Solidarity with Ukraine – How do We Stay Together in a State of Exception, Invasion and War?

Ewa Majewska*

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.
W. Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History, 1940.

We are most tempted to rethink solidarity in situations of crisis. In the 1970s the Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka, wrote about the “solidarity of the shaken” - those, who recognize their weakness in confrontation with the imperial powers and instead of resigning – connect in their vulnerability and struggle\(^1\). Another Czech writer, Václav Havel, wrote about the “power of the powerless”\(^2\). His main essay on this topic, translated into Polish in 1979, and smuggled soon after, directly inspired the formula of the Independent Workers movement “Solidarność” (Solidarity) in 1980. It expressed the necessity of resisting even in situations of being overwhelmed and supposedly deprived of any power. Persistence, disagreement, subversion thus become the means of political action; uniting with others practicing the same seems like a logical necessity, and perhaps also a historical one. The solidarity strike of the Gdańsk Shipyard workers defending the fired crane operator, Anna Walentynowicz, in 1980, first became a general strike of some seven hundred thousand workers in Poland, and than transformed into the first labour union independent of state control in the East Block, counting ten millions registered members in March 1981. On December the 13th, 1981 however, this “carnival of Solidarity” was brutally stopped by the introduction of the martial law by the general Wojciech Jaruzelski. The “Solidarity” union was delegalized, its leaders – arrested, and for

* Ewa Majewska is a feminist theorist of culture. She published Feminist Antifascism (Verso, 2021) and five other books, as well as articles in journals, magazines and collected volumes. She is a Professor at the SWPS University in Warsaw, Poland.

\(^1\) J. Patočka, Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History, Chicago: Open Court, 1996.

three subsequent years the only form of resistance could be a small, ordinary, un-heroic one.

In my writing, I tend to emphasize the necessity of reshaping our perception of political action, in order to include those forms of agency, which are not shaped accordingly to masculine gender, body or socialization. Resistance performed by expressions of weakness, resignation, maintenance work and subversion much better suit the feminist and queer theory and experience. As Bonnie Honig suggests in her book Antigone, interrupted, we might need to re-connect Antigone with Ismene once again, as apparently even in the original text of Sophoclese’s tragedy, “one shall not walk without the other”, which is in turn a direct quote from Luce Irigaray’s Body-to-Body-with-the-Mother. Just as much, as we need strength, we also need care, love power and reproductive labour.

To be many and to be together - that is the etymology of the word “solidarity”. It also means to be heterogeneous, to work across borders, differences and inequalities, in an effort to unite, but not to unify. The works of Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Sybille Peters and so many other feminists show, how being many and diverse at once not only happens, but also brings political change. In Gdańsk, Poland the solidarity strike of 1980 begun because of the firing of the female crane operator, Anna Walentynowicz, just three months before her retirement. She spoke fluent 1968’ discourse, when she said, that after the augmentation of the prices of alimentary products, it will not be life, but survival. She was twice as old as the workers, predominantly male, who defended her. Also – she was Ukrainian, which nobody known until she died some years ago, and her private papers and documents were revealed. She was afraid to openly speak about her Ukrainian origins in Poland. So many Ukrainian people still are.

As the Russian invasion against Ukraine started in February 2022, I begun to have a peculiar habit – for some 2-3 weeks, every morning I was writing to my feminist friend in Ukraine, Olesia Kamyshnykova, who translated my text Mestiza from Ukraine? Border Crossing with Gloria Anzaldua, into Ukrainian language some years ago, and to a feminist philosopher based in Russia, also a friend, to check, how they were, but also to maintain the solidarity ties across the

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borders suddenly militarized and antagonized by Putin and his atrocious army. Only later I was checking, whether the war also entered Poland, which was a fear most people in my country shared, and many still do. It was a time of fear, however – I would never say something like: “we are all traumatized”. We, in other countries of the former Soviet Block, are just afraid, that another cold war will happen, with the impossibility of thinking and acting freely, with scarcity of food and things, with limitations to democracy; people in Ukraine are bombed, raped, deported, imprisoned, shot at, declared to be nazi, eliminated and reduced to a Schmittian figure of “enemy” in the state of exception imposed by Putin in Ukraine and his own country as well. The difference between these experiences of the current Russian invasion – that of the people in Ukraine and that of other East Europeans – should always be emphasized.

