Becoming-Drawer as Becoming-Other

In Memory of Davyd Chychkan

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Davyd Chychkan, who was born into a family of artists (both of his parents, his grandfather, and great-grandfather were all professional artists), was present at the origins of the grassroots anti-fascist street movement in Kyiv in the 2000s. When the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine began, he was actively involved in anti-fascist street graffiti. Unlike those representatives of Ukrainian culture who prefer to "join the soldiers" remotely—e.g., through charity concerts and donations to the army—he enlisted in the army and asked to be sent to the front line, where he died on August 10, 2025.

Davyd critically assessed market-oriented professional art and deliberately refused to receive a higher education in art. As a true nonsystemic anarchist, he was engaged in noninstitutional self-education: he read left-wing and anarchist theorists and contemporary political philosophers, whose ideas he sought to embody in his work. Davyd saw the future of Ukraine not as nationalist and bourgeois, but as internationalist and socialist. As a result, ultraright nationalists regularly smashed the work in his exhibitions. Today, after his death, they declare him a hero.

During his lifetime Davyd refused to accept the "elevated" title of "artist." Instead, emphasizing his anarchist non-belonging to the guild identity, he referred to himself as a "*рисувальник*," a "draftsman" or "drawer." It is thus hardly likely that he would have agreed to be called a "hero," especially by representatives of those nationalist groups who, again, vandalized his "treacherous" exhibitions, calling him a "separatist" and a "servant of Moscow." Today, in a situation of war, the question of who deserves to be called a "hero" in Ukraine is above all a matter of collective belonging, signifying adherence to the body of a heroic nation and the traditions of authentic Ukrainian national identity, like the military salutes of Stepan Bandera's Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and Ukrainian Insurgent Army.

Such an understanding of heroism seems far removed from the political consciousness of contemporary Western societies, which the American war theorist Edward Nicolae Luttwak defines as "post-heroic."[1] In European history, Luttwak notes, mass deaths on the battlefield and military heroism were indeed celebrated as a norm of social life. But what allowed this heroism? According to Luttwak, it was made possible by the phenomenon of so-called "spare" male children. For example, in agricultural European households, one male could inherit the family's land, another

[1] Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Belknap Press, 1987).

might marry a land-owning wife, and the others were considered "spare children" whose fate was to go to war and die there.[2]

In the second half of the twentieth century, the birth rate in developed Western societies declined. As a result, the reserve of "spare children" was exhausted, the era of so-called "new wars" began. These wars, according to Mary Kaldor, have shifted to periphery countries, and are waged as proxy wars, where developed states deploy force indirectly.[3] The main threat to Ukraine, according to Kaldor, is the war turning into a protracted and fragmented conflict in which warlords, armed groups, and oligarchs reproduce themselves through sporadic violence. This would constitute a victory for Putin.

Can we not say that in the era of new wars, the phenomenon of "heroism" is sustained by fighters from social groups who are forced to play the role of "spare children," superfluous to their national motherlands?

The thesis that heroism today is devalued in the political life of Western societies is shared by Alain Badiou, who, unlike Luttwak, defines the modern zeitgeist not as a state of post-heroism, but as a situation of disorientation, a large-scale devaluation and instrumentalization of values.[4] Wendy Brown calls this a state of nihilism that nourishes forms of "negative solidarity," where the survival of one social group is possible only at the expense of another.[5]

In disoriented times, according to Badiou, there is a demand for the return of old figures of sacrificial nationalist heroism, representing forms of disoriented heroism rather than true heroism. Under nationalist ideology, heroism becomes possible through—to use a Hegelian term—the sublation of the finitude of the individual subject into the infinity of the Nation, which is identified as Absolute Being. The paradigmatic context for this type of heroism, notes Badiou, has traditionally been war, and the emblematic hero is the "exemplary soldier," understood as the subject of national sacrifice. In the capitalist era, this exemplary hero replaces the figure of the aristocratic warrior in the discourse of heroism.

