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## Existential War and the Ontological Understanding of Culture

### Abstract:

Experiencing Russia's aggression against Ukraine gives grounds to define culture as a particular world of collective existence; one that is under an existential threat and therefore, this full-scale aggression should be considered a war on cultural world. This allows for the interpretation of the concept of culture in terms of Heidegger's existential ontology: as being-of-the-cultural-world. Habermas' universalist view on communicative mutual recognition of different cultures is then critically assessed. In turn, an issue within cultural interactions is that of a critical point where communitarian and liberal philosophies meet, while national-cultural and sociopolitical dimensions reflected in a state differ. Following Taylor and Honneth, Hegel's concept of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) can be treated as the cultural basis for civic unity and interactions. The essay ends with the conclusion that an idea of ethical life could serve as a correlate of social philosophy for the ontological understanding of culture.

### Keywords:

existential war, the world of culture, ontology, ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), civil society

The world mass media today repeats to Ukrainians that about which we have no doubt, namely that there is an existential war taking place in Ukraine right now. The simplified idea of protecting the “Russian world” became the basis of a dictatorial regime and its imperial policy, and formed the newest, Russian version of fascism in the twenty-first century. Under the false slogans of “one nation” and “denazification,” Russia tries to destroy the identity of the Ukrainian nation, whose cultural values historically align with those of Western democracy. Due to its declared goal of destroying the being of another cultural world, this war is accurately identified as existential.

To start, I would like to say that my account of the concept of culture is based on two pillars. The first one is a kind of thematization of our everydayness, our personal and national experience of the war that is existential per se, with the second one being what we can provisionally refer to as philosophy of culture.

The full-scale, bloody aggression of Russia in Ukraine brings to light what before was obscured behind Soviet-communist ideology based on the principles of Marxist philosophy; that is to say, the radical transformation of Putin’s politics, which ultimately motivated this aggression, which can be called generally and to some extent, or conditionally, a pro-Asian orientation. More specifically, it is an orientation toward a non-European way of the strategic organization of collective life. This is a war, first and foremost, against the ideals of a European Ukraine, against the ideals of Euromaidan, which was driven by civil society; it is an attempt to undermine our deep historical connection and identification with European culture. I think this differentiation between European/non-European (when I say non-European, I do not merely mean Eastern European or Asian) is a deep cultural motivator for Russian aggression. For sure, it gives us philosophers a chance to clarify some basic concepts by which we thematize culture.

The difference of Europe/non-Europe immediately refers us to the time and philosophers of the Enlightenment and their Philosophic Geography<sup>1</sup>, as if they had discovered the eastern territories of Europe, the so-called Eastern Europe, for

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1) “The term ‘philosophic geography’, apparently coined by Ledyard in his diary during his Russian misadventure, was intended to contrast with the sacred geography that oriented the globe according to Christian concerns, like the medieval mappings that placed Jerusalem at the center of the known world or made Columbus imagine that the New World might be the gateway to paradise. For an enlightened traveler like Ledyard, only secular values were relevant to his geographical sense of place, and his global map was oriented according to the rational, or ‘philosophical’, concerns of the Enlightenment... [H]is global vision was conditioned by his enlightened values” (Wolf, “The Global Perspective of Enlightened Travelers,” 438).

themselves for the first time. This was primarily the discovery of the otherness of a different cultural *topos* located between Europe and its Eastern regions for a further systematic (anthropological) study. At the same time the very idea (the *eidos*), of “Eastern Europe” is inherently dynamic, meaning the cultural and geographical boundaries have changed and are changing in tandem with historical and geopolitical transformations on the European continent.<sup>2</sup> However, for the purpose of this essay I rely only on the fact of historical awareness of the cultural otherness of Eastern Europe’s peoples, which was clearly conceptualized in the philosophical works of Herder. As it was pointed by the well-known Larry Wolff in *Inventing Eastern Europe*:

The philosophers of the Enlightenment articulated and elaborated their own perspective on the continent, gazing from west to east, instead of [previous Renaissance’s] from south to north ... the old lands of barbarism and backwardness in the north were correspondingly displaced to the east. The Enlightenment had to invent Western Europe and Eastern Europe together, as complementary concepts, defining each other by opposition and adjacency.<sup>3</sup>

It was the inventing of the Orient of Europe, or according to Edward Said: the Orient was constructed by the Occident “as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture,”<sup>4</sup> “as an ‘object’ of study, stamped with an otherness.”<sup>5</sup>

The Enlightenment era discovery of Eastern Europe was accompanied precisely by the discovery of a new meaning of the notion of culture. To generalize, the

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2) As Przemysław Bursztyka argues, “the category of Eastern Europe is a historical category,” Bursztyka, “Reconceptualizing Eastern Europe,” 68. In this thorough article Bursztyka summarizes the long and dramatic history of what he aptly calls “significant cultural operations, which contributed to the creation of what is now a product known under the name ‘Eastern Europe’” (ibid., 72), starting from the intellectual creation of an idea of Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century up to the current changes in its meaning, caused primarily by Russian aggression in Ukraine.

3) Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 5.

4) Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

5) Ibid., 97.

defining concept of culture meant above all: processes of cultivation of that which is given by nature, and as a certain progress of civilization through upbringing and education. According to Larry Wolff, “Eastern Europe became the domain in which enlightened absolutism proved itself as political theory, as the formula for development and civilization,” which includes the ideas of such a central figure of the Enlightenment as Voltaire.<sup>6</sup>

But it was Johann Gottfried Herder who brought a new meaning to the understanding of culture. Herder began “to claim that there is a plurality of different, nationally specific ways of living, each with its own particular way of viewing the world, its own characteristic virtues and achievements, its own desires, ambitions, and ideals, and each in principle of equal value.”<sup>7</sup> I note following Geuss that Herder, despite the mentioned pluralism, used the term *Kultur*: just as for “Kant and the Enlightenment: it refers to the general state or level of cultivation of human faculties.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Herder’s concept of culture is already significantly different from the convergence of ideas about culture and civilization in Kant. It also was different from the understanding of culture as civilizing progress in Voltaire, who was enthusiastic about imperial Russia. It is not a coincidence that unlike Voltaire, who welcomed the partitions of Poland, Herder regretted it.<sup>9</sup>

Those European regional conflicts from the end of the last century, which took place within the so-called socialist camp, and now the especially bloody war in Ukraine demonstrate the relevance of Herder’s vision of culture. Like previous conflicts, our military resistance to the Russian aggressor is, above all, a decisive fight to defend the entirety of one’s own way of life. “Herder very much stresses the internal coherence of each of these ways of life. Such a way of living is not just a random collection of traits, but rather a unified whole of parts that ‘fit together’.”<sup>10</sup> It is also worth emphasizing that Herder’s vision of ways of life also includes in their “wholeness” various forms of government and legislative systems: “Laws, government, manner of life count for still

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6) Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 205. Also, “Voltaire developed a subtly modulated conception of mastery in Eastern Europe, mastery as a civilizing process rather than mere conquest” (ibid., 204).

7) Geuss, *Morality, Culture, and History*, 34.

8) Ibid.

9) See Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 205 and 332.

10) Geuss, *Morality, Culture, and History*, 34.

more, and in this way a people's manner of thought, a daughter of the whole, becomes also the witness of the whole."<sup>11</sup> In his works, culture begins to be understood not only through the perspective of cultivation of subjective and social qualities of humans – in particular education, upbringing, taste, behavior – but also as a separate “whole” way of collective human being as the nation: the substantial unit of world history.

Two centuries after Herder, both historians and philosophers made a significant clarification to his understanding of the phenomenon of a cultural whole. A main one was and still is the attempt to overcome the danger of cultural essentialism – a biologizing view of a nation as a natural organism, “similar to a family,” attributing spirit and morality to characteristics of the physical world. It is worth mentioning that the latest evaluations of his view do not give grounds to consider him as a forerunner of German Nazism, or any other type of radical nationalism.<sup>12</sup> In order not to lose the key meaning in Herder's view, namely his vision of cultures as quite separate, I will try to point out the main contemporary steps, in my opinion, for overcoming cultural essentialism as a kind of reification of cultural specificity, while simultaneously preserving the main meaning of the understanding of culture as a separate, unique world of national collective life.

As a Ukrainian I cannot help but mention here one of the most famous articles by the outstanding Ukrainian intellectual and dissident Ivan Dzyuba. Its title is “Do We Recognize National Culture in its Wholeness?”<sup>13</sup> The purpose of writing the article in 1988 was to prove the need to recognize the principled unity of Ukrainian culture as a particular world of culture. The main issue he was concerned with was the need to realize a certain unique wholeness of national culture. As a defender of national independence, he formulated arguments against the “cultural colonization” of Ukrainian society by Russia. Dzyuba identified the politics of culture as a policy of recognizing a culture as a whole, which has been historically revived and has had its own history even within the tough censoring grip of imperial tsarist Russia and the USSR. I think his article, written during the era of “Perestroika,” completely aligns with the latest philosophical attempts to clarify the meaning of the concept of culture.

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11) Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, 220.

12) See Vicki, *Herder's Political Thought*, 135–36.

