ideological traction. From 2014 to 2022, this story hinged on false narratives about Ukrainians as Nazis (Shestopalova 2023) and justifications for invasion and any violence that might be unleashed on Ukraine and Ukraine's supporters. It is in no way hyperbolic to assert that since Putin's reelection, Russian media discourse has celebrated atrocity, genocide, war crimes, and sadistic destruction, even at planetary scale (Ries 2016). Overt celebration of grotesque vio-

lence has been built into this "battle fantastic" (Sumlenny 2022) from the very start and the elaboration of atrocity is by now a professional specialty within the Russian state regime's official creative class. Such violence is in no way new to post-Soviet popular culture in Russia, but its turn to military atrocity is crucial to distinguish from its crime and mafia-centred earlier decades.

Because of their importance as evidence of political intent and elite support for the destruction of Ukraine, Russian official utterances celebrating war crimes have attracted no small degree of journalistic attention and scholarly and legal analysis (Dudko 2022; Etkind 2022; Moses 2022; New Lines Institute 2022, 2023). Since the war started in 2014, bilingual journalists have used social media effectively to chronicle the Kremlin's weaponization of narrative, symbolism, and rhetorical framing. Genocidal utterances and bits of exterminist banter have been clipped, translated, and widely shared. International social media users have been able to access English translations of Kremlin-driven rhetorical productions via Twitter feeds such as those of "The Daily Beast" journalist Julia Davis, Ukrainian Ministry official Anton Gerashchenko, and Francis Scarr of the "BBC."[6] Their translated clips provide relatively superficial and decontextualised but nonetheless important exposure to the narrative systems, tropes, devices, and genres marshalled by the discursive forces in Russia's war. I cite a few of them here because of how well they convey both the substance and tone of the rhetorical attacks from within Russia's official "agitainment" ecology (Tolz and Teper 2018; Alyukov 2022). These anglophone journalists' daily samples of short clips, often centred on the vividly cruel speech of agitainment stars like Margarita Simonyan, Vladimir Solovyev, and Sergei Mardan, barely begin to capture the scale and "creativity" of official and everyday Russian celebration of the war's atrocities, but they are useful in highlighting the generic frames of this cruel speech and in making this atrocity agitainment viewable and understandable to audiences outside of Russia.

Agitainment stars all share the same fundamental narratives, creating a dense fabric of taken-for-granted geopolitical fantasy. On television, their lengthy semi-scripted discussions situate regular bursts of extreme malevolence (what the clips translated for social media highlight) within large cushions of more banal blather (what the translated clips do not show). Arguably, the longer discussions help to normalise the points where speakers rise into vivid atrocity celebration, exterminist harangues, monologues of apocalyptic threat, and energetic discussions of the most effective tactical maneuvers through which to defeat Ukraine and liquidate its purported "Ukronazi" leadership.

6 Julia Davis curates the "Russian Media Monitor" which is the most readily accessible inventory of such clips on YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/@russianmediamonitor/featured Accessed 20 July 2023.

Such political pedagogy fills hours of broadcast time every day, tens of thousands of hours of it over the course of the war. Daily, evening, and weekend shows are hosted by a few leading performers and populated by dozens of regular academic experts, political figures, culture producers, and other guests whose individual styles and ideological specialties are quite familiar to viewers, not at all unlike the parade of regulars on comparable hosted cable shows around the world.[7] The bursts of what would normally be shocking exhortation to evil-doing, such as the banter between Solov'ev and Simonyan quoted in the third epigraph, are situated within tiresome yet hypnotic rambles about NATO, the US, Russophobia, Zelenskyy, European and Russian geopolitics and history (especially of the Great Patriotic War). Barely veiled celebrations of war crimes — of forced migration, urbicide, genocide, and nuclear apocalypse — become just part of the broader flow of what is known as agitainment (Tolz and Teper 2018).[8]

In the tradition of critical discourse analysis (Wodak 2014) we might pose questions about what atrocity speech, overtly organised and planned, but also spontaneous and dynamic, *does* in multiple contexts within and beyond Russia. In what ways does atrocity speech permeate social relations, take hold in institutions, and manifest itself in widespread discourse genres? Even more crucially, perhaps, is the question of how the rhetorics of atrocity, repeated millions of times, might change social morality, expectation, and capacity. Russian leaders have been carrying out an experiment on the Russian polity and individual people. Rhetorical violence creates new classes and sharpens hierarchies. It solidifies and consolidates, both publics and elites. The "gift" of rhetorical unfetteredness the Russian regime provides creates something, it is just not clear yet what it is or what it will become. Problems of access will obviously limit scholars' ability to conduct ethnographic and in-country archival research for quite a while to come. Nevertheless, we can examine wartime speech genres as political tools, as conveyances of ideology, as harmonisers of affect, and as vehicles for stretching the social capacity for sadistic cruelty.

EXHORTATION TO EXTERMINATE

Below I provide a few examples (out of a multivalent stream of literally thousands) of "exterminist exhortation" from the first year of the full-scale war. This genre is characterised by performatively cheerful incitement to destroy Ukraine in every way. It

7 https://smotrim.ru/ provides extensive guides to Russian shows; because of sanctions a VPN may be needed to access such links in various locations. (accessed 20.07.2023)

8 Here is just one of thousands of video clips celebrating Russian weaponry and the threat of nuclear weapon launches. https://youtu.be/y68hgP__4gE (accessed 20.07.2023)

is hard to imagine that utterances within this genre would not be considered "direct and public incitement to commit genocide" under Article III of the 1948 Genocide Convention. On 11 September 2022, the long-running and popular programme "Evening with Vladimir Solov'ev" features a discussion as to why the Russian military has not yet carried out "American style" or "NATO style" strategic bombing on Ukraine. With smirking gestures, Margarita Simonyan asks:

> On the territory that remains of Ukraine, which has not been liberated [in other words, captured by the Russians] isn't there still civilian infrastructure? Power stations, nuclear power plants, power junctions, lots of infrastructure of various kinds... which could be incapacitated, stopped from functioning for this enemy government (what remains of it)... we could [incapacitate that] quickly, easily, and with long-term impact. People are asking, people ask me, why aren't we doing that? There is no good answer. The time has now come to either do that [strike the infrastructure] or explain to our people why we aren't doing that, so that they understand. I don't understand it.

To this, Solov'ev responds "Like the Americans did during the War, strategic strikes, it is part of NATO strategy, why don't WE do that now? It is time to take harsh measures!" and from there ensues a conversation to the effect that if the Ukrainians are being helped by the Americans in the war, they are no longer Ukrainian and can thus be bombed with impunity. Panellists all echo the need for "harsh measures."[9]

A few weeks later, a similar discussion of infrastructure destruction takes place on Solov'ev's show. On 9 October 2022, the Deputy Dean of World Politics of Moscow State University quite matter-of-factly urges a campaign to create a "flood of refugees" leaving Ukraine for Europe, and insists it must be carried out rationally, without emotion, at just the right moment to cause the greatest harm to Europe, and insuring that Ukraine will no longer exist, because it must not exist."[10] In a more excited tone, on Solov'ev's programme of 28 November 2022, political scientist Sergei Mikheev harangues viewers with the insistence that Russia carry out far more extensive strikes on all Ukrainian infrastructure (energy, housing, transport, urban centres) and argues that if it drives the people out of Ukraine, that is fine, they should

9 Translation mine. For the whole conversation, see: https://smotrim.ru/video/2475769 Julia Davis also featured it in one of her Russian Media Monitor clips: https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1569368457602387969?s=20. Both accessed 20 July 2023. Solov'ev seems to be referring to U.S. strategic bombing in WWII.

10 "Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'evem" 9 October 2022. https://smotrim.ru/video/2492153 Translation mine. (accessed 20.07.2023)

all just go to the US or the EU. "So they won't have any water, so what? This will help the Russian army."[11]

Alongside destruction of infrastructure and cities to drive Ukrainians out, "exterminist exhortation" produces a steady stream of discourse about the need to heal, cleanse, "re-educate" and brainwash Ukrainian citizens, to extirpate their Ukrainianness. Until his assassination in April of 2023, pro-Kremlin blogger and militia fighter Vladlen Tatarsky made regular appearances on different shows to insult Ukrainians and incite atrocity against them. He appeared on Sergei Mardan's show on 22 October 2022, where he and Mardan discussed the need to completely eradicate all Ukrainian monuments, especially those dedicated to the Holodomor, as "cult" objects uniting Ukrainians. Tatarsky intones:

> What are Ukrainians? I suddenly understood it. A Ukrainian is a Russian who has fallen ill. Like a transvestite, he was born a man then something happened, and he had an operation and decided to become a woman and live like a woman. He puts on a dress, a wig, puts on lipstick and goes walking that way all over town. It looks odd, you think "that's a man…" a Ukrainian is a Russian spiritual transvestite, who is trying to squeeze into another skin… they have shifted from healthy Russian persons… into total schizophrenia. The future of Ukraine, those people who live there, is that they are Russian people, and they will return to their normal state. When we win in Ukraine, the future of these people is that they will become Russian people, recover from their craziness, their spiritual transvestitism, and return to their normal state.[12]

This short text well exemplifies the intertwining of the Kremlin propagandists' many narrative threads: here, in the most straightforward way Tatarsky declares that Ukrainians are mentally ill, that they are infected with LGBTQ syndromes, that they are ridiculous clowns, that they are abnormal, and that the Russian project is to restore them by turning them back into normal Russians. It is extremely common in this kind of discourse to talk about reeducation and curing, of both adults and children, but then to remind viewers that those who resist healing deserve liquidation. It is impossible to overstate how often this discourse is repeated in Russian broadcasts and other media.

11 "Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'evem" 28 November 2022 https://smotrim.ru/video/2520223 Accessed 20 July 2023.

12 "Mardan Live," 22 October 2022. https://smotrim.ru/video/2499997 See translation by Julia Davis here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qetPWY15RgE&t=9s (both videos accessed 20.07.2023)

Such broadcasts occupy only one space in a much broader news and culture universe, where dozens of national and thousands of regional and local journalistic outlets, many evolving from longstanding Soviet print journalism into digital outlets (Vartanova and Smirnov 2010), methodically deliver a mosaic of information and disinformation about the war and the national political and social situation. The structure of such a media mosaic is that prosaic journalism about local, national or international news events appears in the same digital space with relatively subtle — in other words, not overly "screamy" — disinformation narratives on standard, recurrent themes. Crucial narratives accuse Ukrainian leaders and soldiers of being Nazis, repressing, torturing, and killing Russians in Ukraine for decades, with the help of NATO and the US, which has methodically turned Ukraine into "anti-Russia" and is using it to wage war on Russia and all things Russian, and so forth.[13] The sheer scope and sophistication of this rhetorical production is remarkable. Writing, production, and editorial values are high, digital systems function smoothly, leading experts are consulted and contribute, an enormous number of different journalists, scholars, military and diplomatic professionals, and opinion writers produce torrents of such material every day, month after month, and it all reads like "truthy," objective news and analysis. It all looks like it always has, nothing has changed in how news and opinion is presented to the public except there may be a special tab or section for the "Special Military Operation." A glance at any of the top Russian news sites, like "Izvestiia," "Kommersant," "RIA Novosti," "Argumenty i Fakty," or "Rossiiskaia Gazeta," shows this in an instant.

The main news sites function as a specific rhetorical niche, each in its own style conveying a familiar matter-of-factness. The maintenance of this generic tone helps to rationalise and justify the war, legitimise Ukrainian suffering, and communicate to the broad public the idea that exterminating Ukrainians and obliterating their society is a routine, and banal task, necessary to save Russia. Most opinion authors do not use overtly exterminist exhortations in print, but they all draw over and over from the same tried-and-true litany of narratives about Ukraine as an existential threat to Russia which have appeared in Putin's and Medvedev's speeches and cross-media propaganda for over a decade.[14] The steady, constant discourse about the need to quash Ukrainian independence escalated profoundly in the year before the spring 2022 invasion, and since then many Russian columnists have written about little else. For instance, Viktoria Nikiforova, in "RIA Novosti," often expresses how sorry she feels for Ukrainians taken hostage by the West (as the story goes) but

13 See Brusylovska and Maksymenko (2022) for an excellent, grounded categorization of key Kremlin narratives as they appeared in four Russian newspapers and news portals.

14 See Knott (2022) for an overview of such discourse in Putin's speeches from 2013 on.

reminds readers that strong medicine and pedagogy will be needed to cure them. She wrote one distinctive essay on this in early March of 2022, but continuously parades this idea and others in its ilk.[15] Nerdy texts like Nikiforova's are professionally seductive, a genre of genocide justification and "lite" war crime incitement.

Some opinion essays in mainstream news outlets do utilise undisguised exterminist rhetoric; perhaps the most famous and widely covered was the essay published by political advisor Timofey Sergeitsev, also writing in "RIA Novosti" on 3 April 2022. Titled "What Should Russia Do with Ukraine?", this text was widely noticed when it appeared and has been described by Fran Hirsch (2022) and other scholars as clear legal evidence of genocidal intent. In the essay, Sergeitsev matter-of-factly details why Ukraine cannot exist, why its culture and language must be annihilated, why every trace of Ukrainian history must be wiped away, and why many, if not most, Ukrainians will need to be liquidated. The fact that Sergeitsev's sober and didactic "to-do list" for wiping out Ukraine appeared on a Russian state media news site and was never taken down means the Kremlin *wants* such discourse to stand and most likely either commissioned or approved it before publication. Most opinion authors are less overtly exterminist, but they all draw repeatedly on the same litany of narratives about Ukraine that Sergeitsev outlines, as well as from Putin's texts from 2021 and 2022, and from the rich stream of "denazification" invective on Telegram and Twitter from Prime Minister Medvedev.[16] News outlets publish long, history-twisting essays, explaining Russia's fated noble role in the world and its necessary mission to punish Ukraine. As Oksana Dudko notes in an essay on Russia's systematic projection of its own genocidal intent onto Ukraine, "the idea that Ukraine is entirely a Nazi state that can hardly be "cured" has fuelled Russian claims that Ukraine must cease to exist as a state" (Dudko 2022, 136). This false narrative underlies and energises the entire universe of exterminist exhortation.

Outside of the long-standing, structured news systems, there are specialist and political websites (Tsargrad.ru is a telling example) where extremist and exterminist material circulates via thousands of blogs, random news websites, RuNet (Russian-language internet) and TikTok videos, podcasts, and other formats and platforms that circulate a lower quality but nevertheless important array of propagandist activity — producing, consuming, reacting to and sharing material, some of which encourages extreme violence. The particular structure, content, and tone of these

15 The list of Nikiforova's opinion columns can be found here: https://ria.ru/author_Nikiforova_Viktoriya/ (accessed 20.07.2023)

16 President of Russia, "Article on the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians, 12 July 2021. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181 and "Address by the President of Russia, 21 February 2022. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/70565 Medvedev's Telegram channel: https://t.me/s/medvedev_telegram/11 (all accessed 20.07.2023)

utterances represents the same key tropes that move across all platforms and into everyday talk. These tropes bounce from television to news sites, through social media, and into popular discourse, as many journalists and scholars are capturing in real time. These discursive genres pop up in all kinds of contexts, such as courtyard videos with Putin-loving *babushki*; videos and Telegram posts from Chechen Leader Ramzan Kadyrov and top Russian military brass; texts and clips from academics, top religious leaders, and famous actors and filmmakers. The three themes of obliterating Ukrainians along with all memory of them, of showing them utter cruelty ("no mercy"), and "curing the sickness of Ukrainian culture" (implying either through extermination or complete submission and brainwashing) reverberate across Russian rhetorical spheres, intertwining with many other sub-tropes and narratives.

On Telegram and other RuNet platforms, individual voices and collectivities, unfettered by any regulation or censorship, express their most cruel desires and satisfactions. Telegram features the most grotesque, extreme exterminist discourse and imagery of the war. In early May 2022, a month after the atrocities of Bucha were uncovered, Ian Garner published "We've Got to Kill Them: Responses to Bucha on Russian Social Media Groups" in *The Journal of Genocide Research*. Garner provides an inventory and typology of the commentary on several key pro-war Russian Telegram channels' posts about the Bucha massacres; the posts that elicited these comments referenced the main themes of Russian disinformation about the war. In the Bucha case, the narrative insisted that it was the Ukrainians who had committed these war crimes. Garner calculated that almost half of the comments on Bucha that he collected "exhorted the Russian army to be more violent in its approach in Ukraine" (Garner 2022, 5). Among others, Garner reports these three notably murderous comments:

> "Death penalty for all the khokhols, there's no place for them in the world, time to destroy this fucking race."
> "Destroy the satanists, no mercy."
> "Ragulizm [a term that mocks Ukrainian culture as primitive] is a sickness. And sickness needs to be cured. It's not a real thing. They'll get us if we don't get them first." (Garner 2022, 5)

Such claims and calls for Ukraine's merciless destruction appear by the tens of millions in posts and comments in Telegram, most crucially through the highly followed feeds of numerous Russian militarist elites from many spheres. In June 2022, Dmitry Rogozin, former head of Roskosmos, openly called for the total destruction of Ukraine on Twitter as well as on his unregulated Telegram channel:

> In general, what has grown up in the space of Ukraine is an existential threat to the Russian people, Russian history, Russian language, and Russian civilization. If we do not put an end to them, as, unfortunately, our grandfathers did not do… we may die but it will cost our grandchildren even more. So, let's get this over with. Once and for all. For our grandchildren. (Former head of Roskosmos Dmitry Rogozin on Telegram, 16 June 2022)[17]

Andrew Hoskins and Pavel Shchelin insist that the unfettered space of Telegram is a "battlespace in which participants exploit extreme, unregulated, uncensored, and unsanitised opportunities to push their version and vision of war." It is "a place where anything goes, streaming the most graphic images of human abuse, injury and death" at a scale and speed never experienced in war before (Hoskins and Shchelin 2023, 456). Yet this "anything goes" reality has gone well beyond Telegram into shared digital discourse and everyday talk (Burtin 2022; Shtrykov 2022). Questions of how it all operates together, of what kinds of resources have gone into ensuring the surging ubiquity of such rhetoric, and, especially, of the extent to which people fall sway to its ugly messages and sadistic charms: these require ethnography, institutional study, and deep theorisation.

It is clear, however, even from afar, that the violence of this war is shaped and motivated by the expressed intent to cause suffering and loss. In speeches, ritual addresses, and press conferences Vladimir Putin declares Russia's sovereign necessity to wage the campaign against Ukraine and the world and insinuates that whatever violence necessary to achieve Russia's (just) aims will be applied. The television hosts and guests amplify everything Putin says yet articulate violent threats more openly; all of these utterances appear coordinated and complementary (Agalakova 2022; Brusylovska and Maksymenko 2022; Kucher 2022). From the outset of the 2022 invasion, the leading Russian television propagandists competed to communicate the intention that Ukrainians experience every form of injury, dislocation, impoverishment, hopelessness, insecurity, and terror. Gathering up the official spin on all news, the pundits have amplified and played with it. Their performances are a mix of spontaneous and scripted, taking on Kremlin priorities and being checked and censored before broadcast (Agalakova 2022, Roudakova 2017, Zvereva 2020). Whatever violence, injury, and loss occurs in Ukraine is talked about and dissected, blamed on the Ukrainians themselves and celebrated as a Russian achievement. "These are not the random musings of a few powerful TV hosts," writes former TV anchor Stanislav Kucher (now in Prague): "In what one might call the Putin power vertical, popular propagandists are the highest officers of the information war, and

17 https://t.me/rogozin_do/3065 (accessed 20.07.2023)

theirs are not independent voices. Any message they broadcast is vetted and blessed either from the commander in chief or from his inner circle" (Kucher 2022).

