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Dignity, arbitrary rule, and emancipation in an authoritarian regime: ethnographic remarks on the uprising in Belarus

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Abstract

The protest movement in Belarus has been presented by some of its protagonists and analysts as a struggle for dignity, implying a contradiction between dignity and authoritarian rule. However, the author's ethnographic work carried out between 1999 and 2013, which focused on the dachas of city dwellers on one hand and on everyday life in the kolkhozes and villages on the other, revealed examples of the attainment of dignity within the repressive system itself. Although the system is based on violence and arbitrary rule, it simultaneously generates means of establishing forms of dignity. Dachas enable the affirmation of an enhanced representation of oneself. In the collectivized countryside, certain moral qualities – endurance, resourcefulness, and self-reliance – can be manifested in daily activities and provide access to a sense of self-worth. Since August 9 2020, these forms of dignity have been polarized into a form of defensive dignity, in which arbitrary rule and recognition are not antinomic, and which is expressed as loyalty to the incumbent regime, and an offensive dignity, for which personal dignity can be complete only if the demonstrators' demands for collective dignity are met.

Résumé

Le mouvement de contestation en Biélorussie a été présenté par certains de ses protagonistes et de ses analystes comme un combat pour la dignité, ce qui implique une contradiction entre dignité et régime autoritaire. Or, le travail ethnographique mené par l'auteur entre 1999 et 2013 en Biélorussie, et qui portait d'une part sur les datchas des citadins et d'autre part sur la vie quotidienne dans les kolkhozes et les villages, montre des formes d'accession de la dignité au sein même du système répressif. En effet, le système, qui repose sur la violence et l'arbitraire, génère dans le même temps des supports permettant le déploiement de formes de dignité. La datcha permet l'affirmation d'une représentation valorisée de soi-même. Dans la campagne collectivisée, certaines qualités morales – l'endurance, l'ingéniosité, l'autonomie - peuvent se manifester dans les activités quotidiennes et autorisent l'accès à un sens de la valeur de soi. Depuis le 9 août 2020, ces formes de dignité se polarisent en une dignité défensive, pour laquelle arbitraire du régime et reconnaissance ne sont pas antinomiques, et qui se traduit par une loyauté envers le régime en place, et une dignité offensive, pour laquelle la dignité personnelle ne pourra être complète que si l'exigence de dignité collective portée par les manifestants est satisfaite.

Keywords

Belarus; dacha; kolkhoz; dignity; authoritarianism

The issue of dignity has been central to the protest movement in Belarus after the 9 August 9 elections. While the demonstrators themselves rarely use the term (*hodnasti* in Belarusian, *dostoistvo* in Russian), and researchers who have studied this exceptional social mobilization have not observed the term among its slogans, some of the names given to the protest marches organized on the Sundays following 9 August 9 allude to it. Examples include the March for Freedom (*Marsh Svabody*, 16 August), the March for Justice (*Marsh Spraviadlivasti*, 20 September), and the March for Pride (*Marsh honaru*, 11 October).ⁱ In addition, public figures involved in the movement make prominent use of the term, as in the declaration to the European Parliament on 21-September 2020 by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia, the candidate who challenged Aliaksandr Lukashenka in the election and was forced into exile in Lithuania: “Our fight is a fight for freedom, democracy, and human dignity.”ⁱⁱ On 13 August, Sviatlana Aleksievich, the Nobel Prize winner for literature and sometime member of the Coordination Council – the opposition body responsible for ensuring the transfer of power and organizing new elections – declared with reference to the demonstrators who had been occupying the public arena for a week: “I am grateful to them for defending our dignity.”ⁱⁱⁱ Just a few weeks later, the Belarusian writer Sasha Filipenko wrote a text reflecting this idea of dignity: “The revolution that is taking place right now is above all a revolution of pride. It is not economic or political demands that have come to the fore, but ethical and moral demands. We want to be free people!”^{iv} Some interpretations of the movement place the moral issue of dignity at the heart of its demands. For example, while the journalist Piotr Smolar saw the events underway in the country as the manifestation of a form of “civic dignity,” his colleague Benoît Vitkine made the following comment: “The 80% credited to the President was perceived as a spit in the face. For many demonstrators, it is their dignity that is at stake.”^v Although the term “dignity” itself is only marginally used *in* the actual wording of demands that protagonists of the uprising articulated – contrary to what was observed during the popular movements in Ukraine and the Arab countries – the question of dignity nevertheless remained central to the mobilization’s dynamics, as discourses *on* the movement testify.^{vi}

The term “dignity” refers to the qualities – esteem, consideration, prestige – that make people worthy. It refers to the “social worth” of each person, or, more precisely, to individuals’ “sense of worth.”^{vii} The 9 August vote was seen as a humiliation, a belittling, a demonstration of contempt, a lack of respect. Stealing the election amounted to denying the value of all citizens who sought to express themselves. Ordinary citizens experienced and perceived the extreme and systematic police brutality of 9, 10, and 11 August 2020 as an outrageous violation of their integrity and dignity. In this sense, the challenge to the regime emerged in the form of a demand for recognition and a refusal of indignity imposed in an arbitrary manner. Journalists and protagonists of the contest described the Belarusian uprising by using the metaphor of waking up after a long sleep, or the image of an inner liberation after two decades of alienation, of estrangement from oneself.

Such metaphors emphasize the repressive dimension of the regime and stress the idea that powerful constraints – police forces, security services, propaganda mouthpieces – prevent the free exercise of individual destinies. Social science research has extensively documented this dimension of Lukashenka’s. The revolution is said to have consisted in generating a power struggle to break the chains that curb citizens’ autonomy. However, my ethnographic work in rural Belarus between 1999 and 2013 revealed examples of the attainment of dignity within the repressive system itself. The first investigation focused on the daily life of Belarusian city who spent significant time on rural dachas.^{viii} Between 1999 and 2003, I conducted some 40 interviews with workers, artists, teachers, administrative officials, and others in this category. The second survey, carried out between 2006 and 2013, focused on everyday life in rural Belarus.^{ix} I conducted around forty interviews with inhabitants of villages and small towns, self-employed craftsmen, priests, teachers in agricultural high schools, and especially with current and retired *kolkhozniki* (collective farm workers) who held or had held a range of different posts: directors, milkers, drivers of tractors and other vehicles, mechanics, etc. My field research, among permanent rural residents and urban *dachniki*, speaks to a common rural ecosystem that stands in some contrast with that part of urban world that constituted the “driving force”^x of the uprising.

