

RETHINKING THE SOUTH CAUCASUS. INTRODUCTION

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Editorial note. With the exception of the paper by Zurabishvili and Zurabishvili, written in English, all research articles and essays in this issue are published in Russian with extensive English summaries. Book reviews are in either Russian or English. This introduction is published in full in both Russian and English.

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The South Caucasus, or Transcaucasus, exhibits a striking cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity, even though it occupies a comparatively small territory between the Black and Caspian Seas. The geopolitical significance of this intermediate space has strongly affected society and politics in the region, turning it into a battleground for competing powers. In the course of the past two decades, the Caucasus has been at the center of global attention, as it became a political fault line shaken by territorial conflicts and wars. The paradigm of cultural diversity has framed the most common representations of the region's past and present, representations that are often shrouded in multiple legends and myths linked to both ancient history and contemporary geopolitical games.

As a field of research, too, the Caucasus is a borderland that brings together and separates Europe and Asia. Two area studies disciplines—Slavic Studies and Near Eastern Studies—have staked out their claims to the region: the former because of the long-standing influence of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union on the cul-

ture, economies, and politics of the Caucasus; the latter because of the large proportion of Muslims among its population and the no less considerable impact of Near and Middle Eastern cultures on the region.

And yet the Caucasus, for all its age-old history and rich cultural patchwork, remains on the margins of international scholarly interest. For a number of reasons, this fascinating region is strikingly understudied. Some of these reasons are discussed in this issue of *Laboratorium*—for example, in an interview with the well-known Russian anthropologist Sergei Arutiunov.

Although higher education in the Caucasus is being Europeanized,¹ social science research in the region is facing marginalization, adding to the geographic isolationism that the Caucasus has inherited from Soviet times. It is very difficult to trace the outlines of the social science landscape in the absence of a lively scholarly debate, be it internal or with colleagues from neighboring countries, above all Russia. With this issue of *Laboratorium*, we would like to launch a discussion on how to overcome the isolation of social scientists in the Caucasus from contemporary scholarly debates. It is with this aim in mind that we have included, among other papers, work by young anthropologists on the transformation of everyday life in the Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

While there is a certain rise in the number of studies of the Caucasus by foreign scholars, mostly anthropologists, the landscape of social research in the South Caucasus itself is rather barren.² Why do South Caucasian social scientists not take advantage of the increased attention to their region to carry out more in-depth, comparative research? What is it that hampers the development of the social sciences in the region? We believe that there are four important factors at work here. Three of these are, to varying degrees, common to all post-Soviet countries, including Russia.

Firstly, there is the lack of professional training, due to defects of the Soviet system of higher education that have yet to be overcome. The skills and knowledge displayed by most graduate students are significantly inferior to those of their peers in Europe or the United States.³ Of course, there are now opportunities for Caucasians

1 Thus, since 2005, higher education in Armenia and Georgia has been undergoing reforms in the framework of the Bologna Process, which was started in 1999 by the education ministries of 29 European countries, with the support of the European Commission, in order to standardize the European system of higher education and increase student mobility.

2 The most visible and productive research group is the circle that has formed around Levon Abrahamian in Yerevan. His book on the transformations of Armenian identity in a changing world, published in English, is based on in-depth ethnographic observation of postsocialist society in Yerevan (Abrahamian 2006). Overall, however, anthropological research has remained under the influence of Soviet ethnography, with its essentialism and tendency toward scholastic theorizing (Sokolovskii 2009).

3 As demonstrated by the Heinrich Böll Foundation's fellowship program for young scholars in the Caucasus, which has been in place for several years. The program's selective application process ensured that only the most motivated and talented early-career scholars were chosen, yet their training (in particular, their grasp of contemporary theory) and skills often proved

to study in the West, but few take up this option, and those who do rarely choose to return once they complete their studies. The radical reform of higher education that is a prerequisite for serious improvement in the quality of teaching has only been carried out in Georgia, but even there, according to a senior administrator at Tbilisi State University, it has met with resistance and is far from complete. There is still a lack of qualified teachers. At the same time, the social sciences have been politicized on an unprecedented scale. Azerbaijani history textbooks are an especially glaring example of this, and so, generally, is historical writing produced over the past two decades.⁴ The social sciences have become a battleground for ethnic and state nationalisms.

