

## Book Review:

*Orthodox Ethics and the Spirit of Unfreedom,*  
Giorgi Maisuradze, Bakur Sulakauri Publishing, Tbilisi, 2013.

Giorgi Maisuradze is certainly one of the most productive and original authors in the contemporary Georgian literary and intellectual sphere, with a broad range of remarkable publications since 2011. Apart from two books of fiction in Georgian, *The Apocalyptic Beast* (Siesta, Tbilisi, 2011) and *Kill Tbilisi* (Bakur Sulakauri Publishing, Tbilisi, 2013), whose strange, if not estranged, and hermetic style still awaits due critical evaluation, in the last three years he has published three collections of essays concerning fundamental political, social and cultural problems of Georgia, consisting of material from his own previous scientific publications, blog entries and magazine articles reworked specially for the respective collections. These are: *Closed Society and its Guardians* (Sulakauri, 2011), *Lost Contexts* (Sulakauri, 2012), both awarded with the Saba Literary Prize, and the collection under review here, *Orthodox Ethics and the Spirit of Unfreedom* (2013, with an introduction by Salome Asatiani). Notwithstanding the considerable scientific baggage from philosophy, psychoanalysis or cultural and religious studies drawn on by Maisuradze, the essays are written in a clear, accessible style intended for the broader public – a feature that distinguishes them from Maisuradze’s scientific work like his dissertation, *Genese und Genealogie. Zur Bedeutung und Funktion des Ursprungs in der Ordnung der Genealogie* [*Genesis and Genealogy. On the Signification and Function of the Origin in the Order of Genealogy*] (Kadmos, Berlin, 2013) and the book “*Sonniges Georgien*” – *Figuration des Nationalen im Sowjet imperium* [*Sunny Georgia’ Figurations of the National in the Soviet Empire*] (co-authored with Franziska Thun-Hohenstein, Kadmos, Berlin, 2014) as well as many articles both in German and in Georgian dealing mostly with questions of genealogy, Soviet culture and the formation of national and imperial identities. Far from claiming scientific, “cool,” objectivity, the essays of the three Georgian collections deploy an emotionally charged individual perspective on the Soviet and post-Soviet past with a pretention towards universal validity.

During the presentation of the book, Maisuradze said that he conceived the collection in the immediate wake of the violent events of 17<sup>th</sup> of May, 2013, when thousands of people, led by priests of the Georgian Ortho-

dox Church, attacked a small rally celebrating the International Day Against Homophobia. In fact, the stress on phobias and generally on the affective dimensions of post-Soviet Georgian politics and society which is the dominant leitmotif of the collection can also be considered as the trait that distinguishes it from the former two collections which dealt mostly with the same issues.

The very first two essays, – “The Paradigm of the 9<sup>th</sup> of April” and “Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s Apotheosis” – are among the most original contributions to the analysis of the genealogy of post-Soviet Georgian identity and establish the tone as well as the methodological framework for the whole collection. Maisuradze declares that the trauma of the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, 1989, when Russian troops massacred the anti-Soviet demonstration assembled on the Rustaveli avenue in Tbilisi “was the act of creation of the community of people called the ‘modern Georgian nation’ and [that] this event could be understood through mythological or mythopoetic configurations and paradigms, rather than through political or juridical theories” (p. 14). The birth of the new collective body of Georgians after the erosion of the Soviet socialist collective body is described as an event born out of a deeply traumatic experience of bloodshed, helplessness and the loss of an all-encompassing existential-political meaning – a veritable *Trauerarbeit* spontaneously and exemplarily expressed through a myriad of anonymous poems that could be found on trees across Tbilisi the day after the massacre. As if imitating the affective, pre-linguistic dimensions of the cosmogony of the new Georgian reality which he describes, Maisuradze starts his analysis with the evocation of his own wonderment in the face of the chaotic commotion of yet unknown energies which he witnessed on the streets of Tbilisi after the bloodshed. However, this very depiction of the affective uproar becomes part of the formation of a greater conceptual *tableau*, which mobilizes the scientific tools sharpened by Maisuradze during the work on his dissertation on genealogical and cosmogonical myths as paradigms of the formation of identity. This *tableau* provides us with a history of a particular, historically situated affective configuration – a pictorial conceptualization of the birth of post-Soviet Georgian politics out of the affect of blood.