The solidarity with Ukrainians, and with Russians resisting, is perhaps easy to imagine, but what it means to be in solidarity “with Ukraine”, as the title of my text boldly announces? I had many doubts about it, changed it several times, and decided to stick with the first version. Yes, I am in solidarity with Ukraine. With a country, whose identity, possibility, existence and reasons to be, have been contested probably more often, than affirmed. Just as I stand for Palestine, Kurdistan, independent Barbados and other former colonies, I stand with Ukraine. This act of solidarity is further complicated by several centuries of colonial politics of Poland (or “the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania”, to be precise) in Ukraine. It is even more complex after the recent decades of Ukrainian economic migration to Poland, when even some feminist and progressive friends of mine would pronounce the shameful and disgusting formula “my Ukrainian girl/woman” to depict a babysitter, cleaning lady or cook; or “my Ukrainian guy” to depict a construction worker, driver or factory worker, like as if they owned these immigrants. In the border-crossing trains between Poland and our eastern neighbors, Ukraine and Belarus, the Polish border guards immediately jump to the “first name basis” communication after hearing eastern accent, which in the communication with strangers in Poland is pure arrogance. They would never do it with Polish citizens.

How to build solidarity with Ukrainians having all this in the present and in the past? How to stand in solidarity with Ukraine, understood as an independent state, while at the same time contesting the notion of nation, nation-state and state, which I often do, on various grounds? Luckily, apart from the abusive, colonial history and somewhat racist present, recently mildered by the generosity

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and hospitality of some hundreds of thousands of Polish families and persons, who supported, hosted and maintained war refugees from Ukraine, we share some other things. One of them, a perhaps marginal detail, is the first lines of our national anthems, of which I am not the greatest fan, as I think the nation is not even a notion, but a phantasmagory, as argued by Benedict Anderson in his influential *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, first published in 1983. However, those songs, chosen to represent the state’s population in a literary way, may signalize certain tendencies and intentions important at least in the moment of the conception of a country. In Polish national anthem, the first two lines say: “Poland has not yet perished//So long as we still live”, which is a particularly weak declaration of huge doubt and a lot of hope rather, than hegemony. The Ukrainian national anthem opens in similar way, although its content seems much more certain and optimist, as well as less heroic: “The glory of Ukraine has not yet died, nor the will. Still upon us, young brothers, fate shall smile”. Also – the existence of Ukraine is certain, only its glory and will might be weakened at times. As Olesia Kamysnykova informed me, the older version of Ukraine’s national anthem actually also undermined the existence of Ukraine, similarly to the Polish one, but the current version proceeds as explained above. It nevertheless seems to be a very similar opening – with a doubt, and having Russia as the neighbor country might explain such lack of certitude. As we learn from psychoanalysis, such weakness at the basis of one’s identity can lead to openness and acceptance of heterogeneity, to various versions of “mestisaje”, as Gloria Anzaldúa wrote about the Mex-US borderlands, but it can also lead to insecurity and fascism, as the history of the 1930s Central Europe’s countries shows. In *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva discusses the impurity of any origins and the possibility of a hybridic identification, based on the recognition of the “abject” – the moment of differentiation (already not the subject, but not an object yet) – as the core of contemporary identity. Such impurity means, that we inhabit the borderlands, with all the biologic, cultural, linguistic, gendered and racialized consequences, with pride rather than shame. Such framework became particularly useful in Poland after 1989, when the monolythic “Polish” identity built by the state communist powers after
WWII collapsed into a variety of ethnic and national identifications, such as the discoveries of Jewish origins of some highly patriotic, nationalist families, the Ukrainian origins of some of the nationalist politicians, or the appearance of the new Polish families with origins in post-war migration experiences, like those of Vietnamese or African descent, or the stronger expressions of two major regional minorities – the Silesians and the Kashubians – with their distinct languages and claims of autonomy. Embracing such hybridic nature of a state and/or of one’s own identity proves to be the best vaccine against the nationalist and racist viruses of contemporary cultures, however the hegemony of one-ness sadly still prevails.

