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Heartlands of Eurasia: the geopolitics of political space

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Book reviews

The captive and the gift: cultural histories of sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus, by Bruce Grant, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2009, 216 pp., \$21.95 (paperback), \$68.50 (hardback), ISBN 9780801475412 (paperback), ISBN 9780801443046 (hardback)

In 1993, I spent a semester studying in Rostov-on-Don, Russia. Rostov is predominantly ethnically Russian, but is known as the ‘Gateway to the Caucasus’ because of its geographical position. Our group was warned about the nefarious intentions of the regional non-Russians. The Georgians, as an example, were bandits and rapists. Another student group, cautioned by such exhortations, travelled to Tbilisi, but the women reportedly never strayed far from the Intourist hotel for fear of the locals. Yet our excursion to the north exposed us to a tribute to Georgian culture. The cuisine, the wine and the boisterous hospitality were celebrated in restaurants and homes. As I prepared for my second trip to Georgia over a decade later, a colleague in my Russian language class, upon discovering my destination, burst out ‘but you will be kidnapped!’

In his fascinating book *The captive and the gift*, Bruce Grant explores the murky relationship between Russia and the Caucasus, examining the histories and mythologies that surround Russian and Caucasian impressions of the gifts given and received by one another. He considers the ways in which Russians understand the Caucasus – often portrayed by the intelligentsia, government and media as a region of unschooled brigandry and theft (seizures of people as well as goods). In doing so, Grant exposes the complexities and hypocrisies inherent in building an empire, particularly when that empire rationalizes its behaviour by the compensation offered to the conquered. At the heart of the book is the juxtaposition of empire and sovereignty, of cultural understanding and political expediency, and an exploration of the power of the powerless. Grant’s contention is that Russian imperialism in the Caucasus was substantively different from the colonial enterprises undertaken by Western Europe, with far-reaching consequences for current-day interactions between the Russian state and the communities on its *de jure* territory (such as Chechnya), as well its relationships with the now independent states of the Transcaucasus.

The bulk of the book contextualizes popular Russian conceptions of the Caucasus throughout the process of Russian expansion into the region. The currency of that process, according to Grant, might be best understood through two conceptions. First, gift giving is considered from both an imperial perspective (empire as a giver of civilization) and an indigenous mechanism to show fealty, curry favour, or extract closer connections, either with other clans, tribes and groups, or the empire itself. The second motif, captivity, draws attention to the kidnapping, hostage-taking and prisoner capture that dominates the Russian understanding of Caucasian culture. The book is organized thematically, illustrating how Russian literature and history have depicted the Caucasus, portrayals that misunderstand Russia’s own role in determining Caucasian behaviour. Grant also interrogates popular conceptions of imperialism that focus on the hegemony of the empire and its unilateral expression, drawing attention to their scant appreciation of the interactive process of taking territory, co-opting subjects and establishing political control.

Grant takes aim at Russian perceptions that mountainous cultures have been particularly prone to theft and persistent violence. He notes that such illustrations of *gortsy* (mountaineers) rarely differentiated between the behaviours of people of varying altitudes, instead generally lumping together all Caucasians as brigands. Moreover, Grant draws the readers’ attention to

a reciprocal frame by which to understand the violence castigated in Russian imagination as integral to the Caucasian culture. How much of the raiding and theft behaviour, such as it existed, was a *product* of imperialism rather than longstanding custom? Moreover, he argues later, the Russian perception of its own Caucasian empire draws in large part from the difficulties it experienced building it. Grant notes the privations reported by the Russians in offering their gift of beneficence and civilization to the peoples of the Caucasus, who did not seem to appreciate that the act of imperial taking was in fact imagined as one of giving. This Russian notion, he argues, has been steadfast for centuries, outlasting the Soviet period to touch the contemporary era, articulated throughout in a literary tradition detailing episodes of Russian citizens taken hostage by and then educating the backward Caucasian *gortsy*. Upon enlightenment, the captors often permit their shrewd hostage to go free. The captors in such stories, Grant notes wryly, almost always die in the end. Thus, the Russian tradition abjures any imperial intent at all: 'The Caucasus cannot be foreign to us: too much energy has been spent on it, it is too organically connected with Russia's great mission and calling in the world' (Vasilii Velichko, quoted p. 58). In addition, Grant reports the gift of empire was imagined to enhance the Russian condition: 'the main thing is that our civilizing mission in Asia, from the very first steps . . . will lift our spirit; it will give us dignity and self-consciousness, which at present we either lack altogether or have very little of' (Dostoyevsky, quoted p. 92).

