

**The interference of various superstructural factors
In caucasian studies
Concerning political and cultural interactions**

The topics we will deal with in detail can be summed up as follows: a) commensurability of ethnic, cultural, political and religious parameters – in what sense and by what criteria they can be compared; b) identity: methods and criteria by which they can be defined; c) influences and interactions: principles and methods of evaluation; “mimesis” and “centrism”.

It is clear that the main point of view of this research will be the one offered by ethnic, national and ideological problems, which often interfere in the discussion of the various topics in a negative or unilateral way. The above topics certainly do not cover the whole range of the main matters concerning the methods of Caucasological researches. They do not describe a picture wide enough to lead the research on a way free from obstacles, which only create tensions and make interethnic contrasts graver, putting to risk the serenity of the inquiry.

We will not consider the problems concerning nature and definition of the Caucasological discipline, not because we consider them less important for the unity and coherence of the entire discipline, but because of the limited length of the text itself, and mainly because they have a smaller direct influence on this research, in spite of their theoretical importance.

We will not examine the elementary and universal “rules” that should lead any human debate, all the more if it is scientific: respect for the boundaries of the topic which is being discussed, respect for the people and the community. The two main qualities of these rules, which confirm their importance, make them universally accessible, provided that good sense and good will are present. Once we are sure of these predispositions, eventual complications should be due to particular “technical” reasons, which we will widely discuss.

The main idea which leads our analysis and supports its axiological system can be considered the synthesis of a contextual reading – against any temptation of transposition and anachronistic levelling – and a contrastive-analogical reading, aiming at deciphering the historical phenomenon, in a process of comparative referentiality – that is a “contrastive analysis” – of its analogies with better known phenomena.

Our aim is not that of providing solutions with no alternatives (it would be too simplifying and simplistic), but that of individuating at least which paths lead to no results.

We are aware of the dimension and complexity of the hermeneutic moment: no analysis, either concerning the subject matter or methodological, can totally ignore the social and cultural background of the historical moment, without referring indirectly to it and without being influenced by it. Being aware of this is maybe one of the best ways of exorcising the risks of subjectivism as much as possible. Thus we will consider the subject matter from a certain distance, which will avoid any excessive identification with the object, without subtracting the subjective dimension.

Ethnic Definability of Anthropological “Objects”

Between the questions debated in the various disciplinary sectors of Caucasology – from philosophy to history, from literature to linguistics –, referred to a number of ethnic groups and languages that is enormous if compared to the limited geographical area, there is one which subtends many others: the question of the ethnic definability of the various “anthropological objects” contended by the different

factions involved.

Certainly many of these cases could find a solution, at least with fewer difficulties, if it wasn't for the interference of political factors. However, not only political matters make resolutions more difficult but also other factors, other preconceptions, which are worthy of discussion; three of them are particularly frequent and determinant. We are going to discuss them first.

1. *Factors of confusion or simplification.*

i. The equalisation or confusion between the concept of "nation", intended as an ethnic unit, with its own language, culture, institutions, territory, and the concept of "nation" intended as including also a State political structure. In more concise and immediate terms: the confusion between the concept of "nation" as an ethnic-cultural entity and that of "nation" intended in conformity to the ideology of State-nation. This ideology, subjected to the lucubrations of modern human sciences, which have been elaborated in the West or in westernized contexts, is often a mean of applied interpretation of history, even if most times in silence, with no exclusion of religion and of the ages which are now of interest for our research.

ii. The maybe often unconscious tendency to equalising or proportioning historical reality – boundaries, territory or state configurations, population extension and density – to contemporary political reality.

iii. The reductive simplification of the concurrent factors in the determination of an ethnic-cultural specificity. This simplification is just an aspect of a more general simplification, aiming at ignoring or reducing the complexity of the factors that at various levels and in different ways share in the development and in the disappearing of historical phenomena.

We must now try to understand better the mechanisms concerning these factors, through the use of examples and through attempts of brief analysis that will make clearer what we mean.

We will now premise a few considerations before proceeding.

1. The critical observations we will make concerning the various examples don't implicate any overall negative evaluation of the works and of their authors. On the contrary, we are aware that many of them have studied the topics we are concerned in at a high level. However, this doesn't prevent them from making mistakes. We will concentrate on these mistakes, in relation to the aim of our research.

2. We must also notice that in the examples taken into consideration, as in many other cases, more methodological slips are present and act simultaneously in a reciprocal correlation. We will examine these examples mainly under the point of view that is more relevant to our study.

