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CAUCASUS PARADIGMS REVISITED

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Introduction: reading the Caucasus – conflict, closure and diversity

In 2007, Bruce Grant and Lale Yalcın-Heckmann undertook to identify 'Caucasus paradigms', the dominant tropes for the understanding of this region. Three paradigms stood out in their analysis: conflict, closure and diversity. The conflict paradigm reflects the fact that the vast majority of academic literature on the Caucasus has been dedicated to conflicts (e.g. Cheterian 2009; Cornell 2005; Souleimanov 2013; Zürcher 2007). And indeed, there are many: the secessionist conflicts involving Chechnya, Nagorny Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a civil war in Georgia, violent regime changes and Islamist insurgencies. These conflicts have found interest among political scientists, social analysts and psychologists. The books they have written perpetuate an image of the Caucasus as being 'somehow emblematic of "natural belligerence"' (Grant and Yalcın-Heckmann 2007: 12). As the flip side of the prevailing conflict paradigm, some authors have advocated the need to build 'bridges' or 'corridors' and to acknowledge and engage with peaceful patterns of cohabitation (e.g. Kakabadze 2012).

The 'closure' paradigm refers to the image of societies in the Caucasus as 'traditional' and 'closed', rather than 'open'. Throughout history, the Caucasus has been invaded by various superpowers, among them Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans, Persians and Russians (see Chapter 6). They defeated the Caucasus militarily, so one often reads, but the Caucasians were capable of preserving their culture and societal particularities. Armenia is a case in point. Although the country ceased to exist as a sovereign unit for centuries, its inhabitants nevertheless preserved their language and faith. Similar stories are told about the Muslim inhabitants of the North Caucasus. The image of closure in respect to the Caucasus conveys a timeless picture of cultures in the Caucasus and conceals the large extent of cultural assimilation (for example, in the Tbilisi of the nineteenth century) and widespread patterns of mobility (for example, in trade).

The depiction of the Caucasus as a region of often bewildering diversity refers to the linguistic and ethnic complexity of the region (see Chapter 3). The first testimonies to this stem from early travellers who mentioned the high number of translators needed to do business in the Caucasus (Pliny the Elder) or the challenges to communication in this 'mountain of tongues' (Al-Mas'udi). To the present day, the striking linguistic diversity of Dagestan is a treasure trove for linguists. The dominant academic representation of the myriad languages of the Caucasus is that of a complex assemblage of stable and sharply delineated ethno-linguistic units that thus become essentialised.

Taken together, the Caucasus paradigms of conflict, closure and diversity foster a perception of the region's 'unknowability' (Grant and Yalçın-Heckmann 2007: 2): for outsiders it all seems too much, too different and too savage to grasp. Another logic seems to prevail in this region, which thereby becomes exotic. The exoticism of the Caucasus is either represented as endemic violence driven by sentiments of honour (the 'noble savage') or as a kind of *savoir vivre* with an oriental flavour ('Georgian hospitality'). In any case, irrationality is key here. This provides the discursive legitimation for intervention: rationality needs to be provided by an enlightened nation of the northern hemisphere. In the nineteenth-century Caucasus this role was played by Russia, analogously to other colonial powers elsewhere in the world (such as Great Britain in India) (Layton 1994).

These representations of the Caucasus still prevail. By stressing the exotic particularities of the Caucasus and proclaiming essential cultural features, such as inveterate inclinations towards conflict and conservatism, they also contribute to the making of the Caucasus. After all, each region is a discursive product, and the Caucasus is no exception. But they also reinforce a meta-paradigm of the Caucasus as a region in need, or to put it differently, what I will refer to as the *deficiency paradigm*.

