

Chapter 1. Political Theory and Central Asia: An Introduction

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In her introduction to Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt writes of how the cultural critic had a passion for small things, even minute things. As she notes, 'for him the size of an object was in an inverse to its significance' (Arendt 1965, p.11). That Benjamin passionately believed the complete *Shema Israel* could be inscribed on just two grains of wheat, suggests that from the smallest appearances, even perhaps perceptibly marginal exteriors, we can ascertain much greater significance. From entities of the tiniest origin we can draw out everything else. We can develop far greater insights than at first sight may seem possible from such small objects, ideas and experiences.

The region of Central Asia is not a tiny object or idea. Yet, too often in popular and policy discourse it is positioned as marginal, obscure, fractious and oriental (Heathershaw and Megoran 2011). Like Benjamin's passion for drawing out deeper more comprehensive understandings of the social, cultural and political world, the history of social sciences alerts us to how some of its greatest advancements in political and social theory are built from the ground up from studies of particular, often non-Western, previously marginalised regions of the world. Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) ground breaking theory on *habitus* and *doxa* were inspired through his empirical work in Algeria, while Benedict Anderson's (1983) conceptual formation of the imagined community was developed through his work on South East Asia. Our aim with this volume is to do precisely such theorizing from the position of the Central Asian region.

While there are many works focusing on politics in Central Asia ranging from political science to international relations and from history to anthropology, new perspectives on political theory are currently under-developed, if not completely absent in this particular region. The field seems to be reduced to a small space constrained between isolation and colonization: ideas do not rise, flow and circulate; they are only imported and at best adapted. The study of Central Asia seems to be stubbornly resistant to moving beyond a field of Area Studies. It is our contention with this volume that rather than being small in appearance, marginalized and on the periphery, Central Asia can be a rich lode for theorizing the political and social world. Central Asia needs to come in from the margins and be central to how we can understand politics not just in the broader post-Soviet region itself, but far, far beyond.

The idea for this volume derives from an encounter that happened a few years ago between a scholar of Central Asia who works in the United Kingdom and a scholar of political theory who works in Central Asia. As it happens, during a conference we began discussing the difficulties of teaching and undertaking research on political theory in (and often also on) Central Asia because of the absence of academic debate on theorizing politics in the region. Further, we considered that the region is ideally located for these kinds of reflections because it can be characterized as a *central corner*. Geographically, Central Asia (to include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) is in the middle between Europe and Asia and, in this regard, it would be more appropriate to speak of Central Eurasia. Politically, the presence of major players around the region (China, Russia, India, Turkey Iran, but also the power projections made by the EU and the USA) make it somewhat a corner around which, and sometimes inside, bigger games are played, even if they have to come to terms with local rules and agency (Cooley 2012). We thought that this combination of a central and a peripheral nature are potentially harbingers of a fruitful vitality, where ‘us’ versus ‘them’ distinctions get prolifically confused and contested. In this sense, this central corner has the potential to be the place where theoretical experiments could be borne, but we could not proceed any further without involving other scholars who live or come from the region. Therefore, we decided to write this book as an edited volume, involving as many young local researchers as possible.

This collection, therefore, is concerned with exploring the dialecticism between theory and empiricism. Ideally, this volume would not simply involve the transporting or transposing of Western social scientific theories and concepts to the Central Asian region, and that rather we would prefer some form of theory generation derived directly from the region itself. But realistically the application of non-Central Asian concepts and theories is hard to avoid, and theory generation difficult to bring about. Moreover, we are acutely aware as editors of our positionality as non-Central Asian scholars with a background in Western social science and political theory and the ways in which that may well encumber attempts of drawing theorization from the region which fail to privilege the Central Asian perspective. However, this is why we have sought to bring forward the voices of young Central Asian scholars as much as possible. Nevertheless, the central aim of this volume is to bring to bear what the Central Asian experience of politics can speak to us of in terms of theories and concepts within political studies.