How can people access dignity, even under Lukashenka's repressive regime? How do these forms of personal dignity currently relate to demonstrators' demands for collective dignity? Examining the material and moral conditions of townspeople's and villagers' lives enables us to understand the ambivalence of the symbolic projections of the self observed within the system. Today, forms of "defensive dignity" are based on the functioning of the regime and are expressed by showing loyalty to Lukashenka, while forms of "offensive dignity" see the system not as a provider of support for personal autonomy, but as an intolerable guardian that prevents individual emancipation. In this article, I would like to use my ethnographic research from 1999–2013 to reflect on the forms of dignity espoused in the ongoing events in Belarus, and on their ambivalence vis-à-vis the regime.

The dignity of the *dachnik*

The domestic economy

Access to a dacha and a vegetable garden is today, as 20 years ago, widely shared among the urban population and is not reserved for a privileged social group.^{xi} My ethnographic investigation brought to light the organizational arrangements of a large portion of city dwellers' daily lives based on an analysis of activities related to dachas. First and foremost, the economic dimension of dachas and vegetable gardens became clear. Analyzing the narratives of Charlotta Andreevna and Semen Borisovich^{xii} – retired academics, and of Petr and Mariia – a skilled worker and an accountant, reveals the enabling role of the vegetable garden. Consuming home-grown products means reducing the share of the family budget spent on food. The hundreds of kilos of potatoes, apples, or tomatoes, and the dozens of bucket-loads of cherries, cucumbers, onions, and other foods that are harvested enable people to spend an entire winter without buying fruits and vegetables. Vegetable gardens not only give people enough to eat, they also enable them to eat *well* by giving them a variety of fruits and vegetables. To produce such quantities, the *dachniki* mostly rely on help from family members. However, some of them benefit from a social status that gives them access to greater resources. The story of the policeman Anatolii Tetelin is significant in this regard. Being a lieutenant in the police

enabled him, through services rendered and bottles of *samogon* (moonshine) distributed, to maintain a relatively extensive clientelist network and thus gain access to many factors of production, both human (masons, drivers, etc.), and mechanical (tractors, cranes, etc.). The dacha is a powerful source of economic capital and can be seen as a component of a general household entrepreneurial strategy. The economic importance of the dacha must be tempered, however. Observations in the field revealed that some people, who have absolutely no need of a dacha to survive, nevertheless devote all their free time to cultivating their vegetable gardens. For the others, the economic importance of the dacha really became apparent only at the time of the profound economic crisis that followed the collapse of the USSR; it ultimately seems accidental.

A world for oneself

The dacha came to be considered a place that allows individuals to reappropriate “supports” upon which they can rely. As Robert Castel and Claudine Haroche insist, individuals have no *a priori* existence; they can acquire consistency only if they are supported by “a foundation, or a matrix, or a base. [...] Existing positively as an individual, as I see it, means having the capacity to develop personal strategies, to have a certain freedom of choice in the conduct of one’s life because one is not dependent on others.”^{xiii} This matrix can be broken down into three major forms: time, space, and “profession.”

Temporality has been interpreted in two dimensions: the uncertainty of the future and the dislocation of the present. In an economic context characterized by radical uncertainty, cultivating a vegetable garden allows individuals to reappropriate a fragment of the future and helps to ease their worries, doubts, apprehensions, and anxieties. The difficulties that the Belshina factory in Babruysk suffered in the early 1990s disturbed Piotr’s and Maria’s sense of temporality: the indeterminacy of the immediate future affected this couple, who were unsure whether they would be able to finance the final years of their son’s studies, on whom all their hopes for a better future were placed. The existence of the vegetable garden allowed them to feel in control of some of their future resources, to

anticipate, to escape from the urgency of a particularly stressful present situation. Post-Soviet daily life is also characterized by multiple mechanisms leading to the systematic dispossession of time, from queues to labyrinthine bureaucratic complications. The young university student Anton Dvorikov explained to me how obtaining his driver's license and defending his thesis became major existential challenges. The temporalities of the socialist city are in fact characterized by unpredictability and arrhythmia. As such, they contribute to individuals' exhaustion. The experience of time at the dacha is very different: by cultivating a vegetable garden, individuals reappropriate time for themselves.

These modes of dispossession of time in everyday post-Soviet life are combined with mechanisms leading to the dispossession of space. The structure of urban spaces, following a Soviet-era logic of gigantism and dispersion, standardization of apartments, similarity of furniture, and lack of privacy make it difficult to carve out a place of one's own in the city. The dacha then becomes the subject of a practical appropriation. One can furnish it as one wishes; one can make it into a real home. The dacha is also a "second place." This access to dual domestic bases sometimes helps to resolve latent conflicts between different family members, makes cohabitation in cramped spaces more bearable, and enables the preservation of private places.

In the 1990s, Belarus suffered from economic instability, which downgraded the status of many workers and plunged members of several social groups into precariousness. For individuals whose competencies were questioned in the workplace, for despised and sometimes humiliated workers whose qualities were denied, dachas became places in which they could rebuild a positive self-image, places in which they could freely express expertise that reflected their moral qualities. Petr's trajectory illustrates this constant threat of being plunged into indignity. His determination to cultivate his vegetable garden reflected his desire to assert his sullied honour. Maria may have also seen it as a place of controlled freedom, where her husband's anxieties would not cause him to indulge in the unbridled consumption of vodka. Vadim Rublev, a senior civil servant in a government department, saw the dacha as a place in which his work was truly rewarded, a source of gratification and joy, in contrast to his work in the senior civil service, which in the 1990s brought him only ulcers,

fear, and mistrust. In this way, the dacha came to be seen as a restorative place where individuals have control over things, can reclaim a part of themselves, and regain a certain ownership of themselves. The dacha is a place of self-belonging.

