Critiquing anthropological imagination in peace and conflict studies:
On the complicity of resistance with counter-hegemony

by Philipp Lottholz*
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ABSTRACT

Anthropological approaches to social conflict and post-conflict transition, and ethnographic methods in particular, have been welcomed as way beyond the impasse in the debate between proponents of a Western-style, 'liberal' peace model and its radical critics. Different authors (Mac Ginty 2011, Richmond 2010a, 2011) have repeatedly argued that ethnographic perspectives can help to discover the 'local voices' that are muted by hegemonic discourses of Western intervention. Yet, this 'ethnographic turn' has not quite materialised, but remains the sketch of a research agenda that is waiting to be realised by future generations of scholars in peace and conflict studies. This paper will take issue with the claim that ethnographic perspectives, and an anthropological approach in general, can help to resolve political science and international relations (IR) debates about the viability of Western forms of social and political order in non-Western settings. By combining literature-based and fieldwork data analysis from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the paper aims to throw light at the 'everyday' realities of people in so-called transition countries. While debates about the 'liberal peace', democratisation, economic reform etc. have been said to be detached from such realities, the paper will argue that ethnographic perspectives and the realities they unveil might not necessarily point to viable alternatives from global hegemonies. Rather, it will be shown that hidden resistance to Western intervention and the resulting instances of 'hybridity' are not necessarily benign, but might lead to 'awkward' or regressive forms of social order and even structural violence, thus exposing complicity with authoritarian, patriarchal and other forms of counter-hegemony. This leads to the conclusion that there is a high need for critical reflection and trans-diciplinary thinking in order to expose, critique and avoid the ethical and political dilemmas of symbiotic anthropologies.

* PhD Candidate, International Development Department, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK. Email: pxl167@bham.ac.uk.

Introduction

Peace and conflict studies are one of the scholarly field into which ethnography has had the most significant inroads in the past years, whether in rhetorical or substantial terms. While there have been multiple calls to integrate ethnographic, and anthropological approach more generally, into research of conflict affected and post-conflict societies based on their obvious advantages (Richmond 2009: 570; 2010a: 679, 2011: 14; Mac Ginty 2008; Milne 2010; among others), it is not quite clear how the symbiosis between anthropology and peace and conflict studies is actually playing out and what are the potentials and dangers that can be identified based on such an assessment. This paper ventures to explore the trade-offs and dilemmas that incorporating ethnographic methods and approaches into peace and conflict studies research may give rise to at worst, or, at least, which may not be addressed more successfully by this new, symbiotic approach. The paper will thus take issue with the claim that ethnographic perspectives, and an anthropological approach in general, can help to resolve political science and international relations (IR) debates about the viability of Western forms of social and political order in non-Western settings.

At the heart of this question, and the prime reason for why ethnographic methods have had such an appeal in peace and conflict studies, are debates around the issue of how to rebuild societies after conflict on a global level. The 'liberal peace' model which envisages democratization, marketization, privatization and further reforms after a Western (neo-) liberal blue print model has come to dominate the international intervention industry that has seen substantial growth in the post-Cold War years (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2007). However, has been established in critical scholarly circles that, due to its widely perceived limitations and failures, this internationally dominant 'liberal peace' approach to rebuilding and managing post-conflict countries has to be augmented, if not entirely substituted (see Richmond and Franks 2007; Cooper 2007; Cooper et al. 2011), by locally owned 'hybrid' and 'post-liberal' forms of peace that accommodate local needs, culture and tradition (Pugh et al. 2008; Richmond 2011). It is here where ethnographic and anthropological approaches are invoked as the new way to grasp the 'everyday' perspectives of the subjects of the peace that is being built (Richmond and Mitchell 2012) and to identify the 'grass roots' and 'bottom up' agency that can inform sustainable processes of peacebuilding.

Yet, these new approaches are not only subject to contestation (Zaum 2012, Millar 2014a), their conceptual development also seems to be limited if and when it is only attempted in globally comparative perspectives focussing on the prime cases of international intervention, and within a political science/IR frame of reference. Indeed, the ethnographic 'turn' seems not quite to materialise but remains the sketch of a research agenda that is waiting to be realised by future generations of scholars in peace and conflict studies. Studies that inquire the 'hybrid' forms of peace that specific countries manage to secure through ethnographic (Reeves et al. 2014; Millar 2014b), sociological (Hönke 2013) or area studies perspectives (Renders 2012) further promote the symbiotic development of anthropology and peace and conflict studies, respectively. But they also already bring up some of the issues that are to be explored in this paper.

In this paper I will argue that ethnographic perspectives and the realities they unveil might not necessarily point to viable alternatives from global hegemonies. Rather, as I will try to show, the hidden resistance to Western intervention and the resulting instances of 'hybridity', which the ethnographic device is supposed to help discover, are not necessarily benign or empowering. On the contrary, this resistance and 'hybridity' might lead to 'awkward' or regressive forms of social order and even structural violence, thus exposing complicity with authoritarian, patriarchal and other

forms of counter-hegemony. I will show this inherent ambivalence of the 'everyday' perspectives on peace, and the concurring ambivalent implications of incorporating ethnographic methods into peace and conflict research, both in theoretical perspective – discussing the 'ethnographic turn' in peace and conflict studies and political science/IR – and by analysing field work data from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The illustration of how individual, 'everyday' perspectives may be embedded in (global) ideological agendas despite their resistance to another one will point to the need for critical reflection and trans-disciplinary thinking in order to expose, critique and avoid the ethical and political dilemmas of symbiotic anthropologies.

The paper is structured into two main sections. In section one I will critically discuss the high hopes with which the 'ethnographic turn' in political science and IR, and specifically peace and conflict studies, is associated in order to state my argument in theoretical terms. Specifically, I will show how discussions on ethnographic approaches in peacebuilding literature get entangled in relativist claims towards the 'conscientiousness' and 'healthy anthropological imagination' which ultimately mirror demands for more sensitivity or attention to detail that already abound in the general literature. I will thus argue that fostering a sustainable symbiosis between anthropology and peace and conflict studies requires a consistent critical outlook and the integration of anthropological/ethnographic approaches with other useful frameworks that can help to critical inquire the way in which post-conflict peacebuilding may be understood. In section two I will try to show how what such an approach could look like in the case of politics in post-Soviet Central Asia, which I will analyse by integrating fieldwork data and literature-based analysis on Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Central Asia more generally. I will try to show how individual perspectives and practices can be embedded in these discourses, and, crucially, how resistance to one global ideology simultaneously appears to be embedded in a counter-hegemonic discourse and vice versa. In Central Asia, this is apparent in the way in which governments manage to discursively establish their legitimacy on the basis of arguments of provision of security, order, progress and a sense of belonging, all of which are important for populations which are still grappling with the turbulent socio-economic changes and hardship experiences during the 1990s. However, these emancipatory claims are accompanied by an impression that the approach to governing populations is increasingly biopolitical, i.e. top-down and intrusive into people's private spaces. The conclusion links back the latter discussion of empirics and concepts in peace and conflict studies to the main argument.

