Observing Political Conflicts in the Kyrgyz Republic - Some Notions on the Interrelationship between the Form and the Content of Field Research

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Research on Central Asian Politics

In this article I will concentrate on the distinction between the form and the content of field research. It is well known that the methods we use shape the results of our research. Every method applied leaves an imprint on the object of interest, transforms it to some degree. Often we are not fully aware of the transforming power of the methods we choose, we underestimate their impact and do not thoroughly reflect on the process of method selection.

This also seems to be the case of political science and its research results on political systems or the state in Central Asia. Within a traditional branch of political science, information gained from interviews with experts, conducted in the capital of a selected state, lead to biased perceptions of the dynamics of power (Anderson1999, Huskey1995, 1997). An unjust constitution, the lack of well-reformed laws or the lack of political will to reform the political system, explain the rise of authoritarianism. Corruption, informal networks and traditional society become catch-all concepts or black boxes without further inquiry, since definition and explanation would demand a considerable larger amount of time and surely the application of a different set of methods. To work on this problem a new branch within political science has set out to open these black boxes and include traditionality, for example, or a better description of informality into the picture. These *comparative Central Asian politics* concentrate on clans, on regional groups or local networks to enhance our understanding of politics in the region. They amend the explanations provided by the traditional branch of political science and often generate genuinely new ones.

These new explanations, which can be found in such works like Kathleen Collins' *Clan Politics* (Collins2006) or Edward Schatz' *Modern Clan Politics* (Schatz2004), are based on a different set of research methods. Large-scale fieldwork in many different parts of the society is conducted. Extensive interview work not only with political decision makers in the capital but also with average citizens in some remote villages shape the scholars' perception of state and society in Central Asia. As a result they cannot but grant society a larger say in the formation of state power, disclosing the black boxes of corruption and informal networks. The state is seen more and more as being captured by traditional and informal institutions, it seems to be rendered to a position of mere superficial importance.

This interpretation of comparative Central Asian politics has not been left uncontested. The amount of anthropological work in Central Asia has enormously increased in the last years and its results question the concepts of clans and tribes and their alleged role in political conflicts. In the opinion of anthropologists, traditions in Central Asian societies do play a role but have been mostly confined to less politicized spheres of life. The use of traditional vocabulary like uruu and urukh or concepts like clans and tribes to describe state politics is seen as unreflected and precipitated (Rasuly-Paleczek2005). It is considered to be a repetition of the creation of black boxes, of catch-all concepts, now only using more suitable terms. Anthropological work in Central Asia produces a rather different picture of society, often leaving the state aside, not even asking for its role or its presence in the life of the average citizen. As it is the case with the above-mentioned branches of political science, here the methods used for conducting research too play a role in shaping the results. Spending a year or even more time in a remote village enables the researcher to draw a full picture of the divergent meanings of social relations in a selected locality. The capital being far away leaves national politics become a game being played without any consequence for the everyday life of the villagers. Bishkek does not matter, when it comes to marriage festivities, the busy times of the harvesting season or funeral rituals. Whereas comparative Central Asian politics try to answer questions which are related to the state, anthropological work tends even not to ask this question (Gullette2006, Hardenberg2008). The pure absence of state institutions or the pure ineffectiveness renders such questions meaningless. However, producing a great deal of well-founded knowledge on traditional or re-traditional institutions, anthropological research has heavily criticized the results of political science, which was and is striving to get a grasp on the peculiar nature of Central Asian politics.

Analyzing Current Approaches – The Use of Distinctions

Based on this rather short discussion of results of the various disciplines, working on state and society in Central Asia, one can draw some first conclusions. Indeed every discipline has its own set of methods and its results are influenced by the methods' form. Traditional political science analyzes the modern state or what can be subsumed under this term, conducting mainly research within the capital of the state or otherwise relying on the judgment of experts. This form of conducting research can often be found within analytical institutes or organizations evaluating the political development in a large number of countries. Comparative Central Asian politics on the other hand includes society by grounding its understanding of it in notions of tradition and the modern unmodernity. It is able to do so, because its research methods reach beyond the capital and its experts. It comes across the importance of phenomenons like relatives and zemlyachestvo, when interviewing people in the province. Finally anthropology is usually confined to the task of

describing the *Lebenswelt* of a selected number of individuals or a selected community. Choosing for this difficult task isolated locations for the purpose of better (participatory) observation, the definition of traditional institutions is an almost logical outcome. And so is – at least for the case of Central Asia – the verification of the meaninglessness of the state.

