Reflections on Kyiv’s EuroMaidan

Jennifer J Carroll

Ethnography of the Unexpected

Maidan Nezlezhnosti (Independence Square), the epicenter of civil resistance and police violence in Kyiv, is located about a kilometer from my apartment. Enabled by this proximity, the protests, and all the joy, grief, and confusion that has followed, have become a part of my daily life. I didn’t come to Ukraine to study politics or protest or social unrest; I came to study medical addiction treatment programs and the explanatory models of the people who use them.

But anthropological fieldwork is a slave to the unpredictable. You may spend months (years, really) building the kind of network needed to gain access to local hospitals, to gain legitimacy in the eyes of program managers and clinicians. You may spend your days, for months on end, collecting interview and making observations in outpatient programs, your evenings typing up and transcribing your notes. You think you know how things are going to go. But then, one day, a key informant may call you and ask you to meet her in the gallery for the show trial of a political prisoner. Or she may ask you to go with her inside the barricaded walls of a protest camp that is preparing for battle with the Ukrainian Special Forces. “Why do we need to go there?” you might ask. “Because it’s important,” she will say. And so you go, because, as anthropologists, ignoring these words (“it’s important”) from an informant just isn’t something that’s in our blood.

The unrest that has shaped daily life in Kyiv for the past three months constitutes a state of exception in every sense of the word. Social and political structures are disrupted. Ordinary mechanisms of knowledge production are put on hold. The location of moral authority shifts dramatically, and the answer to questions as simple as “what’s a safe way to get through downtown?” or “who disappeared today?” require multiple levels of verification. It requires an expert knowledge of not only the events and players on the ground, but also of the ways in which information is refracted and changed by formal media channels and the complicated terrain of informal media networks that have emerged to replace them.
In her writing on the series of self-immolations by Tibetan protesters in 2008, Charlene Makley advocated for "an ethnography of violence that [moves] with events as people reframe them over time and in their everyday lives" (2012). In my last few months in Kyiv, no other approach ever seemed feasible. Everything here—the events on the streets and the meaning of those events—change quickly and change often. Life has become a constant scramble to figure out what’s happening and what has happened.

I have visited Maidan almost every day since its inception. As an ethnographer (and a person of habit), I never leave my home without a notebook and pen; however, the tool that I consistently reached for during the protests was my camera. Extensive photo documentation has proven infinitely more helpful in making sense of recent events than any jottings or notes could ever be. This is, in large part, for the way in which the uncoded meaning of a photograph (what Barthes called “the third meaning” in his 1978 book Image-Music-Text) remains fluid and flexible. This flexibility is an absolute necessity in times of rapid change. Though a photograph signifies what Barthes calls a “having-been-there,” a talisman of proof that quickly becomes the emotional bread and butter of an ethnographer/photographer recording extraordinary events, Barthes correctly observes that this “having-been-there” quickly gives way to a more powerful “being-there.” This transcendent sense of “being-there” is created by the viewer’s presence in an awkward temporal place where events are simultaneously happening in the visceral moment and being read and experienced as events that have already happened, that have already been assigned meaning and value.

There are certain moments that I captured in pictures that bring the transformative ability of this third meaning into view: the walls of fire separating protesters from armed and violent riot police, attorney Viktor Smalii standing behind bars in a courtroom during his show trial, or Serhiy Nihoyan, who was at one time an interesting stranger in the crowd, then later a friendly acquaintance, and later still the first martyr of EuroMaidan, killed by a sniper’s bullet to the head, as he straddled the barricades near St Michael’s Gate.

Roland Barthes argued that all images have two iconic meanings: one coded and straightforward, the other uncoded, “surreptitiously substituting a pseudo truth for the simple validity of openly semantic systems.” We struggled with the uncoded meaning of these images in the moment that they were captured. Will the police come back tonight? Will the amnesty agreement be upheld? Will this be the last moment I see this place or share the company of this person? Or will this extraordinary moment prove to be ordinary, an icon of the new normal, the new status quo? In those seconds that watched and
waited—and indeed for hours and even days following—we could not understand what the events of EuroMaidan meant. We only understood that they were happening around us and happening to us. This is, I think, what Michael Taussig touched upon in his 2011 book, *I Swear I Saw This*, when he referred to images captured rapidly and desperately as “more than result of seeing.” The inability to hold onto and verify to ourselves these fleeting moments when the extraordinary happens turns the pictures we take into “a seeing that doubts itself” (ibid).

As a scholar of semiotics, hermeneutics, and critical theory, I cannot help but see the spectrum of meanings that could be attached to what has happened here in Kyiv as contingent, situated, and hopelessly fragile. Even my own memories of EuroMaidan are hopelessly bound up in the images I’ve captured and the experiences of taking them. What I remember is entering into the barricaded area, camera in hand, and being
told where I needed to go. I remember complete strangers literally carrying me up hillsides and placing my feet on higher ground to capture a shot of things they insisted were important. Dozens of unknown arms would gather gently around me to hold me steady as I stood on fences and barricades to capture photos and video.

One evening in late February, as police armed with live ammunition were kept at bay by a massive tire fire that cut across the square, a man in his 60s, who was sitting by hastily constructed barricades, gave up his chair for me. He asked me to stand upon it to take a clearer, fuller picture of the fires that were burning on the other side of the barrier. My feet were so muddy. I hesitated. “Mozhno?” I asked. “Nuzhna!” he answered. “You need to!”

The residents of Kyiv, along with the rest of the world, are still frantically assigning meaning to the events of the past three months. The ethnography that Makley advocates for, that follows the transformation of those meanings across people’s lives, is nowhere near complete. For this reason, these pictures that have been taken become anchors. They carry multiple messages and uncoded transmissions, but they also give us the privilege of reveling in the “having-been-there.” They let me and the others who have shared them feel closer to the coded message and to a very simple sense of ‘truth’ about the messy and complicated uprising that we’ve witnessed. Because the truth, as Avery Gordon observed in *Ghostly Matters,* “is what most of us strive for. Partial and insecure, surely, but the truth nonetheless. The capacity to say ‘this is so.’”

Jennifer J Carroll is a medical anthropologist who researches gendered identity and drug addiction in Ukraine. More broadly, her work focuses on current global health paradigms and critically-engaged public health policy. She is currently working towards a PhD in sociocultural anthropology and a concurrent MPH in epidemiology at the University of Washington. She also holds an MA in sociology from Central European University and a BA in anthropology from Reed College.

Kristen Ghodsee is contributing editor of the Soyuz column in Anthropology News.