Nation, Symbolism and Revolution in Ukraine: a tense ethnographic experience in/of liminality

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ABSTRACT

In Ukraine, a former colony of the Russian Empire, as well as a former republic of the Soviet Union, between November 2013 and February 2014, thousands of people took the streets of the main towns of the country, mainly the Maidan Nezalejnosti, the biggest square of Kiev. The demonstrators were pacifically demanding the signing of a free trade agreement with the European Union. As the president decided to postpone the signing of the agreement in favor of closer ties with Russia, the demonstrators moved to demand the resignation of the government. The revolutionary process thus triggered, known as EuroMaidan or the Revolution of Dignity, represented a liminal moment, during which symbolic forms and actions were negotiated in order to shape of a new nation-building ideology, marked by a strong distancing from historical ties with Russia. I will present here some ethnographic reflections on the symbolic forms and actions of a nation under reconstruction, using for that my own experiences in Kiev in the first half of February 2014.

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INTRODUCTION: AN "AUTHENTIC" REVOLUTION?

For more than 90 days, between November 2013 and February 2014, the streets of the main cities of Ukraine were taken over by protesters and became the scene of a movement known worldwide, since its early days, as EuroMaidan (Євромайдан), hereinafter referred to as *the Revolution of Dignity* (Революція гідності) (Kvit, 2017; Shveda, 2015)[1]. The protesters demanded political and symbolic rapprochement with Europe in opposition to the government's tendency President Viktor Yanukovych's turn increasingly to serving Russia's economic interests and influence needs of Vladimir Putin (Burkovsky, 2015; Hnatiuk, 2019; Portnov & Portnova, 2015).

The movement, which began in Independence Square or Maidan Nezalejnosti (Майдан Незалежності), the main one in the Ukrainian capital, had some peculiarities: it was the first protest movement in 21st century Europe to have resulted in the fall of a government established, that is, an "authentic revolutionary movement" (Shveda, 2015); it was a self-managed popular movement that managed to mobilize a large part of the urban population in the western part of the country for at least three months, serving as a reference for the yearnings of other protest movements across Europe; this generated a strong sense of belonging and, together with the other two revolutions that took place respectively in 1990-1991 and 2004, it served for the revision of national identity and its symbols, now based on solidarity and integration beyond diferences (Kuzio, 2006b; Liubarets, 2016; Riabchuk, 2019; Shulga, 2015); and finally, the party base of the movement was represented – or rather, politically appropriated *ma non troppo* – mainly by groups from the centre-right, right, center-left and even from far right, all more or less anti-communist, united against Russian power (Kuzio, 2019; Perepelystia, 2019; Riabchuk, 2019).

I will present some brief information about the Ukraine history to contextualize the 2013-2014 revolutionary movement. Then, I will show the triggering of the facts chronologically related to the increase in tension during the revolutionary process up to the moment I was at EuroMaidan, between February 8th and 15th, 2014. Some photos, all of my authorship, will deal with what I am calling here, albeit in a less problematic way, *of tense imagery ethnography in/of liminality*. Finally, I will sketch a short reflection on the symbolic forms (Cohen, 1969, 1979) used and/or forged at EuroMaidan. These forms were presented to me as elements of materialization of the sociation (Simmel, 2006) that would be at the base of a possible national identity in reconstruction in Ukraine at that time, in opposition to the historical links – colonial and imperialist – with Russia.

Although the objective of this text may not seem innovative, it is about adding more elements to the always current discussion on the relationship between symbolism and nationalism – or between actions and symbolic forms and ideologies of nation-building and national projects. Here, this relationship will be treated with

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emphasis on symbolic universe negotiated precisely during a revolutionary process that, like so many others, has a strong dramatization content, as it is characterized by the highly ritualized configuration of liminal space-time. As an outcome of the revolutionary process and the symbolic agencies negotiated there, there is the much-desired elaboration of what Shulga (2015) called "a single matrix of meta-meanings" as the mark of a new Ukrainian national project marked by the distancing from the Russian/Soviet symbolic universe of the past and by the consequent incorporation of European values and the de facto integration into the modern/colonial world-system.

CONTEXTUALIZATION: A NATION ALWAYS DIVIDED BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Before Soviet domination, the space sovereignly occupied today by Ukraine was never, in fact, the territory of a unified nation, being almost always under Polish-Lithuanian, Austrian or Russian domination. This ended up generating, in the west of the territory, a way of life or "culture" more oriented towards Central Europe and, in the east, a "culture" more oriented towards Russia – that is, the Black Sea, the Caucasus and Central Asia (Burkovsky, 2015). The Kiev region – the Rus of Kiev – is considered the cradle of the Russian Slav people and a center for the dissemination of the Orthodox Christian religion. Regional political and military hegemony was, however, dictated by the Russians around Moscow from the 13th century. Between the 14th and 17th centuries, after the Mongol occupation, it was the turn of the Polish-Lithuanian domination, defeated by the military force of the Cossacks (originating from the Kievan Rus') with the help of the Russians in the fight against Western enemies (Balcer, 2019). The Russian expansionist zeal between the 17th and 18th centuries made Ukraine a colony and, at the beginning of the 20th century, one of the republics of the Soviet Union (Deschanet, 2014).

Kiev, the capital, became the third most important city of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, second only to Moscow and St. Petersburg (Leningrad), with numerous richly ornamented palaces, opulent monasteries and churches with gilded domes and large squares boasting glorious monuments (Deschanet, 2014; Lebedynsky, 2008; Magocsi, 2007; Subtelny, 2009). Despite (or perhaps because of) the vaunted and concentrated wealth in the hands of a few, nationalist movements developed in the first half of the 20th century, led mainly by Stepan Bandera and supported by the need to redistribute income and improve the living conditions of the great mass of impoverished Ukrainians (Kuzio, 2006b; Kvit, 2017). The immigration of Ukrainians to Brazil dates from that moment, which began in the last decade of the 19th century and continued throughout the first half of the 20th century.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the industrialization program promoted by Josef Stalin and his main advisor, the Ukrainian Lazar Kaganovich, weighed heavily on the

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peasantry, who had to increase food production without having the proper equipment to do so. The collectivization of agricultural production imposed by the Soviet central power, carried out without much planning, generated a situation of misery that led to the death of millions of people in what became known as the "Ukrainian genocide". The situation worsened with the purge of a large part of the intellectual elite in Ukraine, composed of opponents of the Soviet regime. The calamity situation resulted in the strengthening of nationalist ideologies by fomenting hatred for Russian politicians, the Soviet regime and the "Orientalism" it represented (Burkovsky, 2015; Deschanet, 2014; Kuzio, 2006b; Kvit, 2017; Magocsi, 2007). The Russian model of subjection and domination – both that marked by the Russian colonialism of the tsars, and that marked by Soviet imperialism – came to be questioned in its powerful and persistent form of coloniality (Quijano, 2000), with Western Europe as a libertarian counterpoint, which led to the anti-Russian revolutionary movements of the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. With this, it left the sphere of Russian domination, but submitted itself to the modern/colonial world-system represented by the European Union and its allies (Lander, 2005).