Another reason for the underdevelopment of the social sciences is the lack of a professional community that might provide a home for young social scientists. Conferences and seminars are irregular; libraries lack recent foreign publications; many complain about the erratic publication schedule of local scholarly journals. Institutional peculiarities in the publication of scholarly work are partly to blame, and Sergei Arutiunov discusses this tradition, which goes back to the 1960s, in the interview we publish here.⁵

disappointing. Only those who had studied abroad (for example, at the Central European University) had more background.

4 See e.g. Abbasov 2006, Rumiantsev and Abbasov 2006, Shnirel'man 2003.

5 A number of scholarly journals in the social sciences are published more or less regularly in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, mostly but not exclusively in local languages. More than half of them were created after 2000. Thus the *Bulletin of Armenian Studies*, founded in 2006, publishes papers on Armenia from the fields of linguistics, ethnography, folklore, history, literary studies, and the history of art. *Kron ev hasarakutyun (Religion and Society)* was launched in September 2007. *21-rd dar*, the journal of the Noravank Educational Foundation, has appeared since 2003. *Aramazd: Armenian Journal of Near Eastern Studies* has been published by the Association for Near Eastern and Caucasian Studies in Yerevan in Armenian and English since 2006, presenting articles by Armenian and foreign authors on the archaeology, history, and culture of Armenia and the Near East. The traditional *Patmabanasirakan hands*—the National Academy of Sciences' *Historico-Philological Journal*—was founded in 1958, and its *Social Science Herald* has been published since 1940. Yerevan University has been publishing a *Yearbook of the Sociology Department* since 2006, and has a long-standing interdepartmental bulletin (*Banber Erevani amalsarani*) with specialized issues in sociology and economics.

Georgia also has a number of social science periodicals. These include *Epoka (Epoch)*, a sociology journal; *Kartveluri memkvidreoba (The Georgian Heritage)*, which publishes historians, linguists, and anthropologists; *Clio; Analebi (Annals)*; and *Amirani*.

Journals published in Azerbaijan, often in Azeri and Russian, include the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Humanities Series; Archaeology and Ethnography of Azerbaijan* (since 2003); *Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijanis* (published by the Presidium of the National Academy of Sciences); *Proceedings of Baku University. Humanities Series; Philosophy and Socio-Political Sciences* (published by the Azerbaijani Association of Philosophy and Socio-Political Sciences); and the *Journal of Qafqaz University*, published since 2003.

We thank Levon Abrahamian in Yerevan, Ketevan Khutsishvili in Tbilisi, and Aliaga Mamedly in Baku for their help in compiling this list.

However, the problem is not so much the lack of local journals as the inaccessibility of these journals to anyone who does not read Armenian or Georgian. Added to the fact that local periodicals are hardly disseminated outside their own countries, this means that foreign colleagues have very limited access to local sources and debates.

Universities and institutes of the Academies of Sciences continue to be organized along the lines of the Soviet social sciences. This framework is imposed by an older generation of academics, who continue to occupy dominant positions in the academic establishment (this is least true of Georgia).

The third cause of stagnation has to do with the difficulty of making a living as an academic. This is true of most post-Soviet countries. Academic salaries (especially at early-career stage) are low. Scholars are forced to work at multiple institutions, leaving little time for serious research. The typical academic teaches at several universities, makes money on the side at a for-profit polling agency, and engages in various outside activities that have little or nothing to do with research. Local and Western foundations give grants that often do not aim to promote in-depth research and are awarded based on non-transparent criteria.⁶

All this pushes young scholars to pursue careers abroad. They leave their countries in search of better education and a position that would allow them to carry out research. They would be leaving in even greater numbers if it wasn't for one peculiar feature of the South Caucasus. This brings us to the decisive impact of a fourth factor that hampers the development of academic social sciences in the South Caucasus: the presence of numerous international organizations which, paradoxically, drains the social sciences of their already meager resources. Almost any educated person who knows foreign languages will easily find employment at one of these organizations, with a salary that may be significantly higher than the national average. Given the exceedingly low level of academic salaries, the choice is clear. Hence, if emigration offers a chance to pursue an academic career, the move from academia to an international organization is a striking example of brain drain. Admittedly, some of these organizations occasionally carry out certain types of research. However, this is not their main task, and their research is of a purely applied nature, is not bound by academic standards of scholarship, and is geared to the organizations' objectives. Worst of all, in most cases the results of this research are not made available to the public.

