"VALUE VILLAGE" IN MY VILLAGE: WESTERN UKRAINIANS AND OVERSEAS KIN

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Based on my field work in Hrytsavolia, a rural community in Western Ukraine, this paper addresses the main theme of the 1999 Soyuz Conference, the relationship between the center and periphery. Placing an emphasis on local perspectives and looking at changes in local social structure in times of post-Soviet transition, examining the connections between Hrytsavolians and their overseas relatives in Western Canada, and their re-discoveries of each other after a long period of restricted communication, I offer a critical re-evaluation of the center/periphery perspective through studying so-called "small" or peripheral worlds. Although I have little trouble identifying Hrytsavolia with the spatial trope periphery, for economically and geographically it is located far away from well-established intersections of cultural and capital flows, I am less comfortable with the center/periphery model and its workings in the case of this community, for the counterpart idea of a 'center' is not easily 'located' in the space and history of Hrytsavolia. It is from this discomfort my paper is born.

During the time of the Soviet Union, with the center of Moscow strongly regulating its peripheries, this regulation to a great degree defined social structures. Of course, this controlling of the peripheries was not homogenous or perfect and was often appropriated by those on the peripheries in their own local terms. Nevertheless, regardless of the modifications of the imposed social structures these were still definitive of the shape local actions took. With the demise of the Soviet system, if the center/periphery model holds, the new center of Kiev should take over Moscow's role for village communities in Ukraine. Has this been the case?

To address this question I examine the small village of Hrytsavolia, located on the outskirts of Lvivs'ka Oblast in Western Ukraine. Geographically, politically, economically, and administratively it is undoubtedly "peripheral," located far away from well-established intersections of cultural and capital flows. Nevertheless, my findings have been that in post-Soviet transition the residents of Hrytsavolia locate themselves not on the periphery of any center but globally, by engaging in their own global networks that often bypass the center, be it Kiev or the Oblast center, Lviv. This is partly due to historical factors, but it is primarily due to revived kinship connections with relatives in North America and religious affiliations. Consequently, I prefer the expression "local world" and terms like global flows and networks as more appropriate, however the center/periphery model remains a useful one to employ to map changes Hrytsavolia has undergone.

Although there are many ways to tackle this issue, for example by analyzing changes in rural economies, or by studying people's migration patterns, I focus on the overseas kinship connections of Hrytsavolians. To situate this discussion I briefly outline Hrytsavolia's dislocations in the history of the region, discuss the effects of the Soviet system on its social organization, and examine the post-Soviet transition that marks the breakdown of the center/periphery metaphor.[i]

History

Collective memory holds a complex image of Hrytsavolia's involvement in global cultural flows prior to Soviet times. Hrytsavolia was a periphery to at least four states within this century; the 'center' and what it represented for this community was always shifting. Before the First World War the village belonged to Austro-Hungary (with the center in Vienna). The Western Ukrainian People's Republic ruled the region in 1918 (with the center in Lviv). From 1921 until 1939 Hrytsavolia was part of Poland (with the center in Warsaw). During both World Wars, the village was consistently at the front lines. Neighboring villages still bear names such as *Nimets'ka mytnytsia*, German Customs, *Pol's'ka mytnytsia*, Polish Customs, *Avstriys'ka mytnytsia*, Austrian Customs. These all point to a turbulent past of alternating powers. Hrytsavolia and its vicinity often changed hands.

Within these years of wars and changing centers many Hrytsavolians emigrated. They left 'the periphery' and caused those left behind to participate in global flows of Ukrainian transnationalism. The Hrytsavolian diaspora reflects all the major stages in Ukrainian emigration from Western Ukraine spanning a century. There were families leaving the village for Brazil in the 1880s and 90s. There were those who joined the cohort of so-called Ukrainian pioneers at the turn of the century and became known as the fathers of Ukrainian immigration to Canada. In the 1920s and 30s some were commuting between the village and their place of employment in North America, and upon settling down contributed to the so-called second wave of Ukrainian immigration to the New World. At the end of the Second World War, Hrytsavolian youth taken by Germans to work in Germany chose to become DP immigrants to Canada and the United States.[ii]

With the establishment of Soviet rule in Western Ukraine in 1939, and of the new center in Moscow, local social structures and individual actions experienced change. Hrytsavolians became full subjects of the new Center. There was forced involvement into collective production, either in the local collective farm (mainly women) or through work in state forestry or brick factories (mainly men). Potentials for and perspectives on the future and the need to act within the system were surely different during Soviet times when economic, political, social and cultural life on the peripheries in many aspects was structured, regulated, and controlled by Moscow.

