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LEARNING TO BE FREE: Freedom and its Counterfeits in Post-Soviet Ukraine

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Introduction. Post-Soviet Ukraine as a Philosophical Event

Contemporary Ukraine is undergoing a dramatic social and cultural change that affects the lives of the majority of its citizens and residents. Like everything that happens in human affairs, this change could be conceived of as a genuinely philosophical event. This fact urges intellectuals and scholars from all fields of study, striving to interpret the data of social life and understand the whole picture, to look for the philosophical categories and arguments suitable for the task.

This presentation seeks to carefully analyze the cultural and social context of contemporary Ukraine as to its impact on the understanding and exercise of the human person's freedom. Having this in mind, we conceive of freedom as the properly personal, fully autonomous and dignified exercise of the person's power for self-transcendence in his response to values and embodied in his self-determination that eminently manifests itself in his personal gesture of self-giving. We also attempt to draw the profile of human freedom by contrasting its genuine manifestations with its counterfeits that tend to substitute for it in the lived experience of Ukrainian fellow-citizens. Three major cultural mechanisms are brought to the fore in this respect, namely, post-colonial, post-Soviet and neo-liberal capitalist conditions of the human persons' shaping of their individual and collective life-projects. Thus we are going to expose some of the critical factors which can jeopardize the understanding and corrupt the exercise of personal freedom to which our fellow Ukrainians prove to be most susceptible because of their particular social and cultural history and its legacy in the present. We invoke the idea of the project of building a nation-state as a response to the long post-colonial status of Ukraine, which at its extreme commands an unwarranted allegiance to collective organism and its inherited or imagined traditions at the expense of the responsible exercise of freedom and can lead to the exclusion of constructed strangers from participation in social and cultural exchange. We bring up for discussion the Soviet remnants of the present socio-cultural reality that continue to exert their power over the minds of many people or are half-consciously revitalized as an allegedly viable strategy for coping with the exigencies of present life-conditions dominated by ruthless neo-liberal capitalist market forces. In the wake of such a life-strategy, people tend to sacrifice their freedom and their personal cultural and social creativity to the collective whole of state power charged with the authority to substitute for individual life choices. And, finally we denounce neo-liberal consumerism in its extreme alienation of the human person from his community and selfless commitment with others as indispensable conditions and manifestations of genuine human freedom. Last but not least, we try to identify those factors that might prove conducive to the proper awakening and exercise of the human person's genuine freedom as it is practiced in the particular social and cultural circumstances of present-day Ukraine.

Now, we proceed from the obvious fact that people's choices and their exercise of freedom do not occur in abstract space. The actualization of the innermost personal center of the human person, from which our fundamental freedom stems, comes about in a certain social and cultural setting that either promotes the unfolding of human moral potential or sets to it limits difficult to overcome or surpass.

Ukraine is a young country in Central-Eastern Europe that gained its political independence in 1991 after the spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union, unexpected by most prominent Western sovietologists. Ukraine belongs to a family of countries and comes from a region that during the greater part of its history found itself “in between,” between East and West, between the Germans and the Russians, compelled to maintain its cultural identity and political sovereignty in continuous argument with the idea of “historical nations” and struggle with the more powerful imperial forces.¹ It is a country that blurs neat, “all too human” distinctions aiming at sparing critical thinking and mostly revealing their imagined and constructed character. These could be exemplified by the conviction that to be a good Catholic one needs to be a Latin. Or by the platitude taken for granted in much of the contemporary political sphere about the clash of civilizations and the impossibility of maintaining political unity and social order in a context that exhibits far-reaching linguistic, historical, cultural and religious differences. In many respects, historically speaking, Ukraine is a border-land which has experienced throughout its history, for better as well as for worse, the strong impact of powerful cultural centers. No wonder that my country tends to be a cultural phenomenon grounded on creative synthesis of friendly polarities, transcending artificially imposed and habituated dichotomies.²

Freedom in post-colonial Ukraine

Since gaining political independence, Ukraine has been referred to by most political writings as a “country in transition” or “transition society” and treated as an object of the so-called “science of transitology.” This trend of political thought had developed into a science of its own long before the breakdown of the Soviet Union and concerned itself mostly with social change in Latin America and so-called Third World countries. The transition in mind was primarily conceived of as a change from authoritarian political government and paternalistic forms of shaping social life to more democratic forms of political leadership and free market economy. Many political scientists would agree with the view that to do justice to the specifically Ukrainian version of society in transition one needs to adopt rather a post-colonial model of analysis of social changes and emphasize the urgent need for shaping a civil nation and a civil and jural society.³ The reason for such an approach is that for centuries Ukrainians happened to be placed under the permanent pressure of various metropolitan powers and underwent totalitarianism rather than a milder form of authoritarianism which attempted to bring under state control and legislation all aspects of human existence, and which compromised the very idea of law, either completely ignoring it or using it as an ideological instrument of ruthless physical and moral oppression.

