

## Konstantin Megrelidze's Theory of Consciousness

The fate of Konstantin Megrelidze's thought is as tragic as it is paradoxical – the thinker's *opus magnum* was published decades after it was written, because of political censorship, the author himself died in exile, and the second book, written in a Soviet lager, has been irrevocably lost. The thought itself is present in modern social sciences, but this is a presence of something forgotten. This presence of the forgotten gets Megrelidze's name mentioned in the *Handbook of Contemporary European Social Theory* once (Delanty 2006, p.159)<sup>1</sup>; the third edition of his major work was republished in the Russian language in 2007<sup>2</sup>; and there are some works published in Georgian, Russian and Western European languages about his thought<sup>3</sup>. But his work has not yet been translated into any other language, which would make it available to an international audience (it exists only in Russian and Georgian); the number of persons in Western academia familiar with his work is limited to the specialists of the history of Soviet epistemology; and the place he deserves in the development of social and philosophical thought has not yet been determined.

But the paradox extends farther. Not only was Megrelidze's *Major Problems of the Sociology of Thought*, written in 1936, published only in 1965; not only did it have to undergo the process of self-censorship, which changed the initial title of the book from *Social Phenomenology of Thought*, which in the 1930s was no longer acceptable, but the first edition of the book, published after the "thaw" initiated by Khrushchev's 1956 anti-Stalin speech, was itself heavily censored and adapted to the changed realities of the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. References to Stalin were taken out, but, what is of more importance for the argument of the work, long discussions of, quotations from, and reference to, the work of Nicholas Marr and his theories, were also deleted. Thus, the readers of Megrelidze's work of the last half a century have been familiar with it only in a truncated and abridged form, since the full edition of the book still awaits publication, lingering in the archives.

This is a deplorable situation for many reasons. In the history of Soviet social sciences and humanities, Megrelidze provides an indispensable body

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of work to understand the developments of philosophy, sociology, psychology and linguistics in the 1920s and 1930s. He was situated on the crossroads of strategically important networks – being educated in the German traditions of phenomenology and Gestalt psychology, having attended lectures and seminars of Edmund Husserl, Wolfgang Köhler and Max Wertheimer in Freiburg and Berlin from 1924 to 1927, moving to Leningrad in the 30s to become a researcher at Nicholas Marr's institute, interacting with Alexander Luria, developing his theory of consciousness and language in parallel with Lev Vygotsky, Valentin Voloshinov and Mikhail Bakhtin. The relative neglect of his work deprives us of the possibility to analyze the developments of humanities in the first decades of the Soviet Union in all its fullness and complexity.

Megrelidze developed a theory of human consciousness, which was both part of the historical context of early Soviet epistemology and attempted to break out of its limitations. Megrelidze's thought originated at the intersection of different disciplines and disciplinary traditions: phenomenology (in its Husserlian form), Gestalt psychology, Marrism (Megrelidze's book was written during the time when the author was working in N. Marr's institute). Another important current of thought, which had influence on Megrelidze's conception, was the French sociological tradition, together with nascent structuralism. E. Durkheim, L. Levi-Bruhl and F. de Saussure are authors often referred to in the book. Megrelidze's aim was to show – in contrast to the traditional empiricist approaches – the social nature of the human consciousness. The above-named authors were interesting for him, first of all, because they went beyond the empiricist tradition, which entailed reduction of the consciousness on sensory data and association mechanisms. But still, the word "sociology" in the title was chosen on second thought. The original idea for the title was *Social Phenomenology of Thought*, which was presumably suppressed by the author because of political reasons – it was the word "phenomenology," which, in the ideological atmosphere of the 1930s, had become too problematic to be used in the title of a book that wanted to present itself as standing firmly on the ground of orthodox Marxism.

The original title gives us the possibility to reflect on the influence of Husserl's phenomenology on Megrelidze's thought. One could argue that what mattered for Megrelidze was Husserl's main idea of the intentional character of consciousness. As it is often defined, consciousness for Husserl (1950) is always the consciousness "of something".