Part of the Center's intrusion into local life was its control over people's religious practices and of their direct communication with the West. Many had kin there as well as connections to religious communities, as in the case of Hrytsavolia Stundists. Forgetting the overseas kin was enforced by the Center's prohibition to communicate with the kin abroad. The 1960s were particularly bad years. As one of my informants confessed: "we were told that we will be sent to Siberia if we keep writing letters to my father who lived in Canada" (Titka Maryntsiunia, interview 1998). Forced to cease such communication, which prior to the 1960s had included intensive correspondence, money transfers and the mailing of goods, Hrytsavolians remained mostly out of touch with their relatives for almost thirty years. The community's spiritual, real and symbolic connection with the kin 'over there' diminished in its intensity. The overseas kin moved from the domain of reality into the domain of personal and collective memories, of imagination and conversation.

The post-Soviet era brought yet another structural transformation to the local world. Since 1991 Hrytsavolians' participation in *kolhosp* (collective farm) and in state forestry has almost ceased.[iii] In 1992, with the reorganization of kolhosp into a co-op, members of the former collective farm were each given 2 hectares of kolhosp land while those who used to work for the state forestry received no land. Men started looking for and finding employment outside of the village, mainly as contract workers in the construction industry, while women remained to work on their private strips of land that had grown in size from an average of 0.26 hectares per household prior to 1992 to 0.9 hectares since then.[iv] Local politics became more complicated due to the redistribution of new statuses within the locality. Those who ruled the collective farm during the Soviet time remained in power. They were joined by the local clergy and the newly established group of merchants that started supplying the villagers with food and goods brought from Poland or warehouses in Lviv. Those who maintained interaction with the relatives in North America gained new status as well.

Like the rest of the Ukrainian rural population, Hrytsavolians are witness to the stagnant politics of the Center to re-organize Ukraine's agricultural sector with its ineffectual attempts to conduct economic reforms there. Statistics services in Ukraine have registered a steady decline in production in the agricultural sector of Ukraine's economy. In 1996 there was 30 percent decrease in yield compared to 1990. Production of such vitally crucial items like wheat and meat had dropped 50 per cent against the 1990 level while the production of potatoes, the traditional food of survival, has increased (Zhovtaniuk 1998: 63). Meanwhile the buying ability of the rural population had dropped 6-8 times against 1990 (Shpychak 1996: 3-12). As one Ukrainian economist said, the Ukrainian village is just a card in the political game of those in power (Diiesperov 1998).

Thus, Hrytsavolians continue to work on the private strips of land that provide them with about 80 percent of the produce the family will consume during the year. A few families own horses: the best machinery, as the local saying goes. A few owners of small combines exchange plowing of someone else's land for skilled work they need in their households, for connections, or for gifts. The rest is done manually and when spring comes, working on the land takes twelve to fourteen hours a day, not to mention other duties around the household. With no money-based salaries or agricultural products supplied by the collective farm, as it used to be under the Soviet rule, for many, life has become harder. Logically, many Hrytsavolians attribute the responsibility for the hardships people experience these days to the Center. In failing to invent proper transitional mechanisms the Center has been steadily losing its appeal to local people. The center/periphery relationship has significantly weakened.

Hrytsavolia today

Today's village community consists of some 147 'active' households with 577 adults.[v] There are two thriving religious communities. The Ukrainian Orthodox recently renovated their church. There are about 20 families of Stundists. Surrounded by the forest on three sides, the village is connected to the rest of the world by one paved road as well as by a number of small forest roads each leading to equally small neighboring communities. Although the 110 km between the village and Lviv may seem like a short distance, in reality a trip to Lviv these days is a one day project for local people relying on one public bus a day and a transfer in another town.

