LESSONS FROM RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

MISCOMMUNICATING SOCIAL CHANGE

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COMMUNICATION STUDIES • INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
Many social activists today argue that, because of the recent rise in socio-economic inequality on a global level, we need to expand the frame of reference for democratic struggle from the local to the global (Holden 2013; Khasnabish 2008; Kurasawa 2007; Routledge and Cumbers 2013; Scholte 2014; Scipes 2016; Smith 2008; Smith et al. 2015). They assert that the movement for “democratic globalization” should target the core of the global system of social injustice and mobilize otherwise isolated global resources to fight against it. The global dimension of democratic struggles is also important in another crucial aspect: The globalization of outlook should help us to stir up human imagination so that “suppressed possibilities of development can potentially be imagined” (Fuchs 2010, 181), thereby disrupting ideological closures and working to enable critical judgment. It is this potential that allows activists striving for social change to present democracy not as a closed set of canons but as a project of open possibilities: unexpected demands, unprecedented challenges, unforeseeable articulations, and audacious decisions. To realize this potential, they say, we must transcend our social contexts and subvert everyday experience by opening ourselves up to the global horizons of an unrestricted social imaginary.

It is difficult to argue against the postulates advocated by scholars and activists holding this view. Indeed, a broader frame of reference for local struggles is important if we want to reveal connections between the unprecedented growth in social inequality throughout the world and the consolidation of global financial resources into the hands of fewer and more powerful multinational players. A globalized outlook enables a focus on the lack of
public accountability and democratic surveillance over the activities of global economic and financial powers that control people’s lives. It shows the nature of global transformations that undermine even further the system of democratic governance, which has always suffered from the systematic exclusion of underprivileged populations and the favoring of those who possess power (Calhoun 2013; Castells 2012; Mouffe 2009).

The arguments mentioned above are taken as common sense by today’s social activists and democratic theorists. Yet, the question remains: What exactly do we mean by “democratic globalization” that would allow us to imagine “suppressed possibilities of development,” as many democratically minded thinkers hope? How would this “democratic” globalization differ from “global coloniality” (Escobar 2004) if the conceptual grammar of the former is similar or even identical to that of the latter, as the omnipresent usage of such concepts as “modernization,” “development,” and “developing countries” suggests? The problem with these and similar terms, habitually employed by the most democratically minded activists and scholars, is that they are the key signifiers of colonizing discourses of development and modernization that reaffirm Eurocentrism and suppress non-Western knowledges and cultures (Dussel 2001; Gaonkar 2001). “Epistemicide” is the term Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) uses to describe the “immense wealth of cognitive experiences” (74) of others that has been rendered incomprehensible and radically denied (47–53).

The employment of the concept “development,” long since charged with imperialism, is just one among myriad other instances when scholars and activists striving for a democratic globalization employ conceptual vocabulary that has always bolstered imperial domination by the West. It implicitly valorizes the most cherished ideas of the West through which its global domination was secured: development and unipressive change (Escobar 2004; Ferguson 1999; McCarthy 2010; Quijano 2000). This is not surprising, given that Enlightenment epistemologies constitute a “common sense” informing both academic sociological theorists and social justice activists. As Catherine Walsh (2007) maintains, struggles for global justice “are more complicated when one takes into account the naturalization and intransigence of this eurocentricity, or mental colonialism and blindness even amongst the Left and the proponents of so-called ‘critical’ theory” (226). Timothy Luchies (2015) agrees. “Our strategies and tactics, and often our modes of critique, are heavily conditioned by the[se] systems of domination,” he claims (524).

The problems of “coloniality” (Quijano 2000)—the ubiquitous penetration of the colonial imaginary into all aspects of our lives, including the way we think, communicate, and act—are well recognized in contemporary scholarship (Raj 2012; Santos 2007; Seth 2009; Walsh 2007). This imaginary presupposes the division of the world into modern (civilized) and not-so-modern
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(not yet civilized and thus “developing” or “modernizing”) sociocultural formations. The expansion of Western modernity, incorporating more and more “premodern” peoples and regions, is still a common-sense assumption shared not only by those who manage the contemporary imperial system of global power, including bureaucrats of developmental agencies, but also by many of the activists and scholars who attempt to struggle against its abuses. With the best intentions to liberate the world from tyranny, we often only reaffirm global imperialism by employing the unipersistent discourses of development and modernization—the conceptual building blocks from which the imperial edifice arises. In doing so, we naturalize the hierarchies of global neo-colonial power by “dissolving epistemic violence into apparent conceptual neutrality and terminological transparency,” as Gennaro Ascione (2016, 319) argues.

If, following post-colonial thinkers, we understand modernity as a discursive formation through which the non-Western world was constructed as a barbarian “other” (Jameson 2012; Said 2003), the conceptual tools used to dismantle the hegemony of Eurocentrism matter. When the genealogies of the concepts employed by activists to challenge the abuses of power “go deep into the intellectual and even the theological traditions of Europe” (Chakrabarty 2009, 4), one can hardly expect that the coloniality of power will be dismantled. Rather, the uncritical continuation of Eurocentric conceptual grammars will allow the coloniality to persist under the veil of ostensibly liberating narratives of development and modernization.

