

The politics of knowledge in Central Asia: science between Marx and the market, by Sarah Amsler, London and New York, Routledge, 2007, xv+188 pp., £75.00 (hardback), ISBN 0-415-41334-6

The politics of knowledge in Central Asia: science between Marx and the market is a meticulously researched and elegantly crafted monograph that marks a major contribution, both to the historical sociology of social science in the Soviet Union and the contemporary politics of academic reform. A detailed study of the contested institutionalization of a single discipline in Soviet Kirgizia and post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, Amsler's volume draws upon a particular example of disciplinary demarcation to engage broader debates concerning centre-periphery relations in the Soviet Union, and the ambivalent embrace of Western social science in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. She does this by developing the concept of 'boundary-work', a term she takes from sociologist of knowledge Thomas Gieryn, to refer to the practices through which an autonomous disciplinary identity is articulated.

In its attention to the micro-processes of disciplinary formation, the book marks new ground in the critical study of contemporary intellectual life in Central Asia. But it is also a model of reflexive scholarly engagement. The volume converses with a wealth of published and unpublished sociological scholarship in Kyrgyzstan in a way that both historicizes current debates within the Kyrgyz academy, and which recognizes the politics that surround the author's own project to 'sociologize' sociology in the country. In contrast to accounts that would dismiss as naïve or old-fashioned attempts to carve out a positivist sociology that seeks 'strength in truth', Amsler contextualizes this intellectual quest within a broader moment of social, political and academic restructuring. In so doing, she provincializes and interrogates the self-consciously 'critical' sociology in which she herself was schooled. Thus, the volume is as much a reflection on the historical situation of post-modern philosophies of knowledge as it is a critique of the positivism that characterizes contemporary Kyrgyzstani sociology.

The book's five main empirical chapters trace the 'social science project' in Kyrgyzstan from its inception in the 1960s with the founding of the republic's first sociological laboratory to the creation of university departments three decades later, and the contemporary predicament of acute donor-dependence for research. This broadly historical narrative is framed by three theoretical chapters that locate Kyrgyzstani sociology firmly within a 'colonial logic of science', which expressly foregrounds the continuities in structural dependencies between Soviet and post-Soviet social science in Kyrgyzstan. The institutional history that Amsler traces is a fascinating and revealing one. She demonstrates how the post-war industrialization of Kirgiziia that transformed 'public opinion', 'worker satisfaction' and 'inter-ethnic relations' into objects of empirical sociological enquiry in the 1960s simultaneously created intellectual space for the articulation of a distinctly 'republican' sociology. Within a centrally sanctioned framework, sociologists working in Soviet Kirgiziia generated empirical research that questioned official Brezhnev-era rhetoric concerning the eventual 'convergence and merging' (*sblizhenie i sliianie*) of Soviet nationalities. It is noteworthy that the first large-scale empirical study of ethnic relations in Kirgiziia, undertaken by students of the republic's Sociological Laboratory in the 1970s, never came to see the light of day. 'Socialism and Nationalities', as the project was called, generated too much data that contradicted official rhetoric. Although studies such as these were not acts of resistance to official ideology, Amsler demonstrates how such moments of censorship became foundational to a conception of sociology in the republic as a discipline battling to speak truth to power with the tools of science.

This rhetoric of intellectual autonomy, Amsler demonstrates in chapter four, took on increasing salience during the years of *perestroika* and early independence. In this new context, earlier

connections between science and modernization were reinterpreted ‘no longer as an aspiration to “catch up” with the metropole but increasingly to articulate alternative forms of intellectual sovereignty within the Soviet system’ (pp. 67–68). Moreover, it was in this setting that the idea of a ‘national sociology’ came to be articulated. Critiques of structural intellectual dependence fused with concerns over the failure to examine the republic’s pressing social problems to foster a distinct disciplinary identity – one in which ‘appeals for methodological and social disinterestedness in the pursuit of sociological truth’ existed in permanent tension with the demands for ‘politically relevant’ research (p. 143). In the summer of 1990, when social tensions and ethnic animosities erupted in tragic violence in Osh, concerns over the ‘failure’ to foresee and prevent this conflict decisively shaped the future institutionalization of the discipline, with sociologists orienting less towards union-wide concerns than to the empirical study of Kyrgyzstani society.

