

Antropologicheskie issledovanya Tsentral'noy Azii v zapadnoy nauke Anthropological works on Central Asia in Western Academia

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Anthropological works on Central Asia in Western academia

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Or:

ДИАНА ИБАНЬЕЗ-ТИРАДО, МАГНУС МАРСДЕН. Антропологические исследования Центральной Азии в западной науке (форум "Что такое «региональные исследования» в современной антропологии(на примере Центральной Азии) // Антропологический форум. 2016, № 28. С.50-65.

Also available online (with further discussions by a great variety of scholars on the themes of regional studies/Central Asia): <http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/05/>

During a speech in February 2013, the USA Secretary of State John Kerry applauded American diplomats working in *Kyrgyzstan* for their efforts in supporting democratic institutions. Two years later, in January 2015, the New York Times referred to *Kyrgyzbekistan* in an article about Tom Caldwell, a mountaineer kidnapped by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Soon afterwards, the New York Times itself clarified that *Kyrgyzbekistan* had been 'misidentified' and the paper apologised because of the error. Blog and twitter users soon picked up the New York Times' mistake and claimed *Kyrgyzbekistan's* right to exist: a national anthem was created and posted on Youtube, the country was described as an 'authoritarian democracy' and the first travel guide to *Kyrgyzbekistan* was published online. Other commentators, including the writer Leonid Berdshisky, did not, however, find much to laugh about in terms of the *Kyrgyzbekistan* or *Kyrgyzstan* mistakes. Berdshisky (2015) described this type of error as a 'manifestation of our strange indifference to, or even contempt for, countries that appear remote, small or unimportant', and as a sad stigma unleashed by well-known world politicians and journalist on the so-called Central Asian '*stans*' (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan). Both these errors and jokes are signs of how, despite of the changing landscapes posited by increasing although unequal global mobility of people and capital, Central Asia still conveys in much public discourse a sense of being formed by the 'unfathomable' five republics which were once part of the Soviet Union.

Until very recently, Central Asia was seen in academic writing as an 'overdetermined yet understudied region of the world', often treated as a 'periphery' of social phenomena in other regions (for example Islam and Islamic revival in the Middle East), as a framework for analysing emerging nationalism and so-called post-Soviet 'transition', and as a result of historically grounded Soviet/Russian and Chinese imperial dynamics (Liu 2011:116). Scholars have also begun to critically recognise the ways in which Central Asia has been romantically imagined as either the renewed space of the ancient Silk Road (Megoran 2004; Marsden 2015), as an obscure and oriental space of 'danger' (Heathershaw and Megoran 2011) or as a simplified post-Soviet spatio-temporal marker (Ibañez-Tirado 2015). In this contribution, we firstly track the first developments of Western scholarship in Central Asia understood as a region primarily formed by a 'core' of five Soviet/post-Soviet countries. Then we address the ways in which anthropologists in Western academia have moved towards a study of Central Asia beyond the geographies posited by well-bounded nation-states in order to productively incorporate historical and more contemporary geographies, temporalities and mobilities that emphasise trans-regional plurality, connectivity and heterogeneity. We finalise with a discussion about the politics of the production of knowledge concerning area studies, and the role of Central Asian studies in such a debate. Because of the length and focus of this discussion, we have chosen to review only published anthropological works in Western academia. We acknowledge, however, that we are not making justice to all the excellent scholars who have conducted anthropological and inter-disciplinary research in Central Asia in diverse parts of the world.