Although for Husserl every conscious act is directed, this does not mean that there is always a real object towards which it is directed.<sup>4</sup> According to Husserl, with each act of consciousness a noema is associated, in virtue

of which the act is directed toward its object, if there is any - when we think of a centaur, our act of thinking has a noema, but it has no object; therefore there exists no object of which we think. Because of its noema, however, even such an act is directed. To be directed is to have a noema.

The noema is an entity, a generalization of the notion of meaning (Sinn, Bedeutung). The noematic Sinn is that, in virtue of which consciousness relates to the object. The noema of the act is not the object of the act. The noema is an abstract entity and is not perceived through our senses.

This discovery of noema is fundamental because it makes two very popular philosophical positions, dominant in Megrelidze's time, obsolete. The first position is that of Ernst Mach, which reduced reality to the complex of sensations. This position was called subjective idealism in Soviet philosophy and was the main target of the Leninist critique (Katvan 1978, 87-109). Phenomenology shares the rejection of this position, since the latter does not allow objects to exist by interpreting them as a complex of subjective associations. Phenomenology makes this position philosophically untenable by demonstrating, through the painstakingly detailed analyses, that consciousness is directed at the object and not at the complex of associations.

On the other hand, phenomenology also makes impossible the philosophically naïve Leninist theory of reflection, according to which, cognition is nothing else but the reflection of the object into consciousness, reflection being a general character of the matter (Ibid., 87-88). By demonstrating that consciousness is directed at the object through *noemata* – and interpreting the process of this directedness as constitution – phenomenology introduces a new dimension into the analysis of cognition, which is reducible neither to objects nor to consciousness, but which ensures the link between the two. Constitution itself is a way an object is intended in consciousness; an object is intended through a manifold of meanings (senses, *noemata*) that present the same object as having various properties – for example, presenting possible properties of the back side of an object in visual perception which does not show this back side at all.

If we put Megrelidze's work in this context, it will become obvious that he attempts to develop a similar position and connect it with theories of language and society without referring explicitly to Husserl (who was himself considered a "subjective idealist" in the Soviet Union).

In a philosophical gesture, which is reminiscent of Husserlian phenomenology, Megrelidze opens his book with a criticism of the naturalistic theories of consciousness. This is a fundamental step, since it repeats the procedure of primary importance for the way that phenomenology of consciousness is introduced in the works of its founder. Specifically, in the first volume

of Husserl's *Logical Investigations* and in the opening chapter of his *Ideas I*, naturalistic attitude is the one to be overcome in order to reach the phenomenological level of reflection; since naturalism reduces the processes of meaningful constitution to the natural processes of a physiological sort.

"Ideational content of consciousness" is the concept by which Megrelidze is taking into account this systematic fundamental phenomenological position without affiliating himself all too openly with Husserl. Ideational content of consciousness – or, as he also says, the capacity to freely reproduce representations – is an essential trait differentiating human consciousness from animal consciousness. Megrelidze then, sees human consciousness as the capacity to actualize its representations freely in relation to past and future. Consciousness is an imagination of not yet existing (the future) and already not existing (the past) phenomena.

This is where Megrelidze (2007, p.17) introduces his concept of consciousness, which is rather broad: "The general formula of consciousness – away of orienting of the individual in the milieu". This general determination should make us think of several issues. First of all, it expresses the conviction that human consciousness has its origin in the lower forms of the psyche, specifically in the animal psyche. But Megrelidze rejected the naturalistic interpretation of this origin. The reason for this rejection was that the naturalistic approach reduces the orienting activity of the individual to its physiological and biological presuppositions. These presuppositions of consciousness are of course to be taken into account, but they leave out the fact of the existence of human society, which cannot be deduced from the individual behavior. This inability stems from the way the physiological approach considers each and every individual in his/her capacity to orient himself/herself in the milieu without referring to this individual's relationship with other individuals. e. of the essential intersubjective character of human consciousness. Those committing the naturalistic fallacy see the distinction between the animal psyche and human consciousness as a difference in degree, not in nature and essence. But, according to Megrelidze, there is an essential difference between these two phenomena. This difference can only be taken into account when there is a clear understanding of the fact that human consciousness has human society as its prime presupposition. The individual is understood here as a producer, a producing being, to whom the object is not given as a finished entity, it is given to him as a task (following Hermann Cohen's formula – "nichtsgegeben, sondern aufgegeben" also used by Megrelidze, but in an entirely different sense). The consciousness of the individual is not mirroring the object existing outside him independently; the conscious representation of the object shows this object as something to be produced, to be created; represen-

tation gives us the object in view of the transformation it has to undergo as a result of our practical activity.