Yet there are cases when Western foundations are prepared to invest in the professionalization of a young generation of social scientists in the Caucasus. Compared to the rather formal initiatives of other organizations, the fellowship program created by the German Heinrich Böll Foundation, which opened a South Caucasus regional office in Tbilisi in 2002, has been an exceptional success story. In its very first year,

6 On the problems of the "grant economy" in post-Soviet countries, see Mikhail Sokolov's (2009) case study of Saint Petersburg.

it funded 30 research projects in sociology, history, and urban studies (the number has gradually declined since then). Each grantee was supervised by a well-known scholar from the South Caucasus, Russia, or Germany. The best works were published annually in collections of articles (some of which are reviewed in this issue of *Laboratorium*), which introduced a number of talented but previously unknown authors. The program has launched a whole series of successful academic careers as well as research areas and methods that are new to the region. Alumni of the program have increasingly published their work in foreign journals, and this issue of *Laboratorium* features several of them (Yulia Antonyan, Tamar Zurabishvili, Sergey Rumyantsev, Gayane Shagoyan).⁷

Earlier versions of the papers by Elza-Bair Guchinova, Gayane Shagoyan, and Yulia Antonyan were published as essays in the online *Festschrift* that marked the sixtieth birthday of the Armenian anthropologist Levon Abrahamian, who directs the department of contemporary ethnography at the Armenian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (www.levonabrahamian.am). Given the difficulties facing the social sciences in the Caucasus, such as their geographic isolation and the post-Soviet stagnation of scholarly debates, the creators of this website have made a remarkably lively contribution to intellectual life in Yerevan. A review of this unusual private/public academic forum is included in the present issue of *Laboratorium*.

Whereas the mountains of the Caucasus earlier had been one of the main factors in the emergence and preservation of cultural diversity (Anchabadze and Volkova 1993:6), after the collapse of the Soviet Union local nationalisms and ethnocentrism have created more serious obstacles to scholarly exchanges. They are the main reason for the scholarly isolation and ideological parochialism that characterize South Caucasian historiography, sociology, and ethnography. Viktor Shnirel'man (2003:517) writes that ethnic tensions and conflicts have created

an atmosphere of palpable threat to ethnic values and the political and territorial status of certain ethnic groups, forcing the local intelligentsia to consolidate. The dominance of an *esprit de corps* precluded the emergence of a diversity of conceptions of history; dissenters were immediately ostracized.

Added to the Soviet tradition of local academic organization, this has contributed to the marginalization of serious scholarly research in terms of government support.

7 To be fair, having grown apart from the Russian-language scholarly community, South Caucasian scholars are trying to form personal collaborative networks. Instead of forging ties with universities and Academies of Sciences, as in the past, they now work through the non-profit sector, relying on research grants. Having established themselves in Western academia, some young scholars symbolically "return" to their home countries, using their new social capital in order to connect this isolated region with global scholarly debates. The 39th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology, held in Yerevan in 2009, may give an impetus to research in the region.

In contrast, studies by foreign authors are gradually overcoming a tradition of exoticizing the Caucasus⁸ and trying to break free from their post-colonial framework. The roots of this exoticization reach back to the mid-19th century and to Russian Orientalism, and have been nurtured by constructions of a mythical Caucasus in Russian literature, media, Soviet ethnography, and outsiders' perceptions of everyday life in the region. In the socialist period, the image of the Caucasus was influenced by a dominant discourse of "friendship between peoples" and "Eastern hospitality."

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the course of the prolonged conflicts in the North Caucasus, labor migration from the South Caucasus to Russia and, finally, the war in South Ossetia in 2008, the Russian media shaped a hostile collective image of the Caucasus, as expressed in the racist term "a person of Caucasian nationality." In response to the unfriendly acts of the northern neighbor, Caucasian interest in Russia has significantly cooled, and the social sciences are becoming even more parochial, national, and marginalized (the latter is true of many other regions of the former Soviet Union).

