



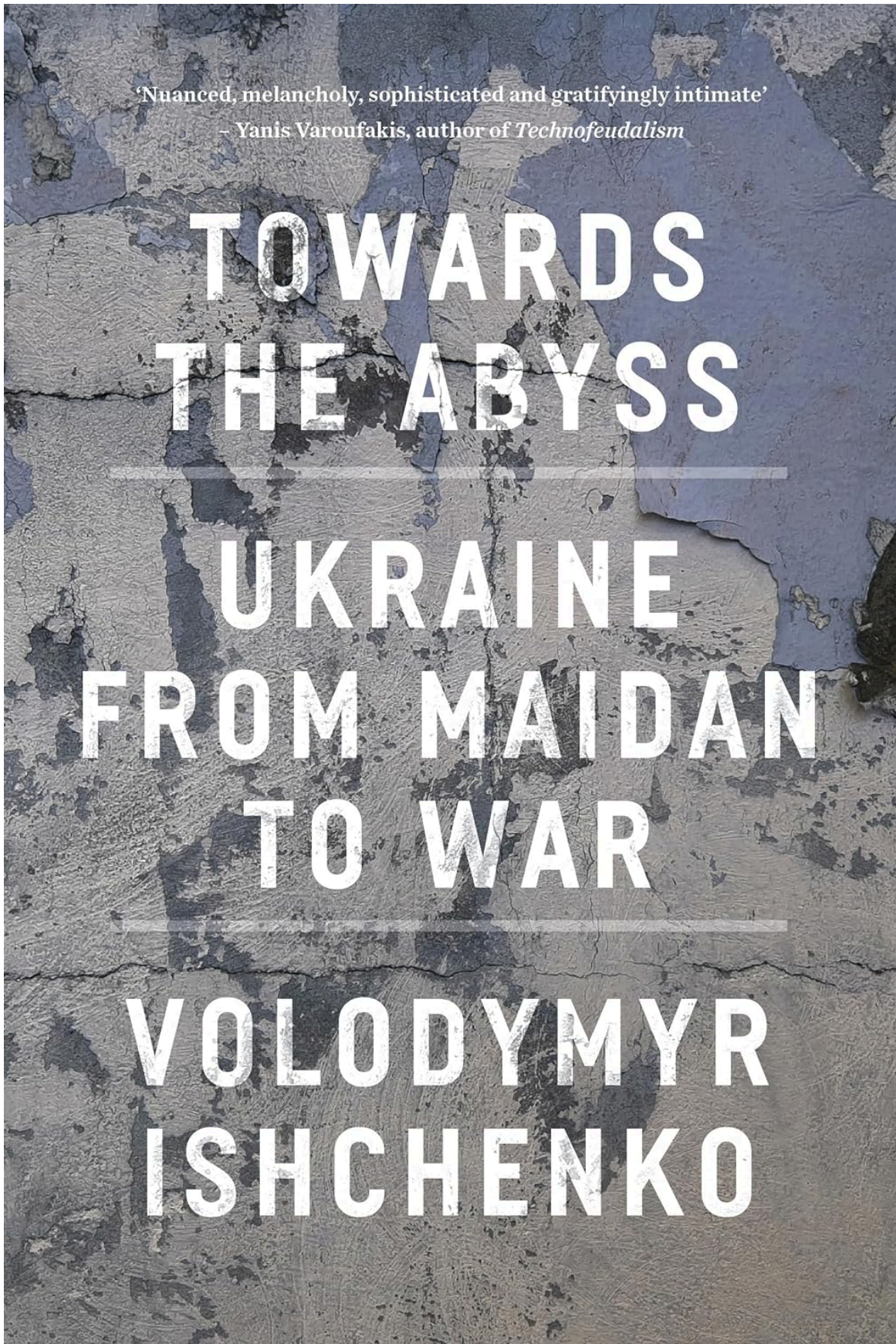
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How the Post-Soviet 'Crisis of Hegemony' Explains Class and War in Ukraine: A Review of Volodymyr Ishchenko's Towards the Abyss: Ukraine from Maidan to War

 By Bogdan Ovcharuk  February 24, 2024



Published this month by Verso, *Towards the Abyss* offers a Gramscian account of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022,

alongside a personal perspective from its author, Volodymyr Ishchenko. Verso's and LeftEast's readership, likely familiar with Ishchenko's polemical articles and his theoretical framework, is now offered an edited collection of texts composed and published across various genres and periods, organized chronologically and accompanied by a candid preface and a detailed interview.

