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“My pink socialism became red as a wound”: Impossible interview from Ukraine

Friday 25 February 2022, by [ULYANOV Anatoli](#), [YAKOVLEV Vadym](#) (Date first published: 11 February 2022).

In 2000s Ukraine, Anatoli Ulyanov co-made online media dedicated to art, culture, and politics, and became recognized for his provocative writing style.

After a series of violent attacks from the government-hired right-wing mercenaries, in 2009 Anatoli and his partner Natasha Masharova were forced to leave Ukraine, and eventually got asylum in the US. Two of their online medias were banned in Ukraine (for “blasphemy and pornography”), and in Russia (for “propaganda of homosexuality”).

In the US, Anatoli’s views became radicalized by the experience of living among the working-class and the rise of Trump. His initial stand against nationalism and for diversity and human rights evolved towards anti-imperialism, anti-racism, and socialism.

This interview with Anatoli was conducted in 2021 by the Ukrainian writer Vadim Yakovlev. No media in Ukraine has risked publishing it, including the one that commissioned it. The editors feared criminal prosecution according to Ukrainian decommunization laws.

In the current climate of military hysteria, censorship, right-wing violence, and the impunity enjoyed by those who perpetrate it, safely expressing nuanced voices that don’t fit into a nationalist narrative and the discourse of the NGO-ized civil society representing a form of Western soft power has become impossible.

Vadim Yakovlev: For the past 13 years, you have lived in exile. I remember you from the 2000s. Back then, your work was a big part of this broader movement of post-Soviet postmodernism. Now you openly express your leftist views. It doesn’t seem you have any nostalgia for the times of ideological ambivalence.

Anatoly Ulyanov: I have nothing against nostalgia, but this one isn’t mine. The events that followed the Great Recession are more significant than anything I experienced in the early 2000s. Those were the days of naïve optimism, bougie art shows, and the dawn of the right-wing. The one that robbed me of the opportunity to live and work in Ukraine. I have no sympathy for that past, although it was an integral part of my journey to all the horrifying delights of today. This recent decade reminds me of the post-Soviet 1990s that shattered my family. It has a similar intensity of ruthlessness. Yet again, we are living the death of another Giant.

V.Y.: I can see why postmodernity attracted so many people. Its irony and indifference to all kinds of ideological indoctrination seemed emancipatory.

A.U.: Yes, it was a breath of fresh air. An opportunity to mix everything, play with any idea, drag identities. It felt good. But our principles became as liquid as our gender in the process. The very sense of freedom came from unscrupulousness. It’s liberating to live disregarding any fact, bond, or

social obligation.

But then we woke up in this world of post-truth. And found ourselves being commodified symbols of market niches. Ruled by the ad-algorithms and views that change according to conjuncture. Living in the world where success and the “quality” of a human is measured by their wealth.

While high on its gas of ambiguity, many didn’t realize that postmodernism was an ideology that pretended it wasn’t one. It served the hegemony as a fertilizer. Cooking minds to accept the religion of neoliberal capitalism. Its “freedom” is all about that: there are no ideals, everything can be anything, and it means nothing; democracy has won, history is over, the world is all about you and your emotional self – take, buy, put on, eat, and stop thinking of the social price of your privatized joy.

It’s possible to be happy in such a world. But one must be either stupid, living in a social bubble, or a rich, self-obsessed sociopath.

V.Y.: Years later, we can see this cynical postmodernity in action. Putin has adopted it to establish his autocracy. It also serves the Ukrainian national-democrats to reinforce their elitist privileges and marginalize dissenters.

A.U.: It’s because statements are secondary to the material conditions that define all social and political forms. What matters is not how we string together words, or even what moral aspirations are fueling them, but how the production and distribution of material goods are organized. Property relations. Class. And it is important to see the interests of what class the economic system, the policies, or the people who compose lyrics, serve.

V.Y.: In Western societies, the postmodern paradigm, used to set a neoliberal course, has led to humanization on various levels. But in the former Soviet Union, the postmodern has been more of a protective reaction to the unreflected shock of the fall of communism and the arrival of capitalism with a not very human face.

