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The Language of Dystopia

The Ideological Situation in Ukraine

Since independence, Ukrainian political discourse has come to be dominated by a language that facilitates state control over a static confrontation between regionally based conservatisms, each rooted in its own historically conditioned sense of resentment.

Today, as in the past, Ukraine is a field of struggle between state and country—and not, as many think, between West and East or between Europe and Russia. By ancient pan-Russian tradition, the culturally, regionally, and ethnically diverse country is an attractive target for the power elite and for state institutions, which from century to century try to establish control over the land and over the minds of the people who inhabit it. By the same tradition, the country extricates itself, hides in the shadows from vigilant eyes and greedy hands, and buys its freedom with bribes, destroying the state's effectiveness with a saving corruption. The age-old struggle between the power elite and the subordinated population began, if we are to believe the chronicles, with the Norse invasion, and it continues. There is no end to it!

As always, the options and motives of the warring sides are not the same. The country tries to survive and to preserve itself and its web of

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traditions, which are often unspoken and invisible to the mind of the statesman. The state, for its part, strives to legitimize the supremacy of its own interests by all available means. The state has an important advantage in this confrontation: the self-descriptive language of the contemporary world works in its favor. The nomenclature of this language operates with binary oppositions of the Manichean kind. Only phenomena that have a dual nature are susceptible to political verbalization: the struggle between western and eastern Ukraine, the cultural confrontation between linguistic groups, geopolitical orientation toward Moscow or Brussels. In the language of “either–or” there is no place for a “third path,” for horizontal relations and neutral decisions.

Two Conservatismisms

The language of our contemporary world and its fundamental grammar make the struggle between the country and the state imperceptible. It seems that the very structure of this language is designed to divert our gaze from what really exists. The tension of the Ukrainian ideological field is created by the binary oppositions of the language of the contemporary world. These oppositions determine its lexical norms, which create an articulable—and therefore also visible—reality. Because of the grammar and lexicon of contemporary language, the state, not the country, offers value orientations for sociopolitical interaction. This offering is meager, confined to two conservatismisms, based on the country’s cultural “breaks”—on the resentiments of the people who populate Ukraine’s expanses.

In this context, I interpret *ressentiment* as a special sociopsychic process that unites substantial groups of people and is generated by shared traumatic experience. Ressentiment is a component of collective memory, a sort of *pain of remembrance* whose cause is articulated in terms of some actual, inescapably but unjustly co-present Other. It does not matter whether the trauma itself existed in reality; the important point is that it is *remembered*—and remembered in such a way that it creates in large groups a feeling of unity in political or social action. The traumatic experience builds up over a fairly long period, becoming a sort of superego that prescribes for affected personalities (that is, for people who accept an identity based on ressentiment) a definite, emotionally colored appraisal of any significant social phenomenon. Gradually the ressentiment becomes a standard for judging events and a meaningful

cultural compass. It exerts influence not only on appraisals of past social experience but also on expectations of a shared future.

As a rule, resentment is a self-reproducing pain experienced by a person who has assumed one or another collective identity with all its baggage. The dialectic of collective memory is based on the fact that the memory of trauma does not find direct realization and sublation in actions motivated by resentment. The irrational memory that bears the pain is always topical, renewed, and self-fortifying. This also strengthens the irrationality of political life, which manifests itself in the dominance of ideological constructs that require the least critical thought or public display of substantive elements of social life. Such an ideological construct in Ukraine has been conservatism, as an ideology that connects the collective memory of experienced pain with primordial cultural values and that requires group—often political—action to establish a utopian order that would abolish the causes of the pain. The power of resentment has led to the boundless dominance of conservatism as a logic of political action.

For so long as society remains in search of the guilt laid on fellow citizens on the “other” side of the Dnieper, interspersed with temporary Pyrrhic victories of one of the hemispheres of the Ukrainian globe, the state can maintain undivided control over the lands that constitute the country of Ukraine. This general situation has come to be known as dystopia or anomie. As a dystopia, Ukraine has found itself in a place where any developmental impulse dies before it can set in motion a mechanism of irreversible change. As a state of anomie, Ukraine resides in a place where the values that make possible the act of social solidarity do not operate. Distrust, suspicion, and mutual disrespect make the Ukrainian dystopia a foundation of conservative beliefs.