As in colonial times, the colonial imaginary manifests itself in the discourse of the unidirectional unfolding of human history with its presentation of the West as an avant-garde of the unipersistent movement. Denying the complexities of historical contexts, this vision of the Western world also presents it as an embodiment of “normality,” the measure of all other sociocultural formations. Whole societies are judged along the imagined unipersistent scale, where the highest point is always occupied by the “progressive avant-garde” whose modernity is imagined as “the privileged historical site where something like absolute knowledge finally becomes possible” (Seth 2016, 392). Meanwhile, at the lowest point are “barbarians” whose numerous shortcomings (psychological, mental, cultural, etc.) preclude them from “‘coming to see’ certain kernel truths about the human condition” (Taylor 1999, 170). In contrast to colonial times, however, the split between “the civilized” and “the barbarian” currently runs not along territorial boundaries but across all kinds of borders, separating “progressive” and “backward” forces within once unified cultural formations. As a result of this cleavage, internal otherness (with labels such as “barbarian” and “ignoramus”) comes to life—a paradoxical development given the democratic aspirations of those struggling for the cause of a democratic global world.
As I argue in this book, social movements striving for democratization need to deconstruct common assumptions sustaining the hegemony of global imperial power resting on the coloniality of imagination. One of the most important of these common-sense beliefs is the narrative of progress with all its derivatives: development, modernization, democratization, and the like, modeled on Western experiences. More often than not, the discourses linking these signifiers in hegemonic chains reproduce the same dynamic between the West and the rest: the former being active (developing, modernizing, and democratizing) and the latter passive (developed, modernized, and democratized). As Anibal Quijano (2000) puts it, “the foundational myth of the Eurocentric version of modernity is the idea of the state of nature as the point of departure for the civilized course of history whose culmination is European or Western civilization” (551). It is this uniprogressive mythology that dispossesses peoples and cultures, relegating them to “the state of nature” or “the past.” Global social injustice draws on global epistemological injustice; the struggle against the former requires struggling against the latter as well.

THE UNIPROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE OF SOVIET PERESTROIKA

In 2011, as part of my research on the discourses of perestroika, I analyzed the letters to editors and opinion pieces published by two local Ukrainian newspapers from the beginning of 1989 until the end of 1991. This was the most crucial period of Gorbachev’s perestroika, a movement for democratization and modernization, when heated debates on the country’s future took place within the Soviet public sphere (Baysha 2014). A considerable part of my research dealt with articles and interviews by such well-known perestroika activists as Yegor Gaidar, Grigory Yavlinsky, Anatoly Sobchak, Valeriya Novodvorskaya, Vitaly Korotich, and Yevgeny Yevtushenko. An interesting discovery came out of my investigation: These and other activists striving for democratization systematically disparaged Soviet working people who did not share their views on the reforms. It was especially shocking to realize that this disparagement was perpetuated in the name of democratization and social progress.

As perestroika activists imagined it, the main hindrance against the transition to a democratic, prosperous, and civilized future was the presence of “retrograde forces” and “agents of the past” who opposed the reforms. Mainly, these retrograde forces were imagined to be the working people who wanted to see in perestroika not an embrace of capitalization and marketization but rather an “updated” socialism, in line with what Gorbachev promised at the beginning of the transformations. Indeed, as my analysis of workers’
letters to the editors showed, many of them imagined these transformations in egalitarian and collectivist socialist terms: “We . . . want to take over our enterprise as a collective property” (Logvinenko 1991, 1). They believed it would make them real owners of their enterprises: “The workers have a right . . . to become shareholders of their enterprises, to get an income out of what they produce” (Berdnik 1991, 1). In collective privatization, many of the workers saw an opportunity to enhance egalitarianism; they wanted to undermine the power of nomenklatura, not socialism.

Perestroika activists most presented people’s unwillingness to move toward Western capitalist modernity as ignorance, backwardness, and a lack of desire to work. They imagined people working at state enterprises as “the horde of honest toilers” (Kirsch 1990, 8) unable to produce anything useful at all. The judgment was based on the comparison of Soviet workers with their American counterparts. In the eyes of perestroika activists, the Soviet “toilers” could only “count money in somebody else’s pocket” (Kirsch 1990, 8), while Americans were the models of perseverance and diligence: “They [immigrants to the United States] . . . tasted difficulties, failures, and despair. But they didn’t give up” (Oxford 1991, 9). Against the image of hard-working, efficient, and, therefore, prosperous citizens of the United States, the Soviet people appeared stupid, lazy, envious, and—not surprisingly—poor.

In the view of many perestroika activists whose opinions I analyzed, the “crowd-ness,” or collectivism, of Soviet popular culture was a soil in which “the most dreadful and ugly things in history have grown” (Mitrokhin 1990, 13). In order to achieve a more “civilized” intellectual condition, this culture of “crowd-ness” needed to be destroyed. Valeria Novodvorskaya, the leader of the Democratic Union, expressed this sentiment in the clearest way possible:

Bolshevism is the prolongation of the autocratic history of Russia. Faithful. Servile. Collectivist. In order to transform to democracy . . . we need to change our consciousness . . . . To become different and to scramble out of our skins . . . we need to kill dragons in ourselves. (Novodvorskaya 1990, 3)

Novodvorskaya recognized that the “dragon” derived its strength not from the “command administrative system” but from people who gave this system its strength: “Totalitarianism is not a dragon that tortures unfortunate people; totalitarianism is such a social state when the dragon has the same number of heads as it has people” (Novodvorskaya 1990, 3). She was ready to fight those dragon heads even though they were in fact human: “It is cool to fight with them. It is not a boring enterprise. In principle, it is fun” (Novodvorskaya 1990, 3).

