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Limits and Potentials of Tbilisi's Youth Culture

Field Report

BA4 European Metropolitan Regions

**Tbilisi: the politics of capitalist transition and everyday practices of reclaiming
urban space**

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1. Introduction

In the night of the 11th of May, one year after the lifestyle media platform “Vice” published an article titled “Is This Georgian Club the new Berghain?”, Georgian police forces raided Bassiani and Café Gallery, two of the most influential clubs within Tbilisi’s rave scene. The article compares Berlin’s most famous club with Tbilisi’s Bassiani, stating their astonishing resemblance, explaining the harsh drug policies of the Georgian state and the struggles of the LGBTIQ community to a broader audience. What did not catch the interest of an international audience at the time, has now gained more followers and publicity (Hanna: 2017). On the 12th of May 2018, thousands of people assembled in front of the parliament and expressed resistance through a collective dance protest. The protests have shown that there are many people affected by a political and social norms that strongly differs from their own. In response, a counter demonstration of violent right-wing groups with ties to the orthodox church was mobilized, aiming to end the rave in front of the parliament. After an official statement by the government, claiming the police couldn’t protect the Bassiani protest attendants any longer, the demonstration dissolved. The clubs were reopened one week later. The raids themselves do not only seem questionable but also like a power demonstration by the government to remind the community of their place within the neo liberal state, meaning that they are tolerated as long as their activities take place in the realm of night-time economics. The support diminishes, as soon as they confront the state with actual political demands. The government’s tolerance to the LGTBQ community is in that sense clearly driven by the aim of establishing Georgia as a competitor within the European/Western economic hemisphere. The night-life culture struggles to overcome the division between business-oriented politics and their actual political aims, as the protests around the closings were widely misunderstood by the majority of the mostly Christian-orthodox Georgian society.

Demands like sexual liberation and a new drug policy do not seem to be collectively adaptable for those struggling with their material needs on a daily basis. The economic and educational gap between the middle-class protesters and their opponents is therefore one of the key factors that prevent their ideals from being understood (OC Media 2018). Many of the problems Georgia faces today seem to be rooted in its history. The challenges of the transition from a Soviet republic to an independent state is manifested not only economically but also identity-wise. The soviet past was erased and replaced by Western norms and values, oriented towards marketization and a neoliberal economy, but failing to provide social and economic security for the majority of Georgia's citizens. In the transition to a post-soviet state, the church provided an identity-forming power which is one of the main reasons for their heavy influence on public opinion nowadays (Mebagishvili 2012: 2).

These recent events prove the potential of spaces like Bassiani etc. to be hubs for expanding "political/artistic" action into the public sphere. The question we want to examine, concerns the limits and potentials of the current cultural movement in Tbilisi.

2. State of the Art and Theoretical Framework

The relevance of contributing to the current discourse emerged while analyzing a variety of online articles that concern Tbilisi's Youth Culture and we felt the lack of a scientific perspective. An article in the online magazine "PostPravda" framed Tbilisi's social movement as a "counter-culture", which seemed to be an interesting term in regards to our research topic. Therefore, we looked up different explanations of the term and found the concept definition by Yinger and Westhues, published in 1972. They delineate the "movement of hippiedom" in the 1960's as the first counter-culture. According to them, the characteristics of counter culture are defined as „[...] a set of beliefs and values which radically reject the dominant culture of a society and prescribe a sectarian alternative. [...] a group of people who, because they accept such beliefs and values, behave in such radically nonconformist ways that they tend to drop out of society" (Westhues 1972: 9f). In their understanding counter-cultural movements are "situationally created designs for living formed in contexts of high anomie and intersocietal conflict, the designs being inversions of, in sharp oppositions to the historically created designs." (Yinger 1982: 39-40).

In order to not simply apply a fifty-year-old theory to the modern context of Tbilisi, which is different in both its locality and history, we saw the necessity to draw on literature, incorporating a so called 'post-socialist condition':

[...]a condition perhaps signalled by most of the countries joining the EU in recent years, and what some commentators and economists have termed as a period of transition and incredibly catch-up Modernism(!), indicating that we will afterwards enter a new phase, no longer post-socialist or in transition, but something else, presumably the endless equilibrium of market economy, capital and liberal democracies (Sheikh in: Jordan/Miles 2008: 69).

