

THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE IN CENTRAL ASIA

Science between Marx
and the market

Sarah Amsler



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There has been great interest and investment in reforming scientific institutions throughout the post-Soviet world. To date however, no thorough analysis of the role of organized intellectual activity in the region is available. Through careful historical and ethnographic research and the extensive use of local scholarly works, this book provides a persuasive and careful analysis of the production of knowledge in Central Asia. The author demonstrates that classical theories of scientific revolution or science and society are inadequate for understanding the science project in Central Asia. Instead, a critical understanding of local science is more appropriate. In the region, the professional and political ethos of Marxism–Leninism was incorporated into the logic of science on the periphery of the Soviet empire. Local academics assimilated, negotiated and resisted its priorities in their work. Similarly, after the end of Soviet rule, they interacted with the new post-Soviet ‘logic of the market’ and democratic ethos of science in an effort to refashion a new science for their new society. The scientists’ work to establish themselves ‘between Marx and the market’ is therefore creating new political economies of knowledge at the periphery of the scientific world system.

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PREFACE

I began researching this book at a historical moment, both auspicious and tragic, seven years after the final disintegration of the Soviet Union, while working as a sociologist in Central Asia during the late 1990s. The nature of my early encounters with Central Asia and the circumstances under which I have since worked in the region have decisively shaped my approach to the sociological study of organized knowledge in these societies. I, like many other foreign social scientists working in the former Soviet Union during this period, was initially recruited by a ‘development’ organization – in my case the Open Society Institute, which at the time sponsored an academic fellowship programme called the Civic Education Project.¹ As I settled awkwardly into a position as assistant chair of the new Sociology Department at the American University–Central Asia, I began to wonder why the organization had recruited me, a newly qualified American academic who knew little about the society in which she was hired to teach, and also what epistemological, political and cultural prejudices had allowed me to accept a position whose authority was clearly predicated on Occidentalist generalizations about the universality, superiority and progressive nature of ‘Western’ knowledge. The sociology and politics of knowledge, and particularly as regards colonialism and postsocialism, were implicit in this work from the start.

Within the post-Soviet academy, all that was once solid had indeed melted into air and the future seemed both wide open and frighteningly impossible. The authority of academic knowledge, particularly in the social sciences, was heavily damaged by its politicization within Soviet society. It was being reclaimed through new associations with the very ideologies of positivism and empiricism that had epitomized its antithesis, bourgeois ‘pseudoscience’, only a decade before. While there was ostensibly expanded space for intellectual experimentation, imagining what this might entail was difficult. The reconstruction of existing boundaries of legitimate knowledge was thus experienced as a crisis as much as an opportunity. Beyond the practical challenges of post-Soviet higher education, there were also palpable currents of wider contention: discourses on the inferiority of ‘local’ or ‘Soviet’ knowledge and the superiority of ‘Western’ knowledge, fatalistic determinism in sociological theory and research, and polarized responses of unproblematic attraction or

irredentist reaction to post-Marxist models of progress in neoliberal development agendas.

In this environment, my interest in theorizing social scientific ‘knowledge’ met with both enthusiasm and resistance. There was not only little time for luxurious meta-theorizing – empirical research needed to be conducted and disseminated, courses needed to be designed and taught, prolific institutional regulations needed to be satisfied – but some academics also felt that it was intellectually unnecessary. Problems encountered were taken for granted as natural elements of ‘the transition’, a slippery and ideologically laden concept that we inherited from an earlier epoch of postcolonial modernization projects and reinterpreted to suit the post-Soviet one. Historical process had spoken: ‘Marx’ (and much of what this name entailed) and the ‘East’ had lost, and the ‘market’ and the ‘West’ had won. What would be the purpose of looking backward for answers, into a history characterized by what were publicly characterized as humiliating errors of intellectual and professional judgement? Or of peering inward, when decades of cultural work and workers seemed so obviously proved to be inadequate for understanding or creating the ‘good society’? And what was the point of discussing the current politics of knowledge when it was now clear and possible that true knowledge could *not* be ‘political’; when the very possibility of the ‘sociology of knowledge’ detracted from the little legitimacy that social scientists had established under the Soviet regime?