The symbolic distance between the urban and the rural has significantly increased, with a fast growing chasm between two social worlds with their different possibilities, orientations and newly emerging forms of action. If fully supported by parents, the village youth may still continue to go to the city to obtain their professional skills, but, as I was many times reminded in the village, it happens less and less. The local schoolteacher during one of our talks shared this thought with me: "what is the point of studying these days? There is no job for us in the city and there are no jobs these days in the village, the kolhosp has ceased to work, mechanical brigades and brick plants nearby are dead. So, youth stays in the village these days, at least there is something to eat here. Girls are getting married right after high school or even during their last year of studying. Boys drink, oh, what a life we have these days!"

Nevertheless, even if nostalgia for the secure life under socialism is still present, the necessity to act for themselves is more and more felt by local people. New perspectives on how to better one's life are emerging. With no ideological control by the new Center over localities, the relationship with the world outside has revived. Some active Hrytsavolians regularly travel to Poland, Rumania, even Turkey to sell and buy foods and merchandise. They bring these items to the markets and their village, providing villagers with supplies; a task formerly performed by the Soviet Center.[vi] In addition, Hrytsavolians have resumed their global engagement by renewing connections with the overseas kin.

The village and the overseas kin

In the last two decades the contacts between the villagers and their extended kin overseas have revived. Letters have started circulating more intensively, with more monies transferred and parcels with second hand goods sent to individual families.[vii] On my first day in the village, fresh from Edmonton, while walking along the village road my eye caught in the dust something that I would first think didn't belong: a familiar looking little blue piece of paper with the sign "Value Village: $1.99." To come across a cloth tag from the Canadian chain of second hand stores "Value Village" would be ordinary in any Western Canadian city, but I confess, I didn't expect this to happen to me so casually in a remote Ukrainian village.

On many occasions I have been shown pictures of brothers, fathers, cousins, grandparents, great cousins photographed against a background of cars, houses, fields in those remote unknown places like Canada, Ontario, Pennsylvania, or Colorado. *Titka* (aunt) Maryntsiunia, a local source of tradition and traditional wisdom, has also been a great collector of correspondence between her family and relatives in Canada and the US including that of her father. She keeps hundreds of cards, letters and pictures from Canada in one big sack in her chest. Because her house is centrally located on the intersection of three roads, locals often stop by and engage in conversations that revolve around many issues. Participating in these talks, I realized how interconnected people are to each other through the complex network of kinship as well as how related they are, in one way or another, to those abroad. As I understood from my talks with older people, incoming letters were often read aloud to an audience larger than the immediate family. All factors considered, correspondence remained responsible for the maintenance of imagery and the virtual presence of the overseas kin among the local kin. It provides people with rich topics for their discussions on the world outside of their own.

By the 1980s, after decades of forbidden contact, the overseas kin had gradually taken up a significant place in the collective memory of the community. This was accomplished primarily through conversation, stories and shared relationship with the kin 'over there.' Hrytsavolians, when one looks closer at their family relations, are for the majority related to each other though distant or direct links of kinship. When it comes to "sharing" the overseas kin, 'sharing' literally refers to the blood-based relationship between the Hrytsavolia people and their extended kin spread across the world.

In addition to letters, parcels and monies, Canadian and American relatives also step down from the world of the imaginary into Hrytsavolia reality, some regularly visiting the community. On the other hand, one by one, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, and even sons and daughters travel to Canada or the States for a visit. Some stay for a few months, others prolong their visit for a couple of years, yet others (younger women) marry into the communities they 'visit' and remain in the West forever. Some do this legally, some illegally. Those who return to the village gain a different status and in conversations they are often presented as one group, through reference to them as the collective noun A*merykantsi* (regardless of whether the person arrived from Canada or the US). In 1998 there were five visitors from the New World and I have encountered at least another five villagers who were about to leave Hrytsavolia to visit relatives abroad. My own presence in the village was perceived as another visit by someone related to Hrytsavolians in Canada. Some of my informants wanted me to take pictures of graves of their relatives so I could pass these images to their kin in Canada. Others, before pictures were taken, dressed their kids in clothes from the parcel they received from Canada so I could pass these photos back to Canadian relatives.