It is important to note that in itself conservative ideology is a necessary element in the political development of any country. Conservatism, by and large, is the credo of citizens who appeal to the need to defend “traditional values”—that is, certain significant goals of the social, religious, and ethnocultural type. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, conservatism is a political ideology that justifies support for “institutions and practices that have evolved gradually and are manifestations of continuity and stability.”¹ Once, in the heat of debate, John Stuart Mill called conservatives representatives of “the stupid party.” Setting aside his political bias, we can nonetheless find a rational kernel in his words: conservatives have little interest in real historical reflection on politics in general

and on the principles governing their own political activity in particular. Indeed, students of conservative ideology have developed a consensus, which Edward Green, for instance, articulates: "Conservative[s] desire to trust instinct and experience over intellect and reason in the discussion and shaping of their response to political issues."²

The very name of this ideology indicates a strategy of protecting established norms and values. But often this protection is largely a matter of convention, in that it pertains not so much to an existing order that for some reason is under threat as to an imaginary order that supposedly existed in the past and corresponded to some ideal condition of sociopolitical life of the given "nation."

The state is seen here as the main instrument for restoring the ideal order. Michael Oakeshott has observed that conservatism "is tied to . . . certain beliefs about the activity of governing and the instruments of government."³ He has also drawn attention to the irrationality of the conservative statist credo, in which "the intimations of government are to be found in ritual, not in religion or philosophy; in the enjoyment of orderly and peaceable behavior, not in the search for truth or perfection."⁴

Conservatism needs a state that in the name of stability will protect traditional values, customs, and institutions against change.

A Common Language

Due to the coexistence of conservatives with liberals and socialists within a shared political space, a given country may ensure its own stable development, thanks in part to the competing political offerings. Such competition generates diverse and divergent solutions, giving citizens grounds for choosing goals and means of overcoming socioeconomic problems. In addition, the contest of ideologies permits various ethnic, religious, and other significant groups to create their own ecological niches. Inescapable competition limits the capacity of any single ideology to shape the life of citizens, helping them understand that the state is merely one means of satisfying their needs. Ideological competition is a guarantee of balanced social change, enabling critical intelligence and respect for tradition to keep society in a condition acceptable to individuals and groups.

Until 2004 Ukraine preserved a political pluralism within which nationalists, socialists, and sporadically arising liberal groups balanced one another. After the events somewhat hastily named the Orange Revolution,

however, the Ukrainian political space converted itself into a “conservative situation.” For this reason, since 2005 our self-descriptive lexicon has reverted to ancient conservative concepts. Instead of increasingly complex political communication conditioned by ideological competition and by an evolving political logic, we have seen ideological simplification, diverse forms of political reasoning and worldviews reduced to a single semantic field. The political debates during the elections of 2007 and 2009–10 confirmed the persistence and vitality of this trend. Compensating for the unipolarity of the ideological field, political antagonism in Ukraine characterizes relations not among ideological opponents but between territories.

Although the undivided dominance of conservatism encompasses the entire country, its two halves live under the influence of different types of resentment. Our lands have diverged in political confrontation under the impact of two traumatic experiences of the twentieth century. The trauma of western Ukraine is associated with the tragic experience of rural communities in which the decisive factor was forcible and accelerated “Soviet modernization,” combined with the “ethnocultural loneliness” that emerged as a consequence of the Holocaust and of the postwar transborder resettlement of Poles and Ukrainians. This trauma was manifested in the fixation of social attention on the imagined ethnic component of political events. For the eastern and southern Ukrainian lands, the trauma was associated with civil war, industrialization, collectivization, the Holodomor [famine of 1932–33—Trans.], and Nazi occupation. This trauma emphasizes the nonethnic social component. The two resentments address themselves to different collective memories and lead to a dystopian political confrontation that goes beyond rational bounds. In this way, they prepare the soil for the coexistence of two types of conservatism: one calling for the preservation of illusory agrarian and tribal traditions of “state building” and based on self-isolation and a monoethnic vision of the country; the other characterized by a desire to protect Soviet “achievements” and to overcome ethnicity, coupled with a post-Soviet incomprehension of the potential of civil society. Neither supports its founding principles or intentions by critical examination or public discussion.