The reader will need to know that the idiosyncratic style of this book is not inconsequential. *Towards the Abyss* is written in sweeping, albeit at times fragmentary and even diary-like, prose. The style embodies the mannerism of essayistic political writing about current affairs, known to readers in the region as *publitsistika*, and to the Western audience under a paler name—opinion journalism. The authorial viewpoint shifts from sociological analysis through ironic commentary, to the sober theoretical interventions on the specificity of the post-Soviet condition. The book is a singular contribution to the rejuvenation of critical Eastern European scholarship that the author combines with the perceptive realism in the wake of the disaster that hurls towards the abyss.

Verso editors have given this book a structure that allows a deep dive into the development of Ishchenko's thinking over more than a decade. The work is prefaced with a personal essay that takes a retrospective view on events that unfold across the nine chapters. Through this, the reader not only gets a snapshot of what it means to be a “wrong Ukrainian,” but also understands how this recalcitrant authorship is not a subjective whim but is rooted in the lifeworld of Ukrainian Soviet modernity. A chronological insert then recaps the timeline of events following the demise of the Soviet Union and preceding the pro-Western Ukrainian movement

known as Euromaidan. The first two chapters of the book deal with a critique of Euromaidan, making a charged case that these events do not constitute a modern social revolution but barely conceal a deeper class conflict in post-Soviet Ukraine—a conflict that Ishchenko seeks to fully flesh out for his reader. The next chapter shows how the consequences of this conflict, left largely unaddressed by the Euromaidan movement, led to the rise to power of the comedian Volodymyr Zelensky. Following a detour to a comparative analysis between Euromaidan and political protests in Belarus that illuminates the strength of violent nationalism in Ukrainian politics, the fifth chapter, a text on Gramscian theory co-authored with Ishchenko's comrade Oleg Zhuravlev, serves as the theoretical core of the book. An impatient and theoretically inclined reader might as well start there.

With this background and theoretical framework laid out, the second part of the book starts with reflections on three possible scenarios of the Russia-Ukraine crisis written just over a week before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a text particularly captivating for readers anticipating what would follow in the days to come. Such anticipatory reflections, cropping up in this and other texts, are then followed by a sociological account of fateful events for the region. As the mood turns somber amid the tightening geopolitical rivalry, the seventh chapter tackles the most media-hyped topic of Ukraine's prospects with the NATO military alliance and ties it to the specificity of the post-Soviet class conflict in Ukraine. The following chapter extends the already operationalized theory of class conflict to the analysis of the political economy behind Russia's war. As if anticipating the reader's follow-up questions on the issue of imperialism, the penultimate chapter dispels what the author finds to be

obfuscating approaches to decolonization in the academized—one might say ‘Americanized’—discourse around Ukraine and instead insists that not only his analysis of the political economy of imperialism is stronger, but it also allows taking a concretely universalist perspective to which the readership of Verso and LeftEast will be most sympathetic. The book then closes with an appended recent interview Ishchenko gave to *New Left Review*, in which the reader might usefully find answers to many factual questions.

To grasp what might be the central argument of *Towards the Abyss*, the readers should first consider its larger theoretical framework. The author draws on the tradition of Western Marxian social theory, particularly on some key ideas of Antonio Gramsci, and his “Prison Notebooks”. Although Gramsci is most famous for reclaiming Machiavelli in his portrayal of the communist party as the ‘Modern Prince,’ the insight that has proved to be ‘sticky’ in contemporary social theory concerns his observation of the specificity of the relationship between the state and civil society. He observed that unlike in the Russian Empire, where bourgeois civil society was relatively small and weak and political power lay in the hands of a coercive state, the Western relationship between the state and civil society implied a combination of coercion and consent, a phenomenon he termed cultural hegemony. It is based on this historically grounded theory that Ishchenko offers his analysis of the critics of hegemony as he also modifies the theory in light of Soviet and post-Soviet specificity.