Central Asian Politics

Taking the above into account, a brief excavation of scholarly literature on Central Asian politics highlights the need for greater theorisation in relation to the region. During the Soviet period, scholarly works on the region were rare. Either they were exotic accounts of travel in the Central Asian steppe (Maillart 1934), broad historical treatments of the region (Kolarz 1952; Wheeler 1964; Hambly 1966) or focused largely on the question of Muslim identities and the challenge this posed to Moscow (Rywkin 1990), something hitherto was viewed as symptomatic of the Central Asian's peoples' resistance to Soviet domination through the persistence of traditions and customs (Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983; Allworth, 1991; Jones Luong 2002, p. 19). Such works fed into scholarly work of the 1990s post-independence period which emphasized the process of nation-building (Akbarzadeh 1996a, 1999; Bohr, 1998; Roy 2000; Kurzman 1999), the potential for ethnic discord, violence and conflict (Akiner 1993, 1997; Akbarzadeh 1996b; Rumer, 1993; Rashid 2002) and, because of the failure of democratization, the establishment of authoritarianism and the agential power of the region's political leaders (Carlisle, 1995; Gleason, 1997; Kubicek, 1998; Cummings and Ochs, 2002; Cummings, 2002; Huskey, 2002; Kangas, 2002; Bohr, 2003). Such studies were no doubt electrifying in their illumination of a region of the Soviet Union which had long been a darkened, dusty corner of scholarly concern, but still theorization of, in and from the region was few and far between in the 1990s. For instance, analysis on the nature of authoritarianism in the region rarely went beyond attempts of regime typologisation as opposed to seeking to theorise the underpinnings of political power and its legitimation. Moreover, much of this work preserved the tendency to obscure and orientalise the region by way of focusing on the potential for conflict and violence and the idiosyncrasies of presidential leadership.

In the early part of the 2000s debate did ensue regarding the extent and durability of traditional politics, social behavioural norms and organisations vis-à-vis the rationality of the Soviet experience (Collins 2006; Jones Luong 2002; Gullette 2007), often characterised as a tension between informal and formal forms of political relations and behaviour (Isaacs, 2011). The politics of informality has become a central lens through which understanding of politics in Central Asia is viewed especially in terms of the development of neopatrimonialism, clientelistic networks and political mobilisation (Tunçer-Kılavuz 2009; Radnitz 2010; McGlinchey 2011; Isaacs 2014). But this too lends itself to overly focusing on the ways in which informality pervades some form of

preconceived 'normal', formal rule-bound politics: a 'normal' politics implicitly characterised as Western and liberal. Thus indicating, perhaps, a failure to engage in a more theoretical and critical manner with the way in which the politics of the Central Asian region operates and stands on its own terms outside of what is considered the 'normal' conditioning of political behaviours, relations and institutions.

With the above in mind, in the last decade scholars sought to offer more nuance readings of existing interpretations of the region by characterising political and social development within a postcolonial frame, (Dave 2007; Adams 2008; Heathershaw and Megoran 2011; Cummings 2012) which has added a welcome critical dimension to studies of the region. Furthermore, recent studies have operated from a more conceptually thematic perspective examining broader conceptual areas such as symbolism, power and legitimation (Cummings 2009), the performance of politics (Reeves, Rasanyagam and Beyer 2014) and the political dimension of identity and culture and its relationship to power, authority and questions of legitimacy (Isaacs and Polese 2015; Kudaibergenova 2017; Isaacs 2018).

While these debates and developments have proved integral to the advancement of our knowledge, they have not elicited deeper theoretical and conceptual discussions regarding fundamental social and political phenomena essential to the post-Soviet experience in the region. For example, often legitimation or legitimacy emerge as key concepts with which to discuss regimes in Central Asia and their use of discourses to sustain power, but the boundaries have yet to be pushed beyond this to try and elucidate how Central Asian regimes can advance our understanding of legitimacy and legitimation as abstract concepts. The same can be said for fundamental political concepts and ideas such as ideology, neoliberalism, nation-building and the state.