13) Dzyuba, *Chy usvidomyuyemo my natsional'nu kul'turu yak tsilisnist?*

As one of the prominent leaders of the movement for national independence, Dzyuba stresses the need to learn to “philosophically and sociologically think” about Ukrainian culture “as a whole, as a system ... of a corresponding self-awareness and a corresponding state of mind, which can be characterized as meaningful and spiritual patriotism,” and not only as a “mechanical sum of cultural phenomena existing on the territory of Ukraine.”<sup>14</sup> At the same time, he considers the highest criterion that outlines the borders of a national culture to be “anxieties [for this whole] that arise in elementary contact with real life” of “for example, a linguist or a philosopher ... [or] writers,” who have “common human, patriotic, [and] civil responsibility.”<sup>15</sup> Dzyuba reflects on Ukrainian national culture “because it is about the historical destiny of the people.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the national culture has its boundaries; it should be seen as a particular world, a circumscription framed by figures of culture like ordinary people who together care for the preservation of the cultural features of national life.

Defining culture through its characteristics as a body of artistic and intellectual work of a particular national community, Dzyuba directly connects it with the formative potential of culture, with the “future of the people as a nation.” However, recognizing the complexity of the concept of culture, he prioritizes its broader meaning as the wholeness of all manifestations of creativity and ordinary life of the community, which traditionally relate to the concept of culture. The latter brings his account of culture closer to the Herderian one.

In contemporary literature, we can see a critical assessment of the understanding of culture primarily as a wholeness. In his systematization of the complex word culture, theoretic of culture Terry Eagleton ranks the meaning of culture as a way of life last in terms of its generality.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, he notes that the concept of culture as

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14) Ibid., 548.

15) Ibid., 561.

16) Ibid., 554.

17) “‘Culture’ is an exceptionally complex word ... but four major senses of it stand out. It can mean (1) a body of artistic and intellectual work; (2) a process of spiritual and intellectual development; (3) the values, customs, beliefs and symbolic practices by which men and women live; or (4) a whole way of life. ‘Lappish culture’ can mean the poetry, music and dance of the Lapps; or it can include the kind of food they eat, the sort of sport they play and the type of religion they practise; or it can stretch even further to cover Lappish society as a whole, taking in its transport network, system of voting and methods of garbage disposal.” Eagleton, *Culture*, 1.

“a whole way of life... risks taking on too much,” since in this broad sense, “the term ‘culture’ has certain built-in inflationary tendencies.”<sup>18</sup> This skepticism is understandable, as the broad concept can hinder the analysis of the notion of culture in its divided manifestations, that is, the clarification of its different meanings. Nevertheless, Eagleton acknowledges that “the more extended meaning also has its application,” tracing its historical emergence in the works of Herder, particularly emphasizing its significance as a key concept in the language of Romantic nationalism and national liberation movements as well as the ambiguity of the latter, which can be found in nationalist movements.<sup>19</sup> In general, Eagleton considers culture in the Marxist tradition as a certain superstructure over the material base of society,<sup>20</sup> thus distinguishing culture as a special sphere of social life, which underlies his criticism of the concept of culture as a characteristic of the whole way of life of a particular community.

However, it is worth emphasizing the important difference in the understanding of the wholeness of culture in Dzyuba’s article. For this, it is necessary to consider

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18) Ibid., 3.

19) See Ibid., 125–127.

20) Here, I can outline only the contours of the influence of Marxist views on Eagleton’s account of culture as part of the social superstructure. He refers to the original meaning of the term culture as derived from cultivation of the given by nature. He also stresses another source of the word “culture” that has the anthropological meaning of the Latin verb *colere*, which means to occupy or inhabit. In Marxist terms, it is about human mastery over nature, including human nature, in the process of developing productive forces and relations of production. Under capitalism, the contradiction between them is reflected in the class confrontation of the ruling class and the people. If in its “narrow” aesthetic sense “culture is a matter of wholeness, but self-cultivation involves a form of self-division of being an artist and artifacts in one body” (Ibid., 27), then in the broad anthropological sense, in social life, the further separation of culture and nature occurs. Eagleton refers to the “severe judgment” of John Ruskin regarding civilization, which is “broken into small fragments and crumbs of life,” that leads “the mass of nations everywhere to vain, incoherent, destructive struggling for a freedom of which they cannot explain the nature to themselves” (Ibid., 120). Accordingly, Eagleton speaks of the impossibility for culture under capitalism to “restore a degree of wholeness to humanity, which is a result of “self-blindness...of class-society” according to Marx (Ibid., 52). Thus, he also draws a parallel between that “self-blindness” and understanding of culture in Heideggerian terms as the concept of pre-understandings or primordial orientation to the world, as well as sees in that a key to understanding of Freud’s unconsciousness and Lacanian “the Other.” Nevertheless, Eagleton remains a kind of historical optimist regarding the mastery of this “dark subtext” of the idea of culture. “Left to its own devices, nature will not redeem us. It harbors both destructive and regenerative forces, and one of the problems of culture is how to defuse the former without diminishing the latter. Culture must preserve the energy and freshness of the natural while curbing its disruptiveness.” Ibid., 28.