This hegemony – rooted in the ancient notion of absolutism based on the figure of hegemonic pater familias of infinite power over the other members of family or state, returns in Europe each time the hybridic, democratic vision of politics undermines absolute monarchy. Be it in XVI century, when Jean Bodin resuscitated the absolutist sovereignty based on the hegemonic father; in early XIX century, when Louis de Bonald opposed the French Revolution’s democratizing effects, or in early XX century, when the philosopher of law, Carl Schmitt, built legal fundamentals for a transformation of Germany into the Third Reich, appointing Jews and other minorities (incl. Communists, Roma people, gay men and others) to fulfill the role of “enemy”, indispensable for the absolute state power to solidify. For the power to be undivided means to absolutize homogeneity, and to weaponize the state against any version of hybris – heterogeneity and impurity. According to Schmitt, as reconstructed in the more recent works of Giorgio Agamben, the politics of the state of exception has three main elements: the absolutist sovereignty, capable of creating laws, but at the same time – exempt of their limitations; the “enemy”, who has to be designated, deprived of all rights, possessions and status, imprisoned or otherwise isolated, and eventually – put to death; and the creation of homo sacer – the holy exception, one whose life ceases to have any symbolic meaning, and is reduced to zoe – the biological survival, as another reminder of the unlimited powers of the sovereign.

The similarities and contradictions between the homo sacer and “enemy”, the important difference is that today’s homo sacer, for Agamben: the undocumented migrant and refugee, fulfills the biopolitical function of mainly staying alive, not merely that of being left to die, thus providing the counterbalance

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9 I discuss these political theorists in their role of suppressing women and other minorities political agency in the book: E. Majewska, *Feminizm jako filozofia społeczna. Szkice z teorii rodziny*, Warszawa: Difin, 2009.

to the absolutely powerful sovereignty. Such “holy exception” plays the role of useful constant example for those not (yet) reduced to their biological functions, as they are not killed, but left to die, beyond the rule of law. If we consider Putin to be an imperial, absolutist sovereign ruler, as he wants to be, the role of homo sacer of his vision and practice of state is fulfilled by the LGBTQ+ minorities, deprived of any chance to articulate their claims or rights because of the nationwide ban on “LGBT-ideology”, passed by the Parliament of Russia, the Duma, in 2012. The state does not need to persecute the non-heteronormative persons or populations, they are “left to survive”, exempt of legal or institutional protections available for other “good” citizens. The other “enemy” in contemporary Russia are women, who have been legally deprived of state protection from domestic violence, as acts of such abuse have been erased from penal code and no longer constitute a crime in Russia. As we see, the comparisons between Putin and the German Reich’s fascists are becoming relevant, and allow to discuss his rule as a contemporary version of fascism. His imperial war in Ukraine, completed by the declarations of the need to erase the population and culture of that country, only add to such comparison11.

Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski, the Marxist researcher based in Warsaw, recently published a very interesting paper, accounting of the history of Ukraine of the last five decades in the context of efforts to build the Russian imperialism. In short: whenever imperialist tendencies in Russia grew to be dominant, the first “enemy” to attack has always been Ukraine, since the 1500s. This “historical necessity”, as Kowalewski depicts it, marks its sign in the twentieth century as much as earlier, however the Russian state’s colonial character is here depicted as colonial regardless, whether it is tsar or Stalin or Putin12. As of now, Kowalewski argues, “Restored on the ruins of the USSR, Russian capitalism remains dependent on the same extra-economic monopoly on which past modes of exploitation depended and, like them, it is distorted by this dependence. The Russian state protects capitalist private property, but at the same time restricts it because this property is subject to state coercion, just as the fusion of the state apparatus with big capitals restricts and distorts competition between them. Thus, under the weight of this monopoly, state oligarchic capitalism and military-oligarchic imperialism have taken shape in Russia.”. Today, with its

