

IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE POSTCOLONIAL EXPERIENCE

The article provides a theoretical and conceptual analysis of identity in the context of postcolonial experience as a complex, dynamic and multi-level social process. It argues that postcoloniality should not be perceived as a completed historical phase but rather as a long-term structural condition shaping modes of self-reflection, symbolic self-definition, and political subjectivity in societies formerly subjected to imperial domination. Particular attention is paid to the mechanisms of internalized colonial narratives, as well as to the role of language, collective memory, and social trauma in the formation of identity configurations. Identity is conceptualized not as a fixed essence but as an ongoing process of negotiation between competing national, imperial, and global narratives. Using the Ukrainian case as an analytical lens, the article demonstrates that postcolonial societies are capable of generating their own modernization and symbolic projects without merely reproducing external models. The study substantiates the claim that Ukrainian national identity constitutes a theoretically significant and empirically representative case for the global intellectual debate on multiple modernities, the limits of universalism, and alternative trajectories of social development.

Keywords: *identity, postcolonial experience, collective memory, social trauma, decolonization, Ukrainian case.*

Ідентичність у контексті постколоніального досвіду

У статті здійснено теоретико-концептуальний аналіз ідентичності в контексті постколоніального досвіду як складного, динамічного та багаторівневого соціального процесу. Обґрунтовано тезу про те, що постколоніальність не є завершеним історичним етапом, а

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постає тривалим структурним станом, який визначає способи само-рефлексії, символічного самовизначення та політичної суб'єктності суспільств, що перебували в умовах імперського домінування. Особливу увагу приділено аналізу механізмів інтеріоризації колоніальних наративів, ролі мови, колективної пам'яті та соціальної травми у формуванні ідентичнісних конфігурацій. Ідентичність розглядається не як стабільна сутність, а як процес постійних переговорів між конкуруючими наративами – національними, імперськими та глобальними. На прикладі українського кейсу показано, що постколоніальні суспільства здатні продукувати власні модернізаційні та символічні проекти, які не зводяться до копіювання зовнішніх моделей. Доводиться, що українська національна ідентичність є теоретично репрезентативним матеріалом для глобальної інтелектуальної дискусії про множинність модерностей, межі універсалізму та альтернативні шляхи соціального розвитку.

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Ключові слова: ідентичність, постколоніальний досвід, колективна пам'ять, соціальна травма, деколонізація, український кейс.

Statement of the scientific problem. The problem of identity in the context of postcolonial experience belongs to the key interdisciplinary areas of modern socio-humanitarian research, combining the analytical resources of social philosophy, sociology, history, cultural studies and political theory. In the 21st century, it acquires particular relevance in the context of the transformation of the world order, the crisis of liberal universalism, the delegitimization of Eurocentric modernization models and the return of asymmetrical relations of dominance in new, often hybrid forms. Under these conditions, postcoloniality increasingly appears not as a historically completed stage, but as a long-term structural state that affects the ways of self-reflection, symbolic self-determination and political subjectivity of societies that were or are in the zone of imperial influence.

Identity in the postcolonial context cannot be considered as a stable, homogeneous or linearly evolutionary construct. It is formed in a field of constant tension between external normative narratives inherited from colonial hierarchies and internal experiences of historical trauma, cultural fragmentation and symbolic dependence. As Stuart Hall has noted, identity in postcolonial societies is more a “position” and a “process of becoming” than a fixed entity (Hall, 1996). In this sense, it emerges as the result

of continuous negotiations between the past and the present, the local and the global, memory and forgetting.

The research problem is to identify the mechanisms of identity formation and transformation under conditions of postcolonial asymmetry, when social actors are forced to construct self-images in a situation of structural inequality of access to symbolic capital, knowledge and the right to interpret their own history. It is not only about the decolonization of political institutions or the formal acquisition of sovereignty, but above all about the decolonization of consciousness, language, collective memory and symbolic space, which, according to Frantz Fanon, is the most prolonged and painful dimension of the postcolonial transition (Fanon, 1963).