The deficiency paradigm

The Global South

In most academic work, the societies of the Caucasus are depicted as somehow deficient. They constantly and substantially seem to lack something: knowledge, competence, understanding, civil society, the rule of law, democracy, peace-building mechanisms, a sense of citizenship, or good governance. These are only a few catchwords representing motives in a concert that is performed not only for regions like the Caucasus, but for the entirety of the discursive construct known as the 'Global South' (on this concept, see Dados and Connell 2012; Hollington et al., 2015). The Global South is a fuzzy category that encompasses most countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, but also European countries like Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine – at least according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (see its website at <www.oecd.org>). Parts of the *geographical* south do not belong to the *Global* South; the latter ends at the approaches to Australia or New Zealand. Hence, the Global South is a political concept incorporating any place in the world not entitled to be counted among those countries of 'the West', an imaginary region which claims to be based on the European enlightenment movement and driven by democratic values (and, some say, a Christian heritage).

One could consequently say that the Global South is a place of absences, whereas the Global North – or West – is thought of as a place of presences. In the West, we find academic centres of excellence that spread knowledge and foster competence and understanding, engaged citizens that stand up for their rights, courts that protect the rule of law, political institutions that channel democracy, a foreign policy that promotes peace-building mechanisms, and a sense of citizenship and good governance. It seems only logical, then, that the task of the West is to support regions of the Global South, such as the Caucasus, to build competences, provide training in business skills, optimise education, create and maintain a thriving civil society represented by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), foster awareness for the rights and duties of citizens, fight corruption, strengthen democracy, import laws and legal procedures, and so on. This task is often referred to as knowledge transfer.

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Post-Soviet space

A second manifestation of the deficiency paradigm is the identification of the Caucasus as part of *post-Soviet space*. This has raised concerns among South Caucasian academics, who claim that attaching the 'post-' label to Soviet successor states such as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia reifies their connection to Russia, and consequently to a space often perceived as defined by difference – and deficiency – relative to the West. But there is nevertheless wide agreement that the 'Soviet heritage' still shapes the political, social and cultural landscapes of the Caucasus.

What is this heritage? A widespread argument, at least among Western scholars, is that it derives from experience of a totalitarian regime. According to Petr Macek and Ivana Marková (2004: 173), for example, an 'unquestioned consequence' of this experience is 'the profound demoralization of citizens, learned helplessness, undemocratic thinking, and distrust of institutions'. As these 'mental states of imprinted totalitarianism have not disappeared' (Ibid.), the transformation of post-Soviet societies into democracies has so far been unsuccessful. The crucial task is thus to overcome the 'Soviet heritage' by instilling trust, democratic thinking and civil engagement. And this is precisely the purpose of most Western funds spent in the Caucasus by the larger donors. The post-Soviet space, within which the Caucasus finds itself, is thus a particular kind of Global South. It is deficient, but for a special reason: its former belonging to the Soviet Union (itself a failed alternative modernity in the eyes of many). It is this constellation that explains why certain funding schemes or conference designs bring Central Asia and the Caucasus under one umbrella. Both areas are conceived as the former 'Soviet Orient' – a perception that, maybe ironically so, reproduces a Soviet narrative in the present time.

Both the Global South and post-Soviet space are politically charged concepts that contain a derogatory agenda. Is it possible to think about the Caucasus without these concepts? What is the Caucasus, after all? To understand why the Caucasus has become associated with these normatively connoted conceptualisations of space, it is necessary to examine the origins and dynamics through which the region emerged as a category of analysis. In the following section, I outline how heterogeneous spaces of the Caucasus became a unified object of academic study and why historical preconditions continue to shape the study of the Caucasus to this day. I argue that Caucasus studies has its origins in the needs and tastes of colonial rule, shaped by a fixation with a classificatory philology – giving rise to terminological and analytical essentialism. For Caucasus studies to develop into a critical area studies field, it needs to tackle and overcome this heritage.

The colonial origins of 'Caucasology'

Institutionalised and organised Caucasus studies, dubbed 'Caucasology' at that time, originated as a political endeavour in seventeenth-century Russia. With the extension of the tsarist empire to the south, the Caucasus entered a Russian sphere of interest. More needed to be known about this area to facilitate its conquest and subsequent administration. For this purpose, a multitude of experts was sent to the Caucasus by the Russian Academy of Sciences. The first was Johann Anton Güldenstädt, a Baltic German in the service of Catherine the Great, who travelled the Caucasus in 1770–73 and published his influential travelogue in 1787 (Güldenstädt 1834 [1787]). He was followed, among others, by Peter Simon Pallas (1803) and Julius Klaproth (1812, 1814).