Further conclusions can be drawn regarding the indication of one side within several distinctions, underlying schemes, that guide our scientific endeavors (Luhmann2000, 2005). When referring to the distinction state versus society, the traditional political science approach naturally puts emphasis on the state and refers to the society just for some reflection. In the state we have the constitution, laws and courts, presidents and parliaments. In the society we find tradition and informality, i.e. unmodern practices that somehow try to permeate the state, to undermine it and disrupt it. For traditional political science the state is the side within the distinction that guides the perspective, society on the other side is used only to create the above-mentioned black boxes. In comparative Central Asian politics, the society seems to play a bigger role. Here the reflection on this side of the guiding distinction is conducted thoroughly. However, like in traditional political science, the first side of the distinction state/society is indicated, it is again the state, that needs explanation, not the society. The society is used for reflection, only this time the reflection serves to unravel the secrets of the black boxes. In contrast, in anthropology emphasis is usually put on the society, not the state. State becomes a dependent variable, barely used for reflection on the other side of the distinction and often disappearing altogether.

Another distinction is formal/informal and a third one is center and periphery. Regarding the last one, center versus periphery, anthropology and traditional political science are in the same boat. They both give credit to this distinction, determining the divide between the center, the capital of a given state and its remote areas, almost untouched by political decisions made in the center. Needlessly to say that traditional political science and anthropology concentrate on different sides of the distinction; however, they often come to the same conclusion, for example the definition of a weak state. This weak state is barely able to administer its political center, not to mention the far away provinces of a country. On the contrary comparative Central Asian politics distances itself from the use of this distinction (which – in my opinion – is reproduced in political science in Central Asia with the distinction made between elite and non-elite). This approach tries to come up with an encompassing explanation for all political activity (and conflicts) on a given territory. Grounding their explanations in traditional institutions scholars within this field try to bridge the gap between the center and the periphery. The logic of clans in a village can be observed in the center and conflicts between clan factions in the capital have consequences for people living in the province. The second distinction refers to the organization of society. Do people in Central Asia live po zakonam or do they live po ponyatiyam? Does formality rule or is informality the hidden

mechanism for the organization of political power? All three discussed approaches to Central Asia actually indicate informality within the distinction between formal and informal. Concepts like the weak state, calls for more support, more development aid for the enhancement of the effectiveness of formal state institutions all serve as evidence here.

Dealing with Irritations – Fieldwork in Karabalta

When I set out to conduct my field work in 2005/2006, I was guided by the then broadly discussed arguments of Kathleen Collins. Simply put Collins states, that Central Asia is home to re-traditionalized segments of society, which social logic run counter to the logic of formal stateness. In the long run, she writes, divergent post-independence regime trajectories in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tadzhikistan converged into the common picture of clan politics, where clan factions compete for power, using their unmodern bonds between members of one and they same clan for support. According to Collins these bonds are deeply rooted in society, embedded into re-traditionalized meanings of extended family ties. Though Collins is not fully sure about the relation between central clan players and peripheral clan members, she nevertheless contends that clan ties cover the whole society from the last village to the presidential administration.

Being somewhat silent about the tulip revolution and its outcome, Collins argument needed to be tested. I chose the provincial town of Karabalta as my local arena to conduct my fieldwork. I had embraced the idea to approach my object under scrutiny, i.e. informal social relations and their impact on political conflicts, from a holistic perspective, like it is usually done in social anthropology. I was convinced, and I remain so until today, that the use of qualitative social research methods enables us to tell more about the nature and dynamic of informal relations than the use of quantitative social research methods. I also maintain that accurate descriptions of social actions in a given locality serve better to explain ongoing informal practices, than expert interviews being conducted in the capital.

