

# European *Alternatives* Journal

Democracy  
Equality & Culture  
Beyond  
the Nation State



EUROPEAN  
ALTERNATIVES

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B

U

T

O

R

S

# DECENTRING EUROPE

PAGE  
ARTICLE  
AUTHORS



10

On planetary crisis, building alternatives: An interview with Marina Garcés

Letizia Ybarra



15

The war in Ukraine: the agentivity of the subalterns

Hanna Perekhoda



19

Can criminal law bring peace and justice to Ukraine?

Daniele Archibugi



25

Greening Transatlantic Relations

John Feffer

# Assembling, Connecting and Organizing

PAGE  
ARTICLE  
AUTHORS



52

Grounding 'citizen participation' in social movements

Alvaro Oleart



56

Diversity: Interest or obligation?

Paula Solis



40

Decolonising Berlin: the materiality of anticolonial resistance

Seema Syeda



45

The weaponisation of queer rights: a migration perspective

Julia Tinsley-Kent, Anastasia Gavalas



47

Why we need No Borders to achieve Climate Justice

No Borders in Climate Justice Network

# Art Beyond Borders

PAGE  
ARTICLE  
AUTHORS



52

Art Production & Global Instability (Room to Bloom)

Beral Madra



57

Organizmo Bloom

Marcela Caldas



63

Barricading the Ice Sheets

Oliver Ressler



66

Framework for Resilience: Ecological Empathy

Artsformation



68

Global Scream! Visual photo essay

Anna Krenz

ultimately passive, given the volume and intensity of the information we receive permanently and that, in addition, is often redundant and false. The problem is not even this, but the fact that it no longer generates any kind of relation to some kind of reciprocity. Imagine those ducks that they feed excessively to make foie gras. Sometimes I have the feeling that we are like those ducks: they tell us everything until our liver swells and it bursts.

**Earlier you mentioned the 'cities in transition' as a new narrative that encourages action. What are these cities in transition?**

**MG** Cities in transition is a movement that began in England and that starts from the idea that it is not so much about adopting one model or another – production, consumption, exploitation – nor thinking only about the future and of models, but of building transformation practices, not only in the present (as if this was a static idea), but in transit. In other words, if we decide to wait to not have gasoline cars to start changing the energy models, that moment will never come.

I like this idea of how criticism and transformation can coexist in time. We already know that criticism today leads us to challenge almost entirely the ways we have to live, but the fact that criticism is necessarily total does not imply that the practice has to wait to be able to relate to that whole, because then we are already once again in the moment of disproportion: you cannot relate to the whole, because you are very small in relation to it.

The cities in transition are full of examples of the first thing that you asked me, of how to begin to make you find what, by ratio of proportion, could not previously be found. The small change and the total change, the daily practice and the transformation of the world, the speed at which certain changes are imposed and the slowness of the consequences of those changes. All these are transitions that we can think of from very concrete experiences.

I also transfer this idea to the field of humanities, since the debate around these has remained stuck in an approach similar to modern environmentalism. "How to save the humanities," "how to save culture" or "how culture can save us". These are very preservationist, salvationist and conservative concepts and, in the end, also very purist.

**How do you think the current political system relates to culture? What possibilities do you think it gives to culture?**

**MG** I believe that the current system, against what it might often seem, does give a lot of importance to culture, but only in a way that is of interest to the system itself. It is not that it relegates culture to the sideline, but that, at least in western societies with more or less social welfare, it makes it the main battlefield: that is where the consumerist society is built, along with uncritical subjectivity. This means that today's culture builds citizens through an attitude of consumption.

The individual consumes according to a list of possibilities among which he or she can choose, as if it were a menu: political options, lifestyles, ways of being in the world. Culture is not just going to the movies or buying a book, culture is the way in which we understand and shape the way we live together. It is through the culture

industry – which ranges from clothing design to commercial cinema, from television to social networks – that we live today as uncritical consumer citizens.

In this context, counterculture is the only one that goes some way towards breaking its own social function. Philosophers such as Nietzsche and Deleuze argued that one can only think against one's own time. This 'against' is not necessarily a destructive force, but the other way around, a creative one: only by creating other ways of understanding and valuing our ways of life can we start thinking and sharing, which is what culture is supposed to be. Yet the cultural forms that the system produces are those that subordinate us more and more, even if they present to us the idea that the market and culture are in opposition. In reality, however, culture is the market, and the market is culture.

This interview by Letizia Ybarra was first published in the online magazine [La Grieta](#).

Marina Garcés is a professor of philosophy at the University of Zaragoza. This year's Transeuropa Festival will take place in Cluj from 11-15 October.

