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This is Not about Europe: Reflections on Ukraine's EuroMaidan Revolution

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Back in October of 2013, all of this was practically unthinkable: Yanukovych gone; Berkut dissolved; Crimea annexed by the Russian Federation; separatist conflict in eastern regions. Hannah Arendt warns that "predictions of the future are never anything but projections of present automatic processes and procedures, that is, of occurrences that are likely to come to pass if men do not act and if nothing unexpected happens" (1970, p. 7). Ukraine's EuroMaidan revolution was thusly unexpected.

Scholars have treated EuroMaidan the way we treat most unexpected things – by attempting, through various means, to explain what it is, where it came from, and where it will be going. Many aspects of the EuroMaidan revolution – its culture, its structure, its eventful unfolding – may give a familiar 'post-Soviet' sheen to experts of this region; however, EuroMaidan also created new discourses and fostered new cultural imaginaries that require a thorough and critical re-thinking of Eastern European politics and society.

In the months following the rise of the EuroMaidan movement, and well into Ukraine's bizarre paramilitary conflict with Russia, much of the broader public discussion of these events has focused on the views and moti-

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Figure 1. Two posters from a series that were printed and hung in multiple locations around EuroMaidan. They read (Left) "There are not have not been wages. Thank you for this, Party of Regions" [in Russian]" and (Right) "Yanukovych and deputies, return our wages!" [in Ukrainian].

vations of large-scale actors: Russians, Ukrainians, radicals, separatists, and Putin, just to name a few. Questions along the lines of "Is EuroMaidan a radical movement?" and "Do people want to live with Russia or Ukraine?" have been dominating the analysis in numerous venues, from talk shows such as Democracy Now! to editorials on The Washington Post's Monkey Cage blog. This frame has also been reproduced at public talks and roundtables on the Ukrainian crisis in which I have participated in the United States, which have included question-and-answer sessions dominated by debates over which specific 'domino theory' of Eastern European politics most accurately describes the events that we see unfolding. In response to this, I join Mychailo Wynnyckyj, a sociologist from the Kyiv-Mohyla Business School, in his criticisms of such overly simplistic theoretical lenses that obviously and egregiously flatten the symbolic and phenomenological richness of the revolution (Wynnyckyj 2014).

The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to highlight that very richness. It does so by drawing on ethnographic data, both distanced observations and intimate interactions, which I collected in Kyiv throughout the winter of 2014. Specifically, I will discuss three significant features that were central to the revolutionary discourse that emerged from Kyiv's EuroMaidan: 1) the mobilization of Ukrainians across social classes; (2) local engagement national identity and 'the Nation'; and (3) the manifestation of 'dignity' amidst street warfare in Kyiv. I doing so, I consciously lend my voice to anthropologist Emily Channell-Justice's insistence that "the question of what EuroMaidan is cannot definitively be answered, [because] there will always be multiple versions of EuroMaidan" (n.d.). A such, this exposition of 'multiple EuroMaidans' contributes to a more critical re-thinking of the diverse discourses and symbolisms that have emerged in Ukraine in the wake of rapid social and political change.

A revolution across classes

The earliest protests in Kyiv's Independence Square, which took place in late November 2013, were motivated by disappointment over

the tabling of a plan for stronger European integration. It was not until the vicious police attacks of November 30 that then-president Viktor Yanukovych became cemented in the public eye as the common enemy. From that day onward, it was largely around a shared intolerance of his leadership that EuroMaidan protesters rallied, swelling dramatically in numbers and in fervor. This fact is easily demonstrated by the veritable ocean of signs and slogans at large Sunday rallies inside Independence Square, which bore messages like "Out with the bandits!" and "Yanukovych, goodbye!" This anti-Yanukovych rhetoric found an incredible amount of traction across classes, largely due to the broad effects of corrupt government policies across large portions of Ukrainian society.

In response to these concerns, working-class citizens of Ukraine mobilized in large numbers at EuroMaidan, and many were heavily involved in the protests. Even a cursory glance of the list of individuals killed by police forces during February 18–20, 2014, reveals that many of them were farmers, teachers, and construction workers (such a list can be viewed at <http://nebesnasotnya.com.ua/en>). Furthermore, working-class interests were voiced perhaps most loudly in critiques of state corruption. Kyiv city employees, for example, had gone months without receiving their wages, and EuroMaidan provided both a language and a platform for assigning responsibility for that failure. "There have been and still are no wages," read a poster that papered the walls of downtown Kyiv (see Figure 1). "Thank you for that, Party of Regions." The accusation being made is that the wages of city employees had not been paid because the money had been stolen by Yanukovych and his 'mafia'. "Yanukovych and deputies, return our wages," read another. Those stolen wages, it was claimed, had been spent by politicians on their lavish estates.