A.U.: There is no “capitalism with a human face.” It is impossible to exploit people humanly. And capitalism is impossible without exploitation, profit extraction is its inherent condition. The regional differences between capitalisms correspond to the differences in the material development of the regions in question. Both Putin’s regime, brought to us by US-backed liberals; and Ukrainian nationalists, who rose from the yeast of the US-backed Maidan, are products of the market empire and its triumph in 1991. I see no point to break it down into “good” and “bad” capitalism. We all live in the same interconnected historical reality.

V.Y.: Becoming a leftist meant to overcome this paradigm? Was it the experience of life in the U.S., the citadel of capitalism and Western imperialism, that made you fall in love with communism?

A.U.: I became a communist after the capitulation of Bernie Sanders amid the BLM uprising of 2020. After everything I’ve seen during the pandemic: no hospital beds, mass graves dug by the convicts, families evicted, and then billionaires blooming like leeches over the suffering of the whole world – my “pink socialism” became red as a wound.

When I saw militarized cops beating the soul out of unarmed Black teenagers – there was no Imaginary America left in me anymore. The myth that was fed to me my whole life by Hollywood, Radio Liberty, and other colonial actors dissolved.

The imperial behemoth who told me that I am the brute from the totalitarian snowdrift, and that it’s

I who should accept the “democracy” of a Western Savior – the one who imposed a contemptuous view of my history – that beast became exposed.

Another contributing factor was the decommunization in Ukraine. Under the guise of “the fight against totalitarianism,” the right has purged Ukrainian politics of dissent and declared people like myself ethnically inferior, equal to fascist occupiers, enemies, speaking “dog’s language.” The only way of belonging they offered to people like me was guilt, self-hate, and subordination.

V.Y.: When you say “people like me,” who are you referring to?

A.U.: I grew up in a Soviet, Russian-speaking family. So for me, decommunization was an extension of my exclusion from Ukraine.

At first, the nationalists said: “Bear with us because we have suffered so much.” Then, as they grew in strength, they started saying, “Accept our national order or get out.” I will never forget how one of my classmates at the University of Journalism in Kyiv changed overnight amid the Orange Revolution of 2004. “You oppressed us for 70 years. Now is our turn,” he told me.

The Ukrainian right used the social dynamics of the past to justify their arbitrariness in the present. The tendency to oust the “wrong Ukrainians” and the bizarre concept of a “titular nation” have turned millions of people into second-class citizens.

This transformation of oppressed into oppressor concerns me greatly. It reveals this swinging historical inertia that turns life into an endless loop of domination and revenge.

My work against nationalism, decommunization, and the market empire is for human dignity, inclusion, and equality. I pride myself with whatever vile labels conservatives use to mark people like me. If someone wants to dismiss the Soviet experience as alien, expel everything Russian from themselves, trample on their parents’ culture, I, on the contrary, accept it all as the ingredients of myself. Not only because these elements are related to my truth, but also because of their own qualities. Socialism is much more attractive to me than anything that the status quo offers – both in the US and in Ukraine, where there is no place for me at all.

Besides, it remains viable both for the anti-capitalist struggles, revitalization of the left, and as an internationalist key to the most interesting people everywhere: dissidents, revolutionaries, activists, underground artists, but more importantly – all of the working and oppressed, whose challenging real-life experience hardened their personalities, giving them form and depth.

V.Y.: Tell us more about how your experience of exile in the U.S. has changed your worldview.

A.U.: I did not think I was running away to heaven, but I fled to the “capital of the world,” which had just elected its first Black president and looked like a starship compared to Ukraine. While I was already critical of US foreign policy, I saw a liberal as a lesser evil than a nationalist. And the U.S. as a lesser evil than Russia. But I was not yet aware of the incest between Ukrainian nationalism, Russian autocracy, and Western imperialism.

I had come to the U.S. as a politicized bohemian libertine. I called my opponents “conservatives.” That included nationalists, traditionalists, homophobes, patriarchs, religious fanatics. Left ideas were present in me, but I hadn’t yet identified myself as a leftist. At that time, I associated the left with totalitarian collectivism. Or with people who spray ACAB on the wall before getting stoned in their parents’ garage. None of that corresponded either to my class or the consciousness that accompanied it. As petty-bourgeois, I imagined myself as a “creative persona,” “not like everyone

else,” and contrasted myself to the “masses” as the carriers of conservatism.