Keeping in mind the post-colonial status of Ukraine, it is no wonder that the project of “building a nation-state” became a leading national idea for the Ukrainian people and political elites.⁴ The controversial character of this project came immediately to the fore when it became

¹ The historic and cultural identity of this region is reflected in a much celebrated idea of the Central-Eastern Europe. However politically not neutral and even intentionally constructed in its character, however much criticized for its self-defensive and even alienating potential, in my opinion, this concept of cultural geography does reflect certain crucial empirical reality common to such countries as Poland, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Baltic states, etc.

² Among the most prominent and successful examples of such a synthesis one could mention the phenomenon of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy of the 17th century, the most influential academic institution of higher learning in early modern Eastern Europe, which fruitfully combined loyalty to the Eastern Christian legacy with the commitment to make its own the Western intellectual achievements of the time, including the scholastic method of teaching and learning. Another telling example is the existence and legacy of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, now the largest Eastern Catholic Church in the world.

³ Cf. Kuzio Taras. “Ukraine’s Post-Soviet Transition: A Theoretical and Comparative Perspective” // *Society in Transition. Social Change in Ukraine in Western Perspectives*. Ed. by Wsevolod W. Isajiw. – Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2003. C.21-43.

⁴ Cf. Grabowicz George G. “Ukraine after Independence. A Balance Sheet for Culture” // *Society in Transition. Social Change in Ukraine in Western Perspectives*. Ed. by Wsevolod W. Isajiw. – Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2003. C.307-326.

clear that the Soviet Union would never be revived and the project must be filled with more positive content rather than with the idea of departing from the depressed and backward USSR. In fact, the controversy concerned the meaning of the national. Old post-Soviet elites who managed to seize power had no real attachment to any distinct national identity but felt subconscious sentiment for the more powerful and predominantly Russian culture of the former Soviet Union. They were inclined to interpret “national” in procedural terms. In contrast, the Ukrainian-speaking part of the country, with clear allegiance to the traditionally more-discriminated-against Ukrainian national culture, felt marginalized and pushed into an extremely defensive attitude by the state’s indifference to national issue and thus provided resources for the rise of nationalist sentiments.

The crucial difference between traditional nationalism of the 19th century and its Ukrainian counterpart in the present day is the progressive character of the former and conservative sentiment of the latter. As Ernest Gellner demonstrated, the political success of nationalisms in the modern era was accelerated by the dramatic social processes launched by the modern capitalism.⁵ Classical nationalism was an attempt to provide unity to the disembedded members of modern society set in motion by the driving forces of the industrial revolution. At that time it offered to the human person uprooted from his traditional settings a matching and attractive substitute for social consensus and a feeling of belonging. The “homeland” was replaced with the fatherland, its broader counterpart. Hence the idea of culture as overarching the broader social whole and transforming it into a national body, while inherited identities and their allegiances lose their power to establish a common ground and social cohesion. Hence the repeated attempts at standardization of social and cultural practices exemplified by state-administered obligatory mass education in the primary and secondary schools.

Present-day Ukrainian nationalism could be interpreted as a conservative, and in this respect even pre-modern, force to the extent that it inaugurates the inherited identity in contrast to the strategy of constructed identity ascribed to competing social and cultural trends. On the one hand, it rightly stresses that the exercise of freedom as such does not necessarily conflict with the pre-given data of human life and even presupposes them. On the other hand, it risks to lose sight of the fundamental dimension of freedom in which the human person is called to freely affirm and appreciate what seems to be unquestionably taken for granted in the nationalist project. In other words, the genuinely human and personal relationship to one’s own cultural, social or historical given presupposes an act of conscious reflection on its value, critical differentiation of its appeal and finally could be followed on one’s own will by the voluntary embrace of that culture. This distance to his own self which enables the human person to take a stance regarding what happens to his self is critical for notion of personal freedom. “Post-traditional” more conservatively minded nationalism tends to overlook this unprecedented sovereignty of the human person over himself and thus corrupts and arrests human freedom in its artificial picture of man and his life. Moreover, it precludes its followers from understanding nationality as one of the gifts that call for appreciation and grateful appropriation rather than unreflected and thoughtless “natural” solidarity.