However, EuroMaidan was not simply a working-class phenomenon; middle-class activists were mobilized and heavily integrated into the protest movement as well. Ukrainian political scientist and prolific blogger Taras Voznyak made this observation as far back as December 19, 2013. "Some might think that [EuroMaidan] is a popular revolt," he wrote. This is true, and it isn't … The middle class is also tired of Donetsk's guardsmen raiding the coffers" [Ukrainian: Хтось може подумати, що це народний бунт. Це так і не так… Олігархи зацікавлені в припиненні розбійницьких експропріацій чужого бізнесу… Олігархи дозріли до переходу до широкої демократії. Всі… Середній клас теж втомився від постійних рейдерських наїздів донецьких опричників.] (Voznyak 2013). This sentiment was echoed by the leaders of a protest group called AutoMaidan,

Figure 2. Two stickers, part of a much larger series, which were prominently posted around EuroMaidan and other parts of Kyiv. They read (Left) "This is not about Europe, this is about the future of our children. Come out to Maidan." [in Russian] and (Right) "This is not against Russia, this is against the persecution of the Ukrainian language. Come out to Maidan!" [in Ukrainian].

which participated in direct action against Kyiv police forces (using their cars to transport protesters or block police access to public areas) and who self-identified as middle class. I spoke to one well-known AutoMaidan leader, Serhii Poyarkov, in late January. He told me that he and his AutoMaidan compatriots were united by their disgust at police violence, as well as by their common social status. He noted especially that their status as car owners distinguished them among EuroMaidan protesters as distinct members of the middle class. "The most active people from the middle class came to AutoMaidan," he said. "We wanted to show our protest by staging these actions near the authorities' doors."

Many EuroMaidan protesters also believed quite strongly that oligarchs had involved themselves in the struggle, working under the radar to support EuroMaidan. Since hard evidence to support this is difficult to find, it is possible, I suppose, to argue that these were nothing more than beliefs, that Ukraine's elite were not actually getting their hands dirty in the people's revolution. If it is true, however, certain events require explanation. For example, on December 11, two truckloads of orange hard hats were dropped off at EuroMaidan in anticipation of a planned (and later implemented) Berkut raid upon the camp. Multiple stories circulated about the benefactors behind this and many other donations. Most of those stories were partially true at best. The story of the origin of the hard hats that I heard most often held that the donation of helmets had been "anonymous," implying that the donor was important enough socially and politically that such secrecy was required. "It was Poroshenko," some said. "An oligarch, for sure," others insisted. "Even they are joining us now. This is how we know we are going to win."

Ultimately, EuroMaidan was successful because it mobilized and built unity across classes. This fact was illustrated, perhaps best of all, by the bottleneck that formed on the evening of February 19 at the southern-most barricade on Khreshatyk Street, at the intersection with Bohdan Khmelnytsky Street. Hundreds of vehicles lined up to deliver tires to feed the bonfires that held police forces at bay. Standing by the gates that day, I saw tires emerge from the trunks and backseats of modified Hondas, used Volkswagens, ancient Ladas, black Lexus SUVs, and brand-new Porsche Cayennes. Some even brought tires strapped to the side of a bicycle. Protesters that day were not commenting about this extraordinary breadth of citizen involvement, because, to be perfectly frank, it was by that point no longer extraordinary. This was simply what they knew their revolution to look like.

The nation

Much has been written, and many hands have been wrung, about the involvement of right-wing and ultra-nationalist groups in the EuroMaidan protests. This debate over EuroMaidan's

Figure 3. A man stands guard atop the barricade on Instituta Street. Independence Square (and the EuroMaidan encampment) is located on the other side. It was at this barricade and along Institutka Street moving away from this barricade, that dozens of Self-Defense volunteers were killed by sniper fire on February 20, 2014. This photo was taken on December 15, 2013.

