

# Research Trends in Sociology

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## Introduction

There is a dearth of sociological research on Central Eurasia. There are several reasons for this relating to the discipline itself as it exists in both the former Soviet Union and in the West. In the former Soviet Union, sociology as a discipline was (and remains) less developed both theoretically and empirically than its close cousins, anthropology and ethnology. In the West, until recently sociologists have been uninterested in Central Eurasia or unable to carry out empirical research in the region. In this review article, I will briefly explain the discipline of sociology as it relates to research on Central Eurasia, and then I will examine two of the main trends in the limited body of sociological literature on Central Eurasia.

This review is based on the author's survey of the sociological literature on Central Eurasia. No one source or bibliographic database was used and the author was limited by her own language abilities to reviewing material in English, Russian and Uzbek. The main sources used by the author were: HOLLIS, the library catalog of Harvard University and periodical indexes such as SOCIOFILE. Of the some 150 articles and books viewed by the author, more than two-thirds were focused on the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, while materials on the Caucasus and Xinjiang each made up 10% of the sample, with materials on Siberia receiving even less attention.

As this sample to some degree reflects the author's own knowledge and interests, these proportions should not be taken as completely representative of the sociological literature on Central Eurasia. Likewise, the materials in this sample reflect the author's own interpretation of whether or not an article or book was "sociological." Some of the criteria used to make this decision were: 1) that the source deal with more than one aspect of social life (e.g. articles solely on demography or religion would not be included but articles that dealt with the intersection of the two would be included) and 2) that the source report something empirical rather than results based on secondary literature or impressions (though some of these were included if they were of exceptional interest). More than half the sources dealt with the topics of politics or ethnicity, often in the same piece. The next most common the topics were demography and culture, followed distantly by economy and gender.

## 1. The State of the Field

### 1.1. Sociology in Central Eurasia

To quote one of the Soviet Union's most prominent sociologists, Tatiana Zaslavskaya, "Soviet sociology was sociology without sociologists" (quoted in SHLAPENTOKH 1987: 263). In order to understand why sociology is so underdeveloped in contemporary Central Eurasia, it will help to understand its stunted institutional development in the Soviet Union. Under Stalin, sociology was effectively destroyed. According to Vladimir Shlapentokh, during Stalin's time "the term 'sociology' was declared bourgeois; it appeared exclusively in quotations and then only in a pejorative sense" [*ibid.* 14]. After Stalin's death, sociological research started taking place under the guise of economic research on labor and standards of living. In the early 1960s, scholars doing this research were able to establish a few institutional homes within institutes of philosophy or economics, but it wasn't until the mid-1980s that actual sociology departments were established to train undergraduates in Soviet universities, while *doktor nauk* degrees in sociology were only awarded as "Doctorate in Philosophy, specialty in applied sociological studies" [*ibid.* 56]. Kazakhstan State University in Almaty, for example, established a sociology department in 1987 and began awarding doctorates only after 1991. Currently there are only seven sociologists with *doktor nauk* degrees and about 20 with *kandidat* degrees in a country of 16 million [*Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniya* 1998].

Additionally, Shlapentokh [1987] argues that sociologists was just as subject to political whim as were other professionals. Many of the sociologists active in the "golden age" of the late 60s-early 70s were dismissed from their institutes and denounced in the press during the purges of 1973–1975. Even during the periods when sociology thrived, there were several factors limiting its development. One was its dependence on politics in a state where the politicians didn't actually want to know what was going on in the social realm over which they ruled. Another was the lack of exposure to the work of sociologists in other countries, except through cleverly constructed articles criticizing "bourgeois social science." A third factor was the inadequacy of methodological training, with the first textbooks being published only in the mid-1970s, though quantitative methodology developed a fairly sound foundation in the 1980s. Soviet sociologists also were in a tough spot when it came to theory, as they were encouraged to "creatively theorize" only within the structures of party ideology and their aversion to the serious application of Marxist theory further limited the possibilities available to them.

Finally, there were only three centers of serious sociology in the Soviet Union: Moscow, Leningrad and Novosibirsk. Sociological training in regional and republic universities was limited by the conservatism of local party committees and resulted in less sophisticated and less diverse research [*ibid.* 89]. According to

Shlapentokh, even though promising students could be sent to one of the three main centers for training, “many young people from the provinces, especially Central Asia, had extremely poor educational backgrounds and were ill-prepared for the training” [*ibid.* 101].