We recognise that there is now a vast literature on Central Asian politics, which is derived from many different disciplinary approaches: International Relations, Anthropology, Political Geography and so forth. However, we have neither the scope nor space to offer a full archaeology of the flourishing of Central Asian studies which has taken place over the last decade or so. There are many good works, in terms of single-authored monographs, journal articles and edited volumes, but the main point we are making above regards the under-theorisation of the region. Differently put, our concerns in putting this volume together is the way in which theorisation from the region is, for the most part, limited. This is not to suggest that scholars are not adopting theoretical approaches or concepts, but rather that too often they are limited, not expanded upon

and the focus tends to be on the empirical side of the dialectical equation entrenching a general tendency, not always intentional, to essentialize the region.

Theorising the political

Such under-theorisation is understandable. To theorize the political is to suffer the classic difficulty of the social sciences: creating theory when all we can observe is how things happen but not why. This is the curse of social and political scientists that promises to be swept away by the great advance of big data analysis with its pragmatic move from causality to correlation. But political theory is as much about interpretation as it is causality and correlation. Histories of political thought tend to be presented as a linear canonical line-up with limited consideration for the ways in which such theorists and theory are interpreted (Browning 2016, p. 6-7). Political theorists are involved in interpreting the social and political world from a particular vantage point of history and context. Such interpretations are then interpreted through different frames, methods and points of reference by later theorists and scholars (Browning 2016). This is how we understand theory and theorisation in the context of this book. Existing theorists, theories and concepts are used as either explanatory or hermeneutic tools for the Central Asian political post-soviet context. But in this volume such theorisation then becomes part of a theoretical interpretation and re-interpretation from the context and vantage point of the region. Meaning of objects, ideas and concepts are not the same at all places and at all times, thus the Central Asian experience can reveal something which on the one hand will be context specific in terms of abstract understandings of power, the state and ideology, but on the other hand, allow for a deepening and expansion of how we can understand such concepts and practices in the general broader sense. Consequently, through this process we hope to begin taking the first steps towards the greater theorisation from the Central Asian region and consequently begin a deeper debate and discussion on theorising of and in Central Asia, both in terms of expanding theoretical and conceptual frames with which to analyze the region and in relation to extending our understanding of such concepts and theories.

Naturally, political theory is also normative, even if often this is implicit or built around a set of assumptions stated or unstated. Therefore, taking account of positional normativity remains an important aspect of theorization and some of the contributors in this volume offer explicitly normative positions relative to their aims in relation to the dialectic between theory and practice.

We see such normativity as something to celebrate rather than hide – but not that this should detract from approaching the region and how it is understood, analysed and theorised without a keen critical eye, rather that normative positions should be at the very least clear from the outset.

Key themes and approach of the book

The endeavour of theorising from and in the Central Asian region cannot, and does not, begin from a *tabula rasa*. In the first instance, all of the contributions in this book build upon the excellent scholarly work which has already been undertaken in relation to Central Asia, of which a selection was discussed above. In the second instance, political theory is amorphous. Setting the task of theorisation in relation to the politics of the Central Asian region without the parameters of a systematic frame would make for an ill-defined and nebulous undertaking. Therefore, we have adopted three broad categories of political theory/practice as the pivot around which the chapters in this volume are situated and make a contribution to broader theorisation. We recognise that this is not an exhaustive schema, but rather those we have considered the most important in terms of concrete politics in the region as well as being fruitful for delivering on the promise of theorisation in relation to Central Asia. Of course, other scholars might set up a different set of categories. Nevertheless, these categories are: models of governance/power; ideology and the state/political order.