Scholarship about the Central Asian region in Western academia has been regularly produced throughout the twentieth century (Myer 2002); indeed, as Mitchel (2003) suggests, area-studies have a clear interconnection to geopolitical agendas and strategic funding from the Second World War. Soviet Asia attracted the attention of scholars who saw in the Soviet Union a potential force for radical change in the Middle East (Myer 2002). In the second half of the twentieth century, Western interest in the study of Central Asia centred its discussions on 'coloniality' (e.g. Stahl 1951; topic analysed more recently by Cole and Kandiyoti 2002; Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004; Khaleed 2007b; Chari and Verdery 2009; Morrisson 2009; Kalinovsky 2013; Mostowlansky 2014) and the so-called 'anti-colonial' movements of Central

Asia: the Basmachi Revolts (Caroe 1953) and the anti-Soviet movements of the Jadidis (Wheeler 1960; more recently Khaleed 1998; Abashin 2012).

As well, studies of Soviet Asia were characterised by their focus on Muslim populations and Islam (Myer 2002). Scholars particularly addressed the ways in which Islam was able to 'survive' the communist system; the term 'Soviet Islam' became commonly used to describe official forms of religion (e.g. Carrère d'Encausse 1974; Benigsen and Wimbush 1985). The debates about how Islamic practices became to be interpreted as 'tradition' during the communist era were influential in later studies of post-Soviet Islam (e.g. Khaleed 2007), and in the discussions about radical Islam and its causes in Central Asia (e.g. Naumkin 2005, Rashid 2002). Debates about Islam frequently coincided with discussions on ethnicity and national-identity (e.g. Gross 1992; Roy 2000).

The importance of nationalism, ethnicity and identity to the political projects of the Soviet and post-independence states have remained in the scholarship of Central Asia until today (Schatz 2002; Ilkhamov 2004; Hirsch 2005; Bergne 2006; Collins 2006, cf. Gulette 2010; Kudaibergenova 2015). It is in this context that anthropologists began to conduct long-term fieldwork in post-Soviet Central Asia and to prioritise research that takes into account not only 'official' and 'unofficial' forms of Islam, shifting power-structures, crafted identities and nations and well-bounded ethnicities, but also the life-histories, experiences and everyday entanglements of Central Asian populations with such processes and categories of analysis.

A key contribution of this new anthropological works has been to bring attention to the complexity, agency and creativity of everyday life in Central Asia. In this sense *Everyday Life in Central Asia* (eds. Sahadeo and Zanca 2009) highlights the ways in which taken-for-granted concepts such as Islam, communism, culture and identity are understood and lived differently by great diversity of contemporary Central Asians in their day-to-day practices. The focus on lived experience is developed further by Reeves, Rasanayagam and Beyer (2014). Their *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia* brings together anthropological works analysing the nature of the state in Central Asia, from the perspective of localised ethnographies that explore how politics are performed, practiced, invoked, and experienced.

A series of full-length monographs focused on Islam in Central Asia and based on long-term anthropological fieldwork in Uzbekistan also saw publication. Challenging existing literature

that posits Soviet Islam in Central Asia as peripheral, unorthodox, official and barely surviving seventy years of secularisation, Louw (2007) analysed the ways in which people in Bukhara understand and perform their ways of being Muslim and Uzbek. Rasanayagam's work (2010) in the Ferghana Valley emphasised the increasing fear of repression that Muslims faced in Uzbekistan, as well as the deployment of creativity in the face of such apprehension. Challenging the study of Islam as a global objectified category of analysis from which one can measure the diversity and orthodoxy of practices, Rasanayagam engaged with everyday experiences as the ground of Muslim moral reasoning and selfhood. Adams (2010) analysed the production of national culture in Uzbekistan via the staging of highly controlled mass spectacles and concerts. As Reeves (2014b) already noticed, Uzbekistan's increasingly restricted public sphere and controlled ideology have led to major difficulties for researchers wishing to work on the country. This is also the case for Turkmenistan where researchers have no access to conduct independent and long-term fieldwork.