In October 1990, in Kiev, students gathered in October Revolution Square, soon after called Independence Square, to claim political, economic and social rights. This movement became known as the Granite Revolution (Революція на граніті), as the protesters spent days sitting on the square's stone floor (Codogni, 2019; Onuch, 2019). Ukraine became independent in 1991, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and sought to gradually move closer to the European Union in a clear demonstration of opposition to the Russian pre- and Soviet past, although a significant portion of the population was Russian and had Russian as a first language. After a decade of economic and political crisis marked by galloping inflation, uncontrolled corruption and a capitalist business oligarchy shamelessly taking turns in power, the country had a moment of stabilization and growth with the support of the European Union (Katchanovski, 2008; Kuzio, 2019; Riabchuk, 2019).

In 2004, protests took to the streets of the country's main cities, following the controversial election of Viktor Yanukovych, a politician more concerned with serving Russian interests than continuing the rapprochement with the European Union (Gretskiy, 2019). Violently repressed, the demonstrations – entitled the Orange Revolution (Помаранчева революція) – managed, however, to nullify the election and bring to power Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, both in favor of closer ties with the European Union, while maintaining relations trade with Russia. It is worth remembering that Ukraine has a reasonable proportion of the Russian origin population, mainly living in the industrial and agricultural regions of the east and south of the country, while the other large part, living in the central and western regions with more rugged and less pleasant lands, is historically closer to Western European nations, which has inevitably marked the results elections since

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independence (Katchanovski, 2008; Kuczkowski, 2019; Kuzio, 2006a; Samokhvalov, 2006; Umlad, 2009).

Unhappy with the facts and fearful of losing the loyalty of Ukraine (considered by the Russians as the "granary" of the Soviet Union to this day due to agribusiness in the eastern Russian region), Vladimir Putin's Russia made use of supply of natural gas to the country to destabilize the Ukrainian economy by forcing Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko to sign a loss-making agreement on the unfavorable price of natural gas to Ukraine (Baranovsky, 2015; Katchanovski, 2008; Kuczkowski, 2019). In 2010, Viktor Yanukovych was successful in the presidential elections, with landslide victory in Russian east and south. Since then, Tymoshenko, a successful executive in the oil and natural gas industry before becoming prime minister, has been a victim of harassment by the pro-Russian political forces, headed by the president himself, accusing her of having precisely signed that agreement unfavorable to Ukraine, which resulted in her conviction and imprisonment. Yanukovich turned to the Constitution prior to the *Orange Revolution* of 2004 to concentrate more powers in his hands and prevent the opposition from advancing – for example, he banned coalitions in legislative elections and independent candidacies and ostensibly used public media to favor your own party. (Hnatiuk, 2019; Kuczkowski, 2019; Umlad, 2009; Onuch, 2015; Stepanenko & Pylynsky, 2015b).

EUROMAIDAN, REPORTS OF A DEMOCRACY IN THE PROCESS OF REINVENTING ITSELF[2]

The vigorous protests that took place for more than 90 days between 21st November 2013 and the second half of February 2014 in the main cities of Ukraine, mainly in the central and western regions, appear to be the result of a series of events and factors, among which the following are prominent: the rejection of a free trade agreement with the European Union and the rapprochement with Russia promoted by Yanukovich; attempts to change the Constitution in his favor; the numerous proven allegations of corruption in his government; the evidence of human rights violations; and, not least, the prominent abuse of presidential power and the excessive use of police forces, especially riot police. Disgruntled citizens, party forces and political groups from opposition, mainly from the centre-right, right and centre-left, but also from the extreme right, in a surprising and improbable union, took over the main square in Kiev, henceforth dubbed in the social networks of EuroMaidan, built barricades throughout the city in the vicinity of public buildings, occupied these buildings and established intense solidarity networks with the initial aim of convincing the president to sign the agreement with the European Union and then, with the radicalization of the movement, to lead the president to resign (Kuzio, 2019; Onuch, 2015; Portnov & Portnova, 2015; Stepanenko & Pylynsky, 2015b). I will briefly report on the triggering of the events that led to increased tensions and the violent

2 | The accounts that make up this section were drawn from my own experience of direct observation and conversations with several people at Maidan in February 2014 and from the works of authors, generally Ukrainian (Kuzio, 2019; Liubarets, 2016; Onuch, 2015; Perepelystia, 2019; Portonov & Portnova, 2015; Riabchuk, 2019; Shulga, 2015; Stepanenko & Pylynsky, 2015b; Voznyak, 2019).

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outcome in February 2014, punctuating the report with photos of my own taken in Kiev during the demonstrations.

In 2013, the Gross Domestic Product per capita of Ukraine was just over 4,000 dollars (USD), while that of Romania, which had been admitted to the European Union in 2007, was almost 9,500 USD, and that of Poland, admitted in 2004, of almost 13,800 – France's was around 42,600, Russia's approximately 16,000, and Brazil's, by way of comparison, 12,300[3]. In late November of that year, Yanukovich was about to sign an agreement to make economic rapprochement with the European Union viable. For a large portion of the population, this would represent not only a considerable improvement in trade relations and, therefore, in general living conditions, but also a real possibility of approximation of the ideal of justice and rights practices in force in Western Europe – while in Russia, Vladimir Putin regime became increasingly authoritarian, denounced for numerous human rights violations, with the repression of ethnic minorities and homosexuals. However, a few days before the expected date for the conclusion of the agreement, the government announced that it would no longer sign it, to the general surprise of the population. From that moment on, on November 21st, protests were triggered in several cities across the country, convened even by social networks, starting at Independence Square or Maidan Nezalejnosti, in Kiev (Burkovsky, 2015; Portnov & Portnova, 2015; Stepanenko & Pylynsky, 2015b).