The problems of postcolonialism, postcolonial identity, and identity in the context of modern globalization processes constitute a relevant scientific research field. Of particular theoretical and applied importance are the works of Western scholars Anthony Smith, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Samuel Huntington, Montserrat Guibernau, Francis Fukuyama (Giddens, 1991; Smith, 1995; Bauman, 2000; Huntington, 2004; Guibernau, 2007; Fukuyama, 2018), and others. Ukrainian scholars pay considerable attention to issues of identity and historical memory, in particular through the prism of regionalism, borderlands, socio-cultural transformations, and research in the context of memory studies (Stepiko, 2011; Nagorna, 2011, 2012; Shapoval, 2013; Troyan, 2014; Kyrydon, 2016; Hrabovska, 2024; Vermenych, 2025; Troyan & Rumak, 2025, etc.). They consider national identity not as a given, but as a socio-cultural construct that is formed under the influence of historical experience, memory, and symbols. Researchers emphasize that the territorial Ukrainian identity is a component of the national one, especially in border areas that have a unique historical experience. Their works also emphasize that historical memory (what society remembers or wants to remember) directly influences the formation of national identity.

The aim of the study is a conceptual analysis of identity as a complex, multi-level and conflictual process in the context of postcolonial experience with a special emphasis on the Ukrainian case as empirically and theoretically representative for a broader global discourse. The Ukrainian experience allows us to combine the analysis of internalized colonial narratives, language and cultural politics, traumatic memory and contemporary processes of political mobilization. The methodological basis of the work is the approaches of postcolonial studies (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988),

historical sociology, social philosophy of identity and research on collective memory and trauma. The theoretical significance of the research lies in deepening the understanding of identity as a procedural, open and internally contradictory construction, while the practical significance lies in the possibility of applying the obtained conclusions to the analysis of contemporary political, cultural and social transformations in postcolonial and post-imperial societies.

Presentation of the main material. *Postcolonial research perspective.*

The postcolonial research perspective emerged as a critical direction in the humanities and social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century in response to the limitations of classical modernization and Eurocentric models of explanation of historical and social development. Its key task was to reveal the hidden structures of power, knowledge and symbolic dominance that continue to operate after the formal end of colonial rule. In this sense, postcolonial studies are not exclusively an analysis of the colonial past, but rather a tool for critical understanding of the present. The approach proposed by Edward Said in his work *Orientalism* was fundamental for the formation of postcolonial theory, where the author showed that the West produced systematized knowledge about the «East» as the Other, thereby legitimizing political and cultural dominance (Said, 1978). Said emphasized that *Orientalism* is not simply a set of misconceptions, but a “discursive formation” closely linked to institutional power. This approach laid the foundation for the analysis of knowledge as a form of symbolic violence.

The further development of the postcolonial perspective is associated with the names of Gomi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Bhabha proposed the concepts of “hybridity”, “mimicry” and “third space”, which allow us to go beyond the binary opposition “colonizer - colonized” (Bhabha, 1994). In his opinion, colonial discourse is never holistic and stable, but is constantly undermined by ambivalence and practices of cultural recoding. In this sense, postcoloniality appears as a space of unstable identities and open semantic configurations.

Spivak, in turn, radicalized postcolonial criticism by raising the question of the possibility of a “subaltern” voice within the conditions of dominant discourses (Spivak, 1988). Her famous thesis “can the subaltern speak?” points to the structural impossibility of fully representing marginalized groups within Western epistemological frameworks. Thus, the postcolonial perspective turns into a self-reflexive project aimed not only

at critiquing the object of research, but also at critiquing its own analytical tools. An important feature of the postcolonial research perspective is its interdisciplinary nature. It actively integrates the work of history, sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, and political theory. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in particular, called for the “provincialization of Europe,” that is, the rejection of the interpretation of the European experience as a universal norm of historical development (Chakrabarty, 2007). This is not a denial of modernity as such, but rather an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of modernities and alternative trajectories of social development.