This systemic coordination is visible on the occasion of a literal "blessing" by President Putin to the country's leading propagandist, the head of Russia Today, Margarita Simonyan, which took place on 20 December 2022 in the Kremlin's St. Catherine Hall. Putin bestowed on Simonyan a medal for her service in science and technology. In an elaborate speech after receiving the medal, she thanked Putin for "slaying the cannibals" since 2020, reciting his own phrase from the time of the Second Chechen War about "drowning terrorists in the outhouse." In her one-and-a-half-minute, Simonyan repeated Putin's well-known phrases *mochit* (to drown) and *mochit' v sortire* (drown in the outhouse) over and over: "We will help you drown the cannibals as long as you request it of us."[18] Six months later, as she hosted a conversation with Putin and others at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, Simonyan asked Putin the first question by laughingly telling a joke she'd heard that the only hope for Russia was world hunger due to the world grain shortage.[19] Putin responded seriously and without joking in a rambling, self-justifying way. A bit further in the discussion, Simonyan semi-teasingly told Putin about her and other people's fear of disappearing products and services. In both appearances, as in many earlier fora and interviews, propagandist Simonyan played the cruel joker (as in, starving the Global South) to Putin's sober straight man, setting him up in question after question to come across as realistic and reasonable. The choreography of these duos is exceptionally tight and the messages about Russia as a heroic and humane power taking care of the deserving in both Ukraine and Russia (and beyond) are sophisticated and smoothly embedded in joking, matter-of-fact, "lite" war crime rhetoric, more openly delivered by her than by him, but publicly showing how harmonised the rhetoric of the president and the pundits are. Exterminist atrocity is the ultimate exercise of power, so it makes sense that just like Putin, other leaders, public figures, and propagandists want to partake and participate in it, be drawn into the swirl of violence. The rhetorical "play" of atrocity speech generates immediate, palpable power. Unfettered and legitimated, accessible to any who can wield speech well, it can be creative and charismatic, and its use can consolidate power and create hierarchy. Michael Humphrey writes that atrocity is "a political strategy which confronts people with cruelty, horror and death to achieve political ends." He notes that atrocity must have

18 "Simonyan thanks Putin for slaying the cannibals." https://youtu.be/ptR9-xzqSbU. Mochit' is hard to translate and means far more than "drown" — it suggests maceration and urination, as well. (accessed 20.07.2023)

19 "Simonyan and Putin at St. Petersburg Economic Forum, 17 June 2023." http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68669/videos (accessed 20.07.2023). Here is a clip of that comment with translation: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/5JBGLntWpOg (accessed 18.08.2023)

an audience, and that its political impacts stem less from injuries inflicted as on "the rhetorical impact of pain, suffering and even death on the audience." It is "through a 'carnival of cruelty," Humphrey writes, "that the meaning and political effects of atrocity flow." (Humphrey 2013, 11). This carnival generates euphoria, a terrific political resource (Serebryakov 2022, 590).

THE EUPHORICS OF CRUEL SPEECH AND THE AESTHETICS OF EVIL

Although he is writing of the politics of Trumpism and its "whirlwind of cruelty," Adam Serwer's book *The Cruelty is the Point* could just as well be a study of this moment of Putinism. He describes a leader whose "only real, authentic pleasure is in cruelty…":

> It is that cruelty, and the delight it brings them, that binds his most ardent supporters to him, in shared scorn for those they hate and fear… The president's ability to execute that cruelty through word and deed makes them euphoric. It makes them feel good, it makes them feel proud, it makes them feel happy, it makes them feel united. And as long as it makes them feel that way, they will let him get away with anything, no matter what it costs them. (Serwer 2021, 105)

Widely circulating clips from Russian television highlight exactly these moments, and what we see are men and women exuberantly and repetitively (ritualistically) enacting scorn, performing hate, mocking and laughing at vast and irreparable injury, multiplex trauma, the obliteration of lifeworlds, histories, and communal ties. As noted above, in all of their contextual discussions, the propagandists use the projection of "mirroring accusations" to accuse the Ukrainian government of exterminating its own population (New Lines Institute 2022, 2). But their mocking laughter often conveys a "wink-wink" glance that seems to contradict the mirroring, as if they seek acknowledgement and ownership of their own country's injury to another, as if they seek acknowledgement and ownership of their power to change worlds through injury. Ukraine, its leaders, its people, its defenders are the atrocity object-victims, the focal targets of Russia's violence and violent rhetoric. The monumental and multi-pronged flow of violent rhetoric in Russian pro-war discourse injures in ways that will be felt and traced for decades (if anyone survives to chronicle all this). In a sense, and this is hideously painful to consider: the rhetorical war perpetrates a forced witnessing by targeted victims of what Russian forces are doing

to them. Politician's and propagandist's rhetorical violences "rub in" the sense of ongoing, unending, multiplex sadistic injury which people and communities are suffering. The wound is salted with disinformation, the twisting, mirroring, warping of every possible detail of history (Etkind 2022, 16-18; Khislavski 2022). As Elaine Scarry says about torture, every victim and witness of this war can see that there is "not even a fragment of a benign explanation" for the pain Russia is producing (Scarry 1985, 38). It is world-destroying and cognitively and psychically ruinous, and the rhetorical violence is what demonstrates its intent to be so ruinous and injurious. Those who proudly "own" their country's deliberate atrocity do so with performative glee and practiced intonations and gestures of cruel mockery. The fact that female propagandists, especially the indefatigable rhetorician Margarita Simonyan but also Marina Zakharova, Olga Skabeeva, and many others, deliver some of the most memorably sadistic exhortations amplifies the macabre tone of the rhetorical war as a whole and normalises a sense of collapsing social morality. The larger world offers a wide audience for both the physical and rhetorical violence of the war; it actively draws in diverse audiences with wide-ranging views on it all. Both supporters and critics of Putin's wars outside Russia consume and recirculate extremist video clips along with news, disinformation, images, stories, analysis, etc. The global circulation and collection of exterminist video clips, the more outrageous the better, keep audiences drawn in but are also addictive. They ricochet cognitively, each exhortation's sadism and illogic compelling it to be witnessed and analysed. "They want our heads to explode" someone in the US said to me, and that cliché accurately characterises one aim of the rhetorical war. But it is ruinous to have one's head explode; the rhetorical war creates a wide swath of psycho-social injury, injury which needs to be studied empirically and theorised.

Elaine Scarry's idea (1985) that political power is made real through wounds of every kind provides insight into this. To produce the power aesthetic that Putin's elite requires, wounds must be seen, and their horror celebrated (with just the slightest mask produced by the false flag sleight-of hand). Historian Daniel Feierstein points out that genocidal violence is aimed to destroy and reorganise social worlds and writes that "for genocide to be effective while the perpetrators are in power it is not enough for the perpetrators to kill and materially eliminate those who stand for a particular social order the perpetrators wish to destroy. They need to spread the terror caused by genocide throughout society" (Feierstein 2014, 121). This is what the rhetorical violence of the war sets out to accomplish: manufacture a thick imaginary, a cultural surround cured by hatred and violation. Accomplices of all kinds are willing to help, to be part of this history-making social activity. They do this to partake in the injury of Ukraine and its people and to communicate to the world, but it is crucial to interrogate the likelihood that Russian audiences and citizens are

the primary target of this world-revising rhetoric. In this dimension, the war-makers set out to revolutionise Russia itself, by recreating citizens' ideas of their own history and identity, by reconfiguring their future path, and by ritualistically shaping a new affect, a *habitus*, appropriate to that path.

In his study of Telegram posts reacting to misinformation about Bucha, Garner demonstrates the spread and sharing, the contagion and harmonization of this euphoria, as people draw on state media performances for inspiration:

> Users seem to engage in a race to post ever more extreme responses, making calls for Russian troops to commit genocide against Ukraine's population. To do so, they draw on both long-standing and new state media narratives about Russian nationality and the Ukraine conflict, framing their opinions in the language of a historical Russian patriotism and painting genocide as a form of self-defence. Users express these views in an almost rote language that dehumanises Ukrainians on gender, sexual, and racial lines. (Garner 2022, 7-8)

The TV propagandists invite viewers to ponder that they know how evil they are and they dare anyone to stop them. Here, I use the word evil deliberately; propagandists constantly play with good and evil, Satanists and devils in their rhetoric about the war, and it can be seen that they themselves are performing and modelling "evil" in a deliberate, theatricalised way, with a heavy dose of *stiob* — a specific kind of ironic tone that makes it hard to pin down what is sincere and what is cynical (see Hemment 2022). The propagandists know how powerful the enactment and rhetoric of evil and impunity is, and we can see this in their regular meta-commentary on their own work as propagandists and on the history and role of propaganda and misinformation in wars of the past (for instance, Russian claims that the US is using Goebbels' methods against Russia during this war, when Russia is actively channelling the Nazi propaganda minister and TV pundits are performing Hitlerian speechifying).[20] Adriana Petryna suggests how the sheer volume of this kind of mirroring and projection manufactures impunity:

> The fake news supporting it becomes part of an ecology in which perpetrations of war crimes threaten to outpace the ability to account for their volume. As Russian propagandists brandish the impunity haze like a lethal weapon, they declare their state's

20 See, for example, Solov'ev's performance of 24 July 2023 with Julia Davis's translation here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTj3Yhw3_gw&t=67s (accessed 20.07.2023)

> intention to destroy an entire population. In a "war that is not a war," performances of exemption from punishment are, in fact, coincident with an overload of war crimes. (Petryna 2023, 3)

Moscow-based cultural critic Yuri Saprykin published an essay in leading business newspaper *Kommersant* in December of 2022 outlining a literary and popular culture shift in moral poles and identifications during the Putin decades; clearly Saprykin is hinting at these shifts of polarity among war-time political elites, including their mouthpiece propagandists, but couching his observations as if they were merely of literary interest, no doubt to dodge the censors. "The literature of the 21st century again and again confronts us with characters who rise above the 'ordinary' ideas of good and evil," Saprykin tells us.

> Again and again, we come to conclude that the concepts of good and evil are conventional, imposed by the cultural hegemon, the so-called masters of discourse. It is very possible that evil is merely an alternative version of good, and that in a different system of coordinates it is justified – as an impulse towards creative freedom, or an attempt to overcome 'archaic/sinful man,' [*vetkhii chelovek* — an Orthodox term] or a force that allows one to avoid an even greater evil…

Saprykin concludes by noting that in some of the popular fantasy literature of the recent nationalist era, moral people may be cast as dull, restricted, and frustrated, while "being dark is easy and pleasant (and even sort of romantic); in a world subject to rules imposed from above, this gives drive and freedom, and this sovereignty is above considerations of ordinary morality." His essay hints at the "ethical shift" that might be seen in recent Russian history, a shift that may "come at the cost of blood" (Saprykin 2022).

This Nietzchean (or Goebbelsian) logic provides a "permission structure" (Petryna 2023) for switching the polarity of good and evil and celebrating that reversal. It allows for the state's forced adoption of an entire phantasmagorical alternative history and sanctifies the performance and perfection of an aesthetic of evil, rehearsed in everything from presidential speeches to comments on Telegram posts. War is celebrated everywhere, from billboards to stadiums to kindergartens. Peace is illegal, Serebryakov reminds us (2022, 587). This logic and aesthetic permeate the Russian communicative campaign about the war with an atmosphere of ever-escalating competition to lay waste to moral norms and celebrate doing so (Orlova 2022). Regime propagandists create, exploit, and repetitively elaborate a wide inventory of violent fantasy on Russian television and other media: constant, bizarre, and detailed

threats of nuclear strikes on London, New York, and all other major European and American cities or on the Yellowstone (to unleash volcanoes); gleeful predictions about the collapse of the power grid throughout Europe and the suffering that will ensue; chortling merriment over strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure and calls for their intensification, so as to leave Ukrainians in the cold and dark without water, shelter, or transport; dismissively joking about sexual assault on women, children, and Ukrainian prisoners of war; and endlessly discussing the need for Ukrainians to submit to Russian "cleansing," "medical treatment," "conversion therapy," de-worming," "de-culturation," etc. as a path to its "denazification."

Again, it is crucial to theorise this ritual performance of rhetorical violence as having multiple victims, audiences, and targets, and to recognise that a core aim of both the kinetic war and the rhetorical war is to completely transform Russian society, or, more accurately, to complete a transformation two decades in the making. In no way whatsoever is this argument intended to minimise the targeting of Ukraine or distract from analysis of Russian military atrocities there. But it is crucial to acknowledge that Putin's war has multiple targets and that the ideological, societal, cultural capture of Russia itself, and the completion of political capture, is an essential goal of the past decade and a half and of the war on Ukraine since 2014.

Elsewhere (Ries 2022) I have called this a Kremlin "project" carried out under cover of war, with war as a necessary amplifier and intensifier of ongoing processes of political and ideological consolidation (Müller 2009; Vishnevetskaia 2014; Wijermars and Lehtisaari 2020). As Martin Müller's ethnographic study of the production of geopolitical identities at Russia's main state university (Moscow State Institute of International Relations, MGIMO) revealed more than a decade before the 2022 invasion, the institutionalisation of new power identities hegemonised habitus and discourse especially among professional classes. "The myth of a strong Russia represents just such an emerging hegemonic project at MGIMO" writes Müller:

> It is able to unify the social terrain by providing a universal screen on which all kinds of hopes, demands and aspirations can be inscribed. Whether it is Russian cultural uniqueness, Russian independence and sovereignty in international relations, the concept of multipolarity, the defence of Russian national interests, Russian economic prosperity or Russian influence in the post-Soviet states, all of those come together in a chain of equivalence arranged around the nodal point of a strong Russia to constitute a myth. This project can emerge successfully as hegemonic because of its unparalleled comprehensiveness. (Müller 2009, 208)

Writing around the same time, Andreas Umland noted the same kind of consolidation in other discursive spheres, noting that "the Russian book market is experiencing a glut of vituperative political lampoons whose main features include pathological anti-Americanism, absurd conspiracy theories, apocalyptic visions, and bizarre fantasies of national rebirth" (Umland 2007, 3). From 2014, the aggressive cruelty of this discourse, across multiple spheres of rhetoric, discourse, and social ritual was continuously magnified. Writing of linguistic violence in Russia in the context of legal repression, injurious speech in the media, and physical attacks on the LGBT community (which is strongly tied to Russia's rhetorical attacks on Ukraine from even before 2014), Lara Ryazanova-Clarke discusses "the cross-discursive flows and negotiation of violence as various parts of society perceive and respond to the initial trigger" (Ryazanova-Clarke 2016, 5). Focusing on several notable moments in the recent decades' campaign of intensifying repression of LGBT expressions and persons, Ryazanova-Clarke details the ways in which official declarations of hate and violent intent against gays – voiced with cruelty, and what she calls "raw sadistic cheerfulness" (17) were recited, magnified, intensified, re-signified, turned into humour, and set to reverberate in public media spheres. She quotes from a 2014 *Der Spiegel* essay by well-known Russian novelist Liudmila Ulitskaya, who lamented that:

> My country is ill with aggressive ignorance, nationalism and the imperial mania of greatness. I feel ashamed for my ignorant and aggressive parliament, for my aggressive and incompetent government, for [Russian] leading politicians – supporters of violence and treachery, those who aim to be supermen. (Ulitskaia, as quoted in Ryazanova-Clarke 2016, 4)

As a great many scholars and writers have chronicled, the Russian state media has for years choreographed the dispersal of rhetoric around specific ideological campaigns and myriad nationalistic, fabulistic, violence-promoting, and often anti-Ukrainian tropes and devices (Urban 2010; Gorham 2014; Yampolsky 2014 and 2022; Szostek and Hutchings 2015; Ryazanova-Clarke 2016; Wood 2016; Tolz and Teper 2018; Zvereva 2020; Wijermars and Lehtisaari 2020; McGlynn 2020; Pidkuĭmukha 2021; Etkind 2022; Fusiek 2022; Zabuzhko 2022). Russia's violent rhetoric is theorised, institutionalised, ritualised, planned, and coordinated, and as such is *constitutive* of the prosecution of the war, not merely reflective or secondary to physical assault and military atrocity. We might argue that the rhetorical side of the war, especially its core narrative lines and devices, is more effectively planned and deployed than the kinetic; such an assertion would be supported by the non-stop array of evidence and analysis about the catastrophic failures of the invasion planners to follow Russian

military doctrine, prepare for more than a three-day coup in Kyiv, or run a logistically sophisticated operation. The coordinators of rhetorical war have great and obvious advantages over military commanders, however. Rhetoric can be deployed in an instant, new discursive bombardments can be manufactured overnight, rhetorical violence can be dispersed globally through myriad platforms at the speed of sound, and, crucially, armies of rhetorical warriors, millions strong, of all ages and genders, can be recruited and mobilised with ease and at little cost. The narrative of these warriors, whether they are state television propagandists or "mere" Telegram commenters, does not need to be coherent, it can function perfectly well as a "discursive bricolage" of conspiratorial fiction (Borenstein 2020, 171), an "incomprehensible logorrhea" (Wieviorka 2022, 18), or "a soup of anti-liberal inspirations of every kind from across the centuries" (Berman 2022, 55). As Martin Müller's (2009) research suggests, the mobilisation of elites and citizens as rhetorical warriors *changes habitus* and harmonises or synchronises peoples' selfhoods with larger political projects, even if these are projects whose only comprehensible sense or logic has become loyalty harmonisation itself. Following Deleuze, Mikhail Yampolsky notes "the system of professional amplification and circulation of the despot's 'network of signs' which through circulation by "priests, bureaucrats, messengers, etc." produces "…the illusion of significance."

> It is completely exhausted by the repetition and reproduction of the despot's nonsense. The primary effect of such a system is that repetition functions to produce feelings of loyalty, devotion, and inclusion rather than meaning. No one can explain the meaning of the war, but it is possible to keep on stretching this chain of signs ad infinitum so that, when they reach their imagined limits, they hold the promise of meaning. However, this never happens. What occurs is an outward expansion of the signs to encompass an ever larger group of people. And, while this paranoia produces only the endless repetition and replication of incoherence, it is pervasive, leaving no room for silence or evasion. (Yampolsky 2022)

As Anna Arutunyan convincingly argues in her book *Hybrid Warriors: Proxies, Freelancers, and Moscow's Struggle for Ukraine* (2022), the war itself, the kinetic war, may be the result of accident, experiment, improvisation, Putin's complex management of power relations, opportunism of all kinds. But even the kinetic war ultimately rests on the phantasmagorical nationalist mythos generated by the Putin elite, on their long-elaborated historical *ressentiment*, as well as their confident shared belief that Ukraine would joyously fall into Russia's imperial embrace. Such beliefs are constituted by rhetoric and its repetitive, reverberating circulation over many years

and within and between many kinds of social institutions. In that sense, the entire war rests on the power and elaboration of rhetoric, the instrumentalisation of mediated, constantly elaborated, and socially institutionalised imaginaries. The war also crucially rests on the generation of a *habitus* of sadism, and the constant rhetorical rehearsal of desire for more and more and greater and greater atrocity. Writing of the lexicon of the Third Reich, Victor Klemperer says that language "dictates my feelings and governs my entire spiritual being…words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all" (Klemperer [1947] 2006).

The scale of damage to Ukraine in this war cannot, of course, be overstated; the transformations to Ukraine wrought by the war will be profound, indelible, complex beyond measure, and everlasting. Scholars (and many others) already chronicle this and try to predict Ukrainian post-war futures. How the war has changed and will change Russia must be studied in depth as well, going beyond the geopolitical, economic, and demographic impacts of the war, the sanctions regime, and the exiling of hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens. What are the ideological, cultural, and everyday impacts of the rhetorical war, the wide spread of sadistic discourse, the ritual celebration of military and imaginary atrocity, the millions of tiny doses of verbal arsenic? "Once malice is embraced as a virtue it is impossible to contain" writes Adam Serwer (2021, 102). To what does this lead? Yampolsky (2022), Wieviorka (2022), and others suggest that it is ultimately nihilistic, leading to a loss of social meaning or a loss of the ability of words to signify. Even after a polity arrives there, however, the empty words are still quite functional if they can be kept going, if they can be circulated and their aesthetic and commitments absorbed.

On 7 February 2023, on her TV and streaming show Ch.T.D., Margarita Simonyan took up the question, then under wide discussion by everyone, of what Russia's goals are for the war. Throughout, Simonyan uses the phrase "our goals" and explains that they are vague and complicated on purpose. "Denazification and demilitarization" has to be vague, she tells us, because "goals are subject to change depending on capability."[21] At first this seems like banal word-smithing to keep the questions about the war's progress at bay, but from a different angle it is a statement about how the war (or at least the continuation of the war) functions for its own sake and for the amplification of power. Orgiastic, ritualistic, sadistic — Russia's war in Ukraine is a pedagogy of violence, for evil, against peace. War rhetoric in all of its deployments performs its totalising, poisonous, world-altering function.

21 Julia Davis/Russian Media Monitor with subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fvh-HL5Cn3N8 Accessed 20 July 2023.

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AUTHOR'S CONTACT

Nancy Ries
Colgate University,
E-mail: nries@colgate.edu

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AN ENGAGED STUDY OF RELIGION: ACTIVISM, CRITICAL RELIGION AND POTENTIAL RADICAL RELIGIOUS STUDIES CURRICULA

NATALIA ZAWIEJSKA

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION, JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY, KRAKÓW

LECH TRZCIONKOWSKI

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION, JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY, KRAKÓW

The activist approach remains a neglected area in the study of religion(s). By activist, we mean a socially engaged yet non-confessional stance that focuses on the scholar dealing with the relationship between religion and the public sphere. While other disciplines are incorporating the socio-political and socially transformative potential of academic knowledge production into their curricula, the field of the study of religion(s) is lagging behind. The (dis)engagement and rejection of activist approaches in the study of religion seems to be determined by paradigms of knowledge production, the dominance of understanding and explanatory approaches, the programmatic socio-political neutrality of the religious studies scholar imposed by the discipline, and claims to the specificity and uniqueness of the object of study. However, as we attempt to show, several modes of engagement can be identified that lie between the scholar's attitudes of engagement and programmatic neutrality in the study of religion(s), namely translating, deconstructing, meditating and transforming. We propose that these modes should be included in the spectrum of approaches that straddle the critical and activist study of religion. We argue for the radical mode of engagement as a further step in developing the link between research and activism in the study of religion. In doing so, we focus on the scholar(s) of religion as an authority figure, an agent of power distribution, capable of proposing reformulations, accompanying negotiations, and supporting processes of reordering the contemporary post-secular public sphere. This article is an invitation to discuss the activist approach within the scientific study of religion. We also hope to stimulate debate on more radical forms of the activist approach, which we would call "the radical study of religion(s)".

