

On a Universal Civilizational Condition
And the Impossibility of Imagining a Better World

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When academicians and the activists of social movements discuss “democratic” globalization, they often employ the conceptual grammar charged with the legacy of colonialism. The problem with such concept as “development” and “modernization” is that they are the key signifiers of colonial and neo-colonial discourses reinforcing Eurocentrism and suppressing non-Western knowledges and cultures. These concepts reproduce the dynamic of relationship between the West and the Rest well known since colonial times: the former being active (developing and modernizing) and the latter passive (being developed and modernized). This is what post-colonial theorists call the problem of “coloniality”– the ubiquitous penetration of the colonial imaginary into all the aspects of our lives – the ways we think and act.¹

As in the colonial times, the colonial imaginary manifests itself in the discourse of the progressive unfolding of human history with its presentation of Europe as an avant-garde “destined to move ahead of the huge advancing column,” as Charles Taylor sarcastically puts it.² Depriving the history of the complexities of historical contexts, this vision of Europe also presents it as an embodiment of “normality”; the measure of all other socio-cultural formations. Whole societies are judged along the imagined progressive scale, where the highest point is always occupied by the West; the lowest – by “barbarians” whose numerous “lacks” (psychological, mental, cultural, etc.) preclude them from achieving an advanced human condition. In contrast to colonial times, however, the split between “the civilized” and “the barbarian” runs nowadays not along territorial boundaries but across all kinds of borders, separating “progressive” and “retrograde” forces within once unified cultural formations. As a

¹ In my research, I draw on postcolonial studies as represented by works of Enrique Dussel, Arturo Escobar, Dilip Gaonkar, Anibal Quijano, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and others.

² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

result of this cleavage, internal otherness, “barbarian” and “awkward” comes to life – a paradoxical development given the democratic aspirations of those struggling for a truly post-colonial world with old colonial weapons.

In my research, I illustrate this point referring to three different cases of social movements in the name of democracy: (1) Gorbachev’s perestroika, (2) anti-Putin movement in Russia, and (3) the Maidan revolution in Ukraine. Taking place in different historic periods and contexts, these social movements turned out to be similar, however, in two important aspects: they (1) uncritically valorized the West as a model of an advanced civilizational condition and (2) constructed their progressiveness by juxtaposing themselves against “dark masses” of their compatriots opposing westernization.

My analysis of the discourses employed by the activists showed that they tended to discuss the appropriation of Western modernity by their societies not in terms of profitability or losses but as a means of achieving a more advanced civilizational condition – to achieve a state of “normality.” Their discursive constructions implied that Westernization was the sole possible direction of social movement, and no alternative projects of modernity were worth being considered and discussed. Deprived of the complexities of historical contexts, societies (Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian) were judged along the imagined progressive scale, where the modern West occupies the highest point – the point of reference, stimulus, and desire.³ In the presentation of the activists whose discourses I analyzed, the West emerged as an undeniable moral force with the right to judge, pass verdicts and impose punishment.

³ Some of my findings have already been published. Baysha Olga, *The Mythologies of Capitalism and the End of the Soviet Project* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014); Baysha O., “Ukrainian Euromaidan: The Exclusion of Otherness in the Name of Progress.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no 1 (2015): 3-18; Baysha Olga, “On Progressive Identity and Internal Colonization: A Case Study From Russia.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no 2 (2016): 119–137.

Aligning themselves with the “civilized” West, the activists – often imagined themselves as progressive warriors struggling against “neo-feudal” systems. The metaphor of Middle Ages, employed by the activists with regard to their societies, revealed the inherent tendency to see the history of mankind as an inevitable triumph of enlightened modernity as signified by the West. To achieve this condition, one needed to topple the medieval fortress separating underdeveloped societies (the USSR, Russian, or Ukraine) from real civilization, to liberate the countries from the forces of darkness, and to clear the way to the radiant future of humankind. The motif of the fight between the forces of good and evil was popular among the activists. They imagined themselves to be always on the side of good; those opposing Westernization – on the side of evil, even though in each of the cases the opposition consisted of millions of people living in the late USSR or contemporary Russian and Ukraine.

Informed by mythological imaginary, this discourse presented the West not as a subject of rational discussion but as a magic key to a fortified gate separating the past from the future, the modern from the obsolete and the tyrannical from the enlightened forms of government. Because of the constructed “inadequacy” or “abnormality” of those opposing “developing” reforms, the latter were not seen as human beings or citizens whose opinions deserved to be taken into account. They were “idiots” or “serfs.” In the opinion of some activists, these “underdeveloped” publics had a chance “to become Human Beings”– they just needed to take the side of those striving for reforms. The human condition was defined exclusively in terms of understanding the progressive potential of Westernization.

The main problem with the modernizing mission of the social movements I analyzed is that all of them ended up undermining democracy rather than promoting it, as they diminished and marginalized their presumably underdeveloped compatriots and colonized them by

excluding their voices from the deliberation on important issues of societal democratization. The inherent logic of the progressive discourse was organized in line with a mythological construction well known from colonial times: struggle between “moderns” and “barbarians” whose barbarian identity is ascribed to them by modernizers. My analysis shows that just as European colonizers imagined themselves at a higher point of civilization as compared to colonized “barbarians,” Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian activists for democratization constructed their “progressiveness” by juxtaposing themselves against those opposing their modernizing endeavors – the “ordinary” people of the Soviet Union, Russia, and Ukraine. In the presentations of the former, the latter appeared as miserable folk who were incapable not only of speaking for themselves but also of thinking; they needed to be enlightened and civilized (developed).