I) A deceptive turn? The limits of anthropological imagination

This section will develop the argument of the paper by reviewing some of the anthropological and ethnographic research that has evolved in research in political science and IR. This will also include a concise view on perspectives on the potential of ethnography in peace and conflict studies. As I will show, the potential that is attributed to ethnographic work is often of more speculative rather than substantial nature. The ethnographic device is being attributed more legitimacy in terms of validity of the data that it is able to produce, but while this may generally be true, it is being disregarded that some of the dilemmas that research on conflict affected societies, and the international peacebuilding industry, for that matter, faces, are merely being relocated and possibly addressed in similarly insufficient ways, no matter whether they are viewed in ethnographic or other terms. This points to the need to nurture a critical reflection as part of the scholarly approach, rather than taking the salvaging role of ethnography and anthropology for granted.

One note on the categorizations of the disciplines of IR and political science, and the field of peace and conflict studies and its subfields, is warranted. The issue, and also unit of analysis, that links much of the literatures within the latter and the former – and forms a point of contention within and between them - is the phenomenon of the state, and the question about its interrelationship with different forms of peace and violence both on country level and within the international system. I will thus review literature on anthropological understanding and ethnographic explorations of the state in a first part of this section, before discussing the development and limitations of the anthropological imagination in peace and conflict studies.

I.1 Ethnographies of the state: A conceptual and empirical step forward

Before looking at how anthropological perspectives on the state began to attract attention it is worth briefly sketching out the conceptual step forward that an actual anthropological imagination allowed to overcome the entrenched focus on state institutions, capacities, stability and security that is generally seen to plague studies of international and country level politics. Migdal and Schlichte put it in a handy way when they argue that it is not the imagery of the state, i.e. its different institutions, symbols, representatives - in short: its visible material substance – that constitute a state, but that it is practices through which a state is constituted in every instance of time: "State and non-state actors also *do* the state" (2005: 14, emphasis added). This opens the scope of statebuilding scholarship for a "post-Weberian" (ibid.) perspective on the state, that engages with the historicity and meaning alluded to earlier and leaves aside (while not being ignorant of) the physical dimension of the state. The two major contenders in this situation are, on the one hand, state actors, especially leaders, who, rather than governing with the help of the threat of physical violence (as implicitly argued by neo-Weberians), see their "as objects that need to be 'developed', controlled, supported and contained" (ibid.: 18). The technologies that have emerged in the attempt to accomplish such processes have been subsumed by Foucault's term governmentality (Foucault et al. 1991). Migdal and Schlichte further elaborate that the ruled, i.e. the different non-state actors, have the opportunity to disobey and re-shape the ways in which they are made to behave, as they have a wide array of "strategies and tactics" at their disposal (ibid.: 19). This "practice of everyday life", as conceptually developed by French sociologist Michel de Certeau (1984), is the field in which peace and conflict studies scholars see major potential for resistance to dominant forms of political and social order that are imposed through national elites and/or international interveners. And while Richmond and colleagues remained theoretical in these arguments, This perspective helps to throw light on how everyday practices both constitute the state and compliance with state policies and practices, as well as resistance – all of which are inextricably linked with processes of peacebuilding (see below).

Anthropologists found an increasing interest in the state throughout the 1990s. Akhil Gupta, for instance, argued that the state as political entity that is often taken for granted, is actually in a process of constant formation and reformation, as it is constituted by people's everyday practices which, in turn, are informed by their imaginaries (1995, see also Das and Poole 2004). The focus on the everyday level, importantly, allowed for more space to accommodate the cultural specificities of the ways in which the state, its institutions, and its different materialisations are constituted. Thus, new culturally specific perspectives on how the state is constituted, but also undermined, in different settings, were produced, which enabled a critical discussion of how notions of democracy (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) or corruption (Gupta 1995, Olivier de Sardan 1999, Smith 2010)

played out in practice in different cultural contexts, and how different dimensions as culture itself (Bevir and Rhodes 2010) or, for instance, space (Ferguson and Gupta 2002) mediate these practices.

Tapping into this debate, the most widely known edited volume presenting ethnographic perspectives of the state was published by Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat under the title *States of imagination: Ethnographic explorations of the postcolonial state* (2001). Combining Gramscian perspectives on hegemony and class analysis with a Foucaultian governmentality approach, this volume offers an insight into the working of the post-colonial state, in particular, that emphasises a critical stance. It is the stressing of the ambiguity of the state that makes this volume especially critical vis-à-vis previous publications (2001: 5). This ambiguity is most apparent when the contributions illustrate how the state can be distant and impersonal, but very close through a representative; or benevolent and friendly in one instant, while rapidly resorting to violence in another. The volume thus took a critical and "denaturalising" stance vis-à-vis the ahistorical assumptions of *stateness* after a Western democratic fashion, which were widespread in the development and peacebuilding community, and the emphasis on physical domination and delivery of public goods brought up by neo-Weberian historical sociologists (2001: 1). While the ethnographic approach was thus arguably shown to offer a lot more insight than the established political science/IR literatures, the baggage of normative and ethical issues that come with research would not be any less vital, as I will show in turn.

The proximity to and close collaboration with the researched subject that characterise ethnographic approaches in the social sciences and its anthropological root discipline, in particular, are very vividly illustrated and critically discussed in Julian Eckl's "Responsible scholarship after leaving the veranda" (2008). In this piece, Eckl unfolds the metaphorical space in the field that is inhabited by anthropological researchers and exemplifies the different issues and dilemmas that they, in symbolic replacement of social scientists generally, face when leaving the armchair on the veranda and venture into the field to cohabitate there with the subjects, get to know their customs and practices and immerse themselves into the subject society. Foreseeably, as Eckl shows, immersing oneself into the field and spending a lot of time with the subject society does give rise to a number of issues that complicate research. Thus, ethnographic researchers might face responsibility that might arise as result of their mere presence in the field and encounter situations where they unwillingly put themselves and others into danger (Eckl 2005: 188-189). Examples include the case of a teenage cocaine dealer (Vanderstaay 2005), a ward for mentally ill people (Taylor 1987) and militant nationalist teenagers (Fangen 1998). In all of these cases, inaction, i.e. failing to report abuse/criminal intentions or to support the research participants leads to negative dynamics in which the researchers seems complicit. These – partly manageable – potential dangers and dilemmas are compounded by the expectation pressure that arises vis-à-vis the ethnographic researcher to bring about change in the context that he is researching. This is an important point as it has strong bearing on the question *what* and *whom* ethnographic research – and the theories it informs - are *for*.