With the final Russian defeat of the Persian army in 1826–28 in the empire's south, interest in the Caucasus grew and statistical and ethnographic data about the Caucasus was in great demand (Reisner 2012: 184). This demand was met by the early pioneers of Caucasus studies. In a similar vein, later generations of Caucasologists satisfied other states' needs for precise 'data' on the Caucasus, among them Nazi Germany that planned to conquer the Caucasus, and the United States – as well as the United Kingdom – that attempted to instrumentalise national movements in the Caucasus in order to weaken the Soviet Union.

Philological fixations

From the very beginning, philology dominated Caucasus studies. The discipline of philology comprises literature studies and linguistics, and both have played a seminal role in Caucasus studies. One of the first endeavours of the emerging discipline was Marie-Felicité Brosset's (1830) translation of the medieval Georgian Chronicles (Georgian title: *kartlis tskhovreba*) from Georgian into French, again on behalf of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The tsar's viceroy in the Caucasus, Mikhail Vorontsov, in turn published a Georgian grammar and a Russian–Georgian dictionary by the Georgian linguist David Chubinashvili (Reisner 2012: 185). More grammars and dictionaries covering an increasing number of the plentiful languages spoken in the Caucasus were to follow up to the present day.

In addition to being the prevailing expression of Caucasus studies, linguistics had another profound effect, namely shaping the prevailing perception of the area. This effect can best be illustrated by maps, such as frequently used maps of the linguistic groups of the Caucasus (see for example Geocurrents 2012). The classification of languages differentiates between *langue* families that are said to be autochthonous (Schulze 2009), or indigenous (Harris 1991), to the Caucasus and those also present elsewhere in other parts of the world, such as Indo-European, Semitic or Turkic languages (on the languages of the Caucasus see Chapter 3). In a standard map issued by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), this classification directly translates to ethnic identity. Population group identities in the Caucasus are ascribed according to language families: the North-East, North-West and South Caucasian groups are subsumed under the category 'Caucasian peoples', whereas those speaking Indo-European languages such as the Armenians become 'Indo European people' and those speaking a Turkic language, such as the Azerbaijanis, 'Altaic people' (CIA 1992).

There are at least two problems with this kind of representation of ethnic groups in the Caucasus: first of all, it equates ethnicity with language proficiency. This, however, is a very narrow take on ethnicity that is static, completely ignores other ethnic identity markers such as territoriality, history and culture (cf. Bromlei 1973), and does not consider issues of self-identification. The underlying agenda is reductionist and obsolete. Secondly, it perpetuates the image that certain groups in the Caucasus are more 'Caucasian' than others, namely those speaking languages that are classified as belonging to one of the three Caucasian language families. As stated above, it is usually these groups that are referred to as 'autochthonous' or 'indigenous'.

Until very recently, Caucasus studies was construed as the study of the autochthonous groups of the Caucasus (for example at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena, in Germany, until the 2000s). This excluded groups like the Russians, for sure, and to a certain extent also groups such as the Balkars or Karachais that speak a Turkic language. This puts the latter groups in a difficult position: They could be seen as latecomers to a region already 'owned' by others. After all, this is the 'Caucasus', and they are not a 'Caucasian' people. The inherent hierarchy in this classificatory system is often instrumentalised in political

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conflicts, for example between Ingush and Ossetians or Kabardians and Balkars. Or consider this headline from an Azerbaijani media platform: 'The Armenians are not autochthonous to the Caucasus' (1905.az. 2019). In order to fully grasp the complexity of the present-day region without reifying nationalist agendas, the study of the Caucasus needs to deconstruct this classificatory schema and to let go of notions such as 'autochthony' or 'indigenousness', which produce essentialist understandings of ethnic identity and hierarchies of belonging.