Today, the Caucasus, both North and South, has come to be associated with armed violence, brutality, clannishness, tribalism, ethnic conflicts, and local wars. It therefore comes as no surprise that many political scientists and historians have focused on the study of national identity, collective memory, political Islam, and "interethnic" relations (Gordin 2003; Shnirel'man 2003; Tishkov 2007; Tsutsiev 2007; Mamedli 2008; Auch 1996; 2004; Shnirelman 2001; Cornell 2001; 2002; Lynch 2003; Champion 2004; Reisner 2004; Wheatley 2005; Soghomonyan 2004; Yunusov 2007; King 2008).

Due to globalization and geopolitical changes, the Caucasus, with its energy resources and key location, has gained a new significance, and is beginning to interest Western anthropologists, linguists, and historians. The South Caucasus is becoming something of a new frontier for social scientists. One interesting direction of research in history and the social sciences is a detailed, micro-level anthropological approach to the study of Caucasian societies that does not exoticize local attitudes and practices.

Thus, following the independence of the South Caucasian republics, historians gained access to state and former party archives. They began to study nationalism and the formation and functioning of local institutions of the Soviet regime. The Caucasus has become a fertile ground for case studies of the Great Terror, Stalinism, and collective forms of violence throughout the Soviet Union, as exemplified by the works of Jörg Baberowski (2003; 2007). Baberowski's approach to the depiction of Stalinism is novel in that he analyzes the archival material on a micro-level, through the prism of everyday life, social practices, urban and rural dwellers' attitudes toward

8 Until recently, the vast majority of publications about the Caucasus, especially those in Russian, may serve to confirm Edward Said's view of Orientalism as a peculiarly "European" view of the "East" from a standpoint of superiority, various kinds of racism, and dogmatic stereotypes (Said 1978).

the authorities, as well as individual biographies.⁹

In Russia, too, this “anthropological turn” in history and the social sciences is becoming increasingly popular across disciplinary communities (Prokhorova 2009:13). Its essence is in shifting the focus of analysis from the macro-level of political and social abstractions and national heroes to the micro-level of everyday life, the social practices of small groups, and the behavioral models of various subcultures. The social sciences are evidently experiencing a methodological breakthrough thanks to the explosive contributions of anthropological approaches, which include participant observation, extensive fieldwork, and Clifford Geertz’s long-fashionable principle of “thick description” (Geertz 1973).

Meanwhile, anthropology itself has undergone a postmodernist emancipation in the course of the past twenty years. Abandoning the excessive culturalization of society and the primacy of static representations of collective worlds, critical Western anthropologists have increasingly acknowledged the plurality and individual specificity of worldviews. The classical subject of research—a remote Nuer settlement, say, studied as part of a unified “field”—has fragmented and shifted to multiple levels of the global world’s urban landscape. Instead of communities ritualized in a structuralist manner, anthropologists now offer more flexible accounts of swiftly changing cultural phenomena, visible and invisible fault lines in familiar patterns of everyday behavior, human agency, and the multidirectionality of societies in the context of the transnational and the cosmopolitan (Taussig 1987; Strathern 1999; Humphrey 2002; Appadurai 1996; Schiller 2004).

Research by Western social and cultural anthropologists in the societies of the South Caucasus exhibits several common features. On the one hand, traditionally Western scholars tend to conduct long-term field work. Unlike many Russian ethnographers, their relatively strong knowledge of local languages puts them at an advantage in studying social phenomena from the “inside.” On the other hand, while they may speak Armenian, Georgian, or Azeri, Western anthropologists often have little understanding of Russian and therefore remain excluded from ongoing scholarly debates, which often continue to be held in that language. Although Russian is on the decline in the South Caucasus, it has played an essential role in the constitution and modernization of Caucasian communities and has had an important bridge function in the development of scholarship.

Bruce Grant’s latest book charts the emergence of the social contours of a “Caucasian reality” and the history of representations of violence and captivity (Grant 2009). Among English-speaking anthropologists, this book has already sparked a debate about methodology, since his analysis is entirely based on existing sources about the Caucasus: tsarist-era and Soviet poetic works, fiction, and movies in Rus-

9 We should also note the work of Georgi Derluguian, a professor of sociology at Northwestern University, who has written about one of the first nationalist activists in Abkhazia and Chechnya (Derluguian 2005).

sian.¹⁰ However, considering that not all his colleagues know Russian, Grant's book is an extremely valuable contribution to the study of the "cultural mosaic" and transformation of social values in the Caucasus region, despite the lack of new ethnographic material.