In contrast to Uzbekistan, fieldwork in Tajikistan was possible once the violence of civil war (1992-1997) receded, and the process of strengthening state institutions based on discourses of peace building were reinforced by the government (Heathershaw 2009). Harris' first work on gender, control and sexuality in Tajikistan (2004) was followed by her study of the Muslim youth of Dushanbe (2005) that enquired whether young men were a threat to Tajikistan's post-war stability. Roche (2014) continued this debate by turning her attention to Tajikistan's youth treating this category of person not as simple risk or potential source of instability, but as creators of affirmative social and political dynamics. Roche (2012) has also analysed the collective post-war commemorations lead by Tajikistan's government and the gendering effects such commemorations have on female villagers in the Karategin Valley. Concerning masculinity, memories of the war and post-cosmopolitanism, Marsden (2012) studied rural-urban migrants, more specifically Pamiris who move to Dushanbe and Khujand, and their everyday sociality with non-Pamiris - the very same actors they confronted during the war. Based on fieldwork conducted in Kulob southern Tajikistan, Ibañez-Tirado (2015) has also explored the ways in which life-histories are narrated differently by men and women of dissimilar generations, and thus questioned the validity of the category 'post-Soviet' for locating alternative temporalities experienced by Kulob residents and Central Asians more broadly. Research on Tajikistan's Pamirs has also been prolific in recent years both by Western

and local scholars (the latter are mentioned in more detail below). Motowlansky's works concentrate on the Eastern Pamirs and the ways in which the new Pamir highway, running from Tajikistan to China, has an effect in the mobility of people and goods in this region (2014b).

In Kazakhstan, anthropologists have studied violence against women, for example, how domestic violence is portrayed as being linked to cultural politics and primordial notions of ethnicity (Snajder 2005, 2007). Werner (2009) has also explored violence against women in the form of 'bride abduction' – a practice that was banned during the Soviet period but that currently is often interpreted as 'traditional'. The other strand of anthropological literature on Kazakhstan deals with materiality, cities and architecture. From the late 1990s, major architectural projects have transformed the flashy new capital of Kazakhstan: Astana. Buchli (2007, 2013) has explored how, despite the government's efforts in portraying and building Astana as the epitome of urban planning, the decay in old and new buildings are the materialisation of Astana's inhabitants dissent. Laszczkovsky (2011, 2014) studies the ways in which the cityscape in Astana is imbued by the experiences of the city's inhabitants, and how both architecture and the everyday practices of Astana's dwellers results in specific 'aesthetics of the future'. Linking both past and notions of future harmony, and based on research conducted in the former capital of Kazakhstan, Alexander (2007) explores the relation between urban rational planning and contingency in the making of Soviet and post-Soviet Almaty, as well as the local notions of harmony vis-a-vis failed projects of urban planning.

Scholars working in Kyrgyzstan have also been especially prolific in their contributions to theories of place, space and landscape in relationship to mobility. Madeleine Reeves' *Border Work* (2014) offers a detailed ethnography of the Ferghana Valley, where the borders of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan coincide. The author explores the agency of this region's inhabitants in producing the state and its international borders despite governments' efforts of demarcating and separating territories, patrolling and reinforcing check points. In a similarly complex zone bordering Uzbekistan, Liu (2012) has produced a detailed ethnography of Osh. Liu analysed the embodied practices and bodily experiences of the Uzbek communities in this city that has been scenario of shocking outbreaks of violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in recent decades. In several articles, Beyer's works have

focused on the courts of elders in both rural and urban Kyrgyzstan (2015), and on the ways in which elders' narratives of descent and local books of genealogies are intimately linked to the landscape in Talas, north-western Kyrgyzstan (2011). Based on fieldwork conducted in the Toktogul Valley, Féaux de la Croix analysed the contrasting metaphors of stationed water in the reservoir formed by the Toktogul dam, and the flowing water of the working dam, the mountain pastures and the scared places (2012). More recently, the author has engaged with her informants' visions of the future in relationship to the privatisation of water resources and the prognosis of building more dams in this region (2014). Other strand of the literature on Kyrgyzstan has explored the shifting understandings of what it means to be a Muslim (McBrien 2006, 2009). As well, male-migration to Russia and its effects in women's mobility (Reeves 2011) and in the sociality of elderly people and children who do not migrate (Isabaeva 2011) have been the focus of recent scholarship.