V.Y.: In what social milieu did you find yourself?

A.U.: In Ukraine, my milieu was the middle-class intelligentsia. But after moving to the U.S. I found myself in a different class, settling in the only neighborhoods I could afford – working-class, immigrant, of color. Like Crown Heights in Brooklyn or Westlake in L.A. This new social environment triggered my political awakening. It opened up a different perspective on the U.S., its history, and the reality of the “land of the free.” My immigrant experience with the US system, institutions, and everyday life in America only exacerbated this critical view. And pushed me to reassess myself.

V.Y.: What do you mean by reassess?

A.U.: For an immigrant, resocialization raises questions of belonging and identity. Look, I am a political refugee from Ukraine. And here I sit in a bureaucratic limbo, seeking asylum from a country that is revealed to me as an oligarchic police state. In the process, I learn that this country, the very country I’m asking to protect me, backed the geopolitical projects that have driven me into exile. Meanwhile, war and hysteria swallow Ukraine. Censorship and violence are rising to exclude anyone who doesn’t fit the new patriotic standards. The state of being trapped in-between two fires, living somewhere and nowhere at the same time, lacking the sense of belonging, is something that makes you address those aching questions like “who are you,” and “where are you going?”

V.Y.: What was the main challenge of your class transition?

A.U.: The racial aspect of it. You see, I wasn’t “white” when I arrived. I mean, I knew that people could be of different colors, but I had no understanding of race as a social construct. My skin color was never part of my identity. The Soviet text provided me with a decolonial concept of “people’s friendship.” But here, in the U.S., I felt that race was everywhere and that I “should” align myself with it, which is a condition of assimilation in this country as well as a tool of social control. To separate me from the people in the hood I’m living in, and “gentrifying” it by my very presence in this skin that contributes to an advancement of the ruling class. These artificial yet established borders are at the heart of my conflict with American society. The only people I’m interested in connecting in the U.S. are those I’m not “supposed” to connect with here by design. A design that implies competitive loneliness.

V.Y.: How would you describe the political situation that you faced in the U.S.?

A.U.: The global response to the Great Recession was the rise of right-wing sentiments. Political polarization has intensified. As well as the left mobilization of youth in the West. Systemic racism, immigrant families separated and caged on the border to the promised land, veterans living in tents, and, finally, Trump brought me into the Democratic Socialists of America.

V.Y.: Ukraine’s postcoloniality is mainly associated with Russia. Thus, it’s instrumentalized by nationalists to racialize Russian speakers, ethnic minorities, and dissidents. No one in Ukraine uses postcolonial theory as a tool to criticize Western imperialism.

A.U.: Unfortunately, the post-Soviet space, and Ukraine in particular, is one of those forefront colonial enclaves of the market empire. If the American dream is still alive, it is alive there, in ideal conditions for its cargo-cult.

Our people made this belated bet on capitalism. So now, trapped within the mindset of post-purchase rationalization, having this post-Soviet allergy to anything remotely leftist, they crawl over the Polish strawberry fields into another “bright future,” that holds nothing for us but rubber gloves

to clean Italian toilets. Only a few of us have a chance at “success.” Which is to join the machine of exploitation as its colonial administrators, lower managers, and privileged servants.

Neocolonialism remains invisible to us. When Crimea is annexed, we understand it: soldiers, guns – classics... But “independence” on IMF loans that our children and their children won’t be able to pay back; Carpathian trees becoming IKEA chairs; the aspiration to join the imperial military bloc NATO, written in the Constitution of our sovereign state – none of this alarms us... This is our way of “European integration” – to pimp our Motherland to “the better master.” We keep telling ourselves that it’s not capitalism that brings us to our current problems, but rather the lack of it. So we’re going deeper into the swamps of the market empire, trying to purge ourselves from our past and replace it with the imported present of “true capitalism.” This is a casino fever.

V.Y.: How would you describe the problem of racism and the consequences of the colonial era in the U.S.?

A.U.: Without knowing the history of colonialism, it is difficult to understand what the empire is, at whose expense capitalism develops, why New York has skyscrapers while Nairobi has slums, how it all connected, where the wealth of all those white Westerners who now teach us human rights came from, and how to recognize the machinery of colonialism today.