Terminological essentialism

Caucasus studies is still dominated by an academic terminology developed in the Soviet Union. Although there is much talk about the 'Soviet heritage' as a dominant feature of the Caucasus as a region, there is little discussion regarding the impact of Soviet sciences on current ways of understanding the Caucasus (for an attempt to tackle this issue, see Mühlfried and Sokolovskiy 2012). Maybe paradoxically, this Soviet heritage to Caucasus studies has morphed into explicitly nationalist historiographies and cartographies. And maybe even more paradoxically, it has pene-trated the discourse of nationalism's fervent opponents in the Caucasus.

The respective terminology has again to do with ethnicity and once more reifies hierarch-ical classifications of groups. This time, however, the classificatory difference does not ascribe 'qualities' of belonging, but asserts that ethnicity comes in doses. The full dose is ethnicity proper, which qualifies its bearers as being a nation; lesser doses of ethnicity are manifest in sub-ethnic, ethno-territorial or ethnographic identities (see Bromlei 1973, Bruk 1973–1982 and *Bol'shoi Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar'* 2000 for details). These latter categories are assigned to groups said to form part of a larger ethnos (e.g. the Georgians), but which feature distinctive linguistic, regional and/or cultural traits. Smaller units thus defined, in conjunction with others, form the larger ethnic collectivity defined as a nation.

In the case of the Georgian ethnos, examples of such groups are Tushetians, Kakhetians, Rachvelians, Gurians, Imeretians, Khevsurs or Pshavs, who speak a certain dialect of Georgian, traditionally reside in a discrete area of Georgia and have localised traditions of historical know-ledge and cultural practice. In accordance with Soviet academic parlance, they are also assigned a distinct mentality or worldview and are interchangeably referred to as ethno-territorial or ethnographic groups (e.g. Chitaia 1997–2001, Makalatia 1983 [1933]). This terminology has been adopted by Western scholars such as Olson (1994: 240ff.) and Wixman who labelled the Tushetians, for example, as a 'Kartvelian [Georgian] ethnographic group' (1984: 200).

These categories are not only inconsistent with prevailing perceptions of ethnicity in con-temporary Western academia. Within the dominant constructivist paradigm developed already in the 1960s by the social anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1969), the features assigned to sub-ethnic, ethno-territorial or ethnographic groups could also apply to an ethnic group – given that they resonate with self-perceptions of the respective people. These categories are also part of a nationalist ideology. When groups like the Megrelians (Mingrelians) or the Svans, for example, are qualified as a sub-ethnic group of the Georgians (e.g. Topchishvili 2017) despite the fact that in addition to possessing all the other features of sub-ethnicity mentioned above, they speak a distinct language (cf. Broers 2012 for the Megrelians), this is not least a result of concerns over separatism. As ethnic groups with their own languages, some fear, they may well claim sover-eignty outside of the confines of the Georgian state, and this claim would be difficult to dismiss on scholarly grounds. The background of these concerns is separatisms that have led to the de facto statehood of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These concerns have motivated some Georgian scholars to argue that Megrelians speak a dialect of Georgian, not a language (e.g. Gogebashvili 1990 [1902]), although the vast majority of linguists worldwide disagree (e.g. Harris 1991).

Essentialist categories such as 'ethnic', 'ethno-territorial', 'ethnographic' and 'sub-ethnic' thus not only ascribe a fixed collective identity, but also a political fate. Some of these groups may claim or strive for national sovereignty, others may not. Once again, the politicised past of Caucasus studies takes its toll. Only reconsidering its vocabulary in respect to defining collective identity, such as ethnicity, would help to overcome this ghostly past. It is not only this past, however, that keeps Caucasus studies enchanted, but also prevailing stereotypes concerning the region. Taking the discursive exoticisation and primitivisation of the Caucasus into account, is it time to deconstruct this area and dismiss the concept of the Caucasus as a unitary region?