the constant dissident background of his thought, namely the struggle against the Russification of the entire life of the Ukrainian community under Soviet conditions. In other words, it is about the danger of the existence of the whole culture of the community, that is, the existential significance of culture as the unity of national life without which the nation has no future and is doomed. The idea of the wholeness of culture reflects all manifestations of the life of a certain community as an independent unit, a particular world of collective existence. In this sense, the idea of the wholeness of culture acquires ontological significance.

The problematic of the politics of recognition, of an independent cultural whole as a particular and sovereign community's sense of being, inevitably draws us into a dilemma of two currents in philosophy today. This is quite close to a philosophical tension between communitarians and liberals, despite quite wide frameworks in this division.

Putting aside the ideological differences between them, I would like to present their positions from within the experience of the Russian-Ukrainian war; that is, to consider both virtual philosophical camps from the internal position of the personal and collective experience of war, that is, from the first-person plural "We" perspective, and from the conditional position of an observer as the third-person plural "They." The former involves the dramatic experience of concern for the lives of loved ones who voluntarily went to the front lines, of the fear of rocket explosions outside the windows of one's apartments; an experience which is inseparable from understanding that one's fate depends on the existence of the whole that we call Ukraine. The latter is, so to speak, a kind of political view of the event of war from the outside. Of course, those presenting this point of view are also deeply interested in avoiding the danger of this war as a potential trigger for a global nuclear catastrophe, and in reducing their national budgets' spending on Ukrainian refugees (which subsequently reduces the national welfare of the countries that have granted them asylum), and so forth. However, it remains external to the experience of the other culture as another way of community-being.

It is about two approaches to war – from within the experience of resisting the Russian aggression as part of the everyday communal life on the one hand, and as an external observer's attitude, on the other. If we understand culture as a whole separate way of life, then this duality is also relevant for how culture is to be understood.



Not by chance does it coincide, I think, with the approaches of the above-mentioned groups of communitarian and liberal philosophers.

Returning to the conversation about the particularity or originality of cultures, and to simplify such a conversation I allow myself to use a concept of the world, obviously, as the common world of collective existence. Making such a generalization, I would like to point out the difference in views between the mentioned groups of philosophers regarding the sources of social integration. I indicate two approaches to understanding presuppositions of mutual recognition between citizens in a community that experiences solidarity in a state of war for its national and cultural independence; this is how it is now in Ukraine faced by its aggressor, but not only in Ukraine. I can only touch on these two approaches here as the existential versus the universalist.

Let me start with the existential approach to the social whole as a cultural world, form of life, or an autonomous collective way of being. At this point I would have to mention Charles Taylor's philosophical roots as a key representative of the communitarian philosophy. He based his original philosophical approach on "the concept of the subject as essentially embodied in the world, engaged by the world"; "our way of being is open to the world, our perception is essentially the way of being of the subject, gripped (at grips) with the world."<sup>21</sup> At the beginning of his philosophical career, Taylor justifies this initial philosophical position by referring to Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception with an obvious reference to Heidegger's ontology.<sup>22</sup>

I apply this definition of the subject as a human being (and agent) essentially engaged in the world as it relates to our current experience of the war. It does not look random. The well-known characterization of war as existential not only uses Heidegger's terminology of existential ontology, but is also able to uncover the entire philosophical depth of the causes and motivations of war, which is not so obvious when obscured by the catastrophic events of warfare. This is a "War of Worlds," a war between different cultural lives and I intentionally use not only the name of the famous work by H.G. Wells. Not so long ago, in the socio-political context of the terrorist suicide attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City, the artistic depictions of "War

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21) Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, 25.

