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Review forum

Nick Megoran. (Ed.), Reading Nick Megoran's *Nationalism in Central Asia*: A Biography of the Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan Boundary, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh (2017). xv + 368 pp.; bibliog; index. US $29.95 (paper) ISBN: 9780822964421

1. Introduction

1.1. Shona Loong, James D. Sidaway and Chih Yuan Woon

If as a local government official tells Nick Megoran, 'in the Soviet period there were no "chegara-pegara," or, as we might say in English, "border-schmorder"' (Megoran, 2017: 143), then *Nationalism in Central Asia* is an evocative portrayal of how this instance of "chegara-pegara" has come to be. Not only that: the phrase in itself evokes how Megoran has styled his monograph. Through innumerable anecdotes, fondly and humorously recounted, he demonstrates his commitment to longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork conducted in local vernaculars. The book is the culmination of two decades of fieldwork (1995–2016) that Megoran conducted in the Ferghana Valley, during which he has not only witnessed changing border regimes but also married and had children alongside many friends from the fieldsites, allowing them to '[compare] notes on [their] growing families and greying hairs' (Megoran, 2017: 142). Yet *Nationalism* is not about empirics alone. Megoran, who is already well-known for his work on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan boundary (Megoran, 2004, 2005), contributions to border studies (Megoran, 2012), and for calling political geographers to investigate peace (Megoran, 2010) and to make space for political theology (Megoran, 2014), returns to these themes through the 348 pages.

Nationalism begins with the premise that 'borders offer unique vantage points to produce decentered accounts of the state and denaturalized narratives of nationalism projects' (Megoran, 2017: 30). Megoran establishes this in the introduction, in relation to debates about borders and nationalism. Chapter 1 and 2 examine the significance of the border in nation-building projects in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan respectively, in order to ground the rest of Megoran's book. Chapter 3 tells the story of Chek, a small village that straddles the boundary, and the way in which ethnic identities were fomented there through border closures in the 2000s. Chapter 4 discusses the outbreak of intercommunal violence in Osh in 2010, despite that both elites and non-elites had once thought of the border city as a 'shared space' characterized by 'economic interdependence' and 'deeper cultural, linguistic, kinship, and religious bonds' between Uzbek and Kyrgyz townsfolk (Megoran, 2017: 227). Megoran concludes with scholarly, ethical, and political implications of his book.

This forum arises from an "Author-Meets-Critics" session at the New Orleans Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers in April 2018. The panel included graduate students and established scholars who approach political geography from varied perspectives. These include theoretical interests in sovereignty and territory, feminist approaches and border studies. That all six commentators found much value in Megoran's book is testament to its wide-ranging ambitions and accomplishments. Some commentators discuss the "border biography" method that the book advances. Beyond borders, biography is strangely underutilized in political geography. Another review forum in this journal recently noted that in political geographers "enthusiasm for bottom-up, popular and ethnographic approaches, we may be missing the potential for political biography as method and source, especially at a time when the humanities have reappraised, revitalized and re-thought biography" (Radcliffe, Daley, Inwood, Sidaway, & Samatar, 2018).

Border biography, as Megoran sees it, is both historical and ethnographic. Megoran states that border biography is the central motif of the book; a way of demonstrating that borders are *made* and that 'they *do* things' (Megoran, 2017: 4, original emphasis). This is no easy task. As Ali Hamdan's review shows, each of Megoran's interlocutors are presented as fully and fallibly human. This refers not only to border dwellers and their families, but also technocrats and border guards, who likewise shape the particular socio-political geographies of the border. John Agnew points out the book's profoundly humanistic bent, praising it for being the 'best study that [he is] aware of how an international border was made from scratch.' Commentators also notice the ethical imperative. Having previously argued that scholars should confront the normative stances implicit in critical geopolitics research (Megoran, 2008), Megoran states that his work is part of his search for — following Yi-Fu Tuan — a good *place*, where human flourishing is undisturbed by power. Megoran cites, though does not elaborate, Islamic narratives (p. 25 and 257) about human guardianship of the Earth: "So, there may be a role for borders, but only as far as they contribute to making good places" (p. 25). The role of borders in the making of a "good place" is a focus for Dina Krichker's piece, which positions *Nationalism* within a continuous struggle for peace, putting it in conversation with the theorist and activist Gloria Anzaldúa and Krichker's own work on Spain's violent border with Morocco around the enclave of Melilla. Reece Jones demonstrates the timeliness of this imperative, in the light of the securitization of the US-Mexico border and the European Union's external borders. If, as Hamdan (this volume) asserts, the book's contributions to political geography are regrettably understated', then this set of commentaries reveals what *Nationalism* offers to the subdiscipline. For one, Henryk Alff shows that *Nationalism* builds on a voluminous literature that conceptualizes borders as a process of negotiation, rather than as pre-given entities (among others, Sidaway, 2015), while providing a carefully grounded perspective on Central Asia that has been sidelined in this literature. Jennifer Fluri reflects on several intersections between Megoran's work and feminist political geography. For instance, Megoran refuses to accept ethnicity as a reified category of analysis, both in his methodological and theoretical approach.

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The reviewers do present criticisms of the book, but these are scattered. That commentators do not point out a single common shortcoming is revealing of the cogency of Megoran's work. Most are framed in terms of aspects of the book that commentators hoped the author had elaborated on. Reading these commentaries therefore gives shape to *Nationalism* for readers who are not familiar with Central Asia, placing it in the context of other related bodies of work on, say, the post-Soviet context, postcolonial theory, and axes of identity beyond ethnicity. These are not so much limitations per se as they are aspects of Megoran's case study that pique further curiosity or theoretical linkages.

True to Megoran's positioning of the book as an ethical intervention, Megoran concludes that "at its best, politics can be about making borders into good places … The violence recorded in this book was not inevitable, nor is violence in the future" (Megoran, 2017: 259). As the study of borders proliferates and suffering at them multiplies again, Megoran's call for detailed ethnographies and guiding research towards a carefully considered ethico-political stance becomes timely. His book is usefully read in tandem with others recent monographs from same publisher signaling the ways that Central Asian borders are complex human artefacts meriting biographical study and other critical strategies (Levi, 2017; Mostowlansky, 2017). All three bear comparison with the landmark *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation* (Kashani-Sabet, 1999). May these wonderful books endure far longer than the many new border walls and associated ideas of exclusive lines.