Thus began a period of liminality, a marginal space-time between two structural states of existence, during which the symbols (or contractual terms) of social aggregation could be re-elaborated to generate an interesting consideration of national identity (Turner, 1974). It seemed to be, for me, a privileged moment for observing the nation in its reflective state. What was revolutionary about this moment was not so much the fact that the president could be deposed and new elections called because of the strength of the popular movement, but the fact that a space-time was being created for social bonds reinvented, amalgamated by a heteroclite set of symbolic forms in a new mode of sociation (Simmel, 2006). An ethnography produced mainly with images allowed us to analyze the process of construction of a national identity or nation-building ideology in progress (Peirano, 1992), contrary to the effects of a very peculiar configuration of coloniality of knowledge and power (Quijano, 2000) imposed by the Russian colonialist and imperialist background[4].

On November 22nd, students mobilized, constituting the main axis of the movement at that first moment. On November 24th and 25th, thousands of protesters came from the interior for a political act that had already been scheduled for the date of signing the agreement. At Maidan, political parties and more or less institutionalized groups were only allowed to manifest on the condition that they did not star in the scene. On November 26th, two groups that until then demonstrated in different places joined the Maidan: students and protesters from the countryside, on the one hand, and, on the other, the representatives of these opposition political parties and

3 | These data are available, regularly updated, on the website of the Statistical Division of the United Nations (UN), at < https://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/CountryProfile > Accessed on April 13, 2020.

4 | Tlostanova (2008) uses the perspective of coloniality of knowledge and power by Quijano (2000) to make an interesting analysis of the way in which Russia – both the imperial and the Soviet – developed as a colonial power from the 18th century, even based on racial hierarchies. The author does not deal specifically with Ukraine, but following the clues proposed by her, one can understand the effects of Russian and Soviet nationalism justifying the subjugation even of Slavic peoples, like the Ukrainians, on racial grounds, considered as peoples to be "civilized" through Russification. Therefore, the perspective of the coloniality of Quijano is also adopted here.

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groups. At that time, in opposition to Yanukovich's party, the *Party of Regions* (Пáртія регіóнів), meet in the streets *The Homeland* (батьківщна), Yulia Tymoshenko's party (still imprisoned at that time), and the Democratic *Alliance* for Reform (Партія удар) by Vitali Klitschko (a former boxer), both pro-Europe centre-right liberals, as well as the extreme Pan-Ukrainian Union or *Freedom*/Svoboda (Свобода) by Oleg Tyahnyb, from the far-right, heir to Stepan Bandera, the ultranationalist of the 1930s-1940s.

Alongside these official party structures, several ultranationalist groups also took advantage of the situation, many of them with neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic references, who gathered at Maidan largely under the same red (representing blood) and black (the fertile Ukrainian soil) flag,[5] that one what came to be called from then on the Right Sector (иравии сектор), under the leadership of Dmytro Yarosh – following the revolutionary movement, the *Right Sector* would become an official political party and Yarosh, after having candidate for the presidency, was elected parliamentarian (Portnov & Portnova, 2015; Shveda, 2015).

As for the left formations, there was in Ukraine, at that time, on the part of the electorate, an understandable association of the communist and socialist parties and groups with the Soviet past. The Communist Party was part of Yanukovich's governing base, and some self-declared leftist groups demonstrated, by the way, against EuroMaidan, such as the group The Battle (боротьба) – a group based mainly in eastern Russian cities such as Kharkiv and Odessa. The "new left", represented by non-Stalinist communists, anarchists, feminists and LGBTs (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transexual/transgender people) was extremely divided in the face of EuroMaidan's demands not to clearly see the association between their agendas. By the way, at Maidan, the assembly of tents representing the various sectors of this "new left" was vehemently impeded by Svoboda and the Right Sector - in the countryside, this left had more space in the mobilizations, as we could see in Lviv, in the region West near Poland, where flags, for example, representative of LGBT color rainbows appeared alongside European Union flags. The participation of people from the "new left" was, therefore, a little more individualized at EuroMaidan (Shveda, 2015; Stepanenko & Pylynsky, 2015a)[6].

There was hope that the agreement with the European Union would be signed by November 29th, when a meeting of European leaders, in which Yanukovich participated, held in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, would end. However, the agreement was not signed. On the night of November 30th, police forces, represented in large part by the feared riot police Berkut (беркут), violently repressed the demonstrations, leaving several injured. Berkut's pretext for the confrontation was the installation of a gigantic Christmas tree on Maidan. The tree installation would never be completed and the structure would serve, during the following weeks, for the disposition of the flags, banners and posters of the many groups and entities there represented. During the confrontation, many protesters went to find refuge in the Saint Michael's

5 | Therefore, this flag must not be confused with that common to anarchist movements. In Brazil, in acts that took place in May and June 2020 in support of the President of the Republic and contrary to the Supreme Court, demonstrators appropriated Ukrainian nationalist symbols, such as the flag of the Stepan Bandera movement of the 1930s, and even advocated the "Ukrainization of Brasil", referring to the need to occupy public buildings, such as what had happened in Ukraine during this revolutionary period.

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Golden Domed Monastery (Михайлівський золотоверхий монастир), not far from there, which on November 30th and December 1st became the site of meeting of the popular mass infuriated by the brutality of the police forces in their action against the students.

This popular mass – from then onwards thickened by liberal professionals, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, retired military personnel, merchants, small and medium businessmen, intellectuals and writers, teachers and artists (in general, most of them graduated from higher education and without ties to political parties, unions and/or non-governmental organizations), in addition to young students born in the period just before or just after independence –, decided to walk towards Maidan, in what became known as the "March of the Millions". The aim of the march was to gather as many people as possible against the brutality of the police forces and the government's insistence on not signing the agreement with Europe. The violence against students had the effect, contrary to what the police forces might believe, to increase the mobilization, since on December 1st it was estimated that more than half a million people gathered at Maidan and its surroundings in support for the movement, to the cries of "They give us corruption, we return with revolution".