22) See *Ibid.*, 18.

of the Worlds” and the many popular films based on the work, became a framework for naming and fundamentally understanding the events surrounding the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks as a clash of opposing cultural worlds and civilizations. Michael Frank, a Swiss researcher of cross-cultural interactions, convincingly revealed it in his analysis of the discourse surrounding 9/11.<sup>23</sup>

In characterizing culture as the world, I primarily refer to its ontological wholeness. It relates not only to the external characteristic of a collective way of life, but also to personal contexts that are deeply dependent on the existence of collective being. The war has especially emphasized the existential meaning of cultural specificity within the national community: its “to be or not to be” for each of us. Both referents, “I” and “We,” at least in Ukraine, find themselves in a limit-situation. In this situation of life-and-death struggle are the circumstances for an authentic choice. Fear for the existence not only of oneself, but of this independent world and concerns for the possible loss of its social (national) specificity and uniqueness testify to its finitude and to the possibility of the non-existence of one’s own cultural home. All of that, I think, allows us also to use key concepts of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology of *Being and Time*<sup>24</sup> to clarify the event of this and other recent wars. Following Herder’s intuitions, as well as the realities of our time, it makes sense to apply the methodological principles of universal existential analytics of the human being-in-the-world (*Dasein*) to analyze the modes of being of specific cultural worlds. It seems it is worth accounting for being-in-the-world as our essential embeddedness in “there” (*das Da*), that is, in a certain unique and sufficiently autonomous cultural world. This constitutes the meaning and deepest reality of our personal and collective existence that represents our national identity, which we cannot lose without also losing the authenticity of ourselves. This conversation is about the pluralism of the human being in cultural worlds, and therefore about hot-topic geopolitical issues of intercultural relations in a global world.

Existential identification of culture as being a whole, that is, the ontological understanding of culture as an autonomous world of human existence, certainly encounters significant difficulties in its recognition. The main ones are the dangers of national-cultural essentialism as I have mentioned above, and relativism as another.

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23) Frank, *Discourse on 9/11*.

24) Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

However, essentialism is overcome by the concept of being as a person's existential self-understanding, essentially involved in the surrounding collective world of being-with-others (*Mitsein*). This overcomes also any biologizing view of cultural identity as an ethno-nature or even a genetic characteristic of certain communities. Nowadays we can see it in the messaging of Russian propaganda.<sup>25</sup> The existential embeddedness of human beings in the cultural whole of a society indicates their identity as inseparable not only from any acts of understanding of the world but also conditions any practical behavior and actions of people.

However, it is precisely at this point that a similar existential-ontological understanding of culture or, in short, the ontology of culture as a particular world of being, is overtaken by a disadvantage of relativism. We see, for example, that the obvious nationalist ideology of the "Russian world" does not generate mass resistance from the Russian population, instead it cultivates a memory of victory in the Second World War with a mixture of memorializing the tsarist empire and the communist USSR. Today the same is known to us from numerous examples of information wars as a hybrid part of armed conflicts. It is not only Ukrainians who are surprised and disgusted by the obviously unjust aggression that has no real reason behind it and repeats the practices of Nazi German propaganda and its aesthetic of mass-culture style. We could raise legitimate questions: "Why is there a massive lack of critical thinking within the Russian population?" (taking note of the weak democratic opposition), or "What are the grounds for their support of this status quo?"

The simplified answer to these questions is well known. The consequence of official propaganda through the all-national mass media controlled by Putin's power are especially telling. But in the context of the discussed topic, it is worth recalling the words of the famous analyst of nationalism Antony E. Smith: "But are the masses simply a tabula rasa, waiting for the nationalist messages of their rulers to be inscribed

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25) Multiple public statements by representatives of Russia's government and academia, indicate a certain tendency of public opinion in Russia toward a kind of genetic essentialism that, as it were, determines the peculiarities of Russian civilization. "A member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Taliya Khabriyeva, suggested that a new ideology should embrace 'values genetically typical of Russians,' constitutionally defined. Khabriyeva's idea provoked a wide discussion in academic circles. Sulashkin's Center, a Moscow-based think tank working on the New Constitution project, doubted that 'the identity of Russian civilization' could be called 'genetic.'" Nemtsova, "Putin's Fascination with Genetics?"

on their minds and hearts?”<sup>26</sup> After all, Russian propaganda tries to use culturally inherent nationalistic values and norms to justify the war and, at the same time, eliminate any existing elements of democratic order, including civil liberties, by censorship and punishment.<sup>27</sup>

I think the ontology of culture provides good methodological ground for clarifying issues like those. Keeping in mind the reference to Heidegger’s existential analytics in *Being and Time*, I would note that the initial existential position of the human being in the world of culture is experienced and realized by a person as his or her collective or national identity. There is no objective representation of this cultural wholeness as such in material or physical natural form, although it creates an existential ground for understanding and acting in the ontic reality of existing things and events. Meaning that the reality and existential experience of the war has been made phenomenologically apparent to us as our mood, or inner ground for sense and will to resist to the aggressor. Heidegger observes that “the reality of what is real can already be given without an explicit existential and ontological basis. *Dilthey* tried this in [his] treatise ... What is real is experienced in impulse and will. Reality is *resistance*, more exactly the character of resistance.”<sup>28</sup> I would like to emphasize once again that we are talking about an understanding that is inseparable from the very existence of a person, even though we are used to the idea that understanding is a supposedly subjective quality as an act of consciousness. The experience of war clearly demonstrates that when we are talking about the existential meaning of a war-experience, our understanding coincides with our existence. In the critical situation under the conditions of war our understanding of the meaning of being becomes much more visible for ourselves. Of course, it is possible to distance yourself from concern over the course of the war, especially when its events do not directly affect your individual existence. However, this concern for the state of the collective world of “We,” which is not even realized, can as expatriates know well, haunt us as a longing for our domestic world, as nostalgia.