2. Borders are not a sideshow

2.1. John Agnew

Are borders a sideshow in the making of putative "nation-states" or are they absolutely central to their course? Through tracing the recent history of the hardening and challenges to that process along the borders of two countries recently part of a single state and whose dominant ethnic groups were never previously organized into separate states, Nick Megoran (2017) provides a wonderful account of how borders are key to establishing a sense of nationhood that then legitimizes territorial statehood. This is a natural experiment, so to speak, since most border research is retrospective rather than contemporaneous in the way this is.

The book is based on a profoundly humanistic — people-centered — encounter with communities on both sides of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz ethnic divide as they have been sorted into two separate groups through territorial separation and displacement. Almost from the beginning of this process in the 1990s, Megoran has been returning to observe and consult with 'his people' in an ethnographic approach that thoroughly deserves the label. This is not some helicopter descent followed by rapid retreat to a four-star hotel in the capital city. Neither is it a recounting of a series of unconnected anecdotes and stories forced into an overdetermined theoretical framework but, particularly in its main chapters, it provides a set of analytic narratives reflecting on the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan from four perspectives: from the centers of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan towards their peripheries and at the border in a contested zone and then from the city of Osh near the border. The latter two are richly informed empirical reports of the long-term field research Nick conducted between the 1990s and the past few years.

In a review forum of this sort, one is expected to mention some aspects of the book that might have benefited from elaboration and also to draw attention to some conclusions that remain clouded. None of what follows should be interpreted as in any way distracting from the achievement of this book in providing the best study that I am aware of how an international border was made from scratch.

First of all, and perhaps reflecting in part my own obsession with the potentially divergent connections between sovereignty and nationalism, the essentially post-colonial situation of the border at hand deserves more attention. This is not just any old border but one between entities that were previously administrative units within the Soviet Union and not really 'nations' in any real sense. As David Lewis (2011) has pointed out, local elites more than populations as such had incentives to harden their borders to institutionalize their own roles. When 'nationalism' is invoked in the context of Central Asia as the social force behind territorial sovereignty, therefore, it is important to make this distinction as clearly as possible. Indeed, the book suggests that the 'popular' in front of nationalist politics has been imposed through coercion more than purely organic.

Second, the management of the border itself, as opposed to its delimitation and progressive hardening, is not subject to much discussion. This could have led, as George Gavrilis (2008) has emphasized, towards more of an appreciation for how practice at the border on the part of 'managers' as much as crossers is the result of 'institutional design' more than 'state capacity' as typically construed by political theorists. That Uzbekistan had a more centralized authoritarian regime than did Kyrgyzstan for most of the period tells only part of the story. Perhaps the structure of the book in terms of looking from centers outwards and then in terms of local people at the border means that less focus was possible on how much borders are organized and policed as well as crossed or avoided locally rather than "nationally".

Third, the broader historical-geographical context of Sovietization and city-hinterland relations across Central Asia have had longstanding effects on differences between ethnic groups in urban-rural residence, affinity and nostalgia for the old Soviet Union, and openness to collaboration across borders following the breakup. These all show up in the differences of experience and perspective that Megoran finds among his informants. But on my reading he does not make enough of them as opposed to the presumption of pre-existing (if mutable) ethnic identities as the essential currency of Central Asian nationhood.

Finally, and speculatively, there is currently much talk of an 'opening up' of Uzbekistan following the death of its dictator Karimov in 2016. It is worth reminding ourselves of how repressive the Karimov regime actually was. Human rights watchdog Freedom House regularly ranked it alongside North Korea on political rights and civil liberties (Buckley, 2018). The future of its border with Kyrgyzstan will depend at least in part on whether Uzbekistan opens up its economic model and adapts its old Silk Road cities to the new Silk Road promised by China's much-hyped Belt and Road initiative. The hard border has not delivered economically much to anyone on either side except for those in the local elites with offshore bank accounts (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017). Whether being members of a pair of territorialized state-enterprises offers adequate political compensation to everyone else for this failure is not entirely clear either. I would guess not.

3. Seeing like a borderlander: boundary discourses and ethnography in the Ferghana Valley

3.1. Henryk Alff

The field of Border and Boundary Studies over the last two or three decades has seen a remarkable revival in the social sciences and humanities. This is aligned with an ever-increasing body of reflexive (inter-)disciplinary work being done on the transformative/transformed character of boundaries in a globalizing, yet increasingly securitized, world. However, in-depth, locally grounded and ethnographic contributions on boundary-making processes in human geography have remained somewhat at the margins of this growing debate. Even less research has focused on Central Asia despite the political, economic,

and social effects newly enforced state borders have had on the region and its peoples' lives. Nick Megoran's empirically grounded and longitudinal study of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan borderland in the Ferghana Valley does a magnificent job in dealing with both of these shortcomings.

Megoran rightly emphasises from the very outset of the book that boundaries are not just 'out there'; they are *made* and "they *do* things" (Megoran, 2017: 4). The agency that newly produced boundaries in Central Asia have in the political life of the state, as well as in the everyday lives of the borderlanders, and how they "materialize, rematerialize and dematerialize," are what he calls a "boundary biography." Megoran remains a bit vague about what this means conceptually, especially when the Soviet-era histories are left largely unconsidered in the book. However, having applied a mix of methods such as interviews, focus groups, discourse analysis and, most importantly, long-term ethnographic research in communities along the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary over a period of 20 years, Megoran is in fact able to reconstruct the evolving dynamics of these borderlands, from virtually non-existent in the sense-making of the borderland population, to highly militarized and destructive. Moreover, this long-term exploratory approach is in fact a major strength of his book.

Megoran attributes the coming-into-existence of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary to a geographical manifestation of nationalism over time. This essentially conceptualizes boundary-production as a process of negotiation between actors rather than focusing on the boundary-as-a-line logic that has dominated classical studies in the field for so long. In order to explore how "power is exercised in relation to borders," Megoran intertwines elite/centre perspectives *on* the border with non-elite perspectives *from* the border, making up the core of his book. Based on an extensive discourse analysis of the official press in Uzbekistan (Chapter 1) and of the much more liberal media landscape in Kyrgyzstan (Chapter 2), he first scrutinizes the materialisation of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary from the state perspective.