For all their concern to map out a distinctly republican sociology, however, none of the ‘second generation’ of Kyrgyz sociologists, as Amsler refers to those scholars who made their intellectual mark during *perestroika*, could have foreseen the transformations that independence would bring to their discipline. Independence did not usher in a new era of intellectual confidence in Kyrgyzstan, as is commonly assumed. On the contrary, it fostered an acute interrogation of previous interpretative paradigms just at the time when political relations, institutional identities and logics of funding were being dramatically restructured. Youth and ability to communicate in English suddenly became the markers of academic respectability for grant-givers and organizations aimed at social science ‘reform’. A relatively coherent intellectual field fragmented into competing camps, and markedly different intellectual visions came to be institutionalized at the country’s two major university departments of sociology.

What remained constant in this process of restructuring, Amsler argues, was ‘the desire to develop a body of knowledge that will be scientifically sound, politically useful and socially authoritative’ (p. 92). Quite how such concerns should translate into departmental curricula, hiring policies, research priorities and pedagogical visions in a context of profound economic restructuring, remained, however, intensely contested. In perhaps the most fascinating of the book’s empirical chapters, Amsler shows how such concerns came to be articulated in newspaper polemics by Kyrgyzstani sociologists around political ratings, privatization and the measurement of ‘public opinion’. These articles were, at one level, driven by pedagogical and technocratic concerns: the perceived need to foster a public and political elite who would be informed about real social change in the country. But they were also central in articulating a place for sociology as a truly democratic and post-Soviet science, a discipline that would, in the words of one article cited by Amsler, act as a ‘mirror’ to society, revealing people’s real ‘relation to power’ (p. 126). Debates about public opinion and privatization, for example, were crucially also debates about the ‘proper’ way of doing objective sociology (whose opinion to solicit? How to deal with politically contentious findings about the (un)popularity of privatization? How to balance ‘expertise’ with the opinion of ‘ordinary people’?) Heated discussions around political ratings crystallized concerns about the strained boundary between ‘science’ and ‘politics’, with sociologists accusing one another of ‘political prostitution’ and unethical research. The fact that these debates were occurring in newspapers rather than in academic journals is revealing of the particular political and intellectual moment. A reflection of the collapsed post-Soviet market for academic publishing, newspaper polemics also created a very public space for intellectual boundary-work and the formation of sociological ‘camps’. Post-Soviet sociology in Kyrgyzstan was, from its very inception, a very public social science.

Of the volume’s many important insights, three are particularly worth signalling to scholars of Central Asia. First, the volume makes an important intervention into ongoing debates about centre-periphery relations in late Soviet society, and the scope of intellectual dependence.

Amsler's invocation of a 'colonial logic' of Soviet social science perhaps too easily dismisses the significant differences between the structures of intellectual domination in the Soviet Union and Western colonial empires (not least, the conscious differentiation from the methods and epistemologies of 'bourgeois' social science). However, what the study does demonstrate in fascinating detail is the degree of de facto diversity that characterized the practice of Soviet sociology, and the extent to which a centralized structure facilitated the articulation of a distinctly republican, and later national, sociology. Thus, the study acts as an important corrective to accounts of Soviet science that have been almost exclusively focused on central institutions.

Second, by exploring the history of disciplinary institutionalization from the 1960s onwards, the author is able to situate contemporary concerns to articulate an empirically rigorous and 'de-ideologized' sociology within a much broader intellectual history. 1991 is certainly a decisive moment in this narrative; but the particular way in which disciplinary 'boundary work' came to be practised in the 1990s was profoundly mediated by past institutional and epistemological frameworks. As Amsler demonstrates, current positivist and functionalist philosophies of science that are explicitly posited as a rejection of former Marxist-Leninist paradigms are in many respects 'epistemologically compatible' with the latter. By looking historically at intellectual outputs from the 1960s to the 1990s, Amsler manages to avoid the type of determinism that can come from taking 1991 as a moment of sudden epistemological 'liberation'. There is an important methodological insight here for the value of tracing contemporary accounts of post-Soviet transformation to the as-yet little researched Brezhnev era.