Present-day Ukrainian nationalism is not of course homogeneous in its character. Politically it is represented, on the one hand, by right-wing anti-liberal nationalistic forces referring predominantly to the legacy of the interwar Galician nationalism infected with totalitarian *Zeitgeist* of the time and, on the other hand, by its distinctly democratic and liberal rival competing with the former for being *the* representative of Ukrainian national idea. The principal challenge to be met by the non-indifferent to the national idea liberal actors of the present-day Ukrainian political scene is to find a middle way between nationally obsessed and by definition exclusive policy that aspires at creating nationally homogeneous culture and mono-cultural political state, and political attitude and practice that feels to owe nothing to peculiarly Ukrainian national identity. Finding this way will amount to no less than contributing to a solution of the much discussed and most urgent problem of

⁵ Cf. Gellner Ernest. “Nationalism and the two forms of cohesion in complex societies” // *Culture, Identity, and Politics*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. pp. 6-28.

“two Ukraines”, by way of constructing living, non-artificial, non-oppressive modern Ukrainian culture that will appeal to both more traditionally sensitive Ukrainian-speaking and presently less concerned with the national Ukrainian renaissance Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine.⁶

Freedom in post-soviet Ukraine

16 years have passed since the historical break-down and disappearance from the world of political maps of the USSR, accompanied with the loss of legality of the communist political government. It is noteworthy that the Communist Party and its political heirs in the new Ukraine keep losing official political impact, though during the first years of independence the Communists⁶ continued as if by inertia to exert an influence sufficient to constitute the major counterpart or counterbalance to the politically dominant national-democratic forces and post-Soviet “nomenclatura,” which were allied – though for completely different reasons – in their interest in the existence of an independent Ukraine. But the question still remains whether the Soviet Union continues to thrive subjectively – if not objectively – in the cultural memory and everyday experience of ordinary people. Did it lose not only legality, but also legitimacy? Are its specific “*ordo amoris*” and cultural preferences still reflected in today’s everyday behavior, cultural and political practices, social institutions and the educational approaches of our contemporary life? Do political and moral authorities exert their influence on the politics of memory and reception of the Soviet legacy, and how? In other words, is the *homo sovieticus* finally and irrevocably overcome in the minds of Ukrainians?

In my opinion, the most compelling challenge for Ukrainian society in the post-Soviet context consists in the limited ability to shake off moral blindness as a *conditio sine qua non* to perceive and articulate new values, to introduce new ethos into all spheres of life. The malfunctioning of the new political system and social mechanisms is an effect of the lack of a developed and interiorized culture, not just a result of managerial or technical misfire. Efficient social cohesion and community building necessary for the proper functioning of any human institution and organization cannot be achieved without the horizon of values which these people share and in which they experience themselves as united. Empirical data from much ethnographic research confirm the conclusion that the procedural means of democratic life cannot be mechanically transplanted into new soil without paying much attention and effort to the transformation of consciousness and value-perception.⁷ What the Westerner may experience as something given by default, the Ukrainian in the post-Soviet context must carefully learn and adopt. The settled Soviet regime was quite efficient in suppressing cultural creativity and uprooting the self-experience of the human person as a cultural agent. Not unlike some procedural theories of social transformation inspired by modern belief in the solidity of social structures, immune to any individual interference and built on an unwarranted assumption about the uniquely transforming power of the social order, post-Soviet leaders approach social life as though all transformations occur not with live human persons but with biological creatures or automatons. Hence during the first decade of political independence we could state the fundamental lack or even impairment of business, political, academic, and mass-media culture in contemporary Ukraine. Having been compromised by the first, economically most dramatic years of independence and by an unparalleled worsening of human living conditions, freedom indeed has never become, until the

⁶ The acute discussion of the alleged division of Ukraine into the pro-European West and pro-Russian East with their competing and incompatible civilization world-views, of the „natural” or „constructed” character of this division receives the most intensive coverage in the Ukrainian mass-media. Whatever its origin and political ulterior motives promoting it both from inside and outside of Ukraine, it’s impossible to change this fact or overcome this myth without appreciating the reality of freedom of the human person and creating samples of Ukrainian culture that will be both national and competitive in their appeal not only domestically but internationally because of their cultural quality and value.

⁷ Cf. *Uncertain Transition. Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*. Ed. by Michael Burawoy and Katheribe Verdery. – Lanham-Boulder-New York-Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999.