KEYWORDS: engaged study of religion, critical study of religion, activism, modes of engagement, ideology, Catholicism, Poland

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING THE FIELD OF ANALYSIS

With this article, we hope to start a more detailed and very necessary debate on the social and political responsibilities of scholars dealing with religion today.[1] In order to do so, we will consider different possible forms of scholarly engagement, focusing on their socio-political implications and their potential for social transformation and the deconstruction of reified categories associated with "religion". We wish to identify and discuss the various modes of engagement that can be found in the contemporary study of religion and to scrutinis the encompassing conceptual frameworks they may fit in, such as the critical study of religion and the activist approach. Our aim in this article is to commence a discussion about a potential "Radical Study of Religion(s)" curriculum and agenda that would move beyond the intellectual tradition of the critical study of religion as it is currently practiced in the scientific study of religion and towards the activist approach modelled after similar approaches in the social sciences.

Our starting point is to consider activism as the kind of engagement that can shift power relations and thereby introduce social change even on a local or small scale. We contend that when implemented reasonably, scientific knowledge produced in the field of the study of religion(s) can have a substantial impact on current patterns of social imagination leading to intellectual and practical transformations at different levels of public social and religious lives. However, it is crucial to distinguish our proposition for the activist engagement by scholars of religion from other activisms already present in the field of "religion". It is important to note that this article does not deal with any form of confessional activism aimed at social justice or the common good which has been properly analysed elsewhere (see Tsypylma and Kormina 2023). The area of activism we will concentrate on is defined by the scholar who studies religion, the body of scientific knowledge on religion and its relevance for social, political and public transformation. Therefore, our reflections focus on the public sphere and the academic who approaches religion from a scientific perspective. Given its breadth, we situate our argument in the extensive debate around the epistemologies and development of the secular and post-secular public sphere. We wish to start the debate about the role of the scholar of religion in negotiating, translating, and ultimately forming the post-secular, building on Habermas's claims about the place of religion as inherent to contemporary configurations of the public sphere (Habermas 2006, 2008) and later debates on reciprocal formations of the religious and the secular within the formal and informal dimensions of the public sphere (Mahmood 2009, 2010; Asad 2003; Mapril et al. 2017). The latter have significant

1 For a thorough overview of the discipline, which also discusses the differences between the American and the European traditions of religious studies see Stausberg (2016).

consequences for contemporary governmentality, deliberative democracy, the formation of citizenship, and the definition of civic rights and obligations, as demonstrated by Cristina Lafont (2013).

In our perspective, "radical" refers to a self-aware and deliberate civic means of involvement by religious scholars who draw on their experience in order to shape the public sphere and public discourses. In such a position, religious scholars abandon their programmatic disciplinary socio-political neutrality and assume the role of an authority figure, an agent of power that can propose and/or enact reforms in the public sphere. In the context of the study of religion, "radical" would denote non-confessional engagement introduced from beyond the religious sphere that has the potential for leading to solutions that have a transforming impact on religious groups and individuals' lives. This could be accomplished by developing and fostering new fields of imagination and spaces for encounters between religious actors and representatives of the secular public sphere. This may also require action to limit certain hegemonic claims or unilateral discourses. We consider being radical as a form of activist approach. Since acting in accordance with socio-political convictions has been actively discouraged in religious studies, we frame such activist engagement as radical. If, at this point, our argument may seem utopian, further on, we will discuss a number of cases that, in the Polish context, we consider as having potential for activism and radical engagement.

We begin by acknowledging the ambiguity of the relationship between neutrality and engagement in the study of religion. According to McCutcheon (2003), research on "religion" is far from neutral, highlighting the difficulty of navigating through and between different worldviews, the challenges of self-positionality, and the tension between self-conviction and scientific involvement. However, many scholars argue that the scientific study of religion is programmatically neutral, overlooking the question of the social and political involvement of the scholar of religion. We are interested in reversing the logic of the issue of neutrality, and our goal is to explore how the scientific study of religion can be practiced beyond — and most importantly, against — the programmatic neutrality in relation to social and political processes. We argue that the study of religion is fully biased, inherently engaged, and hence potentially appropriate for the activist engagement of the scholar.

First, we are interested in a number of elements that make the study of religion biased, including the formation process of the scholar as an academic subject, local scientific knowledge formations, and the dominant paradigms that organise local knowledge. By doing so, we hope to raise a discussion about the seemingly disengaged nature of knowledge production within the scientific study of religion(s), which has long been seen as a fundamental conviction within the discipline. We aim to dispel this assurance by using the example of the genealogies of the scientific study

of religion in Poland. In particular, we will show how the production of academic knowledge on religion is guided by the changing scientific paradigms as well as the local forms of cultural heritage and religious traditions. We suggest that the academic discourse on religion can substantially influence social imaginaries of religion and shape public debates and performances. This, in turn, can stimulate and influence social and political actions, such as the choice of specific approaches to religious education, the state policies on religious pluralism, or the use of religious sciences in the technologies of atheisation of society, as was in the case in Poland during socialism. This section of our reflection aims to identify a number of fields in the production of scientific knowledge on religion that are inherently socially and politically engaged.

Secondly, we wish to take a closer look at the scholar of religion as a figure who is socially, politically, and religiously involved both in the local socio-political environment as in the shaping of socio-political and religious realities. To illustrate our arguments, we will present a number of cases in which scholars trained in the academic study of religion(s) have been involved as experts in legal proceedings. By doing so, we attempt to shed more light on the multiple possibilities of scholars of religion for social and political engagement and their practical implications. Most importantly, we wish to draw attention to the mediating role of the scholar of religion, who can have the capacity to invert power relations, translate religious and social imaginary in both directions, and mediate between religious and non-religious actors when the public and counter-public spheres need to be reconfigured. Therefore, we aim at reflecting upon the scholar of religion as a potentially significant figure engaged in the distribution of power among particular groups and societies, in citizenship formations, and thus involved in the local governmentality.

Finally, while we seek to understand the individual, social and political implications of the different modalities of the relationship between neutrality and engagement in the scientific study of "religion", our primary goal is to identify, define, and analyse various modes of engagement present in the field of the study of religion(s) as they appear in particular scientific approaches, such as the critical study of religion and activism. In our view, activism is certainly a spectrum of different forms of engagement that we refer to as modes. The critical study of religion(s) approach is a significant intellectual tradition focused on deconstructing both the reified categories associated with religion and the representations of structures of power, social order and relations that exist in the socio-religious imagination. Thus, it involves modalities of translation and deconstruction in the study of religion that are capable of changing the patterns of social imagination and of the perception of particular processes and structures as well as having transformational effects in social life. However, the critical approach is rarely applied by means of the deliberate engagement of the scholars of religion.

In terms of further theoretical developments of the discipline of religious studies, we are particularly interested in identifying these modes of engagement that have not yet been clearly defined and are deemed peripheral. In our view, a prime example of these unacknowledged, transformative or radical, modes of engagement is activism — which in its most extreme form, we would call the radical study of religion.

This critical paper is based on our extensive experience as scholars of the scientific study of religion. While we cannot yet identify as "radical scholars of religion", our critical examinations of the current developments in the study of religion have spurred us to question established modes of approaching and researching religion.[2] We draw upon our experience as teachers of religion at the Institute for the Study of Religion of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. One of us used to head the Institute and worked to change its rigid scientific nature. Now he is a driving force behind the next World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), the leading forum for the academic study of religion(s), to be held in Kraków in 2025. We are both involved in reassessing and deconstructing the implications of the study of religion in the modern period. Moreover, we have both been hired in multiple judicial and various other cases where the expertise of the scholar of religion was deemed dependable and significant or where it was legally mandated. Recently, we established a study group focused on activist knowledge production and practice within the field of religious studies.

In this article, we combine two distinct perspectives: that of a social scientist studying religion in Poland, Africa and in Lusophone contexts, and that of a historian of religions. By doing so, we aim to dissolve the artificial boundary between historical and social sciences prevalent in the study of religion. This boundary, in our opinion, impedes the discipline's progress and hinders the understanding of the complexity of its research topics.

Our analysis is focused on Poland, as we have identified it as a valuable case study for several reasons. Primarily, the study of religion in Poland not only reflects global trends in the discipline but also presents a diverse and unique analytical material, shaped by the specificities of its historical development and its current social context. The formation of the Polish study of religion(s) in the communist era and its current position in the socio-political context of the alliance between the state and the hegemonic Catholic Church have had significant impact. Therefore, in order to

2 Natalia is currently leading two research projects using the activist approach. The RUM project (https://rum.project.uj.edu.pl/) aims to map and categorise "religion" in Polish cities. The output of the project will be published in the form of interactive, open-access maps intended to stimulate debate on public "religion". In turn, one of the dimensions of the PentActors project (https://pentactors.project.uj.edu.pl/en_GB/) tests the activist involvement of the secular scholar of religion working with Pentecostal communities in Poland.

strengthen our case, we consider the global and local genealogies of the study of religion in Poland. We suggest that the Polish case can serve as a starting point for further reflection and comparison that can help in developing a sound activist and radical study of religion programme. In this, our perspective both from within Poland and more broadly from East Central Europe, appears to be essential for us. We wish to examine how scholars working in different social and religious contexts would respond to our observations and experiences. Thus, we aim to reverse the common academic practice we have seen of scholars struggling to apply theories devised in sensibly different contexts, notably in multiethnic and religiously diverse societies.

IDEOLOGICAL (DIS)ENTANGELMENTS: "RELIGION" AND THE GENEALOGIES OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN POLAND AND BEYOND

According to the dominant historiographical narrative, the study of religion(s) emerged as a consequence of the secularisation of knowledge in the context of modernisation processes in the West (Molendijk 2005; Molendijk and Pels 1998; Strenski 2015). The discipline was finally established in the second half of the nineteenth century when the chairs of liberal Protestant theology were transformed into chairs of Comparative Religion (Molendijk 2005). Despite efforts to distinguish the new scientific approach from the confessional one, the study of religion(s) shared its subject matter with theology, namely "religion". Ironically, the object of study was defined theologically. Jonathan Z. Smith aptly described the differences between theological and scientific approaches as "the debate between an understanding of religion based on *presence*, and one based on *representation*" (Smith 2001, 132). It is therefore important to make a clear distinction between an approach that views "religion" as a *sui generis* category, which characterized the mainstream study of religion until the early 1980s (Grottanelli and Lincoln 1998; Kippenberg 2002), and a subsequent critical approach in which "religion" has been seen as an abstract concept and analytical tool created for research purposes (McCutcheon 2003; 2019).

The evolution of this academic discipline has had a direct impact on its present state, encompassing various modes of (dis)engagement. The period from 1870 to 1925 was crucial in shaping the study of religion(s). Friedrich Max Müller, one of the founders of the new discipline (Science of Religion or *Religionswissenschaft*), expressed hope that its development "will change the aspect of the world, and give new life to Christianity itself" (Müller 1867, xix). At the same time, new disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and the psychology of religion have emerged, exploring "religion" not as an isolated essentialised category but as a part of a broader socio-political context (Grottanelli and Lincoln 1998). Beyond the evolutionary scheme that

placed "religion" in the human past and predicted a future based on science, other thinkers attempted to liberate humanity from "religion" by theorising it as an illusion and a consequence of more fundamental social forces, seen in the case of Karl Marx, or, according to Sigmund Freud, as a result of psychological processes (Strenski 2015).

However, the belief in the existence of religion as a *sui generis* reality has persisted. In the classical period of the study of religion, the phenomenological approach to religion became dominant. Researchers following this paradigm developed a procedure for studying "religion" from the perspective of believers. While its primary objective was to grasp the meaning of religious phenomena from an insider's point of view, phenomenology focused on understanding the religious individual, *homo religiosus*, making sense of life through their sensitivity to the manifestations of the sacred. Romanian scholar and writer, Mircea Eliade, insisted upon the dominant position of phenomenology and firmly believed in the mission of the History of Religions. Specifically, the study of religion was intended to initiate the New Humanism and the restoration of the spiritual centre of the modern world (Eliade 1961). This type of nostalgic post-romantic engagement was based on Eliade's worldview that developed during his time as an activist in the pre-war Romanian fascist Legion "Archangel Michael".

In Poland, the study of religion(s) (Polish: *Religioznawstwo*) has developed within a context of several paradoxes. The hegemony of the Catholic Church is the first of these. While the study of religion in the West has its origins in the development of liberal Protestant theology, in Poland, we are confronted with the phenomenon of "Catholic religious studies", which stood in opposition to the emerging comparative history of religion advocated by local free thinkers (Hoffmann 2004). A second peculiarity, common to all Eastern-European countries after the Second World War, was the presence of a state based on atheist ideology (Bubík and Hoffmann 2015). The state propagated "scientific atheism" as an official worldview, while at the same time actively opposing the Catholic Church and attempting to restrict its ideological influence. The support of the "scientific" study of religion by the Communist Party and the state apparatus associated the discipline with atheistic Leninist-Marxist ideology. This kind of politically supported atheistic engagement cast a long shadow over the future of the study of religion(s) in Poland and discouraged any activism based on Marxist methodology, which is generally associated with the majority of non-confessional activist approaches in academia. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church maintained its role as an independent institution due to its hegemonic position and influential cultural dominance. Church institutions, such as the Catholic University in Lublin, survived the Stalinist era and became an important reference point for decades to come.

In 1957, a group of freethinkers took the initiative of founding the Atheist Intelligentsia Club (the name clearly referred to the Catholic Intelligentsia Clubs that had been formed a few weeks earlier on the wave of the Polish October of 1956). The founders of the club were representatives of the new communist intelligentsia, mostly students and staff of the University of Warsaw, and those involved in the freethinkers' movement, which had been dissolved during the Stalinist period. The rebirth of the freethinkers' movement was crowned by the creation of the Polish Society of Freethinkers and Atheists — a state-sponsored organisation promoting rationalism and atheism. The Polish Society for the Study of Religion was founded in the same intellectual circles (Bubík and Hoffmann 2015).

The development of the study of religion(s) in Poland as a scientific discipline was to some extent dependent on the need to provide teachers for scientifically based Religious Education (RE) in public schools. In the 1980s, the communist authorities initiated the teaching of religious studies in secondary schools. In this context, the creation of the Institute of the Study of Religion(s) at the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the Jagiellonian University in 1974 was a milestone. Postgraduate Studies in Philosophy and Religious Studies were established on the initiative of philosophers from the Jagiellonian University and activists from the secular movements of the Communist Party. The main purpose of the new department was to meet the urgent need for training teachers and cultural and educational activists (Szyjewski 2021).

The change of political system in 1989 had significant consequences for the further development of the study of religion(s). First, many of the scientific centres established by the Communist Party were closed, and some scholars were determined to pursue new careers as political scientists, sociologists, or psychologists in the rapidly developing higher education system. Second, the Polish Society for the Study of Religions adapted to the new situation by opening up to cooperation with Catholic religious scholars. One consequence of this development has been the constant blurring of the boundaries between confessional apologetics and the study of religion. Third, the scientifically based Religious Education in secondary schools was abandoned, undermining the teacher-training centres. Instead, the confessional Religious Instruction (RI) provided by the Catholic Church was introduced in secular schools. The scientific study of religion(s), however, did not find a way to disseminate knowledge under the new conditions. The only introductions to the study of religion(s) published in Poland after 1989 were written by Catholic scholars with a religious agenda (Bronk 2003).

Paradoxically, between the Scylla of ideology and the Charybdis of theology, the Polish Society for the Study of Religions has attempted to join the mainstream development of the discipline. As a result of the initiative of a few individuals, two meth-

odological conferences of the IAHR were organised in Warsaw, making an important step in the creation of a contemporary discipline (Tyloch 1984).

The past ideological entanglement between the repressive policies of the communist state and the study of religion(s) has strongly influenced contemporary modes of engagement in the study of religion(s) in Poland. Today, the activist mode of engagement, predominantly inspired by Marxist thought and practice, is suppressed among Polish scholars of religion. Instead, after the fall of state communism, Polish scholars of religion emphasised the need to respect "religion". This is unexpected because the study of religion(s) is arguably the only humanistic field in Western academia (including Poland) whose subject matter is protected by law and enjoys certain benefits (Smith 2004), such as certain preferential legal solutions for religious organisations. Consequently, expertise in the discipline can lead to the granting or the withdrawal of economic privileges, the protection of religious communities and associations, and the well-being of believers. In most Western legal systems, the accusation of blasphemy has been replaced by the protection of "religious feelings". The special status granted to "religion" by legal systems and cultural traditions suggests that our discourse on "religion" should be respectful. However, as Bruce Lincoln emphatically stated, respect is a religious, not an academic, virtue (Lincoln 1996).

THE ENGAGED STUDY OF RELIGION: TOWARD A TRANSFORMATIVE MODE OF ENGAGEMENT

While the genealogies of (dis)engagement in the study of religion may explain the current (dis)continuity in the practice and, in particular, the framing of the activist modes of engaged scholarship on religion, in what follows we present several contemporary cases in which engagement takes a practical, applied form. With these cases, we would like not only to reflect on the socio-political implications of the religious scholar's personal convictions, but also to draw attention to the importance of the corpus of scientific knowledge about religion that the scholar can use while participating in socio-political processes in Poland.

In Poland, scholars of religion are often involved in expert work for regulatory state structures such as legal proceedings. This is stipulated by the Polish Penal Code, which contains a section — Chapter XXIV — defining crimes against freedom of conscience and religion. These are divided into three main articles: 194, 195, and 196, which are currently being used in a number of court cases in Poland. The first one addresses discrimination based on religious conviction and may refer to cases where access to the free choice and the practice of "religion" is restricted or hindered, as well as the right to non-denominationalism and atheism. Article 195 deals with "malicious" interference with the public performance of a religious act by a church

or any other lawful religious association as well as with funerals, celebrations, or mourning rites. Article 196 may be seen as the most problematic, as it refers to a person who "offends the religious feelings" of others by publicly insulting an object of religious worship or a place intended for the public performance of religious rites. Judgments in these cases can have serious consequences. If an act is qualified as an offence under one of these articles, the perpetrator may be fined, deprived of liberty, or imprisoned for up to two years.

While similar provisions can be found in the penal codes of many countries around the world, in Poland, according to police statistics, the number of denunciations and prosecutions has increased significantly in recent years, coinciding with the rise to power of the right-wing populist political faction. Proceedings related to "religion" began to reflect the worldview and ideological cleavages present in Polish society. If in 2010, the number of proceedings initiated under Article 196 was 52 and the number of offences established was 48, these figures started to increase significantly after 2015. In 2017, these figures were 70 and 60 respectively, reaching 130 and 97 in 2020.[3] Last year, in 2022, some members of the right-wing political group Solidarna Polska ("Solidarity Poland") began lobbying for a restriction of the provisions of the Penal Code, in particular Article 196. Politicians from this group emphasised the ineffectiveness of the current provisions, which they said had contributed to an increase in crimes against believers on the grounds of their religion.[4] However, the parliamentary project was not supported by the ruling party, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość ("Law and Justice"), and politicians from Solidarity Poland launched a petition for the civil project "In Defence of Christians". With 380,000 signatures, the document was submitted to the parliament in October 2022.[5] A few months earlier, the centrist political party Nowoczesna ("Modern") had announced the introduction of a bill to remove Article 196 from Polish law.

These cases show how, in Poland, a legal judgement related to "religion" is deeply intertwined with political agendas and particular worldviews. Articles 194-196 are the basis for legal reasoning, although they are based on subjective premises, such as "offending religious feelings" or "malicious interference", categories that require interpretation in each new case. Thus, the interpretation of the alleged perpetrator's act may depend on the context, the pressure of governmental power structures that enforce and suppress civil liberties, the worldview and level of engagement of the

3 https://statystyka.policja.pl/st/kodeks-karny/przestepstwa-przeciwko-5/63492,Obraza-uczuc-religijnych-art-196.html (accessed 15.01.2023).

4 Solidarna Polska, Twitter post 14 April 2022, https://twitter.com/SolidarnaPL

5 https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/Druki9ka.nsf/Projekty/9-020-881-2022/$file/9-020-881-2022.pdf (accessed 05.01.2023).

expert called upon to explain the case, the expert's personal agenda, and, finally, the expert's theoretical choice of reasoning and justification.

