

Ukraine and the “threat” of direct democracy

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These are my own thoughts after following today’s events in Ukraine. I am cross-posting them from Immanence [1]. — A. Ivakhiv

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“Power to the millions, not to the millionaires” (#Leftmaidan)

Three forms of democracy vie with each other in Ukraine today.

The first of these is what we might call authoritarian democracy. This is a hybrid of democracy and authoritarian rule, in which partially developed democratic institutions can be relatively easily played off against each other by the powers-that-be to maintain their rule.

This form of quasi-democracy, a democracy in appearance but not necessarily in substance, has been expertly achieved in Putin’s Russia. In Ukraine, where it has not been identified with a single individual, things have been murkier: a range of oligarchic clans have tied themselves to individual figures — presidents like Kuchma and Yanukovich — who act as “guarantors” to their wealth and power. Sometimes parliamentary rule suits the power class best; sometimes it doesn’t, so, as in the case of the last four years, it is replaced by presidential rule.

The second form of democracy is the kind of liberal democracy found in states like the U.S., the U.K., France, and Germany. Here, the institutions of democracy are more developed and more transparent, and outright authoritarian rule is ruled out in principle. But wealth and power can still be amassed and hoarded in ways that enable control by proxy through the electoral system.

Multi-party states provide for alternative alliances to be formed between members of the wealthy class and different social groups. As these change over time, and participation is, in principle, open to all, there is the appearance of real options. This is the terrain of popular cultural struggle — the forms of “hegemony” and “counter-hegemony” that cultural studies scholars (such as the late Stuart Hall) have analyzed in some detail.

The third form of democracy

The third form of democracy is direct democracy, and it has been more visible in Ukraine today — precisely today — than it typically is anywhere in the world. Perhaps February 22 will one day be remembered as one of those days when direct democracy reared its head. This is a democracy of the street, where self-organized groups, forged in the fire of a three-months-long resistance movement, have begun to take on the functions of governance.

The tropes of direct democracy have been frequently heard in today's conversations in Ukraine, even if they are not identified as such. (I've spent the last 24 hours intensely following the news developments, revelations, and television and social media commentaries in Ukraine.)

Most often, people simply refer to the need for a "new system," a "different system," one led or represented by "new people" and "new heroes" who've emerged out of the Maidan itself, and who have little or no relationship to the political establishment.

Existing opposition leaders, including the three party heads and the newly released ex-prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, are heard out — and in the case of the latter, applauded and respected — but this respect is tempered by widespread acknowledgment that "we don't want to go back, we want to move forward." And where the skepticism to Tymoshenko's appearance in the Maidan was kept in check by those present, social media like Twitter and Facebook have simply let it rip. Cynicism about the past seems coupled to a belief that something different is nevertheless possible.

In line with this third form of democracy, the Maidan movement has shown a tremendous degree of self-organization. Building organized networks — for self-defense, food, supplies, medical care, transportation, strategy development, military action (if needed), and so on — is laborious work, and it can be a formative experience for those who undertake it. It leaves an imprint that can make one feel that a different way of doing things just might be viable.

The difficulty with this third form of democracy is that it's a democracy of people who, for all their recently gained insights, are people. And they may be untrained and unmolded by the system of checks and balances developed for political action by the other two forms of democracy. They have no commitment to that system. That can be scary.

Direct democracy comes from people whose faults are all too visible. They have memories like elephants. They harbor grudges. They respond with their guts. They identify with symbols and images that haven't gone through the machinery by which such things get shaped into acceptable public discourse.

The "right"

In Ukraine, some of these people — and notably many of the ones who put their lives on the line and placed themselves in the line of sniper fire a few days ago — have identified themselves with the political right. For the most part, this is not at all a right of laissez-faire economics, and it is only a right of social conservatism within fairly reasonable limits (for its cultural context). Except for one thing: nationalism.