This new national body as a sanguine community of martyrs desperately fighting against larger forces of Evil, comforts itself through the religious-messianic model of the crucifixion and future resurrection of the Georgian nation. This community expresses its intentions through a poetico-religious vocabulary rather than through rational political argumentation. As a form of non-argumentative, pathetic discourse, poetico-religious rhetoric may still be considered to be dominant in popular/populist Georgian politics. This is evidently the legacy of the mythopoetic, non-rational discourse of the anti-

Soviet liberation movement developed under the leadership of the first President of independent Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, whom Maisuradze sees as a bizarre mixture of a political leader and a high priest (p. 27).

Maisuradze links this non-rational, non-rationalizable element of Georgian politics to the fascistic, sacrificial affect of sanguine communities through which a certain cosmogonic cycle launches and permanently reenacts itself. There are two main phenomena which attest to the author's diagnosis that the ultimate symbolical and existential horizon of Georgian society is still governed by its own reaffirmations through sacrificial rituals (when either one's own blood or the blood of the excluded Other must be shed in order to relaunch the cosmogonic cycle and identitary integrity) and/or by means of the recurrence to mythopoetic and religious imagery and rhetoric.

For Maisuradze, the return of sacrificial affect is exemplarily represented by the events of 17th of May, 2013 which is at the center of at least eight essays in the middle section of the book. This is where things get slightly repetitive, as if Maisuradze, caught up in a compulsion of repetition, revisits, if not invokes, the traumatic event of May 17 over and over again, condemning the crime, vehemently prophesying the fall of Babylon (= the corrupt Orthodox Church) like Jeremiah, lamenting the deafness of the hoi poloi towards the prophecy of doom (= the intellectual's call to reason) like Cassandra, only to find himself blocked in categorical, affirmative denunciations, as if the subject of fear and condemnation remained unapproachable. However, there are five paths Maisuradze treads in order to gain at least partial understanding of the catastrophe of May 17 as well as of the reasons for the almost supranational power the Georgian Orthodox Church has attained over the last decade. These are: 1. the model of a fascistic majority producing its identity through the immolative exclusion of a discriminated minority; 2. the release of excessive libidinal energies successfully manipulated mainly by the Orthodox Church, an institution known for consciously diffusing obscurantism as a main condition for the obedience of non-emancipated masses; 3. a historical analysis of the transformation of Christianity into an instrument of political power and persecution as well as a certain diagnosis of modern Georgian political theology in terms of a profound reciprocal echoing between the common place image of a severe punishing God and the political affective longing for total submission to an "iron hand"; 4. the fundamental supposition that within Georgian Orthodox culture there are no proper ethics, i.e. no true freedom, because it lacks a rational, responsible acknowledgment of the necessity of personal choice between good and evil, due to the complete reliance of Orthodox subjectivity on external rituals to be fulfilled blindly. This amounts to the historic lack of a passage through the cathartic fire of any-

thing similar to the Reformation, i.e. the return of the religious into the immanence of everyday life, and/or to Enlightenment, i.e. the emancipation of the individual towards self-responsibility and self-reflectivity. 5. The underdevelopment of self-reflection exposes what one may call prelogic mimetic dimensions of mentality when the subject is incapable of rationally distinguishing himself from the (feared) object and has nothing left than to destroy it in order to erase the pre-diacritic similarity, if not unity, of subject and object.

The long essay “The System Must be Demolished” is the theoretically most consistent text of the entire collection. It tries to explain the interplay between power, sexuality and taboos that lay at the heart of the nearly irrational scale of the prison tortures. Maisuradze refers to Agamben to explain that this crime was a logical consequence of the permanent state of exception as imposed by Saakashvili’s revolutionary government, producing extra-legal areas and situations for the unpunishable violence against the *homo sacer*. In terms of future scientific in-depth analysis comprising of the fields of gender studies, cultural anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis and political philosophy, one may wish for a more explicit link between the overtly sexual content of both the torture as well as the public’s reaction to it and the events of May 17, in order to understand to what extent the ideals of masculine sexual domination and dominant social and political paradigms in contemporary Georgian society reciprocally determine each other.

The third cluster of essays comprises an evaluation of the state of contemporary Georgian (artistic and intellectual) culture as a frail body permanently constricted by two hegemonic powers, Georgian politics and the Georgian Orthodox Church. This set of essays also serves as a general judgment on the entire period of Saakashvili’s government. On the one hand, Maisuradze reveals that Saakashvili’s recurrence to the mythopoetic rhetoric of the fight of St. George against the Evil Dragon particularly on the 12th of August 2008, amidst the distress and helplessness in the face of Russian invasion, was no mere metaphor, but the reanimation of the sanguine-martyrological paradigm launched by Gamsakhurdia. On the other hand, Maisuradze tries to analyse the notorious Saakashvilian ideological and architectural kitsch in terms of what he calls a political regime’s “aesthetic formation”, “a unity of particular expressive signs connected to a specific political system as its aesthetic imprint.” The author claims that the “aesthetics created by the political system reveals itself as the very expression of the system’s content, as the articulation not only of its ideological but also of its mental order. Therefore, the analysis of a system from the perspective of its aesthetics turns out to be more illuminating than the analysis of its economic or juridical foundations” (p. 165). This may be seen as an honest methodological caveat on