Self-image

As well as being a place of production and of self-restoration, the dacha is also a place for the creation of multiple signs, which first and foremost manifest membership in a particular group. This makes the dacha an essential place of family integration. Gift systems contribute to family cohesion. In this respect, the help of family members at the dacha appears to be both a result of the activation of the family network and the motivation for its activation in equal measure. Gifts at the dacha are part of a larger system of family support, which is often crucial in an uncertain economic and social context. The dacha and the vegetable garden sometimes also play a fundamental role in the construction and perpetuation of family memory. The narrative of the patriarch Pavel Ivanovich, a 90-year-old retired worker when I met him at the turn of the millennium, reveals a bruised identity, a life marked by humiliations and traumas (including collectivization, hunger, and war). Pavel's vegetable garden contained signs – such as the quality of the products grown, the cleanliness of the garden, and the plants' perfect alignment – that revealed traces of a true family ethos (hard work, courage, honesty) defended in adversity throughout the twentieth century. Tat'iana, a teacher, lived in a contaminated area until 1990. She found mention of the Chernobyl disaster extremely distressing; she recalled tangled memories of mourning and relocation in terms conveying a deep affliction. The dacha built after she was rehoused therefore became the focus of a new family consciousness. Attitudes toward this major physical and moral mobilization at the dacha are sometimes reserved. The testimonies of young people provide glimpses of real pain, signs of the wounds of an individuality in search of recognition, which is stifled within a group. Certain symbolic negotiations may occasionally ease these tensions. For example, Anton Dvorikov, who was 25 years old at the turn of the millennium, proclaimed that he would plant a lawn and take care of it, but refused to do any weeding at all in the vegetable

beds. His grandfather, Pavel Ivanovich, although initially skeptical, finally agreed. In his own way, Anton was part of the family continuity: he continued to visit the garden, but he introduced an innovation that allowed him to assert his individuality.

The signs created in the dacha do more than advertise membership in a family group; they also reflect one's social affiliations. The dacha is a stage on which one's house and garden are presented for appraisal by others (neighbours, friends, work colleagues). The dacha thus takes on an ostentatious dimension as a place in which lifestyles are asserted. The presence of certain objects (billiard table, American barbecue, table tennis table, etc.) reflects the gradual emergence of new standards of good taste. Strategies of distinction are also apparent in discourses on the dacha and the vegetable garden, with the rejection of gardening sometimes being seen as proof of embracing modernity. In this way, the dacha and the garden become places of representation through which social status is asserted.

Finally, the discourses of *dachniki* frequently express a divergence or remoteness in relation to their affiliations. Individuals represent themselves and perceive themselves as being singular beings and authentic subjects. Individuals act partly in reaction to the procedures associated with an external hold over their private sanctuaries. Leonid, a retired academic, presented his life as a succession of obstacles overcome, one after the other. The narrative of the acquisition and construction of his dacha bore resemblance to an epic. A second register of expression of subjectivity also emerged from the interviews: poetic wandering. The painter Fedor's flights of fancy revealed his quest to experience a sublime moment: a prerequisite for creation. Embodying a form of victory over the world, or its abolition, the dacha thus became a place of self-expression.

This study of Belarusian dachas at the turn of the millenium provides insight into why people living in a highly restrictive environment were willing to go to such great and complicated lengths to maintain a positive image of themselves, in their own eyes and as perceived by others. This situation did not change substantially between 2003 and 2020. Dachas were and are a site conducive to the affirmation of personal dignity.

The dignity of the *kolkhoznik*

Endurance

The ethnographic survey I conducted between 2006 and 2013 revealed the ways in which rural residents organized their daily lives. Belarusian urbanites' views of kolkhozes generally focus on the difficult working conditions, low wages, disorganized production, violent social relations, alcoholism, etc. However, ethnographic analysis showed how the system also generated forms of dignity, allowing for the acquisition of social grandeur in local scenes. When talking about their practices, their projects, and their regrets, workers mentioned the moral motives of a meaningful life. Their discourses outlined a "moral community" that adhered to shared principles and more or less explicitly defined the prerequisites for dignity.^{xiv} In this way, the collectivized rural world generated resources that enabled the expression of forms of subjectivization and singularization. Here, too, we can be reasonably confident that the situation today remains essentially the same.

Whatever the different professional functions performed by tractor operators, milkers, saleswomen, teachers, veterinarians, etc., the work carried out "on the side," in addition to one's official job, is not perceived as a degrading chore, even when it is an economic necessity dictated by circumstances. In its dual active and productive components ("one appreciates the work done for its own sake" and "one appreciates the result of the activity"), it satisfies these people's "taste for activity."^{xv} This morality related to activity is powerful and widely shared in Belarusian rural worlds. Indeed, the people who are respected are those who work "around the clock," in both winter and summer, and who never take a moment's rest.

Working tirelessly here means facing up to adversity, the constraints imposed by the kolkhoz, economic fluctuations, and the vagaries of the climate, which cause uncertainty about the functioning of the domestic economy. Several people I met are praised by family members, neighbours, and villagers as being totally committed to both their salaried activity and their work on the side, thus satisfying the needs of their household but also preparing for their children's future by building a house or by saving a few thousand rubles or sums in different currencies day after day. This asceticism is

particularly evident among older women, who have devoted their lives to work. As in the American working classes studied by Michèle Lamont, dignity here is based on a “disciplined self” invested in a pronounced sense of effort.^{xvi}

Ingenuity

The second motive for grandeur is technical know-how and manual expertise. The emphasis here is on the “aesthetics of production” manifested in such situations. This, opposed to the “aesthetics of contemplation,” “refers to the perceptions of those who are interested in conditions for the production of the sensitive world, i.e., who have both the means of knowing its production process and an interest in this knowledge, and who owe their judgment of taste to this very knowledge.”^{xvii}

The attribution of value to technical performance appears in many of the discourses I collected as a manifestation of the narrator’s qualities. The testimonies often feature exploits that are admired by all. Mikhail, a retired agricultural high school teacher, built a house for his son over a 10-year period. In 2008, he showed me the fruit of many years of work. Self-construction brings into play multiple practical skills that the actors must acquire, through imitation, consultation of various publications, trial and error, patience, and precise knowledge of the qualities of the materials used. The finished house embodies the sum of the labour and technical qualities of the master builder, who thus acquires a certain respectability in the eyes of the neighbourhood. In 2012, I was told about an uncle who had built a motorized hang glider from various purchased or salvaged parts, which was powered by a car engine. This handyman flew the machine illicitly with no license or permit, was able to assemble and dismantle it quickly, and stored it in a van. During the same year, a *babushka* from Polesia, who had to leave her native village after it was contaminated by the Chernobyl disaster, showed me tapestries in her home that she had embroidered herself in the simple designs traditionally found in her beloved region. She told me that she was self-taught and liked to draw. A few weeks previously, the *sel’soviet* (rural council) had organized a celebration. This *babushka* had exhibited her tapestries there, and a television crew had come out to film her. People with ingenuity have the ability to use different items

- sometimes standardized, sometimes heterogeneous and acquired in a more or less random manner
- to manufacture or cobble together useful and beautiful creations.