Eckl further addresses the question these tensions in the research environment is bringing up: How to deal with the fact that the researcher becomes – wittingly or not – implicated in the context and thus ethically or morally committed to the cause of his research participants? He sheds on a more 'activist' strand of ethnographic scholarship, action anthropology, where the scholar is in a process of active dialogue with the community (or participant[s] in general) in the quest of improving their internal workings or their implication in the wider global context (Eckl 2008: 189, see also Seithel 1990), and which fed into the emergence of action research methodologies (see Gorard

2013: 153 ff.). He further helps settling the question on whether and how critical research could and should intervene in the real world, and whether it can actually decide not to do so. Discussing the possibilities of non-partiality and non-intervention, Eckl rightly notes that, even if researchers do not draw concrete conclusions for the way in which real world issues should be dealt with – or, in Cox's words, if they don't "come up with real alternatives" (1981: 134) – their ideas will, in one way or another, influence real world policies through other scholars or the readership. Thus, Eckl concludes, "even a seemingly disengaged "armchair" researcher is caught up in a web of responsibilities similar to the one of the field researcher" (2008: 194). While this is a very valid point, the subsequent sub-section will show how it is conversely true that the step out of the veranda, to use Eckl's terms, may bring the researcher closer to the subjects of peace. But, as I will try to show, this proximity does not only give rise to the ethical and agential dilemmas mentioned above but also does not eradicate all ambiguities that the armchair researcher may be facing. In fact, even staying with locals for quite considerable time will not help to overcome other more deeply embedded biases that the researcher may be subject to and more or less aware of.

I.2 The limits of anthropological imagination in peacebuilding studies

Before examining how anthropological approaches have been received in peace and conflict studies literature it is worth briefly explaining the inherent contestations of this field which foreshadows the salvaging role that is often being attributed to new, alternative and potentially empowering intellectual outlooks. In this literature, two poles have evolved around which a lot of the literature may be clustered: peacebuilding and statebuilding. Peacebuilding is seen as the more historically established paradigm focused on the inquiry of the more amorphous, casual and complex instances and processes that constitute peace, and which thus is more often done through more interpretive and post-positivist frameworks. Statebuilding, on the other hand, describes the rather technical process of re-establishing institutions such as the rule of law and democratic elections (Haider 2011: 4). Acquiring the status of a scientific paradigm with the rise of UN and other INGOs' global interventionism after the Cold War (Marquette and Beswick 2011), statebuilding has been seen as a device which helped justify the implementation of liberal democratic blue prints for post-conflict reform and reconstruction through the Western "centralized and institutionalized approaches to social science" (Richmond 2010b: 172), i.e. positivist economics, political science, and IR approaches. The lose consensus about measures to be taken in post-conflict reconstruction in any country, including democratic elections, economic liberalization and de-regulation, opening of markets, privatization, (re-) introduction of justice and rule of law institutions, and adherence to good governance and human rights standards has become known as the 'liberal peace' (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2007). It is the partial or entire failure of this 'liberal peace', and its disconnectedness from developing, transition and post-conflict countries' realities which lies at the heart of the incorporation of anthropological approaches into studies of peacebuilding.

As already stated in the introduction, calls for the incorporation and application have been numerous. While some ethnographic or anthropological contributions have already enhances discussions in this field (Nordstrom 1997; 2004; Eastmond and Stefansson 2010), it would appear that they do not seem to have a transforming effect, or, to say the least, they have not developed the critical argumentative weight to bring about shifts in the general orientation of it. This is not to say that substantive work on violence, conflict and peace has not been produced by anthropologists, as the publications by Philippe Bourgois or Veena Das show. But it does not seem like a substantive dialogue and creation of inter-disciplinary research agendas has actually taken place. The scholars

within the critical camp of the peacebuilding cohort who have called for inclusion of anthropology and ethnography, on the other hand, have not taken substantive steps at sketching out and realizing such a research agenda, either. Richmond's, as well as Mac Ginty's, work in many respects remains theoretically and methodologically within post-positivist registers, while the consistently critical stance towards state- and Western-centric literature on state- and peacebuilding certainly makes them at least intellectual leaders in this field. Further, their research is mainly focused on the antagonistic relations between the subjects of peace, i.e. populations of post-conflict and developing countries, and Western liberal peace interventions (e.g. Richmond and Mitchell 2012; Richmond 2011; 2010a; 2009; Mac Ginty 2011). This makes it appear to re-create the West-Other distinctions (Sabaratnam 2013) that post-colonial emancipatory scholarship (including critical peacebuilding) tries to avoid. And further, with important regard to this paper's argument, such a focus, rather than taking the subject's perspective as starting point, focuses on the subject's resistance to the Western liberal peace intervention apparatus.

This leaves the problem that these subjects might be 'naïve' and hopeful about the possibility of integrating their country into the global economy and governance structures so as to attain development, progress and wealth untreated. David Chandler, the foremost critic of this strand of research, argues that 'despite its claims to 'deeper' and more 'bottom-up' or 'social' understandings of post-conflict peace, remains entirely within the world of superficial appearances' (Chandler and Richmond 2014: 19-20). He bases this argument on the work of Louis Althusser (2008), who claims that the subject is already embedded in ideology as the latter is transmitted not only by ideological state apparatuses and different cultural and religious, but even through social practices in the private sphere, which are shaping the subject's cognitive and ideational understandings (Chandler and Richmond 2014: 18). Therefore, the barrier to shaping more emancipatory, just and peaceful societies would not lie in disclosing the everyday perspectives and needs of populations, but, as Chandler contends, '…in the 'materiality' of the mind-set of the subject, understood to be false, imaginary or ideological, due to the problematic societal practices in which they are embedded' (ibid.: 20). This indicates the need to not only incorporate anthropological or ethnographic perspectives into research, but also explore adjacent socio-psychological, psychoanalytical, political sociological and other research angles in the attempt to devise a critical approach at understanding post-conflict societies.

The contribution that has discussed the possibility of ethnography and anthropology's fruitful synthesizing with peace and conflict studies is a short piece Jevgenia Viktorova Milne (2010; "Method: Theory and Ethnography in Peace and Conflict Studies"). The biggest promise which she identifies in the use of ethnography would be the re-discovery or re-constitution of the post-conflict subject through the process of participating in ethnographic research. Such an effect would indeed be promising as it would indirectly address the problem of moral and ethical commitment. Milne explains:

> [I]f the experience of self-transcendence (or self-discovery – through redefining him- or herself with respect to an unfamiliar 'other' of the ethnographer – can play some role in illuminating, for the subject, the processes involved in identity construction generally …. [then] [a]n ethnographic encounter … enables a redefinition and reinvention of local identities via-à-vis a non-adversarial other, exploring the non-antagonistic potential o the sense of self that can be subsequently redirected to re-evaluate the 'otherness' of former adversaries in conflict. (2010: 89)

She further demonstrates awareness of the many pitfalls that the quest for realizing such hopes may bring with it. The problem the focus on the concept of 'culture' may end up reifying cultures and identities, and the global hierarchical structures and power relations that characterize their relationships (Abu-Lughod 1991), for instance, is countered by her point that the conscientious ethnographer would be aware of the 'polyphony of versions and interpretations of lived reality' (90) and would thus develop the correspondingly relativist approach to such categories. While she attributes the potential to enhance peacebuilding inquiries by incorporating ethnographic and anthropological approaches, she explains the persistence of one-size-fits-all solutions and positivist and nomological scientific approaches in peace and conflict studies and practice with the fact that ethnographic methods do not lend themselves to the level of generalization and deductive reasoning that the prevalent mode of scientific inquiry allows (76 ff.)