Two of the many examples that have appeared in the public media in recent years illustrate the entanglement between the study of religion and social criticism. The first case concerns the event organised to mark the anniversary of the head of the main Catholic radio station in Poland, Radio Maryja, a well-known controversial public figure, priest, and businessman, Tadeusz Rydzyk. Organised by a group of activists, the "commemoration" took the form of an artistic happening in front of the headquarters of Radio Maryja and aimed at criticising the irregularities of the Catholic Church in Poland, which, according to the protesters, were embodied by Tadeusz Rydzyk. The activists pointed to the Church's accumulation of capital and its hegemony over social life in Poland. They listed several "sins" of the Polish Catholic Church such as conceit, arrogance, and hypocrisy. The means used by the activists were typical of a carnivalesque, festive logic: masquerade, exaggeration, irony, and sarcasm. The first part of the event was reminiscent of the popular May/June celebrations of the Polish Catholic Church, such as Corpus Christi. Several people formed a processional group, some wearing cassocks. A group of women carried an image mounted on a stick resembling a maypole, which they called the "Queen Vagina" (*Królewska wagina*). It was a crowned image of the vagina and bore a passing resemblance to the image of the "Sacred Heart of Jesus", later interpreted by the critics as the monstrance. According to feminist activists, the intention of the image was to empower women in the context of the patriarchal culture of the Polish Catholic Church. A significant part of the performance was a list of the Church's greatest sins, combined with the declaration of "apostasy", which the activists claimed could free people from membership of such a disreputable institution as the Polish Catholic Church.

In Poland, the declaration of apostasy is being discussed and performed with increasing frequency — an important fact in a country where the majority of the population are automatically counted as members of the Catholic Church by virtue of infant baptism. The event has triggered pro and con statements, debates, and polemics, reflecting the polarisation that exists in Polish society and is often referred to as Poland's culture war (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Some of the protesters were accused of violating Article 196 on offending religious feelings, in particular with the "Queen Vagina", other reinterpreted Catholic symbols, and the figure of Tadeusz Rydzyk. Although the event was legally registered and protected by the police under the freedom of civic expression and freedom of speech, several performances of the event were perceived as contradicting these civil rights and were prosecuted. The responsibility and the expertise of the scholar of religion was to navigate between the manipulation of various Catholic symbols, which was unacceptable for some

Catholics who found it offensive, and the obvious tendency hidden behind the accusation of suppressing certain forms of social protest, criticism, and freedom of expression in relation to the religious worldview. In this case, the expert opinion went against Catholic claims that were interpreted as a way of suppressing social protest and criticism. The expert's position was clearly informed by the constructivist model of "religion", which places this category in a limited socio-religious space that should not infringe upon or violate fundamental civil rights such as freedom of speech and expression. The performances were interpreted as a carnivalesque type of artistic activity that allowed the use of tools such as irony, parody, and exaggeration under the rule of *licentia poetica*. According to this perspective, the expert associated the manipulation of religious symbols with social imagination, creativity, the reproduction of popular culture, and freedom of speech.

Another similarly mediatised case was that of the "Rainbow Mary". It concerned the distribution in the city of Płock of stickers depicting a reworked image of Our Lady of Częstochowa, one of the most popular images of Mary among Polish Catholics. The image is historically associated with Polishness and the Polish-Catholic connection. Some activists added a rainbow halo to the original image. The act was a reaction and commentary to the use of anti-LGBT elements in the traditional Easter decoration of the tomb of Jesus at St. Dominic's Church in Płock.

While the authors of the "Rainbow Mary" were prosecuted but acquitted, the justification for the verdict was based on the expert opinion of a scholar of religion (Archiwum Osiatyńskiego 2021).[6] Among other things, the acquittal was justified by arguments drawn directly from the religious worldview, which made the legal analysis unduly dependent on various elements of religious doctrine. For example, the judge stated that the reworked image did not depict sexual acts between non-heteronormative persons, and that only such acts could be considered sinful according to Roman Catholic teaching and therefore subject to legal action. It was also said that the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church does not exclude non-heteronormative people from the community of believers. Both arguments led to the conclusion that the rainbow added to the halo did not offend Catholics and, implicitly, that it did not contravene official Catholic doctrine. Such an understanding appeared in another argument, in which the judge explained that the Catholic Church does not regulate in any formal and unambiguous way how the image of the Mother of God and the Baby Jesus is to be presented. Therefore, the alteration of the image by the activists does not violate the internal regulations of the Catholic Church. Problematic statements in the acquittal were combined with arguments based on the "understanding", approach, derived from the phenomenological tradition in the study

6 https://archiwumosiatynskiego.pl/wpis-w-debacie/tecza-symbol-dumy-osob-lgbt-nie-niesie-ponizajacych-tresci-uzasadnienie-wyroku-slowo-w-slowo/ (accessed 02.01.2023).

of religion, which apparently prioritised an emic understanding of religion based on Catholicism. As a result, although the judge recognised the cause and purpose of the act as embedded in social protest, the justification of the final judgement derived its premises from a religious worldview.

The case of the evangelical pastor Paweł Chojecki, the owner of a local Internet TV channel, who publicly criticised Catholicism, illustrates different dimensions of the serious engagement of the scholar of religion. For several months, he repeatedly referred to certain elements of Catholicism, such as the Virgin Mary or the Eucharist, using coarse and explicit language. His programme attracted attention and he was sued by several Catholics for "offending religious feelings". Although part of the expert report commissioned for the purposes of the legal proceedings recognised that the pastor's remarks arose from and were embedded in the paradigm of Protestant criticism of Catholicism, the expert went beyond the scope of the assessment. Using his legitimacy as a specialist of "religion", the expert extended his competence giving an opinion on the tone and form of Chojecki's utterances. Chojecki's criticism was condemned and found offensive on the basis of the evaluation of the character of his communication. In addition, the expert gave an opinion on a matter outside his area of competence and made a number of mistakes, which were pointed out in a separate independent opinion prepared and made public at Chojecki's request by the former Dominican monk Tadeusz Bartoś (Redakcja IPP 2021).[7] As a result, Chojecki was threatened with several months' imprisonment, which he subsequently appealed against. The seriousness of the situation lies in the legitimisation of any statement made by an expert on "religion", which could ultimately have detrimental social consequences in the violation of freedom of expression and in the limitation of any criticism.

Another case relates to the impact on civil liberties — such as exercise of the right of some groups to self-organisation, self-determination, freedom of expression or even the freedom of belief. The expertise was prepared by a number of scholars working at the Institute for the Study of Religion at the Jagiellonian University, the oldest in Poland and one of its kind in the country (Banek and Czarnecki 2013).[8] The report considered the application by members of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) for official state registration as a religious organisation in Poland. The expert opinion denied the group's right to be called a "religion". At an individual level, the experts wrote, the Church of the FSM could be considered a religion, as anyone is allowed to believe in whatever they wish. On an institutional level, however,

7 https://idzpodprad.pl/aktualnosci/tylko-u-nas-prof-bartos-kontra-prof-przybyl-sadowska-w-procesie-pastora-chojeckiego/ (accessed 23.05.2023)

8 https://www.klps.pl/downloads/klps_ekspertyza.pdf (accessed 01.11.2023)

the experts argued that the application should be rejected because accepting it would have legal and governmental implications that could not be accorded to the explicit parody of religion. These arguments are weak for several reasons. On the one hand, the experts described the Church of the FSM as a joke religion and maintained that such a model should not be considered in religious terms. In doing so, the experts brought into play an obvious hierarchy in which only serious religions are allowed to be framed as such. At the same time, they explained what "seriousness" could mean in this case. The justification made it clear that "adult and reasonable" people could not believe in the FSM as the creator of the Universe, an omnipotent and omniscient being. Paradoxically, such a statement revealed the experts' own biases for a Christian worldview. On the other hand, the experts based their definition of "religion" on a number of older works of Rudolf Otto, Cornelius P. Tiele, Natan Söderblom, and Joachim Wach. As a result, they focused on distinguishing "religion" from a non-religion by capturing it in Otto's terms of *das Heilige* (the sacred). This concept, in Otto's sense, has long been outdated as a heuristic tool in the study of "religion", as it refers to essentialised and theological understanding of "religion". As a result, this expertise has created a precedent for judging "religion" according to both inadequate and arbitrary categories.

With these cases, we have brought into the debate further modes of engagement by scholars of "religion". Above all, we wanted to present some examples of how different kinds and levels of engagement by religious studies scholars can be put into the service of tasks of high socio-political responsibility. These cases show that the expertise of scholars of religion can have serious implications for both individual lives and social groups. More generally, it can shape certain social imaginaries and normative discourses about various religious categories and narratives that can be applied, whether in the implementation of social justice, civil rights, and support for minorities, or in the legitimation of authoritarian governmentality, hegemonic worldviews or the personal agenda of the expert. In this sense, the scholar of religion becomes an important actor in the socio-political process, mediating between different power structures and understandings of "religion" as having legal, social, civil, and even national security implications (Jensen 2006). Such engagement can be understood as transformative and, as we argue below, it has the potential to be included in the radical study of religion curriculum.

ACTIVIST APPROACH IN STUDYING RELIGION: TOWARD THE RADICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

Building on the previous sections, we would like to reflect on how to make a place for activism in the study of religion(s). Our still incomplete definition of the activist

approach in the study of religion(s) should grow from the conscious socio-political engagement of the scholar and a specific and carefully applied theoretical corpus that is used to intervene in the socio-political process.

Looking at the relationship between activism and anthropology, which continues to be a widely debated issue, may be helpful in structuring our reflection. Indeed, there are a number of common points between the arguments about applied or engaged anthropology and our own aims in studying religion. According to some anthropologists (Warren 2006; Willow and Yotebieng 2022), the process of knowledge production can already be understood as a kind of transformative social engagement if we consider outputs such as reinterpretation, translation, and the deconstruction of established ways of meaning-making and thinking. In light of the legal procedures presented above, we should now agree that all cases in which the scholar of religion questions "religion" as a reified category are valuable for revealing and deconstructing the hidden social structures, relationships, and formation processes that lie behind common, locally binding notions of "religion". Such endeavours, as we have seen, can have serious implications for dismantling established power structures and bridging or breaking down the connections between "religion" and other aspects of social life.

Going a step further, such an approach is related to what Charles R. Hale calls cultural critique in anthropology, "an approach to research and writing in which political alignment is manifested through the content of the knowledge produced, not through the relationship established with an organized group of people in struggle" (Hale 2006, 98). The rapidly developing sub-discipline of critical study of religion(s) operates within a similar paradigm (Goldstein 2020; Miller 2022) rooted in a constructivist theory of religion that privileges the translation and deconstruction of particular categories. We recognise that in the study of religion(s), such deconstruction, and the "disenchantment" it entails, may also have significant social implications, for example on processes of social imagination. When we speak of "disenchantment", we do not necessarily mean secularisation, deconversion or apostasy. We rather refer to the raising of an awareness that allows one to reconsider one's own positionality and level of involvement in relation to "religion", reflect on the scope and meaning of specific categories of "religion", and develop sensibility to public and hegemonic discourses on "religion". We propose to call such an attitude the "religious science imagination" (Polish: *Wyobraźnia religioznawcza*, German: *Religionswissenschaftliche Vorstellung*) which is akin to similar concepts in anthropology (Mencwel 2006) and sociological imagination (Mills 2000). Following Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish'sradical imagination project (2014) we argue that imagination is crucial for the ability to create "something else, and to create it together" (Haven and Khasnabish 2010, iii). Therefore, we consider "religious science imagination" as part of the activ-

ist project of shaping public sensibilities about "religion" in order to pave the way to discussions on public social practices between different religious and non-religious actors. Jonathan Z. Smith insisted on the role of imagination in the study of religion, pointing to the necessity to understand religion as an entirely constructed and abstract concept, imagined as real and operational by various individuals, groups and institutions, so that it is perceived as a shaping force of social structures and processes (Smith 2004). In our view, one of the key pillars of activist modes of engagement in the contemporary study of religion may be the involvement of the scholar of religion in the process of social actors developing such an imagination. This is mainly due to the educational potential that lies in this self-conscious deconstructive project that leads to the de- and re-configuration of "religion" and its socio-political entanglements.

The modes of engagement described above are hardly consistent with the activist approach in anthropology, according to which it implies engagement and knowledge production in association with particular communities or groups, where conformity to a given group's worldview, its claims and emic concepts is crucial (Kirsch 2002; Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016). In the case of the study of religion, such a situation reveals the field's specificity, because working in association with a community may involve supporting its theological understanding and confessional worldview, going against the foundations of the contemporary developments of the discipline, which is paradigmatically non-confessional. For this reason, we propose that considering the "vector of activism" is crucial in the conceptualisation of the activist paradigm in the study of religion. It is legitimate to ask where the locus of the applied activist's power lies, and what the expected direction of activist action is. This has to do with the scholar's orientation, goals, and self-positionality. Anna Willow and Kelly Yotebieng's comment (Willow and Yotebieng 2022) on the hazy boundaries between anthropological research and activism in the case of applied anthropology can serve as a good example. While for applied anthropologists it is often difficult to draw a line between their activist and academic identities, for scholars of religion such division needs to be much clearer to prevent their possible confessional engagement.

Another important dimension to consider is the relationship between minority and hegemony, which appears to be especially significant when determining the activist mode of engagement of the religious scholar. As mentioned, the "vector of activism" may point in different directions depending on whether the scholar is working with a minority or the dominant religious group. In the former case, the engagement may be carried out with the aim of protecting the rights of a given group (see the examples of "pastor Chojecki" and "FSM"), whereas in the latter case, the vector may be directed towards safeguarding the secular sphere (see the examples of "Tadeusz Rydzyk" and "Rainbow Mary"). The former case would favour the mediating mode of the scholar's engagement, protecting freedoms and rights of self-deter-

mination. This is precisely what the experts failed to provide in the arguments concerning the Church of the FSM. The latter case, on the other hand, would advance a regulatory and preventive policy, limiting the repressive practices that restrict social and civil liberties. In turn, the "Tadeusz Rydzyk" case could serve as an illustration of how the scholar of religion might use secular logic to draw an interpretative line against charges of blasphemy and "offending of religious feelings". Despite the final judgment protecting civil liberties, the "Rainbow Mary" case could serve as a failed example where the expert missed the point and based the argument on confessional premises. As such, the case held the potential to change the public discourse and imagination about the ontology, place and function of religious images and objects in the public sphere. It also had the ability to serve as the precedent for future similar cases. Instead, the interpretation of the act was relegated to the religious realm. In this instance, the expert of religion had the opportunity to act according to the radical mode of engagement, but he did not.

It is legitimate to ask whether the study of religion(s) is prepared for a more radical mode of engagement, one in which the scholar of religion would be directly involved in, alongside, outside, or even in opposition to some dimensions of "religion" (for example, taking a stand on issues such as hegemonic, dominant religious institutions and their discourses, as in the "Tadeusz Rydzyk" and "pastor Chojecki" cases where a clear position against Catholic claims was urgently needed). Such involvement would not only work at the level of deconstructing reified categories and creating new imaginaries of "religion" in social life, but a would also likely be an audible voice calling for more radical social and political reconfigurations, and opening up new arenas where negotiations between religious and non-religious actors could take place. We suggest that a radical activist mode of engagement would initiate a new dimension in the study of religion, in which the figure of the scholar of religion would take on a diagnostic role, identifying cleavages in the social spaces that affect religion and need to be redesigned in order to better negotiate the reconfigurations of the public sphere, the protection of civil liberties, the redefinition of the social contract, and the work toward multiple forms of social, economic, and legal justice. Such a stance would also pose new challenges for religious institutions, groups, and individuals, who would be encouraged to rework and rethink the boundaries of their religious imaginary and practice in relation to the public and counter-public spheres. The limits and threads of the radical approach need to be further explored. The question arises as to whether a radical curriculum in religious studies is possible without undermining the founding idea, which still persists in various disciplines dealing with religion, of the hyper-particularity of the object of study and engagement, namely "religion" itself.

CONCLUSION

We hope that our reflections on the activist approach to the study of religion(s) will stimulate a more in-depth and complex debate than we were able to present in this short scientific contribution. Tackling this issue is urgently needed both for religious studies and other disciplines that study "religion", such as anthropology and sociology. While the social engagement of the scholars is increasingly being discussed in academic circles, the study of religion has been slow to follow suit, lagging behind current developments in rethinking the idea of the university, the production of scientific knowledge, and the social responsibilities of scholars. We acknowledge, however, that the activist approach to the study of religion(s) poses new challenges to "activist scholarship" and requires the construction of new ways of navigating between religious and non-religious actors, and between different models of religious presence in the public sphere. As we have shown, in the case of the study of religion, the academic production of knowledge, the dominant scientific paradigms that govern the operational corpus used to reflect on "religion", the local religious and cultural heritage, and the local socio-religious landscape significantly shape the attitude of the scholar and their modes of engagement. The wide range of activist modes in the activist approach to the study of religion(s) could also be considered as the specificity of this field of study.

Most importantly, we would like to add that although we are speaking from Eastern-Central Europe, our academic belonging is grounded in the European tradition of the study of religion. This fact limits our capacities to reflect on an activist approach to the study of religion while being "outside Europe", where the activist vectors described above may have different locus and directions. Even if the activist mode in Europe is mostly used in post-secular negotiations of power relations, it is still largely rooted in post-Enlightenment constructs of separation between secular and religious spheres (see Mahmood 2009). Future debate on the place of activism in the study of religion(s) therefore needs to cover a far wider range of contexts and cases, especially when it comes to multiethnic and religiously diverse societies.

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AUTHORS' CONTACTS:

Natalia Zawiejska
Institute for the Study of Religion, Jagiellonian University, Kraków
E-mail: natalia.zawiejska@uj.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-4298-1324

Lech Trzcionkowski
Institute for the Study of Religion, Jagiellonian University, Kraków
E-mail: lech.trzcionkowski@uj.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-6624-7431

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CONVERSATION

ON THE CHALLENGES OF ENGAGEMENT AND DOING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN CONFLICT ZONES

CATHERINE WANNER

PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERISTY

SANDRA KING-SAVIC

UNIVERSITY OF ST. GALLEN

JELENA TOSIC

UNIVERSITY OF ST. GALLEN

OLEKSANDRA TARKHANOVA

UNIVERSITY OF ST. GALLEN

Catherine Wanner invited several anthropologists to come together to discuss the challenges of conducting fieldwork in a region ravaged by war. The group consisted of four anthropologists, two who conduct research in Serbia and two in Ukraine. The group discussed the ethical complications that arise for anthropologists whose field site is or was the site of war as well as the responsibilities war creates for anthropologists who respond to the outbreak of armed combat by writing about state-sponsored violence and the process of enduring violence. Sandra King-Savic moderated this conversation, which took place on 7 July 2022 at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland before a live audience. The transcript of this two-hour conversation was shortened to fit this article and edited for clarity.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, ethics, war, Ukraine, Yugoslavia

Sandra King-Savic:
We have brought together a group of scholars to have a conversation about how our positionality and the dominant political ideologies that have contextualised our fieldwork experiences have shaped our research. Two have conducted research in the former Yugoslavia, two in the former Soviet Union, and all in regions that have

been the site of devastating armed combat. Research that engages the experiences of war inevitably has strong political implications. Over the years, we have asked ourselves, should our research aim to be ideologically dis/engaged? Anthropologists, in other words, have a choice: to either acknowledge that they have taken a side or not. If they have taken a side, the next issue is to establish to what degree they will advocate for that vision, knowing full well that no research is entirely neutral. When there is an opportunity to critique dominant ideologies, is this advisable or even laudable? Or, should anthropologists simply aim to analyse the ideologies they encounter by observing the values, emotions, and behaviours of interlocutors as they conduct research? By ideology I refer to a network of ideas that is not necessarily coherent, although it is often considered as such by its proponents. Ideologies, such as nationalism, populism, communism, or liberalism often reflect how a world should be and are often surprisingly at variance with the actions of its bearers. How is an anthropologist's ability or even obligation to critique these ideologies affected by his/her positionality? I ask you here to respond to these issues by way of a vignette drawn from your research experiences.

Jelena Tosic:
In spring 2002 I sat in a Belgrade café and was quite nervous before an interview. I had a meeting with an official representative of Obraz, a clero-fascist, far-right organisation with pronounced racist, antisemitic, homophobic and gender-conservative statements and actions. Its members were involved in attacking Gay Pride participants in the first Gay Pride Parade in Belgrade in June 2001 as well as repeatedly attacking Women in Black, an activist group that has commemorated the Srebrenica genocide since 1996. At the time of the mentioned meeting, Obraz was still a "legitimate" movement. Later, in 2012, it was officially banned and since 2015 it has registered again, interestingly under the label of a "Russian-Serbian Culture Organization," only to be re-registered under another name in 2019. Serbia, at that time, was a very interesting, but difficult place to study — it was the aftermath of the NATO bombardment in 1999 and the fall of Milosevic in October 2000 and his extradition to The Hague in June 2001. Yet, it was before the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in March 2003. It was a time marked by a simultaneity of hope and disillusionment regarding democracy and socio-political change in general, which was the core interest of my doctoral research. I remember that I started the interview by saying that I do not share the same ideological views as my interview partner. Let us call him Dejan. My opening statement stressed the importance of talking in spite of our ideological differences and the need to get beyond them. We ended up having a nice conversation about our by and large incommensurable, but also intersecting, views on what was going on in Serbia and where the country should

be heading. Without focusing on Dejan's position and narrative as such, the aspect I would highlight most of all is the weird aura of a pleasant coffee chat, and the dual nature of the workings of ideology and its relationship to our research practices and ethnography. On the one hand, one can stress the explicit and manifest dimension of a dominant political ideology as a political instrument. At the same time, ideology functions to simplify, polarise, and prevent us from seeing certain processes and structures, which is crucial to explore. This dimension is particularly foregrounded by Marxist thought (ideology as false consciousness and occluding the relations of production), but it is insightful beyond Marxist approaches.

