

WHAT IS UKRAINE? NOTES ON EPISTEMIC IMPERIALISM

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Abstract. This brief essay reflects on the ontological question “What is Ukraine?” and pursues the urgent question that follows: “...and who should define its past, present, and future?” The author develops the idea of “epistemic imperialism” to name the asymmetrical structures of global knowledge production, structures that have been revealing themselves since late February when the stakes of defining Ukraine have taken on profound urgency. The author reflects on her personal and scholarly relationships to the questions of epistemic authority and epistemic imperialism. Four additional questions are posed and evaluated: first, amid the unspeakable horrors of the ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine: whose knowledge has mattered? Second, whose voices have been treated as credible and authoritative? Third, who has assumed they know what Ukraine is — or they do not need to know — before offering a diagnosis or prognosis? And fourth, how might those of us with relative power inside of the Anglophone academy think about the politics of redistribution from within the prestige economies in which we operate?

Keywords: Ukraine, epistemic imperialism, knowledge production, West-splaining, redistributive politics.

An Ontological Question with Existential Stakes

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in late February of this year, the historian Olesya Khromeychuk delivered a searing keynote address — later published online — and titled simply “Where is Ukraine?”. Challenging us to define Ukraine on our mental maps,



Khromeychuk persuasively argued that “Knowledge is not only about power; it is also a matter of security”. She warned if we keep failing to include Ukraine in our mental maps, Ukraine’s “existence on the actual map of the world will continue to be at risk” (Khromeychuk 2022).

The spatial exercise implicit in asking “Where is Ukraine?” suggests a corollary question: What is Ukraine? In this brief essay, I want to pose this ontological question not to answer it, but to observe how the asymmetrical power structures of global knowledge production have been revealing themselves since late February, as the stakes of defining Ukraine have taken on profound urgency. Amid the unspeakable horrors of the ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine: whose knowledge has mattered? Whose voices have been treated as authoritative? Who has assumed they know what Ukraine is – or they do not need to know – before offering a diagnosis or prognosis? And how might those of us with relative power inside the Anglophone academy think about the politics of redistribution from within the prestige economies where we operate?

My core assertion is that this war has aimed an ultra-bright spotlight at the *epistemic imperialism* that governs knowledge production between centres (often correlating to the hubs of former or present empires) and peripheries (formerly colonized spaces such as Ukraine). Epistemic imperialism is the hubris of believing that what one knows or studies from a privileged perspective, as within the Anglophone academy, can be exported wholesale to contexts about which one knows little or nothing.

Scaling up from the situated term “Westplaining” – in which authority in the so-called West is privileged – epistemic imperialism allows us to see how overdetermined outsider narratives about *what Ukraine is* have flowed between hegemonic centres of knowledge production in present and former seats of empire, often wholly skipping the knowledge produced in Ukraine, by Ukrainians, or by those who study Ukraine specifically. In this sense, *epistemic imperialism* shares in Walter Mignolo’s influential notion of the “epistemology of coloniality” by calling attention to “the boundaries between knowledge, the known and the knowing subject” (2000: 115) (for a methodical analysis of how Mignolo’s claims relate to Foucauldian power/knowledge, which is implicit in this analysis of global power/knowledge asymmetries, see (Alcoff 2007)). But departing from Mignolo’s assertion that “historical inheritances and their revolutionary implementation in the Soviet Union are not...linked to colonial legacies and postcolonial thinking”, I argue that Ukraine does embody a type of “deep-settler colony” concerning its historical entanglements with Russia and the Soviet Union (2000: 99–101). Therefore, the epistemic imperialism that defines current discourse about the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine allows considering more fully the complexity of colonialisms enacted in the absence of racial hierarchies as they are understood in the West and

on contiguous territories rather than ones across oceans and seas. Yet, critically, sinister techniques of colonization — domination, coercion, assimilation and elimination among them — are similar if not identical to other cases of imperialism and colonialism, especially in settler colonial cases (Wolfe 2006). Furthermore, because Ukraine is often excluded from contemporary divisions of Global South and Global North — a lamentable paradigm, in my view, that exacerbates the dangerous erasure of Ukraine and much of the former so-called “Eastern bloc” from our mental maps — it offers a particularly acute site for renewed “border thinking”.

In the introduction to my first book *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine* (Sonevtsky 2019), I drew upon Mignolo and Tlostanova’s definition of “border thinking” (2012: 7) to spotlight Ukrainian discursive strategies such as *wildness* that refute the “hegemony-seeking power-knowledges that arose in the context of European colonialism”. There I argued — and here I extend the argument — that Ukraine’s historical entanglements with Russia mean the coloniality of knowledge that must be most urgently dismantled, or provincialized, comes from the former imperial locus of Russia.

