

Review - The Bivocal Nation

Written by Stéphane Voell

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STÉPHANE VOELL, JAN 28 2020

The Bivocal Nation: Memory and Identity on the Edge of Empire
By Nutsa Batiashvili
Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

Another book on Georgian national identity? I had to admit that I was not eager to read another publication on this topic. In such texts on Georgia, the frequent references to national identity appear like toasts during a traditional banquet: eloquent appraisals of the motherland and its people with their splendid past. Therefore, when starting this book by Nutsa Batiashvili I was expecting another. I discovered, however, an impressive deconstruction of these kinds of 'toasts'. I found a critical analysis of self-portrayal in Georgian narratives of national identity, which helps us understand the structure of such 'toasts' to the motherland in textbooks, historiography, opinions of local academics, and essays from pupils. Batiashvili was originally trained as a social psychologist and holds a PhD in anthropology. After fellowships in the UK and the US she was one of the few researchers that went back to Georgia to continue her academic career in the Caucasus. With her book, she holds a mirror to academic narratives on national identity in her country.

From various oral and written narratives, Batiashvili extracts a form of master narrative, consisting of a common set of themes used in national self-portrayals of the history of Georgia. The Kingdom adopted Christianity in the fourth century. During Georgia's Golden Age between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, Georgia achieved its greatest territorial expansion and reached the pinnacle of its power. Its decline was forced, among other reasons, by the Mongol invasion. In the nineteenth century, Georgia was incorporated in the Russian Empire, and, after a short period of independence, into the Soviet Union. The master narrative is structured as follows: While Georgia is at risk of territorial disintegration, a new enemy, powerful but less cultured, appears. Devout Christians thwart the overpowering foe and resist external domination. However, internal weakness initially impedes the nation's liberation. Once these divisions are surmounted, Georgia ultimately frees itself from foreign dominance.

The goal of Batiashvili's book is not to screen national narratives for variations of these themes, but to examine how these are used. She introduces the concept of 'bivocality', referring to a 'discursive strategy', which is both using and producing memory narratives. Bivocal narratives oscillate between self-idealization and self-condemnation, which she describes as form of 'Georgianness'. With bivocality Batiashvili aims to present a fresh perspective on how a nation is imagined. She builds on Benedict Anderson's concept of a nation as an 'imagined community', but his approach of an imagined 'deep, horizontal comradeship' is, for Batiashvili, insufficient to grasp the contrariness of the narratives. In Georgia, the nation is imagined between unity and rupture, between an ideal and a flawed image. The 'internal disglissia' is, however, not divisive; on the contrary, it forges the nation.

Batiashvili develops her argument along the themes of 'voice', 'dialogism' and 'memory game', which are rather metaphoric frames, based on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of utterance. These themes structure the book in three parts. The section 'voices' (a nation consists of a dialogue of different voices) starts with a chapter on the discussion of a meeting of academics planning to publish a new textbook on Georgian history. In the second chapter, Batiashvili first discusses the difference between history and memory, defining the latter as a cultural resource for the cohesion of the nation. In history textbooks published in the years 1974, 1992, and 2001 the author shows how publications use the same themes to maintain the Georgian bivocal narrative.

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The second section of the book is entitled 'dialogism', pointing directly at the bivocalism, the simultaneity of two poles, the self-idealizing and self-condemning, and more concretely the conversation in memory narratives with an imagined other. The first example, in chapter three, are essays from pupils. Batiashvili demonstrates how the pupils use memory as a structuring framework and 'sense-making mechanism' to write about contemporary issues. Themes from the Georgian master narrative are displayed as unquestioned realities and used as cornerstones for their own points of view. In the fourth chapter, Batiashvili explores the origin of bivocalism in the national movement of the nineteenth century. The focus is on the figure of Ilia Chavchavadze, who sets the tone of the master narrative up until the present day. The writer and political figure Chavchavadze was the leading protagonist of the national movement of the nineteenth century. Batiashvili explains, with reference to historic events, how Chavchavadze's Georgian national imaginary was constructed. She details how, in this narrative, Georgians survived invasions, responded bravely, but also occasionally demonstrated internal weaknesses.

The third section is entitled 'memory game', which is understood as a rule-based communicative process (borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'language game'). The fifth chapter gets back to history textbooks and a so-called 'textbook war'. Batiashvili describes the textbook projects of the Saakashvili government, and the positions of 'traditionalist' historians that oppose government policy. According to Batiashvili, the at first glance contradictory positions of a 'modern', more 'Western' textbook in comparison to traditionalist history-writing are in fact both part of the same memory game, using the same bivocal motives and strategies – similar even to the narratives of nineteenth-century nationalists. The sixth chapter goes back to the discussion of academics in the first chapter and interrelates this project of history textbooks (or the plans to write them) to some other authors and experts on textbooks. The final, concluding chapter is in fact just another chapter with a new subtopic. In 1883, King Erekle II signed the Treaty of Georgievsk with the Russian Tsar, in which Georgia became a protectorate of Russia. Erekle II feared invasions and accepted the protectorate of the Russian Empire, which had to guarantee Georgia's protection and territorial integrity. However, Russia only partly abided by the treaty and later annexed the Georgian kingdom. Batiashvili scrutinizes the political reactions of this decision with her bivocal framework.

Batiashvili has a clear narrative writing style. She frequently interweaves empirical data with theoretical discussions. However, the core argument of the book, concerning the bivocality of the themes and the uses of memory between self-idealizing and self-condemning, is referred to throughout the book in a perhaps somewhat inflated manner. I think that Batiashvili's 'bivocality' is possibly a little too binary to grasp the complexity of the references to the master narratives, but the author herself does at various times address the complexity and multivocality of these narratives.

In this context, one should also consider that the nation 'Georgia' – as this book is entitled 'bivocal nation' – is not only a nation for Georgians. I think that part of the mentioned metanarrative omits the heterogeneity of this region. Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and many others reside in the country and contribute to the imagination of the nation. The narratives of imaginations of the nation by minorities are not discussed. This book is an important contribution to the analysis of contradictory imaginations of the nation in Georgia. It shows how pupils to academics all take part in the same 'memory game', but the question of what happens if someone breaks out of this 'game' and does not contribute to the postulated 'bivocal nation' remains.

About the author:

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