Deconstructing deficiency: towards an interactive paradigm

Since the late 1980s many observers, mainly geographers, have come to question the viability of the area studies concept (e.g. O'Loughlin 1988; Paasi 1986; Pudup 1988; Thrift 1994). Besides stressing that area studies originated in an endeavour utilising knowledge about certain world regions to facilitate their political domination, the area studies approach was criticised for essentialising regions as seemingly congruent and separate entities. By doing so, area studies epistemologically separates, and 'others', these regions from those 'we' inhabit (Hollington et al., 2015: 6). Based on this criticism, attempts were made to transcend areal boundaries by engaging in global history or migration studies, to compare regional dynamics ('comparative area studies') and to work across ostensibly discrete areas by introducing larger units of research ('cross area studies').

Caucasus studies has so far remained largely untouched by these debates. Yet, there are ample grounds to question whether the notion of the Caucasus captures a reality on the ground. The level of regional integration in the field of economy is rather low, especially in the South Caucasus, let alone between the North and the South Caucasus. Calls for more regional cooperation are frequent (e.g. Kakachia 2015), but remain mostly unheard. Political alliances are inconsistent; some Caucasian governments lean towards the Russian Federation, others towards the European Union or the United States. Shared cultural values are increasingly challenged by young generations that become more and more vocal, for example on the streets and in the nightclubs of the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. And after all, the Caucasus is politically split between a North that belongs to the Russian Federation and a South that consists of three sovereign nation states, plus units with diffuse belongings such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh.

All in all, it seems to make sense to abandon the Caucasus as a unified (and unifying) concept. Many in fact do. Instead of 'the Caucasus', one nowadays often reads of the 'South Caucasus' as a region – a region which, for some, is easily identifiable. Jeremy Smith (2015: 1), for example, has no doubt: 'Look at any map, and it is clear that, geographically, the South Caucasus constitutes a distinct and clearly defined region'. In addition to this, political realities clearly separate the North from the South Caucasus. This argument is particularly important for those who want to exclude the South Caucasus from the 'Russian World' (in Russian: *Russkii Mir*), and hence the sphere of influence of the Kremlin.[1]

Or then again, maybe it does not make sense. First of all, abandoning the notion of the Caucasus clearly follows a political agenda, namely to disentangle the South from the North Caucasus. Reproducing this agenda in the field of academia would mean to introduce borders and boundaries in a spatial setting that was, and is, dynamic, and to disentangle places that have been and remain connected. It is easy to deconstruct the notion of the Caucasus as an artificial and utilitarian concept serving political interests. But such

a deconstruction may itself be equally deconstructed, as it is also driven by political agendas. Science does not need to be complicit in the making of new ideological borders. Secondly, it would mean to abandon a concept that still inhabits the imaginations of many of those living there, and creates sentiments of belonging. Thirdly, it would include a return to the old-fashioned understanding of an area as a bounded spatial container and ignore new perspectives on areas as dynamic.

Even worse, getting rid of the concept of the Caucasus would leave an empty space that would be filled by nationalist approaches towards the region's histories and societies, especially in the South Caucasus. This tendency to nationalise historical and contemporary processes is not limited to Armenian, Azerbaijani or Georgian scholarly circles, however, but also reverberates in the comparatively high number of books written on Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian history (e.g. Altstadt 1992; Fähnrich 2010; Hovannisian 2004; Lang 1980, 2001; Suny 1994; Van der Leeuw 2000), vis-à-vis very scarce books dedicated to the history of the Caucasus as a whole (for exceptions, see Forsyth 2013; King 2008).

The shortcomings of the deficiency paradigm may instead be better addressed through the pursuit of an alternative *interactive* paradigm. In a schema developed with my colleague Tsypylma Darieva, this paradigm defines the Caucasus as a *border area*, a *contact area* and a *cultural area*.

The Caucasus as border area[2]

When looking at the Caucasus from above (a view that is reproduced on geographic maps), the most striking sight is the eponymous mountain range. In its stricter sense, the geographical topos 'Caucasus' is limited to this range. The larger region, which includes the lowland areas of Kabardia, Chechnya or Dagestan in the north, for example, as well as the wider plateau associated with Armenia and the sprawling areas of southern Azerbaijan on the Iranian border, is also known as Caucasia. In Anglo-Saxon parlance, however, the notion of the Caucasus usually encompasses the greater region. It is in this broad sense that the designator 'Caucasus' is used here.

