

Editorial

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Editorial

It is at one and the same time a daunting and exciting prospect to take up the editorial role at *Central Asian Survey*. Having just returned from the 20th Central Eurasian Studies Society (CESS) conference at George Washington University, it is clear the field of Central Asian Studies is in a strong position. As my predecessor Madeleine Reeves noted in her editorial for the last issue, 'our field has grown and consolidated in ways that were hardly visible at the time' when she took up the post. It is true the Central Asian Studies field I was first introduced to in the early 2000s has expanded in ways which seemed unimaginable at the time. Back then I could read everything that had been published on the region. Now, given the considerable number of monographs and the on-going pipeline of peer-reviewed articles being published year-on-year, each exploring the multifaceted, dynamic and complex nature of the historical, social and political nature of relations in the region, it would take a lifetime to read them all. Likewise, the range of panels, quality of papers, theoretical and methodological innovations and the empirical richness on display at the CESS conference in Washington was indicative of the maturation of our field. Central Asian studies is no longer a dusty outpost of Slavic studies, but rather a vibrant and self-sustaining scholarly field in its own right. Moreover, critical engagement with, and re-assessment of, both Central Asian and non-Central Asian scholars' positionality within the field, and a more meta-disciplinary reflection on how we study the region, is expanding the depth and breadth of our field. This was highlighted recently in a series of articles published in *Open Democracy* on questions and issues of activism, academia and equality in Central Asian Studies (Sekerbayeva 2019).

This growth of our field presents itself as Janus-faced, representing simultaneously a series of challenges and opportunities. As Madeleine stressed in her editorial, there remains a challenge in terms of increasing the number of quality submissions coming into the journal. This is especially the case with articles being submitted by scholars from the broader Central Asian region. Yet, we know that significant structural inequalities persist within Central Asian higher education and academy, such as a lack of access to grant funding, Open Access academic journals and broader global scholarly networks, which constrain both the agency and voice of local scholars, although the latter is something organizations such as CESS, the European Society of Central Asian Studies and *Central Asian Survey* work hard to overcome. As a non-Central Asian scholar who has written on the region for the last decade and has relied heavily on the perceptions and reflections of local scholars, it is important that such local knowledge and understanding is not just simply extracted without reflecting or seeking to find ways to encourage and empower local Central Asian voices and attempting to rebalance the asymmetries which exist between the Global North and Global South in scholarly activity. At *Central Asian Survey*, therefore, we remain committed to ensuring that the journal is the primary outlet for Central Asian scholars to publish their research, reflections and understandings of political, social and economic developments in the region. To aid this we are now actively exploring ways to attract funds to run writing workshops for local early-career scholars in Central Asia.

Furthermore, as at least three handbooks for Central Asian Studies are due to come out in the next few years with different publishers, it is important that those volumes include Central

Asian voices. Not least because Central Asian voices should be central to how the field is understood and interpreted. It should be noted that the closer integration of local scholarship into the mainstream of academic publishing in our field should not be a precursor to the pushing out of the non-local or more established scholars. Far from it. Rather, pluralism of perspectives should be our byword, and a levelling of the playing field in terms of access, resources and opportunities should be our aim. Central Asian Studies should always seek to be a collegial, open and diverse field in terms of its population and research interests.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for any area studies journal is the extent to which it has to justify itself to broader disciplinary debates. While on the one hand we may identify our research with the region, on the other we are always located as scholars in larger disciplines. It is fundamental to the aims of this journal that we maintain an inter-disciplinary perspective and contribute to those disciplines. To some extent, there is a slight imbalance in the submissions we receive, which tend to weigh more heavily towards politics, international relations and anthropology, and thus there is an opportunity to welcome more contributions from sociologists, historians, geographers and economists. It is also fundamental that while we remain an area-studies journal which publishes research aimed at advancing our understanding of Central Asia and the Caucasus, we also ensure that scholarly submissions to the journal seek to contribute to broader disciplinary debates via conceptual, theoretical or methodological originality. It has long been the case that abstract and conceptual advancements in the social sciences emerge from the study of the granular, of particular regions and patterns of social relations and behaviours identified in discrete self-perceptibly bounded communities. Walter Benjamin famously believed that the complete *Shema Yisrael* could be inscribed on just two grains of wheat. The significance of this for Benjamin was that even in the most discrete and particular objects we fit great advances in cultural understanding. Likewise, Central Asia can tell us much about the state of the 'global'. The region speaks directly to all kinds of debates in the wider social sciences, whether it is to do with spatial politics, borders and identities, gender, questions of legitimation, the nature and place of Islam, and the growth of global populism. Central Asia as an object and subject can be central to furthering our understanding of these phenomena.

My tenure as editor *Central Asian Survey* will also coincide with two important anniversaries. Firstly, 2021 marks 30 years of independence for the republics which were formerly part of the Soviet Union. Secondly, 2022 will also register the 40th anniversary of the journal. Both anniversaries represent an opportunity to retrospectively take stock, firstly in an empirical sense regarding the changing dynamics of the region since independence in 1991 and more theoretically regarding the development of our field since 1982. At the same time, any 'looking back' should be grounded critically. We should not fear confronting areas where collectively as a scholarly field we have inadvertently re-produced inequalities and overlooked important political and social positionalities.

I want to close with a reflection from the CESS conference. I was on a panel which discussed what it meant to be a scholar of the Central Asian region in the twenty-first century. Amid the wide-ranging and engaging discussion which covered many aspects I have already alluded to above, I reflected that being a scholar means to live a life which leaves traces. We seek, individually and collectively, as scholars, to advance knowledge and understanding in our fields, and more often than not this will be an incremental movement forward. But each gradient pushes the boundaries of what we can know and how we can shape the world around us. *Central Asian Survey* remains the receptacle in which we can leave traces that shape and advance our understanding of the Central Asian region. It is a container to be filled on a quarterly basis by the plurality and diversity of voices and perspectives of our collective field. And, I invite you now to read the traces to be found in this issue.

Reference

Sekerbayeva, Z. 2019. "Two fields" within: Lost between Russian and Kazakh in the Eurasian borderland', *Open Democracy*, 11 October. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/two-fields-within-lost-between-russian-and-kazakh-in-the-urasian-borderland/> Accessed 14 October 2019.

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