There were also more political reservations. For example, attempts to democratize the research process; include interlocutors as partners instead of objectifying them as ‘subjects’; and inviting participants to comment on tentative findings were greeted with ambivalence. Why would I deliberately discredit myself by trying to minimize the authority bestowed upon me as a foreign ‘expert’? In many respects, the dominant academic culture in the region respects hierarchy and deference, expertise and pretences to neutral objectivity; in short, it rewards as ‘science’ much that I deliberately call into question. Some suspected that the ‘interactive’ approach to research was a manipulative and paternalistic experiment similar to professional ‘trainings’ now so often organized by international educational organizations.² A few were angry about the insinuation, however benign I initially imagined it to be, that their knowledge was in any way ‘political’ and resisted being interpreted as political as well as intellectual actors. Finally, some distrust foreign researchers, whom they fear – not entirely without cause – will steal their ideas and slander their reputations in foreign-language journals that they can neither access nor read. In short, through this work I became aware that epistemological and political architectures, even of methods that aim to dismantle power relations, are structurally embedded within these very relations.

As I began to explore this phenomenon more systematically, I had another – this time textual – encounter which reoriented the project. I began to accumulate books and articles, which I felt described and in some cases theorized the state of social science in Central Asia. However, they were written not about post-Soviet

societies, but by and about social scientists working elsewhere at other times in the postcolonial world: India in the 1960s, Latin America in the 1970s and Africa in the 1980s. My analytical aperture widened: problems of organized knowledge production in Central Asia cannot be adequately understood if we view them only through the narrow national and regional lenses through which we had for so long been accustomed to looking. They beg questions about knowledge, power and capital at the global level; about the relationship between the colonial and Soviet experiences, on the one hand, and neocolonialism and post-Soviet independence on the other; about the relationship between ‘globalization’ and ‘postsocialism’. It occurred to me that social science in Central Asia may not, as it were, be undergoing a simple ‘transition’ from ideology to truth, as often assumed by narratives of de-Sovietization and development. This book instead paints a different picture of a complex social and cultural institution that has been continuously re-imagined as part of shifting encounters between the logics of science and power, and of late, the ‘market’.

Reflections on power and knowledge in the field

The book has also been shaped, less intentionally if not less reflexively, by the usual ethnographic suspects: culture shock, language barriers, problematic access to people and documents, strained rapport with interlocutors, role conflicts in the field, and uneven power relations between the researcher and the researched. Other researchers of former Soviet countries argue that there is, in addition, ‘something peculiarly postsocialist about the inevitable complexity of fieldwork relations’ in these societies. They cite the impact of Cold-War ideologies on mutual impressions of researcher and researched, the as-yet-untheorized differences of everyday social organization in non-capitalist cultures, the way that people in these formerly closed societies interpret the intrusion of foreign observers, and the ambiguous relationship between detachment and engagement in the post-Soviet field (Dudwick and De Soto 2000). However, if we are to make any sense out of this shared experience, it is necessary to move beyond its recognition and theorize how the particular features of postsocialist ethnography are related to broader issues of power and knowledge embedded in the imperial politics of the academy in the region.

First and foremost is the problem of how to negotiate, if possible to deconstruct, the Orientalist, Occidentalist and colonial subtexts of social research in Central Asian societies. Some have framed this problem as a post-Cold-War clash between ‘triumphant’ capitalist researchers and disappointed and ‘defeated’ Soviet citizens (Liu 2003; Zanca 2000: 153). I suggest that it is also linked to institutionalized structures of power and domination within Central Asian society itself, many of which have been obscured by well-intentioned but misguided ‘post-power’ discourses of globalization and civil society in recent years.³ The people of Central Asia are self-consciously observed and evaluated, and are therefore often wary of the motives and intentions of foreign researchers. This is

particularly true for social elites, including many of the academics and intellectuals discussed in this research, for whom national independence wrought not only professional dislocation but also severe losses of economic privilege, social power and cultural prestige. The notion that all scholars were 'liberated' from the very social structures in which they were gaining status during the 1980s is a bitter irony for those who were invested, both professionally and intellectually, in the institutions of Soviet science. Since independence, asymmetrical power relations between foreign and indigenous researchers have been exacerbated by the emergence of new inequalities, such as age, political orientation and access to English-language or American and European education, which compound existing hierarchies of ethnicity, gender, region and party affiliation. In some cases, scholars' work and professional identities have been simplistically branded as naïve, illegitimate and ideological – to use the word in its contemporary pejorative sense, 'Soviet'. Academics who once saw themselves as architects or administrators of a formidable empire, once the guardians of the truth about social reality, have become the exotically observed and *passé*. This has obvious implications for research relations, which are therefore also experienced as political encounters.