The aim of our work was therefore to contextualize Yinger's and Westhues's idea of counter-culture. Andy Bennett's "Reappraising Counter Culture" (2012) provides a more recent approach to the subject, arguing for a re-examination of the term. Still, he considers aspects such as the importance of music and a focus on the middle-class youth (as the main participants) to be continuously relevant. He also refers to Giddens, describing how identities are not only inherited but even influenced and limited by cultural commodities. An analysis of "who builds a social movement" therefore needs to observe how some people get to hold opposing values and why others, who might be even more oppressed, do not (Bennett 2012: 6f).

Although the definition of the term "counter-culture" and Bennett's reappraisal were helpful for a better understanding of opposing youth cultures, they do not seem to provide a basis for further discussion. The argument about the differences between counter- and sub-culture bewilders a discourse on the conflicts mentioned above. These approaches are closely linked to the 1968 movement and lack an embedded analysis of the material conditions nowadays, making them too narrow in their perspective. Hence, to acquire a more critical concept for a further discussion of the collected data, we want to discuss our findings with Peter Marcuse's concept of the "alienated and deprived conflict" in regards to the "Right to the city" movement and Judith Butler's approach of a "performative theory of assembly".

Marcuse argues that the current situation of rising unemployment, decreased governmental services, and an endangered public education system and retirement security derived "from a system that both necessarily produces gross material inequality and at the same time produces gross insecurity and emotional discontent and distortions" (Marcuse 2009: 187). In his opinion, the victims of this system include the materially deprived as well as the socially alienated and directly oppressed in "cultural" terms.

Marcuse describes the *deprived* as a group of people, who are "deprived of basic material and existing legal rights." (Marcuse 2009: 190). They consist of the working class, including the

so-called middle class, those that are producing profit for others and the excluded, operating at the margins of the system without any protection. The *alienated*, on the other hand, are not defined by their economical class. They include the youth, artists and the intelligentsia, who share unsatisfied human needs and consider those a cause for resistance, as well as those that are directly oppressed through their race, ethnicity, gender, or lifestyle (Marcuse 2009: 189 – 191).

In her book “Notes towards a performative theory of assembly” (2015), Butler seeks to establish a universal theory of assembly through linking her observations of current political uprisings to different political theorists such as Arendt, Agamben or Levinas. She claims that

[...] when we think about what it means to assemble in a crowd, a growing crowd, and what it means to move through public space in a way that contests the distinction between public and private, we see some way that bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments [...] (Butler 2011).

She further argues that political and public space do not precede political action but are rather produced through plural action that is to say collectively standing up for a cause. This aspect seemed applicable for our analysis of the politically charged protests around the club closings and their transformative potential.

3. Methods and data

Besides searching for applicable theoretical framework, we relied on the insights from the grounded theory for data analysis. As B. Glaser and A. Strauss have developed the method and published it in “The Discovery of Grounded Theory” in 1967, the approach is to come up with new theory through evaluation of empirical data. Since then, the approach went through the changes, but still different approaches share three essentials. First, codes are developed while collecting data and influence further data collection process. The goal of working with such codes is to (at least partly) understand, not only classify, the given information. The identified codes are grouped to build final categories which allow to shape a statement/theory. The second essential for social sciences to go with grounded theory is the writing of memos/theoretical samples after the first step in data collection. When searching for more possibilities to collect data, e.g. interview partners or places to observe, this pre-

evaluation proves to be very useful. The writing of fieldnotes has helped to classify concepts for the final categories. Our first categorisation consisted of seven concepts that deal with our research interest: Neoliberalism, Church, Education, the Bubble in which the movement takes place, Clubbing, Art and Public Space. As third essential of the concept is Strauss' listing of the process of constant comparison. Statements and both social and situational context in which they were given have to receive special attention (Strauss, A. in Mey, G.; Mruck, K. 2011: 22f). Those three essentials were part of our work, even though we didn't follow a strict methodological approach.