As a mountain range, the Caucasus is a geophysical border area, with its watershed separating the North from the South Caucasus. Not in all cases, however, is the watershed identical with the political border. The high mountain region of Tusheti, for example, politically belongs to the South Caucasus republic of Georgia, although it is situated north of the main ridge and its waters flow northwards. The western and eastern contours of the Caucasus area are defined by the Black and Caspian Seas. The northern and southern borders are less clearly demarcated geophysically. Usually, the Kuma-Manych depression is considered the northern border of the Caucasus, at the same time dividing Europe from Asia. Administratively, the western part of the North Caucasus (including the Republic of Adygea) belongs to the Southern Federal District of the Russian Federation with its capital at Rostov-on-Don. The remaining seven republics in the north are part of the North Caucasus Federal District, with its capital at Pyatigorsk, and which was separated in 2010 from Russia's Southern Federal District. The southern border of the Caucasus runs along the former political border between the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire and Persia, established some two hundred years ago (see Chapter 7).

Prevailing self-perceptions do not always coincide with political boundaries, however. The discursive representation of Armenia, for example, is primarily related to the cultures of the Armenian highlands, which stretch from Diyarbakir in southeast Anatolia via Lake Van to Lake Sevan. This self-perception thus has more to do with Asia Minor and the Middle East than with the Caucasus or the Black Sea region.

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The Caucasus as contact area

The Caucasus is not only a border area, but also a contact area between Europe and Asia. This area is criss-crossed by an east–west axis and a north–south axis. Over centuries, if not millennia, goods, people (sometimes treated as goods), practices and ideas have been exchanged via these two axes. The east–west axis corresponds to the historic Silk Road that touched on the Caucasus region on its southern edge, and facilitated the exchange of goods from the Netherlands to China. The spatial conditions are fundamentally different in the case of the north–south axis, which passes over the High Caucasus mountains. This is only possible in a few places: close to the shores of the Caspian and the Black Sea and at a small number of mountain passes.

The city of Derbent, located on the Caspian Sea in Dagestan, held strategic importance for the trade route from north to south. Its name, derived from Persian, means 'barred gate'. On the Black Sea, it is the narrow strip of lowland on the coast of Abkhazia and the Krasnodar area, which allows a relatively easy crossing of the High Caucasus. The most famous and most widely used of mountain passes in the High Caucasus is the Cross Pass (2379 metres) on the so-called Georgian Military Highway, which leads from Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia, to the Georgian capital Tbilisi.

The Caucasus as cultural area

Finally, the Caucasus has been a cultural area since ancient human times, as testified, inter alia, by the long history of viticulture and mining. Georgia, for example, boasts of the world's oldest gold mine and being the 'cradle of wine'. Even the oldest European is said to have been 'Georgian'. When human skulls and bones dating back 1.8 million years were excavated near the south Georgian town of Dmanisi on the border with Armenia, the Georgian archaeologist and excavator Davit Lortkipanidze took this as proof that the first human being outside of Africa, that is, the first European – but also the first Asian! – was a Georgian (Archaeology News Network 2010). Investigations in the ancient mine of Sakdrisi near Dmanisi have revealed that gold could have been extracted there since the fourth millennium BCE. If so, it would be one of the oldest gold mines in the world. This, however, has not stopped the Georgian government from opening large parts of the mine for commercial gold mining, and the historic gold mine is now completely destroyed (Demytrie 2014). The slogan of Georgia as the 'cradle of wine' is based on the fact that the oldest indications of viticulture stem from the southern Caucasus and that viticulture may have spread from this region to Mesopotamia and Egypt, and then further to the Mediterranean, most likely by Phoenician traders. In addition to the Georgians, however, the neighbouring Armenians also claim to have invented winemaking, and to possess the oldest archaeological evidence for this – in addition to being the first Christians and thus the first Europeans in a 'civilizational' sense (Owen 2011).

