

Anthropology Book Forum

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Embracing democracy and market economy: lessons from Kyrgyzstan

Review by Tringa Bytyqi

Where Are All Our Sheep?: Kyrgyzstan, A Global Political Arena

by Boris Petric,

Berghahn Books, 2015

Where Are All Our Sheep?: Kyrgyzstan, A Global Political Arena is a result of ten years multi-sited fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan (2001 - 2010), namely in the Naryn region in the north, its capital Naryn and Bishkek, the country's capital. From the observation of the summer lifestyle of livestock herding up to the top politicians of the country and foreign election observers, Petric explores the social change in the country and its actors by adopting a holistic approach. Opening to the world after the independence for Kyrgyzstan in 1991 meant introducing the market economy and democracy which led to an important movement of people and ideas. The fact that the country does not produce anything anymore engendered the businessman and the demokrat as emblematic figures, local expressions of the desire to adapt to the new reality. If the sheep once represented the wealth of Kyrgyzstan, well, somebody ate them all. This very rich and accessible ethnography speaks to all social sciences researchers working in countries that live through major social, political, economic and symbolic restructuration due to their adoption of the market economy and democracy (Central Asia, the Balkans).

In the first chapter Petric analyses the creation of the Kyrgyz national identity. The Manas epic, a part of cultural heritage shared by all the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, came to embody the Kyrgyz spirit. Created by political, artistic and media cultural Kirgiz elites, this identity was consolidated by the international community (p. 36). For Petric,

the nationalization of heroes goes hand in hand with the desire to establish a specific relationship between land and nation and corresponds to a strong demand in the Western imaginary. However, what's more troubling is that the image (one country, one nation) does not reflect the Kyrgyz society where the non-ethnic Kyrgyz are simply excluded. Having politicized the ethnic relations between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks in the south (p. 39), this ideology Petric argues (p. 38), is becoming "a moral code defining a new social behavioral norm."

The second and the third chapters are dedicated to the world of the NGOs and the Internationals, namely the expatriates and consultants, promoters of democracy. The largest NGOs (UNDP, NGO Counterpart International, Soros Foundation and UN) focus their work mainly on good governance and civil society. Considered merely a technical problem that needs adjusting to the local reality (p. 48), the good governance ideology holds the state's role in social life undesirable and thus promotes the development of the civil society. Many local and national NGOs in Kyrgyzstan thus emerged as a response to the donor's request. The fact that activism, initiative, and social mobilization are celebrated and passivity is negatively evaluated Petric (p. 66) argues "aim to change the relations young people have towards values". The electoral democracy is a cure-all for political and economic failures (p. 52) and has created a sort of "electoral fetishism" (p. 53). If the local NGOs are independent of the state, their legitimacy in return is not dependent on local social forces.

In the fourth chapter, Petric tackles the migration inside Kyrgyzstan and outside of the country. Nearly a million of Kyrgyz live and work temporarily or permanently in Russia and Kazakhstan. Only a recent accepted phenomenon, the social and geographical mobility during the Soviet era was controlled and highly monitored by the government (p.73-76). Nowadays wide accepted and valued, social mobility is encouraged by the Kyrgyz government. According to Petric (p. 72), "the migratory experience is thus conceived as a circular movement where the individual essentially continues to picture his life in Kyrgyzstan. It is a kind of rite of passage". In 2008, more than a hundred racist murders occurred against Central Asians in Russia. The independence liberalized the

mobility but also became the source of the exodus of the European population from Kyrgyzstan.

In the fifth chapter, Petric takes us along the biggest marketplace in the Bishkek, the Dordoy Bazaar. Occupying over more than a square mile, the Dordoy Bazaar is the largest private bazaar in Central Asia. Thousands of clients from all over the country and the former USSR come daily to do business. The collapse of livestock farming, the disappearance of industry and the partial privatization of agriculture has transformed the bazaar economy into the “vital locus of social organization” (p. 92). A large part of the contemporary Kirgiz society is now made of merchants. Askar Salymbekov, the owner of the bazaar and one of the richest men in the country is the embodiment of the social, economic and political Kirgiz dynamics. Part of the Soviet era administration, Salymbekov has managed to surf through big structural changes and profit from every resource at his disposal. Petric accompanies him around for some weeks, and we get a glimpse of the complexity of Salymbekov’s navigation in different networks. Petric argues (p. 102) that the owner of the bazaar is “at the heart of multiple social ties,” thus he can build a political clientele because the “economic relations overlap the solidarity networks.”

The sixth chapter introduces us to a particular corps de métier, the election monitors. In the winter of 2005, Petric himself enrolled in the mission of monitoring the elections in Kyrgyzstan on behalf of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). We follow the author in his journey, from the arrival at the airport, during the ride on a bus to the luxury hotels where the training took place onto the day of the monitoring and the evening to celebrate the monitoring. If the election observers think about their work in terms of neutrality and impartiality, this ethnography proves the opposite. They have a particular lifestyle and constitute a special social group. Some monitors are even “professional international electoral expert contract workers” (p. 117). Observers express pride in taking part in a potential revolution in the country, where the political situation was tense, they can even be convinced that their mission is to bring civilization (p. 121). Petric argues that “an election observation mission is the continuation of struggles for influence between certain powerful countries. [...] a political

arena where strong antagonisms exist between different countries and groups of countries” (p. 119). In the seventh and the last chapter of the book, the anthropologist returns to Kyrgyzstan to film the presidential election monitoring.

In the conclusion of the book, Petric offers analyses that render this ethnography important for understanding the political sphere in the context of globalization. He argues that “beyond its specificity, the Kyrgyz laboratory symbolizes the emergence of a new type of political space in the world” (p. 150). I have indeed encountered several effects of the democratization process described in the book, in my fieldwork in Kosovo. Though rich in description, the author uses very little theoretical framework in his work. Thus, this ethnography is an excellent point of departure for future anthropology researchers who work in a very complex and paradoxical world of today.

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