Governance/power concerns a reflection upon the ways in which authority and power is practiced in the region and more specifically how it is constituted and legitimized. This is especially pertinent given the stark authoritarian (but also divergent) nature of regimes in the region. But our concern here is not just on the operation of power and its legitimation, but also how it interacts with broader philosophical ideas related to liberal and neo-liberal modes of governance. *Ideology* concerns the way in which various systems of beliefs establish different modes of regime legitimation. This occurs in relation to the myths, discourses and general framing of political and social relations which support the operation and durability of power. *The state and political order* addresses the role of the state, how it is constituted, its level of agency both domestically and internationally, how it engages with citizens, and how this contributes to our understanding of the state and how it underpins power in the region.

Under this tri-partite rubric we have twelve in-depth case studies from a range of cases from the Central Asian region. Some are based on single countries while others are comparative. While we did attempt to draw from a further range of single-case studies, the nature of the politics of the region and the limitations of conducting research in some countries (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) means that Kazakhstan and to an extent Kyrgyzstan are the more frequent sites of research. Therefore, tendency towards case studies on Kazakhstan is a consequence of the systematic nature of scholarship on politics in the region and is not something which can be easily remedied. Additionally, Kazakhstan is the regime that has been not only most economically successful, thanks to its natural resources, but also better able to adapt to novel models of governance while keeping a blocked political system. These refinements might make Kazakhstan the model for the region, even if other countries are not going to recognize this role for obvious issues of status. Finally, there is a thread connecting the contributions: all chapters are both embedded into local conditions and try to go beyond those boundaries for generating the possibility of theorising Central Asia and beyond Central Asia.

The book unfolds as follows: the first section tackles the theme of ‘Models of Governance’ with a series of reflections that show how states, institutions and organizations function in Central Asia. In particular the focus is here on the combination of authoritarian governments and neoliberal frameworks. The section starts at chapter two (the first being this introduction) with a contribution from Sofya du Boulay and Rico Isaacs ‘Legitimising authoritarian power: Legitimation and legitimacy in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan’. The theme of legitimation is in part central to many of the chapters in this volume explicitly or implicitly (especially in relation to the chapters in the second section). This unsolicited pervasiveness of the topic shows that there is a constant necessity in Central Asia towards justification. While recent independence might seem to be a reason, with the necessity of creating structures and discourses that justify exercises of power, this chapter points to authoritarianism as a system of governance that feels its insecurity and therefore is avidly looking for strategies of legitimation, such as in its drive for modernization. The third chapter by Assel Tutumlu ‘Governmentalization of Kazakhstani State: Governmentality and Neopatrimonial Capitalism’ reaffirms the strengths of authoritarianism in its ability to merge with market-oriented technologies of governance. A peculiar form of governmentality emerged in Kazakhstan in the shape of *neopatrimonial capitalism*. Here the role of the state is to ensure the efficiency that derives from keeping the market functioning. This function requires the generation of normalization

practices and technologies for the formation of individuals who are able to operate as entrepreneurs and who are abandoned with the requirement of taking responsibility upon themselves. The effect was the necessity for people to rely on informal networks linked to political power. The fourth chapter by Liga Rudzite ‘Theorizing Managerialism in Development: Changing Donor Landscapes and Persistence of Outcomes in Kyrgyzstan’ has a parallel take on neoliberalism and its framing of aid-development practices. Specifically, it reviews the effects of managerialism in Kyrgyzstan to show how the possibilities generated by the advent of non-Western donors towards a re-moralization of development in terms of social justice might have been overstated. New actors are emerging, possibly with competing agendas, but what seems to remain is the managerialist model with its effectiveness above all mantra. The section closes with the fifth chapter by Galym Zhussipbek and Kairat Moldashev ‘Rawlsian Liberalism and Rationalistic Maturidi Islam in Central Asia’ that tries to provide normative support to a proper alternative to the current political trends in the region that would be able to combine the traditions of an institution like Islam with a liberal ideology that can be politically acceptable to the peoples of Central Asia. Standing against the thread of authoritarianism and neoliberalism, it proposes a convergence between the Islamic school of *Maturidi* with its rationalist and anti-hegemonic orientation and the political liberalism of John Rawls with its concepts of fairness and overlapping consensus.

