

The First War of the Anthropocene: Ukraine and the Struggle to 'Un-Cancel the Future'

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DAVID CHANDLER, SEP 25 2023

This short article seeks to analyse the Ukraine war as the first war of the Anthropocene. Political discussion and media coverage of military conflict tends to always point beyond literal, strategic, or battlefield questions, to those of existential meaning. Thus, wars are always discursively framed in the context of the fears and concerns of their times. In International Relations, military conflict (the Ukraine as the 'final twentieth century war') and imaginaries of the Anthropocene (as a 'posthuman' political aesthetic) have been largely treated separately, as if war was somehow 'modernist' and the Anthropocene 'postmodern'. Two topics, two temporalities, two methodological frameworks, two different scholarly communities. However, if the Anthropocene is the contemporary condition we are in, rather than an organisational and policy question of addressing climate change, then we should be able to see how the loss of confidence in liberal modernity and its affirmative imaginaries of progress is played out in this, as in any other, policy sphere.

In fact, the Ukraine war seems to be a perfect case study of the Anthropocene. On the strategic level, little seems to be happening at present with the war stuck territorially, the Ukrainian summer counter offensive having made little headway against Russia's massed minefield defences. However, on the international level, Ukraine appears to be garnering more and more diplomatic weight along with high-level statements of political support and promises of more military equipment.

Recently, the European Union has risked its own political unity by strengthening support for Ukraine, forcing Poland, Hungary and Slovakia to accept Ukraine grain exports which threaten their own domestic economies. US president Joe Biden promised to supply Ukraine with long-range army tactical missile systems (ATACMS), expanding the possible range of missiles that can be used in Russian territory. Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau told the Canadian parliament that Canada will give an extra C\$650m (\$482m) in military aid to Ukraine over the next three years. There seems to be a mismatch between the international declarations of support for the Ukraine, echoing from practically every presidential and prime ministerial office in the West, and meaningful progress on the battlefield.

What's to be gained by taking an 'Anthropocene' approach to the Ukraine war? Perhaps the first benefit might be moving beyond the realism/liberalism bind that holds back much contemporary thinking in the discipline. Where the critics of support for Ukraine deploy the *Realpolitik* line of argumentation, seeing the West as pursuing a 'proxy war' against Russia, advocates of support for the Ukraine argue that it is a war for liberal democratic values and universal freedom. This dominant framing bifurcates our understanding via the binary of realist 'interest' and liberal 'values'. An Anthropocene approach does not pit interests against values in this way, seeing both as already pre-existing and the question being a matter of choice between them. Instead, it might take as a starting point the crisis of modernist framings; how fragile conceptions of 'interests' and 'values' are themselves reconstructed and contested through the conflict.

Perhaps the Ukraine war could be analysed in much the same way as more obviously 'Anthropocene' discourses are, such as James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar* where destructive conflict is played out between the colonial humans on a depleted Earth and the Na'vi, blue-skinned humanoids who live in harmony with nature on the planet Pandora. The film is about Jake's human journey from a destructive colonial mode of extractivism to a renewed

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appreciation of the importance of living with other beings who share our environment. It is through the engagement with the indigenous Na'vi that humans (and the film's audience) can be potentially transformed for the better. In *Avatar*, the engagement with the indigenous non-Western Other enables 'values' to overcome 'interests', but the key point is that these are values that were already lost under acquisitive extractive modes of Western being. In the Anthropocene, the Na'vi are necessary to realise both the extent of this loss and to overcome it too, in fact, to reclaim the 'reality' of what it means to be human.

It could be argued that Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky plays the very same role for the West. His seemingly naïve desire for democracy, freedom, and the market and to be included in any available Western institutions reminds Western leaders of what they have lost. Zelensky is seen to express 'real' European or Western values and desires, as opposed to the actual ones, discredited by neo-liberalism, entrenched inequalities and racial exclusions. As one commentator states: 'Citing principle after moral principle, Zelensky has appealed to parliaments, leaders, and peoples across the West to help his country by giving them the hard power tools they need to fight – and win. He has encouraged people and politicians to relive the heroic moments of their history and confronted them with examples of where they failed to live up to their ideals.'

Like the indigenous Na'vi, Zelensky and the Ukraine struggle itself, are cinematically read as providing an affirmative futural imaginary at a time when Western and European political institutions appear broadly discredited. By intervening to save the Ukraine we do not save ourselves, in some realist or interest-based understanding, but something else entirely: we save our future selves by becoming better, realer, or truer to our 'values' and our 'interests'. If the Anthropocene is about cancelling the future, then the Ukraine war is discursively framed in opposition to this, the war, in the words of Ukraine advocate Ben Tallis, can be seen as 'un-cancelling the future'.

I'd like to conclude by considering what is at stake in viewing the Ukraine war as the first war of the Anthropocene – the first war discursively framed with the goal of 'un-cancelling the future'. Another way of putting this is to ask 'What would you sacrifice to un-cancel the future?' or, to steal Claire Colebrook's expression, *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?*. The problem with saving our future selves through saving the Ukraine is that it is a discourse of disavowal. A disavowal of a Western or European actual past and actual present. The salvation of liberal, Western, modernist, European 'values' can only come at the expense of understanding the actual reality of colonial, extractivist, and racial reasoning at their base.

When thinking about 'un-cancelling the future', learning the lessons of the past, or becoming truer to our 'real selves', as Elizabeth Povinelli notes, it is central to 'remember the function of the horizon and frontier in liberalism as a mechanism of disavowal'. The war for Ukraine is one of disavowal, a war through which it is hoped the 'idea' of modernity, the idea of 'Europe', and the idea of 'values' can conceal their rather shabbier reality.

About the author:

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