

Nona Shahnazarian

Bruce Grant and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, eds. *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories and the Making of a World Area*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007. 314 pp. ISBN 9783825899066.

Nona Shahnazarian, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Armenian Academy of Sciences; Centre for Independent Social Research Armenia (CISR Armenia). nonashahnazar@gmail.com.

This review is dedicated to the memory of Sergey Arutyunov (1932–2023).

The collection *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories and the Making of a World Area*, published in 2007, represents a landmark anthropological publication in the field of Caucasus studies. Edited by anthropologists Bruce Grant from the United States and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann from Germany, this volume brings together the work of scholars in the field. Published in Germany as part of the Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia series, the book is tailored for an English-speaking audience, which enhances its relevance and accessibility for a broader scholarly community. The book contains 13 chapters, each addressing different aspects of the Caucasus region through a variety of disciplinary lenses, including anthropology, history, and sociology. Rather than providing a detailed summary of each chapter, this review highlights the key themes and debates that the book engages with, particularly within the context of global Caucasus studies. What sets this book apart is its approach to the Caucasus not merely as an object of Western scholarly inquiry but as a region with diverse voices and perspectives. Despite the majority of contributors being affiliated with Western institutions, they have extensive experience living and conducting research in the Caucasus, which lends their work a nuanced and deeply informed perspective. Additionally, several contributors are from the Caucasus region itself, ensuring that the book reflects a multiplicity of viewpoints.

The shift away from primordialism (also known as objectivism, substantialism, and essentialism) since the 1980s has significantly reshaped social sciences and humanities, especially in disciplines like history. Traditional focuses on wars and revolutions led to stagnation, prompting European historians, particularly the Annales school (founded in 1929 in France), to advocate for broader, interdisciplinary approaches. They emphasized economic history, linguistics, anthropology, and sociology, seeking to transcend rigid boundaries. This transformation, although primarily advanced in the Global North, is still fragmented. Efforts to narrate global social history beyond territorial borders and to promote gender neutrality challenge stereotypes and deconstruct hierarchies. Postmodern thought calls for integrating national histories into a decentralized world history, amplifying marginalized voices through a constructivist approach. The work critically examines outdated paradigms like geopolitics, ethnos, and ethnogenesis, with editors and authors like Bruce Grant challenging essentialist ideas, including the notion of inherent belligerence in the Caucasus.

In the introduction to their collection, Lale Yalçın-Heckmann and Bruce Grant emphasize that the book offers a comprehensive resource on Caucasus area studies, reflecting on how geographical and political boundaries have historically shaped perceptions of the region. They argue that mountains, both real and metaphorical, have long influenced how the Caucasus is imagined—from ancient Greek myths to Russian imperial divisions. The editors discuss the notion of a shared Caucasian civilization and the challenges of managing diversity within the region, questioning the extent to which the Caucasus can be considered a cohesive cultural and historical entity.

The authors also explore the integration of Caucasus studies into Middle Eastern studies, particularly after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, noting the complexities of merging these regions. As review of publications on the Caucasus in the book's introduction shows, post-Soviet scholars tend to focus on the theme of Islam. One of the authors, Seteney Shami, seeks to answer the question of why they do so by examining how regional studies have long focused on "developing" countries, avoiding a focus on Russia, Europe, and North America for decades. This has often been in service of the idea that "peripheral" zones might catch up with metropolitan centers (p. 8).

The introduction further reflects on the Soviet ethnographic legacy in the Caucasus, particularly the shift from imperial conquest narratives to Soviet-era studies that emphasized folklore and cultural history. Overall, the introduction serves as a historiographic review, analyzing the evolution of Caucasus studies and questioning thematic imbalances, particularly the overemphasis on Islam and the complexities of interdisciplinary approaches.

The book is divided into three sections: "The Archaeology of Knowledge," "Re-making a World Region," and "Mobilities and Boundaries." Each section reflects the book's commitment to ethnographic rigor and interdisciplinarity, encompassing diverse contributions from cultural anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, sociologists, linguists, and a medical anthropologist. In a way, such an academic assemblage explains the somewhat uneven grouping of articles into sections or blocks. The postmodern spirit of the book is evident in many aspects. The simple lexical choice of using key terms in the plural—histories, anthropologies, globalizations, peripheries, boundaries, postmodernisms, mobilities, perspectives, identities—does more than merely raise new questions; it also disrupts the foundations of entrenched approaches and judgments. This "plurality" removes the pressure of an "all-seeing eye" or a "panopticon," rejecting the notion of a single, "correct" discourse and instead asserting the legitimacy of writing new, alternative histories or counter-histories.

The sections, influenced by Michel Foucault's concept of archaeology of knowledge, explores local discourses and critiques power relations. The second section aligns with Foucault's "genealogy," challenging holistic narratives by analyzing how North Caucasus authors mythologize ancient history for nation-building. This critique of essentialist and bio-deterministic tendencies in post-Soviet thought highlights the persistence of Soviet-era paradigms.