Thus, the subject, according to Megrelidze, produces the content of consciousness, which does not correspond with the object of cognition. But it is not to be reduced and explained away by referral to the subject. Megrelidze was looking for a way to avoid both underestimating and substantializing the role of activity. It is not objective thought forms to which certain content of consciousness corresponds, but the content, which is proper to consciousness, and which is not reducible to the subject. This, once again, explains the concept of ideational content of consciousness: it is the content proper to consciousness, which only has the cognitive reference to the object because there is a relation between the subject and object of cognition.

Since the content of consciousness of an individual is free and ideational, he relates to other individuals as independent and distinct. The same object can be perceived by different individuals differently. Thus, the communication between different individuals becomes problematic. The states of other organisms, such as joy or pain, can be perceived without mediation, but the ideational content of consciousness of other individuals remains inaccessible to us without mediation. Another social tool is needed: language. Language is for Megrelidze an important condition of possibility for the ideational content of consciousness. Only through language is the existence of reproductive representations possible. On the grounds of this approach Megrelidze stresses the special character of the sign. Language for Megrelidze is not a mechanical sign, through which the subject arbitrarily and externally coordinates the sound complex with an object. Language is the expression of the ideational content of consciousness. Megrelidze attempts to show that the genesis of this content is intimately linked with the genesis of human language.

However, before turning to the question of language, there is another question to be considered: do animals have reproductive representations, on which the ideational content of consciousness is founded? The question was addressed by Megrelidze in the context of the discussion of Gestalt psychology. There is a significant parallelism between the approaches of phenomenology and Gestalt psychology, of which Megrelidze is well aware. Both of them reject the reduction of meaningful phenomena on sensory data. What interests Megrelidze in this particular regard is the experimental basis of Gestalt psychology. He discusses in detail Wolfgang Köhler's experiments, which had as their aim to show the intellectual behavior in apes. Can apes have reproductive representations? Megrelidze is skeptical of this possibility, indicating that apes can only make certain human-like actions because these acts are immanent moments of the task situation. These actions impose

themselves upon apes; there is a capacity of abstraction from the situation, which is lacking in primates. This is explained by Megrelidze when he refers to paradoxical but exact formulations suggested by Gestalt psychology: “The box tends into the situation” (Kurt Koffka’s expression when discussing the case of an ape using a box as an instrument to reach a certain goal in a human-like fashion). Megrelidze saw in this, and related formulas, the key for explaining the so-called intellectual behavior of apes. That is why we cannot speak of ideational content of consciousness in relation to apes. The capacities suggested by the representatives of Gestalt psychology such as Köhler can be explained from the objective relationships, not from the subjective capacities of the higher animals. Thus, according to Megrelidze, “reproductive representations” ascribed to animals are mechanical, unmediated, mirroring of the objects. These are sporadic behaviors, which then can be automatized and transformed into conditional reflexes. According to Megrelidze, this kind of behavior cannot be the origin of specifically human activity, since not every kind of situation presents its own effective solution. As for the ideational content proper, it is not dependent upon the situation, but in most cases on the disposition of consciousness itself. This is why Megrelidze rejected the possibility of a general, organizing, Gestalt principle, which would organize both animal and human mirroring of the world. Megrelidze’s approach takes off from the criticism of Gestalt psychology and cannot be considered without this criticism.