the part of an intellectual with no false pretensions of expertise in economics or law, although the essays also heavily stress the problem of social injustice as perpetuated and masked by various hegemonic ideological configurations. Maisuradze repeatedly emphasizes the social hegemony of the Georgian Orthodox Church which was perpetuated since the 1990's by means of a permanent influx into the Church of the economic capital and the spiritual transfiguration of the new, suspiciously enriched, financial elites (a process which unfolded in parallel to the degree of the impoverishment of the masses).

However, it would be incorrect to claim that Maisuradze's proposition to decipher the political structures through its aesthetic aspect amounts to a cultural Marxist approach following, for example, the Benjaminian methodological thesis that "the developmental tendencies" in the aesthetic superstructure lay bare "the present conditions of production"<sup>1</sup> which, for Benjamin, acts as the justification for the theoretical concentration on art and culture in general, rather than on the economic "basis". For, nowhere in Maisuradze's text is a reference to the determining character of the (Marxist) "basis" to be found. At one point Maisuradze even mentions that using socio-economic misery as an explanation for the events of May 17 proves insufficient. (p. 79). Rather than venturing into specific questions of economic oppression, Maisuradze develops a multi-faceted analysis of the cultural ideological strategies of the political, economic and religious elites and invokes the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony (p. 47) as a configuration of ideas and beliefs that, although imposed with the aim of maintaining the socio-economic status quo, nevertheless possesses a certain independence which distinguishes it from the Benjaminian model of a nearly direct mirroring of the economic structures in the very forms and content of aesthetic, cultural phenomena.

Maisuradze goes on to analyze the already mentioned Saakashvillian pervasive aesthetics in an essay about imposing the aesthetic-political hegemony of a new kind of civil American-style nationalism with a bias in the idea that Georgians are the most ancient Europeans. Therefore, Saakashvili re-fashions the Georgian architectural heritage with a pseudo-European complexion and substitutes the aesthetics of European-esque facades for a proper politics of Europeanization, i.e. democratization of the political, social and judiciary systems. Though, far from being a totalitarian regime, Saakashvili's aesthetization of politics, the formation of what we could call the state as a "total work of art" in the sense of Boris Groys<sup>23</sup> or Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe<sup>4</sup> succeeds only as the expression of the aesthetic caprices of a governor which, instead of transforming or annihilating the undesirable elements of society, simply masks them with a Potemkin façade.

Because the Soviet intelligentsia managed to survive during Shevardnadze's government inertially continuing to use their past cultural-artistic aesthetic expressive forms and intentions, it does not surprise Maisuradze that at his arrival Saakashvili managed to oust artists from the cultural sphere and invade the entire social space with his own theatricized politics. Since Georgian culture had never had the habit of producing its own systems of meaning which had always been provided by bigger centres of political and ideological powers like Soviet Moscow, Georgian culture had constructed a whole language of political allegories and "hidden meanings." But after the gaining of independence, representatives of the cultural field found themselves deprived of their (negative) source of creativity and proved incapable of finding new paradigms. Since they continued to perpetuate the old pathos and the veiled heroism of allegorical art, they involuntarily transformed their own culture into "a caricature without context" (p. 166). The erosion of artistic meaningfulness went along with the bankruptcy of the Georgian intellectual culture which, according to Maisuradze, always had lacked sovereignty, preferring rather to content itself with the re-active, if not reactionary, state of the state-manipulated intelligentsia, from the "Red intelligentsia" up to the intellectuals of Saakashvili's own "Rose intelligentsia".

The collection, a permanent negotiation between the personal and the public, successfully mediated in the essayistic genre, should not be read in terms of a scientific work. However, one wishes that it would motivate a scientific questioning of the factors necessary for the birth of a new sovereign artistic and intellectual culture to both of which Maisuradze has the ambition of contributing his own share of fiction and theory.

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### Notes:

- 1 Benjamin, W., Jennings, M., Doherty, B., Levin, T. and Jephcott, E., 2008. *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. P.19
- 2 Groys, B., 1992. *The total art of Stalinism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- 3 Groys, B., 2008. *Art power*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- 4 Lacoue-Labarthe, P., 1990. *Heidegger, Art, and Politics*. Oxford, OX, UK: B. Blackwell.