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26) Smith, *Nationalism*, 88.

27) “*This Is Not Propaganda*” is the title of a British journalist Peter Pomerantsev’s book, which is primarily aimed at clarification of the difference between propaganda and politics of “a struggle to control the construction of identity” (Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda*, 10), as well as how mass media “is rearranging our relations and identities with its own logic” (ibid., 11).

28) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 194.

War clarifies what is not thematized under normal conditions, it usually remains only as a pre-ontological precondition for self-understanding of cultural belonging, as well as for understanding of the state of affairs. In the critical situation of war, regardless of what specific things are thematically discussed, the “to be or not to be” of the world of the collective “We” remains the premise of any discourses. It is a kind of tacit knowledge of the key existential issue, with its core covered – hidden behind our attention to the troubles of everydayness. Subsequently, this constant non-thematic presence of “our” world in communication, particularly regarding the events of war, disposes us to its respective evaluations and judgments. We can say this: the existential understanding is inseparable from being-in-the-world and its particular mode, and therefore it finds arguments for itself only within the limits of the disposition, of existence or non-existence, of “this” (its own) cultural world.

The wholeness of cultural being is given to us in the form of a mood (*Stimmung*) as a general premise for a certain emotional experience and also defines the direction of the rational interpretation of events. The latter determines and directs a choice between the possibilities for our practical and theoretical actions in the surrounding world, and thus directs our existence, and projects our actions. In this sense, we can understand the existential significance of the human experience of identity in the horizon of time. The present attribution of oneself to a certain community also includes dimensions of temporality and historicity. During war, for example, we can observe a strong intensification of mass-mood to clarify the answer to matters of “who are we” or what is “our” national historical world that actualizes the idea of “our past.” The latter is generated by concerns over the existence of “We” in the future. A just war against an aggressor opens sources of resoluteness in which we disclose the real or authentic historical and cultural heritage we defend as our common good at the cost of our lives. In *Being and Time* that existential mood is expressed as follows: “If everything ‘good’ is a matter of heritage and if the character of ‘goodness’ lies in making authentic existence possible, then handing down a heritage is always constituted in resoluteness [*Entschlossenheit*].”<sup>29</sup> In the current state of war, national history has become a subject of mass interest. Past events have indeed acquired particular, sometimes even decisive, political meaning that is critically important for the projecting of possibilities

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29) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 351, (383–84 in German original).

to open a future. A concern for the being of “our” national world not only outlines its imagined historical and temporal boundaries but also underlies a real projection of a future that depends on inherited heritage as a “good” recognized by the collective. Existential possibilities, as the possibilities which ensure the future existence of a nation, depend as we can see today, on resolute recognition and resolution of the problems of the past; particularly in the relations between nations as subjects or separate “historical worlds” of international politics.<sup>30</sup>

I turn now to the second approach in contemporary philosophy, which I have labelled external and universalist. As for it, a better example can hardly be found than Jürgen Habermas’ universal position on the assessment of international relations and mutual recognition of cultures. In his recent article in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*<sup>31</sup> Habermas insists, even begs and makes a plea (*Plädoyer*), for negotiations; he offers a rational solution to this existential war through negotiations between the Russian aggressor and the Ukrainian side. Putting aside here any detailed analysis of his fundamental theory of communicative actions aimed at (mutual) understanding (*verständigungsorientierten Handelns*), I pay attention here only to the sources of his universalism grounded in his post-World War Two political worldview and theory.

As is well known, the original position of Habermas’ theory is oriented toward liberal-democratic values. In relation to the concept of culture, his argumentation is based on a cosmopolitan view. Liberal-democratic politics acquires universal significance in modern times. Accordingly, particular forms of life with all their national characteristics, cannot be an obstacle to the formation of a common universe of mankind. An example of this can be his vision of citizenship in the European Union, in which “a particularist anchoring of this kind would not do away with one iota of the universalist meaning of popular sovereignty and human rights.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, a model of

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30) Today we can see, for instance, how governments of both nations are demonstrating a will to finally resolve Polish-Ukrainian historical disputes over the great Volhynian tragedy which happened in the 1940s during World War Two. In the current war, when Poland is one of Ukraine’s consistent and friendly partners in providing us with military and humanitarian aid to repel the aggressor, the resolution of this old conflict between the two nations is seen as the way to open, no doubts, better opportunities for further cooperation to overcome the encroachments of Putin’s Russia.