However, Megrelidze does go farther than this, partially contradicting his own conclusion, but finding a more convincing ground to differentiate animal psyche from human consciousness. According to him, animals are able to produce acts of consciousness, but they are not able to retain these acts. This is an important point, since it points to the crux of Megrelidze’s theory of consciousness. In order for consciousness to perpetuate itself beyond sporadic acts, a social setting is needed and this is exactly what animals lack. The major argument of Megrelidze consists in showing that the determinants of human consciousness are to be found not in the natural but in the social world. He attempts to think the genesis of ideational content of consciousness as a sociogenesis. This was conceived as an attempt to overcome the existing vulgar Marxism of the time, which operated within the framework of subject-object dichotomy. It is against this approach that Megrelidze introduced intersubjectivity as the major topic of his theory of consciousness. Human consciousness, according to him, can only deal with objects if it thinks in relation with other subjects. As in Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*, which were published several years before Megrelidze’s monograph,<sup>5</sup> the Georgian philosopher understands intersubjectivity as the condition of possibility for

the emergence of objectivity. As it is known, Husserl was according an increasingly important role to intersubjectivity, by which he meant the interaction of different subjects in the surrounding world, especially in our collective constitution of objects in nature or in culture. What could be taken in the beginning of his phenomenology, as a phenomenon pertaining to an individual consciousness, appeared with time (especially in the 1920s and 1930s) to be the function of intersubjective community. Objectivity is constituted by intersubjective community. It is through the experience of the other that we gain access to the world of objects. This certainly leaves the question of the synchronicity between different subjects to be explained – if objectivity is dependent upon the community of different subjects, how does this community come into existence and how is it possible that ideational contents of different consciousnesses agree with each other?

This is where Megrelidze introduces the question of language and refers to the conception of Nicholas Marr. What is important for him is the linkage between language and praxis. Meanings and senses kept in language are derived from the concrete practical activities of human beings; praxis explains semantics. By referring to the ethnological literature, Marr and Marrists, as well as Megrelidze, demonstrate how linguistic studies can show this rootedness of semantics in functionality: e.g. some tribes refer to a mirror as the water, and to a clock as the sun, thus giving to the unknown objects the names of those things, which had been fulfilling the same function in their practical activities (Meshchaninov 1929). Another example of this train of thought is found in Megrelidze's discussion of the difference between color systems in different cultures. The absence of the color green in the worlds of Vedas and Avesta, as well as different perception of colors in the ancient Greek world is not attributed by him to some kind of physiological cause, but is explained as a fact derived from the concrete praxis of historical human beings (Megrelidze 2007, 197–198).

Marr was not the first to notice this functional origin of semantics. Ludwig Noiré and Lazarus Geiger, German thinkers of the 19th century, both had written extensively on the subject – Marr took their theory and integrated it into his idiosyncratic “new linguistic doctrine”. Megrelidze knew about this origin and discussed it explicitly in one of his texts.<sup>6</sup> This was the theory, which gave him the possibility of linking consciousness and praxis – a constant task facing the attempts at synthesis of phenomenology and Marxism throughout the 20th century (Desanti 1994). Through rooting the objectivity in intersubjective relations and linking intersubjectivity with language, for which the point of reference became the existing social practices of any given culture/society, Megrelidze seemed to have outlined a so-

cial theory, which would provide a picture of social determinants of human thought.

This opens the way for Megrelidze to establish the independent realm of cultural and historical phenomena. The criticism of naturalism was needed not only to free the human consciousness from its dependence upon physiological causes, but to free the space for the consideration of a separate dimension as well, which is more important for understanding the content of human consciousness than the biological substratum it presupposes. The quotation of Giambattista Vico in the first paragraph of the first chapter of the book, where the Italian thinker draws a distinction between nature and history according to the principle of their relationship with human productivity, proves to be essential for the understanding of Megrelidze's theoretical project.<sup>7</sup> Vico attempted to found the science of human affairs in criticizing the dominant Cartesian tradition;<sup>8</sup> in many ways Megrelidze follows in his footsteps by attempting to dissociate the theory of consciousness from the domination of natural sciences. This explains the turn towards the rich material he draws from anthropology, folklore, and sociology in his study. The primary notion is that together with the theory of language, the theory of consciousness is needed to understand human society. The attempt to demonstrate the original unity between consciousness, language, and social practice, remains the most important contribution of the Georgian philosopher to social theory.

