

concept of leisure), sought to do so through a series of collective activities from sports and performances to mass spectacles and games. This universal playground sought to offer everyone “independent of their level of culture” something that could resonate with them, as their personality could be developed. As such, the park appears to be simultaneously an escapist man-made paradise and a giant laboratory for social engineering. The setting for the park’s elaborate “evolutionist” program was developed through a series of design competitions, and at a certain moment was led by Lissitzky, who devised a system of spatial elements for organizing the masses. The system of planned functional zones, organized by way of the so-called “switching zone,” allowed the park visitors to devise their own entertainment program. To me, this approach to design as a kind of programmable code seems to anticipate solutions to landscape architecture of the late post-modern era.

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Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding. Ed. David W. Montgomery. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2022. xliii, 738 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Tables. Maps. \$75.00, hard cover. doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.293

Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding is impressive, both by its sheer size (738 pages!) and by the number of leading scholars who have contributed insightful chapters. Multi-disciplinary, yet accessible, this volume brings together thematic chapters with nuanced case studies in order to facilitate an informed understanding of this often underrated or overlooked region. With its wide range of topics, from social structures and dynamics to work, religion, and arts, to name just a few, it is a seminal reading on social and cultural aspects of Central Asian societies.

The book is framed and held together by the notion of context. This thematic focus is carried through the eight parts that structure the book (“Contextualizing Central Asia,” “Contexts of History,” “Contexts of Living,” “Contexts of Structure,” “Contexts of Transformation,” “Contexts of Work,” “Contexts of Vision,” and “Contexts of Aesthetics”). Each of these deals with contexts of different walks of human life such as living, structures, transformations, work, or aesthetics and explore the multidimensionality of life within this particular context. The parts are further broken down into thematic chapters, four for each part, that deal with particular aspects plus three case studies. These are followed by discussion questions and suggestions for further readings. Before the parts proper of the book start, there are two introductory chapters, one by the editor David W. Montgomery (“Central Asia in Context”) that explains the aims and structure of the book; the other by Julien Thorez and Emmanuel Giraudet (“Mapping Context”) that introduces critical cartography. The last part, “Contexts of Aesthetics,” is followed by a short reflection (“Translating Contexts into Policy”) by David M. Abramson, Laura L. Adams, and David W. Montgomery. The rigid focus on context makes the book appear

almost like a monograph at first glance, but the individual contributions turn out to be quite different in style and approach. What is good for the book, namely the multitude of voices, is a challenge for the review. Even the generous space given here does not allow doing justice to all the authors, so I will write mostly about larger issues and only pick out some chapters that illustrate these.

Overall, most chapters are brilliantly written and make well-founded arguments for their respective cases but some stick out as special. In her chapter “Urban Life,” Natalie Koch not only manages to tie together the urban built environment, infrastructure, claims to modernity, and social inequality in an admirably concise manner, she also weaves her different aspects into one compelling narrative. Bringing to us vivid accounts of Central Asian migrant life in Russian metropolises with all its contradictory experiences, Madeleine Reeves paints a rich tableau that goes far beyond the usual victimizing or “economic rationality” clichés while she also illustrates affective and moral aspects of work and selfhood. Till Mostowlansky in his case study of mobility on the Pamir highway captures the putative counterpoints and intricate affective entanglements by which a rural woman may conceive of herself as local and modern, shaped by Soviet ethics and traditional healing, a professional and a mother of many children, all at the same time. Cynthia Werner’s subtle and compelling contribution discusses the category family from an unexpected and fresh perspective. It is exactly this kind of conjunctures that are so common in Central Asia and that are so often misunderstood or misrepresented. Puzzlingly, the chapters look like they were written without knowing the others’ contributions, although the introduction (xxiii) says otherwise. I wonder what might have happened had the stated collaborative approach been maintained and the authors of the eight parts had been truly encouraged to discuss their main arguments with each other. One can only imagine the invigorating tension stemming, for example, from the different affective modes of identifying as rural or urban in the two highly interesting chapters by Tommaso Trevisani and Natalie Koch. This procedure would also have prevented some irksome stereotypes, like the notorious “rift...between the sedentary, densely populated, and socially conservative ‘hydraulic’ societies...and the pastoral-nomadic transhumant ways of living” (182) that resurfaces from the depot of historical clichés together with some of its stereotypes (about gender roles) despite efforts by historians to complicate these topics and do away with the dichotomies.

