Uncertain divides: religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Georgian borderlands

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The breakdown of the Soviet economic system and the new contacts across the ‘Iron Curtain’ have challenged familiar spaces and triggered a multitude of responses. Anthropologists writing about this issue have argued that the messianic appeal of ‘the West’ for people in the socialist bloc was crudely shattered when they were exposed to the forces of global capitalism and neoliberal reform. The high expectations of life after socialism did not come true and accordingly people have abandoned their dreams about capitalism and democracy, instead expressing nostalgia for earlier times or seeking refuge in religious cults or other alternative ideologies. This sense of disillusionment is equally present in Batumi, where postsocialist changes have dramatically reduced the living standards of most inhabitants. But despite the unavoidable disillusion, I observed that many people held on to their dreams about a bright and ‘modern’ future, which were usually modeled on images of ‘the West’ or ‘Europe.’ The main question of this case study is why and how, despite disillusionment with postsocialist change, the dreams of ‘modernity’ have retained their primacy in Ajaria?

I will provide answers to this question in three parts. First I will argue that inhabitants of Batumi have channeled their discontent with the dislocations of economic and political change not to ‘the West’ or to capitalism and democracy, but to other ‘dangers’ that are held responsible for denying Batumi residents the fruits of their dreams. Second I will demonstrate that local ideas about ‘modernity’ are neither entirely new, nor free-floating. Instead, the images are linked to Soviet ideology and Georgian nationalism and are actively advanced by local elites in defining the scope for future change. Third, I will show that the images of modernity form an important constitutive element of people’s social identity and as such provide insight in their dilemmas of reconciling ideas of tradition and history with meaningful images of the present and the future.

This case study thus explores the links between ideologies, political power and identity in a rapidly changing social field. As in the previous two case studies the goal is to discover how social identities are being restructured after the opening of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of socialism. But in this case study the perspective from which these reconfigurations are analyzed is quite different from the first two. The second case study on ethnicity and kinship focused on the international border and on how the people living in its immediate vicinity were affected by the existence of this geographical divide and the powers that controlled it. In the first case study on religious change the geographical dimension of borders was more loosely defined. Instead of being fixed it was a changing and porous zone or frontier between opposing and unequal ideologies. In this case study the geographical qualities of borders are abandoned even further, although the dynamics under study are directly related to
the opening of the (very physical) international boundary. In contrast to boundary and frontier, the term borderland as used in recent writing partly abandons the physical connotations of borders and instead is employed to describe ambivalent spaces that are open to multiple influences (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 18). It serves as "both metaphor and place to further our understanding of multiple cultural identities amidst great world change" (Donnan and Haller 2000: 16). Borderlands seem to be especially relevant for studying the 'creativity' and 'constraints' that characterize cultural processes. This idea is reflected in the following two quotes.

The borderland is simultaneously a zone of cultural play and experimentation as well as of domination and control (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 39).

Borderlands and borders illustrate the contradictions, paradox, difference and conflict of power and domination in global capitalism and the nation state, especially in local level practices (Alvarez 1995: 447).

First, 'borderland' refers to a space in which various cultural influences meet and where new combinations are made from the convergence of flows. It links up with the idea that we are dealing with an unstable field in which social relations are being redefined. As such, the notion of borderland is useful to conceptualize the flows of images, goods, and people across the border into (and out of) Batumi. These new flows, combined with the processes of change triggered by the collapse of socialism, added to the insecurities and differentiation in the borderlands. The contradictions and paradoxes that are inherent in these multiple changes become particularly visible through an analysis of the meanings that people attach to their changing environment.

Second, the notion borderland connotes space in which the power of the state is contested and its features redefined. This is particularly clear in the quote from Alvarez, which stresses the workings of power rather than the 'creativity' in borderlands.¹ The challenge then is to look beyond the play with images and explore how they are tied to the interests and actions of regional elites. As Sampson wrote, "Behind the metaphors of globalization as 'forces' or 'flows', we tend to forget that cultural practices and representations do not just 'travel': they are pushed, pulled, mediated, refused, bounced back and assimilated" (2002: 301). In other words, when studying the influence of global discourses and images it is important to pay attention to their 'production' and 'marketing', and to the way in which they are employed locally. This is especially urgent with reference to the title of this case study, borderlands of modernity. The title refers both to the ambiguity of the concept 'modernity' in Batumi and to the fact that 'modernity' as a powerful and seductive narrative links up with the interests of global and local elites.