Why was it such fun for perestroika activists like Novodvorskaya to fight their own compatriots? Because they revered Western modernity piously.
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Anything that went against their whole-hearted faith had to be uprooted like a weed: *nomenklatura*, people's culture, even people themselves. Novodvorskaya boasted that her Democratic Union had, as its backbone, activists “who are ready to sacrifice their lives for democracy” (Novodvorskaya 1990, 3). In the views of many perestroika activists whose opinions I analyzed, it was not the democratic system of government that served people's needs; on the contrary, people should serve “democracy” by sacrificing their lives or, at least, their ways of life.

THE UNIPROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE OF THE MOVEMENT FOR FAIR ELECTIONS IN RUSSIA

On March 4, 2012, Russia held presidential elections. By the end of the day, as the preliminary results of voting were released, it became clear not only that Vladimir Putin would remain the president of Russia but also that he would be an absolute winner in the first round of the elections. In the immediate aftermath of the elections, two topics of discussion were most popular among the Russian intellectuals who openly challenged the results of the vote: suspicions of election fraud and the human condition of voters who supported Putin. Focusing my attention on the latter, I analyzed the opinions that were expressed by anti-Putin activists in various programs on *Echo of Moscow* (hereafter, *Echo*)—a Russian independent radio station that serves as an important node in the network of communication among those who struggle for democracy against Putin’s authoritarianism (Baysha 2016a).

My analysis showed that 95 percent of the participants in these discussions addressed Putin’s supporters in the hierarchical terms of uniprogressive imagination—as people who were not developed enough yet to understand and support the democratic aspirations of the opposition. The speakers imagined Putin’s supporters as “yesterday’s people”: “Today’s people do not vote for Putin. Yesterday’s people support him” (Muratov 2012). The latter appeared as a mob lacking the ability to think critically and act independently, a mass of dupes easily manipulated by means of different fears: “Fears were mobilized. Soviet people have specific painful points that can be pressed: the enemy, the internal enemy, the external enemy” (Mlechin 2012a).

It was commonplace to refer to Putin’s supporters as “Soviet,” because in the view of *Echo’s* commentators, these people had stopped developing somewhere in the middle of Soviet history, in Stalin’s times: “My neighbors are modest and obedient state employees . . . . They have always voted for whoever is in power. This is a Soviet habit” (Larina 2012). These “Soviet” people occupied the lowest point on the uniprogressive scale of development and signified backwardness, darkness, and retrograde thinking. To construct
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this scale, *Echo*’s speakers frequently employed the metaphor of “hibernation”: “The colossal mass of our people are still dozing. For them, the state doesn’t exist. They don’t even know . . . . ‘Leave us alone,’ and that is it” (Konchalovsky 2012).

In contrast, Putin’s opponents were presented as educated, modern, and having control over the circumstances of their lives—the people of “today.” *Echo*’s speakers depicted anti-Putin protesters as the models of “honesty and integrity” who were “exclusively nice, benevolent and attractive” and “respectable.” They turned out to be “normal people” “knowing the truth.” Against the image of morally degraded Putin supporters, Putin’s opponents were presented as agents of progress and embodied all the positive qualities of modernity: mobility, intelligence, and a capacity for independent, critical thinking. These people were not scared; they were ready to struggle for the recognition of their dignity and the freedom of their spirit.

Dissociating themselves from the general population of Russia, the authors of these and similar statements explicitly allied themselves with Western civilization, which they presented as a higher level of the human condition: “Russia is a country of serfs. It doesn’t have this [European] mentality” (Konchalovsky 2012). Some of the speakers went as far as questioning the humanity of Putin’s supporters by comparing them to dumb animals unaware of their rights and true interests: “The motives of those people who are treated like cattle are unclear to me because these motives have nothing to do with the activity of such formations as the brain cortex” (Latynina 2012). To be sure, such open and offensive prejudice as demonstrated in this excerpt was not the rule; rather, it was an exception. However, this exception only confirmed “common-sense” assumptions shared by *Echo*’s speakers: Putin’s followers were not full-fledged citizens with independent, informed opinions. Their underdeveloped intellectual condition did not allow them to resist Putin’s propaganda and make informed judgments (more on this in chapter 5).

THE UNIPROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE OF THE EUROMAIDAN

In late 2013, as soon as the Euromaidan broke out, I analyzed the discourse of its activists in their blogs on *Ukrayinska Pravda (UP)*, selecting for study the posts in the “Maidan” group from November 26, 2013—the day the group was formed—until January 21, 2014, which denoted the beginning of a murderous stage of the Euromaidan protest (Baysha 2015, 2016b). I intentionally focused on this period to show how the discourse of anti-Maidan otherness was formed before the bloody stage of the confrontation started.
My analysis showed that the bloggers of *UP* tended to discuss the agreement with the European Union not in terms of its profitability or losses for Ukraine but as a means of achieving a more advanced civilizational condition—to “rush ahead,” “never go back to Sovok” and to achieve a state of “civilization” and “normality.” Not only did the constructions of *UP* bloggers imply that Westernization is the sole possible direction of development, but they also suggested the possibility of regression or “returns” back into history (the return to the USSR, equated to the “Dark Ages”). Deprived of the complexities of historical contexts, the USSR was judged along the imagined uniprobative scale where the modern West occupied the highest point—the point of reference, stimulus, and desire.