These legacies can be seen in much of the sociological work produced by scholars from Central Eurasia which lacks reference to a common literature. There is also a disjuncture between the style of theorizing that these scholars are used to, which tends toward teleology and typology, and the kinds of structural or phenomenological theories that Western scholars engage with. And while this work often presents a quantity of solid data, the conventions of methodological disclosure used by these authors (which often consists of little more than reporting what method was used and what the sample size was) make it difficult to assess the quality of the data being reported. Finally, in a parallel with the Western sociological research featured in this review, most of the best work is done by people who are not sociologists. Many of the most respected sociological researchers of Central Asia have their degrees in history or philosophy.

Sociology in Central Asia continues to fall below international standards. According to Buckley, some universities simply changed their faculty of scientific communism to a faculty of sociology, leaving instructors and curriculum the same [1999: 1]. Institutional barriers remain in places like Uzbekistan where funding and publishing opportunities are still controlled by the government [*ibid.* 2]. Sociology in countries such as Kazakhstan faces many problems including lack of institutional support in the Academy of Sciences, reliance on inappropriate methodologies, and problems in obtaining journals and adequate instructional materials [*Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniya* 1998]. However, in many ways the situation has improved greatly over the last fifteen years. Sociological training is more widespread throughout higher education and many new research programs have been initiated. Some Central Eurasian universities are now teaching sociology courses designed in consultation with international specialists. The demand for high quality sociological research has increased, as governmental and international organizations require opinion polls and other data gathered using standard methodologies. The range of methodologies has also expanded beyond surveys to include focus groups and qualitative work. Scholars who have the language skills to study abroad are bringing back the influence of international sociological theory.

Certainly there are still problems getting local research published. The range of topics addressed by Russian-speaking scholars appears to be quite limited. Articles on Central Eurasia in the Russian *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniya*, the main empirical journal from the Soviet period onward, are predominantly concerned with issues of ethnicity, demography, and migration from Central Asia to Russia. A special issue of this journal [*Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniya* 1998] devoted to Kazakhstan contained a wider variety of topics but the articles were of slightly less-

er quality than this journal's other recent issues. Other social science research published in Russian on Central Asia tends to fall clearly under the concerns and methods of ethnography, treating Central Asians as members of *ethnic* groups rather than as members of *societies*. Beginning in the late 1990s, Central Eurasian scholars started to publish in English language publications but they were not being adequately mentored in presentation and substance by whatever peer review or editorial process these journals have in place. For example, most of these authors were not required to give minimal information about their research methodology or to tie their work into any sort of existing body of literature.

### *1.2. Sociology in North America*

In the West, sociology is largely pursued by scholars who are interested in studying their own society, while those who want to study another culture pursue anthropology. There are exceptions to this, especially in the subfields of historical sociology, political economy, and the sociology of culture, which use methods that require comparing different societies to test and build social theory. Additionally, one of the fundamental characteristics of sociology is its empiricism, and for much of sociology's disciplinary lifetime, sociologists were prohibited by political restrictions from carrying out serious scientific research in Central Eurasia (the growth of sociology in North America coincidentally coincides with the closing of Soviet society). As of this writing, there are only a handful of Ph.D. sociologists in North America (and another dozen or so in Europe) who study Central Eurasia. However, now that it is possible to conduct empirical research in Central Eurasia, and with the opportunities Central Eurasia offers to build on social theory using these unique cases, the amount of sociological research on Central Eurasia is likely to slowly but steadily increase.

Unfortunately, the state of sociological research on Central Eurasia is characterized more by the absence of information than by well-defined trends. To speak of trends in research implies that scholars are building on the work of others, explicating important issues in Central Eurasian societies and engaging in scholarly debates about their causes and consequences. This is far from the case in sociological research, which is plagued not only by a paucity of research, but also by problems of research quality and theoretical import. There is still so little reliable foundational work on core sociological issues such as stratification and social institutions that nearly every scholar is conducting his or her research with a nearly clean slate. This makes it difficult to achieve a high level of theoretical or methodological sophistication.