¹ See also Gupta and Ferguson (1992: 19) who write that although "deterritorialization has destabilized the fixity of 'ourselves' and 'others' [...] it has not thereby created subjects who are free-floating nomads."
What I am trying to come to grips with in this case study is the pervasiveness of the myth of modernity as well as the ambiguities that people feel when talking about issues related to the idea of modernity. It is important to note that fascination with ‘modern’ lifestyles did not start with the opening of the border or the collapse of socialism. On the contrary, Marxist ideology “had its own notion of how to gain modernity – a more or less religious idea of paradise, with a just and omnipresent manager” (Herzfeld 2001: 39). This ‘idea of paradise’ did not disappear overnight. It entered the present, not as a legacy that will disappear with the older and more ‘nostalgic’ generation, but in combination and confrontation with newer ideas of modernity. When people in Batumi talk about present and future life, they also invoke a dialogue of Soviet and Western images of ‘modernity’ which is telling of the origins of the dreams and the ways in which the dreams are integrated into their lives and aspirations.

But although acknowledging that narratives of modernity have specific sources, it is crucial to avoid falling into the trap of equaling these sources with modernity as an analytical concept. As Herzfeld recently wrote, applying the notion of modernity in ethnographic research demands cautious treatment since the conceptual pair modernity and tradition “represent a characteristic difficulty for anthropology, because they are part of our own received rhetoric” (2001:81). The main risk that needs to be avoided is essentializing and objectifying discursive patterns that only partly (and in indirect ways) reflect realities. As with reference to the main topics of the previous case studies, ethnicity and religion, external definitions of modernity are misleading, as the meanings attributed to the concept change according to context. I therefore will not employ an external or etic definition of modernity and I will make no attempt to analytically distinguish between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ life. But what is clear, and what is important for our discussion here, is that the theme of ‘modernity’ has locally been extremely important in coming to grips with the rapid economic changes that have characterized the 1990s. The insistence on using the term despite its drawbacks stems precisely from the recognition that the term is increasingly important for the people that we study.²

Ideas about ‘modernity’ appear in various forms and are applied to various themes, the most important of which are perceived differences between Islam and Christianity, between rural and city life and between Europe and Asia. Although these terms have different implications, they are each related to the idea of ‘modernity.’ This claim finds substance in the writings of several critical Georgian thinkers. Darchiashvili and Pataraia, for example, showed that ‘the West’ and ‘Europe’ have the same connotation for the Georgian political elite (2001: 65). The political philosopher Ghi Nodia moreover, argued that whereas Western scholars hasten to distinguish between ‘modernization’ and ‘Westernization,’ these notions are almost

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² See also Hannerz, who writes that anthropologists only reluctantly admitted modernity because it is “more than most concepts strained between analytical and rhetorical uses” (1996: 44)
synonyms in Georgia, and ‘Western’ is used interchangeably with ‘advanced’, ‘modernized’, or ‘civilized’ (2001: 32).

In Batumi, city life is generally described as more modern (sovremeno) and civilized (tsivilizovanno) than life in rural areas, which is considered to be backward (otstalo) and traditional (traditsionno). These characterizations appear in discussing themes like dress codes, types of accommodation, gender roles and levels of education. As we have seen in previous chapters, rural inhabitants and city dwellers talk differently about these aspects. Villagers may talk with contempt about the ‘immoral’ dress codes in the city, or reject the individualized life in apartment buildings, while at the same time showing fascination with the freedom and opportunities of life in the city. In Batumi as well, there is great ambiguity in talking about these differences. On the one hand, many inhabitants look down upon what they see as backward life in the mountains – the low level of education there, the absence of ‘modern’ washing facilities or about the young age at which village youth enters marriage. The negative views are further enhanced by religious difference and expressed through jokes – like about wearing veils or about the ‘stupidity’ of hodjas – which serve as symbols of backwardness. But at the same time there is also a more romantic view that depicts rural life as healthy and ‘traditional.’ Food is considered to be ‘purer’ and ‘cleaner’ than in the city and life in general is seen as more relaxed. Especially now that the uncertainties of postsocialism have undermined many benefits of city life the close ties in rural areas between kin and neighbors are likely to evoke positive comments. In addition, particularly among the intelligentsia the view is popular that rural life is also more truly ‘Georgian’ than city life. However, they are more likely to refer to rural areas in the Christian provinces of Georgia, than to ‘Muslim’ life in the Ajarian highlands.