What irritated me in the aftermath of the interview with Dejan was not so much its content, but the smoothness of the interview. I asked myself: How could this interview be so unproblematic and even pleasant? Have we been moving merely on the surface, the visible and obvious aspects of our incompatible ideological positions? Did my ideological position prevent me from actually seeing some legitimate concerns of a clero-fascist position without subscribing to it? Could this conversation have been something else for Dejan, other than just presenting himself as a legitimate conversation partner to a PhD student "from the neoliberal West"? What were we both not addressing in our attempt to have a balanced and "peaceful" conversation?

I want to connect my fieldwork memories to what ethnographers of the far-right have been discussing lately. As the anthropologist Agnieszka Pasieka (2019) highlights, we know more about right-wing ideologies than about the people holding them. What she and others rightfully advocate is doing ethnography on and with people holding views we do not subscribe to without either condemning them in advance, exoticizing, or victimising them. Of further importance is to look deeper into histories and everyday practices of these movements and the people subscribing to them, in order to see them in the context of (re)producing worldviews and regimes of inequality they legitimise.

In addition to calling for more ethnographic research on supporters of right-wing ideologies, I think we also need to continue talking about and exchanging experiences on how this kind of research is done concretely. Making use of the dual nature of ideology can be quite useful here. This can imply a variety of research strategies: focusing explicitly on conversations where views and practices (including our own) are revealed or are made invisible; being especially attentive to 'common sense' claims and implications; having a closer look at the places, processes, and actors involved in reproducing particular ideologies; and bringing these reflections back to the conversations, up to and including considering how certain right-wing formations also occlude the ideological strength of other more powerful political actors. The last point brings me back to my vignette. Obraz and similar organisations are often seen as a political instrument by the present-day regime in Serbia for creating a quasi-ultra-right opposition, which the political elite can dominate.

I would like to conclude with a note of caution. Some time has passed since the (post)Yugoslav wars. I would not say that it makes it easier to think about them, especially not when someone suffered losses among family members and friends. However, I do think, and this is my personal experience, it does imply possibilities of access, return, debate, activism, mourning, and maybe even some kind of closure. The latter can also be grounded in research on how certain ideological strands play out through time and in socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts, and be used to mobilise and legitimise violence. I do wonder if or how we can actively build in reflections on ideology into our ethnographic research process under conditions of an on-going conflict, such as the current war against Ukraine.

Oleksandra Tarkhanova:
Thank you very much for this vignette. I am a sociologist with a background in feminist and state scholarship so being political is not unfamiliar. I have two related fieldwork memories that stand out for me. In my project, which I have been working on for two years now, I focus on citizenship, including the relations between displaced people or people who live under occupation in eastern Ukraine and the Ukrainian state. In the summer of 2021, I spent some time at the so-called entry-exit crossing points in eastern Ukraine, where people cross between the government-controlled and occupied parts of the regions. I was working in welfare offices along the former 'contact line.'

The first memory I want to share is from the crossing point, the only one that was open during the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. Before the pandemic-related restrictions on movement across the 'contact line,' thousands of people used it every day to travel in either direction for a variety of reasons. When I was there, it was still very busy but much less than before. During the summer heat wave, I was looking for a place to hide from the sun, like most people at the crossing point, and I spent some time talking to an NGO worker. He was helping people who could not cross for whatever reason, usually document-related, in a hot overcrowded, unairconditioned metal container. During our conversation, we were approached by a woman, who, judging by her appearance, was obviously in mourning. She was asking for help in crossing after she was stopped by the Ukrainian border guards earlier. She explained that she wanted to attend her cousin's funeral (in Russian, a cousin means a kind of brother). She was told that she could not cross because she was not on the separatist authorities' list and could not prove blood relations to her cousin because of their different surnames. Yet, she insisted she was like a sister to him. Faced with a crying distressed person asking for help, the NGO worker very calmly said he could not do much. All he could do was write a letter of support to the border guards, with which she would be let back into the government-controlled territory.

She grabbed this opportunity, although the NGO worker was very sceptical and told her that it would probably not work. This encounter took place in the late morning.

The second time I met her was when she ran into the hot, crowded container around 3 pm, yelling at me, "Where is your colleague?" Then she ran into a smaller air-conditioned part of the same container where the state and the NGO representatives were cooling down. She screamed at them about having to walk in heat between the two block posts towards the occupied territory, which is a good distance away, just to be refused entry again. After letting some of her frustration out, she explained to me that the border guards of the de-facto authorities on the other side did not want to listen to her reasons or accept the paper provided by the NGO. She insisted that as a Ukrainian citizen, she should be able to cross into the occupied territories to attend the funeral, but the guards threw the paper in her face, saying that it would only be accepted by the other Ukrainian border guards and that her reasons would not work with them.

Later, I discussed the incident with the NGO worker, and he said, "They, the ordinary people, do not understand what is happening here. They do not understand that we are two separate entities, the Ukrainian side and the Luhansk de-facto authorities, and we do not talk to each other. What we do here is different from what they do there." Although I initially accepted his interpretation of people's frustration with complicated and oppressive rules, after weeks of interviews and further conversations, I realised that it is not actually what happened there. **This woman, like many other people I talked to, intentionally disregarded the *de facto* border between the Ukrainian state and the political entities in the occupied regions to resist the established and consequential, yet disturbing and meaningless, separation of Donbas from the rest of Ukraine**. When she insisted on her Ukrainian citizenship to the border guards of the unrecognised republics, she claimed a right to freedom of movement and assumed a (national) identity. However, she primarily appealed to the normalcy of the past when attempting to activate a citizenship that used to span across the newly created "border". In the end, people's everyday practices are governed by the established institutions and infrastructures that reflect the consequences of the war, be it the new "borders" or occupation regimes. However, the people I talked to refused to ideologically legitimise the existence of these new "borders" or new "states" even when they were obliged to accept or engage them. I imagine that similar processes — of simultaneously submitting to and learning to live with an occupation regime, and yet devising strategies of resistance — take place now in the occupied south and east of Ukraine.

Another incident speaks to my positionality when doing fieldwork in such a setting. I was in an empty social welfare office in a small settlement briefly occupied during the initial stage of the war in eastern Ukraine, talking to welfare workers.

When the only "clients" that day came by, I was promptly invited to interview them in the corridor while they waited for their documents to be processed. This is how I met two 55-year-old men, former miners, who had travelled from the outskirts of Donetsk to the government-controlled part of the region for the first time since the war started in order to apply for their pensions from the Ukrainian government. They started the conversation by speaking Ukrainian to me, probably because they had followed my exchanges with the Ukrainian state employees, who spoke mostly a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, which is common in the region. Knowing that the region they come from is mostly Russian speaking, I offered to switch to Russian, which they happily accepted. After briefly discussing why they were there and their experience crossing the "contact line", they wanted to know more about me. I come from an industrial town in the neighbouring region. After learning that, the first question they asked me was if we are allowed to speak Russian where I come from. I was shocked by this question because of the obvious answer — of course, people are allowed to speak Russian, which is their native language. They were just as surprised by my answer as I was by the question. We both left the conversation thinking that propaganda created this perception of Ukrainian language policy.

I was also forced to reflect on how much I underestimated the importance of the language issue. I am a Russian-speaking Ukrainian, who learned Ukrainian in school, so I am bilingual. The question of language-based discrimination has always been way more complex than its politicised representation. It was mostly Ukrainian speakers who were marginalised in the region where I come from. The recent changes in Ukrainian language policy, which include requesting state employees to have Ukrainian language proficiency, were less consequential than in many other regions. After this interaction, I was left wondering if it really matters that language became a political issue. It is used to simplify and caricature the Russian war against Ukraine, both by Russian propaganda and sometimes in the perceptions of the West. Perhaps, the longer the war lasts, the more we will need to deal with the consequences of war as reflected in deeper cleavages between people that are not as easily overcome as language, no matter how frustrating or meaningless they are.

Catherine Wanner:
In your case, Sasha, you and your interlocutors share a language, heritage, and until recently citizenship. And yet different (mis)understandings of those same elements of everyday life have been forged through propaganda to separate you from the people you interviewed. I do research on religion in Ukraine as an American, which means that I come from a different country, speak another language, and I do not share the religious convictions, affiliations, and lifestyles of the people I study. Jelena began her interview with the politically-active cleric by acknowledging their ideological differ-

ences. This didn't produce the kind of cleavages that might have prevented engaged discussion. I usually also begin by acknowledging the differences in perspectives, belief systems, and values between myself and my interlocutors. However, unlike in Jelena's case, I have found on occasion that some deny these very cleavages. When they do, although it allows for trust that leads to meaningful dialogue to emerge, other issues arise. When members of a particular community espouse certain ideologies, beliefs, and practices, and assume the anthropologist is an "insider" and therefore shares their social and political values, the ethical responsibility of the researcher to set the record straight is keenly felt and yet more difficult to achieve.

I have studied a multitude of religious communities, from highly stigmatised, marginal groups to mainstream Orthodox believers who, before the war, subscribed to a generalised, apolitical ambient religiosity as "Just Orthodox". Doing research on religion raises the stakes in striking the appropriate balance between observation and participation, so as not to foster any illusions that the outsider, non-religious anthropologist is really an insider member of the community. And yet, on several occasions, after taking great pains to explain my positionality, namely that I am not a practitioner of whatever faith group I am studying, nor am I of Ukrainian origin, and that I intend to write a book, I belatedly realise that some of the people I am interviewing have dismissed all that as untrue or irrelevant. Cynically, they think people will say anything to get what they want, which renders how I present myself as meaningless. They decide for themselves who I am. On occasion, after seeing interlocutors listen very patiently to me explain who I am, what my research is, and why I am conducting it, I later realised that they have decided to ignore all that because they have decided that I am someone else.

Problems emerge when they publicly present me as the insider they want me to be. Two instances were particularly wrenching for me. Once at a large charismatic megachurch service, before several thousand parishioners, unbeknownst to me, the head pastor called me to the microphone as "Sister Cathy" and asked me to "witness" about my faith. It was impossible to remain seated. My choice was to set the record straight and publicly humiliate him or overlook the "Sister Cathy" part and introduce myself in the usual secular vein that I ordinarily would with no mention of faith or religion. I opted for the latter and I am sure the pastor was disappointed. To this day I am uncomfortable when I recall that moment. But I don't know how I could have avoided it other than to never have studied this group in the first place.

As part of another project on deinstitutionalized religious practices, I travelled from Eastern Ukraine to Western Ukraine with a pilgrimage group. One of the women in the group was very pious, whereas all the others were "Just Orthodox", meaning curious and enthusiastic to be participating but were not devout believers. The leader of the pilgrimage group paired me, the foreigner, with the single person in the group who was a committed Orthodox believer. On the long journey, we had ample time

to talk. The pious woman, for some reason, decided I was a Jew from Ukraine who immigrated to the U.S., became religious there, converted to Orthodoxy, and had now returned to Ukraine to go on pilgrimage. Not one word of this was true but she persisted in introducing me in such terms.

The question is then, why do some interlocutors collapse the differences and imagine the anthropologist to be like themselves, even when the lifeworlds, values, and political orientations are drastically different? I have come to understand two things about positionality: sometimes people just want to see you in their own likeness because this allows them to build enough trust to verbalise the thoughts, fears, regrets, and hopes that they so desperately long to share. To do this, some interlocutors need to remake your biography into who they would like you to be, instead of who you are. This allows them to speak freely and openly and achieve some kind of therapeutic effect from the dialogue. Interpersonal dynamics, along with the willingness or need to talk, influence how our positionality is interpreted for us in spite of the best intentions to be authors of our own biography.

Research on religion, however, exacerbates the tensions that might be created by differing positionalities. Ideological commitments, along with the moral convictions and the personalised, emotional experiences that feed them, are not only verbalised. They are also enacted. I attended a charismatic megachurch, but I declined to preach. I went on a pilgrimage, but I did not venerate icons, bathe in a sacred spring, or perform many of the other rituals even those who professed to be non-believing did. In other words, when doing research on religion, deciding how to verbally engage interlocutors is the first step. One also has to decide how ideological positionality will be enacted and publicly practised.

Sandra King-Savic:
Thank you all for these insights into your positionality, which I think also reveal how our research and our research positions can be grounded in certain assumptions and ideas, which sometimes lead to misrecognition and ignorance of alternative ways of thinking and the different positionalities of informants. An alternative way of thinking can generate ideas that are otherwise invisible to us in what I would call "blind spots." I would like to discuss something Jelena mentions, namely that we talk about "the other part of Europe." The other part of Europe relates to blind spots that we all have to some degree. We see how the capacity to store historical information is connected to this question. When we go back to 24 February 2022, journalists and commentators often stated that this was the first war on European soil since World War II. Such a statement is, in my opinion, loaded with ideological signifiers because it starts by labelling people and places. This ought not necessarily be a normative and value-driven statement. Yet, we need to consider the ideological components behind

the establishment of such narratives. I come to this question from my own research on the wars of succession in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. How do you make sense of the framing of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as the first war on European soil since 1945? This raises the questions as to who is European, what is Europe, and how we categorise people? I wonder how you understand this framing. Does this short-lived historical memory and subsequent blind spots influence our own thinking as to who is European, and what being European means?

Catherine Wanner:

I think that the current Russo-Ukrainian War is seen in very different terms than the Yugoslavia wars were, suggesting how difficult, and perhaps even misguided, it can be to compare wars. Yugoslavia was seen as a single state that through wars at times gave birth to multiple states, whose impact was localised primarily in the Balkans. You are right that these are all political assumptions that invite dismissal of the responsibility to respond to the suffering all wars inevitably generate. These reactions contrast sharply with the outrage expressed over the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which drew on a recognition of thirty years of Ukrainian independence and the violation of established state sovereignty by another, more powerful state.

I am not sure there is so much historical amnesia regarding the former Yugoslavia as there is selective historical recall in justifying the empathic and ultimately supportive Western response to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To motivate concern and engagement, the same commentators who refer to "the other Europe" remind us that when Hitler annexed Austria and the Sudetenland, there was little reaction. Then Germany invaded Poland, and eventually the entire globe became engulfed in war. Putin waged war in the "near abroad prior to 2022 and took the territories of neighbouring countries with little impunity. He annexed Crimea and fomented an armed insurgency in Eastern Ukraine for six years before launching a full-scale invasion "of the second largest country in Europe", as is often said. In reacting to the Russo-Ukrainian war, history is marshalled to offer a cautionary tale that combines with Cold War rhetoric to demonise Russia. A David versus Goliath narrative quickly takes root that offers clearer ethical and moral judgments of who is the victim and who is the victimizer than the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s did.

Another factor fuelling the engagement in the war in Ukraine as part of Europe, without the qualifier, is the media frenzy it has generated. This is the first internet war where every person with a mobile phone is also a documenter of war crimes and human resilience. Ukrainians realised, especially after the Maidan in 2013-14, that social media is a great motivator of collective action. The emotive value of seeing babies born in underground metro stations, refugees fleeing with their pets in tow, and hearing air raid sirens and explosions from missile attacks in real time on the evening

news has cultivated empathy for the suffering of Ukrainians. This has prompted an engaged activism to respond to this suffering by either contributing money or providing some other tangible form of support. From this engagement flows the narrative that we owe Ukrainians because they are defending (our) European values of democratic governance and the rule of law.

As anthropologists should we join in and encourage such activist responses to this war? To all wars? Should it be an obligation of scholars working in conflict zones to cultivate solidarity with the suffering of *all* peoples involved, whether that suffering is occurring in Europe, the "other Europe", or elsewhere? In other words, as an anthropologist who primarily researches the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for Ukrainians, should I also highlight how some Russians are suffering economically, morally, and emotionally because of what their government is doing? Are these Russians, or even all Russians, victims as well? And, if so, should their suffering be qualified or simply considered on a par with combat-induced suffering? These become pertinent issues because, although a tragedy is unfolding today in Ukraine, perhaps tomorrow it will be in Russia. How we communicate now who is victimised, who is an aggressor, and who is European will have consequences for future research and how the broader public responds to violence. At this time, Adam Michnik's (2022) assertion that "We are all Ukrainians Now", the title of an article he wrote after the invasion began, which collapses the cleavages that could divide us, has come to dominate Western responses to the war in Ukraine. In contrast, in the 1990s, the dominant narrative was that the wars broke out in the "other Europe" and affected "other Europeans", which created distance and a more muted response, if not indifference, to suffering.

Oleksandra Tarkhanova:
I have been researching political discourses on gender and nationalism in Ukraine for years, and "Europe" is such an empty signifier in these discourses. It can be used and abused by both sides. Liberals draw on the European gender equality legislation, gender mainstreaming, and freedom of expression, and right-wing politicians draw on conservative values of "Christian Europe" opposing ratification of the Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women. **At the same time, ironically, Russian propaganda claims to be defending European values, such as traditional gender roles and sexuality, which are being challenged in Europe. Can we say this category of European values is meaningful? This is worth talking about.** "Europe" is interesting as an empty signifier. It is interesting to look at which aspect of the idea of Europe is mobilised at what moment and what goes into a black box. Now, as you said, Cathy, Ukrainians are very adept at finding each and every winning argument for themselves, and this is one of those arguments that works.

Catherine Wanner:
I think one thing that your example shows is that the idea of Europe might be contested but it still has positive connotations. This is why both sides evoke Europe to support their political positions. Europe can be used to validate and support all positions because it is appealing. I think that both sides believe that using the idea of Europe will generate support, no matter what the specifics of the political and ideological positions are.

Jelena Tosic:
When we try to understand the workings of ideology it is crucial to look for "blind spots" in terms of, on the one side, claims and implications that appear logical, obvious, and commonsensical, and on the other side as aspects of debates and interpretations one would expect to encounter, but which are absent. This is something that I try to do all the time when I do ethnographic research since both an over pronounced implication of "givenness" and an absence of certain questions and themes are, in a way, blind spots, which can point us to how ideology works and plays out in a particular setting or situation. And, of course also, in a reflexive sense, to the ideological implications of my expectation as a researcher to find some issues raised and discussed in a particular way. When we speak about the image of Europe in the context of nationalism in former Yugoslavia, it is important to keep a comparative outlook and try to look at the debates in all parts of former Yugoslavia. It shows that not only nationalisms, but critics of nationalism were and are present everywhere and the images of Europe they invoke are highly similar and yet contradictory. What they share are particular blind spots, such as the implication that the "nationalists on the other side" were radically different instead of recognising that they actually share similar ideological elements and political (if not military) means and strategies. Furthermore, an essential blind spot of how these wars were and partly still are portrayed is the underrepresentation of antinationalist and antiwar sentiments and initiatives across conflict lines. Sidelining these aspects of the war was a tool of legitimising the war and keeping nationalism going long after the armed conflicts had ended.

Of course, I don't have the knowledge and expertise to speak about the war in Ukraine and one should keep in mind the radically different war scenarios in these two cases. We had a conversation a few weeks ago with Alexander Etkind about blind spots in terms of representing what is going on in Russia at the moment, especially in terms of opposition to the war against Ukraine and which particular segments of the Russian population are sent into the war by the Putin regime.

Oleksandra Tarkhanova:
I think the question of blind spots, assumptions, and oversimplifications is interesting. This brings me to the discussion of the difference between an ideological position and a political position. The fact that I find objectionable the aggression of one state against another over national territory and political authority and occupation of this national territory already means that ideologically I subscribe to the international order of national borders. Or is it military aggression alone that is ideologically opposed? Can we even detach the occupation of state territory from human suffering that begins at the moment of military aggression and continues under this occupation regime? **At this stage of the war, I am very comfortable with being politically engaged. I would even say that being politically disengaged and still doing empirical research would be unethical**, **in my opinion**. A clear political position is what gives me the energy and focus to continue with this work.

To respond to what you said, Cathy, I find it reasonable to rethink our understanding of the earlier stage of the war, post-2014, in light of the recent Russian aggression. As you said, reflecting on what kinds of terms we adopt is crucial. I used the more neutral term, non-government-controlled territories, before the full-scale invasion when talking about parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. By doing so, I could focus on what was actually the focal point of my study — state authority, sovereignty, and governance — and remain critical of state policies trying to regain control over the territory by controlling the population.