The problem of racism, which is systemic and passive-aggressively subtle in the U.S. now, is not about calling names. It is about the way schools, hospitals, police, courts work. How goods, resources, status, access, and opportunities are dislocated across different social groups. Thus, racism is a class problem. And the issue of race is not as much a question of phenotype as of place in the hierarchy, and prospects of the people who are subordinated to its inherent injustice.

V.Y.: Nevertheless, one cannot substitute race for class. Racism does exist. And by the color of the skin in particular.

A.U.: Well, of course. I’m not talking about substituting class for race but about their interconnection in American society. It’s not that skin color doesn’t matter. It’s that race is fused with class, which in the U.S. is a “class of color.” That is to say, classes are historically racialized in the U.S.

Both race and class are part of the machinery of social control and of the reproduction of the system that relies on exploitation. The owners of this system need to nurture and maintain the segregated have-nots so they serve them in the process of profit extraction. Accompanied by the fragmentation of the oppressed, this mechanism is crucial to preserve the status quo of those in power.

Colonizers invented a “savage” to justify and develop the system of racial oppression. In doing so, they invented themselves as white men. Thus, this bond, this relationship, and the hierarchy they so fanatically preserve was created. In other words, whites need Black people to be white, to be themselves.

Now, who is poor in the U.S.? Like everywhere else, the most exploited and oppressed segments of the population. Which here are the victims of colonialism, genocide, slavery, segregation, racism, i.e. the racialized subjects. To grasp the full depth of the crime American society is rooted in, we need to comprehend this complex dialectic between race, identity, and class. We cannot remove the race from the class. But neither can we take the class out of the race. In the mechanics of capitalism, they are interconnected, feeding each other and serving an unchanging purpose: the reproduction of a certain social order.

V.Y.: In Ukraine, many believe that a “dictatorship of minorities” is taking shape in the West.

A.U.: Minorities are not the problem. The problem are those in power who exploit identities to prevent solidarity.

One should not confuse neoliberal identity politics with the nuanced agendas rooted in the realities of different communities. The fact that elites exploit the BLM movement or a rainbow flag for electoral spectacle doesn't mean that the struggles of the people aren't real.

The fear of “minorities’ dictatorship” is a right-wing hoax. The only minority in power whose dictatorship should be our concern is the minority of the super-rich.

V.Y.: When Ukraine introduced quotas for Ukrainian language in the media, those who supported this offered the following reasoning: the Ukrainian and the Russian languages cannot coexist on an equal footing without regulation by the state, because the Ukrainian language has been oppressed for centuries, and needs a boost. It would seem, based on our postcolonial rhetoric, that we should be the loudest supporters of BLM, and yet it's quite the opposite - a lot of Ukrainians are siding with the white supremacists on the question of African-American rights.

A.U.: It's sad to see Ukrainians who side with the oppressor while being unable to recognize themselves in the oppressed. Many of us tend to prefer the illusion of our belonging to the White man. Seeing ourselves as Europeans. Like the Germans or French. But the reality is we're not. And they'll never see us as equals. To the imperial nations, we're the “savages” to be “civilized.” The source of cheap labor, hot chicks, and resources to feed the empire. After being “liberated” and colonized, we became the North of the Global South. So instead of licking the boots of our colonizers, we better connect with the other wretched, and learn from their experience of decolonial liberation. After all, we first met neocolonialism in the 1990s while people of Africa and Latin America have been acquainted with this beast for much longer. They know better how it moves.

V.Y.: Since Euromaidan, feminists and the LGBTQ community have become more visible in Ukraine. Western donors fund organizations in the civilian sector and push Ukrainian politicians to be more attentive to gender equality and the protection of LGBTQ rights. Pride marches and marches for women's rights happen every year. But left ideas are hardly ever heard at these events. Liberal nationalists dominate the discourse. Feminism and the struggle for LGBTQ rights are going hand in hand with capitalism, nationalism, and militarism. It's not very common to hear our feminists and queers criticizing Western imperialism. After all, it is uncomfortable to criticize the hand that feeds you.

A.U.: The lack of leftists in the Ukrainian LGBTQ community reflects the lack of leftists in the Ukrainian public sphere in general. Which is the result of this broader post-Soviet “decommunization” of Ukrainian society, and the right-wing violence that accompanies it. Having said that, the Ukrainian leftists bear a part of the responsibility for this lack as well.