Over the two decades of Ukrainian independence—for local cultures, a time of heightened reactions to vital challenges—a common language has arisen. Designed to avoid touching both eastern and western sore spots, it is incapable of describing the unique experiences of culturally

diverse regional communities. This language sets the rules for the linguistic game of dystopia. At the same time, it fully corresponds to the state's desire to establish control over citizens and their (existing and possible) associations within Ukrainian borders. An interesting point is that this language fully satisfies neither the Soviet–industrial East nor the nationalist–agrarian West. Since it emerged in the 1990s, it has been able to sustain a minimal viability for the dystopian political system. But although this language is intended to hold resentments in check, it constantly reproduces and strengthens them.

The clash of conservatisms never ameliorates political confrontation or solves the vital problems of Ukrainian society. The conservative lexicon refers to a logic in which exclusivity prevails over inclusivity. The state and the elite benefit from this exclusive language, which sustains the dystopia that enables the state to keep the country under control. It does little, however, in terms of building a civil society and modernizing the country. Within this language's area of operation, people cannot attain a rational consensus that provides space for political competition, but they can maintain a consensus based on the state's interest—that is, on a conservative ideology that exalts and strengthens the state. The state becomes an authority that makes endless demands on the citizen and interferes in the most delicate spheres of human life—including the matter of ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity.

Viktor Yushchenko's attempts to base Ukrainian statehood on ethnic nationalism further exacerbated the discord between the sections of Ukraine. Nationalism, regarded as a swear word in the 1980s and the 1990s, acquired a legitimate place in Ukrainian political discourse. Its supporters among intellectuals and politicians assert that it remains the sole means of overcoming the burdens of imperialism and therefore the main instrument of social modernization. Although the first argument had some justification, the second assertion, which lacked theoretical substantiation from the start, was discredited in practice by the governance of the "Orange" team in 2005–9.

The Struggle Between the State and the Country

According to the nationalist credo—as formulated by the Romanian historian Vladimir Tismaneanu, a dominant influence on East European intellectuals—the mission of nationalism is to legitimize the new countries that emerged after the collapse of the communist bloc.⁵ Nationalism,

thus understood, has succeeded in some places, although—in the Balkans, for example—at an incredibly high price. In Ukraine ethnic nationalism has strengthened resentment, weakened the sociopolitical structures that maintain the unity of the country, and contributed to the demodernization of Ukrainian society.

The attempt to affirm a new political identity for Ukrainian citizens with the aid of state institutions has led to the formation of a special rhetoric that parliamentary parties regularly use in appealing to the electorate. The logic of this kind of communication is based on essentialism—the attitude that treats race, ethnicity, gender, and class as eternal substances that possess a fixed set of key characteristics. In the political rhetoric of Ukraine, this logic manifests itself in discussion of the ontological differences between and fundamental incompatibility of Occident and Orient, the Kiev and Moscow patriarchates, or “eastern” and “western” Ukrainians. Normative value is ascribed here to only one of these “essences”; phenomena with the opposite characteristics are a priori abnormal, incorrect, and threatening.

Conservative thinking based on an essentialist logic results in the appraisal of political events and the planning of political actions according to the “ours–not ours” [*svoe–chuzhoe*] criterion. Here “ours” is invariably ascribed moderately positive and “not ours” radically negative characteristics. Constant use of this scale leads citizens to a special type of political action in which the issue of responsibility, as a rule, never finds a concrete addressee. By referring to an ontological system of values, conservatism simplifies political judgment; *not ours* is always to blame for the defects and problems of the contemporary world, never *ours*. In estranging the *other*, an individual imagines himself in terms of authentic affiliation with an exclusive, rooted group whose characteristics appear as his own ontological structures.

Taking into consideration this structure and derivative rhetoric of political judgment, I can offer a different interpretation of the contemporary political–cultural situation, which at the beginning of the present article I called a struggle between the state and the country. This metaphor contains an aspect that requires clarification. By “country” I have in mind groups of citizens; various cultural, geographical, and social communities; and civil society as a whole—groups whose interests the state fails to address and often ignores. “State,” in this context, refers to the authority constituted by institutions and political structures serving the purpose of holding on to power, property, and control over the population. Thus,

according to the logic of this conceptual metaphor, one of the state's most important functions is to reproduce the conditions under which conservative thinking flourishes; this in turn enables the state to remain as it is. In ensuring control over the bulk of resources, the activity of the state authorities stops the normal development of everything that does not fit the nomenclature of their thought and speech.