Sometimes a turn of a phrase or the beginnings of a smile at the corner of a mouth convey the pride felt in having managed to obtain a particular type of material, to have repurposed it, to have succeeded in gaining the confidence of a third party and ensuring his or her complicity, to have succeeded in persuading someone to participate in the construction of a house or in the harvesting of a plot. Grandeur here is based on ingenuity. The world is organized around powerful constraints that people perceive as hardships to be overcome. It is precisely because it is so difficult to overcome these frequent obstacles in everyday life that managing to do so is rewarded by special forms of satisfaction. The ethnographic testimony echoes the words of Alena Ledeneva, who analyzed the emotions aroused by practices related to Soviet-era *blat* – “the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures” – in which people showed their intelligence, efficiency and creativity, their “ability to get things done.”^{xviii} She concluded that when workers succeed in “beating the system,” they take control of their destiny and the rewards they can gain are more than purely monetary.^{xix} In Belarus today, resourcefulness and cunningness are still valued qualities.

Autonomy

To be worthy, one must not only be a technically competent worker and clever – or even cunning – enough to be able to operate in a system of unstable rules, but also assert one’s self-sufficiency. This last quality condenses and forcefully demonstrates the previous ones. It came to the fore when people showed me everything they had personally cultivated, raised, arranged, or built, referring to these things collectively as results of the practice of *sam* (“myself”). Maksim embodied this figure of self-sufficient utopia, in which the greatest social worth was seen in local representations of reputation.

Maksim was 35 years old in 2010. He lived in a hamlet of 80 souls near a small town of 2,000 inhabitants. Maksim had had a chaotic career. He has been successively a sports teacher, a soldier, and

a construction worker. He had been married four times, and he had been ravaged by alcoholism. At 27 years of age, he had returned to Babruysk, in the east of the country, to live with his parents and start over from scratch. He then spent a year working in Leningrad (he insists on that name). Upon his return to Belarus, he was employed by a private company for one or two years, and then he moved to the countryside. In 2010, Maksim was working as a self-employed carpenter and earning \$200 per week. His wife, a manager in a construction company, led a team of five men who respected her. She was the same age as Maksim. At the time of our first meeting, they had a several-month-old baby. The carpenter had not drunk a drop of alcohol for several years.

Maksim was respected in his neighbourhood. He worked tirelessly and was praised and recognized for his technical skills. He knew how to cultivate the land, hunt, and build. Maksim showed particular pride when telling me that he lived a self-sufficient life, and that he knew how to obtain everything needed to live, without recourse to either money or other members of society. This was a recurring theme on the three occasions we met. He produced everything. The fruits and vegetables he ate were grown on land he owned or rented from the neighbouring kolkhoz. He told me he stored a ton of potatoes in his cellar. Sometimes he raised pigs and a few geese. From 1 November each year, he went hunting for deer and reindeer in the nearby woods. He butchered the animals himself and made his own sausage. He stored meat in his refrigerator, in a large freezer in Minsk, and also in his parents' freezer in Babruysk. He cultivated tobacco, which, when necessary, enabled him to avoid buying cigarettes at the village store. He knew about medicinal plants, which he dried in his house. He was familiar with the virtues of certain flowers, which he used to make homemade tea. His beehives provided him with sugar. For his building projects, he recycled or reclaimed everything – from bricks found in an abandoned factory to wood from the forest near his home. He told me that he built his *bania* (sauna) without spending a ruble. Maksim, the village carpenter, believed that he could live in autarky. This much-vaunted autarky reflected his ability to construct a world that followed rules he had personally laid down.

An external perspective on life in and around the kolkhoz points to the powerful heteronomy at work in these social worlds, characterized by hierarchical controls, numerous administrative injunctions, and fragile budgetary resources that make households vulnerable and dependent – in short, a universe characterized by a high degree of uncertainty, which prevents people from projecting themselves into a future that makes sense to them. Maksim’s story shows that it is possible, in this context, to reappropriate rules and resources for oneself in order to create a personal universe governed by personal rules, and to regain forms of power over one’s environment. In my presence as an external observer who, presumably, completely espoused the liberal discourse condemning the incoherence of economic structures established in Belarus, he declared that it was possible, in this context, to assert one’s dignity – not by opposing the system, like human rights defenders – but with its help and from within it. Declaring, as Maksim did, that one does not depend on anyone, means declaring that the system is acceptable because one can live with it, because it allows people to be autonomous and worthy, provided they have sufficient moral resources to make the efforts required to ensure their autonomy.

Dignity and politics

Remoteness from politics

City dwellers’ dachas and vegetable gardens can be interpreted in terms of political and social domination. This domination does not rely solely upon the overt force of weapons; it is also connected with forms of symbolic domination. The interpretation of vegetable garden cultivation as a means of exerting political and moral control over workers was formulated back in the nineteenth century: Friedrich Engels saw vegetable gardens as a way of occupying workers’ free time and of distracting the working classes from social struggles.^{xx} The cultivation of vegetable gardens can be interpreted as a kind of enslavement or a “disciplinary mechanism with multiple effects,” which distances gardeners from political discussions.^{xxi} In other words, dachas can be seen as a way to help ensure the gardeners’ loyalty to the regime.

In fact, this critique of Marxist and Foucauldian inspiration appears to have a “liberal” counterpart. Certain declarations by intellectual defenders of public liberties, democracy, and civil society convey a rather negative opinion of dachas, sometimes tinged with disdain, suggesting that their fellow citizens are interested only in the fate of their potatoes and tomatoes, not caring about the more “serious” and more “important” political issues. This passion for the vegetable garden is portrayed as a sign of the ignorance, irrationality, and immaturity of these “uneducated” people. In 2001, Vintsuk Viachorka, leader of the Belarusian Popular Front, a nationalist party that favours the democratization of the regime and advocates opening the country to Europe, declared: “I don’t have a dacha and I’ve never had one. My family buys food from the stores.”^{xxii} Underlying this seemingly insignificant statement seems to be the idea that the dacha, at least in Belarus, embodies the archaisms of society; not having a dacha here is tantamount to espousing modernity and may even be seen as a sign of political lucidity.