3. Finally, we will deal particularly with those theories and solutions that we consider absurd, barely methodologically correct (aside from any historical-philological detail, which we won't discuss). Many times in those debates, sometimes conditioned by ideological and generally extra-contextual factors, both aspects contribute to the progress of logical reasoning under many points of view. This means that a thorough examination of these factors, led on an excessively detailed historical-philological level, may not be the best way of showing the methodological principles and the criteria of their application in their mere essentiality; this is exactly what we mean to do.

We will deal just with those cases that we consider almost absurd, and even these won't be examined in detail. The aim of this study is in fact neither that of finding a solution to these questions, nor that of summarising all or at least the most controversial cases. Our aim is that of finding a few methodological principles and paths, hoping that we will contribute to the overcoming of certain impasses that often hamper Caucasological studies.

2. *A few examples*

i. As far as the first point is concerned, we will derive the first example from the words of a well-known Byzantinist, Paul Lemerle. Talking about Pakourian/Pakuriani he states that: “Qu'il soit géorgien, nul doute: géorgien sang pur”.

This is a really meaningful example of confusion between the many parameters that come together in the determination of an ethnic and ethnic-cultural identity; it would probably be more correct to consider it “ignorance” or non-consideration of some parameters. It is most of all an example of the tendency, typical of the ideology of the State-nation, to considering an ethnic-cultural identity unidimensionally. This conception is averse to much Armenian experience and in any case insufficient to show in an adequate and coherent way many cultural phenomena and many ethnic components, typical of the Middle Ages, of the Middle Eastern peoples, and of the Subcaucasian people in particular. In fact, the case of Pakourianos is destined to remaining an insoluble rebus without a conception of the ethnic-cultural identity that perceives it in terms of pluridimensionality and multivalence (compare paragraph B. iii, in particular number 29 and 31, in reference to the Armenian-Chalcedonians).

The confusion perceived is stressed by the emphatic tone of the expression – “sang pur” –, with no doubt foreign to that shrewd moderation that the research for a scientific objectivity should impose – at least as a boundary-concept, as a purpose not to be forgotten, even if not an easy one.

Reading the statement more attentively one more slip can be found, regarding the relations between the different parameters of the ethnic-national identity. First of all, as we have already said, the various parameters are absorbed and confused in one only dimension and meaning. This confusion is made even worse by the reduction of state parameters to a level similar to that of ethnic-racial determinations. In other words, we are in front of a representation (or an attempt of representation) of the juridical-political reality of the subjection to a state structure, in terms typical of a bio-physiological qualification, of almost racial connotation. We are fully aware that Lemerle's statement has nothing more than a rhetorical-metaphorical meaning, but this does not deny its referential connotations, the more if the stature of the scientist is taken into consideration.

ii. As far as the second point is concerned, a first example, very trivial and usual, is the projection in the past of the modern names of cities and monuments, whose denominations have changed in the centuries, many times reassuming their most ancient names, as in the case of Tbilisi or Gumayri (Giumri, the former Leninakan in Armenia). A widely known case, even if not directly connected to the Subcaucasian ambit, is that of the capital of the Ottoman Empire: many call it Istanbul, not only talking about the modern city, but also referring to the Ottoman Age, even if its official name has always been Constantinople, that is Kostantaniyye/Konstantiniyye in the Ottoman form, during the Empire.

b) One more example, more relevant in content, comes from the indiscriminate use of the word “Caucasian”, in reference to the Armenian reality of the Middle Ages and of Antiquity. References to the

“Caucasian peoples” and to “Caucasian Christianities” are very often made talking about the past.

Such a use has become more and more frequent during the twentieth century, due to the vanishing of the Armenian people in Eastern Anatolia, and to the consequent disappearing from the geographic map of what the Ottoman Empire simply and justly called *Ermenistan*, *Ermeniya*, *Eyalet-i Ermenistan* (Armenia, region of Armenia).

We think that the expression “Subcaucasia”, which we proposed years ago and which was positively accepted by authoritative scholars, might offer a useful mean of obviating at least terminological imprecision. Obviously words are not everything, but when they are not used with their current acceptation there is a serious risk of causing misunderstanding. The Cartesian rule of expressing clear and distinct concepts, which we think to be nowadays more necessary than ever, entails the use of a clear and appropriate language and terminology.

d) The last two examples of historical anachronism that we are going to examine are taken from contemporary historiography, precisely from the Azerbaijani and Armenian ones.