Hrytsavolians' experience of and involvement in networks of kinship on the global scale has significantly shortened the symbolic distance between such spaces as Ukrainian Canada or America and Hrytsavolia's local world, contributing to the on-going 'shrinking of the world,' or what Appadurai calls "deterritorialization of persons, images and ideas " (Appadurai 1991: 192). The exploration of the outside world and of possibilities to improve one's situation is fulfilled along kinship lines defined in global and transnational terms. Together with exploration of the near abroad, the influx of ideas, goods, and money from the far abroad, from the 'land of milk and honey,' contributes to imagination in Hrytsavolia about the world out there. It provides local people with fantasies about possible changes in their lives if only this "if" could be realized. These days this imagination is supported by growing penetration of western popular culture via the media. A typical day for teenager girls in my host family started with "Melrose Place." The girls once asked me whether women in Canada are as beautiful as those in the States. The way they imagine female beauty, in this case North American style, informs their decisions on what 'to wear out.' Young girls, ignoring the dust and sand of the village roads, when "going out to the street" prefer wearing nylons, high heels, short skirts, and elaborately laced, pompous blouses of predominantly Polish origin that are available nowadays in the markets. Ironically, these global imaginations are rooted in their local realities.

Conclusion

In the growing complexity of people's interactions, new global orientations, and choices in localities like Hrytsavolia, how productive is it to consider this complexity in terms of a center/periphery model? Hrytsavolia, a small Ukrainian village on the outskirts

of the Lviv region is exposed to many more cultural flows of meanings than just those which originate from the Center. While the political center itself is under threat of being consumed by the aggressive expansion of a world system, those on the periphery are eagerly exploring their own ways of bettering their lives. They welcome new cultural flows from the outside, which are part of the expansion and penetration of Western culture into their locality; many of these are brought in through their own kin. Many of these promise opportunities and many bypass the 'center' entirely. Within the local world new social structures and practices emerge, providing "the matrices within which an international flow of culture has continuously entered into varying combinations and syntheses with local culture" (Hannerz 1987: 548).

In times of social transition, in order to account for the changes in the periphery, or more precisely, in various local cultures, with their new practices and networks it is not enough to approach these local worlds with the center/periphery perspective. Perhaps, the tropes global/local serve a better role here. While trading forays into the near abroad are a recognized practice among Hrytsavolians, their connection with the far abroad is being organized along transnational/ethnic kinship links. In both cases, formerly significant links with the center are being challenged.

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Notes

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[i] Coming to Hrytsavolia was not the beginning of my inquiry into Ukrainian transnational connections and imaginations among lay people in Ukraine and Canada. I came across this particular village via the connections with Hrytsavolian people mainly in the town of Mundare, rural Alberta, which is my primary field site. Both communities are connected via kinship links formed though all four immigration waves. Several Hrytsavolians of the latest immigration (1980s-1990s) are actively building up their own cultural life in rural Alberta. Working with Hrytsavolians in Canada led me to explore their home village where I spent some time last May and to which I am heading again this year.

[ii] As a result of this migration Mundare, my primary research site in the Canadian West, has received several Hrytsavolian individuals and families during each wave of immigration which all helped me to engage with their home village.

[iii] From conversations with local people, Hrytsavolia, May, 1998.

[iv] "Pohospodars'ka knyha Berezivs'koii sil's'koii rady narodnykh deputativ, 1996-1999," vol. 6.

[v] "Zvit po naselenniu na 01.01.99 Berezivs'koii sil's'koii rady," Berezivka, Lvivs'ka oblast. 1999.

[vi] Different foods are sold in different households. Seventeen year old Svitlana shared with me: "Ice cream we buy from *titka* Olena around the corner. Ketchup we get from Mykola who has little kiosk right in his front yard. Rice my mother gets from *titka* Henia on the neighbouring street."

[vii] Orbit, a shipping company in Alberta, transfers annually up to 4.5 million US dollars to Ukrainians like villagers in Hrytsavolia and sends annually up to 10 tons of goods in parcels. This is just one of four shipping companies in Canada (Orbit, Pysanka, Karpaty, and Meest) that targets the Ukrainian Canadian market with its half a million population and specializes in purely transnational transactions and services with Ukraine. Interview with the owners of the Orbit company, Edmonton, March 25, 1999.