# The war in Ukraine

Hanna Perekhoda on recognising subaltern agency, abandoning geopolitics and breaking out of the Western-centric worldview



Allied exhibition - Kyiv Biennial 2021  
Photo credits: VCRC

**On 24 February 2022, the Kremlin launched its “special military operation”, with the announced goal of the explicit disappearance of Ukraine as an independent state and society. Over a year later, Putin’s troops are still unable to crush Ukraine. Planning to take Kyiv in three days, Putin forgot one small detail: Ukraine is not just a former peripheral territory of the Russian Empire, it is a country inhabited by a people and these people will resist to defend themselves. The denial of the agency of subalterns, a product of the colonial and elitist imaginary of the Russian ruling classes, has led to miscalculations so significant that this invasion has turned into a disaster for the Russian army.**

#### **Blind spots in the geopolitical approach to the war**

The Ukrainian resistance surprised not only Putin, but also Western intellectual circles. Many observers could not, until the day of the invasion, abandon the view that Putin was a ‘pragmatic’ politician whose rationality always had to be sought on the side of political or economic gain. Putin would have been ‘far too smart’ to engage in a large-scale war. This was the conviction of John Mearsheimer, the best known representative of the neo-realist school of thought. The failure of the renowned professor to analyse reality and his inability to foresee the coming war blowing up on a scale that Europe had not seen since 1945 did not prevent his theories from spreading.

This neorealist logic dominates not only the publications in the conservative right-wing newspapers where he is a regular guest. This year we have seen that when it comes to pronouncing on the war in Ukraine, left-wing figures who are highly respected for their commitment against Western imperialism demonstrate a surprising complicity of reasoning with their counterparts in the opposite political camp. More or less inclined to denounce the brutality of the Russian invasion, the hard right and the far left are united in their identification of the ultimate culprit of the war in Ukraine: the West, personified by NATO and the US.

Those who defend such a reading share, sometimes unwittingly, a so-called neorealist perspective on international relations, which is based on the conviction that states are rational actors, seeking to maximise their national interests. Having to operate in a hostile and ruthless world, they submit to a zero-sum game logic. Russia would also be a rational actor motivated by objective security concerns. One of the problems with this type of analysis is the basic assumption on which its proponents build their arguments, namely the shared and presumed objective rationality of states.

It is clear that a state is not a person with a will of its own, but a social construct in which conflicts between class-

es with different or even opposing ‘national’ interests are at stake. Nevertheless, states are run by living beings who determine the international politics of their countries. National interests are shaped by political elites based on their own perceptions of themselves and the world. These perceptions are historically shaped and change in response to both the international and domestic political issues of the moment. Therefore, in order to understand the behaviour of political leaders, it is necessary to examine the social and political context to which they belong.

This is where it gets complicated. How many renowned intellectuals who are invited on TV shows to give their opinion on such a hot topic have ever done any field research on the politics, the economy or the history of Russia and/or Ukraine? As for the “geopolitical” approach, it does not require any expertise on the societies in question, but simply the use of a ready-made explanation scheme that can be transposed to any war on planet earth. Who would give up this temptation to appear to be an expert in everything? However, in order to understand what provoked this war of invasion, the least we can do is not to transpose a “universalist” vision (in reality often suffering from a Western-centric illusion) onto political actors whose identity, norms and values we ignore. By dint of analysing the current conflict from a strictly geopolitical perspective, often suffering from presentism, we condemn ourselves to failing to see processes that are nonetheless decisive in Putin’s decision to begin the invasion of Ukraine.

#### **Social inequality in Russia and Western economic cynicism**

The annexation of Crimea and the creation of separatist states in eastern Ukraine (2014), the crushing of popular revolutions in Belarus (2019) and Kazakhstan (2021) were not caused by any external threat. Russian interference was nothing more than the autocratic and mafia regime’s response to the threat of “democratic spread” that had the potential to move across the border into Russia. The existence of a neighbouring country where revolution succeeds, paving the way for democratic and economic development, risks awakening dangerous ideas amongst Russians.

Putin’s regime has made Russia one of the most unequal states in the world. War is a logical outcome for such regimes, as it is one of the last ways to close ranks within a country that threatens to collapse under the weight of internal contradictions between the working classes and those who are obscenely rich and virtually uncontrollable. Putin’s motives therefore have much more to do with the desire to preserve his prerogative to exploit the Russian population with total impunity than with the actions of the leaders of Europe or the United States.

Western political and economic elites are, however, among those who bear a very heavy responsibility for what is happening to Ukraine. Not because they “humiliated” or “threatened” Russia. Putin invaded Ukraine because he was convinced that the Western elites are just as corrupt and just as cynical as ever. After all, they already let Putin have his way with Chechnya, Georgia, Syria and Ukraine in 2014. For decades they had no problem trading with this regime that annexes territories of independent states, murders political opponents, legalises the hunting of LGBTQ people, funds far-right parties around the world and openly disregards international law and human rights. Ukraine is paying the price for decades of this Western complacency and economic cynicism, and it is paying with the lives of its citizens.