Focusing on data collection we conducted four in-depth qualitative interviews with persons we considered belong to or are well acquainted to Tbilisian counter-culture(s). Our first contact was the Instagram activist Ketí (all names changed), who we found through the article "How Georgian Artists are Challenging Sexual Norms and Re-imagining their Country" by POST PRAVDA Magazine. She introduced us to Elene, a friend of hers. Both are connected to the photographer Sandro, who was also mentioned in several articles by POST PRAVDA magazine. We got in touch with Niko at "Politika by Bauhaus", an off-Location for art, exhibitions and nightlife with a politicized clientele.

We met Ketí at Fabrika in Tbilisi, which she described as a place where she could openly talk to us, albeit its very commercial appearance. Contrary to what we feared beforehand, the interview developed very naturally and Ketí had a lot to tell us about. The challenge lay rather in controlling the direction of the topics than keeping the flow of speech alive. She seemed to enjoy telling her daily experiences and stories, even though they were mostly about harassment. Her ironical way of dealing with rape threats, for example, seemed like a way to contain her daily struggles within Georgian society.

Elene invited us to her apartment, thinking that Simon was an acquaintance of hers, which turned out to be the cause for her meeting us at home. Her husband Alex translated questions and answers because Elene only speaks Russian and Georgian. It seemed that it was not easy for him to follow up to our questions and her answers equally and we felt like he was missing some important points of hers. Elene and Ketí had a similar way of explaining their struggles as if it helped them to talk about it, leaving little space for us to intervene their narration.

Our interview with Niko was contrary to what we had heard before. He is a researcher and does not consider himself to be part of Tbilisi's rave culture. As an outsider to the movement and himself being unaffected by marginalization, he seemed to talk about the protests from a

more distanced perspective. Due to his intellectual background, he was able to criticize the movement's scope profoundly, giving us a comprehensive and critical overview of the situation. He had a masculine, dominant and almost authoritarian way of explaining his point of view. Almost exclusively facing the male part of our research group and leaving barely any break for us to pose a question.

The interview with Sandro was unexpectedly different than the ones we had conducted before. He was more critical than Elene and Keti, being able to take a step back from his own marginalized position to give a broader overview of the movement. It seemed that, although he stressed the movement's importance, he was aware of its flaws and able to criticize certain aspects that he considered wrong. He also focused on the questions and specifically on what we wanted to know, which narrowed down his narration.

We tried to identify important places, where opposing values are shared, such as Cafe Gallery and Bassiani and went there for participant observation. The reopening of Bassiani after the police raids was a huge event, with an exceptional open-door policy. The atmosphere was leisure but also tense in face of the huge amount of security forces within the club. Besides many banners saying things like "RAVOLUTION" or the gay pride flag, the political approach was made clear in a speech held by the club owners:

History has repeatedly proven to us that victory is only achieved to join efforts for social goals and better future we must become stronger to solve social, economic, political and other systemic problems existing in our society and thus live in a free and balanced country. (David Lezhava 27.05.2018)

Different perspectives on the limits of the movement depend on the personal situation of the interviewees. The data synthesis started by structuring our findings into seven concepts, as mentioned above, and simply collecting quotes/statements. While structuring our findings we noticed how closely linked they were and restructured them into two main categories: limits (neo-liberalism, education, church, deprived and alienated conflict) and potentials (arts, clubbing, protest/public space) of the movement and related subtopics.

4. Limits and Potentials of Tbilisian Counterculture

4.1 Limits

In the following we will discuss the limits and potentials of the countercultural movement by reference to our conducted interviews. According to our interviewees, the fundamental

challenge the movement faces lies within the reality of the neoliberal system. The neoliberal hegemony demands autarky as a moral ideal, while simultaneously unravelling exactly these opportunities on an economic level by exposing every member of society to the danger of becoming precarious (Butler 2016: 23). The people we interviewed expressed similar thoughts, stating that they consider the movement trapped within its own ideals and neoliberal boundaries. Sandro claimed that the government itself has interest in the polarization of the people by the rallies in order to outsource the “real problems that we have in Georgia [...]” (Sandro). Niko stated that “Bidzina Ivanishvili [...] supports the project of night economics after he has seen that Bassiani became popular. They said we need to develop night economics and started supporting Bars.” Because the interest in supporting the movement of and around Bassiani seems to be merely motivated by profit, the political struggle remains difficult:

So, if he [Ivanishvili] does not need liberals, if it's dangerous for his capital, he will slowly cut the resources and bring the Nazis and fascists on the other side and this is what he is showing right now: ‘we are the only one protecting you right now and if you don't talk with us we take out police and we will see what happens.’ (Niko)

The extensive marketization and privatization resulted in deep social inequalities and shaped the urban environment. Elene described it as different “layers of people who are living here who own private jets and luxury hotels, who are living all a very European-American lifestyle like. They are ignoring the fact that there are other people living here”. In Marcuse's terms, this ‘layer’ of society consists of “the underwriters and beneficiaries of the established cultural and ideological hegemonic attitudes and beliefs” (Marcuse 2009: 191). This economic development also had a humongous impact on the development of urban space. Apart from wide-spread luxury building complexes and casino halls, it also yielded places like Fabrika, where we met Ketu to conduct an Interview. She commented on it as:

All this hipster shit it took kind of a commercial approach at this point. This [Fabrika] is a great example. It is a lovely place but if you think about it, 90% of the people coming here are quite right leaning. They love this occupation of post-soviet places but this is strictly commercial. It's not like this is a place that appeared out of nowhere. It was a marketing decision (Ketu).

That implies the ongoing commodification and commercialization of places which label themselves as ‘spaces for rebellious minds to create and share’, as stated in the self-description of Fabrika. In this regard the term ‘rebellious’ functions as a mere marketing strategy. To think in Marcuse’s classification of social groups within the current urban society, it becomes obvious that the *alienated*, who are described as the Youth, artists, intelligentsia, have aspiration for change, but often, if not mostly, are embedded within a corporate profit logic. Simultaneously being in ideologic resistance to the dominant system but paradoxically benefitting from it on an economic level. A feeling of powerlessness against the government is prevailing according to our Data. Politics and business are tightly connected which makes financial strength more important than the strength of protesters, as Ketii stated it. The majority of the society is poor and struggles on an existential plane, lacking both time and power to keep up protests while facing corrupt jurisdiction. “We are tired of protesting, it doesn’t change anything, everything is so entangled, the chances of change are small” (Xatuna).

Another category of Marcuse’s classification is constituted by the *deprived*. He characterizes them in Marxist class terms as the *working class* as well as the *excluded* who are materially exploited. As seen from his perspective, one of the main challenges that contemporary social movements face is the remaining distance between the *alienated* and *deprived*.

In Georgia, miners and other *deprived* people are often labelled as “darks” or “bnelebi”, directly translated as someone who does not see a light at the end of a tunnel, meaning they are people who are likely to be stuck in their economic and social surrounding due to a lack of education and material possibilities. According to Niko, about 90 percent of the mostly Christian-orthodox Georgian population could be and often are named “darks”. Most of them struggle to sustain livelihoods on daily bases, suffering from lack of employment, welfare, a corrupted state and a deeply embedded Orthodox-Christian value system. In Herbert Marcuse’s terms, they embody “a society one-dimensional in its driving force”, which in itself “produces one-dimensional people, and struggles to be supported by them” (Marcuse 2009: 187).

The distance between the two sides is often displayed through a lack of solidarity. The alienated, for example, did not support the struggle of the mine workers, arguing they would not want to support homophobes, even though they face similar problems. People therefore did not attend the mine worker’s protests as they feel discriminated by them, missing a

chance to possibly unite their struggle. The mineworkers, on the other hand, are unlikely to overcome their cultural beliefs and support the struggles of minorities, which results from a conservative value system. Gladly there are occasions when such divisions are bridged, but not systematically enough. The strong position of the church, as mentioned above, is deeply rooted in Georgia's history, especially in the transition from a Soviet to a Post-Soviet state. According to Niko 96% of society trusts the church. People are still shifting to the church because they offer an identity, which was eroded by several occupations in the past, especially the Soviet one. Religion is therefore strongly merged with nationalism. While the state fails to provide support for the communities, the church delivers neighbourhood services, listening to people and giving them continuity, which leaves them a powerful position in society. Especially those that are left behind by a lacking welfare state find their belonging in faith. The strong belief in traditional, conservative values make people fear "LGBTIQ propaganda" and shut their eyes to alternatives. The Georgian Orthodox-Church redefined the 'International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia' (IDAHOT) as 'Day of Sanctity and Integrity of the Family"', trying to alter an ongoing discourse by stressing traditional values. According to Marcuse such a defence constitutes a reflection of emotional impoverishment (Marcuse 2009: 187 and Lomsadze 2018).