31) Habermas, “Ein Plädoyer für Verhandlungen” [A Plea for Negotiations].

32) Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 500.

discursive (i.e., deliberative) democracy is being implemented in the EU as a common political culture, which is based on networks of various communicative currents. Therefore, in the future of Europe, Habermas believes there could be a differentiation of a “Europe-wide political culture and the various national traditions in art and literature, historiography, philosophy, and so on, which have been branching out since early modernity.”<sup>33</sup> This gives him reason to extrapolate, however, with “a cautiously optimistic extrapolation of the course that European development could take, so that we are not condemned to resignation from the outset.”<sup>34</sup> Habermas’ commitment to what I have seen here as the universalism of his understanding of culture underlies his entire philosophical position. One can compare his latest claims with the theoretical intentions of his earlier works. “In a future Federal Republic of European States, the same legal principles would also have to be interpreted from the perspectives of different national traditions and histories... . However, regardless of the diversity of different cultural forms of life, it does require that every citizen be socialized into a common political culture.”<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere, discussing the universal pragmatics of speech, he notes that in communication “at the same time we ourselves produce the communicative context of the intersubjectively experienced lifeworld through speech acts.”<sup>36</sup> Such political optimism is obviously based on the disconnect between politics, in particular political culture, and culture as a whole way of human co-being. Does it mean we need to return to the understanding of the concept of culture that existed before and after Herder, and leaving for the concept of culture only its enlightening and educational content of “cultivating” or “civilizing,” and not as a way of being? Are we today on a path of civilizational progress, well paved by knowledge and technology as well as liberal ideas, to the desired “eternal peace”? Does the history of overcoming identity conflicts and existential wars between cultural worlds not prove the weakness of this vision of “the end of history”?

Based on the actual experience of the war, I would also like to ask: and what about “wholeness” of human existence in one’s own cultural, and therefore, social

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33) Ibid., 507.

34) Ibid., 506.

35) Ibid., 500.

36) Habermas, *Pragmatics of Social Interaction*, 78.

world? What about the basic integrity between both politics and culture, or the interaction of “political culture” and the entirety of the cultural world? After all, it is precisely this political and cultural wholeness that Ukraine is today defending against the claims of a completely different “wholeness” of the “Russian world.” I will not mention here the course of political and national-cultural events for example in Poland or in the UK, or even in Mr. Orbán’s Hungary today. I think the optimistic view on international progress mentioned above, at a time when these conflicts of cultures acquire the significance of a “war of worlds,” testifies at least to the ontological ambiguity of the very concept of the world. From the point of view of the ontology of culture, it can be said that Habermas bypasses this important issue of ontological difference.

I cannot get into the scheme of “formal concepts for the objective, social, and subjective worlds,” which was used by Habermas to explain the importance of the historical differentiation of the primary, syncretic, mythological understanding of the world in “the cultural tradition” of modern society. According to him, our rational picture of the world emerges out of that differentiation together with the emergence of the independent public sphere and the creation of social conditions for argumentative discourse. In contrast to mythical worldviews the modern understanding of the world is based on an opportunity to critically check the “objective” meaning of “validity claims,” that is, about the truthfulness or sincerity of human statements regarding social and subjective worlds.<sup>37</sup> However, if we asked for the complex structure of Habermas’ thought on which criteria such objective checking rests, the answer would eventually lead us to the ontological presupposition of “a one-world concept” as “the shared objective world”: “Communicative language use and the cognitive function of language ... share the assumption of, and refer to, the convergence point of an objective world.”<sup>38</sup> Obviously, such a theoretical original, I would say epistemological, position does not allow for the recognition of fundamental differences and uniqueness of cultural worlds. Today it is a rhetorical question about the ability of communication that is initially “aimed at mutual understanding” to overcome the existential “war of cultures” through possible “compe-

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37) See Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. I, part I, Introduction.

38) Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, 57.



tent” negotiations with an aggressor. What about radical disagreement based on existential clashes between cultural worlds?