Both of these interpretations, which see gardening as a means of “alienating” dominated populations or a product of the immaturity of an ignorant “people,” support claims that dachas are a cog in the mechanism that keeps political structures functioning. Today, dachas could be interpreted as one of the multiple means of perpetuating Lukashenka’s regime. Indeed, the leader himself, in his vibrantly populist speeches, praises certain virtues that gardeners often proudly espouse – courage, patience, a strong work ethic, and a sense of endeavour:

“The democracy we need is when a man works and earns a wage, no matter how much, so that he can buy a small amount of bread [*khlebuchka*], a little milk [*molochka*], some fresh cream, a little *tvorog* [curds], and sometimes a little meat to give to his child, etc. But as far as meat’s concerned, let’s not eat too much of it in summer”.^{xxiii}

These critical perceptions of gardeners by city dwellers without dachas can be extended to the collectivized countryside and rural worlds that exist in Belarus. In the cities, one frequently hears remarks tinged with scorn about rural communities, which reflect a form of classism.^{xxiv} *Kolkhozniki* find themselves associated with negative qualities: they are narrow-minded, easily pleased, and ignorant; they drink too much and they support a political regime that prevents the country from

entering the modern era, which should be their legitimate aspiration. Urban and rural gardeners are considered to be immured in their unworthy condition, from which they can be liberated only by external intervention. They are said to be ensnared in the system by default, but it would be inconceivable for them to be positively attached to it. In this way, dignity and the authoritarian regime are regarded as antinomic. Indeed, this critical perspective sees urban and village gardeners being subjected to an externally imposed order, without any control over their own destiny. They are said to lack reflexivity and to submit passively to imposed constraints that restrict their world to fixed horizons. The ethnographic perspective provides insights into the multiple ways in which these worlds are experienced and interpreted, no longer from the outside in a top-down perspective, but from the inside. This approach helps to avoid the temptation to resort too quickly to the argument of alienation of this part of the population, by perceiving it only as a victim of propaganda or prisoner of a monolithic, conservative culture. It allows us to understand the coherence of the worlds lived by the villagers, as well as the motives and reasons that structure their actions and representations.

Attachment to the authoritarian regime

The interlocutors I encountered in and around kolkhozes stated that it was possible to lead a dignified life in the rural world, implying that the existing economic structures – which provided room to manoeuvre – enabled people to create existences associated with values, in their eyes and the eyes of people around them. By defending themselves against the potential “reduction of oneself” brought about by external injunctions, people could assert themselves “as someone” by establishing a *raison d’être* based on recognition and consideration.^{xxv} Indeed, the people I met engaged in activities that were not pure products of imposed constraints and thus manifested ways of living as they pleased. These considerations echo Alf Lüdtke’s reflections on workers in Germany in the 1930s. The historian places the “emphasis on the activities and desires through which individuals, alone or in groups, seek to escape the demands and orders from ‘above’ or ‘outside’” and uses the term *Eigensinn*, which Florence Weber translates into French as *dignité personnelle* – “personal dignity.”^{xxvi}

François Dubet's sociology of the experience of injustice, forged in the French context, can be applied to Belarus – albeit with certain adaptations, since there are great differences between the professional and national worlds studied. It highlights the essential features of the fair world that permeated my interlocutors' discourses. For Dubet, "work is at once status, exchange value, and creative activity, and each of these 'natures' refers to a principle of justice."^{xxvii} The first principle of fairness is equality. "What outrages us, far more than the inequalities themselves, are the vast chasms separating the richest and the poorest."^{xxviii} The world described by my interlocutors enables everyone to satisfy his or her material needs, although there are generational differences in the definition of these needs. Unlike the rural worlds in other countries of the former Soviet Union, in which "proletarianization" characterizes the rural condition, the Belarusian system provides protection and employment opportunities for all.^{xxix} The second principle of fairness is merit. "Assuming that we are all equal, and that every society nevertheless ranks and classifies individuals, the only way to do so is by evaluating the talents, energy, and efforts of free and equal individuals."^{xxx} In the world described by my interlocutors, it is possible, by dint of one's personal energy, to mobilize both authorized and informal resources, to build desirable life worlds, and thus to be rewarded for the efforts one has made. The third principle of fairness resides in autonomy. "Each of us judges the fairness of his or her work in terms of the freedom, autonomy, and self-fulfillment it affords."^{xxxi} In the world my interlocutors described, it is possible to orient one's actions in accordance with one's own wishes and to express one's uniqueness in certain forms of work. In this way, the world of the collectivized countryside can be perceived as a fair world. A distinction must be made between the manner in which external observers evaluate and qualify the environment and that used by the interlocutors I encountered. The analysis does not state that this cosmos is fair; it shows why, in respondents' eyes, it may appear to be. It is a world that is not fundamentally unfair, because practical experience of it draws on principles that make sense to the interlocutors: equality, merit, autonomy, and solidarity are possible in this world, and they enable people to lead dignified and meaningful lives within it.

Dignity and revolution

The will to repress

Rural communities are therefore governed by norms, rules, and obligations that authorize the expression of forms of fairness. These forms of justice remain fragile. Unfair situations are commented upon, discussed, and denounced in everyday conversations. Examining these experiences and representations of injustice sheds light on everyday politics. In fact, the question of the regime's legitimacy came up only rarely in my conversations. Politics, in the sense of exchanges of views about the validity of the rules governing collective life, was not discussed. However, interlocutors mentioned that the system was being undermined by threatening behaviors that challenged and damaged the foundations on which "moral communities" were based.^{xxxii} The targets of the critics can be grouped into three ideal-typical figures: profiteers, idlers, and moralists.