In the presentation of the Euromaidan activists whose blogs I analyzed, the EU in particular and the West in general emerged as an undeniable moral force with the right to judge, pass verdicts and impose punishment: “Victoria Nuland . . . is warning—in the event of a forceful dispersal of the Euromaidan, the same methods will be applied not only against bureaucrats but the political leaders of the Party of Regions” (Leshchenko 2013). Aligning themselves with the “civilized” West, the bloggers—Euromaidan activists—presented themselves as “educated people,” “people who stand for their dignity,” who were “very motivated,” “goal-seeking,” “smart,” and “responsible.” In the presentation of the bloggers, the Euromaidan was a protest of conscious citizens against the “feudal-oligarchic” or “neo-feudal” system. In other words, the Euromaidan was imagined as an attempt to jump out of the dark medieval ages—the premodern state of human development—to the era of the Enlightenment. The social condition of the contemporary West was presented to be a norm against which those who were thought unfit could be judged. From this perspective, the Euromaidan was conceived as an attempt to breach the new iron curtain that separated Ukraine from the condition of the highest modernity as represented by the West.

My analysis of the bloggers’ writings suggests that “Middle Ages” was not just a convenient metaphor employed as a rhetorical device for mobilization purposes. The metaphor of medieval darkness used by the bloggers seems to reveal their inherent tendency to see the history of mankind as an inevitable triumph of enlightened modernity as signified by the West. In order to achieve this condition, one needed to topple the medieval fortress separating Ukraine from real civilization, to liberate the country 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 some of *UP*’s bloggers. “Ukraine is occupied by the Golden Horde”—this is how one of them imagined those holding power in Ukraine (Okara 2013).

Informed by a mythological imaginary, this discourse presented the EU not as a subject of rational discussion but as a magic key to a fortified
gate separating the past from the future, the obsolete from the modern, and
the tyrannical from the enlightened forms of government. Not one blogger
under my analysis offered a multi-dimensional, non-mythological discussion
of the European integration rejected by Ukraine’s government, which was
presented as a group of “bandits,” “criminals,” or just “immoral” people.
This grand simplification of social and political realities, which are always
much more complicated than the simple duality of “good vs. evil,” developed
into a tendency among UP bloggers to see all opponents—not only those in
power—as “jackals,” “the bootlickers of the regime,” “traitors,” or just “weak
and demoralized people.”

Because of their “inadequacy,” or “abnormality,” to put it in Michel
Foucault’s terms, the opponents of the Euromaidan were not seen as human
beings or citizens whose opinions deserved to be taken into account: They
were “provokers,” “idiots,” or “serfs.” The latter, in the opinion of some blog-
gers, had a chance “to become human beings”—they just needed to take the
Euromaidan’s side. The human condition was defined by the bloggers exclu-
sively in terms of understanding the uniprogressive potential of European
integration (more on this in chapter 9).

THE UNIPROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE OF AN
ANTI-CORRUPTION MOVEMENT IN RUSSIA

In the spring of 2017, I examined the discourse of Russian alternative media
in the aftermath of anti-corruption rallies organized by Alexei Navalny, dur-
ing which hundreds of the protesters were detained by police. This time,
I analyzed two Russian media known for their critical anti-Putin stances:
Echo of Moscow and Novaya Gazeta. I analyzed qualitatively the content
published by these outlets between March 26 and April 3, 2017—the week
immediately following the protests initiated by Navalny, a span likely to con-
tain the most emotional discussions of the manifestations.

As my analysis revealed, similar to the cases discussed above, uniprogres-
sive discourse was organized around several nodal points known from the
previous cases of perestroika, the Euromaidan, and the movement for fair
elections in Russia in 2012. First, “Russia” was presented as an underde-
veloped and backward cultural formation in need of a historical correction
envisioned in terms of modernization, which was equated to Westernization.
In the representations of the writers and speakers whose opinions I analyzed,
Russia appeared not as a modern state but as a “remnant of the past” that
had lost its historical orientation. Putin’s system of power was compared to a
monarchy dragging the country backwards into history. The whole of Russia
was imagined to be a “senile” social organism in need of a blood transfusion.
Second, the human condition of “Putin’s supporters” was seen to be “abnormal,” which found its reflection in the linking of this nodal point to signifiers related to social diseases. Russian people were imagined to live in a “swamp of absenteeism” and in a state of “social paralysis”; they existed in the brainless manner of “anchovies” or “mushrooms”—nonhumans or degenerates. From the speeches and writings of the anti-Putin activists, the general population of Russia (Putin’s supporters) appeared as “declassed masses” of “spineless shit” that did not support emancipatory social movements out of fear. According to this vision, widely shared by the speakers and writers whose opinions I analyzed, people supported Putin because they were “dependent on the state in this or that way” and were scared to lose this miserable security.

Third, in contrast to the general population of Russia refusing to support the protests out of fear, the protesters themselves were imagined to be active and ready to carry out their historical mission of modernizing Russia. They were imagined as “not indifferent,” “successful” “self-confident,” “educated,” “honest,” and so forth. They were everything that Putin’s supporters were not. It was widely believed that “the audience attending protest actions does not watch TV” (Kashin 2017); that the protesters had been “formed as personalities in the Internet” (Chizh 2017) and, therefore, “propaganda does not influence them” (Shulika 2017). In the presentation of the speakers and writers whose articulations I analyzed, TV consumption signified degradation, conformism, and, generally, a lack of intellectual freedom. In contrast, the refusal to watch TV was seen as an act of intellectual liberation, the emancipation of the spirit of free citizens, to whom “the future belongs quite naturally” (Remchukov 2017).