Figure 4. A woman in a traditionally patterned scarf paints poppy flowers and a Tryzub, the trident that appears on the Ukrainian coat of arms.

right-wing and nationalist undercurrents (with figures like Stephen Cohen and Volodymyr Ishchenko arguing vehemently that EuroMaidan was an inherently right-wing and troublingly nationalist movement, and others like Timothy Snyder, Anton Shekhovstov, and Mychailo Wynnyckyj insisting that it was not) has been not so much a quarrel over who was and wasn't there, of what radical groups were and were not represented. Rather, I submit that the fundamental disagreement has been over what 'nationalism' actually means and how it is connected to fascism or radicalism, if at all.

A kind of nationalism did indeed take center stage at EuroMaidan; however, what should be capturing the attention of outside observers is not the fact that groups like the right-wing Svoboda (Freedom) political party and the far-right social collective Pravy Sektor (Right Sector) were present and visible at the protests. Moreover, our attention should not be unduly drawn to the types of banners that they waved or the images and symbols that they deployed. What is most notable and worthy of our attention is that, "against the wishes of its leaders, the radical youth of [groups like] Svoboda fought in considerable numbers, alongside of course people of completely different views. They fought and they took risks and they died, sometimes while trying to save others" (Snyder 2014). Many dedicated members of these so-called 'radical' groups took up arms in cooperation with so-called 'ordinary' Ukrainians against a common enemy that threatened the very dignity and livelihood of the Ukrainian nation.

This was, as least, the message transmitted by countless protestors who held signs and slapped stickers on walls and windows that read, "This is not against Russia, but against the persecution of the Ukrainian language" and "This is not for Europe, this is for the future of our children" (see Figure 2). One young man who fought the police on Hrushevskoho, with whom I spoke at length about the politics of the group Pravy Sektor, insisted that allegations of fascism or ethnically motivated nationalism were misinformed. "It's not a nationalism to the point where you hate or discriminate," he insisted. "It's rather that you really, really want [space for] things to be Ukrainian." Though there are many ways to interpret this statement, a broad appeal to social and political autonomy is by far the most compelling. Wanting 'things to be Ukrainian' is not a manifestation of some 'primordial' nationalism that requires policing of geographic, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries. Rather, it fits more closely with Katherine Verdery's definition of nationalism as "the political utilization of the symbol nation through discourse and political activity" (1993, p. 38). Numerous protestors told me that radical groups "[did] the necessary work of radicalizing ordinary Ukrainians against their oppressors" and "[made] the nation visible, so that people know what they are fighting for."

These observations should in no way be interpreted as an apologetic treatment of the political platforms of Ukraine's right-wing groups, as those platforms are legitimately problematic and socially worrisome. Rather, this is to highlight that, within the specific context of EuroMaidan, many activists were engaging with the concept of 'The Nation' as something somewhat unmoored from the modern nation-state as an institution, grounded instead in the specific grievances of the EuroMaidan protesters and the immediate threats to the safety and well-being of those protesters. This specific motivation – the protection of personal

safety and the defense of 'dignity' – is discussed further below.

Figure 5. Homemade riot shields on display in the Ukrainian House (Ukrainskyy Dim) near the EuroMaidan encampment have been used as canvases, painted with religious icons, folk motifs, and scenes from the EuroMaidan protests.

The art of war

The Berkut attacks of November 30, 2013, christened the EuroMaidan revolution in blood, and violence, in various forms, has shaped the movement ever since. The Ukrainian riot police are an obvious example of that violence. Uniformed men without names, without rank, without badge or identification numbers of any kind, their faces hidden behind helmets and masks, waged a bizarre war against the crowds inside the barricades. Though he is discussing the current military occupants of the Crimean Peninsula, Alexei Yurchak's description of "a pure naked military force – a force … without a face, without identity, without a clearly articulated goal" (Yurchak 2014) also applies here. Outside of the barricades, bands of 'titushky', government-hired thugs and gangs, roamed the streets, terrorizing activists and protesters as they wandered from the safety of EuroMaidan's interior. They created a visceral, fear-riddled experience of what Anna Fournier has called the "bandit state" in which the "randomness of street criminals" is given terrifying coherence by the "intentionality of state officials" who direct them (2012, p. 17).