Profiteers are boundlessly selfish and unscrupulous, without any compassion or concern for others. When everyone lives by pulling together in order to get by collectively, profiteers are seen as people who depart from the common morality, break away from the group and spurn it by riding roughshod over its principles. The second figure is the idler, who lacks the will to work. Alcoholics are the quintessential idlers. Profiteers do little work because they exploit other people's labour, but they are reproached more for their unscrupulousness than for their idleness. Profiteers and idlers are both characters without morals. The other menacing figure is embodied by anyone who presents an alternative morality that conflicts with the morality shared locally. Moralists do not subvert the system; instead, they invalidate it, delegitimize it, and look down upon it. Political and human rights activists are the main embodiments of the moralist. In certain cases, they are reduced to the figures of opportunists and unscrupulous profiteers, who do not believe in what they say but who criticize the regime in order to attract more aid from foreign powers. On a more fundamental level, however, they are seen as scandalous figures who challenge the order on which existences are based. By refusing to play by the established rules, and by talking about democracy, Europe, and the market, my

interviewees perceived them as denying any value to the fundamental dignity to which they themselves laid claim.

From this perspective, the experiences of my friend Iurii are significant. After working as an academic, he entered politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century” and supported one of Alexander Lukashenka’s opponents. Iurii comes from the rural world. His parents, now retired, were kolkhoz workers. They live about 50 kilometres from Minsk. They have a large vegetable garden; maintain a cow, pigs, and hens; and cover most of their own needs. His brother works in the police force. Thanks to this status, he was able to build his parents’ house by mobilizing different networks within the informal economy. Iurii’s family has taken a very dim view of his change of direction. It is seen as an affront, which might not only directly endanger his family – undermining the position of his brother, who could be suspected of failing to support the regime due to Iurii’s political affiliations – it could also, and above all, call into question the legitimacy of the world they have created for themselves and which they consider to be desirable. What could the opposition, democracy, and Europe possibly offer them? The only conceivable prospect would be instability and to cast doubt upon the desirability of their lives. Iurii’s relationship with his brother – with whom he has not spoken in several years – has become strained, and the same applies to his dealings with Leonid, his father.

From the perspective of many of the villagers I encountered, repression protects against the threat of disorder. Recourse to punishment often seems legitimate. This expectation vis-à-vis the authorities appears either in the form of explicit justifications for coercive measures adopted by the regime, or as an attitude of indifference regarding these measures when they target “moral offenders.”^{xxxiii} These considerations are aimed at “moralists” in particular. Clear comments against them were rarely made in my presence. I was assumed to side with human rights advocates, and this subject was avoided in my presence.

Only Maksim, who liked to goad me and get me to react to his provocations, and his wife commented on current events and made judgments against opponents repressed by the regime. Their rejection of the alternative forms of political life embodied by opposition activists found expression in

comments of a gender-oriented nature. In October 2012 Maksim's wife talked about the events in the Arab world, broadcast on Russian and Belarusian television channels, and she saw the fight against authoritarianism through the lens of Belarusian forms of life. She was indignant that people in Egypt and Tunisia were protesting in public and spending their time doing nothing when they should have been working. "Why are they out on the streets every day? What's the point? They have families and must work at all costs; you have to work to feed your family." She came back to this subject several times. For her, the only morality there was consisted in protecting one's family, using the socially acceptable means at one's disposal: work. She saw protesting as complaining in a feminine and devirilizing manner, and this echoed discourses conveyed by the Belarusian media.^{xxxiv}

Maksim also mentioned protests by the Belarusian opposition on 19 December 2010, after that disputed presidential election, which were met with severe repression. If the people had really been angry, he said, they would have made mincemeat out of the security forces (in Russian, *Otryad militsii osobogo naznachenia*, or OMON), who were just scared young lads. Besides, the carpenter reiterated that he wanted to come and live in the country in order to be a real man. Defending one's dignity puts the emphasis on a form of masculinity that is associated with virility and a strong and capable body, built by working with unforgiving materials and overcoming technical obstacles. Hardship is not just an ordeal that one suffers, it is also an experience to be endured, in which one can take pride.^{xxxv} For workers like Maksim who have a local reputation and status, the authoritarian regime does not inhibit the expression of their personal dignity. On the contrary, the rigours of the world require individuals to exhibit their power in order to succeed. When life is too easy or too superficial, when it lacks trials and hardship, it becomes impossible to distinguish real men from the others. The arbitrary violence employed by the State against certain citizens is of no importance as long as these people do not belong to "us" – to those who defend their ethos through their work. Maksim accepted the world as it was and simply wanted it to remain unchanged, precisely because he had managed to construct himself as a person within it. "I couldn't care less who's in charge – Lukashenka, Putin, or the European Union. The only thing that counts for me is that they leave me

alone to do the work I'm interested in." In general, I heard few real complaints about the system of constraints upon individuals. Regrets were sometimes expressed about being unable to take better advantage of the system, as some people did. People might possibly want things to change for themselves, but they demand that they do not change for others. It is a world that fundamentally aspires to its own reproduction. The stability of the rules and their modes of application enable individuals to find their bearings and construct viable, and even desirable, worlds for themselves.

My open discussions with Maksim were an exceptional occurrence in my field of investigation. Reflections on opposition activists were generally non-existent or took on meandering and loosely structured forms. Leonid's attitude was highly significant. He did not understand his son Iurii, who defended a worldview that called into question the very foundations of his social existence and posed a direct threat to the status of his other son, a policeman. Indeed, the latter could be suspected, due to his brother's political activities, of having links with opponents of the regime. As a young man, Leonid endured suffering in the century of Soviet rule. His own father, convicted on grounds of being a kulak, never returned from deportation. In 2012, however, when Leonid and Iurii were discussing politics, the father claimed to be a follower of Stalin, which antagonized his son, who was an ardent advocate of individual liberties. How should we interpret this reference to a period that brought suffering to his own family? In this context, the only way for Leonid to defend his world was to take shortcuts. In a world in which the expression of his worldview had to be kept strictly to himself, the only way to defend himself was not to explain the merits of the kolkhoz, whose economic incoherence could be demonstrated by an expert in that field and which a political scientist could denounce-as a dominating institution that alienates the inhabitants of rural areas. Stalin, the USSR, and the past were present as an allusion, in an unexplained shortcut, to the coherence of the lifeworld that Leonid was seeking to defend. This is a practical form of metonymy that is used, as Bourdieu puts it, to designate the "language of denial" and "practical euphemisms," which reflect a form of politicization.^{xxxvi} This opinion is not a mechanical product of propaganda but rather the discursive extension of a world that has been experienced and which has its own coherence. Despotism is not seen as an obstacle to

emancipation. On one hand, the regime offers material and organizational support for anyone capable of exploiting the room for manoeuvre that the system tolerates (embezzlement, theft, exchanges, clientelist relationships, etc.); on the other hand, the regime represses – with violence, if necessary – the social forces that call into question the forms of life perceived as dignified in the rural world.