Now, I refer to these territories as occupied to signify the different way they are governed since the full-scale invasion and the similarities to other occupied parts of Ukraine. While there are several distinct occupation regimes in Ukraine, and our job as researchers is to understand how occupation functions and what it means for people's everyday lives in different regions, the fact of occupation is something I would like to see agreement on. While we should be self-reflective and cautious with blind spots, to take the most analytically pristine and sanitised terms is an attempt to keep our distance from the object of our study. In a way, this is an academic standard or, rather, an ideal. However, there is power and transparency in recognizing your positionality and embracing the political in the research, as feminist researchers amply prove. Political engagement is something I consider to be necessary, at least for my own research right now. In this respect, as Jelena said, research during a war and research in or on a post-war region might be different.

Sandra King-Savic:
In keeping with the topic of distance and temporality in a different context — and this may be an uncomfortable question — all of us are conducting research on "post" or active conflict regions, but all of us are also not facing difficulties in Switzerland

or the United States, respectively. We are not armchair scientists, to be sure, and yet we are geographically removed from the conflict and "post-conflict" regions, even if we are travelling back and forth researching on a regular basis. This connects to the question of the "field", which signifies, in a way, colonial undertones that we may be partaking in, however unwittingly. Do you see conflicts or potential conflicts resulting from geographical distance or proximity in your research?

Catherine Wanner:
That is a tricky question. In a war situation, it can become unethical to distance yourself or, conversely, unethical to insert yourself, depending on the context. After 2015, as a U.S. citizen, you could not travel to Crimea or other non-government-controlled areas without running the risk of losing your funding. That limits what kind of research can or cannot be done. Right now, granting agencies will not support travel to Ukraine, which means that traditional fieldwork is becoming difficult to conduct. So, what is left to do? In a wartime situation, inaction is not possible. You have to be inventive. In the past, online 'chatography' was frowned upon because of the decontextualized nature of dialogue. When there is limited electricity, sometimes during virtual conservations you do not even get see the person, their gestures, or hear their tone of voice. Their words can be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted. But if the reality of war right now limits access, technology also makes continuous fieldwork possible. Whatsapp, Zoom, Skype, and a variety of other apps allow us to stay in touch with interlocutors and to be in multiple places at once. Moreover, social media plays a significant role as the site where our interlocutors are interacting with each other and gaining information and new ideas that shape their own ideological engagements.

Having said that, after the invasion of Ukraine began, multiple initiatives to conduct oral histories of the experiences of war, violence, dispossession, and displacement were launched. Some scholars sharply criticised these efforts to document the experience of war saying it was way too soon and there was too little recognition of the fact that these were traumatised people. Making them retell what they had been through amounts to a reenactment of the trauma of displacement, some argued. Moreover, the criticism continued, if an interviewer repeatedly hears stories of excruciating human suffering day after day, they too will become traumatised. Interviewers themselves need specific kinds of support to conduct this type of research, which would not be the case with a multitude of other forms of research and research topics.

I think there are merits to these criticisms. No one should be forced to speak and no one should be obliged to listen. But I also see people who feel the need to say out loud what they have been through and to share what they have seen. Someone should be there to listen, and hopefully someone who is trained to do so. This is

where I think it can be useful to have a variety of interviewers, including some who come from another place and are perceived as outsiders, especially as it relates to blind spots. A variety of interviewer positionalities are needed. If you have never experienced war or displacement, as I have not, there are some things that you can, and in fact need to, ask about because you otherwise cannot imagine them. Sometimes people are willing to reflect and explain the obvious or make an effort to describe things at a much more basic and therefore expansive level for those who have never experienced them. Otherwise, the "blind spots" of outsiders might lead to misunderstandings that interviewers from the region often do not have. It is not my goal, nor do I think it should be anyone's goal, to speak for refugees and the displaced. Rather, for my part, I hope to facilitate the recording of the experiences of war so that they can be shared with a broader audience and so that those who have committed war crimes can be held accountable.

Oleksandra Tarkhanova:
I have thought a lot about this question and listened to the ongoing debates since February 2022 on whether we can and should do empirical research right now. I very much agree with your assessment, Cathy. In the end, my colleague and I decided to go ahead with a project to interview people who have been displaced on how they made the decision to either leave their homes, stay in Ukraine, or go abroad, and finally, how they chose their destinations. Just yesterday, we had the first supervision session with a psychologist for interviewers and transcribers in our project, which we scheduled before most interviews were to be conducted, except for pilot conversations. One of the reasons we decided to go ahead with the study is that displaced people, most of whom arrived at their new homes several months ago, want to tell their stories. The initial traumatic reaction to the events that forced someone to leave home and the traumatic experience of displacement itself could have been, to an extent, processed by now. After several months of bureaucratic hurdles abroad or in Ukraine, people are often trying to reconstruct their experience into a cohesive story. There is a sense that people want to build a narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end, even though they themselves are very aware that wherever they are right now, this is probably not the end. The psychological supervision throughout this project is meant to equip interviewers with tools to foresee and handle emotional distress, but more importantly, to talk through their own interview experiences with the moderation of a professional. This, in equal measure, concerns people who transcribe the interviews.

I appreciate and agree with your perspective on the role of 'outsiders' in such research. We will have a very different situation, and I guess we will see how it goes. Most of the people who conduct interviews in this project went through the same experiences as the interview participants. That is another reason why there are several

supervision sessions planned during the research phase. Hopefully, this will lead to a closer relationship developing in the setting of the interview and a sense of trust evolving in the course of interviews.

As to the distance from the 'field', in my case, the conflict zone is also my home. I reviewed these paragraphs while visiting my family in eastern Ukraine during another Russian air attack on civil infrastructure and civilians all over Ukraine.

Sandra King-Savic:
Beyond interviews and other textual representations of conflict and suffering, what are the other sources anthropologists and the public have to bring to bear on understanding the causes and effects of this war?

Catherine Wanner:
A friend of mine recently sent me drone photographs that give a bird's-eye view of destruction. They show buildings with multiple floors destroyed so that the viewer sees all the way down to the ground. Home after home is in ruins. I have no idea where this drone and its photos came from, but I noted how fast these photos went to Facebook, and all kinds of other outlets where they were repeatedly shared. The photos make undeniable the destruction that we all know is occurring. They generate empathy for the suffering Ukrainians are currently enduring. But what about after this conflict is over? We have seen in the case of the former Yugoslavia that once the armed combat ceases, often our empathy dries up. Even when it remains vibrant, as I think it currently does as a reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, emotional responses are often limited. We no longer see or feel the suffering in Syria, Somalia, or Pakistan. Even though the media gives us eyes and ears everywhere, our empathy for some often leads to ignorance of others. There is just not enough emotional bandwidth to take in the impressions of suffering from past or active conflicts elsewhere. This brings us back to proximity and different kinds of Europes. Yugoslavia seemed far away for those who were not from there, whereas Russia's war in Ukraine is not contained and therefore seems close by. We are all living with its consequences in some form. There is certainly enormous concern in the Baltics, Poland, and in the Balkans, given their histories, which suggest that **perhaps this war will not end soon. Perhaps we are witnessing aggression that merely has valleys and peaks.**

Oleksandra Tarkhanova:
Then the question is, are these pictures actually enough to elicit action, to make people do something? I guess the question that is more relevant to us is: how does this change the relevance of our research? Our research was perceived as being on the

margins. Now this changes. Does it take a war for others to take our research seriously? I would like my research to be relevant, to have some genuine impact on the way that things develop. But we are still operating against the background of a fairly western cannon kind of knowledge, and understandings of history and literature. We are the outliers, which means we have to translate the events into the consciousness of others and establish a framework for interpreting these regions and their histories.

Catherine Wanner:
This process always happens against a political and ideological backdrop, right? The Cold War set a precedent as did 9/11. When there is a perceived threat, there's an interest in acquiring knowledge about those places. That research is relevant. I think your point is that we should be genuinely committed and interested in others anyway, without waiting for armed combat to erupt. However, the same kind of perceptions of threat, which stimulate interest, also focus attention. Sometimes only later do we realise our blind spots, or the places our attention bypassed and the regions where we didn't produce a great deal of knowledge. I think that this war in 2022, in comparison with the 2008 war in Georgia or other earlier wars in Moldova or Chechnya, has provoked into existence perspectives that our field has been overly Russo-centric and a recognition that we need to decolonialize our own knowledge and to rethink our region. **This war has provoked a sweeping re-thinking of what is Europe, where it begins and ends, and what may be beyond Europe. This invasion has also prompted a reconsideration of Russia, the Soviet Union, and the kinds of histories, cultures, and exchanges that might have connected some of those regions to many other parts of the world.** Our perceptions of threat during the Cold War led to a laser focus on Moscow. We considered other regions as objects of Moscow's policies, and they became our peripheral interests because we perceived these regions to have minimal agency, even when they were situated in conflict zones. This was made glaringly obvious in the 1990s. Now I think there is a greater cognizance of the fact that we need to think more in terms of histories of encounters, entanglements, and cross-border commonalities as opposed to within frames of narrow state sovereignty. I hope that is what we have learned in the aftermath of our penchant for seeing Yugoslavia or even the Soviet Union as single entities conceptualised in terms of a centre and its periphery.

Jelena Tosic:
Yes, this is one source of the blind spots we discussed earlier. All this can prompt us to think about what impact, if any, did the critical scholarship on former Yugoslavia and its dissolution have today. What is the impact of this knowledge we are produc-

ing with so much personal and professional effort in countless panels, round tables, and publications? I see it as a privilege to have been able to gain an education, to build on the resources life as a transnational migrant can offer, and to be able to devote my time to develop critical perspectives on nationalism, forced migration, and the aftermath of violent conflicts, which I also see as my personal responsibility due to my aforementioned privilege. But a crucial question is: what significance does the knowledge we produce actually have and for whom?

Sandra King-Savic:
I have a question relating to temporality and empathy. I am thinking of Arlie Hochschild's book, *Strangers in their Own Land* (2016). Hochschild says that empathy is something that allows us to cross a bridge and understand what is happening elsewhere, including in places we do not know, have no access to, and/or do not speak the languages. Some of us can and do travel to conflict zones, others are not able to, or simply do not wish to do that. What does this do to our collective sense of empathy?

Catherine Wanner:
Empathy can be a two-edged sword. Empathy becomes paired with its twin, the denial of empathy when it creates a sense of an in-group that suffers unjustly and an out-group that is either blamed for that suffering or is otherwise excluded from receiving empathy. While empathy, as a bridge, makes possible the awareness of suffering of some people (an in-group), it can also deny empathy to others (members of an out-group). All Ukrainians are clearly suffering, whether they live in Ukraine or not, and this makes for a very elastic understanding of who is in the in-group. The anguish of seeing innocent, frightened children and dogs in bomb shelters suffering unjustly curries the propensity to create an equally expansive understanding of the out-group. Empathic emotional reactions run the risk of casting all Russians as members of the out-group, as responsible for this suffering, as supporters of Putin and the Wagner Group, and as participants on some level in war crimes, which is clearly not true. So, when empathy creates a bridge to proclaim some deserving of empathy, it can also prompt specific forms of micro-activism that can sweep up others, place them in an out-group, and deny recognition for the ways this war has affected them. This potentially creates blind spots to recognizing forms of suffering and assessing responsibility for the atrocities that are being committed. This war is widely considered a "just war" and therefore it could potentially last for some time. We see from the Yugoslav case that ending combat is only the first step in another long chapter of recovery. How to create a "just peace" in the aftermath of this war should already be a concern of ours.

Sandra King-Savic: Thanks to all of you for being here, and for the engaged and constructive conversation.

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AUTHORS' CONTACTS:

Catherine Wanner
Pennsylvania State University
E-mail: cew10@psu.edu
ORCID: 0000-0001-6079-8542

Sandra King-Savic
University of St. Gallen
E-mail: Sandra.king-savic@unisg.ch
ORCID: 0000-0001-8207-8562

Jelena Tosic
University of St. Gallen
E-mail: jelena.tosic@unisg.ch
ORCID: 0009-0009-8825-1085

Oleksandra Tarkhanova
University of St. Gallen
E-mail: oleksandra.tarkhanova@unisg.ch
ORCID: 0000-0002-1206-6766

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VARIA

THE BIEBRZA HYDROSOCIAL LANDSCAPE. ANALYSIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES IN THE LARGEST POLISH NATIONAL PARK

MAGDALENA KOZHEVNIKOVA

INSTITUTE OF ETHNOLOGY AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

The author analyses narratives about the environment in the largest national park in Poland. She attempts to present the socio-cultural aspect of water in Podlasie, based on the concept of the hydrosocial cycle as interpreted by Jamie Linton and Jessica Budds (2013), but extending it to the non-human world. In the Biebrza Valley there are many different environmental discourses, as well as conflicts related to the different approaches to the relationship between nature and humans. Two of them are dominant: the discourse of the employees and experts of the Biebrza National Park ("institutional") and that of the dissatisfied inhabitants ("agricultural"). The author moves away from the relativistic understanding of knowledge, typical of ethnography.

KEYWORDS: Biebrza River, Biebrza National Park, hydrosocial cycle, environmental discourses, climate crisis, Anthropocene

INTRODUCTION

The Anthropocene — although not yet formally recognized as a geological epoch, has already changed the reflection on human-nature relations (Binczyk 2017: 52). Taking into account the need of ecologisation of the humanities, including ethnography, I will analyse environmental discourses in the largest Polish national park from an engaged position[1]. I believe that the complex problem of environmental protection

1 I conducted ethnographic field research on the Biebrza river during four stays from April 2022 to March 2023, for a total of 40 days. I also used materials collected by the principal investigator, Dr. Małgorzata Owczarska. In total, we recorded 116 ethnographic interviews on the Biebrza river and many informal conversations, and we participated in numerous activities organised by both the Biebrza National Park (*Biebrzański Park Narodowy*, *BbNP*) and the local community. This article is an

should be treated as a priority, which in practice means that I will depart from the ethnographic relativism of knowledge and opt for ecological expert knowledge as the one that offers the best chance of reversing catastrophic anthropogenic trends.

The Biebrza Valley is a unique natural area whose axis is the river. By analysing the narratives about the environment that exist in this territory, I present the socio-cultural entanglements of water in Podlasie, a region of Poland at the centre of which the Biebrza National Park (*Biebrzański Park Narodowy*, *BbNP*) is located. When tackling the conflicts and narratives concerning the environment, I will consider that there are more-than-human participants involved: animals, plants, fungi, bacteria, minerals and rocks, peat sediments, and water that takes many forms, both visible and hidden in the landscape.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE/EXPERT KNOWLEDGE

Expert (scientific) knowledge and local (agricultural) knowledge are two different perspectives for understanding the relationships between the various actors that make up the "environment". Most social scientists, fearing the trap of colonialism or paternalism, emphasise the equivalence of these different types of knowledge. However, as Agnieszka Kowalczyk's (2012) analysis shows, treating each type of knowledge equally may turn out to be tantamount to giving up critical work and taking responsibility, which would be a denial of the engaged research. As Kowalczyk argues, "lack of commitment on the part of the researcher is not a neutral attitude, but also an ethical position. The social researcher is a witness responsible for taking or refraining from taking action. In my opinion, writing in the field of social sciences can, and above all should, become a place of resistance" (Kowalczyk 2012, 109).

When considering the types of knowledge, the dispute between "theoreticians" and "practitioners" is of utmost importance. As Amanda Krzyworzeka, who conducts research among farmers in Podlasie, notes:

> For farmers, knowledge has meaning and value only in action. It is not needed by those who do not make decisions, who do not work, and who do not use it in their daily activities. In this sense, farmers talk about the impracticality of "theoretical" knowledge, that is, knowledge that cannot be translated into specific actions. According to them, "theoretical" knowledge also includes that coming from a person who is not a practitioner and therefore does not enjoy the authority developed through his or her own activities in the field of agriculture. (Krzyworzeka 2011)

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Farmers' knowledge is verified by people close to them, such as family and neighbours, who vouch for it. "Valuable knowledge is also that which has been filtered through the local sieve of social networks, checked by friends, assessed by them, validated by their opinions" (Krzyworzeka 2011). This is where the connection between knowledge and values is most evident, because we can assume that the "local social network" consists of people with a similar worldview who accept what falls within the existing framework. Therefore, in order for knowledge to be implemented, it must be consistent with the attitudes, goals and values that operate in a given community. Knowledge that does not fit with one's worldview is usually rejected. When the environment is seen primarily as a reservoir of resources, it is difficult to acquire, accept and practice knowledge that supports new ecological solutions, and, for example, limits human activity in order to protect the natural world. "Ignorance in some areas may also be a reflection of a person's views, a way of expressing approval or disapproval" (Krzyworzeka 2014: 129).

According to Krzyworzeka, farmers in Podlasie understand ecology in a variety of ways, but most importantly economic thinking always wins over ecological thinking. In my research, I came to a similar conclusion: for local farmers, caring for the environment always implies caring for resources that can be used. Nature does not have an autotelic value, but it has practical value, it is calculable, and actions conducted in its direction should be profitable or at the very least not detrimental:

> The issue of environment and ecology was approached in an extremely pragmatic way: if a certain action could save money (preferably in the short term) or make everyday activities easier, it was worth doing. In many households I observed actions that could be considered ecological, but it usually turned out that the motives of the household members were of an economic rather than ecological nature. (Krzyworzeka 2014: 233)

Sławoj Szynkiewicz, writing in the context of the indigenous cultures of Northern Asia, suggested that "contrary to the stereotype, the intimate closeness of humans with their immediate environment does not translate into a healthy attitude towards it" (2005, 116). According to him, there is a false idealisation of the relationship between indigenous societies and nature, a relationship which in some extreme cases can even lead to the destruction of human societies that are deprived of their food base due to their excesses. A "healthy attitude" in this case may mean not so much the recognition of the intrinsic value of nature, but above all its anticipatory and sustainable use. This conclusion is also relevant for contemporary rural communities.

"EXPERTS" AND "FARMERS" IN THE BIEBRZA VALLEY

Although in the Biebrza Valley there are many different discourses on the environment, two of them are dominant: the discourse of the employees and experts of the Biebrza National Park, which I will call "institutional" and the discourse of dissatisfied inhabitants, for whom the transformation of the 1990s coincided with the creation of the BbNP, which in some cases led them to identify the national park with the cause of their life's failures. There are also other discourses that are less clear-cut and often intertwined: the lovers of the region (the so-called *biebrznięci*), ecologists and tourist service providers. They all have their own knowledge of nature, based on education and/or experience. However, I will reserve a term "experts" for individuals who represent knowledge based on scientific data, that is former and current personnel of the BbNP and academic experts (biologists, hydrologists, etc.) from outside. Another group of my interlocutors were people who had no training in life sciences, but who were actively seeking new information in this field, motivated by concern for the natural environment. The third group of interviewees were people who, by virtue of due to their work or farming background, were connected to agriculture and represented local knowledge based on tradition and experience.

In the following, I will focus on a disagreement between experts representing a state institution and (current or former) farmers, who believe that "the greatest threat to nature in the Biebrza is the existence of the Biebrza National Park." This conviction stems from the fact that the BbNP has banned certain practices (e.g. mowing the river, motor navigation, poaching, burning grass) and imposed not only its vision of nature conservation, but also that of coexistence with nature, contrary to existing agricultural knowledge and practice. In turn, an expert associated with the park states:

> You have heard stories about the Biebrza, that this is a landscape of coexistence between humans and nature. […] It is not about humans and nature. Humans started to waste this nature. They dried up these meadows and dug drainage ditches. There are 540 km of drainage ditches are within the borders of the Biebrza National Park. That means that if there are 540 km of ditches, and the Park is 600 km^2, there is one kilometre of ditches per square kilometre of the Park. (Expert, 10.12.22)

However, the idealised image of the relationship between humans and nature, which was supposed to exist in the past, remains for the locals as a model of relations and a state to which they would like to return. In their opinion, the National Park disturbs and forbids the development of a harmonious coexistence of people and nature on the Biebrza River.

Due to the specificities of the Biebrza landscape, water plays the most important role in the ongoing discussions — the river, ponds, swamps and peat bogs. In fact, in each of these narratives water has a different meaning and value, both material and emotional, its use or desire to use it is different, its purpose is different. Mediation between these positions can only be undertaken after deciphering the aquatic relationships and dependencies. I wanted this research, conducted in the field of transrelational ethnography, to have a practical value because, like Katarzyna Majbroda, I believe that:

> The goal of transrelational ethnography, which I see as one of the trends in current anthropology, is not so much to keep pace with the changing world, but to mobilise it, to prepare for understanding the processes and phenomena that are coming, in a formula open to collaboration with various entities, also non-academic ones. (Majbroda 2021: 19-20)

Hereafter, I will present the main arguments of both discourses in the Biebrza hydrosocial landscape, attempting to create a simplified model of complex and multi-layered relationships. However, I must emphasise that during the ethnographic research, my perspective as anthropologist was constantly confronted with arguments from bioethics and animal ethics, which are an important part of both my training and identity as a scholar. Therefore, my conclusions may lie at the intersection of different disciplines and scientific worldviews. Moreover, in the face of the ongoing climate crisis, I consider the ecological responsibility of each of us to be one of the most important issues. I believe that local knowledge and practice can no longer be idealised as the best mode of relationship with nature. Simply being close to nature does not guarantee better knowledge of it. Farmers who know how to use (or even exploit) nature do not know how to protect it, and the measures they propose may be counterproductive, as I show below. Local knowledge does not always include global dependencies and connections and is powerless against them. In my view, in the face of the climate crisis, it is scientific and expert knowledge that should be a signpost. Its most important feature is that it is changeable and subject to constant review, whereas agricultural knowledge changes slowly and does not keep up with the changes.