From that moment onwards, the movement was given a new direction: not only to demand the signing of an agreement with Europe, but above all to vehemently induce the resignation of the Yanukovich government. Although the parties and political groups quickly took over the structural part of the organization of EuroMaidan, it is unanimous that it was a citizen movement of the urban middle classes that emerged

after independence, generally critical of politicians and their actions (Hnatiuk, 2019; Portnov & Portnova, 2015; Riabchuk, 2019). With the advance of neoliberalism, the proliferation of this type of "anti-politicians" movement – but not necessarily anti--political or apolitical moviment – can be seen, such as the Occupy that, since Great Britain and the United States, won several countries around the world from 2011, or the Movimiento 15-M in Spain also in 2011, or the protests against the "political class" in the streets of Beirut, Lebanon, in 2019 and 2020.

At that time, the self-defence groups were reinforced to protect protesters from Berkut abuses, more vigorously after another violent attack on December 11th that left a few hundred more injured. During the night of this attack, all the bells of the Saint Michael's Golden Domed Monastery rang, in honor of those who were on Maidan – the last time this happened dates back to the 13th century, when the Mongols invaded the city. Huge barricades made of earth and ice around the square were quickly erected, reminiscent of the fortifications of medieval Slavic encampments, and members of these groups began to filter the entry and exit of protesters from the protected area. Retired soldiers helped train these brigades. The brigades were soon more or less unified under the responsibility of a member of *Svoboda*, with between 200 and 300 people divided into units called *sotnya*

(Сотня) and following the tradition of the famous Cossack warriors (козáки) of the glorious times of Ukrainian resistance in the 17th and 18th centuries (Urazova, 2016). In this way, a memory was activated and an anti-Russian nationalist imagery was forged – for example, on Sundays, at Maidan, a popular assembly took place to decide on the directions of the movement, named as the Slavic medieval popular assemblies; and Maidan itself was often named as Ukrainian fortified camps were named in the

Figure 2

past, centers of military and political decisions at the time (Balcer, 2019; Liubarets, 2016).

At Maidan, the various tents set up, whose number increased every day, served as: accommodation for people from other cities and districts far from the capital; kitchens and restaurants that offered meals several times per day; chapels and ecumenical spaces (and later, altars of martyrs already dead in the confrontations with Berkut); miscellaneous food deposits; thrift stores that

distributed second-hand clothes to those most in need, due to the very cold temperatures common in the Ukrainian winter; debate and conference rooms; committees of political groups and parties; wards and health care posts; cellphone and notebook repair workshops; press rooms; lan-houses of fortune; and even art galleries... giving life to the *communitas* installed there, typical of the liminal space-time, in Turner›s terms (1974).

Figure 3

With the increase in movement from December 11th (and from the siege of Maidan by the police forces), some public buildings in the surroundings were transformed into field hospitals, support points, legal aid offices and warehouses for supplies, such as the buildings of the Unions House, Post Office and the Commerce Federation. All services and products were offered free of charge. The huge structure set up was self-managed and seemed to dynamically create a kind of shared sense of belonging beyond so many differences, a feeling that could underlie another way of seeing oneself as Ukrainians, namely, an idea of a nation no longer "divided" between Ukrainians and Russians (Stepanenko & Pylynsky, 2015a). The intense network of interactions marked by the reciprocity of actions thus established between individuals, driven in a passionate about the desire to share an ideal of national belonging in common (despite the differences or beyond them), it seemed to configure a new modality of sociation, this process represen-

Figure 4

ted by the systems of cooperation, solidarity and collaboration, as defined by Simmel (2006), stimulated by the preliminary nature of the situation.

Maidan remained occupied and the government, irreducible, until on January 16th, a set of repressive measures was enacted, called by protesters as "dictatorial laws", with the aim of putting an end to the movement, such as: the prohibition of the grouping of more of five motor vehicles, the confiscation of material

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anti-government that incited violence, the arrest of people who disturbed the social order, the prohibition of participation in peaceful demonstrations wearing helmets or military uniforms, the impediment of the assembly of tents without the permission from the police, control of the flow of the internet connection, etc. These measures were clearly aimed at limiting demonstrations and imposing a censorship for the control of demonstrators and their

Figure 5

movement – the Communist Party contributed to the measures, demanding the condemnation for desecration of monuments from the Soviet period, for example. The ban on vehicle groups was due to the fact that demonstrators with motor vehicles gathered to close streets and roads or spread EuroMaidan's messages very frequently, beyond the liminal space-times. The prohibition on the use of helmets, in turn, caused several people to walk through the streets of the city, as I could see, with pots decorated on their heads or construction helmets, also richly decorated or with words of protest. It was the creative form of resistance found by the protesters, another symbolic form that the movement took in the face of government measures to repress the model of sociation that was under construction, a way of taking the values of liminality to other spaces in the city.

It is believed that these measures had the immediate effect of radicalizing the movement. On Sunday, January 19th, the speeches of successive personalities on the grand stage in the center of Maidan, taken by more than 100,000 demonstrators, inevitably highlighted the repressive character of the new laws. At one point, the crowd was called to participate in a march to the Parliament or Verkhovna Rada (Верхо́вна Ра́да), located near the Maidan. On Mikhailo Hroushevskoho Street (Mikhail грушевського), the crowd, armed with handmade truncheons and largely wearing balaclavas, was surprised by Berkut heavily equipped with iron truncheons, firearms, stun bombs and grenades. At least four people were killed, two or three of them by firearm, among them Serhyi Nigoyan, a young man whose family had immigrated to Ukraine fleeing the conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region (therefore, one can see an Armenian flag in Figure 7 and, in Figure 8, photographs of those killed in those clashes). These were the movement's first martyrs. The situation deteriorated further in the hours that followed until January 22nd. Berkut proceeded to send out into the crowd infiltrated mercenaries called titushky (тітушки) to sow discord, promote violence

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and dissolve *communitas*, many of these people being discovered by protesters and subjected to curses and even torture by members of the self-defence brigades – yet another demonstration of the form of resistance and reaction to truculence of the police forces. Several leaders and members of the brigades were arrested and tortured, one of them found dead around Kiev a few days later, soon made a martyr to the movement with his photos displayed on altars at Maidan.