In contemporary research, the postcolonial perspective is increasingly being applied to the analysis of societies that do not fit into the classical model of overseas colonialism. This applies, in particular, to the imperial and post-imperial spaces of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. In such cases, the postcolonial approach allows us to identify mechanisms of cultural assimilation, symbolic hierarchization and internal colonization that have long remained outside the attention of mainstream theory (Tlostanova, 2017).

Thus, the postcolonial research perspective is not only a separate theoretical direction, but rather a critical lens that allows us to problematize established ideas about knowledge, history and identity. Its heuristic potential lies in its ability to combine analysis of the past with criticism of contemporary forms of domination, opening up space for a more pluralistic and reflexive vision of social reality.

Identity as a dynamic and multi-level process. In contemporary socio-humanitarian studies, identity is increasingly treated as a fixed, essentialist characteristic of an individual or community. Instead, it is understood as a dynamic, open-ended, and contextually determined process that is shaped by the interaction of social actors with symbolic structures, institutional practices, and historical narratives. This approach is a reaction to the crisis of classical modernization theories that viewed identity as derived from linear social development and unified models of nation-building. As Stuart Hall notes, identity “is not something that is already complete, but rather something that is constantly in the process of becoming” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). It is not formed outside of history, but within specific discursive fields where memory, power, and representation play a defining role. In this sense, identity is more of a “positioning” than an entity, which gives rise to its internal multiplicity and potential conflict.

The multilevel nature of identity is manifested in the interaction of individual, collective and macrosocial dimensions. At the individual level, it is associated with processes of self-awareness and biographical reflection, at the collective level with the formation of shared symbols, myths and narratives, and at the institutional level with identity policies, educational canons and official models of historical memory. Anthony Giddens emphasizes that in the conditions of late modernity, identity becomes a “reflexive project” that individuals and communities are forced to constantly rethink (Giddens, 1991).

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In the postcolonial context, the multilevel nature of identity is complicated by the influence of historically entrenched asymmetries of power and knowledge. Colonial rule not only transformed political and economic structures, but also deeply interfered with the symbolic self-determination of subordinated communities. As Frantz Fanon noted, colonialism seeks to “deform the past of the enslaved people and destroy their cultural orientations” (Fanon, 1963, p. 210). As a result, the identity of postcolonial societies is often formed in conditions of a gap between their own historical experience and imposed external models of self-description. Identity in this sense is not only an answer to the question “who we are”, but also the result of a constant negotiation process between competing narratives - national, imperial, global. It includes cognitive, emotional and normative components that can be in a state of tension or even mutual denial. This is why postcolonial societies are characterized by the phenomenon of “fragmented” or “split” identity, where different symbolic loyalties coexist without a final synthesis.

Gomi Bhabha describes this situation through the concept of “hybridity”, emphasizing that colonial and postcolonial experiences produce not pure but mixed forms of identity that arise in the so-called “third space” of culture (Bhabha, 1994). This space is at the same time a zone of tension and opportunity, because it is in it that the reinterpretation of established hierarchies takes place and the potential for new forms of subjectivity opens up.

An important aspect of the dynamics of identity is its connection with collective memory and traumatic experience. According to Jan Assmann, cultural memory functions as a “symbolic reservoir” from which a community draws ideas about its past and future (Assmann, 2011). In postcolonial societies, this reservoir is often fragmented or ideologically overloaded, making it difficult to form a coherent image of “we.”

Thus, identity in the postcolonial dimension is appropriate to interpret as an open structure, prone to transformations under the influence of social conflicts, political crises and cultural reinterpretations. Its instability is not a sign of weakness or incompleteness, but rather an indicator of deep processes of reflection and symbolic reconfiguration. As Dipesh Chakrabarty rightly notes, the task of modern theory is not to find a universal model of identity, but to recognize the plurality of historical experiences and paths of self-determination (Chakrabarty, 2007).