The captive and the gift also captures the complexities inherent in gift giving and accepting. Rather than a unilateral experience, Grant argues, accepting gifts can empower the recipient. Thus can villages in bride kidnapping cultures solidify relationships with others and secure bride prices. The recipients of the gift of empire may gain protection from other empires seeking to plunder. Grant records the ambivalent Georgian reflecting the sacrifice of Georgian sovereignty to Russian expansion in order to forestall Persian and Ottoman encroachment, yet proud of the education he earned in St Petersburg. That the programmes of co-optation were part of the strategy may also grate. Grant notes the Russian military perception that the 'firmest political hold comes when one becomes "a brother to the conquered"' (p. 57).

Grant uses historical, literary and cinematic evidence for his analysis. Although his focus is on Russian and Caucasian experiences, he competently offers global contexts of empire and gifts. His final substantive chapter, drawn from field research, explores the Caucasian interpretations of the Russian perspective, which seems far too short, particularly given the level of detail he devotes to the explorations of Russian perspectives. For this political scientist, however, it was the most intriguing chapter. I wanted more of it. While Grant notes differences in interpretations of the Russian/Caucasian conditions (the former viewing the relationship as paternal, the latter fraternal), I yearned for more detail about the diversity in Caucasian views toward Russia during the Soviet collapse and the era immediately afterward. This period was surely a time when the Caucasians were divided amongst themselves regarding how to interact with the Russian state, but such divergence is not explored in systematic detail. A notable omission from the book, published in 2009, is any mention of the 2008 war in Georgia, which would push the gift and sovereignty motifs in a variety of interesting directions, given Russia's punishment of Georgia and gift of sovereignty to Abkhazia, viewed by some Abkhazians as an imperial exercise, but a lifeline nonetheless. These minor criticisms aside, this is a book that is valuable across disciplines and is exemplary in its writing, empathy, and depth.

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The central Caucasus: problems of geopolitical economy, Edlar Ismailov and Vladimer Papava, New York, Nova Science Publishers, 2008, i–xii + 133 pp., \$79, ISBN 9781604566062 (hardback)

Substantial English-language works on the Caucasus region are few and far between. This modest volume is the work of Dr Eldar Ismailov, who is Director of the Institute of Strategic Studies of the Caucasus (Baku, Azerbaijan) and Dr Vladimer Papava, a Senior Associate Fellow of the Joint Center, formed by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (John Hopkins-SAIS) and the Silk Road Studies Program (Uppsala University). He was also Georgian Minister of Economy (1994–2000) and a Member of Parliament of the Republic of Georgia (2004–2008). Both scholars are described in the foreword as senior economists. This biographical detail is important as it helps to explain the book that they have produced.

The book begins with a foreword by S. Frederick Starr, a long-standing senior figure in the field of Soviet and Russian Studies, who has also researched on the region. The foreword describes how the authors have set out to ‘re-conceptualize’ the Caucasus as a region. This is truly the starting point of the book. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the complex history of the region and introduces the concept of ‘The Caucasus’. Simply put, the ‘Central Caucasus’ – the focus of the book – is the three independent states of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. The Northern Caucasus is the bordering regions of the Russian Federation, and the Southern Caucasus is the bordering regions of Turkey and Iran. Given the book’s scope the analytical focus is obviously upon the Central Caucasus, and I am left wondering about the efficacy of the wider concept of the Caucasus as a region as it is never really deployed in the book.

Although the book is presented as an analysis of the Central Caucasus, it is really about Georgia and Azerbaijan because Armenia is seldom discussed on an equal footing. This is probably explained by the authors’ origins and also by their focus, one might even say obsession, with the benefits of globalization and prospects for regional economic integration in the Central Caucasus. The book is spoilt by the continual need to relate everything to the issue of economic integration. Because of this, the book fails to provide a comprehensive introduction to the economies of the region. The structure of the book is compromised by the integration agenda. We are thrown in the deep end in chapter 2, which examines ‘The integration ability of the Caucasus’. The later chapters on ‘The main parameters of the Caucasian economic space’ (chapter 4), the ‘Special features of the economy’ (chapter 5), and the ‘Economic interrelations in the Central Caucasus’ (chapter 6) provide analysis of the economies of the region and should thus logically come first. Without a basic understanding of the regional economy, regional specializations and inter-regional and international trade, it is difficult to consider how the theoretical benefits of economic integration might assist the region. This analysis would then more logically be followed by a discussion of the ‘Integration ability of the Caucasus’ (chapter 2) and the ‘Economic interrelations in the Central Caucasus’ (chapter 6). In short, the book’s structure puts the ‘cart before the horse’, which is frustrating for the reader looking for an introduction to the region, and also confuses the argument of the authors.