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huge agrarian production, several atom plants, natural resources and 41 millions of inhabitants, as well as the access to the Black Sea, Ukraine seems once again like the missing element to rebuild Russia as Empire. The question remains however, on which grounds this imperialist war can be legitimimized, and to what extent the uncertain gossip about the supposed “Nato threat” explains any of the recent developments?

In times of war, solidarity also means to work from within the experience of vulnerability and trauma, to be together in pain and despair. Our solidarity is thus perhaps unheroic, although it can be strong and brave at the same time. My hectic, sometimes a bit hysteric reactions to the war crimes of Russian army in Ukraine, were responded by the calm reactions of my Ukrainian friend, who – in order not to collapse entirely, tried to keep focused and calm, and still tries, as luckily not even the recent bombarding of Kiev harmed her. When we finally met in person this summer, I cried, as I do now, while writing this piece, as I did during our “Gathering of Solidarity with Ukraine”, organized by Judith Butler, Irina Zherebkina and Sabine Hark in May this year.

Our inclination for diversity and contradictions should not make us blind or prone to the cruel paradoxes of the current Russian propaganda. In post-war Soviet block we could not learn about basic historical facts – about the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, allowing peaceful acceptance between fascist Germany and soviet Russia in the years 1939-1941; about the soviet invasion on Poland on 17th September 1939, about Katyn, the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, about other crimes of the USSR committed against small countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Asia. Now we are immersed in the same kind of lies spread to legitimize the current Russian war against Ukraine. Here in the East European region, we recognize these lies immediately. This time however, Russian propaganda is global, and spread by multiple means of communication, it connects with the legitimate anti-colonial claims in Africa and South America, it fuels the often justified criticisms of Nato and the US, however in most cases there is no connection between those matters at all.

The uncertainties and doubts, typical for the narratives of the times of war, create an affective state of exception, in which we do not know anymore, which sources are credible and what is the truth. Putin and his state apparatus are launching propaganda machines of unprecedented scale, backing up the radical right-wing groups, media and political parties of the West, as well as the leftist milieus in the South. Sadly, even some of our feminist allies could not resist this propaganda, combining their solidarity with the colonized countries with full delegitimization of Ukraine’s claims to peaceful existence.
Our task as scholars, professionally equipped with tools to unmask, criticize, deconstruct and dismantle the fakes and lies served by the Kremlin, is clear. One of our acts of solidarity with Ukrainian scholars and population, can be the creation of other narratives concerning Russia, Ukraine, the conflict, but also – rethinking the notion of peace, which has conveniently been made hostage of Putin’s propaganda, as we see today. With the knowledge of historical facts, as well as with clarity about the propaganda machines today, we might try to find common grounds between those criticizing Russian imperialism and those criticizing the Western colonial practice. We should work in solidarity, against the divide et impera on both sides of the world. We should not allow pacifism to be a violent tool of surrendering entire countries to imperialism. Pacifism is a rejection of violence – any violence, not just that perpetuated by the West.

Today, as the Russian army invades Ukraine in an unprovoked attack, our task is to be many, to stay together and to build solidarity, also that of the shaken, the perplexed and the weak. It should help our Ukrainian Friends and Colleagues not just to survive, but also to share and make sense of the trauma they - you - currently experience. Our ability to critically address and read through the lies can be one of our weapons in this struggle, regardless whether we engage in military support for Ukraine or not. Our long practice with the precarious, yet tangible alliances both: in theory and practice, can be another useful tool. I am honored and grateful for being a part of this process, although the moment of its inception is so very dramatic. As our feminists, protesting in Poland recently, I would like to say to feminists and everyone in Ukraine: you will never walk alone!