Second, this research has been an exercise in comprehending and translating theoretical dissonances that were revealed between my interlocutors and my self. The most vivid example of such 'talking past' actually comes from a colleague, however, who was once accused of denying the existence of the Kyrgyz nation after presenting a conference paper on the social construction of ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan. It emerged that a statement which would not even raise eyebrows in a setting of shared epistemological *doxa* could easily require hours, days or perhaps even years of preliminary discussion in a more heterogeneous environment. As other ethnographers of Central Asian societies have argued, the success of the interpretive endeavour depends not only on how well one can master the 'epistemic negotiations' that are vital for cross-cultural understanding, but also on how well the analyst comprehends the larger social and political contexts that ground the epistemologies, and how well she 'answers not for the impartiality or replicability of her research, but for the situated knowledge she has collaborated with her informants to produce' (Adams 1999: 331).⁴ This has been a particular challenge, as it is precisely this sort of knowledge that is the main focus of this book.

Finally, as a sociologist studying sociologists with whom I also worked, this research raised questions about how to negotiate 'objectivity' and 'engagement'. Ultimately, I never resigned myself to the advice of a trusted friend, a young Kazakh professor, who advised me to enter into power relations or face exclusion from the academic community. 'Be instrumental', he said, 'use your power. That's how it works here'. In many senses, he was right. That, unfortunately, is rather 'how it works' there at the moment; power relations are an integral part of academic practice in Central Asia, as they are elsewhere. However, I decided, perhaps against the rules of 'good' anthropology where one strives to conform for 'rapport' and 'acceptance', that I wished not to be bounded by this fatalistic essentialism, and instead attempted to preserve a methodological faith in the

possibility of democratizing the research process, even in this imbalanced context. As with all decisions in social research, this choice closed certain doors and opened others, including to relationships with people and ideas that have been excluded from the traditional structures of academic discourse but who are playing major roles in the transformation of the social sciences in Central Asia.

I have paused on these methodological issues because they are central to the way in which I articulate the relationship between theory, method and practice in this book. In addition, they contextualize the research process within some of the political, cultural and economic forces that both inspired and constrained it.⁵ These points are therefore understood as integral to the research, rather than as auxiliary concerns.

The critical stance: some premises

I have made every attempt to construct a valid representation of the sociology and politics of knowledge in Central Asia, one which accounts for both the ‘logic of science’ and the ‘logic of practice’ (Bourdieu 1992) – which would, in other words, be loyal both to the principles of critical sociological theory and to the subjective meanings and values that Central Asian sociologists attach to their own work. Another story, guided by other experiences, political proclivities and theoretical orientations, would be different. I am not a detached observer of Central Asian society. In addition to a theoretical interest in the sociology of knowledge, I have political and moral concerns about the democratization of knowledge and about the social consequences of the politics of truth in the region.

The interpretive work in this book therefore draws on two sociological traditions that may be described as ‘critical’. It is first informed by theories of knowledge that question grand narratives of modern scientific progress and aim to expose the political, economic and cultural foundations – and where appropriate the human consequences – of what might be called the underside of enlightenment. Critical theories of knowledge, which were elaborated in relation to pre-fascist Europe and became ascendant throughout Western Europe and the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, assume renewed significance in Central Asia. Here, ‘scientific knowledge’ is portrayed as a redemptive political force, and it has become almost heretical to challenge the origins or consequences of its claims to epistemological authority or to interrogate the cultural meaning of its intellectual products. Further, academic knowledge is linked to technocratic action, underpinned by instrumental rationality and driven by an unexamined belief in the promises of rational scientific progress (Torres 1999). These underlying assumptions lead researchers into teleological studies which may explore the causes and effects of social change but neglect to consider the nature and politics of this change itself, for ‘when the prophetic and the progressive are important to social life, their inscription in social and educational sciences is an orthodoxy that makes it difficult for us to perceive them as effects of power’ (Popkewitz 1991: 27). Critical theory reminds us that in a society where social scientists are considered

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to be physicians who diagnose and cure the ills of a sick society, it is also crucial to investigate the limitations and possibilities of the ‘healers’ themselves.

The second ‘critical’ dimension of this research is its orientation towards humanist sociology. In the tradition of Max Weber, C. Wright Mills and others it defines sociological research as a moral responsibility as well as an intellectual endeavour, believing that in questions of human freedom, ‘nothing is less innocent than non-interference’ (Bourdieu 1999: 629). My analysis of academic knowledge and culture thus inevitably differs from that of policy makers, aid workers and anthropologists who have also written on similar themes. Its provenance in praxis has made it methodologically challenging, and I hope that my attempts to accommodate both symmetrical analytics and normative practice, ethnography and critical theory, and observation and engagement will raise provocative questions about the sociology of knowledge in Central Asia and other places subject to both nationalizing and neo-colonial ‘development’ in the conditions of postsocialist global capitalism.