At that moment, one more inflection in the movement was perceived, due to the escalation of violence. The three party leaders who had been standing out at EuroMaidan came to be harassed for being opposed to direct confrontations with Berkut. In late January, these opposition leaders managed to respect a truce and resumed negotiations with the government. On January 23rd, they announced to the public on Maidan the plan resulting from the negotiations: the protesters would have to release the public administration buildings taken in the last days and unlocking Mikhailo Hroushevskoho Street, which gave access to the seat of government and various ministries and embassies; in return, the government would release some prisoners. But, in a popular assembly, the protesters rejected the plan in block and continued to urge the president's resignation. The government, in a clumsy political maneuver, proposed that the movement's two main party leaders assume the post of prime minister, which was also promptly rejected by the protesters and the interested parties themselves. Finally, in the last days of January, the government ended up nodding positively to the movement: the prime minister resigned, the "dictatorial laws" were revoked by the Rada and an amnesty law to prisoners was approved, with the condition that it enter into force only after the protesters had left the public buildings occupied. Protesters released some buildings, unlocked part of Mikhailo Hroushevskoho Street and the violence ceased, although Maidan remained occupied

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Figure 7

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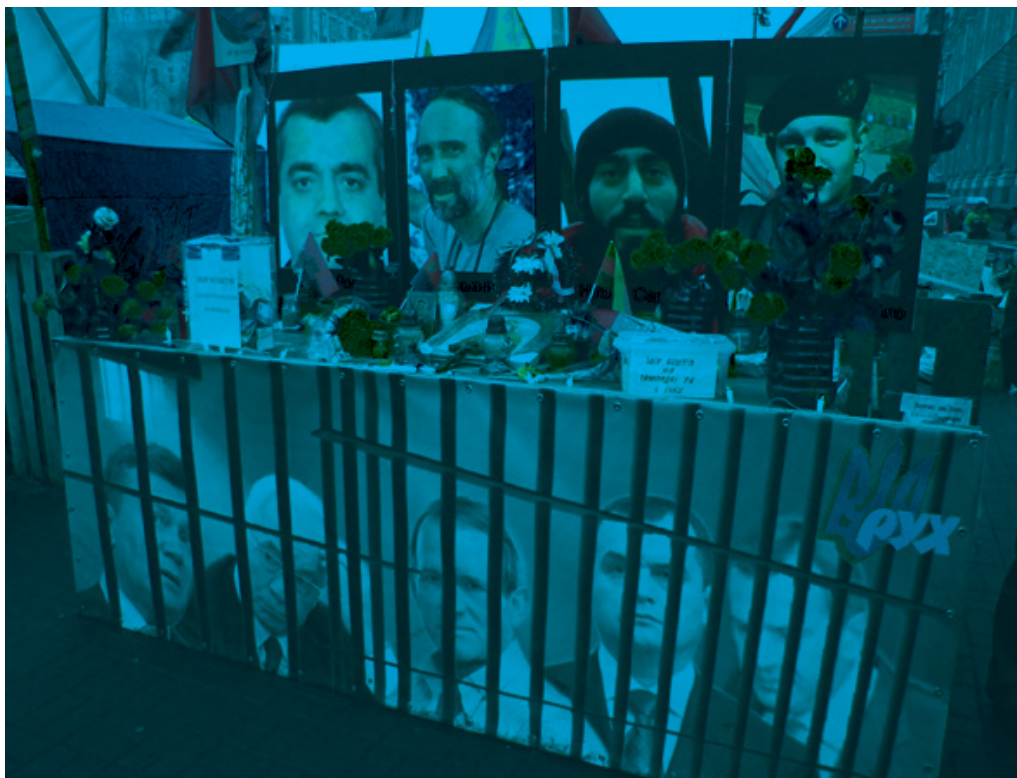experiência etnográfica tensa na/da liminaridade

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and the barricades standing, at least until February 18th, when the Rada was to deba-te the return of the Constitution as a result of the 2004 revolution and choose a new prime minister.

I was in Kiev from the 8th to the 15th of February, at the end of that short lull between the violent outbreaks of late January and the brutality of the massacre that lay ahead. I was traveling through former Soviet Republics (Armenia, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine). The photographs of my authorship in this article were all taken during those days in Kiev, produced from a certain ethnographic perspective concerned with capturing the strangeness of the relationship between tension and serenity that astonishingly inferred from this situation of negotiation of nation-building[7] ideology. These were days of physical experience of liminality for the tourist-anthropologist I was being at that time. Here is an excerpt from the diary I wrote during the visit, precisely on the day of my arrival in Kiev, demarcating Maidan's liminal space-time:

The city presented itself to me with two faces: on the one hand, the normal life of the
usual traffic at airports and train stations, of vehicular traffic and traffic jams in the great
circulation axes, of the fervent prayers of the faithful in the countless colorful churches
and monasteries characterized by golden onion-shaped domes, the noisy food markets,
bustling crowded cafes, rich museums receiving few tourists during the freezing winter that
marks the low season, etc. On the other hand, sometimes less than 10 or 20 meters from the
stations, busy avenues, churches, markets, cafes and museums, there were barricades made

7 | No photographs or reports from the city of Lviv, in the west of the country, where I was just after Kiev, will be presented. They won't be either photos of police violence scenes I witnessed on February 10th and 11th. I suggest the 2015 documentary White on Fire, directed by Evgveny Afineevsky and produced by Nerflix.

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of remnants of various materials and bags of frozen wet sand, silent protesters marching with the flags of their movements or parties and posters with sayings and symbols, streets and avenues occupied by men and women dressed in military clothes warming their hands over bonfires made in the ground in the vicinity of temporary camps, tents where small theatrical performances took place or political debates or they contained elderly women serving soup, bread and biscuits to protesters and campers or even where clothes and shoes were distributed to the most vulnerable, etc. Between these two spaces, the majestic Maidan, surrounded by barricades with entrances controlled by hooded guards. (Saturday, February 8th, 2014).