This volume emphasizes individuality in a region dominated by collective social pressures from groups, clans, or families. Individualism is often scarce in the Caucasus due to these collective structures, even though extreme forms of individualism, like the *abrek* (an outlaw figure), exist. Bruce Grant examines the *abrek* not as a symbol of violence but as one who reduces it. He links the Caucasus with captivity narratives popular in colonial empires, examining how people crossed community boundaries and the cultural implications of theft and social order. Grant's work delves into complex issues like bride abduction, showing how cultural practices in the Caucasus sustain social exchanges and leadership. His research also critiques Orientalist and Eurocentric perspectives. In this regard, Grant's use of the term "Caucasian Wars" can be critiqued, as it overlooks the agency of the highlanders, who prefer the term "Russo-Circassian Wars."

Georgi Derluigan, in "Forgotten Complexities of the North Caucasian Jihad," explores the delayed Islamization of the North Caucasus, focusing on the interplay between *adat* (customary law), *sharia* (Islamic law), and Soviet formal law. He argues that by the mid-1990s, Islam became the last symbolic resource for ethnic societies in the region after the failures of Soviet socialism, Western liberalism, and local nationalism. Islam in the North Caucasus, however, remains fragmented by competing ideologies like Sufism and Wahhabism, driven by post-Soviet anarchy and historical memories. Despite the complexities, Derluigan emphasizes the potential for shared practices and regional market dynamics to transcend conflicts.

Lale Yalçın-Heckmann's chapter explores the intricate social and economic dynamics in border regions, revealing much about the history and future of the Caucasus. Her analysis emphasizes the market's role in erasing borders and differences, portraying it as a force of synergy and mobility. After the Soviet collapse, the region's new states faced pressures that reshaped borders into symbols of instability and uncertainty. Borders, like the one between Georgia and Turkey, not only enforce state discipline but also foster specific identities, often leading to corruption by state agents. Yalçın-Heckmann contrasts formal borders with informal economies, such as the Sadakhlo-Bagratashen market on the Georgia-Armenia border, where vertical state control meets horizontal free competition. Her ethnographic observations in Azerbaijan highlight how small traders blend state jobs with business, reshaping citizenship regimes. Ultimately, the article balances the tension between closure and openness, with markets symbolizing optimism and accessibility.

Seteney Shami's article, "The Prehistory of Globalization: Circassian Identity in Motion," intricately examines the Circassian diaspora, focusing on the nineteenth-century migration to the Ottoman Empire and modern return migrations. This mass exodus, known as the Muhajirism, reshaped the western Caucasus, even causing the extinction of languages like Ubykh. Shami contrasts two Circassian women—Shem-sigül from the 1850s and Şengül from the 1990s—to highlight both the tragedy of forced migration and the daily life of premodern Caucasus. By employing a multilayered methodology that includes in-depth interviews and historical sources, the author explores the relationship between movement and identity, particularly examining how memory, both collective and individual, is preserved or erased. Shami also

critiques Eurocentrism, particularly regarding slavery in the Caucasus, showing how Circassian women, despite being sold into slavery, became highly mobile, embodying fluid identities. This gender-sensitive analysis challenges Western narratives of modernity and globalization, offering a complex, ethnographically rich perspective on Circassian nostalgia, comparable to the experiences of other displaced groups.

Sergey Arutyunov shares the editors' optimism about the future of the Caucasus but raises questions about how the region will define itself. He revisits the idea of the Caucasus as a region rooted in imperial traditions and criticizes modern scholars for overlooking this concept. The Soviet academic tradition recognized the Caucasus as a distinct historical and cultural area, exemplified by works of Soviet Caucasiologists. Arutyunov identifies pan-Caucasian elements that unite the region despite its multilingualism. He refers to the pan-Caucasian lexicon and notes the historical significance of the Circassian coat (*cherkesska*) and patriarchal values. Addressing linguistic features of Caucasian languages, he highlights their consonant-heavy nature, exemplified by Ubykh and Abkhaz. However, the realities of political fragmentation and competing nationalisms hinder the development of a broader pan-Caucasian identity. The *cherkesska* may symbolize a shared heritage, but it does not yet serve as a unifying cultural force in the geopolitical landscape of the Caucasus. Arutyunov concludes that while the Caucasus remains a competitive arena, its future lies in trade and exchanges. However, many boundaries, particularly in light of recent geopolitical developments, still need to be overcome.

The book *Caucasian Paradigms* is highly recommended not only for sociologists, anthropologists, and historians but also for politicians and activists. It fills significant gaps that the authors themselves attribute to the *unknowability* of the Caucasian social matrix. To some extent, these "gray areas" have been addressed by the authors, highlighting the book's heuristic potential. In many ways, this book is a revolutionary work. The editors' introduction serves as a synthesis of the foundational ideas that define Caucasus studies as a complex and evolving field. The book's cross-disciplinary approach is particularly valuable, as it opens up new avenues of inquiry and raises provocative questions about the nature of the region. This makes the book not only a significant contribution to the field but also a pioneering effort in expanding our understanding of the Caucasus. Overall, *Caucasus Paradigms* is a must-read for anyone interested in the Caucasus, whether as a region or as a subject of scholarly inquiry. It provides a comprehensive and thought-provoking exploration of the region, making it an essential resource for scholars, students, and anyone looking to deepen their knowledge of this complex and fascinating part of the world.