This gap between post-structuralist/positivist approaches and peacebuilding evaluation and analysis is drawn in a much more narrow way in a recent publication of an ethnographic study that provides a suitable example to illustrate the ambivalent conditional blessing that incorporating ethnography into peacebuilding research offers. Gearoid Millar's *Ethnographic approach to peacebuilding* not only presents his ethnographic insights from working in the headquarters of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and during his assignment to evaluate a bio-energy plant investment project in Sierra Leone, respectively – it also constructs a recipe style guide to incorporating ethnographic methods into peacebuilding research. Millar develops his own ethnographic approach along these four pillars:

- the *experiential* dimension of peacebuilding, emphasising the importance of generating a maximally representative sample by focussing research on different groups that generic research would exclude (e.g. non-elites, non-English speaking, groups in peripheral locations) (ch. 3);
- *engaging with the local community*, meaning carefully selecting a representative sample of respondents from a variety of backgrounds (ch. 4);
- *ethnographic preparation*, which denotes effectively the in-depth reading of literature that helps to understand the context of the country that is being studied (ch. 5);
- *self-reflexivity of cultural biases* of the research the secondary concepts informing it (e.g. justice, development, empowerment) (2014b: 8; ch. 6).

This very basic approach makes sense as the book is written for an audience of peacebuilding practitioners, policy-makers, donors, and probably postgraduate in peace and conflict studies, and it seems to make a great effort to speak to them on their own terms. That is, the inherent problems and limits of evaluating the impact of peacebuilding interventions, as well as designing them, is approaches from an (imaginary) point of view that all or most of the current peacebuilding interventions are well-intended but unfortunately do not meet their goal of delivering post-conflict peace, justice and welfare, among other things. More importantly, though, the book effectively exhibits a good amount of positivist thinking coupled with a strong belief that ethnographic research can be inserted as a tool in place of the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and research techniques used in peacebuilding interventions and research so far and thus, given a few more details are taken care of, would help to change the way in which peacebuilding is being studied and done.

This is apparent in the prescriptive voice in which many passages are written ('must', 'need to', 'it is imperative'), but mostly in the de-coupling of ethnographic methods as such from the wider academic context it is embedded in:

> I argue that an ethnographic approach should be seen not as an extension of anthropology but as a tool for any discipline, or, as in my own case, any interdisciplinary scholar of peace,

> conflict, and post-conflict peacebuilding. … I do believe that even non-anthropologists unwilling or unable to commit to this mode of ethnography can adopt and benefit from the evaluation process I describe. (2014b: 6)

This pick-and-choose approach is mirrored in the way in which Millar constructs his four pillars of the ethnographic approach. All of the latter are described in a comprehensible way, but the descriptions and discussions rarely come full circle in critically reflecting on the temporary and contingent status of the scientific works that they are based on. For instance, Millar rightly points out how ethnographic preparation, i.e. immersing oneself into the local culture by reading different anthropological, cultural and area studies literature on the country (Sierra Leone in this case) can help to understand the local context better. However, while the literature on patronage networks, neo-patrimonal state-society relations and secret societies is comprehensively for Sierra Leone and beyond, such discussions are concluded by a 'full stop' conclusion about how this shows that the ethnographic approach is useful in understanding the cultural context better. Pointing towards the contingent nature of the mentioned concepts and the disagreements within the academic landscape would further facilitate a critical effort of the reader to think for themselves here.

On the other hand, the sustainability and appropriateness of the way in which ethnographic approaches are used are effectively centred on an assumed critical reflection on the part of the reader/researcher/practitioner. The underlying message of the book, which makes it appear as little innovative and as much relativist as many other contributions within the field of peace and conflict studies, is that, if it is just done in a sensitive and attentive enough way, then adopting an ethnographic approach to peacebuilding (evaluation) will help to change this whole endeavour considerably. This may be true given the core advantages of ethnographic methods, but doing things better and in more attentive, sensitive ways would most probably also improve the outcome of other approaches. This relativism is most apparent when Millar states that, given the multiple and often undetected biases that researchers unconsciously bring with them, "the ethnographic approach … demands a healthy anthropological imagination or … "cultural humility"" (2014b: 160). This also confronts the contingency of the point made by Milne that reifying culture and the power relation that comes with it may be precipitated by conscientiousness: To an extent, whether ethnographic approaches improve the ways in which researchers manage to understand and study societies depends on their ability to be critical and not disregard the wider contexts and global relations within which their inquiry is embedded. Whether anthropological imagination is healthy enough or not will be determined by the purpose of the research and/or the positioning of the scholar – it will ultimately be a subjective process that may be subject to manipulation and instrumentalization as much as any other non-ethnographic/anthropological one. The only way out of this dilemma is to fill in the void created by such relativism with the normative substance that critical, post-colonial, subaltern studies and other ethical and philosophical frameworks offer. In the remainder of the paper I will try to develop such a perspective by analysing political phenomena in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

II) Authoritarianism from the bottom up? Critically embedding ethnographic research in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

This section presents a sketch of what the integrated approach at understanding developments in post-conflict societies could look like. It focuses on the Central Asian countries of Kyrgyzstan and

Tajikistan and tries to combine perspectives on the history and historical continuities in society and politics with the more everyday perspectives and imaginaries that would appear to inform individual perspectives. Given the space constraint it is worth pointing out a few main discourses that currently inform the evolution of these two countries in the form of brief key points:

- Cooperativeness and compliance with international standards: What has become known as 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1992), i.e. a belief in the superiority of liberal democracy and free markets as organizing principles for peaceful countries was adopted as a new reality by many people throughout society (Rabikowska 2009, Amsler 2007). This is notwithstanding the argument that this may be a result of brainwashing or manipulation by national elites and international players. The docility if not naivety with which large parts of the population received the new narratives about free markets and a new form of politics is thus an item that is still waiting to be adequately problematized.
- Hard work and perseverance were discourses that should appease the population already during Soviet times; in the eye of the failure of democracy and liberal market reforms such appeals became increasingly vital. A good example is Askar Akaev's, "Kyrgyzstan - Difficult road to democracy" (*Kyrgzystan – trudnaia doroga k demokratii*) where he blames the low economic growth and lack of prosperity on the financial crises in Russia and South-East Asia and alleged that the "people's spiritual uplift is able to do miracles" (Akaev 2002: 193).
- Order and stability denote a discourse that increasingly serves as a way to justify depoliticization and disengagement on the part of the population throughout the post-Soviet space. It is important to understand that people in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are longing for a level of order and security more than anything else. This is especially understandable given the shadow that the civil war or, respectively, fundamental social and economic reconfigurations in the 1990s, cast on the current affairs in the two countries. Apart from the socio-economic hardship experienced in those years into the 2000s (or until today) by many, it is the sense of loss and defeat that is distressing some within the population and has given rise to a the 'psychodrama of identity in a post-1989 world' (Cornis-Pope 2012: 152).