Despite these structural problems, the individual chapters are not without merit and the authors are at their best when relating wider economic theory to the history of the regions and the challenges of economic transformation. This is what they call their ‘Geopolitical Economy’ approach. Unfortunately, one is repeatedly struck by the inherent contradictions in their analysis. They rightly highlight that the region is heterogeneous, and state that the current situation in the Caucasus is not promising for economic integration; yet they see such integration as essential to future economic prosperity. What they are left with is a case for closer cooperation between Georgia and Azerbaijan, particularly in the case of transport where Georgia provides an outlet for Azerbaijan’s energy exports, and suspicion both of the

motives of Russia, which opposes regional integration, and Armenia, which seeks cooperation with Russia and Iran. Obviously, the analysis pre-dates the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia, but that only serves to highlight how Russia desires to undermine the internationalizing ambitions of Georgia and Azerbaijan.

The more empirical chapters that focus on the regions' economies are heavy on verbal description and short on up-to-date statistics. The latter suggests that some of the chapters were prepared at an earlier date. The analysis fails to make use of the specialist reports and statistical material produced by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the World Bank; there are also UNDP publications on the region that would have provided more information.

More imaginative attention to presentation – particularly the provision of maps and graphs – would have greatly enhanced the text. The only map of the region is a stylistic one on the front cover. This is a serious omission given the importance of understanding the region's geography as a transit corridor between Central Asia and Europe, as well as its relative position vis-à-vis Russia and Iran. The discussion of transportation and economic specialization would be much easier to follow with supporting maps. Equally, the dynamics of relative economic performance and standing would have benefited from the use of graphs.

One clear contribution of this text is its bibliography, which occupies 31 pages (23.3%) of the book. It provides the reader with access to the specialist literature on the region by local scholars and is therefore a very useful research tool. In fact, for anyone working on economic aspects of the region the book is worth buying for the bibliography alone. Unfortunately, it is let down by a poor index which omits, for example, Nagorno-Karabakh.

In the final analysis, this book falls short of its potential. The authors are eminently well qualified to produce a detailed analysis of the economic development of the Central Caucasus; but poor presentation and an over-emphasis on the elusive benefits of regional economic integration undermine the wider value of the book. Despite these shortcomings, and although it fails to provide a sufficient overview for the non-expert, it is still essential reading for the specialist working on the region.

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Islamic Central Asia: an anthology of historical sources edited by Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010. xiii+ 318 pp., map, index, glossary. ISBN 978-0-253-22140-7 c1 \$75.00, pbk \$27.95

One of the difficulties of teaching courses in Central Asian history has been the lack of accessible primary sources for students. This problem has been particularly acute for the historiographical great black hole of the post-Silk Road, pre-Russian centuries, the fine contribution of Daniel Waugh and Lance Jennott notwithstanding (see <http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/>). These gaps make the new collection of primary texts from Scott Levi and Ron Sela a very welcome and impressive volume.

The collection spans a huge chronological range, from the Orkhon Inscriptions of the eighth century CE to a Khivan account, written in the early twentieth century, of the Russian

massacre of Yomut Turkmen at Gök Tepe. While most of the selected texts concern Transoxiana, the Chaghatay Khanate/Kashghar region is also included, which is unusual. The texts are divided into six sections, each prefaced by an introduction that lays out the historical context with admirable clarity and concision, as are the individual selections. Sela and Levi chose from a variety of genres (court chronicles, administrative documents, inscriptions, histories), and focused on lesser-known texts, including twelve new translations from manuscript sources.

What do we learn about Islamic Central Asia here? One of the things that it is often difficult to convey to students is the humanity of people in the past, especially people whose lifeways were profoundly different from those of the modern West. These texts provide a lively picture of diverse, curious, occasionally cranky and very human people across time. Al-Biruni observes just labour and pricing policies among pelicans (p. 42), Alisher Navoi lauds Turki as vastly superior to Persian while dismissing Hindi as a language that “sounds like pens with broken points,” (p. 185), while in his history of the Khanate of Qoqand Haji Muhammad Hakim Khan tells us that a ruler reacted to military defeat by taking to drink and playing with his pigeons (p. 279).