The first example deals with the transposition in the past of the boundaries of the modern Republic of Azerbaijan, very common in contemporary Azerbaijani historiography, aiming at establishing a criterion of ethnical identification. The result is the equalisation of the Azerbaijani identity and the Albanian-Caucasian one, or at least the affirmation of a strict continuity between the two, justified by the simple fact that the two ethnic groups have followed each other as inhabitants of pretty much the same territories.

Confusion has been made between space-time parameters and anthropological-cultural ones. This confusion implies a radical inversion of the type and quality of their relations. In fact, the correlation between anthropological-cultural parameters and space-time factors is a very complex matter, which often varies throughout history, because of the succeeding of peoples and cultures.

There are two main types of correlation, referred to the cultural level and not to the demographic transformations and exchanges: a) the typology of “fusion”; b) the typology of “exclusion” or “secession”.

The first typology acts when a new culture is born from the synthesis of two or more groups of peoples and/or cultures. This typology is present throughout history in many different forms and shades, which we are not going to discuss in detail. An example, almost a model, is that of the birth of the culture of Central and Northern Western Europe from the fusion of German and Celtic roots with the Roman culture.

The typology of exclusion and secession, opposite to that of fusion, implies the unilateral and hegemonic domination of a new culture of emigration, and the marginalization, if not extinction and suppression, of the preceding local culture. An example is that of the domination of the Anglo-Saxon Culture on the pre-Colombian cultures in North America. This typology is present in many variants and shades, too. Sometimes the extreme variations of the two typologies can be so similar that it’s very difficult to distinguish between the two of them. In any case the two theoretic models remain clear and distinct.

As far as the passage from the local Subcaucasian cultures, in the specific case of the Albanian one, to the Turkish-Azerbaijani culture in superior Atropatan, it clearly followed prevalently, if not entirely, the model of exclusion and secession. It would be a big mistake to consider the relation between the Azerbaijani and Albanian culture as based on the model of “fusion” instead of that of “secession”: it would mean mistaking a space-time succession for an anthropological-cultural connection.

e) A parallel temptation, even if connected to a different historical problematic, seems to have affected

recent Armenian historiography, still mainly of a popular kind and often due to the work of amateurs.

It has to do with the pre and proto-Armenian phases of the East-Anatolian highland, from the Urarts up to the various populations of Hurrític and Indo-European roots, who lived there during the second millennium B.C.: those populations are often defined as *hay*, that is “Armenian”, with no further distinction. Obviously in this case the historical problematic is on a different level if compared to the preceding example. Here the problem doesn’t concern the temporal overlapping of two cultures of which one vanishes, without leaving any trace of its presence in the other culture; this time the problem has to do with the process of formation of a new culture from the synthesis of many precedent cultures. In other words, we are in front of a process of “fusion”.

Armenian “popular” historians don’t make any distinction between the process of formation of a culture, on the one side, and its historically formed reality, on the other side.

f) The confusion between the process of formation of an ethnic identity and the identity itself subtends certain historiographic theories (with a functionality derived from the fundamental nationalistic tendencies), such as the one on the origin of the Bragats, by P’. Ingoroq’va. Ingoroq’va maintains that one of the reasons for such a theory is that the land of origin of the Bragat dynasty is in the region of Syspirtis (the modern Ispir, in northeastern Turkey). Now, if the word “origin” is referred to the time when the dynasty appeared on the historical scene, that is the II-I century B.C., this land was part of Armenia (the Georgian influx has been reaching it starting from the IX-X century A.D.). If reference is instead made to ages anterior to the VI-VII century B.C., talking about “Armenians” and “Georgians” as ethnic-cultural identities seems inappropriate. This historical anachronism takes origin from the confusion, or from the lacking distinction, between the phase of formation (respectively pre- and proto-formative) of an ethnic unit, and the unit itself when it has already formed.

As Kalistrat Salia notices: “The question of the dynasty – whether it is national or foreign – is of scarce importance”, without forgetting that “feeling of unity that in those days prevailed among the aristocracies of the three Caucasian kingdoms – Armenia, Iberia, Albania”.

iii. a) The third point is the reductive simplification of the factors concurrent in the determination of an ethnic-cultural specificity.

A significant example is the reduction of the Armenian-Chalcedonian art to Iberian or Byzantine art.

This reductivity may have different reasons:

1. Confusion between ethnical-cultural parameters and political-state parameters, which we have already discussed.

2. Misunderstanding of the complexity of the factors determining historical phenomena and processes;

3. A certain approach to the phenomenon on a formal level of artistic analysis that could be defined as “centralist” and “globalist”, since it follows the parameters directly taken from the study of “imperial” arts, without the necessary attention to the characteristics of a particular micro-area. This approach could be defined as simplistic – a different version of the old Eurocentrism, which is still present in various sectors of Eastern studies. As far as Armenian-Chalcedonian art is concerned, recent studies, in particular the ones by Lidov, even if partly confutable, should make us think about the reductive way in which local and marginal arts are dealt with.

