

Reflections upon the Ethical Dilemmas in Research amidst the War

Tetiana Kalenychenko

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TETIANA KALENYCHENKO

European Center for Strategic Analytics, Ukraine

REFLECTIONS UPON THE ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN RESEARCH AMIDST THE WAR

Ukrainian society struggles today to survive under the conditions of the long-term confrontation against Russia. Scholars who research in or on Ukraine also struggle to express their vision of a society under attack, or to analyse the changes that are occurring. At the same time how people – citizens and researchers alike – find support for continuing life are just some of the issues that are beginning to become the object of contemporary anthropological research regarding Ukraine. Despite the “hot phase” of military events and new tragedies that only increase every day, some main lines of discussion and questions can still be traced. As part of this special issue, authors of short essays and reflections discuss such concerns, touching upon the issues of identity, belonging, originality and understanding, as well as ways of making sense of the myriad current challenges we all face.

Who has the right to define boundaries between us and others? It is those who have the right to establish the politics of belonging who define them and divide social groups, notes **Tina Polek** in her self-observation of an anthropologist in the context of war (pp. 215–218). A sense of belonging becomes the measure of and engine for change that prompts self-research and re-affirmation for representatives of a society experiencing such a deep crisis. The very feeling of belonging can become a starting point for understanding and revising one’s own identity when it is actualised under the conditions of war.

The geography and mixed identity of one particular city with mixed histories and identities, which became emphasised after full-scale invasion and is still under threat, becomes a deep focus of research in Kharkiv in Ukraine. **Yevhen Zaharchenko** and **Roman Liubavskyi** (pp. 219–225) dig into this previously-industrial city of migrants and students, the first capital of Ukraine, to show how decommunisation and the issue of decolonisation changed the city landscape. They explore several Soviet monuments and the joint decisions taken at official levels on how to incorporate them into commemorative practices in a common post-war future. As the authors mention, this opens onto a broad discussion of the lingering colonial and imperial heritage in Ukraine. They reflect too on how this Soviet heritage has diminished too

slowly in its influence on the formation of Ukraine's own evolving grand narrative, for example, as an emerging modern European state.

Understanding one's own identity is a dimension of academic research that occupies scholars far beyond the borders of Ukraine. **Ignacy Józwiak** offers a vigorous discussion of "westplaining", a term that emerged after February 2022 in response to attempts by Western commentators to impose the paradigm of accounting for the war "through and by 'the West'" (pp. 239–249) on scholars from Central and Eastern Europe. Searching for one's own voice and proving the value of scholarship away from leading Western academic institutions is a balancing act that requires, on the one hand, engaging with academic failures to analyse events appropriately as they unfold and, on the other, responding ethically to those commentators who continue to ignore voices from the "periphery". We, as editors of this special issue, draw attention to the academy in its primary sense as a place where it is possible to articulate the complexity of reality, and we hope to nurture shared understandings that produce of new meanings and possibilities, instead of regurgitating clichés that ossify attitudes and dialogue.

Human dignity in general, and Ukrainian subjectivity particularly, have become pervasively contested. Will the world allow us to hear our own voices without constraint or reduction to banalities? Will there be a place for a vernacular eloquence that expresses a renewed identity, not only for Ukraine and Ukrainians, but also for other parts and peoples of the world where identity becomes unintelligible in the face of the Scylla and Charybdis of indifferent Western and malevolent colonial discourses and practices? Where may it be possible to find at least some pillars of humanity to recover the dignity of each individual who now lives under the conditions of a large-scale war on the European continent in the 21st century? These questions should not remain purely rhetorical, but can and should provide space for reflection on the reality that hope and safety are unequally rationed today, a basic truth that remains uncomfortable to talk about in places where it ought to be forcefully debated. Such truths pull researchers and leaders of public opinion out of comfortable conceptual frameworks, plunging them into the current, harsh reality of a contemporary world of precarity. Such pointed and poignant verities call for decisions to be made now, to prevent the direst of consequences for humanity.

Under the current ubiquity of fake materials and data, and the seeming hegemony of artificial intelligence, it is documentary evidence and personal stories that should remain the object of research. Thus, according to **Olena Martynchuk**, personal or family history can be told by and through photographs, which become actors in the social system and provoke people to communicate and interact with each other (pp. 227–229). In the case of Ukrainian refugees, who chose what they could take with them with little time to decide, family photo albums became valuable possessions that traffic in meaning, bringing them back to "normal life" at one point and serving as a symbolic reminder of life before the "war", itself a protean reality, shifting in register and meaning as the conflict trudges on.

The research concepts and terms we use also need revision because of the ongoing war. For example, **Patrycja Trzeszczyńska** is convinced that the term “refugees”, as applied to Ukrainians, should be reviewed (pp. 231–238). This concept, she argues, rather describes a person who loses the capacity for action and decision-making, which contradicts the prevailing image of Ukrainians who found themselves abroad during the war. This vulnerability, which becomes characteristic of the “refugee” in refugee discourses, deprives them of the possibility to exercise agency and to choose what to do next with their lives. In challenging this conceptual “refugee” in a variety of influential discourses, then, researchers, and anthropologists in particular, must attend to the task of defining new ethical boundaries, regarding the level of trauma that “refugees” they work with have experienced. They must consider the ethics of the narrative they transmit, and monitor their own level of involvement in respondents’ contexts. They must also bear responsibility for the enduring impact of the narratives that continue after the life of any particular project. In general, research in times of vulnerability should guide researchers by highlighting the ethical principle of *primum non nocere*, “first do no harm”, while still being in a position to document the personal and group aspects of experiences of shock and trauma in a way that brings respondents’ agency and inherent human dignity to the fore.

Academia has an opportunity to provide a platform for sincere and multifaceted discussions that can correct a flailing humanity at the peak of self-doubt and stultifying introspection. The moment requires an ever-higher sensitivity and perception of a decreescent global environment, even as much of humanity has to fight for bare, physical survival and the right to basic self-determination. The fact that scholars have not met the moment raises the question of the troubled subjectivity of social scientists and anthropologists worldwide. Personal, acquired experience of human struggle and tragedy, and the ability to understand it scientifically, become decisive here. Only through such a process of a global and collegial mutual understanding, framed in robust terms, may it be possible to render a coherent and persuasive description of those painful lessons. Thus may humanity itself learn that we may change our minds to respond intelligently and compassionately, in the places where intelligence and compassion are most needed. We invite you, here, then, to read, reflect and consider such reflections together with the authors of this special issue and to continue the dialogue beyond the pages of this journal, to participate in meeting the moment.