Another helpful feature of this book is that it brings together excerpts from disparate sources, making comparisons much easier. I particularly appreciated being able to read from nine different accounts of Mongol history, both familiar (Juvaini, the *Secret History* in De Rachewiltz’s recent translation) and obscure (al-Nasawi’s vivid insider’s account of the fall of the Khorezmshah, translated from the Arabic by Sela). While some of these excerpts are frustratingly short, they will provide students with a good sense of the range of contemporary histories of the Mongols, written by their enemies and their employees. Similarly, texts concerning the early Turks, written by Turks themselves (such as the lexicographer al-Kashghari) or by observers who saw Turks primarily as military slaves (Arab writer al-Jahiz) convey how wild and unruly these newcomers to the Islamic world were perceived to be. These comparative excerpts should whet students’ appetites for entire texts, at least where those texts are available.

The editors do not neglect European observers of Central Asia, although again they favour the lesser-known sources. Instead of Marco Polo or William of Rubruck we read an account by the Spaniard Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, who visited Timur Lang’s capital Samarkand in 1404 and noted its wealth as a trade center even as Timur himself could no longer walk unassisted. When the Englishman Anthony Jenkinson reached Bukhara 150 years later, he found the Uzbek emirate plagued by thieves but still in no need of English goods, although the emir was impressed with his handguns. Two later English merchants who investigated Bukhara in 1740, however, concluded that no trade with the region could bring profits comparable to the risks entailed. These and other texts convey a clear sense of gradual economic decay and loss of political control, particularly in comparison with the aggressive Russian and Qing empires. Nonetheless, in 1858 Russia still felt it was worthwhile to send Nikolai Ignatiev on a reconnoitering mission to Khiva and Bukhara as the “great game” rivalry with Great Britain heated up.

One inevitably has criticisms of such an ambitious project, but mine are few and minor. Not all of the selections are annotated equally, and as a teacher I would appreciate a little more guidance on either how reliable a text itself may be or (just as important) how reliable its translation is. Some of the older translations that Sela and Levi use were written in an archaic, faux-biblical style (particularly an 1881 translation of Juzjani’s Mongol history) that makes one suspicious of their accuracy. Although sources by or about women are surpassingly rare for early modern Central Asia, I regret that the editors did not include an excerpt from the Qoqandian poet and teacher Dilshod’s memoirs, which are currently best accessible in a Soviet Uzbek translation

of the Persian original. Quibbles aside, this is a fascinating and much-needed collection, one that I read more thoroughly than I intended to because I could not put it down.

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Building states and markets: enterprise development in Central Asia, by Gül Berna Özcan, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, xxvii + 291 pp., including map, data appendix, index, (hardback), ISBN 9781403991614

Gül Berna Özcan divides society in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia into five groups engaged in a dynamic reallocation game: ruling families, oligarchs and courtiers, protégés and apparatchiks, middle class, and the underprivileged. This book focuses on the fourth group, the middle strata of independent entrepreneurs, and examines different aspects of the state-market relationship through the experiences of the entrepreneurial middle stratum. A sentence from the book's conclusion captures the essence of the book's contribution: 'Survey evidence gathered from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan illustrates the development of capitalist markets, the character of the entrepreneurial and social differentiation, and shows how they have been following different trajectories' (p. 221).

The book's strength lies in the 183 interviews conducted by the author between 2004 and 2007 in Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan. The author writes well, and the quotes from interviewees sound a genuine voice from the region. This complements the aggregative less personal perspective of most research on Central Asia, including reports by multilateral institutions and analysis of household survey data. For understanding the shadowy world of small business in Central Asia, no single approach is satisfactory, and Özcan's sample has no claim to be representative because it is too small to draw systematic conclusions, but to a degree unmatched in the existing literature, it provides genuine individual experiences as evidence of economic life in the three countries.

The entrepreneurs' voices speak of deep dissatisfaction with the judicial system, especially in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (pp. 83–84), and in those two countries of a complete lack of knowledge of the national assembly. By contrast, the Kyrgyz entrepreneurs are much better informed about their parliament. Several chapters draw primarily on information from the Kyrgyz Republic, whose situation is not described in a positive light, but the impression is of a more open society than in the other two countries. To lump the Kyrgyz Republic with Tajikistan as 'chaotic authoritarian states' (p. 221) is unjustified by the evidence from the book; the two changes of power in the former reflect a greater degree of social involvement than in Tajikistan, whose history has been of civil war followed by the rule of a ruthless autocrat.

My main disappointment with the book is that the interviews are given too little attention. For the most part the summaries of interviews are a single paragraph, which leaves the reader thirsting for more details about the entrepreneur's situation. A corollary to this concern is that too much space is devoted to discussion of issues not supported by the author's own research.