As a result, identity appears as a procedural, multidimensional and historically conditioned category, the analysis of which requires an interdisciplinary lens and critical sensitivity to the contexts of power, memory and experience. It is this approach that allows us to avoid simplified interpretations and reveal the heuristic potential of identity as a key concept of modern social theory.

Language, memory, and trauma as key factors in contemporary experience. In the postcolonial context, language, collective memory, and social trauma constitute an interconnected set of factors that determine not only the processes of identity formation but also the broader configuration of social experience. These are the deep symbolic structures through which communities make sense of their own past, interpret the present, and project possible future scenarios. Unlike the institutional aspects of decolonization, these dimensions are less visible, but much more persistent in their long-term consequences.

Language in colonial and imperial projects acted not only as a means of communication, but also as an instrument of power. Colonial language policies, as a rule, were aimed at displacing, marginalizing, or functionally restricting local languages, which led to a break in cultural continuity and a weakening of the symbolic autonomy of subordinate communities. Pierre Bourdieu emphasized that language is a form of “symbolic capital,” access to which determines the position of a social actor in the hierarchy of power (Bourdieu, 1991). In this sense, the imposition of a dominant language meant not only a change in communicative practices, but also a reformatting of the very conditions of legitimate thought.

The restoration of linguistic subjectivity in postcolonial societies becomes a key element in the reconstruction of identity. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o notes, the decolonization of consciousness is impossible without the return of language as a full-fledged carrier of cultural experience, since “language carries culture, and culture carries values through which a

person perceives himself and the world” (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986, p. 16). Thus, the language issue goes beyond the limits of a purely linguistic problematic and becomes central to postcolonial self-determination.

Collective memory is the second key dimension of the postcolonial experience. It acts as a space for symbolic struggle between competing interpretations of the past, in which dominant narratives are entrenched or, conversely, questioned. According to Maurice Halbwachs, memory is socially constructed and depends on the framework within which a community makes sense of its own history (Halbwachs, 1992). In colonial conditions, these frameworks were imposed from the outside, which led to the displacement of alternative forms of historical knowledge. In the postcolonial situation, the processes of “returning memory” are often accompanied by the actualization of traumatic events - repression, famine, mass violence, forced assimilation. Jan Assmann emphasizes that cultural memory performs not only an integrative, but also a normative function, determining the limits of permissible understanding of the past (Assmann, 2011). The struggle for memory is thus both a struggle for the symbolic order and the moral evaluation of historical experience.

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Social trauma constitutes a third dimension of postcolonial experience, inextricably linked to language and memory. Traumatic events do not disappear with the end of violence, but continue to influence the structures of the collective imagination, reproducing themselves in the form of fears, mistrust and recurring crises. Jeffrey Alexander defines social trauma as the process by which a community comes to realize that a certain event has caused fundamental damage to its identity (Alexander, 2004). Importantly, trauma is not an automatic consequence of the event, but is formed through narratives, symbols and interpretations.

In postcolonial societies, unspoken or institutionally repressed trauma is often transmitted between generations, acquiring latent forms. Kathy Caruth notes that trauma is characterized by a “delayed effect,” where its meaning is only realized over time, through recurring symptoms and narrative gaps (Caruth, 1996). In such a context, the lack of language to describe traumatic experiences complicates their integration into collective memory and contributes to their return in the form of social and political conflicts.

Thus, language, memory, and trauma form an interconnected analytical triangle that allows for a deeper understanding of the specificity of postcolonial experience. Language sets the symbolic conditions for the articula-

tion of experience, memory structures its historical understanding, and trauma reveals the limits of representation and stability of identity. Their integrated analysis opens up the possibility of going beyond reductionist models of identity and contributes to the formation of a social theory that is more sensitive to historical experience.

In conclusion, it can be argued that postcolonial reconstruction of identity is impossible without working with language, memory, and trauma as interdependent dimensions of social existence. It is in this plane that not only the rethinking of the past takes place, but also the formation of new horizons of collective self-determination.