Western anthropologists have carried out several in-depth studies in post-Soviet Georgia. Paul Manning studied the cultural history of the Georgian intelligentsia, the architecture, literature, and material culture of Georgia's urban population, everyday practices of consumption, and advertisements for various brands of drinks (Manning 2009:71–102; www.dangerserviceagency.org). His works on drinking culture and face-to-face communication during the emergence of capitalism in Georgia complements Florian Mühlfried's profound analysis of the post-Soviet Georgian feast (Mühlfried 2006, reviewed in this issue). We should also mention the work of the German scholars Jan Koehler (2000) and Barbara Christophe (2005), both of whom try to explain the peculiar culture of male bonding, the social organization of urban violence, and the role of corruption in post-Soviet Georgia.

One of the most interesting works on Georgia in recent years is a "social biography" of the Turkish-Georgian border in Adjara after the fall of the Iron Curtain written by Mathijs Pelkmans, a Dutch anthropologist working at the London School of Economics (Pelkmans 2006). In 2007, the U.S. Society for the Anthropology of Europe awarded Pelkmans the William A. Douglass Prize for his study of everyday life in three Adjarian towns, noting his brilliant analysis of practices of overcoming fear, the construction of new identities and the increasing popularity of conversion from Islam to Christianity as a strategy of survival in the new nation-state. That book is also reviewed in this issue.

As for the study of everyday life in post-Soviet Armenia, the best work dates back to the early 1990s, when the U.S. anthropologists Nora Dudwick (1994) and Stephanie Platz (1996; 2000) courageously conducted ethnographic participant observation during the Karabagh war and the energy crisis. A new research project on transnational representations and the transformation of collective memory in (post-) socialist Armenia began in 2004 at the Humboldt University's Institute of European Ethnology in Berlin.¹¹ In particular, it studies the transformation of urban public space in the three Caucasian capitals (Darieva 2008).

10 See the online forum <http://openanthcoop.ning.com/group/caucasus> (Muehfried 2009)

11 The urban anthropology and sociology of the Caucasus are very poorly developed both in the region and outside it. We know of two in-depth studies carried out in the 1980s in Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively. One of them was published in Russian as *The Population of Yerevan. Ethnosociological Studies* (Arutiunian and Karapetian 1986); the other one (Abbasov 1987) was devoted to the socialist transformation of lifestyles in Azerbaijani cities. The ongoing research project *Identity Politics in the South Caucasus. National Representations, Post-socialist Society, and Urban Public Space*, based at Humboldt University in Berlin, aims to reveal general and specific tendencies in the transformation of urban public space and the cultural representation of the post-Soviet South Caucasian capitals, using ethnographic research methods.

Azerbaijan still remains mostly “closed” to social research. The reasons for the lack of scholarly interest in this country by both foreign and local authors are not entirely clear. To be fair, several interesting works on Azerbaijan have appeared in the past decade. Hülya Demirdirek and Ingrid Pfluger-Schindlbeck address classical anthropological themes such as changing kinship systems, folk religion, and gender in urban and rural Azerbaijan. Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, who heads a research group for the study of social citizenship in the South Caucasus at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, has studied the political economy of the contemporary Azerbaijani wedding as well as attitudes toward changing sense of property and land use after the collapse of the kolkhozes (Demirdirek and Whitehead 2004; Pfluger-Schindlbeck; Yalçın-Heckmann 2007; 2009).

Given the active role of anthropologists in the study of the South Caucasus, we built this thematic issue of *Laboratorium* around studies that adopt an anthropological perspective. We believe this to be one of the most interesting directions of research on social reality, since a detailed, micro-level anthropological approach makes it possible to offer fresh insight into the transformation of the social world and identities without exoticizing local beliefs and practices. These studies illustrate the dynamic transformation of social space in the Caucasus: migration and its social effects, everyday practices of survival under extreme conditions, and processes of decline and renewal in urban and rural life.

Authorized translation from the Russian by Mischa Gabowitsch

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