This view from within enables us to steer clear of the one-sided argument of alienation and self-deception that pervades many narratives of the ongoing revolution. The refusal of change is unlikely to stem from a form of blindness caused by effective propaganda or an unconscious fear instilled by the security services. The refusal of the revolution is unlikely to be the product of a rural tradition that is resistant to change; rather, it is likely to stem from a conscious decision to defend a world to which one is attached, and which one imagines would become impossible if the rules governing everyday life were to change. Dignity for oneself – a defensive dignity – can be asserted only against others: those who do not share the representation of a dignified life specific to these moral communities.

The desire for emancipation

These reflections derived from ethnographic surveys in the rural world should not lead to the assumption of an automatic and necessary link between belonging to the rural world and defending the incumbent regime. Journalists have documented protests against the current regime in villages and small towns – even if the world of the kolkhozes is very rarely mentioned in media coverage of events in Belarus. The motives for dignity remain fragile and it is likely that while some see the system as the guarantor of this dignity, others perceive it as an obstacle to the expression of a sense of self-worth. Maintaining the local balances that provide access to a form of social grandeur depends on multiple factors. The younger generations I encountered 10 years ago were more critical and dissatisfied with their economic situation than their elders, being less inclined to share their elders' production ethics. It can also be assumed that the economic situation, relationships with local authorities (*sel'soviet*, police, kolkhoz leadership), proximity to border regions, and differentiated

inclusion in relatively close-knit kinship and neighbourhood networks impact the social space in different ways. The defensive dignity of the people who perceive the world as acceptable or even desirable contrasts with the offensive dignity of those who are dissatisfied with it. Here we see the ambivalence of the links between dignity and politics.

This ambivalence was already apparent in my studies of city dwellers' dachas. The critical discourses underlying the idea that dachas distance people from politics can be opposed to a contrasting hypothesis that, by restoring forms of dignity, dachas might promote not a withdrawal into oneself and an acceptance of the regime but rather a possible tendency to challenge the system in place, on grounds of a regained sense of self-worth. Indeed, certain analyses postulate that rather than being instruments of subjection, city dwellers' dachas and vegetable gardens might actually reflect a means of resisting the imposed political order. In this way, Naomi Rozlyn Galtz believes that it is possible to discern "a constant undercurrent of deliberation": she sees Russian dachas as places of discussion and exchange that can be interpreted as "signs of civil society."^{xxxvii} Karine Clément adopts a more circumspect position on practices associated with resourcefulness in Russia. On one hand, in line with the above-mentioned perspective in which the vegetable garden is interpreted in terms of control and exploitation, she shows that practices associated with artful resourcefulness can be instrumentalized by political and economic leaders. On the other hand, however, she considers that withdrawal into a private sphere can also be interpreted as a form of "passive resistance against the logics of power"; it may take on a "more offensive meaning when it stems from a strategy of regaining or asserting freedom, compared with a policy seen as contravening this freedom." This reclamation of oneself could then be associated with a political dimension: "Such an emphasis on private and individual values perhaps marks the beginning of the worker's rehabilitation as a subject, the recovery of a certain dignity, and perhaps even the first steps toward a more active engagement in the collective sphere."^{xxxviii} Dachas can thus be interpreted not only as an instrument of domestication of the population with a view to ensuring obedience and loyalty to the regime, but also as a form of "exit," which could be the promise of a future "voice."^{xxxix}

The enigma that social sciences are probably required to solve therefore lies in the relationship between personal and collective dignity. Two hypotheses can be ventured. In the first hypothesis, the system is no longer able to maintain supports for dignity at the local level, and a build-up of muted anger leads to the rapid politicization of citizens who were previously remote from politics. This case would require the very precise documentation of local situations by conducting a comparative analysis in order to understand the tipping points for certain territories: professional settings, relationships with the administration and hierarchy, intergenerational solidarities, etc. In the second hypothesis, it is no longer possible to avoid integrating personal dignity and the worlds carved out at the local level into a collective dignity that, in Belarus, was repudiated during the 2020 elections. The latter hypothesis would see people who were formerly considered as belonging to the remote world of “them” – the others – switching over to join the immediate world of “us.” It is no longer possible to assert one’s own worth when that of people belonging to other social universes in the same society is trampled underfoot. How did people who were perceived as different become, in a few days or weeks, fellow human beings who had to be defended? Three hypotheses can be put forward. First of all, the handling of the COVID crisis showed the regime’s contempt for people who could previously rely on the state to help them get by. In addition, the mass repression that followed Election Day was directed at a large segment of the population that had not previously been direct and systematic victims of the regime. Finally, digital social networks played an important role by putting the spotlight on this arbitrary state violence, which happened to be inflicted upon people seen as innocent and honest. These factors may help to explain why, in contrast to the December 2010 election, ordinary citizens (including some *dachniki*, *kolkhozniki* and villagers) interpreted the repression in 2020 as affecting people on the local level, being no longer reserved for scandalous, remote figures and eliciting little reaction due to the lack of identification with these other threats.