The last limiting factor we could extract out of the gathered data was education which was mentioned by every interviewee. All of them went to a private school and were therefore able to talk to us in English. Niko described it as an apparent societal split in the educational system. Teachers in private schools earn up to ten times more than their colleagues teaching in public ones and therefore try to change to private schools. This situation leads to a decreasing level of public schools and a proper education becomes a privilege for higher income.

4.2 Potentials

Referring to our literature as well as our interviews, we recognized the strategies of reclaiming space through art, clubbing and protesting in the public sphere, as the main potentials for an emancipatory transformation of the current urban environment in Tbilisi. One way to address socio-critical topics is to spread a message through art. Although Instagram profiles might be considered artistic as well, we wanted to focus on art that is exhibited in public in the first place.

There are two progressive elements that should be considered in the question of the political potential of art. The first one manifests itself in the making of paintings or photographs with models. When Elene told us about her new series ‘problematic situations’ and her aim to have queer models posing for her, she described one of these progressive elements. Marginalized people, who are mostly afraid to express themselves openly in public places, are able to feel normal and comfortable in her studio and in the exhibitions. Both provide a safe space and the feeling of being beautiful and “worth to be shown”, which is essential to her and for her work.

“Niko” was the first public exhibition by Sandro, who shows most of his work in the digital space of Tumblr and Instagram. In his work he criticizes the dominant masculinity in the Georgian society, represented by the most common Georgian name Niko, by showing the beauty and vulnerability of the nude male body. Showing this side is only possible in private spaces, similar to the moments in the studio of Elene . The aim is to take the feeling of acceptance from the studio to the streets someday.

The other progressive moment can be observed in the exhibition and the following interpretation of pictures. Finding exhibition places that are visited by the public is important, but dependent on your personal situation. Elene told us that finding a place is a lot about connections, family name and social background which can be hard for an emerging artist. Being a married woman and hence her apparent heteronormativity, enables her to show her work in museums, whereas Sandro is not allowed the same because he is homosexual.

In the light of the extensive marketization and privatization of urban spaces, as mentioned above, it becomes even more relevant for the city’s inhabitants to reclaim public spaces. Of course, there has been an ongoing discourse on the definition public space, which we cannot do justice in this paper. Judith Butler’s notion on public space focuses mainly on the alliance between bodies. For her, “The ‘true’ space [...] lies ‘between the people’ which means that as much as any action takes place somewhere located, it also establishes a space which belongs properly to alliance itself.” (Butler 2011)

The club scene provided the first semi-public spaces in Tbilisi, where sexual orientations of any kind could be expressed. Café Gallery and Success Bar, for example, were the first spaces for the LGBTIQ community to meet and connect without facing harassment. Sandro and Ketii both told us about their first visits to Café Gallery and the liberating moment of recognizing to be part of an existing queer community, instead of being alone.

Besides providing spaces free from fear and harassment, another slightly ironic benefit of educating people without lecturing them became apparent: “So if you [as a heterosexual/not gay friendly person] want to have sex you have to be nice to gay people, if you want to dance you have to be nice to gay people [laughs]” (Sandro). The opportunity to assemble people of different backgrounds in one space is automatically a progressive moment. As Butler argues, the mere assembly itself means an embodied and plural performativity, which is an essential element for very understanding of “people”, even if it is necessarily partial (Butler 2016: 15). What Sandro tries to explain in a simple manner, inherits a fundamental potential of clubbing to connect. Keti stated, that Bassiani supports the LGBTIQ community as a “frontier in the fight” and told us about both the integrating effect of open parties and the importance of closed queer events like “Horoom”. On the one hand it seems relevant to open Bassiani for various people regardless of their sexual orientation to assure inclusiveness and dialog. But on the other hand, there still remains the responsibility of the club to provide safety through closed events, for marginalized people considering the daily risk of homo- and transphobic harassment.