Orange Revolution in 2004, an appealing factor and principal value of human aspirations. All of this empowered the vicious cycle of the self-perpetuating authoritarianism of a paternalistic state and the blocked cultural creativity and moral sensitivity of the citizens. The less the public realm becomes constituted by human free initiative and the readiness to deal with each other without any direct recourse to state violence, the more the state is urged to exercise control over and interfere with human affairs, the more the doctrine of “state building” as a self-legitimizing goal, an “end in itself” imposes itself on the human mind.

In this respect an appeal to the cardinal importance of awakening the free personal center and developing mature moral consciousness as a prerequisite for responsible human interrelations worthy of the dignity of the human person becomes a really powerful message. Social engineering in the Soviet Union deliberately and systematically aimed at constructing *homo sovieticus* as a social human being experiencing dislike for and no need of freedom. Ideology, the state system of violence, education, and the economic practice of deficit economy aimed at making the human person completely dependent on the state, transforming him into a beggar with no political ambition, no moral backbone, only with thoughts about physical survival. *Homo sovieticus* was planned as a collective human being, without any internal core or interiority that would have made him, his thoughts and actions independent on the external impulses and stimuli administered by the state and its ruling ideology.

No wonder that the political system established in post-Soviet Ukraine until the Orange Revolution often was referred to in political science with the newly-coined category “electoral authoritarianism,” which indicated a version of faked democracy.⁸ While pretending to have in place the external features of liberal democracies with basic constitutional rights, multi-party system, periodical elections, free market, etc., the government developed canny social techniques and political technologies to manipulate and control public opinion, distort the political perception of citizens and interfere with the outcomes of the political choice of the people up to the point of its negation. It introduced a system of state persecution and oppression of any dissent which dared to go beyond mere private opinion and jeopardized the system with the appearance of independent non-government institutions and independent figures on opinion-influencing positions.⁹

In contrast to nationalism, the strategy of the post-Soviet Ukrainian elite may seem at first sight modern and even in a sense “liberating,” since it declares indifference to the inherited, pre-given identity and stresses the dominant and leading role of the state in solving the identity crisis and guiding new identity building. Here the social whole in the form of the state remains *the end in itself*, the only law-producing and legitimizing power which allegedly could and should be trusted in setting the rules of social communication according to which individual projects of self-realization could be harmoniously pursued. The specific differences in approaches due to their liberal or socialist emphases do not concern us here. The fundamental assumption remains the same. The state and its institutions, with greater or lesser authority to interfere in ordinary human affairs but being the only authority that has a monopoly to exercise physical violence, are not only instrumental for general human happiness but constitutive to it. The state and its ideology become powerful agents in shaping collective identities of their citizens and mobilizing them. No wonder that, when combined with nationalism, the capitalist industrial state of the modern era tends to employ the instruments of selectivity or even brain-washing for adjusting historical memory, tuning cultural and regional differences with a pre-given pattern, reducing social conflicts that endanger social unity, and even redefining political and cultural vocabulary for its own purposes of self-

⁸ Cf. Умланд Андреас. “Електоральний авторитаризм на постсоветському просторі” // *Критика* Рік XI, Число 9 (119), Вересень 2007. С.2-3.

⁹ Among factors successfully counteracting authoritarian efforts of the state, political scientists point to the existence of large and influential enclaves in Ukraine such as citizens from western Ukraine with stable political preferences that resisted leveling attempts of the state to establish a comfort consensus about the indispensability of the state powers in any social intercourse in Ukraine’s public sphere.

preservation. In general, it tends to reduce moral life to a citizen's decency or formalism of rule-following.

To conclude this line of thought I would like to mention one more aspect of post-Soviet reality that corrupts the exercise of true personal freedom. In technical literature this social datum is referred to as the "blackmail state."¹⁰ This term conveys the idea of such an organization of social life through awkward and confused legislation that any social or economic practice becomes impossible without transgressing these rules or having recourse to unlawful practice qualified as corruption. It is an attempt to bind everybody with the feeling of more or less guilt thus disempowering people in their potential of protest against state injustice and power abuse. In higher education it takes the form of the lack of corporative solidarity and repulsion against the practice of academic dishonesty, of the precedence of non-academic motives in academic promoting, etc. Moreover, this social sickness destroys the potential of social trust and solidarity without which healthy social life is a fiction. It has been stated that those who steal little and those who steal much differ from each other only accidentally by holding different positions with different stealing potentials, but they do not differ fundamentally in their attitudes. Such a "culture" destroys any possibility of a new start and corrupts in this respect the human person's power of freedom since it limits considerably the public space in which this freedom could be safely and trustfully actualized. It is in this respect that the witness of those who do not comply with and break spurious, wicked social rules and authoritatively show an alternative style of life becomes all-important or even indispensable.

