

George F. McLean: Reminiscences and Reflections

Edited by
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McLean's Testament for the Ukraine

Yaroslav Pasko & Korzhov Henadii

Ukraine's intellectual circles discovered George McLean rather late, unfortunately – only in the 2000s. The work of such a prominent scholar is so important and his understanding of the problems of the Ukrainian transformation is so relevant that the value of his intellectual contributions – for the different communities and groups of Ukrainian society, intellectuals, the political class, and civil society – can hardly be overestimated. His life and work, having a truly global scale, only now, from the position of a certain historical distance, allows us, Ukrainians, to realize a very simple and important thing. Social change requires solid values and a foundational world-view. To carry out complex socio-political and economic reforms, strengthening the principles of identity is possible only in the presence of strong cultural and moral-normative prerequisites, which are the fundamental basis for the formation of values, deep-seated norms, and rules.

Father McLean constantly emphasized the significant threats to the “young states” associated with the post-communist evolution. It was important to consider cultural foundations and rethink “the experience of occupation” in post-communist societies, and he contributed to a deeper understanding of the post-totalitarian heritage that makes complex change in Ukraine impossible or transforms such change into a banal “simulation.” His workshops and lectures provided illustrations of practical change, while rejecting the tendency of the mechanical imitation of western trends that is popular in our country, but counterproductive. Father McLean noted the need for the Ukrainian society to focus on global cultural markers and common cultural heritage with other countries. At the same time, however, he appealed to the “ethos,” the traditional foundations of identity, that allows the country to evolve despite unfavorable global trends and the lack of natural resources.

Realizing the importance of intellectual assistance and the dependence of the processes of “social modernization” in the Ukraine on the presence of a powerful intellectual environment – and reflecting on American and European ideological and cultural concepts – Father McLean impressed his audience by the depth of his analysis, his sensitivity to various historical and cultural determinants, as well as his exceptional combination of the styles of academic scientist and public philosopher, able to connect with the widest audience.

It is difficult to overestimate the role of George McLean for the development of Ukrainian society and science. The authors had the oppor-

tunity to get acquainted with him for the first time in Lviv, in December 2001, at a conference devoted to the issues of civil society. The country was experiencing difficult times, separating from the totalitarian past. It was unclear in what way it would be possible to change society which, as a result of the irresponsibility of the political elite and social clientalism, was incapable of overcoming the “family spots” of its communist past, of adapting to global change and creating networks of civil interaction, moving away from economic determinism and the Marxist paradigm of social development towards modern European concepts.

In this context, the Ukrainian scientific community was simply amazed by his presentation at the 2001 conference, where he offered theoretical approaches unknown to Ukrainian humanists. He focused on themes such as: communicative rationality, communitarianism, critical theory, modernization theory, and postcolonial studies. Criticizing the economic determinism of Marxism and the classical theory of modernization, which presupposes evolution as the single and universal way of development, Father McLean emphasized the dimensions of “ideal communication,” promoted ways of modernization alternative to those existing in the Ukraine, and highlighted the importance of cultural and religious factors of social change in Eastern and Central Europe. Equally important was the fact that George McLean drew attention to the decisive role of intellectuals and representatives of the “middle class” in shaping new cultural and social contexts. He was also interested in the emergence of new identities in countries undergoing the path of “late modernization.” Being an exceptionally educated man, a specialist in the theory of knowledge, humanities, and philosophy of culture, McLean revealed to us, the inhabitants of a post-colonial country, the broad horizons of “public sociology” and the social sciences, and which stimulated the young scientists of our country: philosophers, political scientists, sociologists as well. This was especially noticeable at conferences and seminars devoted to the problems of civil society, social modernization, and social identity. Due to historical reasons, all the above problematic had previously been pushed away to the margins and studied only in a very schematic way. Consequently, RVP joint seminars on civil society were particularly illuminating in this context.

At the time, it was believed that civil society was a purely political concept associated with the development of non-governmental organizations. Professor McLean greatly deepened our understanding of this concept, disclosing the links between civil society and the concepts that directly affect the formation of this social institution: the concepts of life-world and system, community and civil society, community and subsidiarity, decentralization and federalism. He drew attention to the role of the traditions of republicanism (“common cause”) in shaping the new social order, as well as the role of local communitarian traditions in shaping

the global world. Realizing the complexity of the Ukraine's transition to democratic models, this scientist and great friend of our country highlighted two factors, without which, in his opinion, it was impossible to change anything in the country. The first is the role of the moral-normative sphere, which is the basis for overcoming corruption and moral decay. In this context, he attached great importance to the understanding of Aristotle's political philosophy. (A number of studies on this issue has since been translated into Ukrainian.) Second, he understood the practical preconditions and peculiarities of the path of each country in overcoming the consequences of the communist and colonial past.