Ukrainian national identity: a sociopolitical and sociocultural vision of the postcolonial experience. The Ukrainian experience of postcoloniality is a striking example of the complex interaction of imperial heritage, national revival, and contemporary global challenges. The formation of Ukrainian national identity took place under conditions of prolonged external domination, which combined political subordination with cultural assimilation and symbolic hierarchization (Hnatyuk, 2005). As a result, this identity acquired a multidimensional character, combining elements of different historical experiences, regional traditions, and modernization projects.

A sociopolitical and sociocultural analysis of Ukrainian identity requires going beyond reductionist models that reduce it to a “catch-up” or “peripheral” form of nation-building. As Rogers Brubaker rightly notes, the nation is not a finished object, but rather a “category of practice” that is constantly being reinterpreted in the process of social and political interactions (Brubaker, 2002; Brubaker, 2004). In this sense, Ukrainian identity appears as an open social process in which local and global dimensions are intertwined.

The postcolonial nature of the Ukrainian experience is determined by the specifics of the imperial structures within which it was formed. This is not only about classical practices of political control, but also about long-term symbolic dominance that influenced language, historical memory and cultural canons. As Eva Thompson notes, imperial discourse in Eastern Europe created asymmetrical modes of representation in which the Ukrainian experience was systematically marginalized or subordinated to the “grand narrative” of the metropolis (Thompson, 2000). As a result, Ukrainian identity has long been forced to build itself in opposition to external models of legitimacy. At the same time, the Ukrainian case

demonstrates that postcolonial societies are capable of producing their own projects of modernity without reducing them to mechanical imitation of Western models. Dipesh Chakrabarty emphasized that the task of modern social theory is to recognize the “plurality of modernities” and historical paths that do not fit into a single Eurocentric scheme (Chakrabarty, 2007). The Ukrainian experience of nation-building, combining elements of civic, cultural, and political identity, is an important empirical material for such a theoretical reorientation.

Of particular importance is the analysis of Ukrainian identity in the context of resistance to symbolic violence. Pierre Bourdieu defined symbolic violence as a form of domination that is realized through the acceptance by subordinate groups of imposed patterns of perception as “natural” (Bourdieu, 1991). In the case of Ukraine, this mechanism manifested itself in the devaluation of one’s own cultural experience, the secondary nature of language and history, and the continued reproduction of the “cultural inferiority complex.” Overcoming such structures has become an important component of the modern Ukrainian identification process.

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— From a sociopolitical and sociocultural point of view, Ukrainian identity is representative not only as a national phenomenon, but also as an example of broader global processes. It allows us to analyze the interaction between local practices of self-determination and global discourses of democracy, sovereignty, and human rights. As Arjun Appadurai emphasizes, in a globalized world, identities are formed in conditions of constant flows and intersections, which makes them both local and transnational (Appadurai, 2005). The Ukrainian experience vividly illustrates this tense interaction. In particular, the border region acts as a space of “clash of cultures”, where historical memory becomes a tool for constructing identity (Vermenych, 2025, s. 329). It should be emphasized that this can occur in conditions of mutually exclusive motivations, such as, for example, in the conditions of the modern Russian-Ukrainian border region. It is here that a traumatic break occurs and at the same time a break with the post-Soviet paradigm in its post-imperial and post-colonial expression. An important aspect of the inclusion of Ukrainian identity in the global intellectual conversation is its ability to problematize the limits of universalism. Universalist models often ignore the specifics of post-imperial and post-colonial contexts, viewing them as deviations from the “norm”. Instead, the Ukrainian case demonstrates that alternative trajectories of social development can be no less productive from a theoretical point of view. As Madina

Tlostanova notes, post-colonial and post-socialist experiences are capable of producing “de-centered” forms of knowledge that challenge dominant epistemologies (Tlostanova, 2017).