Because this short essay will advocate for transparency and humility in how scholarly authority on Ukraine is produced, I will briefly situate myself concerning the problems of epistemic authority and epistemic imperialism.

Learning Ukraine

After a few tense days in Austria, in which my parents deliberated about whether to go or wait out the political instability, my parents, younger brother, and I arrived in Ukraine on August 24, 1991 — the very day Ukraine declared its independence from the Soviet Union. Overnight, our Soviet visas became irrelevant. As our train from Vienna pulled into Truskavets, a small Western Ukrainian city known for its therapeutic waters, we anticipated meeting the branch of our Sonevtsky family who lived there. My father overflowed with emotion at reuniting with his kin. He fled the advancing Red Army with his parents as a ten-year-old child — the same age I was when we rolled into the Truskavets train station. At that age, I could not appreciate the tectonic scale of the geopolitical events into which we had arrived but I remember some of the feeling: it was effervescent, perhaps something like collective euphoria. The Truskavets’ Sonevtskys greeted us on the train platform, popping the corks off green bottles of Soviet champagne. I remember how the whole station seemed to party in anticipation of new freedoms to come.

To me, the entire trip was utterly bewildering. After Truskavets, my family travelled to Kyiv, where we stayed in the apartment

of a prominent journalist whom my parents befriended a year earlier when he came to Washington, DC on a Soviet-American diplomatic visit. His freshly post-Soviet Kyivan family took us to see the sights of the historic capital city – sights I had learned about on Saturdays in my diaspora Ukrainian School – and I remember feeling disoriented by the language I heard. I spoke the somewhat outdated version of Ukrainian preserved by my US diaspora community fluently. But what I heard in Kyiv sounded, to my ears, harder, more guttural. I did not understand many of the words, but sometimes I could understand them perfectly. I probably did not ask – and it seems as though no one explained – but what I was likely to hear in many contexts was of course Russian, the language of Soviet prestige (and earlier, Russian Imperial prestige) that dominated the streets of Soviet Kyiv.

What I learned then, as a ten-year-old child, was that I knew little about contemporary Ukraine, despite my upbringing in a diasporic Ukrainian enclave. I understood, even then, Ukraine was not merely the two-toned land of cloudless skies and sunflowers but a real lived-in place, one that exceeded my childhood imagination.

Nearly three decades later, I can say I know somewhat more: as an undergraduate, I dedicated myself to the study of Ukrainian history and culture, where I learned about Ukraine as a place of overlapping imperial inheritances, a place that was resolutely multi-lingual, multi-confessional, multi-ethnic. As a graduate student, I became an ethnographer of Ukraine. As a professor, I have written a book about sovereign imaginaries and music in Ukraine, and another (forthcoming) book on the irreverent yet anti-imperial politics of the late Soviet Ukrainian punk band Vopli Vidopliassova. Since 1991, I have lived in Ukraine on and off for approximately three years, and visited dozens of times to see family, perform as a musician, and present my scholarship. Before the Russian-instigated violence erupted in the east in 2014, I had travelled the entirety of the country freely, from Lugansk to Lutsk to Lviv, from Kerch to Kyiv.

Like Khromeychuk (2022), I became one of a small but growing cohort of “vocal Ukrainianists” inside of the Anglophone academy – a position which she evocatively compares to being like the “killjoys spoiling the party”, or the “angry woman who will not stop screeching about the patriarchy”. Such analogies resonate strongly for me: Ukrainian perspectives on the histories of Russian imperialism in the past and present have traditionally been marginalized or sneered at by the Russocentric academic apparatus institutionalized under the umbrella of “Slavic Studies” or “Russian and East European Studies”. The writing of Ukrainian history, until quite recently, was often treated as partisan pleading, not on par with the serious projects of narrating the story of Russia (Von Hagen 1995). Since I completed my PhD a decade ago, I have been fortunate to secure a few different tenure-track and tenured professorships within the (deeply flawed) Anglophone

academy. But I have always had to persuade hiring committees and colleagues in my home fields of Anthropology and Music that my chosen non-canonical site, marginalized within these and most fields, is both interesting enough to hold the attention of U.S. college students, and legitimate as a primary site of research.

When the full-scale invasion began in late February, I made an offer on social media to share what I knew with anyone who wanted to listen and answer any questions students or colleagues might have. Fully aware that my experience and base of knowledge could never be enough for me to speak with unmitigated authority, I Zoomed into classrooms and conferences — more than I can count — scattered throughout North America and Europe. What I found, overwhelmingly, was this: in the absence of knowledge about Ukraine, there were stereotypes, simplistic assumptions, and — most consequently — the authoritative voices of non-Ukrainian scholars much more powerful than I, who had entered the arena to pontificate about what Ukrainians should or should not do or accept as they faced the threat of erasure.