The workshops conducted by McLean in Central Europe stressed that the Ukraine faces two obstacles to social change. First, there is the obstacle of the rudiments of the communist past, which are connected to the total bureaucratization and absorption of the life-world by the system, when the latter, through its own media, power, and money, colonizes, reduces, and destroys the former, while leveling the role of civil society in the country and making serious social change impossible. In the process of fruitful discussion during public forums and private conversations, McLean stated that Soviet socialism defiled all forms of authentic communal life, turning people into faceless masses, incapable of self-organization and social partnership. A second obstacle in the Ukraine, according to McLean, is the dearth of authentic individualism. The reason for this is the existence of a total monopoly and the lack of competition. In the end, post-soviet society generates a type of person who constantly feels depressed, unable to preserve his own historical memory and patterns of his own traditional culture.

McLean quite critically summed up the consequences of the Soviet past in our country, contributing to the awareness of the terrible form of Leviathan reproduced in the post-Soviet space. He outlined the awful situation in the humanitarian field, where everything that went beyond the limits of ideology was eliminated or put aside on the margins and practically not developed.

Another critical focus of McLean concerned the role of cultural industry in promoting a national culture – a notion that is not clear enough in the West and is perceived by most advanced countries through Russian culture. Thus, McLean emphasized that, without first developing culture in all its forms – traditional, high, academic – one cannot substantively develop civil society. It was also important to find those social groups that could be the engine for social integration and that could unite society on other principles. McLean emphasized that, due to the lack of development of private property as the basis for the formation of the middle class, there was little chance that those social groups that are classic in the West could become the drivers of modernization in the Ukraine. He accentuated the

decisive role and social mission of intellectuals in social change, emphasizing their symbolic meaning for Ukrainian and Polish societies.

The problem was, in Father McLean's opinion, the coordinated behavior of all actors of social change, in the context of the transition from the post-communist social order to the rules and norms common to Europe. He proposed drawing on the invaluable experience of social transformations, conflicts, and intellectual disputes in Central Europe, in the formulation of a shared public space. This is greatly lacking in our society, which, due to the irresponsibility of the political class, the socio-cultural amorphousness, and the weakness of democratic identity, did not fully take advantage of opportunities presented to us in recent years.

Therefore, McLean's critique of the Central European and, especially, of the Polish experience of the Third Republic is especially appealing to us: the liberal vision of national transformation in contrast with the mechanisms of the functioning of post-communist power, which remains organically linked with the Soviet legacy that was extremely ineffective and prone to corruption. It is very important for us to note his "deconstruction" of the post-colonial experience: a discussion of the optimal sociocultural path to democracy, which would allow reconciling the specifics of the Ukrainian cultural archetype with the requirements of global trends: liberal optimization, pluralism, and tendencies towards forcing moral and normative virtues into the private sphere.

The unquestionable value for Ukrainians is McLean's vision of the nature of modern "post-metaphysical liberalism," which, as Ukrainian experience also proves, is constantly expanding its monologic claims, and avoiding serious philosophical discussions about moral and religious concepts. Such a liberalism, according to McLean, is contrary to recognized authentic liberal patterns and increasingly gravitates towards "ideological neutrality," narrowing the space for democracy. In the context of his intellectual approach, this model appears as "socially distorted and unfair." This social order is extremely restrictive of the ability of communities and groups to realize their cultural and religious heritage.

McLean explicates the modern moral and ideological crisis of post-communist societies by referring to the processes of the "liquefaction of tradition" – the global victory in former post-Soviet countries of "gray" democracy, deprived of the deep sense of democracy. This 'liquefaction' is extremely insensitive and unfavorable to serious national projects; it despises people's aspirations for a "common good," and rejects the special mission of the spiritual authorities who were the driving force behind the velvet revolutions of 1989. Diagnosing the signs of crisis in Ukrainian society, Father McLean essentially foresaw its consequence: a comprehensive change of power in Ukraine and the practical elimination of the power levers of political actors – i.e., "old politicians," who were the per-

sonification of the “colonial past” – and the definition of a new vector of life in Ukraine.

McLean's theoretical views, although only briefly touching upon Ukrainian issues, lead us to a better understanding of the fundamental problems of Ukrainian transformation, which, unfortunately, were neither solved nor even comprehensively put forward by Ukrainian society. Why in the 25 years of the formally independent existence of the Ukraine have there not been complex changes in the political and social sphere? Why are not the common guidelines for society and the government identified as seeking a common good that is coordinated with individual interests? What should be the social design of the future? Why have civil society and the ruling political class neither resolved nor even clearly outlined the problems of cultural decolonization and the arrangement of public institutions on the basis of global and national development? Instead of the meaningful discussion of such issues in the public sphere and their gradual solution, we observe the primitive replication of meaningless universal economic recipes, which are, over and above, used selectively and in an arbitrary way. The negative effects of the non-critical assimilation of western models are too frequent, in particular, due to the lack of comprehensive understanding of Father McLean's views. His legacy is an intellectual testament to us, Ukrainians, to help us understand our problems and to provide a recipe for their solution.