

## **Satenik Mkrtchyan**

### **Field Report**

For a young social scientist from the post-Soviet Caucasus, these two weeks of intensive library work, professional guidance and meetings with relevant specialists in the field, along with assistance from graduate students and professors, were useful for compiling a comprehensive reading list, syllabus and a preliminary literature review on the topic of ethnic identity. This report begins with an etymology of "ethnicity" as a concept. Then, I go on to discuss sociological perspectives on nation, ethnicity, and identity. Furthermore, I discuss ethnic socialization issues, focusing on education and identity. Lastly, in a small section, titled "Hypothesis for Future Research," I address some anthropological and cultural perspectives related to identity in Georgia and Armenia.

As is the case with any other concept, "ethnic identity" or "ethnicity" also needs to be defined before outlining theoretical concepts regarding it. This is how the term is defined in *The Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations*: "The actual term [ethnicity] derives from the Greek *ethnikos*, the adjective of *ethnos*. This refers to a people or nation. In its contemporary form, ethnic still retains this basic meaning in the sense that it describes a group possessing some degree of coherence and solidarity composed of people who are, at least latently, aware of having common origins and interests" (Cashmore, Banton, and Adam 1996: 102). The term was used in the 1840s by Lloyd Warner and his colleagues and soon appeared in the *Oxford Dictionary*. Max Weber's definition has kept its significance throughout the whole period since the term's introduction: "Those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation; furthermore it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists" (qtd. In Roth and Wittich 1978: 389). Frederick Barth's book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Differences* (1969) alerted scholars to the fact that understanding the word "ethnic" as referring to groups of people who are considered to have a shared identity, a common history, and a

traditional culture heritage,” though being true, needs to be modified to give a basis for analyzing and understanding ethnic phenomena: “something like mechanisms, not for descriptions of manifest forms” (Barth 1998: 5). Derived from Fredrik Barth’s work, ethnicity is conceptualized as “group identity that is essentially fluid depending upon how the boundaries of an ethnic group are drawn in a specific context, and hence, the precise content of ethnic identity is defined in relation to distinct external stimuli” (Stack 1986: 5). Another specific concept belongs to Geertz’s concept of culturally generated “ethnic bonds” (“givens”) – blood ties, language, territory, and cultural differences – which provides a new vision in contrast to the previous ethnicity studies. As Anthony Smith mentions, according to Geertz “ethnicity is not in itself primordial, but humans perceive it as such because it is embedded in their experience of the world” (Smith 1999: 13). This very brief passage on the historical background of the concept of ethnicity allows us to get closer to outlining the approaches and theoretical concepts in the social sciences.

The concept of identity, of course, is not only sociological or anthropological but is linked to concepts in other sub-sets of literature. One can find many ideas related to identity in the notions of “social goals” (Goffman), “subjectivity” (Michel Foucault or Judith Butler), “consciousness” (Marxist literature), and “habitus” (Pierre Bourdieu). A more in-depth understanding of these related concepts would provide for a broader understanding of identity as a concept.

In Western social science, however, discussion falls into two camps, with one school subscribing to a primordialist (essentialist) view, which is not currently popular, and the second emphasizing the notion of social construction. Thus, the main approaches vary in their focus on the factors important for understanding ethnicity. One centralizes “objectivist” factors, such as common language, culture, territory, history, religion, and the other subjectivist aspects. The primordialists, such as Van den Berghe, stress the role of “natural” factors, such as lineage and cultural ties, in determining ethnicity. To primordialists, it is the in born bonds that give rise to and sustain ethnicity (Yang 2000: 1042). Within this approach, there are two perspectives: the sociobiological, which gives a decisive role in determining ethnicity to kinship, and the culturalist, which says that

common culture (language and religion) is important in determining membership. For constructionists, ethnicity is more imaginary and constructed rather than innate. Benedict Anderson (1983) presents the concept of imagined community, stating that a nation is a community that is socially constructed. In other words, people imagine themselves as belonging to a nation.

A third approach, which is comparatively new but re-specifies the old debate between primordialists and circumstantialists, presents a cognitive turn in the study of ethnicity. As introduced by Rogers Brubaker, cognitive perspectives try to conceptualize ethnicity (also race and nation) as a perspective on the world rather than a thing. “How do people get these categories?” is the question which becomes significant within the framework of this approach. This question has two major variations of answers, one of them looks towards the state (census, legal terminology, passports and other relevant forms of classification), and the other one studies everyday life (informal context, everyday discourse and conversations, social interactions and network, self-presentation) to find out how these categories are constituted.

