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Practical present-day philosophy in Ukraine

Ukraine – I had been wishing to visit this country for some years already when I finally decided to organize a trip in the summer. I had heard many stories about Kyiv and Ukraine in general from my Russian and Ukrainian friends, and after a trip to St Petersburg, my curiosity was all the more aroused, since I had been told Ukrainians are in many regards like the Russians and yet not Russian at all. This seemed quite intriguing to me – especially because I am myself a kind of French-Czech-Dutch culture mix. Thus, at the beginning of the month of August I left France, where I am a student at the Ecole normale supérieure of Lyon, and took off for Kyiv, resolved to discover this people's double identity.

I suppose someone who is delighted at a place he or she has visited begins his account with a positive note which quickly evolves into a fairy-tale. Strangely enough, my first impressions of Ukraine were not equally fine, and I would consider it dishonest to tell you I was keen on Kyiv from the very beginning. Whereas I had fallen in love immediately with St Petersburg, it took me some time to feel wherein Kyiv's appeal lies, but perhaps it is this hidden character of Kyiv's charm that explains why I finally preferred it above the Baltic metropolis.

My first impression was based on the host family with whom I was to stay two weeks, and nothing can better reflect my thoughts on the first evening than a portrait of the lady. Her name was Lyuda, and she was the mother of an eighteen-years-old girl. Their apartment was located in the historic district of Podol in Kyiv, at less than five minutes on foot from the well-known tourist street Andreyevskiy Uzviz. I reckoned I was very lucky to stay in such a nice-looking place close to the large and beautiful river the Dnepr. The first place where my hostess took me was a little church on the riverbank, from whose location the vast expands of nature on the central island could be admired, in the very heart of the city - something you won't find in a capital like Paris. Lyuda went there to feed the dead of her family, by offering well-cooked foodstuff. She was an exceedingly pious woman, paradoxically and monstrously racist, not afraid to dress skimpily and to glue fake flashy-coloured nails on her fingers, which transformed the use of a keyboard into a difficult task. At first, she really made me laugh, but I could not help thinking her ideas were tear-jerking, as she was probably not the only one to combine this shameful mix of extreme racism and apparent faith in Christian ideals. Even the worst French Le Pen-voter would not be able to "improve" these views on black people. She told me for instance that France had been forsaken by God since the 1789 Revolution, and from then on tainted by debauchery and poison, among which the arrival of the "nyegri" could be counted. This debauchery would find its expression in French cinema, where "sons sleep with their mothers". After which my hostess concluded the evening by stating I could still be rescued if I decided to learn the etiquette and become a marriageable girl. All in all, virtue apparently resided in the fork you hold in your left hand and the knife that is in your right.

It took me some time to forget about my initial bad impressions, and to look unbiased beyond several aspects of life in Kyiv which at first displeased me. It now seems to me as if I had had only eye for the most negative views one can get in the Ukrainian capital city. The first few days I had the feeling Kyiv is one gigantic anthill, and by saying so I do not only hint at the noisy traffic, the countless building places and the ramshackle houses being refurbished. Human life seemed to be valued as little as an ant's life – one could see the Ukrainians work for next to nothing until sunset, during the night in supermarkets, and late in the evening, when people normally wish to get a wink of sleep, I could still hear the drills, saws and hammers building the "monstr" next to the apartment – i.e. a huge office centre in the middle

of an ancient area. The railway station was to me the epicentre of this hellish anthill, with its extraterrestrial noise, amplified, as if it weren't enough, by music from blaring loudspeakers. Customer-friendliness was based on the sole principles of exclusion, confusion and privileges. In the major hall of the railway station, there could be found about twenty counters for advantaged people, like the counter for "Members of Parliament", but only three counters for common people, who became uncommonly annoyed at the endless queue. The queue I had decided to join finally proved as useless as any other, since the only tickets left to Sebastopol in Crimea cost more than fifty dollars. Later, I was told the cheapest tickets are often bought up in large amounts by some companies wishing to keep up the impression of privilege among their employees, who thus can benefit from the low prices to the most popular tourist resorts of Ukraine (among which, Crimea).