I also share here another excerpt in which I report the first impression of Maidan, written just before the excerpt above:

Families strolling through the tents and barricades, people serving food, party flags, young men hooded and in military uniforms, tension and, at the same time, peace and serenity… and an almost unbearable smell of burning, kerosene… In the middle, a stage with almost non-stop programming – when I arrived, there was a prayer and the listeners, following along. I noticed members and leaders of different religions in this ecumenical act: Orthodox Catholic priests, Roman Catholic priests, an Islamic mufti and even Buddhists! Exciting! A thermometer on top of a building read 0 degree. I spent a couple of hours walking between tents and barricades, dumbfounded. I ended up calling the attention and, of course, I took advantage of the situation to talk to about eight people. I know that, among the liberals and moderates calling for Yulia Tymoshenko's return, there is the far right, probably represented by these guys with baseball bats, military uniforms and hoods and hidden faces… Including

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two members of security from square, uniformed and hooded, made a point of explaining
to me what the Right Sector was. There is also the strange (for me, of course) Ukrainian
nationalist movement, which once fought the Germans and the Soviets in World War II...
From there I came to the hotel, still ecstatic, by very dark streets parallel to the avenue where
the Parliament and Presidential Palace stand. Many policemen standing in the streets,
hiding behind their shields, some visibly cold and others even asleep. On one of those
streets, I dropped the hat I was holding in my hand and one of these Berkut policemen came,

Figura 10

Figura 11

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took the hat and handed it to me with a smile. The avenue of palaces is, of course, closed off, with army cars and thousands of police and military controlling entry and exit, strong tension in the air... Between the military and the militants, a curiosity: an alley with luxury designer international stores, such as Prada, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, all of them in operation, which only reinforces the idea of Maidan's liminality, while the surrounding structural spaces continue their life normally (or almost). (Saturday, February 8th, 2014)

In the square, people looked happy, effusive and radiant, because they were full of hope. They sang, danced and talked a lot in the rhythm of the sounds that came from the stage or from the numerous tents installed everywhere. Sunday, February 9th, 2014, families strolled between the barricades, looking little worried about the police weapons arsenal installed on the other side, where men armed to the teeth were ready to attack at any moment. Realizing that I was a foreigner, many supporters seduced me into explaining what was happening, according to their point of view – everyone was unanimous in starting the conversation by saying they wanted freedom, they wanted rights, they wanted to be recognized as European. That was how I managed to enter the buildings of the Federation of Commerce and the Post Office, in addition to the municipal administration building, almost in a kind of guided tour, with the right to very interesting reports on the chronology of events, as I explained above. It was not difficult to see that solidarity, which perhaps was being lost from the daily lives of these people due to the hardships of life caused by political ills and economic tightening, seemed to be the feeling in vogue in the square, a sweet feeling. What seemed to be at stake was the struggle for a world more united, fluid, circular, interactive and inclusive – which would include Ukraine –, unlike the proposed world represented by Yanukovich and his Russian partner, not porous, individualistic, warmongering and exclusivist.[8] Finally, in the square, tension and serenity walked hand in hand, making solidarity the motto of the new national ideology that was weakly trying to reconfigure itself to the cries of Слава Україні (Glory to Ukraine!). But, could the game really be reduced to this dichotomy described as so simple? Is Europe really the guarantor of the freedom so dreamed of by those Ukrainians from Maidan and Russia, therefore, the promoter of hardship?

Between February 18th and 23rd, just a few days after I left Kiev for Lithuania, with a few days' stopover in Lviv, the situation deteriorated surprisingly. Protesters marched towards the Rada to press for a return to the Constitution in its 2004 model and the choice of a new prime minister. Once again, protesters were surprised by the government's decisions. Police forces, authorized by Yanukovich to evacuate Maidan with tanks, cornered the protesters at several points – men, women and children – and snipers did not spare even Red Cross members and priests, resulting in the massacre of more than a hundred people on Mikhailo Hroushevskoho Street, near Mariinsky Park (Маріїнський парк) and especially on Instytutska Street (Інститутська).[9] All

8 | Any similarity to the Brazilian reality current does not seem to be mere coincidence (Cesarino, 2019).

9 | This last street became known as Centena Celestial St. and, in 2019, a memorial would be built there. See, to that In this respect, the following article: < Https://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainians-rue-lack of-justice-for-euromaidan killings/29780996.html > Accessed on April 15, 2020.

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of this was filmed and photographed. While the protesters tried to produce with burning tires a dense smoke that prevented, for a few moments, that the snipers saw them so that the wounded could be saved and the bodies removed, the police forces destroyed all of Maidan's wealth structures and set fire to field hospitals, such as that of the Federation of Commerce, charring the wounded, health workers and volunteers.

An agreement was signed shortly thereafter with the participation of European and Russian observers, providing for the anticipation of the end of Yanukovich's term, the release of Tymoshenko and presidential elections for December 2014. However, the demonstrators reinforced their repudiation of institutionalized political forces, publicly harassing even those opposition leaders who had been participating in EuroMaidan, called traitors and criminals. Some protesters then threatened an assault on the seat of executive power. Yanukovich had just traveled to an activity that had already been scheduled in the pro-Russia region, and in that time the opposition accused him of running away from his obligations, mainly due to the massacre that had just taken place. The Rada quickly decided for his dismissal with the favorable vote of 328 of its 450 members. An emergency interim government was formed by the Rada and scheduled the presidential elections for May 2014. The Rada immediately took some decisions that would have direct consequences in triggering the events that marked the next months of 2014 and the year of 2015, such as: in addition to the issuance of Yanukovich's arrest warrant and the opening of a case for a crime against humanity at the International Criminal Court, it was decided to abolish the law that established that in areas where less than 10% of the population spoke a minority language, this language could also be considered as official, which directly damaged the relationship with the more Russified regions. Russia declared internationally that it did not recognize the interim government and that what had taken place in Ukraine was a coup, in addition to taking economic measures to repudiate Ukraine to escape from persecution[10]. Yakunovich went into exile in Russia with his advisers, from where they would have led together with the Russian president the pro-Russia protests in the regions eastern and southern Ukraine, culminating in Russia's annexation of the strategic Crimean Peninsula and the sharpening of the divide between pro-Europe Ukrainians and pro-Russian Ukrainians (Kuzio, 2019; Perepelystia, 2019; Riabchuk, 2019).

PERSPECTIVES: SYMBOLIC FORMS AND NATION-BUILDING IDEOLOGY

In the documentary film released in 2015 by Netflix and directed by Evgeny Afineevsky, *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom,* one of the interviewees, at 34 minutes, says: "When people saw at barricades, it was like they saw the historic barricades of the 16th century. Why shouldn't we use the laws, the rules, the hierarchy of

10 | See <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2014/02/22/53086e73e2704ec87a8b456a.html>, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2014/02/21/actualidad/1392967433_822026.html >, < https://www.abc.es/internacional/20140226/abci-rusia-ucrania-presidencia-201402252104.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fpt.wikipedia.org%2F>. Accessed on April 15, 2020.