In Karabalta. I wanted to find out, if and how Collins' clans were reacting to the tulip revolution, perhaps even coming up with an explanation for the events of March 2005. I started to meet with local chinovniki, local members of mestnyje keneshy, school directors and company bosses in the town. Very soon I detected a conflict going on in Karabalta between town politicians. Contested was the position of chairman of the town council. Being in good relation with one contender for this chair I managed to get a first insight into the logic behind such political conflicts on the ground. I found through many conversations that local nets of patron-client relations were the background of political conflicts, shaping their dynamic. Clans, as stated by Collins, were absent here, actually relatives seemed to play a role, but were definitely subject to the logic of differently organized patron-client relations with money as the main mechanism for the relations' reproduction. Secondly

it seemed to me that the local was doing what it did on its own, not relying thereby on central authorities. In meetings people told me, that Bishkek is not interested in local affairs, that it has no authority on what happens in the town of Karabalta. Of course fights between the opposition and supporters of the president could be observed in rayon and town. However, they were managed according to local rules. My informants assured me that nothing in the province is as conflict-laden as it appears to be in the center. To put it differently, what I was asked to do was to apply the distinction made between center and periphery. Here the province, sorting out its problems on its own, there Bishkek and its national politics, sorting out a different set of problems.

However, with money as the main mechanism to reproduce relations, I also was provided a bond that bridged both sides of the distinction, linking provincial clients with national patrons. The situation got even more confused once referring to the distinction formal versus informal. Surely patron-client relations were something informal. It was, however, difficult to define their nature. With clans not playing a big role I had to ask, what stepped into their place? Money is always good to keep relations going or to establish new ones, but does this mean that nothing traditional, nothing unmodern had survived? Does it mean, that every relation now was simply for sale?

After having conducted my first round of interviews and observations I had developed a first preliminary hypothesis: Collins was wrong presuming clan politics to be encompassing the whole of society and subjecting every player to its logic. In Karabalta political conflicts followed a different logic compared to that in the center. In addition, the informality maintained in clans could not be observed, instead money was somewhat a substitute and if not money, than somehow differently organized patron-client relations served as the main mechanism for raising support in political conflicts.

Having settled with this set of explanations it took not long, before I started to concentrate on some irritating moments within my observation. It was not the contradictory moment within the relation between money as a society-encompassing mechanism to regulate political conflicts on the one hand and the constant reference to the center / periphery distinction by my interview partners on the other that made me focus. By spending a large amount of time in Karabalta, I got used to the surrounding idea of a different set of informality, myself thus reproducing the concept of a black box, substituting patron-client relations for clans-bonds. In fact, the irritating moment only appeared when I started to reflect on the changing form of my field research. At first it looked like gathering context material, thus following one of the advises for naturalistic inquiry as outlined by Erlandson et al.. (Erlandson1993). The conflict around the chairman position in the town council demanded the study of the law on local self-government. It was thus only natural to turn to specialists on this topic, who could easily be found in Bishkek. However, with time passing on, I found myself traveling to Bishkek forth and back. This fact alone was irritating. If the conflict was considered to

be understood according to local rules, why was I forced to travel back to the center for its understanding? Spending hours with one of the conflict participants on laws and documents of central state agencies and trying to find out about their meaning, made me doubt my previous hypothesis about the isolation of the local arena and also questioned my assumption about the relation between formality and informality.

Aside from collecting background information, it appeared that the actual dynamic of the conflict on the chairman position required thorough understanding of central state actions as well. Meetings in Bishkek with officials of the State Agency for the Affairs of Local Self-Government, interviews with local self-government experts in the international community, discussions with strategists of the apparatus of the former Minister of Local Self-Government, alone by happening in Bishkek, they forced me to stronger reflect on my hypotheses formation process. What was the significance of my constant presence in Bishkek? Why endlessly trying to track back the circumstances of the emergence of some central state regulation, when this regulation was supposed to have an impact on local affairs only according to local conditions?