Under such circumstances, the public application of reason damages the state and frees the country. Hostility to the public application of reason is quite typical of the Ukrainian political community, but since the events of late 2004, leaders and parties have insisted on avoiding discussion of certain themes and consistently following the "official line." The Law on the Holodomor that was adopted on 28 November 2006 first articulated this prohibition. Article 2 states: "The public expression of skepticism regarding the Holodomor of 1932–33 in Ukraine is deemed an outrage against the memory of the millions of victims of the Holodomor and an insult to the dignity of the Ukrainian nation and is illegal."⁶

Essentially the same logic guides discussions about the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UIA), and the Red Army during World War II. The arguments are solely about who should be regarded as a hero—not about what feats of heroism were performed, what crimes were committed, what requital the participants in these events received, or how a person was to survive in the slaughterhouse of war. Debates not connected with history proceed in the same key. The political actions of President Viktor Yushchenko, who in 2007 disbanded parliament on dubious grounds, or of President Viktor Yanukovich, who in 2010 created a governing coalition on an equally shaky foundation, are appraised solely on the basis of party affiliation—without drawing any political or rational conclusion. Violation of the rules in relations between the state and the country does not delegitimize the state but merely compels the country to believe less and less in rational solutions. Whoever may head the "state," this authority resists the public application of reason.

The state's success in its struggle against the country reflects the ease with which it can manipulate disconnected and mutually estranged citizens who have no opportunity to use rational argumentation in the public space. It is simpler for the state authorities to appeal to the emotions and suppress rational principles, and this makes Ukrainian social and political institutions less and less modern. Ukraine is rapidly losing not only the industrial legacy of the Soviet Union but also the achievements

in the cultural, social, and political spheres that have their origin in the enthusiasm of perestroika.

Ukraine in a Panic

A particularly notable type of irrational argumentation is the so-called “moral panic,” which from time to time engulfs the political elite, intellectuals, and a large proportion of politically active citizens. Under certain conditions, the public suddenly perceives some person or group in a wholly negative and alarmist light. According to Stanley Cohen’s definition, a moral panic is a set of events defined by a substantial part of the population as “a threat to societal values and interests.”⁷ Today we use this term to describe a public reaction determined by an incorrect or distorted perception of various events, minorities, or subcultures. Volodymyr Kulyk recently analyzed Ukraine’s experience with moral panics.⁸ His study describes many panics that have struck Ukrainian society. In terms of the present article, however, I think it important to emphasize that the panics of the last decade in Ukraine have often led to protests by large social groups, who have demanded that the government guard society against an approaching threat, even if that means restricting civil rights.

Rooted in hidden cultural and social conflict, panics have become part of the arsenal of political technologists—the magicians of the contemporary world, who know how to channel the energy of resentments toward the attainment of their clients’ short-term political goals while worsening social division over the long term. I would note that the target of a panic is always formulated in moral terms, channeling people’s energy into rage and not fear. In addition, panics arise out of apprehension not for life or property (here a rational reaction is needed) but for “moral values” of some kind.

Over the last decade, panic has become a frequent guest in Ukraine. One example is provided by the events of 2005–6, when political debate focused on the idea of federalizing the country. At that time, the state, in the person of the president, cursed the very word “federalism” (sic!) and those who employed it in public discourse. The Communists and socialists now fall into a similar panic when they talk about integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The nationalist campaigns of 2007–9 discredited the Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine as a deviant group that threatens the values of the “normal”

community of those who speak Ukrainian. Such incidents act as surrogates for the rational, political, public communication that facilitates the development of modern political institutions. They appeal to the essentialist prejudices of large social groups and legitimize the often illegal actions of high officials and their entourages.

By overpowering the country, the state acquires an exclusive right to distribute public goods and supremacy over its citizens. It dictates the logic of protecting its interests and subordinating civil liberties to state security; it neutralizes the influence of formal and regulatory institutions. This state of affairs is based on the absence of the rule of law, the weakness and dependence of the courts, and disrespect for parliament.

Even on a nonfinancial issue like the status of the Russian language in Ukraine, the state reserves for itself the right of final decision. The authorities believe that the main goal of contemporary language policy should be to develop in citizens a specific reflex that blocks productive public discussion and guarantees the state's "right" to formulate the highest values. In the absence of legal regulation, bureaucratic arbitrariness constantly threatens the linguistic and cultural rights of citizens who consider themselves members of large and small ethnocultural groups. For the time being, incompletely privatized Soviet factories and undivided land distract the power elite from cultural policy, but soon these resources will be exhausted. Then the situation will become dire, as our rulers act on their intentions with regard to the cultural sphere.