One of the core activities of any social science is the building of theory. This activity is especially challenging for those conducting sociological research on

Central Eurasia for two reasons. The first is that much of the sociological theory that is specific enough to generate concrete, testable hypotheses has been developed for application to capitalist or developing societies. Formerly state socialist societies have entirely different institutions and require the researcher to do more than simply apply the old theory to the new society. As social scientists come together across disciplines to apply very general social theories to the societies of Central Eurasia, there should be a growing body of specific theories which sociologists can draw on to ground their research. The second reason theory building is especially difficult for sociologists studying Central Eurasia is the unreliability or absence of easily accessible empirical data upon which hypotheses can be tested. As this is combined with the problem of having so few colleagues to collaborate with, a single scholar is left overwhelmed with all the tasks of the research process, from theory generation to data analysis.

When faced with these considerable challenges to doing serious social scientific research on Central Eurasia, many scholars do the best they can with limited resources. However, publishing such research without honestly reporting its limitations does little to build the foundation the field sorely needs. One of the negative trends in sociological research on Central Eurasia is the publishing of scholarly articles that are not based on sound empirical research or that fail to take a critical approach towards sources. Due to the lack of stringent peer review and eagerness to get data into print, there are many publications that have titles promising to enlighten the reader on the social dimensions of religion, politics, and civil society which one must approach with a critical eye. Needless to say, these articles are not included in this review but they are so prevalent that a word of caution is in order.

The main flaw in much of the sociological literature on Central Eurasia consists of generalizations based on secondary sources, mainly the books and articles of others who also have not conducted empirical research or on an uncritical reliance on newspaper sources, treating the statements generated by the media as unproblematic reflections of social facts. Another problem that is even more distressing because it indicates a deliberate disregard for the principles of social science rather than mere laziness, is that some of the sociological literature that does have an empirical basis draws unsupportable conclusions based on flawed data. For example, apart from opinion polling done by large governmental and non-governmental agencies, much of the survey research published between 1985 and 2000 was based on small, unsystematic samples or failed to provide any information about sampling at all.

None of these problems can be solved until a sufficiently well-trained and active group of sociologists begin doing research on Central Eurasia, and the core of this group should be local sociologists. As I mentioned above, the state of the discipline in Central Eurasia is rapidly improving, but during the period of 1985–2000, sociologists working in Central Eurasia still faced considerable barriers.

ers to conducting and publishing their research.

## 2. Research Trends

There are a few areas of sociological research that are developing a substantial enough body of literature that they can be built upon by other scholars. The quality of the work in these areas has already benefited from the cross-pollination of scholars in the field, though most of the work continues to be done by non-sociologists, especially cultural anthropologists and researchers in public policy. The two main trends in the field of sociology are analyses of poverty and “coping,” and studies of national identity grounded in an analysis of social institutions.

### 2.1. *Networks and survival*

Coping with sudden poverty has been one of the most pressing social problems facing the citizens of Central Eurasia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fortunately, there are two collections of solid research on how people are coping with the everyday aspects of the transition from socialism. Additionally, there are a few good individual articles on this topic, such as ones comparing urban and rural poor in Kyrgyzstan [HOWELL 1996] and village survival in Buryatia [PANARIN 1999]. The first collection is the edited volume *Household Welfare in Central Asia* edited by Falkingham *et al.* [1997]. The second is a special issue of *Central Asian Survey* guest edited by Kandiyoti and Mandel [1998].

The Falkingham volume draws on data from official government sources, international organizations such as UNDP, and studies conducted by organizations such as the World Bank. Due to its relevance, its grounding in existing literature, and conscientious methodology, it is an excellent contribution to the sociological literature on Central Asia, though by its very nature it is already out of date. The first part of the book examines the methodological problems of assessing household welfare in Central Asia and its helpful cautions regarding measurement techniques and survey research should give pause to authors who are tempted to use existing data uncritically. The second part of the book is a careful examination of various tools and indicators for quantifying living standards in Central Asia and reports on the concrete results of using these different methodologies in studies on poverty, living standards, the labor market, and nutritional status. The third part of the book, which is the most analytical, looks at the interaction between various social supports and household welfare. The chapters in this section report on public transfers in Kyrgyzstan, exchanges between households, and the role of the voluntary sector. With its examination of multiple variables (state, education, gender, work, family),

the chapter in this section by Klugman *et al.* [1997] on kindergarten divestiture stands out for its sociological impact.