The ambiguities do not only refer to valuations of rural life but also apply to discussions about city-life, and especially in view of the recent changes. On one level, ‘The West’ has a tremendous appeal, while at another there is much doubt about whether ‘Western lifestyles’ are compatible with Georgian lifestyles and the broadly valued Georgian ‘traditions.’ Although I run the risk of simplifying matters to the point of distortion, it appears that ‘the West’ or ‘Europe’ as an image of abundance and technological progress is a fertile ground for dreaming, while images of individuality, sexual liberty and cultural plurality foster more ambiguous reactions. In short, although ‘modernity’ has a tremendous appeal in post-Soviet Batumi, this does not mean that it is uncontested or unconditionally embraced. ‘Modernity’ and its locally understood antidotes ‘backwardness’ and ‘tradition,’ are important in many discussions. They return in ideas about ‘East and West,’ in publications that portray Batumi (and Ajaria in general) as the gateway to Europe or as a bridge between Europe and Asia. Most importantly, the concept modernity refers to the imagined future of Ajaria.
REORDERING WORLDS OF MEANING

‘Modernity’ as a contested concept is a useful term to analyze the redirection of cultural, economic and political flows after the collapse of the Soviet Union and to explore how old and new commodities, lifestyles and ideologies are incorporated in locally unfolding social and cultural patterns. The ways in which ‘external’ influences are adopted, modified, and or rejected, provide insight into how people are seeking and asserting new forms of identity in contexts characterized by an asymmetrical intersection of discourses. Ultimately these processes involve redefinitions of personhood and post-Soviet space in which many connotations produced by the ‘Iron Curtain’ continue to play a role. Let me illustrate some of the involved issues by recollecting an experience that helped me to better understand some of the dimensions that are important in reordering worlds of meaning.

A few weeks after I first arrived in Batumi in 1997, I had a discussion with my research assistant Teimuri. Before leaving the Netherlands, I had been in a rush to make all the necessary purchases for my fieldwork trip to Ajaria. Anticipating that my fieldwork would involve extensive walking I decided to buy new shoes. I eventually bought relatively inexpensive shoes (approximately 50 USD) of the Italian brand ‘Dolcis.’ They seemed well suited for the ‘rough’ conditions of fieldwork and I expected that that they would last at least until I returned. However, three weeks walking on unpaved village paths and plenty of rain and mud were obviously not the conditions for which the shoes were designed. Only a month after I had bought them they were practically useless. The sole had cracked open and the padding was pulverized. I was a little angry with myself, for my ‘Dutch wisdom’ told me never to buy cheap. Anyway, the next walk through the mud revealed that walking had become impossible for me. Since there was no possibility to purchase shoes anywhere near, I had to tell Teimuri about my shoes although I felt embarrassed to do so.

Teimuri showed his astonishment when he first learned that my solid looking shoes had worn out so fast. He was even more baffled when I confessed the (to him extraordinary high) price I had paid for the shoes. But it did not take long before everything was crystal clear to him. According to Teimuri, the shoes I had bought were not of Italian origin at all. I showed him the brand name and the sign that said “Made in Italy” but this did not make any impression on him what so ever. He shook his head and said: “I am sure that these shoes were not made in Italy. Probably they were manufactured in Turkey or so, the seller has simply duped you.” For him this was another example of how Turkish ‘mafia’ operates. He showed me his own shoes, “Do you see these? I bought them seven years ago when I was in Moscow. Maybe they don’t look beautiful, but they are very strong, made in Russia.” With disappointment in his voice he added, “Unfortunately they don’t make them any more.”