Ethnic identity formation processes are also in line with children’s ethnic socialization as “the ways in which ethnic group membership affects development. Ethnic socialization refers to the developmental processes by which children acquire the behaviors, perceptions, values, and attitudes of an ethnic group, and come to see themselves and others as members of such groups” (Phinney and Rotherdam 1986: 11). Rotherdam and Phinney (1986) define ethnic identity as one’s sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one’s thinking, perceptions, feelings, and behavior that is due to ethnic membership. They also differentiate ethnicity and ethnic identity based on the fact that the first is about the group patterns and the latter refers to the individual’s acquisition of group patterns. The school is one of the institutions within which some parts of ethnic socialization take place.

There are several key texts on the topic of education and identity. The first important study is Eriksen’s (1993) anthropological perspective on ethnicity and his discussion of history, ideology, and modern education. In addition, two works by Shnilerman (1998) are key: one related mainly to historical myths,

national ideas, schools and historiographies in Russia and Transcaucasia and the other on national histories in the Soviet and post-Soviet states. In his article, Sergey Rumyantsev (2008) discusses maps in school textbooks in Azerbaijan and Georgia, and Arthur Mkrtchyan's (2007) analysis of identity politics practices employed in Armenian schools tries to establish to what extent the current Armenian state is a modern one.

Eriksen's (1993) book, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, provides another perspective on ethnicity construction, namely anthropological perspectives of identity in everyday life where ethnicity is created and recreated through people's subjective perceptions of historical processes. This approach demonstrates how the seemingly natural categories of nation and ethnicity are historical, contextual, and socially constructed. In the first chapter, Eriksen discusses the term through different approaches and mentions that all examined approaches agree that ethnicity has something to do with the classification of people and group relationships. The chapters called "History and Ideology" and "Modern Education and Ethnic Identity" are quite relevant to the theme of ethnic construction. In "History and Ideology," he says that "knowledge of one's own history (whether fabricated or not) can be highly important in the fashioning of ethnic identity. Genealogies, both personal and cultural ones, are always written in selective ways – both for political and other reasons" (72). Furthermore, Eriksen discusses the differences between anthropological and historical approaches, mentioning that "while many historians tend to try to find out what really happened – most anthropologists would rather concentrate on showing the ways which particular historical accounts are used as tools in the contemporary creation of identities and in politics. Anthropologists would stress that history is not a product of the past but a response to requirements of the present. For that reason, this discussion of history relates not to the past but to the present" (72).

In the chapter "Modern Education and Ethnic Identity," the author mentions that a "uniform educational system covering large areas greatly facilitates the development of abstract identifications with a category of people whom one will never meet... It enables a large number of people to learn, simultaneously, which

ethnic group they belong to and what are the cultural characteristics of that group. Mass education can be a deficient aid in the establishment of standardized reifications of culture, which are essential in the legitimation of ethnic identities. Mass produced accounts of ‘our people’ or ‘our culture’ are important tools in the fashioning of an ethnic identity with a presumed cultural continuity in time” (92). This concept can be used to understand how the school system, via history textbooks and history teaching, contributes to the “fashioning” of identity among schoolchildren in Armenia and Georgia. Also, it is useful to discuss the extent to which program development, textbook creation, teaching practices and curricula are uniform and standardized across schools in the same country (nation-state as a political unit).

The issues of ethno-politics, historical memory representation, and history teaching in post-Soviet states have been discussed in Shnirelman’s work. Namely, in one of his online articles, “Russian School and National Idea,” he discusses the issues of historical education in secondary schools in post-Soviet Russia and the ways it is used to fit the new reality, specifically through the combination of different interpretations of the same historical event. Shnirelman’s (2000) other work, *The Value of the Past: Myths. Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia*, refers to the role of historiography and perceptions of history in ethnic conflicts and may help in discussing history teaching in Armenia and Georgia.