I describe the water-saturated Biebrza landscape as a hydrosocial space, referring to the concept of the hydrosocial cycle as interpreted by Jamie Linton and Jessica Budds, but extending it to non-human beings. For these researchers, the hydrosocial cycle is "a socio-natural process by which water and society make and remake each other over space and time" (Linton, Budds 2013: 170). The hydrological cycle, which refers to the natural circulation of water in nature, is a process that humans

can only modify or disrupt. In the hydrosocial cycle, on the other hand, it is the relationship and dialogue between water and people that is most important, and I would add that it also includes other entities that revolve around the water ecosystem. Thus, the concept of the hydrosocial cycle is a theoretical and analytical means of studying water-social relations, assuming that water is not a background for human social relations, but an active, albeit unconscious, participant. In the case of the Biebrza landscape, it would not be an exaggeration to say that water dominates it, not only in the visual and aesthetic sense, but also as a causative factor.

Transrelational ethnography, which I have chosen as my method of analysis, allows us to treat water as an important and causal context, as it requires conceptualizing reality as systems of interconnected entities, where what was previously used to be treated as an insignificant background becomes an important element of research (Majbroda 2021: 10). Transrelational ethnography is helpful in the holistic approach to this multi-subject community, which

> crosses borders, gathering and intertwining human and natural, environmental, climatic, biological, technological and material entities in specific arrangements, it provides an opportunity to notice the interdependence and coexistence of many elements whose different configurations make up the currently observed processes and phenomena. (Majbroda 2021: 6)

Therefore, I will describe activities and situations in which what is human is co-created by the non-human world, both animate and inanimate. Undoubtedly, the most important context, but also the causative factor, will be water — rivers, swamps and wetlands. Water is not an intentional entity, but due to the "transrelational perspective, what has hitherto functioned as a static and devoid of agency, and was thus perceived only in terms of the background of specific situations and phenomena, is an important, and sometimes decisive, element of the analyses undertaken" (Majbroda 2021: 11). The potentiality and multiplicity of water's forms do not allow it to be pigeonholed. Water will always elude unambiguous categories, generating many points of convergence (and even collision) of the entities gathered around it. Taking into account the aquatic perspective allows more subjects to be included in the considerations, but this requires empathy with their different ways of experiencing, the separation of the senses and corporeal experience (Neimanis 2017).

THE FIELD: BIEBRZA VALLEY

The Biebrza Valley is full of water — it is the area of the largest national park in Poland, covering over 59,000 hectares. The park was established in 1993 to protect the ecosystems of the river, wetlands, peat bogs and swamps. Before the Second World War, two areas in the Biebrza Valley were protected, creating the Grzędy and Czerwone Bagno Reserves. After the war they were merged. At that time, the main aim was to preserve the elk population (Raczyński 2013, 32). To this day, the Biebrza National Park is the largest elk sanctuary in Poland. However, now, apart from the most recognizable members of the deer family in Poland, the most famous inhabitants of the park are birds. Since 1995, the Biebrza National Park has been listed on the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. This is due, in part, to the fact that the Biebrza marshes are a unique national and continental refuge for water and marsh birds, especially the endangered aquatic warbler, a small and inconspicuous bird of the reed warbler family. Poland has the largest concentration of aquatic warblers in the European Union, with 29% of the world's population of these birds breeding here (BirdLife International 2017, 119). The Biebrza Valley is also a Special Bird Protection Area (*Obszar Specjalnej Ochrony Ptaków*) and a Special Area of Conservation (*Specjalny Obszar Ochrony Siedlisk*) belonging to the Natura2000 (network of protected areas in the European Union). Nearly 300 species of birds can be found in the area, either seasonally or all year round.

The axis of the protected area is the Biebrza river. Nearly the whole river lies within the national park, except for a short stretch at the river source. The river has a natural character, that is, it has undergone very little human intervention. It meanders strongly, constantly changes its course and floods in spring. In many of villages along the Biebrza River, the water is both a means of communication (the river) and a barrier (the marshes), and for centuries it has determined the layout of the villages and the customs of their inhabitants. Today, this influence has diminished as a result of technological development (bridges, asphalted roads, mechanical means of transport) and climate change (milder winters, less water in the landscape). The construction of the Augustów Canal (in 1839) and extensive melioration contributed to the observed decrease in the water levels and drying up of the marshes. Efforts are currently being made to restore water to the landscape. These are mainly activities carried out as part of several renaturation programmes of the Biebrza National Park.

In the Biebrza Valley, we are dealing with a specific cycle of dependency centred around the river: the nature of the Biebrza we observe today has been shaped by humans through regular mowing of sedges over the last few centuries. This made it possible to create habitats and feeding grounds for rare bird species (e.g. aquatic warbler, great snipe, greater spotted eagle, black grouse). Typical for many peat bogs is the tuft-valley structure, that is, there are less watered tufts and more watered valleys

in a compact area, which leads to a high diversity of flora and fauna in a limited zone. In addition to birds, the Biebrza wetlands are inhabited by reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates (for example, reptiles: viviparous lizards, sand lizards, slowworms, grass snake, adders; amphibians: various species of frogs, toads and newts; invertebrates: over 700 day and night butterflies, beetles, dragonflies, arachnids and crustaceans). An unresolved problem is the use of special mowing trucks (*ratraks*) to protect bird habitats, which destroy the tuft-valley structure of the peat bog that provides shelter for other animals, and leads to the direct killing of small animals living in the mowed area.

The nature of the Biebrza bears the mark of strong anthropopressure, and the Biebrza National Park tries hard to preserve it in the state to which it was brought by humans. Of course, this is an oversimplification, because for several decades human influence on the Biebrza has been destructive, along with changes in agriculture: the drying up of meadows, the abandonment of cattle grazing and the introduction of artificial fertilisers have upset the delicate balance of the riverine ecosystem.

The "wilderness" of the Biebrza Valley, that is, the succession of vegetation (overgrowth of the river and its backwaters, afforestation of meadows), will result in the disappearance of many species from this landscape. At the same time, there is a fight against new species, often classified as invasive (which is a direct and, in my opinion, controversial translation of human classifications into the non-human world). The whole of these procedures is a paradox, that shows once again that the nature-culture opposition is an artificial construct: the vision of the ideal nature of the BbNP is a human creation, a certain static state isolated from the history of this region, opposed to the dynamics of the processes that take place in nature, its continuous development and change. This environment is evolving, one of the experts told me:

> The main problem of nature conservation that we have, not only in Poland, but all over the world, is the eternal dilemma of whether to protect processes [natural processes, that is, processes that take place without direct human intervention] or to protect the status quo. And now, if we protect the status quo, it is immediately doomed to failure […] the protection of the processes is that we have this ecosystem much more stable. So it is nature, but not quite the way we would like. […] it is certainly a dynamic ecosystem and management, because we are talking about environmental management, not about nature conservation, we should anticipate that we are protecting a growing child. And methods that were good 10 years ago are no longer good today. (Expert, 10.12.22)

The National Park therefore acts as a natural heritage park, still trying not so much to protect the imaginary "wild nature" as to control and tame it.

In the Biebrza Valley we have a unique environment from the point of view of biodiversity and with the abundance of water, inhabited or seasonally visited by a large number of species. Leaving aside the debate over the concept of species in biology (see Kaszycka 1996; Nilsson 2014, 23-39), and recognising the legitimacy of species categorisation as an operational tool, I would like to emphasise here what is only seemingly obvious: when we use the term species, we often lose the perspective of individuals belonging to a species, which always have an individual biography. In the current discussions on nature (as well as in conversations with people associated with the BbNP), I see insufficient interest in the individualistic dimension of species, and yet it is the subjectivity of the individual that is most important in ethical considerations regarding animals (including humans).

MOWING

Among the many key issues that exist in the local community, mowing is the most important, because it is at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, familiarity and strangeness, and the still opposing forces of economy and ecology, which arouse not only many doubts, but also many emotions. The grazing of animals and the mowing, first by hand, and now by machine, have created a specific type of vegetation and breeding conditions for many bird species that are unique on a continental scale. Let's take a look at what mowing has looked like:

> Men used to mow these meadows first. They would mow it, it would take a week or so, there you had to rake it over and then you would fold it into these rolls, you would make a pile of the rolls, you would carry the pile to the haystack. The haystack was made of piles. I made many stacks. My job was on the stack. Because there was no way to take them home at that time. So they lay there, these stacks, waiting for the winter season, when it would freeze, and then they would take them to the farms, these stacks. (Former farmer, 09.02.23)

This seemingly trivial activity in a wetland is a source of problems and conflict. No one mows with a scythe in knee-deep water anymore, and farmers rarely choose to graze cows in these areas, because sedge grass is not nutritious and does not translate into efficient milk production. According to farmers, cows are reluctant to eat sharp and hard sedges and to enter flooded meadows. However, it seems unlikely that cow preferences play a substantial role in the decision to restrict grazing: human

interests and economic benefits are the decisive factors. Other forms of mowing include mechanical mowing (with mowers, tractors, trucks) and grazing by other animals (for example, Polish Konik). As agriculture withdrew from the marshes, the process of losing the semi-natural ecosystem of the marsh meadows began. They began to be replaced by common reed, shrub and tree communities, which are much less ecologically valuable. Another reason for the increased need for mowing is the constant lowering of the water level in the wetlands, which favours the succession of vegetation and the afforestation of these areas, since previously the stagnant water in the meadows prevented the growth of bushes and trees. The priorities of nature conservation in the BbNP have thus been defined, with the protection of wetlands and the species that inhabit them, especially the avifauna, as the main task. The flagship species expected to benefit the most from mowing the marshes is the aquatic warbler. However, mowing with mow trucks raises many doubts among both experts and locals:

> And all of a sudden it's in line with nature to put 'tanks' in the Park. […] And the noise, and they destroy everything, they do shit there, to be honest, with it. But here's the money. A programme that brought a lot of money. Everyone wrote a few sentences, earned their money, embraced money. […] How it's ecological, well, I really don't know anything. […] How much is this groomer doing to do, how much is he going to do there, one round after another, how much is he going to destroy. Will this help the warbler? Honestly, I doubt it. (Former farmer, 09.02.23)
>
> They [mow trucks] destroy everything. There are these clumps, swamps, aren't there? It goes in, cuts everything, then like an airport. They're supposed to save the birds. Because birds in the tall grass, where will this bird find food? (Former farmer, 20.07.22)

The protection of the Biebrza nature consists primarily in the protection of birds. This is a decision made by humans, guided by anthropocentric criteria and his own scale of values for individual species. This can be described as a conflict in which species of flora and fauna undesirable for humans are on the losing side (see Korpikiewicz 2017: 34-35). The BbNP decided to use trucks to mow the swamp meadows because this is the only way to work in a very wet area and to mow large areas at once. Although *ratraks* mow meadows, they also damage the soil, irreversibly kneading the delicate "sponge" of peat bogs, levelling the tuft-valley structure and killing many creatures inhabiting wet meadows, including endangered and protected species of amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates. Everyone is aware of the harmfulness of *ratraks*, but it is argued that their use is the only available method of mowing large areas. BbNP staff and experts explain that they have looked very carefully at places

where mowers should not go. As a result, it was decided that they would go where the benefits of mowing outweighed the losses. However, the BbNP has no influence on land not owned by the State Treasury, where decisions are made by individual landowners. According to BbNP staff, *ratraks* have no restrictions there and cause much greater natural losses. Experts outside the BbNP also see the lack of land ownership as a problem: "reorganization [of mowing] requires ownership. The Park should own all the land" (Expert, 10.12.22). Therefore, a major limitation is land ownership, especially the lack of influence on the way and conditions of mowing outside the BbNP property. One of the BbNP staff members made an interesting comparison: "I'm afraid that *ratraks* are a bit like democracy, which means that no better system has been invented yet. This system is full of imperfections, but it works somehow" (BbNP worker, 26.07.22).

According to many people, mowing with *ratraks* is not only harmful to the environment, but it also costs a lot of money, which is a source of further misunderstanding. In addition, according to some local residents, the tenders for mowing announced by the BbNP favour entrepreneurs from distant cities:

> But it's companies from Warsaw, I don't know where, they have tenders for these 1000 hectares, or whatever. And then the farmers mow and so on. He takes the money, hires people, they mow. And that's how they earn. He doesn't touch his hand, and he has money. (Former farmer, 20.07.22)
>
> When the Park leases to a farmer, it wants a lot of money for the lease, and then it becomes unattractive. It's not a penny thing, they're really asking for a lot of money. And it's kind of unattractive for cow feed now. (Businessman from a farming family, 21.07.22)
>
> When I came here in '75, there was a world of clean meadows here, it was clean. And now they let the *ratraks* in, God knows… Only God knows where these people come from. (Farmer, 26.09.22)

Thus, a stranger, also summoned by the BbNP, appears in the Biebrza meadows. This stranger is "townish" and "rich" (because he can afford to take part in the tender), but he takes jobs and decent earning opportunities from the locals.

BbNP staff have an answer to these allegations. As a government institution, the National Park operates in under the Public Procurement Act and is obliged to issue tenders under legally defined conditions. Various types of associations can participate in such tenders, but this requires the establishment of formal cooperation between smaller local farmers. However, the experience in recent years has shown that farmers are not interested in forming associations and participating in tenders under such conditions.

The problem of mowing is also related to the issue of controlling the work carried out, including the removal of the swath:

> Well, one comes from Poznań, wins a tender for mowing a thousand hectares, and what does he do with this green mass? I am always arguing with park rangers at meetings […] This one from Poznań has a cowshed in Poznań, and this one has it here, so this herb will be useful to him, and this one has to do something about it. No one will take it to Poznań, there is no one to sell it to. They have made such artificial pellet mills, but how can you make pellets from this that is wet, you have to use more energy to dry the pellets than to get results. (Non-farmer resident, 23.04.22)

This rational statement echoes the regret that the "man from Poznań" will leave the swath, which would be useful for the local farmers, lying on the mowed land. What is more, the work of non-local contractors not only does not benefit the environment but also deprives local farmers of the possibility of earning or using goods, and even harms the natural environment of the Biebrza river:

> If only these activities with these *ratraks* were well controlled, because the task is: dry, take away. Nobody is doing it, mowing, now they don't even mow anymore, they use mulchers, they trample everything, it's all lying around. […] The Park says they're in control [...]. And this mass lies there. Firstly, it produces this humic acid, secondly, it suffocates, it flows down the river, it rots. And with it, with this mass, fish, animals, everything, because after all, this is what the lack of oxygen that causes it. It takes, this green mass takes oxygen from the river. (Non-farmer resident, 23.04.22)

On a symbolic level, we are dealing with an outsider, represented by a capitalist from a big city, whose actions are deceptive in order to appropriate goods and destroy local natural resources. Indirectly, it is he who "takes oxygen from the river".

"DIRTY" RIVER

In the above statement, the problem of the river's degradation appeared. According to the inhabitants of the Biebrza Valley, the river is currently "dirty", not because of chemical pollution or waste, but because of an excess of vegetation in the water, because of mowed and uncollected grass that washes into the river with the rain from the meadows, and because of vegetation that overgrows the riverbed.

> It was an intensively used river, so it cleaned itself. Now it is not cleaned, it is overgrown […]. Now no one cleans it, because supposedly it can't be done. The Park is against it, as everything has to be super natural and left alone, and it's supposed to be self-regulating. And it doesn't work. (Businessman from a farming family, 21.07.22)

The main purpose of this narrative is to defend the old order. The locals may not realize that according to experts when the river becomes overgrown, becomes shallower and narrows, plants grow in it, but they are also carried by the water, which is a somewhat beneficial phenomenon, because it allows for even better water retention. According to the expert, the overgrowth of the river is associated with a slower flow of water. At the same time, we are experiencing a low water level more and more often, so the slower flow is beneficial for the peri-aquatic ecosystem. "Plants are very much needed because they help to stabilise the hydrological situation" concludes the hydrologist (Expert, 10.12.22). In addition, aquatic vegetation is a natural barrier to pollutants, collecting and filtering them. Furthermore, plants have the ability to oxygenate the water. These facts are known to experts, but not to the local population, who have no connection with nature conservation and who demand destructive measures for aquatic ecosystems in the belief that they will bring benefits.

In the last two centuries the Biebrza was used by raftsmen to float timber, for transport and for water tourism. Its bed was "clean", because the river was "cleaned": leaves, thickets and reeds were cut from it. Cows grazing on the banks made it easier to get close to the river, creating beaches. Anglers caught fish, poachers poached. The river was used in many ways, as the residents recount:

> [The older generation] had to spend a lot of time by the water because it was the water that gave them everything. There was a lot of grain here, but hay was very important, because everyone had cows, and when you went to make hay [mowing], you had to cross the river for two weeks, so you had to stay there by the water. They would camp there with whole families, or actually whole villages, and work there and only come back when they had finished everything. (Agritourism owner, 24.04.22)
>
> They left the water, the farmers left the water, they don't drive there, they don't mow there, they have their own meadows. […] The cows don't go anywhere. I still remember when they used to drive the cows from Uścianek from across the river, which is 6 kilometres each way. We had to go there twice a day, I still remember those moments. And now the cows are there, the fodder arrives, in sealed tanks, in a barn where there are cows, there can't be swallows, there can't be a cat. Hens are not allowed in the yard, sterilisation of life. (Non-farmer resident, 23.04.22)

According to many inhabitants of the villages and towns along the Biebrza, in the past the river used to be more beautiful, cleaner and deeper. It was used, and therefore aesthetically pleasing: "once, probably during communism [...] barges sailed here and every bend of the Biebrza was regulated. […] Just as the river flows and bends, there was a fascine here so that [the river] didn't just take away the land. And it was nice" (Former farmer, 22.07.22). This is linked to a certain industrial aesthetic that is still dominant in social perception, manifested in the increasing use of concrete at the expense of green areas (Mencwel 2020). It is also partly connected to the issue of usability, which is dealt with on an ad hoc basis in order to achieve immediate results. The ecological advantage is less spectacular, more gradual and therefore still underestimated.

Today, the Biebrza is a "dirty" and overgrown river, and the BbNP is to blame for this, as it banned motorboats, the cutting of rushes and restricted fishing. In an idealized past:

> The Biebrza was desilted, the banks were fortified with fascine, the Biebrza was a navigable river. […] Rafts floated, floated down with this timber. And try to float it today, when even last year, with the high level of the Biebrza, it was difficult to cross the Biebrza in a kayak. This is a degradation of the river because there are no conservation measures. It should be mowed so that the water flows as it should, in a normal way. (Former farmer, 09.02.23)

"Normal" denotes what the river used to be like, as the more or less distant past is a permanent point of reference for the local population. In addition, the river must be wide and deep, according to the common perception. An overgrown, shallow and overflowing river is "degraded" in relation to the ideal image of a river. Furthermore, leaving it in its natural state is seen as a renunciation of its protection:

> When we talk about the Biebrza, all these natural values have been created by man, not by nature, by mowing the meadows, by clearing the Biebrza river. It's all human. And we [people in general: tourists, locals, naturalists] enjoy it. And we [people like BbNP employees] are now downgrading it. We don't touch it. And for me it's such a misunderstanding. It can't be that: nature is beautiful, I don't touch it. Yes, I made it with my hand. After all, humans have created it, so he has to take care of it, protect it and also intervene in it. (Former farmer, 09.02.23)

Hence, the Biebrza landscape is perceived as a human-made landscape that requires constant care and intervention. According to the expert:

> The river does not need to be mowed if it is functioning properly. And the river is functioning less and less properly, because of the pollution it receives from agricultural areas, mainly nutrients, in short fertilisers. So, we know that the vegetation in the river is starting to become more luxuriant. But is the problem that the Park is not mowing, or is the problem that excess fertiliser is flowing in from the surrounding agricultural areas? In fact, in many cases, the people who are complaining are themselves the cause of the situation. (Expert, 06.10.22)

The "wild" river is aesthetically and practically unattractive in the eyes of the inhabitants, who are used to a certain image of the river from the times when it was used for their purposes. At the same time, both sides of the dispute declare their willingness to protect nature, but although they use the same terms, their understanding is fundamentally different. This is due both to the different goals of the parties (naturalists strive for renaturing, residents wish to continue using natural resources), the lack of ecological education (understanding what nature conservation is and the intrinsic value of nature), and the isolation of the Biebrza National Park from the community in which it operates, which leads not only to a lack of support for the activities of the BbNP, but also to a complete misunderstanding of these activities. Another problem is the lack of consideration of the Biebrza in a broader context — the network of rivers, climate change, global anthropopressure.

INTEGRATION WITH NATURE OR CENTURIES OF EXPLOITATION?

