

WAR AS THE ULTIMATE DISRUPTION: SHATTERED EPISTEMOLOGIES AND STUTTERING SPEECH

(THE EDITORIAL PREFACE)

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Abstract. This editorial preface to a collection of essays, put together under the topic “Transformation of society and academia in the wake of the Russian war in Ukraine: urgent notes”, touches upon some landslide shifts in East European Studies. The urgency is validated by the gravity of epistemological challenges that the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has presented: coming from predominantly Russocentric perspectives, with little space for indigenous voices and local expertise, Area Studies largely failed to predict or explain the ongoing developments in Ukraine. Although the imbalanced global knowledge economy persists, some changes are gaining ground: those speaking from the privileged positions temporarily suspend their expertise and former subalterns start speaking up. These phenomena have not yet produced a paradigmatic shift but rather a palimpsest of narratives against muteness in the face of war atrocities – the author captures this complex intermingle of speaking and silence with the metaphor of “stuttering speech”. One of the key questions this special issue is aimed to address is how scholars can verbalize human experiences that are hardly explicable, in the situation when the language itself is “broken” – or, in scholarly parlance, where established paradigms do not work. How can one make sense of the events that seem absurd and resist interpretation? An overview of authors’ contributions to the issue is presented, aimed to put separate essays in dialogue with each other to articulate the major lesson from this war-instigated epistemological crisis. Stop assuming that you know. Unlearn. And listen.



Keywords: epistemic imperialism, epistemic mistrust, epistemic exploitation, stuttering speech, practices of unlearning.

The preparation of the current issue was neither easy nor straightforward. Initially conceived as “urgent notes”, raw thoughts and first reflections on the impact of the Russian full-scale invasion on the Ukrainian and adjacent societies, we hoped that the essays would be collected in early summer 2022. But it turned into a protracted project with quite a few hiccups on the way. Ironically, aimed to highlight some repercussions of the war on the academic domain, this initiative turned into a case in point in and of itself. While potential authors tended to proclaim their enthusiastic support for the concept of this issue, with approaching – and repeatedly postponed – deadlines, this enthusiasm often vanished. The articulated excuses were indicative as well. One author inside Ukraine said they had not found a good idea to develop in their potential contribution, thus they preferred refraining from any statements. Whereas another author, this time from Poland, admitted it was too morally and psychologically challenging for them to work on this piece. It seems that the matter of distance as regards the war was crucial when asked to share some personal accounts. It would be a stretch to make any generalizations based on contingencies that brought certain authors and texts into this issue and left others out of the project. Yet, the resulting profile of our contributors is quite peculiar: they are predominantly female scholars of Ukrainian origin based in Western institutions, with an outspoken public position and media presence. This might (or might not) allude to their specific positionality of being intimately connected to Ukraine and, at the same time, having a geographical distance and access to external fields to gauge both internal and external perspectives.

Another barrier was symptomatic as well: a big name in Ukrainian studies, and a prolific author well integrated into the Western academia, said they had no time or energy for slow thinking and writing at the moment, giving interviews, public lectures, and engaging in other activities with broader outreach almost in the 24/7 mode. So, at least temporarily, a sort of public diplomacy, or national advocacy, pushed academic writing off their schedules. That made me think of an apt remark by Olesya Khromeychuk that Ukrainian scholars moved in the Western academia from facing epistemic mistrust to experiencing epistemic exploitation (Khromeychuk 2022: 194), that is from being put on the quota of “an indigenous voice” – symbolically included but barely heard – to suddenly over-demanded experts with no moral right to decline any offer of a public speech, even if no promise to be taken seriously is provided. Such extremes in the presence and positionality of Ukrainian (or, broader, Eastern European) experts reveal some important – and maybe even tectonic – shifts. When the courageous

resistance of the Ukrainian people, propped up by smart and bold public speeches of the Ukrainian President on the global stage, gave some credentials to Ukraine as a long-term subaltern to finally *speak up*, multiple sound voices of scholars, writers, and officials marked the global intellectual landscape anew. They often point to what Maria Sonevytsky in this issue labels as “epistemic imperialism” (p. 22): when Western hegemony in the knowledge-production, while tackling Eastern Europe, engages predominantly with the Russian version of regional history, thus perpetuating Russian epistemic imperialism in and on the region. Even if the observation itself has been intuitively sensed and repeatedly articulated by Eastern European intellectuals, it was often ignored or discarded as an exaggeration allegedly stemming from dangerous nationalisms embraced by their beholders. Vestiges of both Western epistemic imperialism and epistemic mistrust toward Easterners are still intact but windows of opportunities to transform the academic field seem to be opening up, even if with unpredicted durability and long-term outcome. This does not replace hegemonic narratives with alternative ones, but it produces what I would metaphorically call “stuttering speech”: when privileged voices at times stop producing statements, and former subalterns at times do speak, stuttering speech emerges at the crossroads of self-tamed hubris, on the one side, and intermittent indigenous articulations, on the other. Muteness in the face of war atrocities sets the pace.