Many of us are stuck in Marxist orthodoxy and rely on pure class analysis while ignoring the complexity of modern social structures. We tend to disregard peoples' identities as a bourgeois whim. As a result, we are failing to incorporate nuanced agendas of different communities into our programs. We say “hey, forget about your race, ignore your gender, it's not important - what's important is class. Here is the giant book from the 19th century. It explains everything in the most boring way possible. Now read it and come to us afterward.” No surprise LGBTQ people drive themselves into neoliberal NGOs, where they are recognized and soon become the weaponized soft

power of the market empire.

Instead of blaming individualism for the lack of solidarity, the left should build bridges between different social groups. And show people that their diverse struggles are connected and rooted in the mechanics of the class society we have to erode and dismantle. If we'll be able to reveal not only the general picture of systemic class divisions but also how they affect us all in our kinky diversity, solidarity will once again become a possibility.

The monolithic working class no longer exists. Therefore, we need to develop our theory, update our practice, and navigate through complex and fragmented social structures.

V.Y.: If we talk about the Ukrainian left, it is still an extremely heterogeneous milieu. There are leftists who pay attention to the voice of women, LGBTQ, and other oppressed groups. And there are outright archaists, who think that nothing has changed in the world since Lenin and Trotsky.

A.U.: I'm not interested in sectarian wars. All I can say is that the label "leftist" seems growingly empty to me. I prefer to say it bluntly: I am a communist. Without the shy prefix "democratic," as if anything undemocratic can be truly socialist. I don't want to hide under the umbrella of vague leftism. I want the dream of a classless society to be clear. Revitalized by the new generations, full of pride.

Our Marxist orthodox have a lot to learn from the developments of the Western Left. Just like the Western Left could power themselves up by rediscovering the core of Marxism, arming themselves with the most powerful weapon communists have, which is dialectic materialism. Without it, our socialism is a bucket of dead dogmas and good intentions.

V.Y.: What can you say about the LGBTQ movement in the U.S.? Is there a lack of an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and intersectional approach to the theme of oppression?

A.U.: I see no deficit of left ideas in the U.S. The bigger problem here is how authorities deal with these ideas. In Ukraine, they suppress them with violence and prohibition. In the U.S., the system simply co-opts everything. I won't be surprised if it can absorb cannibals into moderate centrists.

The Democratic Party has its house socialists, appropriates left slogans, and reduces it all to moral exclamations within identity politics. It disarms the left by turning their agenda into a shiny sticker on the façade of the status quo.

We are used to seeing our enemies as conservative and aggressive men who are stuck in the past of their caves. But in the U.S. the major villains are people like Bezos or Musk whose "caves" are covered with rainbow flags, the BLM fists, and the MeToo hashtags. They are fluent in the new ethics, understand the progressive rhetoric, know whom to cancel, and they drink the blood of their workers with a welcoming smile, inclusively.

Like every other community, LGBTQ has its bourgeoisie, which speaks for the whole of the community from specific class positions. Is there actual solidarity between white middle-class housewives at the Women's March and those Latina women who serve them sausages while they are listening to the wisdom of Hollywood stars? What can the white gay couple from WEHO know about the interests of a Black transgender woman who lives in a tent? We connect all these people with the word "community," but are they really one? I'm not sure. What I'm sure of is that we need to pay more attention to the material conditions that define peoples' lives. And improve those first.

V.Y.: It is difficult to talk about communism as an alternative to capitalism in Ukraine. Not

only because of the ban on communist ideology, but also because of the recent experience of building communism in Ukraine. An experience that has left an ambiguous and dramatic mark on many Ukrainian families.

A.U.: Global warming leaves no alternative to breaking up with capitalism but the death of mankind. We might have different opinions regarding what should replace capitalism. What is fundamental to understand here is that capitalism cannot be fixed. And that it is not the final point in the development of humanity after which there will be nothing but better capitalism. Our efforts must be directed not towards improving the status quo or criticizing its alternatives based on examples from the past, but towards the exodus from capitalism in the present. What we need is to connect and fight the exploitation which holds us back, and the inequality that quells the full bloom of all human beings.

Anatoli Ulyanov
Vadim Yakovlev

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P.S.

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