Much of the background to the entrepreneurs' situation is based on unsupported assertions that may, or may not, be correct, but which add little to the existing literature. The author is consistently critical of international institutions, especially the IMF and World Bank, but the

evidence from the interviews points to domestic factors, especially the entrenched positions of the top three social groups and their interests, as the main obstacle to entrepreneurship. Statements such as ‘The real issue has been a profound lack of industrial policy to guide SME [small and medium-sized enterprise] development’, and apportioning blame to the ideological orientation of international institutions and their short-sighted policies (p. 175), or that ‘Long-term capacity building requires sophisticated policies’ (p. 189) contrast with the interviewees’ desire to have as little to do with the governments or with aid donors as possible. The most active industrial policy in Central Asia has been that of Turkmenistan; the absence of interviews in that highly regulated economy may be related to the paucity of entrepreneurs. Reference to ‘increasingly unaccountable and authoritarian regimes’ (p. 220) in Central Asia is too simplistic; civil society has been strengthening in Kazakhstan since the turn of the century, and the Kyrgyz situation may be improving.

The chapter on the gendered economy is one of the best. Most small businesses in Central Asia are run by women, and a female interviewer with linguistic skills was well-placed to bring out these entrepreneurs’ perspectives. Again, however, the background of ‘the growing influence of the patriarchy’ in Central Asia (p. 122), supported by reference to rape of Bosnian women (chapter 5, footnote 4), seems based on preconception rather than evidence. A finding from household survey data is that college-educated women were the biggest gainers from the transition from central planning (e.g. Anderson and Pomfret 2003); the interviews provide living examples of this finding. The position of women in the Soviet Union was far from ideal; they faced the double burden of a full-time job in the workplace combined with the expectation that they would do most of the household chores. Small businesses have given those women with initiative and drive an opportunity to establish economic independence and, although their situation may be far from ideal, it is not self-evidently worse than that of their counterparts two decades ago.

In sum, I recommend this book to anybody interested in the lives of small-scale entrepreneurs in Central Asia. The words of the interviewees speak vividly of conditions faced by this important group in the present-day economy and society. Özcan provides a more unified, better focused and deeper treatment than other studies of individual experiences of economic change. On the other hand, the book’s title may mislead readers looking for an analysis of the development of markets in Central Asia; such readers would be better served by the admittedly ageing book by Gleason or, for a detailed account of the large bazaars, the recent paper by Kaminski and Raballand.

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Heartlands of Eurasia: the geopolitics of political space, by Anita Sengupta, Lexington Books, Plymouth, 2009, 38 pp. preface + 185 pp, £39.95 (hardback), ISBN 9780739136065

The deliberate use of the plural form in the book's title perfectly reflects the fluid, sometimes blurred and always politically-constructed concept of the 'Heartland'. Sengupta states in the introduction: 'there has never been and there will never be a single fixed geography of any region but multiple dynamic geographies' (p. xxxi). The multiple dynamic geographies of Central Asia (also known as Central Eurasia, Heartland, Inner Asia and many other labels) are a good demonstration of this argument.

The book starts with a brief outline of Heartland theory. The author of the theory, British geographer Halford Mackinder (1861–1947), assumed that with the dynamic development of land communications the vast land-locked territory of the heart of Eurasia would become strategically important for any power that seeks global supremacy. For about a century his theory has served as the foundation for conventional (or imperial) geopolitics and strategy, and as a starting point for the development of its theoretic opponent, critical (democratic) geopolitics. Sengupta discusses interpretations and reinterpretations of Heartland theory in the twentieth century, and its evolution from geographical to political 'pivot' and from Heartland into a 'Chessboard' for the intricate strategic game of great powers.

In the second chapter Sengupta examines Russian debates on Eurasianism. Here, she makes an accurate observation about the post-Soviet Eurasianism that has become 'an umbrella philosophy absorbing all that is radical in the bubbling cauldron of post-Soviet political thought' (p. 27). Eurasianism emerged out of the nineteenth century philosophic, political and historic debate on Russia's path in the modern world. Such prominent Eurasianists as Lamanskii, Trubetskoi, and Savitskii argued that Russia was neither of Europe nor Asia, and it had its own 'third' path of socio-cultural and political development. Contemporary Eurasianism, represented by ultra-left (Ziuganov), ultra-right (Prokhanov and Dugin), and moderate (Panarin, Gadzhiev) political thinkers, takes a more expansionist stand and closely relates Russia's revival to the successful restoration of its control over 'near abroad', ex-Soviet territory that includes Central Asia.