**The existence of a neighbouring country where revolution succeeds, paving the way for democratic and economic development, risks awakening dangerous ideas amongst Russians.**

European Alternatives continues to support transnational Ukraine Solidarity efforts including a series of online ‘No To War’ assemblies with Nobel prize winner Oleksandra Matviichuk and an international conference, ‘Solidarity with Ukraine: building a new internationalism’ held at the London School of Economics in March 2023.

#### **Russian nationalist ideology and the aggressive denial of Ukrainian independence**

The second aspect that geopolitical analyses fail to take into account is the history of relations between Russia and Ukraine, which is marked by a very long experience of domination and oppression. Ukraine is more than a neighbour for Russia: it is a central part of its national identity – for anyone who identifies with the dominant Russian national narrative. By announcing the invasion of the neighbouring country, Putin is explicitly saying: Russians and Ukrainians are one and the same people. The distinct national identity of Ukrainians is said to be an artificial invention, a result of the plot by Western forces to weaken Russia. A long article, published in July 2021, bearing the signature of the President of the Russian Federation, is devoted entirely to this subject. The Ukrainian state is an illegitimate invention, it has no right to exist. Under the title “On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, he develops this same conception, in which he “firmly believes”. Ukrainians must become Russians... or disappear.

Should we perceive Putin’s speech denying the right of Ukrainians to exist only as a discursive manipulation intended to conceal the “true” motivations of the “strategist” president? Would it be completely incongruous to admit that for this enthusiast of Russian historiography in its most essentialist and nationalist version, the will to accomplish his ‘historical mission’ could be one of the determining reasons for engaging in such a war? This does not imply, of course, that Putin’s expansionism does not have a material basis. Ultimately, all wars are fought over the distribution of resources and power. However, it is important to avoid a reductionist economic approach, which tends to see this war as only a struggle for the control of resources and markets. Putin’s ideas to justify the invasion of Ukraine do not serve to conceal his “real” interests. Distorted through the prism of pseudo-historical schemes, they are the very expression of his interests. Archaic as it may seem, national ideologies still have an exceptional performative power, they can incite the perpetuation of wars and genocides. And given the personalistic nature of Putin’s regime, his personal beliefs play a disproportionate role in his policy decisions.

Unfortunately, the lack of knowledge about the Russian national narrative, the role that Russian nationalists attribute to Ukraine, and the denial of Ukrainian agency and the legitimacy of their historical experience prevent many people outside the post-Soviet space from understanding the nature of this war and acting responsibly and appropriately.

We risk falling into a perverse form of Western-centrism that ignores inequalities, and thus the voices of the subalterns, outside the binary opposition between 'the West and the Rest'.

#### With whom do we stand in solidarity?

In February 2022, the great powers assumed that Ukraine would fall in three weeks. But over a year has passed and Ukraine is resisting. The resistance of subalterns could be surprising when we fail to integrate into our analyses the agency of countries and societies that hardly exist on our mental maps. Left-wing intellectuals are right to be critical of Western hegemony. But in denouncing Western hegemony,

We risk falling into a perverse form of Western-centrism that ignores inequalities, and thus the voices of the subalterns, outside the binary opposition between 'the West and the Rest'.

Analysing the Russian war in Ukraine from an exclusively 'geopolitical' perspective often leads to seeing the world through the spectacles of the ruling classes of the great powers. If one sees the world as a chess game where the real agents are the states and not the people, it follows logically that one finds oneself supporting the ruling classes of countries opposed to the United States and seeking to redistribute the spheres of exclusive domination. This type of approach renders the popular classes, the oppressed nations, the subalterns in general, invisible, denying their own capacity for action. It is therefore intrinsically incompatible with progressive political values. It leads not only to false conclusions, but also to dangerous positions. Legitimising or even praising the rise of non-Western imperialisms because they are seen as a 'multipolar' challenge to US unipolarity, while exhibiting overtly fascist tendencies and carrying out genocidal policies, is politically irresponsible.

The "multipolar" world promoted by Putin will be nothing but a world where one can invade; use terror; threaten the world with nuclear weapons, famine and energy shortages; where the great powers share spheres of influence to install the most oppressive regimes and plunder nature and population with total impunity. The current war is probably one of those decisive moments that call for a deep reflection on the blind spots of our analyses and that require us to take real

political responsibility. With whom are we in solidarity? With the peoples in struggle or with the ruling classes of revanchist imperialisms that seek to redistribute the planet? It is time to give an honest answer.

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Hanna Perekhoda is a PhD student in history and graduate assistant at the University of Lausanne, working on Russian and Ukrainian national narratives. She is one of the founders of Comité Ukraine Suisse and a member of Ukrainian socialist organisation Sotsialnyi Rukh.

# Can criminal law bring peace and justice to Ukraine?

Daniele Archibugi on the paradox of impartial international criminal justice and the Realpolitik of peace negotiations



Venue of the Kyiv Biennial 2021  
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