With this very brief outline of the most crucial discourses characterizing societal change in the two countries I will analyze the issue of political representation and mobilization in the context of the rise of political entrepreneurship in Kyrgyzstan before turning to look at political positionings vis-à-vis what I call neo-authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, especially through analyzing field work data from Tajikistan. I will aim at showing that the current challenges faced by Central Asians make many people acquiesce to neo-authoritarian, biopolitical regulation and disciplining of their own lives with the justification that the regimes/governments of their countries offer in exchange for this acquiescence a reasonably hopeful prospects of securing a safer and more secure present and a sovereign and self-sufficient path to progress (relatively) independent of external assistance.

'Neo-athoritarian' is not a straightforward label to be used in this context, and it might equally be unsuitable because of the negative connotations with physical coercion, repression and manipulation it evokes. Becker (2004) develops the idea of a neo-authoritarian approach to manipulating public opinion in his analysis of the Russian media landscape, where state ownership and control of media apparently plays a major in role in shaping public opinion. In a similar vein, Matveeva notes how, during the course of post-Soviet developments, Central Asian governments were managing to wield symbolic power and use political manipulation in such a way that they were able to "[a]chiev[ed] a degree of 'legitimacy' which fosters compliance with the existing domestic order, has made the rule of the current leaderships easier and has reduced the pressure on them to

simply rely on coercion" (Matveeva 2009: 1095). These regimes seem to converge with a general trend in post-Soviet scountries confirm the trend that is led most prominently by the Russian state. Here, life is regulated by legislation and government policy through what mirrors a Foucaultian framework of biopolitics (2008) – the regulation of the formerly private sphere of citizens' life, including matters of health, sexuality and faith, but also the question of belonging to the national political community. This extension of the competency of government is discursively normalized as best strategy secure the welfare, well-being and future development of the population (Makarychev and Medvedev 2015).

II.1 From representation to mobilization to political violence? Political entrepreneurship in Kyrgyzstan

The concept of political entrepreneurship[1] describes the form that political activity, or leadership more specifically, that has started to take hold since its liberalization in 1991. It is constituted by a rational actor perspective on political players that is combined with a view on the 'entrepreneurial governmentality', a mindset programed for the conducting of business (politics) within and around the rules depending on the circumstances. Alexei Yurchak (2006b) provides a detailed theorization of this in the case of the generation of entrepreneurs during the last decade of the Soviet Union's existence, who, in the classical Foucaultian sense, became increasingly "capable of making some form of that activity [government] thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it was practiced" (Gordon 1991: 2-3). He provides examples where his respondents developed ways of making use of the fact that when some norms and expectations from the leadership were too unrealistic, it was possible to declare, for instance, 15 lectures to have been held while in reality only three had indeed taken place. This was possible when the contacts in the next higher hierarchy level knew about the pointlessness of such prescriptions; and this grey zone practice gave the person who accounted for this 'fictitious' work some free space in the working schedule[2] (2006b: 289 ff.). As perestroika reform introduced the possibility for *Komsomol*[3] committees to have their own bank accounts and independent economic activities (1987) and the founding of cooperatives (1989), people who had developed this technique of using personal networks and bargaining to use the new legal arrangements to make profit quickly found ways to turn their own or customers' state-appointed budget into cash (*obnalichivanie*, 294), to profitably import and retail electronic devices from the West, and to circumvent import taxes which were at a level where they could be considered as "state-sponsored extortion" (295). Yurchak also shows how these mechanisms worked well into the 1990s, when organized crime and an increasingly involved

[1] Kubik (2003) develops the idea of 'cultural-political entrepreneurship' in the Polish and Russian contexts, but applications in the Central Asian case seem to be lacking. Makovicky's work (2014) inquires the entrepreneurial self in post-Socialist countries from an ethnographic perspective but concentrates on small and medium businesses.

[2] In his main work on 'the last Soviet generation', Yurchak provides further examples on how it was possible. This passage describing how his respondents managed to free themselves of their duties at work is instructive: ""If we wanted to go to an art exhibition or a café during work, we told the chair of our department that we needed 'to leave for the *raikom* [district committee of the Komsomol].'" These techniques of personalizing and domesticating the time, space, institutions, and discourses of the state, by citing authoritative forms, went on all levels of the ideological hierarchy, including the Communist Party […]." (2006a: 120)

[3] The Communist Party's youth organization omnipresent in the whole economy and many spheres of life.

security service played a more and more important role. This shows how entrepreneurship had already been developed *during* Soviet times and that the entrepreneurial spirit of people in managing affairs in relation to official norms regulations, which, accordingly, must have shaped the reception of ideas like democracy and market liberalization in a distinct way.[4]

An analogy to this is John Engvall's (2011) argument that in Kyrgyzstan, the state has become an investment market, where an individual can place an investment by buying a political office and then try to extract money and other benefits through their position. In a similar vein, Ganev (2005) speaks of a "reversed Tillyan perspective", where it appears that in the times since independence, post-Soviet leaders have, rather than building it up, more undone and plundered the state or used it to channel part of the state budget and international donor money in their own pockets. It is crucial, though, to understand the patronage networks and affiliations of what is usually called 'corrupt elites' in the broader societal context: Whether a practice should be called corruption or otherwise designated in a negative way often depends on the way in which its an actor is implicated in the context. In the case of political entrepreneurs, i.e. politicians who play by but also bend the rules, it depends on the perspective of people whom they actually represent and the ways in which they think they can benefit their constituencies most effectively. As Yurchak states, "[w]e cannot brand practice as immoral or irrational without first studying it ethnographically and historically" (2006b: 280). This resonates with the proposition that a post-liberal form of politics offers the possibility to make international templates, which are based on a vague and often imaginary Western ideal, can help to make the latter more accommodative for local needs and peculiarities – but, as this paper argues, might also result in problematic trajectories of structural violence or oppression.