The next two chapters are devoted completely to Central Asia, its geopolitical location, self-identification and correlation between concepts of the Central Asian region, a Eurasian space, and the Heartland. In this regard, this study is one of few books where Central Asia is viewed both from outside and inside. Sengupta reveals an impressive awareness of local academic and political discourses. She closely examines the interpretations of Mackinder's theory by local scholars (Tolipov, Matikeeva and others) and traces the impact of these interpretations on local politics and self-identification. She also provides a detailed political, social and historical background of the formation of contemporary Central Asia, and gives an account of relations between the five Central Asian republics.

In the fifth chapter, Sengupta uses a case study of Uzbekistan to address the topic of imagined spaces and imagined nations. Basing this part of the research on critical geopolitics theory, she demonstrates the interplay of perceptions of territory and nation in the speeches of Uzbek President Islam Karimov, the papers of Uzbek scholars and popular narratives. The Uzbek nation as well as other ex-Soviet peoples had to establish new self-understandings after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent demise of the Soviet identity. The concept of a Soviet citizen and the corresponding ideology needed to be replaced with national identity and ideology. The construction of the Uzbek nation is reflected in high-politics rhetoric that attributes features of greatness to Uzbekistan: thousands of years of glorious history, a large and mainly mono-ethnic population, natural resources and a favourable geostrategic location.

Another instrument of national consolidation is the construction of danger. President Karimov often addresses threats to security in his speeches and publications, and represents Uzbekistan as the pivot of a strategic region (p. 107).

These methods of national consolidation contain certain dangers and might have negative long-term consequences. For example, the exclusive state support of Uzbek culture, history and language serves to homogenize the population in an attempt to construct an Uzbek nation. This effort undermines rights of ethnic minorities and highlights the problem of contested spaces.

In the final chapter Sengupta examines academic and political discourses about the region. Here, she gives the reader a general understanding of contemporary social, political and cultural narratives frequently used to write the region into global space. Chronologically, the first and most persistent discourse is the Great Game debate that stems from the nineteenth century strategic rivalry between the British Empire and Russia for control over Central Asia and India. The second discourse refers to the Turkic connection of Central Asia and civilizational approaches. Sengupta identifies underlying implications of Turkey's efforts to reinforce political, economic and cultural ties with the Central Asian republics. The last part of the chapter discusses ambiguities of a regional discourse that revolve around the possibilities of rebuilding and strengthening links between the Central Asian republics, in order to assume the role of independent subjects of international relations.

Sengupta elaborates her arguments with an analysis of many geopolitical concepts related to Central Asia, starting with classical geopolitics and proceeding to the innovative approaches of critical geopolitics. What is especially valuable about this study is the subtle use of multiple sources: romanticized descriptions of Central Asia taken from travel stories and memoirs delicately interweave with the dry language of policy papers. The analysis draws on elements of conventional and critical geopolitics. Sengupta introduces the reader to some elements of critical geopolitics, but the book does not provide a deep analysis of this field of study. She uses O'Tuathail's framework to build her argument, but pays less attention to other aspects of critical geopolitics, such as the role of popular culture in critical geopolitics and other grass roots perceptions that shape the 'self' and 'other' in Central Asia. Sengupta might consider delving deeper into critical geopolitics, for example, by expanding her range of sources to include less conventional ones such as music, cinema, theatre and humour.

The range of authors discussed includes representatives of Western, Russian, Third World and Central Asian academia. Some sources date back to the nineteenth century while others are as recent as the book itself. The extensive bibliography is a strength of the book. A minor flaw can be noted with regard to the literature review. Sengupta provides a detailed analysis of Russian and Western literature, but in her discussion of Central Asian literature she concentrates on Uzbek authors. This is evident throughout the book, and not only in chapter 5, which is devoted entirely to Uzbekistan. The extensive scholarship of neighbouring states is largely overlooked.

This abundance of references and citations does have another shortcoming: the writer's own voice is overshadowed by other opinions. Often Sengupta restates arguments of other scholars and gives examples from other books to prove her own ideas, and it is difficult to differentiate her contribution from the contribution of quoted authors.

The book makes a substantial contribution to Central Asian studies and geopolitical theory because it provides an accessible and thorough account of interpretations and reinterpretations of the Heartland theory, and explores how geopolitical scholarship informs strategies of external powers, local policies and popular geographical perceptions. I would highly recommend this

book, not only to scholars, but also to students who are beginning their own journey into the little-explored heart of the vast landmass of the Eurasian continent.