With the domination of conservative political thinking that appeals to the two resentments, the relations between "eastern Ukraine" and "western Ukraine" look like a mechanism for the generation of constant and unavoidable errors. In my opinion, the imagined communities of "our Russian-speaking East" and "our Ukrainian-speaking West," which lack a common language and universal means of discussing common issues, have preferred a strategy of revenge. The inhabitants of each region vote into the legislatures political forces that may not uphold their interests but *can* be relied on to exact revenge on those of their fellow citizens whom they consider their enemies. Of course, people do not say such things out loud, but the inhabitants of eastern Ukraine persistently elect to the highest posts politicians with a criminal past not so much in obedience to Cossack traditions as out of a desire to emphasize their disrespect for a state arrayed in ethnic "western" attire. Conversely, western Ukraine elects politicians who promise to expel all antistate forces from the political and social arena, so that Ukraine will at last start to live "as it

should.” This “lose–lose game” constantly reproduces the conditions for the territorial division of society, while the prize—in the form of control over the distribution of resources—always goes to the state and the power elite.

In Lieu of an Afterword, or “What Is to Be Done?”

In light of the above, we may say that the realization of at least a minimally optimistic scenario for Ukraine’s development requires change at two levels of our society. Above all, it is necessary to strengthen non-conservative financial and political forces. This heading should include nonimitative neoliberals and neosocialists. Conservative loneliness can be overcome if we put into practice the East Slavic custom of “sharing joy among three.” We cannot, however, place any special hope in Ukraine’s liberals; they are at present in a minority, and due to the degradation of Ukrainians’ civic awareness their electoral appeal is fading. As for the socialists, the damage inflicted on Ukrainian society by the economic crisis may lead to extraterritorial solidarity within the social strata that have borne the greatest losses. Given the exclusivity of the economic policy conducted by the current government of Nikolai Azarov, which upholds the interests of big capital, I might argue that the socialists have a great future—at least, over the medium term. Bureaucratic arbitrariness and a shortsighted state policy of redistributing social wealth in favor of 2–3 percent of the population must give rise to powerful resistance movements among latter-day “proletarians”—that is, those who no longer have anything to lose.

Another area that requires radical change is the development of social institutions that strengthen the element of rationality in contemporary Ukrainian culture. I am speaking, above all, of the social sciences and the humanities. These disciplines are by nature inextricably connected with politics, and their evolution can contribute to modernizing political institutions. The current inclination of the Ukrainian elite toward conservatism is directly associated with the deficiencies of Soviet and post-Soviet higher education in Ukraine. Critical rationality resides outside the research and educational system’s area of interest. Changes within this system might set in motion a long-term modernizing mechanism that would stimulate reform of the cultural and political situation. Critical rationality can offer an alternative to conservative sympathies, and therefore the conservative dystopia is not inevitable. The underdevelopment

of political philosophy, theoretical sociology, and political science (not politology but precisely *political science*) is not only a product but also a cause of the flourishing of conservative practices. The weakness of the universities, which have been unable to resist the temptations of the market, and the confinement of academic research to the hard and natural sciences do not yet permit us to speak of impending innovations in the development of the social sciences and humanities. But without such innovations it is simply impossible to model for citizens and counterelites a different mode of political thinking.

Notes

1. www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/133435/conservatism (accessed 31 May 2011) [source of the English quotation—Ed.].

2. E.H.H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 284.

3. M. Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative," in M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962), p. 183 [here and below, quoted from the text available at <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jo52/POS254/oakeshott1.pdf> (accessed 1 June 2011)—Ed.].

4. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

5. Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York: Free Press, 1992), pp. 5–9.

6. Zakon "Pro Golodomor 1932–1933 rokiv v Ukraini" (www.president.gov.ua/documents/5280.html) [accessed 1 June 2011; for a Russian version, see www.president.gov.ua/ru/documents/5280.html—Ed.].

7. Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (St. Albans: Paladin, 1973), p. 9 [p. 1 of the editions available at <http://books.google.com>, the source of the English quotation—Ed.].

8. V. Kulyk, *Diskurs ukrains'kikh medii: identichnosti, ideologii, vladni stosunki* (Kiev: Krytyka, 2010).