Producing Knowledge in Emergency Time

One early morning in March, I found myself speaking to an audience of roughly 150 anthropologists from around the world. I spent the early morning the way I did every day in the first months of the war, texting with family and friends on various platforms and scouring Telegram, Twitter, and other social media platforms for information about what was happening on the ground.

As I was preparing my notes for the panel, I thought through the overwhelming number of episodes that had cluttered up my thoughts in the days since the full-scale invasion began. I recalled a panel I had attended in the days just before the escalation, where the public-facing economic historian Adam Tooze — after making it clear his expertise in Ukraine was quite limited — talked through how the strange nature of Ukraine's economic trends since the 1990s did, and did not, match the model of a “failed state”. To his credit, Tooze was careful not to overstate the matter but suggested that a transnational construct of anti-Black racism may contribute to how certain states (particularly on the continent of Africa) are quicker to be labelled “failed” than others (such as Ukraine), despite the economic data and forecasts. It was a nuanced point. Yet soon after, on the iconic New York City public radio program hosted by Brian Lehrer, Katrina van den Heuvel, the publisher of *The Nation*, said Tooze had unequivocally diagnosed Ukraine as a “failed state”. Van den Heuvel, harnessing Tooze's credibility and authority, then went on to parrot the so-called “realist” position popularized by the influential U.S. political scientist John Mearsheimer

(a position that alarmingly parallels one of the narratives the Kremlin likes to inject into its noisy propaganda war): that Putin had no choice but to wage this war of aggression against Ukraine; that NATO expansion — and the US in particular — were to blame; that Ukrainians are sacrificial proxies fighting for Washington and Brussels; that Ukraine is a failed project, irredeemably corrupt. The complex histories and contexts of Ukrainian politics, Ukrainian aspirations, the history of Russian domination over Ukraine, of why Ukrainians might be so forcefully defending their right to exist despite their immiserated economic status were shockingly absent from the discussion. Unchallenged, van den Heuvel advanced her biased claims to a wide audience of New Yorkers who were almost certainly seeking guidance on what to think about a war that seemed to be spontaneously erupting across the ocean. I was livid, but my desperate attempts to call through to the show, or to respond on social media, amounted to nothing.

This is only one tiny example of how the prestige economy undergirds the apparatus of epistemic imperialism: Tooze, who is not an expert on Ukraine but an eminence within the Anglophone academy, makes a nuanced point; Van den Heuvel twists Tooze's point while marshalling the power of his name to advance a narrative beloved by the Kremlin in which Ukrainians are wholly absent. Plenty of other examples abound: from the pontifications of the Harvard linguists Noam Chomsky (Kukharsky 2022) and Steven Pinker (Bremmer 2022); to the writing of conservative American historians who credulously echo Putin's version of history in claiming Vladimir Lenin was, in fact, the "main architect and creator" of modern Ukraine (McMeekin 2022); to the "anti-war" manifesto signed by over 150 feminist scholars situated primarily in Europe and the Americas (Feminist Resistance Against War 2022). The list included American feminist luminaries such as Nancy Fraser and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor but not one single Ukrainian signatory. The manifesto called for immediate ceasefire — a simplistic, irresponsible wish for peace on the aggressor's terms. (The bracing Ukrainian feminist manifesto composed in response, aptly titled, "The Right to Resist" (2022), is worth reading). None of the examples listed above sourced Ukrainian knowledge. Yet the force and reach of these scholars situated in privileged positions vis-à-vis the power structures of global knowledge production reverberate loudly: back to the Kremlin, without Ukraine, to the exasperation and frustration of many of my Ukrainian friends and colleagues.

Superficial analyses on the operations of antisemitism, race, Islamophobia, gender and sexuality issues, and many other aspects of Ukraine conducted by journalists or scholars with no expertise in the contested histories of the country, who often work without relevant language skills (all too often comprehending only Russian), continue to proliferate in a space absent of Ukrainian voices. Where Ukrainian perspectives could add context or rebuttal or nuance to blunt various

assumptions or to trouble comforting slogans, there is instead silence or dismissal of “emotional” testimonies. I have witnessed the consequences of this particularly demoralizing variety of wartime dehumanization too often, when well-meaning friends with no connection to Ukraine reach out to me for information, trying to come to some understanding amid the cacophonous war of narratives. *Well, if it's a failed state, maybe there's nothing to defend?* Or: *The only sensible way forward is for Ukrainians to accept that they can't win, right?* Or: *But what about Ukrainian Nazis?* Or: *This is just the Western military-industrial complex's fault, right?* Too often the subtext is that Ukrainians may not be perfect victims, or that Ukrainians have no agency, or that it is just too confusing to learn how to evaluate the situation, and therefore it is difficult to rationalize supporting Ukrainians today militarily, morally, and financially.