The main argument of the book, which depicts "[b]order issues […] as a product of the interaction of domestic power struggles in the two states" (Megoran, 2017: 6), comes through well in the first two empirical chapters dealing with the discursive level of border-making. Megoran examines how the negotiation of boundaries involving various political actors contributes to claims over national space. In the case of Uzbekistan, these negotiations remain largely confined to the ideological-territorial reframing of state space favored by first President Islam Karimov that was widely represented in the official press. This discourse posits borderland places as locales where "chaos [from the neighboring state] threatened to burst in upon stability" and prosperity in Uzbekistan (Megoran, 2017: 43). In Kyrgyzstan, Megoran argues that the borderlands discourse is centered somewhat more on pluralistic contestations between regional political factions and patronage networks regarding Kyrgyzstan's post-nomadic nationalist identity, and particularly understandings of unity and concordance. Border politics in Kyrgyzstan, in fact, have been shaped strongly by negotiation processes involving the nationalist agenda of changing elite circles and the associated heated public debates. The disregard of the Russian-language press in Megoran's review of Kyrgyzstan's media coverage on bordering processes due to his limited command of that language can be considered a minor shortcoming, as there are often discursive deviations to Kyrgyz-language newspapers, particularly when it comes to expressions of national identity.

The centerpiece of Megoran's book is his fascinating ethnographic account of everyday life in the now extinct cross-border community of Chek (Chapter 3) and the Southern Kyrgyzstani city of Osh (Chapter 4). Here, he illustrates the destructive consequences of domestic power struggles on the ground. More so — and this makes the book so valuable — he elaborates through recurring narratives from his fieldwork, how cross-border populations make sense of the unpredictable boundary materializations from their emic perspective. He also pictures how the dynamically changing borderland conditions are often obfuscated, strategically utilized, subverted, or simply ignored by the borderland populations. Megoran (2017: 135) constantly reminds us that the trope of legible boundaries is an illusion and that, in particular for borderland dwellers in the Ferghana Valley, "moral maps of kinship connections and responsibilities" often matter more than "political geographical divisions."

The peculiarities of the dynamically evolving Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan boundary become tangible, and it is here that Megoran's idea of border biography is at its strongest — in the continuous, but also increasingly erased, existence of pre-Soviet, place-based (Andijonliq), and linguistic belonging (Qypchaq) as well as the interrelated fluidity (and performativity) of ethnic identity across the border. In these concepts of belonging, the sense of 'boundary biography' following certain socio-historical path-dependencies can be surmised. Paradoxically, the establishment of harsh, and in case of the Ferghana Valley outright life-threatening, boundary regimes in the name of the nation is considered locally by some of Megoran's interlocutors "as violence against authentic ways of being Uzbek and Kyrgyz" (Megoran, 2017: 159). This becomes especially evident in the case of Osh, where both the Uzbek and Kyrgyz sense of precarity resulted in massive violence in 2010 and the fatal spatial separation of the ethnically mixed population thereafter. However, Megoran does not finish his empirical account with a dismal outlook towards ethnic segregation somewhat suggested by some observers as a way of dealing with conflict. Instead he encourages us to rethink the future of Osh's population as one that is interconnected in multiple ways across the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary through a shared sense of destiny and economic opportunities.

While the author concludes that "[b]orders are violent spatializations of identity" (Megoran, 2017: 242), the major achievement of his book is his ability to grasp the boundary not as a state-made structure ordering space but, similar to Madeleine Reeves' earlier published work (2014), as a process that is constantly shaped by very different actors. By utilizing a reflexive and in-depth approach, rarely seen in political geography, his book accomplishes its mission to foreground "the human face of borderland destruction" in overcoming rigid state-society differentiations (Megoran, 2017: 243). If we believe Megoran, then more questions seem to remain for future boundary research in the Ferghana Valley than answers are given. Yet, with this book, he opens the box for more general, visionary, and extremely relevant scholarly debates on the subject of if and how borders can be remade into policed and simultaneously 'good' or moral places.

4. In praise of longitudinal ethnographic political geographic research

4.1. Jennifer Fluri

Megoran (2017) provides an insightful book on the complications of bordering processes and national identity formations and contestations in Central Asia. Megoran's extensive empirical and ethnographic analyses are based on extensive research in this region over the course of two decades. His expertise is further enriched by including his own self-reflective understanding of social and cultural changes to the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. I contend that his long-term attention to and research within this area is a highlight and the foundational strength of his book. His ethnographic approach provides a thorough "biography of the border", which takes readers on a reflexive journey through Megoran's multiple encounters with various respondents over the course of time, combined with robust academic analyses. By placing not only his extensive years of research but also himself in the narrative, he provides thoughtful and thought-provoking

considerations of places and people impacted by bordering processes and their complicated, contentious and at times contradictory experiences of geopolitics. His examination of border delineations and subsequent forms of place making and nation building include several rich accounts of daily life. In many respects Megoran illustrates various accounts of the everyday in the midst of macro scale geopolitics. These narratives explicate the multiple and shifting experiences of places and people over time. Megoran's research is akin to feminist political geographers' methodological approaches that seek a nuanced understanding of everyday geopolitics (Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2004, Dixon & Marston, 2011). Through ethnographically rich narratives he discusses the ways in which macro scale political process, such as border making, intimately affect the daily lives of individuals and groups in various places.

While Megoran does not specifically focus on gender, his use of narrative attends to feminist methodologies through qualitatively rich ethnographic descriptions of individual and collective engagements, interactions, and experiences of bordering processes. By placing himself within these narratives Megoran includes his own self-reflections as an additional lens of both analysis and experiential understanding of places. He is able to provide such rich and reflective descriptions and analyses precisely because of his long-term commitment to research in this region. Therefore, his book further underscores the importance of and need for more longitudinal ethnographic scholarship in political geography. Megoran provides contemporary and timely analysis with expertise that includes both extensive and intensive research. His attention to detail along with many thorough and thoughtful descriptions further adds to the strength of his empirically based descriptions and academic analyses. His use of narrative further allows his “biography of the border” to come alive for readers particularly descriptions of the village of Chek, which he examines to explain the history of the border beginning with the vibrancy of this location and its inhabitants and ending with its eventual erasure. The loss of Chek exemplifies how bordering processes create divisions that require, in this case, the elimination of a place and the displacement of its inhabitants. He carefully illustrates how personal stories and experiences of bordering processes are more complex and complicated than the politics that has delineated these spatial shifts in place making and destroying. His analyses call attention to territory as a spatial expression of power (Cowen and Gilbert, 2008: 16). In this way he shows how the destruction of place and the creation of national identities and ethnic divisions express power through various configurations of violence.