Ishchenko applies the Gramscian theory of hegemony not only to contemporary events but also to the political history of the Soviet Union. The problem that Ishchenko does not expound, but that he

presupposes, is the construction of the Soviet workers' state out of the remnants of the Russian Empire with its own specific configuration of asynchronous social forces. These included not only workers but also the petty bourgeoisie and a large peasantry, populations that were also culturally heterogeneous. The notion of communist hegemony, central to Ishchenko's co-authored chapter with Zhuravlev, indicates the attempt by the Soviet state to subsume 'subaltern classes under a universal project.' This use of the term hegemony already indicates an approach that rejects the notion that 'actually existing socialism' operated merely through coercive state measures, but rather suggests a force of the larger hegemonic idea of socialism or communism at play. While the inner workings of 'communist hegemony' are not explained in detail, the authors advise the reader to consult recent literature on various practices of subjectification under the leadership of the communist party—that is, its ability to appeal to asynchronous social groups. The crucial point in this theoretical and historical elaboration is that Soviet cultural hegemony entered a fatal crisis under Brezhnev while the Thaw period saw the formalization and bureaucratization of the state, which undermined communist hegemony, releasing the erstwhile integrated social forces into a 'conservative reaction.' The post-Soviet crisis of hegemony has its roots in this historical account.

Even though the crisis of hegemony becomes a 'path dependency,' or a persisting determination of regional crises to this day, the book outlines the crucial transition moment that occurred with the demise of the Soviet Union, a part where the book's argument is further theoretically couched. Even the political layperson is aware that the transition from socialism to capitalism in the former Soviet Union was nothing like a transition to capitalism in Western

societies. On the one hand, this was not a transition from feudalism or absolute monarchy to a market-driven society, but a decline and weakening of an already modern, industrialized society with socialist property relations and legal institutions. On the other hand, this transition was marked by what Marxian theorists call 'primitive accumulation,' a process of capital accumulation driven not by the economic activities of capitalist enterprises but by the use of force. This weakening of state institutions and opportunistic appropriation of collective wealth by former Soviet elites, as the theory chapter outlines, only heightened the already existing crisis of hegemony while transforming social conditions, political actors, and social forces. Those able to accrue capital by turning state property into private property, typically former elites who retained some political advantages but lost their legitimacy among the population, are termed 'political capitalists'. Some post-Soviet countries like Russia and Belarus, also saw the emergence of Caesarist or Bonapartist rulers, who appealed to impoverished populations.

With these theoretical resources in mind, we can grasp the thread of argument binding together this book: the persisting crisis of hegemony, rooted in the failures of Soviet modernity and transition to capitalism, undergirds the inability of post-Soviet political projects to create stable political institutions that would represent subaltern classes. While the reader might wonder about the normative purchase of the notion of 'counter-hegemony from below' in relation to this failed institution-building, the purpose of Ishchenko's exposition rather lies in showing the configuration of the state and civil society in Ukraine. These domestic forces comprise political capitalists, otherwise known as oligarchs; the pro-Western urban professional class; nationalist forces; as well as

increasingly alienated and impoverished subaltern classes from the southeastern part of Ukraine. The Caesarist leader re-emerges in the exposition as well, but more in relation to Russia and Belarus, although some Ukrainian presidents like Petro Poroshenko are shown to at least have aspired to this authoritarian position. The Western influence is likewise continuously scrutinized, especially in relation to what Ishchenko portrays as a contemporaneous alliance between pro-Western professional classes and nationalist forces. The development and interplay of these forces are demonstrated in the post-Soviet Maidan and Euromaidan movements and events leading to the Russian war in Ukraine.

The readers will be left to trace for themselves in the book the articulation of the perennial class conflict sustained by these forces. We can only outline here the main nodes of this conflict. First, underlying the phenomenon of Maidan is the particular class combination of the transnational, pro-Western, and NGO-funded 'civil society' in alliance with radical nationalist forces that do not shy away from seizing control of the state security apparatus. All in favor of a neoliberal-type governance that Ukraine's Western allies propose to replace modern industry and social protections, these forces constitute the politics of post-Maidan. 'Unlike social revolutions,' Ishchenko emphasizes, 'the *maidans* did not bring about radical transformations in favor of the popular classes; they typically only increased social inequality.' Second, this unholy alliance between 'civil society' and nationalist forces, often lapsing into authoritarianism that it disavows through a useful comparison with Russia, demonizes and exploits the populations of erstwhile industrial regions in the South and East of Ukraine. These Eastern and Southern regions, as Ishchenko shows time and again against the received wisdom in the West, did not so much desire to join