A new Hypothesis

At that point of my fieldwork, step-by-step, I developed a new hypothesis, in which I state the importance of the interrelationship between the formal sphere of state institutions and the informal sphere of patron-client relations. The periphery becomes again linked to the center, connected to the dynamics in decision-making processes of central state agencies. In regard to the underlying functional logic, politics in Bishkek, on the national level look rather similar to the political conflicts that can be observed in Karabalta. The course of the conflict around the town council chairman position can be perceive as being conditioned by the local arena as much as it it by the center. In fact at some point the conflict, which first seemed to be the result of an antagonism between local strongmen can be interpreted as being possible only because of center state regulations, providing the province with an opportunity to conflict. Even more, the conflict is not only made possible by formal regulations, but it also seemed to be actually dynamized by them. Hours spent to discuss the right meaning of the new changes to the law on LSG meant the constant reconnection to center state actions, in the end it meant the destruction of the first assumption about the isolated province.

Actors in the province tried to understand the rules set up in the center so to act not against the law. However, rules set up in the center in Kyrgyzstan are usually contradictory, not giving clear guidance on how to pursue a defined course of action. The impression is that not the contradictory content of the rules guarantees the permanent link between center and periphery, but the need to continually observe center decision-making processes for possible signs of clearer guidance. The

center assures the province's attention by reproducing contradictory rules, substituting one problem with another. It thereby secures its authority in local affairs by being the remaining organ left to turn to for final decisions in political conflicts. In the case of the chairman position, the incumbent changed three times, illegitimate sessions dealing with the question of the chairman position were held, and illegal votes on it were organized. During that time, multiple questions to state organs in Bishkek were asked by different local players, the deputies of the election district in the Zhogorku Kenesh were pulled into the conflict, and for some time even an appeal to court was considered.

In this new interpretation the center in form of the state gains importance, as does formality. Unlike the anthropologists and the traditional political scientists, I once again agree with scholars of the comparative Central Asian politics approach. I state the bridging nature of the logic behind politics in Kyrgyzstan. However, unlike Collins or Schatz, I hypothesize that the realm of formality is of greater importance than assumed by these scholars. Regarding the first distinction made between state and society, I remained undecided for long time. State seemed to play the decisive role with its permanent production of contradictory rules, but society seemed to be needed to create an observer of this production. This problem led to more reflection about the question, why the observed reality (re)presented itself the way it did. Until that point answers to "what?" and "how?" questions had been produced. What can be observed and how it is functioning, what I am observing? However, the question remains: how can be explained, why provincial actors turn to the center for guidance in the first place? Why does the periphery care about decisions made somewhere in the far away center? I elaborate on this problem in depth elsewhere, using Luhmann's systems theory to create a model of interrelating modes of observation for political communication, thus substituting a state-as-society approach for the state / society distinction (Wolters-forthcoming).

Conclusion

In my concluding remarks I would like to focus once more to the surprising course of my hypothesis formation. Settling down in the province, in Karabalta, I was struck by the inability to look behind the image of the province, which unfolded to my mind's eye with the support of my discussion partners. Concentrating on Collins' argument I searched for material that helped me falsifying her hypothesis. Once I had reconstructed the divide between center and province I searched for material that served as evidence to this argument. Trips to Bishkek were considered necessary means to collect background material, at first not questioned on their research-form changing nature. However, once this irritation manifested itself after many trips to Bishkek, the old hypothesis about the center/province divide felt apart. It was replaced by a fresh look on the distinction between formality and informality, which in the end also served as a counterargument to Collins' hypotheses.

This short record about the production of different hypotheses confirms the initial statement about the importance of the methods' form and its impact on the research results. Reflecting on this fact is often easily advised, but less often followed. The research on the logic of politics in Central Asia provides us with examples of mis-conceptualizations probably partly being caused by a lack of reflection of the methods that were used. Concentrating on either province or the center may lead to false assumptions. Comparing large numbers of cases reduces the chances for accurately describing dynamics of social actions and thus finding more proper explanations. In my opinion scholars, trying to find out more about politics in Central Asia, should use the reflection on their methods to question the distinctions that guide their observations. Otherwise it might happen that distinctions like center versus periphery, formality versus informality or state versus society are reproduced instead of being replaced by innovating concepts.

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