When I asked Teimuri about a good place to buy shoes he was uncertain how to answer that question. “These days it is difficult to know where to go to. It is probably better to ask Mzia [my host mother in Batumi]. She knows the town better
than I do." It was decided that Teimuri would stay in the village to take care of some domestic chores while I went to Batumi. Once I had arrived I discussed the issue with Mzia. She told me that there were several possibilities depending on how much money I wanted to spend. First there were the new boutiques and Mzia seemed eager to accompany me there, perhaps because she had never bought anything in those shops with their expensive import goods. And then there was the Hopa bazaar, named after the first Turkish town across the border. Noting my interest to go there, she raised her doubts as to whether or not I would be able to find any good shoes.

Mzia arranged that I would get a ride from her neighbor Malkhaz, a modestly successful businessman and owner of two telephone shops. Once we were on our way in his Mercedes, Malkhaz thought the whole expedition was a joke, a Dutchman buying Turkish goods. He was sure that I was the first person from ‘the West’ to do his shopping at the Hopa bazaar. When I stepped out of the car he gave me a last bit of advice, “if you really want to buy shoes here, you might just as well buy a second pair straight away, otherwise tomorrow you will have to go back there barefoot.” The eight-dollar shoes I eventually bought lasted until social expectations back in The Netherlands induced me to buy new ones.

Without being aware of it, my shoes and I had behaved in unexpected ways and as such had triggered responses that provided insights in locally held ideas concerning the opening of the border and the rapid social and economic change. Most literally the above-described episode refers to the world of goods and the expectations that existed with reference to the opening of the border. Teimuri’s remarks pointed to the differences between the Soviet and the post-Soviet period. The regret with which he talked about his own Russian shoes betrayed nostalgia to times in which you could be certain about the quality of goods. This time stood in sharp contrast with the uncertainties of the present era in which deception was common. But his astonishment was more specifically driven by the idea that the quality of his Soviet shoes was similar to the quality of European shoes. My Italian shoes were expensive and should have been good looking and of high quality, characteristics that they had lost after a few walks through the rain. This explained Teimuri’s amazement with my shoes and his certainty that I had been cheated. Mzia’s and Malkhaze’s comments basically pointed in the same direction, and revealed even stronger the sense that present-day markets were treacherous. I had ignored Mzia’s advice about buying shoes in one of the new boutiques that sold high-quality import goods, and instead had purchased my shoes in a place where most Batumi residents buy their clothes out of necessity. This was definitely not how a supposedly rich European was expected to act.

OUTLINE OF PART III

The changed world of goods provides a good starting point to analyze the values and ideas that residents have attributed to the changes in the economy. Chapter 8 will look both at the economic opportunities that arose from the opening of
the border and the accompanying dislocations in the post-Soviet moral economy. For this purpose I will explore the trade with Turkey that skyrocketed in the 1990s. This trade is vital for the economy of Batumi, but at the same time it has become a strong symbol for contemporary disorder and poverty. The stories that people tell about the border opening and the new flows of goods provide intimate reports of changes in the moral economy in Batumi. Popular contempt is largely channeled towards obtrusive forces like the ‘Mafia,’ or to nearby neighbor ‘Turkey.’ This channeling of discontent allows the dream of the transition and its implicated images of ‘modernity’ and ‘the West’ to preserve its promises. The specific qualities that people attribute to the changes in their society moreover, provide clues for understanding the role of morality and economy in constructing social identities in the midst of social upheaval.

The changes in the flows of goods and the resulting dislocations have made a large impact on social life in Ajaria. But we should recognize that the goods and the involved images are not, somehow, free floating in amorphous space. Rather, various elite groups manipulate the images as well as the underlying economic and social relations. Chapter 9 explores the uses and manipulations of the images of ‘modernity’ by the political elite. The question here is how the political elite combines new and old symbols to legitimate power, and what reactions this engenders in various layers of society. The chapter looks at recently constructed public buildings that have become conspicuous expressions of how the future of Ajaria is presented and imagined. I structure my argument around what might appear an odd case: the fact that many of these new public buildings remain empty. I argue that these empty buildings show how, despite great disparities, the myth of transition and the actual social-political changes in Batumi are intimately connected. The buildings, and more generally the regime’s emphasis on construction, contribute to the continuation of the myth of progress and modernity. Moreover, I argue that the emptiness reinforces the power of this myth by keeping the images and dreams part of the future and thus accessible to everyone. Even more so, because people are made to believe that the buildings will be put to use soon, this future is tied to the present, thus keeping the dream not only accessible but also alive.