On that early morning in March, while I was collecting my thoughts for the Zoom room of anthropologists, I decided – believing I had just coined a term – that all these examples could be subsumed under the phenomenon of epistemic imperialism. Later, I found that “epistemic imperialism” appears, almost in passing, in the epilogue to Peter Harrison’s 2015 book *The Territories of Science and Religion*, which traces how discourses of “science” and “religion” became objectified – and thereafter counterposed – as a project of modernity. Harrison writes, “the insistence that science sets the standards for what counts as genuine knowledge remains a characteristic feature of the modern Western epistemological discourse. Arguably, the epistemic imperialism of science was inherited from the supposedly neutral grounds of eighteenth-century natural theology from which it emerged” (2015: 190). The sense in which I meant the term can be quite smoothly adapted from this definition: epistemic imperialism in this war derives from the supposedly neutral (or seemingly meritocratic) grounds in which knowledge is produced and disseminated within the imbalanced global knowledge economy.

This definition shares much in common with the discourse of ‘Westplaining’ that has circulated widely since late February. In a keen analysis, Aliaksei Kazharski defined the term this way:

‘Westplaining’ is speaking without sufficient expertise but from a position of authority, often making false projections and assumptions that are based on the Western experience but are not necessarily relevant to the region in question. The point is not where you are from. Rather, it is whether you possess the necessary expertise and whether, before you decided to comment, you spent enough time following the region, learning the languages, and gaining some intimate understanding of the countries involved. Kazharski also points to the Russocentric distortions of “Westplainers”, many of whom do not recognize that the received wisdom they have of the region is filtered

through long-standing Russian or Soviet narratives about Ukraine (Kazharski 2022).

What epistemic imperialism offers is a term that encapsulates all these overdetermined outsider narratives about *what Ukraine is* and shows their prevalence not only in the “West” from which ‘West-splainers’ launch their uninformed takes, but critically locates them also in Russia, the site that *produced* many of the stereotypes about *what Ukraine is* as part of its epistemic imperialist project dating back centuries. It hardly needs to be mentioned Russia had, in both imperial and Soviet times, repressed the Ukrainian language; used brutal techniques to divide and conquer its multi-ethnic populations; banned or executed Ukrainian intellectual, religious, and creative leaders (Amelina 2022); and created a culture of threat and inferiority around Ukrainian identity (Rafeenko 2022; Sonevytsky 2023). In recent Russian propaganda, Ukrainians have been depicted as either the rabid nationalists on the border, as Russians suffering temporarily from false consciousness, or as hapless pawns of U.S. and NATO imperialism. Denying the complex identities, the complex personhoods of Ukrainians, appears to be a technique of epistemic imperialism as well.

The question “what is Ukraine?” is, and will always be, unanswerable. Modern Ukraine is a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-confessional space with a complex mix of imperial inheritances; it is, in Rory Finnin’s words, a “homeland of homelands” (Finnin 2022). The only precarious answers to the question can come from Ukrainians, who have been defining and will continue to define what Ukraine was, is, and will be in the future. And I would assert that Ukrainians (in the imperfect processes of “agonistic democracy” described by Chantal Mouffe (2000: 93) have been doing this for the thirty-plus years since Ukraine declared independence from the Soviet Union. Take the changing norms of citizenship from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era, the Ukrainian “memory wars” (Portnov 2013), the societal ruptures of the Orange and Maidan Revolutions, the 2019 election of a comedian whose only political experience before winning the presidency was playing the president on TV (now famous for refusing to capitulate to Russian aggression): all of these are examples of the ongoing experiments in defining what Ukraine is and who is included in its polity. Admittedly, these agonistic processes cannot take place outside the context of regional and global geopolitics – the missteps of the post-Cold War European security order, the abhorrent military adventurism of the US in the 21st century, the rise of illiberal regimes around the globe – but these processes occur nonetheless on terms that Ukrainians themselves must define and debate.

Throwing off the shackles of epistemic imperialism as I have described will require, first, that we unsettle the “supposedly neutral ground” upon which an entitlement to speak is based. It will require

individuals with intellectual authority, large platforms, or positions in the media, ceding some of that power. It is practically a cliché to note that people with power rarely voluntarily share it with those less powerful. But for the many scholars inside the Anglophone academy receptive to critiques of their exceptionalism, alert to the coloniality of knowledge production, I am hopeful a new politics of humility – coupled with a practice of redistribution that shares, or redirects, the opportunity to speak – is possible. This is an invitation to continue to learn, to reach outside of existing networks, to aid Ukrainians in their projects of epistemic and material resistance, and to ask and to listen before assuming that you already know.

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