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INTRODUCTION

How did it happen that we so quickly ‘forgot’ about the decades-long preaching of communist ideology, that we believed in as the ‘sole truth’ and ‘sole science’? Is it proper that, not having clarified these painful and core questions for ourselves, we have begun to elaborate a ‘new ideology’ as if the former one did not exist, as if those people who now so energetically took the ideology of ‘national rebirth’ or, let’s say, the ideology of the ‘all-consuming market’ did not also militantly struggle for the realisation of ‘communist ideas’?

(Asanova 1995)

How is it possible for man to continue to think and live in a time when the problems of ideology and utopia are being radically raised and thought through in all their implications?

(Mannheim 1936: 42)

Despite great interest and investment in reforming cultural institutions throughout the post-Soviet world, there has been little rigorous research into either this project or the more specific dynamics of organized intellectual activity in the region. Sociologists of knowledge and science who in the past have mobilized en masse to analyse lesser upheavals in scientific and intellectual life have remained curiously silent about the fate of ideas in post-Soviet societies. This is particularly true in what were once the ‘borderland republics’ of Central Asia, where academic and scientific institutions are often treated as development projects or anthropological exercises as opposed to subjects of legitimate theoretical analysis. This can be explained in a number of ways: a historical apartheid between Cold-War-era ‘area studies’ and mainstream sociological theory, the marginalization of Soviet academics and intellectuals within the global science system, their preoccupation with the daily hardships of academic practice, and Orientalist ideologies and prejudices which led scholars to conclude that there was no legitimate science under the Soviet regime, that no serious work was produced during that time, and therefore there was nothing worth consideration.¹

Whatever the reason, this oversight has impoverished the understandings of the complex politics of organized knowledge in the region and its potential role in social change and human freedom. It also compromises our understanding of the sociology of knowledge and science more generally, particularly as regards intellectual activity in marginalized academic communities and under new 'post-communist' conditions of neoliberal hegemony in former Soviet space (Outhwaite and Ray 2005). The continuing intersection of knowledge and power within the academy means that knowledge reform must not be taken for granted as 'inherently progressive and truth-producing', as it is often interpreted in reformist discourse (Beliaev and Butorin 1982; Popkewitz 1991). As the Central Asian writer Karybek Baibosunov (1993) has noted of the social sciences, knowledge fields 'are enduring major cataclysms [as they are] freed from an ideological path and seek to raise influence on new trends'. It is also necessary to understand how these changes are influencing the production of organized knowledge itself, and to critically evaluate the new ideological paths which have replaced the old and which are shaping contemporary intellectual practices.

This book is written as a contribution to this conversation and can be read on two levels. Most broadly, it is an exploration into the cultural meaning and consequences of the modern 'science project' in the non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union, the effect of the Soviet regime and its collapse on efforts to institutionalize academic social science, the impact of these efforts on shaping the knowledge about the 'post-Soviet', the necessity of non-Western perspectives on the 'globalization' of knowledge production, and the shifting relationship between knowledge and power in the academy under politico-economic regimes of both state socialism and late capitalism, or what might also be referred to as the comparative political economy of truth.

The exploration of these broad themes is grounded in the sociological and historical study of the institutionalization of a single social scientific field, sociology, in Kyrgyzstan (formerly the Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republic). It integrates historical research, ethnography, interviews and content analyses of academic and popular publications on social science with critical theories of knowledge to illustrate how conceptions of 'science' and 'truth' are historically contingent and have been negotiated through professional practices within the Central Asian academy. This focus allows for a deep understanding of the diversity of everyday practices of knowledge production in post-Soviet space. Despite considerable attention to 'national' and 'international' development, local institutional contexts are crucially important in shaping knowledge outcomes and experiences. Comparative research on 'indigenous' or 'national' sociologies provides excellent insight into the political economy of postcolonial science, as will be discussed in the following chapter, but tells us little about how social forces are engaged by academics themselves. Similarly, studies of a general 'Soviet' sociology are instructive but often fail to appreciate the heterogeneity of the Soviet experience, especially in cultural life. Although important to understand the dynamics of power and knowledge at the macro

level, it is therefore also vital to examine how local power structures and cultural practices mediate these forces.