I was particularly interested in his examination of the violence in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. His analyses challenge popular media portrayals of the 2010 riots as driven predominantly by ethnic divisions. By showing the ways in which bordering processes instigated disparate methods for reinforcing national identities as well as economic divisions, he carefully complicates this understanding by retracing its links to the formation of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. Megoran explains that his focus on the border was also a methodological approach to uncover a clear understanding of how individuals define and express ethnicity. In an effort to avoid the inherent pitfalls of studying ethnicity as a category of analysis, his focus on the border illustrates a compelling understanding of the ways in which ethnicity has been shaped, contested, and divided through bordering processes. Therefore, rather than “ask” about ethnicity, Megoran sought “to observe it and to allow it to emerge (or not) as a salient factor in conversations and interactions” (Megoran, 2013: 895). This approach allowed him to elucidate the ways in which the shared space of Osh, became contested. For example, he discusses how highlighting Kyrgyz or Uzbek linguistic or national identity were expressed through the built environment. As Megoran explains, Osh remains both a shared and contested space, and ethnic identities and divisions are further intersected by other social categories such as socioeconomic class, gender, and belief systems.

The richness of Megoran's ethnographic research is evident by his powerful and thoughtful narratives. My only minor critique was that I was left wanting to know more about gender roles and relations and their relationship to other social categories and the processes of border formation and national and ethnic identity formations and contestations. Future research on this region could build upon Megoran's work by focusing explicitly on intersectional gender analyses of everyday geopolitics. Overall, this is an exceptionally well-written and informative book that I look forward to assigning in my graduate and undergraduate courses. This book would be excellent for graduate courses in political geography as it provides and outstanding overview of post-Soviet spaces as well as national building, and the processes of border formation and its aftermaths. Additionally, Megoran's writing style is accessible and this book would therefore also work well in an upper level undergraduate course, particularly for students interested in understanding how borders shape and change places, and the interrelationships among borders, territory, nation building and identity formation.

5. Nationalism in the postcolony

5.1. Ali Hamdan

Nick Megoran's *Nationalism in Central Asia* is a powerful meditation on the role of national boundaries in shaping political life in the Ferghana Valley. Readers follow the transformation of the valley from a locus of Central Asian mobilities into a dynamic borderland between the two new post-Soviet states of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Yet after years of coexistence, the sudden eruption of ethnic violence between communities who had for so long “given daughters in marriage” to one another (Megoran, 2017: 232) marked a dark turn. Megoran investigates the changing relationships among identities, places, and the institutions that draw them together.

Borders are the motor of this transformation for Megoran, a form of “congealed violence” that he argues reshapes lives, livelihoods, and places for the worse in Central Asia. If this assertion seems uncontroversial to political geographers, it is likely because they are not the target audience for the book's more forceful assertions. That role falls to scholars contributing to the “voluminous Anglophone political science research” that centers on the role of clans, tribes, and other traditional patronage networks as political actors in the region (Megoran, 2017: 87). According to Megoran, this work underplays the role of nationalism in Central Asia's post-Soviet states and casts the 2005 riots in Osh, Kyrgyzstan as symptomatic of long-standing ethnic tensions between Kyrgyzstan and its Uzbek minority. Megoran makes a different case. Instead of framing violence as a result of state breakdown and the reemergence of “traditional” social relations (tribalism, clientalism, timeless ethnic hatreds), he argues that the Osh riots show that nationalism, state-formation, and bordering practices were central drivers of ethnic polarization. In Kyrgyzstan, political elites draw on the heroic figure of Manas to articulate a “post-nomadic political imaginary” that is “used implicitly by Kyrgyz for understanding the challenges the country faces,” among them a tense relationship to its Uzbek minority in the south (Megoran, 2017: 90). Likewise, Megoran (2017: 44) shows how the “geopolitical envisioning of Uzbekistan as a land of plenty and its neighbors as places of deprivation” has been used by the Karimov regime to legitimate its increasingly authoritarian rule. A sad consequence has been the territorialization of ethnic identity as it becomes gradually elided with national identity. In both new republics, “ideas do matter” (Megoran, 2017: 245).

Resistance to ideas also matters, and so borders offer the terrain on which Megoran can engage with political geographers. He does so on normative grounds. For instance, Megoran (2017: 245) dismisses prevailing social process approaches to borders, whose “totalizing

presumptions close down or exclude other avenues of inquiry". The result is what Toal (2017) would call a "thin geopolitics" of borders that reduces them to a mere imposition by a metropole. This overdetermines the role of the metropole in analysis and importantly, disregards the complex processes through which nationalism is negotiated, appropriated, and contested in the space postcolony. Politics thus assumes a narrow gloss as resistance to the international state system, but to Megoran it is too ethnographically thin to offer a general theory of borders. In this he reflects on other critiques of resistance, which are all too frequently "… thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the subjectivity – the intentions, desires, fears, projects – of the actors engaged in these dramas" (Ortner, 1995: 190). In much this spirit, Megoran (2017: 169) argues that "border guards are neither simply the faceless agents of nationalism nor unpatriotic, money-loving 'donkeys' to be duped" but are instead "women and men who must do their jobs … forming human relations with others and making moral choices in ambiguous contexts". This sort of intellectual dexterity allows Megoran to complicate – rather than conflate – the relationship between resistance to *particular* bordering practices in the postcolony with Resistance (proper noun) to what Malkki (1995) calls the "national order of things" writ large.

Megoran (2017: 245) pushes geographers to pursue what he calls a "border biography" approach that advances "theoretically informed and empirically rich, comprehensive, multi-scalar, multimethod studies". In his service he leverages years of deeply-engaged fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and by this measure alone the book is a rousing success. It continues Megoran's promotion of ethnography, and gives voice to the political ambitions of individuals who are at once broadly relevant and brilliantly particular: technocrats at the Kyrgyzstani Department on Territorial Issues, flirtatious border guards, and families whose livelihoods relied on daily transgression of the boundary between the two states.