The second section ‘Revealing Ideological Justifications’ focuses on the relationship between ideology, legitimacy and power in Central Asia. Frameworks of belief, myths and personality cults are all prevalent in the region. Here the point is to understand how ideology and legitimation work and how they are linked to power. Of particular interest is how these phenomena work for justifying authoritarianism in Central Asia. Chapter six by Parviz Mullojanov ‘In Search for “National Purpose”: In Theory and Practice’ reconstructs the ongoing process of building ideologies in Central Asia from its Soviet past to its current mythologization of history. The peculiarity of the region, as well expressed by the case of Tajikistan, is the surplus connotation of national identity and national interest into the idea of national purpose and the use of this idealistic concept as a support for authoritarianism. Chapter seven by Diana Kudaibergenova ‘Compartmentalized Ideology: Presidential Addresses and Legitimation in Kazakhstan’ provides a perspective on the issue from the conditions of ethnic diversity in Kazakhstan. Specifically, *compartmentalized ideology* works through a multiplication of different discourses of legitimation for different ethno-linguistic audiences while maintaining the role of the president as the sole

unifier. This technology removes the possibility of alternative forms of ideology and legitimation and perpetuates the authority and power of the president as the sole element able to provide security and identity to the political community. Chapter eight by Adrien Fauve ‘Beyond “Personality Cults”: Sacralization of Power in Kazakhstan and the Concept of Monarchy’ takes this concentration of ideological power as a signifier of the ambivalence of the concept of personality cult. Then it recognizes that the sacralization of the power of the president builds up and generate a form of monarchy. The second section concludes with chapter nine by Mikhail Akulov ‘Eternal Futurostan: Myths, Fantasies and the Making of Astana in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan’. Here the mythologization of the past and the future of Kazakhstan, as an instrument for justifying the modernization of the country under the legitimacy of the president, are spelled out and reach their apotheosis in the construction of Astana.

The third section “Reframing State and Order” moves forward from the previous two sections by going back to the role and performance of the state as the actor that either dominates and controls political and social life in some Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) or is often seen as failing in others (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). In Chapter ten by Selbi Hanova ‘The State Identities in Post-Soviet Foreign Policy: Theories and Cases in Central Asia’ the role of the state as the main provider of identity is analyzed considering the case of Kyrgyzstan and comparing it with its neighbors. This highlights the continuing importance of the relevant Other as the provider of self-identification by difference. Chapter eleven by Filippo Costa Buranelli ‘The Heartland of IR Theory? Central Asia as an ‘international society’ between Realism and Liberalism’ assumes the states as the main actors in Central Asia and delves into their relationships. By showing how the institutions of sovereignty, diplomacy, international law, authoritarianism and great-power management work, it argues that Central Asia can be characterized as an international society. Chapter twelve by Viktoria Akchurina, ‘The Incomplete State: re-conceptualizing state and society relations in Central Asia’ focuses on the Fergana Valley and provides an account of the *incomplete state* as a social practice in order to challenge the concept of failed and weak state. The thresholds between public and private, legal and illegal and formal and informal constitute a space of interstitial emergence that need to be considered for understanding the functioning of the state in Central Asia. Chapter thirteen by Alessandro Frigerio ‘Driving in Almaty: Ironic Perspectives on Domestic Anarchical Society’ continues in this direction by taking the specific path of drivers in Almaty and showing how exceptionalism and

resilience operate. Reconnecting to the first and second sections, it concludes by identifying the risks of privatizing and authoritarian ideologies for legitimizing and governing.

Finally, we close the volume with a few concluding remark where we highlight the main outcomes of each contribution as well as the main questions that they open up for further reflections.

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