However, the question is where local residents are supposed to acquire ecological knowledge and what role the Biebrza National Park could play in this. The problem is the lack of transfer of expert knowledge from the BbNP to the local population. The BbNP is treated as a foreign entity, not only because it represents other interests and works against the short-term benefit of the human communities on the Biebrza river, but also because it uses a different language from the communities in which it is embedded. It is the hermetic language of specialists who, despite their declarations, find it difficult to talk about their activities in an accessible way. Of course, there are many reasons for this state of affairs and it is not a manifestation of ill will. There are systemic, budgetary, human resources and psychological issues at play: the understandable reluctance of individual employees of an unpopular institution to discuss difficult and potentially contentious issues in direct contact with local residents. In many cases, the conflict is only apparent and could be resolved through effective and friendly sharing of expert knowledge (although this would require a change in the stereotypical image of the BbNP).

First of all, we should be aware that the point of reference for the agricultural discourse is the past, when man exploited river resources freely. This is an ideal state against which the present is measured and evaluated, regardless of the fact that not only times have changed, but also the climate and the environment. The Biebrza river flows through agricultural areas, not industrial ones. The most serious factors affecting the state of the river are the melioration carried out since the second half of the 19th century and the fertilizer run-off from the fields for several decades. The low water levels that have been recurring in recent years, are caused by the general disappearance of water in nature and are a global phenomenon. And this is the starting point of the institutional discourse. Awareness of the disappearance of water from the Biebrza landscape is not yet widespread, as it is an exceptionally water-rich landscape. However, more and more people living in the Biebrza Valley are noticing a change in weather phenomena: sandstorms, less and less snowfall in winter, recurrent low water levels, violent short downpours that have replaced the light rain that used to last for many days. Yet, not everyone realises what this means: the earth cannot absorb so much water at once, thus much of it evaporates or "runs off" into the sea through watercourses. Wetlands are drying up. The BbNP, which was established to protect the most extensive and pristine peatlands in Central and Western Europe (Brzosko, Jermakowicz, Mirski et al. 2016: 30), has introduced many changes, and most of the legal prohibitions it proposes are interpreted in terms of oppression and restriction of existing freedoms. There is a sense of unequal treatment, of injustice, which is all the more acute because it has not been going on "forever" (it is not "sanctified" by tradition), but has its own specific time frame. All restrictions, both those related to the functioning of the BbNP and those related to the Natura2000 areas and EU regulations, are treated as having occurred "since the establishment of the Park". The opening up of the area to tourists, while at the same time introducing prohibitions for the local population, has brought about changes that many feel are painful and harmful. According to this opinion, the BbNP has appropriated the water in such a way that it "organized itself on the river" (non-farmer resident, 23.04.22), which is both the axis of the BbNP and the centre of life and activity for the inhabitants. Joint use of the river became impossible due to conflicting interests of both parties. Only a part of the inhabitants decided to change the way of using the Biebrza.

A young entrepreneur from a farming family, accurately summed up the residents' objections to the BbNP:

> The park excludes humans from the ecosystem. This is my observation and I think that of many residents agree. […] Humans have been there for centuries, in this ecosystem, in this Biebrza. They suddenly started to separate people, because of the

> animals, the fish, the vegetation and everything. They just don't take into account that humans were there. In this whole ecosystem. (Businessman from a farming family, 21.07.22)

This statement reflects the posthumanist view of nature as *natureculture* (Haraway 2003), and humans as its inseparable part. If we accept Jamie Linton and Jessica Budds's approach to the hydrosocial cycle, the water world of the Biebrza must be seen as both shaping and being shaped by humans. The National Park as a state institution, but also (less conscious) political changes, the introduction of new technologies (fertilisers, silage for cows, bars instead of bedding in barns and pigsties) and EU regulations (think of the swallows and cats banned from barns) caused a rupture in the existing (or perhaps only imagined?) symbiosis of people, animals, plants and the river. Sławomir Łotysz, describing the Polesie marshes, makes a sad statement: "Cutting down forests, burning swamp meadows, destroying birds and overfishing — this is how one can briefly describe the 'fusion' of Polesians with nature" (Łotysz 2022: 120). It is highly probable that the centuries-long "human presence" in the Biebrza nature had a similar character.

The lack of understanding of the forced changes, the difficulty of finding one's way in the new economic situation and the lack of knowledge about the changing ecological situation led to resistance and, for three decades, to dislike the institution responsible for these changes. Those who reformulated their knowledge about water, produced its new social meanings, for example by changing the way it was used, coped with it in the best way. The Biebrza landscape is gradually changing from an agricultural to a touristic landscape. Those of the residents who have noticed this transformation find it easier to adapt to the new situation. This includes both locals and visitors. Among them there are also some "retrained" farmers who are confronted with a new way of looking at nature and are forced to change the optics from using nature to protecting the common good. Water becomes a resource of a different kind: it still brings benefits, but they are more mediated, woven into more-than-human relationships:

> I live on water. I live on birds, and birds live on water, and so do I. We're at the height of the season right now, it's April, and I have guests in my house all the time and we have 100% occupancy, because they're all coming to see the water birds, to photograph them, to watch them, to enjoy them, right? We have a lot of migratory bird species. We are one of the coolest places for migrating ruffs in great numbers, thousands of them sit here on the backwaters, for geese, for ducks, it is simply paradise, bird paradise. (Agritourism owner, 24.04.22)

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, it can be said that the creation of a national park in the Biebrza Valley has forced changes in the functioning of the local community. It was not only a promised stimulus for development (new jobs, attraction of tourists), but also a source of prohibitions and restrictions. Some residents felt excluded. Interestingly, this psychological withdrawal was correlated with a physical withdrawal from the water, due to the forced abandonment of certain water use practices.

In response to the accusations of some local residents, ecologists and park staff point to a lack of knowledge of natural processes and interdependencies and blame local farmers for the existing conflict. They point to a lack of understanding of the impact of agricultural activity on the natural environment (fertiliser run-off into the river, melioration of meadows, etc.) and ignorance of global climate processes (drying up of wetlands, greenhouse gas emissions). Expert knowledge about the need and ways to retain water in the landscape has not been assimilated by, or perhaps not been properly made available to local people who see more benefits for themselves in a river with a cleared bottom and banks, which they remember from their youth or childhood, than in an overgrown river, which is what the Biebrza has become. Interlocutors associated with the "institutional" or "ecological" discourse point out that there is a clear lack of connection between current impacts and long-term causes in the "agricultural" discourse, which is a manifestation of gaps in the field of environmental knowledge.

In this conflict, each side has its own arguments. There are two different approaches to environmental issues here. On the one hand, there is a concern for the environment as a value of national and even global importance, with protection based on rapidly changing and evolving expert knowledge. On the other hand, the natural environment is perceived as a local resource at the service of people who use it, based on tradition and knowledge of the exploitation of nature, which is often at odds with ecological issues. Although I am convinced of the need to compensate the inhabitants for the losses they have suffered as a result of the objective constraints imposed by the principles of nature conservation, I consider the issue of environmental protection to be a priority. As Dominika Dzwonkowska writes:

> One of the causes of the ecological crisis is the utilitarian view of the value of the environment, i.e. from the perspective of its usefulness for achieving our goals. Therefore, recognising the value of the environment, which is independent of our goals, the value of the environment itself, could be the reason for ensuring proper care of the natural environment. (Dzwonkowska 2022: 110-111)

Since the climate crisis is already a scientifically proven fact that affects the lives of current and future generations, a paradigm shift in thinking and the subsequent change in behaviour is a requisite for human survival. Therefore, "proper care", which should be understood as care based on scientific knowledge, is a sine qua non condition for the survival of the homo sapiens species. Paradoxically, it is the abandonment of anthropocentrism that can save humanity.

The Biebrza Valley, as a unique wetland, has a special place in narratives and ecological activities. The cooperation of its inhabitants in the field of environmental protection should be considered in terms of a mission and even an honour, not as oppression. As Sławomir Łotysz notes: "Today, when we know more about the role of peatlands in the global balance of greenhouse gases, the need to protect them has ceased to be a matter of fashion or worldview, and has become an increasingly accepted necessity" (Łotysz 2022: 115). The analysis of the hydrosocial cycle carried out in the Biebrza Valley leads us to conclude that some local inhabitants (especially farmers or people with an agricultural background) see the BbNP as a "foreign" entity that has taken possession of the nature they used to use and imposed its own rules. It can be assumed that this is related not only to the perception of the river and the wetlands, but also to the perception of nature in general: there is a clear conflict of interest between those who protect it and those who use it. As a representative of the institutional divide, the BbNP is constrained by directives, laws, budgetary limitations and rigid bureaucracy. In Poland, institutions are generally perceived as oppressive, incompetent, top-down imposed and acting against the interests of local communities. This is a legacy from the period of partition, when all state institutions were considered foreign and hostile to the Polish nation (Napiórkowski 2019: 43). This attitude towards law and institutions is still embedded in the mass consciousness, so that although the BbNP itself is an institution implanted in the local landscape, it can hardly be said to be integrated into the local community. The most common expressions to describe the BbNP's actions are "the Park restricts" and "the Park forbids". Interestingly, despite the 30-year history of the Biebrza National Park, younger generations often inherit the aversion to the BbNP from their parents and grandparents. The Biebrza National Park has failed to "raise" a welcoming generation of inhabitants; throughout its history, it has not become "its own" on the Biebrza River, but at best it remained "its foreigner". The reason for this may be, apart from the above-mentioned lack of effective communication channels and transfer of expert ecological knowledge, may also be the failure to make a lasting impact on the life of the local community. The promotional and educational activities carried out, although very valuable and necessary, are not systemic and do not have a long-term impact. There is also a lack of support from local authorities or influential people.

Despite their great potential, the local tourist guides have not become such: they are a fragmented, divided group, not all of whom identify with the BbNP.

The Biebrza National Park has also failed to overcome the aversion to ecology. Ecology in Podlasie is treated with suspicion and reluctance, as a whim of urban people who do not have to deal with "real", "wild" nature. It is also seen as a fashion imported from the West. One can be tempted to say that ecology — analogous to the soft patriotism analysed by Marcin Napiórkowski (2019: 36) — is an enlightening, educational and moralising trend that drives the local community into parochialism, ignorance and obsolescence. In Podlasie, ecology is often viewed as a hostile ideology ("eco-terrorists"), both in terms of politics and daily life, because the ecological attitudes and practices that the BbNP demands are in contradiction with the local traditions and the current use of the natural environment.

The concept of the hydrosocial cycle can be helpful in finding a solution for these issues because it "draws attention to how 'water' is created and how it configures social relations. Through the hydrosocial cycle, water becomes a means of exploring and analysing social practices and relationships, and tracking how the force infuses these connections so that they can be revealed and potentially acted upon" (Linton and Budds 2013, 176).

Given the complexity of not-only-human life in the Biebrza Valley, it is important to emphasise the absence of the voices of non-human subjects in both discourses. Even the "ecological" discourse is dominated by an anthropocentric vision of nature conservation subordinated to human interests dominates, which has nothing to do with the postulates of deep ecology (nature has an immanent value, independent of its usefulness for humans) or holistic ethics (the entire biosphere is considered an ethical good). And yet, as early as the 19th century, postulates for the protection of nature appeared, regardless of its usefulness for human society (see Dzwonkowska 202, 52). At the same time, the Biebrza National Park, like many other protected areas, is an anthropocentric creation. Humans decide which elements of the environment are worth preserving and maintaining. There is no room here for the free development of flora and fauna, all species must live within the limits set by humans. They are caught, shot, plucked or mowed down — all in the name of a certain image of "nature". Guided by their vision, humans regard some species as desirable, others as unnecessary or harmful. The criteria vary, but they all belong to the world of anthropocentric values. We care primarily about what we consider beautiful, useful or valuable because of its rarity. This is not an indictment of national parks or other types of nature reserves, but merely a reminder of the fact that there is no such thing as "natural". This "nature" of the Biebrza National Park is a human creation, both on the theoretical level — as a vision and legal goal of the protected area — and at the practical level — as a repeated practice of control, ordering, systematisation and

use. It is important to note, however, that the institution's relationship with the river breaks with this pattern: the Biebrza is left free to develop, to shape its channel, determine its course, and even organise the life of water creatures. The human influence on the Biebrza is limited, and the ongoing restoration processes, attempt to reverse the effects of past human interference. At the centre of the social conflict is the approach to the river, which has always been a part of the life of the inhabitants of the Biebrza Valley — tangible, material, and not just to be admired from afar.

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AUTHOR'S CONTACT:

Magdalena Kozhevnikova
Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Warsaw
E-mail: m.kozhevnikova@uw.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0001-7484-9638

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REVIEW

SERIOUS LAUGHTER. REVIEW OF *AUTHORITARIAN LAUGHTER. POLITICAL HUMOR AND SOVIET DYSTOPIA IN LITHUANIA*, BY NERINGA KLUMBYTĖ, ITHACA: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS 2022

ALBERT JAWŁOWSKI

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

The work of the Lithuanian researcher Neringa Klumbytė, who lives in the United States, may arouse jealousy. Several times I have tried to write something about laughter, jokes and situations that become comical, even unintentionally. And each time I put these plans aside for later. This was not only because of my embarrassing procrastination but more out of a certain helplessness at the need to write seriously about laughter. Indeed, about one of the most serious human activities and reactions to the world, the emotional expression characteristic of the human species.

Klumbytė took the subject very seriously. She saw it as an excellent opportunity to examine how culture emerged under the conditions when its content was shaped from the top down by the Soviet authorities. In her reflections, she concentrates on the problem of humour, directed laughter as a tool for managing society and forming worldviews. In considering laughter, she focused mainly on the didactic and propagandistic levels of its influence.

The author analyses satirical magazines published in the territory of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic and the entire Soviet Union (such as "Broom" and "Crocodile"). She conducted a meticulous research in the Lithuanian archives, including, among others, the Lithuanian Central State Archives, the Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art (LALA) and the Lithuanian Special Archives (LSA), the latter of which provided access to the internal party documents and the resources of the Republican Department of the Committee for State Security (CSS).

Klumbytė did not limit herself to analysing the content of the magazines, documents and other materials she found. The results of her fieldwork are also very interesting: in particular, she based her conclusions on interviews and informal conversations conducted with Lithuanian editors of the satirical magazine "Broom", as well as commissioned authors, satirists and graphic artists. Crucially, these interviews were carried out with people who had worked with "Broom" before the final period of the Soviet Union and the so-called *glasnost***,** that is in the Brezhnev era, when the Soviet model of an authoritarian regime seemed stable and unchangeable.

In this way Klumbytė, has taken the rarely trodden path of exploring the cultural and social history of the Soviet Union. As a result, apart from the obvious content analyses and recommendations as to who in the Soviet ideological universe deserved the birch of sarcasm and contempt, we also get an appealing sketch of the portrait of the creative intelligentsia caught up in Soviet propaganda. The sketch, however, is not black and white. Alongside the crude propaganda, satirical magazines also published foreign language translations and apolitical social humour, including certain ideas that slipped in between the lines and went unnoticed or ignored by the censors.

Although Klumbytė inevitably touches upon the problem of the equal participation of intellectuals and artists in the maintenance of the Soviet system, she chooses not to pass judgement. In some sections of the book we find descriptions that allow us to better understand not only the content itself, but also the people who produced it. They were not ideologically indoctrinated or "true believers" in Marxism-Leninism. Nothing of the sort. Nor should they be called cynics for hire. They could perhaps be described as conformists, striving to find their own place in the "system", to pay the necessary tribute of loyalty. And to retain as much autonomy and freedom of choice as possible. But let us return to the basic problem that the author discusses — laughter conditioned by the authoritarian system.

One of the most interesting issues raised in the book is the conceptuality of humour. The laughter the author examines is historical and cultural. It is linked to individual conditions and the perspective through which those who laugh look at the world. Laughter can, therefore, be characterised by gender, race, class and religion. It can manifest a political stance — deliberate or spontaneous, premeditated or ad hoc.

What made people who grew up in the Soviet Union laugh, became incomprehensible to younger generations. Jokes that were funny in the Soviet era ceased to be entertaining on the level of emotions and obvious associations after the fall of the Soviet Union. This was not because the generation of people born and raised after 1991 automatically rejected everything created by the old regime, including satire. It was because humour not only requires knowledge of cultural codes but it also feeds on experience. Humour is possible within the shared associations, within a sense of comic inadequacy. Bursts of spontaneous laughter cannot be fully explained. One

needs to feel it to be completely immersed in shared laughter. It could be said that people born after the fall of the Soviet Union no longer feel the world which they only know second-hand.

The intergenerational culture of laughter turned out to be a cultural community based on shared worldviews, comparable experiences and the perception of nuance. It can be argued that a cultural community in this sense is a community of feeling the world and responding to it almost on the physiological level. It is a community of emotional outbursts caused by similar stimuli. In this case — bursts of laughter.

By writing about laughter and humour, Klumbytė tells a story about disappearing worlds. In some sections of the book, she deliberately does this in the form of ethnographic documentation. She conducts a peculiar inventory of material objects, especially when she "enters" the homes of her interlocutors. She takes her readers to the summer house of Juozas Bulota, the former editor-in-chief of "Broom", who has brought there furniture and knick-knacks he acquired in Soviet times. This description is reminiscent of a trip to a "retro museum" overflowing with exhibits.

While reading, we nearly stumble over a low coffee table, a sofa from the second half of the 20th century, a wall unit. And of course, indispensable in the home of the intelligentsia, bookcases full of chaotically arranged books, catalogues, albums, old papers, sentimental photographs, decorative elements whose value and meaning can only be understood by their owner. We can see the collection of dolls dressed in traditional costumes typical of certain Soviet republics and "friendly states" of the Eastern Bloc. Under our feet we have old, slightly worn carpets, miraculously obtained from department stores plagued by shortages. The view from the window is obstructed by a thicket of houseplants that barely fit on a windowsill.

Personally, the chapter I found most interesting is the one in which the author writes about multi-layered and "multidirectional laughter" (p. 135-168). She addresses one of the most fascinating problems of humour: the fact that it cannot be fully controlled. Humour as a tool of the authoritarian seriousness of propaganda can, in certain situations, be highly dangerous to it. A small dissonance or an unintended context can be enough to turn the seriousness, or even the sacredness of the disgruntled regime into pastiche. Laughter can be used to stigmatise enemies or as a safety valve. Agreeing to controlled jokes about the authorities, carnival mockery and transgressions are part of a repertoire of methods as old as societies themselves for maintaining social order. But it is difficult to predict when a safety valve becomes a detonator. Another deeply inspiring and engaging theme is the dystopia of the Soviet project that emerges in between the lines of top-down controlled satire, as well as the problem of creating and maintaining a sense of justice in satirical content to which the author devotes a separate chapter.

The book is, therefore, much more than an analysis of the content of magazines and the censored jokes used by propaganda. It is a true archaeology of the culture of Soviet Lithuania. Klumbytė's work is an outstanding contribution to the study of the Soviet authoritarian regime. From the descriptions and analyses of satire caught up in the Soviet system we learn a great deal about the relationship between the state and citizens, propaganda and the strategies of individual creators to break free from its dogmas.

Finally, it should be noted that the author also devoted space to an exhaustive characterisation of the cultural, social and political life of the Soviet Union. This is probably due to the need to include a "compulsory programme" to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the subject to various committees and reviewers. On the other hand, this section of the book may be particularly instructive for readers who do not deal with the social and cultural aspects of the Soviet Union on a daily basis. Laughter — even when it was directed from above — could not be completely tamed. Shared laughter worked against vertical social organisation. And thanks to laughter, as the author suggests, the society resisted its total atomisation. This multi-layered book is certainly worth a close reading.

AUTHOR'S CONTACT:

Albert Jawłowski
Institute of Applied Social Science, University of Warsaw
E-mail: a.jawlowski@uw.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-3921-6648

INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

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When ideologies are used to justify violence, oppression, or to fortify hierarchies of inequality, is there an ethical responsibility for anthropologists to engage with the actors pursuing such agendas? If so, what effects might engagement in ideologically driven political interventions have on the quality and impact of anthropological research? If events in an anthropologist's field site prompt political activism, how should anthropologists reflect on the ideological underpinnings of their scholarly response to ideas and events they find objectionable? The aim of this issue of "Ethnologia Polona" is to address these questions by interrogating the intersections of academic research and ideological engagement as they have unfolded historically and as they continue to shape our field today during this period of growing political tensions.

Anthropologists who conducted fieldwork during the Cold War had to contend with a polarised ideological context that either condemned or celebrated socialism. Many continued to conduct ethnographic research during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s or in their aftermath, when nationalist, xenophobic, and exclusionary debates raged, much as they do today. The importance of recognising the intersection of ideology and research, and the impetus to act it often yields, became especially poignant after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This war prompted anthropologists to re-evaluate their own research and the existing theoretical paradigms that had been developed to understand power and political change. How can we explain the multiple outbreaks of war we witness today and the will to fight among some and the will to resist among others? Which ideologies motivate these positions, and which do we want to inform our own?

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