What is at stake here is a problem that is virulent throughout the whole Caucasus today: nationalism, or the nationalist filtering of historiography. In the early history of winemaking and mining in the Caucasus, there were no fixed ethnic groups that clearly correspond to today's nations. Hence, any attempt to extend national historiography into ancient times and to claim cultural techniques such as wine-making, bread-baking or mining as national properties is a nonsensical endeavour. Referring to the Caucasus as a cultural area thus does not entail demarcating a distinct cultural space based on exclusive classifications, but indicates a heterogeneous space of interaction, a space that comprises multi-lingual groups and multi-religious communities of about 30 million people.

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The interactive paradigm offers possibilities to study processes across political borders. Caucasus studies could be an area study and a cross-area study at the same time. It could bring to the fore regional dynamics, and it could compare these dynamics across macro-political affiliations. Caucasus studies could be at the forefront of critical areas studies, when so far it has been in the back row. It could also merge into a trans-area study by connecting the Caucasus to neighbouring (and sometimes overlapping) areas such as Europe, Eurasia, or the Near East. Nested within the interactive paradigm lies a third paradigmatic approach which assumes increasing relevance as Caucasology matures into a post-colonial and self-reflexive discipline, and which posits the possibility of reversing time, direction and perspective.

The reversal paradigm

Although profoundly criticised for its teleological implications and dismissed as a viable analytical category by many (e.g. Humphrey 2002; Ledeneva 2013; Nazpary 2001), the model of 'transition', and the associated schools of transitology, still feature prominently in the discourses of political scientists and NGO activists. According to this model that had its heyday in the 1990s, post-Soviet societies like those in the Caucasus are on their way to a market-driven democracy of the kind found in the Euro-Atlantic space. The political and societal transformation is thus a unidirectional process from 'A' to 'B', making it a linear transit.

When chaos unfolded in the immediate years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this came as a promise: the chaos at point 'A' could end soon, if only people and politics would seriously strive towards 'B'. But almost everywhere in the post-Soviet world, this promise did not hold. This is why new promises in the form of authoritarian stability or religious fundamentalism, whether Muslim or Christian, are on the rise. For those in the West, however, the model of transition is still comforting, as it feeds the belief that one lives in a 'normal' country that could teach countries still in transit a lesson. But what if this belief is based on an illusion?

The idea of a *reversal* paradigm is rooted in the appearance of plentiful indications that Western countries are becoming more like post-Soviet countries rather than the other way around. This would mean that transition is in fact taking place, but in reverse: 'old' democracies are increasingly penetrated by practices and ideologies tested and forged in 'transitional societies' like those of the Caucasus or other areas in the Global South. This is because the latter became a playing field for unregulated neoliberalism. The results of this process of reversal are visible in daily life, and I illustrate this with my own experiences.

In the 1990s, I shared the belief that Caucasian countries like Georgia were in a transitional process, developing into something more akin to Western democracy. Thus, when I saw people in Georgia picking up empty bottles from parks or other public venues to sell them on for small change, I assumed that this practice would soon cease to exist, as people would soon cease to depend on such forms of income. Just like women selling plastic bags at various street markets for an extremely small profit margin (and without paying taxes of course), the bottle collectors would soon be able to find more profitable and less precarious ways of maintaining their livelihoods with the consolidation of the nascent post-Soviet state, according to the logic of transition. As long as this was still a future promise, I left my empty glass or plastic bottles where they could easily be seen for people to pick them up. When I returned to Germany after one year of fieldwork in Georgia in 2003, I noticed that things were taking a different turn, however: quite a few people in my home country were now collecting discarded returnable bottles to cash in their deposit value. It already started at my arrival. When I embarked on a local train from the airport, an elderly person was

roaming the compartments looking for empty deposit bottles — a practice that was illegal but, as I later learned, widespread. Once my attention was attracted, I noticed more and more people in parks, trains or airports in search of bottles. Germany was becoming more like Georgia, not the other way around.