Naturally, a collected volume of this size and range is bound to show some iteration, inconsistency, and variation in tone or quality. Kudos to David Montgomery who as an editor has managed to mostly smooth out these issues. Where they remain, however, they pinpoint some deeper conceptual problems with the book. Obviously, it is the editor’s right to choose what he finds important. Yet, in a book like this, which comes with a certain aura of authoritativeness and will remain influential, we as scholars need to be sensitive to our own positionality, and the temporality and situatedness of our data lest we substitute one linear master narrative with another instead of diversifying the voices. As we know, all data has an age, and if presented without temporal or spatial context (strangely enough in a book that puts context center stage) as some authors chose to do, it adds to the kind of putative timelessness that is unfortunately so pervasive in writings about Central Asia. The same could

be said about positionality. Trying to understand how people in certain places live and understand “the local,” as Morgan Liu does in his chapter, inevitably means to position oneself in well-honed, often taken-for-granted webs of affect, hierarchies and power; in his case the relatively strictly gendered space of a mahalla. The rhapsodic picture we get of playing children in the street, elderly men sitting and chatting is all very true, yet it is very different from the life many women, especially young ones, experience in these very places. This does not imply that they don’t love their mahalla or their family, but to detail one’s own position within this male world as well as attempt to include its female part (including their invisible labor for entertaining guests) with potentially very different valuations would have rendered the narrative more holistic; probably also less idyllic.

The most irritating part of the book is probably “Contexts of History.” The reason why I particularly take issue with this part is the way it is organized into four thematic chapters: Precolonial Central Asia, Colonial Central Asia, Soviet Central Asia, and Post-Soviet Central Asia. Even if it is undisputed that a book of this kind cannot (and in fact never pretends to) do justice to the long and diverse history of the region, it becomes equally obvious that “precolonial history” cannot be adequately represented on sixteen pages (as opposed to the remaining 156 pages for the more recent one and a half to two centuries. Levi Scott was brave to take up the challenge but cannot get significantly beyond a rather general description of the three khanates in the predominantly sedentary parts of what became Russian-dominated Central Asia. He mentions in passing the importance of the huge transformations that took place between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the Dzungarian crisis, water politics, and shifting patterns of legitimization, to name just a few, but cannot go into any detail in a way that would make the reader feel their importance and novelty. Again, mutual reading would have prevented some redundancy between his and the next chapter by Alexander Morrison that are caused by the two authors’ divergent timeframes for the colonial conquest. The reason why I dwell on this rather tiny portion of the book is that it spotlights an unfortunate by-product of the book’s organization and the choice to make history separate rather than a cross-cutting topic running through all parts (a similar thing could be said about religion). Although I am convinced that it was unintentional and the editor did not, in any way, want to promote the stereotype: by the choice to reduce precolonial history to but one chapter, post-Chinggisid Central Asia in this book looks again, as in so many Soviet and western publications, like a rather stagnant space with not much to tell about until colonial history starts. This sorry impression is intensified in the case studies section, where precolonial Central Asia is left out.

What comes as a surprise in the book is its relatively conventional take, attested by the outline of its chapters. The way the book is arranged and the selection of topics and approaches shows that they have been conceptualized from a western perspective and western interests. Querying this is not a critique for the sake of criticizing. A consequence of this approach, as well as of the small number of Central Asian authors in this big volume is that significant topics discussed in Central Asia, in some cases already since the late Perestroika years, do not appear. Obviously, we all have our wish lists of things

we would like to see covered in a seminal book like this, but topics like decoloniality, indigeneity, cultural heritage, indigenous capitalism, or human-environment relations have rapidly gained traction within Central Asia, especially with a younger generation of scholars. Including them, or indeed any one of them as a part of the book would have allowed for the inclusion of research topics that may not seem plausible for western readers at a first glance.

The book is aimed at a wider interested public and, as the “discussion questions” at the end of each part and the “further reading sections” suggest, primarily for teaching. The division of the parts into chapters that deal with more general aspects of a topic and into case studies works well and provides a good structure. Different layouts for the topic chapters of each part and the case studies add to reader-friendliness with the small exception of the picture credits for which, unfortunately, an unsuitable script has been chosen that runs too densely to be easily readable. The decision to relegate footnotes to a separate pdf and not include them in the book seems unfortunate for a volume dedicated to teaching. It is obvious that questions of space would have played the main role here, but space could have been gained if the “discussion questions” had been abandoned. While they partly give good incentives for discussions, they could easily be brought up by professors and teachers individually while the weaker ones are hardly suitable for teaching.

The approach through context is strongest and works best in my view when it permits authors to overcome national boundaries and to highlight the temporality, contingency, and fluidity of borders, traditions and structures, and as well as the connectivities and multiple directions people chose for themselves. Context, as the section “About this Book” says, is crucial for understanding and valuing others and their circumstances. All of the above said, *Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding* provides many of these important contexts and is seminal reading for everyone interested in but not yet familiar with the region. Especially those of us who engage in teaching will gratefully refer to it.

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Polygynous Marriages among the Kyrgyz: Institutional Change and Endurance. By Michele E. Commercio. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022. ix, 268 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Tables. \$55.00, hard bound.

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In *Polygynous Marriages among the Kyrgyz*, political scientist Michele E. Commercio asks why polygyny has been “normalized” among ethnic Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan. Commercio’s analysis draws on rational choice theory, which says agents make strategic calculations to maximize well-being, as well as historical institutionalism, which says that as people strategize, their choices are shaped by their worldview and perceptions of how their choices will be