Those first days, I really got the impression people did not care for one another. In France, people at least try to conceal this by holding up an appearance of politeness, whereas Ukrainians not only omit to greet shop assistants, but also shout at people without even knowing them. It took me a few days before I realized this was normal in Ukraine, but then I was almost "honoured" to be treated like a real Ukrainian by a caretaker who snapped off my head. Finally, Sartre was right, for Ukraine in any case – "l'enfer c'est les autres", hell is made by the others. I came to the conclusion that a country is what the people make it.

The turning point was probably the weekend, during which the big streets of Podol and the central street Khrechtchatyk are closed for traffic, and Kyiv suddenly changes into a quiet little sunny city, where everybody goes for a stroll in his most trendy outfit. The weather was nice and I went to Dnepr-beach with my hostess' daughter, who, by the way, also had fascinating nails. We swam in the river, burned the whole afternoon in a surprisingly warm sun, and practiced our Russian / patience with a foreigner's Russian.

After this first weekend, I can say that the more I got to know the Kyivlyani (inhabitants of Kyiv), the more I appreciated them. The city still seemed a disorder to me, with as many magnificent buildings as "monstry", as the Ukrainians called them. But much more than in St Petersburg, I found the people themselves were a most interesting sight. Without knowing it, the Ukrainians are as eccentric and captivating as their capital city, and this impression would only grow stronger during the rest of my stay. One can find anything in Kyiv – young people chatting up in a rough manner, madmen wrecking their cars by driving down the central hill at break-neck speed, drunkards, twelve-years-old girls sunbathing on a square and drinking a pivo (beer) as early as eleven o'clock a.m., enquiring sellers whom you engage in a long conversation (I was even invited by one of them to visit her workroom), very hospitable talkative people and simple-minded individuals like my hostess, who believe Belarus is an excellent country because of their most excellent president, Lukashenka. In order to appreciate Kyiv properly, the visitor should open up his mind to what can snobbishly be called "human experience", because the Kyivlyani are very interesting, impolite, and eager to learn something about other countries.

Very often, I had to disappoint the people I was talking to, when they wished to know whether the French really care so much about perfume and fashion shows. One of the biggest differences I could notice between St Petersburg and Kyiv consisted in the fashion-beauty-wealth obsession Kyivlyani have developed. The city is an uninterrupted fashion show, where people allow themselves to wear to most unsightly and flashy clothes one could find. Stiletto heels, pink miniskirts and fluorescent green leather jackets would not shock any Ukrainian. Very soon, I felt myself a doll, because appearances were more than ever a means to judge reality. Lyuda and her daughter wanted to see all my beauty products and cosmetics, my earrings, clothes and miniskirts (which I don't have). I accepted to play my role of French doll, but only because I knew it would not last longer than a few weeks. Moreover, being so

materialistic, nobody thinks it impolite to ask somebody how much he earns, how expensive his car is, what his father, mother and sister earn. Wealth is important in Ukraine, and as my hostess explained to me, wealth is something you absolutely have to show – you should for instance change clothes everyday, even if they are still clean. After that, the spectacle carries on in the following manner: 1) buy designer wear, 2) buy a four-wheel drive with alarm in order to run over the poor who move about on foot or in a Lada, 3) build a house that looks like a kitsch-castle, 4) travel abroad... But, after all, I thought, perhaps we are simply hypocrites in wealthy Western Europe... We don't ask people how much they earn, because it is absolutely not-done, but does that mean nobody thinks about it? What would we do if we had to live in a country where you are either despairingly poor or threatened by destitution...? I found those questions most interesting – practical and present-day philosophy, specialized in ethics. It is because we generally live well in France that many people can forget about the money question, think about something else, and somehow feel too classy and refined to abase themselves to such materialistic passions.