The book is thorough, insightful, and relatable, but its contributions to political geography are regrettably understated. Aside from a brief mention, Megoran does not explicitly engage with postcolonial theory, which offers a way for his insights to travel beyond the post-Soviet world. Seen in this broader lens, "subjects in the postcolony … have to have marked ability to manage not just a single identity, but several – flexible enough to negotiate as and when necessary" (Mbembe, 2001: 104). In the border village of Chek, Megoran's interlocutors pursue "numerous ways to circumvent the new materializations of the boundary [to] resist the cartographic vision of elite border makers" (Megoran, 2017: 171) and yet "could accept the theoretical value of enforcing border control" (Megoran, 2017: 186). Another potential resource might have been the growing field of transnational history. Writing about Eastern Europe after World War I, Tara Zahra (2010) uses an analytic of "national indifference" to foreground the local tensions shaping ethnically-mixed communities, rather than drawing on mechanical allusions to resistance. Drawing on these tools, among others, might have helped Megoran to more thoroughly provincialize the totalizing presumptions of border studies in geography.

Ultimately, Megoran is content to rely on his own tools to critique nationalism, but it means that he does so alone. This is admirable. Still, he reflects toward the end: "… is Chek's life and demise worth recording? Or is this just 'salvage ethnography,' an outsider's indulgent and romantic recording of exotic civilizations vanishing in the path of grinding modernity?" (Megoran, 2017: 187). Megoran's (2017: 80) answer is characteristically unique and understated: that in a world where nationalism forms the "inescapable ideological context for ordering politics", borders should "be managed to promote human flourishing" (2017: 258). This is difficult to contest in the abstract. For Megoran, the valley had once hosted a flourishing space for the circulations of merchants, holy men, workers, pastoralists, and above all, families, before the trauma and opportunity of independence. Disagreement comes easier in light of the moral geography that seems to underpin what sort of flourishing matters. This rests, largely, on an unspoken notion of local cosmopolitanism that deserved more explication than it receives in the text. Where Megoran (2017: 45) excels at revealing new tensions brought about by borders, he is curiously silent when it comes to older tensions – gender, age, and so on – that may prevent women, youth, or the "impious" from sharing his rosy view of life in the borderlands. If "good places" are mostly found in the past, are they impossible in the future of the postcolony without this traditional form of cosmopolitanism?

Readers will set down *Nationalism in Central Asia* having learned how borders, nationalism, and the "shrunken geopolitical visions" that they materialize matter to politics in the Ferghana Valley (Megoran, 2017:153). Borders are, for Megoran, more than artificial impositions onto the political life of post-Soviet Central Asia, but acquire deep political significance for his interlocutors. The many voices Megoran draws on are characters, not caricatures because they "have their own politics" (Ortner, 1995: 177). And he is careful to show this at every turn. What is surprising about borders and nationalism in Central Asia is thus not that they produce bad places or cause violence, but that they become so meaningful even in places where they seem most manifestly unnatural. To understand and theorize this, critique from the metropole on its own will not do; one must be willing to learn from the postcolony, in the postcolony.

6. The rich benefits of deep engagements with a field site

6.1. Reece Jones

As I was preparing this review, I took *Nationalism in Central Asia* with me to a doctor's appointment. The doctor read the title and said, "Wow, now that is esoteric." I laughed to myself because Nick Megoran has written elsewhere about how the region is often portrayed as remote, unknown, and potentially dangerous, thereby justifying it as a necessary target for Western interventions (Heathershaw & Megoran, 2011). But the doctor was right that the book is narrowly defined and tells a very detailed story of Central Asian nationalism and borders. Nevertheless, the implications and parallels for scholars working on other borders around the world are evident, page after page. For example, take this passage about the role the border played in the political imaginary of the late Uzbek President Islam Karimov:

> For President Karimov, the 'border' was a site whereby a geopolitical imagination of Uzbekistan as a haven of peace and tranquility, threatened by violent, backward, and unstable neighbors could be imagined. This geopolitical vision was enacted and transmitted chiefly through the performance of border control rituals, the celebration and sanctification of border guard services, the remaking of border landscapes, and the repeated media portrayal of the apprehension of criminals, terrorists, and smugglers at the border (33).

If you replaced Karimov and Uzbekistan with Trump and America, this could easily be a description of the role the border plays in US politics in 2018.

The impact of national policies on people at the border is also a clear connection between the Central Asian case and other borders. Megoran asks "What happens when politicians from the centre attempt to enforce their nationalist fantasies onto people who actually live in border regions and whose lived reality diverges strikingly from the imagined geographies of the centre? What violence is done, what effects does it have, and how is it resisted?" (135) These same questions drive research at the US-Mexico border, at the edges of the European Union, and dozens of other securitized and militarized borders around the world.

Nick Megoran has made many contributions to the field, but

perhaps his most well-known intervention was his argument for doing ethnography in political geography (Megoran, 2006). Megoran argued ethnographic participant observation was "a research method neglected by political geographers, yet one that could enrich and vivify the growing, but somewhat repetitious, body of scholarship on both critical geopolitics and international boundaries" (Megoran, 2006: 622).

Nationalism in Central Asia extends this argument by demonstrating the rich and nuanced picture that can be painted by faithfully returning to the same research site over decades to document the changes as political events disrupt the place and the people's lives. The strength of the book is the comprehensiveness of the story. Having spent many years in the region, Megoran is able to tell the macro, state level story of how the border came to be symbol of nationalism that had to be securitized in order to protect the dignity of the nation and the micro, local level story of how those distant political performances are enacted on the ground and shape people's lives.

The changes experienced by the residents of Chek in the Ferghana Valley along what eventually became the hard border between Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic stood out for me. When Megoran first visited this town in the 1990s, people were aware that the border was there but it was not marked and not enforced in any way. The residents of Chek moved across it, married across it, and used the economic differences to make money. Megoran brilliantly illustrates the overlapping sovereignties of the two states by sending two letters to a friend's house that was in a gray zone that appeared to be administered by both states. The letter sent through the Uzbek postal system gave the address as being in Uzbekistan and the letter through the Kyrgyz postal system gave the address as being in the Kyrgyz Republic. Both letters were delivered to the house from the separate postal systems, showing that the home was firmly in a zone of overlapping sovereignty. However, over return visits, Chek sees progressively more state intervention. Fences go up on the outskirts of town. Border guards arrive. Eventually the houses in the gray zone are bulldozed, including the house that received the two letters, erasing the shared cross border history of the town. The chapter illustrates, in granular detail, how the blurry idea of a frontier zone was replaced by the clear lines of state sovereignty, of inside and outside, of us and them.