The social scientific community within Central Asia lends itself to this analysis, for here, a modernist ideal of scientific politics has long existed side by side and in permanent tension with deep scepticism about the politicization of knowledge itself. This dichotomy gives rise to a series of fascinating professional projects which span the Soviet and post-Soviet experiences and which are very specifically related to the articulation of boundaries between ‘knowledge’ and ‘power’. Since the mid-twentieth century, social scientists have worked continuously to align the relationship between social science and politics in order to transform a heteronymous field of knowledge production and scientific practice into an autonomous one, or from a field whose development is dominated by external forces to one which is self-producing and reproducing and which can exert influence in socio-political practice. Although varying across geopolitical contexts – internal colonialism, national independence and capitalist dependency – projects to institutionalize and reform sociology have all been grounded in a need to define and articulate relationships between ‘truth’ and ‘power’ which enable social scientists to negotiate their professional identity in ways that are commensurate with the logics of both science and politics. While analysed in a post-Soviet context, this can also be understood as a more general tension between establishing ‘sociological relevance’ and ‘social relevance’, or between criteria used to measure the intellectual validity of social scientific knowledge and those used to evaluate its societal significance, which has been a consistent tension in social science, particularly in postcolonial societies (Joshi 1995: 82).

This book will therefore focus especially on the ‘boundary-work’ done by Kyrgyzstani academics to define the field of sociology during the late socialist period (1985–91) and in the decade following national independence (1991–2001). This is an alternative to the traditional approaches of the ‘institutionalization’ or ‘development’ of knowledge fields and professions. Boundary-work, or the ‘rhetorical strategy of promoting particular ideologies of science’ (Gieryn 1983), is an analytical concept used by sociologists of knowledge to the means by which fields of legitimate knowledge are constructed, maintained, transformed and broken down, both within scientific communities (Camic and Xie 1994; Fuchs 1986; Gieryn 1983; Kuklick 1980) and in the public sphere (Fisher 1990; Gieryn *et al.* 1985). It builds on the theory that disciplines are socially constructed as opposed to naturally occurring, but extends this by exploring how and under what conditions they are formed and legitimized, by whom and with what intentions, and how the definition of ‘truth’ is conditioned by the social and material relationships in which these processes of validation are embedded. The central assumption underlying the concept is that the borders of knowledge units (e.g. the definition of knowledge, its distinction from non-science and pseudoscience, the relationship between knowledge and power, etc.) are not fixed or universal, but rather fluid and negotiated in contests for professional legitimacy, cultural authority and material or social resources (Gieryn 1983).

Analysing boundary-work in social science is therefore a way of understanding how and why knowledge is actually produced with a focus on the localized actors and institutions that have an interest in this process (Mulkay 1991).

In this context, social science cannot be seen merely as a site of 'transition', but may also be one of revolution, inertia, struggle, retrenchment or resistance. It grounds practical debates about how to reorganize the intellectual architecture of interrupted worlds and are spaces where alternative ways of knowing about these worlds may potentially be introduced, adopted, challenged and negotiated. The structure and meaning of knowledge are changing here, but not in entirely predictable or systematic ways. Questions about what exists in society, or what may be known to exist, how this might be legitimately ascertained and verified, who has the right to know and speak of knowledge and organize its production, and what role authoritative knowledge can and should have in social life – in other words, epistemology – are debated privately, publicly and in earnest. The production of social knowledge in postsocialist space is often a cultural politics, raw with emotion and linked to power, associated not only with questions of 'national development' or 'globalization' (as it often discursively is) but also to the survival of academic careers and to human emotions of anomie, dilemma and hope in the face of an uncertain future. The intimate relationship between knowledge and power is thus simultaneously assumed, denied and contested in Central Asian social science, and projects to reform knowledge institutions in the region, particularly within the academy, cannot be adequately understood outside this context.

The ethnographic and historical data discussed here challenge dominant perceptions that Soviet science was wholly ideological and post-Soviet science unproblematically 'autonomous'. We will see how a professional ethos of 'Marxism–Leninism' was variously defined and incorporated into the logic of science on the periphery of the Soviet empire, and how academics assimilated, negotiated and resisted its priorities in their work in the pursuit of both social truth and professional prestige.² We will see how they later struggled to integrate these practices and epistemologies with the post-Soviet 'logic of the market' and democratic ethos of science in an effort to refashion a new science for their new society, and to construct discourses of truth to facilitate its legitimization in the face of new authoritarianisms. We will also learn why political ideologies were once considered good science and why positivism has become good politics, and how the boundaries of science have shifted in relation to political discourses of communism, capitalism, nationalism, justice and democracy.

In other words, we will see that problems stemming from the lack of intellectual or professional autonomy in Soviet society were not simply resolved by national independence. The hegemony and intellectual politicization of Soviet rule emerge as partial factors in the politics of Central Asian social science rather than as the defining factors. The relationship between organized knowledge and power has changed form as new forms of heteronomy creep into place. While there have certainly been ruptures between 'Soviet' and 'post-Soviet' science, there is also