The special issue of *Central Asian Survey* edited by Kandiyoti and Mandel [1998] represents a more ethnographic picture of household welfare, though it shares the theme of household exchange with the chapter by Coudouel *et al.* in the Falkingham [1997] volume. For example, Deniz Kandiyoti examines how rural households in Andijan Province, Uzbekistan, cope with financial pressures by means of social networks among women which have adapted their function to include supplying credit to their members. Cynthia Werner examines similar household networks and the social meanings of credit and debt in rural Kazakhstan, demonstrating that household welfare in Central Asia needs to be examined in its complex social context where networks of reciprocity, rather than just income and food production, make up a large share of household economic transactions. Similarly, though in an urban context, Victoria Koroteyeva and Ekaterina Makarova provide an extremely helpful longitudinal picture of how money functions in Samarkand's social networks in the rapidly shifting consumer context of Gorbachev-era and independent Uzbekistan. In contrast to the studies of rural areas, they point to evidence that money is taking the place of social connections and networks of reciprocity in urban Uzbekistan. All three articles note that there are three important types of networks for both men and women (kinship, classmate, and colleague networks) and that these networks are most useful in covering expenditures for large life cycle celebrations. In this same volume, Beller-Hann deals with similar questions in the case of Southern Xinjiang.

Another excellent study that bridges the connection between social networks and formal institutions is Roy's [1999] work on the kolkhoz. Roy argues that the ability of a well-connected kolkhoz to secure benefits for its members continues to reshape collective identities as well as reinforcing traditional practices and hierarchies. Meshcheryakov [1999] examines the institution of the media and shows how economic strategies are shaped by the mass media in a part of Buryatia that is highly dependent on oral forms of culture for their networks.

Some scholars have fruitfully investigated the intersection between these local networks and the international aid community. These studies stress a tension between international norms and local practices. Abramson [1999b] argues that international organizations fundamentally misunderstand the role of the state in formerly socialist societies. He points out that attempts by international aid organizations to create "civil society" in Central Asia may actually foster corruption and conflict. A particular problem is the way that Western ideas of civil society get translated as anti-Islamic. Abramson argues that "the exclusive use of civil society rhetoric by Uzbek national NGO and development workers in dialogue with donor nations does indeed seem to foster a particular hegemony in which "civility" is symbolically opposed to accommodating an Islamic political culture" [*ibid.* 247].



In an earlier piece, Abramson [1999a] made the point that what many foreign aid organizations view as corruption, and thus something to be rooted out, is the very thing that binds social relations in Central Asia. He provocatively argues that so-called obstacles to development such as nepotism, clannishness and corruption can be viewed as assets. What the West sees as civil society (trust guaranteed by a stable set of institutions regulated by the state) is not what Central Asians see as civil society (trust as guaranteed by networks of mutual obligation).

The focus of Werner's [2000] article is also the clash between the definitions of corruption held by international organizations and the practices of Kazakh ritual exchanges. Werner asserts that most approaches in the literature on development fail to take into account local definitions of what kinds of behavior are corruption and what kinds of behavior are appropriate forms of social networking. Werner argues that in Kazakh society, the boundary between gift and bribe is especially problematic as the English term "gift" covers many different Kazakh categories of presents and ritual payments. There certainly are problematic exchanges that are defined locally as bribes with the context of the bribe affecting its degree of immorality [*ibid.* 18–19]. However, often the motivations behind these exchanges are complex and some things that function as bribes are "viewed as 'traditional' forms of exchange which express hospitality and generosity... Personal connections... are maintained and extended through gift exchange" [*ibid.* 19]. As Werner's other [1998] work clearly shows, gift giving, even between citizens and government officials, is part of the fabric of social life in Kazakhstan and should be seen in its cultural context.