The systematicity of informal spaces in which public goods become apportioned according to patronage networks – and the acceptability of such practices - is illustrated by Aksana Ismailbekova's ethnographic observation of a local election committee in rural Kyrgyzstan, in the work of which patronage plays a role but, as she reasons, "not so much hinder[s] as facilitate[s] democracy" (2014: 81). She documents a number of violations of election regulations that she observes in her position as election observer, for instance people being permitted to vote despite having no documents, or, and most importantly, the even distribution of *unused* ballots to all election observers who then filled these out in favor of their respective candidate (89). As this process ensured that the village's "native son" was elected into parliament, all the actual irregularities were performed very naturally and "people did not view the election in their village as corrupt. Rather, people found ways to justify their actions and legitimated their behavior through social networks of reciprocity and out of obligation and loyalty to their [native] son, […] someone who could mediate their interests to the government" (94). This exemplifies the way in which the high level of communal cohesion and trust can cause a bending of principles of democratic conduct in their classical legal-rational interpretation. The boundary between corrupt behavior and what is seen to be loyal support for one's own community, then, is blurred and seems to indicate a post-liberal approach to hybridizing of practices of democratic conduct once imported from the West.

[4] I have discussed elsewhere the hybridization of political activity and entrepreneurialism in the post-Soviet world drawing on the concept of '*sovok*' or '[post]-Soviet mentality' that occurs in Viktor Pelevin's novel *Generation П*. The basic idea of his concept is to adapt in a synthetic way promotional material from Western TV adverts to the demands of the Russian consumers, which leads to conceptual hybrids of at times hyper-real quality. Further aspects of such hybridization of Western concepts in the post-Soviet context are explored in Lottholz 2014.

Contrary to the following examples, in this case the hybridization takes place behind closed doors and does not appear to bear potential for great conflict.

That such re-interpretation, hybridization and reappropriation of standards and codes of conduct might lead to much more imminent and conflictual outcomes is obvious. As such, Scott Radnitz analyzed how different local elites in Kyrgyzstan "create a social support base by making material and symbolic investments in local communities" (2012: 7). These groupings, on the one hand, might be seen as a localized form of politics which is based on communal values. On the other hand, Radnitz shows how for these networks playing a role in the emergence of a "subversive clientelism" (ibid.), where elites managed to build up these networks to a point where they were enabled to overthrow regimes (in Radnitz's case the Bakiev regime in the 2010 revolution) through coordinating their actions (ibid.: 8). Here, a complex but significant trajectory seems to become apparent, through which political entrepreneurship does not only imply that politicians in different contexts have to use the means at their disposal in order to garner support and ensure representation of their constituency, but where it is their willingness and ability to overstep the rules of the game in order to achieve certain ends. The high level of poverty and the crass socioeconomic inequality between different groups within the Kyrgyz population, for instance, the rural-urban divide, creates favorable conditions for a commodification of political activity through entrepreneurial practices. This can be as blunt as different local politicians buying off votes from people in need of a low sum of money that they can get for selling their ballot (OSCE 2011b). On the other hand, the activity of organizing rallies and pickets has in a somewhat bizarre manner become commercialized: The 'Squad of women for special purpose' (*Otriad bab osobogo naznacheniia*, OBON), is an organization of women who perform protests for any clients in need of a 'mock constituency':

> [T]hey are used by everybody who wants to use them. And they even have a price list of their services. If you want to attack a building, it is one price; if you just want shouting, it is another price.[5]

That such methods seem to gain salience is shown by a 2011 report by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) which observed 239 public assemblies of different kinds between June and November 2011, of which 108 (i.e. 41.2 per cent) were smaller assemblies of only 2-50 persons (OSCE 2011a: 18). This is one example of how a sort of "virtual politics" (Wilson 2005) has emerged where political entrepreneurship and the commodification of political activity are not only subverting the classical assumptions of the 'liberal peace' that, for instance, a vibrant civil society is needed for sustainable democratization, but where the mixing of local, customary and traditional frontlines with classical liberal democratic concepts leads to an utter inversion of the latter that can cause new conflicts and structural and physical violence.

The most tragic example for such negative potential "malevolent hybridity" (Richmond 2009: 337) are the interethnic clashes in South Kyrgyzstan in 2010, which occurred after months of tension and political confrontation as to the status of the Uzbek community in Kyrgzystan[6]. The latter had

5 Interview with development practitioner, Bishkek, 12 July 2012. This research was conducted from 20 June until 20 July 2012 for a M.Sc. dissertation under the title "Social order without the state? Conceptualising everyday legitimacy in state-society relations in the Kyrgyz Republic", University of Birmingham: International Development Department; unpublished manuscript.

6 In this conflict that spread out from the city of Osh on the 10th of June 2010, 470 people were killed, about 110,000 left the country to Uzbekistan and 400,000 were internally displaced

demanded more rights and representation, including a constitutional entitlement to such, after the overthrow of the Bakiev government in April 2010; demands which were met with hostility and an increasing fear of Uzbek domination among the Kyrgyz public (Matveeva et al. 2012, Laruelle 2012). A nationalist narrative of the Kyrgyz as titular ethnic group being dominated by economically and professionally more skilled Uzbek minorities in the South emerged and served as way to make sense of why so many people went out of their ways and took part in looting and attacking the respective other group, although this is not being said in official statements. This explanatory pattern was also found in different observations and conversations during my field trips[7] and can be subsumed under a narrative in which "[e]thnic tensions are […] systematically explained by the excessive good and tolerant nature of the Kyrgyz people and the lack of recognition that minorities have toward them" (Laruelle 2012: 43).

The implications of the hybridization of Western practices of democratic participation and mobilization are thus ambiguous. Even if newly emerging political entrepreneurs manage to give their local constituencies a sense representation, the wider structural conditions of inequality and poverty, here exemplified for the Kyrgyz case, seem to have spurred a commodification of political life that distorts the practice of political negotiation and engagement and, furthermore, can have disastrous consequences when action is coordinated on a high scale and gets out of hand. Ironically, in a sense, it is rational-legal state institutions after a 'liberal peace' blue print that are envisaged to bring the solution in the protracted post-conflict reconstruction process in South Kyrgyztsan. In an interview, representatives of an NGO giving judicial advice to citizens in their post-conflict trials moaned the arbitrariness of Kyrgyz dominated state institutions and the absence of justice:

> A constitutional state [*pravovoe gosudarstvo*] is a state, [in] which, when I, for example, do a thing, I know … what kind of reaction from the authority there will be. But now I do things and I don't know what kind of reaction there will be, I absolutely don't know. For example, for the very same deed we see here, right, we see several reactions come from the authority. And that doesn't surprise anybody. For the very same criminal act, one is sentenced to three years, and another one gets a lifetime sentence.[8]

As this indicates, from a point of view that is concerned with human rights regardless of ethnic belonging and, beyond this, with securing justice for citizens in an institutional environment, it is the problem of arbitrary behavior of these institutions, stemming from their capture or otherwise affected dysfunction, that makes achieving justice and, ultimately, peace, impossible. This is further strengthened in the following passage:

> Right now the state politicians on the higher level are talking good words, very rightful there. But on the ground they are not being carried out, nobody reacts towards our losses. The president says, 'like this!', the premier says, 'like this!', but on the ground, there isn't anybody like this. Our major disease: there is no [functioning] power vertical there. They

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(Kygyzstan Inquiry Commission [KIC] 2011: ii, see Matveeva et al. 2012 for a comprehensive analysis of the events themselves).