Perhaps most significantly, Amsler's account gives us an important insight into the discursive antecedents of contemporary intellectual nationalism in Kyrgyzstan: why imagining a 'national sociology' has come to be important in the republic – and why this project is both intellectually fraught and politically contested. There is a substantial literature on 'nation-building' in Central Asia, much of it critical, and little of which deals with the dilemmas of articulating a 'national' intellectual space as sensitively as Amsler does in this volume. The full theoretical potential of this insight remains somewhat understated in the text, and could benefit from further comparative elaboration (for example, by engaging more thoroughly with literatures in subaltern studies that have examined the predicament of post-colonial science in South Asia) as well as ethnographic unpacking. For example, we learn that 'generation matters, as do ethnicity and gender' in the academic hierarchies of sociology departments (p. 96). Quite how such social positions mediate the decisions ranging from the designation of 'socially important' research questions, to the choice of authoritative social theories, to decisions concerning the language in which to publicize research findings (Russian, Kyrgyz or English?) are questions that could be powerfully engaged through ethnographic illustration. Indeed, Kyrgyzstani social science may be in a 'post-colonial' predicament of structural dependence, but quite how that predicament plays out in particular institutional settings is far from straightforward. As Laura Adams has pointed out in another important exploration of cultural dependence in Central Asia, there are multiple ironies today (ones that have yet to be engaged by comparative studies of post-coloniality) of an intellectual predicament where expressly 'Western' discourses are invoked to critique a history of Russian intellectual domination.

In sum, this is a subtle and beautifully written volume – one that cleverly subverts in practice the binary of 'Marx and market' to which the title alludes, by exposing the extent to which the past lives in the present, and the epistemological continuities between Soviet materialism and contemporary Western endeavours at educational reform. As the first book-length exploration of the politics of knowledge in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia, Amsler's monograph deserves to be widely read, by students and scholars alike. It is an unfortunate irony that the

economics of knowledge production about Central Asia, which gives a £75 price tag to the book, will make it less accessible to scholars of the region than it deserves.

Reference

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Zhdanovskii diskurs v natsional'nykh regionakh Rossii poslevoennykh let. [The Zhdanov discourse in the national regions of Russia in the postwar years], by B.V. Bazarov, Ulan-Ude, Izdatel'stvo Buriatskogo nauchnogo tsentra Sibirskogo otdeleniia Rossiiskoi akademii nauk, 2006, 123 pp.

One defining trait of the late Stalinist era was the 'Zhdanovshchina' – the domination of Soviet artistic life by Andrei Aleksandrovich Zhdanov (1896–1948), the First Secretary of Leningrad's Party organization, whom Stalin placed in charge of cultural affairs in 1946. In the interests of ideological purity, Zhdanov wrapped Soviet culture more tightly than ever in the straightjacket of 'Socialist-realism' and infused it with shrill xenophobia and boorish philistinism. Outlasting its creator's death in 1948, the Zhdanovshchina defined Soviet cultural policy for the remainder of the Stalinist era.

Many readers are familiar with Zhdanov's tendentious, loutish attacks on Russian cultural leaders such as Anna Akhmatova and Sergei Prokof'ev; but we must also keep in mind that the Zhdanovshchina had special implications for the nationalities: since late Stalinist ideology was laced with triumphalist Russian chauvinism (and tacit anti-Semitism), Zhdanov and his acolytes specifically accused non-Russian cultural leaders of 'bourgeois nationalism', a charge tantamount to treason. Thus did Zhdanovism's tentacles reach even unto the steppes and forests of southeastern Siberia inhabited by the Buryats – a Mongol-speaking indigenous people whose culture has been shaped by their traditional herding economy, their Buddhist and Shamanist faiths, and their cultural ties to their Mongolian kin to the south.

In this present volume, Boris Vandanovich Bazarov, director of Ulan-Ude's Institute of Mongolian Studies, Buddhism, and Tibetan Studies, has produced the first book-length study of the Zhdanovshchina in Buryatia. After thoroughly reviewing the literature on Soviet cultural policy in Buryatia, Bazarov describes the Zhdanovshchina's origins in the book's first chapter, 'The Change of Political Course in the Postwar Years'. The Great Patriotic War's devastation and trauma; the potential political threat posed by returning prisoners of war and by newly-absorbed (or reabsorbed) non-Russians in the Western Borderlands; and a general perception that the Party's ideological controls had weakened during the war, all left the Soviet leadership acutely sensitive to possible challenges to its authority. Thus, the 'return to the pre-war model of socialism was accompanied by the restoration of a harsh political *diktat* in intellectual life' (p. 24).

Stalin trumpeted the new cultural line at a January 1946 Moscow gathering of Soviet cultural leaders, warning that Soviet culture had become contaminated by 'dangerous tendencies' such as