4. Finally, as far as artistic phenomena are concerned, the underestimation of any factors, apart from purely formal elements, in the definition of an artistic identity. If even formal analysis is inadequate, the result will be an approach reductive in many different ways. This can explain certain shocking remarks made by well-known scholars such as when, not too long ago, the church of Tigran Honenc' in Ani was simply defined as nothing more than an *église géorgienne*.

b) The discussion on the Armenian-Chalcedonians doesn't deal just with art, but almost with any aspect of social life; this is the reason why it represents a really important matter for anthropological, ethnological, sociological and religious studies.

It certainly creates much confusion in the usual schemes of these disciplines, which often use Western models as ideal models, datum points, and means of interpretation. The Armenian-Chalcedonians, instead, offer a model of really unique ethnical-national conscience, acutely analysed by Arutjunova-Fidanjan. This model can't be exactly outlined either according to national-state parameters, neither ancient nor modern, or to cultural, linguistic, religious parameters. It can be expressed through symbolic values, behavioural typicality, which on the one side bind them to the common national root, and on the other side do specify them almost as a sub-ethnic entity, with strong inter-ethnic connotations, similar in this to the nearby areas where they have developed.

Conditionings deriving from political factors

At the beginning of our analysis of factors influential in the controversies on the ethnical identification and qualification of anthropological objects, we made reference to political motivations. Nowadays, after the fall of the Soviet Union and with the beginning of inter-ethnic conflicts, we can perceive more clearly that during the last few decades many controversies were nothing more than the transposition on a scientific-historical level (it would be more accurate to say pseudo-scientific-historical) of wars yet to be fought with the use of weapons.

i. One of the clearest examples is the Azerbaijani-Armenian controversy over Caucasian Albania. The Azerbaijaniization of the Albanians, that is the "retro-Albanization" of the Azerbaijani people operated by the Azerbaijani side, can be easily comprehended in the context of the conflict of Karabakh: this is a historical deformation within sight of a precise political aim. In front of this historical forcing, not even the Armenian reaction was always free from political conditionings: for example the embarrassment of recognising the long process of assimilation, that is of Armenization, of the populations bordering the peripheral areas of Armenia.

This embarrassment can be explained mainly as the result of a chain reaction, whose outbursts are very often too strong, especially if considered not only in the ambit of a purely scientific reasoning, but also in relation to a cultural and political tactic or strategy. In fact, this historical process of assimilation can be considered as part of the process of interaction between stronger and weaker identities, which is very frequent in history. Today its recognition should not interfere in the rights of the Armenian population in Karabakh. This shows that the outburst of political motivations is often excessive, if compared to what would be necessary for the defence of certain rights.

ii. One more example of political conditioning over a scientific analysis, in the Subcaucasian ambit, is given by the tendency of a certain Georgian historiography and philology to historically considering the Caucasian populations of the Republic in the unitariness of the Georgian nation. Certainly the historical problems here implicated are different from the ones concerning the Azerbaijaniization of the Albanians: the populations here concerned are in fact ethnically and culturally similar and they have always been living

together, in the same regions in which they are living today.

The conditioning acted by political motivations over scientific research brings research itself into discredit, and it also discredits its eventual consequences on a judicial level. This topic, which we have already considered in other studies, lies outside our present concerns.

Interaction between different cultures

One of the most tedious problems in Caucasological studies and in Middle-Eastern studies in general, apart from ethnic-national identifications, is the interaction between different cultures.

In fact, a very primitive concept of “influx” is still very common. A received influx is considered negative: a deprivation, a humiliation, a subjection, almost an offence; in order not to be considered inferior, a people must deny any influx received, while they must show that they have been the once influencing their neighbour-enemy.

This shouldn't be too shocking. Europe itself, before reaching an equilibrium, at least concerning its internal relations, – at the end of an evolution which has lasted hundreds of years of wars, but which has been homogeneous and autonomous –, has very acutely suffered from similar illnesses. We must now go back to Caucasus.