Fourth, any project of a more “civilized” future was imagined as unquestionably Western. The “West” appeared for the activists as a model of economic, political, and cultural development; the Western condition served as an ideal, compared to which Russia’s backwardness and barbarism were apparent. Against Western Europe and the United States, which “produced civilization, science, and law” (Nevzorov 2017), Russia seemed to be “a raw material appendage”; the survival of Russia “depend[ed] only on economic, financial, and technological resources of the West” (Shevtsova 2017). The West was also imagined to serve as a model of high morality whose approval should be sought by all “progressive” forces (more on this in chapter 6).

**TOTALITARIANISM IN THE NAME OF DEMOCRACY AND PROGRESS**

To sum up, there are four nodal points in the unipressive discourse that I have identified through my case studies. First, a non-Western society (or
several societies) under consideration is/are presented not as unique sociocultural formation(s) that should be judged on its/their own terms but as part(s) of a universal project of globalization that should be modeled on liberal Western institutions. Second, the people of the non-Western society or societies who oppose Westernization are presented either as intellectually underdeveloped “barbarians” unable to fathom the value of uniprogressive propositions or cowered masses too scared to embrace the march of history. Third, those pushing the agenda of universal globalization are presented as an avant-garde force of history whose mission is to bring their societies up to a civilizational “norm” equated with the “Western condition.” Fourth, “the West” (imagined as a homogeneous unity) is always presented as a model of economic, political, and cultural development; the Western condition is presented as an ideal compared to which the backwardness and barbarism of non-Western peoples and societies appear obvious.

The problem with the modernizing mission of the social movements with a uniprogressive imaginary is that all of them ended up undermining democracy rather than promoting it, as they had diminished and marginalized their presumably underdeveloped compatriots, and colonized them by excluding their voices from deliberation on important issues of societal transformations within “progressive” public spheres. As I show in next chapters, the discourse of uniprogressivism is internally antagonistic. Establishing a solid, impermeable barrier between activists pushing forward the agenda of universal globalization and “others” who oppose it, it creates the conditions for a “maximum separation,” when “no element in the system of equivalences enters into relations other than those of opposition to the elements of the other system” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 129). It does not allow for a democratic exchange of opinions between the two antagonistic camps within a symbolically shared space.

The inherent logic of this uniprogressive discourse is organized in line with a mythological construction well known from colonial times: struggle between “moderns” and “barbarians” whose stigmatized 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,” famous Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian activists for democratization constructed their “progressiveness” by juxtaposing themselves against those opposing their modernizing endeavors—the “masses” of people of the Soviet Union, Russia, and Ukraine. In the presentations of the former, the latter appeared as miserable folk who were incapable of speaking or even thinking for themselves; they needed to be enlightened and civilized (developed).

The narrative of unidirectional progress, employed by all the social movements under my consideration, clearly presents the West as the avant-garde
leading humanity toward the “normal” modern condition in which no cultural or historical differences matter, and where all societies ultimately look the same. Whether in Gorbachev’s USSR, Putin’s Russia, or Yanukovych’s Ukraine, the discourse of unidirectional progress always presumes an inexorable movement of humankind toward an advanced condition where the ultimate truth, hitherto obscured, can finally be unveiled. It is this unprogressive discourse that unites all the cases I discuss in this book with countless other instances of “democratic” projects that attempt social engineering in the name of unidirectional progress. The essence of this version of globalization is Western domination; the basic tool of this domination is the hegemony of its unidirectional progressive ideological constructions.

As I have already pointed out, the division of the world along a unidirectional scale of development is not territorial any longer. The split now goes across territorial borders, allowing all the world’s “progressive” forces to unite against all “retrograde” ones. But does this division bring about a more just globalization? As my case studies suggest, the result is far from “democratic,” since huge portions of each population find themselves excluded from the ranks of “deserving” publics. In two of the cases I have discussed—perestroika and the Euromaidan—this dynamic is especially evident. As a result of perestroika, the working people of the USSR lost all the collective property they possessed before the reforms (see chapter 4); as a result of the Euromaidan, whole regions protesting against the “coup d’état,” as they imagined the revolution, lost their political power (chapter 12). These are quite logical outcomes of grand transformations in the name of unidirectional progress when the notion of “progress” is defined by a local intellectual “avant-garde” aligning itself with the West, not with its “backward” compatriots—in other words, when the process known as “internal colonization” (Mignolo 2001) happens to local populations by domestic colonizers through the mythologies of a universal history. I will elaborate on this in the next chapter in greater detail.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations to English are my own.
2. High-ranking officials within the Soviet Union appointed to their posts by the Communist Party.
3. Sovok—a derogatory term to denote the Soviet Union.
4. Victoria Nuland, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs at the US State Department (2013–2016), actively supported the revolution, visiting the Maidan several times and encouraging the protests by distributing cookies among protesters.
Chapter 2

The Genealogy of the Uniprogressive Imaginary

THE LEGACY OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Since the advent of modern times in Europe, it has been common sense to ascribe to the modern identity such attributes as individuality, mobility, competitiveness, inventiveness, and reflexivity. With the constant revolutionizing of production, continual shaking up of all social relations, and everlasting uncertainty and agitation, these qualities helped the nascent European bourgeoisie to sweep away everything that had been fixed and frozen in the venerable medieval tradition. As Dilip Gaonkar (2001) put it, “the term modern generally designates the consciousness of an age that imagines itself as having made the transition from the old to the new” (6). In this sense, to be progressive means being on the edge of changes: open to new propositions, capable of self-reflection, and generating unconventional visions.

