

Class, values, and revolutions in the Russia-Ukraine war

Friday 8 March 2024, by [ISHCHENKO Volodymyr](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2024).

Chris Hann's essay serves as a valuable intervention against the tendency to normalize primordial ethnonationalism following the full-scale Russian invasion. It is not immune to the common pitfalls and omissions in the writings of many authors whose point of criticism is aimed primarily at the role of Western elites in the conflict within and around Ukraine. But surely, Hann's core argument contains essential truths. Many social scientists have contributed to the construction of a theoretically shallow, methodologically nationalist, and culturally essentializing narrative. It is a telling fact that someone engaging the discussion has to begin with some basic facts of Ukrainian national identity formation, such as its diversity, or has to remind that the interests of the Western ruling classes in the war do not necessarily coincide with the interests of the Ukrainian subaltern classes, or that those are also likely to diverge from the interests and ideologies of their own comprador middle classes calling themselves "civil society."

Indeed, it is disturbing how acceptable some truly obscurantist and politically reactionary arguments have become since 2022—worse, that they are regularly cloaked in fashionable buzzwords like “decoloniality,” “agency,” and “self-determination” (Ishchenko 2022b; Maxwell 2022). The Russian invasion provided an opportunity for liberal scholars to attack in one go, as almost the culprits of Ukrainian suffering, some of the major theoretical advancements of recent decades, including, for example, modernist theories of nationalism, the critiques of neoliberal democratization and modernization paradigms, Marxist theories of imperialism and dependency, and world-systems analysis. We are witnessing a kind of replay of a Fukuyama moment, when a sudden political event is used to revise the results of long-standing theoretical debates and to advance arguments whose validity is highly questionable from the outset but that, thanks to their superficial suitability to the political moment, gain dominance.

However, there are also problems with Hann's argument. Against the imperialist perspective, characterized by the notion that non-Western societies must emulate Western institutions and ideologies, Hann asserts that alternative modernities can be built on non-Western “values” that many, if not most, Ukrainians share with Russians. Do we really need to reinvent Huntingtonian arguments about “primordial civilizations,” arguments that now also serve as the ideological background for Putin's rhetoric about the multipolar world? One cannot derive “values” unproblematically from a supposedly durable cultural substrate; they are always also ideological representations and, as with other ideological processes, they depend on the power structures and material forces that produce, reproduce, and change them. In the case of Ukraine, values are a slippery thing.

Hann is right that the historical great power rivalry over the territory and people of what is now Ukraine produced divergent variants of Ukrainian national identity. He refers to them as “exclusive” and “inclusive” (in relation to Russian), and this is one of the typical scholarly ways of approaching

the notorious East-West divide in post-Soviet Ukrainian politics. [1] The radicalization of the contentious politics between what we may call for the sake of brevity the “Eastern” and “Western” political camps in Ukraine set the stage for a series of escalatory processes, starting with the Euromaidan revolution in 2014 and followed by the war in Donbass and its expansion with Russia’s full-scale invasion.

In recent publications I argued that this escalation was a result of the profound asymmetry in political capacity between the Western and Eastern political camps in post-Soviet Ukraine (Ishchenko 2023a). Particularly in the final stages, the latter camp failed to articulate an attractive nation-building project for Ukraine that would be compatible with the Minsk accords and that could be supported by civic mobilization, a project that should have been offered from within Ukraine rather than one being perceived as externally imposed by Russia (Ishchenko 2023b).

However, to reduce this asymmetry in hegemonic capacity between the two camps to Russia’s weak position in relation to its Western rivals would be too static and simplistic. It would miss the issue of how exactly a large group of Ukrainians with Russia-inclusivist identity came into being (a fact that Hann derives problematically from the shared and enduring East Slavic “civilizational” substrate). What played a key role here were the processes of Soviet social revolution and its degradation over time, including their impact on the asymmetrical ability to claim leadership of a national development project in the post-Soviet period.