Another relevant work is the collection of papers published in Russian in 1999 and edited by Airmaher and Bordyugov, called *National Histories in the Soviet and Post-Soviet States*. In general, the book seeks to answer several questions related to history and its representation, and in particular how modern historians assess events of the past. What are the main directions of the historical sciences in Russia and in post-Soviet states? How does a new view of the past influence the relations between nations and states? Specifically, the article on Georgia by Anchabadze argues that the tradition of the ancient national statehood has had a crucial role in shaping the Georgian identity. And, this is the reason, Anchabadze says, why the medieval kings “The State Builders,” and especially the history of the first Republic (1918-1921), get special attention. The

article on Armenia by Iskandaryan and Harutyunyan, titled “Armenia: Gharabaghization of the National History,” discusses historical mythologies, which hold particular value in the national and cultural identity of Armenians, especially the image of the “Christian people surrounded by enemies” (Iskandaryan and Harutyunyan 1999:148). Moreover, the authors think that the current foreign policy issues and the conflict in Mountainous Gharabagh have resulted in some kind of “gharabaghization” of history, shifting the focus from the genocide issue to proving that people are autochthon.

Post-Soviet history and issues related to teaching it are further addressed in another collection of articles by the same editors published in 2002 in Russian. The collection is titled, *Historians Read the Textbooks of History: Traditional and New Concepts of Educational Literature*. Another very interesting article is by Sergey Rumyantsev (2008) titled, “Ethnic Territories: Presentation Practices in Historical Textbooks in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan and Georgia,” which is based on an analysis of maps in post-Soviet secondary school textbooks. This is how the author summarizes the results: “It is possible as early as in secondary school to get an idea about ‘our national territories’ which were lost due to neighbors’ intrigues. The textbooks do not present the fact that representatives of different communities lived in the same territory during different historical periods. As an ideal model of the ‘historical motherland,’ they offer pupils only a map of the period of maximum enlargement of the political borders of the state. The map of present-day borders, on the contrary, is called upon to cause a sense of loss regarding a considerable part of ‘our’ territories. Thus, although the cartographical discourse in the relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia is not aimed at topical territorial disputes, it still has an element of territorial claims with regard to all neighboring countries, which could easily be actualized in the future” (811). Comparing the maps of the two countries, the author writes: “I believe that the version of historical borders presented in post-soviet Georgian history textbooks is capable of conveying the authors’ logic about the ‘correct’ state more successfully to the pupils than the Azerbaijani version. The Georgian version is externally non-contradictory and constantly pushes the pupil to think about and compare the present-day and ‘historical’ state of affairs” (819).

According to another publication, maps “became a political force” in the South Caucasian societies. Thus, the specific features of their production in the post-Soviet times should be analyzed while taking into consideration “the identity of map makers and map users, and their perceptions of the act of making and using maps in a socially constructed world” (Harley 2001: 54-56). Rumyantsev titled the Georgia related part of the article “Georgia: Czars – The Land Collectors,” which presents the logic reflected in the textbooks as follows: “The most important merit of any given czar is the enlargement of the borders of the Georgian state” (Rumyantsev 2008: 822).

Artur Mkrtychyan’s article published in the book *Representations on the Margins of Europe: Politics and Identities in the Baltic and South Caucasian States* (2007) is relevant to the general theme of my research. The key article is titled “Armenian Statehood and the Problems of European Integration as Reflected in School Education.” The author uses Habermas’ description of the modern state to say that “the modern state arose as an administrative and tax state and a territorial state endowed with sovereignty that could develop into a democratic state of law and welfare within the context of the nation state” (Mkrtychyan 2007: 196). Thereafter, he tries to establish to what extent the current Armenian state is a modern one. More specifically, he solves this issue through an analysis of the practices of identity politics employed in Armenian schools. In the concluding part, he writes that “the Republic of Armenia, as reflected in state school education, is neither a legal, welfare, national, nor territorial state in the usual sense. The current Armenian state is only a taxation state and has formed itself out of the Soviet system of command” (Mkrtychyan 2007: 204). The author describes how important the state schools are in the process of identity formation throughout the overall circle of socialization relating to the psychological phenomenon of imprinting, the basis of which lies in the fact that there are particular emotional stages of life when what is seen and learned can no longer be forgotten. The age group of 9 to 13 is the most important emotional stage for children's primary political socialization (195).

The most relevant part of the article to be used for this research is Mkrtychyan's field work model<sup>1</sup> and discussion of identity politics in post-Soviet Armenian secondary schools. He argues that identity politics are based ethno-cultural and historical ideas rather than on the concept of nation-state with its civic dimensions.