7 Interview with anonymous source, Bishkek, 17 April 2014; a set of conversations with my ethnically Kyrgyz driver, during the field visit in Osh, July 2012, who explained how he had been provoked by Uzbeks himself. In this light, the role of Uzbeks in the emergence of conflict is undeniable. However, there seems to be little possibility, or will, to acknowledge the victimhood of Uzbeks, which would be a first step away from feeding the latent nationalism currently prevailing.

8 Focus group discussion with NGO activists in Osh, 13 July 2012.

> don't execute things. See, they have a directive from above, on the ground they ignore them. And then in Osh, while in other regions this more or less functions, and such a [...] multinational mixture isn't the case… but here in Osh we have a fifty-fifty situation. Here this question is very acute, the ethnic relations with each other.

Without being too critical, this point of view gives important insight into the problems that lie at the heart of post-conflict reconstruction. The respondent indicates that while public political discourse is often reconciliatory both vis-à-vis individuals affected by the conflict and the international community's demands for action, it is the problem of on-the-ground implementation that prevents individuals from receiving their allotted compensation. Further reference is made to the inter-ethnic composition in the city of Osh, which complicates matters. The passage is most interesting in its invocation of the power vertical (*vertikal vlasti*), which would be missing - a central shortcoming of the Kyrgyz state in the eyes of the respondent ('our major disease'). Here the link with the narratives of effectiveness and stability in neo-authoritarian contexts is immediately apparent: the power vertical is, after all, the idea of vertically integrated state institutions for which Vladimir Putin became famous (see for instance Monaghan 2012). This dire situation that people in Kyrgyzstan, especially minorities, face in the face of state capture and the evolution of political entrepreneurship with its different forms of manipulation and commodification, and the conclusions that the interviewees quoted above draw about the need to make state institutions more effective and bring about order, lead to the next section where I will examine the ways in which individuals make sense of the trade-offs they face in a stable, but also restricted political environment.

II.2 Security, order and belonging in Tajikistan and beyond: Emerging neo-authoritarianism?

Following the line of argument developed in the previous sub-section, this sub-section will shed light on the everyday perspectives of people in post-independence Tajikistan and beyond, and the uncertainties and challenges that appear to make them increasingly acquiescent to forms of political authority that limit personal freedom, or, respectively, that minimize the interest they take in processes of political decision making.

The prevalence of discourses of stability as legitimization strategies used by regimes are noted by a number of authors (for instance Marat 2009, Mellon 2010). In his study on regime legitimation in Tajikistan, Heathershaw notes how stability and stabilization provide collective rationales for "ascrib[ing] roles to the elite as well as inscribing a wide range of rights and functions to political authority" (2009: 66). Thus what the leadership would demand from the public and sees as inextricably linked with economic development is political *in*activity (ibid.). In the case of Tajikistan, the discourses on harmony (denoted by the Tajik word *tinji*) and peacefulness (*mirotvorchestvo*, a Russian word) that Heathershaw (2009) identifies within different groups and strata of society, the overall importance of stability after a civil war that lasted from 1992 until 1997 are an understandable priority shared among all of society. Thus, it is possible that, while the Tajik state is being considered fragile and weak, given the role of Russian troops in guarding the border with Afghanistan or Islamist insurgencies, it also wields considerable control over its population, which, for instance, became visible in the raising of millions of dollars by way of issuing and making compulsory the purchase of shares in the Rogun dam hydropower plant project (Heathershaw 2014).

The collective memory of the civil war years in Tajikistan became very apparent in biographical interviews conducted with respondents from a rural district outside Dushanbe. Despite the limitations of the interview setting that might have limited the respondents' readiness to share

critical views[9], their descriptions of how they perceive the current situation of Tajikistan match the general longing for security and stability after years of civil war during the 1992, as well as the view of president Rahmon as the vanguard of this peace:

> **Respondent A:** As our president is ruling the country we are thankful to him because everything is available to us every day and night. … Today we are happy that we have a good president, we don't have any problems, we see everyone 'with one eye' [as being equal].
>
> **Respondent B:** And now as we have been living in the independent state for 20 years, everything is available to us. Our kids can live free. During the years of the Civil War, there were some cases where I needed to go to Dushanbe and at 2am to bring two breads or *bulochka* [bun] to feed my family. … We are thankful to his majesty [referring to the president] that he brought peace and solidarity and we are having a good life. We can go wherever we want without any feeling of danger now. We are really thankful to our Government. … We slept with danger and fear before. If your girl grew up and became beautiful they would take her without permission, you couldn't do anything during the civil war. I am glad that my daughters were little at that time, because otherwise they would have taken them as well. We are living free now, we don't have any lacks and complaints.

Already apparent in the quotes above, this passage exemplifies the perceived relative in individual welfare in the post-indepedence period but also the economic struggle for survival:

> **Respondent B:** Today everything is available. If you have money you will go and bring anything you want in your life. As we say, we are now a *kabk* (bird) out of the cage [meaning we are free]. We are totally free. We don't have any obstacles. We work. If you don't work you cannot eat. If you work you earn money and live your life.

This leads to another aspect that unites the different Central Asian countries: Whether in the economically more developed cases of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan or in the extreme poverty of Tajikistan, it is the hardship of the transition years in the 1990s, which the entire post-Soviet generation bear in their collective memory. It is understandable that pleas to hold out in such conditions until the "difficult road" towards the end of political end economic transition is passed have lost their appeal, especially given the fact that it is labor migration to Russia which helps to secure the livelihood of the majority of the working population both in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. For the majority of populations in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, integration into the world economy and domestic reforms have in this sense not kept the promise of delivering a higher living standard, while a country like Kazakhstan, amid proclaimed democratization efforts, can be said to have exerted much more agency and decision power of its own during such processes. Such outcomes produce the disenfranchisement on the part of the people that can lead to acceptance of distinctly non-Western forms of politics, whether out of spite or in the hope for a genuine improvement of livelihoods.

[9] The interviews were arranged as part of a training workshop in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, 13 July 2013. The workshop organizers selected and approached the local dwellers in the village where the event took place. A Tajik colleague helped to conduct the interviews and with transcription and interpretation thereafter.