Historically, the emergence of the progressive social imaginary was associated with the Reformation, the development of capitalism in the West, the formation of the bourgeoisie as a political class and the spread of Enlightenment philosophy. As Charles Taylor (1992) explains, in the course of these grand cultural transformations, historical changes acquired the meaning of moral growth and higher consciousness. As a result, the myth of the avant-garde came to life—a mythology based on the construction of oppositions: between “the blind” and “the visionary,” “traditional” and “progressive,” “philistine” and “unconventional” and so forth. The implication of this vision is that “some are destined to move ahead of the huge advancing column,” (Taylor 1992, 424) leading the way for the rest.

The values enshrined as “progressive” and “modern” have been freedom, independence, dignity, self-discipline, responsibility, rationality, and so on—qualities indispensable for the “modern agent” who is “free, independent,
lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy,” as Iris Murdoch (1971, 80) sarcastically notes. The modern described by Murdoch comes to life with the deep transformations of Western society articulated by its philosophers. Relocating the sources of moral strength from the cosmic order to the consciousness of a rational being, they make rationality an internal property of subjective thinking. God’s existence is now only a stage in the course of unstoppable human progress, as measured by emancipation and freedom. As Taylor (1992) explains:

Adopting the stance of disengagement towards oneself . . . defines a new understanding of human agency and its characteristic powers. And along with this come new conceptions of the good and new locations of moral sources: an ideal of self-responsibility, with the new definitions of freedom and reason which accompany it, and the connected sense of dignity.

To come to live by this definition—as we cannot fail to do, since it penetrates and rationalizes so many of the ways and practices of modern life—is to be transformed: to the point where we see this way of being as normal, as anchored in perennial human nature in the way our physical organs are. (177)

Once normalized, the ideas of Western modernity—liberated from tradition and traditional faith—established new limits of the thinkable, to put it in Michel Foucault’s (1977) terms. Everything not in line with the new “normal” came to be seen as “abnormal otherness”—something to be marginalized, silenced, and excluded, or subjected to correction, discipline, modernization. Constructed against the norm of the modern condition, the abnormal otherness is now conceived as a state of underdevelopment in need of correction. It is at this point that the unidirectional progressive vision of historic development and the mechanism of normalized judgment described by Foucault converge.

Modernity, as is well known, escapes a fixed definition. It is “‘the new,’ which is always in a state of disappearance, destined to be overcome and made obsolete through the novelty of the next fashion” (Gaonkar 2001, 6). What was modern yesterday may be obsolete today. Since the collapse of the global colonial system and the demise of the Soviet empire, attempts to revive colonialism or Bolshevism have been associated with political regression and moral degradation. Even the Enlightenment itself has stopped serving as an intellectual authority on human emancipation: Accused of harboring an inherent mythological irrationality and subjugating potential (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002), it was dethroned from the pedestal of progressive wisdom to make room for the postmodern mode of thinking. The latter denied unidirectional Enlightening endeavors and greeted the schizophrenic freedom of rhizomes (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).
Although the criticism of Enlightenment ideas has become widespread, the basic Enlightenment narrative—an inexorable movement of humankind toward a progressive common condition—still remains a dominant paradigm of thinking within the political discourses of modernization, development, and democratization according to Western standards. Presenting progress as a struggle between “moderns” (democratically minded progressive publics) and “barbarians” (those who oppose progressive transformations), these discourses reproduce Manichean social cleavages that have been well known since colonial times (Fanon 2004). In the age of globalization, however, as I have mentioned, the dividing line runs not along civilizational boundaries but across all kinds of borders, even if these borders are within once unified cultural formations.

The subjugating potential of the Enlightenment narrative, recognized by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, has been well elaborated within postcolonial studies. Many postcolonial scholars believe that the concepts of “civilization” and “progress” acquired a universal status once Europe began to expand over the globe, ruthlessly repressing all preexisting forms of social organization. Civilization, as Walter D. Mignolo (2001) notes, “became a trademark of Christian Europe and a yardstick by which to measure other societies” (32–33). In the view of Thomas McCarthy (2010), the ideologies of racial inequality spread across the world through the works of modern European philosophers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant. From this point of view, the political values of liberal justice, which the philosophers of the Enlightenment exalted, were inseparable from justifications of inequality and subjugation made by the same philosophers: While opposing the state of slavery for Europeans, Kant, Hegel, and other outstanding figures of the Enlightenment supported it for “savages.” Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, which relocated people in chronological hierarchy rather than in geographical places, became an important philosophical justification for unfolding the Western colonizing enterprise on a global stage. By ascribing barbarian status to the non-Western world, Western scientists and intellectuals constructed a need for the “barbarians” to modernize.

The colonizing discourses of modernization have always been formed through the opposition between “the West” and “the Rest”—the “progressive” and “modern” West against “barbarian” and “pre-modern” others (Said 2003, 7). Enlightenment philosophy provided intellectual justification to political and economic changes not only within Europe but also across the world—by propagating faith in the unlimited emancipatory potential of human reason and the inevitability of progress in both the material and moral condition of mankind. Discussing Orientalism as a style of thought based on ontological and epistemological distinctions made between “the orient” and
“the occident,” Edward Said famously argues that Europe gained its identity by setting itself apart from the Orient: “The major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (2003, 7). Said also points out that, in order to understand the hegemony of European ideas over the Orient, one needs to analyze the implicit connection between European philosophical doctrines, racial theories, and justifications of slavery and colonial exploitation.