Russia as they were alienated by the dismantlement of the Soviet state's socialist welfare. Third, against the naiveté of pro-Western elites, he shows how political capitalists, having abandoned their former base in these Eastern regions to the war, have joined the ranks of the alliance of the pro-Western neoliberal intelligentsia and nationalist forces. The notion of a civic nation that Westerners espouse is shown by Ishchenko not only to be primordialist in nature but also to have failed to build tangible institutions and meaningful party politics. This further demonstrates the author's realistic understanding that the same alliances occur in Europe, as the last few decades have buried the promise of a 'social Europe' without socialism.

Finally, all these nodes coalesce in Ishchenko's analysis of war and imperialism: *"The contradictory interests of post-Soviet political capitalists, the professional middle classes and transnational capital structured the political conflict that ultimately gave birth to the current war."* To be sure, and for those whose approach to the book is informed by their political "standing-with" position, Ishchenko certainly does not adopt any pro-Russian stance. The pro-Russian protests that emerged in opposition to the pro-Western Maidan—referred to as anti-Maidans—are considered by the author just as one-sided. If the Maidan is trapped between Ukrainian nationalism and neoliberal European imperialism, anti-Maidans are seen as gravitating towards Russian imperialism. However, Russia's decision to employ full-scale military force in 2022 indicates that these pro-Russian forces were more a reaction to pro-Western neoliberal governance than a 'civilizational' choice. Russian imperialism is hardly an appealing option for anyone in the Eastern and Southern regions, and believing so would mean indulging in the notion that these industrial working-class populations are less

civilized than the pro-Western—ironically, often non-unionized and even anti-labour—middle-class intelligentsia. Instead, Ishchenko argues that we must understand Russian imperialism as connected to the class of territory-bound political capitalists “whose main competitive advantage is derived from selective benefits from the state, unlike capitalists, whose advantage is rooted in technological innovations or a particularly cheap labour force.” Although this stance requires further engagement with literature to fully grasp the dynamics of inter-imperialist rivalry, Ishchenko’s materialism spoils the feasts of moralism that mystifies the Russian imperialist war as a cultural, linguistic, or inherent evil—all usefully in line with the triumphalist discourse of conferences organized by Western governments and military industries on ‘decolonizing Russia,’ all the while outsourcing the inter-imperialist rivalry to the neoliberal war economy of what is effectively the peripheral “northernmost country of the Global South.”

All strengths of this book notwithstanding, the reader might take issue with the use of the notion of hegemony: is it descriptive or prescriptive? Clearly, different social forces in the region combine coercion and consent and can be termed hegemonic. Yet, Ishchenko mentions in passing a need for counter-hegemonic forces “from below” that would redeem the “subaltern” classes. Is it a realist appeal to a new hegemony, or a rejection of hegemony? This ambivalence opens up an abyss in the place where Ishchenko’s normative proposal could have appeared, an abyss left after ideas such as communism and socialism have been defenestrated and (literally!) outlawed in Ukraine, so that the only legitimate language—from the human resource terminology of diversity and inclusion to more radical “counter-hegemony”—has to be pulled from the canon of contemporary Western technocratic academia. Similarly,

one might raise an eyebrow in response to Ishchenko's accusation that Maidan's idea of Ukrainian civic nation was 'exclusionary.' These protests against exclusionary politics that suffocate the otherwise 'diverse,' 'plural' and 'plebeian' populations of Ukraine read like an appeal to the political principle of Ishchenko's neoliberal opponents or academic audiences taught in mainstream Western academic institutions. One cannot help but wonder whether the terms that Ishchenko uses reflect his theoretical and political commitments or are used to respond to his critics with whom he would not shoulder a common intellectual enterprise.

It goes without saying that Ishchenko is not to blame for this impoverishment of Eastern European intellectual tradition, of that difficult universalism of Rosa Luxemburg and Georg Lukács. Above all, it does not diminish the courage with which the author provokes interlocutors from different fields to do further intellectual labour. For the questions that Ishchenko raised are itineraries for theoretical reflections and a hope—a hope of sorts that sustained the previous generation of 'interwar' exiled Marxist thinkers—for a modern and universalist politics worthy of its name.



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