The Russia-exclusivist identity (in Hann’s definition) took root in Galicia not only because it was instrumental in legitimizing the imperial interests of the Habsburg Empire in competition with those of the Romanovs, but also because the former was able to educate the masses of Galician peasants in this identity before they joined the rest of Ukraine in the Soviet state during World War II (Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006). On the eve of World War I, most of the population of Eastern Galicia was already literate and almost all children attended school, while Ukrainians in the Russian Empire remained predominantly illiterate. This is the key explanation of why the *maloros* identity [2] did not take hold to the same extent on the territory of the Russian Empire and soon lost its bearers with its collapse. Soviet nation-building was different—both in concept (articulating Ukrainian identity as distinct but “fraternal” in relation to Russian) and, more importantly, in the fact that it was promoted in a modernizing breakthrough in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution: starting with the mass schooling of the illiterate majority in the first postrevolutionary decades, but also with rapid industrialization, urbanization, politicization, and before long improvement of living standards and welfare (Kotkin 2001).

Contrary to Putin, the Bolshevik Revolution did not usher in an “artificial” creation of Ukraine but rather the opposite: the expansion and deepening of an inclusivist modern Ukrainian identity. Precisely because switching to the Russian language became a part of modern social advancement for many formerly Ukrainian-speaking peasants, it formed the basis for a durable identity of a large group of Soviet Ukrainians (Ishchenko 2024). Precisely because the post-Soviet transformations in Ukraine were a demodernizing crisis, these Russian-speaking Ukrainians did not return immediately, en masse, and “in freedom” to the Ukrainian language. During the post-Soviet crisis, the divergence of Ukrainian inclusivist and exclusivist identities was only reproduced. All the observed shifts to the latter have come only in response to Russian aggressive actions, and Hann is right to question how sustainable they have been and whether they represent a positive embrace of the “Western” project.

This is essential: Ukraine’s East-West divide was the nationally specific articulation of the class conflict common to most other post-Soviet societies between, on the one hand, local political capitalists and, on the other, professional middle classes allied with transnational capital organized under US hegemony. The ability of the political representatives of the Russia-inclusivist Ukrainian identity to universalize their particular interests and defend them through civic mobilization and

contentious politics was significantly weaker than those of the “Western” camp’s civil society. Although the project of Euro-Atlantic integration was partly delusional (at least until 2022) and partly marginalizing for large sections of Ukrainian workers, the “Eastern” camp could offer no alternative “pro-Russian” development project beyond the continuation of post-Soviet stagnation. As a result, it could only rely on passive voters rather than an active civil society of its own. The working-class interests had no independent ideological articulation and political representation in the post-Soviet class conflict. Consequently, the maidan revolutions only reproduced and intensified the crisis of post-Soviet hegemony (Ishchenko and Zhuravlev 2021).

In earlier work I have suggested that this asymmetric political dynamic of post-Soviet class conflict lies behind the Russia-Ukraine war and is crucial for understanding why Putin resorted to the full-scale invasion at all, why he could not rely on soft power in Ukraine, and why he initially bet on destabilization and rapid decapitation of the Ukrainian state by a limited “special operation” (Ishchenko 2022a, 2023a, 2023b). Ukrainian identity and “values,” then, is a very dynamic, contested, and slippery terrain, in contrast to what a lot of commentary assumes. The future of Ukrainian identities—inclusivist or exclusivist—will also depend fundamentally on whether a new successful modernization project will be on offer after the Russia-Ukraine war, and on what terms.

Volodymyr Ishchenko

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Footnotes

[1] Such as Sakwa (2016), Petro (2023), Arel and Driscoll (2023), and ironically one of the prominent Ukrainian national-liberal intellectuals, Mykola Riabchuk (2015), from exactly the opposite political position (see Ishchenko 2023a for the discussion of the limitations of this approach and its alternatives).

[2] “Little Russians” as one of the three branches of the Russian people along with “Great Russians” and “White Russians” (Belarusians)—the national concept Putin has recently revived.