So, I have tried to describe the reality of our experience of existential war from two philosophical positions that I pointed out as existential and universalist respectively. Both have their limits. The proposed ontological understanding of culture as a particular world of a collective human being is certainly uncomfortable as an image of a closed monad. Indeed, the question which the discourse of this war constantly faces is the difficulty of explaining how the collective identity of a “We” could be turned into primitive propaganda for a war of identities – a war of cultural worlds. How and why has national identity become a phenomenon of fascism, which Ukrainians name “ruscism,” in its new cultural form? Yes, we are obviously observing how official Russian propaganda forms the basis of the ideology of fascism through the understanding of social unity precisely on a basis of an appeal to the imagined integrity of the “Russian world.” This image of historical wholeness contains an appeal to the historical image of such a world, on the basis of which the political circles of the Russian Federation use the sense of collective identity of their own population to justify an unjust, imperial war. Why did a rapid reification of one’s culture, being in the mass-consciousness, quickly come to the absurd recognition of the genetic peculiarity of Russians? Perhaps, it happened in a way similar to the emergence of German fascism on the eve of the Second World War.

On the other hand, the universalist position contains its own dangers precisely because it ultimately might take the position of strategic communication in relation to the integrity of other cultural societies. We see that the dominance of Western liberal values has met with some resistance from the rest of the world, as well as from conservative politicians within the EU itself; or, at the level of everydayness, it turned into the opposite: woke culture.

The dilemma, which I would call the key dilemma in the discourse of existential war – the war to victory versus negotiations/communication to achieve peace – reflects the existence of two indivisible dimensions of the wholeness of the cultural world. These are dimensions of the socio-political unity of society or what we know as a social contract between equal and autonomous individuals on the one hand, and its correspondence to the cultural identity of the community on the other. It is at this point that communitarian and liberal approaches meet today. It is at this point that

the search for such a philosophical vision for modern societies where those two would combine is underway today.

To outline a possible way to overcome the noted difficulties, I will refer here only to the works of Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth. Both, each in his own way, use Hegel's concept of *Sittlichkeit* to explain the integrity of modern society's existence.<sup>39</sup> *Sittlichkeit* is translated into English as "ethical life," and I will also interpret it here as "customary collective existence" to focus on the practical normativity of cultural traditions and their regulatory role for both everyday coexistence and the political system of a democratic state.<sup>40</sup> Both philosophers turn to Hegel's philosophical system, particularly to his understanding of the common practice of *Sittlichkeit* in which both civic/political and business interactions of citizens and ethical life find mutual agreement within the state entity. I see here an attempt to overcome the dilemma of communitarianism and liberalism in their radicalized versions. The idea of ethical life as a ground for people's co-being in a state community could serve as a social philosophy correlate of the ontological understanding of culture.

The cultural world preserves its wholeness when there is a unity or, let us say, a social understanding between the dimensions of socio-political and ethno-cultural identities of its citizens. It is civic activism that connects the public sphere with extra-political cultural aspects of society. In other words, when there is a developed civil society, as well as a developed public sphere – or following Habermas on this matter, "networks of public communication" – due to which the historical life of cultural traditions and customs are constantly restored and reproduced, then one can hope for the political stability of a society. This is possible when there is no alienation of *Sittlichkeit* as experienced through one's national or ethnic and cultural identity being opposed by state politics. Quite often that wholeness of the cultural world is violated by inadequate politics. When such alienation occurs, political struggle is radicalized, and the color revolutions arise. We can see this in the

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39) See Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*.

40) "This has been variously translated in English as 'ethical life,' 'objective ethics,' 'concrete ethics,' but no translation can capture the sense of this term of art, and I propose to use the original here. *Sittlichkeit* is the usual German term for 'ethics,' with the same kind of etymological origin, in the term *Sitten*, which we might translate 'customs.'" Ibid., 80–81.

events of domestic political life in our country.<sup>41</sup> Civil society's activism connects the public sphere with extra-political aspects of society which is a topic that goes beyond this conversation.

The above seems to bring me back to topological views about certain cultural parts of the European world and their differences. I would suggest introducing not geographical nor topological, but a substantive criterion for distinguishing Central and Eastern Europe within Europe (should we need that), as well as between the Western democratic world and other cultural terms. Such an effective criterion could be the criterion of the existence of a developed civil society of this or that nation-state. In the crucible of developed civic activity, these two dimensions of civil-political and ethical life are constantly interacting in the wholeness of a culture-world. In this vision of cultural-world integrity, norms of ethical life normalize the interaction between social institutions and practices of interpersonal relations, and themselves are constantly reproduced and renewed in the united cultural world.

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41) Current examples of which can be multiplied. I would like to refer here only to Ukrainian "Revolution on the Maidan" of 2013–14, which began as mass civic protest directed against Russian pressure to force Ukraine to not sign the Association Agreement of Ukraine with the EU. In the worldview of Maidan, "freely coexisting ... Ukrainian patriotism, the desire to split from Russia and Russian culture and aspiration for European civic values and their core recognition of fundamental freedoms." See Bystrytsky, "*Maydan ta identychnist*," 12.

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