One reason in this particular case is the downscaling of the welfare state in Western countries and the negligible social security in most post-Soviet states. Another reason is increasing de-regulation in the Global North that sometimes builds on experiences gained in the informal markets of the former Soviet Union. One example of this reversed process of knowledge transfer is the transport system. With the advent of private entrepreneurship, a new means of transportation appeared on the roads of almost every post-Soviet city in the 1990s: the so-called *marshrutka*. *Marshrutkas* were privately run minibuses that were mostly faster and/or more accessible than buses, tramways or the metro. At least in its initial state, the *marshrutka* business was barely regulated by the state. For the passengers, the missing safety regulations put their physical wellbeing at risk. For the drivers, the missing labour regulations meant that they were left without any social security. For the (formal or informal) owners, the absence of safety and labour regulations increased their profits.

The *marshrutka* system still prevails in many post-Soviet cities, but has become more regulated. At the same time, more unregulated forms of public transport represented by companies such as Uber are on the rise in Western cities. Hence, we observe the following: 'What Uber now experiments with in the Global North — running mobility networks predominantly beyond the regulatory oversight — has been at the cornerstone of [the] marshrutka mobility phenomenon since the 1990s' (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018: 14–15). Similar processes can be observed in the fields of accommodation (Airbnb) or service (TaskRabbit). In all these cases, practices that are covered in the 'economy of sharing' are detached from the post-Soviet context and implemented in the Global North. The assumptions of transitology are reversed.

This process of knowledge transfer that runs counter to the predominant understanding of global development is largely understudied. Taking charge of this process would not only expand the scope of Caucasus studies, it would also de-provincialise its agenda and synchronise it with global studies.

Conclusion: transitology reversed?

Most of the citizens of the Caucasus have long and profound experience of policies of de-regulation and the absence of social security. They are experts at living with insecurity. Usually, this expertise is neither acknowledged nor researched by social scientists. Often, it takes the form of mistrust or disengagement — phenomena long disregarded by social sciences due to the discipline's obsession with relations, engagement and integration (Mühlfried 2018: 9). Because of this narrow perspective, practices of preserving distance from neighbours, colleagues or state-political institutions remain neglected in academic study. If noticed at all, these attempts are usually ascribed to false consciousness and contextualised as obstacles to conviviality. Ideally, people should trust and engage, not mistrust and disengage.

Given that social and ontological insecurity is also on the rise in the Global North, experiences of living with insecurity from the Global South through practices of detachment may be worth taking into consideration, however. In times of reversed transitology, it makes sense to reverse the perspective. Instead of stigmatising mistrust elsewhere and lamenting rising mistrust in the Global North, instead of criticising citizens of the Caucasus

for acts of disengagement and insisting on civil engagement as a civic duty, it is time to take a step back and try to understand what people actually do when they mistrust and how they manage to disengage. This knowledge may prove essential in the face of contemporary unrestrained and aggressive neoliberalism.

This revaluation of values would produce insights that transcend the narrow scope of regional studies and that are of relevance for both Global North and South alike. Following this agenda would build on the insight that Western sciences contribute a great deal to constructing the societies of the Global South as substantially deficient and forever catching up (Chakrabarty 2009). A reversible and reflexive perspective would synchronise Caucasus studies with postcolonial studies, and it would have a chance, finally, to quit the game of othering.

Notes

1 For practical purposes, however, the notion 'South Caucasus' offers significant benefits. Inter alia, it allows suspending the always-contested question of national belonging with respect to citizens of the de facto republics of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh. The British Chevening scholarship programme, for example, allows students from Abkhazia to enrol as citizens of the South Caucasus. If they were given the chance to register as citizens of the Republic of Abkhazia, this would be contested by the government of Georgia. And if they were to register as citizens of the Republic of Georgia, this would cause an outcry in Abkhazia.
2 This section (with a few changes) has previously been published in German in Darieva and Mühlfried (2016). Many thanks go to Tsypylma Darieva for allowing me to make use of this material.

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