The strength of the book is the familiarity of the Central Asian case generally, and the Ferghana Valley specifically, which has provided fertile ground for a number of scholars over the years such as Alex Diener (2009) and Madeleine Reeves (2014). The depth of analysis and the careful attention to the history and nuances of Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic makes this an extremely valuable book. It is the full expression of what a biography of a border should look like.

7. Looking for a good place in border studies

7.1. Dina Krichker

"Boundaries materialize, rematerialize, and dematerialize in different ways, in different contexts, at different scales, and at different times" (Megoran, 2012: 477). This quote from Megoran's article on Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan boundary became engraved in my memory a while back, when I was a Masters student, and all my subsequent encounters with borders, both as an academic and as a traveler, were illuminated by this insight. Borders are material, as well as social, but in spite of the materiality integral to their condition, borders are virtually omnipresent. What draws me to the idea of border biographies is the avenue that this approach opens for reconciling an understanding of borders as social practices, and borders as political, legal and cartographic phenomena. Naturally, border biography research design implies a multi-scalar and multi-method study. Nick Megoran's long-awaited book is an outstanding example of such academic endeavor.

The book can be read as an author's pursuit of a "good place". On the first pages of the introduction, Megoran (2017: 5) states that the primary question of geography should be "What is a good place?" The search for 'good places', or peaceful non-violent places where the excesses of power do not disturb human existence, takes us on a journey, where stories are told on different scales, from different historical moments and diverse geographic locations. Through these narratives, the border comes alive, and manifests itself as a pulsating artery of history: dynamics of international relations and power tendencies inevitably affect the borderland, and hence can be read and interpreted by critical analysis of boundaries' materialisations, dematerialisations, and rematerialisations.

In the maelstrom of events, once lively present places disappear, oftentimes in a result of a violent application of power, as in the case of Chek village. Megoran's book is a statement that destruction of places should not be forgotten (Megoran, 2017, pp. 187–188). In pursuit of geopolitical and economic gains, governments resort to manipulation of historical and cultural legacies, in order to channel nationalist sentiments. After setting a wider elitist geopolitical context in the first two chapters, Megoran offers an anti-geopolitical vision of the border life, the one crafted and told by personal interactions in the border area. Border narratives and accounts of peaceful life in the borderland in the 1990s is an invaluable lesson of harmonious coexistence, one that challenges the vision of the modern borders as necessary attribute of the national security.

Yet, I am left wondering, what is the mode and rhythm of communication between the centre and the borderland, and vice versa? While being connected by the ties of nationalism, central governments and borderland dwellers seem to be isolated from each other not only geographically, but also institutionally, and there is no functioning communication bridge that may cover this distance. Such discontinuity between the centre and the border becomes especially palpable in the story of Nurbek, a Kyrgyz man from Chek, who in 2003 had to go to the government officials armed with a grenade, in order to fight for the right of his family to have electricity in their home (Megoran, 2017: 173). This story makes me think of the microcosm of the border life that once used to be divided from the central region in a way similar to the latest materialisation of the international boundary in Ferghana valley. In both cases, such divisions are linked to violence.

Conceptual understandings of violence helps Megoran (2017: 24) to identify harmful effects of the border materialisations. Hence, while acknowledging the physical destruction of places and abolition of modes of interactions that border regimes produce, he also notes that borders can serve for "promoting good and restraining evil" (Megoran, 2017: 258). In other words, borders can be made good by good politics (Megoran, 2017: 244). Still, nowadays the main function of borders is preventing the free movement of people. As argued by Reece Jones (2016: 5), "violence of borders today is emblematic of broader system that seeks to preserve privilege and opportunity for some by restricting the access for resources and movement for the others." While the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary is not a division between wealth and poverty, minorities and border population inevitably fall victims to the border violence (Megoran, 2017: 256). This way, on a more global scale, resistance to border violence cannot be reduced to a set of good political decisions on the national levels. However, it would probably be an intellectually stimulating exercise to think about construction of peaceful frontiers and good places along the border lines as a massive act of resistance to the broader system that divides people into legal and illegal, safe and dangerous, welcome and unwelcome guests.

Even though production of peaceful borderlands is an enormous enterprise, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) suggests a formula for eliminating the clashes that stem from national, cultural or religious differences. She claimed that we should start by "healing the split that originates in

the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 80). The work of Nick Megoran can be seen as a part of such struggle. When describing a dispute he witnessed in 2011 in Osh between an Uzbek and a Kyrgyz man sharing a taxi, in which they were attacking one another on the basis of national difference and whether Osh was truly Kyrgyz or Uzbek, Megoran suggested his own answer to this dispute in the book. He said that "Osh is neither the Uzbek's place nor the Kyrgyz's place, but God's place" (2017: 206). Such vision indeed uproots dualistic thinking and has a potential to "heal the split" between clashing nationalistic perspectives.

Classically, geopolitics is seen as a science for war and about war. However, when looking at geopolitics in the context of a border biography approach, it takes on a completely different meaning. Geopolitical analysis here is employed for understanding historical development of the borders, and demonstrates how dynamic and fluid those are. When acknowledging that politically constructed division lines that are supposed to demarcate our differences cannot be seen as absolute, the confrontations around the border lines become absurd. Hence, Megoran's book functions as a peacemaking initiative, and that is, indeed, a great point of reference in a quest for the 'good places'.

8. Geography, interdisciplinarity and area studies: reasserting the value of the regional in a violent world

8.1. Nick Megoran

In April 2000, US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, undertook a whistle-stop tour of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. *En route* from Tashkent to Washington D.C. she gave a press briefing aboard her plane. She began by saying:

> "The most basic thing in my mind is, it took us a very long time to get there and a very long time to get back and there are the ten time zones, that's what we've been going over, and there is no question about the fact that this region of the world is very isolated and very far away"

This is remarkably ethnocentric. With medium-haul flights to the major cities of Europe and Asia, Central Asia is arguably far less 'isolated' than the USA. But most striking is her invocation of Central Asia as a *region*: and a region, she would go on to say, that was dangerous in various ways. This view of Central Asia as an obscure and dangerous region has informed much Western policymaking. Intervening in recent debates, I thus want to use my response to my readers here to make a case for the importance of a specific geographic contribution to area studies.

I am hugely grateful to all the respondents who took the time to read my book. Rather than respond in detail to all their comments, I seek to weave their points of praise and criticism into a reflection on the entanglements of area studies and geography. In particular, I suggest that in the recent debate it has simply been taken for granted that geographers ought to engage with area studies because of *what* geography is about - places. I use the comments on my book to suggest that geographical contributions to area studies are also valuable because of *how* and *why* we engage with the world.