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our ancestors?"[11] At Maidan, the barricades, as well as the small medieval Slavic wooden-style watchtowers, the colorful traditional clothing worn by many participants, the altars always lit with candles and carefully ornamented with Orthodox crosses, the meticulous organization of the self-defence brigades in Cossack *sotnya* and the impressive functioning of popular assemblies on the Slavic model (during which the main decisions were taken) seemed to refer voluntarily to the glorious past of the federation of Christian Slavic tribes which, from Kiev, dominated, between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, throughout the region that today includes Belarus, the western part of Russia and Ukraine, under the name of Kievan Rus', homeland of the fearless Cossacks who would impose themselves on the world between the 17th and 18th centuries.

These symbols captured from the past clearly seemed to have been chosen with care to counter the association of the new Ukraine with the menacing Russia – and to remind that the Russian people are of Ukrainian origin – especially when articulated with other more modern symbols – therefore, European – and, thus, shaping an ideology of nation-building that would contribute to the legitimacy of the Ukrainian claim to autonomy, freedom and dignity of its national identity. If we take into account some of the immediate consequences of EuroMaidan – the sharpening of animosity towards Russia through the annulment of contracts for the sale of Russian natural gas to Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the self-declared independence of two of the largest industrial cities located in the east of the country, the part invasion of the territory by guerrillas supported by Moscow and the constant attacks on military border posts, etc. – the importance of reinventing traditions is clear (Hobsbawn, 2006), the creation of an imagined community (Anderson, 2008) and the re-elaboration of national symbols for the consolidation and maintenance of Ukraine's own independence and recognition of its sovereignty about the integrity of a historic territory. What seemed to be at stake, at EuroMaidan, was the very elaboration of a modern nationalism based on a new mode of sociation composed of symbols capable of unifying the apparently contradictory (political and partisan) differences represented by the movement.

In his society characterization based on the distinction between *forms* and *contents*, Simmel says that the interaction between individuals happens because of an infinite series of motivations ("erotic instincts, objective interests, religious impulses, goals of defense, attack, game, conquest, aid, indoctrination [...]" – Simmel, 2006: 60) that exert effects on others and suffer the effects of others. This is what the author establishes as the content of the sociation, that is, everything that exists in individuals and in historical reality "[...] as impulse, interest, purpose, tendency, psychic conditioning and movement in individuals – everything that is present in it in order to engender or mediate the effects on others or to receive these effects from others. " (ibid.: 60). But, according to the author, these become contents or materials

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of the sociation only when they aggregate individuals in "[...] certain forms of being with the other and of being for the other that belong to the general concept of interaction." (ibidem: 60) Thus, the sociation would be

> [...] the form (which takes place in countless different ways) in which individuals, due to their - sensory, ideal, momentary, lasting, conscious, unconscious, motivated by causality or teleologically determined -, interests, if they develop together towards a unity within which these interests are realized. These interests, whether sensory, ideal, momentary, lasting, conscious, unconscious, casual or teleological, form the basis of human society. (Simmel, 2006: 60-61)

What seemed to infer from the activities at Maidan was precisely a reflection on what *contents* should be aligned in what *forms* to generate a possible unit, as we saw above and through the photos presented. Simmel alerts to the fact that individuals give the materials that make up the sociation certain forms, according to their interests, but the very historical dynamics of social life causes there to be a common shift "[...] from the forms determination by the matters of life to the determination of their matters by the forms that become definitive values [...]" (Simmel, 2006: 62). This happens, for example, when individuals, motivated by the need to organize their interests and conduct, establish a content of norms and rules that will configure the Law; but, once established as an institutional form, the Law ceases to be a means and becomes an end in itself. At EuroMaidan, it was the negotiation of these materials that was at stake in order to configure a new unified national symbolic form – and against the determination of the materials by the forms, what was represented by Russian colonialism and imperialism and the russian coloniality of power and knoledge that imposed on Ukrainian materials or forms (Tlostanova, 2008).

Conducting research in ethnographic contexts far from the Ukrainian reality, Cohen states that symbolic forms are a set of elements that mark the identity and exclusivity of a particular political group, such as "[...] emblems, facial markings, myths of origin, customs of endogamy or of exogamy, beliefs and practices associated with the ancestors, genealogies, specific ceremonials, special styles of life, shrines, notions of purity and pollution, and so on. " (Cohen, 1969: 219) Leach (1996 [1954]) had already advocated the interpretation of symbolic actions and manifestations in terms of social relations, as well as Nadel (1951), Goffman (1985 [1969]), Douglas (1996 [1970]) Geertz (1973), Turner (1974), Todorov (1977) and a whole tradition of researchers who have also proposed and have been suggesting that social relations are expressed in symbolic forms. The main function of symbolic forms would be precisely to objectify and/or materialize social relations (and the underlying power relations).

For Cohen (1969), a political regime can manage to impose itself and maintain power through force, but it is only through symbolic agencies that its stability

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is guaranteed. Contrary to what might be supposed, symbolic forms are not the hallmark of religious systems or codified traditions from a pre-modern past. Cohen maintains that, both in capitalist societies and in socialist ones at the time he wrote, "[...] emblems, slogans, insignia, mass parades, titles, anthems and patriotic music [...]" (Cohen, 1969: 219), as well as all sorts of other symbols, are used to maintain the political order, which demonstrates the strength of symbolic forms in the secularized world. Precisely, it is these symbolic forms – shared in the contemporary context even by digital means such as the internet – that were being tacked together in a creative and original way in Ukraine, perhaps generating a kind of imagined community (Anderson, 2007, 2008) capable of produce the regime's instability, at first, and then its restructuring, as happened throughout the three Ukrainian revolutions of the last decades, mainly with the outcome of EuroMaidan.

Considering nationalism as "[...] the belief and practice aimed at creating unified but unique communities (nations) within a sovereign space (states) " (Puri, 2006: 341), it is easily estimated the relevance of symbolism to new national projects under construction: there must be sharing minimum of the same – imagined – *content* material so that a – communitarian – *form* is produced with national characteristics. By symbolism, Cohen (1979) understands the set formed by *symbolic forms* and patterns of *symbolic action*. At EuroMaidan, as seen above, symbolic forms reminiscent of the Kievan Rus' past and the Cossack warrior resistance, in addition to orthodox Christianity, mingled with the flags of the European Union and countries that make up the block, a few rainbow flags referring to LGBT people, songs sung by contemporary *popstars*, sandwiches from a McDonald's store located on Maidan or kebabs and pizzas from the surrounding area, Buddhist chants and Islamic prayers, posters and banners of nationalist political leaders of the early 20th century and photos of martyrs emblazoned on veritable totems and altars, epic theatrical reenactments, nativity scenes of fortune, piano and violin concerts on the iced sand bags of a barricade, exhibition of caricatured illustrations, and so many other things or forms, composing, in an improbable – but viable and serene – harmony, a patterned symbolic action, par excellence anti-Russian – therefore, anti- Soviet and anti-colonialist.