This and further aspects are addressed in Tommaso Trevisani's "ethnography of consent in Uzbek authoritarianism" (2014: 244), which provides different examples how threats to one's own livelihood and the stabilization of one's own situation are being rationalized in both historical perspective and with regard to the current emergence of a strong Islamic movement in Central Asia:

> We are in Asia here, not in Europe. Democracy does not work here. In your country, if a politician does something wrong the media will bring him trouble. Not here. Look at Kyrgyzstan. They said without democracy there will be no development, but they got democracy and this has only led to chaos. People here experienced democracy in the early years of independence. But people also realized that if there is no [Uzbek president] Karimow, there will be the "wahhabists", there will be anarchy: this is no alternative. Ours is maybe not a democracy, but we have our freedoms. During the Soviet period we were even afraid to build large homes or to own cars. The security organs would come and ask you "where did you get the money from? How can you afford it?" Today nobody asks such things anymore: this is freedom. Today we can use our language: this is freedom. (Uzbek university teacher, quoted in Trevisani 2014: 247)

This passage exemplifies well the disillusionment with the 1990s' transition period that serve as justifications for being acquiescent of an authoritarian regime that does not seem to allow even for the utterance of opposing opinions. First, the surveillance and lack of freedom during the Soviet period is given as one issue in comparison to which the current economic activity and the cultural freedom are seen as decisive improvements. Secondly, the anarchy and uncertainty during the period of transition to democracy, as well as the instability in countries where democratic experiments do not seem to work (Kyrgyzstan) are invoked as negative counterfactuals that justify a stronger grip of the leadership. Such trajectories have also evolved in Kazakhstan where free market reforms have been accompanied with a lack of freedom of expression and the absence of a controversial public debate (Carlson 2013: 132, Olcott 2002) and have taken even more absolutist forms of leadership in Turkmenistan (Mellon 2010).

The above quote also signifies the important factor of belonging and identity that Central Asian leaders create with their regimes that overtly resist the pressures to democratize and liberalize themselves after the Western model. Given the post-1990 flooding of Central Asia with liberal universalist idea about its transformation and political reform, it appears logical that many felt like the new Western partners were just another force trying to submit Central Asian countries to their geopolitical agendas. The corresponding resistance against this hegemonic and neo-colonial force of liberal universalism appears to play a crucial role in legitimizing Central Asian authoritarian regimes. Matveeva shares this observation in the following way:

> Delegitimization of Western criticism has found a cultural resonance because it reflects shared beliefs of sovereignty and fatigue with being lectured by outsiders. Western liberalism, by contrast, is presented as culturally too distant, with its appeal undermined by messy policies abroad and financial crisis at home. (Matveeva 2009: 1119)

This rejection of Western approaches to politics indicates a further point besides the idea that Central Asian neo-authoritarian regimes provide economic and individual security after the turmoil of the 1990s. Furthermore, there is an indication that, in order to understand the longing for a strong leader we need to understand what Marcel Cornis-Pope called the "psychodrama of identity in a post-1989 world (Cornis-Pope 152)". While the many facets of the consequences and personal

histories of the fall and the aftermath of the Soviet Union are a universe of their own, suffice it to say that psychological aspects of this major event are by and large bypassed in the inquiry into post-Socialist transition. The Russian president Putin's classification of the fall of the Soviet Union as the biggest tragedy in the 20th century seems to resonate with people's view while it seems to be ignored too much in scientific analysis of the issue. This is confirmed by Yurchak who finds that people were gravely struck by the fall of the Soviet Union (2006a: 30). Central Asian authoritarianism in that sense is a source of pride (Trevisani 2014: 249, Liu 2014: 274) for those people who – still, or again - value the creation a meaningful alternative to Western development and integration into the world's economic order and governance institutions. In the case of Uzbek diaspora Liu thus diagnoses the strong role of an "imaginary that fixated on independent Uzbekistan as the *reference standard for good post-Soviet statehood*" (2014: 274, emphasis added).

This section has shown how neo-authoritarian forms of authority in Central Asia provide both the hope for economic stability, personal security and a sense of belonging and collective identity. While such ideas have frequently been explained on the basis of regime discourses, if not propaganda, it is the previous case of political instability in Kyrgyzstan which was shown to be perceived as negative example across Central Asia, as well as the socio-economic marginalization of big shares of the population that nurture the disappointment with especially the Tajik and Kyrgyz states, where many inhabitants have to secure their livelihoods through labor migration across the region and to Russia. These negative cases not only cause a positive perception – if not that of a role model - in the eyes of citizens with regard to more distinctly authoritarian regimes such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, they also nurture the disenfranchisement with ideas of democracy and political and economic reform imported from and habitually identified with the West. Central Asian neo-authoritarian regimes thus gain further legitimacy by using such disenfranchisement and consolidating their power at the expense of citizens' participation and the accommodation of individual needs and rights. This indicates a shift towards authoritarianism, where the 'liberal' forms of politics becomes marginalized and stigmatized as a Western concept that is incompatible with Central Asian cultural and traditional ideas of political representation, shared wealth and collective identity. While this approach at governing legitimizes itself through the claim to empower and represent people, and provide them with security and stability, more appropriately and successfully than Western, democratic ways of government would allow, there are still apparently many questions and many obvious instances in which these governments/regimes appear rather as an alternative counter-hegemony which produces its own moments of exclusion, marginalization and structural violence. Through resisting the Western 'liberal peace' idea, individuals will, wittingly or not, in different ways support such counter-hegemony.

Conclusion: The conditional potential of symbiotic anthropology

This paper has presented the argument that anthropological imagination in peace and conflict studies has been at the heart of hopeful and ambitious ideas, but that it has also exhibited decisive limits that need critical reflection in a trans-disciplinary perspective. In the same way that the ethical issues that were ostensibly brought to initial attention in political science by ethnographic approaches are - and certainly always have been - also faced by 'arm chair researchers' (Eckl 2008), I argued that ethnography and anthropology more widely offer no inherent solution to the problems and contradictions faced by peace and conflict studies. The problem that Western, 'liberal peace'

blue prints do often work, and that even the incorporation of ideas and people regarded as 'local' or 'indigenous' into the international peacebuilding project did not substantially improve this situation is not, as I argue, a matter of conscientiousness, nor of 'healthy anthropological imagination' (Millar 2014b: 160). It is much more about integrating different scholarly perspectives and approaches into a consistent, critical project that will help to confront the underlying and inherent contradictions leading the impasse that is being perceived in international peacebuilding today.

My attempt at outlining what the analysis after such a model could look like by linking ethnographic perspectives on individual political positions with the wider developments of politics in the post-Soviet countries of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Central Asia more generally is limited in its own way. The detailed description of the emergence of political entrepreneurship as a hybridization of Soviet practices of marketing and trading and, on the other hand, the permeation of state institutions by clan and family networks in the Kyrgyz case, for instance, has compromised the possibility of giving more detail about the NGO who I interviewed about their view on politics and the prospects for peace in the post-conflict environment in the South of the country. The combination of theoretical argument and empirical analysis across disciplines and geographical contexts has thus shown that, given the expansion that the academic political economy is experiencing in the same way as the global economy, trying to fit an increasing number of theoretical devices and perspectives into a single framework requires shaping and shoehorning these in such a way that they may themselves become distorted and austere. Critical discussion and reflection as to the appropriate measures and proportions is needed in such a case to establish a consensus on the viability of multi-disciplinary inquiry.

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