The legacy of the Enlightenment charged the term “progressive” positively, associating it with attempts to bring about liberation from tyranny and, to put it in Hegelian terms, the emancipation of the human spirit. If scrutinized more closely, however, the term is not so easily cast as wholly positive. It was resolute faith in progress that marked the consciousness of Western colonizers who believed in their civilizational mission and moral right to modernize non-Western “others.” The belief in progressive development guided both French Jacobins and Russian Bolsheviks exterminating everything and everyone in opposition to their revolutionary zeal; it motivated the “Great Leap Forward” plan for massive industrialization in China, during which millions of Chinese perished; it also inspired the Young Turks who violently oppressed other social groups of Turkish society that rejected modernization (Conversi 2010). A list of examples of social engineering in the name of “emancipation” and “progress” would be extensive. What unites these inhumane modernizing enterprises is their common legitimizing ideology “anchored in the notion of ‘unlimited progress,’ which included the eradication of various opponents and minorities” (Conversi 2010, 724).

“Modernizing” reforms following Gorbachev’s perestroika can also be judged as an attempt at modernization at the expense of the working class that was excluded from deliberation and robbed. The “bandit privatization” of working people’s property (Castells 2010, 188) was perpetrated under the veil of unprogressive discourses that signified the reforms with the meaning of achieving a “normal” civilizational condition (Baysha 2014). These normalizing discourses were constructed by the members of Soviet intelligentsia or the “knowledge class,” to use John Frow’s (1995) term, whose conduct has traditionally been “derived from a faith that it was in the vanguard of history” (Pipes 1960, 496). In presentation of John Hartley, the composition of this “vanguard” is diverse: “from media professionals to intellectuals, computer software firms to government scientists, educators to archivists, journalists to activists” (Hartley 1999, 216). As Hartley explains:

During the twentieth century, increasing social power was exercised around control of information, knowledge, symbol and communication . . . . A “class”
has arisen of those who produce knowledge (broadly defined), who are nei-
ther “owner” nor “worker” in traditional terms, who have great collective
social sway but little individual power, who are not internally organized into
class-conscious parties or movements, but who nevertheless represent the most
advanced and cutting-edge aspect of socio-commercial development outside the
finance industry. (1999, 216)

Fighting with each other for the right “to speak on behalf of an increasingly
unknowable audience” (Hartley 1996, 26), different groups of the knowl-
edge class colonize “others,” depriving them of their voices and truths. As a
result, alternative discourses organized around different subjectivities—that
of Aborigines, nuclear disarmers, trade-unionists, workers, and so forth—
come inadmissible and capable of being reported only as “the wild ravings
of clowns and idiots on the lunatic fringe” (Hartley 1992a, 62).

At the end of the day, it is not actually the opinions of “minorities” that are
oppressed but the preferences of the general population—the “mass,” which
is preconceived as vulnerable, impressionable, infantile, untutored, inexpe-
rienced, and unenlightened. Imagined as “helpless, disordered, pathologized
body,” in the presentation of the “progressive avant-garde,” this “mass”
appears in need of “counselling, therapy or a good-telling off (for their own
good, of course) by the caring professions of social and political science”
(Hartley 1996, 243). The semiotic effect of these snobby colonizing discourses is not the solution of people’s problems but the production of victim-
ized populations for the interventions of progressive experts.

Differentiating between “external” and “internal” colonization, Walter
Mignolo argues that the latter is carried out by intellectuals assuming that the
local culture has “to be improved by the growing and expanding European
civilization” (2001, 34). Hartley (1996) agrees; only, in his view, in times of
“virtualization of communities and deterritorialization of imperial power . . .
the concept of internal colonialism can be extended from territorial and ethnic
minorities to demographic others” (101), even if these demographic “others”
are the majority of people—the theydom of popular culture as opposed to the
wedom of the knowledge class. Seeking to gain power for their own point of
view and “naturalizing as public opinion the passions of the knowledge class”
(Hartley 1999, 98), the members of the knowledge class marginalize, dimin-
ish, and silence their own compatriots in the name of historical “progress”
imagined as Westernization. The edifice of global neocolonial power is bol-
stered by “a chorus of willing intellectuals” who always have “calming words
about benign and altruistic empires, as if one shouldn’t trust the evidence of
one’s eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the
latest mission civilizatrice” (Said 2003, xxi). “Even the most draconian of
IMF restructuring programmes,” David Harvey (2005) argues, “is unlikely to
go forward without a modicum of internal support from someone. It sometimes seems as if the IMF merely takes the responsibility from doing what some internal class forces want to do anyway” (117). What is important to recognize with respect to the subject of this book, is that the local support for global neocolonialism/neoliberalism is always provided the name of progress conceived in unidirectional terms.

One of the basic problems with this unidirectional progressive discourse, as James Ferguson (1999) notes, is that it tells people nothing about the inherent logic of neoliberalism. Its narrative is always about “progress, according to which the native population was moving rapidly along the avenue leading to ‘civilization,’ later styled ‘Westernization’ or ‘modernization’” (34). Ferguson (1999) argues that the discourses of “globalization,” “democratization,” “civil society” and “economic growth” are just contemporary invocations of the old mythological narratives of social evolution “that reduce a complex and differentiated global political economy to a race for economic and political ‘advance’” (16). He insists that it is this simple evolutionary dualism, prescribed by the mythological progressive imagination, that ruins local systems of self-government in the name of progress and a “normal” modernity.

**BREAKING THE LINK BETWEEN UNIPROGRESSIVISM AND DEMOCRATIC THEORIZING**

As long ago as 1985, Laclau and Mouffe theorized that “the era of normative epistemologies has come to an end, so too has the era of universal discourses” (3) and that a truly democratic condition can be achieved only if the link between the evolutionist (uniprogressive) paradigm and democratic theorization is broken. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), it is only through this radical break that any totalizing ideology, which transforms a conjunctural state of affairs into a historical necessity, can be deconstructed. This break will make it possible to see that any given historical conjuncture is not the natural order of things but rather the expression of certain power configurations; it will also enable the imagining of alternative ways to organize the social, which can foreground unexpected historical turns.