For some decades, the scholarship of Central Asia was centred in the figure of the nation-state, and focused on the legacies of the Soviet enterprise. The questions this scholarship attempted to investigate were buttressed by an emphasis on the exceptionality and particularities of the Soviet/post-Soviet phenomena in Asia, and therefore developed as being relatively disconnected from literature that involved broader and comparative projects across Asia and the Middle East. More recently, anthropologists have worked in bridging the gaps between scholarships traditionally divided into either Synology or Central Asia studies; as Bellér-Hann et.al. highlight, there are historical and contemporary contacts and dynamics between China and Central Asia in the realms of intimacy, migration, trade and education that can shed light into particular forms of cultural hybridity and patterns of mobility (see also Bellér-Hann 2008; Hann 2011; Rippa 2014). Similarly, Marsden (2012:356) developed a comparative analysis of literature of Central and Southwest Asia (mainly Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran) in order to 'encourage work on the important role that ideas of the "region" in addition to those of the local, nation-state and global are playing in adding further texture and complexity to everyday life, identity, political economy and religion in Central and Southwest Asia'. Increasingly more anthropological studies on Central Asia have engaged with themes of trans-regional movement and connectivity: Marsden and Hopkins (2011) explored processes of interaction across Cold War and colonial boundaries through a consideration of the Afghan frontier region. Mostowlavsky (2014) has analysed diverse experiences of colonial

rule and orientalist projections in Gilgit-Baltistan (Pakistan) and Ghorno-Badakhshan (Tajikistan) thus challenging the classical periodization of colonial/postcolonial. As well, Marsden has recently turned his attention to networks of Afghan traders that both connect Central Asian to multiple Eurasian contexts (2015), as well as to settings beyond (e.g. Yiwu-China, 2015b). The historical and more contemporary connections between Eastern Europe (via socialism), Mongolia and Russia with Central Asia has also positively criss-crossed different area studies' scholarship (e.g. Humphrey 2002, Hann 2002, Mandel and Humphrey 2002, Kandiyoti 2002, Humphrey, Marsden and Skvirskaja 2008). From an ethnographic perspective, Werner et.al (2013) analysed the religious experiences of Kazakhs in Western Mongolia who have not migrated to Kazakhstan in the post-socialist period, and Dubuisson and Genina (2011) examined the imaginaries of 'homeland' by Kazakhs in Mongolia and their notions of belonging through their moving in space and time. With a focus on mobility, migration and diasporas, scholars have also contributed to new configurations of the Central Asian region in relationship to other geographical areas it has historically been associated with: Reeves (2014) has explored the perils of Kyrgyz migrants in Moscow when procuring their documents to be able to work and live there, and Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado (2015) have studied the importance of mixed marriages to the anchoring of Afghan traders in Ukraine. From a more inter-disciplinary perspective, yet emphasising globalising processes of inequality and mobility, Laurelle (2013) has edited a volume on labour migration in Central Asia.

The growing interests by scholars in trans-regional and trans-national connections have developed in the wider intellectual context of critiques of area studies. Area or regional studies, understood as a way of producing inter-disciplinary knowledge about particular geographies and cultural areas of the world, have been at the source of constant debate in the humanities and social sciences for at least the last twenty years. These debates have address the challenges of 'fostering particularism...ideological, theoretical or merely parochial clientelism' (Guyer 2004:501), the impact of reproducing 'gatekeeping concepts' (e.g. caste for India, Appadurai 1986) or 'zones of theory' (e.g. Islam, gender and segmentation for the Middle East, Abu-Lughod 1989), and the necessity of grounding globalising phenomena into the particularities of specific region's history of inequalities (Eqbal 2003). Area studies have also been criticised because of the way academic institutions are organised and funded, and

because of the disparities and topographies of knowledge that these produce (Tlostanova 2015, cf. Amsler 2007).