During the whole century the problem of influxes has been harshly debated by Georgians and Armenians, with the exception of the most illuminated personalities of both sides: Nikolaj Marr, Korneli Kekelidze, Grigol Peradze, Ilya Abuladze, Michael Tarchnišvili, Nikolos Adontz, Hakob Manandian, Nerses Akinian, Sirarpie Der Nersessian, Lewon Melikset-Bek, Suren Eremyan, and various others. It is necessary to mention a person like Cyril Toumanoff, today the “patriarch” of Caucasologic science, whose fully conscious multivalent personality of Armenian-Georgian, is reflected in his serenity of scientist, as much equidistant as equi-involved.

A negative role, instead, was that of various personalities who weren't always able to accompany equity of judgement and freedom of spirit to their acute minds and wide erudition. Between others, we must mention Girogi N. Cubinašvili, considered the father of the history of Georgian art. Cubinašvili comes from a cultural contest which is really adverse to the recognition of the art of his people, in their individuality and originality: it was often confused with Armenian art or considered subjected to it, almost as one of its regional variants.

The right reaction to such a situation shouldn't be excessive (compare what has been said in the precedent paragraph about the excessive Armenian reaction to the Azerbaijani mystifications on the Albanians). Such was, instead, Cubinašvili's promptness in confuting any Armenian influx over Georgia that sometimes he ended up devaluing Armenian art in a way that was really not adequate to his talent, erudition and artistic sense. For example, he wrote that the marvellous church of St. Hrip'simê, like every other Armenian church of the same kind, is a mediocre work that gives proof of its total dependence from the Georgian Gvari, or that the splendid basilicas of T'alín and Aruc have no artistic value and no real *grandeur*, and that in general Armenian architecture is characterised by a “conscious tendency to ... tracing”, provoking the sound criticism made by Anatoly Jakobson, a famous scholar of Subcaucasian art, which is inexorable but in the same time a model of scientific “style”.

Today we are probably in a situation that is in theory more advantaged, if compared to the twenties-fifties, for a possibly impartial study of influxes and interactions. The development of comparative studies in literature and art, and the structuralist and semiotic way of thinking, have in fact contributed to the

elaboration of a wide range of inter-textual theories and approaches in the last five decades. Even if these theories and approaches treat mainly literary texts, in any case they develop very interesting views of the interweaving and interactions between art works, of the mechanism of influxes, of its typologies and of its stylistic-artistic importance.

A fundamental datum that emerges from these studies is that an influx itself is a neutral category regarding the artistic, intellectual and cultural value, even on the level of the progress of civilisation, both for those who exert it and for those who receive it. The influx exerted is not necessarily a sign of grandeur, as much as the received one is not a sign of inferiority and subalternity. On the contrary, it is not impossible for a work inspired by a certain model or prototype to overcome it in vigour and geniality.

We must now transpose this principle on the level of historical influxes and interactions in general, of any kind. The consequence is the neutrality of these historical processes with reference to the scale of the values of civilisation. In this prospective the influx becomes simply the result of a historical “conjuncture” of the various dimensions which determine together exercise, mechanism, nature and direction of influxes and interactions.

Not to disturb theorists of literature and art, comparatists, semiotics and structuralists, it seems fundamental not to belittle the things that belong to others in order to exalt or defend what is one's own.

This admission requires two further clarifications in order to be fully comprehended in all its importance: a) it obviously doesn't signify the unimportance of the studies of interactions and influxes. It just corrects their aim. Interactions and influxes must in fact be studied not in order to affirm or celebrate superiority of level or of any other kind, but in order to understand better the mechanisms of historical, cultural and artistic processes; b) at the same time, it doesn't either signify the equalisation and levelling of the value of art works; it only means that such value must be judged through aesthetic criteria intrinsic to the art work and not in base of real or supposed influxes that explain its genesis.

As far as Armenian-Georgian relations and interactions are concerned in particular, they undoubtedly have a very rich history, with roots in the most ancient antiquity, also made by influxes which are often reciprocally mistaken according to the contextual factors of the different ages. Relations between Armenians and Georgians, in the alternation of joyous and adverse happenings throughout history, offer a rare model in which there are many points in common – such as the ones concerning the concept of one's identity, social organisation, way of life, religious sense –, but also many differences of form and content – from language to religious confession, from characteristic features to artistic expression. Not in vane the Georgian tradition considers Haos (in Armenian: Hayk) and K'art'los (eponyms of Armenians and Georgians) brothers, sons of one only father, T'orgom(a). Even if it would be hard to historically identify these characters, legend once more reveals itself as the shell of a historical truth, if it is necessary to admit that the very ancient East-Anatolian/Caucasian tribes have had a fundamental role, side by side with Indo-European elements, in the formation of the Armenian ethnos. This appears to be the convergent conclusion of the most serious studies.