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Argorods of Western Uzbekistan: knowledge control and agriculture in Khorezm, by Caleb Wall, Münster, LIT Verlag, 2008, xiv + 323 pp, €29.90 (paperback), ISBN 3825814267

During the last two decades, agriculture has undergone substantial changes in Central Asia. These changes were shaped by several factors such as shifting markets and economic relations, re-organization of production processes with the restructuring of state and collective farms, redefinition of property rights for land, and altered national and international regimes of water distribution. At the same time, agriculture continues to be of crucial importance to the former Soviet republics. On the one hand, the expansion of agricultural production has been a strategic priority for all Central Asian countries, with the purpose of attaining self-sufficiency by means of subsistence production or for the generation of foreign currency through cash crops. On the other hand, agriculture, along with animal husbandry, is a key livelihood strategy for rural dwellers in the region. Poverty is particularly marked in rural areas of Central Asia, where 80–90% of the poor depend on agriculture as a source of income to sustain their livelihoods. In view of these issues, agriculture has thus become an important focus both for academic and/or development-oriented research in Central Asia.

Caleb Wall's monograph provides us with rich empirical insights into the changes and dynamics of agricultural knowledge in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. His research centres on rural Khorezm in Western Uzbekistan, with a focus on the Yangiaryk district. Wall's research was conducted in the framework of a long-term research and development aid project titled 'Economic and ecological restructuring of land and water use in the Khorezm region (Uzbekistan)'. The project focuses on Khorezm, mainly because this region has suffered from considerable negative impacts on humans and the environment due to the desiccation of the Aral Sea. It is implemented jointly by the Centre for Development Research (ZEF) at the University of Bonn and UNESCO for the period 2000–2011.

Wall's main research interest is the production of agricultural knowledge in post-Soviet Khorezm. He sets out to explain 'how different actors operate within a "system" of knowledge and how three different "systems" interact in the Khorezm region' (p. 1). Accordingly, Wall thus distinguishes between three 'knowledge systems'. The first is the 'peasant system', understood to be the knowledge system of the majority of the rural population. This includes both 'indigenous' (defined as existing prior to the existence of the Soviet Union) and 'local' knowledge (defined as encompassing practices adopted in the past century, thus largely during the lifespan of the Soviet Union). Second, there is the 'post-Socialist system', meaning the post-socialist role that the government of Uzbekistan assumes in setting the institutional framework for agricultural knowledge (p. 3). Finally, there is the 'ZEF/UNESCO project system', which refers to the knowledge system established by the above outlined project. The delineation of these three knowledge systems also provides the organization of the book, as the author explores each system in a separate chapter (chapters 4 to 6).

Wall seeks to combine knowledge management theory with a Foucauldian perspective on the nexus between knowledge and power for his research. Methodologically, he subscribes to an ethnographic approach. His data stem from unstructured and semi-structured interviews, direct observation, archival data and a sociological survey conducted in 2005. As a research strategy, he adopts an ‘extended case study approach’ (p. 46) which he finds productive for bridging the three knowledge systems outlined above, as well as combining them with archival sources. Wall’s research was participatory and partly action-oriented with regard to the ZEF/UNESCO project, receiving funding and operating within the project framework. He discusses both the advantages of privileged insights into project activities as well as better access to government officials, and also the disadvantage of being somewhat constrained in his research topic (p. 66).

Wall’s explorations of the ‘peasant system’ or the ‘local knowledge system’ centre on the concept of the *master*. He suggests that in Khorezm this term denotes a person acknowledged for certain practical skills or expertise in a relevant field such as agriculture (p. 87). He suggests that the term amalgamates the original meaning in Russian for a technically skilled person with the notion of *joshuli* (‘chief’ or ‘boss’) as a particular form of male authority in Western Uzbekistan (p. 102). Wall sees present-day mastership constituted by cultural preferences of Khorezmian society structured by gender and age hierarchies as well as the ethnic segregation of economic activities. This, he suggests, is a mixture of both the legacy of Soviet labour organization and the authoritarianism of post-Soviet Uzbekistan. He argues that in the course of the last century, the ‘local knowledge system’ has changed from one of indigenous knowledge to local knowledge. Alongside with this transition, he identifies a ‘knowledge loss’ (p. 139) in the sense that ‘old’ knowledge has been destroyed without it having been replaced by ‘new’ knowledge.