Conclusion

Experts estimate that Lukashenka's regime can count on support from 25–30% of the population.^{xi} Why did this segment fail to join the revolution of dignity in Belarus? At first sight, the clues that journalists have revealed in the form of concise and often repetitive statements remain difficult to interpret. Olivier Tallès paints a portrait of a sympathizer who joined a demonstration in support of Lukashenka on 25 August. Every day, watching the Russian television channel RBK, Dimitrii Kholub, a 71-year-old retired truck driver who lived in Babruysk, followed the news continuously. "In all countries, Libya, Ukraine, the revolution ended badly," he thought. "I want the future to be the same as the present." Echoing the authorities' slogans, he adds: "Here, there are no oligarchs, no inequalities. Everyone has a job. That's freedom for you."^{xii} In October 2020, Ania Nowak investigated the situation in Marina Horka, a small town about 60 kilometres from Minsk. She met Aleksandra, a 68-year-old retired worker, who was walking with her granddaughter in the downtown park. She said that she appreciated

the peaceful life we have in Belarus. Of course, we have meagre pensions, but we get by: we do our gardening, we go out picking mushrooms, gathering berries... I don't want change, I don't support the demonstrations, what people my age want is peace and stability.^{xlii}

These reflections prompted by a long-term ethnographic survey provide insight into the substance of the often brief and stereotyped discourses of regime defenders that we can read in the press. Ethnography reveals that Lukashenka's regime has produced conditions conducive to the development of lives lived in dignity. This research shows that the state of dependence and guardianship characteristic of the authoritarian regime is not necessarily opposed to forms of self-assertion. Among forms of support for the regime, it is therefore wrong to perceive only blindness linked to ideology, narrow wishes for life confined to material considerations, and prudence or even spinelessness linked to fear of repression. The forms of dignity are based on structures governed by the authorities and are therefore perceived positively. Conversely, the information technology sector, which is playing a particularly active role in the protests, is imbued with forms of existence that are already independent of state structures.^{xliii} The arbitrary rule of the regime does not simultaneously

restrict and enable this sector, as in the rural world. Arbitrary state intervention is seen only as constraint, surveillance, impossibility, and dependency. In this way, the arbitrary rule of the regime is an obstacle to emancipation, which can be defined as liberation from a state of dependency.

This leads us to a second question. Why did citizens who had hitherto kept their distance from politics, or who were even attached to the regime, choose to join the protest movement? Research on Belarusian dachas shows that many city dwellers discovered places of self-belonging in rural areas, where they could manifest their sense of self-worth. This recovered dignity is ambivalent. It can either cause people to barricade themselves behind a defensive posture and be expressed as an ambivalent attitude toward politics, or it can assert itself in an offensive posture consisting of challenging the political regime. When the victims of repression are perceived as friends, relatives, and fellow human beings, it elicits the idea that personal dignity might be only truly possible when linked to collective dignity. This “moral equality,” in the words of Pierre Rosanvallon, is the bedrock on which the democratic ideal is based.^{xliv} It can be hypothesised that while the regime sinks deeper and deeper into unyielding authoritarian repression, significant signs of democratization may be starting to appear in Belarusian society. A degree of mystery remains regarding what Karine Clément, when analyzing social mobilization in Russia, describes as the “transition from a life experience based on the immediate environment, one’s close relations, the everyday or the ordinary, to an extraordinary and unusual experience of strange, foreign, or unfamiliar practices that might relate to politics or to collective confrontational actions.”^{xlv} Although the feeling of personal dignity observed in relation to Belarusian dachas appears to be one condition of possibility for this transition, it is only transformed into a defence of collective dignity when linked to many other factors (COVID, social networks, international movements, actualization of a national consciousness, etc.). Social science research will need to document this phenomenon through fieldwork in order to understand the multiple forces underlying the revolution of dignity that occurred in Belarus, even if this requires social science researchers to contend with what are probably the most difficult conditions of investigation ever encountered in the country’s independent history.

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ⁱ Zelenko, "Khronotop protestnogo plakata," 309–22.

ⁱⁱ Dorman, "Crise biélorusse."

ⁱⁱⁱ Dragokhroust, "Le prix Nobel."

^{iv} Filipenko, "Biélorussie: 'Nous vivons.'"

^v Smolar, "Révolte biélorusse"; Vitkine, "Biélorussie: 'Ce qui est impressionnant'."

^{vi} Reznik, "From the Orange Revolution"; Aleya-Sghaier, "Tunisian Revolution."

^{vii} Narotzky, "Between inequality and injustice"; Lamont, *Dignity of Working Men*, 245.

^{viii} Hervouet, *Datcha blues*.

^{ix} Hervouet, *Taste for Oppression*.

^x Gapova, "Class, Agency, and Citizenship," 47.

^{xi} Twenty years ago, even if it was difficult to access to precise data, I showed that a large majority of urban Belarusians owned a dacha. For example, in 2002, in the Minsk region, city dwellers cultivated 225 000 usually familial plots of land (related to a population of around two million individuals). Hervouet, *Datcha blues*, 22.

^{xii} To guarantee their anonymity, all names of persons met in the fieldwork and mentioned in the article have been changed, along with the names of the villages and towns in which they reside.

^{xiii} Castel and Haroche, *Propriété privée, propriété sociale*, 13, 36, 48.

^{xiv} Lamont, *Dignity of Working Men*, 9.

^{xv} Weber, *Le Travail à-côté*, 199.

^{xvi} Lamont, *Dignity of Working Men*, 4.

^{xvii} Weber, *Le Travail à-côté*, 216.

^{xviii} Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours*, 1.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 56, 162, 58.

^{xx} Engels, *Housing Question*.

^{xxi} Isaac, Fritsch, and Battegay, *Disciplines à domicile*.

^{xxii} Levkov, "Oda dache."

^{xxiii} Statement by Lukashenka quoted in *Nasha svoboda*, 10 April 2001.

^{xxiv} Lapatniova, *Biélorussie*, 60.

^{xxv} Weber, *Manuel de l'ethnologue*, 246, 245, 237.

^{xxvi} Lüdtke, "La domination au quotidien"; Weber, *Manuel de l'ethnologue*, 223.

^{xxvii} Dubet, *Injustice at Work*, 5.

^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, 7.

^{xxix} Allina-Pisano, *Post-Soviet Potemkin Village*, 189.

^{xxx} Dubet, *Injustice at Work*, 8.

^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, 11.

^{xxxii} Lamont, *Dignity of Working Men*, 9.

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- xxxiii Ibid., 6.
- xxxiv Ousmanova, “Pouvoir, sexualité et politique.”
- xxxv Shevchenko, *Crisis and the Everyday*, 81, 108.
- xxxvi Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 98.
- xxxvii Galtz, “Space and the Everyday.”
- xxxviii Clément, *Les ouvriers russes*, 181–83.
- xxxix Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*.
- xl Astapenia, “Belarusians’ Views.”
- xli Tallès, “La timide mobilisation.”
- xlii Nowak, “Loukachenko a remis.”
- xliii Shukan, “Pour la Biélorussie.”
- xliv Rosanvallon, *La société des égaux*, 82.
- xlv Clément, “Mobilisations sociales à Astrakhan,” 127.