In this sense, Ukrainian national identity appears not as an object of “explanation from the outside”, but as an active participant in the global intellectual debate about the nature of the nation, identity and modernity. Its socio-political and socio-cultural analysis allows us to rethink the relationship between the center and the periphery, the universal and the particular, as well as between historical experience and theoretical models of its interpretation.

The full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war actualized national identity as a key factor in resistance to imperial aggression. The Ukrainian experience of 2022–2026 showed that Russian aggression finally destroyed the myth of “brotherly peoples” and transformed Ukrainian identity from a cultural marker to a factor of physical survival. The war accelerated the processes of nation-building, consolidation, and decolonization, which had previously been gradual. The rapid growth of the use of the Ukrainian language in the public space, the rethinking of the historical canon, and the dismantling of imperial symbols and toponyms demonstrated the depth of identification shifts. The war turned historical memory into a resource of resistance, and culture into a tool for preserving subjectivity. Historical experience shows that empires are defeated not only due to the depletion of resources, but primarily due to the loss of the ability to impose their identity on conquered peoples. This is exactly what is happening in the current Russian-Ukrainian war. The Russian model of identity has proven to be destructive, exclusive, and unfit for integration, while the Ukrainian identity is open, civic, and mobilizing. The war has transformed Ukrainian identity from “declarative” (based on passport) to “value-based” (based on beliefs).

Thus, Ukrainian identity is a valuable material for global intellectual conversation, as it combines the experience of postcolonial transformation, resistance to symbolic domination, and the creation of its own modernization projects. The analysis of Ukrainian national identity contributes not only to a deeper understanding of Ukrainian society, but also to the development of a more pluralistic and reflexive sociocultural theory.

Conclusions and research perspectives. Summarizing the results of the study, it can be stated that identity in the conditions of postcolonial experience appears as a complex, dynamic and conflictual process, formed at the intersection of historical traumas, symbolic hierarchies and modern socio-

political challenges. It is not reduced to either the passive reproduction of colonial schemes or the simple reactive denial of the imperial past, but involves active work on rethinking one's own experience, collective memory and ideas about the future.

The study shows that language, memory and trauma play a key role in the formation of postcolonial identity as interrelated factors of social experience. It is through them that both the internalization of colonial narratives and their deconstruction take place. Identity in this context is not only a sphere of symbolic struggle, but also a resource of social mobilization and political subjectivity. The Ukrainian case convincingly demonstrates that postcolonial societies are capable of producing their own modernization and cultural projects that do not amount to copying external models and at the same time enter into a full-fledged dialogue with global intellectual traditions.

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The Russian-Ukrainian war has become a decisive turning point in overcoming the post-Soviet legacy and breaking with a postcolonial identity framework. Under the conditions of full-scale aggression, Ukrainian society has undergone an accelerated process of decolonization of consciousness, accompanied by a critical revision of imperial narratives, the reconfiguration of historical memory, and the strengthening of a civic, value-based national identity. This transformation is not merely reactive but reflects a deeper structural shift toward affirming political subjectivity, cultural autonomy, and a European-oriented civilizational choice. Thus, the war functions not only as a security and geopolitical challenge but also as a profound internal catalyst *завершення пострадянського транзиту*, marking the consolidation of a self-sufficient, postcolonial Ukrainian identity within the broader dynamics of global socio-political change.

Prospects for further research are related, firstly, to an in-depth comparative analysis of postcolonial identities in various regional and civilizational contexts, in particular, a comparison of the Ukrainian experience with cases from Central and Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, the Balkans, or the Global South. Secondly, an interdisciplinary synthesis of postcolonial studies with studies of security, memory, and political emotions is promising, which will allow for a deeper understanding of the role of identity in the conflict-generating processes of the modern world.

In general, the analysis of identity in the context of postcolonial experience contributes to the formation of a more inclusive, pluralistic, and decentered vision of modern socio-political transformations. At the same

time, the experience of the “peripheries” appears not as marginal, but as theoretically significant and conceptually productive for the global social and humanitarian scientific sphere.

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