There have been several earlier special issues of the *Topos* journal dedicated to this war: one was focused on the new dimensions and war strategies in the 21st century (2016), and the other one problematizing the role of intellectuals in the times of war (2018). Indeed, the Russian war against Ukraine started back in 2014, while its broader rhetorical framework as the war against the collective West was unleashed in Putin’s Munich speech in 2007 and tested in action in Georgia in 2008. However, it was the full-scale invasion in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 that made painfully obvious the fact that outdated epistemologies cannot be just modified and refurbished – they need to be substantially revised. Several epistemological fallacies were disclosed at that moment. The universal one was formulated by Andrei Vazyanau in this issue: “don’t assume we know each other well”. In my contribution, I describe several mutual “misreadings” between Ukraine, Russia, and the collective West that resulted in reciprocal failed expectations and prognoses. The German President captured this *Stimmung* well in his resonant speech: “24 February was an epochal shift [...] there is simply no place for old dreams” (2022). Upon such public acknowledgement by top diplomatic figures, continuing knowledge production “as usual” without accounting for the intellectual consequences of this war for the humanities at large is hardly feasible. The Ukrainian writer from Kharkiv, Serhiy Zhadan, formulated it at the recent award ceremony in Germany, alluding to Theodor Adorno: is poetry possible after Bucha

and Izium? And he responds — it is “undoubtedly possible. Moreover, it’s necessary” (2022). One of the key questions this special issue is aimed to address is how scholars can verbalize human experiences that are hardly explicable, in the situation when the language itself is “broken” — or, in scholarly parlance, when established paradigms do not work. How can one make sense of the events that seem absurd and resist interpretation?

Kateryna Botanova argues in her opening essay that there is no binary opposition between the role of an artist and the role of a citizen: both overlap and enforce each other when one decides to reattach to their locality and to own their place inside history in the making, to regain their agency. And to that end, to unlearn perceiving oneself through the gaze of the Other is paramount. There is no coincidence that most of our authors chose to speak about the decolonization of knowledge: it seems to be not only an epistemic task but an existential exigency. Maria Sonevytsky reflects on some habits of Western experts to make claims on Ukraine “by extension” investing their authority in the imbalanced global knowledge economy to promote their agenda rather than to seriously *learn Ukraine*. What Sonevytsky suggests instead is a new “politics of humility”: to “unsettle the ‘supposedly neutral ground’ upon which an entitlement to speak is based”, those finding themselves in privileged positions must cede some power and agree “to ask and to listen before assuming that you already know” (p. 28–29).

Svitlana Odynets shows how human sympathy might preclude understanding rather than facilitate it. The condescending logic of humanitarian help reproduces global cultural hierarchies and as if frees its beholders from the moral obligation to incorporate Ukrainian perspectives in their research maps and body of knowledge. Yuliya Yurchuk seconds this by describing how her students’ fixation on Western imperialism as the only evil prevents them from adopting a critical stance toward multiple sources of atrocious deeds. By the same token, often well-grounded criticism of Eurocentrism only reinforces it, albeit in a perverse way (cf. Ost 2022). Andrei Vazyyanau suggests that some self-limitations on assumptions about the Other might be due before the conundrum of the complex and multi-faceted colonial legacy in the region is at least partially solved. Botanova’s essay presents a wonderful example of decolonized knowledge that not only disentangles from the hegemon but also engenders solidarity with other subalterns: quotations from African intellectuals demonstrate how their knowledge and experience resonate with Ukrainian developments. Valeria Korablyova exposes how close examinations of Ukrainian resistance might help us all to hold our ground in the increasingly turbulent world, where Russian aggression is one — but by no means the only — grave challenge. Historical caesuras put us into situations where prefigured solutions do not work, and we are left with

tough moral choices. When accumulated knowledge fails us, the only viable strategy is to do what *feels* right. As Yuliya Yurchuk remarks: “I chose some volunteers and initiatives whom I trust and donate them on regular bases. I also do what I am trained to do: I talk” (p. 45). What is equally important – I would reiterate the point made by all the contributors – is also to listen.

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