8.2. Area studies and geography

Sidaway, Ho, Rigg, and Woon (2016) identify three 'waves' of area studies: imperial, Cold War, and those which have emerged under globalisation with a sensitivity to issues of representation. The third wave is anxious to distance itself from this dubious imperial and Cold War past, and seeks to construct an area studies that is emancipatory, globally-minded and 'critical' (Koch, 2016). Toal makes a persuasive case for this approach, what he calls 're-asserting the regional.' He argues that US foreign policy towards the Middle East and Central Asia under 'the war on terror' has been marked by an ignorance of other cultures and how they operate, and a limited understanding of the world's geographical diversity. Instead, he suggests that "these features of the contemporary geopolitical moment constitute strong arguments for political geographers to re-assert the importance of 'thick' regional geographical knowledge in the face of 'thin' universal theorizing about world affairs" (Toal, 2003: 655).

In a sophisticated analysis, Jazeel contends that "Geography's alarming drift from Area Studies" (Jazeel, 2017: 96) is a product of what he calls "authoritarian" theorisation. He argues that the imperative to produce "theory that is transferable between contexts has led to the devaluation of sustained engagement with places." But for Jazeel, 'theory' is not an unproblematic, self-evident category – the claim that something is 'theory' is a rhetorical strategy aimed at distinguishing it from data, empirics, testimony and narrative, implying a mastery over various fields and "universal and citational value for others working in multiple elsewhere" (Jazeel, 2017). Jazeel's antidote to this is not a rejection of theory, but rather, it is patient and focused 'attunement' to places (Jazeel, 2016), something that geographers should be predisposed to. I broadly agree with Jazeel, and want to use the response of my interlocutors to consider what this might mean in practice, in particularly *how* and *why* we engage with the world. I think there are particular geographical ways of doing this, adopted in my book.

8.3. For ethnography

The aspect of the book that is most positively commented on in this forum is its sustained engagement with the same places, particularly the village of Chek and the city of Osh. My interlocutors are identifying three different things here. The first is a method, ethnography. Methodologically and epistemologically this is profoundly different from social science methods such as interviews and focus groups, which foreground the power of the researcher in setting up an artificial context to ask questions that might never ordinarily occur and thereby garner 'data' in answers that might largely be artifice. I would endorse the validity of all these approaches, as well as purely textual analyses, but argue that the recovery of ethnography has enhanced geography, as it helps us thoroughly engage with places as places. The second aspect is what Alff calls the "long-term" approach and Jones "faithfully returning to the same research site over decades" – repeatedly going back to the same places, for days or months at a time, year after year. This enables the building of trust and the understanding of how societies change over time, rather than being "retrospective" (Agnew, this volume) as much human geography research is. And the third aspect is what Agnew identifies as a "profoundly humanistic – people centered – encounter." The influence of humanistic and the later feminist movements in geography inspired my engagement, being the desire to foreground the richness and variety and significance of human life in any account of space and power. As a student I was challenged by Hägerstrand's arresting question about 'What happened to people in regional science?" (Hägerstrand, 1970). It is a question we need to keep asking ourselves about political (and other) geography: as Hamdan put it, do we see "characters" or "caricatures"? I am uneasy when largely decontextualised interview extracts are used as proof texts to demonstrate a theoretical argument, or when people and places are treated as 'case studies' in the construction of some analytical taxonomy.

When they do admire the ethnography, one aspect that the commentaries repeatedly underline is how this contrasts with elite perspectives. This points, I suggest, to how geographers can make a specific

contribution to 'area studies', or rather the interdisciplinary attempts to understand certain discreet places that have enough in common for them to be grouped together as regions. To illustrate, I will compare my book to two others that I find particularly helpful in understanding the Ferghana Valley and Kyrgyzstan more generally. Scott Radnitz (Radnitz, 2010) wrote *Weapons of the Wealthy,* a political science account of political struggle in the republic and in particular the 2005 'Tulip Revolution' that overthrew President Askar Akaev (discussed in chapter 2 of my book). Madeleine Reeves, an anthropologist, described in *Border Work* (Reeves, 2014) how boundary materialisations impacted rural life along Kyrgyzstan's southern Ferghana Valley boundary (discussed in chapter 3 of my book). Both books are impressive and insightful, but have limits that reflect their disciplinary locations. Radnitz's attempt to uncover the real business of politics amongst local elites misses the ideological power of territorial nationalism and its ability to resonate with and mobilise non-elite populations. Reeves', on the other hand, describes the outcomes of elite politics on rural lives, yet is weaker at connecting these accounts. The unfolding dramas of regional and national politics that had such an impact on her interlocutors appear as disjointed fragments in distant places, leaving the analytical and explanatory power of her account underdeveloped. Both of these books are marked by their strong disciplinary traditions of what counts as knowledge and how it is generated. It is here that human geographers, with our attention to the interplay of scale and the relative lack of restrictive disciplinary canons of how research *ought* to be done which allows a greater methodological eclecticism, can enrich interdisciplinary discussions. Geographers have become comfortable at undertaking ethnographic, textual and elite interview studies and insist on bringing scales of analysis together. So if the argument of my early advocacy of ethnography in political geography (Megoran, 2006) was that geographers ought to recover mainstream traditions of ethnography that we had lost sight of, the book advances this by showing in turn that geographers can bring something particular to interdisciplinary area studies.

8.4. Against political geography?

I turn now to the criticisms of the book, many of which I would accept. For example, both Agnew and Krichker draw attention to my relative neglect of the institutions of border management and how they operate. Although the book did narrate interactions, conversations and interviews with day-to-day border managers, this was clearly a lacuna and one that I explicitly acknowledge in the book. As far as I know there have been few studies to match Heyman's illuminating ethnography of the US Border Patrol (Heyman, 1998): securing the institutional permission to undertake that would be hard anywhere, and especially in Central Asia. Perhaps an interview-based institutional study, as advocated by Kuus (2015), would be more feasible, Either would go a long way towards filling this gap in our knowledge.

The major criticism, voiced in different ways in a number of responses, is a failure to engage more thoroughly with theory or to push the book's "contributions to political geography" (Hamdan, this volume). These concerns are valid, and I want to engage with them because they highlight Jazeel's argument about the valorisation of work that seeks a more generalizable transferability between contexts which, he argues, devalues intimate place-based engagement.