These nationalists are defined as such by their belief in the classic nineteenth-century definition of the nation as a kind of naturally or God-given entity that unifies a people with a land. That idea is passé among many westerners, for good reason. But it has its very clear analogue on the political left. It's called internationalism. (And in Ukraine, it's partly in response to the internationalism that was imposed by the Soviet system, which many Ukrainians felt was a ruse behind which Russian chauvinism played its cards.) Take that national focus away from them, and they are not so different from those who believe in a humanity that will collectively overthrow its oppressors and institute an international regime of equality, solidarity, and communality.

Neither of these sets of beliefs is particularly deeply established in human history. They are, in fact, modern constructs. People have, of course, identified with their social groups (or tribes) and with land for a very long time. But the idea, which we now identify with the political right, that a vast

expanse of land — the second largest in Europe, in this case — should be territorially bounded, sovereign, and ruled by its own, self-identified people — is a modern idea, only a few hundred years old.

Analogously, the idea that that a biologically defined, species-wide entity called “humanity” marches forward in an upward, progressive direction toward a world of equality, fraternity, solidarity, and global community — that, too, is a very modern idea.

Ukrainian nationalists are not, in this sense, some atavistic throwback to the past. Their way of thinking is widespread, but it is a way of thinking that takes on an intensity when circumstances are difficult and no ready narrative presents itself as a solution to that difficult. (“We need to take back our country from those others who are threatening it.”)

The struggle to shape humanity into a nationally divided one or into a globally unified one — the right or the left narrative in the matter of human identity — is a struggle to be waged not just in Ukraine. It’s one of the frontiers for human self-definition in the coming century. And it’s part of the terrain that any form of direct democracy will have to engage with.

Anti-oligarchy

One of the common tropes among Maidan activists of both the right and the left is that they are against a corrupt and oligarchic regime. (That’s the case even if they acknowledge that some oligarchs have been helpful, and even as they have reached out to the oligarchs to join them and to stop propping up the Yanukovych regime.)

Neither a Russian option nor a European option holds out the promise of a non-oligarchic future for Ukraine. The latter promises greater transparency and the rule of law — which means that the wealthy will have to resort to the kinds of methods for exerting power that one finds all over the western world, in democracies of the second kind. That alone is a significant improvement over the status quo.

But some Ukrainians today are articulating the vision of a democracy of the third kind, based in a close encounter with just that. This vision of a non-oligarchic Ukraine is held by the radicals on both the right and the left.

To the extent that the Maidan continues to define itself as a democratic revolutionary movement — and some, at least, are doing that — and that those who come to represent it will continue to embody that promise, it will have created something new in the country. That won’t solve everything, and cultural as well as economic struggles of various kinds will continue.

Meanwhile, there is the open moment. It feels today to its participants as if history itself has heaved open a chasm into the unknown.

This video of a giddy, tired opposition journalist who first discovered the vacated presidential administration in Kyiv shows what this moment feels like. Note the look on her face as she says, at 0’44”, “Yanukovych fled. Like a rat.”

Translation from 0:16 on:

“Historical fact: look, I’m the first person. It’s empty here, absolutely empty. I wasn’t able to get here for months. Now I’m here. Weird. I expect no sniper will shoot me here... Yanukovych fled! Like

a rat!" [...]

[1'20":] "In the end, now we'll have to learn how to control this government. We'll have a new president, a new system of government. And we, the civic society and Spilno.tv [one of the online opposition television channels, for which this journalist works] will control this government so that a similar dictator cannot emerge."

Democracy of the third kind is never easy. I wish it well.

A. Ivakhiv

P.S.

* <http://blog.uvm.edu/aivakhiv-ukrtaz/2014/02/22/the-threat-of-direct-democracy/>

* This essay is slightly modified from the original version. For my earlier thoughts on the politics of the Ukrainian Maidan, see here:

<http://blog.uvm.edu/aivakhiv/2014/02/07/country-under-reconstruction-ukraine-the-society-of-the-provocation/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://blog.uvm.edu/aivakhiv/2014/02/22/ukraine-the-threat-of-direct-democracy/>