For Ukrainian authors such as Shulga (2015), in the first two decades after independence, Ukraine lacked a "single matrix of meta-meanings" (ibid.: 231) recognized by the majority of the society and with which individuals could understand and interpret the world around them, giving them necessary comfort to promote the stability of the social unit. This matrix starts from – and extrapolates – the notion of symbolic universe, in the sense attributed by Berger and Luckmann (2004 [1966]). The Soviet symbolic universe would have lost its cultural hegemony in Ukraine after the Granite and Orange Revolutions, although it remained present in the public sphere. However, a new symbolic universe was not sufficiently consistent

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and integrated as a matrix of meta-meanings or a set of meanings to become hegemonic in terms of symbolic actions and forms supporting a new sociation and a new national ideology, triggering thus what the Shulga calls a "war of symbols". EuroMaidan would have reactivated what was at the root of the Ukrainian problems, namely: the tension between persistent Soviet symbolic actions and forms and desire of freedom represented by belonging to Europe. The dramatization over the three months of the revolutionary process, with the mark of liminality, added to the impotence generated by the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the violence of the war the outcome of this "war of symbols", as Shulga (2015) says, was the definition of a single matrix of meta-meanings – or a new ideology of nation-building, as advocated here (Peirano, 1992).

Until EuroMaidan, there were, according to Shulga (2015) and confirmed by Perepelystia (2019) and Riabchuk (2019), two alternative models competing for Ukrainian cultural hegemony. The same did not happen in Russia, giving this country the strength to continue sustaining one of the models in Ukraine. In Russia, there would have been no attempt to change the cultural traumas of the past, as they still seem to feed the socialization processes of the new post-Soviet generations, according to Shulga (2015).[12] There was never an attempt to replace the cultural trauma of the "Great Patriotic War" (as the Second World War is called in Russia), with gigantic military parades still being held in Red Square, in Moscow, for other more current memories and symbols, such as the struggle for the end of the Soviet regime – precisely, because there was no complete break with the Soviet past.

In Ukraine, on the other hand, there has been a greater emphasis on valuing the story of Stalin's 1932-33 famine genocide, called Holodomor, as I have seen in exhibitions at the National Museum of Ukraine. This is confirmed by Liubarets' (2014) assessment of memory policies and Koposov's (2016) comparative analysis of "memorial laws" adopted in Russia and Ukraine following EuroMaidan. These two researches show how they stand, by part of Ukrainian politicians, the Holodomor as an important memorial to the country's history, while, on the part of Russian politicians, the neighboring country, by not valuing the commemorations related to the "Great Patriotic War", is associated with Nazism and anti-Semitism (an accusation that is intensified on account of the participation of ultranationalist groups during EuroMaidan).

PTo maintain cultural hegemony, Russia would use not only military force – hence the numerous war campaigns, such as the wars in the Caucasus or even the current incursions into Syria and elsewhere – but also the overvaluation of the Russian-Slavic symbolic universe, to the detriment of the wide ethnic-cultural diversity present in the vast Russian territory (Tlostanova, 2008). Shulga (2015) also points to the fact that, at EuroMaidan, there was a total rejection of paternalism and the primacy of the state over the interests of citizens, as was typical of Russians regimes,

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on the one hand, and, on the other, discourses for the construction of national ideology also turned to belonging to European values, beyond the purely Slavic past. The "war of symbols" thus unleashed inevitably turned into a real war, with real victims and real economic and social consequences, as EuroMaidan's Ukraine provoked the very principles of Russian cultural hegemony in the region.

The events I witnessed in Ukraine in 2014 seem to compose, in fact, a revolutionary process. The *Revolution of Dignity* apparently did not represent, as is generally defined, a revolution in dictionaries, a profound and radical social, economic and/or political restructuring, including with the eventual seizure of power by force by a certain group (Shveda, 2015).[13] It was a typical period of experience of liminality, without the structure being completely and/or radically shaken. But it was all about showing it well succinctly, with this ethnographic imagery account in/of liminality, a moment not yet fully concluded today (Vozniak, 2019) of consolidation of what Shulga (2015) defines as a single matrix of meta-meanings, conceived by very particular symbolic actions and forms. The sharing a new single matrix of meta-meanings or the elaboration of new contents for a new social form seem to present themselves, therefore, as a revolution in the sense of what Arendt (1990) and Gramsci (2002) would give to this term. In this way, national symbols enact power, as Cohen teaches us when he says that "[p]ower relations are objectified, developed, maintained, expressed, or camouflaged by means of symbolic forms and patterns of symbolic action [...] " (Cohen, 1979: 89). The symbolic actions and forms on stage during EuroMaidan – and after that – materialized the power relations that would contribute to renegotiate, on new cultural bases, the Ukrainian social, economic and political structure, sustaining and legitimizing it.

An interesting example of what is going on in Ukraine is the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other (LGBTQI+) pride parades held in Kiev. Although they started in 2013, they took on greater proportions from the second half of the 2010s onwards. The police forces – those who in EuroMaidan were shooting at protesters in defense of the pro-Russian government[14] – now protect, in their hundreds, the protesters in his performances and stagings molded from parades held in the West, bearing the flags of the European Union and the United States. Police forces defend the protesters against attacks by far-right-wing and religious radical groups who have been systematically trying to stifle the parades, burning rainbow and... the European Union flags[15]. In 2019, Western diplomats and Ukrainian politicians participated in the parade, and the newly installed president, Volodymyr Zelenskyi, even spoke on the matter, saying he defends equality and freedom for all people.[16] History will tell, with infallible precision, the price paid by Ukraine for opting for anti-Russian symbolic actions and forms, as proposed by Koposov (2016), Liubarets (2014) and Shulga (2015), in favor of the modernity offered by the alignment to the West, in the construction of a new, more fluid and inclusive

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nation-building ideology – but no less colonized.

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