An important question here is, how do we use theory? Following Karl Jaspers (Jaspers, 1997 (1913)), I see theories, concepts and other higher-level abstractions not as ends in themselves, but rather as lenses to help us momentarily view aspects of reality that might not otherwise be apparent. But in so using them we obscure other insights, and risk confusing our partial view with the reality under study.

This has a number of implications, not least in how I explicitly invoke theory. I draw on various theoretical traditions to help me understand the Ferghana Valley borderlands – for example critical geopolitics in chapter 1 (authoritarianism in Uzbekistan), and post-Marxist theories of discourse in political conflict for chapter 2 (Kyrgyzstani politics). These are understated, but intentionally so: to my mind theory works best when its key insights are used to inform a discussion implicitly, but recedes into the background explicitly. Various authors commented on how "accessible" (Fluri, this volume) the written style is – which is a result of this, and which opens the book up to a more interdisciplinary and international audience. I have pushed the theoretical and disciplinary implications of this work in specialist journals (including *Political Geography* and *Society and Space*), but this book, aimed at a wider readership, wasn't the place for that.

In particular, several of the commentaries suggest that whilst the book is strong at showing how Kyrgyz-Uzbek 'ethnicity' is not an explanation of conflict, it is weaker at addressing other identities, including male-female, young-old, rural-urban, and pre-Soviet place- and linguistic-based affinities. My colleagues variously propose post-colonial theory, intersectionality, and transnational history as ways to better get to grips with these complexities. I accept that these approaches could have helped improve understandings of identity more broadly. But, again, the primary purpose of the book was to explain how ethnicity was not an essential category from which a politics of conflict inevitably proceeds, but rather, by political choice, could be mobilised through spatial strategies in power struggles – with devastating consequences. Thus within the book's discussion historical identities are mentioned to show the malleability of census categories and the contingency of current designations, and gender and class-based conceptions of authentic Uzbekness and Kyrgyzness are invoked by the rural poor to challenge the relentless advance of border fences and border controls. But this primary focus on ethnicity was sparked initially as a reaction to essentialist and simplistic depictions of the region in the 1990s, then driven by the trauma of the violence of 2010 where people were raped, robbed and murdered *en masse,* on the basis of their ethnic designation. That needs an explanation, and I provide one, however incomplete. But as Jaspers suggests, bringing one aspect of reality into the foreground inevitably obscures others. So by framing the narrative around a temporal progression of encroaching border regimes – a movement necessary to demonstrate "how an international border was made from scratch" (Agnew, this volume) – the book ends up perilously close to implying a previously "rosy view of life in the borderlands", as Hamdan insightfully puts it. He is right to be sceptical of this.

However I would push back against the suggestion that the book's "contributions to political geography" are understated. It is explicitly set up as a contribution to border and boundary studies, which have been one of the subdiscipline's staple themes since its formal inception, and which with the violence of European Union and US bordering practices have re-emerged as key themes. As Jones (this volume) observes, the argument about how President Karimov used borders in Central Asia could be readily transferred to how President Trump uses them in North America, and the book concludes with a broader discussion on the ethics of bordering.

8.5. Geography, place and area studies

This review forum has helped me think about the specific contributions that geographers can make to 'critical area studies,' the interdisciplinary attempt to understand certain geographically proximate discreet places that have enough in common for them to be usefully studied comparatively as 'regions'. This goes beyond the banal assertion

that geographers write about places so therefore should contribute to area studies, to an argument about *how* we engage with those places. Geographers' traditional tolerance of methodological eclecticism, their recognition of the value of intimate engagements with specific places, and an expectation that the processes observed in those places be traced at different scales, make for our particular engagement to area studies.

Beyond that, as Krichker (this volume) emphasises, geography is primarily about the pursuit of good places, or *why* we engage with places. Human geography has a radical edge that has long insisted we judge space and place management regimes by the extent to which they promote or deform human life. That is an area of studies fiercely critical of scholarship in service of state power.

Further, because geographers have long been attentive to the artificially constructed nature of regions, continents and the like, geographical contributions to area studies insist that these are *critical* area studies: that we hold areas lightly, whilst recognising that they have some utility. A 'region' is the insistence that although places are unique, we don't treat them as exceptional, alien or discreet entities but rather we trace commonalities between them, because geographical proximity matters. As Agnew observes, "Classifying the world by geographical areas seemingly cannot be avoided if one is both to make sense of it and acknowledge that many people also think about the world in terms of regional divisions at various scales" (Agnew, 2013: 7). Madeleine Albright's press conference is proof enough of that. But a *critical* area studies insists that we remember 'regions' are artifice and that this insight genuinely informs our analysis. An excellent example of this is provided by Heathershaw and Cooley, whose work Agnew cites, in their work on 'offshore Central Asia' (Heathershaw & Cooley, 2015). This apparent oxymoron (given that Central Asia is the most landlocked region on earth) is deployed to show that eye-watering levels of regime appropriation of state resources in countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan has been facilitated by the architectures of offshore tax havens under largely UK and US jurisdiction. In this analysis, the corruption, bad governance and instability that characterise these countries (and therefore merit comparative study as a 'region') are not to be explained through an orientalist designation of 'the stans' and their *disconnectedness* from an Atlantic core, but rather by their multifacted *interconnectedness* to the 'West.' As my book similarly argues, the destruction of Chek and Osh cannot be understood outside of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan's location in a global system of sovereign nation states. A critical area studies traces global processes at the same time as it tracks the unfolding of similar consequences in neighbouring places. Recent UK and US governments have too often seen Central Asia in terms of a distant, obscure and fractious region, informing misguided (and sometimes violent) policy interventions. In such a world, there remains an intellectual, political and moral case for the hard work of geographically-informed sustained engagement with other places.

And, finally, Agnew (this volume) reminds us of the "opening up" of Uzbekistan post the death of Karimov in 2016. One week after receiving my copies of my book, which concluded with an argument to 'reopen the borders', the new President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirzoeyev, announced the surprise reopening of many road border crossings in the Ferghana Valley for the first time since 2000. The book had lasted all of a week before its concluding argument became obsolete! That is a reminder that there is no 'final word' on any scholarly topic. We collectively make modest contributions. I thank everyone else in this forum once more for helping sharpen mine.

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