But Badiou believes that, unlike the archaic concept of sacrifice, the figure of the heroic soldier includes the dimension of the impossible as "event," which he understands as "the capacity of human beings to create something beyond their own limits," or to do something in a situation "when it is thought that nothing is possible."[6]

Can we not think of the anarchism that Davyd sought to represent in his work as such an "impossible"? If the goal of nationalists is to transform the nation's leadership into the new ruling class of their country, then anarchists as internationalists advocate for the revolutionary solidarity of oppressed, precarious peoples against their own national rulers and all the imperialists of the modern world.

Contemporary researchers of war study it as a complex, multifaceted process that includes not only objective material acts of destruction and production, but also significant transformations of human subjectivity, social consciousness, and the psyche, including the formation of mass passions, hopes, and desires, both militaristic and anti-militaristic. Judith Butler, in their books

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[2] Edward Luttwak, "Who Will Win a Post-heroic War? Neither Side Is Prepared to Fight," *UnHead*, June 19, 2024 →.

[3] Mary Kaldor, "Commentary on Kogler: Analysing the Ukraine War through a 'New Wars' Perspective," *European Journal of Social Theory* 26, no. 4 (2023).

[4] Alain Badiou, "The Contemporary Figure of the Soldier in Politics and Poetry," lacan.com, January 2007 →.

[5] Wendy Brown, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber* (Belknap Press, 2023).

[6] Badiou, "Contemporary Figure of the Soldier."

Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? (2009) and *Precarious Life* (2004), explores the transformations of human subjectivity in conditions of war, introducing the concept of "frames of war," at the heart of which is the frame of the desire to wage war.[7]

Within frames of war, lives are hierarchized and divided: some lives are considered more valuable and in need of protection, while others are considered less valuable and do not merit protection; some are grievable and must be defended, while others are labeled as threats and become "killable." These lives are reduced to bare life, devoid of social meaning and ineligible for mourning.

Starting in 2014, after the Euromaidan protests and the outbreak of the war in Donbass, Ukrainian nationalists begin to smash exhibitions of Davyd's works, both in the west (in Lviv) and in the southeast of the country (in Odessa). Why?

The reason is that Davyd's works interfered with the frames of war and the hierarchy of human lives demanded by the Russian-Ukrainian war. His works did not hide or reproduce these frames; on the contrary, they exposed and subverted them. Davyd's works and anarchist ideas violated the norms of the national-heroic—norms which, according to those who attacked his exhibitions, affirm and glorify his death in the war that took his life so that the life of the Nation can continue.

Yet the work and life of Davyd Chychkan were not limited by the norms of national sacrifice. His works, which expose and parody the archaic desire for superiority, confront us with the same existential questions about war that Butler formulates: What lives do we recognize as worthy to be protected, lived, and mourned? And what lives are recognized as unworthy of living, lives which can be redeemed only in death for the sake of the Nation?

The exceptional Ukrainian artist Davyd Chychkan did not go to the front to defend the framing of the lives of people in the nation as unequal to its elites. He went in solidarity with the people whom nationalist ideology labels as "insignificant," as "non-heroic." Through his work, Davyd—following Deleuze, Badiou, and other political philosophers that he read intensely—demonstrated that people in a situation of war (whether as fighters or as refugees) cannot maintain their subjectivity as identitarian. Instead, they find themselves "becoming other." In this situation, Davyd dreamed that people framed as "insignificant" by nationalist ideology could become, among other things, artists (like Davyd himself) and poets (like Plato's poet, with his special subversive role in the polis).

The paradox of the existence of an artist or poet, according to Butler, is that they do not find their personal identity and possess it, but rather accept it as something that is not stable, secure, or authoritative. The artist only exists insofar as they experience their work together with those who make up their audience, in the multitude of a precarious "we." It was for such a precarious Ukrainian "we" that Davyd fought and died. In *On Tyranny*, Leo Strauss writes that every creative subjectivity represents a threat to the state precisely because they do not embrace the roles and identities imputed to them by official ideology. They are "inconvenient" for heroization and monumentalization by power. This was and remains the case for the creative political subjectivity of Davyd Chychkan.

[7] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009).

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