It is in the way that EuroMaidan activists met this violence that I perceive most vividly what has been called a "declaration of dignity" (Wynnyckyj 2014). Protesters met those who attacked them in kind, of course, wearing body armor, bearing homemade shields and cudgels, forming organized squadrons and patrolling the barricades with an impressive level of tactical expertise. Though much of the fighting may have looked the same to outsiders, it must be emphasized that the purpose of these engagements by protesters and by government forces could not have been more different. The goal of government forces (both official and unofficial) was to intimidate and incite a violent response. It was violence designed to beget violence. The purpose of the EuroMaidan Self-Defense brigade was self-defense. They guarded against physical threats to the people inside the barricades as well as "a worldview that leaves no conceptual space for a regime that tortures, maims, and hunts down its own citizens" (Wynnyckyj 2014).

Though there is much to be said on this, my defense of this claim will, here, be limited to two significant points. The first is the observation that the most widespread and consistent military tactics (if we can call them that) used by the EuroMaidan Self-Defense brigades were de-escalation tactics. They were designed not to counter the violence of the police, but to render that violence infeasible. The epitome of this de-escalation technology was the barricades themselves (see Figure 3). The walls made of snow, barrels, and barbed wire had no conceivable mechanism other than a defensive one. They were designed to stop police from entering the square and, in the event that this failed, to slow them down. They were built to make physical attacks on crowds of protesters a practical impossibility.

The tire fires served a similar purpose. Massive walls of smoke and flame, stoked and fed by activists for days at a time, were a strategically implemented tactic used for a single purpose: to protect citizens from the police. Rubber burns

very hot, and it burns very slow. It releases a thick cloud of black smoke that rendered protesters invisible to shotgun- and grenade-wielding police on the other side. Ukrainians understood this very well. Why else would thousands of Kyiv's residents flock to the barricades, creating traffic jams that went on for blocks, to bring more tires each day that activists were shot and killed? When the first tire fires were lit between police and protesters on Hrushevskoho Street, EuroMaidan activists immediately built a barricade behind that fire. When the flames died down, police found themselves physically barred from rushing and provoking the protesters. This strategy successfully quelled the violence on that street for nearly a month.

The second observation is how the material culture of street warfare became incorporated into the artistic enterprises of EuroMaidan, in which both Ukraine's historical culture and the lived reality of the protests themselves were imagined and re-imagined in visual art form. The orange hard hats that became a standard element of the EuroMaidan volunteer 'uniform' were painted with elaborate designs mimicking traditional Ukrainian embroidery and artistic tropes (see Figure 4). The very riot shields that Self-Defense volunteers carried with them were painted with religious images, folk art themes, depictions of EuroMaidan events, and idealized portraits of Ukrainian citizens, men, and women alike, joining hands under the words "Our strength is our united hearts" (see Figure 5). These technologies of conflict were engaged in artistic self-expression that embodied shared cultural values as well as a shared reluctance to enter into violent conflict. This creative repurposing evoked a shared Ukrainian identity that valued creative aspiration above the use of violence for wielding social authority and control.

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What's been heard and what's been missed

The features illustrated here contribute to a more thorough intellectual rendering of the EuroMaidan revolution, yet it renders one that is necessarily incomplete. More work is needed – both theoretical and ethnographic – to give depth to our understanding of these events. The work of anthropologist Emily Channell-Justice, who has been present in Maidan since the earliest public actions in November, illustrates quite well, for example, that access to the public forum was not equitably distributed among protesters. Leftist activists, in particular have struggled to have their ideas heard. "[Their] ideas were glanced at and glossed over," Channell-Justice reports. "Or, they were trumped by more provocative slogans about equality, tolerance, and feminism" (n.d.). Channell-Justice also calls our attention to the cultural black boxing of certain forms of militarism at EuroMaidan. "While all needs, including food and healthcare, were provided, it relied strongly on a militarized protective structure to guarantee the well-being of participants. Criticisms about this type of militarization and the hierarchies it can reproduce – in its own organization as well as between militants and 'civilians' – were not part of the discussion [at the Maidan]" (Channell-Justice n.d.).

Despite these limitations, these details of the EuroMaidan revolution, described here, can contribute to a theoretical vocabulary with which to talk about Ukraine's recent history that has been generated by Ukrainians to describe the revolution that they have lived through. Though our ability to predict the coming future will remain as scattered and piecemeal as it has always been, we must foster conscious inclusion of emic concepts such as these into larger analytical discussions about the EuroMaidan revolution. This is critical to our ability to understand new events and transformations as they come, and to be in a truer and more open conversation with the new Ukraine.

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