In the same manner I started appreciating the Kyivlyani, I began to enjoy the city itself after better acquaintance, and the more I got to know its churches, little streets and hills, the more I became fond of Kyiv. In comparison to St Petersburg, Kyiv has much more Orthodox churches with a typically Eastern European or Byzantine style, some of them very old, others rebuilt just a few years ago. Often being considered as the centre of Orthodox Christendom, the city attracts a great number of pilgrims, for whom the most important stopover is definitely the monastery of Kievo-Pecherska Lavra. Monks who have been declared holy slept in caves there and their bodies are still shown to the visitors. In this monastery, one can find all the best and all the worst things typical of Orthodox Christianity: churches gilt to the point of kitsch (a Protestant would simply fall in a faint on seeing the saints' bulging eyes staring at him from the iconostasis, gilt from top to bottom), iridescent onion domes, corridors and caves where a crowd of bigots push and shove, holding long wax candles and kissing the glass which shelters the bodies of the saints, monks with long dresses and dark beards, driving surprisingly posh cars (here we can see of what use the recent (spectacular) rebirth of the Orthodox faith in Ukraine has been), a crammed full Mass, where the believers stand on their feet listening to the priest's Old-Slavonic gibberish for hours... Likewise, the position of the different Christian churches on the Ukrainian religious map seemed much of a puzzle to me, especially since my viewpoints once and again proved wrong and quite reductive. Whereas I had supposed the Ukrainians to be, like the Russians, Orthodox – when believing -, I discovered there are manifold churches, some of which I had not even heard of, like the Greek-Catholic. What is more, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine is split up in two major currents, each paying allegiance to another patriarch, either in Moscow or in Kyiv. My teacher, who was very eager to explain all these particularities to me, told me about this difference and explained that the Ukrainian-Orthodox churches can for instance be distinguished from the Russian ones thanks to the "ruchniki" (clothes) placed on top of the icons.

Very soon, I noticed the same type of cohabitation could be found in the use of Ukraine's two major tongues, Ukrainian and Russian. This cohabitation is almost as ambiguous and tortuous as that of Ukrainian cultural characteristics. In Kyiv at least, both languages are spoken. Ukraine is not Russia, but most people speak Russian very well and often even exclusively, for the simple reason that the country had been russianized since the beginning of the twentieth century. I found it most difficult to make out in what proportions both languages are exactly used, because the answer to that question would vary widely depending on the person you had asked about it. A pro-Russian would sketch you a picture of an overall-Russian speaking country, where, as my hostess asserted, even the politicians defending a distinct national identity are unable to speak Ukrainian properly. They'll depict the Ukrainian-

speakers as foreigner-sponsored rebels imposing their boorish dialect through discriminating laws. According to them, the boors make up a very small minority of the population, and are moreover often Greek-Catholic. My hostess told me that at her work one Ukrainian imposed his language on all the other employees and was in this supported by the law. On the other side, you are very likely to hear a pro-Ukrainian portray Ukrainian's martyrdom during the twentieth century, or, if he or she is in the mood for more chatting, during the four or five past centuries. To them, the martyrs make up a large amount of society, with the only problem that Russian is still spoken by too many people. At least, both sides seemed to agree on one point - that Ukrainian is more spoken by young people than by the elderly. The hardest for me was to tell between real Ukrainian and "surzhik", a word - for once, an utterly Ukrainian one - designating the linguistic mix which was bound to emerge with two so resembling languages. But it was in Crimea that my impression of Ukrainian as a ghost language got the strongest, as it was used in all formal matters, and there alone: on the signs and hoardings, at school, for administrative questions, on the Muscat wine bottle I bought for my parents...

I arrived in Crimea on Friday, after a flight of two hours on board of a rickety Aerosvit (Ukraine's national airline company) aircraft. I was to stay there for several days with my Ukrainian (even though he considers himself Russian) friend Andriy or, if you use the Russian spelling, Andrey. According to my teacher, I had been most lucky in my choice for aerial transport instead of railway transport, since, in addition to the ticket price, there had been an accident with the railway tracks during my absence, which would have had me in a real fix for several days, stranded somewhere in the Ukrainian countryside...