While discussing the problems of the constitutional and welfare state, the author states the following:

1. Analysis of the material and the schoolwork reveals that pre-state ethno-cultural presuppositions of national unity are much better and more frequently elucidated than the mechanisms of social solidarity.

2. The formation of the "pre-state" perceptions reinforcing the ethno-cultural and historical peculiarities of Armenians in the identity of schoolchildren continues to play the most important role, as in the continuance of traditional educational policy. Yet it appears that the current Armenian school system has not been able to cope with the problems associated with teaching a consciousness of legal and social justice.

3. In the schools examined, it became clear that not very much space is devoted to the topic of current national statehood in decorating the classrooms with pictures and visual aids. Armenian history and cultural accomplishments are frequently depicted, but the symbolism of the nation-state has taken the secondary role (198-199).

The author goes on to present the following components, formed and anchored by identity politics in Armenian schools, in the structure of schoolchildren's national identity: "they are members of a people dispersed throughout the world, which 'lost' a large part of its territory as a result of genocide. They represent the legacy of a great 1700-year old Christian culture and a pagan culture almost twice as old, embracing very valuable nation and human cultural goods, especially since the invention of Armenian alphabet by Mesrop Mashtots" (200). Regarding the time period used by the current identity

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<sup>1</sup> In 2006 I conducted 30 interviews with school teachers and principals in five different schools in Yerevan and Abovyan and two focus groups with school children. I also analyzed the relevant publications about school education, official documents, lesson plans from the state middle schools for 2004-2005, and children's schoolbooks, essays, drawings, and craftworks. The practices of identity politics were also visible in school names, exhibits, wall newspapers, etc. (196).

politics, the author says: “the schools reinforce the cult of the fallen heroes and political leaders of earlier eras and of recent history. In many schools there is a special gallery room named for historical national heroes (for example, G. Njdeh room). Yet the present and the future have been pushed into the background of school practices and are hardly given any space either in schoolbooks or in wall decorations or outside events” (201-202).

The author devotes a part of the article to the concept and representation of “Our Land” in the schoolbooks. He mainly discusses the mythical ancestor of the Armenians “Haik” introduced to the schoolchildren right in the A-B-C book. He also shows the way the “the whole territory of the Armenian Highlands is ethnicized and perceived as a fatherland. This conception of territorial commonality is a very important basis of national identity” (202).

The following passages conclude the theme:

1. The colorful pictures of the historical homeland in school books present themselves as holy land, as the land of the Armenian kings and great poets, and thus as “our land.”

2. The reconstruction and reconfiguration of the “lost homeland” by means of artistic and literary school exercises occupies a large space in the practices of school education. Strictly speaking, Armenia is not perceived as a territorial state.

3. Rather the perception is much more of a state that could not attain its complete territorial sovereignty due to the genocide.

4. In school education the roots of the current problems are very often sought in the tragic history of the Armenian people (203-204).

### **Hypotheses for Future Research**

Three general points regarding Armenian and Georgian identities have surfaced as a result of this two week stay at UC Berkeley, which of course need further research:

- to apply the notion of ethno-nationalism,<sup>2</sup> as suggested by Anthony Smith, to “non-Western” concepts of nationalism.
- to keep in mind that both Armenia and Georgia have a long history and most modern approaches leave the antiquity and medieval period phenomena out. In this sense, Smith’s (1995) article “National Identities: Modern and Medieval?” where he discusses ethnic and national identities in Antiquity and Medieval Europe is very interesting and applicable to these two cases as well. Another interesting topic requiring further research is to see how the constructivist approach or concepts of the “cognitive turn” can fit into the ancient and medieval periods of Armenian and Georgian history (e.g. Hobsbawn’s concept of “invention of tradition”).
- to discuss current Armenian and Georgian realities, while acknowledging that post-Soviet successor states have retained many continuities from the Soviet context, and that it is the researcher’s task to take that period into account in a study of post-Soviet identities.

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<sup>2</sup>However, in case of Georgia, the multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition of the modern Georgian Republic (according to the 2002 census results in Georgia which does not include Abkhazia and South Ossetia): 83.7 percent Georgians and 83.9 percent Orthodox Church believers) could give some space for those who might make this argument.

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