At such a moment (of assembly), politics is no longer defined as the exclusive business of public sphere distinct from a private one, but it crosses that line again and again, bringing attention to the way that politics is already in the home, or on the street, or in the neighbourhood, or indeed in those virtual spaces that are unbound by the architecture of the public square (Butler 2011).

The split of social groups for various reasons is the key boundaries of change, therefore it is important to find ways to overcome this gap and unite for a fight against the common enemy of the economic and educational system, as Niko stated it. While still being limited by the lack of solidarity through personal marginalization, the potential of empowerment cannot be neglected. A protest that actually achieves change can motivate others to fight for their demands. In this context Sandro gave the example of the metro driver’s strike and said that “it would be a presidential case” if they managed to go on a strike and succeed, even though the government tried to prohibit it. Such a strike could have shown the power of a small group on the entire traffic system. In order to overcome the split and organize protest, Niko wants to organize and connect communities, in some ways similar to what the church does. Niko aims to build a network between existing movements and people, who would not attend protests against drug policy but have similar and shared demands to protest for. Setting the focus on common problems like labour, education and equality might be an opportunity to

overcome narcissistic and egoistic behaviour to fight united. Butler argues that in order to transform the fight for rights of gendered and sexual minorities into a common fight for social justice, meaning a fight that could be characterized as radically democratic in its fundamental demands, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are various other minorities that face similar challenges. To condense the focus of the fight exclusively on sexual and gender identity lacks the pluralism of these other minorities and therefore Butler states that it is essential to expand the meaning of identity (Butler 2015: 91).

5. Conclusion

The data we collected cannot be used or regarded as a complete portrayal of the current movement in Tbilisi, as the interviews that we conducted only represent a small percentage of the involved groups. Although the statements draw a rather comprehensive picture of the challenges Georgia faces, especially within the context of Tbilisi, this analysis can only provide a partial insight into the public discourses. The perspective missing is that of the *deprived*, whose angle is not represented through their own articulation. This article should therefore only be considered a snapshot of a rapidly changing society.

The core problem of the societal division, regarding the political demands of the recent protest movements, is rooted within the *alienated* and *deprived* conflict. The reality of the neoliberal system divides those groups in their demands and opportunities. The idea of a good life, articulated by the *alienated*, collides with the basic material needs of the *deprived*. The aspirations of the *alienated* are trapped within the neoliberal logic of the government and therefore limited in their scope. The *deprived* suffer from bad education and are profoundly influenced by an orthodox-Christian church induced value system, providing identity and effortless answers for complex circumstances. The gap between the two groups does not seem covered by the recent protest, as they were largely addressing problems that many could not identify with.

Even though the *alienated* operate in a tight knitted sphere among their own, their way of life has an impact on society. Applying Butler's theory of a performative assembly, Marcuse's identification of the *alienated* as an opposing group to the *deprived* becomes looser. With artistic action, clubbing and protesting, as forms of bodies in alliance, new aspirations and ways of living become implemented into society and can also be defined as political action.

The performative nature of assembly creates a space which can be perceived as political and therefore as public. But at this point, we have to speak of a performative contradiction, because those actions are mostly limited by their peer group and the points mentioned above but somehow slowly encroach into society. Their demands of a progressive drug policy or LGBTIQ rights remain unconnectable for the *deprived* majority, if their basic material demands stay unfulfilled.

A chance to overcome the *alienated* and *deprived* conflict could be Niko's idea of community organizing, in order to condense the needs of the *deprived* into political demands, as well as to form an alternative option to church and state. In this momentum the aspirations of the *alienated* could become concrete and both groups could unite their struggle in the fight against their common enemy: capitalism.

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All interviews are edited for clarity.

Declaration of Authorship

We hereby declare that the thesis submitted is our own unaided work. All direct or indirect sources used are acknowledged as references.

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