My stay in Crimea was wonderful and most enlightening. This region lies in the south of the country, and is both geographically and culturally isolated from the rest of Ukraine. Being a peninsula, it forms an almost separated clump of land in the Black Sea. The Crimean climate and that of the rest of Ukraine are like night and day - from continental cold to subtropical, with all the changes this implies in the landscape and vegetation. For example, when we drove to Yalta, we saw a hilly countryside planted with vineyards, olive trees, and we stopped over at some friends' place where we were offered peaches from the garden. But the cultural difference was almost as strong, since I only met pro-Russians and even people for whom Ukraine was like another country - a foreign one. I was told this could be easily explained when considering Crimea's past; not so long ago, it was merely Russian, ethnically as well, but Khrushchev had placed the region under Ukrainian authority. This change did not matter as long as Ukraine was just one Soviet Socialist Republic among others, because regional differences were surpassed by powerful central rule. However, after Ukraine's independence in 1991, the Crimeans suddenly found themselves in a country they had nothing in common with. Nobody speaks Ukrainian and wishes to.

A clear example of this specific regional identity is the city of Sebastopol, pronounced "Sevastóópolye" in Russian. My friend was born in this city, and even if these days he studies abroad, participating in the Ukrainian brain drain like many well-off fellow countrymen, his family still lives in this seaport town. Thus, it was in Sebastopol, on the south-west coast of Crimea, that I stayed with my friend, who himself was put up by an acquaintance (a flat in a dilapidated Soviet-era building, with no warm water, and a lock we had to take to pieces in order to get out the first evening). All the people I met in Crimea concurred that they had nothing to do with Ukraine and that their belonging to the latter was a mistake, or even worse, an offence - to demonstrate this, they spent a lot of time showing me everything that was Russian, like the faculties of the Moscow state university that are located in Sebastopol, the oil paint panorama picturing the 1854 siege of Sebastopol during the War of Crimea, and, inevitably, the Russian fleet, which squats in Crimea. A few years ago, Sebastopol was a closed city, and even the Ukrainians themselves were not allowed to enter it.

Nowadays, to maintain its naval base on the Black Sea, Russia has to pay Ukraine a not inconsiderable rent. Throughout the city, we could see Russian flags and sailors, buildings and museums.

My impression of Crimea, even if I stayed there only for a short time, was excellent, especially as I had come prejudiced to this region – not particularly in a negative manner, but I had had a preconceived idea. I expected to find a kind of mini-copy of the Provence, with Toulon or Marseille as equivalent of Sebastopol. This was not at all the case. Sebastopol surprised me in a positive way, with its large bays, impressive warships, and the pleasant and clean city centre. The landscape seemed much better preserved than on the Côte d'Azur – Crimea misses the tremendous flow of tourists that makes the French south coast a disagreeable, even horrid place to many French. We were not bored a single minute, and I met a flock of friends and relatives of Andriy/Andrey – among them, a very kind divorced babushka who cooked a kind of English breakfast for us every morning, a divorced dyedushka (grandfather) who had worked for the KGB (real folklore...). They all honoured Russia / Ukraine's reputation of hospitality, which made it a great experience to get acquainted with the people and learn from them.

Much more than in Russia, my opinion underwent a great change between the sullenness of the first days after my arrival and my fondness of Ukraine when leaving the country. I had to open up for new impressions and the people. I believe it's extremely difficult to get to know the Ukrainians, since they give you so many different images of themselves, often totally opposed.

I wonder whether it is not actually the merge of these various identities, which are not always compatible and were superimposed during the past centuries and decades, that makes present Ukraine what it is – why should we try to define a more pro-European or pro-Russian mentality, and think Ukrainians necessarily adhere to one or the other vision? The Orange Revolution, impressive though it was, might have misled me and many other Western Europeans as well, letting us believe Ukraine's martyrdom-version is the only true one. Perhaps it is this knotty, schizophrenic identity which characterizes Ukraine and its inhabitants - in the vein of my hostess, who keenly affirmed she did not speak a word of Ukrainian because she loathed it, and whom I caught watching Ukrainian nonsense on the television for hours, and yelling with sincere enthusiasm "havno" (shit) instead of the "correct" (regarding the pronunciation) Russian alternative "gavno".