To open up the imagination toward new democratic possibilities, we need to “withdraw the category of ‘necessity’ to the horizon of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 13) because neither a fixed path of linear development nor the application of “inexorable laws” for social transformation are compatible with open democratic imagination. The logic of necessity operates through fixed meanings and limitations that restrain the work of the symbolic; it creates “totalizing contexts which fix a priori the meaning of every event” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 34). To avoid totalization, therefore, we need to
avoid thinking in terms of “normal” stages of historical development and “normal” models of historical change.

In Laclau and Mouffe’s view, authoritarian methods of government are intrinsically connected to the evolutionary/uniprogressive imagination that presents historical conjuncture as inevitable historical necessity. Considering Leninism as an example of such an authoritarian rule, the authors argue that

Leninism evidently makes no attempt to construct, through struggle, a mass identity not predetermined by any necessary law of history. On the contrary, it maintains that there is a “for itself” of the class accessible only to the enlightened vanguard—whose attitude towards the working class is therefore purely pedagogical. (1985, 59)

As I described earlier, the “pedagogical methods” of not only Bolsheviks but many other social engineers in the name of “progress” have been anything but peaceful and tolerant toward the “non-enlightened” “backward” masses.

Anti-democratic and totalitarian tendencies inherent in uniprogressive endeavors stem from “essentialist apriorism, the conviction that the social is sutured at some point, from which it is possible to fix the meaning of any event independently of any articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 176). It is this “essentialist apriorism” that, in view of Laclau and Mouffe, “galvanized the political imagination of the Left: the classic concept of ‘revolution,’ cast in the Jacobin mould” (1985, 177):

In many cases the violent overthrow of a repressive regime is the condition of any democratic advance. But the classic concept of revolution implied much more than this: it implied the foundational character of the revolutionary act, the institution of a point of concentration of power. (1985, 177–78)

In Laclau and Mouffe’s view, this Jacobin revolutionary imaginary is incompatible with democracy that requires the opening of discursive space:

Sticking to the evolutionary paradigm of democratic theorizing will inevitably lead to polarizing political effects since the progressive imaginary presupposes the existence of strict dividing lines between “progressive” and “regressive” forces of history with “military relations” between them. (70)

In Laclau and Mouffe’s view, non-military relations—that is, inclusive/pluralist democratic politics—can only come to life if no rigid boundaries between identities are established and if the category of “objective interest” from a predetermined historical agent is abandoned, since it only holds meaning within an eschatological conception of history.
But if there is no predetermined path of development dependent on historical laws, then how can we understand history and social change? Laclau and Mouffe argue that all historic changes should be understood as dependent on hegemonic articulations, and history should be regarded not as an ascendant continuum of developmental stages, but as a discontinuous mosaic of hegemonic formations or historical blocs. Any historical social change, therefore, should be considered progressive or regressive not objectively, from a vantage point of an abstract evolutionist paradigm, but from the subject position of this or that participant of the political process.

What is stemming from this conceptualization of history and historical change is the necessity to acknowledge that no social movement can be conceived as a “progressive movement” a priori, if “progress” is understood not in closed unidirectional terms of moving forward along a pre-established Westernized route, but in open terms of imagining different ways of achieving a better and more just societal condition. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) put it, “The political meaning of a local community movement, of an ecological struggle, of a sexual minority movement, is not given from the beginning; it crucially depends upon its hegemonic articulation with other struggles and demands” (87). In other words, it is an error to think that new social movements have any “objective” interests or historical missions and that their meanings can be conceived independently of their articulations. Any given struggle can be articulated in any number of very different discourses; it is this articulation that determines its character, not the predetermined historical position from which it appears: “That the forms of resistance to new forms of subordination are polysemic and can perfectly well be articulated into an anti-democratic discourse, is clearly demonstrated by the advances of the ‘new right’ in recent years,” Laclau and Mouffe suggest (1985, 169).

The basic precondition for a radically libertarian conception of politics is the refusal to dominate—intellectually or politically. It is this precondition that is unachievable if the project of liberation is conceived in unidirectional evolutionary terms, as a movement toward a “more advanced” societal condition under the domination of self-proclaimed “progressive forces of history.” In Laclau and Mouffe’s view, “This point is decisive: there is no radical and plural democracy without renouncing the discourse of the universal and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to ‘the truth,’ which can be reached only by a limited number of subjects” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 191–192). In order to be inclusively democratic, the discourse of a universal history should be replaced by the discourse of a variety of historical projects articulated by “a polyphony of voices, each of which constructs its own irreducible discursive identity,” Laclau and Mouffe assert (1985, 191).
In the next chapter, I present Laclau and Mouffe’s ideas in more detail and explain some other theoretical positions on which I draw in my analysis of how social change may be miscommunicated through uniprogressive discourses.

**NOTE**

1. This part of the chapter is a modified version of the articles “Ukrainian Euromaidan: The Exclusion of Otherness in the Name of Progress” (published in European Journal of Cultural Studies, 2015, Volume 18, no. 1, pp. 1–18) and “On the Progressive Identity and Internal Colonization: A Case Study from Russia” (published in International Journal of Cultural Studies, 2016, Volume 19, no. 2, pp. 121–137).