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### Notes:

- 1 See Delanty (2006): "A little-known work on the sociology of thinking by the Georgian philosopher Constantine Megrelidze, who died at an early age".
- 2 Мегрелидзе, К. [Megrelidze, C.], 2007. Основные проблемы социологии мышления [Major Problems of the Sociology of Thought]. Москва [Moscow].
- 3 See Бочоришвили, А. [Bochorishvili, A.], 2007. "От редактора" [From the editor], in: Мегрелидзе, К. Основные проблемы социологии мышления [Megrelidze, C. Major Problems of the Sociology of Thought]. pp. 3-7. Москва [Moscow]; Джиоев, О. [Dzhioyev, O.], 1980. "Опережая время" [Ahead of time], in: Заря Востока 17 декабря; Zarya Vostoka 17 Dec. [Тбилиси] Tbilisi; Friedrich, J. 1993. Der Gehalt der Sprachform: Paradigmen von Bachtin bis Vygotskij. Berlin: Akademie



- Verlag; Friedrich, J. 2005. Les trace de N. Marr dans le livre de K. Megrelidze, in: Cahiers de l'ILSL N° 20, pp. 109-125; Мотрошилова, Н. [Motroshilova. N.], 2012. Отечественная философия 50-80-х годов XX века и западная мысль [Russian Philosophy in the 50–80s years of 20th Century and Western Thought]. pp. 131-136. Москва [Moscow].
- 4 Here I am summarizing the well-known article of Dagfin Foellesdal (1969) "Husserl's Notion of Noema", in: *Journal of Philosophy*, 66: 680-687.
  - 5 This precedence does not necessarily imply that Megrelidze was familiar with Husserlian theory of intersubjectivity. He left Fribourg in 1925 when this problem was still not the center of Husserl's attention. *Cartesian Mediations* was only published in French translation in 1931. It is hard to surmise whether Megrelidze was aware of the newest development in phenomenology. It seems more likely that his turn from consciousness to the social world was rather effected through the intermediation of Marxist problematic of society and Marxist problem of language.
  - 6 See Мегрелидзе, К. [Megrelidze, C]. 1935. "Н. Я. Марр и Философия Марксизма" [N. Marr and Marxist Philosophy], in: *Проблемы истории докапиталистических обществ [Problems of the history of pre-capitalist societies]* 3-4, 70-89; Мегрелидзе [Megrelidze]. 2007. *Основные проблемы социологии мышления [Major Problems of the Sociology of Thought]*, p.127. Москва [Moscow].
  - 7 Megrelidze quotes Marx quoting Vico: "Die Menschengeschichte unterscheidet sich dadurch von der Naturgeschichte, dass wir eine gemacht und die andere nicht gemacht haben" (Мегрелидзе, 2007, 25). Interestingly enough, this is the only quotation of Vico in G. Lukacs' book *History and Class Consciousness*, which was the object of ideological attacks in the Soviet Union of the 20s and 30s. The leading role in this attack was played by A. Deborin (cf. his article "Г.Лукачиегокритикамарксизма", in: *Подзнаменеммарксизма*, 6-7, 1924,49-69), whom Megrelidze knew, since Deborin was present at the defense of his dissertation in 1936 as a member of the committee. The major disagreement of Deborin and the official Marxism-Leninism with Lukacs' interpretation of Marx was the question of difference between nature and society and whether dialectics could be applied to both regions (as Soviet Marxism held) or only to social and historical phenomena (as Lukacs contended). In this debate, Megrelidze seems to be siding with Lukacs; quoting Vico through Marx in the original German without giving a Russian translation in the book itself, which seems to be a way to defend himself from the accusa-

tions of heresy. This is another, non-phenomenological, Marxist context for understanding Megrelidze's thought.

- 8 See Vico, G. 1968. *The new science of Giambattista Vico*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press; On Vico cf. Amoroso, L. 2006. *Erläuternde Einführung in Vicos „Neue Wissenschaft“*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

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