Freedom in post-modern Ukraine

One more challenge to the exercise of freedom in the Ukrainian milieu comes from the post-modern context into which Ukraine finds itself pushed by the process of economic and cultural globalization. British literary theorist Terry Eagleton and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman seem to agree that post-modernism, at least in some of its crucial aspects, is a cultural form of neo-liberal capitalism which is a driving force of contemporary consumerism and relativism.¹¹ Bauman shows convincingly how the neo-liberal policy of turning the human person into a "consumer" with his essentially-constructed inability to get attached and stay loyal to anything in his pursuit of new and more intense pleasures overlaps with the post-modern cult of unlimited freedom that is valued as something absolute.

It is a great achievement of Christian philosophical thinking¹² to bring to intuition the essential contradiction between the intentional pursuit of subjective satisfaction and the power of self-possession necessary for genuine personal freedom. American philosopher Deal W. Hudson observes in his *Happiness and the Limits of Satisfaction* that happiness being understood as a mere psychological phenomenon which has nothing to do with the objective order and the value of things possesses an immensely destructive force for both the private and the communal life of the human person. „To have seen mental and emotional satisfaction become the unacknowledged *summum bonum* of our age is to have witnessed the tremendous encouragement of unhappiness caused by consequent dissociations – from history, from community, from the self.“¹³ In other words, a human person devoting his life to the attainment of such happiness will inevitably cut himself off from all reality and from other persons. He will fail to get awakened to a single common world, but live in a dream imprisoned in the narrow room of his own self. Bauman also points to the inability of post-modern man to build lasting personal relationships and a solid personal identity, since any

¹⁰ This category for conceptualizing post-Soviet reality in Ukraine was coined and introduced by Mykola Ryabchuk, one of the leading contemporary Ukrainian analysts of social life in Ukraine.

¹¹ Cf. Eagleton Terry. *The Idea of Culture*. – Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Bauman Zygmunt. *Postmodernity and its Discontents*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

¹² Cf. Hildebrand Dietrich von. *Ethics*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972.

¹³ Hudson, Deal W. *Happiness and the Limits of Satisfaction*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996, p.34.

commitment is charged with the loss of freedom. Bauman calls the identity of such a person a “palimpsest identity,” since it is always being rewritten under the influence of new impressions and stimuli.

The inability of the human person to take superactual fundamental moral attitudes to reality makes a mature moral life impossible. This is a typical example of a morally unconscious person in the Hildebrandian sense, i.e., the person who lets himself go, who is not integrally one with himself and does not discern any claim on him that may come from objective reality. In fact, reality for him turns into a mere phenomenon, semblance. Moreover, human subjectivity itself becomes empty, flattened and undetermined, while consciousness in its yielding to satisfaction loses its qualitative identity.

Experiencing an identity crisis, Ukrainians became very susceptible to neo-liberal capitalist ideology that found its distinct expression in indifference to the public sphere and public matters, in the rise of violence in response to one’s lack of means to keep up with the attractions of consumerism, etc. This challenge also resulted in the weakening of solidarity among people in their relationship with the state in the 90th and the consequent transition of Ukrainian society to mild authoritarianism.

In 2004 Ukrainians made a major breakthrough in their response to the identity crisis deepened by consumerist ideology.¹⁴ This response was the Orange Revolution. It was called a revolution of the spirit, since people rose against the humiliation and oppression of human dignity which the state had taken for granted as its general attitude to the individual and society. Those who went onto the streets were not social outsiders and losers. These people “had much to lose.” The slogans of the Revolution expressed not economic aspirations and the satisfaction of basic human needs but a yearning for a society in which everyone is treated with the dignity of a human person. In this sense, it is also worth noting that the Orange Revolution came about when Ukraine demonstrated steady economic growth and the social generosity of the state. This social event released channels of courage in human hearts, brought latent freedom and people’s solidarity with one another to its remarkable actualization and was for me the most outspoken confirmation of the liberating truth on the essential relationship between freedom, human dignity and selfless devotion to objective values.

¹⁴ One must always guard oneself against collapsing into the consumerist mode of social and cultural perception and thinking, against constant danger of political abuse of people’s natural needs for social comfort, as it was evidenced by the recent parliamentary elections in Ukraine where politicians of all sorts and convictions looking for immediate political success irresponsibly appealed to people’s latent consumerism thus turning them artificially into potential consumers of the alleged future benefits.