## 2.2. *Institutions and national identity*

While there are many publications on national identity in Central Eurasia, few of them take a sociological approach and systematically analyze empirical data. I will focus on two main areas of research on national identity that relate to broader sociological literatures: transnationalism and the institutionalization of "imagined communities." One of the areas of social research on Central Asia with the most theoretical interest deals with the construction of trans-national identities. For example, both Roberts [1998a, 1998b] and Gladney [1992, 1998] examine the cultural construction of Uyghur national identities in multiple locations. They both argue that groups like Uyghurs make use of the idea of the nation while at the same time challenging the actual nation-states in which they reside.

Along the lines of Benedict Anderson's nations as "imagined communities" approach, Sarsembayev [1999] systematically applies an Andersonian framework to the case of Kazakhstan by examining the role of print media in nation building, while Adams [1999] looks at how Uzbekistan's cultural elites imagine their com-



munity by projecting an image of Uzbek national identity through spectacular holiday concerts (a similar discussion of the role of holidays in constructing both national and multinational Kazakh identities can be found in Eitzen [1999]). Adams, contributing to a debate originating in the historiography of Soviet nationality policies, argues that the Soviets institutionalized a schema of Uzbek national culture that continues to be hegemonic today. A similar argument pointing to the institutional continuity between Soviet and Islamic institutions in contemporary Dagestan is made by Bobrovnikov [2000] who argues that de-sovietization destroyed only symbols and official ideology while preserving key Soviet values and institutions. These Soviet ideas come together with the newer Muslim nationalist ideologies rather than competing with them.

There are several authors who manage to link their research on Central Eurasia to general social theory. Roy [2000] contains one of the most solid book-length treatments of the creation and institutionalization of national identities in Central Asia. He argues that Anderson's analysis of imagined communities doesn't apply to certain aspects of Central Asia such as the concreteness social networks give to the community (see above) and the fact that the "lazy intelligentsia" never bothered to "beef up" the center's version of their national culture [2000: xi]. Roy also intelligently applies mainstream social theory (notably Bourdieu's notion of habitus) to his well-grounded empirical research on historical and contemporary aspects of nation building. Using feminist theory to launch their analyses, Megoran [1999] presents a preliminary approach to understanding how Central Asian nationhood is gendered by applying feminist theory to his own observations, and Tohidi [1996] examines the intersection of gender and nationality in Azerbaijan where women are confined by expectations that they should pass on tradition and ethnic identity.

Other studies also take an institutional approach to understanding the construction of identity, but focus more on the subnational level. Schatz [2000] argues that the importance of "clans" in Kazakhstan is in part due to the state not being able to implement a strategy to promote ethnic Kazakhs. This lack of state capacity to promote ethnicity left ethnic entrepreneurs up to their own devices which resulted in the proliferation of lineage-based claims to resources. Edmunds [2000] concurs with Schatz that there is some invention in these lineage based claims. In his study of Kazakhstan, Edmunds also looks at other bases of identity such as Islam and nomadism. In their work on Uzbekistan, Koroteyeva and Makarova [1998b] explore the role of the neighborhood (*mahalla*) organization as the nexus between the state and community in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. The authors argue that mahallas are one example of state sponsored nation building through the appropriation of indigenous local institutions that allow "the penetration of state activity into daily life... by an appeal to popular tradition as a legitimizing strategy" [*ibid.* 140].

### 3. Conclusion

While there are other examples of quality sociological research on Central Eurasia (such as demographic work on Turkmenistan by Kadyrov [1993], on rural Central Asia by Buckley [1998], and on Xinjiang by Toops [2000]; changing business norms in Uzbekistan by Khafizova [2000]; gender in the Azerbaijani workforce by Sabi [1999]; social and economic inequality in Kazakhstan by Tazhin and Tazhimbetov [1993]; on elites by Adams [2000] and Odgaard and Simonsen [1999]; civil society in Kyrgyzstan by Anderson [2000]; and Soviet women and Islam by Tolmacheva [1993]), for the most part there are few major trends on the horizon. One exception is the application of the theoretical literature on social movements and globalization to issues such as environmentalism [SCHATZ 1999] and nationalism [DERLUGUIAN 1999]. Another exception is work on international organizations and civil society that is currently being conducted by graduate student sociologists. It is likely that this work on the spread of international norms and the globalization of organizational forms will be a new theoretical nexus for sociologists working on Central Eurasia.

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