Tlostanova (2015) explains the problems of production of knowledge as a phenomenon of 'coloniality' of the 'modern' West (or the rich 'global North') aiming to study, interpret and theorise 'humankind' thus creating an ontological 'other'. These hierarchies of knowledge-production, the author suggests, have ignored post-Soviet spaces and thinkers, and have thus resulted in a 'post-Soviet condition' determined by 'external imperial and double colonial difference transparent in the West/East and North/South division' (2015:46). Indeed, one could interpret area-studies scholarship as a Western construct for Western audiences about non-Western societies. But the problems of asymmetrical knowledge-production cannot simply be reduced to a formula West ('global North') against the rest, or to the conclusion that, as Tlostanova puts it, the 'post-Soviet' space/scholars cannot think. On the one hand, such an approach over-simplifies the historic relationship between different centres of scholarly knowledge production and new trends and networks of funding that do not originate in the West/North (e.g. Ibañez-Tirado's research on Tajikistan has been funded in the past by CONACYT-Mexico). On the other hand, it also fails to take into account important changes in the field of Central Asian studies. The scholarship produced by Ismaili Pamiris about their own home-region in Tajikistan's Badakhshan Autonomous Mountainous Region is an example that does not straightforwardly attain to theories about Western coloniality of knowledge; this type of research is often sponsored by the Aga Khan Foundation International Scholarship Programme. Although this programme generates other types of inequalities within the Central Asian region (e.g. often non-Ismaili Tajik students complain to us that they cannot aspire to obtain scholarships and funding that Ismaili-Pamiris are able to aspire to), Pamiri scholars have produced excellent works localised in the historical and geographical particularities of Pamiri villages, yet contributing to broader literature on the history of Muslim societies. With research conducted in Tajik, Wakhi, Russian and English languages, for example, Iloliev's work (2008) analyses the life of the Ismaili religious scholar Mubarak-i-Wakhani, and through the works' of this scholar, Iloliev explores indigenous Pamiri perception of Ismailism. Furthermore, the work of Mastinbekov (2014) focuses on the history of religious functionaries in Pamir vis-a-vis processes of secularisation brought about by communism in this region and beyond.

As Mirsepassi et.al. (2003:2) put it, 'in the absence of detailed knowledge that area studies have generated about regions of the world that... are considered to have no policy relevance', the academic world would have been entirely uninterested in topics that are beyond the merely utilitarian pursue currently buttressing neoliberal politics of research-funding. Indeed, many universities and academic institutions in the UK are seeing cuts in funding for social sciences, humanities, as well as language training. If area studies were to disappear important spaces for language training, inter-disciplinarily, and grounded approaches to the study of the effect that so-called globalising processes have on particular world-regions would also be endangered. This is especially the case in a context where so-called hard sciences, mainly those with a 'direct impact' in society, and globalised disciplines such as Business and Management, proliferate. Under this framework, far from advocating for the disappearance of Central Asian studies or the re-interpretation of which space or nation-states should be included in the category, emphasis should be placed upon ensuring a plural and flexible understanding of the region that allows it to perform the maximum form of theoretical work; as Sidaway suggests, in order to transcend traditional area studies, we have the 'broader intellectual task of recovering the interconnected spaces of the past and apprehending those of the globalizing present' (2012: 507). Finally, we advocate that recent anthropological scholarship on Central Asia has been, and can continue to be successful at capturing the wider trans-regional imagination not by emphasising the region's 'landlocked' geography or the exceptionality of the Soviet/post-Soviet history, but by focusing on Central Asia's vantage point of connectivity, mobility and hybridity, and on the agency, localised experiences and undergoing inequalities of Central Asia's populations vis-a-vis globalising processes in the broader Asian expanse.

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