In a second step, Wall explores knowledge governance in Uzbekistan, thus the ‘post-socialist system’. He starts out with a historical review of agricultural sciences in the Soviet Union. He argues that during this period, there was a heavy focus on politically mandated goals such as mechanization in remote regions such as Khorezm. Their goal was to achieve the state targets for agricultural production, targets that were implemented in a hierarchical, top-down manner. He describes present-day agricultural science as still heavily politicized with features inherited from the Soviet period. In Uzbekistan, agricultural science is directed by the state, and research findings cannot contradict or challenge the state’s ‘accepted wisdom’ (p. 292). At the same time, present-day knowledge governance also reproduces the former centralized governance structure and thus continues to marginalize peripheral regions such as Khorezm. The production of knowledge remains strictly controlled, and its implementation enforced by coercive measures and threat of force. Farmers thus have few options but to apply the mandated methods and cultivate the authorized crops, namely wheat and cotton. These conditions create a ‘culture of fear’, which in turn impedes innovation and prevents the development of locally suitable solutions (p. 296).

Third, Wall explores the ‘ZEF project system’, which aims at ‘development research’ and ‘transfer of technology’. While predominantly guided by an ‘epistemology of science’ and Western concepts towards these aims, ZEF also encourages the incorporation of knowledge with different epistemological backgrounds. Yet the very concepts that underlie platforms for knowledge sharing (such as databases) at the same time restrict this incorporation as they already provide for a pre-selection of what constitutes knowledge in the first place (pp. 206–208). Wall concludes that the ‘ZEF project system’ is also situated in a knowledge/power-nexus, but shows less negative implications for the production of agricultural knowledge than does the state system discussed above. ZEF, he concludes, adopts a ‘much more enlightened’ attitude to knowledge control and the exercise of power than Uzbekistan’s state governance (p. 279).

Wall's book provides a rich fund of findings on agriculture in Khorezm. There are, however, a number of shortcomings. First, Wall's use of 'argorod' in the title of the book presumably makes reference to Bronislaw Malinowski's famous monograph *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Wall uses 'argorod' to describe the garden plots that are attached to most houses in rural Central Asia. However, I have so far never encountered this term to denote garden plots. Rather, I suppose that 'argorod' may be a misspelling of the word 'ogorod' (garden) in Russian. In terms of content the title is misleading, as the book does not centre upon the institution of the garden plot. *Argorods of Western Uzbekistan* thus provides for a catchy title, but is inaccurate in terms of both terminology and book content.

A considerable weakness of the book is that the author has not systematically reworked the original format of a doctoral thesis for the purpose of publishing it as a book. There are many redundant sections, as well as a tendency to repeatedly remind the reader about what the author has already done or state what he intends to do in the book. The author occasionally presents a wealth of interesting findings but fails to render them in a coherent argument. This particularly applies to the many 'case studies' that are presented throughout chapters 4 to 6. At times, the reader is hard pressed to find her or his way through the book. These points limit the usefulness of the book.

Wall adopts a rather instrumental approach to knowledge and power which at times is at loggerheads with the conceptual framework that he proposes. In particular, he exposes a lack of self-reflexivity when conducting research on the production of knowledge in a political system with starkly uneven power relations. In a similar vein, he also tends to overlook his own position as being (or, at least being understood as) a representative of a particular Western aid agency. His research is thus clearly framed within the system of power that development aid represents in the first place. Wall discusses the double bind of having been partly funded by the same aid agency that he researches. However, he fails to engage with the existing academic literature in critical development studies which deals with the challenges and advantages of researching development aid 'from within'. Such an engagement could have helped Wall to develop a more reflexive position as a researcher.

These problems come into view when he describes the ethnographic and participatory methods that he drew on for his field work. For example, complaining about informants' non-compliance, Wall states that: '[t]here is a disappointingly small literature on the refusal of informants to cooperate fully in the ethnographic enterprise' (p. 55). Rather than searching for such literature, I suggest, it might have been more productive to reflect on why, exactly, potential informants refuse to participate. People usually have very good reasons for being unwilling to expose their views in relationships permeated with power or contexts shaped by coercion and threat of violence. In turn, exploring their silence or refusal might have provided insights into the subtle working of power for the production of (agricultural) knowledge. Moreover, I would also argue that there is no thing such as an intrinsic right of the researcher to people's participation in her or his scientific enterprise – if this relationship is understood to be an equal one.

Despite these shortcomings, Wall's book offers very valuable insights into the changes and dynamics of agricultural knowledge in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The book should be read for its empirical richness on a region and a topic which has hitherto received only limited academic attention.

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